



BRO AND THE BEAST

JOEL ABERNATHY WRITING MPREG AS

L.C. DAVIS

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PART 1

L.C. DAVIS

JOEL ABERNATHY

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When musclebound frat bro Brad gets run off the road by a reckless driver, he thinks it's game over. When he wakes up inside his twin brother's favorite corny shifter romance novel, he realizes the real game is just beginning.

Desperate to get back to a world where he's top dog, Brad finds himself in the crosshairs of Raul, the menacingly hot hero of *The Wolf's Mate*, who's intent on teaching Brad a whole new meaning to the word alpha.

Not only does Raul insist that Brad is an omega—*his* omega—but Brad is going to have to come to terms with the fact that he isn't just a part of this fictional world. He's a stand-in for the main character, and the only way out is to make sure he gets to his happily ever after.

CHAPTER
ONE



“Are you still reading that crap?”

Devon looks up at me from the hardcover book plastered with some jacked dude with long, flowing black hair and golden eyes that reflect the light whenever the book turns even slightly. He gives me a familiar scowl. "*The Wolf's Mate* isn't 'crap,' it's literary genius. But since it's not about some Gary Stu asshole who gets magically transported into his MMORPG harem of busty goth chicks, I wouldn't expect you to get it."

I snort, reaching over and snatching the book out of his hands.

"Hey!" he cries, diving over the back of the couch in an attempt to grab it back, but I'm already halfway across the room. Devon and I are twins, but I still have a few inches of height on him, and all I have to do is hold the book out of his reach. That's probably why he gives up immediately and just sits there with his hands on the back of the couch, glowering at me.

"Let's have a look at this 'literary genius,'" I taunt, examining the page he's on. I clear my throat and begin to read. "Catalina froze like a deer in the path of a wolf as Raul stared her down from across the crowded room, and a wolf he was. The socialites gathered in the ballroom around them might not have known his true nature, but they were instinctively wary of the man's domineering alpha energy. Even in a three-piece suit fit for the black tie affair, he looked huge, his broad, muscled chest barely contained by the well-tailored fabric. His piercing golden eyes seemed to cut through her very soul like a knife, full of predatory intent. Her first instinct upon seeing him was to freeze in terror, but the searing lust that stirred within her loins was a far more self-destructive impulse."

More glowering.

I raised an eyebrow at him. "Yeah, this is some real groundbreaking shit. Just out of curiosity, how can a suit be well-tailored if the guy's busting out of it? Sounds like he needs to lay off the protein shakes."

"You are such an ass," Devon mutters, jumping over the back of the couch and stalking over to try to snatch the book out of my hands. I dangle it just out of his reach, unable to resist fucking with him. His eyes are the same shade of green as mine, but they look a few shades darker in his rage.

The physical similarities between us end with our dark hair and eye color. He's still the skinny kid we both were in high school until I decided I was done getting bullied and put on a ton of muscle. He

keeps his hair long and uses way too much product to keep it shiny while I just use the same bar of soap I use to wash everything else and let mine do whatever it wants until it gets annoying enough to make a trip to the barber. He coordinates his cable knit sweaters with his khakis and loafers, but when I'm not in my gym clothes, I just wear jeans and whichever T-shirt I grab first. Even for fraternal twins, we really are complete opposites, and those are just the physical differences.

"Come on. You're the nerd who was always reading books by snooty dead guys back in high school. You can't tell me you actually think this vampire shit is good."

Devon clutches his book protectively against his chest. "You can like the classics *and* paranormal romance. It's not mutually exclusive. And it's shifters, FYI."

"Right. That makes it so much better."

He rolls his eyes. "Of course you wouldn't get it," he grumbles, walking over to the coffee table to grab his bookmark and tuck it lovingly between the pages. The loft apartment we share downtown is spacious enough that he has his part of the living room and I have mine, with a shared big screen TV in between. The TV cost a whole month's salary at the garage, but it was worth it since gaming is *my* preferred method of escapism.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?" I demand, folding my arms.

"Nothing," he says with a shrug.

"Nah, you said it. Man up and finish the thought," I say gruffly.

He heaves a bored sigh and leans against the couch. "You don't have a romantic bone in your body, Brad. Of course you think it's stupid, but not everyone's content with one-night stands and friends with benefits."

"Now who's judging?"

"I'm not judging, I'm just saying, you wouldn't get the appeal of escaping when you get everything you want in reality."

I scoff a laugh. "Are you serious right now?"

"Am I wrong?" he challenges. "Women fling themselves at you like you're a fucking rock star, and your frat buddies worship the ground you walk on. You've never had to work for a damn thing in your life, except maybe your abs."

"Yeah, right. I guess I just spend half my time covered in grease fixing people's cars for the hell of it," I shoot back.

"So you work part-time as a mechanic," he says dryly. "We both know as soon as we graduate, you're gonna go work some cushy corporate job for one of your Kappa Nu bros' rich daddies and spend your days fucking models and playing golf."

"Oh, fuck off," I growl. "So what if I use my connections to get ahead? I worked damn hard for them, instead of spending the best years of my life holed up in my room reading trash and thinking I'm so much better than everyone else because I don't even try to fit in."

"At least I know who I am! I'd rather not fit in than change everything about myself just to become a fake asshole who looks and thinks and talks like everyone else."

"Keep telling yourself that," I say, taking a step toward him. "You're always the victim, aren't you? Poor, special, unique little Devon, always so misunderstood. If only some big, strong alpha male would come along and see you for the swan you really are. You ever stop to think maybe the reason you can't find a boyfriend is because you're the asshole? Because you're so convinced everyone else is gonna judge you, you have to judge them first before you even give them a chance?"

The moment the words are out of my mouth, I know I went too far, but the hurt in his gaze is immediately eclipsed by anger. "You're right. I should just settle, like you. Settle for mediocre grades and meaningless relationships and friends who only like you when you're drunk."

I clench my jaw, trying to remind myself I can't deck the little punk because it wouldn't be a fair fight anymore, unlike when we were kids. "Okay, maybe I have settled. But I'd rather settle for a reality I can actually feel and see and enjoy instead of living in a fantasy world where everything ends in a happily ever after."

He gives an exasperated growl. "That's my fucking point! You don't get it. The real world bends itself around your whims, but that's not the world I live in. That world is hard and cold and boring as hell, and the few guys I do meet are either homophobes or closet cases who think I'm good enough to fuck behind closed doors, but not to be seen out on a date with in public. That's my reality, and yeah, I'm okay with escaping it once in a while to live in a better one. One where love is real, and it's okay to be different, and everything works out okay in the end. If you wanna judge me for that, fine."

I frown, realizing he takes this all a lot more seriously than I ever imagined. I don't really know what to say. I know I should say something, but I'm still trying to figure out what when he grabs his jacket and his keys and stalks toward the front door.

"Hey, where are you going?" I call after him.

"Out," is all he says before slamming the door shut hard enough that the shelf next to it rattles.

For a second, I think about going after him, but when he gets like this, it's better just to let him cool off and apologize later. Everyone thinks I'm the one with the temper just because of the way I look, but at least I have an outlet.

I sigh and collapse on the couch, since I have the night off and I'm not due to meet the guys at the party for another few hours. I turn on the TV, but there's nothing on cable, and I've either watched all the good shit on our streaming channels or promised I'd watch it with Devon. He's already pissed enough, so I reach for my game controller, but my fingertips brush the book instead.

I glance over at the muscular werewolf on the cover. "Thanks a lot, asshole," I mutter.

There is a part of me that's curious, though. I was kind of being a dick, and while Devon upped the ante, I was the one who started it. Maybe if I skim this book he's so obsessed with and at least feign interest, he'll be quicker to forgive me.

I love my brother. I really do, more than anyone or anything. As different as we are, he's my best friend, and I don't want there to be this separation between us, especially not over something so petty.

It isn't like I *meant* to be an asshole. It's always just come easily, like sports and keg stands.

I try starting at the beginning of the book, but my attention span is way too short for that, so I skip ahead until I stick on some weird shit about alphas and omegas. It figures shifters would have alphas, given their proximity to real wolves and all that, but I'm pretty sure omega wolves are supposed to be at the bottom of the hierarchy. The way they talk about them in this book, they're just... bottoms. In a very different context.

The main character is one, and there's some drama about her running away from her pack to escape a forced marriage to an alpha who sounds like a total douchebag. I can tell he isn't the love interest on account of how she isn't always thinking about his abs.

Then enters the real love interest, another douchebag named Raul, except that he has dreamy eyes and she likes his scent or some shit. They meet at a bar and lock eyes for a few moments that would have sent me packing immediately. Who just eye fucks a perfect stranger right there in the middle of the dance floor?

She gets all lightheaded and her panties melt, though, because she immediately knows he's a shifter, too. And an alpha. I'm starting to think the sketchier a guy is, the greater the chance he's an alpha.

The main character panics, since she's sure he was sent to bring her back, and she makes a beeline for the nearest exit. Except the club is totally packed, and some idiot is blocking the hall and he freaks when she runs into him. He grabs her by the wrist and pushes her up against the wall, which no one else even bats an eye at because they're all fucking pussies or whatever, but the werewolf I'm pretty sure qualifies as a stalker comes to the rescue. He barely lays a finger on the drunk, but he eye-fucks him in a different way. The guy skitters off, intimidated by his raw masculine energy or whatever.

By this point, RIP the main character's panties.

He gets all chivalrous and tries to make sure she's all right, but she excuses herself and flees the bar, as if a guy who spends that much time making sure his hair is perfectly tousled is just going to give up and leave it at that.

She wants to call a cab, and by some miracle, she actually makes it out to the parking lot without dicks-for-eyes bothering her. The whole time, she feels like she's being watched, though. And yet, despite the fact that this chick is being pursued by like thirty different werewolves, she thinks she's just being paranoid.

Everything is going good until she sees flashing lights in the rearview on a remote stretch of the highway going anywhere away from the area. She thinks she's just got the worst luck ever, but the driver pulls over, and when the cop gets out, she holds her breath, hoping it's not the dude from the bar.

And it isn't. It is, however, another shifter. A beta, but he's fucking huge. Bro eats iron nails for breakfast, and even though his eyes are hidden behind thick aviators despite the fact that it's eleven at night, she knows they're the same honey gold she hides behind brown contacts. The driver's like, "Hey, I didn't break any traffic laws," and the cop looks back into the backseat and says he wants the main character to step out of the car.

Okay, now she knows she's definitely fucked. She's just not sure if this guy was tipped off by her crazy fiancé, or the also-crazy-but-decidedly-sexier dude back at the bar. She gets out of the car and decides to play it innocent, hoping he'll be on somewhat good behavior in front of the human driver. He tells her to cut the bullshit and says she has two options. She can come the easy way and the human goes off to enjoy the rest of his night with a weird story to tell his buddies about the wanted criminal he almost transported across state lines, or the unpleasant way. The way that doesn't end so good for the human.

The main character thinks about how she could shift. She has a pretty clean shot to the woods, and this dude is jacked, but she's smaller and probably faster, so she has a decent chance to escape. Except she would have to call his bluff about hurting the human, and there's a damn good chance it's not a bluff at all. In the end, she reluctantly lets him put her into the back of the squad car and he takes off, refusing to tell her where they're going. All he'll say is that he works for the creepy guy from the nightclub, whose name she learns is Raul.

It's just about to get to the good part as they drive through a set of huge iron gates and approach this mansion that looks like it's from an old film when my alarm goes off to remind me about picking up drinks for the party.

Even though I brought drinks last time.

Maybe just one more chapter.

CHAPTER
TWO



One chapter turns into five, and while I've always had a hard time slogging through my textbooks, it's like the pages just fly by. It's like I'm watching a movie in my head, and despite the fact that this bitch keeps making supremely stupid decisions that make me wonder if it's her first time outside of the house, I can't bring myself to stop.

"Come on, Catalina, what are you thinking? This dude is obviously some kinda serial killer," I mutter, flipping the page.

I'm so wrapped up in the story that I barely notice the time until my phone buzzes with a text from Craig asking where I am.

I pause for a moment, trying to remember what it was he wanted me to do. All of my thoughts have been consumed by this fucking head movie thing. One question after another keeps cropping up in my mind.

If this dude is really such an alpha, then why doesn't he just challenge the dissenters in his pack to a drinking contest to assert dominance?

If this chick is a runaway omega, how the hell has she not gone into heat before? She mentions she takes suppressants given to her by her pack doctor so the alphas back home don't go nuts, but she's been gone long enough to have run out by now and that's not the kind of thing you can just pop by a CVS and buy.

I mean, she has to have come across other werewolves since she's been on the road. You'd think they'd notice she has magical werewolf pussy if it's so fucking irresistible that this alpha douchebag can't keep his hands off her just because she's in heat all of a sudden, because of his pheromones or whatever.

And what the fuck is all this shit about his knot? How the hell does bro fit into a jockstrap if that thing's sitting down there all the time? Or is it just when he has a hard-on?

I've never been so invested in another guy's junk unless you count that time Stupid Steve decided to see if his dick would stick to a frozen lamp post—hence how he got the nickname Stupid Steve—and I'm really not sure what to make of that, but one thing is for sure.

I. Am. Invested.

In this story, I mean. Not the werewolf dick. I ain't gay.

Not that there's anything wrong with being gay. I'm just not. I mean, I like watching movies about aliens invading Earth, but that doesn't mean I wanna stick my dick in a little green man.

Or woman. But if I did, it would definitely be alien pussy. Not alien dick. Unless it's on a chick.

My phone buzzes again with another text from Craig whining about how I'm not there to play wingman to his drunken idiot as he tries to hit on random Delta Phis he doesn't have a chance in hell with.

I groan, setting the book aside and shooting him a text to tell him to keep his panties on and I'll be there in ten.

To be fair, it's really not like me to miss a kegger, and as tempted as I am to stay home and sit this one out, I can't justify it to myself. Even if no one else would find out why.

I'll just show up to the party, grab a few beers and then sneak away to the back deck for some alone time with my new best friend, Catalina and her freak-dicked werewolf boyfriend.

I unplug my phone from the charger, throw it in my pocket and grab my keys.

It's time to get this party started.

It's raining by the time I get outside, which is nothing new in this fucking town, so I tuck the borrowed book into my jacket for safe keeping. The last thing I need is Devon bitching at me for getting his book soaked.

I jump into my truck and start the engine, cranking the heat and turning on the wipers. The roads are slick with rain, but I'm getting used to driving in these conditions.

I switch on the radio, blasting my favorite tunes as I cruise down the street. With the monotony of the rain pitter-pattering against my windshield and the music lulling me into a daze, I don't notice the car coming toward me is driving on the wrong side of the road until it's too late.

The sudden impact throws me hard against my seatbelt. The airbag deploys with a loud bang, momentarily blinding me and knocking the wind out of me.

My truck spins out of control for what seems like an eternity before finally coming to a stop. Spots swim before my eyes as I hear a voice shouting something I can't make out. The light from the jackass's headlights is painful and I squeeze my eyes shut, but it doesn't stop. My world continues to spin and the darkness becomes more insistent until I know the only way to escape is to close my eyes and succumb to it.

There are only two thoughts in my brain as I lose my grip on consciousness. The first is regret that sets in immediately as I realize the last time I saw my brother, we got into a stupid fight over a stupid book, and the second is that I'm never going to get to find out how that stupid book ends.

CHAPTER

THREE



I slowly blink my eyes open and stare in confusion at the cracked pavement beneath me. The overhead lights are obscured by the rain, but a dim glow comes from the street lamp across the street. I hear the distinct sound of raindrops tapping against the pavement, and I blink again as one lands right in my damn eye.

Where am I? What the fuck happened?

As I take in my surroundings, it slowly dawns on me. I'm laying next to a car I don't recognize on a street I don't know. My memory quickly comes back, but now my current circumstances make even less sense.

How am I still alive? I got hit head-on by a car that had to be going a solid sixty at least.

There's no sign of the car that hit me, though. Or my truck. Just this unremarkable sedan on the side of the road.

I haul myself to my feet, dizzy but miraculously unhurt as far as I can tell. A quick rifle through the sedan's various compartments reveals there's no sign of my phone, either.

I get back into the car even though the idea of going away for grand theft auto is not my idea of a fun Friday evening, but what choice do I really have? I turn the key in the ignition, but the engine won't turn over.

Shit.

I pop the hood and get out to inspect it, but while I'm perfectly at home in a good old-fashioned muscle car's innards, I've never even seen this make and model and there's nothing that jumps out at me as being the reason the car won't start. There's nothing on the hood or in the interior of the car that even indicates who made it, so it has to be some kind of custom build, as shitty as it is.

That's when it hits me. I have no choice but to walk if I want to find help.

The rain is coming down harder now, and I'm already soaked by the time I reach the nearest crossroads. The night sky is full of stars, and a half moon hangs low in the sky, providing a little light as I trudge through mud and puddles.

There's not a single damn car on this country road. How the hell did I even get out here? Pretty sure

the campus is nowhere near, considering how many stars I can see in the sky despite the rainclouds masking half the sky.

Devon is probably having a meltdown by now. I feel a twinge of guilt for the way things ended between us. I have no idea how I'm alive, or what the fuck is going on, but I do know the first thing I'm gonna do when I see him again is apologize.

I spot a flicker of light up ahead off a dirt road. I make my way towards it, and as I get closer, I can make out the outline of a building. It's an old-fashioned-looking tavern and there's a big neon sign out front labeled DUSTY'S.

Hey... isn't that the name of the bar where the heroine met the werewolf in that book? I let out a dry chuckle. Great, I'm hallucinating now.

Or dreaming.

I'm really not sure which is worse.

I take a deep breath and push open the door, feeling an odd sense of comfort wash over me when I step inside the cozy atmosphere of Dusty's. The bar is packed, and I'm pretty sure that every resident in wherever the fuck this is is somehow here. I sure as hell don't recognize a single one of them.

I make my way up to the bar and take a seat, feeling a little bit more at ease when I catch sight of the bartender. He's an older man with kind eyes, and he looks at me with a gentle smile as I approach him.

"What can I get ya, son?" he asks in a thick Southern accent.

"Actually, I'm kind of lost," I reply, embarrassed. "I don't suppose you know where I am?"

He looks at me confusedly for a moment before replying. "You're in Heartland, son," he says with a chuckle.

Of course I'm dreaming I'm in the same town from that damn book. Wonder when the eyefucker's gonna show up.

The bartender notices my distress and sets a glass of whiskey in front of me. "Here ya go. Looks like you could use a drink."

