



A M A R T H U R

AN OMEGAVERSE
STORY

CLAIMED

BREAKING FREE BOOK SEVEN

CLAIMED: AN OMEGAVERSE STORY

BREAKING FREE BOOK SEVEN

A.M. ARTHUR

BRIGGS-KING BOOKS

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BLURB

CLAIMED: An Omegaverse Story Breaking Free Book Seven

University student Demir Higgs is on the fast-track to graduate with honors and dive straight into medical school. His career plan leaves little time for dating, so after he catches his casual boyfriend cheating, Demir attends an anonymous sex party, determined to finally lose his virginity. He chooses an older alpha in a red mask and the man takes Demir apart piece by glorious piece, worshiping his body in ways Demir never imagined. Too bad he'll never see the man again.

After his bondmate disappeared eleven years ago, Senior Constable Brandt Lars fell into his work and avoided dating, disinterested in relationships. Not until the boy in the blue mask. Introducing the young beta to the wonders of sex was Brandt's absolute pleasure, and he can't stop thinking about him—until Brandt comes face to face with Blue in the form of Demir Higgs, the middle son of a work colleague. Demir is equally drawn to Brandt and their chemistry is through the roof. The age difference is an issue, but their attraction is real, and stolen moments turn into a secret relationship they both enjoy...but something is still missing.

Years ago, Oliver Strand lost all his memories in a horrible car wreck that left his face scarred and his sense of smell obliterated. But he built a new life for himself and his son, and now he's visiting Sansbury Province as a guest speaker at a territory-wide anti-sex-trafficking conference. What he does not expect to find at the conference is an alpha he doesn't know, but who insists Oliver is his missing mate Ollie Lars, who disappeared the same week as

Oliver's accident.

Brandt is overjoyed to discover his bondmate is alive, despite Oliver having no memory of his old life in Sansbury, and he's determined to keep both mate and son in his life. But he's also in love with Demir and doesn't want to lose him. Demir is ready to be the bigger person and step aside so the Lars family can be together again—until Demir realizes he and Oliver have unique chemistry of their own. And they've also both been claimed by the same alpha.

Can a grumpy alpha in love with two men, an omega with no memory of his mate, and a beta determined to chart his own course find a way to navigate the complicated waters of a poly relationship? Or will all three men end up stranded alone with broken hearts?

NOTE: This is a non-shifter, M/M/M Omegaverse story with alpha/omega/beta dynamics, heats, knotting, and mpreg. In this world, omegas are second-class citizens, but they are working toward gaining more civil rights and protections under the law. Series warnings for mentions of past physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. Additional warnings for extremely kinky sex, including dirty talk, light spanking, biting, edging, roughhousing, come-swapping, and threesomes. This series is best read in numerical order.

CLAIMED

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First Edition

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DEAR READER,

I can honestly say I never expected this book. Not even a little bit. When Senior Constable Lars first appeared way back in book one, *SAVED*, he was kind of a jerk and mostly a prop. He was there to give Tarek Bloom a hard time. And then he kept showing up. Still grumpy, still kind of a jerk, but the consummate professional and dedicated to his job. Then in *WHOLE*, Jaysan and Morris went a date and that date got interrupted by...Lars. A very drunk Lars lamenting the anniversary of his bondmate's disappearance. I'm honestly not sure where that scene came from, but from that moment on I wanted to know more about Lars and his missing mate Ollie.

And then there is Demir Higgs. I've adored that boy since his first scene, and I've wanted to write his love story for several books now, but he was too young. I never imagined he'd end up with not only an alpha twice his age, but also falling for a mated omega with a child of his own. I had so much fun exploring these intricate, tangled relationships, and I hope you enjoy their story.

My love,
A.M. Arthur

PROLOGUE

OLLIE TURNED bright eyes onto Brandt Lars, his smile so wide it could light the heavens, and it definitely lit the hospital waiting room. “It’s our turn, I know it,” Ollie said to his bondmate. “I can feel it, Bebe.” His pale hand covered his flat lower belly. “He’s in there. Our little man.”

After almost six years of trying to get pregnant, heat after heat, Brandt was not leaving this moment up to a cheap plastic stick and a home test. No sir. He and Ollie had made an appointment in Obstetrics for a proper test after Ollie’s home test came up positive, and Brandt wasn’t very happy they’d been shunted to a new doctor on staff. Someone named Nero Troi, and yes, Brandt had checked up on the beta man’s record. Only three years out of medical school.

But Ollie was practically vibrating with excitement in his chair as they waited for their appointment. They’d grown up as neighbors and been best friends, which was unusual for young alphas and omegas, but their parents had been close. Brandt had loved watching Ollie grow from a slightly gawky, blond teenager into a beautiful man with sun-kissed hair and a smile that always lit up the room.

“Yes, he is.” Brandt kissed Ollie’s cheek simply because he could, then slid a possessive arm across Ollie’s shoulders—both a reaction to the new couple who’d entered the waiting room and his own need to touch his mate. He’d never tire of touching him. Despite them being only a few months apart in age and feeling the mating bond at sixteen, Ollie’s parents had refused any formal mating agreement for years. Brandt was one of only two children to a mated pair, and Ollie’s parents had feared infertility would run in the family. They also weren’t happy that Brandt planned on joining the Constabulary

Academy directly out of secondary school.

Usually the academy required at least two years at university, but Brandt had always been an excellent student, testing ahead of his peers, and he'd aced the entrance exam at only seventeen. And Ollie had waited for him. He also didn't have his first heat until he was twenty, which was rare, but not worrisome to Brandt. Brandt didn't care if they had one child or ten, as long as he had them with Ollie.

Still...six years.

Please, let this not be a false positive. Please.

"Brandt and Oliver Lars?" a deep voice said. Kit, the office assistant, beckoned to them with a patient smile.

They followed Kit down a corridor to an exam room, where Ollie was given a paper gown to change into. A few minutes later, the doctor entered. Dr. Troi was a short, average-looking man, but he had an air of peace about him that helped Brandt relax. A little. All doctors who worked in obstetrics were beta, so he wasn't a threat, but Brandt hated the idea of another man, even a doctor, looking at his mate's intimate places.

"It's a pleasure to meet you both," Dr. Troi said after introductions went around. "I hope you don't mind the change in your caregiver. Dr. Sorenson had to step back for personal reasons, and for the last two years I've worked with couples experiencing fertility problems."

Brandt resisted the urge to posture and bristle and say they didn't have fertility problems. But they did. Six years and a lot of knots later, and they were finally—he hoped—pregnant.

"I don't mind," Ollie replied. "Unless you don't have good news. Then I can't be held responsible for my mate's actions."

Dr. Troi smiled. "Well, I do have the results back on your urine sample, and you are, indeed, pregnant. Congratulations."

Ollie squealed and threw himself off the exam table, right into Brandt's waiting arms. He hugged Ollie tight, but not too tight, tears of absolute joy making his eyes smart. "We did it," Ollie said. "We finally did it, my love."

Brandt laughed and kissed his temple. "Yeah, we did."

"I need to caution you," Dr. Troi said, "that a first pregnancy at your age brings health risks. Not only for yourself, Mr. Oliver, but also for the baby."

"Ollie, please, only my parents call me Oliver anymore." Ollie cinched his arms around Brandt's waist and rested his head on his shoulder. "What sort of risks?"

“There’s a much higher chance of miscarriage, so you’ll need to take extra precautions. We can go over all of that in a moment.”

“And the baby?” Brandt asked. He slid one hand down to rest over Ollie’s belly, determined to protect this new life with every bone in his body.

“There could be developmental delays. Your first heat occurred when you were twenty, correct?”

“Yeah, about twenty and a half,” Ollie said. “My family doctor didn’t think that was something to be concerned about.”

“Normally, it isn’t, but you’ve gone through roughly two dozen heats since without conceiving. In your chart, there’s no mention of a fertility test.”

“No,” Brandt said, a bit testy now. “Fertility tests aren’t covered by the province and I can’t afford the expense on my current salary.” Given the fact that without omegas and their unique ability to conceive and carry children, every test and drug available for obstetrics and pregnancy should be available through the general public health care, but it wasn’t. So many things beyond basic health care for a pregnant omega were priced above the average person’s salary.

What if I really am the reason we couldn’t get pregnant for so long?

Unless a lot of credit landed in Brandt’s lap, he’d probably never know.

“An understandable, if frustrating problem,” Dr. Troi replied. “Mr. Ollie, how about you hop up and we do a quick exam?”

Ollie kissed Brandt’s cheek before climbing onto the table. Brandt held his hand, mostly to keep his need to growl at Dr. Troi in check, while the doctor poked at his mate’s private bits. After a few minutes, Dr. Troi declared everything looked good. A quick check of Ollie’s latest blood work proved him healthy and ready to carry a child.

“Now we just need to get through the next nine months,” Brandt said. “And we can finally start decorating the nursery.”

“Shopping!” Ollie laughed. To Dr. Troi he said, “Brandt hates shopping. Really, truly hates it.”

Dr. Troi chuckled. “I’m not fond of it myself. On a medical note, I’d like to see you every couple of weeks, just to keep an eye on your progress. You can make your next appointment with my assistant Kit before you leave.”

“Of course. Thank you so much, Dr. Troi.”

“You are very welcome.”

After the doctor excused himself, Ollie tugged Brandt’s head down and kissed him. A hard, possessive kiss that left his alpha gasping for air and a

little hard. “When we get home,” Ollie said, “I want you to fuck my throat.”

Brandt growled possessively. For all Ollie had been a quiet, timid teenager, the first time they’d fucked at seventeen? Ollie had a dirty streak as long as the province itself, and he adored sex outside of heat. So much that they had quite the collection of sex toys in their bedroom drawer, and while they’d have to be careful with what they put up Ollie’s ass for the next nine months, Brandt couldn’t think of a better reason why.

“Should I tie you up first?” Brandt whispered, then licked the shell of Ollie’s ear.

“Goddess, yes. Please.”

As much as Brandt wanted to whisk his mate home and shove his cock down Ollie’s throat, he was too excited and eager to pamper the man. So they had an early dinner at Petrova’s, their favorite place to eat, splurging on more food than they could possibly consume and a few too many margaritas—virgin for his omega. He bought Ollie’s favorite chocolates from a sweets shop down the block, delicious little squares of dark chocolate and mint that he fed to Ollie with his own mouth after they got home.

Once they were both full of good food and chocolates, they worshipped each other’s body. Brandt didn’t leave an inch of Ollie’s skin untouched, unlicked, unloved. He worshipped Ollie’s entrance for ages, then sucked his balls. His dick. He made sweet love to his mate, until Ollie cried for him to be rougher, to give him what he wanted.

So Brandt tied Ollie spread-eagle on the bed, exactly how Ollie loved it, and then took his time fucking Ollie’s mouth. Teasing, only giving Ollie a taste, before pushing in deep enough to choke. It was his sweet, beautiful Ollie’s favorite game, and they played until Brandt couldn’t hold it in any longer. He pumped his load down Ollie’s throat before sliding down his mate’s body to suck him dry.

Happy and sated, Brandt untied his omega and cuddled him close. Ollie combed deft fingers through his chest hair, then licked the damp skin of his pecs. “Careful,” Brandt teased. “You might find yourself with a mouthful of cock again, if you keep licking me like that.”

Ollie sucked on his nipple, and a few minutes later, hard and leaking for his bondmate, Brandt took his revenge.



The next three weeks passed in a kind of blur for Brandt. Between working as a patrolman, studying for his constable exam, and helping Ollie with the nursery, he barely had time to eat or sleep. And that was okay. This was the life he'd always wanted with Ollie.

Ollie picked out paint colors, and Brandt came home one day to find the nursery a lovely shade of green. They shopped for the crib and changing table together, as well as toys, diapers and bottles. Everything was arranged exactly how Ollie wanted it, and Brandt loved watching him nest. He also went to bed each night with a prayer in his heart that both his mate and baby would be okay.

Ollie's second appointment with Dr. Troi approached far too quickly, and it coincided with a flu outbreak at work, giving Brandt no time off to go with him.

"I'll be fine," Ollie said that morning as they shared pancakes for breakfast. "I'll drop you off at division, and then go to the appointment at nine. It's a routine checkup."

Brandt didn't like it, but Ollie was right. He'd allowed his mate to get a driver's license years ago, even though Ollie rarely drove alone. Their house wasn't in the best neighborhood, but it was home and Ollie loved being there, waiting for his bondmate to return to him.

"Okay," Brandt said. "But you call me as soon as it's over. Have dispatch patch you through to my car radio."

"I will, you overprotective nut."

Brandt blew him a kiss.

They left the house ten minutes later, and Brandt kissed Ollie thoroughly before getting out of the car. He hated watching his mate drive away, but they'd see each other again at the end of his shift.

A shift that passed slowly, despite them being shorthanded. Not much was happening across Sansbury Province today, and as the morning eased closer to lunch with no word from Ollie, Brandt began to wonder. He didn't worry until after one o'clock and nothing. Then he called the hospital and asked to be directed to Dr. Troi's office.

"Mr. Ollie didn't show up for his nine o'clock appointment," Kit said.

Brandt's blood ran cold. "He had to have shown. He dropped me off at work and then went straight there."

"I'm sorry, sir, but he never signed in. Are you sure he didn't have an appointment in another department?"

Yes, Brandt was damned well good and sure Ollie didn't have an appointment anywhere else today. He made several calls but no one had seen Ollie. The house phone went unanswered. As panic set in, Brandt called his supervisor, who gave him permission to leave and look for Ollie.

But Ollie wasn't home and neither was their car.

Hours passed into days. Days into weeks. Weeks into months. The house became chilly and dark. The nursery lay empty and barren. And as months morphed into years, bitterness replaced joy. Grief replaced love.

And Ollie Lars never came home.

ONE

TEN YEARS & Eight Months Later

Demir Higgs studied his reflection in the dresser mirror, unsure if his outfit was sexy or way overdone. Tonight was finally the night, and he wanted Theron to lose his fucking mind when Demir told him he wanted to go all-in and try anal sex. To finally pop that stupid cherry and become a man. Theron had been so patient with him these last six months, sticking to Demir's preferred blow jobs and fake-fucking, without going all the way.

It was hard to put into words why Demir was so hesitant, but he was twenty years old, damn it. Beyond time.

Plus, Theron had seemed distant the last few times they got together for a make-out session, and Demir didn't want to lose him to someone less prudish. Demir was halfway through his third and final year at university and set to enter their medical school program next fall. Thanks to taking extra courses while still in secondary, he was graduating university a full year early.

All studying and little play made Demir a dull boyfriend.

Not anymore.

He'd finished fall semester finals this morning, and he planned to surprise Theron at his job tonight. Theron worked at an art gallery in Aurora Crest, and they were having an exhibit tonight, debuting new works from a local painter. Demir wanted to show up looking sexy as hell, whisper sweet promises in Theron's ear, and then wait impatiently at Theron's place for him

to leave the gallery and come home.

He eyeballed himself. The shirt was too flashy, so he swapped out the bright blue button-up for a more sedate, but still pretty shade of green. Demir looked good in most colors, taking after his late omegin with his ashy-blond hair and pale skin—unlike his older brothers Tarius and Aven, who both resembled their sire. He was also reasonably good-looking, having hit a decent growth spurt when he turned sixteen, his skinny frame getting taller and adding a bit of muscle tone. Still, he was beta and would never be as big and broad as his sire, so he was careful. Careful to avoid dangerous situations, careful to study, pass, and learn.

Careful to keep the promise he'd made to a close family friend so many years ago to cure Donal Syndrome one day.

Knocking on his bedroom door was immediately followed by his stepdad Liam poking his head inside. "Dinner's ready," Liam said. He eyeballed Demir's outfit. "Going out later?"

"Yeah, hoping to surprise someone." Despite being in university, Demir had chosen to live at home with his sire and Liam. He liked being in the familiar house with his two younger siblings too much to live in the dorms, or even off-campus housing like his brothers had when they attended. "Do I look okay?"

"You look grown up and very handsome." The compliment sounded like it came from someone so much older, but Liam was only twenty-six. Not that much older than Demir or his brothers. Sometimes it was strange for their sire to have mated a second time and to someone the same age as Aven, but when Dad and Liam were together?

Pure joy.

On a squeal of laughter, the door was shoved farther open, followed by the little body of Demir's youngest brother Linus. At three and a half, Linus was kind of small, despite being alpha, but he was also an adorable carbon-copy of Liam, right down to his bronze skin and black hair. Linus dove at Demir's ankles, and Demir scooped his brother up into a hug.

"How's my favorite baby brother?" Demir asked.

"Dada made spaghetti and meatballs," Linus replied. "I don't want meatballs."

"You're at least eating the spaghetti." Even though Liam made delicious meatballs, Linus didn't like the shape of them. Usually, they mashed some of the meat into his pasta sauce and the kid never knew the difference.

“Dinner time!” Layne’s loud voice echoed in the hallway, going past Demir’s room toward the dining room.

With a short bark of laughter, Demir put Linus down and followed his family toward the luscious scents of food. A big bowl of spaghetti and meatballs, a basket of garlic bread, and a bowl of Caesar salad were waiting for them. Layne was in his spot, and Demir helped Linus up into his booster seat.

“Where’s Dad?” Demir asked, noting the empty chair at the head of the table.

“He got caught up at work and will be about ten minutes late,” Liam said as he began serving the boys. “He said to start eating so the pasta didn’t get mushy.”

“Oh, okay.”

Dad had been promoted from Senior Constable to division’s Chief Constable last month, when Chief Underhill moved to Buckman Province to take a territory position, and that came with a hell of a lot more responsibility. He was still learning and training, but Isa Higgs was a good, fair man, and he encouraged all the officers he oversaw to be the same.

Demir filled his own plate while Liam expertly mushed half a meatball into the sauce on Linus’s plate. Linus had entered the picky-eater phase of being a kid, and it was entertaining as hell watching Liam and Dad find ways to hide things in his food. The kid loved fruit, but lately he’d been weird about most meats. The only thing Demir had ever been picky about was his pizza. Plain cheese or nothing. Maybe a little garlic salt on top if he was in the mood.

School was out for everyone now for winter break, and Layne was excited for the upcoming Winter Solstice celebration. Five days of fun, gift giving, parties, and the turn of the calendar into the new year. The constabulary hosted a big party every year, and Demir was excited to invite Theron as his first ever plus-one this year. It wasn’t until next weekend, but Demir had gone every year since he was a kid.

Almost.

Except for the two years between Omegin dying and Dad meeting Liam, when Dad had been a surly, angry, grumpy bear who basically ignored his kids. Demir had spent a lot of time with his older brothers during those two years, in the off-campus apartment they’d shared, and he’d never been happier to see his dad get a life, a mate, and a new son in Layne.

Layne wasn't a picky eater, but he was a precise eater, going one item at a time. He ate his required few bites of salad, then all his meatballs. After those were gone, he ate half a piece of garlic bread, before finishing with his noodles. Demir just shoveled food into his mouth, while taking care not to splatter red sauce on his shirt.

Dad got home about fifteen minutes into the meal, dressed in a very familiar uniform. The only slight change was the color of the sash, indicating his new rank, which was now the highest possible in the province. He kissed Liam on the mouth, clapped Demir on the shoulder, and gave both Linus and Layne kisses on their heads before settling at his place. Liam served him, not out of demand, but because Liam enjoyed waiting on his alpha after Isa had worked a long day.

Alpha/omega couplings were way different than beta marriages, because of hormones and pheromones and the mating bond and stuff. But Demir still wanted a marriage like that, full of love, joy, and mutual respect. He wasn't sure if Theron was that guy, but Demir was ready to take the next step in finding out.

"Going out tonight, Demir?" Dad asked after he'd packed away some food.

"Yup," Demir replied. "Art exhibit downtown."

"What's an art exhibit?" Linus said.

"*Exhibit*, and it's when a place shows off the paintings someone has painted and tries to sell them to wealthy people."

"I paint. Can I do one?"

Demir loved the finger paintings Linus made for him and his family, but he couldn't see them on display at Hubert Galleria. "How about we do an exhibit right here at home tomorrow? We'll tape them up in the hallway where everyone can admire them."

Linus beamed. "Okay!"

"I want to do an exhibit, too," Layne said.

Liam quirked a *See what you've done now* eyebrow at him, but Demir didn't even stutter. "We'll display that basket you made out of popsicle sticks last week," Demir said. "How's that?"

"Yay!"

Goddess, his little brothers could be holy terrors sometimes, but Demir loved them to pieces. He'd always been the youngest, the baby brother everyone else worried about. When Liam came to live with them, already

pregnant with Layne, Demir had often wondered what it would be like to be the older brother. The protector. He'd been thrilled to play big brother after Layne was born, and then beyond happy when Liam and Dad mated, and he'd nearly peed himself with excitement when they got pregnant together.

So much had changed in the last four years. Demir was in his third year of university. Tarius was working for family friend Ronin Cross as a paralegal and sharing an apartment with two other betas his age. Aven was living with his boyfriend Yosef, while working as a secondary school teacher, and Demir lived in hope of an engagement announcement any day. Yosef was really cool and seemed good for Aven.

Layne and Linus started squabbling about their upcoming exhibit. Demir excused himself and took his plate into the kitchen. Liam followed him a moment later with the empty salad bowl. "So is this person you're surprising at the art exhibit?" he whispered.

"Yeah."

And because Liam was cool like that, he let it be. After the safe sex and consent talk with Dad when Demir was fourteen, they were both very hands-off when it came to who Demir was or was not dating. Not that Demir had dated anyone other than Theron. He was too busy studying to become the best doctor and researcher possible, and boyfriends tended to want attention. Theron was extremely patient, wasn't clingy, and always understood if Demir was too busy to hang because he had an exam or study group.

His belly wobbled over what Demir was going to ask for tonight. But twenty was too old to be a blushing virgin. Time to take care of that little detail.

The exhibit opened at seven, and Demir didn't want to show up first. He wanted to slip inside and surprise his maybe-boyfriend, so he helped Layne with his reading for a while. Even though school was out for two weeks, Layne was a bit behind and his teacher had suggested some workbooks to help improve his skills. At seven-thirty, Demir grabbed his keys and took the car he shared with Liam.

He drove to Aurora Crest, a neighborhood in the art and culture side of the province, near the financial buildings of downtown. All around were museums, art galleries, and performance art installations. Street buskers were out in full force this evening—actors standing on street corners doing dramatic readings, or musicians playing their instruments for tips. The public lot was less than a block from the gallery, and it took a while to find a spot.

Demir wasn't an art-minded person, so he didn't come down here very often. The last time had been a museum trip for one of his secondary art classes, and he'd been bored to tears. He preferred numbers, facts, names and dates, not swirls of paint on canvas that could either be clouds or a man crying.

The gallery was in full swing by the time Demir arrived. He wiped sweaty palms on his slacks, nerves jumping now. The front of the building was all tinted glass, giving Demir a good view of the front room. Most of the paintings were hung in a way that you couldn't really see them from the windows, on free-standing walls that created pockets of people all over the place, ensuring visitors actually entered the gallery to browse.

He spotted other people close to his age, so he wouldn't stick out too much, and entered the gallery. Someone at the door took his winter coat and hung it on a rack. Soft music played just above the din of conversation, and he smelled incense. The kind often burned in public places now when all genders were mingling in close quarters. A scientist had discovered it about three years ago. The incense managed to diminish strong gender scents to alpha and omega noses, making confrontations less likely between alphas.

As a method of lessening hormonal outbursts, Demir liked it, but he was far more interested in the slow development of a synthetic drug similar to an alpha's pheromone suppressant but designed for omegas to lessen their scent appeal—especially teenaged omegas who didn't want to drop out of secondary school at sixteen, just because they now smelled so distracting to alphas that alphas lost their self-control.

Demir was all over anything that gave omegas more freedom.

A waiter came by with a tray of flutes. Demir took one simply for a prop, not because he liked champagne, and scanned the crowd for Theron. The artist being featured was easy to spot, surrounded by fans and fawning collectors. Theron once said his job meant keeping clients happy, putting out fires, and being a Johnny-on-the-spot, so Demir kept looking while pretending to enjoy the artwork.

A peel of familiar laughter drew Demir's attention, and he turned, heart pounding with excitement to have found Theron. And Theron was there, about ten feet away near a painting of what might have been a bridge over a river, and he was clinging to the arm of an older man. A man who smiled so lovingly at Theron that Demir's stomach hit the floor.

The other man said something to Theron, and Theron laughed again. This

time, he zeroed in on Demir...and the bastard didn't stop laughing. He also didn't pull away from his companion or show any sign of having been caught. Maybe he hadn't been caught? Maybe the older man was a client Theron was trying to impress?

Except the older man leaned down and planted a firm kiss on Theron's mouth. Theron said something and the man looked up, right at Demir, his smile so sympathetic Demir wanted to vomit. Theron beckoned Demir; Demir turned on his heel, put his flute down on the nearest flat surface, and stormed out of the gallery. He barely remembered to grab his coat as he left, beyond embarrassed and no longer interested in whatever this was.

"Demir, wait!" Theron's voice followed him down the sidewalk, more chilling than the winter wind cutting through his coat.

Demir did wait, though. Outside the gallery and away from other people, maybe he could handle this. But when he turned, Theron was dragging his companion along by the hand, both of them coat-less, and Demir took a tiny, rude bit of satisfaction knowing they were probably freezing.

"I didn't know you were coming tonight," Theron said when the pair caught up.

"Yeah, well, that's why it's called a surprise," Demir snapped back. "Who's that?"

Color rose in Theron's face that had nothing to do with the weather. "Demir, this is Patryk. My husband."

Demir squawked. "Since when are you married?"

"For the last two years."

The world swam in front of his eyes, and Demir blinked back angry tears. "So you were cheating on him with me?" No, Patryk didn't look angry or upset, so that wasn't it. "Was I anything to you besides a handy blow job?"

"Yes, you were," Patryk replied in a deep, gentle voice. "You saved our marriage, Demir."

I'm going to be sick.

"How the hell did your husband fucking around with me save your marriage?" Demir asked.

"It's hard to explain," Theron replied. "Without getting too personal—"

You had your mouth on my dick, what's too personal?

"Patryk had an accident last year that left him...disinterested in sex."

Patryk himself groaned, clearly older and less embarrassed by this discussion. "I have nerve damage that makes maintaining an erection nearly

impossible, and I'm allergic to most medications so over-the-counter helpers don't work. Theron tried to be supportive, and I love going down on him, letting him fuck me, but he got frustrated with my limitations, so I gave him permission to look for sex outside our marriage."

No wonder Theron never pressured me for anal, he was already getting it from his damned husband!

Patryk leveled an angry look at Theron. "However, I told him to be honest with whomever he chose to sleep with, and he clearly wasn't honest with you about the scope of your relationship."

"You fucking think?" Demir glared at Theron, so furious at the man his hands shook. "So you used me for sex? That's all I was this whole time? A booty call?"

Theron flinched, and that was his answer. "I'm so sorry, Demir, what I did was cruel. You were so much fun to hang out with, and when our friendship turned sexual, I didn't want to lose my friend by telling you about my marriage problems. You didn't seem to be the type of guy who'd want to be the 'other man'."

"You never told me you were married, not one time, even when we first met. How can you lie to someone like that and pretend it's a friendship?" Demir had already steamrolled past the grief stage and was edging quickly into anger. He didn't show it often, but Demir had definitely inherited his sire's temper. "How many other people were you sleeping with? Nah, never mind, fuck you."

"Demir—"

"Save it." Demir made a cutting gesture across his throat. "You saved your marriage, congrats. Now you get to fuck off and get out of my life, you raging asshole."

"Come on," Patryk said. He tugged Theron back toward the gallery. "I'm so sorry, Demir."

Demir glared, angry breaths puffing out in front of him in clouds of vapor as the two men walked away. He'd come down here, so excited to finally have sex, and all he'd been was a convenient dick to suck? And not even Theron's only side piece, by the sound of it.

"Son of a fucker," he said to no one in particular. He'd come out tonight determined to get laid, and he'd be damned if he went home still a virgin. A perfect stranger wasn't his ideal choice but waiting and dating hadn't done him any favors, either. Aven had confessed his first time was with a hookup

at a university party his freshman year, but Demir didn't have time for frat parties.

He wasn't going to find any answers in Aurora Crest, so he drove to a heavily-beta neighborhood near the Narrows that was full of bars that stayed open late and served cheap burgers. Normally, he'd come down here with a friend, or a brother, and he'd take the bus instead of driving, but he wasn't here to get drunk. He wasn't sure why he was here, wandering the packed weekend streets, listening to the music filtering out from various establishments. Wandering past clusters of friends out for a good time.

Demir eyeballed the different neon signs, uncertain which bar to choose. He wasn't a drinker, and he kind of hated dive bars, but most of the men around him were beta, so he didn't have to worry about aggressive young alphas getting handsy. Except, hadn't he come out here to get handsy with someone?

"Demir, hey!" A figure waved at him from down the sidewalk. Cody, his lab partner last semester, stood near a bar's closed-in patio area with two other guys their age. Demir approached, relieved to see someone he knew who wasn't family or a close friend.

"Hey, Cody," Demir said.

"I don't think I've ever seen you down here before," Cody said after introducing him to his pals.

"I don't come down here much and never alone. Guess I needed a change of pace. How about you?"

"We're out pre-gaming."

Demir wasn't a barfly but even he knew that term. "I thought pre-gaming meant drinking at home where it's cheaper?"

"Cody's trying to find his balls," one of the pals said, "and go to this party in an hour."

"What kind of party?"

"Kinky sex party."

Demir perked up. "How'd you get invited to a kinky sex party?"

"My older brother's mate throws them at their place, and it's too weird for me, but Cody joked about wanting an invitation, so I got him one. Now the wimp won't go alone."

"I'll go." The words shot out of Demir's mouth before he could think, and now that he'd said it, he absolutely wanted to go. What better place to pop his cherry than a sex party?

It's also a good place to get hurt, because you don't have a clue what you're doing.

Cody stared at him like he'd sprouted a third eyeball. "You want to go to this thing with me?"

"Sure." Demir squared his shoulders. "I'm assuming all the sex is voluntary and consensual, right?"

"Absolutely," the pal said with a firm nod of his head. "My brother-in-law is super tight about that stuff. And the best part is the encounters are anonymous. Everyone wears a mask that covers half your face, so you don't have to tell anyone who you are."

For the first time in his life, anonymous sex sounded like heaven. He could get it on, get it over with, and then get back to his regular life of studying and practical labs. "Come on, let's go," Demir said to Cody. "If nothing else, we can ogle hot older guys."

Cody snorted. "Okay, fine. If Demir Higgs, a guy who embodies the definitions of workaholic and library mouse, wants to go to a sex party, I guess I can go too."

Once he had the address, Demir led Cody back down the sidewalk to where he'd left the car. He considered texting his new location to one of his brothers, just in case, but this was the first time Demir had ever done something this spontaneous. This...dirty. He didn't want to tell anyone in case he chickened out at the door.

"You sure about this?" Cody asked.

"Positive." Demir studied a paper map from the glove box until he was fairly sure he knew where the party was. Good neighborhood, all two and three-story homes, so it should be safe enough. "Your friend said it was consensual, so even if we go it's not like we *have* to fuck anyone."

"True. Guess I talk a good talk, but I'm glad you're going with me. It's easier with a friend."

"Yeah."

Demir eased onto the street and headed to a neighborhood several miles away from the edges of the Narrows. Far from the poor neighborhoods, butted up against the richer ones where well-off mated pairs set up house and thrived. He'd grown up in a house similar to these, if a bit smaller and only one-story. The party was easy to find because of the cars parked on the street all around and the three-story home blazed with lights.

Wherever the sex was happening, it wasn't near those bright windows,

because few shadows moved behind them on the upper floors. Or maybe the sex wasn't happening yet. It was only a few minutes after the time printed on the paper invitation Cody flashed at him. About the size of a postcard, black paper with red lettering, fancy and mysterious.

The house had a large front porch half-covered with fancy, weather-proof drapes, and an outdoor space heater kept the chill at bay. A tall, lanky man stood by the front door. He had a laundry basket on one side of him and held a smaller basket of different colored masks in his left hand. A freestanding coat rack was nearby, so they left their coats there and approached the door. "Your invitation and your shirts, gentlemen," the older beta said.

"Our shirts?" Cody repeated.

"All activities are between consensual parties, but you are required to show off the goods to a degree."

Cody glanced at Demir. Demir shrugged and whipped off his shirt. The doorman traded it for a blue mask that he slipped over his face. And it wasn't a cheap paper party mask, either, but a soft fabric that hugged his nose and cheekbones. Cody put on a green mask.

The interior of the home was warm and all around them were shirtless men. Most appeared to be beta, but some were obviously alpha by their size and bulk. Soft, sensual music played from hidden speakers. The dining room had finger foods and a wet bar where men helped themselves. Demir eyeballed the liquor. Cody went straight for it.

He stuck close to Cody as he surveyed the other rooms, a glass of whatever Cody poured for each of them in his hand. Conversations occurred all over, some light touching, but no public displays of sexual activity.

Yet? He had no idea how these parties worked.

A man about Demir's height and with a very defined set of abs approached them with a smirk. "You must be first timers," he said. "Even behind the mask, you've got this wide-eyed look of wonder going on."

"We are," Cody replied. "First timers to this party but not to other things."

"Oh? Tell me more."

Cody bit his lower lip and cut his eyes at Demir. Demir took the hint and left Cody to flirt with the purple-masked stranger. He wandered back to the table of finger foods, smeared what looked like hummus onto a toast square and ate it.

Only manners kept him from spitting out whatever was on that toast,

because it tasted awful. Grimy, metallic, and like nothing that should ever be put in someone's mouth. He tried to chew, but ugh!

"Here." A paper napkin appeared in front of him, and Demir tried to discreetly clean out his mouth. He sipped at his drink, which was almost too strong but it helped. "It's liver pate. I don't like it either."

Demir finally looked at his savior. He wore a red mask that didn't hide how icy blue his eyes were, so pale they were almost white. Definitely older, with speckles of gray at his temples and in the light stubble on his cheeks. Alpha, too, his scent more distinguishable with the man practically on top of Demir. Right in his personal space, smiling, making a show of checking Demir out.

"I'll keep that in mind," Demir said, turning on what little charm he possessed as he took in the bigger man. A good six or eight inches taller than Demir, a thick body. Not quite muscular, but also not overweight, with a chest of wiry hair mixed with brown and gray, and Demir wasn't sure why he found that so appealing. Granted, he spent more time with his nose in books than checking out other men, but he'd never imagined being so attracted to an older alpha who looked like he could bench-press Demir without breaking a sweat.

"You don't look like you're used to these sorts of things," Red said.

"First time." *For a lot of things.*

"Ah, well, you don't have to look so spooked. No one's gonna maul you, grope you, or drag you downstairs if you don't wanna go."

"Downstairs?"

Red nodded, those pale eyes twinkling. "That's where the playrooms are. Some have windows for folks who like to be watched, but they've got private rooms, too. You play, Little Blue?"

Little Blue? Oh, my mask.

"Uh...not really." Demir wasn't sure how honest to be with this guy, who was watching him like he wanted to pounce. And Demir would probably let him, because who better to have sex with for the first time than an older guy who probably had loads of experience? "Not with an audience, anyway. Not sure that's my thing."

"Hmm." He stroked a finger down Demir's left arm, a warm touch that made Demir's skin prickle with awareness, and his dick took notice. "You look like you taste all kinds of sweet, Little Blue." Red leaned in, hot breath whispering across Demir's cheek. "Are you sweet?"

“Not always.”

Red chuckled. “I like you.”

Something about the man was familiar, but Demir couldn't put his finger on it. And did it matter? They both wore masks, and neither of them had shared their names. This was exactly what he'd come here for: an anonymous hookup.

Demir cocked his hip. “What do you like about me so far?”

“I like the sound of your voice, and I like your tight little body.” Red rested his hand on Demir's hip. “You got a tight little ass to go with that hot body?”

You have no idea.

He got a grip on his libido, though. Up close, a beta nose could generally identify basic gender, but they couldn't tell if an alpha or omega was mated. And as an older alpha, chances were good this guy was mated, and Demir was done helping other men cheat. “Are you mated?”

Grief flickered in Red's eyes. “Was once. He...passed away a long time ago.”

“I'm sorry.”

“It's an honest question, and I'm glad you asked up front. Some men come for the sex and don't care who might be waiting at home. You've got integrity, and I like that about you. I'd love to show my appreciation in private.”

A ripple of anxiety mixed with anticipation as Demir leaned up and whispered, “Lead the way, Big Red.”

Red smirked, took his hand, and led Demir toward an open door near the kitchen. A door that led downstairs and into the vast unexplored world of anonymous sex.

TWO

DECORATIVE TWINKLE LIGHTS lined the walls of the carpeted staircase leading down. Demir wasn't sure what to expect other than a finished basement. Instead, he found a corridor that reminded him of a small hotel. Doors along both sides. Above each door knob was a small box that was either red or green.

"Green means it's empty," Red murmured in his ear. "It's early yet, so not a lot of folks are down here. Means we can take our time."

Demir shivered and allowed Red to lead him past two doors with wide windows. A quick glance inside showed a bed and not much else. Red opened a door without a window, and this room was much the same. A double-bed made up with sheets and pillows. A small table with a drawer, a big pump bottle of artificial slick on top of it. Simple, but cozy, and a fake window and curtains above the headboard made Demir feel less like he was in the basement of a stranger's home.

Red shut the door. The lock snapped into place, and Demir's entire body jolted. He was really doing this. Having sex with an anonymous alpha he'd never see again. Maybe a fellow beta would have been better for this, but it wasn't as if the alpha was going to spring a knot. That only happened during an omega's heat cycle, because of shared pheromones.

Red slid two large arms around his waist from behind and pressed his hairy chest to Demir's naked back. A thick erection slid against his ass, and Demir swallowed. "You nervous, Little Blue? Ever played with an alpha before?"

"No."

"You're not nervous?"

“I’m nervous, and I’ve never done anything with an alpha. Only a beta.”

“Only one beta?” Red’s fingertips skimmed the top of Demir’s slacks, the light touches waking Demir’s dick up to that hand’s proximity.

“I’m a university student. Don’t have time to date.”

“So you get off in an efficient way by coming here, huh? Sounds smart. Like a boy who’s got his entire life figured out.”

“I’m not a boy.”

“To me you are. I’m a horny old man compared to you, Little Blue. A horny old man who likes hard, sweaty fucks, but that’s not you, is it? You want sweet.” Red widened his stance so his erection more firmly pressed between Demir’s cheeks and rubbed in a blatant way. Demir clenched, a little worried about fitting that thing in his ass. “You wanna be seduced.”

“You’re doing a good job so far.” Demir twisted in Red’s arms, needing to see his eyes again. To look and know he wasn’t being jerked around or teased. Red’s pale eyes were intense, focused on him, and he rubbed his cock against Demir’s belly. Emboldened by the older man’s uncensored lust, Demir groped his dick through his jeans.

Red’s nostrils flared. “Something down there you like?”

“Not sure yet.” Demir squeezed Red’s cock harder. He’d almost always enjoyed going down on Theron—except for the last time and he wasn’t thinking about that right now—but Theron was nowhere near as big as Red. So far, though, Red wasn’t directing or commanding when he could easily shove Demir to his knees and demand a blow job. Stuff his mouth, choke off his air.

Instead, Red watched Demir, took cues from him, and Demir...liked it.

Demir took a step back and thumbed open the fly on his own slacks, showing off a new strip of bare belly and the line of his briefs. With a salty smile, Red dropped to his knees and undid the rest of Demir’s fly. Tugged pants and underwear to his ankles, baring Demir’s erection to the stranger.

Except...Red didn’t feel like a stranger anymore. He *was* seducing Demir, instead of simply taking what he wanted like many alphas did. The cadence of Red’s voice, the faint pine-note of his scent, stronger now that he was aroused, eased Demir into a place where he trusted the man. Red wrapped his left hand around the base of Demir’s cock before licking across the head and into the slit. Demir gasped at the sensation and braced one hand on Red’s shoulder for balance.

He hadn’t expected this. All the guys he talked to who slept with alphas

said alphas hated giving head. But Red was about to go down on him without Demir asking.

Who is this guy?

“Oh, darling, you are sweet,” Red said. “Can’t wait to taste your come.”

He dove onto Demir’s cock, licking and sucking, nibbling the foreskin and taking Demir right into his throat. Okay, so Demir didn’t have the longest or thickest dick, but that move impressed the hell out of him—especially when Red swallowed around him. Demir wrapped a hand in Red’s hair, needing to hold something, and that seemed to delight Red. He growled softly as he massaged Demir’s balls, deep-throating him over and over, until Demir was...oh shit!

“Gonna come,” Demir said. He tried to pull Red off, but Red kept his lips wrapped around Demir’s cockhead and worked his shaft, until Demir came in his mouth. His thighs trembled and his belly wobbled as Red made a show of swallowing, licking his lips with a wet smack, then licking Demir’s cock clean.

“So sweet, Little Blue. Damn.”

Demir collapsed on the edge of the bed, a bit dizzy from his orgasm. It had happened so fast, way faster than Theron had ever gotten him off. Red impressed him further by helping Demir untangle his pants from his shoes, getting everything off. Red stepped back and openly eye-fucked him while he got out of his own shoes and jeans. The sight of his impressive erection made Demir’s mouth water, even as his hole clenched again.

Red stepped closer, and Demir reached out. Wrapped his slender fingers around that thick shaft. Stroked him a few times. “You gonna get it nice and wet for your pretty little hole?” Red asked with a seductive purr.

Demir wasn’t so sure about that fitting in his mouth, much less his ass, so he turned on some sass. “How do you know my hole is pretty? You haven’t even seen it yet?”

Red’s eyes narrowed. Challenge accepted. Red dove for the bed, his big body easily overpowering Demir’s, and Demir put up the required struggle, but he wasn’t afraid. Not even as Red wrestled him onto his stomach and settled over him, that thick cock nestled between his cheeks. Red could so easily just shove it in, take what he wanted...but he wouldn’t. Demir couldn’t explain why he knew Red wouldn’t.

He’d never implicitly trusted an alpha stranger before. Never.

But he trusted Red.

Red dropped kisses along his shoulders, occasionally nipping at his skin, waking it to the unexpected sensations. Demir writhed beneath him, enjoying the play, his dick perking back up to the fun still happening. Red licked along his spine, down to the small of his back. The top of his ass. No one had ever touched him there, and Demir sucked in a breath.

Fingers parted his cheeks, and Demir held back a squeak of surprise. Hot air gusted across his hole seconds before Red's tongue swiped at the muscle. "Holy shit," Demir gasped. "Do that again."

Red growled and attacked his hole with the same gusto with which he'd blown Demir only a few minutes earlier. Licking, nibbling, sucking on the skin. Stabbing with his tongue. When a thick finger slipped into his ass for the first time, Demir cried out at the unfamiliar sensation of being penetrated. Demir humped the bed, his body going crazy, at once demanding the finger get out and also push in deeper.

"You are a vocal one," Red said. He bit Demir's left cheek just to hear him holler. Then he was gone and before Demir could object, Red was back with the slick. His finger slid inside more easily, and Demir sighed, relaxing into the single digit fucking his ass. To the kisses and nips Red dropped all along his cheeks while he played.

Then Red crooked his finger downward, pressed against something, and Demir shouted as pure pleasure raced up his spine. "Holy shit, oh goddess." Red massaged his prostate a few more times, before easing a second finger inside along the first. It burned but in a good way, and Demir couldn't censor the sounds falling from his mouth.

"You are tight," Red said. "Tight and sweet and so pretty with your ass spread for me like this. I'm a bit jealous of this other beta for having you first."

Demir flinched. "He didn't."

Red's fingers paused inside him. "You're a virgin?"

"Just to anal." When Red didn't resume finger-fucking him, Demir glanced over his shoulder. Red's expression was tender and a little sad. "What?"

"You sure you want to do this for the first time with an old man wearing a mask?"

"Yes." Demir shoved Red's hand away so he could turn over and face the now-hesitant alpha. "I came here to have sex. I chose you. I want it to be you, Big Red."

Red studied his face a beat, his eyes dropping to Demir's lips a few times, and it occurred to Demir that they hadn't kissed yet. Demir leaned in, curious, but Red avoided him. "I'm sorry, Little Blue, I don't kiss."

"Oh. Okay." Disappointed, Demir held his hand instead. "Are we still fucking? Because I really, really want your dick in me before the night's done."

The dirty talk lit a fire in Red's eyes again. Maybe Red didn't kiss on the mouth, but he kissed every other inch of bare skin he could find on Demir's body. Taking his time, worshipping Demir's nipples and abs and navel. Teasing his kneecaps, even his feet. No one had ever sucked on his toes before, and Demir nearly came again from that sensation alone. Red took him apart bit by bit, until Demir was a panting, writhing mess with precome painting his lower belly.

"Please, please, please," Demir gasped, so thoroughly deconstructed he couldn't form any other word.

Red turned him back onto his stomach, Demir a boneless mess who could do little to assist. Stuffed a pillow under his lower belly to tilt Demir's ass into the air. "I know you're a virgin, but I'm not," Red said. "I've had a clear bill of health my whole life, but these rooms have rubbers if you'd rather I use one. Up to you."

Demir wasn't sure how to make that decision. There were only a handful of minor STD's out there, more frequently shared among younger betas, and all Demir wanted was to feel Red's cock in his ass.

"You're hesitating, so how about I use one?" The bed dipped. A drawer opened and closed. Demir listened to the sound of the condom opening. Sliding down Red's cock. Slick being added from the bottle. Red coaxed more slick into Demir's hole with those two wicked fingers, fucking him so slowly Demir was on the cusp of begging again.

"Gonna go real slow for you, Little Blue. I'm gonna watch your sweet hole stretch for my cock. Gonna hear you gasp and moan, but I need you to hear me." A warm hand touched the back of Demir's neck. "If you feel real pain, you tell me, okay? I'm not small, and I'd never forgive myself if I tore you."

Demir shivered at both the idea of being hurt like that and the tender cadence of Red's voice—like a lover of years, rather than an hour. "I'll tell you," Demir replied. "Promise."

"Good." Red removed his fingers, repositioned Demir's hips a bit, and

then reached down to tug on Demir's cock. "Don't worry if you can't stay hard the whole time. Not everyone can. But I promise, you'll come a second time before our night's over."

"Guh." Demir couldn't manage anything else.

"Bear down, sweetheart." Blunt heat nudged at Demir's entrance, held steady a beat to let Demir feel it, and then pushed in. Demir tried to do as asked, but the stretch made him lose his concentration, and all he could do was feel. Red thrust in short, tiny motions, getting his hole used to the idea before pressing deeper. It burned but in the best, most erotic way of Demir's short life.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck," Demir panted. "Oh!"

"You with me, Little Blue? Too much?"

"Fuck no, more." Demir arched his back, needing more. "So good."

"You are so pretty, spreading like this to take me in." A finger brushed his rim, and Demir moaned. He never thought dirty talk would get him off so much but it did. He liked Red's dirty talk. A lot. "You don't have a lot of me in you yet, but we're getting there. You're sucking me in, taking me just right."

"Guh." Demir clawed at the sheet, perspiration dotting his face and neck, and he nearly ripped the damned mask off for some relief. He had half a mind to shove backward and impale himself, but the words "tore you" kept him from going too fast. Red knew what he was doing. Red eased in and out, then in more and out less, until surely he had to be fully seated.

Demir reached back, curious, and he moaned into the mattress when he felt at least two more inches of cock outside his ass. No way he could take the whole thing. "Yeah, I think this is good for now," Red said, somehow reading Demir's mind. He used shallow thrusts as he jerked Demir's flagging erection. The pressure on his cock and in his ass swirled together to drive Demir out of his fucking mind. He made incoherent noises, each one jolted out of him by Red's push into his body.

"So pretty," Red said, those naughty fingers again rubbing the stretched skin of Demir's asshole. "You're doing so well for me, Little Blue. So fucking well. How does it feel?"

"Full. Tight. Never...imagined."

"You're the perfect little bottom, aren't you? You love this."

"Yes." He loved everything from the dick in his ass to the cadence of Red's mesmerizing voice, to the dirty, dirty descriptions of what Demir's

body looked like. “More.”

Red gave him more. Demir lost his ever-loving mind to the barrage of thrusts, the thick slide of Red’s cock, the squelching of slick and smacking of skin on skin as Red finally worked his entire length inside. Red held his hips in a near-bruising grip as he fucked him, and Demir swore he felt that alpha cock in his throat.

“Yes, yes, yes,” Demir whispered, over and over, practically a prayer as his body soared. He wasn’t even hard anymore, and it didn’t matter. Never in a thousand years would he have believed sex could be this amazing, this life-changing.

Oh yes, Demir Higgs liked getting fucked, and he really liked getting fucked by a big alpha cock.

Who are you? Can I keep you?

“I’m Big Red, Little Blue,” Red replied, and shit, had Demir asked those questions out loud? “We’re each other’s for tonight. Is that all right?”

It wasn’t, but this was the arrangement they’d agreed on, so Demir nodded and let go. Gave his body to Red for whatever use he saw fit. Red turned Demir onto his back, hitched Demir’s legs up over his shoulders and slid back inside, fucking him so hard the bed frame rattled. Demir didn’t care. If he only got this once, he’d enjoy every blessed second of it. Red toyed with his cock and balls, and the pressure felt amazing. Demir longed for Red to lean down and kiss him, but Red didn’t kiss.

Red did lean down, but to suck on one of Demir’s nipples. Demir clenched, and Red shouted at the added pressure. “You wanna taste my come, Little Blue? Want me to cover your face with my spunk?”

Demir wasn’t sure. He didn’t mind swallowing, but all over his face?

“How about in your mouth, then?” Red asked, again bizarrely in-tune with Demir. Were his thoughts really that easy to read? Demir nodded, though, much preferring that option.

Red fucked him a while longer, hips gaining speed, practically shoving Demir higher up the bed with each pounding thrust. So hard, so fast Demir wasn’t sure he could take much more. Then Red eased out, stripped off the condom and knelt over Demir’s head. Knees by his ears. “Open for me,” Red said.

Demir did, nerves fluttering in his belly. But Red didn’t shove his cock inside, merely held it steady. Demir licked the weeping head, while Red jerked himself to orgasm. Thick come shot into Demir’s mouth, and he did

his best to swallow, loving the taste of the big man. The way he towered over Demir without scaring him, allowing Demir to suck on him instead of fucking into his throat.

Why did this have to be so perfect?

Grief over this being a one-off pulled Demir back into his own head a little more. Red dropped a kiss to his sweaty forehead, before he began playing with Demir's body again. Making his nipples ache, his dick swell, and after all those touches and pinches and licks had swirled together into one motion caressing his whole body, Red swallowed another load.

Demir floated in the aftermath of the best sex of his life, while Red held him around the waist, their heads sharing a pillow.

"How do you feel?" Red whispered after an eternity of silence.

"Dunno. Good." Demir clenched and yeah, ouch. Big ouch, but so worth it. "I might need a pillow to drive myself home, but this was incredible, Big Red. Thank you." He rolled onto his side, grateful when Red allowed Demir to snuggle against his chest and tuck his head under Red's chin. To breathe in the man's sweat and musk and unique, faint scent of pine.

"You're very welcome." Red's large hand lightly caressed his ass, fingers teasing his crease. "I'm so happy to have met you tonight, but I meant what I said. Only tonight."

"I know." Demir closed his eyes so he didn't cry. "Do we have to leave the room yet?"

"No one's pounding on the door, so no. We don't have to leave yet, Little Blue."

"Thanks. You realize I'll now compare every future sex partner I have with you, right?"

Red chuckled, the sound vibrating into Demir's chest. "You'll forget me soon enough."

Never.

But Demir had to find a way to let go after tonight and move on. Maybe he'd make a concentrated effort to meet someone at the Winter Solstice gala next weekend. Someone who'd romance Demir, sweep him off his feet, and make him forget about this night of passion, fun, and hard fucking.

Doubtful, but he'd try.

Bells chimed somewhere in the room, and Red groaned. "It's a signal that there are people waiting, so if anyone's done to please vacate. As much as I enjoy holding you, I can't be selfish."

Demir hated losing this, but it had always been temporary. He cleaned himself up with wipes from the little table's drawer, then tossed them into a trash can. He did need to pee, so maybe going upstairs was a good thing. They dressed slowly, apart, not talking, as each new layer of clothing put distance between them and their incredible sex.

In the corridor, he kept his head down, cheeks flaming even though no one could see who he was. They still knew he'd had sex with Red. Demir wasn't embarrassed by the sex, just that people *knew*. They passed the rooms that had gathered an audience and went upstairs.

"Where's the bathroom?" Demir asked Red when they'd rejoined the bulk of the party. Some guests were making out on the furniture, but no one was openly groping or fucking. Probably house rules.

"That way, second door on the left." Red pointed.

"I have to pee. I'll be right back."

Red smiled and nodded. Demir tossed him a sassy wink and joined the short line for the toilet. He felt the ache in his ass now, and okay, they'd gone hard. Maybe a little too hard for his first time. But every sore spot was worth it. Demir had never felt as free, as alive as he had while Red played his body like a practiced instrument. Knowing exactly how to touch him, lick him, drive him inside and out.

He did his business, washed up, and went to the spot where he'd left Red.

No Red.

Demir searched the entire downstairs of the house, and he even ventured back down to the basement, hoping for one more glimpse, one more word of conversation. But a sad reality stole over Demir on his second circuit of the house, and he tried not to let grief crush him. Because he'd known. Deep down, he'd known this was coming.

His Big Red was gone.

THREE

AS A SENIOR CONSTABLE who oversaw the weekly night shift, Brandt Lars was no stranger to sleepless nights, even on weekends. Usually, he wasn't asleep because his body was attuned to being awake while it was dark and asleep when light, and the schedule helped feed his solitary existence. And for many, many years after Ollie went missing, he was content to grieve alone in their shared home.

But eight months ago, he'd marked the ten-year anniversary of Ollie's disappearance. The constabulary had declared the case cold four years prior, but ten years. Ten. Years. Ollie was gone, and Brandt had no life. No friends. More than once since that anniversary, Brandt had sat in his recliner at home with his service weapon on his lap, and he'd stared at it. Wondered if he had the strength to end his boring, lonely, meaningless existence.

To perhaps meet his Ollie again in the neverlife.

Three months ago, he'd put the gun barrel in his mouth. The instant the metal touched his tongue, he'd heard Ollie screaming in horror, "No!" The taste of gun oil had made Brandt vomit all over himself and the gun, and he'd never done it again. Never even thought about it. His beloved wouldn't have wanted Brandt to die. Brandt wasn't sure he wanted to live, but he no longer desired death.

Death would come when it was ready.

The first time he ever attended one of Beau Quill's sex parties had been four weekends ago, and Brandt had found partner after partner to fuck all night long, and he was often one of the last men to leave. Sated but still disconnected, he'd eagerly accepted the invitation to tonight's party.

Big. Fucking. Mistake.

He sat on the little house's front porch, sipped a beer, watched the sunrise, and all Brandt could see, hear or smell was Little Blue.

My perfect, sassy, sexy Little Blue, and I gave him up.

Whoever was under that mask, Little Blue deserved better than Brandt. Better than a widowed alpha so despondent, so disconnected, he'd nearly killed himself. That little beta brat deserved another beta like himself, someone who'd love him, pamper him, and who wasn't twice his age.

I can't believe I fucked a university student.

He'd known Little Blue was young, even with the mask, but hearing how young? Brandt had never found himself so attracted to a beta before, never mind someone Little Blue's age. Not once. Ever. So why Little Blue? He'd seemed familiar in a way Brandt couldn't put his finger on, as if he'd caught the boy's honey-sweet scent in passing once. But Brandt rarely socialized, unless he was having beers with his coworkers on a rare evening off.

No, he drank most of his beer in the morning now, alone on his stoop. Sometimes it felt stupid to have stayed in a house that held so many painful memories. Memories of frantic searches, long days and nights wondering, weeks ranting and raving at the sky for taking his mate away. But this house also held amazing memories of the life they'd built together.

A life he couldn't let go of. He'd probably die in this house, alone, if the job didn't kill him first.

Brandt pulled from his longneck, savoring the familiar bite of his favorite drink.

Does Little Blue like beer?

What did it matter? He'd never see the kid again, and they were both better off. Well, the kid was better off. Last night, Brandt had tasted something he hadn't had in over a decade: connection. Real, genuine human connection, and not just with the sex, but in how they talked to each other. How easy it was for Brandt to read Little Blue's body language, his hesitations and uncertainty, and Brandt responded. He wanted to spend the rest of his life sinking his cock into that tight little hole after licking it open for hours. Maybe he'd never knot again if he took up with a beta, and that was okay. His knot had been for his bondmate, and his bondmate was gone.

Gone where, he'd never know. Dead? Alive? Happy? In pain?

No, it was easier to believe and to tell others he'd passed away. Little Blue had looked so sad when Brandt told him his mate was gone, and Brandt had been proud of the boy for checking that Brandt was single before the sex

happened. There had been a small amount of wariness there, too, and he'd wondered if someone had recently broken Little Blue's heart.

Who was he under that mask? Brandt couldn't very well go sniff every beta university student until he found his Blue, but it was tempting. So very tempting.

His mobile rang, and for one brief, shining moment, he hoped it was Blue. But they hadn't exchanged numbers. They hadn't even exchanged first names. Simply Little Blue and Big Red, anonymous as they were meant to be.

Annoyed at himself, he flipped the phone open without checking the ID. "Lars."

"Hey, it's Bloom."

Fellow constable Tarek Bloom had recently been promoted to Senior Constable, and he'd taken over the daytime supervising job from Isa Higgs when Higgs was promoted to Chief. Technically, as a standing Senior Constable, Brandt should have been up for the daytime gig, but Brandt preferred nights, so he didn't fuss. Plus, Bloom had a mate and young son at home who probably loved knowing their alpha would still be there at night.

The perfectly little family Brandt never got to have.

"What can I do for you, Bloom?" Brandt asked. They were friendly at work now but not friends, and neither of them worked weekends unless division was short-staffed. They'd had a horrendous flu outbreak two winters ago and it had been all-hands-on-deck for two weeks, with very few breaks.

"I'm actually calling on behalf of Braun," Bloom replied. Braun was his omega bondmate. "Now that we're both senior constables and closer colleagues, Braun would like for you to come over for dinner tonight. Unless you already have plans."

His plans were a TV dinner and more beer. A home-cooked meal sounded like heaven, and maybe being around people would help him not brood over Little Blue. "That's a very thoughtful invitation, and please tell Braun I said so. If it's not an inconvenience, I'd like to accept."

"Excellent, and it's no inconvenience. And please bring a plus-one if there's anyone."

Brandt bit his tongue hard to keep a tart response inside. "Happily single but I appreciate the thoughtfulness all the same."

"No problem. Six o'clock tonight?"

"Sounds good. Thank you, Tarek."

“You’re welcome, si—Brandt.”

Brandt smiled at the bitten-off “sir.” He’d been Bloom’s supervisor for many years, so some habits died hard. “See you tonight.” He closed his phone, his mood buoyed by the looming dinner date. Brandt couldn’t honestly remember the last time anyone had invited him to their home for dinner and that was sad. Really, truly sad. He was the very definition of a hermit when he wasn’t working. Yes, he’d gotten better since the gun incident but he still had no real friends.

Maybe tonight was the first step toward getting a life. A life both Ollie and Little Blue would be proud of.

Please.



Brandt was well-rested, showered, and dressed by the time he hit the road, giving himself a few extra minutes to swing by the store and buy a bottle of wine for his hosts. He wasn’t sure of their tastes or tonight’s menu, so he chose a simple merlot. The combined Bloom/Cross household shared a two-story home, with lawyer Ronin Cross living upstairs with his family, and Tarek’s clan on the first floor. The two alphas had mated omega brothers who were incredibly close, and living on top of each other seemed to work for them.

Brandt had no family he spoke to anymore, and he tried not to let that macabre thought pull him under as he parked on the street in front of the house. The door opened before Brandt had a chance to knock and a little boy gazed up at him. He had his omegin’s bright green eyes but everything else about him resembled Tarek.

“You’re big,” the boy said.

“And you’re quite small.” Brandt knelt on one knee so he could see the child more directly. “Hello, young man. You’re Rei, aren’t you?”

“Yup. And you’re a constable. You work with Papa.”

“Yes, I do work with your papa.”

“Rei, let the man inside.” Braun’s semi-familiar voice drifted outside a moment before the omegin did. He wore an apron and a patient smile. “Thank you for accepting my invitation, Constable. It means a lot.”

“I appreciate the invitation a great deal, and please, call me Brandt

tonight. This is for you.” He held out the bottle of wine.

“You didn’t have to, but thank you.” Braun waved him in. “Please.”

The apartment was a big, open floor plan as far as the living room, dining room and kitchen mattered, and the entire downstairs smelled like garlic and tomatoes. Tarek Bloom stood near the sofa, and he came over to shake Brandt’s hand.

“Ronin and Branson will be down in a few,” Tarek said. “The twins are being fussy, so Kell volunteered to keep them upstairs unless they behave.”

Every time Brandt heard the word twins he marveled that a pair had been born here in Sansbury four years ago. A healthy pair of alpha/omega twins. Ronin and Kell Cross had endured months of public scrutiny after their birth, but once they’d slaked public interest with photo ops and a few interviews, their lives had settled once more.

There were, he noted, bars on the downstairs windows and front door. Braun and Kell were both outspoken advocates for omega rights, and more than once the constabulary had investigated threats made against them and their families.

“I’d love to see the twins if they make an appearance,” Brandt said, smiling fondly as little Rei went for a pile of toys. “I do enjoy the company of small children.”

“How much do you charge to babysit?” Braun asked with a teasing grin. “Seriously, though, I think the twins are reliving their terrible twos again in their fours. I’ve never seen such a stubborn pair of children and never mind trying to separate them for more than five minutes.”

“Oh?”

He followed Braun deeper into the apartment, past a dining table to the kitchen where Braun began opening the wine. “Yeah, Emory got in trouble this afternoon for saying a bad word, thanks to Branson’s big mouth,” Braun continued. “Ronin punished Emory by making him stand in the corner, and Caden didn’t like that, so he got all alpha and decided to start screaming the same cuss word, hoping to get punished alongside his brother.” Braun popped the cork out and smirked at Brandt. “Caden got punished, but he had to stand in the corner of another room for twice as long.”

“The little alpha thought he could outsmart his parents, eh?” Brandt said.

“Guess so. Kell’s been so stressed about his speech for the upcoming constable summit, he just let Ronin take care of it.”

“The summit isn’t for another three months.”

“Kell takes his speeches very seriously,” Tarek said. “Especially when he’ll be speaking in front of constables from every province in the territory.”

Made sense.

The front door opened. Ronin Cross stepped inside with a boy who was the spitting image of Kell. Branson was tall for only being six-and-a-half, and he ran straight to where Rei was playing. “I found something on your front porch,” Ronin said.

He moved out of the way, and two more familiar faces entered the house. Dex Freel used to run the main records room at division before going part-time to raise the little boy who also ran over to play with Branson and Rei. Dex was beta and had adopted with his husband Serge, and what was the kid’s name?

“I hope you don’t mind two more for dinner,” Dex said as he came over to shake Brandt’s hand, the other steadying himself on a cane. He’d walked with a limp for as long as Brandt had known the man, but it had become less pronounced in recent years after yet another surgery. “Gaven and I were supposed to have a play date with Jax’s kids, but Karson came down with a cold, and we decided not to spread the germs around.”

Gaven, yes, that was his name. So many children.

“Good plan,” Braun said. “You know you guys are always welcome. I made lasagna for us and chicken fingers for the picky eaters, so there’s plenty to go around. Brandt, I assume you’d like wine?”

“Yes, please,” Brandt replied. He allowed himself to be directed to a chair and observed the easy way this bonded family moved around each other. Getting kids into chairs and booster seats, passing around garlic bread, salad, and drinks. Branson was apparently the picky eater, because he wanted chicken fingers and ketchup and a breadstick, but nothing could touch each other on his plate. The other two boys had a chicken finger each because their eldest playmate had one, but they also ate a bit of the lasagna.

The food was delicious, and Brandt found himself enjoying the simple conversations about work, parenting, and the goofy things their kids did to keep their parents on their toes. Even the little ones chimed in with stories of their own, all of them excited school was out for the next two weeks. Brandt wasn’t subjected to any personal questions from the adults, and for that he was grateful.

Naturally, one of the children piped up with, “Why are you so old?” Branson asked directly at Brandt.

“Branson, that’s rude,” Ronin said.

“It’s all right.” Brandt chuckled. “I’m not all that much older than your Uncle Tarek there.” He wasn’t sure what Branson called Ronin, so he didn’t say “your dad, too” since Ronin wasn’t his biological father, despite having raised the boy since infancy. “I’ve just stressed myself into early gray and a few extra wrinkles.”

“He looks like Pappy,” Gaven added, clearly delighted at having made the connection.

“And who is Pappy, young man?” Brandt asked.

“My granddad. He lives way south where it’s always warm.”

“Serge’s dad,” Dex added. “We’ve visited his parents a few times since Gaven was born.”

“They’re close?”

“Extremely. I adore them, and they’ve always treated me like their son and not just someone Serge married.” Something in Dex’s eyes flickered, suggesting his own parents hadn’t been so generous. “I wish we could go more, but Serge’s job keeps him tied to the hospital so much it’s hard to plan long trips.”

“I imagine so. He’s an ICU nurse, correct?”

Dex beamed and rattled on about his husband, clearly proud of everything about Serge. On a break in conversation, Branson—obviously the most curious of the trio of boys—turned to Brandt again and asked, “Where’s your mate? You’re an alpha, right? You should have a mate.”

Brandt blinked at the innocent child, a bit stumped by all the questions. “I had a mate when I was much younger, about your Uncle Braun’s age. But my mate passed away a long time ago.”

“Oh. That’s sad.”

“It was very sad. He was a wonderful man, and I miss him very much. But I think he’d be happy to see me sitting here, making new friends.”

That seemed to perk Branson back up, because he finished eating his breadstick. Brandt sipped his wine, ignoring what felt like pointed stares from Dex and Tarek. Both men had been fairly new to the constabulary, Tarek still a patrolman and not on Brandt’s radar yet, when Ollie disappeared. They knew the case had been declared cold and eventually closed, even though no one ever knew what became of Ollie Lars.

The kids excused themselves to play, while Braun got up to serve coffee. Brandt passed. “The food was delicious,” Brandt said.

“Thank you,” Braun replied. “It was great having you here. I’m so sorry about your mate, but I’m glad you’re getting out of the house more.”

“It was far beyond time.”

“I don’t suppose you’re looking to date again?”

“Braun.” Tarek swatted his mate on the ass. “Leave him be.”

Braun tossed his alpha a heated look before collecting dirty dishes. He obviously hadn’t meant any harm with the question, and Brandt wasn’t offended. But he also got the impression Braun was the nosy sort, like his nephew, and Tarek seemed used to tempering his mate’s worst habits.

“Brandt,” Tarek said. “Share a beer with me on the front porch?”

The question held a small measure of “can we talk in private?” so Brandt nodded. Tarek fetched two cans of beer from the fridge, and they went outside into the bracing cold air. Even in his winter coat, Brandt felt the chill to his bones. Maybe moving south where it was always warm wasn’t such a bad idea. He could leave it all behind: Ollie, the house, Little Blue, the memories.

“I hope no one offended you tonight,” Tarek said. “Branson is harmless, but I suspect your mate is a touchy subject.”

“It is and no, I wasn’t offended, least of all by a child’s curiosity.” Brandt sipped at the beer, not used to the mild flavor of this brand. “Those children are precious, Tarek. You’re a lucky man.” His eyes burned and not from the cold. “We didn’t get a chance to tell many people before Ollie disappeared but he was pregnant. Finally pregnant with our first child.”

“Fuck, I am so sorry. Goddess.”

“I lost more than just my mate that day, I lost my entire life. And I became the worst version of myself. I know I’ve been a bastard, to you directly and to others in the division, and I’m working on that. I don’t want to be the Senior Constable everyone’s scared of anymore.”

“I’m glad to hear that. Sir.” Tarek winked at him. “You did ride me pretty hard, especially back when I first met Braun. Hard to believe it’s been more than six years since all that went down.”

“Yes, it is.” He didn’t have to ask for clarification about “all that.” Events that had begun nearly six-and-a-half years ago.

Newly orphaned and alone, Braun had escaped from a halfway house for omegas after witnessing illegal activity. With help from the constabulary, they’d raided the halfway house and rescued eleven other omega orphans. They arrested the house owner, but the monster killed himself in jail while

awaiting his trial for human trafficking. The omegas were housed in a secure wing of the hospital pending new placement, and then one night they disappeared. Brandt had been furious and lashed out at everyone for losing those eleven precious lives.

He'd always suspected Braun of being part of it, and Tarek had been briefly suspended pending an investigation, but they'd never found proof. And after so many years, all Brandt could really do was hope those omegas were safe and happy, wherever they were.

"For what it's worth," Tarek said, "I think I understand you a bit better now. And I'm so sorry for your losses."

"Thank you, Tarek. That means a great deal to me. It's been difficult watching you men fall in love and have children of your own. Hell, even Higgs has a new mate and kids. It was just never in the cards for me, I suppose."

"It's hard to move on when you aren't sure if you're cheating on your mate, or if they've passed away. I can't imagine what I'd do if I lost Braun that way, him simply vanishing into thin air. I'd lose my mind."

"But you'd still have Rei and Kell's family. You wouldn't be alone like I was."

"You're right. And I still have family in other provinces, spread across the territory. I'm sorry you went through that alone."

"It's the past, and I can't keep living there." His mind flashed back to Little Blue, cuddling in bed after they fucked. "Even if I never mate again, I can create some semblance of a new life. With friends?"

Tarek smiled and clinked his beer against Brandt's. "With friends."

FOUR

LIAM KNEW.

Demir didn't have a clue how Liam knew, but he shot Demir knowing glances all freaking weekend, and it was getting on Demir's nerves. Okay, so he'd gotten home late after the party because he'd driven in circles for hours, despite his sore ass, hoping everyone was asleep by the time he showed. But Liam had waited up.

"Theron called the house line looking for you," Liam had said. "He said you'd broken up with him, and he wanted to make sure you were okay."

