



wild heart

CARE SCENE NO DO

E. J. LAWSON

CRESCENDO

WILD HEAT

E. J. LAWSON



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Edited by: Jennifer Jones @ Bookends Editing

ONE

JOSIE

“CAN YOU BELIEVE IT?”

“She is going to *flip!*”

I’m so stuck in my own head, thinking through everything I need to do before the end of the day, that it takes me a minute to realize something’s off as I make my way back into the office.

The unavoidable trip to the dentist—*aka, Satan’s toolshed*—has put me on edge and I slow my steps as the drone of conversation grows louder the closer I come to the main atrium.

A champagne cork pops and glasses clink when I walk in and I stop dead in my tracks, taking in the chaos. *What the fuck?*

I raise a brow, eyeing the gathering of my coworkers with Stefanie, my boss and close friend, smiling like a loon as she tops off glasses.

Shit. Something happened. Something big.

I can smell it in the air. The rush. Our office is predominantly Beta, but the few Alpha managers Stef’s hired in the last couple months fill the air with scents of sticky honey and rich amber musk.

A buzz of excitement rushes through me and for one gut wrenching second, I wonder if Stef’s been promoted or taken a job somewhere else. I couldn’t stand working for another cutthroat bastard like the Alpha she replaced. Maybe she’ll take me with her when she goes. I’m her best girl and she damn well knows it.

Natural light filters in through the floor-to-ceiling windows behind her, making her hair sparkle like a halo as she drops her head back and laughs, her cheeks flushed like an Omega in heat.

As I skirt around the edges of the office space, finding a clear path, Stef

catches sight of me and lets out a loud whoop.

Her eyes are bright and excited as she rushes toward me, grabbing my arm and flinging our joined hands into the air like we've won something. "The woman of the hour, ladies and gentlemen, I give you Josephine Collins!"

My forced smile wilts in an instant and heat gushes to my face when my fellow talent managers burst into a round of applause.

"Uh, not that I don't like impromptu parties, but what is going on?" I mutter to Stef as they continue to cheer and call out congratulations.

She barks a trademark Stef laugh and hauls me around to face her, gripping me by the arms like she's afraid I might make a run for it.

"*Firebrand*, babe!" she says emphatically. "I just got word. *You* got the account. There must've been hundreds of applicants but—" She cuts herself off mid-sentence to squeal, bouncing on her feet like a coked-up groupie. But wait, what did she say?

"They're our biggest client yet and they want *you*!"

This time, it sinks in.

Firebrand.

One of the *hottest* all-Alpha bands in the country.

And they want me as their manager.

Me?

Holy. Fucking. Shit.

Shock and relief slam into me equally hard, and my lips part, my brain going numb as the words sink in and I struggle to make sense of them.

Until now, my career as a talent manager has been pretty small-time. Technically, I'm still an assistant manager. I've got a few clients of my own, but they're comedians and lesser-known bands. I've been getting them gigs in clubs and small-time concert halls for years now, but this... This is *not* that.

Firebrand is huge. My first real big-time job and it's for one of the most famous bands in the country right now.

And then I remember.

Firebrand has been openly looking for a new manager at least a few times in the last year. High turnover. Which means either those managers are doing something wrong, or the band is so unmanageable that they've been forced to quit or were terminated by the label.

There's a catch. There's always a catch.

But still.

It's a massive contract, and no strings, surprises, or overwhelming attention from my coworkers is going to keep me from celebrating.

Stef smacks my ass, snapping me out of my own head. "Stop looking like a mindless monkey and celebrate with us!"

I accept the champagne Stef passes me and raise my glass into the air alongside hers for the toast.

"To Josie," Stef announces, her eyes gleaming with emotion she would never admit to. "For putting us on the map!"

A chorus of "congrats, Josie!" rings out before I bring the champagne flute to my lips and take a long swallow. Bubbles always go straight to my head, but today is not the day to be concerned about getting a little tipsy.

"When did you find out?" I ask Stef after everyone has taken a drink and the others start breaking up into smaller groups, chatting among themselves.

Firebrand's latest album starts playing through the stereo in the break corner where some of my coworkers are settling in and I'm glad I at least know it's theirs, since I'm not 'technically' a fan. I suppose now that'll have to change.

Looking around the room, I see my co-workers chatting animatedly with one another. The walls are exposed brick, and the ceilings are high, but there are no partitions in our workspace so I have a view of the whole space.

It's got a revamped warehouse feel to it, and right now, the vibe in here feels almost like a club. Everyone is so excited; I wouldn't be surprised if they start dancing on their desks. We'll have to find a way to switch off the sun to make it dark, but that doesn't seem to be bothering anybody, the atmosphere in here is that electric.

Stef grins at me. "I got the call about twenty minutes ago. Thankfully, I've been keeping a few bottles of champers in the fridge just in case an occasion presented itself. What do you say we close up shop early and I'll take you out? We could go have a few drinks, maybe a fancy dinner later? On the company tab, of course."

I swallow past all the dry spots in my throat and nod. "Sure. That sounds fun. Should we invite the others?"

"Maybe later," she says before linking her arm with mine. "Drink up. We've got a lot to talk about and your flight to San Francisco leaves first thing in the morning."

"My flight?" I squeak. "Already?"

“Yep.” She chuckles when she realizes that my eyes have gone as wide as saucers. “Things move fast when you represent a band as big as this, hon. There’s never any time to waste and they want you there, like, yesterday.”

“Where’s the contract? I should probably look over—”

Stef waves me off. “Paperwork later.”

I nod lamely. It’s about the only command my body agrees to respond to right now. *I’m moving across the country tomorrow. Shit. Not permanently, but fuck...*

Do I keep the apartment? I mean, I guess so, for now, anyway. But if it works out then they’ll want me there full time and—

Later, I promise myself, breathing out all the overboiling thoughts. I will think about the details *later*.

Stef isn’t deterred by my state of semi-disbelief, though. She even puts her fingers under my glass to encourage me to take a longer sip when I bring it to my lips, then she drains her own and sets it down on the counter.

“All right, everyone,” she says with another wide grin on her lips. “We’re locking up early today. I’m taking this one out, but we’ll let you know where we are later if you want to join us.”

There are a few nods, but almost as one, people finish their drinks and get ready to leave. There’s nothing quite like your boss saying you can go home early to kick people’s asses into motion.

Less than twenty minutes later, Stef and I are walking into a trendy cocktail bar I’ve never even been in because of their prices, but it’s nice. Mood-lighting, chandeliers, high tables with those clear plastic stools around them and little lounge areas.

I’m clearly underdressed, but no one else seems to care or notice but me. The joys of being a Beta...

A cute female Omega lounges on a low sofa in the corner, a group of three males around her. Judging by their scents, at least two of them are alphas. Nope. All three are. They top up her plate with bits from a platter, filling it to almost spilling until she squeals at them to stop. She’s pregnant, I realize as she shifts to sit up straighter, her round belly knocking into the table.

“Um, earth to Josie,” Stef singsongs, snapping her fingers. “Are you still in shock? You look like you’re still in shock.”

I blink back to the present as Stef places an order for us and the waitress leaves, rushing to check if the hightop of alphas a few feet away needs

anything else, her voice going up by at least two octaves. I don't blame her. They're clearly unbonded and smell like warm summer after a hard rain. But they sit like there are sticks stuck up their asses. She shouldn't waste her time.

"Yep, definitely still in shock," Stef chuckles.

"It's...Firebrand." I breathe their name like it's a revelation, but truth be told, it kind of is. "They've been everywhere for the last few years. This is crazy, right?"

She smirks, shaking her head before fixing her big blue eyes on mine. "It's not crazy. Everyone has to get their first big break sometime, and this is yours. You're a multi-talented Beta with a passion for music and the industry, and if anyone can get these guys to fall in line, it's you."

I arch a brow at her. "There's a reason they've bulldozed through half a dozen managers in half as many years. They're Firebrand by name and in spirit. I mean, I know their antics are part of what makes them so popular, but let's not pretend that I don't have my work cut out for me."

"You've got this." She waves a hand at me and smiles. "Are you really doubting yourself right now?"

"No, I'm confident, but I'm not stupid. I've already been dealing with a ton of crazy people and it's about time I got paid properly for it. All I'm saying is that it's hard to believe that *I'm* the one who's going to be dealing with their particular brand of crazy from now on."

"True, but you'll be fine. Just don't let them push you around." She winks. "Not in any way you don't want them to."

I groan and roll my eyes, but when the server delivers our neon pink cocktails, I pick mine up without even asking what's in it. If I really have a flight to catch from Boston to San Francisco in the morning, I might as well get some celebrating in before it's time to get to work.

About three cocktails later, Stef is singing everything she says and the idea of having to keep Firebrand under control doesn't seem so daunting anymore. "Grandma Pearl would be so proud of youuuu. Makin' your way in music just like she always said you would."

I laugh, swigging back another sip of my tart, syrupy cocktail, feeling a warmth radiate within that's more than just from the alcohol because I know she's right. Grandma would be proud. But I can't think about that right now or happy Josie might turn into blubbering Josie and no one wants that kind of rain on parade day. "Hey, are you a Firebird?"

“Wazzat?” she asks, eyes shiny before she doubles over laughing. “Oh, right. That’s what they call their fans, isn’t it? Firebirds? Nah. Can’t say that I am.”

“Neither am I.” I shake my head hard and fast, and my eyes are a little slow, feeling like they’re sticking to the insides of my sockets. I’m not quite drunk, but I’m definitely getting there. “They’ll send me some, like, reading material or something before I go to meet them, right?”

Her chin flies up and down, the finger she’s pointing at me swaying a bit. “We’ve been too busy to be fangirling like the Firebirds.”

“Damn right,” I chuff out a laugh.

“Tell you what,” she swallows. “I’ll do some research and email it to you for the plane ride.”

I nod. That would be good. I know who Firebrand is in the way that everyone knows who the Kardash...karsash... oh fuck, what are those people called? Anyway, it’s like that. Impossible to *not* know who they are but since I don’t listen to their music myself or hungrily ingest every falsified scrap of news about them, I really don’t *know* know who they are. I know from magazine covers and posters and billboards that the main focus seems to be on their frontman. The other three seeming to prefer to hang back in the shadows of the frame. Like vampires.

I snort, giggling to myself.

“Hey, do you think we should eat? Are you hungry?”

I can’t remember how long it’s been since lunch but judging by the orange glow of sunset outside, I’d hazard a guess it’s been a lot longer than I assumed.

“Food is probably a good idea.”

Before I even know what’s happening, she’s paid our check and we’re stumbling down the sidewalk toward a different fancy restaurant at the end of the block.

Despite what a whirlwind today has already been, it’s such a magical time of day that I smile dreamily.

I half wonder if I should go home and start getting ready for tomorrow, which takes the smile from my lips, but then Stef laughs, linking her arm with my own again before dragging me into the restaurant and away from my last Bostonian sunset for a while.

“Hang on a minute. I made a rez.”

It takes me a beat to figure out what she said, and I’ve barely caught up

when we're being led by a sweet little Beta hostess to a table at the back. It seems her *rez* included pre-ordering our meal, because we're only just seated when platters of appetizers are set down in front of us.

"Oh, good!" she cheers as she eyes the lamb lollipops, flatbreads, and tartare. "Alcohol soaker-uppers. Dig in, we're going dancing after this."

A zing of excitement rushes through my blood. Things have been so busy lately that I can't remember the last time I went out.

"Hey, who's going to take over my clients when—"

"You let me worry about that," Stef interrupts. "You're big time now, baby. Your clients will be served just as well as by one of my junior managers."

I nod dutifully, glad for the food and the sparkling water the server pours into our glasses. I drink it down greedily, shaking my head at the drink menu when the waiter asks if I want something else. If we're going dancing, I need to rehydrate and refuel before I add more gas to the fire.

But Stef has other plans. "Your fanciest champagne, please."

"Two glasses or—"

"The bottle," Stef corrects.

"Are you trying to get me drunk?"

She waggles her brows at me. "Is it working?"

By the time we've worked our way through four courses, I'm stuffed and feeling a little more clear-headed, but I'm still riding the high of achievement and of having my tenacity to succeed finally mean something.

These last three years, I've been busting my ass, keeping my head down and my eyes on the prize. Now that some of the initial shock about hearing I got the contract has worn off, I feel like a hundred-pound weight has been lifted off my shoulders. Like I can finally breathe and let loose just a little bit after keeping my nose to the grindstone for so damn long, and the club Stef takes me to after dinner is exactly the right place for that.

Rock music filters out to the street as we approach the place, already so loud that it thrums in my blood and threatens to take control of my heartbeat. I'm about to join the snaking line of people outside, but Stef just keeps walking, marching us directly to the bouncers and saying something I can't hear before the velvet rope is unclicked. Just like that, we're allowed entry.

"What did you say to them?" I yell to be heard above the din as we make our way into the darkened interior.

She flashes me a sly grin, leaning in closer so I can hear when she says,

“Just gave ’em my name. I’m on the list!”

I frown, but the bassline of the music is already infusing my body with the need to move, the strobing green, blue, and red lights from above casting a spell on me. I’ve always loved dancing, and I wonder why the hell I haven’t been in so damn long.

Stef takes my hand and raises it above her shoulder as she leads me to the center of the packed dance floor, and almost immediately, we’re enveloped in the crush of writhing bodies. Despite the food and water, there’s still enough alcohol in my system that my inhibitions take a backseat and I simply allow the music and scents in the club to take over.

With my hands in the air, I close my eyes and focus on the pounding beat, losing myself to the rhythm of the music and handing it all the stress I’ve been clinging to for so long. I signed Firebrand. This is the break I’ve been waiting for since I was seventeen. I don’t just have a foot in the door, my whole body is right in the middle of the room. We dance for what feels like hours.

Stef orders an endless stream of drinks, but I don’t want this night to end with my body curled around the porcelain goddess so I switch to water, guzzling it down with only a few sips of sweet apple martini in between.

A scent hits me square in the chest, filling my lungs with the heady aromas of bergamot, apple, and vanilla and my eyes almost roll back. There are a fair amount of alphas in the club, but this one scent drills past all the others. “Holy fuck, do you smell that?” I shout over the music to Stef, who’s trying to hear me with all the noise.

“Smell what?” she shouts back, cocking her head at me. I shake mine in response, telling her *never mind* without the need for words. She wouldn’t know what I was talking about anyway. As betas, we have weaker scent glands and *most* of us can’t smell an Alpha from a mile away. ‘Most of us’ does not include me. I was born broken. Able to scent an Alpha the minute he walks into my airspace. It was why my parents always thought I would present as an Omega like my sisters. They were wrong, though.

I breathe in the spicy sweet vanilla scent catching another, almost stronger than the first, this one filled with notes of freshly ground coffee beans and Irish cream. It should be a damn crime to have this good of a sense of smell in a world *filled* with some of the best smells known to man. Especially when I know those scents aren’t meant for me. They were born of genetics and evolution and other things scientific shit I don’t understand. But

I do know that those scents? They are there to attract a mate. An *Omega*. Not a Beta like me.

When I open my eyes to ask Stef if I can buy her another celebratory drink, I realize I'm on my own. She's in the arms of some tall, dark, and handsome stud, and it doesn't look like she's particularly interested in a drink right now, considering her tongue is halfway down his throat.

I throw my head back and laugh, perfectly happy to just keep dancing for now.

My lids have hardly slid shut again when a pair of muscular arms wrap around me. I start, trying to pull away, but then the guy begins to move with me, his thigh between my legs as he pulls my body into his. The movements are insistent, but not forceful. Powerful, but not threatening.

When I open my eyes and turn my head to glance at him, all I see is a strong, male profile, his jawline as hard as the body behind me and dark hair styled messily around a handsome face. There's a glint of metal in his lip and tattoos visible on his neck and forearms. I don't know who he is, but he clearly wants to dance and so do I, so *why the hell not?*

Leaning into him, I go with it, my pulse skyrocketing the longer I'm in his arms. A heady, alluring scent rolls off him in waves, and it's not long before I realize he's an Alpha. Not just an Alpha, but *the* Alpha. The one whose scent I picked out earlier. Sweet and spicy. Apples and caramel.

A mewl catches at the back of my throat and I let my eyes close again until I feel another body stepping into me. Equally hard, equally tall, and with an equally arousing scent suddenly enveloping me from the front.

With a soft squeak, my eyes fly open to find a broad chest, the elegant column of a clean-shaven throat, and a chiseled jaw. Classically handsome with a winning smile that he flashes at me, he's definitely got that clean-cut, boy-next-door thing going for him. Or maybe it's the exhaustion making the edges of my vision fuzzy or the strobing pink and blue lights painting him in a more flattering hue, but I don't think I care.

He starts swaying with us, and since the Alpha behind me doesn't push him off, I'm assuming they know each other.

While I'm grappling with having not one, but two sexy Alphas suddenly dancing with me, a female comes up on our side. She holds up a phone, but the guy in front of me growls something I can't hear and waves her off, and then she's gone, disappearing back into the fray almost like he wounded her.

"What just happened?" I mutter, and somehow, the guy behind me hears

the question.

He brings his mouth to my ear, and his voice is deep and rich, vibrating in his chest molded against my back as he responds, “We’ve already got a dancing partner for tonight, don’t we?”

Oh, well...that tracks. Two Alphas like them? I’m sure they’ll be getting plenty of other offers.

“Just relax,” the male in front of me croons, his voice soothing and steady, friendly almost. He wraps his arms around my hips, and my nerve-endings come to life as he moves against me.

My lips part, my heart thundering in my chest as my blood migrates south. A dark chuckle wraps around me, but I don’t know who it came from. I don’t really care. My body is reacting too deliciously to these Alphas for me to *want* to focus on anything else.

Honestly, after a dry spell lasting most of my adult life, I’m on Cloud 9 right now. Not even the weird looks I’m getting from those dancing closest to us puts me off. *Let them watch if they want to.*

Strangely, even though I’m expecting them to move onto their next target once the song ends, they stay with me as one song melts into the next. The longer we dance, the more the air between us charges until I’m practically panting and grinding on the leg of the Alpha in front of me.

“Want to get out of here?” the Alpha behind me rasps as the song changes into yet another.

“Maybe someplace a little more private,” the one in front of me adds, lowering his head to speak into my other ear.

With their mouths on either side of my head and their bodies sandwiching my own, their intoxicating scents mingling and rock-hard bulges in exactly the right places, I can’t say no. I’ve only ever had one other one-night-stand, but I might be about to make that two.

These sexy Alphas are inviting me back to their hotel room, I got a huge win today, and tomorrow I’ll be back to all work and no play in a new city.

Tonight, I’m celebrating and I’m free. So I tilt my head back and loop my arm around the neck of the Alpha in front of me as I nod, looking at him through my lashes.

The male behind me groans, his grip on my hip tightening before he slides his hand into mine and starts dragging me through the crush of bodies to a staircase near the exit. Once again, I’m vaguely aware of the looks of jealousy and longing being shot our way by so many as we pass, but I really

can't bring myself to care. In fact, I stand straighter, maybe even preen a little.

I thumb a sloppy text to Stef, telling her I'll be back soon and not to go anywhere, before slipping my phone back into my pocket.

Tonight really is my night.

One night of no-holds-barred fun, and then I'll figure out how to be the best manager Firebrand has ever had—and by that, I mean that I'll figure out how to be the one that sticks.

TWO

JAX

THE GIRL'S back slams into the door of a VIP room at the club as her lips hungrily devour mine. I don't even know her name, but I don't need to for what I want from her.

Her lips are plush but firm, and my tongue delves into her open mouth, exploring like I'm making a study of her. Which I am, but only to determine what she likes. And this little bird likes being dominated. Owned. She wants to be *devoured*. No complaints here. I'll fucking gleefully become her savage.

Now I'm no Dom in the BDSM sense, but I also don't do gentle and tender, so this girl and I will get along just fine. What's even better is that she didn't seem to recognize us on the dance floor. There's been no indication at all that she has any idea who we are, which is fan-fucking-tastic.

It's been a long-ass time since someone went somewhere with us just because, and anonymous sex is just what the doctor ordered for tonight. Dylan and I are both looking to blow off some steam after our show earlier, and if we don't have to worry about her being some crazed groupie who's going to try to keep some of our hair or a used condom, then it's so much better.

To be safe, staying right here in the club seemed the better option. A little bit of cash slipped into the hand of one of the bottle girls opened a lot of doors, including one to a private VIP room in the back of the club.

The chick kisses like a goddess, all passion interspersed with these playful nips and needy moans.

She's a Beta, and all I really need to know about her is that she's hot, willing, not totally wasted, and has moves like a dancer that I'd rather see

sans clothing.

I sense rather than see Dylan moving in at our sides, pressing himself up against both of us as he lowers his mouth and seals it over her neck. She moans into my mouth, and I roll my hips into hers when I feel them straining toward me.

Seamlessly, I lead her back a step and Dylan slides in behind her, then his hands push between our bodies and he teases his fingertips into her waistband but doesn't take it any further just yet. Instead, he tugs her shirt free and moves his hands up her sides, bringing the fabric with him.

Our lips part for the material to pass between us.

"I don't," she pants. "I mean, I didn't come here for—I'm not—I don't usually—"

I press my finger to her lips to silence her because I already know. I can tell. It's probably half the reason I was so drawn to her.

"We know," Dylan says and turns her head for him to get another taste of her. His mouth descends to hers slower than mine did, his touch gentler than my own. As he kisses her, his fingers circle her ribcage and then they're moving up, up, up until he's cupping her tits over her navy cotton bra.

I like that she's not wearing some kind of lacy lingerie. God knows, we've seen our fair share of underwear and it always makes me feel like they saw us coming a mile away when we get their clothes off and they're all dolled up underneath.

While they're busy, I take a moment to admire the Beta in front of me.

She's got golden brown hair with bits of sun-bleached blonde shot through the ends and around her face. I'm not sure of the exact color of her eyes, but they seemed lighter. Blue or green, maybe hazel. She's not a stick figure either, with some nice curves to hold on to. With Dylan's darker blonde hair and much taller build, he towers over her like the All-American football player who got the girl at the end of the rom-com.

They're both much...cleaner than I am. Dylan's got tattoos, but she doesn't seem to, and even then, his skin isn't nearly as inked up as my own. The picture they cut together is really fucking sexy, all sweet and passionate and shit.

I can't wait to make this rom-com a dirty one.

Tired of waiting on the sidelines, I decide to get to work on her pants. They're the practical kind, too. Almost like she went out straight from work which, again, I find sexier than if she'd gone home to change first. This tells

me that she's spontaneous, and I like that.

People have been trying to plan out every minute of my day for fucking years.

And then they wonder why I act out.

Dropping to my knees, I move closer to her and hook my fingers into her waistband, seeing the dip of her stomach when she sucks in a sharp breath at the unexpected contact. A groan escapes me in response, my cock aching where it's pressing against the zipper of my jeans.

I'm not into deprivation, but I ignore my own need for now. There will be plenty of time to get my own later, but she needs to be naked. Now.

Sliding my fingers inward until I reach the metal nub that is her button, I undo it deftly and tug the pants down, releasing a shuddering breath when I get my first real whiff of her arousal. There's a shiny patch of wetness on her white panties and I lean in, I find her scent. I'd gotten a little taste of it out on the dancefloor. It's muted as most Beta scents are, but here, high on her inner thigh is where it's at its strongest and she smells fucking delicious. Like summer berries and a hint of vanilla cream. Just enough to tease my senses and pique my arousal, but not enough to make me lose control. Not enough for my true nature to take the reins from me.

This was why we *only* fucked betas. Why we would never touch an Omega. It would be bad press if one of us lost our fucking minds and did something the rest of us would later have to pay for.

I lean forward, tugging her panties down and leaving them in a pool around her ankles with her pants. Her pussy is bare except for a little whisper of unshaven hair in a triangle over her mound, and her lips are swollen and glistening.

Reaching up, I run my fingers along the insides of her thighs to let her know I'm still here, then I spread her apart and tuck in. I feel her knees getting weak, but Dylan holds her up, one of his arms banded around her waist while the other works at getting her tits out of her bra.

It's a fidgety front-clasped thing, but nothing we haven't come across before. He manages to unhook it, and she lets out a breathy moan when the cool air in the room brushes across her now-exposed nipples.

Her teardrop tits are on the smaller side, Dylan's favorite. He wastes no time getting his hands on them as I return to my task, licking through her juicy folds before clamping my lips over her clit and sucking. She bucks against me, moaning uncontrollably as she starts shaking when I don't let up.

Dylan moves his mouth to her ear, murmuring to her while he keeps one arm securely circled around her waist and paying attention to her nipples with his free hand. *We're such a good team.*

I smirk into her pussy, and while I slide a finger into her, her inner muscles are already constricting so much that I know it's only a matter of time. I can't make out everything Dylan is saying to her in a breathy murmur between nips to her earlobe, but the little I do hear revs my motor well into the red.

"How's that feel, sweet girl? He's good, right? I can feel how much you're already shaking. You don't have to hold back with us, baby girl. It's not going to be over when you come. Just think about how good it's going to feel to let go, and then have us work you up all over again."

She responds to every one of his words just as well as she is to my movements, her thighs trying to clench of their own accord. I hold her open just as Dylan holds her up, the pair of us keeping her splayed for our feasting.

"That's it, sweet girl," Dylan croons between kisses, tweaking her nipple as he rubs himself on her backside. "Give it to him."

He goes quiet and she's right there, chasing his words into oblivion. Her body goes rigid, but she's strung so tight that she's almost vibrating. Her breaths are coming in short gasping pants that Dylan swallows and her pussy is clamped around my fingers so tight, *I'm* going to fucking come just thinking about what she's going to feel like around my cock later.

A short moment later, I brush my teeth over her clit and that's all it takes before she floods my hand and my mouth, not making a sound as Dylan kisses her again while the orgasm overwhelms her. I don't stop eating her until I've wrung every ounce of pleasure her orgasm will give. Dylan picks her up in his arms and carries her to the giant sofa in the corner.

For a minute, I think she's passed out, but then she opens her eyes lazily and stares right at me. "You're going to fuck me, right?" she says in a husky murmur before she glances at Dylan. "Both of you?"

"Ooooh shit, our girl wants to play," I groan before pulling my fitted t-shirt over my head. I see her eyes widen at the amount of ink on my skin, and it idly crosses my mind that it might make her wonder if she's seen it somewhere before, but there's still no flare of recognition in her eyes.

Literal volumes have been written about my tattoos, but this woman must not have read any of them. Relief courses through me, somehow getting me even harder than before, and I dig into my pocket for a condom.

Dylan undresses quickly at the same time I do, then he crawls on the sofa between her legs and looks up at her. “I’m not going to let him have all the fun. One more, then you can have me.”

Without hesitating, he spreads her legs open wide and moans when he runs his tongue across her folds. She jerks on the sofa, obviously still sensitive, but she doesn’t stop him.

Instead, she keeps her legs spread and her eyes glaze over again, but not before she looks back at me and beckons me to her. Dropping the condom on the cushion, I scoot over to her on my knees, and she puts her hands on my hips, guiding me over her before she props herself up on her elbows and takes my throbbing cock into her hot mouth.

“Holy—” I choke out as my hands move into her hair and I wrap the long strands around my fists. “*Fuck*. Yes. Just like that.”

I realize she can’t use her hands right now, but she does pretty fucking well without them. Plus, if she was able to use one, I’d lose it. Right now.

As it is, it’s fucking hard not to come. My knot swells and she lets her lips hit it on occasion when she takes me deep, and it sends all the fucking tingles shooting through me. By some miracle, I manage to keep my hips mostly still. I’m not blowing my load in her mouth, that’s for fucking sure. Not after I felt that pussy around my fingers.

In almost no time at all, she’s moaning around my shaft and I know she’s getting close again. Stroking her hair a little, I look down at the furrow on her brow and remember the thought I had earlier about how she liked it a little rough.

She sure was wet after I rammed her into that door, and the sounds she made said that she loved it, so I stop with the stroking and tug her hair harder instead. She responds with a roll of her eyes and a louder moan. I grin. “That’s it. Come for him. Let him get his taste so I can get inside that delicious pussy.”

Whatever Dylan’s doing along with my dick in her mouth and my hands in her hair must work for her, because the next thing I know, she’s shaking all over again, coming apart with me in her mouth, the vibrations of her moans so close to sending me over the edge that I pull out.

She’s fucking gorgeous when she comes.

Who is this girl?

I shake off the nagging question. It’s one I rarely ask. One I shouldn’t ask.

It doesn't matter anyway. We'll be gone by morning.

I'm not sure how much longer I can hold back, but when I turn to look at Dylan, the fucker is already putting on a condom and he *winks* at me as he positions himself at her entrance.

I get out of his way, frustrated as shit but knowing how this works. Besides, I can feel the urgency from him streaming into our bond and I'm not about to knotblock him. Lying down next to her instead, I wrap my fist around my shaft, giving it a few lazy strokes as he kisses her deep, her arms winding around his neck as he thrusts inside on a loud moan.

As soon as he's in, he stops moving for only a moment before I see her coming to life underneath him, her hips starting to move to let him know she's ready. He grins against her lips, kissing her until they're both moving frantically, and it's about at that point that I've had enough of this watching bullshit.

"Get her up," I say sharply, and he does, but he does it without ever really leaving her. Rolling onto his back, he brings her with him and since he's still kissing her, she's bent over flat, her stomach against his with her ass nicely in the air.

I get up on my knees again and move in behind her as I grab the condom I dropped earlier, rolling it on before sliding my hands onto her cheeks. "Have you ever been taken here?"

She glances at me over her shoulder, her wide eyes going slitted as she bites her bottom lip. For one heartrending second I think she might say no and I'll have to wait my turn, but then she nods, her cheeks flushing scarlet. "Do it."

My eyebrows arch, but I'm not about to ask any questions. Thankfully, I carry a sachet of lube in my wallet just in case an occasion like this calls for it, and I lean over to grab it before tearing off the top and squirting some of the liquid onto her.

Tossing the remnants down beside us, I get back into position behind her and Dylan stops moving for me for a sec. I line myself up, pressing my tip against her until I feel some give, and then I slowly work myself into her. Inch by glorious inch.

She's fucking tight. Fucking tight and fucking hot, and even though it takes a while, Dylan eventually starts moving again and when he does, I feel him through the thin membrane inside her. It gives me that extra something I did *not* need right now, and the base of my spine ignites just as she starts

shuddering and Dylan tenses underneath her.

“*Fuck!*” I bark, unable to move slow anymore, knowing there’s no way I can last more than another few seconds and rushing now to the demise of any self respect I may have had.

I move inside her, fucking her tight little ass, my fingers digging into her hips, rolling her into Dylan beneath her.

“You like that, sweet girl?” Dylan asks in a breathless whisper against the Beta’s ear and she whines in response, her fingernails digging into the leather cushions beneath us. Dylan throws his head back, his teeth bared as he loses his control.

Our little bird reaches a hand between herself and Dylan, rubbing her clit for barely a second before she’s screaming.

My orgasm rips through me like a goddamn explosion of light, pleasure, and relief, and it blinds me until it finally subsides, leaving me wrecked in its wake. I pull out of her and the girl collapses on top of Dylan, and he wraps an arm around her and holds her while we all catch our breath.

“We’ve got a red-eye waiting for us and we still need to check out of our hotel,” I grunt when an appropriate amount of time has passed, slipping back into my jeans. “C’mon Dyl, we gotta move or the guys will scalp us.”

The Beta yawns, extricating herself from Dylan without even a trace of disappointment.

“I need to get some sleep anyway.” She pads over to her discarded clothes, not looking back as she starts pulling them on. I cock a brow at Dylan and we go back to silently watching her as she rakes her fingers through her hair and checks her face in the mirror, wiping off a little smudge of mascara.

We just had some of the hottest sex ever and she’s going to leave...just like that. She isn’t going to whine. She isn’t going to try to get our digits. She got what she wanted and she’s just done with us.

Am I offended?

Should I be?

Damn.

I might be getting hard again.

The Beta stops to glance back at us one time, and it’s only once she’s got her hand on the door handle to leave. She flashes me a smile that somehow manages to be coy and shy at the same time.

“Goodnight,” she says. “This was...” She pauses, tongue to her teeth

trying to find a word she hasn't chosen yet. "Fun," she decides.

With that, she opens the door and disappears, and Dylan looks at me after she slams it shut behind her. "I think she stole our line."

Laughter bubbles out of me as I realize that she did. She also left us here, naked, still panting, and still feeling half boneless while she's already on her way home.

THREE

JOSIE

LAST NIGHT WAS A ONE-NIGHT STAND. I've never done anything like that before, but I understand the basics and I knew that I shouldn't ask too many questions. It was about pleasure, and chemistry, and sex—not the beginning of a happily ever after and frankly, I was okay with it.

It was by far the best sex I've ever had and I don't regret it, but strangely, getting it on with two incredibly talented Alphas wasn't the weirdest thing that happened to me last night. As I lean back in my seat on the airplane, I screw my eyes shut and try to forget about the dreams that came after the one-night stand.

It's a long flight, and one I don't particularly enjoy. Business class is great and all, but ever since I woke up this morning, I've had this unsettled feeling in my gut.

It's probably just nerves. I'm taking on the biggest job of my career.

I roll my eyes at my brain's attempt to soothe me. That mantra has been playing on repeat in my head for the last six hours, and while there is some merit to it, it's not making me feel any better. *Whatever. I need to get to work anyway.*

As I lean forward to pull my tablet out of my purse, my head pounds in protest. I wince. Apparently the two ibuprofen I took earlier weren't going to cut it.

With cotton-mouth and the headache as a reminder to stay away from the champagne onboard, I power up my trusty tablet to do a little more research while popping another couple painkillers. Wildly vivid sex dreams aside, I do need to stop focusing on the guys I will probably never see again and start finding out more about the band I'm about to meet.

The truth is that Firebrand may be one of the biggest acts around at the moment, but I know shockingly little about them. If one of their songs comes on, I'll recognize it as theirs, but apart from their frontman, Asher, I'd walk right past them on the street and not realize it.

Thankfully, I have five hours left to do research before we land, and Stef sent me an email with some links attached she thought I should have a look at. Once my tablet is on and connected to the internet, I navigate to my email app and read the outline she provided in the body of it.

Firebrand consists of four members—which I knew—but apart from the Asher guy, I'm not even sure I knew their names before I see them staring back at me, written out in black on white.

Asher, Holden, Dylan, and Jax—short for nothing. His name is just Jax, according to the information she managed to dig up. Asher is the rhythm guitarist and lead singer, the womanizing frontman whose reputation as a player is as well-known as his gorgeous face.

A face that is plastered on every billboard from here to Timbuktu, if not further. If I was part of their band, I'd have been a bit miffed about him being on every ad, but hey. *What do I know?*

Holden is their lead guitarist, Dylan is the bass guitarist as well as their songwriter and backup vocalist, and Jax is the drummer. I'd have liked to have been able to put faces to their damn names, but my connection on the plane is so shitty that none of the images on any of the articles I open will load. At least the text does, but the more I read, the more nervous I get.

This band is more than just a handful. They're freaking terrors, every PR professional's nightmare come to life. Headline after headline screams about what they've been caught doing this time, covering everything from the ridiculously insane, like allegedly having *jointly* fathered octuplets, to the criminal; everything from burning a house down to the rock star staples like multiple accusations of vandalism, theft, and even flooding an entire hotel floor after they had an alligator brought to their room. The list goes on and on.

Dragging in a deep breath when my plane finally starts its descent, I remind myself that rock stars have a long and checkered history of misbehavior and that this band is no different. They just need someone to help keep them in line without making them feel like there's a noose tied around their necks.

I can do that. *I think.*

When I've disembarked and collected my luggage, I stride out into the terminal to see a man wearing a Beckett Records t-shirt holding a sign that reads **JOSEPHINE COLLINS**. I smile, walking right up to him before I extend my hand.

"Hi." I nod at the sign. "That's me. I'm Josie. You are?"

"Trevor," he replies as he lowers the sign in one hand and shakes mine with the other. A Beta. Good. I don't need any more Alphas around me until it's absolutely necessary. "It's good to meet you, Josie. We're all really excited that someone was willing to show up to manage Firebrand."

"Willing to?" My brows twitch up as he takes my wheeled suitcase from me and motions for me to follow when he starts toward the parking lot. "I can't imagine there would've been any shortage of takers. They're a notorious act, sure, but it's an honor to have a chance to represent them."

He snorts. "Notorious is right, but let's get you away from the airport and the easy escape it provides before we get into the details."

With that, Trevor pulls out his phone and fires off a quick message, probably telling the powers that be that I've arrived, and then he leads me to a luxurious black town car that makes me feel like a celebrity myself. I would've been ecstatic about all this had it not been for Trevor's slightly ominous words before.

I mean, come on. They're a band. How bad can they really be?

"So," I say once he's settled behind the steering wheel and I'm buckled into the passenger seat beside him and he's given me a strange look that seems to ask me why I'm not sitting in the back. "You're from Beckett Records, right?"

It's a silly question given his t-shirt, but it breaks the ice and for the next few minutes, the laid-back driver tells me he's been working for the company for two years and he loves his job, and then we get into the nitty-gritty.

"My bosses are waiting for you at HQ," he informs me as we turn a corner. "The Becketts aren't bad people, but they have very little free time and very high expectations so be ready to hit the floor running. I know you've had a long flight, but they want to meet with you before I take you to the hotel. They've also asked Firebrand to come in to meet you and they'll show you around the offices."

"Sure." I was expecting a meeting when I got here, and I'm eager to get started. If only to learn more about the actual assignment and the band it relates to.

Trevor digresses again after that, launching into a history lesson about his bosses and how they rose to the top of their game, and while it's interesting, I'd rather have heard more about Firebrand.

Once we get to a modern, steel-and-glass skyscraper downtown, however, Trevor finally stops speaking and wishes me luck. "They'll be waiting for you in the lobby. I'll keep your luggage in the car and take you to the hotel when you're done. I'll also help you with apartment hunting if you make it through the first few days."

"Okay," I agree, ignoring yet another ominous warning and choosing instead to climb out of the car. Once my feet hit the sidewalk, I smooth out my navy pantsuit before entering the building through a revolving glass door.

Just like Trevor said, there's a couple waiting in the lobby, but I'm thrown off by the arrangement. I don't think I already knew, but I should've. The Becketts are both alphas. They scream authority. Her in a crisp white suit and him in black slacks and a pressed button down. Stranger still are the two female Omegas hovering behind them, chatting quietly together. I see the markings on their necks. I wonder if they have more Alphas in their pack, or maybe some Betas?

The female Alpha, Mrs. Beckett, steps forward with a welcoming smile on her lips, extending her hands and taking both of mine in them before giving them a squeeze. "Josephine," she says warmly.

She smells like spiced cider. I try not to breathe too deeply.

"It's lovely to meet you," she tells me earnestly. "Thank you for coming out so soon. I'm Marianne Beckett and this is my husband, Peter."

"Of course." I squeeze her hands in turn. "Thank you for the opportunity."

"Come." She releases my hands and after Mr. Beckett shakes hands with me, they quickly introduce me to their bonded omegas, and I follow them all to the elevator. It seems to be an express one to the top, and no one says a word in the few seconds it takes us to go from ground to the 30th floor.

The door slides open to reveal a dining room of sorts with a bar along one side, a 270-degree view of the city below, and the bay in the distance. It's an amazing view, but before I can even think about taking it in, Mrs. Beckett's arm is on my elbow and she's guiding me to a table at the center of the room.

There's no one else in here, so I'm assuming it's some kind of executive dining area, and Mrs. Beckett confirms my suspicion when she notices me gawking at everything. "Peter and I have our offices on this floor. There's a

waiting area as well, but we like to have our privacy.”

I glance in the direction she waved when she mentioned their offices, and it’s then that I realize there’s a window looking into a waiting area and I see two doors beyond it. It’s a damn nice setup, that’s for sure.

“Sit,” she says as one of the Omegas pulls out a chair for me and I feel terrible but I’ve already forgotten her name.

I’m facing the view here instead of the interior of the building, but that’s absolutely fine by me.

The waiting area is empty and that view is to die for, all clear blue skies, city skyline, and sparkling ocean. As I sit, Marianne and Peter take seats across from me, and the Omegas excuse themselves as Mr. Beckett settles back in his chair. I take it their mates don’t have official roles in the company? Or perhaps just not ones that pertain to this meeting?

It’s not my place to judge or wonder, but I can’t help it. Grandma Pearl always said that would be my downfall—that I always needed to *know* things. That I couldn’t just let things lie.

I clasp my fingers together and force a pleasant smile to my lips.

“Firebrand is easily one of our most profitable outfits,” Mr. Beckett starts, his voice deep and booming, befitting his statuesque features and high brow. “Unfortunately, they’re also our most troublesome. Forgive me for being blunt, but you’re the third manager this year who has signed on to take a stab at them. I realize there is a certain amount of prestige that comes with representing a band of this magnitude, but are you certain you’re up to this? Please don’t take offense, Miss Collins, but you seem very *nice*.”

The way he says ‘nice’ makes it sound like a dirty word and I try not to let my annoyance show in my features. Beckett Records is big leagues. If I can impress them, one day I could move up in this company. Become a headhunter working in A&R like Grandma Pearl was.

I stare at the Alpha for a beat, but then I straighten my spine and nod. “I’m sure. I understand that they’re a little hard to—”

“This is about more than them just being hard to handle,” Mrs. Beckett interjects gently. “I hope you don’t perceive us as being brash, Josephine.”

“Josie,” I correct with a warm smile.

“Josie,” she repeats. “We just want to be sure you know what you’re getting into. We’ve had far too many meetings just like this and we’d prefer not to have to have another in the next few months.”

“You won’t have to,” I say confidently. “But perhaps you can tell me a

little bit more about why you've had so much trouble keeping anyone in this position. If I know what the managers who came before me failed at, then I can better prepare myself to avoid the same mistakes."

She sighs deeply, glancing at her husband before she turns back to me. "What Firebrand does goes beyond just throwing TVs out of hotel windows and driving expensive cars into pools, which they have done, don't get me wrong, but the problem is that they're a pack of four Alphas and it makes them difficult to keep out of trouble."

I nod slowly. It's common knowledge that they're all Alphas. It's just not something I've really paid attention to before. It's also not something I've honestly had time to consider the meaning of. "I understand, but to my mind, from a marketing perspective, that's good news. It's driving an entire generation of Omegas and even Betas to be weak in the knees at the mere thought of them."

"Yes, well that's one way of looking at it," Mr. Beckett says dryly. "The other is that this entire generation of Omegas and Betas are throwing themselves at the band and the band, in turn, are eating them for breakfast. It's bad press, which is why we try not to place too much emphasis publicly on the fact that they are all Alphas. It sometimes brings unwanted attention and more trouble than we need."

"That makes sense." I look back at Mrs. Beckett, noting the concern etched into the lines around her eyes and mouth. She just looks so tired and so worried that I have the strangest urge to comfort her. "I'm sure we'll find a way to turn all this around. It's all about turning weaknesses into strengths."

"With your track record of handling and rebranding troubled acts, they shouldn't be a problem for you," she says, and I'm not sure who she's trying to convince, but I have a suspicion it's all of us.

I have had some experience with troubled acts, but again, my previous clients were nowhere near the level Firebrand is on. I'm not sure the experience I've had will be worth much with them.

Personally, I'm starting to have doubts about *handling* and *rebranding* this lot, but I'm just going to keep telling myself that I will be able to wrangle this band into submission. I swear I will. It'll just take a little elbow grease to do it...and maybe a crowbar.

FOUR

A S H E R

AS WE FILE into the waiting area outside the Becketts' offices, I feel another headache coming on. *How many of these fucking meetings are we going to have this year?*

We just got a new manager a few months ago, and here we are, about to meet another. It's exhausting. It's also our fault, but it's not like we *meant* to chase the others off. It just happened. We're not everyone's cup of tea, I guess.

Holden, Jax, Dylan, and I might be a little bit difficult to control—I should know, considering that I tried to do it once upon a time. In our first few years, I thought being the frontman also meant being the guy who had to control the others and play the politician.

Epic fail.

It worked out okay for a while, but then we had *the talk* with the label we were with at the time. Everything fucking changed after that talk.

I'm not entirely sure what they expected was going to happen, but tell a group of young, twenty-something Alphas to act more like the *bad boys* everyone expects rockers to be, and shit is going to go bad. *Fast.*

But that's what they did. Honest to God, they sat us down and told us to *switch it up*, to *be the bad boys* because *everyone likes a bad boy*. They told us to be outrageous in our actions, outfits, everything. That we needed to live up to our band name.

I mean, it wasn't a tough sell on any of us, and I quickly found myself caught up in that storm. Now here we are, eight years later, unable to find anyone who's willing to work with us for longer than an average of eleven weeks. It's fucking tedious, to say the least, breaking them in and then

watching them leave, only to have to do it all over again.

Shaking myself out of my thoughts once we're left alone in the executive waiting area, I drop into one of the armchairs and immediately kick my legs up on the coffee table in front of me.

My heavy biker boots crash into a little potted plant that used to occupy the space where my feet are now, and the pot lands with a dull thud on the ground as tiny stones splatter out of it and a fake aloe of some kind follows. *Uh, oops?*

Jax snickers and that mischievous gleam appears in his eyes as he crouches down on one knee and arranges the tiny stones into two mounds. Once he's satisfied with his handiwork, he plants the aloe between the mounds and moves the pot so that the open end is facing the tip of the aloe.

I sigh. "A prickly dick with a jizz-catcher. What are you, ten?"

He shrugs as he rises back to his feet. "Phallic imagery is a classic and since the Becketts *are* prickly dicks, it sends a message."

I want to argue with him, I do, but I can't. Fact is that I don't think they're either prickly or dicks, but they have been tightening our leash and I can't just excuse that. It wouldn't be the *bad boy* thing to do.

I snort under my breath at the thought. These people need to make up their fucking minds. They created the proverbial monster, and now they want to chop off its head. So what if it wasn't the Becketts who gave us that piece of advice?

We're cogs in the rock-and-roll machine and they've made millions off our antics. They say they want us to change. To be more responsible, but do they really?

I can't say I care. We are what we are now, and according to the media that follow us around all day, I'm a *tall, dark-haired rock god with a voice like velvet and a line of Beta and Omega females longer than Route 66 who are all eager to please me*. I'd say that means I'm doing something right.

Even if it also means we've gotten into some trouble that we need a manager to sort out. Apparently.

Holden grunts as he drops into the chair beside mine and spots Jax's work of art on the floor. Unlike Jax, Holden is a man of few words. He uses them sparingly and directs them only to those he wants to hear them.

"Fucking juvenile," he mutters as he shakes his head. "You can do better."

I groan internally, and like clockwork, I see the challenge flashing in

Jax's eyes. He looks around the room, gaze landing squarely on Dylan, the nice one, the golden retriever to Holden's grump and Jax's devious troublemaker.

"What are you thinking?" he asks when he sees that familiar look in Jax's eyes.

"I don't know yet," he muses. "Apparently, I need to do better."

A female Beta who works for Mrs. Beckett hurries past, and like a flash, Jax's hand shoots out and snakes around her wrist. He tugs her into him and at first, she startles, but as soon as she focuses on his face and sees who he is, she smiles radiantly and relaxes into him.

Without skipping a beat, he wraps his arm around her waist and holds her tightly against him, then he slides his hand into hers, straightens their arms, and leads her into a ridiculous tango. Dylan picks up what he's throwing down, immediately starting to tap out a beat on his thighs before he breaks into an accompanying song.

It's not a traditional tango song, but rather a pop hit about a bad romance. It works, though, and pretty soon, a small crowd of employees has gathered to watch. Jax knocks into more potted plants and a freestanding lamp while they're at it, but nothing else topples over. Mostly because there's another Beta running to catch it all.

I lean back in my chair, watching him with a smirk curving on my lips. Our new manager will be here soon, and it's going to be interesting to see their reaction to this. At least it will let us know if this one might last.

If an obnoxious tango makes their blood boil, we're definitely going to have a problem. Before the song has even ended, we catch sight of a woman being led our way from the Becketts' private dining room.

Dylan follows my gaze, and he stops singing abruptly when he sees her. Jax is still dancing, but he turns the Beta to see what we're looking at, and as soon as he does, his footsteps falter and he releases her.

The immediate tension from them is palpable, and Holden suddenly sits up and exchanges a questioning look with me. Since I have no idea what's going on, I shrug, but she's brought into the room before we can ask.

It turns out our new manager is young and female—probably a bad move on the Becketts' part—and she's pretty. Taller than most females but still a few inches shorter than us with light, golden brown, highlighted hair and vivid green eyes. A full, curvy figure being hugged by a navy suit, but none of that is what strikes me first. What strikes me is that she's got her chin held

up slightly and her shoulders are pulled back. She's pretty *and* she's confident, and she's definitely got enough of a spark to make her even more attractive.

"Gentlemen," Peter says when they walk in. He makes eye contact with each of us in turn. "This is Josephine Collins, your new manager. She's from Boston and she just got in this afternoon, so be nice. Let's try to make this one last, shall we?"

"Call me Josie," she says as she steps forward and extends a hand to me, but her gaze seems to be having a hard time leaving Jax and Dylan. She clears her throat when I slap my palm into hers and I inhale deeply, catching a whiff of her faint Beta scent. Pleasant...and marked.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say she smelled like Jax. Like Dylan.

My brow wrinkles and I release her hand, looking her up and down.

"It's nice to meet you, Asher," she says with a pleasant smile that doesn't reach her eyes.

"No, it's not." I'm not saying it to make her uncomfortable. I'm saying it because it's true. "I don't know what you did wrong to end up with us, but you may want to rethink your choices."

It seems like she's interested in making this a quick, professional meet-and-greet thing, and she doesn't take the bait as she lets go of my hand and moves on to Holden. He grunts his name when she shakes with him, but he's clearly as aware as I am that she seems hung up on the other half of our band.

"I'm here to help you with anything you may need," she says as she lets go of Holden's hand. "I will need some cooperation from your side, though."

She said it to us all, but she's very obviously flustered and it gets even worse as she shakes with Jax and Dylan. Both of them are staring openly, and it's not hard to put it all together. She's from Boston and that's where we were last night. We went out after our show, and those two disappeared from the VIP area early on, melted into the crowd on the dancefloor, and we only saw them again at the airport.

Fuck. We need a manager. One who can stay on pace with us. The past few weeks, we've had a series of aides who have barely been able to keep up and I've seen Josie's résumé. She's experienced, but not so much that she'd be a know-it-all set in her ways. She has excellent recommendations from past acts, and even though they're seriously small fries, they only had good things to say about her.

