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FALLING FOR
Autumn

FALLING FOR AUTUMN


HOLIDAY HOLLOW OMEGAVERSE

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 Created with Vellum

*To those who raise their pumpkin spice lattes and apple ciders
proudly*

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WELCOME TO HOLIDAY HOLLOW

Holiday Hollow is a light warm-hearted omegaverse featuring a delicious blend of sweet and spice and happily ever afters. While you won't find any shifters in these pages, you will find alphas who tend to take charge, betas who are charismatic, and omegas who do whatever the hell they damn please... especially during heats.

So grab a cup of your favorite drink, light that candle, and curl up to all the fluffy goodness and small town charm that Holiday Hollow has to offer.

CHAPTER I

AUTUMN

If you told me I'd end up in handcuffs my first night back home in Holiday Hollow I'd have called you crazy. I'm not the type to break the law or cause trouble, but it seemed that this town might not be as welcoming as I'd imagined.

"Peter, I can't do this right now, Gladys is telling me to turn right in the middle of the corn field," I told him through the car system as I drew closer to my destination.

"I still can't believe you named your GPS." His chuckle filled my car cabin as I cursed the navigation gods once again, my words causing him to become concerned. "That's a sure fire way to get a flat tire. How far out are you? Are you safe? Should we stay on the phone?" His alpha side was not loving that I was alone in the middle of nowhere... at night. But he wasn't my pack and therefore didn't really get a say in my safety or choices. Though I knew he meant well.

"Almost there," I replied, starting to recognize the signs and sights around me that led back to the place I'd spent most of my summers growing up.

Holiday Hollow was a small town in the middle of North Carolina that thrived on all things, you guessed it, holiday. For every single major holiday, and even some minor ones, there was a festival or event of some kind. Hell, they even celebrated some of the more obscure National holidays, making each and every day special. The town put its heart and soul into those and tourists would come from all over to witness the spectacle.

Honestly, it was my happy place. Especially this time of year. Maybe it was a bit much for a girl named Autumn to love all things fall, but I really did. Give me crisp fall air, crunchy leaves, and pumpkin and apple scented everything.

“Alright, I’ll let you go then. Just be safe please, and think about our offer, Autumn,” Peter asked. His voice had visibly calmed now that I was no longer ‘lost’.

I knew exactly what he was referring to and I had absolutely no decision made about it.

Living life in the city exclusively to finish my MBA with a specialization in marketing these past couple of years had been a big change, but I was one determined omega who sure as hell showed everyone that not only could I keep up, but that I could excel.

Of course now that it wasn’t mandatory for omegas to pack up as soon as they were eligible, that led to a ton of not only job offers, but potential pack offers as well. Hell, some were a combination of both like Peter’s.

He was an alpha who I met during my program and while we did have a rather fun one-night-stand tryst during our first year, we were more friends than anything else. Which was why I had been so surprised when he’d approached me with his pack after graduation. They were a nice pack, caring even, but there was no spark for me. Maybe I was just old fashioned, but I wanted to be drawn to my pack, unable to keep them out of my mind, hell, maybe even let an alpha keep me safe once in a while. Most alphas in my life made me feel like I had something to prove. When I found the right pack, it wouldn’t be like that.

“You still there?”

“Yeah, sorry, just trying to pay attention,” I replied with a sigh. “You know that I’m not making any decisions this fall, Pete. I’ve been busting my ass for two years straight and I need to take a step back and think about what I really want. I’m not looking to pack up right now.”

The last thing I needed was ties and complications while I tried to sort out my life and my orchard. My handy dandy bag of toys a la knots would do the trick just fine thank you very much.

“I hear you, Autumn. Can’t blame a guy for trying when you’re such a great catch,” he replied good naturedly. Though he couldn’t mask his disappointment completely. “I’ll let you go now so you can concentrate. Drop a friend a line so I know you’re still alive down there.”

Most people couldn’t understand why I wasn’t chomping at the bit to be courted or start a new position at an agency. That was the life I’d worked so hard for, after all. But moving to Holiday Hollow wasn’t just about nostalgia and wanting to live my days in happiness, though those were definitely bonuses. It was to take over my grandparents’ orchard.

I spent every single summer of my childhood there, surrounded by the apple trees and their copious amounts of barn cats. My late alpha grandpa Roger swore they kept the birds at bay and I didn’t mind the snuggles under the trees. Though my beta grandfathers joked he had a soft spot for the cats.

Grandpa Roger was a stoic man, he didn’t say much to anyone. Well, except for me, I was the exception. He always had an old story to share, and I loved to listen to them. I’d soak up every detail and thrive on his passion. His pale blue eyes would sparkle and the full force of his smile would come out. Those moments and his love for the orchard are what made me love it too. He never pushed me to come, or even to help, but there’d be a look of pride every time I asked him to teach me something or helped around the orchard. He lived for that place, and I was determined to not let it die with him.

My beta grandfathers were the charismatic ones. Grandpa Allen would crack jokes anytime he could, while grandpa John was more the sweet, loving type. Together they kept grandpa Roger’s grumpiness at bay and they all made grandma so happy. Honestly they were the reason I believed in having a pack. Without them I’d probably have given up on packs long ago... the dating pool in the city was a hot mess and the new

laws definitely reinforced that I didn't just want to settle for anything.

A pang of sadness cut through my chest and I took a shaky breath to ward off the tears. I hadn't seen my grandparents in so long. When I hit high school and then college it always got harder to come back. My heart ached at the thought of grandpa Roger up here all alone after grandma and the others had passed. But I was doing what I needed, getting my degree that I knew I could put to use and make sure everyone knew this place was amazing. It was just sad that grandpa didn't live long enough for me to make him proud.

The fact that he left something that meant so much to him, to me, was humbling. Then again, grandpa Roger always said I could do anything I put my mind to and supported me. Ever since I presented as an omega he had been sure to reinforce that it wouldn't hinder my dreams. Omegas had worked damn hard to be afforded the same opportunities as everyone else, and I was going to make sure I proved him right.

The large wooden sign that said 'Welcome to Holiday Hollow' came into view. A grin spread across my face at the sight.

"It looks like I'm finally home," I said to myself, trying to pretend that I wasn't intimidated as hell. It'd been so long that I was afraid I wouldn't remember what I was supposed to do or how to care for the farm. My only saving grace was that I wouldn't be alone.

Grandpa Roger had hired an orchard hand a few years ago after he'd lost the rest of his pack, and from the few times I spoke to him, I knew he'd been a good fit. That only compounded when grandpa passed and our friendship grew into weekly and sometimes daily calls and updates. Riley had been amazing and stepped in while I finished my degree and would be here to help ease me into the orchard running life. I seriously would be at a loss without him.

Though I wasn't crazy enough to think I'd be able to run it just the two of us, but without a pack I'd have to figure it out until I found my happily ever after. Something I'd believed in

a little less with each passing year. The reality was that even though omegas had fought hard for their place in the world, not a lot of packs wanted an independent omega working just as hard as they were. And I certainly wasn't the stay at home and dote on her pack type.

The town itself was small, one of those places with an old downtown like you saw in *Hallmark* movies. A large square right in the middle of town, cute shops lining the streets around it. Close to downtown was even a good sized grounds where they held the bigger components of the festivals.

As I drove around the square to get to the other side of town, I noticed that only half of the shops were recognizable. That had me excited, the prospect of exploring and rediscovering the town was exactly what I needed.

But now wasn't the time. I continued toward the outskirts of town, where my orchard awaited. The pavement quickly gave way to gravel, my small car protesting a bit but it managed to handle it all the same. I wound my way through the twisty road until I could see the trees on both sides. They definitely were not up to grandpa's standards, which wasn't surprising with one person running the whole show.

The old farmhouse came into view and my heart clenched at the sight. It definitely was going to be a fixer upper. As I approached I could see the peeling paint, and the porch looked like it might not even support a pumpkin, let alone a person. But growing up in the orchard during the summer taught me that I could do anything I put my mind to. I wasn't just a city girl moving to the country, who didn't know how to wield a hammer. This was my place now, and I couldn't wait to make it home again.

Parking in front of the farmhouse, I left my bags in the car, first wanting to assess the situation. When I had told Riley that I wasn't sure what time I was getting in, he graciously let me know he'd leave a key for me in the pot on the porch.

As I maneuvered the wooden stairs that could use more than a little TLC, and the flood lights came on, I quickly realized a problem. There wasn't just one pot gracing the

entrance way of the farmhouse, there were dozens, all shapes and sizes with plants that had all seen way better days.

Not being one to give up, I quickly went to work, checking the ones closest to the door first, looking in the beds of the planters and underneath.

“Shit!” I yelled, as the largest pot tipped sideways in my hands, crashing noisily across the porch, the terra cotta shattering everywhere.

Thankfully, I had my suede boots on, but that didn’t mean it hadn’t scared me half to death. I peeled off my sweater, using it to protect my hands as I cleared the largest pieces out of the way so that I could access the door again.

I thumped my head against the door in exasperation, only for the blasted thing to give way and actually open on its own.

“Well, fuck me,” I sighed, hoping against hope that this wasn’t an omen for things to come.

“Put your hands up where I can see them!” A voice shouted from behind me.

I turned around quickly at the demand only to get blinded by some kind of mega-watt flashlight a second later, spots forming in my vision as I held up my forearm to block the light.

“You think you can lower that thing before you burn out my retinas, please?” I asked, half alarmed and half amused.

“Trespassing is a federal crime,” the voice said again, this time moving the beam down and off to the side. I still couldn’t see him, but his voice grew louder, the sound of his steps as he approached letting me know he was coming closer. From the protective growl I knew right away he was an alpha. Which meant this could go either way. My heart pounded but I kept on a mask of calm, not wanting to seem suspicious since he already clearly didn’t trust me.

A few moments later his scent hit me, reminding me of the crisp ocean air and warm wood. Now there was no doubting he was an alpha, and fuck me if he didn’t smell delicious like a breath of fresh air.

“I’m well aware, sir,” I said diplomatically, knowing I needed to diffuse the situation before it escalated even further. “I think there’s been some kind of misunderstanding here. If you’d just let me explain, we can clear all this up—”

“Hands behind your back, ma’am. Have you also been damaging property as well as breaking and entering?”

He seemed to want to get control of the situation quickly, and I couldn’t deny this looked bad, so I obliged him, putting my wrists behind my back. This alpha was clearly on alert but I had to remind myself he was also protecting his town. I was a strange woman trying to get into what they thought was an abandoned farmhouse, at night.

When I said that omegas were treated equal now, I meant it. We could own our own business and live the lives we pleased, choosing to have a pack or not, but that also meant we weren’t coddled and were upheld to the same expectations as everyone else. Including consequences to our actions, even if he was way off base with this one.

He pocketed the flashlight as he went for his cuffs, my vision returning back enough to see his strong jaw and features silhouetted on the flood lights that hung from the corners of the shabby roof awning.

“As much as I love handcuffs, this wasn’t exactly the welcome wagon I was expecting,” I said with a sigh as the first link of cool metal touched my wrist, trying to ignore the way his scent was *doing* things for me.

“I don’t know where you’re coming from ma’am, but here in Holiday Hollow we take care of our own. What we have here is special, and I won’t have anyone trying to make an easy mark of us just because of our hospitality,” he said, his voice still firm, but not unkind. My annoyance level was rising every second he wasn’t listening to me but there wasn’t much I could do yet.

Thankfully the sweet smell of apples clung to the air from the orchard around me and tempered my mood just a bit more as I tried to understand how the situation looked from his side of things.

“I admire you for that,” I said, responding to his statement. “Holiday Hollow deserves the very best, so I can’t hold that against you. I meant to arrive while the sun was still up and Riley was still around, but I got caught up and couldn’t find the blasted key.”

I felt him freeze behind my back, and I was all too aware that the coarse pads of his fingers still touched my other wrist, the other handcuff almost fully in place. He breathed deeply again, dragging my scent through his nose.

My words seemed to trickle through his skull as I praised my grandma once again for teaching me to kill them with kindness. After we sorted this whole mess out I really just wanted to crash and then wake up to a glorious pumpkin spice latte and start this whole new chapter of my life on the right foot. I wasn’t going to let this little misunderstanding get in my way.

“Riley?” he asked, suspicion still coloring his voice. This wasn’t an alpha who trusted easily, that much was obvious.

“Yep!” I confirmed, nodding my head. “Riley Ortiz, orchard hand extraordinaire who’s been holding down the place for me since grandpa Cedarwick passed. I’d have been here months ago, but I couldn’t bail on the internship I’d committed to.”

“Who exactly did you say you were?”

“I didn’t, and you didn’t exactly ask or let me tell you,” I said with a grin, turning to look back at him over my shoulder. “I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours.”

“Sheriff Halston, Sheriff Hunter Halston,” he offered, a challenging glint in his eye.

Oh, this man had trouble written all over him. Now that I could fully see him, thick brown hair messed to the side with looks that would stop weaker hearts, it appeared Holiday Hollow made treats in the form of men as well. And when you added in his scent, I knew he’d be hard to ignore.

Obstinate, brash, quick to judge...but hey, despite what they say, first impressions aren’t always the best. After all, I’d

just arrived and I managed to break something without even setting foot inside the house.

No, coming to Holiday Hollow was going to be a fresh start and a way to get back to my roots. Come Fall Festival and all, I was going to make it happen, no matter what.

“I’m Autumn, Autumn Cedarwick, and I do believe you’re the one who is trespassing on *my* orchard.”

CHAPTER 2

AUTUMN

The moment the sun started streaming through the thin curtains, I was awake, though I'd rather not be. After last night's encounter with the delicious alpha sheriff who thought I was breaking in, and eventually convincing him I was in fact supposed to be here, I was exhausted. I'd carried in a few things after he'd left before pouring myself into bed.

At least he'd apologized and looked genuinely embarrassed about the cuffs after he'd taken them off. He even helped me find the key under one of the small pots that was in the corner of the window seal.

Using what little motivation I had, I forced myself to get out of the old rickety bed, stretching my neck to the side and trying to work out the kinks. Grabbing my robe off of the bedpost, I tied it around me and made a beeline for the kitchen. Thankfully the place had running water and electricity, two of the biggest essentials for coffee making.

Rummaging through the boxes on the table, I found the coffee maker and got it hooked up. The smell of coffee soon filled the kitchen, that alone helping wake me up a bit more.

Now this was how a kitchen was supposed to smell in the morning.

It had barely stopped brewing the coffee when I pulled off the pot and filled my mug. A loud knock sounded on the door and I groaned, setting my coffee down on the counter. With one last longing look at it, I tightened the belt on my robe and went to answer the door, hoping it wasn't the sheriff again.

That alpha was more than I could handle with a severe lack of coffee in my system.

When I pulled the door open, my jaw dropped. The most adorable man was standing on the other side. Apparently Holiday Hollow was home to some of the hottest men, not even here a day and I've already spotted two. Though I much preferred the one who didn't have me in cuffs. *Well, for now at least. There's a time and place for everything.*

The beta smiling awkwardly down at me looked out of place, his hand coming up to scratch the back of his neck. Despite his obvious nerves, his grin was to die for. I found myself easily returning it. He had the whole boy next door vibe, from his soft brown hair and expressive blue eyes, to his flannel, worn jeans, and work boots. His soft scent of spiced cream put me directly at ease and there was something so innately centering about him that I instinctively knew he was a beta. His demeanor reminded me of grandpa Allen but that was where the resemblance stopped. *Thank god.*

"Hey," I offered, hoping it would prompt him to speak.

"I-I'm your neighbor. Jack Halston. I run the pumpkin patch," he stuttered out, his smile dropping a bit as he got flustered. His name hit me for a second. Halston. Why did that sound so familiar? I couldn't place it, but honestly it could be as simple as a faded memory from those summers spent here. "It seems I owe you an apology."

"An apology?" I questioned, not understanding where this conversation was going. We hadn't even met, what could he possibly have to say sorry over?

He winced. "I'm the one who called the cops on you."

I let out a laugh that had his grin coming back. He seemed like such an easygoing beta and already I found myself wanting to know more about him.

"So I have you to thank for my 'Welcome Wagon'?"

He groaned, his own smooth laughter filling the space between us. "My mom would beat my ass. She's literally the head of the welcoming committee." His joking tone had his

playful personality shining through and I decided we were going to be fast friends. He was too adorable and fun for us not to be, plus that smile of his made me want to melt.

“I’m sure I’ll meet her soon enough, but I’ll keep your name out of it,” I promised. “And your officer let me go when he finally let me tell him my name.” It was honestly comical how different the alpha and beta I’d met so far were. I had a feeling that Holiday Hollow was going to be full of interesting characters.

“Which is?” he prompted, raising an eyebrow. That adorable grin fell back into place. It didn’t feel like he was flirting, just genuinely nice. This was closer to the greeting I’d expected, but even I could admit the other one would make a good story one day.

“Autumn Cedarwick.” A flicker of recognition flashed on his face but he didn’t comment on it. I felt bad, I didn’t remember much of the townies from back then. When the entire pack was alive they kept me plenty busy on the orchard. Between baking and chores, I was never bored. But when they were gone, grandpa Roger and I stuck with each other. The only other person I knew well was Beatrice at the diner, and mainly because she made the most amazing apple pie in the world. “You want to come in for a cup of coffee?”

He looked a bit shocked at my offer, it wasn’t exactly common for omegas to invite people into their homes, but something about him felt right and it was the hospitable thing to do. Not to mention he didn’t strike me as the ‘dangerous to be alone with’ sort. Plus, with the state of the house I hadn’t exactly gotten all territorial over things just yet.

“Sure,” Jack agreed, following me further into the house.

“Sorry it’s a bit of a mess, I haven’t even carried in all my stuff yet.”

“No worries. If you need help I’m just next door,” he offered.

“Thanks.” I smiled at him before pouring him a mug of coffee. Thankfully I’d thought ahead enough to pack it in my

essentials box. “I hope you don’t want anything in it, because I have zero groceries.”

He grimaced but quickly tried to hide it. “That sounds perfect.”

The revelation had me a bit down as I didn’t take mine black either. The sweeter, the better. I slid his mug over to him and picked up my own, both of us taking a drink.

The bitter taste had me sputtering and barely managing to swallow it. It was full flavored, bold, and awful. Jack didn’t look like he was faring any better.

“Wow, that’s bad. You don’t have to drink that. Black coffee is for masochists.” He laughed and put his mug on the table, looking relieved. Jack was the type of beta who wore his heart on his sleeve, unable to hide his emotions even from a stranger. It was refreshing, honestly. Coming from the corporate world meant I was met with fake people far too often. “I really need to get supplies.”

“Do you know where the store is?”

“It’s been several years, but I think I can find it. Holiday Hollow isn’t exactly a town you can get easily lost in.”

“If you haven’t unpacked, my pickup probably has more room. Want me to drive you into town? I know an amazing coffee shop we can hit up on the way.”

For a second I hesitated, not sure what his intentions were, but I couldn’t help but trust the guy. He seemed so genuine, like he just wanted to help me out. And having a beta by my side meant I might not have to deal with random alphas approaching me. *This isn’t the city*, I had to remind myself. That would be one thing I’d have to unlearn.

“That’d be really nice,” I admitted. “You said you’re my neighbor?”

“Yup, just over at Halston Farms.” He gestured in the direction of the pumpkin farm that bordered the orchard. “Someone is always around if you need anything. We have a lot of farmhands who handle the day to day but I’m out there making sure things go smoothly as well.” It made sense that a

huge pumpkin farm like his would need the help and one man running it all seemed a bit crazy. Hopefully all my work this fall would get the orchard to the same status.

“Perfect. I just need to take a quick shower and change. I can meet you at your house?” I offered.

“Of course,” he said. Grabbing his mug, he went to the sink and rinsed it out before waving and seeing himself out. The moment he walked away with one last tempting tease of his scent, I missed his presence. I never really realized how weird it was to be so alone out here. The quiet was nice, but also unnerving, living out here all alone would definitely be a huge change.

“Well, I didn’t see my morning going in this direction, but I’ll take it,” I laughed to myself before hurrying to my bedroom to grab clothes. I took a quick shower and got ready before heading his way, eager to see the town and get some real caffeine in me.

Despite our properties both being pretty expansive, our houses were on the edges of the property line so the walk wasn’t too bad between them. He was already waiting, leaning against his truck. As soon as he spotted me, his grin lit up his face again, putting me right at ease.

I said a silent thank you to the small town gods as I approached, glad I wasn’t stuck with some uptight neighbors who hated me or pre-judged me before they even knew my name. I was a packless omega trying to take over an entire orchard. That alone was against the norm. But then again, that wasn’t really Holiday Hollow’s style.

“So how long has it been since you’ve been in our little town?” he asked as we climbed in the cab and he started the truck up with a dull roar.

“Probably the first summer of high school,” I admitted. The familiar guilt hit, knowing I could have made time to come down here during the summers but was just ‘too busy’ being a stubborn teen.

Jack seemed to notice the mood change and quickly redirected the conversation. “Well then, I think you’re due for a quick tour. I’ll point out the main stuff so you can find your way around but if you get lost just call me, I’ll give you my number. You never know when you might need a second or third set of hands on these old farms.”

“That’s really sweet. Thanks,” I said, shocked he was being so welcoming. He didn’t even seem like he gave it a second thought, it was just in his nature to be this kind, and that made me like him even more. “I’m sure I won’t get lost too easily. It’s still as small as ever, right?”

He chuckled to himself. “Yeah, except during festival time. Then it gets downright crowded.”

“I’m looking forward to this one. We came back for a few of them throughout the years before I got too old and mom got too busy, but the fall one was always my favorite,” I explained.

“Are you going to be making Cedarwick’s famous apple cider? I know a few people who will be really excited if you are. Your grandpa was a legend here.” And knowing my grandpa, I knew he hated that title. He always said it was grandma’s recipe that got him through and it was a pack effort. He just continued the process alone to honor them when they were gone.

“That’s the goal. We’ll see if I’m able to make it happen, I have to get my feet under me first. Plus, it’s been a while. I’m not sure I even remember the recipe and I don’t know if he left it for me. But I want mine to be just as good as his.” Determination warmed my chest. It seemed like such a simple thing, making cider, but to me it was a sign that I’d figured out life on the orchard and I couldn’t wait to give it a go.

“I’m sure it will be,” he said confidently, even though he didn’t even know me that well.

We fell into companionable silence as he drove through the outskirts of town. As soon as we hit the main road, he started noting all the changes that had happened in the last several years.

“Right there used to be a candy shop. It was run by old man Lawry,” he said, gesturing to the tiny building.

“I remember that place, grandpa took me there once after I fell off the ladder at the apple orchard. I just got a little banged up but I think he felt bad so he brought me here for some chocolate. It was a solid move, grandma taught him well,” I joked.

“Well now the only thing you’re going to get there is fish or pet food. It’s a small pet supply store now.”

“The candy store was better,” I teased and he didn’t bother to disagree. From his hatred of black coffee, I’d wager he was just as much of a sweets lover as I was.

My eyes caught on the old diner that looked like it was stuck in time. “Should I assume that Beatrice doesn’t work at the diner anymore?”

He shook his head. “Old Beatty’s still there. I don’t think she even ages anymore, she stopped at seventy and she’ll just be here in Holiday Hollow, making pies for all eternity.”

“Sounds good to me. Her pie was amazing. I’ll have to go visit soon.”

He looked like he wanted to say something but swallowed it down and pointed out another change. I was soaking it all in, but honestly it just felt good to talk and spend time with Jack. Between school, work, and life I hadn’t had much chance to keep up with my social life.

Once omegas finally broke the mold and gained a bit of equality in the eyes of the law and workforce, I’d worked my ass off to show that we were just as capable. Unfortunately that meant I was always surrounded by people and coworkers, but never made many real connections. That was something I intended to change now that I was in Holiday Hollow.

Jack continued to proudly list the stores we were driving by, some new, some old. The bookstore was replaced by an art store, but a new bookstore opened recently across town. I’d definitely have to check it out.

“And here we have the best coffee in town,” he announced as he pulled through the drive-thru of Claire’s Coffee and Confections. “Pick your poison. My treat.” I didn’t bother to argue, figuring his small town hospitality wouldn’t allow me to pay for my own.

“Well since it’s the beginning of fall, I think I’ll go for a pumpkin spice latte.” I waited for him to roll his eyes, but his smile never faltered.

“I was thinking the same thing. Theirs is amazing, but trust me, you need to get a maple bacon scone on the side, they’re phenomenal.” My stomach growled at the mention of food, both of us laughing at the ridiculously loud sound. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

Instead of there being a drive-thru speaker, like I was used to, he pulled right up to the first window. A bubbly woman with curly red hair and curves to die for slid the window open, her smile growing at the sight of Jack. She looked to be a couple of years older than us with enough enthusiasm to be mistaken for ten years younger.

“There he is! Let me guess, a caramel macchiato? Apple pie latte? Pumpkin spice latte?” I perked up at the apple pie latte she mentioned, but today felt like a pumpkin kind of day and I had already told him my order. I made a note to come back another day and try that one. Or maybe all three.

“Well, I have a new neighbor, and I told her I’d treat her to some coffee. I’m going to need two pumpkin spice lattes and two of your famous maple bacon scones.”

“It’s your lucky day,” she announced. “We only have two left. Let me go snatch them before someone else does.” She literally turned and sprinted away, sliding up to a glass cabinet before another barista. They argued for a second before she returned with a small paper bag and a triumphant grin in place.

“They snooze, they lose,” she laughed, handing it through the window to Jack. She was fantastic and I couldn’t help but think how much I loved this place and the town already. “Perks of being the owner. Now let me get those pumpkin

spice lattes, I just ground the spices fresh this morning, you're going to groan."

Jack went to grab his wallet but she waved him off, passing the two cups over from another barista.

