

Chapter 31 - Selling Myself To The Alpha

Axel POV

I run back home as fast as I can. I grab a blanket and toss it onto the backseat of my car before I speed to Liana's cottage.

Today's conversation with my parents was a wake-up call. They want me to marry and in a moment of anger, I agreed to something that I should not have. I only wanted them to get off my back and spoke too soon.

And they will hold me to that. I need to get through to Liana. I need her to let go of Wyatt and accept me as her mate. And I need to do it fast.

"Are you ready?" I shout as I walk through the front door.

"Yes," she replies as she takes her bag and walks to me. "But it has hardly been ten minutes, let alone twenty."

"Good, you can read time," I tease her before I take her hand and drag her to my BMW.

"What the hell has gotten into you?" She laughs as I open the door for her.

"Sheer brilliance," I quickly kiss her on the lips before I close the door and get into the driver's seat.

"You're so confusing right now," She squints her eyes and turns to me as I drive.

"It's not complicated," I smirk. "I was unsettled, then you comforted me, and an idea hit me."

"May I ask why you were upset?" She asks gently.

"Only if you want to spoil this moment," I grind my teeth. The very last thing I want to do is discuss Angela.

"Okay, so tell me what I am to be expected on Monday," she changes the subject.

She listens intently as I tell her in detail what her new employment entails.

"Here we are," I announce, and she looks around.

“But this is nowhere,” she laughs nervously.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” I ask as I look at the surroundings. As far as the eye can see, there are trees and shrubs. We are literally in the middle of the woods. “I always come here when I had enough of people. At this spot, you cannot hear any noises other than nature.”

“I bet it’s scary here at night,” she ponders.

“Liana,” I look her in the eyes and all playfulness evaporates. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she whispers after a moment. “Yes, I do.”

“Good,” I sigh relieved and give her a quick peck on the lips. This will not work if she does not trust me.

“I’m going to shift,” I quickly take her hand when she gasps for air and panic sets in her eyes. “Don’t panic. Just listen, please. No loud noises or growling, I promise. You’re going to stay in the car, and I will go behind those trees. I will go sit on that spot over there and I will wait for you, okay?”

“I ... I don’t know about this, Axel,” She swallows hard and gently I stroke her cheek.

“Just ... try,” I look at her pleadingly. “Please?”

“O ... okay,” she nods after a moment and closes her eyes briefly.

“Thank you,” I lean over and kiss her long and lingering before I reach over to the back, pick up the blanket and get out. I throw the blanket open in the clearing in front of the car. I look at her for a moment and wait until she nods before I disappear behind the trees.

Liana POV

I wring my sweaty palms together and start taking deep breaths. But no matter how much I breathe, I cannot beat the rising panic. Axel’s wolf appears and I watch the magnificent animal walk to the clearing in front of the car. He sits down next to the blanket and looks at me in anticipation.

For the life of me, I cannot bring myself to get out of the car. I am being ridiculous! The only wolf that ever tried to harm me, was Brad. In fact, if it were not for Missy’s wolf, I would have been dead. And I trust Axel, he has been nothing but good to me.

“Get over yourself, Erickson,” I mumble as I open the door and force myself to get out.

My knees feel wobbly and weak as I cautiously walk to Axel. His tail gently starts wagging and I smile slightly. He is nothing but an overgrown puppy. He does not move an inch when I slowly

stretch my hand out to touch him. His fur is thick and soft under my fingertips, and I take a step closer. I slide my hand from his head down his back and a calmness flows over me.

“You’re gorgeous,” I mumble as I sit down on the blanket next to him while I keep caressing him.

He whimpers softly before he lays his head on my lap and looks at me with big, innocent eyes.

“Fine,” I laugh joyously as I rub him behind his ears. “You’re not so scary after all.”

“I believe I owe you a drawing,” I pull my bag closer and take out my sketchpad and pencils. “But I cannot do it with you on my lap.”

Axel scoffs once but stands up and goes to lie down a few steps further. I look at him intently before I pick up my pencil to start the first line.

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“All done,” I announce and turn the sketchpad towards him.

He gets up and trots closer. He looks at it for a moment before he starts licking me on my neck.

“Ew,” I complain and turn my head away.

“Are you calling me disgusting?” Axel murmurs.

“You’re you again,” I look at him in surprise where he is kneeling next to me. “And naked!”

“Thank you,” he cups my cheeks and kisses me long and thoroughly.

It is not long before I am mesmerised by his touch, and I do not object when he pushes me onto my back. His hand moves tediously slow from my knee up my thigh, over my hip and stomach before cupping my breast.

I wrap my arms around his neck and curl my fingers into his hair as desire starts building within. Slowly, he starts undressing me and soon our naked bodies are entangled on the blanket.

Being vulnerable and exposed to the elements of nature is an exhilarating rush and makes me feel alive. I reach between our bodies, and he jerks slightly when I take his erection in my hand and stroke him.

He groans from deep within his chest and I stop moving my hand.

“Am I doing it right?” I ask softly. I have never been this bold or touched a man like this before and I am clueless.

“Don’t stop,” he groans as he covers my hand with his. He tightens his grip on my hand and guides me up and down. I continue with the rhythm with more confidence, and he moans his pleasure against my lips.

“Enough for now,” he takes my hand away and towers over me before he captures my nipple in his mouth.

His lips move from my breast down my stomach towards my navel. He spreads my legs and I obey eagerly. His hands are resting on my inner thighs as his lips move lower.

“What are you doing?” I gasp in surprise when he licks my clitoris.

“Enjoying you,” he replies before he continues what he started.

“Holy shit,” I whimper when he alternates between licking and sucking. Never in my wildest dreams could I imagine that it will feel so good.

My fingers curl into his hair as my breathing becomes faster. He slips a finger inside me and my back arches from sheer ecstasy when my orgasm hits me. I am trembling by the time his tongue releases me from the sweet torture.

Axel smiles satisfied at me as he sits down and pulls me onto his lap with my back towards his chest.

“On your knees,” his voice is hoarse, and I comply.

He centres himself and I groan when he shoves into me. Without waiting for his orders, I start moving up and down. He sighs in satisfaction as his hand roams from my stomach to my breasts. I gasp for air when he captures a nipple between his fingers and gently toys with it.

I keep on moving up and down as his lips caress my neck while his fingers continue pleasuring my nipples. His other hand moves down between my legs and starts rubbing my clitoris.

My entire body is in sensory overload, and I reach my climax much too fast. I am still convulsing against his chest when he pulls my back tightly against him and thrust harder and faster into me until he reaches his own release.

I am a numb mess when he bundles me into his arms and lays down with me. For a while only our breathing is audible.

“I like your wolf,” I smile and nestle closer to him. “He’s pretty.”

“Pretty?” He groans as he playfully sucks on my neck. “What happened to handsome or good-looking?”

“Just be grateful I didn’t call him cute,” I laugh as I wiggle out of his arms and start getting dressed.

“You’re a wicked woman,” he grins before he jogs towards the trees.

I gather my things and pick up the blanket.

“I’ll carry it,” A fully dressed Axel takes it from me and together we walk to his car.

“I won’t be able to see you until Monday,” he says as he starts the car. “We have guests at home.”

“Angela?” I fail to sound nonchalant.

“And her parents,” he confirms. “They’re my parents’ friends but I am expected to be there.”

“I hope you have fun,” I look out of the window as I say the words because I sure as hell do not mean them.

“I promise you, I won’t,” he sighs heavily.

“In that case, good luck,” I smile, and he reaches over to take my hand.

“I’m going to need it,” he kisses my knuckles.

Chapter 32 Mother Needs Money

Chapter 32 - Selling Myself To The Alpha

Liana POV

“I’m not ready for this,” I mumble to myself when I wake up.

I spent the entire Sunday preparing myself mentally and still, I have ‘the first day at work’ jitters. But I am equally as excited for this new chapter.

I jump out of bed and get ready for the day. I pick out a black pants suit with a white blouse to wear. I roll my eyes when I look at myself in the mirror and reach for the concealer to hide the hickey that Axel left – again!

By the time Drew stops in front of my cottage, I have been ready for half an hour. With confidence – and a stomach full of butterflies – I walk to the car.

“Good morning, Miss,” Drew greets me formally as he opens the back door for me, and I bite back my smile.

“Thank you, kind Sir,” I wink at him as I get into the car next to Axel.

“Morning,” Axel hardly looks my way as he keeps on paging through a document and my stomach drops to my feet. The day has not even started, and he already sounds difficult.

“Hi,” I say softly and ignore him. Whatever is in that document, he does not like it one bit. The last thing he needs right now, is me making small talk.

My cell phone chimes in my handbag, and I quickly take it out. I smile when I read Nina’s message wishing me luck on my first day, and I arrange a lunch date with her. I am still non the wiser about Wilson and Stacey and it is weighing heavily on me that I am keeping such a big secret from my best friend.

“Drew,” I lean forward. “Please drop me off here, I’ll walk the last block.”

“What for?” Axel frowns as Drew pulls over.

“Can you imagine how it’s going to look if we arrive in the same car?” I raise my eyebrows at him.

“Like I’m giving you a ride,” Axel snorts. “Many employees carpool.”

“Not with the Alpha,” I say firmly. “I’m already the odd one out because I’m human, and I’m the new girl. I’m sure as hell not going to paint a red target on my back as the Alpha’s pet.”

“Liana, you’re being dramatic,” Axel growls dissatisfied.

“No, I’m not,” I open my door and climb out. “Favouritism from the boss is the fastest way to isolation.”

“Liana ...”

I cut him off by closing the door and start walking. He can be as mad as he wants. He will eventually get over it. But my time at Silver Enterprises will be one long hell if anybody so much as gets a whiff of my connection with Axel.

