

2



The illustration depicts a muscular man with short brown hair, shirtless and wearing blue jeans, sitting on a mossy log in a dark forest at night. A woman with long dark hair is leaning over his shoulder from behind. To the right, a large grey and white wolf is looking towards the viewer. The background is a misty forest with glowing blue light filtering through the trees. The title 'BRO AND THE BEAST' is written in a large, stylized font with a pink-to-blue gradient and a jagged, torn-edge effect.

BRO AND THE BEAST

JOEL ABERNATHY WRITING MPREG AS

L.C. DAVIS

BRO AND THE BEAST

THE WOLF'S MATE #2



L.C. DAVIS
JOEL ABERNATHY

CONTENTS

Blurb

Chapter 1

Brad

Chapter 2

Brad

Chapter 3

Raul

Chapter 4

Brad

Chapter 5

Raul

Chapter 6

Brad

Chapter 7

Raul

Chapter 8

Brad

Chapter 9

Brad

Chapter 10

Raul

Chapter 11

Brad

Chapter 12

Raul

Chapter 13

Brad

Chapter 14

Brad

Chapter 15

Brad

Chapter 16

Raul

Dear Reader

This is what Brad gets for finally "sinking his teeth into a book," like his nerdy brother is always hounding him to. He definitely wasn't expecting the book to sink its teeth into him.

With the newfound knowledge that he can get pregnant as an omega, Brad's urgency to get back to his world of touchdowns and keg stands is intensifying by the minute. Unfortunately, so is his attraction to Raul, the possessive alpha shifter who broods mysteriously and smells like sandalwood and something uniquely masculine.

Not one to sit on the sidelines, Brad is determined to change the fates of his favorite characters before he heads home. But what's a frat bro to do when the original heroine shows up and he's not quite as ready to hand back her role as he originally thought?

CHAPTER 1

BRAD



As I stare up at Raul, trying to process the fact that the reality rug has been yanked out from underneath me for the second time in the last few days, I wait for him to reply.

"Brad, look, I know you're upset, but--"

"No," I snap. "No, I don't think you do know. Because if you did know, you'd have fucking said something before you knotted me!"

I sound as pissed as I am, and that's infinitely preferable to sounding even half as terrified as I am. I'm not even sure I believe him, if only because I need it to be crap, but what reason would he have to lie? It's sure as hell not going to do him any favors.

He winces like he actually feels bad. "I... just assumed you knew you could get pregnant. You're an omega."

"Yeah, in this world!" I can't believe I've actually accepted that, more or less, but with a guy's knot buried in my ass--something I practically begged him for, at that--it's not like I've got much of a choice. "The whole 'cis men getting knocked up' thing is news to me."

"I'm sorry," he says, and the most infuriating thing is, I'm pretty sure he actually means it. He looks sincere, at least. "But there isn't exactly a way to prevent pregnancy that also resolves a heat."

"I would've made you wear a condom, dude!"

"They don't make condoms that can withstand an alpha's knot," he answers in a flat tone.

"What, you're telling me that giant apple in your pants is stronger than Kevlar?" I challenge.

"It's not that," he says with a snort. "They just don't make anything like that. Most omegas *want* to be pregnant. There's no market for it."

"Of course there isn't," I mutter. "Most omegas would jump at the chance to be barefoot and pregnant with your pups, huh?"

"That's not what I said."

"You didn't need to," I say. "It's clear from the way everyone acts. And I'm not interested in being your werewolf incubator."

"You're not," he says earnestly. "That's not the way I see you at all."

"Well, I'm not interested in being a stand-in for your Catalina, either," I growled. "And I'm not gonna throw my identity away to be your fucking omega."

"I don't even know who that is," he protests. "And I would never ask you to be her, or anyone else."

"You don't even know who I am!"

"No," he agrees, lacing his fingers with mine, which has the effect of making me freeze.

Well played, douchebag.

"But I want to," he continues. "And you don't know me, either. You think you do. You have all these ideas in your head about who I am and what I want, but if you could just let that go for five minutes and actually get to know the real me, maybe you'd start to understand how I actually feel about you."

I stare at him for a few moments, processing what he's saying. "I'm not staying here," I say once I trust myself to speak. "And as for being pregnant, that's not even something I can think about right now."

It's not like it would last once I get back to the real world... right?

"You don't need to think about it," he assures me, squeezing my hands tighter. "But you're here now. With me. Can we just take this thing one step at a time, and try to start from a blank slate?"

I sigh in irritation. "Yeah, fine," I say. "I guess."

Raul gives me a faint smile. "Thank you. So... do I still need to run as soon as my knot is out of you?"

"I haven't decided yet," I grumble.

He chuckles. "Well, I guess I'll just enjoy it in the meantime. Here," he says, shifting carefully so he's next to me rather than on top of me, but our bodies are still locked together. I grimace since it still hurts, as gentle as he's being. The new position is admittedly more comfortable, though, even if it means I have to hitch my thigh up over his hip.

Raul wraps an arm around my back and pulls me closer, grabbing the blanket with his other hand to cover us with. "That's better," he says, nuzzling the spot beneath my ear. It doesn't have quite the same electrifying sensation on me as it did before, but it still makes me shiver. Because that's apparently something I do now.

"Yeah, I guess," I say, my voice muffled in his neck. I can't help but breathe in his scent, though. That's still as comforting as it was before.

"Good," Raul murmurs, pressing a kiss to my forehead.

It's another unexpectedly tender gesture that makes me go tense when I should be punching him in the nose.

I guess that's not just a heat thing. The weird responses to physical sensations that should make me cringe, especially coming from another man, and instead, they make me fucking melt.

"Why does that happen?" I ask in spite of myself.

Raul hesitates, looking down at me in confusion. "Why does what happen?"

"When you touch me, it feels..."

“Good?” he offers.

I cringe. “No,” I snap again. “I mean... yeah, but it shouldn’t.”

He gives me a knowing smirk. “For one thing, you’re an omega. For another, you’re *my* omega.”

“Let me guess. That mate bond thing?” I ask warily.

“That’s right,” he says. “Of course, you’re not officially my mate until I mark you.”

I do a double take, wide awake even though I was starting to slip into blissful sleepiness. “Until you what now?”

“Don’t worry about it right now.” He sighs. “Let’s just get some rest.”

“We’re not done with this conversation,” I warn him, but for now, he’s right. I really don’t have the energy, physically or otherwise, to get any more earth-shattering revelations.

I close my eyes and feel my body relax against his, whether I want it to or not. It’s been a long damn day, and I still find myself holding out hope it’ll all just be a dream when I open my eyes.

But for the first time, there’s a tiny, microscopic part of me that isn’t sure I want it to.

CHAPTER 2

BRAD



At some point in the night, Raul's knot must have gone down, because he's gone when I wake up. And it's a testament to how fucking exhausted I was, because I don't even remember him pulling his monster cock out of me.

I roll over onto my stomach and groan when I realize I have some dude's dried come dribbled down my ass cheeks and thighs. And then it all comes back to me.

Fuuuuccckk.

I take a deep breath, trying to clear my head, and I'm surprised to find that my head isn't pounding. For some reason, I was expecting a heat hangover. In fact, the only thing that really hurts right now is my ass.

I sit up, wincing at the way my aching hole protests the movement, but the rest of me feels... good.

Better than good, really. All the traces of my heat are gone, and I feel strangely relaxed. More than I have in a long time, if I'm being honest with myself.

At least until the thought that I might be pregnant resurges. I push it aside and decide to fall back on the old tried and true method of denial as I haul my aching ass out of bed and into the shower.

Luckily, I don't have to do the walk of shame and go down the hall at the risk of running into anyone. I'm pretty sure if they didn't hear anything last

night, they would definitely pick up on Raul's scent inside me. Knowing what I know of werewolves and their annoyingly heightened senses from the book, that seems pretty fucking likely.

The hot water is immediately soothing and I relax all over again as I start to scrub myself from head to toe, trying to get off the alpha's scent. If *I* can still smell him, I'm sure they can.

The most annoying part is that a part of me actually likes it. There's some primal omega brain thing going on that wants more of him and his alpha-ness. It's embarrassing, and I'm not sure what it even means. I'm so confused.

Finally, after what feels like forever, I turn off the shower, towel myself off, and realize I don't have anything to change into. Of course Raul comes in right then, holding a tray of food.

He shuts the door behind him and stops to look me up and down, clearly approving of the fact that I'm naked, save for the towel around my waist, and still dripping wet. "Good morning," he says in a husky voice that makes me feel things I shouldn't be capable of feeling now that I'm not in heat. "Sleep well?"

"I slept okay," I mutter, folding my arms over my chest. "You trying to win me over with food or something?"

He sets the tray on the edge of the bed and I take in the mouthwatering sight of pancakes, bacon and a cup of coffee. "Not exactly," he says with a smirk. "I brought you breakfast in bed because I thought you might be hungry after such an... eventful night."

"Oh, fuck off," I say, even though my growling stomach betrays me, And I can tell from the glimmer of amusement in his eyes, he hears it.

"Not that you need them, but there are clothes in the drawer," he says, nodding to the dresser. "I'll take you into town later to pick out some things that fit better."

"I don't need you to buy me any damn clothes," I snap, going over to the dresser even though all I really want to do is dig into the food. Sure enough, there's a fresh T-shirt and pair of sweats, so I pull them on and drop the

towel since Raul has already seen more than enough of my body in far more compromising positions.

"Of course you do. You're my mate," he says in a matter-of-fact tone. "It's my responsibility to take care of you."

I bristle at his words, even though the truth is, I'm not really in any position to turn him down. I have a few bills in my wallet and I know none of my cards are going to work considering I'm pretty sure they don't even have any of the same banks in this universe.

And then, it hits me.

"Hey," I say urgently, looking around. "Where are my clothes?"

Raul blinks at me. "What do you mean?"

"The ones I came here with," I answer. "My jeans and my wallet."

"Oh. I'm sure Dr. Wilson put them somewhere safe," he answers.

"Yeah, well, I need 'em now," I say. "I can prove to you I am who I say I am."

Raul is giving me a wary look, and I'm sure it's because he thinks I'm having a "relapse" or whatever. But if I can show him my driver's license, not to mention a credit card with a chip on it, that's at least gotta lend some credence to the fact that I'm not from around here. Or from this time at all.

"I'll tell you what. Why don't you sit down and have some breakfast, and then we'll go find your things?" he offers, even though I can tell it's less of a suggestion and more him telling me how it's going to be.

I'm about to tell *him* how it's going to be when the siren's song of freshly cooked bacon becomes too loud to ignore.

I'll deal with this son of a bitch's ego after breakfast. Doesn't help that I was too keyed up from heat to eat anything last night.

I grudgingly sit down and pile a bunch of eggs and bacon onto a slice of toast before taking a bite. I'm halfway through my open-faced sandwich

when I realize Raul is staring at me and look up to find him watching me with this dreamy look on his face, like I'm a kitten in a top hat or some shit.

"What the fuck is your problem?" I ask with a mouthful of toast, washing it down with the bottle of orange juice on the tray.

"Nothing," Raul says quickly. "You're just cute."

I feel an immediate surge of anger, which is a hell of a lot better than the feelings of lust and ooey gooey warmth that plagued me last night. I really am feeling back to my old self. For the most part, anyway.

"I'm not cute," I snap. "Do you have some weird Shallow Hal thing going on where you see me as some tiny 'uwu' beansprout with glittery Hello Kitty eyes and not a swole bro who could bench your whole family?"

Raul stares at me blankly before he says, "I have no idea what most of those words even mean."

"Fucking weirdo," I mumble into my toast before polishing off the rest of my breakfast in record time and getting back up. "All right, breakfast's over. Time to do what you promised."

Raul stops and stares at the mostly empty tray, looking impressed and a little bit confused, but he reluctantly gets up. "Fine," he says with a sigh. "Let's go see the doctor. You do seem like you're feeling better."

"If 'better' is a euphemism for not being horny on main anymore, then yeah, sure," I say, brushing past him as I walk out into the hallway. Normally, visiting Dr. Wilson would not be on the top of my to-do list, but I'm desperate to prove myself to him. Maybe then he'll start taking me seriously and help me figure out a way out of this shit.

And last night's distractions aside, I still have to figure out a way to get Trent out of prison.

To my relief, we don't run into anyone else on the way downstairs. In fact, the mansion is dead silent. "Where is everyone?" I ask, looking around.

Raul's awkward silence tells me I'm not going to like the answer to that question.

"What is it?" I demand, turning around to face him.

"I sent them away," he finally answers.

I narrow my eyes. "Why...?"

"You were in heat," he says in the tone of a man who's convinced he's right but knows it's going to get him into trouble. And he's right about one of those things. "I'm protective, Brad. You're my mate. The urge to protect my den was strong, and it's uncomfortable for other shifters to be present when there's a mated pair in heat and rut anyway."

"One, we are not a 'mated pair,' so file that away in the brain library," I say through my teeth. "Two, how many times do I have to tell you I don't need or want your fucking protection?"

He's giving me that look that says I'm the one being unreasonable again. Poor, long-suffering Raul. "You're human, more or less. Of course you need my protection. Do you really think you could take another alpha? Or even a beta?"

I open my mouth to reply, and then I get a flashback to Lenore judo flipping me onto my ass, complete with classical music playing in the background, and shut it. "That's beside the point!"

The door to the clinic opens and Dr. Wilson comes out, looking annoyed and uncaffeinated. I gotta admit, I was expecting all the characters in this book to act like they just started existing whenever the main character—or, unfortunately, me—comes into a room, kind of like NPCs in a video game. Instead, it's pretty clear they all have their own shit going on, and Dr. Wilson's exhaustion tells me he's probably been up all night dealing with something.

"Ah. Raul, Brad," he says, nodding to us both before his gaze lands on me. "You look like you're feeling better."

I grimace, knowing there's no mistaking the implication behind his words. He knows I'm out of heat.

And he knows why.

Everyone in this damn house—at least the ones Raul didn't chase off *because* he was fucking me—knows it.

Fuck me.

CHAPTER 3

RAUL



I can sense the tension between Brad and the doctor, but I try my best to ignore it. I can tell Brad is embarrassed about the whole situation, but I can't really blame him for it. I'm sure I would feel the same way if I were in his shoes.

"We were wondering if you could help us find Brad's clothing from when he first came here," I say, stepping in quickly to avoid any awkwardness.

Dr. Wilson glances between Brad and me, hesitating. "I'm sure I put those old things somewhere... let's see."

Brad looks like he's going to transform into a wolf at any second and tear into the other man's throat. In fact, I'm pretty sure if it is just a matter of his wolf being latent, Dr. Wilson rubbing him the wrong way would be all it takes to bring it out.

We follow him into the clinic and watch as he rummages around in his cabinets before pulling out a small box. "Here," he says, taking out the clothes he's deposited into a biohazard bag, because he's just a dick like that. He hands the bag to Brad, who immediately unzips it and starts rummaging through his jeans. He finally pulls out a wallet like it's some lost artifact.

"Got it!" he cries triumphantly, flipping through the billfold. He yanks out a card and thrusts it at me. "Proof."

I take the license and study it, raising an eyebrow. It's the most ridiculous forgery of identification I've ever seen, and considering half the shit the younger rebellious wolves in the pack pull, that's saying a lot. There's Brad's picture, along with his name, date of birth, weight, eye color—and sure enough, it's from Massachusetts. But it's also got some sort of holographic film stretched across the surface of the card that glimmers in the light, like my little sister's toy purse.

Not to mention the print date was in 2020.

"This is..." I trail off because I'm not really sure what the word is, before I finally decide on one. "Interesting."

Brad's smug expression falters. "Interesting? Bro, do you have eyes? I ain't from the damn Blue Fang pack! How else would I have this?"

"It's clearly a fake ID, Brad," I say as gently as I can. The only thing worse than upsetting him, though, is reinforcing his delusion. "Not a very good one."

"May I have a look?" Dr. Wilson asks. I reluctantly hand it over and he squints, holding the card up and wiggling it in the light.

"What the devil is this? It looks like Mina's purse."

"It's my fuckin' ID!" Brad bellows, a vein popping out in his forehead. "What are you dweebs not getting?"

"It's shiny, Brad," I say pointedly.

"That's just how they print 'em now!" he cries.

"In 2020?" I challenge, hoping at least that will help him process what's going on. "It's 1986."

"I mean, it's not 2020 anymore, but yeah! It's 1986 in this stupid book!" he yells. "Not where I'm from."

"What is this about a book?" Dr. Wilson asks, eyeing him suspiciously.

I sigh. I was really hoping to have this conversation with him in private, but here we go.

"Brad believes he's from another world," I explain. "One where our world is just the contents of a book."

"*The Wolf's Mate*," Brad grumbles.

Dr. Wilson stares at him for what feels like a full minute before finally responding. "That's... quite a theory."

Brad huffs, crossing his arms over his chest. "It's not a theory. It's the truth."

"I see," Dr. Wilson says slowly, and I can see the wheels turning behind his eyes. "And how long have you felt this way?"

"What do you mean?" Brad scowls. "Ever since I got into a car wreck and woke up in this train wreck of a romance novel, that's how long."

Dr. Wilson frowns. "Hmm."

"Don't 'hmm' me," Brad says. "I'm not crazy!"

Dr. Wilson gives me a pointed look. "Might we speak alone for a minute?"

"No!" Brad snaps. "You might not! Fucking assholes, I'm not crazy."

