



A Den Mate for Dylan

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Welcome to Foxwood Hollow. In a world of fox shifters sits a small, quaint town where everyone knows your business. Often stifling, always safe, and forever a place to call home.

Dylan

Axel is the love of my life; he just doesn't know it yet.

Ten out of ten do not recommend spending your formative years pining after an alpha who's your brother's best friend. But alas, here we are.

My only solution is to leave Foxwood Hollow and start afresh. So what do I do when I have no choice but to return home, only to realise all of those years and miles haven't doused the flame?

Axel

He's your best friend's little brother. He's your best friend's little brother.

It was a mantra I'd repeated to myself for years, ever since my brain had shifted from omega smells good to omega smells like mine.

I'm happy for Dylan when he leaves Foxwood Hollow to chase his dreams. I always knew he was destined for a life larger than this little town can offer him. But I feel his absence like a gaping chasm, and the silence that follows has my alpha instincts going into overdrive.

When Dylan finally comes home, a lot has changed. But the soul-deep longing is as present as ever.

Can I really let him slip through my fingers again?

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Chapter One

Thirteen Years Old

My older brother Cooper's rut was finally over, so Axel would be here for tea in like an hour—plenty of time.

I nabbed the kitchen scissors from the oak counter and returned to my bedroom.

Having the smallest room in the house was really beginning to infringe on my potential, but it fit a single bed, a wardrobe, and a desk in the corner where my laptop perched, so it would suffice.

The YouTube video I'd queued up earlier doled out its instructions for around ten seconds before I lost interest and figured it couldn't be that difficult to adlib.

I laid out the brand-new pair of light-wash Levi's my mom bought yesterday on my navy checkered bedsheets. And then I hacked at the knees with scissors until there were holes on both sides.

The rest of the jeans still looked too 'new', though, so I cut a few extra holes for good measure. I stood back to admire my handiwork.

Yes, they will do nicely.

When the doorbell rang and low voices drifted up the stairs, I quickly shoved on my newly customised jeans and a red Vixen Vipers rugby shirt to boot. Axel's cousin

was their scrumhalf. Glancing in the mirror to make sure I was presentable, I frowned at the way my unruly brown curls were betraying me, sticking up in every direction. This would not do. I popped into the bathroom on my way down the stairs and managed to tame my mop a little with some water so that Axel wouldn't think I looked like an electrocuted cat.

Axel was the love of my life; he just didn't know it yet.

I walked into the kitchen right as Mom was carving up a roast chicken. It smelled amazing. As fox shifters, we pretty much ate chicken for every meal, but it never got old.

"Oh, hey, Axel, didn't know you were gonna be here," I said super casually.

Axel stood next to the dining table, already so tall. His luscious dark hair was damp from the rain outside, and he'd been growing it, the longer locks beginning to curl around his ear. Oh, and what an ear. His ears were perfect, completely in proportion with his lovely head. His dark brown eyes sparkled when he smiled at me, the skin crinkling in the corners, letting me know it was a real smile. Just for me.

"Erm, yes you did. I literally told you like two hours ago. Stop being weird," Cooper interjected, and I could feel my cheeks go beet red.

"Miss me, Dyl-pot?" Axel replied, ruffling my hair like I was still five.

What will it take for anyone to take me seriously around here?

"Dylan! What on earth have you done to your jeans?" Mom pointed at me with the carving knife in a way that felt a little more murderous than the situation called for. "They sure as hell didn't have giant holes in them at the shop! Why would you cut them up?"

“Nobody is wearing jeans that aren’t ripped anymore, Mom. Do you want me to be bullied? Look, Axel’s jeans have loads of rips in them.” I pointed at Axel’s very worn, faded jeans that were more hole than denim by that point.

“Axel spends his weekends doing manual labour and helping his dad build dens. I don’t think he destroys a perfectly good pair of new jeans with scissors, Dylan!” Mom retorted.

Cooper snickered and gave me a condescending look before sitting at the dining table with Axel.

“It’s called creative expression, Mom. Look it up. Stop trying to stifle me.” I sat down at the table with my nose in the air.

“You can vandalise your clothes in the name of creative expression all you like once you’re paying for them yourself. Until then, please abstain or buy a colouring book or something,” she replied while dishing up the food.

A fucking colouring book?

Stuffing a roast potato in my mouth, I glared at her.

“Thanks, Mom, this looks delicious,” Cooper said to her. Such a kiss ass.

“Yeah, thanks, Miss B,” Axel added, flashing Mom a big toothy smile that, when aimed at me, caused me to clench my fists just so I wouldn’t reach for him.

“Did you get your results back on your English Lit test?” Mom asked me.

“Yep. Got an A,” I replied through a mouthful of tender chicken.

“Nerd,” Cooper coughed.

Mom turned her attention to him. “What about your geography mock, Coop?”

“I, um, almost passed this time,” Cooper muttered quietly. And even though he pissed me off for always making fun of me in front of Axel, I still thought it was a bit of a dick move of Mom to ask him about that with his friend here.

Coop and school weren’t the greatest mix, and in his defence, it wasn’t for a lack of trying.

Once we’d all finished eating, it was my turn to clean up, so I collected the plates and took them over to the sink.

“Mom, can I go with Axel to Charley Burrows’ party on Saturday?” Cooper asked.

“Parents present?”

“No... but his older sister, who’s like, thirty, will be there.”

“Alcohol?”

He shook his head.

Mom arched an eyebrow at him.

He broke. “We won’t be drinking any, I promise.” Coop proceeded to give Axel a look .

“The party is a few houses down from my dad’s. You know he’d sniff it out on us in a heartbeat,” Axel explained, and of course, Mom capitulated because, frankly,

nobody was able to resist his puppy dog eyes—even Mom.

“You’ll be back at Axel’s by eleven?”

They both nodded their heads vehemently.

I couldn’t wait until I was old enough to go to parties. I was sick of always being left behind.

Cooper headed upstairs, and Mom poured a glass of red wine to take to the living room, leaving Axel and me to finish the washing up.

Axel always stayed to help when it was my turn. Well, on Cooper’s turn, too, but that was beside the point. Cooper, as usual, got bored of waiting, which gave me at least fifteen—sometimes twenty minutes when I was particularly creative with dragging out the process—of uninterrupted Axel time. He grabbed a tea towel and began drying the clean dishes.

“How’s den making season going?” I asked.

Twice a year, once in spring and once in autumn, all the alphas go into rut. If they’re looking to make an omega their mate, they need to have a den made beforehand.

Originally, alphas were expected to build their own dens, but nowadays, the wealthier ones hire someone like Axel’s dad, who specialised in den making.

Only, Axel’s dad had an accident last year with a piece of machinery, and he lost his left hand. So, Axel began helping him out despite being only fifteen himself.

“Good, busy but good. We finished building the final one of the season yesterday, so I get my free time back,” Axel replied.

“I hope one day I’ll find an alpha who builds us a den rather than paying someone else to do it.”

“You trying to put me out of a job?” He nudged me with his elbow.

“No, I just meant, um...” I stuttered.

“I’m only messing with you. You deserve someone who’ll build you the best den one day.” He smiled, and my heart felt like it was swelling, suddenly too big to fit inside my chest.

Nobody could build me a better den than you could.

“One day,” I said instead

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Chapter Two

Fourteen Years Old

G lancing around the woods, I spotted my new friend, Callie. We shared a desk in English, and she was so chatty that we quickly formed an easy friendship. She was the year above, but an omega same as me, and we both enjoyed watching the school rugby matches for all the wrong reasons.

It was a crying shame that Axel was now in sixth form and no longer eligible to play. Watching his shorts straining to contain those thick thighs had been the highlight of my week.

A bunch of Callie's friends were throwing a bonfire in the woods tonight because, from next week onwards, most of the alphas would go into rut and disappear for a week. She extended me an invite, and since Coop was already out this weekend, Mom jumped at the chance to have an empty house. She'd recently started seeing a new omega, a woman named Abbie, so she hadn't batted an eyelid or even bothered asking me if there'd be drinking.

My omega mum had died when I was only a few months old, and my alpha Mom hadn't dated anyone since that I knew of, so it was certainly understandable for her to look for a new mate.

Dressed in a pair of dark-wash skinny jeans and a charcoal-grey cowl-neck jumper I'd finished knitting the weekend before, I headed in the direction of the smoke permeating the air.

I joined Callie, who was sitting on the trunk of a large fallen tree, with a few people I recognised from school but hadn't ever really spoken to. Her amber eyes glittered in the firelight as she held court, and as soon as she clocked me, she waved me over enthusiastically.

"Dylan!" she squealed.

"Hey, hun," I kissed her flushed cheek. Her breath smelled of rum and coke.

"Everyone, this is Dylan. He's super smart, so he's taking Maths and English a year early," Callie crowed, making me blush from embarrassment. "And he made this beautiful jumper he's wearing. Here, feel how soft it is!"

I wasn't trying to hide my knitting hobby per se, but I also wasn't advertising it to people as the first and only thing they knew about me.

Before Callie or any of her friends even got the chance to touch the soft wool, I was shoved back by a big paw.

"Hey, what are you— Oh!" I stuttered.

"Ask people before you touch them." Axel glared at my new friends. I was torn between wanting to bask in any morsel of attention Axel deemed to throw my way—which was few and far between these days—and wanting to tell him to fuck off and stop embarrassing me.

"Axel, jeez, it's fine. They just wanted to feel my jumper," I tried to explain.

"They can still ask first," he muttered before stalking off without another word.

"I'm so sorry. I don't know what that was about. He's best friends with my brother

and a little... protective, I guess.”

“Damn, we just got told off by Axel King. How is he even hotter when he’s angry?” Callie’s blonde friend said.

“Keep it in your pants, Elliot. I heard he asked out Lauren Bell,” Callie replied.

My stomach dropped. Surely I would know about it if Axel had found an omega?

“Where did you hear that?” I asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

“Lauren was talking about it in the cafeteria at lunch, and she made sure everyone would hear. Not that I can blame her; if Axel was my alpha, I’d want the whole world to know he was claimed.”

The gossip continued from there, but I couldn’t hear a word of it. It was as if my ears were stuffed with cotton wool. I wasn’t totally braindead; I knew realistically that this day would happen. But not now. Honestly, I’d hoped it would happen once I’d ditched this town and left for uni. So I could hear about it in vague terms via updates from my brother instead of seeing it with my own two eyes.

Axel had found an omega. His future played out painfully in my mind: in a few years, he would build her a den, and she would build them a nest, and they’d spend all their ruts and heats wrapped around each other, in lust and then in love. And I’d spend the rest of my life searching for an alpha who smelled even half as perfect as Axel did—probably settling for less.

I excused myself from the conversation, telling them I’d spotted my brother and was going to say hi. Instead, I headed deep into the woods; twigs snapped loudly underfoot as I strode away from all my classmates. When I knew I was alone, I quickly stripped out of my clothes. I always kept one of those tiny fold-up shopping

bags in my pocket for situations like this.

Once all my clothes and shoes were stuffed into the bag, I squeezed my eyes shut. Rubbing the heels of my palms into the sockets until patterns danced behind my eyelids and I could feel the shift begin.

I was out of practice because I didn't shift often, preferring to remain in my human form. But, like riding a bike, it happened without too much thought. At first, russet orange fur sprouted through my skin, covering my body. Next, my arms and legs shrank down, forcing me to drop onto all fours. And finally, my least favourite part of the shift, my face contorted, jaw popping as it elongated to form a muzzle, and my sharp teeth released.

Using my mouth to bite down on the handle of the bag of clothes, I dragged them to my destination. It was too big to carry because I was only a small fox.

Sniffing until I found the tree I was looking for, I tugged the bag of clothes with me and scurried inside the hole at its base. It was a long abandoned den that Cooper and I had discovered as kids. Presumably, the alpha and omega who it had belonged to had either moved or were no longer mates, as there were no residual scents within the packed dirt walls.

The idea of breaking a mate bond had always seemed devastating to me before, but now it was a soothing balm to my aching heart.

Maybe Lauren and Axel would be temporary. Maybe when I was older, Axel would realise that I smelled just right like he did. Like mate. Like fate.

In my sad, abandoned den, though, I pulled out my warm jumper, Axel's scent ever so faintly lingering on the wool from where he'd pulled me back earlier. I spread it on the ground, turning in circles a few times before giving up and accepting that it was

what it was.

And then I curled up in a ball on the saddest excuse for a nest in existence and cried.

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Chapter Three

15 years old

It was after midnight, and Mom and her omega, Abbie, had gone to bed over an hour ago. I could hear low voices still coming from Cooper's room, where Axel was sleeping over like he did most weekends.

I told myself I was going to the bathroom, just really quietly, like silently. And maybe I spent a little longer than necessary lingering in the hallway outside Cooper's bedroom that had a big 'No Trespassers' sign stuck across it.

"She really asked you to spend her next heat with her?" Cooper whispered, although not very quietly.

My heart leapt into my throat at that.

"Yeah, last night she texted me. I nearly popped a woody in front of my dad when I read it." They both giggled like kids.

"Are you gonna?"

"I dunno. I feel like you should be really sure about an omega before you spend their heat with them."

"I mean, you've been together for a year, and it's not as if you haven't had sex with her."

My stomach recoiled so violently that I thought I might be sick. He'd already had sex with her. He'd given his first time away before I was even old enough to be a contender. For once, I was angry at him; why couldn't he have waited? Waited until I was a little older, and he could see that I smelled right and that I was his .

"I know, this just feels different. Like a commitment."

Unable to hear anymore, I crept back to my bedroom as quietly as possible, with the remnants of my tattered heart in tow.

I opened my bedroom door to find Axel climbing the stairs two at a time, presumably aiming for Cooper's room. I was in heat last week so he hadn't been over in a while. Mom claimed that having omegas around alphas they weren't related to during heat was a recipe for teenage pregnancy, so she'd asked him not to visit until it had passed.

The summer sun had tanned his face, and it complemented his dark hair and deep brown eyes beautifully.

"Hey Dyl, you okay?" he asked, smiling warmly at me. As he got closer, though, I wrinkled my nose because I could smell her all over him. It was becoming a problem.

"Mhmm. Just about to break down my nest," I explained.

"Oh. That must suck. Only your second heat, though, so I'm sure your next nest will be even better," he replied reassuringly.

"Wanna see it?"

His eyes went wide, clearly shocked and maybe a little embarrassed judging by the faint blush on those chiselled cheekbones of his.

“Um. Sure. Okay.”

We both stepped into my bedroom and I sort of presented my nest with a flourish of my arm like I was revealing one of the transformed rooms on an episode of Changing Rooms.

“Oh. Nice one,” he said, giving me a very awkward smile.

Glancing back at my nest, I frowned. I’d spent a full day building this nest, getting it just right. All he had to say was, ‘Nice one’?

“Axel, that you?” Cooper yelled from the hallway.

“Yeah, mate. Just in here,” Axel replied in a strange voice like he’d been holding his breath.

Cooper popped his head around the door. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“I was just showing Axel my nest,” I replied.

“Oh my god, Dylan. You’re so embarrassing. You can’t be going around showing people your nest. Your heat ended yesterday; you shouldn’t even still have it,” he replied before dragging Axel from the room.

I made sure the bedroom door was fully closed before I began taking apart my nest that—only minutes ago—I’d been so proud of. I tugged out all the bigger blankets first, folding them methodically one by one. The entire time, silent tears ran down my face. Because the alpha, who I’d loved since before I was even old enough to know what love was, didn’t love my nest. And he didn’t love me.

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Chapter Four

16 years old

“What is it?” I asked, eyeing the clear liquid in the shot glass.

“Baijiu. I think...” Elliot replied. He and Callie had talked me into coming to this party to stop my moping.

Two years on and Axel and Lauren were still going strong. Yesterday at dinner, he’d told us she’d got a spot at Raynard Uni, the closest large city, so they ‘wouldn’t even have to do long distance’. He’d said it cheerfully, too, like he wasn’t crushing my withering heart in the palm of his hand.

Realistically, that was it now. She would go to uni, and in three years, she’d return to her beau, and he’d build them the loveliest fucking den ever, and I would die alone.

I necked the baijiu and winced. It was strong and burned something awful going down my throat.

“More, please,” I said, holding out the glass to Elliot.

Several hours and many shots later, Elliot and I were dancing together on top of Jia’s dining table.

Jia always threw the best house parties; her mum often had to travel for business, and their house was huge.

I could feel eyes on me, and it made me up the ante. Grinding my arse into Elliot's crotch in a way that was only okay because, well, it was Elliot, and he wouldn't read anything into it. We were both omegas, after all.

I glanced over my shoulder, hoping to spot a set of dark brown eyes lined with thick lashes looking back at me, but instead, I found a set of blue.

"Who's the blue-eyed hottie alpha?" I muttered under my breath to Elliot as we continued to dance. He skillfully manoeuvred us to take a better look.

"Oh boy. Trouble is who he is. That's Jia's new stepbrother, Adam. Moved here a couple of weeks ago."

Adam. I let the name roll around in my head. Similar to Axel, but not.

"How old is he?" I asked.

"Seventeen, he's my year," Elliot replied.

Seventeen. I could definitely work with seventeen.

"Let's go get a drink," I said, tugging Elliot with me in the direction of the kitchen where Callie was holding court to a bunch of alphas. It just so happened to also be where Adam was.

I pretended not to notice him, brushing past him on my way to the fridge to grab a lemonade. I smelled him, though, and he smelled good. When I spun back around, his eyes met mine, and he didn't break eye contact.

"Omega," he said in a low gravelly voice.

I bristled a little. “It’s Dylan, actually,” I said, with as much sass as I could pour into it.

He chuckled. “I like that. Got some fire in you, Dylan.”

“Well, I am pretty hot.”

His gaze raked over my body from head to toe. “Isn’t that a fact?” He grinned, and I could feel the spark of something.

After I finished my drink, Adam followed me into the living room, where several couples were making out on the sofa.

He sat down on the floor, his back leaning against the wall with his legs outstretched and patted the patch of carpet next to him. I joined, sitting with my knees pulled up to my chest.

“So, Dylan, what do you do for fun around here?” he asked, picking at some lint on the shaggy carpet.

Do not tell him about your knitting projects.

“Um, this, I guess? In autumn, we usually have a bonfire on the weekends in Vixen Woods,” I explained.

“Party boy?”

“I could be,” I replied, trying to sound flirtatious. Adam had the palest blue eyes. Like a frozen lake, peeking through a dusting of snow.

“What about you? You’re new here, right?”

“Yep. My alpha dad has a new family now, and then my omega dad met an alpha here and wanted to move. Seems a waste of time starting over for a year only to head to uni and start over again.”

“What are you gonna study at uni?” I asked. My brother often acted as though my desire to carry on learning made me the odd one out.

“Medicine.”

“Wow. Know where you wanna go?”

“Just somewhere far away.”

“From here?”

“Not sure.”

“Very mysterious,” I said, smirking at him.

“Working though, isn’t it? You’re totally into me.” We both laughed at that. His was deep and vibrated from his chest in a way that made my stomach swoop. “What about you, little omega, big dreams?”

“English lit and creative writing. Also somewhere far from here, but I’ll try not to cramp your style,” I replied, winking at him.

Adam reached over, brushing an errant brown curl out of my eye. Then he cupped my jaw and pressed the pad of his thumb to my bottom lip. Without really thinking, I kissed it. And the next thing I knew, his lips were on mine, soft but firm.

I’d never kissed anyone before. I wasn’t sure exactly how I felt about his wet tongue

slipping inside my mouth, but it made me feel desired and wanted. Made a warm sensation build in my belly. I wanted more of it.

I straddled his legs to continue the kiss, letting my tongue touch his and exploring the sensation. His hands rubbed up and down my back, but he didn't press for more, even though I could feel how turned on he was.

And then, all of a sudden, my lips were ripped from his, and I was being dragged backwards by my t-shirt.

"What the fuck?" I sputtered, confused. Adam's eyes were dilated, and his gaze kept darting between me and whoever had just ruined my first kiss.

I followed Adam's line of sight only to find a very large and angry Axel towering over us both with his teeth bared. And was that... was he growling?

"I'm sorry, I didn't know he was claimed. I'm sorry," Adam kept saying with his hands raised defensively.

"I'm not fucking claimed! And certainly not by him," I squawked, pointing at Axel. "What the fuck Axel, why would you do that?" I asked.

"I... You're... He was taking advantage of you. He's too old for you." Axel sniffed the air before adding, "And you're drunk," he tried to justify.

"He's seventeen, asshole. And like you didn't drink at my age." I huffed. "What are you even doing here?"

I spotted Cooper standing a little further back than Axel, looking equally perplexed by his actions.

“Lei invited us,” Axel said through gritted teeth. Lei was Jia’s older brother; he was in the same year as them.

“Just you and Coop?” I asked.

“Sorry babe, there was some kid vomming in the toilet. Have you got a drink already?” the perpetually cheery Lauren said. Bouncing over in that bouncy way, she did. “What’s going on?” she asked when she spotted the weird standoff going on between Axel and Adam.

“Absolutely nothing, Lauren. You guys have a lovely night. Adam and I are gonna go find somewhere a little more... private,” I said, really enunciating the last word as I made eye contact with Axel.

Before he could reply, I tugged Adam out of the living room and into the garden, where the wall of cold air sobered me up a bit.

“What was that about?” Adam asked.

I rubbed my palms over my bare arms, trying to get warm.

“Here, wear this.” Adam wrapped his jacket around my shoulders.

“That was my brother’s best friend, Axel.”

“Ahh, I think I’ve read that one,” he replied, and I snorted a laugh because he probably had. “Let me guess, you’ve had heart-eyes for him forever, and he sees you as a surrogate baby brother?”

“Something like that, yep,” I admitted for the first time out loud to a near-perfect stranger at that. But there was something warm and kind about Adam, and I decided

then that Elliot had been wrong; Adam wasn't trouble at all.

“Well, my year here could be a lot more interesting if I spend it pissing off an obstinate alpha.”

I grinned. Okay, so maybe he wouldn't be trouble for me. “Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

“Louis?” Adam arched an eyebrow at me in question and I rolled my eyes.

“Casablanca, you heathen.”

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Chapter Five

17 years old

“I can’t believe you’re going to abandon me in just two more months,” I said sulkily to Adam. He was sitting on my desk chair, attempting to solve my Rubik’s Cube, which he’d been working on for over a month.

Over the course of the last year, Adam and I had become good friends. I was going to miss him when he left for uni, although I was happy for him that he’d got in where he’d been hoping for.

“I’ve liked it here more than I thought I would. I’ll be back over Christmas.”

“Your return over Christmas wouldn’t have anything to do with a certain dreamy step-brother now, would it?”

“Lei and I are just friends,” he replied indignantly. Likely story.

“Here. Stand up a sec,” I said, holding up my knitting against his chest to check the width. I was making him a jumper as a goodbye gift.

The front door slammed shut downstairs, followed by the voices of Coop, Axel and... fucking Lauren.

“Oh my god, quick, lick my neck!” I said to Adam. He rolled his eyes but obliged and even rubbed his stubbled cheek over my face and hair for good measure.

There was a soft knock on my bedroom door. “Hey, love. Is Adam staying for dinner?” Abbie asked.

“Please,” I mouthed at Adam. I wasn’t having dinner across from Axel and Lauren without reinforcements. Adam shrugged his acceptance.

“Yeah, Abbie. We’ll be down in a minute,” I called back.

“I’m gonna need this,” I said to Adam, wrestling him out of the hoodie he was wearing.

“Why? I’ll be cold!” he whined.

“It’s summer you big wuss, if I have to smell Lauren all over him, then he can smell you all over me,” I declared, shoving the hoodie over my t-shirt before tugging Adam down the stairs.

In the kitchen, I brushed past Axel to grab two cans of pop from the fridge. When I turned around, his nostrils flared, and he glared at Adam.

Perfect. Perfect. Perfect.

“Hi, Dylan,” Lauren said sweetly as I passed a can over to Adam.

Here’s the thing, I knew I was the dickhead here because Lauren was a lovely person. In fact, if she was dating Cooper instead of Axel I’d probably have loved her and been thrilled to have her in my life. But when she came into my home smelling of my alpha, it made me want to scratch her eyeballs out like a psychopath. It didn’t help that she perfectly resembled a textbook cheerleader with her long, bright blonde hair and Hollywood smile.

“Lauren.” I nodded at her and plastered a fake smile on my face.

“Well, we have quite the full house this summer by the looks of things,” Mom said, changing the subject.

We all sat down around the large dining table as Abbie and Cooper dished out the food. Abbie had been a great addition to our family; case in point, the delicious Korean fried chicken we were having for dinner.

Abbie worked as a chef at this fusion restaurant in town and tried out all her dishes on us—no complaints from me.

“This is delicious, thanks, Abbie,” Axel said, finally finding his words.

“You’re welcome. I think it might need to be a little spicier, but it’s almost there.”

“I volunteer as chief taste tester,” Cooper said, waving his fork in the air.

Adam stayed pretty quiet through dinner, as he usually did in a big group.

“How’s your first year at uni been, Lauren? Glad to be back for the summer?” Mom asked.

“It’s been great, actually. Met loads of people, and my course is interesting. I miss this one, though,” she replied, reaching a hand over to squeeze Axel’s shoulder. He smiled down at her adoringly in response. Gag me.

“I bet you’re thrilled to have my son third-wheeling you all summer,” Mom said, winking at Lauren.

“Hey! I resent that,” Cooper interjected.

Lauren laughed. “I’m pretty sure I’m the third wheel in this scenario. I’m half expecting our den to have an add-on for Cooper.”

Everyone laughed at that like it was the funniest fucking thing in the world.

I, on the other hand, stood up and ran from the room without a word. I crouched on the ground outside the kitchen door, tugging on the roots of my hair in an attempt to distract myself from the way my eyes burned. Behind me, it sounded like Axel and Adam both got up.

“It’s fine, I’ll go. He said he didn’t feel too well earlier. Probably just feeling sick,” Adam lied.

“I’ve finished eating, you haven’t,” Axel argued.

“Babe, let Adam go check on him. Sit down,” Lauren reasoned with him, and Adam left the kitchen a moment later.

“Come on, little omega. Let’s go get some fresh air.”

I followed Adam silently out of the house, and once I’d caught up with him, he reached out and took my hand, interlacing our fingers. I was really going to miss Adam next year. He was the only person who knew the full extent of my obsession with Axel, and while he would occasionally poke fun at me, he never judged me for it.

He walked us to the field not far from my house and sat down on a bench before tugging me to sit on his lap. I sat sideways like a little kid, and he wrapped his big alpha arms around me tight.

“They... are... gonna... be... den mates... aren’t they?” I hiccuped.

“Maybe. They have been together a while,” Adam said.

“Can’t you just... lie to me... for once.”

Adam chuckled. “They’re only nineteen, and Lauren still has another two years of study. I don’t think you have to worry about them becoming den mates in the immediate future.”

I snuggled into Adam, pressing my face into his wide chest. If only I could love him instead. Not that he really saw me as anything but a friend either, but still. It would be so simple.

Adam kissed the top of my head and held me as I cried, once again, about an alpha who would never be mine. And then I cried some more because I realised I wouldn’t even have Adam next year.

I needed to get a grip.

When we returned home, we snuck up to my room as quietly as possible and curled up on my bed to watch some trashy TV.

As usual, we were only three episodes in before Adam fell asleep. There was a soft knock at the door, and I got up so whoever it was wouldn’t wake him. I’d kicked off my jeans when I got into bed, so I was only wearing Adam’s hoodie, but it almost went to my knees anyway.

I opened the door to find Axel staring down at me with a concerned look on his face.

“You okay?” he asked.

“Um. Yeah. I wasn’t feeling great, but I’m fine,” I lied.

“Is Adam still here?”

“Yeah. He’s asleep.” I nodded my head in the direction of Adam’s sleeping form on the bed.

Axel’s gaze finally seemed to take in that I was only wearing Adam’s hoodie and nothing else, his nostrils flaring before he appeared to take a few deep breaths to centre himself.

“He makes you happy, though? Treats you well?” Axel asked with a pained expression on his face.

“He’s my best friend,” I replied, which wasn’t a lie.

“Okay, good. That’s good. I better go... Lauren’s waiting for me.”

“Right. Night, Axel.”

“Night, Dyl.”

I watched as Axel turned and jogged down the stairs to his Lauren. To his future. I wondered if it would ever burn any less. If I’d ever run out of tears for that man.

One year. I had one year left in this town before I would disappear and start a new life. A life where the scent of Axel wasn’t embedded in every crevice of my existence. Where I wouldn’t have to watch him fall more and more in love with someone else as I became a smaller and smaller fraction of his world.

I returned to my bed and cuddled up to Adam, who wrapped an arm around me and held me tight. For a few moments, I let myself be comforted by a smell that wasn’t mine but was friend . And friend wasn’t a bad smell. But even Adam’s scent would

be slipping through my fingers, slipping from my life in a few months.

Have you ever wallowed so much in self-pity that you actually begin to hate yourself? Because I was becoming insufferable even to me .

I needed a hobby or a distraction, at the very least. Maybe a few more friends, too.

Maybe I should dye my hair?

New hair, new me. That's a thing, right?

Yeah. I'd go to the hairdressers tomorrow, and all my problems would be solved. There was nothing that the acrid smell of bleach couldn't cover up.

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Chapter Six

18 years old

The day I left for uni was anticlimactic. I'd sort of pictured this dramatic farewell with Axel, but he was working today, and Cooper was too, so we'd said a very perfunctory goodbye yesterday.

Mom and Abbie had given me some money to put towards a car, and along with what I'd made selling knitted nesting material on Etsy for the last year, I'd been able to get enough together to buy my little blue Ford Fiesta.

Abbie had spent the entire day yesterday batch cooking, so I had a freezer box in the boot filled with food; I'm sure I wouldn't look like a total weirdo rocking up to my hall's accommodation with a month's supply of meals.

Once I'd said my farewells to Mom and Abbie, I was just climbing into the driver's seat when I heard someone yelling my name. Cooper.

He ran towards me and wrapped me in a big hug. "Sorry, I wasn't sure if I'd get away in time," he said, clearly out of breath. Cooper was two years into his apprenticeship as an electrician, specialising in delivering electricity to the dens in local towns. School might not have been his place to shine, but he'd been thriving in this role; I was proud of him.

"I thought you were working," I mumbled into his big sweaty shoulder.

“I was. But I told Jack you were leaving today, and he let me nip out for an hour.”

I was oddly touched. Cooper and I weren't especially close. We were total opposites, never really able to find common ground but we did love each other.

“Be safe, okay? And call me. I know we don't... I know we aren't really good at that. But I want to hear how you're getting on, okay?” he said, and I felt my eyes pricking with hot tears.

“Yeah, Coop. I'll call. And I'll be back for Christmas.”

Cooper kissed the top of my head and let me go so I could get into the car. As I drove away from the only place I'd ever called home, to a city on the other end of the country, I glanced in the rear-view mirror to watch as my mom, Abbie and Cooper slowly became dots on the pavement.

It was only once I'd passed the town sign that I pulled over and sobbed.

I lied to Coop that day. Not about calling; I did do that. Once a fortnight, I'd call him, and we'd make small talk for half an hour. It was nice. I didn't come back for Christmas that year, though.

I had a bit of a whirlwind romance during my first term. Bennett and I met during fresher's week. His dorm was on the alpha floor above mine. We'd slept together within a few weeks, and it was mostly good. Bennett smelled nice, and he was kind to me. He was funny, and he loved showing me off to his friends, which I definitely enjoyed. I hadn't invited him to spend my heat with me, though; it felt too soon, and when he asked me to join him for his autumn rut, I'd declined and said I wasn't quite ready for that step yet. But then he'd asked me if I'd come and spend Christmas with him and his family at a ski chalet in the French Alps, and it seemed rude to reject him twice in one day. Also, it was a good excuse not to go home and have to see Axel and

Lauren making heart eyes at each other.

Leaving home had been good for me. I'd made lots of new friends, I loved my course and I was finally becoming my own person, finally thriving instead of just getting by.

Early on Christmas morning, when Bennett was still fast asleep in the bed next to me, my phone started to buzz with an incoming call. I crept out of the room as quietly as possible when I saw Axel's name flash up on my phone.

"Sorry. One sec," I whispered.

I grabbed my big puffy coat and put it on, along with some snow boots, before I stepped outside onto the balcony; the freezing cold air immediately made my nose turn to ice.

The chalet looked out onto the snowy mountain and with the sun still rising, the light slowly crawled up the face of it, making the ice glitter.

"Hey," I said.

"Merry Christmas," Axel replied.