By all accounts, this is the woman for the job—and she took it, which is a

feat in and of itself since our reputation precedes us. *And they just had to go and sleep with her. Both of them. Fuck.*

After she takes a big step away from us all, she finally manages to tear her eyes off them for long enough to spare a glance at Holden and me. “It’ll take me a few days to catch up and find my feet, but I meant it when I said I’m here to help with anything you need.”

By the sensations rattling through the pack bonds I know Jax and Dylan would be more than happy to take her up on that offer. I cast them a warning look but it’s hard to be angry when I can tell by their surprise that they didn’t know who they were fucking last night, either.

Of all the damn luck.

“My office is on the 28th floor, I believe,” Josie continues. “Once I’m settled, I’ll invite you for a meeting so we can get to know each other. In the meantime, I’ve already been given your numbers and I’ll text you mine, as well as my email address. I’m available to you at all times, but I’m not your beck-and-call girl.”

Ha. Call girl. Jax snorts, but I cut him a look to shut up. At least she’s trying to be clear and professional, which is more than I can say for the last few candidates. I swear, one only took the job to get selfies of him with us to post on his social media pages.

“Any questions?” Mr. Beckett asks, then he keeps speaking without bothering to wait for any of us to voice the questions we may have. “Right. This meeting is adjourned. Thank you for coming in, gentlemen. Josie, let me show you to your office.”

She nods at him, sending Jax and Dylan one last, disbelieving look before she turns woodenly and follows Mr. Beckett to the elevator. Mrs. Beckett has disappeared into her office, and the Beta Jax was dancing with before gives him an inviting smile.

“Shall I walk you out?”

“No, thanks.” He doesn’t even look at her as he swipes his tongue across his lower lip and shares a *what-the-fuck* glance with Dylan instead.

“We’ll find our own way out.” I walk her to the waiting room entrance, making it clear that we want her to leave now before I turn back to the shitheads in question. “What the fuck did you two idiots do?”

“We don’t know what you’re talking about,” Dylan says, trying for innocence and failing spectacularly.

I sigh. “Sure, you don’t. You slept with her, didn’t you?” I groan. “Hands

off, boys. I mean it. We need a manager.”

“Yeah, like we need a hole in the head,” Jax mutters.

My eyebrows rise as I cross my arms over my chest. “Right, well, then I suppose you don’t mind booking the next few years’ worth of shows, hotels, airline tickets, private cars, and—”

“Okay, okay.” He tosses his hands up in front of him. “Just chill. We won’t touch her again. Fuck, man.”

“We didn’t know who she was, Ash,” Dylan says as he looks at me imploringly. “We were just looking to party after the show last night and she had moves, man. Good ones. It was just once. It’s fine.”

“It’s not fucking fine,” I growl. “It’s a goddamn nightmare, is what it is.”

Being our manager is not a role I want again, and if they keep this shit up, that’s exactly what I’m going to be forced to do.

FIVE

JOSIE

THIS. Is. A. Nightmare.

As much as I'm not sure exactly how to handle these guys, I've only just started what could've been a dream job. I've always wanted to manage a band like this and Firebrand was supposed to be my ticket to the big leagues.

Now, it turns out that I've already slept with half the band. At least they didn't say it, or I'd have been fired on the spot.

Technically, our encounter last night pre-dates my employment as their manager. I hadn't met them yet and any number of things might still have cropped up that prevented me from ever actually managing them, but the account had already been given to my firm.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

In a state of incredulity, and slightly numb with shock, I follow Mr. Beckett to my office. Thankfully, he doesn't seem too interested in making conversation, and I'm left to my thoughts until they slam to a halt when he motions at an office bigger than my apartment back in Boston.

"This is yours," he says. "You can keep the furniture that's in there. If you make it longer than three months, we'll send a decorator to work with you if you want to change anything."

My jaw grows slack as he leads me deeper into the interior, and I look around, blinking hard as I struggle to take it all in. Not only is it a massive corner office, but it's got a partner's desk with a fancy desktop computer on it, a conference table, a sitting area, a door I'm pretty sure leads to a private bathroom, and even a couple TVs mounted on the walls. Hardwood floors are covered in plush, geometrically patterned rugs and two entire walls are made of glass.

The view is almost as impressive as the one from the dining room, and given that there's even a little bar in the corner, I'm not sure I'm ever going to have to leave this place. "Tha...thank you, sir."

My stammers fall on deaf ears, or more accurately, no ears. When I finally spin back to the door where Mr. Beckett used to be, he's not there anymore, but he appears a moment later with a small troop of assistants.

"These are yours," he says almost like he's handing over a bunch of keys. "They'll introduce themselves and help you get settled. There are a few things you will need to start with immediately. Your assistants will get you up to speed. Let us know if there's anything else you need."

With a brief incline of his head, he gives me a polite smile and then he turns on his heels, striding out of the office almost like he's afraid he'll get trapped here if he doesn't get out right away. I'm still reeling when the first assistant steps forward.

"Good afternoon, ma'am," he says. "I'm Felipe. This is Anna, Anya, and Basil. We'll remind you of our names as we go along."

The dark-haired guy speaks in brisk, clipped tones, and I realize that they've been through this many times before, but I've never had one assistant. Let alone four.

I also know that I need to slow things down here. I need to build a rapport with them and earn their trust if we're going to work well together, and it sounds like I'm going to need a solid team behind me for this job.

"First, I'm not a ma'am. Please, call me Josie. There's no need to keep reminding me of your names." I turn to a redheaded female with porcelain features and clear green eyes and hold out my hand. "It's lovely to meet you, Anna. I look forward to getting to know you."

Repeating the motion with the blonde female and a strikingly similar-looking blond male, I make a point of calling them by their names and then I commit them to memory. "Are you two related?"

The blond-haired pair with the deep brown eyes seem surprised by the question, but they nod in unison. "Brother and sister. Both exactly eleven months apart."

"Wow. Your mother must be quite a woman," I say lightly, smile, and then turn to wave a hand around the office. "Look, it's no secret that my predecessors didn't last long. I intend on breaking the cycle, but I'll be honest with you. I've never had anyone reporting to me and I'm used to doing things alone. It might take me a minute to get used to delegating and accepting your

help.”

Felipe steps around me and nods, preceding me to the desk before he switches on my computer. “Passwords have been reset and the master is on that sticky note on your screen. You may want to take a few minutes to enter your own passwords and to get acquainted with the security protocol. Every time you log in, you’ll also have to answer a series of questions you need to set with your first login and—”

“Every time?” I frown as I study those wide set, chocolate brown eyes. “That seems excessive.”

He shakes his head. “Not when you’re managing a band every reporter and their aunt wants the scoop on. Every shred of information about them comes to you first, which means your computer houses every secret everyone wants to get their hands on. Answer the questions and trust the security protocol.”

“All right.” I nod, feeling a little dazed, but shit.

The office is amazing and the job itself is an incredible potential launch pad for my career, so I know I should be loving all this, but it comes with serious strings attached. And complications.

Self-doubt is something I’ve worked hard to overcome. Being a Beta with Omega twin sisters has meant that I got used to being overlooked. Sometimes even a little bit forgotten, but not in a malicious way. My parents love us all equally, but some will always be more equal than others. That hasn’t changed since 1984 and it’s not going to anytime soon.

Our parents constantly nagged me to try to make up for, well, who I am. And for the fact that my sisters often got more attention. From them and from society.

Eventually, I said fuck it to that life and moved out, got a place of my own, and made my own way in the world. I needed to have at least a little faith in myself to make all that work, but right now, I’m feeling way out of my depth.

“Okay, so uh, Mr. Beckett mentioned things that we’d need to get started on right away?” I’m not addressing anyone in particular, but Anna nods and steps forward, lifting a tablet and navigating to something before she hands it over.

Before I can even glance down at the screen, never mind read whatever is on it, she starts breaking it down for me. “The first thing that requires urgent attention is a lawsuit currently pending against Firebrand. They were at a

nightclub for a quick show and ended up trashing the place. The club is suing them for damages.”

“Regular rock star stuff,” I muse.

Anna sighs and shakes her head. “To a certain extent, I suppose that’s true,” she says. “However, the club had to be shut down for three weeks and they’re demanding not only compensation for the actual damages they suffered, but also damages for lost revenue for the time they were forced to stay closed.”

After taking a second to process, I drag in a deep breath through my nostrils. “This is actually a lot more like the stuff I’m used to doing. Have we tried to settle? Those demands don’t seem unreasonable to me.”

“They’re not unreasonable, but the label was only willing to offer half the claim amount as a settlement. The club didn’t accept the offer.”

“Okay. Set a meeting for me with the club owner, and if you don’t mind, please make a note to have a chat with the Becketts about it before I start negotiating,” I say. “What’s next?”

“Would you like a cup of coffee?” Basil asks. “I can help you set up the computer as well, if you’d like.”

“Thank you, I’d appreciate that, but I need to hear what we’ve got coming our way before I start messing around on a computer.” I take another look around my mammoth office, and Anya follows my gaze before she smiles.

“It’s nice, isn’t it?” she says quietly. “You’ll either be spending all your time here, or none. It depends on the phase Firebrand is in, but we’re here to keep your office mobile when you need it.”

“It’s a whole stratum above the conditions I’m used to working in, but I’m sure I’ll adapt fast with all of you around to help.”

She smiles again, inclining her head before Basil comes back with a cup of coffee and we settle at the conference table. When I realize I’m the only one with a drink, I shake my head. “Nope. That’s not how this works. Get something for yourselves, then we’ll pick up again.”

Basil blinks hard, but Felipe sends him a look that spurs him into motion, and a few minutes later, he’s back with a coffee for each of them as well. Anna jots down notes on her tablet as she tells me more about the nightclub incident, and then Felipe takes over.

“Firebrand is performing most nights at the moment. The shows have been arranged, but we need to follow up with each venue and ensure everything is ready for them. Holden got handed the wrong guitar once. He

smashed it to smithereens without saying a word, and then stoically waited for his to be fetched and brought to him before he went onstage. The show started two hours late as a result.”

I swipe my tongue across my lips. “Well, he’s not the only musician with a propensity for violence against instruments if it’s not the correct one. How many guitars does he have?”

“No one knows,” he replies, and when I widen my eyes at him, he shrugs. “It’s true. We really don’t know. He’s not exactly famous for being all warm, fuzzy, and talkative.”

“That’s more Dylan’s area,” Anya adds helpfully and I remember just how *talkative* he was in that private room back in Boston. I blush and cough, sipping my coffee to play it off as a tickle in my throat.

“He’s the friendlier one,” Anya continues. “Asher’s the guy you want to talk to if there’s a business issue to be discussed, but don’t expect much small talk from him, either. And if there’s a stunt to be pulled, then Jax is the one you want.”

Just hearing their names makes me feel like bricks have grown in my lungs, but at the same time, everything south of the border tightens. And I’m not a *tightening at work* kind of gal. Not at all, but damn...those guys knew what they were doing.

If only last night hadn’t happened, I’d have been in seventh heaven right about now. So far, despite everyone’s warnings, I haven’t heard anything that has put me off. It’s intimidating as hell, and I’m definitely going to need some time to get used to it, but even if I’m out of my depth, I’ll learn how to swim.

As long as they can keep their damn mouths shut about what happened and don’t expect a repeat event. If not...I don’t know, but I have a feeling my assistants will be going through this whole spiel again soon if anyone finds out what—or who—I was doing less than twenty-four hours ago.

SIX

JOSIE

MY LIFE HAS BECOME SUCH a whirlwind that I haven't even been to my hotel yet, but Anna already has the nightclub owner on his way in. She impressed upon him that I needed to speak with him before the club opens tonight and apparently, he's not happy about it but he's coming in anyway.

Such is the power of the Firebrand name.

Meanwhile, with Basil's help, I answered the legion of security questions and managed to get my computer set up, and we're just about to discuss their next show when my door bangs open. A red-faced Anya appears behind a redder-faced man wearing an expensive suit. The veins in his jaw and temples are protruding and he's breathing hard.

As soon as his gaze lands on me, sitting stunned behind my desk, he thrusts a finger in my direction and his features tighten into a scowl. "Who are you? You're not a lawyer. What are you doing meeting with me about this?"

I stand slowly, drawing in a deep breath before forcing my lips into a polite smile. *Talk about trial by fire.*

"Good afternoon, Mr. Fisher." I step out from around my desk and cross toward him, holding out my hand when I get close. "I'm Josephine Collins, the new manager of Firebrand."

"*Good luck,*" he mutters as he gives my hand a firm shake and steps back, narrow brown eyes still locked on mine. "Be that as it may, you need to speak to my lawyers."

"I will be happy to do so, but I wanted to speak to you in person before we hand all this over to the respective legal teams." I motion to my sitting area. "Let's take a seat. Can I offer you a drink? Coffee, tea, water?"

His gaze flickers toward the bar, but then he sighs and glances back at me. “Coffee.”

“Excellent.” I turn to Anya, who’s still standing in the doorway, and she nods before I have to say anything. She even shuts the door behind her to give us the privacy we need for this conversation.

Man, these assistants are damn good at assisting. A girl can get used to this.

Making a mental note to be extra good to them in return, I fix the smile back on my face and lead the nightclub owner to the sofas. He sits down reluctantly, perching right at the edge of his seat with his spine as straight as if he has a stick up his ass, and I take a seat across from him.

“So, Mr. Fisher.” I fold my hands in my lap and cross my legs, thankful that I’m wearing pants and don’t have to worry about flashing him my naughty bits, and then I lean back, doing my best to appear confident and in control. “I understand that you’re suing the band for damages caused to your club after a performance, is that correct?”

He nods once, scratching the scruff on his jaw before he leans back as well, spreading his legs wide and lowering his head to peer at me from between short eyelashes. It’s pretty obvious he’s trying to go for the whole *cool as a cucumber, I’ve-got-this* look, but it’s not working very well for him. He just looks like a slouch to me now.

“They really went to town on the place. We had to stay closed for three weeks after just to put it back together again, so yes. I’m suing and no, I’m not withdrawing the suit.”

“Of course not,” I agree, and he blinks hard, taken aback by the ease of my concession. “No one is suggesting that you simply withdraw the matter, but it is time to settle. You can run the blame game all you want, but in the end, the record label has more money and better lawyers. It’s in your best interest to find it in your heart to reach an amicable solution to all of this.”

Anya gives a little tap at the door before entering and pushes silently inside with a little tray. She says nothing, but smiles politely as she sets down a mug of black coffee and little pots of cream and sugar before excusing herself.

Fischer takes the cup into his hands and sips his coffee black.

Once Anya has closed the door behind her, those dark eyes narrow again, and he regards me for a beat before he shifts and plants both feet firmly on the floor, propping his elbows on his knees and leaning forward to look

directly at me. Coffee forgotten.

“I’m not the first guy who’s suffered serious damages because of them, but I am one of the first not to cave as soon as things started getting hairy. The reality is this, Ms. Collins, someone needs to hold them accountable for their actions and that someone is me.”

“Contrary to what you may believe, I’m one hundred percent in agreement with you that they do need to be held accountable for their actions. I may be new here, but that’s something I intend to work on with them. However, where you and I differ is that I don’t believe your lawsuit is the way to teach them about accountability. Ultimately, they won’t lose a second of sleep over this. It’s going to cost both you and the label a fortune in legal fees and, win or lose, they’re going to be as popular then as they are now.”

He huffs out a breath. “How much do you know about the rock star life beyond the cameras and paps?”

“A bit,” I say lightly. “Enough to know that what they did to your club is par for the course when allowing a band like them to perform.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I’ve had bigger acts at my club, and they’ve never caused half the damage your guys did. They’re out of control and I lost a boatload of money because of it. I’m not letting them off the hook.”

As I look back at him, it dawns on me that this is going to be a hard sell. I’m good at my job when I’m allowed to do it properly, like I am now, but this man isn’t only after the money. It’s personal for him. A principle issue.

I get it, though. If a bunch of entitled dickheads came into my business and trashed the place, I’d have been furious as well. I’d also have been out to prove a point. The problem is that proving a point isn’t a cheap or quick process, and I need a win here. So does he. They’ll bankrupt him before they let him wipe the floor with them in court.

“Why don’t you tell me why you asked me how much I know about their life?”

He sighs, hooking his arm around the back of the sofa before bringing his gaze back to mine. “They think they can get away with anything and it’s because they can. Mostly. They sweep through places like a hurricane, wrecking everything in sight and after, other people are left to clean up their messes. They set fire to a friend’s bar counter in a stunt gone wrong. Left it a burned-out husk and with the safety inspectors on my friend’s ass about it. Never even said sorry.”

A faraway look clouds his eyes as he keeps giving me a stark image of

the life these Alphas are living. “They streaked through a hotel to the pool once, drunk or high out of their minds, and then had the entire pool area shut down for the weekend for a *private event*. Do you know how much they paid for it?”

“No.”

“Nothing,” he says. “The hotel in question had to cancel two paid events at that pool area that weekend, one of which was a Bonding Ceremony for a member of Congress. The bar tab alone for that Ceremony would’ve been enough to keep the hotel afloat for at least a week, but no. Your boys took over, drank the booze that had been stocked for the Ceremony, and fucked the place up so bad that they had to cancel the events the next weekend as well. Eventually, they paid for what they drank, but that’s it. Nothing else.”

“Thank you for telling me about that,” I say sincerely, trying to hide the shock in my voice that they got away with only paying for the booze. “This case, however, is not about that weekend or the burned-out bar. I understand that you’re trying to illustrate why it’s so important for you to persevere with your suit, but it’s not going to have the effect you’re hoping for. Even if you do win, which isn’t guaranteed.”

He snorts. “I have them on camera destroying the place.”

“Yes, you do, but on that same footage, you can see them being egged on by your very own employees. The same employees who spoke on social media about what great tippers they were that night.” I pause to let it sink in. “Your club was also trending on social media for weeks after, wasn’t it? The presence they gave you online was unheard of for you before. I have it on good authority that ever since you reopened, people have been lining up outside, hoping to get in to catch a glimpse of them or even just to party in the same place where they had such a great time.”

“Does that mean you expect me to let them just walk away when they cost me millions? Their shenanigans may have gotten me some publicity, but not nearly enough to make up for the damage they caused.”

“I hear you, and to answer your question, no. I’m not expecting you to let them walk away after that. I didn’t ask you to come here to try to intimidate you into taking a deal or to convince you to let them off the hook completely. I simply believe we can work together to find a solution that is mutually beneficial.”

He arches a dark eyebrow at me. “You sure you’re not a lawyer?”

I chuckle and shake my head. “I’m just a new manager looking to do the

right thing for all involved. A protracted legal battle doesn't seem to be the right thing in this instance, especially since Firebrand probably won't even know about it. Eventually, they may have to appear in court for a day or two, but outside of that, I'm quite sure this won't be on their radar. Meanwhile, the only people who will be winning are the lawyers we're all going to be paying."

He grunts. "What are you suggesting, then?"

That's a damn good question, and one I was prepared for, but I don't have the authority to make the deal right here and right now. "Beckett Records will buy a stake in your club, making it Firebrand's official hangout when they're in town. We'll cover the damages caused by the band and, of course, they'll draw a crowd every time they're there. The band will post at least one selfie or picture at your club when they're in attendance to ensure people know they're there, at least until word gets out that they're regulars."

"And?"

"And you accept *half* the amount the Becketts' offered in the settlement to cover any other losses you may have suffered from your closure." I look right into those skeptical eyes. "This is a good proposal, Mr. Fisher. It gives you reimbursement for the damages and some cash in hand, and Firebrand will make your club the most popular place in town."

He rolls a reply around in his mouth, crossing his arms over his chest. "If they don't destroy it first..." he mutters.

"We will also cover any future damages," I add, sweetening the deal. "What do you say?"

His teeth grind as he thinks it over but eventually, he stands up and holds out his hand. "Bring it to me in writing, and then we'll talk."

I nod, getting to my feet and shaking his hand before walking him to the door. "I'll get our legal team on it right away."

After I get the Becketts onboard, that is. If I can't get them to bite, then I may have a problem on my hands but for now, I'm just going to keep the faith that their desire to get this over with will convince them to go along with what I believe to be the most beneficial solution to put this thing to bed once and for all. I believe it so wholeheartedly that I may just have staked my brand-new career as Firebrand's manager on it.

SEVEN

HOLDEN

AT LEAST ONCE A MONTH, I'm forced to take a break from my new life and step back into the one I left behind. In other words, one day a month, I have to deal with my family. Today is one of those days, and I'd literally rather have major surgery than spend the afternoon with half of California's aspiring politicians.

Every single one of my three siblings is in politics. My three Alpha fathers are in politics and my mother, an Omega, is in politics as a spokesperson for Omega issues.

As I approach their table at the members-only Ruby Club, I fist my hands in my pockets and brace for the barrage of questions I know is going to be headed my way as soon as they see me. They're all gathered on the terrace, my two younger brothers and my older sister at one end of the long table, and our four parents on the other.

Right at the center is an empty chair, undoubtedly left open for me. It's the proverbial hotseat, and since my sister, Lucy, also an Omega, is following in my mother's footsteps and Hunter, my Alpha brother, is being groomed for a senate run in the coming months, I know I'm not going to be left alone about my own political aspirations.

Short answer: I don't have any political aspirations, but even Adam, my Beta brother, is going to corner me about it. It's just how my family is put together.

As expected, as soon as I pull my chair back with a loud scrape, all conversation at the table comes to an abrupt halt and all eyes are on me. There are no hugs, no bright smiles, and no idle questions about how I've been.

Their features are schooled, businesslike, and I groan internally when I see the gears turning in all their heads at the same time. I don't say hi. I don't like talking, but more than that, they don't want me to say hi.

They want me to say—

“Are you done with this rocker phase yet, Holden?” Jake, my Senator father, asks after taking a sip of his whiskey. “We need your help with Hunter's campaign and the press you've been getting is going to hurt us in the long run.”

And there it is. What they want me to say. *Yes, I'm done with this phase and I'm all in on helping to make my brother the next Senator Grant.*

Too bad I'm never going to say that. Staring stoically at my father, I put my hand up to signal the server that I need a whiskey too. Hell, I need a whole bottle to get me through this lunch, but I'll start with a tumbler.

My mother's sea-blue eyes meet mine, and they're glinting with determination as she sets her champagne down on the table. “At the very least, let me set you up with a nice Omega to settle you down. Your father is right. All this bad press of yours hasn't been good for us and it's not getting any better. Hunter needs you to be a team player for the duration of his campaign, darling. It really is the least you can do.”

I arch both my eyebrows at her. “Settling down is the least I can do?”

“Yes,” she says decisively. “We need to give the reporters something good to write about you for once. A Bonding Ceremony will do quite nicely.”

Fuck. It's the same song and dance every time, and if I could avoid it, I would. My parents aren't stupid, though. As soon as they found out we were with Beckett Records, they bought an ownership stake in the company.

It's a minor one, but enough to make some calls and the first call they made was to ensure that I have an afternoon once a month where I'm obligated to be in town and free from any work commitments.

“I'm not settling down,” I say firmly. If I was anyone else, I'd have tried to draw Lucy or Adam into the conversation, to make small talk with them and shift the focus to their plans, but I detest small talk. I refuse to indulge in it, even if it might take some of the heat off me.

Through the bond I have with my pack, I feel a spike of worry I know is coming from Ash. I don't even want to know what he just felt from me to cause it, but I inhale and exhale deeply a few times to try to calm down.

While I do, I keep looking right at my mother until my other father, Max, clears his throat. “Ah, our dining companion for today has arrived. I believe

you've met Josie, Holden?"

I twist in my seat to see a familiar face making her way toward us. Our new manager is fucking gorgeous, but she looks like she's been run ragged and it's only day two. Still, there's a spring in her step as she approaches us, that same energetic light in her eyes that I noticed yesterday.

"Thank you so much for inviting me," she says as my parents stand up to introduce themselves and shake her hand. "I must admit, it was quite a surprise to be included in a family lunch."

She shakes with each of my siblings in turn, and a growl catches in my chest when I notice my brothers both eyeing her like she's their next meal. Jake motions her into the available seat which just so happens to be right across from mine, and while I'm surprised by the protective instincts rearing up inside, I'm also thanking my lucky stars for the distraction.

"We wanted to meet the band's new manager in person," my mother explains politely as everyone settles back into their seats. "We like to be involved and to know who's in charge of our boy and the press they're getting."

Part of me wants to lurch forward and warn Josie that she's in the lion's den right now, but since I can't do that without the whole table hearing it, I simply lean back and nod at her when I meet her gaze. Surprisingly, she holds her own with them right from the outset with ease, a far cry from the strain I saw in her eyes and heard in her tone yesterday.

Something definitely seems different about her. She's confident and conversational, and even though my family is significantly more intimidating than the band, she seems way more comfortable with them than she did with us.

"What are you doing about the lawsuit?" Adam asks almost accusingly. He's an attorney for the Department of Justice and he's a born political animal, working his way up without ever having seen the inside of a courtroom.

Josie obviously doesn't know any of this, but she doesn't skip a beat. "The label may be buying out a stake in the nightclub, which would result in no court case and only having to pay a quarter of the original claim amount. It's a good deal, but I have to run it by the whole board before it will be final."

Jake nods his approval, which isn't an easy thing to get from him. "That will certainly mitigate the public fallout of a lawsuit against them. *We cannot*

afford for them to look like destructive brats or vandals right now. The details of this deal would be kept private?”

“Absolutely,” she assures him. “Part of the settlement would be that the owner has to sign a non-disclosure agreement. The only thing the press would get is an opportunity to photograph Firebrand being welcomed back to the club with open arms. We would also address the *misunderstanding* and make it clear that the damages people saw being caused in the videos have been repaired and paid for.”

“That’s a solid plan,” Max agrees, and even my mother looks pleased.

She cocks her head as she turns to look at Josie. “Impressive. Sounds like you’re doing a spectacular job already.”

Josie lets out a nervous chuckle and shakes her head. “It’s only my second day on the job but so far, it’s going well. Ask me again in a month.”

Mother eyes my brothers, catching the way they’re watching Josie and confusion flashes behind her eyes.

“Forgive me,” she says. “You’re a…” She trails off.

Josie’s brow lifts, realizing what Mother is asking her. She chuckles. “A Beta, ma’am,” she replies with confusion. “In my position being anything but would make my job a *lot* harder.”

Mother nods, smiling politely, shaking her head as if casting aside an intrusive thought and turns the conversation to our upcoming tour. “You may not be aware of this, but Holden’s brother will be running for the Senate and Lucy and I have some important committee meetings coming up. Everything he and Firebrand do can derail our work and cause some serious backlash. It is imperative that you control this in the coming months, Josephine.”

“Of course,” she agrees with a smile before she suddenly turns to me. Her bright green eyes sweep across my features before she suddenly pushes back her chair. “On that note, thank you so much for the invitation. It was lovely to meet you all, but I need to abscond with Holden for the day. We have to do some photoshoots in preparation for the West Coast tour. Fun stuff. I’m sorry to have to steal him away, but we have to get back on track. They’ve been a rudderless ship for too many weeks and it’s my job to fix that.”

My parents all seem surprised and frankly, so am I. The label has always kept their promise about an afternoon free of work commitments, but this has to be important if they bend that rule for her.

“We’ll let you get going,” Tim, my other father, says as he stands to shake Josie’s hand again. “Good luck with catching up on everything. I’m

sure they've missed dozens of appointments without having someone herding them there."

My insides bristle, but I keep my expression stoic. They're forever talking about us like we're children and sure, sometimes we do act like it, but we're perfectly capable of making it to our own appointments without having to be herded like sheep. I just wasn't aware that we had photoshoots scheduled or that we missed any.

Josie leads me to one of the label's fleet of SUVs, then she surprises me again when she climbs in behind the steering wheel herself. In the past, our managers have always been driven everywhere, but it seems she's different in that regard too.

"Where are the shoots?" I ask gruffly, my voice scratchy from disuse for the day. "I'll text the others to meet us there."

She frowns, but as she guns it out of the parking lot, she suddenly turns to grin at me. "There is no photoshoot. I made it up because you looked absolutely miserable at lunch. Since we haven't eaten yet though, we should probably grab something from a drive-through. I don't want to risk you being photographed at a fast-food joint when we're supposed to be working. What's your poison?"

"Clever of you to get us out of there, but my folks are on the board, Josephine. They'll check that we did, in fact, uphold our commitments. If we were supposed to be taking pictures, they'll make sure pictures were taken."

She blinks a few times in rapid succession, but as she stops at a red light she whips out her phone and answers me while furiously typing out a message to someone else on her phone screen. "No problem," she says. "I can come up with a couple influencers out and about who would love the clout on short notice. We'll make it work."

Once again, she doesn't skip a beat. When we met her yesterday, I wasn't even sure how she got the job to begin with, but I'd have bet good money that she wasn't going to last longer than a week. After the last hour, however, I'm starting to think I was wrong about her.

This girl has got something. I'm not sure what it is, but *something*. And I'm pretty goddamn certain that it's something we've been needing in our lives for years now. Something that we might finally have found.

EIGHT

JOSIE

HOLDEN GRANT IS a damn intimidating man up close and personal like this. For starters, he's huge. Almost seven feet of pure, hard, tattooed muscle that takes up the entire passenger seat of the label's SUV.

He's also the most stoic person I've ever met. We've been in this car together for twenty minutes and other than telling me that we'd have to make the photoshoot a reality, he hasn't said a word. He's just sitting there, staring straight ahead.

There's not a hint of a facial expression or a slight tightening of his lips or eyes. To be honest, I'm not even sure he knows where he is right now. It's like he's tuned me out completely. Tuned out his surroundings. Tuned out everything except his own head.

It's weird, and I'm not used to it *at all*. With nothing and no one else around, it's making me itchy. I can't sit still like this, even if the silence isn't an all-together uncomfortable one. Don't get me wrong. I can be quiet. Just silent and still, but this is carrying on too long and we don't know each other well enough.

"So, uh, your parents want you to be a politician?" The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

Holden blinks hard, then his eyebrows rise a fraction higher on his forehead. "That's a very personal question."

"I know." My heart is thrumming and my palms are suddenly covered in sweat, but it was the first thing that popped into my head and my mouth just ran away from me. It's not like I can take it back, though. "My parents wanted me to get a degree in nursing, if it helps."

He gives me a blank stare. "Nursing?"

I nod. “I’ve always been in love with music and I’ve always known I somehow wanted to make a living in the industry, but my parents didn’t really think it was the most responsible choice. Apparently, it’s a turbulent industry and it’s completely unreliable. No one in it has any job security and chances are, I’m going to fail and need them to look after me for the rest of my life.”

The words pour out of me unbidden. *Crap. I’m rambling. He doesn’t care about any of this.*

But when I look at him, there’s suddenly something resembling emotion in his eyes. Understanding, even. “We should introduce your parents to mine. Sounds like they have some opinions in common.”

“You’re a superstar.” I glance at him when we stop at the next traffic light. “Surely, they don’t think you’re going to fail.”

He shrugs. “In their eyes, I already have.”

“But you’re a superstar,” I reiterate. “How is that a failure?”

“It’s complicated.”

“I’m sure I can keep up.” *God, why am I insisting on dragging this out of him?*

I swear, I have foot-in-mouth disease. If I carry on this way, I’m going to have to have my toes surgically removed from my palette.

As Holden’s gaze meets mine, however, he seems surprised rather than offended. “I’m sure you could. Why do you want to, though?”

“I don’t know. The car was too quiet.”

He chuckles. “I happen to like the quiet.”

“Yeah, I got that.” The light changes and I turn to face forward again, my eyes on the road as my fingers tighten on the steering wheel. “But hey, this is as good a time as any for us to bond a bit, isn’t it? We’re going to be spending a bunch of time together. We may as well get to know each other a little bit while stuck in traffic.”

“I don’t know about that,” he muses. “So, have you heard back about this photoshoot yet?”

Fuck. “Uh, Basil said he’d call me back. One of the street photographers I’ve interacted with before seemed interested when he messaged her, but will you check my phone? He may have texted his response.”

Holden’s eyes widen. “You want me to check your phone?”

I smirk at him. “Go ahead. I have nothing to hide.”

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.” I pick up the device from between the seats and hand it over after unlocking it with my fingerprint. “Just see if he’s gotten back to us, will you? I promise there’s nothing on there that will make you want to scrub your eyes with acid.”

“No naked selfies?” he teases, and surprise ripples through me at the lightness in his tone, but I wink before shaking my head.

“Why? Would a picture of me naked make you want to scrub your eyes with acid?”

He snorts. “Not likely.”

As he glances down at my screen, his thumb gliding across it as he scrolls, he suddenly snorts. “He got back to us, all right. I’m not doing that, though. Reach out to someone else.”

“What? Why?”

“This street photographer of yours is at a farmer’s market. I don’t do farmer’s markets. Hell, I don’t even have anywhere to keep fresh produce.”

I frown. “You don’t have a fridge?”

“Nope. A mini-fridge in my hotel room, but they keep that stocked with drinks. No space for produce.”

“Hotel room?” I have no idea what to think about that. “Is your rock star mansion being remodeled or something?”

“Jesus, you really have no filter, do you? Are you always this direct?”

“Nope,” I admit. “I’m just nervous.” My hand flies up to clamp over my mouth, but it’s too late. I’ve already said more words I shouldn’t have fucking said. “I’m sorry. It’s just...you make me nervous.”

“You’re intimidated by me?”

I can’t gape at him without looking away from the road, so instead, I just let my jaw drop so he can see how ridiculous a question that is. “You’re a rock god. I’m your brand new manager who’s only just been upgraded to full manager status. How am I not supposed to be intimidated by you?”

“In that case, you’re doing a great job, but I’m not going to the farmer’s market for a photoshoot. My vibe is more...”

“Dark and broody,” I suggest, holding back a smirk and I think I see the ghost of one pulling up one corner of his mouth.

“That’s why this is perfect,” I announce. “We’ll showcase another side of you. A lighter side. It’ll be fun.”

“I don’t have a lighter side and for the record, I don’t have a rock star mansion either. We’re never really in town for long enough to have justified

buying one. I still have my old apartment, but I sublet before we went on our second tour and the tenant can't afford to stay at a hotel. I can."

My brows tug together as I consider his reasoning. "That doesn't really make sense. He could just rent a different place."

"Yeah, but then the apartment would just be empty most of the time anyway. No point uprooting him just so I can sleep at my old place for the few weeks at a time we spend in town."

"Ever heard of putting down roots? Having someplace to put your stuff?"

He shrugs those wide shoulders, his expression impassive. "My stuff is in storage. Except for clothes, obviously."

"Okay, then," I say. "I don't really get it, but if that's what makes you happy right now, then I won't interfere. We're doing the shoot at the farmer's market. This photographer is good and she's available right now. Besides, we just need a few snaps of you to prove we really did have somewhere to go. You don't have to buy anything if you have no place to keep it."

"That's just mean. I'm going to be photographed walking past people's tables and just not buy anything? Doesn't seem fair."

My teeth sink into the back of my lips. For a guy who seems so stoic, he really does seem to have a lot of hidden depths. He doesn't want to move back into his place because he doesn't want to inconvenience a tenant if the place is mostly going to be empty anyway, so his entire life is being stored somewhere else instead.

They're damn famous and successful, so I'm pretty sure he can afford a house even if he keeps the apartment and yet, he hasn't bought one. Now, he doesn't want to go stroll through a farmer's market without buying anything because it's *unfair*.

"Okay, well, if you want to buy stuff, do it and we'll donate whatever you end up getting. I'll have one of my assistants look into places in the area to drop it off after."

Cocking his head, he thinks it over for a beat before he nods and leans back in the seat. "Yeah. Okay. That sounds good. On one condition."

"What's that?"

"We donate it anonymously. Have your assistant look into a place while we're at the market, and then we'll have it sent over but there won't be any pictures of me donating stuff and we'll never mention it publicly."

My brows rise, but I don't argue. "It could be pretty good PR. I get it, though. Too many people nowadays only do good when they can be seen

doing it.”

“That’s not what this is about. Should I text the others to join us at the market?”

“Sure,” I agree. “What’s it about then?”

Holden taps out a text on his phone, then hands mine back for me to unlock again before he takes it upon himself to text Basil about finding someplace to donate the produce to. With that done, he shrugs at me. “I just don’t want the attention.”

His phone beeps, and he glances down at it before he sighs. “According to Dylan, Jax is sleeping and he’s got to check in with his Mom. Asher’s meeting us there, though.”

“That was quick,” I comment lightly, but I really am pretty impressed at the speed of their responses. “You guys really are pretty close, huh?”

“We’re a pack,” he says like that settles it, and I guess it does. We drive the rest of the way in silence, but it’s only a few more blocks so I don’t mind it so much this time.

As I park, he touches my arm, waiting for me to glance at him before he withdraws his hand and inhales deeply. “You were right earlier. My parents do want me to be a politician and if I don’t want to do that, then at least to become an aide to one of them. They want me in their game because it’s the family business.”

Something warms in me, a recognition perhaps that he’s opening up to me in ways I don’t think come naturally to him. Wanting to give him something in return, I smile and nod my understanding. “My parents think the music industry is unreliable because my grandma Pearl was a musician. She never gave up, but she also never made it big.”

His lips curve into something resembling a smile, and seeing it there makes my heart skip a beat. “You know, talking to you isn’t all bad. You’re very intrusive, but not all bad.”

With no idea how to respond to that, I go with the first thing that pops into my head—which I really need to stop doing—and *wink* at him. “You’re not all bad either.”

A low bark of laughter rumbles out of him, his head shaking as he climbs out of the car and stops to wait for me on the sidewalk. As soon as I’m next to him, he sucks in a deep breath. “I’m going to get mobbed.”

“No, you won’t. It’s a normal, weekday afternoon. Besides, it’ll be good to get some shots of you casually interacting with fans. You guys have a

reputation for being very closed-off unless you're drunk. Some nice pictures of you, sober and during the day, interacting with mere mortals at a market will prove to people that you're not a vampire."

He arches a steep brow at me, but then the photographer spots us and grins, coming right over to shake my hand and gawk at him. "I thought Basil was playing some kind of prank on me when he asked me to photograph Holden Grant in the middle of the day at a farmer's market, but it's really you."

Holden sends me a smug look before he shakes her hand in turn. "It's really me. Nice to meet you and, uh, we're sorry about the short notice."

"No worries," she gushes as she lifts the camera hanging from her neck. "Thankfully, this thing is pretty much attached to me. I never leave home without it and I'm done with my errands. Should we get started?"

"Any minute now. We're just waiting on one more to join us." Looking around, I breathe a sigh of relief when I see Asher striding down the street. He doesn't seem nearly as uncomfortable being out in public in the daytime as his packmate, but he does seem confused.

Sunglasses cover his eyes at first, but when he reaches us and pushes the mirrored lenses up, I see the confusion swimming in his gaze as he lowers his head to one side. "What's up with us doing an impromptu photoshoot? At a farmer's market, nonetheless."

"What is it with you guys and farmer's markets?" I roll my eyes, which is when I notice that the photographer looks like she's about to faint at the sight of these two together.

Laughing softly, I reach out and poke her in the ribs. "Katie? Are you in there?"

Her entire body jerks, but then she sticks out a hand to shake with Asher before she turns back to me. "What do you have in mind for this shoot?"

"Just them, casually strolling up and down. Perhaps interacting with the people who own the stalls and whoever else approaches them. Let's just keep it light and happy."

"We don't do light and happy," Asher grumbles. "We're more dark and mysterious."

Holden smirks at me. "See? I told you."

Resisting the urge to stick my tongue out at him, I inhale deeply and give him a sweet smile. "Today, you're light and happy. Real men of the people. We're all shooting from the hip here, so just go with it, will you?"

Asher looks like he might argue but then shrugs, still seeming puzzled as he glances at Holden and then falls into step beside him when he starts moving.

“Just pretend the camera isn’t there,” I call out to them, nudging Katie to follow. “Keep it looking candid,” I instruct her. “Today they’re just normal guys doing normal things.”

To my surprise, the guys hit the brief completely and in fact, if I’m not very much mistaken, they even seem to be having some fun.

At one point, Asher answers a call and smirks, disappearing into a veggie stall only to return with an eggplant he seems to have purchased. As he hands it over, he grins. “For you. A token of Jax and Dylan’s affection.”

I take it from him, blushing beet red when I get the joke, realizing that they *all* know. But as long as it stays a secret between the pack and goes no further, I should be safe.

Chuckling as he walks away, I wonder if Asher’s always this playful. I don’t think he is, but maybe he’s sussing me out just the same as I’m doing with them.

Either way, the shoot goes well and Katie seems unbelievably excited about the shots she got. She promises to send me the best ones once she’s done editing them, then she takes off, leaving me with two rockers who aren’t nearly as brooding or dark as they seem to think they are.

“Thanks for that, gentlemen,” I say as I rejoin them. “You’re free to go.”

“Cool. Thanks, but we’re sticking around.” Asher gives me a friendly smile and then waves as he walks back to the nearest stall, and Holden watches him go before turning back to me.

“Would you like to stay with us? We’re going to look for some more stuff to send to the homeless shelter Basil found. You’re welcome to help us shop.”

My mouth dries up, my brain completely stuck for a minute before it finally unglues itself. “No, I need to get back to the office, but thanks for the offer. Have fun.”

With that, I turn and walk away, needing to put some distance between myself and the not-so-intimidating-after-all Holden Grant. Today did not go like I thought it would, and I have a feeling these guys are just going to keep surprising me.

NINE

JOSIE

A WEEK after my plane touched down on California soil, I'm more strung out than I've ever been before. If I didn't know any better, I'd think I've been coming down with something, but I do know better.

It's just been one hell of a stressful week and I'm tired, run down, and under an insane amount of pressure. Trevor and I found a nice apartment for me, but I've only been there once. All the other nights, I've slept right here, in my office, and it looks like it's going to happen that way again tonight.

At least I've got a nice sofa. I definitely slept on worse back in Boston in my tiny apartment.

As I stretch my arms out above my head, closing my tired eyes for just a moment, I try to think about what else I need to get done tonight. I know there's a lot on my list, but I can't remember any of it right now.

The label dumped all the prep work for Firebrand's next tour on me, and while it's been illuminating to see exactly what goes into a tour as big as this, it's also been exhausting. For me and the band, to be honest.

I've had the four of them running around between media appearances and photoshoots, all while working to keep them in line, and in the background, I've been following up on venues, setlists, merchandise, ticket sales, security, and a whole bunch of other logistics I've never even thought about.

In keeping the band so busy, I've mostly been able to keep them out of trouble, though I heard they have been goofing off during photoshoots and flirting during press interviews. It would be putting it mildly to say they've been resistant to my efforts to focus on doing their goddamn jobs instead of making a spectacle of themselves.

On the upside, Holden really seems to be trying to help. It can't be an

easy feat for him. Especially with him being able to feel everything through the pack bonds when the rest of the pack—namely Jax—gets all riled up. It's good to know I've got something resembling an ally in their ranks.

Of course, he might also secretly be working against me, but I guess I'll just have to wait and see. I don't really know them well enough to make any judgment calls just yet.

Lowering my arms back to my sides, I rub my stinging eyes and decide it's time to close up shop for the night. My brain has officially packed its bags for the day and its long gone. I'm pretty sure I've hit my productivity cap for now, and I'm only going to mess up if I keep going.

As I shut down my computer, there's a soft knock on my door and I frown. I sent all my assistants home hours ago and I'm not expecting anyone to come by. Sitting up straighter, I focus on the door but it's closed, and since I don't have x-ray vision, I resign myself to the obvious and call out, "Who is it?"

Instead of responding, the person on the other side opens the door and keeps me in suspense until a very unexpected face peeks out from behind it. "It's Asher," he says belatedly and completely unnecessarily since he's already striding into my office like he owns the place. All *six-foot-five* of the pure, rock star splendor that is the Firebrand frontman walks toward me, smirking as he waves a hand at my bar. "Nightcap? I've noticed you've been putting in a lot of long hours, so I thought I'd come by and see how you're doing."

For a moment, I'm utterly speechless. This man is one of the most famous Alphas in the world, and he's casually striding into my office in the middle of the night to check in on me. *What the hell happened to my normal life?*

"I, uh, sure," I say once I find my voice. "Uh, how do you know I've been putting in long hours? I haven't seen you around here all that much. Also, shouldn't you be at your show?"

"Just got done with it." He chuckles, and the sound infuses my soul with a strange warmth, like breathing in around a campfire on a cold night. "I know everything that goes on around here. Everything that has anything to do with Firebrand, anyway. Call it a throwback to the old days when your job used to be mine."

While he speaks, he walks to the bar and moves in behind it, disappearing briefly before coming back with two tumblers, an ice bucket, and a bottle of scotch that, according to the label, is older than my mother. He reaches down

again and this time, his hands are full of ice when they reappear. He drops the cubes in the bucket and wipes his palms on his thighs before tilting his head at me.

“Are you coming?”

I nod, finally remembering how to move and wheeling my chair away from my desk. Standing up, I tentatively walk over to join him, wondering if this really is what it appears to be or if he’s got ulterior motives for coming here tonight.

As if he can read my mind, he smiles when I sit down on the stool on my side of the bar. “I’m sorry we’ve been making you work so hard. When the four of us are together, we tend to give in to our worst impulses and it doesn’t help that everyone, including the label and our fans, encourage us to do it. I know that doesn’t make up for it, but I figured I owed you an explanation.”

“You don’t, but thanks for giving it anyway.” I look at him across the wooden counter, studying his sharp jawline and arrow-straight nose, his iconic white blond hair and those intense navy blue eyes. “I don’t mind putting in the hours. Eventually, I’ll get on your speed but until then, I knew I was going to be playing catch-up.”

He breathes in deep, a sudden furrow appearing on his brow as his gaze locks on mine. “You smell different today. New perfume?”

“Uh, no.” Heat creeps to my cheeks as my gaze hits the counter while he fills our glasses. “More like no perfume. It’s been a long day and I, uh, I wasn’t expecting company.”

Truthfully, I probably need a shower.

He hums low at the back of his throat, his gaze contemplative when I lift mine to look at him again. As he passes over my drink, our fingers brush, and a jolt of electricity zaps right through me. It’s so intense and so unexpected that I nearly topple over, but thankfully, I’m a little more graceful than that. I can’t hold back the sharp gasp as I suck air into my lungs though, but Asher doesn’t comment on it.

He merely smirks and withdraws his hand, wrapping his long fingers around his own tumbler instead. “Whether or not you expected company, you smell good, Josie. Real good.”

The moment lingers for a beat too long, and I blink hard to snap myself out of it. He’s a renowned playboy, a tease who has all the moves and I’ve already slept with half of the goddamn band. I can’t give in to this strange attraction I suddenly feel brewing between us.

“Why do you bring out the worst in each other?” I ask to distract both him and myself from whatever the hell is going on right now. “You’re an established act now, a close-knit pack who has rocketed into the stratosphere together. You’ve achieved the kind of success most people can only dream of. It seems to me that should’ve made you feel more settled and less erratic.”

Those blue eyes flash with surprise as he stares back at me. “Whoa. Talk about going straight for the jugular.” He lets out a low whistle, but before I can apologize or tell him that I have no idea where that came from, he smirks again and nods slowly. “Okay, I’ll play, but only if I get to ask you some personal questions too.”

“Shoot,” I say. “I don’t have anything to hide.”

“Don’t you?” he muses before he picks up his glass and slides out from behind the bar. He walks to the sofas and settles on one, then pats the spot beside him and looks at me. “We might as well get comfortable if we’re going to grill each other.”

“We’re not grilling each other.” I roll my eyes, but carry my drink to the sitting area anyway. For some reason, I even find myself quietly obeying his unspoken command to take the seat next to him.

I’m unbelievably tired and I have the strangest urge to be closer to him. Maybe it’s because sitting next to him will be the closest I’ve gotten to physical contact in over a week, and I’m craving that contact. I don’t even know why. I’m not usually a super touchy-feely person, but again, it’s been a long damn week.

Asher laughs before he turns to look at me. We’re only about a foot apart, and it’s like there’s a magnetic field around him, drawing me closer even when it shouldn’t. He seems to be oblivious to it, though, simply sitting there with that sexy, infuriating smirk on his stupidly full lips as his gaze locks on mine.

“I don’t know why we bring out the worst in each other,” he says almost offhandedly. Conversationally, despite the seriousness of the subject we’re discussing. “It’s like there’s this itch between us that we’re all trying to scratch and we’re just not quite getting it. Like the more we try, the worse the itch gets and at the same time, the further away we are from actually getting to it.”

“That’s...weird.” I can’t help it. It *is* weird. As his manager, I should probably be trying to soothe him, but shit. I have no idea what to say to that. “Maybe you’re trying to scratch the itch the wrong way? Maybe the chaos is

what's making it worse."

He shrugs. "Maybe, but it's a vicious cycle. Chaos begets chaos. Even if I wanted to, I have no idea how I'd stop it. And besides, it's what the fans expect now. It's what makes us...us. Your turn."

"For what?"

"To answer a personal question," he says before he leans in just a little bit closer, his hand on the back of the sofa now almost touching my shoulder. "Why did you fuck Jax and Dylan?"

My heart collapses before it starts racing and my eyes slam shut as I groan. "So you do know about that."

"I do." When I open my eyes again, he's smiling, but it's devious. Wicked. "I told you. I know everything that relates to Firebrand, and our manager sleeping with half the band relates to us, so why'd you do it? You hardly seem like the type."

"The type for?"

Those eyes remain locked on mine as he brushes a bit of my hair back and tucks it behind my ear. "A threesome with two famous rock stars."

My heart gallops and my breath is dangerously close to catching with him looking at me that way. "You're assuming I knew who they were."

"Didn't you?" He cocks his head before shifting so that he's even closer to me than he was before. "Do you honestly expect me to believe you didn't know when you became our manager the very next day?"

"I didn't know." *Why does that sound like a promise?* "I'm no Firebird, Asher. The club was dark. I was tipsy and I honestly wasn't expecting anyone famous to be there, least of all the band I'd just been appointed to manage. The band who are based in *San Francisco* and who I was *flying* out to meet in the morning."

"Fair enough," he murmurs, intensity pouring off him in waves that strangely taste like fire smoke and leather. "I suspect we bring out the worst in each other because we're still chasing something. We achieved that success you mentioned, but it just doesn't feel like we're....done."

"You're not done," I say softly. "You've still got at least one tour ahead of you and you're young. You—"

"I didn't mean it like that," he interrupts. "The band's not anywhere near done. We know that, but there's something else. Something that makes it feel like there are fire-ants crawling all over us and it won't stop until we find whatever is making us feel this way."

“Yeah, you probably need a doctor for that.” My heart is slamming in my ears, my cheeks flooding with heat as Asher and I keep getting closer and closer to each other.