"Uh, thanks," I say, fishing into my pocket to make sure my wallet hasn't done a disappearing act, too. This might be a dream, but I really don't want to spend the night washing dream dishes.

I take a sip and he smiles at me knowingly. "Now, why don't you tell me what brought you here tonight," he says with a twinkle in his eye.

I've lived on this planet for twenty-two fucking years and I've never seen someone's eyes twinkle. Something is very, very wrong with this place.

"Uh. Just needed to get out of the rain, I guess."

He seems about to say something when a customer hollers at him from further down the bar, already three sheets to the wind. "Pardon me," he says before going to attend to the man's rowdy group.

I take a few gulps of beer to steady my nerves. Once the bartender comes back over to my end of the bar, I nod to him. "Hey, Mister. You got a phone I could use? I lost my cell."

"Your cell?" he echoes, tilting his head in confusion.

Shit. I forgot, the book is set in the early '80s for some fucking reason. Probably so the author can get away with lazy plot devices that the characters can't settle by just making a two-second phone call.

"Never mind," I sigh.

"There's a phone back there," he says, nodding toward the hallway on the other side of the bar.

"Thanks," I say, dropping a five to cover my beer even though it's probably only ten fucking cents in this era. I slide off the stool and walk down the hall where I find a payphone waiting outside the bathroom.

Haven't seen one of these in a long time. I remember the last time was at a Walmart in Tucson during the cross-country roadtrip I dragged Devon on to celebrate our high school graduation. He made me take a picture of him standing next to it, like it was a damn tourist attraction.

I pick up the phone and dial Devon's number, which gives me hope, since I usually can't figure out how to dial a number in a dream, but all I get is a disconnected tone. My heart sinks.

That's not possible. Not if I'm in the real world. Which means...

Shit, what the hell am I supposed to do now?

My head is spinning, so I go into the bathroom to splash some cold water on my face and try to calm down.

So I'm in a dream. All that means is I have to wake up eventually. And I might as well enjoy myself in the meantime.

When I leave the bathroom, I look around the bar and take in the sights and sounds of this strange place. The music is old-school country, with a twangy fiddle that almost makes me want to dance. The walls are adorned with photos of old cowboy stars, and every now and then someone will break out into a honky-tonk tune.

The people here are friendly and welcoming, sipping drinks at the bar or playing cards at the tables. Some of them even give me a nod when I pass by, as if they've seen me around before, even though there's no way that's possible.

Where the fuck is Heartland, again? Pretty sure it's in Texas in the book, so I guess it's true what they say about people being friendlier down here. If I were back in Massachusetts, I'd have been flipped off six times by now, minimum.

There's an empty pool table across the room, so I figure, what the hell? Why not?

I grab a pool cue and start lining up my shots. It's kind of nice to have something to distract me from the weirdness of this place. I eventually find myself in the middle of a game with two other guys, both local regulars who seem amused by my presence but don't ask too many questions.

We shoot the shit, and whenever I make a slip-up that makes it clear I'm not from around here—or from this time—they're drunk enough they just shrug it off. One of them even buys me another round of beer. I'm having fun, all things considered, but it occurs to me that if I am in some kind of lucid dream, I'm probably wasting my time by doing something so mundane.

Then I remember. There's a karaoke machine across the room, so I go up and start singing *My Way*, which is something I'd never do back home, but what the hell. It's a dream.

I'm having a blast and everyone loves it when someone comes in and belts out classic tunes like this one. As I finish the song, there are whistles and claps from all over the bar. Even the bartender's eyes are twinklier. Definitely a main character moment for me.

That's when I notice the door open, and in walks a familiar face.

Raul.

He looks exactly like he did in my mind movie, with the same dark eyes, wavy black hair and sun-kissed skin. Unlike all the other schmucks in here who are wearing flannel, jeans and cowboy boots, he's dressed in a sleek black suit that looks like it cost a small fortune. His eyes are solid gold, so sharp they could cut diamond, and they're looking right at me. Like he's trying to stab me with his pupils or some shit.

The intensity of his stare is unsettling, to say the least. I'm pretty sure I've never looked at anything or anyone that way, except maybe a twenty-ounce sirloin at Longhorn.

I look over my shoulder instinctively, half-expecting the heroine with the magical werewolf pussy to be standing behind me. When I realize that nope, it's just me and the weird ghostly cutouts of Frank Sinatra that are floating by on the karaoke screen as the song replays itself, this goes from awkward to hell fucking no real fast.

"Uh, here," I say, shoving the microphone into the hand of the nearest drunk before I sprint off the stage.

No way I'm sticking around for this shit. I wanted to finish the book, not live in it.

That's what I get for reading. I'm sticking to action movies with oily shirtless dudes and WWE from now on. Nothing good ever comes from literature.

CHAPTER
FOUR



I'm halfway to the door when Mr. Knife Eyes intercepts me, coming out of nowhere. How the hell have these bumpkins not figured out he's a werewolf by now if he's teleporting all over the damn place like a complete weirdo?

"You there," he says, putting his hand out to stop me. It rests against my chest, and while I really don't like being touched by strangers, I'm not expecting the way my heart ker-thumps against the wall of my chest like it's trying to get out.

What the hell?

I thought that line was just an exaggeration. That or the heroine has undiagnosed POTS.

Why the fuck am I feeling this shit?

Am I...?

Nope. No, I'm not even gonna entertain that thought.

"You got a problem, buddy?" I ask, taking his hand and pushing it off my chest. I try to ignore the literal spark that runs through my fingers at the touch.

Just static shock. That's all.

Raul gives me a long, measured look. His gaze is so intense, I can almost feel it burning my skin. I feel a weird heat rising to my cheeks, but I shut that shit down real fast. Biofeedback, baby. If I can push through the pain of hundred-pound bicep curls, I can keep myself from blushing.

"Who are you?" he asks, his voice low and menacing. The kind of voice that makes you want to turn tail and run like a dog with its tail between its legs.

Nope. Not gonna back down. This asshole might be an alpha wolf, but I'm the vice prez of my fraternity and Kappa Nus don't run.

I look him right in the eye and square my shoulders, meeting his intensity with my own brand of defiance.

"I'm nobody," I reply, the bravado in my voice almost convincing myself it's true. "Nobody you need to worry about, anyway."

He frowns and I can tell my answer didn't satisfy him. I'm sure he's used to people cowering in the face of his alpha-wolfness, and I'm not about to give him that satisfaction.

He steps closer, so close I can smell the musky scent of his aftershave and see the flecks of goldier gold in his eyes.

Wait. When the fuck have I ever noticed someone's musky scent if it wasn't Steve stinking up the frathouse after a workout?

He sets one hand on my shoulder, like he's trying to keep me in place, but all it does is make my heart beat faster.

"You sure about that?" he murmurs softly, and before I know what's happening, I feel another strange sensation washing through me. Like I'm a T-shirt fresh out of the dryer, all cozy and limp and staticky. My bones seem to forget they're rigged up to my muscles, and my skin hums where he's touching me. It's like a rush of heat and electricity that starts in his hand and shoots through me from head to toe, leaving me feeling strangely... calm?

He must feel it, too, because he pulls his hand away fast, like he's been burned.

I stand there for a moment, stunned by what just happened. I'm not sure if I should be scared or pissed.

"What did you do?" I blurt out before I can stop myself, my voice unsteady.

Raul stares back at me with an expression that's hard to read. He looks almost afraid.

"It's you," he says quietly, and I get the feeling he's talking more to himself than me.

"Who?" I ask anyway. He's not even touching me, but I find myself frozen, like my shoes are melting into the floor, and I can't bring myself to look away from him. It's a struggle just to remember how to blink, and my eyes feel dry from doing it way too little.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

He opens his mouth as if to answer, but seems to think better of it.

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. Who does that? Me, apparently.

Oh my God, I have to get out of this place.

"Wait!" Raul calls after me as I make a beeline for the front door.

I ignore him and keep walking. I don't need to know who he thinks I am, or what weird force just seemed to connect us. All I know is that something very strange just happened, and it's freaking me out. Even if this is all a dream.

No, especially then.

I keep walking faster and faster until I'm running through a parking lot that's really just a big patch of gravel where the townies park their dirty pickup trucks and motorcycles. And there's a white fucking Ferrari sitting in the back of the lot.

Wonder who that belongs to.

I'm tempted to kick up a bunch of gravel onto it, but I don't want to waste the time when I hear someone following close behind me.

This is deja vu in the worst kind of way.

It's not exactly like the book, I remind myself. I didn't get pinned against the wall by some asshole with a tiny dick complex. That's one point for me not being stuck in the literal book, just my brain's fucked up version of it.

How long can a dream last?

I venture a glance over my shoulder and, to my relief, there's no sign of the werewolf creep. My relief is short lived, though, when I collide with someone I'm pretty fucking sure wasn't there a second ago.

"Hey! Watch it, asshole!" the guy bellows. He's tall and thin with greasy hair and a green plaid shirt, just like the asshole who pinned Catalina in the book was described.

Son of a bitch.

There are three men around him loitering on the curb and they all come around to flank him like it's some cheesy eighties gang movie. I'm fully expecting them all to start snapping to the same rhythm and busting out the showtunes when the greasy douchebag shoves into my chest.

There have been entirely too many strangers' hands on my pecs this evening for my liking.

"You got a problem, buddy?" he demands, echoing my own words too closely for comfort.

Do I sound like that?

"Yeah, I got a problem," I answer. "Ever heard of Head and Shoulders? Because I'm thinking you should buy some stock before you singlehandedly grease up the Atlantic Ocean."

He screws his face up in confusion. "Huh?"

"I think this guy's callin' you a greaseball, Jerry," the guy to my right says helpfully.

Jerry squints at me and takes a switchblade out of his pocket, flicking it open.

Maybe it was a bad idea to antagonize him.

Nah, scratch that. It's my dream and I could use a punching bag to take some feelings out on. Even if I'm pretty sure I'm gonna need to wash my hands with straight lye afterward.

I've taken enough bullshit tonight and this guy is going down.

I kick his arm away and grab his wrist, twisting it around until he drops the blade and it clatters onto the pavement. I step up to him, ready to deliver a swift punch to his face, but Raul appears out of nowhere and grabs the guy by the back of the head, flinging him across the lot like he's a ragdoll.

Jerry's face plows right into the gravel and he skids a few feet.

Ouch. That's gonna leave a mark.

Before I can do anything, Raul grabs the other one by the front of the shirt and hauls him off the ground. "Is this how you spend your nights?" he demands. "Threatening people weaker than you?"

The guy's squirming and thrashing to get away, but he stops to look at me, then back at Raul, then back at me again, and squints in confusion. "Huh? He's more jacked than me, man!"

It's a fair point, but not one Raul seems interested in considering. He throws the guy back and they all take off running, Jerry included.

Raul turns to me then, his face grim as he looks me over for any signs of injury. "Are you all right?" he asks. His voice is gruff but his eyes are gentle and concerned as he reaches out and tries to touch my cheek.

I bat his hand away. "I was doing just fine until you showed up. Did you not get the hint when I left the bar?"

He frowns as if I'm the one being unreasonable. "You shouldn't be out here on your own. It's not safe."

"Uh. Hello?" I gesture to myself up and down, in hopes of breaking whatever spell he's under that seems to have given him the impression that I'm some tiny little werewolf girl and not a six-foot-two, two hundred and thirty-four pound linebacker. "Do I look like I need your protection?"

His brow furrows, and he seems to be considering my words, even if he's having trouble computing them. And here I thought this guy was supposed to be some kind of genius-slash-musician-slash-werewolf sex god.

"Look, I think we got off on the wrong foot," he begins, offering his hand. "Let's start over."

"Oh, no," I say, holding up my hands and backing up. I've had enough shocks and weird mind melding for one night, thank you very much. "I'm not interested in getting off on anything with any body part of yours."

Raul frowns harder. "What?"

"Nothing," I mutter, pinching the bridge of my nose. What is wrong with my gutter mind? This guy of all people shouldn't be capable of sending my thoughts down it.

"Are you sure you're all right?" he asks, concern ebbing into his voice once more. It's low and silken and it has a strange effect on me, like a warm blanket wrapping around me and squeezing tight.

I shake my head and turn away from him, walking toward the bus stop where I was heading before Jerry and his friends decided to mess with me.

"Wait," Raul calls out behind me. "Where are you going?"

"Anywhere but here, with you," I reply without looking back at him.

He follows me anyway. Of course he does.

"You can't leave."

I spin around on him and he doesn't seem to expect that, stopping short. "And why the hell not?" I bark.

He blinks slowly at me, and puts his hand out, like I'm a fucking horse having a meltdown. "Just calm down," he says in that low, easy tone that sends another surge of warmth through my chest.

"Is that the shit you say to Catalina when she's pissed?" I snap. "Because even I know better than that, dude. Relationships 101—never tell someone who's mad to calm down unless you wanna get neutered."

He just stares at me blankly for a few seconds. "Who is Catalina?"

Okay, now I'm pissed.

"I'm sorry, *who is Catalina?*" I echo. "She's just the woman you've been waiting your whole life to find. I guess that whole 'lightning striking the center of your chest' thing when you first laid eyes on her was bullshit, huh, Raul?"

Now he's looking at me like I'm certifiably insane. And I am standing here in the rain, arguing with a figment of someone else's imagination, so maybe I am.

"I'm sorry, but I really have no idea who you're talking about." His eyes narrow slightly. "And how did you know my name?"

Shit.

"I'll ask the questions here, asshole," I say, not about to let him turn this thing around on me. "You're the one who's acting like a stalker."

He sighs in resignation. "There's a good reason for that, and if you'll just let me take you somewhere we can talk, I'll be more than happy to explain."

"Right, because getting in cars with strangers to drive to undisclosed locations is very safe."

"I'm not a stranger if you know my name," he challenges, cocking an eyebrow.

Touche.

"Besides," he continues, "I know what I felt back there, and I know you felt it, too."

I grit my teeth. "Let's pretend for a second I do know what you're talking about and I don't think you're crazy. What was that?"

Raul pauses, and I can't tell if it's because he's bluffing about knowing what it was, or because he just isn't sure how to tell me. Or if he wants to. "It was a bond."

"A bond?" I echo. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means we're connected," he answers. "By fate."

"Fate," I say flatly. "Like the little pointy fuckers from Hercules?"

"No," Raul says, sighing. "Look, I'll answer all your questions, but would you please at least come

back inside with me? I'll buy you a drink and—"

"You're buying, huh?" I interrupt, clapping him on the shoulder so hard he staggers. "Them's the magic words, buddy." Luckily, this time, there are no magical zaps or warm fuzzies.

Raul looks bewildered as he turns to follow me back inside the warmth of the bar. The thing is, I do want answers, and after all this shit, I could definitely use another drink.

CHAPTER
FIVE



We take a seat at a booth in the back of the bar, which isn't quite as packed as it was earlier. It's still full enough that I can barely breathe through the stench of humans and cheap beer. Usually, I can't stand the way they smell, but the man in front of me is a notable exception. He smells like pine and wood and something uniquely him. Something uniquely masculine.

That alone should be off putting, but it isn't. Neither is the fact that somehow, despite what I know I felt, he is human. And he is also, paradoxically, an omega.

The strangest omega I have ever encountered, without a doubt, but definitely an omega.

And he's *my* omega.

My omega, who is currently downing his fourth beer like it's water as he leans over the table, taking up most of the booth across from me with his huge frame. Hell, I'm not even sure a human is supposed to drink that much water, let alone alcohol.

"Can we talk now?" I ask hopefully, since he seems a bit less... angry. Usually, humans tiptoe around werewolves, not the other way around. Maybe he has some latent shifter blood I just can't sense. That would explain a lot.

Not everything, but a lot.

"Yeah, sure, knock yourself out," he mutters, leaning back against the padded booth. He doesn't seem even slightly buzzed, which is an impressive feat even for someone his size.

I'm used to towering over humans at six-foot-seven, but this one is only five inches shorter than me, give or take. He's also built like a linebacker. Not only is he not a woman, he's the most masculine human I've ever met, but that doesn't stop me from thinking he's the most gorgeous person I've ever seen—of any species.

This is a human I can appreciate. He stands out in any crowd, with his hulking, muscular frame and his wild, wavy brown hair, so light it looks gold under the bar lights. He has strong, handsome features with a straight nose and a square jaw, dotted with a scrape of stubble. His full lips provide just a hint of softness that makes the full picture of his face a beauty to behold, even if it is a masculine kind of beauty.

And those piercing green eyes...

He's wearing a black polo shirt with a logo I can't quite make out and denim jeans. Those jeans could double as a work of art, considering how nicely they hug his muscular, perfectly round ass. An ass I can't stop staring at and imagining what it would be like to fill with my knot.

Could he take it? He's certainly harder than any other omega I've encountered, and that fact is more appealing than it has any right to be.

It occurs to me that I don't even know if he's gay. Hell, *I'm* not gay, but that doesn't mean I wouldn't take him out behind the bar and fuck his brains out.

My cock is half-stiff just thinking about it, so I shift my weight to my left leg a little, hoping he won't notice. Something tells me he definitely wouldn't appreciate that, whether he's gay or not.

"Let's start with the basics," I say. "You already know my name, so what's yours?"

"Brad Miller," he answers, hiccuping as he takes another swig of beer.

My God, he is so enchanting.

"Brad Miller," I murmur, mulling over the subtle poetry of his name. That's a name I could growl during sex. The Brad part, at least. Miller might be a bit awkward. "How lovely."

He stares at me like I'm the dirt in the treads of his shoes. "Go back to that bonding shit you were on about earlier."

"Right," I say, clearing my throat. Time to get back on track. "I don't know how much you're aware of, so I guess I'll start from the beginning. I'm—"

"A werewolf," he interrupts, waving me off with a hand that's sporting a big, gaudy ring on the middle finger with a huge red stone in the center. It looks like the kind of ring a vampire who belongs to a coven would wear, but I can't imagine what he'd be doing with one. "Yeah, I know all about that shit."

"So you aren't human," I say, frowning.

"Never said that."

"Then how did you know what I was?" I ask. My size and energy are usually dead giveaways to anyone in the know, and vampires usually take one look at me before skittering off, but even an alpha werewolf isn't so different at first glance that an unsuspecting human would be able to pick him out as inhuman.

"Let's just say I've been reading a lot," he says cryptically.

He becomes more fascinating with each fact I unearth about him. I find myself leaning in, eager to breathe in more of his intoxicating scent. I never thought I would find the scent of pine and man so... appealing. "So you know about wolves—and vampires, I assume?"

