



KNOT YOUR
FOREVER

JADED OMEGAS PART FOUR

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR
JARICA JAMES

KNOT YOUR FOREVER

JADED OMEGAS BOOK FOUR

JARICA JAMES

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To Justin

*Your loss threatened to break me but I knew you'd never allow that. So,
instead I poured my heart out on these pages.*

*To anyone who experienced loss, I see you on those nights that it's not easy
to breathe without them. You're not alone. <3*

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

I started this book so many times but it took me nearly 3 years to finish. The story I started with was not Shaye and her pack's journey but I'm so happy it ended up being them. The emotions in this book are strong, but they all come from my soul. This journey was personal to me, though my loss was much different than Shaye's.

This one was tough to write but I hope that I've done it justice. Enjoy their journey, it's not one of grief and loss only, but of hope and healing as well.

Thanks for reading,
Jarica

BLURB

Losing your mate is said to be one of the most painful experiences an omega can face, I now know how true that is.

Now I have to face a world without Everett. He was my best friend, my mate, and my alpha.

It didn't take long before I decided that it was too hard to keep going. I just have one last piece of unfinished business... meeting his twin, Lake, a year after Everett's passing, to read the letters he left us.

Only Lake isn't alone. His pack is worried about his sudden silence and crashes our reunion.

Riven, Micah, and Drew all want to keep their packmate from drowning in his pain. But then something happens that none of us expect... we aren't just strangers, but pack.

Now we're facing the ghost of Everett together and the guys want to help me move on, but I'm not so sure I can. I've already lost one mate and I'm terrified to let myself love again.

Am I strong enough to embrace my new forever or will my grief claim me first?

This is a standalone in the Jaded Omega Series. There will be topics such as grief, losing a mate, moving on, thoughts of suicide, and past trauma. This is a pack that will find their healing journey together against all odds.

TRIGGER WARNING

This book does contain mentions and thoughts of suicide, loss, grief, and all the emotions that come with losing a mate.

Please only read if you feel comfortable with those topics.

Stay safe <3

CHAPTER
ONE

Shaye
Sixteen Years Old

I could never quite pinpoint the day I fell in love with Everett Greene. It was a subtle shift in how I saw him at first. The small smiles that made my heart beat a bit faster, sweet brushes of his hand over mine, and small moments we spent together sharing secret looks.

For several years we were too scared to take that step or tell each other how we felt.

Then I found myself dreaming about this alpha at night and thinking about him each morning. He haunted my thoughts in the best way.

When my parents were separating, he was there to hold me when the tears were falling down my cheeks. He told me that everything would be alright and I would always have him by my side.

Everett was a twin, which meant it wasn't usually just the two of us. Lake was a permanent fixture in our lives and I loved him as much as I loved his brother.

The three of us experienced every major milestone together. We were inseparable from childhood and all through our teen years.

Lake and I spent our days mocking each other and pulling pranks, earning us more than a handful of groundings.

Everett was the calming force between us. Even when he came into his designation and we realized he was an alpha, he was unwavering in his calm. It was refreshing to have an alpha who was sweet and thoughtful, protective and calm, unwavering. There was no lame posturing and pretending he was

above us or crazy testosterone surges.

He was just Everett, the same gentle giant who had always been by my side.

Then one day he looked at me and told me that I was his. Our scents had come in and there was no denying the truth.

That was when everything changed.

My little crush turned into something new and raw. It was beautiful and chaotic and all consuming.

We fell hard.

Everyone told us we were too young to be as close as we were, but we'd always been close. He was my constant. The one person I could tell every secret to and never had to fear if he would use it against me.

Right now his hand was in mine as he pulled us through town to our special spot. His scent of sage and cedar mixing with the smell of late night campfires of summertime.

It was my favorite time of year. Lockwood had a lake we loved to swim in all day and ended the evening with a huge family barbecue. Now my family was just me and mom, but during the summer it felt like I actually mattered to her.

We'd snuck out after Lake fell asleep. It was our only chance to get away the last few days. This summer, Lake had been full of more energy than ever before.

The crickets were singing their nightly song as we moved through the summer night. Everett was humming a tune low under his breath and I couldn't hide the smile on my face as I just breathed in and out, relaxed and happy.

The air was still sticky with humidity and my tank top was clinging to my skin. When I snuck a glance at my mate I swallowed hard. His jaw was covered in stubble and was shadowed sharply by the low, warm light of the streetlights as we passed.

"You're always doing that," he rasped, giving me an amused look that had his turquoise eyes sparkling.

"What? Walking?" I asked, confused now that he'd pulled me out of my admiration.

"No, staring at me," he said with a soft laugh. "Like I'm something special."

"Looking at you is one of my favorite things." I groaned and blushed

furiously. “That was so cheesy.”

“I like looking at you, too,” he said, squeezing my hand in his. It was just like Everett to embrace it and make my awkwardness feel normal.

We stopped as we reached the top of the small hill and settled in. From here, we could see the entire valley below us and the sky expanding for what felt like millions of miles around us.

“There’s the comet,” Everett whispered as he moved our clasped hands toward the sky. We were laying side by side now and his scent of sage and cedar settled over me like a warm blanket.

I shivered, but it was more from being so close to my mate than anything. I’d known it from the moment his scent hit me. There was no denying it and when he finally realized I was his, the rest was history.

“Someday, when I marry you, we’re going to have a huge telescope to view the stars,” he said with a soft chuckle. The wistful way he spoke had me imagining what our future would be like.

He was always working on his video game and I was always reading. We were the perfect introverted pair. Our future house would have a shared office, half with my books, the other half with his games.

We could share looks across the room and make a cozy life together. Nothing could be more perfect than that.

“You want to marry me?” I asked, my entire body lighting up at the news. A warmth spread through me, filling me from head to toe with an overwhelming sense of acceptance.

He turned so his turquoise eyes could study me and I felt a smile tug on my lips.

“Did you think I would change my mind? You’re my mate,” he said. Even when dark circles lined his eyes he was gorgeous. Breathtaking even.

I always thought it was strange that the twins could be night and day. Everett was broad shouldered and bulky, his features chiseled. He had long, black hair and was more reserved.

Lake was blonde, his hair short and styled. His love of the outdoors left his skin with a bronze glow. He was also more lean, even though they were both alphas. At least Lake said he was an alpha, his scent had yet to come in.

The only thing they shared was their eye color and a respect for their parents. I admired that about them.

“I just like to hear you call me your mate,” I admitted as I snuggled into his side. My nose ran along his neck and I inhaled the scent that was all him.

“Can we stay like this forever?”

His voice was rough when he spoke again, like he was holding emotion back.

“Forever, sweetheart.”

I wish I would have known then how short forever could be.

CHAPTER
TWO

Shaye
Nineteen Years Old

"I have cancer." Everett's words hit me so hard that I couldn't breathe. He was crouching down in front of me as I sat in my chair. My hands were clutched in his and tears were running down his cheeks.

My heart shattered at the news and I could barely breathe. My thoughts raced as I tried to piece it all together. How could I not have known this was happening?

I knew he was tired and something was wrong, but I never could have imagined it was this bad. I thought it was being apart at different colleges. We had our own paths to follow until we started our future together. Scholarships had put us at different colleges and even though they were in the same city, he and Lake weren't going to classes in the same school.

Separation was hard on mates. I thought that was the issue.

Not this.

Never this.

Everett being terminally sick was not something I could wrap my mind around.

Oh god. Terminal.

No.

He was supposed to be with me forever. I couldn't do this life without him. He was everything to me.

"We can fight it, right?" I said frantically, my voice wobbling with each word as my eyes searched his for any hint that there was a way out of this, a

possibility that didn't end in pain and heartbreak. I gripped his hand in mind, squeezing it to stop them from shaking. I was looking for a lifeline when I knew there wasn't one.

"There's treatments and scans we can do. They're always finding new ways to fight. We'll do whatever it takes," I said.

"Sweetheart, I'm so sorry," he said, his voice cracking as my entire world shattered. I felt so helpless. There was nothing we couldn't face together... except this, apparently.

"No, no, no," I begged him, the universe, god? I didn't know. It was for anyone willing to listen at this point.

"It's progressing too fast, they can't fight it," he admitted in a voice so low I would have missed it if not for how intently I was staring at him. His eyes were full of pain and defeat. He had accepted his fate, but I couldn't. "I tried."

"This can't be happening."

"I wish with everything in me it wasn't," he said as his voice broke off into a sob. "You and I were supposed to grow old together. But you have to promise me you'll still live on without me. I need to know you'll try."

Those turquoise eyes begged me to look past my pain and understand, to forgive him for not telling me sooner.

There was nothing to forgive.

Everett wasn't lying to me, he was protecting me in a way only Everett could.

"How can I? I'm not me without you, Everett," I argued. "No, please, don't say this. There has to be something."

He didn't answer but the anguish in his eyes and tears on his cheeks gave me my answer. Everett didn't cry, not like this.

My sobs tore through me in painful hiccups that had my chest cracking open further with each passing second. It felt like someone had ripped my soul from my body and I couldn't shove it back in if I tried. He was such a part of me that I wouldn't feel complete without him.

"I'm sorry, I should have told you sooner. But you were the one person in my life who could take my mind away from it all. Talking to you was everything I needed," he said. "That's how I want to go out, Shaye, to the sound of your voice and your scent calming me."

He was begging me to believe him, to help him, to sit back and watch him die. His hands were the ones gripping mine harder this time. He needed me to

listen and stick by him.

“Tell me everything,” I said as I tried to calm my breathing. As he spoke I couldn’t help but study him, commit every tic and expression to memory forever.

Even as my mind refused to believe it... I think my soul already knew.

“They found it early in the year and I’ve tried treatments... it just didn’t matter. They’re moving me to hospice now, sweetheart. I’m choosing to die on my own terms. I can’t let you all watch me die slowly and painfully. That would break me.”

Did he think this wasn’t breaking me?

“There is no happy ending here, not for me,” he said as he finally broke down completely. I moved from my chair and onto the floor with him, wrapping my arms around him and holding on as tight as I could.

“I’m here, Everett, always. I love you so fucking much,” I said, pouring out everything he meant to me from the depths of my soul.

He needed me to be strong, but I wasn’t sure I could do it.

My soulmate just told me he was going to die on his own terms, which meant soon. You don’t throw around words like terminal and cry if there is hope.

I couldn’t find it in me to be angry that he’d kept me in the dark. Living with this for months would have been torture and he knew me well enough to know I’d throw it all away for him.

We clung to each other as I felt my soul shatter into a million tiny shards that could never be repaired.

Everett deserved so much better than this.

I wanted to wake up from whatever nightmare this was.

His scent even smelled off now, there was a medicinal hint to it that made my stomach churn. I was so happy to see him today that I missed it.

Now I would never scent my mate again without it.

There was no going back to those summers in Lockwood or the days we spent losing ourselves in each others’ arms.

This was the beginning of the end.

For both of us.

There was no way I could survive this. The pain.

“How long?” I managed to ask in the aftermath of our tears. My voice sounded hollow and his eyebrows furrowed as his fingers teased over my cheek. Even in all this his eyes held the same reverence he’d looked at me

with for years.

“Sweetheart,” he said, unable to give me an answer.

“Everett, I have to know,” I begged.

“A few months to a year,” he said with a sigh of defeat. His hands clung to me and he buried his face in my neck, breathing me in.

“You promised forever,” I protested, unable to wrap my mind around losing my entire world in only a few short months. If he was this sick those days would be spent at his bedside, with him growing weaker by the hour.

“I’ll be with you forever, Shaye. Death isn’t the end for us.”

I wished with everything in me that I could believe him.

CHAPTER
THREE

Shaye
Twenty Years Old

Lake and I were side by side on the couch in Everett's hospital room, our bodies pushed together so we didn't have to face this alone.

Lake and his parents had already said their long goodbyes, though even those words could never be enough.

The doctors and nurses were working in silence around him but his eyes were locked on me. Somehow the tears weren't falling yet. I refused to let them blur my last moments with him.

I hadn't slept or eaten in days. It was too hard to keep anything down. As the days and hours ticked down, I selfishly wanted every second with this man that I could get.

My fingers brushed over the bite mark on my wrist. He had claimed me the night before he left for college, before we knew all this, and I'd never been more grateful to have his mark on me forever.

However short forever might be.

"It's time," the doctor said as he adjusted the IV. He stepped back, monitoring but giving us space. He was taking him off everything but the pain medication, letting him slip peacefully into death. He couldn't hold on any longer. My poor mate fought so hard.

Everett lifted his hand and I was moving, pulling Lake with me. We settled on either side of him on the bed and held him close, careful not to jostle the needle in his arm.

"I love you forever, sweetheart. Always remember that."

“I love you, too,” I said in his ear as I pressed one last kiss to his lips. He brushed a kiss over his twin’s temple before turning to me. Our eyes locked and neither of us could look away.

I don’t know how long it took as I clung to him. But when his eyes closed for the last time and breath no longer rattled in his chest, my screams were all I could hear.

I’d held onto my pain for him, kept as strong as I could manage. But now I let it break me. The pain was already engulfing me. What started as a small fire was now a raging inferno that was burning me alive.

Strong arms pulled me away from Everett but I fought hard against the hold. If I let go that was it.

He was truly gone.

“Shaye, please,” Lake cried. “We have to go now.”

“How?” I asked but he didn’t have an answer. Instead he wrapped his arms tighter around me and helped me out of the room.

We somehow managed to get back to his place but I couldn’t face a single soul. I walked up to Everett’s room and curled into a ball on the bed he would never lay in again.

It still smelled like him and I clung to his blanket, pulling it over my head so I could drown in his scent.

“Everett, I can’t do this without you,” I said into the silence. His voice didn’t answer and that was just as painful as watching the life leave his gorgeous turquoise eyes.

At some point, I felt someone come in and check on me and I hated myself for making his family worry about me at a time that was already terrible for them.

“Shaye baby, it’s Mom.”

“Mom,” I sobbed, pulling the blanket down to look into my mother’s puffy eyes. She pulled me into a hug and held on tight. “I’ve got you.”

If only that were enough to keep me from breaking completely.

The next weeks were a whirlwind of memorial services and trying to keep from drowning in my grief. I tried to be supportive of Lake, I knew he needed me, but I couldn’t.

Weeks later and I was still staying with Everett’s family. Leaving was too hard.

I was sleeping in his bed when I woke up out of the trance I was in. Somehow I stood up on my own two legs and glanced around. The pain

nearly stole my breath.

It was dark outside and the clock on the table said it was one in the morning. I couldn't talk to anyone and didn't want to see the others, I just needed to go.

I stood in the middle of Everett's room and fought the urge to run so I could make sure I wasn't leaving anything behind.

His backpack still hung on his bedpost and I upended it on the floor so I could stuff my things inside along with a few of his that I couldn't leave behind.

The framed picture of us that sat beside his bed was the first. The tee shirt he'd worn last at the top of his hamper that actually smelled like him and not all the terrible medications he was taking. Then, finally, a blanket we always snuggled under to watch movies.

Finally, I picked up the book he'd been reading and traced my fingers over the cover. It wasn't my style of book, he loved horror novels, but knowing he read it had me stuffing it in the bag, too.

With nothing left to do I padded down the stairs and left without a single word.

Call me an asshole but self-preservation was the only thing keeping me going for now.

A KNOCK on the door pulled me from staring at the pages of the book I'd taken from Everett's room. I hadn't read a page yet, I just pretended. It kept my mother from sighing heavily and urging me to do things.

I stood up and pulled open the door when she didn't bother. My breath caught at the sight of Lake standing on my doorstep.

Seeing his turquoise eyes that matched Everett's was nearly my undoing. We couldn't even speak at first but finally, he handed me an envelope.

"He wrote us each a letter. I couldn't read mine."

Lake sounded different. The life had drained from him; the enthusiasm he'd held in everything was completely missing.

He was drowning and I couldn't save him.

His hair was disheveled and the dark circles under his eyes looked more like bruises than lack of sleep. There was a dead look inside of them that

shook me to my core yet I wasn't strong enough to be there for him when I was dying inside like this.

"I can't either," I said with a sigh. There was no way I could read whatever beautiful words he'd written me. Not when breathing was still too hard to manage most days.

My hands gripped the envelope tightly enough my fingers ached.

"What do we do? How do we get through this?"

"We do the motions, Lake. There's nothing else we can do. I promised him I'd try."

"Read the letter with me. We can wait a year, go to the cabin and be alone with it," he said in a rush. "In a year we'll be able to read it, right?"

He was pleading with me, desperate to not face this alone.

Never. That was the answer I wanted to give but couldn't. Everett wouldn't want me to abandon Lake.

"Okay, one year," I agreed even though I wanted to run away and never look back. I was leaving for a new college in a month and I wanted a fresh start, one where everyone didn't look at me with pity.

"If you ever need me, Shaye, I'm here for you," he said, giving me one last sad smile before walking away.

My chest ached as I watched him get in his truck and drive away. The letter was clutched so tightly in my hand that I was crushing it and I had to force my fingers to uncurl.

"Come on, sweetheart," my mother said gently as she pulled me back inside and directed me to my room.

She no longer offered reassurance. There was nothing anyone could say to fix this. I just had to keep moving, pretend that I wasn't constantly being crushed under the weight of my grief.

The pain of losing a mate was said to be unbearable and now I knew it was true.

Just knowing that Lake needed me would keep me going. I'd give it a year and if the pain still hadn't stopped, reading my letter with Lake would be the end for me. I'd pretend everything was fine, say my goodbyes...then?

Then I'd join Everett.

Knowing I had a plan in place to see him again filled me with a rush of relief. The weight lifted slightly and each breath was just a little bit easier.

One year, I could do that.

I'm coming, Ev.

CHAPTER
FOUR

Shaye
One Year Later

Dear Everett,

Today is the day. I'm heading back to Lockwood to say goodbye to Lake. Well, we're finally reading those letters you left us. I couldn't bear it before now. Knowing he was waiting kept me going but every single day is awful. My heart hasn't recovered and even though my tears have dried, I don't want to do this anymore. Life without you isn't living.

I can't wait to see you again. Wait for me.

Love,

Shaye

The drive to Lockwood was surreal. Good and bad memories were warring in my mind as I saw the sign come into view.

It was a town I'd spent many summers at. Our parents both had

properties that were on the outskirts of town on the edge of the forest and Lake Greer. We spent the warm months together swimming and having fun.

Now it was the beginning of the end for me.

I'd made it through my year. Everyone thought I was improving but it was only because I knew this was almost over. It allowed me to keep going but I was honestly only a shell of myself.

I woke up, took care of myself, did the motions, pretended to smile, and focused on my studies... rinse and repeat.

Every day I wrote Everett a letter. It was my way of keeping him with me each morning and I snuggled into his blanket at night. It no longer smelled like him but my memory was strong enough it didn't matter.

In my little blue Kia were the only things I owned. I should have just left them but for some reason I couldn't. I'd dissolved my lease, quit my job, and unenrolled from school.

My three bags and a suitcase was all I had left of my life. That and Everett's blanket and letter sitting by me in the passenger's seat.

My pain would be over soon. I'd be with him again. Nothing else mattered now.

Knowing I'd need caffeine for the night ahead, I stopped at the Raven's Nest. Back then I'd get delicious hot chocolate. Now I needed extra espresso.

The bell dinged over the door as I pushed it open and several people turned to look at me.

"Shaye King, is that you?" an older woman said excitedly. It took a second to recognize Victoria Klein. She always came over to welcome us back for the summer and shared a pie or two.

"Hello, Mrs. Klein," I said, giving her a fake smile. Her smile was bright before it faltered and the look of pity I was far too used to moved over her face.

"Shaye..." she trailed off before starting to speak but I beat her to it.

"Please don't say it. I get it and I'm fine," I said before waving. "I've got to hurry but it was so nice to see you."

She stuttered out a quick goodbye as I rushed up to the counter. I couldn't find it in me to feel bad. Too often people wanted to talk about it to the person hurting the most. Those words were for them. Not me.

"Sometimes you have to run from the town biddies," the girl behind the counter said with a small laugh. She was pretty, her auburn hair and bright-blue eyes standing out with the subtle makeup she'd brushed over her face.

She was a natural beauty. “I’m Katya, what can I make for you?”

“Caramel latte, extra espresso,” I said with a quick smile.

“Like, extra espresso I’m sleepy or extra espresso make me see colors?” she asked with a chuckle.

“The second,” I said with a grin. The omega gave me a wink before going about making the drink.

“You new in town?” she asked. “I haven’t seen you here before.”

“My family owns a cabin just outside of town. I used to spend summers here,” I explained quickly. “I’m meeting an old friend out there.”

“Oh nice, well then welcome back...”

“Shaye,” I supplied as she trailed off.

“Here we are, strong as heck,” she promised as she cashed me out. I threw the change in the tip jar and said a hasty goodbye before walking out, not sparing a single glance toward Mrs. Klein.

I finally let out a breath again as I settled in my car. I’d made it through the first interaction at least. I knew nostalgia would hit me here, I just didn’t expect it to hit quite so hard.

Everett was everywhere. The town square we’d watched Fourth of July fireworks at, the small grocery store where we’d stock up on snacks, the park we’d hang out at when we needed to get away from our parents.

Tears burned in my eyes but this time I didn’t let them fall. I’d cried too much the last year and now I needed to keep it together.

The drive out of town felt slow with the low speed limits in town but I made it to the cluster of cabins. My family didn’t sell ours, but we also hadn’t been back in a few years. Mom had barely left my side until I went to school.

A black pickup truck was already waiting outside but I knew it wasn’t Lake when I saw an older couple swinging on the porch, hand in hand.

Everett and Lake’s parents were like second parents to me. At least I could hug them one last time now. I owed them that much.

Part of me felt guilty and selfish for leaving them without a word. I’d cut them all out for an entire year while I tried to come to terms with my new normal.

Linda and Lake reached out a few times but I couldn’t bring myself to respond.

Lake’s were the hardest. They were pleas to let him know I was alright, texts begging me to respond. I never did. If I sent even one reply I knew it would open up a new fissure in my already fractured heart and I wasn’t

willing to risk it.

“Shaye,” Linda said as she stood and walked out to greet me. Her eyes were misty as she pulled me into a hug. She still smelled like her vanilla perfume and I clung a bit tighter than I meant to.

She took a shaky breath before we parted and Chad gave me a bear hug next. He held me tight for a few beats and I returned it, soaking it in before we stepped away.

“We weren’t sure you’d come,” he said gruffly. “Glad to see you, sweet girl.”

“Lake will be here soon, he’s grabbing some supplies. We wanted to be here first and give you this. Ev made it for you and we finished it, we just haven’t seen you to give it to you yet.”

I started to apologize but she narrowed her eyes.

“Don’t you dare apologize to me. Just take it,” she said, putting a necklace in my hand and closing my fingers around it. “I love you and I hope you stop by after you and Lake have your reunion.”

My chest tightened. Knowing I was going to break her heart made me want to reconsider, but I couldn’t. It was just too hard.

She walked away and I let out a sigh of relief. I was glad I didn’t have to offer empty promises.

“Door is unlocked, kiddo,” Chad said before he followed his omega to their pickup truck. I went back to my car to grab my two bags I needed and left the rest. My backseat looked like I was moving but I didn’t care.

When they started to drive away I turned and walked up the path and pushed the door open, walking inside the cabin. It felt strange being back here after so long. Every cell in my body screamed for me to run but I forced myself to stay.

The inside had Linda’s touch. A fire was roaring in the fireplace and a few candles were lit, filling the air with the scent of vanilla and pine.

There were two rooms so I took the guest room and put my bags on the bed before kicking off my shoes.

I didn’t know what else to do with myself so I took my envelope and put it on the table before standing in front of the fire. My fingers were frozen so I reached forward and warmed them for a moment.

“Shaye.”

Lake’s voice was deep and rich, familiar. It filled me with warmth and the smile on my face was genuine when I turned to look at him.

Amidst losing my soulmate I'd forgotten how much this alpha also meant to me.

He had aged, we both had. The smile on his face was soft and gentle but had lost that playfulness I remembered.

"Lake," I breathed out, already walking toward him. His expression was a mess of emotions as he pulled me into a hug.

Strange, he still didn't smell like anything. I'd always found it odd he hadn't come into his scent. Everett said he was just a late bloomer... but now? There was no way.

Why would he take blockers?

It was the only thing that made sense.

"I've missed you," he said, his voice choking. Tears burned at my eyes again but I took a shaky breath and fought them back. "I didn't think you'd come."

"We made a pact, of course, I'm here," I said in a lighter tone than I felt. This was harder than I thought. He was going to be heartbroken all over again. It was clear that he cared.

He always had.

He sent a few messages the first few weeks after I ghosted them. When I didn't respond to the initial ones they dwindled down to Happy Birthday and holiday greetings.

Now I could see the damage I'd done.

Guilt threatened to swallow me and for once, I decided to talk about it instead of forcing it back down.

"I'm sorry for abandoning you, Lake," I said as I pulled back. Even with tears turning them glassy, his eyes struck me. They were that turquoise that haunted my dreams and I had to look away quickly.

It was the only feature the twins shared and I could barely stand to see them now. I was still too raw.

"No apologies," he said, and I knew it wouldn't be the last time he said it. "There are other things to focus on now."

We were quiet for a bit before he changed the subject to easier territory.

"You seemed to enjoy school. I stalked you on Insta," he said with a chuckle as he led me to the fire. Things felt so awkward now and I hated it.

We were best friends once.

Before we lost a piece of ourselves.

"It's nice enough," I shrugged. "I graduate next year." The lie felt bitter

on my tongue and I had to work to keep my face a calm mask this time. Lying to him was so much harder than lying to the rest of the world.

Even my mom thought I was adjusting. Dad couldn't care less. He had only seen me once since that day and other than a pat on my head he barely uttered a word.

"What did you decide to go with for your major? Last I heard it was undecided," he said, hanging on to every word I spoke. It was strange to have someone trying to absorb everything I said. Even my friends were surface level now.

As I thought it over I studied him. His blond hair was styled differently now. It was longer on top and combed back, shaved shorter on the sides. He was wearing a black-leather jacket but his vintage tee underneath was all Lake.

On instinct I found myself breathing in, then remembering there was no scent to this man.

I felt guilty that my body was responding to his presence. Leaning in closer and fighting a blush at the way he looked at me wasn't right.

He was the brother of my dead mate.

"Game Design," I admitted. It was one of the few joys I had anymore. Everett and I had planned on making a game together one day. He'd practically finished one while he was alive. He spent months talking about it. I'd even played a few demo levels of the mystery game before college life got too busy.

A broad grin spread across his gorgeous face and I fought back another wave of attraction and simultaneous guilt. It lit up his features and he had a slight crinkle around his eyes that made him look even more handsome.

"I didn't realize you were into the gamer thing too," he chuckled. "I should have known, huh?"

"Everett taught me how and I was hooked. Now it's a way to keep him with me," I admitted quietly. At the reminder of my mate I pulled the necklace from my pocket and inspected it.

It was a small moon. There was a notch on top and I realized it wasn't just a necklace, but a tiny urn. I bit back a sob as I read the small silver tag attached.

Forever.

He promised he'd be with me forever and he made sure he was.

"Shaye, are you okay?"

I nodded even as a tear slipped out.

“Your mom gave me this before you got here,” I said, showing him the pendant. He tugged one out from under his shirt and gave me a sad, crooked smile.

“I have one too.”

His was a skull and I laughed through my tears at the dark humor of it. Leave it to Everett to put his ashes in a skull.

“Fuck, this is going to be hard, isn’t it?” Lake breathed out. “I’ve been coping a bit better until today.”

“Me, too,” I lied smoothly. “As best as I could be.”

“I know the feeling,” he said, giving my hand a squeeze. My skin tingled at the contact but I didn’t pull away. I’d take his comfort for now. It felt kind of good to be close to someone. I’d held everyone at arm’s length for a year.

Living with a ghost was lonely.

Lake didn’t let go until the fire dwindled down. Finally, he stood up and fed it another log before turning to me.

“Are you ready, Shaye?” He pulled his envelope out of his pocket. I swallowed hard and grabbed mine from the table, turning to face him as a chill ran through me.

“I’m ready.”

CHAPTER
FIVE

Shaye

My hands shook as I opened the envelope. The sight of Everett's sloppy handwriting hit me like a punch to the gut and I had to force myself to breathe.

I pulled the paper to my nose and took in a deep breath, letting out a sob as his scent hit me.

"What did he smell like to you?" Lake asked gently. "I always wondered."

"Sage and cedar," I answered without having to think about it. "Then a hint of alpha musk."

He let out a hum of acknowledgement but didn't press me as I pulled the paper from my nose and started to read.

*Dear Shaye,
I'm not really sure what a world without me will look like. From the broken look on your face when I told you, I would say it's not been easy.
There's so much of your life left to live and I'm going to die a happy man knowing I got to*

spend some of it with you.

From the moment I met you, I knew you were mine. The way your freckles covered your skin, the way the sun sparkled in those warm, brown eyes, your dark hair that hung in waves, the smile that cut me to my core.

You've always been gorgeous.

You hated those round-framed glasses, but I loved them. They were a part of who you were and the way your nose crinkled when you smiled always had them falling down so you had to push them back in place.

It was adorable.

Fuck, I'm going to miss seeing that.

It was more than just your looks. You have always been such a sweet soul but also had this crazy playful side that rivaled my brother. I'd always thought you were the perfect blend that complemented our personalities.

You're all I think about during the bad days I have. It's kept me going this long, sweetheart.

The one thing I can't quite come to terms with is the thought of leaving you so soon. I promised you forever, sweetheart, and now the

world is making a liar out of me.

Shaye, I need you to keep fighting every day for me. Live your life, make something of it. You're too bright of a light to dull because of this.

You're stronger than that. Don't let my ending be yours, too.

I stopped reading and let out a startled laugh. He'd read my intentions in those final days. Honestly, I should have known he would see right through me. He always did.

Did it change anything for me? I'd already made so many plans to end this on my terms, to join him, but would he hate me?

Fuck.

I sat heavily on the couch and stared at the dying embers in the fireplace. When the emotions had dulled enough to breathe, I continued.

Lake is going to need you now more than ever. He's always loved you as much as I have. When we first met you, he called dibs first. I just beat him to the punch. There was no way I wasn't going to make you mine.

Those years we spent together were everything to me. When I got sick, I knew it wouldn't be easy on you, but it was fucking awful for me, sweetheart.

Knowing that every hug, kiss, or taste of you might be my last? It was torture.

I could fill pages and pages of this letter telling you what you mean to me but I've spent every day trying to do just that.

You're my world, Shaye.

A love like ours is hard to come by and I feel truly grateful that I got to find it before I had to go.

Take care of my parents. They'll beat themselves up over this, though there was nothing any of us could do. Sometimes the world is just unfair.

I've come to terms with my end and I'm going to leave you knowing you'll have years to live an amazing life.

Though, I do have a secret I can't keep to myself. I don't want you to be angry at me for keeping it to myself, but I figured there'd be time to deal with it. Only time became an issue and it was too late.

Lake held himself back for me. He took scent blockers and kept his distance so I could have more time and selfishly keep you all to myself.

If he was blocking his scent, he knew you were his mate. I'm not stupid, just an asshole.

He doesn't know that I found out, but I found them, heard him talking to a friend.

You will have a pack that will adore you and he is your first step. That thought gives me more peace than I can put into words.

Be kind to him, he's losing his other half as well. We've always been close and had just as many plans for our future.

You'll be great together. You can fix each other's broken pieces.

Just don't forget me, love, and keep living for me.

I'd wait an eternity to hold you again, a lifetime will be nothing.

I love you forever, sweetheart, don't ever forget that.

"Dammit," I cursed as I dropped the letter and stood up, pacing in front of the fire as I tried to remember how to breathe again. Tears were falling freely and I wanted to scream.

I'd made my peace and now he was throwing a wrench in all my plans. He was stubborn, but this was taking it to new lengths.

He knew exactly what he was doing.

My breaths came in quick, short pants that had my head spinning. My fingers rubbed anxiously over my bite mark but it wasn't helping. The world started to tilt but strong arms caught me and settled me on the couch.

"Shaye, breathe with me," Lake demanded, putting my hand on his chest and putting his palm on my cheek. "In, and out, you can do this. Breathe for me."

It took several tries before I finally got my body to cooperate. My head cleared but it was now pounding painfully.

I wanted to ask him if he was taking scent blockers but I knew it wasn't the time. We could only process so much at once.

"I'm okay now," I said, taking an exaggerated breath to prove it. He sat down and let out a heavy breath.

"Fuck," was all he could say.

Lake

SEEING Shaye hurting was breaking me apart. All of my memories of her were being clouded by this broken version of my omega.

The omega I knew was mine but hadn't told her yet.

I'd stopped my blockers this weekend, meaning in a day or two she'd realize what I'd known and lied about for years.

I couldn't do it anymore. She needed to know.

This might be my only chance.

Even in this state she was beautiful and my chest ached with the need to hold her. I hated that I couldn't fix this.

Shaye's dark hair had lost its glossy shine, her eyes were cast in dark circles. She looked like a shell of herself. She wasn't coping as well as she pretended.

She'd made it clear she needed to get away after Everett's memorial. I'd given her space and made sure she knew I was here, but now she was standing in front of me.

This was about reading our letters and finding some closure. It wouldn't remove the grief but maybe we could move on.

Hopefully, together.

She knew the depth of my pain and I knew a semblance of hers.

Life without Everett was hard. He had been my other half our entire lives. He was my opposite but we were inseparable. When she came into our lives it was the first time we'd ever fought.

We both wanted her. Neither was willing to budge.

How stupid we were back then. We could have been a pack all along like

we were meant to.

My own scent came in late so she knew he was her mate long before I realized I was too. I just wanted her all the same.

By the time I was ready to see her again, we found out about Everett's diagnosis.

I went on blockers the next day. The outcome wasn't going to be good and I couldn't find it in me to take any focus off of him.

He deserved his time with Shaye.

I still don't regret what I did, outside of lying to her. It was unavoidable and I planned to come clean about this.

First, I had to actually read this letter.

My focus had been on Shaye, gauging her expressions as she read.

Some soft smiles and small sobs would escape, then shock, and I was itching to know what was on those pages.

Her brown eyes had been glossy with tears since I'd arrived but now they were full of pain and I wished I could take it from her.

How could I when I had my own pain to bear? My best friend was gone and I spent every day trying to figure out how to be me without him.

If not for moving here to Lockwood, I don't know if I would even manage to wake up. Micah, Riven, and Drew literally pulled me out of rock bottom and gave me a chance to really live.

I'd taken on a job after seeing a listing at the coffee shop. They were looking for an electrician to help with some renovations. I was, apparently, the only licensed one in the area that they could trust.

One afternoon together and they'd decided I was going to be their friend. Micah had a room I could stay in and got me out of the inn. They helped me get up every day and find passion in renovating houses, and now I felt almost human most days.

They knew my shit and I knew theirs.

Riven was raised by abusive parents and sometimes still struggled with his own mental health. My parents took them in as their own and he's slowly healing.

They were the same with Micah and his sister, Ellie. His parents were terrible and he hasn't talked to his parents much after they humiliated his sister on live TV and made her out to be crazy.

I've met Ellie and she didn't deserve any of the drama that had followed her appearance on a reality dating show. She's got a pack now and a baby,

she's living her best life.

Then there was Drew

Together we could talk about anything and on our bad days? We had each other to fall back on.

They knew I was here and offered to come but this was one thing I needed to face alone.

If she rejected me, I knew they'd be there for me.

The mere thought of it had my stomach rolling and bile rising. I'd waited for her for so long I couldn't wrap my head around an outcome like that.

"Are you going to read it?" Shaye asked gently. With a breath I nodded, finally focusing on the handwritten letter. My brother's final goodbye to me.

Lake,

I hate that I have to leave you like this. We've been so close all our lives and the thought of not being by your side makes the pain even worse.

Take care of our mate, Lake, because I know she's yours. I found your blockers not long after I found out. I was selfish and for that I'm so fucking sorry. I wanted my time with her and was bitter that you'd get her entire future without me.

Thank you for giving it to me without being asked. I knew your intentions and I didn't hesitate to do what I needed at the time.

But it wasn't fair to you. You deserved better from me.

She is going to need you. Shaye has such a

good heart and this is slowly killing her. I worry how she'll manage after this and I need to know that she still has you.

Don't let your pain get between your friendship. Be there for each other, heal together. Live the life that I won't get to.

Take this time and talk, because I know damn well she's too stubborn to talk to anyone. She shuts down and I'm scared, Lake. Terrified that she's not doing well. Help her move on, help her heal, and let her do the same for you.

You'll be amazing together.

Something inside of me tells me that you'll need a nudge, a way to come together. So, I've provided just that. Tomorrow, whenever tomorrow may be for you, I want you to go to the website at the bottom of this letter.

Do it for me.

I'll see you in the next life brother. Until then, I love you. You are strong enough to do this. I promise. I've always believed in you.

Love,
Everett

There was a site listed just below his name. I wanted to follow it but as

usual, he was right. We needed to talk, to breathe, to live in this moment even if it hurt.

Tomorrow we could see what he wanted to show us.

For now I had to remember how to fucking breathe. It had never felt like a hard task until I lost him. Now it's a chore every damn day.

"I'm sorry, Lake. I should have been there for you more," Shaye whispered, her voice breaking.

"I shouldn't have let the distance form between us," I countered. "But we're here now, right?"

My eyes searched hers, begging those beautiful brown orbs to reassure me, to not let me face this alone anymore.

"We are," she said. The way her forehead wrinkled and she shifted uncomfortably had alarm bells ringing in my head.

Something was off.

Another instance of my brother being a know it all. Now I was grateful for his words or I might never have seen it.

She was someone at the end of her rope, holding on by a thread.

At least I'd be here to catch her.

CHAPTER

SIX

Shaye

Dear Everett,

I just wanted to let you know that I forgive you. There was nothing to forgive, really. You did what you could to spend your life with me. Neither of us could have predicted that this was how it would end.

Even after a year, I see your ghost everywhere. Being back in Lockwood has been a constant reminder of the summers we spent together.

Lake looks great. Tired, a bit jaded, but he's living. I wish I could say the same for myself. I've been planning to join you after this. This time with Lake was my last commitment that I couldn't back out of.

Yet you seemed to know all along that I had this plan.

Now what am I supposed to do?

I can't live without you, Ev. I tried and failed. It's a bleak, terrible existence that I want no part of.

How do I break that to Lake?

How do I leave him in pain like I've been in knowing we're mates?

The answer is... I can't.

“**W**hat are you doing?” Lake asked gently. I closed the leather-bound journal that I had been writing in. It was the same one that I’d filled the pages with over the year that Everett had been gone.

My cheeks warmed, but I didn’t back away from the answer. I looked up at him, blinking away another round of tears.

I thought all my tears had dried up, but, apparently, being here broke that dam right open.

“My therapist suggested that I write to him, get my feelings on the pages as an outlet. Every time I feel overwhelmed, or every time something good or bad happens, I give it all to him.”

Lake didn’t look confused or concerned. He just nodded as if he understood.

“I talk to him sometimes. Almost every night, actually. We had talked about living in the same town our whole lives, how we had all these plans for the future that can’t happen now. I didn’t really know how to live without him, you know.”

I let out a humorless laugh.

“Oh, I definitely understand. This year has been nothing short of hell,” I admitted.

“How did you keep it together so long?”

That was a loaded question. I couldn't just tell him that I'd given up completely, and it freed me, at least to some degree. The best way to describe it was that I was a zombie, a husk of the person I was, just counting down the days.

