

RED'S MATE



CAROLYN FAULKNER

BLUSHING BOOKS

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PROLOGUE



In the vast wasteland that Earth had become, Emily Harding—a woman out of time who had been released from stasis into a world that was utterly unrecognizable to her—had carved herself a comfortable niche with her Alpha mate, Vaudt.

He was a fearless soldier and leader, who kept himself, his mate, and those who fought with him safe from harm as they made their lives in a small compound in the unforgiving landscape in which they found themselves, surrounded by the remnants and reminders of what had once been a great civilization—the one about which Emily had first-hand knowledge.

His second, Kosh, had been lucky enough to find a rare omega of his own—Tura—and although their relationship had gotten off to a rocky start, they, too, had come to care deeply about each other in the way that only a bonded Alpha/omega pair could.

But theirs was far from the only stronghold in an otherwise cruel and grim environment.

CHAPTER 1



They didn't know what they had until they got there. They had heard rumors that there was something of great value here, amongst the ever-present ruins of what had been, but they had no idea what until they got closer. His men had fought valiantly to that point, but as soon as they began to sense what might be contained in this tiny, ragged, remote village, they lost their focus and sense of mission entirely. The strict military discipline that had been instilled in all of them broke down, and each of them—with the exception of a few stalwart souls and some of his staff of high ranking officers—began fighting viciously amongst themselves, intent on grabbing the ultimate prize for themselves and murdering everyone in their way—even their best comrades—in order to get it.

Nothing filled their heads, nothing tantalized their senses, nothing commandeered their bodies and minds more completely or more devastatingly—even than strong drink or gambling—as this had. Indeed, no deterrent—not even the surety of death that came with desertion and dereliction of duty—was strong enough to dissuade them. They thought of nothing else, each with the same ultimate goal that he would have it for himself.

The town they invaded was so poor and makeshift that, in their uncontrolled frenzy, everything had been razed to the ground. What hadn't been destroyed by the fighting was smoldering from the inevitable fires.

Now, the battlefield, such as it was, was laid waste, bodies everywhere—more of his own men than natives by far. He'd had to outright kill some of his best men himself because they would not—could not—stand down. It was an oddly eerie sight, as there wasn't the usual sound of the wounded crying and groaning. Anyone who had challenged him and the small band of men who had remained loyal to him, despite the fact that he knew they had been subjected to the same impulse as the rest of the weak they had fought, had been put to death. It was a harsh judgment he'd had no choice but to enforce. Mutineers could meet with only one fate, no matter the reason behind their rebellion.

They certainly couldn't be allowed to get their hands on what they sought with such vigor.

His core group of men—what remained of the battalion—gathered around him on the outskirts as he surveyed their worst defeat in years—and at their own damned hands!

"Where is it?"

"Safely delivered to your tent, Colonel, although..." His legate, Kavan, looked severely reluctant to speak further, which was unlike him. They were brothers-in-arms, and he and Ciaran had shared everything they possibly could, including women.

"What is it, soldier? Spit it out!"

The younger man drew a hesitant breath. "We—well, we, uh, lost some of the Omega A-Team who procured and...delivered...it."

"How the fuck did that happen?" he asked, incensed and already heading for his horse.

"Well, the prize was—" Kavan had never seemed quite so averse to telling him much of anything, until now.

"Was what?" He'd never been known for his patience, and what little was left of it was wearing very thin.

Finally, he spit it out, with no small amount of embarrassment. "Uncooperative and surprisingly good with a knife."

Despite the seriousness of what his right-hand man was imparting to him, Ciaran gave him what passed for a smile. "I see," he said, swinging up onto his stallion without the use of a stirrup. "How many?"

Kavan knew that he was asking how many they'd lost. "Three."

"Three!"

"We likely would have lost the other two if they hadn't managed to knock it out."

The look on the colonel's face let him know that he could very easily be joining the corpses they'd just been stepping over. "Unacceptable—both the loss of those good men in a situation that should have been anticipated and, also, the use of that method to control it."

"Yes, Colonel," he agreed, not that it mattered. "I think they thought it was the only avenue open to them and employed it as a last resort to retain control rather than lose it."

"I had given express orders that it was not to be harmed in any way. Did I not, *Legate*?" he snarled, his tone implying that the exalted title might not be his for much longer.

Kavan sank to his knee immediately, holding up both his gun and his sword over his head as an offering to the bigger man, to do with as he pleased.