"Brad, no one is saying that," I say, putting a hand on his shoulder at the risk of setting him off even further. He flinches, but I can feel the toned muscle of his shoulder relax soon after. He can't help responding instinctively to my touch. He is an omega, after all, and if last night proved nothing else, it's that.

I'm relieved. I was worried it was going to take a hell of a lot longer than that for him to come around, but it seems he's already calming down. It should be easier for him to come to grips with being an omega now that he's gone into heat. It's hard to deny that when it's a whole mountain of evidence in and of itself.

And considering he's not in heat anymore, there's a very good chance he's pregnant, which is a reality check of its own. I need to make sure he's in a better place before he has to come to terms with that.

"Let's go talk in my office," Dr. Wilson says softly, and I can see the genuine concern in his eyes.

I nod, and Brad reluctantly follows us in.

I pull out one of the chairs in front of Dr. Wilson's large oak desk before I can stop myself. Brad glowers at me, but sinks into it, and Dr. Wilson and I take our seats shortly after.

"So, Brad," Dr. Wilson begins, folding his hands on the desk. "Tell me about this other world of yours. How does it differ from the one we live in?"

"Oh, it's different all right," Brad mutters. "For one thing, there aren't any sanctimonious werewolves who turn you gay with their magical musk."

I bury my face in my hand. This is not off to a great start.

Dr. Wilson clears his throat, clearly as uncomfortable with the direction of this conversation as I am. "Okay," he says slowly. "What else is different?"

"Everything makes sense," Brad says pointedly. "There's no hocus pocus bullshit. I'm just a normal dude who goes to a normal college with a normal family and a normal fucking life."

"I see," Dr. Wilson says, writing something down in his notebook. "And how is it you think you came to be here?"

"I got into a car accident," Brad says, his brow furrowing. "It was raining and some douchebag was going down the wrong way. He creamed me, and next thing I know, I wake up here on the side of the road and everything is fucking weird."

"Hmm," Dr. Wilson hums again, obviously unconvinced.

Brad scowls at him. "It's true!"

Dr. Wilson holds his hands up in a placating gesture. "I'm not saying otherwise."

"No, but you're scribbling it in your damn diary," Brad growls, shooting us both an accusatory glance. "You both think I'm nuts."

"That's not true," I insist. "We're just trying to help you, Brad."

"Well, you can fuck off with your 'help.'" he growls, pushing himself up from the chair. "I'm done."

"Brad—"

I stand instinctively to go after him, but Dr. Wilson clears his throat. "I'd give him a moment if I were you. It's not good for him to get any more keyed up, especially this close to a heat."

I grit my teeth in frustration, but he's right. Like it or not, I'm definitely capable of stirring negative emotions in Brad as easily as I made him moan in ecstasy last night. Besides, it isn't like he's going anywhere. I still have the house on lockdown and guards stationed outside of it.

My hearing is sensitive enough that I can hear his heavy footfalls on the stairs as he goes back up to his room and slams the door, so I relax back into my chair.

"That didn't go well," I mutter.

"No," Dr. Wilson agrees. "But he's in denial. What did you expect?"

"I guess."

"This really is quite serious," he muses, glancing up at the ceiling as he leans back in his chair. "Do you have any idea where he comes from?"

"The Blue Fang pack," I answer, noting the way his demeanor shifts, his eyes going wide with apprehension. "He ran away, I know that much. And he's still more or less in denial about being an omega, so I assume they're to blame."

"Poor thing," Dr. Wilson murmurs in a newly sympathetic tone. "I've heard of this kind of thing happening from time to time."

"You have?" I ask doubtfully.

He nods. "Sometimes omegas who are traumatized project what they've been through onto their omega nature itself, and try to mask it. In extreme cases, they can be in denial that they're an omega at all. Can't say I've heard of any claiming to be from another world, but... psychosis presents differently in everyone."

"You really think it's that bad?"

"I'm no psychologist," he says with a shrug. "But based on what I've heard from him, I'd say it's likely. I'd like to have a colleague come and examine him, if you're alright with it. She specializes in psychiatric care for omegas."

"I don't know," I say, if only because I can already tell what Brad's reaction is going to be. The last thing I need is him shutting down on me. "He's already in a tough spot."

"That's all the more reason to have a professional take a look at him," Dr. Wilson insists. "Especially considering the reason he thinks he's here."

"What do you mean?"

"Think about it. He thinks he got here because he was in a car accident," he answers. "What do you think he's going to view as the solution if he gets desperate enough to 'go back'?"

His words fill me with a fresh kind of dread. I've been worried for Brad's mental wellbeing from the beginning, and about what would happen on the off chance he does manage to escape all my security measures, but what if he's an even bigger threat to himself? A direct one?

"Tell her to come as soon as she can," I mutter. "I'll pay ten times her usual rate."

I might not have been expecting to find my mate right now, but now that I have, I'm going to do whatever it takes to protect him.

Even if it's from himself.

CHAPTER 4

BRAD



Even as a teenager, I was never the type to storm up to my room, slam the door, and lock myself up. That was more Devon's thing, but ever since I woke up in this new world, my emotions have been a rollercoaster.

I pace around the room, my anger slowly ebbing away and being replaced by a strange surrealness. I'm here. I'm an omega. And I'm mated, apparently. I can't explain any of that, but I can't deny it either.

Not after everything that happened last night.

I bury my face in my hands and groan, leaning against the dresser. I seriously can't believe I let Raul fuck me. I practically begged him for his damn knot.

What the hell is wrong with me? Now that the heat is gone, I can finally think clearly again and the reality of the situation is starting to sink in. Even if Raul and everyone else thinks I'm crazy.

And honestly, I can't even blame them.

I hear a knock on the door, and I can tell it's Raul without even looking. Only he could knock with that level of audacity.

"Fuck off," I growl.

"Brad," he says, his voice gentle. "May I come in?"

"What part of fuck off was unclear? Because recent events lead me to believe you know what 'fuck' means. Is it the adjective that threw you?"

"Pretty sure that's a preposition," he answers.

I growl in frustration, flopping back on the bed. "Fucking come in, then, if the only other option is you bitching through the door."

The door opens and closes softly. I'm honestly amazed he gave me even a few hours of privacy. Omegas have the reputation for being the clingy ones, but I'm starting to think alphas are the real culprits.

"What do you want?" I ask flatly.

"I just wanted to see how you were feeling after..."

"After you and Dr. Douchebag had your little intervention and laughed in my face?" I offer.

"No one was laughing, Brad."

"No," I say, swinging my legs off the bed and sitting up to face him. My head swims as a result of getting up too fast. Next thing you know, I'm gonna be getting the vapors, whatever the fuck those even are. Pretty sure it's what happens when Smelly Steve has a little too much to drink. "You just sat there looking at me like I'm some poor idiot who's out of his fucking mind."

"No one thinks that," he insists, sitting down on the edge of the bed. "I'm just worried about you. So is Dr. Wilson."

"Yeah, right," I snort.

"It's the truth. You may not like him, and I'm not going to pretend like his bedside manner is perfect, but I trust him," says Raul. "If I didn't, I wouldn't let him anywhere near you."

As much as his words chafe my ass, there's something about them that's kind of touching, too. When he reaches out to caress my cheek, which is something that's never happened to me in my entire life—but seems to be the go-to expression of care in Book World—I freeze.

"You're dangerously close to pulling back a nub, bud," I warn him.

He gives me a look like I'm bluffing. "I—*fuck!*" he cries, yanking his hand back when I bite down on it. "What the hell, Brad?"

"I warned you," I tell him, feeling a tinge of panic when I taste blood. I stick my tongue out and blow raspberries, trying to get it out of my mouth. "Oh, shit! Am I gonna turn into a werewolf now?"

"That's not how it works," Raul says, watching me with a newfound wariness as he clutches his hand. I didn't bite him *that* hard, for fuck's sake. "If it were, you had more than enough of my DNA in you last night to make the change."

My face heats up, but he has a point. "Next time I tell you not to touch me, take me seriously," I grumble.

He snorts, shaking his head. "Noted. I apologize."

"Whatever," I mutter. Then, I have an idea for how I can spin this whole thing to my advantage. "If you're really sorry, there is something you could do to make it up to me."

"Oh?" he asks, raising an eyebrow. Judging from his tone, I think this fucking idiot actually thinks I'm gonna ask for more dick or something. "And what might that be?"

I could punch him in the dick. Or I could play along and humiliate him. I'm in a particularly sadistic mood, so I decide to go with the latter.

"Well, I'm in kind of a kinky mood. Whips, chains, bars, that kind of thing."

"Is that right?" Raul asks, his voice husky and his eyes glazed with a lust I barely recognized last night, considering how focused I was on my own. He leans in, and I lean closer, our lips just a hair's breadth away.

"Yeah," I say, a smirk tugging at my lips. "So you know what would turn me on *real* hard?"

He's hanging on my every word, and he looks like it's taking all his restraint not to kiss me, which doesn't bother me as much as it probably should. I've always had women throwing themselves at me, but I've still been the one to

initiate things, and I'm not used to being on this end of the equation. I'm not accustomed to seducing anyone, and it's more enjoyable than I'd like to admit.

"What?" he asks, his voice strained with desperation almost as much as those jeans are strained by his cock.

"If you went down to that prison and let Trent out," I answer, dropping the husky voice.

Raul's expression falters in confusion before the realization hits him and he pulls back, scowling. "Very funny," he mutters.

"Great, but I'm not joking," I say, folding my arms. "If you're gonna keep me cooped up here and treat me like a patient in a psych ward, the least you can do is let my friend out."

"You said yourself, you don't even know him," Raul protests.

"I do in this world," I counter. "And if you want me to come out of my 'delusion' or whatever the fuck it is you think is happening, you should want someone around who knew me before. Someone who can help jog my memory."

Raul frowns, but I can see the wheels turning behind his eyes, so I think I struck on something there. "*If* I consider bringing him to the house, you have to promise me something."

"What is it?" I ask warily, thinking he's going to try making a bargain of his own.

"Promise me that you won't do anything to put yourself in danger," he says. "That includes trying to escape through *any* means."

As I listen, I realize I don't even know what he's getting at, but I'm too afraid he'll change his mind to question it. "Yeah, fine," I mutter. I don't like making promises I can't keep, even in a dream, but if that's what it takes to get him to spring Trent...

"I mean it, Brad. His fate is tied to yours if I do this," Raul says, growing solemn as his eyes bore into mine. "You're responsible for what happens to

him. I want your word."

I swallow hard as the meaning of his words sink in. If I run, he's going to take it out on Trent, which means when I do find a way to get out of here, I'm gonna have to take Trent with me at the very least.

It's not ideal, but it's better than nothing. And hey, it might be good to have an ally. "Okay," I say through my teeth. "I give you my word."

That seems to satisfy him, at least. "Good. Then I'll see what I can do."

CHAPTER 5

RAUL



"This wasn't exactly what I had in mind," Brad protests, staring as my men apply the heavy-duty lock to the glorified prison that's been set up in the basement in record time.

"It's not the prison," I reason. "It's inside the house."

"Technically," he says through his teeth.

"If you wanted something else, you should have been more specific," I say in a wry tone.

I can't help but enjoy getting under his skin once in a while. The way his pupils narrow and his nostrils flare like a bull about to go on a rampage is cute. It's a dangerous game, but it's one I can't resist playing. Especially after that little game he played with me earlier.

"He's still a prisoner," Brad protests.

"Of course he is," I say. "Never claimed otherwise. He's from an enemy pack and he trespassed on my lands, trying to capture you. Do you really think I'm going to just let him freely walk around my home where there are children, not to mention my mate?"

He looks visibly annoyed, and I can't tell if it's because I called him my mate, or because I implied he needs protection. Either way, that's not the kind of thing I can sugarcoat. He needs to understand the reality of his situation, little by little.

Hopefully when the time comes, he can accept it.

Brad says nothing for a few moments, glaring at the heavy metal door cordoning off the back half of the basement. It's as vast as the mansion itself, and there are several finished apartments from the days when more of the family lived in the mansion.

"Can I see it?" he finally asks.

I nod, taking out my key card to open the door. He follows me into the open space leading toward the recently refurbished apartment I had my men turn into a prison on short notice, and I can tell from the way his eyes widen as he takes it all in that he's impressed, whether he wants to be or not.

"Not quite the dungeon you were expecting?"

"It's decent, I guess," he mutters.

"He'll be staying here," I say, opening up a second door that leads into the apartment. "There's a kitchen and a bathroom, as you can see. He'll be perfectly comfortable."

If this guy really is important to Brad, then that makes him important to me, no matter how much I dislike it. It doesn't keep me from being irrationally jealous, but if I can't temper that for Brad's well being then I don't deserve to call myself his mate.

He says nothing again for long enough that I start to worry he isn't relieved, after all. "Is something wrong?" I ask warily.

"No," he says, glancing over at me. "Nothing's wrong, I just... thanks. I guess."

I can tell from the tension in his voice and the fact that he's not meeting my eyes he's not comfortable with saying that, which makes it mean all the more. I smile. "Of course. I just hope your friend appreciates you sticking your neck out for him."

He snorts. "Pretty sure he still hates you, in full disclosure."

"No worries. It's mutual."

Brad tilts his head, a hint of curiosity in his eyes as he watches me. "There's that much bad blood between you and Blue Fang?"

"Not really," I admit. "Our packs have never gotten along well, but I really don't have anything personal against them. Just him."

"Why?" he asks, frowning. "I thought you just met him."

"I did," I say, letting that sink in for a moment.

When it does, Brad rolls his eyes all the way back into his head. "You can't be serious."

"I'm an alpha," I say with a shrug. "I can't help it."

"You're ridiculous," he counters.

"Never claimed otherwise."

Brad just sighs heavily. "For the record, nothing ever happened between us. I mean... between him and Catalina. Fuck, I don't even know what I mean anymore."

"Don't stress out about it," I tell him. "The memories will come back on their own. You shouldn't force it."

He scowls, and I can tell from the venom in his gaze the moment is over. I really need to learn to stop putting my foot in my mouth where he's concerned, but that's easier said than done. "They're not memories," he snaps. "I don't know what they are or what kind of woo bullshit all this is, but it's not repression or whatever. I was awake for half of Intro to Psychology, I know that much."

I chuckle. "Fair enough."

Now is probably not the time to bring up the fact that I have someone coming to talk to him. Something tells me he's not going to believe the wolf pack just has a live-in psychologist. I'd hoped maybe this would soften him up to the news a little, but that goodwill didn't stretch as far as I thought.

Maybe I'll wait until we're in bed again. That definitely seems to soften him up a little.

I hear footsteps upstairs, and a moment later, Brad seems to notice, too. The way he perks up immediately raises my suspicions, but I tamp it down. I need to take his word for it if he says there's nothing between him and Trent. My wolf, on the other hand... it isn't always so logical. Not by a long shot.

Lenore and another guard come downstairs, leading Trent between them. I can tell Lenore is appropriately suspicious of him, and probably my decision to bring him here, but as my beta, she wouldn't question me in front of the others. I'm sure I'm going to be hearing about it later, though, and I can't say I blame her.

Trent is glowering at me like he wants to tear into my throat, and if it wasn't for that collar around his neck keeping him from shifting, he'd probably try. It's just another measure that has to be taken in order for me to feel comfortable with him being here, even under lock and key. The way his gaze immediately softens when he looks over to Brad at once reassures me and fills me with blinding, possessive rage.

"Hey," Brad says awkwardly, glancing between us as if he can sense the tension. And I'm sure he can. "Check out your new digs. Better than the old place, huh?"

Trent looks between us, his eyes narrowing in growing suspicion. "Why did you bring me here?"

"You can thank him for that," I say, nodding toward Brad as I fold my arms. "But don't make me regret it."

Trent says nothing, but he doesn't look away like most betas in his position would when confronted with the stone cold stare of an alpha. He's brave, I'll give him that.

"You'll be fine here," Brad says with confidence, smacking him on the shoulder hard enough that Trent winces a little. "Just don't do anything dumb."

Trent frowns, and I can tell there's more he wants to say, but he doesn't want to say it in front of me. If he thinks he's getting Brad alone, though, he's dead fucking wrong. "Yeah," he mutters. "I won't."

"Raul, could I speak to you about something?" Lenore asks.

Not great timing. At least not for me. I hesitate, glancing back at Brad and Trent, who look more than eager to get rid of me.

"You. Stay posted at the door," I mutter to the other guard.

"Yes, sir," he says, nodding to me.

I follow Lenore out of the room and stop on the other side. "I'd rather not go any further."

She sighs but she stops, turning to face me. I can tell from the way she's searching my face she thinks I've lost my mind.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" she blurts out. "A Blue Fang wolf? In our home?"

Yeah, that confirms it.

"What is that saying about keeping your friends close and your enemies closer?" I challenge.

"Pretty sure that's not about your literal fucking enemies," she cries. "It's bad enough you brought him here."

I bristle immediately, even though she hasn't called out Brad by name. "Don't. You can question me on everything else, but not on this. Not him."

"Why?" she demands. "What the hell is so special about him that you're willing to risk dragging us into war with another pack?"

"War with Blue Fang was inevitable, and Brad is proof of that," I answer. I can tell that got her attention, so I continue, "He ran because he was being forced into an arranged mating with Constantine."

"Constantine?" Her eyes widen and I can see the rage building behind them. Like so many of us, she's lost loved ones to that monster. Her brother, and her uncle.

"Blue Fang and Grayridge are forging an alliance," I answer. "And he's the one who's supposed to cement it. Whatever happened there, it shook him up, but I have someone coming to talk to him and I'm hoping it'll help him

come to terms with everything. In the meantime, Trent might have information we can use."