"Fake it till you make it, I guess. What have you been up to this past year?" I looked away and cleared my throat. It was a subject change but I wanted to know the answer.

Being here with Lake felt right, like I had something back that I was missing. Or someone. How had I not realized in all the sadness that he was important to me, too?

"I spent the first few months at home, barely leaving the house. I couldn't figure out how to go on. Then one day, I just heard Everett in my head, calling me a loser. We'd always been competitive, that's how we motivated each other, and I knew he would not want me to sit there like that. So, I didn't. You know I already wanted to become an electrician and was apprenticing. I didn't like the idea of sitting in an office or school or whatnot, so I did a program and finished my journeyman time. Actually, just finished that a few months ago and passed my test."

"So, you're licensed now?" I questioned.

"Yep," he agreed. "I did some odd jobs here and there, and then I moved. I couldn't stay in that house anymore, Shaye. It was a constant reminder."

"Where did you move?"

He pulled my feet into his lap. We were already sitting so close that I guess he didn't think about it.

I tensed for a second at the contact. No one had touched me since Everett outside of pity hugs. Call me touch-starved but I couldn't help but shift and get comfortable.

He relaxed again and started rubbing my feet.

Maybe I shouldn't indulge myself, but just for this moment, I wanted to pretend like everything was fine, like I was going to stay.

"I moved to Lockwood," he admitted. "It was always a place that had really good memories for me. I loved those summers we spent together, Shaye. Even if I wasn't your focus."

"I didn't know, Lake," I said, not meeting his eyes. I was afraid I'd find too much there. "You were always important to me, and I loved you in my own way. I just..."

"Everett was everything?" His voice was defeated and I couldn't let him

keep hurting like this. I also couldn't lie.

"If I answer that, it sounds insensitive. He *was* everything to me. We fell hard and we fell fast. It started with his scent. Once it hit me, I knew. Then the feelings developed after that. No. That's not accurate, I think they just changed and shifted. I think I've always loved you guys in some way."

I fidgeted with the hem of my shirt as I spoke, nervous and not sure how to handle the intensity of this moment.

He froze and I met his eyes. "Wait, us?"

My cheeks flushed as I tried to figure out how to explain it.

"I had a crush on you both at one point. How could I not? We spent years together. Every awkward year of puberty was ours to share. Then suddenly we weren't kids anymore. Once his designation came in, and his scent hit me, it all changed."

"That's why I started blockers," he said with a soul-deep sigh.

"The fact that you did that for your brother was selfless, and I can't imagine how painful it had to have been to watch us together, knowing that you were my mate but not letting me know."

"You're not mad at me for keeping it?"

"In some ways, I wish you would have told me. There's some regret there. But at the same time, you gave me Everett. We had that time because of *you*, and that's not something I can find in myself to be mad about." I let out a breath and shoved my dark hair out of my face. I needed to cut it but had put it off for too long.

"I should have told you after. I should have fought harder before you left." He was desperate now, leaning closer as he spoke, but this one wasn't on him.

"It wouldn't have made a difference. I was so far gone it wouldn't have worked. I don't think I could remember a single conversation I had between the funeral and me going back to school."

"The distance between us felt like it was going to go on for eternity," he admitted. "That's why I came about the letters."

"Did you read yours before tonight?"

"No, of course not," he said firmly. I believed him. Lake was never a liar. "I was already struggling, but when my parents were talking about you going to a new school, I couldn't let you walk away without having some kind of bridge between us."

"I'm glad you did," I said. I couldn't tell him everything, but I gave him

at least a watered-down version. “It gave me something to look forward to.”

“Me, too,” he admitted.

The moment hung between us. It was too heavy to break right away.

After another log had burned down to nothing I broke the silence, ready to keep going.

“So, do you have an apartment in town?”

“I stayed at the inn at first while I tried to find a job. Before, I only ever worked as a journeyman and got my hours in to get my license. Once I was licensed, I had to do it all on my own. It was a little bit harder.” He let out a small chuckle.

“Lakewood is a small town, too, I’m sure that didn’t help.”

He nodded. “It is, but that’s what I like about it. I was in the Raven’s Nest, and they had a bulletin board of local job listings and flyers. One of them was for a group that was working on renovating homes, and they needed a licensed electrician they could consult with regularly. It was constant work and long term, I couldn’t pass that up. So, I gave them a call, and it was the best decision I’d made in a long time.”

“Are they good guys?” It was nice to know he had someone in his corner when I wasn’t there for him.

My chest ached at the thought of him wallowing in his own grief, alone, knowing his mate left him, too.

I swear someday this guilt was going to eat me alive.

“The best, actually,” he said. He had on a genuine smile and lit up as he talked about them. “Micah was the first one I met; he had a house that he lived in alone and he worked on flipping houses in town and the surrounding ones. He was working with his business partner, Collin, for a while. Then Collin and his pack had a baby, and he needed to step back. So, Micah brought on a few more guys to help keep the business going. That’s where Drew and Riven came in. None of them were electricians, so they needed one more.”

“It worked out then,” I said, committing every smile and the way his eyes danced with emotion, to memory.

“When I talked to them, we all kind of hit it off. We worked on that first house together. It was so smooth that we made a ton of plans going forward. When Micah found out I was living at the inn he demanded that I come stay in the spare room at his house.”

“That’s awesome. It sounds like you found a pack.” I swallowed down

the bile rising at the thought. He'd found a pack and until this moment, I didn't realize how uneasy that made me feel. I'd been consumed by Everett so much I'd let Lake fall to the back burner. It was my own doing. My jealousy was unfounded.

"We never really called it that," he admitted. "We are in some ways. They know my past, and they've all got their own shit."

"Doesn't everybody?" I questioned.

He gave me an eye roll and squeezed my foot that was still resting in his hands.

"So, tell me about school and the game you were working on."

"School was fine. It's a pretty male-dominated industry, but the program is pretty diverse. Every class we had all kinds of projects directed at one single game. You start the early stages of game development in the intro classes, and then it progresses over the years until you're ready to submit it for your final project. Some people in the program have used that to land amazing jobs."

"What, that's awesome," he grinned. His enthusiasm was reminiscent of the Lake I remembered and I found myself smiling more, wanting to see that smile stay in place.

"I'd already gotten my undergrad in, so I just need these two years of work to catch up, and I've already done a lot of that. I took a lot of classes. My advisors tried to deter me, but burying myself in work was the only way I knew how to live." I glanced down at my hands, still avoiding him. He was getting tired of it from the small sigh he let out.

But Lake wasn't giving up.

"How about friends?" he asked. He was scrutinizing me so hard that I felt like I could shrink under his gaze. He was going to see through all my lies like no one else could.

"I had some. We hung out, did happy hours, celebrated after classes ended, things like that."

"Do you know anything about them?" My eyes widened, and I looked up at him. His face was etched with lines of concern.

"No, we were never really that close, but it was nice to socialize once in a while."

"I'm a little bit worried about you, Shaye." He gave my foot a squeeze, not letting me hide this time.

"You don't need to worry about me, Lake. I'm fine."

“No, you’re not. Don’t bullshit me.” His eyes were narrowed now and I hated that I lost that smile.

“What else can I be, Lake? I had to survive somehow. So, I threw myself into school. I did some graphic design work on the side, and I made superficial friends. There’s no crime in that.”

I sounded defensive and pathetic, and we both fucking knew it. But for once, he didn’t call me on it.

“Speaking of game design,” he said, switching subjects. “At the end of my letter, Everett gave us a website to check out. He left something else for us on it that he wants us to see. He said it was a way to bring us together. He wanted us to give this a shot, Shaye. *I want to give this a shot.*”

My heart fractured even further, and I didn’t even know that was possible. How could I promise him anything? I didn’t have a future.

“I’m not ready to talk about that.”

“Okay,” he said, his eyes closing in defeat, but he accepted it easily. A yawn had his mouth falling open and he ran a hand over his face.

I glanced at the clock. It was only eight but he was clearly exhausted.

“Why don’t you get some rest? We’ll check out the website in the morning after some breakfast. You clearly need sleep.”

“I didn’t sleep much last night,” he admitted. “Or the last week. I was anxious about coming here and seeing you again. That and all the memories we were about to drag up, the letter, all of it.”

“Trust me, I understand. I’m not going to run but I need you to understand something. My past with Everett has broken me in so many ways. I don’t know how to crawl out of it or how to fix it, so I can’t promise you anything, not until I figure out how to do this without him.” My voice was desperate and sounded crazed but he didn’t run away from it. Instead, he met me with calm.

“That’s alright. I’ve waited this long, I can wait a little longer.” His eyes were shadowed as he gave me a sad smile and ran his hand through his blond hair.

Those words lanced through my heart, though. It had Everett’s words replayed in my head.

I’d wait an eternity to hold you again, a lifetime will be nothing.

How could I do this to Lake? Could I leave him to the same fate that Everett left me in?

Fuck.

My head was more of a mess now than before.

Lake stood up, fighting off another yawn. He leaned down long enough to brush a kiss over my forehead.

“Promise me you’ll be here in the morning.”

“I promise,” I managed to whisper. He closed his eyes and nodded before heading for the bedroom. He paused in the doorway, his hand gripping the frame as he turned around to look at me.

“We’ll get through this, Shaye. We’ll follow whatever he wanted us to do, and then we can talk again. No pressure, okay?”

“Okay,” I said, giving him a smile before turning my attention back to the dwindling fire. He threw two more logs on the fire before going to bed. He didn’t close the door or bother to change. He simply collapsed on the mattress.

He may have seen right through me, but I could also see right through him. He was nothing like the Lake I remembered.

When his soft snores filled the air, I let myself outside and went to my car. I pulled out that damn bottle of pills and put it on the dashboard, staring at it.

The urge to reach for it and swallow them down was muted now.

All I could think about was Lake, his blond hair, those turquoise eyes, and the fact I wasn’t sure that I could hurt him like that.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

Micah

The sounds of construction kept halting. One of the three of us would be working and then just stop, glancing at the others before sighing and going back to work.

We'd been at it for hours, even working late just to distract ourselves.

"This is fucking stupid," Riven muttered as he threw down his hammer. It fell to the floor with a clang, all of us stopping at his words.

"What else can we do?" Drew questioned. "He asked for time. How do we not give him that?"

"We all know what he's been through," Riven said as he started to pace. His hands ran through his black hair, and he gripped it tight enough he winced. He was dripping with sweat from working, and his shirt was off, tattoos on full display under the harsh lighting in the room.

Riven looked like a badass, and he was. He was the complete opposite of me. My sisters always teased me about being a golden retriever alpha, and if that was true, then he was a rottweiler.

"That man is out there pouring his soul out to an omega that lost her mate. There's no fucking way that's going to go well. They're not going to take care of themselves. They're not going to eat. They're just going to sit there and cry and be miserable, and I can't fucking do it. I'm going."

"Aww, he has a heart after all," Drew teased but I noticed he was already packing up to leave, too. "You're such a Dom, Riv."

"Look, I get it. We're not going to calm down till we know he's okay. Let's text him," I tried to reason.

“I fucking did that three hours ago, two hours ago, and one hour ago—nothing,” Riven argued.

“So, let’s take him dinner,” Drew said as he held up Riven’s keys.

“Fine. We’ll go grab some pizzas and drop them off. If he says to leave, we leave. They may need space and we can’t take that away from them. But we also need to know that Lake is alright.”

“He’s pack,” Drew said, losing a smile now.

We all knew we were a pack. Lake belonged with us. The universe had done us all a disservice in some way and we were all reluctant to talk out loud about what we had become.

Apparently, until the other alpha was pushed.

“Pizza,” Riven said. He looked around until he found his shirt, tugging it over his head and fixing it before snagging his keys from Drew. “Are you coming or not?”

He didn’t bother to look back at us, and we had to hurry to get out to his pickup truck. We both dove in, Drew taking the bench seat in the back, and me sitting shotgun.

The tension in the car was insane as we drove to pick up the pizza. If it weren’t for the fact that I started to call it in before we even left the driveway, Riven might have lost his mind at the wait time.

“I think we should just be thankful that they’re open this late. It’s after eight in Lockwood,” Drew said as Riven clenched his fists at the line inside the store. Even from our spot out front, we could see people waiting.

Drew was about the only one who could throw humor at Riven and not have any repercussions.

Drew and Riven had been friends for years. When I had posted about needing some backup after Collin had to focus on his own pack, they responded. Not long after, we needed an electrician, so we brought Lake in. The four of us fit together so well but we hadn’t pushed it. Not when one of our pack members was so caught up on his past and the omega that got away. It just didn’t feel right.

Now that he was talking to her and we had no idea how he was coping, it was really hitting home that Drew had been right all along.

“Go,” Riven ordered me and I climbed out without being hurt by his rude tone. I may have been keeping my cool but I was just as on edge as he was. I’d seen what a rejection could do to someone when it was chosen, I couldn’t imagine the pain if it was a true mate.

Thankfully, the wait was fast. Within five minutes of me running inside, I had a stack of pizzas, breadsticks, wings, and soda.

We crashed at the cabin before for random nights out. We'd grab beer, some food, and just relax for the weekend. Sometimes we'd fish, swim if it was warm enough, and just get away from the world.

That also meant finding it in the dark was nothing. Riven navigated through the gravel roads easily.

When we pulled up to the cabin there was Lake's familiar truck, but also a small car.

What I didn't expect to see was a girl sitting inside it. Her head was tilted back like she was sleeping, but it was the bottle of medication on the dashboard that caught my attention.

"Are you kidding me?!" Riven growled. He barely put the truck in park before he was running out of the car and ripping her door open.

She nearly fell out, but he caught her. The scream that she belted out was loud enough that it reverberated through the trees.

She lashed out at the assault, her fist met his cheek. He didn't even react as he held her in one arm and reached inside for the bottle with his free hand.

"This is what you were going to do to Lake?" he demanded. He was angrier than I'd ever seen him. She was going to hurt our packmate and he wasn't having it.

"Riven, you're going to hurt her," Drew's words were firm enough to get Riven's attention.

We both walked closer, trying to get her away from him when the door flew open as Lake ran outside. He looked half asleep, his hair mussed and his eyes blinking rapidly as he tried to see what was happening.

"What the fuck is going on out here? What did you do?"

"Lake!" she sobbed, pushing her way out of our hold and rushing to him.

He held her close and glared at us. This was not how I saw this night going out. What the hell was even happening?

"What the fuck, guys?" he demanded before soothing her with a hushed voice. "Hey, they're not going to hurt you. These are my friends."

"She was going to hurt you," Riven said, his voice was so deep and gravelly from being angry that Lake froze. His eyebrows drew up in confusion.

It only took Riven holding out what was in his hand for Lake to let her go and look at her like she had ripped his own heart out. His hand went to his

chest and his voice broke as he spoke to her.

“Shaye? Tell me that’s not true,” he begged. “You promised you’d be here in the morning.”

“I wasn’t going to do it, not anymore.”

“Not anymore,” he repeated as he took another step from her. We all went to him, pressing in close to offer comfort.

She was crying now as we faced off with her. She was also angry.

With shaking hands she pulled the gold-frame glasses off of her face. She started pacing between us and I froze as her scent hit me. Shaye smelled of summer sun, citrus, and herbs.

It was a bright mix, and it hit me right square in the chest.

She was my scent match. We were mates.

She was so angry that she didn’t notice it but we all did. Riven and Drew had tensed beside me.

We shared a look, and I knew what they were feeling.

Not only was Lake our pack, but she was our omega.

An omega that was on the verge of a mental breakdown.

“We need to call an ambulance or something. She needs to go to a hospital,” Riven said without letting the news impact him. The way he shut himself off was always startling but right now he was right.

“Look, we can get you help, Shaye,” I said, trying to soften the truth.

She turned and squared up with us. She was a lot shorter, so she had to look up at Riven as she put her focus on him.

The fire in her gaze should have burned him alive but he was thriving on it, meeting her with the same level of anger and indignation.

“I fucking said that I wasn’t going to do it anymore.” Her screech of protest was loud enough it echoed in the night.

“Then prove it. Go flush it down the toilet,” he challenged as he crossed his arms over his chest.

“Fine,” she bit out, taking the bottle from him and stalking inside. He was on her heels, both of them brushing past Lake to go inside.

It was the most insane encounter that I’ve ever had in my life. I didn’t know how to unpack it all.

How were we going to tell Lake she was ours, too?

Hell, after Riven, she might not care.

Riven and Shaye were arguing the entire time before I heard the toilet flush. We moved inside and stood in the entryway, waiting for them. I gave

Lake's shoulder a squeeze. He was barely holding it together.

"There, are you fucking happy?" Her screams echoed through the cabin.

"No, I'm not happy. Are you kidding me?" he shot back. "Do you have any idea what you were going to do to him?"

"Yes, I do, which is why I wasn't going to do it. Until I came here, I didn't know he was my mate."

"What?" That caught Riven by surprise and he stopped short.

We all turned to Lake, and he nodded, agreeing with her.

"She didn't. I took suppressors."

"We knew you did, but we didn't realize that she didn't know. I thought you said Everett found out," Drew said.

"He did, that doesn't mean she did."

"This is a lot more fucked up than I realized," Riven said.

He sat down heavily on the couch and gripped his black hair in his hands again. It was short enough that it spiked through his fingers.

At this point, Shaye was more mad than sad. Her tears had dried, and her hands were fisted at her sides. She was gorgeous but she had that same lingering sadness about her that Lake held tightly to him.

"Why were you sleeping in your car with them?" I questioned. My voice was a whole lot more gentle, and she turned to me.

She started to answer before sniffing and going over to the box of tissues that someone left on the side table. She blew her nose and composed herself before she came back. It might have been her way of gathering her thoughts but her voice had the nasally quality of someone who had been crying for days on end.

Hell, for her, it was likely a full year of tears. My chest ached for my mate and the pain she endured.

"Because this had been my plan since before I left home. I didn't think I could do this anymore. I doubt anyone in this house knows what it's like to lose a mate."

"Yeah, but I know what it's like to lose my twin," Lake said in a broken whisper. "And now you were going to take my best friend from me, too."

She looked guilty and then shifted her gaze to us.

"Can we not do this in front of strangers?"

"We're not strangers, we're his pack," Riven said. If her nose wasn't so clogged from crying, she'd probably realize we were hers, too.

"What are you guys even doing here?" Lake asked as he looked around at

them. “I asked you guys not to come.”

“Well, good fucking thing we did,” Riven countered, deflecting.

Drew stood up, pulling me with him. “We got dinner. The plan was to bring it out, check on you, and if you were fine, we’d leave if you wanted us to. Come on, Micah, let’s grab the food before it’s too cold.”

We both walked outside to get the boxes and drinks before coming back into the awkward silence that had taken hold.

“Go to the table. Sit, and eat,” Riven demanded. It was to both of them.

Shaye glared at him, but Lake didn’t hesitate to take her hand and lead her over to the dining room table, sitting her down before sitting next to her.

Drew sat on her other side, which is probably for the best. She could use some beta calm in all this craziness.

I had never been to a more awkward dinner in my life, and that was saying something because I grew up with the most narcissistic parent pack that ever was.

Shaye ate mechanically, not meeting anyone’s eyes or talking.

In fact, everyone was silent, and we barely ate anything. We managed a slice each and didn’t touch the rest.

“I’m going to put some logs on the fire,” Lake said. I think he just needed something to do with his hands. He always had to move more when he was nervous, although the man rarely sat still as it was.

That left Shaye with us at the table.

“Were you really *not* going to do it?” Drew asked. “Or are you just saying this to placate us?”

She turned her head to look at him, body tense and eyes shadowed.

“I was telling the truth. It was my plan when I drove here. That’s why I had them. But I talked myself out of it, at least for now. Here, I can prove it.”

She stood up and went outside. Riven got up and followed her. I was glad to see him going with her, she shouldn’t be alone. I wasn’t sure I believed her yet.

She was rolling her eyes when she came back inside with a journal in her hand.

She ripped out a page and smacked it down on the table in front of Drew before taking her seat with a huff. She angrily ripped off a bite of pizza and chewed while he read.

The look on his face was pure pain. He closed his eyes, took a breath, and nodded before sliding it over to Riven.

Riven scanned the paper and his jaw tightened as he read but he gave nothing else away.

He shoved it my way and I took a breath before reading what she'd written. The handwriting was older at the top, dotted in watermarks from her tears.

It was a goodbye letter.

She had crossed out the top half and the newer writing was below it. The pen was a different color and fresh.

Shaye had poured her heart out on this page, talking about how hard life had been without him. There was anger mixed in, hating that he left her like this. It was full of every emotion and stage of grief.

At the end she told him of her plans, that she wanted to see him soon.

Until she read his letter.

That had, apparently, changed everything. It was hard to read and I felt my throat tighten with emotion.

I wanted to be with you again, Ev, but I can't do that now. You made sure to take care of me even in your death. Lake needs me and even if I let my feelings for him stay buried, seeing him again changed things.

I would never let him feel the pain that I dealt with over this year. Even if I suffer, I'm not a monster. He deserves better.

Someday I hope I can learn to keep going like before, to find myself. Until then, wait for me, Ev.

I love you.

When Lake joined us, I slid it his way. He should know what she wrote. I had a feeling it would be the first step in healing.

She reached over and took his hand, waiting until he met her eyes to speak again.

"I was going to stay for you."

CHAPTER
EIGHT

Shaye

I felt someone's gaze on me before I even opened my eyes. Without having to look, I knew it was Lake. His presence was something that I'd always noticed. Only now, it felt different.

We were mates.

"Why are you in here?" I questioned in a quiet, hoarse whisper. My mouth was dry, and my eyes were crusty. It felt like I'd barely gotten any sleep at all.

"You were crying out in your sleep," Lake said. His voice was low, gravelly, as if he drifted in and out in that chair all night. Knowing Lake, he probably did. "Drew came in here a few times, but you didn't settle until I was in here. I held your hand for a while, but then I moved over here. I was afraid you'd be upset when you woke up." He looked at me with tired eyes. The urge to reach for him was strong but I didn't move a muscle.

At that moment, the distance between us suddenly felt very vast, like we'd never be able to cross it. I'd stayed for him. I meant what I said, but I wondered if it was useless, if we had already done too much damage to move past it.

I just wanted to scent him. To confirm what he and Everett already thought they knew. Yet, even as I had the thought, I knew it was true. Maybe I'd always known it in some way. We'd always been close. The three of us could have been a pack had they let me know.

My mother had always harped on and on about how choosing your mate versus having a scent match was setting myself up for failure. She chose my

father, and look where that ended up – in a nasty divorce, and with my father barely speaking more than a few words to me over the years.

He was not included in my support network whatsoever. Maybe he never had been.

Did he always resent me?

At this point, he probably had a scent match somewhere, making a new family, replacing us all. I waited for that familiar ache, but it never came. Sometime in the past year, I had accepted that inevitability. It was easier to let go of things and now none of that seemed to matter.

“I don’t know what to do to fix this,” Lake said.

Not wanting him to keep freaking out, I sat up in my bed, propping myself against a headboard and tucking my knees in front of me, curling my arms around them as if it could hold me together during this conversation.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

His turquoise eyes dimmed in the morning light, and I hated that I was the one putting more shadows there, but I couldn’t take the blame. Not this time. This was on both of us.

“Everett kept a lot from you, Shaye. He was sick a lot longer than he let on. We just never knew how bad it was. He didn’t want to worry you before they had answers, and then by the time they found them, it was too fucking late.”

He sounded so cynical. His lips were turned down at the corner as he thought over how to continue and his fingers toyed with a tear in the fabric of the chair he was fidgeting in.

“Why did you start the blockers?”

“I heard him talking to Dad one night about how he was so happy that he had you. That he was thankful you found each other early in life and he got all those years with you. I heard him talking about how that’s the one thing that kept him getting up every day – the fact that you were mates. And I... I couldn’t find it in me to break that bubble between you two.”

“Even before you got the diagnosis?” I questioned. “It wasn’t an issue then. Was I not worth telling?”

That wasn’t fair to say to him, but I needed to hear his answer. I needed to know that he did it for Everett and not because he didn’t want me.

“No, Shaye,” he said, his voice slightly panicked. He couldn’t keep the distance anymore and moved until he was next to me on the bed, taking my hand in his.

I tensed at first but forced myself not to recoil from the touch. After a few beats, I welcomed the warmth he was providing.

“You’ve always been important to me, Shaye, and I’ve always loved you. I just couldn’t deny him what little time he had with just the two of you. I didn’t want you to resent me for taking the focus away from him. Before that, there just wasn’t a time our schedules lined up and we were both home to reveal it. Time was against us from the start.”

“I wouldn’t have hated you,” I said.

There was so much more I should have said but I hadn’t worked through my own emotions enough to find the right words. I’d avoided them for so long, let myself be numb to survive, and now I was even more of a mess for it.

My stomach rolled with nausea, and I tightened my hold around my knees with the one arm that I had free, the other still tucked tightly in his hand.

“What if I don’t know how to live anymore?” I finally put a voice to my worries. It was merely a whisper, but he heard me all the same, his fingers running soothingly over my palm.

I couldn’t look at him and he didn’t force me to.

“We’ll figure it out together, Shaye. You’re not alone anymore. I’m not going to let you be. I never should have let you be from the beginning.”

“You tried,” I reminded him. “I shut you out. My heart was shattered. I didn’t know how to breathe most days. If I let you in, if I admitted that I had more to live for, then I don’t think I would have made it this far. The grief would have consumed me until there was nothing left.”

“Was this way any better?” he asked. He’d never been one to sugarcoat his words. So far, he’d been gentle but this was reminiscent of the Lake I knew. “Tell me there’s some of you left in there, Shaye. I haven’t seen you smile yet. Not one that reached your eyes.”

“I could say the same about you.” I let out a humorless laugh. “Are you really any better off than I am right now?”

“Somewhat,” he said. “I have support. You do as well, if you let us in.”

“I don’t want to be broken anymore,” I admitted as a tear finally escaped.

Lake’s face crumpled at my words, and he pulled me in close. Instinctively, my nose pressed to his chest as he held me, and my breath caught as I inhaled the first glimpse of the scent he’d hidden from me for so long.

It was a complex scent. There were hints of alpha musk mixed with

saltwater and summer breeze. It was refreshing and free.

It fit him.

He must have realized that I froze in his arms and backed away.

“I’m sorry. Was that too much too fast?”

“You’re my mate, Lake,” I said. Warmth and guilt flooded me as the realization finally sank in. The hope mingling under the surface was something I couldn’t let take hold. I had to protect myself.

“I stopped taking blockers a few days ago. I figured this was my one chance to let you know,” he admitted. He’d always had a way of reading me, of knowing exactly what I wanted to say.

Everett may have seen into my soul and knew every part of me, but Lake always understood me. It wasn’t until now that I realized that they were two halves to a whole on a different level, and now I’d never get to experience them together.

Tears started to fall again, and I forced myself to get up and move. Lake tried to protest, but I was already out of the room and in the kitchen. I didn’t care what time it was or if I’d wake anyone else.

I started opening cabinets and pulling down the supplies, the clatter of dishes far too loud.

It wasn’t until I had ingredients in front of me and was forming a dough for cinnamon rolls that I realized what I was doing.

It was the same breakfast that I’d cooked with their mom a million times in this very kitchen. It always felt like such an important thing to do – that I was learning a family recipe from someone who is more like a mom than my own mother was for a long time.

To me, it was never just simply baking together, it was a memory that we created every summer for most of my important years.

I fell into the easy tradition, letting it soothe my soul. It was fracturing even further than I thought possible here and I needed to counter it with something good.

The dish towel was full of my tears more than it was flour, but I kept working, focusing on the task at hand. I dug out Linda’s old timer and set it so I could let the dough rise.

The sound of the faucet turning on had me jumping, the whisk flying from my hand and clattering to the ground. Riven turned to me, cocking one eyebrow as he filled the coffee pot.

“I didn’t realize anyone else was awake. Sorry,” I said in a rush, turning

back to the dough and staring down at the bowl. Even though my heart was pounding in my chest and my head was spinning, I had gone from a soul-deep sadness to startled, and it was sending me in a tailspin.

My breath started to come faster, and this time I didn't recognize it as a panic attack until it slammed into me full force.

An unfamiliar scent hit me before somebody was putting their hand on my back and stepping up to my side. I looked over to see Drew, and my eyes widened, but it did nothing to help calm my senses.

My nose was assaulted by the scent of palo santo. It was subtle and masculine, a mix of wood and understated citrus. My body reacted immediately, instinctively leaning in even as my chest heaved in shallow pants.

He was my scent match, too.

What the fuck was happening? Why was the universe throwing all this at me at once? I was only one omega, there was only so much I could take.

"Hey, breathe in and hold it," Drew said. His voice was low and soothing but it did nothing to calm the raging storm.

He kept talking and I tried to focus on his words but they just weren't breaking through.

"Hey!"

Riven's voice cut through loud enough I took in a startled gasp. He shoved Drew aside, a little more gently than I would have expected, and put his hands on my cheeks, forcing me to look at him.

I stared up at him with wild eyes, frantically trying to pull away, but he wasn't letting go.

"Breathe in right now. Slowly," he demanded. There was an alpha command in his voice, and he wasn't letting me get away with this anymore.

My body did the opposite, my heart pounding in my chest even faster as his scent settled over me.

Oak and bourbon. Smooth, clean, warm, and intoxicating.

He was my mate, too. That likely meant that Micah was as well. They were a pack after all.

God, this had to be some colossal fucking joke. The universe kicking me while I was down. It was dangling a pack in front of me when it knew damn well this would never work.

"You don't get to hide from this. Take a fucking breath," Riven demanded again. His voice was loud and forceful as he stared down at me.

His green eyes were piercing into me, and I couldn't seem to look away. He didn't give up, continuing to yell at me through the chaos in my brain. Finally, I let my eyes flutter closed, and I forced myself to take a breath. "Hold it," he commanded. "One, two, three."

He took over exactly what Drew was saying, but the command in his voice was forcing me to listen, my omega complying to one of her alphas.

When I finally had my breathing back to normal, my eyes narrowed at him, and I stepped back. He let me go willingly and let out an annoyed huff of laughter.

"You going to run from me now?"

"This has to rise. I gotta go clean the flour off myself. I'm fine," I said in a rush as I brushed my hands off on my apron and started to run from the room.

Micah stepped in the way with his expression full of concern. His scent hit me as I ran past, solidifying what I'd already suspected.

They were all my mates.

I slammed my door closed behind me and leaned against it, wishing I could get Micah's scent of warm sugar cookies out of my nose. It was like a warm hug.

Maybe that was why I didn't tailspin into another panic attack.

Thank god for that.

Instead, I went to my usual methods, grabbing the leather-bound journal off of the dresser and the pen that was always safely tucked inside.

I poured my soul out on those pages, knowing I'd never get a response, but feeling better all the same.

As the words filled the lines, my chest untightened a little at a time, my breathing a little bit easier.

My head still hurt, but that was always a result of a panic attack. At least now I was in control.

Dear Everett,

Lake found a pack. They're here with us now, and apparently, they're all my mates. Yesterday, I was planning to leave this life behind, to give up. I stayed for Lake, but I worry that it might have been a mistake. They're going to expect me to be their omega, Everett. How am I going to be anybody's but yours? That's been my identity for so long that I don't know how to be anything else.

They aren't going to want an omega who's broken, who cries way too

much, who barely knows who she is anymore.

I'm damaged goods.

They all deserve better than this, and I can't give them anything other than what I am.

How do I move on? How do I keep living? I wish you could give me all the answers, but those days are past.

I'm going to have to figure out how to be Shaye again.

I don't know if I'm strong enough.

A timer went off in the kitchen, pulling me from pouring my heart out on the pages. I closed it and took a few deep breaths for good measure. I was in control again, and I was going to keep it that way.

There was a heavy silence in the air as I went back out, pretending I was unaffected as I finished making the pan of cinnamon rolls and putting them in the oven.

The guys moved around me as they grabbed drinks and helped clean up in the wake of my baking.

I stared at the oven, waiting, when a mug of coffee was pushed my way. The color looked perfect, just the way I liked it.

I glanced up at Lake, surprised.

"It's not the first coffee I've made you, and it's not going to be the last," Lake promised me. "You're not alone."

He pressed a kiss to my forehead before stepping away completely. He kept repeating those words to me, but I knew it would be a long time until they sank in.

When the cinnamon rolls were done, I pulled them out of the oven and poured the icing I made over the top before heading to the table.

Drew was moving already, putting a hand towel down for me to set the hot pan on top of, while Lake and Riven grabbed plates.

Still, no one broke the silence, except for groans of appreciation as they bit into the warm, gooey rolls.

Even I had to admit that the comfort food was exactly what I needed. I closed my eyes and breathed in as the sweetness burst across my tongue.

Until Lake broke the moment.

"I think it's time to pull up that website."

CHAPTER
NINE

Shaye

Everett's face filled the laptop screen. He was as gorgeous as ever, even with the dark circles lining his eyes and the hollowness of his cheeks.

I drank in every detail of his face, from the slight stubble on his chin to the way his nose was crooked just the slightest.

My fingers traced over the indentation of his teeth on my wrist. It wasn't from anxiety this time, but nostalgia.

The thing that stood out the most to me was the gleam of excitement in his eyes. I remembered that look well. He had it every time he planned something exciting for us to do or wanted to show me something new with his game.

It was like the look he got when he was passionate about something.

Then he started to speak and it was like I was yanked back in time. His rich, deep tone washed over me and my soul absorbed every nuance of his words, drinking it in like it could fill the emptiness inside of me.

"Look, there's no easy way to say this. By the time you guys watch this, I'll be gone, and I'm so fucking sorry about that. I know you both well enough to know that you'll both fall apart, probably separately because you're both stubborn as hell."

Everett rolled his eyes, and Lake and I shared a smile through our tears. He knew us a bit too well, apparently.

"That is one of the things that weighs heaviest on my conscience—the fact that I'm afraid that you guys are going to spiral out of touch, lose yourselves and each other."

His eyes pierced me right through the screen. I couldn't look away or blink as it felt like his attention was fully on me.

"Shaye, we were so consumed with each other. We texted every morning, talked every night, spent every moment we could together. I know if I was in your shoes I would..."

He trailed off and glanced off camera, gathering himself with a long breath.

"So, I did the only thing I could. I turned to video games. Call me a dork all you want, but this is the game I've been spending years working on. In fact, I got in touch with a development team, a group of friends that I've worked with over the years. Shaye, I'm sure you remember Landon. He agreed to help bring this game to life for me. I've sent everything into them, and knowing you two and your procrastination, by the time you actually read the letters and click on this link, it's going to be an insane amount of time. That only means that they'll be further along in development."

"Holy shit," I breathed out. He had been working on that game since we were in high school. It started as an idea then bloomed into him searching out a group of other kids interested in indie gaming. I never suspected he'd taken it this far.

"Landon promised not to release the game or contact you until you reached out first. It's sitting on hold for them, but this is a project of passion more than anything... a favor that they owed me. There will be logistics that Landon will talk to you about, but essentially, once you guys have played, a few things will be tweaked according to your feedback. Then he and his team will launch it out into the world, and you'll get 50% of the proceeds for the lifetime of the game. A way for me to take care of you both."

"What?" Lake gasped. He reached forward and hit the spacebar, pausing the video so we could both process the mindfuck that he just gave us.

"He's got your guys' number, though, doesn't he?" Drew teased. "He knew damn well you'd wait and he knew exactly how you'd react."

I could feel the weight of their gazes on me and I shifted my hair, letting it create a curtain between me and them. It was my protective armor, a way to block them all out.

Lake's fingers curled around mine, and I finally risked a glance at him. His turquoise eyes were glassy, and his chin had the slightest tremble to it.

"Are you ready?" he asked. His voice was strong despite how broken I knew he must feel. I gave his hand a squeeze and nodded once, unable to say

anything out loud this time, afraid that it would betray me, and crack me wide open for them to see.

Lake reached forward and hit the spacebar, the video playing again.

“We spent every summer of most of our lives in Lockwood. That was where I fell in love. It was where Lake and I grew closer. It’s where I became who I am today. We spent so many years going to the local hangouts, hearing the townies gossip and share all their spooky campfire stories to keep us up at night.”

“Did this town really have scary stories?” Micah asked. “I can’t see it at all.”

“Oh they did,” I mused. “I’ll share them sometime.”

“I’d love that.” The softness in Micah’s voice had me glancing at him. His dirty blond hair was mussed like he was continuously running his hand through it but the smile on his face was sweet.

It also lacked pity and that was everything right now. I was so tired of that look. Before I could make a fool of myself I turned back to the screen.

“I took all of that and I created a game. But it’s not going to be that simple.” Everett let out a laugh, as if he could see our reactions, the rich, booming sound filling the room, and it was me who hit the spacebar this time.

I was keeping it together until that point. His laugh was one that had haunted my memories and one of the things I missed most about him. I clutched my chest. The pain was so strong, as if the wound had cracked open again, and it was gaping just like it was that first day that I lost him.

My grief flooded my system so fully that I could barely breathe and it took all my focus to shove myself out of my chair and move. The moment I was on my feet I was running for the door. I tore it open and hurried off into the morning light.

A light rain was falling and the chill of it burned my heated skin. It didn’t matter, I welcomed the pain at this point. It was familiar and all consuming, unavoidable.

It wasn’t until my sneakers met the main road that I realized I’d done it again.

I left Lake behind to suffer alone.

Only this time, it wasn’t alone, he had a pack, one that I was supposed to be a part of.

I stopped running, bending over with my hands gripping my thighs,

gasping for air and trying to pull myself together. My hand shifted back to my chest, putting pressure on it like it could hold the jagged edges together for a little while longer.

“Shaye,” Lake called, his hurried footsteps running up behind me. I launched into a rambling speech, trying to beg for his forgiveness or explain myself... I wasn’t sure.

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t trying to run. I stopped myself. I just... god, it fucking hurts so much. It’s like I can’t do basic functions or think or breathe. Like I can’t take a single fucking step without falling apart. And if I stop moving and give in? Well, it’ll tear me open completely.”

“I know. I’m so sorry. I feel it, too, maybe not as strongly as you do—” I held up a hand to stop him before he could finish that thought.

“No, don’t do that. Don’t downplay your own shit, Lake. He was your twin. That’s not just an average bond.” We were both panting now from running and the rain was soaking through our clothes. His eyes softened and he pulled me in and held me tight.

I don’t know if it was for me or him, but I melted into the touch, finally letting somebody else in on my pain, letting him hold me up when I wasn’t strong enough to do it myself.

It wasn’t much, but it was a start.

“I don’t care if it takes us a week to get through this video, Shaye. We’re going to do it together.”

He pulled back and held out his palm for me. I reached forward and slid my hand into his, marveling at the way it engulfed mine. There were so many ways that he was the same person that he was back then and so many reminders of why he wasn’t now.

He was bigger. He’d come into his alpha designation. Lake was stronger in so many ways than I could *ever* be.

We walked back hand in hand. Drew, Micah, and Riven were waiting on the porch. They were still strangers to me, but we were also so much more than that.

I didn’t have the capacity to deal with that then. Though, to my credit, I didn’t flinch away when Micah brushed his fingers over my arm, his eyes asking if I was okay.

I offered him a small smile before tucking myself into Lake’s side.

How they weren’t running for the hills yet, I had no idea.

We sat back down in front of the laptop and they didn’t say a word as

they waited for one of us to hit play.

My hand shook as I reached forward, but I didn't let myself back down. I tapped the key and waited for Everett's laughter to finish.

"Okay, you guys had to know I was going to complicate this. I always make you work for it. I said in my letter to Lake that I wanted this to be a journey, a quest if you will." He paused again and shot us a smirk, knowing damn well he was being cheesy this time.

