

CH 2 - Kai

KAI POV

The next two hours were the longest of my life.

Seriously. I've faced down rogue wolves with murder in their eyes, sparred with three-hundred-pound Alphas who wanted to break every bone in my body just for fun (aka my brothers) even spent a week in the mountains surviving on squirrels and snowmelt—but nothing had prepared me for being trapped in a moving vehicle with Reyes Silver, Alpha Heir and certified motor mouth.

He didn't shut up. Not for ve freaking minutes.

I almost missed the moment when he thought he hated me.

That, at least, had been quiet.

"I mean, it's not like I wanted to get kicked out of prep school," he was saying now, voice full of casual bravado. "But the headmaster totally overreacted. It was one exploding locker. Come on. Who even uses lockers anymore?"

I stared out the window, counting pine trees like they were lifelines.

Ten. Eleven. Twelve.

Where was the off switch? The mute button? Something?

"And then there was this girl—totally obsessed with me, not my fault—who tried to sneak into the boys' dorm at midnight. And of course I got blamed for that too."

"Shocking," I muttered.

He grinned at me through the rearview mirror like we were in on a private joke. "I know, right? Alpha heir problems. We're so misunderstood."

I blinked slowly. "Tragic."

If sarcasm were silver, I'd be rich.

But Reyes didn't take the hint. In fact, he leaned into it. Literally.

He shifted so he was half-turned in his seat, elbow on the headrest, watching me like I was a particularly entertaining movie he couldn't stop watching.

"Anyway," he continued, like I'd begged him to go on, "I think we're gonna be good friends."

I stared at him. Then laughed. "You think what?"

"Friends," he said brightly. "You've got a vibe. Not the usual 'I'll-kill-you-in-your-sleep' Alpha recruit thing. More like... 'I-don't-want-to-be-here-but-I'll-stab-you-if-you-ask-why' thing. I respect that."

Wow. What a glowing personality prole.

"Thanks," I said, deadpan. "I was going for 'leave me the hell alone,' but I guess I overshot."

"Noted." He winked. "But I like you anyway."

Unbelievable.

The worst part? He wasn't even being fake. He genuinely thought we could be friends. Just like that. Because I hadn't bit his head off hard enough to deter him away. Apparently sarcasm was some sort of invitation in Reyes-speak.

It was... weird.

Unexpected.

And absolutely not going to happen.

I wasn't here to make friends. I wasn't here to get close to anyone. My secret was too big, my life too carefully built on smoke and shadows to trust anyone—not even a funny, cocky, oddly charming alpha brat who smiled like he didn't have a care in the world.

Especially not him.

Summer scoffed in my head, her presence rippling like a sigh of fur and moonlight.

'You could just admit he gives off a good vibe.'

That earned an internal glare. 'We don't trust vibes. We trust facts. And instincts. And so far, all of mine are screaming "dangerously annoying.''

'He's not a threat,' she said with a shrug. 'Just loud. And... warm.'

'Loud is a problem,' I shot back. 'Friendly gets you killed. Warm makes you lower your guard.'

'Only time will tell,' Summer murmured, half to herself.

Time.

The word lodged in my chest like a stone.

There was still a couple of weeks before I turned eighteen. Until then, my mate bond was locked behind biology I couldn't cheat -just a few days and i would be eighteen, able to scent a mate, a man. one I would not be able to hide from, one that would see through the cracks of my act—even if I wore a pendant that masked my scent and changed my life.

And with the pendant around my neck they would never scent me.

Which meant for now, I was safe.

But what if...

'What if he's our mate?' Summer asked softly.

I frowned.

I hadn't planned to nd my mate at the Academy. That wasn't part of the mission. That wasn't part of anything. I wasn't ready. Hell, I'd barely accepted what I was pretending to be—how could I handle a mate bond on top of that?

Especially if it was an Alpha.

Especially if it was Reyes.

The idea made my skin crawl.

Not because he was awful. He wasn't. Objectively speaking, he was good-looking. Funny. Energetic in a way that lit up a room.

But that was the problem. He was too much. Too loud. Too forward. Too everything.

'Being mated to someone like Reyes would be my personal hell. The kind you get locked into and the Moon laughs watching.'

'Worse than being a breeder?' Summer asked dryly.

I inched.

Low blow.

Obviously not,' I muttered. "But do you really think we could handle him stuck to our side all day, every day?"