"Yeah, well, when Theron's married and I'm the piece on the side?" Demir had snapped back. "Easy reason to break up, and can we talk about it tomorrow? I'm exhausted."

Liam stared at Demir's neck a beat, then nodded. "Yeah, go to bed."

It wasn't until Demir was in the bathroom, peeling off his shirt to take a real shower and wash the last of Big Red off him, that Demir saw the hickeys. So he wore a turtleneck the next day, avoided sitting on hard surfaces, and spent most of the day in the library and away from Liam and his talks. He adored Liam, who'd always been more of a friend than a parent, but Demir wasn't ready to talk about his night.

Or Big Red.

The next day, after helping Linus and Layne set up their promised art exhibit in the hallway, Demir volunteered to take them to the outdoor ice rink to play, so Liam and Dad could have a date day, or whatever. Naturally, Tarius showed up because Liam had probably told him where to find his little brothers. Demir could always talk to Tarius when he was upset, so Liam had picked a good substitute.

“So Theron,” Tarius said. They stood on the side of the frozen pond and watched their brothers skate around, both of them pretty good for their pint-sized ages.

“Yeah.” Demir shoved his gloved hands deeper into his pockets. “Son of a fucker was married the whole time and he never told me.”

Tarius grunted. “Asshole. Want me to beat him up for you?”

Demir laughed because Tarius was the gentlest, least violent soul he knew. “Nah, but thanks. The timing couldn’t have been better, actually, because I was ready to go all the way with him that night.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, well, it worked out, because I found someone to take care of it for me.”

“Take care of it?” Tarius physically turned Demir to face him, his eyes sharp and angry. “Theron cheated so you what? Found some random stranger to have sex with?”

“Yes.”

Tarius’s lips pressed into a thin line. “Look, I’m not going to lecture you, because what’s done is done, so I’ll ask a question instead. Are you okay with everything that happened?”

“Yes.” Not a moment’s hesitation, because Big Red had taken incredible care of Demir two nights ago. “It was so good, Tarius, I swear. The guy was super-patient and sweet, but also kind of dirty, and I had a fantastic time.”

“So are you seeing him again?”

“No.” His cheeks were already red from the cold, so his brother probably couldn’t see Demir blush. “It was an anonymous hookup. No names, no phone numbers. It’s what we both wanted.” Until the end, when Demir wanted more. “I was tired of being the only virgin in my level, okay? I thought I needed hearts and flowers, but apparently I just needed a super-hot, older alpha with a big dick.”

Tarius rolled his eyes. “I really didn’t need to know that. But you solemnly swear you aren’t hurt or otherwise regret anything about that night?”

“Honestly? The only thing I regret is I’ll never see him again.” Might as well toss it all out there. “It was a party where everyone wore masks. He could be out there skating right now and I wouldn’t know.”

“Boy, you sure did want anonymous, didn’t you?”

“I thought I did. Like I said, I’ll never see him again, so it’s better to

move on and forget, right? But please keep this our secret? Tell Liam I'm fine if you have to, but no details."

Tarius's lips twitched. "We're that obvious, huh?"

"Yeah. You'd never make it as a secret agent, dude."

"Good thing I like being a paralegal, then." Tarius nudged him with his shoulder. "So it was good, huh? The sex?"

"It was epic. Definitely wouldn't have been that good with Theron. He had a pencil dick compared to my hookup."

Tarius snorted. "Better up your ass than mine, I guess."

"Dude, really? You're a top?"

His brother just smirked at him. Huh. Guess everyone had their preferences, and while Demir was curious how it would feel being the one sliding his dick into a tight hole, he really, really loved the opposite.

Linus's distinctive cry made it to them, and they followed the sound to their baby brother flat out on the ice, with Layne trying to help him up. "I've got them," Tarius said. He carefully made his way out to the boys, since neither of them had skates on. Demir didn't need to wipe out and crash down on his still-tender ass.

Once Tarius had the boys sorted, he slide-walked his way back to the hard earth beyond the ice. "He was more scared than hurt, just needed some reassurance."

Demir slung an arm across Tarius's shoulders. "Did I ever tell you you're a great big brother?"

"Always bears repeating. Just don't tell Aven I'm your favorite."

They both laughed, but it was true. Tarius was four years older than him, Aven six, and while they'd always been close growing up, Aven had started to drift away from his family a little in recent months. Probably had to do with moving in with Yosef and them planning a future together. But Tarius was always there for Demir, even when Demir didn't know he needed his brother.

Other than when Omegin died, the most traumatic events of Demir's life had happened very quickly less than six years ago. His sire was shot on the job and then, only hours later, Demir was chloroformed by a psycho intent on kidnapping Liam and Layne. Demir didn't remember Mancini drugging him, but he remembered waking up in emergency, disoriented and sick to his stomach. And even though a nurse had examined Demir, he simply didn't believe Mancini hadn't touched him while he was unconscious until after a

doctor did a thorough exam.

Tarius had been by his side during the exam, and he'd slept next to Demir that night, right there both times Demir woke from a nightmare. He'd had frequent nightmares for a few weeks after, as he suspected Liam had, as well. Nightmares of Mancini taking Liam away, of Mancini shooting Dad in the face, of Mancini assaulting Demir while he slept. And even if he had to call Tarius at three in the morning, Tarius talked to him and never complained.

Demir truly had the best big brother ever.

"You wanna get hot chocolate with us after to warm up?" Demir asked.

"Sure. If you're paying."

"Cheapskate."

"Says the uni student still living at home. I'm a working man, I earn my credits. You're on scholarship and still get a stipend."

True. Demir had always been a thrifty spender and had a decent savings. "Fine, I'll pay. Might as well keep splurging."

"What else did you splurge on?"

"Haven't yet, but I want to buy a nice outfit for the gala next weekend. Now that I'm trying this whole dating thing, it seemed like a good place to mingle, since I apparently have a thing for older men."

Tarius side-eyed him. "How much older?"

"Can't say in numbers, but I really liked his gray chest hair."

"Oh goddess, you're impossible."

Demir laughed. "Yeah, I am. Should I go full-on suit and tie, or something more casual?"

"You're asking me for clothing advice? My favorite outfit is jeans and a thermal shirt. Ask Dad for advice."

"No thanks. Do we know anyone else who dresses well?"

"One of my roommates is a clothes snob. I can have him call you with pointers. Ugh, I can't believe I'm helping my little brother get clothing pointers so he can find another hookup."

"Hey, not necessarily a hookup. But I'd rather find someone to date who isn't already married, thank you very much."

"Yeah, definitely not married this time." Tarius's expression flattened. "I kind of want to go egg his gallery for you."

"Egging? Are you still twelve?"

"I can't do anything that'll cause real damage. Our dad is the Chief now, so the last thing he needs is his kid getting arrested for property damage."

Eggs can be washed off.”

Demir shook his head. “I love you but no egging the gallery.”

“Damn. Guess I’ll have to make do with dismembering him in my head.”

“Hell, Tarius, when did you get so bloodthirsty?”

Tarius squeezed his hip. “When some married asshole broke my brother’s heart. No one messes with the Higgs family, dude. No one.”

Family sticks together.



Tarius’s roommate did have some good ideas on clothes for Demir, and they met up early in the week to hit a strip of clothing stores that catered to the younger crowd, and he liked the guy’s company. Not enough to date him or whatever, but they had fun, bought clothes, and got burgers for an early dinner before parting ways.

Liam side-eyed Demir the night of the gala as they all climbed into Dad’s car. Layne had an earache this weekend, and Aven was babysitting him, so it was just their three, plus Linus, who was excited about a big party. He’d been too young the last few years to really understand what was going on. Demir was very happy with his own outfit of black dress slacks, a white button-up shirt, and a silky black vest with silver piping trim. Elegant, classy, and trendy.

The gala marked the first night of the Winter Solstice celebration, and on the fifth night, they would celebrate the new year. But tonight was for fellowship with friends and celebrating the gifts the goddess had bestowed upon them this past year. And drinking. Lots of drinking. Sometimes games, usually door prizes donated from local businesses. It all depended on what the volunteer constables and patrolmen planned.

They always used the Hotel De Fontaine, because it was the oldest, most elegant hotel in the province, and the ballroom was gorgeous. Ornate chandeliers, enormous paintings on the walls surrounded by ornate frames, and so many sculptures on pedestals. It reminded Demir more of an art museum than a hotel, but it wasn’t his venue to critique. He was just a guest.

A valet took Dad’s car away. Demir held Linus’s hand, while Liam clutched at Dad’s arm. Liam wasn’t a huge fan of these gatherings, because of lingering notoriety surrounding his years-ago kidnapping, but he’d

admitted last year's gala hadn't been half-bad in terms of the press trying to get in his face. Hopefully, this year they'd back off completely.

Yeah, right, they're all vultures, especially the gossip rags.

Those jerks used anything they could to insinuate that one of the fight ring omegas was having trouble with his mate, and Demir hated it. Why couldn't the press just let them live their lives? They'd all been through enough. But Karter and Jax Jenks would probably be here, as well as Tarek and Braun Bloom.

Demir didn't see any of them yet, but they'd only just walked into the ballroom. Someone played a piano in the far corner, and he spotted an elevated stage, so maybe someone was going to sing? A refreshments table with food was set up near a free bar, and not far from that were the door prizes for the raffle. The dance floor was still empty, but maybe three dozen people had arrived so far. Still early, still so much potential.

And no one yet close to Demir's age.

Karter and Jax were the first people he knew to show up, and they were alone, which surprised Demir a little. Jax had given birth to their third son a few months ago, and while he looked amazing, rumor was he was a very possessive omegin, especially during the first couple of months.

Maybe they had a heat, so he doesn't have to breastfeed anymore.

Jax was completely mute, and Demir knew enough signal language to interpret Jax's enthusiastic greetings on his own. His alpha mate, Karter, was a constable who worked under Tarek Bloom now, and the few times Demir met Karter, he'd liked the guy. He liked them both. Hell, Demir liked pretty much everyone.

Except Cheating Theron and his husband. I hate them.

Dad introduced Demir to a bunch of colleagues, all of whom were mated or married, and as the first half-hour of the gala passed, he started wondering if this wasn't a huge mistake. These events appeared to be for couples and their kids, or the occasional young, single alpha. But the young ones didn't interest Demir.

Big Red broke me for guys my age.

After the first hour or so of mingling, a man with a beautiful tenor took the microphone and began to sing along with the piano player. Couples migrated toward the dance floor, and Demir hung back with a glass of cola. Dad and Liam were as mismatched as you could get, with Dad's big, bear-ish size, and Liam being so much shorter and slimmer, but damn. The affection

in their eyes as they danced...beautiful. He also spotted Tarek and Braun in the throng, and later Karter and Jax.

The gala itself was open to the public, but it tended to draw a lot of law enforcement. So many of Sansbury's rich and elite had been busted as accessories to various sex trafficking rings that, in some ways, the constabulary had taken their place as the ruling class. Good riddance, though, as the entire territory was working to clean up the trash and protect innocent lives.

A beta guy Demir's age tried flirting with him, but Demir couldn't get into it. Maybe tonight had been a mistake. He drank his cola, and when Dad and Liam left the dance floor for drinks, he trailed them and ordered a beer. Not his favorite, but Demir was getting bored. Maybe he'd take a cab home so Dad and Liam could enjoy their night.

Their trio sipped drinks and watched folks mill around. Linus was in a penned-off corner of the room reserved for the younger children and minded by a pair of older omegins, so their parents could mingle. Demir had half a mind to fake a headache, offer to take Linus with him, and just go home. Forget he'd ever tried this whole dating/mingling/flirting thing.

He well and truly sucked at it.

"Lars, I'm surprised to see you here," Dad said. "It's been years since you've attended the gala."

Demir looked up into the palest blue eyes he'd ever seen, and his heart turned over hard. Gray at the temples. A tall, thick body that filled out his suit like a fucking wet dream. He wasn't close enough, and the room was too crowded for Demir's beta nose to tell, but...was it?

Big Red?

"Chief Higgs," the man named Lars said, and yes, Demir knew that voice. It rippled over his skin like the softest caress. "Mr. Liam, it's good to see you both."

"You as well," Liam replied, giving the man a firm shake.

Lars, Lars, Lars, why do I know that name?

"It's been ages since you've seen my youngest with Herris, probably before he passed," Dad said. "Demir, do you remember Brandt Lars? He's a senior constable down at division. Night shift."

Brandt Lars stared him down like Demir was gum he'd scraped off his shoe before schooling his expression. "Nice to see you again, Demir," he said. "You're all grown up."

Like you don't know it.

Demir put every ounce of challenge he had into his eyes, then grinned and said, "I absolutely have grown up, Constable. Pleasure." He held out his hand, tempting the older man.

Brandt's nostrils flared, and he shook briefly. But the contact was enough to seal it. This was his Big Red in the flesh.

And my dad is his boss. Fuck my life!

"If you'll excuse me," Brandt said, and he wandered off without waiting for a word.

Demir pretended not to watch him go, tracking Brandt's movements out of the corner of his eye. If Brandt Lars had spent even a quarter of the time Demir had spent remembering their time together this week...well, his left hand was exhausted! And Brandt seemed to be heading out of the ballroom.

"Where's the bathroom?" Demir asked. "I drank a lot of cola while you guys danced."

"Out the main doors, to the left," Dad replied.

"Awesome, thanks."

He kept his gait as steady as possible, when he wanted to break out into a run. The hotel had two different public restrooms, designated omega/beta and beta/alpha, which was dumb to Demir, because they all had dicks. Who cared what the gender was beyond that? But, he supposed some young omegas probably objected to pissing next to an unmated alpha.

Or the unmated alphas couldn't be trusted to control themselves, which was the more likely reasoning behind two bathrooms.

Demir ducked into the beta/alpha bathroom, and he wasn't surprised to find Brandt at the trench urinal lining one wall. He didn't look up, so Demir marched over, planted himself right next to Brandt, and said, "Hi, Big Red."

Brandt's hand jerked and nearly sent a stream of piss into the air. "Fucking hell, Little Blue, don't do that."

"I knew it was you." One glance down at Brandt's dick confirmed it. "Hi."

"We can't talk here."

Demir looked under the stalls but didn't see any feet. "Where can we talk, then? You got a room?"

"No." Brandt leveled a dark glare at him that only made Demir's dick twitch with interest. For the first time in his life, an alpha's anger didn't bother him in the slightest, because the trust from a week ago was still there

—and as those pale eyes roved down Demir’s front, so was the lust. “End of the hall. There’s a concierge lounge that no one is using. Five minutes.”

Brandt finished, zipped up, washed his hands and was gone before Demir could think to take a quick leak himself. That had been sudden and...kind of hot. Especially since Brandt hadn’t openly, totally dismissed him.

Dad and Liam will probably be dancing again. No one will notice if I disappear for five minutes...or an hour.

Demir shoved his credit card into the wall dispenser, loving that a hotel of all places offered these things, and bought two items just in case. Then he waited as long as his jumping heart could stand. Two men came inside, so he couldn’t loiter any longer. He strode down the corridor in the correct direction and looked for a door plate that said Concierge Lounge.

No idea what that was, but okay.

A door stood ajar, so Demir slipped inside and pushed the potted plant holding it open out of the way. In the dim light, he spotted a few couches, a table with chairs, a tiny kitchen area, and stacks of meeting room chairs. Huh.

“We can’t do this, Little Blue,” Big Red’s deep voice said from somewhere in the darkness.

Demir squinted into the gloom, desperate for a stronger sense of smell so he could locate his prey. “We can’t talk?”

“Not alone like this. All I want to do is fuck you again, and we can’t.”

“Why not? Erectile dysfunction?”

Brandt’s growl clued Demir in seconds before a big body ensnared his from behind. Thick arms looped around his waist, and a familiar erection nudged into the small of his back. “Does this feel dysfunctional to you?” Hot breath gusted by his ear, smelling like cinnamon and whiskey.

“Are you drunk?” Demir asked.

“No. One shot. You?”

“I barely sipped at one beer, and I bought a condom and slick from the bathroom dispenser.”

Brandt groaned, that lovely cock thrusting against his back. “You are so tempting, Little Blue. But we can’t.”

“Hell yes, we can. I’ve been thinking about you all week. Missing you. Please.” He grabbed one of Brandt’s hands and brought it around. Pressed it to Demir’s own erection. “You make me so hot, Big Red.”

“Fuck.” Brandt massaged him through his slacks. “You are pure temptation in that saucy little black vest. Didn’t figure you for being such a

clothes dandy.”

“Not.” He thrust against Brandt’s hand. “Friend helped. Wanted to find someone tonight. Found you.” Dear goddess, he didn’t usually speak in clipped phrases like this, but Brandt was making him kind of nuts. Demir spun in Brandt’s arms and nipped at the bigger man’s Adam’s apple. “You know you wanna be balls deep in my ass again tonight.”

Brandt growled, and the sound reverberated in Demir’s own balls. The alpha didn’t move, though, so Demir did. He sauntered to the dining table, put the condom and slick packets on the flat surface, and then undid his belt. Shoved his new pants and briefs to the floor and tipped his ass into the air. In the dim light, Brandt’s eyes gleamed. His nostrils flared.

“You little beta brat.” Brandt stalked toward him, and if he’d been a stranger, the intensity of his gaze would have made Demir flee. Instead, he braced his hands and stifled a cry when Brandt dropped to his knees and licked the crease of Demir’s ass. Bit both cheeks in turn. “I’m gonna come so far up your ass, Little Blue, you’ll taste me for days.”

“Fuck, yes.”

Demir held on as his Big Red tried to take him apart with lips, tongue, and teeth, playing familiar magic on his hole. His own rock-hard cock hung heavy and aching, needing more than air, but Brandt ignored him, instead focusing solely on his entrance. When two fingers pushed into his spit-slicked hole, Demir bit his own arm to silence his cries. Saliva soaked his shirt sleeve within moments, because damn! Fingers and tongue worked him open, fucked him together, and Demir was so close. So fucking close to coming with nothing but air on his dick.

Legs shaking with desire and need, Demir knocked the condom to the floor, no longer wanting it, and tried to give the slick to Brandt. “Fuck me, Big Red, now.”

Brandt licked his ass from taint to the small his back before he stood. Rubbed his naked cock against Demir’s hole. “Do naughty, tempting little brats like you really need slick?” A tremor ran down Demir’s spine, and Brandt stilled. Put a hand on the back of Demir’s neck, a grounding touch. “Too far? With the dirty talk?”

“Maybe a little?” Demir liked the dirty talk, but, “Not stuff that could hurt me.”

Lips ghosted across one shoulder. “I’ll remember. I’d never fuck anyone outside heat without slick, I promise.”

“I believe you.”

Brandt traced his thumb down Demir’s crease and pressed inside. “You open so beautifully for me. Am I still the only one who’s had you?”

Demir snorted. “Dude, it’s only been a week.” That wicked thumb thrust deeper and crooked to brush his prostate, and Demir cried out. “Oh fuck, that’s good.”

“I know.”

“You fond of having a thumb up your ass?”

“Depends on the thumb.” He licked the back of Demir’s neck, then blew across the slick skin. “I’ve never been fucked with a dick, but I’ve been fingered. You fond of putting your thumb up an alpha’s ass?”

Demir nearly came on the spot. The mental image of him fingering his Big Red? Mind-blowing. He humped back, needing more, so Brandt swapped his thumb for those two familiar fingers. “Guh.”

“You didn’t answer my question.” Brandt bit his earlobe, and Demir sighed.

“Never fingered anyone before,” Demir replied. “I’ll do it. Anything for you, Big Red.”

Brandt chewed lightly on his earlobe, and Demir squirmed, caught between Brandt’s fingers and mouth, and unsure what he wanted. Curious, he braced his weight on his left hand, then reached behind to grope Brandt’s cloth-covered ass. Press into his crease. Brandt growled in his ear. “Not tonight, Little Blue. Not tonight.”

Does that mean we’re doing this again?

Demir couldn’t bring himself to ask. All he could do was stand there, ass tilted into the air, while Brandt dropped his pants, slathered slick onto his cock, and pushed the rest into Demir’s ass. Fucked him a few more times with those wicked fingers, playing with his gland until Demir nearly shot.

The fingers pulled out and familiar blunt pressure—naked this time, and so much better!—nudged at his hole. Standing like this felt different, more intense somehow. Brandt nudged his legs wider apart with his own knees, one hand on Demir’s hip, the other likely bracing his cock. Brandt entered him with the same care as before, short nudges in, back out, farther in, out. Stretching him so carefully Demir wanted to weep for the glorious press and burn.

Brandt finally reached around to clasp Demir’s cock. The pressure in his ass, the hand on his cock, the dirtiness of fucking over a table with their shirts

on and their pants around their ankles...Demir pressed his mouth into his upper arm and cried out against his shirt, unable to censor himself. He thrust against Brandt, taking his whole length a little too fast, but he needed more. Needed it all.

His Big Red fucked him with both hands on his hips, driving into him with fierce slams against his ass, and Demir took it all. Needed it all, again and again, from this man. Nothing had ever felt so right, so free, so fucking perfect.

Brandt's chest pressed against his back, those practiced hips never stopping, and he bit the back of Demir's neck like an animal claiming its mate. Pure pleasure rippled down Demir's spine, and he shot his load onto the carpet and table, skin tingling where Brandt's teeth still kept hold of his scruff. A few more fierce slams later, and Brandt shoved deep inside. As far as he could possibly go, and Demir felt the heat of his come coating his insides. He fucking *felt* it.

They stood there for several long moments, Brandt still hard in him, teeth on Demir's neck, Demir panting, unable to catch his breath. His arms started shaking, but he couldn't collapse onto the table with Brandt holding him by the neck, which was an oh-so-sweet sting. Brandt's arms circled his waist and pulled Demir up, those teeth finally setting him loose, so Brandt could press Demir's back to his heaving chest.

Standing now and still impaled, Demir didn't know what to do with the heavy emotions swirling inside him. He'd loved everything about this, but Brandt seemed...unsure. That wouldn't do. "Can we stay like this forever, Big Red?"

Tension leaked from Brandt's arms. He licked the bite mark on Demir's neck. "Did I hurt you?"

"Nope. It was intense. I loved it."

Brandt gave a few shallow thrusts, before he pulled out halfway. "Look at my come inside you, Little Blue." Pushed back in. "I like it in there."

"Me too. Gonna ruin my new pants when it leaks back out."

"Not necessarily." He gently eased out of Demir and knelt. "Bend over again."

Demir squeaked but did as asked, uncertain until Brandt shoved his tongue inside Demir's tender, open hole. "Holy fuck!" No one had ever...oh! His eyes rolled back at the unique sensations as Brandt literally cleaned him out, until Demir was half-hard again.

“Better make sure you’re clean,” Brandt said with a wicked growl. A long finger pressed inside, and Brandt played his body until Demir was ready to shoot. “Not gonna miss this load, sweet thing.”

Brandt Lars, a fucking alpha, crawled under the table to suck Demir’s cock into his mouth, and he swallowed every drop when Demir came for the second time in ten minutes. Boneless and ready for a nap, Demir let Brandt assist him in slithering to the floor, his bare butt on Brandt’s soft cock. Demir really, really wanted to kiss him, but he remembered and sucked on Brandt’s neck, instead.

“Fuck, but you make me crazy, Little Blue,” Brandt said. “Haven’t done that in years.”

“Licked come out of someone’s ass? Yeah, that was a first for me too. I loved it.”

“I’m glad.” He kissed Demir’s temple in such a tender way, it almost felt like an endearment. “I’d never forgive myself if I lost my mind and hurt you while we’re having sex.”

“You don’t. I trust you.”

“You barely know me.”

Demir looked up, not liking the hesitation in Brandt’s pale blue eyes. “Let’s get to know each other. Have lunch with me tomorrow.”

Brandt quirked an eyebrow. “Like a date?”

“Yes.”

“I’m thirty-eight. Old enough to be your father.”

“So? You’re the same age Dad was when he met Liam, and Liam was my age. Same age difference.”

“Yes, but they were bondmates.”

Demir’s heart sank. “And I’m just a beta.”

“Hey.” Brandt gently tapped his chin. “You aren’t ‘just’ anything. You are so young, with so much potential. Why would you want to be friends with an old fart like me?”

“Were you in this room with me for the last half-hour? Did you not just fuck my brains out and then lick me clean? And okay, maybe all we have between us is sex, and nothing else in common, but we’ll never know if we don’t, you know, date.”

Brandt studied him with open curiosity, his gaze wandering up and down Demir’s face and body, and it wasn’t even weird that they were sitting in a hotel room with their tackle hanging out, having this conversation. “Your

father is my boss. He'll murder me if he finds out I'm fucking his kid."

"No, he won't. Dad's protective but he's not a helicopter parent. And who says we tell him? If we date and decide we're not compatible as anything other than fuck buddies, he doesn't need to know. My sex life is my sex life."

"And if we *are* compatible?"

"Then we talk again." Demir turned on a seductive smile to hide his worry. "Unless you'd rather we stick to casual sex, because you don't want to get involved with a beta."

"It's not that. I had one bondmate in my life, and losing him turned me into a complete bastard. A grumpy, joyless recluse. One of the reasons I attended the party last weekend was an attempt to be sociable, to try and be out in the world again. I never expected you, Little Blue."

"Got it. Not ready to settle down now that you're out swinging again. Cool." Demir tried to get up, but Brandt's strong arms held him fast. "Let me go."

Brandt immediately released him. The quick acquiescence made Demir pause, but he wanted to pull his pants up. They both stood and fixed their clothes. Demir rubbed the stinging bite mark on the back of his neck, a little worried he'd find blood, but Brandt hadn't broken skin.

"That's not what I meant," Brandt said. "I'm just trying to explain where my head is at. I went to the party looking for sex, and I found a beautiful, vibrant boy who turns me on with a smile, and I don't know what to do with you when we aren't fucking. I'm completely turned around and upside-down."

"Oh." Demir felt a little silly for getting so defensive, but he was new to this too. Theron had been a fun distraction, but this was chemistry in motion. Chemistry he never expected to find with an alpha, and he could clearly see Brandt had never expected to feel it with a beta half his age.

"I suppose this is a long-winded way of saying yes, I'd like to have lunch with you tomorrow, but I'll warn you. I haven't been on a date in about eighteen years."

"Really?"

"Yes. My bondmate Ollie? We grew up as neighbors, and we knew at sixteen we were bondmates, but his parents wanted us to wait until at least eighteen to mate, no matter when his first heat hit, and then they disagreed with my decision to join the constabulary. But Ollie and I were stubborn, and we finally won the argument and mated when we were twenty. I'm not sure

how much of our relationship was dating, as much as it was constantly building our life together.”

“And then you lost him.” Just saying the words sent a wave of grief through Demir’s chest. “I can’t imagine the pain of losing a bondmate.”

“You watched your sire lose his. It can ruin an alpha if they don’t have people around to love them.”

“It almost ruined Dad. His temper got so bad I didn’t want to live at home anymore. And then he met Liam and everything changed. I know I’m not omega, and I’m a far cry from a bondmate, but I enjoy being with you, Brandt. Let’s keep being with each other and see what happens.”

Brandt watched him a beat, his expression hard to read. Then he closed the few feet between them and pulled Demir into a tight hug. Gentle fingers massaged the bite mark, and Demir sighed into his broad chest. “Okay, Demir. Let’s see what happens.”

FIVE

BRANDT SAT on his porch the morning following the gala—and another incredible round of sex with Little Blue, who now had a name and face—with his beer and watched the sunrise. He'd need to force himself to take a power nap soon, so he didn't fall asleep during his lunch date with Demir.

They'd exchanged phone numbers and shared a call late last night to make plans. Demir hadn't sounded annoyed that Brandt requested they eat takeout at his place, Brandt's treat. He almost sounded excited that Brandt was inviting him to his house, and while Brandt wouldn't mind sex, he wasn't sure about fucking Demir again so soon. He had slick for jerking off, but he'd be just as content eating and talking.

And checking on that bite.

Brandt hadn't done that to a guy since Ollie. Ollie had a dirty streak as long as the territory, and he loved being manhandled and bitten. And Brandt loved to bite. Demir seemed to enjoy it, and it was telling how easily Brandt could let go with the boy, but he didn't want to pressure Demir into things he wasn't ready for simply because his hormones were on overdrive. They needed to talk about sex while not high on endorphins.

He guzzled his beer while considering lunch options. Gourmet was not a word he knew, but he had six different delivery places on speed dial and was intimately familiar with the freezer aisle at the grocery store. Pizza seemed too buddy-like, but pasta for lunch was weird, wasn't it?

His junk drawer in the kitchen had a menu for every restaurant within five miles of his house. He rifled until he found one for a diner that didn't deliver, but had a To Go lunch menu with great options. Unsure what Demir would like, he texted a few ideas to him, and then he stretched out on the couch for a

nap. The beer helped him relax, as had last night's unexpected aerobics in the concierge lounge. He dozed and dreamed of Demir in that sexy blue mask, and he woke later to the chime of his phone's text alert. Plus an erection.

Text first. Demir was fine with anything, not picky about food except only cheese on pizza. That little quirk made Brandt grin. Then he shoved his sweatpants down, spat on his palm, and dealt with the woody, imagining it was Demir's tight ass taking his cock. After only a few strokes, Brandt covered his fist in spunk, a little surprised by how much there was, considering all he'd licked out of Demir's ass last night.

Yeah, that was his new favorite memory. Not only the way licking his wet, open hole had made Demir's legs shake, but for how dirty it was for most people. He hadn't planned it, but Demir had challenged him with that "ruining his new pants" comment, and Demir had come a second time from the tongue-fucking. Both times they'd had sex, Demir had come twice.

Ah, the energy and refraction time of youth.

Okay, so thirty-eight wasn't really that old in general, but for a mated pair, it was the end of their fertility, the last chance to have another child. Brandt had lost that chance by grieving Ollie all these years, mourning the family he'd lost, instead of planning for a new one. He'd wasted so much time...

Does Demir want kids? I have no idea.

The vast majority of adoptions happened between beta couples, with the very rare infertile mated pair going that route. He'd never heard of an alpha/beta couple being allowed to adopt, even after obtaining a marriage certificate like beta/beta couples, and legal alpha/beta pairings were extremely rare. If Demir wanted a family and husband one day, it was selfish of Brandt to pursue him as anything other than a fuck buddy.

But damn it, Brandt could see having more with Demir. The boy made him feel young, alive, and more seen than he'd felt in a decade. Relevant, too. More important than just the function he served when he donned his constable uniform. He couldn't ask Demir to settle for an older, widowed alpha whose favorite breakfast food was beer.

Could he?

No.

He wandered into the master bathroom to wash up. Despite the guest bathroom being in perfect order, Brandt could never bring himself to use it. Ollie had decorated it, like he'd decorated the nursery, and both rooms sat

empty and dusty. Dusty photos sat on dusty shelves or hung on dusty walls, because cleaning meant moving them, and Ollie had touched them all last. So Brandt only used their bedroom and master bathroom.

After a long, hot shower, he called the diner with his food order and a pickup time of eleven-ten, since Demir was supposed to be there at eleven-thirty. With a bit of time to waste, he tidied up the living room. Threw away empty beer bottles, straightened a stack of unread magazines, fluffed old throw pillows long gone flat. The entire place looked...tired. Worn.

Outdated.

It was very much Ollie and Brandt, with nothing that was just Brandt Lars, beyond the stack of frozen dinners in the freezer and case of beer in the fridge. Nothing to tell Demir who Brandt was as an individual. He'd spent the last decade still one half of 'Brandt and-' with no 'and'. He'd existed without living, and there was little to do about it now, because he had to get their food.

The diner was vaguely familiar as a place he used to eat in with Ollie. The staffer who handled his order was friendly and, on a whim, Brandt added two pieces of peach cobbler for dessert. Who didn't like cobbler? He made it home with a few extra minutes, so he put place settings on the small eat-in kitchen table, then took their food out of the takeout containers. Added them to the plates.

The doorbell rang, and Brandt nearly dropped the box of cobbler. He hadn't heard Demir's car. Brandt took a steadying breath and answered the door. Demir stood on the narrow stoop, bundled up in his winter coat, smiling at him with such intent Brandt wanted to kiss him.

Not yet. Even though his body was reacting to Demir's proximity already, this wasn't about sex. This was them having lunch and getting to know each other.

But didn't people who were dating greet each other with a kiss? Was he ready to kiss Demir? He'd only ever kissed Ollie...

"Hi," Demir said. "Can I come in?"

"Yes, of course." Brandt took his coat and added it to the hooks by the door. "Did you sleep well?"

"Like a rock. I literally woke up thirty seconds before I replied to your text." Demir traced a finger down the front of Brandt's long-sleeved tee, and Brandt swore he felt the heat of that light touch right through his shirt. "How about you?"

“I’m usually asleep right now. Night shift, remember? But I managed a power nap, so I’ll be fine for a while.”

“That’s right, I forgot you’re a nighttime supervisor. How is that?”

“Dark. I’m used to it now, after running the shift for the last eight years. It’s another way I’ve been hiding, I think.” Brandt had never said it so bluntly before, but Demir brought his walls down. “It’s easy to forgo dinner with friends when you have to be at division for work.”

Demir leaned up to kiss his cheek. “We’ll have to work on that. Not your work schedule but the meals with friends thing.”

“I’ve actually taken a step in that direction.” Brandt led him into the kitchen and pulled out a chair for Demir. “Last weekend, I went to dinner at Tarek Bloom’s home.”

“Yeah? How was that?”

“Fun. Strange but fun. I enjoy being around young children, and they had three there. Watching them rough and tumble, knowing they’ve all grown up together, was...lovely.” He sat across from Demir.

“Did you get to see the twins?”

“No. Ronin and Branson came down, but the twins were apparently very fussy that day, so Kell kept them upstairs.”

“Bummer. They’re the cutest things. Completely identical from head to toe, same size and everything. I have no idea how their parents tell them apart.” Demir snickered, then tapped his nose. “Oh yeah, this thing.”

“It’s easy to forget when you aren’t used to so many things in life coming down to scent. An alpha’s sense of smell can be incredibly useful as an investigator, but quite confusing in a room full of people.”

“Like the gala last night?”

“Indeed. I have nose drops for those instances, when I’m afraid of being overwhelmed, but I don’t use them throughout the week while I’m working. The pheromone suppressor, yes.”

“Makes sense. Sometimes I’d kill for a better sense of smell, but it is what it is. So what’s for dinner.”

Brandt lifted the foil lids off their bowls. “Beef pot pie and peach cobbler for dessert.”

“Ooh.” Demir broke his crust with a fork and leaned down to inhale the fragrant steam. “I’ve had chicken pot pie, but not beef. Omegin made it for Aven’s birthday, because it was his favorite. We’d all share a big pan of it.” The young beta never stopped smiling, and where Brandt expected grief, he

saw only thoughtfulness and joy.

“Were you close with your omegin?”

“Sure, we all were.” He forked a bite of the crust, meat and gravy, but didn’t eat it. “You see, Dad grew up in a really conservative house where the alpha worked and the omega had kids, kept the house and cooked, and while Omegin’s beta parents were way less old-fashioned, Omegin loved Dad, so he fell into that role. Omegin was a fantastic parent and homemaker, and he cooked like any restaurant chef, so the four of us were super-close. Omegin and my brothers, I mean. Dad loved us, but we only saw him at night and on weekends, and it wasn’t the same.

“And when Omegin died...Dad was helpless. He couldn’t cook his own food, and he was so angry all the time that he pushed us three away, and it was all a mess. But it worked out in the end.” Demir finally ate that bite, and his eyes fluttered. “Oh wow, this is good.”

Brandt broke his own crust and tried the pot pie. Creamy gravy, melt-in-your-mouth beef and tender veggies. “It is good.”

“You haven’t had it before?”

“No. I thought we’d try something new together.”

Demir’s bright smile said he’d made a good choice. “What were your parents like? If I can ask?”

“They were kind people. We were just on the high side of poor, so it was probably a good thing they only conceived two kids. Fewer mouths to feed stretched the credit a bit further on payday. They were the same as yours, with Omegin the homemaker, and Papa worked for the sanitation department. It was a supervisor position but the pay was, pardon the expression, crap.”

Demir laughed around a mouthful of food.

“But we were happy, for the most part, and my brother was how I first became friendly with my neighbor Ollie, since alpha and omega friendships were not encouraged back then.” He thought of the mixture of kids attached to the Bloom/Cross clan. “More so nowadays, I suppose.”

“Times are changing. So are how we define relationships.”

Brandt didn’t miss the inflection in Demir’s voice. “I suppose things *are* changing.”

“Is your family still in Sansbury?”

“No. My brother was beta, and when his husband took a job in the Southern Territory, they moved. He tried reaching out after Ollie disappeared, but I took my anger out on him. We haven’t spoken in years.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.” Demir frowned at his food. “I can’t imagine not talking to my brothers.”

“We grew apart as we grew up. I’m glad you and your brothers are still close. You deserve every happiness, Little Blue.”

“So do you, Big Red. Nothing you’ve done is so unforgivable you aren’t allowed to be happy again. Even if it’s not with me, I want you to be happy.”

Brandt fell a tiny bit harder for the young beta man sharing his table. “Thank you.”

“What about your parents?”

A flash of grief flared bright before dying into embers. “Do you remember the two-block fire in River Row nine years ago?”

Demir nodded. “I had a few classmates who lost everything in that fire.”

“My parents lived next door to the home where the blaze started. They didn’t get out.”

“What?” Demir looked so devastated that the alpha in Brandt had him up and around the table before he thought twice. He knelt and hugged Demir tight. “Oh goddess, Brandt, I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, it was a long time ago.”

“Still.” Demir clung to him. “To lose your relationship with your brother and your parents died? I can’t imagine being so alone.”

“And I hope you never have to know what it’s like, I mean that.” He pulled back far enough to kiss Demir’s forehead. “You are truly a special person, and you deserve nothing but amazing things in your life. With me or without.”

With me, please, with me.

Demir kissed him lightly on the cheek in a gesture that seemed to say, “with you.” But Brandt couldn’t ask for that, not yet. Not while this was still so young and new. Unexplored. He kissed Demir’s forehead again and returned to his chair. They ate in silence for a few minutes, enjoying the delicious food and the company.

“So if you told me what you’re studying at university, I’m afraid I’ve forgotten,” Brandt said.

“I don’t think I did. I’m set to graduate a year early this coming spring, so I can go into the medical program next fall. I want to be a doctor and a researcher.”

“That’s ambitious. Research in omega obstetrics, I assume?” The vast majority of doctors were alpha, and those betas who made it into and through

the program almost always went into obstetrics.

“No, I don’t want to be an OB.” Demir scowled at him. “Everyone assumes I do just because I’m beta, and while I definitely believe in more advancements for omega health in general, I want to be a genetic disease specialist. I’m going to help cure Donal Syndrome.”

Brandt blinked, awed by the intensity of Demir’s voice and statements. He vaguely knew what Donal Syndrome was because of a case several years ago involving an omega whose son had inherited the gene. An omega very friendly with the Higgs family. “Wait, are you doing this for Brogan Tovey’s little boy?”

“Peyton, yes. I am. Brogan is Liam’s best friend, and Peyton is one of my brother Layne’s best friends. They’re all practically brothers to each other, and they’re definitely family. We were all so devastated by Peyton’s diagnosis. I won’t let my brother die young, Brandt. I can’t.”

His heart squeezed tight with emotion, and Brandt rose again, hating the tears gathering in the corners of Demir’s eyes. Demir came to him, and Brandt swept him into his arms. Held him close and rubbed his back while Demir trembled a few times before quieting. Demir didn’t cry, he simply allowed Brandt to hold him.

“I can’t imagine learning something so terrible about someone I love,” Brandt whispered. “What you’re doing is brave, selfless, and incredibly generous. I am in awe of you.”

Demir pressed his forehead against Brandt’s neck, his warm breath fanning across Brandt’s collarbone. “I’d been sort of interested in medicine before the diagnosis, just as a maybe thing, but after...I knew to be taken seriously as a beta specialist, I’d have to work my ass off to prove myself. And I did. Graduated secondary at the top of my class, while simultaneously taking university classes to earn extra credits. I’m top of my class in university. I know I can do this. Omegin always said the Higgs boys could do anything we set our minds to.”

“I wish I’d known your omegin better. He sounds like he was a wonderful man.”

“He was. And I’ll always miss him, but think how different everything would be if he was still alive. What if one decision meant we never found the fight ring? What if it meant Liam and Layne both died in captivity? And Brogan and Peyton, Jaysan and Aeron? What if more omegas were kidnapped and died?”

“The what-ifs can lead us down quite the rabbit hole, but the past is the past. The things that happened can’t be changed. Liam and Layne are in your life. Ollie is gone from mine. Those things simply are.”

“I know.” Demir let out a long breath. “All we can do is live in the present, right?”

“Absolutely. It’s taken me a long damned time to learn that lesson.”

“Maybe you learned it at exactly the right time.” Demir lifted his head, dark eyes shining with emotions Brandt didn’t dare name. “Big Red.”

Desire flared hot and bright inside Brandt, and he tried to tamp it down. Tried and failed, because Demir licked his lips, and it was over. Brandt dove in, finally kissing those pink lips, nudging them open with his tongue, licking inside to taste the sweet, sweetness that was Demir. Demir grabbed the front of his shirt and kissed back with the ferocity of any alpha, giving as good as he got, nipping at Brandt’s questing tongue.

Brandt hadn’t kissed a man on the mouth since that long-ago morning when he kissed Ollie goodbye. But in this moment, he couldn’t *not* kiss Demir. Couldn’t *not* claim that lovely mouth, chase Demir’s wicked tongue, taste this last unexplored corner of the boy in his arms.

He palmed Demir’s ass, wanting to be inside him again, but also acutely aware he was probably too sore for penetration after last night. Demir rubbed his growing erection against Brandt’s thigh, then blatantly groped Brandt’s dick. “Want you,” Demir said between kisses. “Please.”

Fuck. Brandt wanted to be the responsible one here and remind Demir this was a date, not a booty call, but everything about Demir made him lose his damned mind. For all Demir was not his omega bondmate, Brandt’s body reacted as if he was. He scooped Demir right off his feet and carried him down the hall to the bedroom, while Demir sucked a mark on the side of his neck.

Brandt was thankful his uniform had a high collar, because Demir was as oral a guy as Brandt was. And speaking of oral...

As soon as Brandt crossed the bedroom threshold, he carefully put Demir down and turned him so he could examine Demir’s neck. The skin where he’d been marked was red and angry, but not swollen. Like a bad scratch without broken skin. Demir shivered when Brandt kissed the mark.

“I loved that,” Demir whispered. “The way you held me in your mouth. It was the most erotic thing I’ve ever seen.”

“I didn’t plan it.” He licked the mark again, then reached around to grope

Demir's cock. "But I loved it, too. Maybe I'll do it again once this has healed some."

"Please. Are we fucking again?"

"Not today. We can have sex, but I expect you're too sore to take my cock again so soon."

Demir sighed, but it wasn't an annoyed or resigned sigh. It was a sigh of relief. Confused, Brandt turned Demir to face him, but Demir wouldn't look past his throat. Brandt tapped Demir's chin until his Little Blue looked up with uncertain eyes.

"Hear me right now when I say this." Brandt cupped Demir's cheeks with his palms. "You do not always have to submit to me when we play. Not every time. And we won't fuck every time we're together. I do not expect that from you. If you're sore or tired, you need to tell me. I am insanely attracted to you, but I'm also old enough to know restraint and when to keep it in my pants. We could spend the rest of our afternoon eating peach cobbler and watching television, and I'd be happy."

Demir's uncertainty melted away and he blinked several times. "Thank you for saying that. I just...whenever I saw Theron, we had sex. Not fucking, obviously, but we always fooled around and made each other come, and I guess that's all I really know about dating."

"Then let's learn some new things, okay? As much as I'd love to suck you off, I think I'd rather go out to the sofa and spend more time kissing you."

"Yeah?" He blushed. "Is it okay we're kissing? You said you don't kiss."

"I don't kiss anonymous strangers. You are neither of those things now, and I could happily kiss you for hours."

"Okay."

Since Brandt liked how Demir felt in his arms, he let his inner alpha out again and carried Demir back into the living room. Sat on the sofa with Demir on his lap, Demir's legs resting on the cushion next to them. Demir watched him with so much tenderness in his eyes that Brandt couldn't possibly make the first move.

So he waited.

What was he waiting for?

Demir needed Brandt to kiss him again, to make the first move like

before, but Brandt didn't. His pale eyes simply roved over Demir's body. Brandt was still hard beneath him, but the flood of relief that had hit Demir when they agreed to no fucking had nearly knocked him over. Demir was sore. He didn't regret a single thing about their hard fuck last night, but Brandt did not have a small cock and it had only been Demir's second time taking one.

And Demir's lack of dating experience had embarrassed him, but he'd kept that pretty-well hidden. Brandt had said all the right things to ease his anxiety over this date—the expectations that had plagued him since he woke up and tested his hole. He'd have let Brandt take him, if that's what the alpha wanted, but Brandt had seen to Demir's needs first. And that, more than anything else, slid Little Blue even deeper under Big Red's spell.

Demir leaned in and nuzzled Brandt's nose with his own, getting a stronger hint of Brandt's subtle pine fragrance, wishing he had an alpha's nose so he could scent the man better. Brandt squeezed his hips; Demir rested his own hands on Brandt's shoulders. They remained frozen in place for a brief moment in time, neither man moving first.

“Kiss me,” Demir whispered. “Alpha.”

Brandt growled low in his throat, a sexy sound that hit Demir right in the balls, and then Brandt inhaled him. They were lips and tongues and hands, moving together in a delicious symphony of taste and touch, and Demir went under. Asking for the kiss had switched something inside Brandt, and now the alpha was showing up, taking what he wanted. Demir wanted to submit to Brandt's kisses, because he implicitly trusted Brandt not to hurt him.

Somehow Demir ended up on his back, Brandt's thick, heavy body slotted between his spread legs. Sure, their erections rubbed each other through their pants, but this wasn't about their dicks. It was about the never-ending kiss. The flavor of the man making love to his mouth; the thrust of his tongue; the way he'd retreat, giving Demir a chance to chase.

He scraped his fingers down Brandt's back, then up under his shirt, nails dragging across bare skin. Brandt growled, an encouraging sound that made Demir do it again, harder. It was beyond clear that Brandt liked things rough and dirty, and Demir was here for all of it. Demir hadn't considered sex much beyond the basic vanilla mechanics, but this kind of sex? Full of lust and desire and a little bit of wildness?

Perfection.

Brandt tangled his fingers in Demir's hair, holding his head so he could

plunder Demir's mouth. Tugging without hurting. A single digit caressed the mark on his neck, and Demir moaned into Brandt's mouth. He'd never imagined being so turned on, so completely naked, and so thoroughly fucked, all while still fully clothed.

Demir let go of everything and soared on Brandt's kisses. He came at some point, and so did Brandt, and the kissing slowed to gentle nips and sips, until it stopped completely. Brandt wormed sideways so he was only half-crushing Demir into the sofa and wrapped his arms around him. Demir simply breathed in the bigger man and this beautiful, expected thing they'd done.

"Guess I can't just kiss you, Little Blue," Brandt said into his ear, so soft Demir thought he heard the words inside his own head.

"Good." Demir found the closest bit of Brandt he could—his chin—and kissed him. "Don't let me go yet."

Brandt held him tighter. "Not going anywhere."

Demir pretended he meant he wasn't going anywhere ever, and they'd find a way to be together always. Now that he'd tasted Brandt Lars, Demir couldn't imagine giving him up. His dad might not approve, and his brothers might think he was nuts to fall for a widowed alpha, but it was happening.

Even though he'd never been in love before, Demir could easily fall in love with Brandt—if he hadn't already.

SIX

AFTER BORROWING the smallest drawstring sweats he owned from Brandt, Demir scrubbed the come out of his jeans and underwear, and he left both to dry in the guest bathroom—after he dusted it with some toilet paper, which tore really easily. Like it was old and frail, and he wondered at the last time a guest had used the room.

Brandt had put on fresh sweats, too, and the warmed peach cobbler was waiting for them on the living room coffee table. After their epic make-out session, all Demir really wanted was a nap, but dessert was a wonderful second choice. He loved peaches, too, and the cobbler was delicious.

“So not much of a housekeeper, huh?” Demir asked.

“Not really. And it isn’t because Ollie did all the cleaning. I just...had no one to keep the place tidy for. No friends or family to visit. No one to impress.” Brandt gazed around the dim, dusty living room and squinted. “Hmm. I should hire a cleaning service.”

“I’ll do it. I like cleaning. It helps center me when I’m stressed about school or something.”

“I didn’t invite you over to clean my house.”

“I know, and you also didn’t ask me to. I offered. Can I?” Demir had never wanted to dust a house so badly in his life, and he couldn’t explain the impulse. Brandt had done so many amazing things for Demir, showing him the wonders of rough sex and desire, and this was a tiny thing by comparison.

Besides, he liked this house. It reminded him of home in the general floor plan, but while Demir had grown up in a four-bedroom house, this smaller place had two. He’d only peeked inside while using the bathroom, and the sight of the empty nursery had made him want to cry. Brandt had no children

that he was aware of, or that he'd mentioned.

"Living room only," Brandt finally said.

"Awesome. Where are your supplies?"

"Goddess, at least finish your cobbler first."

"Sorry." He shouldn't be this excited to clean, but Brandt was letting him do something nice for him. Demir ate the last few bites of dessert before hazarding a question. "Why do you have a nursery?"

Brandt's face went dark and tight. "Don't go in there."

"I didn't. I wouldn't without permission, I swear." The anger simmering just below the surface made Demir scoot a few inches down the sofa. "I glanced in when I came out of the bathroom. I'm sorry."

Brandt rubbed his temples with his forefingers and then dragged a hand down his face. "No, I'm sorry. It's a touchy subject."

Yeah, no kidding.

"It's also a completely appropriate question," he continued, "since we're supposed to be getting to know each other. Forgive me for snapping at you?"

"Did you and Ollie ever get pregnant?" Maybe it was bratty to answer his question with another question, but Demir was curious.

"We did once." Brandt looked grief-stricken for a split second. "We found out he was pregnant a few weeks before he disappeared. The nursery was the last thing we did together, although Ollie did most of the work."

"Oh." Now Demir wanted to cry for bring up such a painful subject. "I'm sorry. And I yes, I forgive you, of course."

"Other than his OB and a recent friend, you're only the third person I've told. We hadn't informed any family yet, and after...it was too painful not knowing what happened to them both."

"I can't imagine how you feel. Never knowing if they died, or if you have a child out there somewhere."

Brandt nodded without comment, and Demir really needed to cheer him back up. "Do you have a CD player? Maybe we can listen to music while I clean."

"Sure, I can put something on. And the cleaning supplies are under the kitchen sink. I think."

The supplies were, in fact, in the hall closet, neatly packed inside a handy plastic carrier that Demir deposited on the coffee table so he could assess the contents. It made sense to dust before he vacuumed, so he grabbed the can of polish and a rag, and he got to work on the bookshelves while music played

in the background.

At first, Brandt simply watched him, and Demir made a game of wiggling his hips to the music. Teasing, even though the sweats were too baggy to properly show off his ass. Then Brandt grabbed his own rag, had Demir spray polish on it, and he cleaned right next to Demir. In his personal space, so their hips bumped and their elbows brushed, and it was pretty damned close to perfect. Definitely the most fun Demir had ever had cleaning.

Brandt helped him polish the knickknacks and framed photos. They even dusted the pictures on the walls, leaving no spot untouched. While Demir got the vacuum set up, Brandt brought them both drinks from the fridge: a beer for himself and water for Demir. Demir wasn't a huge beer fan but he'd drink it if necessary.

The big alpha proved himself quite useful in moving heavy furniture so Demir could vacuum beneath it. "We make a pretty good team," Demir said once they'd finished the living room. He wanted to run the vacuum down the hall, too, but this was the area Brandt had allowed him to clean, and it looked a hell of a lot better.

Turned out if you opened blinds and pulled back curtains, real sunlight made the place shine like new, despite its age.

"Yeah, we do." Brandt took the vacuum cord from him. "I'll put this away. Go sit, you've earned a break."

"Thanks." Demir kissed his cheek before sprawling onto the sofa to sip his water. The house really did look—and smell—better after their cleanse. *He* didn't smell much better, a weird cross between lemon polish and sweat, but they'd done a solid day's work.

Brandt shut the hall closet and returned, gazing down at Demir with a wicked glint in his eyes. "You know, there's something you and I didn't get to do at the gala last night."

"Blow jobs?"

He laughed out loud. "No, you sex fiend. Dance."

Demir stared at him. "You want to dance with me?"

"Yes." Brandt walked to the media player and switched the CD they were listening to. Slower, sexier music filled the room. He held out a hand. "Dance with me, Little Blue."

Unable to resist the nickname, Demir peeled himself off the sofa and walked into Brandt's arms. They were both sweaty and wearing sweatpants, but it was the sweetest, sexiest dance of Demir's life. Brandt moved them in

slow circles around the living room, showing off an unpracticed ability to lead his partner, and Demir fell for him a little bit harder. They danced through the entire CD, which was a compilation of love songs that spoke to Brandt's sappy nature.

It was the best day in a long, long time, and Demir was sad to see it end, but he'd promised to be home for supper by six. And Brandt looked ready to fall asleep at any moment. Demir loved spending time with the man, but he didn't want to interrupt Brandt's sleep schedule so much that it affected his job performance. They kissed by the door for a long time before Demir forced himself to leave.

Dad and Liam were setting the table together when Demir showed up, and he was surprised Tarius and Aven were there, too, playing with Layne and Linus in the living room. While their family tried to get together for a meal at least once a week, Demir had forgotten tonight was the night they'd agreed on last weekend.

Demir excused himself to the bathroom and carefully wiped himself down with soap and water. Scrubbed his face good, hoping to get as much of Brandt's scent off him as possible. Dad worked with Brandt, and while the scents of mated alphas were less defined than unmated, Demir didn't want anyone suspecting who he'd been with all day.

When Aven commented on his change of clothes, Demir said, "I was at the sports complex on the rock climbing wall. Got sweaty and wanted to change."

No one questioned him, but Tarius did give him a curious eyebrow-quirk. Demir tilted his head in an "I'll tell you later" gesture. Halfway through the meal, Dad said, "So Demir, this afternoon a boy named Theron came looking for you."

Demir nearly choked on his pork chop. "He what? Why?"

"He said you were ignoring his calls and he really needed to speak with you." Dad had a way of asking questions without asking them, and Demir saw what he wasn't saying.

"Theron is someone I know from a friend of a friend," Demir said, picking his words carefully. "I thought we were a thing, but he was cheating on me, and now we're over. I don't want to talk to him."

Dad's face went dark. "He cheated on you?"

He was so not unpacking that whole "you saved our marriage" bullshit excuse he got last weekend at the art gallery. "He was with someone else the

whole time he was with me, and for a while before.”

“How did he cheat?” Layne asked. “Were you guys playing a game and he moved the pieces when you weren’t looking?”

As far as explanations from a six-year-old went, that pretty much explained it. “Yes, he did. He changed the rules without telling me, and it wasn’t fair.”

Layne glowered. “I should’ve kicked him in the shin.”

“Violence isn’t the answer,” Liam said in a stern voice. Layne was omega, a natural caregiver, so the shin-kicking response must have come from one of his playmates. Or maybe his little alpha brother Linus, but Linus seemed more interested in his dinner roll than the conversation about Demir’s love life.

“Sorry, Omi.” Layne returned to his dinner.

Dad’s sour look said he’d like to kick Theron somewhere north of his shin. He was an overprotective sire, but he also didn’t meddle in his kids’ lives, preferring they come to him with their problems. That had gotten ten times easier to do since Dad and Liam mated, because Liam tempered Dad’s worst impulses. And when Demir looked at them, he didn’t see a physically mismatched couple with an age gap. He saw a mated pair in love.

Brandt and I will never be a mated pair, because I’m just a beta.

But maybe...maybe they could one day be in love?

Demir wasn’t at all surprised when Tarius followed him from the dinner table straight to Demir’s bedroom, where he closed the door. “You were so not at the rock climbing wall today, little bro,” Tarius said. “Where were you really?”

Lying wouldn’t get them anywhere, and he needed someone to talk to about this. “You remember the guy I met at the party last weekend? I figured out who he is, and we hooked up again this afternoon.”

“Really? How did you find him?”

“Random chance. I ran into him at the gala last night.”

Tarius gaped at him. “Seriously?”

“Yup. It was his eyes, Tar, I knew his eyes. And then his voice. He is a wonderful person who’s been hurt a lot in the past, and he takes such good care of me. I can’t remember a better day than today.”

“What’s his name?”

“Nope. You don’t get to pull the big brother card and look into who he is or his past. I need you to trust me on this. We’re still getting to know each

other, dating and stuff, and I don't want outside pressure to ruin it."

"Oh shit." Tarius heaved a sigh. "He works for the constabulary and knows Dad, doesn't he? I'm right."

Demir shrugged, unwilling to give anything else away. "Look, Dad has never said a word one way or the other about any of us dating a patrolman or constable, but Dad does know this person, and I don't want him getting into the middle of things while it's still so new. Please."

"Dude, as long as you aren't getting hurt or doing something dangerous, you know I've got your back."

He resisted the urge to rub the bite on his neck. "Thank you. I really like this guy, and I'm pretty sure he likes me. And I know alpha/beta stuff is kind of weird and not very common, but we *are* attracted to each other. I just need time to see if we can be more than only...lovers."

Tarius stared at him for a long time. "Is he good to you? In bed?"

"He's amazing. Generous and patient and he pays attention. We got off this afternoon just from kissing." Maybe TMI, but whatever. Demir was trying to make a point, damn it.

"All right, I won't say anything to Dad or Liam. But you need to check in with me. I need to know that you're really okay."

"I am and I will, I promise." He adored his big brother for being so protective, while also understanding Demir's need for privacy. "Once I know what's what, and if we're in a place where our relationship can be more, I'll tell you who he is."

"Deal." Tarius stuck his hand out, and Demir shook it. "I know I'm not the oldest, but if this guy hurts you or breaks your heart like Theron did, I'll rearrange his face. And then I'll kick his ass."

Demir didn't fight his impulse to hug Tarius. "Thanks. I love you, you pain in the ass."

Tarius chuckled. "Same. But please be safe with this guy?"

"I am safe with him, I promise." He pulled back and planted a wet kiss on Tarius's cheek that had his brother yelping and pulling back.

"Gross." Tarius swiped at his face, smiling the whole time. "Goddess, Linus is more mature than you."

"Probably. So we're good?"

"Yeah, we're good. We weren't not-good before, but I'm glad we talked. And we will keep talking right?"

"Yes, father, we will."

“Brat.” Tarius lightly cuffed the side of his head. “So are you seeing your mystery man tomorrow?”

“I’m not sure. We didn’t make any specific plans, and there is an advance assignment I want to get started on.”

“Dude, school doesn’t start again for another week, and it’s the weekend. Take a day.”

Demir shrugged. “We’ll see.” He didn’t want to eat into Brandt’s sleeping time, which would make seeing each other during the work week a pain, because Demir’s classes were all during the day, save one weekly lab. Maybe weekends were their only real option for hanging out.

He’d text Brandt later and see what he thought.

Tarius left him alone, and he was immediately replaced by Dad’s hulking form. Dad wasn’t glaring, though, so Demir met his stare with a casual smile.

“Are you really okay?” Dad asked.

“I’m fine, I swear.” Demir flapped an unconcerned hand in the air. “Okay, so I was pissed when I found out Theron was cheating, but it was a mostly casual thing between us, anyway, and I got over it. I *am* over it. Honest.”

“Good. You boys deserve the very best men in your lives. Always remember that.”

“I know, and I’ve been so busy with school that I haven’t really bothered dating beyond Theron, so you don’t have to worry about me. The new semester starts in a week, and then I’ll be buried in the books again.”

“Our future doctor in the family.”

“You know it.”

Dad studied him with a tender smile. “Herris worried about you the most, and I think it’s rubbed off on me. You’ve always had a huge heart and you see the best in everyone. I just don’t want more men like this Theron character taking advantage of you.”

“No one’s going to take advantage of me, Dad. I wasn’t paying attention with Theron or maybe I’d have seen the signs. But I’m paying attention now, and I will go into any future relationship with my eyes wide open.”

My eyes are wide, wide open with Brandt, I promise.

“That’s what I want to hear.” Dad’s eyes went distant the way they did when he allowed his mind to wander into the past. Maybe he was remembering Herris. Maybe he was remembering the moment that he’d admitted had haunted him for a long time after it happened: walking into

Demir's bedroom the night Mancini kidnapped Liam and finding Demir out cold in his bed. Not knowing what Mancini had done, despite the monster saying he hadn't touched Demir beyond drugging him.

Demir touched his dad's elbow. "Hey. You wanna pull out a deck of cards and see if we can teach Linus and Layne how to play something better than *Go Fish*?"

Dad chuckled. "I don't think Linus has the attention span yet to go beyond *Go Fish*, but we can certainly try."

"Popcorn later?"

"We've already got the bundt cake to eat for the Winter Solstice night two, but I think that can be arranged for your bottomless pit of a stomach."

Demir wanted to joke about all the calories he'd burned today, but that would only lead to unwanted questions. So he followed his dad into the living room for a few rounds of cards and night two of five celebrating the winter solstice and the new year with his family.



The week following the gala was what Demir decided to call their "honeymoon phase," because he and Brandt found as many opportunities as possible to spend time at Brandt's house during the day. With Brandt working at night, Demir didn't mind chilling on the sofa while Brandt took power naps in between them doing...well, stuff. A lot of sex, sure, but they watched movies, listened to music, and they talked.

Demir had never enjoyed talking to anyone as much as he did Brandt, and it took him a few days to realize it was because of their age difference. They looked at life and the world with such different points of view that they could debate almost anything, discuss absolutely everything, and always find common ground. It was the easiest friendship of his life, and it just happened to come with frequent, intense orgasms.

They didn't fuck every day—for which Demir's ass was very grateful—but they found other fun ways to get off, and it was the best week of his life. With Dad working and Liam on frequent play dates with the little ones, no one asked Demir where he was all day long.

The trick came the following week when Linus went to preschool, Layne back to primary, and Demir started classes again. The downside of living at

home was Liam had gotten used to Demir's intense bedroom studying habits, and Demir hated lying by saying he was going to study at the library, or joining an on-campus study group, just so he could see Brandt. Liam had always been amazing with him, respecting his privacy.

After the second week of school passed, Demir was packing up his books to spend the day studying at Brandt's house, now that he was off for the weekend. Liam ambled into his room, plunked down on his bed, and said, "If I ask you what you'll be doing today, will your answer be the truth?"

Demir stopped zipping up his backpack and turned to face his stepdad. "Yes." He would absolutely do schoolwork while Brandt napped.

"And if I ask where you're going today? Will it be the truth?"

"No, it won't." Even though he'd just opened a can of worms, Demir felt lighter for telling the truth, instead of lying. Liam deserved better than that after all the freedom he gave Demir to live his life. Demir was an adult, but he still lived at home, didn't pay rent, and was therefore subject to any rules Liam and Dad chose to lay any down. Which they hadn't.

Yet.

Liam frowned, not happy with the answer but also not surprised. "Why not? I've never known you to keep secrets. And you know you can tell me anything without judgment."

"I know." He sat next to Liam, intensely grateful they were having this conversation alone and not with Dad. Dad was out front with the boys enjoying the novelty of last night's thin sprinkling of snow. "It's nothing bad or illegal, and I'm not in trouble, I promise. It's just...private. And special."

"Special?" Liam's eyebrows went up. "As in *it's a guy* special? Are you seeing someone on the sly?"

"Yes?"

"Demir, why are you embarrassed about that? Because of what happened with Theron?"

Being used as the other man had left Demir a tad shy over completely trusting in what he had with Brandt, but it had only been three weeks since the gala. Despite them seeing each other almost every day and Demir feeling as if he'd known Brandt for years, it was still very new. "I'm not gun-shy or anything, we're just...feeling our way. It's only been a few weeks, and it kind of happened right when things with Theron imploded."

"So it's a rebound?"

"I hope not. More like bad timing. Or maybe perfect timing?"

Liam didn't look convinced. "But you're being safe?"

"He's great, and he takes really good care of me." *In between marking me, fucking me until I can't walk, and then pampering me with bubble baths and sweets.* He wasn't sure what he'd do when spring hit and he didn't have an excuse to wear turtlenecks anymore. "It's just still so new, and we're trying to figure out what our relationship is. Kind of like you and Dad did when you first admitted you felt the mating bond."

That point hit home, and Liam smiled. "As long as this guy makes you happy, I'm happy for you. I mean it. And when you're ready to introduce us, I'll make us all a nice dinner. Okay?"

"Okay. And can you run interference, in case Dad gets suspicious?"

"You don't want your dad to know you're dating?"

"Not yet. I know I can't keep this a secret forever, but maybe a little while longer?"

"I can do that." Liam nudged him with his shoulder. "So do I at least get a first name?"

"No." There were probably hundreds of Brandts in the province, so a first name wasn't anything to get suspicious over, but Demir didn't want to risk the secret getting out too soon. Dad would blow his stack, and Demir needed to be certain where he stood in Brandt's life before going up against his own sire.

Hopefully, when the truth came out it wouldn't come to that.

He hoped.

But he doubted it.

SEVEN

“ARE you still working on your speech? I thought you finalized the draft on the train?” Diego flopped stomach-first onto the bed nearest the hotel room’s desk and propped his chin in both hands. Freshly showered, his dark hair glistened with water, and it dripped down his face to the coverlet below.

Oliver Strand glared at his brother-in-law, annoyed he was dripping all over Oliver’s bed, but the exasperated half-smile on Diego’s face made him snicker instead. “Just a few last-minute edits, that’s all,” Oliver replied. “I’ve never addressed four hundred assorted constables, patrolmen, victims, and family members before, not to mention media and random spectators in a ballroom, especially not during our territory’s first major anti-sex-trafficking conference. I’m a little nervous.”

“Well, when you put it like that...”

“Yeah.” His speech wasn’t long, only three double-spaced pages, because he had a brief allotted time to talk, so Oliver had to put as much power into his limited words as possible. The victim speeches didn’t have the same number of minutes as the speeches from various law enforcement and judicial personnel—which was kind of annoying, since the conference was being hosted in Sansbury Province, a place supposedly getting progressive about omega rights—but Oliver was honored to have been invited.

His entire speech was more about his late mate Oskar’s story, not his own, and Oliver needed to do him proud.

“He would be, you know,” Diego said in the ensuing silence. They’d already been close before, but Oliver and Diego had become the best of friends since Oskar’s passing, and Diego had become attuned to Oliver’s moods. “Proud of you for even being here, in a strange province, giving a

speech about your life with Oskar. What he sacrificed.”

“Yeah, he would be.” Oliver spun the desk chair around to fully face Diego. “Is it weird that I still get mad at him? It’s been almost two years since Oskar was killed saving the lives of trafficked betas, and I still get mad at him for jumping in front of that bullet.”

“It’s okay, I get mad at him, too. He should be here with you and Eriq, and he’s not.”

“He should be here with you, too.”

Oskar and Diego had been the only children born to their mated parents, because their sire had died young of a heart attack, and they’d been close their entire lives. Close enough that both men had joined the constabulary when they were old enough, to pursue individual careers in law enforcement. And even though Oliver and Oskar hadn’t been bondmates, Oliver’s brief life with his late alpha had been full of love and support.

Oliver’s arms ached to hold Oskar once more. When he missed his mate, he often sought out their son Eriq for a hug, but Eriq was downstairs at the hotel pool with three other kids from their small entourage of Rainier Province victim speechmakers. Four omegas, two betas, and their assorted families were staying on this floor, their rooms close together for comfort. If Rainier was the farthest west you could get in the Northern Territory, then Sansbury was its polar-opposite in the east.

It had taken two full days by train to get here, and while Oliver had enjoyed watching the territory go by, he missed the warmer climate of home. For the first month of spring, Sansbury was still remarkably chilly for his taste.

“Your speech will be perfect, because it will come from the heart,” Diego said, snapping the thread of grief in the room. “You’ll make us all proud.”

“No one will remember my speech, not once Kell Cross speaks. You’ve seen his speeches on the news. The man knows how to work a room and make an impression.”

“Yes, well, activism is his life, not yours. You’ll be perfectly fine as an amateur speaker.”

“The only reason they invited me is because of Oskar.”

“They also invited you because of your past. Or rather your lack of a past.”

Oliver shrugged. He hated being reminded that until eleven years ago, he had no past. No life, no history, nothing, not even a face. The scar near his

left ear tingled as it often did when he thought of those earliest surgeries to repair damage from a horrible van wreck, from which Oliver was the only survivor. Five other people died, and Oliver had barely survived himself. Multiple surgeries to repair internal damage, and then reconstructive surgery and skin grafts to give him a face again.

And all the while, Eriq clung to life in his womb. He'd been born by Caesarean eight weeks early and spent the first month of his life in an incubator in NICU. And after almost a year in the hospital, omega and child finally walked out healthy and ready to create a life together—a brand new life in Rainier Province, surrounded by strangers, because Oliver didn't have a single memory of his life before the wreck.

Or of Eriq's sire.

"Besides, it's like a paid vacation," Diego added. "Three days in a new city, with its own culture and layout and history. Plus, that train ride was awesome."

"You're right." Oliver needed to stop dwelling on why he was here and enjoy the experience. And the fact that their territory had made so much progress these last six years in terms of omega civil and reproductive rights, domestic violence laws, and sex trafficking. They still had work to do, especially in individual provinces in the south, but things were so much better. Hell, in Rainier, Oliver was allowed to live with Diego without any sort of formal guardianship agreement.

No more mandatory halfway homes for widowed omegas.

"Why don't we go out and walk around?" Diego asked. "See some of the city before the kick-off mixer tonight."

Oliver glanced at the alarm clock. Only one in the afternoon, and the mixer didn't start until six. They had several hours to see Sansbury and explore a bit, and he had no qualms about wandering a strange place with his best friend by his side. Diego might be beta, but he was still an active patrolman in Rainier, and he was a big guy who read as alpha from a distance. He was also incredibly protective of Oliver, and having Diego along would help Oliver identify gender when necessary, because the wreck that changed his face had also destroyed his sense of smell.