"Why're you up so early?" I asked. Not entirely sure of why I was acting like this was perfectly normal. I hadn't exchanged a single word with Axel since I'd left home three months ago.

"Couldn't sleep."

"Where's Lauren?" I dared to ask.

"At her parents. You're... Coop said you were spending Christmas skiing with a...

friend.”

“Boyfriend, Axel. I’m here with my boyfriend; he’s called Bennett,” I said.

“Right, yeah. Cooper mentioned that. He makes you happy, Dyl-pot?”

“I’m not a kid anymore, Ax. I’m not your Dyl-pot. And yes, he makes me happy. I’ve got to go; everyone will be up soon. Have a good Christmas.” I hung up the phone before he could reply and took a deep breath of frigid air in an attempt to unknot the ball of anxiety in my stomach.

“Hey babe, what’re you doing out here?” Bennett asked, sliding the door open and joining me on the balcony. His face still looked soft from sleep as he squinted down at me.

“Coop called me,” I lied.

“Oh, that’s nice. You want a hot chocolate? We can stick on a terrible hallmark film until the others wake up.” Bennett gave me one of his endlessly kind smiles that I tried to return, and I told myself that there was no reason in the world I couldn’t be perfectly happy with him. No reason at all.

“That sounds perfect.” I stood on my tiptoes and kissed his cold but soft lips. Trying to shove the memory of Axel’s voice into the locked box inside my brain where all things Axel lived now.

Shit, I’d lost track of time. I’d spent the entire day holed up in the library, and I was due to meet Bennett at his place in ten minutes.

Stuffing my books and laptop into my backpack, I made a dash for it, only to be met with torrential rain outside. Excellent. I ran across the car park and dived into my

little Ford already soaked through.

By the time I made it to Bennett's place, I was fifteen minutes late and closely resembled a drowned rat, with my curls frizzing in every direction imaginable.

"What happened to you?" Bennett asked when he answered the door.

"Got side-tracked on a project, and then the heavens decided it was time for another flood, apparently. Got a towel handy?"

Bennett returned with a fluffy white towel, and I scrubbed it over my head.

"Want to go out for dinner or order in?" he asked.

"Mind if we order in? I'd have to go home if I was gonna be seen in public." I kissed him quickly and headed for the sofa where a big cosy blanket was calling my name.

"Pizza?"

"Good with me." I smiled. One slightly annoying thing about Bennett was that he never seemed capable of making a decision on anything without a large degree of consultation.

Once he'd ordered—after checking what toppings I wanted despite the answer always being ham and mushroom—he came and joined me on the sofa but at the opposite end with a serious expression on his face. Eyebrows drawn together like he was deep in thought.

"What's up?" I asked when he was taking too long to find his words.

"Umm. So... you know my rut is coming up soon?"

My stomach dropped. Fuck. I should have seen this coming.

“Mhmm.” The sound came out a few octaves too high to sound anything but mildly alarmed.

“Well, we’ve been together for over six months now, and I was hoping you’d spend it with me?” He fiddled with the corner of the blanket nervously, and I swallowed.

“I know this isn’t what you want to hear, but sharing a rut or my heat is a big deal to me, and I just don’t feel ready for that yet. I’m sorry.” I chewed on my bottom lip, watching as his face dropped and he got that ‘kicked puppy’ expression.

“You’ll be ready one day, though, right? With me?”

I wondered briefly whether if he’d left me with the out, hadn’t added the ‘with me?’ if I’d have taken it. But his question forced me to admit a truth that I’d been avoiding. I had a great time with Bennett; he made me feel special and desired in a way that was new to me, but I couldn’t give him what he wanted, and it wasn’t really fair to either of us in the long run.

“I really care about you, Ben. But... I don’t think so. Not in the near future, anyway. If you want that with someone, you shouldn’t let me get in the way.”

His eyes went glassy, and he looked away from me as he sniffed.

“I shouldn’t have asked you. This isn’t what I wanted,” he said quietly, wiping his eyes with his sleeve.

My stomach churned with guilt as I watched him trying to fight tears, his eyes getting red. I couldn’t do this; I needed it to be over.

“I know,” I replied, barely above a whisper. “But it’s probably for the best. You’re a great guy, Bennett; the right omega will be lucky to spend their heats with you. It’s just...” I gulped. “Not me. I’m sorry.” And I was. What business did I have breaking hearts when my own had never recovered?

Bennett nodded his head and wiped his eyes once more.

I wasn’t sure what I was supposed to do next. I hadn’t eaten all day, and he’d already ordered me a pizza, but how fucking awkward is it to eat pizza with someone you’ve just broken up with.

In the end, I decided that it was best to get out of there and grab something to eat on the way home. “I’m gonna go, Ben. I should give you some space.”

Also, I would like to no longer sit here awkwardly.

After an uncomfortable, stilted hug, I got out of there and headed back into the rain.

I knew I’d miss Bennett but there was a slight relief to breaking up. Despite working quite hard to avoid thinking about it, guilt always lingered over the fact I loved someone else even when I tried not to.

I liked Bennett a lot, but did I love him? Not even a drop in the ocean compared to what I felt for Axel, and wasn’t that a gut punch?

I didn’t update anyone back home except Adam, but he was on the other side of the country. Even on my fortnightly calls to my Mom and Cooper, I kept up pretences, not wanting it to get back to Axel that I was alone when he was inevitably preparing to become den mates with Lauren. It was too sad and depressing to picture, so I kept it to myself.

“You won’t be home at all over summer?” Cooper asked the month before I was due back.

“No, I’m literally going to be shoving all my things into storage and then going straight to Italy before I come back here for second year,” I explained.

On a bit of a whim, I’d applied for a short story competition, the winner getting to spend two months on a writing retreat in the Italian countryside. I couldn’t wait.

“Oh, okay. I miss you, Dyl. You’ll come home eventually, right?”

“Of course, I promise I’ll be back for Christmas this year,” I said, and I decided then that I’d keep that promise. I could only avoid home for so long and I did miss my family. Maybe by the time I finally made it back to Foxwood Hollow, I’d be over Axel. Maybe pigs would fly also. Anything was possible.

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Chapter Seven

19 years old

“ U mph,” I grunted as Cooper barreled into me just as I’d walked inside the front door. He wrapped his arms around me and squeezed me so tight I was a little worried I might pop.

“I missed you,” he mumbled into my hair.

“Missed you, too. But. Breathing. Essential,” I gasped.

“Sorry.” He looked sheepish.

Behind him, Mom and Abbie waited patiently for their more civilised forms of affection.

“I’m gonna fatten you up so good,” Abbie said, leading me towards the kitchen, which smelled amazing.

I’d arrived on Christmas Eve and planned to leave the day after Boxing Day under the guise that there was a New Year’s Eve party that I was dying to get back for.

In reality, though, it was damage control. I needed minimal opportunity to see Axel because I knew it would set me back to square one.

For the first time in my life, I was almost content to be on my own. I dated alphas

here and there, but mostly, I spent time with my best friends, Iqra and George.

We'd met back in June at a creative writing course and had quickly become inseparable, even changing our accommodation at the last minute so the three of us could share during our second year. I felt a sense of belonging with them that I'd never really experienced before. I knew that if I could survive the next few days here relatively unscathed, that when I left, I'd have them there to pick me back up again. They knew all about my lifetime spent pining for Axel, after all.

Christmas Eve turned out to be much better than I'd anticipated. We all drank lots of mulled wine while Abbie plied us with endless amounts of her festive culinary creations.

Christmas Day was more of the same, only with a game of Settlers of Catan that nearly had us all prepared to kill each other.

That night, stuffed full of turkey and wine, I'd fallen asleep with a smile on my face, actually happy to be home surrounded by my family.

Over breakfast on boxing day, Cooper said, "Axel's coming over today if you want to hang out with us?"

I chewed on my food slowly, buying myself a bit of time. I'd come prepared for this eventuality.

"Actually, Adam's home and I said I'd see him before I leave tomorrow."

"So you won't see Axel at all while you're back, then?"

"Yeah, no. Probably not. He's your friend, Coop. Not mine."

Cooper frowned at that. “I mean, obviously, he’s my friend, but you’ve known him basically your whole life. It’s not like he’s a random stranger.”

“I’m sure I’ll see him plenty when I’m back over the summer; don’t sweat it,” I said and quickly cleared away my plate so I could escape Cooper’s scrutinising gaze.

“If you come back this summer,” Coop muttered under his breath when I’d made it as far as the door. I ignored him and continued on.

“Hey, little omega. It’s good to see you,” Adam said, wrapping me in a giant bear hug. I took a deep breath; I’d missed his smell.

“Hey, stranger.”

Inside Adam’s house, I said a quick hello to his family before following him down to the basement, which was sort of a hangout spot. It had a sofa, a big TV and a pool table for entertainment. There was also a mini fridge in the corner where Adam pulled out two beers.

“Want one?” he asked, holding it out.

I nodded, and he popped the lid off before passing it to me.

“Been anywhere since you got back for Christmas?” I asked once we’d taken a seat on the sofa.

He was immediately suspicious. “No... why?”

“Interesting.”

“Why’s that interesting?”

“Just wondering how you got that giant hickey on your neck if you’ve only been here for the last week.”

Adam slapped a hand to his neck, covering the red mark as if that would erase the fact I’d seen it. A bloom of red spread over his cheeks.

“How many minutes do you think we’ll have until Lei comes down here ‘looking’ for something?” I asked, laughing at Adam’s crimson face. “And don’t bother lying to me about who gave you the love bite, hun.”

“On a scale of one to ten, how likely is it that my dad has also seen this but was just too polite to mention it?”

“Ten,” I replied before taking a big gulp of beer. “Ooo, and I think that was four minutes,” I added when Lei’s head appeared around the door.

“I needed... to fetch a beer. These ones are my favourite,” Lei said, grabbing a bottle of the most generic brand of beer you could imagine.

Despite it being December and therefore fucking freezing, Lei was wearing a hoodie with the sleeves cut off. Don’t get me wrong, Lei had nice arms; he was unusually stocky and built for an omega, but the ‘gun show’ was clearly for Adam’s benefit.

“You don’t need to pretend, Lei. He knows.” Adam raked his hand over his face as Lei stood there with his mouth hanging open.

I mimed zipping my lips shut and sat with a shit-eating grin for once enjoying the fact that Adam’s love life was the messy one. Step-brother indeed.

It was late when I got home that night, and everyone was asleep. I had to take a moment to centre myself when I could smell Axel’s scent, where it clung to the walls

as if to taunt me.

After tossing and turning in bed for a while, I got up and headed to the kitchen to make a cup of tea and nab a few of the last remaining biscuits from Abbie's mass baking.

Just as I was pouring the hot water into my mug, I heard the soft sound of feet padding down the stairs.

Cooper appeared, looking sleepy with his messy brown hair sticking up at all angles.

"Thought I heard you get up," he said.

"Tea?"

"Sure."

I grabbed a second mug and once the tea bags had brewed enough, poured a generous splash of milk into each. Placing them both on the dining table, I took a seat opposite Cooper and watched as he gingerly took a sip.

"Why are you avoiding Axel?" Cooper asked.

I bristled, preparing to deny that fact but finding I didn't really have the energy to.

"I... It's complicated," I said, and Cooper nodded.

"I thought... I thought it was just a childish crush. I didn't realise... Never thought it ran that deep." Cooper stared into his mug of tea like it held the answers to the universe. All the while, my heartbeat sped faster than a rabbit's.

He eventually looked up, and what he saw in my eyes seemed to break through an invisible barrier between us. My eyes were stinging with the effort of holding back tears, and my brother got up from his chair to move next to me before pulling me into a hug.

“I’m sorry I didn’t acknowledge it before now. I won’t push you to see him again,” he whispered into the top of my head.

I broke down crying at that because while I wasn’t sure if my heart could take seeing Axel, I wasn’t sure it could take the idea of never seeing him again either.

“He does miss you, though. I hope you know that you don’t mean nothing to him. You’re like his—“

”—Don’t. Don’t say it,” I interrupted him.

I didn’t think I could take hearing out loud from Axel’s best friend that he’d only ever seen me as his little brother.

When to me, he was everything.

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Chapter Eight

20 years old

The third year was kicking my arse. For once, at Christmas, I didn't have to lie about why I couldn't make it home and not only because my secret was out with Cooper, but because I was knee deep in research for my dissertation.

It felt like, despite all my efforts over the last two years, it all came down to this one piece of work.

Luckily, I was in a shared house with Iqra and George again, so I didn't have to deal with new housemates who would steal my last tin of baked beans from the cupboard or drink my cans of pop from the fridge.

There was a knock on my bedroom door, followed by Iqra walking right in.

"Coming to the pub with me and George?" she asked.

I looked at the clock. It was eight pm, and I'd already been studying for six hours. It seemed unlikely that I'd be especially productive if I carried on, so I relented. "Yeah, that sounds good, actually. Let me get changed quick."

When we arrived at our local, a few more of our friends were already there and were clearly several drinks in. We said hello before heading for the bar to catch up.

George and I quickly made our way over to the pool tables to wait for a spot to

become free.

“Ohhh alpha goodness, look at them,” George said, eyeing the corner where two alphas were in the middle of a game. He had a point; they were certainly easy on the eyes.

One of them could clearly feel George’s heated gaze on them and glanced up to look at us. He licked his lips in a way that wasn’t subtle.

When his friend only had a few more balls to sink, he came over and asked if we wanted to play a game against them next.

“Sure, we’d love that,” George said, no chill whatsoever as usual.

The alpha George kept batting his eyelashes at turned out to be called Ivan, and his friend, frankly a fucking Adonis, was called Remy.

Remy looked like he’d been sculpted by Michaelangelo himself. He had tight black ringlets styled flawlessly on top of his perfectly symmetrical face. He smiled with gleaming straight white teeth framed by plump full lips, and when he caught me gawking, he winked at me with sparkling dark brown eyes.

I wanted to lick him.

After losing the first game to them, George suggested it was only fair to play alpha/omega against alpha/omega, so he abandoned me without a second glance to join Ivan’s team.

Not that I was complaining. Playing with Remy was no hardship.

Remy and I won the second game, and I won Remy. He spent most of the game

finding any excuse to press his hand to my back or brush his fingertips over my arm until, at the end of the night, he asked, “Fancy coming back to my place?”

I’d never had a one-night stand before. And I couldn’t help but think that if I began with a guy like Remy, I’d have peaked far too early. But when I really thought about it, I realised I didn’t have the capacity for anything more. I wanted to make the most of my final year and finish with a first-class honours degree to show for it, so getting distracted by love or even ‘like’, wasn’t on the cards for me right now.

“Sure, I’d love to,” I replied.

And so began my friends-with-benefits situation with Remy Adebisi. He never invited me to spend his rut with him and never expected me to spend my heat with him either. He was funny and sexy and scratched an itch without asking for more of me than I had to give.

By the time June had rolled around, however, it had mostly fizzled out. We both had final exams, and neither of us planned for it to extend beyond our heading home for the summer.

“Here,” Iqra said, handing me a margarita in a plastic cup. Our house was mostly packed up, and George had already left to return home yesterday.

I took a sip and glanced around the house we’d called home for the past two years. The tequila cocktail was somewhat helping with the absolute pit of dread in my stomach about moving home until I figured out my next steps in life.

It was a strange dichotomy to feel deeply homesick and total foreboding about returning to Foxwood Hollow. It had been home for the first eighteen years of my life, yet it was also the place where it felt as though I’d had my heart chipped away at every single day.

Three years. By the time I saw Axel again, that's how long it would have been. Three whole years. Because there's no way I'd be able to avoid him for the whole summer.

By silent agreement, after Cooper and I had our heart-to-heart over cups of tea in the middle of the night, he had stopped updating me on Axel. Left him out of his stories, and it was as if he'd vanished. Somehow, it was both a relief and a bereavement in one.

"Cheers to getting our degrees," I said to Iqra, tapping my plastic cup against hers. "I'm really gonna miss you and George."

"Well, I can't speak for George because he'll be off gallivanting around Europe with Ivan all summer, but I will definitely be visiting to escape my family at some point in the very near future," she said.

"Maybe I'll even get to meet the famous Axel King." She winked at me, and I shoved her into a pile of stacked boxes.

"Dick." I downed the last of my drink and began to mentally prepare myself for tomorrow.

No more running away. Tomorrow I'd face the music and return to Foxwood Hollow.

It was weird being home. Cooper had moved out last year after completing his apprenticeship and being taken on full-time. It made the house eerily quiet.

Made the place smell wrong, too.

For most of my life, this house had smelled of Mom, Cooper, me and Axel, and then eventually Abbie, too. Now, the scent of Cooper was faint and Axel barely a whisper in the air.

It was hypocritical of me to be so bent out of shape over the change when I'd disappeared for three years and was hardly the same eighteen-year-old love-sick kid that had left.

My phone buzzed in my pocket.

Adam

I'm in town for a few days. Pub tonight?

He didn't need to say where. The town was small, so there was only one pub. I didn't have anything else to do, so I replied telling him I'd be there, and he told me to meet him at seven-thirty.

It was warm and still light out when I left, so I walked there. I was excited to catch up with Adam. We hadn't seen much of each other over the last few years, but we'd always stayed in touch. The last time he called, he said he had some exciting news for me, and if it wasn't that he'd finally locked shit down with Lei, I might have to beat him over his alpha head to knock some sense into him.

When I turned the corner, I spotted Adam standing outside waiting for me. He had a smile on his face as he texted away on his phone. He looked older, with a hipster beard taking over his face, but he looked happier than I'd ever seen him.

Stuffing his phone back into his pocket, he looked up. "Hey, little omega."

I skipped the final distance between us and wrapped my skinny arms around his bulky frame. "Fuck, I missed you." I grinned up at him.

Adam led the way inside the pub. Only when I stepped inside, there was one scent that stood out among the rest.

I whipped my head around, searching.

Only to make eye contact with the man behind the bar, hands frozen in midair as he polished a glass with a cloth. Piercing brown eyes, wide with shock.

Axel.

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Chapter Nine

Fuck.

It was like being transported to summers at the lake, fresh water and flowers as wild as he always was. The pub was so busy I shouldn't have been able to smell him from all the way over there, but I could. Fuck, Fuck, fuck.

"You okay there, Ax?" Milly asked. She was working the bar with me that night. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

I feel like I've seen a ghost.

Dylan appeared to recover quicker than I did, taking a deep breath and squaring his shoulders before approaching the bar with his... Adam.

Great. So glad Adam is back on the scene.

"Long time no see, Axel," Dylan said, his voice trembling slightly.

It took me a moment to form a response because I couldn't stop staring at him. Dylan had always been objectively beautiful. He had the kind of face that people wanted to photograph, but where the last time I'd seen him, there were still remaining signs of boyish roundness to his face, he was all man now.

When his words finally registered, though, I bristled.

“Avoiding someone usually has that effect,” I replied.

So, clearly, I was a little mad at him.

Dylan gulped while Adam read the drinks menu as if it were a gripping crime thriller.

“What do you want?” I asked before he could reply.

“What do I want?” His eyebrows scrunched together, causing a little divot to appear. I had the strangest desire to smooth it out with my thumb.

“Yes... most people come to the pub to order a drink.”

“Right. Drinks. Um...” His eyes darted along the glass bottles of spirits lining the shelf behind me. “I’ll have a gin and tonic. Adam?”

“Just a pint of lager for me. Thanks.”

Clearly, the drinks menu hadn’t inspired him. I poured both their drinks and ran them up on the till.

“Want me to start a tab?” I asked, tapping on the screen.

Dylan nodded. His bright green eyes were wide, and his lips were parted in a small ‘o’, making him look like an anime character.

They took their drinks outside to find a seat in the small beer garden. There was only space for a handful of picnic benches but it was popular in the summer.

“Cover me for ten?” I asked Milly.

“Sure, hun.” She gave me a quizzical look but then was quickly distracted by a group of women who were responsible for the extensive selection of gins on offer in this pub.

I exited through the front door and made my way around to the side of the building where we kept the old kegs for collection, hidden away from patrons and curious eyes.

Crouching down against the wall, I tugged on my hair, groaning.

Dylan was back. Fucking Dylan was back.

I didn’t really know what had happened with us. The last time I saw him was almost three years ago, the day before he left for uni. We said goodbye, and everything was normal, but then he just didn’t come home again.

Cooper had been keeping me updated, telling me how Dylan was getting on with his course, that he’d made friends or that he had a new boyfriend. The latter I pretended to be one hundred percent cool about.

Then suddenly, the Christmas before last, the updates abruptly stopped. If I asked Cooper how Dylan was doing, I would get a ‘He’s fine.’ or ‘He’s doing good’. And nothing else. Nada. Like he’d become an intangible ghost overnight.

Cooper hadn’t even told me Dylan was back, and I’d seen him yesterday. Why wouldn’t he have told me? Anxiety that I’d repeatedly pushed down over the last two years reared its ugly head, convincing me I must have done something terrible but that nobody would tell me what it was.

Was Dylan just visiting, or was he back for good?

Gravel crunching underfoot alerted me to approaching footsteps. Dylan appeared from around the corner, hands stuffed awkwardly into his jeans pockets that were a little too tight to be functional.

“Milly told me I’d find you here.”

I was surprised he remembered her. She’s my cousin, but she grew up in a different town, and until she moved here a couple of years ago, she’d only visited sporadically.

“Consider me found.” I thunked my head against the brick wall behind me, enjoying the distraction of the slight biting pain it caused.

“Why... Why are you angry with me?” he asked.

It was a valid question. Only it didn’t have a reasonable answer. My irrational mind made me feel abandoned by Dylan. Despite it being entirely unfair of me to put that on him, rationality didn’t change how I felt. Because I did feel abandoned by him.

“Are you back for good, or is this a flying visit?” I asked, ignoring his question.

“Um... for the foreseeable future. Until I decide what I want to do next, anyway.”

“Are you going to avoid me the whole time?”

Dylan’s eyebrows shot up his forehead, followed by a pink blush that crept along his cheekbones. “I literally just sought you out. I’m not avoiding you,” he said, and I raised my eyebrow, calling him out on the lie. “... anymore.”

Well, at least he wasn’t continuing to pretend that not seeing me for three years was some unfortunate accident that was out of his hands.

“How come you’re working here? Have you stopped working for your dad?”

His words ripped at a wound that had barely begun healing.

“My dad died last year.” It was hard to swallow past the lump in my throat.

“What?”

“My dad—“

”—No, sorry. I heard you, I just... I didn’t know. Cooper never said. I’m so sorry.“ His big green eyes went glassy, and a single tear escaped and rolled down his cheek like he had taken some of my pain off me until I was strong enough to have it back.

“I’m guessing you haven’t heard anything about me for about as long as I haven’t heard anything about you, Dyl. Only I reckon you know why, and I don’t.”

Dylan opened and closed his mouth a few times but didn’t say anything. Speechless Dylan was certainly a first; maybe he had changed.

“I gotta go back to work,” I said without giving him the opportunity to even respond. As I brushed past him to get back inside, it was as if the heat from his exposed arm burned my skin. His scent clouded my ability to even think so I escaped quickly without glancing back at him.

When Adam came back to order their next round, Milly served him. It was shortly after nine pm when Cooper rocked up.

“Hey pal,” he said and waited for his usual. I poured him a pint of lager and left it on the bar top in front of him, not uttering a word because I’d been feeling petulant ever since my conversation outside with Dylan.

“What’s up with him?” Cooper asked Milly, gesturing at me with his chin.

“He’s been grouchy ever since—“

”—ever since I showed up,“ Dylan cut Milly off, and I whipped my head around. Cooper kept looking from Dylan to me and back again like he was seeing double, a slightly panicked expression taking over his face.

“Good catch-up, was it?” Cooper squeaked.

“I’ve got customers to serve,” I said before stalking off to the other end of the bar. When I turned back around, Cooper and Dylan appeared to be having a heated conversation in the doorway.

I spent the following hour keeping extremely busy and pretended not to notice when Dylan left. Coop still remained on his regular stool at the far end of the bar, looking like a scolded puppy. It was late, and most of the customers had left.

“Want another?” I asked.

“Please.”

I poured him his drink and placed it on top of a fresh beer mat. Cooper immediately took a long pull from the glass before wiping a damp hand on his trouser leg.

“What’s going on, Coop?”

He raked a hand over his face, then picked up the soggy beer mat and began picking at the corners—a nervous habit of his.

“You know how when we were kids, Dyl always had a bit of a crush on you?”

This wasn't news. Dylan hadn't been subtle, and Cooper used to frequently make jokes about it at his expense.

"Mhmm."

"Well, when he last came home for Christmas, I could tell he was avoiding you, and I didn't understand why. We actually had a real conversation for once, and I realised it wasn't merely a kiddy crush, and it hadn't gone away. I promised to stop pushing him to see you or talk to you. That turned into me just not bringing you up at all because, for a while there, I was worried he might never come home again."

Well fuck. It hadn't gone away?

My heart plummeted into my stomach at the realisation that Dylan had still had feelings for me only a couple of years ago, and once again, I'd fucking missed my shot.

Cooper continued, "Eventually, I could see he'd finally moved on, and I didn't want to interfere with that." He stared at the bar top the entire time he spoke, worrying his bottom lip with his teeth.

"Did he ask you not to tell me anything about his life?" I asked.

"No." He shook his head. "It just didn't feel right to tell you things when he'd chosen not to have you in his life anymore."

And that . That was what broke my heart a little. Dylan had chosen not to have me in his life anymore, and his return to Foxwood Hollow didn't mean that had changed. He hadn't expected to run into me.

And, like Cooper said, Dylan had moved on.

Chapter Ten

The next day, I woke to my phone alarm blaring obnoxiously and a pounding headache rattling my brain painfully in my skull. Why had I even set an alarm?

Bollocks. It was for a delivery.

I'd never intended to become a pub landlord, and on early morning delivery days, I resented it. My grandparents had owned the place. Then, shortly after Dad had died, my omega grandfather had a fall, making mobility difficult. My alpha grandmother decided it was time to retire, and they moved to Spain, leaving me their pride and joy.

Yay for me. Not.

It was probably for the best that Dylan hadn't spoken to me for the last two years. My life had been a trainwreck during that time, leading me to end up the begrudging owner of the town's only pub, as well as my dad's den-making company.

Loud banging on the door downstairs alerted me to the delivery man's arrival. I dragged myself out of bed and chucked on some shorts and a T-shirt to go and answer.

The driver was a man down, so I stepped outside to help him bring the kegs over to the cellar drop. We'd unloaded the final one when I spotted a familiar mop of curly brown hair running past the car park entrance.

Without even thinking, I called out, "Dylan!"

Almost stumbling before righting himself, he caught sight of me, smiled, and then frowned.

He tugged a pair of earbuds out and trotted over. I quickly signed the truck driver's delivery slip and said goodbye.

Dylan was a little sweaty from his run and it made his scent even more potent than usual. Thank god we were standing outside.

He squinted up at me, the sun behind me shining into his eyes. I stepped to the side slightly to block it for him.

"I feel like it's illegal for them to have you working this early when you were on a late shift last night," Dylan said, frowning.

I snorted a laugh. "Yeah, my boss is a real tyrant."

Dylan huffed at that. "That's outrageous. Are they inside? I'm gonna tell them." He tried to get past me to reach the door, but I tugged him back by his sweaty t-shirt.

"Calm down, Scrappy-Doo. I'm kidding. I'm my boss. This is my pub," I explained.

"Your pub?"

"Yes."

"It can't be; Cooper told me your grandparents had sold this place a year ago—oh." It was like you could physically watch the cogs turning in Dylan's mind as he pieced the information together.

"You own a pub, and your dad died. Fuck." His eyes welled up, and I realised that in

the warm sunlight of the next day, I wasn't really all that angry with Dylan. I just missed him.

"Yep. My world didn't stop turning after you left, Dyl. I'm sure yours didn't either."

"I know that. I... I'm sorry I made you feel like you couldn't tell me something as huge as that."

Dylan had never been one to hide from his own mistakes; had always offered his sincere apologies without a second thought. He was transparent in a way that most of us were too jaded to be, and I found relief in the fact that hadn't changed about him.

"Honestly, I assumed Cooper told you at first."

"God, that's even worse! You thought I knew, and I hadn't even bothered to call." Dylan looked genuinely forlorn at that, his face a picture of regret.

He wasn't wrong. I had thought that for a long time. Then, one night a few months later, I'd got really drunk with Coop and ended up crying that Dylan hadn't even sent me a text, even Lauren had bothered to do that. Coop had finally broken and admitted that he never told Dylan. When I'd asked why, he kept saying, 'I just couldn't' but refused to elaborate. After a while, I stopped asking.

"It's fine. Eventually, I figured out you didn't know."

"Do you live here?" he asked, giving me whiplash with the abrupt change of subject. He was sniffing the air around me and eyeing the doorway to my flat with suspicion.

"Yes, I live in the flat above; why?"

"But... It... There's no... I can't smell... Never mind," he muttered in the end.

“What are you doing on Sunday?” It was getting hard to follow Dylan’s everchanging trains of thought.

“I’m not sure. How come?”

“Abbie is cooking a welcome home meal. There will probably be enough food to feed the whole town, knowing her. Come?” He sounded nervous, like it was a big deal to ask, even though I’d practically lived with his family on the weekends when we were kids.

“You know it’ll be hard to avoid me in your own home, right?”

He huffed and rolled his eyes. “I don’t recall you ever giving me such a hard time before.”

I laughed at that. “I’ll see you on Sunday. Tell Coop to text me what time.”

“It’s my invite. I’ll text you what time.” And that’s the Dylan I remember. “Wait, you haven’t changed your number, have you?”

“No Dyl-p— Dylan. Same number.”

“Okay. Good. That’s good. I’ll text you then. About Sunday.” And with that, he nodded his head and returned to his jog, bobbing along the pavement and down the lane.

One thing had become abundantly clear: Dylan might have moved on. I, however, had not.

“Hey, Miss B,” I said when she answered the front door.

“Cooper’s in his room, love. Go on up.”

I smiled at her and jogged up the stairs; only at the top, Dylan appeared in his doorway. He’d been in heat all of last week so I’d not been allowed over.

“Hey Dyl, you okay?” I asked.

When I stood in front of him, he wrinkled his nose like he smelled something he didn’t like. It made me oddly self-conscious.

“Mhmm. Just about to break down my nest,” he said. Like that was a perfectly normal thing to bring up around an alpha. He was young, though, and he was probably still getting to grips with it all.

“Oh. That must suck. Only your second heat, though, so I’m sure your next nest will be even better,” I replied, trying to sound reassuring.

“Wanna see it?”

Jesus fucking Christ. I’d never seen any omega’s nest before, not even Lauren’s. She’d invited me to spend a heat with her, but since I’d said no, she certainly hadn’t shown me her nest afterwards.

He looked so happy, though. Maybe I was making something of nothing.

“Um. Sure. Okay.”

Dylan made a sort of ‘ta-da’ motion towards the carefully put-together soft furnishings piled on top of his bed.

It smelt like... it smelt like something I should not be smelling. He’s fifteen years

old. He's fifteen years old. He's fifteen years old. Stop being creepy.

Almost sixteen, my brain unhelpfully interjected.

He's my best friend's underage little brother.

My eyes flew open, only to find Milly standing over me, splashing droplets of water onto my face from a pint glass.

"Oh goodie, you aren't dead," she said.

"You spawn of satan, what are you doing?"

"I was setting up downstairs, came up here to count the till, and you looked kind of dead. I thought it would reflect badly on me if you were, in fact, dead, and I'd just continued on by, counting money next to your slowly decaying corpse," she replied, a little too cheerfully.

"Well, on that lovely note, we've established I'm alive. You can go and terrorise someone else."

I got up off the sofa, where I must have accidentally dozed off, and headed to the bathroom for a piss.

I had actively avoided thinking about that day with Dylan. The thing was, Dylan had always smelled good.

At first, it was just in the same way that most omegas smelled good to me, an alpha. And then, as he matured and his scent developed, I found I preferred his smell to most omegas, but I didn't view him through any sort of romantic lens, so I'd pushed it to the back of my mind.

Only, that day, that was the day that Dylan Bailey smelled like mine . And I was so ashamed that I didn't tell a soul. Hardly had the courage to admit it to myself.

In fact, when Lauren had her next heat, and she invited me to join her, I said yes. Because I thought maybe if I could share that experience with her, scent her when it was at its strongest, I'd realise I was worrying over nothing.

That first heat with Lauren was undeniably incredible. I loved her. I loved her as much as my seventeen-year-old brain was capable of at the time. And she smelled good, amazing, even. But afterwards, when the pheromones faded, it became glaringly obvious that she didn't smell like mate. Like fate. Like mine. Like... him.

