

You Can Never Run From Me

"Miss me, mate?"

"I didn't."

He laughs—quiet and low, the kind that slides down my spine and settles somewhere inconvenient.

"You're lying," he says calmly, his eyes skimming over my face as if he's reading something written beneath my skin. "I can see it in your eyes. And in the way your heart is trying to beat its way into mine." His gaze drops to my lips. "Were you waiting for me?"

"Why would I wait for you?" I scoff. "I left you, remember? I escaped from your room." I give him a smug little smile. "Pretty memorable, actually."

His eyes darken. "And you will pay for that."

I lift a brow. "Threat or promise?"

"Both. But I must say, mate..." He hums, amused. "You're either very clumsy, or you enjoy falling into my arms. Not that I'm complaining."

I realize—too late, with a sharp jolt of irritation—that I'm still in his arms.

I shove at his chest, more annoyed at myself than at him and he lets me go easily—too easily.

"Why are you here?" I ask, forcing boredom into my voice.

He looks at me like I've just asked why the sun bothers to rise.

"What kind of question is that?" he says atly. "I'm here to take you home."

"Your home is not—"

He doesn't let me nish.

One second I'm arguing; the next I'm being lifted like I weigh nothing. I yelp and smack his shoulder. "Put me down, you barbarian!"

He ignores me and carries me straight toward a line of carriages waiting outside. Ten of them. His men are everywhere—silent, armed, watchful.

It looks less like a rescue and more like the beginning of a war.

"You came with an army?" I ask.

He glances at them like they're just part of the scenery. "I came prepared."

He dumps me into one of the carriages before I can argue, climbs in after me, and shuts the door with nality before I can even think of another escape.

The moment we start moving, he pulls me onto his lap like I'm something both precious and infuriating, then buries his face against my chest and inhales slowly, deeply—like he's been starving.

"I missed you so much," he murmurs.

My chest tightens traitorously.

I don't say it back but my body does. My pulse. My breath.

I stare out the window and pretend the bond isn't humming between us like a live wire.

When the carriage nally stops, he lifts me out again like it's the most natural thing in the world and carries me into a grand hotel, past stunned staff, straight to the VIP oor and into a massive, silent room that smells like him—dark pine and power.

It isn't the same room I escaped from before. And worse, the security is doubled. Not that I can escape without my wolf.

The door closes.

The silence is loud.

He sets me down—and then, without warning, pushes me back onto the bed. Not roughly. But not gently either.

I bounce against the mattress and glare up at him. "You're insufferable."

"And you're still mine," he says, almost amused.

I sit up, already irritated—just in time to see him reach for his belt.

My annoyance spikes into something sharp and cold.

"What are you trying to do?" I snap.

"Finishing what we started," he says. "I'm marking you. Completing the bond. No more running. No more games. I'm done chasing you, mate."

There's no amusement in his eyes now. They burn with hunger. With possession.

"There will be nothing in this world that can take you from me after that."

Something in his tone—feral, claiming—twists my stomach.

"And also," he adds calmly, "you can never run from me again."

I stare at him, disgust curling in my gut. "So nothing will stop you from having your way, huh?"

He steps closer, his voice low and dangerous. "Nothing."

I lift my hands between us.

The cuffs catch the light, dull metal gleaming.

He stops.

His entire body goes still.

"What's that?" he asks slowly.

My laugh is bitter, sharp around the edges. "Don't tell me you didn't see them. Or did you just not care? They must have hurt you too when I touched you."

He swallows, his eyes xed on the metal like it's a living thing wrapped around my wrists. "I felt something. I thought it was the bond—reacting to the separation."

He reaches for my wrists, then stops, as if even getting too close might break me.

"Who did this to you?" His voice drops, quiet and lethal. "Who is the bastard?"

I laugh, but there's no humor in it. "You should know. You all bow to him."

His gaze turns deadly. "Who."

I meet his eyes. Don't blink. Don't look away.

"The Alpha King."

The room doesn't just go cold.

It freezes.

He stares at me like I've just told him the sky has fallen.

"What?" He lets out a short, disbelieving laugh. "How? Why?" His eyes rake over me—sharp, assessing, not cruel, but confused. "You're an omega. An insignificant one, by every visible measure. Why would the Alpha King even notice someone like you?"

Each word lands like a small cut.

"Are you a royal slave?" he asks, frustration bleeding into his voice. "Did your family commit treason? Did you steal something? Kill someone important?"

He runs a hand through his hair, pacing once, then twice, like his thoughts are crashing into each other.

"This doesn't make sense," he mutters. "The Alpha King doesn't chain people for nothing."

I sit there and watch him unravel, strangely calm.

"He's my jailer," I say nally. Half lie. Half truth. "And he wants me dead."

Kei stops pacing.

Slowly, he turns back to me.

His eyes soften just a fraction—but underneath, something violent stirs.