"That explains the basement prison, I guess," she mutters. "But it doesn't explain why Brad isn't in it."

"Because he's an omega, for one thing," I answer in a clipped tone. "And he hasn't done anything wrong. Seeking sanctuary isn't a crime."

"Last I checked, he was actively trying to escape," she says, folding her arms.

I clench my jaw. This isn't the kind of thing I wanted to come out with right now, especially considering Brad hasn't yet accepted the fact that he's my mate, but it's clear I don't have much of a choice.

"Brad is my mate," I say, not completely surprised by the fact that she looks like I just punched her in the gut. I know Lenore has always been interested in me as more than just a friend and pack leader.

As deeply as I respect her, and as much as I value her as a trusted friend and beta, that's all she's ever been to me. Even before Brad came along, romance just wasn't in the cards between us. I respected her too much for her to just be a fling, and now I understand why I've never felt more than fleeting attraction with anyone else. My destined mate was out there, waiting for me to find him.

Whether he wanted to be found or not.

Lenore's shock is clear, but she covers it quickly enough. "I... see," she says, clearing her throat. "I guess that changes things."

"It does," I answer. "You're my most trusted beta, Lenore. You're the only person I trust to keep him safe when I'm not here. Can I count on you?"

She holds my gaze, nodding. "Always."

"Thank you," I say, glancing back at the doorway leading into the other apartment. I can hear Brad and Trent conversing in relatively relaxed tones, but the subject matter of their conversation is innocuous enough, so I assume at least Trent knows I'm keeping an eye on him.

He'd better not forget it.

CHAPTER 6

BRAD



"Who was that?" Trent asks, frowning as Lenore and Raul leave the room.

"That's Lenore. She's his beta," I answer. "And she kinda hates me, but we're gonna be best friends in no time, so it's no big deal. Listen, you can't pull that shit."

"What shit?" he asks.

"The macho staredown 'if I could stab you with my eyes, I would' shit whenever Raul is in the room," I answer. Why the fuck do people in this world have such sharp eyes, anyway?

Trent rolls his eyes. "It's kind of hard not to when he's kidnapped you."

I groan. "It's not a kidnapping," I say. Raul was right. I really don't want this to be a kidnapping. Especially after I just got knotted. I don't need the ego blow. "It's just a... strategic relocation of a human being against their will. Or at least, it was. I'm good for the moment."

"You know who he is, right?" Trent asks, gesturing toward the door. "He's the regional fucking alpha."

"What, did everyone know that but me?" I mutter, shaking my head. "Never mind. I know who he is. But he's not a threat to either of us—as long as you behave."

"Behave?" Anger flashes in his eyes. "Is that what you did? Is that why his scent is all over you?"

I stare at him for a moment in shock. And here I thought layering the fifty billion types of shampoo, conditioner, body wash and soap Raul keeps stocked in his shower would cover that up. Maybe I should've gone with steel wool instead of a loofa.

"Excuse me?" I ask through my teeth.

"Are you going to deny it?" he challenges. "Please tell me you didn't mate with that asshole just to get me a better prison cell."

Before I've fully processed what I'm doing, I have him pinned against the wall by the throat. The look of shock on his face suggests this isn't how Catalina handles her interpersonal conflicts.

Oh fucking well.

"Let's get one thing straight, asshole," I growl while I still have the element of surprise distracting him from the fact that he's a hell of a lot stronger than I am, even though by all appearances, I should be able to snap him like a twig. At least I've got years of confidence built up from actually being the strongest guy in the room. "Who I 'mate' with or why is none of your damn business. You don't own me, and neither does he. Do we have an understanding?"

I can still see the anger flaring in Trent's gaze, but the tension in his body relaxes. I'm beginning to be able to pick up on the signs a shifter is submitting. Not really that much different from putting one of the unruly pledges in his place.

Maybe Raul was right about his pack and mine not being too different, after all.

"Yes," Trent mutters, finally looking away.

Good enough. I release my grip on him and step back, putting some space between us. "Good," I say. "Now I'm going to ask you a question, and I need you to tell me the truth."

"Anything," he replies, giving me the puppy eyes once more. Guess putting him in his place hasn't done anything to dissolve the crush he has on me for some fucking reason. I'm about as polar opposite from Catalina as you can get—unless my imagination did some serious reading between the lines when I was devouring the book—but he seems just as smitten with me as he was with her.

Unfortunately, it isn't gonna end any better for him in the romance department, but I can at least make sure he gets to the end of the book alive.

"This whole 'heir of accord' bullshit between Blue Fang and Grayridge," I begin. "Is that what it's gonna take to cinch this alliance?"

"Yes," he answers carefully, like we're treading in dangerous waters. "That will make it official, but the alliance is there in all but formal terms."

"Yeah, that's what I was afraid of," I sigh.

"You shouldn't be worrying about politics," he says. "You're an omega."

And just like that, he's back on my shit list. "I shouldn't be worrying about politics?" I snarl. "Like politics ain't the reason I'm fucking here."

Trent winces. Before he can say anything, the door opens and Raul steps in, looking between us as if he can sense the tension. "Is something the matter?"

"Nothing," I grunt, walking over to him. Not because I need his protection, but because I'm hoping he'll hold me back if Trent makes another remark.

Not that Raul is a whole lot better in that department, but I'm starting to realize it's not just alphas who have backwards ideas about omegas. I'm pretty sure heat pheromones release some kind of brain worms.

"By the way. Trent is going to tell you everything he knows about the alliance with Grayridge," I say pointedly, looking back over my shoulder at Trent. "Aren't you?"

Trent clenches his jaw, and I can tell from the way he's looking at Raul, he's trying to decide whether or not he wants to attack him here and now. Instead, his shoulders slump and he mutters, "Sure. Whatever."

"I see," Raul says, studying him closely. "In that case, I'll be back later with my beta to have a conversation."

I follow him out into the hallway and upstairs, and he stops to look down at me suspiciously once we're alone. "What happened in there?"

"Nothing," I say with a shrug. "Just setting the record straight."

I can tell he wants to push it further, but instead, he sighs. "All right. You know, if he really does cooperate, this could be a turning point in the war."

"I wouldn't get your hopes up too much," I warn him. "Trent is just a foot soldier. I doubt he has access to any serious intel."

"Still. Even small bits of information can make a big difference," Raul counters. "Of course, you do know that he's completely, madly, head over heels in love with you, right?"

There's no mistaking the jealousy in his tone. "What, and Lenore's not completely, madly, head over heels in love with you?" I challenge. "Cuz either you're oblivious, or you think I am."

He sighs. "I'm aware of her feelings, but they're one sided and they always have been. Lenore is my most trusted ally, and she knows where I stand. Especially when it comes to you."

I grimace. "You mean you told her you think I'm your mate."

"I told her you *are* my mate," he corrects me.

I roll my eyes. "Great. Does the whole damn pack know we fucked?"

"No," he answers. "Just anyone who's gotten close enough to smell my scent on you."

Yeah, that's pretty much what I was afraid of.

"I'd be more than happy for the whole world to know," he says, reaching out to touch my cheek. Before I can whack his hand away, his touch does that annoying bone-melting thing it did to me last night.

Son of a bitch, I hate this omega bullshit.

"Look, I'm not gonna pretend last night didn't happen," I say, deciding this conversation is inevitable, no matter how little I want to have it. "But we've both got bigger things to worry about without getting distracted by... whatever this is," I say, gesturing between us. "You've got a war to win, and I've got a world to get back to."

I can tell from the way the faint lines on his forehead crease he's not thrilled with the direction this conversation is taking. That and he always gets weird when I mention my world, and the fact that I still very much need to get back to it.

"This isn't a distraction, Brad," he says. "It's everything. You're not some fling, you're my mate. I don't think you understand exactly what that means."

"Okay, then explain it," I grit out, folding my arms to put some kind of barrier between us. I don't like how much stronger than me he is physically, but that's nothing compared to the way he makes me feel. Like I'm an armadillo on its back and all my mushy insides are vulnerable and exposed.

This feelings crap is bullshit. And the fact that it's not going anywhere even though my heat is over is freaking me the fuck out.

"It means we're bonded," he answers, holding my gaze. There it is again. That uncomfortable feeling that makes it both hard to hold eye contact, and impossible to look away. "Bound to each other forever. Our fates were entwined from the beginning, and the moment we met, that connection became unbreakable."

"And what would happen if someone were to apply an industrial strength wire cutter to that connection?" I challenge. "Just theoretically."

His expression remains stony, not cracking like it usually does in response to my smartass remarks. "There is no severing a mate bond except in death. Fated mates almost always follow each other into the afterlife, and when an alpha loses his omega before his time, whether by death or by separation, he goes feral."

"Feral?" I ask warily. "What does that mean?"

"It means he eventually becomes a monster," Raul answers in a solemn tone. "A creature made out of pure, blind rage who will stop at nothing to get what's his, and the only way to stop him is to put him down."

I swallow hard. "It's always something dramatic with you alphas, isn't it?"

Raul blows a puff of air through his nostrils, and I realize only when my back hits the wall that he's cornered me up against it. My body seems to have a mind of its own where he's concerned. "Maybe. But the only thing you need to accept is that you're not going anywhere," he says, stroking his fingertips down the angle of my jaw. "If you were taken from me, there's nothing I would stop at to get you back, even if it means tearing this world apart. Or the next."

I swallow hard again, but my throat is bone dry. Other parts of me, not so much. Guess that annoying self-lubrication thing isn't just at play during heat.

I have a bad feeling he's not just being dramatic about that. And if anyone could tear his way through the pages of a book and into reality, it's the man in front of me. The fire behind those golden eyes makes me wonder if he's not a bit feral to begin with.

Before I can even formulate a response to any of that, a tiny voice shatters the tension between us. "What are you doing, Raul?" a little girl cries.

Raul freezes, his entire demeanor shifting back to his usual easygoing self as he turns around to face the small girl standing at the end of the hallway, her golden eyes as wide as saucers as she stares at us. She doesn't look like she could be more than six or seven, with a heart-shaped face and dark hair pulled up into twin buns on either side of her head. The buns are decorated with little cat-shaped hair clips. She's wearing a rainbow shirt beneath a pair of overalls that are covered in dirt, and some of it is smudged on her cheek, too. It looks like she just crawled out of a damn mineshaft.

"Hey, Minnie," Raul says with a fond chuckle, lifting her into his arms when she runs over to him. "There's someone I'd like you to meet."

The kid keeps staring at me like she's one of them creepy little ghosts in *The Shining*, and I'm suddenly reminded of why I was thinking about getting a

vasectomy. Me and kids have never mixed. Hell, I didn't even like myself when *I* was a kid. They all seem to come in one of two varieties—the kind that're always shrieking like medieval peasants whose village is being raided by dragons, and they somehow manage to always be sticky, or they're the kind that stare at you like a tiny Victorian ghost in a well.

This one's definitely the latter.

"Uh, hey," I say, waving awkwardly.

She doesn't blink. Does she ever blink?

"Brad, this is my sister, Mina," Raul says in a pleasant tone. "Mina, this is my friend, Brad. He's going to be staying with us from now on."

I grit my teeth, but I'm not about to start arguing with a first grader. Or is it third? They all kind of blend together to me at that age. "Nice to meet you."

Mina frowns, looking me up and down, and I swear I've never felt more judged in my fucking life. Not even when Devon caught me eating tuna out of a can with my fingers at 3 AM.

"He smells like a human," she says, wrinkling her nose like I stink.

I can tell from the shine in Raul's eyes he's trying not to laugh, and I'm not sure if he's more amused by her or by my obvious paralysis. "Well, he is human. But he's also an omega, so he belongs here with us."

"An omega?" She gives me a double take, which endears her to me slightly. "He doesn't *look* like an omega."

"Thank you," I say.

Raul puts her down and says, "Why don't you go get cleaned up? We're having dinner soon, and Hannah's going to freak out if she sees you covered in dirt."

"Fine," she grumbles, like she's been personally curating her collection of grime and considers this a huge setback. I can respect that. She glances at me over her shoulder with a malicious gleam in her eyes. "Are we having human for dinner?"

I blink, looking between them. "What now?"

Mina just cackles and runs off.

"Kids," Raul says with a shrug, walking down the hall.

"Hey, wait a sec!" I call after him. "She was joking, right? You guys don't eat humans. *Right?*"

Raul laughs. "No, we don't eat humans," he says, a mischievous gleam in his eyes as he looks me over. "Although you definitely look juicy enough to tempt me."

"Oh, fuck off," I growl, even though I'm pretty sure he's joking.

At least, I hope.

CHAPTER 7

RAUL



With the way things have been lately, it's rare for me to get to sit down and enjoy a family dinner, and rarer still that nearly everyone manages to be present, but it's important to have this opportunity to properly introduce Brad to everyone.

And I can't help but hope that maybe seeing a pack behaving as family rather than whatever the hell he's used to will help him accept his current circumstances more readily.

My family might be big, loud, and kind of crazy, but they're good people, and full of love. I know they'll accept him, if only because he's my mate, and most of them have been waiting long enough for me to take one. Granted, I didn't think it would happen now, but my only regret is that I didn't find him sooner.

Brad is the only one who hasn't showed up yet as everyone gets seated around the table. Lenore and Curtis are sitting with Dr. Wilson at the far end of the table, while Mina and my other sister, Hannah, are closer to me at the head of the table. My cousins, twins Matthew and Kyle, are in between sitting across from each other. It's not quite a full house, considering the twins' parents live down the road and my brother-in-law, Rick, is out of town on pack affairs, but that's probably just as well since Brad looks overwhelmed the minute he walks into the dining room.

I get up to pull out his chair instinctively, but even if I had a second to think about it, I'm not going to set a shit example by not pulling the chair out for

my mate. Especially when he's an omega.

To my relief, he doesn't put up a fight, he just glowers at me, but I'm sure I'm going to hear about it later. Not that I really mind if the fight ends up like the last one...

"Everyone, I'd like to formally introduce you to Brad," I say, taking my seat next to him. "Brad, this is—"

"Hannah, Matthew, Kyle, Dr. Wilson, Curtis, Lenore, and the maneater," he says, pointing to all of them—Mina last—as he lists their names off. "Yeah, I know."

He looks at me pointedly, like that proves he knows them all by appearance because he's read about my life in a book. I really have my work cut out for me.

I sigh. "Yes." I turn to the others. "I'm sure you all already know this, but Brad will be living with us here from now on." I can tell he wants to argue that, too, but I continue anyway. "And I know you'll make him feel welcome."

"It's nice to meet you, Brad," Hannah says, giving him a warm smile. She's four years younger than I am, and my opposite in just about every way. She's petite and blond with light honey-gold eyes, and she's more or less sunshine in a person. Someone around here has to be emotionally stable, I guess.

"Yeah, now that he's not trying to kick my ass," Matthew says with a snort.

"For the record, if you were human, I would have," Brad announces.

"Matthew," Hannah scolds. "Language. There are children present."

"I could kick Matthew's ass, too," Mina announces proudly before taking a bite of her borderline raw steak.

Hannah buries her face in her hands. Her attempts to raise our little sister as a "civilized lady" in our parents' absence are admirable, but ultimately futile. The sooner she accepts that, the better.

"Could not," Matthew mutters under his breath. He flinches when Mina brandishes her steak knife, though, and she cackles, kicking her feet under the table.

Okay, maybe family dinner was a mistake. I forgot the crucial detail that it was *my* family coming to dinner.

Brad seems comfortable enough, though. In fact, he's already halfway through his steak and he doesn't seem remotely phased by the fact that it's practically still mooing.

"So," Kyle says, eyeing the newcomer warily. "What's the deal, anyway? You imprinted on him or something?"

The table falls dead silent. Leave it to Kyle to shove his foot so far down his own throat he could perform an endoscopy. I can tell from the eager looks on everyone else's faces that he's only asking what they wish they could, though. Everyone except for Dr. Wilson and Lenore, who already know.

The latter has been notably silent since our conversation earlier, but I can only hope things will go back to normal between us soon. Like I told Brad, I've known about her feelings for a while, and she's known they're not mutual, but now that I've taken a mate, that realization is probably setting in a bit differently. That's what I get for not being as blunt as I would have been with anyone else, though.

After the Grayridge pack attacked ours, Lenore, Curtis, Matthew, and Kyle were the ones I leaned on to help me put the pieces of our shattered lives back together. She's the only one I'm not related to by blood, but she became family all the same. At least in my mind.

I look over at Brad, knowing he's going to be pissed off if I tell them the truth, but trust is the thing that unites a wolf pack and a family. At least the one I lead. I don't have any intention of starting things off with a lie. Brad still thinks this is something he's just going to wake up and forget about one day, and while that stings, I have to remind myself it's only fair from his perspective. He's human, and whether he can feel the effect of being imprinted on or not, he can't possibly understand the depth of the way I feel for him already.

Patience and time. I have to give him those things, at the very least.

"Yes," I say, choosing my words carefully. I can feel my family's eyes fixed on me, and I'm sure they're all having mixed reactions. Shock seems to be the one common denominator among all of them. Even Mina has dropped her fork, staring at me like I just said we were adopting a cat. "Brad is my mate—my omega."

"Holy shit," Kyle murmurs.

Even Hannah doesn't bother to correct him. She's the first to react with a smile, though, a glimmer of excitement in her eyes. "You imprinted?" she squeals, looking between us like she can't quite figure out why no one else is as excited as she is. "That's amazing! Congratulations. But... isn't he... um..."

