



# Claimed by the Feral Wolves (The Omega Selection #2)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** A fake relationship might be the only thing that saves me from the monster from my past.

Two handsome alphas have claimed me as their mate in order to protect me from the man who killed my brother, Kurt. Our relationship is fake. They don't want an omega, and I don't want alphas, but we have to make it seem real if there's any chance of getting free from Kurt.

But just when we think things can't get any more complicated, the feral wolves arrive.

Before I can even understand what's going on, two claim me as their mate. Now, we can't tell them about our fake relationship, but I have to get them to understand that they can't really be my mates. That when this is over, I'm walking away with no one at my side.

The problem? None of the men that surround me seem to have any desire to let me leave alone. Including the man who wants me dead.

**Total Pages (Source):** 23

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Faye

The ballroom is full of breakfast smells: hashbrowns and bacon, toast and jam, and thick black coffee. Alphas laugh loudly and omegas flirt boldly, and I'm in the center of it all, firmly seated on Cayson's lap. I'm trying desperately to look like a woman in love, even though none of it's real. Not the way Cayson and Ezra are gazing at me, nor the bond we're faking to everyone around us.

But we have to play our roles. Especially in front of Kurt and the ultimas. Even now, I can feel Kurt's eyes burning into me from across the table, but I don't look at him. If I do, any happiness and humor I have will slip away.

Just another couple of weeks, and The Selection will be over. Cayson and Ezra can reject the bond with Kurt, which will ruin Kurt's claim on me, and I'll be free of everyone, and back at my cabin. I just have to keep pretending to work on my bond with my "mates."

"Is that comfortable for you, Jelly Bean?" Cayson asks, fluttering his eyelashes in a way that has me fighting laughter.

"Not really," I whisper to him, trying to be quiet enough that everyone else won't hear.

If we're going to keep up this ruse that Cayson and Ezra are my mates, people can't hear me complaining about Cayson showing me extra attention. I should be like all

the other ladies with their chosen mates, just dripping with honeyed words and kisses, while falling all over myself for them.

The thing is, I am uncomfortable.

The discomfort isn't from Cayson's lap, which is actually quite nice. I'm practically drowning in his scent, which mingles with the breakfast smells and makes my mouth water. And for such a big, muscular man, he certainly provides a nice seat. Even still, I can't seem to relax. I just... don't know how to be a mate. I've never even had a boyfriend. Everything we're doing feels strange and foreign to me. Like someone just told me that I'm a duck, and I'm trying really hard to be one, but I'm just not.

"Is there something I can do to make you more comfortable, Jelly Bean?" he asks, combing his fingers through his dirty blond hair as he flashes me a wicked smile.

This time I do laugh. "No, I'm fine."

I study his profile—the way his strong jaw runs into his neck—and when I catch him looking back at me, his eyebrows raised, I clear my throat and turn away. As much as I'm supposed to be pretending to be his mate, I can't let him know I find him kind of cute. He'd make this whole experience so much worse if he knew I was actually having trouble resisting him. I mean, the teasing and playfulness would be absurd with his ego that big.

"Bite," Cayson says, holding his spoon out, and his eyes sparkle as he looks at me.

A blush covers my cheeks as he holds the spoon a little closer. I eye the yogurt with berries and granola, and reluctantly open my mouth, feeling like everyone is watching the exchange as I take the spoon into my mouth. This has to be too much, even for mates, right?

“Is that good?” Cayson asks, bouncing me a little on his leg. “Do you want another bite?”

Beneath me, I feel him harden, and I try to pretend not to notice the way he watches my mouth while I eat. Cayson is many things, not the least of which is a horny bastard. I shouldn’t even feel flattered by his reaction to me, knowing he’d probably react like this to any woman in his lap.

“Make sure to give her some walnuts,” Ezra says, scooping some from his plate into the parfait with his spoon. “They’ll make her brain big and strong.”

And Ezra, for all his seriousness, is enjoying this far too much, at least based upon the fact that his brilliant blue eyes are filled with absolute mirth. I guess the only blessing is that all this silliness should make it clear to everyone that we’re the perfect mates, just like we’re supposed to be.

If only I wasn’t dying from embarrassment.

“Guys,” I whisper, cheeks flaming, “stop.”

“Stop what?” Cayson asks, leaning closer.

“You know what,” I tell him, feeling out of breath as his dark eyes slip down to my chest.

“It’s funny how girls are always telling Cayson to stop,” Ezra jokes, smirking.

“Actually,” Cayson says, drawing out the word. “They’re usually telling me to never stop, while with you, they wonder when you’re going to get started.”

Ezra’s gaze swings back to me. “He talks a big talk, but that’s the only thing that’s

big about him.”

I laugh.

Cayson rotates his hips under me, making me gasp. “Faye is absolutely aware of just how much I’m packing.”

“Man, a slight breeze could get you going,” Ezra drawls out, but there’s a little irritation in his voice.

“It’s not a breeze causing this,” Cayson says, rotating his hips again.

My jaw drops open. “Guys!”

Another plus of Cayson and Ezra fawning over me like this is that Kurt hasn’t had a chance to so much as get within an inch of me. Cayson zeroed in on me the second I walked into the ballroom, bringing me over to the table while Ezra started bringing plates of food. By the time Kurt came in, I was already firmly situated in Cayson’s lap, a spectacle for everyone to gawk at, a little bit of everything from breakfast laid out in front of me.

Kurt is positively fuming, his arms crossed as he stares daggers across the table at us. I try to ignore him, but his attention still makes me uncomfortable, and there’s that familiar acrid taste on my tongue in his presence. It’s weird though. Cayson and Ezra are better at chasing away my fears of Kurt than anyone or anything I’ve ever experienced. With them, I sometimes even forget he’s around. Kurt is like the big, bad monster from my nightmares, whom Cayson and Ezra are able to make prance around in a pink pair of panties.

“Another bite,” Cayson says, making little airplane noises as he brings the spoon to my mouth.

My face feels like it's on fire. This is too much!

"You don't have to feed me like I'm a baby," I mutter, trying to take the spoon from him, but he puts a finger up, holding it out of my reach.

"You're my omega," he says loudly, so anyone passing by will hear him. "I'm not going to let you lift a single one of your pretty fingers."

He holds the spoon up to my mouth again. This time it has a bite of raspberry pastry, which happens to be my favorite, so I swallow my pride and lean forward, taking the bite from the spoon. When I open my eyes, Ezra's gaze is focused on me, a funny look crossing over his face.

"Yes," Ezra says, gesturing to the plates and plates of food spread out across the table, "an alpha should treat their omega like a queen."

"Or a Jelly Bean," Cayson says, flicking the tip of my nose.

I hear a stifled laugh and I glance to the table next to ours, where Addilyn is trying her best not to cackle at my situation. Deep down, I know she must be at least a little bit jealous. She's been trying to get her hands on alphas since we got here, and here I am, pretending to bask in the attention of two of them. But it's definitely not jealousy she's feeling right now.

"The cutest Jelly Bean," Ezra adds, his tone deadpan but a tiny sparkle behind his eyes showing how much fun he's having playing along with this charade.

"I'm going to come up with nicknames for you," I threaten.

Ezra lifts a brow. "What kind of nicknames?"

“I want to be called... python ,” Cayson says dramatically.

“Python?” I ask, confused.

He presses himself harder against my ass and lifts a brow. “Yeah, your python, baby.”

“Why is everything about your... about your...?” I’m too embarrassed to finish my sentence.

Cayson leans in closer. “Say it.”

I shake my head.

To my surprise, he lightly bites my bottom lip. “I’m going to get you to say it eventually.”

Ezra clears his throat. “Maybe she should be in my lap.”

“Like hell,” Cayson mutters.

I look at Ezra. “I’m going to find a nickname for you too.”

“Yeah?” He actually looks happy about that.

“Good morning, everyone,” a commanding voice says.

I freeze, immediately dropping my head in deference to Brock, the ultima who’s standing at our table. Near me, I feel Cayson and Ezra doing the same. Keeping my head lowered, I don’t look up at the dark-haired man. It’s partially because he’s an ultima, and partially because I’m still upset about how little he did about Serra’s

death. About Kurt killing an omega, at The Selection, in cold blood. He at least seemed to consider my side, but that consideration didn't go very far.

"Good morning," Kurt says, sarcasm laced through his tone.

"How is everything going today? Are you enjoying exploring your mating bond?" the ultima asks, and I can feel his gaze practically pinning me in place.

I swallow, waiting for one of the guys to speak up, but all eyes are on me. I realize that I'm the deciding factor here, so they want to hear what I have to say about our bond. My eyes trail across the table, landing on Kurt, and a shudder runs up my back.

"If I'm being honest, sir," I begin, struggling to speak. I'm unable to meet the ultima's eyes, so I talk to the floor instead, praying Brock doesn't tell me to speak up. "I think I have a very strong connection with Cayson and Ezra." I glance at Kurt, whose hands are gripping the edge of the table tightly, his knuckles a ghostly shade of white. "But I don't think that Kurt and I have a connection."

Glancing beneath my lashes, I study Brock's face, but it's impossible to read. At least, unlike with Hector, he doesn't seem shocked that I don't want to be tied to the man I accused of killing my brother and Serra. Yet, he still doesn't seem to have accepted that there's nothing in this world, or any other, that could make me want Kurt as a mate.

"While that may be true," Brock says, as if choosing his words carefully, "remember that it's important to explore your connection to all of your alphas. It will give you the chance to ensure you really understand the bond. Our goal here at The Selection is to forge bonds that will last lifetimes, and unless you take it seriously, we can't begin to do that. Surely, Kurt must have felt something, some sort of forming connection, or he wouldn't have claimed you. Honor him by giving that a chance."



As Brock speaks, a lump forms in my throat, and I just nod, unable to say anything back.

“What about it, Jelly Bean ?” Kurt drawls, his voice dripping in loathing and sarcasm. “Why don’t you come and sit on my lap for a while?”

The thought of it makes bile rise in my throat, and I tighten my arms around Cayson, who sends a threatening glare across the table at Kurt. Both Ezra and Cayson are glaring at the other alpha. Ezra’s arms come around my shoulders protectively, and it comforts me a bit to know they’re on my side. Remembering the presence of the ultima, I try to speak, to say something intelligible, but my words come out garbled, and, to my horror, a single tear slips down my cheek.

“I—I?—”

“That’s alright,” Brock says, holding up a hand, his brow wrinkling, like he doesn’t understand what an omega would have to lose by exploring her mating bond with an alpha. For everyone else, the worst that could happen is that it wouldn’t work out. I’m not that lucky.

I picture the dead, staring eyes of my brother, and the same of the girl we found in the woods. The worst case scenario for me isn’t just that Kurt and I don’t bond, it’s that he grows tired of playing with his food and finally just kills me the same way he’s killed others.

“Perhaps this mating bond is just going to take extra time,” Brock says, putting his hand on Kurt’s shoulder. Kurt continues glaring across the table at the three of us, and I place my forehead against Cayson’s chest, not wanting to see Kurt’s icy stare. “Try to be patient, Kurt.”

“Oh, I’m trying,” he says, and when I glance up, I see him smirk at me. “But an alpha

can only be patient for so long.”

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:31 am*

2

Faye

Cayson's room does not at all reflect his personality, which is no surprise, since it's only his room while he is here at The Selection. The decorations are dark and formal, looking like they belong to a much older, much more serious, lord of a castle. It makes me wonder if all the alphas' rooms in the castle look like this. Fortunately for him, the area that matters most is all Cayson.

His closet.

"Cayson," I say, while rifling through his clothes, "you have more clothes than I do, and that's including all the clothes the wardrobe ladies have been sewing for me!"

"Well, what can I say?" he drawls from his spot on his bed. "I'm a man of fashion."

I glance at Cayson as he lays back on the pillows, looking completely comfortable. His sleeves have been rolled up, and he has his hands behind his head, showing off the large muscles in his arms. He's wearing a dark purple shirt and black slacks, but the buttons are undone halfway down his chest, giving far too much of a show of his delicious chest.

It's strange to me how he can be so big and strong, and also so unthreatening.

"A man of fashion?" I repeat, then lift a dark shirt with a brilliantly colored peacock on it, showing it to Ezra and Cayson with a questioning glance.

“A man of fashion, or a man with no self-control?” Ezra asks, giving Cayson a look.

Ezra’s sitting at Cayson’s desk, tossing a ball up in the air and catching it over and over again, patiently passing the time while I go through Cayson’s things. Cayson throws a pillow at him, trying to derail his ball-tossing, but Ezra just catches both the pillow and the ball.

That’s the thing about alphas: they’re hard to surprise.

I push past a gray suit and think about the announcement they’d made just after breakfast: Today’s activity is a fashion show, in which omegas dress alphas. Use this exercise as an opportunity to explore your creativity and have fun with your matches and potential mates.

“Gods,” I say, pulling a purple suit with crystals from the closet, “why do you even have this?”

“Oh, I can’t believe I brought that,” Cayson says, laughing at the atrocity. “ That was for a Halloween party, and it was itchy as hell, and just terrible in every way. We weren’t supposed to dress as anything. The theme was color .”

I keep holding it out, a smile spreading over my face.

“What are you thinking?” Cayson asks suspiciously.

I grin at him.

“Get him,” Ezra says, followed by a rich laugh that only makes me smile harder.

“No, Faye,” Cayson says, his smile falling off his face to be replaced with an expression of mock horror. “Don’t make me wear it. Please.”

“I get to pick!” I sing, tossing the suit at him. “I’m the omega. And besides, this is payback for earlier at breakfast.”

“Oh, come on, Jelly Bean,” Ezra says, his voice low and even as he looks at me. “You loved it.”

Cayson cackles and I level my gaze at Ezra. “Oh, you’re getting punished, too. You’re supposed to be the one with a good head on your shoulders.”

“Can’t I be the good looking one and the clever one?” Ezra says, raising an eyebrow and putting a hand to his head dramatically. “Why must everyone pigeonhole me?”

I laugh, then catch a flurry of movement to the left. Cayson is putting on the purple suit, and I avert my eyes, my face flushing a deep scarlet. I want to put the backs of my hands to my cheeks to try and cool them down, but that might be too obvious.

“You can look, Faye,” Cayson sings. “We’re together, remember?”

Yeah, right. We’re the kind of “together” that doesn’t involve seeing each other half-naked, and he knows it.

“What makes you think I want to see that?” I ask, hating how flustered I sound.

It’s obvious I want to look. Anyone who claimed to not want to see Cayson without his shirt would be a liar. Except, both of them are staring right at me, so I can hardly do it subtly.

“Ezra,” Cayson says, as he steps into the purple pants. “Tell Faye she doesn’t have to be shy around us. We’re her co-conspirators. Her partners-in-crime.”

“Tell Cayson that I don’t need to know what his underwear looks like,” I shoot back

as Ezra's phone beeps, and he pulls it out of his pocket.

Cayson starts strutting around the room half-dressed. "Come on, you know you want a peek at this."

He's shirtless. Ridiculous. Hot. Sexy. Wait, no, crazy. Crazy is what I meant.

"Go get dressed!" I tell him, laughing. "Ezra, tell him he needs a shirt on."

"What?" Ezra says, looking up from his phone. His brow is wrinkled, and as I look at him, I feel his worry almost like it's my own.

I put a hand to my chest. "What's wrong?"

"What?" he says, tilting his head at me, as though wondering how I could tell something was bothering him. "Oh—it's just some stuff at home, with the pack."

I motion for Cayson to finish getting dressed and sit, then I pull out some makeup I borrowed from Addilyn for the event. Her being her, the makeup bag is full of glitter and bright, bold colors. I decide to go for it and create a makeup look that matches the purple suit.

"Tell me about it," I say. "Cayson can't talk right now because he's holding still for the makeup."

"I don't see why I need makeup," he mutters, falling into the chair in front of me. "I'm perfectly gorgeous as I am."

"Shh," I say to Cayson, and then, glancing over my shoulder at Ezra, "Talking about stuff makes it easier to deal with."

Although me of all people understands how he's feeling.

Giving Ezra some space, I turn and focus on Cayson's makeup, trying to avoid Cayson's eye contact this close. The man really is gorgeous. I start with dark purple on the inside of his eye, then work into a softer pastel near the edges. I'm reaching for the glitter when Ezra speaks up.

"There are some issues back home, with the crops," he says with a sigh. "For the past two years, we've been dealing with a pest problem. They're destroying the crops, and it just keeps getting worse. Our stores are running low. If this year doesn't go well, we may have to purchase rations from other packs, or even humans, which isn't going to win us any favors."

"Oh," I say, sticking my tongue out a bit as I concentrate on drawing tiny stars around Cayson's eyes. "Do you have equipment for pesticides? Shouldn't you be able to just treat the plants at the start of the season?"

"We have equipment—" Ezra sounds exhausted, "—but it's the same junk the pack had when my father was my age. It takes ages to do a single row of crops, let alone spray an entire field."

"Maybe this seems like an obvious solution, but couldn't you just get new equipment?"

"Our pack funds are kind of tight right now, unless we want to tap into our reserves, which we try never to do," he says. "We have a large class moving into college, and we pay for all their educational fees, since they'll be contributing to the pack with their knowledge. There are quite a few who are going into medicine—which is great for the pack, but means we have to make sure we set the money aside for them. All of that to say there's just no money for new farming stuff, as helpful as it would be."

“Have you applied for any grants?” I ask, and when Ezra doesn’t say anything, I glance back at him to make sure he heard me.

“What?” he asks, when I meet his eyes. “Grants?”

“Yeah,” I say, my mind slowly working. “Being in the mountains, we always had problems with crops. The soil wasn’t very fertile, but we could overcome those issues with modern farming equipment and by treating the soil. I used to help my pack apply for those grants. I was still too young to take over the grant writing on my own, but I got a solid feel for how the process works... before everything happened.”

Everything being my brother's murder, and my pack’s refusal to do anything. I swallow hard, like I always do any time the subject of my brother’s death comes to mind. It’s a trauma I feel like I will never stop reliving. Especially now, with Kurt coming after me. I’m just happy now that the memories don’t seem to pull me down to as dark a place, at least with Cayson and Ezra around.

“That’s actually... that’s actually a really good idea. I’ll look into that,” Ezra says, sounding intrigued.

A few minutes pass as I carefully work. I’m trying to make sure the two sides are even, to make the makeup really pop.

“All done!” I say, stepping back from Cayson and admiring my handiwork. He looks beautiful—like a human canvas—and I’m surprised I managed to do so well with the makeup, since I don’t use it that often.

It just figures that this guy looks like a damn male model, with his sharp cheekbones and big brown eyes. Sometimes it’s hard to believe Cayson isn’t even cockier than he acts. With how pretty he is, I wouldn’t blame him for it.



“Wow,” Ezra says, “you look like an even bigger jackass than normal.”

I stick out my bottom lip, play pouting at him. “You don’t like it?”

Ezra laughs, standing and shaking his head. “Sorry, Faye—I think you did a great job. Maybe it’s just the material that’s flawed.”

“Flawed?” Cayson says, emphasizing the word. “There’s nothing flawed about me. Even my dick is the picture of perfection.”

“Probably more like a pirate hook,” Ezra mutters.

“Pirate hook?” Cayson puts a hand to his chest in mock horror, which is hilarious when paired with the sparkly purple suit and the sparkling eye makeup. “Well, I never! I’ll have you know, it’s straight as an arrow.” He turns to me and winks. “You’ll see.”

My cheeks flame. “I will not see.”

He laughs and tugs me into his lap. “Would my little omega like some sugar?”

I push on his chest and get myself free from his lap, laughing hysterically. “Cayson!”

Ezra grins. “Should we head to the fashion show?”

My smile fades, and I give him a mischievous look. “Actually, we’re not done yet.”

Ezra groans. “Faye, Cayson is dressed up enough for the both of us.”

“I don’t think so,” I say, struggling not to grin. “Go ahead and take a seat, and we’ll see how we can make you just as pretty as Cayson.”

Cayson laughs at Ezra as he grumbles, but Ezra drops into the chair in front of me. And, again, it's so strange to me. These two alphas are huge men. They're men who tower over me, who could break my bones with no effort at all, and yet, they're so gentle with me. They actually act like I'm the one with all the power instead of them.

Even though it's not true.

Cayson circles to his closet. "You know, I have an idea..."

"You better not," Ezra mutters.

"What kind of idea?" I ask sweetly.

"You know that Halloween party?" Cayson asks, going to the closet and rummaging to the back. "I couldn't decide on a color, so I actually have this one as well."

It's a bright, aquamarine blue with multi-colored glitter on the lapels, and I instantly reach for the makeup, knowing I'm going to do Ezra's makeup just as glittery and bright, but with blue instead.

Ezra gives me a look. "We're going to look ridiculous."

Yes, they are, but I have a feeling that I'll find them just as sexy as always anyway. Which is a strange and slightly terrifying idea.

"Well, that's fine, right?" I say. He looks up, meeting my eyes. "It's not like you're trying to impress anyone. You're leaving here without an omega, right?"

Ezra re-fixes his gaze on the mirror, clearing his throat and nodding. "Right."

I get to work putting on Ezra's makeup and feel completely at ease. This isn't like

doing my own makeup. If I mess up, no one will care. This will just be fun, no matter what.

“Wait—” Cayson says, “If you’re not going to dress Kurt, does that mean he has to come nak?—”

“I sent a servant to dress him,” I say, waving a hand.

“How did you pull that off?” Ezra asks, lifting a brow.

“I didn’t even need to explain myself to his servants; they already seemed to know why I wouldn’t want to dress him. I’m guessing he’s as nice to them as he is to everyone else.”

Cayson laughs. “And you technically handled him being dressed, so you’re following the ultima’s request.”

“Exactly. Now, let me focus.”

The truth is, I don’t want to think about Kurt right now. With Cayson and Ezra, it’s like I have a protective bubble around myself, but I know the instant I’m out of that bubble, I’m not safe any longer. Kurt has claimed me as his mate, and that will require all our effort and all our focus to get him to “prove he doesn’t fit in our bond.” I just have to keep focusing on that.

“You know,” I say, “I thought Cayson would make a really pretty girl, but you would too with these eyelashes and big blue eyes. The contrast between your dark hair and eyes is just so...” I realize what I’m doing and stop.

Ezra’s gaze holds mine. “So what?”

“Adorable?” Cayson offers.

I try to hide my embarrassment. “It just suits you is all.”

Ezra reaches over and tugs at a strand of my pale blonde hair, then pushes it behind my ear. “Everything about you... suits you too.”

Now, I am blushing. These men just make me feel things I’ve never felt before, but I’m doing everything I can to push those feelings away. This is all pretend. A fake relationship. I can’t fool myself into thinking it’s anything more than that. My feelings are just because I’ve felt isolated for so long that their attention is nice. That’s all.

I’m just putting the cap on the eyeliner when the bell tolls, signaling that the fashion show should begin. After Ezra dresses, it’s time for some fun. And time to see Kurt again.

“You boys ready?”

Cayson winks at me. “I’m always ready.”

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:31 am*

3

Faye

“Faye!”

I turn when I hear Addilyn calling my name and gesturing for me to come sit next to her near the end of the stage. I’m surprised and impressed at how good everything looks. There’s a genuine catwalk on one side of the room, with curtains hiding the back of the catwalk and out into the hallway. Little circular tables and chairs have been set up all over the room, and everything has been done in dark blue and white colors.

The Selection may not be my favorite thing to take part in, but they take their events seriously.

Passing through the tables set up around the stage, I make my way to Addilyn. A few of the women give me strange looks, and I tense. I know I’ve been the center of a lot of gossip since telling people that Kurt killed Serra, and even more since I didn’t walk up to Kurt when he claimed me as his mate. As far as I know, no one has refused to do that before. The thing is, I don’t think any of these women would have been happy to be claimed by Kurt, and they know it.

One of the hard things about being an omega is the assumption that if an alpha wants you, there must be some connection between the two of you. That you must feel it too. It’s like no one can imagine an alpha claiming an omega who wants nothing to do with him, even though we all know there are alphas that just take what they want,

not caring what anyone else thinks.

So, stop staring at me. I wasn't wrong to not want Kurt.

"How's it going?" I ask as I reach Addilyn.

She pats the chair next to her. "I got us the best spots in the joint."

I laugh. "Thanks, that's just what I needed."

After taking a seat next to Addilyn, a little wave of nervousness moves through me. I can only hope that my little dress-up game for Cayson and Ezra isn't seen as disobedience. I've caught sight of some of the other alphas, and it's clear omegas were taking this one seriously, dressing the alphas in their best suits, perfectly styling their hair, and prepping them to show off their outfits.

In comparison, Cayson and Ezra look like they came from another dimension.

"Can you believe the ferals will be coming soon?" a girl next to me asks her friend.

I look at Addilyn, and she nods. "Since the alpha-ferals don't have the same standing as the alphas in packs, they have to come later. It's a way to remind them that they're outcasts of society and not respected, without being total assholes, since many of them will be able to join packs once they have omegas... and then will become alphas, recognized as such by the packs."

"Fun," I say. "A bunch of wild beasts who have done something awful enough to be tossed out of their packs."

She gives me a look. "And some who were born to feral parents and did nothing wrong. Remember, one of my dads is a feral."

I blush. “That’s right. You’re right. I’m just nervous about more male energy being here.”

She giggles. “I won’t mind it one bit.”

“Hey,” someone says, and I turn, pulled out of my thoughts by a pretty brunette leaning over the table to get my attention.

“Oh, hi,” I say, still getting used to making new friends. Addilyn was easy, because we grew up together, but when I talk to the other omegas here, I just feel awkward. “I’m Faye.”

“I know,” she says, somewhat uncomfortable. I get a bad feeling in the pit of my stomach. “I just... well, I thought I’d heard that you were the one who found her.”

When I stare at her blankly, she clears her throat softly, glancing around as though she’s worried someone might overhear our conversation. “Serra,” she clarifies, and a chill rolls down my spine.

After the levity of goofing around with Cayson and Ezra, this feels like I’ve swallowed lead. She’s staring at me expectantly, but there’s something in her expression that makes me feel like she didn’t come here just for gossip, which I’m glad about. The murder of a young girl is hardly fodder for gossip.

“Yeah, I found her,” I say, chewing on my lip. “What was your name again?”

“It’s Janna,” she says, again keeping her voice low like she doesn’t want anyone to overhear. “I don’t know if I should be telling you this, but?—”

A door on the other side of the room swings open and Janna jumps, her face turning white like she’s expecting someone to come through and beeline straight toward us.

My heart is hammering in my chest, and part of me wants to reach out, take her by the shoulders, and shake her, to tell her to spit it out or drop the topic, because I just need to not feel like this.

“What did you want to tell me?” I ask, quietly, insistently, staring as the color returns to her face.

“I saw Serra coming out of Kurt’s room,” she admits softly, “the day before, well, the day before you found her. It just spooked me, I guess, to know that they had been together so soon before it happened. And then, there were rumors that he was involved. I just...I wondered how you feel about having him as a mate. I’ve been getting bad vibes from him, but everyone talks about his pack, and his family’s honor and everything. I didn’t know if I was just getting a bad read.”

I stare at her for a moment, that information rushing through my head.

She saw Serra the day before she died. Coming out of Kurt’s room.

I think of how scary it would have been, to be vulnerable with him, alone in his room, allowing him to touch you. I think of how scared she must have been out in the woods, with nobody there to help her, her calls for help echoing off the treetops, unheard.

If she was even able to call out at all.

My brother wasn’t.

“Faye?” the girl asks, and I come back to the present, remembering that I was having a conversation with her.

I put the back of my hands to my cheeks, trying to cool them, then I realize that her



telling me this might actually be useful. So far, the council seems to think there's nothing linking Kurt to Serra outside of their dance. They think I'm just throwing false accusations around for fun. This little detail might be enough for them to properly investigate her murder.

"Janna," I say, scooting forward and putting a hand on hers. She glances down at it cautiously. "Kurt and I are not mates. He's claiming me to hurt me because I've seen him do some bad things, even though I can't prove anything. And what you saw, it could really help our case with the council. I just know that?"

"Keep your voice down," Janna whispers, glancing around the room, though nobody is looking at us.

"Sorry," I say, dropping it even lower. "I just...if you were to tell the council about what you saw, we might be able to?"

Her eyes widen. "No, no, no—"

"Just listen," I tell her, before she spirals too much. "If you can tell the council—"

The door bursts open again and Kurt walks in, his cool eyes sweeping the ballroom. No doubt he's searching for me, since he didn't enter in through the catwalk area like the other alphas. He's probably pissed I didn't come to dress him.

I duck down, hiding behind Addilyn, taking a deep breath and trying to calm myself down. It's an instinct. One I can't fight. Omegas are always the prey, never the predator. And in this little game of Kurt and I's, I definitely know the role I play.

"He's gone," Addilyn whispers. "Behind the stage."

I thank her under my breath, but when I sit up again and turn to keep talking to Janna,

I realize she's moved across the room and is studiously ignoring my glances. My hands curl into fists, and I wait for her to come back, even knowing that she won't. No one ever wants to get involved. Getting involved is the right thing to do, but it's also scary and dangerous. And no one likes scary and dangerous, least of all omegas.

A cool wave of anger rushes through me. This is exactly what happened with my pack. Nobody wants to do anything except whisper and gossip. Everyone wants to talk about honor, but when it actually comes to stepping up and doing the right thing, nobody is prepared to confront it.

I turn in my seat, breathing carefully to try and keep my cool.

"I'm sorry," Addilyn says, giving me a gentle look.

"Do you think there's anything I could say to her to get her to speak to the council?"

She winces and shakes her head. "No. But if it helps, I also don't think they'd care that much about an omega seeing Kurt and Serra together. They'd just dismiss her too."

Damn it. She's probably right.

At once, the lights go down and rhythmic music starts to pump through the speakers. Several stage lights flash on, pointing up at the catwalk. The atmosphere around me instantly changes, filled with excitement. I try to push my conflicting emotions down and just enjoy the moment.

Soon, I'll be back, alone at my cabin. The thought is less comforting than I thought it would be.

The first alpha comes walking out on the runway, and nervousness flutters in my

chest again. I dressed my guys in a silly way. These guys don't look silly at all. As time passes, I only become more nervous. Every alpha is dressed in their finest suits. Black, brown, and gray. All looking refined.

Oh my gosh, what did I do?

My mind starts spiraling. The council will hear about this. Will they get mad? Will they focus more on me? I bet the alphas and omegas will start gossiping even more.

This was a mistake.

Near the end of the show, most of the alphas have found their spots at the tables near their omegas, and I just have a pit in my stomach, counting down the seconds until my guys appear. They should be up soon. As soon as the thought enters my mind, a single, sparkling purple leg sticks out from between the curtains, and a peel of laughter rips through the crowd. One omega whistles as Cayson reveals himself piece by piece, which is followed by more laughter.

The omegas around me get louder and louder, screaming like Cayson is some kind of rock god, as he, instead of simply walking out and walking back, dances his way to the end of the stage like a male stripper, meeting my eyes and winking as he does so. Near the end of the runway, he does a sexy little crawl, lowering down onto his belly. When he gets to me, he rubs his lips against mine as the women scream and shout his name.

"Hey there, baby cakes," he whispers, "my little Jelly Bean. Maybe you can tip me later if you like the dance?"

I feel flushed, embarrassed, but also something else. As I look between his sexy face, covered in makeup, and all the women that wish he was theirs, I don't know what to say or do. I've never had people envy me before.

Boy is he good at making this all seem real.

He lightly kisses me again and grins as he gets to his feet, dancing in the center of the stage as Ezra comes out looking amazing in his blue suit, his face schooled perfectly into that of a model. He walks right past Cayson, making it to the end of the stage with perfect posture, until Cayson dances over to him, whipping his sparkling purple tie out and wrapping it around Ezra's torso, dancing up and down him to the cheers and whistles of the crowd.