"Yep," he says unceremoniously. "I know all about those toothy little fuckers. Dunno why you don't just carry around a crossbow loaded with stakes all the time, with how often they end up kidnapping your girl."

"My girl?" I echo with a frown. This is the second time he's made allusions to that effect, but I haven't taken a lover in months. As rare as omegas are, there are still plenty who are more than willing to lend themselves to an alpha in rut, but I haven't had the time for such things with the war escalating. "I'm afraid I have no idea what you're talking about. I don't have a mate."

At least, I didn't. Not until he came along. But he isn't ready for that truth just yet.

"Seriously?" His brow furrows, as if this troubles him greatly. "You're telling me you've never met a chick named Catalina Evergreen? Spends a lot of time thinking about how she's only five-five, and you tower over her? Petite but curvy, long brown hair, thinks she's plain but is actually catnip to werewolves? None of this rings a bell?"

"Catalina?" My nose wrinkles. That's not a very growlable name at all. Not like Brad. "Isn't that a salad dressing?"

He just sighs, running a hand down his face. "Never mind."

"You know about omegas, then?" I ask.

"Sure I do," he says, waving his hand dismissively. "Submissive, doe-eyed little werewolves with daddy issues and tight pussies that put off magical pheromones once a month that drive you and all the other alphas batshit, so the vamps are always trying to take them like some fucked up game of capture the flag."

"I can't say I've ever heard it put quite like that, but I guess you've got the gist," I say awkwardly. "Bonding with an omega grants an alpha more power, so they're highly coveted, and they do go into heat. But they can be any gender."

"Huh," he says, frowning harder. "Guess I didn't get to that part yet."

"What?"

"Nothing." Brad leans in, folding his arms on the table in front of him. "So, what's this bonding bullshit all about?"

I hesitate, because this is where I have to tread carefully. The last thing I want is him running off on me again before I've even gotten the chance to tell him who he is to me. He may be sturdier than the other omegas, but he's still human as far as I can tell, and while I would rather him come with me willingly, I'll force him if I have to.

"It's something that happens when an alpha encounters his true mate for the first time," I begin, choosing my words with great precision. I can tell from the wariness in his eyes that I haven't chosen them quite carefully enough. "It's a feeling that washes over you, like warmth and electricity. A deep, innate sense of knowing and belonging that makes everything and everyone else seem like nothing in comparison."

He grows more apprehensive as I speak, and I can hear his heart quickening. It's such a strong, steady rhythm. "True mate," he says in a derisive tone. "You mean an omega?"

"Yes," I answer. "Once upon a time, every alpha had his perfect match, but these days, it's exceedingly

rare. Omegas aren't born as often as they used to be, and with the war, they're more vulnerable than ever. Packs do our best to keep them sheltered. Protected. But things happen."

"You mean they get knocked off by vampires treating them like a pigskin in the fourth quarter," he says.

I blink. "I.... yes? I think? But you don't need to worry about any of that," I say, reaching for his hand instinctively. "I would never let any harm come to you."

When he yanks his hand away, I know I've made a mistake, but I find I can't fully control myself where he's concerned. It's something I've always judged the other alphas for. Regardless of gender, they act like they're coming unglued the moment they catch the scent of an omega in heat.

I don't even have that excuse, because he certainly isn't in heat. I'm sure if I made any attempt to touch him again, he'd sooner bite my hand off than let me.

And I find that makes me want him even more than I already do.

What is happening to me?

"Me?" he balks. "I ain't no fuckin' omega, bro."

Here we go. Time to backtrack, because he clearly isn't ready for this. "I just meant because you're human. At least as far as I can tell."

"Course I'm human," he growls, as if the implication otherwise is a great insult to him. "And I don't need some werewolf weirdo to protect me, even if this shit wasn't a dream."

"A dream?" I stare at him for a moment. "What do you mean?"

His expression falls, like he didn't mean to say that, which is curious. He seems to be warring with himself for a few seconds before he heaves a big sigh and says, "You know what? Fuck it. I know you're not supposed to tell dream people you're in a dream or whatever, but I'm already stuck, so it can't do that much harm."

"I'm sorry, are you telling me you think you're dreaming all this?" I ask warily.

"Buddy, I *know* I'm dreaming," he says, jabbing a finger at me before he downs the rest of his beer.

"Maybe you should slow down a bit," I say. Maybe he's more affected by the alcohol than he seems. Omegas are more sensitive to that kind of thing, even if he is built like a damn house. "I don't want you getting sick."

I know that was a mistake, too, when I see the murderous look he's giving me, as if I've just fucked his mother on his father's grave. Without a condom.

"Sick? You think I'm too weak to handle a few beers?" he demands in a tone of great offense.

I hold my hands up in surrender. "No, of course not."

I can only stare in awe as Brad steals my beer from the table in front of me, guzzling it down without pausing and making frigid eye contact the entire time, as if to assert dominance.

He slams the empty glass down on the table and says, "I'll drink you under the table anytime, anywhere, you fleabitten mofo."

All I can do is gaze at him, a strange warmth stirring in my chest. "You are a charming creature, Brad."

His face contorts in disgust and he pushes up from the table. He struggles to leave the booth in his haste, considering it clearly isn't designed for someone so built, but he manages.

"I'm done with this shit," he says gruffly, shuffling toward the door. He isn't quite as quick anymore, and I can tell the alcohol has finally started taking its toll.

Good. Maybe now he'll be easier to catch.

Something tells me he's not going to be any more agreeable as a drunk, though.

I throw a few bills on the table, more than enough to cover the tab, and follow him out into the rain, which has only gained strength since we've been inside.

"Brad, wait!" I call after him, my voice barely audible over the thundering sound of the storm.

I almost can't believe it when he stops, turning his bleary eyes toward me with an expression that's hard to read. I can almost see the battle raging inside his head. The battle between being a 'tough guy' and being smart. Eventually, he takes a step toward me.

"I don't know what you think this is, but let's get a few things straight," he growls, his eyes blazing at me as he stares me down through torrents of rain. "I'm not weak, I don't need your protection, I'm not a damn omega, and I sure as fuck am not your mate. Got it?"

The only one of those things I can agree to is the fact that he certainly isn't weak, but while the idea of starting out lying to my mate doesn't appeal to me, I can tell this isn't a war I'm going to win tonight. Just getting him to swallow his pride enough to get out of the rain is going to be enough of a battle.

"Got it," I say, holding my hands up in surrender. "Just let me give you a ride home, at least."

When he falls silent, I know something is wrong. He looks away and I realize he's embarrassed, or maybe scared.

"You don't have a place to go, do you?" I ask quietly, my heart breaking at the thought.

I can tell he's uncomfortable when his jaw tightens and he takes another step away from me. "I have a fucking apartment," he snaps. "Just... not here."

"Then you can stay with me," I say immediately. "Just for the night, if that's what you want. We can talk about it in the morning."

Brad glares at me, then up at the sky, as if he's finally noticed the terrible weather. Even I don't like being out in this shit in my human form, although it wouldn't stop me as a wolf.

"Fine," he mutters. "Just for the night."

With that, he turns and stomps through the wet gravel toward my car. It takes everything in me not to

reach for his door, only because I'm sure that would send him spiraling again.

"How did you know which car was mine?" I ask, getting in on the driver's side.

He gives me a look. "It was obvious."

I'm not sure what to make of that, but I pull onto the road and turn on the heat since we're both soaked clean through our clothes by this point. Brad says nothing else as we drive, and while there are a million questions I want to ask him, I manage to resist.

The moment I laid eyes on him, I knew he was something special. I knew he was mine. But it's become clear to me during the short time I've known him that convincing *him* of that isn't something that's going to happen in a single night.

I've never been the kind of man who shies away from a challenge, though, as rare as they are. And I think I just found one that's worth the fight.

CHAPTER
SIX



I already know what to expect as Raul pulls up to his mansion smack dab in the middle of the woods, but I still can't help but be impressed.

The place is huge, a sprawling two-story structure made from bricks and painted white with blue shutters. It's framed by several tall oak trees, and the front yard looks immaculate with its green grass and carefully pruned hedges. There must be at least fifteen cars parked in the parking lot out back, though I'm sure that's only half of the fleet. When Raul presses a button on the device clipped to his vizor and a huge garage opens, I realize I'm right.

I can't help but drool a little when I see the big red muscle car he parks next to.

"Is that a '57 Camaro ZL1?" I ask, trying not to sound like a complete nerd while simultaneously leaning forward to get a better look.

I'm pretty sure that's the car he took Catalina on a drive through the woods in when they made out for the first time, but she just said it was a "big red sports car." I guess this really is my dream, after all.

"It is," Raul says, glancing over at me as he unbuckles his seatbelt. "You like cars?"

"Nope," I say, getting out while being careful not to ding the beauty next to me with my door. That would be a tragedy of Greek proportions, even if it is only a dream. I can't help but walk around to examine her, my eyes traveling over every sleek line and curve with hunger I can't even muster for porn. "I eat, sleep, and breathe cars. I work part-time down at Mel's Body Shop."

Of course, that means nothing to him. We're not even from the same universe let alone the same town. Hell, he's not even real.

"Really?" he asks, sounding a lot closer than he was last time I saw him out of the corner of my eye. I turn around and find him watching me with a look that probably mirrors the way I'm ogling his car, and that immediately has me on edge. "Maybe you can take a look under the hood sometime," he says, nodding toward the car. "It hasn't been running right since my brother, Curtis, took it for a joyride down by the river."

Those are the only words that could keep me from gouging his eyes out for the way he's looking at me, but I'm not sure if he's that crafty or if he just lucked out. I take another look at the car and sure enough, there are mud splatters up underneath the tires, even though someone did a half-assed job of

washing the exterior.

"That should be a crime," I say, caressing the top of the car. "You poor baby. What have they done to you?"

Raul chuckles like this isn't the equivalent of a human rights violation for cars. "Come on inside. If I'm cold, you must be freezing."

I look down at my soaked clothes. He's not wrong.

I follow him in through the garage entrance. The house is as lavish on the inside as I expected it would be from Catalina's over-the-top descriptions. She was really into the chandelier in the grand hall when she first walked in, but she neglected to mention the one in the kitchen.

This place is fucking ridiculous.

The kitchen is bigger than any I've ever seen, with stainless steel appliances and marble countertops. The floor is made of shiny dark wood, polished to a shine so bright it almost hurts my eyes to look at it.

Raul leads me out of the kitchen into the grand hall. The walls are lined with framed art from all over the world, from traditional paintings to modern abstracts. It's like walking into an art gallery.

I'm floored by the over-the-top nature of it all, and I feel like a fish out of water. This is not the kind of world I'm used to. It's a world of old-money wealth and privilege, and I'm completely out of my element.

"Is something wrong?" Raul asks, stopping at the bottom of the stairs.

"Nope," I mutter, following him up the stairs.

He takes me to what I assume is his bedroom, which is just as extravagant as the rest of the house. The bed is enormous like everything else, with a dark mahogany frame and luxurious velvet sheets. I can't help but admire the ornate carved details on the headboard.

A fuck palace, if ever there was one.

"Make yourself comfortable," he says, gesturing to the bed. "I'll find you something to wear."

I'm not about to sit on some random guy's bed, especially when he's been making werewolf eyes at me all night, so I fold my arms and make a point of standing as close to the door as possible.

Raul just sighs and opens an armoire. At least, I think that's what that thing is. Pretty sure it's the same thing as the busty French furniture chick from *Beauty and the Beast*. Real fancy shit.

He pulls out a pair of gray sweatpants and a black T-shirt and hands them to me. "Change into these," he says. "They should fit."

I take the clothing from him, feeling a little awkward. I think about asking him to leave, but decide against it. It seems weird and I'm not one to get all flustered over something like this. I regularly strip down in front of other dudes in the locker room at the gym and walk around the frat house in my boxers, so why is this any different?

When he turns away like I'm some Victorian lady in need of modesty, I'm pissed as hell, but I can't exactly call a guy out for *not* ogling my Johnson.

I change as quickly as I can and mutter, "You can look now, Fancypants."

He turns around, giving me a strange look.

"What?" I ask, the annoyance clearer in my voice than I wanted it to be.

"I was just trying to respect your privacy," he says.

I raise an eyebrow. "Why are you treating me like a girl?"

"Not a girl," he says, and the way he trails off makes me suspicious.

"Then a what?" I demand.

He won't say anything, but I'm pretty sure I'm ready to solve the puzzle, Alex, and I do not fucking like it.

"You damn well better not mean an omega," I say, jabbing a finger at him.

"Would it really be so bad if you were one?" he asks, confirming my suspicions and then some.

"Are you shitting me, bro?" I cry. "Look at me. Do I look like a fucking omega to you?"

He hesitates, studying me way closer than he should need to. "No," he finally concedes. "You don't look like an omega, but that doesn't mean you aren't one. And you certainly smell like one."

I do a double take. I know I should be offended by that remark, but I'm honestly not sure how I should be offended. "Excuse me?" I snap. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Raul holds up his hands in surrender. "It's a compliment," he says. "Omegas smell differently than alphas and betas. You smell like an omega, that's all."

I stare at him, trying to decide which of his bones I'm going to break first. The metacarpal is always a classic, but you really can't go wrong with a good jaw fracture. It would be immensely satisfying to pop him right in that stupidly chiseled—

"Look," he says, interrupting my homicidal thoughts. "Being an omega is nothing to be ashamed of. It's just a different type of power and strength. You don't need to be afraid."

"That's easy for you to fucking say," I bellow. "You're the one who was telling me an hour ago how bloodsuckers have killed off most of them because they're so weak!"

He grimaces. "Weak physically, perhaps. But that's beside the point. Other packs may be different, but I protect my own, and I would never let anything happen to you." He reaches out and I strike his hand away hard enough that he grimaces, shaking it off. "Son of a bitch," he mutters. "You're strong for a human."

"There's more where that came from if you put your hands on me again, pal," I warn him.

There's a knock at the door, and Raul reluctantly calls for whoever it is to come in, which is probably

a wise choice, considering I'm about to attack him if he keeps pushing this omega bullshit . Next time, it'll be more than his hand he has to worry about.

There's a young woman on the other side of the door who looks extremely confused. She's dressed in all black and has a gothic look to her, with long blonde hair and piercing gray eyes.

"Is everything all right, Raul?" she asks, glancing between the two of us.

Raul nods and then motions for her to come inside. "Everything is fine," he says. "Lenore, I'd like you to meet Brad. He's going to be staying with us for a while."

"That's debatable," I say through my teeth, but my attention is drawn back to the woman. So that's Lenore. I remember her from the book. She looks innocent, but she's smart as hell and she has it bad for Raul. For some reason, he's ignored her for the last ten years in favor of the roughly human equivalent of unsalted butter.

I love my girl Catalina and all, but next to a big titty goth girlfriend with a blackbelt and a degree in microbiology? Come on.

The biggest limit to her intellect seems to be her taking out her frustration over the whole unrequited love thing on Catalina rather than shrugging Raul off and revenge-banging his hot brother. These fucking wolves' lives are like trash TV on steroids, and while I'd be more than down for binging the rest of the book in one sitting, I really don't wanna fucking live it.

Especially not when I'm currently the stand-in for Unsalted Butter, as far as I can tell.

Lenore gives me a strange look and tilts her head, clearly sizing me up. I've only ever been looked at that way by another linebacker trying to suss out the opposing team's defense during quarterfinals when there was a national scout in the crowd. This bitch's eyes could cut diamonds.

I like her even more than I did in the book, even though I'm pretty sure I was supposed to hate her for being jealous of Catalina for some fucking reason.

"Sup," I say, nodding to her.

Her brow furrows in confusion and she turns back to Raul. "Jeremy just told me he and our scouts picked up the scent of a bunch of alphas crossing into the territory lines on the north end of the city. Should I send reinforcements?"

Raul's demeanor immediately shifts, and he becomes the stalwart, steel-eyed alpha that leaves Catalina's panties perennially moist. "Immediately," he answers. "Send everyone we can spare, aside from the core team. I want them stationed around the mansion. No one gets in or out."

There's no mistaking that, and if he thinks I'm just gonna gloss over it, he's in for a rude awakening. "I told you, I ain't stayin' here," I said. "Thanks for the dry clothes and all, but you deal with your werewolf problems and I'll be on my merry way, cool?"

Raul and Lenore are both staring at me now.

"Who is he?" she asks, sounding even more suspicious.

"It's a long story," Raul says, raking a hand through his hair again. This guy is gonna go bald by thirty if he keeps that shit up.

"Actually, it's not," I say, looking toward Lenore since I'm pretty sure I stand a better chance at reasoning with her. "Look, I'm not from around here and I just wanna get home. I don't know how I got here, but if there are any wizards behind curtains or magical fortunetellers in this world that can help me find my way back, that'd be dope and you seem pretty well connected. So, do you know anyone who can help me?"

Lenore's eyes go wide and her mouth drops open slightly before she snaps it shut again, shaking her head. "I'm sorry," she says finally. "I have no idea what you're talking about." She looks at Raul, clearly expecting him to explain it away as some kind of weird joke.

But Raul only sighs heavily and says, "He's just... confused. Make sure the others know to keep him from leaving while I go out to handle the intruders." His eyes meet mine when he says this and I can see the warning behind them. "We'll finish this discussion when I get back."

"The hell we will," I growl. He's out the door before I can reach him and when I try to follow him out into the hall, Lenore blocks me in the doorway.

"I'm sorry, but you're not going anywhere," she says in a frigid tone.

I give a stiff laugh. "Look, I respect the whole badass thing you've got goin' on and all, but I've had a shit-tastic day, I'm pretty sure my real body's in a coma somewhere, and I really need to get back to my brother, so let's just save ourselves both the time of pretending like I can't pick you up and move you aside like a ragdoll."

Lenore arches an eyebrow. "You're welcome to try, big guy."

I clench my jaw. I'd never hit a woman, even if she is a supernatural monster who's technically holding me here against my will, but I don't really think moving one gently aside is a violation of my ethics, all things considered.

I barely even reach for her before she grabs my wrist and flips me onto my back like I'm not easily four times her size. My ass hits the floor hard enough to knock the wind out of me and I wheeze. "What the fuck?"

"I warned you," she says, folding her arms. I can tell from the glimmer of amusement in her eyes she's eating up my dismay.