"Human?" Brad offers, polishing off the rest of his wine glass. "Yep. And that ain't even the half of it, sis."

Before he can divulge anything I'd rather them not know about his... theories on our reality, I clear my throat and say, "There's been a lot to process over the last couple of days, but we'll figure it out. Together. Like we always do."

Brad rolls his eyes and reaches for the bottle of wine nearest to him. At least he's complying. For now.

"You sure that's a good idea?" Matthew asks warily. "A human living among wolves... there's a reason that isn't done."

"It isn't done because wolves don't imprint on humans," Curtis says pointedly. "What's he supposed to do, ask fate to roll the dice again?"

Matthew grunts in acknowledgment. "I'm just saying, it could cause problems. Has he ever even seen a wolf shift?"

"He's' right here, douchecanoe," Brad says gruffly. "And I lived with fifty Kappa Nus my first two years of college, so a bunch of mutts is nothing."

"Kappa whats?" Matthew asks, wrinkling his nose.

"My fraternity," Brad answers.

Lenore glances over at me, frowning. "I thought you said he was from Blue Fang."

"He is," I say quickly. "It's a... society within the pack. For... omegas."

"Seriously?" Kyle asks, raising an eyebrow. "Blue Fang's got fifty omegas? Sorry, Raul, but I might have to swap packs."

Dr. Wilson clears his throat. "Someone pass the salt, please."

I'm sure it's his attempt at a distraction, considering how he's always nagging me about sodium, but I'm grateful for it. Kyle just looks confused and passes the salt over.

"While everyone's here, there's something we need to discuss," I say, deciding it's high time for a change in subject. "With the recent trespassers, I've got every soldier I can spare running patrols, so the pack is going to need all hands on deck for the next few weeks. Everyone needs to do their part. That includes you, squirt," I say, looking pointedly at Mina.

She sits up tall, sticking her knife into the table as she makes unnecessarily intense eye contact with me. "I'm ready to fight."

I sigh. "Your devotion to the cause is admirable, but doing your homework without giving Hannah a hard time and finishing your chores was more what I had in mind."

"Aww, man," she mumbles in disappointment, pushing her mashed potatoes and carrots around with her fork.

"As for you two," I say, looking over at the twins. "Liam is on patrol for the next week, so I'm going to need you to fill in for him, checking up on the more vulnerable members of the pack. The Felmans say their roof is leaking, and Mrs. Donovan is going into labor any day now, so she'll need someone to fill in at the store at a moment's notice."

"Yeah, we know the drill," Kyle says boredly.

"Got you covered," Matthew assures me.

"I've got the clinic if Dr. Wilson has to go out onto the field," Hannah chimes in.

"Thank you, Hannah," he says with a polite nod. "I'll feel better knowing it's in your capable hands."

She smiles pleasantly, but I'm pretty sure she doesn't have a damn clue how much longing there is behind those words. And considering that she already has a mate, it's probably for the best.

"What do you need me to do?" Curtis asks, glancing over at me.

"Lenore and I are going out on patrol tomorrow," I answer. "Just keep an eye on the house for me."

That's the closest I can get to admitting that I want him to keep an eye on Brad without triggering my mate's radar.

"Wait a sec, it's my week for patrol," Curtis protests. "I thought you didn't want us switching off unless we had to?"

I hesitate, glancing between him and Lenore. I just assumed leaving her and Brad alone would be a mistake, but leave it to Curtis to be a stickler for the rules. Granted, they are rules I set, but still.

Lenore stops chewing, glancing up at me, then Brad, clearly uncomfortable. "Sure," she mutters. "I can watch the house."

I'm tempted to argue, but the last thing I need is Brad getting the idea that I specifically want her going with me. Not that he seems like he'd be jealous, when he doesn't even want to be my mate, but I still don't want to give him reason to be.

I'm beginning to realize all my trepidations about *looking* for a mate because it would complicate things were not only founded, but didn't go far enough.

Not that it matters. No matter how complicated my life has become, I already can't imagine what it would be like not to have Brad in my life. And there's no way I'm going back to that for a single second.

"What am I gonna do?" Brad asks, looking expectantly at me.

I blink. "What do you mean?"

"You're handing out jobs to everyone else," he answers, folding his arms. "What am I supposed to do, sit on my—" He pauses, glancing warily at Hannah and Mina. "My chair all day?"

"Smooth," Kyle snorts.

I hesitate, because I know he isn't going to like the answer on the tip of my tongue, which is that he's an omega, and in most packs, omegas are worshiped and waited on hand and foot. But something tells me he would consider that a fate worse than death.

"You're still adapting to everything," I answer carefully. "I didn't want to overload you, but I'm sure Dr. Wilson or Hannah could find something for you to do if you get bored."

Brad gives the doctor a wary look, like he thinks he's going to get tranquilized again. "Yeah, sure," he mutters at length.

I breathe a sigh of relief. For the moment, it seems, that satisfied him, and I decide I should be grateful he's interested in being involved in the pack after all. If he's more involved in the pack, maybe it'll be easier for him to let go of all this book nonsense. The sooner he sees this place as his home, the better.

CHAPTER 8

BRAD



Dinner went better than I thought it would, but I still find myself wondering what the hell I've gotten myself into. They're a hell of a lot more normal than I was expecting, Mina aside, but that's part of the reason I feel like a fish out of water.

No, not out of water. I feel like a fish in a three-piece suit standing in line at a fucking Costco. I have no frame of reference for domestic bliss, considering my family's idea of "family dinner" was usually me and Devon microwaving pizza rolls while our parents were busy pretending like they never had children.

It's also pretty fucking clear that Raul is the head of this idyllic family, and everyone kind of revolves around him. Not even in a creepy "obey your cult leader" way like I initially assumed, but in the sense that they all seem to genuinely respect and trust him. He's so commanding, I just figured he'd be bossing everyone around like a typical alpha douchebro, but outside of the battlefield, that really doesn't seem to be the case.

As tempted as I am to go straight back to my room, there's something on my mind and I find myself lingering while Raul talks to Kyle, who flagged him down after dinner. I'm trying to look like I just so happen to be lingering in the lounge area not far off from the hallway where they're having their conversation, and not like I'm waiting for him, so I grab a book off the shelf and pretend to be reading while taking great care to make sure my brain doesn't actually absorb any of the words.

Not making *that* mistake again. The last time I read something, I got sucked in, and the last thing I need is to wind up inside a book within a book. Hell, when I find a way to get back home, I'm taking a Sharpie to every last surface in my apartment with words. Cereal boxes, shampoo bottles, the little "do not remove under penalty of law" tag on my pillow... Might even make Devon find a way to permanently turn off subtitles on the TV because I'm not leaving anything to chance.

"Planning ahead?"

I look up sharply at the sound of Raul's voice. "Huh?"

"*What to Know About an Omega Pregnancy*," he says, nodding to the book in my hands.

I look down at the title and feel a surge of panic as I snap it shut and shove it back onto the shelf. "No," I grit out. "I just thought it was a gag."

"I told you male omegas can get pregnant," he says, raising an eyebrow. "Did you really not believe me?"

"Wishful thinking, I guess," I mutter.

Raul gives me a knowing look, walking toward me. "You know... now that you're not in heat, Dr. Wilson could give you suppressants if you're that adamant about avoiding it."

"Uh, why the hell *wouldn't* I be adamant about it?" I challenge. "I'm a fucking linebacker. It's not like it's my dream to pop out a bunch of werewolf babies. Or puppies... is it puppies?"

"I'm not sure why you couldn't do both," he says with a shrug. "But I'm just saying, you have options. If you don't want to get pregnant, suppressants are one of them."

I grunt. "What happened was a one-time thing, FYI. Don't think we're gonna be banging on the regular, and I don't plan on sticking around long enough to go into heat again."

There it is again. That troubled look. "Brad, even if you're right and you are from a different world, how would you get back if you don't even know

how you got here in the first place?"

I hesitate, because he raises a decent question. One that's been bugging me, even if I haven't had a ton of time to contemplate it. "I haven't figured it out yet. And by now, my brother's definitely looking for me. He's a total brainiac. If anyone can figure it out, it's him."

"I'm sure he is," Raul says in that careful tone that makes me feel like a raging bull in a china shop. The worst part is, I don't even think he means to be patronizing. "If you tell me more about him, maybe I can help you find him."

"You can't find him, dude, he lives in another fucking dimension!" I cry. "You don't get it."

"Maybe not," he says patiently. "But that's why I think you should talk to someone else. Someone who can give you a neutral perspective on all this. Because you're right, I don't understand. I want to, but I can't, and I'd be lying if I said I'm not worried about you."

I narrow my eyes as I listen, growing more suspicious with each word. "Oh, hell no. I know an intervention when I hear one," I growl. "This is like that time we all got together and taped Dustin to a chair because he couldn't stop vaping even in the shower, and I'm not fuckin' here for it."

Raul blinked at me. "You *taped someone to a chair*?"

"Don't change the subject," I snap. "You planning on having me carted off to a padded cell or something?"

"What?" he asks, sounding genuinely horrified. "No, of course not! Dr. Wilson just has a friend who works in psychiatry, and he'd like her to come have a talk with you. So would I, for that matter."

"So it is an intervention," I accuse. "Because you fuckers think I'm crazy."

"Not crazy," he corrects. "I never said that, and I'd kick anyone's ass who did. Like I said before, I think you've been through a lot of trauma. The accident alone would throw anyone for a loop, not to mention being separated from your brother and away from home. Those things would

affect anyone, and even if everything you say is true, it wouldn't hurt to talk to someone about it, would it?"

I grit my teeth, prepared to argue when an idea occurs to me. "And if I talk to this shrink of yours and she says I'm sane? Will you believe me then?"

Raul freezes, and I can tell he wasn't prepared for that. "I... suppose I'd have to take it into consideration."

"Good enough," I say. "Then I'll talk to her, and when she tells you I'm saner than any of you motherfuckers, you can kiss my ass."

I immediately regret that choice of words when I see the flicker of amusement in Raul's eyes. "Happily," he says in a dry tone. "Or we could go upstairs and get a head start."

I grimace. "Oh, fuck off. Like I said, that was a one-time thing. I'm staying in my room tonight and you'd better fucking stay in yours."

"Okay, fine," he says, holding his hands up. "Whatever you say. But in that case, we should probably say goodbye now."

"Goodbye?" I ask warily. My chest immediately tightens up at the thought of that. I might still be in denial about the whole mate thing, but my body is more than onboard. "Why?"

"I'll be leaving before sunrise," he says. "Something tells me if I try to wake you up, I'm going to end up with a right hook to the jaw."

He isn't wrong about that. But this brings us back to what I wanted to talk to him about in the first place. "What are you going to do out there, anyway?"

The fact that he doesn't answer immediately has me even more suspicious. "We're at war, Brad. I'm the alpha. I wouldn't be much of a leader if I wasn't willing to lead my packs from the frontlines."

"Of course you would! Newsflash, cowardice is practically a requirement for entering into politics these days," I tell him. "Why can't you just get an office and a whiteboard and send other people to do your dirty work like everyone else?"

The corners of his mouth tilt up slightly. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were worried about me."

I grimace. "You're the one who was just telling me our souls are bound together with cosmic superglue or whatever. What happens to me if you get nerfed?"

"By that, I assume you mean killed," he says. "It depends on how long a mated pair has been together, but omegas aren't as affected as alphas. And you're human, so I imagine that would be even less of a problem."

"Well, that's sexist," I mutter. "Or omegaist or whatever."

"I'm afraid you'll have to take that up with mother nature," he says in a flat tone. "I thought you'd be relieved."

"Well, I'm not," I tell him. "So just... don't do anything dumb and get yourself killed out there."

Raul smiles, and I loathe the butterflies it stirs up in my stomach even more than I loathe him. Time to chug an entire can of Raid. "I'll do what I can," he says, moving even closer. I instinctively back up against the bookshelf, freezing when he puts his hands on my shoulders. My body melts in response to his touch.

Maybe I will take those suppressants, after all.

"I'm going to miss you," he says, his voice low and intimate. The rich tone of it feels like hot water cascading over me. "Is there any part of you that's going to miss me? Even a little?"

I swallow hard, because there is one part of me that already misses him more than I want to admit, and if he steps any closer, he's going to figure that out. "Nope," I lie. "Sorry, bro. But good luck with your, uh, wolf war and all that."

"Oh, well," Raul says, his mouth curving into a more dangerous smirk as he leans in so close I can feel his breath on my lips, his hands still resting firmly on my shoulders. "Guess I'll just have to miss you enough for the both of us, then. Maybe just one kiss? For good luck."

I glower at him, even though my lips are already tingling with the memory of his pressed to them so recently. Hell, I don't even remember my first kiss that vividly, but I can still feel his, and in spite of myself, I lean in, my lips parting slightly in preparation to meet his. The moment we touch, I feel it again. The same spark that ran through me the first time we touched at the bar. It isn't quite as jarring now that I know what it is, but it's still there. Still just as powerful.

I sink against Raul as he kisses me, and his tongue slips into my mouth. He wraps his arms around me, strong and warm, and at this moment, if I could speak with his tongue halfway down my throat, I would betray myself by asking him to stay. To stay with me for the night. To stay home, forever.

Fortunately, by the time he breaks the kiss, that self-destructive instinct has passed just enough for my self-control to kick back in.

"That's just for luck," I mutter. "With the way things work in this stupid book, if I didn't kiss you, you'd probably get hurt on the battlefield and I'd end up feeling so guilty I had to nurse your ass back to health."

Raul chuckles. "Understood. In that case, I thank you for your valiant sacrifice."

"Whatever." I roll my eyes, waiting until he leaves the room to sink back against the shelf and groan.

I'm actually fucking worried about this cornfed ab monster who turns into a literal monster on a full moon. And whenever the hell he wants, as far as I know.

What the hell is wrong with me?

CHAPTER 9

BRAD



I spent most of last night tossing and turning, which never happens. Pretty much every night, as soon as my head hits the pillow, I'm asleep. Hell, I've gotten screamed at a handful of times for drifting off while a girl was jerking me off.

And yet, when I finally did manage to fall asleep for an hour here and there, I inevitably jerked awake from a nightmare of a giant black werewolf with familiar golden eyes getting torn apart by an even bigger monster with fur as white as snow, and a huge scar over his left eye.

That's how I know it's Constantine, because the author of this book has more clichés rattling around in their skull than brain cells, so of course the villain has a scar. A sexy scar that made everyone in his pack treat him like shit until he rose up through the ranks and made a name for himself.

As if that would even happen in real life, where the only downside would be having to compensate everyone whose panties melted on sight. I mean, if I had a badass scar like that, I'd be unstoppable, but that shit is always wasted on emo villains and never guys who'd put it to good use.

This isn't real life, though, and the residents of this fantasy world are pretty shallow, I guess. The members of Raul's pack don't seem that bad, even if they have bitched a little about me being human, but I guess I can understand that, too. Pretty sure I'd be awkward about a rotisserie chicken running around my apartment.

When I wake up a third time, I give up on sleep entirely and roll out of bed. It's barely the crack of dawn outside my window, so I don't even bother to get dressed before I leave my room and rush down the hall.

Not because I'm hoping I can catch Raul. I just really need to take a piss, that's all, and I forgot my suite has its own bathroom.

But since I'm up, and his room's on the way to the other bathroom, I figure I might as well just stop by and check. I knock on the door, but there's no response, and my heart sinks a little for reasons entirely unrelated to Raul.

I barrel down the stairs, taking them three at a time, and I nearly bowl over the petite blonde woman crossing over from the nearest hallway in the process.

"Shit, sorry," I say, reaching to steady Hannah.

"It's fine," she says with a startled laugh, adjusting the laundry basket on her hip. "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah, it's fine," I say quickly. "I was just..."

"Looking for Raul?" she offers, raising her eyebrows.

As tempted as I am to deny it, I'm pretty sure she'd see right through it. "That obvious, huh?"

She just gives me a knowing smile. I can definitely see the family resemblance in their eyes. "I'm afraid you just missed him. He left with the others about half an hour ago."

"Oh, right," I say, running a hand through my hair.

Suddenly, I regret coming downstairs in my pajamas, since Hannah is already dressed up like she's going to church in a billowy yellow sundress with her hair pulled up in a perfect bun. I wouldn't have expected shifters to be up at the ass crack of dawn, but it's pretty clear I'm going to have to change my habits while I'm here if I have any hope of keeping up with the rest of the household.

"He'll be fine," she says in a gentle tone. "He always is. Raul is the strongest wolf I know."

"I wasn't worried," I say with a shrug. "Just forgot to ask him something, that's all."

I can tell she doesn't buy it, but she smiles and nods. "I'm afraid most of us ate breakfast already, but if you're hungry, I'm sure the chef would be happy to fix you something."

"You guys have a chef?" I ask in disbelief.

She laughs. It's a light, airy sound, and I'm starting to see why Catalina described Hannah as "bottled sunshine." Granted, I'm pretty sure *she* didn't mean it as a compliment. "They rotate every few days, and sometimes the chef is me, but we stay pretty busy around here, so it's convenient. If you haven't noticed, shifters have a big appetite."

"Yeah, you guys have that in common with frat bros," I muse, looking down at the basket in her hands. "You want some help with that?"

"I've got it covered, but thanks," she says, beaming. "But if you want something to keep yourself busy, there's always something to do in the garden."

"Garden. Got it," I say, heading toward the stairs. "See ya later."

I head back upstairs to shower and get dressed for the day, taking my time since I suddenly don't have that much of an appetite. My head is usually blissfully quiet, but it feels like an overcrowded bus station, filled with all kinds of what if's and questions I regret not asking Raul last night.