He chuckles before he slides his hand off the back of the sofa and into my loose hair.

I should tell him to stop.

I *need* to tell him to stop.

“Maybe,” he admits. “Or maybe we need something else. Jax and Dylan have been pretty relaxed since they came back from Boston...”

The next thing I know, he closes the final bit of distance between us, and even though everything in me is screaming that this is a bad idea, when he kisses me I kiss him back with just as much intensity.

I know this is a game to him. I’m not under any illusion that playboy Asher King has feelings for me, but as our kisses grow more heated and he pushes my jacket off my shoulders, I do the same to him.

Stop, Josie. You need to stop.

I moan into his mouth and he swallows up my sound greedily.

His shoulders are broad and his heat radiates through the fabric of the t-shirt he still has on, his muscles hard and defined under my palms. Asher pushes into me, his grasp on the back of my neck tightening as his front molds to my own and he sets me on fire in a way I never have been before.

This is the kind of kiss that deserves to have a song written about it—if we don’t get burned away before he gets the chance to write it. Asher devours my mouth like he’s a one-man conquering army and before I can even begin to get my head wrapped around what’s going on, he’s got me flat on my back on the sofa and he’s peeling my pants off.

There’s a tiny voice in the back of my mind screaming with five-alarm-fire intensity that this is a bad fucking idea, but I can’t seem to make myself stop. As his skin slides against mine there’s a much louder voice, insistently chanting *more, more, more*.

My shoes practically fly off my feet and then his hands are on my breasts as I kick my pants and panties away. I’ve never thought of myself as particularly wild or feral, but just like it was with his bandmates—and the dreams I had of them after—that’s exactly how I feel right now. The need to be consumed fills me and I spread my legs wide when he kneels between them.

His mouth descends between my thighs and I feel him shudder as his nose

runs along the inside of my thigh, his fingers biting into the soft flesh there. “*Fuck,*” he hisses. “Are you wearing a pheromone, Josie?”

It takes my fuzzy brain a minute to catch up to his question. He thought I was wearing an Omega pheromone perfume. I shake my head, my back arching with need while a zing of something like frustration shoots through me. I already told him I wasn’t wearing any perfume.

Asher’s heavy lidded eyes slide closed as he drops his mouth to my pussy to taste me and I cry out, fisting my hands in his hair as he licks his hot tongue right through my wet center.

Fuck.

Fuck. This is so bad.

No. This is *so fucking good.*

My door isn’t locked and anyone can come in at any time, but somehow, that doesn’t bother me as much as it should. In fact, it makes it that much more of a turn on. What are these guys doing to me?

Asher’s white teeth graze my clit and his hands weave their way up my thighs, his fingers teasing at my entrance as his stubble grazes against my mound.

I lose myself in the sea of sensation he’s whipping up from deep within my being, not even trying to fight it as a powerful orgasm starts building almost immediately and breaks free with a sudden detonation of euphoria.

My entire body tenses as it goes off like a goddamn firework, but I manage to keep the screams of pleasure from escaping, biting my lips so hard to keep quiet that I taste a tinge of metal in my mouth by the time I come back down to earth.

As soon as I stop shaking, Asher grins at me from between my legs.

These fucking Firebrands know their way around a woman, I think to myself, trying to remember a sex partner in my history that could hold a candle to their talents and coming up with exactly zilch.

“There,” Asher says, breathless, his lips still glistening with my release. “My thanks for keeping things together the last few weeks.”

I start when he pushes to his feet and starts walking toward the door. “Where are you going?”

“Far, far away from you, Josie.” He gives me one long, last look, then he smiles again and disappears, pushing his palm down on his erection as he leaves.

I’m left panting on the sofa, unable to really comprehend what just

happened until I see his jacket still lying on the floor. Without even really thinking about it, I wrap it around my shoulders, breathing in his scent as I let myself doze off, promising that I'll only grab an hour or two before I get back to work—and put my damn pants back on before I'm literally caught without them in the morning.

TEN

DYLAN

MY NOSE SCRUNCHES up as I stare at the piece of paper in front of me. I'm hunched over in the recording studio, trying to write on the piano's closed lid, but I seem to have hit some kind of mental wall.

Frustration courses through me, but I drag in a deep breath through my nostrils and reread the last of the lyrics I wrote. *Can't keep my mind off your body, my hands all alone. I'll go to war, I'll fight. Fight for our story and just one more night.*

"What's going on over there?" Jax asks, interrupting my thought process just as the next word was whispering like a shadow from the back of my mind.

"Fuck," I mutter, scrubbing my palm over my face as I shake my head. "I lost it."

His eyes go all big and innocent. "Oops."

"It's not your fault." I sigh, blinking myself out of my zone before taking a look around. "Where the hell are they? You and I aren't supposed to be the only ones trying to write new fucking songs for the next album. Unless it's just going to be us going on tour."

He snickers, rolling his eyes before breaking into a little drumroll that ends with a sharp smack on the cymbal. "Surprise! You're the artistic one, bro. The new stuff always starts with you. We just give our input once the rough draft is written up. Want me to give you some beats to work with?"

"No. It's useless. This is bullshit. It's all a jumble in my head and I can't get it to make sense."

"You will," he says confidently, twirling his sticks between his fingers before he leans back. "Lay it on me. What have you got so far?"

“Nothing usable,” I insist just as the door bursts open and Holden finally makes an appearance. I give him a look and shake my head when his blue-brown eyes latch on mine. “You’re late.”

“Family meeting,” he grunts before he slides his jacket off and tosses it on top of the piano. “Weird, since Josie saved me from the last one. I had to do some meet and greets with fan influencers to make up for it, but I kind of assumed she’d get me out of the follow-up meeting as well.”

“Maybe she tried,” I say as he picks up his guitar and steps around me to read my notes over my shoulder.

Instead of commenting on what I’ve got, he grunts again and moves into his place, closing his eyes and strumming a few bars before stopping and starting again with something completely different.

Jax watches him for a few, then he cocks his head. “She saved you from a family meeting?”

“Yep.”

“Why?” he asks. “It’s in your contract that you’ve got to go to ’em.”

“I know.” Holden inclines his head and shifts his guitar in his hands still without opening his eyes. “We gossiping or making music here?”

“Says the guy who was over an hour late,” Jax teases. “I think we can spare a few minutes for gossiping about our new manager under the circumstances.”

Holden’s eyes suddenly snap open and he fixes our drummer with a heavy glare. “Over an hour and Dylan has three sentences. You guys are on fire, aren’t you? The fuck have you done for the last hour, Jax?”

I stand up and step between them. “Bickering isn’t going to get us anywhere. Where’s Asher?”

“Fuck knows,” Holden says as he returns his focus to his guitar. “If you two want to talk about Josie, go right ahead. Since you’ve fucked her, I guess you’ve just got more to say about her than I do.”

When I glance at Jax, we exchange a look and I give my head a firm shake. We have to try not to get into what we did with her that night. We didn’t know who she was when we pinpointed her on that dance floor, and so far, she’s been good for us all.

The last couple weeks is the longest we’ve gone without the press reporting on some *situation* we got ourselves into. I like the peace. It’s letting me feel like we can just do our jobs without all the noise, and noise isn’t going to help me get a fucking song written.

“Okay,” I say when Jax shrugs at me and spins his drumsticks again. “This is what we’ve got so far. *Can’t keep my mind off your body, my hands all alone. I’ll go to war, I’ll fight. Fight for our story and just one more night.*”

“That’s not complete bullshit,” Jax says slowly. “Got any ideas for what comes next?”

“I’m thinking maybe, *Rivers run deep, waves crashing to the shore—*”

“I thought the metaphor for this one was war,” Holden says. “Now we’re going to rivers and waves? The fuck does that have to do with war?”

“I don’t know, bro. Have you ever tried to get out of a rip-tide? Felt like war to me when we got caught in it that time in Hawaii.” Jax winks at Holden and then the door bangs open again and Asher finally comes in.

With trademark smirk firmly on his lips, his shirt misbuttoned and his hair wildly sticking up in all directions, he kicks the door shut behind him. “Sorry, boys. I had a meet-and-greet with some fans in the mixing booth back there.”

As I glance at the soundproof booth at the back of the studio, the lights inside are suddenly on and there are two females who are giggling and waving as they gather their clothes. I roll my eyes as Asher walks to his guitar stand in the corner and picks up his instrument.

“Amazing how the meet-and-greet didn’t extend to the other three members of the band,” Jax grumbles as Asher slings his guitar strap over his shoulders.

“They didn’t ask and I didn’t offer,” he retorts. “Where were you? I heard you talking some shit about Josie instead of working, so don’t pretend you were in here, slaving away while I was saying hi to the fans.”

“Saying hi?” Holden snorts. “Didn’t know we were calling it that now.”

“Yeah, would it kill you to let us *say hi* sometimes with you?” Jax jokes. “Might be nice if you’d share *our* fans.”

Asher’s smirk never fades. “Hey, don’t look at me. They won some contest on one of my social media pages. I’m sure you’ll be getting your own meet-and-greets soon. Mine just happened to be first.”

“Bullshit,” Jax mutters.

At the same time, Holden sniffs and tightens his grip on his guitar. “No thanks.”

Meanwhile, I’m just standing there, wondering why, so often when we’re just shooting the breeze, there’s this snide undercurrent. It never used to be

this way. We're a pack and a strong one at that. These days, we just seem to be rubbing each other the wrong way.

It's got to be stress, right? Fuck knows, we're constantly under a mountain of it.

"Did you say something about Josie and your family?" Asher asks Holden as he absently strums his guitar. "You didn't rip her head off for interfering, did you? It's a pretty head. And a smart one. It'd be a real pity if you decapitated her. I'm appreciating having her in our lives."

My eyes nearly bug out. "You're appreciating her?"

"Sure." Asher shrugs before he frowns at me. "Aren't you? Things have definitely been running a little more smoothly for us since she took over, unless you missed it."

"I haven't fucking missed it," I mutter as I head back to the piano and drop down on the seat. "I'm just surprised you've actually noticed, what, with your head always being buried in a cunt somewhere."

"That's not nice," he retorts, but when I look at him, he winks at me. "Even if it is probably true. Jealous?"

"Not even a little bit," I say, and I'm dead serious. "Can we get to work now?"

"Hang on, I'm still waiting to hear if Holden ripped her head off." Jax points a drumstick at our friend and packmate. "Did you? Or is she still alive?"

"She's still alive," he grumbles. "I didn't mind when she showed up. It distracted them from trying to convince me to run for president or something."

Once again, my eyes are about to fall out of my head. "Have you been body-snatched? Because I could've sworn I just heard your grumpy ass say you didn't mind our manager interfering with your family."

"Whatever, man," he says before he closes his eyes and starts strumming again.

Even Asher seems surprised, but he shrugs it off and turns to me. "You were arguing about metaphors when I walked in? What's the problem?"

Jax explains it while I reach down to pinch my thigh. It's like we've been catapulted into some kind of twilight zone where Jax and I are the ones who've slept with a manager, and she still seems to be capable of managing us without freaking the hell out about it. Holden *doesn't mind* her pitching up to a family lunch, and Asher *appreciates* her for doing her job.

The world's gone crazy, but judging by the sharp pain that shoots through me when I pinch myself, I'm not dreaming. Asher doesn't even get on me about mixing the metaphors. "Yeah, no. I think I like that. Besides, we can work it back. *I'll go to war, I'll fight. Fight for our story and just one more night. Rivers run deep, waves crashing to the shore. Nothing can stop me, for you I'll wage the war?*"

"It's a little repetitive," I say as I turn it over in my mind. "With a few tweaks, I think we could make it work, though."

"Just a question here, gentlemen. Who exactly are we going to war for?" Jax arches a brow at me. "You got anyone specific in mind?"

I shrug, but the truth is that I was thinking about our manager when I wrote that first line. *Can't keep my mind off your body, my hands all alone.*

If she hadn't reappeared in our lives the way she did, I'd probably have forgotten about our night together by now, but as things are, I haven't been able to stop fucking thinking about her. Fantasizing about that night and wondering how to make it happen again.

I know I promised Ash there wouldn't be a repeat performance, but I'm starting to think she's more than just another stand-in. Things have changed since she showed up. We've changed. In small little ways that may not seem like much but really, when taken all together, they're bigger than you'd think.

"No one in particular," I lie, looking right into my best friend's eyes and hoping he doesn't feel the guilt about it coursing through the bond. "I just thought it was time for some fresh material."

In more ways than one, but I don't mention that just yet. For now, I'm just going to keep watching Josie do her thing, quietly weaving whatever spell she's weaving on them. And then I'll see how long it takes for them to realize I'm not the only one secretly fantasizing about having this manager of ours stay on. For a long time. Who knows? Maybe it'll even wind up being forever.

ELEVEN

J A X

PEOPLE KEEP SAYING I'm the troublemaker of our group. That's not true. I'm just the one who's willing to take the plunge.

I feel the others through our pack bond, just waiting for me to act first. They have the same impulses I do. I'm just the one with the balls to take the leap that gives them permission to do the same thing.

I don't really even know why. For attention maybe? But then again, Asher gets most of that anyway. I prefer to think it's just because I know how to have fun.

We've worked fucking hard for the privilege to do whatever the hell we want, and it just so happens that I think we deserve to do it now that we've earned that privilege. As we walk into Asshole Fisher's nightclub after yet another practice sesh, I sigh. The prick is suing us—*suing*—and yet, here we are.

The order came down from Queen Bee-ckett herself that we're supposed to hang out here tonight. On the regular, from now on, actually. We're to hang out and perform here often, and he *fucking sued* us just for having some fun after our last show.

Asshole.

Snapping the toothpick I was chewing between my teeth as annoyance rips through me, I force myself to give the prick a dickish grin when he approaches us. "Fisher!" I cheer like we're long-lost friends, but there's a pap just outside the door and he's taking our picture as Fisher smacks his palm into mine.

"Jax," he says, his own voice slightly more restrained than mine, but he's also smiling for the camera. "It's good to see you again, boys."

“You too,” Asher says magnanimously as he shakes with Fisher once I’ve withdrawn my hand. “It’s great to be back, Fish.”

Appropriate nickname since shaking his hand feels like touching a freshly-caught catfish.

The man beams at Ash and then moves onto Holden and Dylan. It’s still early evening and the club isn’t officially open for business for the night yet, but we were told to come right over. So here we are.

As he shows us in, I see the pap haul out a tablet and I groan internally. *In T-minus ten seconds, the entire world is going to know that we’re here.*

“Thanks for having us back, bro,” Asher says as he follows Fisher into the already darkened club and across the empty floor to the stairs leading up to the VIP area. “We didn’t mean to cause you so much trouble the last time we were here to party.”

Fisher waves him off. “The label wants to buy a stake in the club because of it, so it’s no problem. It’s a much-needed cash-injection, to be honest. Plus, since you’re going to be performing and partying here on the regular, we need to put all that behind us.”

Ah, of course. They need to get some return on their investment, after all. Asher nods like he knew all that, which he may well have. I didn’t have a fucking clue, but that’s not unusual for me.

“Glad to put it behind us, Fish,” he says happily, but I see the cool glint in his eyes.

He’s not happy, and neither am I. I never wanted to come back here. Fucking dude *sued* us. For nothing. Most of the damage wasn’t even caused by us. They caught us on camera smacking a few things into other things and suddenly, the club had been *trashed* and *Firebrand did it again*.

Someone is responsible for getting us into bed with this guy, and I for one want to know who it is. He’s slimy as fuck and it’s not even a good club. “So, Fish. Who do I need to thank for getting us back in your good graces, huh?”

The guy turns to me, blinking hard before he frowns. “You don’t know? Your brilliant manager came up with the idea, so if you’re going to thank anybody, thank her.”

“I will,” I bite out through gritted teeth.

All roads are leading back to good ol’ Josephine these days. Asher and Holden are acting softer toward her and even Fisher seems to be rocking a bit of a crush. “You guys are lucky you found her. I don’t know how you’re convincing her to stay, but she’s good. She’s empathetic and she’s smart. Our

first meeting, I walked in there pissed as hell and I walked out wanting to take her deal. It was like magic.”

“Magic, sure.” I squeeze my eyes shut when no one’s looking.

It’s fucking annoying that everyone is on Team Josie. She’s trying to rein us in, and I don’t like feeling like a dog on leash. Being the rowdy bunch is our thing and everyone knows it. They like us this way and I like the freedom that gives us. And sure, that night Dylan and I had with her was hot, but we’ve had a lot of hot nights.

“Jax?” Fisher’s voice booms into my thoughts and when I refocus, he’s giving me a weirdly tight grin. “What was that?”

I blink myself out of my thoughts and laugh. “Nothing. Just that she is magical, all right. As magical as a fucking mosquito that sucks the fun out of everything, even if she is hot.”

His features harden, but before we can get into it, Josie appears like talking about her summoned her. She’s all dressed up like a golden-haired goddess. At least this time, it looks like she went home to change, but now that I know who she is, I don’t really care.

That night, I found it sexy that she hadn’t bothered. Now I know why. She was out celebrating because she’d just been assigned to hold our leash. In a short black dress that emphasizes her long legs and her full tits, she smiles as she walks up to us.

“Gentlemen,” she says before turning to Fisher and extending her hand. “Arlo, it’s good to see you. I’m here to supervise their first time back at the club after the incident. I trust we’re all going to have a nice, relaxed, drama-free evening.”

She shakes with him and turns back to us. “Arlo’s been good enough to reserve a spot for us in the VIP section. We thought it best to get you in before they open, which is happening in about ten minutes, so we’ve got some time to reacquaint ourselves with our surroundings before the fans will start coming in.”

Holden sighs, but nods his agreement. “Other acts are coming out tonight as well, right? It’s not just us?”

“It’s not just you,” she says reassuringly, even reaching out and squeezing his bicep before dropping her hand back to her side.

And the big guy just nods at her. He’s not quite smiling, but he’s not scowling either and for him, that means he’s practically elated.

...and apparently totally fine with her casually touching him.

“The label is also sending out First Instinct and Marsha Quinto.”

I groan. “First Instinct, as in that all-Omega girl band?”

“You have a problem with them?” she asks, her face impassive as she glances at me. “They’re extremely popular right now and they have a stellar reputation.”

“Yeah, I know. Everyone keeps reminding me.”

I trudge up the stairs to the VIP then, and when I hear a giggle from behind me, I glance over my shoulder to see Dylan offering her his arm as they follow me up. My eyes roll, but an irrational stab of jealousy also pricks at me.

As if Holden felt it, he sucks in a breath and then sends me a sharp glare, but I flip him off and keep right on going. When I get upstairs, Beta waitstaff are already waiting and I grin as I slide an arm around one’s waist. “Can we have a bottle of Macallan? Five glasses. Please and thank you.”

I add the last part loudly enough that no one can accuse me of having been rude to the staff, and then I let go of the female Beta as I turn in a slow circle to take in the renovated space. They did a good job. Honestly.

There’s a brand new long bar all the way along the back wall, complete with glass shelves, tasteful backlighting, and a nice brass rail to put your feet on. The wallpaper used to be grimy and dusty, but it’s a crisp, clean hunter-green now and the scorch-marks have all been covered.

In fact, everything up here is glass, hunter-green, and gold now. If you ask me, it’s a vast improvement and we did the dickhead a favor by forcing him to redo it.

I catch a whiff of Josie’s sweet scent before I feel her coming up beside me. I’m not sure if it’s just because of our carnal history, but her scent seems to have stuck with me, and it’s growing on me by the day. It also seems so much sweeter now, but that must be because she was just at home to shower and change. Probably perfume. Maybe even that kind that they mix Omega pheromones into.

“Do you like it?” she asks, glancing up at me like she genuinely cares. “Soon, it’s going to be like your second home so I hope you do.”

I shrug. “It’s fine. You know what would make it even better?”

“What?”

I jerk my head in the direction of the bathroom. “If Dylan and I take you in there to christen it before the place fills up.”

A good hate fuck should set me straight. Maybe get rid of some of this...

this...whatever the fuck *this* is charging the air between us.

Her cheeks flush furiously, but she shakes her head even if I see the smile she's trying to hide. "We had a good time back in Boston, but it's not going to happen again. We're working together now and it would just make things complicated, regardless of what happened between me and Asher. We need to at least attempt to keep things professional from here on out."

Her and Asher? What the fuck? I don't know what she's talking about, but I'll find out from Ash later.

"You're turning me down?"

She nods and shoots me a cheeky wink. "We'll always have Boston, right?"

"Right," I bite out, but as she sashays her tight ass away from me, I take another look around the newly renovated space and decide I actually fucking hate it.

It looked better in ruins.

TWELVE

JOSIE

I CAME to the club to keep the quartet of rockers in line but honestly, it's *one* in particular that's giving me a run for my money tonight.

Fucking Jax Adler Living up to his reputation.

It's not just him, but he seems to be the instigator. Holden and Asher can be out of trouble one minute, then Jax appears and the next moment, they're right there with him. It's kind of hard to explain, but I'm starting to get the idea that they indulge him. Or maybe like whatever rush of idiocy goes to Jax's head also filters out to their heads through their pack bonds.

Why, I don't know, but what I do know is that wherever he goes, trouble follows. He appears to be in a mood after our conversation earlier, and they seem to be doing their best to cheer him up.

I would never admit it out loud, but I was tempted to take him up on his offer. I'm proud of myself for standing strong, but the fact that I was tempted at all is bad news.

Standing off to one side as I try to catch my breath, I check my watch. It's not even one in the morning, but it feels like we've been here for at least twelve hours. As I blink at the waitress in front of me, I can't quite believe what she just said.

"He brought what?"

"A horse, ma'am," she says with wide eyes. "It's on the dance floor and he's dismounted, but the horse is still there. We think it's a mare."

"Does it make a difference?" I push off the wall and stride past her, peering over the rail from the VIP section down onto the main dancefloor.

I don't know where the fuck he found a horse, but she wasn't kidding. There's a horse on the dancefloor and it seems to be scared.

Shit. Fuck.

Sliding my phone out of my pocket, I fire off a quick message on the group text the label created for their team present tonight.

Me: Stop the strobe lights. Now. Change the music. Something downbeat. Just. Change. It.

Once the message is sent, I'm already flying down the stairs, approaching the magnificent creature with my hands held out in front of me as I move slowly toward it. Mercifully, the crowd has already parted and my path is clear.

Also mercifully, Jax didn't remove its bridle. There's no saddle, but there is a bridle, and a minute later, I manage to wrap my hands around the thick leather reins as I run my hand through its snow-white mane.

"That's okay, precious. You're okay," I coo as I start pulling it to the door. "You're just beautiful, aren't you? I'm sorry you got caught up in this."

As soon as I get it out the door, I see the trailer waiting for it outside. I have no idea where this whole rig came from, but at least he made it wait. A man hops out and grins at me. "Snowy's a good pony, right? She loves putting on a show."

"In a club?" I snap at the guy as I hand over the reins, keeping my voice down so the cameras clicking all around me don't pick up on the altercation. They're not too interested in me or the horse now that Jax isn't on her back. "It's fucking animal cruelty. You're lucky I don't report you for this."

As I spin and walk away, I see a gaggle of girls who are most certainly underage giggling their way into the club. The bouncer they just passed stuffs something in his pocket and an irritated growl tears out of me.

"Empty them," I demand when I reach him, pointing at his pockets. "Turn them out. Right now."

"Who do you think you—"

I cut the large man off by getting right in his face. "I'm a manager for Beckett Records, who are in the process of becoming co-owners of this place. I've got an office inside if you'd like to see it. Perhaps we could wait there together for the cops to arrive."

We absolutely cannot have it said that my Firebrands are partying with kids who are barely out of high school. I don't care who their parents are or how much they paid to bribe the bouncer. The man sighs and produces a

handful of hundreds.

Red flashes in my field of vision as I snatch the cash away from him, struggling to keep my voice down. “You’re fired.”

“What?”

“You heard me.” I scowl at him. “Now leave before I call the police.”

The man stares at me incredulously, but then he shakes his head and storms off, and I fire off another text on the group chat asking for a replacement bouncer to be sent out immediately and that the private security crawling around inside for our act’s protection dispatches someone to look for the girls. After I give a brief description of what they’re wearing, I head back inside.

The strobe lights are just coming back on and the music is back to normal when the next crisis hits. A supplier called to confirm our order of one hundred bottles of Dom Perignon to be delivered immediately.

“That was a mistake,” I say calmly into the phone. “We certainly did not place that order. Please call this number from now on any time you receive a strange request from us.”

I sigh. *Fuck, maybe I just should’ve taken Jax up on his offer.*

On the other hand, I don’t think he’s being spiteful. I think this is just what it’s like to be their manager when they are out for the night. A few more crises later, I retreat to the office the label has been given to use, which means that for tonight, it’s mine.

It’s a small space overlooking the nightclub, and its windows are made of one-way glass so no one can see in. Other than the view, it also offers two armchairs, a mini-fridge, and a desk. It’s nothing fancy, but I need someplace to catch my breath—hopefully for real this time—and this is the best I can come up with.

I left only a lamp on inside, and after shutting the door—and locking it for good measure—I fling my arm over my eyes and melt into the wood paneling behind me as I let out a loud groan.

A chuckle rings out in the relative silence of the soundproof room, and my arm immediately drops back to my side as I push away from the door. I didn’t see him before, but Dylan gives me a friendly wave as he stands up out of the armchair.

“Sorry to intrude,” he says, smiling. “I asked my security where I could go to get away for a few minutes and they told me this space belongs to the label now.”

“I... no. You’re not intruding.” I clear my throat and draw in a deep breath to gather myself. “I just wasn’t expecting anyone to be in here. Why did you need a break from it all? Did something happen? Is there another crisis I need to sort out?”

He chuckles again as he shakes his head and sits back down, picking up his drink and motioning at the empty glass still standing on the small sideboard. “I’m just not much of a partier anymore. When Jax is doing his thing, I try to duck out these days. Nobody will notice I’m gone anyway.”

Riiiiiiight. I don’t say it, but I’m entirely sure he’s wrong. I’m sure there’s a legion of fans missing him downstairs right now, but again, I don’t say it. “I’d love that drink. Thanks.”

“He’s keeping you on your toes?” he asks idly as he pours me a glass of the expensive scotch they seem to favor.

When I nod, he grimaces a little. “I’m sorry. He’s not a bad guy, I swear. He just, uh, he doesn’t have much regard for his own safety. He tends to get off on the adrenaline rush of things like skydiving, and if he can’t get that...”

“He settles for letting horses into clubs or having threesomes with nameless strangers?” I summarize for him when he trails off.

Dylan shrugs, the tops of his cheeks flushing. “We’ve all got our backstories, Josie. Just be patient with him. He’s got a good heart.”

“Is that why you take the fall for him so often?” The question tears out of me before I can stop it, and my heart flies into my throat while I wait for his reaction.

I’m not sure what to expect, but I don’t get anger or even irritation from him. Instead, he drops his head back and laughs before looking at me again. “Yeah, I guess it is. I don’t mind taking the rap for him when he needs it.”

He picks up my drink and holds it out, and I take it before sitting down in the armchair next to his. “If everyone has their backstories, what’s yours? Why are you so caring when your pack is...not?”

I grimace. “I don’t mean any offense by that. Everyone has their good and their bad.”

“They care. Sometimes, anyway. Take Asher for example. Before we could afford a manager, he was it. He worked day and night for us, and he still keeps his ear on the ground just in case.”

“Yeah, I got that.” I think back to that night in my office when he came to *check in*. “He’s a player who loves the game, but there’s more to him than that.”

Dylan nods. “Exactly. There’s more to Jax than just being a troublemaker, too. It’s not my story to tell, but there is a reason he is the way he is. As for Holden, he cares deeply, but you’ve met his family. They’re not exactly the warm and fuzzy type. I’m not sure he ever learned how to show how much he cares, so he just shuts up and does his own thing.”

“Then there’s you. Obviously, you learned how to show how much you care. Where did you get that from?”

“My mom,” he says fondly, a soft smile touching the corners of his lips. “She raised me by herself and she wasn’t always present, but she did her best. She’s a Beta and life wasn’t always kind to her. *Alphas* weren’t always kind to her, and she struggled. Every fucking day was a struggle, but she managed to keep us fed and with a roof over our heads until I was old enough to take over.”

Curiosity burns in my gut, but I don’t ask what unkind things *Alphas* did to her. It doesn’t feel right to pry when we’re only just starting to get to know each other. “So now you take care of her?”

He nods, his chest swelling a little as his smile widens. “To this day, I support her any way I can. I bought her a little house and I set up a bank account for her. I call her whenever I get the chance, but at least twice a week, and I visit as often as I can get away. On that note, can you make sure there’s always a ticket for her when we’re playing in town?”

“Absolutely. I can even do you one better and promise that she’ll never need a ticket. Give me her name and I’ll add it to our list. It’s the same list my name is on and even yours. It gets sent ahead to every venue and if her name is on it, she’ll never be denied entry or backstage access.”

A light comes on in his eyes. “You can do that?”

“Consider it done,” I promise. “She’s your family. Family is important to me.”

“What about your family?” he asks, shifting in his chair so he’s facing me fully. “Will they be coming to any of our shows?”

My brow hikes up and a snort escapes as I shake my head. “It’s unlikely. My sisters might, though. When they get a break from school. They’re at the Omega Academy Massachusetts, but they said they’d come out to visit when they can.”

“They’re both at the Academy?”

“Yep. Twins,” I explain. “I doubt my parents will join them when they come, but if they do, I’ll introduce you.”

“Why wouldn’t they come visit?” He frowns. “They’ve got to be hella proud of you for doing such a good job with us.”

I sigh, running my hands through my hair before wrapping my fists around it at the back of my head. “They always insisted I have a fallback career. Nursing. Just in case music *didn’t work out* for me. They nagged so much that eventually, when I was seventeen, I moved out and got my own apartment. I worked two jobs to get myself through college rather than to go home. I don’t think they ever forgave me.”

He hesitates for a beat, his eyes searching mine before he flashes me a small but understanding smile. “You and Holden have that in common. His parents never forgave him for pursuing music either. I know where he got his love for it from, but where did you get yours? Going out on your own at seventeen and everything that entails means that you have at least as much passion for it as we do.”

I chuckle, releasing my hair and picking up my glass to take a sip of my drink. Once I’ve swallowed the incredibly smooth liquid, I dip my head in a nod. “I suppose I do. My grandma Pearl always encouraged it. Before she passed, all she could talk about was how I just had to keep my eyes on the prize and my dreams would come true. Now, I’m broke but I still have a dream and my tenacity, so let’s hope Pearl was right about it being worth it and paying off if I could just get started with a career in music.”

As we sip our drinks, it occurs to me that I keep getting closer to these guys and I don’t know what the fuck is going on that I can’t seem to keep my hands or my mind off them. I’m not this woman. Usually, this kind of thing is the least of my worries, but it’s like something in them calls to something in me. It makes no sense, but I feel this deep-seated urge to find comfort and even protection in them.

Before I can shake it off and ask Dylan more about his past, we’re interrupted by the next crisis. My phone rings and I hit the speaker button when I see that it’s our security.

“What is it? What happened this time?”

“Jax left the club,” a male voice says from the other end of the line. “We don’t know how, but he and his motorcycle are in the rooftop pool of a hotel nearby.”

I gape at the phone, my throat working before I glance at Dylan. “How?”

The security guy doesn’t answer, but he already said they don’t know. Dylan shrugs. “I’ve stopped asking. Let’s go.”

“I’ll be right there,” I say before I hang up the phone and then I’m on my feet with Dylan right behind me as we head out.

Shit. I don’t know what the hell happened in this Alpha’s life that makes him physically incapable of staying out of trouble, but I need to get this situation under control. Before the others find out and somehow end up making it even worse.

At least half the gang will be out of here before First Instinct gets here to run their closing set. I wasn’t looking forward to fielding my quartet of rowdy unbonded Alphas when the Omegas started perfuming up the place. Choosing to be thankful for the small win, I lift my chin and drag Dylan through the throng of people, thumbing a text to security to keep a close eye on the other two until I could return.

THIRTEEN

DYLAN

DREAD SITS like a stone at the pit of my stomach as Josie and I ascend to rooftop level in a gilded, mirrored box. As soon as we walked into the hotel's lobby, I knew it wasn't the kind of place where they were going to tolerate Jax's bullshit.

It's got that uppity, tight vibe with soft piano music playing in the elevator and the buttons are ringed with gold. Our manager is practically thrumming with nervous energy beside me. Her jaw is set and she looks like she's bracing for a fight, which is probably pretty accurate if I know my pack brother.

He's been on edge for days, and he's not likely to just back down. Josie's eyes are on the little numbers above the elevator doors and just before we hit **RT**, she glances at me. "I've called someone to get the bike out of the pool and clean it up, but getting Jax out is on us."

Inhaling deeply, I incline my head in a short nod, and then the doors slide open in front of us and we're met with a sight not even I expected. Jax has obviously already got another party going on here. Music is blaring through the speakers at the swim-up bar and I instantly recognize the playlist as one of his when one song fades into another.

He must have plugged his phone in to be the DJ, and I have no idea how he got so many people up here in— *Actually, scratch that. I know exactly how he got so many people up here in such a short amount of time.*

He's Jax. People follow him like he's the Pied Piper of Partying. Jax, who is standing on his bike in the pool with his arms thrust up in the air, is bellowing something I'm sure is supposed to be a war cry.

There are people everywhere, dancing, and pointing, and *filming* him in

his stand-off with the police. Beside me, Josie must've noticed the same thing. "Fuck. I asked the hotel to hold off on calling them, but it looks like they were serious about getting him out of here."

She grabs my hand and cuts to the officers who are trying to make their way through the partying crowd to reach him. While she's pulling me toward them, my gaze is locked on Jax. Judging by the way his muscles are flexed under his wet shirt and his neck is bulging, he's psyching himself up to fight the police when they do get to him. His eyes are wild and wide, his hair sticking up in all directions.

He's fucking high.

And he's been blocking all of this shit from us. Over the years we've become good at concealing things we'd rather the pack not have to feel through the pack bonds. But I fucking hate it when he uses the ability to cut us out when he needs us the most.

Worry and frustration twist and simmer in my belly. This is *not* a pleasant situation and Josephine is about to get the worst of him. He promised me he'd lay off that shit, but whatever is going on with him seems to have compelled him to go back on his word.

A cop sees us winding our way through the crowd and doubles back to meet us halfway, his features locked in a tight scowl and his eyes narrowed in a serious glare. "He one of yours?" he barks at Josie when we're within earshot.

She nods, her face pale as she steps up to the plate. "Yes, sir. He is. We truly apologize for the ruckus. He, uh, he's had a hard—"

"Save it," the cop grinds out before he thrusts a hand at the pool. "Talk him down or we're going to have to take him down."

When I look back at Jax, I realize that he's leaped off the back of his bike and is now standing on the bar counter, grabbing bottle after bottle and hoisting them up in the air like trophies before he smashes them against the beams that make up the bar. My stomach sinks.

"Yes, sir," Josie says immediately. "We'll calm him down before he does any more damage and I've already called someone for the cleanup."

"There's glass in the pool," the officer growls. "A pool children and other hotel guests need to be able to use. That presents a real danger, ma'am. Get him under control. Now. I don't care who he is. He needs to calm down before the charges get worse."

She nods. "Understood. Do you mind trying to keep the crowd back while

we talk to him? I'm afraid they're only encouraging him."

"We've been trying since we got here," he snaps, then he spins on his heels and marches away to join his coworkers with crowd control.

Josie's green eyes move up to mine and she swallows visibly. "Let's go. We need to get him to bring it in, apologize, and offer to pay for the booze and the cleanup."

I look back at her, my head already shaking. "I'll try to help calm him down, but I know him and the way he is right now, we haven't got much of a chance of that even happening. There's zero possibility of us getting him rational enough to offer to pay for anything, let alone to apologize."

She lets out a deep breath before her mouth presses into a hard line. "Okay. One thing at a time. Let's just see if we can get him calm. The rest can come later."

"You got it," I say as we fight our way through the bodies to the pool. Jax has broken just about every bottle in the well-stocked bar now, and the throng of people who were in the pool with him before has evaporated, clearly realizing that said pool is now a mess of glass and alcohol.

As I watch, he grins and lifts a decorative flower pot above his head, but as he brings it down to smash it, I wave to grab his attention. His gaze flies to mine and he gives me a happy, lopsided grin that makes my heart melt.

"Dylan! You came, bro! It's a better party than that lame shit at the club, right?"

I nod, putting my hands up as Josie disappears from my side. From the corner of my eye, I see her skirting around the pool and I know she's making for the entrance of the bar. When he sees her, he's going to lose his shit all over again, but we need to kill the music so the cops have a chance to tell people that the party is over and to make their threats of arresting them if they don't leave.

"Yeah, man!" I call back at him, shoving my hands into my pockets as I follow Josie's footsteps around the pool. "Why don't you come over here, Jax? There's a lot of glass around you right now. You're going to cut your foot open again!"

He smirks. "Chicks dig scars."

"They do, but do you remember Barcelona? You nearly lost your toe and that shit we used to have to put on it burned like hellfire, am I right? You don't want to go through that again."

He watches my progression around the pool, but just before I get to the

bar, he smashes the pot and lets out a burst of manic laughter. “Barcelona was fucking awesome, D. Let’s go back.”

“Sure. Let’s go. You need to get off the counter for that to happen, though.” I duck in around the little roof and slide through the gap to get into the bar area just as Josie locates and unplugs his phone.

He howls like he’s been injured and my gaze snaps to him as worry cascades through me, but he’s fine. It’s just that his music has gone off and he’s finally spotted Josie.

“*You.*” He sneers as he glowers at her, his chest suddenly heaving and his fists flying into the reeds that make up the roof of this thing.

All around us, cops are shouting now that the music is off. “Party’s over, people! Move it. Let’s go. Anyone left on the premises will be getting a free ride downtown.”

There’s a general hush and a low hum of people groaning and scattering to grab their things, but there are some die-hards who aren’t perturbed. They’re still filming and chanting Jax’s name as he reaches into the holes his fists just made and starts tearing the reeds apart.

“Jax,” I say imploringly, pleading with my brother to just stop already, but there is no reaching him.

When he’s in a mood like this, he won’t stop until he’s done—or arrested, in this case. And even then, God have mercy on the cops who try to touch him and whoever he winds up in the cell with.

Desperation claws at my insides, but Jax roars and keeps ripping at the reeds, tossing handfuls of the stuff into the water and getting covered by the dust and debris himself in the process. People are still cheering him on, hooting and hollering with every roar he lets out.

Cell phone cameras are still pointed at us, and a group of officers has broken away from those ushering the partygoers out and is now coming toward us. “Jax,” I try again. “They’re going to lock you up for this, man. Get down now before it gets even worse.”

“Let them try,” he growls before he tosses a grin over his shoulder and aims it at the nearest camera. “You hear that? Booooooooooo!”

I groan, keeping my voice low enough that hopefully, the cameras won’t pick it up. “They’re going to arrest you for malicious damage to property and possibly for endangering these people with all that glass. Don’t resist, Jax. Just come down here and Josie will talk to the cops for you.”

“Josie.” His nose wrinkles as he glances at her where her gaze is

bouncing between us like she's watching a tennis match. "This is all your fault, you know."

Her head jerks. "Excuse me?"

He smirks cruelly. "Yep. Yep. Yep. Can't put a leash on a beast, baby girl."

"You're not a beast." She levels him with a soft, caring look that seems sincere even if I can also see the turmoil churning behind her eyes. "You are not a beast, Jax. And no one is trying to put a leash on you."

He scoffs, then he breaks into an obnoxious yet heartbreaking rap. "I'm not a beast? Tell that to my mother and my father who couldn't be bothered."

She glances at me, and I see the pain she's feeling for him right now. Unfortunately, he sees it too, and he bends over backward and he laughs like a madman. The cops seize the moment now that he's distracted, barreling past us and managing to wrestle him off the bar.

"Hey!" Josie screams shrilly at them. "Do you have to be so fucking rough with him?"

"He can take it," I assure her, though watching the cops wrench his arms behind his back makes my teeth grind. "He won't even feel it with all the shit in his system right now."

Jax is roaring again, every muscle bulging as he tries to fight back.

Josie, for all her confidence and fire, looks like she might cry as she watches them press his face into the wet cement and then lift him back to his feet thrashing.

It takes four of them to slap the cuffs on him and lead him away—with at least half a dozen cameras still on him.

I rub a few wide circles into Josie's back and the glimmer of tears I saw in her eyes evaporates like it was never there. She clears her throat, stepping away from me. I have the almost uncontrollable urge to pull her closer, tuck her in under my chin and comfort her, but I can tell from the suddenly hard set of her jaw that she doesn't want that right now.

Her shoulders are slumped as we follow the police to the elevator. The doors close on them and Jax—still cursing and laughing—only now he's got a bloody nose, and Josie waits a few seconds before hitting the button to call the elevator back up to the rooftop for us.

"I'll try to get him out on bail when we get to the station," she mutters and I *hate* the defeat I hear in her voice. I want to break Jax's nose a second time for being the one who put it there. "Call the others. We're definitely not

going back to the club tonight.”

FOURTEEN

JOSIE

TO CAP off the events of an already long night, I called the label's lawyers and they got a bail hearing set for Jax tonight. Or this morning, rather, since it's now well past four and we're still at the station.

"How is he?" I ask a female officer who had that starstruck look in her eyes when we first came in, but has settled down now and has at least been giving me updates every once in a while.

"They'll let you back there to see him soon," she says soothingly. "He's doing okay, though. He's been very nice to others being held in the cells with him. We've had to hand out pens and paper for them to get his autograph, and last I saw, he was taking pictures with a biker gang who was arrested before him and were being let out so their phones had been handed back."

"So he's giving autographs and taking selfies with fans? In lock-up?" I blink hard, not sure if it's surprise or exhaustion getting to me at this point. "Unbelievable."

She smiles. "If it helps, he was calm enough that they let him have the pens. That counts for something."

I sigh, returning her smile before stifling a yawn. "Thanks for telling me. Do you know how much longer it's going to be before they'll let me see him?"

She shrugs. "As soon as your lawyer calls to say they're done with the hearing. You'll be allowed to give him whatever news comes down."

I nod, squeezing my eyes shut for a moment to alleviate the stinging. "Okay. Thank you. I guess I'll just wait on the call, then."

As I make my way back to the row of uncomfortable seats in front of the window, I thank all the gods that there are no crowds in here. A bunch of

paps are still hanging around outside, no doubt waiting to get a shot of him leaving the station, but at this hour, there are no other family or friends around waiting for their people to be released, there's no visiting, and no one else is let into the station.

Apart from the low hum of the lights and some chatter drifting from a break room somewhere, it's quiet here. I breathe in deep, not even really minding the scent of stale urine wafting out from the cells or the thick odor of sweat hanging in the air.

This is a high-stress environment for those who, like me, are unfortunate enough to be trapped in the waiting area, just cooling our heels until we get word of what's going to happen next. Thankfully, the band agreed to let me handle this. I made it clear to them that there was no use coming down here and that it would only serve to cause more havoc if the press knew they were in the station with us.

As far as I know, they're all at Asher's, waiting for me to call with an update. With that in mind, I fire off a quick text on the group chat I created with them earlier to let them know what I just learned from the officer.

Me: He's fine. We're still waiting for the lawyers, but he's safe and being a generous celebrity to the other inmates.

Holden: Ok.

Asher: Send the lawyers some coffee. They're going to need it.

Dylan: Can we keep a lid on the selfies he's taken in a cell? I already found one online.

Me: Selfies were with bikers who had already been released. I'll find out about coffee.

I'm about to put the phone down when it starts ringing, and I take the call immediately, pressing the device to my ear harder than necessary. "Mr. Davidson? Give me good news. Did you get him bail?"

"We did. Beckett Records is ready to pay. I'll let you know when it's been done."

Relief spirals through me, leaving me dizzy in its wake. "Thank you. I'll go tell him."

"Josie?"

I frown. "Yes?"

"Once they've paid, make sure he's calm. Take him straight home and lock him in his bedroom if you have to. In Jax's case, being released from jail does not mean he's going to keep his nose clean even just until the sun rises."

My heart sinks as I think back to that broken look in his eyes when he was talking about his parents. He may be an Alpha, and he may be one the most famous, successful musicians in the world, but he needs help and I intend to give it to him.

Whether he wants it or not.

“I understand, Mr. Davidson. Thank you.”

“Good luck,” he says, then he hangs up and I walk back to the officer, fixing her with a tired smile as I show her my phone. “They got him bail. Do you need to check on some kind of system, or...”

I trail off, because I honestly don’t know how this works in California. The police at the stations I frequented for my clients in Boston knew me. They took me at my word and we’d established a measure of trust but here, I’m in the dark.

With a few strokes of her fingers on the keyboard in front of her, she nods. “I just got a message from my friend who was told to wait for the update. Jax is free to leave.”

“Can I see him now?”

“Of course.” She walks to a small door around the side of the counter and opens it, waving me through. “I’ll take you to him.”

As I follow her down a short corridor, things are surprisingly quiet and peaceful back here at the cells. Most are empty, but we pass a couple with people sleeping it off on the cots provided. She takes me right to the end of the row and there, sitting up on a cot with his head in his hands, is my client. My devious Firebrand who is responsible for one of the longest nights I’ve had in a long time, and yet, I’m not angry.

I’m exhausted and I can’t wait to get to bed, but he looks wrecked and I just can’t find it in myself to be pissed right now. Jax is not a small man, he’s over six feet tall and he spends at least a few hours a week working out. Probably punching things. He’s built like a fighter, stocky but tall too, but his shoulders are folded in and his elbows are resting on his knees, his big palms open and pressed to his eyes until he hears the officer say his name.

When he looks up and turns to us, his eyes are red-rimmed. Not like he’s been crying, but like he’s got the hangover from hell—which tracks. He doesn’t smile when he sees me, but he doesn’t sneer either.

His gaze just meets mine, and it’s not hard to see that he’s in a bad place from the haunted look in those eyes. “And?”

“And you got bail,” I say, but when a relieved smile starts breaking out

across his face, I shake my head. “The label is paying, but they’ve given me purview to decide if you’re being let out now or later on this morning.”

It’s a complete bluff, but he needs to understand that actions have consequences. He can’t keep going batshit crazy, spend a couple hours in jail during which he indulges his adoring fans, and then just expect to be let out to do it all over again.

With the tour coming up, we can’t have him in and out of jail. Not only can the band not perform without him, but we just don’t have the time to keep going back to wherever he was arrested for his hearings.

Jax gives me a blank look. “Okay. That’s nice for you. Let me out.”

“No,” I say softly but decisively, my gaze steadfast on his. “What you did tonight is unacceptable, Jax. Do you have any idea how difficult it is to get every shard of glass out of a swimming pool?”

He scoffs. “I’m sure they’ve already sent someone to clean it up. It’s no big deal.”

My eyebrows lift as I look back at him. “No big deal? With that amount of glass, it’s likely they’re going to have to drain the pool to clean it out and yes, I’ve sent people to do just that, but the pool area is wrecked. It’s going to have to remain closed for at least one day, and there are children staying there. Children and other people who are on vacation and who—”

He snorts and cuts me off. “Enough with the guilt trip, lady. Just let me out.”

“I’m not telling you this to make you feel guilty,” I press on, keeping my voice as gentle and sincere as I can. “I’m telling you so you understand that you’re not alone in this world. Your actions affect others. Some of those others look up to you. Some even care about you. Do you know that Asher, Holden, and Dylan have been up all night? I doubt they’re going to get any sleep.”

“So? I’m not stopping ’em from crashing if they want to.”

A long breath slides out of my nostrils as I stare back at him. “Yes, you are. They’re *worried* about you, Jax. That’s why they’re staying up. Plus, we might be facing another lawsuit—”

“Don’t blame me if you can’t do your goddamn job. If we get sued, that’s not on me. It’s on you for not containing the situation.”

“Wow.” I stare back at him. “Have you ever taken responsibility for anything? I’ll do what I can to smooth this over, Jax. I always will, but I’m not going to let you out of here right now if you don’t give me some

assurances that you're going to start being more responsible."

He rises to his feet and laughs, a booming, slightly unhinged sound that makes the officer at my side shy back a few steps. "Fuck you, Josie. You don't get to tell me what to do."

"Spoken like a true teenager who needs to continue his time-out. I'm sorry, Jax. After everything you did tonight, if you're not willing to take accountability and to acknowledge the effects of your actions on others, I can't let you out."

"The label is paying. You can't keep me here!" he yells, coming at the bars as I start backing away. "Tell them to let me the fuck out, Josephine!"

My heart is cracking, breaking, chipping away at my resolve. I clench my fists.

"No." I meet his hard gaze one last time, praying that he'll forgive me for this eventually. "I'll see you later, Jax. Try to get some sleep."

With him still yelling profanities and threats, I turn and walk away, hearing the hurried footsteps of the officer as she follows me. A few of the others who are sleeping in their cells stir, but since none of them are waking up properly, I'm assuming they got as broken as he did earlier.

Sadness and a feeling of dejection weaves its way through me, but I stand by my decision. Jax needs to stew in it for a while longer. He needs to sleep it off and get himself under control, or he's going to wind up stuck in a cell for a lot longer than one night.

I will do everything in my power to stop that from happening, even if he's not willing to help me do it.

FIFTEEN

A S H E R

AFTER A LONG-ASS FUCKING NIGHT, hungover and tired as hell, we trudge into the Beckett Records offices for a meeting we were called into before the sun had even fully risen. Jax had the longest night of us all, I'm sure, but he's still in jail.

Apparently, he was left to sleep it off, and while I'd never say it to his face, I think it was probably for the best. He's spiraling again, and although he was about due for another, it never ends well. I love him like a brother, but he needs to be protected from himself sometimes.

The label hasn't cared enough about him in the past to do that, and I'm wondering why they suddenly changed their tune until I overhear that it didn't come from them. We're approaching the boardroom when heated voices filter out into the hallway.

"Josie made this call all by herself, Mr. Beckett. I advised against it as soon as she told me she was leaving him there." That's Mr. Davidson's voice. We've dealt with the label's lawyer enough that I'd recognize it anywhere.

Josie speaks up next. "Yes, I made the call, but to be fair, you told me to make sure he was calm and he wasn't. It kept him out of trouble, didn't it?"

Someone—the lawyer, I'm assuming—huffs out a breath. "I told you to take him home and lock him in there if necessary. Not to leave him in lock-up."

Surprise flickers behind Holden's eyes when I glance at him. I shrug, but I should've known she was the one who was looking out for him. It's the lawyer's job to get us out, but it seems Josie exercised common sense and made the call that needed to be made.