Summer paused. "Fair point."

'I don't even nd him attractive in that way... I mean, he's good looking and all but... just not my type... at all,' I added for good measure.

Summer rolled her eyes. 'You never nd anyone attractive. You're like a one-woman iceberg.'

I didn't argue. It was true.

Maybe it was fear. Maybe trauma. Maybe some deep, broken part of me that refused to let anyone in. I didn't know. I just knew I wasn't the kind of person who looked at someone and felt butterflies or reworks or any of the crap they put in books.

There was only strategy. Survival. Sharp edges and escape plans.

Reyes cleared his throat, pulling me back to the present.

I blinked. "Sorry. Zoned out."

"No problem," he said cheerfully. "I gured you were reliving some tragic moment or plotting my death. Either way, I respect the dedication."

He was smiling again. Like everything was a game.

"Just thinking," I said.

"Dangerous habit."

"Not for me."

He laughed. Again.

How did he laugh so much?

What had his life been like that he could afford to laugh so easily?

I wanted to hate him for it. For the ease he has. For the sun in his voice. But I couldn't—not fully. There was something about him that refused to be hated, even when I wanted to.

Which made him more dangerous than anyone else I'd met.

"I like the way your mind works," Reyes said after a beat.

I gave him a look. "You haven't seen my mind work."

"No, but I've seen your face while it does. You're very expressive. It's like watching a chessboard light up."

Was that supposed to be a compliment?

I turned away. "Maybe stop watching, then."

"You keep saying things like that," he said, not offended in the slightest, "but I think you like that I notice."

I didn't answer.

Mostly because I wasn't sure if he was wrong.

Not completely, anyway.

The Academy loomed like a fortress carved into the woods. Stone walls, iron gates, and watchtowers. It wasn't Hogwarts or some ivy-covered school where dreams were made. This was where legacies were broken. Where power was shaped and sharpened like blades. Where failure wasn't an option—because it meant death.

The SUV slowed at the front checkpoint.

Reyes looked out the window and whistled low. "Looks like summer camp for psychos."

He wasn't wrong.

I stared through the glass at the gates that separated this place from the world I used to know. My heart thudded once—heavy. Final.

This was it.

No going back.

The driver handed over our documents, nodded once, and the gates creaked open.

Welcome to hell.

We were dropped off at the central building, where a sleek, suited Beta, at least he smelled like one, with a clipboard gave us our schedules, room assignments, and a lengthy list of rules that included things like no unauthorized challenges, no-ghting out of the training eld, and absolutely no shifting.

Reyes raised an eyebrow at that last one. "What about lunch breaks?"

But I exhaled, the last one was a blessing for me. In wolf form everybody would know that I was a female and a golden wolf.

Which meant... trouble.

The Beta did not laugh.

I didn't either.

The Academy didn't tolerate stupidity—or weakness.

We were split into dorm wings randomly. No exceptions. Everything was designed to reinforce alliances between packs, forge new friendly relationships and strengthen our kingdom.

Luckily—or unluckily—I was placed in the second wing.

Reyes, of course, was thrilled.

"Room 215," he read, grinning. "Bet you're next door."

"214," I muttered.

Of course.

We climbed the stairs together, Reyes dragging his obnoxious designer bag like it was a trophy. The hallway smelled like testosterone and pine-scented cleaning products. I kept my head down, ignoring the eyes that followed us—mostly scented.

Some of them landed on me, lingering.

Too long.

Too curious.

I pulled my hoodie tighter, instinctively checking that my pendant was still in place beneath the collar.

Still masking. Still safe.

No one knew.

Yet.

Reyes unlocked his room with a key card and threw the door open with a ourish.

"Home sweet home!" he said. "Guess I lucked out with the window view. You get to hear me snore through the wall."

"Do you ever stop talking?" I asked.

He paused. "Nope."

And then, infuriatingly, smiled at me again.

Like this was just the beginning of a bromance.

I stared at him for a long moment. His ridiculous grin. His ridiculous condescence. His ridiculous everything.

And felt a twist of something in my chest.

Not attraction.

Not curiosity.

Just a question, rising slowly in my mind.

What if he really meant it?

What if he did want to be my friend?

What would that even look like?

Was that... allowed?

I shook the thought off before it could bloom.

No.

I wasn't here to connect.

I was here to survive.