"No way, new neighbors means it's on the house." We both jumped when she practically launched herself out of the window, hanging halfway in so she could grip the edge of the truck door and see around him. She gave me a cheerful wave. "I'm Claire, this is my place. Make sure you stop by, I've got new stuff seasonally."

"It's nice to meet you," I offered. "My name is Autumn Cedarwick. I just moved into my family orchard." Her eyes light up at the mention of my name.

"Tell me you're gonna stay. Are you gonna run it yourself? Does that mean you're going to be part of the Fall Festival this year?! Are we gonna have apples again? Oh, and apple cider, I miss making my famous apple cider donuts, I'd always send your grandpa a box, I can do the same for you!" She said it all in one giant rush, not even taking a breath until the very end, practically gasping to catch her breath.

Her enthusiasm and demeanor had me smiling right along with her.

"Yes, to staying, at least for now. The orchard is going to take more than just me, but luckily I have some help. I'm still settling in but making the Fall Festival is the goal. Yes to apples, and a maybe on the apple cider," I answered her in return, loving her enthusiasm. "You'll definitely see me around again since I'm sure this tastes just as heavenly as it smells." I noticed a few amused smiles of the other workers behind her. It was nice to see an omega not only owning a business but earning the respect of the town itself. Just seeing it made me even more excited for the orchard to get up and running again.

"Well then it's definitely on the house," she squeaked out before climbing back through the window and waving at us. "Have a nice day, you two!" The suggestive way she said it had me biting back an internal groan. Thankfully Jack doesn't

even seem to notice, just smiling and waving back before driving off.

“On to the store?” he asked as he took a long pull of his latte.

“Yes, please,” I agreed before trying my own. “Oh man, this is magical!” I took a bite of the scone and my reaction was pretty much the same.

“The city has nothing on her coffee,” he laughed, driving down main street toward our destination.

I relaxed against the seat and enjoyed my breakfast, grateful for the morning’s turn of events.

CHAPTER 3

AUTUMN

W eighing my options, I stood in the living room taking in how the natural light brightened up the space. It could still use a little cheering up to make it more homey, but that wasn't anything a gallon or two of paint couldn't fix.

After Jack and I had gotten back from the store and all of my delicious yummys were put away, I finally managed to find the energy to unpack. Whether it was from the excellent company all morning or the liquid heaven, I had a pep in my step and I was determined to get things done.

"Please tell me the wall didn't somehow offend you and you're already going to run off and leave me," a familiar voice called through the open screen door. "You just got here."

"Just debating whether a soft blue or yellow would work better in here," I said, giving the space one last appraising look. "The only way I'm leaving here before the Fall Festival is if they make me. Did you not tell anyone I was coming into town?"

I turned to finally put a face to the voice I had spoken with the past few months while finishing out my internship. Sure, I'd seen a photo of Riley in one of the photos my grandpa had sent me before he'd passed, but it did nothing to captivate his mischievous smile or fabulousness. This beta was not only going to make my job easier, but my life better, I could already tell. That charisma would go a long way around here, especially chasing away the ghosts of the memories that kept hitting me every time I turned around.

“Well, when I saw your headlights down the drive, I started to make the trek from my cabin. But then I saw you trussed up in those cuffs last night and thought I’d better let you have your fun,” he shrugged, tilting his head to the side and staring past me. “Choose whichever color makes you happy, anything has to be better than what you’re currently working with. I told you this was a fixer upper.”

“But you didn’t tell anyone I was coming,” I reiterated again, moving quickly to open the screen door and let him in.

“I may have been slightly afraid that once I told you the truth about how much work this place is, and the state of it, you might let one of those big marketing firms snatch you up instead of heading here once your project finished,” he admitted, running a hand through his dark hair sheepishly. “But now you’re here, and you’re not arrested. No harm, no foul, right?”

He turned his eyes up at me, through his thick lashes, the look so pitiful I couldn’t help but laugh. Clearly this beta knew how to play his cards right.

“Oh, you’re good. Hells bells, are you sure you’re not an omega? That look is dangerous, Riley.”

“And it brings alphas to their knees just as well.” He grinned wickedly. “How do you think I enchant all the citizens of our dear town?” he asked as he walked up with open arms. “Welcome home, Autumn.”

Riley pulled me into a friendly hug, his greeting tugging at my heartstrings as I wrapped my arms around him. It was comforting to know that I wasn’t going into this alone. He might have been my grandpa’s right hand man the past five years or so, but from our long talks the past few months he already felt like family, the beta brother I’d never had.

“Okay, enough of that before you make me all mushy,” I said with a sigh. “We have a ton of work to do and not a second to waste, the Fall Festival is just around the corner. Do you know how many people have already demanded cider?”

“Not today we don’t,” Riley countered with a reassuring smile. I had a feeling he’d worked his ass off just so I didn’t run, but it wasn’t necessary. Or at least I hoped it wasn’t. “I already made all the rounds this morning and have the majority of things set up for the upcoming harvest. Sure, there are a million things you could do that would be useful, but for today, I’d recommend you finish settling in and plan to meet me bright and early tomorrow morning.”

“How early are we talking again?” I asked, wondering how many cups of coffee I was going to need to down. It wasn’t that I wasn’t used to waking up early, it was that I knew corporate America early and farm early were two entirely different things. That didn’t even factor in the rickety old bed I desperately needed to replace as soon as possible.

Riley’s lips twitched. “Let’s say I’ll meet you here at seven and I’ll take you on a full tour of the property to get started, then we can ease you into the rest of the tasks.”

“You’re not going to go easy on me forever,” I warned, knowing that I owed Riley a debt of gratitude for all the hard work he’d put into the place.

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” he assured. “Alright, I’ll leave you to it. Call me if you need any help, otherwise I’ll see you in the morning.”

After saying goodbye I was left standing with an even greater sense of determination to help restore this place and continue to make it something my grandparents would have been proud of.

Not wanting to wait another idle second more, I snagged my keys off the kitchen counter, hopping in my car and heading back into town. The refresher course Jack had given me that morning came in handy as I made my way to the town’s furniture store, immediately making my first purchase of a new bed that was literally like sleeping on a cloud. Miraculously they even managed to have it in stock, and they were more than happy to help arrange same day delivery for me.

With one major thing checked off my list, I made my way towards Main Street, easily managing to claim a space in front of the hardware store. I knew I'd need more professional help for some of the repairs to the place, but the things like paint and the small things I'd learned here and there I could handle in the meantime.

The chime of the bell overhead as I made my way into the store was welcoming, but the front counter was noticeably vacant.

"One second," a deep voice called from the back of the shop. I'd never been affected by voices before but this one sent a shiver of anticipation down my spine that I quickly and vehemently ignored.

I took that as my cue to look around, snagging a cart and picking up a few items here and there. The farm obviously already had plenty of tools, but from the dust and rust on them, it couldn't hurt to have a small backup set for the house.

After picking out a new toolbox, I chose a few kitchen door knobs to replace the ones I noticed missing along with a tarp and some rollers.

By the time I made it to the paint aisle, I managed to add a few more things to my cart. The farmhouse was livable, it just needed a whole lot of love. Good thing my grandparents' pack had taught me most aspects of orchard life, including how to fix what was broken.

As I'd unpacked I'd noticed little things here and there that needed fixing, like the missing door knobs or the kitchen table needing to be refinished. Those things I could handle, but it was the chips in the countertops and the things like the porch that made me realize I might have to dip into some of the maintenance fund once this harvest was over depending on how well we did. There was more to do than just fixing it up, there were major repairs as well. But doing little decor touches like paint were in my control right now and I hoped it made it feel more homey too.

I shuddered to think about what I would do when my heat hit later this fall. There was absolutely no way that place felt

suitable for a nest just yet.

“Can I help you?” that same deep voice asked from behind me, making me turn in surprise as my hand flew up to rest against my pounding heart.

“Oh, sweet apple streusels you scared me,” I swore, taking in the man before me.

“Apologies,” he said, the rasp in his voice more noticeable now that he was close.

His shoulders hunched as if he was trying to make himself smaller, not that he had a chance in hell of making that happen. The fact that this alpha somehow knew how to make himself look less intimidating than he was didn’t sit well for me, and I instantly wanted to comfort him.

“There’s no need for you to apologize,” I reassured him. “I was lost in my own head thinking about all the stuff I have to do.”

He seemed to relax at my words, his shoulders rolling back as I got my first real look at him, all thick thighs and muscles with a soft belly that was perfect for snuggling against. All of that was topped off with a full beard and expressive brown eyes. His smell was muted, probably from blockers, so while I couldn’t tell for sure, I suspected he was an alpha.

It wasn’t until he shifted his stance that I realized I had been staring at him a bit too long. If I didn’t already think something magical must be in the water, this handyman was another case in point.

“Autumn?” he asked with a grunt.

I nodded my head, not surprised in the slightest. Even at the mattress store earlier they already seemed to know who I was. Word travels fast in a small town, especially when there’s a new local.

“Yes. Nice to meet you...”

“Boone.”

“Would you mind helping me with a few gallons of paint?” I asked.

It was clear that he wasn't much of a talker, something that I didn't mind. What he didn't say he more than made up for in his expressions and myriad of grumbles and grunts, each one seeming distinct and just as direct.

He spoke when he needed to, nothing more, nothing less. It felt calming to be around him and watching him get to work on mixing the different colors I'd picked out. He listened silently as I told him about a few of the things I was working on around the farm.

"You'll need help," he said simply, nodding for me to follow him as he carried my gallons of paint to the front counter.

"I know you're right, but I don't really have the time to focus on that right now. The only reason I'm even attempting to get some painting in today is because Riley is giving me his form of a pity day to get settled," I acknowledged.

What I interpreted as a knowing grunt escaped Boone, the corner of his lips tipped upward, letting me know that I was right and that Riley's reputation had preceded him.

"I'll stop by," Boone said, as I gathered the other items from my cart, setting them on the counter for him.

"It's okay, really, don't trouble yourself. Once the rush is over with the harvest I'll tackle it and get some help. Until then, everything else pretty much works and thanks to you I'll have these cheery colors to breathe a little more life into the place." He studied my cheerful smile for a moment before focusing on the register.

Boone let out a hum as he ran my card through the machine, passing it back to me and then gathering my bags in his arms expectantly. It took me a moment to realize that he was offering to help carry the stuff to my car, my eyes stalling on his taut forearms.

"Thank you!" I said, rushing to grab the door and hold it open for him. "Sorry, life in the city was obviously different. I'm still getting used to how genuinely nice and helpful people are here."

Wordlessly he followed me to my car, loading all of my supplies with efficient ease.

“Autumn,” he said, drawing my attention to him as he closed the lid of my trunk, his eyes boring into mine as he seemed to waver back and forth on what to say.

“What is it?” I asked, taking a step closer to him, finally getting the faintest whiff of the warm scent of cedar and sage that seemed to wrap around me like a comforting blanket.

“It sounds like you should stay,” Boone said, his low, raspy voice sending a shiver down my spine that had nothing to do with the cool autumn air.

A wide smile broke out on my face as he gave me a small reserved one in return, before giving me one last nod and heading back into his store. Apparently he wasn’t a fan of city life, and I was quickly remembering that I wasn’t either.

The whole drive home, back to the farm, that stupid smile stayed with me, just another sign that I was exactly where I was supposed to be.

CHAPTER 4

AUTUMN

It had been about a week of getting up early every day with Riley, and I wasn't any more used to it. My body was quickly adjusting to the labor, though the second and third day were iffy.

Honestly, it was the lack of sleep that got to me. Even in college my classes were later, you couldn't catch me up before eight at the earliest. Now Riley had me getting up every day at six-thirty and meeting in the orchard at seven. No matter how much I tried to fall asleep early, it never quite happened. There was always one more project to handle, one more page to read, anything to avoid it. I knew he was up himself most days at five.

But it was the beginning of apple harvesting season now and I couldn't afford these random slumps in energy. We still had months of apples ahead of us. Most apples peaked in September, but he'd set up a perfect routine, by spreading our varieties out, with a main harvest in each month during fall. It was the only reason we could even do the Fall Festival, otherwise our apples would be long gone before it hit.

Riley and I had brought our first bushel of Golden Delicious apples to the barn yesterday, and I'd snagged a bucket to bring inside. They were perfect for baking, so I figured it was time to test my skills. Plus, it was tradition. The first apples always went into a pie. Which is why I'd spent the last three hours trying to figure out how to perfect a pie crust... and failing.

The house already smelled like a bakery, which was a definite bonus. The downside was I had a stack of failed crusts, some that hadn't held together and some that I'd somehow managed to ruin while blind baking them. It wasn't like I could disrespect my grandma's good name by going to the store and picking up a pre-made one. Okay, so I had to open all of the doors and windows because of the smoke the oven decided to make, but it was doable for now.

Swallowing down my frustration, I clicked on the baking video I was trying to follow. "Okay, butter, check. Flour, check," I muttered to myself as I measured out the ingredients. "Sugar... shit."

Apparently, I'd used the end of my supply on the last round. It might be cliché to ask your neighbor for a cup of sugar, but today I didn't care. I was already covered in flour, my apron looked like I dumped a whole mixing bowl on myself, and there was no way I was going to clean up to go to the store just when I was going to get messy again.

Setting aside the mixing bowl, I wiped my flour covered hands off on my apron before heading for the door. If we were going to be friends, he may as well know I was a complete hot mess now.

It was late afternoon so I knew Jack wouldn't be in his fields anymore, so instead I headed for his front door and knocked. The white farmhouse looked like it was built when the farm opened, but had obviously been renovated and updated creating something almost immaculate.

The paint was pristine, the porch swing adorable, and the landscaping cultivated to perfection. I was honestly impressed he'd managed to make it look this nice, he was a bachelor after all. And I was quickly learning that two people and a couple hands could barely keep up with farm life, I couldn't imagine doing it completely alone. Maybe he had a team that helped him run it.

The door opened a few minutes later, Jack's face lighting up when he saw that it was me.

“Hey there, neighbor,” he joked, leaning against the door frame and crossing his arms, his toned muscles pulling the fabric of his shirt tight. “What have you been up to?”

His eyes roved over the mess on my apron as he raised his brows in amusement.

“Listen, don’t ask, it’s been an afternoon. I managed to use all my sugar, so before I drive into town looking like a flour monster, can I be terribly cliché and ask if you happen to have any I can borrow?”

“Actually, yes. I always keep an extra bag or two in the pantry. Come on.”

He turned and led me into his house. As I stepped inside I detected more than just his scent in the air. There was another, almost familiar scent I couldn’t quite place, that lingered here too. I couldn’t tell if he just had a close group of friends or he was in a pack, either way, it smelled delicious.

Jack’s house was nothing like I expected. The entire place was some form of farmhouse chic, with aged woods, white and light gray accents, and chunky wood furniture. I had my doubts that he decorated it himself, and if he did, well I was definitely impressed.

“Your place is gorgeous,” I complimented. He glanced around at his house for a moment and shrugged.

“Mom did most of it before they retired to town. I like that it’s so open and airy, so I didn’t bother to change much,” he said casually as he rifled through the pantry. I let him focus on his task and turned to check out the kitchen.

“Holy shit,” I muttered. “This kitchen is what dreams are made of.”

An industrial-sized stove with a huge hood over it stood out like a crowning jewel. The kitchen island was big enough that he could bake twenty pies and have them all out cooling, and still have room left over. Stools were placed on one side of the island, making it inviting. The countertops were butcher block and I was fairly sure I’d sell my fall-loving soul just to have this.

“I’m gonna start baking over here,” I joked after another few minutes of gaping at his kitchen. He stood back and narrowed his eyes at me.

“I don’t think so. I can’t let you in on these famous family recipes. They’re top secret.” He put on a fake offended tone and I rolled my eyes.

“Yes, and you’d be in awe of my baking skills. I should probably have my own show,” I joked back. He chuckled and handed over a bag of sugar.

“I’ve got two more in the pantry.”

“I knew you had a sweet tooth,” I said with a triumphant fist bump. “This is why we’re going to get along famously.”

“Sweet tooth might be an understatement, but I also just like to bake. And to be prepared. Speaking of... you know you have to run into town today anyway, right?”

“Why is that?” I questioned, racking my brain for some kind of lost plan I’d made. From the way his smile fell, there was obviously something big I was missing.

“Today’s the signup for the Fall Festival. I thought you were set on participating?”

I gasped. “What? How did I not know this?!”

“We probably just all assumed that you knew and nobody actually bothered to tell you the exact date. Everyone around here marks it on their calendars like a fucking holiday.” I laughed and shook my head.

“Well, then I’m definitely going to need to go to town. Do you know what time it’s at?”

He glances at his watch. “Yeah, it’s usually at four-thirty on the dot. Just head to town hall. I’m sure that the committee will have a whole table out front waiting. They’ll definitely expect you to be there.”

“You know I will be now that I know,” I yelled out, giving Jack a little wave in thanks before I headed out, running back towards the orchard while holding my bag of sugar like I was a football player running for a touchdown.

After depositing the sugar on the counter, I glanced at the clock and cursed, realizing I had about forty-five minutes to wrap this up, shower, and drive to town hall. After turning off my oven and hastily wiping up my mess, I took the fastest shower known to man.

Excitement bubbled up in me as I drove toward town. This was the moment that I'd been waiting for. There was still about a month to go before the festival, which was plenty of time to show them that I belonged here in Holiday Hollow.

Despite the crowd that seemed to be gathered around town hall, I managed to snag a prime parking spot not too far away from the lovely ochre colored banner that hung against the columns announcing that I was in the right place. If I kept getting parking spots like this I'd never want to leave.

Grabbing my purse, I got out of my car, scanning the different stations to see where I should start first.

I saw Jack through the crowd, clipboard in hand as he shot me a small wave. But when I tried to make my way over to him I was instantly bombarded by a gaggle of women and a few men who were each trying to be more helpful than the next.

“Autumn, it's so good to see you! You were just a cherub the last time I saw those cheeks. Say, do you think you could put me down for five jars of Cedarwick Apple Butter this year?”

“Oh, me too!” Another chimed in. “And a few gallons of cider.”

“You *are* making cider right?” Yet another woman chimed in. It felt like a thinly veiled threat wrapped in a smile and teasing. At least I hoped she was mostly kidding. “It's so nice to have you here! The Fall Festival wouldn't be the same without you.”

The onslaught of questions one after another caught me a bit off guard, leaving me unsure for a moment of where to start first. Sure the harvest was well underway, but I still needed to

sit down with Riley and see what we could realistically come up with in time for the festival.

I didn't want to promise something now then let these ladies down in the future. They were just genuinely excited to see me and trying to be helpful, it wasn't their fault that I couldn't really give them the answers they wanted right now.

"Alright ladies, back it up," a woman called, cutting through the group. Yet another omega in this town with authority. Impressive.

Her light brown hair was twisted up in a cute clip and her cardigan had an official looking button on it that made it clear she held an important position around here.

"But Janet, we're just trying to make sure she gets settled."

"I know," Janet reassured, placing a hand on the woman's arm. "But why don't you let me get her all checked in for the Fall Festival first. We wouldn't want Autumn here to miss the sign up when she's clearly worked so hard to make it here in time to participate. And I haven't gotten to welcome her to Holiday Hollow yet."

The group surrounding me nodded in agreement, clearly respecting Janet's words and heeding them as they dispersed around us, leaving me to breathe freely once again.

"You must be Jack's mom," I said with a wide grin. "Thanks for saving me back there. I got kind of overwhelmed with all the questions."

"That's what mothers are for dear," she said, giving me a kind look. "We're all thrilled to have you here, some people just need that extra bit of perspective sometimes. I know my boys both do from time to time."

"Boys?" I questioned. "I didn't know Jack had a brother."

Janet grabbed a cup, placing it under the thermos and filling it up before passing it to me. The smell of pumpkin and caramel filled my lungs, making my mouth water before I dove in for my first sip, the perfectly spiced pumpkin juice instantly brightening my day once more.

“I’m surprised you haven’t met him yet,” Janet said, answering my earlier question. “Him and Jack are close. If he’s not working or fishing, you can usually find them together. Although he has been known to chase a holiday honey or two, the man rarely sits still.” She gave a playful eye roll at his expense.

“Do I even want to know what a holiday honey is?”

“A limited edition treat that is only available for a brief moment every year before it’s gone,” she said drolly, shaking her head. I’d never heard a quick tourist tryst referred to that way and I found myself adoring her that much more for it. “I love my son to death and he’s a fantastic man, I won’t have anyone thinking otherwise, but sometimes I wish he would take a second and slow down and enjoy the small moments around him. I’ve only told him so half a dozen times.”

The love was clear in her voice and it had me sighing. “Speaking from experience, I’ve needed to hear that five or more times myself. I’m sure one of these days either your son or I will get it through our heads.”

Her eyes brightened in recognition as she looked over my shoulder. “Looks like I’ll get a chance to nag him again and you’ll get a chance to finally meet him.”

She waved her hand, gesturing to someone I presumed to be her son, only when I turned around to see who was heading our way my eyes rounded in disbelief.

Crossing the sidewalk like he owned the place, was none other than the man who’d given me an entirely different kind of welcoming party. The aviators that sat just below the brim of his hat, and that wide, cocky smile gave the impression that he owned the place. That, or the shiny sheriff badge that was pinned to his chest.

“On the second hand, maybe I take back everything I just said,” Janet countered, studying the expression on my face.

“Hi mama,” he greeted, taking off his hat and placing a kiss on her cheek. His eyes darted back and forth between

mine and hers, realizing a second too late that maybe he had walked into something.

“Hunter Elias Halston—why does this sweet woman look like she wants to take her apple peeler to your hide?” Janet asked with her hands firmly on her hips.

A wave of warmth spread over me, her fierce love and affection shining through even when she was reprimanding her oldest son. It made me miss my own mom a little bit, wishing that she wasn’t taken from us too soon. My dad tried his best, but he was a very hands off alpha who didn’t know the first thing about pack life much less how to raise a young daughter.

“Mama,” he said, holding his hands up in surrender while looking contrite. “Ms. Cedarwick and I just had a *minor* misunderstanding.”

“What did you do?” she asked again, each staccato word causing him to grimace.

“I may have thought she was trying to break into the farmhouse and attempted to arrest her,” he relented, looking slightly petrified of his own mother.

“Even had me in cuffs and everything,” I added helpfully, shooting him a shit-eating grin.

I was loving every single second of watching a grown man like Hunter squirm under his mother’s inquisition. It brought a warm joy to my heart.

“That’s it,” Janet said, turning towards me. “He’s out. You’re in.”

“What?!” Hunter sputtered, his trepidation turning to outrage.

“Oh shush,” his mom said, waving him off. “I always wanted a daughter and it seems I have a new spot to fill since you clearly forgot all the lessons your fathers and I taught you about how to treat a lady.”

“I apologized—”

“Say, Autumn,” Janet carried on, smiling at me brightly as she ignored her son completely. “How do you like pumpkin

brûlée? I make a killer one that is just to die for.”

“First you try to trade me out and then you offer to make her *my* favorite dessert?” Hunter asked, outraged. If it wasn’t for the little twinkle in his eye cluing me into the fact that he must be used to his mom’s antics, I would have bought the act.

“What did you do now?” Jack asked, walking up. He shot me a small smile as he came to stand next to me, a bundle of papers in one hand.

From the looks of it he had already managed to sign up and get the Fall Festival guidebook. Something that I still hadn’t managed to accomplish yet. But first there were some things I needed to get clear.

“You didn’t tell me you were Hunter’s brother,” I said looking at Jack before turning to Hunter, comparing the two in my mind.

“I thought you knew,” Jack said, his face growing a bit pale. “Hunter said he introduced himself.”

“I gave her my full name, not my whole life story,” Hunter said with a sigh. “Look, whatever we have going on between us, don’t blame my brother. He genuinely thought you knew. Hell, honestly I thought you’d made the connection between our last names and just decided you didn’t care when he came home all chipper after introducing himself to you.”

His little speech was somewhat redeeming, not that I was truly upset about my little run in with the law. It was the most excitement I’d had in awhile, kicking off this new chapter in my life with a bang.

I’d forgiven him the second he apologized for the mix-up and took the cuffs off me. Although if I was honest with myself I wouldn’t mind if he broke them out again. I was all for a little kink in the bedroom and from the stories his mom told, he wasn’t a stranger to them either.

It was my own fault that I hadn’t made the connection, but I didn’t really remember the good sheriff’s last name at the time. I had been a little...distracted.

“We’re good Jack,” I reassured him, reaching out to take his hand and squeezing it. “I can see now why you’re the favorite.”

Janet let out a whoop of laughter as she pretended to wipe tears from her eyes.

“I see why Jack’s taken a liking to you,” she said. “You’ll fit right in. Come on, let’s get you signed up.”

“I’ve got to get back to work,” Hunter said with a sigh, excusing himself from further laughter at his expense. Just because I was a snarky brat I gave him a finger wave and grin before he turned to leave.

She walked around the table we were gathered near, taking her place and turning around her clipboard. Humming to herself she filled stuff out, asking me questions here and there about what kinds of goods I was going to have and how much space I’d need for my booth.

“How much space is standard?” I asked, looking between her and Jack.

Jack was still having a bit of trouble meeting my eye, the blush on his cheeks from his family’s teasing still making himself known.

“There’s two sizes of booths that we assemble each year. You can always go off what your grandpa Roger gave last year, but it really just all depends on how many products you plan on delivering. How about I put you down for the same space regardless? If for some reason you can’t fill it, then you can just sell fresh baskets of apples or consider doing gourmet caramel dipped ones, both of which are easy enough to do,” Janet offered.

Her suggestions had merit and I made a mental note to expand the plan to include those regardless. Couldn’t hurt to spice up what the town was used to. And apparently they were missing their apples.

“You’ll be fine,” Jack assured, seeming to gather his courage as he squeezed my hand reassuringly just like I had him a moment ago. “You have the whole town behind you.”