Dylan lets out a sigh behind us, but then steps around us and leads the

way into the room. “Is he okay?”

When we follow him in, I see the Becketts on one side of the long conference table and Josie and Mr. Davidson are on the other. It seems Josie’s been called in to explain her decision while Mr. Davidson is pretending that she’s in front of a grand jury.

There’s no love lost between us and the Becketts, but I’ve known them long enough to recognize the slightly stunned looks on their faces when they glance at us before turning back to Josie. I suspect they were expecting the flustered, timid girl they met on the first day, but she’s nowhere to be found as she lays it out quickly and efficiently.

She smiles at Dylan and nods. “He’s okay, yes. A female officer at the precinct has been keeping an eye on him for us, and I just got another text. She’s going off shift now, but he’s in good hands and is still sleeping.”

“Thank you,” Dylan says as he pulls out a seat at the far side of the table and sits down. “He was in bad shape. It’s better he stayed there.”

She nods. “I agree.”

After turning to greet me and Holden, she gives Mr. Davidson a scathing look before she turns back to our bosses. “A judge who finds out that a rock star decided to spend the night in jail instead of taking the easy way out will see that as a positive and might be inclined to be lenient on him when he appears in court.”

“What happens in court is my domain,” Davidson objects, but Josie rolls her tired eyes as she shakes her head at him.

“I’m sorry. We’re not territorial about that sort of thing, are we?” she spits before focusing on the Becketts. “My understanding is that we’re a team and that we need to act in the best interests of Firebrand together. Staying in jail for the night was in Jax’s best interest legally, and at the same time, word of a star like him spending the night in the cell will improve his reputation as a badass. It’s a win-win and I won’t apologize for making the decision that needed to be made.”

Mrs. Beckett sniffs as she regards Josie, then she lowers her chin in the slightest of nods. “Of course we’re a team and of course we need to act in their best interest, but Mr. Davidson arranged bail for Jax. He should’ve been let out.”

“With all due respect, ma’am, he was in no state,” she says firmly with her head held high. “He was yelling and he lunged at the bars. The officer who was with me even backed away. He was still high, still drunk, and it is

my true belief that he was only just starting to feel the after-effects of the night. That's the real and most important reason I left him in there. He wasn't ready to come out."

She drags in a deep breath, looking at each of them in turn as she explains, "Last night, he was openly hostile and antagonistic. There were still reporters outside the station when I left. This morning, they will photograph him leaving sober after having spent the night like anyone else would have. We can only hope that he won't be as inclined to mouth off and that he might even smile apologetically as he leaves."

Mr. Beckett looks at her over the top of his glasses. "You're saying you think he'd have made it worse if he encountered the press last night?"

"Yes, I do. In fact, I don't even just think so. I know so. That was where he needed to be. If we'd gotten him out, he would've started it all up again and he needed these last few hours to sleep it off. It's not like we've left him to rot for a week. It's been less than four hours since I left the station."

Davidson lets out an irritated grunt. "Getting him out before dawn would've meant less exposure."

"No, it wouldn't have. It would've meant a different kind of exposure. The kind where the entitled rock star gets to leave only hours after he was arrested, still visibly under the influence, who gets into it with, and perhaps even takes a swing at, a reporter, and isn't held to the same standards as the others who were arrested for the same thing."

Mrs. Beckett raises her hands and massages her temples briefly. "The fact remains that it wasn't your decision to make, Josephine. When we hired you, we realized you were inexperienced with acts who are as much of a brand and household name as Firebrand, but we decided to give you a chance because of the way you handled your smaller clients. However, a band like this one requires a touch more finesse than you've demonstrated."

"We're about to go on tour, ma'am," Josie counters without wavering. "With criminal charges pending against Jax, we need him to get onboard and be part of the team. We can't have him going around the country causing these kinds of messes and we absolutely cannot afford to have charges piling up. If this judge looks kindly upon the fact that he stayed and slept it off, and if we can keep him out of trouble until his appearance, we should be able to get him off with a slap on the wrist."

She's utterly calm as she puts it all out there, especially considering Mrs. Beckett's thinly veiled threat about possibly firing her. They think she's not

up to the task, but I really don't want to see her getting the boot.

Truth is, she's the first of the managers they've hired for us who genuinely seems to care about running us properly. She doesn't interfere, but she also isn't going to let us run completely rampant. No one has asked for my opinion, but I'm going to give it anyway.

It doesn't help that I can't stop thinking about that night in her office, and I know the other two can feel the undercurrent of arousal running through me every time I look at her. Arousal and strangely, an undeniable instinct to protect. To stand up and go to bat for her just like she's doing for Jax and has done for Holden with his family.

"I agree with Josie's stance on this," I say as I lean forward and look at the powers that be. "Jax has a tendency to lose control and you all know it. The only way to snap him out of that spiral is to force him to take a step back, and this seems like the best way to have done it."

Dylan nods, backing me up as he leans forward as well. "What she did protected him from himself and it was necessary. If Jax had gotten out before he sobered up, I can guarantee he would've left a trail of chaos you'd have been trying to clean up right now. When he gets out, we'll talk to him. Maybe he'll agree to lie low for a few days, to take things easy between our commitments, and hopefully, that'll be enough to give the next person time to fuck up and take the heat off us."

"The reading of his charges is in a couple hours," Davidson interjects with his nose stuck in the air. "We need to wrap this up, go get him, and get him prepped and ready for court. Josephine may not agree, but I do have a job to do."

She sighs and rolls her eyes at him. "I know you have a job to do, but so do I. Again, we're supposed to be a team and teams don't work against each other. If he needs to be prepped and ready for court, we'll make that happen. I'm honestly not sure if he's ready to come out, but if you insist, then I guess we should get to it."

When I glance at Holden, it's clear that he has no intention of stepping up on Josie's behalf. He's leaning back on his chair, his muscled arms folded and his eyes narrowed. He doesn't voice his dissent to anything anyone is saying either, but he doesn't quite agree with us.

"It's time to get him out now," Holden says in a raspy voice that betrays how much he smoked last night, how little he slept, and how little he's said. "Make your decisions and let's go."

He shoves his chair back, but doesn't stand up just yet. Mr. Beckett keeps looking at Josie over his glasses, his eyes moving from one of hers to the other until he eventually sighs. "You're both right. You've both got jobs to do. Davidson, you secured bail, but Josephine is their manager. It's your job to take care of the legalities and hers to take care of the band and their PR. If she believes it was necessary to leave him there, then I'm willing to say that the decision was within her discretion to make."

Mrs. Beckett nods, but gives her a stern look. "You should've called us, though. It might've avoided all this unpleasantness if we'd had notice of your actions."

"It was four-thirty this morning, ma'am," Josie says respectfully. "In order to allow you to have full appreciation for the situation, I would've had to put you on a video call with him and I was afraid that might've escalated things further. Especially at that hour."

"Even so," Mrs. Beckett replies. "Next time you take such a drastic decision that Mr. Davidson disagrees with, perhaps a phone call."

"Yes, ma'am." Josie pushes her chair back. "If that's all, I'd like to accompany Mr. Davidson to the precinct to pick Jax up."

"As you should," Mr. Beckett says before he dismisses us all.

Holden, Dylan, and I stand up, but Dylan digs his keys out of his pocket while Holden and I wait for Josie to emerge from the boardroom. "I'm going to his place to pick up some clothes for court. I'll meet you at the Clubhouse with a suit?"

"Good idea," I agree. "We'll see you there."

He nods and jogs to the elevator just as Davidson storms out and Josie follows, much calmer than the lawyer but clearly exasperated. "He's not happy that I'm going with him, but he needs to suck it up. I'll text you when we—"

"No, we're coming with you," I say firmly and Holden nods his agreement. "He's getting out of lockup and he needs our support. We're going to be there. United front and all that."

"All right," she agrees without even trying to argue. "That's a good point, actually. Where's Dylan?"

"He'll meet us at this tiny hole-in-the-wall bar between the precinct and the courthouse with clothes for Jax's hearing."

Her eyebrows twitch in surprise. "You've been here before, huh?"

I roll my eyes, chuckling darkly as I fall into step beside her. "You have

no idea. We're a well-oiled machine about it at this point. The Clubhouse is safe, though. There's a back entrance no one really knows about, and we can park in the alley. It'll be a quick stop and he'll be decent by the time we leave."

For the first time in a long time, I wish I didn't need to know this shit. We've had our fun, and it's been great, but something just feels off about it now. Jax is up on criminal charges again, and we're the water boys, fetching his armor and hoping against all hope that this isn't the time some DA makes those charges stick.

It just feels like we've been here too many times, and it's getting old. If I'm ever going to live up to my father's legendary career, I need to start getting serious about it at some point, and I'm wondering if maybe, I've finally fucking reached that point.

SIXTEEN

JOSIE

I AM NOT LOOKING FORWARD to meeting with Jax when he's released. As we move toward the police station at a crawl so we don't accidentally hit any of the swarm of reporters gathered in the street outside, trepidation solidifies in my gut.

Even with the backing of the Beckett Records board and the band—with the exception of Holden, who definitely isn't a fan of the move I made—I just have this ominous feeling I can't quite shake about what's going to happen. Not necessarily as soon as I see him, but he's going to find a way to pay me back for this. I just don't know how yet.

All I know is that it's not going to be pretty.

"Jesus, that's a lot of paps," Asher murmurs from the backseat of the label's SUV. The windows are tinted pitch-black so no one can see him, or Holden next to him, but they clearly know they're in the car. Reporters surge toward us, slowing down Trevor's crawl to a near-stop. "Was it this bad last night?"

"At first, yes, but by the time I left, most had gone home." I half expect Holden to let me know exactly what he thinks of my decision as soon as I make the admission, but he doesn't react. Instead, his head is resting against the padded seat and his eyes are closed, his chin keeping time with whatever music is playing on his headphones.

Asher glances at him, then leans forward between the seats. "Go into the underground parking, Trev. If Davidson called ahead, that's where they'll have Jax waiting for us."

Trevor nods and veers slowly to the left, waiting for people to make a path for him as we approach a boom. There's a team of policemen standing at

the entrance to their parking lot and thankfully, they manage to keep the crowd at bay as the boom rises and we're let into the bowels of the precinct.

Just like Asher predicted, Jax is already waiting for us outside a small elevator, and it takes just one glance to see that he's looking a lot better than he did when I left. His eyes are alert again, his shoulders open and broad, and his spine straight.

They must've let him use a bathroom, because his wild hair is damp and tamer, having been slicked back, and when he climbs into the car, he doesn't smell terrible either. The scent definitely isn't his own, but someone must have given him some deodorant.

He piles into the back with Holden and Asher, grinning like the Cheshire Cat as he gives them quick, back-thumping hugs and then leans forward to slap Trevor's shoulder. "Thank you for coming to get me. Man, that cot was surprisingly comfortable. Best sleep I've had in weeks."

He ignores me completely, but it's not like I was expecting him to be happy about what I did. I see Asher looking him over. "Are you okay?"

"All good, man," he says, but the shadow of worry doesn't disappear from Asher's eyes.

Since they're a pack, I know they share a bond. I haven't really thought about it too much, but I also know that regardless of Jax's grin or easygoing tone, if Asher's still worried, he's feeling something from Jax that justifies it.

Which might also be why Holden doesn't support my decision. He could be feeling something through their bond that makes him question if it was the right thing to have done after all. My teeth sink into my cheek as I consider their connection and what they might be feeling right now.

Honestly, pack bonds are a bit of a mystery to me. I know about them. I had something like that with my family, but it isn't the same as a chosen pack.

"To the Clubhouse, Trevor," Asher says. "We need to get him dressed."

Jax barely glances at me before he asks everyone but me, "Where's Davidson? I saw him when he arrived at the precinct. He got there before you idiots, but he said he had some papers to sign. Shouldn't he be with us?"

"He'll meet us at court," Holden grumbles. "Don't worry, bro. He'll be there."

Jax nods, then launches into a colorful description of the people he met and how amazing the fans in jail were to him, and when we get to the Clubhouse, he even insists on chugging a beer to "*clear the cobwebs*" after

he's dressed.

No one objects, even if I have to crack my teeth from trying so hard to keep my mouth shut, and Holden wordlessly offers him a mint when the beer is empty. Thankfully, Dylan had the foresight to bring not only a suit, but also some toiletries and even a few painkillers.

It's a quick stop before we head to the courthouse, and the reading of the charges goes just as fast. To me, it sounds serious, but Davidson looks downright bored and none of the band so much as flinches as the list of charges is read out.

Malicious destruction of property, vandalism, and damages are scary words to me, but it seems I'm in the minority here. The hearing takes no more than a few minutes before the gavel bangs and Davidson ushers us out again.

"You're to go back to Beckett HQ," the lawyer says politely to Jax before he shoots me another glare. "Explain everything to him. I'll see you all for a meeting about this soon."

With that, he shakes hands with the guys, glares at me one last time, and then takes off. I sigh, but then I pull back my shoulders and lead them to the car where Trevor is waiting. Back in my office, Holden takes a seat at the bar while Dylan kicks his feet up on my sofa and lies down. Asher sits next to Jax at the conference table and proceeds to lay it all out for him.

"Here's the deal, bro," he starts while I wonder just when they all got so comfortable in my office that I'm the one who suddenly feels like an intruder. "There's no other way of saying it. You fucked up. I have no idea what happened, but I do know that we're in trouble because of it. You need to lie low for a while until all this dies down, and we've all got to get our shit together before this tour."

Jax nods along, but I have a feeling he has no intention of slowing down. "Look, I spent the fucking night in jail. Trust me, I know I messed up. It's not like I did anything we haven't all done a dozen times, though. Boo hoo. Why is it such a big deal this time?"

"It's not," Asher responds calmly. "We've just got to focus on the tour and let the noise die down for a bit."

"You're not going to do it, are you?" I step up on the other side of the table and look him right in the eyes. "I don't mean to make you feel called out, but I'd rather be direct. Are you going to slow down? Are you going to focus on the tour and not the shit you want to cause?"

“No,” he says easily, looking right back at me as he lifts his hand and loosens his tie. Once the knot slides down, he jerks the tie over his head and drops it on the chair next to him. “That thing is like a noose. Just like you. You’re here to clean up our messes, Josie. To be our glorified assistant, so no. I’m not slowing down. I don’t need to in order to focus on the tour. I’m a fucking Alpha. I’m capable of doing more than one thing at a time.”

“Cleaning up your messes might be part of my job description, but I didn’t expect to have to deal with a fucking child,” I snap back at him, knowing I probably shouldn’t and yet, I’m completely unable to deny the way my blood is boiling in the face of this fully-grown Alpha acting like a complete toddler. “Go home and think about your life choices, Jax. Get the hell out of my office.”

He smirks as he rolls back the chair he’s on and rises lazily to his feet. “Gladly. You serve at our leisure, Josephine. Don’t you fucking forget it.”

My heart is hammering so fast at this point that it might just explode. If it doesn’t melt in my boiling blood first. I’m not usually so quick to anger, but I feel like I’d be able to catch literal snakes and crush them with my bare hands right now.

Jax keeps smirking as he turns and strides to my door before he quirks a brow at the others. “You coming, or are you Team Josephine on this?”

“We’re coming.” Dylan sits up and shoots me an apologetic smile. “See you later, Josie. Thanks again for everything.”

“Thanks for nothing, you mean,” Jax declares loudly from the door and Holden laughs gruffly as he passes me, simply throwing his hand up in a casual wave without saying a word. When he and Dylan reach the door, Jax frowns at Asher. “You coming?”

“Yeah, give me a minute.”

Jax purses his lips, but leaves with Holden and Dylan in tow, and then Asher turns to me. “Sorry about that, but you must’ve known you weren’t going to be super popular with him today.”

I nod. “It’s not a problem. Just take care of him, okay? We really do need him to pump the brakes but more than that, I’m scared that if he doesn’t, he’s going to spin out of control in a way we can’t fix in a matter of hours.”

And though I won’t admit it right now...it’s become more than all that. I’m worried about Jax, himself. One day one of these ridiculous outbursts is going to get him seriously hurt, or worse, and even as pissed as I am at him right now, I can’t stand the thought of that.

I've still got that dark, ominous feeling in my gut, and I just really don't seem to be able to shake it. Asher smiles, and the darkness recedes for a moment to make way for a few bubbles of giddy joy over having him look at me so fondly.

"We'll take care of him. Don't worry. I have some stuff to do, but after everyone gets some sleep, he'll probably go to the studio with Holden for practice. He'll be fine."

"Thanks for being a team player," I say before I do something stupid, like hug him. It gives me the warm fuzzies when he's like this with me, and it doesn't even make sense because he's simply reassuring me that they'll take care of their own packmate. For some reason, it still makes me want to cuddle the heck out of the lead singer—who would probably run for the hills if he and I had a bond that allowed him to feel what I'm feeling right now.

Sighing as he waves and takes off after his pack, I walk back to the conference table and see Jax's tie still lying on the chair where he tossed it. Part of me wants to incinerate it in the little gas fireplace I have in my sitting area and record it on video to send to him as proof of how well I'm cleaning up after him, but a smaller, far less rational part wins out.

Picking it up, I run the navy-blue fabric through my hands and let the soft, rich feel of it on the pads of my fingers soothe me. And then I carry it to the little cubby where I've been keeping Asher's jacket. I've slept in it so many times by now and I know I should probably give it back, but I can't seem to convince myself to actually do it.

It just feels like it's mine now, and so is Jax's tie.

SEVENTEEN

J A X

HOLDEN and I are practicing together and it feels damn good. As the drummer and lead guitarist, we have good chemistry, and since we're also the soloists in the band, it's nice to have some time alone. Especially since Holden is letting me work out my anger issues and he's keeping up with everything I'm laying down.

Neither of us speak for the first couple of hours, and it's fucking incredible. I'm not feeling anything particularly strong from Asher or Dylan, and because they haven't burst in here yet to check on us, I'm assuming they're asleep.

If they weren't, one of them would've been worried about the intensity of the rage pouring out of me and being matched by Holden. As it is, though, no one interrupts us and we just get to let it all out. By the time one of my sticks finally snaps, I'm panting and I'm covered in a thin layer of sweat, but I'm feeling better than I have in at least twenty-four hours and there's exhilaration unlike any other swirling through my veins.

I swear, not even adrenaline injected straight to the heart could feel this good. Laughter tears out of me as the sound cuts off and I drop my broken stick on the floor.

"Fuck, yeah," I breathe, grabbing the bottle of water on the floor and squirting a generous amount of it down my throat.

Holden chuckles and sets his guitar down before he wipes sweat off his brow with his forearm. "Feeling better yet?"

"So much," I admit, my cheeks hot with the thrill as I fill my lungs with air and hold it in before blowing it out slowly. "You?"

"Yeah, but I figure you had more to work out than I did."

I arch a brow at him. “Your parents are on your ass about quitting the band after this tour and joining the family business. I’d say you had just as much to work out as I did.”

“Maybe, but that’s nothing new.” He shrugs his big shoulders and takes a sip of his own water, swallowing it before he brings his more brown than blue hazel eyes to mine. “They want me involved in Hunter’s campaign in a meaningful way. I said I’d share their posts on social media, but apparently, that’s not enough. Evidently, when one’s younger brother is making a run for the senate, one is expected to show up for events and to speak on his behalf.”

“Fuck.” My eyes get wider when I realize what that would mean. “Are you going to do it? Drop the tour to go on the campaign trail with him?”

“Not if I can help it, but they’re not going to settle for me just hitting share on their posts. I’m going to have to get creative about it, but my family is quote, unquote *one of the most prominent families in this country’s politics* and I need to *be mindful of that at all times while I’m gallivanting around like a lone wolf whose actions don’t affect anyone else.*”

The words bring back a vague memory of Josie’s warning before she left me in that cell. She mentioned that I had to remember that my actions have further reaching consequences than I might think, and Holden’s basically saying the exact same thing now.

“Last night didn’t help your cause, huh?”

He shrugs. “Fuck ’em. I didn’t want to be part of the political game growing up and I’m still not interested. If voters are idiotic enough not to vote for him because his brother’s band gets in trouble sometimes, that’s not my problem. What we do has nothing to do with Hunter’s promises or his politics.”

“Sure, except that’s not really true. What we do *does* affect him.”

Holden grunts. “Do you really think he should be a senator?”

As I think it over, I laugh, reaching for another drumstick from the spares bucket I keep behind my chair. “Nah, probably not. Although, your parents might disown him if he loses. On the other hand, it must be nice to have parents who care so much about you that they try to force your brother onto the campaign trail with you even though he’s got a successful career of his own.”

“My upbringing wasn’t as cruel as yours,” he agrees in a hushed murmur. “Doesn’t mean it wasn’t cruel in its own way, though.”

“What do you mean? Your parents cared. Mine didn’t. End of story.”

He shrugs. “Think about it. Your mother was an absentee Beta and mine is a helicopter Omega who tries to control everything we do. Your father didn’t want the responsibility of taking care of you and mine didn’t want to take care of us either, but he did want to mold us into sheep-like mini-mes. Neither setup provided a happy family home. That’s cruel either way.”

“That’s more words than I’ve heard you say at any one time in, like, a year,” I tease before I drag in another deep breath and nod. “You’re right, though. Thank God we don’t have any kids of our own and don’t want ’em, am I right? With our histories, we’d all fuck up a kid beyond belief.”

Holden laughs dryly. “Yeah, it wouldn’t go well for us. The Alpha who refuses to give in to certain parts of his nature because his mother was raped by another like us and the Alpha with the commitment issues because his famous father drank himself into an early grave, and then there’s the two of us. No kid would stand a chance with us as fathers.”

“We’d have to pay for therapy into the next lifetime,” I joke, but it’s also not really a joke. We all have our own reasons for wanting to remain unbonded, and they’re damn valid reasons. Which is why I don’t even know why Josie’s face pops in my mind while we’re talking about this, but it does.

And the resulting annoyance makes Holden give me a sharp look. “What was that all about?”

I sigh, snapping the other drumstick between my fingers before plucking up another new one and admiring both the shiny, fresh lengths of wood as I turn them over in my hands. “I don’t know what it is about our new manager, but it’s hard for me to control myself around her. Even when she’s not around. She makes me feel stuff, man.”

“Yeah,” he muses before he gives me a long, hard look that seems to pierce my skull. “Is that what sent you over the edge last night? That she was there?”

“I don’t know,” I admit. “Maybe. I made a pass at her just after we got to the club. She turned me down cold, and I think that might’ve been what set me off.”

Holden’s known me long enough that he knows this is new behavior for me. Getting set off by a female has never happened before, but the great thing about him is that there’s never any judgment. Instead, he chugs the rest of the water and moves over to sit down on the piano bench.

“The restlessness? I’ve been feeling it from everyone. Is it her?”

I shake my head. “Honestly? I don’t know. It seems to have gotten worse

since she got the job, but I don't know why it would be her. I think it may just be this phase we're in, you know?"

"Upcoming tour with no new album to go with it just yet?" he asks.

I nod. "We'll have the music when we need it, I know we will. It's just also been a while since we've done anything different. Is it just me, or has it been rinse/repeat for a long time now?"

"Not just you." He rubs a hand over his head before he raises it slowly to look at me. "You meant it when you told Josie you weren't going to slow down, didn't you?"

"Yep. What even is that, man?" I pull a disgusted face at him. "We're rock stars in our prime and she wants us to slow down and behave? She's not a fucking babysitter and—"

I cut myself off when I feel that storm rising from deep within me all over again. No female has ever made me this riled up this fast, but especially not in this way. It's like my soul is torn between all the extremes.

Heeding her warning about consequences and saying fuck it to it all. Protecting her and pissing her off. Fucking her or alienating her. I'm a mess, and I meant it when I said that was her fault. *Well, partially anyway.*

A lot of it can probably be attributed to my upbringing. My need for people to notice. To pay attention. To care. But it's not just that anymore.

Contrary to what she seems to think about me, I'm not a fucking child. I'm not acting out and I know what taking responsibility means. I've done it. My actions are my own. They belong to me. A shitty upbringing of being passed between two parents who kept treating me like a hot potato doesn't have anything to do with me doing what I did last night.

I did that. Me. It wasn't them. I wanted to do it, so I did. And that's what she doesn't get. I do what I want to do and if I don't, it feels like I'm going to drown in my own insides.

The itch rises up once more, more intense this time as it crawls through me and makes my skin feel like it's on fire. As if he's feeling the exact same thing with the exact same sense of urgency, Holden pushes to his feet and marches over to the door.

"Come on," he says. "I can't sit in here anymore. Let's go out."

Without questioning him, I drop the new sticks next to the broken ones on the floor and follow my packmate out the door. *If even he feels like we need to find some trouble, who am I to argue?*

None of us were built to sit on our asses like good little boys and wait for

the teacher to give us a damn lollipop. We're just not wired that way.

I fucked up last night. I admitted that and I'm going to face the consequences. I never promised that I wouldn't do it again. In fact, the only promise I made was that I would.

EIGHTEEN

JOSIE

“YOU’RE HERE.” I’m stunned when I open my front door of my apartment to find Stefanie standing on the other side. Wearing a bright smile and with a suitcase standing behind her, she pulls her sunglasses off her head and opens her arms for a hug. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought it was about time I came to check on you,” she says as she squeezes me. “I’ve been calling and calling, but I haven’t heard back at all, so I got worried and booked a flight. This assignment of yours has padded our expense account nicely and some of that money was earmarked for travel between here and Boston.”

She releases me and wheels her bag in, but she doesn’t stop talking for so much as a second. “When I landed, I saw the news and I realized why I haven’t heard from you. Firebrand seems to be putting you through your paces. Is it true Jax let a horse into a nightclub last night?”

“Among other things,” I say as I finally start processing that my best friend is really here. “I’m sorry for not returning your calls. I didn’t mean to worry you. Things have just been happening nonstop since I arrived. It’s not just Firebrand, either. It’s the Becketts too. They actually almost fired me this morning.”

Stef’s eyes widen as she stares back at me. “Is that why you’re at your apartment in the middle of the day? I called your office from the cab to make sure you’d have a minute to see me when I got there, but then your assistant told me you’d gone home for the day.”

“Which one was it?”

She frowns. “Excuse me?”

“Which one of my assistants told someone who called my office that I’d

left early and gone home already?”

“Uh, Felipe, but he didn’t just offer it up. I told him I was your boss from Boston and your best friend. He made me answer, like, a dozen questions to confirm I am who I said I was before he finally told me. How many assistants do you have?”

“Four,” I say, blushing a little when I realize how quickly I’ve grown completely accustomed to them. “With the amount of work and logistics that goes into an act like Firebrand, it’s not as ridiculous as it sounds to have four assistants.”

She laughs. “Well, I don’t think it sounds ridiculous at all. In fact, I feel like you could use double that amount. At least that way, you might’ve had time to return my calls, but here I am.”

She finally stops talking as she turns in a slow circle to take in my living area. “This is a damn nice place.”

“Thank you. This is the first time I’ve been here at noon. I like the natural light, though. The bay windows drew me to this place over the other Trevor showed me.”

“Trevor?”

“He’s another assistant at the label.” I laugh when I realize we’re going to need to take about a hundred steps back. “You know what? Let me take you to lunch. On the label. We can get something nice to eat and I’ll catch you up.”

“Sounds great.” She leaves her suitcase in the center of the room and then takes my arm, following me out and to a bistro down the block I’ve seen a few times but haven’t had the opportunity to check out.

It’s an airy, trendy place with a great-looking menu and lots of patrons with glasses full of crisp white or pink wine. There are a few males in here too, mostly betas thankfully, but it kind of looks like one of those lunch-with-the-girls spots, and that’s perfect for us right now.

After we’re seated, we order a glass of wine each and the server leaves us with menus before she goes to get our drinks. Stef looks around, smiling as she plants her elbows on the clear glass top of the table and looks at me.

“So, let’s start at the beginning and by that, I mean the end. You didn’t actually get fired this morning, did you?”

“No, but it was a close call.” I still haven’t slept, which was what I went home to do, but having my friend here has energized me. I had no idea how much I needed to see a friendly, familiar face until I saw hers, and it’s great

to know I can say anything to her without fear of judgment or repercussion.

She helped me get to where I am now, and I did the same for her. Technically, the Firebrand account belongs to her company even if I'm the person on the contract, and if there's anyone I can be completely honest with, it's her.

"It's been a shitshow," I admit after telling her about everything I've had to do since I first got here. "A crazy blur and I still haven't been able to catch my breath. Trevor told me I had to be ready to hit the ground running, but I don't think I've stopped running since. I haven't even started wrapping my head around Jax and Dylan and then—"

She holds up a manicured hand. "Whoa. I think you skipped a step again. What about Jax and Dylan?"

As I stare into her blue eyes, I realize she doesn't even know about that part yet. Heat explodes on my cheeks but again, I need to talk to someone about it and she's the best person I know. "What I'm about to tell you, you cannot repeat to another living soul. Not ever."

"Dish, girl," she cheers softly, her eyes sparkling with excitement like she senses the magnitude of the gossip that's coming. "What did you do with Jax and Dylan?"

"Well, uh, do you remember the night before I left? We went to that club and—"

"You disappeared without saying goodbye?" She purses her lips in disapproval and some of the excitement fades for a second. "I remember. I was about to call the police to report you missing when I got that text a few hours later. Where did you go and what does that have to do with Jax and Dylan?"

"Did you know Firebrand had a show in Boston that night?"

A furrow appears between her brows. "Uh, yes? Of course, I did. Didn't you?"

"No." I sigh, wrinkling my nose as embarrassment threatens to swallow me whole. "I guess I should've known, but I just didn't. We applied for the account and I steered clear of everything Firebrand related after that. I probably should've kept track of them, though. It sure would've made things easier if I had known who they were."

Her eyes widen. "What did you do?"

"Well, uh, I did them."

"What?"

“Yep.”

I gulp down a big sip of my wine before the glass has even touched the table. The server chuckles as she sets down Stef’s wine, then says she’ll give us another minute to talk before she comes to take our food order. I wait until she’s gone to continue, not wanting the next Post headline to read **NEW FIREBRAND MANAGER HAS THREESOME WITH CLIENTS**.

I cringe a little at the image, but continue. “I went at it with not one, but two guys, and it got worse the next day when I realized that those two guys were half the band I work for now.”

For a long minute, she just stares at me with her eyes as big as they can get before she bursts out laughing. “I almost can’t believe it, but it does kind of sound like your luck at this point.”

“I know.” A low groan rumbles out of me as I hang my head, shake it, and then reach for my wine again. “I mean, the work is more or less what I expected, but the scale is a lot higher. The label’s resources are nice, though, but—”

“No, nooooo. No.” She wraps her fingers around the stem of her glass and grins at me. “We can talk about the work later. Let’s talk about that night first. You had a threesome with two of the most famous rock stars alive. You’re not skipping past that. As your boss I do not condone sleeping with clients, but as your friend, I am in serious need of detail.”

She has the decency to lower her voice when she says *threesome* and *rock stars*, but the excited squeal at the end of the sentence still draws a few curious glances our way. I give her a sidelong look. “Want to say that again? A little bit louder this time. I don’t think the people in Atlanta know we’re gossiping just yet.”

Stef laughs and waves me off. “Oh come on, no one’s listening to us. I want details. How was it? How were they?”

“It was amazing. They were great, and that’s all I’m saying.” My face is going to melt off if it gets any hotter. “Can we please drop it now?”

“No,” she says seriously. “That’s not nearly enough information. Also, be honest. Did you really not know who they were?”

“I really didn’t know—” I cut myself off when our server comes back and this time, she stays while we look over the menus.

We order our food, grilled chicken with salad, and once she takes off again, Stef tries to grill me for more information until she realizes I’m not going to budge. I don’t quite understand it, but I’m feeling more protective of

their privacy than my own.

It's not that I'm shy to talk about sex and I've certainly discussed it with Stef often enough, but I don't know. Something about giving her intimate details about Jax, Dylan, or Asher for that matter just doesn't seem right.

Eventually, she lets it go and asks me more about my assistants and what I meant about the scale of the work. While we eat, we discuss the tour and their impending album no one's heard so much as a single of, and just as I'm about to pay the bill, my phone rings.

"It's Felipe. I'm sorry. He knows not to bother me today unless it's urgent, so I've got to take this."

"Go ahead." She smiles and picks up her own phone. "I should check in with the office anyway. Make sure the place is still standing without me."

"What have they done now?" I ask instead of greeting him.

His voice is frantic when he responds, and the food I just ate turns into a pile of rocks in my stomach. "Holden has been staying at the Bayside Grand these last couple months. I just got a call from the manager there. Sounds like they trashed his room, Josie. They've been getting noise complaints all afternoon and the guys won't let them in to assess the damage. You need to get your butt over there like, right now, before it gets any worse. I'll try to keep this on the DL from the Becketts for as long as I can, but they will need to be notified eventually."

My heart catapults into my throat and I drop a wad of cash on the table without even counting it. Jax just got released from jail this morning and he's already at it again. And this time, he dragged Holden down with him.

I might not have gotten fired a few hours ago, but if I can't get this sorted out before the cops get involved again, I have a feeling I might be catching a plane back to Boston with Stef when she leaves. I knew I shouldn't have ignored that ominous churning in my gut earlier, but I did. I ignored it and I let Asher's pretty words about taking care of him reassure me.

Now, two of my Firebrands may be facing the cells, criminal charges, and possible incarceration depending on how far they've gone this time. And especially in Jax's case, I have absolutely no idea if I'm going to be able to save him.

NINETEEN

HOLDEN

“AWW, SHUCKS,” Jax says when he opens the door to reveal Josie waiting on the other side. “Someone called the teacher on us.”

She arches a brow at him, worry flashing in her eyes as she peers past his torso and surveys the damage in the room. “Thank fuck they called the teacher and not the cops. Are you insane? You got out of jail less than twelve hours ago, Jax.”

“Exactly,” he says without skipping a beat. “We were having a party to celebrate my being released from prison. Don’t worry we already sent all the, uh, *female entertainment* home.”

“Things got a little out of hand,” I admit as I rise from the naked mattress on the floor. The mess is tame. Jax was blowing off steam. Steam he needed to blow off or else the resulting blast would’ve been far worse than this.

Mostly, he was blowing off steam because he doesn’t like how everyone seems to be falling at her feet like we’re fucking dominoes. He needed some resistance. He needed someone *with him* instead of with her. Now that it’s all said and done, I feel a sense of calmness at his center and that’s what this was all about.

“A little out of hand?” She blinks hard as she steps past him and surveys the interior of the room.

My gaze follows hers, and I’ll admit it looks a little bit worse to me now than it did before. The mattress is torn and pillow stuffing is scattered around on the floor. The TV might’ve taken a dive into the shower—but to be fair, at least the glass from the broken screen is contained in the tub now.

I dared Jax to swing from the chandelier to the curtains, and though the chandelier held, the curtains didn’t do so well under his weight so they’re on

the floor now, along with the rail they were hanging from. Most of the furniture has been upended from a game of naked *the floor is lava* we played with the pretty betas Jax ordered up. We shot champagne corks at the painting on the wall because I wanted to play darts but we didn't have any, so there are a few dents and tears in it, and oh, there's still some of the champagne dripping from the ceiling, but other than that, we're good.

Nothing that a check to the hotel won't fix.

"This is what you call a *little* out of hand?" she asks him furiously, motioning with short, stabby points at the room. "This is *not* a little out of hand. This is, once again, property damage. Damage someone has to clean up and someone has to pay for. What the fuck were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that you need to get laid or something, Jo. You're wound way too tight." Jax winks at her, then he reaches for his motorcycle helmet on the floor. "I'm out. See you guys later."

He slams the door behind him when he leaves.

"Has he been drinking?" she asks me and I give a so so motion with my hand.

"He should be fine to drive."

She narrows her gaze at me doubtfully, clearly torn between chasing after him and staying here to clean up his—no, *our*—mess.

I offer her a lazy grin. "He's okay now. You'll see. It helped."

"It *helped*?" She pulls her face so one eye is a little bigger than the other. "Are you the insane one? This did *not* help, Holden. This might get him locked up for the next few months. Depending on the amount of damage, it could even be a year."

"He's right, you know. You do need to get laid. Relax a little. You should probably fuck him again, actually. There was some definite sexual tension just then."

The bigger eye bulges a little. "Maybe you should stop saying so many words. I think I like you better when you're quiet. This is crazy. Why would you enable him like this? You know he has trouble controlling himself."

"It's not my job to keep him in check," I say frankly. "It's also not my job to make him feel collared or like I'm putting him on a leash. Besides, it's fine. I've been staying here for a couple months. They know me. I'll write a few checks and agree to post some pictures of myself in the hotel. They've been asking me to do it anyway. It will be okay. I promise. This was the best option."

“In what universe does this count as things being okay?” she shouts, her eyes shooting fireballs at me as she plants her hands on her hips. “This is *not* okay, Holden. Not only is it criminal, but it’s also despicable. You can’t just trash every hotel you come into contact with. We’re in the process of making deals with several chains for the tour. If they find out about this, do you really think they’re going to allow us to stay with them?”

“They’re not going to find out about it. Like I said, I’ll deal with it.”

“You will do no such thing.” She seethes, those eyes still flashing as she stares me down. “I will take care of this and you will go home, or go to Asher’s, or Dylan’s, or wherever the fuck you can go that isn’t here, and I will try to keep both of you from coming up on more charges.”

With her chest heaving and her cheeks flushed, she’s more gorgeous than she’s ever been before. This Beta has a spark in her that has lit a fire in us all, and I’m tired of fighting it. I’m just tired, actually, but I think I’ve put up enough resistance for today.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful when you’re angry.”

She gasps, something shifting in her eyes as she looks at me—really looks at me—and swallows, her teeth clenching just as tightly as her fists at her sides and I know—I just fucking *know*—that she feels this, too.

Even angry as she is, stressed as she is, she can’t deny it.

And fuck. I’m tired of denying it, too.

Her lips part and I shake my head at the warning I can sense she’s about to give...the refusal.

“No,” I growl, closing the distance between us in two long strides before my hands are on her hips and I haul her to me, my head descending at the same time hers tips back.

Her body snaps tight with surprise, but she doesn’t push me away as I seal my lips over hers. I step into her, my tongue teasing at the seam of her mouth.

Then she surprises the shit out of us both when she starts kissing me back, nipping at my lower lip before she wraps her arms around my neck and pulls me closer. Neither of us were prepared for this to happen, but something is going on here that I don’t care to stop.

Jax had his fun with the other Betas earlier, taking the pair of them into the bedroom to do fuck knew what, but truth be told, I could barely touch them. It didn’t feel right. Because they didn’t feel like her. They didn’t smell like her.

She smells so sweet, especially right now, with her all geared up. Too sweet. Too strong of a scent. Faint from further away, tolerable, but not up close like this. This close she smells *warm* somehow. Like fresh baked berry explosion muffins with a dusting of sugar on top. So recently pulled from the oven that if you bite into one, you'll burn your mouth and yet I can't get enough.

Warning bells ring in my ears. Broken thoughts swell and recede.

She shouldn't smell this good.

My erection presses hard into the zipper of my jeans, my knot swelling until I grit my teeth.

She's a Beta, I remind myself.

I swallow up her little moans. High on all that is Josie.

She's a Beta. You can't knot her.

But louder than every other thought is one that I can't deny.

She is mine.

My reaction to her is visceral as I kiss her hard, my tongue delving into her mouth as I walk her back until she slams into the ruined painting against the wall.

It drops to the ground with a loud crash, but not even that breaks the spell. If anything, it spurs me on, making my kisses almost bruising as my hips roll into hers.

She lets out a moan that would've brought a lesser Alpha to his knees, and actually, that's exactly where I want to be right now. Abruptly breaking the kiss, I kneel in front of her and tear her pants off, tossing them away before shoving her panties down.

When her pussy is exposed and right in front of me, I groan before leaning forward, breathing her in before pulling back to look up at her. Her head is thrown back, her eyes closed and her brow puckered in concentration.

Her hands slide into my hair and she tugs it hard, guiding me forward until my nose is buried in her slick cunt. She's practically dripping with arousal. I run my tongue over her nub, tasting her, and the flavor goes straight to my cock, lighting me up from the inside.

"Fuck, you're so wet, Josie," I murmur, lapping her up, unable to get enough of her, my cock throbbing in time with my pulse as if it has an agenda all its own. One I know I'm going to be fucking powerless to stop.

Her arousal shimmers on her perfect mound and it nags at something in the back of my mind, but I'm too far gone, too lost in her to chase down the

memory.

Josie's grip on my hair tightens when I graze her clit with my teeth, then she moans again when I suck it between my lips.

Keening and arching into me, she trembles when I really get going and I band an arm around her hips, keeping her up when her knees start shaking. Josie responds to every move I make, every flick of my tongue and every brush of my teeth.

Sliding my free hand up the inside of her thigh, I feel her wetness long before I reach her opening. It's so much that it's dripping down her legs.

I push my fingers inside her, groaning when her muscles start milking them like she's already on edge. Moving my fingers inside her, I bring my lips back to her clit and she screams, her fingers tightening to the point of pain in my hair.

A few flicks of my tongue later, I suck her in and then she comes, flooding my hand and my mouth with her slickness as she moans my name. I lick her clean after, and as she sags, I push up to my feet, catching her and carrying her to the destroyed mattress.

She rests her head on my shoulder and when I set her down, she props herself up on her elbows, her lower half still naked and her head tilting as she stares up at me through heavily lidded eyes. Her lips are red and swollen, and she's so damn sexy like this that my cock literally jumps in the cage of my jeans.

Like she felt it, she drops her gaze to my crotch, sitting up and beckoning me closer. Without a word, she hooks her fingers into my waistband and unceremoniously tugs my belt free before she pops open the button. Her eyes are locked on my zipper as she tugs it down, and when she lifts my pants and boxers over the tip of my dick before she pushes it all down, she sucks in a sharp breath.

Fuck if that doesn't feel good.

Her tongue comes out to swipe across those swollen lips, then she smirks up at me before leaning forward and taking my cock into her mouth. I groan, my hips thrusting into the delicious heat of that mouth as her fist wraps around the base of my shaft, just above my knot.

Her tongue flicks across my tip, the flat of it sliding over the sensitive nerves underneath before she shifts her hand to brush against my knot. A shout tears right out of me and I can't stop it. I've never made a noise like that before, but *fuck me...she's good at this.*

I never want her to stop but at the same time, I'm dying to bury myself inside of her. But I can't. I just know somehow that if I let myself go there, I might not be able to stop myself from trying to knot her. Her body isn't built for that. It would hurt her.

And strangely, that is the last thing I would ever want to do.

Letting her have her fun as long as I can hold out, I thread my fingers into her hair and send a piercing glare at the ceiling, trying to ignore the sparks shooting from my knot to the tips of my toes.

Fuck.

Fuck.

It's not long enough before I pull back, getting on my knees on the mattress instead of blowing my load in her mouth. She moans when she wraps her arms around my neck, then she lies down and brings me with her.

I can't.

I fucking can't. I have to have her.

I'm strong enough. I can hold back.

After giving her another hot, hard kiss, I narrow my eyes on hers and spank the side of her ass. "Don't move. I need a condom."

A soft, mewling sound escapes her, and it almost undoes me. Thankfully, my pants are still lying right next to the mattress and my wallet is in my back pocket. Grabbing the condom out of it, I rip it open with my teeth, roll it on at hyper speed, and then I'm positioning myself at her entrance.

Josie folds her arms around my neck, pulling me down to kiss me again as I force myself to sink into her slow, already fighting the temptation to shove my knot into her. Her body can't take it and I don't want to hurt her, but shit. The need to knot her right now is intense.

Instead, I focus on finding what makes her squirm and moan, quickly finding a rhythm that does it for her. It's more punishing than I thought she might like, faster and harder but her body's responses are unmistakable.

Our girl likes it rough.

Incidentally, so do I, and giving her what she wants sends me racing to the edge right along with her.

She pulls on my hips, making it a fucking herculean effort not to go that extra mile and push in to the hilt, forcing my knot into her drenched pussy.

"Just like that," she mewls, rolling her hips into mine with every thrust. "Fuck, Holden, I'm going to—"

She cries out and I feel her contract around my cock inside of her and the

sound, coupled with the sensation, almost has me blacking out as I groan into the hollow at the side of her neck and come like I have never fucking come before.

My orgasm rips through me like lightning, sucking me dry as her pussy constricts around me, holding me tight before eventually, she collapses against the mattress, trembling with the aftershocks of her orgasm. We're both still panting in the aftermath when I rest my head at the crook of her neck, unable to resist breathing her in even now, after the heat of the moment has passed. I rub against her there, marking her with my scent before I even know what I've done.

We stay like that for a few long beats, but as she comes down, I feel her tensing and I sigh, rolling off her and getting up to dispose of the condom.

The mood in the room has shifted and I can't bring myself to look at her because if I find regret in her eyes...

I don't know if I could take that.

Heat rises in my chest, the anger that always comes to try to push out any other emotion I don't like.

I clench my jaw, pulling my pants back on.

"You need to leave," she mutters and it's something in her voice that has me finally turning around, unable to stop myself from looking at her.

Her eyes wide and frantic as she looks around like she's only now realizing where she is. What she's done.

And there it is. The guilt.

The regret.

She tugs a half deflated pillow onto her lap, covering herself with a wince. "I'll take care of the room and deal with the hotel manager. Just go."

My brows tug together when I see a sheen of moisture in her eyes, hear that telltale catch in her throat while she's speaking. Fuck. I can't take it when girls cry. I don't know what to fucking do.

But Josie. I can't see her cry. I'd rather poke my own goddamned eyes out.

"Josie, hey, it's okay, we—"

"Go, Holden." She darts her gaze to my own, her jaw clenched as she raises a trembling hand and points at the door. "Just go. Please."

It's the 'please' that gets me, the word landing in my gut like an anvil.

Silently stepping into my shoes, I stride to the door and after grabbing my keys, I take one last look at her. She's still sitting on the mattress, her fingers

twisting in the pillow on her lap.

She seems stunned. Like she needs to hug herself to keep it together, and I don't cuddle. Not ever. But as I step out of the room and let the door swing shut behind me, I have the weirdest urge to go back inside. To pull her into my arms and comfort her.

Luckily, these doors lock automatically once they're shut and I left my key-card inside. Shoving away the intrusive thought of breaking the door down to get to her, I swallow hard and march my confused ass to the elevator. I need to get out of here. Now.

Before I do something harder to take back than fucking.

TWENTY

JOSIE

TEARS PRESS at the backs of my eyes, stinging them as I suck in breath after breath, but nothing seems to quell the tide of panic rising up from deep within. This is not me. I don't even know how many times I've had that thought these last few weeks, but it keeps occurring to me because it's so fucking true.

I don't get flustered after sex. I don't get upset and I sure as hell don't cry, and yet as shivers wrack my body and the tears break free, I can't deny that I am, in fact, upset. I'm crying after sex, and I don't know why.

Well, I know why I'm upset. What I don't know is why I did it to begin with. I've now found myself in a sexual situation with each member of Firebrand and Asher is the only one I haven't full-on slept with.

It's like I can't control myself when I'm around them, and not in the fan-girl, throw myself at the rockstars' feet kind of way. This goes deeper than that. I'm not starstruck by them anymore and it's not about wanting to get another notch on my bedpost.

I'm not entirely sure what it's about, but when Holden came at me, it was like something larger than myself that resides within the very center of my being drove me into him. Rendered me completely incapable of resisting.

Which also isn't me.

I've never been a slave to my baser impulses. God knows, my body and I are usually in tune. I don't suffer from body betrayal and I don't think that's what's going on now, either. If this was just about them turning me on, then it would've been fine.

But it's also not just that. It's not about getting off. It's about being with them, in their arms, claiming their bodies as my own to the best extent I can.

All of which is ridiculous. I'm a Beta. What this sounds like, even in my own head, is more the relationship between an Omega and her Alphas, but that's not possible.

Even if their scents do drive me crazy and I feel like I'm high whenever I get a whiff. What's worse is that this is going to ruin my dream job. My shot at the big leagues is in jeopardy, and it's because of me not being able to remain professional even if I want to.

After sitting on the mattress for a long time, I finally manage to get to my feet. My legs are still trembling as I walk over to where Holden flung my pants, but I think the shakiness is because of the shock. I'm three and a half for four with the guys, and it's not a good feeling.

Bending over, I swipe my pants and panties up and move to hurriedly pull them on, until I spot the evidence of my arousal literally all over my legs.

What the hell?

My mind races to supply me with excuse after excuse as to why or how I could've possibly been that turned on but I set my jaw against the tidal wave of rampant questions in my mind.

Deal with the problem, Josie.

I shift my thoughts away from the fact that I just fucked Holden Grant and back to more pressing matters, like how I'm going to make this hotel disaster go away while I clean myself off in the bathroom.

When I come back out, I spot one of Holden's undershirts lying nearby. There's a lot of his stuff in this room, but once someone comes in to clean, I'll have them box it all up for him. I don't even know where to have it sent, and yet I've slept with him. *Go me.*

Driven by some insane compulsion that I'm starting to think is my new normal, I grab the undershirt and press it to my nose, sighing when Holden's scent of oakwood and citrus and dark chocolate saturates me from the inside out.

What am I doing?

I'm officially going insane.

I get rid of the shirt and pick up the landline phone, which miraculously, is *not* broken.

It's time to get to work.

When the manager arrives, I've already opened the door and I'm standing in the center of the room, surveying the damage. Upon closer inspection, I've realized that Holden was right. The suite looks a mess because of all the

stuffing, feathers, and upturned furniture, but it looks worse than it actually is.

Everything they've broken or made a mess of can be replaced or set right within the next day or so. The manager strides in after a short knock signaling that he's there, and when I turn to face him, he offers me a tight smile.

"As you requested, we didn't call the police. Thank you for coming right away."

"Of course." I run my hands through my hair and try to get my head in the game, blinking away the lingering memories of what Holden and I were doing in here less than a freaking hour ago. "I'd also like not to get any lawyers involved. It's not necessary. Firebrand will pay for the damage. If you send us an invoice for the cleaning and replacement costs, we'll cover it in full."

The manager sighs. "I've spoken to corporate, and they're willing to accept any offer that covers our costs, so thank you for that."

"But?" I arch a brow at him, knowing that there's something else coming. "They'll accept our offer, but what else?"

"They would like for the Grand franchise to be considered for accommodation for the band's upcoming tour. We have hotels in most of the cities they'll be visiting and we're willing to keep this quiet, out of the press and away from the lawyers, if we're to be considered for future business. For Firebrand and Beckett Records' other artists."

"I can only speak for Firebrand," I say clearly. "If you want their other artists to consider your hotels, I can put you in touch with their managers, but I can't make any promises on behalf of anyone else. As for Firebrand themselves, the Grand is already in consideration as a hotel chain for the tour."