I'm also pretty sure my coccyx is busted, and that's nothing compared to my ego, but I haul my ass back onto my feet anyway. "Okay, that was a freebie," I groan, pushing into my lower back until something cracks and feels better.

"What are you doing to the boss's new fucktoy?" asks a guy who wasn't in the doorway five seconds ago. He looks a hell of a lot like Raul at second glance, and he's huge even if he's not quite as tall. They have the same tan complexion, dark hair, and weirdly intense eyes, but his don't have the same soul-fucking quality, and his hair's a lot shorter. He looks younger, too.

Too bad he's not gonna live to see another day.

"Ex-fucking-scuse me?" I growl.

"His what?" Lenore cries, sounding equally offended, even though I'm pretty sure it's not on my behalf.

"Can't think of any other reason he'd be dragging an omega back to his bedroom in the middle of the night," the newcomer says with a shrug.

"An omega?" Lenore does a doubletake at me again and I'm relieved when I see the incredulity on her face. "No fucking way."

"Thank you," I say, throwing my hand out. "Finally, someone with a brain."

"You're a beta," the asshole scoffs to Lenore. "You've probably never even met an omega, but an alpha can smell one a mile away."

Lenore hesitates, giving me another scrutinizing look. The horror on her face as she gives weight to her suspicion mirrors my own. "Whatever, Curtis. He doesn't *look* like an omega."

"Because I'm not one," I snap.

This doesn't seem to convince either of them. I've been aware of the existence of werewolves for all of an hour, and they are already by far the most overconfident douchebags I've ever met. And that's saying a lot.

Hell, I *am* an overconfident douchebag, and these people give me an inferiority complex.

"What do you know about this?" Lenore demands, turning to Curtis.

"Nothing," he says, holding his hands up. "I just know what I smell."

That's it. I'm done with this shit. I capitalize on the element of surprise and storm past the both of them, socking Curtis as hard as I can in the gut on my way past. He doubles over and wheezes, clutching his stomach. My hand throbs like I just punched through a cinderblock, but I ignore the pain and storm downstairs.

"Shit," Lenore mutters, sounding closer behind me than she should be able to be, but I don't dare look up to see for sure.

"Don't hurt him!" Curtis bellows, his voice sounding strained and winded.

I ignore them both and stalk down the stairs only to find myself face to face with two more overgrown farm boys in plaid. As different as their hairstyles are—the one on the left is blond with an undercut and the one on the right has dyed blue hair pulled back into a ponytail—their features are identical and I recognize them immediately as the twins. Two of Raul's most trusted enforcers.

"Look what the wolf dragged in," the blue haired one—Matthew—sneers. Because he's a walking fucking cliché.

Before I can say anything, I hear Lenore's voice from the top of the stairs. "Don't hurt him! He's an omega."

"A what now?" the blond one—Blade—asks in disbelief.

Before they can sort it out, I blow past them and the uncertainty seems to be enough to get me past Matthew. As big as they are, I should easily be able to take them both, let alone one on one, but apparently, this world doesn't play by the rules of logic.

Or the logic is simply the kind I don't want to recognize, but I'm not letting myself go there. Not when it feels like the damn walls are closing in.

I'm halfway to the front door when I realize all four of the wolves are closing in on me, but if I hurry, I should be able to—

Someone cuts around the corner and I glimpse a flash of white cloth before they grab me. A lean arm that's stronger than it has any right to be wraps around my neck and its owner pulls me against his chest before I feel a sharp pinching pain in my neck.

"Fuck!" I hiss, thrashing against my assailant and grabbing blindly until I catch the syringe in his hand he just stuck me with. I spin around, brandishing it as a weapon and find myself staring down the chestnut-haired, bespectacled beta Catalina refers to as Dr. Dreamy. "You son of a bitch," I snarl, taking a step toward him only to feel my limbs turn to lead.

There's a warm, tingly feeling spreading out through my chest and into my extremities and I stagger forward, unable to remember how to put one foot in front of the other. And soon, I forget how to stay upright at all as my body sinks down until I'm on my knees and the mansion—along with the five werewolves—are spinning in an elliptical orbit around me.

"That won't hurt him, will it?" Lenore asks warily. The fact that even she's talking about me like I'm some fragile flower whose leaves can't stand to get bruised is just adding insult to injury.

"No," says the doctor, taking a step toward me. He kneels down and puts a cool hand to the side of my neck like he's checking my pulse, slipping his other arm beneath mine as he guides me into a fall now that the last of my strength is giving out. "It's just a mild sedative. Just to make it easier to move him somewhere more secure."

"Mild my ass," I say, my words slurred as I struggle to fight the sedation in vain.

The doctor's eyes glimmer in amusement as he hauls me to my feet like it's nothing, despite being a few inches shorter than me and looking like he couldn't bench a hundo if his life depended on it.

He says something to me, but his words are garbled and my vision is too blurry to read his lips. The others are closer now, talking in distorted voices that sound like someone playing a record backwards. Someone else—Curtis, I'm pretty sure—drapes my other arm over his shoulder and hauls me into his arms. Like I haven't already been humiliated enough for one lifetime.

All I can think as I black out is how I'd better wake up in my own world, or at least one where I can be a space pirate or something cool. This omega thing is absolute, complete fucking bullshit.

CHAPTER
SEVEN



When I arrive back at the mansion only to find that Brad is in the infirmary, I'm torn between panic and rage, even if I can tell he hasn't been harmed from his scent and general appearance.

Dr. Wilson, Lenore and Curtis look nervous as they stand by, and I can feel the tension radiating off them like waves.

"What happened?" I demand, my voice hard and tight.

Dr. Wilson takes a deep breath before speaking. "Brad was getting out of control," he starts, and my heart plummets into my stomach. "He was about to start an altercation with Matthew and Curtis, and things were escalating quickly. I made the call to sedate him."

"He's a damn omega," I growl. "How much trouble could he possibly have given you?"

"You've seen him," Curtis protests. "I don't know where you found this guy, but he's no ordinary omega."

As wired as I am, first from the hunt in the woods and now from returning to find my mate unconscious and bound with restraints to a hospital bed, he has a point. My body's instinctive response to Brad's scent may be textbook, but other than that, there's nothing about him that screams omega.

"He'll be fine," Dr. Wilson says, repeating his earlier assurance, before I can put him through a wall. Now that my adrenaline has ebbed off somewhat, he doesn't seem much more relaxed. "It wouldn't be the worst thing for him to rest a bit. I checked his vitals and ran a metabolic panel, and he's just showing signs of mild dehydration and stress."

"You're sure that's all?"

"He seems to be quite healthy otherwise," he answers, but I can tell there's something else from the tension in his voice.

"What is it?" I demand.

He hesitates. "He is an omega, there's no doubt about that. He has all the classic markers in his bloodwork, but he doesn't have the lupine antigen."

He's not telling me anything I haven't already deduced by scent, but there isn't much that those expensive tests and medical implements can tell someone that a wolf's nose can't suss out. Still, it's good to have confirmation.

"I know," I say. "I don't think he has a wolf at all, or if he does, it seems to be latent."

"Is that possible?" Lenore asks. "A human omega, I mean."

"I've never heard of it in thirty years of practice," Dr. Wilson answers. He doesn't look like he could have been in practice for that long, but most wolves don't look our age. The aging process slows considerably after the mid-twenties and usually caps out around fifty.

"Could you give us a moment alone, please?" I ask, turning to Lenore and Curtis. She's my most trusted beta and Curtis is my brother, so it's unconventional for them not to be involved in any major decisions involving the pack, but my patience is already stretched thin. And considering the fact that the threat I went after earlier is still out there while my mate is here, vulnerable, I'm not in the mood to be trifled with.

"Well, I can't say I have much personal experience in the matter of imprinting, but that sounds about right," the doctor says. "Have you told him yet?"

"No," I answer. "And based on our limited interactions so far, I don't have reason to think he'll take it well."

He raises an eyebrow. "You're the most powerful alpha in the region. Most omegas would jump at the chance to be your mate."

"He's not most omegas," I say, glancing down at the man in bed, feeling a surge of pride and protectiveness. "Not by a long shot."

"That's an understatement," the doctor sighs. "If he is somehow a human omega, I'm sure I don't need to tell you that there are going to be wolves who have an issue with you taking him as a mate."

"You're right," I say, already getting dodgy at the thought of anyone criticizing what's mine. "You don't need to tell me. But if they have a problem with it, they can take it up with me when the time comes. In the meantime, I assume I can trust your discretion."

"Of course," he says, lowering his head. "He is my patient, after all."

"Run as many tests as it takes to figure out what's going on with him," I tell him. "And send for me the second he wakes up."

"You're going out again?" he asks, clearly surprised. "I take it you didn't locate the intruders?"

"We chased them off the territory," I reply. "And captured one. He's going to need treatment, so I'm afraid it's going to be a busy night for you."

"He was injured?" the doctor asks.

I stop in the doorway. "Not yet. But he will be when I'm finished questioning him."

CHAPTER
EIGHT



I open my eyes to a pounding headache, and when I look around and realize I'm in some sort of hospital room, I'm actually relieved.

Relieved because that means all that stupid wolf bullshit really was a dream. I'm back in my world. A world that makes sense. A world where alpha and beta are just words cheesy pickup artists use to sell overpriced books to douchebags who want to blame their lack of a love life on anything but their shitty personalities, and if I'm any of the above, I'm definitely a fucking alpha.

Sure as hell not an omega.

I have a private room, at least, but I'm kind of offended there are no flowers, considering I was just in a major car accident. When Kevin got laid up in the hospital in traction after that ATV accident, we all chipped in for a muffin basket. A nice one with little salted pecans and everything.

Where the fuck is *my* muffin basket?

There's no sign of Devon, either, and that stings way more. I tell myself maybe he just doesn't know yet, but the truth is, I wouldn't blame him for not coming. We've been drifting further and further apart lately, and I was a total dick during our last encounter. There's no getting around that.

But hey, I'm alive, which means I have the chance to make it right. And I'm going to make it up to him. If all this bullshit has taught me nothing else, it's that being the little guy sucks—and everyone else treating you like you're weak just makes it that much worse.

Devon was right. I really didn't understand what it was like before. But I have a better idea now, and the first thing I'm going to do when I see him after pulling him into a bear hug is apologize. I owe him that at the very least.

There's no call button, so I sit up and decide to assess the damage on my own. I'm not hooked up to any monitors or IVs, even though there is a cart loaded with a bunch of equipment across from the bed. Weirdly enough, I'm not bandaged up, and when I walk over to the mirror above the sink across the room, I don't have a scratch on me.

That isn't what holds my attention, though. It's the fact that I'm not wearing a hospital gown or even what I was wearing the night of the party. I'm wearing a familiar T-shirt and sweatpants.

I feel dread coiling in the pit of my stomach like a cobra about to strike, and I take a step back, feeling a little wobbly on my feet all of a sudden. I just assumed my spinning head was the result of whatever injury led to me getting hospitalized in the first place, but I'm starting to remember the tranquilizer, and...

Fuck. No, this can't be happening. No way this shit is real.

I just want my fucking life back. My brother and my job at the garage and my Kappa Nu bros. I'm even starting to miss Steve and that's saying a lot.

The door opens while I'm still spiraling, and the last person I wanted to see appears in the doorway.

Okay, the second to last.

The doctor is standing there, and when he sees I'm out of bed, he hesitates, keeping his hand on the doorknob like he might need to slam it shut. "You're up."

"You're the son of a bitch that drugged me," I snap, clenching my fists at my sides.

"Calm down," he says in a tone a vet might use when talking to an ornery horse, holding his hands up. "I don't want to have to sedate you again, but I will."

He's slowly moving his hand to the breast pocket of his lab coat, and I can see the outline of a syringe within, so as much as I want to put the bastard's head through the drywall, I stand my ground instead.

"Holding a person against their will is a crime," I say firmly, pointing at the floor. "Not to go all Karen on you, but this is America, bro. If you don't let me out of here right now, I'll call the cops and have that medical license of yours revoked faster than you can say malpractice."

Hopefully 911 actually works in this dream, which I'm beginning to worry is never gonna end. Usually, I just mash buttons only to realize I'm holding a banana rather than an actual phone or something, but this dream is weirdly consistent with its own reality, fucked up as it is. And it's way too real for comfort.

"The cops, huh?" the doctor asks boredly, slipping his hands into the pockets of his coat. "I doubt that, considering the sheriff is a member of the pack."

"He's what now?" I ask, feeling fresh dread well within me. That actually checks out, though, now that I remember Aviator Shades from the book. He's the one Raul sent after Catalina, so it figures there would be other plants on the force. For all I know, the whole damn department needs flea baths.

"Big guy about yay high," the doctor says, reaching up about a foot over his head. "Turns into a big snarling monster every full moon."

"Right," I say through my teeth. I'm really starting to hate this guy even more than the others.

I've only encountered the doctor a few times so far in the book, and each time, Catalina is usually too preoccupied with how his golden eyes resemble "disks of sunlight"—whatever the fuck that's even supposed to mean—to mention what a dick he is.

Then again, he didn't really have any reason to be a dick to her, considering she was frail and in

distress in one form or another during most of their encounters, other than the embarrassing-as-shit omega exam she had to go through during her first rough heat.

If he comes anywhere near me with any of those implements, he's going to be pissing and shitting outta the same hole.

"You're right, of course," he says. "Holding someone against their will is a crime in the outside world. But as I'm sure you're figuring out, things work a bit differently in ours."

"Yeah, you can say that again," I mutter.

"The fact is, you are not a free person with the rights and privileges thereof," he continues. "You are an omega, and when you came onto our territory, you became the responsibility and property of our alpha."

"I ain't no one's property, buddy," I grit out. "And I sure as shit ain't an omega. I'm not even a fucking wolf!"

"That does present a medical curiosity," he muses, walking into the room and over to the sink. He's bold enough to keep his back turned as he washes his hands, but I'm sure there are others waiting for me outside the door if I try to make a run for it. "I wouldn't say it's impossible for a human to be an omega, but I've certainly never heard of it in all my years of practice, and I don't know anyone else who has, either. But, given the way shifter packs are so protective of your kind, I suppose that doesn't prove anything in and of itself."

I bristle at his words. *My kind*. "I don't know why you assholes think I'm an omega, but you're way off base," I inform him. "I'm human. Just an average, admittedly very swole, but completely normal human."

He chuckles at that, drying his hands off before he turns to face me. If he notices I'm a bit closer to the door than I was a few seconds ago, he doesn't say anything. "Your blood begs to differ."

"My blood?" I echo, snatching my hand up to the crook of my left arm, where I just now notice the medical tape stretched over a cotton ball. Now all I can think about is how pinchy it feels. "You stole my fucking blood, bro? I thought you were werewolves, not vampires!"

"We're shifters," he says, as if that answers my question. "I did a full workup, just to make sure you're healthy."

"Of course I'm healthy," I say, flexing my bicep in indignation. "This is Grade-A American beef, baby. Never even missed a day of class."

The doctor purses his lips as if he's trying not to laugh, which just pisses me off even more. "Well, it doesn't hurt to be sure. Especially considering we don't know where you're from, and you have a rather... unique situation going on."

As much as I really don't want to, I'm beginning to entertain the possibility that he's telling the truth about me being an omega. At least in this fucked up dream world. Why it bothers me in a dream I'm going to get the fuck out of the first chance I have, I'm not sure, but it does. A lot.

"You can tell that shit from a blood test?" I ask warily.

"Of course," he says. "The secondary sex classifications are genetically encoded. Even before the traits of an alpha or omega manifest around puberty, it's possible to tell with a blood test. There are certain markers that are present in an alpha or an omega, and they're absent entirely in betas."

"If alphas and omegas have the same markers, then why the hell don't you guys think I'm an alpha?" I demand.

"They don't," he says patiently. "They're opposites. Two sides of the same coin—and it's not just about the markers. There are other traits as well."

"Yeah, I know all about the knots and the panty wetting," I say, waving my hand in the air. "Pretty sure I would've noticed either one of those."

"Be that as it may, the results of the blood test and your scent are conclusive enough," he says. "Of course, I'd be happy to perform a more in-depth examination with the alpha's permission if you'd prefer."

"No," I say quickly. "Hell, no. Try it and I'll break your fucking hand off."

"You really are a strange omega," he remarks.

"I'll take that as a compliment," I say. "And I'm not a damn omega. How long are you freaks planning on keeping me here?"

"That's really something you should take up with the alpha," he says.

"Raul?" I ask. "Just because he's pack alpha doesn't make him a god."

The doctor tilts his head slightly, like he's confused. "Raul is the alpha over the entire region, not just the Stone Hollow pack."

"Seriously?" I ask. How would I miss that in the book? Then again, maybe Catalina just hasn't figured it out yet where I'm at. Or maybe this version is somehow different from the original. It makes sense, considering the fact that Raul hasn't even heard of Catalina, or so he claims. I'm pretty sure his status as regional alpha is the kind of thing she would have focused on, like all his abs and how rich he is even though she supposedly doesn't care about that shit.

"Seriously," he answers, folding his arms. "Does that change your tune?"

"Yeah, sure," I say. "It means I'm going to sue his ass as soon as I get out of here. He's clearly good for it."

The doctor shakes his head. "Yes, you are a strange one, indeed."

"So I've heard," I say. "Again, I take it as a compliment."

I hear a commotion out in the hall, and I immediately brace myself, both to fight if I need to and in case the opportunity to run presents itself. I'm not used to not being able to muscle my way out of any situation, but I'm also not in denial about the reality of my current one.

Hell, considering I'm trapped in a book, I'm not sure reality is the right word to describe it.

When none other than Raul walks in, looking like some kind of lumberjack god in a red flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up to reveal his burly forearms and a pair of jeans that are tight enough to reveal the outline of his massive package even though I'm pretty sure he's not even hard, I'm immediately on edge.

"You're awake," Raul says, sounding at once wary and relieved. I don't like the way he's looking at me. Like I'm the last chicken parm on the sandwich tray and the Superbowl party isn't even half over.

"I'll give you a moment alone," the doctor says. I can't believe this, but I'm actually not eager for him to leave. Not when the alternative is being alone with his boss.

"Great," I mutter. "I was hoping the guy who lied to me and kidnapped me would show up."

"Do you really want this to be a kidnapping?" he challenges, raising an eyebrow. "Because that seems like the kind of ego blow you wouldn't want to have to explain to your 'frat bros.'"

I narrow my eyes in loathing, because he has a point. "Not my fault you guys are meta-human freaks," I mumble.