Plus, if I learned anything about you this past week or so, it's that you're determined and strong. You can do anything you set your mind to Autumn."

Touched by his words, my eyes locked on his bright blue ones, a moment seeming to pass between us. It was so sweet I thought I'd melt.

"I guess there's only one question left then," Janet said, the tone of her voice filled with anticipation. "Will you be entering the tenth annual Fall Festival pie contest?"

I looked back to Jack who was smiling broadly at me now, his tentative shyness seeming to abate more and more as we spent time together. This look though, was damn right confident.

"Is that why you'll lend me a cup of sugar but not let me take over your massive kitchen and school me in pie crust?"

"It could have something to do with it," he acknowledged, shrugging his shoulders not so innocently.

Janet hummed under her breath, her eyes darting back and forth between Jack and I. "It seems like you're testing both of my boys," she said with a small laugh. "I knew I liked you. So, what's it going to be, Autumn?"

Holding my hand out for the clipboard I grabbed the pen, boldly signing my name without a moment of hesitation. I wasn't afraid of a little challenge. My move to Holiday Hollow said as much and I wasn't going to start balking now. Especially when I had a pair of brothers in my life that were making things a lot more interesting.

CHAPTER 5

HUNTER

It had been a busy past few days with the excitement of the Fall Festival in the air approaching.

Which was why it seemed like a good time as any to get cleaned up and go grab a pint and unwind at Holiday Brews. It was the perfect place in Holiday Hollow to grab a drink and some grub. The beer was cold, the food hot, and they even had live music that played most nights of the week.

Everyone was in a stir over little Autumn Cedarwick returning, and she seemed to have already ensnared most of the town, my momma included. I swear she took one look at her and decided she was replacing me. The welcoming committee had all but swarmed the omega when she first arrived.

While it wasn't uncommon for omegas to own businesses, and hell, rise to be some of the most influential people in the world, I was still a little surprised that she'd shown up alone.

Call it old fashioned of me, but most of us preferred some type of companionship and pack over solidarity, and I'd thought for sure, with her trying to take over the entire orchard, she'd of at least brought a friend. Although, I guess she did have Riley.

I shouldn't have been as surprised as I was to see her there, perched on a stool at the long wooden bar talking to Lindsay as she took a sip of what appeared to be pumpkin ale.

My feet moved on their own accord, eating up the space between us until I was next to her and the words were falling

easily through my mouth.

“Is this seat taken?”

She gestured to me to take the seat as she took another drink from her beer, her neck tilting up slightly.

“The usual, Halston?”

“You know it, Lindsay,” I said with a wink, giving her my usual charm as she grabbed me one of their homemade IPAs. I gave her a ten to which she tried to give me change until I just arched an eyebrow at her and she finally relented.

Finally I took a sip of my ice cold beer and turned my attention back towards Autumn. Her cheeks pinking a smidge as I’d caught her clearly looking at me through the whole exchange.

“So did you have a good time with my mom and brother?”

“I did. She was such a nice lady,” she said, the sincerity clear in her voice. “Makes me miss my momma, but everybody’s been really welcoming. I mean, barring the almost arrest.”

I couldn’t help but wince slightly at her tease before I composed myself, by Hollow I was never going to live that down.

“You wound me,” I jested, not letting my smile falter.

“You’re a confident one aren’t you?” she questioned.

“There’s nothing wrong with being confident,” I countered, raising an eyebrow at her.

“True, but there’s a difference between being confident and cocky.”

“Look,” I said, setting down my beer, the facade on my face finally cracking. “I really am—”

“I’m just kidding,” she relented with an adorable laugh. “I’m not mad about it. You were just doing your job.”

I nodded, a sense of relief filling me. I didn’t know why those words meant so much to me, but I couldn’t stand the

thought of her being mad at me. I wanted to continue our playful banter and that wasn't going to happen if she forever thought I was a complete ass. I had my moments, sure, but I prided myself on being a decent alpha.

“So did you just have to get away or just enjoying a night out?” I drew out, obviously changing the subject. There was more I wanted to say, more I wanted to ask and demand she tell me, but I held my instincts back and let her take the lead.

“There's just a lot of pressure going on. I just needed a moment of reprieve,” she admitted, washing down a small sigh with another pull of her pumpkin ale.

My eyebrows dipped down with concern. “Are you managing okay on that apple farm of yours?”

She gave a shrug. “Who really knows? I'm only a week in. It's a lot of work and there's so much left to learn, but Riley is a godsend. I just suddenly realized how big that place is and how small I am.”

I nodded. “Riley's a good one. And you know if you need help there's plenty of people ready and willing, myself included.”

“He is, and he hasn't even been easy on me, which I appreciate. But between running that, figuring out what I'm going to serve at this festival and the plans for the orchard as a whole, it's all a little stressful. I'm sure I'll figure it out.” She waved it off, clearly not wanting to bring down the night with her stress. But the truth was I *wanted* to listen, to hear how she was doing. It had to be a big change for her to move out here and take everything on and she had my respect for that.

She took another drink, catching my eye as she hummed happily. “I'm not sure whether to be impressed that you're drinking beer, or not surprised because it's pumpkin.”

She nearly choked on the beer at that, a cute little sputter before she recovered quickly. “Well my name *is* Autumn, gotta live up to the reputation, right?”

A carefree laugh spilled from my lips at her fire, and I felt some of the tension from the week melt away.

“So... how is it being a sheriff in a town like this? I can't imagine there's much crime.”

I leaned back and took another drink, the smug smile on my lips still in place as we continued our banter.

“It's a hard job but someone's gotta do it.” She rolled her eyes and I continued, a bit more serious this time. “It's really not too bad. We have more crime during tourist season than we do any other time, but it's usually things like petty theft or small car accidents because people are in too big of a hurry to handle the small town life.”

She nodded with a small smile on her face. “I can imagine, city traffic is the worst. I haven't missed it one bit since coming here.”

“Well it seems the tourists can't leave it behind,” I countered. “We have at least two a season. But other than that I just deal with a few things like rowdy teenagers throwing a party, or neighbor disputes. It's always little things and it always gets resolved pretty quickly. There's a whole lot of old ladies in this town who want to keep Holiday Hollow peaceful. You'll be safe here, omega.”

She nodded knowingly but I didn't miss the relief my words gave her. She quickly defaulted to humor though. “A few Karen's here and there?”

I shrugged. “Yeah, but they always have the best of intentions. Those intentions just end up being a pain in my ass.”

“At least it's not like those videos you see going viral,” she joked.

Before we could continue, Lindsay was back. “Kitchen's gonna be closing in about thirty minutes. You guys want me to put anything in for you?” As if on cue, Autumn's stomach rumbled loudly.

Shaking my head, I reached for the menus. “Yeah, I think we will. Can you give us just a sec, Lindsay?” She nodded and walked away to help someone else.

I slid one menu towards Autumn before opening the other, both of us quiet as we decided. They had an assortment of bar food and I was tempted to order it all to satisfy that growl I'd heard. It irked me that Autumn was hungry, plus you couldn't really go wrong with things like pizza, wings, and mozzarella sticks.

When Lindsay came back, she pulled out an order pad and looked at us expectantly. "What will it be?"

"I think we'll take one of your pepperoni pizzas and some mozzarella sticks. Plus, whatever Autumn wants to add on," I said, giving her an encouraging smile.

"I'm thinking the buffalo wings with a side of ranch, and some chips and queso," she said, her teeth catching her bottom lip.

"Can't go wrong with cheese," Lindsay joked.

"Make the wings a large one please, Linds, and put it on one bill," I said before she could walk away. She nodded and I turned back to Autumn to find her curious eyes on me. "As an apology for the near arrest."

"You didn't have to do that, but thanks," she said with a small smile and I had a feeling that I had caught her a bit off guard. Apparently I liked surprising her and oddly enough... that thought didn't scare me. *Much*.

When our food was brought out, we ate, sharing between us and just chatting about little stuff like our childhoods, what summers were like here for me, what they were like for her. I felt myself relaxing around her and talking to her like an old friend which was something that I definitely didn't do, but I was enjoying our conversation too much to think too deeply about it.

When all our food was finished and Lindsay cleared it away, I turned to her and took the last drink of my beer, our third of the night. We both had a pleasant buzz, and I had a feeling we were both done drinking for the evening, but I didn't want our time together to end just yet.

"Care for a dance?" I asked her.

Surprised, she glanced at the dance floor only to realize it had definitely filled up now.

“You want to dance?” she questioned, her eyes trailing down me.

I scoffed. “I wouldn’t have asked you if I didn’t, darling.”

“Hell yeah,” she said, getting up excitedly.

“Here, I’ll tuck your purse back here,” Lindsay offered her.

“Thanks,” Autumn said, passing it over before Lindsay shot me a look that said *behave*.

I’m sure from the way my mom talked that Autumn knew my reputation, but she didn’t seem to mind and for that I was grateful. Some omegas expected alphas to wait for marriage, especially in a town like this. Hell, and the other way around. But that was outdated thinking and it wasn’t an alpha only trait to play the field when they weren’t tied to a pack, or a pack wasn’t fully settled.

Once she was in my arms, her sweet scent of all things fall soaked into me, and in that moment I knew exactly how screwed I was. There was no way I could resist tightening my grip on her hips ever so slightly as we twisted and two-stepped our way through the music.

We didn’t say anything, her eyes locked on mine as we moved. Our bodies were pressed close enough I could feel every inch of her, and from the way she pressed into me and the strong burst of her scent, I knew she was feeling it too.

You could cut the sexual tension between us with a knife. Song after song we danced, our grips on each other tightening until we were both breathing hard and looking for an excuse to keep touching each other.

I swallowed hard, glancing down at her lips.

“Want to get out of here?”

My palm stayed at the small of her back but didn’t press any further, letting the final decision remain firmly in her court.

She took a second to weigh the decision, and her green eyes meeting mine as emotions flicked one after another before a smile stretched against her lips.

“Are you offering me a bit of fun, sheriff?” she teased.

I grinned back, leaning down and letting my lips brush against her ear. “I’m offering you a whole lot of fun.”

She hummed, pressing herself against me even more.

“My place?” she suggested her fingers traced over my chest, feeling the hard plains beneath.

I moved my lips to hover just above hers, loving the way her breath seemed to catch.

“Back to the scene of the crime...good choice. Let’s go, sweetheart .”

I took her hand and led her off of the dance floor. Lindsay already had her purse ready with a knowing grin. She shot Autumn a wink I probably wasn’t supposed to see.

We made our way out of the brewery, hands brushing slightly as we walked next to each other. Just as we made it to her car, I pulled her close, needing to know the taste of her on my lips before we made the drive back to her house.

I sipped from her, my small testing kisses turning more possessive as she wound her fingers through my hair. She rubbed against me, desperately seeking more than I could give her in the middle of a parking lot and it took all my willpower to break away.

“Don’t make me arrest you for public indecency, darling. Let’s go. I’ll be right behind you.”

Ensuring she was steady first, I made my way to my car, making sure to follow closely behind her the entire way.

The drive back to the orchard was short, but it nearly did me in. I couldn’t stop thinking about Autumn, and from the looks of it where she almost missed the turn into the farm, her mind seemed to be running too.

“A bit distracted?” I called out as we both climbed out of our cars. She tried to play it off cool, sauntering past me with a wicked grin in place.

“What would I have to be distracted about?” She joked.

I let out a growl and chased after her. She yelped and ran up to the house, throwing open the front door. We were going to have a talk about her not taking any unnecessary chances later but for now I was determined to claim my prize.

I was hot on her heels as she neared the bedroom at the end of the hall, catching her mid run and tossing her playfully on the bed.

“You know I’m trained to take down grown men, right?” I teased as I climbed over her.

“The fun is in the chase, sheriff,” she shot back at me with a giggle.

And oh, how right she was.

CHAPTER 6

AUTUMN

My laughter was cut off with a moan as Hunter started licking his way down the column of my throat, his other hand trailing down my side. Goosebumps erupted along my flesh and I was already ready to rip my clothes off for this man.

Damn girl, calm down.

As if he heard my inner pleas, Hunter started to lift my shirt. Cool air hit my exposed skin and the hungry look in his eyes only made me want him more. He expertly took off my bra, giving a small grunt of appreciation before he sucked one hard nipple into his mouth. He teased me with a mix of nibbles and soothing flicks of his tongue before moving onto the other.

His calloused fingers teased over my exposed abdomen, leaving a trail of fire in their wake. I felt like I was so tightly wound I'd spontaneously orgasm any second and embarrass myself, the slick between my thighs already perking up in response to the alpha.

As my hands pushed Hunter's shirt up, I realized that his cockiness was definitely justified. His six pack was sculpted to perfection. Pushing him away, I maneuvered us so he was laying on the bed and I was straddling him.

He got points in my book for letting me manhandle him how I wanted.

"This is nice," he teased, hands kneading my breasts as he grinned up at me like he won the lottery. And damn if that

didn't do things to my own ego. "But you're wearing far too much."

"I could say the same," I grunted as I tried to lift his shirt off, but I couldn't stretch far enough. He chuckled and took pity on me, pulling it off and tossing it aside. "Damn."

"You like what you see?" he asked, shifting me off of him. "Just wait."

I barely held back my eye roll but it was only because my eyes were too busy watching him shimmy out of his tight fitting jeans.

When he pulled his boxers down, freeing his cock, I couldn't help but lick my lips. He was long and thick enough that I knew this was about to be amazing. I didn't hesitate to lean over him, my tongue darting out to tease the tip before swirling around the head.

Hunter groaned and reclined back, but his eyes never stopped watching.

He tasted so good on my tongue, and I knew then and there that one taste of him wouldn't satisfy me.

"No biting. No knots," I said, pulling off him slightly before we both were too lust drunk to think properly.

"Just fun," he promised.

Wrapping my fingers around his base, I used my hand as a guide as I fully took him into my mouth. When I hollowed my cheeks and gave him everything I had, my lips almost kissing the base of his knot, his moans reached new levels.

I'd always been a pleaser, and hearing his praise and groans of pleasure did me in, my own need and perfume rising to the surface.

"Sweetheart, you have to stop," he drawled, breathless and disheveled and looking like an Adonis in his own right.

He didn't give me the chance to get my bearings before he had me flipped on my back. My jeans were ripped away in moments, my lacy panties along with it. Hunter froze at the sight of me, letting his eyes rove over me excruciatingly slow

and I swore I could feel his gaze like a caress. He brought my discarded panties to his nose and breathed in the scent of my slick.

“Are you just going to stare or are you actually going to do something about it, sheriff?”

“Oh, I’m going to do something about it all right, beautiful. But before I have you coming on my cock I need to taste you on my tongue,” he said, giving me one last long look before he dove between my thighs.

The man did nothing in halves, devouring me with the same attention he’d shown me since I’d met him. He licked a full wet stripe up my slit, a muffled curse against my sex before he began to get to work.

“Hunter!” I screamed, my hands finding his short hair and holding him to me as he slid two fingers inside me, curling at just the right angle as his tongue sucked and swirled around my clit, humming like my slick was the best thing he’d ever tasted.

Over and over he fucked me, pulling moan after moan from me until my thighs clamped around his head.

A purr rumbled from him, vibrating against my sex and pushing me over the edge as I clenched around his fingers, pleasure washing over me as my body grew hot and burned brighter.

If that’s what it felt like to come on his tongue, then holy pumpkin pie, I wanted to know what it felt like to come on his cock.

“Don’t worry, omega, you’ll know soon enough,” he said with a laugh, pulling away, his face glistening with my slick. “If you’re talking about pie though, you may want to figure out how to bake something that smells and tastes just like you, you’d be sure to win that contest then.”

For fuck’s sake, had I said that out loud?

“Still are, sweetheart. It’s doing wonders for this big ego of mine,” he said, his hard cock pressing hotly against my thigh.

Reaching behind me I grabbed a pillow and chucked it at his cocky little face.

“Get that ego of yours inside me before I combust,” I said with a growl.

He chuckled before reaching into his discarded pants for a condom and sliding it on. I thought he was going to take me, dominate me, but instead he maneuvered onto his back, cock sheathed and ready for me, his signature grin back in place.

“Come on, sweetheart. I need this image burned into my brain,” he said, the excitement in his voice making me shake my head.

I climbed on top, not willing to wait any longer. I wasn't delicate, lining him up and sinking down on him in one move. We both groaned as he filled me, the sensation exquisite.

Nothing says stress relief like an orgasm or two.

It had been far too long since I'd indulged in a night like this, and I found myself feeling greedy, wanting to make the most out of the moment we were sharing together.

Bracing my hands on his chest, I started to ride the sexy sheriff alpha, using him to find my own release. I took greedy breaths of him, drawing in his salty ocean scent.

His hands gripped my hips, helping me move and whispering delightfully delicious things that would have made me blush if I wasn't already flushed all over.

“Yes,” he groaned. “Work that pretty little pussy on me and use me exactly how you need. Show me how much you want it.”

He filled me in ways I scarcely wanted to admit to myself, my toys never feeling as good or as hot as he did.

Following his words, I rode him harder, the harsh sounds of our bodies moving together filling the air. His blue eyes stayed locked on mine the entire time, adding another layer of connection.

My orgasm rolled through me with enough intensity that I cried out, head falling back as pleasure swirled through my

entire being. But it had been far too fucking long, and I needed more. I needed to come completely undone. I wanted to be fucked and taken until every last thought was driven from my mind and all that left was the floating feeling of pure bliss.

“Please,” I said, a small whine escaping me as the smell of freshwater grew stronger in the room, his chest rumbling in response to my plea.

I was desperate for more, greedy, but I couldn’t care less. Hunter certainly didn’t seem to mind.

“Even better than I imagined,” he praised. “Are you sure you want more, sweetheart? I don’t know if you’ll be able to take it.”

“Give it to me now, Hunter. I swear to gods if you don’t you’ll regret it,” I growled, his words causing me to rally in response.

“Is this what you want?” he asked, taking over, his grip on my hips tightening as he began to thrust into me.

I could feel his knot grind against me with each thrust, and just the thought of it, of how it might have felt inside me was enough to have me clenching around him all over again.

“Oh god. I’m—”

“That’s it, Autumn. Let me see you fall like those pretty little leaves.”

Hunter redoubled his efforts reaching a hand between us and teasing my clit until I was coming again, my slick making us slip together even faster, extending my own orgasm as my eyes screwed shut and I heard him gasp as I pulled his own warm release from him.

Collapsing against him, we stayed connected as our heart rates slowed.

Eventually I rolled off of him and he got up to clean up, coming back to snuggle into my back and pulling me close, the mix of our scents in the air settling over us. The cuddles were almost as amazing as the sex and I found myself drifting off to sleep, hoping round two would come before he left.

A GENTLE TOUCH on my arm woke me in the morning. Pulling my head from where it was buried in the pillow, I looked up to see a growingly familiar face smiling down on me.

“Hey,” I said sleepily. “I’m surprised you stuck around.”

Rolling over I stretched a little, enjoying the slight tinge in my muscles and the way Hunter’s eyes roamed over my body. He was already fully dressed, sitting on the side of my bed.

“Honestly, me too,” he admitted, with a little shrug. “But it’s not like we’re never going to see each other again, and well, I’d like us to be friends.”

Even while my foggy brain was still waking up, I could tell he was slightly uncomfortable. This was clearly uncharted territory for him. I was no holiday honey who would be gone the next few days like he said.

It was kind of adorable. It also made me reaffirm my opinion of him that he was a good man at heart. He could have just cut and run but he’d made the choice to at least wait until I was awake.

“Friends sounds good,” I said, debating if I should leave it at that or razz him again just because I could. Oh, who was I kidding. “Although a real friend would have brought out those handcuffs again.”

Laughter escaped us both as he bent over and placed one light kiss on the corner of my mouth before rising out of bed and taking his keys out of his pocket.

“See you around friend,” he said heading for the front door. It wasn’t until he was almost there that he turned around, throwing a smirk over his shoulder. “Or should I say neighbor?”

“What?!” I questioned, fully awake now.

“Don’t forget to lock your door this time!”

The sight of his retreating back and the subsequent sound of his truck starting was my only answer.

I knew Janet had said the boys were close, but fuck me, she could have told me they lived together.

CHAPTER 7

AUTUMN

With my mind clear and my body way more relaxed than I'd like to give Hunter credit for, I enjoyed a cup of coffee. It was an amazing fall roast I'd picked up from Claire's the other day while running errands. Now that I had coffee in hand and partially consumed, I focused on getting ready for the important day ahead of me.

As I showered I made sure to use the scent eliminating soap I'd rummaged through my boxes to find, the bottle basically full from its lack of use. Let's just say my romp with Hunter was *very* needed. I let my mind have one more moment of enjoyment of my previous night's activities before facing the reality of my day.

I'd just finished getting dressed and running a handful of mousse through my wavy locks when I heard the knock at the front door.

"It's open!" I called, knowing that Riley had probably just shown up a few minutes early.

I heard a shove against the frame. "Not so much, babe."

Seems like Hunter hadn't wanted to wait for me to get out of bed and locked the bottom twist lock even while trying to boss me around with his warning.

I opened the door, watching as Riley took a few steps. "Sorry about that."

"I don't care about the door, but you could warn a beta before you air out your love den, holy shit."

I fought the urge to blush, stepping onto the porch and leaving the door open while closing the screen. “Why don’t we go over everything in the barn?”

Riley took my cue as I slipped on my shoes and the two of us walked through the yard back to the barn.

He maybe lasted all of two minutes before the questions started. “Does the good sheriff’s baton live up to the hype?”

“For fuck sakes Riley, you can tell it was him?”

“Easy babe, you don’t smell like him now. I may have been out to dinner myself last night with Claire and saw you leaving Holiday Brews with him. It looked like you were all for it, but if that’s your reaction then you need to tell me whether or not I’m going to have to kick his ass. I’ve been practicing apple throwing lately for the festival. I can probably beam him really good in the eye and bruise him up. Honestly that’s probably the only fighting skills I have to my name.”

My shoulders relaxed. “Oh gods, no. He was actually nice about everything. I just didn’t want everyone in town thinking we were an item or something. I know how fast word travels around here.”

“Nice? *Nice*?! One does not sleep with the town’s most eligible bachelor and then say it’s *nice*. Need I remind you how I’ve shared my fair share of dating woes with you over many late night calls? Dish.”

I shook my head, knowing Riley wouldn’t relent, and honestly, I did want someone to talk to. He’d been an amazing friend, and I knew he didn’t have a judgmental bone in his body.

“It was more than nice, okay,” I said, as we finally came into the barn. My cheeks were redder than a red delicious now. “Multiple times nice that I won’t soon forget. Not that I’d tell him that and let it get to that big ego of his.”

“Yes!” he said with a grin. “Gotta keep those alphas in check. So...what now?”

“Business as usual?” I said with a shrug. “We both knew it was a casual thing and we agreed to being friends. I need to

focus on the farm right now anyway, we've got plans to make, mister."

Riley raised his hands in response. "Fine fine, I can tell when someone isn't looking to get packed up."

Truth was, even though my parents' relationship had left a sour taste in my mouth, it had never turned me away from the thought of having a pack one day. If anything, having a pack might have changed the situation.

My mom and dad had decided against having one, both of them wrapped up in the progressiveness of city life, so when mom passed there wasn't a real support system like a pack to rally behind. My father wasn't a bad dad, he had just never been what I'd call empathetic. I got the obligatory phone calls and cards on holidays and my birthday, but besides that, that was it.

It was the summers he'd sent me here to the farm that taught me what a pack could really mean. Not only had I'd seen the way my grandpas had doted after my grandma, but after she'd passed I'd seen the way they'd taken care of each other as well.

I looked to Riley who was watching me with a concerned expression.

"Not right now," I agreed, finally answering his question. "But one day."

"First, you want to show how much of a bad ass you are and win that pie competition don't you?" he said, lightening the mood.

"Pie competition...figuring out the booth for the Fall Festival, how to make this infamous cider everyone talks about and maintaining the legacy of my family, not to mention making sure the farm runs smoothly and our crop that sustains us year round goes off without a hitch so this whole thing doesn't go up in smoke. But sure, yes, the pie competition."

Riley let out a long sigh. "Have a little faith, Autumn. Your grandparents wouldn't have left this place to you if they didn't think you could handle it."

I looked around inside the barn, the baskets and bins lining the far side of the space and the racks that lined the shelves closest to us filled with supplies and jars of preserves left over from seasons past. I took a seat at the long table next to the barn kitchen and pulled out the list I'd been making throughout the week and put it on the table.

"I know," I said, patting a seat next to me. "But I also know that you've had to have been burning yourself out at both ends. My background is in business and marketing, I know what it takes to maintain this place and I know we can't hold in the same pattern for much longer. Realistically, what do you need the most, Riley?"

"Hands," he admits with a grimace. "We'll need more hands than we currently have for the harvest. The land's doing alright but could use a bit of upkeep and we need more help. The last few years we've just been selling the apples wholesale to a large distributor that we haven't used locally, which is the only reason we've been able to make it on the labor front, seasonal help aside."

"While selling wholesale helps us stay in the green, it doesn't leave much room. I know we have the maintenance fund gramps set aside, but it's not enough to cover everything. After the pack passed, I know he was simply maintaining. There's bound to be machinery and such we're going to need to update and replace that hasn't been handled in years and lord knows you could use at least a couple more dedicated staff. All of that is going to require something more than what the orchard has been doing the last handful of years," I said.

I already had ideas spinning through my head, paths and avenues we could take to set the orchard up for success. My grandparents had already done a fantastic job with the place, making sure it stayed that way was nothing more than some hard work and an honor I was ready for.

"I know I already got you all the crop projections for this year and obviously you've been looking over the financials, but I did make a list of the gear and machines that are wearing thin. They should hold for the season, but after that, we'll need to replace them," Riley said, producing his own list for me.

