

Chapter 2: Birthday

Kennedy

I watch as my mother prepares the woman on the bed in front of her. Sometimes I get to be in the room, helping by giving her the tools that she needs to complete her surgeries, or stitching up our pack members after she's done. But since today is my eighteenth birthday, she told me I could assist. It didn't hurt that I told her that it was the only thing that I wanted for my birthday.

"When you do a Cesarean section, you have to be careful where and how you cut. You don't want to cut too deep and risk injuring the pup and you don't want to cut too high on the mother's stomach because you could cut the pup," she says, pointing to the area where she wants me to cut.

Thankfully, it's Anna who is having a baby today. It's her fourth pup with her mate, Bennett, their oopsie baby thirteen years after the birth of their third pup. It's why my mother suggested that she have the C-section rather than try to deliver naturally. It's also why I'm allowed to assist. I've grown up around Anna and all of the nurses and doctors in the hospital. I've spent every possible minute of my life in this hospital. I love the medical world, love the idea of becoming a doctor just like my mother. While the others in my family were sparring and training to become strong warriors, I was here, learning everything I possibly could about medicine, anatomy, and being a surgeon.

Thankfully, when my mother told Anna that assisting in a surgery was the only thing I wanted for my birthday, she offered to schedule her C-section today. I was a little surprised, but since I've stitched up her pups before, and I've worked so closely with Anna, she agreed. My mother had me practice cutting on a medical dummy that she and Beta Noelle use in the hospital teaching rooms. I sliced that poor mannequin nearly to pieces I've practiced so many times.

I take a breath and look up at Anna. Her mate is holding her hand and murmuring to her.

"Focus, Kennedy," my mother says patiently.

Anna's eyes flash to me and she winks. "You've got this, Kennedy."

I nod and turn back to her stomach, putting the edge of the scalpel against her stomach where my mother is pointing and, using the pressure that I've practiced so many times, I make the incision.

"Very good, Kennedy. Just a little further. Perfect," she says, and I pull the scalpel away, smiling hugely as I step back to let my mother do the rest. A few minutes later, she's carefully pulling the baby from Anna's uterus and laying her on Anna's chest.

"Congratulations, on your baby boy," she says to them.

I know that Bennett is thrilled to be having a boy. Their first three children were girls. I ready myself to assist my mother with closing up Anna's stomach when she turns to me.

"Your father and brother are asking about you," she says.

I look up at the clock and realize that it's mid-afternoon. I sigh. I really don't care about the party. The only reason I'm even partially excited is because Alpha Quirin will be here. There are a lot of other Alphas that will be here too, including Alpha Henry, who I like. But the others are just hoping to have an Alpha female for a mate. My sisters would be better options for them. They are all excited about becoming Lunas of their own packs. Me? There's only one man for me. He just happens to be an Alpha as well.

I fell in love with Alpha Quirin when I was six years old. There was something about him at Alpha Henry's eighteenth birthday party that drew me to him. I'd watched him all night then followed him outside. I don't know why I'd felt safe with him that night. But I have every other time I've been around him since then. I don't see him often, not nearly as often as I'd like. But I've noticed that he's not as curt or abrupt with me when I approach him as he is with other people.

I got my wolf, Echo, on my tenth birthday. That night, at my party, she had agreed that there was something about Alpha Quirin. Maybe because he's an older Alpha and doesn't play the stupid games that the others play, or maybe because he refuses to let the other Alphas tease me in any way, but I've always seen him as a protector. Others find his quiet, glowering nature offensive, but not me. Unlike Alpha Henry, who is easy going and has lots of friends, you have to work to get on Alpha Quirin's good side. I've only known a couple of people who have earned that privilege and remained there. I count myself as one of the few.

Over the years, I've watched as daring women have approached him during these gatherings. I've also watched while he assessed them and took some to bed with him. I've tried to determine what it was about those women that made him decide to be with them and not others. I haven't figured it out yet and maybe he hasn't either. I've never seen him take the same woman to bed more than once at these parties. If they approach him again at another party, he turns them down.

My mother says the women want him because he's a challenge. My father says they want him for his wealth. I want him because I want to get past the hard, crusty exterior that he puts up in front of others. Over the years, I've had glimpses of the man underneath the armor, and I want him. I want that man, the man that very few, if any, ever get to experience.