How far are he and the others going?

How long will he be gone?

What's he even going out there to do, exactly?

Shit, if I'd known it was gonna mess with me this much, I would have just offered to go with him. But somehow, I already know what his answer would be, and I don't want to have another reason to be pissed off.

One thing is for damn sure, now more than ever. I am *not* cut out for the life of an omega, doing light chores and waiting around for the alphas and betas to come back. Fuck that shit.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath before turning off the water and going over to the dresser to put on some of the clothes Raul left me.

To my surprise, there are more clothes than there were before, and they actually fit me perfectly. I choose a pair of jeans and a plain white T-shirt, which is pretty much what I would wear back home. Whoever went shopping not only had an uncanny eye for my size, but also my taste, and I have a feeling Raul is somehow responsible. When he found the time, I have no fucking idea.

I go back downstairs and decide to make myself eat something. A lack of appetite is another problem I've never had before. The chef isn't in by the time I get to the kitchen, so I make myself a half-dozen eggs, some bacon, and a stack of waffles from the freezer. I'm halfway finished when I feel myself being watched and turn around to find Lenore looming in the doorway like some kind of goth mannequin.

"Fuck!" I cry. "How long have you been standing there?"

"A minute or two," she says with a shrug.

I stare blankly at her. "You wolf freaks have got to stop staring at people, you know that?"

"You learn a lot from observing someone," she counters.

"Oh, yeah?" I lean back from the table. "And what have you learned from watching me?"

"For one thing, I've learned you eat like a horse," she says, looking pointedly at my plate.

"Linebacker, baby," I say, patting my hard stomach. "Gotta keep fuel in the tank."

She rolls her eyes. "They really let omegas play football in Blue Fang?"

"Dunno what they let omegas do in Blue Fang," I say with a shrug. "Where I'm from, omegas are just wolves who get picked on. I mean actual wolves, not the kind who turn into people. Or is it the other way around?"

"Depends on who you ask," she says, sauntering into the kitchen to sink into the chair across from me. "When we first met, you said something about being from another world. Are you still on about that?"

I consider my reply for a minute, because I'm not sure what Raul has told her or what he wants her to know. But I decide fuck that. I'm not tiptoeing around the truth just because it makes him uncomfortable.

"It's reality," I say with a shrug. "And this isn't. At least not for me."

She frowns. "What are you talking about?"

I sigh, because no matter how many times I've explained all this, it just keeps sounding weirder. And if I'm being honest with myself, it is. Sometimes I find myself wondering if I'm crazy, especially when the present feels so real and vivid, and the past almost seems like a dream in comparison.

Honestly, if it wasn't for Devon and my frat bros, I'm not even sure I would believe it. And I have no idea what that says about my life before, but I'm pretty sure it's nothing good.

I'm sure Lenore is just going to think I'm crazy like everyone else does, but I recount my story from the beginning, because why the hell not?

By the time I'm done, her expression hasn't shifted much. I was half expecting her to laugh her ass off.

"Well?" I finally ask. "Get it over with. Tell me it's all bullshit and I'm nuts."

"Oh, it definitely sounds like bullshit, and you being nuts is an understatement," she says in a matter-of-fact tone. "But it makes about as much sense as you being a human omega from the Blue Fang pack who just so happens to have run away from an arranged mating with our greatest rival."

"Huh. Guess that's a better reaction than I expected," I admit.

"Go back to what you were saying before," she says, frowning. "About this girl you think you replaced somehow."

"Catalina. Yeah, I know," I say, deciding to get the name thing out of the way. "She's the main character in this book. Gets under your skin from day one."

"You do have *that* in common," she says flatly, folding her arms.

I snort. "Yeah, yeah. Anyway, she's supposed to be Raul's soulmate or whatever. Sorry. I know you probably don't wanna hear that."

She narrows her eyes, and if looks could kill... pretty sure that dagger strapped to her hip is gonna beat her eyes to it, though. "For fuck's sake, does *everyone* know?"

"About your crush? I dunno," I say with a shrug. "Catalina has a targeting laser for romantic competition, so probably not."

"So Raul imprinted on her in this book you read," she continues. "And now, he's imprinted on you. So you think *you're* Catalina."

"I don't know what else to think," I answer. "I'm not pretending I know how any of this works. Like I said, I was in a car crash, and I woke up living in my brother's favorite book. So far, all signs are pointing to me being the stand-in for Balsamic Vinaigrette, but there are some differences."

"You being a muscleheaded frat bro, for one," she says, holding up a finger.

"Yeah, that," I answer. "Some other stuff, too. I don't remember Raul and the others going out right after she arrived, so I think the timeline's a little off. And Raul's less of a douchebag than I expected."

Lenore sighs. "He has his days. So your plan is what, get back to your world and then Catalina comes back?"

"That's the ideal scenario, yeah," I answer. "Just haven't figured out a playbook yet. But I'm sure my bro's gonna figure something out any time now."

"Not sure waiting on your brother in another world is the most straightforward plan of action," Lenore says, raising an eyebrow.

"So you believe me?" I ask hopefully.

She hesitates. "I don't believe anything without proof, but I'm open to the possibility. And there's no explanation for how you landed on our doorstep that doesn't require a leap of faith to one degree or another."

"Okay, so how can I prove it to you?" I ask. "You could ask me something I couldn't know."

She pauses like she's considering it. "There aren't really any answers that could prove you're from another universe," she finally says. "No matter how unlikely it is, it's feasible you could have found out just about anything there is to know about us. Now, if you managed to know something that *hasn't* happened yet... That would be a little more interesting."

"Oh," I say, sitting up straighter. "Yeah, that's right. I haven't finished the book yet, but I read further ahead than where I'm at now, at least."

"Well?" she asks expectantly.

I pause, trying to recount anything I've read that's about to happen that would prove to her beyond a shadow of a doubt I know things I shouldn't have any way of knowing. Unfortunately, when I was reading the book, I was more focused on the sex parts, and I'm not about to admit that to her for a million different reasons.

"I think I got it," I say, snapping my fingers. "After Catalina joins the pack, you guys throw her a big welcome party, but there's a thunderstorm and the power goes out. Raul goes out to check the fuse box, but it doesn't work and he realizes someone cut the power right before the Grayridge pack attacks."

Lenore blinks at me. "You don't have anything a bit lower stakes than that? Preferably *before* our enemies attack?"

"Uh..." I rack my brain, trying to remember. It's mostly just Catalina thinking about Raul's abs. Or Raul's dick. Or how much hotter she looks in the pack's ceremonial garbs than the others do.

She thinks a lot about cheese, too, and that, I can respect.

"Oh, yeah!" I cry. "Curtis is gonna get into a four-wheeler accident and break his right leg. But I guess that's not really low stakes, is it?"

"No, it's just Curtis," she says with a shrug. "That works."

"Er... sure. I'll try to think of some other shit, too," I say, really wishing I hadn't just skimmed a bunch of shit to get to the sex. Now that I have firsthand experience to go off, it wasn't even that well written. "Thanks."

"For what?" she asks.

"For listening," I say with a shrug. "And not immediately judging."

"Oh, I'm definitely judging you," she informs me. "Just not for that."

I laugh. "Fair enough."

CHAPTER 10

RAUL



I've only been out with Curtis for half the morning, and already feel like giving up and turning back. To be fair, that's only partially my brother's fault. It mostly has to do with the fact that both my animal and human brains are fixated on the omega back home.

It isn't in an alpha's nature to leave his mate unguarded and alone at home, especially this close to a heat. Of course, Brad isn't actually in heat, and he isn't unguarded. Not by a long shot, but that doesn't mean it's any easier to talk my instincts down. Nothing about the way I feel for Brad is rational. Nothing at all.

On the other hand, I get the feeling Brad is enjoying his vacation from me. He clearly doesn't like to be hovered over, and while I'm trying to be on good behavior, it's more of a test of will than I expected.

You okay, man? Curtis asks, glancing over at me. I can tell from the look on his wolf's face I've been spacing out again, but we're just running through the woods on the outer perimeter of the territory, so it isn't like I need to laser focus at the moment.

In fact, there has been no sign of any additional trespassers whatsoever. All the old trails have long since grown cold, and I have a feeling once we finish tracking them, they will have more than covered their tracks before they go back to their home base.

Of course, I already know where they came from. Grayridge and Blue Fang. There's no doubt about that, and I have a hostage to corroborate my side of

things, but I'll need more in order to justify invading the Blue Fang pack, even if I am the regional alpha.

And invading is exactly what I plan on doing, sooner or later. We've been waiting for Constantine to make the next move for too damn long. Especially considering I know what that move is going to be. The same as it always is with the Grayridge pack. Bloodshed.

I have no issue with shedding the blood of the pack that killed so many of my own packmates. So many family members, friends, and brothers and sisters in arms. But I can't justify escalating the war beyond defensive measures for my own personal vengeance. For my mate, however...

There are enough pacts within our pack system that have lingering ties to Blue Fang to make things complicated. And the fact that I've claimed a mate from Blue Fang who was betrothed to another pack is not going to sit easy with them.

Not that I particularly give a damn what they think about anything, but even I have to give an account for my actions. Especially when I might be leading my fellow packmates to their deaths as a result of them.

I'm fine, I say, pushing my paws to hit the earth faster.

It's rare that I go out in my four-legged form rather than as a bipedal alpha beast, but I can shift easily enough if I need to, and attracting attention right now is not my goal. Especially not as we cross over into outsider territory, and there's a decent chance of running into humans. They get enough of a scare encountering the four-legged kind of my species in the woods.

Really? Curtis challenges, struggling to keep up with me. I slow down a bit, since he's smaller even when I'm in this form. Most people are, including other alphas. That's not why I have the role I have, but it certainly makes it easier to garner respect.

The only wolf I've ever come face-to-face with who's a match for me in my other form is Constantine, and in that sense, I can understand Brad better than he probably thinks. I know what it's like to be the strong one. I know what it's like to feel invincible, until you come up against someone who

reminds you that you're not. Who reminds you of what your exact limitations are.

I promised myself that the next time I encountered Constantine, I would have closed that gap between us, if not exceeded it. And that's a promise I intend to keep.

Yes, really, I answer. Why are you harassing me?

I'm not harassing you, he scoffs. But you've had your head in the clouds all day. Let me guess, thinking about your mate?

What of it? I challenge. Is that so strange?

I never said it was, he protests. I'm just saying, you've been preoccupied lately.

Of course I have, I snap. He's my mate. We'll see how it is when the time comes for you.

He just growls in acknowledgment, and falls into step beside me in silence, which is much preferable. It doesn't last, though.

You know, I backed you up at the table, but the others are right. Him belonging to Blue Fang is going to cause some problems, he says. I shoot him a withering glare, and his ears flatten against his head. I'm just saying, man.

Maybe you should say less, I answer. And yes, I have considered it. I'm not an idiot, I know what's in store, but like you said before, what would you have me do? Hand my destiny over to our enemies?

Of course not, he says. Blue Fang isn't exactly our enemy, though. At least, not yet.

I blow a puff of air through my nostrils. *Not in any official capacity, perhaps. But if they're allying themselves with Grayridge, then that was going to change any minute anyway.*

Yeah, I guess so, he agrees. But it's not like they're going to admit to that.

He's right about that, too, unfortunately. My actions in taking Brad as my mate are justified in the eyes of the other packs only if Blue Fang allied with our enemies, but Blue Fang's alpha could very well claim that I kidnapped Brad and that's why they were forced to form an alliance in the first place. It's exactly the kind of bullshit politics I would expect from Blue Fang, and Grayridge isn't above exploiting such things, either.

No, I agree. But that's why we're going to find more proof of the fact that they trespassed on our territory.

How? Curtis demands. They're already long gone by now, and we already have a hostage.

I bristle in response to his question. He's right again, of course. We do have a hostage. And if I have to use him, I will, but I also know what Brad's reaction is going to be if I try to trade his friend as a hostage, which is exactly what any attempt at negotiation is going to result in. And if they think there's even a chance Trent divulged information, they're going to kill him as soon as they get him back.

Fewer questions, more hunting trespassers, I say gruffly.

I can tell Curtis wants to argue, and in his defense, "because I said so" isn't my usual line of reasoning. When it comes to protecting my mate, though, I'm willing to break all the rules.

Including my own.

CHAPTER 11

BRAD



"Nothing like getting your hands dirty," I mutter under my breath as I kneel in the garden, my fingers sinking into the rich soil. The sun beats down on me, sweat trickling down my back and soaking into the waistband of my jeans. I'd rather be working out, but considering this place is full of shifters who get their energy out in their wolf forms, the gym is shit, and I need something to keep myself busy while I wait for news on Raul's dangerous mission.

He's been gone for two days, and when he gets back, I'm making him buy one of those overpriced bricks that pass for cellphones in this decade. I don't care if he has to strap it to a dog collar.

I can't believe I'm fucking worried about him. A guy I'm still planning on getting the hell away from the first chance I get. But that doesn't stop me from worrying, and while I want to blame it on omega hormones or whatever, I'm definitely not still in heat and I'm not sure that's a lot better for my ego than the alternative, anyway.

At least the garden gets to benefit from my neurosis.

"Who knew I had a green thumb?" I chuckle to myself, trying to imagine what my buddies back home would say if they saw me now.

As I rake my fingers through the soil, I can't help but let my thoughts drift back to Raul. The guy who came into my life and smashed apart everything I thought I knew about my sexuality like a fucking wrecking ball.

I'm supposed to be focused on gardening, not daydreaming about the very person I'm trying to take my mind off of. But it's hard not to think about him, especially with his scent clinging to my clothes—or rather, the T-shirt I stole from his room because I guess I'm that fucking pathetic now.

Okay, Brad, get a grip, I tell myself, forcing my attention back to the task at hand. I told Hannah I'd help, and since she looked like she was going to pass out when she came out yesterday and saw the state of chaos I'd created, the pressure is definitely on.

I plunge my hands back into the dirt, relishing the feeling of soil between my fingers. The physical labor is cathartic, and I can feel the tension in my muscles easing. It works for a little while, but eventually, my thoughts veer back toward Raul, just like that damn car drifting off the road that started all this shit. I shake my head, as if I could physically dislodge his memory from my brain.

Eventually, I give up trying and that helps a little. I lose track of time as I work, digging hole after hole with a kind of manic energy that surprises even me. It's only when I step back to admire my handiwork that I realize I've gone a bit overboard.

"Damn," I say, surveying the newly dug flower bed that stretches across half the garden. "Didn't think I'd get this carried away."

"Whose grave are you digging?"

As I wipe sweat from my brow, I turn around to find Mina watching me from the edge of the garden, her eyes roaming over the massive flower bed.

"You're a creepy little thing, aren't you?" I retort, trying not to let her unsettling presence get under my skin.

"Maybe," she says, her smirk widening. "But seriously, what's with all the digging? Are you starting a cemetery or something?"

"Ha, very funny," I reply, rolling my eyes. "I told Hannah I'd help spruce up the garden. And maybe I got a little carried away, but who doesn't like flowers?"

"I love flowers," Mina says in a matter-of-fact tone. "Especially Nightshade. But Hannah won't let me plant any."

"Yeah, can't imagine why she wouldn't want you having access to poison," I say flatly.

As Mina settles herself on a nearby bench, I return to my work, trying to ignore her presence. But it's hard not to be aware of her watching me, her laughter bubbling up whenever I make a particularly clumsy move.

"Hey," I call over my shoulder. "At least I'm trying, alright?"

"That's sad," she says without missing a beat.

I roll my eyes. But despite her teasing, I can't say I mind the company.

"Hey, are you sure you did that right?" Mina calls out to me, pointing at the rose bush I just planted. "I'm pretty sure the roots are supposed to go in the ground."

I fold my arms, giving her a half-hearted glare. "Alright, Princess. Why don't you come over here and show me how it's done then?"

"I am *not* a princess." Mina hops off the bench and saunters over to me, an impish gleam in her eyes. "You asked for it," she warns.

Before I know it, Mina is elbow-deep in soil, digging up my hard work. Even as a human, I can see the puppy nature coming out. To my chagrin, she does seem to know what she's doing. I watch as she skillfully manipulates the dirt and roots, her small hands surprisingly deft.

"See?" she says pointedly, brushing her hands together once she's finished. "Easy peasy."

"Color me impressed," I admit. "Where'd you learn all this?"

"From Hannah," Mina replies, a hint of pride in her voice. "She taught me everything I know. Our mom was a gardener."

I wince internally. I feel for her, losing her parents at such a young age. I doubt she even remembers them much, if at all. "Hannah takes care of you, huh?"

“And Raul,” she answers. “He teaches me stuff Hannah’s too boring to let me do.”

“Oh, yeah?” I ask, leaning on my shovel. “Like what?”

“Like how to fight,” she says enthusiastically, flexing a nonexistent bicep. “And how to gouge out someone’s eyes!”

I can’t help but laugh. “Yeah, I guess that’s a pretty important life skill for a wolf pup. But you shouldn’t dismiss Hannah’s lessons. You’re a pretty good gardener, too.”

She seems surprised by the compliment and digs her hands back into the dirt, plucking out a worm and tossing it aside. “I guess you’re not completely useless. For a human.”

“Thanks,” I snort, wiping the sweat from my brow as we continue to work side by side.

Truth be told, Mina’s presence is a welcome distraction from my worry about Raul, which is compounded on top of my worry about getting back to Devon and the rest of my life back home. And as we laugh and tease each other, planting flowers under the warm sun, I can’t help but feel a sense of camaraderie and belonging that I haven’t felt in a long time.