I report at reception and after completing a mountain of paperwork at human resources, I get my pass and walk to Axel’s office.

“Is it always this chilly in here?” I ask Juliana as she shows me my desk. I cannot remember that it was this cold the last time I was here. But to be fair, last time I had to make a life-altering decision and the temperature was the least of my worries.

“Yes,” she laughs softly. “Wolves have a higher body temperature, and we like things cool. You’ll have to get used to wearing jackets and jerseys if you want to work here.”

“And gloves,” I roll my eyes as I rub my hands together.

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After two hours my fingers are cramping from all the notes that I have taken down. Juliana continues at a merciless speed, and I am battling to keep up.

“Mister Silvermann’s office,” Juliana answers the phone and puts the line on speakerphone so that I can better observe.

“Juliana,” Shelly speaks. “Here’s a Mrs Erickson to see Liana.”

“Don’t send her up,” I say quickly, and Juliana looks puzzled at me. “I’m coming.”

I disconnect the call before either of them can say anything. Of all the places my mother could visit me, she picks Silver Enterprises. She never visited me before at my previous employment and I know this is not an emergency, she would have called.

“Dammit,” I grunt as I stand up.

“Liana, relax,” Juliana laughs. “You’re allowed to receive visitors. Especially if it’s your mother.”

“Believe me, you don’t want her here,” I scoff as I dash for the elevators.

I do not even have to wonder why she is here. Money.

I smile stiffly when I see Mother and walk towards her. Without attracting any attention to us, I take her by the elbow and steer her away from the crowd towards a corner.

“This is a surprise,” I smile politely.

“You never call, so I decided to come and see you,” Mother grimaces.

“Mother, that’s not true,” I sigh. “I phone daily.”

“You phone your father, not me,” she argues.

“Okay,” I take a deep breath to calm my nerves. “I’ll alternate calls from now on.”

“So,” she looks around the building. “This is where you work now?”

“Yes,” I nod. “And I need to get back to it.”

“Fine,” she rolls her eyes. “I can see you’re busy. I won’t keep you any longer. You haven’t sent money in a week and we’re a little short.”

“Mother, I was nearly killed,” I hiss furiously at her. This woman’s audacity has no end. “I didn’t work last week, and I don’t have money.”

“But you work here now,” Mother looks at me as if I am the unreasonable one.

“For like two fucking hours,” I lose my temper. “I haven’t earned anything.”

“Sure,” she pouts and crosses her arms in front of her chest. “You don’t have money for your parents, but you can afford to buy fancy new clothes.”

“I borrowed these,” I lie smoothly. If she learns about Wyatt’s repayment, she will insist on more. And I am not counting on Wyatt. Knowing him, he will find a way to miss payments or to completely get out of it. The only reason I got the first instalment, is all thanks to Axel. “I will send you money at the end of the week when I receive my pay cheque.”

“Can’t you ask for an advance?” She asks as if it is the most obvious solution.

“Mother, have some dignity,” I hiss at her. “And no, I can’t. I’m still paying off Dad’s surgery, remember?”

“So, your dignity is worth more than your starving parents?” She raises her eyebrows.

“You’re not starving,” I rub my temples where a headache is developing. “Dad told me you still have plenty of food.”

“Bah! What does he know?” Mother scoffs. “Rice and pasta aren’t enough. We need meat and vegetables.”

“Well, it will have to do for now,” I say with determination. I would have robbed a bank if it were my father standing here. But not her and Leon. They are wasteful and lazy. “I’m going back to work now because if I don’t, I will be fired and then we’ll all starve.”

“Liana,” she calls me when I start walking away and I turn back to her. “I don’t have money to get back home.”

“Wait here,” I grunt as I walk back to my office.

My entire body is quivering with anger. How did my sweet father end up with such a wretched witch? I know she is my mother but for fuck’s sake. I am nothing but an ATM to her. And I might have minded less if I did not know that she is supporting my spineless brother with my money.

Juliana gives me one look before she turns away as I march into the office. I grab twenty dollars from my purse and walk back to Mother. I just know she is going to bitch because it is not a hundred. And yes, I do have a hundred and yes, I will survive without it, but this is more than money to me. She does not respect or appreciate me. And the more I give, the more she will take.

“This is all I have on me,” I hold out the money and she looks at it with disgust.

“Leon needs shoes,” she says as she takes the money.

“Tell him to get a job and work for it,” I cross my arms in front of my chest.

“That’s unfair,” Mother looks at me appalled. “You know very well things don’t come as easy for him as it does for you.”

“Easy?” I nearly levitate out of anger. “When were things ever easy for me, Mother? When I worked two jobs as a scholar to help support the household and still got straight A’s? Or the time that I had to sacrifice my dream to go to college because Leon was picked for the football team, and he needed money for his gear and upcoming tours?”

“It’s not his fault his football career was cut short because of an injury,” Mother’s face turns red from anger. “You were always envious of your brother.”

“He broke his leg, not his neck,” I grunt. “Nothing is stopping him from finding a job.”

“It’s your obligation as the eldest to help out,” she glares at me. “I didn’t raise you to be selfish.”

“Discussing this with you is futile,” I sigh. “You either won’t or can’t be reasonable, and I don’t have time for this. I need to get back to work.”

“How much will you send Friday?” Her eyes sparkle when she asks the question.

“The usual, Mother,” I sigh exhausted. She simply does not stop.

“But you have this new fancy job,” she says with big eyes. “Surely they pay better than the restaurant.”

“Yes, but by the time the loan is deducted, I have less than before,” I smile sarcastically.

“But ...”

“But leave now or I’ll get security to escort you out,” my voice is low from bottled-up anger.

“You’ll never do that to your own mother,” she gasps.

“Try me,” I sneer. “I had enough, Mother. You’re pushing me too far. All you care about is how much I can give you. You didn’t even call me after I was attacked to hear if I’m okay or if you

can help me. Instead, a neighbour's wife took care of me. And the saddest part of all is that I did not even expect a call from you. Now, get out before I call security.”

“I'm ashamed of you,” Mother's eyes well with tears.

“The feeling's mutual,” I grimace.

She gives me one last look filled with pain and despair before she turns around and leaves. Exhausted to the bone, I walk back to the office. This is the first time I have ever talked to Mother like this. I never defied her. I just could not take it any longer. But after years of dealing with her, I know this is not the end. No, Mother gets what Mother wants.

Chapter 33 He's A Cheater

Chapter 33 - Selling Myself To The Alpha

Axel POV

With irritation, I throw the document and it flies through the air and crashes against the wall. I cannot believe this.

My father has always been strict and ruthless, but I did not expect this. He got his attorney and drew up a martial contract for me and Angela. And she has already signed it!

I thought he was joking when he handed me the document when I got into the car this morning. Until I start reading it. I was so dumbstruck that I hardly registered when Liana climbed into the car.

Now I cannot help but wonder if that was the reason why she got out of the car. Was it really because she does not want other people to ask questions or was she mad at me?

I need to talk to her. I still cannot explain to her why I was upset but I can at least apologize for being so cold.

“Where's Liana?” I ask as I look at her empty desk.

“She went downstairs,” Juliana replies. “I think her mother's here.”

“Thanks,” I nod and walk to the elevators.

If Liana's mother came all the way here to see her, there must be something wrong. And I hope it is not her father. After seeing her drawings about her dad, there is no doubt in my mind how much she loves and cares for him.

I know it is none of my business, and she would most likely be angry at me for trying to help, but I care about her happiness.

I see Liana and her mother talking in a corner and I frown when I notice the tension in her shoulders. I know that body language all too well. Liana is angry. Something is definitely wrong.

I walk closer but stop dead in my tracks when I hear her mother's words.

“Can't you ask for an advance?”

Nope, I turn around and walk away. I do not mind getting involved, but Liana would not want me to hear this. I know that she helps her family financially and I also know that she does not want to discuss it with me.

If I get involved now, it will embarrass Liana. I will wait until she discusses it with me.

Liana POV

I am beyond relieved when it is lunchtime. It took everything from me to concentrate on my training. I just could not shake my anger and anxiety.

I know my mother; she does not give up easily. And years of experience have taught me that she will continue pressuring me until I give in. I might think I have won this round, but I did not win the battle. I know the only reason she went home, is because she does not want me to lose this job. She wants me to do well and exceed because it means more money for her.

And I must constantly fight my guilt for not giving more. I will have extra money because I am not paying rent at the moment. But what happens when my agreement with Axel expires? I will have to move out and find a place of my own. Not to mention that this job is only temporary. If I give Mother more now, she will expect it every month. She will see my reasons as excuses, and I just do not have the energy left in me to argue with her about it.

My greatest fear is that she will continue coming to Silver Enterprises. Once she realizes that, she will deliberately come. She knows I will give up and pay just to keep her away from here.

I really need to grow a backbone and tell her no. Honestly, there is nothing she can do to me if I refuse to give more money. But as I think these words, my throat pulls close and my heart rate increase as anxiety builds. I pinch my eyes close and push the thoughts aside until I can breathe again.

I take my handbag and greet Juliana before I walk to the restaurant where I am meeting Nina. She is the one person I can unload on without judgement. Nina has seen my mother in action countless times.

“Well, look at you,” Nina smiles as I take a seat across from her. “You look great.”

“Thank you,” my smile is genuine for the first time today. “Carol helped me put together a corporate wardrobe.”

“So, how’s your first day so far?” Nina asks curiously as the waiter comes closer to take our order.

“Complicated,” I sigh heavily after the waiter leaves and tell her about Mother’s visit.

“You should inform security to deny her access,” Nina advises me.

“I can’t do this any longer, Nina,” I complain. “It doesn’t matter how hard I try or how much I give, it’s never good enough.”