I felt myself smiling back. It was crazy how rapidly I could go through emotions these days, especially when it came to him. It was enough to give any sane person whiplash.

"Lockwood is full of history. Each location in the game is significant, and I modeled it after the town. I want you guys to go to Lockwood if you aren't there already. Once you contact Landon, he's going to send you back a link to an app that we created together. This app will only ever exist for you guys. I told him to add a few extra just in case you happen to find someone else to spend your time with."

This time I did risk a glance at the others. Riven was standing behind us, arms crossed, glaring down at the screen, giving nothing away with his expression.

Micah had his hand on the back of my chair, like he wanted to touch me but wasn't letting himself do so, and I appreciated his hesitation. I couldn't take it right now.

Drew was giving me a soft smile. It was encouraging and I relaxed a little before turning back to the screen.

"The app has a map of the game and a map of the town. It lists the destinations I want you to go to, and in which order. Once you get to each place, the app will give you instructions, some history, and another video from me."

He paused and narrowed his eyes at us before continuing.

"I'm going to need you to keep it together. You can't go blubbering around a town this small or you'll earn a one-way ticket to a grippy sock vacation."

Lake groaned. "He's such an ass."

My laughter surprised me and it cut off too quickly... but damn it felt good. Strange, but good.

"That's everything I can give you right now, but don't worry, you'll be hearing my voice a little bit more. And I hope each time it's a little bit easier.

Just promise me that you'll lean on each other for this journey, that you'll *actually* listen to these memories and find a way to move on. I don't want you to forget me, I just want you to continue moving forward regardless. Then again, that would be impossible. I'm unforgettable."

Again, there was that smirk. The brat knew what he was doing. It was Everett's way of adding some humor to the moment that he knew was going to be hard to hear.

"I'm always going to be with you guys, but you can't live in the past anymore, you have to move on. I *want* you to move on. Find friends, a pack, and maybe even love again. You deserve it."

His eyes softened and his smile shifted.

"Remember, Shaye, forever."

This time, Micah didn't hold back. Maybe he knew how significant that was to me or maybe I gave some signal, but he put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed. A soft purr rumbled from his chest, soothing us without words.

There were no words anyone could say in that moment. It was too intense.

I didn't freak out or panic, I just existed as his words were absorbed.

Drew was the first to break the silence several minutes later.

"So, you're telling me that he created an *entire* video game, an app, and an adventure for you to go on? All while sick?" The beta was stunned and I couldn't blame him. He didn't know firsthand how amazing Everett was. When he set his mind to something he didn't hesitate, he went all in.

"Everett was really thoughtful like that. Lake was outgoing, witty, and laughed easily. Everett was more stoic and calm. He was the one staying indoors while Lake was on whatever outdoor adventure he could find. Video games were his escape and it makes sense that he went through all this trouble to help us cope."

I trailed off, trying to put words to the storm of emotions and thoughts racing through my head.

"He was trying to save me."

"Are you going to let it save you?" Riven questioned.

That was such a loaded question, and of course, it came from him. The man who forced me to flush those pills down the toilet.

I had yet to thank him because the effect it would have had on Lake would have been unforgivable.

There was no way I could walk away now, not when this was waiting for

us.

He hadn't just created a digital world for us, he created a way for me and Lake to connect again.

"I'm going to try."

CHAPTER
TEN

Shaye

“Hello, this is Landon Grant. Can I help you?”

“Hi, my name is Shaye King. My mate, Everett, gave me your number.”

“Shaye,” his voice softened a little bit as my name registered. “Look, I’m not going to start this call off as that person that says ‘I’m sorry.’ It sucks, and we both know it. But let me just tell you what this man has created for you.” A long whistle echoed through the line. “I’ve been waiting a long time to share this.”

“Sorry, it took so long to watch the video.”

“Nope, no apologies here. That just means we got extra time to work on the little details. What you guys are going to get is way better than what you would have gotten back then. In fact, the time will probably give you a chance to appreciate it more.”

“What exactly is it you’re giving me?”

He let out a laugh. “Oh no, Shaye, I can’t reveal anything. You need to appreciate it in all its glory. Hit me with your number, and I’ll send you a text. You can forward it to a group chat with anyone else who’s participating in this journey. Just promise me you’re not going to be alone.”

“Lake is with me, and so is his pack.”

“Our pack,” Lake muttered under his breath.

Thankfully, Landon wasn’t here with us, so nothing was awkward. But I

shot him a look anyway.

“Thank you, Landon,” I said quickly before giving him my number. “Do you need anything else from me?”

“No, but I would really love your feedback once you get to the game portion of this. He told me that you have a whole journey before that, so just enjoy that and call me if you need anything, okay?”

“I will. Thank you.”

“I promise, the pleasure is mine,” he said with a chuckle before ending the call. Whatever Everett had cooked up with this man was something they both took very seriously. I could hear it in Landon’s excited tone and the refusal to share any details.

We all sat in an awkward silence until my phone pinged with the message.

“Wait, we don’t have a group chat,” Drew pointed out as he took my phone from me.

It took him all of a few seconds to have a group chat pulled up before he handed it back.

“There you go, sweets.”

He gave me a wink and I felt my face flame. I wasn’t used to anyone flirting with me, especially not when I was a hot mess. My body reacted instinctively and I had to fight the urge to lean closer.

I shook my head to clear it and hurriedly forwarded the text with the link to the group chat.

The app was named Locked Inn, and it had a little lock as the icon. It didn’t take long to download, and I fidgeted in my seat as I waited. I had no idea what to expect but the fact he went to these lengths for us was insane.

Then again, he was always that type of alpha. Protective, sweet, and would do anything for those he loved.

God, I missed him.

When the icon flashed that the app was ready, I tapped it and held my breath as it loaded.

The layout was just how he described in the video. There was a map of Lockwood and then a map of Locked Inn, which, of course, was nearly identical, though a lot more whimsical than Lockwood itself was.

“Where’s our first destination?” Micah asked, pulling up his own app and watching me. He did that a lot. His eyes finding me in the quiet moments we’ve had so far, like he’s reassuring himself I’m here and okay.

“Why are you guys coming?” Thankfully, for once, it didn’t sound like a harsh question, just curiosity. “You didn’t know Everett. This isn’t going to be significant to you like it would be to me or Lake.”

“We’re Pack,” Riven said again. He always spoke like it was a challenge instead of an answer. At least I knew what to expect from him. Harsh, honest words and no coddling. I was realizing how much I hated the sympathy I got from everyone else. He just looked at me like I was an asshole and that was far better.

To him, I was an awful person. I had come here with plans that would have hurt someone in his pack. The intention was there and he wasn’t letting me off that easily.

“What he’s trying to say is that we’re pack. We’re going to be sticking together through the hard times and the easy times. That’s what pack does,” Drew translated, giving Riven a shove.

“You guys don’t even know me. I’m not your pack.” They all narrowed their eyes on me but it was Lake who protested.

“Look, I understand that you’re going to need time to consider all of this, but that doesn’t make you any less our scent match. It doesn’t make you any less pack. We’re going to sit by you when you face hard videos. We’re going to see you through this entire thing. You’re not going to be alone anymore.”

“You keep saying that.” I let out an exasperated breath as I stared right back at him.

“And I will until you believe me,” he argued. He gripped his blond hair and let out a harsh breath. I hated that I was stressing him out more. I wasn’t trying to.

“I’m not trying to be stubborn,” I said in a quiet voice.

“I get it. You’re used to being a lone wolf these days. But you’re not anymore, so just accept it, and we’ll face this together.”

“I’ll look at the list later. I need to go for a walk to get some fresh air.”

I stood up, and Riven started to protest, but Micah stepped up. “I’ll walk with her,” he promised before turning to me. “Actually, did you just need fresh air, or do you want to run to town with me so I can get some clothes from the house? We can stop for coffee on the way back.”

“Coffee sounds great,” I admitted. And so did getting out of this stuffy cabin for a while.

Before we could even walk out the door, my phone was ringing, my mom’s name flashing across the screen. I kept going, climbing into Micah’s

passenger seat while I heard her out.

“Hey, Mom,” I said as I answered, putting her on speaker like I usually did, not even thinking about the fact that I wasn’t alone anymore.

“You sound oddly put together. How’s your little reunion going?”

‘Little reunion.’ As if this was no big deal.

“It’s fine. I’m fine. We’re fine.” The lies I’d told her for a year came so easily.

“Yes, yes. You can’t blame your mother for worrying,” she said, letting out a laugh. It was a superficial laugh, like one you gave to strangers so you didn’t hurt their feelings when you didn’t find them funny. “Look, if you need me, you know where to find me. I’m getting ready to run out, but call me, okay?”

She hung up before I could even respond to her and looked over at Micah.

“I see our moms are very similar,” he said as his lips tipped downward. “I feel like that was the obligatory ‘I made an effort, so why don’t my kids talk to me anymore’ phone call.”

“She was really great at first when I lost Everett, and then slowly... I was too much. My grief was too much for her. My tears were too much for her. My presence was too much for her. She barely saw me off to my dorm room before she left me. Then I was the college’s problem.”

He reached over and gave my hand a squeeze before pulling back. He didn’t linger, just offering quick support.

“That’s a ‘her’ problem, not a ‘you’ problem. You are *not* too much.” He looked at me before turning back to the road.

“Thanks,” I said, turning to look out the window because I couldn’t handle the gentle look he was giving me.

Now that we were locked inside his car, his scent was everywhere. It was so strong that all I could do was breathe it in. I hated what it did to me. My inner omega perked up, relaxing because she was close to her mate while my mind was a mess of guilt and stress.

“You have a house in town?” I asked, trying to switch to easier topics.

“I do. I needed a change. We used to live in the city, and I hated it. Then I found Lockwood, and I’ve never looked back. There are plenty of homes to be redone in all these old towns around the area. Hell, maybe we need to expand to the cabin network.”

“It’s not a bad idea. Even as a kid, half of these cabins were so rundown they should’ve been condemned. They belonged more to the animals than

they did to the people who had the deeds.”

“Oh, they still are,” he promised. “Not much has changed with that. Then, after establishing myself here, my sister moved to town as well. She needed an escape, and what better way than to hide in a town too small to be found. Then again, when you’re rejected on live TV, you can’t exactly run away from it. She was the talk of the town for a while.”

“Wait, is your sister Eleanor Winters?” I gasped, shocked. They looked nothing alike. She was a redhead and petite, he was tall and had dirty-blond hair. Even their features were different. She had a smaller nose and softer features, he had a strong nose and sharp jaw.

“The one and only,” he said with a smirk. “She found her mates here in Lockwood. She’s never been happier, and she made me an uncle.”

“I’m glad she’s happy here. That entire show was bullshit,” I growled. I’d been so mad for Ellie as that shitshow unfolded.

“Not to sound like a dick, but I’m surprised you watched it. You don’t really seem like the reality TV type.”

“I’m not, actually. But all the girls in the dorm were hooked. It was one of those things I did to pretend to be normal. After a few episodes it wasn’t even pretending, I was hooked.”

“It was like a train wreck, right?” he laughed. “I watched it, too, but don’t tell Ellie. She’d kill me on the spot.”

“Your secret’s safe with me,” I promised.

We shared a quick smile that warmed me from the inside out. Micah was easy to talk to and sweet. His blond hair, green eyes, and dimples made him seem adorable and not intimidating. He seemed like the kind of guy who just wanted everyone to be happy and found joy in the little things. Honestly, I could use more of that in my life.

I turned to look away and it felt like the awkward silence started to rise between us again. Would that silence ever be comfortable? The last thing I wanted was them to constantly worry about me.

Micah must have felt it, too. He cleared his throat to get my attention and when I looked back he gave my hand a squeeze again. The alpha was always seeking out touch and I hated to deny him. I just wasn’t ready yet.

“Look, I know it’s not my place yet, but you *are* pack. Part of me is constantly fighting the need to take care of you. I just...you know, you’re allowed to be happy, right? You can smile. You don’t have to hide from it. You can laugh. It doesn’t mean you care about him any less. I heard that

video, he wants you to live your life, Shaye.”

His words were like a dagger straight to the heart. He saw right through me already, but it should have been impossible. I hated that I was attracted to them, that I genuinely liked spending time with them.

“It just feels wrong,” I admitted. “I was so happy back then. I know it always seems crazy to talk about it like that, but there’s a very distinctive divide in my life. Who I was then and who I am now are very different people. I feel like years have passed in the last year and a half.”

I let out a shuddering sigh but he was reaching for me again, not letting me experience the moment alone. The gentle way he handled me never felt overbearing or pushy, just sweet.

“Trauma changes you. When something terrible like that happens, you don’t just get over it, Shaye. You probably never will. I don’t mean to sound terrible but it’s true. He’ll always be a part of this pack, too. But it won’t be like this forever. You’ll find a way to live again, and I, for one, can’t wait to see you do it.”

“How can you guys care? I just don’t understand why you want to stay here while I figure this out.”

“We’re already a pack, Shaye. We’re not going to just walk away from Lake either. He’s invested, so we’re invested. And that was before we even knew you were our mate.”

“What if I can’t be your omega?”

The words hung between us but he didn’t get angry. Micah just ran his fingers over my hand in a soothing pattern.

“I’m not worried about that, Shaye. It’s not something we need to talk about right now. We have this journey and game to experience. We are going to be here to support you and help you through it.”

We stopped in front of a house. It was... cute. Micah kept it well-maintained, from the cut grass to the small flower bed. There was a bright-blue door that stood out among the white siding. It was kind of adorable.

“Come inside with me. I have to grab my stuff and Lake’s so it’ll be a minute.”

“Where do Riven and Drew live?” I questioned as I followed him inside. Didn’t packs usually live together?

“They have a place in town. The lease is almost up and we’ve been talking about finding a pack house. Mine is too small. I’ll be a bit sad to leave though.”

He looked around with pride. Micah had built a life here and had seen his sister and now his pack-mate, through hard times here. I couldn't blame him for not wanting to give it up just yet.

It was oddly cozy inside. It didn't have that bachelor feel, where it was just basic furniture, white walls, maybe a movie poster, and some old beer cans.

There were family photos on the wall, some artwork, a fairly decent-sized TV and a comfortable couch. The kitchen was clean and organized even though he didn't know he had company coming.

It was refreshing.

"Ellie and Tori, my other sister, always tease me about my house. Don't tell me you agree," he said as he watched me take it all in.

I found myself actually smiling and holding up my hands. "I didn't say anything. I just—" I trailed off as I tried to find the words. "It just kind of looks like you already have a woman's touch here. It's kind of nice. I am impressed, honestly."

"I'll take it. I'd like to take all the credit, but they added a few pieces of decor. And I've always liked clean, bright spaces. Growing up, we were pretty well off, and we always had to be perfect. Everything about us. This house was exactly what I wished our house was. It's cozy. It's not too perfect, you know?"

He disappeared into the bedroom to gather his things before walking off to the other and doing it all over again. I took the time to browse through the photos.

You can always tell a lot about a person from the photos on their walls. These weren't just formal aesthetic photos.

They were candid shots.

Micah had gathered happy moments and put them on display. There was one of him and his niece, Micah lifting the baby into the air, mid-spin. The photo was a little blurry, but I kind of loved it.

There were some of the guys working on a house, leaning over a pile of boards and smiling at the camera.

Then there was him with a redhead and a blonde. Their features matched, and I recognized Ellie from the show, so I knew the two were his sisters.

People in his life were important to him, and it suddenly made sense why he was all in on this journey.

Lake was important enough that he wanted to be there for him. They all

did. Maybe there was something to having a pack.

Even if I hated to admit it to myself, I craved that kind of attention again. I needed to feel seen.

Someone like Micah deserved the best. He deserved for someone to care about him as much as he cared about everyone in his life. I wanted to be worthy of that kind of appreciation. I wanted to open myself up again. I wanted to live.

Everett told me that he wanted me to move on, and I wanted to give it a shot. It was tiring being conflicted all the time, balancing guilt with hope.

Micah's hand went to my lower back, and I jumped, relaxing again as his laughter filled the air. Just being around him made me want to soak in his brand of sunshine.

"That's one of my favorite photos," he said, tapping the one in my hand. I hadn't even realized I was still holding it.

"We were having what we call family barbecues, something that my sister Ellie and her group of friends started. It's always at Serenity's parents' house because they've got this *amazing* backyard. We were having a hot dog eating contest. As you can see, I lost gloriously. Shockingly enough, Serenity won."

"She looks so tiny," I said, taking in the girl doing the victory fist pump.

"One of my sister's mates, Ezra, is her cousin, and they grew up together. He lost, and you can just see it in his face, can't you?"

His laughter turned to a soft chuckle, and he shook his head, tapping to show me who was who.

"Of course, her mom had made this balloon hot dog crown to commemorate the win. They're a crazy bunch, just wait until you meet them."

He expected to keep me around long enough for family barbecues. I wasn't sure how to handle that.

I didn't know what to say, so I put the photo back on the table where I got it from. Micah snagged the two duffel bags he'd dropped on the floor and flashed me his perfect smile.

"Are you ready?"

"Yes," I agreed.

He tucked one of the bags under his arm so he could have a free hand. He offered his hand to me and I couldn't find it in me to say no.

Not when he looked so hopeful.

I was quickly learning Micah was touchy and I didn't hate it.

The fact he was so vastly different from Everett was the biggest factor. There was no way to compare. Usually, I was looking for him in everyone who came into my life.

This time, I couldn't. None of them were the same. Drew was funny and calming, Riven was harsh and honest, Micah sweet and goofy, and Lake was Lake. He was my constant but I saw the same shadows in him that lived in me now.

Maybe this journey would change us both, chase those shadows away so we could live again.

I put my hand in his and let him pull me out of the house. He locked the door behind us and led me to the car. Opening my door, he let me in before dropping the duffels on the ground.

He leaned over me to buckle me in. His pretty green eyes met mine for a moment before he moved away. They weren't as stark as Riven's, his were more of a mossy green, pale but gorgeous.

He was gone just as quickly, and my chest ached for a different reason. It was almost like I couldn't stand his absence. He closed my door before putting the duffels in the back and finding his way into the front seat.

My body relaxed when he was close again and I hated that I felt out of control. But Micah didn't let me overthink. He filled the silence easily and it relaxed me in ways I didn't know were possible.

"Time for coffee," Micah said as he backed out of the driveway. "Although if you prefer tea, my sister has a house blend that she makes for Raven's Nest now."

"Was that the extra counter I saw? I thought they'd renovated," I mused. "Maybe I'll try one."

"If you like tea I'm sure it's great. It's a bit too herbal for me. I like my hot drinks sweet and not earthy."

"Somehow I'm not surprised by that," I said, shooting him a grin.

Micah gave me a lopsided smile back and I swear he looked at me like I hung the moon for offering him a genuine smile. His good mood radiated off of him, and I longed to be that happy and free.

Maybe someday I could be.

When he parked in front of Raven's Nest and turned off the key, he jumped out. He was around to my side and opening the door before I even had a chance to unbuckle and climb out.

He held out his hand, helping me out of the car and keeping his fingers wrapped around mine as he led me inside.

“Micah!” a woman called out. There was a shuffling of feet, and I looked up to see his sister Ellie hurtling towards him and crashing into him in a hug.

Apparently, he wasn't the only one who wasn't afraid to show affection.

“Is Lake doing okay?”

“He's fine, Ellie. And Ellie, I want you to meet Shaye.”

Ellie's eyes widened as she looked from him to me, down at our hands, back up to me, and then back at her brother. She was like a life-sized bobble head. It might have been funny if I wasn't so fucking nervous now. I hadn't even accepted the pack and I was meeting family.

The joys of a small town.

“Look, I'm not going to be that girl that embarrasses y'all in that moment, but I do expect a phone call later, and I will hunt you down if I don't get it. But as long as Lake is alright and you're alright, then let me make you a drink.”

Her eyes were wide and full of excitement, and I swear she was practically vibrating with the force of holding back.

True to her word, she hurried behind the counter and waved us over.

“Give me our usual, and then Shaye will have...” He turned to me. I glanced at the menu before my eyes fell on the mix of teas.

“Holy hell,” I muttered at the extensive list. Micah gave my hand another reassuring squeeze. I swear I was growing addicted to them.

“If you can't decide, she's great at making concoctions. Tell her the mood you're going for.”

“How about fighting exhaustion?” I asked.

“I've got the perfect one for that,” she said without missing a beat. She hurried off to make our drinks.

An omega with dark hair stepped out from the back, barely dodging out of the way of Ellie's chaotic drink making.

“Hey, Serenity, what are you doing here? I figured you'd be off on your fancy yacht.”

Damn, apparently she lived an impressive life. If she had a yacht what the hell was she doing in Lockwood?

“We're in town for a bit, so I thought I'd say hello to Walter, turn in a bit of paperwork and go over a few things. It's kind of nice doing the behind-the-scenes work now.”

“The travel doesn’t hurt I’m sure,” Micah teased her. She smiled then, not bothering to hide her agreement.

“It’s great, the pack is amazing, but I do love being back—”

Serenity stopped talking abruptly, her raspy voice cutting off. She did the same thing Ellie had, bouncing her gaze between us a few times, though her face remained expressionless.

Then she was back to talking like nothing happened.

“Plus, I’ve been missing girls’ nights and queso, so we’re planning one in two days, because, you know, everybody’s schedules have to line up or something these days,” she rolled her pretty blue eyes before landing them back on me. “Do you like queso?”

“Doesn’t everyone love queso?”

“Okay, you’re in,” she said, as if that were that. Apparently, I’d been adopted into a friend group.

Is this how adults make friends now? Or maybe it’s just a Lockwood thing.

Ellie came up and handed Micah the guys’ drinks in the carrier, then slid my tea toward me.

“I hope it works for you,” she said, giving me a warm smile.

“She’s joining us for queso,” Serenity added, matter-of-fact.

Ellie rolled her eyes and gave her friend a look. “You know you have to actually invite people and then wait for an answer, right?”

Serenity turned toward me. “Are you in?”

Everybody’s eyes were on me, and usually, I would hide away from that kind of attention. But this time, I wanted to try being a person again and maybe finding real friends would be a step closer.

“I’m in.”

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

Drew

The silence in the cabin was stretching on, making me fidget more as every minute passed. The guys all left to get us a pack space set up and Shaye was *not* an early riser.

The only reason I was up now was because Riven was too loud, and we were all crammed together in this tiny cabin. I didn't want to make noise and wake her up or cook her food only to have it be cold by the time she got up for the day.

Hopefully, she wasn't opposed to moving locations. Despite how intense her emotions were, she seemed the type to go with the flow.

We were just a bit too cramped here. There weren't enough beds or showers. Riven was going stir-crazy, and at least back in town, he could escape easier to work on the house.

A little physical labor always did him some good on his bad days.

Ever since he found Shaye in that car, it had been a bad day.

I hated that she was getting the worst parts of him, but she gave it back as good as he doled it out.

I pulled out my phone, bored and ready to check in with the guys. Clicking the microphone option, I used voice-to-text to message them back and forth, letting it read theirs back to me.

Drew: How are things going there?

Micah: Not bad. We've got the office empty now and are getting it ready for Shaye.

Riven: We've got our place still, but if you want to stay here, I can make

the couch work, and you can share with Lake.

Lake: We're going to need a bigger place.

Drew: That's not a 'right now' problem. Let's just get this girl a room, give us a place to shower and function, and go from there. We have the first location to visit tomorrow, and she'll need rest for it.

Micah: Is she still sleeping?

Drew: Yes.

Riven: Figures.

Lake: Shut up, she's just not a morning person.

I could feel Riven's eye roll from here. He loved to give us a hard time, and I was actually glad to see that he was doing the same to Shaye.

He was only a morning person because in his past he was never allowed to sleep in. If his father got up and breakfast wasn't ready there was hell to pay.

Now, sleeping in general was hard for him. Maybe when he finally had an omega at his side, he'd sleep longer than a few hours at a time.

I swear the man napped more than slept.

Movement from the back bedroom had me perking up, ready to see Shaye walking out. When the bathroom door closed I stood up and started getting to work in the kitchen, figuring by the time she got dressed, she'd be ready to eat.

I pulled the leftovers out of the fridge that we'd saved for her and started heating them up, making sure the coffee was hot. I'd watched her make two cups already, so I doctored it up the same, hoping that it was good enough.

By the time I was turning around to put it on the table, she was walking in.

My omega was disheveled from sleep but still just as gorgeous. Her black hair was piled on top of her head in a crazy messy bun, small strands hanging down loose around her face.

Despite the yawn that was cracking her jaw right now, she looked better rested than she had since we first saw her. Even the circles under her eyes were slowly receding.

"Good morning, sweets. We've got breakfast here. Come sit down."

I put her plate and coffee mug down, and she sat in front of it while I busied myself making my third cup of coffee for the day. The last thing I needed was more caffeine, I was already twitchy, but I didn't want her sitting alone.

“Where is everyone?” she asked, not taking a bite of her food yet as she stared down at it, blinking.

“Is something wrong with the food? I can make you something else if you want.”

“No, no,” she said hurriedly, stabbing a bite of fried potatoes and shoving them in her mouth, as if daring me to take it from her now.

I had a feeling she just wasn’t used to being taken care of. I’d seen the same look in Riven, and judging from the phone call that Micah told us about, she definitely didn’t get it from her parents.

“The guys went back to Micah’s place to move a few things around. We were hoping you wouldn’t mind staying there with us while we follow the clues.”

“We’re leaving the cabin?” she questioned with a frown.

“We’d like to. There’s just not enough room here. Too few showers and beds and the kitchen is lacking.”

She smiled as she looked over the cabin. Her eyes had a faraway look.

At least this time, they weren’t full of sadness, too.

“Linda and I used to make some amazing breakfasts in here, but you’re right. It’s not exactly fully equipped.”

“That and we figured if we’re going to be exploring the town, we may as well be closer, just in case some of it’s emotional.”

She snorted before taking a drink of coffee. “More like all of it is going to be emotional.”

“You aren’t wrong about that,” I said, wishing we were bonded so I could offer some silent support. For now, I offered a distraction. “They’re preparing the guest room for you, and then I’ll probably be sharing with Lake while Riven takes the couch.”

“He’s going to fit on the couch?” she mused. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen someone so... big. Shit, that sounds terrible, but you know what I mean.” She winced as she finished stumbling over her words. Shaye was adorable when she was flustered and I loved the soft blush lighting up her cheeks.

“Riven has a lot to work through, and one of those ways is through working out. If he’s not at the gym, he’s doing physical labor,” I explained.

“Hmm,” was all she offered before taking another bite of her food. She groaned as she bit into the bacon. I’d added a little brown sugar while it was cooking.

“Who cooked?” Her brown eyes were full of curiosity. The way she

focused on you during conversations made it seem like you were the only two people in the room. Right now, I had the brunt of her focus and it felt so fucking good.

“Me,” I answered with a grin. “Is it good?”

Shaye rolled her eyes but didn’t hide her smile. “From that smile, I think you know it is,” she laughed. “Are you the cook of the pack?”

“Oh, god, yes. You do not want Riven, Micah, or Lake in the kitchen. Unless it’s a quick sandwich or something. I do most of the cooking, but I make them do the prep work sometimes so it’s not all on me.”

“As you should,” she said with a wink. “This is delicious. It’s been a long time since I’ve had some solid home-cooked food. College cafeteria food is not exactly amazing.”

Sometimes it was easy to forget that she was younger than us. She had an old soul vibe about her. The difference was only a few short years but mentions of college while we were running a business felt so strange.

Riven was the oldest at twenty-six, Micah just under him at twenty-five, I was twenty-three, and Lake and Shaye were both twenty-one. It wasn’t exactly an age gap but it felt like our lives had taken us in very different directions.

“You know, I want to know more about you, Shaye. I don’t want to make it too intense. How about we play a game of twenty questions to lighten the mood of it? You ask me a question, then I ask you one.”

She thought it over as she chewed on her toast, finally answering after she swallowed it down with more coffee. Noticing that her cup was almost nearly gone, I got up and made her a fresh mug, pushing it in front of her.

“Alright, you go first,” she said, taking another bite and finishing off her plate.

“What’s your favorite color?”

She let out a surprised laugh. “I was expecting something way more profound than that. “Probably turquoise.”

The color of Everett and Lake’s eyes.

Everything about Shaye was wrapped up in the twins. I couldn’t imagine caring about somebody that deeply, but then again, I’d never had an omega before. I’d never been in love, either.

Just looking at Shaye, being near her, made it seem a lot more possible.

“What’s yours?” she questioned. Her head cocked to the side as she waited, a small smile on her lips.

“It depends on the day,” I answered honestly. “Sometimes it’s green, like the color of leaves in the spring when you walk through a forest. Sometimes it’s blue like the surface of the lake during summer days. Right now, it’s brown,” I said as I met her gaze.

“The color of coffee?” she asked, chuckling to herself as she brought her knees up into her chair and took another sip.

“No, the color of your eyes,” I clarified.

Her cheeks turned a beautiful pink, but she managed to roll her eyes, deflecting again. That seemed to be her go-to, but I wasn’t about to give up.

“Next question,” I said, tapping my chin as I thought it over. “When you were growing up, what was the one place you wanted to visit?”

“That’s easy. My favorite book was this fairy tale retelling of *Beauty and the Beast*, and the main girl ran this library. The library was sentient and could choose whatever book you wanted to read at the time. It just read your mood and found one for you. Every time I read it, I could just picture myself spending hours there, reading book after book.”

My eyebrows rose. I wasn’t expecting a fictional answer, but I kind of loved that she wasn’t afraid to be honest. She was one of those genuinely unique people that didn’t try to fit in. She was just herself. I loved that.

Her dream also sounded like my nightmare.

Dyslexia was a bitch. I struggled through school and I hated reading. In fact, my chest tightened just at the thought of it.

I’d spent way too much time being bullied in school to have any fond memories. I was never able to escape to new worlds the way she was.

“What’s your favorite book?” she asked. She must have seen something on my face. Her eyes widened for a beat before she was waving her hand in the air, as if erasing the question completely.

“Okay, different question. Why the forest in the rain? That was oddly specific for a color question.”

“The town I grew up in was smaller than this, if you could even believe it. I come from a really big family. So being the youngest, I was often pawned off on one of my older siblings, and they hated me for it. My only escape was to disappear into the forest, and on the rainy days when nobody else wanted to be outside, it was peaceful. Just me, the trees, the trickle of rain, and the scent of the forest.”

“Sounds lovely,” she said, giving me a soft smile.

“Favorite type of food?” I questioned. This would be one I’d pay

attention to, just so I could spoil her a little. Maybe it would bring out one of her rare smiles.

She pretended a lot, but the real smiles... they were few and far between.

“If I’m making it, I like to bake. Sweet things are definitely my go-to. If I’m eating it, however, anything with cheese. I’m a sucker for a good mac and cheese, or pasta in general.”

“An omega after my own heart,” I teased. She bit her lip, trying to hide her smile this time, but I saw it anyway. It lit up her eyes, adding warmth back into them. They seemed to swirl with rivers of honey, a mix of brown and gold.

She was so beautiful that it made my chest ache. I had this need to take care of her, to spoil her, to be with her. My beta instincts screamed for me to soothe away her pain and bring out her smiles.

I wanted to calm the storm that lived behind her eyes.

“What’s your favorite dessert?” she countered, not realizing inside I was aching for her and hanging on to every word she gave me, hoarding them like treasures.

“Cookies. They have the most variety, and they taste good every time.”

She opened her mouth to say something, but my phone started going off, the group chat dinging again. Only this time, so did hers in the other room.

“I don’t want to grab my phone. Is it the guys?” she asked. My body froze as I stared at the screen. Now that I was nervous and on the spot, the words on my screen were like a foreign language to me again.

This could be the moment where I hide away my shortcomings. I could fight through it and fumble over the words. Instead, I clicked the icon for it to read out loud.

There was curiosity behind her eyes but not judgment. The vise around my chest loosened just a little bit at that.

Micah: We’ve got the house ready, come when you’re ready.

Riven: Is sleeping beauty awake now?

She snorted at that and snatched my phone, typing back for me.

His answer was immediate.

Riven: You make it too easy. Now get your asses in gear. We’re waiting.

After it finished reading off their messages, I got up and started cleaning up the dishes.

“We should pack up. They took the car, so I’ll just ride with you. Are you ready to face the world?”

She let out a sigh and stood up, fixing her hair and pasting on a smile that didn't reach her eyes.

“As ready as I'll ever be.”

CHAPTER
TWELVE

Shaye

Dear Everett,

Today marks the beginning of us following along on your journey. I still can't believe that you orchestrated this whole thing just for us. It feels like too much, or maybe it's just that I don't like thinking that it's the final gift you've given me.

I'm not ready to say goodbye... I've never been ready. I may have said it to you that day you left, but this kind of goodbye, the letting go of the pain in my heart, feels harder to do somehow.

Being around the guys makes me feel human again, something I didn't think I'd ever feel. Yet I feel so bad, like I'm betraying you, even

though in my mind, I know that we could have been a pack if you were here.

Nothing feels right without you, Everett. It never has.

The old train station looked different than it did years ago. Then again, everything in this town did.

What was once a thriving train station was now an abandoned brick building. Vines and grass had overgrown enough that it looked like nature was trying to reclaim the structure.

“Do we watch a video or do we go inside first?” Lake asked.

He stood next to me as we took it all in. His shoulder was pressed into mine, and I welcomed the warmth it provided.

My phone buzzed with a notification and I held it up to see the app had chosen for us.

When I opened the app, a video popped up. Being tied to our location it knew it was time to start.

“You guys ready?” I asked as I glanced at Lake and then the others. No one answered, but they all nodded.

I pressed play and Everett’s face popped up again. He was smiling, his skin glowing in the afternoon sun.

“You’ve made it to the first location. I’m here now.”

He pulled the camera out a little further to show what was behind him. Even then, it held fewer vines and overgrowth but it was still abandoned outside of a few workers shutting the place down.

“You may be asking yourself, ‘Why are we here? What does this place have to do with anything?’ But every single place on this journey is significant in one way or another. You see, this was the first place that I fell in love with Shaye, and it was the first moment that I knew that Lake was also her mate.”

“Oh shit,” Drew mumbled under his breath.

“It was just after your parents were divorcing, Shaye. You were so sad that summer, and we tried everything we could to cheer you up. Even the moms gave us fewer chores and gave us the run of the town. We ended up here with a handful of change, sat along the track while we waited for another

train to come through. They only came through twice a day, but we were early this time.”

He paused for a moment while a train rumbled behind him, and I took a moment to look at Lake, who was already watching me.

“Do you remember the day he’s talking about?” I asked.

Lake nodded. “I do. My answer is not the same as his though. I loved you before that. He’s talking about the day your bag got stuck in the tracks, I think.”

My eyes widened. I forgot all about that.

Everett in the video started forging ahead now that the train had barreled past him.

“It was also the day that I thought I was losing you, ironic since now you’ve lost me. I was terrified, Shaye. My entire life flashed before my eyes and Lake and I both ran forward, yanking you out of the way and making you forget about your pack. It might be full of your treasures, but you were far more precious to us.”

I could picture that day in my mind now. I’d been so upset that I couldn’t yank it free. My books were inside and I didn’t notice the train coming. They did, though.

“We fell down in a heap and you landed on top of us. We kept our arms protectively around you as the train rumbled past. All I could focus on was the smell of cinnamon and honey... of you. When the train was done rolling by, you laughed.” He shook his head and smiled, his turquoise eyes sparkling with humor. “You never realized how close you were to danger because you relied on us to keep you safe, and we did.”

I smiled at him, my heart warming at the protective smile on his face. He always did make me feel safe. Hell, some days he kept me sane.

“Now you have to keep each other safe. I’m not there to help save you anymore, but I know Lake will be. I want you to be that carefree again because I know this is taking its toll on you. Just that moment was hell for me, Shaye, and you’re living that hell every single day.”

His voice cracked then and I saw the sadness creeping back in, stealing his smile. He’d been enjoying the memories but reality was always a harsh awakening.

“You have to let someone else in, sweetheart. You don’t have to do this alone. Lake is right there with you, living in his own hell, wishing you were closer. Let him in, Shaye. Experience this together. I need to know you’re

both happy.”

I thought he was done, and I turned to look at Lake, unsure how to process what he just said. At every turn, Everett was letting me off the hook, telling me that I could move on, that I *should* move on. Yet my entire soul revolted at the idea.

“He’s not done,” Riven said as Everett continued. I turned back in time to see him pointing at the building again.

“To unlock a bonus level, I’ve hidden something inside. It’s a code. Can you find it?” He gave one last wink before the screen went dark. The app let out a beep before the Lockwood map was back in place.

“A little breaking and entering,” Drew said, rubbing his hands together. “Sounds like our entire afternoon just got a bit more interesting.”

“It’s locked up tight,” I pointed out. A silver chain was almost hidden by the vines that had grown over, but I could see it sparkling in the sun.

Micah stepped closer to inspect it, and Drew and Riven went with him. Lake hung back with me, and I finally turned to face him again.

“I’ve hated myself for a long time for leaving you on your own. I knew you were hurting, too, but I was trying to save myself. I’m so fucking sorry, Lake.”

He gave me a sad smile that clouded his turquoise eyes and tucked a strand of my dark hair behind my ear.

“Don’t apologize. We did what we had to. You’re here now and that’s everything to me.”

“I’m not sure I know how to be your omega, Lake. I don’t even know how to be myself.” There was so much distance between us, even now, that I didn’t know how to close it. But I wanted to. I stared into his eyes, begging him to understand.

“Then that’s where we start. We help you find yourself again,” he answered me without even a moment of hesitation.

The only reason I was still entertaining this idea was because they were giving me time to grieve, process, and heal, at my own pace.

It was starting to sink in that I really wasn’t alone.

I let out a breath, my hair ruffling around me.

“Let’s find that code,” I said.

It was a whole lot easier to focus on a mystery than to focus on me. I was set on not having a future, and now that I did, I had no fucking clue what to do with it.

Maybe that was the thing... I didn't have to know the answers or where I was going to be after this. I just had to live in the moment while this journey was going on.

I needed to absorb Everett's words and let them hit me square in the chest so I could face my demons. If I wanted to move on I had to forgive myself for living when he couldn't.

That wasn't my burden to bear, and I'd held onto it long enough that it was a part of me now.

A loud thud had me looking up to see Riven holding a huge rock, slamming it down on the chain. A few more tries and the chain coiled to the ground.

He was covered in a light sheen of sweat as his muscles bulged with the effort. My mouth went dry. He was huge, his tattoos covering everything from the neck down and I could see the indentation of piercings under his shirt. It made me wonder what else might be pierced.

He turned to me, the green orbs locking me in place. He unsettled me. Every time he turned my way it was like he could see under the surface and find all the hidden thoughts I kept close to my chest and refused to share with anyone else.

He saw me, and he didn't let me hide.

"You coming?" he asked, raising one eyebrow.

His challenge was all it took for me to push past them all and head inside. I pulled my phone out and clicked on the flashlight, but it barely gave enough light. Between the cloudy windows and the vines growing on the outside there wasn't much room for natural light to fill the space.

The station now felt like a different world. As the door shut behind us, it cut off the sound of nature, leaving it utterly silent outside of our quick breaths and footsteps.

"You know I didn't sign on for a horror movie," Drew deadpanned as he glanced around. "Shaye, can you hold me? I'm scared."

Surprising us all, I held out my hand. He grinned like the Cheshire Cat as he put his hand in mine, giving the guys a look that definitely said he'd won the lottery.