"Corporate is willing to offer very competitive rates."

I nod. "In exchange for?"

He meets my gaze directly, unremorseful but I suppose they do have the upper hand right now. "Branding on the tour website as an official partner and at least one video made by a band member at each site."

"Done," I agree without hesitation. Those are standard terms in these negotiations anyway, and if it helps to keep this incident private and the band out of jail, then I'm all for it. "The band will also be paying your damages out of their royalty checks."

The board and the band just don't know it yet. No doubt they're not going

to like it, but maybe it will make them think twice next time they feel the urge to destroy a suite. “You can send the inventory of the damage caused as well as the invoice directly to my email address, and I’ll make sure you receive payment.”

He nods and I go to take one of my shiny new business cards out of my purse to give him my contact details but when I flip back the top of the leather bag, I find something else waiting for me atop my wallet.

Holden’s undershirt.

The one I discarded just a few minutes ago.

I must’ve put it in there but I have no memory of doing it. I swallow hard, reaching around the wad of scented fabric for the short stack of business cards beneath my wallet. I clear my throat, trying to shake off the feeling making the tiny hairs on the back of my neck rise.

“Thank you,” the hotel manager says, accepting the card as I rush to flip the leather flap back closed on my purse, hoping he didn’t see what was inside.

My cheeks heat.

I clear my throat. “Excellent. I do apologize for this, and your chain will be given due consideration for the tour. Ask your corporate offices to send their proposal directly to me as well.”

After we shake hands, I leave the hotel to the clean-up and head back to my place. Since I only have one bedroom, Stef is staying at a hotel and I told her I’d be in touch, but right now, I just need a hot bath in the amazing, claw-footed tub I’ve never used and some time alone.

In the time I’ve been in San Francisco, my office has started feeling more like home than my apartment, but I suppose that will change as soon as I spend more time here. With that thought in mind, I walk straight to my bathroom when I get home and open the faucets.

The tub has a picture window that looks out over the bay in the distance, and I smile as I start hunting for the lighter I know I saw in here somewhere. There are candles on the window sill and two on the vanity, and once I’ve lit them all, I shed my clothes and even add some bubble bath to the water before I lower myself into it.

Between the warm, late afternoon sun and the candles, the bathroom is dimly lit with an orangey glow, and since I can’t see the street or even any other buildings from my position in the tub, it’s like I’m in a peaceful bubble for the first time in weeks.

It's just me, my thoughts, and the view of the water in the distance. The sweet, citrus-vanilla scent of the bubbles fills the air and I inhale deeply, closing my eyes as I rest my head against the side of the tub. I haven't had much time off since I arrived in California and right now, this bath feels like a tropical fucking vacation.

I left my phone in my purse, and panic threatens to invade the peace when I realize that I don't have it close by, but I force myself to forget about it. It's almost the end of the business day, my assistants are at the office, and if someone really does desperately need me for something, I'm sure I'll hear the incessant ringing of my phone. Besides, I don't want to so much as *open* my purse right now.

I don't want a physical reminder of my latest fuck up staring me right in the face and invading my airspace with the scent of Holden.

Sinking deeper into the hot water, my traitorous mind wanders back to Holden no matter how many times I try to gain control of it.

I know enough about Alphas to know that their knots are extremely sensitive and that it brings them incredible pleasure if you gently caress it. Dylan and Jax were the first Alphas I've ever slept with, and though I was intrigued with their knots that night, making sure to pay some attention to them when I could, I didn't feel the need to have them knot me. Not like an Omega would.

First, because it's not actually possible for them to do it without causing me what I've heard is pretty intense pain and maybe even some tearing, *yikes*, but also because my body just isn't wired that way.

With Holden, though, it was different. A few times, it was right on the tip of my tongue to beg him to give me his knot, which is bizarre. Just thinking back to it makes that need claw through my insides again, and the space between my legs pulses as my clit starts aching for attention.

Before logic or reason can take over, my mind wanders further and my hand slides between my legs as I imagine what it might feel like to be knotted. Not as me, a Beta who will be hurt by it, but for the purposes of this particular fantasy, for the first time in my life, I picture what it might feel like as an Omega, whose body was made for an Alpha's knot.

I imagine begging Holden for his and him giving it to me, locking us in place as his seed fills me up. Then I imagine Asher doing the same, and Dylan and even Jax next. The more I think about it, the more it turns me on, and the faster my hand moves until the water is splashing over the sides of

the tub and an orgasm rolls through me.

As I'm coming down, I realize what I just did. What I was thinking about when I did it, and my teeth sink into my lower lip. *What the hell is going on with me?*

I honestly have no idea, but I'm starting to think it's more than just stress and exhaustion. Fear snakes through me when I really consider everything that's happened.

My Beta body is betraying me. Feeling things it shouldn't. Wanting things it *can't* have. Something is very wrong. I don't know what, but one thing I do know? It sure as hell isn't good.

TWENTY-ONE

A S H E R

ALL AFTERNOON, worry has been eating me up inside. Something happened, first with Jax and Holden, and then with Josie and Holden. At least, that's the best I've been able to come up with.

I felt the turbulence from Holden and Jax through our bond, and then it was like that turmoil snapped and a sudden calm took its place. But that's not what's confusing me. I've felt that enough times before to know it means that Holden did something that finally managed to yank Jax out of his latest spiral.

That part's fine. It's what came next that threw me off. Holden's tether in our bond is usually the steadiest. I feel him there all the time, but I don't often feel spikes from him. Some irritation when he's with his family, but that's mostly it.

The dude is solid. He's got a good grip on himself and he rarely feels anything powerful enough to make me sit up and take notice. That's changed recently. I've noticed little spikes whenever he's with Josie, and this afternoon, I felt one of those.

They've become familiar to me, but what wasn't familiar was the massive rush that came after. Not only was the lust strong enough that I got hard while looking over a fucking tax return, but there was this insatiable desire for something so much more than just fucking.

More a feeling of...*possessiveness*.

It was odd—to say the least.

I got her address from Basil, who's always had a bit of a crush on me, and I don't know why I want to make sure that she's all right, but I do.

There's a disturbing feeling in my gut that something's changing about

her. Either that, or something is changing about the way I feel about her—which is way more disturbing.

Even so, I knock on the door and hold up the bottle of wine I brought, ready to explain myself, when she finally comes to answer it. Her hair is up in a knot on top of her head and she's wearing a fluffy purple robe, her eyes slightly unfocused as she opens the door.

"Stef, I'm so sorry I haven't called. I—" As soon as she realizes that I'm not whoever Stef is, she blinks hard and her eyes fly wide open. "Asher? Is everything okay?"

"All good," I lie, presenting her with the expensive red wine I don't even know if she likes. "I brought you a housewarming present. It's late, I know."

She blinks again, rapidly and far too many times, before she finally steps back and waves me in. "Sorry. Please, come on inside. I just, *uh*, you caught me off guard. Give me a minute, I'll get changed and—"

"Please don't." I step into her little foyer, taking a quick look around as she shuts the door behind me. Her apartment is cute—small, but homey. I doubt she decorated it herself or that any of the furniture belongs to her, but it still seems to suit her.

There's an open-concept kitchen off one side of the foyer and a dining room-slash-lounge in front of me. A short corridor leads away from it, and I'm assuming that's where her bedroom and bathroom are. It's nothing fancy, but the walls are painted a light gray and the furniture is turquoise, white, and a darker shade of gray. There are pops of purple, yellow, and green in the knick-knacks on the modular bookshelf and in the cushions of her sofas, and large bay windows look out over the twinkling city lights.

"Nice place," I say as I turn back to face her just as she pushes away from the door.

"Don't change on my account. You look pretty comfortable right now, and after everything we've put you through recently, the last thing I want is to make you uncomfortable in your own home."

Those green eyes move slowly up to mine before they narrow just the slightest bit. "What are you really doing here, Asher?"

"Housewarming gift. I told you." On that note, I head to her kitchen and grab two glasses from the open shelf they're on. "Want some? The store assistant said it was the best bottle they had."

"*Uh*, sure." She watches as I rummage around in her drawers for a corkscrew, and then frowns as I make myself at home, opening the wine

before dumping the cork in the trash and filling the glasses. “We’re going to drink a whole bottle?”

“Probably. There’s two of us and it’s only one bottle. We’ll be fine.” I hand over her glass and pick up my own before deciding to take a seat on one of the turquoise sofas.

Josie seems a touch confused, but she comes to sit next to me anyway, her cheeks a little paler than usual as those eyes bore into mine. “You didn’t come over just to bring me a housewarming gift and you’re not staying just because the store assistant said it was good. Out with it, Asher. What’s going on?”

I blow out a heavy breath, sliding my arm around the back of the sofa to keep my hand from snaking toward her. “Fine. I really did want to bring you something, but I also just wanted to check on you. It’s...well, I know something happened after we left your office this morning. I don’t know what, but uh...”

The fuck is going on with me? I don’t stammer and sure as shit don’t trail off, but look at me evolving into a speechless—

“I’m well aware that most of my conversations with the pack are shared between you. I also know that it’s not intentional and that it’s just how your connection works, but what exactly do you think happened?”

Fuck. It doesn’t seem like she’s suffering from the same affliction I am, that’s for sure. In fact, she seems to be getting more confident by the day. Swallowing past the dry spots in my throat, I nod. “It really isn’t intentional and it’s not like I can hear your conversations with them, but I can feel what they’re feeling and sometimes, that’s enough to get a general idea of what’s happening or what’s being talked about.”

“So what do you think Holden and I talked about this afternoon?”

My gaze remains locked on hers. “I don’t think you talked much. I think you argued and then you fucked.”

Her eyes widen before her cheeks flood with a deep red color and her gaze hits her lap. “You’re, *uh*, you’re not wrong about that. I think...”

“You think what?” I prompt gently as my hand slides around the back of the sofa and I start toying with her hair exactly like I was trying *not* to do just a minute ago.

A few strands have escaped from the damp knot on her head and I wrap them around my finger, my eyes studying the side of her face as her expression crumples and she drags in a shuddering breath. She smells like

fucking sunshine.

“I think there’s something wrong with me, Asher. I don’t think I’m cut out for this job.”

“Bullshit.” Before I can even think about it, I wrap her up in my arms and hold her close, breathing in her scent as I rest my chin on her hair. “There’s definitely nothing wrong with you and you’re the best manager we’ve had. If you’re not cut out for this, then we’re fucked because we’re not going to find anyone half as good at it as you.”

This is not really the kind of thing I ever do with anyone, but she’s different. A long time ago, the guys and I agreed never to take an Omega. None of us want to be bonded and we all have our own reasons for it, and Josie’s not supposed to be an exception to our rule.

On the other hand, she doesn’t count, right? She’s a Beta, so maybe we can have her. In some way, even if we can’t bond with her.

She sniffs as her arms wrap around my waist, her head resting on my chest. Right over my heart, and I like it more than I should to know she’s finding comfort in my heartbeat right now. “I don’t know, Asher. Ever since I got this account, I haven’t really felt like myself. First with Dylan and Jax, then you and now Holden? I mean, I’m a goddamn professional and yet, it’s like I can’t keep my legs closed. It’s infuriating.”

I chuckle before turning my head to press a kiss to the top of her head. “Yeah, I know the feeling. We all do, but don’t give up on us, okay? We’re going to figure it out. I promise.”

“How?” she asks, her voice muffled as she presses her face into my shirt and releases an exasperated puff of air that warms my skin and somehow, my insides too.

“I don’t know that yet, but we will.” *Hey, would you look at that? My confidence is back. Thank fuck.* “Have you eaten anything today?”

She stills in my arms before she pulls back to look up at me. “I had lunch with a friend before I got called to Holden’s hotel. Are you hungry?”

“Not really, but I’m going to order some takeout and then you and I are going to talk. You are cut out for this and I’m not leaving here until you know it.”

A soft smile touches the corners of her lips as she nods. “There’s a Chinese place right around the corner. They deliver. I found the menu in a drawer the other day and stuck it on the fridge.”

“I’ll get it.” Grudgingly extricating myself from her, I walk to the kitchen

and grab the menu and the wine before going back to her. Once we've placed our order, I sit back down, refill the glasses even though we've hardly touched them, and then I pull her feet into my lap, enjoying the serenity of the moment when she keeps them there.

"I'm supposed to go on a date with an up-and-coming model later," I volunteer lightly after a few moments. "We're supposed to start some rumors and get tongues wagging that we're together—"

"Why don't I know about this?" she asks, her brows furrowing.

I shake my head. "It was set up before you, I think, but don't worry I don't think I'm going to go. Just not feeling it. The Becketts are going to be pissed about it, though. Just a heads-up."

"Pissed is their default setting when it comes to all of us. Why don't you want to go? What doesn't feel right about it?"

"I don't know, but I listen to my gut and right now, it's telling me to stay here. With you. Besides, I really do need to convince you to stay and if you're doubting your role in Firebrand, then this is where I need to be. Is it because of last night, and Jax?"

"No." She sighs, her head shaking slightly. "Maybe. I don't know. What I do know is that he'd prefer it if I was gone."

"No, he wouldn't." When she scoffs, I arch a brow at her. "Trust me, I've known him a long time and I can literally feel what he's feeling. He doesn't want you to leave. We're all just...we're a little bit fucked up. It's why we work so well together, but it's also why we need you."

"He hates me," she deadpans.

I laugh. "He does not hate you. He wants you and he's annoyed that you turned him down, but that's about it. What Jax did last night? That's not on you, Josie."

"Are you sure? Because it kind of feels like it is. Like it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't turned him down."

"It would've happened. Maybe not in the same way but Jax is... complicated. We all are."

"You're definitely right about that." She leans back against the armrest, her feet still in my lap as she cradles her glass in her palms and takes a small sip of her wine. "Holden enabled him today. He told me Jax was fine now, but they fucked up another hotel room and I smoothed it over, but we may have to stay at the Grand for the tour."

"I like the Grand." I smile, taking a sip of wine as I shrug. "And if it

helps, we all know we shouldn't enable him, but he's calm now. For real. Thank you for smoothing it over."

"It's my job, but you're welcome." She tilts her head, her curious eyes on mine. "I know your pack is strong and I don't mean any offense, but why do you put up with him? Why do you all follow him when he starts losing his mind?"

I lean forward and tug at the knot on her head, chuckling before I drag in a deep breath. "You're going to have to try harder than that to offend me, and we put up with him because we love him. We follow him when he causes shit because it's fun and it's what we've been told is expected of us."

"There are plenty of celebrities who are able to meet a hotel room they don't want to destroy and who manage to stay out of jail. It's not what's expected of you. Maybe someone told you that once, but it's not true. Not anymore."

"Perhaps," I agree. "Lately, I've been feeling the same way, but a ship doesn't turn on a dime. We'll get there now, I think, if you stay. We've all just...we've had a lot to work out."

She frowns, her nose wrinkling as she shakes her head. "Again, no offense, but why? Your dad was a rock god revered by the entire world. You grew up as a prince in this industry."

"Both of those things are true, but that's also not the whole story. For starters, you're right about him being a rock god, but that also means that no matter what I do, I can't live up to his legacy. Which isn't fair, because he bonded with my mother, an Omega, who got Cervus and died, and then he drank himself to death but no one knows that part. No one knows that he gave up on life and on me when he lost her."

Josie's jaw grows slack and her eyes fill with sadness as she stares back at me. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know that."

Inhaling deep through my nostrils, I nod and tamp down on the urge to rage at her. "I know. That's my point. Things aren't always what they seem, and I can work my ass off for the rest of my life and still not live up to his *stellar reputation*, so I stopped trying. I don't want to be him, and fucking a few things up along the way to prove it seemed like a good idea at the time."

"Jax is trying to prove something, too, isn't he?" she asks quietly after hesitating for a beat.

I nod just as a knock comes from the door. "He's trying to prove he doesn't need anyone and that he doesn't care if they don't want him, but

that's not my story to tell."

"That's the same thing Dylan said." She sighs as we get up to grab our food, but she doesn't bring it up again, changing the subject to the tour instead while we eat.

By the time I leave her place, I'm pretty sure she's not going to quit on us, and since she told me to do it, I go on the date with the Omega model the Becketts contracted. We end up having half a drink together before I leave. The model's scent makes my nose wrinkle and I prefer the lingering bouquet of *Josie* still clinging to the fabric of my shirt.

The model looks only a little hurt when I excuse myself, heading back to my hotel room to figure out what's happening with Josie instead of ending the night with a casual fuck like I usually do.

I can't shake the feeling that there's some kind of shift happening, and I don't think I'll be able to rest until I figure out exactly what it is. And what it means for Firebrand, Josie, and all of our careers that, right now, seem to be not only on the line, but clinging to some fragile thread that could snap at any given moment if we can't get it under control.

TWENTY-TWO

JOSIE

DAYS AND WEEKS RUSH BY, blurring into one another as we prepare for Jax's day in court over and above everything else we've got going on. The band has become an almost permanent fixture in my office at this point, spending at least two or three hours a day with me but no more than that.

I've forbade visits to my apartment and I work *hard* not to be alone with any of them or to get too close anymore. I'm damned determined to keep my shit together and to keep this job, but I'd be lying if I said it wasn't without an *extreme* amount of restraint. And the only thing that makes me feel better at the end of the day, when I'm all alone, is surrounding myself in all of the items I've stolen from them. Like some kind of deranged kleptomaniac.

But at least the awkward tension between me and Holden seems to have mellowed out into a mutual understanding. That understanding being that we should *not* have fucked. Or at least, I hope it's mutual. Sometimes it's hard to tell with the way he watches me, like he might rip my clothes off again at any second.

"Why are we going through all this again?" Jax snaps as he shoves away the pictures spread out on the table in front of him. "It's ancient history. Shit I got into years ago. It's not relevant."

The urge to soothe him rises up from deep within me. These days, it's like I'm balanced on a knife's edge. One minute, I'll be feeling like myself and the next, it's like there's this whole different person in front of me.

A person I don't know, but really like. I mean, I like when she's there but when she's not, the thought of her is annoying as hell. *Yeah, I know. I'm confused about it too.*

Ultimately, however, she's much warmer than I usually am, and I like

that. I think it's because I'm settling into my role as their manager and I want to take care of them. I want to make them feel like I care, because I do. I do care.

Reaching out, I cover Jax's hand in my own and give him a soft smile. "It is ancient history, but our lawyers are worried that the prosecutor is going to use it to paint a picture of who you are. All we're doing now is going through it so I can get the full story."

"So you can tell it to the lawyers?" he snaps, and my smile doesn't go anywhere. It should. It should fade. I should stand up to him, but I don't. He's hurting. He's embarrassed and angry. I don't want to add to his anguish right now.

"Yes, so that I can give the lawyers the answers they need. If there's anything you don't want them to know about or anything you don't want to talk about, then just tell me and I'll cover for you, okay?"

He sighs and his fingers gently brush and squeeze mine before he retracts his hand and I feel like I've just lost a damn limb.

Get yourself together, Josie.

Jax sighs. "Yeah. Okay."

As he pulls the pictures back to him, he winces and I find my heart cracking for him. It sends a bolt of pain shooting through me and I flinch in turn.

The next second, Asher's arm wraps around my shoulders from the other side. I stiffen, but right now, I can't bring myself to pull away. I lean into him, letting him soothe some of the pain.

"It's okay, Josie," Holden murmurs from Jax's other side, leaning forward to be able to see me as Jax keeps looking through the old photographs. "He's going to be fine. It's just that no one likes to be reminded of the bad stuff, you know?"

"Hey, this wasn't bad stuff," Jax protests. "These were great times. Great fucking times. Like this." He taps the picture he's looking at. "This was when I freed Frank from that petting zoo in India."

I scoot to the edge of the chair, bending over to get close enough to see what he's talking about. It's like there's a monster inside me who thrives on information about these guys. It's insatiable, and it hungrily soaks up every tiny nugget they're willing to share.

"Who's Frank?" I ask. "There's no one else in the picture. It's just you holding a python."

“That’s Frank,” Asher says laughingly. “The python is Frank. Jax was holding him for a picture and then asked if he could walk around with him for a bit. Next thing we know, it’s the next morning and Frank is in our hotel room. They threatened to press charges. We convinced them not to, eventually, but it was a close call.”

“Frank was a good snake,” Jax murmurs as he looks at the picture, then he shrugs and adds it to the pile of evidence we’ve already discussed. “I need a drink. Or to go relive some of these memories.”

“Absolutely not,” I shoot upright and Asher’s arm slides off me. “You’re not reliving any of these memories before your hearing. I’ll get you a drink, though.”

Pushing my chair back, I stride over to the bar and turn back to look at the others. “Anyone else? Jax, what are you having?”

“Vodka,” he says and I catch the way Jax’s eyes flit up and down the length of me, like he might swallow me whole just the same as that giant python could. “On the rocks. Thanks, Jo.”

Did he just say thank you?

I lift a brow and preen inwardly, taking full responsibility for his sudden discovery of manners. Actually, he’s been a lot nicer these past couple days. Calmer, too. It’s sort of throwing me off. I don’t know what to make of it. That last thing I’ll do is draw attention to it though. With my luck, that’ll only set him off again. I don’t want to ruin this sudden shift in him.

Dylan’s gaze tracks me as I move in behind the bar, fixing Jax’s drink while waiting for the others to respond. He seems curious—and worried, but I guess that makes sense. I’d be worried too if my packmate was facing jail time. If I had a packmate, which I don’t.

Extreme sadness trickles into me at the thought, taking root in my heart and blossoming into a whole tree of sadness. My face falls, the corners of my mouth turning down, and Asher sucks in a sharp breath.

“Are you okay, Josie?”

“Of course.” I clear my throat and paste on a fake smile. “So, drinks?”

They put in their orders, all except for Dylan who turns me down politely, but he’s still watching me closely. I can feel his eyes on me with every move I make, and it’s making me uncomfortable. Not because I don’t like it, but because I do. A little too much.

My cheeks get hot as my panties grow damp, and I pray to everything that’s holy they don’t somehow figure it out. As I carry their drinks to them,

Dylan is still watching me, but then he inhales deeply and his nostrils suddenly flare, a low groan reverberating out of him before he finally—fucking finally—averts his gaze.

After I set down their drinks, Dylan smiles at me. “Hey, Jo?”

“Yes?”

“My shoe is untied. Think you can get that for me?”

“Of course.” I return his smile, glad that he’s still not really looking directly at me, and then I sink to my haunches to tie his shoelace. Somewhere deep down inside me, there’s a voice whispering that I shouldn’t be doing this for him. That I should tell him to do it himself.

But that voice is being ridiculous. I’m already down here. *Why shouldn’t I do it for him?*

Patting his now-tied shoelaces when I’m done, I smile at him again before I stand up. “There you go. All done.”

The expression on his face is puzzled for some reason, his eyebrows held tighter together than usual as he nods. “Great. Thank you.”

I wonder what that was all about. The urge to go to him, climb into his lap, and ask him to talk to me about it surges through me, but I fight it back. I can’t climb into his lap. That would be extremely unprofessional, and yet there’s another side of me that wonders why, exactly, it would be unprofessional.

He and I have already slept together. There’s no reason I can’t just get on his lap, but something in me won’t allow me to do it.

A couple days later, the guys are in my office again and I’m still wondering why Dylan keeps looking at me like that. At times, those eyes are absolutely smoldering and at others, they’re so dark it seems like he’s about to start crying because of how worried he is.

As I’m sitting on the sofa staring at him and chewing the inside of my cheek as worry of my own races through me, Asher comes to sit at my one side and Holden sinks down on the other. Neither of them are close enough to touch me, but as their heat seeps into me, the worry morphs into lust and I dig my fingernails into the sofa cushions to keep myself under control.

“You okay, Josie?” Asher asks with concern etched into the lines around his mouth. “It’s going to be fine, you know? He’s going to be fine.”

“I know. We just need to get him there, is all.”

Holden gives me one of his rare smiles, and the lust intensifies so much that I have to squeeze my thighs together just to get some relief. “You’ll get

him there. We know you will.”

I drag in a deep breath, but if I’m being honest, I’m glad they’re heading out to the studio in a few minutes. Our preparation time for the day is over and they need to get back to practice—and I need to get my head on straight.

It’s getting increasingly difficult to think clearly when they’re around. Their scents—hell, their mere presence—is enough to make me feel like I’m in an emotional tumble dryer. I’m all over the damn place, and I know that they’re worried, but that also means I need to be able to think clearly.

Because they’re counting on me. They’re putting their trust and their faith in me to get Jax out of this bind. Our lawyers are working hard, but we need more than that. *I* need to come up with something better. Something concrete and solid to get him out of this.

And in order to do that, I need to not be with them. I need to think. More than anything else, I need them to be happy. Happy, and safe, and out of danger. I don’t know why it’s such an overwhelming, burning need for me.

Jax got himself into this and as his manager, I should be trying to get him out of it, but it shouldn’t feel like this. It shouldn’t feel like I’m never going to be the same if I fail. But it does feel like that.

It feels like everything is riding on my protecting him, and when he tentatively smiles at me as he gets up to leave, it also feels like I’m going to melt right into the sofa. Asher chuckles and gives me a quick hug and a kiss on the top of my head that sends an electric jolt to my toes before he gets up, too.

“See you around, Josie.”

“Work hard guys,” I say absently as Holden pats my knee before standing up too. In the meantime, Dylan watches each of them with curiosity burning in his eyes, then he sighs and gives me a wave as he backs out of my office.

I don’t have a clue what’s going on with him, but there’s something, all right. And as soon as I’ve got a minute, I need to talk to him and figure out what it is.

TWENTY-THREE

DYLAN

AS THE DAYS GO BY, the guys and I write some music, practice a lot, and end up meeting with Josie more often than not. With a new album to bring out, singles to drop, and the tour coming up, there's work to be done and thankfully, Jax is playing along.

For now, anyway.

Everything seems to be settled, like we're in the eye of some kind of storm. Everything, that is, except for Josie. I have no idea what's going on with our manager, but her scent is definitely getting stronger and a few times, I'd have sworn I even caught a whiff of arousal.

Not, like, the usual arousal I so often scent on females when they're around us, but something much more enticing. It's richer, sweeter, more powerful, and it's making it fucking difficult to focus on work when she's around.

I'm not the only one feeling the effects of it either. We haven't outright talked about it, but I'm feeling it from the others too, the tension when we meet with her, the burning restraint to keep our hands to ourselves, the itch not to.

Jax, Holden, Asher, and I wound up in a rut once. Back in the early days. When we were young, wilder than we are now, and a little more naïve. It sucked. It was horrible, and if I didn't know any better, I'd say we're staring down the barrel of another one.

It's made me become a little more vigilant. That's *not* a place I want to go back to, and even just the possibility of it has made me aware of even the tiniest details.

Which is how I know that Josie is feeling the effects of whatever is going

on, too. I've seen the way she squeezes her thighs together when she's with us, how her pupils dilate and her cheeks flush just before I get that intoxicating whiff I'm starting to suspect is actual fucking *slick*.

She's also acting more and more like an Omega with every week that fades into the next. Seriously, I've been watching and not only that, but I've secretly tested her a time or two, and there are small things she's doing that have been enough to make me take notice.

Like how she's acquiescing to requests from us she would normally contest. The other day, I asked her to tie my damn shoe and she dropped to her knees and did it. Didn't even roll her eyes once. She's also melting into Asher these days like she's looking to him for protection or comfort, and I've realized that when it happens, he wraps her up in his arms like some kind of superhero and holds her there like he's only too happy to keep doing it.

Makes me jealous as fuck, but it's also interesting because it's not normal behavior for him. Same with Holden, who has taken to murmuring little reassurances to her when he thinks no one is listening and even Jax, who has been at heel like some good little puppy trying to earn a treat.

And then there's me. My own instincts have been screaming at me, thrashing against the cage I keep them locked in to avoid giving in to some of the Alpha urges that I refuse to let myself indulge in. I've had to fight against my natural impulses before, but never this hard.

Sometimes, I even feel a little feverish because of it. All of which is why I need to talk to Josie. As soon as Jax's hearing is done. I would've spoken to her about it before, but the last couple of weeks, even the album and the tour has been put on the backburner in favor of preparing for our packmate's day in court.

A day which, it turns out, is also when everything comes to a head.

As we're walking into the courthouse, Jax and Josie are in front of me, staying much closer together than I've seen them since that night we all danced together. Their hands are brushing with almost every—*synchronized*—step they take, and her giggles drift to my ears over the low humdrum while we're passing through security.

"We're all good, Josie," he says, and though I've never seen him flirting with her so openly before, he's definitely doing it now as he reaches up and twirls a lock of her loose hair around his finger. "The judge will grant the label's motion to dismiss and then we'll go out and celebrate. On me. Without any horses or pool parties."

Strangely, she leans in to him instead of smacking his hand away, smiling as she bats her lashes and nods. “Promise me there won’t be any smashing, shredding, or destruction and I’m there.”

“Oh, there’s going to be smashing, all right.” He winks at her—*fucking winks at our manager*—and then he gives her a sexy smirk. “It just won’t be bottles I’ll be smashing this time.”

She giggles again, and my head nearly implodes as confusion clouds my thoughts. They have *never* been like this before. All this time, all those small things I’ve noticed, it’s all been in passing. It’s never been outright or really even anything to write home about by itself.

It was the sum of it all that made me suspicious, but this is insane. Especially since they don’t stop when we walk into the crowded courtroom. The judge, an Alpha himself, stares at them both like he sees right through him, and I have to stop myself from asking him what exactly he’s seeing.

Because if he’s seeing what I’m seeing, maybe what I’m thinking isn’t so crazy after all. Eventually, after Davidson settles in and has asked Jax for the third time to take his seat, the Judge steps in. “Mr. Adler, keep quiet and sit down. Your Omega will be here when we’re done.”

My spine snaps straight at his words, and Asher glances at me with confusion that matches my own shining from his eyes. He shrugs as we exchange a glance, and Holden settles back at my other side with a contemplative scowl on his face as he crosses his arms and zones out while the proceedings get underway.

He’s not the only one. Asher seems slightly dazed, too, but Josie and I are focused on the judge when he refuses to dismiss the charges. *Fuck.*

Jax barely seems to notice that he wasn’t let off totally scot-free, but before he can carry on with whatever the fuck he was doing with Josie before, I wind my arm around her waist and lead her into the SUV with me instead of getting in the other SUV she came in with Holden and Jax.

As soon as we’re alone, she twists to face me and I hit the button to raise the privacy shield before giving her a serious look. “We need to talk.”

“About what?”

“About what’s going on with you,” I say gently, reaching out to rub the back of her hand in soothing motions with my thumb when she winces like she was hurt by my tone before. “Look, Josie, I know we haven’t known each other very long, but in the time we have known each other, you’ve changed.”

Tears well on her lashes. “What do you mean?” Her head jerks when she

says it, and she shakes it hard as if she's begging me not to say what she maybe already knows I'm going to.

"I'm worried about you." I keep rubbing her hand, my eyes resting firmly on hers. "Look, I've got to ask you something. Are you..."

I don't know how exactly to put this but the question needs to be asked, and as if on cue, a fucking gut twisting, skin tingling waft of her scent hits me, woven through with tendrils of sweet *sweet* arousal.

Josie winces, her hand going to her lower tummy.

I set my jaw. "Are you sure you're a Beta?"

She frowns. "Of course, I'm sure. My sisters are Omegas, remember? I know what they went through when they presented, and I'm also sure I've never gone through that. I get my period, like all Betas."

"Okay, but you've been behaving like an Omega. When we were in your office the other day, I was looking for my notepad that I forgot in there before, and I found a stash of clothes that belong to us. Two of Asher's jackets, Jax's tie and a handkerchief, Holden's shirt, and two of my scarves. That's typical Omega behavior. It's called nesting. I googled it to make sure."

"I know what nesting is," she snaps, her eyes wide as she shakes her head again. "I don't...I didn't mean to...I...It stayed behind in my office. I was just keeping those things safe for you. I just put them away, you know, so that you wouldn't lose..."

She squeezes her eyes shut and drags in a deep breath, letting the excuse trail off.

I tighten my grip on her hand. "That's not all. Your scent has gotten stronger, you're more submissive, and you've been different with us. Have you noticed how often Asher holds you, or how even Jax has been sticking to you like glue the last week or so? Or how Holden is always reassuring you that you're doing great. That's not fucking normal, Jo. Not for any of them."

When she opens her eyes, I see the acknowledgment in them, but I also see the tears. They've welled again and they're shallower this time. She sniffs, wringing her hands in her shirt as a tick of pain lances through her again and I swear I can almost feel it myself. I want to rip that pain out of her by the root just as much as I want to bury my knot in her right this second.

"I think I'm sick," she says, her voice watery.

"I don't think you're sick, Josie. But this, whatever *this* is, could be a problem for us when you're supposed to be a Beta in charge of managing a band of unbonded Alphas, and that's putting it mildly."

“You don’t think I know that?” she says miserably. “I know that whatever is happening to me is a problem, but we have bigger issues to deal with right now. Can we just agree that I’ll go see a doctor when I’ve got time, and that —”

“No, we can’t. I don’t mean to be a dick, but if I’m right, then we can’t wait until you’ve got time to get you to a doctor. You need to see someone like, today. If I’m right, the guys and I may need to get on suppressants pronto and...so do you.”

“What are you saying?” she asks slowly. “I’m not an Omega, Dylan. Whatever this is, it’s not that. It *can’t* be that.”

I stare back at her, so fucking uncertain but so sure at the same time. The feelings are contradictory and yet... “Have you noticed any other changes? Things I might not know about or—”

“I missed my last period,” she whispers suddenly, the last of the color draining out of her face at the admission. “I thought it was just the stress, but I’m emotional. I haven’t been feeling like myself. Do you think I’m...”

“Pregnant?” I ask, my own heart lurching when I realize that if she is, and if it started after she met us...I was the one inside her that first night. Jax didn’t penetrate any orifice that may have resulted in a baby. I don’t think Asher’s fucked her. I think Holden has, but too recently for her to be having this level of symptoms.

If she is pregnant...then that baby is mine.

A fierce and almost visceral reaction shakes me to my core, lighting my spine like liquid fire until a dizzying rush of something I can’t name permeates my brain.

Mine.

“We used condoms, Jo,” I manage through gritted teeth, suddenly unable to look away from her stomach, hating how a part of me is fucking hoping that she *is* pregnant.

What the fuck, Dylan?

“Unless you’ve been with—”

She shakes her head hard and fast. “No, I’ve only been with you guys. There was no one before you for a long time.”

My pulse skyrockets.

“Okay, well, if it is that, we’ll get through it together. You need to get to a doctor.”

“I will,” she promises as the car starts slowing down. “After the meeting.”

“Meeting?” Both of my eyebrows climb up on my forehead. “No meeting is more important than this. I can have a doctor come here to see you at the office. Now.”

“No, we can’t.” There’s resignation in her eyes as she looks back at me. “I promise you I will get myself checked out, but you and I are both due upstairs right now. There’s a board meeting on the state of the band after everything that’s happened. Holden and Jax trashing that hotel room after he got out of jail was the final straw. I worked hard to keep it quiet, but the Becketts found out about it anyway. They’ve put off this meeting until after the hearing, but now, I need to be there.”

It feels like there’s a hook behind my belly button and someone is tugging at it as hard as they can, but she wouldn’t lie about this. We’ve got a board meeting to get to, our band to save, and then, after that, we’ve got a manager to take care of.

A manager who may be carrying my baby. Fuck.

And here I thought Jax was going to be the only child I would ever have to take care of. My eyes slide closed, but I’m still not convinced it is that, and as I climb out of the car and my head clears, I realize that while we were locked in the backseat together, I didn’t notice how much more potent her scent became in her heightened emotional state. In the closed off space.

The fresh air puts things in perspective and I breathe it in greedily, praying for a reprieve.

But as I stride after her into the building and the fog of it all disappears, I do a quick mental tally. We’re all Alphas and so are the Becketts, Holden’s dads who are on the board, and a bunch of the other board members.

All in, she’s about to be in a closed conference room with at least a dozen Alphas, and I strongly suspect that her body chemistry has somehow shifted. That she’s an Omega that’s possibly in the very early stages of her first heat. My entire body winces at the thought of it, but right now, there’s nothing I can do to stop her.

TWENTY-FOUR

HOLDEN

I HAVE no idea why Dylan took Josie to the other car, but I'm glad for it as soon as we walk into the boardroom ahead of them. This is business as usual for us, but since we're here first, maybe we can make some headway with the board before Josie's subjected to their wrath.

We've sat through three or four of these since we started with the label, being lectured on what we're supposed to be doing and what we've been doing wrong. As we file into the conference room and take our seats, I realize it's going to be worse this time.

My parents are here, all four of them, and so is the entire board. Twenty angry, tight-jawed faces stare back at us as we sit down, twenty pairs glaring daggers as they watch us settle in.

The meeting won't be called to order officially until Josie and Dylan are here, but Jake is all over me as soon as his eyes meet mine. He doesn't give a shit that this isn't a family meeting or that there are so many other ears listening. My dad never does, not when he has the opportunity to shove a verbal pineapple up my ass without any cameras in sight.

"Dumping a television in a shower and tearing up a hotel room? Really, Holden. We asked you to tone it down. We told you we needed you to keep your fucking nose clean until after Hunter's campaign." Jake glares at me.

"With all due respect," Asher chimes in before I can, drawling like he's so bored he can't be bothered to form the words properly as he rolls his eyes at Jake. "You were part of the conversation when we were told to transform the band into something reminiscent of the rockers from the 70s and 80s, and now you want us to tone it down? It was your idea. Way to keep shifting the goalposts."

I smirk at my dads. “True that. We—”

The door opens and Josie walks in, followed closely by Dylan. She looks more distressed than usual, but it’s not that that shuts me up. It’s the fact that her scent hits me like an anvil to the head. Its warmth embodied in scent. Like the summer sun beating down over a field of ripe berries. Like sticky cobbler straight out of the oven.

I know there’s more bullshit coming, but for a moment, I forget where I even am and I can see the rest of the band reacting the same way. A low growl tears out of Asher and Jax lets out a soft whine. Dylan looks like he’s in pain and I have to resist the urge to rip the eyes out of every other Alpha in the room who are suddenly staring at her.

They’re all blinking hard, some jaws slackening and others tightening. It’s clear they’re surprised by the intensity of her scent, and my muscles bunch as I try to remain seated and calm when all I want is to protect her from them.

Especially when they’re suddenly turning the full weight of their rage on her. It might be her scent that’s driving them to be so harsh, but Mr. Beckett has barely called the meeting to order when he starts berating her.

“We heard what happened in court this morning. The judge refused to dismiss the charges, and this despite you insisting that he’d look kindly on Jax because you left him in jail.”

Mrs. Beckett’s eyes have never been as hard as they are now when they flick between Josie and her husband, her Alpha. If even I’m noticing the way his nostrils are flaring as he reacts to her scent, then I’m willing to bet every dime I have that she’s noticed it too.

“Not only did you leave one of this label’s biggest stars in jail against legal advice and after we paid his bail, you have also failed spectacularly to keep them in line. You sat in front of us that morning and swore up and down that he simply needed more time to calm down and yet, only hours after being released, he caused over three thousand dollars’ worth of damage to yet another hotel room.”

Unable to resist a good roasting, my dad jumps in next. “The press hasn’t been able to get enough of their misbehavior. They’ve been front page news fourteen times in the last six weeks, and not one of those stories was good. Their reputation is being shot to pieces and you’re not doing anything to stop it.”

“Your appointment was a stopgap measure while we were searching for a

suitable, permanent replacement,” Mr. Beckett says and fucking *ouch*. I can see the sting it causes Josie to know that she was never necessarily thought of as being a permanent choice.

“That is why we gave the account to your firm and didn’t appoint you as an employee of Beckett Records. That being said, you are skating on dangerously thin ice.”

As soon as he says it, it’s like he lit the powder keg in all of us. None of us like that he’s threatening her, and I can sense from the rest of the pack that we’re all about to go off.

Josie beats us to it, though, meeting them point for point. I still don’t know what happened between her and Dylan on the way back from the courthouse that stressed her—and him, for that matter—out so much, but it’s clear that she’s using her emotions to fuel her right now.

“If you had been in court, you would’ve known that Jax was commended by the Judge for spending the night in jail even after he was granted bail. He said it was one positive indicator of remorse and that it shows that he was willing to take a modicum of responsibility for his actions.”

She turns to Mrs. Beckett next. “Again, it might’ve been against legal advice, but the fact that he remained in jail that night is the only thing counting in his favor right now. As for that morning, I believe I told you that he wasn’t ready and that he needed more time to calm down. If memory serves, you and Mr. Davidson were the ones insisting he should’ve been out already.”

She takes a deep breath, then looks around the table and meets the eyes of every board member staring back at her. “The Grand agreed not to press charges, call the police, or involve their lawyers. We have already settled the amount owing to them and the press has not reported on that incident because I kept it quiet.”

I’m not surprised when she turns to my parents next, though I am a little taken aback by the way she digs her heels in with them. “You’re trying to control your son and his band, and in doing so, you’re refusing to let them be the creatives they have always been. And then, when they act out, you complain about them breaking free from your control even though you *encouraged* them to behave this way. The public loves them and I don’t know if you’ve checked Hunter’s rating recently, but the younger generation adore him and the reason for that is sitting right in front of you.”

The board members are all so stiff that it looks like they’re ready to

pounce. They're not happy about being lectured when they thought they were going to be the ones doing the lecturing, but Josie's obviously not done yet.

She drives her point home with her head held high even though I notice her tiny fists are shaking at her sides and her cheeks are flushed even though she still looks pale. "You have all made this bed that you shoved me into less than two months ago. You stoked this fire and I'm the only person here who's really managed to contain it at all. The stories in the press recently have all been related to that one night when Jax got arrested. There has been nothing new and if you will let me do my job, even as a stopgap measure, then I will make sure that it stays that way."

When she's done, she turns to us. "Let's go. When they get their heads out of their asses and they're ready to discuss what we came here to discuss instead of treating us like kids in the principal's office, we can come back."

With that, she turns on her heels and marches right out. Jax snickers and puts his hands together in a slow clap as he follows her out, and Asher, Dylan, and I head out behind them. Josie doesn't stop moving until we're in her office, but as soon as we are, she drops down to her haunches and the next thing I know, her shoulders start shaking and I'm pretty sure she's crying.

Jax freezes when he notices it and Asher shuts the door behind us, locking it after telling her assistants to give us a minute before rushing to close all the blinds on the windows. Dylan breezes past me and goes to sit on his ass on the floor, folding his arms around her and pulling her into his lap.

As I watch, he starts rubbing her back and massaging her shoulders, rocking her gently as he murmurs words I can't hear into her ear. I'm confused as fuck, but it seems I'm not the only one. Asher hasn't moved away from the door and Jax gives me one look before he strides over to the bar.

"Anyone for a drink?" he mutters even as he lines up five glasses and grabs a bottle of whiskey from the shelf behind him. "Right. We're all having a drink. Everyone needs a drink."

At this point, I'm pretty sure he's talking to himself, but Asher makes big eyes at him and nods, moving over to the counter to join our packmate while I stand where I am, staying there like I've been planted.

Truth be told, I don't know if I can move. Between her scent, that meeting, and Dylan's very strange behavior, I don't have a single fucking idea what's going on and standing still seems safer at this point.

Eventually, as Asher and Jax gulp down whisky like it's their last chance to taste it, and Josie finally stops crying, Dylan looks up at me and starts explaining. "We're not entirely sure what's happening, but you've all noticed the shift with Josie. Her scent. Her actions. Our reactions to her. There have been some physical changes as well, which I won't share the details of, but I think Josie is somehow transitioning into an Omega. Or maybe she's presenting late. I don't know. It's either that or she's..."

Josie drops her head and Dylan finishes. "Or there's a small chance she could be pregnant."

Jax drops his glass and it shatters on the ground as the blood drains out of his face. "It wasn't me."

Dylan sighs. "Yes, Jax. We know. If it was anyone, it was probably me, but the point is that we don't know that for sure."

"How are you so calm right now?" Asher asks him, his own cheeks pale and his throat working as he keeps blinking like his lids have hit a glitch. "You may have...you may be..."

"Because one of us needs to be fucking rational about this," Dylan snaps before he looks at me. "Pregnancy explains some of the physical symptoms, but the other stuff still doesn't add up."

"Yeah, *uh*, I know a guy," I manage to grunt, swallowing past the lump in my throat as I stare back at him. "That's why you're looking at me, right?"

"Right. I remember you mentioned once that your family knows that doctor guy. The specialist. Thane Woods, right? He works in some kind of hormonal...whatever. Do you think you could call him for us?"

"Thane Woods?" Josie reacts like she's received an electric shock, her body tensing as her eyes open as wide as they can. "The Cervus expert? I don't have Cervus. I can't have Cervus. I'm not even an Omega!"

Her voice rises in pitch with every sentence and I can somehow *feel* her panic like it's my own. I wall up against it, hating how it's twisting her face, how it's filling her eyes with fear.

"No, baby," Dylan murmurs soothingly, wrapping his arms around her again and pulling her close. "I don't think you have Cervus. The Woodses are known for their research and breakthroughs with Cervus, but Thane works in hormonal research now, *not* in Cervus. If anyone can tell us what's going on, it's him."

My chin drops in a nod as I slide my hand into my pocket to reach for my phone. I'm on autopilot, my body obeying commands my brain hasn't given.

I think Dylan is right. I think our Beta might be an Omega and if she is, we're in much, much bigger trouble than anything Jax has ever been able to get us into because though logic would dictate that we'd need to let her go, I'm not sure I can.

TWENTY-FIVE

JOSIE

THE NEXT COUPLE of days feel completely surreal. Things at the office are strained, but the board hasn't called me in yet so for the moment, I still have a job. I can't believe I had such an outburst at the *board* of Beckett *fucking* Records, but in my defense, Dylan's timing to call me out on everything wasn't great.

Stef ended up spending only that one night in San Francisco before she got called back to Boston, though it would've been amazing to have had her closer for all this. I've buried myself in work, trying to do as much as I can before I get fired, but today is the day.

Holden managed to get me an appointment at the Woods Institute in California and I have a consultation with the illustrious Thane Woods himself. The rocker must have even more serious connections than I realized to have been able to pull this off so soon, but he did. I got the email to confirm the appointment an hour after he made the call.

I took the day off and Firebrand offered to drive me, but I turned them down. I need to do this alone. Whatever this is, I need time to process it without an audience of my clients. Although, they've definitely become more than that.

These last couple days, they've really been there for me. I even think they may be my friends now. Even if it does sometimes look like they're in pain because of it, which is possibly the strangest thought I've ever had.

As I walk into the Woods Institute, my face is warm and my heart feels like it's been connected to a livewire that's keeping it in hyperdrive. Their building is ultra-modern and clinical, but somehow, that's comforting. Everything is white, glass, and metal, and the lack of anything

overstimulating is possibly the only thing keeping me from passing out right now.

I approach a large reception desk in the lobby, and a kind-faced Beta smiles at me when she lifts her gaze away from the computer. “Josephine Collins?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“Excellent.” She rises gracefully from her chair and picks up a tablet. “Dr. Woods is waiting for you. Follow me.”

My heartbeat thuds in my ears. “Am I late? My appointment is at 10 a.m., isn’t it?”

“Sure is,” she says politely. “The doctor is ready to see you, though. Would you like something to drink?”

“No, thank you.” My throat is so dry that my voice is raspy, but anything that hits my stomach right now is sure to come straight back out again.

She leads me to a vast corner office, and inside, behind a huge partner’s desk, is a handsome Alpha whose face I’ve seen on too many TV interviews to count. He smiles when we walk in, then he excuses his receptionist and turns to me, waving me into the seat across from his desk. His nostrils flare and he coughs lightly, brows rising in surprise at what I assume is my scent.

The guys haven’t stopped mentioning how much it’s changed, how much stronger it is, even if I wish they’d pretend they couldn’t scent it.

“It’s nice to meet you, Josephine,” he says warmly after shaking my hand and sitting back down again. “I must say I’m surprised you haven’t been to see me sooner with everything Holden described to me on the phone.”

I sit down on the chair he motioned me into, my spine ramrod straight. I really can’t believe that I have an actual appointment with this Alpha—but I also never thought I would need one.

“To be honest, I probably should have seen a doctor earlier, but this isn’t easy for me. I also never would’ve thought to contact you. You’re not exactly the doctor people call about being stressed.”

The words rush out of me on a nervous ramble and he chuckles as he inclines his head like he understands. “Holden told me you were extremely busy. I’ll do my best to let you get back to Firebrand and their mischief just as soon as I can, but let’s talk for a moment. He said you’re a Beta?”

“Yes.”

Thane’s head lowers slightly to one side as his gaze sweeps across my face. “I’m the best in the country when it comes to hormonal issues. I don’t

mean to sound immodest. I'm only saying it so as to assure you that you've come to the right place, but that being said, you're no Beta."

"Excuse me?"

He flashes me a kind, understanding smile. "Even if Holden hadn't told me what he did, I'd have known there's something different about you. Your scent certainly isn't anything like I've ever gotten from a Beta before. He mentioned that too. I was skeptical, but he was right."

I frown. "What are you talking about?"

"I'd like to run a few tests. We'll get some of the results immediately, but I'll call you with the results we won't have right away. First, however, let's have a quick chat. I have my suspicions about you, but we should talk before I tell you what they are."

"Okay," I say slowly. "What would you like to know?"

"Holden said the band has noticed a few changes in you after you started working for them about six or so weeks ago?"

"Yes, they have. I've noticed changes too, to be honest. It's been getting worse." My pulse starts hammering again as I lean forward and clench my fingers together so hard my knuckles ache. "Do you think I have Cervus? I can't have it, right? I'm not an Omega."

"I don't believe you have Cervus, Josie," he says soothingly. "I wouldn't be so fast about saying you're not an Omega, but before we get to that, do you remember when the changes started? When was the first time you felt something different?"

"I, *uh*. On the plane. I mean, the morning before I got on the plane to come here. Actually, no. I had weird dreams the night before that."

Thane smiles again. "Okay. These dreams you had, why were they weird?"

"They were, *uh*, vivid." My cheeks grow hotter than Hades. "I was different in them. Bold."

"And then the next morning?"

"I-I I felt different. Confused, but also weirdly confident."

He nods and makes a note on the pad in front of him. "Let's go back to before that. What happened that day?"

"I found out I got the Firebrand account and I went out to celebrate with my friend." I cringe. "Do you need details?"

"Not graphic ones," he says easily. "I'm assuming something happened while you were celebrating?"