Although the huge hooves of his enormous, volatile stallion kept dancing dangerously nearer to the closest thing he had to a friend, Ciaran kept him under control, frowning darkly and growling, "Put those down. I guess I'll see for myself what it is that we've found and how something like that nonetheless managed to kill three of my best men, who were supposedly trained to prevent exactly something like that from happening."

With that, he galloped off, leaving his junior officer sighing in relief and in charge of seeing if there was anything else left of any value to scavenge, although he doubted it.

His tent, as the colonel and the commanding officer of the battalion, was in the center of the camp—the rest of it being constructed around where he was—and it was also relatively luxurious, especially in comparison to how regular soldiers lived.

He'd seen pictures of how things had been before, though, heard stories that his father and grandfather had told him at their knees, although he'd found it hard at that young age to believe it. But nowadays, he'd seen the evidence with his own eyes of how far man had come—well, what was left of it, anyway—at one time, and baldly acknowledged the fact that even he lived in squalor and poverty in comparison to what had once been.

Although he wasn't much of a man to cling to comforts, his tent was more than merely where he slept. It was also where he met his junior officers, and where, on the rare occasion, if they were strong enough, if they fought well enough, he met with the leaders of places that were much better organized and able to fend them off than the pathetic one they'd destroyed today.

And he recognized the power of a subtle display of wealth to such as those, as reflected by the sumptuous surroundings into which they were brought—whether it was a fellow soldier or rebel leader.

There was an actual door to his tent rather than the flap everyone else had, and the rest of the tent covered an actual, easily disassembled structure that gave it the shape of a large, square room. It was something he'd taken as a spoil of war long ago, from an—unsuccessful—leader of a ragtag band of men who considered themselves to be soldiers of a sort.

But not the right kind, apparently, since they'd lost.

When he came through that door, he immediately began to search—with his eyes only—and the fact that she was not readily visible didn't particularly worry him, despite what she'd done to his men. In fact, he was so unconcerned that he simply followed his usual after-battle routine as if nothing was different, when literally everything was different.

He took off his helmet and divested himself of his guns. Then he began to remove the makeshift, piecemeal body armor that covered his regular battle uniform, which was of camouflage material that roughly matched the wasted landscape in which he lived and fought. It was protective but lightweight, so he wouldn't overheat.

Ciaran usually had a boy to do this for him—a personal slave who took care of his armor, brought him food and water and anything else he wanted—but, being well-trained, he had waited outside the tent this time, and Ciaran had dismissed him, preferring to be alone when coming face to face with that which he had coveted for so long.

As he stripped each part from his body, putting them carefully where they belonged in each case, he listened acutely for any unusual sounds or movements and did his best to ignore what his own body—hell, every thought or instinct he had—was clamoring for him to do.

The bold-faced truth was that Ciaran had never been this aroused in his life. He'd scented her through the entire battle, which probably accounted for the large number of losses on their side, even though they'd won. Men of lesser mettle hadn't been able to control themselves or their reactions to that very particular, very potent aroma, eagerly abandoning their mission in favor of locating that which every man—every Alpha—most desired in this hellhole of a world.

And he had her. She was here, mere feet away, and yet he forced himself to continue as if she wasn't.

It was a test of will, and one—for once—he wasn't at all sure he was going to win.

He knew exactly where she was, too—where she thought she'd hidden herself from him so that she might perpetuate whatever kind of mischief she intended. The elite team of male Omegas who had captured her and brought her here for him—what little remained of it because of her unacceptably successful efforts—would have stripped her of any weapons—and most likely her

clothing, too—and probably bound her hands and feet, at least, before putting her in here and taking their positions outside the door to guard her—with their lives, if necessary—until he returned.

But he wasn't going to take any chances and assume that she was still bound or even unarmed. If she'd managed to kill his men—any of his men—then she was a formidable force, indeed. If she hadn't been female and such a coveted prize, then he might have offered her a high-ranking position in his little corner of what currently passed for an army.

But Ciaran wasn't about to allow her to escape the reality of her true destiny. He intended that she would confront it every second of every day, at his hands—and other, more demanding parts.

He didn't complete all of his usual after-battle rituals, though, declining to call for a bath, deliberately leaving himself—his face, hands, and muscular arms, as well as his uniform—blood spattered and dirty rather than cleaning up and, instead, stalking over to the end of his big bed. As he did so, he could see how, on the right side, the rugs next to the bed were stained with blood and dirt very much like he was, leaving an unmistakable woman-sized smudge that clearly led under the bed.