It was something I appreciated about him. The beta sure did know how to have fun, but he also worked hard. I knew he loved this orchard just as much as I did. And everything he'd handed me I could trust was honest and necessary. That was huge.

I read through the list, the items and figures not all that shocking. Overall, it just affirmed what I knew all along. We needed to diversify the business and reinvest in ourselves. We were a successful family business for sure, but if we started using our own product to make goods and such it would open so many more possibilities.

Hell, people loved the family cider so much, if I could figure out the recipe and bottle that, it'd probably be liquid gold.

“So first things first,” I said, turning to Riley. “I want you to hire a few people who know their stuff and you trust to be your right hands in the fields, build the team you want. I think we both know my skills lie elsewhere and with that I can concentrate on our showing at the Fall Festival and figuring out our strategic game plan for the crop.”

“You want me to hire them?” he questioned. “Isn't that an owner thing?”

“Riley.” I leveled him with a serious look. “I know you've been doing more work than you've let on even with gramps still alive. Make your team. For now, I'm only here for the season. There's no one else I'd trust to do this.”

A smile stretched across his face, a look of determination in his eye. “I won't let you down, Autumn.”

“As far as I'm concerned you're family. We're in this together.”

“Damn straight we are,” he said, knocking his shoulder against mine. “Okay well, not straight on my part. But I get your point.”

For the next few hours we hashed every little single thing out, which eventually led to me grabbing my laptop from the house to keep organized with the game plan.

The main thing I needed to focus on first was the upcoming Fall Festival and our offerings there. Figuring out what products to make and sell was essentially the perfect launching ground for what I was envisioning for our orchard.

Hundreds of people traveled to Holiday Hollow for the event which meant hundreds of potential customers, especially if I was thinking about commercial efforts. Not only that, but the festival gave back to the community and supported so many of those who were less fortunate. This city was a special place where everyone pulled together, and I didn't want to let them or myself down.

"You could stay, you know?" Riley said once we were finished. It was such a serious voice for my friend that it caught me off guard. "You don't have to completely update and accomplish this in one season."

"I know," I acknowledged. "But I want to do this not just for the orchard but for me too. I had quite a few offers I left back in the city and sorting this out will help me decide which direction I want to take. I'm not saying I'm leaving for certain, but it's something I owe to myself to give plenty of thought to."

To say I was an overachiever was putting it mildly. Then again, maybe the constant stigma of feeling like I had to prove myself twice as hard because I was an omega had something to do with that.

Regardless, I'd come away with my Masters and a handful or so of job offers, all of which I kindly informed I was unavailable until winter. It was a risky move sure, but having and running my own small business was something invaluable when it came to skillset, and once I explained that to the head hunters they practically salivated.

In truth it left me feeling the slightest bit icky at their reaction, but then again, I knew that the orchard was personal to me whereas they viewed it simply as business.

"That's not what I meant, Autumn," Riley said, rising from his stool and picking up his cup. "I need to get back at it, start

looking for those extra hands as soon as possible. Do you need anything else today?”

“I’m going to be working on finalizing this most of the day and I planned on stopping by and seeing Beatrice at the diner for lunch since I haven’t had a chance to swing by yet. Do you want me to bring you anything?”

“I’m good,” he said, shaking his head. “I’ll catch you tomorrow.”

I wasn’t dumb. I knew what that sliver of wistfulness in his voice meant, but I hadn’t lived in the city and worked my ass off to give it all up. I knew Riley understood that too, just as gramps had when he’d encouraged me to stay on and finish up. And honestly I was so torn I knew it would take every bit of time I had here to figure out the right direction to take.

By the time I made it to the diner I was hangry and had a mild headache. Not the best look for me, but I knew that I had come to exactly the right place for the cure.

Beatrice’s diner looked the same on the outside as it always had. It was an adorable barn made of faded wood that had the perfect country aesthetic. The front walk was lined with handmade rocking chairs for guests to wait for a table on busy nights and tourist season.

Inside I was shocked to see that they’d done plenty of upgrading. The counter was no longer an old ugly vinyl made of a huge slab of wood that was left uneven and rough around the edges, but coated in resin to keep it gorgeous. The walls were planked wood and behind the counter every bit of wall that wasn’t taken up by the long prep bar or the order window was covered in shelves. They’d lined them in rustic antiques and old liquor bottles. The daily specials were written on a large chalkboard and I knew it was the same one from when I was a kid.

Each table was covered in a checkered cloth but nothing about the place screamed simple diner. It fit the theme of the town and I bet the tourists ate it up. From the vintage photos and farm tools bolted to the walls it was that wonderfully

chaotic decor that made you feel like you were being transported back in time.

I doubted very much the food had changed, and honestly hoped it hadn't, but I was excited to find out.

"Do my eyes deceive me or is that little Autumn Cedarwick walking through my front door?" A warm familiar voice asked me.

Spinning around I saw that Ol' Beatty hadn't aged a day, still exuding the love and charm the beta had shown me growing up, her curls still perfectly in place. When she pulled me in for a hug, I had to fight the snuffle that rose to my throat, suddenly feeling a bit sentimental.

Beatty had been my grandmother's best friend and seeing her again had unexpectedly brought back up a pang of sadness I hadn't expected.

"Oh honey, I know," she said quietly in my ear. "I miss them too."

"Sorry it took me so long to stop by," I said, giving her one more hug before pulling back and taking a deep breath.

"Nonsense," she said, shushing me. "We're pretty slammed right now, but grab a seat and we can catch up after the rush if you're still around. If not, you'll just have to come around for Sunday dinner, you hear me?"

"Yes, ma'am," I said, waving her off as she got back to the crazy packed diner.

I spun around looking for an empty spot, only to hear my name being called from a booth in the corner, Jack waving a hand over to come and join him.

As I neared, I realized he wasn't alone, the same quiet alpha I'd met in the hardware store the other day sitting across from him, his brown eyes tracking my movements as I neared them.

"Oh I don't want to impose," I argued despite there being only available seats at the counter.

“Nonsense,” Jack said, sliding over so I had no choice. And I was grateful, because eating alone had never been my thing. As I sat down I felt eyes studying me and hoped I wasn’t unwelcome by the quiet man across from me.

CHAPTER 8

JACK

She stood for a second, glancing at Boone with a hint of worry in her eyes as she chewed on her lip, debating on if she wanted to intrude. I knew that feeling of awkwardness well, my social skills were a far cry different from my brother's. He was confident and charming, able to talk to anyone without a separate thought while it took me a time or two to warm up to people.

"Don't worry about Boone, you can join us. He's just reserved," I promised, giving my friend a look as she glanced his way. He was too busy looking at her and breathing in deep, meaning he'd noticed how good she smelled as well. When he caught my eye he took another deep breath and gestured for her to sit. She relaxed at that and took a seat.

"It's crazy how much this place has changed," she noted. It was an attempt at small talk, but little did she know it was the perfect topic.

"Boone did most of the work," I said and he blushed, groaning slightly at the attention. She laughed at his reaction, the sound adorable and melodic. Her face was relaxed now and she looked even more gorgeous than the first time I'd met her. Between that and the scent of sugar, spice, and fresh apples, I had to force myself to not react.

"That's amazing. The counter? It's phenomenal and honestly the whole place is so inviting and fits the aesthetic the town shoots for. I bet it looks amazing in any backdrop. Fall, winter, hell even summer and it's my least favorite season," she rambled on excitedly before trailing off with a blush.

“Sorry, didn’t mean to go on and on. It’s just crazy being back here.”

“Miss city life?” Boone asked, shocking us both.

Autumn recovered easily, shooting my best friend an interested look before answering.

“Yes and no,” she said with a shrug but was cut off as our waitress swung back by.

“Hey boys can I get yo-” she cut off as her eyes landed on Autumn and her face soured slightly before she recovered. “Oh sorry, didn’t see you there. Can I get you something?” Her reaction was out of character. Usually Theresa was nothing but kind, befitting her beta nature, even if a bit *too* friendly with us.

“Oh, I haven’t even looked at the menu,” Autumn realized as she grabbed one off the table and glanced through it quickly. “How about the fall harvest french toast and a glass of milk. I know it’s lunchtime but I can’t resist.”

“Sure,” she said with more than a little judgment in her voice before turning back to us and smiling bright. “Can I get you anything, Boone?”

She was practically purring her words and I knew how much he was hating this right about now, especially as he shifted back in his seat an inch from her attention.

“Actually, I’d love another coffee and a slice of pie. I’ll take the peach, and he’ll take the cherry,” I said for both of us.

“On it,” she promised before rushing off.

“Tough crowd,” Autumn noted, shooting me a questioning look. “Did I piss off a girlfriend or something?”

“No,” I promised. “She’s been after Boone for years and she’s just not really his type.”

“Does the man speak for himself?” Autumn teased. There was no judgment behind it, the words felt more curious, like she was trying to figure us out.

We weren't the best example of a pack, with living different places and having Boone be willfully, stubbornly independent. My brother and I were close and Boone had always been our best friend, but the man had trust issues. Honestly they both did. Their issues were understandable, but they also made things difficult. He had a room at the house but rarely used it.

"Sometimes," Boone said, evenly as he took a sip of his own coffee. "Did you get the place painted?"

She smiled. "I think I underestimated my free time. There's so much to do but yeah I got some painting done in the house that day. It's just about all I'll be able to get done for a while. The whole orchard needs some TLC but we're hiring some hands and setting plans in motion."

There was a pride in her that I'd seen in her grandfathers, especially Roger. I was glad someone was taking over the orchard that truly loved it.

Holiday Hollow was a special town and having an outsider come in wasn't easy for most people. If she had tried to sell it I think we'd all be holding our breath, afraid someone would buy it and try to turn it into a franchise. Our town thrived on family owned and small businesses, something we prided ourselves on and honestly, it gave the town its charm.

"Here you go," Theresa said as she slid across the coffee, and pie, before turning and offering Autumn her milk and french toast. "I'm Theresa by the way. How long are you in town for?"

"Autumn. I just got to town but I'm taking over my family's orchard," she said with a smile. Theresa seemed to relax a bit at that and left with a quick 'enjoy your food'.

"Looks like your sweet tooth strikes again," I teased her as she dug into the apple crumble topped french toast. She narrowed her eyes playfully.

"Don't act like you don't have just as big of one." Her pretty eyes flickered to the pie in front of me. "And don't think I missed how much sugar you keep on hand."

Boone let out a short laugh that had Autumn beaming. It took a lot to earn one of those from him so it was well deserved pride on her part.

We all ate in companionable silence, throwing out the random town gossip and small talk here and there. By the time she pushed her plate away with a groan, the place had all but cleared out.

“Glad my headache is gone now at least,” she said. “I love marketing and business planning but staring at the screen for too long is the worst, especially when I forget to eat.”

I made a note to make sure to invite her over to dinner more, and if she politely refused, then I’d just make extra servings and leave them on her doorstep.

“At least you have the perfect land to take walks on to clear your mind,” Boone offered. She smiled wistfully at that.

“You haven’t lived until you’ve watched the sun rise against that backdrop,” she agreed. “I’m a lucky woman. It’s definitely not something I got in the city.”

“Just remember we’re around if you need anything,” I said.

“You too,” she challenged. “Friendship goes both ways. But I’m sure Boone will see me soon enough, I need to get some materials to fix the stairs and I’ll be bugging you for some Fall Festival insight. You might regret your hospitable offer.”

“Not a chance,” I promised. Our conversation was cut off as Beatrice came over with our checks. Before Autumn could complain much Boone snatched both and slid out of the booth to go pay at the register. The old woman took his spot without hesitation and started grilling Autumn about everything that had happened since she’d come last as a kid. She was just as open and sweet to her as she was with us. It was rare to find someone who was genuinely just nice.

“I have to get back to work,” Boone announced, just grunting at Autumn’s thanks for paying for her food before waving and rushing out.

“You’ve won over Boone already?” Beatrice asked in shock. “I’m impressed.”

“He’s sweet,” Autumn offered. “I hear he’s responsible for all this gorgeous work.” She waved at the diner and Beatrice nodded enthusiastically.

“Yes! He was a godsend. I mentioned it one day while replacing my stash of lightbulbs and he offered to help. Within six months we had a whole new look and last tourist season I got twice as much business.”

“Who designed it all?” Autumn asked curiously.

“Theresa, my niece,” she answered. “She’s great at decorating on a budget. If you ever need help spicing up that property give her a call.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Autumn promised before Beatrice was called back to the counter.

“She has so much energy,” I pointed out as she slid behind the counter to joke with a fresh wave of customers. There was always someone coming in to chat with her, it made people feel less alone. Ol’ Beatty was a staple in Holiday Hollow.

“She does,” she agreed with a fond chuckle. “She loved to give my grandpa shit, the only one who really joked with him after the pack passed and he needed that in his life.”

“He was pretty serious,” I agreed. “Your grandma’s opposite.”

“You knew them well?” she asked.

“Yeah, they were amazing. We’d do dinners every so often and she was always so sweet. She’d bake with mom and I sometimes.”

I faltered for a moment realizing that my memory might make Autumn sad from what she’d missed.

“Wait. So you’re saying your top secret recipe might have come from my grandma?!” she asked with a laugh.

“Oh my god, how could I forget!” I gasped, smacking my head lightly at the realization. Her eyes widened at my

expression. “I found an old cookbook from her last night! My pantry needed some organization and I climbed on the ladder to dust the top shelf and sort it and found a few stuck up there. The rest were mom’s but that one was definitely from your grandma.”

“Really?” she gasped.

“I’ll drop it by soon, promise! Maybe you’ll have a chance at winning after all,” I joked.

“If my kitchen can even handle it. That stove might just be older than I am,” she said, chewing her lip again. I was quickly learning it was a nervous thing. “The first time I fired it up it smelled funny, and had a bit of smoke, but thankfully it cleared after a while.”

“You should have Boone take a look,” I said quickly. “We can’t have you starting a fire in that old of a house.”

I’d delivered my words lightly but now I was genuinely worried. The house hadn’t been changed much since we were kids and here she was using more electricity and the appliances more than they’d been used in years upon years.

“I’ll talk to him,” she promised with a groan. “He’s going to hate me by the time summer ends. There’s so much that needs an update out there.”

“The work makes him happy. Boone’s not the idle kind of guy,” I reassured her. It was something he’d done since he was old enough to have a job. As teens most of us were swimming during the summer in the local creeks and aside from the few times we’d dragged him out there, he was doing odd jobs around town.

“I got that impression from him,” she said as she stood up. “I’m really glad we ran into each other Jack, we should do it more often. I better get back to work though. Thanks for the company.”

“Of course,” I said, following her out.

Part of me wanted to make up some kind of an excuse, ask for more of her time, but I knew it wasn’t my place. She had a

ton of things on her plate and she didn't need me selfishly adding to it.

Before I could grab the door for her, it swung open and my brother walked in. He stopped short at the sight of us and then narrowed his eyes as he breathed in.

"You smell like you," he accused her. The alpha intensity in his words was unlike him and we both just blinked at him in surprise before he cleared his throat. "I mean, good afternoon." My brother was flustered. Interesting.

"Uh, I better go," she said, shooting Hunter a questioning look. "Friends don't comment on how other friends smell, sheriff. Get yourself together or I'll have to make a citizen's arrest for you being uncool."

It seemed my brother had already won her over and I couldn't stop the pang of jealousy that hit me as I walked back to my own truck to head back home.

Usually I couldn't care less about who he set his sights on, but Autumn felt different, and I didn't like the idea of him using her and tossing her aside like he tended to do. It wasn't something he did maliciously, he was just deeply allergic to commitment. Something we've never seen eye to eye on, which was another reason our pack was less than perfect.

Hunter didn't want to commit, Boone was scared to commit, and I desired it more than anything.

Instead of heading home, I ended up at my mom's office in town hall. Like usual I was met with a kiss on the cheek and a hug, which is what I had unknowingly wanted and helped soothe that small pang that sat with me. Mom was affectionate and sweet, the best kind of mom honestly.

"What's this I hear about sharing lunch with a certain orchard owner?" she teased as she sat behind her desk. Her pink painted lips were turned into a mischievous smile that had me laughing.

"Well that was fast. Boone and I were just being friendly," I countered, even though I wished it was more. "Try not to read too much into it."

“I would never,” she deadpanned before bursting into laughter. “A mom has to hope. You boys have all fought finding an omega for so long. I’m not getting any younger, you know.”

“I’m gonna go,” I joked with a groan. It wasn’t the first or likely last time we had this lovely little chat. She’d be an amazing grandma, she just had to be patient.

“Actually,” she said, more serious this time as she stood and went to one of her work tables. “I need to run this over to her. Save me a trip?”

“Smooth, mom,” I laughed. “But yes, of course I will.”

“This time no underlying intentions. The festival is coming on fast and we just had another dispute about booth placements and the high school is putting on the haunted house and a few of the kids are dropping by in twenty minutes to give me the rundown for approval.”

Mom was clearly overwhelmed and I made a mental note to make her a batch of cookies and drop them off tomorrow. She needed to stop running herself ragged but that wasn’t something I could say out loud. Mom was a proud omega who barely listened to her alpha, let alone her worried son.

I gathered up the basket and swung by home for the cookbook before dropping both off at Autumn’s house. Even I wasn’t too proud to admit I was glad for another reason to see her.

The hug I got for bringing them by and the scent of everything fall wrapping around me meant more than I dared to give thought to and I left her house trying to cling to the faint scent of her that filled my lungs.

This season was definitely going to be interesting.

CHAPTER 9

AUTUMN

I 'd spent most of the morning pouring through the cookbook Jack had brought by yesterday afternoon, incredibly grateful that he'd found it.

Seeing my grandma's familiar writing in the columns and all over the sheets of her typed up recipes brought back fond memories of us in the kitchen and barn. It was a treasure I didn't expect to have and it honestly couldn't come at a better time. There were so many good ideas to use for the Fall Festival, here and ready for me to make use of.

It was the steady sound of hammering that pulled me from the book and had me opening the door, wondering what on earth was going on.

There on his hands and knees, seemingly fixing the rotting step of the porch was none other than the big teddy of an alpha I'd had lunch with yesterday.

"Boone?"

The hammering stopped for a moment as he tilted his eyes up in acknowledgement before getting back to work.

Not knowing exactly what to do, I went back inside to fetch him a cup of coffee. I didn't know how he took it so I made it exactly like mine with half the amount of sugar.

In the short time it took me to make him a cup he was already working on the last step, the old boards set aside in a corner pile. He paused when I came out, accepting the cup from my hands.

“Thanks,” he said, trying to hide his wince as he took a sip.

“Sorry,” I apologized, quickly trying to take the mug back from his hand. “I didn’t know how you took your coffee.”

He let me take the cup, reaching a hand back to rub his neck. “I’m grateful either way. Do you want these stained to match the rest of the deck or do you want to wait until you’ve decided what to redo with the place?”

“Wait until I’ve decided,” I confirmed. “It’s no use going to the extra work for aesthetics right now. I sure am appreciative, but you didn’t have to come all the way out here and take time out of your day to do this Boone. I was planning on swinging by later.”

“You mentioned it yesterday,” he said with a grunt. “Didn’t want you hurting yourself or anything. Can I take a look at the stove?”

I watched as he gathered his tools, adding them to the large metal box at his side before turning to face me again, his shoulders curling in on himself when he found my eyes on him. I didn’t know who’d hurt him in the past but bless their heart, I wanted to carve their rind.

“Sure, but I have a few questions for you first,” I said, startling the poor alpha.

He grunted, his feet moving half a length back. “I overstepped.”

“Hush,” I told him, taking a drink from the mug I’d taken back from him. “They aren’t life or death questions and I’m extremely grateful for you coming out here, Boone. I just want to know how you take your coffee.”

“Why?” He asked, the confusion in his voice clear.

“Well, I’d like to know for the next time we’re together so I don’t apparently try to poison you with my cream and sugar with a splash of Joe.” I swear to all things wholesome in Holiday Hollow the alpha actually blushed and I felt a lick of desire roll through me. “So?”

“I don’t drink coffee,” he admitted. “Tea, cocoa, cider.”

“Ahh, so you’ll be one of the ones wanting some of the Cedarwick’s famous blend as well, aren’t you?”

“It’s my favorite,” he admitted.

“I knew you had good taste,” I said with a smile, “which brings me to my next question. What are you doing tomorrow night?”

“Fish fry.” It was going to be hard work to get answers out of this man. Good thing I’d never shied away from a challenge. And despite not knowing him well... or at all, I liked the alpha a whole lot already.

“What about the night after?” I asked, only to be met with a shrug of his shoulders. “Perfect, then I’ll be taking you out to dinner. Come on, you can look at the stove if you want now.”

“What?” the alpha barked, the sharp sound doing things to my insides before he quickly regathered himself and stomped up the stairs to come join me where I’d turned back to the house.

“You and I are going to dinner the day after tomorrow,” I said firmly, before adding on at the last second, “unless you really truly don’t want to share a meal with me.”

“Are you asking me out?” he asked with a growl.

“So what if I am?” I countered, leaning a hip against the kitchen counter and setting the mug down.

Sure I wanted to thank him for his generosity, but there was something more that I couldn’t quite put my finger on, similar to the way I felt when I was with Jack if I was honest.

The two of us stared at each other, the tension growing between us. I wanted to know more about the kind hearted man in the flannel. Not just because I wanted to know who put that caution in his step, but because I wanted to see him smile at me like he did at the diner yesterday. I wanted to earn his trust and confidence.

Not for the first time since meeting him I wished I could truly smell him, if only just to know how he was feeling. The

only thing I picked up from him were severely muted wood tones.

“Okay,” Boone agreed after a moment.

“Fantastic, I’ll need your number please.”

He passed his phone over without a word and I was surprised that it didn’t have a lock screen on it, just a photo of him and Jack standing next to some kind of cabin in the background. I quickly dialed my own phone number then saved off my name while he opened up the old wood burning stove, closing and opening up different vents.

“Don’t use this until it’s cleaned, or the whole place might catch on fire. I’ll call someone, get them out to look at it,” Boone said. “It’s a little outside my scope.”

“It’s okay,” I assured him, passing him his phone back. I guess there’d be no more pie testing for me until then. “Really, Boone you didn’t have to do any of this, I appreciate you stopping by.”

He nodded, taking a deep breath in before letting his shoulders relax. “I wanted to. Is there anything else you want me to take a look at while I’m here?”

A laugh escaped me. “That list is way too long, honey. I need to decide what to do with this place first, which probably won’t happen until I sort out the orchard and Fall Festival. Trust me, when I’m ready to hire someone to fix up the place you’ll be the first one I call.”

“Not looking for a job,” he replied, the bass of his voice deepening.

“I know, I know,” I assured him, hustling him out of the place before he could find another thing to fix, which was basically everything. “But if the work needs to be done, then I’d rather hire someone I trust.”

His sharp inhale of breath was the only indication from him that he’d heard my statement. But the truth was, I did trust him already, which was a little strange for sure, but something about him, despite his size, made me feel safe and I found myself feeling protective of him.

“If you change your mind, I’ll be next door for a few hours.”

“Say, do you have any extra two-by-fours?” I asked, an idea floating through my mind. I’d been wanting to work outside and enjoy some of the fresh fall air but there was just one teensy tiny little problem I needed to clear up first.

“I do,” he answered with a hint of suspicion. I had a strong feeling that he had no idea what to make of me. That was a reaction I got fairly often, especially as an omega who preferred to handle things on my own when I could.

When I offered no further explanation he went to the back of his truck and pulled out three boards, laying them on the ground and raising an eyebrow as if to ask if that worked.

“That’s perfect. Thank you,” I said excitedly, waving as he drove off.

My mind was already working on the possibilities so I ran inside with more than a little spring in my steps. I’d spotted some old boxes in one of the bedrooms and went right for them.

Ripping off the first, I sneezed as a cloud of dust rose in the air. With watering eyes I made my way to the window and opened it, taking in a few deep breaths of fresh air before going back to the box. Inside were old video tapes and a few pictures. I smiled as I flipped through the old Polaroids. Each one showed my grandparents’ pack smiling back at me. Even the grumpy old alpha managed a smile or two mixed in with the looks of adoration he cast down at them.

Moving onto the next I found what I was looking for. An array of old clothes that were weathered enough to be useless for much else. After gathering an armful I went back outside and dropped it off by the pile of wood.

Making scarecrows wasn’t something I’d ever done before, but a quick search online was all I needed to figure it out. Plus, I had done enough work on the orchard to know how to dig a hole for a post.

While digging around the tool shed I found the tool I needed and some quick mix cement to hold the post in properly.

All that I had left was to pick the perfect spots.

Walking the orchard was generally refreshing, but at the moment all I could think about was the day that prompted this entire project.

I had just arrived at the orchard the day before and once I finished helping grandma do the dishes I ran out to find grandpa Roger. Helping outside was my favorite part of being in Holiday Hollow. That and grandma's cooking.

"Grandpa?" I called out as I walked through the trees. The apples were shining bright red in the morning sun and a breeze was blowing through the trees. It was so much more peaceful than the city where my parents insisted we live.

The shriek of a bird was all my warning before an entire flock of crows dive bombed the tree I was walking under. They pecked at the apples and eventually the bright red hat I was wearing.

My screams echoed in the orchard and soon a whole stampede of footsteps was running my way. Alpha gramps was at the front of the line, brandishing a rake like a madman as he scared them away from his crop and me.

By the time grandpas Allen and John scooped me up and took me inside to safety, I was crying up a storm. And thus my hatred for the winged assholes began.

A laugh escaped as I remembered it all, feeling so silly now but it didn't matter. My fear was unshakable.

With three locations picked out I started to use the post hole digger to dig a deep enough hole for the board. When all three were cemented and set, I finally went back to the tool shed to grab some extra wire and started working on the clothes for my scarecrow friends.