“You have two choices,” Nina stops talking while the waiter serves our food. “One, you keep on giving and accept the situation for what it is. Or two, stop giving them money.”

“What about my father, Nina?” I ask desperately. “He’s old and sick. I cannot bring him to live with me. Not until I am on my feet. I cannot do it to him. And just thinking of cutting them off, ignites a panic attack.”

“I didn’t say stop helping them,” Nina smiles wickedly. “I said to stop giving them money. Buy groceries and let them be delivered. Pay the utility bills directly. That sort of thing.”

“My mother’s going to hate that,” I roll my eyes. “But you’re right, I must draw the line at some point.”

“Pissing your mother off is a bonus,” Nina snorts.

“I know, but she is still my mother,” I sigh.

“And that’s why you’re still helping,” Nina nods. “But your mother and Leon have taken advantage of you long enough. And they will continue to do so as long as you allow it.”

“Let’s change the subject,” I smile weakly. Nina’s ideas make perfect sense but my stomach dives just thinking about it. “How are you doing?”

“I couldn’t be better,” she sighs delighted. “Wilson is planning a romantic getaway for us. I cannot wait to see where he’s taking me.”

“That’s nice,” I smile but I cannot look her in the eyes. I was going to tell her about Wilson today, but it seems unfair to do it now after I unloaded my problems on her.

“Why don’t you like Wilson?” Nina’s direct question catches me off guard and I quickly take a sip of my water to think of an answer.

“I never said that,” I must pick my words carefully. “I saw him for what? Two hours? It’s not enough time for me to have an opinion.”

“Liana cut the crap,” Nina huffs. “I can tell you don’t like him. I know you, remember?”

“Fine,” I scoff as I sit back. “He’s a cheater. I didn’t know when or how to tell you and ...”

“I can’t believe this,” Nina hisses and her eyes are blazing. “He warned me, and I took your side.”

“Warned you about what?” I frown. “What are you talking about?”

“Wilson told me, okay?” She whispers as she leans forward. “I can’t believe you.”

“Will you just tell me what you’re talking about?” I ask flabbergasted.

“Fine,” she huffs. “Play dumb. He told me you made a move on him, and he rejected you.”

“That’s insane!” I shout before I could stop myself. People stare at us, and I lean forward. “It’s a lie.”

“That’s what I said,” Nina seems on the verge of tears. “You’re my friend, you would never do such a thing, but now ...”

“No,” I cut her off sharply and take out my phone. That son of a bitch! He got to her first and planted a devious seed. Now I am looking like the guilty party.

“I can prove it,” I say as I send Stacey’s number to Nina. “I caught Wilson talking to a woman, calling her babe and other sweet nothings. He said it’s his girlfriend, Stacey, and he’s leaving her for you on the sixteenth. That’s her number.”

“Okay,” Nina grimaces as she takes her phone and dials the number.

“Hello, Stacey?” Nina looks directly at me. “My apologies, wrong number.”

“That, my dear friend, was Wendy’s,” she glares angrily at me. “Like the restaurant Wendy’s. Would you like fries with that?”

“That deceitful dick,” I grunt as I close my eyes for a moment.

“I can’t believe this,” Nina looks at me with hurt in her eyes. “Whatever is going on between you and Wilson, should come to an end. Without these preposterous stories. Because just as I know you wouldn’t make a move on him, I know he wouldn’t cheat on me.”

“Fine,” I look at Nina. “I’m not going to fight about this here. I told you the truth about Wilson, my conscience is clean. Whether you believe me or not, is up to you. We have been best friends for years and I never lied to you before, and I sure as hell never made a move on any of your boyfriends. What would I possibly have to gain to start now?”

I take money from my purse and place it on the table as I stand up.

“I love you, Nina,” I say sadly. “You’re my best friend in this world and I wish I was lying about Wilson, but I’m not. When – and not if – Wilson shows his true colours, I’ll be there for you.”

I smile softly at her before I walk back to the office.

Can this day get any worse? I can kick myself for not checking the number Wilson gave me. He is a conniving prick; I will give him that much. Not only did he fool me with the number and sob story. He also got ahead of me, making me the evil one.

With a heavy sigh, I put my purse away and take my seat behind the desk.

Chapter 34 I Will Miss You

Chapter 34 - Selling Myself To The Alpha

Axel POV

I tap rhythmically with my pen on the desk. Things are starting to spiral out of control at a rapid speed. And I know my dad is behind it. He is trying to force my hand to marry Angela.

I just received a call from Jack’s company that they will be revising their contract with us. Which is not out of the ordinary – it happens annually.

But the clerk phrased it that they will not renew with us. And I bet the clerk was ordered to say it like that. My dad and Jack know I will pick up on it and that I will do anything in my power to keep the contract. Including marrying Angela.

Well, the joke is on them.

There are plenty of software companies out there and I will find them.

“Juliana,” I say over the intercom. “I need to leave for Dallas tonight. Please book my airline ticket and accommodation. And tell Liana I need to see her.”

Within seconds, there is a rapid knock on the door, followed by Liana entering.

I lean back in my chair and leisurely look her up and down. She looks stunning.

“I can see what you’re thinking, and it’s not a good idea,” she rolls her eyes as she sits down.

I quickly hide my smile behind my fist. She is right about my thoughts, but it did not cross my mind to actually act on them. Especially not on her first day. She is overwhelmed enough as it is. But I am curious to see if she really would resist me.

“And why is it a terrible idea?” I get up and walk over to her. I go stand behind her and gently start massaging her shoulders.

“For starters, it will be highly suspicious if you lock the door,” her voice is surprisingly steady but the goosebumps over her body betray her.

“Then I won’t lock the door,” I tease as I glide my hands into her blouse and cups her breasts.

“Somebody might come in,” her breathing is shallower than a moment before.

“Juliana will not allow that without my permission,” I play with her nipples until they are hard against my fingertips.

“She might come in,” Liana argues, and I let go of her.

I pick up my phone and keep my eyes on a flustered Liana.

“Juliana,” I keep my voice steady. “Please go to HR and bring me Liana’s file. I need to verify the information.”

“Any other excuses?” I ask as I put the phone down and walk to her.

“Time,” she looks at me. “There’s not enough time.”

“Then we shouldn’t waste any by talking,” I take her hand and pull her up against my chest. Her lips are soft and willing. I sigh contently against her lips as I pull her closer. Kissing her is just as exhilarating as it was the first time. I slowly let go of her and rest my forehead against hers.

“It’s never a bad idea to kiss you, Liana,” I whisper hoarsely before I walk around my desk.

“How is your day so far?” I ask as I take my seat.

“F ... fine,” she clears her throat and sits down.

“No questions, suggestions or requests?” I smile, allowing her to speak her mind.

“Nope,” she smiles politely.

“I saw your mother came to visit,” I say, and she turns pale.

“I’m sorry,” she immediately seems upset. “It will not happen again, I ...”

“Geez, Liana, relax,” I look at her surprised. “She’s welcome to see you here. I was only going to ask how your father is doing?”

“He’s fine,” she relaxes. “Thank you.”

“Is something wrong?” I ask cautiously. “Something that I can help with?”

“No,” she shakes her head. “Everything is fine. I ...”

“Everything is not fine,” I say sternly, and she swallows hard. “But you don’t have to tell me what’s wrong. Just know that I’m here if you want to talk, okay?”

“I appreciate it,” she looks me straight in the eye. “But some things I need to sort myself.”

“Duly noted,” I say stiffly. It stings that she does not want or need my help. I am her mate; I am supposed to do things like this for her.

“Thank you,” she nods before she gets up and leaves. Absentmindedly I stare at the door. I gave her more than one opportunity to ask for an advance, but she did not even attempt. Why? Is it pride or shame?

Juliana comes in with Liana’s file and I thank her as I accept it. Honestly, this file does not contain anything that I do not already know. I page through it until I find her parent’s address.

I am sticking my head in a hornet’s nest by getting involved, I know. But how can I not? I want Liana to be carefree and happy, but she is so bloody stubborn when it comes to money.

I take down the address and make arrangements for cash to be delivered to Liana’s parents. She is going to bite my head off when she learns about this, but I will deal with it then. Right now, I must find a new supplier and get Angela off my back.

Liana POV

Dear heavens, that man can work my hormones like it is nobody’s business. My knees are jelly as I take a seat behind my desk.

And why must he be so observant? Why can he not be like other men that do not notice a new hairstyle, let alone your emotional status?

I nearly choked when he said he saw my mother. So much for my efforts of keeping Mother away from his office. I cannot tell him about my greedy mother. It is too shameful. And the thing with Nina, well ... that is just girl stuff. Nothing he will be interested in.

“Okay, ladies,” Axel comes out of his office. “I’m off and I’ll see you on Monday.”

Juliana and I say goodbye and I take only a second to watch him walk away. I will not admit it out loud or to him, but I am going to miss his sexy ass.

**

I walk straight to the bus stop after work. I just want to go home and wash this day off me. A car pulls up next to me and Drew’s head pops out of the window.

“Need a ride?” he grins. “Get in.”

“Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes,” I laugh as I open the door, but my smile instantly freezes when I see Axel in the backseat.

“What are you doing here?” I ask in surprise. “Aren’t you supposed to be at the airport?”

“That’s where we’re heading,” he smiles at me. “But I needed to talk to you before I leave.”

“Did I do a terrible job today?” I ask as fear and insecurities clamp my heart.

“No,” he chuckles as he hands me an envelope. “Your studies. I’ve enrolled you part-time since you said you need to work full-time. You’ll have classes twice a week after work from six to nine.”

“Are you a wizard?” I tease as I open the envelope.

“I’m not going to lie, I had to pull strings,” he smiles satisfied.