"Well, if you can tolerate being around this meta-human freak for a moment, how about we go on a walk?" he asks, propping the door open. "The fresh air might do you some good."

I eye him doubtfully, but he lets me pass through the door without any issue. There's no one else around as I walk outside the room and find myself in some kind of clinic area. I follow Raul through another door and realize the clinic is, in fact, attached to the mansion.

"Fancy," I say dryly. "Your whole pack lives here?"

"Not at all," he says. "Quite a few of them do, though. My inner circle."

"Is it true you're the head honcho over the region?" I ask.

"Dr. Wilson has been giving you the rundown, has he?"

"A little," I admit.

"I am responsible for the seven packs united under regional law," he says, walking through the hall into another part of the mansion I didn't even see before. "Technically, it's called a super pack. A wolf term, of course."

This place is fucking huge. It looks way bigger than it did last night. At least, I hope it's only been a day since I got knocked out. I sniff myself subtly, but I don't smell like a guy who's been unconscious for weeks.

When I see the way Raul is looking at me out of the corner of his eye, I realize maybe I wasn't so subtle about it, after all.

"So you're basically like the president of the Greek system," I reason.

He blinks. "I guess if you want to look at it that way, sure."

He stops at a side door and pushes it open, revealing the garden beyond it. It's huge, and there's some kind of hedge maze the door opens up into. I can see the forest beyond it, but it's no surprise a house full of wolves prefers to live out in the boonies. My brother would be eating this shit up.

I have to admit, it feels good to be outside and the fresh air is helping to chase away the lingering headache from whatever the doc stuck me with. I find myself trapped in a labyrinth of hedges, which I'm sure was at least part of Raul's reason for bringing us out this way. While I still have every intention of running, I do want some answers first.

"So, what was so important you had to leave like that?" I ask. I'm pretty sure I know the answer, though. Lenore said some intruders were sniffing around the territory, and in the book, Catalina was on the run from her home pack and her shady fiancé, so I'm sure they have something to do with it.

"There were wolves trespassing on our territory," he answers carefully. "We captured one of them."

"Who was he?" I ask.

The way he studies me makes it clear he's not sure how much he wants to divulge. "I'll tell you what. You answer one of my questions, and I'll answer yours."

I snort. "Tit for tat. Sure. What do you want to know?"

"Let's start with the basics. Where are you from?"

Oh, so now he wants to listen. "I'm from Morehead, Massachusetts, but I go to Mass State."

"I see," he says thoughtfully. "So how did you get all the way down to Texas?"

"A car accident," I answer honestly with a shrug. I don't really give a shit whether dream guy believes me or not.

He frowns. "What do you mean?"

"I answered your question," I remind him. "Now, you answer mine."

He sighs, as if I'm being unreasonable by holding him to the rules he set in the first place. "The wolf we captured was a member of the Blue Fang pack. Does that ring any bells?"

He's asking, but I can tell from the way he's looking at me, he already knows the answer. And my surprise is probably plain on my face, despite my attempts to immediately cover it up. That's the pack Catalina's from.

"No," I lie. "Not really."

Raul stops walking and turns to face me, a somber expression on his annoyingly handsome face. The guy could give Fabio an inferiority complex. "You know, we're not going to get anywhere if we're not honest with each other," he says in a low voice that makes me feel uneasy for some reason, even though there's nothing threatening about it, per se. It's the kind of feeling I had when I was younger and I would get a lecture from my dad about how disappointed he was in some bullshit I had pulled.

"You're not really in any position to demand honesty from me," I tell him, folding my arms.

He narrows his eyes, and I can see the fight in them. I'm pretty sure it's not every day someone challenges the bigshot alpha or whatever. At length, he relaxes a little and says, "Maybe not. But I'm asking for it all the same. Please."

I grit my teeth. "Yeah, whatever. Stop begging."

There's a ghost of a smirk on his lips. "So you do know of the Blue Fang pack."

"Yeah, I do," I admit. "They're assholes who force omegas into arranged marriages."

"Among other things, I'm sure." He takes a step closer. "That's why you ran from them, isn't it?"

"Me?" I ask. "I'm not from Blue Fang, bro. I'm not even a wolf. Your doctor should be able to tell you that."

"I know you can't shift, but you are an omega," he reasons. "You must have come from a pack."

"Well, I didn't," I say. "That's Catalina's pack. If you want to know why they're sniffing around your territory, you should ask her."

His brow furrows in confusion. "You keep mentioning her. Who is she, really?"

"She's the chick from the book I was reading before I got into the accident," I explain, feeling like a broken record. "Look, I'll tell you how it went down from the beginning. My brother and I got into a fight because I was giving him a hard time about reading this cornball horny werewolf shit—no offense—so I decided to make it up to him by reading it. I don't know, I guess I hoped maybe it would give us something to talk about. He's always so walled off, and sometimes I'm pretty sure he would rather live in a fantasy world than in the real one with me."

Raul listens intently as I find myself rattling off more than I intended to share with him, but he seems more worried than judgmental. "This brother... he's human, too?"

"Yes," I say. "Everyone is. I mean, at least as far as I know. I guess there could be, like, weird vampire sex orgies I don't know about, but as far as I know, that shit is all just fantasy, like cyborgs and reindeer."

Raul starts to say something, then stops, frowning. "Reindeer are real, Brad."

"Yeah, sure, and I'm sure there are pixies, too," I say with a wave of my hand. "We've already established your world is fucked up."

He shakes his head. "So let me get this straight. You think that you somehow ended up in your brother's book."

"I know I did," I tell him. "I don't know how, but I did. The last thing I remember is headlights coming at me and going off the road, but that book was the last thing I read before that, so I'm pretty sure the real me is in a hospital bed somewhere and this is all just some dream cooked up by the brain injury and whatever drugs they're pumping me full of."

"I see," Raul says thoughtfully. "Which would mean that me and everyone else..."

"Are fake," I say. "Or at least, not real. Not in my world. I'm sure it's breaking some kind of dream

etiquette to tell you that, but I don't really have a choice."

"Huh," Raul says, and he seems to be considering what I've told him for a few moments. He's taking it pretty well for a guy who just found out he's from a book. Actually, from a dream about a book. "Maybe you do have a head injury. I'll tell Dr. Wilson to take another look."

"Go fuck yourself!" I bellow. "I just poured my heart out to you, man."

"I'm sorry," he says, holding his hands up. "But you can't expect me to believe any of that."

"I'll prove it," I tell him. "I know shit about your life no one else could. At least not a stranger."

"Try me," he says. "So far, all you told me is that I'm in love with a woman I've never met or even heard of."

"You have a brother named Curtis, and your parents were an alpha-omega pair who were both killed along with your uncle, who should have inherited the throne when the Grayridge pack attacked yours when you were twenty-one," I tell him. "I know you took responsibility for raising Curtis and your other siblings, including your infant sister, Mina."

"True," he answers. "But that's biographical information that anyone would know. Even a Blue Fang wolf."

So I'm going to have to get a little more specific. I think back through Catalina's recollections, but they're so cluttered with abs and his uniquely masculine, sandalwood scent—whatever the hell sandalwood is—that it's hard to pull out anything objective.

"I know you've got a birthmark on your right ass cheek," I inform him, savoring the way his smug expression goes blank. "And it's shaped like a star without one of the points."

"All right, so that's... a bit more specific," he says through his teeth. "It still doesn't prove my entire world is a lie."

"Okay, fine. You don't have to believe me," I say, deciding to try a different strategy. "But just accept the fact that I believe me."

He tilts his head. "That is a fair point," he says. "Here's something for you to consider. If what you say is true, and you really were somehow transported into this book, have you ever thought that perhaps Catalina isn't here because you are?"

I start to speak, then stop, because he's introducing a possibility I haven't considered for more than point five seconds. And now that I am, I really don't want to.

"You're saying I'm Catalina?" I croak.

"She is an omega, isn't she?" he asks.

"I mean... yeah."

"And she ran from Blue Fang to escape an arranged marriage?" he presses. "But somehow, she ends up with me instead."

"Yeah..." I say, not sure I like the way this is headed. "You imprinted on her or some corny magic werewolf soulmate thing."

"I see," he says thoughtfully. "That settles it, then."

"Settles what?" I ask warily.

"I imprinted on you, Brad," he says, holding my gaze. As much as I want to believe he's fucking with me, there's no hint of dishonesty in that intense, brooding stare. "I knew it the moment I laid eyes on you."

"No," I grit out, even though I know he's telling the truth. I know it as surely as I know my own name. I feel it on some instinctive level. Like I've known it all my life. But that doesn't mean it's any easier to accept. "This is bullshit."

"You know it's not," he says calmly. With infuriating confidence. "You feel it too, on some level, I know you do. I can see it in your eyes. You can deny it all you like, but it doesn't change the facts. The way they're all laid out, it seems pretty obvious to me, even if you're right about all this being a fantasy. A story."

"And what is that?" I ask through my teeth.

A ghost of a smile tugs at his lips. "Catalina isn't the main character, Brad. You are."

CHAPTER
NINE



I find myself staring at Raul in a state of shock, and my brain is short-circuiting, trying to come up with reasons why he's completely and totally wrong. But the problem is, what he's saying makes sense in the most fucked-up way, no matter how much I want to deny it. And I can't really think of a reason why he's wrong.

"I'm... no," I say, shaking my head. "Nope. Look, for one thing, I'm straight. I mean, if it was my brother, he'd be eating this shit up, but I can't be your mate. I'm a fucking dude, in case you haven't noticed." I gesture up and down my body.

"I've noticed," he says flatly. "For the record, I'm straight, too. Or at least, I thought I was."

The implication that I made him think otherwise is not lost on me, and I'm torn between being flattered and freaked out. "Bro. Are you saying I'm so hot *I turned you gay*?"

He raises an eyebrow. "I'm not sure that's how that works. But I am quite convinced you're my mate, all the same."

"Well, clearly there's been a mixup," I say. "You're supposed to be with Catalina. Petite brunette, curvy in all the right places, a little short on any features or personality traits that would distinguish her from a J.Crew catalog model, but she's a nice girl. You'll get along great, and I'm sure once I get back to my world, she'll pop back up here."

"I'm not interested in Catalina," he says firmly. "Even if what you're saying is true, I have no intention of finding her. Or of letting you go."

Yeah, there's nothing menacing about that. "You're only saying that because you're written to be an overprotective, obsessive alpha douchebro."

"What?" he asks, frowning.

"It's not important," I say. "But I'm getting back home, one way or another. I'm not leaving Devon, for one thing, and it's rush week. I can't leave my Kappa Nu bros hanging."

"And Kappa Nu is your... fraternity?" he asks, like he's having as much trouble keeping up with the cast and structures of my world as I am with his.

"Yeah. Best frat in the whole world," I say. "Probably the universe. Not sure if they got them out there

in space, but if they do, we're better than them, too."

"Right," Raul says slowly. "Well, if you find fraternal organizations based on hierarchical structure appealing, you shouldn't have too much trouble settling into life in a wolf pack, even if you are human. And I'm sure I can find a way to bring your brother here."

"No! I want out of the coma, I don't want him in one," I say. "Are you even listening?"

"You're really set on this other world thing," Raul says, sounding concerned, which is infuriating. "Do you remember anything about Blue Fang?"

"Sure I do. The alpha's a dick who treats Catalina like a pawn just because she's an omega," I answer, pausing. "It is pawns they have in chess, right? Or is that checkers?"

"It's chess," he answers with condescending patience. "So did they hurt you? I mean... her."

"Subtle, bro," I grumble. "Not physically, but whenever she acted out—usually trying to escape—they would lock her up in this dark room without any windows and not let her have anything to eat. Real Little Orphan Annie shit. Then there's the whole deal with them trying to force her into an arranged marriage with that Constantine asshole."

"Constantine?" His eyes light up with an emotion I recognize clearly enough: rage. "Constantine Grayridge?"

"Yeah, that's the guy," I say. "I don't know where the author gets these names from. Some kind of generator. You know, they got those for everything now. We had way too many Kevins in the frat last year and we were running out of nicknames, so I went to Google and there was a whole ass generator for that shit."

"You went to what?" he asks, frowning even more.

"Never mind."

"Let's just try to stay on track," he pleads. "The Blue Fang and the Grayridge packs have formed an alliance?"

I hesitate, trying to remember. The truth is, I kind of glossed over all the werewolf politics crap to get to the weird wolf sex. The whole knot thing undeniably stuck in my head, and I had to know what that was all about. It started out as kind of a "rubbernecking at a car accident" situation, but then...

I shake my head to clear it, and because I really don't want to think about the softball in this guy's pants now that he's right in front of me. "Yeah, uh, I think it was still in the works. It was based on them handing Catalina over to Constantine. Something about producing an error code for his Honda?"

"An heir of accord?" he asks eagerly.

"Yeah! That's it."

"The Grayridge pack hasn't united with another territory it didn't take over by force in a century," Raul murmurs. I can see the wheels turning in his eyes. "What are they planning?"

"No clue, bro," I say. "I didn't get that far in the book. But I'll tell you what—you help me get back to

my world, and I'll find a way to send you the CliffsNotes."

"You're not going anywhere," he says, raising his eyebrows. "But you clearly have information I can use, whether you consciously remember it or not."

"I don't know, man. Devon is always talking about how much spoilers suck. It's probably better if you just get around to it the natural way."

"We are at war," he says firmly, his eyes aglow with determination. This is definitely that look that melts the main character's panties. My sweatpants are getting tight for entirely unrelated reasons, though.

Damn, I gotta get out of this place.

"My parents died at the fangs of the Grayridge pack, and so have many others," Raul continues. "If your pack and theirs are truly uniting, countless others will die as a result unless we stop them. And you yourself are in grave danger."

"How do you figure that?" I ask.

"Because," he says, his eyes boring into mine, "the wolf we captured asked for you."

My chest gets a bit tighter, until I remember none of this is real. "You mean he asked for Catalina."

"No," says Raul. "He asked for you, by name. And he described you perfectly, right down to the letter."

Okay, so that's a little unsettling. As much as I don't want to admit it, I'm starting to think Raul is right about at least one thing. This book is changing.

Because of me.

CHAPTER
TEN



Brad is obviously taken aback by what I tell him. He doesn't realize how much danger he's in, and for a moment, I feel a pang of guilt for being so blunt. Especially since it's clear he's struggling with all of this to the point where he's invented some false reality to cope with whatever horrors they put him through back in Blue Fang. If even half of what I know of them is true, I can't say I blame him.

But I remind myself that it is my duty to protect him, and if that means being a bit harsh, then so be it. It's better than letting him escape with no idea of what's really out there.

"Where is he?" Brad asks after a few moments of silence.

I hesitate. "Where is who?"

"This asshole who was asking for me," he says. "I wanna see him."

I frown. "That's out of the question."

He points an accusing finger at me. "You're the one who wants me to stay here, so I need to know what's going on. No more secrets."

"It's not a secret," I reply. "It's just not safe. You have to trust me when I say that."

"Trust you?" He scoffs. "I don't even know you. I'm not a kid. I can handle this. I just want the truth."

"The truth is, the wolf we captured is dangerous," I say carefully. "I'm not willing to put you at risk."

I know he's not going to find that explanation to be satisfactory, considering he balks at any attempt to protect or care for him. And if his idea of being taken care of is being forced into a marriage with a wolf even more monstrous than the others in his pack, I can't say I blame him for that, either.

I intend to show him there's more to being an omega than what he's found so distasteful he had to concoct an entire alternate reality to cope with it, but I know it's going to take time. Time and patience, but those are a small sacrifice to make for my destined mate.

I never imagined I would find one, let alone in such an... unconventional package, but now that I have him, I wouldn't want anyone else. He's perfect for me, and I'm just going to have to convince him that I'm the perfect mate for him as well.

"More of this bullshit," he growls. "I never asked for your protection, asshole."

"You have it all the same," I say with a shrug. "And you're going to have to learn to live with it. I won't expose you to harm, even if you hate me for it."

"Is that son of a bitch in your custody or not?" he challenges. "Because if you can't even protect me from a guy who's imprisoned on your watch, I don't think I'd put my ass on the line with you even if I was in the market for a bodyguard."

I frown. He has a point, as much as I don't want to admit it. And as unconventional of an omega as Brad is, I'm starting to realize that my methods of dealing with him are going to have to be unconventional as well.

"I'm asking you to trust me," I say after a moment's contemplation. I can see him about to argue, so I continue, "so I guess it's only fair I give you reason to."

He doesn't seem to know what to say to that, but he finally grunts. "Now we're talking. Lead the way, Helsing."

I raise an eyebrow. "Helsing was the werewolf hunter."

"Not in the movie I saw," he counters.

I just sigh and motion for him to follow me through the nearest exit to the garden labyrinth. "We'll have to drive. The prison is on the outskirts of the territory, and it's going to be a hike on two legs."

"Can't believe I'm stuck in a damn werewolf romance novel and I don't even get to turn into a werewolf," he grumbles, trudging alongside me toward the parking lot behind the mansion.

"So now you *want* to be a wolf?" I ask.

"I'm just saying, it ain't fair I get stuck with this omega bullshit and I don't even get a super awesome monster form," he says, stopping by the car once we're in the garage.

"If it makes you feel any better, only alphas have a monstrous form," I tell him. "The rest are regular wolves."

"I guess a little," he says.

He's blocking my path to his door, so I can't open it casually and pretend like I just got there first, which I'm sure was his aim. And the way he's glaring at me in challenge has me sweating bullets, torn between denying my alpha urges and not wanting him to hate me any more than he already does.

Instead, I take my keys out, open the driver's side door, and toss the keys to him as a compromise. He catches them in midair.

"You drive," I say, clearly surprising him.

He stares at the keys, then at the open door, and the way his eyes narrow tells me he's onto me, but he slips in anyway.

I sigh in relief and get in on the passenger's side. Technically, omegas weren't even allowed to drive

until I took over as alpha, but something tells me it's a mistake to tell him that. I input the coordinates in the GPS as he pulls out of the garage.

"There's no address," he says, glancing down at the display.

"No, it's not listed," I answer. "Kind of defeats the purpose of a secret underground prison, doesn't it?"

He snorts. "Fair enough."

We drive in silence, and for the first time in my life, I find that I'm uncomfortable with it. I don't like not knowing what he's thinking, but I can tell there's a lot on his mind, so I resist the urge to push it.

One thing at a time.

CHAPTER

ELEVEN



When the GPS tells me to stop the car in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by pine trees and dirt road in either direction as far as the eye can see, I'm starting to feel like I might have woken up in a horror novel rather than a romance.