This finally makes Ezra crack a smile, and he circles Cayson, reaching down to touch the hands of the omegas reaching up to them. When he gets to me, he lowers down and places a kiss on my lips, and I feel my entire body erupt into flames as everyone stares at me enviously.

Yes, these are my two alphas. At least as far as everyone is concerned. I've never felt luckier.

"Hello, our pretty little Jelly Bean," Ezra says, loud enough for people to hear. "This is just a preview of what you'll be experiencing later."

That makes me blush, and the crowd continues to chant and laugh as Cayson peels off his purple suit jacket, tossing it out to the omegas, who swallow it up like he's a pop singer. The music picks up in volume. Ezra pulls out some moves I never would have thought he had in him, like his hand sliding down his chest as he dances, and I realize that I'm not just amused by what they're doing. I'm a little turned on.

How can the guys be making me laugh and make me feel like this at the same time?

Another figure steps from behind the curtains and the laughter and cheering dies down until it's silent. Cayson and Ezra look back without saying a word, and my gaze follows theirs.

Kurt.

He's wearing the world's most boring suit, one that's not even fashionable. It's the kind of suit you might picture on an elderly accountant. I didn't pick it, but I would have. It's a suit he completely deserves. Somehow, it draws attention to the fact that he's both smaller and less muscular than Cayson and Ezra. The guy looks practically tiny up on the catwalk with them.

Beside me, Addilyn brings her hand to her mouth to stifle her laugh, even as some of the omegas in the back of the room clap awkwardly for him. Cayson and Ezra do their final bows, turning and leaving Kurt alone on the stage. The atmosphere fully shifts, and it's like every person in the room suddenly feels as awkward as Kurt looks.

His eyes find mine in the crowd, but this time, instead of looking away, I think of Janna, and how she had cowered at the opportunity to do what was right.

My brother deserves justice. Serra deserves justice. His other victims, and potential future victims, deserve for someone to fight against him now.

I raise my chin, noting how his eyes widen slightly in surprise.

He thinks I'm a victim. I'll show him differently.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:31 am*

4

E zra

Cayson bumps my fist behind the curtains, grinning like an idiot. This is just the kind of thing he loves to do. It wasn't exactly in my wheelhouse, but when I thought of Faye, I just wanted to do something to make her smile. She doesn't smile nearly enough, and when she does, it's breathtaking.

"This is the worst thing I've ever seen," Cayson says beside me, peeking out at Kurt, who is doing an awkward move at the end of the stage.

We could be back in our seats with Faye by now, but we didn't want to miss a moment of this. This is candy for the soul. Something to look back and laugh at in my darker moments.

It's... a trainwreck.

The women are literally leaning back from the stage. Their combination of disgust and unease is palpable. Kurt truly is the kind of man that any smart woman should stay far away from. He makes their instincts scream that he's not safe.

It looks like the omegas know what to do around him.

The show closes out when Kurt, still brooding, turns and stalks off the stage and the music is shut off before he's even stepped into the backstage area. As soon as the lights come back on, I watch through the curtain as Faye gets to her feet, pushing

through the crowd to come behind the stage, heading straight for me.

Instantly, my pulse picks up. Faye looks incredible. Her hair is brushed in waves that fall over her shoulders. She's wearing a green dress covered in little flowers that comes down to her ankles. The material of the gown is light, almost sheer, and there's a plunging neckline. It's a casual dress, and yet, it's not. Something about the way it hugs her body makes me think she could wear it in the middle of a dance floor filled with beautiful women and still steal the breath from every man in the room.

Her hazel eyes meet mine, and her lips curl into a smile. My chest aches at that smile. I swear, when I first met her, I thought this woman might only be capable of feeling terror and sadness, but something's changing about her. Something I can't quite put my finger on, but I like it.

"Faye," I say, immediately taking her and tucking her to my side.

The woman fits me like a glove. Her tiny body is pressed against mine like that's where she was always meant to be, and her scent washes over me, that of lavender and vanilla. I inhale deeply, instinctually pulling her even closer.

She laughs and runs a hand over the sparkles on my suit, before looking up at me. Something strange tugs in my stomach at the sight of her, so close, carefree and happy. This is how she's always meant to be. This is why she needs an alpha to protect her.

Hopefully someday she'll have one who will beat the shit out of Kurt if he even looks in her direction. Someone who won't be scared of Kurt's big bad daddy. Even a man like me has to be careful with someone like Kurt. I wouldn't want him attacking my pack out of anger. I wouldn't forgive myself for any lives lost because of this asshole.

Not that that fact will stop me from hurting him if he ever comes after Faye again

while she's under my protection.

"How did you like the show?" I ask, watching as she glances off to the right.

Cayson is over there, chatting and flirting with a throng of omegas, who are all talking and petting him—their hands on his suit, his chest, ruffling his hair. It looks like just any other day with Cayson, but Faye hasn't seen him like this very much. Around her, he's always laser focused on Faye.

It's something that's been a surprise to me. Cayson focused on one girl? Before this, I would've thought that was impossible.

I watch Faye closely. Something like jealousy passes over her features, which isn't good. Faye shouldn't be jealous of him. It doesn't matter if Cayson flirts with other omegas, all of this is fake. I hope she's not forgetting that. Just the thought of Faye actually being hurt when we end this charade makes me feel like I've been punched in the stomach.

"I thought there were some clear standouts," Faye finally says, tearing her eyes away from Cayson and re-fixing them on me. "You guys obviously stole the show."

I raise my eyebrows at her, and a sense of understanding passes between us. She's going to pretend she doesn't feel jealous, and I'm going to pretend I didn't see that look on her face just now. It's just one of the many things we're pretending about.

"I'm surprised you played along with Cayson like that. I thought you were far too serious for public dancing," she teases, poking me in the chest.

"I'm not too serious for that," I say, laughing and nudging her.

It was surprisingly a lot of fun, dancing around on the stage up there with Cayson. As



serious as the council, and everyone else, likes to take The Selection, there is something inherently goofy about the whole thing. And Cayson and I were just exploring that.

I mean, we were already a group of alphas in a fashion show. The whole thing was ridiculous.

“Could have fooled me,” she says, reaching up and picking a piece of fuzz from my collar.

It makes my breath catch in my throat, that light touch. The simple act of her caring for me like that, caring about my pack enough to think about something as unexpected as a grant to help us. When was the last time someone did something like that? I think of Katie, and for some reason, I can’t remember if that was something she did. Which is weird. Are my memories of her getting duller?

“You two looked like you’d done that a thousand times before,” she tells me, still smiling.

“Not a fashion show exactly,” I say, glad to be distracted from my thoughts about Katie, “but lots of similar things.”

I think about Cayson and I growing up, thick as thieves, always getting into trouble and causing problems. Nothing crazy, just normal kid stuff, around my duties to my pack. But when I turned thirteen, things changed. My father sat me down and had a talk with me about maturity, being what the pack needs, having a sense of honor. I realized then that my youth as I knew it was over. I was onto a new phase in my life.

After that, Cayson was off without me, getting into trouble and causing problems. He fell in with a bad crowd, making worse decisions and being even less responsible, with me only occasionally joining him for the more PG stuff. It was as if he decided

to become exactly what his father always accused him of being.

I like to think before that point I balanced him out, made him rethink some of the riskier choices. We were good for each other.

But that change in responsibility wasn't the only thing that dulled my spirit. I think of Katie—of that one night that changed everything—and my chest tightens.

I hold onto the feeling, waiting for the flood of grief and guilt to take me, but for the first time since it happened, that complete overwhelm of emotion I expected doesn't come. I stand there, breathing okay, and thinking of Katie without gasping for air. Some part of me feels like the sharp edges of remembering her are smoothing, the memory less like shattered glass and more like just a normal memory.

“What kinds of things did you guys do together?” Her voice pulls me from the past. “I'm trying to picture the two of you, stern Ezra and goofy Cayson, as kids.”

I clear my throat, thinking about how best to explain this. “Cayson and I used to do crazy stuff all the time, growing up. Like, we once found an old boat on the river, we packed supplies, and we took the boat as far as it would take us. We were gone for three days, and boy, you should've seen our dads' faces when they caught up with us downstream.” I'm grinning at just the memory. “And there was another time that Cayson found his pack's stock of plastic wrap. That night, we plastic wrapped just about everything in town.”

She laughs, and the sound is magical. “So, what happened? How did you get so serious?” She seems to be genuinely curious.

I don't know what to say. “I just... I suppose I just stopped having fun.”

“Oh yeah?” she asks, studying my face. “Since when?”

I open my mouth, but the words stick. It's there on my tongue, the truth of it... Katie being the reason I forgot how to have fun. I struggled so much with living without her that I missed out on a lot of happy moments around me. I didn't want to be happy without Katie.

But it was more than that.

I wanted everyone around me to see how miserable I was without her. To prove that she was my mate, my life partner, and without her, there was no romance, no sparkle, left for my life, even though most of the people around me doubted we were mates. They dismissed it as just a teenage romance, a passing phase, and that hurt. Like me losing her didn't matter unless she was my true mate. Like it was just expected that when we came to The Selection, we'd find our mates, and our childish romance would be over.

"I don't know," I whisper.

Her expression says she knows there's more.

"I can't..." I say, and I can't. I'm not ready yet.

"Oh," Faye says, stepping up on her tiptoes, "your makeup is running."

I let out a sigh of relief. She isn't going to make me keep talking. I don't have to bare this wound just yet. Instead, her soft fingers run over my face, and I have to bite back a groan at her touch. My blood runs hot through my veins, and I take deep breaths to stay in control.

"You look like a girl after the walk of shame," she says, laughing and reaching into her pocket, pulling out a makeup removal wipe.

She came prepared, and weirdly, something about that turns me on even more.

“I look like a girl after the what ?” I tease her.

“Oh, please,” she says, laughing. “Don’t act like you haven’t sent out plenty of girls after a night of fun.”

“I would never,” I assure her, and when our gazes meet, it’s like there’s a tug between us, some sort of undeniable gravity pulling her into my orbit, and me into hers.

I can’t stop my face from moving, bending down, nearing hers. Her eyes are a mix of fear and determination, anxiety and want, and it’s almost enough to stop me, but then, in a moment that surprises me, Faye tips her chin up and meets my lips with hers.

It’s a slow, exploratory kiss. Like neither of us has completely accepted that we’re kissing. She tastes sweet, of course she tastes just like she smells. Like something good enough to eat. I bring my hands up, thumbs grazing the delicate curve of her jawline as I cup her face gently, feeling as a shiver runs up her back at the feathery touch.

“Uh, excuse me!” Cayson says, his tone low as he sidles up behind Faye and reaches his arms around her, sandwiching her in the middle of us.

Our kiss breaks, and I glare at the other man. Cayson’s only wearing the sparkling pants. He’s free from the rest of the outfit. Faye doesn’t seem to realize it until she glances back at him. I watch as Faye’s eyes dip to his chest. Her gaze turns heated, her pupils dilating, and I want nothing more than to have her look at me that way, too.

“Where’s my kiss?” Cayson asks, his voice coming out an octave lower than normal.

“Cayson...” she says, a warning in her tone.

“Ezra got a kiss,” he challenges.

When Faye turns around to say something, he grabs her hips, turning her in true Cayson fashion. His hand comes around to the back of her head, while his other travels to the small of her back, pinning their hips together. She makes a surprised sound, and his lips descend onto hers. And this kiss... there's nothing slow or gentle about it.

I have to look away to keep from getting turned on at the scene. Not only do I want to continue watching them, I want to be touching Faye too. I want to make her feel like she's on fire, begging for me and only me.

You've only ever felt something like this once before, a stray thought whispers in my mind. My heart is hammering, and I steer my thoughts away from Katie. Away from the fact that no other woman has turned me on since her. No other woman has even made me want to consider taking her to my bed, but Faye makes all of those feelings rise inside of me.

Except, there's something different about the way I feel about Faye. Something on a deep instinctual level that I don't understand. Something that demands that I claim her for my own. This is supposed to be fake, a lie to keep her safe from Kurt, but something inside demands that I truly claim her for my own.

Cayson pulls away from her, burying his head into the crook of her neck and whispering something in her ear. Based on my previous encounters with his moves, I imagine he's saying something like I've wanted to do that since I first saw you.

Faye tips her head back, letting him run his teeth and tongue up the tender skin of her throat. I feel my entire body flush with heat. I want her like this, in our bed, doors

closed. This is our chance to do things to her that will make her never want to leave our bed.

That's when I remember that we have an audience. I glance around and freeze. Some alphas and omegas are looking on with amusement. The unaccompanied alphas are staring with far too much interest.

"Cayson," I say, "dude—PDA."

When he just keeps running his teeth along her throat and my fucking cock jerks, I give him a little nudge. We don't need a room full of hard alphas looking at our omega in a sexual light. That can only bring problems our way.

"Yeah, sorry," Cayson says, pulling back and scrubbing a hand through his hair.

Faye is blinking, looking like she's trying to remember where she is. And it's hard to see her like that, because I want to be the one that makes her lose herself. I want to be the one tasting her neck. Fuck, I want to bite her and mark her for all to see.

Frustrated, I drag my gaze from her. Across the room, I see Kurt, a whirlwind of barely suppressed rage bulldozing through the alphas and omegas, the curtain a flimsy barrier against his furious exit. And Brock, the ultima, is watching. For a second, I tense, and then I remember this is a good thing. I can only hope that this little display has shown him that Faye is connected to us, and that he won't keep pushing her to "explore" her mating bond with Kurt.

Then, we can end this charade. We can... just walk away from Faye.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:31 am*

5

Faye

I pace back and forth in my room, flexing and unflexing my hands. I feel on edge. I'm in my silk pajamas and robe, because I was just getting ready to sleep for the night when the bell came over the speakers, indicating an activity, and making every muscle in my body tense.

Damn it.

The bell had tolled loudly, but I hadn't heard any instructions. Not a single servant has come to the room to demand I get dressed or leave the room. On one hand, staying in my room might be optimal, as it could mean I won't have to risk seeing Kurt at all. On the other hand, staying here might just make me a sitting duck if he realizes I'm not present at the activity.

Again, I glance down at my outfit. Pink silk shorts. A pink silk spaghetti strap top. A silky pink robe that goes down to my thighs. And white underwear and a bra.

I'd been about to toss the bra and crawl into bed when the toll sounded. Now, I'm wondering if I'm an idiot for staying in these clothes when I should be prepared for anything and anyone.

At least the guard Ezra and Cayson assigned to my room is still there. I'd checked as soon as the bell had started ringing, nervous about Kurt showing up at my door. And yet, I still had no idea what was going on.

Where is this activity? What is this activity? Why is no one telling me anything?

There's a knock at the door and it feels like my heart stops in my chest. I oscillate between telling myself to answer it and wondering if I should dive under the bed and hide, pretending not to be here. In all likelihood, it's just a servant telling me what the activity is, but I can't seem to walk over to the door given the slight chance that it could be Kurt on the other side of that door.

Will the guard stop him? Will the guard really fight for me if he needs to?

"Faye," a voice calls, and when I recognize it as being Ezra, my sputtering heart calms a little.

"Oh, thank the gods," I mutter, hurrying over to the door and swinging it open.

This time, my heart is in my throat again, but for a different reason. Cayson and Ezra are standing in the doorway, both of them in their robes and pajamas. Ezra has on a black shirt and gray sweatpants, and Cayson has on blue checkered pants and a white shirt. Both are wearing robes and looking incredibly handsome in a way I wouldn't have expected.

Since when do men look so hot in pajamas?

As I stare at them, Ezra holds out a board game, and Cayson lifts two bottles of wine, a devilish grin on his face. I blink, not sure what I'm looking at. What in the hell are they doing?

"Don't thank the gods, baby," Cayson says, sauntering past me into the room. "Thank us."

Damn shifter hearing.



“Well,” Ezra amends, “thank The Selection, I suppose.”

“I’m not thanking the gods that you’re here,” I say, turning toward them and rolling my eyes. When I notice Cayson’s gaze heating, his eyes sweeping up and down my form in my skimpy pajamas, I tug my robe shut and wrap my arms around myself. “I’m thanking the gods that it’s not Kurt at the door.”

It’s strange. It kind of feels good that Cayson’s looking at me the way he is. It makes me feel attractive. Like maybe he sees me differently than he sees the other women who are always falling over themselves to get his attention. But looking at him also reminds me of the kiss from earlier, the way he had buried his face in my neck, taking a long, deep breath like he’d been suffocating up to that point. Though his hands were only on my back and neck, it felt like he was touching me everywhere, cradling me, holding me in exactly the way I wanted without me having to ask.

My skin is still crawling with heat from the experience, but I try to shake the feeling away. The last thing I need is to lose my faculties and show Cayson any of my confusing feelings. This whole thing is a show. They’ve both made that clear, and I’m not about to forget that I don’t want an alpha either.

Realizing the door is still open, I move to shut it, but the latch doesn’t catch. Instead, the door flies open, hurling me backward into the room. Ezra moves forward at the last second, catching me before I can fall, keeping me from sprawling out over the floor.

The door finishes swinging open and Kurt steps inside, a scowl firmly on his face. He’s in nothing but white boxers that do absolutely nothing to hide the outline of his erection. Just the sight of it makes me want to vomit, so I turn my gaze upward.

The guard appears at his side, an apology on his face, as he puts a hand on Kurt’s shoulder, as if to haul him out. “I—”

“Do better,” Ezra snaps.

“But we’ll handle this,” Cayson adds.

The guard nods and steps back out of sight.

At the look on Ezra’s face, I remember that he was here the last time Kurt was in my room. From the fury that lingers there, I’d wager he hasn’t forgotten what Kurt attempted that night either.

This isn’t going to end well, no matter who makes the first move.

Ezra lifts me into his arms and starts across the room, his movements measured. I can feel the tension singing through his tight muscles as he gently puts me down on the bed, standing beside me like a sentry.

“Hey man,” Cayson says, his tone joking but his body language lethal. “How the hell did you get over the threshold? Thought guys like you had to be invited in?”

Kurt sneers at him. “That’s very funny, Pack Steel. Good thing you’re good at telling jokes. When your pack folds, you can come be my court jester.”

“If my pack folds,” Cayson says, that jaunty look still on his face, even as he steps closer to Kurt, crowding him. “I’ll give your daddy a whole lap dance. He’d like that, wouldn’t he?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Kurt growls, raising his fists, but Ezra moves over to stand just beside Cayson.

“Hey, Kurt,” Ezra says, something dangerous in his voice, “you should try knocking.”

“You should try including all the alphas who are supposed to be included,” Kurt says, his eyes tracking over Ezra’s shoulder to me.

I’m trying to be strong, to muster the same gusto I had at the fashion show, but the memory of the last time he attacked me in my room is too fresh. I can’t stop thinking of the bruises that just barely shifted from black to greenish-yellow around my neck, how easy it was for him to hurt me.

How easy it was for him to take my brother from me.

“Don’t look at her,” Ezra says, shifting and cutting off Kurt’s line of sight to me. “You’re talking to Cayson and me, isn’t that right?”

“That’s right,” Cayson says, the teasing note dropping from his voice, “and unfortunately, it doesn’t look like you’re on the list for tonight’s activities.”

“Yeah,” Ezra says, glancing over his shoulder as though he’s assessing the area. “It’s a little crowded in here right now. Maybe come back next year?”

“Fuck you guys,” Kurt says, trying to push forward, but he couldn’t take Ezra, let alone both of them, if he tried his hardest.

Cayson and Ezra give him arrogant looks. Kurt’s neck turns red, and he charges again, but the guys hold firm against his advances, keeping him in the doorway. Their power is undeniable. They’re strong alphas through and through.

“You’ll be sitting this one out,” Ezra says, a sharp tone to his voice. “Whether that’s with or without bloodshed is up to you.”

They lock gazes for a long moment before Kurt inches back. His expression is outraged. “Just wait until the ultimas hear about this,” he hisses.

Cayson just laughs and says, “Yeah,” giving Kurt a meaningful and loathing glance. “Because the council is so good about righting the wrongs in this place. Now, fuck off back to your own room like a good little boy.”

Kurt stands, breathing hard, looking between the two of them angrily, but he must realize that he’s not going to get past them, and they’re not going to willingly let him in, so he lets out a forceful breath of air and turns on his heel, stomping back out into the hallway. I stare after him in shock. When he and I are alone, Kurt is like this malevolent force of energy I can’t escape. But with Cayson and Ezra, he seems like a terrible little boy throwing a tantrum.

The change is... hard to believe. Like a fantasy I never even knew I had.

When Cayson and Ezra shut the door and turn around, Cayson has a mischievous grin plastered on his face as he brushes his hands together, as though getting the dirt off. “Now that we’ve taken care of the little pest problem,” he says, “who’s up for a little game time?”

“A game?” I ask, confused.

“That’s what the ultimas arranged for us tonight: games in our pajamas, with our sweet omega.”

I hesitate. “But won’t there be trouble because we didn’t allow Kurt to join?”

Cayson gives me a look. “You think Kurt is going to tell them a story where we easily overpowered him and got him away from his ‘own omega’? He’d look like an idiot.”

He has a point. Kurt is a proud asshole, that’s for sure.

“But if there’s any problem,” Ezra says, “we’ll handle it.”

“Now, a game?” Cayson asks, his eyes sparkling.

It’s hard not to blush, even though I know Cayson could flatter a possum. “I’m not very good at stuff like this,” I admit.

Cayson grins. “The nice thing about these kinds of games is that anyone can win. It’s mostly about luck.”

“Luck?” I try to laugh but can’t quite make that happen. “I’m not the luckiest either.”

He grins. “You’ve got us in your bedroom. I’d consider that pretty lucky.”

Ezra meets my gaze. “It’ll be fun. I promise.”

I take a deep breath, even though it feels weird to have them in my bedroom. In our pajamas. With them looking ridiculously fine.

It’s enough to make a girl forget that they’re not really mine.

“Okay, let’s do it then!”

They high five each other in a goofy way that has me laughing. Ezra makes a beeline for the bed, and Cayson sets up the wine on my table, grabs three glasses, and uncorks the bottles. All his movements are smooth, as if he’s practiced this a million times before.

Which, it’s Cayson, so he probably has.

“Aren’t some other omegas going to be sad missing you two tonight?” I tease, but

there's a little bit of curiosity behind my joke.

Yes, they've claimed me, but it's not completely unheard of for alphas to continue messing around with the omegas as they stay at The Selection, still getting to know their mate. The bond is not yet fully formed. It's rare, yes, but not unheard of. And these two don't have a true mate...

Ezra lifts a brow. "Like I said, I'm not here looking for an omega."

"You don't have to leave with an omega to hang out with one," I say, flashing him a smile.

He shakes his head. "That's more of Cayson's philosophy than mine."

On one hand, that eases a little of my worry. On the other, I notice how quiet Cayson is being. For some reason, it'd really bother me if Cayson spent his days flirting with me and his nights with the other omegas. I mean... the girls here might even be laughing with each other behind my back, knowing my "mate" is sleeping with them and professing his love for me. Some omegas are just like that. It's why some alphas and omegas cheat. Although extremely unlikely, it does happen.

To my surprise, Cayson's dark eyes find mine. "My Jelly Bean takes up too much of my time for me to have any left for someone else."

I lift a brow. "Even at night."

He flashes me a dirty smile. "Oh, it's usually late at night when I'm thinking about my Jelly Bean. Pants down, cock in hand—"

"Cayson!" I shout, my face flaming, even though I'm happy that's the only thing he's doing at night.

He shrugs. "Ask an honest question, get an honest answer."

Ezra stops beside me on the bed and reaches out, touching my throat in a strangely intimate way. "You're healing."

I swallow hard. "The bruises aren't so bad."

Our eyes meet and tension sings between us. I remember his light kiss after the runway show. It'd been short and sweet, but it'd also whispered of so much more. I wonder what Ezra is like when he loses control. For some reason, just the idea of it makes me feel warm and uncomfortable.

Ezra looks away, clearing his throat. "Well, I'm glad. Even though I do kind of wish Kurt had given us a reason to mess up that face of his."

"You mean, mess it up more, right?" Cayson asks, smirking. "Because Kurt is one ugly motherfucker."

I laugh. "He looks like a human in pug form... It's a look that works for a dog. Humans? Not so much."

"She's right," Cayson says, smiling at me.

"Did you see his face at the fashion show?" Ezra asks, smirking.

"Oh, he had a definite squirrel up his asshole," Cayson mutters.

I smile, but then remember the ultima. "Brock saw it all though, and he didn't look happy."

Ezra sighs and leans back, his gaze meeting mine. "This fake relationship thing we're

doing is really tricky. We have to convince everyone, including the council, that we're all in love. We have to make it clear we're not getting along with Kurt, and that he can't possibly work as your mate because he doesn't fit with us. While at the same time pretending to be giving him a chance."

"In my opinion," Cayson says, popping his fingers, "the way we're acting just solidifies just how much we don't like him. They'll hardly be able to deny us when it comes time to refuse the connection with him. Everyone will have seen how much we hate him. This whole 'giving him a chance thing' is just so Kurt's big, bad daddy doesn't come down on the council when he's throwing a tantrum because he didn't get the mate he wanted."

"I just don't want them getting mad at me," I say. "I don't want their attention on me at all."

Ezra gives me a gentle smile. "It's okay. Don't worry about them. We'll handle any issues if they come up."

And I believe him.

Cayson and Ezra work together to get the game set up on the bed, spreading the board out so we can all reach the pieces. Once it's set up, we're all poured a generous glass of the best tasting wine I've ever had. I never really remember having red wine before. Maybe a sip or two when I was a girl. But I don't remember taking a sip of a wine and thinking, wow, this reminds me of blackberries and strawberries, in the most amazing way, like I do now.

"This is amazing," I say.

"Really? I thought it was just decent," Cayson says, looking at me curiously.



I feel embarrassed. “To be fair, I haven’t exactly had a lot of opportunities to try wine.”

“What?” Cayson sounds shocked. “I’ve tried about a thousand different wines, from all over the world. Wine is the stuff of dreams. A full life requires wine.”

Ezra lifts a brow. “Not everyone is privileged enough to have a wine cellar.”

“Oh, right,” Cayson says, wincing and rubbing the back of his neck.

“It’s okay,” I say, waving his comment away. “My cabin has a lot of things: a beautiful lake nearby, a wonderful garden, places to find wild mushrooms, and the most beautiful wildflowers. The silvery lupines are my favorite. But it also has a lot of disadvantages: no people nearby, which I’m actually starting to see as not as great a thing as I thought, no modern comforts, food can be scarce and food variety is limited, meaning sometimes you have to go hungry even from basic things, and the cabin tends to get pretty cold in the winter, since it doesn’t have proper insulation.”

Both men are staring at me. I suddenly feel nervous. What did I say?

Ezra’s mouth pulls into a thin line. “Your alpha should have helped insulate your cabin, and he should be making sure you have enough food.”

What? No. That’s not the responsibility of an alpha. I shake my head. “I’ve never really complained about it before, so he wouldn’t know.”

Ezra seems upset. “He knows you’re an orphaned omega in the middle of the woods. He sure as fuck should be checking in on you and making sure you’re being cared for. You don’t have family or your own mates to care for and provide for you, so it’s his responsibility.” He crosses his arms over his chest, looking determined. “When we leave The Selection, I’ll send someone out there to build up your supplies and do

repair work on your cabin.”

“You don’t need to—”

“It’s not up for debate.”

I look to Cayson for help, but he seems just as upset. “He’s right, Jelly Bean. It’s okay to sometimes need someone to care for you.”

“Because I’m an omega?” My words are a challenge as I look between them.

Ezra’s expression gentles. “Even alphas need help sometimes.”

“Really?” I ask, not feeling convinced.

“You helped me already with your suggestion of getting grants. I’ve already informed my father, and we’re looking into it.”

I’m shocked. “Oh.”

“And I need help dealing with my asshole dad all the time,” Cayson admits. “The guy seriously sees me as something just below the goop he scrapes off his shoes, even though he’s never given me a chance to be anything.”

“But you’re... amazing,” I say.

Cayson gives a tight smile. “Thanks, but try telling my dad that.”

There’s silence between us. It’s weird. With how smart, funny, and confident Cayson is, I almost find it unbelievable that his dad can’t see that. His loss.

Ezra opens his mouth, hesitates, then presses on. “When my first girlfriend, Katie, died—”

I gasp. “Oh my gosh, I’m so sorry!”

He gives a sad smile, his expression far away. “I was fifteen, and so was she. We’d dated for two years and thought we’d be together forever, but then she went to the river that day... there was a flash flood, and she never came back.”

“Oh, Ezra,” I whisper, grabbing his hand and squeezing it.

He shakes his head, as if shaking away the memory. “What I meant to say was that, when I lost Katie, I needed a lot of support from not only Cayson and my family, but my whole pack. My family and pack might not have been... as there for me as I had hoped, but Cayson was, and it was invaluable.”

My heart hurts for the man in front of me. I knew Ezra had lost someone, but I had no idea it was a partner. I wonder if that has something to do with his unwillingness to find an omega. The thought makes me sad, even though I understand that need to never be hurt again better than anyone.

“I’m so sorry,” I say.

Ezra shakes his head. “Don’t be. Just remember, alpha or omega, we all need someone. We can’t survive on our own. It’s not how wolves are meant to be.”

And he sounds so sincere that it eases something in my chest. “Maybe you’re right. Just a little bit.”

Cayson smiles. “A little bit is better than nothing. Now, we ready to play this game?”

“I’m ready to embarrass you,” Ezra challenges.

We all focus on the board in front of us, choosing our pieces and getting ready for some fun. Fun that includes pajamas, wine, and two handsome men on my bed. I could do worse.

I study the board, seeing all the properties around the outside, deciding which ones I want to buy first. We’re each given a pile of money. Our pieces are set up at the starting spot, and the dice is pulled out. We’re ready to either land in jail, pay money, or buy properties.

As we play, Cayson openly cheats and Ezra plays exactly by the rules, sometimes catching himself accidentally breaking one and insisting he pay the penalty. It’s comical to be a part of. It’s like the game perfectly captures the two men’s personalities, and I’m loving every second of their contrasting game styles. Especially when my style is somewhere in the middle. I don’t try to break any rules, but if I find that I did, I don’t ask for a penalty.

“Hey,” Cayson says, after one bottle of wine is gone. He’s on his side, his head in his hand, looking up at Ezra and I with a glint in his eye. “What do you say we make this a little more interesting?”

“I am not playing another drinking game with you,” Ezra mutters, concentrating as he places his cards down on the board. “Last time, I’m pretty sure I met the gods before I sobered up again.”

“Nah, not like that,” Cayson says, raising his eyebrows. “A different kind of a game. An even more fun one. How about every time you land on someone else’s property, you have to take an article of clothing off? How about that?”

Ezra laughs. “Knowing you, you’ve got nothing on under those pants.”

Cayson raises a brow. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

“I’ll pass.”

“Faye?” Cayson asks, turning to me, making my cheeks go pink. “What do you say?”

The wine warms my insides. A night of laughter and smiles fill me. I glance between the two of them and I feel safe with these two men. I know, deep in my bones, that they’d never hurt me.

Something inside me tugs, hard, and I say the words before I can think about the consequences. “Sure, why not?”

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:31 am*

6

Faye

Neither Cayson nor Ezra have the chops to beat me in this board game. Cayson is just too reckless, moving before deciding on a strategy, forgetting to collect his money, missing obvious choices that would benefit him. Ezra, on the other hand, is just too nice. He keeps purposefully avoiding buying properties so I won't have to risk landing on them and isn't actually playing the helpful cards he collects. Between these two losing strategies, I'm sitting in my pajamas, having only lost my robe.