Cooper and I arrived at his mum's house at the same time, so we walked right in. His mum and Abbie were dancing and laughing in the kitchen together; Dylan must have been upstairs.

It was hard to imagine Miss B before Abbie these days. Miss B loved her sons with all her heart, but Abbie lit up a part of her that I don't think even she had realised had dimmed.

"Hey, Miss B. Something smells delicious, Abbie," I said.

"We're having roast duck today. Only the best to celebrate finally having our Dyl back home." Abbie grinned.

"Good luck, Miss B. With Cooper moved out, you're outnumbered now. These omegas will be running rings around you."

"Don't I already know it." Miss B laughed.

The sound of soft feet padding down the stairs was followed by a freshly showered

Dylan appearing.

Droplets of water dripped from his damp curls, running down his neck and over his scent mark. His delicate collar bones and left shoulder were exposed in an oversized off-the-shoulder t-shirt. It was navy blue and complemented the pink shorts he had on underneath.

Shorts which showed off long, slim, and... totally smooth legs.

“Dude, stop that!” Cooper’s voice interrupted what must have been a much longer than socially acceptable perusal of Dylan’s body. Blush spread over my cheekbones, and after I caught Dylan grinning, I quickly looked away.

It was funny how we all defaulted to our usual spots at the dinner table. Dylan and I sat opposite each other, Cooper next to me and Miss B opposite him. For years, this was how we’d all sat for meals, and then when Abbie joined their family, she sat at the head of the table at Miss B’s insistence since Abbie was usually the one who’d cooked us all a delicious meal after all.

No offence to Miss B, but the culinary offerings in this house improved tenfold once Abbie took over.

I couldn’t help but relax into the aching familiarity of it all, even as Cooper and Dylan squabbled over who got the last roast potato from the bowl.

“Well, doesn’t this take me back a few years,” Miss B said fondly.

I smiled because I’d really missed this. Even if I could only have Dylan as a friend, I’d take it in a heartbeat.

After losing my dad, and my grandparents moving overseas, the only family I really

had left were my cousins, Milly and Pippa, and Pippa was away most of the year, playing for the Vixen Vipers.

I had never truly thanked Miss B for welcoming me into her home and treating me like a bonus son. My childhood would have been incredibly lonely otherwise because Dad worked insane hours to make sure we could get by.

Guilt weighed down on my chest when I realised that not only had I never thanked her for her kindness, but I'd been harbouring secret feelings for her son since he was sixteen years old. My food sat heavily in my stomach for the remainder of the meal, and I knew I was being unusually quiet.

After we'd finished eating, I joined Cooper in his room as if on autopilot.

"Fresh air?" he asked, and I nodded.

Just like old times, the two of us clambered out of his window and up onto the flat section of the roof where we'd smoked cigarettes and weed for the first time.

My brain was still spiralling with an endless loop of regret and shame.

"What's up with you?" he asked. Cooper occasionally had his moments of perceptiveness.

"Do you ever regret never leaving Foxwood Hollow?" I asked with my head tipped up to the night sky. It was a full moon tonight, and the yellow glow chased away the darkness.

He took a moment to ponder the question, not seeming too fussed by the oddity of it out of nowhere. "Not really. This is home. I never dreamt of a big life. Just a quiet one where I was happy," he said, more honestly than I'd been expecting.

“I worry sometimes that I’ll never be good enough for someone who... who wants more than a small life here.”

“Like Lauren?” he asked.

Hearing her name jarred me momentarily. Because I hadn’t been thinking of Lauren, although I suppose it was a similar issue that had eventually parted us.

She’d wanted to live in the city, and I hadn’t. I’d been content working for my dad’s business, and it relied on my generation to add to its reputation. You couldn’t exactly up and move it to a big city and expect it to thrive.

The second thing that had put the nail in the coffin of my and Lauren’s relationship was that after four years together, I still wasn’t prepared to spend my rut with her. And eventually, she called me out on it in a way I couldn’t skirt around anymore.

We had a huge argument that started with her being mad that I wouldn’t even spend the off-season in the city with her and progressed to her agreeing to move back to Foxwood Hollow if I was prepared to settle down properly and begin a family with her. To finally, her asking me if I was saving my first shared rut for someone else.

I’d choked up under the direct scrutiny. The truth of a statement I hadn’t even admitted to myself yet. But she’d been right, and I couldn’t lie to her. I was saving my first shared rut, something I wanted to keep for and experience with my mate that would be only for them and nobody else. And I knew she wasn’t it.

We broke up that day. I’d never told Cooper the full truth, just the part about how we wanted different things—her the concrete jungle life and me a small local one. Hence, the fact he thought my latest existential crisis was about Lauren rather than his little brother, who I knew had always dreamed of a big life. A life away from here with new faces and epic experiences.

Why had I ever thought someone like me could contain a spirit as wild as Dylan's? Why would I even want to? I should want more for him.

Would I give up my little life here for Dylan so I could watch him burn brightly in a city bursting with energy? I probably would, only he would light up the sky, and I would dim to nothing. Just ashes left in his wake.

"Sure, like Lauren," I replied to Cooper, barely a whisper. My mind had wandered to an alternate universe, possibly even bleaker than this one.

Chapter Eleven

“We just need to actually hire someone,” Milly suggested for the hundredth time.

“Like who? People annoy me,” I replied grumpily as I wiped down the bar top. It was a Monday night, so things were slow. Only a few locals in, and Cooper was sitting at the bar.

“You’re hiring?” Cooper asked.

“Axel is gonna work himself into an early grave if he tries to do a full den-making season and work behind the bar every evening,” Milly explained.

“I managed it in the Spring,” I said indignantly.

“You were practically a zombie by the end of the month. I’m not debating this with you, Ax. Fucking hire someone, or I will.”

“Who’s the boss here?” I asked.

Milly merely looked at me with her eyebrow raised, telling me neither of us wanted her to answer that question out loud. I might have owned the pub, but Milly was the one who kept the place from crumbling to the ground.

“What about Dylan?” Cooper said.

“What about Dylan?” I asked.

“He said a few days ago that he was looking for a temp job until he figured out what he wants to do next. He’s never worked behind a bar before, but let’s be honest, he’s smarter than all three of us put together, so I think he could keep up.”

Milly looked at me expectantly, daring me to come up with an excuse. “He’d certainly attract a few extra punters with that pretty face of his.”

Not the way to convince me. I growled involuntarily.

Cooper was already dialling on his phone.

“Hey, Dyl. Might have found some work for you.”

Apparently, I was getting no say in the matter.

“Axel needs bar staff to help cover den-making season. Fancy it?”

Milly looked at me smugly.

“Don’t you have work to do?” I mouthed at her.

She smirked and went back to pulling the tap handle, emptying the bright purple line cleaner into a metal bucket underneath.

“It’s not for a few weeks; plenty of time for Axel to train you up,” Cooper explained to Dylan.

I pinched the bridge of my nose and looked skyward.

“Great. Pop down tomorrow, and Axel will talk you through it all. Yep. Bye, Dyl.”

“What if I had plans tomorrow?”

Both Cooper and Milly cracked up laughing at that with a bit more enthusiasm than I felt the situation warranted. I huffed and left them to their antics. I had some orders to do anyway.

In the corner of the bar, one of the local brewers was setting up for an open mic night. It was my least favourite night in the pub, but it did bring in a regular crowd on a Tuesday, so I couldn't grumble about it too much.

The front door swung open, wafting Dylan's scent towards me before he'd even stepped inside. He had a nervous smile on his face; I suspected bar work was a lot out of his comfort zone.

“Hey, Dyl, thanks for coming in,” I said.

“Hey, um. Not that I'm ungrateful, but I suspect that Cooper sort of strong-armed you into this. And if that's the case, you can back out. I won't be offended. I know I don't have any experience. I'm probably a terrible hiring choice. I don't even drink beer,” he rambled on like he couldn't contain the word vomit.

“Easy there. Milly was complaining that we'd be understaffed during the season, and Cooper mentioned that you were looking for some temp work. No bullying involved, I promise,” I lied. There was plenty of bullying involved. Fortunately, Milly wasn't there yet to call me out on it.

I added, “Honestly, I could really use the help. It would be nice to know that I had someone here who I trust working with Milly while I'm busy.”

Dylan's chest puffed up at that. He'd always been a bit like a house plant that sprung back to life at the first ray of sunlight, or in his case, any minuscule amount of praise.

It was cute, and I'd always found myself pressing that button a little more than I should have.

"Okay, well. That's good. Show me the ropes, boss!" He grinned at me and flung his arms wide like working behind a bar was going to be the most fun he'd ever had.

Oh, sweet summer child.

I'd always felt that everyone should work in hospitality at some point in their lives. It's character-building, at the very least.

"So the main cover I need is Thursday through Sunday, four pm until close. Except for Saturdays, which would be twelve until close. Would that work for you? Even if you could only do a couple of days, that would be fine. Any extra help is appreciated," I said.

"I can do that." He nodded his head eagerly.

"Great. I usually start building from the first week in October, but I spend the last two weeks of September checking in with customers for where they want it and any final design changes, so if you're free, starting the week after next would be great."

"But, when will I actually learn to, you know, be a barman?" he asked, looking at me as though I was expecting him to diffuse a bomb with nothing but a pamphlet for guidance.

"Next week, come over during the day when it's quiet, and we'll get you trained up in no time," I reassured.

"Okay, awesome. Are there any books you'd recommend I read beforehand?" he asked.

“I’m sorry. Books you should read before what?”

“Like, bartending books. Books which will tell me how to pour the perfect beer or what a good wine smells like?”

I really tried not to laugh. I truly did. I even pretended to rub my nose to cover the smile on my face.

“No, Dyl. It’s more of a learn-by-doing type of job.”

He looked disappointed by that.

“But maybe there are some YouTube videos you could watch instead?” I suggested. I assumed there were YouTube videos for anything, and if doing some research would make him less nervous, have at it.

“Great idea! Maybe I could stay for a while and watch you work?”

Sweet Dylan Bailey was going to be the death of me.

Chapter Twelve

I checked my watch for the millionth time before returning my attention to the closed front door of the pub. We opened at twelve, but I'd told Dylan to get here at eleven thirty so I could show him what we did to prepare beforehand.

I'd given Milly the day off since she worked as much as I did, and there was no need for three people to man the bar on a slow Monday.

Over the weekend, Dylan had texted a couple of times, telling me he'd found a great YouTuber who demonstrated how to pour the perfect pint and so he was pretty convinced he'd nail it right away.

I hoped he wouldn't be too disappointed if it took him a few tries to get the hang of it. Dylan was one of the most intelligent people I'd ever known... academically. Practically, however... Well, I'd seen him lose more than once to a can opener.

After what felt like aeons of waiting, there was a firm knock on the pub doors. I unlocked them, jiggling the key a few times because it always got a bit stuck, and I made a mental note to spray it with some WD40 so that Dylan wouldn't have any problems if he were opening or locking up. Milly would probably thank me for it, too.

I swayed slightly when I finally got the door open. Was Dylan spraying himself with pheromone enhancers or something? I didn't remember being quite this affected by his scent before he left for uni, although I suppose I'd had years of practice. This had been like a hit after three years of sobriety. There was no giving it up again, that was

for sure.

“Are you gonna let me in?” Dylan asked, lips quirked into a smile.

“Oh. Yes. Sorry, here.” I stepped back and followed behind him as he made his way to the bar.

He looked smart, dressed in faded black skinny jeans that hugged his peachy arse in a way that had me biting my fist. On top, he had on a dark green polo that brought out the moss green of his eyes, which sparkled with insurmountable life and energy that was all Dylan.

“Working here probably won’t be like you’re used to—“

”—I’m not afraid of hard work, Axel,” he interrupted, glaring at me.

“That wasn’t what I meant. I only meant you’re probably used to a bit more excitement than you’ll find here. It’s nothing but a small town pub,” I explained.

“It is?” he asked, his voice laced heavily with sarcasm. “You don’t say. It’s almost like I was born and raised in this town.” He arched a perfectly tweezed eyebrow at me.

“Touché.”

Once I’d shown Dylan where to do the cash count and how to open up the till, we took all the chairs from off the tables and put out some beer mats. By the time all that was done, it was noon, so I opened the main door and used a wedge so passers-by could see we were open for business.

Half an hour later, one of our regulars, John, a retired painter and decorator, came in

and ordered his usual.

For the first time, I let Dylan watch me pour, and he studied me like there would be an exam afterwards. Then, I rang it through the till, showing him the correct buttons to press and how to set up a tab. His fingers twitched like he was dying to take notes, and I stifled a smile.

“Got underage workers now, do you?” John asked gruffly, nodding his head at Dylan like he couldn’t hear him.

“Dylan’s twenty-one, John. He’s Cooper Bailey’s younger brother, remember?”

“I heard he’d ditched small-town life to get a degree,” John muttered, saying ‘degree’ like Dylan had left to join some kind of fascist organisation to be ashamed of.

“He did go and get a degree. And now he’s working here,” Dylan interjected, clearly fed up with being talked about like he wasn’t there. He smiled menacingly at John.

“Not much of a degree if all it’s landed you is a bar job in a town like this.”

I had been about to step in and explain to John that Dylan was only doing this temporarily as a favour to me. That he’d be onto bigger and better things in no time at all. Just watch. But then Dylan’s next words stole those thoughts immediately.

“Respectfully, Mr Faron, I disagree. Locals like this are community hubs for a town like ours. They help combat loneliness, are a venue for music, and keep local brewers in business. Not to mention that I’d imagine you’d be pretty gutted if this place closed down,” Dylan said sanctimoniously.

I didn’t bother to fight the smile that spread wide across my face. Dylan was a spitfire when he wanted to be and the way he called the town ‘ours’ was more of a comfort

than it ought to have been.

“He’s even worse than that cousin of yours,” John grumbled. “Well, Dylan Bailey , put your money where your mouth is and pour us another pint, will you.” He downed the last of his drink and eyed him expectantly.

At that, Dylan suddenly looked like a deer in headlights, but then, like I could peer inside his brain, I saw the moment he’d had a word with himself, told himself he’d watched the videos and watched me, and he could pour a pint.

Grabbing a fresh glass, he methodically held it with precision at a forty-five-degree angle before doing a sharp pull on the tap handle. Three long pulls, and he set it under the tap to settle for a moment while he added the order to John’s tab. Then, he returned and added a final small pull to give the pint the perfect amount of head before placing it on a beer mat in front of John. Dylan had the smuggest look on his face, and I couldn’t blame him. In fact, I was proud of him.

Working here might not be anything like what he’d been used to those last few years, but one thing that never changed about Dylan was his tenacity. There wasn’t a challenge he wouldn’t rise to with the determination of a dog with a bone.

“That was perfect, Dyl, you’re smashing it,” I praised him, and he beamed all the way to his eyes.

“See, studying pays off. It should be considered a transferable skill on my CV, really,” Dylan said, going off on a tangent.

“Not many people study quite so proficiently as you do, lo— Dylan.”

As always, he blossomed under the praise, and my brain helpfully took that moment to suggest that he probably had a praise kink, and wouldn’t that be fun?

With a handful of customers served and having gone through most of the basics with Dylan, there wasn't much to do. Just minutes after John had gone and taken a seat out of earshot of us, Dylan asked me a question that had clearly been on the tip of his tongue for a while.

"So, uhm. I noticed that I haven't seen Lauren since I've been back." He wiped at the perfectly clean bartop with a tea towel in a transparent effort to make the conversation seem casual. I fought the urge to snort a laugh.

"She still lives in Raynard."

"Oh. I can't really scent her here. Has it been a while since she visited?" He glanced at me over his shoulder with curious eyes.

I could just tell him we broke up almost two years ago... I could .

"Yeah, it's been a while," I replied instead.

He huffed, clearly irritated at not getting a clear answer to his inquisition.

A few minutes of silence passed by before Dylan turned to face me with his hands on his hips. "Are you still together or not?" he blurted.

I appreciated how reliably short on patience Dylan was and burst out laughing at his pouty face, which only stood to infuriate him more.

"I don't see why this is funny," he snipped.

When I finally stopped laughing, I explained, "Sorry. I just knew what you meant the whole time and was waiting to see how long until you just asked me outright, and it really wasn't very long at all." I laughed some more, but then he stomped off to the

far end of the bar in a strop and began taking the clean glasses out of the dishwasher aggressively enough that I was mildly concerned he might accidentally break something.

Approaching him like you might a skittish deer, I placed a hand on his shoulder and turned him to face me. He glared up like an angry kitten, and I had to really fight the urge to smile.

“We aren’t together anymore. Haven’t been in a long while,” I said.

“How long?” He looked sad for some reason I couldn’t understand.

“Almost two years.”

Dylan’s mouth popped open in surprise. He looked like he was about to ask me why I didn’t tell him, but then he clearly remembered why and just appeared sad again.

“Do you miss her?” he asked instead.

“No, not anymore. It was a long time coming. The last time I spoke to her, she was engaged and expecting a kit. I was happy for her,” I explained honestly. It had been a relief to see Lauren move on and no longer feel responsible for holding her back from a future I couldn’t give her.

“You were?”

I fought the urge to roll my eyes at his pedantry. “I am .”

Chapter Thirteen

O n Saturday, I was working with Cooper for a change. We were a few weeks into den-making season, and my client, Mr Miller, was wealthy enough to be forking out for electric hookup in his den. It was nice having company while I worked.

Mr Miller had chosen a design with a trapdoor for access so he and his omega could come and go in their human forms; it had become one of the most popular designs in the last few years.

I'd finished packing down the earth in the main section of the den, where Cooper was now wiring up some outdoor fairy lights that worked on a dimmer switch. My job today was digging out an extension, which was the main reason why I wanted to club Mr Miller in the back of the head. It had been the first and, hopefully, last request I'd had for an extension that would be a separate space for his omega when they weren't in heat, and he wasn't in rut. Yuck.

I'd heard of traditionalists like Mr Miller, but thankfully, they seemed to be few and far between in Foxwood Hollow. Traditionalist alphas only mated with their omegas when they could knot them, which meant they had to be in rut/heat. They treated omegas like they were toys they could cast to one side the rest of the time instead of people to be treasured and cared for. It made me sick to my stomach.

I'd almost refused to take this job on principle, but Cooper needed the money, and most of the other den-makers used their own electricians.

"Check this out," Cooper said.

I poked my head out of the area I'd been working in to take a look.

Holy shit.

He'd embedded the lights into the ceiling, making them look like twinkling stars. The effect was magical. I doubted Mr Miller would appreciate the effort, but hopefully, his omega would.

"Damn, Coop. That looks great."

He grinned and continued tinkering away while I got back to work.

With a large section of earth to try and get through to extend the space, I took off my clothes and shifted into my fox form so I could really get at it with my paws.

Even as a fox, I was larger than most, taking up a considerable amount of room in the den. I scrabbled and dug at the dirt wall, chipping away at it bit by bit.

I'd been distractedly wondering how Dylan was getting on. It was his third Saturday night shift, which was the busiest day at the pub. Milly liked him; she said he was a fast learner, and the customers liked him, too. Not that this news was surprising. Dylan was easy to like. He wore his emotions all over his face, laughed freely and smiled warmly. I'd found myself strangely jealous of Milly these last few weeks, getting to spend hours and hours with Dylan while I dug giant holes in the ground.

Clearly, I hadn't been paying enough attention to my digging. A low rumbling in the earth was followed by a waterfall of dirt, caving me inside.

Fuck. My. Life.

"Ax? Are you okay in there?" Cooper yelled from the other side. I couldn't reply

properly as I was still in my fox form, so I let out two yelps so he'd know I wasn't injured or anything.

It wasn't the end of the world, but it was annoying. We'd been on track to finish by the evening, and I had fully intended to drink several pints while watching Dylan like a creep.

Sitting on my haunches for a moment, I took some deep breaths so that I wouldn't get too wound up by my predicament.

Then I went back to digging. And digging. And a bit more digging.

Cooper went straight home after we'd finished work; it was almost midnight, after all. I stumbled into the pub and plonked myself on one of the red Chesterfield armchairs that faced a fireplace with a few remaining embers still producing heat. I thunked my head against the backrest, exhaustion taking over.

Milly handed me a beer, and I mumbled my thanks. Shortly after, they kicked the last punter out and finished cleaning up and closing down.

"Feet, please," Dylan said, jabbing me with a broom.

"Ow. Be nice to me. I'm tired," I moaned.

"Let me clean the floor, you big baby," he replied, not very nicely at all.

"Night, Ax," Milly called out. "Make sure he makes it up the stairs before you go," she directed at Dylan.

"Will do. Night, Milly."

Once Milly left, Dylan came and joined me, sipping a glass of white wine and shoving a pint of water in my face.

“Coop texted and told me what happened; you’ll be dehydrated. Drink this.”

“You drink it,” I muttered irritably for no real reason other than being bone tired. I drank the water regardless. “How did tonight go?” I asked, wiping my exhausted, watering eyes with the back of my hand.

Dylan proceeded to witter on about his day. I wasn’t really listening too much to the details of it because I was tired, but his melodic voice was a soothing balm to what had ended up being a stressful day.

“I’m gonna pop to the loo, and then you need to go to bed,” Dylan said before flouncing off with far too much energy for someone who just worked a busy twelve-hour Saturday shift behind a bar.

My eyes drifted shut. I wasn’t sleeping, not really. Just resting my eyelids until Dylan got back.

“Come on, sleepyhead,” Dylan said, jolting me awake.

“Huh? Wha?”

“Let’s get you upstairs.”

Dylan tugged me to standing and then wrapped his warm little arm around my waist. I tried not to lean on him too much because he was only small, and I was a behemoth in comparison. I’d probably squish him, and that would be a shame. I could never live with myself if I squished Dylan.

Was I drunk? I'd only had one pint. I wondered if you could be drunk on exhaustion. It felt like it.

When we made it upstairs to my apartment, I flopped face-first onto the bed, smushing my face into the duvet cover, and I think mumbled a goodnight to Dylan.

Someone was trying to steal my shoes.

"They're mine. I need those," I said to the thief.

"You can't sleep in your shoes. You only need to cooperate with me for a few minutes, and then you can go to sleep," my lovely Dylan explained. He'd never steal my shoes.

"Okay," I acquiesced.

Dylan proceeded to remove my other shoe and my socks.

"Turn over, please."

I did as requested, and then he undid the top button on my trousers. In all the times I'd pictured Dylan undressing me, it had never been quite so... perfunctory.

"Lift your hips," he requested, tugging off my bottoms and folding them on the floor next to my shoes and socks. "Okay, you can get into bed now."

"Are you leaving?" I asked, suddenly very sad and emotional at the prospect.

"Not yet, Ax. I'm just popping to the bathroom. I'll be back in a sec."

I nodded and crawled under my duvet cover. It didn't smell like Dylan, and I needed

it to.

When he returned, he freed my hands from the warmth of my duvet and began washing them with a cloth and warm water. I'd rinsed them after work, but they were always caked in dirt, so I stopped bothering to get it all off at this point in the season.

Using a fresh cloth, he wiped my face with gentle hands. The warm water was soothing and smelled faintly of my soap. It was possibly the most intimate and caring thing I'd ever experienced, and I couldn't even keep my eyes open to witness it. But the smell and feel of Dylan, cleaning me up and comforting me, was a moment I'd cherish forever.

When the cloth disappeared, soft lips pressed against my forehead, and Dylan whispered, "Goodnight."

I reached out, catching his wrist and asked him for something I didn't deserve. Not one bit.

"Stay?"

He didn't reply, but he didn't leave. And then he sat on the edge of the bed and began taking off his own shoes and socks.

Relief and any excitement I could muster in this state warred inside me as he shimmied out of his tight black jeans, leaving him in a pair of tight cerulean blue briefs that I managed to keep my eyes open for just long enough to admire.

His polo came off next, and then he opened my chest of drawers, rummaging through them before pulling out a vintage Vixen Vipers shirt of mine. When he tugged it over his head, it reached just above his cute little pointy knees, and he crawled over me to get into the bed by my side. I didn't possess the words for how my inner fox seemed

to puff it's chest up at the vision of him in my clothes. All I knew was that Dylan Bailey should always be in my clothes unless he's wearing no clothes at all.

Having Dylan in the bed next to me seemed to be having a bizarre effect on my breathing. Like I hadn't even realised that I'd never truly taken a deep breath until this very moment, it was as if I could taste his scent as it filled my lungs, breathing life into them for what felt like the very first time.

Dylan shivered a few times once he'd buried himself under the duvet, and that would not do. So, I wrapped an arm around him, pulled him close and cocooned him with my much larger body.

Much better.

Mate was safe now. Mate smelled good. Smelled of us. Mate should always smell of us.

Chapter Fourteen

“That’ll be twenty-two ninety-nine,” Mrs Thomas said.

I tapped my card against the machine to pay for the bottle of red wine and then left the shop, the bell above the door ringing as it closed behind me.

Every November since the law passed in 1998, Miss B has been hosting a celebratory meal in honour of equal rights for omegas. Now that Abbie was in charge of the actual meal part, it was something I looked forward to every year.

I finished making the final den of the season last week, and I was almost beginning to feel human again after a couple of day’s rest.

Dylan had agreed to stay on at the pub until the new year at least. It gets busy during the lead-up to Christmas, and it would mean all three of us actually got some days off each week. I was looking forward to the following weekend when Milly was off, and I’d get to work my first proper shift alone with Dylan.

I hadn’t been alone with him since the night we’d spent together. I’d had the best night’s sleep of my life wrapped around him. Settled in a way I’d never felt before. Then I’d woken up to a note from him saying he’d left for his morning run. I knew it had been an excuse, a reason not to address the elephant in the room.

I’d known Dylan for most of my life, and our relationship had never included cuddling... especially not with my boner pressing into his back.

That night had changed something between us. When we'd brush past each other behind the bar, it was like being electrocuted, and there were times I worried we might choke on the tension that stole the oxygen from the air around us. I'd catch Dylan glancing at me when he thought my attention was elsewhere, and his gaze burned holes into me. I couldn't help but wonder if we were one spark off an ember away from going up in flames.

As I crossed the field to get to the Bailey house, the frosted grass crunched under my feet. It was my favourite time of year. Seeing your breath lingering in the air, a sea of orange, brown and yellow leaves lining the pavements like an autumnal collage.

Cooper answered when I knocked on the front door. He must have arrived not long before me because his nose was still pink from the cold.

"Come on in," he said, a big smile on his face. Cooper was never happier than when he was surrounded by his people. I used to joke that he was a collie at heart, always trying to herd people and keep them all close by. He had never appreciated the comparison.

I followed him into the open-plan kitchen/dining room, expecting to find only Abbie, Miss B and Dylan, but finding an additional two strange faces there.

Dylan talked animatedly to them both with his arms gesticulating wildly. He paused mid-sentence when he spotted me.

"Oh hey, Ax. This is my friend, George, and his alpha, Ivan. George was one of my housemates during second and third year. Guys, this is Axel; he's Cooper's best friend and currently my boss." He grinned. Dylan looked cosy in one of his knitted blue jumpers that complemented his pale complexion.

Dylan's cheeks were flushed, indicating that he'd had at least two glasses of wine. It

didn't take much for him to get a little bit tipsy. I smiled at his friends, relaxed almost, knowing they were only friends and unlikely to be an ex since they were here together.

"Nice to meet you both. You've come at a good time. Abbie goes all out for this meal," I explained.

"I can tell. It smells amazing," George replied.

George gave me an assessing once-over that left me feeling momentarily flayed. Thankfully, his attention was immediately snapped towards his boyfriend, who had gently squeezed the back of his neck. They were an unusual-looking couple; Ivan had some of the palest blonde hair I'd seen on an adult with a sharp-angled face that belonged on a catwalk model. George, on the other hand, was pink-cheeked and almost cherubic-looking with dark auburn hair.

With two extra guests joining us, Dylan ended up sitting next to me, opposite his friends. Although I missed getting to stare at him without it being weird, it was nice having his warmth and scent right next to me.

"How was interrailing? I saw some of the photos you posted and was super jealous," Dylan said between mouthfuls of delicious chicken.

His question percolated in my mind and made me feel guilty. I shouldn't have trapped Dylan behind the bar of my pub when he was only twenty-one and should be off gallivanting around the world with people like George and Ivan.

"It was great. It's actually a shame we have to, like, return to real life and get jobs and stuff." George pouted. "Oh but, oh! I forgot to tell you, guess who we bumped into in Prague, of all places?"

“I’m definitely not guessing; who was it?” Dylan replied.

“Remy! And let me tell you, the guy somehow looked even hotter under the summer sun. I will never understand why you didn’t lock that down when you had the chance,” George prattled on, and my food turned to ash in my mouth.

“Is that the guy you wouldn’t tell me the name of but just nicknamed ‘Adonis’?” Cooper asked.

Dylan rolled his eyes before mumbling a “maybe.”

Great. Dylan had an ex who was an Adonis—and apparently discarded him afterwards. If this poor Remy guy didn’t make the cut, what chance did I ever really have?

“Oh my god! I forgot you called him that,” George said, confirming for him.

“Why didn’t I ever hear about this boyfriend?” Miss B asked.

“Ugh. He wasn’t my boyfriend. It was just a casual sort of thing,” Dylan explained, crimson blush dotting his cheekbones in a way that I usually adored but certainly did not right now.

“Well, I hope you used protection,” Miss B replied.

“Good god, Mom. We’re eating here,” Dylan said, exasperated.

“There’s never a wrong time to talk about safe sex practices.”

“I’m with Dyl on this, Mom. I don’t need to be thinking about Dylan having any type of sex, safe or not, with an Adonis while I try to eat chicken,” Cooper interjected, of

course catapulting that exact image into my mind until I thought I might be sick.

“Bullshit, you could probably eat with a rotting corpse next to you,” Dylan said.

“I was on your side!”

This devolved into continuous bickering between the two of them.

I sat between them in silence, trying to robotically chew through mouthfuls of food as I attempted to think of an excuse to get out of there.

How were Dylan and I supposed to be friends when I couldn’t even handle the mention of someone he used to sleep with?

Once the plates had been cleared of our mains, I managed to sneak off to the bathroom and send a text to Milly asking her to call me in ten minutes with some kind of emergency.

With my phone on loud, I returned to the table, having barely said a word to anyone the entire meal. I knew I was being rude, but I couldn’t bring myself to make small talk when I was so irrationally devastated by images of Dylan having sex with this Remy guy.

Almost fifteen minutes later, when I was beginning to worry that Milly hadn’t seen my text, my phone rang. I apologised and got up to answer.

“I have a really terrible gas leak. My whole place might blow up imminently,” Milly delivered in a dry, monotonous tone.

“Oh god. Get out of there. I’ll be right over.” I tried to inject a little theatrics into my response in case anyone was listening.

“I’m really sorry, Miss B, Abbie, I have to shoot. That was Milly; there’s a gas leak in her apartment,” I explained.

“Oh gosh, no way. Of course. We have Cooper’s old room free if she needs somewhere to stay while it gets sorted,” Miss B offered.

Guilt churned in my stomach, turning the contents to ash over lying to the people who were kindest to me. I didn’t deserve their love one bit.

I thanked them before grabbing my coat from by the door and legging it outside. It wasn’t until I was halfway across the field that the heavy sheets of rain pouring from the skies above even registered.

“Axel!” A voice shouted from the direction I’d run from.

No, no, no, no, no. Not right now. Please.

“Axel!” Dylan yelled again.

I spun around to find a soaking wet Dylan jogging towards me without even a coat on.

“What are you doing? You’re gonna get sick. Go back inside,” I shouted. A vibrating thunderclap rumbled angrily overhead.

“Why are you running away? What’s wrong?”

“I told you. Milly—“

”—Don’t bullshit me. Milly lives in a flat with only electric heating. She doesn’t have a gas supply, so don’t lie to me.”

Well fuck. Who would even notice something like that? Weird little nerd.

“I just needed to leave. Go back inside.” I grabbed his shoulders and manually turned him around like he would return home if he were facing in the right direction.

“No. Tell me why,” he demanded, shrugging my hands off his shoulders.

Another thunderclap reverberated through the grey clouds, followed by a flash of lightning that lit up Dylan’s face like a beacon, and I was merely a moth to his flame.

“I couldn’t sit there and hear about you with someone else, okay? I know it’s a me problem. But I just couldn’t do it. Now go home, Dylan,” I begged.

“You sound like a jealous alpha! You’ve always pulled this fucking shit, Axel, and it isn’t fair!” he yelled.

“Pulled what shit?”