“Thank you,” I say as my heart swells with gratitude. I so wish I could hug and kiss him right now but with Drew in the car, it is out of the question.

“Don’t mention it,” he says firmly. “Seriously, please don’t tell anyone how you got it.”

“Why?” I ask with big eyes. “Did you do something illegal?”

“No,” he bursts out laughing. “But if word gets out that the faculty made an exception for you, other people might expect the same.”

“Oh,” I mumble and look down as a blush creep up my neck. That was a really stupid thing to say.

“Sir, I’ll get your luggage and meet you inside,” Drew says as he parks the car and gets out.

“Thank you again,” I smile at him. “For everything.”

He leans forward and kisses me gently. But suddenly it feels like I will never see him again and I throw my arms around his neck and pull myself closer to him. Axel sighs contently as our kiss turns passionate. The closer I am to him the more I relax, and the disappointments of the day vanish.

“Are you going to miss me?” He murmurs as his lips trail down my jaw to my neck.

“No,” I groan as a shiver runs down my spine when he grazes his teeth over the spot that he loves so much.

“Liar,” he chuckles before he claims my lips again.

“Conceited,” I smile as he pulls away.

“Very much,” he grins and opens his door. “I’ll see you in a week. Be a good girl.”

“Good luck,” I blow him a kiss as he closes the door.

I sigh as I watch him walk away. I do not want him to go, the thought strikes me like lightning. I kick off my shoes and run as fast as I can.

“Axel, wait!” I shout as I run.

He stops, turns around and walks towards me frowning.

“What’s wrong?” He asks concerned.

“Absolutely nothing,” I smile as I take his face between my hands and kiss him. I pour my heart into the kiss. I do not care if people can see us.

“I will miss you,” I admit as I pull away. “Have a safe flight.”

He looks at me in astonishment as I turn around and walk back to the car.

Chapter 35 Hot Lecturer

Chapter 35 - Selling Myself To The Alpha

Liana POV

I am up and out of bed even before my alarm goes off. Today is the first day of my art classes and I can hardly contain my excitement.

I have read and reread the information that Axel gave to me until I knew it by heart. I am ready for this. Not even the crappy events from yesterday could damper my mood.

Well, almost. I did not count on missing Axel this much and it has only been one night.

I pack a bag with jeans and sneakers to change into after work. I will use my lunch hour and the last of my money to buy the textbooks and utensils that I will need. Wyatt's payment could not have come at a better time.

Without his money, I would never be able to afford everything. I go over my checklist once more before I gather my things and leave for work.

**

I look at the campus stretched out in front of me and smile. This is my first step to a better me. I inhale deeply and walk towards the building, passing talking and laughing students.

According to my schedule, all my lectures will happen in rooms 301 and 302. Tuesdays in 301 with Collins and Thursdays in 302 with Harris.

Hastily I search for room 301, but I cannot seem to find it. I am on the verge of panic. If I do not find that room soon, I will be late for my first class.

I pull out the map and try and figure out where I went wrong when a deep charming voice talks behind me.

"Are you lost?"

"I think so," I mumble and turn around, only to have my breath stolen from me.

A gorgeous man towers over me and his chocolate eyes are laughing amused. His hair is the same brown as his eyes and is neatly short.

Holy shit, he is hot. Not as hot as Axel, but a very close second.

"Where do you need to be?" His full lips curve into a smile.

"Room 301," I reply and look away. He is unnervingly gorgeous.

"Follow me," he starts walking and reluctantly I follow. "I wasn't aware that they hired new faculty members."

“Excuse me?” I ask confused.

“Aren’t you a new faculty member?” He looks at me curiously.

“No, I’m a student,” I reply.

“Aren’t you a little old to be a student?” He grins.

“Aren’t you a little rude to be allowed to talk to people?” I snap back indignantly.

“I’ve been accused of worse,” he laughs heartedly.

“And sadly, you still didn’t get the hint,” I snort.

“Here you go,” he smiles as he opens a door. “Room 301.”

“Thank you,” I nod and walk inside.

I find an empty seat as quickly as I can and settle in. Excited, I look around. If I must be honest, I can understand why Mr Hot asked about my age. I am the eldest, but I will not allow that to get to me. This is my dream, even if it came around a little late in my life.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome. I’m Mr Collins.”

Oh, dear goddess, I close my eyes briefly before I look at the gorgeous man in front of the whiteboard. The rude beauty is no other than my new lecturer, Mr Collins.

**

The second the class finishes, I grab my bag and haste out of the classroom. It was the most interesting, but also the most disturbing class I have ever attended. Every time Collins looked in my direction, I would cringe in my seat and keep my head low. But it seems he is not too offended by my words because he did not ask me one question.

“Hold up,” Collins grabs my elbow.

“Listen,” I sigh as I turn around. “I’m ...”

“I’m Luther,” he cuts me short and holds his hand out.

“Nice to know,” I smile sweetly and start walking. I am in no mood for his charm. It is obvious that he is acutely aware of his sex appeal and knows how to use it. Unfortunately for him, I am not interested.

“What’s your name?” He falls in next to me and keeps up with ease.

“My mother taught me not to talk to strangers,” I say stubbornly. He might get it into his head to target me in class if he knows my name. He can figure it out by himself. Hopefully, I am more up to speed regarding the classes by then.

“We’re past that, don’t you think?” He chuckles.

“Mr Collins,” I stop and turn to face him. “Are you this keen on knowing all of your students’ names?”

“Only the cute ones,” he flashes me a brilliant smile.

“That’s inappropriate, don’t you think?” I raise my eyebrows.

“I haven’t even asked you for coffee, let alone a marriage proposal,” he laughs. “There is nothing inappropriate about this conversation.”

“But there is,” I argue. “You’re not talking to me because of my brilliant mind or sparkling personality. You’re talking to me because you think I’m “cute” and hoping for some form of entertainment. So, I’ll make this easy for you – you’re barking up the wrong tree. I’m not interested.”

“Wow,” he clamps his heart dramatically. “Aren’t you a little bumptious?”

“I’m also right,” I say adamantly.

“That’s not ...”

“I must go,” I cut him off and sigh relieved as my bus pulls up. “But thank you for the lecture. I found it very interesting.”

“Not nearly as interesting as you,” he calls after me as I get onto the bus.

I refuse to look his way as I find a seat. Luther might be an Adonis, but I am here to learn, nothing more.

**

I am just about to get into the shower when my phone rings and my heart jumps when I read Axel’s name.

“How was your first class?” He asks after we greeted.

“Interesting,” I reply as I lay down on my bed. “It made me realise how little I know.”

“You’ll get there,” he laughs softly.

“When are you coming home?” I try to sound matter-of-fact. I do not want him to get the idea that I count the minutes until he comes back.

“Saturday morning,” there is a wicked smile in his voice. “Do you miss me that much?”

“No,” I roll my eyes even though he cannot see me. “I’m only avoiding future miscommunications. I need to visit my parents and will only be back Saturday night.”

“Is everything all right at home?” He asks concerned.

“Yes,” I smile. “I haven’t seen my dad after his surgery, and I want to check up on him.”

“I’ll pick you up at the bus stop,” he says adamantly.

“It’s really not ...”

“I insist,” he cuts me off, and I give in.

We talk a little longer before he hangs up and I stare at the phone in my hand. Dammit, now I miss him even more. He just has a way to cheer me up and I realize I have the desire to share everything with him. I want to bore him with details about what I have learned at work and in art class. I do not know when or how the shift happened, but I have developed feelings for Axel which I cannot explain or name.

I wish I could phone Nina and tell her everything about me and Axel. She will have the answers. And I wish I could tell her about Luther. She would have laughed so hard at my embarrassment. I swallow the tears as I look at her name on my phone’s screen. This is the first time since I met her that I cannot call and talk to her. Screw that, I decide and press the button.

Just as I thought she is not going to answer, I hear her voice.

“Hi,” Nina says with a strained voice. She is always cheerful when I call her, and I am taken aback by her cold attitude.

“How are you?” I ask the first thing that comes to mind.

“Good, you?” Her brusque answer stabs me in the heart.

“Listen, Nina, I’m sorry,” I sigh. “Can we just put this behind us? I want my friend back.”

“We’re still friends,” her voice softens. “It’s just ... it feels like you don’t want me to be happy.”

“That’s not true,” I say desperately. “That’s all I want for you. That’s the reason I didn’t want to tell you, but it’s also the reason I told you. More importantly, I need you to know that I didn’t make a move on Wilson. I would never, ever do that to you.”

“I know,” she sighs sadly. “And that’s what makes this so hard. My common sense tells me you’re not lying but my heart so desperately wants you to be wrong about him.”

“Maybe Wilson told me the truth,” I reason. “He might really break up with Stacey and be faithful to you.”

“Maybe,” she sniffs.

“Do you want me to come over?” My heart is breaking for her.

“No,” she pulls herself together. “I need more time by myself to figure out what I want to do.”

“Okay,” I say stoically. “Just say the word, and I’m there in a heartbeat, okay?”

“I have to go,” Nina says quickly. “Wilson is calling.”

“Okay, b ...” Nina ends the call.

“Bye,” I finish the word and sigh.

I put my phone down and take a shower before I climb into bed with a textbook. I realised tonight that I am behind in the class. I study until I am cross-eyed before I put the book down and go to sleep.

Chapter 36 Not My Boyfriend

Chapter 36 - Selling Myself To The Alpha

Liana POV

I am in a miserable mood as I walk from the bus stop to my parents’ trailer. This week was much too long. The only highlight of my day was at night when Axel phoned.

The trailer looks exactly as I remember it.

We might be poor, and you can say about my mother what you will, but tidiness and cleanliness are top on her priority list.