Meanwhile, both Cayson and Ezra are sitting in nothing but their underwear—Cayson in a pair of black boxers, Ezra in a very nice pair of dark blue boxer briefs. I never thought I'd be so happy to be near two half-naked men, but I'm not minding this one bit. Cayson and Ezra are ridiculously beautiful men, with the kinds of bodies only written about in steamy romance novels. The kind of books I've had some experience reading, at least the ones hidden in the back of my grandmother's closet.

The second they took off their shirts and my gaze ran up and down their washboard abs, my mouth had felt as dry as a desert. When they'd both landed on one of my properties, I'd blushed and said they didn't have to take off their pants, but they'd insisted. Which, you know, I guess was okay.

More than okay.

“Well,” Cayson had said, laughing, “I guess you don't have to ask us boxers or briefs?”

As though that was a question I would ever pose to one of them. I think of the matching set of lace underwear I'm wearing—courtesy of The Selection—and blush down to my collarbone. Whatever I do, I need to keep my clothes on.

Cayson passes around our second wine bottle, and I take a greedy sip, hoping to calm my nerves. It works, a little, as more warmth blossoms inside of me, and I feel the tension in my muscles easing, and my mind working just a tiny bit slower. I'm far from drunk, which is probably smart, but hanging out in Topsy Ville is just what I need.

“Ha!” Cayson says, when I finally land on one of his properties. “Go ahead, Faye! Lose a piece... I'm hoping for the top, if you're taking suggestions.”

He raises his eyebrows suggestively, but I just laugh, grabbing my calf and pulling my leg up so I can peel off my remaining sock. I had intended for it to be the least sensual article of clothing I could have chosen, but when I glance up at the guys, they're both transfixed, their eyes wide and dark.

“I didn't know you were so flexible,” Ezra mutters, his voice low.

“I stretch every morning,” I say, but it comes out so quiet, I'm not sure either of them heard what I said. Cayson is just staring at me intently, his throat working in his neck, like he keeps thinking to say something, but pulls himself away at the last moment.

We keep playing, rolling and moving, the tension in the room growing with every turn. When Ezra lands on one of my properties, his gaze shoots up to meet mine, and I try to look away, but my mind is racing with the possibilities. What would it be like to see a man completely naked for the first time? I'm pretty sure every square inch of my skin is burning, red hot.

Slowly, he reaches down, taking off the necklace he wears around his chest and

setting it to the side, next to his neatly folded clothing. On the other side of Cayson is the haphazard pile he's been adding to each time he has to strip.

"The idea here was not for me to see Ezra naked," Cayson grumbles, slouching down and pouting.

I reach out and roll again, just missing Cayson's property and landing on a bonus square.

"Ha," I say, holding my hand out to Ezra, who's functioning as the bank. "Go ahead, pay up."

"I wish you were cheating," Cayson says, rolling the dice again and groaning when he has to go into jail. "I wish there was an explanation for why you're beating us so badly."

Ezra rolls the dice. He lands on a neutral space and breathes a sigh of relief.

"There is an explanation," I say, giddily reaching for the dice. In a few turns, I'll buy Cayson out of his properties and have effectively won the game. "You're too chaotic, and Ezra is too nice."

"I knew you'd been letting her win!" Cayson says, jabbing his finger lazily in Ezra's direction. "Why won't you let me have nice things, man?"

"I have not been letting her win," Ezra mumbles, but his heart isn't in it.

"Oh," I say, sucking in a breath when I land on Cayson's property.

Both of the guys look at me, but I try to play it off like it doesn't matter. Quickly, before I can overthink it, I reach up and tug off the silk top, letting it fall into a puddle



next to me. The cool air rushes over my skin and I can feel how exposed I am. My stomach, my sides, the soft curves of my breasts in the silk bra I'm wearing.

I guess I just have to be thankful that I am wearing a bra.

Glancing up slowly, I look at them beneath my lashes. I can tell the guys are surprised by my choice of underwear, and for the first time since arriving here, I'm actually happy that The Selection has made the choice to dress me up. I never would have chosen something like this myself, but seeing the way they're looking at me fills me with a new found confidence that my granny panties could've never given me.

"White... suits you," Ezra says, sounding a bit uncomfortable.

"You have an amazing rack is what he meant to say," Cayson tells me.

"Cayson!" Ezra scolds.

My cheeks heat, and I realize they're both staring. "Just play the game."

Leaning forward across the board, I place the money I have to pay Cayson in front of him, giving him a full view of my cleavage as I do. It's not like I'm well-endowed. I have pretty average breasts, from what I can tell, but Cayson looks at me like he's been lost in the desert and I'm a water-filled mirage. Which, you know, is good for my ego.

The wine bottle is passed around again, and the energy in the room sizzles with something I'm unsure about. One thing's for certain: the playfulness has changed, turning into something else. Something more powerful.

"Your turn," Ezra says, swallowing hard and glancing at Cayson. He clears his throat, snapping his fingers when Cayson doesn't pay attention. "Dude—your turn."

“Right,” Cayson says, blinking and reaching for the dice. He doesn’t get out of jail, but it doesn’t seem like it bothers him in the slightest. Ezra rolls, gets a card, and quietly keeps his eyes down on his money, pretending to re-organize it for the third time.

When I go again, I land on one of the few properties Ezra had purchased. Once again, their eyes meet mine, and once again, I take that confidence and run with it, standing up from the bed and letting my silk shorts drop to the floor before climbing back onto the duvet and sitting on my knees.

I feel the air—and their eyes—everywhere on me now, and part of me wants to just say the hell with it, to beg for their touch, to fall back and see what it’s like to be with a man, to be with an alpha—no, to be with two alphas.

But, I remind myself, this whole thing is for show. None of this is real.

Something inside of me tenses. It is for show, but who are Cayson and Ezra putting on a show for right now? We’re the only ones in the room. There’s nobody to convince of our mating bond right now.

We go for another turn. Once again, Cayson and Ezra skate by, but it seems like my luck has turned. I’ve landed on Cayson’s property.

I swallow hard. The thought of undoing my bra in front of them makes me feel like I’m beet red from head to toe. Somehow when I agreed to this whole game, I hadn’t thought far enough ahead to think about us actually getting naked in front of each other. I can’t back down now, no matter how nervous I am about showing my breasts to another human being. To men. To Ezra and Cayson.

I reach behind my back, struggling with the clasp of the bra.

When Cayson sees that I can't get it, he's immediately on his feet. "Here," he murmurs, coming behind me, his warm stomach pressing against my back for a brief moment, before he pulls away, his fingers finding the clasp of the bra and deftly undoing it. "Let me help you."

"Thanks," I whisper, then my bra falls away.

Cayson makes a low sound in the back of his throat. Even behind me, his much larger body can easily see all of me, something I'm intimately aware of. "Damn it, Faye, you're absolutely beautiful."

I am?

His hands run down my arms, and he whispers, "Can I touch you?"

I don't know if it's the wine or Cayson, but I find it's impossible to resist him. "No one has ever... I've never."

"You're a virgin?" Ezra asks, sounding shocked.

I nod, feeling strangely embarrassed. Most women my age have had sex before. Usually with a lot of different shifters. Part of growing up is learning enough in bed that we know what we like and don't like. But the truth is, I haven't had many chances to be around men, let alone form relationships with them enough that they'd lead to sex.

"Then I'll go slow. You tell me if you don't like anything, and I'll stop," Cayson murmurs, and there's nothing in his voice to indicate that he's bothered by my inexperience.

I see the two men look at each other. Then Ezra nods, as if they've come to a silent

agreement. Ezra looks at me next.

Nibbling my bottom lip, unsure of what he wants, I just nod too, and something in his face eases, telling me I did the right thing. Apparently, he needed my permission first. What a strange idea.

Cayson's hands move from stroking my arms to stroking my sides, sending goosebumps racing across my flesh when his fingers stroke the sides of my breasts. Tension grows inside my body until I feel like I'm going to scream, but I don't know why. Then Ezra reaches forward and strokes my nipples really gently, slowly, completely unhurried, before he plucks my nipples, making me gasp. My nipples harden as he squeezes and plays with them, and then Cayson is cupping the weight of my breasts in his hands.

My head falls back, and Cayson's gaze meets mine. His head lowers and captures my lips, and then I'm being kissed like I've never been kissed in my life. His mouth is firm and soft all at the same time, and when I part my lips to draw in a deep breath, his tongue delves inside.

I'm breathing hard. My breasts are being played with by both men. Cayson's expert tongue is doing things to my mouth that has me feeling hot and bothered. I'm embarrassed when I realize that I'm actually wet. Soaking the little pair of panties that I'm still wearing.

Cayson breaks our kiss, breathing hard, his eyes dark. "Is this okay? Do you like what we're doing?"

Not sure I can speak, I just nod.

"What if we wanted to go further? Would you be okay with that?" Ezra asks, and there's no pressure in his voice, just need.

Would I be okay with that? After The Selection, I'll be going home to my cold, lonely cabin. Being with these two men might be my only chance to be with a man. My only chance at having someone make love to me. And who better could I choose for something like that than two men I trust and care about? Two men I know would never hurt me.

"Let's keep going," I manage.

They lay me back in the middle of the bed. I have one second to consider what might happen next before they sandwich me between them. Each man takes one of my breasts, and then starts sucking. And, oh my gods, it feels so good. Like being lit on fire with pleasure. My eyes roll back in my head, and I just lose myself in the incredible feeling. Their sucking is soft sometimes, hard other times, and sometimes they use their teeth gently to make my nerves scream with pleasure. I twist and turn between them, feeling lost to the sensations.

I don't know how long we lay like that before Ezra breaks free from my breast. One of his hands slides down my stomach. His fingers reach the elastic of my white silk underwear, and he hesitates. "What if I were to touch you here?"

He wants to touch me where I'm so hot and so wet? I'm embarrassed just thinking about it, but I also feel like I'm dying to be touched there. To feel some relief.

"Yes," I whisper.

His hand slides further into my underwear. One of his fingers caresses my entrance before he gently parts me. The instant his fingers brush my wet core I tense, my body sizzling with need.

"Is that okay?" Ezra asks, his voice husky.

“Yes,” I tell him again.

“Fuck,” he mutters. “You’re so damn wet.”

I start to close my legs. “Is that... is that a bad thing?”

Ezra chuckles low in his throat. “It’s an amazing thing. It means we’re turning you on. It means your body is getting ready to have us inside you.”

I didn’t know that. Any of that. But I relax, knowing this is normal. Knowing that... he’s happy about it.

Cayson breaks his lips from my breast, but continues to touch my nipples. “And you smell so good, Faye. You have no idea. Getting you aroused has got to be the best thing I’ve ever scented in my life.”

My cheeks heat, and Cayson’s hand trails downward until they’re both touching me. Lighting my body on fire. Making me so wet that I’m sure I’m soaking the blankets, but they don’t seem to care.

Ezra lifts his hand to his mouth and licks his fingers, then groans.

I stare, a blush heating my cheeks.

He catches my gaze, and says, “You just taste so damn good,” before bringing his fingers back to my core and stroking me once more.

After a few minutes of me lying back, overwhelmed with need, Cayson draws my underwear off and pushes my legs further apart, then Cayson asks, “Can we lick you? I’m fucking dying to taste you.”

My heart races. I'm not sure what to expect, but I've liked everything else they've been doing, so I'm sure I'll like this too. "Okay."

His words turn me on, and Ezra moves his fingers with a sudden quickness.

Moaning, I feel my body throb.

"Fuck," Cayson moans, "you made her gush."

"Gush?" I ask, breathing hard.

Ezra kisses me. "It's a good thing, Jelly Bean. A very good thing."

Cayson slides down between my legs, and I tense, waiting. Then, his hot tongue begins to lick my folds, touching a bundle of nerves that just feels oh so good. Unable to help myself, I cry out.

Ezra is back at my side, and his mouth finds mine. We're kissing and kissing, drinking each other in. I'm holding onto him, or else I'll get lost in the storm, and Cayson is doing impossible things to my body. With each lick of his tongue, stars dance in my vision. Each time he sucks, I feel like my soul leaves my body. The man should make a career out of this, because it's just so good that I'm losing all control.

Ezra's hands begin to play with my breasts again. His tongue tangles with my own, and we're both breathing hard. Panting. The minutes spin away as they seem to have all the time in the world to drive me crazy. My body seems to be heating up, preparing for something, but every time I get close, they pull away.

Finally, I break my lips from Ezra's, my heart beating wildly. "I think... I need more. Someone, please."

Cayson's licking stops. Ezra freezes beside me. I shift, uncomfortable, wondering why they stopped.

Ezra kisses the space behind my ear gently. "Are you sure, Faye? Are you sure that's what you want?"

I don't hesitate. "Yes."

Cayson moves to lay at my side. He looks at Ezra. "You go first. You'll be more patient... more gentle."

Ezra nods.

Standing, he removes his underwear, and his erection pops free. My jaw drops. I've never seen a man naked before. I don't know what I expected, but the massive cock in front of me is not it.

"Will that fit?" The question explodes from my lips.

Ezra chuckles darkly. "You were made to take my cock. It'll fit."

I'm not so sure, but he climbs on top of me.

Beside me, Cayson rises and slides off his underwear too, and a tremble moves through me. Men can't possibly all be built like this. They might be telling me this is natural, but there's nothing natural about their massive tent poles. No one can tell me that other men are this big.

Cayson climbs back in bed with me, takes my hand, and wraps it around his cock. It is slick and feels unbelievably good in my hand. It's like silk over iron, soft yet hard all at the same time. He leads me, showing me how to grip him, how to run my hand



up and down his cock, while squeezing tightly. I know I must be doing it right when he groans, and his whole body shudders beside me.

Ezra, on the other hand, nudges my legs, spreading me wider. When he's between my thighs, settled on top of me, I truly start to wonder if this is going to work. I'm tiny compared to him. He's a giant of a man. His cock can't possibly fit. Can it?

He kisses down my neck. "This might hurt a little, but I'll go slow. I'll be gentle."

I calm at his words. Ezra could never hurt me, not really. If he's promising to be slow and gentle, then he will be.

The tip of his cock presses into my folds, and he begins to slide himself in my wetness. The movement makes my toes curl, and I'm breathing hard as he continues to play just inside of me. Making me want all kinds of things that I've never wanted before.

When his tip begins to slide into my entrance, I steel myself for pain, but Ezra is very, very slow. His mouth moves down my neck, sucking harder and harder until he lightly bites me, followed by a groan.

Cayson's hard cock feels incredible in my hand, and his warm body against mine makes me feel safe and protected. When I glance at him and see his eyes hooded, and his incredibly beautiful face, I'm a bit amazed that these two men are somehow here with me. How did I get so lucky?

Ezra pushes deeper and deeper inside me until he stops, hesitating. "You're sure?"

My nails dig into his back. "Please," I beg him.

He takes a deep breath that shakes his entire body, then pushes in. There's a brief

moment of pain. A flash of surprise and confusion all at once. My body seems to be in shock, tense and distracted from my pleasure.

Ezra captures my lips and kisses me harder and harder, until the memory of the pain begins to fade away, and I start to wiggle beneath him, wanting more. He pushes deeper into me, the fit impossibly tight, but also surprisingly pleasurable.

When he comes to his hilt, he breaks our kiss. I hear him release a string of curses the likes of which I never imagined coming from him.

Cayson gives a humorless laugh. “Not as easy to keep control in her tight, little body as you thought, huh?”

“Shut up,” Ezra groans.

For a brief moment I wonder if I’ve done something wrong when he pulls out, then pushes back into me. I gasp as pleasure explodes through every inch of my body, and I cling to him as my head spins. He murmurs my name, pulls out again, then slams back in. Over and over again he takes me so deep and so hard that I feel like I must be dreaming. That nothing could ever feel this good.

My nails cut into his back. My legs rise and wrap around him, and I time the stroking of Cayson’s cock with our thrusts, making it feel like we’re all working together.

In and out he moves. Harder and harder. Faster and faster. My eyes roll back in my head, something akin to a lightning strike rolls through me, and I come completely undone, screaming Ezra’s name, riding him just like he’s riding me. Pleasure unlike anything I’ve ever experienced is making me completely lose my mind.

And then I feel hot liquid squirt inside me, and realize he’s come. His scent fills the room. If I thought he smelled good before, it’s nothing to the way he smells now. It’s

intoxicating. It makes me want to take his cock in my mouth and taste that sweet scent, but he keeps riding me, letting every drop of his cum slide into me until he finally calms on top of me.

Cayson's scent hits me then and makes me salivate for him. I realize warmth has spilled down my hand and look to see white liquid dripping over my hand, and Cayson collapsed back, looking satisfied. I made him come too.

"You smell so good I just want to taste you," I say.

Both men jerk to look at me. I lift my hand off of Cayson's cock and start licking, loving that his cum tastes just like him. Sweet and salty all at once. They groan, and I watch as Cayson's cock gets hard once more.

"Move," Cayson tells Ezra.

Ezra pulls out of me, and I whimper.

Cayson gives me a wicked smile. "Don't worry, we're not done yet."

Ezra rolls to my side and Cayson climbs on top.

"Are you sore?" Cayson asks.

I shake my head.

"Good," he tells me, his dark eyes full of need. "Because you have no idea how long I've wanted to do this. Since the day I met you."

There's no hesitation when he plunges into me. No soft caresses or easy touches. He sucks my neck, hard. He bites me multiple times, but not enough to break my skin.

Not enough to mark me. Then he begins to slowly move inside of me, almost as if he's testing my body. Our eyes lock, and he must see something good there, because his look of surprise turns to pleasure, and his speed increases. He begins to fuck me so hard that if I thought I had an understanding of sex a minute ago, I had no idea.

He lifts me off of the bed, and while kneeling in the center of it, fucks me in the air, my legs wrapped around his back. Just when I think I'm going to explode, he flips me onto my stomach and starts to thrust wildly into me all over again.

Ezra moves to my mouth. His erect cock makes it clear what he wants. I spread my lips, and he enters without hesitation. His eyes close as he takes my mouth the way he'd taken my pussy before. His movements are slow at first, then faster and faster until he groans, and his seed spills into my mouth, salty and sweet goodness that leaves me reeling.

He collapses beside me on the bed, but Cayson isn't done with me yet. My body isn't done with this night, and these men, just yet.

Grabbing a hold of my hair, Cayson fucks me from behind like a wild animal, until I'm begging for him to finish me. He does, by switching his rhythm and his pace, bringing me to the edge, then kicking me off of it.

Stars explode in front of my vision, and my orgasm radiates through my body in waves. I'm screaming his name, having lost all control, when he comes inside of me. That delicious scent of his fills me. He collapses on top of me, but only for a minute before rolling off of my much smaller body.

They pull me into the middle of them, and I'm shocked by how good I feel. There's a soul-deep contentment that I don't think I've ever felt before. Their hands are gentle as they touch my body. The warmth of them is so close to me, comforting me.

“So, that’s sex,” I say softly.

Cayson chuckles. “That’s sex, but there’s so much more. More that I’ll be glad to teach you.”

“She’s a quick student,” Ezra says, followed by a chuckle.

I’m proud. I had sex. Sex with two men I trust and like. And they’d been happy with what I’d done. Tomorrow might bring more problems, but for tonight, I’m content.

Faye

When I wake up, I'm sandwiched between two warm, great-smelling bodies. I'm completely bathed in a mixture of Cayson's and Ezra's scents, and it's like waking up to the smell of coffee, or a full breakfast. I don't think I've ever imagined something like this before, but I feel like this is a dream come true that I never even knew I had.

It comes to me slowly, but I realize last night was the first time I didn't have a dream—nightmare, really—about my brother. I slept all night long, dreaming of happy things and feeling safe. It's strange. I forgot what that was even like.

Feeling one of the bodies stir, I suck in a deep breath, trying to decide what to say and do, as he turns toward me. It's Cayson. But to my relief, he's still asleep, as he settles his head in his hands like a little kid. Asleep like this, his face relaxed, he's more handsome than I've ever seen him, looking sweet and gentle instead of hiding behind a cocky mask. I want to reach out and touch him, trace my fingers along the stubble on his chin and cheeks, but I also don't want to wake him.

There's something in my chest tugging on me, pulling me toward him, so potent and emotional that tears spring to my eyes. I've never understood when people said they cried tears of happiness, but I'm starting to get it. When I look at him, I feel this burst of sunlight in my chest, like more joy than I've ever felt in my life, all welling up in one spot, spreading through my veins and warming me from the inside out.

I roll over, intending to snuggle into Ezra's back, but he also starts to stir, turning and

facing me in his sleep. When he settles, he reaches out and places one arm on my hip, tugging me a little closer to him. Always so protective, so considerate, even in sleep. Looking at him, I feel safe, wanted, so cared for and secure. Things that I never thought I'd feel again.

I should not be feeling these things for my fake mates, the men who are helping me get away from Kurt so we can all go our separate ways. This is all an act. Cayson and Ezra have both made it clear they're not in the market for omegas, and I'm not in the market for alphas. We all plan to leave this place on our own, so it'd be stupid to confuse this for something real... something long-term.

Yet, I can't help but rub my chest. I'm feeling so many things. Things that don't seem to fit into the life of the Faye who arrived at The Selection. Feelings that have no place in my quiet cabin in the woods.

It dawns on me all at once. The connection I feel with Ezra and Cayson is something I haven't experienced since my brother died. I'd put up such tall, strong walls against my pack, against Addilyn, against anyone who tried to reach out, that I haven't felt this kind of tenderness and emotion in a long time. Maybe, maybe, I'd put a wall around my heart to ensure I would never be hurt again, maybe because I couldn't handle being hurt again.

The strange thing is that same feeling isn't here any longer. It's like the wall is just... gone.

Before I know what's happening, a sob rips through me, and I bring a hand to my mouth, not wanting to wake either of them, but it's too late. The sound had cut through the room, too loud in the silence, and both men had tensed beside me.

In front of me, Ezra's incredible blue eyes flash open, instantly focusing on my face as my eyes fill with tears. "Faye?" Ezra says, reaching out and tucking a strand of

hair behind my ear. “What’s wrong?”

“What is it?” Cayson parrots, and I feel him sitting up at my back, his muscles tense, his tone saying he’s ready to fight whatever is making me cry.

But how can I explain what I’m feeling? It’s silly. They wouldn’t understand. I should probably say nothing. Or maybe lie. But I don’t know if I can bring myself to do either of those things with them.

“Sorry,” I say, through a hiccupping sob. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you up.”

“ Faye ,” Ezra says, his breath warm and soft against my face.

He leans forward and presses a kiss to my forehead, almost like his kiss can chase away whatever is making me cry. I feel Cayson relax behind me, settling back into the covers and pressing his chest to my back, tucking his head onto my shoulder.

I’m sandwiched between them again, feeling supported and protected on all sides. It eases something inside of me, making it feel safe to express my sadness. Sadness I feel like I need to address for the first time since I lost my brother.

“Talk to us,” Cayson murmurs, sounding more serious than I’ve ever heard him.

He’s tracing a finger over my shoulder-blade, and it feels so good it could almost put me to sleep. I don’t know what it is with these men, but they’ve made me realize just how good touch can really feel. Just how healing it can be.

“I’m fine. It’s just silly emotions,” I say, tears rolling down my face, trying to explain myself without making them think I regret last night.

Ezra brushes my tears away. “Emotions aren’t silly. Tell us. We might be able to



help.”

I hesitate, but decide to take the risk. “I just—I’m feeling things I haven’t felt in a long time,” I admit. “After my brother died, it was like there was this big emptiness inside me. Like the only way to protect myself was by pushing everyone away, hiding in the cabin, wallowing in what I lost. I realize now that pushing everyone away was the wrong choice. I needed something different. Something more like... this.” Not the sex. Them. Ezra and Cayson. “It just hurts so much, being here with you and feeling the comfort I could have had all this time, that I’d been denying myself. Realizing that maybe letting people in would allow some of my sadness to stop torturing me.”

“You know,” Ezra says after a long moment of Cayson rubbing my back and his thumb running soothing circles over my hip. “My father always says that the path winds for a reason. It may feel long and dangerous, but the winding path is a way to prepare us for what’s ahead. A sharp turn may just tell you it’s time to take a break, or an uphill climb might condition your muscles for the battle you’re going to fight.”

“So, everything happens for a reason?” Cayson deadpans, and I laugh a little as Ezra rolls his eyes.

“If only we could all be as eloquent as you,” Ezra mutters, then, re-focusing on me, he says, “Essentially, yes. Everything happens for a reason. It’s not always something you want to hear when you’re going through the bad things. But they make you stronger. They give you character, like seasoning on a good piece of meat. People like Kurt, who have had everything handed to them, who have never gone through adversity or pushed through a tragedy, they are lacking a fundamental experience of what it means to be alive. Growing and changing requires pain. Without it, we would not have a reason to deviate.”

“I didn’t know you were a philosopher,” Cayson says, which makes me laugh again.

Between the two of them, Ezra's comforting and rational speeches and Cayson's light-hearted banter, I already feel miles better. There's just something about these two. Something I can't quite put my finger on.

"Also, it's normal to feel a lot of emotions after sex," Ezra says, kissing my forehead again.

"I wouldn't know," I say, clearing my throat, somehow feeling embarrassed at that fact. "Was it that obvious that I was a virgin with anything I did, or didn't do, last night?"

"Gods, no," Cayson murmurs, his murmurs turning to kisses that send shivers down my back. "There is not a single thing about you that I would change."

"Nor would I."

"I just don't understand," I say with a laugh. It comes out a little watery from the tears, but they've mostly subsided. "I've just never heard of alphas being so tender, so kind and gentle. Are the two of you anomalies? I always heard that alphas would be brutes, always taking what they wanted. Kurt made me think that was true. My grandmother and grandfather warned me that it was true."

"My father would disinherit me if he heard that I had mistreated an omega. It goes against our pack's moral code—my own personal moral code," Ezra says, shaking his head, and I watch as his hair, loose from its normal perfect styling, shakes with him. "The strong should always protect the weak."

"I just don't see how sex could be fun if the other person isn't into it," Cayson says. "Seeing their arousal, how much they want me, is the biggest part of what turns me on." He kisses my neck. "I mean, you saw what you did to us last night."

A blush blossoms over my cheeks again when I think about the way he'd looked at me last night, and the way I must have looked at him. I remember the sight of him, shirtless, then see him naked now, and put my hands over my eyes. But instead of the image disappearing, I see both Ezra and Cayson standing completely naked, their cocks at attention, and my blush deepens.

"You embarrassed her," Ezra says, followed by a laugh.

"I was just thinking about—" I realize what I'm saying and stop.

"Yes?" Cayson says, drawing out the word. "How about you just start with which part of our bodies was doing what?"

"Cayson!" I exclaim, wanting to melt into the bed.

Ezra chuckles. "Leave her alone. She did enough for us last night." The words just lead to Cayson laughing.

Cayson and Ezra continue to soothe me, their hands and lips tracing over my body until I'm completely content. I can't believe it's true, but I actually feel wholly safe and unguarded in their presence.

With everything that's happened to me, I'm not entirely sure that's a good thing. I mean, I will be going home alone after this. Won't I?

8

Cayson

I kick my boots off, dropping my bare feet into the water and reveling in the cool sensation as Ezra sits silently beside me. All day, it has felt like my body has been running several degrees hotter. But it's more than that. I feel like I'm walking on air. Like this is the best day of my life, but maybe tomorrow will be even better, as long as I have Faye by my side.

It's a crazy feeling, but I can't seem to shake it.

Normally, being with a woman once is enough to get the urge out of my system, satisfy the curiosity, scratch the itch. Usually, after having sex, any desire I have for the woman is gone, and I regard her like an old friend I'm not tempted to hang out with again. But after having Faye, I just feel like I got the smallest taste of a feast. There's so much more to be had, and I'm not even through the appetizers.

It's insatiable, the need to be near her, to taste her, to touch her, to have her.

I can't stop thinking about the way she looks, the long, lithe way her body moves, the curve of her hip, how she laughs. I picture her long blonde hair tangling through my fingers and her big hazel eyes filled with desire as I thrust into her. I think of me biting her neck, the overwhelming desire to bite harder, to mark her as my mate. And just when I start to fall off that cliff, I think of her the morning after, and the sound of her crying. I remember holding her closely and wanting nothing in the world more than to keep her smiling and laughing forever.

A startling thought occurs to me when I think of how sensitive and kind she is—Faye would make a great mother. Not just a great mother, but a great wife. I can picture her smiling up at me every morning, while we drink our coffee, with little ones running around us like tiny monsters.

My thoughts turn to my father and my pack, and for the first time I don't want to just run away. As son to the alpha, my place will be leading the pack one day. My father has done everything he can to push me away from that position, to keep the power himself, but maybe I'm done being pushed around. Maybe when I come back with Faye at my side, my father will have to step down a bit and allow me to do what I was born to do.

He'll have to, with my omega. With the family we'd build together.

Whoa. I feel like my brain sizzles. I've never thought about something like that before. What's happening to me?

Beside me, Ezra seems to be grappling with his own demons, having also kicked his boots off and silently joined me at the edge of the dock. I wonder if he's also running hot after last night, and about how he feels about having shared the same woman together. We'd done this before a few times, but this was definitely different. This meant something. Seeing Faye's attraction to Ezra didn't bring me any jealousy, only made me want to please her further. Like a healthy sense of competition.

Like a work-place rivalry that leads to overall increased performance.

As much as he might want to deny it, last night was out of this world. It was different from any other sexual experience I'd ever had in my life. There was an emotional component that ran through the three of us that couldn't be ignored.

After we'd slept with Faye, I'd laid awake for hours, my brain spinning. I've realized

that I want Faye as my omega. There's no denying it. But so does Ezra. The three of us... it just feels right. When I think about my future, I see the three of us together, a unit, a family.

But doing something like this is a risk. However, it's a risk I think I might be willing to take. Leaving behind everything I thought I wanted and following a path leading into the unknown... Is Ezra willing to take that risk? Somehow, doing this without him feels wrong.

I turn the thoughts of her over and over in my head, until I realize I can't keep them to myself anymore. It's killing me that I don't know what Ezra is thinking. Maybe he's not having any of these thoughts. Maybe he doesn't feel the same way about Faye as I do.

"Have you ever...thought about what it would be like to take an omega?"

Ezra's eyes snap to mine, widening. I know why. I'm the last guy on the planet he thought would say something like this. Hell, before I came to The Selection I'd been so sure that I'd never want to spend my life with just one woman. Now, I can't even remember what any other looks like. I'm consumed by Faye.

"Any omega?" Ezra says, returning his gaze to the water. "No."

I chew on that for a moment. He hasn't thought about having just any omega, but maybe with Faye? Hell, of course that's what he means. He's just using a technicality not to say how he actually feels.

But this is a subject that needs to be handled gently. "I keep thinking that maybe it wouldn't be so bad. That maybe—maybe it would be good. To take Faye as an omega."

Once again, Ezra looks at me, his eyes wide. “ Really ?” he asks, his eyes wandering over me, as though he’s looking for the mortal wound or head injury that would make me talk like this. “You’d be willing to give up the other women, the traveling, the freedom? Your ability to go where you want and do what you want? To take an omega?”

“To take Faye ,” I say, taking a shaky breath. “The truth is that I’ve been feeling the connection between us, and I can’t deny that it’s likely the mating bond growing stronger and stronger. Faye is the woman I’m meant to be with. Nothing even feels like a sacrifice, as long as I can be with her. I think that I would. I think we both would. For Faye.”

A fake relationship somehow became... fate. The three of us. Together.