The tips of my ears are burning, but I nod. Thane Woods is part of a pack and they're bonded to a famous romance writer called Riley North. It's not like he's never had sex before. "I met Jax and Dylan. We...well, we had relations."

He nods and makes another note before he looks up at me. "Had you ever been with an Alpha before that?"

"No."

"I see." After making yet another note, he stands up and motions for me to follow. "Thank you for being honest with me. You don't need to be uncomfortable, Josie. I know these things aren't easy and I realize that it's not fun talking to a male Alpha about this stuff, but if it helps, I talk about it all day long most days when I'm not at the Cervus research facilities. It's nothing new to me."

"I know." I sigh. "It's just that this feels really sudden and I'm, *uh*, I'm scared."

"Completely understandable." He walks to a counter at the other side of his office and picks up a little kit that looks like the kind used to measure blood sugar. After unzipping it, he pulls out a device reminiscent of that and shows it to me. "There's a tiny needle in here. It'll just be a little prick to your finger. It doesn't really hurt."

"Okay," I say shakily, offering him my index finger. He positions the device over it, presses a button, and the soft click of a spring sounds before he pulls back again.

"All done." He smiles as he pulls a small piece of paper out of the machine, and I'm a little flabbergasted that I hardly felt it when surprise flickers across his cut features. "Well, well. That was fast."

"What was fast?"

"It usually takes the color a little while to change," he says absently before striding to a chair that looks like something that should be found in an optometrist's office. "Would you have a seat for me, please?"

It's like a switch has been tripped in him. He's not chatty anymore and he seems intrigued, thoughtful, and distracted all at the same time. After he checks my eyes, he asks me a bunch more questions. About my parentage. When I first started my period. When I *stopped* getting it. And about a million other things that each felt like another nail in my coffin.

He then put me through a short series of tests, the most embarrassing of which was a swab to my lady bits done by a female Beta nurse.

He's taken a bit of everything by the end. Urine. Blood. Saliva. Since he doesn't haul out the ultrasound machine, I doubt he thinks I'm pregnant. But after a while, I have to ask anyway, "I'm not pregnant, am I?"

He blinks like I've snapped him out of some kind of trance, then he smiles again. "I don't think so, but if you're concerned about the possibility I can run an additional test. This is what I think is happening... You might want to have a seat."

Thane Woods leans against a cabinet as I sink back into my chair and wait for his verdict like he might be about to send me to the electric chair. "So, there have only been a couple dozen recorded cases—and I've worked with most of those affected—but I believe you're transitioning into an Omega."

My ears are ringing as the memory of what Dylan told me in the car comes back. "Is that even possible? I've never even heard of that."

I didn't even know that was something to fear...

"It is possible," Thane says, his eyes still half-unfocused as he shakes his head. "I believe it's nature's way of making up for all the Omegas we've lost to Cervus. Damn disease sweeping through the population like wildfire. Nature will always find a way, am I right? I've seen double the amount of cases this year as the year before. It's rare, but I promise you, it isn't impossible."

I frown, hating how my palms and chest grow slick with clammy sweat.

An Omega? Me?

Closing his eyes for a beat, he scrubs his hands over his jaw before he looks at me again, and this time, he doesn't seem unfocused at all. "I apologize. I tend to get a bit caught up in my head when I'm working on something like this. What I should've said is that you appear to have a recessive Omega gene hidden somewhere, and something that changed in your circumstances drew it out and activated it."

"You think sleeping with Jax and Dylan did this to me?"

He chuckles. "No, with this gene, you would always have transitioned eventually anyway. Being exposed to two such powerful unbonded Alphas at once just would've, let's call it *awoken* it, a little more harshly. A little more quickly. It's all hormonal, but I also suspect that constantly being in the presence of the Alpha foursome has been speeding up the progression of the transition, which is why it's been so much more noticeable."

Recessive gene?

Progression of the transition?

My head hurts.

“This is a lot to take in,” Thane tells me, but now it almost sounds like he’s speaking underwater, or through thick cloth. And I struggle to regain focus and pay attention, but it’s hard with the ringing sound in my ears and the chatter of a thousand errant thoughts rushing through my head.

“Let’s keep it simple. You’re not a Beta anymore, Josie. We should get the results from the additional testing within a few days, but you need to prepare yourself for the changes that are going to be happening in your body.”

“What changes?” I whisper as bile pushes up the back of my throat. “Can’t you just, I don’t know, deactivate me?”

“No, I can’t. Like I said before, nature always finds a way and this is your nature, Josephine. It always has been, but it’s been locked away until now. It’s not something that can be stopped.” He pauses. “But it is something that can be managed if needed.”

All I can do is stare at him, and he gently puts his hands on my shoulders as he guides me back to my chair. “In the coming weeks, as you keep transitioning, you need to be ready for a few more changes. Your need for a pack, for example, and for an Alpha. As well as, uh, I’m not quite sure how to be delicate about this, so I’ll just say it, but you’ll also have to be prepared for the intense need to be knotted. Now, because you are still in transition, accepting a knot before your body has time to fully acclimate might cause more pain than usual. And historically, in my other patients, I’ve seen painful knotting experiences continue through a couple of heat cycles until the body has a chance to adjust.”

My eyes slam shut and he gives me a moment before he continues. “There are issues which may arise, especially considering your proximity to four unbonded Alphas, but there are plenty of blockers on the market to help you maintain your position with them if those are necessary. Though I wouldn’t recommend going on a course of anything until after your first heat.”

“Blockers?” I breathe. “What—”

“Only take the federally regulated suppressants—I’ll fax you a prescription,” he says. “Do not take anything else. The unregulated stuff can do a lot more harm than good. And there are some really great scent blocking soaps you can get at most pharmacies now. That’ll help Firebrand keep their

hands off if that's what you all want."

I nod, opening my eyes again and feeling like my head has been detached from my body and is floating to a galaxy far, far away.

"Okay. I understand," I reply numbly.

"There are other things that will have to change," he says, and something in his eyes shifts and I get the sense he's uncomfortable, or maybe...sorry?

"Once your class is officially changed to Omega instead of Beta, you will need an escort to be out in public. Either by an intended packmate or a family member. At least until you're formally bonded. I have no choice but to submit my findings to the appropriate agencies, *but* if it would help I can simply *forget* to submit the paperwork for a few more days."

The more he speaks, the more my ears feel like they're buzzing until eventually, it's all playing out in the background of my mind. I'm on information overload and this all still feels like it can't be real. When he finally walks me to his door, I thank him for his time and I tell him I'm looking forward to hearing the results. Or at least, I think that's what I say. It's what I mean to say, but I honestly don't know right now.

I'm screaming inside and my brain has gone numb. Everything he just said explains all the strange things I've been feeling and doing for weeks now, but at the same time, it can't be true, can it? I can't be becoming an *Omega*.

But even as I think it, I know that it *is* true.

I *was* a Beta.

I *am* an Omega.

Everything I know about myself, everything I know about my job and the way I live my life...it's all about to change. And there's not a damn thing I can do to stop it.

TWENTY-SIX

JOSIE

THE RESULTS CAME IN POSITIVE. Thane called to let me know within a day, and then he gave me the details of some specialists I can contact if I need to.

At the end of the conversation, he gave me the basics of what I can expect in the coming months. Essentially, what it boils down to, is that I need to be ready for a complete life shift.

The stark reality of our world is that Omegas live vastly different lives to Betas—*and Alphas*, but that's beside the point right now. The point is that Omegas are in much shorter supply than the rest of us—I mean them—and because of that, things are a lot more complicated for them. *I mean us.*

Ughhhh.

There are Omega academies all over the world I can enroll in, but I've already ruled that out as a possibility. Sure, it would help me to fit into my new life, but I'd be the same age as the oldest students and I'd be starting at the beginning.

Not ideal.

There's also the little fact that I love my job and that I'm not interested in a change of careers. Since my sisters are Omegas and are attending an academy right now, I knew all about that before Thane told me. We went through the process of academy acceptance in a lot of detail with them, but I've never wanted to go there myself.

Now, however, I also don't know if I'll be able to stay in the career I worked so hard for. I was required to share the medical news with the label and there's going to be a meeting later in the month about whether they're going to keep me on as the Firebrands' manager in light of my *situation*.

All of this happened in just one day, and as I sit behind my desk now, it's hard to keep track of everything that happened after I got that phone call just this morning. I'm becoming an Omega, and so many things have already changed, but I know that the biggest changes will only occur after two things happen.

My official status as a Beta for the purposes of government knowledge shifts so that I will forevermore be identified as *Omega*.

And my first heat, which Doctor Thane said could come on like lightning or burn long and slow before erupting. It could be a matter of days or weeks. Or it could take months still.

It's really freaking difficult for me to imagine not being allowed to go out in public by myself anymore. *I mean... what is this? The Middle Ages?*

I realize that there's a method to the madness, but I'm not a teenager. Maybe if I'd presented the same age my sisters did, at 15, this all would've been a lot easier to stomach. Instead, I'm in my twenties and I've lived my life on my own terms until now.

I know I'm not that old, but still. Even just a few years ago this would've been so much easier to deal with. To learn to live with.

As if they can hear my thoughts, my phone rings and my sister's name pops up. If she's calling, it means her twin is right next to her and I'll be on speaker—which is fine. I was actually going to call them anyway.

"Hey, Natalie," I say, a weak smile on my lips as I press the phone against my ear. "Hi, Emily. How are you guys? I miss you."

"We miss you, too," Nat's soft voice comes through the line first. "Are you okay? We've been texting. Are those guys treating you okay?"

"Yeah. They've been great. I'm sorry. It's just been a heck of a month and I haven't had a minute to reply yet."

It's not entirely true. I've been avoiding them. But they don't need to know that.

Emily laughs. "I bet you've been busy," she says suggestively. "You're so lucky to be working with them. Do you think you could arrange for us to meet them when we come out to visit you?"

I groan. "Don't tell me you're *Firebirds* now."

"There is no *now* about it," Natalie says as if I've offended her. "We've always been *Firebirds*. It just so happens that we're more dedicated and more loyal to them now that our very own sister is their freaking manager."

"Yeah, well, for now." I let out a long breath. "I'm sure I'll be able to set

it up for you to meet them when you come out here, but you'd better make it soon if you really want that introduction. I might not be here much longer."

"What? Why?" Emily's worry pours through the phone, my empathetic sister immediately snapping out of fangirl mode. "Did something happen? I'm sure you can fix it, Jo. You've always been good at fixing things."

"I can't fix this. Not unless you've got some way of stopping my transition from Beta to Omega, and considering that Thane Woods himself said there's no way of doing that, I'm pretty sure I'm screwed."

Stunned silence meets my admission, and then they're talking over each other so fast that I can't make out a word of what they're saying. "Slow down, guys. Can't hear you."

"You're transitioning?" Natalie finally says. "How is that even possible?"

"According to Dr. Woods, it's some recessive Omega gene that's been activated. He says there have only been a couple dozen cases so far, but then he went off on a tangent about nature and how it's trying to make up for Cervus killing so many Omegas."

"I'd love to talk to him about that," Nat gushes before she catches herself. "Before we get into that, however, how are you feeling? Are you okay?"

"No," I admit. "My body has been going haywire and now my career may be over."

"It won't be," Emily says confidently. "I've actually looked at Beckett Records as an employer. They have Omegas in their employment—"

"None that manage a pack of four unbonded Alphas and none that are *unbonded* themselves," I interrupt. "This is a disaster, ladies. I know you don't see it that way, but there's no way they're going to keep me on as Firebrands' manager. It's just not going to happen."

"You can take suppressants," Nat offers. "So can they, actually. If they need to, there are rut blockers they can take while you're waiting for the suppressants to start taking effect. You can work it out."

"We could, but that's if they want to and if the label will give us the opportunity to try it. They might not. And then there's the issue of needing to be fucking *chaperoned* everywhere. It's a pretty volatile situation, and as it is, they're blaming me for a lot of what Firebrand has done since I've been here. They're now saying that my transition might've been what caused it and that basically, they've only been getting in trouble because of me."

"But that's not true," Emily protests. "They've always gotten in trouble. That's why they needed a new damn manager."

“I know, but that’s not the way things are playing out right now. Like I said, this is a disaster.”

“It might not be so bad,” Nat says after a brief pause. “Being an Omega isn’t a terrible life, after all. Look at us. We’re doing just fine.”

“It’s not a terrible life, but it’s not *my* life. You guys presented as teenagers, right when you were supposed to. Meanwhile, I worked damn hard to get to where I am, and having to give it all up to get into some academy just doesn’t appeal to me. I need...”

I trail off because I don’t want to tell them what I need right now. Don’t get me wrong, I’m close to my sisters, but we don’t talk about stuff like this. What I need is a pack. What I need is...*Firebrand*, and if I tell my sisters that, they’re going to go all cross-eyed about the possibility of me bonding with their favorite band.

Which isn’t going to happen.

Seriously.

None of them are interested in having an Omega, and in fact, I haven’t even seen them since the news broke. Though that’s probably my own fault. The first thing I did when Mrs. Beckett told me she would have to inform them of the diagnosis was send a text out to the group chat asking that they give me a little time.

I don’t want to see them. Not yet. And I don’t think I want to know their reactions just yet, either. I’m not sure I’m ready for the possible rejection.

I had a more formal meeting with Mrs. Beckett just a couple hours ago and was supposed to go home afterwards, but I came here to my office instead and haven’t been able to bring myself to leave. The door is closed and my assistants know to pretend I’m not here, but I’m scared that if I go, I won’t be allowed back in.

“It’s going to be okay, Jo,” Emily says, bringing me back to the call. “I know it doesn’t feel like it right now and sure, when we first started going through the changes, it was hard. I know we were younger and that it’s going to be even tougher on you, but eventually, it will be okay. I promise.”

“Thanks, Em.” My eyes have gotten all wet again and my vision is blurry. “Will my emotions ever stabilize?”

Natalie lets out a sympathetic chuckle. “Sure, they will. Think of it more like PMS than a mental disorder. It’s not permanent.”

“No, but according to Dr. Woods, being an Omega will be.”

She sighs. “I still can’t believe you got to meet him and you’re working

with Firebrand every damn day. Seriously, I know it doesn't feel like it to you, but you're pretty damn lucky. Even if it isn't meant to last."

I smile through my tears. "You're right. It doesn't feel like that to me, but he was cool. I'm glad I got in to see him. I might not have believed it coming from anyone else."

"He's the best there is. Just listen to whatever advice he's giving you and you should be okay."

"Yeah, I will. I have to go, but you guys be good, okay? Remember to come visit sooner rather than later if you really do want to meet Firebrand. I'll make it happen."

My sisters say their goodbyes and I'm left wanting to cry even more once they've hung up. I've never felt so alone in my life, and yet there's no one here I can turn to. A week ago, I thought the band members were becoming my friends, but I can't imagine calling one of them up to come give me a hug. Not least of which because it would probably make them supremely uncomfortable if I did.

They've been supportive, but ultimately, they're my clients and they're Alphas. It's not their job to comfort me in tough times and especially not when my hormones are going to make them want to jump my bones against their will.

Dragging in a deep breath, I turn back to my computer and try to shake myself out of my misery. I've still got a lot of balls in the air to settle before I turn in the keys to my office. An office I've grown exceptionally fond of and where I think I've been doing a great job.

I've earned this damn office, and while I'm still here, I've got work to do. I may as well get to it.

TWENTY-SEVEN

DYLAN

I'VE NEVER BEEN EXCEPTIONALLY fond of the Becketts, but when my phone rang earlier and Mrs. Beckett's name popped up, I took her call without hesitating. It seems Asher ignored her when she tried calling him, but I'm glad I didn't do the same.

Because I answered, I was the first to hear Josie's news, though I was a little put off that it was coming from the Becketts and not Josie herself. At least until we got a text from her a few minutes later asking us to give her time to process.

It hurts me to know that she felt she couldn't tell me herself, but I understand. It's got to be so hard for her to come to terms with. I'd need time to myself, too.

I've shared what the Becketts said with the pack via text, but I haven't heard back from anyone so I'm going to go ahead and assume it's because they're in shock. Unknowingly, we got close to an Omega.

It's not really a secret or much of a surprise to me at this point, but it does mean some things are going to have to change. We're going to have to start being more careful around her, for starters. We haven't known her forever, but we have been treating her differently than we do other people since we met her.

To the extent that it's become second nature to be close to her physically. It won't be easy, but that's definitely going to have to stop. We'll have to more actively try to keep our hands off. Keep our distance. Before one of us does something they can't take back.

Mrs. Beckett told me Josie went back to her apartment this morning, but as I stride into the Beckett Records' offices, I know she's here. Call it

intuition. A sixth sense. Hell, call it common sense, but I know Josie and she wouldn't have cut and run when she got the news.

She won't be at home, taking some time to lick her wounds and trying to come to terms with the reality of her situation. If I know her, and I think I do, she's here, working hard to ensure that if she has to hand over the Firebrand reins, the takeover will be as smooth and as seamless for us as possible.

My hunch pays off when I ignore Felipe, who tries to tell me she's not here, and stride right past him into her office. Her gaze snaps up when she hears the door opening, and I practically see her bracing herself to come up with some kind of excuse until she sees it's me.

"Dylan?" She frowns. "Why are you here? Haven't you heard? I'm radioactive to you right now."

I chuckle. "I probably shouldn't be here without taking a rut suppressant, but here I am. How are you feeling?"

Shutting the door behind me, I stride deeper into her office and take a seat in her sitting area, far enough away from where she is at her desk that I won't be able to pounce on her. But fuck. The pheromones she's giving off are more powerful than I've ever scented before, and while I'm against taking something she never meant to give, being in the same room she's been locked in all day is difficult.

Borderline impossible without making a move.

"I'm, *uh*, I'm going to be fine. Or so I've been told." She releases a heavy breath, staying right where she is behind her desk as her gaze meets mine. "Have you guys told them to get rid of me yet?"

"What? Of course not. Why would we do that?"

Her eyebrows hike up on her forehead. "Pretty soon, I'm going to be full Omega. That's why. Heats and all."

I feel something inside of me tighten and liquid fire floods my stomach. I really wish she wouldn't use that word. Not right now. Not when it's already a study in control just to remain seated.

I need to distract myself.

As I avert my gaze and look around her office, I notice some of the small changes she's already made. It's not common, but it looks like she really has already started nesting. Most Omegas do it in their homes, but she's so far away from what she considers to be her home that her office obviously feels more like it than her apartment. There are bigger, fluffier pillows on the sofas. A basket of throw blankets under the coffee table with several strewn

on the sofas and by the looks of it, one on her lap, too.

There are unlit candles on most of the surfaces and I know about the extra items she keeps hidden in her desk. The ones that belong to us.

I sigh. “What are you doing at work? Shouldn’t you be relaxing at home? Beckett told me your assistants were covering for you today.”

“They were supposed to, but I couldn’t leave. This is still my job for the moment, and I intend to do it. Right now, my job is to get Jax off. No pun intended.”

I raise my brow at her and she laughs.

“Okay, maybe a little pun intended. God, I just feel so different lately.”

“Yeah, I can tell. At least now we know why, right?” I drag in a deep breath, which is definitely a mistake. As soon as her scent hits my nostrils, I flinch, groaning as my instincts rear up deep down inside.

Josie’s laughter abruptly cuts off. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“No, I shouldn’t,” I agree, repeating the same thing I’ve already said. “I had to come check on you, though. We’re...I don’t know. Friends?”

“Maybe that’s what we were becoming, but now, I’m not so sure.” She regards me as she leans back in her chair, then she gets up and starts closing her blinds for some reason. “Your face looks like it’s about to crack in half. You don’t have to restrain yourself around me, Dylan. I’m the same Josie I’ve always been. I just have a few extra hormones. What’s going on in that head of yours?”

I close my eyes, trying my best to shove all my instincts as far down as I can while also flexing my thighs to try to contain my rapidly growing erection. Try being the operative word. It doesn’t work, but I just have to keep trying.

“It’s a little bit hard for me to articulate right at the moment.”

With all the blood in my head rushing somewhere much further south.

“Shit, the transition is really speeding up, huh?” I mutter with a laugh that I hope lightens the mood.

“Yep. I think so. Thane said it’s probably because of my constant proximity to so many Alphas. Thanks for coming to check on me, but you can leave now. I don’t want to make things hard for you, Dylan.”

A bark of laughter comes out of me as I arch a brow at her before leaning back to show her it’s a little bit late for that. “Too bad. It’s already hard, but here’s the thing about me, Josie. I don’t abandon my friends when things get hard. Not even if the thing getting hard is my cock. We can get past this. I’m

worried about you and I'm not tucking tail. Especially since you don't have anyone else around here to talk to."

As the last blind lowers, she turns to face me with a strange, lusty look in her eyes. "I appreciate that. More than I can possibly describe, but I'm not used to this. I don't know how to control it, either. And what's worse is...half the time I don't even want to."

I swallow, my gaze lowering to her chest to see that her nipples are rock hard under the flimsy material of her shirt. "Fuck."

She swipes her tongue across her lips, her eyes locked on mine as she approaches me. "Dylan, I really need you to leave, unless you plan on taking off your clothes."

No fucking problem, my baser brain screams, but I swallow and bite my tongue. "Your assistants are right outside."

I can't tell her I don't want this. I do. I have for a long time now, but I'm also not stupid. "You're not yourself right now. This will pass once you're more used to the hormones. Let's just...why don't we go for a walk?"

"The office is soundproofed and I don't want to go for a walk," she says softly, drawing closer to me as her lids grow heavier. "You're right that I'm not myself at the moment, but that doesn't mean I don't want you. That I haven't wanted you all along. I'm not going to regret this, Dylan, but if you will then say so now."

I shake my head because *no*, I won't regret this. But this isn't what I came here for.

Is it?

No.

I came here to help a friend. I wanted to check on her because I actually fucking care to know how she's taking all this. I wanted to reassure her. To tell her that we didn't want her to go, even with this new information.

But all of that dies on my lips.

Because it's not about what I want right now.

"What do you want, Jo?" I ask, my voice hoarse now that she's so close I could reach out and touch her. Grab her. *Take* her.

"I don't want to take advantage of you or your condition, so you're going to have to be real clear with me here."

"I want you." She stares down at me for a beat, her legs pressed against mine before she climbs on my lap and combs her fingers through my hair; her nails raking over the back of my neck give me goosebumps and make my

cock practically lurch in my jeans.

A loud groan tears out of me, my cock aching to get inside her as she hooks a knee on either side of my hips. “I want you, too, but—”

Her mouth on mine shuts me right the hell up, and I moan when she wraps her arms around my neck and kisses me deeper. Harder. She squirms on top of me before she lets out a breathy whisper against my lips between kisses. “This is what I want.”

Fully realizing that this is when I should get up and walk out, I band my arms around her waist instead and pull her closer to me, kissing her back, prying her lips apart with my tongue.

A possessive growl ricochets in my chest and her responding whine almost makes me completely lose it. I rip her shirt off.

Once it hits the floor, my hands travel up the smooth, bare skin of her back and I unhook her bra before I’ve even taken my next breath between feverish kisses. She responds with the same ferocity, pushing my jacket off my shoulders and yanking my t-shirt over my head.

After pulling her bra straps off, I toss it away too, not caring at all where it lands. My lips crash into hers over and over again, claiming, *devouring*.

I slide my hands under her thighs, picking her up and standing before going down on my knees and laying her down on the rug. If we’re going to do this, I’m not doing it fast and hard while feeling like I’m about to slide off the sofa.

She doesn’t let go of me as I lay her down, but I don’t want her to. Instead, I keep kissing her, bringing my mouth back to hers time and again while I reach down between us to undo her pants. Thankfully, there’s no button, only a little nub that slides into a metal hook, and it slides free easily, her zipper practically opening itself as soon as the clasp is open.

At the same time, she works on my jeans, getting them undone and then pushing them and my underwear off with her feet. It’s not exactly romantic, but it’s effective and as soon as my cock is free and her pants are off, we’re both moaning uncontrollably, desperate to get to each other until I remember a condom.

No.

Fuck no.

I clench my teeth against the insane urge to take her raw. Whatever primitive nature that lives within me demands that I fill her delicious pussy with my seed and watch it grow.

“Please,” Jo whimpers, her fingers clutching at my back, her back arching and hips tilting.

Fuck the condom.

I push my tip between her slick folds. She’s so hot and so wet and so fucking tight that a shout rips out of me as I push into her, and she murmurs my name, stroking her nails across my scalp as we start moving together.

It’s fucking amazing.

Fucking Josie the first time was great, but this is euphoric.

I’ve never felt anything like it before, and I wouldn’t have been able to stop even if I wanted to. Need consumes me and my knot is so swollen at my base that she moans every time it brushes against her, and it’s not long before she breaks the kiss and cups my face in her hands, tears in her eyes as she looks up at me.

“Give me your knot,” she begs, vulnerability written all over her beautiful features as she stares at me.

I drop my forehead to hers, burning to give her what she’s asking for as I mutter between ragged breaths, “I’ve never done that before, Jo. I can’t...I don’t...I don’t want to hurt you. We don’t know if—”

“You won’t hurt me,” she interrupts, stroking my cheeks with her fingertips as she lifts her head to plant another soft kiss on my mouth. “I need it. *Please, Dylan.*”

As a tear rolls down the side of her face, I feel something inside my chest crack and my resolve is fucking *gone*. I can’t stand to see her like this. Not when I can fix it. Not when I can give her what she wants.

Not when I want it more than anything myself.

“Okay, sweet girl. For you. Only for you.”

She lets out a high pitched moan as I let my body take over. I press my knees hard into the carpet and she spreads her thighs nice and wide for me as I fuck her. Her breaths come in little hitched pants and she looks so damn beautiful like this. Red-cheeked and glowing beneath me. All supple curves, wild hair and slitted eyes.

She bites her lip as I begin to move faster, sliding my length deeper into her slick pussy, slamming my knot against her clit with every thrust, wondering how the fuck I’m going to manage to get it inside of her with how massively swollen and hard it is.

Josie croons into the side of my neck, marking me up with her scent so much that I’m dizzy from it. As if I’m huffing gasoline instead of Omega

pheromones and any second now, she's going to light the match.

On the next thrust, she comes undone beneath me, her pussy clenching around my cock as she screams out her orgasm, tearing up my back with her fingernails, angling her hips in a way that begs me to finish her off.

So I do.

With a loud groan, I bear down, and on my next thrust, I dig my toes into the carpet and *push*. Josie lets out a pained gasp but I can't stop. *I can't fucking stop.*

I force my knot into her warm pussy, grimacing at the way it won't let me enter at first, until finally it gives and she swallows me up. Pleasure so intense that I nearly black out shoots through me and as I press my face to her neck, I feel my jaw open and have to slam it closed, turning away from the urge to bite.

To claim.

Josie's expression is one of the purest torment and the greatest ecstasy all rolled into one.

"Jo," I say, dazed and trying to find my bearings as my body convulses with the power of my own orgasm, shooting my seed deep into her core. "Jo, are you okay?"

She cries openly, hiding her face in my chest as she clings to me, her body shaking. She snuffles, nodding into my chest even though I can still feel the wetness of her tears there.

I hold her tighter, caressing the back of her head, cradling her against me with my cock still locked deep inside her. Before I'm consciously aware of it, I hear a deep, reverberating purr and I realize belatedly that it's coming from me. And with every second that passes, Jo's trembling subsides and I just know somehow that it's me. I'm calming her down. So I keep doing it. I purr for her.

I'll keep purring for as long as she needs me to.

Even though I rationally know I'll need to leave soon, I don't want to.

In fact, I never want to.

I never want to be without her ever again.

And there it is; the real reason I shouldn't have given her my knot.

'Cause now? I can't imagine ever giving it to anyone else.

TWENTY-EIGHT

JOSIE

AS I STRIDE into the hotel where Jax got arrested, I'm missing the pack like they're a limb that has been severed from me. I have a meeting with the manager here before the trial is set to start and it's vital that I bring my A-game, but my head is nowhere near this place.

All I can think about is Firebrand. Getting to them, being with them, never leaving their side. It's not what they want and it's not what I should be obsessed with when I'm about to have a meeting this important, but I can't help it.

After Dylan gave me his knot, it was like something clicked into place deep inside me. We haven't spoken about it, but I'm positive he feels the same way. I haven't even seen him again yet, but I need to. It's like an addiction. A compulsion. It's not optional.

And it would have been one thing if it was just him I was feeling that way about, but it's not. Maybe it's just because I know he's part of a pack, but the same compulsion applies to being with the rest of them. I need them. It's not a matter of want anymore and I mean, sure, I do want them, but this isn't that.

This is the purest, most insatiable form of need I've ever felt. I didn't even know someone could feel like this, but apparently these days, I can.

I want them all so badly.

...even with my lady bits feeling like they've been shredded and then lovingly stitched back together. It's okay though, the lingering ache is a reminder of what we did and I carry it with me like a little keepsake, biting back moans every time I sit down and it hurts.

I'm snapped out of my thoughts when a businesslike man strides across the lobby toward me. Thankfully, he's an Omega. A bonded one by the lack

of escort and the scarring peeking out just above his collar. I've gotten significantly better at immediate identification of that kind of thing, but at least it means that my hormones won't make him look at me the way Alphas have been.

So maybe I *didn't* need to scrub myself to death with scent blocking soap before coming here.

I've been steering clear of any Alpha interaction as much as I can, but I suddenly have a much better understanding of why I need an escort. Because the only other way is finding a pack. And the pack I want has already decided not to take on an Omega and I'm not sure if I'm enough to change their minds.

A whimper escapes me at the thought, but I shut my eyes and drag in a deep breath just in time to greet the manager.

At least I have a few more days before the paperwork is all cleared and my new status is written in stone. A few more days where I can go where I want when I want. Silver linings.

"Josephine Collins. It's nice to see you in person, Mr. Munroe."

He gives me a long, almost puzzled look before he offers me his hand. "We're going into battle against each other. Call me Josh."

"Josh," I repeat after him. "Josie, and I'm hoping to avoid the battle."

He laughs, but the sound is dry and grating. "I know, but negotiations are a battle unto themselves, aren't they?"

"I hope we're not about to get off on the wrong foot here, Josh, but with an attitude like that, our negotiations aren't going to be extremely productive." I almost want to clasp my hand over my mouth or stuff the words back in.

I've always been assertive, but I was never this direct back in Boston. Josh scoffs as he motions me toward their business center. "I've reserved a conference room. Would you like a drink?"

"No, thank you." I want to get this over with so I can get back to the pack that isn't mine. Hopefully with some good news. "I meant it, Josh. We want to settle this thing and I'm not looking at our meeting as a battle. I'm hoping we can find some common ground."

"What common ground?" he asks as he politely opens the door to the business center and waves me in ahead of him. "The way I see it, your client rode his motorcycle into my lobby, into my elevator, and then straight into my pool before he proceeded to destroy everything in sight. Unless you're

willing to accept that, I don't see us reaching a mutually beneficial solution here."

"You're assuming that I don't accept it," I say as I precede him into the conference room he shows me to. "Here's the thing, though, Josh. I was here that night. Were you?"

He seems surprised, but doesn't say as much as he takes a seat and motions for me to do the same. "I wasn't on duty, no. I've seen the videos, though. It was mayhem. I was called, but by the time I arrived, your client had been arrested and the pool area had been cordoned off. I saw the damage he caused, and I can assure you that we're not going to be dropping the charges."

"It's well within your rights not to," I agree easily. "Again, I was here that night. I saw the damage he caused, too. We're not denying that he was here or that he did any of those things you said he did. He did do those things. There are dozens of videos of that night that have gone viral. No one is refusing to accept that he did it."

"So why are we here?" he asks as he pours himself a glass of water from a jug that was on the table already when we walked in. There's a tray of pastries too, but I don't help myself to one of those either. "Our lawyers and the courts are taken up with this matter, Josie. We believe it's best to let it play out in the appropriate forum."

"Why did you agree to meet with me today, then?" I ask as I watch him pile some pastries onto a little plate. "We asked for a settlement meeting and you agreed, yet now you're saying that you're not interested in settling."

"It's not that we're not interested. We are. Or rather, my bosses are. If it was up to me, I'd have sent your boy to prison to teach him a lesson."

I blink hard. "Maybe I should be meeting with your bosses if that's true."

"I suggested it, but they told me to handle it so here we are." He folds his hands on the table without having taken a single bite or sip, which makes me think he intends on having his snack after he sends me to hell. But he's got another thing coming if he thinks it's going to be easy to get me to leave him to it. "We were told that you would be coming prepared with a settlement proposal. Let me hear it."

As I look at the insipid little man across the table from me, I realize that what we're up against right now is his ego. His bosses sent him here to settle, but he doesn't want to. If he has to, he will, but I may have to take this over his head.

Unfortunately, he is the first line of defense and I need to get through him if I ever want to get to his bosses.

This is not something I was prepared for, but I've always been good on the fly.

I can do this. For Jax. For the pack.

The Becketts are waiting for an update after this meeting, and I can't call to tell them that we need to take this to the next level simply because the hotel manager is clearly not a fan of Jax's.

If this ends up playing out that way, then fine. I'll have to make the call to tell them exactly that, but I need to try to avoid it at all costs.

And since he's being so very frank and smug with me, maybe it's time to fight fire with fire. "My proposal is that you drop the charges."

He lets out a snort of derisive laughter. "I've already told you we're not doing that, Ms. Collins. If that's what you came here for, you can leave now."

"Thank you, but I think I'll stay." I lean back in my chair and fold my hands over my stomach, my fingers loosely entwined as I flash him an equally smug grin to the one he's giving me. "If this goes to trial, Jax will get a slap on the wrist. Community service at best."

"He's looking at prison time."

I drop my chin and roll my eyes. "He's never been convicted of a crime, Josh. Sure, he's notorious for causing trouble, but this will be his first conviction and let's be honest here, no one was hurt."

"Someone could have been," he insists. "He was aggressive. There were other people around. A fight might easily have ensued. He should not be a free man right now."

"But he is," I remind him. "He is a free man and he's going to remain one because a fight didn't ensue. In fact, like you said, the entire incident was caught on camera. The footage shows that he never took a swing at anyone. Never got close to starting a fight or even tried to."

"Until the cops arrested him." He sneers.

I sigh. "Perhaps, but none of those cops have pressed charges," I say. "Obviously. The fact is that no one got hurt."

"All that glass—"

"All that glass was cleaned up by people he paid to do so." Well, the label paid, but the point is that it wasn't the hotel who had to shell out the cash for it. "He's also already paid for all the damages. Everything is up and running again. In fact, everything was up and running the very next day. You haven't

lost any revenue as a result and there's an argument to be made that you've turned a profit as a result of the incident."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me." I tap my phone lying on the table in front of me. "Is it not true that your pool bar and restaurant have been overrun by fans? I don't know about you, but I've got social media and I've seen an army of people hash-tagging that they've been here since. A lot of them have even been tagging him in their posts. We know you've been particularly busy since Jax decided to have a party here."

The man's jaw grinds. "He smashed dozens of bottles and literally ripped the tiki bar apart."

"Yes, but again, he's already paid for all of that. You haven't lost any money because of this, Josh. He might get community service, but he's not going to do time. Not when no one was hurt and reparations have already been made without a court having to order it."

"You don't know that."

"I do. I also know that if he gets even as much as community service, it will only take a few appeals for it to be reduced to almost nothing." I look him right in the eyes. "In the meantime, your hotel will be known as the place that sues their rich and famous clientele when they decide to get a little rowdy. That's no way to do business in San Francisco, Josh."

"He's an entitled asshole who came here looking for trouble." He seethes. "He rode his motorcycle through my lobby!"

"Yes, he did, but he didn't run anyone over and we've got dozens of posts and videos confirming that he came here to party, not to cause trouble. Things got out of hand and he broke a few bottles of booze. Snapped a few twigs into pieces. In the greater scheme of things, that's not something one would expect a hotel to be going after a rock star for. I wonder how many other famous clients will choose to bypass your hotel once word gets out that they can't have a little bit of fun here?"

"That's not the truth."

"Isn't it?" I stare back at him, blinking innocently. "Because from where I'm sitting, that's exactly what it's going to look like. As soon as we walk out of court after the judge has made a decision, Jax is going to post about how the little party he had at this hotel definitely wasn't worth it, and he's going to warn others to go elsewhere to have their fun."

"Are you threatening me?"

“No, I’m telling you the truth. He’s going to get a slap on the wrist. At most. You, on the other hand, are going to become persona non grata for vilifying him for partying like the rock star he is. Have you seen what a mob of angry fans are capable of? Have you ever heard the term ‘canceled.’”

He turns white and I hate myself a little but the truth is I will say anything I need to say to make sure Jax doesn’t wind up behind bars. I can’t let that happen. I won’t.

“Which is why I think it’s in your best interest not to pursue charges,” I continue after his Adam’s apple bobs. “Payment has been made. No lasting damage exists, and at this point, I’ve said everything I need to say. It’s up to you, Josh. Are you going to persecute him and blacklist your hotel in the process, or are you going to drop the charges?”

TWENTY-NINE

A S H E R

JOSIE IS SURPRISINGLY RELAXED as we walk into the courtroom to support Jax. The trial is supposed to start this morning, but she hasn't called us in for dozens of meetings in the last few days and Mr. Davidson is talking to her about a golf game he's playing later this afternoon.

I frown, but honestly, it's fucking difficult to keep focused on anything other than her. I swear, she's like a drug and I'm not even fighting the addiction. Her scent has become my preferred way of getting intoxicated and I can't get enough. Even when she tries to scrub it away with scent blocker, it's still there, lingering, teasing me with just enough to make me want to get closer.

It doesn't help that we're all pretty damned certain Dylan knotted her last week. He won't say—and I think it's mostly to protect her privacy, which I respect—but I can't think of anything else that massive explosion of pleasure could have been. And ever since we felt it, I think we all developed a new craving. A new itch that desperately *needs* to be scratched.

Right now though, I need to pay attention to the proceedings. It's hard as hell to yank my eyes away from her, but when the Judge walks in and everyone rises, I finally manage. He shuffles a few papers and then nods at the prosecutor.

“We're ready for you, Mr. Holt.”

He rises to his feet and then shocks the fuck out of me. “The prosecution suggests that the case be dismissed, Your Honor. The complainant has indicated that they would prefer the charges to be withdrawn.”

The judge's brows rise. “Is that so?”

Holt nods. “All damages have been paid and nobody was hurt. As long as

the defendant is held liable for any further damages he might cause in civil court, we're happy to move on."

"Very well. Makes my job easier and we have a long list of cases to consider today." The judge turns his gaze to Jax, lowering his head to look at him over the top of his glasses. "Might I recommend a Narcotics Anonymous meeting anyway, Mr. Adler? In any event, the court notes the complainant's wishes. Case dismissed."

I blink hard, unable to believe what just happened, until I see the corners of Josie's lips twitching. This has her work written all over it, but as we stand and leave the courtroom, she doesn't take any credit.

Instead, she just smiles. "Do you guys want to go out to celebrate Jax's charges being dropped?"

"Fuck yes," he says as he slides an arm around her waist and smacks a wet kiss against her temple. "I don't know what you did, but I do know this was you."

"It was nothing." Her cheeks flush, but then she gently, almost reluctantly, extricates herself from his grasp and hikes her purse up on her shoulder, clutching it so tight her knuckles are white. "Where do you guys want to go? It's on me."

"It's definitely not on you," I say as we leave the courtroom and head down to the parking garage. "We owe you a night out for this. We owe you a lot more than that, but let's start there. Should we go to Mickey's?"

I glance at the others as I say it, and Jax is the first to nod. Holden grins and Dylan can't stop staring at Josie, but he shrugs his agreement as well. Out of all of us, he's the one who seems to be having the hardest time with her transitioning.

I don't know how I feel about what they did. Am I angry with him? Do I feel betrayed? How can I when I don't think I'll be able to stop myself from doing the exact same fucking thing as soon as I have the opportunity.

Though judging by the way he's been acting since, he didn't do himself any favors with it. Every moment with her seems near torturous to him now and it's already tough for me to ignore her scent. I don't need it to become impossible.

We need to keep her around too much. Seriously, apart from that one night, this is the smoothest things have ever run for us and I know it's because of her. I also know she's been working her ass off to make it happen.

For once, we've got a manager who knows how to manage us. We're not

the average clients and she's the first person since me who's been able to do things exactly the way we need them done. Even Jax is *definitely* coming around, but that means we need to find a way to overcome the complications presented by her new status.

Starting with ignoring our own natures when it comes to hers, and fighting tooth and nail against treating her as some submissive or a possession. Which we're doing all right at, even if I have to say so myself.

A tense, mercifully short car ride later, we're breathing fresh air and the instincts clawing at my insides ease up. I'm suddenly much less inclined to claim her as my own, and judging from the lifting tension through the pack bonds, the rest of them feel the same way.

As we walk up to Mickey's, there's a sense of relief and exhilaration coming through our bond from all sides, and I lean into it, grinning as we greet Ben, the Beta who let us have his stage to play on when no one else would give us a chance. His is one of the few smaller venues Jax *didn't* destroy. Probably because Ben is the shit.

"Wait outside, would you? We're good in here," I tell the security detail following behind us before we all step inside.

"Firebrand!" Ben cheers when he sees us, reaching across the counter to shake our hands. "What're you doing in this dive? Fancy stadiums cancel on you?"

"Not yet," I say as I squeeze his hand and then step aside so the others can do the same. "Probably soon, though. You let us play here again?"

He laughs. "Absolutely, man. Any time you feel like returning to the dive bar scene, we'll be here for you."

"Thanks." Jax beams at him. "We need a round of your shittiest tequila, barkeep. We're celebrating my freedom."

Ben nods. "Yeah, I just saw the charges were dropped. Congratulations. I was worried about you for a minute there. You doing okay?"

"Just fine," he replies, swiping his ball cap off his head now that we're out of the public eye.

The great thing about Mickey's during the day is that there's hardly ever anyone in here. At night, it becomes a hive of activity and it's where we got our first fans, but their patrons are like vampires, only emerging from their caves once the sun has long since set.

Right now, it's only us and Ben here and that means we're about to have the best time we've had in a long time.

Ben lines up six shot glasses, automatically counting himself in our number even after all this time, and fills them to the brim with the cheap tequila we used to love. When he's set the bottle down, he slices a fresh lime and passes the plate over to us before slamming the salt down beside it.

"Let's go, boys," he says, then glances at Josie. "And girl. Who are you?"

"This is Josie." Jax swings his arm around her shoulders and pulls her closer, presenting her like she's a prize. "It's because of her that I'm breathing fresh air right now, so let's make hers a double."

She laughs and shakes her head. "The one that's already there is fine, thank you. And a beer to wash it down, please?"

"Make that two," I say before I sigh. "Actually, just make it six. Thanks, Ben."

"But then that's it," Josie says, giving us all a pointed look. "We did not get a major win back there just to risk a repeat offence tonight."

"Agreed," I tell her.

Ben nods and wipes down the few drops he spilled on the counter before slinging the rag over his shoulder and heading over to the fridge. Once the beers are in front of us, everyone licks the space between their thumbs and index fingers, adds some salt, and picks up a lime. It's muscle memory for us, but I'm not the only one whose gaze snags on Josie as her tongue pops out to lick her hand.

Holden even lets out a groan he can't contain and I get it. I really fucking get it. As she looks up when she's ready, and sees all four of us staring at her, she flushes and reaches for her shot. "To Jax getting off?"

"I'll always drink to getting off." He winks at her as he raises his glass into the air. "I've got something better, though. To the best damn manager we've had."

She turns the color of an overripe tomato, but clinks her little glass against ours as we do the same. The tequila tastes like shit, stabbing my throat on the way down and burning like lava in my stomach, but once the liquid is down, we grab our beers, wincing and sputtering, as we make our way to our old booth.

Josie slides in first, ending up flanked by Holden and me on one side and Jax and Dylan on the other, and I'm not gonna lie, she looks damn good at the center of us all. I shake my head at myself as soon as the thought hits. *Stop it, asshole.*

"So, *uh*, there's something we need to talk about." She clears her throat,

but the emotion is still obvious in her eyes and her voice when she finally speaks again. “I just want to say that it was great getting to know you all and that I’m going to do everything I can to make sure that you don’t even notice the handover to your new manager.”

“What new manager?” Holden growls. “They fucking fired you?”

“Not yet,” she admits before sitting up a little bit straighter and squaring her shoulders. “Realistically, though, it’s only a matter of time. And I get it. An unbonded Omega can’t manage a band of unbonded Alphas in their prime. It’s just...common sense.”

The rest of us exchange a look before I shake my head. “You’re the best manager we’ve ever had. You’re a badass, Jo. We need you on tour. We can’t do it without you.”

“We’ll convince the board to keep you on full-time,” Dylan adds, then lets out a soft sigh when his gaze meets hers. “I know you think we’re just saying this because of our...well, our *physical* relationship with you, but it’s not that. I swear. We really can’t do it without you. We were on the verge of imploding when they brought you onboard and I don’t know what’s going to happen if they make you leave.”

“You’ll be fine,” she says, blinking away the tears and breathing in deep before she forces a smile. “You’re fucking Firebrand. Of course, you’ll be fine. Come on, this is a celebration. I’m sorry. I never even should’ve brought this up today. I just wanted to say what I needed to say while it’s just us.”

Jax raises his beer for another toast. “To keeping Josie on full-time.”

Holden and I repeat after him, but Dylan just looks at Josie with such intensity in his eyes that I’d have felt it vibrating from him even if we didn’t have a bond. Since we do have a bond, I can feel his worry, though. His longing.

More moisture appears in her eyes before she sniffs, laughs, and then shakes her head. “I need to get a grip. Will you guys excuse me for a minute?”

“Of course.” Dylan and Jax move to let her out of the booth, and then Jax lopes over to the bar after muttering something about more tequila.

Holden glances at me. “We need to keep this celebration low-key, or we’re going to get 86ed from our favorite bar.”

“Ben won’t call the cops, though,” I say.

Dylan chuckles. “Maybe not, but Holden’s right. This has to be the longest we’ve gone without getting into any shit. We should try to keep the

streak going.”

I grin. “We will. We don’t have a choice. Unless we want to give them even more cause to fire her. What do you guys think? Think she’s right about being on the chopping block just for being an Omega?”

“Yes,” Holden says without hesitating. “We’re Alphas and we’re not bonded. She’s never been on suppressants, and even if she starts taking them now, it’ll be some time before they have any effect. Plus, we don’t even know if she can start taking them yet. And then there’s the problem of her needing to be escorted everywhere. Aside from all that, she’s going to be going through a lot in the next few months and I’m just not sure if she’s going to be able to keep up with us on tour, considering.”

He has officially never said so many words at one time, but I’m not surprised he’s given it this much thought. I think we all have. Even if we have yet to really sit down and talk about it together as a pack.

It’s something we won’t be able to avoid doing for very much longer, though.

“She will be able to,” I counter. “No doubt about it, but that doesn’t matter if they won’t even give her a chance.”

Dylan stares into the bottom of his bottle. “Yeah and there’s also no way of knowing how she’s going to feel or what she’s going to want once her transition is complete...and once she’s through her first heat.”

Right. The *H* word.

“Do we, *uh*...do we have a plan for that?” Dylan asks.

“For what?”

“You know,” he says, his eyes shifting, but not meeting mine as he gestures with his hands as if it’s obvious. “Her heat, man.”

“Um...”

“You do know that Omegas need knots to get through that shit, right?” Holden offers and I sense there’s some sort of mutual understanding between Holden and Dylan that I am not a party to.

“Right. They have special vibrators and shit for that now, though.”

Dylan looks at me dubiously. “I seriously doubt that would give even a fraction of the same amount of relief.”

“And if she’s not getting the relief she needs *closer to home*,” Holden adds. “She could look for it elsewhere.”

Elsewhere?

Heat floods my belly and my teeth clench. The image in my mind of her

being with someone else—*anyone* else—besides us makes me feel viscerally possessive and I know I wasn't quick enough to block the emotion from leaking through the pack bonds.

"Exactly," Dylan says in answer to the swell of emotion he felt. "Just... food for thought."

I sigh, truthfully not knowing what the fuck to say to that, and when I glance at the bar to check that Jax isn't dancing on it or something, I realize he's not there anymore.

Frowning as I look around, I feel my gut tighten. "He's gone. Did you see where he went?"

"I don't know, but she's not back yet either," Dylan says before Holden suddenly groans, and it takes me no more than two seconds to realize why.

Our connection tells us where Jax and Josie are. Not far away at all, and things are getting hot and heavy. Fast.

"Was it like this when I..." Holden wonders and Dylan snorts.

"Yes," I say in no uncertain terms before I turn to Dylan. "The same goes for you, by the way."

He sighs, but I see the spark in his eyes just thinking about it. "There really is no privacy in this pack, is there?"

"Nope. Not when it comes to anything Josie." I groan, my cock growing against my fly as Jax's wild lust courses through our bond. "Fuck. Someone get the tequila he left on the bar."

God knows, we're gonna need it. Or else we're all going to end up joining them.

It's official. We need to have that pack talk. And it can't wait much longer.

THIRTY

JOSIE

DID Doctor Thane mention anything about being this emotional because *damn*.

This had better be temporary.

If this is what it's going to be like from now on, I won't be going to an Omega Academy, but they *will* need to lock me up in an institution.

Not only will I go completely batshit crazy if I don't get a grip on my emotions, but I will also mount every member of Firebrand every minute of every day for the rest of my life. One by one, I'll just keep making my way through them time and again, never feeling entirely satiated.

The need is *that* intense, and being here, in a quiet bar, with all four of them is working me up way beyond what I can handle. Which is weird, considering that it also feels like my heart is breaking and all I want to do is cry.

Cry and fuck. So not sexy.

Gripping the cool porcelain of the sink in the ladies', I drag in a deep breath and then look up to see my tear-stained face reflected back at me in the mirror. *Jeez, I'm such a freaking mess.*

The tears started streaming from my eyes as soon as I ducked out of the booth and now, my makeup is smeared below my eyes and trails of black lead all the way down to my jaw. I really, *desperately* need to learn how to control this.

According to Thane Woods and my sisters, the worst of it should pass once I've completed the transition, but there's so little real, scientific data about what's happening to me that I just don't know if I can trust their promises. Very few Betas in the world have experienced what I am now, and

even though Thane has worked with some of them, it would've been nice to have been able to get some reassurance from someone who's actually been here.

Because this fucking sucks. Not only am I going to lose my dream job, I'm also going to lose my Alphas, and then get thrust into...I don't even know what.

I still don't know what's going to happen next. All I know is that my hormones are out of control. The space between my legs is so soaked and sensitive that I have to swallow a whimper every time I move, and my chest is aching almost just as bad.