A reluctant smile curved one side of his lips up. He stood nearby, not close enough that she would be able to reach out and grab one of his ankles, though, but near enough that he would easily be able to catch her no matter what side from which she decided to attempt her escape.

Clasping his hands behind his back, he spoke calmly, "If you come out now, you will be better treated, I promise you, than if you make me come after you."

"Liar!" The vehement accusation was easily discernable, despite from where it had originated.

He merely chuckled softly, although there was no amusement in it at all.

Then, in a split second that she didn't see coming or she certainly would have done her best to scramble out of his way, the

entire huge bed was lifted up by him with one hand. Ciaran easily bent down and caught the rope between her still bound ankles, using it to drag her out before letting the bed hit the floor again with a loud thump and creak as he rose to hold her upside down by her bindings, as if she was a fish he'd caught and he was holding her by her tail.

And she was wiggling like one, too. She'd worked her hands out of the ropes somehow, at some point, but not before she'd had to dive under the bed, he surmised, because she hadn't gotten to free her legs yet. But his arm was much too long and he much too tall for their freedom to do her any good.

Not that that seemed to curb her frantic attempts to both escape and, he was sure, cause him grievous bodily harm, if possible. She swung her entire body as well as her arms at him but accomplished absolutely nothing in the process.

But, despite her frantic movements, it didn't take her long to still herself completely after taking a deep breath, hanging there panting before him. He knew instinctively that she had decided to conserve whatever strength she had left for a more opportune time and had to feel a small amount of admiration for her. In his not inconsiderable experience, most females in her place—much less an omega, whom he understood was probably feeling much the same urges as he was, perhaps even more so—would have continued to expend her energy in futile protest for as long as they could, leaving themselves nothing with which to put up any further fight.

And from her end of things, if she knew anything about herself and what she was at all, she knew that the really important battle was yet to come.

What he didn't know was that Ebby was still struggling mightily, but internally, fighting so many things at once that she could barely think at all.

Her automatic reaction to being held like this was to want to fight, but she knew she shouldn't, so, after the initial period of panic, she'd forced herself to still. She was terrified that she was

going to die, one way or the other, but in some of the scenarios that were running through her fertile mind, she was going to live, instead, and, judging by the sheer size and strength of the man who was holding her, that was truly going to be much worse.

His humiliatingly superior forces had gone marauding through the town, looking for something that was obviously of great importance to them. Not that finding her had stopped them from finishing the job and killing everyone and everything they encountered, including those who had cared for her and valiantly tried to help her survive in this savage world.

If the enormous brute who was dangling her above the floor did indeed know what she was—and she would have bet he did—she would be subjected to various unpleasant versions of a fate worse than death and might well end up searching for ways to bring about her own end because of it.

And if he didn't, she could be killed outright very easily—he could simply drop her on her head and break her neck. He could rape her, then kill her, or give her to his men, who would kill her in a much slower, more torturous fashion. Or he could sell her for what she knew would be a staggering amount of gold and goods.

But the hardest things she was fighting were by far herself and her own instincts, which were trying to convince her to simply surrender herself to him, her own rampant needs shoving her intellect aside and making that idea seem quite enticing.

She'd scented a multitude of Alphas while they were being raided, but his was, by far, the strongest and most potent, making her head spin and her body automatically begin to prepare itself for his possession—utterly against her will.

She had vowed that, since it seemed that she was going to die anyway, that would never, ever happen. She would resist him with every fiber of her being—or whatever few she could rally to her mind, and she had a feeling that wasn't going to be easy, either.

Her entire body ached abominably with both the urge to allow him to do anything to her that he might want to and the effort of

trying to keep herself from doing just that. Ebby might not have been actively fighting him, but she was growing more and more exhausted just hanging there, where—she was horrified to acknowledge—her entire lower body was contracting heavily, on its own, as it had been since he'd stepped into the room. There didn't seem to be any way to stop it. Her body had already deserted her useless tries to commanding it in favor of complying with her desires, instead, which would inevitably lead to her demise, in one way or the other, she was sure.

Nor did there seem to be a way to stop the worst, most damning—and shamefully obvious—evidence of how she felt—which, even in this position, was leaking in a steady stream out of her, causing the overflow of her own juices to find its way in either direction that was so naturally and readily available to it. As he breathed down over her, he highlighted the wet trail of her own powerful essence as it created a path down to the top of her labia and onto the flat of her lower belly in front and up the small of her back, almost following—and filling in—the indentation of her spine in back.