Ezra lets out a long suffering sigh and scrubs his hands through his hair, letting his head fall forward so his chin is against his chest. “I just...I find all of that a little hard to believe,” Ezra says, and at first, I feel a flare of anger at the thought that he doesn’t think I’m capable of being that kind of alpha to my omega, but then I see the expression on his face.

I’ve seen this expression on his face before.

This isn’t about me and what I would or wouldn’t be able to sacrifice to take Faye as an omega. It’s about Katie. Whatever he says next, I can’t take it personally. Those inner demons are chewing him up and spitting him out. He needs a friend who understands that right now.

He continues, sounding angrier with each word he speaks. “Like, this whole time, if you were capable of settling down and staying in one place, wouldn’t you have done it? To help the pack? I always assumed that this was just how you were.”

I blink at him as he continues, waiting for him to get it all out of his system.

“We have commitments ,” he says, gesturing with his hands, and I don’t fail to notice the we . He’s thinking about himself. What it means if he ends up with Faye. “We can’t just make a choice like this out of nowhere. Like—everything going on with the crops, with the river, with the board elections—there’s too much going on back home to handle a new relationship, an omega.”

He’s kidding himself. I’ve spent a lot of time with his pack. If he brought home an omega, everyone would be thrilled. They’ve hated watching their golden boy struggling after the loss of Katie. The day she was found having drowned in that flash flood, a part of Ezra died that I think has stayed dead, until Faye. He could easily go back home with her on his arm and, for once, have someone at his side to help shoulder the burden of leadership.

Maybe with me at his side too.

“Hey, man,” I say, rubbing my hand on the back of my neck, but he keeps going.

“You wouldn’t know, because you’re never there. How could we possibly take on a mate? It’s so overwhelming as it is. How is my father going to react when I return home with yet another mouth to feed? And if we start having kids? It’s just—you don’t have the same expectations. You get to do whatever you want. So of course taking on an omega seems like a good idea.”

“Your people aren’t starving, Ezra. One more mouth to feed is nothing. And everyone would be happy if you found yourself an omega.”

He punches his fist into the wooden dock. “And what? We would all move into the town between our pack lands and just... rule together? With Faye at our side? Come on, man, you’d run at the first sign of responsibility. She’d get pregnant and you’d



just—”

“Ezra, don’t take this out on me,” I tell him angrily, breathing hard.

I would never commit to Faye and abandon her. I would never walk away from our kid, and even he knows that. He knows after my shitty dad I’ve vowed to be the kind of father I always wanted. He’s saying these things to hurt me, not because he believes them.

“Take what out on you?”

“You know what I’m talking about.”

“I really don’t,” Ezra snaps, turning to me, his eyes looking wild. “Enlighten me.”

“You know,” I say, reaching out and putting a hand on his shoulder. “It’s okay. It’s okay to have feelings for someone else.”

The statement hangs in the air between us, and Ezra lets out a long, shaky breath, his gaze rising up and out, over the water. I know he’s thinking about her, about how fucked up the entire situation was. Katie had just gone out for a swim. It was a day like any other day. She’d asked us to come, but we’d told her we couldn’t. It didn’t seem like it’d matter, and then the pack had come running, and Ezra lost everything. I was there with him, and I wish more than anything that he didn’t have to go through something like that. He’d loved her. He would’ve chosen her as his beta.

But sometimes, it’s just time to move on from the stuff that’s happened in the past.

“This isn’t how things are supposed to be,” Ezra says finally, his voice much quieter, having lost its previous edge. “I was supposed to come here out of duty, skate by, and return to my pack as soon as possible.”

“Yeah,” I concede, shaking his shoulder a bit before dropping my hand back to my side. “I was supposed to come here out of duty, skate by, and return to the South of France with my friends and avoid my pack as much as possible. But then we met Faye.”

I look out over the water with him, thinking. The thought of leaving here without her, of going back to what my life was before, all the parties and travel and women, feels empty if I don’t have her by my side. Maybe this is what everyone has always asked of me. Maybe this is growing up.

I pick up a pebble and launch it out into the water. “But can you even imagine leaving here without her, man?”

When I glance over at him and see the expression on his face, the answer is obvious.

Faye

My mouth tastes of battery acid as I make my way down the corridor. I was just at breakfast with Addilyn and some of the other omegas—the alphas nowhere to be seen—when a servant appeared at my side, leaning down to whisper discreetly that I had been summoned by the council.

And now, I'm pushing through the heavy oak doors, coming to stand in front of the three of them. Alone, they're terrifying, commanding, their power oozing off of them like strong cologne, but together, the pressure is almost unbearable. Each of them is sitting on a large, elaborate throne, gazing down at me with a mix of amusement and disinterest.

I fall to my knees, bowing and lowering my head to them. I have no other choice. Were I to fight the feeling, my muscles would start to cramp, my bones aching until I gave in and lowered myself in respect to them.

"Hello, Faye," Brock says. "You may rise."

Even though he's given me permission, it still hurts to come back to my feet. My body would much rather prefer that I stayed down on my knees.

"Thank you," I murmur, eyes cast downward.

"How have you been finding The Selection this far?" Brock asks, and my heart

continues to hammer.

Surely, this can't be why they summoned me, a single omega, just to ask how I'm enjoying the event?

His power influences me to tell the truth. To admit that most of it has been horrible, aside from the few moments I was able to be alone with Cayson and Ezra. Aside from their kindness, and how they've been there to save me from Kurt.

I swallow, trying to form words that aren't a lie, because it would pain me to lie outright to them. But I also can't tell the complete truth, that Kurt's presence here is a nightmare to me that I never get to wake up from. That would just lead to them yelling at me and accusing me of making things up again.

"It's been fine," I finally manage to say, my eyes firmly fixed on the bottom of the thrones. I can't bear to lift them any higher.

"Just fine?" Brock asks, letting out a laugh. "Surely, at least some of the activities have impressed you?"

I blush a deep scarlet when I think about last night, when Cayson and Ezra arrived at my door with the board game and drinks. Yes, that activity had turned out much better than the rest. But then again, anytime I was forced to be around Kurt was terrible.

"Yes," I manage, nodding a bit for emphasis. "Yes, some of them have been impressive."

Lance nods, looking happier. "How are you liking the other omegas? Are you getting along with them?"

I think of Addilyn, Janna, and the others, and swallow again.

“I’m getting along with them just fine,” I say, thinking of how Janna had moved to the other side of the room when I asked her about speaking up.

It makes me warm, remembering how angry I was, and I feel the ultimas watching me closely. But I’ve already learned that sharing something like that with the ultimas will lead to absolutely nothing except trouble, so I keep my thoughts to myself. Besides, I know I’m not really here for that. They want something. All of this has to just be small talk before they get to it.

“Let’s cut to the chase,” a different voice speaks up, and I recognize the cruel tone as coming from Hector. “Faye, you are required to explore your bond with every alpha. That includes Kurt.”

They can’t be serious. Expecting me to explore my bond with Kurt is absolute horse shit when they know I accused him of murder, twice. When they know I believe he killed my brother then Serra. They have to see that Kurt only chose me to hurt me, as insane as that idea is. Right? They’re the leaders of all the wolves. I can’t be smarter than them.

“I—” What can I possibly say? Nothing they’ll listen to. “But my brother... and Serra, Kurt—”

Brock sighs and folds his arms.

“It’s your responsibility to get to know your mates, regardless of what silly, little notions have formed in your tiny omega brain,” Hector continues angrily.

“Hector—” Lance begins, his tone shocked, but Hector continues.

“Because whether you like it or not, you’ll likely be leaving The Selection with Kurt as your mate, so it’s time to grow up and accept that.”

I dry heave, stopping myself just before actually vomiting. My whole body curls forward. A tense silence stretches between them as they watch my violent reaction to just the idea of Kurt being my mate, and I take my hand from my mouth, standing up straighter as the nausea passes.

Cayson, Ezra, and I have a plan. I’ll never get stuck with Kurt.

Lance sighs. “This is...”

“This is how it works,” Hector says, his words biting. “You must bond with Kurt.”

I must, because the only ones who can stop this thing are the other alphas that claimed me. Cayson and Ezra. If they refuse to bond with Kurt, the council will determine the bond cannot be made to avoid the packs warring with each other, and all of us will return next year, with the understanding that we are to make new bonds. It’s a terrible system. An unfair system. One where the omega has no power.

The way it always is.

“Yes, yes,” I say, tears springing to my eyes, fear coursing through my body. “I’m sorry. I will.”

Tears track down my cheeks. I have to obey the ultimas. I have to keep my thoughts to myself. Speaking up won’t do me any good. I just have to get out of here. Still, the ultimas’ gazes never leave me.

Lance speaks, his voice gentler, but still intimidating. “He just means that we’ve noticed you favoring some of your potential mates over others.”

The mates that haven't killed anyone? I guess they're right, I am favoring them.

"I'm so sorry," I choke out.

"Don't act like you aren't aware of what you're doing," Hector snaps. "It's clear you favor certain alphas, but it is not up to you, an omega, to decide who her mate is. Not once a claim has been made. Before that, we give you omegas long leashes to decide who you connect with. But something you did must have made Kurt think there was a bond between you. You can't just lead him on and then pretend otherwise now because of made-up stories in your head."

"Of course," I say, my voice wavering. It's like I have no control over my body—I have to agree with them, defer to them. "I'll do better."

"Faye," Lance says, "you can look up here."

I force myself to meet his eyes, and when I do, there's a layer of kindness there that soothes me the slightest bit. His blue eyes are earnest, and his expression is concerned. Like maybe seeing an omega absolutely terrified of the man who's claiming her is something he doesn't feel good about.

"I have the sense that there's something you're not saying," he says, tilting his head. "You can tell us. We are here to protect you, Faye."

Immediately, I have a flashback to the first time this happened, trying to get anyone to listen to me when I tried to explain what had happened to my brother, how it was Kurt who had killed him. Nobody cared, nobody listened. Not these three men. Not my alpha. Not any of my people, except Addilyn.

Then I think of Serra, and I know she deserves better than this. She deserves better than the death she got. Hell, she deserves better than these three men not serving Kurt

the justice he so rightfully deserves just because of his powerful daddy.

If nobody ever stands up against Kurt, he'll just keep doing whatever he wants, hurting people and taking innocent lives. It seems important that I say something. That I speak up any time I have the chance. I don't feel strong, but I wonder if anyone ever really does.

"Okay," I say, trying to calm down, knowing that the more hysterical I am, the less likely they are to believe me. "Kurt is a murderer. I personally saw him kill my brother, and I don't feel safe being around him, even though I know none of you believed me about what I saw. When we found Serra in the forest that day, she had been killed exactly the same way. I suspect he also killed her. I told you as much! I feel nothing but loathing for Kurt, nothing but pain, fear, and grief when I look at him. There's not a single part of my soul that's compatible with his. What's more, deep in my heart I know he's only claiming me as his omega to hurt me further. I mean, you all just recently had him apologize for choking me and attacking me in my room. Surely the evidence is pointing to this not being a match."

I run out of words and just stop talking. Waiting. Glad I got it all out, even while knowing deep inside that my words won't matter.

"That is a very strong claim to make about a member of Pack Obsidian," Hector says, and my heart sinks. "Not to mention the son of Dexter. They are an honorable family"

I shudder at the sound of Kurt's father's name, shrinking back and away from the ultimas. Rumors of the cruelty he's capable of have floated through every circle, even reaching me, when I was still involved with my pack. Why is everyone pretending those rumors don't exist? Because it's safer that way, I guess.

Lance's voice is soft. "They are an honorable family, but sometimes mistakes are



made. Surely, in a circumstance like this, we can make an exception and separate this match without them continuing to explore their supposed bond.”

“Breaking the rules of The Selection? Ridiculous!” Hector growls, and I flinch. “And all over the words of one troubled omega.”

“Troubled or not, she seems to know how she feels,” Lance tells him, casting him a strange glance.

“And her feelings matter more than the son of the alpha to Pack Obsidian?” Hector snaps.

Lance sighs. “We’re not supposed to base our decisions on which alpha we might piss off.”

“But we are supposed to base them on one emotional omega being upset?” the other ultima challenges.

Both men glance at Brock, who has sat silently, watching the conversation. My body tenses, and I look at him too, getting the distinct impression that his words will be the deciding factor here, and praying that this might be the moment I’m allowed to untangle myself from Kurt.

“Whether or not your claims are true,” Brock says, staring at me, his expression thoughtful, “it’s unfortunate that you have to spend time with someone that you have these feelings for. But those are the rules—you must explore the mating bond. If it is how you say, it won’t develop. But according to the rules, you must at least give it a chance.”

Damn it.

I fully believe that the ultimas may have never seen an alpha claim an omega they didn't feel a mate bond with, because such a thing is unheard of. If Kurt claims me, for example, then meets his mate in another year, he will not be free to claim her. Men wait, sometimes for many years, to meet their mate, because they're worth waiting for. And because they wouldn't want to risk not being able to claim her later, since alphas only get one mate. But these men have never seen someone as twisted as Kurt before. He's claiming me because the idea of being able to hurt me for a lifetime is more valuable than a real mate.

I just wish I could get them to see that.

My head bows in defeat. They're going to keep making me be around Kurt because this system isn't made to detect people like him. I won't be free of him yet. The room is silent around me.

After a moment, Brock speaks again. "Faye, we are looking into what happened with that girl. If we find evidence against the culprit, no matter who that is, they will be handled appropriately."

I can only nod. I don't trust myself to speak.

"But you should know, as of this time we do not see anything to indicate Kurt is responsible for her death, so you may need to open your heart to the possibility that while Kurt got... too excited with you, he may not be the bad person you have convinced yourself he is. He may end up becoming a loving and wonderful partner."

My eyes feel dull and lifeless. "You think the man who killed my brother will become a loving partner to me? Understood."

"Faye..." Lance says gently, but he says nothing more.

If I wasn't in front of them, I'd laugh at the absurdity of Kurt becoming a "loving and wonderful partner." My gaze finds Brock's, and I can see it in his eyes. Even he doubts his own words. Even he doesn't think Kurt is as wonderful as these men seem to be making him out to be.

"Explore your bond with Kurt regardless of how you feel. That's an order," he says, leaning back.

My entire body deflates with relief the next time he speaks, his voice echoing through the room. "You are dismissed."

10

Faye

The meeting with the ultimas felt like a thousand years ago, but in reality, it'd been less than an hour ago. Immediately upon reaching my room, Addilyn had been waiting outside my door to tell me that all the omegas had to find baskets for the next event. Baskets that had been placed randomly around the castle.

My heart had sunk. I'd needed a few minutes to myself to decide how to handle what the ultimas had ordered, but I guess that wouldn't be happening. I wasn't sure what the ultimas would be doing to us next, but I wondered how I would make it look like I was including Kurt without actually including him.

It'd be tricky. I couldn't be openly defiant, but I also couldn't handle being near him. What am I supposed to do?

"So," she begins, choosing to start heading up the stairs. "How did game night go?"

I blush, remembering how exactly game night had gone. "Well, the guys chased Kurt out of my room, which was a relief, so I just played with Cayson and Ezra."

A smile teases the corners of her mouth. "And how did that go?"

I feel like I could melt into the floor. "It went well. I learned... a lot of new things."

She opens a door at random. "Like what?"

Does she know? No way she knows. “Like that Cayson plays recklessly, and that Ezra follows all the rules.”

“That can’t have been a surprise to you,” Addilyn comments, choosing another room and glancing in, but there are no baskets in sight.

“No, not that,” I admit.

Addilyn spins on me. “So, what exactly happened? You’re obviously embarrassed about something.”

I take a deep breath, deciding to be honest. Knowing that I need to talk to someone about this. “We decided to turn the game into... a strip game.”

“Oh boy!” she says, her eyes brightening. “And how far did things get? I mean, Ezra and Cayson are pretty hunky dressed, I imagine they just got hotter with each piece of clothes they removed.”

My face is on fire. “Right.”

“So, how far did it go?” She’s bouncing on her toes.

I hesitate, then say, “Far.”

There’s glee in her expression. She lifts her hands, palms facing each other, just a few inches from each hand. “Tell me where to stop.” She keeps separating her hands further and further, to indicate the size of their dicks. When they get super far from each other, she says, “No way!”

I laugh with embarrassment. “I’m not doing this.”

“I’m starting again,” she says, then starts drawing her hands slowly apart again.

I wave when she reaches the right point.

She looks down at where her hands are, and her eyes widen. “Holy shit.”

“This is mortifying,” I say, then continue looking through rooms.

“And how was the sex?”

“Sex?” The word comes out a squeak, then I regard her suspiciously. “How do you know?”

She lifts a brow. “We’re shifters, Faye. You smell like you spent the night being fucked by them up one side and down the other.”

Oh, shit. The council must have been aware of that too. “Is it that obvious?”

She winces. “Maybe only because I’m so close to you and know your smell. I’m sure no one else will be able to tell.”

Well, this is mortifying.

“So, how were they?”

I take a deep breath and the words just rush out, “They were amazing.”

“And it was your first time, right?”

I nod, feeling embarrassed.

She squeals. “Your first time, and you got to be with the Cadillac of men. The fantasy of all women. You lucky bastard, you.”

It’s impossible to ignore the heat flaming my face as I open another door, not spotting a single basket.

“So, does this mean the three of you are,” she lowers her voice and looks around, “really together now?”

I freeze, and our gazes meet, something inside of me feeling achy and raw. “No, we’re still the same. We just... had a little fun. It didn’t mean anything.”

“To you or to them?”

“Both,” I say, feeling uncomfortable.

“Are you sure?” she asks, looking doubtful.

I hesitate. Am I sure? “I don’t know. I have my cabin. My plan. And they have their lives to go back to.”

“It’s okay if you’ve changed your mind,” she says. “Love has a way of changing things.”

“They didn’t say anything about changing their minds, or about love,” I say.

“And how do you feel?”

How do I feel? “I don’t mind. I just know that my plan is simpler than any situation that involves them. I don’t need any complications.”

She lifts a brow. “None of that suggests you don’t want to be with them.”

I sigh. Opening a door, I spot a table full of baskets and head towards it. “All I know is that there’s no point in wanting them if they don’t want me, especially when my cabin and my plan makes so much more sense. I mean, what would life even be like with them? Would we live on Ezra’s pack lands, because Cayson can’t stand his dad? Would we help him run things and build a family near his own family home? Would Cayson’s dad slowly see Cayson for what he is, and then we’d be helping to run his pack too?”

“It seems like you’ve thought about this,” Addilyn says.

I glance at her in surprise. Have I? “I didn’t realize I had.”

“Do you think you could be happy with them?”

The answer is surprisingly easy to find when I think about all the laughter and fun I’ve shared with them. “I do think that I could be happy with them.”

“Then, maybe tell them how you feel and see if they feel the same way,” she suggests.

I stiffen at just the idea. “Cayson and Ezra have been honest with me from the very beginning that they don’t want an omega. I would be being ungrateful for the sacrifice they made pretending to claim me if I suddenly started wanting more from them. No, I won’t say anything. I’ll respect their feelings and remember that while last night was really special to me, it was probably just another night for them.”

“Faye—”

I draw my shoulders back. “So, how was your night?”



She hesitates, then pushes on. “Two alphas came to my room. Two I’ve seen a lot but not gotten one-on-one time with until last night.”

“And?”

Her face lights up. “We had a lot of fun. I ended up making out with both of them, and they said they want to spend more time with me. They’re actually brothers.”

“Addilyn!” I squeal.

She laughs. “Don’t put too much pressure on it. I didn’t necessarily feel a spark with them yet, so I’m going to keep exploring my options.”

“That’s still fun,” I say.

She grins. “It is.”

We select our baskets and head out of the room, going back to the stairs. My thoughts swirl with every step. Some strange fantasy plays in my mind of Cayson and Ezra suddenly claiming me, for real, and my life completely changing. Being safe with them. Forming a life with them. Maybe even a family. But the fantasy fades when real life rears its ugly head, and I remember the way every girl fawns over them. Me falling for them is hardly a shock. Them falling for me would be.

We walk down the stairs in silence for a minute before she says, “And how did the meeting with the ultimas go?”

This, I can talk about. “They basically lectured me. They said they’ve noticed I’m not giving Kurt a fair chance and they expect me to. It was basically a threat to include Kurt more or face the consequences.”

“ Ugh ,” she says, wrinkling her nose.

I shake my head. “I just don’t understand. How did things end up like this?”

“Well, if you think about it logically,” Addilyn says, shifting her basket over to her hip. “It seems you’ve managed to accumulate two alphas and one asshole you can’t get rid of, despite being the only omega here who didn’t want any interest at all.”

“Yeah, that part was bad enough. Being called to meet with the ultimas was even worse,” I say, focusing on my feet to make sure I don’t trip and fall down the stairs. “Just being in the room with them was miserable. It was like my body hurt from the force of being near them.”

We make it to the end of the stairs and head to the door that leads outside to the lawn, where Addilyn said we’re supposed to meet. Again, I think about the next event. Again, I wonder how in the world I’ll keep the ultimas happy and stay away from Kurt.

“Being around alphas is bad enough,” Addilyn says with a laugh, looking over her shoulder at me as we step out into the bright sunshine. Across the way, several other omegas are joining the group on the lawn, all holding their baskets. “But, like I said, at least you have two that you like.”

“I wish I had none at all,” I mutter. None would be simpler. “I can’t be around Kurt. It’s too hard. I just feel like I’m going to be sick anytime I see him. I only see my brother and Serra. The worst part is just that he keeps getting away with it, and for what? I’m hoping just to avoid him for the rest of the time.”

“Faye,” Addilyn says gently, knocking her hip into mine. “You know that you have to spend time with him, though, right? I mean, not only did the ultimas literally personally tell you that you had to, but it’s also the only way that you’re going to

prove there's no connection between you and him. If you keep avoiding him, there's no way to prove that it doesn't exist. Just hold on. Play the long game. Keep being brave and show that asshole that he's not going to shake you."

I open my mouth to tell her that I'm not quite sure I'm capable of that, but we've already reached the others. Several of the omegas turn, squealing and folding us into their group. A few of them look over at me, giving me strange looks that I don't understand, but I try to ignore them. One of them starts talking a mile a minute at Addilyn, who jumps right in, talking just as quickly in return.

As the omegas talk and gossip, I try to pay attention. To distract myself from this next game and from dealing with Kurt.

It doesn't work. My anxiety slowly rises.

Eventually the alphas come pouring out of the castle, jostling each other and laughing. All the men are smiling. Everyone but Kurt, who lingers in the background, glaring at everyone. The crowd of men parts as Brock walks through them, his head held high. Silence spreads as he approaches, and all the omegas lower their heads, waiting.

"Good afternoon, everyone," Brock says, from the center of our two groups. "Today is another beautiful day here at The Selection." This ultima, unlike Lance, speaks formally, and to the point. But unlike Hector, he isn't a dick about it. "Some major changes will be occurring soon. The first of which is that the ferals will be joining The Selection activities."

Some people grumble. Others look excited. But mostly, people look worried. It all depends on their experience with ferals.

Not that I blame anyone for their mixed reactions.

Ferals are wolves that do not have a pack. Sometimes ferals become ferals by being thrown out of their pack for seriously poor behavior, while some ferals simply have the misfortune of being born to feral parents. Still, ferals are welcome at The Selection, where they are given an opportunity to be reconnected to a pack through an omega. If a feral chooses the same omegas as other alphas, they will be added to the alpha's pack as mate to the alpha's omega and alphas, recognized by the pack. It's a chance at a new and better life for them.

Most omegas tend to be scared of ferals. Since they live outside the laws of the packs, they are seen as wild and dangerous, unless of course one of their parents was a feral. Alphas tend not to want to be linked to them because they complicate their pack life.

I, for one, just want to avoid them. If I find alphas frightening, the last thing I want is to be near ferals. I can't imagine much worse than being tied to them, except for being tied to Kurt.

He's definitely worse.

"But we don't need to focus on their arrival right now, when there is the next event to enjoy! Today's activity is gathering together—berries, mushrooms—whatever wild produce you can find and collect. Work with your potential mates to find what you can in the forest. The winning team will be whoever has the most produce at the end of the time limit."

"Wow," Addilyn whispers, "there's never been a winner so far in these games. I wonder what the winner will get."

I grin. "No idea."

"Maybe another strip dance from your alphas?" she asks innocently.

I lightly smack her arm, and we laugh.

“Well, I’m going to go find my own harem, since you already have your own. Have fun with your boy-toys.”

She heads off to join up with the other unmated alphas and omegas, and I see Ezra and Cayson making their way over to me.

“Faye,” Cayson says, bouncing over to me like a puppy. I can’t stop picturing the way he looked naked, how his body fit with mine, arched over me. A flush climbs up my neck and out over my cheeks. “You smell like us.”

This only makes me blush harder with the realization that everyone around us must know what happened, and that’s why the omegas were giving me strange looks. It’s weird enough to have had my first time with two alpha men at The Selection, I really didn’t need everyone to know we’d done it.

Cayson pulls me into a hug, whispering in my ear, “Don’t worry, Jelly Bean, we’re just selling the story, remember?” But there’s something about the way he says it that makes me wonder if this is still a story we’re selling.

After my conversation with Addilyn, I’m not sure if that makes me feel better or worse. Of course his words were an act. Everything between us is an act. Except, maybe, the sex, but I don’t even know about that.

After Cayson pulls back, Ezra speaks up, drawing my attention to him. “You look nice,” Ezra says, leaning forward and plucking at the purple sundress I’m wearing. “This is your color.”

It’s so different, seeing him in the daylight, perfectly collected, versus how he came apart in bed. I have no idea how a man can be this tight-laced in life and a complete

wild man in bed. Is that normal? I have no idea.

How am I going to get through this day if I can't stop thinking about what happened?

"Thank you," I say, dropping my eyes to the floor, still unsure how to accept a compliment.

He just chuckles, tucking me into his side.

Then, everyone pauses in their conversation as a group of riders appears on the horizon, traveling fast . My heart jumps into my throat. Who the hell are they? And what could possibly cause them to ride like that?

"Who is that?" Cayson asks, shielding his eyes and looking out over the field.

"Ferals," comes a voice from behind us, and I bow my head when we turn and see Brock, also staring out at the riders getting closer and closer to us, their horses kicking up dust in their wake.

"Ferals," Ezra repeats, and we all watch them in stunned silence.

Of course. Somehow, I didn't picture them arriving on horses. I pictured them creeping out of the woods at night and slipping into our groups like a fox in a hen house.

When Brock had said the ferals would be here, I hardly thought he meant right now. I guess... things would be changing. The ferals will get to join all of us and look for their own omegas. They just didn't get to join until the alphas had had enough time with the omegas, a nod to the fact that they're beneath the alphas as feral-alphas.

For some reason, my heart is positively hammering in my chest, and Ezra reaches

over, running his thumb over the pulse point on my wrist. There're enough men around us already. We don't need more.

“Hey,” he murmurs, “it's going to be okay.”

Just as he says okay , the group of riders comes to an abrupt halt in front of us, and we wait, holding our collective breath, as the dust around them clears. Now, what?

11

Faye

The men atop the horses are rough around the edges, their hair not in the current styles, but instead grown out longer, loose around their shoulders. I've never seen a feral before in real life, only heard about them from my brother. For some reason, the sight of them makes me feel strange. I can't seem to stop my eyes from darting around, taking it all in at once—how they're shirtless, how their chests are covered in tattoos, how their hands are big and callused and clearly very capable.

“They make them come in riding like this,” Addilyn whispers in my ear. “Because it's traditional. Because this is how ferals used to look, even though only some groups live... so differently now.”

It's weird. I have trouble picturing these men dressed up in suits, their hair carefully cut, but I've also dealt with the council myself. They're traditional to a fault, so I believe Addilyn.

My eyes lock with one man in particular, and I feel that same clicking, focusing, the tug in my chest like inevitability when I look at him. He has long black hair and strong, unwavering blue eyes, bright and intelligent, which contrast with his overall rough appearance. Even from this brief glance, he seems like the epitome of don't judge a book by its cover. There's just something deeper there that begs to be uncovered.

When I realize we're staring at each other, I tell myself to turn away from him, but I



don't. His eyes flare possessively, and I finally manage to look away, not wanting to seem like I felt it too, whatever it might be. Only, I meet another feral's eyes, my gaze snapping onto his like a force of magic. That same tugging feeling radiates through my chest, and uncertainty fills me. I search for that wall around my heart and soul that usually keeps me from connecting with others too deeply, but find it decimated.

Damn Cayson and Ezra.

This feral has long, auburn hair, which is braided in some places and loose in others. His beard is the same color, but a shade darker, and his tattoos line up and down his chest, locking into each other. When he winks at me, I realize I've been staring for far too long.

Shit, shit, shit . I look to the ground, not wanting to risk another meaningful moment of eye contact with a single other male in the area. Is it because of last night? Because I had sex? Am I suddenly aroused by every man who gets near me? And why do I feel the same strange connection I feel with Ezra and Cayson with them, when they're complete strangers? Maybe it is normal after sex. After opening yourself back to the world.

Except, I didn't feel this way about the other alphas or ferals. It's unsettling.

I feel Ezra and Cayson looking at me curiously, and decide that it's just safest to keep my gaze trained on the ground. There's something different inside of me, something that was closed before. And it feels like the two of them have opened it. I just don't know if I'm happy about the way they've changed me.

"You."

My gaze jerks up. It was the man with the black hair who spoke, his deep voice

washing over everyone, and he's pointing right at me, his eyes intense, focused. All consuming.

I feel myself shrinking into myself. My heart is beating so loudly that it fills my ears. Why is he pointing at me? What does he want?

He speaks again, his voice loud, his tone aggressive. "You are my mate," he says.

I shrink back, away from him, and Ezra wraps an arm around me. My mind chants over and over that this can't be happening. I'm supposed to have no mates. I already have three. One who I don't want. Two who don't want me. What the hell am I supposed to do with another man?

"I claim her as well!" the man with the auburn hair says, dismounting from his horse.

When the man with black hair sees that, he dismounts too, and the two of them push through the crowd, making their way straight toward me. They radiate absolute confidence, like now that they've claimed me, it's done. I'm theirs.

Which isn't right... right?

"Slow down there, buddy," Cayson says, that joking but threatening tone sharp enough to slice through a man. He steps further in front of me, crossing his arms as the two ferals come to a stop. "That's my Jelly Bean you're talking about."

"Jelly Bean?" the man with the black hair asks, wrinkling his brow.

"My woman," Cayson clarifies.

"Our woman," Ezra says, coming to stand at Cayson's side. "And you may want to slow down before claiming anyone."

The two men exchange a look, but they don't look deterred as I stare at them between Cayson and Ezra's shoulders. If anything, they look like they're putting the pieces of a puzzle together.

"Well, she's soon to be our Jelly Bean," the feral with the auburn hair says, squaring his shoulders as he stares Cayson up and down, as if assessing just how hard they'd be to take down.

I start to feel hot, flustered, my brain turning to mush, the sound of running water too, too loud in my ears. They can't be claiming me. They can't be. All because of a look. A feeling. I don't believe it.

When he tries to step past Ezra, Ezra holds his hands up, and there's something strangely threatening about the gesture. Tension sings between the four men, and I wonder if this is about to turn into a fight.

"Give her some room," Ezra says, his voice low but strong. "Faye can get overwhelmed easily."

"We won't overwhelm her," the feral with the dark hair says, "She's ours to take care of."

There's a tick in Cayson's jaw. "Maybe just go take a walk inside. Get a snack. Take a break."

"We want her," the feral with the dark hair and incredible blue eyes says.