"What are you doing?" Jack's voice was full of amusement. I was so engrossed in my work that I didn't notice the footsteps approaching and I screamed when he spoke.

“Holy freaking pumpkins, Jack!” I screeched as I clutched at my chest. My heart was pounding like crazy now.

“Sorry, Autumn. I didn’t mean to scare you, but Boone and I saw you from across the field. What is all this?” he asked. “Craft project?”

I took another deep breath to recenter myself, the soft rumbling sound coming from Boone comforting. From the serious expression on the alpha’s face I doubt he even realized he was doing it.

“Of sorts,” I said with a shrug, shielding the sun with my hand as I looked up at him. The beta’s smile was firmly in place and the mild scent of spiced cream washed over me and it took everything I had not to take a deep breath and savor it. “Scarecrows.”

“Where are their heads?” He was biting back a laugh this time, clearly trying to not hurt my feelings.

“I haven’t gotten that far. I’ve got these amazing hats and figured I’d find something eventually.”

“I’ve got an idea. Pumpkins.” His grin was adorable and excited as he turned and rushed off back home, Boone following after him. They took so long that I had already strung up the shirts and pants over the poles, using a staple gun to hold it in place.

“The headless scarecrows of Holiday Hollow?” Jack teased. I turned to find him and Boone holding three bright orange plastic jack-o-lanterns.

“Not the pumpkins I thought you meant, but these are even better!” I said excitedly, grabbing one from Boone and rushing over to my first scarecrow. Realizing I couldn’t just sit it on top I paused, frowning at the scarecrow in frustration.

“Here,” Boone grunted, grabbing a pencil out of his pocket and placing the extra pumpkin on top before tracing the size that would need to be cut out. “Be right back.” He took the other two pumpkins from us before stalking off.

“You do know that scarecrows are typically for cornfields, right?” Jack joked. “Haven’t you seen the *Wizard of Oz*?”

“They attack apple trees too,” I said with a slight shiver. He raised an eyebrow at my serious tone.

“There’s a story there,” he said.

“Look, there aren’t many things I’m scared of, just birds and thunderstorms. But death by crow at seven makes birds at the top of the list,” I explained before launching into the full story.

“Oh my god, I remember that! Your grandma and my mom were talking about it and how your grandpas went on this huge rampage of putting up scarecrows that year,” he said with a laugh. “These are much cuter though.”

“Yeah, theirs weren’t exactly scarecrows, more like a stick with a hat, but I didn’t get attacked again,” I said with a grin. “And now this year I won’t either.”

“So no getting you a pet bird for a present?” he teased. “I had such an elaborate plan too.”

“Ha, ha,” I groaned, glad to have Boone walking up as a subject change. The last thing I wanted to be chatting about with a cute beta was my ridiculous fear of birds. It already made me feel a bit silly at times, but fears were like that.

“Here,” Boone said, handing over two then sliding the pumpkin in his hand over the board.

“And now the hat,” I said, sliding it on and using the staple gun again to keep it in place before stepping back and admiring our work. “He’s perfect!”

Before I realized what I was doing I’d thrown my arms around Jack, then Boone, who froze at the contact.

Quickly, before we both had time to overthink it, I was already letting go before he could protest or push me away. Although I couldn’t exactly picture Boone pushing me away.

I’d been dealt that card as an omega throughout school one too many times even with the progressive movement to let omegas choose whether they wanted a pack or not. Thankfully, he seemed to take it in stride as soon as I let go and he and Jack helped me finish up.

When all three scarecrows were complete I felt a bit better about spending harvest season in the orchard, and the experience was even better with their company. I'd taken care of the birds, and I already had a plan so I could sleep through the storm that was supposed to ride in later that night, which made me pretty proud of myself that I was facing my fears and making great strides in Holiday Hollow.

I'd only been here a few days and I was already making great progress with the orchard. Hell, I'd even started making connections with people and friends. I definitely wanted to know more about the adorable beta, surly alpha, and the sheriff I couldn't quite get out of my head.

CHAPTER 10

AUTUMN

The sound of thunder cracking harshly in the sky woke me up, the flash of lightning way too bright before my eyes. Terror shot through me as the storm raged on. I'd always been afraid of storms and it was so much more intense out here than in the city. I'd underestimated how the storm would feel without the barrier of tall city buildings, and each flash of lightning had a new wave of panic shuddering through me.

My teeth chattering was the next sound I heard as I came to, quickly realizing that I was soaked, freezing, and should not be able to see the sky from my bed. The fear of the storm surged to new heights as I realized just how dangerous this had gotten.

A whimper left my lips as the storm raged above me and I quickly threw off the covers and got out of bed. I hated fucking storms, it was the whole reason I'd decided to take a sleeping aid before bed, knowing that if I didn't there would be no chance of me getting any sleep at all.

Although it turns out that was a completely bad idea because I apparently slept through part of the roof coming off and now I was cold and wet and had no idea where my phone was.

Another crash echoed in the sky and I screwed my eyes shut pressing as close to the wall as I could and drew my knees to my chest. I knew I needed to move, to call someone or get somewhere more safe but I couldn't, terror locking in my chest and freezing me in place. Everything seemed louder out here

than the city, no cars or the hustle or bustle to drown out the noise.

I didn't know how long I sat there, but I was shaking with a mix of fear and cold for what felt like hours until it was consuming me whole.

"Autumn!" A voice called, sounding almost as frantic as I felt.

I heard a slew of curses, and clashes of pots sounded as I willed myself to open my eyes.

A second later the door was thrown open, the rain pelting down all around the man whose eyes swept the cabin, the flashlight in his hand pausing once he came to my huddled figure.

"J-Jack?"

"I'm here," he said, rushing to my side quickly. "Are you hurt? Can you stand?"

I shook my head back and forth, flinching a little as another round of thunder cracked in the sky.

"It's going to be okay," Jack promised, holding his arms out to me.

Quickly moving to him I pressed my face into his neck, inhaling the warm cream notes of his scent and trying to focus on the sound of his heartbeat.

"S-Cold," I mumbled, huddling closer as his arms wrapped around me tightly.

"Let's get you out of here, pumpkin," Jack said softly. "I've got the truck out front running with the heat on and the farm has generators. We'll get you warm and toasty in no time, okay?"

"Okay," I agreed, my body growing tired and wanting to shut down from shock and terror.

"Wrap your arms around my neck okay?" Jack asked, pulling me into his arms and heading towards the front door that was still wide open.

At the sight of my laptop bag by the front door, I quickly pointed to it, thankful when Jack got the hint and grabbed it on our way out.

By the time we were in the truck I was shivering, the air from the vents, although warm, seeming to make me feel even colder through the wet pajamas that clung to my body.

“You still with me?” Jack asked, shooting me a worried look as he threw his truck in gear and cut through the path that connected our properties.

“Tired,” I admitted, leaning my head back against the seat and closing my eyes. Maybe if I could just take a nap, by the time I woke up I’d be nice and dry.

“No, no, no,” Jack said, his voice sounding funny as the car filled with more of his relaxing scent. “Open those eyes for me, Autumn.”

“Mmm...later,” I said, pulling my knees up onto the bench seat and curling up. Jack had me now, the big scary storm could just say fuck it while I slept.

I felt the truck lurch to a stop a moment later before the door opened next to me, the sound of the storm intensifying and making me curl up tighter.

“Up we go, pumpkin,” Jack said, lifting me against him as he pulled me out into the rain again, the sharp crack of the sky making me whimper. “It’s okay, we’re here, Autumn. Just stay with me, I need you to talk to me please. Tell me how you’re going to kick my ass in the pie competition.”

“No stove,” I grumbled, wiggling in his arms and pressing further into his neck.

“You can use my stove,” he said, his voice still doing that weird pinch. Why couldn’t he just snuggle me and be quiet?

“Shhhh.”

“Hunter!” he yelled, kicking open the door and slamming it behind him.

It was too bright in here and too loud, but I was so tired it didn’t matter.

“What in the—Fuck Jack, what happened?” a familiar voice said, his voice sounding panicked.

He shouldn't be panicked, he should just keep on smelling delicious. All salty and ocean breeze, I wanted to lick him. Again. I bet he would snuggle me.

“When the storm kicked the power off and the generators turned on, I remembered her saying this afternoon that she was afraid of thunderstorms so I went to check on her. Part of the roof had blown off Hunt, and I found her wet and curled in a corner. I don't know how long she's been like that but she's freezing and I don't like the way she's looking or smelling.”

“Smell good,” I mumbled, slightly indignant.

“We need to get you upstairs and warmed up, sweetheart. You're way too cold and your body is shutting down. Can you tell me how long you were out there?” Hunter asked in a coaxing tone, his scent intensifying just the way I wanted.

I shook my head no. “Sleeping pill. Hate storms.”

Come to think of it, I couldn't really hear the storm as much in their house. Then again they did have a roof.

I must have drifted off because the next thing I knew I was being carried upstairs and to a bedroom where two sets of hands balanced me when they set me on my feet.

“Open your eyes, Autumn,” Hunter said, the power and bark in his voice making me comply.

I narrowed my eyes at him in a glare, now more awake than I wanted to be. “Not fair.”

“I'm sorry, sweetheart but we need to get you out of these wet clothes. Can you do it yourself or do you need help?”

“Help please. It's nothing you haven't seen before.” As loathe as I was to admit it, I wasn't sure I had the energy. Even keeping my eyes open was a feat and I was swaying as I stood.

“Maybe I should go?” Jack said from behind me.

“Not a chance, brother. Strip and get a towel for her hair,” Hunter said, his hands already tugging my sleep shirt over the

top of my head. "I'll need your help warming her up."

My body felt lighter once my wet clothes were removed and I watched in a daze as Hunter quickly shed the pants he was wearing, using them to wipe as much water as he could quickly from my body and led me to the bed in the room. He pulled me flush against him, pulling the cover over us as his large frame wrapped around mine and his heat began to sink into me.

Unable to resist, I pressed my toes and nose into him, taking in a deep inhale as I let his scent settle around me. Scents were a funny thing, and more often than not I either passed them along without another thought or was immediately turned off.

As much as I'd loathe to admit it for his big ego, Hunter smelled better than any alpha I'd come across before. I got the feeling that if I could smell Boone too I'd feel the same way though. Maybe something was in the water here in Holiday Hollow.

"Thank you, sweetheart," Hunter said, resting his head on top of mine as his chest shook. "But my mama would have my hide if there was something in the water supply."

For fucks sake, why did I always seem to express my inner thoughts aloud with him?

"I guess, I'm just special," he said, sounding the slightest bit smug as he ran his hands up and down my arms. I was getting warmer but I was still so freaking tired and cold. All I really wanted to do was sleep.

"I called Boone," Jack's voice sounded from behind me. "He's on his way."

"He shouldn't drive in the storm," I said, briefly wondering why Jack had called him. "Not safe."

As if my words had manifested it, thunder rolled in through the window. Not as loud as it had been in my place, but loud enough that it had me flashing back to those nights alone in my room after my mom was gone and I was all alone.

The bed dipped behind me and suddenly Jack was there, putting a towel near my head, and pressing up against my back tentatively as he wrapped his arms around me.

“There’s no one who takes safety more seriously than Boone,” Jack promised. “Are-Is this okay? I brought the electric blanket, that might be enough.”

“S’Okay,” I said, grabbing his arm and pulling him closer to me.

I didn’t care that I was naked in the middle of a brother sandwich. All I cared about was that I could finally start feeling my toes again, although the pinprick feeling wasn’t very comfortable. At least the bed was.

Although, if the erection pressing against my stomach was any indication, Hunter didn’t have the same feelings as I was right now.

“Fuck,” he cursed. “Sorry, sweetheart. Please ignore him. Why don’t you face Jack and curl up with him so I can finish drying your hair.”

Not wanting to argue, I turned over in Jack’s arms as Hunter pulled away, the feeling of loss slightly hitting me by surprise. From the slight shift of my legs, I realized that the residual wetness I felt hadn’t exactly been from the storm and the alpha hadn’t been alone in his attraction.

Knowing that the moment had passed, I opened my eyes to see a pair of blue ones staring down at me concerned, the pupils in them slightly blown.

“Hi,” I whispered, taking in the beta before me as Hunter began squeezing the excess water from my hair.

“Hi, pumpkin,” he replied, pressing his body against mine. “I’m glad to see those green eyes of yours, you had me worried.”

“I’m not a pumpkin,” I said with a frown.

A naked omega in someone else’s sheets? Yes. A huge, round vegetable? Not so much.

“No, but you’re gourdous,” he said, with a twitch of his lips. A small giggle escaped me but it sounded off, even to my ears.

Hunter groaned from behind me. “Have you learned absolutely nothing from me?”

Jack stiffened slightly in my arms for a moment before he rolled his eyes and gave Hunter a pointed look.

They were brothers, yes, but they were definitely night and day.

“None of that today,” I said, burrowing deeper into the pillows and the bed. “Time for sleep.”

“One more quick check, before you drift off,” Hunter said. “I know you’re still probably fighting off some of the medicine and the cold but we want to make sure we still have our favorite new girl around in the morning, okay?”

I hummed in agreement as they sat me up slightly, checking my fingers and toes and taking what I assumed was my pulse. Either that or they were just scent marking me and I’d have to kick their ass after I showered tomorrow, but I figured I’d give them the benefit of the doubt.

In my head and heart I knew that I was safe with them, and while that was a slightly terrifying thought, it was also comforting and had me drifting off before I could think more on it.

CHAPTER II

AUTUMN

Opening my eyes the next morning was probably the hardest thing I'd ever done. The bed was like a cloud and everything smelled like the brothers who'd already burrowed their way into my life quicker than I could imagine.

Disappointment filled me as I opened my eyes and realized that I was alone again. But I couldn't complain because I was warm. Last night was a bit of a blur in my mind but I remembered Jack rescuing me and them warming me up. If they hadn't come... I hated to think what could have happened.

As I sat up I nearly knocked over a stack of clothes that were sitting next to me. They weren't mine, but I was a bit glad honestly. Wrapping their scent around me while I dealt with the crazy my day was about to be would be nice. I knew it was a little bit much, but I decided not to look into it too much and just do what felt right.

The scent of bacon and something sweet had me finally throwing off the covers and pulling on the clothes. The shirt was too big and smelled like Hunter. The sweatpants were Jack's and still big, but fit far better than if they were Hunter or Boone's.

"Good morning," I said as I walked into the kitchen and saw Jack at the stove. For one of the only times in my life I felt a bit shy.

“Man it’s good to see you with color on those cheeks,” Jack said as he saw me, rushing forward and crushing me in a hug that melted all the tension away.

“Thanks for being my knight in shining armor... or a pickup truck I guess. Either way, thanks.” I was rambling a bit but he just chuckled and let go of me, giving a soft smile before going back to the bacon he was cooking.

“Of course, pumpkin. I’m glad you mentioned you hated storms,” he said as he pulled the bacon out of the pan and put the plate on the island. I grabbed a stool and watched as he pulled some sort of baked french toast from the oven. “I don’t want to think about what might have happened if you...”

A heavy moment passed between us.

“I’m regretting those sleep meds now,” I admitted with a sigh. Unable to help myself I got up and walked to the front porch. The storm had done a number here, limbs and random debris laying around the front yard.

I couldn’t see much of the orchard from here, but I could see the gaping hole in my roof. Dread settled heavy in my stomach. What the hell was I going to do?

“Hey, you alright?” Jack asked, joining me out on the porch. “Look, I’m sorry if last night made things weird. I was just...” He trailed off as I spun around and put a finger over his lips.

“Stop that thought, Jack. You saved my life last night. Did I picture our first night naked together being in a brother sandwich... okay maybe I did, but it was full of way more fun and a whole lot less shivering.”

That had him bursting out laughing and he relaxed.

Following my instincts, I took the opportunity to lean up on my toes and brush a soft kiss over his mouth. His plush lips were so soft and after a brief moment of shock he pulled me in and deepened the kiss. He tasted like coffee and cream and caramel, and what started as something soft, something reverent, began to turn to more.

As things heated up, we stumbled back inside, somehow making it back to the kitchen island, though I had no idea how. He lifted me up and settled between my legs.

“For Hollows sake, Autumn,” he said with a groan, pressing into me more as his nose skimmed my neck.

Our scents mixed together, lust, heavy and thick in the air and only adding to how fucking turned on I was. Slick was already pooling between my thighs and as his hands skimmed down my side I hoped he wasn't going to pull away before it could begin.

“Breakfast will get cold,” he warned me. As if that would make me want to stop.

“We can be quick,” I countered, the need I had for this sweet beta turning sinful.

What I didn't expect was him to pull the sweatpants off my hips and lay me back on the island. I barely managed to get the plate of bacon to safety before he was slowly sliding his tongue through my slick, tasting me with a groan.

“Maybe not too quick,” he said in a husky tone, as he slowly took another taste of me.

I wanted to watch him, his blue eyes locked on mine as his hair fell haphazardly across his forehead. The reverence in his gaze as he focused on me like I was the only thing that mattered nearly did me in.

“Jack,” I whispered, torn between saying more and letting the pleasure ride out.

He hummed against my sex in response, one of his hands seeking out and tangling with mine in a gesture that had me melting even further.

As he began to pick up the pace my grip on his hand tightened.

“That's it, Autumn,” Jack encouraged, doubling his efforts even more.

My only answer was to bite my lip and stifle a cry as he teased his tongue over my clit. My slick gushed in response

and he breathed me in like he was desperate for me.

Jack's tongue was pure fucking magic. Each flick of his tongue or graze of his teeth had pleasure coiling even tighter in my belly. My legs shook as he sucked hard on my clit, using two fingers to thrust into my core.

The tension was completely gone from my body as he feasted on me like I was his favorite meal. I couldn't have held back if I wanted to, my orgasm washing through me with enough force that I couldn't stop myself from crying out his name. It turned to a whimper as he continued to fuck me with his hand through the aftershocks, right into a second orgasm that left me feeling like I was floating.

When he pulled his fingers from me, it took a second for me to realize he had popped them into his mouth, savoring every last drop of slick that he had wrung from me.

There was definitely more to him than being a sweet and charming beta and I wanted to find out just how much.

"Come on, time to eat," he said, as he finished.

It wasn't the dirty suggestion I was hoping for as he sat me back up, and pulled up the sweatpants.

"No," I protested, trying to hop down but he lifted me as if I weighed nothing and put me back on my stool. I took advantage of his closeness, breathing in his warm spiced cream scent that was almost as delicious as the orgasms he gave me.

"Yes," he said. "We can save more for later. There's no need for us to rush, Autumn. For now, you need to be fed before Boone kicks my ass for not taking care of you after a rough night."

I laughed softly. "I'd say you more than took care of me."

With a satisfied look Jack moved away to grab a plate. My head fell back as I tried to slow my breathing. But he was right, I was feeling a bit weak, whether from the exhaustion from the night before or the double orgasms, and my stomach let out a loud growl.

He piled a plate full of food before sliding it my way. I'd just picked up my fork when I realized what I'd done.

The weight of it crashed into me and I realized I was just like all those other omegas that made it so hard for us to take advantage of the new laws in place to protect us. Here I was, getting involved with multiple men, just because it had felt right and I wanted to.

There was nothing wrong with that, I embraced my sexuality, but I never wanted to mislead anyone or use my designation as a ticket to be flagrant with people's emotions.

"Jack," I said quietly. Something in my voice must have sounded worried because he froze.

"What's wrong?" My heart broke at how careful his voice was now. Like I was about to say I regretted what we'd done. That couldn't be further from the truth. But what I wasn't going to do was keep secrets.

"I asked Boone on a date. And I've slept with your brother, Jack. Don't take this wrong, I'm more than glad we just did that, though a bit disappointed there wasn't time for more, but I don't want to start things wrong or get between friends," I explained in a rush, needing everything out. He studied me with those gorgeous blue eyes before his smile was back.

"We're a pack, Autumn, that's not an issue," he admitted. That took me by surprise and I merely blinked at him as I processed it. The way Hunter and he had gotten into bed with me so easily, the lack of jealousy concerning my confession, it all made sense now.

"Boone, too?"

He nodded patiently. "Since we were teenagers we knew we were meant to be a pack. Things have gotten a little turned around these past few years, but he is, and always will be."

"Oh," I said eloquently. He chuckled and put my fork back in my hand.

"Eat, pumpkin. You need your strength back," he said. "We have some things to take care of today."

The words filtered through my brain as I realized exactly what he meant.

“Oh god, Jack. My grandparents’ cabin.” My voice broke as I thought of the gaping hole again and what that would mean not just for me, but for the orchard. The maintenance fund would likely cover repairs, but it would mean a few less equipment upgrades at the end of the day. It was the time fixing it that would be an issue.

And until it was fixed, where would I go?

“Why is she crying?” Boone sounded alarmed and I jumped, not realizing he’d even walked in during my internal whirlwind of panic.

“My cabin,” I answered as I glanced up. His warm brown eyes softened and he started to move toward me before stopping himself.

Not for the first time I cursed whoever had him second guessing himself. His walls felt like they were weakening some, but he still held himself back.

“We’ll figure the roof out. Don’t cry,” he practically ordered me. Jack snorted out a laugh at the response.

“Smooth,” he muttered. “Get a plate Boone, and breathe.”

Boone grunted in annoyance but did as the beta told him, which was more of a sign of being a pack than anything else. Most alphas didn’t take orders lightly.

“Do you have the funds to cover materials?” Jack finally asked when the alpha was sitting in the stool next to him.

“I do,” I sighed. “I’ll need to find a roofer or something to give me an estimate. See what’s within budget.”

“You don’t need a roofer,” Boone grunted. For a brief moment I imagined all three of them shirtless on my roof, fixing what the storm had caused. “We can get the materials from the store, I should have what we need. The longer we wait, the more damage to the house. You’ll need some dehumidifiers in there.”

“I don’t expect you to fix my roof for me,” I argued. “You all have already done more than enough. I’m sure there are some contractors around here. They can check the damage inside too.”

“The sun should hopefully have dried some of it up, but I guarantee those floors and furniture will need to be replaced,” Jack said with a sigh. “Not a good start to the season, but you can stay here while all that is happening. The spare bedroom that you used last night can be yours if you’d like it?”

Boone made a choking sound and Jack simply slapped him on the back as he stared at me expectantly.

It sounded far better than going to a motel for however long all that would take. Here I’d have access to the oven, a clean and likely extremely comfortable bed, and *them*.

“I’d love that, thank you,” I found myself saying before I’d even really come to a decision internally or could let my pride get in the way. But even as I said it, the words felt right.

This wasn’t the plan. I never intended to put down any roots here in Holiday Hollow. I’d had plans to use my degree in a different way, spend my time in the city and check in on the orchard when I could.

I guess no one said I couldn’t make friends along the way, and if they came with benefits, smelled delicious and—

“Eat,” Boone reminded me. I wouldn’t call him out on the fact he looked relieved at my decision to stay.

“Where’s Hunter?” I asked to change the subject.

“He left early to fish,” Jack answered. “Hopefully you’re not against eating some fried fish. That might be a deal breaker on you staying here, pumpkin.”

“Ah yes, the fish fry,” I said, glancing at Boone. “This doesn’t count as our date just because I’ll be around tonight.”

For once Boone laughed. The sound was deep and rumbling and he got a cute little crinkle around his eyes. I wasn’t even ashamed that I was openly staring at him. Even Jack looked on in shocked amusement.

“I’m the alpha, aren’t I supposed to do the asking?” he finally asked with a raised eyebrow.

“Nah, times have changed, and I’m not the wait on an alpha type,” I grinned as I popped another bite in my mouth and chewed. “Jack, this is amazing.”

“Thank you,” he said. A slight pink tinted his cheeks and he tried and failed to hide his proud smile.

When I finished I helped Jack wash the dishes before searching for my shoes. Despite their protests I had to see the damage for myself.

Jack drove me home again and they both followed me inside. My chest tightened as I saw water pooling out into the living room. The hole in the roof was mainly contained to the bedroom and bathroom, but that also meant all of my clothes were soaked. At least I’d saved my laptop last night.

They didn’t press me for words as I packed up everything I could salvage. They carried out each box or basket I’d packed up and loaded it into the truck. Thankfully the boxes of pictures that belonged to my grandparents were in the next room that still had part of the roof. I doubted the part of the attic that remained fared well.

A knock on the door had Jack hurrying out. The sound of several voices had me standing up and walking out to join them. I didn’t recognize most of them, but several men and a few women had toolboxes in hand and work boots on.

“What is everyone doing here?” I asked. There was a tremble in my voice because I knew their answer before they even said it.

“We heard about the damage.” It was Riley who spoke. He walked through the crowd and pulled me in for a hug.

“When someone in town needs help, we help them,” an older gentleman answered.

“I’ve got some towels and Vicky is bringing in some dehumidifiers to get some of this moisture out,” a lady called out, bustling by me with a quick smile and an armful of thick towels.

“But,” I breathed out in shock.

“It’s useless to protest. They’d do it anyway,” Boone grunted. “Come on, let’s go get those supplies. We can order what I don’t have that way it’s not a long wait.”

“Okay,” I said as I blinked around. “Thank you.”

Everyone nodded or waved in acknowledgment, almost seeming like my thanks was more surprising than their act of kindness. Maybe there was something to this small town life after all. Sure it would still take weeks to get the cabin where it needed to be, but them showing up for me like this meant everything.

CHAPTER 12

BOONE

The tight feeling in my chest hadn't eased since I'd gotten to the farm last night.

When Jack had called and told me what happened it had taken me no time at all to grab my keys and head over. The whole way I was imaging those doe eyes of Autumn's lifeless, without the spark of the fire and personality that brimmed from her.

Crashing into the house, and finding them in the guest room upstairs, seeing her asleep between them, with the reassurance of the rise and fall of her chest was the only thing that made me feel like I could finally take a breath.