"This is it," Raul says, getting out of the car.

I follow him, my stomach churning. I can feel something in the air—a kind of dark energy that sends a chill down my spine.

Raul leads me through the trees and around a bend, where I see the prison stretching out before us. It definitely looks like something out of a horror movie. The prison is a huge, imposing building that looms over the surrounding area like a great beast. It's all dark gray stone and reinforced steel laden with blankets of ivy and moss, with tall towers on each corner that are topped with giant spotlights. There's a huge gate, too. The place is like Alcatraz for wolves.

Raul notices my reaction and pauses. "We don't have to go in if you don't want to."

I shoulder past him toward the front door. "I ain't no bitch."

"Never said you were," he mutters, following me. He takes out what looks like a key card and swipes it on the front door. The door clicks open and he leads me into the lobby of the prison.

The lobby is surprisingly bright and spacious, with white tiled floors and looming walls. The air is stale, and I can hear the faint clank of metal echoing somewhere in the maze of hallways. There's a reception desk off to one side, with a uniformed and stern-faced attendant sitting behind it. He looks up at Raul and nods in deference as we pass.

Raul leads me down a long hallway, which is lined with doors and barred windows that lead to the cells.

The air in this place is heavy with hostility and despair. It's not just the smell or the atmosphere. There's something else here, something that I can't quite put my finger on but that leaves me feeling uneasy all over.

We come to an intersection where we have to turn right and then left again before finally reaching our destination—an elevator that requires yet another key card. It plunges us a few stories down into the

basement.

The doors open up and Raul steps out, his footsteps echoing through the cement hallways of bulletproof glass cells that are nothing like the ones above. I get the feeling this is maximum security.

"Our prisoners are shifters," he says in answer to my unspoken question. "It's necessary to keep them in proper containment."

"How many people are here?" I ask warily.

"Hard to say. At any one time, twenty. Maybe thirty," he says. When he sees my shock, he looks amused. "This facility serves the entirety of the seven-pack system, so all things considered, it's not that many."

"I guess not," I snort. "And you have the sheriff in your back pocket, so you probably don't have to worry about due process and all that."

"You and Dr. Wilson really had quite the chat, didn't you?" he asks dryly.

"More than I'd like," I answer.

"There's no grand conspiracy, Brad," he says, stopping in front of a large metal door with no windows. I get the feeling whoever is behind it is one hell of an escape risk. "The vast majority of us just want to live in peace among humans, and packs like Constantine's are the ones who threaten that peace."

"I guess," I say with a shrug. "I don't really have a dog in this fight. Sorry... is that offensive?"

Raul just gives me a look and swipes his key card again, unlocking the door and walking inside.

The room is small and bare, with a single bed in the corner. A man with short black hair and brown eyes is sitting on the edge of the bed. I don't recognize him, but one look at him and I realize he sure recognizes me.

"Brad!" he calls to me excitedly and tries to get up, only to almost fall flat on his face when the chain around his ankle stops him in his tracks.

Raul growls at him and puts himself between us. "Watch yourself," he snarls.

The other wolf stands his ground, but even though he doesn't say anything, there's spite and defiance in his gaze when he looks at Raul that wasn't there with just me.

I'm not sure why or how he knows me, but something tells me this guy isn't just any ordinary wolf. There's something about him that's familiar, but I can't place it yet.

"So it's true. You really are here," the inmate says, looking me over with what seems like genuine worry in his gaze. "Have they hurt you?"

I blink at him. "Buddy, I got no idea who you even are."

His expression crumples, and he looks like a kicked puppy. "Brad... it's me. It's Trent."

Trent?

The name rings a bell in my head, and I remember him as Catalina's best friend from the book. He went after her when she ran away, and wound up getting captured by Raul's men. Unfortunately, when he later tried to escape in order to "save" Catalina—who didn't want to be saved at all by then—it didn't go so well for him.

Poor dumb, lovesick kid. He's a beta anyway, so he should have known he never stood a chance, given the way omegas in this universe crave an alpha's knot like I crave a greasy plate of Randy's Tavern's Heart Attack Nachos when I'm hungover.

"What are you doing here?" I ask. "How did you end up in this place?"

He wrinkles his brow. "I came looking for you," he says, confirming what I already suspect—and fear. Raul is right. I really am a stand-in for Catalina.

Great.

"Right," I mutter. "Well, you shouldn't have. Ever think I left for a reason?"

"You just disappeared without a word," he says. "At first, I thought Alpha Wyatt was punishing you again, but then they announced you'd been kidnapped by the Stone Hollow pack and I volunteered to go out in the hunting party."

"Yeah, well, old Wyatt's full of shit," I say, noticing the way his eyes widen. Something tells me whoever or whatever is responsible for retconning this book to shove me into the heroine's role was too fucking lazy to change more than my name and physical appearance, because this guy is staring at me like I just sprouted a third nipple in the middle of my forehead. "I wasn't kidnapped. I ran."

There's that kicked puppy look again. Feels like that time I accidentally sat on Devon's one-hundredth-scale model of Shining Gundam.

"Without telling me?" His voice is thick and strained with emotion, and I'm really not sure how to respond.

"Is he telling the truth?" Raul asks, watching us both closely. "You know him?"

My first instinct is to deny it, but I think better of it. As much as Catalina whines and cries in the book about Trent's death after the fact, she doesn't do a damn thing to prevent it beforehand. She's way too busy fucking around with her hot werewolf boyfriend and being worshiped by her new packmates—with one or two notable exceptions.

Trent always kind of seemed like an afterthought. He was the kind of character who was there just to pad out Catalina's past, and when he became inconvenient to stuff into the current story, the author had to do away with him somehow. And then his death just gave Raul and everyone else a reason to feel guilty and fawn over Catalina even more than they already did.

It kind of pisses me off, if I'm being honest. Maybe it's just because Trent reminds me a little of Devon—even more so now that I've met him in person—but if I'm already stuck here, maybe I can do something to change his fate.

"He's my best friend," I say awkwardly. "I mean... Catalina's."

Raul gives him another look and seems torn between confusion and jealousy. Two emotions I know well. "I see..."

"Look, can you give us a minute alone?" I ask.

Raul frowns. "That's not going to happen."

I clench my fist, trying to remind myself why I can't punch a hole in this guy's noggin. Namely because he's stupidly overpowered and compared to him I'm just a measly human, but still. "You want me to trust you? Start putting your money where your mouth is."

His eyes narrow. I can tell I'm not gonna win this one easily, but if he thinks he can out-stubborn the only guy in the last twelve years who's won Beef O'Brien's eighty-ounce sirloin challenge, the bastard has another thing coming. "Letting you come here was enough of a compromise. Whatever you have to say in front of him, you can say in front of me."

As much as I want to argue, the way Trent is glaring at him makes it clear he's one second away from getting himself killed.

"Whatever," I growl, deciding to ignore Raul for the moment. I turn back to Trent. "Listen. I'm not in any danger here, but you are. Just chill, and I'll figure out a way to get you out of here soon, okay?"

I can feel Raul wanting to protest, and Trent doesn't look any happier with the plan.

"I'm not leaving without you," Trent insists, being the precocious little bastard he is.

"I promise I'm not gonna bail on you again," I say, feeling guilty for the fact that I might not be able to keep that promise. I've always been a man of my word, and I don't like the idea of going back on it, but I will if it means keeping him alive.

Sure, I'm not ready to entertain the idea that any of this is real-real, but it feels real enough to me and I know it feels real to them. That has to mean something, doesn't it?

Maybe I'm losing it.

"I guess I don't have a choice but to believe you," he says, casting a hateful glance over his shoulder at Raul. "Just promise me you'll stay safe. You can't trust this guy."

I can tell from the way Raul bristles that he heard that. Shifters in the book all have heightened senses, but now that I'm thinking of it, mine haven't changed at all.

Great. All the downsides of being an omega without any of the benefits.

The truth is, I have no intention of trusting Raul, or him, for that matter, but I decide not to admit that. I feel bad for Trent, though, so I lean in to hug him and it's tight enough that he wheezes a little, like he wasn't expecting the embrace to be as firm as it is.

"I'll get you outta here, bro," I whisper so hopefully only he can hear, but it's nothing too incriminating, anyway. I intend to use whatever pull I have with Raul to do at least that much before I get the fuck out of Dodge.

Here's hoping it's sooner rather than later.

CHAPTER
TWELVE



“If he’s your friend, you shouldn’t do that,” I say as we pull up to the mansion. I’ve been silent most of the drive, and so has he. For different reasons, I’m sure.

I can’t deny the spark of jealousy I felt as soon as I saw Brad embrace Trent. He’s not even my mate in an official capacity, and I have no reason to think they’ve been intimate when the beta looks at him like he’s forbidden fruit, but it triggers the insatiable beast within that has already claimed Brad as ours and ours alone.

And I’m inclined to agree with it.

"Do what?" Brad asks, looking over at me with a look of confusion on his face.

"You shouldn't make promises you can't keep," I explain. "Getting him out of prison, namely."

He frowns. "I intend on keeping that promise, actually. You're gonna let him out."

"Is that so?" I ask. His gumption is admittedly admirable. And amusing, but I'm sure he'd hate me even more if he knew that.

"He's a good guy, for one thing," he replies. "For another, you want me to like you."

I snort. "That doesn't mean I'm going to compromise your safety in order to make you like me."

"He's not dangerous," he insists. "Not to me, anyway."

"You told me you didn't remember anyone from your old pack," I remind him.

"No, I said I don't come from this world," he corrects. "I remember plenty, from what I've read."

And here I'd hoped the one silver lining of taking him to see the prisoner was that it might spark his memory and help break him out of this strange delusion. "So you're still clinging to the book thing. What about everything you said to Trent?"

"He's got enough shit to worry about," he says. "No point in confusing him."

"The question is, if he's just a character in a book, why does he matter?" I ask.

"He just does, okay?" he asks in a defensive tone. "You never read a book where the characters felt

real?"

"I have," I said carefully. "Wouldn't have pegged you for the bookish type, you know."

"Yeah, well, there's a lot you don't know about me, buddy," he says. "Namely, I... feel... funny."

I frown at the sudden shift in his demeanor. "What do you mean?"

"I dunno, man, I'm just..." He stops and looks down at his hands. "You put the heat on or somethin'?"

"No," I say, glancing at the dashboard to make sure. I'm not exactly on top of my mental game when he's around. To say he's a distraction is an understatement. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," he mutters, rubbing the back of his neck. His scent hits me afresh, the salt of sweat and the alluring aroma of heat I'd know anywhere. Any alpha would, but I've never smelled anything like this. I've never been affected by an omega's scent, even in the midst of rut, and I'm pretty fucking sure I'm about to be in one right now, just from one whiff of him. "Just feels weird."

I swallow hard, trying to keep my calm. "We should probably go inside."

"Yeah, sure," he says, pulling around back to the garage. When he parks and gets out, the open space makes it a little easier to think about anything else, but not by much.

I know I need to tell him before we go inside, if only because I'm going to lose my mind if anyone so much as looks at him. Before I can say anything, he's halfway to the door when he collapses with a strangled cry.

"Brad!" I call, on my knees next to him the very next instant. I grab his shoulder, and look for any sign that he's hurt, but I don't smell blood. Just the intoxicating scent of his heat. "What's wrong? Are you hurt?"

He looks up at me, his hair falling into his eyes, which are wide with confusion. "Fuck," he grits out, and I realize only then that he's clutching his stomach. "Bro, I think I've got dream appendicitis."

I blink at him. "I don't think there's a special dream variation, but that's beside the point. You're not dreaming, and you don't have appendicitis."

"How would you know?" he asks. "You're not a dream doctor."

"Come on," I say, draping an arm around his shoulder and helping him back to his feet. I could easily carry him, as big as he is, but something tells me he wouldn't appreciate that even in his current condition. "We'll go see Dr. Wilson."

"No," he groans, limping alongside me. "I'd rather take my chances with the renegade appendix."

"You're going to be fine," I assure him, leading him into the house. I spot Curtis in the foyer, and it looks like he's about to go out. He freezes as soon as we come in and I can tell from one look he's already picked up Brad's scent. It's getting stronger and would be impossible for any alpha in the area not to notice. One look is enough to keep his mouth shut, though, and send him running for the door.

Fortunately, Dr. Wilson is still in his clinic when I push the door open and lead Brad inside. He does a double take when he sees the man hanging off me.

"Oh," he says, setting aside the paperwork he's working on and getting up from his chair to come over to us. "Did he get hurt?"

"No," I answer, following the doctor into one of the patient rooms. Brad pulls away from me, and sits down on the edge of the bed.

"I'm dyin', bro," he groans, curling up on his side and clutching his stomach.

"He's not dying," I say with a sigh. "But I'm pretty sure he's in heat."

"In what now?" Brad asks, his head shooting up like a prairie dog peeking out of its hole.

Yeah, he's definitely not dying.

"Heat," says Dr. Wilson. "You are an omega. It's only natural."

"I'm not an omega and I'm not a fucking dog," Brad snaps, sitting up sharply and moving as far back as the table will allow when Dr. Wilson approaches him. "Don't you dare come near me with those blue hands, you freakin' weirdo."

"They're gloves," Dr. Wilson says, looking down at his hands.

"Same difference!"

The doctor sighs, giving me a pleading glance for intervention. "Can you calm him down so I can get a better look at him?"

"You think I know how to do that?" I challenge.

"Ain't nobody calming me down!" Brad snarls, definitely further on the not-calm end of the spectrum than he was one minute ago. There's a reason Dr. Wilson is not mated yet, and it's becoming more apparent with every moment that goes by.

"Brad, he's just trying to help," I say in an attempt to comfort him. "I'm almost completely sure it's just a result of the heat, but he does need to rule out the possibility of anything more serious, like you said."

His tan skin turns a bit ashen and he seems to be contemplating this. "Yeah, whatever," he grumbles. "Just no funny stuff."

I'm not sure exactly what "funny stuff" implies, but heaven help Dr. Wilson if he tries it.

"Just lie down," the doctor says, standing over his bedside. "I'm going to palpate your abdomen."

"You're gonna fuckin' what now?"

The doctor looks skyward as if for strength even though I know for a fact he's an atheist. "I'm just going to feel your stomach."

"Oh," says Brad. "Yeah, fine, whatever."

The doctor carefully lifts Brad's shirt to reveal a column of heavily toned abdominal muscles. I can imagine every inch of the man is just as perfectly sculpted. He's statuesque in composition under soft,

warm skin my fangs and claws burn to sink into, every predatory impulse I've ever known warring with all the care and tenderness that seems to exist for one person and him alone.

The doctor gently prods beneath his ribs on either side before moving down to his right side, in the spot just below his navel. "How does that feel? Any pain, tenderness?"

"No, not really," Brad answers. "Does that mean I'm dyin'?"

"No," Dr. Wilson says flatly. "There's no sensitivity at McBurney's point, so I'd say appendicitis is highly unlikely. Here, bring your right leg up to your stomach and push your foot against my hand."

Brad does as he says and the doctor grimaces. "I said push, not wrench my arm out of its socket."

"Sorry, bro. Shoulda been more specific."

"No pain?" the doctor asks through his teeth.

"No more than there already was. Feels like someone took a fucking torque wrench to my oil pan gasket."

"You're human," the doctor says pointedly. "You don't have one of those."

"Well, how do you explain the fact that I'm burning up?" Brad demands, sitting up again.

"Everything you're describing is a normal side effect of heat," says the doctor. "And considering that any infections would have shown up in your bloodwork earlier, I'm quite confident in that diagnosis. But there is one way to be sure."

"What's that?" Brad asks warily.

"There's a spot that's quite responsive during a heat," he says, moving around behind Brad to prod his lower back beneath his shirt. "It's located right about—"

"Son of a fucking ass!" Brad cries, his spine arching so hard he leaps off the bed and staggers into me. He pushes me away as soon as I catch him and whirls around on the doctor, clutching at his back like he's just been stabbed. "What the hell did you do to me?"

Dr. Wilson looks unsurprised by the outburst, until he turns a few shades paler and I realize only then the monstrous growl is tearing from my own throat.

"You're fine," the doctor says quickly. "It's just a pressure point. But I can say it without a doubt—you are in heat."

Brad looks more disturbed by that than what just happened. And he's looking warily at me over his shoulder, like I'm some kind of monster.

And to him, I suppose I am.

I haven't lost control of my temper since I was a pup, so I'm a bit shaken myself. There are alphas who consider not finding an omega a blessing, because they fear the hold the supposedly gentler counterpart to our species has over them, and I always thought they were exaggerating. Now, I'm not so sure.

"I'm in heat," Brad mutters, seemingly to himself. At least he seems distracted from my outburst. "This can't be fucking possible."

"You're what, twenty?" the doctor asks.

"Twenty-two," Brad says, as if that makes a world of difference.

"You must have gone into heat before," Dr. Wilson insists.

"Well, I haven't!" Brad snaps. "I wasn't an omega before I got stuck in this stupid fucking book."

The doctor blinks at him, then turns to me for answers.

"It's a long story," I say, deciding I'm going to have to fill him and the others in later. Just not in front of Brad.

"I suppose it's not unheard of for a heat to be delayed that long," Dr. Wilson says, the wheels in his eyes turning. "It's just uncommon. Especially for someone so... hardy."

"Thanks," Brad says, clearly taking it as a compliment. "So just give me something to stop it. And don't hold out on me, cuz I know a chick who was on suppressants all the time."

"Suppressants are an option for most omegas who want to avoid a heat," Dr. Wilson concedes. "But they're not an answer to one that's already begun. That's not the way the hormones work. If anything, taking them right now would make the cramps even worse."

"Cramps?" Brad's expression falls. "You tellin' me I've got my fuckin' werewolf period or something?"

The doctor pauses. "That's an accurate enough way of putting it, I suppose. A bit nonscientific, perhaps, but accurate. It is the omega body's natural response to the hormone cycle that begins with sexual maturity, and dictates the reproductive cycle, so... yes. You have your werewolf period."

"Great," Brad grits out. "That's just fucking great. Anything else you wanna tell me? Am I gonna start bleeding out of my dick, too?"

"Not unless you happen to have a UTI on top of it," the doctor says flatly.

"When is it going to stop?" Brad asks, sounding increasingly panicked.

"About a week, give or take," says the doctor. "Perhaps longer if it really is your first heat. Unless of course..."

He trails off, and it's easy to see why. Even for a doctor, it's a bit taboo to discuss mating in front of an omega. Especially with his mate present.

