

CHAPTER ONE - Amber

AMBER POV

The gym was a whirlwind of activity, a chaotic mess of half-nished decorations and loud chatter. The faint scent of pine from the newly delivered Christmas trees mingled with the metallic tang of glitter, which seemed to be everywhere—on the oor, on my jeans, even in my hair.

The basketball hoops had been repurposed as anchors for long, twinkling strands of fairy lights. Blue-and-silver banners lined the walls, each one emblazoned with the Winter Prom theme: "Under the Stars". Paper snowakes dangled from the ceiling, swaying gently in the slight draft coming from the open double doors.

Victoria, my cousin and polar opposite in every conceivable way, stood at the center of it all.

I stood off to the side, trying my best to glue glittery stars onto a centerpiece without making a total mess. My hands were already sticky, and glitter coated my ngers like I'd dipped them in pixie dust.

It looked like a unicorn pooped into my personal space.

But, Victoria, of course, was in her element. She was perched on a ladder, waving her arms like an orchestra conductor as she directed a group of football players hanging the main banner. Her jet-black hair was pulled into a sleek ponytail, and her athletic frame moved with the ease of someone who spent years perfecting her balance as a cheerleader. With her pale skin and dark eyes, she looked like a modern-day Snow White, if Snow White had swapped her woodland cottage for a leadership role in every high school committee imaginable.

"Amber, you're spacing out again!" Victoria's sharp voice snapped me back to reality. She'd climbed down from the ladder and was now standing in front of me, her arms crossed.

"Sorry," I mumbled, dropping the glittered star onto the table.

She sighed, shaking her head in mock disappointment. "You're hopeless. Please tell me you've at least picked out a dress for the prom?"

I hesitated, my cheeks heating up. "Not yet."

"Amber!" She groaned dramatically, throwing her hands in the air. "The prom is in a week! What are you waiting for?"

"Well..." I hesitated. She was going to ip, I just knew it. "I was thinking about wearing that navy blue one Mom bought for Aunt Linda's wedding." I rambled the last sentence at high speed, hoping she wouldn't catch each word. WRONG.

"What?!" Victoria's voice was a mix of horror and exasperation. "No. Absolutely not. You can't wear something off the rack from two years ago! This is your rst prom. You need something stunning, something that makes people stop and stare."

"Yeah, so they can laugh at me," I muttered under my breath.

Victoria frowned. "No one's laughing at you. And if they are, it's because they're jealous. You have no idea how gorgeous you are, do you?"

I rolled my eyes. Gorgeous. Sure. With my too-wide hips, thighs that refused to cooperate with skinny jeans, and a chest that seemed to have exploded out of nowhere last summer, I was about as far from gorgeous as you could get.

Do you at least know if Christian's renting a car, or are you riding with me and Malcolm?"

The mention of Christian made my face burn even hotter. "I haven't asked him yet," I admitted, my voice barely above a whisper.

Victoria's dark eyes sparkled mischievously. "Oh my God. You like him, don't you?"

I opened my mouth to protest, but the words wouldn't come. Instead, a memory surfaced, unbidden and vivid, and I was powerless to stop it.

It had started a few weeks ago during calculus. I'd been scribbling notes when I felt someone's gaze on me. Lifting my head, I caught Christian looking at me from across the room. He wasn't like the others—not like the Savage Triplets, as I started calling the Alpha's sons, who only looked my way to smirk, play pranks or whisper something cruel to their friends.

Christian's gaze wasn't mocking. It was warm, curious. Like he was seeing something in me I didn't even see in myself.

It happened again and again after that. In the cafeteria, in the library, even during pack training. I'd glance up, and there he'd be, his hazel eyes soft and kind.

Then, last week, he'd nally approached me.

"Hey, Amber."

I'd been at my locker, fumbling with the books I needed for my next class. His voice made me freeze, and when I turned around, there he was—dark-haired, tan-skinned, with that easy smile that made my heart skip a beat.

"Hi, Christian," I'd managed to say, my voice embarrassingly breathless.

He rubbed the back of his neck, looking uncharacteristically shy. "So, uh... the prom's coming up."

I nodded, my heart pounding in my chest.

"I was wondering..." He hesitated, his hazel eyes meeting mine. "Would you like to go with me?"

I stared at him, stunned. "You're asking me?"

He chuckled nervously. "Yeah. I mean, if you don't already have a date. You're kind of... amazing."

Amazing. Me. The girl who wore baggy hoodies to hide her too-wide hips and stamina of a snail. I wasn't used to compliments, especially not from someone like Christian—a warrior rank member of the pack, strong and gentle in equal measure.

Okay, and kinda hot too.

"Yes," I'd whispered, my cheeks aming. "I'd love to." Before eeing down the hall like my life depended on it...

I know pathetic.

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"Earth to Amber!"

"You okay?" Victoria's voice yanked me out of my reverie.

I blinked, realizing I'd been staring off into space.

"You were daydreaming again," she teased, a smirk tugging at her lips. "Let me guess—you were thinking about Christian."

"I was not," I lied, though the heat rushing to my face betrayed me.

She grinned, her teasing turning merciless. "Oh, you totally were. I get it, I get it—he's hot. But, Amber, you've got actual drool on the side of your mouth."

Before I could respond, a voice boomed from across the gym. Alek. The middle one of the Savage Triplets.

My bullies.

"WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY?"

I froze.

JUST

MY

LUCK

He stood on the other side of the gym, his dark blond hair tousled like he'd just rolled out of bed. His deep green eyes were locked on me, sharp and unyielding, like he could see right through me. He was tall, broad-shouldered, and every inch of him screamed Alpha-in-training.

Damn.

He looked pissed.

Super pissed actually.

"Who's hot, nerd?" he growled, his voice carrying over the chatter of the gym.

Half the room turned to stare at me.

My stomach dropped. Of course, this would happen. Because the universe loved to remind me that no matter how good my day was going, Alek was always there to ruin it.

Here we go. Thanks, Vic. Really.

I glanced at Victoria, who shrugged unapologetically. "Don't look at me. He wasn't supposed to hear."

"Who's hot?" Alek demanded again, stalking closer. His presence was suffocating, the kind that demanded attention.

"No one," I muttered, desperately wishing I could disappear into the oor.

"Doesn't sound like no one to me," he shot back, his lips curling into a sneer.

"Leave her alone, Alek," Victoria interjected, stepping between us.

Alek ignored her, his gaze boring into me. "Is it that loser Christian? Do you realize he's going to do it for charity, right, nerd? He's too good for his own good indeed."

My blood ran cold.

"What's it to you?" Victoria snapped, her tone sharp.

Alek's jaw tightened, and for a moment, I thought he might actually start a ght. Then, to my relief, one of his brothers called him over, and he stalked away with a nal glare in my direction.

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

Victoria turned to me, her expression a mix of concern and irritation. "You need to stand up to him, Amber. He's just a bully."

Easier said than done. He and his brothers, Alan and Aaron, will be Alphas soon. Too soon.

"Come on," she said, forcing a smile. "Let's nish these decorations. The sooner we're done, the sooner we can get out of here."

I nodded, grateful for the distraction, but as I tied the ribbon into place, I couldn't shake the feeling of Alek's eyes burning into my back.