Chuckling to myself, I pulled him along as we started to explore. I doubted that Everett planned on this place being abandoned when he hid whatever it was.

"I'd say the graffiti is out. There were working trains when he was here,"

I said as I lifted our joined hand to point out the numbers covering the wall.

“No, knowing him it would be something subtle. It would also be somewhere significant,” Lake said.

“Do you think it’s even here anymore?” Drew worried.

“I’m sure it is,” Micah reassured us. “Everett seemed like the kind of guy to look out for every possibility. Look for something that would withstand time. He knew you wouldn’t be listening to those videos the next day.”

I loved that Micah always looked on the positive side. I clung to that hope he was feeding us.

“Okay, something significant to us but sturdy,” I mused. I kept that in mind as I turned in a circle, dragging Drew with me.

Having his hand in mine made me feel braver, as if I could face this without fear. The other guys moved in closer, Riven standing on my other side, not touching me, but I could still feel his presence all the same. Micah and Lake stood behind us.

The weak beams of our phone flashlights didn’t give much coverage, but I spotted a janitor’s closet.

“Do you think they’ll have real flashlights or supplies in there?” I asked as I started to walk.

“Probably not, but I bet the security office would,” Riven said as he turned and walked the other way. The others didn’t separate from me as we rifled through the old chemicals and cleaning supplies. A bright beam of light had us shielding our eyes and turning around.

“I feel like I should be offended that none of you trusted me. I’m always right,” Riven said as he held out a flashlight to me, keeping the other one securely in his hand.

“Thanks,” I said.

As my fingers brushed his, a spark of electricity danced across my skin. His breath caught, but he didn’t say anything, and neither did I. It was nice to know he was just as affected as I was.

“It would be something to do with that day,” Lake said, still stuck on the puzzle of it all. “But I don’t remember coming inside. He said it was in here.”

“No, we did come inside,” I corrected. “We only had dollar bills on us, and we had to get change. I tried to let go of Drew as I ran ahead, but he didn’t let me, his hand clinging to mine and following me up the stairs to the second level.

It was a lounge area overlooking the lobby, a row of windows on one side

gave enough muddy light to make it seem a little less intimidating.

The old vending machines were still here but they were dark and damaged, cracks lining the front.

“How did I forget this?” Lake said, laughing. “We had to get sodas so we had enough change to put on the tracks. I remember me and Everett arguing about whether a train could smash a can. I said it would just launch it, he said it would flatten it.”

“What did it do?” Drew asked, looking at both of us.

Lake and I shared a look before we both burst out into laughter.

“I have no fucking clue. I can’t remember,” I answered.

Lake shrugged, still chuckling to himself. “Agreed. I have no idea.”

“Too late to figure it out now,” Riven said. “What if he put it in the soda machine?”

Micah shook his head. “That doesn’t feel like a smart idea. What if they got rid of these?”

“He might have put it there,” I said, pointing at the chair rail that ran along the length of the wall, stopping just before the alcove. You could see the gap where the end cap had come off.

I moved closer and used the beam of light to try to see behind it. There was something there, the green catching in the light, but it was too far in for me to see exactly what it was.

“Care for a little more vandalism?” I asked Riven. He looked as unamused as ever, but he did walk forward.

Riven put his fingers inside the gap and pulled. His muscles strained as he put his strength into it. The rail groaned and protested before snapping off completely, sending him tumbling on his ass.

If it was anyone else I might have laughed. I rushed forward and held out a hand, as if my small frame could help him to his feet. He waved off my assistance and stood on his own.

“Got it,” Lake said. Apparently, he wasn’t focused on Riven but on the note.

He waved the small green envelope for us to see.

“The front says ‘Do not open until you’re playing the game.’ We’ll have to save it for later.”

Even though we’d found it, I turned my eyes back to Riven, worried that he might have hurt himself. A drop of red hit the ground and I noticed he was standing strange, his balance off as he tried not to cradle it.

I rushed forward, yanking his hand from his side to inspect the damage. There was a long jagged cut running down the side of his middle finger. I cursed and dug into my bag, looking for anything that might help.

The only thing I had was a pack of tissues. I tore it open and wrapped a chunk of them around his finger and held on tightly, hoping the pressure would stop the bleeding. We'd have to clean it when we got home, who knew what that old, rusty metal could do.

Riven's eyes were locked onto me as I worked and I glanced up, meeting his stare.

"I'm sorry you hurt yourself. Does it hurt?"

"I've had worse," he said, and the darkness in those words sent a shiver down my spine.

Ending the day with one of us bleeding was not exactly ideal.

The blood wasn't seeping through the tissues yet but I couldn't seem to let go of his hand.

"I can hold pressure on it, you know," he offered. There wasn't much fight in it, and his voice was oddly soft, though still gravelly.

"I'm the reason you're hurt. Shut up and take it, alpha." He didn't argue this time, but he tried his best to fight the smile on his lips, and I did the same.

It felt as if some of the tension between us fell away. Maybe Everett had been right. This journey was already crumbling some of my walls.

If I let myself stay in the moment, I knew I would fall for them. In some ways, I already was.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

Shaye

My scream cut off as I woke up with a start. It was the last of many nightmares that plagued my night. It seemed the moment I put my guard down, my subconscious took over for me.

The guilt and shame of finding peace with someone else was haunting me. Now, the last thing I wanted to do was go back to sleep again.

I couldn't face the nightmares.

The house was still quiet when I crawled out of bed. We'd all moved into Micah's house. Between getting myself settled into my room at Micah's and us ordering pizza for dinner, I hadn't had much time to think.

We chatted about the train station, and thankfully, Riven didn't end up needing stitches. He let me clean and patch it when we got back... though reluctantly.

It was frustrating that I'd had such a good day yesterday. I'd even started to see myself letting the guys in. I wanted them to be a part of my life and the way they made me feel when I was around them was addictive.

I deserved to be happy.

I wanted to let the pain go.

Then why couldn't my brain give me a break? Why did it have to haunt me even in sleep and try to pull me back into the pit I'd fallen in.

I hated the conflict building up inside of me. My emotions had shifted from sadness and grief until all I had left was anger.

Staying in bed was no longer an option. I needed to clear my head.

I jotted a quick note to the guys and left it on the fridge, attaching it with

a magnet before grabbing my keys and heading for my car.

The drive out to the cabin was quiet. The early morning fog still clung to the streets of Lockwood as I wound my way out of town.

The sun was stronger by the time I pulled in front of the cabin, and I was relieved to see no one else was around.

It was just me, nature, and my anger—nothing else.

With a sigh, I left my keys in my car before climbing out. I didn't head for the cabin but for the lake behind it, winding my way to the dock and picking up rocks as I walked.

I sat on the edge of the dock, staring out at the water with my feet tucked under me. My chest was tight, my body tense, and my face set in a scowl.

Instead of writing out my feelings today, I spoke them into the early morning light.

"I'm so mad that you left me, Everett. I'm angry that I can't find myself anymore. I had a plan. Now you're forcing me to stay. I've been a zombie for a fucking year, a shell of myself. All for nothing."

Grabbing a rock next to me, I launched it into the water, watching as it sank down under the surface.

"When you died, you took a piece of me with you. I'll never have that back. I don't want it back, I just want you here. I'm so angry that you're gone. You fucking left me!" I screamed.

My voice echoed over the water as I let the tears start to fall. I stood up to face the empty lake, wallowing in the new emotion taking over.

"How am I supposed to deal with this life alone? How am I supposed to deal with having a pack without you? You were *meant* to be my pack, my Alpha. How could you leave me, Everett? How?!"

My words cut off with a loud sob. My body shook with the force of my sobs, each one cutting me to my core.

I screamed into the void over and over again as I tried to not break under the pressure of it all.

My chest ached, my throat was raw, and all I wanted to do was hit something.

I needed to let it out.

Under the surface I knew that Everett didn't want to leave me. But at the end of the day, *he did*. He left me behind and didn't let me follow, left me to find the pieces of myself, to put myself back together without his help.

I'll never be the same. It felt like I was a piece of fine china that was

broken and someone had glued back together. The fractures were visible, and they always would be. I'd read once about Kintsugi, the Japanese art of repairing broken things with gold. It was never the same again, but it was even more beautiful after.

There were small chips in my soul that could never be put back even as something new held me together. Maybe one day I'd be beautiful like that, something new and transformed.

I had a pack that wanted to try and heal me. And god, I wanted to let them. But how could I be the omega they needed when I couldn't even function properly right now?

"Fuck!" I screamed out so loud that my voice broke. It echoed along the lake as tears blurred my vision again.

Heavy footsteps on the dock had me spinning around, facing off with Riven—the last person I wanted to see right now.

As the angry tears cascaded down my face, I held up a hand between us, telling him to stop.

"I can't do this right now. Please, just leave me alone," I begged, my voice breaking again.

I sounded pathetic. He didn't need another reason to find me lacking.

"I'm not going anywhere," he said, like that was the end of the argument. "Let it out, baby girl. You have to. Otherwise, it'll consume you and eat away at you until there's nothing left."

"Screaming at him isn't going to fix this," I said with a defeated sob.

"Sounds like it was doing you some good," he said with a shrug before sitting down at the end of the dock. He seemed so casual and calm but I could see the worry in his eyes.

Riven wrapped his arms around one knee and stared out over the water. I sat down but didn't say a word as I picked up one of the rocks I'd collected on the walk here and launched them into the water with as much force as I could manage.

There was no skipping involved, it just plopped on the surface before sinking below the water.

I'd thrown three before he bothered to say anything again.

"Don't stop on my account. You need to let it go."

"I don't need a fucking coach," I growled, grabbing another rock and slamming it down forcefully enough it splashed back on us. "Or an audience."

He let out a little chuckle. “If you want me to be the bad guy, baby girl, I’ll be the bad guy.”

That had me narrowing my eyes and turning to him. He didn’t look the least bit repentant.

“Let me guess, that pretty little head of yours is a mess, telling you that you’re not allowed to accept us, that you *should* feel bad about letting us in because of him, am I right?”

I grabbed another rock, slamming it into the water as I got to my feet, adding more force to it.

“Not only that, you’re pissed off. You’re fucking angry that he left you to deal with all this alone. You’re furious that you have to feel bad every day. You’re mad that the promises he made to you were useless.”

“No, I’m fucking angry that I’m here,” I yelled. “I had an out planned, Riven. I was going to leave. I wasn’t going to have to do this anymore. I wasn’t going to have to wake up day after day and pretend that I was alright, that a world without him was anything I wanted to be in.”

“But you stayed.”

I stopped pacing and glared at him again.

“I did, but it’s not like it’s not getting held against me that I tried in the first place.”

“You didn’t try. You thought about it,” he corrected, “and it wasn’t me who flushed those down the toilet, it was you.”

“Stop trying to give me an out, stop fucking trying to make this better,” I screamed, kicking the rocks so they flooded into the water all at once. My heart was pounding, and I was angry.

He jumped to his feet then and pointed out over the lake. “Scream! Put everything you have into it. Scream!”

I locked my jaw tight, my teeth aching from the force of it, but I refused to follow his orders.

“Why do you have to be so fucking stubborn?” he growled, throwing his hands up. “You know the guys are back there freaking out because they had no clue where you are, but I did. I knew you’d come here.” He tapped his chest hard as he spoke, the thud making me wince.

He leaned in so his face was inches from mine.

“You know how I knew? Because I see myself in you, Shaye. You can deny it all you want, but you’re angry, baby girl. So angry you can’t breathe, so angry that it’s drowning you. Sure, there’s grief there. You miss him with

your whole soul, and that's not going to change. But that doesn't mean you have to stop living. So show me that you're strong, show me that you want to keep living. Fucking, scream!"

The scream that ripped out of me was more of a growl than anything. It was visceral, feral as I unleashed it from my soul.

The proud smile on his face had my cheeks heating, but I refused to give in to it right now.

He was right. I needed to focus on this. I had to let it go. Feeling terrible every time I looked at one of them was no way to live. Hating myself for feeling things for my pack was not natural.

Yet, that scream didn't take away everything.

"We had plans, you know," I said as I started to pace again. I snatched a cattail that was growing on the edge of the dock and started peeling off the layers, picking at it as I spoke. "He promised me forever, and then he left me. I was alone, broken, and I didn't even know who I was. I tried to run, and you know what? It didn't fucking work. Every night I woke up screaming for him, every night I went to bed crying. Each morning I woke up looking like a zombie. I didn't even recognize myself anymore. My plans for the future, my goals—all of it is buried in that grave with him."

He collected a few more rocks and piled them up, already knowing I wasn't ready yet.

"It's fucking ridiculous that I can't smile without guilt. I hate that it feels like my grief and guilt and anger and frustration and pain are just filling me up inside, pushing me until I know I might burst with it. There's no escape."

He handed me a rock and I took it, wrapping my fingers around the rough stone as I looked at him.

"You know what I really want, Riven?" I continued, my voice breaking.

"What?" he asked gently.

"I want to be whole again."

"Then you have to let go," he said, as if it was that easy.

When I didn't budge, he stood up, squaring off with me.

"You know what? I'm not going to lie to you, Shaye. Life fucking sucks. Do you know how many broken bones I had as a child? Way too many to count. My mother was the only one in my life who didn't abuse me. Yet, do you know what she did? She left me with my abuser, *our* abuser."

The fight started to drain from me as I listened, tears still trailing down my face as he spoke.

His voice was deeper than usual, the pain in it winding with his words until it was dripping from every syllable.

“The asshole blamed me for that, too. The day that she left, he sent me to the hospital. They made some excuse and got me back. My beta fathers spent the rest of my childhood hiding every bruise and fracture and pretending like everything was fine. They were just as bad as him, all of them beating me and tearing me down day by day until I was sure that death would be my only escape. I prayed for god to take me, to save me from that.”

There was nothing I could say to him. His face was showing more emotion than it had since we met and all I wanted to do was hold him.

“Then I grew up and I was no longer a punching bag. I was twice my beta dads’ size. When I could hit back, I guess I lost my appeal. The last day I spent there, they tried to lay hands on me, and I returned the favor. My alpha dad was alive when I left, my knuckles bloody and broken, but I didn’t care.”

He stopped talking and glanced down at his knuckles. There were thin scars dotting his skin, the tattoos hiding a portion of them.

“I lived on the streets for a while before I took some trade classes. They were free at the local community college. I signed up when I saw that. That’s where I met Drew. I made a name for myself. I refused to let him get the victory of breaking me down. But if you think that my past doesn’t haunt me, if you think that every night I just sleep peacefully, then you’re mistaken.”

I opened my mouth but couldn’t find the words.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Don’t you fucking dare say you’re sorry.”

“I wasn’t going to,” I shot back.

“Our pain isn’t the same, but if anybody understands waking up every day and fighting through it, pushing forward even though your past threatens to drown you, it’s—”

“You,” I finished his sentence.

“Look, I didn’t come here to trauma bond with you,” he said as he let out a breath. “Hell, I haven’t played guitar since I left and that was one of my only escapes at home. I’m not the same person I was and I’m far from healed. But, I know what I’m talking about when I say you have to let it go. He gave you permission to move on, Shaye. You have to stop with the guilt. Stop punishing yourself.”

“How?” I demanded. “If I knew, I would.”

“By reclaiming your life and refusing to let those thoughts have a chance to win. Maybe try going to therapy.”

“You think I haven’t gone?” I questioned, letting out a humorless laugh. “My mom put me in therapy almost as soon as I lost Everett. Once I was finally able to get out of bed, I continued going. You know what they said? They said I was coping magnificently, that I was doing my best. But you know what? The only reason I was doing my best is because I knew I had an out.”

“Now you don’t,” he said, giving me a look.

“No.”

“Did you really stay for Lake, or did you stay for you?”

“For him,” I said. “He was my mate. When I read that in my letter and his scent blockers wore off, I couldn’t do it. There’s no pain worse than losing your mate. He doesn’t deserve that pain, too.”

My fingers went to my wrist and trailed over the bite mark. He snatched my hand and twisted my arm so he could see it.

“Fuck, baby girl. He bit you? You bonded and lost him?”

When I looked up, I had no words. I simply nodded as fresh tears poured from my eyes. Losing your mate was said to be painful, and when bonded, twice as bad.

Most didn’t survive.

There were countless packs that would die together, the others simply choosing not to exist without their missing piece.

And yet, I had to go on.

He pulled me into a hug, telling me without words how fucking sorry he was. I hoped he understood I was doing the same as I squeezed him back.

When he let go some of the hardness had slipped from his face.

“You have to find a reason to stay for yourself. You can’t just rely on us to replace him. You have to find what makes you happy and how you want to change your future. We want to be a part of it, yes, if you want us, but you have to live for you, baby girl.”

I blinked as I registered the nickname he’d been calling me through this entire interaction. I was so caught up in my emotions that I didn’t realize it until now.

“I thought you hated me,” I said in a quiet tone, my voice hoarse from all the yelling.

“Did I hate that you almost hurt someone I care about? Yes. But the moment I caught your scent I knew you were mine. When you’re ready for me, I’ll be here. Until then, I’m going to push you to keep going every

fucking day.”

It was a promise and I knew from the determination in his eyes that he meant it.

Riven

SHAYE WAS GORGEOUS. She was full of fire and fury and as she threw the stones at the water I watched her fight those demons head on.

I stayed with her, refusing to let her fight alone like I had all those years. She still shied away from our touches so I sat nearby, watching in silence and hoping that companionship would help her.

The trouble with trauma was that it latched on and even when you thought you'd left it in the past it would pop up at the worst times.

After telling her my history, I could feel the memories pushing at me. Usually I would be transported right back to those dark days in my house, my father's fists and words beating me down.

It was her that kept me grounded this time.

She let out small grunts as she launched the stones at the water and I focused on that. Her muscles flexed with each throw and her face was set in determination. It was the first time I'd ever seen her fight against her past this hard and I was so fucking proud of her.

Her dark hair was shining in the afternoon sun as it rose over our heads. Her brown eyes were warmer now and I swear a few of the shadows I'd witnessed there before were receding. She was gorgeous. Breathtaking, even.

Lake had told us stories about her and I felt like I knew her in some ways. I'd nearly fucked it up when I thought she was dying. Smelling my mate then realizing she might not survive was almost my undoing.

Yet she was fighting then and is still fighting.

She didn't want to drown, she wanted to swim. So, I was here giving her a life vest and teaching her how to reach the shore.

Now that she was fighting her past and trying to overcome her grief, I hoped she was willing to give us a chance. Her pack would never look the same as anyone else's. She wore his mark and the pain of that loss would mark her forever.

When I saw he bit her I felt like my world stopped for a moment. I'd only met her and I nearly broke that day we found her. I couldn't imagine falling in love with her completely then losing her forever.

Fuck, even the thought had me rubbing at my chest, the ache too strong to ignore.

As she threw her stones into the lake I made a promise to myself to give her the world. She deserved new adventures that brought her happiness and someone to take care of her on the days that getting out of bed felt like too much work.

She'd have those days. I still did. But facing them alone was no longer in the cards for her. We'd rally around her, make sure she felt supported, and never leave her side.

We were a pack. She was slowly warming up to that thought and I couldn't wait until she gave in completely.

Until then I'd wait for her. She was worth it.

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

Shaye

Riven stayed with me on that dock until the sun was high in the sky. He didn't push me any further, he just let me stare out at the water as he sang softly to himself.

His voice was husky and a bit smokey, filling the air with soothing words that filled my soul with something I didn't know it was missing.

He even collected new pebbles when I ran out completely and tossed them in with me.

When my stomach rumbled, he'd had enough. He got to his feet and held out a hand for me. His eyes pleaded with me to let go, to come with him a new omega.

It felt like he was asking me for so much more than simply helping me up, but I put my hand in his regardless. Warmth shot through my palm and I let it spread through me, chasing off the chill of the morning.

After a few hours of quiet contemplation and screaming into the void, I actually did feel a lot better. I felt like I finally had an outlet for getting out those angry thoughts that wouldn't let me out of their hold.

Deep down I knew that it wasn't Everett's fault for leaving me, but he left me regardless, and I was allowed to experience all the emotions that came with that.

Most of all, I knew I was allowed to experience life.

Riven was definitely right about not tying myself up in them and having nothing else. I needed to be more than my potential pack.

The rift between Lake and I felt vast, and I knew I had to take some

strides to fix that. Maybe some one-on-one time would help. We also had several more destinations to visit over the next week or so. We would find time.

Everett had me excited to discover what he'd left behind in the game, but for today, I needed to heal. I needed time to exist with myself, whether it was with them or not.

"Ride with me. We'll come back for your car," Riven said. He wrapped his arm around my waist and pulled me to his big truck, lifting me into place like I was delicate and strapping me in. He put his foot on the sidebar and pulled himself up so that he could face me.

"I know that wasn't easy, but letting it go makes you so fucking strong, Shaye. Do you hear me?"

I nodded, my mouth too dry to speak with the alpha this close. His scent of oak and bourbon swirling around me. It was comforting and warm.

"Don't let anyone tell you that your emotions make you less," he said softly, his vivid-green eyes not leaving mine.

I found myself leaning forward, pressing my lips to his in a quick kiss, saying thank you without words for being beside me and helping me work through all the bullshit that had been piling up on my shoulders.

He blinked at me once, and I felt heat shoot through me. It was different this time, going straight to my core and awakening parts of me I thought never would react to another man again.

He dropped back to the ground, closed the door gently, and went to his side, climbing in and turning his car on. It roared to life loud enough to jar me from my thoughts.

It was a beast just like its owner.

"Do you want to include the whole pack, or a quick lunch with just me, some alone time?" He trailed off after giving me options.

"Can we just get food and go back to Micah's place, maybe watch some TV or something? I don't want to go on any adventures today... I just want to exist."

Going to another location and seeing Ev's face so soon had me worried I'd have more nightmares. I needed a break.

"We can do that," he promised as he navigated toward town. We stopped at the Chinese place, and he didn't even ask what I wanted, instead ordering half the menu. We sat side by side on a bench inside, waiting for them to finish, not saying a word.

Surprisingly, this time, the silence wasn't awkward.

Now, both of our traumas were on the table and we saw each other in a different light. Even knowing our darkest moments we weren't running away. That was a big deal to me.

There was enough of a crowd in the restaurant that nobody could hear us. I leaned in toward Riven, looking him in the eye.

"I know you told me not to say sorry, and I won't, but honestly, fuck your parents. You didn't deserve that. I've never wished ill on anybody, but I hope wherever he is, wherever *they* are, that they're suffering."

A smirk lit up his face, and he let out a startled laugh. It was something that I hadn't seen on his face yet, and it changed him from broody and intense to breathtaking.

Riven had a strong jawline that cut through his features. The tattoos from neck down only accentuated it. The man was a work of art, and someday I hoped I was brave enough to find out what he looked like without all the clothes.

For now, I needed to keep that mood light. Making him laugh was helping heal something inside of me and made me feel like more of a person, being able to contribute to conversations, to joke back and forth, to not hide. It was something I hadn't realized I'd missed.

"Maybe a plague, a rat infestation, or termites. Imagine the thought of little bugs eating away at your home while you're inside of it." I shuddered.

"Evil, I like it," he nodded approvingly as he ran a hand over his stubble.

"Maybe we should release a bunch of rats in their house. Or snakes, though maybe not at the same time."

"Spiders," he tacked on. "Millions. No escape kind of numbers."

"You know they have these tiny devices that make random sounds at random intervals. It could go a long time between or no time, and it's just like little whispers or things that you think you hear but nobody else does. It's just audible enough to drive you fucking crazy. We could pay someone to install it in their house and drive them slowly mad for the rest of their lives."

At this point, we were both laughing, and it made the wait seem a little more bearable. By the time they called our names, we were both smiling without holding back.

"Here I thought you were some sweet, innocent little omega," he teased as he grabbed the four bags, refusing to let me hold one. Even though he gave me a side-eye, I opened the door for him when we reached the car.

“Nowhere did I say that I was a sweet little omega,” I laughed. “Lake and I used to prank each other all the time. Did he tell you about those?”

Riven shook his head, fighting back a laugh. “No, he didn’t. But now I need to know the stories. We haven’t really got to see the playful side of him.”

My smile started to drop, but he dropped the bags and closed the door, turning and twisting us so I was pushed against the truck. He braced his hands on either side of me so all I could do was look at him.

The rest of the world faded away as I was surrounded by his hard body pushing into mine as he glared down at me. Even his anger was sexy.

“Don’t you dare lose that smile, Shaye. Lake made his own choices, he let you walk away as much as you did him, and you guys can work through that in your own time. But even if you didn’t have that history, he would still be suffering from losing his twin. Grief comes and goes in waves, and he feels it just as much as you do. I won’t just stand by anymore while I watch the light drain from your eyes, or watch you punish yourself for every laugh or second glance you give us. You are allowed to be alive, Shaye. You’re allowed to feel and experience things.”

“Okay,” I said, my voice barely audible as I stared up at him. Riven was fighting for me, even when I found it hard to fight for myself. That thought alone grounded me.

I knew having someone like him by my side meant I wouldn’t drown... I’d always have a lifeline.

If I got angry and needed an outlet, I could see him. And it wasn’t just him. If I needed someone to hold me, I knew Micah would be there in a second. If I needed to laugh, Drew would be there. If I needed someone to talk to, Lake knew me better than I even knew myself these days, and I hoped that we could both find peace.

He’d thrown himself into work, but I knew that Lake was not as carefree as he used to be. I couldn’t wait to see the light come back into his eyes.

He deserved it.

This pack would be as good for me as they were for Lake, and I wanted to be good for them, too. I wanted to stop doubting that I could be their omega and I wanted to stop hating that I had a future.

A weight had been lifted from my shoulders. I hadn’t realized how heavy it all was until I screamed and fought it out at the lake, and surprisingly, the guilt and pain didn’t settle right back in.

It was still there under the surface, and maybe it always would be, but it wasn't all-consuming.

Riven moved away and helped me into the truck again. He started the truck and pulled out of the parking spot.

My mind swirled with ideas to connect with Lake. We needed to have more than just our past, we needed to find something new that just belonged to us.

My phone beeped in my lap, pulling me out of my thoughts. I blinked at the road, realizing we were almost at Micah's house before checking my phone.

Unknown: Hey, this is Serenity. I got your number from Micah and added you to the girls' chat. I changed nicknames so you know who everyone is.

Ellie: Girls and Bear, my omega mate. He joins us sometimes.

Katya: Omega chat. I'm Kat, nice to meet you, newbie.

Serenity: We're going for Mexican later tonight. You in? 7:30.

Shaye: I'm in.

"You're smiling," Riven said as he pulled up in front of Micah's house. There was no hiding it now as it spread further, and I shook my head.

"Don't tell anyone. You'll ruin my reputation."

"Oh, I'm telling them all that I got you to smile. Maybe we should start a competition to see who wins."

I groaned, "Oh god, no. I have a feeling that Drew and Lake would be relentless. In fact, I know for a fact that Lake would. He's always been competitive."

"Don't tempt me, baby girl," he warned as he climbed out and grabbed the food. I hurried to get out before he could help me down, and he narrowed his eyes as I hopped down onto the pavement. I closed the door behind me and shot him a smirk before walking up the sidewalk.

"You're back," Lake's words came in a rush as he threw open the door and crashed into me. I melted into the touch, wrapping my arms around his waist and resting my head against his chest.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to worry you," I said as we clung to each other. It felt like I had so much to say to him, but I couldn't figure out what words to tell him that I was glad he was here.

"Seems I didn't need to worry," he mused as he pulled away, giving me a flicker of his old smile. "You seem different."

"I am," I admitted. "Yesterday felt good, and apparently, it fucked with

me. I just needed to get away. I was so mad at Everett for leaving me, for putting me in this weird position, for making it hard for me to open up to anyone. Then I felt bad for feeling that way.”

“I get mad sometimes, too,” he admitted as he squeezed me tighter. “It’s normal.”

“Riven helped,” I said.

Lake shot him a grateful smile. “If anyone gets pain, it’s him.”

He stepped back and led me inside, not letting go of my hand as we walked into the kitchen. Drew and Micah were already there, and Micah rushed forward, pulling me into a hug when he saw me, giving me a quick, gentle squeeze before releasing me, though I noticed his hand hovering over my lower back, afraid to let me get too far.

Apparently, running away had freaked them all out, but I refused to feel bad for it because I needed it. The first step in not punishing myself.

“Maybe we could watch some TV and just eat? I’ve got girls’ night tonight, but I want to relax until then.”

“Let’s do it,” Drew said, grabbing takeout containers along with Lake. Both of them carried them to the table while Riven grabbed drinks.

Micah still hadn’t left my side, so he led me to the coffee table, sitting on the floor before pulling me into his lap.

For the man who was afraid of touching me moments ago he was being bold now. I liked it. It was nice to not have a chance to second guess the touch or my reaction to it.

I shifted, settling to get more comfortable and sagged against him as his hands wound around my waist.

We let the others work on setting things up as I clicked through channels, settling on a cooking competition.

Micah finally released me when Lake pulled me out of his lap, settling me between them. They were both pressed close to me, their arms touching mine as we all ate in silence.

They didn’t push me or ask what happened, they simply existed with me, and that was exactly what I needed.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

Shaye

“**T**here she is!” Ellie yelled out as I walked into the Mexican restaurant to join them. I’d expect to be a mess with anxiety, but instead, I just matched her smile and rushed over.

Lockwood was a small town, and I felt more than a few gazes on me as I moved toward them. People were probably wondering who I was and why I was here.

“I’m glad you came,” Serenity said as she shot Kat a glare. “I need you to solve a debate for me.” She gestured to Kat. She was the barista who had served me when I first came to Lockwood and I gave her a quick smile.

“Hey, Kat,” I said. She gave me a quick wave and leaned in, giving an overexaggerated sigh.

“She means between her and I specifically,” Kat said. “But ignore her. It’s nice to see you settled in. I hear you have a nice little pack for yourself, too.”

“Kat,” Ellie hissed, swatting at her, but Kat looked unrepentant. I found her and Serenity’s brand of brutal, blunt honesty kind of nice. I’d been around people pretending to be kind to me while gossiping about my loss behind my back.

“I do,” I agreed. “They’re great.”

That was all I gave them for now. There was nothing else to say. I was still a mess and it wasn’t going to fix itself overnight.

I turned back to Serenity to change the subject. “So, what’s the debate?”

She went serious and leveled me with a gaze that said this was important.

Yet, given our current location and her half-empty margarita, it probably wasn't.

"Is queso the superior food, or is chocolate?"

Ellie rolled her eyes and I had to fight off a laugh as I met Serenity's energy, putting on my own serious expression.

"That's tough. They both fit in a fountain, and they both are a comfort food. Can they be of equal rank?"

"She has a point," Kat said. "Wait, why have we not had a chocolate *and* queso fountain party? I'm going to need you to talk to Drake and Valerie and make this happen," Kat said.

Serenity laughed and shook her head. "You know my dad would be all over that. He'd grill a bunch of meat to dip in it, and mom would make homemade tortilla chips and tiny desserts."

"Oh my lord, I'm texting them right now," Kat said, tapping away at her phone.

"You might actually get your old man out of the house," Serenity teased. Kat rolled her eyes and leaned into me.

"Look, tell her there's nothing wrong with dating a silver fox."

"She's dating one of my mate's dads," Ellie said. "She's as young as his kids." She started cackling as Kat threw a tortilla chip at her.

"Are you really?" I questioned, my grin coming naturally this time. "Get it. Nothing wrong with knowing what you want. At least older men don't tend to beat around the bush."

"He was young when he had them," she said defensively before her smile widened and she got that look that you only get when you're falling hard. "He's really amazing."

"Good for you, then."

"So, you and my brother?" Ellie asked, folding her hands under her chin and leaning forward, blinking up at me expectantly.

They clearly switched topic rapid fire and it was a challenge to keep up. I kind of loved it. There was no time to overthink or slip into sadness, you were forced to live in the moment. That was what I was trying so hard to do.

"It definitely came as a surprise. I didn't even expect to meet anybody when I came to town. Lake and I were supposed to have a little reunion and then..." I trailed off, not sure what to add that wasn't a full lie.

"Then you snagged him! So glad you're here," Ellie said excitedly. "He always looked so distraught. It broke my heart."

“We both were, but we’re trying,” I offered with a small, sad smile.

“Nope, none of that, no sadness here. Bad, Ellie. New topic. You can gossip about Micah later. Is Tori coming, or can we order?”

Ellie and I blinked at Serenity, the speed of her words was a new record for tonight.

“There she is now,” Kat answered before we could say anything. I turned as a petite, blonde woman swept into the restaurant. Her hair was cut short and her smile was excited and a little anxious.

She rushed toward our table and dropped into the chair next to me, flashing me a smile before looking at the others.

“I’m so sorry I’m late. I had a dating app meet up, and ladies... it ended up being my ex,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m pretty sure that alpha is stalking me. I need a margarita or ten.”

“Wait, what?” Kat said, holding up her hand. “Girl, do we need an intervention? I think we have enough mates between all of us that we can handle anybody that’s bothering you.”

“We’re not the mafia,” Serenity said, rolling her eyes.

“Doesn’t mean that our mates won’t protect you,” Ellie countered. I’d met her alpha at the diner and from the way he handled everyone, I had a feeling he’d have no problem setting someone straight.

“No,” Tori said, “he’s harmless and more than a little misguided. He doesn’t seem to understand that I *don’t* do commitment. Packs are overrated.” She looked away and I had a feeling there was more to that than she was giving us.

“I thought the same thing until I found mine,” Serenity said gently. Clearly, I wasn’t the only one who caught her reaction.

“Now look at you with eight mates,” Ellie said.

I was just taking a drink and choked on it at the mention of how many mates she had. “Wait, what?” I said, blinking over at the woman. “How the hell do you keep up?”

“We spend half the year running a charter yacht. There is plenty of time to entertain every one of those men and still have plenty of time for relaxation in the sun.”

“That sounds amazing, actually,” I said. “Your life sounds so exciting compared to mine.”

“There’s something to be said for having roots. I miss being on land sometimes, but for now, this is not a bad life.”

I couldn't imagine traveling the world like that. I'd barely been anywhere but Lockwood and home.

"So, tell us about you," Kat said. Now all of their attention was on me.

Oh god, the dreaded question, one I didn't really have a great answer for.

"I'm pretty boring. I was in college for game design. I just dropped out before I came back to meet Lake."

"So, what was the plan after you met Lake?" Serenity asked.

It was an innocent question, but I couldn't exactly answer it honestly. You don't just tell friends that you just met that you had no plan other than... I stopped the thought before I could take hold.

I refused to entertain that mindset anymore. It took way too long, but now I realized just how far I'd let myself fall when I lost Everett.

"No idea," I said with a shrug. "I just needed a big change. I literally unenrolled from school, ended my lease, packed up my car, and drove here."

"Well, that's one hell of a change," Kat said as she raised her margarita in the air. "To new beginnings." We all raised ours and clinked them together before taking a drink.

"Hope you don't mind strawberry," Ellie said. "I just ordered a round for everyone."

"I'm good with it," I promised, taking another sip. It was icy and sweet with just the right hint of tequila. I liked my drinks on the sweeter side, not strong, so it was perfect.

"Watch out, these are the kind of drinks that'll get you in trouble," Serenity warned. "They don't seem strong until you're dancing on a table."

"Noted," I laughed, knowing I'd not let it get to that point.

"Not to be rude, but what's your name?" Tori asked. They'd dove right into the conversation, so we hadn't had a chance to introduce ourselves.

"Shaye," I said, giving her a smile. The realization in her eyes had her features hardening.

Uh oh.

"You're who Micah has been spending his time with. What are you guys doing out at that cabin?"

"Well, you see, Tori, when mates find each other, they usually—" Serenity's words cut off as Ellie threw another chip at her and we all cracked up.

I knew that wasn't what Tori meant. Her question was guarded and full of worry. I think she was more worried about her brother leaving than me

staying. I couldn't blame her, he seemed to be their rock.

I also couldn't imagine pulling the guys away from Lockwood. They were happy here and had their lives established. If I could get past my own demons, I knew I could be happy here, too.

"I'm honestly not sure. Lake's brother, who was my mate, died. It's been a really hard year. Right now we're taking some time to get to know each other and do a list of last wishes Everett left for us. He actually made a video game. He's the reason I was getting my degree in game design. He's got this whole scavenger hunt of sorts for us."

"That's so cute!" Tori gushed. Her entire demeanor changed. I guess I passed her test. "I can't imagine someone loving me enough to do something so intricate and thoughtful."

"He was like that all the time," I said with a smile. This time no sadness crept in as I thought about him. Instead, the warm glow that used to be familiar, settled back in my chest.

"How is Lake handling it?" Ellie asked. "Micah told me that you guys were meeting back up. He was really worried about him."

"He's struggling, but I think it's going to get easier as it goes on. This is our way of saying goodbye, you know, letting go of all the baggage and trying to move forward. Hopefully together."

Now that I said it out loud, I knew it was the right decision.

Lake deserved to be happy.

I deserved to be happy, too. We all did. Maybe we could find that with each other.

My time with Riven on the dock, and how they reacted to me coming back home afterward, made me feel just as treasured as Everett always did. There would always be a hole in my heart from him, a piece missing that he took with him, but maybe they could have the rest.

"We need to establish another girls' night the moment you finish the game. We'll need all the details, and you'll probably need a break from all those men," Kat teased.

"We might need to have this family barbecue beforehand. I can't stop thinking about a queso fountain," Serenity groaned.

"Do they, like, deprive you of queso on that yacht?" Ellie asked. "I thought Oaks was a chef."

"Oh, he is, and he makes some amazing queso. But there's something about queso and margaritas with your besties that is better than any other

kind of queso.”

“Your obsession with it is a little bit alarming,” Tori teased.

“Okay, enough about me,” she waved to clear the conversation away. “Who needs a new tattoo? Because I’m dying to get some new ink.”

“I’ve always wanted to get one,” I said. “Maybe it’s time to go outside my comfort zone.”

Serenity smiled like I just handed her the world. “Girl, I’ve got you. We need to set up a tattoo date.”

The waiter came back with our food, and I dug in, feeling more settled than I had in years. Riven was right. Before, I tied myself up in Everett and Lake, not letting the world get in the way of what we had. Establishing friends alongside my pack made me feel a whole lot more balanced.

Hanging out with this group made me realize what I’d been missing, and maybe it was the first piece of finding myself.

The conversation died down as we stuffed ourselves on some amazing food. I’d driven myself and when we parted ways to say goodbye, I felt almost disappointed that I’d have to climb into the car alone.

At least the guys were sweet enough to go get it for me while I was getting ready for girls’ night.

It was strange. I’d thrived on being alone so much before this. Now, the thought felt... wrong. When I wasn’t with the guys I felt their absence.

It wasn’t that I was needy and couldn’t function without them, it was that I was aware of their absence. It was a physical reaction as much as it was emotional.

Being in a pack was strange.

“Drive safe,” Kat said as she waved to me, her auburn hair blowing in front of her face before she ducked into her waiting car.

A hand locked around my wrist and I nearly screamed until I heard Lake’s familiar chuckle.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” he laughed. “I thought you might like someone to ride home with.”

“How did you get here?” I glanced around but he was alone.

“Riven had to run to grab something from town and I had him drop me off. I couldn’t let our omega be all alone.”

“How chivalrous,” I teased, but secretly, I was happy he was here.

“Have I told you how nice it is to have you back in my life?” he asked as we climbed into my car.

“It’s nice to be back,” I admitted. “Thanks for meeting me. If you hadn’t...”

I trailed off because we both knew what would have happened.