At least his doctors said it was the wreck. Oliver didn't know for sure if he'd had a sense of smell before, but he was pretty sure he had. He could look at a flower and remember its scent, or see a slice of pepperoni pizza and know the spicy aroma. The actual smells just weren't there anymore. It made

eating pretty boring, though, because without smell, the taste of almost everything was bland.

The only upside was Oliver could win pretty much any hot-and-spicy eating challenge, and he'd won a few t-shirts from local restaurants back home.

He rang the mobile of one of the omegins watching Eriq to tell of their plans, and then he grabbed his spring jacket. Even with the sun out it was chilly, and Oliver caught colds way too easily to go without. He needed his voice for his speech tomorrow night.

The Hotel De Fontaine was a fancy place, with detailed crown molding in the hallways, a polished elevator with a doorman, and lush carpets everywhere. Diego had nosed around when they first arrived and said the hotel owners were big donors to the local constabulary, so they got a good discount on events here. Oliver couldn't imagine their own constabulary affording a place like this. They used the meeting rooms in local chain hotels for their conferences and events.

They were situated in what looked like the downtown area, with financial buildings on one side and what looked like an arts district on another, so they explored what a marker called Aurora Crest. Oliver found himself drawn to a park of some sort filled with art installations and moving sculptures, and something about the park felt...familiar.

They had something like it at home, so that was probably it.

He wandered toward the back where music was playing, and he circled a brick wall to find something both familiar and completely new. A fountain shot water into the air and changed colored lights in time with the music playing. A few stone benches held couples and families watching the show, and Oliver stared, mesmerized by it.

I've never seen this before but I feel like I have.

"It's beautiful," Diego said after the current song faded into silence, and the water stopped. A moment later, it began again with new music.

A small voice squealed laughter an instant before a little body collided with Oliver's leg. A child of maybe six or seven grinned up at him. "Sorry, Mister."

"Gaven, watch where you're going," an adult said behind them. "Sorry about that."

Oliver turned. A man with dark hair was limping toward them with a cane he didn't seem to be using. He was tall and muscular like Diego, but had a

gentle smile for them both, and Oliver couldn't decide if the man was alpha or beta. Diego didn't go on the defensive, though, so probably beta. "It's all right, kids have accidents."

"He loves this fountain to pieces, so we always come down the first spring weekend it comes back on. Too cold for the water in winter."

"It's a beautiful fountain. I've never seen anything like it."

The stranger tilted his head, watching Oliver while keeping half an eye on little Gaven, who was intent on the shooting water and colorful lights. "You're not from Sansbury?"

"No, we're in town for the weekend."

"Ah, then welcome. Aurora Crest is a great place to explore if you like museums and art, and about seven blocks south is a great little district full of unique restaurants."

"I appreciate the leads. And I feel like I'm being rude. Oliver Strand. This is my brother-in-law Diego."

"Dex Freel, and you've met Gaven." Dex shook both their hands. "So what brings you to Sansbury, if you don't mind my asking. We're not exactly a known tourist destination like Buckman."

"We're in town for the territory trafficking conference," Diego replied when Oliver hesitated. "We're from Rainier Province."

Dex whistled. "That's a long way to travel."

"Well, it's a big territory."

"Good point. We may run into each other again this weekend, then. I worked for the constabulary for many years, and my best friend is a division Senior Constable, and he's giving a speech tomorrow morning."

"Small world," Oliver said. "I take it your limp is why you don't work for them anymore?"

Dex shook his head. "Long story, but my husband makes good money as an ICU nurse, so I was able to quit and raise Gaven full-time. It's the best job I've ever had."

"I agree. I have a son a little older than Gaven, but he's at the hotel playing with some friends."

"Well, I look forward to meeting him if our paths do cross again. Take care Oliver, Diego."

"You, too."

They shook hands again, and then the man wandered to where Gaven had migrated. Oliver and Diego watched the fountain a while longer before

moving on. So far, everyone they'd met in Sansbury had been super-friendly and kind, and Oliver felt...safe. Familiar, while knowing he'd never been here before.

Haven't I, though? What about my entire life before the wreck?

Hell, Oliver didn't know his own exact age, so he'd guessed based on what doctors said. And Oskar had so sweetly surprised him with a birthday party one summer day, declaring this was Oliver's special day from now on. It had been so wonderful and completely Oskar.

They passed a cart selling ice cream treats, and Oliver bought something for each of them. Ice cream was something he could still taste pretty well, probably from the sweetness, and the notion that he'd eaten this treat in the past helped enhance the flavor. He had a fondness for old-fashioned ice cream sandwiches, which were hard to find in Rainier because they weren't manufactured locally, and bringing them in made them expensive. This one, though? Perfect chocolate cookie-cake bookending creamy vanilla custard.

Yum! Why don't they taste this good at home?

Surely his own taste buds hadn't gotten better overnight.

Oliver had to stop himself from licking the paper wrapper clean like a child. He was definitely getting more of these before he left town.

They explored through the afternoon, and a few times, Oliver got the strangest sense of déjà vu. He never mentioned it to Diego, though. After the first few years post-wreck, Oliver had given up on ever learning who he truly was and where he'd come from. Photo bulletins never helped, because of his facial reconstruction. DNA was extremely new, and he wasn't in the territory database. Fingerprints were attached to warrants or other official files, and apparently he'd never been arrested (not a bad thing).

He was a Jack Doe, a ghost.

The only thing he'd always known to be true was his name. When he could speak again for the first time, the only word he'd known for sure was Oliver. Everything else was a murky blank.

Could I be from Sansbury? Do I have family here?

Did it matter? His face was forever changed, and the life he knew was thousands of miles away in Rainier. The life his son knew was there, not here.

"Let's head back to the hotel," Oliver said. "We can collect Eriq and go to dinner before the mixer."

"Sounds good to me," Diego replied.

They walked arm in arm, navigating unfamiliar streets with bizarre ease as Oliver led. Eriq was showered and dressed when they returned to the room, and he looked up from a TV cartoon to greet them. Oliver's pride and joy, the only part of Eriq that resembled him were his dark brown eyes. He saw little else of himself in his son, and if he hadn't given birth to the boy, Oliver would think he was someone else's. Everyone in his life assured him of their shared scent, and Oliver longed to know that scent himself.

He has to take after his sire.

Oliver studied Eriq out of the corner of his eye as he fumbled in his suitcase for the toiletries bag. The strong line of Eriq's jaw, the long limbs that would probably grow more once he hit puberty, the dark hair on his head. Those things felt more and more...familiar the older Eriq got.

Would I know his sire if I ran into him on the street?

No, he'd come here to give a speech and interact, not dig up a past he'd spent so many years convincing himself didn't matter. Living his life in the present, one day at a time. Loving his son with his whole heart. He didn't need anything else.

But the idea was now lodged firmly in the back of his brain, and it taunted him during dinner. Diego found a place two blocks over that served all kinds of pasta dishes, and Eriq had a grand time picking his combination. Oliver stuck to simple food so he didn't upset his stomach when he got nervous later. Maybe he wasn't speaking tonight, but he'd be expected to mingle and make small talk, and that wasn't his specialty.

Eriq whined about having to wear pressed slacks and a nice shirt. The kid lived for being outdoors in grubby clothes, and even though all the attending children under twelve were being entertained in a separate room for the duration of the conference, Oliver wanted the boy to make a good first impression at tonight's mixer.

Oliver put on a simple, two-button suit and styled his dark-blond hair in the bathroom mirror, while Diego polished their shoes. The rest of the conference was supposed to be business casual, but tonight they'd been told to dress in their best. Oliver's best wasn't much, but he looked good in it. A bit of makeup helped hide the worst of his facial scars, and he expected dim lighting anyway.

Most of the time he forgot about the scars, and all his friends in Rainier had always known him with them. It was only when he met strangers, or he truly paid attention to his appearance that he remembered. He rubbed the

smooth surface of his chin. Had it always been that shape? Was his nose always so narrow?

Stop it, it doesn't matter.

It didn't, not really.

Except it did, and the thought stayed with him on the packed elevator ride downstairs to the lobby. The ballroom was easy to find with dozens of faces milling around outside as well as in. And ballroom was the correct term for the vaulted ceilings, crystal chandeliers, and ornate wall decorations. A stage was set up to the right and a wet bar to the left. Servers in white coats were already walking around with trays of finger foods.

"It's like a fairy tale castle," Eriq said.

"Yes, it is," Oliver agreed. So many people surrounded him—alpha, beta, omega, mated pairs, singles—and Oliver had no idea who was who. The one plus side of no sense of smell was not being inundated by the proximity of all these people. They found others from their Rainier group and hung around until the lights dimmed briefly, and a spotlight shined on the stage.

The crowd hushed as three men took the stage, all wearing constable uniforms and Chief rank sashes. "Welcome," the man in the center said into the podium's microphone. "My name is Chief Constable Isa Higgs of Sansbury Province, and I want to thank everyone here tonight for making time for us this weekend, especially those who've traveled a great distance to be here. Most importantly, I want to thank those who were invited to tell their stories. This weekend is about you and making sure your stories aren't repeated in the future."

The room erupted in applause, and Oliver blinked back grateful tears. There were a lot of law enforcement workshops tomorrow and the next day during the daytime, with most of the speeches happening either in the morning or at night, and Oliver was glad to know this was about more than just procedure and detection. It was about the people who'd survived the horrors and were trying to rebuild their lives.

Higgs signaled for the applause to stop. "I'd also like to introduce my colleagues, with whom I've been working to develop and run this conference. Chief Constables Harry Welder of Rainier Province and Abel Sanchez of Buckman Province." He paused for another round of applause. "Sex crimes, especially against omegas, have gone under-reported for far too long, all across the Northern Territory. For the last six-plus years, I've been working alongside my colleagues at the Sansbury Constabulary and within the judicial

system to protect all citizens from harm, regardless of gender. As alphas, it is our job to ensure the safety of our beta and omega brethren as they pursue the same goals as we do: life, liberty and happiness. And to do that, society must learn and evolve.

“Almost seven years ago, a young, unmated omega named Braun Etting was sent to a halfway house for omegas after he was orphaned. A halfway house approved by the constabulary as a safe place for omegas. But it was not a safe place, and Braun had the courage to escape and find help. If he hadn’t done that, we may never have realized how rampant a problem we had under our noses. Omegas being sold into sex slavery and torture. Beta teenagers being kidnapped for the same. The more we dug into these organizations, the bigger and more intricate the connections became, and we partnered with other provinces. We worked together to find these victims and bring them home.

“And unfortunately, the fight is not over. Not while cruel men with power continue to use that power against the innocent. To ruin lives and take for themselves with no thought of others. But we are changing that all across the territory, and I hope after this weekend everyone in attendance, whether you’re law enforcement or not, will continue to be part of that change. Thank you.”

Higgs stepped back from the podium to more applause, and the trio left the stage. The spotlight shut off, ending the speeches for now. An announcement that the children’s room was ready sent a passel of kids scurrying for the ballroom doors. Oliver kissed the top of Eriq’s head before he scampered away to watch a movie and eat popcorn.

“That was a great speech,” Diego said. “Was this Braun Etting on the list of scheduled speakers?”

“No, but his brother is. Kell Cross, remember?” Oliver replied.

“Oh, right.”

Oliver tracked Higgs’s movements around the right side of the ballroom, hit again with that weird sense of déjà vu. He didn’t know if it was the man’s name, his voice, his appearance, or what, and that sent a prickle of irritation down his spine. Even if it was possible he was originally from Sansbury, how the hell had he gotten all the way to Rainier? The hospital had used DNA tests to prove none of the men who’d died in the wreck were Eriq’s sire, so Oliver had been traveling alone.

No, he needed to concentrate on the here and now, not the past.

The three chief constables in charge seemed to be working the room, making the rounds to meet more people than they could possibly remember names for. Opposite them, someone else had accumulated quite a gathering of listeners, and Oliver stood on his tip-toes to get a glimpse. Kell Iverson Cross stood with a tall, golden-skinned man who had to be his mate, and he was talking with someone whose back was to Oliver. Maybe ten yards away, Kell seemed younger in person than on TV, and he was definitely one of the men of the hour.

“Do you want to meet him?” Diego asked, following Oliver’s line of sight.

“Yes, but maybe not tonight,” Oliver replied. “He’s got so many people over there already.”

“Then what are two more? Come on.”

Diego grabbed his hand and hauled Oliver forward, weaving them through clusters of people and past waiters with food. Oliver wished he had a drink for a prop. Kell and his trial for murdering his first alpha mate had been huge news across the territory, and he’d become even more famous as an activist. Oliver wouldn’t say the man was his hero, exactly, but he admired all the work and time Kell put into helping other victims of abuse.

His stomach curled with anxiety. This was as close to meeting a celebrity as he’d ever get. Diego nudged him closer, and Oliver listened along with the small crowd as Kell answered questions about his life and work from several people. His mate—Ronin? Was that his name?—stood close by and slightly behind, like a security guard. Another young man—omega judging by his height and slender body—flanked Kell on his other side. Familiar face, so he’d probably been on the territory news for something.

Kell had a careful way of including everyone in his audience, speaking to them all and not just the person who’d asked the question, and he noticed the two new faces. “Hi, where are you guys from?” Kell asked.

Oliver’s brain froze.

“I’m Diego Strand,” Diego said, “but I’m just moral support for my brother-in-law. This is Oliver Strand. We’re from Rainier Province.”

“Yes, I know your name,” Kell replied to Oliver with a friendly grin. “Isa—Chief Higgs told me a bit about you at dinner earlier this week. You lost your memory and sense of smell in a car wreck.”

A few people around them gasped.

“Yes,” Oliver said. “Two of the men in the van were later identified as

being part of a sex trafficking ring, and our investigators think myself and the others were being delivered to someone for a particular purpose. The only thing I can say with some assurance is I'm not originally from Rainier Province, but it's a beautiful part of the territory."

"I can't imagine losing everything about myself," the omega next to Kell said. "I'm Liam Higgs. The constable who spoke tonight is my mate."

It surprised Oliver that someone so young was mated to a man so much older and with obvious life and work experience, but it was rude to comment on it. "His speech was lovely. He seems like a good man."

"He's the best. A terrific investigator and a dedicated father to his five boys."

"Five? That's quite a family."

"We stay on our toes, for sure."

"There you guys are!" a new voice shouted, and three more men appeared behind Kell. The one who'd spoken was nearly identical to Kell in every way and had to be his brother Braun. Behind Braun were two tall, muscular men, one of whom was rangy and dark-haired, while the other was stocky with gray at his temples.

That damned *déjà vu* thing hit again, and Oliver chalked it up to having seen Braun on the news before.

Both men were introduced to the group at large by Braun as senior constables. The dark-haired man was Braun's mate Tarek Bloom, and the bigger man was Brandt Lars. Brandt was staring at Oliver in an odd way, as if he recognized Oliver—which was impossible, because Oliver had no idea how much his new face resembled his old.

When Kell mentioned Oliver was a speaker and why, Brandt's eyebrows dipped into a deep V. The intense stare was starting to freak Oliver out a little, so he tried to keep Diego between himself and the very odd alpha whose behavior was becoming borderline rude.

Then Brandt was in his personal space, so close so fast Oliver nearly punched him in the nose from fright. Brandt very deliberately sniffed him, and Oliver glared. "What the hell?"

"How long ago did you lose your memory?" Brandt asked with the most bizarre expression. Like hope and horror had a baby and it landed on his face.

"It'll be eleven years next month, why?"

"Do you have a scar on your left shin that's about four inches long? Starts just above the ankle on the inside?"

Diego gave Oliver a funny look.

Oliver went cold all over. “How the fuck do you know I have a scar?” He didn’t care he was being rude to a strange alpha. This was way beyond normal now, other people were staring at them, and he kind of wanted this guy to go away.

Except déjà vu.

“Ollie,” Brandt said. Hope had won the battle, and his pale blue eyes... filled with tears? “Oh, Ollie, it’s you. I know your scent. Can’t you smell me? You have to know me.”

“My name is Oliver,” he snapped back, “and I lost my sense of smell in that fucking van crash. I have no idea who you are.”

That hope turned to devastation, and their conversation had made the group go silent. “It’s me, sweetheart. Brandt. We’ve known each other our whole lives. I’m your bondmate.”

And like that, everything Oliver thought he knew about his life exploded into tiny, painful pieces.

EIGHT

BRANDT HAD AGREED to attend the opening night mixer with Tarek and Braun out of his own sense of duty as a senior officer, and as part of his personal quest to be more sociable. He wasn't here to flirt or find a date, of course, too happy with his secret relationship with Demir to bother. For nearly three months, they'd dated, fucked, and simply spent time together. And while Demir admitted his family was aware that Demir was dating someone, they were respecting his privacy.

So far.

Part of Brandt had wanted to show up tonight with Demir on his arm and announce to the world he was falling in love with this beautiful, bright, intelligent med student, but Demir didn't want that yet. And Brandt understood. They were both worried about how Demir's sire would react to the relationship, and neither man wanted to risk losing what they both treasured. So they were arriving at the mixer apart.

Maybe they could sneak away to the concierge lounge and relive one of Brandt's favorite memories...

They arrived at the hotel a bit late, thanks to traffic, and their trio paused just inside the ballroom while Higgs made his opening remarks. Brandt scanned the crowd but didn't see Demir. The room was huge, though, so he could be anywhere.

Braun took the lead, and he followed his new friends toward the back of the ballroom where Kell was holding court. The young omegin drew people to him and knew how to work a crowd, a talent he'd developed after years in the public spotlight. "There you guys are!" Braun shouted as they stopped beside Liam, Kell and Ronin.

Brandt's entire being focused in on a pair of men nearby, and with so many people close together in the room, he had a hard time scenting them. Neither was alpha, for sure, and he zeroed in on the dark-blond man with the very pale skin. He looked...like Ollie. And yet he didn't. But that wasn't possible. Ollie was long-gone, and this man looked too young to be his long-lost mate, and what were the fucking odds, anyway?

Except when the stranger scowled in his direction, something inside Brandt snapped firmly into place. His inner alpha reared up and took notice, identifying the scowl. Identifying the man as his bondmate. His childhood love.

And then Kell said his name was Oliver and that Oliver had lost his memory, and Brandt couldn't stop the questions falling from his lips. Despite a newfound rasp to it, Brandt knew that voice, and he couldn't stop himself from bolting to this Oliver's side and sniffing him. Beneath the stink of another alpha was his bondmate. Brandt's own scent mixed faintly with Ollie's sweet buttercup fragrance, and Brandt's heart had burst with wonder.

Uncaring where they were or who was watching, Brandt nearly sobbed with joy when he said, "It's me, sweetheart. Brandt. We've known each other our whole lives. I'm your bondmate."

Ollie recoiled, physically putting another man—a stranger, but not the alpha scent on his mate—between them. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You have to feel it. Even if you can't scent me, you have to know I'm your mate."

"What is your problem, man?" the stranger protecting Ollie snapped.

Brandt tamped down on his instinct to bristle at this beta for snarling like that, because he didn't want to startle Ollie, who looked more pissed than anything else. "Eleven years ago next month, my mate went to his OB appointment and never came home. He disappeared completely, no trace ever found." Old grief tightened his throat, and he had to cough hard to clear it.

The stranger glanced at Ollie, whose eyes were wide with shock.

"Guys," Tarek said, "you're kind of causing a scene. Maybe we should take this to a more private location and figure it out, okay?"

"Diego stays with me," Ollie replied as he clasped his companion's hand.

Brandt couldn't take his eyes off Ollie as Tarek led them out of the ballroom with Braun on their heels. The more Ollie's scent surrounded him, the more Brandt knew this was his Ollie. His mate.

Goddess, the baby. Did he have the baby? Where have they been all this time?

He couldn't find the words to ask in the hallway. Tarek opened a door to one of the conference rooms. The tables were laid out in a giant oval, notepads and pens arranged for tomorrow's meetings. Brandt was grateful for his friends sticking by him, so he wasn't alone in this...situation. All he wanted to do was throw his arms around Ollie and kiss him, to remember what his bondmate tasted like, but Ollie kept this Diego person between them like a human shield.

"This has to be a huge coincidence," Ollie said. "My disappearance and your mate's. Probably a lot of people went missing that week if men were out kidnapping omegas to sell or whatever. Check my fingerprints or something."

"You were never arrested for anything in your life," Brandt replied. "Your fingerprints wouldn't be on file. What about the scar on your leg? And you have one on your belly from having your appendix out when you were twenty-three."

Ollie's hand flew to his stomach.

"Can you tell us more about your past?" Tarek asked gently. "How you came into your life in Rainier?"

Ollie crossed his arms and stepped a few inches out from behind Diego. Brandt stared at the man he remembered so vividly. His lean body and blond hair. New scars near his temples and chin were more pronounced in the conference room's better lighting. "I don't remember a single thing about my life before waking up in Rainier Province Hospital," Ollie replied. "I was in the ICU with broken bones in my face, neck, and shoulders. Doctors weren't even sure I'd be able to walk again with the spinal fractures, but I did. They did skin grafts and reconstructive surgery to give me a face that wouldn't scare small children. They said I should have died, couldn't believe I survived all the pain and physical therapy, but I had to."

He looked right at Brandt, his eyes wary. "I had to live for my son."

Shock hit Brandt with the force of a winter gale, and he grabbed the nearest chair so he didn't fall over. "You had our baby?"

"I had *my* baby." The defensive tone reminded him of every small fight they'd ever had, be it from a wall's paint color to what to eat for supper. "He was born eight weeks early and was in NICU for a month. I wasn't physically able to leave the hospital for almost a full year after the accident, and we went to live in a small community for widowed omegins with children. The

investigation into my identity is how I met my late mate Oskar.”

Brant growled, and he regretted it the moment Ollie ducked back behind Diego. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, I don’t mean to scare you. I just...hearing about you with another alpha...it hurts.”

“I don’t know you, Bent.”

“Brandt.”

Ollie grunted. “Oskar was one of the constables assigned to my case, and we became friends. He tried to find out who I was, but my face had changed, and even border provinces came up empty. As time passed, it became less important to know who I’d been and more important to focus on who I am now. And to be a good omegin to my baby. So when Oskar asked me to be his mate, I said yes.”

“You didn’t feel the bond?” Tarek asked.

“No. But we fell in love and that’s what mattered.” Ollie cut his eyes at Brandt. “I stopped wondering who I was. I made a life for me, Oskar, and Eriq, and it was a wonderful life. Diego here is my brother-in-law, and he’s been my rock ever since Oskar was killed in the line of duty. Part of the reason I’m speaking this weekend is to honor his sacrifice. It’s the only reason I came to Sansbury, and I have a life in Rainier that I’m going back to when the conference is over.”

Everything inside Brandt rebelled at the idea of Ollie leaving. He’d rediscovered his bondmate after eleven fucking years apart, and it felt as if no time had passed at all. Even though Ollie’s appearance had changed a bit—his nose was more sloped, his cheekbones sharper, chin a bit flatter—his Ollie was still there. If Ollie hadn’t lost his sense of smell, he’d *know* who Brandt was.

Even without his scent, if Ollie just got closer to Brandt, gave himself a chance to be near him and absorb his pheromones, Ollie would know, too. But he stayed away, as if too scared to come close and discover the truth.

“Is Eriq your son’s name?” Braun asked.

“Yes,” Ollie said. “And Brandt isn’t taking him from me, no matter what.” The venom in his voice was that of an omegin protecting his offspring, and it made Brandt’s heart fluttered with love.

“I’d never take our son from you,” Brandt replied. “But I need you to accept that this is real, Ollie. We grew up as neighbors. You were best friends with my brother Mason. At sixteen we both felt the mating bond, but our parents made us wait until we were older. We mated at twenty, after I

graduated from the academy, and we tried for children for so many years.” He squeezed the bridge of his nose to chase away bitter tears. “Three weeks before you disappeared, your OB finally confirmed we’d conceived. We were so excited. It was the happiest day of our lives, sweetheart, and we started on the nursery the same day.”

Something in Ollie’s expression flickered, so Brandt kept talking. “You picked out everything from the wall colors to the theme, and you glowed. Only a few weeks along, but you glowed like the sun, and I never imagined you wouldn’t come home that day. You said you’d call after the appointment, but you never called. You never even made it there. You just...vanished. You and our baby were gone.”

“Oh, Brandt.” Braun curled a warm hand around his wrist. “I had no idea your mate was pregnant when he disappeared.”

“It was too soon to tell anyone, and after he was gone, I couldn’t...” A damned tear escaped his eye, and Brandt swiped it away.

Ollie took a few steps closer to him, an omega reacting out of instinct. He reached for Brandt before recoiling—but not in horror or fear. More like... general wariness. As if Ollie was starting to believe him, but he wanted to hold onto the life he’d built with both hands.

“Oliver, I know this is overwhelming for you,” Tarek said softly, “and I know we just met, but I’m an alpha and senior constable, and I’d never lie about this. Your scent and Brandt’s? I can tell they’ve joined. It’s very faint, and I can scent your late mate as well, but you were also Brandt’s mate once.”

Ollie’s eyes filled with tears. Brandt reached for him, but Ollie turned and hugged Diego instead. Diego glared at him with open suspicion, clearly used to being Ollie’s protector since his brother died. And as much as Brandt’s entire body longed to be the one comforting Ollie, he couldn’t risk scaring the man anymore than he already was.

He had to wait for Ollie to come to him.

Oliver pushed against the overwhelming wave of grief trying to crash down over him. Grief for the life in Rainier that was about to change, grief for the life he’d quite possibly lost here in Sansbury with the earnest, hopeful alpha who claimed to be his bondmate. He didn’t want it to be true, but when he looked at Brandt he could see Eriq. He saw Eriq in his face and smile and

darker skin tone.

Brandt's story was too perfectly aligned with Oliver's to be a coincidence, and even if this was some elaborate ploy to trick Oliver into Brandt's bed...why? Why go through the trouble of inventing such tall tales? Of trying to entrap an omegin during a freaking law enforcement conference? Of getting another senior constable in on the plan?

And the déjà vu he'd been experiencing all day...was it because Sansbury had once been his home? Had he been to Aurora Crest and that fountain before? Had Higgs seemed familiar because he'd known the man in his old life?

"I've got your back," Diego whispered. "Tell me what you want to do."

"I don't know." Oliver squeezed his brother once more before letting go. Curious, he turned to face Brandt. "Where was one of our favorite places to go together?"

"Springwood Park," Brandt replied. "It's a special place over in the arts district. They have a fountain there that plays music, and the water spouts change size, shape and color according to the song."

Diego gasped. "We saw that today."

"You did?"

"We walked around to sightsee and ended up there." Diego gaped at Oliver. "You led us there."

Oliver's stomach curled up tight with anxiety, and he was glad he'd eaten a light dinner. Diego pulled one of the conference chairs out and helped Oliver sit. He rested his forehead in both palms, and a moment later, Diego gave him a glass of water.

"I can't imagine how overwhelming this all is," Tarek said. "But it really can be cleared up with a simple DNA test."

"How?" Diego asked.

"If Brandt and Eriq are a match, it proves they're sire and son. And that your Oliver was Brandt's Ollie."

"My name," Oliver said, more anxiety rippling through his body and making his chest tight. "I knew my name. When I could finally talk again, they asked and I said Oliver. For a long time, I wasn't sure if it was because I remembered my name was Oliver, or if it was just the name I wanted for myself. How could I know that and nothing else?"

"No one really understands how the human mind works," Braun said softly. "If we did, we'd know how to cure all memory ailments, and we'd be

able to spot people who grow up to become rapists and abusers.” He came forward and squatted in front of Oliver. Braun was a stranger to him, but he was also a mated omegin, and his green eyes held so much sympathy that Oliver reached out to hold his hand. “I can’t begin to imagine how you feel, but Brandt is a good man. I promise.”

Oliver wanted to believe him—and a deep, deep down part of him did believe Braun, and even believed Brandt—but he didn’t want it to be true. Oskar had been Eriq’s father. They had a life in Rainier. How on earth were they supposed to go forward?

Maybe the DNA test will prove Brandt is not the sire. Then he has no claim to either of us. I don’t care how many alphas say our scents are mixed. Eriq is mine.

“I’ll do the DNA test,” Oliver said. “And I am not telling Eriq about any of this until we get the results.”

“Of course,” Brandt replied. He looked briefly stricken, as if remembering something important, before the expression went away.

Oliver had noticed, though, and he wasn’t letting the strange alpha get away with anything. “What’s wrong? You remember you’ve got a new mate stashed away who doesn’t know about this yet?”

“No, I never wanted anyone except you for a long, long time. There’s just so much to consider going forward.”

“If the DNA test goes your way.”

Brandt flinched, the hurt clear in his pale eyes. “Is the idea of having been my bondmate so repulsive to you? We had a long, beautiful life together, Ollie.”

“Oliver.”

“I’m sorry, old habit. Oliver.”

“An old life over a decade old. If we’re both happy and we’ve both moved on, why change things?”

“Because I have a son. Our son. I’ll never try to take him from you, but if the DNA test proves I’m his sire, I have a right to be in his life. To get to know him and let him know me. Please.” Brandt was near tears again by the end of his little speech, and it made Oliver want to go to him. Comfort him. Hug him close and wipe away his tears.

Oliver had met dozens of alphas in his life, and he’d never reacted so strongly to one’s pain. Never felt his omega instincts to soothe and nurture scream so loudly for Oliver to get off his nervous ass and go to this suffering

alpha.

It meant something.

“How do we do the DNA test?” Oliver asked.

“We’ll need swabs from all three of you,” Tarek replied. “If you aren’t sure how to explain this to Eriq without giving away why, hair or a toothbrush will work, as well.”

“Diego, can you run up to our room and get Eriq’s toothbrush. Buy him another one at the hotel’s gift shop. We’ll say you dropped the old one in the toilet or something.”

“Are you sure you want to be alone?” Diego asked. “*With him?*” dangled at the end of his question.

“I’ll be fine. I’d actually prefer a moment alone, if that’s all right with everyone?”

“Of course,” Brandt said. “We won’t have the results until morning, anyway, and as much as I loathe leaving your side, sweetheart, this has to be so overwhelming for you. I can barely process it myself.” He pulled a business card out of his wallet. “If you have any questions tonight, please call me. Any time.”

“Thank you.” Oliver tucked the card into his shirt pocket. “Goddess, I don’t know how to feel about any of this.”

“It’s okay.” Brandt took two steps forward and went down on one knee. “I have missed you every single day for the last ten years and eleven months, Oliver Sumner Lars. One more night apart won’t break me. All I ask is you keep an open mind going forward. Please.”

Brandt on his knee like that swamped Oliver in a familiar sense of déjà vu and, in that moment, Oliver knew in his heart what the DNA test would say. But he still needed it on paper. “I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you. In the morning, would you prefer to meet with the results here or at the hospital?”

Oliver blinked, surprised the alpha was leaving this decision up to him instead of telling Oliver where they’d meet. “Here. I’m room 704.”

“All right. Then we’ll see each other in the morning.” The naked fear in Brandt’s voice suggested he expected Oliver to take his son and run during the night.

But Oliver was no coward, and he’d face this. “In the morning. Good night.”

Diego kissed Oliver’s forehead, which earned him a gentle warning growl

from Brandt. He'd have to get over that, because Diego was affectionate, frequently offering hugs and friendly kisses. "I'll see you upstairs," Diego whispered before following the others out.

After the conference room door shut, Oliver let his guard down and allowed himself to shake. Let adrenaline, anxiety and flat-out fear take over. He put his head down on the table's smooth surface, unsure what to say, think, do, or feel. His life had completely broken apart, and he had no idea how to put the pieces back together again.

But he had to. He'd figure it out for Eriq's sake. This alpha Brandt might be the kindest person on the planet, but Oliver was no longer his to claim. Neither was Eriq. No matter what happened tomorrow, no matter what the DNA test showed, Oliver's son would always, always come first.

Period.

NINE

DEMIR HAD WANTED to attend the mixer with his family, both to support his dad's efforts with the conference and to see Brandt in a suit. The man filled them out well. And he'd been crazy-understanding of Demir's reasons for not showing up hand in hand. While Demir was head-over-heels for the older alpha, he wasn't always sure if Brandt felt the same.

They spent the bulk of their weekends together, always at Brandt's house, and while Demir felt welcome and comfortable there—he even had his own key—the continued existence of that nursery bothered him. Brandt kept the door shut, and the one time Demir had hinted at cleaning it—not throwing anything away, just rooting out the dust bunnies—Brandt had snapped at him.

So it remained a dusty reminder of Brandt's past. But in the living room, two new photos of Brandt and Demir together, mugging for self-portraits, appeared in frames. Demir had his own toothbrush in the master bathroom, as well as his preferred soap in the shower. Deodorant too, and a few sets of sweats for lounging in after a round of rough sex.

There was absolutely nothing lacking in their sex life, that was for damned sure.

Demir gazed around the crowded ballroom with a glass of champagne in his hand, scanning for Brandt or anyone he knew. He'd gotten separated from Liam right before the opening speech, and then lured into a few conversations with folks from other provinces, especially when they found out Isa Higgs was his dad. The attendees had mad respect for the three chief constables who'd organized this event.

He finally tracked down Dad and Liam, who were having an animated conversation with Braun, Kell and Ronin in the far corner of the ballroom.

“...be such an incredible miracle if the test proves he’s the sire?” Braun was asking. Demir wasn’t sure who Braun’s target was, because everyone looked stuck between excited and shocked, so this wasn’t a discussion of another episode of *Beta University*.

“Who’s the sire of who?” Demir asked as he came up beside his dad.

“Brandt Lars,” Braun said.

Shock jolted through his chest, and Demir swallowed hard. “Constable Lars’s sire?”

“No, Brandt is the sire we’re talking about.”

Demir looked at his dad, confusion making his stomach hurt. “Dad, what is he talking about? What did I miss?”

“Quite a shocking discovery, or so I’ve been told,” Dad replied. “And a bit of a miracle, if it turns out to be true.”

“It has to be true,” Braun said. “Tarek smelled the connection, too.”

A horrible kind of dread slithered through Demir’s gut, hot and acidic and black.

“I was talking to a man named Oliver, one of the omega guest speakers from Rainier Province,” Kell said, having mercy and finally explaining what the hell had happened. “Then Braun, Tarek and Brandt came over, and right away Brandt seemed to recognize Oliver. He asked direct questions and sniffed him, and then declared for all to hear that Oliver from Rainier is his bondmate Ollie, who disappeared the same week Oliver was in a horrific car wreck that changed his face.”

That dread coiled tight, threatening to send what little champagne Demir had sipped back up to revisit him. “His bondmate? How’s that possible?”

“I don’t know, but it’s true,” Braun replied as he did a little happy dance. “Tarek and I went with them while they talked and everything matches. Scents and dates and stories, and even better? No one knew Ollie was pregnant when he disappeared, so it looks like Brandt has a ten-year-old son named Eriq. They’re doing a DNA test right now to make sure, that’s why Tarek isn’t here.”

Demir couldn’t breathe. His entire world had shifted on its axis and if he made one wrong move, he’d fall. Break. Never find all the pieces, because he was about to lose the best thing in his life. Brandt had his bondmate back. And a child. A built-in family. Everything he’d been missing all these years.

Demir was just a beta. A fun fuck buddy.

Disposable.

“You okay?” Liam whispered in his ear, his already soft voice difficult to hear over the din of conversation around them.

“Just shocked.” Demir was far beyond shocked, but he couldn’t show it without outing his relationship. Not that it mattered now. Any minute, he’d get a call from Brandt that things were over, because his real family was coming home.

“It is pretty stunning. I’m happy for him.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

The joyful chatter about Brandt’s great news dimmed under Demir’s rising grief. As much as he wanted to be happy for Brandt, he was also selfishly angry at him. Angry that Brandt had spent the last three months as the perfect boyfriend, doing everything possible to help Demir fall in love with him—*I do love him, damn it, this isn’t fair!*—and now it was over.

One chance encounter thousands of miles from Ollie’s home, and now Demir’s world was crashing down around him. Just like Theron, he’d been a substitute, a stand-in for the real thing, and very soon he’d be dumped.

With anger and grief strangling his heart, Demir excused himself from the group, put his flute down on the nearest table, and walked out of the ballroom. He didn’t see faces or hear voices, he simply walked to the hotel curb and asked the doorman to get him a taxi. Told the taxi driver Tarius’s address. Waited for the driver to announce they’d arrived. Gave the man his credit card to swipe before exiting.

He didn’t remember the elevator or even ringing the doorbell. Only landing on Tarius’s couch, numbly assuring him nothing was wrong with their parents or brothers, and then sobbing into Tarius’s t-shirt. He clung to his brother and cried out the whole damned, stupid mess—starting with Theron’s betrayal to the sex party, finding Big Red at the Solstice gala, and secretly dating Brandt Lars this whole time. He hiccupped his way through Ollie’s return and his stark fear over being replaced.

Tarius hugged him, reassured him, gave him tissues, and then made him drink some water, never once judging him for anything. It wasn’t until Demir had some semblance of control over himself that he thought to ask, “Are your roommates home?”

“That’s what you want to know?” Tarius asked with a chuckle. He ruffled Demir’s hair. “They cleared out so we’d have privacy. Seriously, Demir, you looked like you’d been attacked when you showed up. Do not scare me like that ever again.”

“I’m sorry.” He studied his brother and finally saw the hints of fear that were still leaching away. “I was just so stunned when I heard about Ollie and their son. I couldn’t think. I needed to talk to someone, and you were the only person I could think of.”

“Well, you know you can tell me anything without judgment. I’m glad you finally told me who you’re seeing, and I get why you kept it a secret. I mean...Lars is old.”

Demir grunted. “We’re the same years apart as Dad and Liam, and please don’t give me the ‘they’re bondmates’ crap. Brandt and I are insanely attracted to each other, and the sex we have is amazing. Had? Ugh.” Energy gone, he flopped back against the couch cushions. “I saw something real between us, Tar, I swear I did. Now it’s gone.”

“Has Brandt told you it’s over?”

“Not yet, but it’s inevitable. If the DNA test proves the kid is his, he’ll want his family back. Why wouldn’t he?”

“Maybe because he’s moved on and is in love with you?”

“We’ve never said the words to each other, though.”

“So tell him.”

Demir glared. “I can’t do that now.”

“Why the hell not? If it’s how you feel, you shouldn’t be afraid to tell him.”

“Telling Brandt I love him will only make it worse when he dumps me for his bondmate.”

“*If* he dumps you. Have you tried calling him?”

“No.”

Tarius lightly smacked his shoulder. “Then fucking call him, you idiot. Get his side of the story, say I love you, and then see what he says back.”

“He hasn’t exactly tried calling me, either.”

“Maybe he doesn’t know you know, so he’s taking time to figure out how he feels about all this and what he wants. It’s been eleven years since his mate went missing, right? Neither of them are the same people they were when they mated. Mating bond aside, they may not love each other anymore. Especially if Brandt is in love with *you*, you big dummy.”

Demir didn’t want Tarius to be so reasonable about all this; he wanted his brother to let him vent. “Do you have beer?”

Tarius rolled his eyes. “Fine. Tonight we drink. Tomorrow you figure your shit out, okay?”

“Deal. And don’t tell Dad?”

“I promise.”

“Thanks.” It was still early, barely eight o’clock, but Demir turned his phone off anyway. He didn’t want to be reasonable about his feelings, and he wanted to quiet the part of his brain that was happy for everything Brandt was gaining. His mate. A child he never knew had been born. A family to love and cherish.

The kind of family he’d never have with Demir.

Tarius returned with a six-pack and bag of chips. Demir found a terribly cheesy movie for them to watch, and at some point, Tarius’s two roommates appeared. Tarius simply said, “He thinks he’s about to get dumped,” and the commiserating began. Demir liked Tarius’s roommates a lot, and even more so when one ducked out to the nearest corner store for more beer and junk food.

Between the crying and the drinking, Demir was going to feel like shit in the morning. But for tonight, he was pleasantly, gloriously numb.



Oliver barely slept all night long, only managing a light doze close to sunrise. Fortunately, Eriq slept like a log next to him, having worn himself out playing with the other kids while Oliver’s entire life flipped on its head. Eriq had been asleep, Diego reading on his own bed, when Oliver returned to their room after hiding downstairs for hours.

As the sun rose and filled the room with light from a balcony that gave him a lovely view of the city, Oliver gave himself permission to get up and shower. Dress. They ordered room service for breakfast, because Oliver couldn’t force himself to face anyone yet today. Certainly, news of his public interaction with Brandt had spread into the gossip chain, and he didn’t need to be stared at any more than he already was because of his scars.

Diego excused himself to make a phone call, while Eriq watched morning cartoons. When Diego returned, he quietly confirmed he’d spoken with a lawyer about Oliver’s options. The lawyer had never heard of such a case before, but he informed them that any alpha judge who sniffed the pair could tell if they were or had ever been mates—if Oliver took the matter to trial as a custody dispute.

For Oliver, it all depended on how Brandt reacted if Eriq was, in fact, his. All the DNA test proved was they fucked at least once during a heat, not that they were bondmates. And Sansbury shared the same progressive law that said widowed omegins could live with anyone they chose, but there was no law about separated omegins. Mated pairs did not divorce, so how would a judge see Oliver's mating to Oskar? As not even legal, since he'd still been mated to Brandt? Would Brandt insist Oliver and Eriq move to Sansbury and into his house?

It would be his right, after all, and even if Oliver petitioned against it all the way to the higher territory courts, he'd likely still end up in Brandt's custody—unless the alpha was proved to be a physical danger to the omegin or child. Oliver didn't know Brandt at all, but his instincts said Brandt was a good man at heart. Not abusive or cruel.

Oliver worried himself right into a vomiting spell, which hadn't happened in a long time. For the first few years after the wreck, he'd had horrible anxiety attacks, not only about his healing face but the wreck itself. Knowing five other people had died a gruesome death, but somehow Oliver and his unborn child survived.

Diego made him lay down and sent Eriq to the gift shop for ginger ale.

Less than a minute after Eriq left, someone knocked on their door. Oliver groaned, positive who it was before Diego let Tarek and Brandt into the room. Both men looked pensive, rather than satisfied, and Oliver realized why when he saw the sealed envelope in Tarek's hand.

"Are you all right?" Brandt asked, concerned etched all over his face as he stood near the foot of Oliver's bed.

"You drove him into an anxiety attack," Diego snapped, his standard protectiveness firmly in place.

"Hey, stop." Oliver sat up, his sore stomach unhappy with being vertical, but he'd deal. "I'm anxious is all. Is that the DNA results?"

"It is," Tarek replied. "And I'll swear on any witness stand that we have not opened it or tampered with it in any way. We came directly here from the hospital lab."

"Okay. Open it."

Diego sat beside him and squeezed Oliver's hand. Tarek ripped open the envelope and slid out a sheet of paper. Practiced eyes went directly to the bottom where the specific match percentages were. The flash of happiness in Tarek's eyes made Oliver's gut ache more.

“Eriq and Brandt are a match,” Tarek said. “He’s your son’s sire, Oliver.”

Brandt’s face reddened, and he bit down on his bottom lip, as if trying to keep a lid on his own joy, while Oliver tried to figure out how he felt about this news. He wasn’t altogether surprised, not really, but he also wasn’t happy. A man he did not know was now forever tied to Oliver’s life, and he wasn’t sure how to process it.

“All that proves,” Diego said, “is they knotted once during a heat without protection.”

“Which is how alphas and omegas officially mate,” Tarek replied.

“How do we know Oliver wasn’t forced?”

Tarek’s mouth fell open.

Brandt growled darkly at Diego, an equally protective and angry sound that didn’t scare Oliver like it should. “I’m no rapist, Mr. Strand, and I don’t appreciate the implication. I have loved Ollie—Oliver, sorry, since were small children, and I would never force him to do anything, much less mate with me. We had to convince his parents to allow it simply because they worried about me being in law enforcement. We loved each other. Period.”

“I apologize,” Diego said. “You have to understand, Oliver is the only family I have left, and I’m protective of him. Him, me and Eriq have been a family these two years since Oskar died, and I love them both dearly.”

“I do understand. But lashing out at strangers out of fear is never a good idea.”

“You’re right.”

“Where is he? Eriq?”

“Downstairs,” Oliver replied. “I made myself sick worrying about this, so we sent him to get ginger ale. He’ll be back soon.”

Brandt’s eyebrows went up. “Maybe I stay and meet him?”

As much as Oliver wanted to protect this part of his heart for as long as possible, Brandt had been deprived of his son for the entire ten years of Eriq’s life. “Of course, you can meet him. He doesn’t know anything about this yet.” Brandt had been so patient and kind that Oliver needed to extend an olive branch. “We can tell him together.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“May I ask...his gender?”

“Does it matter?”

“Not at all. I’m curious, but I’ll love him no matter what.”

Brandt's earnestness had Oliver admitting, "He's alpha."

Oliver expected a bigger reaction than Brandt's tender smile. Alphas wanted alpha heirs, after all, and Brandt knowing the child he thought he'd lost was an alpha heir should have gotten...well, something. Except Brandt seemed determine to flip all Oliver's gender expectations on their heads and surprise Oliver.

It was endearing as hell.

"So what do we do going forward?" Oliver asked. "I have a whole other life in Rainier that I can't simply leave for you."

"I know," Brandt replied. "But you're here at least two more days, and I'd love to get to know you again. Get to know Eriq. If that's what you want."

"It is." Oliver felt the truth of the words as he spoke them. Visually and consciously, he did not recognize Brandt Lars at all. However, in some deep-down, instinctive place inside him, Oliver knew the man somehow. And Oliver trusted him. "Other than my speech tonight at seven and a voluntary omega support meeting tomorrow at noon, I don't have a set schedule for the rest of my time here."

"Okay."

"We've talked so much about the past, but not a lot about the present. Perhaps...lunch today? You and I can talk?"

Brandt grinned. "I'd like that."

The door handle turned, and Eriq walked inside the room. He stopped short at the sight of the two strangers, his curious gaze going straight to Brandt.

Oliver held his breath.

Brandt stared at the pint-sized version of himself standing in the narrow space between the bathroom and the room's closet, a paper shopping bag clutched to his chest. He seemed short for ten, but he had Brandt's dark hair and slanted eyebrows, and oh my goddess, he was perfect! Even from six feet away, Brandt could scent the boy: a mix of Oliver and Brandt and Eriq's own unique marker.

Eriq gave him a suspicious frown as he walked to the bed. "I got two ginger ales and a pack of crackers, Daddy." He handed the sack to Oliver. "Do you feel better?"

"I do, baby, thank you." Oliver kissed his temple. "We have some

visitors.”

“Who are they?”

“Well, that man over there is a senior constable here in Sansbury. His name is Tarek Bloom.”

Eriq gave Tarek a shy wave. “Hello.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, Eriq,” Tarek said.

“How do you know my name?”

“Well, your daddy has already told us about you. This is my friend Brandt Lars. He’s also a senior constable. We work together.”

That suspicious frown turned back onto Brandt, as if the boy sensed something was unusual about him. “Hello, Eriq,” Brandt said. He couldn’t look away from his son. A son he never imagined knowing. Never imagined had survived whatever ill event had befallen his missing mate. And here he was. Alive. Healthy.

Beautiful.

“Do I know you?” Eriq asked.

Oliver slid to the edge of the bed and pulled Eriq onto his lap. Oliver was slightly taller than the average omega, but still slender, and Eriq filled his lap. “You’ve never met Brandt before, but he’s always been a part of our lives. You know how I told you I didn’t remember my life before you were born?”

“Uh huh.”

“Well, I met Brandt last night, and it turns out that I used to live here. Some bad men took me away, and it made Brandt very sad, because he didn’t know what happened to us. And he’s missed us this whole time we’ve been away.”

“Why? Who is he?”

Oliver glanced at Brandt, and Brandt’s heart squeezed. “Baby, he’s your sire. He was my first mate.”

Eriq stared at his omegin, so confused Brandt almost regretted telling him at all. But hearing Oliver say it out loud and with authority drove this new reality home. A reality he’d yet to personally share with Demir, and good goddess, he need to speak to the man. He’d tried calling twice, once last night and once this morning, but it went straight to voice mail. Liam had been there during the initial confrontation, and Brandt wasn’t naïve enough to think Demir hadn’t heard *something* by now.

“How do you know he was your mate if you don’t remember?” Eriq asked.

“Because the timing of my accident and his mate going missing are the same,” Oliver replied. “Our names are the same. Since we got here yesterday, I’ve had this feeling like I’ve been in Sansbury before. And we did a DNA test that proves you are my and Brandt’s child.”

“But you didn’t know he was here, right?”

“No, I didn’t. We met completely by accident last night in the ballroom, and then we talked for a while. And just because Brandt is your sire, that doesn’t change how much your dad loved you, or how much you loved him.”

Dad must be Oskar, who’d been in Eriq’s life since he was an infant. Unlike Brandt.

Eriq gave Brandt another suspicious look before asking Oliver, “Does this mean we have to go live with him now?”

“No.” Oliver kissed his temple again. “We’re still talking about things, but Brandt is a very nice man who won’t force us to do anything we don’t want to do.”

“Good. I like my school and my friends at home.”

“I know, baby. Things got really complicated last night, and I promise we both want what’s best for you, okay? We’re going to figure this out.”

Eriq slid off Oliver’s lap and stalked over to Brandt. Looked up at him with fire in his dark brown eyes. “Where have you been this whole time if you’re my sire?” Then the little devil kicked Brandt in the shin. It didn’t hurt, but it surprised the hell out of him.

“Eriq!” Oliver bolted off the bed and grabbed Eriq by the shoulder. “We do not kick people, not ever. You apologize right now.”

“No.” He pulled away from Oliver and went to hide behind Diego, who looked as flummoxed by the boy’s behavior as Oliver. “I don’t want him here. Make him leave, Uncle Diego.”

“Eriq.” Diego squatted and whispered something into Eriq’s ear. Eriq scowled and whispered something back. “Hey, Oliver, you mind if Eriq and I go talk on the balcony for a minute?”

“No, go, please.” Oliver looked equal parts pissed and embarrassed, and when the balcony door slid shut, leaving him alone with Brandt and Tarek, he simply looked tired. “Goddess, he has never acted like that around an adult before. I am so sorry, Brandt.”

“It’s okay, the kick didn’t hurt.” Brandt put a hand on Oliver’s shoulder before he could think twice, and the contact only reinforced that this was his Ollie. But the touch felt different, too. Not as intense as in years past, as if the

instinctive part of him that recognized his bondmate also understood they'd been apart for too long to simply go back to the way things were.

That their lives were permanently changed and they had to find new common ground. Starting with their son.

"That's not the point." Oliver didn't pull away from his touch. He almost seemed to lean into it. "I know he's confused and hurt but that's no excuse for kicking someone. He's definitely grounded when we get home."

Home. Rainier is home for them, not Sansbury.

Brandt flinched and pulled his hand away.

"Oliver, I hate to bring this up," Tarek said, "especially while everything is so confusing for you both, but it's about your initial disappearance-slash-kidnapping eleven years ago. The case was filed away as cold about five years ago, but it's likely Chief Higgs will want it reopened."

Oliver groaned. "Why? It's ancient history."

"It is to you, and I respect everything you went through to create a new life for yourself in Rainier, but your kidnapping pre-dates all of our major sex trafficking investigations here in Sansbury. Investigations that run deep, are connected to a lot of people with money and power, and have saved dozens of betas and omegas from lives in hell."

"I understand."

"Higgs will reopen the case?" Brandt asked, hope blasting through his chest. Hope that they'd finally get answers about that fateful day.

Tarek nodded. "Very likely, yes. We spoke briefly this morning before I met you at the hospital. Higgs is already partnering with Chief Sanchez so we can get copies of everything related to Oliver's case in Rainier. Everything from the identities of the men in the van crash to the doctors who operated on him."

Oliver made a face. "Why do you need my doctors' names?"

"We probably don't, but we'll be thorough. If there's something in your Rainier case file that connects to our file here in Sansbury, we'll find it. I promise."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome. Listen, I need to get downstairs. I'm heading up a seminar in about twenty minutes. Good luck with everything, both of you, and we'll be in touch if we have any questions about the investigation."

"Thank you, Constable Bloom," Oliver replied. "I hope you can get the answers you want."

“Yes, thank you.” Brandt shook Tarek’s hand

Oliver walked the man to the door. Once Tarek left, he turned, his expression one of mild curiosity, instead of the wariness Brandt was used to seeing, and something beyond him caught Oliver’s attention.

Brandt turned. Through the sliding glass doors, Diego and Eriq were leaning on the balcony railing, backs to them, looking out over the city. Probably talking. The pair seemed to have a bond, and Brandt was glad Eriq had still had a father figure in his life after Oliver’s second mate died.

Second mate. Ugh. Another alpha touched my bondmate. Fucked and knotted my bondmate.

He tamped down irrational rage and jealousy over those two things, because how was Oliver to know he had a mate somewhere out there, missing him, waiting for him to come home? Maybe the authorities assumed Oliver’s mate was one of the mangled dead bodies pulled from the wreck. Oliver had been suffering alone in the hospital for months after multiple surgeries, and he was lucky to be alive. Eriq, too. Alive and back in Brandt’s life, by some miracle of the goddess.

Even if Tarek and Higgs couldn’t find any new answers about how Oliver was taken, he was back, and that would be enough for Brandt.

“I can’t imagine everything you went through,” Brandt said. “Having no idea who you were, no friends or family to see you through your recovery. No support system in such a faraway place.” His heart begged the rest of his body to cross the room and hug his bondmate, to show him how much Brandt had missed him. A big part of Brandt still loved his Ollie...but another part loved Demir, too.

Goddess, I am in so much trouble.

“It was hard at first,” Oliver replied, sad and wistful. “The nurses were amazing. I probably wouldn’t have fought half as hard without their constant support. Eriq, too, of course. And Oskar, to an extent, but we didn’t get really close until after I was discharged. And it wasn’t just the physical pain, it was emotional, too. Knowing I was carrying some alpha’s child, and I had no idea who the man was. Who I was. Other people said I had a mingled, mated scent, but I couldn’t smell anymore. I’ve never even scented my own son.”

“To me you smell like the sweetest buttercup flowers, warm on a hot summer’s day. And my own scent is...I suppose a bit woody or pine-like. Try to imagine the sweetest rosemary, tinged with a bit of sugar, and that’s Eriq.”

Our son.

Oliver smiled so tenderly that it took everything in Brandt not to hug him. “Thank you for that. And I’m starting to sense something when I’m around you, Brandt. Maybe it’s the mating bond pheromones, I’m not sure. Losing my sense of smell was like losing an arm or a leg, because I could smell before, right?”

“You could, yes.”

“Thought so. I know what things smell like or taste like, so I always knew I had to have smelled before. It would be so much easier to accept all this if I could just fucking scent you.” Oliver startled. “Shit, I mean shoot. Sorry, I didn’t mean to swear.”

“I don’t care if you swear. I do it all the time.”

“Oh.” He bit his lower lip in a delightfully familiar way. “Sorry, Oskar didn’t like it when I swore, so I always tried not to.”

“Did Oskar treat you well?”

“Oh yes, he was a lovely mate. We obviously weren’t bondmates, but we loved each other. He was a wonderful man, dedicated to helping others. As a fellow constable, I’m sure you understand that driving need.”

“I do. He died in the line of duty?”

“Yes.” Oliver sat on the side of the bed, and he indicated Brandt sit beside him. This close, his bondmate’s scent washed over him and made Brandt a little dizzy. “He was part of a task force that liberated six beta teenagers from a sex trafficking ring. Oskar was shot. He died saving a civilian’s life, and as much as I grieved for my mate, I was proud of him for what he did.”

“It’s an honorable sacrifice.”

“Yeah.”

Brandt couldn’t help wanting to know more about Oliver’s life in Rainier, but he also didn’t want to be a nosy jerk. “Did you and Oskar ever, uh... Eriq’s your only child?”

Oliver glanced at the patio doors before nodding. “He is. Oskar and I tried, and I did miscarry twice, both times in the first trimester. And then on the last OB appointment he attended with me, my doctor said it was unlikely I’d have any more fruitful heats, as he put it. My chances of conceiving and carrying another child are pretty much over.”

“Oh, Ollie, I’m sorry.” Brandt chanced holding Oliver’s hand, and he rejoiced when Oliver didn’t pull away.

“It’s okay, it didn’t really surprise me. I was sadder for Oskar.” Oliver studied him a beat. “Did we ever miscarry?”

“No, we didn’t. We tried to get pregnant for almost six years, and then we decided that at the end of the sixth year we’d look into adoption. But then the home test showed pregnant, and I was so paranoid I made us an appointment with your OB to be sure. When he verified the results...I’d never seen you so happy in my life. You radiated this inner light for weeks, and I indulged every whim and wish you had.”

Brandt twined their fingers together, grateful for the grounding touch as he nudged his way into their shared past. “Before that you’d been so depressed. Sad and moody, because we hadn’t conceived, and you thought you were broken, while I always knew you were perfect. You were worried I’d be mad that you couldn’t carry our child. That you’d somehow failed me as my omega, and that couldn’t have been further from the truth. I have loved you since we were children, and all I wanted to do was make you happy, Ollie. Children or not, I loved you with my whole heart.”

“I believe you. I don’t remember any of it, but I hear the love in your voice, and I believe you.”

“I’m glad you believe me.” And he was overjoyed Oliver still held his hand. “I spent ten years living in hope of finding you again. After a decade... I stopped hoping. I tried to move on.”

I thought I had. I fell in love again, and now you’re here, and what do I do!?

“Like I moved on?” Oliver asked, an odd tinge of grief in his voice.

“That was different. You didn’t remember anything about me, and I believe you completely about that. You had to make a life for yourself and find a way to raise Eriq. I don’t judge you or blame you for any of your choices, Ollie. Oliver.”

“I hated you for a while. Not you specifically, but whoever Eriq’s sire was, especially that first year or so. No one really knew how I ended up in Rainier or where my mate was. For all I knew, you could have sold me to the men who had me. Or you could have seen me in the hospital, broken and ugly, and decided you didn’t want me anymore. I blamed you. How can you not blame me?”

Brandt traced a single finger down Oliver’s cheek. “Because I knew deep down that you didn’t leave me of your own free will. Whether you’d been kidnapped or killed, I knew you hadn’t run away with our child. Because you

loved me too much to be so cruel. I hate that we've been apart for so long, and even if all we are is mated friends going forward, that's okay. Because you're alive, sweetheart, and you're here. Healthy, happy and so is our boy." He cleared his throat hard against a fresh flood of grateful tears. "The rest we'll figure out."

The balcony doors slid open. Eriq came inside first, Diego a few steps behind. The little boy marched right up to Brandt, and Brandt was disappointed when Oliver released his hand. "I'm sorry I kicked you," Eriq said. "It was wrong and mean."

"Apology accepted," Brandt replied. This close, Eriq's lovely scent swirled around him, and it took all of Brandt's self-control not to sweep the boy into a hug. To finally touch his son. "How about you and I start over, yeah? I'm Brandt. It's nice to meet you."

Eriq studied the hand he'd put out to shake before gripping it with his much smaller one. The contact sent a bolt of awareness up Brandt's arm. "I'm Eriq. Are you really my sire?"

"Yes, I am. I'm so sorry I wasn't in your life until now. I had no idea where you were. Either of you. And I'm so grateful that I'm meeting you now." Even if this moment was all he ever got, Brandt could live the rest of his life knowing Ollie and their son were alive, well and thriving—even if it wasn't with him.

Eriq simply studied him with big, uncertain eyes, and this felt like Brandt's cue to make a discreet exit. Eriq and his omegin needed time to talk about this new change in their lives, and Brandt still needed to speak to Demir.

They all had to figure this out.

"I'm going to go for now," Brandt said. "Oliver, we're still on for lunch?"

"Of course," Oliver replied. "Meet you in the lobby at noon?"

"Sounds perfect. It was nice meeting you, as well, Diego." The younger beta gave him a firm handshake. "Take care of them."

"Always have," Diego said flatly.

As soon as Brandt was alone in the hallway, he leaned against the wall, closed his eyes and breathed. His entire life was about to change from this moment onward...and he'd never admit to anyone that he was scared to fucking death.

TEN

DEMIR LET out a long groan as his desire to remain asleep did silent battle with his bladder's urgent need for relief. His mouth tasted like ass—not in the fun way—and his head hurt. He was also in bed with someone else's back pressed to his. After a brief flare of panic, he recognized the gentle cadence of Tarius's snores beside him. He must have crashed in his brother's room.

Last night came back in a rush and sent his stomach into a tangled mess that wasn't going to be ignored for long. Demir crawled over his brother, ignoring a startled yelp—Tarius was the one with his bed pushed against the wall!—and bolted for the bathroom down the hall. Someone was in the shower, but Demir didn't care. He dropped to his knees and barfed up the last of his binge of beer, frozen pizza and chips.

Tarius pushed the handle to flush and whoever was in the shower cursed at them. "Like you haven't done it to me," Tarius said as he handed Demir a glass of water to swish with. "Too much last night?"

"Ugh." Demir spat into the bowl. "Gotta whiz too."

"Go for it. Coffee or water?"

"Coffee, I guess. My head feels like it's full of sand." After Tarius left, he took a long piss and had mercy on whoever was in the shower by putting the lid down and not flushing. He only wore his boxers, but whatever.

In the kitchen, Tarius handed him a shot glass with something amber in it. "Jesse swears by this to soothe a sore stomach."

"What is it? Whiskey?"

"No, idiot, it's apple cider vinegar with a bit of warm water. Doesn't taste great but it should help you feel more human."

"What the hell." Demir downed the shot. It was kind of gross, but while

they waited for the coffee to brew, he did feel less likely to vomit again. “Did Dad know I was crashing here? I don’t remember.”

“I texted him once I realized you were determined to get as hammered as possible, so he didn’t worry when you didn’t come home.” Tarius flashed him a lopsided grin. “I had no idea how much you like singing karaoke when you’re drunk.”

“Fuck, I didn’t.”

“Yeah, you did. Once you realized Jesse had a karaoke machine, you dared us all to a sing-off.”

“How terrible was I?”

“You actually aren’t that bad. But you did sing a lot of sappy love songs about broken hearts and shit.”

“Yeah, well...”

“Have you checked your messages? It’s late, already after ten.”

“Shit, we slept that long?” Demir vaguely remembered turning his phone off last night, and he had no desire to see if Brandt had tried calling. He wanted to put off getting dumped for as long as possible.

“Yeah, but feel free to hang as long as you want. I have some briefs to review for Ronin today, so I’ll be around the apartment.”

“Nah, I wanna to go home, take a shower, and crash until it all goes away.”

Tarius slung an arm around his shoulders. “It’s not going to go away. Whatever happens with Lars, you need to face it.”

Demir grumped. “Can I face it after a nap?”

“You do you, bro. Whatever happens, I’ve got your back.”

“I know, thanks.” Demir borrowed a to-go mug for his coffee, which he sipped on the drive home. It took nearly half-an-hour with weekend brunch-time traffic. Dad’s car wasn’t in the driveway, so he was likely at the conference.

Laughter drifted from the side yard, which meant Liam was probably outside with Linus and Layne. Demir chanced sneaking into the house. Living room and kitchen were empty. Perfect.

He tiptoed through the living room to the hall and made it to the bathroom unnoticed.

Sitting under the shower for a while, with the to-go mug within reach, helped clear some of the hangover fog from his brain, and Demir felt a bit more awake. Still exhausted, though—not only from staying up too late

drinking, but from all the emotion he'd released by crying on his big brother's shoulder.

Liam was waiting outside the bathroom when he opened the door. "I'd accuse you of doing the walk of shame if I didn't know you were with Tarius last night." He held out a bottled sports drink. "Here. It'll help with the whole feeling human thing."

"Thanks." Demir cracked the cap and gulped down a third of the bottle, grateful for the hydration.

"Did something happen at the mixer last night? You cleared out pretty early."

"Nothing I can't handle."

Liam frowned at him, but he'd never been the nosy parental type. "If you want to talk, you know I'll listen."

"I know, but all I really want right now is a nap."

"Okay. Jax and I are taking all the boys to the botanical gardens after lunch. Want me to wake you?"

"Nah, I'll just be a drag today. You guys have fun for me."

Liam gave him another assessing look, one that clearly said he knew something was up, and he was trusting Demir to ask for help when he needed it. Demir adored his stepdad for it. He gave Liam a quick hug before escaping to his bedroom. Shut the door and the curtains. Slid under the cool sheets. He really should turn on his phone but not yet. If someone needed him, they could call the house line.

He tossed and turned, not really sleeping. Dozing a lot and slipping into vague dreams of being with Brandt. Nice dreams of having sex, or sharing a pizza on the sofa—dreams that soon morphed into images of Brandt with another man. Turning his back on Demir. Leaving him behind with a broken heart.

A little after two, he gave up on sleep, went to piss out the sports drink he'd downed, and then headed to the kitchen for a snack. He jolted to a stop at the sight of Dad at the kitchen table eating a sandwich and chips. "Hey, you're home," Demir said dumbly.

"I don't have anything scheduled at the conference until four, so I came back to relax and have a late lunch," Dad replied with a gentle smile. "Join me?"

"Uh, sure."

Demir put together half a roast beef sandwich, slathered with mustard and

mayo, hold the chips. His stomach was still a little weird, so he wanted to start small. With a ginger ale from the fridge, he sat across from Dad and popped the can open. “So how’s the conference going?”

“Extremely well, according to all the feedback we’ve gotten.” Dad popped a chip into his mouth and chewed. “Our seminar leaders are happy with how they’ve gone so far and with the conversations they’ve been having with professionals from across the territory. There’s even been some discussion of doing this every year going forward.”

“That’s excellent.” Demir grinned, so fucking proud of his dad for this accomplishment. “Whatever it takes so no one else goes through what Liam and his friends went through, right?”

“Absolutely. And that’s not even the biggest news of the weekend.”

Oh shit, here it comes.

“I still can’t fathom what Brandt Lars must be feeling right now,” Dad continued. “To find his omega again after so many years, and that his son is alive and well. It’s mind-boggling.”

Demir’s stomach filled with acid. “It is pretty crazy.” His sandwich mocked him now, but he forced himself to take a small bite. Chew. Swallow.

“Lars was supposed to head up a seminar this afternoon, but I gave it to a fellow from Buckman to handle. I imagine he’ll want to spend as much time as possible getting to know his mate again.”

“Yeah.”

“We’ll likely reopen our investigation into Oliver’s disappearance from Sansbury. I don’t know if we’ll find anything new, but we owe it to the Lars family to try.”

“Sure.” As much as all this hurt, Demir could concede that Brandt deserved every possible answer.

“So I’m going to be the nosy parent now, and ask if everything is okay with you? You left the mixer early, and then you crashed with your brother, which isn’t alarming behavior, but it also isn’t like you to disappear without a word.”

“Sorry, I just...” *My boyfriend got his mate back, and I’m preparing to be dumped, but otherwise life is cool.* “I’m having some trouble with the guy I’m seeing, and I needed to vent to Tarius.”

Dad’s inner alpha showed up in his fierce stare and pursed lips. “What kind of trouble? Did he do something to hurt you?”

“Not on purpose, and we haven’t fought or anything. I just needed my

brother.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, Dad, I’m sure. I know you worry and for good reason, considering the past, but I’m okay. I’m dealing with it.”

Not. I am so avoiding the whole thing for as long as possible.

“You know I trust you, Demir, and I’m trying very hard not to go all papa bear on you over dating someone you haven’t introduced to your family yet.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t trust you not to do a background check on the guy as soon as you find out who he is,” Demir teased, trying to keep things light between them, since he *knew* his dad would flip his shit if he found out who Demir was seeing. Used to see? “Besides, we’re in a weird place and might break up soon.”

Dad’s face fell. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“It’s only been a few months. It’s not like it was super-serious anyway.”

Except it had been serious for Demir. Very fucking serious, and he had to stop avoiding the inevitable confrontation with Brandt. Demir picked at his sandwich, managing about half of it before his stomach said no more. Dad had already excused himself from the table and was in the living room watching TV.

Demir returned to his room and powered up his phone. Two texts. One from Liam asking where he’d gone, and one from Brandt: **We need to talk. Call me ASAP, please.**

Straightforward, just like the alpha himself.

He also had two voice mails from Brandt, one from last night around ten, and the other at nine-forty-five this morning. They could be more of begging Demir to call as much as a recording of Brandt dumping him, and Demir couldn’t hear that in a message. So he deleted both, rang Brandt’s mobile and waited, his sore stomach in painful knots.

Voice mail.

Demir hung up, turned his phone back off, and crawled into bed again. Hurt, annoyed, and scared for the future, he stared up at the ceiling for a long, long time.



Brandt tried not to pace the lobby as he waited for Oliver to arrive for their

lunch date. His nerves were jumping all over the place and for far too many reasons. He was nervous to see Oliver again, to talk more and see how they meshed as these two new people they'd become. He was also terrified of admitting to his affair with Demir—and not because he expected Oliver to be upset that Brandt was dating someone not him. How was Brandt supposed to explain how attracted he was—and how much in love he was—with a beta half his age?

What if it disgusted Oliver? What if, despite having mated a second time, he felt as if his alpha had betrayed him by falling in love again? That wasn't the Ollie he remembered, but this Oliver wasn't his old Ollie. He'd changed.

They both had.

And Demir wasn't answering any of his calls or texts, damn it. That frustration helped quell some of his fear. Demir must have heard the gossip last night at the mixer and assumed the worst. Assumed Brandt would fall back into his mate's arms and shove Demir aside, but Brandt couldn't do that. He loved Demir, and he couldn't make those feelings go away just because Ollie was back in his life.

After his morning call had gone unanswered, he'd used his detecting skills to find out that Demir was safe and sound, and that news helped ease a bit of his fear, too. Not all but some.

"Brandt?" Oliver's soothing voice rippled across his skin, the sound as familiar as his own. Brandt turned. Oliver approached with hesitation in both his posture and his dark brown eyes. Nowhere near as anxious as earlier this morning, and Brandt hoped that meant he trusted Brandt to keep him safe in a strange city.

Maybe not so strange, if he'd really led Diego to their fountain yesterday.

"Hi," Brandt said. In the lobby light, the lines of Oliver's scars stood out more, but he still barely saw them. Beyond the way his face had changed, he still saw his beautiful, blond Ollie smiling shyly at him.