Dad put up a white picket fence in the front and Mom planted a variety of flowers. The small patch of grass is neatly trimmed.

I put the groceries down, but Leon opens the door before I can knock.

“Ah,” he sneers. “The prodigal daughter has returned.”

“You can also return,” I say as I walk past him. “But you’ll have to leave first.”

The small open area room - that serves as both a dining- and living room – is also clean and tidy. Except for the area around the couch where Leon spends his every waking moment.

“Mom’s not here,” he ignores my hint and falls onto a couch in front of the television without offering to help me with the groceries. “She’s doing her nails.”

“That’s fine,” I walk to the kitchen and start unpacking the groceries. “Where’s Dad?”

“Out for a walk,” Leon replies.

“Alone?” I frown as I walk to Leon. “What if something happens to him?”

“He’s fine,” Leon snorts. “You worry too much.”

“And you don’t seem to worry at all,” I snap furiously.

“Don’t get on your high horse,” Leon gets up and glares at me. “You’re not here to see what’s going on. Dad is fine and you would’ve known if you made more of an effort to visit.”

“Well, excuse me for working my ass off to keep your luxurious butt on the couch,” I sneer.

“And you’re failing miserable,” Leon grunts. “All we had to eat this week, was pasta. One of the things Dad’s supposed to cut back on.”

“Nothing’s stopping you from getting a job,” I cross my arms in front of my chest.

“You’re such a bitch,” Leon hisses at me. “Why don’t you rub it in a little more? I tried, okay? Nobody wants to hire a retired athlete with mediocre academic records and no experience.”

“Bullshit,” I snap at him. “You’re just too lazy to do actual work. You apply for manager positions instead of entry-level jobs.”

“I refuse to flip burgers in some fast-food joint,” his face distorts in anger. “I’m worth more than that.”

“Such a pity,” I pout. “If it weren’t beneath you to earn money honestly, you could’ve had burgers for dinner instead of pasta.”

“Enough you two,” Dad intervenes, and I turn around.

“Daddy,” I shriek happily as I run to him and hug him tightly. Leon rolls his eyes as he looks at us before he walks out the front door.

“Hey, pumpkin,” he kisses me on top of my head. “Welcome home.”

“How are you feeling?” I ask as I lead him to the couch.

“Healthy as a horse,” he grins and takes a seat.

“Can I get you anything?” I ask eagerly. “You must be thirsty after your walk.”

“Water would be lovely,” he smiles, and I hurry to the kitchen.

“Here you go,” I hand him the glass. “I added lemon slices.”

“Lemons?” He asks in surprise.

“Yes,” I take a seat next to him. “I brought groceries.”

“You’re a good daughter,” he smiles. “Thank you.”

Dad and I are in deep conversation when Mother walks in.

“Isn’t this nice,” Mom smiles as she joins us. “Together as a family.”

“I like your nails, Mother,” I smirk sarcastically. The whole time I must hear they are starving but she has money for frivolous things.

“Thanks, honey,” she holds up her hands and admires her nails. “It’s all thanks to the money your boyfriend send.”

“What?” I frown. “I don’t have a boyfriend.”

“Really?” She looks surprised. “Then why would Axel send money?”

“Axel?” I gape at her. Why in the hell would he send them money? And when? It does not make any sense. “Did he send you money?”

“I just said that,” she snaps at me. “Ten thousand dollars.”

“Mother, no!” I explode. “You must return it.”

“I will do no such thing,” she snorts. “It was a gift from your boyfriend, and I accept it.”

“Dammit, Mother, he’s not my boyfriend,” I grind my teeth not to scream the words. “He’s my boss and this is not a gift, it’s a loan. I’ll have to repay it.”

“Are you sure?” Mother looks suspiciously at me as she leans back into the couch.

“Yes, I’m sure,” I sigh as I tiredly rub over my eyes. “Please, just give the money back. I don’t want more debt.”

“Well, sorry, I can’t,” she shrugs nonchalantly. “I spend it.”

“All of it?” I shriek in shock.

“Yes,” she replies.

“On what, Mother?” I am on the verge of tears. “Because it sure as hell wasn’t food.”

“I told you, Leon needed shoes,” she stares at her nails. “And he had a little loan that was due.”

“You settled his gambling debt with my boss’ money?” I jump up. “Are you mad, woman?”

“You don’t get to talk to me like that,” she glares at me with eyes blazing.

“And you don’t get to take advantage of people,” my hands ball into fists. “Have you stopped for a moment to think how he’s going to react when he learns what you did with the money?”

“Who’s going to tell him?” Mother raises her eyebrows. “You?”

“As a matter of fact, yes,” I cross my arms in front of my chest. “I’m not jeopardizing my job with lies and deceit. I will confess to what you’ve done and then I’m going to repay him as fast as I can. And until I repaid the last cent, you’ll have to come up with a plan to survive, because I’m not going to give you a single cent.”

“You can’t do that!” Mother shouts. “How are we supposed to eat?”

“You should’ve thought of that before you spend the money,” I yell back.

“Liana, please,” Dad says softly as he takes my hand. “It’s a misunderstanding. Your mother didn’t know.”

My heart crumbles when I look at Father, but I fight against it. This time Mother has gone too far. Or maybe I am becoming selfish. This week I had a glimpse of how my life could have been if I did not bend backwards every time.

“Dad, that doesn’t excuse her,” I say exhausted. “It’s not like she doesn’t know your financial situation.”

“I wouldn’t have made the mistake if you bothered to talk to me more often,” Mom scoffs. “If I knew he was your boss and not your boyfriend, I would’ve known it was a loan.”

“Why would you think he’s my boyfriend, to begin with?” Hopelessly I throw my hands in the air.

“Because a boss wouldn’t send money out of the blue, but a boyfriend will,” Mom reasons.

“For fuck’s sake,” I groan as I sit down once more. There simply is no reasoning with her. She will find a way to turn it around and make it your fault.

“Fine,” I sigh, and Mother immediately smiles. “But things are changing from this moment on. I will send you food and one hundred dollars a week. That’s all I can afford.”

“What?” Mother gapes at me. “A hundred dollars isn’t enough.”

“It has to be,” I say firmly. “Because that’s all I can afford.”

“Liana, it’s plenty,” Dad smiles. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank her,” Mom looks at Dad with disgust before she turns to me. “I insist that you continue giving us five hundred a week like before.”

“I’m not your fucking ATM,” I yell and jump up when I completely lose my temper. “Either you take what I give, or you leave it.”

“Watch your tone,” Mother gets up and comes to stand inches from me. “Or I’ll slap some manners into you.”

“Go ahead, Mother,” I challenge her and pull my shoulders back. “Bite the hand that feeds.”

“What happened to you?” Mom’s bottom lip start quivering. “You used to be such a good daughter. Now I’m ashamed of you.”

Her words sting, but I fight it. If I give in now, it is over. She will demand more and more until there is nothing left.

“I’m sorry I am such a disappointment, Mother,” my voice is stoic. “If only I could be more like Leon.”

“He might be unemployed, but at least he respects his parents,” Mother sneers.

“Wife, give her a break,” Father tries to help. “She’s doing her best and she ...”

“Stay out of this,” Mother snaps at him. “This is your fault. You’ve always been too soft with her and look how she turned out.”

Dad lowers his gaze and my heart breaks for him. After thirty years of marriage, he is nothing more than her puppet. He loves her and is stuck.

“I’m leaving,” I hug Dad tightly.

“I love you, Daddy,” I whisper in his ear.

“What about the money?” Mom asks angrily.

“I bought groceries,” I avoid eye contact and sling my handbag over my shoulder. “I packed it away.”

“Liana, don’t you dare walk out on us,” Mother threatens.

“Goodbye, Mother,” I place a hundred-dollar bill on the table and walk away.

Tears stream down my face as I walk to the bus stop. This was the hardest thing I have ever done, and it feels awful. I worry about Dad and his health. I wish I could take him with me, but I know he would never leave Mother.

And I hate that my efforts are not good enough for Mother. My entire life I have tried so hard to make her proud of me. To love me like she does Leon.

Chapter 37 Weren’t Yo...ed To Call Me

Chapter 37 - Selling Myself To The Alpha

Axel POV

I feel confident and free when I step off the plane. Negotiations went better than I expected. Not only do we have a new software supplier, but their prices are also better.

Dad and Jack are going to hate me for this, but I cannot care less.

They should not have started this game if they could not see it through. Even if I did not find my mate, I will not marry Angela.

Drew is already waiting for me, and I walk towards him.

“Is my dad still scheming?” I ask as we wait for my luggage. I am glad Drew figured out Liana is my mate. Now I have somebody that I trust to talk to.

“I think so,” Drew grimaces. “Rooms are being prepared for Angela and her parents. They will be arriving tomorrow.”

“Delightful,” I smile as I reach for my suitcase. “I cannot wait to see their faces when I do not renew the contract.”

“With all due respect, Axel,” Drew says as we load my luggage. “Don’t you think it’s time to tell Liana she’s your mate?”

“I am thinking about it,” I sigh as I get into the car. “But you know Liana, she’s going to be furious at me for keeping it a secret for so long. My timing has to be perfect.”

“That’s true,” Drew chuckles. “Good luck with that.”

Liana POV

The last of the sunrays disappears behind the treetops when I get home. I did not want to phone Axel to pick me up. I need time alone. Time to sulk and lick my wounded soul.

Things were never this bad. I worked, send money home and everyone was happy. Mother never pushed for more and more like she is doing now. And the more I resist, the harder she pushes.

All of this started with Dad’s surgery. Mother must think that I am getting a huge salary to be able to get such a big loan. And now she wants to share in my ‘wealth’. That is the only logical conclusion.

I do not turn on any lights as I walk to my room. I am not planning to do anything else but lay down and feel sorry for myself.