“This!” He pointed wildly back and forth between the two of us. “This hot and cold alpha bullshit. Everyone always acted like I was this dumb kid with hearts in his eyes, but you’d shove people for touching me and then scarper. You’d threaten Adam like I was yours but then go home with Lauren. It’s fucking confusing, and I thought it was in the past, but you’re doing it again right now! If we’re going to be friends, Axel, you don’t get to spend your life making sure I never belong to anyone else when you’ll never see me as anything other than a... than a kid brother!” His chest heaved like he’d been running.

Despite the rain, I could tell he was crying. His eyes were red, and he looked so sad I wanted to take all his pain away. Undo everything I’d ever done to put that look in his soulful, wide green eyes.

“I don’t see you that way,” I confessed, pulling the words from a deeply buried space inside my chest. A space I’d kept locked for the last five years.

“What?” he asked, understandably confused.

“I don’t see you as a little brother, or any kind of brother for that matter.”

“But... What? Since when?”

“Fuck, Dylan. I haven’t seen you that way since you invited me to see your nest, and I nearly fucking died on the spot. I didn’t see you as a brother when I walked in on you dry-humping Adam in Lei’s living room, and I wanted to rip his hands clean off for touching you. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you as a little brother, in fact.” I scrunched my eyes closed as the words tumbled from my lips in a freefall.

“No. That’s not right. That can’t be right. You were with Lauren. You didn’t see me that way.” He shook his head from side to side like he could recalibrate the information and get it to make sense. “Why are you saying this? It can’t be true; it just can’t.”

“I’m a dick, okay? You’re right. I was with Lauren. I had no right to be jealous and possessive over you, but I was . You were my best friend’s little brother, and I couldn’t have you.”

“Were?” he asked, his voice shaking.

“Still are. But I can’t fight this anymore. I can’t cope. I feel like I’m going to peel my own skin off when I’m next to you and can’t touch you. It’s not normal. I know it isn’t normal. But—“

”—What can’t you fight anymore?”

“That you’re fucking mine, Dylan. And I think I’ll die if you really don’t want me anymore,” I choked out the last part, and before the words had barely left my lips, Dylan had shot forward.

His arms wrapped around my neck, and he jumped, his legs circling my waist. I caught him on instinct, and then my vision was filled with Dylan.

Wide, determined eyes peered into my soul and then soft, wet lips were pressed against mine as he kissed me with a ferocity I should have expected from Dylan but hadn’t. He commanded me with his mouth, his tongue parting my lips and seeking out mine. His long fingers gripped the roots of my hair and tugged like he wanted to merge our faces into one. I would have obliged him if I could.

We must have been freezing, but I couldn’t feel it. Dylan, solid little Dylan, was in my arms. I wrapped them tightly around his back, scared that if I didn’t cling to him, he’d slip through my fingers like quicksand once more.

His lips tasted even better than he smelled; I hadn’t thought that had even been a possibility.

With every kiss and point of contact where our bodies met, my brain chanted.

Mate. Mine. Keep safe.

Mate. Mine. Keep safe.

Mate. Mine. Keep safe.

Dylan bit and sucked on my lips like a rabid animal, and I loved every minute of it. Looked forward to the sting and bruised sensation he’d leave behind. I’d welcome it, even.

We kissed violently almost, the years of pent-up frustration being taken out on our abused mouths until we were panting, gasping for breaths and trying to steal each other's air.

Have mine, Dylan. Have my last breath if you want it. It's yours.

Dylan was shivering in my arms, and I could feel his hard length pressed against my stomach.

I wondered if it ached like mine did. My knot throbbed like I was in rut even though it wasn't due for a few more weeks. My balls were heavy and full, desperate to paint Dylan's skin until he smelled just right. So covered in my seed that another alpha wouldn't even dare to look at him. A growl rumbled out of my chest involuntarily at the thought.

"Take me home?" he whispered into my parted lips.

I nodded and stepped back in the direction of his house.

"No, Ax. Take me to your home."

Chapter Fifteen

Dylan

“ N o, Ax. Take me to your home,” I said, just loud enough to be heard over the torrential downpour.

Axel tried to put me down, but I wasn't having any of it, so he conceded and shifted me onto his back instead, carrying me like a baby monkey.

I knew that it was incredibly rude of me to leave George and Ivan at my house while I had my epic romantic moment with Axel; however, I could rest assured that George would befriend a brick wall in a bind, so they'd be fine.

My skin was frigid from the harsh rain pelting down on us, but my insides felt as though lava had replaced my blood and turned my core into a furnace of want . So much want.

My fingertips dug into Axel's shoulders, like if I could feel him solidly under my hands, then this wasn't something I'd conjured up in my head.

Once we'd crossed the muddy field and were back on solid ground, Axel jogged the final stretch to his apartment above the pub. He'd closed it today, giving the three of us the day off. I was grateful for the lack of spectators to our arrival.

Inside, I hopped off Axel's back, and we legged it up the stairs and headed straight for his bathroom to strip out of our wet clothes.

Frozen in place, I watched as Axel's nimble fingers unbuttoned his black shirt. His eyes flashed to mine when he reached to undo his zipper, as though he could feel my gaze boring into him.

"I've waited my whole life to see you naked, Axel King. If you think I'm missing even a second of it, you're sorely mistaken," I said with my hands on my hips.

He rolled his eyes. "You're gonna get the flu if you stay in those clothes much longer, and the sooner you're out of them, the sooner we're both in the hot shower... Naked," he added.

That had been a surprisingly solid argument, and I wasn't quite beyond reason, so I obliged, stripping out of my clothes as quickly as possible. When I looked up, Axel was standing in front of me in all of his naked glory. Long, heavy cock swinging between his legs, begging to have my mouth on it.

I licked my lips and got frustrated when my stupidly skinny jeans got stuck on my ankles.

"Sit on the toilet seat," Axel commanded.

I did as asked, and he tugged my jeans off my feet before tickling the vulnerable soles like a criminal.

"Stop! I'll kick you in your lovely dick if you keep doing that." I squirmed on the seat.

"You think my dick is lovely?" he asked, smirking.

"I might need to double-check, make sure I wasn't mistaken." I swallowed as he stood up, his cock directly in my line of sight. My stomach swooped because it was

perfect. It began to swell and fill up the longer I stared. I tentatively reached out a hand and squeezed the shaft gently.

“Fuck, Dylan. Please get in the shower before I do something I’ll regret,” he groaned.

That got my attention, and my hand froze.

“Regret?” I bit my lip to try and stop it from trembling. I’d die on the spot if Axel regretted even a moment of this.

“Not like that. Not you. But my first time with you is not going to be while you shiver on a toilet seat, okay?”

I nodded and waited as he turned on the shower, trying to shake the momentary insecurity.

“Come on.” He reached for me, and I took his much larger hand in mine.

Positioning us so that I was under the hot spray of the showerhead, he crowded me in a way that made me feel kind of small and vulnerable, but I loved it.

When he cupped my cheek and leaned down to kiss me, I actually whimpered. Axel King was kissing me, and we were naked in his shower. I felt almost certain I was going to wake up any minute, and this would all be a very pleasant dream.

One of his hands travelled down my back and squeezed my arse. He halted the kiss for a moment to groan into my mouth.

“You have no fucking idea, Dylan. No fucking clue how much I need to bury my face in here.” He squeezed again for good measure.

“I will never say no to that, FYI,” I replied breathily.

Before the words had barely left my lips, Axel had spun me around, forcing me to steady myself with my hands braced against the tile walls. With more grace than I’d expected from someone Axel’s size, he was suddenly crouched down behind me and spreading my cheeks with rough hands.

“Holy fucking shit,” I garbled when I felt his wet tongue lave at my hole. I couldn’t even stroke myself because I knew it wouldn’t take much for me to come. The excitement and anticipation that swirled in my stomach had me feeling like it was my first time all over again. In a lot of ways, it was. It was the first time I’d ever truly given myself to someone, mind, body and soul. My nerve endings were like frayed copper wires, sparks flying everywhere that Axel touched, and the sensation of his tongue worshipping my most intimate place was almost more than I could take.

Axel licked and sucked on my rim like a starved man, moaning sinfully. I could feel how slick my hole was getting, but it only seemed to spur Axel on, making him even hungrier for me.

By the time he added two fingers into the mix, scissoring me open, my legs were trembling, and my chest heaved at the gargantuan effort of remaining upright.

“Take me to bed, Axel. Please,” I begged, unable to take the teasing anymore.

He didn’t hesitate, immediately turning off the shower and bundling me up in a big fluffy towel. When I turned to face him, he looked wrecked. His pupils were so dilated his brown eyes were almost black, and his lips coated in my slick made him appear completely debauched. I wanted to taste myself on him. No, I needed to taste myself on him.

Axel led the way into his bedroom and stood next to the large king-size bed with his

towel wrapped around his waist. He looked nervous, so I closed the distance between us quickly, not wanting him to have a chance to question this. Question us.

He sat down on the edge of his bed and pulled me between his thighs. Axel was so tall that him sitting and me standing brought us face to face. I took the opportunity presented to me and kissed him hard, my hands cupping his strong jaw, holding him in place so I could devour him whole. Tasting my slick on him made my balls ache something fierce.

Mine. Mine. Mine. My brain chanted.

I travelled slowly from his lips to his stubble-covered jaw, then peppered kisses along his neck and throat. When I reached his scent mark, I sucked it so hard he moaned and gripped my hips, his fingertips biting into the skin.

I kept going, kissing and licking his chest. Rolled the bud of his nipple under my tongue and revelled in the small gasp that escaped his lips.

When I finally dropped to my knees, I unravelled Axel's towel to reveal my prize.

His beautiful cock was rock hard, the tip red and swollen, glistening with pre-cum. I swiped my tongue over the head, but the small salty bead wasn't enough. All it did was make me greedy for more.

Before I got the chance to take his whole length into my mouth, though, Axel's hand was cupping my face and halting me.

"Is this really happening? Is this real?" he asked reverently.

I didn't reply; I just tugged his hand from my face and interlaced our fingers, squeezing them.

This has to be real. I'll never recover if it isn't.

With my other hand, I stroked his cock from base to tip, watching intently as his foreskin glided back and forth over the head. And then I couldn't wait any longer.

At first, I began by rubbing the head over my tongue and lips, enjoying the way Axel's eyes looked wild at the sight. Then I took him almost fully into my mouth, fighting with my gag reflex when his cock hit the back of my throat.

I sucked and moaned around his length, right where I was supposed to be. Kneeling for Axel with his cock in my mouth. Like I was his. Because I was always meant to be.

"Holy shit, Dyl. You're way too good at that, but I need my hands on you." Axel's voice was all gravel.

I released his cock from my mouth and felt strangely bereft.

When I stood up, the towel that had been pooled around my waist dropped to the floor, exposing me to the cool air juxtaposed with Axel's heated gaze.

"You're beautiful, Dylan. Exquisite, honestly," Axel said. His words seemed to have a direct line with my cock, which visibly twitched. Not missing a thing, Axel smirked.

"Lie down on the bed, love. I plan to know what every single bit of you tastes like. I need to know what you feel like under my hands and all the noises you make when you let go." Axel's voice rumbled through me, louder than the thunder outside.

"Have me," I said, displaying myself for him on the bed.

Have me and keep me. Please keep me.

Axel hadn't exaggerated. He licked and sucked and nibbled on every bit of sensitive skin on my body, pulling noises from me I didn't even recognise. His big, rough hands touched me everywhere except where I needed them.

My hole was dripping slick onto the bed. I needed him inside me so badly that I thought I might combust otherwise.

"Please. Please, please, please," I begged.

"Please, what, love?"

"Fuck me, Axel. Fill me. I need it. You don't understand how much I need it. I've waited. I've been so good. I've waited my whole life, please," I cried. Actual tears spilled from my eyes at the truth that tumbled from my lips, the words escaping me in an embarrassing torrent.

"It's okay. You're okay. Shh," he soothed. "You've been so good. My perfect omega. Bring your knees to your chest. I'll give you what you need, love. I'm sorry you waited; I'm so sorry." Axel kissed me firmly, his tongue sweeping into my mouth, overwhelming me.

Axel reached for the drawer of his bedside table, presumably to retrieve a condom, but I halted him. "Wait. I've been tested, and I'm on birth control... if we don't need to... I've never done it without before, but I'd like to with you." I gulped as I waited for his response.

He groaned into my neck, rubbing his stubbled cheek against my sensitive skin, leaving his scent all over me. "I've been tested, too. But, you're sure?" He leaned up to look into my eyes for my answer.

Instead of responding with words, I stared up at him and hooked my hands behind my knees, exposing my wet hole to him. Thankfully, he took the hint and lined his cock up right where I wanted him. As the large head of his cock pushed past the first ring of muscle, I tensed. The sting of the pressure left me breathless.

His thumb stroked along my cheekbone as he waited for me to adjust. The adoring look he gave me was beyond even my own imagination of this moment. Knowing Axel would always keep me safe, I relaxed and took a deep breath. When I nodded my head slightly, Axel pushed further in, so slowly it was exquisite torture. He paused again, and I was already so full.

“How much is left?” I gasped.

He looked down at where we were joined before answering and bit his lip. “Um. You’re about halfway, but you don’t have to take all of me today. We can build up to that.”

“I’m not a fucking quitter. Keep going. I can take it.” I rolled my shoulders and took some deep breaths while Axel shook his head at me with a smile.

Knowing I wouldn’t give in on this, Axel kept going, inch by delicious inch, until I was grasping and clawing at his arms. The size of him stretched me and reached parts of me I didn’t know needed to be filled.

“Are you okay?” he asked before pressing his lips to mine and groaning in pleasure.

“Wow. Axel King is inside me,” I said.

“Love.” He kissed the corner of my mouth. “It’s weird to full name me like I’m not here.”

I laughed at that, only it caused me to clench around him, and we both moaned at the sensation. And then he began to move, and holy shit .

My slick made the glide easy, his cock lighting up all of my nerve endings with every thrust of his hips.

“Fuck, Dyl. You feel too fucking good. I’m not gonna last long.”

I reached down between us and began stroking myself, knowing I wasn’t far behind.

My entire body was strung tighter than a bow string. As Axel pistoned his hips, drilling into me, I could feel the pressure building. The tightness in my belly and the ache in my balls became too much for me to contain.

It was staring up at Axel that took me over the precipice. His dark hair stuck to his forehead, and a few beads of sweat trickled down his temple. Feral wild eyes gazed back at me, eyes which were wild for me . I’d dreamed for what felt like my whole life for Axel to look at me with that ferocity and desire, and his need somehow ripped my orgasm from me on a yell.

“Oh my god, Axel. Fuck. Yes, yes, fuck!” I came all over my stomach, spurt after spurt, pooling inside my belly button and up to my chest, which was heaving like I’d run a marathon.

“I’m gonna... Shit, I’m gonna come,” Axel blurted right as his thrusting abruptly slowed, and he gripped my hips like there was no physical way for him to be as far inside me as he wanted.

Axel collapsed forward, resting on his elbows and forearms so he didn’t completely crush me, but the extra weight was comforting. I met his lips again with mine, slow and leisurely but with an air of making up for lost time, missed chances. On my part,

anyway.

My legs wrapped around his hips, and I pressed my heels into his bum, keeping him locked on top of me, never wanting to move again.

Axel began peppering kisses all over my face adoringly, and it made my chest swell several sizes larger. I genuinely feared drowning in the magnitude of the feelings I held for Axel. Any thoughts that I'd begun to move on during our time apart vanished from my mind in that frosted field.

Who was I kidding anyway?

Because I was as in love with Axel King now as I had been at twelve years old. Only, unrequited love had been like death by a thousand papercuts, and this, well, this felt dangerously like hope.

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Chapter Sixteen

Axel

“Are you okay? What’s wrong?” Dylan asked sleepily.

After we’d taken another shower, he’d called his friend George to apologise for ditching, and we’d watched Howl’s Moving Castle cuddled in bed.

It had been the greatest night of my life.

I’d fallen asleep with Dylan’s head resting on my shoulder, little puffs of his breath dancing over my skin. I couldn’t remember a time I’d felt more settled than right then. Like finally, I wasn’t searching for anything anymore.

Only now, it was the middle of the night, and I was burning up.

Fuck. Shit. Fuck.

“Oh god, I’m so sorry. I’m going into rut. It’s two weeks early; it’s never early,” I tried to explain as I kicked off the covers to cool down. But then Dylan began to pull away, and he should not be doing that. “Where are you going?” I asked, panicked.

“If you’re going into rut I should leave, Axel. You didn’t plan for this. I shouldn’t be here for this without being invited. I’ll leave, and then I’ll come back once it’s over, okay?”

Absolutely fucking not.

“No! I mean, please. Don’t go, Dylan. Please stay. Please don’t leave. I’m not trying to pressure you, but I think I might really freak the fuck out if you’re out of my sight,” I rambled.

“You aren’t thinking straight, Ax. I won’t be able to handle it if you regret sharing this with me. I’ll go, and then we can talk about it for next time, okay?” His tone was pleading, but I could tell he didn’t really want to leave, and I definitely didn’t want him to leave.

“I saved it for you!” I blurted out.

“Saved what for me?”

“This.” I gesticulated towards my naked, very overheated body like that would explain what I meant. “My rut, I mean.”

“You saved your rut for me? What are you talking about?”

“I... I’ve never... Never spent it with anyone before. I was saving that for... the right person,” I explained, skirting around the part where I had actually been saving this for my mate, and Dylan was definitely that for me, but it didn’t seem like the right moment for divulging that particular truth.

“Really?” he whispered. “You’ve really never spent your rut with anyone else?”

I shook my head. “But I want to spend it with you. I won’t knot you if you don’t want that; I just really need you not to go.” I knew how desperate I sounded, but I couldn’t help it. Panic rose in my chest at the prospect of Dylan, my Dylan, walking out of here while I was in rut.

“Okay, it’s okay. I’ll stay. I’m just gonna go to the loo, and then I’ll be right back,” he said like I wasn’t going to follow him to the bathroom.

Dylan padded out into the hallway, and I... well, I stalked him.

“What are you doing?” he asked, looking over his shoulder with a scrunched expression on his face.

“I’ll wait by the door.”

“For?”

“You.”

“You want to wait by the door while I take a piss?” he asked like I was the one being insane. Like I wasn’t already fighting the instinct to offer to hold his cock while he peed.

I looked at him like, ‘duh’, and thankfully, he left the door open while he did his business, so I didn’t have to deal with that nonsense.

Once we made it back into the bedroom, Dylan crawled into the bed, and I laid on top of him. I could feel his heart beating like a steady drum in his chest, and it allowed my brain to quiet down a little.

“Fuck. Get off me a second,” he said. I really didn’t like the idea of that, but Dylan was considerably smaller than me, and there was a possibility I was squishing him, so I gave him enough space to shimmy out.

“What’s wrong?” I asked, panicking as he began to pace back and forth across my bedroom floor. Not in my bed like he should be.

“This is all wrong, Axel. I don’t have any of my stuff!”

“Your stuff? What stuff?”

“My nesting stuff.” And then the worst thing ever happened. Dylan began to cry. Tears poured from his beautiful green eyes and down his cheeks, and all my instincts went into overdrive.

Mate is sad.

Have to fix this. Have to make this better.

Mate can’t cry.

I jumped out of bed and opened my wardrobe door. Dylan stared at me in confusion as I began chucking stuff out until I got to the box I had tucked away in the back. It was one of those vacuum-sealed bags, and as soon as I found it, relief flooded me.

This will help.

Make mate stop crying.

I carried the heavy bag over to the bed and ripped into it, pulling out all of the contents. Dylan came over and lifted some of the items delicately.

“What? How? How do you have all this?” he asked, barely above a whisper.

The answer to that was obvious, “You made it.”

“I know I made it, but why do you have it?”

“Allen Myers,” I said sheepishly.

“You little shit.” He laughed. “I can’t believe you’ve been ordering my nesting material all these years.”

“It still smells of you. I sealed it as soon as it arrived so it wouldn’t lose your scent. I only caved once after my dad died and took one of the smaller blankets out.”

Fuck. Dylan cried again—big chest heaving sobs.

No, no, no, no, no.

“What did I do? Don’t cry, Dylan. Please don’t cry,” I pleaded.

“All. This. Time,” he hiccuped.

I grabbed his face between my hands and trailed kisses all over. Tried to kiss the tears away. When he began to calm down, I wrapped my arms around him tight, like if I could merge our bodies, I could carry his pain for him.

“Fuck. Okay. Have you got any dirty laundry?” he asked.

“I mean, yes. But why do you want that?”

“Pull out anything that’s worn but not like actually covered in dirt,” he said like that made any sense at all. I did as I was told, though, because at least he wasn’t crying anymore.

When I returned with some dirty but not too dirty clothes from my washing basket, Dylan was already arranging his nesting material on the bed.

He then dashed out of the bedroom and made a beeline for the living room, and I followed. He collected a couple of small cushions from the sofa and a blanket I kept in there and brought them back.

“This is not ideal,” he muttered to himself. “How am I supposed to build the perfect nest with no fucking notice. Fucking ridiculous, honestly.”

I just watched on as he began stuffing my dirty clothes into little crevices of the nest. It took up my entire king-size bed, so we’d still be able to fit comfortably inside it.

Finally, he placed my duvet along the bottom of the nest. With the amount of body heat I’d produce over the next few days, there wouldn’t be any need to be under it.

“Please don’t think for one second that this is my standard of nest, Axel. If I’d had even a day to prepare, it would have been so much better. I promise I’m much better at building nests than the one I showed you when I was fifteen. I could call George; maybe he could get it from my room and drop some of it around?”

“No. Nobody else can be here. And this nest is beautiful, Dylan. It smells like us. It’s magnificent. And you have a knack for this because even your nest back then was wonderful. It was a great nest, Dyl.”

“Nice one,” he muttered.

“Huh?”

“‘Oh, nice one.’ That’s what you said when you saw my nest. That’s not what you say about a wonderful nest, Axel. But it’s okay. I’ve worked on them; they’re much better now. I just can’t really display my full nesting potential when I’m limited to your frankly inadequate supplies.”

“Jesus, Dyl. I was seventeen, and I’d never seen anyone’s nest before, let alone smelled one covered in your intoxicating post-heat scent. I thought I was going to have a stroke or something. I’m surprised I even managed to form words.”

“I bet Lauren made phenomenal nests,” he said sadly.

“She could have made the most spectacular nest in the world, Dyl. But it still wouldn’t be right because my favourite nest will always be the one you’ve built. It’ll smell of you, of us.”

“You really mean that?” He looked up at me through damp lashes.

I bent down and kissed him softly. “I promise, love.”

He kissed me back with urgency, and I walked him towards the bed before lifting him up and depositing him inside.

Perfect.

Perfect mate in perfect nest.

“You gonna join me in here?” he said breathlessly.

Without delay, I crawled into the nest and knelt between his spread thighs. A slight tan line still remained from all his running in those obscenely short shorts during the summer. I ran my hands up his smooth legs, indulging in the feel of his supple skin under my fingertips.

“Do you shave?”

He shook his head. “Hair removal cream.”

“Your skin feels even softer than I’d imagined.”

I lifted his left leg and turned my face to kiss the inside of his ankle before resting it over my shoulder. I repeated the action with his right leg and then leaned forward to kiss the inside of those insanely soft thighs.

With my nose buried in the crease of his thigh, I took a deep inhale; his scent was like a drug I knew I’d never get enough of.

His balls were pink and tight, a slight dusting of hair surrounding them.

“I fucking love your cute little cock,” I told him. When I glanced up, a blush had spread from his chest all the way up to his face.

“You don’t mind that it’s not very big?”

“Not at all. It suits you. And...” I took his full semi into my mouth before letting it go again. “I can swallow you whole,” I said, licking a stripe up his now fully hard shaft.

Pushing his thighs back to expose him, I stared at his little pink hole, and my mouth watered. It was shiny with slick, and smooth like his legs. I swiped my tongue over his opening, and Dylan moaned loudly—so responsive. His feet dug into my shoulder blades, holding my face against his hole as if I had any intention of stopping.

“Fuck, love. You taste amazing.”

I licked a stripe from his hole, over his taint and balls and up his leaking cock. His legs trembled, so I repeated the action over and over until he was writhing under me.

“Axel, if you don’t put your fingers or your cock in me in the next sixty seconds, I will do it myself,” he said sternly.

A laugh bubbled out of me because I loved this side of Dylan. He'd always been so assertive and sure of what he wanted, never caring about outside noise and what other people thought he should want or should be doing.

I pressed two fingers into him, and he slowly relaxed around them. Crooking my fingers to rub over his prostate, I knew when I'd found the right spot because... "Yes. Right there. More," he said. So, I added a third finger.

It didn't take long for me to get jealous of my own fingers, so I removed them, earning me an indignant squawk from Dylan.

I grabbed his hips and flipped him so he was on his front and trailed kisses down his spine. Widening his stance with my knees, I made room for myself between his thighs and spread his cheeks. I dipped the tip of my thumb inside him before using it to rub his slick up and down his crease. Squeezing his cheeks together, I made the perfect channel to glide my cock between. It was a heady experience watching my cockhead peek out of the top before being engulfed by his peachy arse again.

Dylan's petite frame underneath me made it hard to conceive how he took my cock last night. It looked like there shouldn't be room for me inside him.

"I swear to fucking god, if you don't fuck me into the mattress immediately, I'm leaving. I mean it." He huffed, reminding me that Dylan was no damsel and he took whatever he wanted to.

"Since you asked so nicely," I replied, plunging into him with one long thrust.

"Fucking finally!"

I spanked his arse cheek lightly for that, and the moany whimper that escaped his lips made me feel kind of feral.

The sound of skin slapping against skin echoed around the room as I set a relentless pace. Dylan scrabbled and clawed at the bed sheets like he was clinging on for dear life but he pushed back, meeting me for every thrust.

A tingling sensation where my knot formed alerted me to how close I was.

“I need to pull out Dyl, or I’m gonna knot you,” I gasped.

“Don’t. You. Fucking. Dare. Give it to me.”

Face flushed and brown curls sticking to his forehead with sweat, Dylan looked like a wild little animal beneath me. But he was my wild little animal.

“Are you sure?” I checked.

“So help me god, Axel—”

“—Okay, okay. Turn on your side.” I tapped his arse with the palm of my hand, and the sound it made was delicious.

Dylan shuffled onto his side and brought his knee up so I could slide back into him from behind. I fucked into him slowly then, rhythmically gliding in and out until I could feel the swelling begin at the base of my cock. As my knot grew, my thrusts shortened, the swollen ball trapped me inside Dylan, and he groaned as it rubbed against his prostate.

“Holy shit. Fuck, Ax. I had no idea. I didn’t know it would...” Dylan stammered out.

“Didn’t know it would what, love?” I tugged him closer so his back was flush with my chest and gently thrust as I kissed his shoulder.

“I’ve never... nobody has ever...”

I stilled.

“You’ve never taken a knot before?”

He shook his head.

“Fuck, are you okay? Why didn’t you tell me?” I suddenly worried that I could be hurting him. My mind ran over the whole time we’d been in bed, questioning if I’d prepped him thoroughly enough.

“Shh. It feels amazing. Like I hadn’t even realised I’d been chasing this feeling all along. I’m so full, Axel, but I feel like... I feel like I’m yours,” he whispered the final sentence.

I twisted his face so I could look into his beautiful eyes. “You are mine, Dylan. For as long as you want to be.”

That Dylan had clearly also saved this experience and gifted it to me flooded me with too much emotion to handle. I had to fight to keep the moment between us tender because the alpha in me wanted to roar from the rooftops that Dylan was claimed now. That I was claimed now. Dylan was the first omega I ever shared my rut with, but he would also be the last. There was no going back for me. Dylan’s tight heat wrapped around my knot was an ecstasy I’d not known existed, and the rightness of it all floored me.

I kissed him before I had the chance to embarrass myself by suggesting he move in here and be mine forever. Our tongues tangled, and heat built. We were buried in the eye of a tornado, completely wrapped up in each other, and when I reached down to stroke his cock, it wasn’t long before his release spilled over my hand, and I was

following behind him.

I moaned into his mouth as I came, and it felt like it went on forever. Pulse after pulse as my orgasm had my entire body vibrating with the force of it.

It would be a while until my knot would go down, so I wrapped my arms tightly around Dylan's chest, keeping him as close as physically possible, and we both passed out curled up in our nest.

A nest which smelt just right. The perfect combination of Dylan and me. Of us.

Chapter Seventeen

Dylan

“Love?” Axel shook my shoulder gently.

“Mhmm?” I was thoroughly fucked out and had no desire to move.

“You need to eat something.”

I sniffed the air.

Mmm bacon.

When I peeked one eye open, I was met with Axel looming over me like an overzealous mother hen.

“Please?” he asked.

I shuffled around and sat up, trying not to visibly wince at my sore arse lest Axel declare it needed inspecting for damage. He joined me in the nest holding a plate piled high with bacon sandwiches, and my stomach rumbled loudly as if to remind me that eating was, in fact, more important than fucking for days on end.

Before I even had the chance to reach out and grab one, Axel had begun hand-feeding me, so I took a large bite from his offering and chewed.

I'd never spent anyone's rut with them so I wasn't totally sure what was a 'normal rut thing' and what was an 'Axel rut thing' specifically. For the last couple of days, he hadn't really let me do anything myself. I'd had to lock the bathroom door so I could have a poo without company. Even then, he'd sat and talked to me from the other side of the door.

Never in all my dreams of being with Axel like that had I pictured him to be quite so... let's go with doting rather than suffocating.

The salty turkey bacon and the thick, carby white bread turned out to be exactly what I needed. Once I was full, Axel inhaled the rest.

I shivered for the first time in days, and then it dawned on me what that meant. "Your rut's ended?"

Axel nodded his head. "I'm gonna have to work tonight. Pippa's going back home today."

Pippa, Milly's older sister and Axel's cousin had helped cover mine and Axel's absence over the last few days since she was back home visiting anyway.

I tugged on one of the blankets that made up the nest, laying it over myself, and Axel rubbed his big paw up and down my back. The quiet suddenly felt heavy between us, like the bubble had burst, and now neither of us quite knew what would happen next.

"I can work tonight?" I offered.

Axel kissed me on the cheek. "No, love. You should rest tonight. How about I take you out for lunch tomorrow?"

I liked the idea in theory. But something about how he phrased it told me I'd be

sleeping at mine tonight, alone, and I didn't like that one bit. But I didn't want to be that omega who became a stage five clinger after one rut. I hadn't waited my whole life for Axel only to blow it now, so I plastered a smile on my face and said, "Sure. Sounds great."

Showered and dressed, I stood in Axel's bedroom, eyeing our nest. He'd left for work just over an hour earlier, and a pit had formed in my stomach ever since. With a kiss goodbye, he'd told me he'd pick me up at noon the next day, but it felt awkward and stilted, and I was dreading that he might be taking me out to lunch to let me down gently in public.

Not that I'd ever put a huge amount of thought into the aftermath of spending a rut or my heat with someone, but I hadn't ever imagined deconstructing our nest by myself, and it made me want to cry. I felt like once it was gone, it would be like it had never happened, and that thought alone caused a lance of pain to shoot through my chest.

I never enjoyed taking apart my nests after a heat, but this was monumentally worse. Slowly, I began to separate the items that needed to be washed and put the rest back into the vacuum-sealed bags Axel had removed them from only a few days ago.

With the remaining items put on a delicate wash, I left a note on the side for Axel to dry them on a low heat and walked home. My footsteps felt heavy the entire way. Like I'd left a part of myself behind. Maybe I had.

Mom and Abbie were both at work when I got home, for which I was grateful. I trudged up the stairs and stripped off my clothes before climbing into bed and calling George.

"Hello, you dirty dog," George said by way of answering, and I laughed.

"Hey, sorry again for ditching you."

“I’ll take that apology in the form of every sordid detail, thank you very much.”

George’s giddiness was infectious, replacing some of the melancholy I’d been feeling since I’d left Axel’s place.

“Well, you know that scene at the end of *Pride and Prejudice* with Keira Knightly and Matthew Macfadyen in the foggy field with the rain?”

“Only one of the most romantic cinematic moments of our lifetime, Dylan, of course I do!”

“Call me Keira.”

“No! Really, in the rain and everything?”

“Yes, it was very dramatic. And then we went back to his, as you know, had the best sex of my life before waking up in the middle of the night to Axel in rut, and now my arse really hurts, babe. Like I’m debating sitting on an ice pack, honestly.”

“Wow. So much to unpack there. Yay for the best sex ever, though. Love that for you. I can’t believe you spent his rut with him; that’s a big step.”

“I know, right? I tried to leave because it felt like a big deal to do that so soon, but then he was freaking out at the thought of me going, so I stayed, but now I’m worried it might have fucked things up.” I chewed on my lip.