"Unless of course what?" Brad asks, looking between us so quickly he's bound to get whiplash. "What aren't you telling me?"

"He's referring to mating," I answer carefully, because I know how he's going to react to that. And when it's all I can think about myself, I need to choose every word with great discretion.

All the color drains from Brad's face once more. "You've gotta be fucking kidding me."

"I'm afraid not," says the doctor. "Mating is the only way to fully resolve a heat early. Even then, it can take a few times."

"So... all I have to do is fuck and this will be over?" Brad asks, sounding like he's come to terms with it a hell of a lot faster than I imagined. Maybe he won't be so hard to win over, after all.

The doctor is clearly uncomfortable, and the way he keeps glancing my way makes it clear he's afraid I'm going to go alpha male berserk and start breaking things—including him.

I really need to get a handle on this shit.

"That's the gist of it, yes," says Dr. Wilson.

"Why didn't you just say so?" Brad asks with a scoff, turning toward the door. "See you later. I'm gonna go see if Lenore's DTF. Nothing like a little hate chemistry to soothe the soul."

A rush of blinding anger floods through me and I suddenly find myself between Brad and the door, my hand slamming it shut. "You are not going to fuck anyone," I snarl, sounding far more monstrous than I intend.

I think I'm relieved Brad seems pissed rather than intimidated. "And who the fuck are you to tell me shit?"

"Your mate," I answer, sounding a bit more in control, to my relief. Even if my vision is still clouded with anger and I can't quite get my tongue to fall in line. "Whether you like it or not, I have a claim on you."

Brad's eyes blaze with indignation and he opens his mouth, clearly about to let me have it, when the doctor interrupts.

"I'm afraid there's been a misunderstanding."

Brad slowly turns to face him. "Oh, yeah? And what's that?"

"Your mating bond aside, you can't just go have... intercourse with some random person to get out of heat," says Dr. Wilson. "As a matter of fact, it has to be the opposite."

Brad stares at him in abject horror for a few moments and I can see the wheels turning behind his eyes as he comes to a realization I'm just glad I don't have to be the one to drop on him.

Maybe it's time to give the good doctor a raise.

"You mean I've gotta..."

"Get fucked,' to put it in terms you'll be familiar with," the doctor interrupts him pointedly. "To be perfectly specific, you have to be knotted by an alpha at least once."

"Knotted?" Brad's voice breaks and he casts a nervous glance at me over his shoulder, his eyes traveling down to my crotch. He swallows audibly. "Fuck."

"I'm afraid that's the way the biology works," says Dr. Wilson. "A beta of any sex isn't going to be enough to get an omega out of heat. But there's good news. The effect of a bonded pair mating is much stronger, so with any luck, all it'll take is one go and you should be feeling back to normal."

"Hell fucking no," Brad snaps, seemingly jolted out of his shock and back to his usual fiery self. As difficult as that self is to deal with, I infinitely prefer it to thinking I traumatized him. Something tells me it would take a hell of a lot more than an outburst, though, which makes me wonder what the fuck they put him through back in Blue Fang to cause him to detach from his own reality. "Ain't gonna happen."

"Then I suppose you'll just have to wait until it subsides naturally," the doctor says with a shrug. "I can give you some pain medication to make it more bearable, but I can't promise how effective it will be."

"I'll take the damn pills," Brad mutters.

The doctor nods and goes over to a cabinet to prepare a bottle. He returns a moment later, handing them to Brad with instructions not to take more than one at a time, and then another an hour later if it doesn't help, but never more than four in twenty-four hours, and always with a full glass of water and food. Judging from the way Brad's eyes are glazing over at his instructions, I'm not going to be leaving his side anytime soon.

Which means I'm going to be stuck in a room with an omega in the throes of heat who has no intention of letting me touch him. And not just any omega, but *my* omega.

It's going to be a long fucking night.

CHAPTER

THIRTEEN



I've never been the kind of person who takes meds—even the over-the-counter variety—unless it's absolutely necessary. Especially since you can't mix most of them with alcohol, and no way I'm giving up my keggers for anything.

Despite my reputation for being a legendary partier, I've only ever even smoked pot a few times. Hell, Devon was always the one experimenting with that shit when we were teenagers, despite looking and acting the part of the pious little nerd. So I find myself staring at the bottle of pain meds back in my room like it's going to bite me and weighing just how much I really want to take the edge off.

For all I know, dream meds are even trippier than the real kind and I've already had more than enough mindfucks for one lifetime, thank you very much.

Besides, now that I know I'm probably not dying and it's just my stupid omega period, the horniness is by far the more distressing of my symptoms, and something tells me the pills ain't gonna do shit to fix that.

I'm about to reseal the bottle when there's a knock at the door and I jump out of my fucking skin, sending pills flying all across the carpet.

"Son of a bitch!"

"Everything okay in there?" Raul's voice comes through the door, somehow still annoyingly silken and throaty at once, even though it's muffled by the thick wood.

I walk over and open the door a crack to glare at him. "I'm fine," I snap, and I immediately regret opening the door when his scent hits me. It's different than it was before. It has to be, because I definitely would have remembered getting hit with a tidal wave of lust stronger than I've ever felt for anyone, let alone another man. "Why do you fucking smell like that?"

Raul raises an eyebrow, but seems more amused than offended. "Lovely to see you, too, Brad."

"I'm serious. You smell like a Calvin Klein ad and a whorehouse had a fucking contest," I tell him. "What gives?"

"It's called rut," he answers. "It's the alpha equivalent of heat, and it's usually a response to an omega in heat. I can't help it anymore than you can."

"Me?" I cry, more offended than I want to be. "I smell fine." I pause and lean down to sniff my pit though, just to check. Yep, still smells like Old Spice.

Man, I love those commercials.

"You smell better than fine," he says, folding his arms as he leans in the doorway, taking up the entirety of it. "'Intoxicating' is a better word, but it still doesn't cover it."

I feel my face turn even hotter than the rest of me, and the fact that it probably shows is pissing me off enough to distract my aching dick.

"What do you want?" I ask, because I have no fucking idea how to respond to that. I realize my palms are sweating only when it causes my vice grip on the doorknob to falter and I pitch forward and into the not-quite-human wall of muscle before me.

"What do I want," he echoes as he catches me, his voice so low and husky it echoes through me like a damn jackhammer. "Now that's a good question. I doubt you'd like any of the answers, but if you're asking why I'm here, it's to check on you." He looks past me at the pills scattered all over the floor and sighs. "Looks like I was right to. You do know those are supposed to go inside you, right?"

"Oh, fuck off," I growl, pushing him away as I get back on my feet. I'm not as steady as I'd like to be, and I don't like the way my body responds to his touch. It's not even just the hard-on that's testing the willpower of these sweatpants, it's the warmth that spreads through me when his strong hands wrap around my shoulders, instantly melting away all the tension I didn't even realize my body was clinging to. Like a fucking deep tissue massage in a person.

"You should at least eat something first," he says, picking up a bag of takeout he set on the floor for some reason. Probably because he thought I was going to deck him as soon as he opened the door.

Guess he's kinda smart.

I didn't even notice the aroma of the Chinese food he'd brought through his scent before, which is a problem I encounter often enough in the frat house, but for very different reasons. This guy could definitely give Smelly Steve, the worst of the frat's two Steves, a run for his money in terms of the strength of his scent. But there's nothing unpleasant about Raul's scent at all. Hell, if they found a way to bottle it, it would go flying off the shelves.

I might even be inclined to spray everything I've ever owned with it.

Ugh, fuck this heat shit with a rusty dildo.

"Come in, I guess," I say against my better judgment, stepping back to let him into the room. I go over to collect the fallen pills and put them back into the bottle.

"Have you taken any of those yet?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but no," I tell him. "And I wasn't gonna. You just scared the shit outta me and they went everywhere."

I don't like that I just admitted that, considering he's probably going to file it in his "proof Brad is an omega" cabinet somewhere, but my filter is dislodged.

"I'm sorry I scared you," he says as I set the food down on the table across the room.

It's a pretty big suite with its own bathroom and everything. I'm relieved he at least gave me my own room rather than trying to push me into staying with him. Not that that would have gone very well for him at all.

"I'm fine," I grunt. As hungry as I should be, food is honestly the last thing on my mind. Actually, the smell that should be making me ravenous is turning my stomach, and it's getting on my nerves because it's distracting me from what I truly want.

No... fuck, I don't want to want that. But...

"Is something wrong?" Raul asks. When I look up, there's genuine concern in his eyes as he looks down at me.

I'm not used to someone being bigger than me, and I can't help but wonder just how much bigger he is everywhere else. What the fuck is wrong with me? Usually, I can just send intrusive thoughts like that packing without a whole lot of effort, but...

"It's nothing," I say, sounding far less convinced of that fact than I want to be. "Thanks for the food, but I'm really not hungry right now."

"No?" he sounds doubtful, and considering I look like I could clear out a buffet on my own—and I have come close enough plenty of times—I can't blame him. "You're sure you don't want the medicine? Maybe I can ask the doctor to prescribe something else."

"I'm good," I say, holding my tongue because I'm way too fucking close to asking if he wants to fill my prescription for dick. And that's not even the kind of thing Catalina would say, so it's not like I can blame that on whatever kind of book magic is tormenting me.

I'm being forced to confront a very uncomfortable revelation right now, and that's that even if this really is all a dream—which feels less likely the longer I'm trapped here—that means it's *my* dream. And in turn, that means my dream is to be a fucking omega who needs to get railed by a massive alpha shifter with a softball-sized knot at the base of his monster cock.

And judging from the fact that my mouth is watering at the thought, I'm pretty sure I'm not going to be able to deny it anymore.

Raul is watching me with that look of concern again, and I'm not sure if I'm more insulted by the fact that he sees me as something to worry and fret over, or the fact that he seems to be having a much easier time resisting this whole rutt-slash-heat clusterfuck than I am.

"Look, I know this is a lot to take in," he begins. "But I don't want you to be afraid, or think you're going to be pressured into anything. I don't know what the Blue Fang pack did to you, but we're not like that here. *I'm* not like that."

I look up at him, horrified. "The fuck, dude? No one's pressured me into shit. Where'd you pull that out of?"

He blinks slowly at me in a patient expression that's infuriating. And endearing. My signals are so

crossed right now there's a six-lane pile-up happening internally.

"You've clearly suffered some kind of trauma, for you to feel the need to suppress your omega nature and your past life so thoroughly," he says in a matter-of-fact tone. "It's understandable."

"Oh, hell no," I growl. "I'm not some traumatized, abused omega you need to pity."

"I wasn't—"

"First of all, I'm not delusional, so jot that down," I say, stalking over to jab a finger in his face. "And I ain't suppressing shit except a raging shame boner, and I don't appreciate the namby-pamby 'poor Brad' bullshit, so knock it off before I knock your fangs out."

"Fair enough," he says, holding up his hands in a defensive posture. "I apologize."

I'm still fuming, but I'm close enough that I can feel some kind of friction between us. Like a damn invisible forcefield that's at once pushing me back and pulling me closer. Without realizing it, I've caved to the last one.

"Second of all," I mutter, reaching out to press my hands against his chest because I really can't think of where else I'd put them right now. He's just as firm and muscular as I imagined, but even though I'm only touching him through my shirt, he feels cool somehow. At the very least, the touch calms the raging bonfire in the pit of my belly that feels like it's going to eat me alive if I don't do something. "Let's say I want to deal with this thing the drug-free way. Are you gonna make it weird?"

Raul's eyes widen, but I can tell he's trying to mask his surprise. His heart gives it away, though, a strong, quickening rhythm pounding against my palm. "What do you mean by weird?" he asks carefully, his entire body stiffening even as mine unwinds, like he's having trouble holding himself back. That thought is a hell of a lot more appealing than it has any right to be.

"I'm asking if you can just fuck me without wrapping it up in all that sappy, sentimental werewolf bullshit," I clarify. "Just fucking to get me out of heat, no strings attached."

What the hell am I doing?

The worst part is, I can't even blame it solely on the heat bullshit. I mean, sure, it's a factor, but I could put the brakes on if I really wanted to. I could deal with the pain, which has faded to a dull ache that's barely even noticeable, and even the horniness.

But the truth is, there's a part of me—however "suppressed," to use his words—that actually wants this. And all this shit has to come from somewhere, so I figure maybe if I purge whatever curiosity this is while I'm here, I can get it—and him—out of my system before I go back to the real world.

Back to a version of myself I'm comfortable with.

CHAPTER

FOURTEEN



"I'm... not sure," Raul says after a few moments of contemplation, his voice strained. I can tell how much effort it takes him to get those words out and I realize he's not actually having an easier time resisting at all. He's just better at hiding it. Probably has a hell of a lot more practice than I have.

I breathe a sigh of resignation. The truth is, I'm not sure I care. Not enough to keep from doing this. I've already made the decision in the back of my mind and my body's taking the wheel. All that's left is for my conscious mind to fall in line and swallow its pride.

Can a mind even swallow anything? They don't have throats. Pretty sure mine has a cock at the very least, though, and it's rock fucking hard.

Without me even realizing it, my hand has traveled down his chest and sculpted abs to rest over the undeniable bulge in his jeans. With a bizarre combo of lust and horror, I realize it feels like this motherfucker's packing a twelve-inch cock.

What the hell am I getting myself into?

Raul's eyes glaze over with hunger and he grabs me by the shoulders again, his nails digging into my skin through my shirt. He steps into my touch, grinding his pelvis against my open palm.

I'm not sure whose lips make contact first. It doesn't matter, because either way, mine are crushing his with an unjustifiable amount of force, but when in Rome...

It's Rome that was hella gay, right?

I don't even know what the fuck this makes me, but my lips part on instinct to let his tongue slip past and into my mouth, and I'm almost surprised when a moan escapes me. I wrap my arms around him, my fingers tugging at the base of his neck, and the heat of his body seeping into my veins sets my blood on fire.

That first kiss is like a spark igniting a bonfire, and I can feel everything around us burning as Raul's hands dig into my hair and he backs us both toward the bed. I find myself clawing at his chest, trying to tear his shirt off like in the movies, but he has a lot better luck with mine, turning it to fucking shreds in an instant.

Did he shift his claws? I remember something about him being able to do that during one of the sex

scenes I reread for... research, and it's hotter than I want to admit. Fortunately, I barely have time to process that before he pulls his shirt off over his head and the sight of his naked torso shakes out all my thoughts like a fucking etch-a-sketch.

He pushes me down onto the bed less than gently, which is a relief, considering I was afraid he was going to treat me like I was made of glass and make this even weirder. Not that it's half as weird as it should be, considering I'm about to get fucked by a guy.

A werewolf, at that.

An *alpha* werewolf.

Fuck me.

Raul leans down to kiss me again, our tongues tangling violently as I dig my nails into his back a bit harder than I meant to. The heat in his gaze as he looks down at me says he likes it, though. If there's one benefit to fucking a guy who's stronger than me, I guess it's that I can be as rough as I want to. No need to hold back now.

And with his body pressed to mine, there's no questioning just how big the difference in size and strength between us really is. I'm fucking huge in my own right, but any illusion I had that I was anywhere near his size is all stripped away in a second. He's taller, broader, and more solid despite looking comparatively lean considering just how big he is.

He pins my wrists to the bed, and when I feel the curve of his lengthened nails, I realize he really has shifted them partially. His eye teeth look about half an inch longer, too, and his eyes are a more intense shade of gold than they were before.

"You sure about this?" he asks, his voice raspier than it was a minute ago. Why does the sound of it send a shiver down my spine?

Not even from fear. No, that would be so much easier to deal with than the truth, which is that even now that the reality of what's happening—and what's about to happen—is sinking in, I still want it.

More than anything.

"Just shut up and fuck me already," I growl through my teeth. I sound a bit wolfy myself, but my nails and teeth are still normal as far as I can tell, so I'm pretty sure that's just the lust talking.

Raul gives a low, throaty chuckle. "Patience, pet. You're not going to enjoy it if I just shove my knot into you without any preparation."

There's a not-so-dormant part of me that wants to disagree with him, but I keep that thought to myself before my horniness can get me split in half like a fire log.

"Don't worry, Brad. I'm going to give you everything you need," Raul assures me, lowering his head so his lips graze the stubble along my jaw, then my throat. "Sometimes slow is worth it."

I'm not so sure about that, and I'm about to argue when he flicks his tongue against the spot just below my ear. This time, the shiver-inducing sensation is so violent I cry out and my spine arches into him.

"What the fuck did you do?" I cry, still reeling from the rush of blood to my head and other regions that aren't exactly in short supply. It feels like that time I took a hit off Devon's bong, except the heady bliss isn't followed up immediately by an anxiety attack.

"It's another pressure point," he says in a knowing tone, his breath tickling the small hairs at that spot. It's not as overwhelming as the direct stimulation of his tongue, but it's still sending little bursts of pleasure and tingling through my body. "One that's much more pleasurable. You like it?"

In spite of myself, I nod. He gives a deep chuckle against my throat as he presses a kiss just below the dangerous spot and then runs his tongue up to it, pressing in harder this time.

I come undone like that giant ball of yarn that almost took out a whole quarter mile of Route 66 a few years back and I swear I'm this close to blowing a load in my fucking jeans even though he hasn't actually touched me yet.

"Fuck," I grit out, turning my head away from him, even though that just has the result of giving him better access. "Damn it, man, why am I feeling so... submissive?"

The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

"That's the idea," Raul says in a tone that would sound smug, if it wasn't for the hunger laced in it. He starts tugging my pants off over my cock and I'm relieved I'm not wearing underwear. My traitorous dick springs free, slapping against my stomach and leaving a stream of precome trailing from the tip to my navel.

When he tugs my pants off the rest of the way and gets down on his knees in front of the bed, I feel another surge of realization, but it's not enough to deter me. Not by a longshot.

There's heat in his gaze as he looks up between my legs, pushing them further apart before he takes the base of my cock in his hand and runs his tongue up the length of it, stopping at the crown.

I groan, arching my back and pushing my hips forward into his mouth as he starts to suck.

This is it. This is what I need.

Raul takes me into his mouth as far as he can, letting his tongue trail up and down the underside of my shaft, before he pulls away and starts to lick and suck on the head itself. His mouth is hot and wet, and his tongue is flicking and swirling around my crown, sending shockwaves of pleasure through my body.

My hips start to thrust forward in time with his mouth, and my hands clench in the sheets as I try to keep the pleasure from getting too intense.

