

To heal a Rogue #Chapter 5: Mate 1 - Read To heal a Rogue Chapter 5: Mate 1

BONNIE

The night had unfolded perfectly, every moment gliding by without a hitch.

That was the part that stung. I had managed the whole thing with a steady hand, kept my head down, kept my face neutral, and done exactly what a good retainer did: nothing that drew attention. The pay at the end of this would be life-changing. Not life-improving. Life-changing. The kind of money that cleared debts and bought distance and meant I never had to be in a room like this one again, standing behind powerful people and pretending I had no thoughts of my own.

I had been counting down the hours, each one a stepping stone toward freedom.

Then the King had called the remaining guests into that smaller gathering, and I had followed, because that was my job, and I had stood near the wall and become furniture, and everything had been fine.

Until it wasn't.

King Cornelius lifted his glass, and the room went quiet the way rooms went quiet for him, all at once and without being asked, and he looked at his nephew and said the words that nearly made me drop my composure entirely.

Heir to the throne.

Alpha Lysander of Lily of the Valley.

I kept my face where it was. Polite. Neutral. Present without being noticeable. But inside, every mercenary instinct I owned sat up at full attention, because that was information. Not just information. That was the kind of information people paid extraordinary sums to obtain, and I had just been handed it for free while standing in a room I was being paid to stand in anyway.

Queen Edelina was going to lose her mind.

Prince Johann, who had been groomed for that seat since he could walk, who had sat through every diplomatic dinner and every military briefing and every tedious ceremonial function his entire life on the understanding that it was all preparation for something, was going to find out that his preparation had just been reassigned to a cousin from a provincial pack.

I was not going to be anywhere near the palace when that happened. That was the thing about being small and quiet and anonymous. You've got to leave. The ones who suffered when the big dogs turned on each other were always the ones who couldn't get out fast enough.

A smile almost broke through. I trapped it just in time.

The information had a price. I'd figure out who was buying later. Right now, I had a job to finish.

That was when I noticed the heat.

It was subtle at first. The kind of thing you could write off as the heat of too many bodies in a private space, because it was warm, genuinely warm, even with the cooling systems working overtime along the upper walls. I felt it at the back of my neck first and then across my shoulders. A low, creeping warmth that didn't match anything environmental. I didn't wipe the sweat that gathered at my hairline. That was not what retainers did. Retainers stood still and existed as furniture, and so I stood still and existed as furniture, and I breathed through it.

And then there was the scent.

Sweet. Rich. The kind of sweetness that wasn't light or delicate but sat at the back of your throat like warm butter and sugar, thick enough that it almost had weight. I had decided it was the wine. Rich shifters and their stupid, indulgent tastes. It was probably some imported varietals that cost more per bottle than I made in a month, and smelled like a dessert. I filed it away and let it go.

Then Alpha Lysander of Lily of the Valley called for a private word with the King.

I followed.

Protocol demanded it, and I had learned long before tonight that the best way to go unnoticed was to do exactly what was expected of you. So I fell into step two paces behind, kept my eyes moving the way I had been trained to, and trailed them both down the corridor and up to the library.

That pastry scent trailed after me.

I adjusted my theory. It wasn't the wine. It was him. Alpha Lysander had apparently bathed in something that smelled like a confectionery and had the audacity to stand near enough that I couldn't escape it. Typical. Everything about that man was some variety of inconvenient.

The library was cooler than the gathering rooms, at least. Old paper, cedar, and the quiet that came from good insulation and heavy curtains. I took my position near the door, let my face go blank, and became part of the architecture.

But what they said next shattered any hope of remaining invisible.

I heard every word.

My heart started going loud before my brain had caught up to why. The King was telling this man, in the room where I was standing, that Prince Johann was not his son. That the Queen had given him an heir that was not his to claim.

The King had also said with his own mouth that he was infertile.

I kept my eyes forward. I kept my hands at my sides. Every single instinct I had was screaming at me, but I held the position and breathed and prayed that neither of them was actually looking at me, because they should not have been saying this in front of me at all, and the fact that they were meant one of two things. Either I had successfully become invisible enough that they had forgotten I was a person, or they were going to kill me before the night was out.