She hasn’t said anything for a long while when I sense her stillness beside me and look over to find her watching me closely. “You smell like fear.”

“Fear?” I scoff. “I ain’t scared of shit.”

“You’re scared he’s not going to come back, aren’t you?” she presses. “You like him.”

I clench my jaw, focusing on the roots of the bush I’ve been covering. I’m a lot better at the whole digging and destruction thing than the delicate act of planting, but with Mina’s guidance, I’ve been able to make some decent progress. I’m pretty sure Hannah’s not going to let Mina poison me in retaliation for ruining her garden, at least.

“That’s probably going too far,” I mutter. “He’s... fine.”

She gives me a look that says she's not buying my bullshit. Sharp customer, this kid. "You don't need to worry," she says matter of factly. "He won't die. Raul is the strongest alpha there is."

It's hard not to admire her confidence. And she's probably not too far off, but given what little I know about Constantine, it's hard to feel so sure of it myself. Especially when it feels like a part of me is out there.

God, what's wrong with me?

"Yeah," I say, because the last thing I want to do is freak her out when she's already lost so many people. No matter how brave of a front she puts up, she's still a little girl who's known more grief and loss than most adults do in a lifetime. "I'm sure he is. You're pretty mature for your age, you know that? And only half as evil as I originally thought."

Her nose wrinkles, like I've just insulted her horribly. "Don't say that. I have a reputation to keep."

I laugh. "Your secret's safe with me," I promise as we continue our gardening tasks until the sun dips low in the sky, casting long shadows across our transformed garden. Mina and I stand back to admire our handiwork, both of us covered in dirt and sweat but grinning from ear to ear.

"Look at this," I say, gesturing proudly at the rows of newly-planted flowers. "We did this. We're like...garden wizards or something."

"More like garden gnomes," Mina giggles, wiping a smudge of dirt from her cheek.

"Mina?" Hannah calls from the door leading out into the garden.

"Over here!" Mina cries, jumping up and down and waving her arms in an attempt to be seen over the hedges.

Hannah eventually finds us through the labyrinth of plants and her eyes grow wide as she takes on the fresh landscaping behind us. I hold my breath in anticipation, because I definitely took some creative liberties with the whole help thing.

“Oh, my,” she breathes.

“What do you think?” Mina asks, bounding over to her older sister, grabbing Hannah’s arm. “If you hate it, Brad did it.”

“Traitor,” I mutter under my breath.

“It’s incredible,” Hannah says, her eyes scanning the lines of rose bushes we just planted. “I haven’t seen the garden look like this in years. How did you even...?”

“I helped!” Mina cries.

I raise an eyebrow. “Fairweather little imp.”

“You look like you’ve been in the mines,” Hannah says, combing a dirt clump out of the girl’s hair. “Go on upstairs and get cleaned up before dinner.”

“Fine,” Mina grumbles, trudging down the garden path.

“Sorry. I’m a bad influence,” I say, raking a hand through my hair.

Hannah gives me a knowing smile. “I don’t know about that. I haven’t seen her in such a good mood in a long time. Usually, when Raul is gone, she just sulks in her room.

“Huh,” I say. “I guess she worries more than she lets on.”

“He means a lot to her,” Hannah says quietly. “To all of us. He’s always taken care of us. Even when our parents were alive, he was more like another father than a big brother, always sacrificing his own needs to make sure everyone else’s were met.” A glimmer comes into her eyes as she looks up at me. “That’s why I’m so glad you’re here.”

“Me?” I ask warily. “Why?”

“Because for the first time in my life, I’m watching my brother follow his heart rather than just his head,” she answers. “Raul has been an adult ever since we were kids, but when he looks at you, I see a lovesick teenager.”

“Love?” I give an awkward laugh. “We barely know each other.”

“Maybe,” she concedes. “But you are mates. That has a way of rendering things like time irrelevant.”

I stifle a groan. Like I need to feel any shittier about the fact that I’m going to be leaving eventually, no matter what any of them thinks.

The problem is, I don’t think guilt is even going to be the biggest obstacle.

CHAPTER 12

RAUL



The wind ruffles my fur as I shift back into my human form and trudge through the dense thicket surrounding the Stone Hollow pack mansion. It's been days since I've been away on this wild goose chase, trying to find proof of intruders meddling with our territory. My muscles ache and my mind is weary from the lack of sleep and constant vigilance. As much as it pains me to admit, I've come up empty-handed.

I sent Curtis back a bit early, while I made one final loop around the inner perimeter of the pack to make sure nothing followed us back, so he could let the others know we were alright at least. As much as I'm desperate to return to my mate, coming back empty handed fills me with shame.

"Damn it," I mutter under my breath, brushing a wayward lock of hair from my face. I walk out back to the garden to grab a change of clothes I keep stashed in the hollow of one of the stone statues before going in, and I'm struck by the changes.

When the hell did Hannah manage all this?

New flowers peek out from beneath lush foliage, and the layout appears to have been rearranged. The vibrant colors and fragrances assault my senses. The sight of the garden soothes my exhaustion, and I feel a sense of homecoming deep within my chest. I walk through the resplendent garden, taking in the intricate pattern of blossoms and greenery that has been so lovingly arranged.

"Raul!" a familiar voice calls out, and I turn to find Matthew and a few of our other packmates rushing toward me, relief flooding their features. Lenore hangs back even though she would usually be the first to greet me, and I can only assume that's a result of the recent tension between us, but I'm more struck by the fact that Brad isn't among them. "You're back! We were starting to worry."

"Sorry to keep you all waiting," I reply, forcing a smile. "No need to worry, though. I'm a tough wolf to take down."

"Curtis said you guys didn't have any luck," Matthew says, frowning worriedly.

"Unfortunately, no," I admit, my smile faltering at the edges. "But we'll figure something out. We always do."

"Of course," he says, nodding resolutely.

Before I can say anything else, I'm tackled from my right side by Mina, who growls fiercely, "Gotcha!"

I laugh, lifting the girl into my arms. "Hello, little goblin," I tease, ruffling her hair. "Were you good while I was away?"

"No," she says unapologetically.

"She was on surprisingly good behavior," Hannah says, her arms folded as she approaches us with a smile.

Mina rolls her eyes. "Tattletale."

As my family and the other pack members who happen to be gathered at the mansion for my return surround me, wanting to know the details of my uneventful mission, I find myself scanning for any sign of Brad and coming up empty.

"He's inside," Hannah says in a knowing tone, once we have a second alone. "You should go see him."

"I'm not sure he wants to be found," I admit. I can't help but be a little hurt he didn't come to greet me, even though I'm not sure why I expected that.

Hannah gives me a look. “Oh, come on. I thought you’d be different when it was time for you to take a mate, but you’re just as clueless as every other alpha, aren’t you?”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“He’s been rearranging the furniture all day, and that’s after he ran out of things to do, tearing up my garden and putting it back together,” she says flatly. “He’s been worried sick. He just doesn’t know how to show it, that’s all.”

I take a moment to process her words, knowing she’d have no reason to lie. And if she’s right, maybe there’s a different reason for his icy reception. Why do I get the feeling I’m in the dog house?”

“Go on,” Hannah urges, giving me a nudge. “Before he decides to do any more permanent renovations.”

"Thanks," I say with a smile, heading inside.

So Brad is the one who’s responsible for the garden renovations. I shouldn’t be surprised. It’s as vibrant and full of color as he is now.

It doesn’t take long for me to find him. Sure enough, he’s in the living room with an armchair hoisted up in his arms like it’s nothing, and I resist the impulse to rush and take it from him since one frosty look from those fiery green eyes and I know my earlier assumption is right.

He’s not apathetic. He’s *pissed*.

“Brad, I—”

Before I can get the rest of my thought out, he drops the chair with a heavy thud and leaves through the room’s other entrance.

Well, this homecoming is not off to a great start.

I’ve barely turned around before Kyle comes barreling into the room. “Hey, you’re back!” he cries. “Just in time. Hannah wouldn’t let us eat until you were here.”

“Touching,” I say dryly, following him into the dining room. Brad is already seated next to my spot at the head of the table, so I sit down next to him, relieved he’s at least willing to put up that much of an effort at civility.

I’ll talk to him after dinner, but I know better than to push him when he’s like this. Even if I have no idea what I did to make him so angry, but something tells me that’s going to be a pattern. At least he’s a typical omega in the one regard, because half the time, I have no fucking idea what he’s thinking, or what I’ve done wrong.

Dinner goes as usual, with Curtis embellishing his tales of our mission, and I can’t even be bothered to call him on it like I usually would. I don’t even have much of an appetite. Not for food, at any rate.

Halfway through dinner, Brad’s sharp green eyes finally meet mine for only a second before flicking away again. The tension between us is palpable, a charged current that threatens to spark at any second.

I’m on autopilot throughout the rest of dinner, and when Brad takes the first opportunity to leave, I follow him without hesitation. The others seem to know well enough not to follow. To my relief, Brad doesn’t try to stop me from following him into the study, which I know he’s not just going to because he feels like reading, considering his “no more books again ever” policy.

What I’m not expecting is that once we’re inside, he slams the door shut, whirls around, and pins me against the wall, hands gripping my biceps hard enough for his nails to dig into my skin. His face is flushed, a mixture of anger and something else I can’t quite place.

“Where the hell have you been?” he demands, voice strained. “You were gone for days, Raul! Days! No word, no nothing!”

I stare into his eyes, which are blazing with intensity, and try to find the right words to explain myself. “I was searching for answers, Brad. I needed to find proof of the intruders, but... I couldn’t.”

“Why?” he demands. “They were here, what does it fucking matter if you have proof? Besides, isn’t Trent proof enough?”

I fall silent and a look of confusion crosses his face.

“What is it?” he demands.

“I need proof in order to justify further aggression to the Council,” I answer carefully. “I’m trying not to use him.”

“Why?” Brad demands.

When I don’t answer, his confusion turns to recognition. “For me...?”

“I don’t trust him,” I mutter. “But he’s clearly important to you. I don’t want any harm to come to him for that reason alone.”

Brad says nothing and his expression doesn’t shift for a long while. When it finally does, there’s a hint of a smirk on his lips. “You sound jealous.”

“Of course I’m jealous,” I say, seeing no point in denying it. “You’re my mate. And he’s clearly in love with you.”

He rolls his eyes. “You’re a fucking idiot,” he says under his breath in an unmistakable tone of affection. “It doesn’t matter what he feels for me. He’s a friend, and I don’t see him that way.”

“And me?” I venture, even though that’s the one kind of risk that scares me. The kind that involves him. “How do you see me?”

He blows a puff of air through his nostrils. “You’re a pain in the ass.”

“Literally or figuratively?”

Irritation flashes in his eyes, but before he can retort, I take him into my arms and kiss him, figuring I might as well try while I’m ahead. To my surprise, he doesn’t push me away. He grips my shirt like he’s about to, but instead, his fists ball up in it and his lips part to receive my tongue like he can’t resist this thing between us anymore than I can.

The only difference is, I’m pretty sure he’s the only one that tries to.

He breaks away suddenly, as if he just came back to his senses.

“Wh-what the hell was that?” Brad stammers, eyes wide with shock.

“Consider it an apology,” I say nonchalantly.

"An apology? You think a kiss makes up for you disappearing?" He scoffs, trying to recover his composure. "I should lay your ass out for it if anything."

"But you didn't," I remind him.

Brad seems to consider this for a moment, his anger slowly dissipating. "Consider yourself lucky that I'm relieved you're back in one piece."

"Very lucky," I assure him. "Lucky enough to kiss you again?"

His eyes narrow slightly, but there's no bite behind the glare and he doesn't move away. "Don't push it."

I can't help but smile. "I'm sorry I worried you."

He just grunts in acknowledgment, his arms folded. The wall is back up again, but there was a moment of vulnerability I won't be forgetting anytime soon. Those little moments are what gives me hope that one day, my mate might actually accept me into his heart the way mine has already claimed him.

I feel an unexpected wave of exhaustion wash over me, "I think I could use some rest. It's been a long few days."

"Yeah. Sure." Brad nods. "Good night."

"Actually, I was thinking... maybe you could join me?"

Brad raises an eyebrow, clearly taken aback by my suggestion. "You want me to... sleep with you?"

"Doesn't have to be like that," I say with a shrug. "I just thought... I don't know, maybe we could both use some company."

Brad hesitates, but he's not telling me to fuck off like I expected. I guess he really did miss me. "Yeah, I guess."

I'm surprised by his response, but I nod and walk upstairs with him before he can change his mind.

He pauses halfway up the stairs, giving me time to admire his luscious ass. "But if you try anything funny, I won't hesitate to kick your ass."

"Wouldn't dream of it," I assure him with a grin.

"Good."

As we reach the bedroom door, I can't help but feel a strange mix of relief and excitement. Somehow, his presence has managed to chase away the disappointment of coming home empty handed.

Any day I get to come home to him is something to be grateful for.

A victory to be celebrated.

CHAPTER 13

BRAD



I realize I'm heading for Raul's room without even thinking about it, and considering I've fallen asleep in his bed every night since he's been gone, it's kind of become a habit. If he thinks anything of it, he doesn't say anything, at least.

As I enter the room, the scent of Raul's cologne fills my nostrils, and I can't help but feel a pang of longing. It takes me a minute to realize it's not his cologne. Wolves' noses are way too sensitive for that shit. That alluring scent is all him.

And my body seems primed to respond to it.

Fucking omega bullshit.

It's only been days since he left, but it feels like weeks. I walk over to the edge of the bed and step out of my jeans, stripping down to my boxers and T-shirt. I usually sleep commando but I'm not about to go there when I already have a hard time keeping my cock on the straight and narrow when he's around.

He gets undressed down to his boxers, too, and I look up just in time to see him peeling his shirt over his head.

My breath catches in my throat as I take in the sight of his toned chest and abs, even more pronounced than I remembered. He's got a smattering of hair sprinkled across his chest that trails down to his navel before disappearing beneath the waistband of his boxers.

I can feel my cheeks flush with heat, and I quickly avert my gaze, not wanting him to catch me staring. But then he smirks at me knowingly and it only serves to make it worse.

I can't help but admire him in spite of myself, though. His eyes are bright and intense, and they seem to have the power to penetrate right through me. His lips are full and inviting, begging for attention.

He looks so hot that it almost hurts to look at him, but I can't tear my gaze away either. I'm captivated by every inch of him and every second that passes, I feel like my straight card is in even greater danger of being pried out of my grasp.

Who am I kidding? That shit got revoked when he was buried knot-deep in my ass.

As I get into bed, I feel the weight of Raul climbing in on the other side. He reaches for the pillow and pauses, bringing it to his face. "This smells like you."

My spine goes rigid. Busted.

"I was... doing laundry," I say through my teeth.

"Oh, really?" he challenges. "You weren't sleeping in here while I was gone?"

"No," I snap, unable to meet his eyes because then I'm sure he's gonna know I'm lying. Not like it's anything other than glaringly obvious.

He gives a knowing chuckle and reaches to pull his arm around my waist, drawing our bodies closer beneath the covers. "I missed you, too."

"Don't get ahead of yourself," I say, planting my hands on his chest to push him back. Big mistake, because my fingers have a mind of their own, digging into his firm biceps.

My cock twitches, making my boxers almost unbearably tight. Fucking traitor.

Raul looks down between us, heat flaring in those piercing eyes. "Looks like part of you did."

"Oh, fuck off," I mutter, looking away.

He leans in, his dark hair falling in a canopy over my shoulder. "Usually, I enjoy the opportunity to get away for a while and clear my head, but while I was out there, all I could think of was coming home to you."

I clench my jaw, keeping my head turned as his stubble grazes my cheek, and he fucking nuzzles me, like some kind of weirdo. "Why do you have to say shit like that?"

"Like what?" he challenges, his lips brushing ever so slightly against my throat as he speaks. "The truth?"

A shiver runs down my spine.

"You don't have to say things like that," I mumble, trying and failing to sound unaffected.

He chuckles softly and pulls back, his gaze meeting mine. "Why not? You're the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, Brad. And you deserve to hear it."

"I am not beautiful," I growl, my irritation momentarily outweighing my horniness, and the stupid, warm, tingling feeling that washes over me whenever he touches me for some fucking reason.

"Handsome, then," he offers.

I grunt. Marginally better. He's kissing my neck now, his tongue sweeping along my jugular, and that completely unwinds me, like my body's a ball of string.

He works his way down over my chest, paying attention to my nipples. His mouth is hot and wet and I'm melting into the bed as his tongue circles around them. I gasp, clutching at the sheets as he sucks and bites gently, sending sparks of pleasure radiating throughout my body.

My hips buck up in response and Raul's hand slides down my side, drawing a line of fire in its wake. He moves lower, pushing the fabric of my boxers out of the way so that he can slip his fingers between my legs.

I moan loudly, arching into him as he grips my cock and strokes me with expert precision. My breath comes in short gasps now as I'm pushed higher and higher until finally it feels like I'm going to burst apart from sheer pleasure.

Raul pulls away just before I reach that point, leaving me dangling on the edge of coming as he moves back up to kiss me deeply on the lips. His touch is tender but passionate, and I can feel my heart thumping in my chest as he slides his tongue into my mouth.

He shifts his weight so that he's lying on top of me now, our bodies pressed together from chest to thighs. His hand moves down to cup my ass and I gasp in pleasure as he kneads it gently. He kisses me again, this time pushing his hips forward so that I can feel the hard length of him pressing against me through his boxers.