I put a hand on Ezra's back to try and steady myself, but my knees are feeling weak. Two more men are claiming me? No. No. This can't be happening. I have my cabin. I have my quiet woods. My plan was perfect. All I had to do was get out of here without a mate.

When both ferals move at the same time, trying to rush towards me, Ezra jolts forward to stop them, and I sway, feeling faint, only to be caught by a large hand, which sends a jolt through me. A jolt of power unlike anything I've ever felt before.

It's Brock. The ultima. Touching me. His power is too much to be near. His presence is the last thing I want right now.

I might just throw up.

"Don't stop us from reaching our mate," the auburn-haired feral says, his gaze blazing with anger.

"She's not yours," Ezra snaps back at him.

"Don't tell us who our mate is," the feral argues back, breathing hard, fists clenched.

Ezra, Cayson, and the two ferals are suddenly shouting at one another, shoving and cursing and generally getting ready to fight. Muscles are tense. The air sizzles with testosterone. And I'm just standing there, trying not to faint.

"Stop," Brock says, and they immediately halt what they're doing, turning to him and lowering their heads in deference. "There is a process to this," he says, finally releasing me when he realizes I can stand on my own. "Feral or not, you are to follow our directives. Is that clear?"

"Crystal," the auburn-haired one says, while the one with black hair just grunts his agreement.

Brock draws himself up taller. "The rules of The Selection are clear. Alphas and ferals are encouraged to take their time claiming their omegas, because declaring an omega is as good as making her your mate. That is why we give a long Selection

period, so alphas, ferals, and omegas can get to know each other. So males can be absolutely sure before claiming an omega. But after a claiming, the only way a bond will not work is if all the males claiming the omega cannot bond themselves, which is why even after you claim a mate, you will remain here until the end of The Selection. So, are you certain you want to claim this omega within moments of meeting her? Are you that certain that she's your fated mate?"

"Yes," the dark-haired feral says without hesitation.

The one with auburn hair looks at me and smiles. "Absolutely."

Brock sighs, then continues, "Then we should go on to the next important part about males interacting with females here. Omegas are the most delicate of us. Easily frightened. Weak constitutions. We are to cherish and protect them, as they are the backbone of the family—our means to continue our bloodlines successfully. If you don't honor them, you'll be removed from this Selection. Understood?"

All of them, including Cayson and Ezra, mumble their agreement, and I can't help but wonder where this attitude was from the ultimas when I had bruises from Kurt's hands around my neck. If only he had come after me in broad daylight, like the ferals, but Kurt is far too clever to do something like that.

The four men's gazes are swinging from Brock to me, like no matter what Brock is saying their goal is to still get to me, or to keep the two men from me. Brock might be able to command them into obeying him, but it's clear the problem isn't really solved.

Brock continues, "This omega may be your mate, but she is to be handled like a person, and not as an object. Do you understand?"

There's something in the air. A warning or a threat, I'm not sure.

“ Oye ,” the auburn-haired one says. “We’re feral, not deaf, man.”

The entire field goes silent as everyone waits to see what Brock might do to someone who dares to speak to him that way—and especially a feral. After a tense moment, Brock just lets out a low chuckle, which makes a few others let out stress laughs.

“Now, all of you, including the omega, come with me.”

12

X ander

The woman standing in front of me, with the long blonde hair, as different from my black locks as can possibly be, and piercing, discerning eyes—she is my mate. My body knew it the moment I laid eyes on her, and I feel that we are the same. We have both gone through bad things. Together we can share the burden of terrible memories, but also create a happier life together. Create a family.

From this moment on, she is my everything. She is my mate, my only reason for continuing to breathe, and I will make it clear to these alphas that there is nothing they can do to keep us apart.

But even though I know this, and it should be obvious to everyone around us after our claim, the ultimas and these alphas are standing between me and my mate. Every time her gaze darts to mine, I feel the instinct to take her and run. But there's something in the way she looks at me that makes me hesitate to do such a thing, and I realize that it might be fear.

Does my mate fear me?

I glance down at myself. It is true that I might be frightening to a tiny wolf like her. My rough appearance. My rough ways. I have never learned to be gentle, but I will learn to be gentle for her.

Once these men get out of my way.

“Kurt should be here,” an ultima, Hector, if I remember correctly, says, his eyes moving from my mate to the two men sitting next to her, their body language extremely protective as they stand between me, the other unknown feral, and her.

Anger courses through me. I want to rip them apart with my bare hands for keeping me from her. These two men already smell like they’ve been with my mate. It’s bad enough that I had to wait to join The Selection until pack alphas “get enough time with the omegas.” It’s a fucking insult. It’s like they also want the alphas to have the upper hand with the omegas, even though we will be their equal partners.

I’m lucky to have found my omega, but her eyes are downcast, her breath coming quickly. She seems paler than when I first saw her, and there’s a slight tremble to her body that makes my heart ache.

Damn it.

The alphas may be right. It hurts to accept that, but she is clearly afraid of me, or perhaps of all the ferals in general. Whatever her reason for being afraid of me, I will have to work hard to fix things between us. She will be my mate. Mother to my offspring. None of this can work if I scare her.

“Kurt chose not to come out with the alphas today,” another ultima says, and though I’m not that familiar with them, I think this one is Brock. “We can’t fault the omega for his choices, and we won’t wait for him to solve this issue.”

Hector, the ultima with the gray hair, looks pissed. “Of course the ferals were attracted to her. Chaos follows you,” he mutters, and to my surprise, one of the alphas next to my mate looks up sharply.

“What is that supposed to mean?” the blond-haired one asks.



“I’m sure he meant nothing by it,” Brock says, waving a hand to diffuse the tension.

“So, what are we going to do about this... situation?” Lance’s gaze moves between all of us.

“What does he mean? We are here for our mate. We found our mate. It’s not complicated,” the other feral says beside me, glancing again at our beautiful mate.

“You say she’s your mate,” the big blond alpha says, his mouth curling into an angry smile.

I want to punch that smile right off his face.

“Regardless of how... badly the ferals handled their introduction to the omega,” Brock says, his tone measured, “they get to explore their mating bond, if they think one is present. Those are the rules.”

I watch my mate shift uncomfortably, and I curse myself. I may have come on too strong, but I can show her that I’m not what this society thinks of me. I struggle with words, but I can show her through my actions that she couldn’t ask for a more loyal mate.

The other alpha mutters something about the ultimas and their rules, but the ultimas must pretend not to hear it. If I heard it, surely they did as well. Regardless, two angry alphas will not stand in the way of my connection with my tiny mate.

“Faye may need some time to get used to these... ferals,” the dark-haired alpha says, disapproval in his voice.

Faye. Her name dances through me, and I hold it close to me like something precious. This is the name of my mate. This is the name of the woman who will bear my

children.

“You will not stop a mating bond from forming,” Hector says, pointing from one of the alphas to the other, his voice dripping with condescension. “With these ferals or with Kurt of Pack Obsidian. If a male feels a connection with an omega, he gets to explore it. You are not above the rules. No one is above the rules.”

He cuts his eyes to us, like we’re supposed to care about any of this process. Tell the bastards the woman is ours. No more needs to be said.

“Kurt will not be bullied out of this mate bond,” Hector says, sneering, making me curious.

If my mate was uncomfortable being around us, she grows even more so at the mention of this other man and his supposed bond to her, shifting and casting her eyes to the ground. It fills me with a rage I’ve never felt before. I feel a need to protect her from this man she fears.

“Faye,” Brock says, his eyes sliding to my mate, and it feels good to hear her name again— Faye . I roll it around in my head while the ultima speaks. “You know you’re supposed to give all potential mates a chance to explore their connections to you. Do you feel a connection to the ferals here who have claimed you?”

I bristle, sure that Faye was not questioned when these other alphas claimed her. I imagine it—to be trusted, for it to be assumed that you are telling the truth. The life of an alpha is a privileged life, and the life of a feral an acceptance that you’re lower than dirt.

“I—” she says, glancing between all of us.

Her gaze bounces between the two alphas at her side, then to the ultimas, then to me

and the feral next to me. Her hesitation makes my chest twist. I know she felt our connection when we first rode onto the field. It was like a physical force, drawing us to one another, a line from my soul to hers. How can she stand there and pretend she didn't feel it? Especially when it's clear that she's already taken on two alphas?

Say it. Tell them. Tell them we're your mates.

"...I don't know," she finally says, her cheeks flushing an even darker red as she looks to the ground.

I feel the feral next to me tense with agitation. He's clearly upset at her reaction as well, but he doesn't convey any of that emotion when he speaks.

"My apologies to you, Faye ," he says, her name on his tongue like honey, "and to the ultimas. I agree that my approach— our approach—wasn't as gentle as it should have been. It's no wonder she's questioning the bond that exists between us, but I assure you it is there, and I, for one, would be honored to have a chance to explore it."

The feral next to me turns, looking me up and down, before turning back to the ultimas.

"I am called Maverick, and my friend, here..."

"Xander," I grunt out, hearing how it sounds, the word gruff and uneven. My eyes skip back to her's—to my mate's—and I hope she doesn't judge me too harshly for it.

"...Xander, right. We are both just here to find our mates, like everyone else, and would gratefully accept the chance to do so."

When I glance at the ultimas again, they're regarding us differently. I don't know why this stranger pulled me into his speech, but I'm glad he did. I would not have

been able to say it the way he did.

“Fine,” Brock finally says, “but remind yourselves that omegas are our most cherished asset, and they are delicate . If you act in a way that she doesn’t like—if you’re not gentle or you cause her any harm—it will not be tolerated. Is that clear?”

Not tolerated for ferals, they mean.

“As a mountain spring,” Maverick agrees, and when the ultima looks to me, I nod. I don’t care about these people or their ridiculous rules—I just want to get close to my woman, show myself to her in a way I feel she can understand.

Even from this distance, I’m painfully aware of her, the scent of her skin, the scent of the two alphas on her, the rustle of fabric against her when she moves, each time she twists a tendril of hair between her fingers. Unlike the others, I sense that she and I are kindred spirits. There’s a great loneliness in her that’s only starting to abate. I’m ravenous for that kind of relief from my own isolation, and I’m certain she’s the answer to finding it.

I just hope she, and these alphas, let me explore our connection. Because one way or another, I’m not leaving The Selection without her.

I just hope that when she learns my secret, it won’t ruin everything.

13

Faye

The forest is positively gorgeous, the golden late morning light slanting through the trees, small animals running underfoot, and the soft chirping of birds from above floating through the air all creating an ethereal, timeless quality to the place. But I'm not calm or enjoying this walk, because two more men have claimed me as their omega, leaving me unnerved. How do I even go about explaining to these ferals that I'm not in the market for mates? I truly don't know where to begin. Not only are my treacherous feelings bothering me, it's the men walking with me that shatter the calm morning, their disdain for one another coming through clearly, now that the ultimas aren't here to pacify them.

Cayson moves closer to me and flicks his gaze toward the ferals. "Riding up like a bunch of war heroes," he says with a laugh, shaking his head. "Ridiculous."

One of Maverick's bright green eyes twitches. "We didn't choose when we were permitted to join The Selection," he says. "Unlike you, they didn't care to schedule us to come here. We were given next to no time for preparation. They told us to come, and we took off. Just the way it is every year, for ferals."

"Well, whose fault is that?" Ezra mutters, which earns him a sharp look from Xander, the other feral.

I can't keep my eyes from trailing to the two of them, Xander and Maverick, so wild-looking. Their long hair and rough skin is a contrast to Cayson and Ezra's refined

features and sharp attention to their appearances. Looking at the two new men, I truly understand why they're called "ferals."

"What is that supposed to mean?" Maverick asks, his tone light, but a warning underneath it.

"I'm just saying," Ezra says, turning to the side as he steps over a fallen log, "either you were never in a pack to begin with, or you were thrown out..."

"I was never in a pack," Maverick says with a wry, easy grin he aims at Ezra, "so I had the unique experience of growing up with humans."

"You don't look like you grew up with humans," Cayson remarks, and it sounds like an insult.

Maverick stares down at his clothes. Or at his lack of a shirt. "These are basically our uniforms for The Selection. The council has us dress this way, because of tradition, but only half of us grew up on the outskirts of the cities and had to fight to survive. The rest of us grew up amongst humans."

"Interesting," Ezra says, but the word is tight.

The feral smiles. "Growing up amongst humans has its benefits. You ever played football against a human? Like playing with babies. I was the captain of the football team, even had a Division I scholarship."

He glances over at me, and even though I have no idea what that means, it does spark a feeling of pride. Whatever he did, it must be good. And as our eyes lock, it's impossible to look away. He's incredibly handsome, his green eyes sharp and piercing. His pale auburn hair is long, but clean and untangled. Some part of me can't imagine something as wild as him growing up with humans. I feel like he'd stand out

like a sore thumb. Or is there some other side of him?

“Surviving in a human world sounds easy,” Cayson mutters. “You like taking the easy route?”

“Not sure anyone would call being born to ferals easy,” Maverick says, his voice never losing that easy, charismatic edge, but there’s something underneath now, a sort of bitterness emanating from him that I didn’t sense before. “But there were definitely perks to it.”

It’s weird. I kind of want to ask more. Know more. But when I see Xander watching me, his expression so openly fascinated by me, I speak without thinking. “What about you?” I say, turning to face Xander, who looks startled.

He seems surprised that I’ve addressed him directly, and his eyes meet mine for only a second before darting back to the others. He clears his throat, runs a hand through his hair, then kicks at a rock, sending it out into the forest. We all watch it hit a tree with a resounding thunk .

“I was thrown out,” he grunts, finally, his eyes meeting mine.

I feel something tug in my chest, something telling me that he and I have something in common. There’s a depth of sadness in his eyes that I recognize. I see it in Ezra, and I see it in myself every time I look in the mirror.

It’s the kind of look you can only get when you’ve lost something. When you’re grieving. Is that why I feel so drawn to him?

“Why were you thrown out?” I ask, swinging my basket at my side nervously.

The other men have all turned their eyes to Xander as well, clearly interested in what

he has to say. A part of me feels bad. Maybe this isn't something he wants to talk about. But, as much as my heart plans to find a way out of our connection, I also have an unexplainable need to get to know these two men. If only to be sure that this mating bond they claim to have with me is wrong.

Xander looks at me, opening his mouth like he might answer, but then his eyes move to the rest of the men and he presses his lips together, shaking his head. It isn't stubbornness that fills his expression, it's reluctance. Maybe even fear. Even though I get the sense he'd tell me the truth if we were alone.

"There are only a few reasons a wolf might be ex-communicated," Ezra says, his tone sharp. I see the careful calculation in his eyes, measuring the distance between Xander and I, like he might need to intercept Xander if he moves in my direction. "And none of them are good."

We fall silent after that, and I notice the way Xander draws into himself, moving through the forest more quietly than the rest of us, taking care where he places his feet. My heart aches for him. Whatever got him thrown out of his pack, it's troubling him.

Ezra might be worried that Xander is dangerous, but that's not the feeling I get. When I look at Xander, I see pieces of myself. I see someone broken and trying to pull himself back together.

But maybe my instincts are wrong. I don't know.

"Oh!" I say, jumping back, and all the men immediately go on high alert, Cayson's hand coming to my shoulder as he assesses the scene. I look at him and smile, "Look! Mulberries!"

Hurrying forward excitedly, I reach up and pluck one off of a tree.



“These ones are perfectly ripe,” I say, popping one in my mouth and chewing. The warm, sweet berry bursts juicily and I bring a hand to my mouth, closing my eyes.

“Wow,” I say, moaning a bit. “That’s amazing.”

The images come back to me all at once: my brother and I gathering these berries, making pies and squeezing them between our hands to make our skin turn purple. This berry tastes like summer, like a silky cool breeze moving through your hair, lifting it from the nape of your neck, the soft rustling of the leaves all around you. It’s childhood, laughter, and the innocence of youth.

I let out a sigh at the feeling, and when I open my eyes, it’s to four pairs of eyes looking right back at me. Intently. Far too intently. And I have no idea why.

Glancing down, I realize some of the berry juice has dripped onto my cleavage, and I swipe at it clumsily, only managing to smear it around further.

“Oops,” I say, embarrassed, and when I look up, they’re still watching me.

I look at each of the guys, my heart racing as I realize their eyes have locked on my cleavage. There’s a tension in the air, just like the tension that was there last night when I slept with Ezra and Cayson. Sexual tension. Uh oh. Ezra and Cayson, at least, understand this arrangement. But what am I going to do if Xander and Maverick truly think there’s some sort of bond between us?

I drop my hand back down to my side, giving up on the berry juice and clearing my throat.

“I, uh,” I say, and Ezra meets my eyes, raising his brow in question. “I should tell you two,” I direct my attention to Xander and Maverick, who are still looking at me with dark eyes, like they could eat me alive, right here, “I’m not actually in the market for

a mate.”

“What does that mean?” Maverick asks, his gaze darting between me, Cayson, and Ezra. “You’re not in the market for a mate, or you have reservations because we’re feral?”

“No—” I say, laughing and holding my hands up before he can get the wrong idea. “It’s not that. I mean, my experiences with men in general hasn’t been great, so I have nothing against ferals, but, if I’m honest, I just—I came to The Selection because I had to, not because I wanted to.”

There. Was that enough? Do they understand why we could never work?

“You are my mate,” Xander says, his voice low and rough, his eyes boring into mine.

“The mating bond can’t be denied,” Maverick says, putting his hand on Xander’s arm and shaking his head. “That’s the rule.”

My heart drops. The both of them... they seem so certain. If I can’t get them to see my point-of-view, there’s going to be a problem, and I already have enough problems.

“I thought you ferals don’t care about rules,” Ezra challenges, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

“We care,” Xander says simply, his expression fierce.

I swallow hard, feeling that odd pull to the two ferals. The one that makes me feel vulnerable and uncertain.

“Sure,” I say, “I understand that you want to follow the rules when it comes to

choosing a mate, but the truth is that I'm not even sure that there is a mating bond between us," I say, gesturing between myself and the ferals.

My heart is beating double-time, my body denying that, trying to tell me that I can feel the pull, clear as day. Except, there may be a pull. It doesn't have to be a mating pull. It doesn't have to be something that completely changes my life forever.

"I'm sure enough for all of us," Maverick says, crossing his arms over his chest in a way that mirrors Ezra, the tattoos on his arms and chest moving as he does so, in a way that's hard to look away from.

"How can you be, if you've never felt the mating bond before?" I ask, nervously shifting from one foot to another.

"A man just knows," Maverick says, winking at me.

"I know," Xander asserts, looking ready to fight.

I glance around, searching for help, and discover Cayson is gone.

Frowning, I say, "Where did Cayson go?"

Everyone starts looking around.

"Cayson!" I shout, feeling a flash of worry.

"Here, Faye," Cayson says, startling us all by coming out of the woods. He has his hands cupped, full of berries, the juice smeared on his skin. He smirks at the others victoriously as he dumps them into my basket. I blink. I'd forgotten that's what we were supposed to be doing here in the first place. "I got these for you." Then, he presses a kiss to my cheek.

“If she wants berries, she’ll get lots of berries,” Xander says.

“I’ll get the most,” Maverick challenges.

Ezra glares at both of them.

Immediately, they turn, tromping off into the brush while I’m left, mouth gaping, as I stare after them.

14

Faye

“Here,” Ezra says, holding a berry up to me. I open my mouth for him to pop it inside. “Try this one. It’s from the top of the tree—it tastes the best.”

“Mine are bigger,” Maverick growls, popping two more berries in my mouth after Ezra’s. My mouth explodes with the warm sweetness of the berries, but I’m starting to feel sick from eating so many.

“She’s not going to taste the difference now!” Ezra says, scowling and rolling his eyes. I swallow them down, wishing I had some water. “Now I have to go back to the top of the tree.”

While Maverick and Ezra are on the hunt for the best berries, Xander and Cayson are simply trying to see who can gather more, coming back with armfuls of berries, most of which are smashed, and dumping them into my basket. It’s cute, the way they seem to be trying to impress me, but it’s overwhelming at the same time.

“Guys,” I say weakly, when I see the berries starting to overflow. “Guys, there’s enough?—”

“Ha,” Ezra says, returning a moment later, a huge branch in his hand like it’s nothing. “I brought this down from the top, where the berries are sweeter. Now, Faye, try one on its own ? — ”

“Look at this one!” Maverick says, producing a berry that really is the biggest I’ve ever seen.

“Wow,” I say, without meaning to, and Ezra frowns like I’d personally insulted the size of his berries.

I think of Addilyn and her plans to find a whole group of alphas—how is she planning to juggle that many at once? I just have four of them here, now, and it's overwhelming. Surely, I’m not a woman equipped to handle multiple men. I don’t think I could even handle one .

Ezra and Cayson have agreed to back off after we take care of Kurt, but Maverick and Xander are under the impression that there’s some sort of mating bond between us. How am I going to convince them otherwise? Especially when they’re being so sweet, and working so hard to impress me.

“Guys!” Cayson says, his voice full of excitement and joy. We all turn to him, seeing him vaguely through the trees. “Oh my god, it’s so cute! Come here!”

“Cayson,” Ezra says, his voice already wary. “What are you doing?”

We push through the trees, and stop short when we see the cutest little bear cub standing in the middle of the clearing. It’s just a few feet tall, with soft fur and big eyes.

Except, you know, it’s also a wild animal.

“Bear,” Xander whispers, his voice breathy, his eyes going wide.

He and Maverick exchange a look, but I can’t lie—the cub is really adorable. I just want to hold her like a teddy bear. But I also remember my brother saying that if you

ever see a cub wandering around in the forest, it's a good idea to get out of there. You don't want to risk a mother bear perceiving you as a threat.

"She looks so soft," Cayson says, inching toward her. She looks up at him, eyes wide, the picture of innocence.

"Cayson, don—" Ezra starts, but cuts off when Cayson's hand connects with the top of the cub's head.

We all stand there for a moment, holding our breath. Will the cub react? Cry out for its mother? Instead, it nuzzles into Cayson's hand, and it's the sweetest thing I've ever seen.

"She is soft," Cayson says, grinning up at us. "See? Nothing's going to?"

He stops when a roar rings out through the forest. My heart jumps into my throat when I whirl around, only to see the open jaws of a furious mama bear running in my direction.

I scream when Ezra's hand wraps around my bicep, hauling me back behind him. Maverick and Xander move in front of me protectively, jostling me. I trip over my feet and land on the basket of berries as the four guys shift, their wolves a blur around me.

We're going to die. They're going to find us, ripped to shreds in the forest. I'd thought my biggest concern was making it out of The Selection without a mate, but maybe I should have been focusing more on the making it out part.

Except while I'm freaking out, completely useless, the guys have launched into action, coordinating like they've been working together their whole lives. A unit designed specifically to protect me.

Cayson, as a golden wolf, herds the baby bear toward the mom, while Xander, a large black wolf, takes a flying leap toward the bear's side, retreating when she swings out at him. Ezra, his muzzle white and the rest of his body a grey so dark he's almost black, gets under the bear's feet and Maverick, a wolf the same auburn color as his hair, confuses her, running side to side. The bear topples over backward. When she gets to her feet, angrier than before, Cayson has deposited the baby bear back at her side.

She swings at them a few more times, but looks confused, glancing back at her cub. It seems like, knowing the baby is safe, she's not that interested in fighting with this pack of wolves. They growl at her, warning her away from me, pushing her out of the clearing and further into the trees.

I watch them go, heart in my throat, and slowly climb to my feet. Brushing sticky berries off of my dress and body, I keep my eyes glued on where they disappeared, hoping to see my wolves coming back at any moment, and not the bear.

There's movement. I hold my breath.

Cayson comes exploding back toward me in human form, the guys tailing closely behind. All of them look proud. Almost happy. Which is crazy. They just faced an angry bear. But there's no denying it.

"Faye!" Cayson says, barreling toward me. "Did you see that?"

"You idiot," Ezra says, punching Cayson in the shoulder. Maverick comes to me, scanning me over as if looking for any injuries. Xander picks up the crushed basket of berries, awkwardly trying to scoop some of the smashed, purple mess back inside. "You could have gotten her killed."

"No way!" Cayson says, slinging his arms around Ezra and Xander. I stifle a giggle at



the look each of them give him—Ezra, mild annoyance, and Xander, baffled annoyance. “Not with us around! We’re the dream team! We could take that bear with our eyes closed.”

“We didn’t actually take the bear,” Ezra says, but he’s trying not to grin. “We just scared her away.”

“Scared a bear,” Maverick says, glancing at me and giving me a devilish grin, which makes my skin erupt with goosebumps. Absently, I laugh, rubbing my biceps to try and warm them. “That’s a new one.”

“Anything like high school football?”

Maverick’s grin widens, and my heart races in the face of such a beautiful man. “Yeah, except then, I was the bear.”

“The way you hit her in the side?” Cayson says, mock boxing Xander’s side. “Like bam and she tried to get you,” he swings out, and Xander pushes him away, also stifling a smile. “You just danced away!”

I shake my head. I have no idea how long we’re supposed to stay out here, but I feel like we’ve had enough of an adventure. We don’t need to have another run-in with the bear.

“Well, it was good thinking to get that cub closer,” Maverick admits, moving closer to me as we walk.

I can feel his warmth, even from here, and it feels nice, like something I want to wrap myself in. Which is a strange notion. I barely know Maverick and Xander. Every instinct inside of me should be screaming to stay as far away from them as possible, so they don’t get the wrong impression. And yet, I can’t ignore the way they make me

feel.

“I know, the idea just came to me,” Cayson says with a laugh. “Wait until we tell everyone we fought a bear .”

“They’re probably going to ask what the hell we did to get into that situation in the first place,” Ezra mutters, “and we’re going to have to tell them that you’re an idiot.”

“Hey,” Cayson says, putting his hands up and smirking at everyone. “It was worth it.”

Ezra rolls his eyes.

“Maybe,” Xander grunts, and I laugh.

When his eyes meet mine, I fight with the feeling in my chest. Being with all these guys, laughing and joking, reminds me of what things were like before my brother died. It reminds me of what it’s like to feel carefree, and protected, and even if just for a moment, safe.

Man, I’m in trouble...

15

Faye

I'm looking in the mirror, trying to get my eyeliner the way Addilyn showed me, when there's a knock at the door. My heart immediately jumps into my throat, and I jump so hard that the eyeliner tracks across my face, swiping up onto my forehead.

"Gods," I mutter, heart racing as I grab a wet cloth and move to the door. It could be anyone on the other side—it could be Kurt, here to hurt me when none of the other men are around. Except, the guard is still there. Standing silently. Probably wondering why the hell Ezra and Cayson ordered him to watch over me.

Or he's not there. Kurt distracted him, or killed him. Now, Kurt's just waiting on the other side of the door to hurt me.

I swallow hard. "Hello?" I ask, hating how shaky my voice sounds.

"Faye," a voice says, and I'm surprised at the little jolt of self-consciousness I feel when I realize it's Xander standing on the other side of the door.

I think of earlier, when he rode up with the other ferals. As startling as it had been, he wasn't necessarily scary. His long black hair, his brilliant blue eyes, the muscles that cover his broad chest... Xander wasn't scary, he was attractive. I was attracted to him. I wasn't even sure, until Cayson and Ezra, that I could find men attractive. That that part of me existed.

My mind goes to later. To how he and the others worked together to send the bear in the other direction. It wasn't just impressive that he could work so well with the only two men I trusted in the world. There was some part of me that just knew the four men would protect me. I didn't know him or Maverick, and I certainly had some serious trust issues, so feeling this way was scary.

I close my eyes, wondering why he might be at my door. Xander is nothing like Cayson and Ezra—who are always polished. Even Cayson, despite his bad boy charm, has perfectly styled hair every time I see him. Xander is still dusted with the dirt from riding, and his long hair is wild in a way that only comes from exposure to the elements. Yet, some deep part of me wants to run my hand down his chest and let my fantasies open to a world where Xander really is my mate.

“It's Xander,” he says, his voice soft, uncertain.

Something in my stomach tightens, and I clear my throat as I scrub at my face, trying to clear the eyeliner away. “Oh,” I say, checking my reflection in the mirror to see that I've fixed my eyeliner. “It's you.”

I open the door slowly, then stand back, staring. I'm surprised that he's just as good looking as I remember.

The guard is right behind him, frowning. “Miss Faye?”

I swallow hard. “He's alright. Thank you.”

The guard gives a sharp nod, making the sharp lines on his face stand out even more, then backs up and returns to his place on the wall.

My gaze returns to Xander, unsure of what to expect. Wondering why he's visiting me at my room. When he leans against the doorway, my mouth goes dry. He's

standing there, an expectant, excited look on his face, a full basket of berries in his hands. He holds it out to me, and I look between the berries and his face, which is so full of hope I can't entertain the idea of rejecting this gift, even if I have no idea what to do with a basket full of wild berries.

"Thank you," I say.

"For the others," he mumbles, clearing his throat, then lifting his chin to meet my eye. "For the ruined basket. To replace it."

And I get the feeling that this man doesn't say much. That his words are as precious as the gift he brought. Something straight from his soul.

I bring my free hand to my heart to try and soothe the feeling there. The warmth that's spreading in my chest. This man is... sweet. The scare from the bear was so bad that I forgot all about the basket I'd squished beneath me, but he hadn't. I lift my hands, noting how they're still stained purple, and when I glance at Xander's hands, I realize they're bloody and dirty.

"Oh," I say, reaching out and taking his forearm. Touching him is like holding my hand to a flame—I feel the energy and heat immediately, and it makes me want to yank my hand back, but I don't. "Come in, let me clean you up."

He seems confused. "It's okay. My family lives on a farm on the outskirts of a city, with other ferals. I'm used to hard work. And pain."

I shake my head. "Still. You're hurt."

He nods, his expression uncertain.

Xander looks like an alien on a new planet when he wanders into my room, glancing

around nervously like he's not sure if he should be in here with me. Something in the back of my mind reminds me that this is dangerous—he's a feral staking a claim on me, and I still haven't thought of a way to explain what's going on between Ezra, Cayson, and me. Heck, I haven't even told him about Kurt.

How do you tell someone who thinks they're your mate that you're not looking for one at all?

I gesture for him to sit at the chair by the window and turn to the sink, rinsing a cloth until it's warm and wet. Turning back to him, I settle in the chair across from his and work on his hands, dabbing and wiping to clear away the dirt and blood, frowning at the damage.

"Did you cut your hands on the berry bushes?"

"Yes," he says, and it comes out as more of a grunt.

Then, why didn't he stop? Why was it so important for him to get these berries for me?

"You probably could have borrowed some gloves," I say, laughing lightly as I look back to him, but his eyes are focused on our hands and every point where they make contact.

For some reason, I feel a blush rise to my cheeks, and I try to ignore his hands, how I can feel his rough skin under the pads of my thumbs. How we both have worn hands, a similarity between us that's hard to explain.

"I don't like gloves," he says, finally looking up at me, and those blue eyes hold me enthralled. "Ruins the feeling."

Goosebumps break out over my skin, and I hurriedly return my attention to cleaning his hands. Because if I look him in the eyes, I'm not sure what I'm going to do, but I know it won't be anything good. This man knows how to weave a spell over me, and I'll be damned if I let it pull me under.

Once I'm finished cleaning them with the cloth, I move across the room, depositing the cloth in my hamper and taking the first aid kit from under the bathroom sink. I work on the deepest of the cuts, applying ointment and bandages. It's partly for show—surely, as a feral, Xander's cuts will heal by the time the sun sets. But it only feels right to patch him up when he went through all of this just to get me some berries.

Glancing at the basket, I wonder if I could bother the cooks to make some jam, or maybe a pie. That would be a nice way to return the favor. Yes, I think I'll make them into something for him. A gift, even though I'll have to make it clear that it's not intended as a romantic gift.