I clung to the hope of the first option, but confidence was slipping through my fingers. My mind went sideways. Every careful thought I had about the evening, the payout, the clean exit, was scattered like someone had knocked them off a shelf. I thought about exits. I thought about how far I was from the door, whether the corridor outside was staffed, and whether anyone here would actually figure me out if I escaped, considering my real name was not what I had given them when I signed the contract for this posting. Then Alpha Lysander moved.

He swept past me, out the door, and into the corridor, and the pastry scent slammed into me like a wall. I blinked, momentarily stunned. The King let out a weary sigh, then turned, and for the first time, I met his gaze—something I knew I should never do.

"Follow him," King Cornelius said. His voice was even and worn. "Make sure he is all right. He may need a wom..."

I did not hear anything after 'follow him' if I was being frank.

My training said: Yes, Your Majesty. Bow. Go.

My self-imposed training also said: This is your exit. Move fast. Disappear into the corridor and keep moving until you are outside, and then keep moving until you are somewhere with a brand new name and no connection to anything said in that library.

I bowed, and I went through the door, and the corridor opened up ahead of me, and I started walking fast. I was certain I could not stick around after hearing that infertility talk. I had to run for my life.

Then the scent stopped me cold.

It gave no warning. It simply seized me, like the jolt when you misstep off a curb—a total, involuntary halt. My knees locked. I stood stranded in the hallway, my legs refusing to move, as the warmth I had blamed on the room all night returned, but this time it was different. This heat belonged to me, blooming beneath my skin, rising from deep in my belly, and spreading outward.

The instant I recognized it, I understood.

My heat.

It wasn't possible. It had never been possible. I had been on regular suppressants since I was fourteen years old, stronger ones since I was eighteen, because my body had never done anything quietly or predictably, and a heat was the last thing I could afford in any room I was ever likely to be standing in. I did not have heats. I had managed that particular biological betrayal into nonexistence through sheer pharmaceutical force of will for a long time.

But tonight, my body cared nothing for my carefully managed history.

The smell was coming from behind one of the doors to my left.

I ordered my feet to move. They refused. The scent tugged at something ancient beneath my logic, and the heat inside me responded as if it had been waiting for this call. I stood in the corridor, telling myself—firmly, and with mounting annoyance—that this was just a physical reaction, not a choice, and that I still controlled my actions, if

not my body. I needed to keep walking.

I was so wrong. Because I still walked over to that door and opened it.

He was inside.

The moment I saw him, I knew. Instantly, utterly, in a way that left no room for denial. Alpha Lysander stood against the far wall, his eyes too bright, too unblinking, and the scent that had haunted me all night poured off him in waves. He was in a rut—a bad one. The kind that overpowered every other scent and rewrote the very air.

I said the only thing I could manage.

"No." My voice came out shaky on the first try. I steadied it. "Not you."

He moved before I finished the sentence.

I spun to run, and I was quick—truly quick—but he was quicker, the way only something with centuries of predator instinct could be. His hand clamped around my arm, burning hot, and the world tilted. He lifted me as if I weighed nothing, pulled me back inside, and the door slammed shut behind us, rattling the walls.

I got my back against the far side and breathed hard and tried to find any part of my mind that was still operating in a useful register.

His eyes had gone completely glazed. Whatever version of Alpha Lysander had been standing in the library a minute ago, the contained, formal one with the careful voice and the iron composure, that version was no longer home. Something older had moved in behind his eyes, and it was looking at me with the kind of focus that made my spine go cold and hot simultaneously.

Another wave of pheromones rolled off him, and my knees almost gave out.

I gripped the wall.

He crossed the room with slow, deliberate steps. No rush. The certainty of someone who already knew the outcome. He leaned in, breathing me in at my temple, my jaw, drifting lower toward my neck. I stood frozen, my body refusing to obey any wish that wasn't this.

"You are mine," he said.

Tip: You can use left, right, A and D keyboard keys to browse between chapters.