“Like fucked your arse up?”

“Jesus, no! I meant figuratively. Like maybe it rushed things, and now he’s going to pull away or something.”

“You’re the one who said your arse was wrecked; it’s not like I was making a leap, hun. How did you leave things?”

“He had to leave for work and said he’d take me out for lunch tomorrow. I took our nest down by myself, and it was super fucking depressing, so I came home and called you.”

“Aww, babe. I can’t believe he left you to do that by yourself, what a dick.”

I felt suddenly defensive. Yes, it had been shitty to do, but I didn’t like hearing George speak negatively about Axel at all.

“He didn’t really. We just didn’t mention it, and then he went to work. Maybe he thought I’d have gone home and left it.”

“Yeah, maybe. Don’t be mad because I’m saying this with all the love in the world, Dylan. I know you’ve been in love with Axel for pretty much ever, but don’t let that cloud your vision. You deserve the best of the best; Axel is lucky to have you. Don’t accept less, okay?”

I welled up at that. Despite it having only been less than a week since I’d seen George, I missed him. Iqra, too.

“I’m not mad. Thanks, George. I hear you.”

“I better head. I’m supposed to be getting ready to meet Ivan in an hour. Call me soon, though, yeah?”

“I promise. Love you, bye.”

“Love you too, honey. Always.”

I stared at the ceiling for a little while after I hung up the phone. It beeped with a message, and I scrambled to read it, hoping it was Axel.

It wasn't.

It was a message from George with a link to some cream that apparently would make my arse feel better. I quickly ordered it for next-day delivery because—ouch. After that, I pulled out my latest knitting project to keep myself busy for a while.

“Dylan, you home?” Mom yelled from downstairs. It was past ten by the time they got back.

“Yeah, Mom. I'm just in bed,” I shouted back.

There were quiet footsteps on the stairs, followed by a soft knock on my bedroom door because Abbie wasn't a yeller.

“I brought home some leftovers from the restaurant; I've popped them in the fridge for you,” Abbie said, poking her head around the door.

“Thanks.”

“You okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, I'm good. Just tired.”

She said goodnight before disappearing again.

I hadn't heard from Axel all evening, which was surely not a good sign.

That night, I fell asleep wearing a t-shirt of Axel's that I'd stolen earlier that day, and

my heart hurt prematurely like it was readying itself to get broken. Only I couldn't run away to uni this time; I'd have to see Axel constantly, know what he tasted like and what it felt like to be his for merely a snapshot of time. I sniffed his shirt; it was already starting to smell more like me than like him. What a disaster.

My mattress dipped, stirring me from sleep.

"Huh?" I murmured.

"It's only me, love. Sorry I woke you," Axel whispered.

I turned to face him and rubbed my thumb under his tired-looking eyes.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Your mom was still up; she let me in," he explained.

"Not that I'm not glad to see you, but I thought... I thought you wanted a night away from me, maybe."

He pressed his lips to mine in a brief, soft kiss. "I felt bad. Like I'd cornered you into spending my rut with me and like I should give you some space. And then, after I finished work, I went upstairs and saw you'd taken down our nest, and I felt even shittier for leaving you to do that on your own, and I didn't want you to think that I thought that was okay. Because it's not okay. We should have done that together, and I shouldn't have let you leave with only a vague lunch date for the next day," Axel rambled on, and it filled my heart right to the brim.

"You weren't sick of me?" I asked.

"God, no. I'm sorry I was a dick. I won't ever get sick of you, Dyl. I know you, the

real you. Don't shrink yourself thinking you'll ever be too much for me because you won't, okay? I'm sorry if I'm already fucking this up."

My eyes filled with tears, but they were happy ones.

"You're not fucking this up. I'm glad you came over," I whispered.

"Yeah?"

I nodded and kissed him. His lips parted slightly, and I deepened the kiss, needing some physical reassurance that this was the start of something. Something real and something lasting.

"I'm glad I came over, too. You're all warm and snuggly," Axel said before burying his face in my shoulder.

I lifted the duvet so he could join me underneath, and he quickly shucked off his jeans before climbing in. My bed was a little small for the two of us, but it was a good excuse to plaster myself against him.

And then I drifted back off to sleep with a smile on my face, encased in the cave of Axel's arms.

Perfect, perfect, perfect.

Chapter Eighteen

Axel

“Where are you going looking all spiffy?” Milly asked.

I knew popping down to the bar before heading out was a bad idea.

“Do I look like I’m trying too hard?”

“No, you look like a towny,” she replied unhelpfully, and I rolled my eyes. “This is so cute, you’re nervous!”

“I’m not nervous; I’m just nervous adjacent. This is mine and Dylan’s first date, and I feel like if I fuck it up, he’ll realise that crushing on me all this time was a real fucking waste.” I sighed.

“You look good. But also, Dylan liked you when you were in your awkward skater-boy phase, so I wouldn’t sweat it too much. I think you could pick him up wearing a toga, and he’d roll with it.”

“Hey, I rocked that skater-boy look.”

“Sure you did. Now, off you pop. Being late is not a good start to any date, so shoo.”

Milly gesticulated for me to get out from behind the bar, so I pulled on my big boy pants and headed out.

Despite my best efforts to clean her up, my banged-up work van was still, well, a banged-up work van. I'd popped out in the morning to the car wash, but it was a bit like putting lipstick on a pig.

Climbing into the driver's seat, I cringed. Dylan had spent the last few years in a big uni city, probably being wined and dined by alphas who drove a Mercedes, and here I was, picking him up in a piece of crap.

Milly was right, though. Being late would definitely not earn me any favours, and I needed all of them I could get.

When I pulled up outside Dylan's house, I took a deep breath to steel myself before knocking on the front door.

"Hey, Axel." Miss B answered.

Somehow, in all of this I'd forgotten that I needed to face Miss B and the fact I was now dating her son. So I just stood there. On her doorstep. Mute.

Well done, Axel. Excellent impression you're making.

"You okay, love?"

Form words, brain!

"Um. Can I date Dylan?"

FORM BETTER WORDS, brAIN.

"That very much seems like Dylan's decision to make, and given he's upstairs primping himself for said date, I'd imagine it's a yes?" Her lips tilted up in

amusement at my bumbling self. I couldn't believe how much I was monumentally fucking this up already.

She stepped back from the doorway, and I walked inside and headed for the stairs but stopped myself in time. It was like muscle memory to come here and head straight up to Cooper's bedroom.

"Dylan, Axel's here," Miss B shouted up the stairs.

A moment later, his head popped over the bannister at the top.

"Sorry, give me five minutes!" And then he disappeared again.

"Come join me in the living room," Miss B said with a warm look on her face.

The sitting room was cosy with the fire lit. I'd never spent a huge amount of time in here because it had always been Miss B's spot. They tended to gather in the kitchen/dining room as a family.

"I'm not going to lecture you, Axel. I've known you since you were four years old. I trust that if you've decided to be with Dylan, you know there's no such thing as 'casual' for you two."

"No, Miss B. It's definitely not casual. I just... I don't want to hold him back, you know?" I admitted.

"I know." She paused for a second before continuing on, "I don't talk about their omega mum much; I probably should. Dylan might have got my brains, but everything else is her. The thing is, I'm not sure there's a force in this world that could hold him back. I don't worry about that for him. But the Dylans of this world need an anchor, someone to keep them grounded and a safe place to land. There's no

one I would trust more for the job, Axel.” She smiled fondly, and her words slowly seeped into my skin, spreading their warmth like the sun’s morning rays.

“Thank you. That... that means a lot to me. Thank you.”

Loud footsteps on the stairs interrupted the moment.

“Axel?” Dylan called out.

“In here.”

Dylan abruptly burst through the door and... wow.

He was wearing a burgundy suit with a white shirt underneath. The top few buttons were left undone, exposing a smooth expanse of pale skin. The wine-red colour of the suit made Dylan’s already bright green eyes look like sparkling emeralds. He’d obviously had it tailored because it fit him like a glove; he didn’t need to turn around for me to know those trousers would be hugging his arse beautifully.

A pair of black loafers tied the look together and reminded me of how out of my fucking league Dylan Bailey was.

“Wow. You look... wow,” I stuttered, and he beamed at me. If his mum hadn’t been sitting there watching the entire interaction play out, I’d have pushed him up against the wall and kissed him silly.

I shook my head at the image. “Ready to go, love?” I asked.

“Wine me and dine me.” He grinned, reaching his hand out for me to take.

We said goodbye to his mum, and Dylan practically vibrated with energy all the way

to the van.

Before he could climb in the passenger seat, I asked him, “You okay? You seem like you might burst out of your own skin.”

He blushed, and I reached for his face, brushing my thumb along his crimson cheekbone.

“Sorry. I’m just like a weird combination of really excited and also nervous and also like, worried I might wake up and discover I’ve been in a coma for the last week, and my imagination has been running rampant, you know? Because this is not beyond what my imagination is capable of. I’m nothing if not cerebrally creative.”

I cut off Dylan’s rambling with a kiss. Not a heated one, merely a press of my lips against his, slightly ruined by the way I was fighting a smile.

“You aren’t in a coma, love,” I said between kisses.

“Okay, good. That’s good. A coma would be a real bummer.”

I chuckled at him. “Come on, let’s go.” Attempting and failing to be a gentleman, I opened the passenger door and watched as Dylan hopped in. I’d been correct; his trousers made his arse look like a fucking snack. I would definitely be taking a bite out of that later.

I drove us to a nearby town about thirty minutes away that was a little bigger than Foxwood Hollow. Our reservation was at a restaurant that had been opened by a Michelin Star chef. The website said it served hearty food, though. I wasn’t spending a small fortune on a few mouthfuls of grub.

“Welcome to the Den Inn. Can I take your name?” The host asked when we stepped

inside. He was an older gentleman with salt and pepper hair and a slightly snobby air to him.

“It’s ‘King’, table for two,” I replied.

I looked down to see Dylan’s gaze bouncing around the restaurant. With it being late November, the place was already kitted out with Christmas decorations, and there was a giant, beautifully decorated tree in the far corner. Classic gold and red ornaments with warm white lights glittered on its branches and cast a glow around the room.

“Right this way, Sirs.”

We followed him to a table in the far corner, and I pulled out Dylan’s seat for him, which seemed to make him blush.

“Thank you,” he said quietly.

Taking my seat opposite, the host handed us each a menu before returning to his station.

“Wow, Axel. I wasn’t expecting this.”

“Good surprise?”

“A lovely surprise. But—“ my stomach dropped. I’d fucked this up. ”—I hope you know that as nice as this is, I don’t need it?”

I reached across the table to take his hand, interlacing our fingers and squeezing.

“I know. But I wanted you to know that we can do stuff like this. Like I don’t want us

to miss out on the dating part of a relationship just because we already know each other. The truth is, we've been out of each other's lives for the past few years, and before that, we only really knew one side of each other. I want to know all the sides, and frankly, taking you anywhere that will have you dressed like that is a win in my book." I smiled at him.

"I'm excited to get to know all of you, too." His fingers squeezed back.

When a waiter came over, I ordered a beer, and Dylan ordered a glass of Sauvignon Blanc.

Once we were alone again, Dylan chewed on his bottom lip in thought. "Can I ask you something?"

"Ask me anything," I replied without a thought.

"Um... why did you and Lauren break up? You two always seemed so happy. Vexingly so."

I couldn't help but laugh at that. "A few things, really, it was a gradual thing. She didn't want to live in Foxwood Hollow, and I did. And then there was the whole... rut thing." I fiddled with the corner of the tablecloth.

"You really never spent your rut with her?"

"No. Never. She... well, eventually, she saw that for what it was. Honestly, it wasn't fair to her that she had to be the one to end things. I should have done it a long time ago and let her go find the right alpha for her."

"What stopped you?"

“I think a weird mix of love and loyalty plus a large helping of denial, probably. I kept thinking one day I’d wake up and realise I did want to settle down with her. It was comfortable, I guess.” Guilt swirled in my stomach like it always did when I thought about Lauren and how things ended between us.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to be such a buzz kill,” Dylan said.

“It’s okay. This is part of it, right? Filling in the gaps even if they’re not all sunshine and rainbows.”

Dylan still had a thoughtful expression on his face when the waiter returned with our drinks and to take our food order.

Taking a large gulp of my drink for courage, I asked, “What about you? Any notable relationships the last few years?”

He sipped his white wine before answering. “You already know about Bennett. Nothing too serious since then.”

I’m more relieved to hear that than I have any right to be.

“What about the guy your friend mentioned at dinner?”

Dylan snorted. “That was very casual.”

“You didn’t want anything more serious?”

He shook his head. “No. After Bennett... well, I realised if I wasn’t prepared to spend my heart or his rut with him, then I probably wouldn’t be willing to spend them with anyone else either. Casual seemed like the best way for nobody to get too attached and their feelings hurt.”

I cocked my head to one side and scrutinised him as he twizzled the thin stem of his wineglass between his thumb and forefinger. “But you spent my rut with me?”

“I did,” he replied, smirking.

“Why?”

Dylan rolled his eyes at me dramatically. “You know why.”

“I know you had a crush on me as a kid, but that hardly seems like enough of a reason when you’ve held out for so long,” I replied.

He narrowed his eyes at me, and if looks could kill... I’d clearly said something very wrong.

“Are you,” he looked from side to side as if to assess how well the people sitting near us could overhear, “fucking kidding me?”

I opened my mouth to respond, but nothing came out.

“You think I decided to spend your rut with you, build a nest for you off the back of some childish crush? Fuck you.” Dylan stood from the table, but I grabbed his wrist before he could get very far.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said that. I don’t even know why I said that. Please sit down,” I pleaded.

He returned to his seat but with no less venom in his expression.

“What about you, Axel? You were with Lauren for years and didn’t spend a single rut with her. Did you spend it with me on a whim?” he spat.

“No. Fuck. I’m really fucking this all up.” I scrubbed a hand over my face, and Dylan gave me a ‘Ya think?’ look. Which... fair.

It was at that moment the waiter returned with our food, placing a poussin with dauphinoise potatoes and green beans in front of Dylan and a large slice of pheasant pie for me. We both thanked him and after he left, we sat staring at our plates of food in painfully awkward silence.

“I think I’m ruining this because I’m scared that the real me, not the guy you put on a pedestal when we were kids, is going to be a super fucking disappointment once the newness of all this wears off,” I said quietly, using my fork to lift the lid on the pie, a plume of steam escaped and I watched it like the vapour would magically form words and explain to me how to fix this.

When I eventually looked up from my plate, Dylan didn’t look angry anymore. His expression was thoughtful again, and he sipped on his wine while he processed what I’d said.

“I must have been about eight years old when you saw me snot-crying on a school bench. You were in the middle of playing football with all your friends, but the second you spotted me, you stopped mid-game and ran over.”

“I remember; that little shit Ricky Henshaw had stolen your Pokemon cards and flushed them down the toilet,” I interjected.

“That’s right. You wiped my face with your sleeve and told me you’d handle it. Two days later, Ricky came into class and handed me a full pack of replacement cards, double the amount he ruined, and he never picked on me again,” Dylan explained.

“I’m not sure pointing out that at ten years old, I threatened an eight-year-old kid is making the argument you think it is.” I smiled.

“You were kind, Ax. You are kind. When your dad lost his hand, you stepped up to help him continue his business even though you were still a kid yourself, and you never complained. I know you spent god knows how many hours trying to help Coop revise for his exams when he was struggling. I know that you were the best first boyfriend Lauren could have asked for because you’d never offer someone anything less. I know you.”

I tried to swallow past the lump in my throat and was surprised to find my eyes stinging a little, too.

“I’m sorry for being a dick,” I said sheepishly.

“I’ll forgive you.” Dylan smiled and began tucking into his meal. Taking a deep breath, I did the same.

I really needed to get it through my head that Dylan was a grown man and an insanely intelligent and capable one at that.

The pie was fucking incredible and made all the more delicious by the view of the stunning man sitting opposite me.

“You really are beautiful, Dylan. I hope you know that I’m the luckiest guy in the world right now,” I told him between bites of food.

His cheeks blushed furiously and I wanted to feel the heat of them under my fingers.

Once he swallowed his mouthful, he said, “You will be in...” he looked at his watch, “a couple of hours.” Smirking sinfully, he took another bite of food.

It was safe to say that I would never be bored dating Dylan Bailey.

Chapter Nineteen

Dylan

The remainder of my and Axel's first date went a lot smoother once he'd finally decided to stop jamming his foot in his mouth. I could think of much more pleasant things to fill it with instead.

Full from dinner, we ordered a tiramisu to share and I had to fight the urge to reach across the table and wipe the dusting of cocoa powder from those luscious lips of his.

I offered to split the bill with him, but he insisted it was his treat, and I couldn't deny that I enjoyed being spoiled by him. Plus, he had been a bit of a dick earlier.

The drive back to Axel's place from the restaurant felt like it took forever. A few glasses of wine had left me feeling warm and, honestly, pretty horny.

Sitting next to Axel in the van, I reached over and squeezed his thigh gently, noting the little grunt of surprise that escaped him. I let my fingertips travel further up his leg.

"What are you up to down there?" Axel asked in a strained voice.

"Nothing. Just petting you. You're very cute," I replied.

He snorted. "Behave."

Running a fingertip up the front seam of his trousers, I asked, “Don’t I always?”

“More like do you ever?”

“Pull over.”

“What?”

“Pull over. There’s a passing place up ahead.”

We were driving on a dark country road and hadn’t passed a car in forever. I was surprised when Axel did as I suggested; my wandering hand must have been more effective than I’d anticipated.

As soon as Axel put the handbrake on, I scrambled to kneel on my seat and steal a fierce kiss. I reached down to undo his belt and zip while I distracted him with my tongue delving into his mouth. He let out a deep rumbling groan when I pulled his cock out.

I broke the kiss and manoeuvred myself so I could lick his cockhead, savouring the salty bead of pre-cum leaking from the tip.

Axel’s big hand moved to the back of my head, his fingers threading through my hair and gripping at the roots. Encouraged, I swallowed him down my throat, letting my saliva cover his shaft as I bobbed up and down on it.

“Holy shit, Dyl. That sweet fucking mouth. Jesus,” Axel muttered as I gave him the most enthusiastic blow job of my life.

Axel’s other hand tugged my shirt out from the waistband of my trousers, and he slipped his hand inside. He squeezed my arse a few times before his middle finger

found my already wet hole.

Teasing me, he rubbed my slick around the pucker but didn't press in, even when I nudged my hips back in encouragement.

I sucked him down harder, needing him to be as out of control as I felt, needing him to be desperate and wanting and consumed by me.

Stroking up and down his length with one hand, I used the other to cup his balls and bring them up to my mouth, sucking each one and swirling my tongue around them in turn.

That's what finally got me what I wanted, what I needed . Two of Axel's thick fingers penetrated me, plunging in and out of my wet hole as I returned to sucking him off.

The sounds echoing around the van were obscene. My mouth slurping on his cock like an ice lolly, him grunting and me moaning. A perfect symphony of debauchery.

"I'm so close, Dylan. You gonna be a good boy and swallow my load?"

His words went straight to my cock, and I groaned around him until I felt his dick pulsate and his salty cum hit the back of my throat. I swallowed it all down greedily, willing to take any drop he'd offer. Desperate to keep any part of Axel inside me that I could.

He tugged me off his softening dick with the hand still gripping my hair. "Lay on your back for me," he said, his voice all gravel.

I was thankful then that Axel drove a work van with a bench seat, making this possible. Aching to be touched and burning up with the need to come, I scrambled

into position.

Axel undid my trousers and tugged them down just far enough to expose my cock and arse. Using one big hand, he held both my ankles and pushed them back so my hole was on display.

Too needy to even feel self-conscious by the position, I whimpered when he pulled my cock back so it was trapped behind my thighs and giving him all the access he needed.

Unable to see anything from my position, all I could focus on was the feel of his tongue lapping at my hole, up my taint and following the seam of my balls. Then suddenly, my whole cock was engulfed in the warm wet perfect sanctuary of his mouth, and before I'd even adjusted to that, what felt like three fingers slid inside me. My brain didn't know what to focus on, and it was like I short-circuited.

"Fuck. Baby, please. Please, please, please," I begged, although I didn't even know what for.

He set a relentless pace, his fingers fucking into me and rubbing my prostate like it was their sole mission in life. He sucked and swirled his tongue around my cock until I was a babbling incoherent mess, and tears were streaming down my face.

It felt both like time had stood still, and no time had passed at all before my orgasm wracked through my body, causing me to tremble and shake under Axel's hands, filling his mouth with my cum. I could feel my hole clenching around his fingers like it was searching for his knot to keep me full. But I wouldn't be getting that tonight. Not until my next heat triggered it.

I whimpered when he removed his fingers and brought my legs back down. He leaned over me and wiped his clean thumb under my eye.

“Fuck, Dylan. You cry so beautifully for me.” And then he kissed my cheek before licking at the salty tears that remained.

“I did good?”

“So good, love. So proud of you, my perfect boy.”

I sighed into his mouth when he kissed me.

I did good. He’s proud of me.

“Come back to bed,” Axel grumbled when I tried to make my escape the next morning.

“I told Cooper I’d meet him for breakfast, and you need to be up for a delivery soon anyway,” I reasoned.

“I don’t like any of that. Why do you have underwear on? I’m banning underwear from this room going forward. Actually, I’m banning all clothes,” Axel rambled with his face still half-smushed into the pillow. He looked like an adorable grumpy pug.

“I think you might want to introduce some ‘no barging into rooms without knocking’ rules for Milly before you implement your nudity rule, babe.”

“I’ll change the locks. Much easier.”

I pulled on my trousers and shirt from last night and then gave Axel a very quick kiss so I could make my escape before he had the chance to pull me back into bed again.

His resistance to my leaving did wonders for my ego, though. I liked that he always wanted me near.

It was cold outside, so I was glad I'd nicked one of Axel's coats before leaving. This was my favourite weather, though. Crisp cold air, frosted tips on the blades of grass, breaths visible.

I walked back home at a brisk pace as I was supposed to be meeting Cooper in forty-five minutes, and I definitely had dried cum on me.

So not classy.

"Morning," I said to Mom and Abbie, quickly poking my head into the kitchen to greet them before I scampered up the stairs to take a shower.

The hot water was blissful on my aching body. Sex with Axel was out of this world good, but I was out of practice, and it showed.

When we eventually made it to his place, he'd fucked me in his bed, where we both passed out afterwards. At some point during the night, I'd woken up with his giant boner poking me in the back, and things escalated, so he fucked me again.

I wasn't complaining, though. I'd never felt this kind of desire and passion for someone before, and it was even more mind-blowing to me that Axel appeared to feel the same way.

Sufficiently clean, I ran across the cold hallway in my towel to my bedroom. I grabbed a pair of blue skinny jeans and a chunky knit jumper I'd made last year. Once I'd got dressed, I quickly put on some rosy lip balm and stuck my wallet into my back pocket before leaving.

Cooper lived on the other side of town so we were meeting in the middle at the Cluck Cafe. They did the best fried chicken with waffles for breakfast, and I hadn't been at all since returning to Foxwood Hollow.

Going from the cold, quiet street into the busy, bustling cafe was a shock to the system. With few options in such a small town, cafes like this one thrived.

“Hey, Mr Morgan.” I smiled at the grump behind the counter. Mr Morgan Junior, I should have said, since he inherited this place from his dad, ironically the most cheery person you’d ever met. It turns out that sometimes the apple does fall very, very far from the tree. He was like an eighty year old man trapped in the body of a thirty-something.

“In the far corner,” he grumbled by way of greeting, I looked to where he’d suggested and spotted Cooper sitting at a table.

“Thank you,” I replied as cheerfully as possible just to annoy him. He merely grunted in response.

It was good to be home.

“Good morning!” I ruffled Cooper’s hair because why only annoy one person when you can get two for two?

“I don’t even want to know why you’re this chipper, do I?”

“Probably not, no.” I took a seat and scanned the menu even though I knew exactly what I’d be ordering.

“Gross.” He scrunched up his nose.

“What do you want?” Mr Morgan’s gruff voice interrupted.

“I’ll have—“ Cooper began.

”—The same thing you order every weekend?“ Mr Morgan arched an eyebrow at my brother.

“Yes, please,” he replied quietly.

“I’ll have the fried chicken waffles and a matcha latte, please,” I said.

“A what latte?” He glared at me.

“He’ll just take a normal latte,” Cooper interjected, presumably to try and save me from the laser beams shooting out of Mr Morgan’s eyeballs.

That’s one thing I do miss about living in the city. I’d grown accustomed to ordering my fancy coffees.

“You’re such a towny now.” Cooper snorted once Mr Morgan had left to probably make me a delicious latte laced with laxatives in vengeance.

“A matcha latte is not that exotic.“ I rolled my eyes.

Mr Morgan shortly returned with my ‘normal’ latte and... I didn’t know what the fuck that was.

“Um, what is that, and why is it here?” Cooper asked.

“It’s good for you is what it is. Drink it.”

“Why is it green?” Cooper eyed the grass-coloured smoothie sceptically.

“It has spinach in it,” Mr Morgan said, as if it should have been abundantly clear.

“That does explain the green, but it doesn’t explain why it’s in front of me?”

“You can’t live off fried chicken. Drink it.” Without waiting for a response, Mr Morgan stalked off again.

Cooper took a reluctant sip of it. “It’s not great, but it’s better than it looks.”

“Do you reckon he spat in this?” I asked before taking a sip of my definitely not even a latte, more of a milky americano.

Cooper shrugged.

“So... you and Axel then,” he said, addressing the elephant in the room.

“Are you mad?”

“No, why would I be mad? If I was gonna be mad, it would be with him, not you, anyway.”

“Well, that’s not very reassuring. Are you mad with him ?”

“Nah. But, it will be awkward as fuck if the two of you break up. Probably no worse than it was the last three years, though, so.” He shrugged again.

“You think we’ll break up?”

“Don’t put words in my mouth; I didn’t say that. You know what I mean. Is this why you wanted to go to breakfast with me, to figure out if I had a problem with you two?”

I took another long sip of coffee before answering.

“No. Not really. I’ve been trying to figure out why you never told me about him and Lauren breaking up, or about his dad dying,” I said, getting right to the point.

Before he could reply, though, Mr Morgan returned and plopped down our plates of food unceremoniously and then left again without a word.

Cooper squirmed in his seat, his gaze darting all around the cafe, looking anywhere but at me. He even took a big sip of the green monstrosity and winced.

“I... Um...” He began tearing a paper napkin to shreds. “Okay, so after we chatted that Christmas about you avoiding him, I decided to stop talking about him to you because I thought that was the best way for you to move on, you know?”

I nodded and took a bite from my crispy fried chicken while he continued. Credit where credit is due; if a grumpy attitude makes the chicken taste this good, he can grouch away. The skin was perfectly crispy and seasoned, and the meat was succulent. No wonder Cooper seemed to have become a regular here.

“When him and Lauren broke up, I didn’t want to tell you because I didn’t want you to get your hopes up because I honestly had no idea Axel had any type of feelings for you; I promise I had no clue.” He looked pleadingly at me.

“I know, Coop. I believe you.”

“And then his dad died. And I’d already kept everything else about his life from you, so I thought, I’ll just wait for now and tell you eventually. But then time kept passing, and I... didn’t. And then too much time passed that it felt weird to bring it up, and I think I dug my head in the sand.”

The napkin was now fully shredded in a small pile on the table.

I paused for a moment before responding, wanting to make sure I got my point across properly. “I’m not saying this to make you feel bad but I need you to get that it’s not just about Axel. I knew Mr King my whole life, and I deserved to know he’d passed away. I should have been able to decide if I came back for his funeral or not,” I explained as gently as I could.

Cooper wiped at his eyes with the backs of his hands and it was like a gut punch. I hated seeing him upset, but we needed to have this conversation.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“I know, and I forgive you.”

He nodded his head but still looked sad. I opened my mouth to try and comfort him, but suddenly, the green drink was swiped from the table and replaced with a large chocolate milkshake topped with cream and a cherry.

Cooper lifted his sad little face at Mr Morgan, who had a pained expression. He held out a fresh napkin to Cooper before stuffing the shredded remains of his first into his apron pocket.

“What about my health?” Cooper asked, voice remaining small.

“You can be healthy tomorrow,” Mr Morgan said before going to clear a nearby table.

Chapter Twenty

Axel

There was a biting chill in the air as I waited for Cooper to pick me up. I heard him before I saw him. The slightly muted sound of Mariah Carey's All I Want for Christmas pumped through the speakers of his navy blue work van.

When I climbed in the passenger seat, I had to chuck some empty packets of biscuits into the glove box to make space. Cooper was one of the messiest people I'd ever known.

"Ready for our annual Christmas shopping extravaganza?" he asked cheerfully, his lips stretching around a huge grin.

"Never am," I replied.

"That's the spirit."

Cooper drove us to a big shopping centre in the nearest city. Stepping inside was like entering my idea of hell. A litany of trashy Christmas songs filled the air with a backing soundtrack of screaming toddlers.

I really need to get my shit together sooner so I can do my Christmas shopping online.

We headed for the homeware section first to pick out gifts for Abbie. She was always

easy to buy for because every year, she provided a specific list of what cookware she was after and which shop to buy it from.

“Who’s that for?” I asked Cooper as we queued for the till. He was holding an apron with Shrek on the front, saying, ‘Merry Shrekmas. Now get outta my swamp’.

“Just a... friend,” he replied suspiciously, not making any eye contact.

“What friend?”

“Nobody you know.”

“You have a friend who doesn’t live in Foxwood Hollow?” I asked sceptically.

“Remember that time you started banging my brother?”

My face must have been as red as a tomato.

“Touché.”

Once we’d bought gifts for his mum, we went our separate ways to get presents for Dylan. I think he was worried I might buy him a lace jock or something.

Now that I think about it, though...

I was like a fish out of water when I stepped inside ‘Needle Little Help From My Friends’, a small yarn shop in the far corner of the shopping centre.

There were a couple of people milling around inside, and I startled when a woman behind the counter shouted a very enthusiastic, “Happy Holidays! Needle any help today?”

The very friendly American woman grinned as I walked over to her.

“Hi. Um... I’m looking to buy a gift.”

“Awesome! Anything in particular in mind?”

“So my Dyl— I mean, my boyfriend is an avid knitter. He makes a lot of jumpers and nesting material mostly. I wanted to get him maybe a really nice yarn he could make something special with?” I suggested.

Her infectious smile suggested my answer was perfect, which was reassuring, although she seemed as though she’d be easily pleased no matter what I had said.

“Fantastic, well I have plenty of options for you. Have you got a budget in mind?”

“I’d been thinking around ?100, but I honestly have no idea how much this type of thing costs.” I was trusting this woman not to take full advantage of me because I was truly clueless. She didn’t seem like the type to prey on a man’s ignorance, at least.

“I might have the perfect thing for you. It came in last month. Give me a sec.” She disappeared through a beaded curtain behind the counter, and I stared at a wall of yarn while I waited.

I really had no idea there were this many different types of wool. I figured you just picked a colour you wanted, and that was that. I wondered if she might have a book on wool types I could read so I had any idea about Dylan’s hobby.

He’d been knitting ever since he was a teenager, always drawn to soft things. I’d lost count of how many times I’d arrived at his house and spotted him in the front window in a world of his own as he worked on his latest creation.

The shop assistant reappeared with a few different balls of yarn in her arms, but I zeroed in on one in particular. It was forest green and reminded me of Dylan's bright eyes when they sparked with life.

"You have good taste," she said when she spotted the one I was fixated on.

"What type of wool is that?" I asked despite the fact her answer would mean very little to me.

"That's hand-dyed 100% merino wool. I had it in this green colour and in a dark copper, but someone bought the copper the day it arrived. You look like you have your heart set on the green anyway?"

She held it out for me to feel, and it was the softest thing I'd ever touched. Dylan would adore it. I nodded. "Yes. That's perfect. Um... how much of it will he need?"

"To make a sweater? I'd say about five skeins would do the trick."

"I don't even know what a skein is, so I'll take your word for it."

Relieved that I'd been able to find something for Dylan I knew he would love, I was content as the lady rang it through the till and bagged up whatever five skeins were.

I still had half an hour before I said I'd meet Cooper in the food court, so I popped into the gaming store to pick out whatever latest zombie-killing game they had on offer for him.

In the bookstore, I found a fantasy trilogy for Milly she hadn't read yet and was grateful that Milly was organising a joint gift from the two of us for Pippa because I was fairly certain I'd never bought her anything she hadn't ended up exchanging.

Taking the escalator up to the top floor, I found Cooper queuing at the Jamaican Jerk Chicken stand.