"Faye," Xander says, and it startles me again, making me jump as our gazes catch. Suddenly, the room feels too small, too warm, like I'm pressed right up against him. "Do you feel nothing?" And his meaning couldn't be clearer.

He moves our hands gently, which just makes me more aware of the faint, pulsing connection between us. Like our hearts are syncing to the same beat. It's like he's trying to show me something, that connection, and he's succeeding. But that probably isn't the mating bond—it's probably just a tender feeling between two people sharing a space, caring for one another. Or maybe I'm just more aware of him because I understand more about men, women, and sexual energy.

"I want to be honest with you, Xander," I say, taking a deep breath. "I've been through a lot of...stuff. And I think that's affected me and my ability to form connections with others. I'm not even sure... what I feel with Cayson and Ezra."

“What stuff?” he asks quietly.

It used to be that talking about what happened to me was the hardest thing in the world, but after telling Ezra, it feels like it comes easier. Like in baring myself to Cayson and Ezra, I’ve opened up places inside of me that I thought would stay locked away forever. To my surprise, even though I’ve only known him for a few hours, it starts to come out.

“A few years ago,” I say, wringing my hands together, “my brother was... murdered. It was not a good time, and nobody was willing to help me. Everywhere and everyone I turned to just pretended like it didn’t happen, like my brother didn’t matter, and I was alone. The rest of my family had already passed. He was all I had left.”

“I can understand,” he says, his eyes on the ground. “I lost my best friend.”

“Oh,” I say, reaching for his hand again, holding it carefully. “I’m so sorry.”

“I am too.”

My chest fills with the kind of sorrow and grief you can only know when you’ve lost someone close to you. But more than that, I feel that connection between us growing. Is this what it is to feel like someone understands you? I’ve never really felt this until recently.

Before I know what’s happening, I’m leaning closer to him, my eyes flicking back and forth between his eyes and his hands. I don’t know what I’m doing. I don’t know why I’m doing it, but it just feels right.

This close, I can feel him breathing, can smell his underlying woody smell. He leans forward, his expression astonished. Hopeful. Then, our lips are pressed together, and I’m surprised and uncertain all at once.



As I relax, I become more aware of him. His lips are warm and hard, molding to my own like he'd been built just for me. When I soften against him, breathing hard, he presses forward, his hands fluttering around my jaw so tenderly it makes my heart skip a beat. How can such a big man be so gentle?

He kisses me hard, just a little rougher, and I'm practically falling forward, trying to get closer to him. I want to wrap myself in his scent, in the strength of his body. He makes me feel alive in a way that only Cayson and Ezra have ever made me feel.

My thoughts start to spin. I'm kissing Xander. I'm kissing a feral. And we're alone in my room.

The instant the thoughts enter my mind, I stiffen. What am I doing? I don't want a mate. I'm trying to get these men to believe me that there is no connection. And more than that, I've put myself, foolishly, into a dangerous position.

Pulling back, I stand up so abruptly it sends my chair toppling to the ground. Xander looks startled, but I can't think about what he looks like, or I'll start kissing him again. Maybe I'll just fall into his arms and get him to look at me with that surprised, happy look again.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I'm not looking for a mate."

"But we—"

I shake my head. "It was a mistake."

The crushed look on his face makes my heart ache.

"It's not you, it's me. Okay? You did nothing wrong."

As he stands, I usher him to the door, closing my eyes as he passes me. I don't want to keep seeing that broken look on his face. I don't know what I'll do if I see it again.

I feel weak, but he just nods, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he steps through the threshold.

When the door closes, I take a deep breath, feeling terrible for reasons I don't understand. I don't know Xander. He's a stranger to me. I should just be thankful that, after being so reckless, this situation didn't end badly. Not that I thought, deep down, that Xander could hurt me.

When my gaze settles on the basket of berries, something warm settles in my chest. Xander may not be my mate, not really, but he sure is sweet.

16

Maverick

It's a beautiful day on the water. The sun is shining, the water is lapping gently at the sides of our boat, and I'm in the best mood of my life. Somehow, I've managed to get lucky enough to be the one to take Faye out on the boat. It was only big enough for two people, so the other men and I had to draw straws. And luckily, my straw was the longest.

Kurt, a clear asshole if I've ever seen one, got the tiniest straw and threw a tantrum the likes of which a toddler would have been impressed by. Cayson laughed so hard I sincerely thought the alpha was going to shit his pants, which of course sent me rolling around in laughter.

It's a good day.

Faye looks ethereally beautiful right now, the sun slanting off her honey-colored hair, her face turned away so I can see the curve of her jaw. She's wearing a little white skirt and a striped collared shirt, her hair braided over her shoulder. Never in my wildest dreams had I imagined an omega as beautiful as her. Never have I thought such a tiny person could have such a powerful effect on my heart.

"Are you comfortable being on the water?" I ask, watching my oar as it dips into the water again.

I'm trying to look at her less, in the hopes that it might help her relax, but it's hard to

do when my gaze is drawn to her like a magnet. I've never felt anything like this before, and I've had my share of women, human women, but still women. I know it's the mating bond, I just need her to accept that too.

"Yes," she says, nodding a bit and clearing her throat, her gaze drifting back to the shore.

I wait for her to continue, to follow that train of thought, but that single word is all I get. I think of that moment riding up on the group, seeing how she was laughing and talking with the others. And now it's like pulling teeth to get her to say a single word to me. It... hurts. I thought that with my mate everything would go smoothly, that she'd fall as fast for me as I've fallen for her, but those dreams have been dashed.

Not that I'm giving up.

"That's good," I say, "me, too. One of my dads used to take me fishing all the time when I was a kid, and he loved going out on the boat. Said fishing from the shore was for chumps."

That seems to draw her attention. Those big hazel eyes of hers land on me with interest, and a little smile curls her lips. Her full, incredible lips. Lips I long to kiss.

"I've never really fished from a boat. My brother and I usually fished from the shore," she says, and I watch, my throat going dry, as she traces her fingertip along the top of her thigh absently. Her finger blazes a trail just under the hem of her skirt, and it's like I can't physically rip my eyes from the sight of it.

"You have a brother?" I ask, excited.

I have brothers. Too many of them. Okay, well, three of them, but it's more than enough.

“I had a brother,” she says softly.

I flinch, hating the pain in her voice. “I’m sorry.”

She shakes her head. “It’s fine.” But she doesn’t sound fine.

My thoughts spin, trying to think of a way to keep her talking. “I have brothers. Three of them. All littler than me, and all complete animals. They have a game called nard hunter. They take their gel ball blasters and spring out at me any time I’m not expecting them and shoot me in the dick. It’s a hoot... for them.”

She smiles. A real smile. “That doesn’t sound fun.”

“The little bastards drive me crazy, but I love them.”

Her fingers continue playing with the hem of her skirt, and I feel my blood rush south. “So, you have a big family then?”

I lick my lips, trying not to stare. “Three dads, all ferals, my mom, and then my three brothers, so, yeah, we’re a full house, although I know it’s not like living with a pack. Living amongst humans is just different. There’s always a sense that something is missing, but having a big family helps to make up for the lack of pack. At least a little.”

She seems to be considering my words. “I’ve never spent a lot of time around humans. Are they as weak and stupidly violent as they say?”

I can’t help but laugh. “Yeah, some of them are. But they’re also complex, just like shifters. There are good ones, bad ones, and some that are in-between. You actually have to get to know them to be sure of who they are.”

“That’s... a strange notion.” She seems to be thinking. “And humans have families like ours?”

“They usually only have one dad in a family and one mom, so ferals have to be careful how they present themselves to humans. Some of my dads were said to be my ‘uncles’ to the humans, which was always weird to me.”

“I had one dad.” She laughs. “But I know that’s rare.”

I don’t care if she thinks the way I grew up is strange. I’m just glad to be talking to her. Bonding with her. “When we get married, you’ll meet my whole family. I don’t know about your other mates, but I’d love for my brothers to be involved in our wedding, somehow, if that’s what you want.”

Her eyes are wide. “Remember, I’m not looking for mates.”

Not. Looking. For. Mates. Each word is like a blow to the chest.

“And yet you’ve found them,” I tell her, trying not to sound as heartbroken as I feel at her words.

There’s something between us. An unbreakable bond. I felt it the moment she looked at me. Surely she feels it too.

I always wondered how I’d know when I found my mate, but in that second, I didn’t have to wonder any more. She’s my mate. I can feel it in my bones.

And yet, she denies me. Why? Because I’m a feral? The idea makes me want to punch myself in the stomach.

We drift along the water for a long, quiet moment. My mind races with things I

should say, topics I might be able to bring up to get her to open up to me. Now that I've found my mate, I just want to know everything about her.

But she has absolutely no interest in me.

When I turn the boat, rotating us completely in the water, I notice that Faye turns her head so she can continue looking at the shore. There's something in the way her body has tensed that makes me think she's having a strong emotion. When I glance up, there's a figure standing on the sand.

"An admirer?" I ask, raising an eyebrow. Faintly, I remember the ultimas mentioning another alpha when we first met, but it didn't seem like Cayson and Ezra cared for him.

"No," Faye whispers, and the tone and volume of her voice immediately puts me on edge.

I stop rowing and really look at her, and I realize in my excitement over being near my mate, I forgot to actually see her. But I see her now, and it's clear that she's terrified, her head slightly bowed, her breath coming quick, her hands trembling slightly. A cool, intense rage rolls through me, and I look back to the shore to get a better look at the figure on the shore. The person that's making Faye feel like this.

He's small for an alpha, almost laughably weak-looking. And he's got a really unfortunate face, I can see that even from a distance. He's got the kind of mug fitting every thug on the street, every drunk at the bar. No, this isn't her mate. This is... someone to protect her from.

"Who is that?" I ask, trying to keep my fury out of my tone.

In truth, it doesn't matter who it is—if Faye is this scared of them, I'll tear them limb

from limb without her needing to say a word. I will never ask her to explain herself to me. If she needs something, I'll give it to her. No questions asked.

"Nobody," she chokes out, her gaze swinging back around to me, her eyes wide.

This is the first strong reaction I've seen from her, a moment of truth between us, and I hate that it came at the involvement of something that's making her this anxious. My woman, my mate, should never feel afraid. Not with me here.

"Faye," I say, starting to paddle in the direction of the shore. "Who is that?"

"No one."

I paddle faster, determined. I'm already a feral. What can they do to me if I beat that man within an inch of his life? Nothing, that's what.

"Where are you going?" she asks, confusion and fear in her voice.

"To take care of this... problem."

"No, wait," she says, reaching out and putting a hand on the oar. Her touch is light enough that I could keep rowing if I wanted, but I stop anyway, letting the boat drift again. She takes a deep, shuddering breath, wrapping her arms around herself, her chin tucking into her chest. "That's Kurt."

"Your other mate?"

"No," she says, her eyes flying up to mine again. "I mean, he's claiming that we're mates, that he feels the mating bond with me, but it's not true. He's not a good man. He's just—this whole thing is a power play. He's claiming me just so he can hurt me."



Without thinking, I've started rowing the boat back in the direction of the shore halfway through her statement. What kind of deranged asshole claims an omega just to torture her?

The kind that I want to beat.

"Maverick," Faye says, putting her hand out again, but this time I ignore her. "Maverick, no. Stop ?—"

She lunges forward, trying to get the oar from my hand, but nearly throws herself over the side of the boat. I wrap an arm around her and haul her back, settling her on my lap firmly. The touch is overwhelming—her soft skin against mine, the way her skirt fans out over my lap. I expect her to move away immediately, but she just stays where she is, her wide, doe eyes meeting mine.

We stay still for a moment, breathing hard, looking at each other.

"I'll take care of that fucker," I growl, my voice coming out lower than I've ever heard it before.

My hands tighten on her hips, and she lets out a little noise that nearly makes me choke. Slowly, I move my hands up. I plant a palm on her back and start to rub in circles, watching as her eyes flutter and close. As much as I want her, reassuring her comes first.

"Okay," she says lightly, as though she doesn't actually believe I can get rid of the guy.

That's fine—I'll just have to prove it to him. To her. My mate doesn't know me, yet, but she'll learn soon enough that she's my whole world. Nothing will ever be more important than her.

“Just let me—”

She shakes her head, then shifts to rest her cheek against my chest. “I don’t want you to go hurt him... right now.”

My blood is roaring through my veins. I want to kiss her. I want to touch her. As her perfect ass shifts against my erection, I wonder if she’s noticed. If my arousal is obvious. Surely such a tiny omega would climb off of me if she did. A scared one certainly would. Wouldn’t she?

“What pack are you from?” I ask tentatively, trying to continue my line of questioning from before. Trying to keep her in my lap as long as possible.

My chest loosens a bit when she actually responds to me, her voice quiet against my shirt. “Ivory,” she mumbles.

Ivory. The mountain pack. A small group without a lot of strong alphas, but with women who are world-renowned for their beauty. A lot about her starts to make sense. Her shyness. Her fragility.

I stroke her hair, lightly, tentatively. “You must be missing them a lot by now, right? You’ve been at The Selection for a while.”

“Well,” she says, softly, “yes, I have been here a while, but, well, I’m not exactly close to my pack.”

There’s a broken note of hurt in how she says it, and I swallow thickly, ignoring the asinine urge to go and make her entire pack pay for whatever they’ve done to her. All my life, I’ve wanted a pack, but if a woman like Faye doesn’t feel connected to her pack, they had to have screwed up pretty massively.

“I guess I can relate, not having a pack myself,” I say, chuckling. “But surely there must be someone you’re missing?”

Glancing down at her, I see that her eyes go far away, and I wish I knew what she’s thinking. Who she’s thinking about. Is there some man who has already stolen her heart? Some ex-boyfriend or past lover?

After a moment, she clears her throat. “I grew up with my grandparents and brother,” she says. “But I was mostly alone, even before they died.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, nuzzling my nose into her hair and breathing deeply.

Her scent is like coming home. Like having comfort here, close to me, to dip into whenever I want. It’s everything I ever imagined and more.

“Do you want a pack?” she asks, and the question startles me so much that my mind goes blank as I fish for a response to that. Misreading my response, she blushes deeply, her cheeks going from pale to crimson. “Sorry—I didn’t mean?”

“No, it’s okay,” I say with a laugh. “I do. Not like, in any sort of urgent way, I mean. Being a feral is just fine. But having a pack would be good, too.”

I think about what it would be like to have a whole group of people at my back. A community to belong to. Other shifters to share my heartbreaks and triumphs. I can’t imagine such a thing, not really.

She shivers in my lap, and I reach down, grabbing the blanket that’s neatly folded beside me and opening it, wrapping us in its warmth. I’m happy when she relaxes against my chest, and I pick up the oar, steering us to a more private area of the lake. An area hidden behind tall grasses. A place away from that Kurt asshole.

The whole experience is surreal. I'm sitting there with my mate in my lap, aroused beyond words, grateful for every second she doesn't spring away from me. It's progress. More progress than I would've hoped for after her luke-warm reaction when we first met.

I stop paddling, my arms wrap around her, pulling her closer.

"I'm not in the market for mates," she says again.

"Why not?" I ask.

She stills against me and silence stretches between us, but I don't say a word. I need to understand the why of all of this, so I can untangle it. So I can get her to accept me, accept us.

"Being an omega means being smaller and weaker than everyone else. The second an omega ties herself to an alpha, pack, or ferals, it doesn't matter, she's opening herself up to get hurt. To get mistreated. I don't want any of that. I just want to go home to my quiet cabin, live alone, and never worry about getting hurt ever again."

My sweet mate. She's not just coming up with scenarios. Her words are those of someone who has known a great deal of pain from those who were supposed to keep her safe.

"I'm sorry you've been hurt."

"How do you know?" she asks softly.

"We're connected," I tell her, stroking her arms under the blanket. "But you know, as hard as it is, you can't just live the rest of your life afraid to be hurt again. You have to take a risk if you want to form connections. Mates are an amazing thing. Our job is

to create a beautiful home, a safe place for your nesting, and to help you bring our children into this world. Nothing is more important than taking care of you. Now, I don't know your other mates, but I, for one, will do all these things for you and keep you safe."

She glances up at me, and I stare down at her perfect hazel eyes. "You don't even know I'm your mate for sure."

I feel my blood pumping harder through my body. "I'm absolutely certain you are my mate. I've never reacted to any woman the way I've reacted to you. I've never wanted a woman the way I want you. I mean—" I take a deep breath, wondering if I should keep my darker thoughts to myself. "Your scent is driving me wild."

"It is?" She looks startled.

Reaching down, I run my fingertips over one of her legs. "And I can scent your reaction to me."

Her cheeks turn bright red. "You can?"

I absolutely can. From the moment I pulled her into my lap, she's been aroused. And it's been driving me wild. A man can hardly be blamed for losing control with a mate this close, smelling this good.

"You clearly want me too."

She shakes her head. "I— it's not—"

I slide my fingers to glide along her inner thighs, and she spreads her legs a little, which makes my heartbeat fill my ears. That's the best green light I've ever been given, but I don't want to make a mistake or take anything for granted. Her trust is

more important than getting what I want right now.

Using my fingertips, I run my fingers higher along her thighs, stroking down, then back up higher and higher every time. “You have no idea how wild you drive me. How much I want you. I mean your scent, fuck, Faye, it’s incredible.”

“Maverick,” she whispers, and her voice trembles.

I bring my hand up higher, hesitate, then push aside her panties. Her hands grasp my arm, but they don’t try to pull me away, they just cling to me, like she needs support.

“What if I touched you?” I ask, running a finger along her slit.

“I-I...” She swallows, her eyelids fluttering.

As I enter her very slowly, a groan slips from my lips at just how wet she is for me. “We don’t have to take things further. I could just make you feel good. Relieve your tension. Would you like that?”

She’s breathing hard. “Would it... relieve my tension?”

Fuck. She’s not very experienced. “It would.” My voice comes out low and husky.

Very slowly, I begin to stroke her, glorying in her silky smooth body. Glorying in how every slide of my fingers seems to make her wetter. She’s soaking my fingers, probably dripping, and her scent is everywhere, all around me. It’s the only thing I can smell.

She moans in my lap, and my cock jerks.

Her head falls back, and as I stroke her, she lets out a little whimper.

I start working my fingers harder and faster, knowing exactly where to touch her to bring her closer to the edge, and how to slow her down, to make her orgasm hit hard. Her muscles are tense. She begins to bounce against my lap, against my hardened cock, and I'm having trouble pulling in a full breath.

"Ma-Maverick," she moans my name, and my erection swells.

"That's right, baby, say my name. I like to hear you say my name."

My mate is feeling pleasure. She's thinking of me while I touch her. I must be in heaven.

I touch her faster, adding more pressure, working her clit as she bucks and thrusts on top of me. She says my name again, and I don't even know I'm going to come until I start coming, exploding in my boxers as she reaches her orgasm, murmuring my name as she rides my fingers.

She collapses back against me, panting, and I keep touching her, because I never want to stop. This is my mate. Making her feel good is my responsibility, and it's one I relish.

Her head swivels towards me. "Why did we do that?"

I smile, feeling like I'm on cloud nine. "Because we're mates. This thing between us can't be ignored."

She opens her mouth to say something more, when my lips descend onto hers. She's so soft, and so fucking sweet. When her lips part again, my tongue darts inside, claiming her mouth for my own. She whimpers and clings to me, lost in our kiss, just as I am.

Time passes, I have no idea how much, but we continue kissing on the boat, floating on the water, while I touch her and taste her sweet lips. At last, she breaks our kiss, and I stare down at her with pleasure. Her skin is flushed, and her lips are swollen.

She moves my hand out from under her skirt, and I reluctantly pull them out, then lick my fingers clean while she stares on in shock. “What are you doing?”

“I wanted to taste you. All of you,” I tell her.

She shudders in my lap.

I gather her up closer and kiss her shoulder, then her neck. “You, my mate, are perfect.”

“I’m not your mate,” she says, her words like knives to my heart. “This... it can’t change anything between us.”

Unable to help myself, I reach under her skirt once more. “We’ll see.”



17

Faye

As soon as the door to my room closes behind me, I turn and press my head to the door. I close my eyes and take a deep breath. My entire body is shaking with the euphoria of what just happened. It feels like when my brother and I were kids, and we would climb back to the shore after leaping from a cliff into the water. Exhilarating, then total, complete body exhaustion. Like our nervous systems were still trying to adjust to the fact that we were capable of jumping from a cliff's edge.

Just the thought of Maverick's large, rough hand under my skirt makes me flush again, my core tightening. My experience with Cayson and Ezra was incredible, but this was something new, something I can't even compare with that experience. It's like trying to decide if ice cream or cookies are better, when we all know that they're both necessary to life. Being with these men... it's like I'm discovering new nerve endings that weren't there before.

"Faye," someone says, and I let out a little shriek, jumping around and clapping a hand to my mouth.

Cayson is sprawled out on my bed, his feet propped up on the foot board, tossing a ball into the air and catching it. Ezra is sitting in the armchair calmly, but his fingers are tapping at the worn edge. His head cocks when he sees me, and I try to control my breathing.

"You scared me," I whisper, taking a step closer to them and trying to calm my

breathing.

How did I not notice they were there?

“How was your fishing trip with the feral?” Ezra asks, raising an eyebrow at me.

I clear my throat, embarrassed, sure they can smell the answer to that question, and I have no idea how I’m going to explain the crazy thing I did, especially when I don’t even understand it myself. Turning, I grab a glass from the counter and quickly fill it with water, wanting some sort of distraction from the question.

“We have to talk,” Ezra says, his voice very matter-of-fact.

“I know,” I tell him softly.

But what can I say exactly? The whole thing is terribly embarrassing. I got caught up in a feeling. In a moment. It doesn’t mean more than that. Does it?

“Faye,” Cayson says, and when I turn around again, he’s sitting up on the edge of the bed, his expression earnest, searching. “Do you think those ferals are your mates? Like they claimed? Do you feel the mating bond with them?”

I raise the glass, pressing the cool side to my cheek. My entire body feels like it's on fire, and remembering Maverick’s eyes, the way he stared up at me as I rode his hand in the boat, doesn’t help. Do I think they’re my mates? I don’t want mates, so does it matter?

“We’re not trying to pry,” Ezra says smoothly. “But you know that this affects us, too.”

“And our arrangement,” Cayson clarifies, but this feels like it’s about more than just

our arrangement.

When I don't answer, Ezra gives me a look and presses on. "Are Xander and Maverick your mates?"

It's the question that's plaguing me. Some instinct inside of me feels connected to all four of these men, but if Xander and Maverick are my mates, does that mean Cayson and Ezra are too? And if all four of them are mates, what does that mean for my future? For my quiet cabin?

"I don't know," I say finally, falling into the other arm chair, putting my head in my hands.

My braid falls over my shoulder, and I have to take a deep breath. Since getting to The Selection, it feels like I spend most of my day deep breathing to try and avoid the overwhelming rush of emotions constantly plaguing me. Whether it's helping or not, I'm not sure.

"You don't know?" Cayson asks, his tone light and playful as always, but there's something more serious beneath. "How can you not know?"

How does anyone know? This whole thing is so strange and so confusing.

"There's no handbook," I say, shaking my head and tugging on the end of my braid. I can feel both of their eyes on me like I'm a performer on stage. "It's not like I have anything to compare this to—how are you supposed to know if someone is your mate if you've never had a mate before? It's not like an illness, where you can diagnose the problem from the symptoms."

"Sure," Ezra says, "shortness of breath, rapid heart rate, flushed skin?"

“— errant thoughts ,” Cayson adds cheekily, raising his eyebrows at me suggestively.

I balk, laughing and putting my hands up so they can’t see the utter mortification on my face. “But those symptoms—minus the last one—are things that I’ve been experiencing since...since my brother. So how am I supposed to know if the feelings are from my connections with others, or just my standard neuroticism?”

“Easy,” Cayson says. “When you don’t want it to stop, it’s the first one.”

I flush again, but Ezra’s serious eyes are on me. Behind his eyes, he looks far older than his age. It’s like his soul knows more than he’s willing to let on, like he’s been through this before. He clears his throat and finally tears his eyes from me.

“How do you feel about the ferals?” Ezra asks. “Do they make your heart race, Faye?”

“I feel about them how I feel about the two of you,” I finally say, heart skipping a beat. It feels so vulnerable, sitting here in front of them, admitting that I feel something.

“Oh my gods, Faye,” Cayson says, his tone light but his eyes blown out, nearly black. “Do you have a crush on me?”

“On us,” Ezra clarifies, a little smile slipping over his face.

“Not a crush,” I laugh, reaching over and throwing a pillow at Cayson, who dodges the pillow easily, but forgets that his ball is in the air, so it bounces off the top of his head and ricochets toward Ezra, who catches it easily.

“Then what?” Ezra asks, turning his head, his eyes far too intent on me. “If not a crush, then what?”

It's like he knows what I need to say, but I don't know. What does he want me to say? I already told him the truth, I just don't know. But there's something between us that feels as powerful as the way I loved my brother, only different.

"Well," I say, working the fabric of my skirt through my hands. Despite the fact that Maverick just pleased me—twice—my body is already wound up again, feeling tight and coiled, ready for someone to unwind me. "I don't know. I feel it for all of you—you and Cayson and the ferals."

"Speaking of what you feel for the ferals," Cayson says, flipping over the bed so he's sitting right in front of me, his knees close to mine. "Does it have anything to do with the way you smell right now?"

I feel like sinking into the floor. "It all just... happened so fast."

Cayson grins. "That's how it usually goes."

Unable to help myself, I start to pace. "It was so easy before the two of you. I just stayed away from anyone and everyone. I didn't feel connected to other people, I was just safe. Alone. But now, it's like you've opened a door inside of me, and Maverick and Xander just came waltzing through it."

Ezra stands and moves into my path, stopping me. "I understand what that feels like." Our eyes meet and hold.

Feeling uncomfortable, I say, "I really do appreciate all you've done for me. In pretending to be my mates, you've helped me a lot, and I know it hasn't always been easy."

Ezra smiles. "You've helped us too, in ways you can't even imagine."

Cayson stands and stops beside us. “We could certainly have found worse ways to spend this Selection.”

“You like me,” I tease.

Cayson’s eyes darken. “You have no idea.” Then he kisses me. Hard.

When he pulls away, Ezra reaches out and takes my face in his big hands. “You’re impossible to resist.”

His kiss is fierce, demanding. His tongue slips into my mouth, and every stroke of his tongue does terrible things to me. I was already wet, my thighs damp from my fun with Maverick, but now it feels like my body is warming up for another round, and I don’t know how to calm myself down.

Ezra breaks our kiss, panting hard. “Damn it,” he mumbles, finally releasing my face.

I lick my lips as they both stare at me. “What should we do now?”

Cayson steps close enough that his body heat warms me. “What do you want to do now?”

I don’t know what to do or say. Surely, they know what I want, right?

Ezra’s captivating blue eyes lock onto mine. “It’s okay, Jelly Bean, you don’t have to say it. We’ll take care of you.” And there’s no denying his intention.

Still holding my eye contact, he reaches for the hem of my shirt and pulls it off, tossing it on the floor. My heart races as he undoes the zipper on my skirt and lets it fall to the floor. Kneeling down, he removes my shoes, then kisses his way up my thigh.

“Did that feral taste you, or just touch you?” he asks, his voice low and husky.

I’m breathing hard. “He touched me.”

Cayson moves behind me and undoes my bra with a flick of his wrist, then grabs it and lets it fall to the floor. His big hands cup my breasts as I lean back against him, and he begins kissing my neck. Ezra yanks down my panties, leaving the cool air to caress my bare skin. I barely have time to think when he spreads my legs wider and kisses the space between my thighs.

Ezra’s mouth blazes a trail along my slit before his tongue dives inside, and he begins to taste me like a man starved. My back arches, and Cayson flicks my nipples. The combination makes a wave of pleasure roll through my entire body, sending goosebumps erupting all over my body. My knees crumble, but Cayson keeps me on my feet.

I turn my head to Cayson, to tell him something, I don’t know what, but he captures my mouth with his, and that magic mouth of his leaves my head reeling. Both men are fucking gifts with their mouths, using their tongues to do things to me that bring me painfully close to the edge, without taking me over it.

Finally, Ezra pulls his lips from my pussy, and slowly comes to stand. Inches from me, he removes his clothes, one article at a time, his movements rushed. My eyes track every inch of flesh that he reveals, and my thighs squeeze together as my body begs for release. To touch myself. To do anything to calm the fire burning inside of me.

When Ezra is naked in front of me, his cock hard and dripping with precum, he grasps my hips and picks me up. I gasp and wrap my legs around his back. Instantly, his length presses into my wet folds, not entering me, just getting close enough to drive me wild.

Cayson circles to get a better look, removing his clothes with shaking hands and watching as Ezra slides in and out of my folds, drenching himself in my juices. When Cayson is finally naked, he wraps a hand around his cock, pumping himself as he stares at us.

“Jelly Bean?” Cayson pants.

“Y-yes,” I stutter.

“How would you feel about us both being inside you at the same time?”

At the same time? “How... how would that even work?”

“It could work so many ways,” he says, and his deep voice sends a chill down my spine. “But this time? I’d take your sweet ass, and Ezra would have your pussy.”

I’m breathing hard. I know deep inside that I’d let these guys do anything to me right now. “Will it hurt?”

“Not the way we’d do it,” he says, confidence and desire lacing his words.

I nod, liking the idea of them both inside me at the same time, even though it’s kind of hard to imagine having something in my ass be enjoyable. Still, these men have my trust. They’ve earned it.

Cayson moves behind me once more and runs his hands up and down my sides, awakening every nerve in my body. He takes a minute to run his erection through my folds, coating himself in my juices, before moving back. Ezra shifts and puts his tip at my entrance. I dig my nails into his shoulders as he eases his massive length into me one inch at a time. We’re both breathing hard, probably for different reasons, but I finally manage to take all of him.



He's barely stopped when I feel Cayson behind me. His breath is hot in my ear, before he slides his fingers through my folds. Then he uses his hands to spread my ass. I expect him to jam his cock in, but instead, I jump a little as he starts to press a finger inside of me.

The sensation is strange. Ezra inside my pussy. Cayson's finger in my ass. But as Cayson gets himself as deep as he can, he starts thrusting his finger in and out, and strange sensations move through me. I buck against him and Ezra, drawing in ragged breaths, wanting more than they're giving me.

Cayson adds a second finger, and I'm surprised it doesn't hurt. If anything, my body seems to be adjusting to fit him. It helps that Ezra isn't moving. That I just have his hard length inside of me while I adjust to Cayson's fingers.

Time passes, and I feel like I'm losing my mind. Cayson has four fingers inside my ass. He thrusts, hard sometimes, slow other times, while Ezra remains painfully still. My body's tense. My mind is crazed. All I want is for them to make me orgasm the way they had last time, before I go completely insane, but they seem to have other plans.

And then Cayson pulls his fingers out of my ass. I tense, wondering what's coming next, when he spreads my ass again. This time, his cock nudges my entrance, and then he sinks into my ass one inch after another. To my surprise, it really doesn't hurt. It feels... tight, but good.

I hold Ezra tightly, our gazes locked as Cayson comes to his hilt. Then Ezra asks, "You okay?"

Nodding, I whisper, "I think it feels... good."

Ezra smiles and kisses my neck. "Just wait."

They start to move together, working like they've done this a thousand times before. Instantly, the sensation has me in complete shock. The rubbing of their two cocks against all my nerves makes it hard to breathe, hard to think. Even though they have such a careful rhythm, I can't seem to care. I start to move between them, bucking and thrusting, trying to take them deeper and faster. They curse and start moving faster too to keep up with my rhythm, and it feels... amazing.

