

Chapter 3 Coming-of-age Ceremony

Lia

When I was called to the administrative office the next day, I was a bundle of nerves. I didn't understand why they called me here. Wasn't it enough that I handed in the form?

With a shaky sigh, I tucked an ebony lock behind my ear. My blue eyes darted around the room, waiting for the staff member to come into the room and talk to me.

"Thank you for coming here, Lia Brown."

I resisted the urge to squirm in my seat, even though the urge was great.

"I signed the paper and returned it. Why am I here?"

She blinked. "Miss Brown you're not in trouble. We just have to move your ceremony to next week to accommodate a speaking guest we booked at the last minute. The staff will be busy with preparations so I hope you can understand."

"What?" I blurted out. "I want to get this over with; not wait another few days!"

"Miss Brown please calm down," the woman muttered, glaring at me from across the desk. "I understand you are eager to find your mates—"

"No, you don't understand because that's not what I want. I don't want to do this at all. If I had my way I would never go through this mating ceremony for as long as I live!"

Her face fell, eyes rolling dramatically.

"Ah, so you are one of those. Well, let me tell you Miss Brown that not going through with the ceremony—"

"—is social suicide, yes I know. I've been through this already with my best friend."

"Then you should listen to your friend because she is very bright. You don't have to go through with this ceremony, but I would strongly suggest that you do otherwise you're going to find it hard to live in society."

I resisted the urge to glare back.

"I know that, Ma'am."

"Then put on a brave smile and understand that you'll be having your coming-of-age ceremony next week rather than this week. If anything changes then we'll let you know."

When I left the office, I wasn't expecting Simone to be hovering just outside the door. I collided with her, stumbling backward and nearly falling flat on my ass.

"Lia!" Simone cried, holding out her hands towards me. "I'm sorry! I was just waiting for you."

Even though I was angry, I took her hand without much fuss. "It's fine, Simone."

"So what did they want?"

"They are postponing my coming-of-age ceremony until next week because some guest speaker is coming by."

Simone frowned. "Guest speaker? Wait..."

"What?"

"It's nothing."

"Simone, it's something! You're not even looking me in the eyes."

Simone grabbed my wrist, pulling me down the hall until she found an empty classroom where we could duck inside. I was getting confused and more agitated by the second, trying to figure out just what my best friend was keeping from me.

"I was bringing some papers into the teacher's lounge and I heard that the guest speaker is going to be the Crimson Chargers."

I paled. "As in the Rugby team from Ironwood College?"

"Yes."

"As in the Rugby team that my brother and his friends are on?"

"The very same."

I sat in the closest empty seat, wishing I could sink into the ground and take myself away from here.

"Why are they coming here as special guests? Isn't it enough that our school is affiliated with them?"

Wasn't it also enough that I had to see them several times a week when I got home from school? This school was my one sanctuary from them. I didn't want to have to walk through these halls, fearing that anytime I turned the corner I could run into one of them.

But now my sanctuary was turning into a bloody nightmare.

"I'll skip class."

"Attendance is mandatory, Lia. If you don't go they'll write you up."

I huffed. "So? What do I care if they write me up? I have good attendance and grades!"

"Lia, you know how this school treats the Rugby team. They are royalty. The principal won't hesitate to screw you over if you skip it."

Sometimes I hated the fact that my brother and I went to this private academy. Our parents had been aluminis here so tuition was cut in half. Once they died, the school did the charitable thing and waived the rest of the tuition. It was done out of pity, but it was affordable.

The same went if we went to Ironwood College. Our parents were aluminized so tuition would be waived.

"Shit."

"We'll just sit in the back where they can't see us," Simone assured me.

I smiled weakly. "They are very familiar with my scent, Simone. I don't know if it's going to work."

They would seek me out away from the prying eyes of teachers, students, and anyone who could call out their behavior to torment me. I could appeal to my brother, but what was the point? He'd always take their sides.

"We'll figure it out," Simone assured me.

When lunch came around, I didn't even want to eat. My stomach was doing flip-flops and any food would cause a dangerous reaction. Sighing, I pushed my food away, ignoring the disapproving look from Simone.

"I don't feel like eating," I told Simone who sighed.

"You need to eat to keep up your strength! The coming of age ceremony can take a lot out of people, especially with that bitter medicine they force you to eat."

I wrinkled my nose. "Is it that bad?"

"It's very strange," Simone admitted. "That's the best way I can describe it."

None of this bodes well for me at all.

Any doubt I had that Simone may have been mistaken by what she heard in the teacher's lounge was dashed when I received an email the next morning sent to all students.

Subject: Exciting Visitors on Campus This Friday!

Dear Students,

We are thrilled to announce that this Friday, Aspen School will welcome some special guests from Ironwood College: the Crimson Chargers, the college's esteemed rugby team! This is a fantastic opportunity for all of us to meet these talented athletes, learn about their experiences, and gain insights into college life and sportsmanship.

The Crimson Chargers will be visiting our school at 9:00 Am sharp and will host a special session in the auditorium. During their visit, they'll share their journey, conduct a Q&A session, and possibly showcase some rugby techniques.

We encourage all students to attend and show Aspen School's signature spirit of hospitality and curiosity. If you're passionate about sports, teamwork, or considering college in the future, this event is not to be missed!

Let's give the Crimson Chargers a warm Aspen welcome!

Best regards,

Aspen School Staff

I glanced at my brother across the table who was eating his breakfast without a care in the world.

"Michael, why the hell didn't you warn me about this?"

"Warn you about what?"

"About the fact you and your friends are giving a speech at the school on Friday!"

Michael blinked. "Oh, I didn't think I had to. Why does it matter?"

"Well, because of you and your team, my coming-of-age ceremony was pushed back."

"Lia, the coach, and the dean are the ones that set up everything. We were just told when and where to show up. That's the extent of the information we were given."

I huffed. "I still would've liked a warning!"

When I looked at my brother it was like looking at a mirror. We had the same raven hair, ocean-blue eyes, and pale skin. Even our facial features were the same. It was a shame I hadn't been gifted with height like my brother.

"Again, it was out of my hands. If it makes you feel any better, none of the guys are going to be there, Lia. It's just me. The coach chose a few of us to go. I was the unlucky one."

"I'm sure they're giving you a hard time about that too."

Michael grinned. "That's an understatement, little sister."

My anxiety had faded, but I wondered if this was one of my brother's tricks. Sometimes he liked to tease me as much as his friends did. Rarely did he like to do it more than them.

"I need to get to school."

"Need a ride?"

"No, Simone is picking me up."

I needed to learn to drive sometime soon to give myself more independence.

With one last glance towards my brother, I left the house. I still had a nervous feeling in the pit of my stomach that I couldn't shake no matter how hard I tried.