Oliver stopped in front of him, hands clasped together, as if unsure of the protocol here. As much as Brandt wanted to haul him into a hug, he offered a hand to shake instead. Oliver held his hand for several long moments, staring where they were connected. "It's such a strange feeling to know we have a bond, because I feel it when we touch, but I can't believe in it without that instinctive need to smell it. Like the pheromones are there but also not there."

"I can't imagine how odd it must be." All Brandt had to do was inhale and he felt their connection in his bones. "I also promise not to push you into

anything. Today is about getting to know each other again. No expectations other than friendship.”

Oliver squeezed his hand, then let go. “Thank you for that. And we have all afternoon. Diego and Eriq are out exploring Sansbury together.”

Brandt pushed back a pang of unhappiness. He’d looked forward to seeing his son again, but he also understood why Oliver had sent him away. They needed to explore what remained of their connection as bondmates first. Legally, Oliver was still his mate in every way except emotionally.

“So what are you in the mood to eat?” Brandt asked. “I thought of suggesting your old favorite place, but I don’t want it to look like I’m pressuring you.”

“I’m a big fan of spicy chicken burritos and stewed black beans.”

Brandt grinned. “Then Petrova’s it is. They’re mostly known for their make-your-own-taco combo platter, but all their food is excellent.” He hesitated to add this but it felt important. “It’s also where we had our official first date as a couple when we were sixteen.”

Oliver quirked an eyebrow. “We went to a taco place?”

“Yup. It had only been open for about a year and was still the hotspot for teenagers to hang after school for the taco specials and virgin margaritas.”

“Okay. Let’s go. Has their menu changed a lot?”

“Other than the prices, not much, no.”

“Then don’t tell me what we ordered for that first date. I want to try and guess off the menu.”

Brandt grinned. “I like the sound of that.” He offered Oliver his arm, and Oliver slipped a hand around his forearm in a loose hold.

Petrova’s was too far to walk comfortably in the chilly, almost rainy afternoon, so Brandt drove. The décor hadn’t changed much over the years, and Oliver took the place in as they were seated. The air was rich with the scents of chilies, cumin, seared meat and fryer oil. Every table got a complimentary basket of crispy tortilla chips and salsa, and Oliver ate one right away.

Brandt watched as Oliver tested the flavor, maybe trying to determine if he remembered it at all—then Brandt recalled that the loss of scent often affected taste. Probably why Oliver enjoyed spicy chicken now, versus the regular chicken burritos he used to love. When their waiter came over to get their drink order, Brandt requested a dish of their spiciest salsa for Oliver.

“This must be why you’re a senior constable,” Oliver said. “You see all

the clues and put them together.”

“I can be pretty smart when I try. Do you keep a bottle of hot sauce in your pocket when you eat out?”

Oliver chuckled. “No, but I like to cook, so I don’t eat out often. Eriq grew up around chili peppers and spicy food, thanks to my taste buds. It took Oskar more time to get used to it, so sometimes I’d make two batches of dinner. One mild for him, one hot for me and Eriq.”

“How long were you and Oskar mates?” Saying it out loud still made Brandt want to snarl, but he kept himself quiet.

“Almost seven years.”

“Longer than we were.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.”

“No, sweetheart, I asked.” Brandt curbed his need to touch Oliver and reached for a chip instead. “It’s still difficult for me to imagine you with another man, and while I don’t like it, I understand it, and I want to know more about you two. It’ll help me process it all, I think.”

“That makes sense. We’ve lived our own lives these last eleven years, and we have to come to terms with how we’re both different people. Going through what I did in the hospital made me angry and bitter, but Oskar kept me from falling apart. From wallowing in depression and despair. His love got me through it and into a stable place. He made a home for me and Eriq.”

Meanwhile, I wallowed in depression and despair for an entire decade.

But Brandt couldn’t ever be bitter that his Ollie hadn’t. “Do you still live there? Your home with Oskar?”

“No. When he died, I was a wreck, and the house went to Diego anyway. We decided I needed a fresh start, so we sold the house, Diego moved out of his apartment, and we got a condo together, the three of us. It faces a beautiful mountain peak so tall its cap is often in the clouds.”

“Who was the ‘we’ who made those decisions?”

“Diego and I.” Their drinks arrived, and Oliver immediately tried the spicy salsa on a chip. “Oh, this is good. It isn’t just hot, there’s flavor in it too.”

“I’m glad you like it.” But Brandt was stuck on Diego having a say in what Oliver needed. In the choices Oliver made for himself and Eriq. The guy seemed nice enough, if a little overprotective of someone not his mate and not a blood relative.

Stop being so paranoid. They both loved and lost Oskar.

Sometimes he couldn't turn off his inner cynical constable, and he didn't want to alienate Oliver by suggesting anything untoward about Diego's behavior or attachment to him. Especially after only knowing Diego for about thirty minutes.

"So are you going to tell me what we had on our first date?" Brandt asked, redirecting the conversation. "The waiter's going to snatch our menus soon and expect us to order."

"Hmm." Oliver studied the two-sided menu. All the meat, veggie, sides and sauce options were listed on the front of the menu, and any combination could be turned into a three-taco platter, burrito or nachos. The rest of the menu listed specialty dinner combos or a la carte sides. "Well, we were students, so we were probably here for the cheap tacos. Three for two credits? No, this was twenty-odd years ago. Two for one?"

"Correct so far." Brandt tried not to smile too broadly. This was as likely good reasoning skills as because Oliver actually remembered something of their shared past.

"And I've only known you for a grand total about two hours, but you strike me as a beef fan. Also shrimp, but more beef. And a man of simpler tastes, so you wouldn't have gotten a bunch of extra toppings. You like to taste the meat." Oliver's ears turned bright red as he realized what he'd said. "Um, your taco meat."

Brandt laughed. "I like my meat all kinds of ways, but go on."

"You went old-school with the shredded beef taco, lettuce and salsa."

"You are very, very close, and I'm not just saying that to influence you in any way." Brandt wanted to jump up and down at the way Oliver had picked out his favorite taco. "You missed one topping."

"I did?" Oliver scowled at the menu, and for one brief moment, it was twenty-two years ago. Their first date, Oliver so excited but unsure how to choose among so many variations. "Fresh cilantro?"

"Yup. It's my favorite."

"Wow." His scowl turned into a shocked smile. "Wow. I probably had a chicken taco loaded with lettuce, tomatoes, beans, sour cream, salsa, and cheese, huh? It's what I like now, but with spicy chicken."

"Pretty much, yeah. We ate ourselves sick on cheap tacos, and then we walked to a small park near here to feed the swans."

"Yeah? That sounds romantic."

"It was."

“You folks know what you want yet?” the waiter said, ruining a perfectly wonderful moment. Oliver got the spicy chicken tacos with all the fixings, while Brandt played along and ordered his simpler beef taco platter with the traditional sides of rice and stewed beans.

After a few quiet minutes munching on the chips, Oliver asked, “Did you come here much after I left?”

You didn't leave, you were taken from me by force, and I wish I knew who did it so I can murder them with my bare hands.

“Not once,” Brandt replied. “The last time was the day Dr. Troi confirmed you were pregnant. We came here to celebrate. I haven't been back since. Hell, I haven't had a taco since.”

Oliver's entire face fell, and he reached across the table to squeeze his wrist. “I'm sorry.”

“Not your fault, sweetheart. I avoided a lot of things we enjoyed doing together out of this sense of guilt. I couldn't enjoy myself or simple pleasures while goddess knew what was happening to you. I hate how much you suffered at the start, but I'm glad you were able to find joy again.”

“Did you ever? Find joy again?”

Demir's beautiful, grinning face flashed into his mind. “I did. For ten years, I locked myself into a cage of grief and denied myself so many things. I worked, I slept, and I worked some more, and for the first two years I spent my weekends alone in a drunken daze. Until my supervisor woke me up to respond to a weekend emergency call while still under the influence. I could have been fired but he fought for me to stay, and I cut down on my drinking. Saved it for anniversary after anniversary of losing you.”

Oliver's eyes glistened with unshed tears, and he turned his wrist so their hands were palm to palm. “I'm so sorry you went through all that.”

“I didn't know how else to deal with my pain. I drove my parents away before they died, I drove my brother away. I had no friends to lean on. Your parents moved away from the pain of losing you. I became a grumpy bastard, but a grumpy bastard who did my job by the book. I try not to get personally invested in work, as a general rule, but there were some cases that got to me. Really got to me. I'd sit up during the day when I should have been sleeping and talk to you about those cases. You weren't there, but it felt like you were. As long as I didn't change a thing about the house, you were still there.”

“You haven't changed our house?” Oliver blinked several times. “After all these years?”

“Not a thing. Didn’t even want to clean so I didn’t lose you, but after so much time your scent faded completely anyway. The house lost its charm and became...sad. Like I was sad.”

Until a bright, beautiful beta came into my house and brightened it back up again.

“But you said you found your joy again,” Oliver said. “How?”

“Last year, on the tenth anniversary of your disappearance, after a decade of missing you, I accepted the fact that you were never coming back. Whether you were dead or otherwise, you were gone. Period. It about killed me and my depression got worse.” Brandt couldn’t bring himself to mention putting a gun in his mouth. Not yet. “Then I hit rock bottom and realized you’d have been disappointed in me. Disappointed in my standing still, instead of moving forward and seeking happiness. Or at least companionship. So I started going out to bars, to parties, trying to participate in the world, instead of ghosting my way through it. I had a few hookups.” Time to come clean. “And then I met Demir.”

“Demir?”

“Yes. We met at a party this past winter solstice and...I felt passion for the first time since you. Like I could breathe again after being underwater for a lifetime.”

“Are you still, um, seeing him?” Oliver’s tone had tightened considerably, and Brandt studied his mate. Oliver looked...jealous? Definitely not happy hearing about Brandt finding passion elsewhere, and jealousy was a byproduct of the mating bond.

“I think so.”

“How do you not know so?”

“Because I haven’t been able to reach him since yesterday afternoon. He must have heard about your reappearance, and I think he’s avoiding me.” Stubborn Little Blue.

“That upsets you, I can tell.”

“Of course, it upsets me. He’s the first person I’ve let myself love in ten years, and he won’t talk to me.”

Oliver flinched and drew his hand back. “You love him?”

“I do.” Brandt couldn’t lie about his feelings for Demir. “But I still love you, too, Ollie.”

“That leaves us in a very awkward position, don’t you think? Or perhaps an easy one.”

“Easy?”

“You have someone in your life whom you love. We can work out things with Eriq, but you don’t need me.”

“I’ll always need my bondmate. Yes, I love Demir, but I love you, too. When I scented you again everything wrong in my life snapped back into place.”

The waiter chose that moment to deliver their food, and they both used the excuse of eating to stop the conversation. The tacos were as delicious as he remembered, but they also sat heavily in his stomach. He still very much loved Oliver, but he also loved Demir, and society said he had to choose. But how could he choose between a bondmate he’d loved for two-thirds of his life, and the new, passionate love he shared with Demir? Especially if Demir wouldn’t fucking talk to him?

They made small talk for the rest of the meal and when Oliver insisted they split the check, Brandt didn’t argue. On their walk to the door, no plan yet for their next step, Oliver said, “You said you didn’t change the house, right?”

“Right.” Brandt shrugged into his light jacket before helping Oliver into his.

“I’d like to see it. The house.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Ever since arriving in Sansbury I’ve had these flashes. Not memories, but a strong sense of familiarity about places. Maybe I’ll feel something more substantial in the home we shared together. Or even remember something?” Oliver was so tentative now that Brandt would have promised him the world for one small smile.

“We can go to the house, absolutely.” Brandt was proud of himself for saying ‘the house’ and not ‘home’ and accidentally pressuring Oliver. He was still able to think clearly, despite his heart pattering away with excitement and joy. Joy that carried them back to the car and out of the new spring rain. Joy he’d never imagined feeling again in this lifetime.

For the first time in nearly eleven years, his bondmate was coming home.

ELEVEN

THAT IRRITATING déjà vu plagued Oliver from the moment he met Brandt in the hotel lobby, through lunch at Petrova's, and all the way to Brandt's house. Their house from a lifetime ago. The déjà vu was almost constant, and he hated it. Not because he didn't want to remember his old life—he was still torn on that—but because he couldn't just flat-out remember things!

A small part of him wasn't convinced he'd correctly chosen Brandt's favorite taco combination from the thousands of possibilities on that menu. The rest of him believed Brandt when he said he wouldn't influence or pressure Oliver. Lying would have been influencing him, and Brandt didn't strike him as a liar. He was guarded, yes, because of so much past grief and hurt, but Brandt was trying.

Oliver hoped seeing their old home would do something. Jog something loose in his mind, cement once and for all that everything Brandt had told him about their shared past was the truth. Oliver felt that truth in his bones when he touched Brandt, but he had to believe it in his head, and his head was proving much trickier than his instincts.

Brandt took them to a modest-to-poor neighborhood with small houses on small lots, and he parked in front of one that looked like all the others. Squat, single-story, white exterior with light blue trim. One other house on the street had red trim, but the rest had retained the builder's colors. The déjà vu kicked in but didn't show him any specific memories of parking here, living here, building a life here.

His heart, however, gave a happy little lurch when Brandt unlocked the front door, and a sense of belonging draped over Oliver like a warm hug. The door opened directly into a small living room, with an eat-in kitchen tucked

off to the right, and a short hallway straight ahead that likely lead to the bedrooms. Shelves of books and video tapes, knickknacks and framed photos. Plush pillows on the red sofa. The carpet was worn but clean. Everything seemed to sparkle and shine like new, despite being old and dated.

Brandt stood to the side while Oliver explored the space. Oliver ran his fingers over the spines of novels he didn't remember reading, films he'd probably watched with Oskar but now wasn't so sure, pot-metal sculptures and other inexpensive trinkets. On one eye-level shelf, he studied a photograph. A much-younger Brandt held a smiling blond man in his arms, while they fed each other pieces of cake.

That's me. I'm the blond man.

He picked up the photo and studied his old face, seeing bits of the new him in that man's flatter, wider features. Still handsome in a different way. And the love in Brandt's eyes radiated through the picture and right into Oliver's heart. If Oliver had had any doubts about who he'd once belonged to, they shattered under the love in that single photo.

"That was our mating celebration," Brandt said softly. "Your parents threw it at their house. We were so excited to finally be mates, wholly and officially, and we couldn't keep our hands off each other. Feeding each other cake was your idea."

"I saw it in a movie once," Oliver said without thinking. Now where had that come from? He looked up, into Brandt's wide, startled eyes. "What?"

"That's exactly what you told me that night. You loved movies, especially romantic ones."

"I still do." Oliver put the photograph back on the shelf. "We couldn't keep our hands off each other, huh?"

"Nope." Brandt bit his lower lip. "You sure you want to hear about this stuff?"

"As long as it's the truth, I want to hear it."

"It is the truth, I swear. I'd never lie simply to make you like me or believe me. That's not what this is about."

"Okay."

"You loved physical contact, affection, and you really loved sex. I was the one who insisted we wait until we were seventeen to try penetration."

Oliver startled. "We didn't wait until we mated?"

"Nope." Brandt's lips twisted, as if struggling to hide a smug smile. "You loved sex and you weren't ashamed of loving it. We made love dozens of

times before we finally mated, and you were your sexiest, most passionate ever during heat. By the end of our second heat together, I'd bought a big dildo with an inflatable knot to help keep you satisfied."

Ears burning with the truth of those statements, Oliver ducked his head with embarrassment. "I was like that with Oskar, too. Once I was finally comfortable with him, I mean."

Brandt frowned briefly. "With Oskar did you ever...get rough?"

"Rough?" He glanced at Brandt's hands, which hung loosely by his sides. "As in hitting?"

"No, of course not. More like...going hard. Being held down. We'd get pretty feisty, but I promise I never hit you. A few smacks on the ass, sure, but nothing violent. Never to actually hurt you."

He believed Brandt, and dear goddess, his dick was getting into the conversation. Oliver had always had a kinkier side than Oskar, and sometimes Oliver couldn't ask for the kind of rough pounding he wanted. Oskar had always been a little too gentle with Oliver, and Oliver knew that stemmed from being uninformed about Oliver's past. Not knowing if he had a history of being abused, never wanting to overdo it or scare Oliver. In Brandt, Oliver saw a bit of a kindred spirit, and it terrified him as much as it excited him.

"What about the guy you're seeing?" Oliver asked. "Demir? Is he kinky?"

Brandt licked his lips in a telling way. "Yes."

"Is he widowed?"

"No." Brandt circled the sofa and picked up a framed picture from another side table. "He's beta, and he's young."

Oliver took the offered photo. The dark-haired boy mugging for the self-taken image with Brandt was cute, but young was an understatement. He didn't have a single wrinkle or gray hair, and was that a human biology textbook on his lap? "How old is young?"

"Twenty. He's a third-year university student."

He nearly dropped the frame and fumbled getting it back on the table. "Goddess, that's young."

"I didn't know how young he was until after we had sex the first time."

"You couldn't see it in his face?" And no, Oliver hadn't meant to sound so growly, but he didn't like the blunt way Brandt talked about having sex with other people.

Brandt bit his lower lip in that cute, uncertain way of his. “I couldn’t see his whole face. I went to this sex party where everyone wore masks, and I was drawn to him in his blue mask and tight pants. I called him Little Blue, and after the encounter we parted ways. But a week later, we ran into each other at a large, public gathering, and we reconnected. We’ve been seeing each other for about three months.”

“Why wasn’t he at the mixer last night?”

“Because we aren’t out publicly as a couple.”

“The age difference?”

“That and...he’s my boss’s son.”

Oliver gaped at the alpha who looked so thoroughly embarrassed that Oliver couldn’t find any humor in the bizarre situation. “You cradle-robbed your boss?”

“Not on purpose.”

“Oh, Brandt.” Oliver had no idea what to say, no positive reassurances or teasing innuendo. Brandt said he loved this boy, but he also said he loved Oliver, and how could a heart love two men at once? Maybe Brandt still loved the idea of Oliver as a representation of the Ollie he’d once had.

But Brandt’s adoration was clear in his eyes as he said, “I can’t predict the future, none of us can. All I know is how I feel right now. Seeing you in this house? Even with the slight changes, you’re my Ollie. My bondmate. My first true love. And when I think of Demir? His fire and spirit and his generous nature? I love him, too. I don’t know what to do, Ollie.”

“You don’t have to *do* anything. This isn’t a situation you can fix on your own. Three adults and a child are tangled up in this.”

Brandt grunted. “Demir is not a child.”

Huh? “No, I meant you, me and Demir are the adults. Eriq’s the child.”

“Oh. I thought you were including Diego in this.”

“No, he’s a good friend and family, but this isn’t about him. Diego will support whatever decision I make about my future.” Even if Oliver’s decision was moving to Sansbury so Eriq could be close to his sire. He couldn’t very well expect Brandt to move to Rainier, when Brandt had a job and life here. Oliver didn’t work. Yes, he had friends he’d miss, but that’s what the telephone was for.

Not that he was making any plans to move his entire life thousands of miles east after reuniting with his bondmate less than twenty-four-hours ago. Not at all.

Was he?

“I’ll respect whatever decision you make, too,” Brandt said. “I want to hug and kiss you so badly right now, but you just met me.”

“Maybe, but being in this house...” Oliver didn’t have the right words to describe how he felt both at home and adrift here. “I’m not scared. It’s not the home I remember but it feels safe. Warm. Familiar, because these colors and items feel like things I’d have picked out.”

“Do you, uh, want to see the nursery?”

Oliver’s entire body jerk as shock rippled through his belly. “Nursery?”

Grief creased Brandt’s expressive face. “I could never bring myself to give anything away, not even after years had passed. It was the last room you touched, the last chair you sat in before you left. I don’t think Demir likes that I’ve kept it, but he never says anything or asks me to clean it out.”

“He probably understands why you’ve kept it as is. And yes, I’d like to see it.”

Brandt led him down the short hallway. One door stood open at the far end, likely the master, with two others opposite each other in the hall. Brandt opened the door on their left and pushed inward. Stale air floated out, obvious even without a sense of smell, and Oliver took a single step inside.

A crib, changing table, and rocking chair were the largest things in the room, and everything was coated with a thin layer of dust. Even the curtains and rod were slightly gray with the stuff. A few toys lay on the changing table, and some stuffed animals held court inside the crib. Everything was done in shades of green.

Eriq’s favorite color.

“You created this for our son,” Brandt whispered, so reverently it sounded like a prayer. “You made a perfect place for him, and I couldn’t bear to tear it down. It was all I had left of you.” He choked.

Oliver didn’t think. He turned and pulled Brandt into his arms. The bigger man wrapped strong arms around Oliver’s shoulders and hugged him tight, while soft sobs ripped from his throat. They sparked Oliver’s own tears, so upset for his alpha’s grief. For this lovely shrine to a life Brandt thought had been lost forever. Holding Brandt this close, something tickled over Oliver’s skin. Maybe he couldn’t scent his alpha, but Oliver felt the pheromones. Felt the bond deep down to his very soul.

“I’ve got you,” Oliver said. “I’ve got you, Bebe.”

Brandt stiffened, then pulled back to study Oliver with tear-filled eyes.

“Bebe?”

“Sorry?”

“No, it’s what you used to call me. Since we were kids.” Wonder chased away some of the tears in Brandt’s eyes. “It’s in there, sweetheart. Our life together. Maybe you can’t consciously remember, but it’s there. It’s coming out.”

“Maybe. This house...I can’t describe how I feel being here. I don’t consciously remember anything about it or you, but inside I know it. I don’t remember this nursery, but I *know* this nursery, if that makes sense.”

“It makes perfect sense. Is it the same way you know me without remembering me?”

“I think so. There’s this part of me that’s always been there, but it’s been dormant, and now it’s waking up. Seeing the world. Remembering it has a place here. With you.”

With his heart in his eyes, Brandt leaned in closer. Warm air gusted over Oliver’s lips.

Oliver turned his head. “I can’t. I wish I could, but I can’t.”

“It’s okay, I’m sorry.” Brandt let him go and took a full step backward, and Oliver’s body protested losing that comforting warmth. “I shouldn’t have done that. I promised not to pressure you.”

“You aren’t, I swear. But you have a boyfriend who isn’t me. Bondmates or not, I won’t help you cheat.”

Brandt closed his eyes a beat, before opening them to show off glistening ice-blue depths. “You’re right, thank you. I really do need to speak with Demir, tell him what’s going on. He deserves that, at the very least.”

“Do you want to try calling him again?”

“No, he’s made it clear he isn’t ready to speak with me yet. It’s all such a mess, isn’t it?”

“It’s complicated, but it’s not a mess. And the great thing is that there’s no timetable here. No hurry to figure everything out quickly. We can take our time, all of us. Eriq’s still confused about you, and I’m only here for another forty-eight hours. Less than, actually.”

Brandt opened and shut his mouth several times, clearly hesitating about something.

“Spit it out,” Oliver said.

“Well, you mentioned a timetable, and I was wondering...about your, uh, next heat.”

Oliver squeezed Brandt's shoulder. "About six weeks, and I've gotten used to handling them on my own." The flash of hunger in Brandt's eyes suggested he'd be more than willing to help Oliver through his next heat, and deep down, Oliver already trusted Brandt to do so. But in this moment? He wasn't prepared to submit to the man. "It's a non-issue today."

"True. We have licensed beta services that help single omegas through heat."

"We have those in Rainier, too." Oliver didn't mean to sound defensive, but he had no idea where he'd be six days from now, much less six weeks. Hopefully, back home with Eriq and Diego.

This house feels like home, too.

Curious about the rest of the layout, Oliver left the depressing nursery. A full bathroom was across the hall, tidy and as freshly scrubbed as the rest of the house—nursery excluded. The master bedroom was small but neat, and Oliver stared at a chest of drawers. Brushed a finger over the slightly-marred wood surface. Chestnut brown, old but not antique. The far corner had a thin, faded circle about three inches in diameter, and Oliver traced the shape.

"This is important," he said to himself.

"It was our first big fight," Brandt replied. "You had this dresser in your childhood bedroom. It once belonged to your great-grandomegin. We were fifteen, chilling in your room, and I left a glass of soda with ice on the dresser without a coaster. It left a mark, and you were so angry with me. You ignored me for a week, and it was hell."

"I can't imagine ignoring you." The words slipped out without thought, and Oliver was glad to still be facing the dresser. "I hate that I say things like that. I don't want to lead you on or give you hope, when I have no idea what I want."

"If it helps?" Brandt rested a warm hand on the back of his shoulder, and that simple contact shouldn't have Oliver's blood humming with desire. "I'm not sure what I want, either. My entire body says you're mine and I want you, but my heart and mind are torn in two."

"I know. It's why we need to keep talking. Talking is the only way we'll get through this."

"Yes."

"Are my clothes still here?" Random, but Oliver was curious how much of his Brandt had kept.

Brandt coughed. "Is it creepy if I say yes? I left your things where you

left them. I couldn't get rid of anything. Well, except for that block of stinky cheese you like that eventually turned to real mold and made the fridge stink."

"Bleu cheese isn't stinky, it's aged and fragrant."

"It stinks."

"Says the man who eats cheddar right off the block like it's a candy bar." Oliver went perfectly still, shock rippling across his skin.

Brandt gently turned him around, and they blinked at each other, stunned. "How do you know I do that? Did you remember it?"

"I don't know." Oliver closed his eyes and tried to picture such a thing. Brandt taking a block of cheese from the fridge and gnawing off a big bite, but he couldn't picture it, exactly. It was simply something he *knew* about the man. He couldn't see anything about his past; all he had were feelings and these random flashes of information. "I don't know how memory loss really works. Maybe I didn't lose my memory so much as repress it? Because of the trauma of the wreck?"

"Maybe being back here in Sansbury is helping you loosen those memories, like with the cheese thing just now."

"Maybe so." As much as it scared Oliver, the idea of getting some of his past back also excited him. Knowing who he'd been prior to eleven years ago wouldn't change or diminish the life he'd created in Rainier; it would help Oliver's life be that much more rounded and whole. "Do you have any photo albums of us?"

Brandt grinned. "Yes, I do. Come on."

In the living room, Brandt pulled three thick albums off a bottom shelf and set them on the coffee table. "Your parents started them for us," Brandt explained, "when they gave in and accepted we'd one day mate. The first few pages are of us when we were kids." The leather cover creaked ominously as Brandt opened it.

The first photo was of a blond-haired toddler holding a stuffed bear and mugging for the camera, and beneath it was a birthdate. "Is that me?" Oliver asked.

"Yup."

"Wow, we were only one day off on my birthday."

"What do you mean?"

Oliver shrugged as he lightly traced his fingers over the photo. "I didn't know who I was and didn't have a birthday. I joked with Oskar once about

never aging without one, but I guessed I was a summer baby. One day he surprised me with a cake and a party, and he declared it was my new birthday. He was one day off.”

“I’m glad you had him. I mean it. As jealous as I get over the thought of another alpha touching you, never mind, you know, the heats and stuff, I’m genuinely glad you weren’t alone. Glad for you and Eriq.”

“Thank you. I don’t know if I’d be here if not for Oskar’s never-ending patience and love. I really don’t.”

“Then I’m doubly glad.” Brandt squeezed Oliver’s knee. “Glad for all of us.”

A newly-familiar sense of peace washed over him under Brandt’s touch—as if the bond between them he couldn’t scent was made stronger simply by contact. He had no intention of throwing himself into Brandt’s arms and declaring undying love for his bondmate, but Oliver took comfort in this new discovery. In a bondmate who still loved him, even if Brandt was no longer *in love* with him.

The rest they’d figure out together.

TWELVE

DEMIR TURNED his phone back on right before dinner, mostly to make sure Tarius hadn't called or texted, and yes, of course he'd texted to check up on Demir. He replied that he was okay, no longer hung over, and heading to the conference soon to hear the omegas speak.

Another text from Brandt tempted him to delete it unread, but he took a chance instead: **Please, Little Blue, I saw your missed call and I'm sorry I didn't answer. I need to talk to you soon. I love you.**

A text was a fine fucking way of finally saying it, but for the first time since last night, Demir had a smidge of hope that maybe, just maybe, this beautiful thing he had with Brandt wasn't over yet. Not a lot of hope, but enough to keep him out of the slumps of depression.

Demir: **Tomorrow morning. Your house. 10.**

The reply was almost instant: **I'll make us brunch.**

He smiled at those four little words. Weekend brunch had become a new tradition for them, and it wasn't being pushed aside. Maybe. If the bondmate was there...well, Demir would react accordingly.

Liam had heated up leftovers for dinner, and Linus was being fussy about eating his portion, so Demir made a game out of it. Linus's plate was mostly empty by the time the sitter showed up and took over. Ten minutes later, Liam and Demir left for the conference.

The ballroom was packed with more people than Demir expected for tonight's lineup of omega speakers, and he'd bet good credit there were civilians in the mix. This evening's event was open to the public, unlike the day's seminars, and they only found seats because their friends had saved them. Demir sat between Liam and Mikel Tovey, a soft-spoken alpha whose

mate was supposed to speak tonight. Demir skimmed the paper schedule he'd been given, looking for familiar names and their time slots. Kell Cross had been asked to open the evening, with Jax and Brogan Tovey speaking together, Brogan acting as interpreter for Jax's unspoken words. Jax's own alpha, Karter Jenks, was on Mikel's other side, and both men already wore proud smiles.

Another name stood out to Demir: Oliver Strand. No other Olivers or Ollies on the list, so this had to be Brandt's bondmate.

I get to see what he looks like.

Dad took the podium and shushed the crowd. "Tonight is going to be an emotional night. We've invited thirty widowed and mated omegins to speak over the course of the next three hours. Our purpose was to put names, faces, and voices to the experiences you read about in the paper, or that gets a sound bite on the evening news. Fellow human beings who've experienced violence and fear unlike anything most of us in attendance could ever imagine. Please listen with an open mind and open heart so that these stories are never repeated again."

After a moment for applause, Dad said, "Our first speaker of the night likely needs no introduction, but please help me welcome the co-founder of 'Raising Our Voices' and the Sansbury Light House Resource Center, Kell Iverson Cross."

Demir clapped until his hands hurt, and he made note of the two young patrolmen who flanked the stage as Kell stood behind the podium. Kell was often a divisive, passionate speaker, and Demir listened intently to Kell's story—not a story about Kell's own past or history with an abusive, rapist of a mate. He talked about helping a young omega six months ago, a boy he would only call Jack. Jack had been living as a vagrant for a month to escape his abusive mate, and he'd finally had the courage to walk into Light House and ask for help. He detailed Jack's strength in taking back his life and demanding better for himself, after being handed off to his former mate by his parents—a story not unlike Kell's own life.

Kell finished his story with a call to give all unmated and widowed omegas the right to choose their mate, to agree to the match, instead of all control being in the hands of their parents or legal guardians. It was a change in law Demir very much agreed with, because Kell had suffered the same fate as Jack: a hateful sire who pawned Kell off as soon as he edged into his first heat, and Kell had been shunted into three years of utter hell.

The next speech was by an omega from Nakota Province. As time passed, people around Demir occasionally sniffled. All the men spoke with passion and determination, despite the horrors and tragedies they detailed. Some of the stories were about themselves, some about others they'd loved and lost to violence.

At seven, Oliver Strand took the stage, and Demir leaned forward. He was sitting three rows back, so he had a good view of the blond man. His age was difficult to guess, skin smooth and pale, almost unnaturally so. Good-looking and slender, he also had an air of sadness about him, and Demir kind of wanted to hug the guy.

Stop, he's the enemy. No sympathy for him.

"Good evening," Oliver said in a steady voice. "I apologize if I end up rambling tonight. I spent my entire two-day train ride writing and editing my speech, and I didn't even bring it with me." The crowd tittered. "I did that on purpose. My story changed last night in a way I never expected, and I'm sure some of you have heard about it through the gossip chain. Eleven years ago, give or take, I woke up in intensive care, in a hospital in Rainier Province, with shattered bones and third-degree burns on my face and chest. I also had no memory of who I was or where I was from."

Gasps rolled across the audience, and as much as Demir wanted to dislike Oliver on principle, his heart hurt for the pain Oliver must have suffered as he recovered.

"I was also pregnant with an unknown man's child," Oliver continued. "I spent a full year in the hospital recovering, before I left with my infant son to live in a group home. During that time, the constabulary did everything they could to try and find out who I was, but all I ever really knew about the night I was burned was that two of the men in the car wreck with me were linked to sex trafficking."

Oliver cleared his throat hard. "In a way, I am my own unique statistic, in that I had no memory, and yet I built a new life for myself and my son. We thrived, we loved, and we are here today, safe and whole. But I could have easily been another statistic. If our van hadn't run off the road, I may have been delivered to traffickers for a brief life of torment, torture, and finally death at the hands of violent, sadistic men who take what they want, when they want, no matter who suffers.

"Some men in this room weren't as lucky as I was. And in hindsight, the pain and surgeries and stitches were worth it, because I am lucky to be here,

as all of you. We've lost enough of our brethren to the violence of evil men, and I stand with everyone here in the cause of finding ways to end it. Finding ways to give omegas the equal rights and agency they deserve, because regardless of gender, regardless of who gets pregnant or doesn't, we are all human beings. We are all equals. Good night."

Demir joined the standing ovation, eyes smarting with tears as Oliver's words turned over in his mind. Oliver hadn't simply run away and broken Brandt's heart. He'd been kidnapped for the express purpose of sexual slavery of some kind, and Oliver had spent the last eleven years building a life out of the remnants of his broken body and mind. The strength it must have taken to go through so much medically and still come out of it with a healthy child?

Mad respect.

Brandt must have been over the moon knowing Oliver hadn't left him on purpose, while being furious at how his bondmate had suffered.

And I've been shutting him out all day. Goddess, I'm a selfish jerk.

He texted Brandt while the next speaker took the microphone: **I am so sorry about Oliver. I can't imagine how you felt learning all that.**

Brandt: **It shocked me to my core. We'll talk about it all tomorrow, I promise.**

K. See you tomorrow, Big Red.

Brandt sent back a heart emoji. Liam nudged him in the ribs and Demir put his phone away. Halfway through the speeches, Dad announced a ten-minute break. It took all of Demir's self-control to simply stretch his legs and butt, sore from sitting for so long, and not tear around the ballroom to find Brandt. Liam excused himself and returned a few minutes later with two cups of cold water. Demir gratefully accepted his, not even realizing he was thirsty.

Jax and Brogan kicked off the second half of the night by speaking about the fight ring they'd both been kidnapped into, Jax's escape and how his bravery had been the first step toward tumbling the entire house of cards. Brogan spoke a bit about nearly dying in childbirth and raising his son alone. Giving up hope of finding an alpha who'd want them, before meeting his bondmate. He ended with a message of hope.

"You are *not* too broken," Brogan said, his raspy voice a soothing whisper over the sound system. "You are not unworthy of love. Do not let rage and despair consume you to the point of giving up. We are all deserving

of a good, happy life, so hold out for a man who will love you, respect you, and be the partner you deserve.”

Jax made a gesture of agreement.

Demir half-listened after that, his thoughts full of Brogan and little Peyton, whose own blood had the potential to kill him at any time. Demir should have spent his afternoon studying, not sleeping through his hangover and brooding about Brandt. He'd promised Brogan and Mikel.

Guilt swamped him for a while, even after Dad said his closing remarks and encouraged everyone to stay and mingle.

The cash bar was back, and Demir eyeballed it. Then he remembered this morning's barf-fest and wandered the room instead. He found the entourage from Rainier in a cluster around their four omega speakers, Oliver included. They were all emotional, and Demir didn't judge them for it. It had been an emotional night, with a handful of the speakers breaking down onstage, including the black-haired omega they all seemed to be comforting.

As if sensing he was being stared at, Oliver looked at him. Right into Demir's eyes. Recognition widened Oliver's eyes, which was weird—unless Brandt had shown Oliver a photograph of him. Had Brandt told Oliver about Demir? Odds were in his favor, because Oliver excused himself from the group and beckoned Demir toward a quieter corner of the ballroom.

“You must be Demir,” Oliver said, his expression friendly without actually smiling.

“I am.” Up close, Demir more easily saw bits of the Ollie he'd seen in Brandt's photos. “You're Ollie.”

“Oliver. And we share someone in common.”

Demir's belly flipped. “He told you.”

“We talked for a long time this afternoon, both at lunch and at his house. Our Brandt is in a terrible position now, loving two men at the same time.”

“He told you he loved me before he told me?”

Oliver's eyebrows arched. “I'm sorry if that's the case.”

“To be fair, I haven't said it out loud to him, either.” The weirdness of saying he was in love with another man's bondmate was kind of surreal. “But I do love him. Except he's never really been mine to love, has he?”

“That's not my place to say. Demir, I didn't come here to ruin your life, or with any expectation of discovering my past. We're all in an uncomfortable, messy spot right now, and we need to talk. All three of us.”

“I know.” Demir found courage in how reasonable Oliver was being

about all this, when he'd half-expected the man to scream at him for helping his mate cheat. "Brandt invited me over for brunch tomorrow so we could talk, him and me. Maybe you can come over a bit later? Say ten-fifteen or so?"

"Should we ask Brandt?"

"No, he'll be fine if you show up. I'm sure he'll want to see you tomorrow anyway, since you're leaving the day after, right?"

Oliver looked pained. "That's the plan, yes. I want to delay, but I can't reasonably keep Eriq out of school, and his spring break isn't for two more weeks."

"You'd come back for his break?"

"I think so. Even with long-distance phone calls, one weekend is hardly enough time to get to know Brandt again. For myself or Eriq."

Demir studied the older omegin, unhappy with how confused Oliver looked. "Hey." He reached out and tentatively squeezed Oliver's hand. "I don't want you to use me as a factor in any of your decisions going forward. You were in Brandt's life long before I was, and you're his bondmate. The carrier of his son. If anyone needs to duck out of this, it's me."

"But you love him. How can you turn your back on that?"

"If he loves you more, I won't have a choice."

Oliver's eyes filled with tears, and Demir didn't even think. He hugged the man, who was almost identical to him in height and build. This close, his scent was easier to pick up: sweet, like summer flowers. Beta noses weren't sensitive enough to pick up on mated pairs or anything, but Demir swore he also scented Brandt's subtle pine fragrance, too.

How close had they been today?

Not his business. The mating bond always superseded another man's claim, especially if the other man was just a beta. Demir had no legal ties to Brandt, no argument in his favor—unlike Brandt and Oliver, who were still mates in the eyes of the law.

"I'm so glad to have met you," Oliver whispered. "When Brandt told me how much younger you were, I didn't understand. But in these few minutes, you've shown a brave and generous heart. I can see why he loves you."

Demir blinked back tears of his own. For all he'd wanted to dislike Oliver on general principle, he did like the man. A lot. Could almost see them being friends. Once they pulled themselves together, Demir released Oliver and took a step back.

“Brandt mentioned you were a university student,” Oliver said. “What are you studying, if I may ask?”

“I’m fast-tracking into their med school program for the fall.”

Oliver’s lips parted. “You’re going to be a doctor?”

“And a researcher.” He briefly told Oliver about Peyton’s diagnosis, and Demir’s promise to the boy’s parents that he’d find a cure. “Peyton’s like another brother to me. I won’t let him down.”

“That is the most selfless thing I’ve ever heard. Were you interested in medicine before you learned Peyton had the disease?”

“I’d thought about it, but only in a nebulous way, you know? Everything came into sharp focus when we found out he has Donal Syndrome. Like, I knew exactly what I was going to do with my life. My brothers tease me about being an overachiever, because I took university courses while finishing my last year in secondary, and now I’m graduating university with twin majors in Biological Sciences and Chemistry, but my dad and Liam are crazy proud.”

“Your father is Chief Constable Higgs, correct?”

“Yeah.”

Oliver glanced around but no one was hanging onto their conversation. “Brandt did mention the young man he was dating was also his boss’s son, so I understand why you were both so discreet about the relationship.”

“My dad is super-protective of his kids, and he’d flip the fuck out if he found out I was sleeping with any constable, much less one so much older.” Which might not be an issue much longer, if Brandt chose his bondmate and politely kicked Demir to the curb. It would hurt like hell, and Demir would probably rage at Brandt for a while, but he’d eventually move on.

“I spoke to him briefly, and he does seem the overprotective sire sort,” Oliver said.

For a split second, Demir thought he meant Brandt, and then he realized Oliver was still talking about Dad. “Well, for good reason, considering some of the stuff our family has been through.”

“Oliver?” a stranger’s voice said behind Demir.

“Oh, hey Diego,” Oliver replied. A dark-haired man inserted himself next to Oliver. “This is Demir Higgs. His sire is the constable who opened and closed the night.”

Diego’s tense stance relaxed. “Hello, Demir. I’m Oliver’s brother-in-law Diego Strand.” The words came out almost like a challenge. The poor guy

was probably a little freaked out about accidentally traveling to Oliver's hometown and Oliver discovering his long-lost mate.

"Nice to meet you," Demir said. "I'll excuse myself now. Oliver, it was great talking to you, and I hope to see you again before the weekend is over."

"Same, Demir," Oliver replied with a knowing nod. "I'm sure I'll run into you tomorrow."

"Good night, then."

Demir wandered the ballroom, hoping to stumble over Brandt as the room slowly cleared, but he didn't. Brogan waved him over to where their extended family and friends were gathered, sipping drinks and chatting about the night. Liam clung to Dad, which meant all the different speeches had stressed Liam out. Their extended captivity in that fight ring was something Liam, Jax, Jaysan and Brogan would never forget, and it had bonded the quartet of omegins for life.

Their assorted mates were there, too, close to their omegas, and Demir tamped down a surge of jealousy. Jealousy at all these happily-mated pairs, openly loving each other, while Demir couldn't even tell anyone he was in love.

Brogan bragged about Mikel's recent promotion at his construction job to assistant project manager, clearly proud of his alpha bondmate. Lately, Brogan had been full of potty-training stories about his youngest Miko, and Demir was thankful those had been replaced by less stinky conversation. It also didn't hurt that little Miko was now, mercifully, potty trained. As were almost all the kids in their big, patchwork family.

"It's getting late," Karter said as he kissed Jax's temple. "We should collect the boys and head out." Jax signaled his agreement.

One by one, couples left, until it was only Liam, Dad and Demir. "All those speeches were really intense," Demir said. "And personal. Everyone did great."

"They did," Dad agreed. "I was especially touched by Oliver Strand's comments. I can't imagine what it's like to wake up alone, surrounded by strangers, with no memory of who you are."

"He knew his name."

Dad blinked. "Yes, I suppose he must have known that. Huh."

"He came to give a speech," Liam said, "and he found his old life. It's astonishing the way fate sometimes puts us exactly where we need to be to find the person we need most." He flashed Dad an adoring smile that made

Demir want to cry. But Liam had no reason to suspect Oliver's good news was Demir's bad news.

"I spoke to Lars briefly after suppertime," Dad said, also oblivious to Demir's pain. "He and Oliver have been talking and seem to be in a sort of holding pattern. Lars mentioned he's been seeing someone, which throws a big wrinkle into the mix."

Liam's dark eyes zeroed in on Demir, a big question mark in them. Demir held his gaze, daring Liam to say something in front of Dad. And Liam, bless him, said nothing.

Yet.

"What about reopening Oliver's disappearance here?" Demir asked Dad. "How's that going?"

"Rainier's records room faxed over the most relevant forms this afternoon," Dad replied, "and they're sending copies of the full reports and evidence findings via the territory post. Should arrive late tomorrow so Tarek and I can get started reviewing the case."

"Good." After having met Oliver himself, Demir wanted the man to know every single fact possible about his abduction. Oliver and Brandt deserved nothing less.

As soon as their trio arrived home and relieved the sitter—the boys were asleep, no problems—Liam gave Demir five minutes alone in his room before knocking. He came in without an invitation and shut the door. "Tell me the guy you're hungup on and having trouble with is not Brandt Lars," Liam demanded.

Demir shrugged from his desk chair. "Can't."

"Seriously?" Thank goddess Liam couldn't shout, because that had all the inflection of a yell. "How did you two even meet? Was it the solstice gala?"

"Sort of."

"Meaning?"

"How is this you not being a helicopter parent?"

Liam huffed. "I know what it's like to be twenty years old and enamored with an older man, trust me, but you guys don't have the mating bond to draw you together like I had with Isa."

"So? We have chemistry. I'm attracted to him, and he's attracted to me." Demir couldn't bring himself to admit he was in love with the big alpha, because that still had the possibility of blowing up in his face. "And since you're being nosy, the sex is fantastic."

“I did not need to know that, but okay. Again, how did you meet?”

Demir was kind of gloating now, because Liam was not comfortable with the situation at all. But Liam also cared enough to make sure Demir wasn't being taken advantage of and that meant a lot. “We hooked up at a party the weekend before the gala, but everyone there wore masks, so we didn't recognize each other. The last time I really interacted with Brandt was before Omegin died, and I was just a kid then.”

“You're still a kid now.”

“I am an adult university student who's going to be a doctor. If fucking around with Brandt was a mistake, then it was my mistake to make. He makes me feel better than I've ever felt before, and I don't just mean the sex. He's kind, attentive, he welcomed me into his life with open arms, and I lo—adore spending time with him. Neither of us saw this thing with Oliver coming.”

Liam crossed his arms. “So the reason you've been so vague about who you're dating and where you spend your weekends is because you know your dad will want to kick his ass for touching one of his kids.”

“He didn't touch me, ugh, that makes it sound gross, and it's not. Maybe it's not the same because we're beta and alpha, but you know how you feel when Dad does nothing more elaborate than kiss you good morning, or turn your covers down at night? Those tender feelings are how I feel when I'm with Brandt. I can see a future with him. Or at least, I could until last night.”

“Because of Oliver.” Liam sat on the edge of the bed facing him, his expression gentler now. “Have you guys talked at all?”

“Not really. I was angry and hungover, and I avoided him today, but we texted, and I'm going over tomorrow for brunch. We'll talk, see where we stand. But if he chooses Oliver, I'll step aside in a second. I'd never get between a bonded pair.”

“That's what makes you an incredible human being. Your selflessness.”

Demir shrugged. “We've all gotta live in this world. No sense in making things unnecessarily harder on others.”

“True. But sometimes it's okay to be selfish and think of yourself first.”

“Not this time. They're bondmates and they have a kid. All Brandt and I have is three months of hot sex and a lot of mutual desire.”

Liam again looked uncomfortable with the idea of Demir having a sex life, which was hilarious, since Liam was only six years older than Demir. And Liam had once been in the exact same position regarding an older alpha.

Maybe the mating bond had made accepting Dad and Liam as a couple easier. Demir had been over the moon when Dad said he'd fallen in love again, but it had still been an age-gap relationship.

It had also been the first time Demir had heard of an alpha having two bondmates in his lifetime.

Alphas and omegas were driven by the mating bond. To find it and hold on tight. Bondmate pairs were statistically happier and produced more offspring than mated pairs who never felt the bond. Mated couples who didn't feel the bond were usually less happy and had fewer children, as some of Liam's own friends could attest to.

But bonding twice? Rare.

"You've put yourself into quite the complicated situation," Liam said. "I don't envy you at all."

"I don't envy me either, and honestly, it wasn't all that complicated until Oliver showed up. Sure, I was nervous to tell Dad I was dating his subordinate, but Brandt and I were in a really good place. Really, really good. Now I don't know where we are."

Liam patted the bed. "Come here. I'm going to try the fatherly advice thing."

With a snort, Demir shifted spots and pressed his shoulder to Liam's. "Give it your best shot."

"Listen to your heart, Demir, because it's a good one. A smart one. And don't be afraid to fight for what you want. I know it's instinctive to acquiesce to the wishes of an alpha, but if you want to be in Brandt's life, make sure he knows that. The only way the three of you can make a decision about the future is if all three of you have the correct information. If you withdraw because you think it's what Brandt wants, you'll regret it. You'll 'what if?' yourself for the rest of your life and that benefits no one."

It sounded as if Liam wanted Demir to fight for his man when Liam should have been trying to talk him out of pursuing the much older alpha. He studied the omega who was technically his stepfather, but who'd always just been his friend. "Thank you. I want Brandt, but only if I can be sure he wants me just as much. If he wants Oliver more...well, I'll step aside."

"Because you're a good man. Your dad, brothers and I will always be here for you, no matter what."

"Tarius knows it all. I told him last night, right before I went on a beer bender."

Liam chuckled. “I suspected as much. And the timing of everything makes a lot more sense. I’m sorry you had to find out about Oliver’s reappearance like that.”

“Better from you guys than strangers, right?”

“I guess. Thank you for being honest with me, Demir. It means a lot.”

“In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m kind of a bad liar. And it’s so much easier to try and be honest, instead of remembering which lie I told which person. Once I know where I really stand with Brandt, we’ll talk again, okay? I promise.”

“Good.” Liam kissed his cheek. “Try to sleep tight, okay? Good dreams only.”

“Hope so.”

After Liam left, Demir sprawled backward on the bed, keyed up and exhausted all at once. He touched the rough patch of skin on the back of his neck where Brandt loved to bite him during the final few moments of fucking him—a claiming bite that meant the world to Demir. Proof of how much Brandt desired him. That Brandt had claimed him, over and over, with his dick, his mouth, and his heart.

Demir didn’t know what tomorrow’s brunch would bring, but he did know one thing for certain: he wanted to be in Brandt’s life, and he’d do whatever he could to keep his place in it.

He loved the big, burly alpha too much to let him go without a fight.

THIRTEEN

BRANDT WOULD NEVER ADMIT out loud that he was freaking the fuck out about this morning's brunch date with Demir. Nope. He wasn't much of a cook, so Demir usually whipped up their weekend brunch menu, but today Brandt had to cook. So far, he'd burned the eggs and bacon, and then cut his thumb trying to slice fresh fruit for a salad.

In the end, he ran down to the corner bakery for homemade bagels, cream cheese, lox, and a fruit salad.

Not fancy, but it was edible.

He had everything arranged on the kitchen table when the bell rang promptly at ten o'clock. Nerves jumping all over the place, Brandt smoothed down the front of his shirt before answering the door. Demir had a small paper bag in one hand, and his shy smile punched Brandt right in the feels.

"I've missed you," Brandt said immediately. "It feels like a lifetime since I last saw you."

"Same." Demir came inside and held out the bag. "For you. Or us, I guess."

He pulled a small box of chocolate chip cookies from the same damned bakery out of the bag. "For dessert?"

"Yeah. I felt like I needed to bring something. A peace offering for being such a brat yesterday."

"You were confused and hurt. I was annoyed that you wouldn't talk to me, but I get it. This is a crazy situation, and we're all trying to navigate it." Brandt was trying to figure out how to listen to a heart that pulled him in two directions at once. "Please, come sit. Coffee?"

"Actually, juice is fine."

Brandt poured himself a mug of coffee and got orange juice for Demir. They sat in familiar positions opposite each other. The spread wasn't all that amazing, but Demir dug in, slathering an everything bagel with cream cheese and layers of lox. Brandt picked at a dry cinnamon bagel, his stomach too squirrely for much more.

"I love you," Brandt said, apropos of nothing. "I shouldn't have said it for the first time in a text, but I do, Little Blue. I love you."

Demir put his bagel down, eyes wide and liquid. "I love you, too. I have for a while, which is why it hurt so much when I heard about Ollie. I was terrified you'd take him back, no exceptions, no excuses, because he's your bondmate, and I'm just a beta kid you've been boning on the side."

"Oh goddess, no. You are so much more to me than that. Yes, Oliver is my bondmate and the man I loved for most of my life, but he's also different. The Ollie I remember died in that wreck. He isn't the same man, no matter what my nose tells me. It's why we spent all of yesterday afternoon talking."

"Here."

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I ran into Oliver last night after the speeches." Demir poked at a piece of lox. "Okay, so I kind of went looking for him. His speech really affected me, and getting more of the story helped me see him more clearly. And he recognized me, so I figured the only way that was possible was if he saw one of our pictures here at the house."

Demir would have made a great investigator if he wasn't already stuck on medicine. "We went to lunch at a place we used to frequent as teenagers. I can't say he remembered anything, exactly, but Oliver used his instincts and almost correctly guessed my favorite taco. Then here at the house, he had these senses of things. The nursery made him sad, but he knew that a dresser in our bedroom had once been his."

Demir flinched. "Your bedroom."

Brandt saw his mistake. "What had once been my bedroom with Oliver. Right now, it is very much my bedroom with you." Might as well put it all on the table. "I don't want to lose you, Little Blue. But I can't ignore the fact that I have a living bondmate and a child with him."

"I know. You have every right to be with them, but damn it, Big Red. I love you, too, and I don't want to give you up to another man. I will, if that's your choice, but I don't want to."

Grief, love, hope and confusion burned together deep inside of Brandt

Lars at those statements. He didn't want to lose Demir, either, but he wanted his bondmate and child. Having both lovers was too much. Brandt didn't deserve so much love and joy, or to ask two such wonderful men to share.

"Oliver should really be here," Brandt said. "This is as much about him as about us."

"You're right." Demir took a bite of his bagel. "Liam knows about us."

"He does?"

"Yeah, he put my hangover together with you and Oliver spending the day getting to know each other, and when he asked, I couldn't lie. He'll keep our secret, though, just like Tarius."

Brandt swallowed a groan. "Your brother knows, too?"

"Yeah, I kind of sobbed it all over him the night of the mixer, and then I drank beer until I passed out."

"Oh, my Blue, I'm sorry."

"It was my choice. At the time, I was convinced I'd lost you, and it hurt. But now I see how much more complicated this whole situation is. It can't be easy for you to love two men at the same time."

"It isn't." Brandt's throat squeezed with emotion. "I don't know which way is up anymore. What I do know, though, is it's taking everything I have not to kiss you right now. I've missed holding you, touching you."

"Me too. But that's not fair to Oliver."

"Is denying ourselves fair to you or me?"

"Probably not. Nothing about this is fair, Brandt. But there's three of us involved, and the third party should be here any second."

"What?"

Demir looked him directly in the eyes. "I invited Oliver to brunch with us. He needs to be here."

Brandt wasn't sure if he was angry or relieved. He'd wanted to spend some time alone with Demir, to talk things through, but Demir was right that Oliver should be involved. Two people couldn't make a decision for three. And Demir had very clearly stated what he wanted. Now it was time to hear from Oliver.

They munched on their bagels until the doorbell rang. He allowed Demir to get up and answer it, not at all surprised when he led Oliver into the kitchen. Oliver had a bakery bag in his hand—same as Demir—and he put it on the table. Demir pulled out a chair on the end, which put Oliver between them.

“I brought sugar cookies,” Oliver said. “Showing up without felt strange.”

“They’re my favorite,” Brandt replied, his throat thick with emotion. “We used to walk down early in the morning when they were hot from the oven.”

“Oh.” Oliver flushed, his eyes cutting in Demir’s direction. Demir watched them with little expression on his face. Hearing Brandt and Oliver discuss the past had to hurt on some level, but it was also the past. The very ancient past.

A past tied to the most meaningful relationship of Brandt’s entire life.

“So this is awkward,” Oliver said.

“It doesn’t have to be,” Demir replied. “Do you want something to drink? Coffee or juice?”

“Coffee would be lovely, thank you.”

Brandt tracked Demir as he moved through the kitchen, fetching Oliver’s coffee as if Oliver was their guest and Demir the host. Demir didn’t seem aware of it, and Brandt enjoyed the unconscious way Demir was laying claim to this house and Brandt. Once Demir delivered the coffee and sat back down, he said, “I’ve already told Brandt I love him and want him, so now I’m telling you, too.”

“I appreciate your honesty.” Oliver stirred a bit of sugar into his coffee. “Brandt?”

“I love Demir, and I want him,” Brandt replied without pause, “but I still love you, too. I love our son. You’re my bondmate and that connection will never go away. But we’re also both different people now. For all the love I still carry in my heart for you, we don’t really know each other.”

“That’s very true. The bond is there. It’s more difficult for me to identify without my sense of smell, but I do feel it when you’re nearby. But as much as my body trusts you, you’re still a stranger in my mind.”

“I know.”

“And it isn’t fair of me to ask Demir to wait until I get to know you better before I decide what I want.”

“Shouldn’t Demir get to say what’s fair to him?” Demir asked.

“You’re in love with my bondmate, Demir,” Oliver said to him, his voice tinged with both truth and grief. “And he loves you, but I don’t know if I love him.”

Brandt’s heart cracked a little bit.

“So you need time to get to know him, right?” Demir looked from Oliver to Brandt. “Have you guys kissed?”

Brandt's cracked heart gave a mighty kick.

"What?" Oliver's eyebrows shot up. "Of course not."

"Why not? I mean, you feel the bond, so maybe if you kiss him, you'll know if you still love him or not."

"Bond aside, he's your boyfriend and a stranger to me. I'd never presume."

"Then I'm giving you permission. Both of you. To kiss each other."

If Brandt hadn't already been in love with Demir Higgs, he'd have fallen head-over-heels for the guy right then and there. Demir's generosity and huge heart were trying to keep all three men's feelings in mind without being selfish or making demands. He was trying to see all angles of the problem and test them for weakness or strength.

"I'd like to kiss you," Oliver said to Brandt. "If you're game."

"Very much so." Brandt gave Demir an adoring smile before standing. Oliver did the same.

Oliver hadn't come to this house with any intention of things getting physical between himself and Brandt, but Demir had made a good point about physical attraction. If it was there, they should all know about it. Oliver had woken up this morning with every intention of telling Brandt they'd have a platonic relationship, Brandt could get to know Eriq, and that was it.

But being near Brandt again after one night apart? Oliver felt...settled. Whole. At peace with the world because his bondmate was nearby. Oliver hadn't been able to say it, and Demir seemed determined Oliver stay in the picture, instead of pushing Oliver away from his man.

Brandt studied him with his heart in his eyes and waited, allowing Oliver to take the single step forward necessary to put them a hair's breadth apart. The alpha's body heat soaked right into his skin and he tingled with want. Need. A kind of desire it had taken months for him to develop with Oskar, but with Brandt? Instantaneous now that he'd gotten to know the man again.

Oliver rested his palm against Brandt's left cheek and studied him. Those icy-blue eyes that had haunted his dreams last night, full of so much emotion Oliver couldn't breathe. Fine lines bracketed both eyes, and the same specks of silver on his temples flecked his dark eyebrows. Brandt's body seemed bigger, thicker, but bigger and thicker than what? Did Oliver's own body simply know how Brandt used to feel against him?

“You’ve gained weight,” Oliver said.

“Yes.” Brandt’s husky voice threatened tears. “Too much beer does that.” Oliver chuckled. “Am I the same?”

“Mostly. Always were slender, hard to gain weight, no matter what I fed you.”

“Oskar complained of the same thing. Eriq has my metabolism.”

Brandt’s right hand squeezed his hip in a way that made Oliver feel protected—and a tiny bit turned on. “Gonna kiss you now, sweetheart, if that’s okay?”

“Yes.”

Warm breath gusted across Oliver’s lips moments before a mouth covered his. Hot and firm, but also gentle and sweet, Brandt Lars kissed him, and something deep inside of Oliver Strand snapped into place. Every omega instinct in his body knew this man, this alpha, this mouth and body and soul. Oliver kissed him back, a soft moan in his throat swallowed by the tongue Brandt thrust into his mouth.

Hands gripped his hips, pulling Oliver forward, and he went. His body crashed into Brandt’s. Arousal coursed through his veins, waking up his dick, and Oliver dove in deeper. He tangled his fingers in Brandt’s thick hair and held him tight, just enough to feel it, because Brandt liked that. Oliver knew it in his bones. Even though his conscious mind had forgotten his bondmate, his body hadn’t.

The world fell away under the onslaught of Brandt’s kiss. Their bodies moved together, holding tighter, needing more, until Oliver was hard and aching. A hand groped his ass, and he pushed into the touch, ready to give his alpha anything he wanted. When he broke the kiss so he could go to his knees for his bondmate, the spell shattered. The kitchen and their surroundings rushed back in, and they blinked owlshly at each other a beat, before both men turned their heads to look.

Demir was gone.

Watching Brandt and Oliver kiss had been both the most erotic thing Demir had ever seen in his life, and also the most heartbreaking. The instant their lips had touched, they’d each been consumed by the other, as if that single sliver of contact had flipped a switch. Their arousal had thickened the air, and as much as Demir had enjoyed the show, he needed out of that house. Away

from the sexiness that was watching their first kiss after more than ten years apart.

Away from a man Demir could no longer claim as his own.

He'd only gone as far as the front stoop, though, where he'd plunked down to think. The cool spring air smelled like new grass and gasoline, a familiar fragrance in this neighborhood. Tears stung his eyes as he wondered how many more times he'd be in this area, this house. A house that had been waiting for its true omega to come home. Demir had simply helped clean it up for Oliver's arrival.

That's not fair and you know it.

Maybe, maybe not. But he knew what he'd seen. Brandt would choose Oliver, so Demir needed to step aside.

Except deep down, his own affection and love for Brandt screamed at him to fight for his alpha, damn it! Fight for what he wanted, which was a future with Brandt. Demir had initiated that kiss, though, and now he was stuck with the consequences. Stuck knowing the man he loved had rediscovered his bondmate, and that the mated pair's feelings were real. Intense.

And tragic for Demir's own love life.

The front door swung open. "—if he hasn't gone far—Demir?" Brandt's voice. "I thought you'd left."

"I started to," Demir replied, eyes fixed on the cracked path leading from the sidewalk to the steps. "Couldn't."

Brandt sat beside him, one hand awkwardly adjusting his still-present erection. "Why did you walk out?"

"Duh. If you'd seen the way you two kissed each other, you'd have cleared the room, too."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. I told you to."

Brandt leaned his shoulder against Demir's, and that simple gesture shouldn't have felt as good as it did. "Some of that was also instinct and pheromones."

"From the mating bond. He's your mate, Brandt, we can't pretend he's not, or that you guys aren't insanely attracted to each other."

"You're right. Please, come back inside so we three can talk."

Demir sighed and followed Brandt indoors. Oliver was sitting on one end of the sofa. Demir took the other end, putting Brandt on the coffee table facing them both. Oliver was hiding wood, too, and his ears were flushed.

Not embarrassed, exactly, but also not radiating aroused joy.

“I’m sorry,” Oliver said, breaking the awkward silence.

“Don’t be sorry,” Demir replied with a shake of his head. “I told you guys to kiss. What happened is supposed to happen between bondmates, right? I just couldn’t keep sitting there and watching it, you know? I needed a minute.”

“I understand. Believe me, I’m ashamed of myself for losing control like I did. I’ve never felt that way with anyone else, and my reactions were difficult to control, much less turn off.”

“He’s your bondmate.”

“That’s no excuse for giving in to irrational behavior. It’s how alphas have defended violence against others for centuries, and it’s no better for an omega to lose control when I’m not in heat.”

Demir shrugged. He’d never understood the pheromone side of alpha/omega pairings. On an intellectual and biological level, sure, but not an emotional one. How feeling the bond suddenly made that person irresistible, drove you to want to fuck, to fall in love and mate, and to live happily ever after like so many of his family’s friends. In some ways, he could compare it to the intense lust he’d felt for Big Red at that anonymous party and the attraction they’d both given in to at the gala.

But nothing Demir felt for Brandt would ever be as strong, desperate, or dependent as the mating bond between Brandt and Oliver.

“If you two want to be alone, I can go,” Demir said.

“Have either of us asked you to leave?” Brandt replied. “I went after you because I want you here. I need you here, Little Blue. As much as I loved kissing Ollie again, I desperately miss your kisses, too.”

“I miss you, too, but I’m just a beta. You two have a unique, soul-deep connection I’ll never understand. If I was a stronger man, I’d walk out the door and leave you both to live your lives.”

“A weak man would walk away,” Oliver said. “You’re showing how strong you are by staying and fighting for what you want. I see it in your eyes, Demir, how much you love him. And I see his love for you just as clearly.”

“But he can’t have us both.”

“Who says?”

Brandt’s big body jerked, and he turned a startled look onto Oliver. “What?”

Oliver somehow found a way to speak to them both at once. “I don’t know what it’s like here, but in Rainier, polyamorous couples aren’t rare or frowned upon. Granted, most of the mated pairs I know who have a third don’t share the mating bond, but one couple does. The beta they both love was one of my nurses during my recovery. And it’s extremely common to see betas in poly relationships with other betas.”

Demir stared at Oliver, open-mouthed and stunned at the easy way Oliver spoke about poly relationships. He didn’t know of such a thing in Sansbury. Then again, the province had several million residents now, thanks to an influx of workers two years ago when a new toy factory opened on the site where an old one was torn down. And it wasn’t as if folks went on the nightly news to brag about being in love with two men at once.

Like Brandt was.

“Are you serious?” Brandt asked.

“Completely.” Oliver scooted closer to Demir, which put him directly in front of Brandt. He squeezed Brandt’s wrists. “You love both of us, and Demir clearly loves you. I cannot ask you to give him up while I figure out what I want, so I won’t do that. And I also can’t deny the physical chemistry between us. My body clearly knows you as my bondmate.”

“But your mind doesn’t.”

“Not yet, but I’m getting there. I also need to think about Eriq. If I decide to pursue our relationship again, it will affect him. Our home is thousands of miles away, and one of us moving is a huge change.”

Panic fluttered beneath Demir’s breastbone. As much as he loved Brandt, he couldn’t see himself moving so far from his parents, brothers, and extended family. Sansbury was his home, damn it. But if Brandt moved to be with Oliver and Eriq...well, Demir would stay behind.

Brandt’s intense gaze landed on Demir, and he seemed to understand the problem. “Sansbury has been my home my entire life. Demir’s too.”

“I know, and it was mine for a while, as well.” Oliver sighed. “I’m thinking more about Eriq and Diego. Rainier is the only place Eriq’s ever lived, and he adores his uncle.”

“There are phone calls and vacations.”

“True.”

“What about Eriq’s spring break?” Demir asked. “You mentioned it’s in two weeks. I hate to remind Brandt that you guys are leaving tomorrow, but would you come back to visit? Let Eriq get to know Brandt?”

“Yes, I’d like to do that.” Oliver met Brandt’s startled eyes. “Would that be okay? We can all get to know each other better. Eriq understands what poly relationships are. It won’t weird him out.”

“I can’t believe this is real,” Brandt said. “You’d let me keep seeing Demir, while you and I get to know each other again?”

“Of course. Why? Was I so selfish before that I’d have denied you something that made you happy?”

“You didn’t have a selfish bone in your body, sweetheart. But the idea of one of us falling for another man never occurred to us. We loved each other from childhood. There was never anyone else for me.”

Oliver traced a finger down Brandt’s cheek. “Then maybe you staying single for ten years was the goddess making sure you were ready when Demir stepped into your life at that party. Because I’ll be perfectly honest here. Knowing you have Demir to love you and look after you takes a lot of pressure off my shoulders. Without him, my omega instincts would probably take over and push me into something with you that I’m not mentally prepared for. It would be easy to let my body take over, let you fuck me, reclaim me, and then after? I’d regret it, because I’m not ready. Not yet.”

The mental image of Brandt kneeling behind Oliver, fucking them both into wild, intense orgasms, sent blood right to Demir’s dick.

Oh, my goddess, that would be so fucking hot.

Hot and little bit taboo. He’d never watched two adults fuck each other before. Seen pictures in porn magazines, sure, but not in person. And not one of them his much-older boyfriend.

“I think I understand,” Brandt said after a long moment of silence. “What happened in the kitchen...if we hadn’t both remembered Demir, if he hadn’t been here at all, things would have gone further than you’d have wanted.”

“Exactly.” Oliver turned liquid eyes onto Demir. “How do you feel about all this?”

“I’m not sure.” Demir scooted closer, until his thigh touched Oliver’s, and he could rest his hand on Brandt’s knee. “I’ve never been in love before, so I don’t really know how I feel about sharing Brandt. But at the same time, watching you two kiss was crazy hot. I don’t want to lose Brandt. I also know how intense the mating bond is, just from watching my dad and stepdad, and all their friends with their mates. I mean...” Demir bit his lip, his entire face heating.

“You can say or ask anything,” Brandt said, his big hand covering

Demir's.

The contact gave Demir the courage to say what was on his mind. "Would it only be me and Oliver sharing Brandt? Or would, uh, Oliver and I...um..."

"Get to know each other?" Brandt's expression went briefly feral, as if picturing Oliver and Demir together was turning him on. "I hope you do."

"I absolutely want us to be friends," Oliver said to Demir, his own eyes gentle and curious. "I like you, Demir, and the moment we met I had a sense of trust about you that I couldn't explain. I'm open to things going beyond friendship, if it happens, but only if you're comfortable with it."

"I'm not sure." Oliver was cute in his own way, and Demir had responded positively to the guy since first spotting him onstage. He'd hugged him without thinking last night, and it had felt good. Really good.

Was he attracted to Oliver, too?

Maybe.

"Then we'll start as friends," Oliver said with an open smile. "No pressure. And I'll be the first to admit, I've never been with a guy so much younger than me."

"It's amazing," Brandt replied, his voice lust-roughened. "He's got stamina for days, and I can usually get him to come twice per encounter. One day last month, in between him studying and me day-napping, I think I coaxed four orgasms out of him in about eight hours."

Demir's face flamed with embarrassment over his sex life being described for Oliver, but he also felt...proud. Because Brandt was proud of him, that much was clear in his voice. Brandt was bragging about himself, and he was bragging about Demir.

"Have you edged him?" Oliver asked. His face went completely blank. "Wait, what did I just ask?"

Brandt gaped at his mate. "Edging. You used to love it during non-heat sex. I'd take you to the brink of orgasm over and over, and deny it each time until you were a begging, delirious mess. Then I wouldn't let you come until I'd filled you with mine."

That mental image got Demir hard so fast he ended up a little light-headed.

Oliver stared at Brandt with a dreamy look on his face. "Yes. That...feels right. Oskar was very...standard in how we made love. Something always felt missing."

Demir touched the bite mark on the back of his neck, keenly aware of how it felt to have sex with Brandt Lars. The intensity and power of the man's thrusts. The tenderness he showed after. "He hasn't edged me, exactly," Demir said, shocked at his own brazenness. "But he, uh, definitely makes it last."

"I know." Oliver had a slightly dazed look on his face. "I don't remember, but somehow I know." His own hand went to the back of his neck, and Demir imagined a similar mark there. Had Brandt held Oliver by the neck while fucking him, too?

That was...really hot.