“Taking those blockers was dumb,” he said with a sigh.

“It was, but now everything is out in the open,” I reassured him, reaching over and taking his hand as I pulled out of the spot. He kept his fingers wrapped around mine as I drove back to Micah’s house.

“So, tell me about this gig you have with the others,” I said as I focused on the road.

“Micah and his friend, Collin, were buying up houses and remodeling them. He’s taking a break, so Micah brought us in. Riven and Drew are like a dream team with construction. I’ve seen them knock out insane amounts of work in no time at all. I’m just an electrician but I’ve been helping with other things, too,” he explained. “It’s nice to learn the different aspects of the trade.”

“Just an electrician,” I snorted. “Don’t act like it’s not a big deal.”

“Okay, okay,” he laughed. “You’re right. It’s really nice to be working with my hands. The work is therapeutic in its own way. I can lose myself in the labor and not have to think. I’ve done too much of that in the last year.”

“Same,” I said, giving his hand a squeeze. “I’d like to see one of the projects when we’re done with all this.”

“We can arrange that,” he promised.

He let out a long breath as he rested his head on the head rest, staring out the window in quiet contemplation.

Lake was definitely more serious now. I could still read him to some extent. He didn’t feel melancholy right now, more like he was simply soaking in the moment.

When we parked at Micah’s he got out and came around to my side to pull open my door. The moment I was standing in front of him, his lips met mine. I melted into the kiss, my entire body lighting on fire as he pushed me against the car.

I was dazed by the time he released me and he just gave me a smirk that told me Lake was still there under the weight of his loss.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

Shaye

Drew started acting strange the moment we found out we were going to the library. I, on the other hand, was more than a little excited—libraries were definitely my happy place. They'd been my escape during childhood and the divorce. It had been too long since I curled up and lost myself in a good book.

The old building was obviously still open, unlike the train station.

The librarian stood up as we walked in, almost falling over her feet to greet us. Clearly not enough people visited.

“Hello, you’re all new faces. Can I help you find anything?” she asked. She was a sweet, old woman. She was dressed in a hot-pink pant suit and had her curly, gray hair in a pile on her head.

“This is going to sound a little crazy,” I said, figuring we might as well go all in. She seemed the type to have an open mind. “I lost my mate a year and a half ago. He set up this—”

She let out a gasp, both her hands covering her mouth.

“Wait. Was this the alpha with dark hair? It was long, he was beefy, had a sweet smile, bright-turquoise eyes. Yes, I see those eyes,” she said, pointing at Lake with a gnarled finger.

“You’re the only ones here. Give me one second,” she nabbed a sign on her desk that said ‘out to lunch’ and hung it on the front door, closing and locking the doors behind her.

“The library is yours. I’ve been waiting a long time to see how this pans out. Don’t mind me if I just grab my lunch and watch the show.”

She grabbed her bag and hurried off. I blinked at her retreating back in surprise.

“That’s not how I saw this going,” Lake mused, “but I guess that gives us space to work without disturbing anyone.”

When I tapped on the app, the video was already ready to play. I’d silenced my phone before coming in here, so we hadn’t heard the notification this time. I was trying to be respectful, but now we didn’t have to worry about being quiet.

Having a library to myself was always a dream. I shouldn’t be as giddy as I was at that moment, but I was more than willing to spend our afternoon here, even if we did find the clue quickly.

Everett’s face filled the screen, but his voice was hushed this time. He was tucked away in the corner of the library, sitting in a comfortable chair, with books visible behind him.

“I think it’s pretty obvious why we’d come here,” he said. “Shaye would spend every minute she could here. Hell, I think she was the only reason that Lake and I passed any of our book assignments in school. That’s one of the things I love about you, Shaye. You’re brilliant and you’re always willing to learn and explore new worlds. You had your books, and I had my video games.”

“I never thought of it like that,” Lake mused as he huddled closer to me, his scent of saltwater and summer breeze filling my senses.

“That’s why the library level is one of the biggest levels in the game—there are several floors of mayhem and mystery.”

“This game is going to be epic,” I said to the guys, though I didn’t tear my eyes away from the screen, unwilling to miss even a second.

“The library you’re standing in was one of the places we escaped to on the hottest days of summer. I didn’t enjoy reading like you did, Shaye, but you’d read to me regardless. Man, I loved the sound of your voice. I don’t even think you realized you were reading after a while. You were lost from page one. It was just a habit for you at that point, but I clung to every single word.”

He was wrong. I knew he was listening while I read and I loved the attention. Being in his arms, warm and cozy as I made my way through the fantasy books, was my happy place, too.

“This time, your code is hidden in a certain book. I’m not going to tell you which one. I know you’ll find it. Don’t just snatch it and run. Take a

minute and enjoy the library. Look around, find something new to read, and then read a chapter out loud, even if it's just for me."

He paused and I snuck a look at the guys. I was curious if they would want to listen or not. Especially with Drew and his behavior.

I expected the video to end but Everett kept going.

"Lake, there's another bonus code, something just for you. I know that I've made this a lot about Shaye, and I'm hoping that you can give her the support that she needs. But I want you to find the one thing we can agree on every time. That's where the second code is."

"What?" Lake asked, clearly not connecting the dots.

"Heal together, guys. Keep pushing," Everett concluded as he gave one last smile before the screen went dark.

That was the quickest video we had yet. Maybe he knew I'd be dancing in anticipation, ready to dive into this challenge.

When I turned my attention to the others, Riven was watching me as intensely as he always did. Lake was glancing around, probably trying to mull over what book it could possibly be.

Micah was glancing around, curious but content.

But it was Drew that had my full attention now. He acted a little cagey when I asked him to read the text aloud, and it had me putting some pieces together.

I didn't think it was something as simple as not liking to read. It was more significant than that. He could give me more details when he was ready, but for now I wondered if he'd let me read to him.

"Drew, you want to come help me find it? I could use a guinea pig to read to." I held out my hand in invitation. "If you don't want to, you can leave. I understand."

"Not a fucking chance," he said, slapping his palm against mine and trying to give me his usual crooked smile, but it fell flat this time.

My eyes flickered to Lake, asking silently if he was okay with me giving Drew a little extra attention. This journey was supposed to be about the two of us, and I didn't want to abandon him.

"Micah, can help me look for the extra code," Lake said, giving me a soft smile.

Keeping my hand in Drew's, I stepped forward, giving Lake my full focus for just a moment.

"Maybe we can do something with just the two of us soon?" I asked, not

wanting to let the distance grow between us.

His eyes lit up, and he nodded. “I would love that. Mom actually texted me about a family dinner. Maybe we can do something in the afternoon and then end our night there with the pack.”

“I’m in,” I promised. “They could probably use some reassurance that we’re surviving this. Knowing Everett, they probably know all about this journey, and you know your mom is driving herself crazy with worry.”

“She is,” he muttered. “I’ve gotten like four texts a day.”

“Oh god,” I groaned. She meant well but she could be a lot when she was worried about them.

“Go on,” he said, pressing a kiss to my forehead. “We’ve got all the time in the world, Shaye.”

“We do,” I agreed, giving him a small smile before pulling Drew over to the fantasy romance section.

“So, what book are you looking for?” he questioned. I noticed his eyes were trained on me, not even giving the titles a second glance.

“Remember that book I told you about? The one about the library?” I asked. He nodded. “That’s the one.”

My eyes scanned over the shelf until I found the book in question.

Legends of Asteria, the Librarian Chronicles.

I plucked it off the shelf and ran my fingers reverently over the cover. It was well-worn, and I knew I’d given it a bit of that wear and tear myself.

Just the sight had me transported back to those summers as a teen, the scent of Everett around me, both of us tucked into a chair.

It was a moment that I never thought I’d get to recreate.

I was excited to be able to share it with Drew. I had a feeling it was something he’d always wanted but could never voice for himself.

It was crazy that the moment I got out of my own head, I was much more aware of them. Their scents were stronger, and I was noticing the little tics about them—like the way Riven’s jaw tensed when he was frustrated or the way Micah fidgeted when he was nervous. Drew tapped his fingers on his leg anytime he got uncomfortable, and Lake had his same old tell, running his hand through his hair until it looked crazy.

“Now what?” Drew asked as his fingers tapped out a rhythm on his leg. I hated that this was making him panic, even if he tried to hide it.

“Do you trust me?” I questioned.

“Of course,” he said without a single hint of hesitation.

“Then let me read to you. No judgment, no questions. You can even close your eyes.”

“Sounds like heaven,” he promised. I pulled him over to the chair before pushing him down. He laughed as he hit the chair. The impact had it scooting backward a few inches with a squeak along the hardwood floor.

There was only room for one of us so I settled onto the arm of the chair, my feet in his lap.

He pulled off my shoes and dropped them on the ground, his hands massaging my feet. I let out a groan as I turned to the first page, starting to read.

Drew’s eyes drifted closed as I started to read. He looked so content that I didn’t let myself stop.

One chapter quickly turned into two, and it was only when my mouth was dry and I needed a drink that I closed the book at the end of chapter 2.

Drew still had his eyes closed but now there was a serene look on his face.

When I stopped talking, he cracked his eyes open and blinked up at me. His blue eyes were full of something I wasn’t ready to identify. It was too soft and sweet, but it filled me with heat nonetheless.

“Thank you,” he said. “No one’s ever read to me before. I liked it way more than I thought I would.”

“Well, if you want to keep reading it with me, I’ll check the book out. It can be our nightly ritual,” I said, running my hands through his thick, brown hair. His breath caught, and he closed his eyes again, as if he was savoring every touch that I was giving him right now.

“I like when you don’t hold yourself back,” he said. “It’s been painful not to touch you or be close to you.”

“Don’t hold back on my account,” I said as I chewed on my bottom lip for a second, trying to figure out how to tell him. “I’m ready to try and open up. I can’t promise I’ll always get it right, but I’ll try.”

“That’s all we can do,” he reassured me. Though he looked like I’d handed him the whole world in that one sentence.

“We never got through the twenty questions,” he said, his fingers running along my forearm. “What’s your happiest memory, Shaye?”

“In my past, probably the summer that Everett and Lake and I went to watch the fireworks. It was just me tucked between them on our picnic blanket, staring up at the sky in our favorite spot. It was the summer before

everything changed, but I just remember feeling so whole then.”

“You clarified that that was your happiest memory in the past. So, what’s your happiest memory in the present?”

“Right now,” I said, closing the book and holding it to my chest as I scooted off the armchair and into his lap. His eyes widened in surprise, but I didn’t give a chance for either of us to mess this up. I leaned forward, pressing my lips to his.

Unlike when I kissed Riven, he didn’t hold back. His hand tangled in my hair, holding me in place as his kiss turned hungry. He didn’t take it further than a kiss, but I felt him harden underneath me, and I realized in that moment that I didn’t want to run. I wanted him.

I kissed Drew back, my hand resting on his chest while the other clutched my book, breathing in this moment and committing it to memory.

Because this was the moment that I knew that everything had changed, that there was no going back, and I didn’t want it to.

It was also the moment that I realized there was more to life than just the men who wanted me and who I wanted in return.

There were books that I wanted to read, things I wanted to experience. A life that I actually wanted to live.

The moment was broken as the others hurried over to join us. Lake was holding up a book with a look of triumph on his face.

“I found my code, did you find yours?”

Flipping through the pages, I stopped on a small note tucked in the back.

“Yes, right here?” I said, holding it up before putting it safely back in its place. “So, what was the one thing you guys agreed on?”

Lake let out a chuckle and turned the book around to show me the classic horror novel.

“That the book is always better than the movie.”

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

Shaye

As I walked through Lockwood with Lake at my side, his scent filling my senses, I couldn't help but think how stupid I'd been to push him away.

I think it was more about self-preservation than anything else. I was worried that he would find an omega that was his scent match, and it would break my heart.

But in the process, I had broken his.

The gap between us was slowly closing and I couldn't help but snuggle in a little closer as we walked, wanting it to close completely but not sure how to make that happen.

We were walking toward the town square where they had set up a vendor fair for the weekend. It featured local artists selling their wares, small food booths, and the local school had even set up a charity booth where everything we bought contributed to getting new computers for the library.

"I know this might be lame," he muttered as he started to second guess himself.

"It's perfect," I argued. "You know I'm a sucker for these things. I always have been."

"You have," he agreed. "That's why I thought of it in the first place."

"What's all the insecurity about?" I questioned. "You've always been so confident."

"I think I lost a bit of that when I lost Everett. Maybe because he was so quiet, I always felt like I had to be the loud one."

“I never thought you were loud. Just funny and outspoken—that was your personality. I love that about you.”

“I’m working on finding that guy again,” he promised. “I miss him.”

“We’ll get there. It takes time,” I said, giving his hand a squeeze.

My reassurances fell away as I spotted a little corral set up where the local animal shelter had puppies waiting to be adopted.

“Oh my god, Lake,” I gasped, pulling him with me and crouching down by the wire fencing of the kennel. They must have staked it down because it shouldn’t have been able to hold up to the little puppies jumping against it.

“Look, there’s one you won’t be able to resist,” he teased. I followed where he pointed and stood up, circling the corral to get closer to the small beagle.

She must have been the runt of the litter, she was much smaller than the others. Though, she made up for it with her howl. She was adorable. One little bark my way and I felt my entire soul melt for this little girl.

“Are you looking to add a pup to your pack?” an eager shelter worker asked as he approached, his smile wide and excited.

“Maybe,” I mused, genuinely considering it.

“You can hold her,” he urged. The man knew damn well what he was doing. The moment I held her, this was over. “Her name is Mia.”

“Hi, Mia,” I cooed. The puppy perked up at her name, and she let out a little bark as I lifted her. She licked my face a few times, and I was a goner.

I turned to Lake and gave him my best puppy dog eyes, holding her up so he could see her, too.

“Tell me no one is allergic,” I pleaded.

He held up his phone and took the picture before laughing. “That might even bring Riven to his knees. That face is dangerous,” he said. “No allergies that I know of.”

“Did you hear that, Mia? You’re mine,” I said, laughing as she barked excitedly.

“We have nothing for a puppy and we’re meeting my parents for dinner tonight,” he reminded me.

“Don’t bring your logic into this,” I grumbled with a frown. If I had to put her back down in that corral I knew my heart would break. She was mine.

The shelter worker wasn’t giving up on us either.

“We can hold onto her for you if you can’t take her home right now,” the worker promised, but the thought of her spending another night in the shelter

had me shaking my head.

“Call your mom. She won’t mind,” I demanded. Lake smirked at me and clicked his tongue.

“So bossy,” he teased as he pulled his phone out and made the call. I could hear Linda’s voice the moment she answered.

“Are you both okay?”

“Mom, I found a puppy,” I said as I stepped closer, not giving him a chance to talk. “Is she allowed to come for dinner, too?”

“Honey, as long as you’re coming, you could bring a mountain lion cub for all I care,” she laughed.

“See, she’s on my side,” I said as I danced Mia around in victory. The worker was laughing at us as he gathered the paperwork.

Now that I had everyone on board I was ready to sign anything he asked.

“You’ve just made her night. She’s lighting up for this puppy,” he said, trying to be quiet. I heard him anyway and bit back a smile. I always thought Everett was sappy as he watched me do the smallest things and beamed. Now Lake was doing the same and I wanted to soak it in. I’d never take that kind of attention for granted again.

“Good, you both need to find a reason to smile,” his mom said before ending the call.

I shifted the puppy and pulled out my phone to video call, Micah. It was his house, after all, I couldn’t just drop by with a puppy.

“Hey, beautiful,” he answered, his dimples flashing as he smiled at me. “What’s going on? I thought you were on a date.”

“Someone crashed it,” I said, keeping my face straight.

“Who?” He frowned and for the first time looked angry and a bit possessive. It was kind of sexy.

“Her name is Mia, and she’s way cuter than I could ever be,” I said with a dramatic sigh. Lake was biting back his laughter in front of me as Micah sputtered.

“That’s impossible, Shaye. You’re gorgeous, and Lake wouldn’t do that.”

“I’m glad he defends me,” Lake laughed. “Show him Mia.”

I shifted so the pup was visible, and Micah’s face lit up.

“Tell me I can keep her?” I asked, letting her cute little face do the talking.

There was no hesitation in his answer; the phone was bouncing as he got excited.

“At this point, I’ll be sad if you don’t,” he laughed. “Do it.”

“Bye,” I said, blowing him a kiss, then hanging up.

“See, that face is a weapon,” Lake sang out. I ignored him and turned back to the worker to get the boring part out of the way.

Thirty minutes later, I had the paperwork filled out with my address listed as Micah’s, and my sweet puppy happily walking ahead of us on her leash.

People let out little squeals of delight and a chorus of ‘aww’ as we passed and this time I didn’t mind the attention.

“Okay, plans changed. We need the pet store,” Lake said, leading us toward the store and away from the fair. Thankfully, every shop Lockwood had to offer was close to the square.

From the moment we stepped inside the store, Mia’s excitement had me spending every penny I could on her. The cart was overflowing in mere minutes and Lake was adding just as much as I was. This pup had us wrapped around her little paws already.

The worker offered a few bits of advice for new puppy owners as she scanned the items, giving Mia a treat for waiting like a good girl.

When she gave the total, Lake swiped his card before I could dig mine out of my bag and laughed at my protests.

“Hush, now she’s *our* puppy,” he teased. Something in his eyes told me he needed to do this so my protests stopped.

“First, thank you. Second, don’t alpha me.”

“Shaye, I’m definitely going to alpha you anytime something makes you this happy.” He sounded so serious that I had to bite back the goofy smile spreading across my face.

It was hard to remember a time when I felt this happy.

He thought the date might be lame, but it was exactly what I needed.

With a car stuffed full of goodies and a puppy barking at the cars that passed, we made our way out of town to his childhood home. It was strange heading toward ‘home’ again. I hadn’t been back in so long.

Linda and Chad’s house looked just like I remembered. It was a cute ranch-style, and the decor was a bit of a hot mess. She bought things that brought her happiness, and that made the home cozy and chaotic in the best way.

The family room was always my favorite. It doubled as a dining room with a huge table for entertaining guests, along with the comfiest couches. There were sliding doors that led outside that they always kept open so fresh

air blew in.

The large fireplace was lined with knick-knacks and family photos. It was familiar and peaceful there.

We spent a lot of time here as kids. In fact, this is the room that I first met the twins in. My mom and Linda had been friends since they were teens, and once we were old enough, they finally introduced us.

We were inseparable from that point forward.

Things changed in the last few years, but then again, Mom changed after the divorce. It was like she had been controlled so long by my father that she went out of her way to make sure she had nothing tying her down... including me.

“Are you okay?” Lake asked, his fingers curled around mine.

I looked up at him and tried to smile but it must have failed. His eyes were full of concern.

“We shouldn’t have come,” he cursed.

“It’s not that. I was actually thinking about Mom, not Everett this time.”

My grief had changed in the last few weeks. The more I let myself accept my feelings and faced them head on, the easier it was to think about him.

Some days would still be bad and I’d want to curl up in a ball and cry at the mere mention of his name. But tonight, it was bearable.

Maybe it was the puppy snuggled in my arms, fast asleep after a busy car ride, or maybe it was Lake by my side, but right now I felt like I could face the world.

I reached out and knocked twice on the door before pushing it open. Linda would get onto me if I waited for her to come answer. As she always said, I was family.

“Let me see the puppy!” Chad yelled out. I heard the pounding of footsteps as they both fought to get to the front door first. He hip-checked Linda before she jumped on his back, riding on him as he trudged forward. She slid off at the last minute and gracefully moved in front of him, winning their race.

I swear these two were like kids, and I'd forgotten how crazy they were.

“Oh Shaye, she’s beautiful,” Linda said, taking the puppy from me. Mia yawned and let out a little squeak, making her melt even more. Lake said my pleading face was dangerous but Mia had everyone fawning over her.

“Do you need to take her outside before dinner? Everything’s getting set up now,” Linda questioned as she finally looked back up at us.

“No, she was a good girl and went right before we came to the door,” I promised. “I’ll try to make sure she doesn’t have any accidents in the house.”

“Girl, we’ve always had dogs. You know it wouldn’t be the first or the last. Maybe we should have hit up that vendor fair today.”

“I’d like to say that you missed out, but I honestly have no idea what was there except for the puppies. I saw them first, and the rest was over.”

She chuckled at that and carried Mia towards the kitchen. She worked with a mom’s focus as she finished plating up the food with one hand, cuddling my pup in the other.

I couldn’t even be mad that she’d stolen my puppy because she was so adorable.

“When do the guys get here?” I asked Lake. He checked his phone and shrugged, but a knock on the door had him tucking it back in his pocket.

“I guess right now.”

“I’ve got it,” I said, jumping up and heading for the door. Since they weren’t coming in like we did, I pulled it open and gasped as Drew ran towards me, lifting me up in a hug and spinning me around. He planted a kiss on my lips before setting me down.

“That was the most adorable picture I’ve ever seen. Where’s my new baby?” He moved me aside and barreled past.

“She’s mine now!” Linda yelled from the front. Drew rolled his eyes and let out a laugh.

“Old woman, you better not try me,” he sang out as he hurried toward the kitchen. It seems that Linda just made everyone feel like family.

Micah put his finger under my chin, lifting my face and brushing a kiss across my lips. The fire I felt from such a simple kiss was insane, and I blinked a couple of times to clear my head as he backed away.

He quickly followed after Drew, and I heard Linda greet him just as warmly.

When I turned to Riven, he had a strange look on his face, and some of my happiness faltered at the thought of how hard this must be for him.

“Wait, where’s tall, dark, and gloomy?” Linda yelled out before I could say a word.

Riven fought a smile and shook his head as he stared down at me. Even if he tried to deny it, his vivid-green eyes were dancing with humor.

“He’s in here trying not to smile,” I called back, not taking my eyes off of him.

“Baby girl, you’re trouble.”

“You like it,” I countered, giving him a shrug and fighting a smile of my own.

The tension between us was strong, and after the other night of him seeing me at my worst, I no longer felt the need to hide myself. I also didn’t feel guilty for my smiles anymore.

“I do, but did you have to get a dog?”

“You know the ones who protest the loudest are always the ones who end up sleeping with the dog on their chest and saying ‘I never liked them,’ but they become best friends anyway.”

He rolled his eyes and wrapped his arm around me, leading me further into the house. Linda had relinquished the puppy and had both of her hands now. She was setting a huge salad bowl on the counter until we walked in and she stopped everything to rush toward Riven and pull him into a mom hug. She didn’t say anything, just hugged him, patted his cheek, and went back to work.

“I just love when you guys come over. It fills this house with life again. It’s been too quiet for far too long,” she said as she mixed something on the stove.

“It’s nice to be back,” I agreed. This house meant a lot to me, it always had. Now, standing here again, it felt like another piece of myself was falling back into place.

“Come eat,” Linda called, urging us all to the table.

Riven hadn’t let go of me and I think he needed the comfort. His hand twitched every so often and his jaw was clenched in a hard line. He clearly liked being here but I think it also showed him what he missed as a child.

We sat down together and I put my hand on his thigh as she said a quick prayer and started fussing over making us plates.

Some of us didn’t know how to handle that level of motherly affection, and I kept a close eye on both him and Micah, making sure they weren’t uncomfortable.

We ate and chatted until I was stuffed and couldn’t manage another bite. Linda was teasing Lake until she turned her attention back to me.

“So, Shaye, have you heard from your mom lately?”

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

Shaye

“Grab her!” Micah yelled as Mia snatched a chunk of roast from my plate and hopped off my lap with more dexterity than a puppy should have. She was off and running as the whole group of us ran after her. It was the perfect way to avoid an awkward question.

“Block the kitchen!” Linda yelled before Chad veered off to the living room. She ran for the stairs, but was small enough it was not a successful escape. Riven snatched her up easily and tugged the chunk of meat from her jaws.

She let out a whine of protest but didn’t fight him as he took it and handed her off to me. For being such a big guy, he was surprisingly gentle with her.

“That was an interesting turn of events,” I said before holding her up. She looked like she wasn’t sorry at all as she blinked at me. “That was not a good girl. We’re going to have to find a dog trainer.”

“She’s a beagle, she’ll always be motivated by food,” Lake laughed. “Training is a great idea, though.”

“I have to pee, watch her like a hawk,” I told him as I handed her off. Since I was at the bottom of the stairs I headed up to use the guest bathroom on the landing.

I finished quickly and stepped out, my footsteps faltering as I spotted Everett’s door.

It was cracked and from what I could see inside it hadn’t changed at all. They kept it just like he left it... or just like I left it when I snuck away that

night.

I couldn't help myself. I was walking forward almost in a trance and pushed it open. A wave of nostalgia hit me as I glanced around at the space.

His scent was faint, but still here under the surface. He'd spent enough time in here that it would likely stay that way if she left it alone.

"Oh, Everett," I sighed as I looked up at the picture wall. He loved taking candid photos and putting them up. Some of them were awful but he wouldn't delete a single one. That was the one time he never gave into my demands. He said it captured the moment better if I wasn't paying attention, even if my face ended up looking crazy.

My fingers ran over our younger faces, the memories flooding back as I looked at each one. He really was such a huge part of my life. Everett helped me be independent, made sure I was confident, and always encouraged me. In a way, he'd become my inner voice and I'd always be thankful for that.

Looking at the pictures now it felt like a different life. That girl smiling back wasn't me anymore. I'd gone through far too much pain to be her again.

Maybe it wasn't about letting go, but evolving into something new. I was stronger now, that was for damn sure, but I also would never take a single moment with those I cared about for granted.

I knew far too well that time was limited.

My attention shifted from the wall to his room. Everything was still a bit messy. The bed was made but his hamper was left untouched. One of his many hoodies hung on the bedpost and I picked it up, slipping it over my arms and lifting the soft fabric up to my nose.

I inhaled Everett's scent of campfire, cedar, and sage. A single tear fell down my cheek but I didn't let the grief overwhelm me. Instead, I gave it a place in my heart, a small piece of me that would always mourn my loss. The other side of me would stand tall and remember him while honoring his wishes and living my life.

After a few deep breaths of just him I started to walk around again, taking it all in.

A map of Lockwood was hanging above his desk. I walked over to inspect it, my smile widened as I noticed small stars next to the library, train station, town hall, and one last location outside of town.

He had been working on this for a while.

A soft knock had me turning around to see Linda standing there, watching me with a soft smile.

“How are you doing?”

“I’m okay,” I admitted. “It’s a little easier now.”

“Some days are like that. Some days I cry like a baby,” she admitted as she walked over and sat on the edge of his bed. “That boy loved you with his entire soul, Shaye.”

“He did,” I agreed. “I loved him just as fiercely.”

“Those boys down there love you the same,” she said carefully. It was her way of calling me out. Gentle words and blunt truths were woven together in her own brand of telling it like it is.

“I’m realizing that,” I said. “They’re making me realize that giving up on life isn’t an option.”

“I’ve been so worried about you, sweet girl. Your mom stopped giving me updates when you left and Lake didn’t know much either.”

“Mom stopped checking in the moment she left me at my dorm. She didn’t even bother to help me settle in,” I laughed humorlessly. “She was happy to be rid of me.”

“I’ve realized over the years that she is not the woman I became friends with.”

“I guess I was too much of a burden for her.”

“Fuck her,” Linda said with more venom than I thought she could possess. “She was a shit mother for doing that. You were hurting and rightfully so.”

“Thanks for saying that. I let it get to me for a while but I was too sad to care much. Now I’m realizing how fucked up it was.”

“Language,” she teased, giving me a wink. “I’m glad to see you smiling. The girl who came to the cabin and the one who is standing here talking to me are two different people.”

“They’ve helped me work through some things. I’m not perfect now, but I’m getting better,” I reassured her.

Mia’s barks filtered up the stairs and I knew my time here was up. I took one last look around Everett’s room before following Linda down the stairs.

The guys were all laying around the living room floor rolling a tennis ball while Mia happily chased it.

I felt a smile spread across my face at the sight of them. They were adorable as they watched her chase the ball, soft expressions on their faces. They were as in love with her as I was. Even Riven who tried to deny it.

Lake was the first to look up, catching my attention. His turquoise eyes

were warm and welcoming as he lifted one arm. I didn't hesitate to walk over and sit down, pressing my back to his chest, while his arm looped around my waist. Mia ran up immediately, scaling my legs and hopping up on my chest to lick my face.

"Hey, sweet girl, were they not giving you enough attention?" I teased, talking to her in a little baby voice that had them groaning.

"Yes, because she's not already spoiled as hell," Riven said, shaking his head. "Don't think we didn't see that car packed full of junk for her."

There was a small smile quirking up the edge of his lips, and I wanted to move over there and kiss it. I wanted them more than I could put into words, but I didn't know how to tell them that, knowing that tomorrow I might be struggling again.

"We should take her on one last walk before we head back. It's getting late," Lake said as he stood up and went to the other room to grab her leash. When he walked back in, he crouched down and tapped the ground in front of him. "Come here, sweet girl, you want to go on a walk?"

Mia launched herself off of me and ran over, barking at him. She squirmed so much that he had trouble getting the leash on, which made it even funnier. When he finally clipped it into place, he looked at the rest of us expectantly.

"Well, am I walking her alone?"

Not one of us protested as we got to our feet. Micah held his hand out to me as he usually did, and I put my hand in his. He curled his fingers around mine and pulled me toward the door—or really, Mia pulled us toward the door.

The night air was just cool enough to be comfortable. I took in a deep breath as we started down the road, letting Mia get some more energy out. It didn't take her long to do her thing. Of course, she had to stop and sniff every five seconds, letting out little barks when she smelled something interesting, which seemed to be all the time.

I knew she was going to be a whole lot of work, but I was looking forward to it. Putting my energy into something other than my spiraling thoughts would be refreshing.

That and the journey Everett was sending us on. I was looking forward to playing the game at the end.

It also had me thinking of my degree more often. I only had two classes to go thanks to drowning myself in as many classes as they'd let me take.

I made a mental note to message my counselor from school about taking those classes online. The thought of leaving the guys to go back felt wrong, and I didn't want any part of it.

None of that was important tonight. Right now I just wanted more time with them.

"Do you have a fire pit?" I asked Micah. He didn't even question how random that was, he simply nodded.

"I picked one out last summer. We'd have to get some wood, but that could definitely be arranged."

"If we lived in the woods by the cabin, I could just chop us some," Riven said. "I kind of miss the rustic lifestyle."

"Yes, because Lockwood is so modern," Drew teased. I swear the two of them were like siblings, easily shooting barbs back and forth and not taking any of it to heart.

"What do you want with the fire pit?" Drew asked when we'd all fallen into silence again.

"There's just something nice about a bonfire on a night like this," I said. "I was thinking maybe we could have one when we get back. It's still early enough, isn't it?"

"It will give Mia a chance to get familiar with the yard," Lake added.

"It's not like we need to get up for work," Riven said. "We could definitely make that happen."

I loved that they didn't even hesitate to give me what I wanted. It was so simple, yet it meant a lot to me. It had been a long time since anyone had cared enough to do that. Though that was partially on me for closing myself off to everyone around me.

True to their word, after a quick goodbye to Lake's parents and a stop for some firewood at a local gas station, we were all in Micah's backyard, loading up the fire pit as Drew and Micah pulled chairs closer.

Thanks to his fenced-in yard, Mia was running around happily while we made a circle around the fire.

It was one of those slow but impactful evenings that settled something within you. It felt like I was putting roots down in Lockwood and becoming an official part of this pack.

Drew reached out and took my hand as if he knew where my mind was going. I turned his way, and we shared a smile before the fire roared to life.

That was the night I fell in love with life again and couldn't wait to see

where it would lead me.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

Shaye

The Town Hall in Lockwood was fairly small. It was a brick building that was well-maintained but still looked older than the town itself.

One old woman was working behind the desk. We didn't bother to disturb her since the building was open to the public.

The offices were on the left but we headed for the right where they had a small museum dedicated to town and local history.

The word 'museum' was definitely a stretch of the word. It was a single open room with pictures and memorabilia from the town nailed to the wall.

Thankfully and also not very surprising, we were alone, so I didn't bother to wait to listen to Everett's video.

I turned the volume down on my phone so it was just loud enough for us to hear before I hit play.

"Now, I know everybody is well aware why I chose Lockwood as a destination for the game. They'd be right to some extent. It was definitely because of the summers I spent here growing up alongside Lake and Shaye, but it's also more than that. Lockwood itself is one of those towns that once you visit it, you never get it out of your head. The people seem happy here, life is a bit slower than it is in the city, but in the best way. There's character here within the residents and the buildings themselves."

He paused and glanced around the room. There was definitely more on the walls now than when he visited. It was interesting to see the differences that even a year could make.

"One time I came to town with just my dad. We were doing some work

during the fall to prep the cabin for the winter. We went to the hardware store for a few things he didn't have on hand. If we were anywhere in the city, they would just try to upsell us. Instead, the man looked at my dad's cart, asked what everything was for, and then proceeded to talk him out of half of the stuff. He offered a few alternatives before giving us a detailed rundown on how to do it properly. Then he handed over his number in case we needed help."

"That's adorable," I said. He was right, Lockwood was different than anywhere else I'd lived. As kids, we were safe wandering the streets. That couldn't be said for every town.

"Lockwood is somewhere I wanted to end up one day, and now, through this game, I'll get to live there forever. After just two more destinations, you get to see the video game side of it, too. I know you'll love it. I made it with you both in mind, after all."

"So humble," Lake said. He didn't look as sad this time either. It was nice to know he was healing alongside me.

Everett's voice brought my attention back to the video.

"I hope as you're walking through these locations, you're able to talk about all the crazy things we got up to as kids. Those memories were something that kept me going, and I want them to keep you going, too. You can't sit every day and cry over what we had. It's going to be nearly impossible to avoid the tears—I get it to some extent because I cry thinking about all the things I'm going to miss with you, too. But more than anything, I want you to embrace life, to remember the things that helped you be the person you are now, and to embrace every small moment that comes along. You deserve to have long, happy lives, and I'm so fucking happy that you're going to get the chance to."

His voice broke, and my throat tightened as tears threatened to come, but I blinked them away, trying to keep it reined in for once. I'd done my fair share of crying, and he was right, it was time to live in the moment.

"Now, for this code, all you need to do is to find the craziest picture in here. I based this one on the picture itself. To get it right, you need to know the right order: Car, pavement, banner, and shirt. Good luck. I know you'll figure it out."

What the hell?

"It's got to be a picture from those cryptic instructions," Lake said. "Maybe something with a race car? Otherwise why would it have a number

on it? License plates are too common and too long.”

Micah was already veering off toward a wall of photos as Lake talked it out.

Drew pulled out his phone and followed. “I’ve got a note ready to write down whatever we find. We’re not going to find a little envelope with this one.”

Riven pulled me in for a quick hug. It was just long enough so I felt the brunt of my emotions before he was letting go. The way he squared his shoulders and put his hand on my lower back, pushing me to help them find the picture, had me steeling my own spine, knowing that I could do this.

I’d never had anyone believe in me quite the way that Riven did. Everett and I were so deeply in love before we even knew what love really was that it felt like we only saw the best in each other. Riven saw me at my worst. He didn’t try to coddle me or say sweet, meaningless words. Instead he taught me to keep going, to stand my ground and keep my head high.

The guys continued to look at the pictures in the main gallery, but it was something in the back that caught my eye. There was a pennant flag tucked away in an alcove in the back. The main picture was of a dirt bike track, the bikes flying in the air in various action shots. There was one of a full team around it.

“I can’t believe they put this up,” Riven said with a laugh, tapping one of the pictures.

In this photo the dirt bike was flying without its rider. The poor guy was laying flat on the hood of a car where he’d fallen. Thankfully, he had a helmet on and was giving a thumbs up in the picture as a crowd rushed towards him.

It was pure chaos and kind of funny until my eyes drifted to something hanging in the windshield—it was just big enough to see the two bold numbers waiting there. It must have been some kind of parking pass.

Then I noticed the banner hanging along the sidelines, announcing that it was the 75th annual Lockwood dirt bike race. The biker on the car had a number on his torso, and finally, the pavement next to his car was marking the parking spots—the only number visible was seven.

“We found it!” I called out to the others. Drew came over and typed the numbers in as I read them off.

“This was much less eventful than the train station,” Micah said. “Pretty tame overall.”

“I’d say that guy begs to differ,” Drew laughed.

“No fucking way,” Lake said as he leaned in to read the caption. His blond hair fell over his eyes and he brushed it out of the way so he could see. “That’s Walter from the Raven’s nest.”

“No,” I gasped, remembering the grumpy old man. There wasn’t a date on the picture, but it could very well have been him. “Now I have to know. Who feels like coffee?”

I was already walking out of the door, knowing they’d follow after me. Raven’s Nest was only a block away and coffee was always a good idea.

Just as Lake pulled open the door I noticed a music store a few buildings down.

Riven nearly ran into me thanks to the abrupt stop and opened his mouth to say something until he saw my face. His green eyes narrowed in accusation.

“What are you about to do?”

The accusation was not without reason. I had a plan forming already.

“So far, this has all been all about me facing my fears. Isn’t it time for you to heal a little as well?”

“Omega, what the hell are you talking about?”

“Let me buy you a guitar.” I pointed at the music store and he let out a startled laugh but his eyes were slightly panicked.

“Why would I let you buy me one?” he demanded. “If I wanted one, I’d buy it myself.”

“You told me that it was your escape, and you hadn’t touched one since you’ve been to therapy. Years have passed, Riven. Isn’t it time you reclaim something you once loved?”

I could see him working it out in his head, his fists clenching and unclenching a few times as he did. The moment that he gave in, I could visibly see it. His shoulders relaxed, and his eyes softened, just the slightest.

“You really are hell-bent on shaking up my life, aren’t you?”

“I could say the same to you. Literally the first time you met me, I was yanked from a dead sleep.”

He grinned. “I never really apologized for that either.”

“Nope,” I said, popping the ‘p’ and giving him a sassy grin.

“Well, I’m sorry.” He eyed the store then looked at the guys waiting inside for us. “Let’s grab coffee first.”

“Sold,” I said with a squeal before hurrying inside. His soft chuckles

followed me, and I loved that I was one of the few people who could make him laugh.

“What the hell are you talking about?” Walter demanded. The look on his face clearly said to drop it, but Kat was like a dog with a bone, practically jumping over the counter toward Drew, demanding details.

“Wait, what dirt bikes, Walter?” She turned to her boss. “You have to tell me now. I will never let this go—not until the day I die.”

“I’m old as fuck, I’m going to go first.”

“No, you’ll run on spite and sarcasm forever,” she teased, blowing him a kiss.

He shook his head, and his eyes locked on Riven and me walking up like we were his lifeline.

“Look, customers! They want to get a coffee, maybe you should do your job,” he snapped at Kat. She didn’t look the least bit affected by his venom. His attempts were half-hearted at best anyway.

“Sorry, Walter, but I’m with them. I kind of want to know, too. That picture was amazing.”

“Oh, so that’s how you found me,” he grumbled but fought back a smile this time. “I knew that museum was going to bite me in the ass one day. Locals never cared enough to check it out, and nobody else knows me.”

“You can’t tell me that wasn’t one of the highlights of your life,” Lake said.

“It was. That was the day I met my omega,” he said proudly. “That asshole Pete from a few towns over was competing. He did some dirty tricks and got me off track. I hit the wrong rock and flew. That impact took it out of me. I tried to shrug it off, but you know how the officials are in this town... they had to fuss over it.”

“I mean, that bike is pretty high in the air, that was quite the fall,” I mused. He rolled his eyes.