She forced herself to try to concentrate on what she had been taught all her life. Ebby had lived surrounded by other women, Omega males and castrati all her life. She had heard their dire warnings as they had taught her how to fight, to physically defend herself, hoping it might be enough to save her. But nothing could have prepared her for what was happening to her now—what was clouding her usually quick mind, overpowering it in favor of white hot passions that were so strong, so fierce, they terrified her. They filled every nook and cranny of her mind, and had long since laid waste to any modicum of control she might have had over her body.

Through sheer strength of will, though, Ebby somehow managed to almost control her thoughts and her fears, well enough, at least, for her to take another deep, calming breath; not that it did her any good.

When it seemed as if he was going to hold her like this forever, Ciaran lowered her to the ground and let go of her, standing a bit away from her and watching her, as if he expected her to entertain him.

Ebby felt as if she was slogging through sand as she sat up and, with her free hands, began to work at the knots in the ropes that held her legs together, looking nervously up at the giant every few seconds while she fumbled ineptly at the task, as if she'd never loosened a knot before in her life.

And he just stood there and let her, which only made her that much more suspicious about what he intended to do to her.

She shook herself mentally—as if there was any doubt as to what he intended to do to her!

Ciaran wasn't about to discourage her from freeing her legs. Why not? It would aid his cause quite considerably. If she hadn't killed so many of his men already, he'd've offered her one of his knives.

When she was done, she didn't immediately get up and run, nor did she cast aside the perfectly good rope. She kept it, wrapping the ends around each hand a few times, leaving a good, useful length between them.

Only then, did she rise, assuming a fighting stance in front of him, but he merely smiled outright at his would-be assassin.

He was about a foot and a half taller than she was and a descendant of a breed of men who were created to be much bigger, stronger, and faster than the average male, and he had at least a hundred pounds on her, all of it muscle. Even without those advantages, he'd spent his entire life being trained as a soldier, having come up through the ranks by virtue of his own considerable skills—both physical and mental.

In essence, the puny scientists who created his kind had been actively inviting their own decimation. He was an Alpha, through and through, brought up in a military camp that was built on the remains of what had been the Army's at one time, since they kept

the name for their own fighting force. No one really remembered it anymore, and it didn't really matter anyway.

When the End had come, in the aftermath, the survivors, who were inevitably those who had not naturally evolved here—the bigger, the stronger, and the faster—continued the only existence they had known, taking over the good-sized military base in the wasteland of what had once been fertile land and rolling green hills but hadn't been for a long time. Eventually, because of their military prowess, the camp grew into what passed for a thriving city-state with a large, well-trained fighting force, which ran the camp efficiently and ruthlessly, sending out raiding parties like his who would be on campaign for years at a time, collecting anything—or anyone—they thought might prove useful, either to them at the moment or to the camp, eventually, when they returned.

Most of the survivors of the apocalypse were male—the majority of them his type of man—which had almost immediately reduced women to what they had been for almost the entirety of their existence—chattel, sold and traded, but these were ordinary women who were not really made to fulfill one of what they knew was their true purpose—to breed more of themselves.

The children of an Alpha and his bonded omega were—besides being incredibly rare and precious—more likely to be omegas themselves

The mutation that had created the Alphas had had a wholly unexpected effect on some of the female children that were born to Alphas and regular woman. On rare occasions, an omega female was born—an Alpha male's true mate, born to be his, her one true purpose to receive him when he wanted to breed her, which was very frequently. Alphas wore most regular women out quickly because of their sheer size, and sex with regular women was only somewhat satisfactory because it was not a true mating, as they could not complete the bond that would bind them together—in every possible way—with anyone other than an omega.

And any unbonded Alpha male who caught scent of an

unbonded omega—regardless of his training or intelligence—could be very easily overcome with the need to take her as his mate and would risk anything to get her.

Omega females were surprisingly small and delicate, considering the size of the men who would dominate them, but they were also quite strong in some ways—built to survive—and even thrive—under the thumb and sharp eye of her Alpha. They were hopelessly overpowered and utterly controlled by their mates, their little bodies stretched and pierced and flooded to overflowing during a mating ritual that they couldn't deny on their end they nonetheless desired. Then, when they inevitably became pregnant—usually after being brought into heat by repeated breeding by their Alpha—they would be forced to struggle through long labor and birth of what could be a large male child, who would grow up to be an Alpha himself. The cycle would repeat itself for the rest of her life—she would be brought into heat and bred again as soon as was medically feasible.