It just...sucks. There has to be a better word for it, but if there is, I can't think of it right now. Probably because my entire body is feeling strung out.

If even one of these stupidly intense emotions wasn't overwhelming, it would've been way easier to deal with it, but they *are* overwhelming. The lust, the heartbreak, the sorrow, and the uncertainty are all burning in my stomach, trying to rip my insides to shreds.

And to make it worse, any minute now, I'm going to have to go back out there and sit down with the Alphas who have no desire to be mine even if they *want* me. I'm going to have to sit there, and breathe—which, by itself is a massive challenge because breathing means inhaling their scents—and try my very hardest to act like it's not killing me.

To act *normal*, and right now, I don't even know what that means. *What is normal, anyway?*

I grip the sink even tighter than before, thankful that at the very least, my new status doesn't come with super-strength. Because of that, I can take comfort in the fact that I won't break Ben's bathroom. I close my eyes and, breathing in, I focus on my lungs. On the feeling of them filling with air and then holding it there until my eyes suddenly pop wide open.

Because that air wasn't what it should've been. Desire punches a hole through my stomach as Jax's spicy-sweet, Bergamot, apple and vanilla scent courses through me and when I dart a glance over my own shoulder in my reflection, there he is. Standing in the open door, he lowers his head slightly to one side as his gaze meets mine.

"Fancy meeting you here," he says, his voice low and weirdly husky.

I frown. "In the ladies' room?"

"This is the men's room, sweetheart. What are you doing in here?"

On instinct, my eyes dart to the sign on the door, but it's clearly a woman.

It's one of those old-school signs where she's wearing a huge, frilly skirt just to make it clear. "Uh, no. This is the ladies', so the real question is what are you doing here?"

He smirks, glances at the door, shrugs, and then steps inside before kicking away the doorstop to let it swing shut behind him. "I guess I'm here for you."

"I figured as much." I'm trying to keep my tone light, but it's hard when I can't breathe without wanting to impale myself on his dick. I don't even like him.

Okay, that's a lie. I do like him. I just don't want to. He's an irresponsible, entitled pr—

"It's hard to fight the draw these days," he murmurs, biting his lip ring absently, almost like he's talking to himself, then he refocuses and grins at me. "You have a pretty strong scent."

I sigh. "So do you."

He circles farther into the room, then backs up with his gaze still on mine as he goes to lock the door. "Thanks for getting me off."

"I haven't done that yet."

A surprised laugh tears out of him, then he shrugs as he moves closer to me. "The other kind of getting off, but I like that you added the *yet* to that sentence. Means you know and accept where this is going."

"I haven't accepted anything."

But the concerning truth is that I have no inclination to fight it.

"Right."

My heart picks up its pace as he closes in on me, those piercing eyes never leaving mine. It does other things to my body having him this close to me, alone and in a reasonably confined space. But maybe if I don't actively think about it, my nipples will stop trying to slice through my bra and my clit will stop acting like a water balloon that just keeps filling.

This is so damn uncomfortable. Seriously. It's way, way beyond just being turned on. It's being (O)mega turned on. Look at me making puns to distract myself. "You and I didn't even get along before this started happening to me, Jax. The only reason we've been so friendly and flirty with each other is because of our natures. Let's not pretend there's anything more here."

"There isn't?" A tiny flare of hurt speeds through his eyes, but then it's gone and that trademark smirk is back on his lips. "I might've thought the same thing, but we got on just fine that first night. We just happen to have

different ideas about how controlling a manager should be.”

“I’m not controlling.”

He scoffs out a laugh, stalking closer to me in that predator-prey way that sets my instincts on edge. It feels like he’s about to pounce, but that’s ridiculous. *On the other hand, is it? I don’t know what it feels like to be an Alpha in this situation. Maybe he is about to pounce. Whether he wants to or not.*

I move back until my hips hit the sink, but I’m not scared. Well, I’m not scared of *him*. I’m scared of myself and what I’ll do if he doesn’t give me a little bit of space.

“You *are* controlling, Josie. I realize that your job entails a certain measure of control, but I don’t like feeling like I’m on a leash.”

“Now there’s a thought. I should’ve tied you up to keep you in line.”

Interest sparks in those vibrant forest-green depths. “I’d probably let you tie me up, but that comes later. When I trust you more.”

“When?” The heartbreak momentarily surges past the lust and I suck in a sharp breath as pain crashes into me. “There won’t be time for that to happen, Jax. I won’t be around much longer.”

“Nah, you will be,” he says confidently. “The point is that while you’re much better than all our previous managers, you *are* controlling and I don’t typically do well with being told what to do.”

“Yeah, you’ve made that abundantly clear. For what it’s worth, I wasn’t trying to control you as much as I was trying to help you. I realize people have told you that you need to be the bad boy rockers, and I realize you’re enjoying that side of things, but ultimately, you’re going to get hurt, Jax. Either that, or you’re going to end up in prison or dead.”

Something I said makes him pause when he’s only about a foot away from me. His expression grows serious as he searches my gaze before he finally frowns. “You really care, don’t you? Is it me you care about or do you care about how it’s going to affect your job?”

As I look back at him, I realize that he honestly doesn’t know. “My life is already falling apart and I’m already going to lose my job. What possible reason do I have to care about that at this point? I care about you, Jax. I have from the start. I know that things have happened to you. Things in your past. And those things have influenced the bad parts. And I get that. But you have good in you, too. I’ve seen it. I see it right now. But if you keep going the way you have been, you *are* going to destroy yourself, and that will destroy

Firebrand. With or without me.”

“I’ve decided,” he says, a spark in his mischievous eyes. “We’ll never be without you again.” His features smooth out and the smirk is back in place. “Sorry, Jo. You’re stuck with us now.”

His words are a knife to the gut. A promise he can’t keep.

“If only that was your call.” Shoving the pain as far down as I can, I draw in another deep breath, regretting it immediately when his scent is thrown into sharp focus again, and then groan as I shake my head. “So, does this heart to heart mean you’re going to stop being such a royal dick to me all the time?”

...for the time I have left with them.

“Can’t make any promises.” He takes one more step closer, putting his chest right up against mine. “Besides, I’ve got a feeling you like me being a dick to you. Royal or otherwise.”

“Your feeling is wrong,” I say, but I’m lying and he knows it.

Arching an eyebrow at me, he raises a hand to tuck a few strands of hair behind my ear, the look in his eyes surprisingly soft as he stares into mine. “I make your job interesting, and you like that I challenge you.”

“Challenge me to read up on laws and to get nasty with hotel managers who are only trying to do their jobs? I think not.”

He chuckles. “I thought you liked getting nasty.”

“Not in that way.” But then, as I think about it, I remember how I felt when I got that victory. When that rude, petty little man realized I’d won. “Yeah, okay. Maybe you’re a little bit right.”

“I know.” The fingers that were lingering at my ear after he tucked my hair back trail purposely down my cheek until they’re on my mouth, his thumb swiping at my lips. “I don’t know how the others treated you, but maybe you remember...I’m not gentle.”

“It’s a done deal then, is it?” My heart starts pounding in my ears, but my body is already straining toward his, desperate to seal this connection with him now that it’s real and not just a wild, one-night stand.

He brings his head closer to mine, not stopping until his lips are moving against that thumb when he speaks. “Depends. Are you going to say no? It’s not a done deal unless you say yes, so what’s it going to be?”

I should say no. I know I should, but when I open my mouth to say it, what comes out instead is, “Yes.”

And just like that, Jax pounces. His mouth slants over mine, hot and

hungry, as his fingers move to the nape of my neck to hold me firmly to him, his free hand sliding around my waist and yanking me into him.

When my body lands against his and I feel the rock-hard length of his cock against my lower belly, I can't hold back the loud moan that seems to get ripped right out of my soul. I honestly don't know if the intensity of my reactions to them will ever fade, but right now, I'm kind of hoping it doesn't.

It's hell when they're not touching me, but when they are, it's freaking heaven. Like dancing on clouds in the sunshine, *drinking wine spritzers on streets paved with gold* kind of heaven, and it's incredible.

It's not just physical, either. It's...transcendent. *God, that sounds so stupid, even in my own damn head, but that doesn't make it any less true.*

The truth is that as soon as one of them touches me, it's like I can feel it at the center of my being. Like there's this warmth that infuses me with a sense of rightness and belonging that I feel even on a cellular level.

I'd never known anything like it existed, but apparently, it does. Even when it's Jax, who drives me nuts most of the time.

Well, okay. He's also driving me nuts now, but in a whole different way.

True to his word, he's not loving and gentle. His kisses are searing and urgent, his teeth crashing into mine every so often. It even hurts a little, but not so much that I'm at all interested in telling him to ease up.

Meanwhile, his hands have dropped to my shirt and he wraps his fingers firmly around the edges, then he tears them apart, buttons flying off and scattering on the floor. I gasp into the kiss, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I know I'm going to be pissed about that when we have to leave this bathroom, but right now, I just can't bring myself to worry about it.

Instead, I reach for his shirt and give it the same treatment, but instead of ripping it open, the most I've managed is to hurt the insides of my fingers. He chuckles darkly without breaking the kiss, then he tears his own shirt off before he leaves me to it, his hands too busy pulling my breasts out of my bra.

He doesn't move to unhook it, seemingly too impatient as his fingers pinch my nipples between them. I cry out, feeling the first frissons of pleasure already shooting through me. Moaning and struggling to breathe with how much I need him, I push his shirt off his shoulders and start on his belt, fumbling but finally managing to get the thing undone.

Deciding that I only need the most important part of him free, I undo his fly and then only push his pants and underwear down to his ass. When his

cock pops out, I'm happy. That's all I need right now.

Jax releases a husky groan, but as I start lowering myself to my knees to suck him off, he grabs my shoulders, shakes his head at me, and then roughly turns me to face the mirror. Our gazes clash in the reflection, and the flush at the tops of his cheeks, his swollen, parted red lips, and his dilated pupils make it a sight I'm going to be getting off to for the rest of my life.

Those lips curve into a smirk, but then he's reaching for my skirt and shoves it up to my hips before tearing my panties off too. *Fuck. Maybe it's a good thing I won't be staying in this job with them much longer. If they keep this up, I'm going to go bankrupt replacing all the clothing they ruin.*

"I'll buy you new ones," Jax mutters harshly as he reaches his hand between my legs and growls when his fingers slide through the slickness there. His head drops back, his breath shuddering out of him before he shoots into action.

It's not two seconds later when his tip is nudging at my entrance, all thoughts of any form of foreplay vanished as our bodies take what they demand.

Our eyes lock on each other in the mirror again. There's an almost panicked wildness in his I've never seen before, except I realize mine look the same.

Neither of us are in control.

And fuck if that isn't the most terrifying—and most freeing—feeling I've had in weeks.

Without any warning, he thrusts into me and we both cry out. I'm still tender down there from Dylan. Not from his cock, but from his knot.

The doctor had been right about that. My body wasn't fully ready to receive a knot yet and the pain had been so intense that stars burst in my eyes before the edges of my vision went dark. But there had been pleasure, too. A pleasure so intense it made every ounce of pain worth the cost to feel him spill himself inside me.

I whimper, dropping my head as I feel Jax's tip prod something so deep inside of me that it's hard to breathe from the pressure.

But then he grabs my chin and tips my head back up, letting me know that he wants me to keep looking at him.

And I do.

His hips move, slamming into me again and again, forcing me to adjust to his size. Jax is the biggest of the four and I just *know* somewhere deep in my

bones that his knot will also be the biggest. It's going to hurt.

It's going to hurt a lot, but still I can't imagine denying him. I want it.

I want it so bad that I shake with anticipation as Jax fucks me. As I feel his knot swell at his base, preventing him from going as deep as he could only a few moments ago.

When Jax grabs my hair as rough and hard as the sex itself, I can't hold back. Pleasure shoots through me, curling my toes and making me clench around him so hard that I hope I'm not hurting him. He pulls himself free of my pussy and spins me around so fast my vision blurs and then he's on his knees and his mouth is hot on my pussy as he laps up every drop of my release, making one orgasm roll into two until I'm splitting at the seams and he has to hold me up as he takes every drop of my release.

"Your knot," I beg between pants, delirious and fucking insatiable, even with my pussy still throbbing against his tongue with the aftershocks of my orgasm. "Jax..."

Jax pulls away, swiping the back of his hand over his wet lips to look up at me with pain in his eyes. His hands curl around my hips, the fingertips digging into the dips there as he leans in and presses a soft kiss to my mound.

"Not yet, little spitfire. Not until I can make you mine."

THIRTY-ONE

DYLAN

THERE'S NO AVOIDING IT.

It's time to get back to work. Asher has called a team meeting before we start, but we all know we need to get serious about our new album and the tour. None of us are really feeling it, if I'm reading the emotions coming through the bonds right, but we have to get it done.

As I stride into the building where our studio is, I've got to admit that I'm glad she's not around today. Her scent turns us all into idiots, and it's only getting worse as the days pass. It won't be long now until her transition is complete. I can feel it in my bones that things are coming to a head now. She's been having some cramping. Mild, but if google is right, then those cramps won't be mild for long.

And then more symptoms will come.

Her *heat* will come.

And we'll need to decide if we're the ones helping her through that. As for me, I'm already decided and I'll do it my damned self even if the others won't. There's no way I'll let her suffer if I can provide her relief.

Fuck knows Asher, Holden, and I have been seriously on edge since we sat in that bar, feeling everything that was happening from Jax and not being able to do anything about it. Asher didn't explicitly say it, but we all know this 'team meeting' isn't about work. It's about Josie.

We need to talk about it, and we can't do that if she's in the vicinity. Not if we want to be able to talk about it seriously and with clear minds.

At the same time, my skin has this weird itchiness to it when she's too far away. I'm pretty sure it's a psychological thing, but after I knotted her, the longing has gotten so much worse. The need to have her with me. To keep

her safe. To make her mine for good. To mark her so that any other Alpha will know right away that she isn't available. She has someone to belong to.

Hopefully, a *pack* to belong to.

The thought comes with a measure of guilt because I know we all agreed that bonding to an Omega wasn't part of the plan. Truthfully, I thought we were destined to be terminal bachelors. But things have happened.

Josie happened.

And she can't *unhappen* now.

I know it's because I knotted her, but I'm feeling very similar things from the others and I don't think any of them have knotted her yet. Jax definitely fucked her in that bathroom, but other than thanking me for the plaid button down I had on over my t-shirt, he hasn't said a word about it.

Josie came out of the bathroom wearing my shirt, with her hair a mess and her cheeks rosy pink. She looked fucking radiant and it brought me a measure of satisfaction seeing her in my clothes. She didn't offer to return my shirt and I didn't ask. I hoped she added it to her nest. She could have access to my whole damn closet if she wanted it.

I snort to myself as I take the elevator to the third floor, wondering what exactly has fucking happened to me.

I'm so far gone for this girl that I hardly recognize myself, but I like the hazy reflection of the Alpha I see in the elevator doors before they ping open. I think he's a better version.

Jax, Asher, and Holden are already there when I walk into the studio, and my eyes immediately narrow on Jax's. "What's this? You finally learned how to read the time?"

He flips me off and laughs. "You should be asking Asher that question, not me. I'm here on time more often than this fucker."

Ash scoffs and gets up from the piano seat where he was lounging. "Assholes. All of you. But that aside, I've got some news."

"Yeah?" I ask, taking his place behind the piano and glancing at the others.

Holden's clutching his guitar like he's trying to strangle it and staring at Ash like he's bracing for bad news and Jax's features are suddenly lined with worry. *Okay, so they're as clueless as I am.*

Thankfully, Ash doesn't make us sweat it before he tells us his news. "Word has come in from the board that the purchase of the club has been finalized. We're performing there to celebrate, and it'll also be the unofficial

kickoff for the tour.”

This should be good news, but with Josie’s future still on ice, I just don’t feel right about it, and it seems like I’m not the only one. Holden exhales heavily. “What about Josie?”

Asher thumbs his nose, his eyes unfocused and jaw taut as he shifts his focus to the real reason he called us all here early.

“They’re voting about her this afternoon,” he says, expression suddenly grim as the corners of his mouth turn down. “This will be the end of her career if they fire her.”

Jax mulls it over before he frowns. “Why? We’re unbonded Alphas, but that’s not true for every act. Even as an Omega she can still do this type of work.”

But not with us. Therein lies the problem. I don’t want to share her. Not with fucking anybody.

“Yeah?” I challenge Jax. “And who’s going to escort her everywhere, hmm? Because I don’t think her parents are going to move out to wherever and play chaperone. And it’s either that or she bonds with a pack.”

Just the *thought* of her being claimed by anyone else makes a low growl reverberate in my chest. It sets my blood on fire.

The guys feel it, too. I can see the tension on all their faces. But more than that, I can feel it through the bonds.

“She might be able to stay in the business, but it would be in a different role,” Ash says, and I can tell it’s a struggle for him to say this, but the fucker keeps talking anyway. Keeps acting like this is somehow all okay or normal or beyond our ability to control.

“Maybe secretarial work. Something where she could be stationary. In an office. I know some unbonded Omegas have special permissions to attend work unescorted if there are no alphas present in the workplace and if they have safe transportation.”

A scowl settles on Holden’s face as he grinds out the words. “We can’t let that happen to her. She was fucking born to do this type of work.”

“Damn straight,” Jax growls. “Why are we even talking about this like she’s going somewhere else. That shit ain’t happening, Ash, and you damn well know it. She belongs *here*. With us. She’s Firebrand.”

Ash nods. “So you feel the same way, then? All of you?”

“She’s really fucking good at her job,” Jax adds. “We’re not letting them take it from her, or her from us. Right, Ash? You feel it, too. Don’t fucking

lie to me and say you don't."

"I won't," Ash admits, throwing a hand through his hair. "And I do feel it. It's fucking terrifying."

As for me, I feel just as strongly about this as they do, but I'm also somewhat amused by this show of protectiveness from them. I wonder if they even realize that they're about a minute away from pounding their chests, whacking her over the head with a club, and then dragging her back to our cave.

"I'm onboard with whatever you want to do," I say carefully, trying to hide the smile that's begging to break free. "As long as whatever you want to do involves keeping Josie."

"We can't go storming into a board meeting like this," Holden says. "All hot-headed and shit. If we do, that will only prove that she shouldn't stay with us."

"What do you mean?" Jax snaps. "Let's go break down the door wherever they're meeting and make them listen."

I give him a second to realize what he just said, and then I lift my brow at him. "Dude. You just proved his point."

He pauses for a beat, then he marches back to his stool and sits his ass down, muttering as he drags his hand over his face. "Well then what? What do we do? What's the play here?"

"Now that I know we're all agreed that she stays, I suspect the play is to prove that we can keep our heads on our shoulders when it comes to her," Ash says. "She's done so fucking much for us. There's got to be something we can do to help her out with this. Something proactive, I mean."

"She got the hotel to drop the charges," Jax adds thoughtfully. "She also convinced the other hotel not to press any at all. She returned the horse to the owner and she turned me down when I needed to be turned down. If you guys come up with some way I can repay her for all that, tell me and I'm in."

Asher's eyes grow to at least double their usual size and Holden suddenly sits down on the stool behind him—or stumbles into it and then sits down to keep from falling over. I'm blinking like a newborn deer, and none of us seem to know what the hell to say to that.

Jax crosses his arms. "What?"

"It's just that I've never heard you say anything like that." I stare at him. "Do you mean it?"

"Yes."

“Then stay the fuck out of trouble for a few weeks.” Asher gives him a pointed look, then he sighs. “As well as all that, she’s also been standing up for us in front of the board since day one. I noticed it that morning when she had to explain why she left Jax in jail. She’s genuinely cared about us since the minute she started. She’s also the only person other than me who’s ever given a shit about running us right.”

“She broke me out of that family lunch just after I met her,” Holden volunteers next, his eyes unfocused as if he’s lost in thought. “Then, when I told her they’d follow up on the excuse she gave them, she plucked a rabbit out of a hat and magicked up a photoshoot for me to go to right away.”

I look from one of them to the next, my eyebrows tugging together. “Why are we suddenly reminiscing?”

“She stepped up for us,” Asher says. “It’s time we do the same for her. That’s what it comes down to.”

“I agree, but there’s still the elephant in the room.”

Jax bends his upper body into a comical bow without standing up, sweeping his hand out ahead of him. “The floor’s yours, then. Address your elephant.”

“Fine.” I stand and move away from the piano, positioning myself in front of the sound booth because it’s got a view of the whole studio, which means I can see them all at once and, more importantly, make eye-contact with each of them without having to look back and forth.

“Josie’s done a lot for us as our manager, but we’ve also grown a lot personally since we met her. It’s more than a business relationship and if we’re being honest, it has been since day 1.”

“Day zero technically,” Jax corrects me with a sly grin while folding his arms and leaning back on his stool.

“I think it’s time to decide what we’re going to do about it. After that, if you want to go crash the board meeting, I’m in. But we need to talk about this first.”

Holden shakes his head. “The board’s meeting about her in twenty minutes, which means we don’t have time to hash it all out right now. If we’re going to put a stop to this, we have to go in five minutes.”

Asher’s chest rises and falls on a deep breath, then he nods and looks back at me again. “What I will say for now is this: I’ve been a playboy all my life and I was perfectly happy to keep being one, but I’m not anymore.” He pauses like he’s about to drop a bomb and inhales shakily. “I haven’t slept

with anyone in weeks. And...I don't want to."

"*Oh shit,*" Jax mutters teasingly, rubbing his hands together. "Now we're getting somewhere."

Asher cuts him off with a sharp look and he raises his hands in mock defense.

Ash rolls his eyes before he continues. "It's not going to be easy convincing them to keep her, but we've got to try. It might mean...well, it might mean *we* have to take responsibility for her."

And there it is. The fucking bomb.

He's not saying it outright. He's not saying that he'd be willing to bond with her. But he *is* saying that he is willing to lay a claim on her. In doing so, Josie would be our 'intended' Omega and we would be able to take legal responsibility for her.

We'd be her escorts. Convenient since she'd still be managing us.

And I assume that also means he's agreeing that *we* should be the ones to help her through her heat.

It could fucking work.

And whether or not Asher will admit it now, we all know where that will lead.

And no one is saying they're against it.

Good enough for me.

"Let's go break down some doors, then." Jax waggles his eyebrows at us as he stands, but then he grins. "Just kidding. I won't break anything. Scout's honor. Let's just go do what needs to be done, okay?"

"I'm not promising *I* won't break anything," Holden grumbles, but gets up and follows Jax to the door.

"That's the spirit," Jax jokes, clapping Holden on the back as I walk out behind them, but the truth is that I'm nervous as hell. We're about to stand up for our manager—our Omega—but if this goes wrong, it may give them even more reason to fire her.

And if they do, Firebrand, as we know it, is going to fall apart.

Maybe we didn't have time to discuss what we're actually going to do about all this, but in my mind, there's not much of a question about it. We need to bond with her. It's the only way.

And I'm going to have to be the one to say it when this is all over.

If there's still a band after this.

THIRTY-TWO

J A X

THAT WAS as close to a declaration of love as I've ever heard from our lead singer, and as we march toward the conference room like an army approaching the enemy, I feel the others' agreement with what he said. The thing is, I feel the same way. Never expected to.

In fact, I wanted to hate her, but here we are.

While I'm going to need time to wrap my head around it, we need to convince the board to let her stay so I can have that time. After that day in Ben's bathroom...I'm a fucking gonner.

That's all.

I'm as fucking drawn to her as they are. As obsessed with her. Her scent is already my favorite drug—and I've done enough of those to be able to say definitively that there's nothing better.

I'd wanted to knot her in that bathroom so badly, but I'd wanted to do more than that.

As soon as the thought to claim her whispered through my mind I knew I had to stop. Impulse control has never been my strong suit and I wouldn't force that on her. Wasn't even sure if it was what I wanted myself. All I knew was that if I kept fucking her, if I knotted her, that was going to be it. I wouldn't be able to stop myself from claiming my Omega in every way possible.

And a small part of me knew that she wouldn't want that to happen in the grimy bathroom in the back end of a dive bar.

Dylan glances over his shoulder as we walk down the hall to the room where the board is meeting. "How do we want to handle this?"

"With force," Holden grunts, chin thrust into the air as he glares straight

ahead at the door. “We’re not letting them fire her. That’s all there is to it. We just need to get the message across loud and clear.”

“Loud and clear, but without losing our shit.” Ash sends a pointed look in my direction. “I’m serious, Jax. No crazy shit. We can’t afford for them to think that we’ve become even looser cannons now. We need them to know we’ve got it together despite her transition and that we’re going to keep it that way as long as she’s with us.”

I roll my eyes and raise my hands in surrender. “Fine. You got it, but if they won’t budge, what do we do then? That’s when the crazy shit can come out, right?”

“Wrong,” Dylan insists. “We’re not taking no for an answer, but we need to be assertive. Not aggressive. We need to get our point across without reverting back to our old ways. Josie has made us better and we all know it. They don’t know it yet, but when they do, they’ll agree to keep her. So that’s our aim. Let them see how much we’ve grown with her at the helm, okay?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I mutter, but I’ve got a few tricks up my sleeve in case *Plan Cool, Calm, and Collected* doesn’t pay off.

Mostly, it involves threats of doing shit I’ve been wanting to do for a while now but haven’t gotten around to. I saw this music video once of a chick riding an elephant through the city streets and man, it looked fun as fuck. I got in contact with a dude from the zoo and they don’t usually allow this kind of thing, but I think I’ll be able to convince him. *Huge fan.*

And I don’t think the board wants me drunk with a beer still in hand, parading down Market Street on the back of an elephant. Especially not if the plan may or may not also involve livestreaming the parade and cutting through a few malls.

Asher’s brow suddenly puckers as he stares at me. “Whatever you’re thinking that’s put that smile on your face, forget it. We’re not doing it.”

“Maybe not. I think animal cruelty groups will probably shove a pineapple up our asses if we do it, and I love animals. I don’t want people thinking I’d ever hurt one, but just for interest’s sake, how do you guys feel about dressing up and riding elephants?”

Dylan scoffs back a laugh. “We rode on elephants in Thailand, remember? You hated it. Said you felt like a creep for trying to ‘control the majestic beasts.’”

I sigh. “Yeah, I did feel like a creep, but this is for a good cause. It’s for Josie.”

Holden snorts as he shakes his head at me. “If you want to ride an elephant, let’s plan to do it when we swing past Thailand on this next tour. With Josie. As a threat, though, it’s a good one. You’re thinking a bottle of tequila in each hand while parading down Market, aren’t you?”

I wink at him and raise a hand to clutch my heart. “It’s almost like you really know me.”

“Unfortunately.” He smirks before the humor flickers out of his eyes and he motions at the door. “Just the threat, and only if we really need it.”

“Can’t make any promises.” I shrug.

“Jesus,” Dylan mutters at my side. “We’re not going to need threats. We’re professionals and we’ve got every right to have a say in whether or not our manager gets fired. Remember that.”

Asher nods his agreement. “Exactly. If we’re going to stand up for her, we need to do it right.”

Too bad we have different ideas about what the right way might be. I don’t say it, though. Ultimately, I’m happy to let him lead us into the battle. We’ll do it their way, but if that doesn’t work, we’ll break out my arsenal of how we’ll make their lives hell and destroy the label’s reputation right along with our own if we have to.

I blink hard in surprise at the thought. I’ve never given a crap about the label’s reputation, and ours was basically built off all these kinds of antics, so I’ve never thought anything I do would actually be bad for the band, but the fact that I even thought about destroying it all to keep her... *I’m in trouble, aren’t I?*

Shit. I swallow past all the dry spots in my throat, grappling to come to terms with the strength of my feelings for her, but then Asher opens the door and I force myself to get my head in the game. This is too important to be distracted by something like emotions.

Ash didn’t knock before he opened the door, and as we file in behind him, I see the surprise registering on the faces of all the gathered board members. Mr. Beckett is the first to speak up, blinking rapidly before he recovers and shoots an irritated glare.

“Gentlemen, this is a closed-door meeting. I need to ask you to leave.”

Holden faces off with his parents, his gaze hard on theirs as he reaches for a chair, pulls it out, and drops into it to make it clear we’re not going anywhere. In solidarity, even though I don’t really feel like sitting, I grab the chair next to his and Dylan takes the one on the other side.

Asher remains standing for now, but he braces his hands on the chair of the one he's standing behind and levels the Becketts with a serious look. "We know it's a closed-door meeting, but we believe we're entitled to be here. You're discussing the future of our manager, and since we're the band who will be upheaved if there's another handover, we're not leaving. This involves us directly and we have a few things to say."

The Senator exhales heavily and looks at his son. "You can have three minutes."

"We'll have as many minutes as we need," Holden says lazily, folding his arms on the table in front of him. "Firebrand has been spinning out of control pretty much since we signed with you."

Mrs. Beckett opens her mouth to protest—but then closes it again, seeing that he isn't finished. It's not often Holden is the one to speak and it seems that at least for the moment, she's decided to listen. "We were doing fine on our own with Asher managing us, but then we signed with your predecessors and we were told to project a certain image to the world. An image you've made millions off of and which you have never officially told us to clean up. For all your objections and complaining, you haven't dropped us because we're making all of you a ton of money."

Chest rising and falling fast, a red stain is creeping up Holden's neck to his cheeks, and when Dylan notices it, he steps in before this whole thing goes sideways. "All of which is to say we *are* now cleaning up our act. Of our own accord, but we'd never have done it if not for Josie. You don't have to worry, though. We're going to keep being your cash cow. We believe our fans will appreciate the growth in our music that they'll be hearing on this next album. The themes and the music itself is shaping up to be a lot more mature, and we're also thinking that will draw in people who have not been fans of us before."

I lean forward, realizing that we've got the board's attention. Mr. and Mrs. Beckett are listening closely and exchanging glances every so often, and not even Holden's parents are interrupting. "Our history with managers since we signed with you has been..." I try to think of the professional term for a total fucking shitshow and come up with "...turbulent." Patting myself on the back for how professional I sound. "We're willing to take some of the responsibility for that, but the truth is, it's mostly because you brought us a bunch of douchebags who didn't know how to manage us and didn't give a shit about learning."

...well, at least I started off sounding professional.

Mr. Beckett's eyes narrow. "They were some of the best in the business."

"No." Asher finally pulls out the chair he's been gripping and sits down. "They were self-serving, entitled jackasses who were more interested in using us as a stepping stone than in actually managing us. It's no coincidence that things have been going better for us since Josie took over. She's the first you've brought us who's worth her salt and we want to keep her."

Well, I don't know that calling our former managers self-serving jackasses is as professional as he wanted to be, but it's pretty accurate. Grinning at him, I resist the urge to give him a high-five before I turn back to the board.

"In all the time she's been with us, I've caused two incidents. Just two."

"Two *major* incidents," the Senator points out.

I shrug. "It's still just two, and she cleaned them for us. Even made new opportunities out of them. *And* I haven't caused any shit in a while now."

Never mind that it'd only been a few weeks. That's practically years in Jax time.

"We're making music, keeping our heads down, and working on producing our best album yet," I continue. "An album which, by the way, we had jack shit for until she took over."

Mrs. Beckett looks at me coolly. "You're all attached to this Beta, *er*, Omega. I don't care if you're sleeping with her, but it doesn't bode well for longevity. What happens when she realizes you're not serious about her? What happens when she catches you with your cock in someone else's mouth on the road, hmm?"

"Not gonna happen," Holden snaps, leaning back and drawing her gaze to him. "What we decide to do about our feelings for her personally has nothing to do with you."

"Of course, it does," Mr. Beckett challenges him immediately. "Breakups have sunk more successful bands than yours. A breakup on tour with a manager who arranged it? That would certainly be our business. We'd have to jump to find a suitable replacement and if we don't, it could very well mean the end of Firebrand."

"We understand that you want to keep her around," Mrs. Beckett says, her nose wrinkling in distaste. "She never should've gotten intimately involved with you."

I frown, wondering how they know. Wondering if it was that obvious.

“Oh yes,” she says. “We’ve caught on to what’s been going on right under our noses. Her behavior is exceptionally unprofessional, and in addition to all that, she’s in transition.”

“We’ve spoken with Dr. Woods,” the Senator adds. “As it was our connections that got her an appointment with him in the first place, we felt it to be perfectly acceptable to call to inquire as to her condition.”

“What happened to confidentiality?” Holden seethes, but at least he’s doing it quietly.

His dad shrugs. “No confidentiality was breached. He refused to give us any specifics about her case, but he was willing to discuss what he’s seen from others who have gone through this kind of change. The long and the short of it is that it can be unpredictable. She could be going into heat any day now and the doctor advises against taking suppressants until *after* the first heat. Even then, suppressants won’t fully take effect for a while. If she does go into heat, how are you boys going to handle it? Have you thought about that? How is she going to finalize tour arrangements and juggle all of her responsibilities to the band while she’s in *heat*? It’s just not possible.”

“If need be, I’ll pick up the slack.” Asher meets the gazes of various board members I don’t know, making eye contact with everyone in the room in turn. “Everyone here knows I’m capable. I’ll do it. I’ll help her out. She’ll get through the heat. After that, the suppressants will take effect, we’ll get on some rut suppressants, and we won’t have any problems.”

Mrs. Beckett’s brows rise. “There’s no way you can guarantee that. Problems always arise, and you *were* capable of being the band’s manager, but that was a long time ago.”

“On the contrary, I’m the only reason this band still exists,” he counters. “I’ve been picking up the slack left by all our managers until her, and you didn’t even notice. That’s how good I am. Besides, this isn’t really a negotiation.”

I grin. Now this, I can get behind.

“You can either agree to keep her on and give her a permanent appointment. With a raise. Or we’re walking.”

“You can’t *walk*.” Mr. Beckett sneers. “You’ve got contracts.”

“We’ve also got lawyers,” Holden says, drumming his fingers on the table. “Look, we don’t *want* to walk. We don’t want to get caught up in protracted lawsuits about who did what. All we want is to keep our manager. Permanently. With a raise.”

“What you’re saying is that if we don’t appoint her, you’re willing to risk everything.” Mrs. Beckett lifts a brow at us, but there’s this weirdly understanding light in her eyes.

The woman is an Alpha—a bonded Alpha—and she’s not stupid. I think she’s on to us. I think she knows exactly what’s going to happen if they agree to this, and this might be wishful thinking, but I think she’s okay with it.

In fact, I think she’s more than okay with it. We’ll break the internet if it comes out that our pack has taken an Omega, and they’ll be smiling all the way to the bank from all the additional press.

Plus, it’s pretty well-documented that Alphas tend to really *settle down* when we settle down, and that will be a dream come true for their PR department.

She looks around the table before finally turning back to us. “Give us a few minutes to discuss this. Wait right outside. I’ll come get you when we’ve made our decision.”

THIRTY-THREE

JOSIE

TODAY—RIGHT now—the board is meeting to decide my future. It's a damn strange feeling, just sitting here behind my desk, twiddling my thumbs while the higher-ups are higher up in this very building making a decision that affects my life in such a significant way.

Without asking me for any input whatsoever.

I asked if I could address them. They said no.

Go figure.

So now, I'm just...sitting here, looking around my office, wondering when I let this job become such a big part of me. Omega or not, I was never a permanent appointment. My employment here was for a trial period. It was always going to be decided later on if I was going to make the permanent payroll or not.

I knew that. All along, I knew that the initial proposal Stef and I had done for them provided for a probation period. A trial run. Like I was a car they were taking for a test drive before they made the purchase.

It hadn't bothered me then. Now, as I look around the office they said I could decorate if I lasted longer than the trial period, I realize I've already made it mine. Without the decorator they said they'd call in for me, and without spending any money on new furniture, I'd turned it into my sanctuary. My reprieve. My...nest.

Somewhere along the line, I'd covered the lamps in soft material and I'd brought in cushions and throw blankets. I had fresh cut flowers in vases and a few potted plants scattered across the surfaces. Candles everywhere. Framed photographs of my family, Stef, and even the guys stand on my desk and posters of the guys' previous albums and tours line the walls. And then

there's my private stash of Alpha scented goodies.

I'd done it all without even thinking about it, but I had done it and now, I really didn't like the thought of having to leave it behind. That's what is going to happen, though. I have no doubt. Before the meeting, the Becketts had dropped by to thank me for all my hard work.

It felt like the start of the goodbyes. My head snaps up when the door opens, but then my stomach sinks when Basil and Anna walk in. *Fuck, so there's no news yet.*

Tablets at the ready for their next tasks, half my troupe of assistants sit down and smile expectantly at me. Basil's smile is a little dim, though. "You haven't heard anything yet?"

I shake my head. "The meeting should be underway, though. I'm sure we'll hear soon enough. In the meantime, we've got work to do. If there is a new manager coming, we need to make sure you have what you need to keep the band running smoothly until they get here. I know you guys have been through this kind of handover a few times, but never this close to a tour. Whatever we do, we need to make sure it goes off without a hitch."

"Give us instructions," Anna says dutifully, but then winks at me. "If it will make you feel better. I still think you've got nothing to worry about, though. The band isn't going to let you go."

"It's not up to the band."

Misery presses on my chest and shoulders like a boulder, but wallowing in it isn't going to help them do their jobs once I'm gone. Blinking away the tears stinging the backs of my eyes, I clear my throat and glance at my computer screen. "Okay, so when the last manager left, I walked in on such a fucking mess and we're not doing that to the next person. What's going to happen is this: Basil, I've emailed the tour itinerary to you. Venues that still need to be followed up on have been highlighted. Call them every day if you have to, but finalize those venues. If, for whatever reason our venue of choice is unavailable, I've listed three suitable alternatives underneath each one in order of preference."

He nods and clicks into his email app. "Right. I got it. What else?"

"Ask Anya to help you, but you two will be responsible for the logistics of the shows and music while the others will be taking care of the travel and accommodation arrangements." I move my gaze back to Anna's. "Thank you for the vote of confidence, and I hope you're right about me staying, but just in case, I've emailed you all of the arrangements that have been made so far.

You've also got contact details for the drivers, the security company who will be providing the bodyguards, as well as our liaisons at the corporate offices of all the hotels they'll be staying at."

"What about the media?" Basil asks. "What are we doing about them?"

"Right." I drag in a deep breath. "We have a press strategy for social media that you'll be working on with the marketing department, but the band will also be doing one meet and greet with fans in every city they play. Backstage passes are already on sale, and I've set up the press conferences to announce the kickoff of the tour and a few for updates. We've also got—"

My sentence cuts off when I take another deep breath and the air gets knocked right back out of my lungs at the whiff of Asher that fills my senses. I notice him immediately. It's hard not to with that mouthwatering smoke and leather scent he radiates. My gaze flies up to the door, and there he is, leaning against it with a soft, almost loving smile on his face as he watches me with my people.

My people, who take a few seconds to notice that they've lost my attention, but when they do, Basil gets up. "We'll give you a minute."

"We're going to need more than that." Asher pushes off the door and walks into my office just as Anna stands up, too. "How about this? Josie will call you when she needs you. For now, it sounds like you've got enough to keep you busy for the rest of the day."

It's really hard to yank my gaze away from him, but I manage. I love that leather jacket on him, though. It's a deep, rich brown and it's so soft and warm that I'd have stolen it by now if he didn't love it just as much as I do. He'd notice it was gone before I even managed to leave the room with it.

Those jeans are also one of my favorite pairs of his, a low-hanging, dark-wash that's worn through in places. For real and not done in a factory to make the wearer look cool. His blond hair is slightly messy, like he's run his hand through it a hundred times today, but his demeanor is as confident as ever as he watches my assistants leave before turning back to me.

"Guess where I just came from?" he asks playfully.

With the fog clouding my brain now that I'm surrounded by his scent, I blink stupidly before I finally manage to string a sentence together. "Uh, I don't know? The studio?"

"That was earlier. Guess where I went after that?"

I frown. "I'm not really in the mood to play games today, Ash. In case you missed it—"

“Today is the day the board is meeting about your fate,” he practically purrs as he walks around my desk and pulls me up and into his arms, sliding them around my waist and holding me to him. “I didn’t miss it, baby. I could never miss that.”

“Okay, so then you know why I don’t want to play games.” I should push him away. I really should. Someone could come in at any minute with the news that will change my life. But I don’t. Because I can’t.

Instead, I burrow into him, burying my nose against his fitted black T-shirt and breathing in deep. His voice rumbles in his chest against my lips. “I’m not playing games. I’m trying to tell you where I just came from.”

“So just say it already.” Although, the more his heat radiates into me and his scent envelops me like a warm blanket in the dead of winter, the less I care about where he was. “Actually, don’t tell me. Just hold me.”

“I can do that,” he murmurs before pressing a soft kiss to the top of my head. “I’m also going to tell you where I was, though.”

“If you have to,” I grumble, closing my eyes and trying to fight against the wave of desire crashing into me at his proximity. Being so insanely horny all the time is, well, insane, and yet here I am, completely unable to deny it. “Where were you?”

“A board meeting,” he teases. “Right upstairs, actually.”

“What?” I pull away, my lust temporarily forgotten—miracles never cease—as I stare up at him. “Have they made a decision? Why the hell wouldn’t you lead with that?”

He smiles, that playful lightness in his eyes sparking clusters of hope in my chest. “Maybe I’d just like to hear you beg.”

As if the words compel me to do it, I release his shirt and start lowering to my knees. Ash frowns, then his eyes widen with realization and he grabs hold of my shoulders, pulling me back up. “Shit, I didn’t mean it like that.”

“Fine. Please tell me what they decided,” I beg. I may not be on my knees, but I can’t keep the pleading tone out of my voice. “Please, Asher? I’ll do anything you want. Just tell me.”

“Anything?”

I nod. “Anything.”

Wrapping me up in his arms again, he hooks one hand behind my back and brings his free hand to my cheek, stroking it gently as he smiles. “What I want is for you to agree to stay. I know the Becketts haven’t been great employers, and I think it’s really fucking unfair that they’ve put you through

everything they have, but I'm asking you to stay anyway."

"If I could, I would," I promise. "It's their decision, though. Not mine. Unless..."

"It is your decision, Josie," he murmurs. "They've agreed to keep you on. Not only that, but you're getting a raise, a permanent position, and you'll be joining us on tour."

"What about the change?" I breathe, my heart slamming against my ribs. "Are they really sending me on tour while I'm transitioning?"

"Yep. I got them to realize that despite the change, you're good for us. You're the best damn manager we've ever had and we need you. Besides, you're planning to go on suppressants, right?"

I nod, my mind still stumbling over all the information he's giving me. "What about the rules?"

"We've agreed to formally take responsibility for you," he says easily. Conversationally. Like it's nothing.

But it's not nothing.

It's...*everything*.

It takes me another beat to process what he just said. What he got them to agree to is nothing short of miraculous. I can't believe it. I...

A squeal tears out of me when it finally hits home that I'm staying. That they fought for me and won. I jump into him and he catches me, laughing as he winds those powerful arms around me and hugs me tight.

"Congratulations, Josie," he murmurs against my ear as his laughter subsides. "Welcome aboard. Officially this time."

Joy races through me, making my veins feel like they've been filled with little bubbles of elation. I don't know when they started, but there are tears streaming down my cheeks as I bury my face in the crook of Ash's neck.

"Oh my god. I'm so happy. I can't believe you guys did that for me. You did, right? You talked them into it?"

I feel him shrug against me as he carries me to the sitting area and takes a seat with me on his lap. "We might've had a thing or two to say."

"Thank you." I keep my arms around him, breathing him in as a way to ground myself when it feels like the happiness could make me just...float away. It's only then that I realize there's one little dark patch where there should only have been joy. "Where are the others? Why didn't they come with you to tell me?"

"I might have asked—*very nicely*—for a moment with you alone."

“Yeah?” I whisper against his skin before pulling back to look into those eyes. “Why’s that?”

He catches my face in his hands and brings it closer to his.

Our mouths meet in a gentler, more loving kiss than I’ve ever had before, and then his head tilts to the side as he deepens it. I moan and my grip on him tightens as something low in my stomach flutters and my thighs clench. His hands slide down the length of my back, then my shirt goes with them when he moves them back up.

A deep but muted pain aches in my lower belly and I whine into his mouth with need.

“Hold on, baby. I’ll take care of that.”

A minute—and a bit of maneuvering later—I’m naked and he’s topless, but I need to get the last layers of fabric between us off. Still kissing him, my hands shake as I move them to the button of his jeans, but then he takes over, helping me undo and unzip him before he lifts his ass to make it easier to get the pants off.

As soon as they are, he pulls back to look into my eyes, his big hands on my cheeks, fingers lightly stroking my skin. “I’ve been wanting to do this for a long fucking time.”

I realize that he’s the only one of the four that I haven’t had inside of me and suddenly I crave it like nothing before.

“I-I don’t have any condoms,” I mutter, hoping that he does.

He shakes his head. “Are you on birth control?”

I nod, but truthfully I’m not sure if my Beta birth control will work anymore.

And yet somehow, I’m not worried about it.

“I’ve never…” Asher trails off and I feel my brows furrow.

I damn well know Asher King has fucked his way through a stadium’s worth of women so that’s not what he means.

“You mean with an Omega?”

He nods. “Never without a condom, either.”

He sucks in a breath through his teeth as if he’s in pain and when I look down between us I can see his erection, hard as steel, fluttering in time with his pulse, a thick vein running down one side just below the smooth head. And his knot.

His fucking massive knot.

My mouth goes dry.

“I want to fuck you so bad, Jo.”

“Then fuck me.”

“I don’t know if I’ll be able to stop myself from—”

“I don’t care.”

I wrap my legs around his waist and he lets go, grunting as he slides into me and slick gushes onto my thighs.

“Holy fucking shit.”

I moan into his neck.

Ash brings one hand to the nape of my neck and then pulls me forward until my lips are crashing back into his. His kiss is more urgent now, but it’s also still a lot more tender than I would’ve thought him capable of. It makes me all warm inside to the point where I think if it were physically possible, I’d be glowing.

His other hand moves down and settles on my hip. Fingers gripping me firmly, he helps hold me in place as he begins to move. A half-whisper, half-groan spills from my lips, and he swallows it, moaning as he kisses me and fills me all the way up. He’s not as long as Jax, but Asher is *thick*.

So much pressure. So fucking good. I can’t stop myself from moving, pushing him back, going up on my knees and then easing myself back down on top of him as he falls onto his back. He thrusts into me from below, somehow still the one in control even while I’m on top.

But I don’t mind. In fact, I like it. Love it, even. Surrendering to the sea of exquisite sensation, I close my eyes as I kiss him, feeling his hands on my breasts, my hips, the small of my back, and even trailing slowly up my arms.

When he breaks the kiss, it’s only to dot softer kisses along my jaw, my neck, my eyelids, and my cheeks. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I envision looking at us right now, and I imagine we look like one of those movie montages of people making passionate love.

I’m not sure how Asher would feel about the number of times I’ve thought the L-word while he’s been inside me, but I’m not about to ruin the moment to find out. Instead, I just accept it and give in to him and to this moment, letting myself feel every last bit of it.

Asher’s knot brushes against my entrance with every thrust of his hips and every roll of mine.

I suck in air through my teeth, feeling my core constrict with anticipation.

With every one of his thrusts, it’s getting harder and harder not to just impale myself all the way down onto him. As if he heard the thought, his lips

part and he looks at me through hooded eyes as he nods. “Take it, baby girl.”

I throw my head back, locking my knees as he moves into his next thrust.

As he lifts his hips I bear down, my fingernails shredding the leather back of the sofa, but I don’t care. I don’t care about anything but taking him inside of me as I scream his name.

The pleasure is instant. Blinding.

Asher’s eyes roll back and his grip on my hips tightens as he adjusts to the feeling of being knotted inside of me.

“Baby, *fuck*. Jo, I need you to move.”

I nod, whining as I begin to roll my hips, barely able to move with him locked in my pussy, but able to move enough to knead that tender ball of nerves inside of me. Enough to rub my g-spot against his knot until I’m seeing stars again.

I feel him swell inside me, feel his stomach dip, and his thigh muscles tense, and the pleasure swirling around deep inside of me makes a break for it, rushing to my center and exploding out to my extremities.

“I’m coming again,” I whisper shout, bracing for the implosion and the admission throws Asher over the edge with me.

He bears his teeth, growling through them as I feel him let loose inside of me. It’s knowing that *I* brought him that pleasure that sends me tumbling after him.

He wraps his arm around me and wrestles me back into position below him, grinding his hilt into my clit to lengthen the orgasm until I’m clawing and squeezing and pushing and gasping at the intensity of the sensation. It’s too much. It’s too much.

I come again as he sucks my nipple into his mouth and for one second I think I might blackout at the pain and the pleasure and fucking *perfection*.

But then Asher is lightly brushing his lips against mine, bringing me back to life, tucking my sweat-dampened hair behind my ears before he tucks me in against him, curling his body around mine and not saying a word as he holds me until his breathing evens out.

THIRTY-FOUR

J A X

IT'S NOT OFTEN that I arrive at practice first. I'm not usually late either, but I just don't do first. Seems too eager.

Today is different. Practice starts in five minutes, and I've already been here for twenty. Sitting on the floor in the corner, I read over the notes I've made this last week or so. Since we confronted the board.

Strangely, it feels like standing up for Josie as a unit brought us closer together. I wouldn't have thought it was possible to feel closer to them than I already did, but being united in the battle for Josie's job strengthened our bonds.

It's weird as hell, but it's true. We've fought many battles together, but this one was for *her*. That's different. *She* makes us different. Better.

Hence the notes.

The door opens and Asher strides in first, sliding his leather jacket off and tossing it over a mic stand near the door. Without breaking his stride, he pushes up the sleeves of his long-sleeved shirt and heads over to the far wall to grab his guitar.

He definitely doesn't know I'm here yet, and a grin spreads on my lips as I consider how to take advantage of the situation. When he opens his guitar case and takes the instrument out, holding it almost lovingly as he lifts the strap over his head, I smirk.

"Do you two need some alone time?"

He starts, his head flying around as his gaze lands on mine. His free hand shoots to his chest and he narrows his eyes at me. "Jesus. Why are you lurking in the corner?"

"I wasn't lurking." I stand up and brush random bits of stuff off my ass as

I walk over to the piano. “I was just sitting there, waiting for your lazy asses. Where are the others?”

“Right behind me. Dylan went to grab a soda and Holden’s on the phone with his dad.”

I give him an exaggerated shudder. “He’s a better man than I am. I’d have cut off that family years ago.”

“They’re his family,” he says like that should mean something, then he sighs and rolls his eyes when he sees me arching a brow at him. “Fine. So it doesn’t mean much in a family like that, but they’re also on the board and he tried to buy them out, but they won’t have it.”

“Are they still pissed about Josie?”