“All sorted?” he asked when I joined him.

“Yep. Far more painless than last year.”

“An hour and a half, mate. That must be a new record for us,” Cooper said, looking pleased.

It dawned on me then just how long the two of us had been friends. Almost twenty years. And we’d been doing this Christmas shopping trip for more or less the past decade.

I looked at my total doofus of a best friend fondly. Losing my dad last year had been brutal, but Cooper had never left my side.

“Love you, Coop,” I said, knocking my shoulder into his.

“You aren’t dying or anything, are you?”

I snorted. “No, I’m not dying.”

“Okay, good. Well. Love you too then, I guess.” He then got immediately distracted by ordering enough chicken to feed a small family.

Fuck, he smells good.

I buried my nose further into the back of Dylan’s neck and inhaled deeply. He wriggled a bit, and I stilled his hip with my hand.

“Merry Christmas, love,” I said.

“You know what would make this a really merry Christmas?” he asked breathily.

“I’m not fucking you. You think I want to face your mum, Abbie, and my best friend on Christmas morning after they’ve overheard me railing their son? No. Not happening.”

“Spoilsport,” he muttered but finally stopped trying to wriggle back into my morning wood.

He spun to face me, and I kissed the tip of his nose.

“How are you feeling?” he asked sincerely as he brushed the pad of his thumb along my cheekbone.

“I’m okay, just focusing on getting to spend our first Christmas together.”

“This is only an idea, and we totally don’t have to do it if you’d rather not, but Cooper told me you’d scattered your dad’s ashes by the duck pond, and I thought maybe the three of us could go there for a walk after breakfast?”

My eyes filled, and I merely nodded, knowing I’d probably sob if I tried to reply with words. Instead, I ducked down and buried my face in his warm chest, letting him soothe me as he threaded his slim fingers through my hair.

We cuddled like that for a while. I wasn’t sure if I’d ever let anyone comfort me this way. I loved my dad, but he’d always had a gruff type of love. My dynamic with Lauren had generally been me taking care of her, and I’d been content with that because it was what I was used to. I took care of the people around me; I was someone they could rely on, and I’d taken pride in that fact.

So, I was shocked at the relief I felt at being held by Dylan. Small, delicate-looking Dylan who managed to make me feel like he'd tucked me away in a storm shelter where nothing could touch me as we rode out the tempest together.

I pulled my head back up so I could look into those breathtaking green eyes of his and told him what had been almost bursting from my chest for weeks now.

"I love you, Dylan." I stroked a thumb along his bottom lip and watched as the words landed, his eyes widening in surprise before his lips curled up in a smile that I had to kiss.

"I've never not loved you," he replied.

I peppered his whole face with kisses until he was laughing and trying to get away. My heart felt like it might explode, like the organ wasn't designed to hold this much love and happiness within it.

The smell of chicken sausages wafting up the stairs finally lured us out of bed. Dylan had bought us a pair of matching bright red Christmas pyjamas that were pretty embarrassing but seemed to make him happy, so I conceded and kept them on.

We ate breakfast with his family, and it felt less uncomfortable than I'd expected. I'd imagined a lot more weirdness from Miss B and Cooper, but they both acted like it was perfectly normal that Dylan was plastered to my side and didn't really settle until I wrapped an arm around him and ate one-handed.

Afterwards, we all got dressed, and Dylan, Cooper, and I wrapped up to take a walk to the duck pond like he'd suggested that morning.

The streets were serenely quiet as most families remained tucked away in the warmth of their homes. The large oak trees that lined the streets were shrouded in mist as we

made our way to the park, Dylan's gloved hand in mine the entire time.

When we arrived at the pond, I was surprised to find that it wasn't frozen over and the ducks were still swimming around. Dylan retrieved a sandwich bag from his coat pocket and removed a glove so he could reach a hand inside and pull out some of the contents.

"What's on the menu for them?" I asked.

"Oats and raisins. Don't tell Abbie I raided the pantry without asking."

He passed me the bag, and I tossed a handful of food to the now very eager ducks that had swarmed us.

"Do you remember that time when we'd been playing footy, and it landed in the middle of the pond? You got in to get it, and your dad hosed you down in your undies before you were allowed back in the house." Cooper chuckled.

I laughed, remembering it well. "One of many times he ended up hosing me down in the garden."

Cooper grabbed a handful from the sandwich bag and popped a few of the raisins in his mouth to chew before tossing the rest to a goose.

"Remember when we got drunk at Lei's sixteenth birthday party, and he had to come pick us up? The next morning, he started to bash the kitchen pans with a spoon as punishment. I thought my brain was gonna leak out my head," I said.

"Oh god, I think I'd blocked that out. I haven't touched Sambuca again since that night." Cooper shuddered at the memory.

I squeezed Dylan's hand in mine. "I wish he could have met you as my boyfriend, Dyl. But I'm glad he met you all the same."

"He used to ask me why all Mum's common sense had skipped me, and Dylan had inherited it all." Cooper laughed.

"I never told you this, but my first box of yarn was from your dad. He'd popped around with it one day when it was just me and Mom home. Said he'd been gifted it by a customer but had no use of it and thought I might like it. Mom found an old set of my omega mum's knitting needles, and I pulled up some tutorials on YouTube. I might never have knitted a thing if it wasn't for your dad," Dylan said with his gaze on the water.

"I never knew that," Cooper said, and they both smiled.

I stepped behind Dylan and wrapped my arms around his chest, resting my chin on the top of his head.

"Thank you for this," I whispered into his soft hair.

How did I get so lucky? And why had I waited so long to make him mine?

Chapter Twenty-one

Dylan

This was shaping up to be one of the greatest Christmases of my life.

Axel King loved me.

I felt like I'd been choking back the words for weeks, desperately trying not to scare him off before his feelings had caught up with mine. If that was even a possibility.

We all gathered in the living room before Christmas dinner to open gifts. Mine, of course, were the beautifully wrapped ones in craft paper with tasteful little red reindeer stamped on, complete with white ribbons that I'd curled using scissors.

I tried not to grimace when Cooper handed me my gift from him. It looked like it was held together with electrical tape. Scratch that, it was held together with electrical tape.

Tearing into it so the evidence of his dreadful wrapping would make it quickly into the rubbish bag, I smiled when I saw an early edition of one of my favourite children's books, *The Wind in the Willows*.

"Oh my god, Coop. Where did you find this?"

"I had a job a few weeks ago over in Vixon Willow; they have that rare bookshop on the town street there." He smiled.

“Thank you, it’s beautiful.” I ran my index finger down the cover carefully.

“Here you go, Axel.” Mom passed him his gift from me, and I bit down on the edge of my thumb in anticipation.

“Is it safe for him to open in front of your family?” Cooper teased, and I rolled my eyes.

This gift was.

Axel opened the present carefully, tugging off the ribbon before picking at the tape so the paper didn’t tear. When he folded back the paper, he brushed his hand over the soft item before holding it up.

“Wow, Dyl. You really made this? It’s beautiful. I can’t believe how soft it is,” he said reverently. I’d never made Axel anything before, and I wasn’t totally sure why. Maybe I had, in fact, had some self-preservation when I was growing up, although I suspect it had more to do with feeling like my skills weren’t up to par to make anything good enough for him yet.

“It should fit. I stole one of your jumpers to get the sizing right.”

He got up immediately and pulled off the charcoal grey zip-up he’d been wearing to put on the dark copper-knitted jumper. It fitted him perfectly like I knew it would, and the orange hue suited his complexion, bringing out the amber tones of his brown eyes.

“It’s perfect, love. Thank you.” He tugged me to stand and pressed a quick kiss to my lips. It was chaste, but the fact he was happy to be affectionate with me in front of my family lit me up brighter than Abbie’s gaudy Christmas tree. “Open mine next,” he said.

Abbie passed me over my gift, wrapped neatly with candy cane wrapping paper, and I dove into it not very gracefully at all. My eyes bugged out of my head when I recognised the wool.

“You... how? You got this from Clarissa’s shop?” I bumbled out.

“Of course you know the owner of the yarn shop by name.” He laughed.

“Obviously, I’m probably her most loyal customer. This wool is the green-dyed version of what I bought to knit you that jumper.” I pointed at his chest.

“Well, now I feel bad because I only got you the wool, and you bought wool and turned it into something lovely.”

“No way, I was pining after this yarn, but I couldn’t justify getting both. Now I can make myself a matching jumper.”

“More matching outfits for you two, how cute,” Cooper mocked.

“You can return it if you’d prefer something else?” Axel asked.

I clutched the wool to my chest, guarding it from them all. “Absolutely not,” I said, rubbing one of the twists of wool against my cheek.

So fucking soft.

My face ached from beaming like an imbecile since the second I woke up. Something as simple as sitting on the sofa, holding Axel’s hand while my family all nattered away, was somehow even more satisfying than all the scenarios I’d dreamed up over the years.

I looked down at where our fingers were interlinked and squeezed. Axel continued his conversation with Abbie but stroked his thumb over the back of my hand in acknowledgement, and the small gesture released a weight I hadn't even realised I'd still been carrying. The tiniest, most insignificant interaction and yet I'd never felt more seen. And that was all I'd really wanted from Axel, for him to truly see me.

Best Christmas ever.

“What on earth are you wearing?” Axel asked.

I'd popped into the pub on my way to meet Adam.

“The 80's called, and they want their sweatbands back,” Milly chimed in.

“I stop by to say hello, and this is the thanks I get? I'll have you know this is perfectly respectable badminton attire.”

“Who are you going to play badminton with?” Axel enquired.

“Adam. He's home for a few days and wants to burn off some of his festive indulgences.”

“You are not wearing that to go see Adam.” Axel practically choked on the words.

“Excuse me? I'm going to give you a chance to walk that right back and say something a little less, 'psycho-controlling boyfriend.’” I scowled at him, and he thankfully had the sense to look embarrassed.

“They're just... very tiny shorts. I'm sorry, I take it back. Aren't you cold, though?”

“Apology under review. A little but I ran here, and I'm running to the leisure centre,

so I'll be fine. Adam'll feel bad and drop me home after."

"Home home or coming here?"

I not so secretly loved that he thought home could also mean here. It felt like a step closer to me getting to officially move in.

"I'll have to go home home first so I can put on my monk's habit. Wouldn't want to offend your newfound sensibilities at the sight of my bare skin," I said sarcastically.

Axel stepped out from behind the bar and made his way towards me. Cupping my face in the palm of his hands, he kissed me on the lips. "I'm sorry I got all jealous and possessive. I know It's dumb that Adam is still a sore spot for me, even though I know you were never together. You look gorgeous as you always do, whether you wear tiny shorts or a habit, although I have to admit that I do prefer the tiny shorts. You have very sexy legs, love," Axel said quietly so only I could hear.

"Well, he's one of my closest friends, and we're both in love with other people, so I think you need to get over that sooner rather than later. However, your apology was cute, so I'll let you off. I better head, or I'll be late." I gave Axel another quick kiss before saying bye to him and Milly and scampered out the door, back into the cold.

By the time I'd run to the town leisure centre, I was feeling warmed up, although my nose was guaranteed to be bright red from the cold. I found Adam sitting on a bench outside.

"You know it's December, right?" he greeted me.

"That really helps explain all the Christmas trees. I didn't anticipate my attire being so controversial today; we're exercising!"

Adam laughed and stood up to give me a hug. “You have a good Christmas?” he asked.

“The best! What about you?”

“Slightly awkward one this year, I’ll tell you inside.”

Colour me intrigued. We headed inside and down the stairs to the badminton courts. Adam had brought rackets and shuttlecocks, so we were good to go.

“So? Don’t keep me in suspense.” I pestered while Adam changed into his gym trainers.

“Me and Lei finally told the family that we’re together... on Christmas Eve.” He winced.

“And they were shocked? Honestly, I thought you two were like the worst-kept secret ever.”

“I think we underestimated our parents’ willful ignorance. They aren’t mad or anything, but they aren’t thrilled either. I think they’ll be alright once they’ve fully processed, but Lei is fretting about it, which means I’m forced to fret alongside him because, apparently, that’s what you do for a boyfriend. All I know is that me being calm about it was the incorrect response and I haven’t heard the end of it.” Adam sighed.

“I think it’s called empathy, hun. Like he just wants to know that you understand why it matters and why it’s stressful for him. I know you do care, but sometimes, if you react too calm and chilled about it, it comes across like you’re not as invested, and that’s probably what bothered him.”

“You’re weirdly insightful sometimes. Ready to play?” he asked.

“Just call me Yoda. Of course I’m ready. I have sweatbands on my wrists and head. I couldn’t look more ready if I tried. I hope you’re prepared to get your arse whooped.” I swished the racket through the air for emphasis and took my spot on the far side of the court.

It turned out that Adam and I were surprisingly evenly matched. He was better at the actual game than I was, but I was like a Duracell bunny, and he got tired long before I did.

He won the first game by a small margin; we’d gone to 26-24. During our water break, Adam asked, “I’m actually mildly concerned that you haven’t voluntarily waxed lyrical about you and Axel yet. Is everything good?”

“Aren’t you proud of my restraint? I’m really working on not being insufferable about it. But since you brought it up, things are great! He told me he loved me on Christmas day, and I’ve pretty much been on cloud nine ever since. Like, sometimes I could throw up at how perfect everything is,” I gushed.

“Vomit seems like a strange response to that, but sure. I’m happy you’re happy, little omega.” Adam smiled and ruffled my hair. “Jesus, your head is a lot sweatier than it looks.” He wiped his hand on his shorts.

“That’s because my littler legs are having to work much harder than yours ‘Mr can-get-from-one-side-of-the-court-to-the-other-in-one-step.’” I huffed.

“Ready for another game, or do you want to bitch some more?” Adam arched his eyebrow at me, and I stomped back onto the court.

I’d like to say that I handled winning the next game gracefully, but when the final

score was 21-18, I might have completed a victory lap around the court and sung We Are The Champions.

“It’s your humility that Axel loves so much, isn’t it?” Adam rolled his eyes at my antics.

“Axel knew exactly what he was signing up for. A winner. An athlete, you might say.”

“Does the athlete want a lift home so he doesn’t freeze to death?”

“Yes. I’m tired from the winning. Thank you.” I grinned and skipped all the way to the car, high on the sweet taste of victory.

I kicked Axel’s front door several times because my arms were full. It was a few minutes before I heard the thud of his footsteps on the stairs and I was getting impatient. When he opened the door, he looked sleepy. He and Milly had been on the closing shift last night.

“What’s wrong?” he asked. Then he sniffed the air. “Oh shit. Your heat?”

I nodded and then barged past him with the five bags of my nesting material I’d brought from home. In his bedroom, I set to work on building my nest while Axel stood in the doorway looking a little bewildered.

Although my heat was a week sooner than I’d been expecting, we’d talked about it not long after Christmas. I’d never shared it with anyone, and I couldn’t bear the idea of spending this one alone now that Axel and I were finally together.

Over the next year, my heats would begin to gradually sync with Axel, so at least one of them would coincide with his rut.

“You better not have done your laundry,” I said a little more snarkily than was probably warranted.

“There should be some stuff in the washing basket that’s suitably stinky enough for you, love.”

I glared at him, and he held his hands up defensively.

“I’ll fetch them,” he said.

He returned with several worn t-shirts and a hoodie.

It wasn’t enough!

“Strip,” I demanded.

“What?”

“Strip. This isn’t going to be enough. I need what you’re wearing,” I pointed out. I had no idea why he was being so deliberately obtuse.

He took off the t-shirt he’d been sleeping in and passed it to me. This was good; it smelled freshly of him.

“Those too.” I pointed at his joggers.

“Let me get what I need from the kitchen, and then they’re all yours. Can even have my boxers if you want.”

“Fucking obviously,” I muttered as he left the room.

While he sauntered about in the kitchen, I really got to work on my nest. It needed to be my best one yet. It was much easier with all my nesting materials from home, but I dug out the bags that Axel had in his wardrobe because there was no such thing as too much.

By the time Axel returned, it was almost complete. He placed a few Powerade bottles onto the bedside table and left a bag next to the bed.

“What’s in there?” I asked.

“Just some snacks I bought in so I’d be ready,” he explained.

And then I cried.

“Fuck. You’re so lovely,” I wailed.

“Hey, shhh, you’re okay. I’ve texted Milly and she’s got a friend who will help her out for the next few days. We have everything we need up here in the flat, so we won’t need to leave and go anywhere. You have all your materials this time, and your nest is already looking so perfect, love,” he soothed, holding me against his warm, furry chest.

I sniffled and then groaned as the first wave of heat wracked through my body, making my skin feel like it was on fire. Quickly shucking off my clothes to let the cold air take the edge off, I placed the last few items in my nest and crawled into the centre naked.

It didn’t take long for Axel to join me in the nest, pressing his body weight down on top of me in a way that quieted my brain. He got hard quickly, and his big cock pressed against my stomach between us.

I searched for his mouth and kissed him hard. The need to taste him and consume his scent was overwhelming. My hands gripped each side of his head like I was trying to meld our faces together. I felt like no matter what, I just couldn't get close enough to him, and I groaned in frustration.

"What do you need, love?" he asked between kisses.

"I don't know. Just... more," I said right before another wave of heat spread under my skin, making me tingle from head to toe.

He lifted his weight off me and began kissing and licking my neck before he sucked on my scent gland.

"Oh my god, yes. That. More of that," I demanded.

My scent gland was always sensitive, but never like this. I was already on a hair trigger from his tongue swirling around it.

He continued travelling down my body, pressing kisses to my chest and rolling my nipples between his thumb and forefinger in a way that made my toes curl.

Making his way as far as my navel, he nibbled on my hip bones and kissed along the crease of my thigh. When he rolled my balls in his hands, my hips bucked off the bed.

I could do nothing but stare when he nosed at my cock, which was leaking like a faucet. He took a deep inhale.

"Fuck, Dyl. You smell so good. So... right. "

For once, I was grateful I wasn't well endowed because Axel took my full length into his mouth and swallowed me whole.

With my eyes still firmly rolled into the back of my head, Axel's fingers stroked up my inner thigh and down to my hole, which was dripping with slick.

"So wet for me, Dyl. You gonna beg for my knot?" He teased the entrance but didn't press in.

"Pl—pl—please. Please don't tease me, I need it." I gyrated my hips to chase his fingers, needing to be filled with anything.

He kissed the small nest of hair at the base of my cock before giving me what I wanted. Two fingers pressed in, and I took them easily. It wasn't enough.

"I need more. Please, Axel," I begged.

He added a third, and the stretch was finally closer to what I wanted, but if I was going to take his knot, he'd need to use four.

"I can take it, Ax. Give me more."

I moaned loudly when he did as I asked. The feel of four of his thick fingers stretching and filling me appeased my overheated body. He pumped them in and out of me, and every time a knuckle brushed against my prostate, I felt like I might come.

The satisfaction was quick to wear off, much like with the toys I'd used for years during my heats alone.

"Fuck me. Knot me. I need it, Axel. Please?"

He crawled up my body and took my mouth again in a fierce kiss. Sitting back to kneel between my thighs, he lifted my arse so it rested on his thighs and pushed his throbbing cock forward to line it up with my hole.

With my legs resting over his arms, he pushed inside me in one long thrust. He looked up from where we were joined, and his pupils were so dilated that they appeared black.

Axel thrust in a few times with a ferocity that felt a lot like possession. A lot like being claimed. When he leaned forward to kiss me, bending me in half, he continued to pound into me until I was gasping for air.

As I absorbed Axel's passion and desire for me, I found myself fighting off tears.

I didn't know it could be like this. I didn't know...

All those heats I'd spent alone, convincing myself I was content when really I'd been waiting. Waiting for my alpha to finally recognise me. Finally, see me as his. His to claim and his to keep.

Axel's thrusts slowed down, and he peered down at me. "Shit, are you okay? I'm not hurting you, am I?" he asked.

"No... You're... This is... I didn't know it could be like this," I eventually managed to spit out, hiccupping embarrassingly afterwards. "Sorry. I don't know what's wrong with me. Don't know why I'm crying. Just ignore it."

"Baby. Love, I'm not gonna ignore it." He didn't pull out, just stilled inside me. "You know it's only like this because it's us, right? It's... it's never been like this for me. You and me are something special. Something... always," he said, wiping the tears from my cheeks with his thumb.

"Always?" I whimpered.

"Always, love."

I tipped up my head in invitation, and Axel kissed me as he slowly began to move his hips, shallow thrusts that rubbed his cockhead against my prostate maddeningly.

“Yes, right there. Keep... right there..”

A wave of heat hit me like a hurricane right as Axel thrust in at the perfect angle, and I came without any warning. Nothing but the slight friction of Axel’s abs rubbing against me. I shook and trembled beneath him as my cum covered my stomach.

“Want me to keep going?” Axel asked.

Usually, I was too sensitive to carry on, but I knew that during my heat, it didn’t matter. The waves wouldn’t really subside until Axel’s knot had swelled and was trapped inside me.

“Yes. Don’t... don’t stop. Need your knot. Fill me, Axel.”

He flipped us around so I was on top of him. I didn’t have it in me to do much work, but Axel pistoned up into my hole over and over until I began to feel the pulsing sensation of his knot filling.

As his knot got bigger and bigger, his thrusts became shallow, and the bulb rubbed against my prostate until I could feel another orgasm building.

When Axel gripped both of my hips in his big hands, holding me down onto his knot until he scrunched his eyes and warned, “I’m... fuck... I’m coming.”

His cock and knot pulsed inside me as I stroked my own length a few times fiercely until I came again, all over Axel this time.

Afterwards, I collapsed on top of him, and he raised his knees so his knot wouldn’t

tug on my rim uncomfortably.

With my head resting on his chest that heaved from exertion, Axel reached out of the nest and rummaged around in the bag he'd left there before.

A moment later, Axel began hand-feeding me from a punnet of blueberries with his other hand stroking my hair.

"I love you so much, Dyl. I'll spend forever showing you how much if you let me."

"Always have, always will, Ax. You're stuck with me now." I smiled and took another blueberry from his fingers.

I don't think I'd ever been so content in my life as I was right then. Never felt so cared for. So... so loved.

Chapter Twenty-two

Axel

“Roll over.” I tried to coax Dylan.

“Nooooo. I’m comfy,” he whined.

His heat finally broke last night, and I needed to return to work today despite the bone-deep exhaustion. It had been incredible to spend Dylan’s heat with him. I could only imagine what it would be like once we synced and got to experience a heat and rut at the same time. Although, I was slightly afraid my cock might fall off.

I was pretty sure I hadn’t even come this much when I was a teenager and wanked like it was an Olympic sport.

Despite his protests, he let me manoeuvre him so I could make sure the last few days hadn’t caused any damage.

I pulled his left cheek to one side and took a look at his cute little hole. It was pink and slightly puffy, but it looked okay.

“Does it hurt?” I asked, gently brushing the pad of my finger over it.

“Mmph. No, just sensitive.” His voice was muffled from where he was face-first into a pillow. “I have some cream in my bag, which helps. George recommended it after your rut.”

I climbed out of the bed to find his bag and discovered the small tub of ointment in the front pocket.

“You were hurt after my rut?” I asked.

“Not really, a little bit sore. I’d never taken a knot before, and it was basically a knot marathon. That cream has some kind of numbing agent that does the trick.”

He hadn’t moved from his spot in the centre of his nest, so I uncapped the ointment and dipped my finger inside. I rubbed some gently over his rim and poked the tip of my finger inside to make sure he was covered. “Better?”

“Mhmm. Thank you.” His eyelids fluttered open, and he gave me a soft smile.

Sometimes, the fondness I felt for Dylan seemed to overwhelm me. Sex to one side, I experienced an intimacy with him that was unlike anything I’d had before. After so many years of Dylan being my friend’s younger brother, I’d anticipated it feeling weird at first between us. But none of this felt weird. When we were alone together, it was like living inside a snow globe. Together, we were safe and protected from anything outside. Inside, we just got to be us.

Wanna grab breakfast before I start work?

Dyl-pot

I’m popping out of town today. I’ll stop by the pub tonight for a drink, though?

Out of town?

Dyl-pot

Got an appointment. See you later xxx

Got an appointment? That was vague. Even though I had no reason to, I found myself fretting over what Dylan was doing. Was I becoming a controlling boyfriend? I hoped not.

I suppose I didn't really care what he was up to as long as he was okay. But Dylan so rarely filtered what he said that when he gave vague responses to things, it always felt purposeful. His text left me feeling unsettled for the rest of the morning.

Once I'd wolfed down a bowl of cereal, I made my way downstairs to open up the pub early because I was getting antsy in my flat.

By the time Milly turned up for her shift, the place was cleaner than it'd been in months, and I was re-writing the gin menu with some green chalk I'd found tucked behind the bin.

"Bit early for a spring clean, isn't it?" Milly asked as she hooked her bag and coat behind the door.

"Had some free time. Needed doing."

"You need a hobby, you big loser."

I glared at her.

"I'm serious. It's not healthy that you're either working or wrapped up in Dylan. You can't make him your hobby," she said while stealing a J2O from one of the fridges.

"I... hang out with Cooper."

“Cooper comes to your place of work for a drink and talks to you... while you work. Not a hobby, hun. Also, you should probably make an effort to see your best”—cough —“ only “ —cough—“ friend, outside of these four walls.“ She had a very smug look on her face because she might have had a point.

I argued anyway, “I literally had dinner with him at his mum’s last week.”

“Yeah... no. You had dinner at your boyfriend’s mum’s, and Cooper was there.”

“I was having dinner with Cooper’s family long before Dylan and I were together!”

“Doesn’t matter. Now you’re together, it changes things. It would be weird if you only ever saw Dylan with Cooper there; ergo, it’s weird if you only ever see Cooper with his little brother there, too. Don’t be that friend,” she said before sauntering off to the front door to prop it open with the wedge.

I wanted to defend myself, but her words landed, and I felt guilty all of a sudden. Aside from our annual Christmas shopping trip, I couldn’t remember the last time the two of us hung out alone which wasn’t while I was working, and even then, Dylan was usually there, too.

Fuck. I’m a terrible friend.

The afternoon went by at a snail’s pace. I oscillated between fretting over what Dylan was doing out of town and feeling incredibly guilty for letting Cooper down as a friend. All in all, it wasn’t a fun shift.

By the time Cooper showed up for his after-work drink, I had a plan, though. “I’m taking you out!”

He looked around like I must have been talking to someone else before pointing at

himself with his thumb. “You know, Axel. I can’t condone you going behind my brother’s back and trying to date me. I’m not sure how you imagined that wouldn’t get back to him.”

“Har-har, very funny. I’m taking you on a friendship date.”

“That still sounds weird. What’s wrong with him?” he asked Milly.

”I think ... this is him trying to get a life,“ she replied.

“You’re very busy, Ax. You sure that’s a good idea?”

“You’re both arseholes. I’m trying to be a better friend. Not that you deserve it, clearly,“ I muttered as I aggressively polished a glass.

“Sorry! Sorry, where are you taking me out? Should I dress up real nice?”

“If you’re gonna be a dick, I can always take Dylan to see the Vixon Vipers instead.”

“Fuck off. Dylan doesn’t even know the rules of rugby.” Cooper laughed.

“Of course he does. He used to come watch my games in high school; he even has a Vipers t-shirt with Pippa’s name on the back.”

Cooper and Milly both began howling with laughter at that.

“What? What’s so funny?”

“Oh, you sweet summer child,” Milly said as condescendingly as was physically possible.

“I thought I was supposed to be the dumb friend,” Cooper said.

“Oi. One pound in the jar,” I said, arching an eyebrow at him. Cooper had struggled at school, and he’d convinced himself that meant he was stupid. Many, many years ago now, I’d banned him from calling himself dumb or stupid because the more he said it, the more he believed it.

“Buddy, I’m gonna hold your hand when I tell you this, but Dylan watched your rugby games because you wore tight shorts and basically wrestled other guys in the mud. And what’s Pippa’s last name?”

“Um.” Okay, now I felt stupid. “King,” I mumbled.

“I’ll take the Vixon Vipers ticket, though. When is it?” he asked.

“Two weeks, on the Saturday. They’re playing at home, and Pippa said we could crash at hers that night,” I explained.

“Wicked!” Cooper had a huge grin on his face, and it eased some of my guilt from earlier.

I served a few customers and then returned to Cooper’s spot at the end of the bar.

“Seen Dylan today?” I asked as nonchalantly as possible.

“Dyl? No. He’s over in Reynard City today,” Cooper said through a mouthful of peanuts he’d nicked from behind the bar.

“Reynard? What’s he doing there?” I asked, all ‘chalance’ out of the building.

Reynard City is where Lauren went to uni; it’s the closest big city to us, but Dylan

hadn't even mentioned that he was already getting bored of being back in our small hometown. I thought I'd have more time.

"Some appointment with a professor. I can't remember exactly what he said. I'm sure he'll tell you all about it later."

Cooper continued to crunch on his peanuts as my internal crisis continued.

A professor? Did he want to go and get a Masters or something? I suppose it wouldn't be too bad. I'd probably need to hire someone else to work here so I could keep more weekends free to see him, especially if he was planning to move there while he studied.

In den-making season, I'd basically not see him at all. Would he even come home for my ruts? I could go to him for his heats, although it would mean Milly would be on her own if there was an emergency at the pub.

And why hadn't he talked to me about this? I thought things had been going really well. When I was with Lauren, she used to tell me I was emotionally unavailable and I was working hard not to repeat those mistakes. I'd been trying to be vulnerable with Dylan. But maybe I'd been too vulnerable?

Until the weird text that morning, though, I hadn't felt at all like Dylan was pulling away. I'd seen him just yesterday; we'd worked a close together. When everything was locked up, he'd pulled his jeans down enough that his arse was out and told me I needed to fuck him over the table 'or else'. I'm not entirely sure of what he was threatening if I hadn't, but given I was pretty much a slave to Dylan's tight little butt, I was hardly going to deny him.

A peanut landed on my cheek.

“Oh, you’re alive. I thought you’d, like, passed out standing up or something,” Cooper said.

“Good to know that your response to that medical anomaly would be to throw nuts in my face,” I replied dryly.

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Dylan

Axel

Wanna grab breakfast before I start work?

I'm popping out of town today. I'll stop by the pub tonight for a drink, though?

Axel

Out of town?

Got an appointment. See you later xxx

I felt slightly bad for not telling Axel what I was up to, but I really wanted to make sure I had it all figured out before I went to him with my plans.

Just before Christmas, I bumped into Mr Morgan Junior's mum, Mrs Morgan, who also happened to be the head teacher of Foxwood Primary School. Unlike her grump of a son, she was a cheerful and chatty woman. She hadn't been the head when I was at school, but she'd been my class teacher when I was nine.

Over a lukewarm, fairly off-putting cup of coffee in the Cluck Cafe, we'd chatted about what I'd been studying at uni and what I wanted to do next.

It was her who had planted the seed.

“Have you ever thought about teaching, Dylan?”

I had and I hadn't. Not with any seriousness. I'd briefly considered teaching high school English, but I despised teenagers with their surly attitudes, so it had never seemed like a good fit.

“We're always looking for bright local teachers. Why don't you stop by one day and take a look around? It will have changed quite a lot since you were there, and watching a lesson or two might give you a feel for the place?”

In the end, I'd watched four lessons, and my intuition told me that it was exactly what I should do next. I had loved school, had loved to learn with an insatiable curiosity. But it was actually watching a teacher giving some extra time to a kid struggling to read that had enraptured me.

The little girl had reminded me of a young Cooper. Desperate to keep up but struggling, and the way her face lit up when she'd managed to read a full sentence with no mistakes? I'd had to fight back tears.

I'd spent most of my life feeling like I was chasing something. Chasing after Axel, chasing a way out of this small town, chasing to be top of my class.

And yet, it was here in Foxwood Primary, the place where I'd become a person, that I realised, I didn't have to chase anymore.

Axel would be waiting for me at home, and I'd spend every Sunday having dinner with my family. I could have the life I'd always wanted; it was finally within reach.

I didn't need to chase anymore. I could just be.

“Mr Bailey?” A woman poked her head out of the door opposite where I was sitting.

“Yes, that’s me.” I smiled and stood to shake her hand. Her palm was warm but not clammy, and she had a reassuring face.

I followed her into the small office located in the heart of Reynard University.

“You’re here to discuss your options about completing your teacher training, is that correct?” she asked as we both took a seat, her behind the desk and me opposite.

“Yes, that’s right.”

She continued to flick through the pages of my uni record. “Well, no complaints from me. You got a First from Volpe with some outstanding recommendations. What is it about the training you’d like to discuss?” she asked, apparently perplexed.