“They agreed. I was sent straight to the hospital to get checked out, and wouldn’t you know it, I met this lovely little lady who only had eyes for me. I let her fuss over me for a little bit, and when I asked if I could give her my number, she blushed beautifully and accepted. We never looked back.”

“Did she let you keep riding after that?”

“She would have,” he said as he ran a hand over his wrinkled chin. “But I quit not long after. She’d always wanted to open up a coffee shop. I loved hearing her make those plans and she hated being a nurse. It was something

her family pushed her into. I would have done anything to make her smile, so I made her dream a reality.”

This time his own face turned a little sad. It was a similar sadness that I felt myself. We probably had far fewer years than they had, but it was oddly comforting to know that you could still miss someone and keep going for years after.

“She sounds like an amazing woman,” I said. He looked at me, and it took him only a few seconds before I knew he saw something in my eyes that said we were kindred spirits.

“I’m sure whoever you lost was, too, honey. She’d beat my ass if I gave up, and I’m going to bet that whoever you lost would, too. Sometimes the first step in moving ahead is knowing that you have to. Then you slowly realize that the world keeps going, and you can keep growing as a person. We’ll meet them again someday.”

“We will,” I agreed. “Until then, we build a family however we see fit, and we find a reason to smile, right?”

Kat gave Walter’s arm a squeeze, and he turned one of his rare smiles toward her and nodded.

“Agreed, young lady. That’s exactly right.” He stood up and started walking away, letting out one last bark of an order. “Now, get these people a drink.”

“He’s always so bossy,” Kat said louder than necessary, just so he could hear her. I heard him grumble something but couldn’t make out the words, and she just laughed to herself as she took our order.

We didn’t linger at the coffee shop this time, and the moment I had chugged down my coffee, I looked at the others. “Riven and I have a little something to do. We’ll meet you back at Micah’s.”

They asked for details, but Riven wasn’t having it. He stood up, ignoring them all, and started walking out. I gave a quick wave before hurrying out after him.

He grumbled at me as I took his hand. “You’re relentless, you know that? And infuriating.”

“So are you,” I said.

He rolled his eyes before they locked on me again, and I felt that familiar heat spread through me. The one that did anytime he turned his full focus to me.

God, I wanted to give in, and I would soon, but right now this was about

him.

I snapped my eyes away from his and hurried into the music store, staring him down until he followed me inside.

I'd never seen Riven light up the way he did when he stepped in and heard the first chords of somebody playing as they tested out a guitar. His mouth fell open as he stared around, eyes widening at all the choices.

As a kid, he probably had a hand-me-down. Some shitty guitar that his dad had found somewhere.

I wanted Riven to have one that was all his, to reclaim something that he really did care about at one time. One that didn't have shitty memories attached to it.

"Can I help you folks find anything?" a salesman asked.

Riven shook his head, but I gave the man a smile. "Let us look around first, and we'll come find you when we're ready. We just want to browse right now."

"Sure thing," he agreed before moving on to another customer.

"I can't let you do this." Clearly Riven hadn't accepted his fate yet. Silly alpha.

"And why not?" I demanded, putting a hand on my hip and staring him down. I watched him take a deep breath as he looked at me.

"As much as I love when you stand up to me and fight back with all that fire you've got hidden in there, this is too expensive."

"Yeah, and I'm not worried about the damn cost. Let me do this for you."

I could tell he didn't want to, that it went against everything he stood for, but I wasn't giving up.

"Trust me, give me this." I was begging shamelessly, and I didn't care.

"Fine," he said as he stomped off. I bit back my cheer of triumph and followed after him.

I expected him to go toward the electric guitars and amps, but instead, he went for the acoustic guitars. At first, I was going to argue, thinking he was doing it because it was cheaper, but he was like a man on a mission.

As he stepped closer, his eyes honed in on a single one.

Riven was tall, but even he had to stand on his tiptoes to reach the guitar he wanted. I knew nothing about guitars, but it was beautiful.

It had a vintage feel to it, between the slightly faded teal and the deep-wood tones. The tags indicated that it was good for beginners and people who travel, and I felt like that would be perfect for Riven. He could take it outside

for campfires or out to the cabin when we visited.

The salesman came back now that we'd picked something off the wall. He had a big grin on his face. "That's a gorgeous one, but are you sure you wouldn't want something that plugs in? It still has that acoustic feel, but you can..."

Riven held up a hand. "I'm not interested in all the bells and whistles. I want this one."

The man must have known better than to fight Riven because he just chuckled and nodded. "I understand. Sometimes you just know what you want."

Riven didn't fight as the man led him toward some tuners and extra strings. I knew he was going to try to pay for it, but I already had my card in my pocket. My focus was still on them as I ambled over to the huge display of guitar picks.

"Holy hell, that's a lot of choices," Riven said as he caught back up to me. There were so many different ones that I wasn't sure how to begin helping him find a few.

"I'll help. Just tell me which kind to get. I'm clueless," I admitted. He pointed to a particular row, and I simply grabbed one of each until I had a handful and then grabbed a small case for them that was on display next to the shelf.

Riven started to open his mouth, but I shut him up by leaning up on my tiptoes, curling my fingers in his shirt, and yanking him down for a kiss. This one wasn't simply a peck, it was a thank you. One that said, 'Thank you for letting me in and for showing me how to let others in.' It was a promise of more to come.

"It's another nice night, and I think you should play your guitar by the campfire," I demanded, grabbing his hand and leading him back up to the counter where the salesman was waiting with his guitar and other equipment. I handed my card over before anyone could even say a word.

It wasn't until I had paid, ignoring Riven's grumbles at the price, and we were walking out with a brand new guitar in its case, that he finally stopped me.

"I see what you're doing here," he said. I swallowed hard, expecting him to get angry that I'd taken it this far. Instead, he just took a breath and met my gaze before kissing me back like I did before.

"Thank you."

CHAPTER
TWENTY

Shaye

Dear Everett,

Remember those movie nights at the park? There's one tonight so I'm dragging the whole pack with me to see it. It won't be the same without you and our crazy voice-overs we did.

I'll have to remind Lake about those. He hasn't been as carefree since we reunited but I'm seeing some of that light come back to him. His smiles come a little easier and so do mine.

You knew what you were doing with this adventure and we're taking our time with it. This is our reset before facing the world again.

We couldn't have gotten this far without you, Ev. Thank you.

Love,

Shaye

“This is going to be so lame,” Riven muttered as we unloaded our bags from the back of Drew’s SUV. The guys hurried and grabbed everything they could, leaving me with only the blanket. I held it close as we started walking down the path toward the park.

“If I sit with you, will that make it better?” I asked, batting my eyelashes.

“Hell no, he got to spend time at the music store with you yesterday. It’s totally my turn,” Drew argued.

“She read to you at the library,” Lake countered. “Mine.”

“Actually, you got to pick out Mia with her,” Micah said as he held my pup in his hands. “Definitely my turn, don’t you think so, Mia?” Mia licked his nose in agreement, and I shook my head.

“I’m just going to sit down, and the rest of you can fight over who gets to sit next to me,” I said as I headed down the path.

People were already filing into the park. The giant screen was set up at the base of the hill so no matter where we sat, we’d have a good view.

Knowing the guys, I snagged a spot far enough back we wouldn’t have to deal with crazy townies or children running around.

There was a concession stand set up to the side and a line was already forming. I could smell the popcorn and my stomach rumbled.

“Snacks!” Lake called out, spotting it right away. “I’m starving.”

“Set up first, then food,” Micah commanded. He wasn’t always bossy but if it came to making sure I was comfortable, he was not afraid to be.

Once I decided on a good spot where the grass was thick and no one was directly around us, I started laying out the blanket. Drew jumped right in to help me spread it out, and I could see him eyeballing me as I kicked off my shoes and dropped down in the very center. They all moved so fast that they nearly tumbled into me, but somehow they managed to not squish me.

“Give me my dog,” I said as I laughed, shaking my head. Mia happily came to me, curling up in my lap as I pet her, her little eyes drooping shut. They made sure to wear her out in the backyard before coming here so that she was ready to pass out.

Drew ended up taking one side, and Lake took the other. Riven sat behind me, and I had a feeling before this was over, I’d end up in his lap. Micah stretched out in front, his head on my thigh. My hands went to Micah’s hair,

teasing through the blond strands. His eyes drifted closed and he smiled to himself like he won a prize.

“Did they ever announce what the movie was going to be?” I asked. We’d only just found a flyer, and it was very vague about what was playing.

“I hope it’s not a romcom,” Riven groaned.

Drew shrugged, not hating the idea.

“I’m not opposed to a good romcom.”

“I doubt they’re going to play something scary or full of action with all the kids,” Lake said.

“It’s not a family movie night, though, right?” I questioned. I wasn’t against watching a kid movie, but I had to be in the mood.

Micah cracked open his eyes and pulled out his phone. “I’m texting Ellie to see if she figured anything out between her and the girls. They always have gossip.”

It took about five seconds for her to respond back.

“It’s something called Alpha in Disguise,” he read back to us before clicking through to his browser and searching the movie. “It looks like there’s a little bit of pack love in there, but overall, it’s about an omega being tired of being treated like one, so she poses as an alpha.”

“Wait, wouldn’t her scent give her away?” I questioned.

“Not in this day and age. There are blockers for everything,” Micah argued. “And with the right outfit she could hide her size.”

Lake and I exchanged a look. He looked nervous for a second, but I just chuckled to myself, shaking my head.

“You can stop beating yourself up over the blockers, you know. We weren’t ready for each other back then.”

“Are you ready for me now?” he questioned. His turquoise eyes were full of worry, so I leaned over and pressed a kiss to his lips.

“I’m ready, I promise. Just be gentle with me, okay?”

“We’ll always take it at your pace,” Micah said. “If that statement goes for all of us?” I glanced around at the guys, and every single one of them was looking at me, waiting for my answer. They looked like they were barely breathing.

“It does.”

“Good,” Riven said, snatching me up and pulling me and Mia back into his lap. Micah’s head fell to the ground with a thud and he glared up at the other alpha.

“We need a ‘no snatching our girl away’ rule,” he mumbled, but he stood up anyway, holding a hand out to help Lake up. “Come on, let’s get those snacks. We’ll steal her back when we have food.”

He reached into his pocket and tossed a bag of treats my way with a wink.

“Aw, you even thought of our puppy.”

“Of course,” he said as he shot a cocky grin at Riven. The alpha behind me groaned in protest.

“Damn it, they are going to take you away, aren’t they?” he muttered, his nose nestled into my hair. I could hear him breathing me in, and it sent a shiver down my spine.

A woman walked by and looked down at us. Her face was familiar, but I couldn’t place her. Her lips twisted into disgust and she shook her head disapprovingly before hurrying off.

I frowned over at Drew.

“She looks familiar, but I don’t know who that is. Why is she looking at us like that? It’s not like we’re even doing PDA.”

He glanced around and looked at the other packs waiting for the movie. “Hell, you’re more tame than half of them.”

It took one glance around to realize he was right. More than one alpha was holding their omega, and packs were huddled together everywhere I looked. It wasn’t like this was a crazy thing to do when instincts get involved. Especially in big crowds. Alphas tended to keep their omegas close, and we were no different.

I brushed it off as a bitter old lady and focused on petting my puppy until the others were coming back with their arms loaded with snacks.

“At least we haven’t had our date crashed,” Drew said to Micah. “I half expected your sister or someone else to come by.”

Micah smirked. “I volunteered us to help build my niece a playhouse if they left us alone.”

“I’ll take that,” Lake said as he settled in next to me again, his leg pressed against Riven’s thigh so he could be closer to me. Drew was doing the same on the other side and Riven didn’t even bat an eye.

They were all very comfortable with each other, and it showed in little moments like this. I don’t think I could have handled it if they were the jealous type, at least when it came to each other.

The movie started rolling, and I was caught by the first hilarious scene. The omega wanted to join this elite security company, something she

dreamed about since they protected her as a child. She wanted to be that for other omegas, and of course, it never worked out.

I found myself relaxing as the movie went on. The guys had their hands on me, and I was settled back against Riven's chest, content and happy.

But, of course, someone had to ruin it.

"This is disgusting."

It was the same woman from before, and now she was accompanied by another woman. They both glared down at me, their wrinkled mouths turned down in a scowl.

"Would you like to clarify on that?" Riven demanded, his voice harsh and rude. I wasn't even about to shush him, these women had it coming.

The guys were tense now. If this had been another alpha I had a feeling there would have been a fight.

"Mrs. Barnes, I'm assuming that you aren't meaning to be rude, but this is not how you talk to people." Lake was never one for confrontation but this woman had gone too far.

Once Lake had said her name, I was able to place her. They owned a cabin not far from ours and had joined us for more than one barbecue over the years.

She'd always been a little rude and judgmental. The moms always reminded us that she was just lonely.

She lost her alpha to a heart attack a couple of years before we met them. It suddenly made sense why she was so upset with me.

She knew that I lost Everett and was here to shame me for moving on.

"When I lost my Hank, I never looked at any other man."

"Oh, hell no," Drew said. He was on his feet faster than I could blink. Here I thought it was Riven that I'd have to look out for.

"You will not speak to our omega like that. We are a pack, and there is nothing wrong with that. She's allowed to live her life after losing her alpha. We aren't trying to replace him."

"Like hell you aren't. That boy's only been dead a year."

She had no idea what I'd been through or who the guys were to me. What a fucking bitch.

"It's awfully bold of you to assume that you get to talk for him," I said, shaking my head. "You have no idea what he would think about all this."

"He would be hurt," she said in a rush. "He'd be as disgusted as I am."

"Look, Karen, move along," Riven said. "You do not want me to stand

up.”

She gasped and clutched her chest. “How dare you talk to me with that tone, young man!”

“I notice that your friend is awfully quiet,” Micah said, “Maybe you should follow her lead and walk away. Leave us alone. We are just here trying to enjoy a movie.”

At this point, we had the attention of everyone within earshot, and I wanted to crawl into a hole.

The guys were shooting me worried looks, but I was more angry than anything. How dare she make me feel bad for this? I wasn’t going to let her feed into my insecurities.

I’d come too far. Fuck that.

So instead, I handed Mia to Lake, who took her easily. He gave me a curious look as I turned around in Riven’s arms.

His eyes widened in surprise before I moved my hands into his hair and pulled him down toward me. The kiss was territorial and claiming, I didn’t bother to hold back.

He let out a groan and I could feel him hardening underneath me as his fingers dug into my ass.

There was a huff of indignation from the women and I heard them shuffle away. I let out a small laugh before he brought me down for another kiss.

“Holy fuck that was hot,” Lake said, his voice husky now.

“Damn,” was all that Micah could mutter and Drew hummed in agreement. I ignored them as my hips rocked against Riven as he dominated my mouth.

A surge of heat washed through me and my slick soaked through my panties in response. Even just his mouth had me ready to burst into flames

“Baby girl, you have to stop,” Riven begged me, his hands tight enough on my ass now to hold me still.

I pulled away, both of us panting as our foreheads rested together. Unfortunately the heat wasn’t lessening as I sucked in breaths, if anything it was getting worse. My skin was breaking out in a light sweat and my pussy ached for him

“Sweets, are you going into heat?” Drew asked.

They all inhaled at the same time and groaned. I had to blink through the haze before his words registered.

Then the panic set in.

We had only just talked about moving forward. I wasn't ready to be with all of them like this. Not for a heat.

"Breathe for me, baby girl. Do you have suppressors you want to take? Can we get you home in time for that?"

"No," I said, doing the calculations in my head. Fuck, I'd been so caught up and not expecting to have to deal with it that I let them slide. I was weeks behind.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god," I repeated over and over again, but the guys weren't letting me fall apart.

Riven stood with me in his arms, somehow managing not to fall over with the weight. He kept me tight to him while the other guys hurried to clean up and follow us out of the park.

"Listen, we'll take you home. If you want our help with it, we will help you," Micah promised. "If you don't, we'll make you as comfortable as possible. We've got you, beautiful."

"Okay," I whimpered as another surge of heat washed through me. I was clinging to the alpha, my hips starting to rock again.

I knew with everything in my soul that I did not want to go through this alone.

But was I ready to give everything to them?

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

Lake

Seeing Shaye panic over her heat was breaking my heart. She had just given in to our pack and started to accept that this was the path her life was taking. I was afraid that this was going to ruin everything.

We would give her anything she needed to get through this. If it was space that she needed, that would be fine.

It would kill us to have to smell her, hear her suffering, and not be able to ease that pain.

But we'd respect it regardless. I wanted her to feel safe and protected with us.

She was pacing in Micah's living room, and every time she pivoted and marched to the other side of the room, it sent her scent swirling through the room.

My inner alpha wanted me to simply claim my mate, but I couldn't do that. This had to be on her terms.

I also wasn't about to bite her during the heat. We weren't at that stage yet.

"Baby girl, just tell us what we can do for you," Riven begged. His leg was bouncing anxiously, his jaw was clenching and unclenching as he watched her fight with herself.

She stopped walking at his words and gave each of us a look, trying to decide whether she was ready to give in or not.

Shaye let out a breath. Her scent sweetened even further as she bit her lip nervously.

“Will you help me through it?”

“Of course, we will,” Micah said without an ounce of hesitation.

“We need to make sure we have things. I need to run to the store,” Drew said, standing up and speaking into his phone, likely making one of his lists. “We need food, water, electrolytes.”

Then the color drained from his face, and he looked up at her. “You don’t even have a nest.”

“That’s because it hit out of nowhere. It was like I decided to give you guys a chance, and my body said, ‘bet.’” Her voice was still panicked and her hands were flying wildly as she spoke.

“But you don’t have a nest,” he repeated slowly. I wasn’t sure what he was getting at by rubbing it in.

“I’m aware I don’t have one,” she said.

At first, she didn’t understand, and then her face paled as she realized.

“Oh god, I don’t have a nest. I need pillows, and I need...”

She started breathing heavily as a fresh wave of panic set in.

“Breathe,” Riven barked out the order.

She gasped and sucked in a long breath before letting it back out.

“Thanks,” she said.

Micah moved in front of her so she had to look at him. “Shaye, I want you to feel safe and comfortable with this, so I need to know some things.”

“Okay,” she said hesitantly, eyes wide as she waited.

“How do you want to handle protection? What are your limits? What is something you want us to avoid?”

“I’m not ready to be claimed,” she said, her voice strong and sure. I was so proud of her for setting boundaries. “No bites.”

“Done,” we promised.

“No condoms. I want you as you are. They do automatic testing at every checkup, and I’m good.”

“So are we,” I confirmed, looking at the others. Everyone nodded along.

“What about birth control?” Riven said. “If you’re not ready for a bite, you’re not ready for a baby, Shaye.”

“It’s a heat,” she said, her words strong and steady, making sure every one of us was understanding. “I’m on birth control, but they are only about fifty percent effective during heat. I understand the risk I’m taking, and I’m willing to take it. Yes, I understand what the consequences could be, but we’re mates. You’re not strangers. I want this heat to mean something, to be

a turning point, and condoms would make it so much more uncomfortable.”

“I’m fine with it,” I said, warmth spreading through me. She trusted us. She wanted us, and was willing to take risks for us. That was huge.

Was I ready to be a potential father? Well, was anyone? You could never really prepare yourself for fatherhood, but I was willing to figure it out with her and with them by my side when the time came.

“Why don’t you go start on that nest?” Riven said. “Everything’s going to be fine.”

Shaye nodded once, then turned and rushed down the hall. We could hear something crash and things hitting the floor, and we all glanced at each other before running after her.

She was a storm, a building energy that was swirling through the room, grabbing everything soft and throwing it on her bed.

Some of her and Micah’s things were making it to the hallway, and we had to dodge from being hit by random books and items that she would regret throwing later.

Micah, being the sweet guy he was, was already collecting it and taking it to the other room and putting it safely out of reach.

Everyone jumped into action, taking things directly from her instead of letting her break everything. We became an assembly line as she turned her bedroom into a nest. I was a little impressed by how quickly she did it, but she had never done things by halves.

I honestly could not believe that I was about to experience a heat with my mate.

Hell, I couldn’t even believe she *was* my mate, and that she was willing to accept us.

The transformation she had made in such a short time was insane. She’d gone from a shell of a person to finally embracing her new life, finding things that made her happy, and not letting anything stop her.

At some point, Mia ran in to see what the chaos was, and somehow, that shook Shaye out of her panic long enough to look up at us.

“What about Mia? She can’t be here for this. We can’t take care of a dog and have a heat. We need a babysitter.”

“I’ll handle it, I promise. Drew and I are going to run and get supplies while Micah and Riven help you get this settled. We’ve got you, baby. You call us if you need anything.”

“Okay, thank you,” she breathed out before turning her focus back to her

room.

Drew dodged into the chaos and snatched Mia up before following me. He gathered Mia's supplies. I was useless, my head a mess as I realized she was missing something very important.

Everett.

She had a pack that was about to help her through a heat. But the one alpha she felt one hundred percent comfortable with, especially in a vulnerable state, was him.

How did I bring him into this nest? How did I make him a part of this heat?

"Drew, can you drive?" I asked as we walked outside. He didn't hesitate to head for his SUV, loading up Mia as I tapped away at my phone.

"Ellie or your parents?" he questioned.

"My parents," I said. Ellie had a baby. She didn't need to deal with a puppy, and I knew Mom would be more than happy to take her on.

Drew ended up being the one to take Mia inside, giving my mom an update while I waited in the car, still trying to find something to help.

"What are you doing?" he asked when he got back in the car, sounding frustrated. I felt bad for abandoning him but this was too important.

"Listen, I was trying to think of a way to include Everett. She's not going to be happy if he's not part of her nest. He was her mate, the only one she's had before us. We can't ignore him during this. She needs his scent."

Drew didn't even blink before answering, "Well, what can we do?"

"I just found something. The shop is an hour away, and I think her heat is still in the early stages, so we should have time."

"What is an hour away?" he asked, trying to keep me on track.

"There's this person that specializes in making stuffed animals infused with scents. It's meant for omegas who are separated from their alphas or omegas like her who have lost one."

"Do you even know what his scent is? I don't know what you guys' scents are."

He had a point. We could smell our scent matches and to a point, our pack's, but theirs was just a mix of woody scents to me. I couldn't pick out the particular notes that were mate-specific.

"I do, I promise. She told me once. It's sage and cedar mixed with Alpha Musk. She said he always reminded her of campfires during the summertime. I'm not sure exactly what that means, but I have a feeling I could help pick it

out. He was my twin, he's not just a random guy or someone else in the pack."

"Okay, put it in the GPS," he said as he shifted the car into gear. "And put in a grocery order on the way, they can just deliver it to the house."

I did as he asked and put in everything on his list to be delivered.

When we pulled up outside of the shop, I wasn't sure what to expect. *Cherished Memories* sounded like something a little more upscale than we were looking for, but from the website, this was exactly where we should be.

When we walked inside, an old woman was sitting behind the counter while two alphas were working on something at a workbench not far away. All three looked up as we walked in and gave us a smile.

The entire place felt warm and welcoming.

"Hello, can I help you?" she asked as we approached the counter.

"We're looking for something for our omega," I said before launching into the story. As I spoke, the other two alphas joined us, standing beside her as they took in the story.

"Oh, that poor girl," she gasped, her eyes welling with tears. She fanned her face for a second while I finished the story.

"This is about to be our first heat together, and I don't want him to be excluded. I know my twin's scent, and I want to try to recreate it for her."

"We have a few different ways you can do that. We have pillows, sometimes we can make it from the fabric of something they owned, or if she's already got hoodies or something like that, we could do a stuffed animal. There are all kinds of options."

"Let's go for the stuffed animal," I said since I didn't have anything of his with me. "Do you have a black bear? He had dark hair, and she used to tease him for being a teddy bear."

"Oh, definitely," one of the men said. "Come on, son, I'll show you."

Drew hung back at first, but I reached out and grabbed his wrist, pulling him along with me. I didn't want to be alone, and we might not be partners, but we were pack.

I needed him.

He looked happy to be included and I realized I should reach out more. Betas were sometimes the hardest ones to settle in a pack. Their role was overlooked far too often but he was important to us. He helped ground us and he calmed her in ways we couldn't. He was always making his lists and making sure we were all on the same page.

As the alpha took us over to the bins full of stuffed animals, I started to get overwhelmed.

This was such a big deal and I didn't want to screw it up by picking the wrong thing. Drew pushed himself forward so his shoulder was pressed into mine.

"Don't overthink," he said gently. "It'll be fine. She's going to love this."

"Okay," I breathed out as I stared at the options.

The man tried to help out by picking out the three black bears that he had oh hand, sitting them side by side. It was the one with blue-green eyes that I knew was the right choice. They reminded me of my own and of Everett's, and his fur was so soft.

He was big enough that she could cuddle him, not just a small bear that she would sit on a shelf.

This was one that she could hold on her bad days.

I knew it was right the moment I laid eyes on it.

"This one," I said. The man nodded before leading us back up to the counter.

The woman was sitting on a stool, and she had a bunch of glass bottles sitting around. There was a dropper in each one. A large bowl of tiny little beads was sitting in the middle.

She grinned up at us as we approached.

"Now, this is a fun part, but it can be a little tricky. You can't rush it. We need to get it right," she reminded me.

"Okay," I said.

"What are the notes? I need to hear exactly what she said that he smelled like."

"Cedar, Sage, and summertime campfire."

She closed her eyes for a minute, thought it over, taking a few breaths before she started picking up bottles. She'd lift the lid, take a little sniff, and put it back or put a drop or two in the bowl.

When she started adding drops to the beads, the scent started to fill the air. It wasn't overwhelming, but subtle.

My chest tightened as it started to come together. I knew that she was on the right track.

This woman was a witch of sorts. She was bringing his scent back to life, something I never thought I'd smell again.

I knew it would be a little bit different to Shaye, and I might not get it just

right, but as long as we could get it as close as possible, I knew she'd be happy.

"Alright," she said as she mixed the beads with a wooden spoon before scooping a few up and holding it out for me. I leaned in and closed my eyes, breathing in deep. It was uncanny. The scent of sage was a little bit too strong, the cedar too much of an understatement, but it was so close.

She took my feedback and began mixing a little more. When she held the spoon out a second time and I breathed in, a smile lit up my face. My chest bloomed with warmth.

"It's him," I said, my own voice breaking. Drew put his hand on my back.

She gave me a sweet smile before she grabbed an empty bottle. She continued to mix them together, giving a little stir and then smelling it again, comparing it to the bowl before adding a few drops here and there.

When she was satisfied, she screwed on the lid, and one of her assistants took both the bowl and the bottle.

Within minutes, they were stuffing the scented beads into a little pouch, and then he was stuffing it in the back of the bear and closing it up. They gave it a little shake before handing it over.

I pressed the bear to my nose and breathed in.

It was strong, and it was him.

"Amazing," I said.

"We made a bottle to go with it. We won't charge you for that one. She needs her alpha, too," the omega said. "Anytime it starts to lose its scent, all you have to do is add a few drops to those beads, shake them up, and it'll be good as new again. If you run out, you come right back to me."

"We will, ma'am," I said as we paid for the bear. I left a twenty on the counter as a tip before we hurried out, ready to get back to our omega.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

Shaye

“I need more pillows,” I said as I looked around. Micah and Riven hadn’t complained once as they helped empty my room of everything but my bed.

It was half crazy, but they didn’t seem to mind doing the work.

Now, it was cozy in here. My bed was covered in pillows and a few blankets, but they were only mine and what Micah had given me.

“Go get her more pillows,” Micah told Riven. He just nodded and ran out of the house. I heard the jingle of his keys before the front door slammed shut.

Everyone was running around frantically, and I knew it was my fault, but I couldn’t help but let out a chuckle.

Then I breathed in and realized that it was all wrong.

This nest wasn’t complete.

Micah started to say something, but I was already running out of the room. I went into the room that Drew and Lake had been sharing. Lake had tossed one of his shirts on the floor, and I snatched it up before going to Drew’s side and taking his pillow.

On the way out, I snatched two more shirts out of their hamper before heading back to my room.

I threw my treasures on the bed like a crazed raccoon, scavenging for treats before I was off again.

Riven kept some of his stuff in the living room, and I found a pair of his discarded sweatpants on the floor. I snatched them up before heading into

Micah's room. I stole another pillow and a pair of boxers.

Once I got back, I started arranging everything on the king-size bed, tucking the things with their scents in and breathing in again.

It was still wrong.

"What's the sad face for, beautiful?" Micah asked gently.

"It's not right," I said, my lip quivering. I knew how ridiculous I sounded, but he didn't hesitate to move closer, his fingers running over my cheek to soothe me.

"How can I make it better?"

I scooted out of the way and pointed to the bed.

"Make it smell like you."

He ripped off his shirt, and my mouth went dry. A little whimper escaped as my body surged with another wave of heat.

"Take a breath, beautiful. We can't go all in yet."

We both knew there was no stopping it, but I did as he asked, throwing the window open for a second and taking a breath before closing it.

When I turned back around, I let out a laugh, seeing him move around on my bed, squirming on the sheets and rubbing himself all over every surface.

Golden retriever energy to the extreme.

The humor died as my gaze stopped on the tent in his pants. He was hard for me. I wanted to jump on top of him, lick every inch of his body, and then let him fuck me into oblivion.

But my nest wasn't right yet.

Riven came back a few minutes later with his hands stuffed full of pillows.

He looked at Micah and gestured toward the door. "There's another five bags in the car."

"How many did you buy?" Micah questioned, letting out a startled laugh.

"All of them," Riven said, his voice dead serious. "She wanted pillows. I didn't know what kind or how many, so I got them all."

"Thank you," I said, rushing over and taking the pillows from him before arranging them on the bed. I grabbed one of the body pillows and came back to him.

He gave me a weird look, but I ignored him, rubbing the surface of the pillow all over his body and then walking around to his backside, doing the same thing all over again.

By the time I walked back to my nest, it was better again, but still not

right.

“Rub yourself on my bed now.” He snorted at my demand.

“Yes, ma’am,” he teased. He started to move toward it, but I stopped him.

“Shirt off.”

“You just want to look at me, don’t you?” Riven asked with a smirk.

“No, I want you to fuck me. But we can’t do that right now, so rub yourself on my bed so your smell is in my nest.”

His eyes widened, but this time he didn’t make any cute comments or argue. He settled himself on my bed and started moving around. I watched, arms crossed, not stopping him until I was satisfied.

“When are the others getting back?” I asked as I gestured for him to stop.

“They should be back any minute,” he promised.

“Groceries are here,” Micah called from the other room.

Riven rushed out to help him and I went back to settling my nest. It was getting harder and harder to fight the unease in me.

I couldn’t figure out why my nest wasn’t right. All of their scents were filling the room, and I was starting to get flustered.

They found me ten minutes later, ripping everything off the bed as tears were falling down my face. I was too hot and sweaty, my body ached fiercely, and my nest wasn’t finished.

This was a nightmare.

“Hey, hey, hey, sweets, what’s wrong?” Drew soothed as he put his arms around me and made me stop tearing apart my nest.

“It’s not right,” I said before eyeing them. “Rub yourself on my bed, Drew. Wait, where’s Lake?”

“I’m right here, baby,” he promised. Drew and Lake both stripped out of their shirts on Riven’s command and rubbed themselves on my nest. When they pulled away, I moved to the bed, closed my eyes, and breathed in.

The sob that tore out of me was pathetic, and I knew it, but I couldn’t stop myself.

“It’s not right,” I wailed.

“I know why,” Lake said.

“What?” I asked as I turned around to face him.

He was holding out a stuffed animal. It was adorable, and the eyes reminded me of his, but I didn’t understand why he had it.

“It’s for you, baby. Take it.”

I walked up and took it into my arms. It took about two seconds before it

hit me.

Everett's scent.

When I breathed in a second time, their scents were heavy in the room, intermingling with Everett's.

It settled some of the heat raging through me and chased away all of the unease. I let out a contented sigh and sank onto the mattress.

"Is that what was missing?" Micah asked gently. His hands were brushing through my hair, and I nodded, holding the bear tight and fighting back the wave of emotion that was threatening to overwhelm me.

Yet, even as I was missing my former alpha, I realized that this heat wouldn't have been complete without my new mates.

We were all a pack, and even if Everett wasn't here, he was still a part of it. He'd always be a part of me, and Lake had known that.

"Thank you, Lake. You knew I needed it before I did." My voice was thick with emotion. I'd never gotten anything quite this meaningful in my life. I knew he was sweet and caring but this took me by surprise.

"He's a part of you, baby. We couldn't let you go through this without him. You need that security, that safety, and he was that for you." Lake leaned down to press his forehead against mine as he spoke. His scent was strong and so was Everett's, the combination something I wanted to commit to memory.

The guys all watched us, looking relieved that I was happy again. They didn't seem the least bit put off by Lake's addition to the nest.

Their acceptance meant everything to me.

"It doesn't bother you guys? I never want you to feel like you're not going to measure up to him because it's not a comparable thing." I looked at each of them, watching their expressions and making sure we were all on the same page.

"We're all different. You couldn't compare one of us to the other," Drew agreed with me. He was the easiest of my mates to read, his eyes could never lie. Right now they were telling me that I had nothing to worry about. When he moved in closer his scent of Palo Santo wrapped around me like a hug. "We're all yours, sweets."

I just nodded. There were no real words I could say to express what I was feeling. He'd given me exactly what I needed, and I loved him for that.

"Come on, let's get some food in you," Drew said gently, "before the heat comes back with a vengeance."

Now that I had Everett's scent mixed in, my nest was fine. It seemed everything had settled down.

I felt slightly human, but I knew it would be short-lived. This heat was a chaotic mess already.

Everyone was so gentle with me as we sat down at the table. Micah claimed the seat next to me and Lake slid him a plate. Micah stabbed a bite of the pasta with a fork before holding it up for me.

"Open up for me, beautiful."

I did as he asked and let him feed me. Exhaustion was taking over, and it took everything in me to stay awake as I chewed through the bites, especially with Drew next to me.

His hands gently rubbed the knots out of my back, relaxing me further.

"It's okay to feel tired. That was a lot of emotions in a short time. It's still going to hit full force any minute, but for now, just try to eat for us. Stay awake. You've got this, sweets."

When my eyes started to slip closed, it was Riven who brought me out of it.

"Drink." It wasn't a question or an offer, it was a straight-up command.

My eyes popped open and so did my mouth. He tipped the bottle to my lips, and I swallowed down the sweet liquid.

After a few small sips I started taking longer pulls, realizing I was parched. The bottle was half empty when I stopped and took some deep breaths. He at least seemed satisfied for now.

"You all have to sleep with me tonight. I'm not sure when it's going to hit."

"One of us will be with you from here on out. We promise," Lake reassured me. "You keep working on that food. We're going to go get our stuff moved into the nest, okay?"

Lake and Drew disappeared while Micah and Riven continued to feed and hydrate me. They weren't satisfied until I'd finished at least one bowl of food.

I couldn't argue, I knew I needed the energy.

"How about a bubble bath?" Drew asked as he came back in. "I got some bath bombs when we were out."

He held out a hand for me, and the others let me out of their sights long enough for the beta to lead me to the bathroom in Micah's room. The master had one of those tubs with jets, and it was already running full blast with

bubbles filling the basin.

Drew gently helped me strip, and I didn't even question that this was the first time of him seeing me like this.

To his credit, he didn't stand and ogle me. He just made sure I was steady before helping me into the water. He grabbed a rag and started cleaning me, the movements gentle and soothing.

When he was done with my body, he moved to my hair, massaging my scalp and making sure that I was ready for the upcoming heat.

Even being with Everett, I'd never had someone take care of me quite like this. Drew had a knack for knowing exactly what I needed and giving it to me. The way he grounded me was something I knew I would never take for granted.

Then again, I'd never take any of them for granted. They'd given me a second chance at life, and I'd forever be grateful for that.

They also gave me the ability to accept myself and my feelings and to move forward. They encouraged independence. They didn't want me to just rely on them.

When my eyes started to slip closed, Drew called out for help. I was so far into my exhaustion that I didn't even know which alpha helped, but I was dried and helped to bed.

My eyes were closed before any of the pack even curled in next to me, but somehow I knew they were all there.

This was what a pack was supposed to be like. They cared for each other on levels that we didn't even know we needed.

That was one of the reasons that I knew that I was ready to ride out this heat with them.

I was ready to trust them with my heart, my body, and maybe even my future.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

Shaye

I'd never been so hot in my life. I woke up with sweat covering my body and it felt like I was about to combust.

Of course, I knew what it meant, but the guys were sleeping peacefully around me. Since I didn't feel like I was going to die if I didn't get their knot, I opted for a shower first.

Maybe it was because this was about to be our first time together, but I was nervous. The last thing I wanted to do was be sweaty going into this.

Drew's body was wrapped around me, but I somehow didn't wake him as I crawled out of his grip.

Lake mumbled something next to me, but I shimmied down the bed until I was able to put my feet on the floor.

Both Riven and Micah had taken up posts on the floor, making a pallet for themselves and staying close.

Instead of taking a shower in here, I padded down the hallway to Micah's room so I wouldn't disturb them. They needed their rest just as much as I did for this.

My heat was closer than ever. My stomach churned and my body ached. A bone-deep exhaustion still clung at the edges of my psyche.

Slick started to pool between my thighs but the deep yearning I couldn't ignore wasn't there, so I took that as a win.

Despite how warm I was, I set the temperature for the shower high enough that steam filled the bathroom in seconds. I pulled off the sleep shorts and t-shirt I was wearing and dropped them into a hamper.

I could just snag some clean clothes from Micah's closet when I was done.

As I stepped under the spray, a sigh fell from my lips. It felt amazing against my skin, relaxing my tense muscles and washing away the grime that sleep had brought.

It had been a long time since I'd had a heat. They did warn us the first heat post suppressors would be twice as bad. I should have taken that warning more seriously and paid attention.

Despite the nerves, I was anticipating being taken care of by my new mates. I knew they'd treat me well, and that I'd feel amazing. I had nothing to fear.

I took my time washing myself with Micah's body wash, scrubbing every inch of my skin before working on my hair. I'd just put in conditioner when a sharp pain lanced through my abdomen.

A cry fell from my lips before I could stop it as I hunched over and wrapped my arms around myself. It felt like period cramps on steroids, and it was terrible.

The moment I tried to straighten my body, it hit me again, so I gave up, just curling into a ball on the floor. The warm water helped ease the ache somewhat, but all I could do was sit there and whimper.

Now that it hit, the ache between my thighs grew to the point that I wasn't able to ignore it any longer. Slick was running down my thighs as the pain radiated through me with enough force that tears were streaming down my face.

When I heard footsteps hurrying forward, I let out a sob of relief. Micah and Riven rushed forward when they saw me on the floor, both of them stepping into the shower despite the fact that they were fully clothed.

"Baby girl, what are you doing in here?" Riven demanded as he smoothed the hair away from my face. I tried to answer him, I really did, but my instincts were too strong.

I was rubbing myself against him as the heat started to pull me under.

"Just take her to my bed," Micah said. He grabbed some towels and started toweling us off.

Despite my protests, they dried me off first before laying me down. All I could do was watch and beg for them as they tossed their wet clothes aside.

"Please, I need you," I whimpered as my eyes raked over them.

Micah was strong and lean, his muscles well-honed without the bulk. His

skin was dusted with freckles. He took me in as his hand wrapped around his cock, stroking his impressive length a few times before coming closer.

Riven was as inked underneath the clothes as I expected. The tattoos covered his chest and stomach, stopping just above his pierced cock that would easily split me in half. His thighs were powerful and colorful with the tattoos covering them as well.