For the first time, instead of competition, Demir saw an ally and kindred spirit in Oliver. The older man knew how it felt to be Brandt's lover, and at the same time, he didn't know anything at all. Any jealousy Demir had possessed over Brandt and Oliver's shared past was gone, dissolved by understanding and acceptance. Two days ago, Demir had never imagined he'd consider a shared, three-way relationship with a mated couple, but now...it felt right.

Almost inevitable.

He met Brandt's gaze and was undone by the naked lust there, aimed directly at Demir. He shivered under the force of it, unsure what to say or do—until Brandt pulled Demir directly onto his lap, into his arms, and kissed him. Arousal heated his blood as Brandt plundered his mouth, and Demir could barely think beyond *yes! Please! More!*

A hard dick under his ass matched the wood in Demir's own pants, and he eagerly sucked on Brandt's tongue. Put the taste of the alpha back into his mouth, savored it, reveled in the strong arms around his waist. The big chest and thick thighs, and every single thing about Brandt that was so different from Demir's own slender frame. Brandt always made him feel protected. Treasured.

Loved.

Another set of hands touched his shoulders, and it didn't register at first, because suddenly Demir was on his back on the sofa, Brandt on top, slotted between his legs. Demir's favorite place for the burly alpha. Brandt made a meal out of his neck, licking and sucking every inch he could find, and Demir rutted up against him. Their erections didn't rub together but it was close enough, not enough, too much, and oh goddess!

This isn't right.

He opened his eyes. Oliver knelt beside the sofa, watching them with open desire, a hand moving in his own lap, and holy shit! Was Oliver jerking off while Brandt sucked on Demir's neck? It was both wrong and perfectly right. Curious, Demir grabbed the front of Oliver's shirt and tugged him forward. Right into a soft, tentative kiss.

FOURTEEN

BRANDT NEARLY CAME in his pants at the entrancing sight of Demir pulling Oliver close and kissing him. His mate and boyfriend were kissing, and he'd never seen a more beautiful image in his life. Demir's boyish youth against Oliver's age and scars. Light-blond hair versus sun-gold. Sun-kissed skin versus pale.

He stopped kissing Demir's neck to watch them, his hips maintaining a steady rhythm against the hard cock beneath him. Oliver responded slowly, his lips barely brushing Demir's, until the pink tip of Demir's tongue sneaked out to lick. Tease. Taste a man Brandt already knew by heart.

"Are you sure?" Oliver whispered.

Demir licked at his lips again. "Positive. Kiss me?"

With a soft moan, Oliver parted his lips and devoured Demir's willing mouth. Brandt sat up, giving both men more room to touch and kiss. Hands combed through hair, fingers scraped across shirts, and Brandt swallowed back an order for them to just take their shirts off already. He didn't want to push this too far, too fast, and scare either of them. Hell, he didn't want to push himself, either. He'd never had sex with two men at once, much less two men who owned equal parts of his heart.

As they continued to kiss, Demir's honey-sweet scent swirled together with Oliver's buttercup fragrance, and the combination made Brandt's mouth literally water. It was the most amazing, tantalizing, and arousing smell of his entire life, and he needed more.

Oliver was only touching Demir with his right hand, and Brandt tracked his left inside Oliver's open pants. Touching himself, and the scent of his mate's arousal made Brandt slightly dizzy, it having been so long since he'd

scented it. Since he'd been with his mate, explored his body, and seen him come. More than anything, Brandt needed to see his men come.

He rubbed Demir's erection through his jeans, earning a soft moan that Oliver eagerly swallowed. Now that they'd started, the pair couldn't seem to stop kissing, and Brandt was more than enjoying the show. Demir was an aggressive kisser, Oliver less so, and he submitted to Demir's lips and teeth and tongue—submitted, despite Demir being younger and on his back in the submissive position.

Demir had always enjoyed being dominated by Brandt, but he also had a toppy streak of his own that came out when they played and Brandt teased a little too long. He proved it by tugging Oliver away by his hair. "Fuck, I love kissing you," Demir panted. "Didn't expect that."

"Same." Oliver seemed to lean into the touch. "Wow."

"We all need to know what we're doing." Demir met Brandt's gaze, hesitating now. "Was that okay? Me kissing him?"

"Fuck, yes, it was amazing to watch," Brandt replied. He leaned down to kiss both men on the mouth. "I could watch you two make out for hours."

Demir grinned. "Good. But, uh, how far is this going? I mean, we're all hard, but..."

Brandt scooted down the couch so Demir could sit up. They ended up squeezed together with Demir in the middle, all angled to face each other. The fact that they were all hard didn't seem to bother anyone, and the combined scents of all three men's arousal was fucking with Brandt's head a little bit.

"We go as far as we're all comfortable with," Oliver said. "You two have made love, and my body tells me Brandt and I have, too. But you and I don't know each other very well, Demir, and this is new to us both."

"I've only ever had sex with two people." Demir's face went bright red. "Brandt's the only person who's ever, you know. In me."

"I understand, and I'm not asking to fuck you. I've never done that before."

The mental image of Oliver bending Demir over and fucking him made Brandt lose his mind a little bit, and he let out a soft growl.

Demir snickered at him. "Feeling a bit possessive over there, alpha?"

"No." Brandt cleared his throat but couldn't dislodge the newfound hoarseness. "I could bust a nut just imagining Ollie inside you. Or the other way around."

“Really?”

“Absolutely. You’ve always struck me as a switch, Demir. You love being fucked and used and held down, but there’s a part of you that wants to do all that to someone else.”

Demir’s eyes grew wider and wider, before his expression softened. He nodded once, verifying Brandt’s suspicion. “I, uh…”

“I’m not saying today.” He squeezed Demir’s knee. “Simply talking about a possible future.”

“We all three need to want the things we do together,” Oliver said, a bit dazed himself. “That’s the only way this will work, by us talking and exploring as a unit. I absolutely loved kissing Demir, but I’m not sure if I’m ready for things to jump straight to anal sex. With either of you.”

“Of course, sweetheart.” Brandt leaned across Demir to kiss him, loving the faint taste of Demir on his mate’s lips. “I can be a patient man. I love you both too much to fuck this up by pressuring either of you into something you aren’t ready for.”

Demir let out a petulant whine. “I need you to fuck me, Brandt. It’s been days.”

“Days?” Oliver repeated with a smirk. “He does have stamina if days is this unbearable.”

Brandt nipped Demir’s earlobe. “He makes the most amazing noises when I play with his ass. I bought him his first plug two weeks ago. Sometimes I make him wear it while he’s studying.”

“Oh?” Oliver studied Demir’s red face. “He blushes a lot, doesn’t he?”

“Yup. You should see how red his ass gets when I smack it a few times.”

Oliver adjusted himself and left his hand over his crotch. “I bet it’s a beautiful sight. Maybe I’ll see it one day.”

“Goddess, you two,” Demir said. He rubbed at his own erection. “Please tell me we’re all coming soon? My dick’s going to burst if we don’t.”

Brandt chuckled, enjoying this verbal torture. “Demir loves dirty talk.” He squeezed the back of Demir’s neck, over the mark he’d put there. “Don’t you, Little Blue?”

Demir moaned, eyelids fluttering.

“Where did Little Blue come from?” Oliver asked.

“The party where we met. His mask was blue and mine was red. Being anonymous, being with a stranger gave Demir all kinds of courage to go for what he wanted. He wanted to pop his cherry, and I was more than happy to

do it. More than happy to help him learn he likes it rough. Likes dirty talk and hard fucking and being held down.” Brandt groped Demir’s erection through his pants. “Loves shoving this down my throat while I finger him into an orgasm.”

“Fuck!” Demir pushed into Brandt’s hand, and a moment later, his entire body shivered. Warmth spread inside his jeans, and Brandt grinned. “Oh fuck, fuck.” Demir collapsed against the sofa cushion, abdomen still spasming in the aftermath of his orgasm.

“Damn,” Oliver said. “He does like dirty talk.”

“Look at that come you wasted,” Brandt said. “Tsk, tsk. I should probably clean you up.”

Demir fumbled at his fly, and Brandt helped. Fished his slick cock out of his underwear and licked him clean. Scooped some out of his clothes, too, and let Demir lick it off his fingers. “He’ll stay hard,” Brandt said as he continued to suck on Demir, keeping the beta man ready and waiting, right on the edge of a second orgasm. Demir squawked when Brandt let go and sat up.

Oliver watched them with glistening eyes, hand back in his own pants, jerking himself. Brandt tilted his head at Oliver’s crotch. “May I?” he asked.

His mate nodded yes, then settled against the cushion beside Demir. Brandt slid to his knees in front of Oliver, while Oliver pushed his pants and underwear down. Showing off a thick, red cock Brandt remembered so clearly. A cock he’d sucked through so many heats and non-heat love-making over the years. A cock his mouth watered to taste again.

Right hand still lightly jerking Demir, Brandt steadied Oliver’s cock with his left and sucked on the crown. Oliver’s buttercup scent burst on his tongue, combining with the headier essence of pre-come and musk. Familiar things that had Brandt moaning deep in his throat, a possessive growl. Oliver moaned too, and Brandt lost himself in this newfound pleasure. In pleasing his mate. Sucking, licking, nibbling at his foreskin, nosing his balls. All the things Oliver loved.

A new sound made him look up. Oliver and Demir were kissing above him, devouring each other with hard nips, tugs of hair, and sharp inhales, while their alpha serviced them both. Brandt pulled off Oliver, but kept stroking him so he could suck on Demir’s new erection. Back and forth, Brandt gorged himself on cock, teasing them to orgasm, and then denying them release. Enjoying every drop of pre-come, every new sheen of sweat on bare skin.

Goddess, he could do this for hours. Tease his men with his mouth and hands. When Demir started jerking his hips, Brandt sucked on a finger, shoved his hand behind Demir's balls, and pushed his finger inside. Demir shouted. Deep inside his boyfriend, Brandt turned his attention to sucking his mate's cock.

Oliver was losing his fucking mind in the very best way. Despite having no memory of sex with Brandt, everything about this felt familiar and right. Safe. Kind of perfect in a way sex had never felt with Oskar. Yes, Oskar had been gentle in prepping him and always made sure Oliver came first. This thing with Brandt and Demir? It was more than sex. It was an experience all its own.

It was everything Oliver never knew he'd been missing.

Demir's cry surprised Oliver into breaking the kiss to look. Brandt's hand under Demir's ass only meant one thing, and Demir's wide, wild eyes said it all. Brandt was fingering him. Kissing Demir had been a wonderful distraction from the mind-boggling sight of this big, burly alpha on his knees for them. Servicing them. Oskar hadn't been much for going down on Oliver, saving the act for holidays or a birthday treat.

Brandt had no such qualms as he took each man deep into his throat over and over, fingers toying with Oliver's balls, rubbing his taint without wandering farther. As if waiting for a signal, or permission to do more. "Touch me," Oliver panted.

Brandt's chin trembled once, and then he held his hand up. Oliver sucked his index finger into his mouth, wetting it. He lifted his ass enough for Brandt to push his hand under him, that damp finger skating over his hole. Oliver clenched, relaxed, nodded. That wicked finger applied pressure. Demir sucked on Oliver's neck, and Oliver cried out as Brandt breached him. Just the tip of his finger, but it had been years since Oliver was penetrated by anything outside heat, and oh goddess, it felt so good! His bondmate was pleasuring him inside and out. Brandt didn't fuck him the way he seemed to be fucking Demir, simply held that finger in him while he sucked Oliver's cock.

Then Demir's, then Oliver's again, back and forth like he couldn't decide his favorite flavor of ice cream cone. The mental image of Oliver naked, on his back on the kitchen table, while Brandt licked melted ice cream off his

stomach soared into Oliver's mind, before disappearing just as quickly.

Was that a memory? Have we actually done that, or did I just dream it up?

Their faces had been so vague he couldn't be sure. But what if being here, with his mate, helped him regain his lost memories? He tucked the ice cream thing away to ask about later, because right now wasn't the time. Not while Brandt tried to suck Oliver's brains out through his dick.

Demir was caught in a strange place between pure delight and utter frustration. As much as he loved floating along on the sensation of a finger fucking him and Brandt blowing him—plus the occasional hard kisses from Oliver—he needed to come, damn it! He needed to come so badly his back teeth ached, his balls were impossibly tight, and he really thought his dick might explode this time.

And now Brandt was fingering them both, and Oliver's wide-eyed lust fueled Demir's own arousal. He hadn't driven over today expecting anything close to what was now unfolding on the sofa, but somehow it felt inevitable. As if they truly had always meant to be a threesome.

He rubbed the faint rough spot on the back of Oliver's neck; Oliver did the same to him. They were both marked, claimed by the same alpha, and those bites connected them. Made them more than just omega and beta. It created a unique bond between two men who loved this alpha in their midst. An alpha who was doing his damndest to blow their fucking minds.

Curious, when Brandt pulled off Oliver, Demir caught his chin and brought Brandt up for a kiss. He licked into Brandt's mouth, tasting musk and Brandt, and also something sweeter. Oliver's newly familiar taste and scent, one of the sweetest flower. Stronger now because of where Brandt's mouth had just been, and Demir kissed the taste right out of him. Brandt finger-fucked him hard, doing his best with limited space, teasing his rim with a second.

"Wanna fuck you so bad, Little Blue," Brandt said between kisses. "So very bad."

"Do it," Oliver said. "Please." They stopped kissing to look at Oliver, who was jerking himself and writhing on Brandt's finger. "Demir?"

"Yes," Demir replied. Oliver was on board and Demir needed it, too. Needed Brandt to claim him. "Do it, Big Red."

Brandt eased his fingers out of both men. Demir undressed completely while Brandt fetched the bottle of slick they kept in the living room cabinet. Oliver also took his pants and underwear off, but he didn't remove his shirt. Demir didn't have time to ponder it, because Brandt was back. Manhandling Demir onto floor on his hands and knees.

Instead of slicking up and fucking him as promised, Brandt parted Demir's cheeks and shoved the tip of his tongue into his hole. Demir cried out over and over as Brandt did his favorite thing and ate him out. Fingers and tongue and soon slick joined his spit, until three fingers plunged in and out of his asshole.

"Fuck meeeee," Demir whined.

"Dunno, I think maybe you need four first." Brandt leaned over him to nip at his mark. "One day, Little Blue, you'll take my whole hand."

Demir erupted from that whispered promise alone, his whole body shuddering as his come streaked the carpet beneath him. He'd never imagined he could come with nothing but air on his cock, but Brandt had shattered everything Demir thought he understood about sex.

"Holy shit," Oliver said. "He didn't even touch himself."

"Dirty talk," Brandt replied smugly. "I've gotten you off the same way, sweetheart."

"Oh. Damn."

Brandt licked along Demir's spine. "Still want me to fuck you?"

"Fuck yes," Demir said. As much as he enjoyed Brandt's fingers, he needed the man's cock. Needed Brandt to fill him, reclaim him, prove to Demir what they had was still real and relevant and right.

Brandt twisted his fingers, brushing over Demir's gland and milking a bit more fluid from his cock, before tugging free. Slick squelched over skin, and then that thick cock Demir loved so much pressed inside him in one smooth, aching stroke. Demir released a long, satisfied moan that choked off when Brandt pulled out completely, leaving him momentarily empty, only to slam back inside.

Oliver caught Demir's cry with a kiss, bracing Demir against Brandt's onslaught as the big alpha fucked him hard. Hips crashed into Demir's ass over and over, sending Demir into Oliver's capable arms, unable to do more than feel his alpha use him. Brandt draped himself over Demir's back and bit down on his neck. His thrusts got faster, impossibly harder. Demir was dizzy from the fucking, the biting, the insane sensations washing through his entire

body.

Brandt bit deeper as he came inside Demir, and Demir cried out at the sharp spike of pain. With both arms around his waist, Brandt eased them back so he was kneeling with Demir still impaled on his lap. Demir went boneless, unable to properly think with so many endorphins crashing through his system.

“Brandt?” Oliver asked somewhere in the distance, and Demir didn’t care what they did next, because all he wanted was a nap...

Worry zinged through Oliver at the intense way Brandt had fucked Demir, and again at the aggressive way he came inside the boy. Demir seemed completely wasted on pleasure, but that had been crazy to watch. Was that how it had looked when Brandt had fucked Oliver? Like Brandt was losing his mind, overtaken by his alpha need to take and claim?

“Is he okay?” Oliver asked.

Brandt licked the back of Demir’s neck, fingers questing gently. “He’ll have a blood bruise, but I didn’t break the skin. Fuck. I’ve never been so rough with him before.”

Oliver glanced down to where Brandt was still inside Demir, unable to stop his own inner omega from being positive Demir hadn’t been accidentally hurt. “Maybe you should check?”

“Okay, sweetheart, I will.”

They both eased Demir’s half-asleep form off Brandt’s dick and arranged him on his stomach on the sofa. Brandt pulled his cheeks apart and touched him. Eased a finger inside. “He’s a little swollen, but no blood. Thank fuck.”

Demir mumbled something before letting out a soft snore. Brandt pulled the throw blanket off the back of the sofa and draped it over Demir. Kissed the top of his head. “I’d have never forgiven myself if I tore him because I couldn’t keep my wits about me.”

“I know.” Oliver squeezed Brandt’s hand. “That’s why we made sure.”

“I just...I think having you here fucks with my head a little. Your scent turns me on so fucking much, my omega. Reminds me of heat and how hard we’d go.” He bit his bottom lip. “During heat, you loved it when I’d fist you instead of always knotting you.”

Oliver’s chest burned with lust. No wonder he’d been drawn to the beta-only heat service that offered fisting. “Did we ever, ah, do that outside heat?”

“Twice.” Brandt glanced down at Oliver’s still-present erection. “It was something we’d take hours working up to, so you were nice and loose and dripping with artificial slick.”

His cock pulsed with desire, perfectly able to imagine himself open for his alpha’s entire hand. Being fucked by it until he came so hard he passed out. The image reminded him of the ice cream. “Can I ask you something odd?”

“You can ask me anything, always.”

“Did you ever put me on the kitchen table and eat ice cream off my chest?”

Brandt’s eyes flashed wide. “Yes. For your twenty-third birthday.” Then his expression went absolutely feral. “Then I ate it out of your ass.”

“I think...I think I remembered that. The chest part, not the ass part.” The idea of Brandt licking ice cream out of his hole should not have him so turned on...should it? How kinky was he without even realizing?

I never had the chance to explore it before.

Brandt stared at him, mouth agape. “You remembered it?”

“I think so. During the blow job. You reminded me of a kid with an ice cream cone, and then the image of me on the kitchen table and you licking ice cream off my chest just came to me. I wasn’t sure if it was real or a fantasy.”

“Oh, it’s real.” Brandt rested his hands on Oliver’s hips. “Our parents were all pretty conservative in a lot of things, but once we were both old enough to explore what sex meant to us, we learned a lot about ourselves. How far we both liked to go, how edgy or dirty. That included food a lot. And plugs.”

Oliver shivered at the growly way he’d said plugs. Half-naked and still hard, Oliver’s heart ached for more information. “Plugs how?”

He squeezed Oliver’s hips in a way that was almost painful before easing off. “After fucking you and filling you, I’d put a plug in you to keep it there. Then I’d use that come as slick to fuck you again and plug you right back up. Longest that went on was thirty-six hours over a weekend.”

“Holy shit.” The idea of being plugged full of come for thirty-six hours was...really fucking hot. “I liked it?”

“Loved it. Said it made you feel like I was always part of you, even when we weren’t touching. Afterward, we’d go into the shower and I’d make sure you were nice and squeaky clean inside and out.”

Oliver grabbed Brandt's shoulder, a bit dizzy with lust at these new mental images that tried to battle with fuzzier versions of the same. Memories, perhaps? Memories that seemed determined to peek out and wave at him from a long distance away.

Brandt stroked Oliver's rock-hard cock. "How do you want to get off, sweetheart. Anything."

"I don't know." Oliver petted the sweaty hair on Brandt's chest, enjoying the wiry texture against his fingers. Already able to imagine it scraping his back when Brandt draped himself over Oliver's body, cock sliding home in a slick-soaked hole. Using his body as a come-dump for hours on end. But Oliver wasn't mentally prepared to go there yet. Hell, he hadn't expected any of the sex today, especially with Demir. As a threesome.

"Want me to suck you off?"

An image popped into Oliver's mind, and he couldn't stop his lips from saying, "I want to come on your face."

Brandt growled as he kissed Oliver hard, tongue licking deep inside, and oh Oliver desperately wished to know how his alpha tasted. The description Brandt had given him of sweet pine helped, so he pretended he could taste Brandt while they kissed. Brandt lightly stroked his cock, not enough to get Oliver off, but it kept him teetering near the edge.

Oliver nipped Brandt's tongue. Brandt immediately slid to his knees, released Oliver's cock, and waited. The sight of the big, burly alpha on his knees for Oliver again, this time while Oliver towered above him, pushed Oliver over. He jerked himself to an orgasm so powerful his knees shook, and he had to grab Brandt's shoulder to stay upright, while ropes of semen painted Brandt's face and wide-open mouth.

The joy in Brandt's eyes tugged Oliver down to kiss his alpha, smearing that come between them. He licked a streak of it off Brandt's cheek, then kissed him again, sharing the gift. Brandt's soft, steady growl was everything to Oliver. It was safety and yearning and love and passion, and so many other wonderful things.

For all his brain was still figuring this out, his heart and body knew one thing with absolute certainty: Brandt Lars was his bondmate, and Oliver was never giving him up.

FIFTEEN

THE SCENT of sizzling meat woke Demir from a deep sleep. He tried to stretch, but a big body had him pinned face-down on a familiar bed. Brandt's musky, sweaty scent surrounded him, and this morning's activities returned in a rush of shock and desire. His hole ached in the best way, and his lips felt a bit kiss-bruised, but it had been worth it. Absolutely worth it for the way Brandt had ridden him, fucking him literally unconscious.

He blinked his eyes open, taking in the master bedroom where he'd spent countless hours as the new year had eased from winter to spring. His bladder kicked, and Demir managed to climb out from beneath a still-sleeping Brandt to use the bathroom. He expected to be sticky with slick and come, but he'd been cleaned up before being tucked into bed.

This was probably Brandt's daytime nap, so Demir left him to it. His clothes were folded on the dresser top, so he put his underwear and jeans on before tracking down the scent of meat.

Oliver was in the kitchen, fully dressed, and poking at something in a pan. As soon as he spotted Demir, he put his tongs down and approached, concern etched all over his face. "How do you feel?"

Demir blinked at the possessive, protective way he asked. "A little sore but I'm okay. That was intense, the fucking, but I trust Brandt not to really hurt me."

"Good. When he came back down from it, he was worried he'd hurt you. So was I. I've never seen anything so...feral."

"He's never gone that hard with me before." Demir smiled. "It was probably getting his bondmate back."

Oliver ducked his head. "I suppose. I figured I'd let you guys nap and

then make us supper. I don't know about you, but I'm starving."

Demir's stomach growled, and they both laughed. It was barely four o'clock, but he also hadn't eaten much of his brunch bagel—the remains of which had been cleaned up and put away. "How familiar is it? Being in this house with Brandt?"

"Well, I somehow knew where to find the sponges so I could clean the living room carpet, so pretty familiar."

Heat colored Demir's cheeks. He vaguely recalled coming a second time, his body so focused on the thick slam of Brandt's cock in his ass that nothing else really registered. And then being handled so carefully until sleep stole him away.

"And in the interest of complete honesty," Oliver added, "I came on Brandt's face after you passed out. But he's the one who cleaned you up before carrying you to bed. I could tell he needed to nap for a while. Day sleeper and all."

"Yeah, it makes spending time together interesting." Demir wouldn't have minded if Oliver had helped clean him up, but he also appreciated the way Oliver seemed to be respecting his personal boundaries. Despite the incredible kisses they'd shared yesterday, they were still getting to know each other. "I don't think I told you this yet, but only two people in my life know I'm dating Brandt. My stepdad and one of my brothers."

"Okay. Will you tell me more about your family?"

"Sure." Demir got a glass of water to quench his thirst, while Oliver flipped three steaks over with his tongs. Then he put the entire pan in the oven and turned the temperature off.

"They'll be perfect, trust me." Oliver winked. "I've got salad stuff to throw together, but please, talk to me."

"Well, you've met my sire, Isa Higgs, obviously." Demir started to sit on one of the kitchen chairs, thought better of it, and leaned against the counter instead. "I have two older brothers. Aven is a secondary school teacher and Tarius is a paralegal. Our actual omegin died about eight years ago, and Dad mourned his bondmate for a long time. We all did. Then Dad met Liam, my stepdad, and they were bondmates, too."

"Really?" Oliver looked up from the lettuce he was shredding. "Two bondmates?"

"Yup. And they have two kids together. Layne and Linus, and I love being an older brother so much. They're amazing." Demir wasn't ready to

dig into the intricacies of how Layne wasn't biologically related to him. Maybe another day.

"I can hear how much you love your family in your voice. So Liam and a brother know about Brandt."

"Yeah. I mean, my whole family knows I've been seeing someone for about three months now, and they're super cool about giving me privacy. But after this weekend, I laid it all out for Tarius, and then Liam put it together after your speech last night."

"How awkward was that?"

"It wasn't, really, but Liam understood why I didn't want Dad to know I was fucking one of his subordinates."

Oliver chuckled and reached for a tomato to slice. "I can't imagine that would go over well. Nor would the idea of you in a poly relationship?"

Demir stewed over that one for a moment. Beyond their initial conversation about it, what this tangled relationship was hadn't been defined once the sex began. "I don't know how he'd feel about that. Alpha/beta relationships are pretty rare here in Sansbury, and poly is really, really rare, but my dad trusts me. I think he'd be okay knowing I was happy and going into a poly thing with my eyes wide open."

"But he'd have a problem with Brandt."

"It's complicated. Dad and Brandt were colleagues for years, both senior constables. Dad ran weekly day shift, Brandt night shift. But then Dad got promoted last winter, and he's taking it so seriously. Plus, there's the age difference, which really, Dad shouldn't have a say in since Liam is half his age, too."

"Hmm. As a parent, I can see where your dad is coming from. He wants you to be safe and happy, and it's harder to believe when the relationship is so unbalanced."

"But it's not." Demir sneaked a wedge of tomato off the cutting board to try and ease his growly stomach. "Age shouldn't matter, because our personalities balance things out. Chemistry, too. Maybe it helped that Brandt and I first connected anonymously. We could be completely honest about what we wanted and how attracted we were to each other without labels getting in the way. I don't know. But I love Brandt, and as much as I love my dad, I won't give Brandt up to make my sire happy."

"Nor should you have to." Oliver pressed a light kiss to his forehead. "I wish I was this put-together at twenty."

“Dude, you mated at twenty. And how do you know you weren’t put together?”

Oliver opened and shut his mouth. “Good point. I suppose I just...feel as if I wasn’t so mature. I’ve been having these odd memory flashes ever since yesterday. Things that I’m not always sure are my own memories, or something I’ve dreamed up based on what I’ve been told. Being in this house...it’s helped.”

“I’m glad.” Demir took a chance and kissed Oliver on the mouth. A gentle brush of lips that Oliver returned. Oliver nuzzled their noses together. “I’m also glad we’re getting to know each other,” Demir continued. “Figuring out who we are as a pair. I’m attracted to you, too, but it’s different than with Brandt.”

“Same.” Oliver kissed the tip of his nose before returning to peeling a carrot. “I wish I had more to tell you about myself, but you already know the overview of what I can remember, starting from eleven years ago.”

“Yeah, but that’s all stuff everyone knows. What’s your favorite pizza topping?”

He chuckled. “Spinach, mushrooms and bacon. You?”

“Plain cheese. Drove my parents nuts when I was younger, because they’d order this supreme nonsense for everyone else and a small plain cheese for me. I can’t even pick the toppings off, the taste is still there and yuck.”

“Eriq is the same way with plain cheese, but he’ll cover his in red pepper flakes. We both like spicy food.”

“Because of the smell thing?”

Oliver nodded. “Precisely because of the smell thing. Food is typically bland for me, unless there are really strong flavors, like peppers or vinegar, and Eriq has sort of adopted my style of eating. Oskar could deal with a little spice but not much.”

Demir took a chance and said, “Can you tell me more about Oskar? Or is it too painful?”

“It isn’t painful like it used to be. Oskar was a good man. He tried so hard to find out who I was before the wreck. He was a good friend before he proposed we mate, and it made our life together wonderful, despite not feeling the bond. We tried for kids but it wasn’t meant to be. In so many ways, he saved my life.”

“He kept you safe until you could come home.”

Oliver blinked hard at the cutting board for several long moments. When he put the knife down, his eyelashes glittered with tears. Demir pulled him into a hug, regretting that he'd made the older man cry. Oliver pressed his face into Demir's neck and sobbed once. "I'm sorry," Demir whispered.

"Not your fault." Oliver clung to him, and Demir loved that they were so close in size. He could hold Oliver and comfort him without feeling too damned small. "You're right. I am home. It's scary but true. I know this place. But I don't want to lose the life I have in Rainier."

"I know." Demir rubbed circles on his back. "We'll figure it out, okay? Move or don't move, sooner or later, we'll figure it out. The three of us. I promise."

"Thank you. It's all so confusing, and I don't want to tell Brandt I have doubts, but I need to think of Eriq's needs over my own. Where he'll be happy."

"Yeah, you do." Demir gave Oliver another tight squeeze before pulling back and kissing him again. "You're an amazing omegin, I can tell. Eriq's lucky to have you."

"I'm the lucky one. If I hadn't been pregnant...Demir, I don't think I would have fought to live as hard as I did. The pain was constant and intense. All those surgeries and skin grafts and the healing. Knowing Eriq was inside me kept me alive. Having Oskar there kept me sane. Having you here?" He brushed a curl of hair off Demir's forehead. "Helps me trust all this is real and not some strange figment of my imagination."

"I do?"

"Yes. Odd as it sounds, it would have been easier to disbelieve Brandt's claim of the mating bond if he was single, alone, with nothing to lose by fooling a widowed omegin into wanting him. But the fact that he loves you so much and he's still fighting for me? It helps me trust it in my mind."

"And your mind is the part that still resists this."

"Exactly." Oliver nuzzled him again. "You're going to be an incredible doctor one day. You're intuitive and you listen when people talk. Those are rare traits in alpha physicians."

"Good thing I'm beta then, huh?"

"A very good thing. You're also so unexpected. You have the strength and courage of any alpha I've ever met, but also the tenderness and nurturing instincts of an omega."

"I had amazing parents who raised me right."

“Yes, you did. And I know this whole thing is only hours old, but I’d be honored to call you my boyfriend, Demir Higgs.”

“Really?” Demir wanted to melt all over the floor. Falling in love with Brandt Lars had been a battle of sorts—a battle of sex drives, wills, and stubbornness, all fueled by an intense sexual desire for the man. Falling in love with Oliver was like the softest lullaby—calming, quiet, and something he’d remember always, no matter where life took him.

“Yes, really.” Oliver pinched his hip. “And we don’t have to tell anyone yet. Like I said, this is hours old, but what happened between the three of us today? This is real. Brandt is my mate, and you are someone I’m attracted to and care about. You obviously love him back, and your affection for me is in every glance and touch between us. I never thought I’d want to be part of a poly relationship, but now I have a better understanding of why they work.”

Demir nodded, not quite trusting his voice. He loved Brandt with a huge chunk of his heart not devoted to his family, and now he was pretty sure Oliver could claim a piece, too. Simply by being a kind, generous, loving person who trusted his gut and fiercely protected his son. Demir tried to show that with a kiss, caressing Oliver’s lips with his own, promising something he couldn’t put into words.

Oliver wrapped his arms around Demir’s waist and hauled him closer, kissing him back with a gentle ferocity he didn’t expect. To be so thoroughly accepted and claimed by someone in less than a day was shocking, but for that man to be an omegin twice his age? Demir relaxed into his embrace, giving Oliver all control of the kiss.

“Now that’s a pretty sight to wake up to,” Brandt said.

Demir’s insides jolted with surprise, but Oliver took his time ending the kiss. Nuzzled their noses again before looking up at Brandt. “Perfect timing,” Oliver said. “The salad is almost done, and so are the steaks.”

“I knew I smelled something besides you two sizzling.”

Oliver left his arms casually draped around Demir’s waist. “You can contribute by setting the table.”

Brandt’s lips twitched but he didn’t argue. Simply started gathering plates and flatware, while Oliver rested his cheek against Demir’s. Demir wasn’t used to this sort of casual cuddling, and as odd as it felt, he also really liked it. Brandt’s attention was intense and direct, while Oliver’s was quiet and easygoing. Both fed parts of Demir that needed different things.

“Shall I open a bottle of wine?” Brandt asked.

“You have wine?” Demir said.

“I won it in a raffle basket at a work function last year.”

“Well, that makes more sense. I’ve only ever seen you drink beer.”

“Tonight, we get wine and steaks. I didn’t know I had steaks.”

Oliver laughed. “I found them in the freezer beneath a bag of fries. Scraped a little bit of freezer burn off, so they should be acceptable. Our fridge is pretty bare, though. We should go shopping.”

Brandt stared at Oliver, and it took Demir a second to understand why.

Our. We.

Demir pulled out of Oliver’s easy embrace, weirded out and desperate for space. Oliver frowned first at Demir, and then at Brandt. “What?”

“Our fridge, sweetheart,” Brandt said.

“Yeah.” Oliver looked genuinely confused for several long moments, before his eyebrows went up. “Oh. Huh.”

“Please don’t feel bad or weird about it. This was your kitchen once upon a time. It must be confusing to feel so comfortable in a space you don’t remember.”

“I could say that about this entire situation. If I second-guess or overthink everything I say or do, I’ll drive myself crazy, Brandt.”

“I know, it just hit me hard, I think. For an instant, it was like you never left.”

Demir inched away from the pair, retreating to the other side of the kitchen table as the mated couple embraced. Brandt wrapped his large body around Oliver’s slimmer one, dwarfing the smaller man. Demir knew what those strong arms felt like, how warm that barrel chest was against his. Jealousy flared bright for about two-point-five seconds before it faded. Brandt and Oliver had a history and always would; he couldn’t get jealous every time the past presented itself.

He also couldn’t ignore the fact that a pair of older, mated men had found each other again, and it was hard not to feel like a third wheel. Oliver said the strongest men fought for what they wanted, but wasn’t it even stronger to let someone go, so they could be with their true mate?

I can’t give up Brandt. This afternoon proved it.

“But I did leave,” Oliver said. He kissed Brandt’s chin. “Not on purpose but it happened. As much as I feel like I’ve always been in this house, we have eleven years between us that we still need to navigate. And another lover to consider.” He reached out, and Demir went to Oliver, immediately

drawn to the omegin in a way he couldn't explain.

Oliver wrapped Demir into their three-way embrace, and they settled against Brandt's chest, which was broad enough for them both. Had they all three always been meant to be here together? Was that why they fit so perfectly?

"We've got a long road ahead," Oliver said softly. "A relationship between two is already difficult, but with three of us? The best advice I ever heard is from a friend who's poly, and it's so simple: we need to talk. Always. Especially if someone ever feels jealous."

"Deal," Demir replied. "I did get jealous a minute ago, while you two were hugging it out over the past. It's hard not to."

"I know. Which is why I won't judge you for those moments. Ever."

"Thanks."

"Same," Brandt added. "Ollie said it best, too. Me and him have eleven years apart to work through. And I don't expect you to move straight back into this house with me, sweetheart. I'd love nothing more, but I know why you can't."

"Thank you," Oliver replied. "For now, let's enjoy a hearty meal together, the three of us."

"What are you going to tell Eriq?"

Oliver was quiet a moment. "I'll tell him that you and I are reconnecting, and that I want to have a relationship with you." To Demir he said, "I don't want to deny you, but I need to get Eriq comfortable with the idea of me and Brandt as bondmates and co-parents first."

Demir squashed down another flare of jealousy. "I get it. You two need to think about Eriq's needs. He's your kid."

"Your needs are important, too, Demir."

But I'll always be second fiddle to Eriq. He'll always be their priority.

Emotionally that stung, but intellectually it made perfect sense, and Demir could live with it. Even if, months down the road, Oliver and Brandt decided being in a three-man relationship with Demir was too hard, or if Eriq refused to accept it and they had to dump him...it would hurt. A lot. But Demir would survive that broken heart.

For now, he'd take what he could get while he had it. He loved Brandt too much to let him go yet, but Demir took some comfort in knowing that when Brandt eventually left, he'd still have an amazing man like Oliver in his life.



Brandt pinched himself twice during their lovely dinner of steak, salad and wine, positive he was still asleep and dreaming. No way was his bondmate back, perfectly at ease in their shared home, cooking for him again, and making plans to remain in his life. And no way had his bondmate accepted the fact that Brandt had a boyfriend he loved, and with whom Oliver seemed to have already bonded with himself.

Walking in on them kissing like that? Brandt had been half-hard in seconds. He could probably get off watching the pair make out. Brandt's passion with Demir was fiery and fierce, while Demir's affection for Oliver was quieter, almost reverent. A beautiful dichotomy, and the pair was beautiful together.

And they were both his.

Oliver told them a few stories about Eriq, mostly school related, helping Brandt and Demir get to know the boy without him being there. As much as Brandt wanted to see Eriq again, he understood the hesitation after yesterday's shin-kick. Oskar was the father Eriq knew, and it would take time to accept Brandt.

Demir volunteered to do the dishes and clean up the kitchen. Brandt and Oliver took their wine into the living room and sat together on the sofa. He noted the newly-cleaned carpet and overall fresh scent in the room. Oliver must have tidied up after Brandt slunk off to nap with Demir.

"I would like to come back in two weeks for Eriq's spring break," Oliver said. "We haven't made any plans, other than perhaps a hike with Diego. It'll be good for him to spend time with you."

"Diego?"

Oliver snorted and smacked his shoulder. "Eriq, you fool."

"I know. And I'd love for you guys to stay here, if you're comfortable doing that." Brandt saw the problem right away. "I don't have a guest room."

"Technically no."

Brandt's heart lurched unhappily. "The nursery."

"I'd never ask you to change your home for me—"

"Our home."

"But there won't be any more babies who will need a nursery. And it was always meant to be Eriq's room, right?"

"Right." The idea of taking apart the room he'd let stand for eleven

damned years was...appalling. And also right. It was time to deconstruct that final element of the past, to fully let go and embrace the present. To plan for the future. He couldn't do that while mired down in sadness and dust and baby things that would never be used. Not by him, anyway.

"I'm not saying get rid of everything, Brandt. Not at all. Save the things that are meaningful. We can make a keepsake box."

"You probably have a keepsake box of Eriq's things."

"I do but these are your memories. Your hopes and dreams for our child. I'd never diminish that by insisting you clean it all out and get rid of it."

"The crib is the kind that can convert into a twin-sized bed."

"Then we'll keep it and convert it. It's the perfect size for Eriq right now."

Brandt's heart skipped a beat. "Where would you want to sleep?"

"I don't know. Probably the couch."

"Never." He squeezed Oliver's knee. "If you aren't comfortable sharing my bed yet, you sleep in our room. I'll take the couch."

Oliver curled slender fingers around Brandt's. "How about we figure that out in two weeks?"

"What about the things in the nursery? You bought almost everything."

"That's what you said. Do you want to look in there again? Maybe now that I'm settling more comfortably into the house, I'll feel something like I did in the kitchen."

"In the kitchen?"

Brandt listened with barely contained excitement as Oliver detailed more of that déjà vu and being unsure if he was remembering or simply imagining things. "I think you're remembering, sweetheart. Maybe not on a conscious level, but subconsciously, like calling it *our* fridge. Deep down, you know this place."

"I think you're right. Can I see the nursery again?"

"Okay." Less nervous this time, Brandt held tight to Oliver's hand and led him down the short hallway. Opened the nursery door and pushed it inward. Stale air, dusty things, unused toys no longer in fashion with children. Brandt saw the room with new eyes. Saw the grief and sadness he'd kept close for far too long.

Oliver turned on the light and walked inside. Straight to the crib where he picked up a knitted green blanket lightly grayed with dust. Brandt watched him, enthralled that Oliver had gone to that particular item, and he waited.

Hoped.

“This is important,” Oliver said. He stroked the rows of yarn as he studied it. “Was it mine?”

Brandt internally cheered. “Yes, it was yours when you were an infant. Your omegin gave it to you so our child could have it.”

“Wow. It’s beautiful. We have to keep this.”

“Anything you want to keep, we’ll keep. I’ll buy a storage bin tomorrow. The changing table and rocking chair were bought new, so they don’t have any sentimental value. The diapers and wipes are long past unusable, but most of the clothes still have tags or are in their packages. There wasn’t time to wash them before...”

“Before I was taken.”

“Yeah.” Brandt crossed the room so he could wrap his arms around Oliver from behind. Pull his bondmate tight to his chest. “I kept this room untouched, hoping beyond reason you’d both come home one day. Now that you have, it’s time to let the past go and look forward.”

“Agreed.”

“You can donate stuff,” Demir said, his familiar shape filling the doorway. “Light House is always looking for baby items they can give to single omegins in need.”

“Light House?” Oliver repeated. “Why does that sound familiar?”

“Kell Cross’s speech last night. Light House Resource Center is primarily for abused omegas and omegins who are seeking emergency aid, but they also offer counselors and help for abused betas.”

“That’s right, I remember now. I’d love them to have any of the clothes and toys we aren’t keeping.”

Demir quirked an eyebrow but didn’t comment on the ‘keeping’ thing. “Want me to get some paper shopping bags for the donate stuff?”

Oliver looked over his shoulder at Brandt. “BeBe?”

“Sure,” Brandt said, voice huskier-than-average. “Let’s do that.”

Demir disappeared and was back quickly with not only several shopping bags, but also a dusting rag and polish. When Brandt nodded, Demir handed over the bags and set about dusting the furniture. Brandt pulled open the first drawer of the changing table.

Minutes passed into an hour. Lemon-fresh replaced the stale air. Those bags filled quickly with onesies, newborn clothes, socks, and unopened rattles, bottles and pacifiers. The nipples hadn’t aged well, so they went into a

trash bag with the ancient diapers and dried-out wipes. Brandt carried that bag outside to the garbage can himself, so he could have a moment alone.

A moment to look up at the slowly setting sun and say a prayer of thanks for the two men taking care of him tonight. Because Brandt Lars knew in his heart that he couldn't have taken this step without them both and their big, generous hearts.

"I'll do whatever it takes to keep them," he told the sky. "I swear on my life. They're mine."

SIXTEEN

THE NEXT DAY, Demir had a morning class he couldn't miss, so he wasn't there when Brandt said goodbye to Oliver and Eriq at the train station. He was, however, at Brandt's house when the sad alpha returned home. A house that seemed dimmer without Oliver in it. Demir missed the sweet omegin, but nowhere near as badly as Brandt missed him. It was etched all over his face and in his slumped shoulders.

Determined to pamper him a little, Demir drew Brandt a bubble bath, stuck the man in the tub and brought him a cold beer. After Brandt was more relaxed, Demir took him to bed and rode him until Brandt filled his body in a familiar way. One of the last conversations they'd had as a trio before Demir and Oliver both left last night had been about sex. Oliver swore over and over he did not want Demir and Brandt to stay hands-off, that he wanted them to continue their sexual relationship freely.

Demir had been overjoyed with that, because he couldn't have imagined keeping his hands off Brandt for another two weeks.

He studied while Brandt took a post-sex nap. Brandt also had to work tonight as his schedule got back to normal post-conference. A conference that had been, according to Dad at breakfast this morning, a huge success for all involved. So much information shared, stories told, and minds changed in the fight for equal treatment of omegas.

Naturally, Dad also brought up Lars and his newfound mate, and Demir had worked hard not to comment on just how happy Brandt was with Oliver. Dad would want to know how Demir knew anything about Brandt's personal life, and wouldn't that be a horrible conversation to have over waffles and sausage?

Demir ordered pizza for dinner, because there really wasn't anything else—Oliver wasn't wrong that someone needed to go shopping—and it arrived just as Brandt emerged dressed and ready for work. As much as Demir loved the man naked, Brandt was incredibly sexy in his constable uniform.

“Meat lovers for you, cheese for me,” Demir said, pointing at the two small pies. “Do you mind if I bring some groceries over tomorrow after class? Your fridge really is bare bones. There's not a lot I can do with mayo, pickles and two stalks of celery except make sandwich spread.”

Brandt chuckled as he came over to kiss him. “How about we go shopping together? Class is done at one, right?”

“Yup. Great.” He loved the domesticity of them grocery shopping together—until the enormity of it struck him. Nerves wobbled through his belly. “We'll, uh, be out in public together.”

“Yes.” Brandt's easy smile dimmed. “Oh. Right.”

“Maybe we should have talked about that before Oliver left. How open we all want to be. I mean, people know he's back in your life, but no one knows I was ever in it, so...”

Ugh, what a mess.

“Oliver and I are still feeling each other out, finding how we fit. Yes, we've reconnected in unique ways, but you're the one who's here, Demir. When I go in tonight, I will honestly tell people that Oliver and I are talking. We're coming to an understanding. But if you aren't ready for anyone to know about you and me, I get it. We don't have to go shopping together.”

As even as Brandt's tone had been, Demir knew him well enough to hear the disappointment, too. “I'm sorry. I just...when my dad finds out, I want to be able to say with absolute certainty that I'm in a committed poly relationship with you both, and vice versa. But I can't, because you and Oliver are working things out, same as Oliver and I are getting to know each other.” Demir cupped Brandt's cheeks in his palms, putting every bit of determination he felt into his words. “One day, we'll all three go grocery shopping as a trio, and I won't care who sees us. I'm just not there yet.”

“I get it, Little Blue.” Brandt kissed his mouth. Nipped at his bottom lips. “We should eat.”

They settled with drinks and their respective pizzas. Demir waited until Brandt had chewed and properly swallowed a few bites—no sense in making the man choke—before asking, “So exactly how kinky were you and Oliver? He whispered something to me about plugs last night.”

Brandt's eyes narrowed in a familiar way that suggested he was trying hard not to pounce on his prey. "Depends on how you define kinky, I guess. What Oliver and I shared was...an extension of who we were and what we meant to each other. Some folks hear that I'd fuck him over and over, and then plug him up to keep my come inside him for hours, and they think it's nasty. Other folks get hard over the idea."

Demir blatantly adjusted his interested dick. "I think that's sexy as hell. Keeping your come inside me."

"What about fisting? I said it yesterday, but you were pretty gone on endorphins when I did."

"I'm not sure. Did Oliver like it?"

"He did. We only ever did it twice outside heat, and we took our time. But when I was inside him? My knuckles on his gland? He lost his mind."

Demir gulped, fully hard now, and he'd done it to himself by bringing this up. The idea of fitting one of Brandt's big hands inside his ass?

Daunting. But not impossible.

"Oliver liked to be spanked sometimes, not for punishment but for fun. We'd play with toys and food and anything else we could make into a game. He was incredibly sexual outside heat, and as much as we liked to play, sometimes we'd simply make love."

"Kind of like us," Demir said.

"Exactly like us. You're so young and beautiful that I lose my mind sometimes around you, like yesterday. Other times, I just want to hold you tight and keep you safe from the world, and nothing matters more than simply cuddling you after a blow job."

Demir thought back to yesterday's discussion about him being a switch and possibly fucking Oliver one day. "Have you ever been fucked?"

Brandt put his slice of pizza down. "No. I did let Ollie finger me a few times during blow jobs, but that's all."

"Would you ever want to get fucked?"

"Never really thought about it." Brandt's gaze burned into Demir's. "Maybe, depending on the circumstances. You think you can take me, Little Blue?"

"Yes." Demir raised his chin. "Yes, I think I can. But I'd want Oliver there."

"Oh? And why's that?"

Teasing the man ten minutes before he had to leave for work wasn't nice,

but Demir couldn't resist waggling his eyebrows. "So you can suck his cock while I'm fucking you with mine."

Brandt growled, low and sexy, an instant before he pounced.



Demir got home a little after six, his ass a bit tender from the rough spanking Brandt had doled out while Demir was bent over the kitchen table. Demir hadn't realized it was exactly what he'd wanted until Brandt did it, a quick punishment for teasing Brandt so much. Then Brandt had shoved his cock into Demir's mouth and come down his throat while Demir beat off.

Perfect.

Demir had also taken a quick shower before leaving Brandt's house to get the last of the alpha's scent off him before going home. He was surprised to see Tarius over, eating dinner with Liam, Dad and the boys. Demir had texted Liam that he'd eaten an early supper and not to expect him, so he said his greetings and went to his room. The one thing Brandt didn't have was a typewriter or personal computer—the new-to-public-market computers were still crazy expensive for most individuals, but both the hospital campus and the constabulary, as well as a few banks, had switched over from paper records to computer in the last few years.

Demir had Dad's typewriter on his desk, so he pulled out all the notes he'd made for his research paper, double-checked his last sentence, and started working. He managed two pages before Liam and Tarius stormed his bedroom.

"Dad took the boys for ice cream," Tarius said. "We need to talk."

"About?" Demir swiveled his desk chair around, playing dumb for now.

"You and Brandt Lars."

Demir blinked dumbly at his big brother, who looked equal parts annoyed and concerned.

"You were gone all day yesterday," Liam said, "and again today. Are you going to tell me you were studying at the university library both days?"

"No," Demir replied. "I was at Brandt's house both days."

Liam had perfected his *what the fuck?* face around the time Layne, Branson and Peyton all started publicly repeating cuss words they heard from their parents. "What about Lars's bondmate? Oliver?"

“Oliver was there yesterday, too. Brandt invited me for brunch so we could talk about Oliver’s return, and I thought Oliver should be there, so I invited him, and we all talked. A lot.” Did a bunch of naked things, too, but Demir wasn’t going there.

Liam sat on the bed, but Tarius stood near the door, arms crossed and clearly unhappy. “So what happened?” Liam asked.

“It’s complicated.”

“No shit,” Tarius snapped. “Is Lars stringing you along because his bondmate lives thousands of miles away?”

“No! No. Brandt loves me, and I love him. I really, truly do.”

Tarius scowled.

“He told you he loves you?” Liam asked, his expression smoother. More open to listening.

“Yes,” Demir replied. “And I said it back. I love him, Liam, I know it deep down. It isn’t just about great sex, it’s so many other things. I don’t want to walk away, and he doesn’t want to lose me, either.”

“And what about Oliver?”

“That’s the complicated part. In his head, Oliver doesn’t remember his life with Brandt, but being with him in their home? He feels their connection in his bones. He knows he loved Brandt once, and Brandt still loves him, but they aren’t rushing into being a couple yet. They need time, not only for Oliver, for also for their son Eriq to accept who Brandt is.”

“So Lars gets to work on convincing his mate to come back to him,” Tarius said in a mocking tone, “while still fucking you on the side? Really, Demir? That’s what you want?”

Demir glared at Tarius, unused to his brother being so judgmental—not only about other people but also Demir’s choices. “I am not his fucking piece on the side, you jerk. And Oliver and I got to know each other, too. I care about him. He’s a strong, amazing man who’s overcome so much. Physical pain, losing his memory, finding his way in a place he doesn’t know. Raising an unknown alpha’s child. Then suddenly being thrust into a life he knows nothing about with a bondmate he doesn’t know on sight or scent? I can’t imagine being so brave.”

“So you and Oliver are becoming friends?” Liam asked.

Oliver’s sweet kisses flashed into Demir’s mind, and he grinned. “We are. And more.”

“More?”

“I’m attracted to Oliver, too, and he feels something for me. And before either of you freak out, we are being careful. All three of us. We talked for hours, you guys. *Hours*. About everything. This isn’t some lust infatuation or me acting out because I’m stressed. They make me happy.”

“Both of them?” Tarius asked. “How’s that possible? Having feelings for two guys at the same time?”

“I don’t know but apparently, poly relationships aren’t that uncommon in Rainier Province. Oliver is friends with a poly couple. Trio. Whatever.”

“Well, it’s sure as hell unusual here.”

“Maybe, but this is what I want. And no, I still don’t want to tell Dad about it yet. Not until Brandt, Oliver and I are on sure footing with each other.”

“How are you going to do that with Oliver on the other side of the territory?”

“He and Eriq are coming back in two weeks when Eriq’s school is on spring break. We’ll have time to explore all angles of this relationship, and for Eriq to get to know his sire. Oliver’s biggest fear is that Eriq won’t accept Brandt.”

“It’s not an unfounded fear,” Liam said, his soft voice softer than usual. “We all worried our future mates wouldn’t accept our babies. Me, Jaysan, Brogan. It’s a little different, seeing as Eriq is Brandt’s biologically, but the fear is the same. I truly hope Brandt and Eriq bond. I don’t know Brandt well, but he seems like a good man.”

“He’s amazing. Maybe he spent a long time grieving the family he lost, and he came across as an asshole to a lot of people, but he’s changed so much. He wants to make friends and have a life beyond work.”

“Convenient he’s got you while his mate’s away,” Tarius said under his breath.

Demir still heard it, and it pissed him off. “Look, stop bashing on my sex life just because you don’t have one of your own. It’s not my fault you don’t date, so butt out.”

Tarius’s eyes narrowed and he left the room. Demir glared at the spot his brother had once occupied, allowing his temper to simmer. He and Tarius had never fought before, not once, but Tarius was being unreasonable. Acting like he didn’t trust Demir, and okay, Demir was choosing an unusual relationship, but he wasn’t stupid.

Liam watched the empty doorway with a sad frown. “He’s worried about

you.”

“Yeah, well, maybe he could try and support me, too,” Demir retorted. “I’m not a kid he needs to protect from the bogeyman. And you know what? If being with Brandt and Oliver ends up being a bad decision and I get my heart broken? It was my mistake to make and I’ll own it. But he isn’t even giving me a chance.”

“He’s your brother, Demir. He’s tried to protect you your entire life. Those instincts aren’t something he can simply turn off because you’re an adult. You’ll always be his baby brother.”

Demir grunted. “Usually Aven’s the one fussing.”

“Trust me, if Aven was in on this secret, he’d be fussing. But Tarius has his own hot-button issues, and he’s worried you’re being taken advantage of by an alpha. If this poly thing works out for you and he’s able to get to know Brandt and Oliver? To see how happy they make you? He’ll back off.”

“Promise?”

“Yes. The only reason I’m not being fussier about this is you don’t need to be ganged up on, and I want you to know you can always tell me anything. I won’t judge. I’ll ask questions, and I’ll make sure you’re safe, but I won’t judge you or tell you you’re wrong.”

“Thanks, Liam. And Dad?”

“I don’t like hiding things from my mate, but I’ll keep him off your back for now. To be honest, he’s so stressed with his new role as Chief Constable that he doesn’t have a lot of time to worry about you older boys. He trusts all three of you, and I promised to keep an eye on you and your schoolwork.”

“I’m getting all my work done, I swear. It helps that Brandt is a nighttime constable, because I can study and do assignments while he naps. I like our system.”

“Good. Then I’ll let you get back to your paper. Just one thing, though?”

“Yeah?”

“Call Tarius later. Life’s too fragile to stay mad at each other.”

Demir nodded. Their family knew all too well how quickly their lives could be forever altered. “I will. Promise.”

He kept his promise ten minutes later, unable to concentrate on his paper knowing he and Tarius had fought. “I’m sorry,” Demir said the instant Tarius answered his mobile. “That crack about you not dating was rude.”

“I’m sorry, too.” Tarius sighed. “I’m not trying to judge you. I just don’t want you to get hurt.”

“I know, but I’m a big boy now. Everything I have ever done with Brandt or Oliver has been completely consensual, I swear.”

“I believe you. I’m still worried, though.”

“You wouldn’t be you if you weren’t. Just trust that I know what I’m doing.”

“I trust *you*, Demir.”

“Thank you.” Maybe one day, Tarius would be able to get to know his boyfriends, and then he’d trust them, too. See the wonderful men who were Brandt Lars and Oliver Strand and all the ways their triad made sense.

Please.



Tarek Bloom had to sign out a conference room for an unknown time period in order to hold and properly examine all the paperwork the Rainier records room had sent over yesterday. It simply didn’t fit in his own private office, and Chief Higgs had told Tarek to handle this investigation personally.

As a newly-minted Senior Constable and day shift leader, Tarek no longer took lead investigator on cases, instead deferring them to his subordinates—unless a case directly involved one of their staff, like the Ollie Lars kidnapping. Most of his duties involved paperwork, scheduling, fielding problems with the staff, and generally being on his ass in his office all day.

While the change had delighted Braun all over the place, Tarek was still adjusting to not being out in the field, heading up investigations like he’d done for most of his career. Braun loved that Tarek was in his office, instead of running around chasing bad guys, risking the chance of being shot on the job—which had happened exactly once in his fourteen years with the constabulary, thank you.

But the Ollie Lars/Oliver Strand case was unique, because it directly affected one of their own. Tarek and Brandt had only become friendly these last couple of months, and beneath the guy’s boar-ish exterior was a kind, wounded soul. They hadn’t spoken directly yet about Oliver’s return, but when their paths had crossed in the hallway last night, Brandt looked...well, happy.

Brandt Lars never looked happy at work.

Tarek stared at the boxes of paperwork he’d yet to open from Rainier, as

well as the box that had been sent up from their own records room. The case was far too old for electronic records, so every report, every witness statement, every bad lead was typed up and stored in those boxes.

He ended up calling in a rookie constable and two patrolmen to help him organize everything in chronological order. Then he thanked them and started reading, brushing up on Sansbury's case first, which was somewhat thin. They'd never found Brandt's car. Traffic cameras had caught it twice, hours apart on different sides of the province, which had always suggested someone trying to prevent them from following its trail. Ollie's credit card had been used the day before his disappearance at the grocery store, and not once in all the years since.

Ollie Lars had simply vanished with no leads. The head investigator had been then-Senior Constable Alvin Underhill, a man who was now a territory superintendent. Tarek put in a call to the man's office, requesting a brief conversation about those first few weeks. While he waited, he called and spoke with two other constables and a patrolman listed as part of the team, but no one had anything new to share. No special insights, only delight that Ollie had finally been found.

Sort of.

Then Tarek had to spend an hour helping a new patrolman sort out an issue with a suspect, followed by two more problems requiring the supervisor's attention.

Promotions suck.

By lunch, Underhill still hadn't returned his call, so Tarek cracked open the most recent entries into Oliver Strand's files from Rainier. Poked around until he found the names of the five other men who died in the van wreck that stole Oliver's face, memories, and sense of smell. Two omegas, neither of whom were pregnant, according to autopsies, and one beta, all roughly Oliver's age when he disappeared. Tarek ran their names through the Sansbury database, while he pondered the names of the two alphas who'd been connected to a Rainier trafficking ring: Arkin Delano and Kit Modesto.

Neither last name was familiar, so he popped them into the database as well. It would take time for their developing computer system to spit anything out. However, if the names were connect to files older than six years, it wouldn't be in the system yet, and he'd have to get someone to hunt through the old paper records in storage. He sent Constable Corinth downstairs to put in those requests.

Tarek kept digging.

The Rainier investigators had discovered a loose monetary connection between Modesto and someone busted as part of the trafficking ring broken up the night Oskar Strand was killed, and that dinged a bell in Tarek's head. He hated coincidences.

Had someone connected to Modesto figured out who Oliver was and that Oskar was his mate? Had Oskar's death been deliberate? None of the notes suggested anyone had pursued that angle, so Tarek put in another call, this time long-distance to the Rainier Constabulary switchboard.

Two transfers later, a rusty voice said, "Constable Varian Thomas speaking."

"Constable, good morning. My name is Senior Constable Tarek Bloom, and I work for the Sansbury Province constabulary."

"Good morning, sir." Thomas sounded more alert now. "How can I help you?"

Tarek quickly explained Oliver and the new investigation. "I was hoping to pick your brain about your part in dismantling the beta trafficking ring where your colleague, Oskar Strand, was killed on duty."

"Such a sad day. Strand was an amazing constable, great man in the community, and he's still missed. Hard to lose a friend like that."

"You and Mr. Strand were close?"

"Not as close as some, but we solved many a crime together over the years. What would you like to know from me?"

"Did you ever investigate the possibility that Oskar's death that night was deliberate and not an accident?"

Thomas made a surprised noise. "Why would we investigate that? He jumped in front of a bullet meant for someone else. Hard to call that deliberate."

"I'm simply tossing rocks into the pond to see what floats, Constable. Modesto, one of the alphas who died in the wreck that only Oliver Strand survived, has a monetary connection to a man you arrested the night Oskar was killed. A man you only ever identified as Walken. It's right here in the file."

As was a photo of Walken. Older man, gray hair, steely eyes. Beta, according to the arrest report. No fingerprints were lifted because of purposeful acid damage, so no real identity was ever found, and the man was currently serving a life sentence in the Rainier prison.

“I’ll have to take your word, since I don’t have the file in front of me and haven’t looked at it in two years.”

Tarek glanced at the date for the connection note: one year ago. Someone else had added it after the investigation was closed and sent to storage. Huh. “Is there anything you can add of relevance to Oliver’s life in Rainier and the investigation into his identity?”

“Nothing off the top of my head. It was a tough situation, because no one could figure out where he came from. But you give me your contact information, and if anything comes to mind, I’ll call you.”

“I appreciate it, thank you.” Tarek repeated his name and gave his office and mobile numbers. “Anything that you can think of may help break an eleven-year-old missing person case, Constable Thomas. Please call.”

“I will. Take care.”

The call had unsettled Tarek but not for any particular reason. His personal instincts had never let him down, and he’d follow the feeling to its conclusion. There was something to this Modesto/Walken connection. Now Tarek had to figure out what.



Brandt’s days had taken on a new kind of surreal quality since Oliver’s return to his life. He and Demir had resumed their schedule of work, sleep and studying, but it now also included daily phone calls with Oliver. Often in the late morning when Demir arrived after class. Eriq was in school, so Brandt spoke to him every other evening before his shift. The boy was polite and asked questions but didn’t seem altogether thrilled about spending most of his school break in Sansbury with strangers.

Demir was also helping Brandt transform the nursery into a proper guest room. They’d hauled the changing table and rocking chair to a nearby charity shop, and Demir happily delivered several bags of goods to Light House. Transforming the crib into a twin bed took a bit of wrangling, because Brandt had long ago lost the instruction booklet. Brandt bought a small side table and lamp and a throw rug with a lot of bright colors. Demir brought over a colorful painting he’d purchased from a classmate who did art on the side, and they hung it over the headboard.

Brandt even bought a bookshelf, which he filled with books at Eriq’s age

level and a bit older, plus games and toys Demir recommended. He needed Eriq to know this was his room and he was always welcome here.

Sometimes Brandt hated the evenings when he and Demir both left his house, Brandt to work and Demir home, because he wanted Demir here. In his home. Their home. But why make the man sleep there alone? The separation was harder on weekends, when it would be easy enough for Demir to sleep over, but he never did. Demir shopped, cooked, cleaned, and kept Brandt's house without being asked. He just wouldn't sleep over.

Demir did, however, take great joy and enthusiasm in their shared sex life. After the kink conversation, they were more open about pushing boundaries and trying new things. The first time Brandt licked whipped cream off Demir's stomach and cock, Demir was hooked on that sort of play. The first time Brandt eagerly fucked Demir with four fingers stuffed into his pretty hole, he'd had his mobile on speaker with Oliver listening to every filthy description Brandt gave him, while Demir lost his fucking mind.

In the two weeks between Oliver's departure and return, their trio had phone sex six times, all while Eriq was in school and Diego at work. Oliver seemed to get off on listening to them fucking, as if reacquainting himself with his own love of dirty talk and kink. Once, while Demir dozed in Brandt's arms, his well-fucked hole plugged up with Brandt's come inside him, Brandt told Oliver about the first time he fisted his mate. In great, gory detail, every stroke of tongue and fingers, loosening his rim until the widest part of Brandt's hand finally slid inside. The story left Brandt so aroused, he woke Demir and, with permission, fucked him again and then plugged him back up.

Oliver's answering cry as he came on the other side of the territory would have rattled the walls of this little house, had he been physically present.

Soon.

Demir was getting used to the plug, but he found it distracting when he really had to study, so Brandt didn't use it every day or leave it in for long. More than anything, though, Demir's faith in him went from tentative to absolute. And the more they spoke on the phone, the more Brandt heard longing in Oliver's voice.

The longing of an omega too long apart from his bondmate.

Eriq wasn't happy about spending the first two days of his spring break on a train to Sansbury, so Brandt expected a grumpy little boy when he picked the pair up at the station. He so wanted Demir with him for this

moment, but his boyfriend was in class, and it didn't feel appropriate yet. Not until Eriq was comfortable around Brandt, who'd done something this week he hadn't done in ten years: he took vacation time so he'd be home at night with his mate and son while they visited.

But Eriq seemed rested and happy when he bounced off the train and onto the platform with a small suitcase, Oliver only a few steps behind him. Brandt allowed the pair to approach him when all he wanted to do was rush forward and yank them both into his arms. Oliver crushed him with his hug, a lot of power in his small body, and he kissed Brandt soundly on the mouth.

"I missed you, alpha," Oliver whispered in his ear. "More than I expected."

"Missed you, too, sweetheart. So fucking much." Brandt somehow disentangled himself from Oliver so he could squat and hold out a hand to Eriq. "I'm so happy to see you again, Eriq."

Eriq shook his hand and gave him a quick hug. "Hi. Should I call you Dad now?"

"You can call me anything you like, except bad names." He winked and Eriq laughed. "It's fine if you'd rather call me Brandt for now. Until we get to know each other better."

"Okay. Brandt."

Oliver looked absolutely enchanted with them as Brandt rose.

And by some sheer bad luck, a man with a reporter's pad and pen inserted himself into their space. "Constable Lars, I'm with the Banner, and I'd like to ask you a few questions." the reporter said.

Brandt snarled at him. "I've got nothing to say to the press." He'd ignored messages and inquiries from both print and television reporters asking about the sudden reappearance of his mate after more than a decade. He was not interested in sharing his very personal story with the media.

"But this is such a human interest piece for our readers. Surely you can spare—"

"No, I really cannot. I'll tell you what I've said since this started. My relationship with my bondmate is personal, private, and is not up for public consumption. Goodbye."

The reporter backed off. Brandt carefully shielded Oliver and Eriq on the walk off the platform and to the station's parking garage.

"Why did that man want to talk to us?" Eriq asked once they were in the car, Oliver up front and him in the back.

“Because of how unique we are,” Oliver replied. “How I went away for so long and had you, and then we came here and found Brandt again. It’s a very unusual story, but Brandt is right. It’s private.”

“I told other kids at school. They didn’t think it was all that awesome.”

“Well, adults do, unfortunately,” Brandt said. “I’m glad your friends don’t really care and aren’t being mean about it.”

“Everyone’s too busy talking about how Mr. Garrand is marrying his second husband next month.”

Brandt fumbled his car keys. “His what now?”

“Mr. Garrand is a nice beta man who teaches math at Eriq’s school,” Oliver said. “He’s been married for about five years, but he and his husband are adding a third to their union. It’s a relatively new law Rainier passed, and they’re one of the first beta trios to legally marry.”

“Wow.” It would likely be years, if not decades, before Sansbury ever adopted that sort of law regarding beta marriages, much less an alpha/omega/beta triad. But Brandt took heart knowing a more progressive province was giving poly couples the same legal protections as regular pairs.

Brandt took the long way to the house, pointing out different neighborhoods or landmarks to Eriq as he drove. He wanted Eriq to get to know Sansbury, and he also wanted to show Oliver familiar places they’d spent time together. Reacquaint him with the lay of the land, so to speak. They stopped at a small grocery store near home so Eriq could pick out some favorite snacks and food to keep at the house, and Eriq seemed stunned by the gesture.

Then he filled his basket with junk food and a bottle of hot sauce. Brandt felt like a fool for not remembering to get hot sauce and red pepper flakes, and other spicy things for his guests, so he grabbed them, too. Oliver tossed him an adoring smile at the checkout. While the fridge and pantry were well-stocked with regular food, Brandt wanted his mate and son to have everything they wanted.

“It’s small,” was Eriq’s assessment of the house when Brandt parked in the driveway.

“Don’t be rude,” Oliver said.

“It is a bit small,” Brandt replied as he helped Oliver with his suitcase. “Your omegin and I bought it a long time ago, when I was just a rookie patrolman, and it was all we could afford. Even though I’m a senior constable now, I never moved because this house meant so much to me. It was where

the three of us were always supposed to live.”

“Dad’s house was bigger,” Eriq said.

Dad had to be Oskar, and Brandt worked not to let the name irritate him too much. Eriq was a kid and this hadn’t been his first choice for a vacation spot, so Brandt would be patient with his son. And for the first time, Brandt considered the idea of buying a bigger home. One with enough space for Eriq, Oliver, Brandt and Demir in it. A place for all four of them to start over as a family.

Until now, he’d never had a good enough reason to move.

Those three men were absolutely a good enough reason.

Brandt showed Eriq around the house, including his new room. The boy poked around, seeming pleased with the books and games, instead of getting a sterile guest room. Oliver stored his own suitcase in the master, while Brandt put their groceries away, stupidly pleased to have both his mate and son under his roof.

Exactly where they belonged.

From the moment Oliver stepped foot on the train taking him back to Rainier after the conference, until the moment he stepped back off in Sansbury two weeks later, he’d been running at top speed. Anxious, over-thinking things, wary of everyone around him. Even at home in the condo he shared with Diego, Oliver couldn’t relax. Everything inside him knew something was missing. Wrong.

And then Brandt Lars pulled him into his arms again, and everything was right with the world. His alpha would fight any enemy, face any danger to keep his family safe. As scared as Oliver was to leave the life he knew in Rainier, how could he leave Sansbury at the end of the week, for an extended time period, and survive with his sanity intact?

He couldn’t.

Eriq poked around his new room, seeming pleased by the contents and décor, and Oliver was glad. Glad his son—no, their son—was being so open-minded about the big changes ahead. The baby alpha was rarely quick to judgment, but he’d also taken Oskar’s death hard. Accepting Brandt as his father would take time.

They walked into the kitchen together, and Brandt showed Eriq where the food and plates were kept so the boy could navigate on his own. Oliver

appreciated the care with which Brandt was handling Eriq, not forcing anything on him, simply listening and asking his own questions. Brandt's patience was everything, considering how resistant Eriq had been to this trip, thanks to Diego.