“The thing is, when I looked through the prospectus, it appeared that you have specific local schools you do the course in conjunction with, and I’d like to figure out a way I could complete the course while still living in Foxwood Hollow. I’ve already spoken to the head teacher at Foxwood Primary, and she’s more than happy for me to complete my training there. I don’t mind commuting for the classes held here, but it’s really important to me that I live in Foxwood Hollow.”

She listened to my long monologue with interest and some surprise.

“I want to start by reassuring you that I don’t foresee any of that being a problem.”

I let out a relieved breath, and my shoulders finally relaxed. I hadn’t realised how much my hope had been riding on this.

“We advertise the schools associated with the course because some students worry

about finding a placement, and this alleviates that. The truth is, Mr Bailey, there is a major shortage of teachers across primary and secondary schools. If we can find a way to make this work with you, we will.” She smiled, and my concerns melted away at her words.

I was really going to have it all—the career, the home, and most importantly, my Axel.

When I exited the university building, I headed across the road towards a coffee shop. Standing outside and arguing on the phone in Urdu, was Iqra. She spotted me, muttered a few more angry words and then hung up the phone.

“How’s your mum?” I asked, knowing she was usually the source of Iqra’s aggravated phone calls.

“Insufferable, honestly. She keeps trying to convince me that moving out was a mistake and I should go and live at home until I get married. She’s yet to realise that if I move back home, I’ll end up in prison for matricide.” She huffed but then closed the distance between us and wrapped me up in a fierce hug.

“Oh my god, are you okay? You never voluntarily hug me. I’m going to remember this moment for the rest of my life,” I gushed.

“I miss you and George,” she mumbled into my neck.

I wasn’t used to seeing such a soft side to Iqra; she was a good friend but had always been a bit more closed off than me and George were. It was endearing to know she valued us just as much.

“Well then, I might have some good news for you!”

“Let’s get caffeine, and you can tell me all about it.” She smiled as we made our way inside the little cafe, the scent of roasted coffee beans in the air.

On my way back home, I stopped off at the school to see Mrs Morgan and tell her the good news. Come September, I’d begin my teacher training, three days a week in the school and two days a week at uni. I couldn’t wait.

Mrs Morgan was thrilled and invited me, Cooper, and Axel over for dinner the following week to celebrate.

Nobody was home when I dropped the car off, so I was buzzing out of my skin as I walked to the pub to see Axel.

He was serving a customer when I stepped inside, but I spotted Cooper and Milly down the far end of the bar, so I headed their way.

I crept behind Cooper, wrapped my arms around him and squeezed as tight as I could.

“Jesus, Dyl. You’re freakishly strong for someone so small,” he complained.

“Small but mighty, my friend,” I replied.

“Gin I wanted to bury my head in his stomach.

Once he was down to his underwear, he joined me under the covers, and I spent the next few minutes running my fingers through his furry chest. And then, because it was right in front of my face, I nibbled his nipple.

“Oi!” He retaliated by biting my ear.

The joke was on him, though, because I was into it. My cock filled, and I shimmied

out of my briefs.

“What are you up to down there?” he asked.

“Want a sword fight?”

“You did not just ask me that.”

“Go oooooon. You know you want to.”

“Love, that is not a fair fight.” He snickered.

“Why are you being such a scaredy fox then?” I taunted, and he gave up the fight, tugging his boxers down and shucking them off.

He smacked his much bigger, much heavier cock against mine once, and I cracked up until he took them both in his big hand and began to stroke them in a tight grip.

I leaned up to kiss him and rubbed a thumb over the stiff bud of his nipple. He loved that once he was turned on. When he was really close, sometimes I could get him over the edge just by pinching them.

Our sword fight had definitely devolved into a sword wrestle, but I had no complaints. I thrust into his hand, chasing my release and moaning into Axel’s mouth as I did it.

“You gonna come for me, love?” His low, gravelly voice travelled straight from my ears to my aching balls, and I pretty much shot my load on command. I shook as I spilled over his hand and both our cocks. Axel continued to stroke me through my release and then let me go, using my cum to get himself off hard and fast until he grunted and came moments later.

I loved watching Axel come. There was something about watching a big, burly man in that vulnerable moment as he lets go and the need for unfettered pleasure takes over.

“We really need to start putting a towel down,” he grumbled before reaching for the box of wet wipes by the bed and cleaning off his hand.

I watched as Axel climbed out of bed to go to the bathroom, enjoying the sight of his juicy butt a little too much. “Down boy,” I whispered to my dick, who was trying to rally at the sight.

Axel returned and very gently and lovingly wiped my soft cock and balls down with a warm washcloth before throwing it in the wash basket. And just when I was beginning to think that I couldn’t love him anymore, he ruined it.

“What are you doing?” I asked when he climbed over me and began settling in on my side of the bed.

“I always sleep in the wet patch. It’s your turn to take one for the team.”

“Oh, I see how it is. I’m the sacrificial lamb.”

“Baaah,” he... he fucking bleated at me.

When I shuffled and the cold, damp patch on the sheet pressed against my bum, I decided that was a hard pass, so I climbed on top of Axel and rested my head on his chest.

“I’ll just sleep on you tonight.”

I jiggled a little when he laughed, but he began stroking his fingertips up and down

my spine, and I settled in.

Maybe I'll always sleep on Axel now. He makes a lovely bed.

The following week, Axel and I walked in the direction of Mrs Morgan's house where we were meeting Cooper to go for our celebratory dinner. She was thrilled when Cooper said he would come because she'd always had a soft spot for him when he was at school.

We found him on the corner of her street... pacing.

"What's up with you?" Axel asked.

Cooper's head shot up, and he cleared his throat a few times before responding. "Nothing." His voice came out several octaves too high, making him sound like Scooby Doo. "Who's gonna be at this dinner?" he asked.

"I don't know. I didn't exactly request a guestlist before I RSVP'd. Why does it matter?"

Cooper began tugging at the collar of his shirt like he was hot even though it was mid-winter and fucking freezing outside.

"Come on, we'll be late." Axel ushered Cooper and me towards Mrs Morgan's terraced house.

As we made our way to her front door, I couldn't help but side-eye Cooper as he continued acting weird.

"Do you need the toilet or something?" I asked.

“What? No. I’m not a child.”

“Could have fooled me,” I mumbled as Axel used the brass knocker still surrounded by a Christmas wreath. The vibrantly painted yellow door matched Mrs Morgan perfectly with her cheery disposition.

The person who answered the door, however, had the opposite of a cheery disposition.

Her son, Mr Morgan, stood on the threshold. “Evening,” he managed to force out with a smile that looked as though it caused him physical pain to maintain.

Mrs Morgan’s head popped up to the side of him. He was a large alpha, and his wide frame filled most of the doorway. “Well, let them in, Patrick. It’s freezing!”

He grunted but stepped to the side so we could enter the house. The long, narrow hallway was lined with photographs of Mr and Mrs Morgan and a young Patrick, who had evidently always looked a little grumpy.

“Thank you so much for inviting us, Mrs Morgan,” I said to her retreating back.

“You’re more than welcome, but please, call me Linda,” she replied.

She led us into the dining room, a large farmhouse-style table in the centre with bench seats on either side. It was dark outside so the window was covered with a thick red curtain, not dissimilar to what you’d find at the theatre.

“What can I get you all to drink? I’ve got a nice bottle of red here if you fancy it?” she asked.

Axel and I both gave an enthusiastic ‘yes’, but Cooper squirmed a little in his seat. He

didn't really like any alcoholic drinks except lager, but he hated feeling like a rude guest. I was about to answer on his behalf, but then Patrick came into the room and placed a bottle of beer in front of Cooper.

"Glass?" Patrick asked in that monosyllabic way of his.

"No, this is fine. Thank you." Cooper peered up at him with a grateful smile on his face and... something else.

Interesting.

"Something smells delicious," Axel said.

"Oh, that's all Patrick. I'm useless in the kitchen, but his dad, John, taught him everything he knew before he passed." She smiled fondly although her eyes still held a deep sadness in them.

"I was sorry to hear about your loss, Linda," I said.

"Thank you, dear. It's not been easy, but having my Patrick here so much always helps."

To each their own. I couldn't imagine Patrick being a very soothing presence while grieving a loved one, but maybe he had a better temperament when they were alone.

Linda poured four glasses of red wine and took one of them into the kitchen for Patrick while we all found seats.

The atmosphere was awkward but in a pleasant type of way. Like seeing extended family for Christmas when you don't really have anything in common, but circumstances have brought you together, and it's nice to see them all the same.

Linda returned with a tray of what smelled like garlic dough balls.

A very embarrassing groan escaped my lips when I bit into one and found melted mozzarella at the centre. It was loud enough that Axel blushed.

“Sorry, they’re just insanely good,” I said in my defence.

Cooper shook his head at me in a ‘why are you like this’ type of way, but then took a bite from his own and said, “Actually, that’s fair. These are amazing.”

About halfway into our glasses of wine and the garlic balls long gone, Patrick reappeared with plates of pasta for each of us.

I literally salivated. It was chicken and mushrooms in a creamy sauce over linguini and covered in a very healthy amount of parmesan cheese.

“Wow. Thanks... Mr Morgan. Abbie will be trying to poach you for her restaurant if she gets wind of this,” I said.

“Patrick. Mr Morgan was my dad,” he replied, leaving a stilted silence in his wake.

“Well, let’s all tuck in before it gets cold,” Linda jumped in to save the atmosphere.

Cooper was the first to finish, wolfing down the food at a rate that gave me indigestion just to watch. Apparently, Patrick didn’t seem to find it too off-putting, though, since he immediately got up to give him a second helping of food.

I felt like I was at the zoo watching a very obscure animal mating ritual. I’d have to draw the line if either of them started sniffing each other’s butts at the dining table.

Watching the whole exchange between the two of them made my heart hurt a little.

Cooper had never been very forthcoming about people he was dating, and he'd never had a serious relationship that I was aware of. Was he scared to tell us he was alpha-sexual? I hope he knew that nobody in our family would have a problem with that. All we ever wanted was for him to be happy. Axel certainly wouldn't care; after all, Milly was an omega and only dated other omegas.

Overall, the dinner was a success. Linda was clearly delighted to have me joining her staff next year, and I knew we'd get along well. It felt good to have Axel by my side, my partner there with me to celebrate this next chapter.

After we said goodbye to Linda and Patrick, the three of us began to walk home, the air biting cold.

"Still on for the rugby next weekend?" Axel asked Cooper when we were headed in different directions.

"Yes! Can't wait, mate. See you tomorrow." He gave us both a quick hug before jogging away.

By the time we made it home, my fingers and toes were icy cold, so I quickly stripped out of my clothes and climbed under the duvet.

"Dyl? Where'd you go?" Axel called out.

I popped my head out in answer.

"Jeez. I thought you were a pillow." He laughed.

Joining me in the bed, he curled around me and I pressed my cold nose to his warm chest.

“Here, tuck your feet between my thighs; they’ll warm up quicker.”

“Sometimes I love you so much that I think I might die from it,” I replied while doing as he suggested.

“If you die from that, I won’t have anyone’s freezing cold little trotters to warm up at night and wouldn’t that be a tragedy?”

“Little trotters?” I shoved at his chest gently, and he chuckled.

“The cutest little trotters.” He kissed my nose in an adoring way, so I let it go.

I’d almost dozed off when Axel asked, “Did you think it seemed weird between Cooper and Patrick tonight?”

“They seemed... sort of intense, right?”

“I’ve never seen him like that before.”

“Do you think he knows that none of us would care if he... if he prefers alphas?”

“I mean... I’d like to think so. But we’ve been best friends our whole life, and he never told me. Maybe I’ve done a shitty job if he felt like he had to keep this from me.” Axel’s voice choked up a little.

“All we can do is make sure he knows it now. Maybe we’re reading into nothing, anyway.”

“Yeah... maybe.” But he didn’t sound convinced.

Chapter Twenty-four

Axel

I shoved my duffel bag into my van before popping into the pub. Dylan and Milly were doing the final bits and pieces before opening up for the day.

The two of them had ganged up on me a few days ago and insisted that with Dylan leaving in September for his new job, I needed to replace him with two part-timers so we weren't stretched so thin. A new girl, Soraya, would be doing a trial shift with Milly tomorrow.

With Dylan working Monday-Friday each week, it would be nice not to be working every weekend, so that's what finally got me to relent.

"Heading off now?" Dylan asked when he spotted me in the doorway.

I nodded and made my way over to him.

"Dyl, do you know any of the rules of rugby?" I asked.

He cocked his head like a curious spaniel. "None."

I laughed and held his face between my palms, planting a kiss to those pink, pillowy lips of his. "You're ridiculous."

"Bring me back a shirt with your name on it?"

“You mean Pippa’s name on it?” I raised my eyebrow at him.

He stood on his tip toes and whispered, “If you bring me one back, I’ll wear that and nothing else while you fuck me from behind. I’m pretty sure you’ll be seeing your name on my back, babe.” He stepped back with a smug look on his face.

My cock immediately swelled, and I had to tuck it into my waistband before I accidentally pointed the thing at my cousin, who was counting the till about twelve feet away.

“ You are nothing but trouble. This better have gone down by the time I pick up your brother.”

Dylan snorted, then kissed me goodbye.

I’d texted Cooper that I was setting off, so I found him waiting on the curb outside his flat. He dived into the passenger seat and proceeded to pull out several bags of sweets.

“Road trip snacks.” He grinned and connected his phone to the Bluetooth to play music.

I was glad Milly had nudged me to do this. I’d missed spending time alone with Cooper more than I’d realised. As we drove down the motorway towards Cunningham City, belting out our favourite songs, I felt lighter.

Cooper had been the most consistent person in my entire life, and I’d forgotten how settled I felt when I was with him. Like putting on a comfortable pair of boots that had moulded to the shape of your feet perfectly.

I drove us straight to Pippa’s apartment block, she’d given our names to the concierge

who let us upstairs so we could drop off our stuff before the game. Pippa was already at the stadium.

We both sported 'King' rugby shirts on our walk to the match and we spotted several other families in red and white striped Vixon Vipers shirts along the way. The men's team, the Raynard Warriors, had been playing like shit for years now while the Vipers had been winning cups for nearly a decade, and they now had such big support that they got prime time on the sports channel.

Cooper spotted a food van outside, so we both ordered a box of fried chicken wings and a pint of lukewarm beer in plastic cups to take inside.

It turned out that we needn't have bothered because Pippa had got us seats in the family VIP box, which had a full working bar and a buffet.

Cooper and I were the first to arrive, so we sat in the far corner while the staff finished setting everything up.

While we sat and munched on chicken wings, I tried to pluck up the courage to have the conversation with Cooper that I'd been putting off.

"Um... you know when me and Dylan got together, did you feel weird about it?"

Cooper looked at me with his eyebrows bunched up in confusion. "Maybe a little? Only at first. I already knew he'd had feelings for you, so I guess it wasn't totally out of the blue. But then I saw you two together, and I got it."

I nodded my understanding.

"Dylan's always been... a bit like a bird desperate to flee his nest. Always unsettled, and now you're together, it's like he's finally putting down roots for the first time.

And don't get me wrong, I liked Lauren a lot, but it was like you always had to be this stoic alpha for her. You've been... softer these last few months. I think he's good for you, too."

Cooper's incredibly touching and insightful response almost threw me off why I'd asked him that in the first place.

"Wow. That's possibly the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me, thanks Coop. But the thing is, you know how it was weird at first, but now you can see we're both happy you're okay with it?" I hedged again.

"Yes...?"

"Well, you know I'd feel the same way, right? So long as you were happy?"

"I guess, but you're an only child Axel so it doesn't really seem worth thinking about, no sibling of yours I'm going to shack up with in the future."

I pinched the bridge of my nose in exasperation.

"What I'm trying—and clearly failing—to say is, if you maybe didn't like omegas, or if you liked alphas as well, I wouldn't care at all so long as you were happy, okay?"

Cooper's face went so red so quickly that for a second, I was worried he was choking. He took a long sip of his drink before turning to face forwards.

Leg bouncing, he began biting the tip of his thumb—a nervous habit he shared with his brother.

"You don't think I'm a freak?" he barely said above a whisper.

I wrapped an arm around him and sort of wrestled him into a hug. “You’re not a freak, Coop. Lots of people feel that way. Milly’s known since she was twelve that she only likes omegas. Have you really never told anyone?”

My heart panged painfully at how lonely that sounded. How isolating this must have been for my best friend, who brightens up every room he enters.

“Not really. Just... um... I’ve been on the apps before. Met a few... um... alphas on there.” He looked like he might throw up.

“Was it... okay? They treated you okay?” I managed to spit out.

Cooper shrugged, and my heart sank. “It turned out they were... looking for something different than me. I don’t go on them anymore. Please don’t tell Dylan? I know he’s your boyfriend now, but I’m not ready for him to know yet.”

“I won’t tell him, I promise. But... for full disclosure, we spoke last week about whether there was anything going on between you and... Patrick. Dylan said that he really hoped you knew that your family would be supportive and you didn’t have to keep it from them. But it’s still for you to tell them when you’re ready, so I won’t talk to Dylan about it again. I just thought you should know that he said that.”

At that, Cooper bent forward, resting his elbows on his knees and covering his face with his hands. I stroked a hand up and down his back as he processed what I’d told him.

Sensing his need for a change of subject, I said, “Bet you twenty quid that Pippa scores a try.”

He peered at me from between his fingers. “That’s not fair, I can’t bet against her when she gave us free tickets.” He huffed.

By the time we reached halftime, all the awkwardness of our conversation had dissipated. Although Pippa hadn't scored yet, she was on fire as usual.

The family VIP box was full and everyone had been yelling throughout the first half.

When I popped to the bathroom, I shot a quick text to Dylan to check in on how his shift was going. He didn't reply, so they were probably pretty busy. It was a Saturday afternoon, after all.

Pippa scored in the second half, and the Vipers won by a landslide, so celebrations were in order afterwards.

A couple of hours later, we met Pippa and some of her teammates at a local bar they frequented.

For the first time in a long time, I got completely drunk with my best friend. Tonight, I had no responsibilities, nowhere to be and nothing I had to do tomorrow so I could finally let loose.

"How's things going with that omega boy of yours?" Pippa asked when we headed to the bar to order a round of shots.

"Things are good. Really good. He's turned out to be everything I didn't know I needed." I smiled at my cousin, who was nearly as tall as I was.

"I love drunk Axel; you're such a giant marshmallow." She snickered.

"What about you? Any love on the horizon?"

"Love might be a stretch. I've been sort of seeing one of the team physio's, but I think she's moving back overseas after the season ends."

“She hot?” I asked.

“Like, claw out my eyeballs because it hurts to look at you, hot,” she replied wistfully, and I laughed.

“Sounds horrible.”

Several more rounds of shots later and a smaller group of us made our way to one of the bigger nightclubs in the area.

The building vibrated with the bass that pumped out of the speakers, and the air smelt like sweat and sex inside.

It was heady and an odd reminder that I’d never really done this. I went to work for my dad as soon as I finished school, and other than Cooper, most of our friends had left town to go to uni, even if it was only in the next city over.

There were lots of omegas on the dance floor, eyeing me and Cooper like we were fresh meat. I wished Dylan were here.

I should take him out dancing soon; I bet he’d be really good at it. I knew I wouldn’t be able to take my eyes off him, and he’d probably turn me into a growly possessive alpha, but it would be an experience all the same.

Searching out for where Cooper had ended up, I eventually found him in the middle of a mosh pit, jumping up and down like he was having the time of his life, so I left him to it and headed for the loo.

The quiet in the bathroom was a relief. Every time the door opened, it was like being attacked by a blast of hot air and music. Like any club, the place was filthy, and the soles of my shoes stuck to the floor.

After I'd popped into one of the stalls to pee, I washed my hands and retrieved my phone from my back pocket.

It was past midnight, so Dylan should be home by now, and I was drunk enough not to concern myself with whether I might be waking him up when I called.

It rang for a while, and then, "Ax?" He sounded sleepy. I could just picture his sweet little face with a pillow crease along his cheek and his brown curls sticking up in every direction.

"I really fucking love you, Dylan," I slurred.

He chuckled down the line. "I didn't know you were a sappy drunk."

"I'm not. It's just that whenever you aren't in my arms, I wish you were, and I don't like sleeping without you, and also, I wish you were here right now. None of the cute little butts on the dancefloor are yours, and it makes me sad, you know?"

He laughed again. "Yeah, babe. You aren't a sappy drunk at all. If it makes you feel any better, I'm in your bed right now. I couldn't be bothered walking home."

"That's... that's awful."

"Why's that awful?"

"Because you're in my bed, and I'm not in my bed. That's the worst news ever. I bet you're naked, too; your cute little butt is in my bed, and I'm not. This is why I shouldn't leave town."

"Maybe don't make any drastic decisions after that much alcohol. My cute little butt will be here waiting for you tomorrow."

“It should be tomorrow, like, right now,” I told him.

“The sooner you and Cooper get your drunk asses to bed, the sooner tomorrow will come. Text me when you get back safe?” Dylan asked.

“Okay. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Night, babe.”

When I put the phone down, the room spun a little, so I decided Dylan was probably right. It was time to call it a night.

I found Cooper and Pippa, and the three of us ordered a taxi back to her apartment. Cooper immediately fell asleep in the back seat, snoring like a baby bear, his head slumped against my shoulder, and I patted his cheek.

“You two really can’t handle your liquor, can you?” Pippa asked.

“No, I’m usually serving it more than I’m drinking it.”

“I’m just a boy,” Cooper grumbled from my shoulder and me and Pippa both cracked up.

The next morning, however, was not so funny. I woke up spooning Cooper, clearly having reached for him like I would Dylan in the night.

I rolled away, and abruptly, my throbbing head made itself apparent.

“Dylan must sleep really well; you’re so snuggly,” Cooper muttered sleepily.

“Find your own alpha to snuggle,” I replied, smothering his face with my pillow.

“You’re really going to make me regret coming out to you, aren’t you?” Cooper sighed.

“Probs.”

The drive back to Foxwood Hollow was brutal despite the large fry-up breakfast and several cups of coffee I’d inhaled at a nearby cafe.

Cooper and I remained in mutually agreed silence and listened to music on very low the whole way home.

When I pulled up outside Cooper’s flat to drop him home, I sent a quick text to Dylan.

You at your Mum’s? x

Dyl-pot

I’m in your bed, as promised ;)

I smiled even though my head hurt and my eyes stung from the long drive. It perked me up enough that I felt a little less like death warmed up by the time I pulled up into the pub car park.

It was Dylan’s day off, Milly was working with Soraya who was doing a trial shift. She’d worked in a large bar in a bigger town, so my main concern for her was sheer boredom.

Unable to stomach even the vaguest scent of beer, I slipped down the side of the pub for the outside entrance to my flat above.

The second I unlocked the door, I could smell him, and it was like I could finally take a full breath. Taking the stairs two at a time, I dumped my duffel bag in the hallway and found my beautiful Dylan sitting in my bed, knitting and listening to an audiobook.

He hit pause on his phone. “Hey, babe, how’s your hangover?” he asked as he began placing his knitting into the little tote bag he carried around for it.

As soon as I was sure I wouldn’t accidentally get impaled on a knitting needle, I crawled onto the bed and tugged him down so he was lying underneath me. Then I dropped my full weight on top of him and smushed him into the mattress.

“I missed you. That’s dumb, isn’t it?” I asked, my face buried in his neck, making my voice muffled.

“I missed you too.” He kissed the top of my head.

Fuck, he smelled so good.

“I bought some fresh orange juice for you, I even got it with the extra bits how you like it. Want some?”

I felt like I might cry. It was probably the hangover and lack of sleep, but I’d just never had anyone in my life really... care for me.

That’s not to say people didn’t care about me. More that I learned to be self-sufficient pretty young, and I didn’t realise what I’d been missing. Had no idea what it felt like for someone to buy me my favourite orange juice because they knew I’d be feeling rubbish.

I’d always fed into the bullshit that it was the alpha’s role to take care of their omega

and to always be the strong one. It had been eye-opening to see the beauty in the give and take with Dylan.

He wore his heart on his sleeve and could be so vulnerable with me sometimes that it made me want to keep him in our nest forever and never let the harsh reality of the world near him. But then there was the other side of Dylan, the fiercely strong and determined side. His inner pitbull that would go to war for the people he loved. And then, finally, there was his endlessly caring nature. The part of him that knitted soft beautiful clothes for his family and friends, wanting them to be warm and comfortable and to know they were loved by him.

I sniffled, and a couple of tears might have escaped my eyes, but I told myself I wasn't crying, not really.

"Yes, please. I'd love some orange juice," I whispered.

Dylan shuffled out from under me, and I tried to get my shit together while he was in the kitchen. I got undressed and climbed under the covers, the cotton sheets were soft from where Dylan slept in them last night and the scent was like a comforting blanket of it's own.

Dylan returned with a glass of orange juice and a straw like I was a little kid and I tried not to cry again.

Then, he held out a cookie with M&M's in it, and I couldn't hold it back.

"Baby, what's wrong? Do you not like cookies? I can go get you something else?"

"No." I sniffled. "They're perfect. You're perfect. I'm just not used to this, and I'm also pretty hungover."

Dylan joined me in the bed. “Not used to what? Cookies?”

I shook my head. “It’ll sound silly.”

“I say silly things all the time. Do you want me to stop?”

I shook my head again. “I’m not talking shit about my dad or anything because he did the best he could, and he raised me on his own. But... other than making sure I was clean, safe, and fed, I mostly took care of myself, you know? Then, when he lost his hand, it was like I had to care more for him than the other way around. I didn’t... didn’t know how nice it could be to be... taken care of. And then I feel sad because it probably shouldn’t be a revolutionary concept at twenty-three, should it?” I wiped my eyes with the backs of my hands.

Dylan grabbed a tissue from the bedside table and wiped my face softly before pressing a gentle kiss to my lips.

“No, Ax. It shouldn’t be revolutionary, and it hurts my heart a little. It’s okay to know your dad did the best he could, but for that still to have not been quite enough. You can love him, remember him fondly, and still acknowledge that you should have known what it felt like to be... looked after. But we have a whole lifetime ahead of us, Ax. I’m gonna care for you so hard it’ll suffocate you.” He smiled, and I kissed the corner of his mouth.

“Thank you,” I whispered. “I love you so so much. I can’t wait to be suffocated by you.”

“Ooooh. An asphyxiation kink, that’s new.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “We were being sweet, doofus.”

“I’m sorry, but you really set that up for me.”

“Cuddle me,” I demanded, tugging his arms and twisting so he’d spoon me from behind.

Maybe alphas like to be the little spoon sometimes, so sue me?

Chapter Twenty-five

Dylan

It didn't take Axel long to fall asleep, his breathing heavy and even. I pressed a kiss to the back of his neck before slipping out of the bed.

In the doorway, I watched his sleeping form. There were times over the years I worried that my infatuation with Axel was for a version of him I'd made up in my head, the reality doomed to be a disappointment.

But the truth was, every layer I peeled back with Axel made me love him more deeply than I realised was possible to feel for another person. Big, strong, could handle anything, Axel was sexy as hell. Soft, vulnerable, open with his heart, Axel? That made me want to walk over hot coals for him.

His words earlier had been like a knife to my heart. He thought orange juice and a cookie was the pinnacle of generosity? I'd decided then that Axel needed to know exactly what it felt like to be cared for by Dylan Bailey. So, I headed back home to pick up some supplies.

The house was empty because Mom and Abbie were visiting her parents this weekend, so I went straight upstairs to my bedroom and began rooting through the drawers of my dressing table to find what I was after.

Aha! Perfect.

In the kitchen, I was eternally grateful to Abbie that we always had a well-stocked fridge, and I nabbed a cucumber from the crisper.

When I returned to Axel's he was still dead to the world, so I set to work in the living room. I gave the place a quick tidy and covered the sofa in large bath towels. Connecting my phone to the speaker, I found a playlist called 'Gentle Spa Music' and hit play, keeping the volume on low.

By the time I heard Axel calling out for me, I had everything set up and ready.

"Why do you have a towel on your head?" he asked as soon as I stepped into the bedroom. "And why are you in a robe?"

"I'm getting into character, less questions, please."

"This might be our bizarrest role-play yet. It's one thing to pretend I'm a firefighter coming to check your smoke alarms, but whatever this is, it seems weird."

I rolled my eyes. "It's not a sex thing, now shush!"

Clearing my throat first, I said, "Welcome to your Bailey Spa day, here is your robe if you'd care to join me in the main salon." I tried to keep my voice as spa-like as possible but it might have come out a little more 'scary sentient robot'.

"The main salon?" Axel asked, his eyebrows practically shooting to his hairline.

"The living room," I whispered.

"Right. Of course. Not that I've ever tried it, but I feel a bit like this is what an acid trip might feel like?"

“Will you put your fucking robe on and get into the living room so I can fucking spoil you with less backchat, please.” I huffed.

Axel barked out a laugh but took the robe and followed me.

“Now, if you’d like to take a seat, can I offer you a complimentary cucumber water?” I batted my eyelashes at him and handed over the glass.

He smiled at me, and it made his eyes glitter like the night sky, somehow both dark and bright at the same time.

“Would you prefer a face mask which promises to rejuvenate you, hydrate you, or relax you?” I asked fanning out my selection for him to choose.

“After last night, I’ll take some rejuvenation, please.”

I pulled the tissue face mask from its pouch and applied it to his face, carefully. Then I grabbed the cucumbers I’d cut up earlier and placed one on each of his eyelids.

He pressed a few buttons on the recliner so the cucumbers wouldn’t fall off.

I decided on the hydration mask for myself but left off the cucumber so I could continue to pamper my alpha.

He flinched when I grabbed his foot. “You better not tickle me,” he warned.

“I’m giving you a foot massage and a pedicure. If you could try to be a little more compliant, that would be much appreciated.”

He didn’t reply, just wriggled his toes at me, so I continued.

Using some lavender-infused lotion I'd been given for Christmas, I pressed my thumbs into the arch of his feet and received a satisfied groan for my efforts.

Once I'd massaged both feet, I grabbed a nail file to even everything out and then rubbed in cuticle oil because I didn't think he'd appreciate a ruby-red pedicure.

Removing the cucumber covering his eyes, he blinked at me owlishly, and it made him look adorable.

"I'll be right back," I told him.

I returned with a small plate of apple slices and grapes. "Enjoy some of Foxwood's finest fruit while I run your bath, sir."

"Oh, I'm 'sir' now?"

I flicked him on the nose. "Don't let it get to your head."

In the short time it took me to turn the bath taps on and add some salts to the water, Axel had cleaned the plate.

"If you'd like to join me in the bathhouse for a very relaxing rub down, please follow me."

Axel grinned and crowded in behind me when we stepped inside the fairly small bathroom. The bath was only half full, but with us both squeezed inside, it would probably be plenty.

I removed Axel's robe first and then his underwear. His glorious naked body momentarily distracted me from the task at hand, and I bit my lip.

He really was fucking stunning.

My robe got added to the pile, and I didn't have any underwear on, which Axel seemed to appreciate, judging by his lustful gaze.

"In you pop," I said, forgetting my spa character for a moment. "I mean, please step inside our special muscle relaxant bath, where a... spa assistant will join you."

"This is about to get really weird if you aren't the 'spa assistant'." He chuckled.

"Get in!" I smacked him on the arse.

Once he was settled, I scooted in behind and arranged him so his head rested against my chest. He was a little cramped, but I really hadn't had long to plan this, so it was what it was.

Grabbing the shampoo bottle, I squirted some into the palm of my hands and began massaging it into his hair and scalp.

"Holy fuck that feels good."

I took note of that. Enjoys having his hair washed.

Using a small cup, I scooped up the water and poured it over his head to wash away the shampoo, being careful to avoid getting soapy water into his eyes.

Next, I added a tiny bit of my conditioner that I kept here for me because Axel was a heathen who owned 'two-in-one shampoo and body wash' and I refused to subject my curls to such a thing.

Hair fully washed and body thoroughly soaked and cleaned, we climbed out of the

bath. I deserved an award for resisting sitting on his dick each time he'd got hard. I may have cleaned his cock with the soapy washcloth a few more times than strictly necessary, though.

Back in his bedroom, I dried Axel off and then put down a fresh towel on the bed for him to lie on his front.

He looked at me sceptically, but I just pointed at him, then at the bed, and he capitulated.

I quickly dried myself off, too, and retrieved the lotion from the living room.

Straddling the backs of Axel's thighs, my cock rested nicely along his crease. I poured a generous helping of the lotion onto Axel's back and began digging in my thumbs, trying to get at all the knots.