“We’ve got you, baby girl,” he promised as they descended on me. My eyes rolled back as Micah’s fingers made contact with my feverish flesh. Their scents and pheromones wrapped around me like a security blanket and I let myself sink into the sensations of my heat.

“I’m going to make sure you’re ready,” Micah promised as he settled between my thighs, pushing them wider before flicking his tongue over my slick-covered pussy. One taste and he was all in, licking and sucking at me as if he couldn’t let a single inch of me go without his attention.

“Micah!” I screamed as my orgasm slammed through me, my legs tightening around his head while he tongue-fucked me through each wave of pleasure.

Riven’s fingers toyed with my nipples, rolling and pinching them before he used his mouth to soothe the sting away.

I was soaring at the pleasure and need that were taking over. My body was theirs to use and I was embracing that completely.

The guys shifted, trading positions as Riven took Micah’s place.

“She’s ready,” Riven said, voice husky. “You ready for my knot, baby girl?”

“Yes, alpha,” I breathed out, more of a plea than anything.

He growled, the sound possessive and rocking through me, sending another wave of slick to coat my pussy and prep my body for his girth.

Riven ran the head of his cock over my swollen clit and teased through my slick before pausing at my entrance.

“Now!” I demanded. “More.”

They weren’t complete thoughts but he didn’t deny my request. He slowly pushed forward and my eyes rolled back in my head as each stud of his piercing slid into me, rubbing deliciously against my walls as he filled me.

Despite how ready I was for him, Riven was fucking huge. My body protested the intrusion at first, and if not for the slick, I wasn’t sure he would fit so easily.

“Distract her, Micah. She’s struggling to take me,” Riven told the other alpha. “You’re taking me so fucking good though, baby girl. You were made to take me. It’s going to feel so fucking good when I’m pounding into this sweet pussy.”

“Yes,” I breathed out on a sigh. It quickly turned into a moan as Micah latched his mouth onto my nipple, sucking hard as he teased his fingers over my clit.

“So beautiful,” he said as he pulled away and trailed kisses down my jaw to my neck, sucking hard and marking my skin. My omega preened inside of me, ready for them to claim and mark every inch of me.

But even in the haze, I knew I didn’t want their bite. I wanted to be completely aware as I took their mark.

My thoughts were ripped away as Riven stopped waiting and started to fuck me. His knot was already reacting to being inside of his omega during heat. It was swelling as I was adjusting and he started to fuck it into me. Each thrust pushed him deeper and the studs pushed into me in a way that had lightning racing down my spine.

“Fuck,” I hissed as he pushed my knees to my chest and forced me to take even more of him.

“You can take me, baby girl, keep breathing for me,” he ordered. The command in his voice had another wave of slick pooling around him, letting him slide in deeper yet.

“You’re doing so good, beautiful. Let your alphas take care of you,” Micah said as he purred in my ear. His teeth nipped at the shell of my ear before he leaned back and started to pump himself.

“Mark me,” I demanded as I watched, my eyes half closed in bliss as my orgasm neared.

Micah’s eyes locked onto mine as he pumped himself and Riven took advantage of my distraction to release one leg and tease over my clit.

This time there was no build up, my orgasm just took me over in a single breath, making me scream out as it rocked through me. My entire body tensed and shook as I lost myself in pure fucking sin.

Micah’s face fell into a look of equal pleasure as he breathed out my name like it was something to covet. Ropes of my alpha’s cum painted my chest and I reached up, spreading it over my skin and smiling sleepily as I let their scents cover every inch of me.

“Fuck,” Riven cursed. “That was fucking hot. Need to fill you with my

cum, baby girl.”

“Do it,” Micah said. “Fill our omega, give her our seed for days until she’s leaking with it.”

They were as close to rut as an alpha could be. They didn’t lose their minds but they’d be unable to stop themselves from fucking me now.

Good. I wanted to have everything they were promising and more.

Riven’s knot had locked us into place as his pace faltered and he let out a feral growl as he came, his hot cum filling me just as he said it would.

When he was able to move again he spun us so I was on top. My body wanted more even though I was covered in their cum and scents and had come more than I’d ever come before.

Bracing my hands on his chest I rode my alpha’s knot, rocking my hips over and brushing my clit against him with each swirl of my hips.

“Yes, baby girl, take what you need from your alpha,” he said as I cried out, my pussy clenching around him as another release slammed into me. My heart was racing and adrenaline and bliss swirled through my veins, lighting me on fire for them.

“Mine,” I growled as I ran my hands over his chest.

“Yours, baby girl. We’re yours,” he promised.

“Micah,” I breathed out as my head fell back.

Then my alpha was there, pressing into my back and resting his hand on my throat, tightening his fingers just enough to show me that I was at his mercy. His other hand roamed over my breasts, cupping and teasing them as I rocked myself over my other alpha.

Riven’s knot had started to deflate and the moment it released me I climbed off and pinned Micah down. He chuckled as I took over, sinking down on his hard cock to stop Riven’s cum from leaking out of me.

“Take it, beautiful. I’m yours and only yours,” he promised me.

“Mine,” I agreed as I started to fuck myself on him. Riven’s hands found my hips and he started to help me when I was too weak to keep moving, slamming me down on Micah’s cock as his purr rumbled through me.

“What are we doing in here?” Drew’s voice was husky with sleep but he was already stripping out of his clothes.

“She needs some attention on her clit,” Riven ordered. Drew didn’t hesitate to climb on the bed with us and dip his head down where Micah and I were joined. His tongue flickered furiously over my clit and I tried to escape but Riven wasn’t having it, holding me in place now as Drew threw me

headfirst into yet another orgasm that stole my breath away.

“This is where the party is?” Lake laughed as I heard his clothes fall.

“Lake,” I begged, my hand reaching out for him. At first he put his palm in mine but I didn’t want just his palm. My fingers slid down his body to his cock and I wrapped my fingers around him, learning every inch of his rock-hard dick.

“Fuck,” he cursed, moving closer so I didn’t have to struggle to take him.

Micah tried to hold back but Riven didn’t let him, fucking me faster onto the other alpha until we were both screaming against the intensity of our combined orgasm. My pussy milked him for every ounce of cum he had.

“Come on me,” I demanded of Lake, letting his hand take over until fresh ropes of cum were coating my breasts. I rubbed it into my skin as I sank further into the heat.

They were so fucking perfect, giving me everything I asked for and more.

When Micah’s knot released me I was crawling toward Lake but he lifted me up and carried me through the house, forcing the others to follow.

We reached the nest and he tossed me on the bed. Everett’s scent hit my nose and I pulled the bear close, burying my nose into it as Lake filled my aching body.

I had all of my pack here with me now.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

Shaye

Something brushing over my skin had me waking up out of a dead sleep. I startled but was soothed instantly by a chorus of alpha purrs.

“We’ve got you, baby,” Lake promised.

My body responded by rocking my hips. Someone chuckled before I was being lifted out of the warmth of a bath and carried away.

“We’ve got you,” Drew promised, his lips brushing over mine before he was nipping and sucking his way down my neck to my aching breasts.

A pierced clock pushed into my dripping pussy and I relaxed further as Riven started to give me what I needed.

My mind slipped into a state of pure bliss and instinct as they took care of every aching need I faced.

The next few days were a blur of pleasure and small pockets of them taking care of me. They bathed me gently and coaxed me to eat and drink before the heat put me back under its spell.

My head throbbed as I woke again, though this time my skin wasn’t on fire and the ache between my thighs was from being fucked nonstop for days, not from need.

I let out a relieved breath as I peeled my eyes open.

“You awake, beautiful?” Micah asked gently. I turned my head to see him lying on his side, head propped on his elbow and his other hand finding mine.

“I think so,” I said before I coughed, my throat dry and scratchy.

“Shh, I’ve got you,” he promised before a straw was pressed to my lips. I sucked down the cool liquid greedily before he took it away. “We have to

pace ourselves, Shaye. Your body is vulnerable right now.”

“Fine,” I grumbled playfully and shifted. My thighs were wet with our combined releases and I wrinkled my nose.

“Ready for a bath?” he asked with a laugh. “Come on.”

He helped me to my feet and made sure I was steady before leading me to the ensuite. He put a towel down and sat me on the closed toilet as he prepared a bath. Something sweet and fruity filled the air and I smiled as bubbles filled the tub.

“You’re going to spoil me,” I teased.

“Good, you deserve it,” he said as he met my eyes. “I know this heat hit sooner than you would have liked but I cherished every fucking moment with you, Shaye. You’re it for me. I’m already falling for you.”

I swallowed hard as the brunt of his emotions filled the space between us. He meant everything he said.

“Thank you for seeing past my trauma and finding me under the weight of it all,” I whispered.

“You’re more than your past, Shaye. You’re gorgeous and strong, independent, inquisitive, curious, and you care with your whole soul. I would have fallen for you even if we weren’t a scent match.”

“Stop,” I said as a tear slipped free. “I’d choose you, too, Micah. You guys gave me back my life but you also make me want to be a better person. To experience new things and spend every moment I can with you.”

We stared at each other, the air charged with our emotions before he finally pulled me to my feet and brought me to the bath. He sat behind me and pulled me against his chest, letting the warmth seep into my muscles and relax them.

I’d never felt so vulnerable and cracked open for someone to see. He was breaking down any lingering defenses and marking his place in my heart.

I always said he had golden retriever energy and I still stood by that. Micah was full of life and joy, living in the moment and loving those he cared for with his whole soul. I’d seen him with his family and friends and he was the type to do anything to make them happy.

It was healing to witness.

They were all so different and I loved their contrasting personalities.

When the water cooled he drained some before adding more hot water to warm it back up. After he shut off the faucet I turned around in his arms, settling against him and resting my face on his chest. My fingers lazily ran

down his sides as I listened to the soft rumble in his chest.

This was heaven.

When I shifted he was hardening against me but he just chuckled and tried to play it off.

“Ignore that. I can’t help it around you but this isn’t about that. This is you relaxing. Your body needs a break.”

“Fuck that,” I said as I shifted, sinking down on his cock. Now that I wasn’t in heat his knot didn’t start swelling the instant he was inside of me.

I took advantage of that and started to lift myself off of him then sink back down. His hands circled my waist as he watched me. The warm water sloshed around us as I fucked Micah.

Our eyes stayed on each others’ as I rode him. He had a small, satisfied smile on his lips even as his chest rose and fell as he started to lose control.

I leaned back now, bracing my hands on his thighs, thrusting my breasts in the air as I continued to fuck him. The new angle put more pressure on my aching clit until I was shaking with the force of it.

He could tell I was close and pressed his thumb to my clit. That was all it took for me to spiral out of control, my cries echoing in the room as my thighs clamped around him, my pussy clenching as I rode him through it.

“Fuck, Shaye,” he hissed as he lost his own battle. I smiled as he marked me with his release.

I collapsed on him as his knot kept us in place. His fingers lazily trailed over my back and I felt boneless as my body relaxed.

The water had cooled by the time his knot let us go. We still didn’t move right away, staying until I shivered from the change in temperature.

“Alright, time to move, beautiful,” he said gently as he held me tight and stood. I wrapped my legs around him and he simply adjusted me and stepped out of the tub. He wrapped a towel around me.

“Can I help?” Drew asked from the doorway.

“She’s out of heat but help me dry her.”

“I’m still clingy,” I admitted sleepily.

“You’re perfect,” Drew promised as he kissed my shoulder and towed off my damp skin. “We just cleaned up in here and changed the sheets. You should try and get some sleep while they prepare some dinner.”

“Okay,” I agreed easily.

They laid me down on the bed and I dragged Drew with me. He pulled me so I was draped over him with my head on his chest. His fingers trailed

through my hair and I let my eyes slip closed again.

“I wish I could read to you now,” he said with a self-deprecating laugh.

“Someday we can work up to that. I’ll read to you later. I love doing it,” I said around a yawn. “It’s okay to not be perfect. Lord knows I’m not.”

“You are,” he protested but I couldn’t even argue as sleep pulled me under.

The smell of spices woke me from sleep and I was happy to find I wasn’t alone. Drew was snoring lightly under me and I felt someone at my back.

Drew didn’t wake right away as I shifted and I turned to see Lake watching us. He smiled down at me and held his arms open. I grinned back and lunged at him, his laughter soft so he didn’t wake the beta as he squeezed me.

His hugs were always one of my favorite things and I hated that I denied myself of his embrace for so long.

“You’re mine, Lake. No looking back,” I said into his neck as I clung to him.

“You’ve always been mine, baby.”

“The bear,” I said. “That was the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me. It meant so much to have him here with us. I don’t want to forget him, I just want to adapt. Living with his memory is much easier than living with his ghost. It’s not tearing me apart anymore. I miss him with my entire soul but I know he’d be proud of me for choosing you guys.”

“I wanted him to be a part of this, too,” he whispered. “I always wondered what a pack with him would look like and now he has a permanent place here.”

“How did you get his scent in the bear?” I asked.

“I found a shop who specialized. I told her the notes in his scent and she recreated it.”

“That’s incredible,” I said as I glanced around.

“Micah is washing him. We took out the scent beads and are cleaning it up now that your heat is over. He’ll be good as new as soon as he dries.”

“Thank you,” I breathed out, relieved we didn’t ruin him.

“Do you have any regrets about the heat?” He sounded worried but he didn’t need to be. I was happy.

“No,” I said without even thinking it over. “It was perfect. You guys were incredible and helped ease me into it. I was expecting it to be traumatic since it was my first off of suppressors but you made it amazing.”

“Good,” Riven’s deep voice said as he walked in. “You did so good for us, baby girl. I’m proud of you.”

“Thank you,” I said as I leaned my face up. He chuckled and moved closer to press a kiss to my lips.

“Come eat, baby girl. I need to see you get your strength back,” he said as he held out a hand. Lake let me go as Riven helped me to my feet.

“Maybe I should put clothes on,” I husked as Riven’s eyes slowly ran over my body.

“You need to before I fuck you on that table instead of feeding you,” he rumbled, turning and walking away.

Lake chuckled and helped me find clothes. I felt so pathetic struggling to do the basic things but the heat had truly stolen my strength.

The others were all waiting at the kitchen table. It was full of enough food to feed the whole town.

“Who cooked?”

“Me,” Drew promised as he stumbled in. “It’s safe. They just reheated it.”

“Hey,” Micah protested. “I helped.”

“You did,” Drew conceded, giving me a wink. “We knew you’d be starving. What can I put on your plate for you?”

“Everything,” I said as my mouth watered. He’d made an entire feast for us and from the mix of spices in the air, everything was seasoned to perfection.

Once the plate was in front of me, I took the first bite. The flavors burst across my tongue, a mix of smoky and spicy.

“So fucking good,” I said before going all in, scarfing it down in what I’m sure was not an attractive display. The guys at least didn’t stare, instead giving their own plates hell.

When I finished my first plate I scooped seconds onto it and listened as they talked around me.

I didn’t finish the second plate but I wasn’t uncomfortably full.

“Does anyone know where my book is?” I asked.

“Yes,” Drew promised, dropping a kiss on my head before disappearing down the hall. I moved to the couch while he was gone, wrapping a throw blanket around myself and sighing happily as I sank into the cloud-like cushions.

He handed me the book before moving my feet and dropping under them, his hands kneading the soles as I cracked the book. Without asking I started

to read where we left off last time.

When my voice grew hoarse, Micah brought me a cup of tea. I smiled up at him before taking a small sip.

“Ellie dropped off a care package and said this will help you recover,” he said as I took another drink. It was good, a hint of sweetness and floral notes that were equal parts calming and strengthening.

The other guys settled around me, not bothering to turn on the TV, just listening as I read the story.

As I moved from one chapter to the next, I looked up to see all four of my men’s gazes locked onto me, hanging on to every word. It was a good part, full of action, and it seemed I caught their attention.

“Don’t stop, I need to know what happens,” Micah protested.

“No, I need a break. Give me five to grab a snack,” Riven said before heading to the bathroom. I did the same, stretching out and taking a moment to check in with myself.

It wasn’t necessary. Without having to think I knew this was the happiest I’d been in a long fucking time.

They made me feel whole again and filled the empty spaces with not just good memories of Everett, but themselves as well.

I hadn’t realized my heart was capable of holding so much but after them listening to me read and caring for me through a heat, I knew it was only a matter of time before I demanded their bites.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

Shaye

As much as I didn't want to disrupt the little bubble we'd created around ourselves during my heat, I was getting stir-crazy.

Already two days had passed since I woke up without the fog, and now I was ready to move my body. Though the guys were still reluctant to let me go.

"I'm going to go crazy if I sit here any longer. I'm going on a walk. You can join me if you want to, but you're not going to stop me. I'm also going to collect my puppy today, one way or another."

We were all sitting around on the sectional, bored out of our minds.

"What if we drive out to the cabin for the walk?" Micah suggested, chewing on his bottom lip.

I narrowed my eyes at him.

"Why are you guys afraid to let me go outside?"

"Baby girl, you smell like you're still in heat. If you put yourself near another alpha, I'm going to go to jail." His voice was a low, gravelly warning and I swallowed hard, knowing he was serious.

"Fine, drive me to the cabin then because I'm not sitting in this house for another second," I growled. I'd take what I could get at this point.

Of course, Drew and Riven both loved when I got growly. They shared a smirk before standing up.

"Okay, everybody, get ready," Drew commanded. "We need to talk about our next destination anyway. We could do that on the way."

"I'll pack snacks," Micah said, heading for the kitchen while the rest of us

went to our rooms to get dressed.

Since they actually let me go alone, I was dressed and ready within ten minutes. My hair in a high ponytail, and I had just thrown on a hoodie and yoga pants.

Though I wasn't actually sure whose hoodie I had thrown on, everything in my room smelled like all of them now. Even Everett, thanks to the bear that sat on my bed.

It was strong enough that if I touched it and touched something else, his scent transferred along with it. It was honestly the best gift I've ever gotten.

"We're out of food," Micah called out. "I've got the bare minimum of snacks here. We might have to stop and go in somewhere."

"No," Riven said, glaring at him. Micah raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms, looking a little less golden retriever now.

"Look, you can put that machismo bullshit away because feeding our omega is a bit more important than stroking your alpha ego, don't you think?"

Oof, I wasn't the only one on edge here.

The entire room fell silent as they faced off. Drew looked back and forth between them for a second before letting out a breath.

"Okay, it's official. We all need out of this house. I will drive with Micah, and we will get food and stop for Mia. We'll meet the rest of you at the cabin."

"Sold," Lake said, clapping his hands like that finished the conversation. Riven insisted on driving since he was still angsty, while the rest of us piled in the back.

I pulled open the *Locked Inn* app and started looking for more details on our next stop. I knew one was in town, and the other was near the cabins, but as we got closer, I realized it wasn't actually *our* cabin like I suspected.

"Do you know why he put this one on there?" I questioned as I leaned in closer to Lake. "Was it a mistake? It's not our cabins."

He looked at the app for a second before pulling up his GPS, comparing coordinates before he found something.

"Nature is trying to reclaim it, whatever it is. It must be abandoned or something. Definitely an old campground, I see some tents." His voice was a low murmur as he studied the images closely, leaning in close enough his nose was inches from the screen.

The weather was nice enough even at night, that the idea of camping

sounded amazing. If they were going to keep me from going out in public, then maybe this was exactly what we needed to ride out the last waves of this heat until my pheromones settled back down.

“So, what if we got camping gear and camped out for this location? We don’t have to stay long, maybe like a day or two. By the time we’re done, we can come home, rest, shower all the grime from camping away, and then we can re-emerge into the world.”

“I’m so down,” Riven said. “You have no idea. Drew and I used to do this at least twice a month. We’ve got so much shit down in the storage unit. We should go check it out before we head home.”

“I thought I wasn’t allowed to go out in public,” I deadpanned.

“Look, baby girl, don’t test me,” he warned, shooting me a playful glare. “Lucky for you, the storage unit is on the *edge* of town.”

“Lucky me,” I teased, biting back my laughter as he parked the SUV in our usual spot.

It had rained last night, so everything was extra green. The earth was damp from the water, and it smelled fresh. I took in a big lungful of the forest air and closed my eyes, absorbing the light, afternoon breeze and enjoying being out of the house.

My heat was *amazing*. How could I complain about being dicked down by some of the sexiest men I’ve ever met in my life? But this waiting game was awful.

I wasn’t the sit-around-and-do-nothing type. Other than some reading sessions, we were all going out of our minds.

“Alright, we’re here. Where do you want to walk, baby girl?” Riven asked. “I’m assuming we’re avoiding the docks.”

There was a challenge in his voice. Did he get off on pushing my buttons?

“Avoidance isn’t really my thing anymore,” I shot back.

“Am I going to have to separate you two?” Lake mused. He took my hand and started leading me around the opposite side of the cabin from the docks. There were a few hiking trails this way.

Before we could even step inside the cover of the forest, I heard tires on the gravel.

A huge smile broke out on my face as Micah stepped out and put Mia on the ground.

“Mia!” I called out. She let out a bark and started leaping toward us, fast enough that Micah had just let go of her leash.

Halfway to me her little nose went to the air and she let out a single bark before veering off.

We all took off after her, which she found to be a fun little game. I reached the puppy first, scooping her up and snuggling her in my arms.

“You’re a menace, Mia, and I love you. I missed you, sweet girl,” I said as I kissed her little face and scratched her belly. She returned the kisses but wiggled around in my hold until I put her on the ground, keeping the leash firmly in my hand this time.

Mia led the way through the forest, letting her nose guide us. I still needed to run to the pet store and get things like training treats and enroll her in a training class, but for now, I was just happy we were all getting some fresh air, and she was getting to live her best life.

She seemed so happy running from spot to spot, sniffing and barking, even stopping to howl a time or two.

Part of me wished that we could stay out here in the forest just outside of town, close enough that if we needed anything we could run into town for it, yet far enough that the sounds of nature were prominent and fresh air was abundant.

It was doing good for my soul.

Once we looped around the trail and came back out the other side, Riven started telling Drew and Micah our plan.

“The next destination we have to go to is an old campground. We’re going to go get our camping gear, Drew, and see what we can salvage. If not, we’ll buy some extras. Enough for everybody to be able to join us.”

“That sounds like fun,” Micah said with a grin. I was glad that they were not angry with each other after their little spat this morning. He just seemed happy to go on the next adventure with us.

“Wait, Shaye, did you want to do this, too? No offense, I just didn’t know if you were the camping type,” Drew asked. His thick eyebrows turned down as he waited for my answer.

“It was my idea,” I admitted. “If my smell is strong enough that I can’t go into town, at least we can do this for a few days. We have to go anyway and may as well enjoy something new. Plus, Mia’s going to love it.”

“We should grab one of those tethers and cables so she can explore without getting lost,” Micah suggested, joining in on the excitement. I loved the way it lit up his green eyes. “We’ll just have to make sure she doesn’t wrap herself around a tree or something.”

“We’re going to stop at the unit on the way back,” Riven said. “At least I brought the truck.”

“Did you guys find food?” I asked Micah and Drew. My stomach was about to eat itself. I’d been so eager to get out the door that I hadn’t even bothered to have a snack or anything before all this exercise, and my body was still recovering from heat.

“We did. Why don’t you guys find a spot or head inside, whatever you choose, while we go grab it,” Drew suggested. His fingers brushed mine as he passed, and I felt that familiar heat creep up my chest and into my cheeks.

Just one touch from them, and I was flustered. The effect they had on me was unnerving at times. And my guys didn’t bother to hold themselves back when it came to touching me. Micah was probably the biggest culprit. If he was near, his hands were on me. Drew and Lake would give me small touches here and there. Riven just grabbed me and put me in his lap when the need struck him.

Riven was so impatient that he hurried us through lunch, barely letting us finish the array of sandwiches, chips, and cookies before he was ushering us to the truck.

Drew and Micah followed behind us as we drove through town and out the other side. The storage unit was only a few minutes outside of town, set among the fields.

The chain-link fence and cluster of buildings looked out of place out here. Riven drove up to the chain-link gate and put a code in. When it started to slide open he drove past, heading for the back corner.

He parked in front of a wide unit and we all hopped out and waited around as he found the key on his key ring. Mia barked at us through the window, not looking the least bit happy that we forced her to stay inside.

When he started to roll the door up, I expected there to be chaos inside. Instead, it was like the inside of a sporting goods store. They had sturdy metal shelves, and each was lined with different supplies. Everything was clean and well taken care of, and I even noticed some bug traps along the edges so their stuff stayed intact.

“We’ve got a couple of tents, but I think if we grab these two, that’ll be enough. We can always sleep in one and use the other for our supplies,” Riven said as he started grabbing one off the shelf. He handed it off to Micah, who put it in the back of the truck.

Riven and Drew sorted through the shelves, handing things over to

whoever was closest until the back of the truck was full of gear. They had everything we could think of from cook stoves, to camping utensils, wash buckets, water storage, an outdoor solar-powered shower... the works.

Seeing Drew and Riven so excited had the rest of us joining in.

“Remember that time we went camping? I think it was right before we went into high school,” Lake said to me. He slid his arms around my waist and rested his chin on my shoulder. I leaned back into him and smiled at the memory.

“Yes, and we thought it was a good idea to tell each other spooky stories. I think we even had a book for it.”

“We did, and it was a terrible plan,” Lake snorted. “I think I was more scared than either of you ever were. It was just getting dark and both of us were scaring each other to a point that we were screaming every time something moved outside the tent, which was often since the raccoons were trying to pilfer the garbage.”

“Oh my god, I forgot about them. You could see their little shadows on the side of the tent as they tried to get into the trash cans.”

“At least we don’t have things like bears out here,” Drew said. “Riven and I went camping one time out in Tennessee. I woke up in the middle of the night thirsty and started to open the tent only to see a bear waiting. I’d never moved so quietly as I did to zip that back up and sit down. Thankfully, it didn’t seem to notice me, but I don’t think I slept again that night.”

“I slept like a baby,” Riven laughed.

“That’s because you sleep through everything,” Drew shot back.

He was right, but had Drew yelled that night, I bet Riven would have been up in a second. He might be a heavy sleeper, but he was vigilant, and he was quick to react.

From the moment I met them, I always felt safe with these men around. They would do anything to protect me.

I never considered myself one of those omegas who relied on others to provide for me. I had full intentions of contributing to our life once I finished this healing journey we were on. There was no way I could sit back and make them work for me.

Just by being close, they made me feel stronger. The fact that they encouraged me to be independent and do what made me happy was just icing on the cake.

“Okay, done,” Riven said as they threw the last bag into the truck. It was

almost overflowing, but he didn't seem the least bit upset by that. He locked up the unit, making sure everything was secured before we all climbed back in.

You would have thought that we left Mia for hours the way she reacted, but she immediately curled up in my lap as we rumbled down the road, Lake's hand on my thigh, Riven's eyes on the road, all of us preparing for another adventure.

I hoped it would always be like this with them, making plans at the last minute and going all in. I'd never considered myself as spontaneous, but they were helping me embrace the new Shaye.

She was excited, always ready for an adventure, and I was loving every second of it.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

Shaye

The sign for Camp Willow was barely hanging on as it swung on the thin chain that used to hold it in place. The letters were peeling off and the wood was starting to rot.

The old gate was still bound by a thick chain and padlock. For a second, I thought that might be the end of our camping trip until Riven went up and pulled on the hinges. His muscles bulged and they gave way easily. He just tossed the gate aside and dusted his hands off like this was a normal thing to do.

“We’re doing a bit too much breaking and entering on this adventure,” Micah groaned, but his protest was half-hearted. I very much doubted anyone would be out here.

We tried to find the owners, but the last information we found on Camp Willow was when it was still a retreat people could rent.

The entire campground was surrounded by a tall wooden fence that looked like someone stuck a bunch of thin logs together. It was isolated and protected. Even the road leading up to it was half overgrown.

We abandoned the truck and opted to walk in. I kept Mia close, not wanting her to get tangled in the overgrowth because nature had definitely reclaimed this camp.

The entryway was an open area, with a few picnic tables and some random gear scattered around. Two sides were fenced off with a door in the middle and the back wall was the front of a wooden cabin. It likely used to belong to the owners and was for checking in.

Now the windows were busted out and jutting out with jagged edges. The door was slightly ajar and I would guess that there was more than just vines creeping inside there now.

The door to the right said “employees only” and there was a sign outside the door to the left that said “dining area, bathrooms, campsite, cabin.”

“Let’s head that way,” I said, avoiding the employee area for now.

Lake moved ahead, pulling some branches out of the way so Mia and I could get through as Riven and Drew pushed open the rusted door.

There was a wooden pavilion that ran along one side of the new area. The rest was open, with a large campfire ring and several logs around it.

Off to the other side was a small storage shed that said “games” on the outside. I tried to peek inside, but it was too dark. What I could see showed a few different basketballs and a beanbag toss game.

The tall, wooden fences led further in, and we followed the pathway to the next area that had a large bathhouse.

The chances of me doing anything in there were very slim. I’d rather pee in the woods.

Beyond that was an area for the permanent tents. They were made of sturdy canvas, somehow surviving the years of neglect. They were set on platforms that kept them off of the ground and dry if any big rains came through.

The fence parted in the back corner, leading into another area. I wove my way through the maze, passing some abandoned supplies, and into another large, open area.

The fences seemed to cut off here, though there were still some makeshift barriers blocking the woods from the row of picnic tables. A river acted as the final barrier to the campground.

The beach was fine gravel and there were a few mangled beach chairs and umbrellas that still remained.

One half of the wide-open space had a large platform that looked like they were starting to build something, but it never made it that far.

Everything about this place was honestly a mess, yet with the sound of the river rushing over the rocks, the chirps of birds in the trees, and the sunlight filtering through the trees and warming the space, it was beautiful.

As I turned in a circle and stared around, I couldn’t help but fall in love. The location was amazing, only fifteen minutes outside of Lockwood, yet I couldn’t see anything but nature surrounding us.

The entire campground had potential. If we replaced a lot of the broken equipment, repaired the cabins, and got some lighting running through the campsite, it would come back to life.

“Imagine,” I said, pointing to the platform. “If we cleared the area around this and expanded it back into the trees a little bit, this would make one hell of a cabin. Not just a small one, but big enough for a pack.”

“What are you thinking, baby girl?” Riven questioned, but I could see excitement sparkling in his green eyes. He had said how much he enjoyed camping and staying at the cabin, this was taking it to another level.

Micah was already standing behind me and wrapped an arm around my shoulders, pulling me in and placing a kiss on my head.

“Are you trying to turn me into a country boy?” His fake southern accent had me cracking up. It was downright awful.

“I might be,” I said, unable to hide my smile as I turned to Lake. This wasn’t even why we were here. We were here to listen to Everett’s message, but this abandoned spot had stolen my attention.

The guys listened as I started to paint the picture for them.

“I don’t want this to be a business. The last thing I want is to invite people into a personal space. But imagine building a home here, cleaning all this up, spending our summers on the river, Mia running free through the campground. We could even extend the fences so she couldn’t get loose chasing wildlife. Winter might be a little tough, but I have a feeling we’d be able to make it through. Plus, you guys probably don’t do a whole lot of house building during the winter. Maybe that will be our hibernation season.”

They were all staring around as they soaked in my words. I hoped they were seeing what I was... potential.

“We can turn this place into our own personal haven,” I finished.

“They even have some abandoned canoes,” Drew said as he pointed to the riverbank. “That’d be so cool.”

“We can invite the families out,” Micah agreed. “Have the packs over for certain weekends, and that could be the extent of sharing the space.” He glanced around with a wistful expression. His parent pack was awful and he valued family more than anything. I wanted to make sure he had that here.

“I would love that,” I agreed. “I don’t know if Kat and Serenity are the rustic type, but if we make the bathhouse into something really nice, I bet they wouldn’t be able to say no.”

“I’m not even opposed to taking those tents out completely and putting up

some guest cabins,” Riven said. “We could have open floor plans. There’s already bathrooms right next to them, so we wouldn’t have to put them in each individual cabin. In the front area, we could build up that dining tent and put a full kitchen in.”

“I always wanted to be one of those dads that sat outside and barbecued and watched his kids run around,” Lake said with a soft smile. “I always wanted a big family. I feel like this would be perfect for that.” He looked sad as he finished it was the same lingering sadness that clung to me when I had to picture a future without Everett.

Everyone stopped talking as we thought over all of the ideas.

“A big family sounds kind of nice,” I admitted. My parents didn’t give a shit, but Lake’s family did. Even though I was new to town I was already building a makeshift family in Lockwood. Add a couple kids of our own to the mix, maybe a few more dogs, and I’d be happy.

I could even build a small office somewhere here or inside the cabin we’d build so I could work on my games. The guys could do their work while I did mine, then the nights would be ours.

Now that I could see it, I wanted nothing else.

Drew turned and focused all of his attention on me. His moss-green eyes were curious and a bit guarded.

“You really want a life like that? Babies, dogs, living how we want to out here?”

I took a deep breath before letting it out. “More than anything. I may have been guarded even after I agreed to give it a shot, but then we shared a heat together, and it wasn’t just how amazing you guys made me feel but how well you took care of me. You’ve been amazing through this entire journey. I couldn’t imagine being with anyone else.”

I glanced around at them, taking in my pack. They were all watching me with matching looks of hope and something close to love. It was crazy how fast you could fall for your scent match, but that was why we were destined to be together.

It was supposed to be easy. You were supposed to fall headfirst with people who were designed to be compatible with you.

Now I knew it was true.

Losing a mate was torture. I’ve lived through it, and I never wanted to feel that way again.

But finding mates was incredible. My time with Everett was nothing short

of magical. My time with them was different but just as all-consuming and perfect.

“If you want me, then I want all of this.” I waved my arms around to encompass them and the grounds around us.

Lake was the first to move, nearly tackling me before he pressed his lips to mine, kissing me hard before resting his forehead against mine.

“I’ve wanted that from the moment I met you. No matter what we decide, as long as I’m with you, I’m fine.” His eyes burned with conviction.

Micah was next, pulling me out of Lake’s arms and slanting his lips over mine. I parted on a sigh and he pushed his tongue inside, tasting and claiming every inch of my mouth.

My body heated from his attention, and he pulled away too soon.

“What you want, I want,” he promised. “I can do anything I plan to do here or in town. It doesn’t matter as long as we’re together.”

He stepped away, giving someone else a chance, taking the leash from me so Mia didn’t ruin the moment with her craziness.

Drew and Riven stepped up together, but they didn’t seem to mind. Both of them reached out, Riven resting one hand on the side of my neck while Drew tangled his fingers with mine.

“We always wanted to find an omega together,” Drew admitted.

“I didn’t expect to start it by yanking you out of a dead sleep, but here we are,” Riven teased.

“You’ve seen me at my worst, are you sure?” I asked.

“You know our shit and we know yours, Shaye. That’s how it’s supposed to be,” Riven reassured me.

“All of us were broken, at least a little,” Drew agreed. “You knew I had dyslexia before I told you about it, and yet you didn’t bat an eye to find a way to include me in the things you loved, even if it was hard for me. I was severely bullied for that. The stress that it gave me before started to fade. The moment you accepted me, I started to accept myself.”

My throat tightened hearing that. I didn’t know the extent of what he’d gone through, and I’d likely find out more details over time, but I was so happy that I was able to give him the same kind of comfort that they all gave me.

“I know it’s soon, but the feelings I have for you guys rival what I felt for Everett. I didn’t think I’d ever move on after that. But you guys were willing to help me find a way to live, to find a way to deal with all of that pain. Not

only that, you guys saw me through it all, even when I no longer saw myself.” My voice broke as I spoke, the emotions getting the best of me again.

“I’ve always loved you, Shaye,” Lake said, “now more than ever.” He locked his eyes on mine, refusing to let me look away until the words hit me.

“I love you, too,” I said, before turning my attention to the others. “All of you.”

“Damn, baby girl, going for the big words,” Riven teased. “I think I fell in love with you when you were screaming out over the water, all that strength shining through, the fire, refusing to let yourself fall victim to all of the pain, was incredible. You’re amazing, Shaye.”

Drew squeezed my fingers, drawing my attention to him.

“I fell in love with you while you were reading. Your voice was strong and soothing, and it finally showed me those worlds that I’d always wished I could visit. You saw what I saw as a limitation and opened the door for me. Your heart is incredible, even when it was suffering.”

Micah let out a breath. “I don’t know how I’m going to follow up all of those.” He let out a nervous laugh and gave me a lopsided smile. “I thought I’d never fall in love, that I wouldn’t know how because I never saw it growing up. But you made it easy. At first, my heart ached for you, for all the pain you were forced to live with. Then we got to see all these other sides of you. The one that lit up every time there was a new adventure, the one who was afraid to open up because you didn’t want to get hurt but was brave enough to let us in. You’re everything I could have hoped for in a mate and so much more, Shaye. I want to spend my life with you, to build all of this together,” he said, gesturing around at the campground and then at us. “We’re a strong pack, and I love that I’ll never have to be alone.”

“Never again,” I promised.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

Shaye

The stars seemed to stretch out above me for miles. Crickets were chirping, and a soft breeze was blowing through the air as I lay back on the thick blanket, staring up at the stars.

I had fallen asleep with the guys for a little bit, but it didn't last long. My mind was too busy with all the ideas we had put in place.

That and I was still reeling from the fact that I had told them I loved them... and I meant it. We were moving way too quickly but I couldn't find it in me to care.

I had been so broken when we first met each other, and it had taken a few weeks before I even gave them a chance. But something seemed to change after we had spent time together, after they had helped me find myself.

I didn't want to hold myself back anymore. I promised myself that I was going to live in the moment, and that's exactly what I was doing.

Movement in the tent behind me had me turning around to see Riven crawling out of the opening and zipping it gently back so he didn't wake the others.

"What are you doing out here, baby girl?" he asked.

He still had a blanket in his arms, and he wrapped it around us as he settled next to me. That lasted all of two seconds before he shifted again, putting me in his lap and letting out a happy sigh.

"This right here is everything," he said. "The stars were always one of the things that brought me peace. My window was right above my bed, and even on the nights where I lay there in pain, broken and lonely, they always kept

me company.

I turned my head so I could plant a kiss on his jaw, and he let out a slow rumble.

“You know what I’ve always wanted to do?” I mused. Now that he was out here with me, and his scent was wrapping around me, I wanted something other than peace and quiet.

I wanted him.

“What?”

“Be fucked under the stars,” I admitted. His cock reacted immediately, hardening under me until he was poking me. His hands started to move, snaking under my loose shirt and finding my bare breasts.

“Are you going to be quiet so I can keep you to myself?” he rumbled in my ear.

“Maybe,” I gasped as he pinched my nipple between his fingers.

“Drew is a light sleeper. If you wake him up then I’m going to make him watch until I’m done with you,” he warned.

The thought of Drew sitting to the side, watching us fuck, had me biting back a whimper as slick started to pool between my thighs.

He chuckled in my ear, the sound rough and desperate.

“You like that thought, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I admitted, not bothering to hide it.

“Good, because he’s already watching,” he laughed, shifting us so I could see Drew, standing just outside the tent, his hand already palming his cock.

“Don’t stop because of me,” he whispered, stepping closer as he watched Riven pull my shirt over my head and toss it aside. “I think you should bury your face in her greedy pussy and give me a good show before fucking her.”

My mouth fell open in shock but Riven was moving already, putting me next to him before adding his blanket to the pile. He laid me out and shifted the shorts down my hips, exposing my wet pussy to the night air.

The cool breeze had me shivering, goosebumps erupting over my skin before he was parting my thighs further.

“Take a look at how wet our girl is for us,” he said. The way his voice was full of gravel now sent another shiver through me and more slick painting my pussy.