Oliver loved his brother-in-law, but the man had been an absolute bear these last two weeks, doing his very best to undermine every attempt Oliver made to win Eriq over to Brandt's side. Diego wasn't bad-mouthing Brandt or Sansbury, exactly, but he wasn't being supportive, either. He should have been happy for Oliver to finally discover his past. Nothing about re-meeting Brandt diminished the life Oliver had lived with Oskar, so why was Diego so threatened?

For now, it didn't matter, because Oliver and Eriq were home with their alpha and sire. Oliver missed seeing Demir's sweet, smiling face in the kitchen, but he also understood why it wasn't appropriate for him to be there yet. Didn't stop Oliver from missing him even more, knowing the younger beta was only a few miles away now, instead of a few thousand.

"So what do you think?" Brandt asked.

Eriq shrugged. "It's bigger on the inside. I like my room."

"I'm glad. Remember the green knitted blanket on the foot of your bed?"

"Yeah."

"It used to be your..." Brandt frowned. "What's your name for Oliver?"

"Daddy."

"It was your daddy's baby blanket, and it was going to be yours, but you didn't get a chance to grow up here."

"Because bad men stole Daddy and took him away." Eriq spoke solemnly, reciting facts he'd been told without showing any emotion.

"Yeah."

Standing together talking, Oliver was stunned by how much the pair of alphas truly did resemble each other. Not an obvious copy of Brandt's features, but Oliver saw it in the slope of their noses and the way their hair curled at the nape of their necks. Similar serious expressions. Thick eyebrows.

Mine. Both of them.

Oliver needed to bring the conversation away from the serious topic of his own kidnapping. A kidnapping Constable Bloom was apparently still digging into, even after two weeks at it. Brandt had given Oliver occasional updates over the phone, but Brandt didn't know much, since he wasn't part of

the team investigating it. But according to Brandt, Tarek was tenacious and would follow every single possible lead to its bitter end. “It’s about lunchtime,” Oliver said. “Want to go out to eat?”

“Yes!” Eriq bounced on his toes, because eating out was a rare treat.

“I know of a fun place called Harry’s House,” Brandt said. “They have a pizza buffet, plus all kinds of indoor play areas for kids under twelve.”

“Ooh, yeah, can we, Daddy?”

Oliver grinned at his mate and the thoughtful suggestion of a place play, instead of a stuffy restaurant. Brandt was thinking about his son’s needs first, and Oliver adored the man for it. “That sounds perfect,” Oliver replied.

Absolutely perfect.

SEVENTEEN

AFTER HIS MID-MORNING CLASS, Demir spent a few hours working in the university library before his afternoon meeting with a new project group. Going anywhere besides Brandt's house felt incredibly strange, but he was giving the family space today. As much as he wanted to see Oliver again, Demir didn't want to lose him if Eriq freaked out about Demir being in their lives, too.

The library was too cold, too quiet, and not where he wanted to be, so Demir went home after the meeting and worked at the kitchen table for a while. The house was silent, and he vaguely remembered Liam mentioning a play date with the Bloom/Cross kids, followed by Jaysan and his crew coming here for dinner.

Liam came home with the boys and two full shopping bags around four-thirty, and he gave Demir a curious look as he began putting groceries away. Layne and Linus were excited to see Demir home early, so he took a break from his schoolwork to play with his brothers in the living room. He had been neglecting them these last few months, ever since dating Brandt, and his free time was already limited because of school and all the credits he'd packed into his final semester.

"You guys have fun today?" Demir asked. Linus was obsessed with his mega blocks and busy constructing a very tall wall near the bookcase. He nodded absently as he debated between a red or blue block, and those colors made Demir think of Brandt.

"Branson got me in trouble," Layne whispered, super serious now.

"How'd he get you in trouble, buddy?"

"He said it was okay to say 'son of a fucker' now, and Papa got mad. So

did Mr. Kell, because the twins started saying it.”

Demir couldn't help chuckling over the earnest way Layne whispered all that to him. When the boys were in their terrible twos, they'd started mimicking their parents and curse words had been a favorite. Branson was beta, but he was also a strong-willed kid and the oldest of the pack, so the others tended to follow his lead. “Well, you know better than to say it again, right?” Demir asked. “You can't cuss until you're eighteen.”

“Oh.” Layne frowned. “Damn.”

Demir hooted. “That's a cuss word, bud.”

“Oh.” Layne looked poised to say ‘fuck’ again, but Liam was heading into the living room, so Demir put his hand over the little boy's colorful mouth.

“I wasn't expecting you for dinner,” Liam said to Demir. “I bought premade dough and thought the kids would enjoy making their own personal pizzas.”

“Pizza!” Layne said behind his hand.

“Do I want to know why you're silencing him, Demir?”

“Nope.” Demir dropped his hand. “And pizza sounds like fun.”

“Is everything okay with, ah, studying?”

“Yeah. Change of pace today. There's a, ah, returning student who's been away, and I thought I should give someone else a chance to use the, um, library.”

Liam nodded. “Gotcha. You want to help me chop toppings?”

“As long as I don't have to eat them.”

Linus was enthralled by his block wall, but Layne protested being left alone, so he was planted at the kitchen table and given a ball of fresh mozzarella to cut up with a plastic knife. Demir helped Liam arrange bowls of other toppings, while a bottle of jarred sauce simmered on the stove.

Jaysan, his bondmate Morris, and their two kids Aeron and Morgyn, rang the bell at five-thirty. Layne gave up his cheese duties to go play with the newcomers, and Dad showed up about ten minutes later. Dad greeted everyone warmly, but Morris still seemed intimidated by the older alpha. Morris had passed his bar exam last year and was a full partner in Ronin Cross's law firm now, and Tarius was one of their paralegals. The gentle alpha had always acted more like a beta in his temperament, which made him kind of perfect for Jaysan, who was a bull-headed omega with a fiery temper.

After hugging both Liam and Demir, Jaysan looked at the spread of

toppings, blanched, and then escaped to the living room. Demir frowned. Liam didn't seem surprised, and it only took Demir a few seconds to figure it out.

"Oh my goddess," Demir whispered to Liam. "Is Jaysan pregnant again?"

Liam glanced into the living room where everyone else was chatting and watching the kids play. "Yes, but it's early and they're waiting to tell people. They were pregnant after Jaysan's previous heat, but he miscarried at six weeks, so they're being cautious this time."

"Oh wow, that sucks. The miscarriage, obviously, not the being cautious."

Little Morgyn had been a difficult second birth for Jaysan, so Demir was a bit surprised the pair was trying for a third child. But Jaysan was an amazing omegin and Morris a doting alpha. Any child would be lucky to have them as parents.

"It did suck, so pretend you don't know," Liam added. "Jaysan wanted that baby so badly and was a mess for a while after losing him."

Demir vaguely recalled Jaysan not being around much late last fall and that must have been why. He glanced into the living room to where Jaysan was curled up beside Morris on the sofa, one hand resting on Morris's chest. The pair was intensely adorable with Morris's red hair and freckles against Jaysan's darker coloring. Another happily mated couple.

Like Brandt and Oliver.

As much as he tried, Demir couldn't imagine any of the mated pairs he knew bringing a third person into their relationship. It didn't make any sense. But from the start, Demir's relationship with Brandt had been everything except traditional.

He continued tearing basil leaves into a small bowl until a large presence came up behind him. "Didn't expect you home for supper," Dad said. He reached past Demir to snare a slice of pepperoni from another bowl.

"I missed being home with the boys." True enough.

"Everything okay with your mystery boyfriend?"

"Yup. No problems."

Liam cut him a look Dad didn't see.

"Good, good." Dad leaned his hip against the counter. "Think you'll ever bring this guy home to meet the family?"

"I will, I promise. I mean, bringing someone to meet the family is a big deal, right? We want to both be sure this isn't just a fun fling." Again, true

enough that he wasn't lying to his sire, which he never wanted to do.

"All right then." Dad kissed Liam's cheek before reaching for the pizza stones. "Make your own pizza sounds like a lot of fun."

"Thanks." Liam turned to give him a proper kiss. "The oven's hot. Help me roll the dough and sauce them? Then the kids can come choose toppings."

"Sounds good."

Watching four kids under the age of six attempt to put combinations of pizza toppings on their sauced crusts was kind of hilarious. Layne wanted lots of cheese over sausage, Aeron only a little bit of cheese and more sauce. Linus kept eating the pepperoni right out of the bowl. Morgyn was less into the whole thing, so Jaysan helped him put a mix of mozzarella and cheddar on his pie. Liam high-fived Morgyn for his simple, perfect taste in plain cheese pizza.

Once the kids were seated with their cooked pizzas to munch on, the adults took turns making their own food.

"So Brogan and I took the kids to Harry's House this afternoon," Jaysan said from a slight distance away from the toppings. "And you'll never guess who we saw out in public like a regular human being."

"Oh?" Liam replied as he decorated his own crust with pepperoni, sweet peppers, and ham. "Who?"

"Constable Lars."

Demir managed a perfectly schooled expression as he said, "Is he not known for being seen in public places?"

"Not unless he's drunk or there for work. Or at least that's the rumor. I mean, Morris and I did find him plastered in a bar and helped get him home, but this was years ago. Back when we first met and Aeron was only a year old."

"I remember that," Morris said. "It was our first date."

"Great way to spend it," Liam teased. "Hauling drunks home."

"It was also the anniversary of his mate's disappearance," Jaysan added. "And said mate and kid were at Harry's House with him. I didn't want to creep on them or anything, so I didn't talk to him, but I don't think I've ever seen Lars smile like that before."

"Of course, he's smiling," Dad said. "He got his bondmate and son back. I can't imagine that sort of loss followed by so much joy. I didn't realize his mate was back in Sansbury."

Demir bit his tongue so he didn't blurt out the reason. He had no

explanation for why he'd know it.

Liam, bless him, pretended to guess. "Maybe it's Eriq's spring break this week? I know Sansbury's is next week, which makes today's school holiday a little ridiculous."

"Could be," Dad replied. "Demir, when's the university holiday again?"

"Not until the week after next," Demir said. And then a month after that, his finals would begin, and after that, he'd have to study for the med school entrance exam. He'd have even less free time to spread between his family and his boyfriends.

If I'm still with them in a month.

And if Demir had his dates correct, Oliver's heat would start sometime the week after Demir's spring break. Would Oliver return to Sansbury for it? Ask Brandt to go to Rainier?

So many questions. No real answers.

Fingers snapped in front of his face, and he blinked Dad into sharp focus. "Huh?"

"I asked if you'd planned to study your way through the holiday, or if you had plans with your mystery man?" Dad said.

"Wait, Demir has a boyfriend?" Jaysan squawked. "How did I not know this?"

"Because he's being very private about it," Liam replied to his friend. "And we are respecting his privacy." He elbowed Dad. "Right?"

"Sorry," Dad said to Demir.

"It's okay." Demir shrugged, happy to have the reprieve of his cooked pizza to distract himself from conversation for a while. He carried his plate to the table of noisy kids to eat, leaving the other adults to their food. Even though Jaysan, Liam and Morris were only in their mid-twenties, Demir still felt like a kid around them sometimes, because they were all parents, while he was still a student.

Aeron spent half the meal goading Demir into just trying a piece of pepperoni, while Demir encouraged Linus to eat his crust by dipping it into extra pizza sauce. Their big brother Aven had a weird habit of dipping his pizza into ranch dressing, and Layne had picked up on it. Layne got Morgyn to try a bite with ranch on it.

Morgyn took one taste and threw it at Layne's head.

Kids.



So far, so good.

Brandt had successfully spent a full twenty-four hours with his family, and he was over the moon. After a dizzying afternoon at Harry's House, they had an early dinner at Petrova's, followed by a movie at the local cinema. Eriq fell asleep on the way home, and Brandt's heart nearly burst with emotion as he carried his sleeping son from the car to his new bed.

Oliver watched the whole thing with his heart in his eyes, and they spent a bit of time on the couch making out before calling Demir. Demir was eager to hear about their day, but Brandt also heard the longing in his voice. Brandt wanted him in the house so much, but it was after nine already.

They did, however, take the phone into the bedroom so Demir could listen to Brandt give Oliver a blow job. Oliver seemed hesitant to return it, so Brandt kissed him a while longer, until Demir said goodnight. They slept apart that night, Brandt on the couch and Oliver in the master, and that was okay. Oliver was up and had pancakes sizzling before Brandt stirred, and he marveled at the sight of his bondmate cooking them breakfast.

And when Eriq wandered sleepily into the kitchen in his pajamas? It felt as if Brandt's entire life had been on hold until this exact moment. The domesticity of it crashed down on him all at once, and he had to blink back joyful tears. This was real. All of it. Maybe it was all still extremely fragile, and Brandt still had to take care, and that was okay. He'd take all the time in the world if the end result made this his future from now on.

Oliver caught him staring and winked.

Brandt hadn't made any specific plans for them today, so after breakfast they went down to Aurora Crest. Eriq adored the fountain and tried to guess when and where the water would shoot out. Brandt and Oliver sat on a stone bench to watch him, and Brandt's heart trilled when Oliver clasped his hand.

"He reminds me so much of you when he smiles like this," Oliver said. "It truly is a beautiful thing to see."

"I'll never get tired of looking at him. We did that, Ollie."

"Yes, we did. Out of determination and love."

"Yup. And now we're building a new life together out of the same things. Determination and love."

"And patience." Oliver squeezed his hand. "I love how patient you're being with him. Giving him space, not demanding anything more than his

time. Not all alphas would react that way.”

“I know. Many years ago, there was an omega involved in a constabulary case, and he had a baby by forced impregnation. No idea who the sire was until months after the child was born. The alpha tried to take the omega and baby back by force and it got ugly. I’d never do that to you guys. Never.”

“I think that may have made it to the territory news channel. It sounds familiar.”

“The omega was part of that horrible fight ring we busted six years ago.” Brandt bit his bottom lip. “I guess I should also mention that particular omega is Liam Higgs, Demir’s stepfather.”

“That’s right. I heard about that at the conference.” Oliver’s eyes popped wide. “Goddess, wasn’t Demir part of the hostage situation with the baby’s sire?”

“He was.” Back then, Brandt had only known Demir as his coworker’s kid, but now? So deeply in love with the younger man? A part of him raged at a long-dead alphahole for putting his hands on Demir at all. “He’s a resilient young man.”

“He’s adorable, and I miss him. I can’t believe how much I missed you both while I was away.”

Not “while I was home.” Interesting.

“You’re here now.” Brandt took a chance on resting his arm across Oliver’s shoulders; Oliver leaned into him. “Let’s enjoy the present for a while and not think too much about tomorrow.”

“Agreed.”

They watched Eriq and some other kids amuse themselves by the fountain. A handful of parents tossed curious looks their way. Thanks to a few nosy reporters at the conference two weeks ago, photos of Brandt and Oliver had gotten out, along with short blurbs of their reunion. No one approached or gave them a hard time, though, thank goddess. Not like that reporter had at the train station yesterday morning.

Brandt’s mobile rang, and he wasn’t completely surprised it was Tarek Bloom’s number. “This is Lars.”

“Hey, man, it’s Tarek. Is this a bad time?”

“Not at all. What can I do for you? Is it about the investigation?”

Next to him, Oliver perked up.

“No, nothing new I can share with you, other than I’m still pulling a few strings and waiting on some answers. No, I am once again calling on behalf

of Braun. He'd like me to invite you and your family over for dinner tonight at the house. No unexpected guests, just my family and Ronin's. If you think your mate and son are up for it, of course."

"Let me ask them. Hold on a moment." As much as Brandt wanted to show them both off, he didn't want to be the alphahole who made plans with strangers without his mate's input. He covered the phone with his hand. "A coworker is inviting us over for dinner tonight. Do you remember meeting Constable Bloom? His mate is the brother of Kell Cross."

Oliver blinked hard. "I remember them, yes. Are they friends of yours?"

"New friends, yes. Bloom and I are colleagues, same rank now, and I've eaten there before. And Kell has twins who might be there if they aren't misbehaving."

"Oh, yes, I'd love to meet a pair of twins. I've only ever met one pair, and they're fully grown. Never children."

"I've seen them in passing and in photos. It's uncanny how much they look exactly alike, and so much like their omegin."

"Then let's go." Oliver grinned brightly. "Eriq needs to meet other kids here in Sansbury. I know he's a bit older than them, but he's a friendly boy."

With a grin of his own, Brandt put the phone back to his ear. "Tarek? We gladly accept your invitation. What time?"

"Six o'clock. And I promise to try and keep Kell and Braun from making too big of a fuss over you reconnecting with your bondmate. They both have romantic streaks a mile wide."

"I appreciate it. See you at six."

After Brandt put his phone away, Oliver rested his head on Brandt's shoulder and sighed. "This feels so right, BeBe. And where did I even come up with that nickname?"

Brandt chuckled. "According to my parents, it's what you used to call me when we were really small and learning to talk. You couldn't get Brandt out, so you just called me BeBe, and it stuck as a nickname."

"Huh. That feels right. So much of this feels right, I just wish I could remember it all."

"I know." Brandt rested his cheek on top of Oliver's head. "We're getting there."

"What about Demir? He's being so generous in staying away and giving us time together with Eriq, but I want him included. He's still part of this, right?"

“Absolutely. Other than you, he’s the sweetest, most generous person I’ve ever met, and I adore him for giving us space. I’d love to spend time alone with Eriq one day so you and Demir have some time together. After all, I’ve had Demir these past two weeks.”

Oliver sat up straight, eyebrows arched. “Really?”

“Of course. If we’re really in this poly thing, you and he need to be alone. Establish your relationship apart from me. And I promise to do my best not to be jealous if you two decide to be intimate while you’re alone.”

“Do your best, huh?”

“You’re my bondmate. Jealousy happens if you so much as smile at another man.”

“True.” Oliver kissed him lightly on the mouth. “Deep down, I know I love you. But in this present moment, I am absolutely falling back in love with you, Brandt Lars.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Daddy!” Eriq bounced over and practically landed in Oliver’s lap. “Can I get a soft pretzel? There’s a man with a cart over there.”

“Yes, you can.” Oliver handed over his credit card. “But just one.”

“Thanks!” Eriq scurried to the other side of the fountain where a tall man with a white cart was surrounded by kids and their parents.

Brandt kept his eye on the boy until he returned the card to Oliver, pleased by his pretzel and cup of cheese sauce to dip it in. He sat next to Oliver on the bench to eat and watch the fountain, and Oliver brought up their new dinner plans. Eriq wasn’t excited until he heard the chance of meeting the Cross twins, whose arrival four years ago had been big news across the whole territory. He wanted to leave right away, but they had hours yet to spend together before dinner.

Hours they filled by further exploring the art garden and other sights of Aurora Crest, before driving to another neighborhood full of shops and restaurants. Eriq liked poking around in the different stores, and Brandt bought him a 3-D puzzle he couldn’t wait to build. So they went home, and Brandt did nothing more important that afternoon than watch his son create a 3-D model of the Sansbury courthouse.

An odd choice of puzzle to Brandt, until Eriq said he liked it because it had the most pieces.

The closer to dinner they got, the more nervous Oliver seemed to become, and Brandt wasn’t sure how to calm him. Before Eriq, he could have cut the

stress with a blow job, but he couldn't very well do that with a ten-year-old in the house. Instead, he massaged Oliver's shoulders and temples for a while, until some of his mate's anxiety seemed to ease.

"It'll be fine," Brandt said. "They're great people, I promise."

"I know." Oliver sagged against Brandt. "I just...Kell Cross has been my hero for a while now, and I was so nervous to meet him at the conference. Now I'm eating dinner with him and his family? It's a little surreal."

"I bet." Brandt didn't have any heroes of his own, much less know of anyone he'd be nervous to meet, but he was also an alpha constable. Not a lot intimidated him. "Just pretend he's any other omegin with three kids."

"Two of whom are medical miracles."

"Good point." The Cross twins had shocked the world by announcing they were two babies, instead of one, only hours before Kell delivered them via Caesarean. Even Brandt had been drawn to the hospital that day to try and catch a glimpse of the tiny bundles.

Oliver was still fretting when they left the house. Brandt hit a corner store on the way for two bottles of wine for his hosts, and in ten minutes, he parked on the street in front of the Cross/Bloom house. He explained the living situation quickly as they climbed out.

The front door opened before Brandt could knock, and he wasn't at all surprised by the two familiar faces smiling at his family. Braun and Kell each greeted Brandt and Oliver by name, and the three omegins exchanged hugs before Oliver introduced Eriq.

"Are you two the twins?" Eriq asked with a frown.

Kell laughed. "Goddess, no, we're brothers who look a lot alike. My boys will be down in a few minutes. They ran me ragged today, so my mate gave me a break when he got home from work."

Their trio went inside, and Brandt observed the way Oliver took in his surroundings. The open floor plan, the tall man in the kitchen with a young boy, both of whom approached.

"You probably remember my mate, Tarek," Braun said. "And this is our son Rei. Rei, this is Constable Lars's boy Eriq."

The two baby alphas stared at each other a moment. Then Rei said, "Wanna see my room?" and the pair was off.

Kell accepted both bottles of wine and carried them to the counter to open. Braun and Oliver chatted about his visit to Sansbury so far, keeping things light and Brandt appreciated that tact so much. Tarek returned to

whatever he was cooking, so Brandt simply hung around until several sets of feet thundered down the exterior staircase from the apartment above.

Oliver perked up when the front door opened. Branson barreled inside first and, upon seeing his cousin Rei nowhere, raced to the boy's bedroom. Ronin entered more sedately with a pair of identical four-year-olds in tow. They were adorable in their own way, with Kell's bright green eyes, face shape and brown hair, but they also had Ronin's coloring. A good mix between the parents, but the twins definitely favored their omegin.

"Boys," Kell said. "Come meet two friends of ours."

Only Brandt's nose told him which was Caden and which was Emory, before Kell introduced them to himself and Oliver. They were shy and sweet, and Kell took them into Rei's room so they could meet Eriq, too.

"They're astonishing," Oliver said to Ronin. "I can't imagine the shock it must have been."

Ronin laughed. "We were all plenty shocked, but it also felt like the universe was finally giving back to Kell after all he'd been through. Two perfect angels when all we were expecting was one."

"You got your own shock from the universe, though, right?" Braun asked Oliver. "By finding your bondmate again."

"I did, yes," Oliver replied. "It's been a very unique couple of weeks, getting to know someone with no memory of my having known him before. But Brandt has been incredibly patient with us both. He's wonderful."

Brandt, goddess help him, actually blushed, keenly aware of the irritable bastard the other men in this room knew him as. "I've never been happier than I am right now," Brandt said. "We're taking our time, doing this right. I'd hate myself forever if I accidentally hurt my family or pushed them away."

Braun looked like he wanted to melt into a puddle of emotional goo, and Brandt recalled what Tarek had said about his mate's romantic side. Oliver was stolen away by the omega brothers, so Brandt lent his hands to setting the table with Ronin. "I'm not looking to drum up business," Ronin said softly as he put spoons down next to knives, "but if you need any advice about your rights as a mated alpha, my door is open."

"I appreciate it," Brandt replied, "but no thank you. I'd never force Oliver into anything, and I completely respect his autonomy in this matter. Forcing him means forcing Eriq, and I want them to *want* to be in my life. Not there because the law says so."

Ronin's broad smile suggested he'd hoped for such an answer.

Pasta seemed to be a favorite meal in this joint household. Tarek put two big pans of stuffed shells on the table, along with garlic bread, salad, and chicken fingers for the kids. Everyone was called to the table, the little ones arranging themselves at one end. All the kids seemed to want to sit by Eriq, and Eriq was equally entranced by the twins, one of whom wanted shells. The other wanted chicken fingers. Brandt had already forgotten which was which, and he was too far away to scent them over the strong aromas of garlic and basil.

Brandt and Oliver sat beside each other with Kell on Oliver's other side, and the omegins didn't stop talking for the entire meal. The food was delicious, and Brandt indulged in conversation with the others at the table as he'd lost his mate's attention to a man Oliver considered his personal hero. Tarek teased Ronin about his little alpha being a picky eater, and Brandt made it a point to remember Caden wore the red shirt.

He'd never been around twins before and didn't want to accidentally insult the boys by calling one the wrong name.

Brandt also complimented the chef more than once, content to stuff himself full of decadent pasta, cheese, and bread. The ease with which this tight-knit family had accepted Brandt, Oliver and Eriq made his heart give a happy lurch.

It had been a long damned time since Brandt had felt so accepted.

At one point, the omega twin Emory got upset, and within seconds, all three baby alphas—Caden, Eriq and Rei—had surrounded the little boy to make it better. Branson just stared at his friends and ate a breadstick. The instinctive way those kids reacted and supported each other made Brandt hopeful for their futures together as friends. Alphas who protected instead of terrorized, loved instead of demanded. They were the future.

The current generation was working on it, but Brandt's generation still had a long way to go.

Since Tarek had done most of the cooking, Brandt offered to help Braun with the dishes and cleanup duty. He'd never admit it out loud, but he admired Braun Etting Bloom a hell of a lot. Not only for having the guts to escape a dangerous halfway house only a week after suffering injuries in a car wreck, but for having the courage to stand up to the law.

The strong man who fiercely defended his family in public and private could have easily managed to whisk eleven orphaned omegas away in the

dead of night with no trace of them ever found.

Brandt wanted to ask, to tell Braun why he'd ridden Tarek so hard when the omegas went missing. He'd taken it personally because his own omega had disappeared five years prior. But some things were better left unspoken. Braun was smart enough to figure it out on his own now that he knew more about Brandt's past.

Kell prepared coffee and tea for everyone after the meal. The kids had come up with a game that they went outside to play on the lawn. Ronin checked some sort of security box on the wall by the front door, and it occurred to Brandt that they'd probably heightened their external security after the notoriety of having the first multiples in Sansbury Province in nearly thirty years.

Their trio of mates settled in the living room to chat. Oliver spoke more about Rainier and their laxer laws when it came to omega rights, marriages, and how they viewed relationships. It was so subtle Brandt wanted to applaud him for bringing it up. It would make the eventual reveal of their own poly situation less of a shock to their friends.

Friends.

For the first time in many, many years, Brandt had real friends. When Kell suggested they play a new-to-market game, Tarek reminded him they'd left it upstairs. Before Kell got up, Tarek rose and asked Brandt to join him in fetching the game. Much like the last time Brandt had been here, Tarek probably wanted to chat privately.

They left through the front door, and immediately to the right were the exterior stairs leading up to the Cross apartment. It had an identical layout to downstairs, the only real difference the furniture and decorations. And the bigger play area near a set of balcony doors. Three kids versus one meant triple the toys.

"So things have changed quite a lot since the last time we talked," Tarek said as he poked around in a storage closet. "And this isn't me being coy about my investigation. This is completely personal. No work."

Part of Brandt was disappointed Tarek wasn't covertly sharing something new about the case, but the rest was simply grateful for the younger man's interest in Brandt's life. "Things *have* changed. Quite dramatically, in fact." Brandt shoved his hands into his pockets. "I went from lamenting the loss of my pregnant mate to having both mate and child back in my life in only a few short months."

“Taking things slow can’t be easy.”

“It isn’t easy, no, but it’s worth it. As much as I long to have my old Ollie back in my bed every night, sharing meals every day, Oliver isn’t my Ollie. He’s a very different man, even if his core is the same. He knows me, but he also has to get to know me, if that makes sense.”

Tarek emerged from the closet with his game. “It makes perfect sense. When Braun and I first met, we felt the bond, and we knew we were mates, but he hated alphas. Refused to trust me. I had to be patient and let him come to me at his own pace, so I didn’t pressure him or scare him off.”

“Exactly. Oliver and I also have eleven years of separate history to work through.”

“Speaking of that...” Tarek bit his lip, uncomfortable. “There were some rumors going around the precinct a while back that you were seeing someone.”

“Oh?” Brandt kept his face even while his stomach quaked.

“I’m not trying to be gossipy, that’s Braun’s specialty. Just telling you what I know. So naturally, there’ve been some rumors about you having a piece on the side while your mate’s not around.”

Demir is so much more than a piece on the side; he’s half of my heart.

“I see,” Brandt replied. “Well, I don’t put much stock in idle gossip, and if I was seeing someone before Oliver returned, I’d say that’s my private business.”

“As would I. I try to put gossip to rest when I can, especially when it comes to senior officers.”

“I appreciate that, Tarek. All I’m trying to do right now is what’s best for my family.”

“I hear you.”

They returned to the downstairs apartment and set up the game. When it got too dark for the kids to stay outside, they stormed the living room and wanted to watch a movie. The twins were drooping, though, so Kell directed them upstairs for their evening baths. It was getting late, and Brandt didn’t want to keep the families from their evening routines, so he excused his own trio.

Eriq grumped about leaving, so Braun offered to let Eriq join the twins’ play date with little Morgyn, and with Brogan’s youngest Miko, here at the house tomorrow. Branson and Rei would be in school, along with the other older kids. It would have been perfect if both provinces had spring break the

same week, but this worked too.

“Please, please, please,” Eriq said to Oliver.

“Absolutely, you can come over tomorrow to play with the other kids,” Oliver replied. “You don’t have to spend every moment of your vacation with me and Brandt.”

“Yes!”

Brandt smiled at the boy’s enthusiasm, grateful to Braun for the gift he’d just handed him and Oliver: a chance to see Demir alone, without Eriq in the house. He caught Oliver’s knowing gaze and winked.

They’d both see their boyfriend soon.

EIGHTEEN

DEMIR WAS CONFLICTED as he drove over to Brandt's house after his morning classes. Last night, he'd been ecstatic when Brandt called and invited him over to the house after lunch. Finally, he'd be spending time with Oliver and Eriq—until Brandt said Eriq had a play date at the Bloom home. It hurt that they didn't want Eriq around him, even as he completely understood why.

It was too soon to try and explain to Eriq who Demir was and what he meant to the boy's parents.

So yay for alone time, because Demir was looking forward to sex with his men. The gentle patience of Oliver's kisses and the intense slam of Brandt's cock. Brandt had awakened a sexual beast inside Demir that he never knew existed until a few months ago, and he wasn't ashamed of the things he liked. Let the world think he was a freak in his personal life, as long as he reached his professional goals.

New doubts crept in on stealthy feet. The medical program was picky about the beta students they allowed to enter, especially those interested in any field outside Obstetrics. But surely with such amazing marks they couldn't disqualify him based on his personal relationships.

Right?

The thought left him in a weird mood when he parked in front of Brandt's house, and it also made him unusually paranoid. What if someone recognized Liam's car and snitched it to Dad? No, that was stupid. Demir had practically lived here for months, and no one had said a word yet. Since Oliver's return to Brandt's life, he'd managed to come and go without being noticed by nosy reporters.

Stop looking for ways this won't work and enjoy it.

Oliver met him at the door and swept Demir inside with both arms wrapped tightly around his waist. "I've missed you," Oliver said, raw emotion in his voice.

"Same." Demir kissed him soundly, a little surprised by the intense greeting from the omega. They'd spent a grand total of eight hours together so far, but they'd already forged a unique connection. As much as Demir treasured his time with Brandt these past two weeks, they'd both known someone was missing.

And now that someone was back.

Brandt invaded their space to hug and kiss Demir with a bit more aggression. "Hey," Demir said.

"Hey back." Brandt nipped at his lower lip. "It's hard not seeing you for days at a time after being so used to having you here."

"Me too. Studying at home is weird."

Oliver laughed. "Hopefully, you didn't bring any schoolwork with you today."

Demir showed off his empty hands. "Nope. I gave myself the afternoon off. Don't know if I'll get a chance to see you again while you're here, Oliver, and I don't want to waste our time studying."

"Exactly what we wanted to hear."

Their trio shifted to stand in the living room, holding hands as if unable to part. "So did you guys fool around last night?" Demir asked. Brandt had texted him yesterday about their dinner out, so Demir hadn't bothered calling them. They also hadn't called *him*, but he let it slide for now.

"We kissed a lot on the couch after Eriq went to bed," Brandt replied. "Then Oliver went to sleep, and I jerked off to fantasies of you two making out."

Demir turned a curious frown to Oliver. "You didn't stay for that?"

The tips of Oliver's ears blushed, and it hit Demir that his face never did. Probably the skin grafts. "My hesitation is hard to explain," Oliver said, his voice faltering. "I trust in my heart that Brandt won't hurt me if I go down on him, but...it feels strange pushing my boundaries without you here."

"Really?" Affection and joy bubbled inside of Demir. Being so sexually attracted to two men at once was weird sometimes, but its weirdness was also kind of perfect. He kissed Oliver again, thrusting his tongue into Oliver's mouth to show those emotions. He tasted Oliver's sweet flavor, along with the tang of whatever he'd eaten for lunch. Oliver clung to his shirt with one

hand and relaxed, allowing Demir to plunder his mouth. Take what he wanted.

He really, really wanted Oliver.

The erection now digging into Demir's hip suggested Oliver was into things, too, but Demir wanted to be sure. So far, all he and Oliver had done was kiss and touch each other above the waist. He pulled back, not surprised to find Brandt watching them with arousal burning in his eyes, slacks tented.

Demir licked his lips, uncertain now that he was faced with doing more with his other boyfriend than just make out. Talking over the phone was nowhere close to this intense, not even while Brandt was doing wicked things to Demir's body. Goddess, he wanted so much so quickly, and it made him kind of crazy.

"Ask," Oliver whispered, warm breath fanning over Demir's damp lips.

"Can I suck you?" Demir's face flushed hot as he said the words. For as many times as Brandt's mouth had been around Demir's cock, Demir hadn't reciprocated beyond allowing Brandt to come just inside his lips, and Brandt had always silently accepted it. Demir had never asked to suck Brandt off, either, not like this.

For his part, Brandt looked even more turned on, which confused Demir into looking at his own feet. Brandt was aroused by the idea of Demir sucking Oliver, when Demir hadn't sucked Brandt yet?

"Hey, what happened?" Oliver asked. A gentle palm cupped Demir's chin and guided his head back up. Worry colored his dark eyes. "Demir? You can. I'd love it if you would."

Demir cut his eyes at Brandt, who seemed as confused as Oliver. "You aren't mad?"

Brandt blanched. "Why would I be mad, Little Blue? I'd love to see you suck Oliver's dick."

"Because we don't—I mean, I don't—not when we're—fuck." Demir was screwing this up all over the place. "I never ask to suck you. When you hint around you'd like me to, I always find a way to goad you into doing something else."

"You may have noticed, but I like doing this to you. A lot. Come here." He led Demir to the couch and gathered him onto his lap. Oliver sat beside them. "I can say without being boastful that I have a pretty big dick, and it can be a challenge for an unpracticed mouth, so I've never pushed you into taking me that way."

“I’m not unpracticed.” The flames in his face got worse, and Demir pressed his face into Brandt’s neck. “Fuck.”

Oliver’s hands smoothed circles on his back. “Talk to us, Demir. We have to talk about things, remember? You don’t have to suck me if you don’t really want to.”

“I do want to,” he told Brandt’s chest, “but I’m scared of it, too, and I think I felt the same as you when you said doing it alone with Brandt made you nervous, and I didn’t understand why until now. That maybe I needed to know someone else was here to stop it when it got rough and choked me.”

Those hands stilled, and the protective growl Brandt let out rumbled right into Demir’s body. “Who choked you?” Brandt asked, voice tight with anger. “The beta you slept with before me?”

Unable to speak, Demir nodded.

“Oh baby, I’d cut my dick off before I scared you like that. You told me the first time we slept together that you like dirty as long as it isn’t something that can really hurt you. If I suspected I was hurting you, I’d stop.”

“I know.” Truth, and it only fueled his unending embarrassment over this entire situation. His body was reacting without permission, and Demir needed to get himself under control, damn it. “I know, I do, it’s just...the last time I went down on my ex, he...took my air away. Stuffed his cock in my throat, pinched my nose shut. I freaked out so badly I bit him to make him stop. He promised never to do it again, and he didn’t. He really took care of me after that.”

“Until he cheated on you.”

Demir shrugged, grateful Brandt had phrased it that way. While he’d told Brandt the full truth about his fake relationship with Theron weeks ago, he didn’t feel like unpacking it for Oliver right now. “I guess I’m a little nervous about a dick in my mouth again, and Oliver’s smaller than you.”

Oliver kissed the back of his head. “You don’t have to be embarrassed about protecting yourself from harm. And if you need to hear it, yes. If I thought for a single second you weren’t enjoying sucking Brandt’s cock, I’d stop it. I promise.”

“Same.” Demir sat up and twisted to face Oliver. “You don’t have to be scared to give in to your attraction to Brandt, whether I’m here or not. He loves us, so he won’t hurt us. Not for real.”

“Goddess, you two are amazing,” Brandt said. His rough voice enticed them both to look at their alpha. A single tear had leaked down Brandt’s

cheek as he watched them with wonder and love. “This is why we’ll work. We each balance the scales for the others in our own way, and we will be each other’s protectors. I am so lucky to have you both in my life.”

“As am I.” Oliver nuzzled Brandt’s ear. “My alpha.” Then he did the same to Demir’s ear. “My beta.”

“My omega,” Demir and Brandt said in perfect unison.

Demir rubbed at his cheeks. “Goddess, I feel like an idiot now, but I was already keyed up driving here, letting doubts get in the way. Did I ruin our afternoon?”

“Not at all.” Brandt dropped a soft kiss to his lips. “I do, however, need this Theron fellow’s last name so I can pull his teeth out one at a time for choking you. Breath play is a thing, but it’s not for amateurs. Someone could really get hurt.”

“Yeah, I get that, and no, you aren’t pulling his teeth out. Ew.”

“Spoilsport.”

“Alphas are always so bloodthirsty,” Oliver said. “More of society’s problems are solved without violence than with it.”

“Exactly.” Demir was still on Brandt’s lap, but he leaned into Oliver’s chest. “Can we try something new?”

“And what’s that, angel?”

Angel. I like that nickname.

“Can all three of us go into the bedroom, undress, and just...play?” Demir asked.

Brandt grinned, but behind him, Oliver tensed. Not liking that, Demir climbed off both men and shifted to sit next to Oliver, putting him in the middle this time. Oliver covered his face with both hands and shivered.

“What did I say?” Demir asked, his stomach a big pile of ice. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault.” Oliver nudged Demir’s shoulder with his but didn’t look up. “This is my issue. The only person besides medical staff who’s seen my torso in years is Oskar. I don’t even let Diego or Eriq see. I have so many scars.”

Oliver not removing his shirt the first (and only) time they’d all been intimate made a lot more sense, but Demir wasn’t sure what to say to make Oliver feel better. He cast a helpless look at Brandt and hoped the older alpha had better ideas.

Brandt was stuck in a strange place between still wanting to exact revenge on this Theron character for the pain he'd caused Demir, and needing to make his bondmate feel better for his physical faults. He didn't give a shit that Oliver had scars, or that his body was less than perfect. Hell, Brandt had gained a good thirty pounds of flab all over in the last eleven years, and not once had Oliver or Demir looked at his body as if Brandt was less than perfect.

Both of Brandt's men were perfect inside and out. Period.

He couldn't fix Demir's fear right now, but he could fix Oliver's.

"They aren't scars, sweetheart," Brandt whispered. "They're proof of everything you survived and overcame to come home to me. To us. Everything about you is amazing and perfect and deserving of worship. Every line and crease and odd swath of skin. I'll kiss every inch of you and adore it simply for being part of my bondmate. My Ollie."

Oliver raised his head, smooth cheeks streaked with tears, but no grief in his eyes. Only gratitude and love. He held Brandt's gaze for a long moment before unbuttoning the first of many on his blue shirt. Brandt didn't look down, only watched emotions tic across Oliver's face as he pulled at one button after another, the planes of his shirt parting to show off skin as pale as his face and legs.

He'd always been so wonderfully pale, burned far too easily in the sun, and Brandt had loved it about his bondmate. The dichotomy between apparent physical frailty and internal strength and resolve. His amazing Ollie.

At the final button, Oliver paused. Undid it. Froze in place. Demir kissed the side of his neck, so Brandt did the same. Goosebumps prickled across Oliver's collarbone. "We'd never judge you," Demir whispered. "No judgment in this house, not ever."

"Yes," Brandt replied. He nuzzled Oliver's neck again, then bent his head to lightly kiss Demir's lips. "We're all imperfect in different ways. Emotionally, physically, it doesn't matter. We complete each other in ways no one else ever could."

Oliver released a long, shaky breath before pushing the shirt off his shoulders. It puddled around his waist, revealing a torso Brandt both remembered and didn't. Similar shape and build, but the lines were different. More scars and bumps and waxy spots. Brandt traced those marks with gentle fingertips, memorizing this new version of his mate.

"I have metal rods in my collarbone," Oliver said. "Screws in my

shoulder and elbow and wrist on my left side. Most of my face is skin grafts from my lower abdomen, and I had the best plastic surgeon in the territory, but it's still not right. I'm not beautiful, no matter what either of you say."

Demir's palm slipped around to rest over Oliver's heart. "You don't have to be outwardly beautiful for us to love you. Like Brandt said: physically, emotionally, mentally, we're all broken in our own ways, and those things are what make us perfect for each other." That beautiful beta boy kissed the side of Oliver's neck and made their omega shiver. "Please believe it, Ollie, because both of you are helping me believe it, too."

A deep shudder ran through Oliver, and Brandt realized it was the first time Demir had called him 'Ollie' in Brandt's presence. "I love every single thing about each of you," Brandt whispered. "Every mark, every scar, every fear and bad memory makes you who you are as individuals. It makes us three sides of a triangle that needs the other two to stand. Let's all stand together, my hearts."

With a soft cry, Oliver surged at Brandt and captured his mouth, kissing Brandt like he needed his alpha simply to breathe, and Brandt surrendered. He allowed Oliver to kiss him onto his back, senses full of his bondmate, his body a live wire everywhere they touched. Oliver's bare skin rubbed his shirt, and Brandt struggled with his own clothes. Oliver stilled his hands by placing them above Brandt's head on the armrest.

He held Brandt's gaze with wide, desperate eyes, and in that moment, Brandt wholly surrendered to his mate. Every taut muscle in his body relaxed, giving in, allowing Oliver control. Every gorgeous, scarred, living inch of this man Brandt loved could do whatever he wanted and Brandt would say yes. Say *please*.

"If I wanted to fuck you," Oliver said, his voice a strained whisper, "if I wanted to fill *you* with my come and plug you up, would you let me?"

"Yes." *Anything, my omega.*

"I believe you." Oliver drew Brandt's right hand up to press against the scars on his left shoulder. "I won't today, but I believe you'd let me. My alpha."

"Anything, sweetheart."

"I want us to go into the bedroom. I want to watch you make love to Demir again. I love watching you two together."

As much as Brandt longed to sink balls-deep in Oliver, the truth in Oliver's words shot right to his cock. He cast about, finding Demir perched

on the coffee table, hand rubbing his own tented jeans. “Be naked on the bed by the time we get there,” Brandt ordered.

Demir squeaked and bolted down the hall.

Oliver rubbed his nose against Brandt’s, his sweet breath fanning over Brandt’s mouth. “One day I’ll be ready for you inside me again, alpha. Until then, I want to do something else with you.”

“Anything.”

Brandt allowed Oliver to pull him off the couch and down the hall. Demir was kneeling naked on the bed, clothes strewn around the room, right hand lazily jacking his cock. His eyes gleamed with lust but he didn’t move, giving all control over to Oliver, just as Brandt had. Oliver slowly undressed Brandt, wicked fingers skating over the swaths of hairy skin. Tweaking Brandt’s nipples, teasing his navel, dipping into his fly to squeeze his erection.

This was the Ollie he remembered, this uninhibited man who knew what he wanted and wasn’t afraid to ask. Beg. Direct when necessary. Brandt was already barefoot, and when Oliver knelt in front of him, it could only be for one reason. He reached for Brandt’s belt, and Brandt stilled him with a hand on his shoulder.

“Are you sure, sweetheart?”

Oliver looked up through a fan of dark-blond eyelashes, his brown eyes simmering with love and lust. “Yes, alpha. I want to.” Deft fingers released belt and fly, and Brandt’s trousers thumped around his ankles. His erection strained against his briefs. Oliver licked at the damp spot by his cockhead, and Brandt nearly swallowed his tongue.

My mate. Yes, please, goddess.

“I wish I could smell you.” Oliver pressed his nose into Brandt’s groin. “I think I remember your scent, but I want to smell it again. Taste it. Swallow it with your load.”

Demir let out a desperate gasp, but Brandt couldn’t look away from the enchanting sight of Oliver licking his briefs, tracing the shape of Brandt’s cock with his tongue. Wetting the fabric. Stirring arousal and desire deep inside Brandt, burning with need and lust from his very core. His inner alpha demanded he strip, turn his mate onto his knees, and drive home.

The man who loved Oliver with half his heart stayed still and let Oliver lead.

But Oliver hesitated in removing that final barrier, licking and sucking on Brandt through his cotton briefs, until the fabric was drenched with saliva.

Brandt ached for mouth on skin, but he couldn't bully Oliver into this. He'd never forgive himself for forcing his mate into anything. Brandt traced his finger down Oliver's cheek to his lips. Gave him a finger to suck on instead. Oliver easily sucked it in and worked it with his tongue.

Their eyes met, and Brandt tilted his head a few degrees in Demir's direction. Nodded. Oliver grinned around his finger and sucked harder, getting it wet for its intended destination. "Show me your ass, Little Blue," Brandt said.

The bed frame squealed as Demir shifted position; Brandt couldn't look away from Oliver's wicked smile and the dirty way he slurped on two of Brandt's fingers. "Slick's in the bedside drawer, sweetheart."

Oliver nodded and crawled—fucking crawled!—across the carpet to the table. Brandt knelt behind Demir, whose spread legs showed off his perfect puckered entrance, and he wasted no time in working those two fingers inside. Demir gasped and panted, clenched and loosened to take him to the second knuckle. "So pretty, Little Blue. Always so ready for me."

"Need it, Big Red," Demir said, his voice lust-fractured and high. "Oh please. Missed you these last few days."

"I missed you too." A cap popped and artificial slick drizzled over Brandt's fingers. Oliver snuggled closer and rested his chin on Brandt's shoulder. "Wanna watch the show?"

"Yes." Oliver let out a low breath. "I love watching you two. I can't explain it."

"You don't have to explain. Just feel. Watch. Love us both."

"I can do that."

Two fingers easily plunged in and out of Demir's hole, thanks to the slick, so Brandt added a third. Demir fucked himself on Brandt's hand, his own fingers clutching the bedspread, head thrown back on a long pant. Brandt tucked his pinkie in and thrust four fingers, watching Demir's rim stretch to take him. Demir clawed at the bed but didn't object, didn't fight, simply existed to please and be pleased.

Oliver shifted to sit in front of Demir, legs spread, and Brandt didn't have a moment to question it before Demir sucked Oliver's now-bared cock into his mouth. Still in his pants, Oliver thrust into Demir's willing mouth, Demir naked between them. Getting Brandt's own underwear gone took a bit of doing without stopping his assault on Demir's hole, but he managed.

"He's got his dick out, Demir," Oliver purred, eyes half-lidded in a

familiar, lovely way. “Do you want him to put it in you?”

Demir made an agreeable sound around his mouthful of cock. Brandt tugged his fingers free of Demir’s wet hole. Oliver still had the slick, and he leaned forward to drizzle more onto Brandt’s hand. Slick he smeared over his very ready cock before lining up and pushing home.

Oliver sighed along with Demir as Brandt breached the young beta in one smooth stroke, amazed Demir had the sense not to choke on Oliver’s dick or accidentally bite down. For Brandt only being the boy’s second lover, Demir was a natural submissive who also showed dominant tendencies. He’d be beautiful if he topped another man and truly lost himself to fucking.

With Demir’s head bent low, Oliver studied the mark on the back of Demir’s neck. Similar to a faded mark on his own neck that Oliver had wondered about for so many years. He’d asked doctors, who said it wasn’t from the wreck but some sort of older injury. An injury he now knew, even without remembering, was from his bondmate. A claiming mark as old as time itself, and he loved that he shared this mark with Demir. It bonded them together, omega and beta, in a unique way. Their way. To their alpha.

Oliver stroked the bruised skin on Demir’s neck; Demir looked up at him through thick, dark eyelashes. Demir’s glimmering eyes seemed to say, “I know.”

Brandt gripped Demir’s shoulders with both hands and set a rough, steady pace that knocked Demir back and forth on Oliver’s cock. The constant pressure was almost like fucking but different. Brandt leaned over Demir to kiss Oliver, and Oliver relaxed as his alpha plundered his mouth, taking anything he wanted. Maybe Oliver hadn’t been able to take his alpha into his mouth tonight, but he’d give him this.

Demir pinched Oliver’s thigh hard, and Oliver yanked back, heart skipping a terrified beat. Demir pulled off his dick and coughed, eyes wet with tears, and Oliver’s stomach gave a nervous lurch. Even Brandt stilled. “Goddess, I’m sorry,” Oliver said. He stroked Demir’s spit-wet cheek. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” Demir coughed again. “Just...it got a little hard to breathe for a second.”

Brandt was next to Oliver in an instant, both hands holding Demir by the cheeks, testing the boy for damage. “Little Blue?”

“Hey, I’m okay.” Demir yanked his head away from Brandt with a huff. “You didn’t have to stop.”

“Yes, I did. I’ll always stop to make sure my men are okay.”

“The angle just...when you guys started kissing, you pushed me forward, and I didn’t have a good breath to stay that way.”

Brandt’s expression fractured a bit and the big man looked close to tears. “I’m so sorry for not thinking. I didn’t mean to choke you.”

“I know.” Demir cuddled closer to Brandt, then beckoned for Oliver to snuggle up on his other side. Oliver kissed Demir’s temple. “I did love it, though. Sucking while being fucked. It was trippy.”

“You were gorgeous,” Oliver said. He rubbed his palm over Demir’s heart. “You took my cock beautifully with your mouth.”

Demir blushed and buried his face in Oliver’s shoulder. Oliver used his other hand to caress the mark on Demir’s neck. Demir shivered and moaned, so Oliver rubbed harder. As if Oliver had discovered a new erogenous zone, Demir pounced with a soft growl. Oliver fell onto his back with Demir straddling his waist, Oliver’s hands restrained above his head. This new position made Oliver’s heart flutter with nerves, but Demir only licked the side of neck.

He continued to make a snack out of Oliver’s throat while the bed shifted. “You two together,” Brandt said. “So beautiful, and your combined scents? You’re the sweetest of desserts, and I could eat you both forever.”

Oliver shivered at the praise, able to imagine what he and Demir looked and smelled like to Brandt. Like something wonderful to be savored. “Thank you, Bebe,” Oliver gasped.

He couldn’t see it happen, but Oliver knew the moment Brandt pushed back inside Demir. Brandt loomed above them both, and he hesitated, meeting Oliver’s gaze with a silent question. Oliver nodded he was okay with this. Demir released a long, low moan as Brandt resumed fucking him, this time with gentler rolls of his hips.

Demir’s dripping cock occasionally brushed Oliver’s belly, but with his hands still restrained, all Oliver could do was watch and experience. Watch Demir’s face twist and smooth as he took everything Brandt gave him. Watch Brandt’s wicked smile as he gave Demir what he wished. Experience the wonder of being part of this union, sharing such a wonderful thing with his men.

I won’t lose them. Even if it means leaving Rainier behind to move here,

I'm keeping them both.

Oliver captured Demir's mouth with his and thrust his tongue inside at the same time he arched his back. Thrust his own hips up. His lower belly rubbed over Demir's erection. Demir cried out into Oliver's mouth as he painted Oliver's chest with his come. Brandt moaned when Demir went tight around him.

As before, Brandt eased back on his own heels with Demir still impaled on his lap. Demir panted and gasped at the new angle of Brandt's cock, and they both stared at Oliver's come-streaked chest. "Want yours, too, alpha," Oliver said, shocking himself with his own words. "Mark me, too."

With a growl, Brandt helped Demir up and off. Then he rose, his broad body looming over Oliver as he jerked himself. Hot ropes of semen shot over Oliver's belly and chest, and one splattered his chin. Oliver closed his eyes and reveled in this moment. On this perfect claiming.

And then two mouths descended on his body, taking turns licking up come, sharing it with kisses and sucking on Oliver's cock, until it was all too much. Too much, not enough, and when Oliver came this time, it was into Demir's mouth.

Their trio curled up together, a pile of sweaty, sated bodies, and they existed in peace and satisfaction for as long as humanly possible.

NINETEEN

THE MASTER BATHTUB wasn't big enough for all three of them to shower together, so they took turns. Demir jumped in first, leaving Oliver and Brandt to cuddle and nuzzle each other on the bed after a second round of three-man sex. Oliver had initiated it by stroking Demir and Brandt in turn, until all three of them were hard again. Then he'd shyly taken Demir into his mouth while Brandt snacked on Demir's hole. Demir had come like a fountain, overtaken by the joy of Oliver blowing him. Crossing another border between them.

Oliver still hesitated over penetration, but he'd allowed Brandt and Demir to take turns blowing him and sucking on his balls until he came on Brandt's face. Then Brandt had turned Demir onto his belly and faux-fucked his crease until he shot. Demir wouldn't have minded if Brandt wanted to fuck him again, but Brandt's promise rang in his head about taking care if Demir was too tender.

His heart burned with love for his alpha as Demir finished rinsing off. Their afternoon had been perfect, and it would end far too soon. He glanced at the alarm clock as he padded into the bedroom, still drying off and doing little to cover his naked body. Eriq would be home in less than an hour.

He paused, arrested by the sight of Oliver on his stomach, Brandt draped over him, kissing the mark on the back of Oliver's neck. Oliver twitched and writhed, and for one instant, jealousy burned in Demir. Were they fucking? Had he missed it? They couldn't have waited for him?

No, Brandt wasn't hard, and his soft tackle rested in the crease of Oliver's ass without penetrating. They were simply...sharing something. A moment? A mark Brandt had put on Oliver's skin? A promise? Demir wasn't sure, but

it was breathtaking.

Brandt whispered something and Oliver sighed. Demir wondered for about ten seconds if he could silently collect his clothes and vacate, before Brandt looked up. Grinned. “Now that’s always a pretty sight.”

Oliver blinked sleepy eyes open. “Yes, he is. Can we keep him?”

Demir dropped his towel and bent to kiss each man in turn. “I’m yours for as long as you want me.” *Even if it’s only until you’re finally comfortable with each other again.* “Who’s hungry? I’ll get something started while you guys wash up.”

“I could eat.” Brandt slid off Oliver and stood in front of Demir. “If you’d rather not cook, we can order in.”

“I don’t mind. I like cooking for you.” He leaned up to kiss Brandt’s chin before getting dressed.

Oliver stayed on the bed while Brandt hit the shower. “I needed to feel that again,” he said softly as Demir buttoned up his shirt. “His mouth on that mark.”

“I get it.” Fully clothed now, Demir eased onto the side of the bed. Oliver’s back was a mess of scars—proof of life he seemed in no hurry to cover again. “He didn’t bite me the first time we had sex, but he did the second. When he knew who I was. I didn’t realize he was staking his claim then, not really. Not until you came back.”

“When we were kids he was obsessed with wolves.” Oliver sat up and eased over to sit next to Demir, nothing strange about one of them clean and clothed, while the other was naked and a bit crusty. “He’d read every book he could find at the library, and he constantly begged his parents to let us take a train ride to the zoo in Buckman, where they had several in captivity. We did manage to go once.”

“So neck-biting is a wolf thing?”

“It’s a dominance thing. When we first started having sex, Brandt used to love nibbling and sucking bruises on my shoulders and back, places my parents couldn’t see. He didn’t mark my neck until we mated. The moment he came and his knot swelled, he bit and didn’t let go until his body released mine.”

“Wow.” Demir’s blood hummed with arousal at the story, but his spent dick didn’t so much as twitch. “I can’t imagine how amazing that felt.” Except he kind of could. Brandt had known Oliver was his bondmate for four years before he marked the man. Brandt had known Demir for an hour.

Demir rested his head on Oliver's shoulder. "How is it that I feel like I've known you for years?" he whispered. "When it's been less than a solid day?"

"Do you believe solely in the neverlife? Or do you subscribe to the idea of second souls?"

"I'm not sure." Demir had been raised, like most, to believe they lived one life on earth, so make it a good one, because once it was over, they went to the neverlife. Many scholars argued what that was, exactly. Some said they'd find their ancestors and loved ones there, and they'd continue to exist in a sort of bodiless joy for eternity. Others said you simply winked out like a light.

No one taught second souls in school anymore, but Demir remembered the time Aven brought it up at home. Demir had been nine, their entire family gathered around a roast pork dinner prepared by Omegin. Aven had read a passage in his textbook about it, and while Dad had dismissed it, Omegin hadn't. Second souls was a theory of reincarnation, where a wronged person who didn't find satisfaction in life was given a second chance to live the life they were meant to. They were reborn with no memory of their previous existence.

Some who subscribed to second souls said that was how alpha/omega bondmates found each other in the world. Others said it explained instant-attraction between beta couples. No one really knew for sure, because no one came back from the dead to report on it. Demir liked the idea of second souls, especially for all the young people who'd died painful, violent deaths without first finding the joy of true love.

"Oskar believed in second souls," Oliver said. "We'd talk about it in bed at night. Sometimes he teased that I was the only living second soul because of my memory loss. That I'd lived two physical lives and possibly loved two very different men. And now my two lives are merging. Perhaps you and I knew each other in another life, didn't get our chance, and this is the goddess making it right."

Demir's eyes burned with emotions he didn't know how to name. "I like the sound of that. Second souls together again."

Oliver leaned his head against Demir's where it rested on his shoulder. "I can't decide what gender you were in your first life. You have an inner strength to match any alpha, but you have the quiet, nurturing side of an omega."

"Maybe I was both. Maybe beta is who I was always supposed to be for

my shot at true love to work. Maybe I loved you and Brandt separately in my first two lives, and this is my third. My final shot and I did it. Finally.”

“Yes, you did, you precious man.”

Oliver drew him into a new sort of kiss between them. Somehow not sexual at all, their lips still pressed and roamed, teased and sucked, sharing their silent agreement to this back story. A nice mythology to explain the strong feelings they shared after having spent such little time together, especially alone. In fact, other than their first meeting during the conference, Demir had yet to truly be alone with Oliver for any long period of time. And he wanted that. He wanted time for them to spend together, to explore their attraction and interests. Likes and dislikes.

They kissed until the water shut off in the bathroom, and even after that, Demir couldn't stop. Oliver either. Demir was vaguely aware of Brandt watching them as he dressed, moving around the bedroom silently. He could have done this forever and never tired of it, but the bed needed changing and Oliver still had to shower.

He nipped at Oliver's bottom lip. “Thank you.”

“Thank you back.” Oliver pressed their noses together briefly before rising and going into the bathroom.

“Good talk?” Brandt asked once the door was shut.

“Excellent talk.” Demir stood and wrapped his arms around Brandt's waist. “This is going to work. I know it will. Even if people point and laugh and don't understand, I know in my gut the three of us will make it work.”

“Good.” Brandt kissed the top of his head. “I don't know how I'm going to be able to let him go at the end of the week. We only have two more full days.”

“At least we'll have each other. Oliver's leaving us both behind.”

“But he isn't alone. He has Eriq.”

“And Diego.” Brandt's sharp grunt urged Demir to pull back and study his alpha's frown. “You don't like Diego? I only met him briefly at the conference when I first spoke with Oliver. He seemed intense but nice enough.”

“He rubs me the wrong way, but I don't know how to express it to Oliver. I get being protective of family, but the guy is kind of...territorial. And I don't like it. I'm Oliver's bondmate, not some stranger off the street.”

“Diego's beta, anyway. Rainier got rid of their 'omegins need legal guardian's' law like Sansbury. He doesn't have any legal claim to Oliver or

Eriq, so when Oliver chooses you, he'll have to deal with it. Diego will either move here to Sansbury with them, or have a long-distance relationship with his nephew."

Brandt's expression smoothed out. "You sound positive they'll move here."

"They will." Demir knew it in his heart, even if Oliver hadn't said it out loud. Something in their second souls conversation told Demir that their family living together—in this house or another—was the only inevitable outcome to their current situation.

Period.



After a quick dinner of shrimp stir fry—Oliver dumped a bunch of hot sauce on his plate after it was served—the doorbell startled Demir into nearly dropping his ginger ale. He'd been so wrapped up in this meal with his two boyfriends that he'd forgotten about Eriq's impending arrival home.

Brandt got up to answer the door, and two figures stepped into the house. Eriq ran right to the table and hugged Oliver, while Tarek Bloom stood in the entry area with Brandt. Demir froze, uncertain how to play the fact that another constable was seeing Demir in Brandt's house.

Tarek stared at him, both eyebrows slightly arched in question.

"Oliver, you remember Tarek from dinner last night," Brandt said casually. "And Tarek, I'm sure you know Higgs's middle son, Demir."

"Of course, Demir and I have met many times passing the kids back and forth," Tarek replied, still a bit uncertain. "I didn't realize you and he were, uh, friends?"

"It's more for me," Oliver piped up with a grin. "I met Demir at the conference and we started talking and hit it off. I wanted a chance to visit with him while I was in the province, but I also didn't want to neglect the reason I'm here, which is to get to know Brandt again. Brandt was kind enough to invite Demir over this afternoon."

Absolutely nothing about the statements was a lie, and Demir let out a silent cheer at how convincing Oliver had been.

Tarek smiled. "I see. Glad to hear you're making friends in Sansbury, Mr. Oliver."

Oliver waved a hand in the air. “Please, don’t be so formal. You’re my mate’s friend, so you can drop the Mister part, please. Just Oliver.”

“Thank you.” To Brandt he said, “I’ll leave you to it. Eriq had pizza earlier with the other boys, so you don’t have to worry about supper.”

“Much appreciated,” Brandt replied. The alphas went onto the porch alone.

Eriq began describing his day to Oliver, while giving Demir curious looks. The boy seemed to buy the reason Demir was home, and so had Tarek. For now.

Brandt rubbed clammy palms against his slacks as he followed Tarek onto his small front porch at the younger alpha’s request. Oliver’s explanation for Demir’s presence had been spot-on, but Brandt was still uneasy.

Tarek gazed at his shoes a beat before looking Brandt dead in the eye. “Just a word of advice, but you might want to invest in some of that new scent-blocking incense, because I don’t buy Oliver’s story. I can smell it, Brandt.”

He’d spoken evenly, without censure or reprimand, but Brandt still blushed, stomach going wormy.

“Demir’s the guy you were seeing before Oliver showed up? Our boss’s son?”

Brandt groaned. “Please don’t give me the ‘he’s half your age’ bullshit.” He put his hands on his hips and stared up at the porch ceiling. “I love him. Fell in love with him practically from the start. What the hell is age when there’s genuine attraction and love?”

“Look, I don’t want to judge you. This is your life, okay? But you have two great guys on the hook right now, and someone is going to get hurt.”

“No, we won’t.” He glared at Tarek, furious at the implication that he’d ever hurt one of his men. “I love them both. I need them both. And they’re... building their own connection. They’re beautiful together, Tarek. What we’re doing isn’t wrong, it’s simply unconventional. And if it helps, Liam and Tarius both know, and they support Demir’s choice to date us both.”

Tarek’s face was an odd mix of confused and concerned. “I’m assuming, as you’ve never shown up to work with a broken nose, that Isa has no clue?”

“He knows Demir is dating someone but not that it’s me.”

“Or that it’s you *and* Oliver?”

“Precisely.” Brandt hooked a tiny bit of hope from the fact that Tarek was listening and asking questions, rather than outright condemning his unusual relationship. “We all know what we’re doing. We talk constantly. And maybe it’s too much for me to ask to keep Demir, when the goddess saw fit to give me Oliver back, but I can’t give him up. And he flat-out said he’d fight for our relationship. I choose them both, and I hope you can respect that. And keep our secret.”

Tarek groaned. “You’re asking me to lie to my family.”

“No, I’m not. You said yourself you don’t deal in gossip, so simply don’t mention it to anyone. It’ll all come out at some point, anyway, but we’re still building a foundation to stand on. If it cracks before it sets, it’ll never last.”

For a long moment, Tarek stared out at the quiet evening street. “I get the foundation analogy, I really do. I did the same with Braun. And I’ll be the first to admit I don’t understand what you’re doing. I can’t fathom needing anyone besides Braun in my life or my bed, but I’m not you. Your story is unique in how you lost Oliver, so it stands to reason your solution would be unique, as well. I’ll keep your secret, Brandt.”

“Thank you.” Relief whooshed through him like the first rush of oxygen after holding his breath too long. “I mean it, thank you.”

“You’re welcome. I might not understand or agree with what you’re doing, but the three of you are adults. However, Demir is still a very young adult finding his way in the world.”

“I know. I admire his drive to help others, and I will never stand in the way of him reaching his goals. His desire to save lives humbles me.”

“You’re a lifesaver, too, Brandt, just in a different way.”

“I appreciate that. I should get back inside.”

Tarek nodded. “Take care of them.”

“With my life,” Brandt vowed.

Oliver studied Brandt’s posture as he rejoined them in the kitchen. Eriq was still prattling on about his day with the Cross twins, and he tried to listen, but Brandt had been outside for quite a while with Tarek. Brandt wasn’t tense, though, or upset, so Oliver pushed it aside for now.

Since Demir had to get home soon, they each took their time kissing him soundly in the kitchen, while Eriq watched TV in the living room. Oliver had the opportunity to walk him to the door. “I’ll see you soon, angel. My second

soul,” he whispered.

Demir shivered. “Yes, soon.”

Watching Demir walk to his car and drive away hurt deep down where Oliver truly believed the second souls theory. It was the only explanation for the ache he couldn’t dislodge all evening, not even after Eriq went to sleep, and he could cuddle with Brandt on the couch. Brandt sat with his back to an armrest, one leg on the floor and the other bent on the cushion, so Oliver could sit between his spread legs. Back to chest. Butt to groin.

Perfect.

“I miss him,” Oliver said.

“So do I.” Brandt’s hand rubbed gentle circles on Oliver’s stomach. “I miss you both dearly when you aren’t close by.”

“Same. Demir and I did have a good talk while you showered, and I want to nurture the relationship I have with him. Separate from what I have with you and from what you have with him.”

“That’s perfectly reasonable. You have to find your own way to each other.”

“Yes. Brandt, I was wondering...” He picked at the seam of Brandt’s slacks. “If Eriq agrees, would you want to take him out for a few hours tomorrow? Just the two of you?”

“Yeah?” Brandt kissed his temple. “I’d love that. I take it you’ll invite Demir over here?”

“Yes? Yes. Unless he has classes, of course. I don’t know his schedule.”

“His schedule is pretty consistent this semester with all his classes packed into the morning and his afternoons free for labs, groups or studying.” Brandt chuckled. “Well, this semester it’s been studying and sex. It’s sometimes hard to find a lot of time during the week, but we do enjoy our weekends.”

“I bet you do.” He kept stroking Brandt’s inseam, mostly for something to do with his hands and bely his nerves. “Before, when I asked if you’d let me fuck you, did you mean it?”

Brandt stiffened briefly before relaxing again. “Yes, I did. Some of that was heat of the moment but I’d never lie to you. We’d have to talk about it a bit, since nothing’s been up my ass except my doctor’s finger in over eleven years.”

Oliver busted out laughing, then clamped a hand over his mouth so he didn’t wake Eriq. “That’s good to know, I suppose.”

“Nothing about this thing between the three of us is traditional,

sweetheart. Hell, we weren't all that traditional ourselves the first time you and I were together. So I don't want us relying on traditional gender roles with the alpha always fucking, the omega always bottoming. I want you and Demir to have a sex life of your own, if that's what you both choose. And if either of you truly do want to fuck me, I think I'd enjoy it immensely. Because it's you. Or it's Demir. And it's our relationship, no one else's."

"Were you always this wonderful and understanding?" Oliver let his head loll on Brandt's shoulder so his forehead pressed into Brandt's cheek.

"With you, I think I was. But as I said before, I was a horrid human being after you disappeared. I drove away anyone who still loved me, made no new friends for a decade. My parents died thinking I hated them. I don't ever want to be that man again." Brandt's right hand drew lazy patterns on Oliver's belly. "Have you had any other *déjà vu* moments today?"

"I'm not sure. I'm having a hard time telling what I'm imagining and what could be a memory. In some ways, being in this house is like being home. Deep down, I know this place. You. This couch. Those fake flowers in that blue pot. Even if I never get my actual memories back, I know this place. I know you, and I can trust in that. The only real challenge we'll have going forward is Eriq."

"He hasn't kicked me again since the first time."

Oliver snorted. "That's definitely a plus, but being polite is a far cry from accepting you as his sire. Which is the main reason I want you both to spend time alone together. His instincts will tell him who you are, but his heart and mind need to catch up. You know, at first he was angry at me about this trip and didn't want to come."

"How'd you convince him? He looked excited when I picked you up at the train station."

"I reminded him this was my home once, which made Sansbury part of him just like you are. I promised we'd explore our past together and we have been. It's been a wonderful three days so far. I'm so sad it's going to end."

"So am I."

Oliver could sense his mate hesitating over something. "Ask."

"It's just...when will you be back?"

"I don't know. I mean...my next heat is in about three-and-a-half weeks..."

Brandt's wandering hand stilled over his heart. "Would you want me to help with that?"

“Yes. The idea of so much time until then feels like torture right now. And then there’s the issue of who’d travel to who, and you’ve already taken vacation time this week.”

“Trust me, I have plenty saved up. And the department is great about giving alphas heat leave on short notice. Even if I have to travel to you, I’d make it work. Would you...?”

Oliver twisted his upper body so he could look into Brandt’s uncertain blue eyes. “Would I what?”

“Would you want Demir present for your heat? It’s an intense thing, and I’m not sure my alpha instincts would even allow it, but in theory...would you?”

“I don’t know.” He hadn’t given any conscious thought to adding a third man to his heat. Obviously, Demir couldn’t produce the knot that would ease Oliver’s delirium and heat symptoms, but if they were working toward making a threesome work...Demir deserved to be included—even if Demir said no, he’d rather not be there.

“Think on it, sweetheart, there’s time.” Brandt kissed the mark on his neck. “Plenty of time.”

Sometimes it seemed as if there was too much time. Too much time between this visit and the next. Too much time before the end of Eriq’s current school year, which was the earliest they could reasonably move from Rainier to Sansbury—no sense in interrupting the semester when it was halfway through. Too much time for so many things to go wrong and take this amazing life away from them all.

