

## Chapter 26

“You’re looking weak, Ezekiel. There are ways around those rules, and you know them. You should show the vampire prince who he will bow to when you become the Alpha. If you become the Alpha.”

His father’s words still rang in his ears long after the dreaded check-in phone call. If he became Alpha? That was all he had been waiting for, for six fucking years. Now, his father thought he could dangle it in his face like that.

He lounged by the pool while Claire and her friends swam—if he could call it that. They were in the water, but they didn’t look wet. They were still perfectly made up when anyone else would have been a wet mess. How the hell did they even do that?

“Did you tell him-”

“Yes,” he interrupted Myles.

He didn’t want to think about his father right now. How was it okay for him to punish the vampires for a minor infraction committed away from the academy, but his father didn’t even have the balls to gut the wolves

who'd killed his mate? He was such a hypocrite. Talked the talk but couldn't walk the walk.

Since Shadow had made his deadly appearance, his father used him to enforce the rules. It was him the packs feared. It was he who had blood on his hands. But his father still liked to talk like he had the juice.

“Are you coming in?” Claire asked with an inviting smile.

He lifted his beer and tried not to scowl.

“Maybe later.”

He'd invited them to spend the day to stop Derek from asking too many questions, but he knew what he would rather have been doing. He could still feel her body now, hours later. Even though she was so small, she fit so perfectly against him.

Like she was made for him.

Thinking about her made Shadow growl.

It had been a hard week. He had to leave training several times, on the verge of attacking the people hurting Ava. The coach hadn't let up on her, giving her match after match. She had fought more times than anyone else in the class, and her body showed it.

The coach wouldn't let up on her; he knew that. Phoenix Academy showed no mercy. It was how they produced all the bastards who ran the world.

So, he'd stayed away, knowing Shadow would become uncontrollable if he saw her. But last night, he hadn't been able to help- himself. He'd let himself in through her unlatched window and watched her sleep for hours. She'd been restless all night until she had that nightmare. He couldn't blame her for her mental state, but the worst was still to come. Ava would not survive it.

He still wanted her to get out of the academy, but now it was so they would stop hurting her,

As he took a swig of his beer, as if he'd summoned her, he caught her sweet scent in the air and frowned.

"Maybe we will have sorted it out by next weekend. It's our last year; we don't want to break any rules now," Derek said.

They were still talking about his father, but Shadow was a mess in his head, fighting for control. His so-called true mate was near. What was she doing? She should have been resting in her dorm.

"I'm going to clear my head," he told Derek and Myles.

"I'll come with you," Claire offered as she started to walk out of the water.

He knew what she wanted. He never usually cared where he had her, so these walks always became something else. But even the thought of it had Shadow ready to rip her apart. Claire no longer had any right to his body.

“Stay,” he growled.

He didn't wait to see her reaction as he walked around the pool and headed to the woods. Ava's scent was so strong that he had an idea of where she was. He didn't dare let Shadow out so he could run there quicker. It had been almost a week since he let his wolf out for a run, so they were both antsy. But it was better this way. Shadow had already catalogued the scents of the people who had trained with Ava. Letting him out was a bloodbath waiting to happen.

The closer he got to Jared's house, the stronger the scent got. He stayed downwind so Jared and his pack wouldn't smell him, too. But the moment he could see Jared's house, he wished he had stayed by his pool.

Ava was in a barely-there swimming suit, her eyes closed as she lay on a lounge in the sun. And Jared was sitting next to her, rubbing something on her body. His claws extended as he watched the bastard lift her arm and start rubbing it.

He put her hands on Ava's body.

Ava's eyes were closed, but she smiled at Jared, obviously enjoying it. His claws cut into his palms, but the pain didn't register. And then she moaned.

She moaned and let Jared continue touching her body.

That sound caused havoc in his body even as his rage increased. Shadow's rage increased, covering everything with a red haze that took

him back to memories he didn't like remembering. The rage felt almost like the night Shadow had emerged and shown everyone who he really was. So uncontrollable and unstoppable. His hands started to change, and his face tightened as the shift began.

When he saw her flinch, Shadow pulled back and concentrated more on Ava's pain. Even from this distance, he could see the cuts and bruises all over her frail body. That momentary distraction was all he needed to take control of Shadow and shove him back where he belonged.

He turned away from Ava and Jared before he could see anything else that would set Shadow off again and jogged back to his house as quietly as he had come.

Myles had left them, which was good. He didn't need them questioning him about his state.

The girls were still in the pool, and Claire's unwelcome scent tethered him as it had done the day of the assembly. Derek and unclenching his bloody fists as he tried to ignore the threatening growls in his head. Shadow was becoming a danger to everyone. He believed his mate was with another man.

He tried not to think of what he had seen so he could calm the other half of him, but the wolf's pain was his pain.

His chest was caving in.

His heart had been cut open.

“I thought you’d be gone longer than that,” Claire said. “You’ve been walking a lot lately.”

He frowned at the way she said that but didn’t respond as he sat back on the lounge. He didn’t pick his beer back up. He probably shouldn’t have touched it in the first place because it made his human side mellow, but he’d thought he had placated Shadow enough with the nighttime visit and contact with Ava. He’d thought it would be safe to loosen up a little.

“Where did you go?”

Could the woman not see he was struggling here? Could she not tell he was about to lose control?

“You probably need to sleep more. It’s not good to stay out all the time.”

That made him look at her sharply. What did she know about him staying out all the time?

“I think you’re right. I need to sleep. You should go.”

He didn’t miss the look she gave him before she looked down and gave a fake smile.

“Of course. Call me when you need me.”

He didn’t know how long they took to leave, but the moment her scent was gone, it was replaced by Ava’s. He growled and shoved Shadow back.

Was this what the whole semester would be like? Constantly struggling not to kill people? Craving the human like she was the air he breathed? It was only the first week, but he had already stopped several disasters. How much more of this could he take?