I throw back my head, chanting the word, "yes!" over and over again. Suddenly, my orgasm hits and I feel my body gushing with liquid as I ride them with abandon. Every nerve in my body is screaming with pleasure. Every muscle is tight. My head is spinning.

It takes Cayson less than a minute before his grip tightens on me, and he comes, right in my ass. And the feeling... it's nice. Great. Amazing. Superb. Exceptional. I can't quite find the right word. His cum coats my body, claiming me as his own.

Ezra is the last to go. A string of curses leave his lips and then his hot seed is spilling into me, making my channel wetter. Knowing that I got them off, feeling them inside of me, it makes another orgasm wrack my body that keeps pulling me under until I finally collapse between them, breathing hard.

After a long moment of us all breathing hard, Cayson says, "Good work, you made her squirt."

"Squirt?" I ask, in confusion.

Cayson kisses my neck. "You got really wet, Jelly Bean."

I feel my face flush with heat. "Is that okay?"

Ezra's eyes lock with mine. "It's more than okay. It makes us feel like fucking men."

Cayson pulls out of me from behind and Ezra carries me to the bed. Ezra lays me down, him still inside of me, and asks, “Think you can go again?”

I’m embarrassed, but I nod my head.

Cayson climbs on the bed next to us. “Good, because we have a lot to still teach you.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 2:31 am*

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Faye

I walk into the ballroom, which is outfitted with a bunch of round tables draped with white cloths. Candles flicker merrily from the center of each table, the chandeliers lit and twinkling, making the ceiling and walls glow with golden light.

“Wow,” Addilyn says beside me.

“Right?” I mutter.

“They keep finding new ways to outdo themselves,” she says, turning to me with a grin as she squeezes my arm. “I wonder what new, hot men I’ll be sat with tonight. There are a handful of ferals I wouldn’t mind being eaten out by, I mean, I wouldn’t mind eating with.”

“Addilyn!”

She winks at me. “Look who I’m talking to... you went to ride a boat but rode a hand instead.”

My face is on fire. “I’m never telling you anything again!”

And then we’re both laughing until we tire ourselves out. Then her face shifts, the merriment fading away, and she just looks nervous. Which is so unlike her.

She takes a deep steadying breath beside me. “Wish me luck today, Faye. I’m starting to think if I don’t bond with an alpha soon, I’m going to end up being stuck with a beta.”

“That only happens if you don’t match with an alpha for years .” Once omegas are considered past their ‘prime,’ betas are given a shot to see if they can bond with the omegas. And even if they don’t, they can just choose to be paired off. No one really cares what happens to them at that point. “You’re going to be fine, Addilyn. You have plenty of time.”

She wipes her hands on the side of her outfit. “If you say so. I just hope the brothers choose to sit with me. I liked them. I just don’t know if they liked me too...”

I smile. “I’m sure they did. Deep breaths.”

A servant appears at our side, dressed in white and black. “Miss Addilyn? Right this way.”

Addilyn flashes me an excited look weaved with nervousness and sweeps away. I watch her go in a sleek pink gown, gems glowing against her throat, and pray she gets her table full of ferals. For now, she's seated at an empty table on the other side of the room. Other omegas have already been scattered at different tables around the room, waiting for when the men are allowed to join us.

A servant speaks to another servant beside me. “Tell the males. All the females have arrived.”

Then he takes off, and I’m left standing, wondering what to do next.

“Miss Faye?” a servant says, bobbing her head beside me.

I nod.

“This way, please,” she says, heading between tables.

The room smells amazing, and I follow the servant who greeted me to a table in the center of the room. When we arrive, my brain instantly counts the chairs, my skin going cold. Six chairs. One for everyone—including Kurt.

I take a shaky breath and sit, tucking the skirt of my pale blue gown under me as I do. To pass the time, I smooth down my hair, pick a piece of lint from my shoulder, and run my fingertip over the lace edging on the tablecloth. None of it calms my nerves. Soon, I’ll be seated for a fancy meal with four men who I have confusing feelings for, and one man I hate.

The door to the ballroom opens, and my gaze snaps to the person entering. My racing heart continues to race for completely different reasons when I spot Ezra in a black suit, looking like some kind of ridiculously beautiful model. Sometimes I can’t believe he doesn’t want a mate. He seems like exactly the type of man who should have a mate.

“Faye,” Ezra greets. He frowns as he nears the table, and I raise an eyebrow at him in question. “I’d hoped to get here before you, so I could pull the chair out for you.”

“The servant did it,” I say, but I stand, pushing the chair back into the table. Ezra laughs in surprise. “But go right ahead.”

Ezra comes to my side of the table, and I smell his scent like a fine cologne washing over me. It makes my eyes prick with familiarity, and I laugh as he pulls the chair out with a flourish, sweeping his hand in a gesture for me to sit. Once I’m seated—again—he pushes the chair forward so I’m at a comfortable distance from the table.

The door opens again, and in walks Xander. He's wearing a shirt now, a white one, with a blue jacket that matches the deep blue color of his eyes. The jacket strains at his shoulders, looking like it might be one size too small, but then, it might be. I have a feeling the clothing people probably outfitted him for a suit for tonight, without having the time to adjust one to fit his large body.

"Hey," Xander says, glancing between Ezra and I, Ezra's hand still on my chair. "I will help with the chair."

The earnestness in his voice melts my heart. He seems like a man of few words, and I feel kind of honored he chooses to share some of those words with me. Who knew such a big, rough man could be so gentle?

I laugh and stand up again, unable to control my giggles as Xander repeats the entire process while Ezra takes his seat to my left. When I am, once again, seated, Xander takes the chair to my right, but now Cayson is approaching the table, wearing a black suit with a pink shirt. He's clearly watched the whole show. There's a twinkle in his eyes that tells me he's in a mischievous mood.

"Oh yeah," he says, his voice low, "get that sweet ass out of the chair, Faye."

I roll my eyes, but the low timbre of his voice sends a roll of arousal through me. Desperately, I try to tamp it down—I don't want everyone at the table knowing I'm turned on, but it's too late. Their eyes all look a little darker, a little more intent on me.

Cayson helps to tuck me into the chair, as well, making a spectacle of our table. It's minutes before supper is set to be served, and there are still two empty chairs at the table—Kurt and Maverick are missing.

"Faye," someone says, appearing at my side, and my heart jumps when I turn to see

Addilyn, her eyes lit up with amusement, a hand clapped over her mouth. She leans down, whispering in my ear. “First, I got seated with the brothers. Second, and you’re not going to believe this, but someone peed on Kurt’s clothes!”

“What ?” I ask, sucking in a breath, then letting out a breathy laugh.

“I heard this girl at another table say he was absolutely raging in the hallway, calling the housekeepers incompetent assholes. Apparently, his room is a complete mess, too.”

“Who would do something like that?” I ask, my eyes wide.

The entire reason we’ve had so much trouble handling Kurt is due to his father’s powerful position. Anyone who was willing to do something so direct to the son of a very powerful alpha clearly has some balls. But who?

I realize all the men at the table heard this little bit of gossip when I glance over and see Cayson laughing, his hand over his mouth, Ezra shaking his head, and Xander looking confused.

Addilyn gives me a wink, then skips back to her table.

“Kurt is Faye’s remaining mate?” Xander asks, probably remembering him from his tantrum when drawing straws.

“Technically, for now, but he’s also an asshole who definitely deserved for his clothes to be pissed on,” Cayson says, letting his head fall back against the back of the chair. “Oh, this is too good.”

“Yeah, but that asshole has an even bigger asshole for a father,” Ezra says, taking a sip of his whiskey and looking around the ballroom. “Anyone willing to do that is



either making a pretty potent political statement, or doesn't understand what an action like that means."

"Hello everyone," Maverick greets, surprising me by coming over and planting a kiss on my cheek, which makes all three men look at him a little more carefully. "What are we talking about?"

Cayson gives me a look and then says, "Someone pissed on Kurt's clothes... you know, Faye's other 'mate,' who absolutely deserved it, but we're trying to figure out who would be crazy enough to do that."

Maverick gives a shit-eating grin, looking dapper in his gray suit. "That's funny. Really interesting, actually. I'll tell you what—I just used the most interesting bathroom."

There's a moment of silence where we all register what he's said, then Cayson breaks it by smacking his hand on the table loudly.

"No," Cayson breathes, laughing hysterically, tears running down his face. "You are my personal hero."

Maverick gives a dramatic bow. "I'm pleased to occupy the role."

"That took a lot of balls," Ezra says, his expression showing how impressed he is.

Xander just looks completely bewildered, like he wants to ask us if peeing on each other's clothes is normal here.

I smile at him reassuringly. "They're just being ridiculous."

"You love it though," Maverick says, grinning.

I blush. “I’m not exactly crushed it happened.”

There’s a moment where everyone is smiling, and I can’t help but picture Kurt when he discovered his clothes were peed on. He must have lost his mind. It seems like just a tiny way karma could come back at him.

“Speaking of balls,” Maverick says, unrolling his silverware and eyeing Cayson and Ezra playfully. “Seems like Faye’s had her share recently.”

Cayson cracks up laughing again, and I feel my entire body flush from head to toe. Of course, they can smell the guys on me. I’ll never accept how awful it is that every shifter knows when another shifter has had sex. It’s such a crazy notion, and not something I’ve paid attention to at any point in my life.

All eyes turn to focus on me. Cayson and Ezra look amused. Xander looks a little hurt. And, I swear, the other tables’ occupants have turned in our direction.

“Oh my gods ,” I mutter, reaching out and putting a hand on Maverick’s forearm. “You can’t just say things like that. We are in public .”

“Let them know,” Maverick says, shrugging. “They should be happy for us. ”

“Gods,” I mutter, rolling my eyes and picking at my dress, but there’s a potent bloom of happiness in my chest, spiraling out through the rest of my body.

“So,” Maverick continues, “when should we expect an invitation to your bed? Or is there some sort of appointment system? I’m free Tuesday afternoons?—”

“There is no schedule .” I laugh, shaking my head and taking a sip of water to try and cool my body.

“But we may need one,” Ezra says, ever practical. “If this is going to work out.”

“What would that be like?” Xander asks, and everyone looks at him. “If we were in a pack together?”

Silence falls over the table, and my heart starts into double time. This entire experience is going to send me into cardiac arrest. Poor Xander, he doesn’t understand anything of what’s going on. He’s just a guy who probably wants a mate and a pack.

“Well,” Ezra says, after a long moment. “Technically, being part of a bonded group, the two of you would have the ability to join either my pack, Pack Azure, or Cayson’s pack, Pack Steel. Faye would become an omega in both packs.”

“Our lands border one another,” Cayson explains, “so, it would be easy to rule them. If our fathers stepped down.”

“Once they step down,” Ezra says, his eyes slanting to Cayson quickly.

“And the two of you would probably be our seconds,” Cayson says, nodding his head at Maverick and Xander. I expect him to be joking, his usually playful tone, but this is the most serious I’ve ever seen him.

“But that’s only if we all ended up together,” Ezra clarifies, taking another sip of his whiskey.

I bite my bottom lip, imagining that kind of life. Moving away from the mountains, being near the water with Ezra and Cayson. Spending more time with Maverick and Xander. Something in my chest lights up at the thought of it.

It doesn’t sound bad. Before, when I imagined a life with an alpha, it was one of

servitude and abuse. But that's because Kurt was the only example of an alpha that I ever had. That, and my own alpha, who wasn't exactly there for me.

Life with these four might not be so bad .

Yet, none of it is real. Cayson, Ezra, and I... it's all pretend, so that life can't even happen. Even if I wanted it to.

Xander surprises me by asking, "And we would rotate nights with her?"

My cheeks heat, and all eyes are on me for a long minute.

When I don't answer, Cayson says, "Some mated groups rotate, but I'd prefer a situation where we all slept in Faye's bed every night, and she could enjoy... as many of us as she was prepared to enjoy each night."

Xander tilts his head. "I would like that."

"The more time with Faye, the better," Maverick says, winking at me.

I feel strange. "But that's only if we became a bonded group. There are reasons that might not happen."

"Like what?" Xander asks.

"It's complicated," I say.

Servants suddenly come out with food, setting everything down at each table, including ours. I look around, realizing that all the tables have filled up without me even noticing. Addilyn is at a table with two alphas and two ferals, looking happy as can be. Maybe as happy as I feel.

We start eating a creamy shrimp and crab bisque that tastes like heaven. That's one thing about The Selection: all the food is so damn good. It's one of the few things I'll miss about this place when I leave.

You know, and the guys.

"How do you like it?" Maverick asks, watching me intently.

I smile. "It's delicious. Definitely better than my regular food at the cabin. There, I have a lot of fish, rabbit, mushrooms, and berries."

"I imagine you'll be eating pretty fancy at Cayson or Ezra's pack lands," Maverick says, flashing a smile. "I heard Pack Azure and Pack Steel are powerful and wealthy."

Cayson shrugs. "We are, and you're right. If Faye were to stick around us, I'd open her up to all new experiences, including good food and wine. I'd want to take her traveling all over, to see the world."

And there's no joking tone in his voice. For an alpha who doesn't want an omega, he's a pretty good actor. Hell, I almost believe him that he's pictured that kind of life for us.

"I would like to travel," Xander says. "As long as Faye is there."

I smile at him, even though I shouldn't. Even though I might be leading him on. "I've never really thought about seeing the world."

"Well, you should," Maverick says. "When we leave The Selection, all our lives will change forever."

I give a nervous laugh. “I’m not great with change.”

“I’m not either,” Ezra says, “but some things are worth changing for.” His blue eyes linger on me for a minute too long before snapping back to our food.

The soup bowls disappear and juicy steaks and fancy potatoes come out. We all dive in, wolves through and through. And, man, I adore steak. It’s a rare delicacy, even in town.

As I’m finishing another bite, Xander asks, “What about the final member of our group?”

It’s hard to swallow the meat in my mouth, but I manage.

Ezra answers for me, “He will not remain with Faye. He scares her and is not a good man, so we’ll be pushing him out.”

“Is it that easy to get rid of him?” Maverick asks.

“As long as we all refuse the bond with him, yes,” Cayson answers, spearing a piece of steak. “And we all will be refusing the bond.”

“Works for me,” Maverick says, digging into his potatoes.

“And I,” Xander adds, looking fierce as his gaze fixes on me.

Cayson leans in closer to me. “See, Faye? We’ve got you taken care of. No one is going to hurt you with us around.”

And it’s weird. I believe him. As powerful as Kurt has always seemed to be, he feels like a no one in the face of these four strong men. Even a force like him couldn’t face

these four and walk away unharmed.

It might be nice having mates. At least for a little while.

Faye

Just as our last plate is cleared off, Brock enters the ballroom and goes to stand in front of all of us. The din of conversation silences as all eyes turn to him. He's wearing an elegant blue suit and his dark hair is combed back, making the sharp lines of his face stand out even more.

His gaze sweeps across the entire ballroom, as servants line up behind him. "We have a surprise late night game for all of you to enjoy. Tonight, we will be playing hide-and-seek. The groups you're eating dinner with will be your partners for the night. Half the group will be hiders, and half the group will be seekers. If you stumble across members of other groups, simply ignore them and search for your own group members. No one is to go beyond the lawns. The woods are strictly off-limits, as are the rooms that belong to others. Each of you will be given a flashlight." He nods, and the servants behind him step out, carrying little baskets, handing out flashlights to everyone at the tables. "When you have found all the members of your group, you may retire for the evening. Any questions?"

I glance around, but no one speaks.

"Good," he says, rolling his neck. "Everyone with a silver flashlight will be a hider. Everyone with a blue flashlight will be a seeker. Enjoy your game!"

The flashlights are handed out at our table. Ezra and Cayson are given blue flashlights, so they'll be looking for us, and Maverick, Xander, and I were given



silver ones. Well, this should be interesting.

“We’re going to absolutely destroy you,” I tell Ezra and Cayson, grinning.

Xander’s bright blue eyes meet mine, and there’s nervousness in his face. “I believe I played such a game when I was little, but I don’t remember now.”

Confused, I ask, “You haven’t been around that game since?”

“Life is about survival. Not games,” he says, his brows wrinkling.

I look at Ezra and Cayson, concerned. My life was pretty strange, and even I played games as a child. What was his life like as a feral? It seems like he had a very different experience from Maverick.

Cayson reaches a hand out and grips his shoulder. “Hide and seek is like chasing a rabbit. You three will be the rabbits, and we’ll be the wolves. Once we find you, we win.”

“Although it’s all for fun,” Maverick adds, grinning. “We don’t need any fights to the death here.”

I laugh.

Xander looks a little more relaxed. “Hunting rabbits. This I understand.”

Everyone has already started getting up from their tables and heading to the door. Well, at least the hidiers are rushing out the door. The seekers are lingering around the tables, giving them time to hide.

“Well, it looks like it’s our turn to hide,” I say, nodding to Maverick and Xander.

They stand up too, and Cayson and Ezra watch us leave, amusement on their faces. That's the difference between wolves and humans playing this game: humans can't smell their prey and follow their trail the way we can. At least that's what I heard. We'll have to be careful not to leave our scent everywhere, or we'll be caught in no time.

When we make it outside, I say, "We should split up, so we're harder to find."

Xander frowns. "But I want to stay close to you."

My heart flutters. "It'll only be for the game."

He looks disappointed.

Unable to help myself, I move closer, putting my hand on his arm. Leaning up, he instinctively leans down, and I plant a kiss on his cheek. "Don't worry. It won't be for too long."

He rewards me with one of his rare smiles. The ones that light up his eyes and seem to shed years from his age. Because although Xander looks young, there's something in his eyes that speaks of a much older man.

Drawing away from him, I instantly decide where I'm going to go. The greenhouse. "Good luck to you," I say, turning on my flashlight and heading down the stairs.

I don't watch where they go. I'm too excited to go to my perfect hiding place. There aren't a lot of things to leave my scent on along the way, with the neatly trimmed paths, so I think I have a solid chance of winning this game.

The darkness of the night closes in around me. For a while, I see flashlights bouncing in every direction. But as I keep going to the lesser known area of the greenhouse, the

flashlights disappear, and it's just me, alone with my light. The wind picks up, and instead of bringing a welcoming chill, it just leaves a chill.

I'm biting my lip by the time I reach the greenhouse. Maybe this wasn't the best idea. Maybe I should go back where the others are. Except, this is a game. I'm supposed to end up alone, so I don't get caught. I'm worrying too much, not that anyone could blame me after all I've been through, but not everything is dangerous. Not everything has to be scary and horrible.

Entering the greenhouse, I go until I reach the back corner, where I find a stool. Sitting down, I breathe a sigh of relief. As beautiful as the pale blue dress is, it's also very heavy. And these shoes aren't the most comfortable to walk in.

Flicking off my light, I wait, alone in the dark. Minutes tick by. My anxiety starts to creep back up. I angrily try to push it away. All I want is to be normal. I want to go back to the way I was before, when I didn't have anxiety. When, if I was worried like this, I'd know it was my instincts, and I should listen to them. Now, with anxiety warning me about everything, I can't trust it to tell me when I'm truly in danger. And I can't imagine I'm in danger in this greenhouse.

I see a flashlight outside the greenhouse. It bounces around in the dark. Holding my breath, I wait, wondering if it's Cayson and Ezra, or if it's some other seeker mistakenly coming to find me.

"Faye," Kurt calls, his voice dark and playful.

My blood turns to ice. No, no this can't be happening.

Water rushes in my ears and my heart hammers. I squeeze the flashlight as hard as I can, willing myself to calm down. It's okay. I can get away from him. Just not if I'm trapped in the greenhouse.

The flashlight continues to bounce around, probably checking the bushes and trees. He might have picked up my scent, but I was careful. He won't know where I am, at least not right off the bat.

As silently as possible, I climb off the stool and duck down. Crawling on my hands and knees, I try to make my way back to the door of the greenhouse. I don't want him to see my shadow, or my movement.

But if he reaches the door before I do, I'll be right near him, right within his grasp. And I can't be. I need to be faster than him, and silent.

Creeping along, trying not to breathe too deeply or let my heart race too loudly, I keep going. I'm aware of the light near me, of the shadows and the light fighting as his flashlight moves around.

I should've stayed closer to the others. I should have hidden with Xander or Maverick. It was foolish of me to think he wouldn't try to find me when I was alone and vulnerable.

I'm berating myself, trying to fight off the terror that's threatening to swallow me at just the awareness that Kurt is so close and that I'm alone. Kurt, a man capable of murder, a man I've pissed off over and over again. A man who was humiliated tonight. It's strange just how confident I've become when I'm around my guys, and upsetting to realize how vulnerable I actually am the second I'm out of their protection.

Glancing up at the row of plants I'm behind, I realize I'm nearly to the door. It's also the same moment that I realize Kurt's light has disappeared. There's only darkness now. I want to believe that means he's left, and that I'm safe, but I just don't think I'm lucky.

The end of the row of plants is just up ahead. The door just beyond that. All I have to do is reach that door, and then I'll have room to run. A chance to be seen by others if he tries to hurt me.

Crawling a few more steps forward, I reach the end of the row of plants and peek out. My eyes land on something, something I'm not sure about as the shadows separate themselves, and then horror uncurls within my belly. I'm staring at legs.

My gaze slowly moves up, and I see Kurt smiling down at me.

A tremble rolls through me, and I don't move, frozen in horror. I hope against all hope that I've conjured up this image of Kurt from my nightmares, and that he's not really standing in front of me.

"Hello, Faye," he greets, his voice low and pleased. "You're exactly where I want you to be."

He reaches forward and flicks open the button on his pants, then slides down his zipper.

"No," I say, terror grasping me tightly. "Leave me alone. Just get away from me. Please. Please. I don't want this."

His smile widens, and he reaches out, but he doesn't quite touch me. "Yes, you do. Believe me, Faye, I'm not doing this for me. After all you've done to me, the only thing I want to do to you is teach you a lesson. Remind you of your place."

I start crying. I can't help myself. Broken sobs come over me. I need to yell. I know I need to, but I'm just so scared.

A large shadow rises up behind Kurt, and before I can comprehend what's happening,

Kurt's suddenly dragged back from me. He makes a shrill, surprised sound that's abruptly cut off into nothing.

I brush back my tears and see Xander with his arm around Kurt's neck, squeezing with all his might. His expression is something worse than anger, something darker and more dangerous.

Kurt flails about, clawing at the arm with his nails, but Xander is someone else. Something else. His expression is dark and intense. His mouth is drawn into a firm line.

I try to stand but fall several times, my legs shaking too badly to support myself. I finally make it to my feet. All I want is for Xander to hold me, but he's still squeezing Kurt's neck. I find myself standing, watching as the life drains out of Kurt. His panic is so similar to the panic I saw on my brother's face.

I'm ashamed to admit it, but I like watching him. I like seeing him be taught a lesson that he's not as strong as he thinks. That he only thinks he's strong because he picks on the weak.

And then he stops flailing. His arms fall at his side. And I imagine a world without him in it, and it eases something deep inside of me.

But then I think about what will happen to Xander, and it snaps me out of my fantasy. "Xander, you have to let him go."

Xander doesn't react.

I take a step closer. "Xander, you're killing him. You have to let him go."

"He was going to rape you," he grinds out.

I move closer and rest a hand on the arm around Kurt's throat. The asshole's eyes have rolled back in his head. He's passed out. "If you kill him, they will punish you. You won't be able to be my mate. They've already tossed you out of your pack, so they'll probably kill you. I can't handle that, Xander. I need you. Please don't hurt me."

His gaze meets mine. "I could never hurt you."

"So let him go."

He does, dropping the man on the ground like a sack of potatoes. Stepping around him, he holds me closely as Kurt gasps on the ground. "I-I don't want him to live."

"I don't want him to live either, but I love you more than I hate him."

He pulls back from me. "You love me?"

Damn it. I hadn't meant to say that. I don't want to play with his heart. The thing is, I don't know what I want any more. Could I even walk away from these men now? They feel like my heart and soul.

Something is wrong with me.

"I-I care for you," I say.

He sweeps me into his arms and carries me out of the greenhouse. And it's weird how safe I feel in his arms. I barely know him, but it's like Cayson and Ezra unlocked something inside of me, and once that door was open, all four of these men came running in.

Up ahead, I hear Cayson say, "You guys are terrible at hiding."

Lights fall on us, and I wince before the lights are lowered.

“What’s wrong?” Ezra asks, a concerned note to his voice.

“Kurt,” Xander hisses with all the venom in the world.

“Where is he?” Maverick asks softly, and there’s a threat in his voice.

I try to look at them. All three of them are tense and ready, and I know if I say the word, they’ll end this thing with Kurt once and for all. Which will lead to me finally being done with Kurt, and some kind of terrible consequence to these men.

“Xander almost killed him. He learned his lesson. Can you please just take me back to my room?”

Ezra draws his shoulders back. “I’ll go to Lance’s room and report this.” Then he hesitates, running his fingers through his hair. “But with Kurt’s father, and how they’ve been taking his side about you not spending time with Kurt, I suspect they’ll sweep this under the rug again as an alpha getting too excited. Especially since ‘only’ a feral and an omega saw it happen. I’ll make it clear to them that if all they intend to do is make him apologize again, to not bother.”

“Agreed,” Cayson says. “At least this will be in their files.”

Xander looks shocked. “This truly can’t be how things work. Packs are supposed to be more civilized than ferals. Kurt would die for what he did here today.”

“When you’re powerful, you’re untouchable,” Maverick murmurs, and we all get quiet, his words sinking between us.

No one moves for a painfully long moment, then Cayson says, “How about I have the



dessert cart taken to my room, and we all have a treat before we take you to your room?”

He just wants to make sure I’m alright. “Okay,” I say.

We head back to the castle, my men flanking me like I’m something important. My heart eases a little. There were so many things I missed about my brother, but I think one of the biggest things was having someone I could trust completely.

Somehow, I have that again.

20

Faye

When I return to my room after eating dessert with the men, my entire body feels slow and relaxed. It might be because after Maverick insisted on giving me a massage, they all did, until all the anxiety and the fear from the night had melted away, leaving only a lingering reminder that, although Kurt had tried to hurt me, he'd been the one to learn a lesson.

With my men, I'm safe. Maybe staying with them wouldn't be so bad.

I walk through the room easily, practically floating as I reach back for my zipper and draw the heavy gown down my body. I place it back on the hanger and put it in the closet. Tomorrow, the staff will come through and bring in more outfits. And, strangely, I'm actually excited about what else they'll prepare for me.

All this, just to ensure alphas find their omegas. For the first time since arriving here on the bus, I'm starting to appreciate The Selection. I guess if alphas and omegas have to get together, this isn't exactly the worst way to do it. It certainly forces us to get to know each other in a fun way.

I turn on the tub then step into the bath and wash my body lazily with lavender soap. Then I wash my hair, brushing through it with my fingers and rinsing it thoroughly. The bath seems to help even more, pushing away the scary event of the evening like a nightmare I'd soon forget. When I step out of the bath, my entire body feels scrubbed clean, soft, and warm.

This is the first time I've taken full advantage of the amenities since arriving here. As I pick an oil to massage into my skin, I think of what my baths used to include—a quick wash in the pond, unscented soap, if I even had some to begin with. This... this is so different.

Now, I work over every inch of my skin, ensuring it's baby-soft and smooth. I brush and loosely braid my hair, then pull on a silk nightgown that falls over my body and makes me feel like I'm posing for a painting.

I'm just about to pull back the covers and climb into bed when there's a knock at the door.

Like it always does, my entire body tenses at the thought that the person on the other side of the door might be Kurt. Maybe he's here for revenge. Or, maybe, he's just looking for something to do, and thought tormenting me might be a good option after my actions led to him being embarrassed again.

I take a deep breath and pace back and forth in front of the bed, wishing the door had a peep hole, or some way for me to see who it was before revealing myself to be in the room. If he knows I'm in here, will he just find a way to force himself inside?

"Faye," a deep voice says, muffled through the door. I think of that voice, so soft and quiet against my neck while we were drifting along in the boat, and my body calms.

When I open the door, Maverick is standing on the other side, a bouquet of flowers in his hands. "I thought a beautiful woman deserved some beautiful flowers."

Beside him, the guard stands silently, giving me a look. This one is shorter than the other one, but tends to be stationed outside my door in the evening. I'm starting to recognize the guards and their habits.

“Yes, he’s also okay. Him, Xander, Cayson, and Ezra.” I hesitate. “Never Kurt. Not Kurt under any circumstances.”

He smiles, because I’ve said the Kurt part several times before, and bobs his head, before going back to his place by the wall.

“A guard to keep pretty flowers away?” Maverick teases, lightning the mood a little.

I laugh and reach for them, but he shakes his head. “Can I come in?” he asks, his voice low.

I hesitate, already feeling the tension between us as his green eyes trace my body from head to toe. I know where this is going. At least, where it could go. If I let him in now, I don’t know if things can ever go back to the way they were. The memory of his hand in my skirt skates through my head, and I suck in a breath, eyes meeting his.

“Yes,” I breathe, stepping to the side so he can come inside.

He moves carefully, like I’m a skittish animal he might spook if he acts too forcefully. Which, to be fair, I kind of am. So far, I haven’t seen anything to alarm me about Maverick, but he’s still a strange feral. He could still be dangerous to me, and if I see the smallest sign that he is, I am going to run for it. But the thing is, for the first time in a long time I’m starting to trust my instincts again, and my instincts say he’s no one to fear.

I watch as he reaches under the sink, and my gaze is drawn to his very firm ass. I don’t remember ever noticing a man’s ass before Cayson and Ezra. It’s weird. I think they fundamentally changed something about me.

Licking my lips, I just keep staring. Damn, that is a very fine ass.

Under the sink, he finds a vase and scissors and pulls them out, then rinses the vase and places it next to the sink. I watch his hands, capable and strong, as he cuts the flower stems and arranges the flowers in the vase carefully, adjusting their height so they make a good arrangement. It's weirdly... hot, watching his big hands touch something so delicate, and do such a wonderful job with it.

"That's beautiful," I say, when he's disposed of the trimmings and turned back to me.

The flowers are now sitting next to the basket of berries on my table, two symbols of the men I now have vying for my attention and love. Two beautiful things from two very different people, each laying claim to my heart. And what's strange... I value both the objects, and both the men, even though I don't know what that means for the long-term. Even though I barely know Maverick and Xander.

Something to admire. Something to enjoy. Maybe Addilyn was right about getting herself a group of alphas—maybe that means each one satisfies a different need inside you.

"Faye," he says, but I interrupt him by stepping forward and pressing my body against his, our lips meeting roughly.

I'm learning that each of them has their own style of kissing, and Maverick's is desperate, searching. One of his hands plants itself on my lower back, drawing me up against him, and the other cradles my jaw, tipping my head back so he can get better access.

His smell and touch and essence seep into me, until it feels like we're just two atoms slotted together in the fabric of life, working together, seamless.

"Faye," he growls, pulling back when the backs of my knees hit the edge of my mattress. I look up at him, my eyes wide, my entire body thrumming with need. He

moves forward, like he might push me backwards, but there's another knock on the door.

This time, I'm not afraid. Even if it is Kurt, I have Maverick here with me. I don't need to be afraid—he's automatically on my side, and I haven't even told him the worst of what he's done to me.

Seeing the expression on my face, Maverick pulls away from me, moving to the door and opening it. Xander stands there, his chest bare, in nothing but a pair of loose pajama pants, and the sight of it sends another scorching wave of arousal through me.

Both men turn, their gazes dark, heated, and I remember, again, that they can smell me, know how my core is throbbing, twisting with want, how my panties are damp with need.