My words were stuck in my throat but Riven just gave me a wink before settling between my thighs, hooking one leg over his shoulder and diving in. It kept me elevated enough that Drew could easily watch and he had better

access.

The strokes of his tongue were strong and sure as he swirled it around my clit before plunging into my core. He set a rhythm that gave equal attention to every inch of my pussy. There was just enough pressure to have me soaring but not enough to send me straight over the edge like they'd done during my heat.

"Does she taste like heaven?" Drew husked, stroking his cock now. He'd pushed down his gray sweatpants so he could touch himself, and fuck, that was a sight. His lips were slightly parted and eyes set on me as he tried to stop himself from coming too soon.

"Try for yourself," Riven offered, plunging two fingers into me and pumping them in and out, curling slightly to brush against a spot inside me that had my body quivering as it fought to come.

He held out his wet fingers for Drew who didn't hesitate to lick them clean, humming as if he'd tried something truly delicious.

My mouth went dry at the sight of them.

"Damn, that was hot as fuck," I groaned.

"He deserved a taste since I have no plans of sharing you just yet," Riven teased before he latched onto my clit and sucked hard. Stars danced in my vision as my orgasm slammed into me. I gasped for air as pleasure swirled through my entire being. My vision was blurred and my muscles tight as I bit down on my lip to keep from screaming against the beautiful torture.

"Good girl," Riven said before he sat up on his knees and grabbed my thighs, pulling my legs apart so he could slide into me.

There was no easing in this time he simply pushed forward, forcing me to take him and adjust.

My breath caught as the burn and stretch of him invading me became too much. But he didn't wait for me to relax before he was moving; the brush of his piercing and the feel of his cock sliding through my slick was enough for me to embrace the mix of sweet pleasure and biting pain.

The sting dulled quickly and I lost myself in pure euphoria as he slammed into me hard and fast. He pushed his knot into me as deep as it could go as it started to swell and resorted to shorter thrusts, though no less punishing.

He wasn't being gentle and sweet, he was fucking me like he wanted me to remember the feel of him for days.

My gaze shifted from the god between my thighs to the sky above. The stars were shining brightly in the sky and I forced myself to not look away as

he used me to find his own release. When his movements stuttered, his fingers found my clit, rubbing that bundle of nerves just right to send me careening into another release.

This time there was no hiding my cries of pleasure as they filled the night. Waves of pure fucking sin filled me as I stared up at the sky, coming harder than I thought was possible.

As my body started to settle he picked up his pace again, pumping into me two more times before my name was a growl on his lips.

He filled me with his cum as his knot kept it deep inside of me, marking me from the inside out.

“If you don’t want to wait for my knot, her mouth is hot and ready for you,” Riven told Drew. The beta’s eyes flickered to mine in question and I parted my lips for him.

Drew groaned and moved closer, tearing off his clothes before dropping to his knees and lowering his cock to my waiting lips.

He moaned as I flicked my tongue over the slit at the head of his cock, tasting the saltiness of his precum and groaning at the taste of him.

“Don’t hold back,” I warned as he started to push forward, past my lips and into my mouth. He wasn’t as big as the alphas but still longer than average. He hit the back of my throat and I gagged around him but when he tried to pull away I reached out and stopped him with a hand on his ass.

He saw the challenge in my eyes and started to move, fucking my mouth in quick thrusts, pulling out further every few pumps so I could suck in a breath before moving again. He was attentive, but rough, claiming my mouth as tears ran down my cheeks.

I’d never been used like this and my pussy was getting even more wet as I sucked his cock like I couldn’t get enough.

“You’re taking him so good, baby girl,” Riven praised, swiping at my tears before pushing his fingers between us.

He flicked his fingertips over my clit, using our combined juices to make it feel incredible. I whimpered around Drew’s cock and looked up at him through my tears. His jaw was slack but those mossy orbs were watching me, captivated by what he saw.

That was all it took for me to come again, pussy clamping around Riven’s knot and a sob rumbling around Drew’s cock in my mouth.

Drew joined me, his low groan loud as he came down my throat.

Riven started to move again as Drew released me. I sucked in a breath

and bucked against him, too sensitive to protest but drowning in the bliss and never wanting it to end.

He fucked his knot into me, the movements shallow but still enough to fuck me into the makeshift bed.

“I love you, baby girl,” he breathed out, voice hoarse as he lost his control, filling me with a fresh wave of cum.

“Love you,” I breathed out as sleep started to pull me under.

He rolled us over so I was splayed over his chest, his knot holding me in place. His fingers danced over my back and the breeze cooled my skin. It was moments before I was asleep.

When I woke up again I was still outside, though covered in a blanket now.

Riven was still under me and I could feel his cum still leaking from my sore pussy. I needed a shower in the worst way.

The smell of bacon and eggs filled the air and I took in a breath and blinked against the sun.

“You awake now?” Drew asked. I looked over to see the beta curled up beside us.

“Barely,” I muttered. “Need a shower.”

“Come on, he set up the solar shower last night. It should be warm enough now,” Drew said, helping me stand, stirring Riven awake. He didn’t say a word before his eyes slipped closed again.

Drew and I found the shower set up and didn’t bother to hide our bodies as we washed under the barely warm spray. It wasn’t as bad as I thought and I tried my best to wash away the sweat and cum from my skin.

“You know, he never sleeps this late,” Drew said as he started to rub my shoulders and placed a kiss on my hair. “You’re helping him heal, too.”

“Good. I’m glad we’ve been able to find a way to move forward,” I said with a smile. My chest tightened at his words. I was their escape as much as they were mine. That was exactly why we worked so well.

“Breakfast!” Micah called out and we hurried to finish before pulling on fresh clothes. Now that I was clean, my stomach was screaming in protest.

Micah and Lake were in the dining area, a fire roaring in the firepit and the camp stove set on a rickety table nearby. Mia was chowing down at her dog bowl while they worked.

When Micah saw me he made me a plate, coming over with a heaping serving of eggs and bacon.

“Thank you,” I said, tipping my head up for a kiss which he didn’t hesitate to give me.

“Wake up, Riven, we need to listen to this message!” Lake called out, giving me a wink. I could see his anxiety through it and scooted over so he could sit next to me.

“What’s wrong?”

“I just have a strange feeling. I want to get this one over with.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

Shaye

Everett didn't say a word as he panned the video over the campground, giving us a silent tour.

Lake's leg shook up and down anxiously as we waited for him to say something.

Finally, Everett stopped at the edge of the river.

"You know, we spent so many summers on the lake that I didn't even know this river existed for the longest time. The day after I got my diagnosis I came out here, trying to wrap my mind around everything. I screamed into these woods and went through all the stages: anger, pain, sadness, defeat. That was the darkest time of the whole diagnosis. I had to work through it alone to accept it."

He took a deep, shaking breath.

"I knew it would be easier if I didn't fight this every step of the way. Maybe then I'd be able to focus on the people that were important to me. Shaye, Lake, my parents... you all mean everything to me."

"You meant everything to me, too," I told him even though he wasn't here to see me.

"As my death draws closer, I found myself coming back here. I explored these woods and came back to this campground. The second time I walked through here it spoke to me. No, not in the 'I'm nearing death hallucination' sort of way." He chuckled darkly.

Everett was always one who loved our humor.

"No, it was as if this place was calling out to me, telling me that it was

significant. That night, I stayed up for hours creating this camp in my game, and the next day I told my dad about it. I expected him to not know what I was talking about, but he knew right away, a smile going across his face. You know how dad gets when he's nostalgic."

"Not anymore. Everett's death changed him," Lake said quietly. I slipped my hand in his. His dad was a gentle man, kind, but he was stoic now.

"He told me how his parents used to take him and his siblings out here during the summer. They'd rent the whole thing out. He showed me pictures of what this place used to look like."

"I bet it was amazing," Riven said quickly before Ev continued on screen.

"Maybe it was the desperation of my own demise, but I couldn't help but put everything I had into the game and to this idea. I wanted to see it like that again. Sadly, things progressed faster than I thought they would. The treatments didn't slow anything down."

My heart hurt for Everett. As much pain as his death caused me, he had to suffer all the way 'til the end. He had to leave this earth knowing that we would never get to have the future that we talked about, that he'd never get to hug any of us again.

He deserved so much better.

"That night, I sat both of my parents down while Lake was gone. We went over everything I wanted to leave behind, from the game to the letters, and finally to this place. You see, the moment that I found Shaye as a teenager and worked my first job, I took out life insurance. I paid into it religiously, and when I couldn't keep working, Dad paid for me. We weren't an official pack, Shaye, so I couldn't leave it to you, and I didn't want to leave it to one of you and not the other. So, I left it to them instead."

"Why is he telling us this?" Lake asked. I already knew that they had enough to pay for the funeral, but they never mentioned anything outside of that. "I just don't get where he's going with this."

"Just listen," I said gently.

"Dad tracked down the owners of this place, and it was an older man. He ran it in his prime but lost his pack and no longer cared about maintaining it. Dad sat down over a cup of tea, and he told him about me and my idea for this place. They talked for hours. Then, dad asked if he could buy it from him. The old man said he'd sell under one condition—that someday, this place be turned into what it used to be, a place for gathering, a legacy, even if it's not for his own family, but for ours."

“Holy hell,” I breathed out, realizing that Everett and I were more alike than I ever realized. This place did have some sort of magic. It called to both of us even though it was a year or more apart.

“Once you get this far, talk to Dad, Lake. He’ll tell you everything. There’s no code this time, just a surprise,” Everett said as he took one last look around and then gave the camera a sad smile.

Tears filled his turquoise eyes, and his voice was choked with pain.

“Is it silly that I’m so sad that this little adventure of ours is ending? I know that I won’t live long enough to see your reactions and to see you grow into a pack like you deserve. I will never get to see this place look like it should, but I hope with everything in me that *you* will.”

There was no hiding mine or Lake’s tears as the video ended, and a glance at the other guys showed that even their eyes were a little bit glassy.

“What did you do, Everett?” I asked, looking up at the now-cloudy sky overhead.

“There’s only one way to find out,” Lake said. His voice was rough and determined as he pulled out his phone.

A few moments later, Chad’s voice filled the air.

“Hello, son. How are you guys holding up?”

“We just finished the campground video, Dad.”

Chad took in a shaky breath. “We should talk.”

“We’re going to pack up camp. We stayed here overnight. We’ll meet you at your house.”

“I’ll tell your mother. You know she’ll want to get some dinner on. Come hungry. And Lake, I know you, don’t you dare freak out over this. Take a breath. It’s all going to be okay.”

Chad hung up before Lake could protest or ask more questions. Lake let out a growl and dropped his phone to the leaves at his feet.

He was up in seconds, stomping off toward the woods.

I was moving just as quickly, hurrying after him, not letting him face this alone. I was grateful when I saw Drew follow us. We could use the calm that he exuded.

“Hey, stop running from me,” I demanded as Lake started to disappear into the trees.

“I never called you out when you did,” he growled, shoving a branch aside before hissing as it cut into his skin. It had him pausing long enough for me to grab onto his arm, turning it over to see the damage.

Blood was already pouring out of the cut and I shrugged out of my jacket so I could hold pressure on it and glared up at him.

“That wasn’t fair. You didn’t let me run, and you *did* call me on it.”

He cursed under his breath before taking a deep inhalation and holding it, then letting it out.

“Another,” Drew demanded. Lake glared but did as he was told for once.

“I’m sorry, baby. I’m so sorry,” Lake muttered as he turned his gaze toward me. The pain in their depths was heartbreaking.

“I get it, I do, but he said don’t freak out. Why are you freaking out?”

“Because I knew this wasn’t it. I knew it wasn’t as simple as a game because Everett always had to go big. Even now, he’s taking care of me, and you know what I did? I failed him. I couldn’t fucking save him.”

“Of course, you couldn’t,” I said, my hand going to his cheeks. “Nobody could have. Even the doctors couldn’t. Don’t you dare blame yourself. That’s not your guilt to bear.”

“You did take care of him,” Drew said, his voice gentle but strong. “You took suppressors for years because you knew he needed that time, and you willingly sacrificed your own feelings to give it to him. Taking care of someone else doesn’t look the same, ever.”

“Yet he died,” Lake bit out.

“Don’t act like you didn’t go to every treatment that you could make. That you didn’t sit beside him when he was weak, making sure he didn’t suffer,” I added.

Lake let out a soft sob. “I did. I would have done anything to ease his suffering, even a little bit.”

“There’s nothing wrong with pack taking care of pack. He was doing that for you, and whatever this is, he’s doing it again. Just like you did for him. It’s a give and take,” Drew reminded him.

“Just like I had to let go of that guilt, so do you,” I said. “You don’t deserve to carry that on your shoulders. He would have never wanted you to feel bad for any of this. But knowing that he took care of us even when he was gone, that was what kept him going as long as he did.”

In the end, Everett lived a few weeks past where they thought he would. We’d spent that time sticking by his side, both of us watching movies, watching him sleep, not daring to speak a word at times because we didn’t want to disturb him and we didn’t know what to say.

“It wasn’t your fault,” Drew said. “It was never your fault, Lake.”

“I needed to hear that,” he said, letting out a shaky breath, wincing with pain. “Fuck, Mom’s going to kill me. And I ruined your hoodie.”

“It wasn’t mine, it was one of yours,” I said. He took a better look and shook his head. “It’s mine.”

He let out a laugh that had the tension breaking and I grinned back before leading him out of the woods.

Riven’s eyes narrowed at the sight of Lake clutching the hoodie to his arm.

“You got a first aid kit in all that stuff?” I asked.

Riven huffed. “Of course, I do.”

He got up to get it and came back over, taking the hoodie off and glaring at Lake before heading over for the shower. He made Lake hold his hand in the spray before pouring alcohol on it, cleaning the wound. It wasn’t as deep once the blood had been washed away, so he wrapped it in a roll of gauze.

“Are we heading out?” Riven asked.

“Yes,” I answered. “We have to go see Linda and Chad.”

“I’ll come back later for all of this. Nobody’s going to mess with it out here,” Riven said.

He ushered us to the cars, and we didn’t waste time, climbing into one vehicle and heading out of town. Even Mia seemed to sense the mood in the car, curling up with Lake this time.

He patted her gently, his eyes straight ahead. He was working through his own inner demons now.

This must have been what it was like for them to see me suffering. I hated every second of it. I wanted to chase the shadows from his eyes more than anything. But as someone who had gone through it herself, I knew that no one could do that but him.

Chad was waiting on the front porch when we got there, swinging lazily on the porch swing. He didn’t stop until we were standing in front of him.

“It’s not as bad as you think, son,” he promised. “I know you never liked when Everett took charge, but he did right by you.”

Chad didn’t sound defensive, more matter-of-fact. He knew his kids well. “Come on in. For once, your mother ordered in.”

“What?” Lake and I both asked, shocked.

“What, they don’t eat pizza around here?” Drew joked.

“My mom is the queen of ‘we can make that at home,’” Lake said. “I don’t think we ever ordered out even when we went to the cabins. They

always cooked.”

“Tonight is the exception,” Chad said as he headed inside.

We followed him, and some of Lake’s anxiety started to wear off on me. I was nervous about what they were going to reveal, even though I knew it was nothing bad.

“There you are,” Linda said, coming over and giving Lake a huge hug, squeezing him tight before moving on to me. She continued down the line, giving every single one of my pack a hug like we were her own. In her eyes, we were.

Then she was snatching Mia up off the floor and unhooking her leash.

“There’s my girl,” she cooed. “Did you tell your mommy and daddies how we shared popcorn and watched movies every night, how you patrolled the backyard and taught the whole neighborhood who was boss?”

“It sounds like she had a good time,” I said, shaking my head.

“She did,” Linda said, not letting go of my puppy as she led us into the den.

No one spoke right away. Eventually, Chad cleared his throat, letting out a fake cough to catch all of our attention.

“I’m not going to beat around the bush. Everett and I spent a lot of time on his dreams. We had to work quickly, there wasn’t a lot of time.”

For the first time since I’d known him, I saw Chad get choked up. He cried at the funeral and memorial service, of course, but I was so caught up in my grief I didn’t really witness it.

Now I could see the heartbreak that still lived in his heart. As a parent, I doubted it would ever go away. I couldn’t even imagine, and I didn’t have babies of my own yet.

“Outside of the game and getting you two into a pack together, he wanted to give you something to build.”

“Camp Willow?” I assumed. Chad nodded.

“I’d never seen him go into a project full steam ahead like this. He usually weighed his options but not this time,” he said. His eyes started on just me and Lake, then he shifted to take in the group. It felt like we were getting his approval and I appreciated it, intended or not.

“In the video, he said that the old man agreed to sell it to you, but he didn’t tell us anything beyond that,” Lake clarified, urging his dad to keep going.

“We bought it,” Chad said. “Everett saw that through. It’s in both of your

names. I will add the rest of you to the deed anytime you want. Currently, I'm a co-signer, but don't worry, I'll be as hands-off or as hands-on as you want me to be for this."

"For what exactly?" I asked.

"Whatever you want," Chad said, matter-of-fact. "He didn't know if you'd want to live there or run it like it was before. He just knew that he wanted it to be yours. He didn't think that you'd be able to face the cabins again, and he wanted to give you a place where your future children could thrive, like all of you did."

"So the campground is ours?" I asked, my words slow and even. I was not letting myself get excited until I knew for sure. Or until my brain had accepted it at least.

"It's yours," he said, nodding in agreement. "There's also an account with your names on it. I've got that information too. He made sure that you'd be able to make a good dent in progress."

"This is too much," Lake said. "He was always trying to do too much."

Chad came over and put a strong hand on his son's shoulder. Lake looked up at his father and swallowed hard.

"This time, son, I think it's just enough."

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

Shaye
A month Later

Dear Everett,

This will be my last entry. I think I've finally come to the end of needing to let my feelings out on these pages. I've come a long way in the last few weeks, just like you wanted.

Lake and I are closer than ever. It's hard to admit, but I'm glad that we waited. We came back to each other in a way that allowed us to be independent and heal in our own ways. I feel like we were able to work through things we never would have been able to together.

This journey that you set out has been crazy. We took a few weeks off after the campground. Lake needed to process, and so did I.

We still can't believe that you've left us so

much, but you truly built a legacy, Everett. Now, I can see you everywhere I look, but not in the same haunting way I did before. Now, I see you in the trees at the campground, remembering all the times we spent at the cabins. In my nest? You're there, too. I can smell you and remember your smile, the way that you looked at me like I was the most important girl in the world.

I wish I could still feel you hold me. Your hugs were amazing, and it felt like nothing could ever get to me when you were by my side.

But now, I've found some amazing men and I'm building a life just like you wanted me to. I wake up every day now, Everett, excited to see what the world holds for me.

I also wake up nauseous, and that has a whole different meaning that I didn't expect so soon.

We're building a future together, a life, and you're just as much a part of it as you should be.

I'm not replacing you, I'm just adding to the pack that I was always meant to have. I wish more than anything that you were here in

person. But since you're not, I'm doing the next best thing, keeping your memory alive in every way that I can.

Part of that is by living. A year after your death, I wanted nothing more than to join you. In that note you told me, "I'd wait an eternity to hold you again, a lifetime will be nothing." And I finally understand what that means.

I love you, Everett.
Until we meet again,
Shaye

I closed the leather journal and tipped my head back so the sun could warm my skin. The breeze ruffled my hair, and I centered myself for a moment before standing up.

The guys were all going to be here any minute, this was the final destination on the journey that he set up for us.

"Shaye!" Drew's voice had me smiling as he ran toward me at full speed. Mia was running alongside him and the rest of our pack was trailing behind.

I'd always called Micah the golden retriever, but it seemed Drew was giving him a run for his money, today.

"Did you have time to finish?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, holding up the journal. I told them that I wanted to write my last note to Everett before I buried it up on this hill.

This was a place that meant a lot to me and Everett. I wanted my goodbye letter to stay there forever.

Lake's face was the only somber one as they walked up. His hand immediately found mine and I gave it a squeeze.

"Are you ready to do this?" I asked.

"No," he admitted with a grimace. We both knew what this moment meant.

"Why don't you two go alone? We'll be here waiting for you," Drew

said. Micah and Riven didn't protest, and neither did I.

This was one part that we did need to do alone. We had to say our final goodbyes before officially moving on.

We had both done such a good job of healing. I was really proud of myself and of him.

But there was that one final piece that was holding us back. Mine was this journal, and writing out the last words that I needed to put on those pages.

His was letting go of the grief that threatened to drown him.

Lake didn't say another word as we walked up the hill. The app beeped on my phone the moment we hit the top.

With one last glance at Lake, I clicked the video to start it playing. If we hesitated, we might have turned around and walked away, refusing to take the final step.

Everett's smile was bright this time, unlike the sad one he'd given us during the last video.

"This is it. You've both made it. You're so close to being able to play the final product and I'm so excited for you to experience it. I put my blood, sweat, and tears into this thing, and I know you're going to love it."

There was no doubt in his mind that we were going to fall in love with this game that he created. He knew us better than anyone, so I didn't doubt that either.

"Shaye, you obviously know why we're here. This was the hill where I asked you to be mine. This was the hill where we made plans for our future. Now, this is the hill where you say goodbye to me."

Lake let out a choked sob at his words and I let the tears flow freely down my cheeks.

"We've been through so much, sweetheart. You've been through so much. But now, I don't want to hold you back. I want you to go play this game, keep only the good memories, and say goodbye to the rest."

"I will," I promised him. The wind stole my words but I didn't mind.

"Lake, I want you to do the same. I know you probably grumbled at Dad for helping me buy the property and sign it over to you. And the money. You always hated when I tried to take care of you. It was probably the alpha inside of you, but this is just who I am."

"He's right," I told him gently.

"I hate that he is," Lake said as he closed his eyes and took a breath.

"I'm turning this hill over to the two of you. Take this time and be honest

with each other, make your plans and your promises. Don't hold back. *Never* hold back. I know that your smiles don't come as easy these days, and I know that every step of this was hard, but I hope it was worth it. I just wanted to give you guys a chance to stay close, to remember why you're friends, and hopefully to find out what being more means to you."

We shared a smile this time instead of tears. In the last few weeks we had found solace in each other's arms.

"Let me go, guys. We'll always have those memories and I'll be waiting for you on the other side. I love you both. I hope that you found a way to love each other."

Everett stared at the screen for a few beats, a soft smile on his face. It was one of contentment and hope.

When it cut off, a notification popped up. It was a picture of the tree that sat behind us, a set of numbers carved into its bark.

The final code.

We sat on the grass side by side, our hands clinging to each other as we silently worked through the pain, the heartbreak, and the love that he left behind.

This was the hill that I'd fallen in love with Everett Green on. It was also the hill that I was going to give my heart to Lake.

"I'm pregnant."

I hadn't meant to tell him like this, but now that we were sitting here, needing hope to cling to, I knew it was right.

"What?" he sputtered, turning to me with wide eyes.

A full range of emotions went through those turquoise eyes, but it finally settled on excitement.

He tackled me in a hug that had us both laughing. Lake pinned me to the grass before crushing his lips to mine, kissing me with every ounce of love he had in his soul.

When he pulled away, it felt like life was coming back into his gaze. The Lake I missed was shining through.

He was a different person now, just like I was, but I hoped this was his turning point and he'd let himself truly smile again.

"So, I take it you're happy?" I asked.

"Happier than I've been in a long time," he admitted, giving me one last kiss before helping me to my feet. "I'm going to let my brother spoil me one last time, and we're going to build our future."

His hand went to my stomach as he finished speaking.

“I can’t believe I’m going to be a dad.”

“You’ll be an amazing one, I promise. We’re going to give this baby a family that I never had.”

“We are,” he promised. He leaned in and kissed me one last time.

“Do you want a moment alone?” His eyes dipped down to the journal in my hands, and I nodded.

“I do.” He gave my hand a squeeze before heading down the hill to our pack. I dropped to my knees at the base of the tree, grabbing a fallen stick that was big enough to handle the pressure, and started hacking away at the dirt.

I had to make sure it was deep enough so the small journal wouldn’t be ruined right away. Digging the dirt was cathartic, all the memories flooding my mind as I worked.

When I was happy with it, I pulled out the bag that was tucked in my pocket and stuck the journal inside before putting it in the hole. I was covered in sweat and my hands dirty with mud now, but as I packed the dirt down above the journal and whispered my goodbye into the wind, I knew that it was only up from here.

The pack was still waiting for me at the bottom of the hill. Riven shook his head at the dirt covering me but still placed a kiss on my forehead.

“Are you ready to go home, baby girl?”

I glanced behind me at the hill one last time before turning back to them.

“I’m ready. Take me home and give me your bites. It’s time.”

No one bothered to ask if I was sure. They simply led me to the car and buckled me in, putting Mia in my lap before everybody climbed in. Riven sped across town back to Micah’s place.

The tension rose in the car but we didn’t dare speak and ruin the moment. When we got home we let Mia into the back yard before they led me to my nest.

Micah stepped forward and started to peel my clothes off and led me to the shower.

His hands were gentle as he washed the dirt away. When I was finally clean, he pulled me in for a kiss.

The gentleness was gone as his mouth met mine and I melted into his touch. The others weren’t going to let him have me alone. Lake stepped in and led me to the bed, not bothering to dry me off.

We lost ourselves in the moment, touching and tasting every inch of each other until I was high from the lust.

“Someone claim me,” I begged, pushing Riven’s face from between my thighs. He’d already dragged two orgasms out of me and I was barely hanging on.

“Lake,” Riven offered. They knew this moment was significant and the fact they were willing to let him take the lead meant a lot.

Lake pulled me up so we were chest to chest before his mouth claimed mine. Our tongues tangled together before he was shifting back. He laid down and dragged me with him so I was straddling his thighs.

Not wanting to wait I moved lower and lined him up at my entrance before sinking down on his cock. I whimpered as he stretched me, hands still roaming over my skin, the rest of my pack not forgotten in the moment.

As I started to move they continued to bring me higher. Riven was teasing kisses and bites over my shoulder while Micah claimed my breasts. Drew pulled me in for a kiss, his lips needy and desperate.

They worked seamlessly together to build my orgasm slowly, the build-up starting in my stomach then tingling down my spine, pleasure racing through me until I was falling over the edge.

The guys were there to catch me, their hands steadying me as my pussy clenched around Lake.

His fingers found my wrist and he pulled it toward his lips.

“Claim me,” I begged them.

Lake was the first, his teeth digging into my skin, marking me on the opposite wrist from Everett’s. Our eyes met as the full brunt of his love hit me square in the chest. His feelings ran deep and I could feel it in my soul.

Riven bit down on my shoulder, right at the apex of my neck. His was stronger, more territorial, and all alpha. It was fitting for Riven. He loved me so intensely I knew he’d do anything for me, and the weight of that settled in me as I sent my feelings back to them.

I’d do anything for these men and give anything to keep them by my side.

Micah bit me next, his teeth claiming the skin right at the swell of my breast. His lighthearted smile had me letting out a laugh. He would be the one to bite me there.

His love was more gentle, serene. He let it wash through me with a smile on his face, filling me with a joy I had never quite experienced. Micah was the type to embrace life and every new experience with his whole soul and

I'd spend the rest of our lives trying to match that energy.

"Drew?" I asked as I turned, my eyes searching for the beta.

"I'm not an alpha," he reminded me, confused.

"But you're mine," I demanded.

"I'll bite you so the bond connects," Riven said. Drew swallowed hard and tilted his neck, letting the alpha claim him.

I felt his emotions join the others, the disbelief and pure happiness at being accepted exactly as he was.

"Mine," I promised him, tilting my neck to show my unmarked shoulder. He didn't hesitate this time to lean forward and bite down, adding his mark to complete my set.

Lake had been still inside of me until now but as I reveled in their love he started to move again. This time it wasn't hectic, but slow and sweet.

My hands found Riven and Drew's cocks, pumping them as I rode Lake. Micah was off to the side, stroking his own cock as he watched me fall apart.

Our cries filled the air and as we came down from the moment, our joint emotions settled in place.

Lake had told me from that first day that I'd never be alone again. Now with their bond going strong inside of me, I knew he was right.

CHAPTER
THIRTY

Shaye

While I had been writing my last note to Everett, the guys have been turning Micah's living room into a gaming center.

They hooked up the big-screen TV to the computer and loaded the couch with pillows, blankets, and most importantly, snacks.

Now, I sat in the middle of the sectional with a tray in front of me, holding the wireless keyboard and mouse.

A soft tune filled the air as I booted up the game. It slowly got more upbeat as it scanned over the small town.

Finally, when it reached the hill, the title appeared on the screen.

Locked Inn.

It was one of those pixelated indie games. For some, they were nostalgic, but for me, I just loved the cozy vibes.

The cute little jingle continued as the menu screen popped up, and a welcome message scrolled by.

Welcome to Locked Inn, Shaye. I hope you enjoy your stay.

No one else would get the greeting and I loved that it was all mine.

I pressed enter and watched as a little train brought us to our destination, letting out little puffs of steam as it chugged down the track.

Everett's voice started to speak as he narrated the game he created. It was an unexpected surprise, and I shared a grin with Lake as he gave us our background.

“You needed a fresh start from your boring life in the city, and what better place to start than a ghost town? There is one lone inn standing amongst the broken buildings. You couldn’t help but wonder what secrets this town held, why it was abandoned, and why someone would offer for you to bring it back to life.”

A mysterious mayor was the first NPC. I burst out laughing at the tiny little Everett on the screen. His eyes were the same turquoise and his hair long and black.

Though, my Everett wouldn’t wear a top hat and tux.

Between his voice narrating, and the quirky character, it was perfect. He was living on in his own way.

This wasn’t something I could have appreciated before I read his letter, or before I went on this journey, but now it has settled something in me.

He would never be forgotten, and now others would get to hear his voice and play this game he poured himself into.

The game itself was amazing. I was hooked from the moment we started cleaning up the inn and fighting off the zombies that rose every night.

There were only a few people that came into the town – a man who collected your offerings to sell at the end of the day and a few traveling merchants.

Until we started repairing the buildings at least.

First up was the train station. The similarities were uncanny, and when we entered the code we found in the wall next to the vending machine, it popped out a prize – a special ability that allowed us to detect hidden secrets.

The guys had to jump in every so often, helping me defeat some of the bosses after I’d failed. Lake took over from time to time as we explored, just as hooked as I was.

We ordered food twice before we were too tired to keep playing.

Then the next day, we were right back at it again.

It continued like that over the course of a week as we battled our way through the game.

Now we’d unlocked stores in town, and people were moving back in. It was a cozy little supernatural town full of witches, werewolves, vampires, and all kinds of supernatural creatures. They were quirky and funny, and the parallels between the game and Lockwood had us cracking up.

Like the grumpy raven shifter that ran the coffee shop, aptly titled ‘The Nest’. You had to bring him shiny objects that you found around town to gain

his favor and earn coffee that made you stronger.

Part of me hated that we were working through it so quickly, but then again, it was our only focus outside of eating, showering, and sleeping.

I expected to feel a whole range of emotions, but they never hit me. Instead I was just proud of him for managing to make something so amazing.

As my fingers danced over the fresh bite marks and I watched Lake battle another monster to reclaim a fresh part of Locked Inn, I only felt content.

Finally, a day later, we were standing on top of the hill in the game, facing off with a final monster. We'd done our version of a speed run, skipping some of the smaller quests to keep forging ahead. We used the last code to unlock a special sword.

The final monster was slashing a large sword at our character, but thanks to the bonuses, we were able to overcome him.

Riven, Drew, and Micah jumped in every so often, taking turns as the battle raged on. I was happy to watch from the sidelines.

This was the first of many moments like this, of our pack gathering together and playing the games that one of us created.

This time it was Everett's game, I hoped the next, it would be mine.

As I played, I was taking notes – things I thought that could add to it, some that didn't quite work, and the tiny bugs that might have slipped through. I planned to call Landon soon, but this inspired me to want to keep going, to take those last classes, and use my degree.

"Yes!" Lake screamed as the monster fell, fire erupting from his chest before his ashes were swept away in the wind.

Little Everett appeared on the screen, but now he had large, white wings behind him as he gave a long-winded speech that named us a hero.

The way they set it up meant that we could keep working if we wanted to and build the inn up even more. There were side quests left untouched, and we could grind the monsters to gain more goals.

But for now, I was happy. It seemed like Lake was too as he shut the game off.

We all sat for a minute before I pulled out my phone, not wanting to waste another second before calling Landon.

A glance at the clock told me it was only seven, and I hoped that he was around. I was also glad that we didn't finish at three in the morning because that wait would have killed me.

The phone rang twice before his voice echoed through.

“Did you finish?” he asked.

“We did,” I confirmed, “and it was amazing.”

He didn’t get a word in as I gushed about all the amazing features and quests we’d gone through, what I loved about it, and what I thought we could add to improve it.

“Sorry, I know I’m getting ahead of myself. You probably didn’t ask for this level of feedback.”

He was quick to reassure me. “No, no, this is exactly what I wanted. You are the first outside of my team to play the demo like this. Now, forgive me if I’m wrong or if I’m reaching, but you seem to know what you’re talking about.”

“Yeah, before I came back to Lockwood, I only had two classes left for my game design degree. I messaged my counselor last week, and I can finish them online, so I should be done and officially graduating in the spring,” I admitted.

“He thought that might be the route you went.”

“Just how much did you and Everett talk?” I laughed. “You seem to know more about all this than I expected.”

“We talked a lot,” he admitted. “Everett was a great guy and he had a lot of passion for this. We met in a forum. He helped me work some bugs on my game, and I helped him do the same until he had me join him.”

“Do you guys have plans on adding anything else to this game, or is it a finished product?” I asked, the guys shooting me curious glances.

“The main storyline is a finished product. That was exactly how he wanted it to end, and I respect that. He wanted it playable beyond the ending scene. Actually, I’m interested in hearing more about what you would add to it.”

My cheeks heated. It was nice that he was taking me seriously and hearing me out, though I felt like we were worlds apart in our game knowledge.

We talked back and forth, going over my notes more than once. Eventually, I opened up a document on my computer and typed up everything we discussed. I wanted to make sure I didn’t miss a thing.

After two hours, the guys started getting listless, getting up and working on dinner while we continued to talk.

“This is incredible,” Landon said. “I can’t wait to get started on this. You’re in, right? You’re going to join the team? We’re always willing to

bring in great designers. I can send you the details if you'd like?"

"Even before my degree is done?" I questioned in disbelief.

"Oh, absolutely. You can finish it on your own time if you want, but you more than know what you're talking about with this, and you have a personal connection to this game. We'll start here, making this game exactly what you both wanted it to be. Then, if you'd like to join us for other endeavors, I think we'd make a great team, Shaye."

"Send it over," I said, not willing to hesitate. This was an amazing offer, and last time we looked up this man, he had several games under his belt.

This was the exact kind of job I needed.

"You may have to upgrade your systems. I can send you over some equipment. We are always changing and swapping things out, so there's more than enough to set you up a solid work station."

"Thank you," I said, shocked he was being so generous.

"I'm going to send everything over to you in the next week. You read it over and call me next Friday at two. I'll be waiting to hear what you think." He hung up and I blinked at the phone, about to pinch myself to see if it was real.

"Well?" Lake demanded as he dropped to the couch next to me.

The guys were back in seconds, staring at me expectantly. I took a breath and recounted everything we discussed.

"Holy shit, did you decide to take it? Are you going to join his team?" Riven asked in a rush. He had never lit up like this and I felt a warm sense of satisfaction that *I* was the only one he ever aimed that energy toward.

"He's sending me the offer over soon, but I think so," I admitted, a smile spreading across my face until it was almost hurting my cheeks, it was so bright. "He's even sending over a new computer to work on. I'll just have to find a place to set up an office until we get our place finished."

"Oh, we can do that. We'll make it work," Micah promised. "We really need to focus on Camp Willow."

"We're going to need an extra room," I said as casually as I could manage.

Lake bit back a smile. He knew exactly where this conversation was going, but the guys were still thinking I was talking about the office.

"We'll definitely make you your own office, Shaye. This is incredible news."

"Oh, not for an office," I interrupted. "It's for our baby."

I pulled the pregnancy test out of my pocket and put it on the empty tray in front of me. I'd taken one this morning after Lake snuck away and bought them. I was met by stunned silence for a few beats, Lake holding back his laughter as the guys processed the information.

"Baby girl!" Riven rumbled, scooping me into his lap and pressing his lips to mine. "Are you telling me I'm going to be a dad?"

"Yes," I answered as I put my arms around his neck so I could soak in his excitement.

"I'm going to do right by this baby. I'm going to be the best damn dad I can be. They'll never have to feel what I did." A flash of his past pain was there before it was quickly replaced by love and determination.

"Never," I promised. "They're going to be so loved."

"We've got to get started," Micah said, pulling me from Riven. "How long do we have?"

"Seven months," I told him with a laugh. His eyes widened further.

"Holy shit, we're going to be dads. *I'm* going to be a dad."

I'd never seen Micah so flustered, and I squirmed out of Riven's hold to pull Micah into a hug.

"Take a breath."

He did as I asked then his hand drifted to my still-flat stomach.

"You're going to look so beautiful," he said, his eyes gentle as his fingers danced over my cheek. "You're going to be an amazing mom, Shaye."

EPILOGUE

Shaye *One year later*

Camp Willow was finally finished. The sign now hung proudly over the entrance and it was easy to read.

The cabins and buildings had all been completely redone, and we'd added the guest cabins just like Riven had suggested.

Everything had new fixtures, was clean, and made by our pack.

The guys made an amazing team. It was impressive to witness. Even though I had to waddle around the campsite, cheering them on from the sidelines as our baby grew within me.

Now, our son was strapped to my chest, sleeping in his carrier as we added the final touches before our families arrived.

Not just families but friends as well. I was ready for everyone to see what my guys had accomplished and to show off the life we built.

Our lodge was my favorite part. The river ran right behind it, and the porch was wide enough to sit on and enjoy the sun rising over the hills and river.

Kade let out a soft sigh, babbling softly in his sleep. Even as Mia ran around barking, he didn't stir. This kid slept almost as deep as Riven does.

We'd spent the last year settling into our new normal. We finished the lodge first, about two months before Kade was born. The guys had called in all of their connections, and even our family and friends pitched in to help.

We had huge windows, and everything was open and airy. It was the cozy home we'd always wanted.

My office was in the attic, the view from the windows was breathtaking as it overlooked the forest and the water below. I could see the lake from here, the town, and I loved it.

Landon and I had worked tirelessly finalizing the game. We added a few of my ideas in side quests and even added a whole new leg to the main journey.

The rest we were going to work on as extra content. He suggested we make this game something we can add to and eventually make it a classic for those who loved the cozy genre.

Now I understood why Everett had dedicated so much of his nights to this. Once we got going, it was addictive, and I poured a piece of my own soul into this project.

Now we were set to release in only a few short months, and the pre-order numbers were humbling.

I was going to take it slow and enjoy raising my sweet baby, but in the quiet moments, I always found myself going back to my computer, doing more work than I expected.

The guys were always supportive, giving me the time I needed to have my own life and interests. They loved taking care of our baby as much as I did and didn't mind helping more when I got into a new project.

Voices filtered through the campsite and I had to fight off my excitement as I rushed toward the entrance to greet our guests. Seeing our friends and family fill the space had my heart warming.

The guys talked about the work we'd done and what our plans were. As they spoke I couldn't help but watch them. They were all so different but fit perfectly together.

They were exactly what my soul needed.

I'd lost my soulmate, but I'd gained four more.

The End

***If you want more Jaded Omegas, then check out the next standalone,
which is Tori's book!***

[Knot Your Ex](#) Coming January 2024!

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