“Will you share the bed with me tonight, my alpha?” Oliver asked.

Brandt’s tender smile melted Oliver’s insides into a warm puddle of goo. “Of course, I will, my omega.” He kissed Oliver softly before resting their foreheads together. “Always.”

TWENTY

IF TAREK HAD BEEN A NAIL-BITER, his own nails would be worn down to nubs by now. For two and a half weeks, he'd been digging into the Ollie Lars kidnapping, and he kept running into one brick wall after another. Every lead was a dead end. Every thread he pulled snapped instead of untangling this whole mess.

He'd reached out to every province in the territory, asking for any personal or employment records for Arkin Delano and Kit Modesto for the last twenty years, determined to find out who these guys were. The Rainier file didn't have much on them, but the Rainier investigators also hadn't searched the entire territory. Only neighboring provinces, assuming the two alpha kidnapers were somewhat local. It was next-to-impossible to live legally within a province without some sort of paper trail, be it their legally issued credit card, a lease, a driver's license—but that didn't preclude men from the wilds.

Provincial lines were drawn somewhat irregularly around the territory, with wide swaths of unexplored and lawless lands. Mountains and forests and deserts and river basins, depending on where you were in the territory. Once outside province borders, their laws no longer applied, and some men chose to live in the wild, away from the provinces. One of their biggest challenges—and one they'd discussed at the conference—was their inability to seek out sex traffickers beyond the official province borders. Any number could be hiding out there, and it made Tarek sick.

There were also, according to Braun's secret contact, at least one (probably more) sanctuary towns out in the wild lands, where alphas, betas, and omegas lived side by side, no gender roles, and worked as equals. They

farmed their own food, raised their own meat, and lived peacefully as a community. Tarek had never seen it, but his mate had.

He often wondered how the eleven omegas Braun had spirited away to this town almost seven years ago had fared. Were they happy? Mated? In love with families of their own?

Braun occasionally received secret messages from his contact there, assuring him all was well, and Braun seemed to trust him.

Not that the sanctuary town was going to help Tarek unravel his current tangle.

He'd also had Walken's mug shot sent to every province in the hopes that someone could match him up to a mug book photo. His gut told him the connection between Walken and Modesto was worth exploring, he simply hadn't figured out what it was beyond that financial connection. The credit account Walken had been drawing from had paid Modesto half-a-million credits one week before the car wreck occurred. Modesto's account was brand-new at the time, nothing attached to it except the man's signature.

All evidence hinted at Walken paying Modesto to somehow orchestrate Oliver's disappearance—and probably the kidnapping of the other three victims—but how? So far, Sansbury had come up empty for anyone named Kit Modesto having ever worked here, which gave his team nowhere to look.

"Sir." Newly-minted Constable Javier Corinth knocked on the side of the conference room door before entering. Promoted less than six weeks ago after acing his exam, Tarek had added Corinth to his investigation because of his hard work and keen eye for detail. "I think I have something."

"Don't keep me in suspense," Tarek replied.

Corinth handed over a folder, a big smile on his youthful face. "You always tell me to listen to my hunches, sir, so I did. I went back down to our records room and requested they look into a few variations on spellings for both Delano and Modesto, and we got a hit."

Tarek looked at the name on the employment record. "Kit Modesatto. You're shitting me."

"No, sir, I just got the call about it and went straight down." Corinth opened the file and pointed to two sets of dates. "He worked as a receptionist in the OB ward at the hospital for three years under a Dr. Drew Sorenson, then another four weeks under Dr. Nero Troi after Sorenson retired."

Tarek jolted. Dr. Troi was the OB on record for Braun, Kell, and all their omega friends. "We need to get—"

“I’ve already requested any records for both Sorenson and Troi.”

“Good man.” Tarek studied the dates. “Hell. Modesatto worked for Troi at the time Ollie went missing. His employment literally ends the day after.”

“Sir, I don’t remember reading anything in our reports about the receptionist quitting the day after, and that feels like a relevant detail.”

His mind whirred through that report. “They interviewed the hospital staff, who all said Ollie never showed for his morning appointment. Damn it.” Tarek rifled through a stack of paperwork until he found the statement he needed. The signature was scrawled and difficult to read, but it could have been Kit Modesatto. “How the hell did we not see that?”

Corinth shook his head, expression caught between angry and frustrated. “No one would suspect their OB’s receptionist as a potential kidnapper. Not even an alpha receptionist in a position traditionally managed by betas. According to the financial report on Modesatto, his credit card was used regularly around Sansbury for another month after he stopped showing up at the hospital, before it stopped being used. There’s no other employment record for the man here in Sansbury, and no death certificate on file.”

“So he left.” Tarek followed the money trail in his mind. “He used the credit given to him by Walken, now under the last name Modesto, and he took Ollie to Rainier, possibly picking up other kidnapping victims on the drive. Except the van went off the road and killed Modesto, his partner, and three innocent victims.”

“Walken never got what he paid for,” Corinth said with a grimace.

“Get on the phone and call around other provinces with those variations on name spellings for me. You’ll probably get cussed at a bit for giving their clerks even more work, but we finally found a solid lead.”

“What are you going to do, sir?”

“Head over to the hospital and ask Dr. Troi about his receptionist.”



Tarek considered an extra, oral dose of his pheromone suppressor before he questioned Dr. Troi, so he didn’t let his anger show. Anger at the very tiny, very slight chance Troi was involved in sex trafficking in any way, shape or form. If he was, Tarek would break the man’s hands for ever touching his mate, or his mate’s friends. His alpha instincts were all up in this situation,

and they needed to calm the fuck down.

After all, Tarek was the one who'd first brought Dr. Troi to their attention. Back during Kell's murder trial, Kell had started edging into heat, but he was also holed up in a secret apartment with Ronin to protect him from his vicious, vindictive father-in-law. New to Sansbury at the time, Ronin had reached out to Tarek for suggestions, and Tarek had given the man Dr. Troi's name after consulting a few mated colleagues. The man was an exceptional OB, and Tarek didn't want to believe him capable of conspiring with traffickers.

He also hadn't wanted to believe any of their own constables guilty of the same, but that had happened.

Tarek used the elevator ride up as a chance to take some deep breaths and put on his official investigator face. A young beta man greeted him in the Family Medicine area. Tarek flashed his badge and asked for Dr. Troi.

"Dr. Troi is currently in delivery," the beta replied after checking his computer. "I can have a note passed to him that you're here, unless you'd rather not wait. He can call you when he has a break."

"I'll wait," Tarek said.

"All right."

Instead of having a seat, Tarek fielded a handful of phone calls—not only about this case, but a few other active ones that needed a Senior Constable's touch. It was still odd to think of himself with that rank sometimes, especially when he interacted with Brandt. The other alpha was only a few years older than Tarek, but he had years more experience as a constable and he'd been the youngest ever Senior Constable in Sansbury when he was promoted to that rank.

Brandt had intelligence, experience and drive, and now he was dating the boss's son. Tarek still couldn't get over that one. His nose had put it together the moment he walked into the Lars house last night to drop off Eriq. He expected the mingled scents of Brandt and Oliver, but then he'd scented Demir before spotting him in the kitchen with Oliver—because despite Brandt's damp hair that hinted at a recent shower, Brandt had smelled like Demir.

No simple handshake would put an alpha's scent on a beta like that.

How on earth has Demir kept this from Isa for so long?

Then again, Isa was incredibly busy adjusting to the role of Chief Constable, and if Liam was in on Demir's secret, he was likely running

interference. But the distractions would only last so long, especially with Tarek digging around in Oliver's kidnapping case.

He needed to speak with Oliver and Brandt about Modesatto anyway, and see if they'd noticed anything unusual about the guy's behavior.

Tarek waited less than an hour before Dr. Troi entered the Family Medicine lobby, all smiles, which suggested the recent birth had been a success. "Constable Bloom, always a pleasure," Dr. Troi said. "How can I help you?"

"Do you have five minutes to speak in private?"

"Of course. Is this about your mate, or is it official business?"

"Official, I'm afraid." Tarek followed him down a corridor to his private office.

"And how have you been feeling?" Dr. Troi asked as he shut the office door behind them. "Any new discomfort?"

"None at all, thank you."

After several long discussions and a few tests, Tarek and Braun had made the difficult decision not to try for any more children of their own. Braun's first birth with Rei had left him bedridden for a week, and Dr. Troi was certain a second would be as bad, or worse. Neither of them had wanted to risk leaving Rei without his omegin, so two years ago, Tarek had made the decision to put his name in for a new, experimental procedure that cut the vas deferens tubes of both testicles to keep sperm out of semen. The end result was Tarek and Braun could now enjoy heat without bothering with condoms, or worrying about pregnancy.

It had...not been fun to recover from. Even worse, Tarek had been required to attend four months of psychological counseling before the surgeon would approve him. He'd left those appointments irritated and grumbling about how yes, he knew his own mind, damn it, and no, he would never regret his decision. Braun was it for him. Period.

Dr. Troi, of course, had been part of the vasectomy decision, and Braun's first heat post-surgery had been on the painful side for Tarek when he ejaculated. But the discomfort had diminished over time, and now they enjoyed heat sex without any barriers between them. Tarek also liked knowing his experience had gone into a research paper so doctors could improve the procedure for future patients.

"So how can I help?" Dr. Troi indicated one of his office chairs as he settled behind his desk.

“I need to ask you about your office assistant when you first took over from Dr. Sorenson eleven years ago.”

“Hmm. That was quite some time ago and we worked together very briefly. I’m sorry, but I’ve forgotten his name.”

“Kit Modesatto.”

“Ah yes, Kit. He wasn’t here for long under me. I recall him back-talking a bit too much, letting his alpha side forget *he* worked for *me*, not the other way around. I wasn’t sad to see him go.”

“Was the back-talk about anything specific?”

Dr. Troi frowned at his desk blotter. “He made quite a few personal calls on hospital phones while not on breaks. Never rude to patients but he was often rude to staff, especially beta staff. I expect he was sullen because he wasn’t intelligent enough to enter med school himself.”

Tarek resisted the urge to snicker at Dr. Troi’s mocking tone. A rare thing from the even-tempered beta doctor. “What were the circumstances of his leaving?”

“I’d made more than one verbal reprimand about not only his behavior, but also his issues with scheduling. Making appointments at incorrect times, or on incorrect days. I warned him that if he didn’t improve, he’d be let go for gross incompetence. And then he simply stopped showing up to work, so the hospital officially fired him. To be honest, I hadn’t thought about the man for a moment since.”

“Did you ever find it suspicious that your assistant disappeared the day after Ollie Lars went missing?”

Dr. Troi blinked hard at him. “Honestly, no, I was too busy being upset for Ollie and annoyed at Kit. Are the two connected?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t say while my investigation is ongoing.”

“Of course.”

“Do you recall if Ollie’s checkup, the one he was on his way here for when he went missing, was mis-scheduled?”

Dr. Troi squinted as he thought. “I honestly can’t say. I remember the investigating constables checking the schedule, but I can’t recall what they found in it, I’m sorry. It was so long ago.”

Thankfully, Tarek had reread certain parts of Ollie’s file enough that he did remember. He remembered Brandt Lars saying over and over the appointment was for nine o’clock in the morning. Period. A photocopy of the schedule also said nine, but the more Tarek studied the page, the more it

looked like the nine had been written in over another erased mark. It had always bugged him, and now he knew why.

Could Modesatto have changed the appointment to another time and then back? But why?

To convince Ollie he was early and to wait? To go somewhere else with Modesatto?

But no one at the hospital remembered seeing Ollie that day—according to the case file, anyway. Eleven-year-old case files could be rummaged through and items removed. Like witness statements. Lars wouldn't know what was missing or not, since he'd have been banned from taking part in the investigation due to the victim being his mate.

Either way, Modesatto/Modesto was bad news.

"I admit," Dr. Troi continued, "I was stunned when I heard the news that Ollie had been found alive after all this time. I only met the Lars's once, but they were a lovely young couple. So excited for their first child."

"I imagine so. Dr. Troi, I'm not asking for private medical information, just a yes or no. Is there anything you remember about Ollie and Brandt's case that might warrant...outside interest? A reason why someone would target him for kidnapping across province borders? Other than finally overcoming six years of infertility with their pregnancy?"

"Nothing beyond their fertility struggles comes to mind. I'm sorry, I wish I could help more."

"You've been a good help, actually." Modesatto came across as both a loner and someone displeased with his lot in life—a good target for someone with a lot of money to throw around.

But who was Walken and how did he find Modesatto way out here?

According to his work record, Modesatto worked under Dr. Sorenson for over two years, and then Modesatto left a month after Sorenson? Hmm... "If I may," Tarek said, "were you aware of the exact reasons for Dr. Sorenson leaving the hospital?"

"Not the exact reasons, no. I was only a few years out of my final internship and working under another OB when they handed me a bunch of his patients' files and said I had my own practice. I was a bit stunned, but also eager to work with my own patients, especially those experiencing fertility problems, as that was my area of study in med school. I was only a week or so into my job here the first time I met the Lars's and verified they were pregnant. What little I might have heard about Sorenson's departure is

idle gossip, at best.”

“I understand not taking much stock in idle gossip in the workplace, believe me. But sometimes gossip contains a layer of truth.”

Dr. Troi tapped both thumbs on his desk, face pinched. “You’d have to go to the hospital board to verify any of this, and I doubt you’ll get an answer without a warrant, but there were rumors that Sorenson was asked to step down after complaints of professional misconduct with patients, and that’s really all I can repeat.”

“It’s more than enough, thank you.” It definitely gave Tarek a reason to investigate further. “I don’t suppose you were given Sorenson’s complete patient list?”

“No, only the files of those patients who were transferred to my care, but I’m sure with the proper warrant, you could obtain it from the hospital.”

“Thank you, Dr. Troi. You’ve been a bigger help than you know.” Sorenson and Modesatto were connected; Modesatto/Modesto were connected to Walken. Tarek’s new task was discovering the connection between Sorenson and Walken.

The first thing he needed was that patient list, as well as the real reason Sorenson left the hospital, and he put in the proper calls for those warrants on his way back to the parking garage. He might even get the warrants this afternoon, depending on the judge. In his car, Tarek started to call Corinth, only for the man to be eerily on his wavelength and call Tarek first.

“Anything new?” Tarek asked.

“Not on the names I sent out to other provinces,” Corinth replied. “I went ahead and looked deeper into Drew Sorenson. Sir, the man passed away about seven weeks after Ollie Lars disappeared. Records dug up the death certificate.”

Tarek resisted the urge to groan. He’d been hoping to find and interview the man. “What was cause of death?”

“Natural causes.”

“That’s it? Was there an autopsy?”

“Basic autopsy, nothing unusual.”

It was entirely possible Sorenson stepped down from the hospital because he’d been diagnosed with some fashion of incurable disease, and he’d wanted to spend his remaining time with family. Speaking of which... “Do the records show if Sorenson has any living family members in Sansbury?”

“No, sir, but his work record here only goes back about eight years before

his death. Before that it's blank."

"So he probably moved from another province."

"Very possible, yes."

"Follow the lead, Corinth. See if you can find out where Drew Sorenson came from. I've got some warrants pending and hopefully, I'll get them this afternoon."

"I take it your interview with Dr. Troi was fruitful?"

"It definitely gave me a few new avenues to explore. Good or bad remains to be seen. See what else you can scare up on Sorenson. I've got some trees of my own to shake."

"Yes, sir."

Tarek hung up, confident they were on the cusp of uncovering something important. Something that might blow this entire tangled mess apart. Something that could finally give Oliver and Brandt Lars an answer they'd been seeking for the last eleven years: why?

TWENTY-ONE

AFTER A FUN MORNING exploring the Sansbury Botanical Gardens with Jax and his two youngest, Oliver was eager for his afternoon break with Demir. Oliver liked Jax very much, despite their limited ability to speak with each other directly, and he was glad Brogan Tovey had come along with his little boy Miko, so Brogan could translate the signal language for Oliver, Eriq and Brandt.

It was a bit odd to constantly be around omegas more than a decade younger than him, but they treated Oliver as if they'd been friends for years, which Oliver very much appreciated. No one talked about their shared painful pasts, only their present days and how much they loved their children.

Eriq enjoyed his time with the younger kids, but by lunch, he was getting tired of being the oldest. He was excited to spend the afternoon with Brandt at a sports complex on the far south end of the province that had batting cages, an arcade, and all sorts of things to keep a young boy occupied for hours. Fortunately, according to Brandt, there would be plenty of other kids closer to his age to play with at the sports complex, as it was a favorite tourist destination for Sansbury visitors.

Brandt dropped Oliver off at home and then took Eriq off for their afternoon. Oliver shot a text to Demir that he was home alone and to come whenever he could.

Demir replied less than three minutes later that he was on his way.

Oliver paced the living room, both eager and nervous. This wasn't exactly a booty call, though, it was a few hours for them to build their own relationship as a pair. Yes, they'd been naked and sexual with each other but that didn't mean they had to have sex today. Oliver wouldn't mind, and that

was the thing that confused him. In order to truly let go around Brandt, he needed Demir around, but shouldn't Oliver be able to relax with his bondmate?

Stupid fucking sense of smell.

Demir knocked once before entering, bringing with him a draft of cool spring air. He wore a dark blue sweatshirt, which he hung by the door before giving Oliver a shy smile. A smile that sent Oliver's heart pattering away. "Hi."

"Hey." Oliver approached and pressed a kiss to Demir's soft lips. "Is this okay?"

"Sure." Demir kissed him back a bit more aggressively. "Boyfriends greet each other with a kiss, right?"

"Of course. Sorry, I'm a little nervous."

Demir chuckled. "Goddess, so am I. We never really said what today would be."

Oliver curled his hand around Demir's neck, fingertips caressing that rough skin. Demir's lips parted. "Today is whatever we want it to be. Brandt is okay with anything we do, whether it's just talking or sex. Today is about you and me, Demir, and no one else." He rubbed Demir's neck harder.

"You keep doing that and we're definitely having sex at some point." Demir stepped closer, his semi pressing into Oliver's hip. He had his revenge by doing the same thing to Oliver, deft fingertips massaging an old mark only recently reawakened by his bondmate's mouth.

Blood rushed to Oliver's groin, and he captured Demir's lips again. Opened to accept Demir's thrusting tongue. Hands yanked at his clothes. They were moving, groping, kissing, doing all the right things to get them naked on the couch. Demir pulled Oliver down on top of him, spreading his legs to give Oliver room to rut. Their cocks rubbed together between their bellies as they both thrust in time with their nearly-violent kisses.

Fingers scraped across Oliver's back, leaving the skin hot and aching. He tugged at Demir's hair, devoured his mouth, tweaked his nipples, everything to get the younger man off. When Oliver pinched the back of his neck, Demir howled and came, bucking up so violently he almost threw Oliver off. Oliver kissed him until he calmed, his own cock still rock-hard against Demir's hip.

Demir stared up at him with lusty, dazed eyes. "You can fuck me," he whispered.

Oliver's heart turned over, but he shook his head. "Not yet. Stay still,

angel.” He used some of Demir’s come to slick his own cock, then changed his angle so he thrust down, between Demir’s taut cheeks, toward his hole. Without penetrating him, Oliver set a new pace, his eyes never leaving Demir’s as he faux-fucked him.

Yes, one day he wanted to be inside Demir. Hell, it took all his concentration not to yank Demir’s hips up and push inside. Not like this, though. When Oliver topped for the first time, he wanted his bondmate to see it. To be part of such a huge new thing. He wanted to fuck Demir, come inside him, and then watch Brandt do the same right after. He wanted them both to claim their beta mate.

He’s ours. Our mate.

And once they’d claimed Demir, Oliver wanted them both to claim him the same way. Demir first and then Brandt, both men filling him. Marking him as theirs. Not today, maybe not before he left for Rainier, but one day. One day they’d—a finger slid into Oliver’s crease and brushed over his hole.

The gentle pressure pushed Oliver into his own orgasm, and he bit down on Demir’s shoulder to stifle his shout. Demir’s finger stayed there, a constant reminder of Oliver’s own dirty thoughts, long after Oliver’s body relaxed from his release. They lay together, sweaty and sated, until Oliver’s back prickled with a chill.

Demir stroked his hole once more before lightly swatting Oliver’s ass. “Shower?”

“Definitely.”

The afternoon had begun unexpectedly with sex, so after they took turns rinsing off in the master—Oliver didn’t know for sure, but he suspected the old home’s plumbing wouldn’t be happy if they used both the master and guest tubs at the same time—they dressed and cuddled up on the couch. Oliver had scrubbed his spunk off the cushion and flipped it over to hide the wet spot while Demir showered.

“I loved that,” Demir said, nearly whispering in the quiet house. “We have crazy chemistry, huh?”

“We do.” Oliver draped his arm across Demir’s shoulders and encouraged Demir to lean into him. He liked having the boy close. “Can I ask you a personal question?”

Demir snickered. “We’ve had sex more than once, dude, you can ask me anything you want.”

“Fair. Have you ever been attracted to an omega before?”

“Not that I’m aware of, but from fifteen onward I was so focused on school, I didn’t really pay attention to other students of any gender. And most of my omega classmates dropped out at sixteen anyway. They aren’t allowed at university yet, but that’s on Kell’s agenda this fall. An omega study hall. But honestly?”

“Always.”

Demir gazed at him with round, serious eyes. “I’ve never been attracted to anyone the way I’m attracted to you and Brandt. Even the guy who cheated? Theron? There was attraction there, sure, but it wasn’t as intense. It was like, eh, I can get off with this guy and have a fun time, but there wasn’t the same desperation I feel with you guys. Does that make sense?”

“It makes perfect sense. In some ways, the lack of desperation was what I felt with Oskar. We were friends for a long time before we decided to have a sexual relationship. Deep down, I sensed something was missing, but I was happy. We had a good life together, but now that I’m home, this is the life I was always waiting for.”

“With Brandt?”

“With you both.” Oliver nuzzled Demir’s nose with his own. “As strange as it sounds, I’m almost grateful for my kidnapping. If I’d stayed and lived my life with Brandt, chances are we’d have never found you. Little Blue.”

Demir blushed. “I like you saying that nickname. I hate that you were kidnapped and suffered so much from that accident, though. You didn’t deserve that kind of pain. Neither did Brandt.”

“No, but as I said yesterday, the goddess seems to have given us this chance to finally make it work. I won’t waste it.”

“Same. I hate that you’re leaving the day after tomorrow.”

“So do I.” Oliver didn’t want to make too many promises for the future. All they could really do was take each day at a time, plan, and make careful decisions. “But you have plenty of studying to keep you busy until the end of the semester.”

“University spring break is the week after next but I’d have no way of explaining to my dad that I want to spend it in Rainier, when he fully expects me to spend it in the library.”

Oliver bit back the instinct to say he’d take the train to Sansbury and spend the week with them, because he couldn’t promise that. Sure, Diego could watch Eriq and make sure he did his homework for a week, but financially, these trips were adding up. And if Oliver wanted to be sure he

could return for his heat in a few weeks...

“We’ll just have to spend a lot of time having phone sex,” Oliver teased instead.

“Mmm, phone sex.”

That sat in companionable silence for a while. Oliver soaked in Demir’s body heat, the way his chest rose and fell as he breathed, the wonderful simplicity of his presence. He adored these quiet moments the most, because it meant they were truly comfortable with each other.

“Brandt and I spoke a bit last night about him bottoming,” Oliver said.

Demir jolted upright, eyebrows arched high. “Yeah?”

“He’d be willing to let either of us top him.”

“Seriously? Wow. I mean, saying it in the heat of the moment is one thing.”

“That’s why I brought it up again, because I wanted to know for sure. I think I’d like to fuck Brandt, but I can’t honestly see myself doing it without you there, too.”

Demir’s expression softened. “Yeah? Why me?”

“It circles back to getting my brain to trust in the mating bond again. When I’m with Brandt, my body knows him, but my mind still rebels sometimes. Still doesn’t trust it. As I said yesterday about the blow job thing, I need to know someone else is with me. One day, I want to be comfortable enough with Brandt to have penetrative sex while we’re alone, but I’m not there yet. I need you. We need you.”

Something in Demir’s gaze shuttered.

“What?” Oliver asked.

“Sorry, I’m just...sometimes the mating bond thing makes me feel like a third wheel. Like a person you need around until you trust Brandt completely, and then I’ll be disposable.”

“Oh, Demir, no.” Oliver pulled him into a hug, fingers stroking his back and spine. “No, I’d never do that to you. You are far from disposable, angel. Far, far from it. And you’re not a stand-in or a buffer. You are necessary. Today, tomorrow and always.”

The slim body in his arms shuddered once before relaxing. He nuzzled Oliver’s cheek. “Thank you. I might need to hear that a few more times going forward.”

“I’ll say it whenever you need to hear it.” Oliver pulled back and cupped Demir’s cheeks. “I’m falling for you, Demir Higgs. This is our future. Maybe

it'll be a hard-won future, because we do have obstacles ahead of us, but we will win it."

"Obstacles like my dad?"

"Your dad, Diego, society at large. Few will understand what we are to each other, and some will condemn us."

Demir shook his head. "Not my family. My extended family, I mean. Liam's omega friends and their mates. They're the best bunch of people you'll ever meet, and they'll accept us."

"I believe you. I spent time with Jax and Brogan today, and they seem lovely."

"They're the best and so great with their kids. Have you met Jaysan yet? Jaysan, Brogan and Liam are all the best of friends. Jax, too, but he's a little closer with Braun and Kell." Demir's eyes twinkled. "Don't tell anyone, but Jaysan is pregnant again."

Oliver thought back to Jaysan's somewhat pale, pinched complexion when he'd briefly met the young omegin at the conference. He had chalked it up to the speeches, but apparently not. "Is it risky?"

"Sort of. His second baby was a bad delivery, but I guess he and Morris want a big family, so they tried again."

"I wish them all the luck." Grief pushed those words out rustier than necessary, and Oliver cleared his throat.

"Oh goddess, I didn't think." Demir squeezed his hands tight. "I shouldn't have brought it up."

Oliver blinked hard against hot tears, surprised by the sudden swell of emotion. "I thought I'd made peace with not being able to have any more children, but apparently not."

"You have Eriq, though, and he seems like a great kid."

"He's perfect. A little short-tempered but he's an alpha. He'll learn control as he gets older." Now that Eriq had an alpha back in his life—more importantly, his alpha sire—Eriq would have a good role model for learning proper alpha behavior going forward.

"I know he will, especially with you and Brandt for parents."

"Hey." He nudged Demir in the ribs. "You'll be around as a role model, too."

"I guess. It's just hard to picture a future with the three of us raising Eriq. I mean, I'm only ten years older than him."

"And your stepdad is how many years older than you?"

“Good point.”

Demir still seemed uncertain, though, and Oliver wasn't sure how to reassure him that they'd all have equal roles in this three-man relationship they were developing. Yes, Demir was much younger, but he was still a vital part of this. Them. Without all three of them, it simply wouldn't work.

“You thirsty?” Demir asked. “I could use a ginger ale.”

“You are very fond of that stuff.”

He laughed. “I like the carbonation, but I don't want the caffeine. Makes it too hard to concentrate on my schoolwork. You?”

“Water would be lovely.”

Oliver watched Demir putter around in their kitchen—yes, their kitchen—and adored the sight of the beta man in it. Demir belonged here as much as Oliver and Brandt and Eriq, and if Oliver had to say it until he was blue in the face, he would. Anything until Demir believed it, too.

Demir masked his discomfort by asking the drink question, uneasy with hiding how he felt but unsure how to voice it. No matter how many times Brandt and Oliver reassured him he belonged, that he was part of this, that he wasn't a third wheel on a two-wheel bike, a tiny part of him continued to doubt. Brandt and Oliver were bondmates, and they shared a biological child. All Demir shared with the two adults was sex.

And love. You love them both, admit it.

Nope, no admitting it.

He found an open bag of pretzels in the cupboard and was considering them, along with the drinks, when the doorbell rang. Oliver met his gaze from the couch and they both shrugged. Neither man was expecting anyone. Before Demir could think it through, Oliver stood and answered the summons.

“Constable Bloom,” Oliver said. “How can I help you?”

Demir went cold. Explaining his presence in the home yesterday had been easy enough, but two days in a row? Neither of them had bothered lighting the newly-bought incense in the living room after their fevered coupling, and with an alpha's nose?

Shit.

Tarek's voice was muffled behind the door, but Oliver nodded and invited the man inside. Before Demir could make the decision to hide behind

the kitchen table, Tarek spotted him and smiled. “I was hoping to catch you and Brandt both,” he said to Oliver.

“Brandt is out for the afternoon with Eriq,” Oliver replied. “Please, can I make you coffee? Tea?”

“No, thank you, this is an official visit.”

“Oh?” Oliver led Tarek into the kitchen and pulled out a chair. “It’s no trouble. Demir and I were just about to have a quick snack.”

“It really is all right. I’m good.” Tarek took the offered chair, and Oliver sat across from him.

Confused and tense, Demir handed Oliver his glass of water but didn’t sit.

“Full disclosure,” Tarek continued, “because you both look tense. I know. Brandt confirmed your...arrangement last night after I scented it.

Demir nearly dropped his can of soda. “You scented it?”

Tarek shrugged, clearly at ease about the whole thing. “Alpha nose. And if I hadn’t, I definitely would have noticed something between you two today. But it’s your secret, just be careful, okay?”

For his part, Oliver looked annoyed—probably more at Brandt for not mentioning Tarek knew than at anything else. “You said this is an official visit, Constable?”

“Yes, I had a few questions about both your former OB here in Sansbury and his assistant, but I suppose you won’t be able to remember anything without Brandt present.”

“I wish I could help, I really do. I couldn’t even tell you my former OB’s name, much less anything about his history.”

“Why his assistant?” Demir asked, his own curiosity pushing the question out without thought.

Tarek eyeballed him. “I’m working various angles related to Oliver’s kidnapping eleven years ago, and the assistant is simply a person of interest.”

“He’s a person of interest for a good reason, though.”

“Demir, I know you mean well—”

“No, don’t do that,” Oliver said with a snap in his voice. “Please, ask your questions as if I don’t have a memory impairment. I don’t have any secrets from Demir, and I don’t mind him knowing what we’re talking about.”

Tarek went silent a moment. Demir moved to sit next to Oliver at the table, and Oliver immediately squeezed his free hand.

“Within the same week’s timeframe that Oliver went missing,” Tarek

said, “a man named Kit Modesatto received a large payment from a man later identified only as Walken. Modesatto also abandoned his job as a personal assistant at the hospital the day after Oliver went missing. My theory is he was paid to kidnap and deliver Oliver to this Walken character in Rainier Province, but I cannot confirm that because Modesatto is dead and Walken refuses to cooperate.”

Oliver’s jaw was practically on the floor. “You found my kidnapper?”

“Possibly, yes. Again, it’s a working theory. I’d hoped Brandt could shed some insight into the character of Kit Modesatto, but he’s obviously not here.”

“But why Oliver specifically?” Demir asked. His inquisitive side took over, digging through the details of Oliver’s past that he’d been told. “Was Modesatto an enemy of Brandt’s? Someone who’d want to punish him by taking Oliver?”

“Unlikely, since Modesatto was potentially paid to abduct and deliver Oliver. It was a job, not personal.”

“Paid by someone named Walken. Could *he* have a grudge against Brandt?”

“Again, I don’t know. Walken has no records in any province we’ve checked, no fingerprints, only a mug shot and DNA. And he’s not cooperating with the Rainier constable who’s been questioning him about this.”

“Were any other patients like Oliver targeted or taken?”

“That’s still under investigation.”

Demir grunted. Okay, there was only so much Tarek could tell them about an active investigation, but this was about Oliver, damn it! This was important.

“What other motivation is there, though?” Oliver asked. “If it wasn’t personal, why me? I’m no one special. Fuck, it took us what? Six years to even get pregnant? Brandt was still a patrolman back then. It doesn’t make any sense.”

An outside-the-box thought hit Demir. “Constable Bloom, you said you had questions about Oliver’s OB, as well. Could Oliver and Brandt’s inability to conceive have been a motivation to kidnap Oliver?”

“But I was pregnant when I was taken,” Oliver said.

“Your original OB might not have known that,” Tarek replied with a funny look on his face. “Dr. Sorenson left the hospital under newly-

suspicious circumstances only a few weeks before you discovered you were pregnant. If Sorenson was working with the kidnapers, he had no reason to suspect you were finally pregnant.”

Demir pinned him with a firm stare, a horrible theory coming front and center in his scientific mind. “If Sorenson was working with the kidnapers, he knew all of Oliver’s issues with fertility. But why would anyone want an infertile omega?” His stomach rolled with toxic sludge. “Oh goddess, his heats.”

“What?” Oliver asked.

Tarek stared at Demir as if he’d learned to spin credits out of straw. “Modesatto was connected to a sex trafficking ring in Rainier. Selling an omega’s heats to the highest bidder, knowing the alpha doesn’t have to wear a condom because of the tiny chance of impregnation, is a big motivator for kidnapping. Damn, kid, are you sure you want to go into medicine and not the constabulary?”

Demir blushed. “Less chance of getting shot in med school. But I helped?”

“Yeah, you did. You definitely helped me pick the most solid motive out of a variety of other possibilities.”

“But what about the OB?” Oliver asked. “Sorenson? What did he get out of this?”

Tarek shook his head. “Not much now. He died of natural causes seven weeks after you disappeared. His actual medical records are part of another search warrant we’re executing right now. I want to know if he was sick before Oliver disappeared, or if he really did keel over from a heart attack by chance. Hopefully, those files will be waiting for me when I return to division.”

“Do you want me to have Brandt call you, Constable? I’d hate to interrupt his afternoon with his son, but this is important.”

“No, I’ll text him to call when he’s free.” Tarek’s expression shifted from crafty investigator to friendly smile. “How are they getting along, if I may ask? Brandt and his son?”

“So far, so good. We had a lovely morning with some of Braun and Kell’s omega friends. Eriq seems to like it here, but convincing him to move will be a challenge.” Oliver’s eyebrows shot up as he realized what he’d said.

Demir bit back a triumphant grin. They were moving. At some point, Oliver was bringing his family east to Sansbury, to be with Demir and

Brandt.

Exactly where they belong.

“Eriq is a wonderful young man,” Tarek said. “He’s terrific with the younger kids.”

“Thank you. I wish I could have given him a few siblings, but it looks like he’ll have plenty of friends here to keep him company.”

“So you’re planning on moving to Sansbury?”

The tips of Oliver’s ears went red. “Unofficially, yes. I can’t say as I’ve remembered anything exactly, but I’ve had these...moments of clarity. I know this place. It’s home.”

“I’m glad for everyone that this is working out. Hopefully, we’ll be able to finally get answers about your kidnapping. And we can put it to rest once and for all.”

“I would love that.”

“Well, I’ll leave you both to your afternoon. Please, have Brandt call me at his earliest convenience.”

“I will, thank you.”

Demir escorted Tarek to the front door, still a bit weirded out that the older alpha knew he was dating two men, but Tarek seemed completely cool with it—until Demir opened the door, and Tarek leaned down to whisper, “How are you doing with all this?”

“I’m fine.” He tried on what he hoped was a reassuring smile. “Honestly, Constable Bloom, I’m not being taken advantage of. I know exactly who I’m dating, and why, and how I feel about them.”

“I believe you. Good luck.”

“Thanks.”

They didn’t need luck, but he understood the sentiment.

Oliver was still in the kitchen, absently playing with the water ring left on the table by his glass, gaze distant and moody. Demir draped himself around Oliver’s shoulders to kiss his cheek. “You doing okay with all this?”

“I don’t know.” Oliver let out a long, deep breath. “To hear I was possibly purchased so I could be sold during my heats to rich, horny alphas is disturbing, to say the least.”

“But you weren’t. Sold, at least.”

“No, the van wrecked before that happened. I can’t help thinking about the three other innocent lives who were lost that night. The horrible futures waiting for them at our eventual destination. But it doesn’t make sense.”

“Which part?”

“If Modesatto really helped broker my kidnapping and sale, and he was still a receptionist when I found out I was pregnant, why still kidnap me? I’d be useless to the buyer.”

Demir turned that one over a moment. “Maybe the plan was in motion before you got pregnant? It was still pretty early on, right? If Modesatto was committed to the crime and the payout, maybe he was scared to pull out of the agreement. Maybe he figured he could kidnap you, hand you over, get his payday, and then disappear.”

“Could be.” Oliver rested his head against Demir’s cheek. “It makes a horrible kind of sense, and Tarek is right. You’d make one hell of an investigator.”

Peyton Tovey’s shy, grinning face flashed into his mind. “Medicine is my calling, but thank you. I like puzzling things out and solving problems. It’s why I want to get into research and not just internal medicine.”

“To save your friend’s son.”

“Yeah.” Demir might have made a good constable and followed in his dad’s footsteps, but four-plus years ago, he’d committed to becoming a doctor and curing Donal Syndrome. Nothing would stop him from reaching that goal. “Come on, no more sad thoughts. Let’s enjoy the rest of our afternoon together, yeah?”

“We can absolutely do that.”

And enjoy it they did, with a lot of cuddling, laughing, teasing, and talking on the red couch they both loved so much. In the little house they both loved so much. Creating their own unique bond as part of a larger relationship they both wanted to nurture and see thrive.

For as long as humanly possible.

Please.

TWENTY-TWO

BRANDT WASN'T happy that Tarek needed to speak with him while he was spending time with his son, but it was about Oliver's kidnapping and important to them all. After an exhausting, exciting afternoon at the sports complex, Brandt needed a nap and a beer, and he pondered dropping Eriq off at home before heading over to division. Except when Brandt mentioned it to Eriq, Eriq got excited at the chance to see where Brandt worked.

"Dad used to take me sometimes," Eriq said. "My other dad. Oskar." He'd been self-correcting all day, and it was as sweet as it was heartbreaking. The boy had so much to wrap his young mind around.

"All right, then," Brandt replied as they sought out his car in the complex's parking garage. "How about we stop for ice cream on the way?"

"Yeah!"

Brandt had already spoiled Eriq with nachos, popcorn, and a giant grape soda, but what was a little more sugar when his kid was leaving the day after tomorrow? They swung by an ice cream parlor where you made your own cone or sundae and then paid by the ounce. Brandt expected him to go a little nuts with toppings, but Eriq carefully made a waffle cone with vanilla/orange sherbet twist and added whipped cream. Brandt got a bottled water.

Eriq balanced eating his ice cream with trying to see everything as Brandt led him through division headquarters to the conference room where Tarek had laid out his investigation. Corinth was there, puzzling over some files, and he said Tarek would be back in a few minutes.

"This must be your son," Corinth said. "You look alike."

Brandt beamed. "This is Eriq Strand. Eriq, Constable Javier Corinth."

"Hello," Eriq said politely. "Do you work for my sire?"

“Technically, I do, as he’s a senior constable,” Corinth replied. “But I usually work day shift, and your sire leads the night shift, so we don’t see each other very often.”

“Oh. Is this a case you’re solving?”

“Yes, it is. A very important case, as a matter of fact.” He quirked an eyebrow at Brandt; Brandt inclined his head in a brief nod.

Tarek returned just as Corinth had Eriq distracted, so they moved to another corner of the conference room to talk. “Oliver said you had questions about his old OB,” Brandt said.

“I do, and I have a new theory on Oliver’s kidnapping, thanks to Demir’s sharp critical-thinking skills.” Tarek pulled out a familiar notepad and pencil. “Tell me your impressions of Dr. Drew Sorenson.”

Brandt crossed his arms. “He was blunt but professional. Never acted like our inability to get pregnant was some kind of moral failing. Didn’t offer much in the way of affordable options for improving fertility. I mean...he was an OB. Didn’t ever think much of him at all, to be honest. Why the interest?”

“What about the assistant Kit?”

“Same thing. Didn’t think much of him at all. Did Sorenson and his assistant have something to do with Oliver being taken?”

“That’s my working theory, and now I’m trying to prove it. My main problem is both men are dead, so I can’t question them. I’ve also got some calls out about certain arrests in both Rainier and their neighbors to the east and south. Rainier might not have been Oliver’s final destination.”

“But why would an OB and his assistant flag Oliver as a target? I don’t—fuck.” The pieces fell into place so easily it made Brandt’s gut twist. “The buyer wanted an infertile omega.” An infertile omega who could be auctioned to any rich alpha and fucked through a heat, without condoms or risk of children.

Tarek’s grim expression confirmed the guess. “Kit, the assistant, was one of the alphas who died in the car wreck eleven years ago. He was definitely part of the abduction.”

An old memory of that fateful morning when Kit led them to Dr. Troi’s office roared into the present and left Brandt shaking. “I don’t understand. Kit knew Oliver was pregnant.”

“My theory is the abduction and payment was already in place, so it was too late for Kit to back out of the agreement. He received quite a lot of credit

for his part in it.”

More rage blasted through Brandt over how orchestrated the entire abduction had been. “The fucker worked for an OB, so he’d have access to patient records. Son of a fucker.”

“Brandt.” Tarek practically hissed the word. “Get a lid on your temper. You’re making Corinth and your son fidget.”

Brandt closed his eyes and breathed as he counted silently to ten. It didn’t help a lot with his anger, but he could think more rationally. “So that’s it? We have a theory but no real proof?”

“Like I said, I have a few calls out. If I get the news I’m hoping for, it’ll be less a theory and more a definitive narrative of what happened to Oliver and why.”

“How much of this does Oliver know?”

“Most of it. He was there when Demir put the infertility angle together.”

“Demir is going to be an amazing doctor one day. He could be anything he set his mind to.”

Tarek nodded. “I agree. Please, keep this conversation between us. As an interested party, you probably know a little too much, but you’re a colleague and this is your bondmate’s life. I’ll get the answers you need somehow or another, Brandt. I promise.”

“Thank you.” Brandt turned, unsurprised to see Eriq and Corinth sitting quietly at the table looking at a file. “You ready to go, chief?”

“Sure,” Eriq replied. “Thanks for showing me that stuff, Constable.”

“You’re welcome.” Corinth stuck his hand out for a firm shake. “You take care of your sire, you hear me?”

“I will.”

The rest of Brandt’s excess anger died off when Eriq approached and took his hand. Held it the entire tour through division. They made a quick stop upstairs so Brandt could show off his office, before heading to the car.

“You got really mad,” Eriq said once they were on the road.

“Yes, I did, and I’m sorry if I upset you.”

“Was it about Daddy?”

“It was. We almost know who took him and you away from me and why, but Constable Bloom still needs a few more facts before we can be sure.”

“Taking us was a mean thing to do.”

“Yes, it was a very mean thing, and we’ll punish everyone we can.”

“Good. I mean...I love Rainier Province, and I love Uncle Diego, and I

loved Da—Oskar, too, but being here makes Daddy really, really happy. You make him happy.”

“That’s because we’re bondmates. We were always meant to be happy together as a family, and now we have that chance.” Brandt glanced at the boy, whose open expression was full of acceptance and peace. Not the anger from when they’d first met, or the hesitation from earlier in the week. Eriq had slipped into his life here as easily as Oliver, but that spell would break soon. Brandt had no illusion convincing Eriq to move here and leave his friends behind would be easy. And Eriq still didn’t know about Demir.

But the fact that Eriq liked it here would help in the long run.



Demir left before Brandt and Eriq got home. Oliver showed Brandt how much he’d enjoyed his afternoon with a long kiss hello and a beaming smile. Oliver didn’t bring up the investigation before or after dinner, and neither did Brandt. Eriq was so excited by the sports complex and seeing division that he begged to call Diego.

Oliver let him use his mobile, so he didn’t put a long-distance charge on Brandt’s home phone. Eriq took the phone into his room, babbling away as soon as Diego picked up.

“It sounds like you guys had a great day,” Oliver said.

“I loved every second of it.” Brandt cinched his arms around Oliver’s waist and pulled Oliver against his chest. “He’s getting more comfortable with me every hour. He even talked a bit about liking it here.”

“That’s good. I want Sansbury to be our home, Brandt. Not next week or next month, but maybe this summer?”

“Yeah?”

He studied Brandt’s glimmering, hope-filled eyes, and everything in Oliver’s world shifted. Any lingering feeling of grief, confusion or loss disappeared.

He and his son were coming home to Sansbury. In a few more months, they’d be here with Brandt to stay.

Oliver sealed the promise with a kiss. A lingering kiss that hopefully carried the faintest hint of Demir, and it left Oliver hard and aching for his mate.

“Daddy!” Eriq bounced into the living room. “Uncle Diego wants to talk to you.”

“Okay, one sec,” Oliver said with a laugh. “Um.”

Brandt angled away with an amused smirk. “I’ll give you privacy out here, okay?”

Oliver tossed him a grateful smile and shifted so he could sit on the nearest armchair without showing off his problem. Eriq brought him the phone. Brandt suggested they talk a walk and enjoy the sunset, for which Oliver was insanely grateful. Once they’d left, Oliver put the phone to his ear. “Hey, Diego.”

“How are things out there?” Diego asked with an odd sharpness to his voice.

“Things are perfect, actually. It’s hard to explain, but I’m home, Diego.”

Diego grunted. “You’ve been there four days.”

“I lived here for twenty-six years. Two-thirds of my life. Brandt is my bondmate, and I belong here. We both do.”

“So what are you going to do? Not come home?”

“Of course not, we’re coming back.” Oliver glared at the coffee table, unsure why Diego was being so rude. What had Diego expected to happen during this trip? Oliver would decide Brandt was an alphahole and simply share long-distance custody?

Betas could be so obtuse about the mating bond sometimes.

“Then what?” Diego asked. “You’re still leaving the day after tomorrow, right?”

“I don’t want to, but yes. Eriq has school. I don’t want to move him across the territory in the middle of the semester, that would be cruel. But I know what I want, Diego, and I want my mate.” *And Demir.*

“Eriq’s already made friends and had play dates with the kids of Brandt’s colleagues,” Oliver continued, desperate for his brother-in-law to understand. Except...Diego wasn’t actually his brother-in-law, was he? Oliver had been mated when he and Oskar signed their mating documents, so it hadn’t been a legal mating. What did paperwork matter, though? Diego had always been a great friend.

Until now.

“And whose idea was the play date thing?” Diego asked.

“I don’t...Brandt’s, I think, but what does it matter? He wants Eriq to have friends here so he isn’t isolated.”

“If you embrace what you think is yours in Sansbury, you could lose everything you’ve built here. Do you want that?”

Oliver startled, hand squeezing the mobile tighter. “What do you mean? I’m moving to another province, not to another planet where phones don’t exist.”

“Your allowance, Oliver. The credit I invested for you when we sold Oskar’s house. If you embrace being Oliver Lars, it makes your mating to my brother null and void. You lose that money.”

Diego was really worried about finances right now? Oliver had been an emotionally-ruined mess when Oskar was killed and, at the time, he’d been grateful for Diego’s support. For his thoughtfulness in keeping Oliver and Eriq close by. Arranging for them to sell the house and find a cheaper condo for their little family unit. Investing on Oliver’s behalf...controlling Oliver’s life in a very subtle way.

“Oliver?”

He hissed out an angry breath. “We can talk about money later, Diego. Any move is months away yet. And it doesn’t mean I love you or Oskar any less, I promise. You’re family no matter what’s on paper.”

“Obviously.” The word dripped with sarcasm.

“What the hell does that mean?”

“Family should have a say in big decisions, like say, a cross-territory move.”

That controlling hand squeezed Oliver’s throat tighter. “You can have an opinion on the move, and I already sense what it is, but a say? No. This is about me and my son and my bondmate. We three have a say in moving. End of story.”

Diego made an unfamiliar growling sound that worried Oliver, and he nearly cancelled the trip back to Rainier altogether. No. Diego deserved an in-person conversation where he could make all his opinions known. Oliver had plans to make. Probably documents to sign voiding his mating to Oskar Strand. He had a life to untangle there before he could return to Sansbury with an open heart and mind.

“I don’t want to fight,” Oliver said. “Are you still picking us up at the station?”

Diego sighed. “Yes, of course I am. We don’t agree, but we’re still family, and I love you both.”

“Thank you.”

“Give Eriq a kiss for me, okay? I’ll see you in a few days.”

“Yeah.”

Oliver snapped his phone shut and nearly threw it across the living room out of frustration. He hated thinking the worst of Diego, who’d only ever loved him, but the man was being unreasonable. It wasn’t as if Oliver was demanding Diego give up his job and move, too. He’d welcome Diego if he did, of course, and the Sansbury Constabulary would be lucky to have Diego as a patrolman. Eriq would love it if his uncle stayed close, and so would Oliver. But Diego staying or leaving had no bearing on Oliver’s decision.

My life, my decision.

The decision to leave his bondmate and home at all had been taken from Oliver eleven years ago by men who intended him harm. Any decision on returning was taken when he lost his memory. No one was taking this decision away from him. Not for any reason.

He was still stewing when Brandt and Eriq returned from their sunset walk. Brandt took one look at him and sent Eriq for his evening bath.

“What’s wrong?” Brandt perched on the arm of Oliver’s chair. “You look pissed.”

“Diego.” Oliver described their conversation in great detail, thankful that Brandt seemed as incredulous as Oliver felt. “I get that Diego will miss us when we move, but he’s being a jerk about the whole thing. He can’t even be happy that I’m happy here. That I have my old life back. Maybe I don’t remember that old life, but it’s still mine, and I want it.”

“And you have every right to take it.” Brandt shifted them around so he was sitting in the chair with Oliver on his lap. Oliver rested his head on Brandt’s shoulder, grateful for the unconditional support. “I’m so sorry he’s giving you a hard time.”

“It’s just not like him. This weird possessive thing is new.”

“Are you sure?” Brandt tucked a curl of hair behind Oliver’s ear. “I’ve always gotten a possessive vibe from him that has nothing to do with how we met at the mixer. I can’t begrudge him wanting to keep his remaining family close, but I sense he’s against this period. Even though it clearly makes you happy.”

“Hmm.” Oliver closed his eyes and tried to see Diego the way Brandt did, but this new pattern of behavior kept clashing with the sweet, attentive man he knew. The man who’d taken such good care of them since Oskar died. “There have just been so many changes in only a few short weeks, that’s all.

It'll work out.”

It has to.



Demir did not expect to get out of his morning classes and find a text from Brandt asking him to come over to the house. They hadn't talked about seeing Demir today, and he texted back an affirmative, unable to hide a huge grin. With Oliver and Eriq leaving early tomorrow morning, Demir had expected yesterday to be his only chance to see Oliver, and now he'd at least get lunch out of it.

He relationships with both men strengthened with each day that passed, but Demir couldn't shake a distant sense of approaching doom. As if his role in this trio was temporary, no matter how many times Brandt or Oliver assured him it wasn't. That they loved him, wanted him, needed him in their lives. Logically, it made no sense that a bonded pair would need a third person in their relationship to thrive as a couple.

We're different. This is right for us. Period.

It had to be right. Demir didn't know if he'd survive losing them. Not when each man had stolen such huge chunks of his heart.

Oliver greeted him at the door with a solid kiss. “Hey, gorgeous.”

“Hi.” Demir got a similar greeting from Brandt. “Missed you, Big Red.”

“Same, Little Blue.” Brandt nipped at his jaw. “Eriq is at one final play date with the Cross twins. We have until five.”

He squashed a flash of annoyance at not being able to spend real time with Eriq—until he realized both of his boyfriends were hard and a little red-cheeked. Annoyance died under a blast of arousal. Naked sexy times with Oliver two days in a row? Yes, please.

“Are we having sex?” Demir asked. “Please tell me we're all having sex.”

“We're having sex,” Oliver replied with a chuff of laughter. “You're obviously on board.”

“Hell yes.” Demir rubbed his own growing erection through his jeans, beyond eager to get his hands or mouth on Oliver again. And Brandt, whose own mouth and cock knew how to make Demir's body soar. “So, um, is there a script here? Limits on who does what?”

“Well, I have been thinking about something I want before I leave

tomorrow.” Oliver held Demir’s gaze a beat before looking at Brandt. “I want you inside me, alpha.”

Brandt’s pale eyes went so wide Demir worried they’d actually pop out. “You do?”

Dude, they haven’t already talked this out?

Knowing Oliver had waited for Demir to bring this up filled Demir with all kinds of wonderful, gooey feelings.

“I do.” Oliver clasped Brandt’s hand in his and brought it up to kiss the knuckles. “I’ve thought about nothing else since we talked last night. This is the life I choose. Here with you and Demir, and maybe it won’t happen for a few months, but I want you both. I don’t remember what it’s like to have you inside me, my alpha, and I need to know. I want to experience it with my men.”

Oliver had made the final decision to move to Sansbury? Demir gave a silent, internal cheer. Their poly relationship was truly going to happen.

Oliver reached for Demir with his free hand, and Demir completed their circle by holding Brandt’s hand, too. His entire body buzzed from the contact with his men. “You’ve marked my neck, bondmate, but I need you to claim the rest of my body today. Please.”

Brandt’s tear-filled eyes never moved from Oliver’s face, and if Brandt started crying Demir was going to lose it too. He swallowed hard over and over, before clearing his throat. “Oh sweetheart,” Brandt rasped. “It will be my honor.”

With his heart in his eyes and a smile on his face, Oliver turned and led them both into the bedroom.

TWENTY-THREE

OLIVER'S INSIDES had quivered with nerves when he asked for what he wanted today, and those nerves dissolved the moment their trio entered the bedroom. He was safe here with his boyfriend and mate. Everything they did together would be glorious and right.

"Are you sure you want me here for this?" Demir asked, so quiet Oliver almost missed the question.

"It's not about wanting, love, it's about need." Oliver drew Demir into his arms and kissed him, a gentle reminder of how much Oliver cared for him. "I need you both."

Demir pressed their foreheads together. Oliver closed his eyes and breathed in the younger man, imagining his scent as described by Brandt. Their hearts beat together for several long moments. Brandt's large hand cupped the back of Oliver's neck, and Demir's soft moan verified Brandt was holding him the same way. Over their shared marks put there by their shared alpha.

"I love you," Oliver whispered. "Both of you."

"Same." Demir's reply gusted warmly across his lips.

Brandt massaged their necks with practiced fingers, the touch sending more blood rushing to Oliver's dick. "I love you both, as well. Always."

With a cry, Demir kissed Oliver hard, tongue thrusting into his mouth, taking everything Oliver willingly gave. They kissed their way to the bed, erections rubbing, hands wandering. Plucking at clothes, scraping bare skin, wrestling until they were both naked in each other's arms. Hard, aching, and so turned on Oliver's entire body trembled, he reached blindly for Brandt.

Brandt came to them, his broad, hairy body wonderfully naked, and

Oliver's world became a tangle of hands, lips, tongues, cocks, and asses. He touched, sucked, and licked, and he was touched, sucked, and licked in turn. Nipples tweaked, lips nipped, creases teased. Oliver reveled in the simple debauchery of what they were doing, existing in sensation, love and trust for what seemed like hours.

It was Demir who finally put Oliver on his hands and knees, pulled his cheeks apart, and licked his hole. Brandt captured Oliver's cries of pleasure with his mouth as Demir did this new thing between them and prepared Oliver for their alpha's cock. It felt strange and right, and when Demir wriggled his tongue inside, Oliver shot over the bed cover without a single hand on his cock.

Demir didn't relent, milking his first release, keeping him hard and desperate. Brandt scooped the come off the blanket with his fingers and ate it, before sharing more with each of them. Oliver pulled at Brandt's waist until he knelt in front of Oliver, leaking cock presented for worship, and Oliver worshiped him. Worshiped Brandt's cock, taint, even slid a finger back to rub at Brandt's hole.

Brandt held his face with a gentle touch and took over, thrusting into Oliver's willing mouth. Carefully nudging deeper, deeper, until his cockhead pressed into Oliver's throat. Oliver relaxed, taking everything he could, giving his alpha his throat to fuck.

This is right. This is everything.

A finger slid into his ass, and Oliver swallowed around Brandt's cock. "Oh fuck," Brandt said. "Oh, sweetheart, I've missed your throat. You take me so beautifully."

Oliver made an agreeable sound and swallowed again just to hear Brandt moan. He fucked a bit faster, somehow matching the speed with which Demir fucked his hole with a single finger, no idea how Demir had gotten hold of the slick. Then two fingers breached him, and Oliver cried out around his mouthful of cock. He'd missed the exquisite stretch of being penetrated. Filled. Well and truly fucked. Oskar had been an attentive mate, but boring in bed.

This was everything Oliver had forgotten he loved.

Three fingers were too much and not enough, and Oliver pulled off Brandt. "Need you in me, alpha," he panted. "Please."

Brandt growled so possessively, Oliver nearly came a second time. "Yes, my love. As much as I adore coming down your throat, I can't wait to fill

your ass again. To make you mine. Ours.”

Demir gave Oliver’s gland a firm nudge with his fingers before pulling out. He helped Oliver roll onto his back. Brandt crawled between Oliver’s spread legs, already slicking his cock with one hand, his expression so naked Oliver wanted to sob. Demir settled next to Oliver’s shoulder and leaned down to kiss him. His belly rippled with nerves and desire, and Oliver tugged Brandt down to share the kiss. Three mouths weren’t easy to coordinate, but he needed this.

“Take me, my mate,” Oliver whispered.

With another possessive growl, Brandt yanked Oliver’s legs up and open, resting his ankles on Brandt’s shoulders. Brandt’s solid body trembled as he nudged his slick cock against Oliver’s entrance, raw emotion playing out in every muscle and nerve as he reclaimed his mate. Oliver held his gaze, unable to look away, as something both new and familiar happened: his alpha breached his body and slid inside with little resistance, as if being welcomed home.

“Oh yes, oh,” Oliver said. “More. More, alpha, more.”

Brandt bent, dug his teeth into Oliver’s nipple, and gave him more.

Sinking balls-deep into his bondmate for the first time in eleven years was a bit of a mind-fuck for Brandt Lars. His Ollie Lars had been so young, joyful, and eager to please his alpha in bed—and to be pleased in return. His Oliver Strand was older, scarred and different in appearance, but everything else about him was the same. The way Oliver reacted to the pain in his nipple, the mark on his neck, the way he demanded Brandt fucking fuck him already!

And the most brilliant difference? Wide-eyed, lust-crazed Demir Higgs watching it all. Brandt only gave Oliver a moment to adjust to his girth before fucking him like Oliver demanded. Instinct took over, insisting Brandt fuck until he came, but he didn’t want it to be over too soon. He wanted to remember and enjoy his mate. To worship his hole as it deserved to be worshiped before coating Oliver’s insides with his seed.

Oliver thrashed and moaned as Brandt both fucked him and worried his nipples, one after the other, back and forth until the hard buds were blood red and covered in teeth marks. He encouraged Demir to kiss Oliver’s mouth, distract their omega a bit, give him more sensation while Brandt teased his stretched hole with a finger.

Growling with desire, Oliver yanked on Demir's hips until Demir knelt over his face, back to Brandt, and Oliver sucked Demir's cock into his mouth. Demir bucked and fell forward onto his hands, exposing his pretty pink hole to Brandt. Eager to complete the circle, Brandt pushed a slicked finger into Demir's ass. Demir cried out and thrust into Oliver's throat, fucking and getting fucked...and it was perfect.

A perfect moment between three men in love as they shared their love and desire with each other.

Oliver sneaked a finger up to fuck Demir's hole alongside Brandt's, and together they drove their beta lover to his release. He pumped into Oliver's throat, and Brandt slowed his own thrusts so Oliver could swallow every drop. They pulled their fingers out, and Demir showed his thanks by kissing Oliver first, then Brandt, and Brandt drank of him while he hammered his mate's ass. Oliver clawed at the blanket and thrust against him, the slap of skin on skin and heavy breathing the only sounds in the room.

Demir left Brandt's mouth to suck Oliver's cock into his mouth, and Oliver screamed. Clamped down as he came, and Demir didn't waste a drop. Once he'd milked Oliver dry, Demir shared his mouthful of come with Brandt, and it was dirty and amazing and everything Brandt wanted sex with his men to be.

"Come in me, alpha," Oliver said. "Please."

"Fuck, yes." Brandt pulled out so he could turn Oliver onto his hands and knees. Shoved back inside. Snapped his hips once, twice, and then broke into brilliant pieces of pure joy as he came. Flooding his bondmate with his come, marking him as Brandt's once again. As theirs.

He bit his mark as he eased Oliver onto his stomach, still buried deep inside his body, pretending for a brief moment they were knotted. Joined and unable to part for a while. He raised one arm, and Demir snuggled in beside Oliver. Needing a little more than just holding Demir with his arm, Brandt nudged his finger back inside Demir's ass. Demir sighed happily as he nipped Oliver's lips with his own.

The pair shared gentle kisses while Brandt released his omega and bit the mark he'd made on his beta. Stroked his gland with that single finger, and Demir made a joyful noise that filled Brandt with pride and contentment.

"This was perfect," Oliver said. "Thank you. Both of you."

"This is everything I've ever wanted," Demir replied. He pressed his face into Oliver's neck, as if embarrassed by the honest admission. "I have to tell

my dad soon. I love you both too much to keep denying you.”

“There’s no rush on that.” Brandt brushed a damp curl off Demir’s temple with his lips. “Make sure the time is right for you. If it isn’t until Oliver and Eriq move home for good, then wait a few more months. Either way, you’ll be fine. We have allies who support us.”

Demir snickered. “We have Tarek and Liam.”

“What about your brother?”

“Tarius tolerates it because he trusts my judgment, but I wouldn’t say he’s supportive.”

“Your family will come around,” Oliver said. “I know how you feel. Diego isn’t happy with me even suggesting I’d move here. It’ll be an adjustment for a lot of people. But we’ll get through it as a unit. A triad. Three equal sides of a triangle.”

“You guys saying it helps.”

“Then we’ll keep saying it until you believe it.”

“Yes, we will.” Brandt eased his softening dick out of Oliver, so he could properly snuggle both his men at once. “This is our future, more days like this. Days, weeks, months, years, to infinity.”

Demir kissed his cheek. “For as long as we all shall live?”

“Exactly.”

My men. Always.



They had sex far into the afternoon, in various couplings and frothing positions, and Demir couldn’t have imagined a better end of their day than a good, hard pounding by Brandt that left him sore and dripping from both ends: Brandt from his ass and Oliver’s come from his face and lips. He absolutely loved being in between his boyfriends, being used by them at the same time, existing for their pleasure, and he always came like a rocket when it was his turn.

I will never be able to tell my brothers about this. They’d never understand.

Not that he planned on running straight to Tarius or Aven to brag about his great day. He’d meant what he said about telling his family soon, though; he would just leave out a lot of the sexy details. After taking turns in the

shower, they lounged as a group on the couch with the TV on in the background. Brandt had called in pizza delivery for dinner, since no one wanted to get up or stop touching.

The doorbell rang at five o'clock, and Demir realized too late he didn't know who was dropping Eriq off. He felt foolish for fleeing to the guest bathroom and pretending to use it, while listening to Kell's muffled voice talk about Eriq's day with the twins. Once the front door shut again, Demir flushed the toilet and left.

Eriq waved from his spot in front of the TV, unbothered that Demir was there, and why should he be bothered? Demir was simply a friend of his parents. Parents he had a hard time keeping his hands off of while they ate pizza in the living room, with a program Eriq liked droning on in the background.

"Do we really have to go home tomorrow?" Eriq asked during a commercial break.

"We really do, champ," Oliver replied. "You've got school the day after we get back. But we'll visit again soon, I promise."

"Good. I like the twins. They're funny, and Mr. Kell makes the best oatmeal cookies. He said he'd teach me the next time I come over."

"That's a generous thing to do. Oatmeal cookies are my favorite."

Demir checked that off as something new he'd learned about Oliver today, right next to how he looked when he came with an alpha's cock in his ass. Inappropriate thoughts over pizza, and he shifted the position of his paper plate on his lap.

"Branson's really cool, too, but I only got to see him for a little while because he had school," Eriq continued. He nattered on a bit more about the collective Bloom/Cross kids. More than once, Oliver seemed on the cusp of asking Eriq something, maybe about moving here permanently, but he never did.

Once they finished eating and cleaned up, Demir couldn't put off leaving any longer. Oliver asked to show Demir something in the bedroom, and they spent a few minutes simply hugging. They kissed a little, but mostly they held each other, saying their own private goodbyes. Demir didn't know when he'd be able to hug Oliver again, and it hurt. It also hurt that he couldn't see Oliver and Eriq off at the train station in the morning, because the train left at six o'clock. Demir didn't have any way to explain leaving that early to Dad.

So they said a long, silent goodbye. Brandt kissed him on the porch and

promised to see him tomorrow.

Demir didn't go home. He chanced Tarius being his usual home-body self and stopped by his apartment. Tarius *was* home and, after Demir texted his plans to Liam, they settled on the couch with popcorn, beer, and bad movies. Demir didn't get drunk, but he did wallow a little. Tarius never asked; he simply existed with his big brother, and let Demir lean on him.

And that was everything.



In the morning, Demir helped Liam whip up a pancake breakfast for the family, couching his sadness in food and trying to be helpful when Linus and Layne kept squabbling over the mega blocks. Dad seemed quietly stressed, which wasn't unusual lately. A Chief Constable was never technically off-duty, but he was starting to get a handle on the job.

Not good for Demir, though, because as soon as Dad stressed less about work, he'd start stressing more over Demir and his mystery boyfriend.

Demir waited until ten to collect his school bag and head to Brandt's for the day. Dad probably assumed the library, and Liam simply asked him to text if he'd be home for dinner. Brandt was there when Demir arrived, sulking on the couch, beer in hand. The house seemed sad, emptier without Oliver and Eriq in it. Demir plunked down on Brandt's lap and held the big, unhappy alpha for a long time.

"He's coming back," Demir whispered in the silence. "And we'll be here waiting for him when he does."

"I know." Brandt tightened his arms around Demir's waist. "Feels wrong not having him here, Little Blue."

"Because he belongs here. With us."

He sighed. "You should be studying, not consoling an old fart like me."

"You are not old. And I can study later." Demir tapped Brandt's chin until pale eyes met his. "What do you need, Big Red? Name it."

"You sure about that?"

"Yes." No matter what Brandt asked for, Demir knew in his heart it wouldn't hurt him.

And it didn't. Brandt fucked him on the floor, hands and knees, and then used a plug to keep his release inside. Studying wasn't easy with that thing

constantly teasing his gland, but Brandt helped by quizzing him on all the different bones in the hand. The word “bones” wasn’t helpful, and after a lunch of leftover pizza, Brandt took the plug out, fucked him again, and then put it back in.

Demir was a bit drunk knowing he had two of his alpha’s loads inside his body, and it made his afternoon studying while Brandt napped a major pain in the...well, his patience. When Brandt woke near dinnertime—Demir texted Liam he wouldn’t be home—he couldn’t get hard again, so he fucked Demir with four fingers, his come making it squishy, dirty, and oh so perfect.

When Brandt tucked his thumb into the cone of fingers spearing his ass, giving him five to the first knuckle, Demir came so hard he got dizzy and sort of passed out. He came to naked in the tub with Brandt, water soaking his skin, while Brandt very gently cleaned him inside and out.

“Don’t wanna leave, alpha,” Demir slurred. “Wanna stay.”

“Then stay. Stay over with me, Little Blue, please?”

Demir did, enlisting Tarius’s help in covering for his whereabouts. They slept curled around each other, Brandt’s soft dick pressing into Demir’s crease. And when the sun crept over the horizon to brighten their bedroom, Demir willingly opened for Brandt’s slicked morning wood. They moved slowly, reverently, no rush to their climaxes this time.

This is what Demir wanted for his future. A home. A shared bed. Men who loved him, supported him, fucked his brains out in the best way, and who could also make such sweet love to his body.

Brandt came first with a sigh and a long, firm bite to Demir’s neck. Then he slid down the bed to suck Demir off, accepting every drop spilled. After a long, leisurely kiss, they went back to sleep.

Demir was too sore for any more actual fucking that day, so they found other creative ways to console each other over Oliver’s absence. After Oliver called at six to verify they’d both made it to Rainier safely, it seemed okay to leave Brandt alone. Train accidents were extremely rare, but Brandt relaxed a lot after the confirmation of their arrival.

“I have a lab tomorrow right after my morning classes,” Demir said as he gathered his books. “So I won’t be over until around one, I think.”

“It’s okay. I go back to work anyway, so I’ll make sure I sleep in tomorrow morning. Try to get back into my patterns. Vacation time plays havoc with my sleeping routines.”

“Yeah. I’m glad you could take time off to spend with Oliver and Eriq,

though. It would have sucked for them to sit around alone while you worked.”

“Underhill has been after me for years to take my earned time, but I never had a good enough reason. Given enough time, Higgs would have been on me about the same thing.”

Demir hid a flinch at the mention of his accrued vacation time. Taking an extra night or two off to spend with Demir wasn’t a good enough reason? Except that wasn’t fair, because Demir wasn’t able to spend the night. Yet. He’d bring it up later, when their relationship wasn’t a secret, and it was actually an issue requiring discussion.

They resisted a long goodnight kiss, sticking to a shorter, sweet one so Demir didn’t go home with Brandt’s scent clinging to him. Brandt had that incense at home, which helped, and Demir kept a small bottle of cologne in his car that he spritzed on when he got in. So far, so good. Dad rarely waited up for him anyway, and it didn’t matter if Liam happened to smell something, but Demir wanted to be careful.

Thank goddess, too, because Dad shocked the hell out of him by lounging in the living room recliner with a book on his lap. The house was otherwise silent, which was strange for seven o’clock on a school night.

“Where are—oh wait, it’s spring break for primary and secondary schools this week,” Demir said dumbly.

“It is,” Dad replied. “Liam and the other omegas already have a play date plan in place for the week, so I’m letting them do their thing. Apparently, things start off with an overnight at Jaysan and Morris’s place.”

“Liam too?”

“Yup. Just us old farts tonight. Liam thought we could use, um, bonding time. I thought we could do popcorn and a movie like old times. Surely you can spare two hours from your studies.” Dad’s hopeful smile prevented Demir from worming his way out of it.

Demir’s stomach still twisted with nerves. “Cool. Let me put my books away, okay?”

“Sure. Want me to make the popcorn?”

“Okay.”