"Couldn't sleep," Xander says, his eyes meeting mine. I realize they're both looking at me, waiting for my okay, for me to invite them inside, into my bed. Just like Maverick said at dinner.

Despite what I've always believed about alphas, that's not the truth of the situation—they're not going to make me do anything I don't want to do. Not these two men, not Cayson and Ezra.

And, luckily for all of us, I want to do it.

"Come in," I say.

I open the door for him. He steps inside, and I lock it behind him. As he turns to look at me, I take a deep breath, reach down, grab the hem of my nightgown, and strip it off over my head.

Maverick and Xander are in front of me before it even hits the floor. They're close enough to touch, but they don't. They just stand there, breathing hard, looking at me in nothing but my panties.

"You're my mate," Xander says roughly.

"Our mate," Maverick corrects, his gaze running up and down my body eagerly. "No games. No deals. No, we're not doing this because of some asshole. You're ours."

I realize they need me to say it, but I hesitate. "You can't ever hurt me." I can't handle it if they hurt me.

Xander rears back. "Never."

"Never," Maverick says, emphasizing the word.

I hesitate, wrapping my arms around my chest.

"What else, little one?" Xander asks, his expression intense.

Without knowing what I'm going to say, I start talking, "And I don't know anything about relationships or men. I'm used to an isolated life and may need some guidance." I take a deep breath. "And I don't have any idea what the future is going to look like. I just want to be safe."

"We can do that, and we understand all of that," Maverick promises, a smile touching his lips.

I realize something else. I should really be clear about Cayson and Ezra, since it may change what they want. Maybe without alphas, I'm not nearly as desirable. "And I don't know if Cayson and Ezra will be in our future..."

Maverick laughs. “Yeah, right.” And he exchanges a knowing glance with Xander that I don’t understand.

Okay, I said it at least.

Xander uses one finger to tilt my head up, so our eyes meet and hold. “What else? We’ll give you anything.”

His words make warmth spread through my chest. “Nothing else.”

A small smile curves his lips, and he grabs my hips, pulling me against him. Without a word, his lips crush mine, and we kiss until the world spins away, and there’s nothing but us. I break our kiss, breathing hard, and Maverick moves to stand closer to us, capturing my lips with his mouth. His kiss is different, less like he’s drinking me in and more like he’s desperate for me.

Our kiss ends, and Xander takes me into his arms and carries me to the bed before setting me down in the center of the bed. I just stare at them, eyes wide, wondering what will happen next. I’ve only ever had sex with Cayson and Ezra. What if it’s really different with them? What if I don’t like it?

The second the thought enters my mind, I dismiss it. If I like them touching me, like them kissing me, I’m sure everything else they do to me will be great. I just have to be brave, and not get into my head too much.

Maverick starts to undress. His movements are hurried, but his expression is calm. He’s down to his boxers when Xander stops him, putting a hand on his arms. “Are you sure it won’t be too much for her?”

Their gazes swing to me.



I lick my lips. "I'll be okay." That's all I can manage, even though I want to tell them I really want to see them naked. That I've been curious what they look like.

Maverick draws his boxers down and his cock springs free. My jaw drops open, and I swallow hard. He's like Cayson and Ezra. Well-endowed. And if Addilyn is right about most men, all of my men so far are built quite a few sizes larger.

Xander seems more shy and uncertain as he undresses. He glances at me constantly, as if checking that I'm okay with what he's doing, like at any moment he might reveal some horrible part of himself that I might not like. When he gets to his boxers, he seems to start and stop himself from pulling down his boxers several times. I can practically see his treacherous thoughts bouncing through his head.

After a minute, I climb down from the bed. Pushing his hands aside, I lean up onto my tippy toes and kiss him as hard as I can, then ease his boxers down until they hit the floor. Before I can even look down, I reach down and take him in my hand, curling my hand around his massive length.

He groans against my mouth, and I start to stroke him. His entire body rocks from the movement, and his kisses become more and more desperate. He breaks his lips from mine and his voice comes out wild, "You have to stop. I'm going to come."

Maybe I should listen, but I don't want to. I want to make this big man explode.

Collapsing to my knees, I take him into my mouth and start sucking. The normally silent man lets out a string of curses and thrusts hard into my mouth, rapidly, until he groans again and explodes. His taste instantly hits my tongue, and I suck and suck, loving his flavor. I love that I was able to make this big man come undone.

When he starts to soften in my mouth, I pull back and rise. Xander stands with his hands in fists and a wild look on his face. "Sorry. I shouldn't have... I should have

waited.”

“You shouldn’t have,” I tell him softly. “You did exactly what I wanted you to do.”

His eyes find mine, darkening, and I watch him harden once more.

I hear Maverick take a shuddering breath and turn to him. He’s got his hand clenched around his cock and he’s breathing hard. His eyes are running over me.

Without saying a word, I move to him, collapse to my knees, and push his hand away. My mouth is around him in an instant.

“Holy fucking shit!” he groans.

It’s strange how fast I’m learning to figure out what my men like. Just a short time ago, I knew nothing, and now I can tell by the way his body tenses that he likes what I’m doing. As I slowly suck him, I can feel his body wanting more. Wanting me to move more quickly. When he curls his hand into my hair and starts moving me harder and faster on his cock, my body gets wetter at his desire.

Soon, he’s pounding into me, and I’m loving the feeling of his tip hitting the back of my throat. I gag several times, which sends a shudder through his body, encouraging me to do more. To take him deeper. Then he says my name and comes into my mouth. His taste is sweet and salty all at once.

He finally releases my hair, and I lick him clean, then stand up.

Maverick yanks my panties off, lifts me into his arms, and places me down onto the bed. I watch them both, staring, breathing hard, already erect once more and ready to go, wondering what they’re thinking. What they want to do now.

“How do you want to take her?” Maverick asks, sounding breathless.

“Her pussy,” Xander grunts.

“I want her pussy too.”

What does that mean? What are they going to do?

“Follow me,” Maverick says, then climbs onto the bed, with Xander sitting next to me. Without a word, he flips me onto my stomach in the center of the bed and says, “Trust us, Jelly Bean.”

And the thing is, I do. I trust these men who call me Jelly Bean with such ease. Who have shown me at every turn that I’m safe with them.

Maverick comes up behind me, climbing on top of me. He grabs my hips and pulls me up, then reaches down, running his hand down my stomach until he reaches my pussy. Then he starts stroking.

My body reacts, my legs jerking in reaction. My nerves are coming alive. He’s stroking me softly and purposefully as his cock nudges my entrance.

Unable to help myself, I let my eyes flutter closed. I drink in the feeling of him pushing carefully into my body. My channel holds him tightly, tensing around him, making him curse, as he continues to slide into me.

“You feel so fucking good,” he groans. Then he says, “Touch her.”

Xander reaches between the mattress and body and begins to play with my pussy. At first, he seems uncertain. His touch is gentle and playful, but when I moan when he touches my clit, he gets bolder, stroking me harder as Maverick continues to sink into

me.

“You’re so sweet,” Xander groans.

My eyes flash open, and our gazes holds each other as he continues to play with me.

At last, I feel Maverick reach his hilt, and I’m breathing hard from the sheer size of him. Then he moves behind me, shifting higher. The movement changes the angle of his cock, and I moan again, surprised by just how good it feels.

“Alright, Xander, your turn,” Maverick says, panting.

His turn? For what?

Xander stops touching me and moves on the bed. He climbs on the bed, behind Maverick. I don’t have a clue what he’s going to do when I feel him pressing his cock into my pussy.

My entire body tenses, and Maverick runs a hand down my back. “Don’t worry, we’ve got you.”

I’m taking deep breaths. If I can barely fit Maverick inside of me, how the hell am I going to fit two of them in me? And is this going to be like when Ezra and Cayson were in my ass and pussy? Will it feel good because I have two of them inside of me, or will this just hurt?

Xander takes his time, slowly easing into me. Any time my body tightens, he pauses, waiting for me to adjust. A benefit to them getting me so worked up is that I’m wet, so his cock has something to naturally help it glide in. Still, it’s a lot.

I mean, a lot .

When Xander finally stops, it's hard to draw in full breaths. I just feel so... full. Like they filled up every square inch of me and now there's no room left inside of me. Yet, it doesn't feel bad. Just strange.

"How's that?" Maverick asks.

"You're big," I manage.

He chuckles. "I know this is strange, but it's going to feel so so good."

Before I can say more, he and Xander pull out of me. The instant loss of them allows me to draw in a full breath, but I instantly miss them. But even as that thought drifts through my mind, they slam back in.

My legs try to collapse but can't. My vision goes from black to white, and I'm gasping in breaths. Nerves that I didn't even know existed are awake and vibrating like the strings of a guitar.

Maverick reaches around and grabs my breasts, pinching my nipples, hard. The feeling draws my attention away from my pussy for the briefest moment before they pull out and slam back in again.

I'm lost. Drowning in a sea of pleasure. Each time I think I get my head above water, they pull out and slam back in. Maverick's fingers on my nipples, plucking and pinching, help to ground me, but it's not enough. This feels good. Way too good. Something dangerous is building inside of me, and I don't if I want to stop it or watch what it does.

They strike up a rhythm, working together, holding me in place. And I start to move beneath them, taking their thrusts in deeper each time they press into me, becoming an active participant, rather than just an object to be fucked.

The feeling of something building inside of me grows stronger and stronger. Their groans, the way they say my name...all of it adds to the incredible feeling until that something breaks inside of me, and I'm suddenly lost beneath the water.

I scream and scream, I'm not even sure what, as I ride the two cocks inside my pussy, loving the friction, loving knowing their dicks are sliding against each other, loving the fact that I have two incredible ferals who seem head over heels for me, bringing me such an incredible amount of pleasure.

They squirt inside of me. Their cum filling my body is like nothing I've ever experienced in my life. Their liquid gives more lubrication, and as I continue to ride them, goosebumps erupt all over my body.

We keep moving together for a long time, enjoying the sparks of pleasure that continue to radiate long after my orgasm calms, until at last I have nothing left. They pull out of me, each one laying on my side. We're all breathing hard, and my pussy is still squeezing, even with nothing left inside of me.

"That was... amazing," I whisper.

Xander takes my face in his hands. "You're sure?"

I kiss his hand. "I'm sure."

On my other side, Maverick sounds smug, "If you liked that, you're going to like the rest of the night I have planned for us."

I turn to him. "The rest of the night?"

He's grinning. "We've been waiting a long time for our mate. You can't imagine how many things I've imagined doing to you."

I shiver, and their hands move to my body, running over it, trying to chase my chill away, but instead, all it does is turn me on. I don't know what's happened to me, but, somehow, I've been changed forever.

21

E zra

The whiskey in my glass is a special batch, made in the capital city with proprietary ingredients and a secret process that only three craftsmen in the world know about. And yet, right now, it tastes like any other whiskey to me.

Because I can't stop thinking about Faye.

My mind tracks back to that first night here, when Cayson complained about me always getting the good rooms—and it's true. My father may not be the most powerful alpha, but he commands respect. People know how he cares for his pack, and how he always puts their needs first. Which is why I'm often privy to the best rooms.

And this one is no exception. It's near the top of the castle and has a large window. I have a clear view of the countryside from here. I sit in the window seat, back against the cool stone, one leg swinging down. My fingers curl around the whiskey glass, and I will the coolness to bring me back to my senses.

I don't need a mate. I don't want a mate. I did not come to The Selection intending to take an omega—I only wanted to fulfil my duties and return home as fast as possible.

But that was before Faye.

Prior to the dinner tonight, I hadn't thought much about what life would look like if I



actually took Faye as my omega, at least I didn't consciously think I had, and yet the picture of our life together came to me immediately. A life that includes Cayson, Maverick, and Xander, all three men whom I like. Now, a life with her seems like the most natural, simple scenario. Like my life before her has just been practice, preparation for the moment she finally arrives.

My life before flashes through in a series of memories, and the pain comes, like always, when I think of Katie. But now, it's muted, like I'm feeling it through a wall, rather than being hit in the face with it. The first day without Katie comes back to my mind, the first full day of my life that I had to live with the knowledge that she was gone, and now, with it, is an even more terrifying thought—that something might happen to Faye.

I push it away. I'd never allow it. There's no world in which I would allow her to be harmed again, by Kurt or anyone else.

No, our life together would be something special. Faye would always be safe, with four protective men to watch over her, and we would have the gentleness and love we need in our life, all thanks to our little omega. No doubt we'd have many kids together, and she'd be a wonderful mother. Somehow, I can even picture the four of us assholes as good fathers and husbands.

"What a crazy idea," I say, chuckling to myself.

Me, with a wife, kids, and males to complete my family. No longer remaining apart from the world, mourning the death of someone I can continue to appreciate without putting my life on hold for.

Yes, this is what I want. I want Faye, and the life we'll all have together.

"And I don't even feel guilty about it." I smile, shaking my head.

And... I don't. This just feels right. It's not just the correct decision, it's the only decision I could possibly make from the moment I met Faye.

When my next sip of whiskey comes back dry, I realize the glass is empty, and think that I should probably get to bed for the night. I set the glass next to the sink and start for the bathroom, but there's a knock on the door.

At first, I think it might be Cayson, here with a bottle of liquor, like usual, ready to toast to Maverick's little stunt or to talk about what to do with that bastard Kurt. Not that, again, the council would listen to a feral's word over an alpha's about the events of tonight. No doubt when Cayson begrudgingly accepts that, he'd move back to Maverick peeing on Kurt's clothes. He'd been peeved when he discovered I wasn't exactly jumping and cheering about what Maverick had done. Sure, it was amusing, but I'm not sure it was a good move. Poking Kurt had obviously only managed to piss him off more and put Faye even more in danger.

But when I get close to my door, I realize that the scent isn't Cayson's.

What in the hell is he doing here? Something must be wrong.

I open the door to find Lance, the ultima, waiting on the other side. "Good evening," I say, bowing my head as a sign of respect.

He's still in formal clothes, even this late at night. His blond hair is neatly styled. Power flows from him in a way that's always uncomfortable to be around.

He clears his throat and returns the greeting, his face grave. "Hello, Ezra, may I come in?"

"Of course."

I let him in immediately, glad that I keep my room tidy. It's constantly ready for surprise visitors. I picture Cayson's room and its ever-constant state of disarray, despite the housekeeper's best efforts. If Lance visited him in the middle of the night, he would be in for a big surprise.

"Thank you for receiving me," Lance says, the circles under his eyes just a little darker than usual. "I apologize for the late night visit, but I'm afraid it's urgent."

"No problem," I say, nodding and gesturing for him to sit at my table. "Would you like something to drink?"

"Your father has instilled some good manners in you," he says, laughing a bit as we take our seats across from each other, "but no, I don't plan to be here for long."

Interesting. I wonder what he could want. My thoughts instantly go to Faye, but I don't think she's hurt or in trouble. If she was, he'd be in here with a different kind of energy. Besides, the guards have remained by her door, their loyalty deepened by the money Cayson and I are supplying them.

So, what is this about?

"Alright," I say, touching my fingers together under the table and trying to calm my beating heart.

This can't be about Faye. My mind starts to go through the possible reasons he could be here. If something had happened back with my pack, surely Lance would not be so casual about everything.

"Ezra," Lance says, clearing his throat. "I should not be divulging this information to you, but I trust that you're capable of being discreet. Discreet meaning that it stays between you, your mate, and the men you've been bonded to."

“Of course.”

He hesitates for only a moment. “We’ve been doing an investigation of the girl’s murder,” Lance says, his voice dropping so low that I have to lean forward to hear what he’s saying. “I promised that we would, and we are taking the situation very seriously. Some of the evidence we’ve gathered—it points to Kurt’s involvement.”

Of course, I believed Faye when she said she recognized that death. That she saw the echo of her brother’s murder in the scene we came across. But here, now, hearing this from Lance himself, is a different experience entirely. I want to ask about the evidence, figure out what they’ve learned, but my instincts remind me not to push with an ultima.

Even as an alpha, I defer to him, and his subtle power pushes through the room, influencing me. I wonder if this is how Faye feels when she’s around an alpha.

“There’s not enough evidence to make an official accusation,” Lance says, “but it is certainly moving in that direction.”

“I see,” I say, managing to keep my voice steady. “What can I do to help?”

“Unfortunately, there isn’t a lot we can do at this junction,” Lance says, steepling his hands together on the table. “I’m outvoted in this matter, at every turn. The council is just hesitant to take action against a man as powerful as Kurt. Angering his father would not be beneficial to anyone, and we must be absolutely certain that he committed the crime before publicly tarnishing his name.”

Right—because Kurt’s good name is far more important than the lives of fellow shifters. “You know, Kurt has been far more violent with Faye than we’ve let on, knowing that her word won’t mean anything against his in front of the council.”

We both look at each other, remembering our conversation just a short time ago about Kurt in the greenhouse. Lance had been upset, but not surprised, promising to bring it up with the council. I can tell he did, and that it led to nothing from the look on his face.

“I can believe that, unfortunately. But like I said, I was outvoted on how to handle him. Kurt’s father is the kind of man who would stage an all-out-war with the other packs, should he feel his good name is being tarnished. The council is trying to avoid that at all costs,” Lance continues, almost as though he can sense that there’s more I could say. “I’m not a fan of Kurt’s general conduct, and I thought this was enough to warrant removing him from The Selection. But the other council members didn’t agree. I’m not sharing this information for you to take action—in fact, doing anything to interfere with the council’s investigation would be foolish. I’m simply telling you because this development might spur Kurt to take action.”

“You think he might go after Faye more aggressively,” I say, thinking of all the times he has managed to do just that—putting his hands on her, bursting into her room, fucking attacking her in the greenhouse. Tonight, Xander had filled us in on everything he’d done. My blood starts to heat, and I have to re-focus on Lance to keep my emotions in check.

“Nobody can be sure what a man like Kurt might do,” Lance says diplomatically. “But I could not, in good conscience, risk this happening to another omega.”

“I see,” I say, clearing my throat, the image of Faye dead in the woods like Serra, the unfortunate omega, making bile rise in my throat. If this isn’t proof that a bond is forming between us, I don’t know what is. Thinking of Faye’s death is like thinking of my own. “Thank you for telling me.”

“I trust you will not dishonor me by sharing this information with others outside of Faye and your men.”

“Your trust is well placed.”

Lance stands, and I show him to the door, my mind racing the entire time. What am I supposed to do with this information? The brutish, violent part of my mind insists that I just eliminate the threat—kill Kurt so he can’t hurt anyone else, and especially so he can’t hurt Faye.

But the more intelligent, composed part of my mind insists that there has to be a better alternative. And I’ll need to talk to the other alphas and Faye to come up with a plan.

22

Faye

Someone is always knocking on my door.

I wake to the sound, just barely managing to yank a blanket up over my naked body when Ezra and Cayson walk inside, their eyebrows shooting to their hairlines when they see me sandwiched between Maverick and Xander. Xander's arm is thrown over my torso, and Maverick is facedown in the mattress, his ass bare for everyone to see.

I'm so embarrassed that I feel like melting into the mattress and disappearing.

"Wake up," I hiss, smacking Maverick so he can cover himself, then scooting up the bed, so I can sit.

Ezra is politely averting his eyes while Cayson is laughing and making some crude joke I can't hear over the roaring in my ears. How is it that I walked into these games a virgin with literally zero knowledge of men, and now I've had four different guys in my bed? These guys must have changed some fundamental part of me. How? I have no idea.

"Uoof ," Maverick groans, not opening his eyes.

"Good morning, sleeping beauty," Cayson says and laughs, tossing his ball so it bounces off of Maverick, who lifts his face sleepily, grinning at the other alphas.

Xander stirs next to me as well, but he's wearing boxers, at the very least. I don't know when he put them on, but I'm grateful that he did. It makes this awful situation just a little more bearable.

Maverick yawns. "Sorry, I had quite the workout last night."

"A workout?" Xander asks, frowning. "I'm tired from all the things our mate did in bed."

"Gods," I mutter, my cheeks burning.

"Good morning," Xander murmurs, pulling me close and planting a kiss on my cheek.

My face feels like it's on fire, and I wait for Cayson and Ezra's reactions, but they both seem to be enjoying this situation a lot. Way too much, actually.

"It seems you had a good night, too," Ezra says, grinning.

"It looks like our little Faye worked them hard. Maybe too hard. Try to leave some liquid in their bodies next time." Cayson sits on the edge of the bed, while I press my hands to my flaming cheeks, and tickles Xander's feet with a throw pillow.

"Actually ," Maverick begins, casting a smile my way as he slips into boxers, "I prefer my liquid exactly where it is. I just think you wish you were here."

"Yeah, let's make it a party bus next time," Cayson says, wiggling his eyebrows as Xander sits up and grabs the pillow from him, then tosses it across the room. "I call shotgun."

Wait. What the hell is shotgun? Are they talking about what I think they're talking



about?

“Well, I call front seat,” Maverick says, patting his lap.

Oh my gosh, they are!

“Gods,” I say, wrapping the sheet securely around me. “Shut up .”

“Obviously I’m driving,” Ezra says, pretending to examine his nails.

“I’m happy in the back,” Xander says quietly, which makes the guys burst out in laughter again.

Despite how crass it is, and how embarrassed I am, the thought of being with all of them at once sends ripples of want through me. What would it be like? Could I even handle that?

How can it be that before meeting them, I was okay with the idea of being celibate for the rest of my life? And now, here I am, ready to go again after days and days of being with these men in different ways.

“As much fun as this is,” Ezra says, clearing his throat, “there is actually something that we need to talk about.”

My heart plummets into my stomach—is Ezra going to tell the others about our scheme? For some reason, I’m more worried about that than that he has any problem with what’s going on between us. Or has something else happened? I think of how much he cares about his pack, and as much as I know he cares about me, I also know that he would leave in a second if his pack needed his help.

“Lance came to speak with me last night.”

“Lance, the ultima?” Maverick asks, the smile slipping off his face as he sits up, scooting back so he can sit next to me on the bed. He pulls the blanket over us and takes my hand.

Wordlessly, Xander scoots up to sit at my other side. Sandwiched between the two big men, their body heat caressing me, my anxiety eases, if only by a little bit.

“Right,” Ezra says, clearing his throat and pulling up a chair. Cayson is sprawled out at the end of the bed, and grabs his ball from the floor before tossing it.

“That can’t be good,” Xander says, his voice gruff.

“He came to tell me that Kurt is suspected of involvement with the murder.”

“What murder?” Maverick asks, his eyes darting from me to Ezra.

Ezra looks to me, as though giving me the option to explain things if I want.

I can’t even open my mouth. They’re actually doing an investigation? And they might have found evidence proving that Kurt did it? Maybe nobody will ever believe me about my brother—but Kurt going away for this would be something, far better than how things are now. Knowing that he was locked up, unable to get to me, unable to come knock on my door—it would remove so much of my daily anxiety.

“Seems like there’s a bit of backstory to fill in here,” Ezra says, taking a deep breath and running a hand through his hair. It falls right back into place, perfectly, as though he never touched it.

“Seems like it,” Xander repeats.

“Okay, well,” Ezra says, clearing his throat again. “You may or may not know this,

but Faye's brother was murdered, and it was Kurt who killed him. When she went to her pack and tried to tell them what had happened, they dismissed her because of Kurt's political standing."

Maverick's hand tightens on mine under the blanket, and tears prick at my eyes. I wonder if the day will ever come when I don't mourn for my brother. Except, I am grateful that by bringing these men into my heart, it's eased some of the pain from losing him. I haven't replaced him, I just have people to be with me when I'm struggling now.

Ezra continues. "As you know from last night, Kurt is an asshole who wants to hurt Faye, but you don't know the background of it all. When we came to The Selection, Kurt started to use his position as an alpha to take advantage of Faye. He assaulted her multiple times, and has been threatening her relentlessly, supposedly as revenge for daring to report him for his crimes."

I swallow thickly, watching as the men in the room all hear my tragic backstory. But there's not an ounce of pity on their faces—instead, I see only lethal intent. Maverick and Xander haven't even heard the whole story yet, and they already look like they might go at Kurt.

"We were out, shifted in the woods and going for a run, when we found an omega—Serra—that we'd all gotten to know. Dead. And she was killed in the same fashion as Faye's brother. When we went to the council with it, they practically dismissed us."

"Exactly like what happened at home," I breathe, and I feel Xander press his body closer to mine, his touch calming me.

"Right," Ezra says, his eyes softening when he looks at me, before returning to Maverick and Xander. "His most recent attempt to control and bully her was to claim

her as his omega. Neither Cayson nor I were intending to take an omega during The Selection, but we stood in, also claiming her so we could help to dissolve any sort of claim Kurt might have on her. Also, so we would have a better position to interfere and keep him away from her. But the ultimas, Hector in particular, are insistent that Faye explore the mating bond with Kurt.”

So, now they know, but what will they think?

“I see,” Maverick says, glancing at me. “That explains a lot.”

“So your bond with Faye is fake...?” Xander asks softly.

I avert my gaze, embarrassed. “They faked the bond to protect me.”

“You guys are claiming this isn’t real?” Maverick is almost laughing at the idea.

“Our bond is something... we need to talk about. Privately. Very soon,” Ezra says, and when our gazes meet, his expression is serious.

I shiver. Does he mean what I hope he means?

“What did Lance say when you spoke with him?” Xander asks, his leg still pressed firmly against mine, but his eyes on Ezra.

“He came to my room last night to tell me that they’ve found some evidence to implicate Kurt in the crime, but that it’s not enough. Apparently, Lance was outvoted in his proposal to remove Kurt from The Selection. The ultima is worried that, if Kurt hears about this attempt to remove him, he might become even more violent toward Faye.”

“Let him fucking try,” Maverick says, his eyes blazing. His hand tightens even more,

sliding up my arm, an anchor to the ground. I feel such a rush of affection for him that it's like a shock to my system.

“Right,” Cayson says, his eyes skipping throughout the room, landing on each of the other men. “So, we're all agreeing that there's not a chance Kurt gets within ten feet of her?”

“Agreed,” Xander says.

“It would be a good idea,” Ezra agrees. “We need to be extra careful with Faye, moving forward. We need to always assume Kurt is lurking in the shadows to attack her. The guard needs to remain at the door. Any time she leaves this room, at least one of us needs to be at her side.”

I let out a breath, trying to keep control of my emotions, but even with all of them here, I still can't stop picturing Kurt and what he might do if he gets his hands on me. I gasp a little, trying to get some air, and Xander looks at me in alarm.

“Give her some space,” Ezra says, standing and coming to the edge of the bed.

Maverick and Xander back off a little, and I push myself up a little further, tipping my head back and inhaling desperately.

“We're not going to let anything happen to you,” Ezra says, and the others nod in agreement.

Gently, each of them places a hand on me, and it's the right amount of support—enough to be comforting without being stifling. I let my head fall onto Maverick's shoulder, relief washing through me.

Kurt doesn't stand a chance against my four alphas. For the first time in a long time, I

don't need to worry about him hurting me. Right?

I don't know.

Cayson smiles at me. "Tell you what. How about tomorrow, during free time, we plan a surprise for you?"

I return his smile. "I would love that."

That sounds like just what I need.

23

Faye

Please report to the carriage house for a special surprise.

I re-read the instruction again, standing in front of the carriage house. I'm wearing a dress with a long coat, but the early morning breeze whips around my ankles, making me shiver. It's strange that there are no other omegas out here, but maybe they've staggered our departures for the purpose of the game. Maybe it's some sort of scavenger hunt.

No doubt the second my men get their instructions they'll be bolting over here, not wanting me to be alone. They were very clear about the fact that I should never be on my own. In all honesty, I probably wouldn't have left my room if I wasn't expecting to see them here.

"Where are they?" I ask softly, staring around at the quiet morning.

Knowing them, they have something planned.

Bouncing on my heels, I try to contain my excitement. No matter what the game is, I'm actually excited to see my alphas. I think about how they'd gathered around me yesterday, their hands on me protectively. I'm not sure what's going to happen to us in the future, but I'm glad to have them here with me now.

"Good morning," I say to the driver, when the carriage finally pulls up.

The driver just nods, hopping out of the carriage and helping me inside. It's a posh carriage, with thick, red velvet interior trimming. The Selection is many things, but it's definitely fancy. It makes all of us omegas feel like princesses, even though we're princesses who are sort of being sold off.

We pull away from the castle and start down the main road that leads from the castle. I keep waiting for us to stop, expecting whatever our next game is to take place somewhere relatively close by, but the carriage keeps moving. Smiling, I think about which of the guys I'll be paired up with next. They won't let Kurt near me, so I don't have to worry about him any longer. I just get to look forward to a day spent with some, if not all, of the amazing men I can't stop thinking about.

I glance out the window and realize we're nearly leaving the castle grounds, which must mean we're going to the city. It will be nice to get away for the day. I wonder if we'll be visiting some of the nearby towns, maybe chatting with the villagers and getting to know more about their farms and livestock.

Exactly the kind of thing I might be doing if I bond with the four alphas. The fact that that doesn't send shivers running down my arms is a testament to how much I've changed since arriving here. I'm, somehow, open to the idea of a future with all four men in it, even if it's a future I never planned for.

"A future with four men." I laugh a little at the absurdity of it all.

Me, married to four men. Having kids. Living in a town. It's like nothing I ever wanted and maybe everything I needed, even if I don't entirely know what Cayson and Ezra think of the whole idea.

I have to hold onto the sides of the carriage as we go over uneven ground, and I shake my head a little at how crazy all of it is—The Selection and their strange games, always pushing us further and further to try and help us find our mates. It all seemed so stupid, but it also seems to have worked.



Finally, the carriage comes to a stop, and when I look out the window, I realize it's in the middle of a large, barren field surrounded by the woods. The driver appears at the door. He opens it and helps me down again, his face a passive, blank slate. He won't give the game away to me.

When I'm firmly on my own two feet, the driver climbs back onto the carriage and leads the horses away from the field, getting back on the road and heading for the castle. I watch it go for a moment, pulling my coat tighter around my body.

The sun is fully up over the horizon now, but it's just a tiny pinprick, barely coming through the gray cloud cover and the dense fog hanging over the ground. I put the hood up on my coat as another shiver runs up and down my arms.

Where are they? What are the instructions for this game?

"Okay," I call, laughing and skipping a bit. "You guys can come out now!"

I scan the dense line of trees on the other side of the field, looking for my men. My alphas.

"Ezra?" I shout, cupping my hands around my mouth and projecting my voice into the field. "Come on, come tell me what the game is!"

A moment later, still none of them have appeared.

"Cayson?" I call, turning on my heel and scanning around me. A haunting, overly-aware feeling of apprehension crawls up my back, and I suddenly realize that I'm standing in the middle of a field, alone, waiting for my alphas to come out.

"Maverick?"

My voice is laced with the tiniest bit of desperation now, a hint of panic touching at

the bottom of my throat.

“Xander?”

Still nothing.

“Guys !”

“Hello, Faye.”

A dread I’ve come to associate with Kurt blooms through my body like a drop of ink in a glass of water. I struggle to breathe as I turn, coming face-to-face with Kurt, who’s grinning like he’s just won a prize.

At once, I see my brother’s face, his neck at the wrong angle, his eyes staring off into nothing, and I’m certain that it’s about to happen to me, too. Kurt is here, like some sort of familial curse. I think of how confident I’d been that day during the fashion show, and I wish I could summon that courage now.

But I can’t.

I’m trembling, unable to breathe.

“They aren’t here, Faye,” he says, frowning and tilting his head, like I’m a child who’s been dropped at school for the first time, looking for her parents. “And they aren’t coming. Today, we’re playing a new kind of game.”

“A new kind of game?” I pant, terror in my voice.

A slow, cruel smile tilts his lips. “One I’m going to win.”