"Kennedy, are you coming? You still have to get ready, and Dad says we can't start the party until the birthday twins arrive. Connor won't join the party until you do, so hurry up!" my sister Wendy says. She's fifteen and thrilled at the idea of seeing all of the Alphas that will be here tonight.

"I'm on my way," I say, knowing that I need to get ready. My twin brother, Connor, is officially old enough to take over as Alpha from my father. I know my father is excited to be able to pass the torch of the pack to my brother. I also know that Connor was disappointed when he didn't smell his mate first thing this morning. She's not in our pack, but that doesn't mean that she's not in another pack. Every eligible male and female Alpha will be at our birthday party tonight, which has my siblings in a tizzy of excitement. It's an important day for Connor, which makes it an important day for me. My twin is my best friend, and I won't ruin this party for him.

"Congratulations," I say to Anna and Bennett.

"Thank you. I have a gift for you even though we won't be able to join your party tonight. I'll give it to your mother to give you."

"You didn't have to do that," I tell her.

"Of course we did. You just helped to deliver our baby, didn't you?" Bennett asks me.

I smile. "Well, thank you. I know I'll love it," I say.

I head back to the packhouse and spend the next couple of hours getting ready for my party. Because it's such a big deal, to everyone but me anyway, I have someone come in to do my hair and makeup. The dress I chose for tonight is a greyish-green color, something close to sage but lighter. It was the closest I could find to match my eyes. Alpha Quirin told me once that I have beautiful eyes, so I made a point to highlight them tonight.

When I look in the mirror, I hardly recognize myself. My hair is half up and half down with sparkling diamond pins and clips holding it in place. I chose the dress specifically because I want Alpha Quirin to see me as a woman, not as the pup that he always calls me. 'Little Pup'. Ever since that first night that I spoke to him, he's always called me Little Pup. I would despise the name if it didn't make me feel somewhat special. No one else gets a pet name from Alpha Quirin.

The floor length gown is covered in sequins, adding a brightness to the dress. The sleeves are straps that hang off the shoulder and there's a small train in the back that adds a softness to the overall feel of the gown.

"Kennedy, are you ready?" I hear Connor's voice in my head.

"Yes, where are you?"

"Outside your door," he says, and I can hear the laughter in his voice.

I open the door and see my very handsome brother standing there waiting for me. Where I got my mother's looks, he looks almost identical to my father. Unlike my father, his dark hair is shoulder-length, and he got my father's brownish-green eyes, making his eyes darker than mine. He's wearing a suit that fits him perfectly, accenting his broad shoulders and narrow waist. He will have the women at the party drooling over him. They do anyway, but tonight, he looks every bit the Alpha heir that he is.

"Why, Alpha Connor, how very nice of you to be my escort," I say, smiling at my twin. His tie and cummerbund are a close match to the color of my dress. We'll look very good walking into our party together.

He snaps his feet together and gives me a formal bow before extending his arm to me. "How was the surgery? Mom said you were brilliant, as always," he says.

My brother has always been my biggest supporter with my mother a close second.

"Oh, it was fantastic, Connor," I say excitedly, making him chuckle.

"Good. Now remember, no matter what happens today, you will always be my twin and my best friend. I hope that we both find our mates, but if not..."

"Then we keep looking," I say, knowing how important it is for him.

"Then we keep looking. But, if we're both lucky and you end up leaving for your new home soon, never forget that I'm here for you anytime you need me."

"Thanks, Connor."

"Now we'd better go before Wendy bursts something in her excitement."

I laugh as he begins leading me down the stairs. I turn, as I hear the gasps of the people in the room, watching as my brother and I make our way down the stairs. I look around the room, not seeing Alpha Quirin and feeling a stab of disappointment that he's not here. He was the only one I was hoping to see.

The room breaks out in "Happy Birthday!" as we get to the bottom step. From there, we're separated by the massive number of people who want to say hello and wish us happy birthday.

I'm about halfway through the room of people when Echo stands up in my head.

'Echo?' I ask just as I hear a nearly feral snarl behind me and the scent of sandalwood floods my nose.

I turn and see that the partygoers have separated, leaving a space for me to see Alpha Quirin standing across the room from me, his nose in the air as he drinks in my scent.

I gasp as he opens his eyes and focuses his intense gaze on me.

"Mate," his wolf, Raif, growls.

The entire room has gone quiet and almost as one, all heads turn to stare at me.

I swallow hard, excitement and desire flooding my system and overwhelming me. Thankfully, Echo has no problem managing these feelings. She's thrilled.

"Mate," she purrs.