“Weren’t you supposed to call me?”

“Dammit, Axel!” I scream as I grab my heart and turn on the light. He is laying on my bed. His hands are behind his head and his eyes are closed. “You scared the crap out of me.”

“You were supposed to call me,” he opens his eyes and looks at me.

“What are you doing here?” I am still trying to catch my breath.

“Waiting for your call,” he replies nonchalantly.

“I needed the walk,” I defend myself. “Besides, I came back earlier.”

“Have you been crying?” He frowns as he gets up and walks to me. “Did something happen to your dad?”

“He’s fine,” I sigh and walk to the bathroom.

“Why did you cry?” Axel follows me.

“Do you mind?” I raise my eyebrows.

“Don’t you dare lock yourself in again,” he warns me. “I don’t mind replacing the door again.”

“I just need to use the bathroom, geez,” I roll my eyes and shut the door in his face. “And don’t stand there and wait for me, it’s creepy.”

“Fine,” he bangs against the door, and I jump a little. “But if you’re not done in twenty minutes, I’m coming in.”

“Make it fifteen minutes,” I taunt him as I turn towards the toilet. Now that I am over the shock of finding him in my bed, I am happy to see him. I missed him way too much for my own liking.

My eyes widen when I see my face in the mirror. No wonder he is concerned, I look horrible. I wash my hands and face before I unlock the door.

“So?” I look at a gloomy Axel who is sitting on my bed. “How long did I take?”

“Joke all you want,” he grins as he stands up and walks towards me. “You’re not going to get out of answering my question.”

“Axel, tonight’s going to go one of two ways,” I say seriously. “Either you stop asking me and we enjoy the evening, or you keep on asking and then we fight.”

Silently I pray that he chooses the first option. I want to be in his arms, and not at arms with him.

“I need to know,” his voice is firm but gentle.

“Okay,” I cross my arms in front of my chest. “Those were angry tears. My mother and I had one hell of a fight, and you’re partially to blame for it.”

“Me?” He gapes flabbergasted.

“Yes, you,” I reply. “Why did you give my mother money?”

“Because I wanted to help,” he shrugs as if it is the most natural answer in the world.

“No good deed goes unpunished, Axel,” I say frustrated. “Don’t you know that? My mother thinks you’re my boyfriend.”

“Is the idea of me being your boyfriend so repulsive that you cry over it?” He turns pale and his eyes start blazing.

“You’re missing the point,” I grind my teeth. “This is not about you. This is about my mother and her lack of boundaries. As my boss, she will stay away from you. But as my boyfriend ... well, you might as well go clear out a room for her because she will move in with you soon enough.”

“Fine,” Axel looks stunned as he sits down on the bed. “I will tell her I’m your boss.”

“And you will also tell her that the money was a loan, and she needs to repay it,” I say firmly.

“But that’s not true,” he frowns. “I wanted to help. I don’t want the money back.”

“Giving them money isn’t helping,” I groan and throw my hands up in despair. “I should know, I’ve been doing it for years.”

“Axel,” I sigh as I sit next to him on the bed. “My brother has a gambling problem, and my mother refuses to acknowledge it. That ten thousand you gave, is gone. Even worse, they didn’t even use your money for food. Everything you gave went to Leon and his needs.”

“Are you serious?” There is so much anger in Axel’s voice that I want to cower away in a corner and hide.

“I’m afraid so,” I whimper and lower my head in shame. I cannot look at him. I do not want to see the disillusion in his eyes.

Anger starts simmering and I stand up and start pacing in the room. What is the use to work my ass off to better myself just to be dragged back into the trash by my brother? How the fuck is it possible that Leon and I come from the same womb?

“Liana ...”

“Please don’t talk to me now,” I plead as I keep on pacing. “I am trying really, really hard not to lose my shit right now.”

“I’m sorry ...”

“I’m not mad at you,” I laugh humourlessly. “It’s the injustice of it all that’s infuriating. I’m trying to do better and be better, but I will always be trailer trash.”

“Do you honestly believe that or are you simply feeling sorry for yourself?” Axel snorts and I look at him stunned.

“What?” He shrugs. “Did you think I was going to pity you? Life isn’t fair, not to the rich or the poor. I might not know what it is to struggle financially but I know how hard I must work to prove myself to the world. I am more than just my father’s son. Our battles might be different, but our goal is the same – for people to recognise us for who we are and not where we come from.”

“Well, if I didn’t feel like crap before, I do now,” I sigh as sit down next to him.

“You shouldn’t,” he smiles as he drapes his arm around my shoulders. “I didn’t say that to make you feel bad. I said it because I understand. And for the record, I gave the money to make things easier on you. I’m sorry I overstepped.”

“I know you meant well, and I really am sorry about my family,” I sigh heavily as I rest my head on his shoulder. “They’re not bad people, but when it comes to money ... well, then they’re the worst. Except for my father. He’s flawless.”

“Is he now?” Axel laughs heartedly. “Then I must get to know him better.”

“And now you know why I’m so anal about taking other people’s money,” I say as I stand up. “If I didn’t earn it, I don’t want it.”

“Come on,” I take his hands and pull him up. “I haven’t eaten all day and I’m starving.”

“Do you want to go out to dinner?” He surprises me. “I know this great steakhouse. Nothing fancy but their steaks are the best.”

“Really?” I ask excitedly. “But people will recognise you. What will they say when they see me with you?”

“Liana, I don’t care,” he laughs heartedly.

“But you should,” I roll my eyes. “The last thing you need is a scandal.”

“Having dinner with you is not a scandal,” he laughs and kisses me quickly. “Freshen up, I’ll pick you up in half an hour.”

Chapter 38 If You Wa...o Be My Luna

Chapter 38 - Selling Myself To The Alpha

Axel POV

I grab my car keys and was just about to leave when I see the cars coming.

“Oh, crap,” I mumble and run to my car. Did Drew not say Angela and her family is coming tomorrow? Why are they here already?

I get into my car and quickly take a back route towards Liana’s cottage, avoiding detection.

If Angela sees me, she is going to find a way to tag along, and my dear parents will support her.

I am glad Liana and I had this talk. I understand her issue with money so much better now.

But the best part is, Liana shows character and ambition which her brother lacks. She is strong, hard-working and a go-getter. Everything a Luna should be. Once I am certain Wyatt is out of her system, I will claim her as my mate.

“Down, boy,” I reprimand my groin when a smiling Liana walks to the car. Her legs seem to be never-ending in those jeans. Her hair is curly and loose around her shoulders, but it is her eyes that make me hard. Deep, ocean-blue pools with promises of desire and secrets.

Liana opens the door and gets in even before I kill the engine.

“I would’ve opened the door for you,” I chuckle as she puts on her safety belt.

“That’s wasting time,” she laughs as I pull away. “And I don’t allow something like manners to get between me and a decent steak.”

“Good to know,” I chuckle and reach over to take her hand.

We continue our bantering until we reach the restaurant. It does not go unnoticed that Liana is keeping a distance between us as we walk to the restaurant. It frustrates me but I also know she is considering me and my reputation. Her intentions are sweet, and I appreciate it, but I am not ashamed of her or ashamed of being associated with her.

The waiter shows us to our table and hand us the menus. My phone starts ringing, and I grunt annoyed when I see Angela’s name. Without thinking twice, I turn off my phone.

“Is everything all right?” Liana asks softly. “You look annoyed.”

“It’s Angela,” I confess with a sigh. “She and her parents are here.”

“Again?” Liana raises her eyebrows and by the stiffening of her shoulders, I can tell she is not impressed.

“It’s business,” I put my menu aside. “And prepare yourself, you’re going to see her at the office as well.”

“Oh, goodie,” Liana rolls her eyes and I burst out laughing.

“Why don’t you like her?” I cannot help but ask. I know why I cannot stand her, and I am curious as to why Liana is so negative towards her.

“Have you seen and heard how she talks to your personnel?” Liana raises her eyebrows at me. “She’s an entitled socialite and has no respect for the workers’ class.”

I do not respond as the waiter comes to our table and takes our orders.

“My parents want me to marry her,” I confess when the waiter leaves.

“Is she your mate?” Liana turned two shades paler.

“No,” I smile. “It’s all business.”

“And you’re ...”

“There you are!” Angela’s voice cuts through my bones as she interrupts Liana and comes to stand at our table.

Oh, dear goddess, why? I cringe. How the fuck did she manage to find me? This is my first non-official date with Liana, and I was testing the waters to tell her she is my mate. Now this psychopath came and ruin it.

“Angela,” I smile stiffly. “What brings you here?”

“You, silly,” she giggles and rests her hand on my shoulder.

“How did you even know I was here?” I grunt frustrated. I did not tell a soul where I am going.

“Your father tracked your car when you didn’t answer your phone,” she replies nonchalantly and takes a seat next to me, ignoring Liana completely.

“Angela,” I take a deep breath to calm myself. I am going to have a serious conversation with my father regarding privacy and boundaries. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“What do you mean?” she pouts. “I’m joining you. I must admit, this place lacks a class but I’m sure they compensate for it with their food. Otherwise, you wouldn’t be here, right?”

“You’re not invited,” I hiss and Angela’s smile falters. “And you’re being rude by ignoring my date.”

“You’re not on a date,” Angela laughs and turns to Liana. “Alphas don’t date humans.”

“No, they don’t,” Liana replies sweetly before I can. “But we are a good lay, aren’t we, Your Highness?”

“How dare you!” Angela yells indignantly and jumps up. “No true alpha will degrade himself by touching a human.”

People curiously look our way and I grab her wrist tight and hard before I yank her back into the chair.

“Axel,” she looks at me with wide eyes. “How can you allow a human to talk to me like that?”