The sensation is too much and I can't help but let out a loud moan as I come, filling his mouth.

He takes it all, without hesitation, licking and sucking until I'm completely drained.

When he finally pulls away, I'm left panting and trembling on the bed, my body aching with pleasure.

Raul looks up at me with a satisfied expression, as if he knows he's given me exactly what I needed.

"That was... fuck," I groan, running a hand down my face as I try to come down off Mount Olympus.

"For the record, I never come that fast."

He just chuckles. "You're in heat. There's plenty more where that came from. This is just the beginning."

With that, he leans in to start licking again, except this time, his tongue catches a dribble of cum that's traveled down the inside of my thigh and into my ass crack.

"Whoa!" I cry, surging up onto my elbows as he starts to spread me open with his fingers. "What do you think you're doing, bro?"

He looks up at me in confusion, but he pauses. "I'm eating you out."

"I—" I break off because in retrospect, that's obvious enough. "Yeah, but... why?"

"Because it'll help you relax," he answers. "And it's fun. Do you not want that?"

I hesitate, because I've never even entertained the thought, but now that I am, it's more appealing than I'd like it to be. And I'm already giving into all sorts of curiosities.

Rome, here I come.

"Yeah, what the hell," I groan, falling back against the pillows because my face is already red enough and I don't think I can handle watching him do that. The sight of him sucking my cock is already burned into my mind, and not because I found it disturbing. The exact opposite.

Fucking hell, maybe I am a little bit gay. Like... one percent. Maybe one and a half.

He spreads my cheeks and his tongue slides up my crack and it immediately skyrockets to five percent.

"Fuuuuuckkkk," I moan, resisting the urge to lift my hips off the bed. He keeps going, and when I feel his tongue pricking against my hole, I tense up a little. He stops and looks up at me, a question in his eyes.

"Do you want me to stop?" he asks, waiting for an answer.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, trying to steel my nerves. "No," I finally answer, feeling like a dumbass. "Don't stop. It... feels good."

That's all the permission he needs. He slides his tongue inside me and I can't help but moan at the sensation. His tongue is soft and warm, and it feels unbelievably good as he swirls it around.

I reach down between my legs and grab his head, digging my fingers into his hair in approval. He responds by pressing his mouth against my hole and sucking on it, sending jolts of pleasure through my body.

"Oh, fuck," I gasp, my hips unconsciously rising and falling. Suddenly, all the doubts and questions I had about my sexuality dissipate. I don't care if I'm one percent or one hundred percent gay, because right now, this feels too good to care.

He keeps going and grabs my cock, which is stiff as a board once again, while he keeps tonguing my

ass.

I'm on the brink of coming again, so I release his head and grip the sheets in my hands, trying to hold off for as long as possible.

He keeps going until I can't take it anymore and I let out a loud moan as I come, my body shuddering with pleasure.

He pulls his head away and looks up at me with a satisfied smirk.

"Good?" he asks, and I can only nod in response.

He grins and stands up, unfastening his belt, then his jeans. I've never come twice that fast. Hell, I've never gotten hard again that fast, and I can only assume that's either dream physics or omega biology at work. I flunked out of physics and only passed bio in high school because I cheated off my brother, so I really don't have a fucking clue.

All I know is that while my cock is currently twitching at half-mast, there's a throbbing ache deep inside my ass that's just begging to be filled, so I'm far from finished. It's even more overwhelming than the urge to come itself, and as foreign as it is, there's also a part of it that feels right. Natural, even.

Fuck.

"Have you ever had anything in your ass before?" Raul asks as he steps out of his jeans and then his boxers, leaving his absolutely massive cock standing tall on full display.

My eyes dart right to the knot at the base, but it's not as terrifyingly huge as I expected. It's an inch or two wider than his shaft on all sides, and still far from a normal cock. Even if his knot's not the gargantuan object I was expecting, the sheer size and girth of the rest of his dick is more than intimidating enough. It would be almost comical, if the rest of him wasn't big enough to match it in proportion.

I swallow hard. "No, I... I mean, just once. Just my fingers."

"You didn't like it?" he asks, sounding amused. I'm too fucking horny to be properly enraged.

"I did," I say through my teeth. "That's why I stopped."

"Oh. I see," he says with a laugh. "You're one of those."

"What's that supposed to mean?" I ask, my indignation becoming stronger than my lust for a split second. It doesn't last, though.

"Nothing," Raul says, climbing into the bed between my legs. He pauses to run his hand down his shaft, using the precome that's already beading generously on the tip to get it slick.

"Aren't you gonna use lube?" I ask, sounding way too concerned.

"That won't be necessary," he says, and before I can tell him that's fucking easy for him to say, he reaches down and runs his middle two fingers up my crack, pulling them away covered in something clear and slick. All my cum spilled onto my stomach and chest, so I know that's not it, and there's no

way that came from him just eating me out.

"What the fuck?" I cry. My horror is at least making it possible to think through the fog of "I want your dick in my mouth with a side of fries right fucking now."

"It's just your natural slick," he says, rubbing the clear fluid between his fingers. "Nothing to be alarmed by."

"I'm not 'alarmed,' I'm horrified," I clarify, sitting up halfway, my knees still spread apart since he's taking up all the space between them. The bed sinks in from his weight and I can't help but imagine what it would feel like to have all that man on top of me. Inside me.

"Don't be ridiculous," he says in a gentle tone, resting his hand on my left knee. "It's a hell of a lot more convenient than having to go grab a bottle of lubricant every time you want to mate. And for the record, alphas find it extremely hot."

"Great," I mutter. "Just what I've always wanted. A magical, lube-dispensing asshole to turn alphas on."

He just shakes his head, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes, as he pushes my legs even further apart and positions his cock between my cheeks. "Now, where were we?"

"Pretty sure we weren't there," I groan, tensing up in anticipation.

"I'll go slow and I'll be gentle," he assures me. "If it's too much at any time, you can tell me and I'll stop. No questions asked."

"I don't need the fragile treatment," I snap, even though my pounding and tensing ass tells a different story.

Raul reaches down to take his cock in hand and guide it so the tip is resting up against my hole. I suck in a breath and hold it as he pushes lightly, like he's testing the waters.

Sure enough, I can feel my own slick dripping down my cheeks. My mouth is watering, too, so I'm starting to think excess body fluid production is just a part of the whole omega thing.

And yeah, sure, it was in the book, but I'm a cis guy and I sure as hell wasn't expecting this.

"Try to relax," Raul coaches patiently, even though I can tell from the rough edge to his voice and the look in his eyes that he's as keyed up as I am, just in a different way. And I know that look. The look of a guy who wants to fuck someone's brains out and he's barely able to form a cohesive sentence from the sheer force of that desire. I usually *am* that guy, so being on the receiving end of that look is unsettling, to say the least.

And a turn on. Because apparently, I don't know myself half as well as I thought I did.

I grimace, more from the anticipation than any actual pain or discomfort.

Raul brings his hand up to caress that spot that drove me crazy earlier, but this time, it has a calming effect. It still feels good, like one of those erogenous zones I didn't know I even had, turned up to eleven, but it also helps me relax.

He slowly starts to push in, inch by inch, and I can feel the burning sensation slowly spreading out from the spot he's started to fill with his length.

Raul moves with a purpose, but he also seems to be enjoying the process, almost as if he's savoring the experience.

"Push against me," he says, his voice a bit more strained than it was a second ago. "It'll make it easier."

"You're the butt sex expert, I guess," I mutter, doing what he says. I thought he meant easier on me, but considering he slides a whole three inches deeper thanks to the help of my magical lube, I'm not so sure.

"Fuck!!" I scream, my whole body tensing up instinctively. Especially my ass, which only makes the invasion of his giant cock all the more excruciating.

"Easy," he says, and that's the six-hundred dollar square in "things you'd say to a horse and also a lover."

"Don't tell me 'easy' until you've taken a fucking footlong up your ass, pal!" I bellow.

He raises an eyebrow. "I'm not an omega. Your body is made for this."

"One, go fuck yourself," I say, grimacing through the pain. At least he's stopped pushing in for the moment. "Two, I just became an omega yesterday, so can it with that, 'your body is made for this' crap."

"All right, fair enough," he says, holding up his hands. "Do you want me to pull out?"

I panic at the thought, because as much as it hurts, there's a part of me—the same part that's in heat, I'm pretty sure—that's fucking loving it, and I really don't want to have to go through him pushing in all over again.

"No," I say quickly. "No, don't pull out, just... give me a minute."

"Sure. Whatever you need," he says, holding perfectly still as he rests his hands on my knees.

I take a few deep breaths, trying to relax, and then I feel my body loosen up a bit, the pain dulling to a more manageable ache.

"Okay," I say, nodding. "I think I'm ready."

"I'll go slower," he promises, moving his hands down and spreading my cheeks open as he starts to push in again. He keeps his word and goes slower, but I wince when his fingers prod around my entrance, massaging and stretching me around his cock.

Another shudder runs down my spine, this time from pain, and from the pain-adjacent ache deep within me that feels like it's the result of him not being in far enough. His tip is already pressing into my prostate. I've only felt anything against it once, and at the time, it was enough to make me come, which was a humiliating and confusing experience.

I'd never done it again after that, because I really wasn't sure what the fuck that meant. I mean, I knew

guys who liked getting pegged. One of them was a frat buddy, but that was why we called him Peg Greg, and I did not want an assfucking-related nickname of my own. I'd already had to punch a few people to shake "Greasy Brad" when I made the mistake of showing up to rush week with a motor oil stain on my shirt.

It was something I'd always just been content to pretend never happened. Sure, it had felt good. Toes-curling, mind-numbing good, but it wasn't like I didn't enjoy regular sex, so it was no big deal. And here I was not with my own fingers in my ass but another guy's cock, and it was all I could do not to grind against him for more.

I told myself it was just the whole omega thing, and considering how many additional sensations there were that hadn't been there before, that was a convincing enough argument. But deep down in the back of my mind, I wasn't so sure.

"It's okay to let yourself enjoy this," Raul says, stroking the outside of my thigh. That makes me shiver in a different way, and sends a surge of calming warmth through me. Like my body's a series of levers and buttons to push and pull, each one generating a new, dizzying result, and he's the man behind the curtain, controlling it all effortlessly.

I only saw the movie, but I'm pretty sure that's how that went, anyway.

"That's easy for you to say," I mutter. "You're on top. And you're an alpha."

"Does that matter?" he asks, raising an eyebrow. "Is there something wrong with being an omega? Or with being on the bottom?"

"You tell me," I challenge. "Everyone here acts like it makes you fragile."

"Not fragile," he says thoughtfully, tracing the outline of my abs until his fingers drift down to the base of my cock and it twitches traitorously in response. "Just different. It makes you strong in different ways. And I for one find the differences to be exhilarating."

This time, it's his words that are playing games with my head, and that's to say nothing of what he's doing to my body. As he eases in just a hair more, it becomes impossible to ignore the throbbing, pulsating pleasure of his cock pressed up against my prostate, and I bite my lip through a delirious moan.

"Fuck," I rasp, my thighs quivering and clenching as the tension in my core spills out into my extremities.

"That's it," Raul says, his voice a low, soothing rumble. "Good boy. Just relax and enjoy it."

"Good boy?" I echo. "Is that dirty talk to werewolves or something?"

"Or something," he says with a smug smile that makes my cock throb. He grips it as if he senses what's up—literally—and starts thrusting slowly, only moving in and out an inch or so at a time. At first, my body tightens in response, but even the pain has become kind of pleasurable.

And it's only now I realize that the pain from earlier has completely vanished. So has the unbearable heat. Now, I just feel a bit warm, and cool wherever he touches. Like his skin itself holds the relief I

need so desperately.

"Oh," I gasp, my entire body quaking as my orgasm edges closer.

"That's it," Raul murmurs, his own breathing starting to quicken. "Just let go."

And I do. I let go of all the tension, all the fear, all the worry, and I just let myself be taken away by the pleasure. I let myself feel his thick, velvety shaft thrusting in and out of me with greater speed, building up momentum like a freight train, and even though it feels like I'm going to split open, somehow, my body accommodates him. With each thrust, it gets a little easier, until I realize I've taken all of him.

All of him but the knot, which I can feel straining at my abused asshole each time he slides into me. All of a sudden, it doesn't feel as manageable as it looked. I'm pretty sure it's bigger.

"Does that thing grow?" I ask warily.

"My knot? Of course," he answers. "It'll swell up once it's inside you."

"It'll do what now?"

"That's part of mating between an alpha and an omega," he answers. "It keeps the cum inside."

"And the purpose of that is...?"

"Breeding," he replies.

Yeah, I remembered something about that from the book. Shouldn't have asked. The bigger problem is why my body even wants this.

And it does.

Really. Fucking. Bad.

"It's all right," he says, stroking my thigh in consolation as he starts thrusting again, slowly but steadily. "By the time it happens, you'll be ready. You'll crave it."

I already am, but I wouldn't admit that, even if I could speak. My throat is tight and my body tense, but not even from pain. It's more... anticipation. I can feel the knot swelling, pushing against me, and a part of me is begging for it. Begging for something I can't even comprehend.

But Raul knows. He moves his hips in a steady rhythm, pushing into me and retreating, and each time he slides out, that knot is just a little bit bigger as it strains against me, trying to work its way in.

I close my eyes and let the sensation take me, focusing on the pleasure instead of the pain. I'm not sure if it's my body relaxing, him increasing his force, or a combination of both, but his knot slides in with the next thrust and my muscle immediately revolts, my asshole clenching down to push him out. He's already in, though, so all that results in is clenching down on the narrower part of his cock behind the knot, locking it inside me.

"Son of a bitch!" I scream.

Raul looks down at me, sweat dripping from his skin, and smirks. "Technically, I guess that's true."

"What the fuck," I groan, turning my head as I try to resist the impulse to writhe beneath him, since I know that's only going to make the pain more agonizing. As much as my body wants this, it's having second thoughts as his knot keeps swelling inside me.

Now it's a fucking softball. Like it's getting revenge for me internally shit-talking its girth.

"Just relax," he says in a soothing tone, stroking my side. It must be another pressure point, because it's more effective than it has any right to be and I shiver even though that small movement sends a throbbing pain through my lower body.

His knot is pressing into my prostate, though, and the pleasure of that sensation is slowly beginning to outweigh the pain. I let out a low moan, my eyes drifting closed as I give in to the pleasure and the pain, feeling them merge as my orgasm crashes into me like a wave. It washes over me, crashing down on me with intensity I've never felt before, and I scream out my pleasure as I come hard, my body shuddering beneath Raul with each wave of pleasure.

He follows me soon after, his knot contracting and swelling with each spurt of hot cum that floods my insides. I can feel it pulsing inside me, hot and thick and so all-encompassing it should feel like I'm about to explode. Instead, all I feel is a kind of warmth radiating out from my core and through my entire body, soothing all my aches and pains until I'm just left with a pleasant buzz.

When the last pulses have faded away, Raul collapses on top of me, still very much inside me, and pulls me into his arms. I shiver against him, but this time, it's not from fear. It's from sheer exhaustion.

"You okay?" he asks softly, planting a gentle kiss on my forehead.

"Yeah," I murmur back, my voice barely audible. "I think I am."

His knot is still pressing into my prostate, sending little aftershocks of pleasure through me, but my own cock's finally starting to go soft. I'm starting to understand why all those ads on TV make it seem like an erection that lasts longer than four hours is such a bad thing.

Raul leans down and presses his lips to mine, slipping his hands over mine and lacing our fingers together as he kisses me.

"Thank you," he whispers when he breaks the kiss.

"For what?" I ask, my voice still husky from the intensity of my orgasm.

"For trusting me," he replies.

I scoff and look away. "Like I said, don't make it weird."

"My knot's buried in your ass and *that's* weird?" he challenges.

"How long before that thing goes down, anyway?" I ask warily, realizing werewolves definitely don't operate the same way a regular dude does after coming.

"It could be anywhere from an hour to a few," he says casually.

"A few hours?" I cry, sitting up as much as I can with this overgrown lumberjack on top of me.

"Easy," he warns. "You'll hurt yourself."

He's right, of course. Moving that much with his knot still inside me was definitely a mistake, and one my ass is going to be paying the price for every time I sit for a month, but still. "You didn't warn me about that!"

"I thought you knew," he says, blinking. "They really do keep your kind sheltered back in Blue Fang, don't they?"

"I'm not sheltered," I snap, still trying to come to terms with my current position. Literally and figuratively.

We're still connected and it feels like my insides are trying to readjust after being so thoroughly filled up by Raul's knot. I'm exhausted and my body is sore in all the best and most unpleasant ways.

"Just try to relax and enjoy it while you can," he adds. "Your heat is better, isn't it?"

I hesitate. Now that he mentions it, the heat has retreated from under my skin, and I'm not painfully horny anymore. In place of the desperation, there's a deep, heady feeling of bliss and satisfaction that I've never had after getting laid before, and that's even more unsettling than being knotted still.

"Yeah," I grudgingly admit. "Until next month, anyway."

"Not if you end up pregnant," he says casually.

I snort a laugh at his deadpan humor. "Yeah, real funny."

Raul tilts his head. "I wasn't joking."

I stare up at him, trying to figure out if he's serious. When he doesn't break eye contact, I realize he is.

And I fly into a full-blown panic, at least until I recall the one unit of biology that kind of stuck with me, if only because the subject was sex and the prof had a huge rack. "I don't know how shit works in your world, but you need a fucking womb to get knocked up and I'm fresh outta those."

"You have a womb," he says slowly. "All omegas do, regardless of their sex."

I open my mouth to argue, but nothing comes out. As a matter of fact, there are no words left in my head except for the one that's now repeating itself like a broken record.

Pregnant.

"Bro, you're saying I might be fucking pregnant?" I croak out once I can remember how to speak. Feels like there's another softball in my throat in addition to the one lodged firmly in my ass.

"Yes," Raul says carefully, like he rightly thinks I'm on the verge of a complete nervous breakdown. "I just knotted you and you're in heat. It's a distinct possibility. A probability, really."

"Oh," I say, sounding a hell of a lot calmer than I should. But I can tell from the look in Raul's eyes that those piercing "golden orbs" are sharp enough to see the truth boiling beneath the surface.

"Probably good that you're stuck in me for a while, then."

"Why is that?" he asks warily.

"So you'll have plenty of time to catch your breath," I answer. "Because the second that thing goes down, you'd better run for your motherfucking life."

To BE CONTINUED...

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Best,
Joel