I ended up in my room next door, sleeping fitfully on pins and needles all night, listening out for her in between the nightmares that plagued what little sleep I did get. It had been a long while since it had been this bad, but when I'd heard Jack's voice on the phone, the fear and pain that infused every word, it had brought me back to the phone call I'd received when I was sixteen and found out about my parent's accident.

Hunter had told me earlier that she'd been worried about me driving in the storm, but she didn't know how seriously I took safety like that. I mean, why would she? She didn't really know much about me other than I owned the hardware store, and was a part of the Halston pack.

Why she wanted to go on a date with me was beyond me.

I knew she'd already been with Hunter, and that she was into Jack as well, from the scents that were coming out of the

kitchen this morning, so I wasn't sure what her motives were.

It was a sad fact, but besides Hunter and Jack, most people who sought me out or wanted to spend time with me was for a means to an end, whether it was that they needed help fixing something or they were interested in getting to know one of my best friends more seriously.

Which, after the disaster last time, I'd begun staying at the apartment over the shop more, not wanting to get in anyone's way or be another tool for someone to use.

"You look like you're thinking pretty hard over there," Autumn said, her sweet scent wrapping around me, warm spiced apple pie that brought feelings of fall settling over me.

I had to swallow, my mouth watering at her being so close to me.

Grunting in acknowledgement, I took another drink of my tea, my eyes trailing over her, making sure she was okay.

It had to be hard for her, learning that she'd momentarily lost part of what she came here for, but Autumn struck me as the resilient type. She had to be in order to do all she'd accomplished so far, omega status aside.

She had to have multiple pack offers on the table in addition to jobs. It was on the tip of my tongue to ask her more about it, but I didn't have any right to that information.

I looked at the clock again, wondering how long Hunter would be on the lake for. It hadn't taken long for Autumn and I to run to my shop and grab the stuff for me to put a temporary patch on the roof, the dehumidifiers doing the rest of what could be done for now. With all the extra hands we were definitely in a better place than before, but I wouldn't know the real extent of the damage until I got in there and started really getting down to work.

My thoughts drifted back to Hunter as my anxiety flared again, wishing that he was already back home and here with us. I knew he'd already had this planned for today, and us the fish fry tonight, but with the storm last night and everything that happened, I really wish he'd canceled it.

“Hey,” Autumn said again, this time stepping up to me and touching my arm. “What’s wrong?”

Taking a deep breath I looked down at her, wanting to smooth out the little furrow in her brow.

“I just wish Hunter was back already,” I said truthfully. “I know the storm passed, but it could turn just as quick.”

She gave me an understanding smile. “Yeah, between last night, we’ve all had enough excitement already. Hopefully he comes back soon. Y’all mentioned something about a fish fry? Is there anything I can do to help?”

“Whenever Hunter goes fishing we always have a fish fry,” I said in explanation, not mentioning that it was Hunter’s way of reassuring me. That he wouldn’t break our plans and come back in one piece.

Sometimes the anxiety was too much. It didn’t help that I’d left my pills and blockers at the apartment so I wasn’t on my normal routine.

“That’s nice that you have that tradition,” Autumn said. “Maybe I can make something for dessert then? I’ve got about a thousand recipes to—Oh no, the cookbook!”

The devastation in her eyes had me stepping closer to her, her scent turning tart.

“I grabbed as much as I could this morning when I went to survey the damage before you got up, it’s in a few boxes in my room upstairs. I wasn’t sure what exactly to grab and I didn’t want to disturb you while you were still sleeping. The very corner was damp, but the recipes didn’t look worse for wear. The clear protective covers your grandma used came in handy.”

She darted in, throwing her arms around me and squeezing me tight as she muttered thank you after thank you against my chest.

“Hug me back, damn it,” she said with a little growl pulling a chuckle from me.

“Yes ma’am,” I complied, wrapping my arms around her, my head bending down so I could rest mine on top of hers as I pulled in greedy gulps of her scent.

“Why do you smell so good?” She asked, rubbing her head against my flannel shirt. It took her a second for her brain to catch up with what her lips had admitted, her cheeks darkening as she looked up at me. “I guess it’s a good thing I already asked you on a date then, huh? Jack said you were a pack and that it wouldn’t be a problem if well—I want to go out with you, but you might not want to? I know I kind of demanded —”

“Autumn.” I cupped her cheek in my hand, feelings stirring in me that I hadn’t felt in so long. “Take a breath, baby girl.”

I stroked my thumb over her cheek, guiding her head back to my chest. Soothing her and focusing on making sure she was okay actually had some of my anxiety slipping away, and I could breathe a little easier.

“Sorry,” she mumbled.

“Nothing to apologize for,” I assured her.

“I’m not usually like this,” she promised. “Gosh, if I rambled like that in my interviews they’d have dismissed me instantly.”

“That must be hard, having to be *on* all the time.”

“Yeah,” she said, nodding her head as she pulled away from me, running a hand through her hair. “You can’t show weakness when it comes to business or they’ll pounce on it. Add on the fact that I’m an omega, and some people in the city are just waiting for me to choke. I’m glad I came back to Holiday Hollow while I figure things out. The orchard is important to me and I want to make sure I set it up for future success, but it’s giving me the time to do the same for myself.”

She shot me a wry grin, that spark and confidence flaring back into her green eyes.

I tilted my head in question.

“I still want that date, Boone. Is that going to be a problem, with you or the pack, now that I’m staying here in the interim and such?”

“You’re aware that I’m not as easy going as Jack or as smooth as Hunter right?” I asked, the question slipping through my lips and right through my filter before I could catch it.

“Yep,” she said, not missing a beat. “You’ve got that mysterious, silent and strong thing going on, but I’d want to have a date with you regardless if you were in this pack or not, Boone. You’re thoughtful and you’re kind. You showed up literally on my step fixing it, just because you thought it was the right thing to do, and beneath all that tough exterior—which is still delicious by the way—I’m pretty sure you’re just a big teddy bear.”

“I am not a teddy bear.”

I built half the town for Hollow’s sake. There was no way this little omega was comparing me to a child’s toy.

“Yep, a big teddy bear that smells like a warm walk on a nice autumn day,” she said with a wide smile that made my chest puff up in response.

I shied away from my scent in the hopes it would deter others who were just using me as a means to an end. Something I was working through in therapy that I went to every couple of weeks. When my parents passed, I’d went and seen a therapist for a while, and then when everything had happened with Heidi and her getting between Hunter and I, I ended up going to see their son, once he’d retired.

It was nice talking to an unbiased third party, and the guy I saw now was honestly pretty cool. We ended up shooting pool most of the time while we talked and he helped regulate my anxiety meds and didn’t bat an eye when I told him I wanted to start using blockers for my scent.

But now, after not taking them for a day and seeing Autumn’s reaction, I wondered if it wasn’t time to stop taking them altogether. Not my anxiety meds, no, but I’d worked

through most of my issues when it came to my scent and attracting people who only wanted me for what I could do for them or who I knew. You couldn't hold people accountable for other people's actions.

Hell, Autumn and I were already past that. She'd already hooked up with Hunter and then all but stomped her foot when she told me that we were going on a date. If I was honest with myself, the fact that she thought I smelled good did things for me.

Hollows knew that she smelled absolutely delicious herself, all sweetly baked and spiced, just waiting to be devoured. I wondered if she'd follow my directions or continue to be the feisty little omega she'd shown herself to be.

That thought caught me by surprise. It'd been a long time since I'd even allowed myself to indulge in sexy thoughts and here she was getting me to consider how she'd react to my directions.

"I hope you're hungry!" Hunter's voice called from the front door, the man himself walking in with a cooler on his shoulder a moment later.

His eyes swept over me and Autumn in the kitchen before he sat it down and gave me a hug, his head knocking against mine in reassurance, telling me without words everything I needed to hear.

"Welcome home," I said, my voice thicker than normal.

"It's good to have you back here, brother," he said into my ear.

"Good to be here."

He squeezed my shoulder one last time before turning towards Autumn and walking right up and into her space.

"You're looking better, sweetheart. I'm glad to see you up and about and that the boys took care of you," he said, catching a lock of her hair.

Autumn's cheeks turned pink before she cocked her hip and refused to back down. She had no reason to be embarrassed and I was glad as hell she stood up to him and cut through some of his charm.

"They took care of me while you were fishing alright," she said, a smirk on her lips for a brief moment. "Helped figure out what to do about my grandparents' house too."

"Hey now," he said, tilting his head. "I spent the better part of the morning cleaning up the debris from the lake so no one would get hurt next time they went out. I know you probably wish you got to see *all this* first thing this morning, but I knew the guys would handle things."

"Do I look like a woman who needs to be handled?" she challenged.

Hunter let out a low chuckle. "Darling, I don't think you want me to answer that."

Gods, the sexual tension between them was thick, both of their pheromones reacting to one another. I could tell the moment Hunter caught the trace of Jack's scent by his reaction as he flicked up an eyebrow and called for his brother.

"What did I miss?" Jack asked, hair damp and still running a towel through it.

He'd been busy with the farm ever since we left Autumn's this morning and had only now come in to get cleaned up.

"Jack," Autumn said, worrying her lip between her teeth for a moment. "Did you by chance run your offer by Hunter first?"

"What offer?" Hunter asked curiously, looking between the two of them.

"I offered Autumn use of the guest room until the repairs are completed on her grandparents' place," Jack said, his voice firm in a way we both knew he meant business.

There weren't many things our beta was insistent about, but when he was adamant about something we took notice and respected his position.

“That makes sense,” Hunter agreed, his fingers finding the collar of his shirt and tugging as if he was suddenly too hot.

Autumn shifted where she was standing. “If that’s not alright, I don’t mind bunking with the crew down at the orchard or seeing if the BNB has an opening.”

Hunter shook his head. “It’s fine.”

“Then why do you look like you’re about to jump out of that shirt and run for the hills?” she asked.

“You’d love it if I’d jump out of this shirt,” Hunter bantered back with a cocky smirk automatically back in place. “I just...”

“Oh my gosh, Hunter Halston. Are you worried that I’ll fall in love with you?”

“When you’re living with me, how could you resist?” he countered.

Autumn crowded into him, laying a hand on his chest, his hands involuntarily framing her waist as she leaned up to whisper, “It’s going to take a whole lot more than seeing you, naked or otherwise, for me to fall in love with you, Romeo. Especially when you smell like fish guts.”

With that she jumped and popped a kiss on his cheek before going to stand next to Jack who offered her a fist bump of all things. It was insane how easily she handled all three of our personalities, like it was second nature. She could switch from being sweet and reassuring, to firing shots at Hunter, and then give Jack a sweet grin.

“Ground rules,” I said, drawing their attention. “If we’re all going to do this and live together, then we should set some so everyone’s boundaries are respected.”

I felt Jack’s and Hunter’s eyes on me, silently asking if I was going to stay. I gave them a nod knowing that I couldn’t stay away if Autumn was going to be here. I’d been away too long anyway, and even waking up here this morning, in the packhouse with them, just felt right.

“A fantastic idea, Boone,” Autumn beamed. “First off, it should be clear with all of us in the same room that we each have something going on. That’s great, and I’m looking forward to exploring that and getting to know you all better, but please know that I’m not looking to pack up. I’m here for the orchard first and foremost and then I’ll be deciding which offer to take back in the city.”

“No problem here, sweetheart,” Hunter said, the relief in his voice clear. “I believe we agreed to be friends, did we not?”

“Friends don’t pop erections when other friends are laying wet and naked in their arms.”

“Sounds like a hell of a good friend to me, darlin’,” Hunter replied with a grin.

While they were teasing back and forth all I could think about was the fact she planned to leave. I didn’t trust easily and honestly, Jack didn’t jump right into relationships either. But the idea of her leaving had my stomach in knots. Not only would I hate having her away, there were far too many things that could happen in the city. How could I protect her there?

Autumn shook her head. “What else? This is your space, your home. What shouldn’t I do?”

Jack shrugged. “I really don’t have anything, Autumn. I’ve never lived with anyone but these two but if anything comes up I’m sure we can figure it out together.”

I knew what I wanted to ask, but I knew I didn’t have the right to. Running a hand through my beard, I tried to think of a way I could ask without sounding like a complete alpha hole.

“What about you, bear? You look like you’ve got something on your mind.”

I grunted at her name for me, but didn’t comment on it further, taking a deep breath before I asked for what I really wanted.

“If you’re going to be out late, will you please let one of us know where you are?”

She blinked her head tilting to the side slightly as she processed the request.

“I can do that,” she finally agreed. “I guess I should go ahead and let you know that I plan to be out real late with you tomorrow for our date, handsome.”

A moment later a smile I hadn't seen before broke out on her face, stretching her cheeks and making the corner of her eyes crinkle. The fact that it was directed at me nearly did me in.

I knew right then and there that I was in trouble. There would be no amount of time that was enough for me. I'd never get my fill of her.

It had been ages since I'd had my mind set on something, but Autumn Cedarwick was it, and she better be prepared for what it meant to be my girl.

CHAPTER 13

AUTUMN

Boone told me that just because I did the asking, that the date wasn't my job to plan. I'd let him get away with his bossiness for now. Mainly because I knew he was a teddy bear down deep and this little show of his romantic side would just prove that point.

The fish fry the night before had been a treat and I ended up sprawled out on the couch with the boys and stuffed, the three of them taking my mind off of things perfectly.

A soft knock on my door had me rushing over and pulling it open. His eyes lingered and he swallowed hard as his eyes ran over my robe clad body before he cleared his throat and frowned.

Hey, at least I have my hair and makeup done already.

"Don't give me that look, bear, you didn't answer your text," I told him. He narrowed his eyes but pulled out his phone and checked his messages.

"It's cool out, I'd go for the sweater," he said, stepping back out and gently closing the door before I could drop the robe. I changed quickly into my favorite chunky sweater. It was super soft and cream colored, going perfectly with my dark skinny jeans and brown boots.

What I didn't expect to find was Boone waiting by the front door with a flannel blanket over one arm and a basket in his other hand.

"Stop it, a picnic?" I asked excitedly. He shifted uncomfortably and frowned.

“Well it was,” he muttered, clearly taking me wrong as he started to turn away.

“It better still be,” I said with a huff. “I think it’s perfect. And Boone?”

“Yeah?” he asked as he met my eyes. The poor guy was more than just out of touch with dating, he was stepping out of his comfort zone to do this. The fact that he was doing this for me, meant and showed me a lot. Actions really did speak louder than words sometimes.

I still hoped I got to meet the bitch that did this to him one day. Resorting to violence wasn’t exactly my style, but I’m just petty enough to rub in her face all she lost.

“I’m an honest person. If I don’t like something or it makes me uncomfortable, I will always tell you. Please don’t stress yourself out about me liking or not liking something. I’m fairly easy to please,” I promised him.

He took a deep shaking breath before nodding his head. His brown eyes softened as he gazed at me, a small smile finally forming on his perfect lips.

“Okay,” he agreed. “Shall we?”

“Here, let me carry this,” I told him as I grabbed the blanket from him before he could protest. He opened the door and ushered me outside with a hand on my lower back. He dropped the basket and blanket in his pickup truck before opening my door for me. His scent filled the cab, all warm woods and wild berries, as he leaned over me to buckle me in.

I’d never liked when alphas acted like omegas couldn’t function, but having him do these small things, ensuring I was taken care of, was different. He needed to know I was safe and it was his way of caring for me. And it had my chest warming from more than just the pheromones.

“There,” he said as he stepped away. I could tell he hesitated, waited for me to complain.

“Thank you,” I told him. “Now let’s get this heat on, the nights are chillier here than I remembered.”

He smiled at that and shut the door, waiting to answer until he'd walked around to the other side.

"It's because as kids we could spend hours outside and not notice it at all," he answered. "I remember when I was ten, spending the entire day out playing with the guys. We ended up going for a hike and it took way too long. By the time we got back to Holiday Hollow they had the whole town looking for us. They were acting like we'd frozen to death out there and here we come back full of jokes and just fine. Until our asses got in trouble at least."

"I bet they were pissed," I laughed as I imagined all three of these guys causing chaos together as kids. "I'm thinking I need to see some pictures of you guys when you were growing up. I bet you were troublemakers. Or at least Hunter was and you guys just followed along so he didn't hurt himself in the process."

He barked out a laugh. "First of all, no chance of seeing those. Second, that's painfully accurate. I believe that hike was his fault too."

"So how far are we going?" I asked when he turned away from town and started down a winding back road. His concentration while driving was intense, especially now that it was dark and deer could run out at any moment.

"Not far," he said finally as he slowed down around a curve. It was crazy how safe he made me feel. I just leaned back and enjoyed the cozy ride, studying him openly since he was so focused on the drive. His eyes were furrowed slightly in conversation and he chewed his bottom lip absently as he went. The white on his knuckles as he gripped the steering wheel gave away the anxiety I'd noticed in him.

Boone made a turn that had me tensing, the night making it look like he was going right into the middle of a farmer's field. I yelped as the truck bumped along the makeshift road.

"Um Boone? Why are we off-roading?" I asked, my voice wavering thanks to the constant shifting of the truck on this awful road.

“Trust me?” he asked, his voice quiet but intense.

“I do, Boone. I do.”

He slowed a bit more and only a few moments later he stopped, the headlights illuminating a clearing in the crops, large beams of wood sectioning off the dirt area.

“Here, you’ll need this,” he said simply as he handed me a large flashlight before shutting off the lights. We were plunged into pure darkness, with the sky being cloudy I could barely make out the door handle as I fumbled around for it. By the time I was out of the truck I was starting to freak out a little. Darkness wasn’t a fear of mine but I had forgotten how pitch black it was out here away from town.

When Boone’s beam of light led away from the truck I followed him. He waited for me at the edge of the wooden beam, helping me over before continuing on.

“Hold on, there’s lights,” he promised. If not for his scent I’d have lost him in the darkness, his light barely visible anymore as he moved ahead. Instead of following him I stayed in place, waiting for the lights he talked about.

A few moments of silence that may or may not have had me assuming I would be eaten by a monster hiding in the corn, and the lights flickered on with a soft buzz.

It was magical.

That was the only proper description of what I was looking at. Strings of Edison lights were strung from four poles I hadn’t noticed in the darkness. Now that they were lit it exposed a large fire pit already ready with logs. There was a crude wooden bar that Boone or someone had obviously thrown together. Boone was unloading the contents from his basket and putting it down before grabbing the blanket and dropping it over the hay bales near the fire. He worked so methodically that he didn’t even look over at me until he’d had a fire burning.

“Are you okay?” he asked with amusement. “You might want to close that mouth, baby girl, before I start having ideas.”

That snapped me out of the trance I'd been in and I chuckled.

"Yes, this is... amazing, Boone," I breathed out as I came over.

He led me to the hay bale and got me settled before stepping away and returning with a plate that looked like a mini charcuterie board. I picked up a cube of cheese and popped it into my mouth.

"The Kinsey Pack owns it. But after I did work at their B&B, they offered me use of it whenever I wanted. Taking you here seemed like a good time to take advantage of that," he said, readying a few other foods for us to enjoy.

We glanced over at the fire as we picked at the food he'd prepared, but having him so close to me wasn't easy. Sitting in silence was never a problem with Boone, I enjoyed his company and companionship, but it was the searing connection just below the surface that had me on edge.

I could feel the tension building every time our hands brushed and neither one of us could seem to find the words to speak. It was the peak of awkwardness and finally I couldn't help but let out a little absurd laugh.

"Okay this is crazy," he finally burst out. "I like you, Autumn. In fact, I'm in shock you haven't been claimed by a pack already. But don't get me wrong, I'm fucking grateful you haven't. I don't love the idea of you returning to the city but I really want to get to know you and I don't want to fuck it up with my inability to socialize."

I was shocked for a moment at his outburst, not having heard him speak so passionately or so much all at once.

"I don't need you to be anything you aren't, Boone," I said, recovering quickly, moving the food and scooting closer so our thighs were touching. When he shifted uncomfortably I threw my leg over his to keep him from moving away from me. He calmed instantly and took a deep breath, the tension and anxiety draining as he blew it out. "And I want all of those things too. Though I'm not going to lie and say that I know

what will happen in the future, but what's important is that I'm here now."

His hand absently rubbed my leg as he thought over my words.

"Can I kiss you?" he asked.

If anyone else had asked me first I might have laughed, but with Boone I knew it was him ensuring that I was safe and cared for. Instead of answering I leaned forward, my lips brushing his once before I deepened it.

While he'd always been gentle and sweet he didn't hesitate to take over as soon as his lips touched mine. His hand gripped my leg and his other pulled me in. His tongue teased along the seam of my lips and I opened for him. He swept in, dominating the kiss until I was breathless and my entire body was pulsing with need.

We weren't hurried, in fact Boone was the picture of calm dominance. Every touch and stroke of his tongue was with purpose, each one had my omega side ready to preen for him.

"Autumn," he said, my name was said with a hint of confusion, like he couldn't believe this was happening. But I didn't want this to be something he second guessed or worried over. No one needed out of their own head more than this alpha.

"Don't overthink. Just feel," I told him before gripping his shirt and pulling it over his head. I'd gotten my first taste of him and now I wanted more.

He helped me toss it away and his cheeks heated as I ran my eyes over him. Whatever he was worried about was unfounded. Boone was a solid man, a softness covering his strength that was sexy as hell. I couldn't wait to cuddle with him and learn everything that made him tick.

Moving to my knees in front of him I unbuckled his pants and his breath hitched as I took him into my hand. He was average in length, and with how girthy he was, my body thanked him for that.

“Do you want this too?” I asked. He looked taken aback by my question but eventually nodded.

“You don’t have to do this,” he said, the words coming out gritty. “I can hold a conversation, there’s so much we—”

“Boone,” I said, cutting him off. “I really want to know what you taste like on my tongue just as much as I want to know your favorite color and movie. Do you think less of me because I enjoy sex as much as I do?”

“Of course not,” he said, seemingly outraged by my question. “I love that you own your sexuality and who you are. I just want to make sure you know I want you for more than that. That it isn’t just because you’re an omega that you’ve got me coming out of my shell, but that it’s because you’re *you*.”

His words made me smile and I gave him a long stroke with my hand, his cock jumping at the contact.

“I wouldn’t be down here on my knees if I thought otherwise, bear. So I’ll ask you one more time,” I said. “Do you want this too?”

“More than anything,” he promised. That was all I needed before I leaned down and swirled my tongue over him. His ragged breathing was sexy as hell as I wrapped my lips around him, taking his full length before pulling away again.

Satisfaction filled me as he slid his hand into my hair, finally taking over. Boone wasn’t the type to let me have control for long and soon he was fucking my mouth like I wanted him too. His thrusts were still controlled, not taking it too far and holding himself back, but I was glad he’d let go enough for this.

But I wasn’t the type of omega to let him have control for long. Even if my slick running down my thighs gave away how fucking much I was liking this. Every time he pulled back I teased him with my tongue, my hand toying with his swollen knot. The deep rumble in his chest was the only warning before he tried to move me off of him.

“I’m going to come,” he warned me in a rough voice.

“Good,” I said before taking back over, swallowing him down and giving him everything I had. He let out a soft groan, hand tightening on my head as he came, holding me in place as he spilled down my throat. I swallowed him down before slowly cleaning him off. He tried to pull me close but I only gave him one last kiss before walking closer to the fire to warm back up.

“But,” he protested. Something I’d noticed about Boone was that he was always waiting for something, as if he were afraid I’d change my mind. I didn’t want this reciprocated this time. I wanted him to know that I wanted him, not just to use him for my own pleasure.

“Next time,” I promised before sitting down and taking another bite. The soft smile on his face as he gazed at the fire told me everything I needed to know. That I’d made the right choice in keeping it simple this time but also staking my claim. Boone would require a bit more care as we established whatever we had forming here. And I wasn’t going to back down from a challenge. He was definitely worth it.

CHAPTER 14

AUTUMN

“Okay, Carl,” I said as I turned to face the lead contractor. “How bad is it?”

Boone had been more than kind in helping, everyone had, but when I saw the extent of the damage I had to hire a contractor. Carl had been looking over the house for an estimate and plan of what we had to fix. He was a trustworthy older alpha that came recommended by nearly everyone in town, including Boone.

Carl took a deep breath as if he was bracing himself for my reaction. Which meant I was already internally panicking. He winced as he breathed deep, likely scenting my panic in the air.

“Bad news and bad news,” he finally said as he fiddled with the clipboard he was carrying. “The damage from the storm was pretty extensive, but unfortunately it also uncovered something more. There’s a lot of rotten wood in this house that needs replaced for safety reasons. But it goes beyond that.”

Worse? How could it get worse than the entire house being a hazard?

He held up a small jar with a bug inside. My heart stopped as it moved slightly. I was no expert, but if a contractor was showing me, then it had to be...

“Termites. And this is not the beginning of an infestation,” he admitted solemnly. His gray eyes studied me with concern as I silently blinked up at him in horror. “You’ll need to think

about getting the rest of your things out and what your plan is. I'll have some figures here for you in a minute."

He patted my shoulder in that old man way that was reassuring. Right now though all I could think about was tiny bugs crawling through the walls, slowly eating this old farmhouse.

A shudder wracked through me. It was like I could hear them now that I was aware. I knew that was crazy, but I had to get out. Thankfully, the guys and I had already stored the sentimental stuff out in the shed or in their house, so I grabbed a few things left behind before waiting at the kitchen table. Carl and a few of his workers were milling around, discussing things quietly between themselves. They were oblivious to my impending panic.

Then it hit me.

This wasn't just gross or creepy because of the bugs. It was awful. The entire house would need major upgrades. Meaning the entirety of the maintenance fund would be depleted. I couldn't live here for a long time.

I'd have to talk to the guys. Maybe find a place to rent in town... which would take more money. Now that job in the city was sounding better and better. I might just need that salary to keep the orchard going after all this shitty news.