Axel grunted and groaned a lot, and I enjoyed how responsive he was. When my arms were beginning to tire, I moved lower and massaged his juicy bum cheeks. They were covered in a dusting of dark hair, and when I pulled one cheek to the side to take a peek at his hole, it looked like a small pink button with dark hair surrounding it.

"Are you staring at my butt hole?" Axel asked.

"Yes. It's a lovely butt hole. Anyway, you stare at mine all the time. Have you ever... do you like being rimmed?"

"Um... I dunno. I've never... Mine isn't all cute and waxed like yours."

"I like you all big and hairy, Axel. Even here." I stroked my index finger down his crease. "I'd love to taste you if you'd like to try it?"

“If... if you’re sure.” He sounded nervous, and it was strangely endearing.

I shuffled down and spread his thighs so I could kneel in between. When I parted his cheeks with my thumb, he let out a gasp as the tip of my tongue met his hole.

Licking gently at first, I let him get used to the new sensation. When he really began to moan, though, I lapped and sucked at his hole like it was my final meal. Honestly, if I ever was on death row, this is what I’d request.

Axel tasted slightly of the soapy bathwater but mostly of man , and it had my cock hard and my hole slick just to watch him enjoy something where the sole purpose was to receive pleasure.

It wasn’t long before he began reaching under himself to try and stroke his cock.

“Lift your hips up,” I requested, and he obliged.

From this angle, I could continue to lick at his hole and milk his cock at the same time.

Garbled sounds spilled from his lips, but none of them seemed to form actual words. I added some pressure to my strokes and twisted my wrist near the head in the way I knew he pleased himself.

“Fuck, Dyl. Fuck, I’m gonna... Gonna... Gonna come,” he stammered out seconds before he shot his load onto the towel below. His thighs trembled, and he was panting for breath by the time the last few drops dripped from his tip.

I quickly pulled the towel out from under him and wiped his cock before throwing it in the direction of his washing basket. The second that was done, Axel collapsed back down onto the bed.

“Holy shit, Dylan. That was... no wonder you go nuts when I do that.”

“Any time, babe.” I kissed his shoulder blade.

He turned to face me and reached a hand down for my cock, which was only a semi now.

I stopped him. “I’m good. Tonight was about you. I just wanted to make you feel good. Make you feel... loved.”

Axel tugged me and kissed me in a way that was somehow both fierce and gentle. It was like I could feel his love being poured into me via his soft lips and curious tongue.

“I’ve never felt so loved in my life, Dyl,” he said, breaking away. “I don’t think I’ve ever loved so much in my life either.”

I kissed him back, and we spent the evening like that until we fell asleep. Alternating between soft kisses and staring into each other’s eyes like neither of us could quite believe our luck in finding each other.

Which was ironic given we never really found each other. I don’t remember a time of my life when Axel wasn’t in it. He was my lighthouse in a storm, and I knew I’d always find my way back to him.

For the next week and a half, Axel and I had been like passing ships. I was working extra to cover him while he was in den-making season, and he was working during the day when I was free.

Not exactly end-of-the-world stuff but I missed him.

Thankfully, he was due to finish building his final den tomorrow, and then we'd have most of next week off for his rut.

It was Friday night, so me, Milly, and Soraya were all working tonight. With neither Milly or I used to working a shift with more than two of us, it felt frankly luxurious.

Axel had complained that with three omegas, he was outnumbered at work now, but Soraya had been a great hire. Not only was she extremely competent, she was popular with the customers. Striking and beautiful with legs that went on for days, she had a way of making all her customers feel like they had her undivided attention, and it had been great for business.

Having Soraya here made me feel less guilty for leaving in September. Not that I'd be going far since I practically lived upstairs now. Unofficially of course.

I wasn't sure how soon was too soon for me and Axel to move in together, but given the fact that I'd have been happy to live with him from the day we got together, I figured I should wait until he brought it up.

So long as he doesn't take too long. I'm not famed for my patience.

"Oi, day dreamer, I'm going on my break if you could try serving some customers," Milly said, winking at me.

"You underestimate me. I can day dream about Axel and pour pints at the same time, it's practically my specialty."

"Gross." She scrunched her nose up and wandered out the back.

Later in the evening, Axel appeared covered in mud as usual but looking a lot more lively than he had the last few days.

I smiled at him and poured him a pint. He leaned over the bar for a kiss before taking a long sip.

“Good day, babe?” I asked.

“Mhmm. In fact, I’ve finished early, so no more dens this season. And I have a surprise for you tomorrow.” He grinned, clearly extremely pleased with whatever surprise he’d concocted.

“Oooo. What is it?”

“It wouldn’t be much of a surprise if I told you what it was, love.”

I stuck my tongue out at him.

Cooper turned up shortly after, also looking a little muddy.

“Been working with Axel today?”

Occasionally when Axel had wealthier clients, they’d pay for Cooper to come and install some electricity and lighting into the dens, that was usually the cause of Cooper being covered in mud.

Cooper blushed a little before nodding his head. Strange.

The two of them spent the remainder of my shift sitting at the end of the bar and nursing drinks. When I rang the bell for last orders, Cooper patted Axel on the back before waving goodbye to me and heading out.

“Soraya and I can finish up down here if you and Ax want to head up?” Milly offered.

I looked at Axel, who smiled and nodded his head like a puppy and not like he was all of our boss.

“Thanks, Milly. He should be asleep, but he won’t until I go up. I’m sorry your cousin is such a baby,” I said to her.

She laughed. “He is, but he’s quite a hard-working baby, so we let him off.”

“Come on, old man. Let’s get you to bed.”

“Who are you calling old man?” he squawked. “My frontal lobe isn’t even fully developed yet,” he continued as I led him up the stairs to his flat.

“Don’t I know it.”

“Dyl. Love, you awake?” Axel whispered; if you could even call it that, it was so loud.

“I am now you’re acting like Sir Hiss in my ear,” I grumbled.

“Who’s Sir Hiss?”

“That snitch of a snake from Robin Hood, I really empathise with Prince John right now because I, too, thought about stuffing you into a basket.”

“I thought you loved me?”

“I do. And I’d lovingly stuff you into the basket. To prevent the inevitable homicide.”

“That’s... reassuring.”

“For future reference, if you’re gonna wake me up at dawn, it should be with your mouth on my cock,” I explained.

“It’s eight thirty, so dawn was a while ago and duly noted for next time.”

“I mean, it’s not too late if you want to go ahead now,” I offered generously.

“I want to show you my surprise.”

At that, I finally opened my eyes and found Axel staring at me with a very soft expression.

“Why are your puppy dog eyes so much more effective than mine?” I whined.

“Because I use them sparingly, whereas you whip them out to try and get your way at any given opportunity,” he pointed out, which was... well... fair.

I climbed on top of Axel in order to get out of bed, but clearly, he was having none of my antics that morning because not even my naked dick rubbing against him was steering him off course. Rude.

I huffed and grabbed a T-shirt from the floor before heading to the bathroom.

“You look like Winnie the Pooh,” he said, following behind me.

“I tolerate you joining me for my morning ablutions during your rut, but you’re gonna need to skedaddle right back to the bedroom today, babe.”

“Fine. I’ll go make coffee.” Axel stomped off to the kitchen.

Once we were both washed, dressed and had a flask of coffee to go, Axel led me

down the lane and in the direction of the town street. The entire walk, he was jittery and acting nervous, which, in turn, made me nervous.

Right before we reached town, Axel turned right until we arrived outside his dad's old house.

As far as I was aware, Axel hadn't really been back here since his dad died, but he hadn't sold it either. I knew that Cooper came in from time to time to run the water and the heating occasionally in the winter to keep the pipes going.

Together, we walked down the side of the house and entered the garden through a slightly dilapidated gate. The garden was less overgrown than I'd expected, it looked like it must have had the lawn mown at least at the end of the summer.

Axel didn't say a word as I followed him down the path and right to the end of the garden where a large old oak tree stood. On the rare occasions Cooper let me hang out with him and Axel as kids, we often came here and climbed this tree, the branches strong enough to sit and swing on. I smiled at the swarm of fond memories that flashed through my mind. The lowest branch was always a little too high for me to reach, and Axel would dependably hoist me up ahead of him.

"I have a lot of good memories of this tree," I said to Axel while staring up at it.

"Well, love. I'm hoping we can make a lot more."

I glanced over to where he was standing and spotted the trapdoor near his feet.

It couldn't be... No.

My heart hammered in my chest as I watched Axel lift up the door and then reach his hand out for me. Unable to utter a single word, I climbed inside with him.

It was one of the largest dens I'd seen. Axel couldn't stand up in it, but I could. He reached towards one of the walls and flicked a switch, and then... oh my.

The ceiling sparkled to life like he'd tugged down all the stars from the night sky.

He'd placed wood down for the floor, but a lovely soft pile rug sat on top of it, making the whole place feel warm and cosy. In the far corner, I spotted a basket which was overflowing with my nesting materials, and I couldn't cope with what it all meant.

"Who's den is this?" I whispered, not even daring to hope until he confirmed it.

"Well, that depends a little," he replied.

"On what?"

He knelt on the soft rug and turned me to face him, holding my hands in his. "Will you be my den-mate Dylan?"

I sniffled, and then I hiccuped, and then tears streamed down my cheeks in a flood that I was mildly concerned might never end.

"You really mean it?" I managed to squeak out.

"With all my heart, love."

"Of course I'll be your den-mate."

At that, Axel tugged me into his arms, and our mouths crashed together. I could taste my salty tears on his lips as my tongue sought out his.

He was really going to keep me. To claim me as his.

I pawed at his t-shirt, needing to feel his skin against mine. In the end, I settled for shoving my hands underneath.

As the pads of my fingertips stroked the hairs that covered his stomach, Axel wrapped his arms around me and squeezed me tight.

There had been many moments over the last few months where I'd pinched myself, sure I'd wake up to discover all of this with Axel had been the result of the most elaborate dream of my life.

I wish I could go back and tell thirteen-year-old me that it wasn't just a childish dream that Axel would build me a den one day. That we'd have to be apart for a while but that it would all be worth it in the end. Because it was worth it.

The endless chasing, the heartbreak, the ever-expanding love I never seemed able to diminish despite years and miles between us, it had all been worth it to be here. To be held by Axel in the den he'd built for us because we were it. We were forever.

Chapter Twenty-six

Axel

“Ax? Wake up, Ax,” Dylan’s voice slowly filtered through my sleep-addled brain.

“Huh?” I squinted, and the room was still dark. “What’s wrong?” I asked, suddenly concerned about why I was being woken up in the middle of the night.

“I’m—“ Dylan groaned, and then the scent hit me, and I was immediately wide awake. Dylan had gone into heat and my rut was due any day now. We must have synced up because he wasn’t expecting his heat for another month.

“Do you want to stay here or—“

”—No! We need to get to the den. Right now, Ax, we need to go!” He groaned again as the wave of heat made his entire body tremble.

His t-shirt stuck to his sweat-covered body, and his curls were a wild halo around his head. I climbed out of bed and pulled on a pair of joggers and a hoodie. I’d left a rucksack by the front door, which was filled with drinks and snacks that would keep us going for a little while, and then we began the short ten-minute walk to our den.

The moment we climbed through the trapdoor, Dylan began stripping off his clothes like their existence offended him before stomping over to where the bed and nesting materials were and began ‘his process’.

His words, not mine.

I stayed back and let him do his thing until a particularly strong wave of heat hit him, at which point I stepped up behind him and wrapped my arms around his chest, holding him through it.

“Fuck, Axel. I forgot to grab any worn clothes; we need to go back!”

“You’re okay. I stuffed some worn t-shirts into a zip-lock bag, and they’re in my rucksack. We have everything we need, don’t worry,” I tried to reassure him. Mollified for now, he nodded his head while I retrieved the items.

I got undressed while he stuffed the last few worn clothes in the perfect spots of his nest and then stepped back with his hands on his hips.

At a quick glance, Dylan looked so petite with his delicate features but he was actually just very compact. His stomach and arms were toned, and you could bounce a coin off his bum. It was no hardship that I’d spend the next few days buried inside it, my knot locking us together.

“Is it ready?” I asked.

“Of course it’s ready. Does it not look ready? What’s wrong with it? I had to make some alterations because we don’t have your duvet, maybe that’s what’s wrong? God, all my dreams come true, and I’m fucking it up.”

“Breathe, love. It’s beautiful, and I couldn’t have asked for a better mate or a better nest. I only asked because I didn’t want to climb in if you still had any finishing touches,” I explained.

“What finishing touches would you add?”

“None. Let’s pretend I never asked. I was being a dumb alpha; you’re the pro on nests.”

“I am pretty good at them, aren’t I?”

“The best ever.”

I kissed him and pulled him down on top of me into the heart of our nest.

“How are you feeling?” I ran my hands up and down his bare back, enjoying the little shiver when my fingertips brushed along his ribcage.

“I’m tired. I hadn’t been asleep for that long when it started.”

My hand travelled up to his hair, and I weaved my fingers into his curls so I could massage his scalp. “Mmm, that feels good,” he mumbled.

“What do you need right now?”

“Can you knot me? I think I could fall asleep then.”

“Of course. Do you want to come?” I checked because sometimes Dylan preferred not to when his heat was just beginning. His need for it would build over the course of the next few days, and he often held off at the start.

He shook his head. “No, not yet.”

“Do you mind if I do?” I always felt kind of bad coming when he didn’t, but it was really hard to stave it off once my knot formed.

“You know I don’t mind.” He smiled a tired smile and kissed me.

“And you know I like to check. Lie down on your side.” I tapped him on the bum, and we shuffled until he got comfortable.

From behind him, I began by massaging along the side of his body, helping him to relax. When a wave of heat hit him, I pressed two fingers inside his slick hole, which clenched around them.

I avoided his prostate, not wanting to overstimulate him if he was trying not to come, just scissored my fingers to stretch him and prepare for my knot.

He rocked his hips back and forth until I added a third finger. Once he was comfortably taking four, I stroked myself a few times to make sure I was fully hard. The scent of him alone did most of the heavy lifting, though.

“Ready, love?”

“Mmhmm.”

I waited until the next wave of heat hit him and slid home. We both groaned at that first glide, and his hole was dripping with slick. I pumped in and out of him slowly, still trying not to get him too worked up but enough to get me where he needed me.

Kissing along his neck and pale, soft shoulder, I gripped his hip as I rocked shallowly in and out of him until I could feel the sensation of my knot beginning to fill.

“My knot’s forming. It won’t be long now; you’re doing so good,” I praised.

“Yeah?” His voice was strained and breathy.

“Yeah, love. Always so good for me, aren’t you?”

“Aaah!” he gasped when my knot swelled to the point it couldn’t pull out of him easily anymore. He turned his face to kiss me as I thrust as gently as I could inside him, aware that my knot would be pressing against his prostate.

Dylan’s tongue in my mouth, the taste of him, the scent of him clouding my vision, the feel of his body holding me locked inside him, it all coalesced until my balls tightened and my release wracked through me like a bullet train. I shook and held Dylan tightly against my body as my cock pulsated inside him, filling him up and trapping my cum inside him until my knot would eventually wane.

“You okay?” I kissed his rosy cheek and his cute little ear.

“I’m perfect, thank you.” His voice had already turned sleepy so I grabbed one of the blankets and placed it over us. Using the dimmer switch Cooper had kindly installed near the bed, I held Dylan close as he drifted off to sleep. He looked so peaceful, almost ethereally beautiful, while he slept. With all of his expressions softened from rest, you could really see who he was with it all stripped back. My gentle soul with a fierce heart.

“I love you,” I whispered before squeezing tight and attempting to join him in sleep. I always found it a little difficult when I was still inside him like this, but I knew it helped him rest during his heats, so I was getting used to it.

The following day, we used what had been my dad’s house to have a shower before returning to our den. We laid around in our nest for hours, sometimes talking, sometimes I’d play an audiobook or a podcast, we’d nap, it was peaceful.

“What’s this scar from?” I asked Dylan. I’d been playing with his hand and spotted a small silvery scar along the inside of his index finger.

“Oh, umm. You remember that Christmas I spent with Bennett skiing?”

I... growled. And had to slap my hand over my mouth like I could stuff the noise back inside.

“See, this is why I wasn’t going to tell you.”

“I’m fine. Continue. It was involuntary.”

He arched an eyebrow at me. “On Christmas day, we’d all had a lot of wine, and a glass had smashed. Bennett hadn’t cleaned it up properly, and long story short, I leant on a shard, and it got lodged inside my finger.”

“What a fucking idiot.”

“Hey, I didn’t mean to!”

“Not you, him. I hope he still feels guilty about it to this day. Your finger is mutilated because of him.” I huffed.

“My finger is mutilated? I have a very small scar along the inside of my finger. I thought I was the dramatic one in this relationship.”

“I don’t like the idea of you being hurt because someone was thoughtless, is all.” I crooked his finger so I could kiss the scar.

We must have dozed off again eventually because I woke up to my whole body overheated and flushed as my rut began.

Panic surged through me when I realised Dylan wasn’t in our nest.

“Dylan?” I shouted.

Nothing.

I scrambled out of the nest and lifted the trapdoor, it was late enough that the sun had set and outside was covered in a blanket of darkness.

“Dylan!” I yelled again.

“Sorry! I’m here, I’m right here.” Dylan sounded out of breath as he ran down the garden path in nothing but a pair of tiny running shorts in the middle of March.

“Where did you go?” I groaned as my muscles spasmed.

“Just to the bathroom. I thought I’d be back before you woke up. What’s wrong?”

“My rut’s starting; I need you to be in here.”

Dylan quickly climbed in through the trapdoor, immediately shucked off his little running shorts and tugged me back towards our nest.

This time, when we lay together, it was like there was electricity in the air. I’m not even sure how long we spent rubbing our hands all over each other, revelling in the way my heated hand felt against his heated skin.

When finally, our lips touched, it was like a bomb had gone off inside my chest. My tongue tangled with his, and even with him pressed as close to my body as he could get, both naked and skin to skin from head to toe, it wasn’t enough.

“Need... need to be inside you. Can I?” I asked between feverish kisses.

Dylan moaned as a wave of heat had him shaking in my arms. “Yes. I need it, too. Fuck me. I feel like I might combust.”

With Dylan underneath me, lying on his back, I pushed his legs back and effectively folded him in half.

“I fucking love how flexible you are. Like a really sexy pretzel.”

Dylan snorted and started laughing. “Babe, you need to work on your dirty talk. Sexy pretzel. Jesus.” He’d laughed so hard that tears streamed down his cheeks and I thought I should be offended but seeing him so happy with his green eyes dancing in amusement I wouldn’t have taken it back.

Lining my cock up with his hole, I leaned forward and kissed him as I pushed in. After however many times I’d been inside him the last twenty-four hours, he didn’t need any prep, but he still fit snugly around me.

I stilled once I was fully seated, taking a moment to stare down at this man I’d known almost all of my life. His lips were parted to form a little ‘o’ expression, and his chest and face were flushed pink like an orchid. Some of his wild curls had stuck to his forehead with sweat and those bright green eyes of his pierced me like they always had. There was so much life in Dylan’s eyes. Almost too much to be held within them, and it overwhelmed me that someone as uncontainable as Dylan had chosen me.

“Um... Babe?” Dylan’s voice brought me back to the present. “Sorry to interrupt your moment there, but usually this is where you fuck me rather than just like... stare at me.”

His disgruntled expression made me laugh, and I buried my face in his neck.

“Sorry, love.”

Catching his lips with mine, I kissed him hard as I pulled out slowly and thrust back

in, deep. He let out a little gasp so I did it again.

I was surprised by how different it felt with him in heat and me in rut at the same time. We were in sync in a way I'd never experienced with anyone. It was as if even our heartbeats had harmonised.

I fucked him slowly, watched him come apart each time the head of my cock brushed against his prostate. He had such a tight grip on my shoulders I was sure to have little Dylan fingertip bruises dotted over them tomorrow.

“Are you—“ Gasp. “Trying to drive me mad on purpose.” Dylan moved his hands to my hips and pulled like he remotely had the strength to dictate how fast I'd fuck him. Cute .

“Maybe,” I replied, and he glared up at me. “I like when you get all needy and desperate.”

Dylan proceeded to shove me, and I let him. Let him manhandle me so I was lying down, and he could climb on top. He had a smug expression on his face when he sank down onto my cock. Like he'd won something. Like I wasn't being rewarded with the sexiest man ever riding me.

He pressed his hands against my chest and used me as leverage to grind his arse up and down my length. I loved when Dylan just took. There was nothing as sexy as someone who knew exactly what they wanted, and Dylan always knew what he wanted.

I ran my hands up his thighs and gripped his hips, stilling him so I could thrust up into his slick hole and drive him wild. He stroked himself as I did it, his head tipped back as he was lost in the moment.

The telltale signs of my knot beginning to swell began, so I slowed down, letting Dylan set the pace again.

He moved onto his side so we were face to face, and I used my arm to keep one of his legs up as I slowly sank in and out of him. We kissed as my knot expanded to the point of pulling on his rim, and then I thrust gently so it wouldn't hurt him.

Reaching down between our bodies, he stroked himself and kissed me hard at the same time; it was sloppy and wonderful and everything .

"I love you so fucking much, Dyl. I'm never letting you go," I whispered between kisses.

Dylan erupted, shaking in my arms as his cum painted both of our stomachs, and I followed immediately. His tight hole clenching around my knot, watching him come undone, it was all too much. I groaned as my release painted him inside, marking him and claiming him as mine. In the den I'd built for us. My perfect omega.

When Dylan's heat and my rut finally ended, we decided we would shift and head into the woods as foxes for a little while.

As kids, we had spent a lot of time playing in the forest and outside in the garden as foxes, but as we got older, it became more and more inconvenient, and most of us hardly seemed to shift at all as adults.

Before, when I'd get through my ruts alone, I'd often spend them in my fox form. They tended to feel less consuming that way, and I'd just hide out until it was over. Now, I can't imagine enduring a rut in my fox form, unable to run my hands all over Dylan's bare skin. Unable to kiss him so thoroughly that he pants into my mouth, skin flushed pink and pupils wide.

As Dylan neatly folded his clothes back into my rucksack, I began to shift. Despite shifting more than most due to den building, it ached. My muscles and bones strained at the exertion as I willed them to shrink down and transform.

When I glanced up through my fox eyes, Dylan had paused to watch.

“I’ve not seen you as a fox since we were kids,” he said.

I couldn’t reply, so I padded over to him and rubbed my nose into the palm of his hand until he scratched under my chin.

Fuck, that feels good.

“I quite like this, where I can talk, but you can’t respond.”

I huffed and gave him my best ‘of course you do’ look.

Laughing, he returned to scratching under my chin and then, something really embarrassing happened.

I... I fucking... purred.

I had never purred in my life. The rumbling sound escaped my chest without me having any say over it at all. I knew that most omegas purred sometimes and alphas did occasionally, but I certainly never had.

But then... nobody had ever really petted me in my fox form before.

“Come over here,” Dylan coaxed. He sat with his back to the wall and covered his legs with the nesting materials.

I joined him and curled up in the gap he'd left between his legs and rested my head against his thigh.

Feeling small and a little vulnerable was an unusual feeling for me. I'd always been 'big'. Had always taken up a lot of room whether I wanted to or not.

Before I'd shifted, we'd planned to both go for a run in the woods in our fox forms, but it seemed Dylan had a change of plans. He rubbed behind my ears, scratched the top of my head, stroked his hand down my back, and I... purred. I purred so loudly that it was pretty mortifying.

"I love the sound of you purring; it makes me feel like I'm doing a good job of taking care of you," Dylan said, making me feel mildly less embarrassed.

Fuck it, if Dylan liked my purring then why try stop it. I shuffled around a little and exposed my belly to him. He kept scratching a spot that made my leg twitch and seemed to find it highly amusing. I kicked him lightly when he wouldn't stop.

"I know you might hate me for saying this, but you're so fucking cute when you're a fox that I feel like my heart might explode."

And then he booped me on the nose.

So I bit him.

Not hard or anything, just enough to get a little yelp of surprise.

Booping me on the nose. Like I'm his pet poodle or something.

Dylan returned to scratching my head right where I liked it, and I returned to... purring in his lap. Let myself indulge in the attention and affection despite the pang

of guilt because I felt like Dylan had been showering me with care and affection a lot recently, and I was sure I wasn't doing enough for him in return.

“Thank you for making me the most perfect den, Ax. You know, years ago, I can't have been much older than thirteen. I remember washing the dishes after dinner one evening, and you were drying up. I said something like I hoped my alpha would make me a den himself one day, and you told me I deserved someone who'd build me the best den ever.”

I looked up at Dylan's face; he was smiling, and his eyes were filled with happy tears. One escaped and rolled down his cheek, leaving a faint trail of his feelings behind.

“I remember thinking, Nobody could build me a better den than you could. And right now, it's like all my dreams have come true. My heart is so full, and I'm so excited for our future that my heart won't fit in my chest if I feel anymore,” he choked out.

Without really thinking about it, I shifted back right between his legs and kneeled there. Leaning forward, I kissed his tear-streaked cheeks and cupped his beautiful face between my palms.

“Sometimes, you pour so much of your love into me that I feel greedy. It shocks me that you can possibly have any left inside you because you give me more of it than I knew existed in this world. I just wish I could give you back as much as you deserve,” I whispered into the quiet space I'd carved out into the earth for the two of us.

“I've never felt more loved in my life.” And then he kissed me. It was slow and tender, and it made me feel like the small, vulnerable fox again. Made me feel safe and... cherished. And I knew that I'd protect what we had here forever.

Because Dylan was the love of my life, and I knew it.

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Dylan - 1 Year Later

I sat impatiently by the living room window as I waited for Axel to come home. He'd texted me while I was at work saying he had a surprise for me tonight, and then confirmed it was a dirty surprise, and I'd been antsy ever since.

I couldn't even stress clean because the house was spotless. Ever since Axel had finished renovating his dad's old house and we moved in a few months ago, I'd been neurotic about it, needing the place to look perfect all the time. It was as though the entire house had become my nest, and I'd become weirdly protective over it.

The sound of a car door slamming shut had my heart rate picking up.

Oh wow.

Walking down the path to the front door was the hottest man I'd ever known, only now, now, he was wearing a firefighter uniform, and my jeans got too tight very quickly.

I raced to the front door and opened it before he even had a chance to knock.

"Close the door; you ruined my entrance," Axel grumbled.

I rolled my eyes but did as asked, and then he knocked loudly three times while I waited.

"You're right there; why aren't you opening the door?" Axel's muffled voice

sounded exasperated.

“I’m giving you an authentic experience. I could have been in the shower.”

“Open the fucking door, Dylan.”

I obliged. “I might need to speak to your supervisor about your attitude to customers,” I said breathily as I took in the sight before me. Oh my.

“Are you going to behave now?” Axel arched an eyebrow at me.

Nodding my head, I added, “We definitely need to revisit that whole headteacher scenario again, though.”

“One weird roleplay at a time, please.”

Clearing my throat, I said, “What are you doing here, sir? There’s not a fire, is there?”

“There was a report of smoke. I’m going to have to do a full search of the property.”

“Of course. I’d hate for my house to be on fire and me not even realise it.”

Axel flicked me on the nose and stepped inside the house.

“I’ll check the upstairs first.” He smirked at me knowingly.

I followed him up to the bedroom where he wandered around ‘inspecting’ the room. Only to see my rather large knotting dildo was suction cupped to the bedside table. I definitely had not left that there. Which meant Axel had...

“That looks like a bit of a hazard, Mr Bailey.”

I fought the laughter that was threatening to bubble out of me.

“It certainly raises the temperature of the room when it’s in use,” I replied.

“Hmmm. I might need to make sure that it’s not reaching dangerous temperatures in here. You know, for your own safety.” Axel peeled the suction off the table and ran the large red dildo through his hands, testing the weight of it in his palm. I gulped.

“I mean, if it’s a safety concern, then of course. The only problem is that my boyfriend is usually here to help me use it. It’s so big that I struggle to fit it in all by myself.” I bit my lip and looked up at him through my lashes.

“It is very big, and you are rather pint-sized. Maybe I could give you a hand on this occasion.”

“Pint-sized, really?” I scowled at him.

“I like you being pint-sized.” Axel smirked.

“Don’t break character!”

“ You broke it first!”

“Fine. Shh. Okay. Thank you so much, Mr Firefighter, that would be a big help. You really go above and beyond for your work.” I began undoing the button on my jeans and pulling down the zipper as Axel watched on eagerly.

“What can I say? I’m very passionate about fire safety.”

Once I’d undressed, I stood before Axel in nothing but a neon pink jock that I knew he was particularly fond of, and judging by the expression on his face; he wasn’t disappointed.

“I think you should get on the bed on all fours,” Axel suggested as he licked his lips.

In position, Axel ran a calloused hand down my back and along my cheeks before giving me a light smack. I groaned as the heat spread from where his hand had connected with soft skin; knew how pink it would look already against my pale complexion.

Axel rubbed the pad of his thumb over my hole, massaging my slick all around the rim. When he pressed in with the tip, I dropped my forearms to the bed and rested my forehead against them.

I exhaled a deep breath when he pushed two fingers inside me. “Good boy,” he whispered, stroking my back with his other hand.

A shiver ran down my spine. Would I ever not be a pile of goo at those words?

Axel scissored his fingers in and out of me, stretching me as best as he could because that dildo was no joke.

Once he was up to four fingers, I felt the slight burn and tried to breathe through it. “You okay, love? Is it too much?”

“I’m okay. I can take it.”

Axel left soft little kisses down my spine as I adjusted to the sensation, and eventually, I relaxed enough that he could push in and out.

When it was starting to feel a little too good, and my orgasm was building inside me, I told him I was ready.

“You were right; it does get very hot in here,” Axel said as he removed his fingers from me. I could feel my hole clenching at the air, unhappy with the loss of Axel no

longer being inside me.

“You have no idea,” I replied, chuckling.

I gasped when I felt the rubber head of the dildo rubbing up and down along my crease.

“Your boyfriend is very lucky to have such a perfect omega who will take all this for him.” Axel kissed and then nibbled my bum cheek.

“He is, but he knows it.” I turned my head to smile at him.

Axel bent forward and ran a hand through my sweaty hair before kissing me on the cheek. “He does,” he whispered.

“Ready?” he double-checked.

“Mhmm.”

The head of the dildo pressed in easily since most of it was narrower than Axel’s four fingers had been. I moaned as he pushed it in and out of me languidly, using his other hand to stroke up and down the backs of my thighs.

Once I was a mumbling mess, Axel continued until I could feel the pressure of the large knot at the base of the dildo pressing in.

“You can take it. You’re doing so well. So proud of you. You always take whatever I give you, don’t you?” Axel’s words rained down on me, and when I let out a deep breath, my body welcomed the knot.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck,” I babbled as the knot pressed against my prostate. Axel didn’t pull it back out, he just wiggled it around and added pressure on it in the way he knew

drove me wild.

“Look at you. So perfect.”

Axel kept going with it and then pulled my cock out of my jock and back so he could milk me at the same time.

I was so overstimulated that tears ran down my face, but Axel’s words echoed around my head. Good boy. So proud of you. So perfect.

Without warning, my orgasm barrelled into me, and I felt like my entire body convulsed at the force of it. My legs were shaking, and my release splashed down the backs of my legs. I whimpered when Axel sucked onto my sensitive tip.

Collapsing onto my front, Axel slowly worked the dildo back out of me, and I winced. I was beyond oversensitive.

Axel flipped me over onto my back and then stood by the bed. Still in his full uniform, he unzipped just enough to pull his cock out and stroked himself fiercely, gazing down at me the whole time.

On a loud groan, Axel’s cum spurted out of him and landed all over my now soft cock and stomach like paint splatters on a blank canvas. I loved the way the veins in Axel’s throat strained when he came, how his fingers would dig into my skin as he rode out his release. There was nothing more beautiful to me than when Axel let go.

He immediately climbed onto the bed and tugged me into position as his little spoon as he caught his breath.

“You okay?” he asked, kissing the back of my damp neck.

I wriggled and turned to face him. “That was... wow. We are doing that again. Where

did you get this from?" I pinched the uniform.

"Lei got it from work. I probably won't ever be able to look him in the eye again."

I snorted. "I can't believe you asked Lei for this. He's gonna think we're total weirdos."

"He's with Adam; he already knows you're a total weirdo. And everyone knows that I have zero ability to deny you anything, so here we are," he explained.

"Here we are." I smiled at him. "How did I get so lucky?"

Axel laughed softly. "I never stood a chance to be anyone's but yours. Wouldn't want to be either. My ridiculous, perfect, omega." And he kissed me on the tip of my nose.