“You were asking for it,” I sneer, but I have never been more amused than now. “You will apologise to Liana and leave, are we clear?”

“I’m not apologising to anyone,” she scoffs. “Let alone a human.”

“Angela,” my voice is low and dangerous. “If you want to be my Luna, you must learn to behave and obey orders.”

Angela’s lips pull into a thin, ugly line before she turns to Liana.

“I’m sorry,” her voice is strained as she stands up. “Enjoy the rest of your date.”

Without looking at me or Liana, she marches out of the restaurant with her head held high.

Liana POV

I control my rage with a hair-thin line as I watch Angela leaves. The evening has lost all its glamour for me. Not so much about what Angela did or say, but Axel’s words are carved into my mind.

“If you want to be my Luna, you must learn to behave and obey orders.”

Well, I guess that answers my question of whether or not he is seriously considering marrying her. And the answer hurts like a bitch.

“I’m sorry about that,” Axel sighs. “I didn’t ...”

“Please,” I cut him off and give him my brightest smile. “Dinner and entertainment? I consider myself lucky.”

“I will have a talk with her about ...”

“Axel,” I interrupt him. “If it’s all the same to you, I don’t want to talk about it. It happened and now it’s over. If we are going to talk about it for the rest of the evening, we might as well order her a steak.”

“Okay,” he agrees after a moment. “But only a steak, she can’t have wine.”

“That’s fair,” I laugh.

The waiter brings our food and I sit back so he can serve me. I look up and my face freezes when I see Wilson entering the restaurant with a redhead.

“What’s today’s date?” I ask softly.

“The sixteenth, why?” Axel replies.

“I just wanted to make sure,” I mumble as I reach for my wine.

That lying, cheating bastard. He either broke up with Nina or he is still playing both of them.

“Would you mind if I send a text?” I reach for my phone.

“Sure,” Axel frowns. “May I ask what’s going on?”

“My friend, Nina,” I say quickly. “I just need to check up on her.”

“Is there something wrong?” Axel asks concerned.

“I don’t know yet,” I press the send button and stare eagerly at the screen waiting for her reply.

“Son of a bitch,” I grunt when she replies, and I look at Axel. “Do you by any chance have people that can break other people’s knees?”

“For the right price, sure,” he laughs but stops when he realizes I am not joining in the fun. “Wait, you’re serious, aren’t you?”

“Very much,” I sigh as I put my phone away and tell him about Wilson and Nina.

“She just texted me that Wilson is working late and will come over around eleven,” I finish the story. “I mean, come on. What accountant works on a weekend and late? Why can’t she see through his lies?”

“Liana, I admire how much you care for your friend, but you must stay out of this,” Axel looks seriously at me. “You did what you could when you told her the truth. She believes him because she wants to. Not because she thinks you’re lying.”

“Fine,” I sigh and pick up my cutlery. “Let’s hope this steak is as good as you claim because I need a miracle to salvage this night.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” he winks at me as he cuts into his steak.

“Okay, you’re right,” I sigh contently after my last bite. “This steak deserves an award.”

“Told you,” he grins. “Would you like dessert?”

“Please no,” I smile. “I can’t. How about coffee at my place?”

“Yes, please,” he smirks as he pulls out his wallet and calls the waiter over.

I cannot help but look at Wilson and the girl snuggling in a booth. He is so taken with her; he did not even notice me.

“Ready to go?” Axel asks and I nod.

We take two steps before I change my mind.

“Just a second,” I smile sweetly before I take out my phone and march over to Wilson.

“Smile,” I say and take a picture when they look at me.

“What the fuck?” Wilson blinks. “What are you doing?”

“The question is, what are you doing?” I grin, turn around and walk to Axel.

“Now I’m ready,” I smile before walking out.

Chapter 39 Connected As One

Chapter 39 - Selling Myself To The Alpha

Liana POV

“Are you planning on using it?” Axel asks as we drive home.

“No,” I sigh as I look at the photo one last time before putting my phone away. “I only took it because I want him to know that I know.”

“Mission accomplished,” Axel chuckles as he parks in front of my cottage.

My heart is heavy as we walk to the kitchen, and I turn on the kettle. I always knew I was just a six-month rental – as Axel called it – but tonight it became real to me. He is going to move on with his life ... without me.

I do not understand why I feel so heartbroken about this. There never was going to be a me and him. Our circumstances did not change since we signed the agreement. Maybe I only feel like this because of Angela. She is horrible.

I bet I would feel exactly like this if Wyatt picked Angela over me. I can at least tolerate Gwen.

“You seem distracted,” Axel grins as he takes the mugs out of my hands and empties them into the sink. “With eight spoons of coffee, we’ll never sleep.”

“Sorry,” I smile sheepishly. “Tonight was uhm ... interesting.”

“Which part?” His voice is low and seductive as he moves towards me.

My mind ceases and I can only cling to the countertop behind me as I get lost in his green eyes. How do I explain to him what I do not understand?

“The steak,” I murmur as my eyes fixate on his luscious lips that are moving closer. “Definitely the steak.”

“You’re making it so easy,” his lips tease mine with a soft touch for just a second before he moves towards my neck. “I can easily improve on the steak.”

“Don’t be so sure of yourself,” I close my eyes and enjoy his touch. “That was a pretty good steak.”

“Is that a challenge?” He sucks on my neck and my grip tightens on the counter.

“Only if you’re up for it,” my breathing is heavy as he continues kissing my neck.

“Remember,” he pulls away and looks at me with eyes dark with desire. “You asked for this.”

Before I can ask what he means, he picks me up and carries me to the bedroom.

“Strip,” he orders me, and I look him in the eyes as I take off my shoes. He pulls his shirt over his head as I take off my blouse. Together we take off our jeans.

“Not that,” he stops me when I reach for my underwear. “Go lay on the bed.”

Anticipation creates havoc inside me as I obey his orders. Maybe challenging him was not the best idea.

“What are you doing?” I ask as he pins my hands above my head and ties them to the headboard with his belt.

“It was a good steak, remember?” He smiles wickedly before he kisses me softly.

“Where are you going?” I ask with a slight panic as he walks away.

“To get supplies,” he replies. “Don’t move.”

“As if I can,” I grunt as I try to free my hands.

“Stop struggling,” he walks into the room. “You’re going to hurt yourself.”

I stop moving and watch him as he takes a scarf from my closet.

“No peeking,” he whispers as he covers my eyes with the scarf.

“Where are you?” I ask when he pulls away.

“I’m not going anywhere,” his voice is sultry as he glides his fingers up my leg. But before I could guess his next move, his hand is gone. He surprises me by sliding a finger along the lace of my bra before he reaches behind my back and unhooks it. There is a loud ripping sound and then my bra is gone.

“I’ll buy you a new one,” he says as he gets up from the bed.

There is a light wrinkling sound before I feel him sit on the bed again and I gasp for air when he teases my breast with a block of ice. My nipples instantly harden, and I moan in delight when his mouth’s warmth counters the cold.

I feel abandoned when he removes his lips. But it is only a second before his lips trail down from my elbow, down the inside of my arm towards my neck. And then he is gone again.

“Axel,” I fidget against the strains around my wrists. I desperately need to touch him.

“Not yet,” he murmurs before he starts kissing my inner thigh. He hooks my thong with my fingers and slides it slowly down my legs and over my ankles.

I open my legs, allowing him better access as my need for him grows with every touch. My body jerks when he glides the ice over my stomach, followed by warm kisses.

I want to beg him to end this sweet torture and take me. But I bite my lip and only moan as he disappears again. Goosebumps follow his fingers as he caresses my arms, over my breasts, past my stomach to my inner thighs and knees.

He stops once more, and I want to scream. Not knowing where he is and what he is going to do next is bittersweet and exhilarating.

His lips are on mine and I return his kiss feverishly. He drops a small ice cube in my mouth and our tongues wrestle until the ice has melted.

I hear him pick up another ice cube and he glides it down my neck. He circles my breasts and moves down to my navel. My breathing is rapid, and my body is in sensory overload when he removes the ice.

“Holy shit!” I cry out when he licks my clitoris with the ice still in his mouth. My body arches as he continues his onslaught on my most sensitive parts with ice and heat.

“Please,” I pant. “Untie me, please.”

I moan as he licks me once more before I feel him reach over me and untie my hands. With one movement, I rip the scarf off my eyes and straddle his lap.

“Hold me,” I demand as I wrap my arms around his neck and inhale his scent deeply. His arms are warm and secure around my back and waist.

I pull away softly and kiss him long and passionately before I lift my hips. I maintain eye contact as I impale myself on him. Slowly I start moving my hips as I trace my finger over his eyebrow, down his cheek and across his bottom lip.

I kiss him on his neck at the same time as I tighten my pelvic floor muscles and he groans in delight. I suck on his neck as I relax and clench my muscles until his breathing starts getting heavier.

I push him onto his back as I graze my nails over his perfect chest and torso. His muscles are rock-hard and perfect under my touch. I increase my rhythm and his fingers dig into my hips, holding me firm and steady.

My need grows higher and higher, and I move faster. I throw my head back and close my eyes as my body tightens. I am so close, but I do not want this to be over yet. But when Axel moves a hand and starts rubbing my clitoris, I lose all control.

Axel thrusts into me harder and harder without releasing his finger's grip. His body jerks against mine but he does not release me until my body convulses over and over, and I fall onto his chest completely numb.

"Don't," I pant when he wants to pull out of me. "Don't move."

"Are you okay?" he asks breathlessly.

"Yes," I snake my arms around his neck and hold on tighter to him. "Just don't let go of me yet."