He dumped his bag on his bed, took a few deep breaths, and then he went to join his dad for a movie. He nearly fell over when he spotted Tarius and Aven in the living room, too, grinning at him. Demir couldn’t remember the last time he, his older brothers and his dad sat down, just the four of them,

and watched a movie. Once two bowls of popcorn were done and they argued about what to watch, their quartet settled in the living room in a way they never had before.

Even when Omegin was alive, Dad often worked late or went to bed early. After Omegin died, there were no more movie nights. Not until Liam, and then it was a lot of family films for the boys. Their quartet picked an action film and talked throughout, picking apart the story, throwing popcorn at each other, and generally having fun.

Demir hadn't had such a joyous night with his family in a long, long time. And he treasured every single moment, knowing full well how quickly that joy could be stolen from him.

TWENTY-FOUR

TAREK ENDED up taking a bit of unexpected time off the first of the week, because both Braun and Kell were down with the stomach flu, and with Branson and Rei on spring break—plus the twins—the omegas needed all hands on deck. Brogan eagerly agreed to watch the twins for two days, while Tarek wrangled the two elder boys with some help from Ronin, who was upstairs working from home and doting on his sick mate.

Branson and Rei were currently playing outside, while Braun slept in the bedroom in between trips to the bathroom.

Some work Tarek could manage from home, especially over the phone, and Senior Constable Roken was on-call at division, as well, to keep things running smoothly. Unfortunately, it meant the Ollie Lars kidnapping case went onto the backburner in favor of current, ongoing investigations. He hadn't dug up any new developments, anyway, and he was waiting for more research calls to bear fruit.

Tarek remained unconvinced that Dr. Sorenson's death certificate was authentic. It was simply a feeling, an investigator's instinct, so he'd put Corinth on the certificate, looking into everything from the doctor who signed it to the coroner who did the basic autopsy that simply verified the physician's cause of death. No stone unturned.

On his second day working from home with two cranky omegas to care for—the boys were all, thankfully, on play dates elsewhere for the day—Corinth stopped by the house with everything he'd found on the death certificate.

"The paperwork looks legit on the surface, sir." Corinth opened a folder on the dining table and spread a few sheets of paper out, including a hospital

ID photo of Sorenson. “One big problem, though. The coroner’s name was Albert Walken, and while Walken isn’t necessarily an uncommon name—”

“That’s a huge coincidence,” Tarek interrupted.

“Yes, sir. I also looked into the main records for the hospital’s morgue, and there has never been a coroner on staff named Albert Walken.”

Tarek stared at the photo of Sorenson. “So a fake mortician signed the death certificate and no one noticed?”

“Apparently so. Also the physician who examined Sorenson? Died two months after Sorenson died, in a car accident. Brake lines failed.”

“You’re kidding me?”

“I’m not.” Corinth’s expression was grave and annoyed. “Do you think Sorenson faked his own death and covered it up?”

“Signs are pointing in that direction, for sure, which suggests he was also somehow involved in Oliver’s kidnapping.” Tarek picked up the photo of Sorenson and studied it. The narrow nose and squinty eyes. Imagined him older, grayer, angrier. “Corinth, what was Sorenson’s blood type?” He rummaged through his paperwork for his crib sheet on the case.

“Um...O+, why?”

Tarek found the paper he needed: basic details on the man only known as Walken. Also O+ blood. He held the mug shot of Walken up against the hospital ID photo of Sorenson. So many similarities, but also differences. Walken’s nose was flatter, his cheeks fatter. Simple things a plastic surgeon could change if someone wanted to alter their appearance and start over.

“You think Sorenson and Walken are the same person, sir?” Corinth asked. “There is a resemblance and the timing fits. Which means Sorenson/Walken and Modesatto were working together to leave Sansbury with Oliver under new identities, but why?”

“I don’t know. Lovers, maybe? An older beta falling in love with a younger alpha, especially one who works for him, would have been a minor scandal, but nothing to change your life for. And it still doesn’t explain Oliver. Even if they were both being paid by a third party to bring Oliver to a trafficker...”

Tarek was missing something. A final piece of a larger puzzle.

“Has Sorenson’s name come up in any of Lars’s old case files?” Tarek asked. “Any connection that might push Sorenson to seek revenge against Lars through Oliver?”

“None that we’ve found, no, sir. I’ve still got two patrolmen combing

through those case files, but Constable Lars never worked on the high-profile cases of the time period.”

Brandt had confirmed the same thing, both at the time of Oliver’s disappearance, and when they spoke at the start of Tarek’s new investigation. Eleven years ago, Brandt Lars had no enemies, personal or professional, he was a well-liked patrolman, not a single improvement report or civilian complaint on his record.

“A year ago,” Tarek said, mostly speaking to himself, “someone noted the financial tie between Walken and Modesatto in the Rainier file on Oliver. The original investigating officer I contacted had never seen the note, and when I followed up, he didn’t know who’d added it, despite him digging around.”

“Someone wanted us to finally put this puzzle together,” Corinth replied.

“Possibly. But a year ago, whoever this person was had no reason to ever suspect Oliver Strand, the man with no past, would come to Sansbury in the future, never mind discover his real identity.”

“So you think it’s connected to something that happened in Rainier? The notation, I mean?”

“It’s the most reasonable explanation. I floated the idea that perhaps Oskar Strand’s death wasn’t an accidental shooting, but a planned hit.” Tarek started pacing the dining area as his brain spun out with a theory. “Okay, let’s assume there was a personal relationship between Sorenson and Modesatto, and that one of the two men was into shady deals. Most likely it was Sorenson. Why?”

Corinth’s eyes unfocused as the young investigator thought it through. “He’s older, in a position of power, and he has access to medical records of all his omega patients. Also, if Sorenson became Walken, Walken was the one who paid Modesatto. Or at least, a credit account tied to the Walken identity paid him. He could easily have had his fingers in a trafficking scheme.”

“Exactly. If there was ever an active investigation into the man, those records are gone. The only thing I was able to glean from his patient list is that about twenty percent of the omegas he regularly saw were infertile. And given the statistic that less than point-one-percent of all omegas are naturally infertile, that’s a pretty high number of patients for one doctor.”

Corinth frowned. “Especially when there are dozens other OB’s who work at the hospital and privately.”

“Also of note is the fact that before Oliver, two other infertile omega patients of Sorenson’s went missing. One twelve years ago, the other fourteen years. One and three years before Oliver. No bodies were ever found, and both cases were closed as simple a missing person.”

Corinth’s frown shifted into horror as he made the connection Tarek had been dreading as the answer. “Do you think Sorenson was experimenting on his patients without their consent? Doing something to make them infertile?”

“It’s possible. I’m no doctor, but I’ve seen the horrors men are capable of. One of our original theories is Oliver was chosen because he was infertile, and he was potentially meant for his heats to be sold. If Sorenson was somehow creating infertile omegas on purpose, and then selling them, he’d have saved up a shit-ton of credit under that Walken account.”

“So if business is booming, why fake his own death?”

“Maybe someone was nosing around about the two previous disappearances? Maybe he got an offer to set up shop elsewhere to throw off any suspicion that Drew Sorenson was anything other than a stand-up doctor? First, we need to prove beyond a doubt that Sorenson is the Walken who’s in custody in Rainier.”

And it fit with parts of their earliest theory about the entire kidnapping: Sorenson needed out of the province, so he faked his own death. But if Oliver was being experimented on and groomed to eventually be taken as an infertile omega/commodity, Modesatto’s plan to take him had to be in place weeks ahead of time. Modesatto had been paid to take Oliver, pregnant or not, so he took Oliver—all the way to Rainier, along with three other victims. No one expected the wreck to derail Sorenson/Walken’s plans for all the kidnapping victims.

It made sense for Walken to leave Oliver alone in his painful recovery and go underground. Rainier had no records of shutting down a sex ring that trafficked in infertile omegas, nor did any neighboring provinces. It was possible Walken shut it down himself, got rid of the evidence, and went into a different business. Like trafficking young betas, which was how the man was eventually caught and charged.

The bedroom door slammed open followed by the bathroom door banging shut. Tarek flinched.

“Braun’s no better today?” Corinth asked.

“Not much, but he kept toast down for a full hour this morning. Yesterday was much worse.”

“I leave you to him, then, sir. I’ll also call our contact in Rainier and explain our current theories. See if he can’t help us verify on his end who Walken really is. Maybe reach out to the other men arrested alongside him. See if anyone’s willing to talk.”

“Good man,” Tarek said. If this had been a recent case, verifying his identity would have been as simple as a DNA test, but that technology had only become commonly used in the last six years in Sansbury, long after Oliver’s disappearance. They’d have to find another way.

“Let me know what you learn, Corinth. I’ll be on my mobile all day.”

“Of course, sir.”

Corinth let himself out, and Tarek went to check on his heaving bondmate. They were so close to cracking this case, to finally giving Oliver and Brandt the answers they deserved. And if Tarek had assembled all the clues properly, those answers would be coming sooner rather than later.

He hoped.



Oliver had been tip-toeing around Diego for the better part of two days, and he was getting sick of it. They’d barely exchanged ten words since Diego picked them up at the train station. Eriq had filled the car and their late dinner with excited tales of his adventures in Sansbury and how eager he was to visit again. Diego listened with bland patience, and then basically ignored Oliver once Eriq was in bed.

On one hand, it had hurt. On the other, Oliver could avoid any new arguments about his decision to move to Sansbury this summer, after school was out. The first two days weren’t so bad, because Diego worked all day, Eriq was in school, and then all three of them were home at night. But midweek, Diego had the day off, and as soon as Eriq was out the door to the bus stop, Oliver braced for...something.

Except Diego went to his bedroom with a book and stayed in there for an hour. Oliver paced, not used to being shut out by his brother-in-law. He’d never seen Diego angry before. Even when Oskar was killed, Diego had been sad and grieved, but he’d done it with Oliver.

Being ignored was almost worse than being yelled at, so Oliver straightened his spine and knocked on Diego’s half-open door. He was

sprawled on his bed, book open on his lap, his expression perfectly neutral.

“Why are you mad at me?” Oliver asked.

“I’m not mad.” Diego closed the book and sat up straighter. “I’m disappointed.”

“Disappointed by what?”

“I guess that you’re willing to leave the life you have here with me to go be with a man you don’t remember having ever lived with or loved.”

I’m leaving to live with two men, not one. Two men I love very much.

It was way too soon to bring Demir into this battle. “I don’t *want* to break up what we have.” Oliver eased onto the foot of the bed. “You have been amazing, a great friend from the day we met, and I will always love you. But Rainier isn’t my home. Not really.”

Diego’s eyes flashed with something Oliver couldn’t name. “I love you, too. You and Eriq are my life, and I’d do anything for you.”

“I’d do anything for you, too, Diego.”

“Except stay.”

“That’s unfair. Brandt is my bondmate, and he’s Eriq’s sire. I can’t deny those bonds, even if I wanted to. Not after this past week. Not after seeing them get to know each other. Not after I got to know Brandt again. A huge part of me is still back there in Sansbury, and I can’t deny how much I need it. How much I need him.”

More of that strange emotion flashed in Diego’s eyes and...it couldn’t be jealousy.

Could it?

“So you’ll what?” Diego snapped. “Go to a stranger and hope he takes care of you? What about your heat? Do you really trust him with your body at your most vulnerable time of the year?”

“Yes.” Oliver felt the truth of that word in his bones. “Yes, I am going to spend my upcoming heat with Brandt, and every other heat the goddess blesses me with until my time is over.” Determination overrode the last of Oliver’s anxiety over this inevitable conversation. “Once school is out for the year, I’m moving myself and Eriq to Sansbury permanently.”

Diego launched off the bed, anger a dark cloud over his head as he paced to the door and back. “You can’t take Eriq away from me.”

“He’s my son, Diego, not yours.”

“Please.” That anger cloud melted directly into grief that hurt Oliver’s heart. “You two are the only family I have. I need you.”

“Then come with us. I’m sure you can transfer to the Sansbury Constabulary. You’re an exceptional patrolman with a clean record.”

Diego shook his head. “This is my home.”

“And Sansbury is mine. It’s where I belong.”

Diego shocked the hell out of Oliver by dropping to his knees in front of where Oliver still sat on the bed. He grabbed Oliver’s hands in a bruising grip. “But I love you, Oliver. You said you love me, too. You can’t leave.”

Oh no. Oh shit.

“I do love you, Diego, but not romantically. As my brother and friend. As my son’s uncle.”

That grief snapped back to fury so fast Oliver got whiplash, and Diego’s grip on his hands became borderline painful. “Don’t lie. We’ve been everything to each other except lovers since my brother died, and even that was a matter of time.”

Oliver stilled, every muscle in his body pulling tight with dread at not only Diego’s words, but also the scarily intent look in his eyes. Diego wasn’t just upset that his family was moving across the territory; Diego was upset because he saw Oliver as some sort of prize. A possession. A potential lover. But Oliver had never once looked at Diego like that, never considered him as a romantic partner. Not even as a passing fancy.

He was just...Diego.

But that wasn’t what Diego saw in Oliver, and Oliver was standing on a razor-sharp edge, scared to move in the wrong direction. Scared to set off a temper poking around Diego’s fraying edges.

“Diego, my hands,” Oliver said in his gentlest tone. “They hurt.”

Diego eased off a bit but didn’t let go. “We were meant to be together, Oliver, you and me and Eriq. Our little family. I need you. You can’t leave me.”

“We aren’t leaving, we’re simply moving to another place. We’ll still talk on the phone and see each other on vacations. And like I said, you can come with us.” Oliver didn’t want Diego coming with them any more, not after this little revelation of personal feelings, but he needed to tame the beast and get out of this house.

“You’re supposed to be here. With me. Oskar made me promise him at your mating celebration that if anything happened to him, I’d protect you. I’d take care of you and Eriq. I can’t break that promise, not after what I took from him.”

Oliver's stomach wobbled. "What do you mean, what you took from him?"

"Nothing, it isn't important." But Diego's face had gotten wilder, angrier. "No, this discussion is over. Once we're finally together, you'll see. You'll feel it too."

Once we're what!?

His fight-or-flight instinct was ramping into high gear, but Diego's powerful grip on his hands prevented Oliver from getting free of this fucked-up situation. Never in a thousand years would he have thought their friendship would die here, in unreciprocated feelings and delusions of ownership couched in love.

"Diego, please let me go. I, um, left something on the stovetop. It'll burn."

"Kiss me first."

Oliver's heart nearly stopped. "I'm not going to kiss you."

"You ungrateful bastard." Diego shot to his feet and hauled Oliver up with him, expertly twisting one of Oliver's arms behind his own back in a powerful, painful hold. Oliver yelped but couldn't jerk free without dislocating his shoulder. "For years, I've taken care of you and our son. I've kept this place paid up, the lights on, food in the cupboards. I've managed your inheritance from Oskar, all for what? So you could leave me for another man?"

Oliver quailed, terrified of this man for the first time in his life, and completely unsure how far Diego would take things—whether or not he was truly unhinged, or simply reacting to a lot of pent-up feelings that had been kept inside for far too long. Either way, Oliver was the one in very serious danger.

"I'm so sorry," Oliver said. "I am so, so sorry this is hurting you, I mean it. You have been wonderful to me and Eriq, and I will be grateful every day for the rest of our lives. But Diego, you're hurting me right now, and you're scaring me, and I don't want those bad feelings to cloud all the good memories. Please, let me go."

Diego seemed to war with himself but his grip never loosened. Sharp pain tore down Oliver's shoulder and collarbone, and he tried to turn into the grip and loosen the strain. That move had the bad fortune of accidentally brushing his thigh against Diego's groin. The shocking sensation of a half-hard dick sent Oliver pitching right into panic, so he didn't see Diego's mouth coming.

The rough kiss combined with the agony in his shoulder, and it sent acid rolling in Oliver's gut. He cried out. Diego used the parting of Oliver's teeth to thrust his tongue into Oliver's mouth. Oliver gagged and bit down. With a yelp, Diego pulled away and let go of Oliver completely. His right hand whipped out, slapping Oliver across his left cheekbone hard enough to send Oliver sprawling onto the carpet.

Oliver scrambled away, cheek smarting, eyes filling with tears, and he put the bed between them. Grabbed the bedside lamp, ripped off the shade, and wielded the heavy iron base like a weapon. Panic, anger and shock made his insides shake, but he stood his ground.

Diego stared at him with grief-stricken eyes, his mouth wide open. "Oh, Oliver, oh no. I'm so fucking sorry. Oh shit."

"Get out."

"Oliver—"

"I said get out!" He screamed the words so loudly his throat burned, and he swung the lamp in Diego's direction. "Get the fuck out of this house right now before I report you for assault. Get out!"

With a soft sob, Diego shocked the hell out of him by doing as asked. Oliver followed him from a distance, ready to swing, as Diego walked down the hall to the condo's door, grabbed his keys off a hook, and left. Oliver counted to five before bolting to the door and snapping both locks into place.

Then he slid to the floor and allowed himself to shake.

I can't stay here. We aren't safe. Eriq and I aren't safe.

Oliver needed his mate. His mate would make everything okay again.

His mate was a two-day train ride away. He could call but that would only send Brandt into a panicked rage. Oliver touched his tender cheek, surprised to find a smear of blood on his fingertips. Goddess, Brandt would murder Diego for this.

He somehow got up and stumbled down the hall to the bathroom. Turned on the light.

Oliver was a total mess. Wild eyes, a bruising, bloody cheek, flushed ears and neck. He couldn't go out in public like this, so he carefully washed his face and put a small bandage on his cheek. Called the school to tell them he was picking Eriq up in an hour for a doctor's appointment he'd forgotten about. Called the train station to get their schedules for the rest of the day.

Then Oliver grabbed the biggest suitcase he owned and started to pack.

TWENTY-FIVE

BRANDT GRUMBLED a protest as the insistent ringing of the doorbell roused him from his nap. Last night was only his second shift back after his vacation, and his body wasn't happy with the change in his sleeping habits, so he'd crashed the moment he got home this morning.

No more sunrise beers for Brandt Lars.

He rolled out of bed, noting it was only a few minutes after ten, so it wasn't Demir. Not that Demir needed to ring the bell, since he had a key, but he could have lost the key. No, none other than Tarek Bloom and Isa Higgs graced his porch that morning, and Brandt rubbed sleep out of his eyes as he invited both men inside.

"I hope you don't mind if I brew some coffee," Brandt said. "My sleep patterns went to shit last week."

"No, go ahead," Higgs said. He glanced around the small living room and kitchen area, and it occurred to Brandt that Higgs had never been to his home before.

Thankfully, Brandt had listened to Tarek about buying some of that incense. He'd burned a bit last night and any lingering scent of Demir's visit yesterday had dissipated under its fragrance. Brandt glanced at the two framed photos of Demir, though, his stomach quaking with nerves, and he indicated the two men should follow him into the kitchen.

"This is actually an official visit," Higgs continued.

"About Oliver's case?"

"Yes."

Brandt completely lost interest in coffee and invited both men to sit at the kitchen table, choosing to crack open a soda instead. "Do you have more

questions for me?”

Tarek’s lips twitched. “No, we actually have answers for you this time. Do you want to call Oliver and include him in the conversation?”

Belly wobbling with nervous excitement, Brandt called Oliver’s mobile. It went to voice mail, though. “I can fill him in later. Please, what did you learn?”

“That Oliver’s disappearance was part of a larger, orchestrated plan to sell omega heats to the highest bidder, and Oliver’s OB, Dr. Sorenson, was part of it the whole time he practiced here in Sansbury.”

“What?”

“We’ve been working very closely with investigators in Rainier since yesterday morning piecing things together, and they managed to get someone involved to flip on Sorenson, aka Albert Walken, in exchange for a reduced sentence.”

Angry and relieved, Brandt simply said, “Tell me.”

They detailed a larger conspiracy to artificially prevent omegas from becoming pregnant during heat, specifically so those omegas could be kidnapped and sold into sexual slavery. Rainier investigators found the original location of the ring, which had been disbanded less than a year after Oliver’s kidnapping and Kit Modesto’s death. Sorenson had faked his own death to continue running his operations as Walken, who only ever existed on paper until Sorenson stepped into the man’s shoes in Rainier.

Tarek and Corinth discovering the connection between Sorenson and Walken had been the big link missing as to “why Oliver?” Ever since his first heat, Ollie Lars had taken a vitamin prescribed by Dr. Sorenson to increase his fertility chances, and the drug had, in fact, done the opposite the entire time. From what Brandt recalled, Ollie had quit taking them about a year before becoming pregnant, during his bout with severe depression over not conceiving.

Turned out quitting the vitamin had saved his life in so many ways. Oliver had admitted he wouldn’t have fought so hard to live after the wreck if not for being pregnant. Living to give another innocent life a chance.

Walken had shown a strange sort of mercy in allowing Oliver to live in Rainier, probably because Oliver had lost all memory of his former life. He posed no threat to Walken at all. With all these new discoveries and new evidence, Walken was looking at decades more added to an already-hefty sentence.

“He’ll die in prison at this rate,” Higgs said. “Like every monster involved in human trafficking deserves.”

“If those creatures truly got what they deserved,” Brandt replied, “they’d spend those years castrated and pissing through a tube.”

“Agreed.”

He leaned back in his chair, stunned by the wealth of information he’d been handed. “It’s a bit overwhelming. To wonder why for eleven years and to finally know. To put names and faces to the evil men who took my mate with intent to harm him.” Fury pulsed in his temples, awakening an instinctive need to take a train straight to Rainier and break Walken in half for every way he’d ever hurt Oliver. From causing years of infertility and depression, to stealing Ollie from the life and man he loved.

Desperate to hear Oliver’s voice, Brandt called his mobile again. Left a message asking Oliver to call him. He also tried the condo’s home line, but the machine picked up after ten or so rings. Oliver’s silence hadn’t bothered him until this very moment.

“Still can’t raise him?” Tarek asked.

“No.” Brandt met his friend’s eyes. “You said one of Walken’s men flipped. You don’t think Walken would try to retaliate in some way? Maybe go after Oliver or Eriq?”

“It’s unlikely, but not impossible. I’ll call Constable Thomas and have them send someone to Oliver’s residence.”

“Thank you.”

Tarek moved into the living room to make his call. Brandt’s mood shifted between excited to finally have his answers and concerned over Oliver’s silence. It could be as simple as Oliver was out grocery shopping with a dead mobile, or it could be much worse.

He couldn’t think about the ‘much worse’ just yet.

“I can’t imagine the relief you must feel,” Higgs said. “Finally knowing after all these years. Who, what and why?”

“It’s a horrible kind of relief, yes, sir.” Calling Higgs ‘sir’ was still a bit strange, but the man was his boss now. “And I hate to be grateful for that car wreck, because three innocent lives were lost, but if they hadn’t gone off the road, Oliver would either be dead or in a living nightmare right now. Instead, he’s making plans to move home to be with me.”

“He is?” Higgs grinned. “So your bondmate is coming home to stay. Congratulations.”

You wouldn't be so happy about this if you knew I was also in love with your son.

“Thank you, sir, I am beyond thrilled with how quickly Oliver has come to trust and love me again.”

Tarek returned to the kitchen. “They’ll send a patrol car over to the condo to check, but my contact mentioned today is also Diego’s day off. Maybe they’re out as a family.”

“Eriq did mention how much he loves hiking in the mountains,” Brandt said. “But it’s a school day.”

“Still, let’s not worry quite yet. I’m glad you got the answers you were looking for.”

Something in Tarek’s expression suggested Tarek wasn’t as satisfied. “What’s wrong?”

“Just a feeling that I’ve missed something, and not to do with Oliver’s disappearance, per say. I’ve just had this weird, gut feeling that Oskar’s death wasn’t a simple accident, but I can’t find any evidence to prove otherwise. Maybe I’m just so used to seeing conspiracies everywhere that my natural instinct is to assume nothing is coincidence anymore. All the reports substantiate that Oskar Strand died of a gunshot wound he received saving a victim from a stray bullet.”

“What about that bothers you?”

“Timing. Walken was arrested during the same bust where Oskar was killed, and Walken was obviously investigated thoroughly by the Rainier constables. But the notation about a financial link between Walken and Kit Modesto/Modesatto wasn’t added to the file until a year later.”

“That doesn’t have to mean anything. Some investigations take years as evidence comes to light or piles up. Look how many years it took us to bring down everyone involved in the omega fight ring.”

“True.” Tarek still didn’t look convinced. “It’s probably all in my head. I suppose it doesn’t sit right that the only gunshot fired during that entire bust happened to hit and kill Oliver’s mate.”

Brandt bit back a growl. *He* was Oliver’s mate, damn it, but he also understood what Tarek meant. “Well, hopefully that sorts itself out, or your obsessive brain lets it go.”

Tarek smiled. “Hope so. Listen, if you have questions later, or if Oliver has questions, don’t hesitate to call. I’ve still got quite a bit of paperwork to complete before Oliver’s kidnapping case is finally, blessedly solved and

closed.”

Solved and closed. Brandt loved the sound of that.

After his guests left—and Brandt sent his thanks to the goddess that Higgs hadn’t noticed the photos of Demir—he checked his phone’s messages because he’d seen a text notification. From Demir: **Liam’s got the bug that’s been doing around. Gotta go home after class to help with the boys. Call you later.**

Brandt was disappointed, but he also needed sleep. He replied with his best wishes for Liam and an eagerness to talk to him on the phone. Tell him all about today’s good news. With his phone hooked to the bedside charger, Brandt crawled back into bed and fell asleep with Oliver’s smiling face foremost in his mind.



Demir honestly didn’t mind taking care of Linus and Layne that afternoon, especially knowing Braun and Kell had gotten the same virus earlier in the week. Liam had given him a distant thumbs-up from the hallway before going to bed. Demir decided to take his brothers to a nearby park to play with some of the other kids in the neighborhood. It really sucked for so many parents to get sick during spring break, but what could you do?

Linus exhausted himself playing so much that Demir had to carry him home, where he checked on Liam—out cold with a barf basin near his head—before he started making dinner. Linus went down for a nap, and Layne was busy watching TV, so he used the free time to check in with Brandt.

“Hey, you,” Demir said after a groggy hello from his boyfriend. “Getting your much-needed beauty sleep?”

“Trying.” Fabric rustled and Brandt let out a deep yawn. “Sorry. I had an unexpected, but wonderful visit this morning from friends bearing good news.”

“Oh yeah? Entertain me while I cook.”

Demir listened with growing excitement as Brandt detailed motivations and named the men behind Oliver’s decade-old kidnapping. “Oh goddess, Oliver must be thrilled to finally know the truth about it all.”

“He doesn’t know yet.”

“What? How have you not called him?”

“I’ve tried, believe me.” Brandt growled softly. “His mobile goes to voice mail, and no one’s answering the home line. Rainier patrol sent a car to check, but no one answered when he knocked. It’s been hours now, and I’m starting to worry.”

“Have you tried getting hold of Diego?”

“Not yet, but I’m about to that point. Only thing I do know is that it’s Diego’s day off.”

Demir reached for a reasonable explanation to help keep Brandt from spinning out with anxiety over this. “So maybe they’re out doing something fun with no cell service. Not everything is a criminal conspiracy, you know.”

Brandt snorted. “Sounds like something I said to Tarek earlier.”

“About what?”

“Another bit of the case that has nothing to do with the kidnapping. Don’t worry about that. Tell me about your day with your brothers.”

Demir did, chatting his way through whipping up a simple dinner of pan-fried fish fillets and roasted root vegetables. Slowly but surely, he was turning into a decent cook. For Liam, he warmed a pot of chicken broth and hoped his stepdad kept the food down. Brandt begged off around five, because he had to go to work. He also promised to check up on Diego’s number and try Oliver again.

Someone must have tipped off Dad to Liam being sick, because he came home at five-ten with a box of crackers, flowers, and a worried frown. Demir took the crackers and sent his dad off to dote on his mate. Layne helped him set the table and they all, minus Liam, sat down to eat dinner.

Dad chatted a bit about breaking the Ollie Lars kidnapping mystery, and Demir pretended he didn’t already know the details—or that he was a tad worried about Oliver going quiet on such an eventful day. After dishes were done, Dad kept the boys entertained, so Demir could do homework. He had a paper due before the end of the week, since the following week was his spring break, and he had a ton of notes to type up. Brandt’s text at seven that Diego wasn’t answering his mobile or the house line shot his nerves from a two to about an eight.

Where on earth had the small Strand family disappeared to? Eriq was too young for his own mobile, and it didn’t occur to Demir to call the boy’s school until it was far after hours. Not that they were likely to tell Demir anything, but maybe Brandt. That would have to wait until morning, though, and he imagined Brandt was slowly losing his mind with worry.

Demir didn't blame him.

When nine o'clock hit and Brandt started sending 'worst case scenario' style texts, Demir couldn't sit still and type any longer. The boys were in bed, and he found Dad and Liam cuddling on the couch together, the barf basin on the floor nearby. Liam was asleep, so at least he wasn't puking, and the TV was on low.

"I have to head out," Demir whispered. "A friend is having a crisis, and he needs support. If I'm staying over, I'll text you so you know."

"Is this friend in some kind of trouble?" Dad asked.

"Not like that. He just needs someone to lean on, and I've got the strong Higgs shoulders, you know?"

"Then go. Be careful, and I hope your friend is okay."

"Thanks, Dad."

Going to Brandt's office at division was risky, but it was also pretty late, and the night shift crew didn't know Demir as well as the daytime people. He simply walked down the corridor with purpose, as if he belonged there like all the other patrolmen and constables going about their business. Not a single person gave him a second look or asked why he was there.

Brandt was pacing his small office when Demir arrived, and Demir surrendered to Brandt's fierce, tight hug. The big alpha was trembling with worry, and Demir clung, trying to take some of that fear away. "I'm sure he's okay, wherever he is," Demir said, over and over. "He's okay. They're all okay."

"It's just the case..." Brandt sighed and kiss his hair. "Someone turned informant, and I'm scared this is some sort of retaliation against us. No one in Rainier can find Diego, Oliver or Eriq."

Fuck, that's not good.

Someone knocked, and they jumped apart. The door's window was opaque, though, and Demir retreated to a chair hidden by the door when it opened inward. Brandt spoke to someone for a few minutes about a case, before shutting the door again.

"Have you eaten today?" Demir asked. "Because you look terrible."

"Made a sandwich to eat on my way in. Think I left it in the car." Brandt stared at his feet, so vulnerable Demir couldn't stand it. He needed to be strong for his alpha. Get him through this calmly until Oliver and Eriq were found.

"Why don't you sit before you fall over, and I'll go get you something to

eat. You can't help Oliver if you pass out from hunger and exhaustion."

"Okay."

Brandt's office line rang, and he snatched it up. "Lars." His eyebrows rose. "Put the bastard through." Brandt hit a button, and the line switched to speaker.

"Hello?" a tentative voice asked.

"Diego?" Brandt snapped. "Where the hell are my mate and kid?"

"I don't know, and that's the honest truth." Diego hiccupped. "Shit."

"Are you drunk?"

"Yeah. Sobering up but spent the day drinking myself stupid. I am sorry, man, Oliver and I got into a huge fight, and I scared him, and I have no idea where he and Eriq are. I'm at the condo right now and they're gone. Stuff's missing. They're just...gone."

Demir met Brandt's shocked gaze. "Scared him how?" Brandt asked with danger in his tone.

Diego made a sniffling noise, but Demir had no sympathy for the guy. If Oliver had packed up and left with Eriq, it had to have been a bad fight. Really, really bad.

"Scared him how!?" Brandt snarled.

Good thing two thousand miles separated the enraged alpha from his enemy, because Brandt looked mad enough to rip Diego in half.

"You have to understand, I've loved Oliver for years. I've done everything possible to prove myself to him and Eriq. To show him I'd be a good husband. I've sacrificed everything for them."

Horror stole over Demir on quiet feet, and he clamped a hand over his mouth before he lost his dinner. Brandt gripped his desk chair hard enough that the wood creaked in spots.

"What did you do, you son of a fucker?" Brandt asked. Low. Deadly.

"I, uh, made a pass at him, and he said no, and I got so mad I hit him, and it was an accident, I swear. I love Oliver, I'd never—"

Brandt hung up.

"Brandt?" Demir said, worried by how calm his boyfriend was now.

"He's on his way to us." Brandt circled his desk to tug Demir into a hug. This hug was less frantic, more confident. "Eriq and Oliver, they're probably on a train right this minute, and those things don't get mobile signals when they're moving, especially in the wilds."

"How can you be so sure?"

“I don’t know but I am. I know my Ollie, and if he was feeling scared and betrayed, especially by someone he trusted, he’d go where he feels safe. This is his home. Sansbury. Us.”

“Can’t you call someone? Make sure they got on a train?”

“Rainier is outside my jurisdiction, and this isn’t an active case. Please believe me, Little Blue. They’re coming.”

“Okay.” Demir believed it because Brandt believed it.

Even though Brandt seemed positive about Oliver’s plans, Demir wasn’t so sure. He stayed with Brandt for another hour, simply to be near the man, before texting Dad he wasn’t coming home. Demir went to Brandt’s house instead, and he slept in their bed. At some point, Brandt came home from work and slipped in beside him, and they slept more, content in each other’s arms.

Mid-morning, Demir snuck home for his books and kept studying in the living room, while Brandt napped long into the afternoon—until Brandt’s mobile rang a little after two. It was in the living room, so Demir answered it, even though the number exchange was somewhere in Nakota Province.

“Hello?” he said.

“Demir?” Oliver’s voice chased away the last of Demir’s worry for the older man. “Oh thank goddess, are you with Brandt?”

“Yeah, his house. Where are you? Where have you been?”

The noise Oliver released was half-sob, half-sigh. “We’re in Nakota. I got Eriq from his school and onto a train late yesterday morning. I must have lost my mobile. Something happened to the train engine, so we had to stop and swap out, and I found a pay phone at the station to use.”

“Thank goddess, we’ve been so worried.”

“I’m so sorry for scaring you. I couldn’t think of anything else to do except get to you and Brandt.”

“No, don’t apologize. Diego called Brandt at division.”

“Fuck, what did he say?”

“He said you guys fought and he hit you.”

Oliver did sob then. “No, I’m okay, Eriq,” he said and not to Demir. “Just grateful to hear a friend’s voice. Demir, I’ll tell you guys everything when we get there. Tomorrow morning, ten o’clock.”

“We’ll be waiting.”

“You have class.”

“We. Will be waiting.”

“Okay.”

“Do you want to talk to Brandt?”

“Please.”

Demir took the phone into the bedroom, and Brandt’s disgruntled look over being woken died quickly when Demir told him who’d called. He gave Brandt privacy to speak with his mate and waited in the living room. His own phone rang with another call from Dad. He never left a message, simply tried to call, probably to check up on Demir’s friend. Demir didn’t know how to talk to the man, so he ignored the calls for now. Focused on Brandt.

Their afternoon bled into evening, and they alternated between making out on the couch and Brandt quizzing Demir. The paper due tomorrow was a distant dream. If Demir lost points because it was late, so be it. All that mattered was being with Brandt, until they could go get Oliver.

Demir went home at seven, early enough to play with the boys before their bedtime, thus avoiding questions from the adults of the house. Liam seemed better, convinced it was more food poisoning than the stomach bug. Demir whispered a bit of what was going on while Dad read Layne a bedtime story in his room.

“I’m glad he thought to come straight here,” Liam said. “Now when are you going to tell your dad?”

“Soon. I just need Oliver to get here, so I can see for myself he’s okay. You know?”

“Yeah, I know. How about tomorrow night I arrange a sleepover for the boys? Then you, me and Isa can sit down and talk?”

“Okay.” Demir didn’t like this plan, but it had been inevitable from the moment he’d committed himself to a poly relationship. Sooner or later, Dad had to know what was going on.

“For what it’s worth, I’m proud of you. You’re standing strong for the people you love.”

“I do love them, Liam. Each differently, but one no less than the other. I’ll do anything to protect them.”

“I know you will. It’s what makes you a Higgs.” Liam hugged him tight, then bussed his cheek. “Now go, you’ve got a paper to finish, right?”

“Yeah.”

Demir went to his room, put earphones on, and started typing. Dad poked his head inside around eight-thirty to check up on Demir’s friend, and Demir could honestly say the friend was better. Crisis averted but they still needed

support. Dad being Dad, he simply wished them both the best and excused himself.

So far, so good.

Part of Demir had been worried someone would have reported the unusual young beta hanging out in Lars's office last night to the Chief Constable, but apparently not. The last thing Demir wanted was to get Brandt in trouble with his boss for a work-related infraction—never mind the upcoming personal life infraction Liam was insisting he bring up tomorrow.

This conversation is going to suck.

Demir took comfort, though, in knowing Oliver and Eriq were on their way home to Sansbury and the people here who loved them. In about thirteen hours they'd be home, and Demir's family would be complete once more.

TWENTY-SIX

OLIVER HAD NEVER BEEN SO EXHAUSTED in his life. Between the constant struggle to keep Eriq entertained and not pitching a fit over their sudden trip three days after returning to Rainier, and his own fear that somehow Diego had followed them, Oliver had nothing left to give. He napped, unable to really sleep, his dreams haunted by that kiss and slap, and it left him nearly as cranky as his ten-year-old.

All Oliver could tell him was that Uncle Diego had an emergency, and it wasn't safe for them to stay in Rainier. Eriq didn't mind the vacation from school, but the train had very limited entertainment for a child. Oliver had packed as judiciously as possible, selecting clothes and important personal items, rather than puzzle books or novels, and two days with only the train's old magazines and newspapers was torture.

Eventually, the train signaled they were approaching the Sansbury main station, and Oliver nearly wept with joy. Eriq whooped, happy to have room to run around and breathe fresh air. The brief, thirty-minute stop in Nakota hadn't been nearly enough time for the child to properly stretch his legs.

He found Brandt and Demir in the crowd, both of them there, despite Demir having class right now. Rain came down in steady sheets barely blocked by their shared umbrella, and distant thunder rolled over the constant sounds of trains coming and going. Oliver did weep then, breaking down in Demir's arms, while Brandt whispered reassurances to Eriq that his daddy was just tired and stressed out. No one mentioned the bruised cut on Oliver's cheek, but Brandt did silently rage on the drive home, his anger over it palpable even for a man with no sense of smell. The rain had dulled, leaving the world wet and gray and a little humid.

“Can I play outside?” Eriq asked. “Pleeeeeeease. I’ve been cooped up forever. I won’t get too wet.”

“Just stay in the yard,” Brandt replied. “And come inside if it starts raining again.”

Eriq whooped and fled the car. Brandt carried the suitcase inside, and as soon as their trio was alone, Oliver broke down completely. He wept in Brandt’s capable arms until those strong arms picked him up and carried him to the couch. They sat, Demir beside them, hugging them both and crying his own tears.

“I’m so sorry,” Brandt said, over and over. “I’m so sorry I didn’t protect you, sweetheart.”

“You didn’t know he was a danger.” Oliver sniffed. Coughed. “I didn’t know he was a danger, and I’ve known him for years. I never saw it.”

“He said he loved you.”

“He was devastated by my choice to be your mate again, to eventually move here, and to share my heat with you. I thought he was just...upset because things were going to change, but he kept saying he was in love with me, that he’d given up everything for me. He even called Eriq his son.”

“Not after what I took from him.”

Diego had taken something from Oskar but what? Oliver shoved the words away, too tired and upset to properly examine them right now. All that mattered was his boyfriends supporting him, loving him, and giving him a safe place to be weak.

“I’m so sorry,” Demir whispered. “He seemed high-strung and protective, but I never imagined he’d attack you.”

“Same.” Oliver accepted a tissue and wiped his dripping nose. “It happened so fast. He grabbed my arm and said I’d understand after we were together, and then he kissed me. I was shocked and horrified, so I bit his tongue hard, and that’s when he slapped me. He was sorry right after, he was —”

“Don’t do that.” Brandt caressed Oliver’s lightly bruised hands. “Do not excuse what he did. A man who’s hit once has probably done it before, and I don’t care about his reasons. He assaulted you. At the very least, he should lose his fucking job.”

“No one else saw what happened.”

“You’re the one with the bruises, sweetheart.”

“Bruises that can be explained a lot of ways.” Oliver wilted then,

exhausted and emotionally drained. “I just want to rest for a while and not think. I feel like a fucking fool for not seeing what was right in front of my face. His obsession and need to control every aspect of my life. But he was always amazing with Eriq. He was my best friend.”

Demir pressed a kiss to Oliver’s temple. “I’m so sorry you’re hurting, Oliver. So sorry.”

“I need time. I barely slept on the train. I swear, if I hadn’t seen Diego go off like that, I never would have believed him capable.”

“I would,” Brandt said softly. “I saw the possessiveness, but I didn’t pay attention like I should have. I was so wrapped up in having you again that I didn’t properly consider our obstacles.”

“He said he gave everything up for me, but I never asked him to. I was always encouraging him to date or meet new people, but he’d have an excuse to stay home. To not like someone I set him up with. Goddess, it’s all so clear now. Even when Oskar was alive, Diego was...clingy.”

Brandt momentarily tensed.

“What?” Oliver asked. Had he offended Brandt by mentioning Oskar?

“I’ve been trying to reach you for two days to tell you some great news about your kidnapping. Tarek cracked the case.”

“He what?” Oliver sat up straight, nearly falling off Brandt’s lap in his haste. His nose was still stuffy, and his head kind of hurt, but this was the best news ever. “Tell me.”

Brandt did, and Oliver listened as part of a life he didn’t remember merged with one he did, and everything about his missing past made more sense. “So my own OB was poisoning me, basically,” Oliver summarized, “and then he had me kidnapped for a trafficking ring I never made it to, and that he disbanded on his own before it could be busted.”

“Pretty much,” Brandt replied. “I was so scared when I couldn’t find you yesterday, because I thought maybe Walken was going to retaliate by hurting you.”

“Oh goddess, I’m sorry. I didn’t even think to stop and call you. My entire world was focused on getting me and Eriq on a train to Sansbury, and then I couldn’t call until we got to Nakota.”

“It’s okay, you were in survival mode, trying to keep yourself and our son safe, and you did it. You’re both here. And I’m never letting you go again.”

“Good.” Oliver buried his face in Brandt’s neck and soaked in his warmth. “I’m never leaving. I’ll send for any other belongings Eriq wants,

but I'm never going back to Rainier. I belong here with you and Demir."

Demir rested his chin on Oliver's shoulder. "Yes, you do. My second soul."

Oliver smiled. "Yes, I do." He kissed Brandt first, then Demir. Brandt again. Back and forth, leisurely kisses simply to remind Oliver who he belonged to. Everything he'd missed these last couple of days. Imprinting home back on his very soul.

The front door opened. "Daddy, someone's here!" Eriq said as he dashed inside, his clothes soaked through from another cloud burst.

For one brief, terrifying moment, Oliver was certain Diego had followed them here—until a tall, bulky figure filled the open doorway, and Demir shrank back from them. Thunder rumbled outside.

Chief Constable Higgs stared at their huddled threesome on the couch, and he didn't look happy.

Demir's stomach curled in on itself when Dad walked into the house a few steps behind Eriq and zeroed in on him. And not only Demir, but the fact that he'd just been curled around Oliver's back. Oliver, who was sitting on Brandt's lap, and the entire thing was unexplainable with anything except the truth.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

"Lars," Dad said gruffly.

"Chief Higgs." Brandt carefully extracted himself from the couch cuddle and stood, taking a slightly defensive position in front of Demir and Oliver. "What can I do for you?"

Dad's piercing stare hit Demir first, before returning to Brandt. "Came to ask you about something that made no sense until just now. This morning, a patrolman commented he thought he'd seen one of my sons in your office night before last, but that couldn't be, because why would my boys have any business with you at midnight?"

"All right." Brandt was giving nothing away.

Dark, annoyed eyes shifted from Brandt back to Demir. "This is the friend who needed you that night? One of my constables?"

"Yes." Demir stood next to Brandt and slid their palms together. "Brandt is the guy I've been seeing since the solstice gala, Dad. I love him."

Fury filled the room like static. On the couch, Oliver shrank in on

himself, an omega instinctively reacting to the anger of an alpha. Brandt likewise bristled. Demir stood his ground, not surprised by this flare of temper from his sire, and also unwilling to back down from his position. Dad took two long steps forward, putting him within punching distance of Brandt, and Brandt held fast, meeting Dad's gaze glare for glare.

"You've been fucking around with my kid?" Dad snarled.

"Demir is hardly a kid," Brandt replied, strangely calm in the face of another enraged alpha. "And if it matters at all, I love him, too."

"You have a bondmate who's sitting right there."

"Yes, I do, and my bondmate loves Demir as much as I do."

Dad's face twisted into something ugly that made Demir want to drop to his knees—but he didn't. "That's impossible. You can't love two men at once, that's not what the goddess intended."

"I don't dare speak for the goddess and her miracles, but she brought me Demir exactly when I needed him. And she delivered Oliver to us when we needed *him*. I love my bondmate, sir, but I love Demir, too. Do you really think he'd be here right now, missing classes that are so important to him, if he didn't love us in return?"

The classes comment dragged Dad's attention back to Demir. "You're skipping school for him?"

"One time," Demir replied. "Today. Look at Oliver's face, Dad. His brother-in-law hit him and scared him so badly he got on the first train back to Sansbury with Eriq. It's why you couldn't reach him two days ago. He needed to be here with us where he's safe and loved. And I had to be here for Oliver. And Brandt."

Eriq was currently nowhere to be seen, probably hiding in his room from the squabbling adults.

Smart kid.

"I can understand you becoming infatuated with an older couple," Dad said to Demir. "You're young, still discovering yourself, but this isn't real. It can't be. And you." That anger shifted back to Brandt, who didn't blink. "How dare you seduce my kid?"

Brandt held his gaze for several long moments. "As I recall, Demir did quite a lot of the seducing."

Oh shit.

Dad's fist connected with a solid wallop that sent Brandt onto his ass.

"Dad!" Demir shouted at the same time Oliver burst out, "Constable!"

“I’m not a constable right now, Mr. Oliver, I’m sorry,” Dad said. “I’m an angry father who’s been lied to for months.”

“You never asked me straight out who I was dating or if he was a constable,” Demir snapped back, pissed off by the blood on Brandt’s split lip. Brandt stayed down, though, with Oliver kneeling beside him. “Liam and Tarius know, and they support my choice to date these two men.”

“You’re young and impressionable.” Dad stabbed a finger at Brandt. “You, on the other hand, should fucking know better.”

“Know better than to what?” Brandt retorted, his own temper flaring back to life. “To meet a beautiful beta boy at a party and fall for him completely in the short time we’ve spent together? Maybe I should have turned Demir down the night I realized who he was, but I couldn’t. I love him, and despite all my flaws, he loves me too. I’ll never apologize for that. Never.”

“You have an omega bondmate and a son.”

“Yes, I do, and I’m blessed to have them back in my life. But I had Demir first. I loved him before I knew Oliver was still alive, and I couldn’t shut those feelings off.” Brandt took the moment to carefully stand with Oliver’s help. “Maybe a poly relationship is unconventional, but it’s what we want.”

“We’re adults, Dad,” Demir added. “We went into this knowing what it is. No one’s tricked me or taken advantage of me, I swear. I’m so happy when I’m with them I want to burst.”

Dad seemed to ignore him completely, his righteous alpha indignation firmly fixed on Brandt and no one else. “He’s half your age, Lars.”

Brandt growled. “Liam is half your age. *Boss.*”

“Liam is my bondmate. Demir is just a beta.”

Demir’s spine snapped straight, and he gaped at his dad in outraged horror. Never in his life had he heard his sire use the word “beta” with so much derision, as if Demir had less value than the gum on the bottom of his shoe. And it hurt. A lot.

Years of praise, of being told how proud Dad was of him for his med school ambitions, crumbled to dust under the weight of that one single word.

Beta.

He didn’t hear anything else, words blocked out by the thundering in his temples that matched the thunder rolling across the skies outside. Rain pelted his shirt and face as Demir fumbled for his car keys. He didn’t stop, didn’t wait for an explanation, he simply got into his shared car and drove away.

“How dare you?!”

The furious, shouted comment didn't come from Brandt, and he was shocked as hell that it came from Oliver. Oliver got right in Higgs's face as he continued to dress down the bigger alpha. “Demir worships you, Constable, and you shit all over him with that comment? Are you kidding me?”

Higgs gaped down at Oliver, who was a live wire of indignation, the alpha seeming caught between verbally sparring with the angry omegin and chasing after his son. Brandt's mouth throbbed and he watched Higgs carefully, even though the man never struck him as the type to hit an omega, even in anger.

“What?” Higgs asked. “I told the truth. He is beta. Liam is my bondmate, so it's different. The age gap doesn't matter when the mating bond is present.”

“Yeah, well, that's not how you said it.” Oliver crossed his arms and puffed out his chest, and the territorial demonstration was an incredible turn on. “You made it sound as if Demir is lesser-than for being beta. As if his feelings for me and Brandt matter less because there's no mating bond present, and that's a shitty thing to do, especially as a parent. You may not understand Demir's feelings, but they are still real and valid. Why do you think he ran from you?”

“From me?” Something seemed to penetrate Higgs's thick skull, because his anger melted into shock. “Oh goddess.”

A crack of thunder hit so loud it rattled the walls. Eriq raced out of his room on a wail and attached himself to Brandt's hip. Brandt knelt so he could pull the trembling boy into a proper hug, and Eriq looped wiry arms around his shoulders.

“He's never liked thunder,” Oliver said.

“Why's it gotta be so loud?” Eriq asked, voice muffled by Brandt's neck.

“It won't last forever,” Brandt whispered. “It's just a spring storm. You're safe inside, I promise.”

“Fuck.” Higgs bolted to the half-open front door where rain pelted his shoes and the interior floor. “Demir's out in that and he's upset. Damn it.”

Instead of fighting with Higgs over this, Brandt carefully picked Eriq up as he stood, keeping the boy balanced on one hip, and Eriq seemed content to stay. “Where would he go? To see his brothers?”

“Maybe. Demir and Tarius are very close. I'll call him.” Higgs shut the

door against the rain before making his call.

Oliver came over to inspect Brandt's mouth. "Let me get you ice before you swell up too badly."

That comment got Eriq's attention, and he frowned at Brandt. "How'd you hurt your face?"

"It was an accident, chief," Brandt replied. "Listen, we need to do some grown-up stuff, so are you okay to sit here and watch TV for a while?"

"Okay."

Brandt got him settled close to the TV with a blanket and a show the boy liked.

Their conversation shifted into the kitchen, where Oliver gave him ice wrapped in a dish towel for his mouth, and yeah, it stung.

"Where do you think he'd go?" Oliver whispered.

"Honestly? I don't have a clue. I've never seen Demir get upset like that." Brandt glared at the back of Higgs's head. "I don't even care that bastard hit me, because I kind of goaded him into it. I *do* care how much he hurt Demir's feelings."

"Me too. I imagine he's beating himself up quite badly right now, so let's not dump more on top of him? The only thing that truly matters is knowing Demir is safe."

Brandt's brain jumped to a mental image of Demir's car hydroplaning off the road and into a tree, and he pulled Oliver into his arms. No bad thoughts. He'd imagined the worst with Oliver, and Oliver had been alive the whole time. Demir would be fine, too.

"I called his brothers and Liam," Higgs said, keeping his distance now. Anger still seeped off the man in waves that tickled at Brandt's own temper, but the anger now seemed focused inward, rather than outward. "Demir's phone is off. Right to voice mail."

"Of course it's off, Constable," Oliver replied in a much calmer tone than before. "You insulted your son. He won't want to talk to you for a while."

"I honestly did not mean to insult him." Higgs's shoulders stooped. "My boys are my entire life. I've done my best to love and protect them, and I haven't always been a perfect sire. I almost fucked it up once, when my first mate died eight years ago, but I've tried to be better."

"Parents screw up. The good news is we're all imperfect. But you need to believe in Demir the way he believes in you. Believe he knows his own heart and mind."

Higgs took two steps closer, and Brandt tensed. But Higgs's expression was milder, almost contemplative. "I know you don't remember me from before, but we'd met a handful of times in passing. You always did strike me as a compassionate, intelligent young man, Ollie Lars, and you're still that man today. I do not understand what it means to love two men at once, and I probably won't ever. But I can try to accept it as my boy's truth."

"That's all we need. Maybe it's easier for me to say, because poly relationships are more common in Rainier than most provinces, but I believe we'll make it work. All three of us." Oliver glanced briefly over his shoulder. "Eriq still doesn't know about our relationship with Demir, but he knows poly couples. It won't disturb him, I promise."

Higgs frowned. "What about people here?"

"We're prepared to be dismissed or mocked," Brandt said. "But times are changing, and while poly is rare in Sansbury, there's nothing sordid or illegal about it."

"You're a mated alpha. I accept you have feelings for Demir, but it isn't as if you could ever marry him."

"Not yet," Oliver replied. "But poly marriages are legal in Rainier." Higgs's sharp glare had Oliver putting up a staying hand. "I'm not saying we're moving to Rainier simply so we three can get married. In fact, I don't ever want to set foot back there again. I'm saying there's precedent to change existing laws. I don't know what will happen tomorrow, and I'm too exhausted to think beyond the next five minutes. All I want is a chance to love your son the way I love my mate."

Something in Higgs's expression shifted again as a new understanding dawned. Older alphas tended to be set in their ways and their beliefs, and while Isa Higgs had never been a condescending alphahole like some, he was still somewhat old-fashioned in his views on marriage and relationships. Alphas and omegas mated; betas married other betas. He'd probably never imagined another scenario for any of his three eldest sons.

Demir was challenging those assumptions, and Higgs didn't know how to cope. But he seemed to be trying, and that was a start. "Thank you," Higgs said to Oliver. "Demir said earlier your brother-in-law hit you. Did you report him for assault?"

The reminder had Brandt biting back the urge to growl. He'd smash Diego through the wall the next time he saw the bastard.

"No," Oliver replied. "All I could think about was getting here. Making

sure Eriq and I were safe.”

“Eriq didn’t see, did he?”

“He was in school. He has no idea what happened between me and Diego, just that home wasn’t safe, and I decided to come back here for a while. The boy’s missing school, so he didn’t protest very hard.”

Brandt studied his son’s profile in the other room, glad he had no idea what a possessive, hurtful man his uncle had turned out to be. “How are you going to explain never going back?” he asked.

“I don’t know.” Oliver sagged against Brandt’s chest, and he held his mate tight. Kissed his temple. “Goddess, I can’t think anymore today. Can we focus on Demir and not me for now? Once he’s located and safe, we can talk about Diego and what’s next.”

“Take pictures of your face and hands,” Higgs said. “If you press charges against Diego, you’ll need them.”

“Okay.”

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to find my son. I don’t like him out there, upset in a storm, and I have to look for him.”

“Call us if you find him,” Brandt said. Not a request but an order.

Higgs nodded and left.

Brandt didn’t care the man hadn’t apologized for hitting him. He understood the impulse, and if it had been Eriq in a similar situation? Yeah, Brandt would have lost his temper over Brandt’s smug tone with the seduction comment too.

And he agreed with Higgs. Finding Demir safe and sound was their first priority. Until that happened, everything else was details.



Demir Higgs was pissed.

Actually, pissed wasn’t a big enough word for how he felt as he parked his car in the small private lot of the McMillan Rest Center. Rain came down so hard he could barely see the lines, even with his wipers at top speed. Only a few other cars were in the lot. Despite the Center being indoors, he was apparently the only idiot who came out during a massive spring thunderstorm.

But Demir couldn’t think of any other place to go with his roiling

thoughts and emotions. He could always think here, find a sense of peace, so this is where he'd come. With no umbrella, he was soaked again by the time he reached the Center's entrance. An attendant simply asked if he needed directions to find a marker; Demir said no.

He'd been back enough times that he could find Herris Rowan Higgs's marker by heart.

Third floor, second section to the west of the elevator. Dripping water all over the marble floor, Demir walked past row after row of eighteen-inch square markers, each one celebrating a life once lived here in Sansbury. Behind each marker was a box of ashes belonging to the person who'd lived that life.

Troubled and angry, Demir ran trembling fingers over his omegin's nameplate, marked with his birth and death dates. Eight years. Sometimes he could hardly believe so much time had passed since he'd last heard Omegin's laughter, last felt a kiss on his brow, last had a hug from the man who'd birthed him and Tarius and Aven. More than anyone else in the world, Demir knew Omegin would understand.

The hall was empty of other visitors, and small white-noise machines kept the quiet area from being too silent, too...lonely. He traced his fingers over Herris's name as fresh tears welled. Not tears of grief for the man's death, but tears for Demir's own confusion and anger at his dad. For all Demir loved and cherished his boyfriends, Dad simply didn't want to understand.

"Demir is just a beta."

The words had been worse than a punch in the face.

Just a beta.

Unlike little Linus, who was finally the alpha heir Dad had always wanted. Demir was just a beta who made near-perfect grades and who was heading to medical school in the fall, but he still wasn't alpha. And he never would be.

"I don't know what to do," he said to the marker. "I won't give them up for him. I love Brandt and Oliver too much. I need them too much. But what if they don't need me the same way? What if Dad's right, and I'm just a beta? The mating bond binds Brandt and Oliver together, but what really binds me to them? Great sex?"

Omegin didn't answer.

Demir shivered, soaked to the bone, and he sank to the floor. Back to the

wall, he drew his knees up tight to his chest and let his entire body shake. What if Dad was right? He *was* just a beta. To an alpha, he was disposable. To an omega, he was useless, because he couldn't impregnate anyone. Maybe he could only truly be loved by a fellow beta...

But I want them. So much.

"I don't know what to do, Omegin, please, tell me what to do."

The whir of the white noise machine was his only reply.

Demir rested his forehead on his knees and focused on breathing. No more, no less. Despite Dad's harsh words, Demir believed in the love he shared with Oliver and Brandt. They were genuine people with no reason to bullshit or lie to him. They did love him and need him back, maybe a little bit more than he needed them. He balanced the trust Oliver's missing memory had fractured between the mated pair.

He hadn't run from them; he believed in them.

He'd run from the derision and disgust of his own sire.

"Demir?"

Dad's voice echoed in the quiet corridor, and Demir looked up, heart skipping with dread. But Dad approached slowly, hands out by his sides in a placating gesture, his rain-slicked face so contrite Demir didn't tense right away.

"I am so, so fucking sorry," Dad said. He stopped about six feet away, his big body somehow shrinking as Demir stared up at him. "What I said was mean, and it didn't come out the right way, and I am so sorry. I love you so much, son."

"Even though I'm just a beta?" Demir snapped back.

Dad flinched. "You are so much more than your gender. You have the biggest heart of anyone I've ever known, including your omegin. You remind me of Herris so much, every single day, and not just in your appearance. Your kindness and generosity, and your zest for life. All I've ever wanted for you and your brothers is a safe, happy life."

"Just not with two men."

"I'm trying to understand it, I swear." Dad shocked the hell out of him by dropping to his knees, putting himself at Demir's level. "I talked a bit with Lars and Oliver after you left. I don't understand how anyone can share their heart at the same time, especially an alpha with a bondmate, but I do understand how you can have two true loves in a lifetime. I loved Herris with my entire being, and his death nearly broke me. And then Liam brought me

back to life.”

“I’m glad you had that with Liam, because he brought you back to us, too. To me and Tarius and Aven. But I’m not like them or you. I like different things, and I’m happy loving two men at once. They each give me something different, and I give them something, too. Oliver doesn’t remember his previous life with Brandt, but I help him feel safe, and I help him trust in his past in ways I can barely understand myself, much less explain. It’s just something we feel.”

“I can see how that might work.”

“And if it helps at all, Tarius knows about my relationships, but he isn’t exactly happy. He’s a lot like you in that he doesn’t want to see me taken advantage of, and I love him for it. The same way I still love you, Dad, but this is *my* life. Who I choose to love is frankly out of your control.”

“I know. I’d be a hypocrite to judge you based on the age difference, so I won’t.”

Demir studied his dad’s open posture and naked expression, and he began to hope. “It’s just the poly thing?”

“Yes.” Dad let out a long breath. “Maybe it would be easier if it was a beta couple you’d fallen for, but they’re a bonded pair. As an alpha, I have a difficult time imagining needing a third person added to my pair. The idea of anyone else being with Liam...I’d want to pluck their eyes out for even seeing him naked, much less...touching.”

Demir really didn’t need that mental image, but at least his dad was trying, instead of simply being dismissive.

“Oliver and Brandt are so unique, though, Dad. Oliver told me himself that he wouldn’t have trusted Brandt’s claim on him unless I was there, because Brandt was stuck between us. He thought he had to choose, and he wanted us both, and our feelings are real. Oliver saw that. He saw Brandt’s struggle to choose between us, and it made Brandt’s claim on Oliver more real. I can see it from Oliver’s side so well, because he can’t smell, and a beta’s nose is a quarter as keen as an alpha or omega in their prime. We have to trust our gut, not our noses.”

“That makes sense.” Dad inched closer until he was leaning against the same wall, an arm’s reach away. “I overreacted, because I was flat-out not expecting anything like what happened today. I thought maybe one of you boys had a problem you couldn’t come to me or Tarek about.”

“Surprise.”

Dad chuckled. “Sometimes it’s hard to remember you’re an adult now. I want to protect you like you’re still a little kid who can’t face the bogeyman alone, and that’s not fair. I may not understand how you can love two men, but I promise, Demir, I will try. I can’t lose you. I can’t lose any of my boys.”

Demir’s heart ached with so many things, but he had to hear it first. “You won’t try to interfere or change my mind?”

“No, I won’t. I never expected my second chance with Liam, much as I imagine Lars never expected a second chance with Oliver. If you are part of that second chance, if you are what makes their second chance work? I won’t interfere, I promise.”

With a soft cry of relief, Demir launched himself at his dad. Isa Higgs tugged Demir close and hugged the breath out of him, and Demir hugged him back. Needing the bigger man’s love and support after all the stress of the last few days. Needing to know his sire had his back, no matter what. That even though Dad didn’t understand it, he was willing to stand by Demir and support him.

As Demir navigated this new chapter of his life, his sire’s unwavering support was everything.

TWENTY-SEVEN

TWO WEEKS Later

Brandt's shout down the hall as he came—again—nearly rattled the walls, and Demir really hoped the neighbors didn't mind the near-constant soundtrack of the last two days. Oliver's heat would end in about four more hours, give or take, and Brandt had been an alpha on a mission from the moment it started. Knotting his omega as frequently as Oliver would allow—which was every surge and a few times in between, when Brandt wasn't busy fucking Demir.

And Demir didn't mind the minor lack of attention, given the amazing news Dr. Troi had bestowed upon their family earlier in the week: despite his age, Oliver was still fertile. The effects of the sterility drug Dr. Sorenson had been secretly giving Oliver were completely out of his system, and a few tests confirmed that Oliver's choice to stop taking them over a decade ago was why he'd become pregnant with Eriq.

While all three members of their triad were excited by the possibility of a baby, they were also managing their expectations.

If it happened, they would all three love and raise the baby, and Demir adored the idea of having a child with Brandt and Oliver. Maybe the boy wouldn't be biologically his, but Demir would love him as fiercely as either biological parent.

Demir shifted uncomfortably on the couch where he'd been studying for an upcoming practice final. The plug Brandt had kept in his ass for the better

part of Oliver's heat made sitting on anything a challenge, but Demir loved it. Loved knowing that even with an omega in heat, Demir's alpha still wanted to fill his ass and mark him the same way his knot filled Oliver.

The plugs were also to keep Demir nice and stretched. Brandt still lovingly filled him with four fingers and teased about using his entire fist, and they were building up to it. One day, Demir would be ready to do that for his alpha. For now, they were sharing other things.

They'd shared Oliver's first surge, Demir eagerly sucking Oliver's cock through two orgasms, while Brandt first gorged on slick, and then fucked Oliver to their first knot. Demir hadn't been sure they'd really want him around for the heat, because alphas were known to be insanely possessive during those forty-eight hours of natural slick, flying pheromones, and lust-filled fucking. But Brandt had eagerly accepted him into their bed, and Demir was so honored to be part of the first surge that he gave them their privacy for the others.

He was content to keep house and prepare meals for his men, happy with his place in their lives. Coming out to family and friends as being in a poly relationship had been stressful for Demir and Brandt. Tarius still wasn't convinced, even after meeting his boyfriends, but he'd promised to keep an open mind. Aven just clapped him on the back and joked about not accidentally getting knocked up from all the sex he was having—not biologically possible, but Demir had laughed all the same.

Explaining it to Layne and Linus, though, had been as simple as, "These men are both Demir's boyfriend, and they love each other." All they'd wanted to do after that was play with Eriq.

The next generation was going to change the world.

Eriq was still getting used to his new life in Sansbury, and he'd been depressed for the first week or so. He hadn't understood why Uncle Diego couldn't come live with them, and they still hadn't found the right way to tell Eriq the devastating truth about Diego before Oliver's heat hit. Then he'd gone to stay in Demir's room at the Higgs house, while Demir stayed here with his men.

Demir stared at the half-open bedroom door down the hall, his heart breaking all over again for the news they'd gotten from Rainier less than three days ago. Diego had been found dead in their condo, a bullet to the head and a suicide note pinned to his chest. The note apologized over and over for hurting Oliver and confessed to tampering with the ballistics on the bullet

that killed Oskar. That Diego had, in fact, set Oskar up to be killed that day so Diego could have what he'd always wanted: Oliver and Eriq.

Diego had apparently used the trafficking ring bust as his opportunity to get rid of his own brother. And according to Rainier investigators, they still didn't know who'd connected Walken to Modesto in the official file. They probably never would. Maybe the goddess had simply made sure Oliver Strand Lars got as many answers as he needed in order to move forward with his life.

Oliver had been inconsolable until the craze of heat took him, and they still had to deal with Diego's confession, death and resulting financial fallout once the heat ended. And they would. As a trio.

As a family.

They were also expecting a visit from Oliver's parents in two more days. Demir had been in the room when Brandt made that phone call, holding Oliver tightly in his arms while Brandt tearfully told the older couple their son was alive. Then Demir had held Brandt while Oliver spoke to the parents he didn't remember. The entire thing had left Demir in tears and so happy to have witnessed it.

The bedroom door opened and a naked, sweaty Brandt padded down the hall to the couch, his constant erection leading the way. Demir had only worn a robe the last two days, because clothes were inconsequential when he had an insatiable alpha at his disposal. He pushed his books off his lap, stood, and shucked the robe.

Brandt drew him into a tender kiss, full of the taste of Oliver's slick. "He's asking for you, Little Blue."

Heat prickled across Demir's skin, and he followed Brandt into the bedroom, where a very fucked-out Oliver lounged on his stomach, his red ass shiny with slick and semen. Oliver pulled Demir onto the bed and rolled so Demir was on his back with Oliver between his legs. Oliver's erection humped his belly and did wonders for bringing Demir's dick back to life.

"When the last surge hits," Oliver whispered, "I want to be inside you while Brandt is inside me."

"Yes, please," Demir replied. As much as he loved the heavy slam of Brandt's cock, he adored the slow, tender way Oliver slid in and out of his body when they made love.

They kissed for a long time, and Demir didn't realize Brandt had left until he returned with a tray of food and drinks for them all to share. They ate and

kissed and touched and laughed, and Demir had never been more content in his life. Never felt more loved or included, more trusted or seen, especially during the most intimate time of a mated pair's life—moments Demir would treasure forever.

“Oh,” Oliver said as he clutched his lower belly. “It’s starting.”

Brandt cleared the bed before turning Demir onto his stomach and gently easing the plug out. Two fingers pressed inside and stroked Demir’s gland, and Demir’s cock swelled. “I think he’s wet enough for you, sweetheart.”

Demir rolled onto his back and spread his legs. Oliver crawled between them and pushed inside in one smooth stroke. As the surge took hold, he fucked Demir faster, harder, a man possessed of finding release for the hormones coursing through his blood. Brandt knelt behind Oliver, grabbed his hips, and slid into his bondmate.

It wasn’t perfect. It was messy and unpracticed, full of fumbling and slick and hands and moans, and it was everything Demir had ever wanted. Oliver came inside him and never stopped moving, mixing his come with Brandt’s, and Demir let out a long, content sigh. They moved together forever, and it was still over too soon.

Brandt yelled both their names as he came, stilling inside Oliver as his knot expanded, trapping his semen inside his mate, and pressing on Oliver’s gland. Oliver kept trying to fuck Demir, but his thrusts were shallow, almost unconscious. He came one more time inside Demir before stilling. Brandt eased his big body down on top of them in a way that didn’t squash Demir too badly, and they stayed connected, basking in what they’d done.

Together.

Oliver began going soft at almost the same time that Brandt pulled out of Oliver, and even without being able to scent the change, Demir knew the heat was over. And he’d been part of it from start to finish. Oliver was a boneless mess Demir took great pleasure in licking clean with Brandt’s help. Then Demir thoroughly cleaned Brandt’s soft cock, going down far enough to lick his taint and asshole.

Brandt growled and flipped Demir onto his stomach to eat him out, thrusting his tongue into Demir’s hole, laying a claim to him in his own way. Demir smiled against the sheet, exhausted and sated, and so perfectly in love he thought his heart might burst.

Maybe poly relationships were rare, but this was his life. His heart and body had chosen these two very different men. Demir had no illusions their

life together would be easy, but every fight, every outside battle, every rude comment or sneer would be worth it. He'd fallen head over heels for Brandt and Oliver Lars, and Demir would do everything in his power to protect this beautiful life they'd built together.

Always.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A.M. Arthur was born and raised in the same kind of small town that she likes to write about, a stone's throw from both beach resorts and generational farmland. She's been creating stories in her head since she was a child and scribbling them down nearly as long, in a losing battle to make the fictional voices stop. She credits an early fascination with male friendships (bromance hadn't been coined yet back then) with her later discovery of and subsequent love affair with m/m romance stories. A.M. Arthur's work is available from Carina Press, Dreamspinner Press, SMP Swerve, and Briggs-King Books.

When not exorcising the voices in her head, she toils away in a retail job that tests her patience and gives her lots of story fodder. She can also be found in her kitchen, pretending she's an amateur chef and trying to not poison herself or others with her cuisine experiments.

Contact her at am_arthur@yahoo.com with your cooking tips (or book comments). You can also find her online (<http://amarthur.blogspot.com/>), as well as on Twitter (http://twitter.com/am_arthur), Tumblr (<http://www.tumblr.com/blog/am-arthur>), and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/A.M.Arthur.M.A>).

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