He shrugs, securing his guitar in place and then moving over to the main mic. “I don’t think they care much about her either way. As long as he backs his brother’s campaign.”

“Is he going to?”

Holden appears in the doorway like he teleported there, shaking his head as he strides in and marches directly to his guitar. It’s pretty clear he overheard what we were talking about when he answers my question instead of Ash.

“Am I going to support my brother? Of course, I am. Am I going to do it by going on the campaign trail with them? Fuck no. Surprisingly, however, the call wasn’t about that. It was about a media strategy their PR people put together for me to show my support online, from afar, while we go on tour.”

My jaw drops as shock works its way through me. “They’re letting it go?”

He stills for a moment, not even his chest moving until he finally drags in a deep breath and nods. “Yeah, I think they are. Not letting it *go*, go, but I think seeing our interactions with the board recently has proven to them that I’m serious about this. I’m not just going through a phase and I’m not just going to give up, so they’re pivoting. Politicians are good at that.”

The column of Asher’s throat moves up and down as he swallows, then he shrugs. “Yeah, well, it’s about time they realized having you on the campaign trail with them would only be a distraction from the actual politics. No one’s going to pay attention to the politician if there’s a rock star waiting in the wings.”

“Better to mobilize your followers than to follow him around in real life,” I agree just as Dylan walks in.

He takes one look at us, then glances at Holden. “They’re giving up on trying to force you to follow him around?”

“Yep. For now. Are we going to practice, or would you like to keep gossiping?” Holden eases his guitar strap on, then absently strums the instrument for a moment before he starts making tweaks to the tuning.

“Are you guys ready for tonight?” Dylan asks as he sets his drink down and opens the satchel hanging around his shoulders to pull his notebook out. “I was thinking about how it’s the unofficial kickoff to our tour and a celebration, so I feel like we need to really level up on the energy we bring.”

Asher snorts. “The energy we bring? Sure, man. Let’s level up. It’s not like we always put on a fucking good show.”

Dylan grins and scratches the side of his nose with his middle finger. “All I’m trying to say is that I think we have to get the crowd going with our old stuff and then play a few of the new songs we’ve got as a teaser for the album.”

Holden cocks his head, thinking it over before he nods. “We’re still working on a lot of the new stuff, but I guess you’re right. People are going to notice if we only recycle our old hits.”

“We’re ready to go on ‘War for You,’” Dylan says, referencing the first song Josie was his muse for. “There are a couple others, but—”

“I’ve got one.” I stand up, swipe my notebook from the top of the piano, and turn it so they can see the scribbles on the page. “Josie put a lot of effort into making tonight happen and we want to do everything right. I’ve been thinking about that. And her. And just...everything.”

Holden seems interested, but surprised, his eyes wide as he stares at me. Asher’s frowning, but nodding in agreement with what I said, and Dylan is the first to recover, a grin breaking out across his face as he holds out his hand for the notebook.

It’s not that I’ve never written a song. I’m just not the type to write one after the other. Dylan’s done most of the work in that department, and Ash and Holden each get at least one song in per album. I make my contributions to what they write, but it’s been a while since I’ve written anything myself.

“This is sheet music,” Dylan tells the others. “It’s pretty much a complete song.”

Asher’s eyes widen. “This is for Josie? She inspired you to write a whole song? Like, not just a lyric or two? Because that’s kind of what I thought you meant when you said you had one.”

I smirk at him. “Nope. It’s a whole song. I’ve been working on it all week and yeah, she inspired it. It’s even called Josephine.”

Our lead singer stares back at me like he’s never seen me before, and I get it. I’m not the type to write songs, but it has happened before. This, however, has never happened before. Me literally getting lyrical about a female. It just...it’s unheard of, but I’ve stopped fighting it.

And it feels good not to fight against something for once.

“Are you...” he trails off, swallows hard, and then tries again. “Are you shitting me right now?”

“Nope.” The response comes from Dylan, whose eyes are wide as saucers as he looks at Asher. “He’s really done it. Written a song called Josephine. It’s a good one, too. Maybe a few tweaks and we can make it even better. Here. Take a look.”

He hands over my notebook, and my mouth slowly goes dry as I realize that on that page, the one Dylan’s already seen and Ash is looking at now, my feelings for her are black on white. Clear as day. Fuck, I should’ve thought about that before.

Not that I’m ashamed or embarrassed. They know how I feel anyway. They can feel it through our bond, but the point is that we probably should’ve had a conversation about it before I called her *Our Omega* in the song.

As if Dylan heard the thought, he suddenly looks back at me, stares deeply into my eyes for a minute, then turns to look at the other two. “So, I’m thinking now is as good a time as any to talk about it.”

Asher looks up, his cheeks a shade paler now than they were before, but I see the acceptance shining from his eyes. “I’ve already told you how I feel about her. Obviously, we still need to make it official, but it’s kind of already happened, don’t you think? She’s as much a part of us as we are.”

Holden’s jaw grinds and he inhales deeply through his nostrils, then his eyes slam shut but he nods. “Yeah, it’s happened, all right. But it’s not too late...if anyone isn’t on board.”

Dylan balks visibly, his nostrils flaring as his eyes narrow to slits and his hands curl into fists at his sides. Blood rushes to his face and he turns bright red, his gaze hard as he glares at one of our packmates like he’s about to rip his throat out with his bare hands.

“Bro,” I say softly, moving over to put a hand on his shoulder just in case I need to physically restrain him. “He’s processing, is all. Speaking his thoughts out loud.”

My, my. How the tables have turned.

It's always Dylan talking me down instead of the other way around, but the difference is that I haven't been trying to suppress my nature my whole life. After that Alpha raped his mother, Dylan has been fighting his baser instincts, refusing to become the kind of Alpha who can't resist his urges.

We've tried telling him again and again that the Alpha who did it was a rapist. Same as any other fucking rapist. It had nothing to do with his Alpha instincts and everything to do with him being the lowest of the low, a coward who deserves to die a slow and painful death after he's forced to watch someone remove his testicles with a fucking spoon.

But I digress.

The point is that because Dylan represses so much, when it does rise, it comes hard and fast, and that can make him unpredictable. So I keep talking to him. Softly.

"Hear him out. He's not saying we should run. He's just saying that we could. We haven't completed the bond yet, so we could, but we're not going to." I send a hard look at Holden. "Are we?"

"No." He scoffs out a laugh. "Fuck if I know how this happened, but it did. Sooner we make it official, the better."

"This happening then?" I ask, needing it to be unanimous. Official. "We're claiming our Omega? Not just on paper, but for real?"

No one says anything to the contrary and fuck if my stomach doesn't do a little flip.

"We'll talk to her about it after the show tonight?" I suggest.

Nods all around.

"She'll agree, right?" Holden asks, his nostrils flaring and I can't remember a time when I've ever seen him so vulnerable.

"Yeah man," I tell him, because frankly, I don't want to imagine the alternative. "She loves us." I take a deep breath. "And we love her, too. It's going to work out. I know it."

"So, should we work on this new song?" Asher asks, holding up the sheet of music with the title *Josephine* at the top. "If we can get it down over the next few hours, we could debut it at the club tonight? Surprise our girl?"

There's another long minute of silence as everyone comes to grips with what we've just decided. It's huge. Massive, but I made my peace while I was writing that song. As far as I'm concerned, we've had an Omega for a while now. We just didn't know it yet.

“Yeah,” I agree. “Let’s do it.”

THIRTY-FIVE

JOSIE

THE BAND HAS BEEN UNCHARACTERISTICALLY WELL-BEHAVED

this past week leading up to the tour kick-off, and I'm damn proud to think I might've had a bit of a hand in that. Holden's parents have even agreed to stop nagging him about going on the campaign trail with them and I'm so happy for him and so relieved.

To my mind, it also proves that people are starting to see that they're serious musicians and not just troublemakers. Don't get me wrong, I know they've always had legions of fans. But we're also seeing an uptick in ticket sales now that they've hit pause on the shenanigans.

Like fans who might not have wanted to see them live before want to give them a try now that they're not afraid of going to one of their shows. It's weird, but it's a phenomenon that's very real. Bands can have so many fans, but still play to lackluster crowds in half-filled venues.

It's got to do with the difference between liking the band and loving their music. You can listen to their music without having to love the actual people making it. Now, however, the tickets are selling like hotcakes.

Presumably one of the reasons for that is that the unofficial kickoff for the new tour is happening in just a few hours, but according to the feedback we've been seeing online, a lot of fans are also saying that they're looking forward to being able to watch them for the first time now that they've calmed down.

Me? I'm just proud of everything we've accomplished together.

With the performance at the club only hours away, I've got butterflies all over. I'm still finagling all the details, and it's been a heck of a lot of work,

but it's going to be worth it. I'm sure of it.

My guys have been focused on their music, spending most of the last week writing, practicing, and getting ready for this, and I know they're going to put on one hell of a show.

As I walk through the club, clipboard in hand, I check every little detail of every little thing. Even with my head pounding with a pulsating headache and my stomach in knots, I'm not going to let anything ruin tonight's show.

My assistants are here too, helping me make sure we've everything well in hand before the doors open. Tonight's crowd is going to be one of the largest the club has ever hosted—we had to apply for additional permits—and every person who will be attending is to be treated like a VIP.

It's vital that tonight runs smoothly, and since it's the first big performance I've organized for them myself, it's even more important that all of us deliver. Their other shows have been good, but I inherited those plans from my predecessor. They were slap-dash and half done, but this one is all me.

And with the tour kicking off and the VIPs coming, I'm not gonna lie; I've never felt more pressure.

Which, of course, is really *not* helping on top of everything else. There seems to only be so much over the counter ibuprofen and ice packs and heating pads can do to counteract the heat my body has been hurtling towards faster than ever over the last few days.

I've been fighting and resisting it as hard as I can to put it off just a little bit longer. I refuse to be too sick to miss their first show, but I know that when push comes to shove, I won't have a choice.

I didn't tell the guys, but I took suppressants last night and this morning, just to try to get through tonight. But Thane Woods himself warned me that they may not have any effect until after my first heat, when the transition will be complete and my body chemistry will shift permanently.

No harm in trying though, right?

Those, combined with the arsenal of regular over the counter meds and the *two* icy showers I've had today where I scrubbed myself with scent blocker, are surely enough to see me through the evening.

At least all of it seems to have been enough that Alphas haven't been losing their shit around me completely. Though I've noticed that the few helping with set up are steering *very* clear of me. I've promised the guys that I'll watch from the side of the stage so they don't have to worry about me in a

crowd of people while they play.

“Josie?” Anya’s voice breaks into my thoughts, and panic sears through me when I realize I just zoned out when we still have so much left to do, but when I refocus and see that she’s smiling, the icy tentacles melt away from my internal organs.

“What’s up?” I ask, blinking in an attempt to regain my concentration, then I think back to the last thing I did and say it out loud to get my head back on track. “I’ve checked all the bars. They’re well-stocked and ready to go, but do you know if Basil has finished with the welcome drinks yet?”

“He’s done,” she confirms happily. “I’ve also personally checked every restroom, including the additional ones they’ve opened for tonight in the back. Sparkling clean and the attendants you hired are unpacking all their goodies as we speak.”

I breathe a sigh of relief. “The guys did their soundcheck earlier and they were happy with everything. Catering?”

“Present and accounted for,” she says, then pulls up her shoulders as she gives me an excited smile. “We’re ready, Josie. I really think we are.”

As I look around, taking in the lights, the speakers, the banners advertising the new album, and the general humdrum of activity going on around me, I smile. Because I think she’s right. I think we may just be ready.

The butterflies in my stomach still keep growing until they’re as big as sparrows, though.

Until it hurts.

“Josie?” Anya presses and I feel her cold hand on my upper arm. “Girl, you’re burning up. Are you okay?”

I wince as pain slices through my abdomen and clench my teeth against any sound that may try to escape, forcing a smile that’s more a grimace to my lips. “I’m fine,” I say, shakily digging two more little pills from the little bag slung across my chest. I pop them into my mouth and swallow them dry. “Just jittery, you know?”

She nods, but the concern lining her face doesn’t smooth out. “Why don’t you go and sit in the office for a few minutes and let us take care of the rest.”

I’m about to say *no*, but when another wave of dizziness rolls through my head and my lower belly twists in roaring agony, I know I need to say yes.

“I just need five minutes,” I promise her, forcing my back to straighten as I turn on my heel and make my way to the stairs. My lips part on a shuddering gasp as I feel slick pool in my panties and my pussy clench and

throb.

Oh god.

No.

No. no. no.

I all but run up the stairs, throwing myself into my dark office and slamming the door behind me, twisting the lock.

My phone rings loudly in the enclosed space and I shriek, fumbling to answer the call. It's Jax.

"Hey, beautiful," he says down the line and just the sound of his voice makes me want to whine. makes me want to beg him to drop everything he's doing and come here right the hell now.

"Hi," I manage, and I hope he doesn't hear the strain in my voice. "Everything okay?"

"It's better than okay," he says. "Where are you? We thought you'd be backstage by now. They're about to start letting people in."

I swallow. "I'll be there soon. Just a few more things to take care of. Don't wait for me, okay?"

"Is everything cool?"

"Yeah. Everything's great."

I seal my lips together against a whine as another jolt of pain and bone-aching need rushes through me. So strong that little dark spots dance along the edges of my vision.

"I'll have Anya escort me to the side of the stage as soon as I can be there, okay?" I say, interrupting whatever he'd been about to say next, my tone practically begging him to let me end the call.

"Uh. Okay. Yeah, sure. Just be careful. There are going to be a lot of Alphas in the crowd tonight. Maybe get Basil to walk you over too when you're ready?"

"Yeah. I will. See you soon. Kick ass out there, okay?!"

I hang up and practically launch myself into the sofa, frantically digging through my big purse for the toy I stashed there earlier. It's how I've been getting by the last few days and it seems I'm going to have to do this right here and now if I have any chance of making it through this show without bathing the audience in slick and inciting an Alpha turf war.

My fingers brush silicone and I rip the vibrator out of the bag, hurrying to get my tights down and hike up my skirt, keeping the lights off as I tuck myself into a corner of the sofa and long press the button on the side of the

device to get the shaft vibrating and the self-inflating knot to start filling up with air.

I felt like a crazy person when I overnighted the thing to my apartment last week, but now I know it was absolutely necessary. I mewl as I insert it into my soaked pussy, knowing I don't have time to play around. I need to get this done so I can get out there. I need to be there supporting them, making sure everything goes as planned.

Another toe-curling ache expands in my core and I wince, shifting to plant the vibrator against the cushion, pressing it hard into the leather so the suction cup roots it in place as I straddle both sides of it, gripping the backrest as I fuck myself on the slippery length.

Almost there.

I feel the knot almost swollen to its fullest and I reach down, rubbing my clit to bring myself to the edge. Just as I feel the orgasm coming, I curl my nails into the leather and sit down hard, pushing the artificial knot into myself as I come.

The suction cup breaks loose and I curl in on myself, rocking through the shaking orgasm. It's not the same as the real thing. Not even fucking close, but I feel the tension in my core relax, if only just a little, and the aching there subsides, too.

I leave the vibrator knotted in place while I clean myself up, using exactly six bottles of water, three facecloths, and the last of the scent blocking soap I had in my purse to try to wash away any traces of what I just did.

Outside, the doors open and the guests start pouring in.

It's time to get to work.

I click the button to deflate the artificial knot and whimper as I lose the pressure of it and pull it out. I put on a fresh pair of panties and pop another pill and straighten myself out before throwing a towel over the slick coated sofa and leaving.

Music swells all around me as the guests filter in, taking their welcome drinks with little squeals of joy while rushing to get the best spots on the floor.

I lock the door behind me and take a deep breath.

It's fucking showtime, baby. Let's do this.

My team and I are everywhere all at once. We're running around like headless chickens, but the atmosphere is downright festive, I get nothing but compliments from the Betas and Omegas I stop to speak to, and best of all,

the club is trending on social media—which will make the Becketts and Mr. Fischer very, very happy.

It makes me happy, too, considering I was the one who told them this would work. At least this is validation of the idea that the place could be the gold mine I promised them. The butterfly-sparrows race around, punching holes in my stomach lining every time someone approaches me. I hold my breath every time I get so much as a whiff of Alpha, moving immediately in the opposite direction, keeping either Anya or Basil close at my side as instructed.

I'm half-convinced something is going to go wrong. Very wrong, and that I'm going to get fired after all as a result.

If only I could see the guys... I know it would make me feel better, but I also know that I'd only distract them. And if what I suspect is happening right now is *actually* happening then this whole thing could blow up even worse than I'm imagining it could.

These days I'm not just horny; I'm fucking feral. And if the guys scent my heat on me then they're just as likely to lock me up with them backstage as they are to proceed with the show I planned half to death.

"Are the guys almost ready?" I ask Anya, speaking into my earpiece even though she's only a few feet away because the crowd is so loud.

She taps her earpiece and her voice cuts through all the noise. "They're holed up backstage, told Basil they needed to finetune one of the new songs they want to debut tonight before they start."

I'm half wondering why my team knows this and I don't, but I don't have time for petty jealousy right now.

When the moment finally arrives for them to take the stage, the butterfly-sparrows take flight one last time as I make my way up to the side of the stage and find a bouquet of flowers on the sidebar along with a tiny notecard. "For our muse. Thanks for being the spark."

Tears burn my eyes, but I don't let them fall, brushing them away before they have a chance.

I look up and see my guys—*my pack*—about to enter from the other side of the stage. Jax points at me with two fingers before bringing those fingers to his lips to kiss in a salute. Asher mouths the word *hot* at me and the other two grin like idiots.

The DJ we hired to keep the crowd entertained between sets plays an anticipatory tune that makes the audience laugh as they go wild.

The atmosphere is electric now. Tiny hairs all over my body stand on end and the faintly chalky scent of the smoke from the machines drifts to my nostrils as the stage is shrouded in the stuff. “Here they are, everybody! Please make some noise for Fiiiiiiiiirebrand!”

As the DJ announces them, the place erupts in deafening noise. Chants. Cheers. Hollers. Applause. A few shrieks.

I’ve known who they are since before I started, but here, now, is when it gets real. They’re not just my guys. They’re superstars. Alphas who make the town’s who’s-who wet themselves just by walking onto a stage.

One by one, they appear as the smoke thins. Ash is up front, his long fingers wrapped around the microphone and his guitar hangs around his shoulders, his free hand resting on top of it. His eyes are already closed as Jax taps his drumsticks together.

He’s right at the back, almost completely swallowed by the stage from my point of view so close up, but I can see his head. I can see the thrill on his features as his arms start flying, moving so fast they’re a blur by the time Ash starts singing.

Dylan and Holden are between the two, brows furrowed in concentration as they play a song I recognize from back when they first burst onto the scene. The crowd goes crazy for it, singing along to every word and swaying as though they’ve become a single entity.

At the sight, I realize the butterflies are gone. It’s a truly magical, transcendent moment for me. I organized this. I put this together down to the last detail, and it’s a hit. Professionally, it’s probably the biggest success I’ve ever had, and the victory of that is so damn sweet that it brings the tears back to my eyes.

All those years being an assistant, and then a junior manager doing damage control and grunt work. And now I’m here. It’s...unbelievable.

The magic of the moment goes beyond that, though, stretching straight past my professional success and into my heart of hearts. That place where the guys now live. That place they own. It’s like I can feel the spell they’re weaving in the center of my soul, and it unlocks something in me.

Something unexpected.

The urge to fight the transformation is suddenly gone. Making tonight happen was my goal, and the guys are blowing the roof off.

I listen in rapture at their skill and talent as they move from a few old hits to some newer songs. And they’re *so good*. Even better than the hits on their

last album and every word resonates with me as if I somehow had a hand in helping them write the lyrics, which I most definitely did not.

After the crowd has cheered their hearts out at the close of another song, Dylan steps up to a microphone with Holden moving closer on the other side. Jax moves his head in over his drum set, putting his mouth closer to the mic he rarely uses there.

Asher stares right at me as the cheers start winding down, then he smiles but doesn't turn back to their adoring fans. He keeps looking at me and I'm frozen in place, held hostage in that stare.

"This is another new one. It's called Josephine. We hope you love it as much as we do."

Shock freezes me in place.

What?

They're all looking at me as they're performing and strangely, they've all got a bit to sing in this one. They're still backing up Asher, but each one has a solo line in the chorus. I don't think I've ever seen them do anything like it.

"She gave me a taste. A squeeze. A chase. She's making me sweat and beg and break." I smile when Jax smirks at me when he sings it. I'm not sure he can see the smile, but it doesn't matter. I can't be a hundred percent sure, but I suspect he's the one who wrote that line.

"Lost in sin and flesh and drink, I was empty and searching for a sign," Asher croons, gaze locked on mine. "Until you came along and the entire world aligned."

As they keep going, whatever it was that unlocked inside me earlier is shoved right open.

At that moment, it's like I can feel my body pushing past the block the suppressants put in place, and as the thought strikes, I recognize the sensation immediately. It comes on like a bullet train and I'm standing on the tracks, unable to get out of the way before...

Fuck.

I reach out to steady myself as another violent cramp rips through my stomach, making my eyes cross at the pain.

Sweat slicks across my chest and I blink, trying to regain my focus as a rush of heat between my legs signals the release of slick drenching my freshly changed panties. It's like I can't think. I'm struggling to remember how to just breathe through the fog of aching desire filling my head like smoke.

When I glance down at my hands, they're shaking. And I know in my bones there's no stopping this now.

I ache to be touched, but not by just anyone. I ache for...

Fuck.

Fuck, I need to get out of here.

This is dangerous. Too many Alphas around. Shit, why now?

Move, Josie. Stop thinking about doing it and just leave.

I trip in my haste to run away, touching my earpiece to shout for Basil to have a car brought around right fucking now. I won't be the one who ruins this show. Not after I worked so hard to make it their best one yet.

THIRTY-SIX

A S H E R

THE LAST FEW verses of the songs are hard as fuck to get through. No, not hard. Torturous. *Let's just go with fucking hell.*

Glancing over my shoulder, I see Jax's eyes have practically gone crossed and his nostrils are flaring as his chest heaves with giant gulps of air. He's tripping over his beats, his arms still moving but anyone with a practiced ear will notice that he's missing more than he's hitting.

Dylan is standing like an army recruit waiting for his instructor on his first day of training. His spine is ramrod straight and his shoulders may as well have been made of stone. Eyes wide, he looks like his fight or flight response has kicked in and he's a breath away from losing his shit either way.

Holden seems to want to punch something, his teeth are locked together so hard. He's also standing with his legs planted so wide, it's like he's literally bracing himself to take a hit. They're all pale. I'm sure I am, too.

My cock is trying to punch through my jeans, and I've been caught up in Josie's scent before, but she's in heat. She's definitely in heat and I'm not the only one who noticed.

We finish the song and when I look over again, she's gone.

The crowd screams for an encore but by the worried expressions on my pack's faces and what I feel through the bond I know that is *not* going to happen tonight. We need to find Josie. We need to help her through this.

I grab the microphone and give the crowd a cocky smirk I'm not feeling at all. "Thank you, everybody! We're Firebrand and that's a wrap from us. Thanks for being fucking incredible."

I blow a kiss at the crowd, release the mic, step away, spin around, and then feel the others rushing offstage behind me. One of Josie's assistants is

there with a clipboard. As we approach, she steps into my path. “Josephine asked me to tell you there are five press interviews lined up. All with reporters you like. You’ve also got a surprise meet-and-greet. The fans we selected haven’t been informed yet, but—”

“We’re not doing any of that,” Holden says firmly as he steps up to my side. “Where is she?”

“Uh.” Anna blinks hard. “I’m not sure, actually. She said she wasn’t feeling well, so I guess she went home? She just told Basil to take over managing the rest of the evening.”

Dylan grabs Anya by the arms. “Which way?”

She points backstage, and to, I assume, the door that leads out to the rear entry. “Basil organized her ride. Maybe he could—”

“I know where she is,” I say.

“Then what the fuck are we waiting for?” Jax all but shouts. “Let’s go.”

It’s her office. That’s her nest. It’s where she’ll have gone if she followed her instincts. With pretty much everyone from the company here, we’ll also have privacy there to do what needs to be done.

We’ll just have to hope it’s either over by Monday, or else we’ll have to bring her someplace else to ride out the rest. But for now, we just need to get to her. That’s what’s important. She needs us. And we need to be there for her. Like she’s been there for us.

Dylan takes off with Jax behind him, then Holden strides after them like a man on a mission. As always, I’m the one who has to take care of business, but especially this time, I don’t mind. This is for Josie, and there’s nothing I wouldn’t do for her.

“Tell the press we’ve got a family emergency to attend to and that we’ll make it up to them. They’ll understand.” My thoughts are cloudy with worry and need, but I manage to come up with a plan to appease the wolves. “You said we had five interviews, right?”

“Yes.”

“So tell those five reporters that they get to choose a day to spend with us. Any day except for the next few, got it? A full day, all-access pass should be enough, don’t you think?”

Anna’s eyes go wide on mine. “Are you sure? You’ve never done anything like that before.”

“We’re an all-new Firebrand, haven’t you heard? We’re all about the never-been-done-before experiences these days. I’ve got to go.” I start

turning away from her before I remember about the surprise meet-and-greet Josie set up. “One last thing. Have you got a list of the fans who would’ve met us tonight?”

“I do. Josie sent them tickets to the show after they got picked from an online draw. Why?”

My mind races, but I really want to do right by her. If she organized this, it’s important that we don’t just ignore it.

“Okay, we’re not doing the meet-and-greet tonight, but keep the list. We’ll come up with something to do for those fans. I’m just not sure what.”

“It’s happening, isn’t it?” Anya says, jarring me out of my thoughts. “She’s in heat.”

I nod gravely, throwing a hand through my hair.

“Then you better go.”

She doesn’t have to tell me twice.

I hightail it to the parking lot. The guys are already in the car, and they’re all scowling at me as I get it. Holden even punches my arm. “The fuck took you so long?”

“Seriously? Am I the only one who realizes how important tonight was to her? She set up the interviews and the meet-and-greets, idiots. Someone had to take care of all that before we bailed.”

His jaw grinds, but he doesn’t argue. Meanwhile, Dylan is behind the steering wheel and he’s already gunning it toward the record label’s offices. Since no one is expecting us to leave so soon after the show, we’re not followed and surprisingly, we manage to make a clean getaway.

The office floor is quiet but I know she’s here. I can feel it in my bones. Without a word, we head upstairs, a sense of urgency coursing through the bond as we jog to the elevator and down the hall.

Jax reaches her door first and he bursts in without knocking, wildly looking around as he enters. He sucks in a sharp breath and I’m through the doorway not a second later.

Josie *is* here, but she’s not doing so well. Sitting on the floor with her knees drawn up to her chest and her head resting on her arms locked around them, she’s crying softly, whimpering until she lifts her gaze when she hears us.

Holden pushes past me and strides over to her, sinking down to his knees and pulling her into his arms. “Shh, hey, *hey*, it’s okay. We got you. We got you. We’re here now. What do you need?”

She's shaking like a leaf when I reach them, sitting down on my ass behind her so I'm facing Holden. I pull her against my chest, wrapping my arms around her middle, pressing her to me as I begin to purr.

Jax and Dylan sit down on either side of us, reaching for her without pulling her out of Holden's or my grip. Dylan puts his hands on her thigh and Jax reaches in to wipe the tears from her cheeks.

"Come on, baby," Holden says, running a trail of kisses over her collar. "Tell us what to do.

She looks up, still shaking. "I wish I could tell you, but I'm not sure what I need. I just...I need..."

"Fuck's sake," Jax growls as he hooks an arm around her hips and pulls her to him. "You *know* what she needs. *I* know what she needs. Let's not be delicate about it. Just get out of my way."

As the words leave his mouth, he slams his lips down on hers and devours her like one of those cartoon cats eating a fish and pulling a clean, whole skeleton out of its mouth only a second later. He pushes her down and lifts her shirt over her head, tossing it away before pulling off his own.

I've done a lot of things with Jax over the years. *A lot*. I've even fucked with him a few times, but I've never seen him like this. *Felt* him like this.

On the other hand, I'm feeling pretty out of it myself. Her scent is everywhere. Sweeter and stronger than I've ever smelled it. It reminds me of simpler times. Days spent on the beach eating sun-warmed fruit while waves lazily crash against the shore. It's enough to make me rock hard and seeing through tunnel vision.

This is going to be a steep learning curve since none of us have ever been with an Omega before never mind helped one through a heat, but Jax seems to be doing well just winging it, so I go with it, riding the wave he created. I kick off my shoes, then pull off my shirt and finally, I sit up on my knees to get my pants off.

Dylan and Holden watch as Jax flattens himself over her and slides his hand into her waistband. She moans as soon as his fingers disappear beneath the fabric.

Jax groans and I know he's found her soaking wet for us.

Straining under him, she rolls her hips—presumably to push his fingers deeper inside—and she's moaning almost uncontrollably into their heated kiss now. I'm hard as fuck, my cock begging to join the action.

As luck has it, I'm the first one naked and as Jax withdraws his hand from

her skirt to pull it off, he glances over at me and realizes it. “Fucker,” he mutters, but then he goes back to her mouth to keep kissing her even as he slides off her body.

It takes me a beat to realize what he’s doing. Giving me space. I take it immediately, rolling her tights and her panties off before spreading her legs and settling on my knees between them.

It’s only been a couple minutes since we got in here, but she’s coated in shiny slickness and my cock swells even more at the sight of it. I reach between us almost in a trance, gliding my fingers through her wetness and then bringing those same digits to my mouth to taste her.

I groan and my Omega mewls, her lids growing heavy as she breaks her kiss with Jax to watch me taste her. “Please, Asher. I need your knot.”

I lick my lips, bending to kiss her as I position my tip at her entrance. I hold her knees to keep them spread and then thrust into her, knowing that gentle and slow isn’t what she needs right now. She whimpers into Jax’s mouth, and it’s like the sound finally spurs Holden and Dylan into motion.

Dylan tears at his shirt, getting it off in record time while Holden moves his hands to her breasts. Tweaking her nipple with the fingers of one hand, he unhooks the clasp at the front of her bra and bends over to seal his mouth over the nipple his fingers aren’t on.

Enveloped by her hot, wet heat, my vision blurs and my heart is pounding in my ears, my instincts roaring at me from deep within to take her hard and fast. To stop caring about what the others are doing and just to get the job done.

So that’s what I do. Turning my gaze back to her, I catch glimpses of the tortured agony on her delicate features between Jax and Holden’s heads, and though I would’ve preferred to see her face right about now, this isn’t about me.

Her inner muscles are tense as hell, trying to lock me to her as I withdraw, so I slam back into her quickly, needing her to know that I’m here and I won’t leave until she’s ready. My hips move back again before I drive into her, my thrusts becoming more and more punishing with every second that passes. More frenzied as my lips pull back over my teeth and every panting breath hisses out of my mouth with one thought pulsing through my mind.

Mine.

Mine.

Ours.

Josie's hips are undulating beneath me, moans spilling into her kiss with Jax until Dylan takes over from him, kissing her slower than Jax did, more passion and less domination. She seems to like it just as much.

Constricting around me, she squeezes my shaft until my eyes are practically crossed, my balls already starting to tighten and my knot at full fucking ready now. When she bears down to meet my next thrust, she's right against it and a growl rips out of me.

I know that's what she wants, and I'm more than willing to give it to her, but I need more than to knot her right now.

I want to make her mine. Make her ours in a way that can't be so easily undone.

"Be our Omega," I pant as I fuck my girl. "Be ours."

She gasps, her eyes snapping open to meet mine. Hers fill with tears and the other guys speak up.

"It's you," Holden whispers, pressing a kiss to the side of her neck before looking into her eyes. "It's always going to be you, Jo."

"Bond with us," Jax pleads. "Let us claim you for real."

She chokes up, her heated gaze flitting from Jax to Dylan.

He nods. "Only if it's what you want," he says, though I can tell it pains him to say it.

"Yes," she blurts, her chest shuddering with emotion as she blinks tears away. "Fuck yes."

I let my body take control and pound her pussy until her little gasping moans are a staccato song to my every thrust. Until she's coming and I'm fucking electric inside of her, ready to burst.

I screw my eyes shut and force my knot into her. Intense pleasure thunders through me, another growl catching at the back of my throat. Josie screams into Dylan's mouth and he brings up a hand to catch her cheek, stroking it reassuringly as he holds her against him.

Josie screams as I flex my hips, locking even deeper into her as I come hard.

The orgasm shreds my brain and my body alike with the force of it and in the aftermath I taste copper and blink, looking down to see a ridge of angry red flesh just above her left collarbone.

In the aftermath, I'm panting. Struggling to catch my breath, and then I feel it.

I feel *her*.

A soft whisper in my senses, growing stronger by the second. I feel her satisfaction. Her relief. Her joy. Her *peace*.

She's pack now.

Her tether is lighter and brighter than the others, and having her there makes me feel...flutters. Butterflies.

I pull her to me and she rests the side of her face against my chest, sniffing as she feels the bond come through.

"It feels..." she trails off. "I can feel you, Ash. I can feel..."

"I know," I tell her, kissing the top of her head. "I know."

It's incredible.

THIRTY-SEVEN

JOSIE

I'VE BEEN BONDED.

It feels like nothing I could've ever imagined and that's with only *one* of my mates taking up space in my heart. I'm tired and delirious and feeling alternately like sunshine and then like absolute shit, but I'm dying to feel the rest of them here with me, where they belong.

Asher's knot inside of me seems to unlock something, soothing a bone deep ache deep within, until it begins to deflate.

It takes longer than I remember it taking the few other times the pack has knotted me, but I think that's only because the instant I feel Asher's knot begin to soften and deflate, the pain starts to come back. The guys croon reassurances while Asher holds me, but by the time he's slipping out of me, my breathing has turned rapid again and that ache that was sated only fifteen or twenty minutes earlier has returned in full force.

"Is it supposed to hurt this much?" I gasp, itching out shakily and finding the steadying arm of Holden. He holds me tight as I try to move and wince as the shift makes more pain punch through my abdomen. Along with the pain comes a rush of something else.

Something that makes Holden's warm wood and chocolatey orange scent smell ten times as strong. Makes my focus narrow to pinpricks. Makes my pussy flood with slick.

"Holden," I mewl.

"I got you, baby," he says in a low timber, pushing his way around and through the others to get closer to me while Asher strokes my hair and Jax and Dylan go for more damp towels and blankets and water. "Don't try to move. Let me come to you."

“Ow,” I whine, but then he’s there. He’s there and I can feel the heat of him lying down beside me. I can feel a damp towel cleaning away Asher’s seed from my pussy and thighs and then he’s there.

Holden’s large fingers press against my clit, rubbing in perfect circles as he bends his head to suck a nipple into his mouth. I arch my back, tears pricking at the backs of my closed eyelids as the sensations fan out in webs of ecstasy, cascading over my body until every inch of me is covered in goosebumps.

But it still isn’t enough.

“Holden,” I say on a breath. “Holden, please, I need...I need—”

“I know what you need. I’ve got you. We’ve all got you.”

Jax kneels down beside me at the same time Holden gently pushes apart my thighs and kneels there, still stroking my slick pussy. I lean up on my elbows as Jax puts a glass of water to my lips, tipping it until I feel the cool liquid on my lips and force myself to take a few long swallows. Some of it drips down my chin and Jax leans in to lick it from my skin, a slight growl on his lips. The sound makes me shiver and as I feel the press of Holden at my entrance, Jax’s lips have reached my chin and then the corner of my lips and as Holden enters me, Jax kisses me.

I moan into his mouth and as I lie back down flat he follows me down, kissing me until my head is back on the carpet. No, not the carpet. Someone has laid pillows under my head and I sense more than scent or feel that it was Asher.

Holden hooks my legs over his shoulders, lifting my ass from the carpet and I break my kiss with Jax for only long enough to see Dylan flattening several throw blankets over the carpet, making a makeshift bed.

The change in angle with Holden inside of me makes my eyes roll in pleasure and my toes curl in the air over his shoulders.

“Oh, she likes that, bro,” Jax says and I can feel the smile in his next kiss. “Hold her up like that while you fuck her.”

Holden does as he’s told, wrapping strong hands around my hips to hold me in place as he drives into me from his knees. His head tips back and I fucking *love* seeing him like this. Open and vulnerable. Enjoying me. Taking pleasure in *me*.

It’s so hot that when Dylan comes back with the towels and drops them in favor of reaching over Holden to rub my clit while his packmate fucks me, I come undone within seconds.

I feel the gush of slick that comes as I shout out my pleasure and my cheeks stain pink but when I open my eyes again, still shaking from the effects of the orgasm, I can see no one looks put off by it.

If anything, they look even more turned on. I find four pairs of hungry, almost lupine eyes staring back at me with a crazed lust. Pupils dilated so their eyes appear to be black.

They're in rut, I realize, or if they aren't they are damn close to it.

Which means that right now, they need me just as much as I need them.

My gaze flits to Jax as Holden continues to fuck me, his knot almost fully swollen now.

There's a knot of a different kind between Jax's brows and I can see the sweat beading at his hairline. He needs me.

"Jax, give me your cock," I tell him and his brows lower, lips parting. For one heartbreaking second I think he might say no. But then I think the only reason he would is because he doesn't want to make this about him. He wants to take care of *me*. And that's just ridiculous. This is as much about him as it is about me. It's about all of us together.

"Please," I add. "I want to taste you."

His Adam's apple bobs as he moves into position next to me, lying down so I won't have to keep my head lifted. Once he's lined up, I tip my chin up and open wide, taking him into my mouth. He's got a wicked curve to his cock I hadn't noticed before and I think it's no wonder he was hitting all of those delicious places inside of me back at that dive bar. I suck on his tip and feel his hand come around, grabbing a handful of my hair at the nape of my neck as he trembles from the sensation.

I smile around his length, loving how every thrust of Holden's powerful hips between my legs makes my throat take Jax just a little deeper. It's so hot I feel like I could actually melt. And then Jax moves. It's like he can't help himself and I love that. I love that he can't control himself with me.

I love every stroke of his hips as he fucks my mouth, taking what he needs.

"Fuck, *Jo*," he says, strained. "Fuck, your mouth feels so good."

"Are you ready, baby?" Holden asks me and I let out a little whimper moan around Jax's cock, my core tightening in anticipation.

Jax slips out of my mouth and I cry out at the loss of him, tasting salt on my lips.

"We'll have more time for that later, little spitfire. It's you and Holden

now. It's time."

As Jax says it, Holden knots me. His hips flex and his grip moves to my thighs, holding my legs tight against his chest as he pushes his knot inside. A choked sound escapes me and my legs shake like leaves as he fills me up, roaring his release.

"Get her up," he all but shouts, frantic, his voice three octaves deeper than I've ever heard it.

I feel Dylan against my back, helping me to sit up enough that Holden can get his hands on me.

I cry out as he bites me but it's more from the shock of it than anything. The pleasure throbbing down below is enough to erase almost all of the pain of his bite.

When Holden releases me, falling to sit down onto his calves, I'm dizzy with warring chemical reactions as my body struggles through it all.

When I'm able to focus again, I feel a slight sting and realize Dylan is cleaning the wounds on my collar with a damp cloth. But I'm not looking at him. I'm looking at the grinning idiot behind him.

Holden and I are still locked together and the strong silent Alpha is smiling down at me so big that there are dimples in his cheeks. I had no idea he had dimples, but that smile?

That smile is so contagious that I feel it all the way in my stomach.

No.

That's not just from his shit eating grin.

It's *him*.

I laugh, pressing a hand to my chest as if I could feel the part of him that made a home there, just below the surface of my skin and muscle and bone.

He's strength and stability and I'm filled with a deep sense of caring that makes me cry like a fucking baby.

"What did you do?" Dylan hisses, stopping his cleaning of my wounds to pull my head into his lap and cradle it, crooning sweet nothings to me.

"He didn't," I choke out. "He didn't do anything. He's just...I can feel him. I never thought it would feel like this, Dylan. It's amazing."

I see a glimmer of damp in his eyes before he manages to regain control of his emotions and brushes the tears from my cheeks. "You're amazing," he tells me. "Our perfect Omega."

He begins to purr and I feel my eyelids flutter as a feeling of intense calm washes over me. The pain in my abdomen is bearable right now. Not gone,

but tempered for the moment with Holden still locked inside of me. And I think maybe the low fever I had broke because I'm not shivering anymore.

"That's it, sweet girl," Dylan coos. "Rest now."

The next time I open my eyes, there's weak daylight filtering in through the slits in the blinds around the office. Just enough to give the whole room a soft golden glow.

I feel Asher and Holden. Their tethers in my chest radiating peace.

When I lift my head from the nest of pillows and blankets I find them dozing near the outer edges of the makeshift bed we've made.

"Morning, beautiful," Jax says and I twist my head around to find him leaning against my desk with a mug of coffee in his hands. His jeans slung low on his tattooed hips. His tatted chest bare and looking somehow bigger than I remember.

I scent him and my mouth waters. My vision blurs at the edges and that pain—the pain that'd been slumbering fitfully all night comes screaming back into focus.

He must see something in my face crumple because within seconds the coffee cup is forgotten on the desktop and he's here with me.

Holden and Asher are waking up, rushing to crawl their way over as well.

"Jo?" Asher asks. "Hey, you okay?"

"Shit, she's burning up again," Holden says, recoiling his hand after trying to brush my hair back from my face.

"I got this," Jax says, making a waving motion to shoo the others away as Dylan rolls over and groans something unintelligible, still half asleep.

"Help me get her clothes off," Jax says and when I look down, I find that I'm dressed again. Well, only halfway. The guys have put me in one of Dylan's t-shirts and if I'm not mistaken, Holden's boxer shorts.

I yelp as Holden tugs them down my legs, flipping me onto my back in the process. "Don't worry, baby," he says. "You can have them back when we're through."

I blink as Jax tugs the shirt from my torso and up over my head. It snags on my hair and he deftly untangles it, tossing the shirt onto Dylan.

"It hurts," I sniff, reaching down between my legs to try to douse the fire there.

Jax rushes to tear off his jeans, accidentally kicking Dylan in the process.

"The hell, man?"

He notices I'm awake and curses, rushing to get himself extricated from a

pile of blankets. “Why didn’t anyone tell me she was awake?”

No one answers him as Jax bends down over me, pushing an arm around my back to lift me from the mess of blankets, deftly turning me until I’m flipped over and on my knees. “I read that this position can sometimes provide more relief,” he says by way of explanation before I feel his fingers on my pussy.

My ass perks up and my back arches as he pushes one finger into my opening and then two, moving them in and out while his thumb strokes my clit.

“Jax, I need your knot,” I beg him. His fingers are providing some relief, but I need the pressure only his knot can provide.

“And you need orgasms,” Jax says behind me. “I read that, too. Lots and lots of orgasms. I want at least one before I get inside of you and lucky for you, I’m *very* good at this.”

Even in the few seconds it took him to finish those three sentences, I can feel my orgasm start to build, giving credence to his words. “That’s it,” he says. “Come for me, you naughty girl.”

I moan, pushing back into his fingers as they work their magic inside of me. My fingers curl into the blankets and then I open my eyes to find Dylan watching me, and I beckon him over by licking my lips.

He senses my desire and doesn’t waste a second, throwing off his blanket cloak to reveal that he was already rock hard beneath it. I open my mouth and he kneels before me, getting the right angle before he pushes himself into my hot mouth.

The salty taste of him and the press of his length at the back of my throat sends me spiraling out of control.

My thighs squeeze as an orgasm rips out of me and Jax, feeling me clench around his fingers, fucks me harder and faster while stroking more rapidly with his thumb. The orgasm is so strong that I scream around Dylan’s cock in my mouth, trying to escape the sensation that’s almost too strong, but Jax holds me there, forcing me to feel every second of pleasure and then all at once, his fingers are gone and his cock has replaced them.

He slams into me, pushing me forward so I choke on Dylan’s cock, but fuck if that doesn’t just turn me on even more.

“Fuck!” Jax hisses behind me.

“You have no idea what you’re in for, Josie girl,” he pants, fucking me with powerful strokes.

“I’m going to fuck your pussy just like this every goddamned day.”

Thrust, thrust, thrust.

“I’m going to be your good fucking boy.”

Thrust, thrust, thrust.

“Until you beg me to be bad.”

I moan around Dylan’s cock and somewhere below me, I feel Holden’s hands join the party. He rubs my clit while Jax fucks me and Asher’s hot mouth finds one of my breasts.

It’s too much.

It’s everything.

It’s...

“I’m going to make you mine,” Jax growls just an instant before I feel his grip tighten on my hips and I don’t have time to prepare myself before he’s forcing his knot into my pussy, making me see stars. A hand wraps around my hair and Dylan’s cock pops free of my lips as Jax jerks me against his chest and his teeth find purchase in the crook of my neck.

“Ah! Jax!”

He growls possessively as he marks me and it’s not even a full second before I feel him. His tether snapping into place without an instant’s hesitation. It’s chaos and order. It’s fire meeting gasoline.

It’s the purest freedom and an endless amount of forgiveness. I know all at once that Jax will never abandon me. *Never*. No matter what I do. No matter what mistakes I might make. He will always be there. He will always love me.

My heart squeezes and Jax removes his teeth, kissing the spot just next to his bite in a way that makes me shiver. He sits back, bringing me with him as he rests his head against my back, our breathing evening out, finding a matching rhythm.

“Wow,” he says, shuddering. “You feel like sunshine.”

“And you feel like fire,” I tell him.

He chuckles at that, kissing my back again.

“How do you feel?” he asks.

I take stock, clenching around him in my pussy in a way that makes him groan and nuzzle into the back of my neck, marking me with his scent.

“I feel okay,” I tell him honestly. “A little overheated and the pain is still there, but it’s duller. A *lot* duller.”

“Good. That was the goal.”

It's my turn to chuckle and I bring his hand up to my mouth to kiss his knuckles.

"So, orgasms, eh?" Dylan says, coming over to sit on the couch just next to where Jax and I are curled up on the floor. "How many should she have before this is through?" he asks Jax.

"As many as we can give her. And all the knotting she can handle."

Dylan nods. "Lift her onto the couch."

"I'm kind of locked in there at the moment, bro."

Dylan rolls his eyes at his packmate. "I know, man, just bring her up."

He pats the couch and Jax maneuvers himself so he can lift me with him as he rises and then seats us both down on the couch, me on his lap with his knotted cock still locked tight inside me.

"What are you doing?" I ask Dylan, seeing a mischievous gleam in his eyes that I don't see often.

"You'll see," he promises and then tells Jax to lean back.

Jax does as Dylan says and leans back, taking me with him until the space where we're knotted together is on full display for Dylan in front of us.

I'm more than a little embarrassed, but Dylan just looks even more turned on.

"Let's see if I can get you to come with Jax still knotted inside of you."

"What?"

"Just watch the balls, man," Jax warns, snaking his arms around my waist to hold me to him. Not at all put off when Dylan leans in and closes his mouth over my clit.

The warmth and sensation spears through me like an electric jolt and when he starts moving his tongue Jax actually has to hold me down to keep me from squirming at the intensity of the pleasure. Jax's breath fans over my ear, his little groans in response to my pussy clenching around him turning me on even more.

"Oh," I gasp, reaching down to clench Dylan's hair, holding him to me as he eats my greedy pussy until I come undone. And then the fucker does it *again*.

"There we go," he says, triumphant as I tremble in Jax's arms after the *second* orgasm. He swipes the back of a hand over his glistening lips and my pussy throbs with little pulses of pleasure in time with my heartbeat, even though Jax is finally soft enough to slide free.

"My turn," Dylan says as Jax extricates himself from beneath me and he

can't seem to wait another second before getting inside of me. He doesn't even clean away Jax's seed before he's lining himself up at my entrance, his eyes dark and filled with desire.

"Ugh," he grunts as he seats himself inside of me, cradling the back of my neck as he adjusts to the feel of me. "Fuck, sweet girl, you're—" He kisses my collar.

"So."

He kisses my chin.

"Perfect."

My lips.

I wrap my arms around him, pressing my fingers into the dips at the base of his back, urging him to move.

He lifts my leg between us, letting it rest against his torso as he uses the better angle to drill into me deep.

But it isn't long at all before his knot is so swollen and so hard that he can't get himself in deep enough anymore and I know that he can't hold out much longer.

Good, because neither can I.

"You ready?"

"Fuck yes."

"Where do you want it?"

I somehow know exactly what he means and I quickly shove my hair to one side, indicating the spot next to Jax's bite. It feels fitting somehow, that theirs should be together. "Here," I tell him, my voice raised an octave too high.

Dylan shows me his teeth and I bare my throat to him, holding my breath as he flicks his hips forward, working himself into me smoothly, but once his knot is seated inside, it's his bite that pushes me to climax. It's knowing that this is it. The last bond.

That last tether that will make me more than just Josie.

More than their Omega.

It will make me *pack*.

Dylan comes inside me so hard he whimpers with his mouth still closed over my flesh and I know instantly when his tether finds its way into my soul.

He feels like water. Constant. Flowing.

His waves crash over me with promises of love and protection and I don't think I've ever felt more safe in the embrace of anyone.

“You really do feel like sunshine,” he murmurs into the crook of my neck and I can sense his smile in the words. “Warm and bright. Life sustaining.”

I kiss his temple as he pulls back to look me in the eyes and brushes the sweat-dampened hair back from my face. “You know? Even with all the craziness, I think this might be the best day of my life.”

He rubs his nose against mine and I giggle when he pulls back to kiss the tip of it.

“How’s the pain?”

I think about it. “Barely there.”

“Good,” he says on a sigh, letting his forehead fall to rest against mine. “Because I don’t know about you but I’m hungry enough to eat a whole cow.”

As if on cue, my stomach rumbles and I hear the others chuckling around us.

“What does our Omega feel like?” Asher asks. “Thai? Maybe Italian? Something high protein. How about steak and eggs?”

“Is all of the above an option?”

“Absofuckinglutely,” Jax says. “I’m on it.”

The process of being their Omega was a lot more intense to carry out than I expected.

I kind of thought it would be a wham-bam-bite kind of deal, but it’s not.

Now, at the end of it all, or at least, in this intermission my body has granted me, I realize it was so much slower, so much more erotic and loving and meaningful than I ever thought it could be.

I feel complete. And I know they feel it, too.

There’s no regret coming through their tethers. Instead there’s a strong sort of certainty that makes me feel more at home than I ever have anywhere else in this world. And I just know, *this* is where I’m meant to be.

This is *what* I’m meant to be.

Thank you so much for reading *CRESCENDO*! For a cute little epilogue from our girl and the band, join my [omegaverse-only newsletter](#). Don’t forget to pre-order the next book this hot standalone series, *SALVATION* ♥

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