"Hey kid, you alright?" Carl's rumbling voice pulled me out of my downward spiral and I gave him a shrug. He pulled out the chair across from me and sat down.

"Look. We're not your typical contractors. We charge for our time, sure, we have to eat, but we won't be trying to gouge you," he promised. "But with that said, this is a hefty estimate. And this does include the termite control. I have a friend who does it for me at a set price so I added that in. You take your time to work it out and my number's on there for you."

With that he slid it over, patted my hand like a concerned grandfather, and ushered his men out of the house.

I blinked down at the paper.

“That’s a lot of zeros,” I said out loud, my words sounding strange even to me. Apparently I was in full panic mode now.

“Autumn?” Boone’s gruff voice was like a lighthouse in a storm, cutting away some of the panic so I could at least turn to him.

His scent hit me first, it was stronger now that he seemed to be stopping his scent blockers, something he confided in me during our date together, and I breathed in the cedar and fall leaves like a drug. It cut even more of the panic away, but it was fighting an uphill battle in that department. The moment I faced him his own expression went from normal to concerned. “What’s wrong?”

I just slid over the paper in response. Carl made his way out, giving the two of us space as Boone looked over the invoice. He winced, then let out a whistle.

“This wasn’t in my plans, Boone,” I said as I let my head fall back. Hunter’s face appeared over mine before Jack pushed him out of the way.

If I thought Boone’s scent helped, it had nothing on all three combined. It was a masculine blend of earthy tones and sweet notes that was quickly becoming one of my most favorite things. It didn’t hurt that they were just as enticing as their scents.

I may not be looking for a pack, per se, but I was happy to keep delving into whatever strange peace we’d created together. Even though I wasn’t looking and my life was turning out to be a bit of a mess, I wasn’t stupid enough to ignore the possibility completely. If it happened, it happened, at its own pace.

“You alright?” Jack asked. Boone slid over the paper as they sat down. “Shit, that’s not good news.”

“What is it?” Hunter asked impatiently when Jack didn’t hand it over right away.

“Termites,” I said before standing. “Which means my wood is not only infested, but there’s extensive rotting. It’s not just a roof to be repaired, but the whole fucking house. It

might be better to just start from scratch at this rate.” At this point I was pacing as I ranted, hands flailing. “I’m going to have to find somewhere to stay long term.”

“You already have a room,” Boone said gruffly. “Why spend more money when you’re welcome with us?”

“Thanks,” I said, pausing long enough to give him a smile. “But my heat is coming. And that’s not something I can ask of you. There’s probably an omega clinic around here, they always have safe spaces to ride out a heat. I could just go there, then come back afterwards.”

I was so busy talking it out to myself that I nearly slammed into Jack when I turned to pace back. He steadied me before forcing me to look up at him. His blue eyes had me losing myself for a moment as I started to give into his calming presence.

“First, you’re going to breathe. And second, you can take the attic at our place. We renovated it a few years back but haven’t done anything with it so it’s nice and empty. And there’s a lock on the door so you can feel safe,” he promised.

I turned to gauge the others and they both looked a bit taken back by his response, but not opposed.

“I don’t want to disrupt your life more than I already have,” I argued weakly.

The idea of being in a cold, quiet clinic over being somewhere that smelled like them wasn’t at all appealing. I’d chosen that option over spending my heat with anyone since I presented, and it always put a pit in my stomach about it before and after when I thought about it.

“You aren’t a disruption, Autumn,” Boone argued. “I can go back and stay at my apartment over the shop if it helps.” The vulnerability in that statement had me stopping short.

“No, that would make me feel awful,” I said honestly, reaching out to grab his hand.

Hunter had been quiet and a nudge from his brother had him clearing his throat. I appreciated that Jack never let him sit on the sidelines so I could overthink about what he held back.

“I agree, our place is the best idea. We’re all more than willing to go stay elsewhere during your heat and let you use the house, but if that’s truly something you don’t want then we’ll make it work. We won’t lie and say it’ll be easy, but we’re here if you want us and if not, we respect that. Nothing will happen that you don’t want to happen,” he promised.

Something in his voice was strained but when I studied him he was smiling softly and seemed completely genuine. One thing I didn’t think Hunter was, was a liar, so I took him at his word.

“Okay, that sounds nice,” I admitted. “He didn’t give me a time estimate, but I doubt it’ll be quick. I might have enough time to start taking heat suppressants.”

“Is that something you want to do?” Boone questioned seriously. “Sometimes starting suppressants or blockers don’t have the best side effects. I didn’t realize how much until I stopped taking mine recently.”

I loved how open he was with the three of us, and while I wasn’t entirely sure of the reason he’d decided to take blockers in the first place, the fact that we were having an honest conversation as a group, that would affect us all spoke volumes.

“I’ve only tried them once in college and they gave me some intense headaches among other things,” I admitted, grimacing slightly at the memory.

“Then they’re not worth it,” Hunter said. “Trust us, Autumn. You don’t need to do that to yourself for our sake. However you want your heat to play out is how it will go. You call the shots.”

I reached out and took his hand, squeezing it slightly before looking at all of them. “You guys are seriously amazing. I-I have a lot of work to do between the orchard and figuring out what to do with this place now. I need to do a bit of work on my budgets and see what I can swing, but staying with you all would definitely help.”

“Come on, let’s go back to our place. I’ll get some sweet tea and lunch going while the guys take you up,” Jack said as he held out a hand in invitation. I didn’t hesitate to put mine in his and let him pull me out to his truck.

He sat me in the front while the guys jumped in the truck bed. With how loudly it roared to life when Jack turned it on I was shocked I didn’t hear them pull up when I was talking with Carl. Then again, today wasn’t exactly packed full of great news.

Jack parked his truck out front and before I could even open my door, Boone was doing it for me. He pulled me into a hug, which was unexpected but perfect. A low rumble emanated from the alpha and I melted into the embrace, letting the sound lull me into a sense of peace. Even if it was brief, I’d take it.

“You aren’t in this alone, Autumn. We’ll help in whatever way we can,” he promised. “I’ll get supplies for Carl at wholesale, so no one is losing money but it can cut some of the cost.”

“You deserve profit,” I argued weakly. The sound of a little break in cost was nice though.

“Not at the expense of those I care about. I’m doing just fine, don’t worry about me,” he said firmly, his voice brokering no argument and I let out a soft chuckle.

“Thanks, Boone,” I said, placing a kiss against his bearded jaw.

“For what?” he asked, genuinely confused.

That was one thing I liked about Boone. He was just a sweet person, without trying or holding expectations against anyone. He did things because he wanted to. That was what being a true alpha was about and I knew far too many alphas who could use a lesson or two in that regard.

“For being you,” I said simply before pulling back and forcing myself to go inside. I may or may not have sniffed my shirt as I went, happy that it smelled like the alpha.

“Up here,” Hunter said the moment I stepped inside.

Hunter had been acting a little odd since I moved in with the storm and the heat conversation, and I wasn't sure why he was holding back. Was it the conversation we had about no strings attached? Either way, it was his choice and I wasn't the type to push him. He'd come around or he wouldn't, but I didn't think it was going to be the latter.

"Thanks," I said as I followed him up the stairs. His tight jeans gave me an amazing view of his ass and when I stumbled the second time, too busy staring to focus on walking, he let out a bark of laughter.

"Eyes up here, omega," he husked, giving me a wolfish wink that had my cheeks flaming red.

"Look, it's not my fault you chose to walk first while wearing those particular jeans. Your ass looks great in them, by the way," I snarked right back. But I meant every word I'd said. And this moment confirmed my earlier thoughts that it wasn't a lack of attraction that was holding him back.

"I'll keep that in mind," he teased before walking down the hall and opening a door at the end, revealing another set of stairs. When he got to the top he moved against the wall and waited for me to take it all in.

I should've probably been holding myself back because it wasn't truly my space, but as I looked around, it just felt right.

The space was empty like Jack predicted, with brand new polished wood floors and finished walls that were all white. It was airy and open and the set of windows that overlooked the pumpkin field even had window seats. I could imagine putting blankets and pillows in them and snuggling under the stars or the sunset.

The room itself was huge, more than enough room to create a nest for myself, and the slopes of the ceiling made it still feel safe and contained. I'd need pillows, a fluffy mattress to lay out, maybe even some sheer curtains so I could close myself off when I needed a sense of safety, but I couldn't help the tiny thrill of excitement that ran through me.

“It’s perfect,” I told him as I turned back, only to find him gone.

Part of me was sad he’d walked away, but the other part was glad. It gave me a chance to walk around and explore the space. My heat was only a few weeks away so I’d have to work fast, but I could easily handle it.

If only I could figure out what to do about the more than willing men who would help me through it.

The real question was... did I even want that?

CHAPTER 15

AUTUMN

I almost felt like Santa Claus, with the list I'd made and checked twice, but I was a season too early. Regardless, I was on a mission to touch base with all the local businesses on the main square in Holiday Hollow to not only gain information and memories on what they thought about Cedarwick Orchard, but to also scope out potential business avenues for cross promotion.

The past couple days had been crazy, and I was determined not to let it affect my overall goal for the orchard and Fall Festival. Thankfully Riley had hired his chosen hands for the orchard and I was making headway on my networking.

So far, I'd been through a little more than half the block, and everyone had such great things to say about my grandparents, little stories here or there about how much they'd helped the community or were part of traditions here at Holiday Hollow. In addition to finding the most delicious pillow that I couldn't help but buy, I'd found a couple opportunities where potential goods could be sold, but I'd actually have to dive into having those goods made first which is why I was really excited about my next store.

The Confectionery was a hot new shop that had only been around for a couple of years. If my sources (ahem, Riley), were correct, they made the most delicious high end chocolates and French patisseries. That alone would have made me eager to visit the shop, but the opportunity for them to use our product definitely had put a skip to my step.

The door chimed as I entered, taking in the rich onyx walls that framed the gold embellished display cases, the white hexagonal floors, making it feel like the perfect mix of modern and traditional. The store might have been a far cry from small town life, but the smells? The smells had me salivating as I approached the display case.

I must have come just after a rush because the place was empty, a few chairs had been left pushed out, and I could see that some of the goodies in the case were running low.

“Hello,” a voice greeted, a faint accent I couldn’t place on the tip of it.

A man walked from the back, dressed in a sharp black chef coat, his equally black hair combed back to perfection. He had a well trimmed goatee and a slender frame, but his green eyes were shrewd as he studied me. Everything about the man screamed professionalism, curt and genuine, yet not unkind. Simply detached. *Nope. Not intimidating at all...*

“Hi there,” I replied. “I don’t think we’ve had a chance to meet yet, I’m Autumn Cedarwick. I own the orchard in town.”

“Bienvenue, Autumn,” he said, nodding his head, as his accent fell into place for me. “What can I get for you today?”

“Whatever you recommend,” I said, knowing there was no way I could choose. “I was actually wondering if you had a few minutes to talk...”

“Adrien.” He said, his mouth closing in a firm line seeming to weigh his decision. “I have a batch of Pain Au Chocolat in the oven.”

“I swear I won’t keep you long,” I promised. “Whenever you need to grab them, feel free. I just got back to town and I’m trying to get settled in with the orchard and how things are running.”

“Sit,” he said, gesturing his head to one of the bistro tables in the space as he grabbed a plate and bent into the display case. “Allergies?”

“Nope,” I said, my eyes going big as he brought the small plate to the table. I could recognize the Madeline and

macaroon easily enough, although the flavors I wasn't certain of, but the shiny shelled chocolate with flecks of red and orange on top really caught my eye. "May I?"

Adrien nodded again, not saying a word as I took the chocolate and plopped it into my mouth. His body radiated tension, his spine stiff as he took the seat farthest away from me. It wasn't until I let out an embarrassing groan once the chocolate started dissolving in my mouth that his lips even twitched.

"Good, no?"

"Better than good," I gushed, knowing that I had just found my new vice. "Gosh, if you were here when I was growing up I probably would have ate you out of business. How long have you been here?"

"Two years."

"How are you liking it so far?" I asked. "Holiday Hollow is a special kind of place."

"That it is," he agreed, his brow furrowing slightly. "It's taken some time to get accustomed to, but people seem genuinely welcoming."

His statement was cordial, but something told me he wasn't sure if he believed the words he was saying. Small town life was hard to adjust to for those of us who've lived in the city. I had a feeling he was facing something similar. It made me wonder what brought him here in the first place.

Glancing at his watch, he looked back towards the kitchen. I knew I needed to say my piece before he took off.

"I know you have delicious masterpieces to create so I'm going to cut to the chase, Adrien, businessman to businesswoman. I'm exploring the idea of expanding our products into the retail space and was wondering if The Confectionary would benefit from such an arrangement."

His gaze sharpened on me before nodding his head. "Apples have too high of a water content to be used in the majority of the products I make. I could offer them in galettes,

but only during the season and even then the quantity wouldn't be substantial."

Disappointment washed over me briefly, but I knew that this place would be a long shot. I gave him a reassuring smile, knowing that the hard sell wasn't the way to go on with this one.

"No worries, just thought I'd ask. If you ever end up having a hankering for apples, you're welcome at the orchard anytime."

Surprise flashed in his eyes before he glanced at his watch again. "That's very kind of you, Ms. Cedarwick. I need to grab the Pain now. Enjoy your treats."

While Adrien was perfectly hospitable, the man was in desperate need of a hug or a few dozen pieces of his own chocolate. From his stature I would have guessed he was an alpha, but he literally had zero scent and wore a ring on his left hand, a mystery indeed.

I devoured the Madeline before reaching inside my pocketbook and dropping a bill on the table. I didn't want to assume he'd given me the treats for free and frankly, he probably deserved much more for the masterpieces he created.

Just as I was striding towards the door, a lovely pistachio macaron in my hand, Adrien peaked his head out.

"Ms. Cedarwick?" I paused, turning to give him my attention. "Try the coffee shop. Their products and retail space might fit what you're looking for."

Raising my cookie in thanks I stepped out into the street. With half of the stores and shops already visited, I was feeling pretty good about the progress I'd made for the day.

I'd taken a deeper look at the maintenance fund this morning too, after Carl had dropped the news that almost none of the house would be sustainable long term.

Of course later that night, despite the guys' reassurances that we would figure everything out, I may have had a bit of a pity party in my bedroom. Even though I tried to keep it quiet it wasn't too long before Boone showed up at my door, Jack

right at his heels, the two of them cuddling me in-between them as they offered their support.

Hunter had lingered by the door frame, watching over us for a moment.

Part of me couldn't get over how hospitable the guys had been. I'd only been staying with them a couple days now, but they'd gone out of their way to make sure I was comfortable and that I had everything I needed.

Hell, Jack had even done my laundry since everything had been soaked through and wrecked by the storm. Of course a small part of me missed the excuse to wear their clothes, but with the agreement, I guess I didn't really need one.

The lingering touches from Jack and Boone were enough to work a girl up. I could tell they were both trying to let me set the pace which I both appreciated and abhorred at the same time.

Getting to know them better was fantastic, but the more I got to know them, the more I wanted them. It was a cycle that had left me hot and bothered which was why I was thankful for the relief of the crisp autumn air as I strolled down Main Street.

"Well if it isn't the girl who's taking Holiday Hollow by storm!" A warm voice exclaimed, grabbing my attention.

Janet Halston was sitting on a park bench framed by two men who were almost double her size and looking at her as if she hung the moon.

"How are you doing, Mrs. Halston?"

"You either call me mama or if you're not comfortable with that yet, Janet, you hear me? None of this Mrs. Halston business. You're family as far as I'm concerned missy. I don't think you've had a chance to meet my alphas and the boys' dads, Ross and Bill."

The two inclined their heads politely at their respective names, the one who I assumed was Ross, reaching out to clasp Janet's hand tightly.

“Nice to meet you both. You have lovely sons,” I said, not knowing how much to say.

Sure, a good chunk of Holiday Hollow had turned up to help mitigate the damage on the house, but I wasn’t sure who all knew about the termite damage and that I was staying over at the pumpkin farm now.

Having an omega all up on their personal property might not look good in the future for when the pack decided they wanted an omega of their own. I’d already halfway planned how I was going to have to rid my scent from the place even though the voice inside me screamed at that.

“They better be treating you right up there at the farm,” Ross said. *Guess the cat is out of the bag.*

Bill grunted. “If they’re not, we’ll come up there and kick some sense into them.”

“What they said,” Janet agreed. “Although I’m sure the three of them are probably keeping each other in line. I’m so sorry to hear about the orchard house, Autumn. If there’s anything we can do personally or as a community to help just let me know and we’ll get that back up and running in a jiffy.”

“Actually, I was wondering if I could run an idea by you...”

Janet was the expert of all things Holiday Hollow and turned out to be the best one to ask for advice with the direction that I wanted to take with Cedarwick’s Orchard.

By the time I arrived back at the house, I was feeling pretty optimistic, which was saying a lot all things considered. I had a formal meeting scheduled with Janet in a week to flush out my idea and I had picked up a bag of supplies from the store.

“Well someone is looking much brighter today,” Hunter said, standing at the kitchen counter, his hair still freshly damp as if he had just showered.

Sitting my bag down, I shrugged. “Perspective. How was your day, Sheriff? Any excuses to break out those handcuffs?”

“No,” he said, shaking his head with a laugh. “I was with the junior deputies I coach today. It’s a program set up through the local middle school. We do a lot of community based things and go over some of the trails and fishing. It’s sort of like Holiday Hollow’s version of an all inclusive scout troop.”

“That’s really awesome that you get to do that,” I said, a warm smile stretching across my face. Of all the guys, I was a bit shocked it was Hunter who’d taken to being a scout leader. He didn’t seem the caretaking type but he was honestly the perfect alpha to lead them. He loved being outdoors and had proved more than once he was handy.

“It’s honestly probably my favorite part,” he admitted. “Although it does mean those handcuffs have to stay in their holder. For Hollows sake, could you imagine if they got their hands on them?”

“You’d definitely be getting calls to come save them from whatever hijinks they got themselves into,” I agreed, joining him in a laugh.

“Do my ears deceive me or did you just get my brother to laugh?” Jack asked as he walked in, coming to greet me with a hug and a kiss.

“Hey!” Hunter said in mock outrage. “I’m not the grump of the group. That’s reserved for Boone.”

“Speaking of, where is my favorite bear?” I asked.

“He just messaged that he was leaving the shop and should be home soon,” Jack muttered, pulling out his phone and typing away. “There, now we have a group chat! Should have done that ages ago.”

Hunter shot me a look, his eyebrows raised before he made a little whipping motion.

“Oh hush, Hunter Halston,” I told him with narrowed eyes.

Jack blinked up none the wiser. “What did he do now?”

“Why do you think I did something?” Hunter said. “Gosh, you really must think I’m the worst, brother.”

“No, you’re not the worst at all, you just don’t always let people see your best,” Jack pointed out, as he walked over to Hunter and pulled him into a hug. “I think you’re the best, and I’m glad we’ve gotten to hang out more lately.”

I stayed silent, giving them a moment as Hunter ducked his head and whispered something in Jack’s ear. They broke apart, both trying their best not to look teary eyed, while avoiding eye contact. Deciding to go out on a limb and give them an easy out, I proposed my next idea.

“If you want to spend more time together, I kind of have the perfect idea. Although fair warning, I will be using both of your gorgeous bodies and putting them to work.”

Hunter grunted while Jack knocked into his side.

“I’m listening,” the youngest Halston said eagerly.

“How would you all like to help me with trying my hand at making Cedarwick’s Famous Cider?”

CHAPTER 16

AUTUMN

“U m, Autumn? How many kinds of cider did you have in mind?” Hunter asked as he glanced down at the huge stack of recipe cards and photocopies in front of me. I gave him a sheepish smile as I took one and tossed it aside.

“Enough to figure out our classic version, and a new version,” I said evenly.

“Out of all these? You’ll go through your entire crop,” Boone noted. “Let’s see what we’re working with.”

He was in full business mode now, grabbing the pencil from behind my ear and making notes right on the cards. Soon he had three stacks. The entire time he was sorting and marking up the cards I’d spent days pouring over, his eyebrows were wrinkled in deep thought. He mumbled quietly under his breath and I couldn’t help but study him.

Boone was adorable and thoughtful, and I was lucky to be getting to know him like this. I knew there were many sides to himself he kept hidden from others, but he couldn’t hide the way he cared for his people, and I was quickly becoming addicted to having that in my life. To having him in my life.

All of them honestly, but I had to keep them separate in my mind so I didn’t neglect someone. Not to mention Hunter was acting strange still. Holding back physically while still flirting, we were at a slightly awkward place and I wasn’t sure how to take it. Then there was sweet and sexy Jack. We hadn’t fully

connected yet, but spending time with him was so easy. We just fit together and I felt like I'd known him my whole life.

“What did you figure out?” I asked, curious to see what he found that I'd missed. Honestly it was a desperate attempt to get my mind off of them and back in reality for a bit.

“This stack, they use maple syrup as their sweetener. The additions vary outside of that but it's the common factor. This second stack, it's brown sugar and sometimes a mix of white and brown. Then this last is just straight white sugar. You only have one odd man out and I'd just chuck it aside. No one wants to use molasses,” he concluded, handing over the recipe in question. I tossed it aside before stepping in next to him. Our shoulders brushed but he leaned into it this time instead of pulling away. A smile pulled at my lips as I pretended to study them, but secretly I was breathing in his scent and enjoying the touch.

“So how do we eliminate these down to one?” Jack asked as he and Hunter stepped up to the work table we'd drug to the middle of the barn.

“Find the common ingredients and make our own?” Hunter suggested. We all glanced up at him, the guys just as surprised as I was by his input.

“That's a great plan,” I said. “We get them down to one recipe each then try all three and pick our favorite. Then I'll make a Cedarwick classic batch. This is their recipe.”

I held up the weathered recipe card. Grandma had written little notes on the sides and had even added a few cute apple drawings to the edges. She used a precise blend of spices, adding way more than any of the new recipes had.

“You should frame that,” Jack said. “Hang it in the kitchen somewhere or out here.”

“That's a good idea,” I agreed. “For now, we're going to use it. I figured with how spiced this one is, a more subtle blend would be good too. Which all of these fit that.”

It took us literally hours to peel, core, cut, and boil the apples to perfection. It smelled amazing in the barn, but I was

covered in juice from the apples and a thin layer of sweat. This was much harder than I anticipated. If I didn't have the guys around I'd have no hope of operating the huge apple press that grandpa had installed out here, smooshing the apples and filtering out the pulp so just the thick juice remained.

"So wait, what's the difference between cider and juice?" Hunter asked as we watched it fill the big tub under the press.

"Processing," I answered. "I did a bunch of research on it. It's essentially ultra filtered and has a sweeter taste and none of the pulp gets through at all. Whereas apple cider gets a bit more of that and is thicker, and often spiced to some extent. It's also often blended with citrus too."

Boone grinned over at me. "You sound like an apple expert. It seems to be doing you good to be out here at the orchard."

"That and years of summers spent out here," I countered. "I'm not just your average city girl."

"No you're not," Hunter said absently. From the way he didn't even glance up I don't think he meant for anyone to hear it and since he sounded happy about that fact, I didn't bother to point it out. Jack and Boone exchanged a look but didn't say anything as they finished pressing out the last of the apples.

"This feels like a waste," Jack noted, pointing to the huge tub of apple cores and peels.

I grinned at him. "Actually, I've thought of that too. I'd love to make as little waste as possible, so I found a recipe for apple cider vinegar using the peels, some baked apple peel chips, and they can be used to make teas. I thought all three would be perfect, so I'm going to attempt those going forward. For now I talked to a farmer down the road who said he'd take them for his pigs."

"Good girl."

It took me a second to realize the words had come from my bear of a man, who looked slightly surprised by his praise as well, but dammit if it didn't have my cheeks heating and my

mind going to very delicious places. I cleared my throat and bit back a chuckle as I sat aside the buckets to make room for the portable burners and large stock pots to cook the cider in.

“Where do you have the oranges and sugars and spices?” Jack asked. He was also trying to hide his amusement and being a good friend by not calling Boone out.

“In the truck still, Boone and I ran to the store earlier. Help me?” I asked. He waved Hunter to come with him. Jack jumped into the truck bed and started handing bags down. Of course he gave the heavier bags to Hunter to the point it was almost comical.

“You guys know I’m not delicate, right?” I joked. Jack just winked as he threw another bag of sugar on the pile in Hunter’s arms. I rolled my eyes and followed them inside where Boone was emptying the cider into the stock pots already.

“It made just enough,” Boone noted as he sat it aside. “There’s only a little left.”

“I’m going to try it,” Hunter said, grabbing a ladle and spooning out some of what was left and taking a large sip. His face twisted in a grimace and he looked like he’d choke rather than swallow it. When it was finally down he gave a fake smile. “That was thick.”

“That’s what she said?” I offered, unable to help myself.

My laughter bubbled out until all four of us were cracking up. It lightened some of the tension that was brewing.

“Attractive, brother,” Jack teased, earning a punch in the arm from his brother. There was no real power behind it and both of them were grinning. I loved how well they treated each other, even in teasing moments.

“Thanks for helping today, guys, I don’t know how I would have managed without you,” I said. They all stuttered over my gratitude.

“Of course,” Jack said quickly.

“Anytime,” Boone grunted.

“What do I get out of it?” Hunter grinned, earning a punch back from Jack.

“Some cider when it’s actually meant to be drunk,” I teased.

The next thirty minutes were a flurry of slicing oranges and measuring out spices and sugars until we had all three simmering to perfection.

My barn smelled like heaven and all four of us were practically drooling over the cider. The sun was starting to set and giving the perfect backdrop to this evening. A warm glow, crisp fall breeze, and the scent of apple cider simmering on the fire. Honestly, I wasn’t sure life could get any better.

“If this is going to be a while, how about I go run and grab a round of burgers and fries from the diner and bring it back?” Hunter said.