I moan into his mouth, wanting more than anything for him to be inside of me. He seems to read my mind because before I know it, he's slipping his hand past the waistband of my boxers and working a finger into my ass which is slick and ready for him.

I pause for a moment, completely overwhelmed by the sensations. Being an omega is awkward as fuck, but it's hard to feel that way when he looks at me and touches me like I'm the hottest thing he's ever seen.

I'm not used to being... wanted. Or pursued. I'm usually the one doing the chasing, and being flipped over onto the other side of the equation is unnerving, to say the least.

Just... not as much as it should be.

"Are you alright?" Raul asks, pausing with his finger halfway inside me.

I nod, even though I should use this as an excuse to put the brakes on. The truth is, I want to slam my foot on the gas and go full throttle. Even though I'm not in heat this time and I have no excuse.

"Yeah," I say, my voice sounding more breathy than I want. "I guess we could uh... fuck around a little."

"Fuck around, huh?" Raul asks, a glint in his eyes as he works his finger a little deeper into me. When he hits that spot, my body folds into him and a pleased groan escapes me.

"Damn it," I grit out, digging my nails into his shoulders and trying not to squirm. "Why does that happen?"

"I'm stroking your prostate," he says, as if that should explain it. Then, he adds the damning, "And you're an omega."

"Don't remind me," I mutter.

"Is it really so bad?" he challenges, pressing another kiss to the side of my neck as he continues to stroke me. "You like it, don't you?"

"That's the problem," I gasp, burying my face in his neck because I don't want him to see the look on it right now. When he touches me, it's like everything just... stops. I hyperfocus on the heat of his skin, and the friction of his finger--now two of them--moving inside me.

"There's nothing wrong with being an omega, Brad," he tells me, kissing me again, the stubble of his cheek rubbing against mine as he continues to stroke me, his other arm wrapped around my waist and pulling me close against his body. "It doesn't make you weak, or less than. Far from it."

When he says it with that much sincerity in his voice, I actually want to believe him. And I think it scares me that a part of me does. But I'm too breathless to respond, and when I push my thigh between his legs, rubbing my knee against his crotch, his breath hitches, too.

Some things are better said without words.

"Brad," he growls, his voice taking on a dark, urgent quality. He looks down at me, his eyes blazing as he pushes his fingers even deeper inside. "I want to see that face when you come."

I try to speak but all that comes out is a strangled gasp as he pushes his fingers into my prostate and just like that, as if my body takes marching orders from him, a stream of hot cum pulses from my cock, soaking through my boxers.

"Fuck!" I groan, a shudder running through my entire body as I grind into him, riding out the waves of orgasm. By the time I collapse, my heart hammering in my ears, he pulls his fingers out and tugs my boxers off.

I barely have time to catch my breath before he finishes undressing himself.

Raul positions himself between my legs, his hard cock pressing against my inner thigh as he slides his hands up my sides. His lips brush against mine, tasting of the desire that's been building since the moment we met.

He moves his hips forward until I can feel him pressed against me, and then he pulls back just enough to drive me wild. Then he thrusts forward again, pushing himself inside until I can feel the tip go in.

My breath catches in my throat as he begins to move, each stroke more intense than the last. I moan as the pleasure becomes a dull ache, but it's not quite as bad as it was the first time, even though I'm not in heat. At least not until he starts pushing into me past the tip.

As slick as I am, it's still a challenge to take him. And then I realize it is worse than when I was in heat, after all. The dull ache spreads and becomes sharp in places, but Raul is going slow. Being gentle. As much as that should piss me off, I find myself grateful for it.

I arch my back and wrap my legs around him as his body rocks into mine. Every nerve in my body is alive with pleasure as Raul brings me closer and closer to the edge, our bodies in perfect harmony as we move together. He's barely halfway in, which I know only when I reach between us in an attempt to spread more of my own lubricant around my hole to make it a little easier.

"Do you have to have a whole tree trunk for a cock?" I grumble against his lips.

He chuckles and thrusts forward, and I groan as I feel him drive further into me. "Does it feel good?"

"It feels like you're gonna split me open," I breathe, my body beginning to shake. "I don't know if I can take it all."

"You did before," he reminds me.

"Yeah, when I was in heat," I counter.

"Just try to relax," he coaxes, pulling back to kneel between my legs, pulling out just enough to keep the tip of his cock in me. I wince even from that, until he starts prodding me with his fingers, massaging the tight ring of muscle stretched around his cock.

"Raul," I gasp, my eyes falling shut both because it feels good, and because I can't stand for him to see me this way. I've never been this way around anyone but him. Vulnerable. Needy... The fact that he seems to need me as much as I need him right now makes it a little easier to handle, but not entirely. "That feels..."

"Good?" he offers.

I nod, because I don't trust myself to speak.

"We can go slow," he assures me, continuing to massage me until my body relaxes enough that his cock slips in another inch without it causing me any pain. "You're so wet."

Normally, I'd scold him for the reminder, but I can tell from the strain in his voice it turns him on. I'm not sure what to make of that, either, but fuck, what he's doing feels too good to care. And now that my body has had a little time to adjust, I want him inside me even more.

"More," I pant, my fists digging into the sheets. "I need... more of you."

Heat flares in Raul's gaze as he stops what he's doing and moves back to lay on top of me, his cock slowly delving deeper into my ass. This time, I'm ready for him, and the dull ache itself is pleasurable alongside the dizzying, clenching bliss. "You're so tight," he breathes, his voice still strained as his hands rest on the bed on either side of me. His long hair falls down, teasing my nipples as he bends to kiss my throat.

My body clenches around his thick cock as if in response. Really getting sick of it taking orders from him, not me. "You're just huge," I remind him, earning a smirk. He clearly likes being reminded.

"You're pretty big yourself," he says, reaching between us to grip my cock, giving it a long stroke.

I moan, wrapping my arms around him as I grind into his touch, which has the dual effect of driving him deeper into me.

He's angled to hit my prostate just the right way, and I come unglued once again. I pull back to take his face in my hands, crushing my lips against his. It's somehow even more intimate than letting him fuck me, but at the moment, I don't care. I just want him--all of him--and after days of him being gone, there's a furious greed that's built up inside me. One that won't be satisfied by anything less.

Raul returns the kiss just as hungrily, a low growl rumbling through his chest. He freezes, and that's how I know it was involuntary. "Sorry," he mumbles against my lips.

"Don't be," I say, kissing him harder, dragging his bottom lip through my teeth. "That shit's fucking hot."

"It is, is it?" he asks, a hint of amusement and curiosity in his eyes as he looks down at me.

I feel my face grow warm, but my entire body is already so flushed I doubt he could even tell. The truth is, I liked the smutty parts of that damn book a hell of a lot more than I want to admit. Enough to see why they were dog eared in those spots.

Actually being on the receiving end of Raul's attention, though, is... something else. Getting to feel and touch and taste him... I'm not sure how I'm ever going to go back to the random hookups after knowing sex can be like this. Raw and emotional and rough and tender and meaningful, all at the same time.

Even the painful, tear-inducing parts, because it's all him.

I'm falling too fast for him, but I don't think I can stop it now.

"I..." Raul starts, his hand stilling on my cock as he looks down at me.

I kiss him again, hard, trying to shove the feelings away. "Just shut up and fuck me," I rasp, earning a soft groan from him.

"If that's what you want."

He starts to move then, pulling back just enough to slide in and out of me in long, slow strokes. My fingers dig into the hard muscles of his back as I wrap my legs around his hips, wanting to draw him in even deeper.

"Oh fuck," I moan, arching my back as the pleasure starts building again.

"That's the idea," he says, his voice tight.

He speeds up his pace, hips snapping against mine as he pumps into me. The slap of skin against skin echoes around us, and I'm already feeling my orgasm building, even after coming not that long ago.

"Harder," I say, somehow hoping I can purge all this fluffy feelings bullshit from my mind if he just fucks me hard enough.

Raul gives me what I want, slamming into me with enough force to drive the air from my lungs with each thrust. It's fucking amazing, and I can't stop the breathy moans that are coming from me now.

His hand grips my shoulder for leverage as he fucks me even harder, and it's only a few more strokes before I feel his knot pushing against my hole, which is already stretched way too fucking far.

"Do you want me to...?"

I can tell it takes great restraint for him to hold back from knotting me long enough to ask. Unfortunately, I'm not in a state of mind to appreciate self-control right now when I have none myself.

"Just do it," I grit out, driving my hips into him even though that's definitely writing a check my ass can't cash.

A deep growl tears from his throat as he thrusts again in response and buries his knot deep inside me.

I let out a strangled scream, completely forgetting we live in a house with other people, but it's not like it's voluntary, anyway. The pain becomes unbearable for a moment, but then the pleasure of his knot rubbing against my prostate, pushing harder into it than anything ever has, wipes the memory from my brain and leaves me feeling nothing but blinding, impossible pleasure.

"Oh fuck, Raul," I moan, tightening my legs around his hips as I orgasm again, spurts of hot cum landing on my stomach.

At that point, Raul's control snaps, and he's driving into me like a wild animal, his fingers digging into my hips as he slams into me, groaning as his knot keeps driving into me so hard that my vision goes blurry.

I didn't even think it was possible, but I come again as his orgasm stretches out, filling me with more cum than I thought I could possibly hold. It feels like my stomach is a bit swollen from his seed and his knot, but I try not to think about that too hard as I ride out the final waves of my orgasm beneath him, our tongues tangled in a violent duel.

He finally breaks the kiss while I'm still panting and drenched in sweat. But of course he looks like some kind of werewolf god, staring down at me with his long, perfect hair falling in dark waves.

"God, you're beautiful," he says, brushing his fingers against my cheek. I can tell something is troubling him, though, now that the pleasure is ebbing away.

"Stop thinking so hard," I say, placing my hand on his cheek and holding his face in place. "You're making it weird."

He gives me a knowing smile. "Sorry," he says, pressing a kiss to my lips. "Guess we're stuck together again."

"Yeah," I sigh, burying my face in his neck as he shifts us into a more comfortable position. "I guess we are."

And I can't even pretend to mind.

CHAPTER 14

BRAD



I wake up to the faintest hint of sunlight creeping into the room, and for a moment, I'm disoriented. The scent of pine and musk hangs in the air, reminding me that I'm in Raul's bed, sans Raul. As my eyes adjust to the dim light, I spot a folded note on the pillow beside me. Sitting up, I unfold the paper and read the neat scrawl.

Brad, had to handle some pack business. I'll be back soon. Tell Lenore if you need me. -R

I snort at his reassurances, as if I'm some damsel in distress. I roll out of bed with an exaggerated sigh and stretch, feeling the satisfying pull of muscles. I shower off the traces of the night before and get dressed. Then, I make my way to the dining area in search of breakfast and—more importantly—coffee.

The smell of bacon and scrambled eggs greets me as I enter the room. The sight of Matthew standing by the kitchen counter, smirking at me, is less welcoming.

"Good morning, sunshine," he teases, flipping a piece of bacon in the pan. "You smell like Raul."

"Is that supposed to be an insult?" I shoot back, narrowing my eyes at him, but secretly feeling a bit flustered. "You smell like hair dye."

"Ouch," he says, chuckling. "But seriously, if you want to hide an alpha's scent, you're gonna need more than Irish Spring." He takes a step closer, sniffing dramatically. "And something else... could it be love?"

"Shut up," I growl, my cheeks heating up. In one swift motion, I punch him in the gut, surprising myself with how good it feels.

"Ugh!" he grunts, doubling over. But after a moment, he straightens up and laughs. "Well played, omega."

"Go fuck yourself," I mutter, grabbing a plate and loading it with food. The fact that he's probably not wrong about the scent only irritates me more.

As I settle in at the table, my mind drifts to Raul. It's confusing. I'm straight, or at least I thought I was. But there's something about Raul—his strength, his protectiveness—that draws me to him like a moth to a flame. And now I can't even just blame it on heat...

"Earth to Brad," Matthew says, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"What?" I growl, chomping a piece of bacon. "I'm thinking."

"About Raul?" he asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Maybe," I say defensively. "So what?"

"Nothing," he replies, smirking again. "It's just cute, that's all."

"Shut up and eat your breakfast," I grumble, trying to ignore the flutter in my chest at the mention of Raul's name. I really have to get the hell out of here while I still can. But even if I left the mansion now, it's not like I know how to get back to my world.

I shovel the last bite of eggs into my mouth, annoyed by the lingering taste of Matthew's laughter in the air. As I push my plate away, I decide it's time to visit Trent. It's been a while since we've talked, and he's probably feeling lonely and confused, being held captive in the basement.

"Hey," I say, leaning over to Matthew. "I'm going to check on Trent."

"Be careful, dude," he says, his signature smirk replaced by a serious expression. "Maybe you should wait until Raul gets back."

"I don't need Raul to babysit me," I say, shooting him a look as I carry my plate over to the sink. "Say shit to anyone and I'll aim lower next time."

"Yeah, yeah," he says, shrugging as he takes a bite of toast.

Descending the stairs into the basement, the air grows colder and staler with each step. The sight of Trent alone in his room-slash-prison cell immediately sours my mood. He's slumped against the wall, looking defeated and so unlike the confident, happy-go-lucky Trent I remember from the beginning of the book.

To my surprise, the guard stationed outside his room doesn't try to stop me as I go over to the window in the door.

"Hey, Trent," I say through the thick glass. "How are you holding up?"

"Brad?" he immediately leaps up from the bed and comes over to the door. "You're alright."

"Of course I am," I chuckle, trying to lighten the mood. "I'm not the prisoner in this scenario."

"We're both prisoners," he says firmly. "You walking around up there doesn't change that."

I sigh. "I know you don't get everything that's happened. Sometimes I don't get it myself, but you need to trust me, this place is better than Blue Fang or Grayridge. For both of us."

He doesn't need to know I'm planning on leaving this world entirely eventually. I don't need yet another person looking at me like I'm crazy.

"How can you say that?" he demands. "He's the enemy."

"Raul is not the enemy," I retort, feeling a surge of protectiveness for the alpha I've grown so close to.

"He's brainwashed you," he accuses.

"No, he hasn't," I snap. "And neither did Blue Fang, so get that shit out of your head. I'm trying to look out for you, so just do me a favor and cooperate, okay?"

“You’re an omega,” he counters, as if that’s an argument. “I’m supposed to be protecting you and I can’t exactly do that from in here.”

“Me being an omega doesn’t factor into it,” I say through my teeth, tired of arguing. And it’s hard to, when last night was proof enough. Like I needed more. “I’m working on getting you out.”

“By what, whoring yourself out to Raul?” he hisses bitterly.

I stare at him for a moment in shock, and I can tell he regrets his words, but he already said them. “First of all, fuck you,” I say, flipping him off. “I’m not whoring myself out to anyone. What I do or don’t do with Raul is none of your fucking business. Or anyone else’s.”

He frowns. “Brad—”

“No, you listen,” I snap. “Because I’ve tried going easy on you, but if you wanna go there, fine. I know you think you’re in love with me or whatever, but it’s not gonna happen. It was never gonna happen, Raul or no Raul. I care about you, Trent, but as a friend. Nothing less, nothing more. Got it?”

He looks like a puppy left in a cardboard box on the side of the road in the pouring rain, but he mutters, “Yeah. I got it.”

“Good,” I say firmly, my tone softening. I feel for the guy, but it’s not like I signed up for this gig! I didn’t even know what a wolf shifter was until recently, and now I’m stuck in the middle of some furry Romeo and Juliet drama. And I’m the fucking Juliet in this equation, to top it all off.

“Hey man, don’t get all twisted up over this,” I say, trying to lighten the mood. “I never thought I’d find myself in a love triangle with two dudes, let alone as the one being fought over. But here we are.”

“Fine,” Trent mutters, looking away from me. “Do what you want, but don’t expect me to cheer you on from the sidelines.”

“Wasn’t expecting you to,” I sigh, turning away from the door. “Just try to be chill. I’ll come see you again when I can.”

Just as I’m about to leave the basement, the sound of footsteps on the stairs catches my attention. Lenore appears, her blond hair a sharp contrast to her

dark attire.

"There you are," she says with an air of urgency, folding her arms. I'm half-expecting her to scold me for being down here, but instead, she adds, "You have a visitor."

"A visitor?" I ask, frowning. "Who is it?"

She purses her lips and doesn't answer right away. "You should just go see for yourself."

And just like that, I'm on edge as hell. Who the fuck would be coming here to see me, anyway?

CHAPTER 15

BRAD



When I go upstairs, there's a woman standing in the foyer wearing a black pinstripe suit with a white blouse, and immediately, I know she's either a banker or a shrink. They always tend to have the same look.

"Can I help you?" I ask, trying to restrain the annoyance in my voice.

"Hello. You must be Brad," she says, smiling. She's tall and slender with short, wavy hair framing her sharp features. The scent of lavender wafts off her, which is strange since shifters don't usually wear perfume or scents of any kind. "I'm Dr. Donahue. Raul and Dr. Wilson asked me to come see you."

"Of course they did," I mutter under my breath. But, recognizing that she's not the one who deserves my anger, I sigh and say, "Come on in, I guess."

"Thank you," she replies, stepping inside. "I understand you might be feeling... resistant to talking with me. But, I'm just here to help."

"Sure," I say, rolling my eyes. "That's what they all say." I lean against the wall, crossing my arms. "So, when are we doing this little chat?"

"Well, would you like to set up a time?" Dr. Donahue asks, raising an eyebrow.