I do not have words to explain it, but I have a desperate need to be close to him. Laying like this, connected as one, makes me feel safe and complete. I want to cry but I also want to laugh. I feel so happy but also so incredibly sad. For reasons unbeknown to me, it feels that I am going to lose him if I let go of him now.

"Liana ..."

"Shut up," I lift my head and kiss him when he tries to move again. "And hold me."

His chest vibrates against mine as he laughs softly.

"I do not mind this, but aren't you cold?" He asks as he strokes my back.

"A little," I admit with a sigh. I am being foolish, I know.

But before I could move, he holds me tighter as he sits up and grab the blanket. Without letting go of me, or pulling out, he lays us down and pulls the cover over our bodies.

"Are you sure everything is all right?" He asks concerned.

“Yes,” I laugh softly and slowly untangle myself, but he tightens his grip. “I don’t know how to explain it. But for a moment I couldn’t let go.”

“Has the feeling passed?” He asks gently.

“Not entirely,” I admit.

“Then we’ll stay like this until you’re ready to let go,” he says as he holds me tighter.

“Thank you,” I lift my head and kiss him long and lingering before I rest my head on his chest. I close my eyes and listen to his heartbeat until I fall asleep.

Chapter 40 How Did I Fall In Love

Chapter 40 - Selling Myself To The Alpha

Axel POV

I wake up to the tantalising smell of bacon being fried. I stretch out lazily before I get out of bed and put on my pants.

I do not want to get ahead of myself, but I am fairly certain Liana connected with my wolf last night. She just does not know it yet. I am still going to be cautious to be on the safe side, but I am convinced Wyatt is out of her system and she is starting to feel our mate bond. Either that or I am fooling myself and misreading her signals from last night. Maybe I am hopefully optimistic. I do not know, but I sure as hell am going to find out.

This week I will settle the mess Dad created with Jack and then I am going to devote all of my attention to Liana and our mate bond.

Liana is softly humming while she is scrambling eggs when I walk into the kitchen.

“A man can get used to this,” I put my arms around her waist and kiss her softly on her neck.

“As long as you can get used to doing the dishes afterwards,” she laughs.

“Carol is a bad influence,” I sigh theatrically as I take a seat at the table.

“One negative word about her, and you’re not eating,” Liana warns me with raised eyebrows.

“I’m taking it back,” I laugh as I throw my hands up defensively.

“That’s better,” she pouts as she places a fully loaded plate in front of me. “And you can thank her for the delicious eggs – it’s her recipe.”

“Hmm, I need to taste it first,” I tease, and she rolls her eyes as she takes a seat.

I do not say much as we enjoy our breakfast together. Partially because the food is delicious and partially because I do not want to ruin the moment we are sharing. I do not want to leave this cottage, but I have responsibilities waiting for me at home. I just know Angela would have told my parents about last night and they will demand an explanation. Not that I will give them any. If they find out who and what Liana really is to me, they will make her life a living hell.

“This was great, thank you,” I smile as I push my empty plate aside. “Unfortunately, I have guests at home waiting for me.”

“You’re just worming yourself out of dishwashing duty,” she laughs as she stands up and gathers the plates.

“Believe me, dishes sound much more exciting than Angela and her family,” I chuckle.

Liana’s hands are still for a moment before she turns to me with a bright smile.

“Don’t let me keep you then,” she starts rinsing the plates.

“I’ll see you tomorrow at work,” I walk over to her and put my arms around her waist.

“And thank you, this was great,” I kiss her lovingly before I leave.

Liana POV

Boom! And just like that, the serenity in my heart shatters with one word - Angela. The second the door closes behind Axel; I leave the dirty dishes and storm to my bedroom. I inhale and exhale deeply as I pace up and down.

Axel is on his way to Angela. His future bride and Luna. And the thought is eating me alive.

Never in my wildest dreams did I think this will happen. When I signed the agreement, it was about Dad’s surgery and my future. Never about this ... never about love.

How the fuck did this happen?

Infuriated with myself, I take a shower and get dressed. I need to get out of here. It feels like I am smothering. Everywhere I look I can feel him, see him, smell him.

How could I be this stupid? Did I not learn anything from the whole Wyatt episode?

I grab my handbag and walk to the bus stop.

Falling in love with Axel was not on my to-do list. Of all the moronic things I could have done, this takes the cake. And I do not need a colourful presentation to explain to me that he will never love me. It is obvious. He is the future alpha with obligations and expectations. I am not his mate, and worse, I am a human. I will only waste my time hoping that he could love me.

I get onto the first bus that arrives. I do not care in which direction it is going – it is not like I have a destination in mind. I just want to escape this aching pain in my soul.

I stare absentmindedly out of the window as I try to figure out when and where I went wrong. But my mind does not want to function beyond Axel's kind eyes and smile. Dammit, I am such a hopeless case.

The bus comes to a stop, and I am astounded to recognise the campus in a very festive ambience. Curiously, I get off the bus and go closer. Live music fills the air and mixes with passerby's laughter. Colourful stalls are everywhere selling homemade products. Everything from food to beer, clothes and even soaps.

Leisurely I wander from one stall to the next, admiring all the craftsmanship.

"We meet again," a voice says behind me, and I swing around.

"Mr Collins," I smile politely when I recognise him.

"Please," he looks like he is in pain. "Call me Luther. We're not in class now."

"Okay, then," I nod. "Goodbye, Luther."

I turn around and start walking.

"I still want to know your name," he falls in next to me.

"And I still don't see the need for you to know it," I keep on walking.

"Don't you think it's a little awkward for us to spend the day together when I don't know your name?" He smiles brightly at me.

"I do not recall inviting you to spend the day with me," I raise my eyebrows.

"Fine," he sighs theatrically. "Will you please have a drink with me? Anything, beer, coffee, water, your choice."

"Listen," I stop and turn to face him. "I don't want to be rude, but what for?"

"Because I want to get to know you better," he replies nonchalantly. "And truthfully, you look sad."

“You’re wasting your time,” I plaster the biggest smile on my face. It is unnerving to think he knows how I feel. “I’m not interested.”

“Can you honestly tell me you don’t need a friend?” He smirks.

“Oh, please,” I roll my eyes and start walking again. “No man in history has ever harassed a woman because he wants to be her friend.”

“That’s a wild assumption,” he gives me an appalled look.

“Really?” I laugh. “Give me one example.”

“Me,” he replies smugly. “Have a drink with me and I can prove it to you.”

“Are you always so persistent?” I sigh.

“Are you always so stubborn?” He wiggles his eyebrows.

“Yes,” I cross my arms in front of my chest. “As a matter of fact, I am.”

“Now that we’ve established that, what would you like to drink?” He smiles smugly at me.

I look at him for a moment. I do not believe for one second that he is pursuing this in the name of friendship. But does it even matter? I do not care how persistent he is, I am not interested. So, what harm could it do to have a drink with him? It might just be what I need to distract me from my disastrous love life.

“Fine,” I give in after a while. “One drink.”

“Great,” he gives me the biggest smile. “There’s a beer stand ...”

“Nope,” I cut him off. “Non-alcoholic. You’re arrogant enough sober.”

“This way then,” he directs me in the opposite direction. “They’re selling fresh juice with no preservatives.”

“Now will you tell me your name?” He asks as we fall in line by the juice stand.

“Liana,” I reply.

“Finally,” he clamps his heart and I laugh softly.

He steps forward and buys us each drink.

“So, tell me about yourself,” he invites as we find an open table.

“I’m really not an interesting person,” I laugh. No way I am going to share my life’s story with him. “I work and I study. That’s it.”

“Where do you work?” He seems genuinely interested.

“Silver Enterprises,” I reply and for a moment he looks surprised. “Now something about you.”

“Let’s see,” he smirks as he looks at me. “I’m the maverick of the family. I refused to follow in the footsteps of my ancestors and get a business degree. And believe me, as the oldest son, it’s punishable by death.”

“You look pretty alive to me,” I laugh softly.

“You’ll change your opinion when you witness a family event,” he sighs. “Except for a few cousins, I’m mainly ignored.”

“That’s terrible,” I look at him in shock.

“It’s the path I chose,” he shrugs nonchalantly but there is no smugness. “I want to be happy. My family can either embrace it or forget about me. It’s their choice.”

“You’re honestly going to sit there and tell me that it doesn’t bother you one teensy bit that your family doesn’t approve of your choices?” I raise my eyebrows. “It sounds made-up.”

“Oh, it’s true and I hate it,” he chuckles. “It breaks me every birthday when none of them bothers to even send me a message. Except for my one cousin, he’s cool. He always phones and sends a gift.”

“This is an awfully personal conversation to have on a first meeting,” I clear my throat.

“Second,” he wiggles his eyebrows. “And unlike most people, I speak my mind and my life’s an open book.”

“Even when people call you rude?” I smile as I remember our first encounter.

“Especially when people call me rude,” he laughs heartedly.

“Well, in the spirit of honesty, this was fun,” I smile as I stand up. “Thank you, Luther.”

“Are you going already?” He asks disappointed. “We just started talking.”

“My drink is finished, and I need to get home,” I reply. “Laundry might not be fun, but it’s a priority.”

“This isn’t fair, you know,” he grunts as he follows me when I start walking to the bus stop. “I still don’t know a thing about you, and I told you plenty about myself.”

“Luther,” I stop and turn to face him. “You seem like a great guy, but you’re wasting your time with me. And no, this is not me being stubborn, it’s me being truthful.”

“I don’t like it when people make decisions on my behalf,” he crosses his arms in front of his chest and all playfulness in his eyes is gone. “Including deciding how I spend or waste my time.”

“And you’re calling me stubborn,” I roll my eyes before continuing towards the bus stop. “Fine, do what you want, but it doesn’t change the fact that I must go home and don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

“I’ll see you Tuesday,” he shouts as I climb onto the bus.