He comes closer, crouches in front of me, and this time he really looks at the cuffs. Not like an alpha. Not like a warrior.

Like a man staring at a wound he can't just tear out.

"These aren't ordinary restraints," he says quietly, his ngers hovering near the metal without touching. "This is high magic. Old. The kind only the throne has access to. And only the Alpha King himself owns the key."

His jaw clenches. "You must have done something. Or he thinks you did."

I shrug lightly, as if my world isn't balanced on that sentence.

He looks up at me. "Does it hurt?"

I don't answer.

He answers for me anyway, his voice rough. "Of course it does. Your wolf..." He trails off, his eyes darkening. "Your wolf is gone, isn't it?"

That one hits deeper than I expect.

He exhales slowly, like he's trying not to break something.

"Rest," he says at last, his voice softer now. "Tomorrow, I'll storm the palace. I'll demand your release. I don't care if I have to negotiate, threaten, or start a war. You're not going back there."

He reaches up and brushes his knuckles gently against my cheek.

"Until then, rest, my sweet mate."

For a moment, I feel like I'm oating.

Like the world isn't a cage and I'm not a ticking secret waiting to explode.

Part of me wants to tell him the truth. That the Alpha King isn't just my jailer but my father.

That I'm not an omega.

That I'm the one destined to rule.

But I know he wouldn't believe me.

If I told him I was the princess, he'd think I was lying. If I spoke of destiny, of crowns and thrones, and said I was meant to be king, just like everyone else, he'd think I'd lost my mind.

And even if he did believe me... his pride never would. An alpha like Kei would never accept being anyone's queen.

He would never kneel.

He would never stand beside me in my shadow.

So I say nothing.

I let him gather me into his arms, and I lean into him, letting myself pretend—just for tonight—that this peace might last.

Even though I know it won't.

I wake to cold.

Not the gentle kind—the hollow kind.

The bed beside me is untouched, the sheets barely wrinkled and already losing his warmth. But his scent—pine, steel, danger—clings to everything. The pillow. The air. Me. It wraps around my chest like a memory that refuses to loosen its grip, clinging to my skin, my hair, my lungs, like he never really left—like he only stepped out and forgot to take his presence with him.

For half a second, panic spikes.

Then I feel it.

Eyes.

Watching me.

I freeze.

Slowly, I sit up—and that's when I see him.

A man sits in the chair by the window, legs crossed, hands folded like he's waiting for a show to start. He looks... familiar. Same build. Same sharp bone structure.

But not Kei.

Not even close.

It's like someone took Kei and stripped him of warmth, replacing it with calculation.

My heart thuds. "If this is where I scream, I should warn you—I'm very loud."

He chuckles and stands, lifting his hands in a placating gesture. "Relax. If I wanted you dead, you wouldn't have woken up."

Not comforting.

"I'm Kei's brother," he says, as if reading my confusion. "And his beta."

Ah.

That explains the resemblance. The same predator, carved from a slightly different blade.

And the unease crawling up my spine.

"Lucky me," I mutter, pulling the sheets tighter around myself even though I'm fully clothed, the cuffs still softy. "Do all the men in your family watch women sleep, or is that a hobby you picked up on your own?"

His lips twitch—but it doesn't reach his eyes.

"Kei told me everything," he says, studying me like a problem that needs solving. "He's already storming the palace, demanding the key to your release."

I say nothing.

There's something about him that's... off. He looks displeased, like my very existence inconveniences him.

"As his brother," he continues, "of course I'm happy he's found his mate. Moon-blessed, fate-bound, all that poetic nonsense."

He pauses.

"But as his beta? My duty comes rst."

My ngers curl into the sheets. "And what exactly is your duty?"

His eyes ick to my cuffs. Then back to my face.

"To ensure Kei becomes king."

The words land heavy.

"And you're a problem," he says evenly. "You're in his way."

My lips part in disbelief. "Excuse me?"

He sighs, as if I've already exhausted him. "I'm saying what no one else will. Kei marrying you ruins everything. A pathetic, good-for-nothing omega bitch."

I laugh softly. "You should lower your voice. Kei doesn't strike me as the forgiving type when it comes to people insulting his mate."

"Oh, he'll be furious," he snaps. "But he'll forgive me. He always does. We're blood, after all. And when the rage fades, he'll see I did this for him."

"Did what?" I ask slowly.

His eyes gleam. "Saved his future."

My stomach twists.

"Luckily," he says, almost cheerfully, "today is the princess's arranged marriage. Kei is already at the palace—but he doesn't know he'll be there as the groom."

"All I have to do is return you to the Alpha King. If I give you back," he continues quickly, the words spilling out like he's rehearsed them for days, "it proves Kei's loyalty. The Alpha King will cancel the wedding—"

I stare at him. "You're insane."

"—and instead of Alpha Darius," he presses on, eyes bright, "Kei will be offered the princess as his mate. He will become the next king."