"Let's just get it over with," I grumble, feeling like a trapped animal. It's bad enough being stuck in this damn book, but now I have to deal with a wannabe Freud, too? Just perfect.

"Very well," Dr. Donahue says, opening her bag and pulling out a notebook. "Why don't you show me somewhere comfortable where we can sit and talk for a bit?"

"Sure," I say, leading her deeper into the house. As we walk, I can't help but wonder what Raul is hoping to get out of this bullshit. I had all but forgotten I'd agreed to it. Even if it wasn't exactly an enthusiastic agreement.

"Brad?" Dr. Donahue's voice breaks through my thoughts. "Is everything alright?"

"Yeah," I reply quickly. "Just peachy. Here we are," I say as I push open the door to the study. I'm not sure exactly who studies here, or what, but that's what they all call it, anyhow.

"Thank you," Dr. Donahue says as she walks in, glancing around approvingly. She takes a seat in one of the plush leather chairs, gesturing for me to do the same. As I reluctantly sit down, I can't help but feel like I'm sinking into some kind of interrogation chair.

"Let's start with getting to know you a bit better," Dr. Donahue suggests, flipping open her notebook. "Tell me about your life, Brad. What do you normally do when you're not... here?"

"Fine," I mutter, trying to ignore the gnawing irritation inside me. "I'm a college student. I belong to the Kappa Nu fraternity, and I have a twin brother, Devon. Mostly I just hang out with my bros or my actual bro. Darts, keggers, that kind of thing."

"Interesting," Dr. Donahue murmurs, jotting something down. "And what do you study in college?"

"Uh... college?," I reply, shifting uncomfortably in the chair. "Never settled on a major."

"Ah, I see." Dr. Donahue nods thoughtfully before moving on to her next question. "And how did your pack feel about your attendance?"

The question catches me off guard, and my irritation flares up again. It's a trick question, and I know it as well as she does. "You mean my delusions about being from another world?"

"I didn't say that," she says carefully.

"No, but you were thinking it," I counter.

"Alright, let's talk about that," Dr. Donahue says, looking at me with genuine interest. "Can you explain how you came to believe that you're trapped inside a... what was it, a shifter romance novel?"

I groan inwardly. The last thing I want is to have to explain myself to a perfect stranger, but when this perfect stranger technically has the power to put me in a padded cell, it feels necessary. But it feels so absurd to even say it out loud, even if it is the truth and all the bullshit surrounding me is what used to feel absurd.

"Fine," I sigh, running a hand through my hair. "My brother, Devon, loves those books. We got in a fight over one—the one this world is based on, in fact—right before I got into a car accident. Somehow, I ended up here, living this ridiculous life as an omega, surrounded by literal fucking werewolves, and one of them thinks I'm his destined mate. Lock me up and throw away the key if you want to, I know how it sounds. Trust me, no one thinks this shit is crazier than I do."

To her credit, she listens without her expression shifting at all. Then again, maybe that's not a good thing.

"Tell me more about your relationship with Raul," Dr. Donahue prompts, her eyes never leaving mine.

"Raul? What's there to say?" I try to sound nonchalant, but my heart races at the mention of his name. "He's the alpha of this pack, or whatever. We're... friends, I guess. But it's complicated."

"Complicated?" Dr. Donahue echoes, her gaze sharp and inquisitive. "How so?"

"Look, can we just drop it?" I snap, feeling cornered. The last thing I want is for this shrink to start poking around in my feelings for Raul. Even I'm not ready to go there yet.

"Very well," Dr. Donahue says, closing her notebook with a soft thud. "But I can only help you as much as you're willing to be honest with me."

"Look, I'm not crazy, okay?" I snap, folding my arms defensively across my chest. Dr. Donahue's eyes widen slightly, but she maintains her calm demeanor. "At least not enough to need your 'help.'"

"I never said you were," she replies softly, her voice smooth and even. "I'm just trying to understand your perspective."

"Sure," I scoff, my annoyance bubbling over. "And your perspective is that my perspective is one fry short of a Happy Meal."

She doesn't deny it, but she doesn't confirm it either. Instead, she tilts her head slightly and gives me a thoughtful look. "Well, you have to admit, your situation is unique. But that doesn't mean we can't work through it together."

"Yeah, sure. That's shrink code for 'I'm gonna sit here and judge the shit out of you while making a million bucks an hour,'" I mutter.

"You don't like my profession very much, do you?" she asks, raising an eyebrow. "May I ask why?"

"Because you're smug assholes, that's why," I say, recalling the infuriating memory of my brother's therapist. "Like the one my parents took Devon to when they found out he was gay. To 'fix' him, like he was the one who was broken."

"That's awful," Dr. Donahue says in what seems like genuine enough horror. "Can I ask what happened? If you're comfortable talking about it, of course."

I clench my jaw, having a hard time reining myself in as the memory resurfaces. "When I found out what was going on, I stormed into his office and threatened to kick his ass if he didn't leave my brother alone. Then I hauled Devon out of there, and we never looked back."

"Wow," Dr. Donahue says, her expression softening with sympathy. "I'm truly sorry you and your brother had to go through that. You should know that I absolutely despise that kind of backward thinking. My goal here is simply to help you navigate your current situation, not to judge or change you. And for the record, I don't think your brother is something broken to be fixed. Or you, for that matter."

"Great," I mutter, unsure whether to find comfort in her mechanical words or remain guarded. My gaze drifts to the window, and I'm suddenly very aware of the growing tension in my shoulders. Dr. Donahue's presence is bringing up emotions I'd rather keep buried.

"Brad, I understand that this is difficult for you," she says, her voice gentle but firm. "But I promise you, I am here to help, not to hurt. Can we continue our conversation?"

"Fine," I relent, though the word comes out more like a growl.

But as much as I want to keep my guard up, part of me recognizes that maybe—just maybe—Dr. Donahue might be able to help me make sense of this mess I've found myself in. And that's something I desperately need right now, considering I'm no closer to figuring a way out of this mess than I was before.

Just as I'm about to grudgingly answer another one of Dr. Donahue's probing questions, the front door opens with a soft creak. I hear footsteps in the front hall that are strangely familiar already. A few moments later, Raul appears in the doorway of the study, his massive frame filling the space like an oversized puzzle piece. His eyes widen in surprise when he sees the woman sitting across from me.

"Dr. Donahue?" he asks, brow furrowing. "I wasn't expecting you yet. I would have sent someone to pick you up at the airport."

"It's perfectly fine. I caught an early flight," she says, standing to shake his hand. I get the feeling she's another alpha, from the way she carries herself. As gentle as her demeanor is, they all kind of have an energy, and I'm starting to be afraid it's just something I can pick up on because I'm an omega.

"Brad, we can continue our session later if you'd prefer," Dr. Donahue offers, her voice patient and understanding. But all I hear is pity, and I can't get out of this room fast enough.

"Can't wait," I mutter, rising from my seat like it's on fire. Without waiting for a response, I storm past Raul and out of the office.

"Brad, wait!" Raul calls after me, his deep voice laced with concern. But I don't slow down; I can't. My chest feels tight, my heart pounding like a trapped animal desperate for escape.

This was definitely a mistake. Nothing good comes from dredging all this shit up.

"Leave me alone, Raul," I growl over my shoulder, feeling the anger and frustration twist into a knot inside me. Why the hell did they think bringing in some stranger to poke at my psyche would be helpful?

"Brad, please," Raul pleads, but I can't bring myself to face him right now. Instead, I stride through the house, my vision blurring with unshed tears. God, I hate feeling like this—weak, helpless, so damn emotional.

When he touches my shoulder, way closer than he should be, I spin around on him and he seems surprised by the force with which I push his hand back.

"I said leave me the fuck alone," I snap.

To my relief, he just stands there rather than making another move to restrain me. My fight or flight instincts are in full gear and I really don't want to punch him. Not that it would do anything but break my hand, but still.

"Is something wrong?" he asks, a grave look coming across his features. "Did Dr. Donahue say something that upset you?"

"It's not the fucking shrink," I growl. The truth is, I don't even know what's wrong, even if the fact that she's here definitely triggered it. "I just want to be alone right now. Is that allowed?"

The sarcasm in my voice is more biting than I intended, but I'm a bundle of frayed nerves right now and I just want to get away from him as soon as possible, because I've never felt more vulnerable—for better or for worse—than I do in his arms.

"Alright," Raul says quietly, his voice sounding both defeated and concerned. "Just know that I'm here for you, Brad, whenever you're ready to talk."

“Sure,” I say, walking down the hall before I can change my mind. I swallow hard, trying to regain some semblance of control over my emotions, but it's a losing battle. And as I make my way to my room, shutting the door behind me, I can't help but wonder for what's probably the hundredth time since I got here...

What the hell is wrong with me? For the first time, though, I'm starting to wonder if this place is more than just a cosmic fluke or a fucked up nightmare. What if it—and Raul—is just my brain's way of living out some unfulfilled desires?

I decide that's a question I'm really not ready for the answer to, so I climb into bed, curl up under the covers, and hope I don't dream of anything.

CHAPTER 16

RAUL



I yawn as I knock on the door to Dr. Donahue's temporary office, sleep tugging at the corners of my eyes. The wolf inside me is restless, because I spent most of the night laying awake, staring at the ceiling and thinking about Brad. I've already gotten way too accustomed to falling asleep with him in my arms, but I know he needs space right now.

That doesn't translate well in wolf terms, though. Especially not when I can tell something is off with my mate, and I have no idea how to fix it.

The doctor calls for me to come in, so I step into the room to find her sitting behind the large oak desk of the office adjacent to Dr. Wilson's. It's left over from the days when we had two pack physicians, since more of us lived in the central pack.

"Good morning," Dr. Donahue says in a pleasant tone. "Can I help you?"

"Actually, I was hoping I could talk to you about Brad," I told her, walking closer to the desk. "He's seemed a little... off ever since your session yesterday."

"Raul," Dr. Donahue says coolly, setting the clipboard on her desk. "You know I can't disclose any confidential patient information, even to you as his mate."

"Of course," I mutter. "I wouldn't ask you to. It's just...Brad hasn't seemed like himself, and I want to help him."

My hands clench into fists at my sides, frustration bubbling up inside me. If only I could get a straight answer about what's going on with my mate, maybe I could do something to help him. I'm not used to feeling helpless, but if the thing that's hurting him is inside his head, how am I supposed to protect him from that?

"Look, Raul," the doctor starts, her tone softening slightly. "I understand that you're concerned, but trust me when I say that Brad is in good hands. He just needs space right now to work through this."

"I know," I grumble, my wolf still not satisfied. "I'm trying to give him space, trust me. But he's my mate, and I want to protect him."

"Believe me, I understand," Dr. Donahue says with a knowing smile. "But sometimes the best way to protect someone is by giving them room to figure things out on their own."

"And if he's a danger to himself?" I challenge, voicing the fear I don't dare say out loud in Brad's presence, even if it never stops bothering me.

Her demeanor grows somber. "If I think that, I can assure you, I'll take the steps necessary to make sure he's safe. But I don't have any reason to believe we're there yet."

Before I can respond, a high-pitched voice echoes through the hall calling my name, followed by the rapid patter of tiny feet. Mina flings open the door, her eyes wide with mischief as she waves a toy rat triumphantly above her head. "Look what I found!"

I blink, not even sure where to begin. It's too damn early, and I haven't even had coffee yet. I decide to start with the basics first. "What have we discussed about knocking?"

"I don't know," she says with a shrug. "You're boring sometimes, I tune you out."

I frown. "Well, here's the abridged version: do it. Now why are you carrying that thing around?"

"I was going to sneak into Brad's room and put it by his feet before he woke up," she answers, as if that's a perfectly reasonable response. Then,

she scowls. “I picked the *one* day he woke up before everyone else.”

“Brad’s not in his room?” I ask warily, deciding to let the whole breaking and entering lecture wait for a minute.

She shakes her head. “Nope. I thought you’d know where he is. Maybe I’ll put it in the refrigerator so he sees it when he makes lunch.”

“Don’t do that either,” I say, walking past her into the hallway. She’s right about one thing, it’s not like Brad not to be the last one up in the house. Humans need more sleep than shifters, and he definitely has the internal clock of a frat boy. That’s more evidence for his theories than that fake driver’s license ever was.

I tell myself I’m being paranoid, because I have the house monitored on all sides, and there’s always a guard keeping watch to make sure he doesn’t venture too far outside on his own. I know he’d be pissed if he had any idea, but it’s for his own good. That and there’s even more security than usual with everything that’s been going on, and our prisoner in the basement. I’m not leaving anything to chance.

When I’ve all but taken the mansion apart at the seams and there’s still no sign of him, I go into a full blown panic.

“Whoa,” Lenore says as I nearly collide with her on my way toward the front door. “Where’s the fire?”

“Brad is gone,” I say, and I must look as terrified as I am judging from the immediate shift in her countenance.

“Gone?” she echoes. “That’s not possible. We have guards stationed on both ends of the house, and then there’s the perimeter—”

“I know, but he’s not in the house,” I say gruffly.

“Have you checked the basement?” she asks. “He was talking with that guy from his former pack earlier.”

“Of course I have,” I mutter. “He’s not there, either.”

“But Trent is still here?” she presses.

“Yes,” I answer, glancing out the window by the door. Every second that passes, it feels like I’m wasting precious time. “I need you to call the others. Have everyone we can spare searching the area, and then question him yourself. I’m going to look for him.”

Lenore doesn’t waste time arguing. She nods and immediately heads off to do as I asked.

As soon as my feet hit the other side of the threshold, I shift into my bipedal wolf form, not even bothering to take off the clothes that tear to shreds as a result. I sniff the air, but there’s no sign that he’s been out here recently. I set off running for the woods anyway, determined to find him.

Something’s wrong. I can feel it. He wasn’t himself last night, and I never should have let him be on his own in this state, no matter what the damn doctor says.

Where are you, Brad?

And what the hell happened to make you leave?

I can only hope that I find him before it’s too late. Even if he’s not an active threat to himself, his pack is still after him. So is Constantine, and I know the other alpha would stop at nothing to collect what he thinks is his. We have that in common, if nothing else.

The mere thought of Constantine laying a finger on my mate fills me with a blinding rage, and I have to take a deep breath just to focus.

As I run, I cross paths with Kyle and Curtis, slowing to meet them.

Any sign of him? I demand.

Curtis shakes his head, his ears lowered. *Nothing yet.*

Keep looking, I bark, brushing past them on my way deeper into the woods. Somehow, I knew what the answer would be even before I asked.

Somehow, I know they aren’t going to find anything. In fact, as finely tuned as my senses are to Brad, the strongest traces of his scent are back at the mansion. It’s as if he never left.

It doesn't make sense. He couldn't be there without me finding him, and he couldn't have left without anyone noticing, so what possibility does that even leave? He just... disappeared?

I think back to the story he's so certain of, of how he ended up in this world. How he just disappeared from his own world and appeared here without explanation. I feel a growing sense of dread as his words come back to me.

What if...?

No. That's insane. There's no way in hell he's actually from another world. It's too utterly absurd to even entertain, especially considering that his only explanation is that he somehow fell into a book. But how could he just vanish without so much as a trace in a house full of wolves with heightened senses?

Eventually, I stop running and shift back into my human form to call his name, because it's the only damn thing I haven't tried. I call for him until I'm hoarse, then pause, listening intently for any response, but all I hear is the distant rustling of leaves and the mocking laughter of birds overhead. They're watching me with keen eyes, and I'd give anything to see through them for even a hint at where he's gone.

"Fine," I grumble to myself, feeling a trickle of frustration seep into my resolve. "I'll find you the old-fashioned way."

As I shift back into my wolf form and press forward beyond the edges of the territory, I can't help but think about our relationship—or lack thereof. I'm trying desperately to search for answers as to what might have pushed him to this, just when I thought things were finally getting better.

I know he's struggling with being an omega, and I'm sure Trent being here has raised some conflicting feelings about a past he'd rather forget, even if a part of him seems to be clinging to it. But the doctor's appearance is what really seems to have pushed him over the edge.

Eventually, I have no choice but to double back and hope that Lenore has had better luck questioning our one and only suspect. I was willing to spare Trent for Brad's sake, but if there's even a chance he has anything to do

with my mate's disappearance, I won't hesitate to torture him. I'll do anything in my power to bring Brad home.

As the mansion comes within view, it feels strangely foreign and distant, knowing my mate isn't there to make it a home. A cold knot of fear has formed in the center of my chest and at its core is a single, unsettling question.

What if he was right about everything?

And what if I've lost him forever?

To Be CONTINUED...

Dear Reader,

Thank you for choosing this book. I hope you loved the story from page one to the very ending. It has been a pleasure to share it with you!

If you have a moment to spare, I would be incredibly grateful if you left a rating or review of this book. Reviews are critical for indie authors as they're one of the best channels for us to reach readers and spread our stories. Every single rating or review helps me get my stories out there and reach more readers.

If you want to stay in the loop about my new releases and special content, I'd be thrilled if you signed up for my [newsletter](#) and joined my readers' group on [Facebook](#). For those of you who would like to read my books before the general public gets to, check out my [Patreon](#) where I post books chapter by chapter in advance, as well as sneak peeks and stories written exclusively for patrons.

Thank you again for joining me on this journey, and I hope you enjoy your next adventure!

Best,
Joel



Your gateway to knowledge and culture. Accessible for everyone.



z-library.se

singlelogin.re

go-to-zlibrary.se

single-login.ru



[Official Telegram channel](#)



[Z-Access](#)



<https://wikipedia.org/wiki/Z-Library>