Sometimes sooner, depending on the Alpha's attitude towards his omega, which was usually protective, at least, because of how precious she was, but was not always—not even often—loving or affectionate.

The omega standing in front of him was a rare breed indeed, and again, he had to admire her. She'd obviously been trained to fight by someone who had a general idea of what he was doing, although he could have helped her with her stance and the way she held the rope if he'd had a mind to. But he was ashamed to admit that every inch of him was bathed in her arousal—as she was soon going to be in his if any more of that potent nectar seeped out of her. Ciaran was frankly surprised she wasn't standing in a pool of it by now.

So far, she was managing to resist her own deeply imbedded instincts, as was he. But he didn't intend to continue resisting them for too much longer. The sooner he bonded her to him, marking her as his own, the better.

"So you intend to strangle me with that rope, little one?" he asked casually, his hands behind his back again as he moved towards her, watching her carefully as she skirted around him and only occasionally lunging at her—not even moving his hands when he did, as if taunting her with potentially easy access to his thick neck.

But the smart girl didn't fall for it, biding her time, waiting for the right opportunity to strike. He was big, but she was small and quick, and she had the rope.

One of them was going to go down and—seconds later, before she really even registered what was happening, he struck—and it was her.

On one of those teasing lunges, his hand shot out, quick as a snake, grabbing the middle of the rope and giving it a yank.

She should never have wrapped the ends around her hands, she realized much too late, as she was pulled forward, colliding with his solid wall of a chest hard enough to knock the wind out of her. While she was trying to recover her breath, he was busily binding her hands again with the very same rope, and no amount of trying to reclaim them got her anywhere at all.

And when he was done, she was much more securely bound than she had been before. It would take her quite a while to free herself, not that she wasn't going to try.

As soon as he had finished, his hands returned to where they had been. He looked insufferably proud of himself. So Ebby reeled her head back then rammed it into his breadbasket as hard as she could, hearing him give an incredibly satisfying "oof!"

With him off guard a bit, she turned to run for the door to the tent, but he wasn't anywhere near as incapacitated as she'd assumed—hoped desperately—he'd be, and he simply stuck out a big booted foot, causing her to trip and land face down on the rug.

Still unwilling to admit defeat, she hit at the floor and instantly began to crawl as quickly as she could, only to feel, after she'd only

made it a few feet, long, rough fingers closing around one slim ankle as he pulled her back towards him slowly.

Ciaran didn't touch her anywhere else for the moment. He used his other hand to make only the adjustments to what remained of his uniform that he considered to be blindingly, painfully necessary, setting free the long, thick cock that had been torturously confined for much too long around her. As it immediately began to increase dramatically in length as well as girth, the broad, almost purple head began dripping his own tribute to her presence onto the carpet beneath, while she left a dark, impressively damp trail of her body's undeniable answer beneath her on the rug.

He didn't jerk her to him—as everything in him wanted to with a blinding need. Instead, he squatted down and drew her to him with inexorable patience, watching her futile attempts to save herself with immense enjoyment.

Ebby turned herself over as far as she could to claw at the rugs, but she found herself too far away from where she needed to be, and the material was too heavy and well made for her to sink her nails into—besides, she kept them too short for them to do her any good, anyway. Nevertheless, she bloodied her fingertips trying to grasp at something—anything—while at the same time attempting to use her free leg to try to leverage herself away from him. But he was much too strong for her to be able to get anywhere unless she wanted to leave her captured leg with him.

But she never stopped fighting him and the fate that he represented. The old women in town who had hidden her had told her that they were keeping her safe from Alphas. And she knew with a heavy heart that some of them had died defending her. They had told her that being claimed by an Alpha—being bonded to one—would mean a life that was even worse than that of a slave. She would not only completely lose her mind—how so was left a bit of a mystery that had been starkly solved by his mere proximity to her—but she would also lose her freedom and her autonomy to what-

ever brutish, feral Alpha staked his claim on a body she could no longer trust to do her own bidding.

And, at this moment, she was being dragged closer and closer to the most enormous, most untamed barbarian imaginable whose intent was plain in the threat of that fierce looking sword that jutted out menacingly from between his legs.