I stand corrected, tonight did just get better.

“That sounds amazing, Hunt,” I said quickly, the other two agreeing without hesitation. Hunter rushed off, taking Jack’s truck since it was parked out front.

“What’s the plan when we turn off the fire?” Boone asked me. “How long do we let these go?”

“I think they’re about done. We’ll have to wait for them to cool but I don’t want to trap you guys here all night with me,” I said, realizing it might be a while before this finished cooling enough to be tested and bottled up.

“The pots have lids, right?” Jack asked. I nodded and he glanced around before grabbing three apple crates. “So we put them in here, load them up, and take them back with us. We can cool them on the porch while I start a bonfire and we wait on Hunter.”

“Perfect,” I said excitedly as I gathered up the jars and ladles, putting them in Boone’s truck. Boone and Jack loaded the covered cider and I double checked the fire was properly out and everything was safe to close up for the night. I sat the bins of peels out for the farmer to pick up and sent him a quick message before climbing in the cab to sit between the alpha

and beta, who didn't seem to mind at all that we were squished in together. I know I certainly didn't, ever since I had my first taste of each of them I'd been hungry for more, and living with them, seeing how all three of them interacted? Well, I couldn't help but consider their offer about my upcoming heat.

By the time we were unloaded and Jack had a fire roaring, Hunter was pulling up with dinner.

"You're my hero," I said as he handed over a bag with a burger and fries in it for me. I was surprised to see it was onion free, just like I liked it. He just gave me a smirk at my questioning glance.

"Some alphas pay attention," he joked. It was likely Beatty who told him that information but I gave him this win.

We'd barely polished off our food when Boone was yawning.

"I have to turn in now, early opening tomorrow," he said. Hunter stood as well.

"Same, I have opening shift."

"But you haven't tried the cider," I protested. "Wait!" They didn't protest as I grabbed out a stack of styrofoam cups and a ladle.

"This is the maple," I said, handing them each a cup then making one for myself. I took a sip and groaned at the mix of spice and syrupy sweetness. It wasn't too sweet, and really brought out the apples. "This is brown sugar," I said.

Boone wrinkled his nose at that one and quickly sat the cup aside. The other two looked equally unimpressed and when I took a sip, I couldn't disagree. It wasn't bad, but it also wasn't anything to write home about. And definitely not worth putting our orchard's name on the label.

"Alright, hit me with the third," Boone said. I made the final round and we all clicked our cups together before taking a sip. It was better than the second but I felt it was masking the apples more than the first.

“I think I liked the first the best,” I admitted. “Though it could use a bit more spice.”

“On that we agree,” Hunter said. “The citrus gives it a nice brightness.”

“Listen to us sounding like refined cider drinking experts,” Jack laughed. “But I’m going to have to agree. The others are almost too sweet.”

“Then we have a winner!” I said excitedly. “Maybe a few more tweaks and it’ll be perfect. Goodnight guys, thanks again for all the help.”

Hunter froze as I threw my arms around him, but quickly wrapped his arms around me and returned my hug. Before the alpha could overthink anything else, I moved onto Boone who wrapped me in a bear hug that soothed my soul in ways I didn’t know I needed before he released me, placing a soft kiss to my forehead before heading inside.

By the time I could breathe again, I gave Jack a hug as well. He shifted from hug to an arm around my shoulder as he led me back to the fire after we said goodnight to the guys.

“I figured the ciders have to cool some more anyway, might as well enjoy the fire right?” he asked as he settled me next to him on the bench.

I loved the setup they had out here, a cast iron firepit and benches they’d clearly constructed themselves. They’d put cushions over it and sanded them down and stained them, so it was more comfortable than I expected. I melted easily into Jack’s side and we both stared out at the fire. His hand absently brushed over my arm and each stroke of his fingers had my body amping up. It wasn’t just my arousal that scented the air and I glanced up at him, gauging where he was at. His eyes were full of heat as he put a finger under my chin, tilting my face up before brushing his soft lips over mine.

I groaned into the kiss, pushing it past sweet to heated. He didn’t complain as he shifted me over his lap. My hips rocked over him as my hands tangled in his hair, our kiss turning into a war of dominance that he never took too far.

Jack pulled away and took a steadying breath, meeting my eyes as if he were studying me. “Is this okay? We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

“We don’t,” I agreed. “But I want this, Jack. I want you.”

He swallowed hard before brushing his fingers against my hips, shifting my shirt up and over my head. Goosebumps erupted on my arms and torso as a cool breeze drifted over us. But I barely felt the cold, comfortable between our warm bodies and the fire at my back.

I was less gentle as I lifted up his shirt and tossed it to the bench beside us. Thank fuck they lived on the outskirts, meaning no one could see us out here. Plus on the off chance that Hunter or Boone did see, I wouldn’t mind it, but I was more than happy to be in Jack’s arms at the moment. There was just something amazing about connecting under the stars, firelight and the scent of apples in the air still.

His mild spiced cream and caramel scent was the perfect addition and I found myself brushing my nose over his neck, inhaling as I trailed small kisses down toward his shoulder.

“We should go inside,” he said in a strained voice. “You deserve a soft bed and for us to take our time.”

“Next time,” I promised. “For now, I want you out here, like this.”

He groaned at the thought and stopped protesting. It might have had something to do with me shifting off of him, slowly stripping off the rest of my clothes until I was naked before him. It seemed I’d stunned the beta speechless, his mouth agape as his gaze trailed over every inch of my body. Slick pooled between my thighs and I squeezed them together to get friction while he took his time.

“You’re beautiful, Autumn,” he whispered reverently. “You don’t know how much I want you.”

“Then do something about it, Jack,” I challenged. That seemed to bring his brain back online and he stood up so fast I almost stumbled back, but his hands steadied me. My breath caught as he sat me down on the bench, shifting my legs wide

and studying me yet again. “You’re going to give a girl a complex if you keep staring like that.”

“Oh stop,” he laughed as he fell to his knees.

All joking was gone as he swiped his tongue over me, groaning at the taste before going all in. My cries were barely stifled as I clung to his hair for dear life as he tongue fucked me into oblivion. Pleasure tightened in my belly before surging through me. My legs were shaking as I grinded into him, forgetting all thoughts of reservation as I came hard enough my vision blurred.

“Holy shit,” I breathed out eloquently as he moved away, face glistening with my slick. “If this is how we’re going to start all of our encounters then I’m one lucky girl.”

The proud smile on his face was adorable. As he stood, his muscles on display and jeans dipping below his hips, my mouth went dry.

He smirked as he started to unbutton his jeans, then froze. His entire demeanor changed from sexy to serious.

“What is it?” I asked.

He frowned. “I need to run upstairs, find a condom. This was amazing, but unexpected...” His words trailed off as he glanced up at me.

“Jack. I trust you,” I promised, knowing this was more than a one night stand. “I know you wouldn’t do anything that’s not safe and I’m on birth control. We don’t need it unless you’re particularly set on it?”

His eyes glazed over and he shook his head jerkily. “Fucking you sounds like heaven, but I don’t want to take advantage of you, Autumn. You deserve better than that.”

“Jack, all I want in this moment is you,” I said as I stood up, pulling him in for a kiss. “I’m okay with this. Are you?”

“More than okay,” he promised as I unbuttoned his jeans and dropped them to the ground with his boxers. My mouth watered at the sight of him, long and slightly curved. I shifted

us around before I pushed him down on the bench, climbing on his lap.

All the awkwardness from our conversation was gone and I glanced at him one last time for approval before sinking down on him. We both groaned as he filled me. My body was worked up enough that I couldn't pause for long. His hands settled on my hips, letting me take the reins as I fucked myself on him.

Jack wasn't the type to just sit there and let me do the work, his fingers trailing over my skin as he explored every inch of my skin he could reach. My back bowed as his touch ghosted down my spine, his mouth claiming my hard nipple that I'd presented him. He teased his teeth over me before biting down hard enough that I cried out. This time there was no buffering the sound and I wasn't positive the others couldn't hear us. Nor did I care.

Jack took over then, fucking into me as he held my hips in a bruising grip. My legs clenched around him and the moment he started to lose his pace he brushed his fingers over my clit, teasing me until my body was exploding for him, pussy clenching around him as I came again. This time he came with me, crushing his lips to mine so he could swallow down my cries as he fucked me through the aftershocks. When he pulled away from the kiss he rested his forehead to mine as we caught our breath.

"I think the cider is probably cool now," Jack joked, breaking the silence. I climbed off of him as I laughed. "Come to bed with me?"

"I'd love to," I said with a grin as we both got dressed and put out the already dwindling fire. We stole glances as we brought everything inside and put it away. By the time he was pulling me upstairs, I knew that sleep wouldn't be all we did tonight.

CHAPTER 17

JACK

My arm ached as I reached up to grab a fresh bag of flour in the pantry. When Autumn had asked us to help make cider I'd envisioned an afternoon of playful flirting, tasting delicious cider, and being surrounded by her scent. Instead it was full of cranking the industrial apple peeler, slicing apples, and working over a hot burner.

Even if the day had been rough, the night was even better. The scent of the enticing omega was still wrapped around me and I breathed it in with a goofy grin on my face as I got to work mixing the pancake ingredients.

"What are we making?" Boone asked as he came in. For some reason he was the only one who could wake up grumpy, yet motivated. But I wouldn't turn down some company.

"Put on some music, will you?" I asked him first. "I've got coffee brewing already, but you can get some sausage going."

He grunted in response as he went over and put his phone in the speaker dock, keeping it low enough to not wake the others but loud enough we could enjoy it. We'd perfected the noise level during Hunter's brief stint of overnight shifts. We were a small town, and when Barnes retired, he had to take over extra shifts until they'd sent him a few officers from upstate.

When the soulful country music started playing we both sung along, going about our work in companionable silence. That was what I appreciated about Boone. There was no need

for unnecessary conversation. He could make you feel less lonely with his presence alone.

Having him back was amazing. I'd thought we all but lost our pack for a while, but we were slowly breathing life back into it. He belonged here. Just like Autumn did. Even if we hadn't convinced her of that yet. Hell, I hadn't convinced *them* of it yet.

But there was something magical about this town. It stole your heart easily with its quirky citizens and strong sense of community. Holiday Hollow gave you a place to truly belong, to thrive, and I hope it extended to her. Hell, it brought her back after all these years, even if not on the best circumstances.

Speak of the devil.

"I thought I smelled something delicious," Autumn said as she came in. I glanced over and bit back a groan at the sight of her in an oversized tee and booty shorts. The woman could wear anything and I'd likely feel the same, but the disheveled hair and my shirt from last night nearly did me in.

"Morning, pumpkin. Can you go wake up Hunter?"

Boone gave me a side eye but said nothing as she walked away.

"That was mean," he said evenly as he went to prepare her a cup of coffee and placed it on the counter, before going back to the stove.

"He'll be fine," I shot back as I flipped the last of the pancakes onto a platter and carried it to the table.

A loud grunt echoed out of Hunter's room and Autumn's laughter filled the air. Fuck it was nice to have my brother laughing more. He was keeping his distance a bit still, but I could tell that he was enjoying having her here. Hell, he was home more, no more late nights at the bar any chance he got.

"Done, and done," Autumn sang out as she walked in the room, sliding her hands together like she did a job well done. "Oh, pancakes. Mind if I make some eggs?"

“Of course not,” I said. “I can do it for you?”

“Oh stop, I’m capable,” she teased. “Boone, want any? Jack? Anyone know about Hunter? He’s in the shower by the way.” I chuckled at her rapid fire questions. She even talked with more energy than the average person.

“I’ll take some,” Boone agreed. “Hunter doesn’t like eggs.”

“I’m good today, thanks though,” I added in.

She turned the sausage grease back on before cracking a few eggs into the pan. Seeing her in my kitchen, in my shirt... man I needed to talk to these guys, get their head in the game. If we kept things at this level, purely friendly and fun, then we’d lose our chance.

I couldn’t let that happen.

Not with her. She’s too perfect. Well, no one was really perfect, but she was perfect for us.

Boone was slowly coming back to life, something I wasn’t sure would ever happen. Hunter was showing the softer side of himself, spending more time at home and with all of us again, while I, for the first time in a while, was looking forward to my days. I loved the patch and my pack, but I’d fallen into those things. Autumn was the first thing I’d ever chosen myself, and it was all but impossible not to, she had wormed her way into my heart and I never wanted to let her go.

The pack we’d built, then let get fractured, was mending. Dating separately was a stupid plan, one built on desperation when we realized we liked different things but also liked being a pack.

And then came Autumn.

She had the loyal, fiercely caring side that Boone loved. She was confident and could banter easily with Hunter. His snark was met with some of her own and he was loving it despite refusing to see it. And for me, well she was the entire fucking package. Beautiful, intelligent, motivated, and she loved Holiday Hollow.

“You with us?” Hunter asked. He caught me in my head again and the sound of his voice had me jumping.

“Yeah,” I muttered. With a quick glance around to see where Autumn was, I continued. “But I want to talk when she goes out today.”

He frowned but nodded. “Alright.” If it wasn’t for the concern already there, I don’t think he would have agreed so easily.

“So, what do you guys do for the Fall Festival?” Autumn asked as she brought over the eggs she’d cooked up. Hunter wrinkled his nose at the sight and shifted his chair away, making her laugh at his expense.

“I mainly do behind the scenes,” Boone said. “Help build booths and go where Janet needs me.”

“Which means he puts the whole thing together. Mom’s a bit of a perfectionist,” I laughed.

“Oh my god, remember the year she decided we needed a fall fashion show?” Hunter asked. “She had us building a full runway.”

“I think it’s still in storage,” Boone chuckled.

“Wait... who were the models?” Autumn asked, putting down her fork, fully invested now. “Tell me that Beatty got up there.”

“Oh, she did. If I remember correctly hers was a huge poncho that practically swallowed her, but she strutted proudly,” I explained, all of us laughing at the memory.

“So what’s this year, just the festival?” Autumn asked.

“Why, want to shake your ass on stage?” Hunter teased. She smirked at him.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” They stared each other down, the sexual tension rising enough I quickly answered to get us back on track. As much as I’d love to crash the dishes to the floor and lay her out and feast on her, that wouldn’t be right. Not yet at least. I mean she didn’t mind when I splayed

her out in my bed last night once we'd come inside, but I'd save the dining room table for my mental bucket list.

"She's having the Junior Deputies put on a skit," I said.

"About what?" She wasn't shocked to learn about them so she must have heard about Hunter's crew of kids.

"About a lost kid," was all Hunter gave away. He'd explained a little but had been a bit mysterious about the details, even with us.

"Oh, interesting," she said with a small smile before digging back into her breakfast.

"I'll be doing the pie contest and then we always have a booth. Selling some pumpkin products and of course the pumpkins themselves. We also set up the smaller ones for the kids to paint or carve," I jumped back in, answering her original question. "Thankfully we have a great team here at the farm that handles the crop and pumpkin patch side of things. I like going out and helping and overseeing when I can, but it's nice to have them this time of the year, something I'm sure you'll see with the new ones Riley hired."

"They've been amazing, but don't try to distract me with those sparkling blue eyes of yours. You're my direct competition?" she challenged. Her attempt at a game face had me shaking my head.

"Never. We'll both sell out," I promised. "Though the pie... I have that in the bag."

"We'll see," she said before glancing at her watch and wincing. "Shit, I have to run. Thanks for breakfast and I promise to handle dinner dishes. I'm sorry. I have a meeting with Carl at his office in town."

"Want me to come?" Boone offered. I held my breath, afraid this would be another failed attempt at getting these alphas to talk. But Autumn shook her head.

"No, but thank you," she said as she scraped off her plate and dropped it in the sink. "I'm going to mill around town afterward for a bit. I've got some more shops to hit."

“We need to talk,” I said before the others could tuck tail and run after Autumn rushed to grab her stuff. They both sighed, but didn’t protest. We didn’t do well talking and sitting and I wasn’t going to do it with Autumn in the house, so we got to work clearing the breakfast dishes and cleaning up. She gave a hasty goodbye a few minutes later and was out the door.

“What is it?” Boone demanded the moment her tires churned the gravel on the driveway.

“Autumn,” I said simply. “She belongs with our pack.”

“She isn’t the type to let us make that decision for her,” Hunter argued.

“Don’t think I’ve missed you shying away from fully claiming her,” I pointed out. “Yet you flirt with her openly.”

He shrugged and adjusted his ball cap on his head. If he thought he was going to bolt, I’d literally tackle him and tie him down.

“I don’t know, Jack,” Boone said, his words lingering like he wasn’t sure what more to say.

“You like her too,” I said in frustration. “Okay, listen up, both of you. I know this is right, I can feel it. This isn’t just some fling or some neighborly kindness. She’s fucking perfect.”

“She’s leaving,” Boone said, cutting to the heart of his worries.

“You’re right, she will,” I said bluntly. “If we don’t give her a fucking reason to stay.”

“Forcing someone to stay doesn’t work,” Boone said bitterly. The shadows crept back into his brown eyes, taking the warmth right out of them.

“Boone,” Hunter said with a sigh. “She’s not Heidi.”

“She’s not,” he agreed. “But what if—”

“No,” I said firmly. We shouldn’t have let it go on this long in the first place. We’ve tried to talk to him but he shut us out.

I wasn't letting that happen again. He couldn't keep running from things because she made him feel unworthy. "You never told us everything she said or did, whatever turned you into this, but fuck her."

Boone's eyes widened at the venom in my voice, but Hunter took right over.

"Jack's right. Fuck Heidi," Hunter growled. "We let you pull away and shut yourself off when she revealed herself to be a mega bitch and it was fucking painful to see. Sure you didn't cut us out completely, but it was damn close to it."

"I'm sorry," he said. Watching his head hang in defeat had my chest aching and I went over, wrapping my arms around him.

"No, you grieved how you had to and took the time to get your head on straight again, but don't you ever let yourself feel like you're unworthy. Autumn's not going to use you like she did," I whispered fiercely. "She would never."

"She's been careful with you. Autumn's not just smart and sassy, she reads us all like a book," Hunter said. His tone was strange, guarded, but when I glanced over he looked almost hopeful. "Fuck. I do want her."

"Good," I said, both of us turning to Boone for his reaction.

"So do I," he admitted, swallowing hard as if he had to force the words out. "I've never felt the way I feel for her about anyone before. No one even comes close."

"Same," I agreed. "She even fits Holiday Hollow well."

"She fits *us* well," Hunter corrected. For once we all sat back down, lost in our heads for a moment as we contemplated what this would mean for all of us.

"So we're all in?" Boone asked, the determination sparking inside him a welcome thing to see. "Because we have to do this together. It's the only way it'll work."

"All in," I agreed.

Hunter nodded slowly. “I’m in, but I need to get my head on straight before I touch her again. I won’t push her away, but I know the next time I take her I’m going to want to put my bite on her neck. I don’t want to do that if I don’t have my own shit together. I don’t know if either of you’ve noticed but I haven’t really done relationships.”

I knew he needed time, and I understood where he was coming from. At least he was acknowledging that she fit.

“Don’t take too long,” I warned.

“Yes, Dad,” Hunter said, rolling his eyes.

“So now what?” Boone asked. “How do we show her this is where she belongs?”

“We stop holding back,” I said, giving Hunter a pointed look. “We ask her on dates, we enjoy the festival and all the stuff leading up to it. We court her.”

It sounded so easy when I said the words out loud. I just hoped it played through exactly as we planned. Because Autumn wasn’t just any omega, she was *our* omega.

CHAPTER 18

AUTUMN

Carl's news had been on par with what I'd expected, which only had me even more convinced to go ahead with my plan for the orchard. Janet and I were still flushing out some details and legalities, but I had a feeling it'd be just what this town and I both needed.

Claire's shop was busy when I walked in so I simply joined the line. I was a patient person and my laptop was in my bag, so I could wait out a lull in customers before approaching her.

"Oh my god! Autumn!" Claire yelled excitedly, waving me over.

Well, nevermind about waiting her out. She was giving me the perfect opportunity.

"Hey, Claire," I greeted her. "I wanted to speak to you about something if you have time some time soon?"

"Give me your order and about ten minutes to clear this line, then I'm yours," she promised.

"You're so sweet," I said with a relieved smile. She was a much easier person to approach than Adrien had been. Between her bubbly personality and the way she focused on you, it felt like talking with a friend.

After telling her to surprise me I went off to claim one of the few empty chairs. It was about two seconds flat before a group of older women approached me. They were a cloud of perfume, permed hair, and bright lipstick in varying shades.

“Hello ladies,” I greeted with a smile.

“Autumn,” one of the women gushed. “I’m Edith. This is Fran and Patty.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said. “Do you want to join me? I’m meeting Claire in a bit but you’re welcome to sit, there aren’t many options left today.”

“Thank you, dear,” Patty said as she sat down, the two omegas following the beta’s lead. “It’s almost festival time, everyone will be scrambling for the next few weeks. And that means that coffee is essential.”

I laughed at her words. “I couldn’t agree more. Without coffee, I’d never accomplish anything.”

“You and me both,” Fran said, saluting with her cup. The paper was stained with a bright pink lip mark.

“Have you decided yet what you’re going to be doing with the orchard?” Edith asked. She was trying to be sly. *She failed.* This was very clearly a gossip session.

“I did,” I said mysteriously, giving them a wink. “But the plans aren’t fully laid out yet so I don’t want to spoil the fun.”

“I told you that she wouldn’t just spill her guts because we wanted to know,” Patty cackled at her and her friends’ expense. “Sorry about that, Autumn. We’re nosy, it’s a problem.”

I chuckled. “It’s okay. I promise the wait will be worth it. And to give you a glimpse, I’ve been trying my hand at making cider lately. Not quite there but I’m determined.”

They all let out an excited squeal before Fran gave me a grin. “I can’t wait to try it.”

“Oh my god. Did you guys hear about Landon, Mary’s boy?” Patty said in a hushed whisper that literally everyone around us could hear.

“No,” Edith gasped, fully invested. “Is he the one with acne or the one with that awful girlfriend?”

“That’s exactly the story. Apparently that girl met a new alpha and they ran off to the city,” she stage whispered.

“No!” Fran gasped. “But he’s handsome and has a job.”

“The other alpha had a motorcycle,” she countered with a wistful sigh. “How can an omega resist that?”

They continued on and gossiped as Claire worked through the crowd. By the time I’d found out every detail of happenings in Holiday Hollow, she was rushing over to save me.

“I’m going to borrow Autumn, ladies, but make sure you hit up Tyler for a refill before you head out,” she said with a wink, taking my hand and pulling me around behind the counter and out the back door.

“Thanks for saving me,” I laughed as I took a deep breath. “I was about to lose my mind out there.”

“They’re sweet, but they can be a lot to handle,” she agreed. “Fran’s my grandma, she’s always like that. They all are.”

“Now that you say it, I can see the resemblance,” I said, pointing at her gorgeous, curly hair.

“She just keeps hers short now,” she agreed, gesturing to a patio table. This was clearly a private space to the cafe. She’d turned the backyard into a serene space. The yard was full of flower beds and a large oak tree grew up giving the patio shade. She had a comfortable patio set and the table already had two cups of coffee and a plate of goodies. “Take whatever you’d like.”

“Thanks,” I grinned, snatching a cookie as I took my chair. “And thanks for giving me a minute of your time.”

“Of course,” she said. “What’s on your mind?”

“Well I’ve been diving deep into the orchard and I want to branch out a bit more,” I explained, going through my plans with her. Her excitement grew with each one before she stood abruptly and ran inside. It was so sudden that I blinked at her empty seat, completely confused. She bounced out the door a

few minutes later, a huge binder in hand. She sat it on the table with a loud thud.

“This is perfect. I’ve been working on some ideas over the past few years. Your grandpa and I actually had a similar talk several years ago, but obviously it didn’t come to fruition.” I nodded in understanding as she flipped through. “Here we go.”

She turned it and pushed it my way. My eyes widened as I scanned the page, jaw dropping by the time I got through it.

“You guys came up with all this?”

“Yup,” she agreed. “He was talking about the waste of apples at the end of season and what he could do differently. The cider only goes so far. I even touched base with a distributor that approached me for some of my goods to see if they’d be interested. I’ve got plans for apple jellies, pastries and muffins, and maybe a coffee or two. Who wouldn’t love an apple toffee crunch coffee that pairs with my turnovers?”

I wiped at fake drool, making her laugh again. I loved that she was a genuinely happy person, it was infectious. “Sign me up, it sounds amazing,” I agreed. “I’m glad Adrien sent me over here.”

“What?” she asked. The confusion had me glancing up from the page. Her eyebrows were drawn and her cheeks flushed.

“Yeah, I swung by to see if he could use anything I can offer but he said no. Then as I was leaving he said I should come see you,” I explained.

“Am I being pranked?” she asked. The hurt in her tone had me fumbling out a reassurance. Hurting her feelings was definitely not my intention.

“No, he really said that,” I promised. “He was pretty curt otherwise, but as I left he made the suggestion. No joke. I don’t think he knows how, honestly.”

The tension drained from her and she took a drink of coffee as she processed my words.

“I’m completely and totally in shock. That man and I have a rivalry going, I was the first sweet shop in town. I don’t think he realizes there’s enough people with a sweet tooth around to keep us both going. Not to mention that our products are *very* different,” she said with a chuckle. “Wow.”

“Well I’m glad he sent me here, it’s been fun and these ideas are amazing,” I said with a smile. She took the binder and closed it, patting it fondly.

“This is like a secret handshake, no one has ever seen the inside of this. My mind is a chaotic place and this is an extension of that chaos,” she joked. “But in all seriousness, I’d love to talk numbers when you gather up details.”

“Perfect, I’ll talk a bit with Riley and see what’s feasible and let you know,” I promised.

“When you do, tell my bestie ‘hi’ for me. It’s always hard to match up our schedules this time of year. Don’t rush out just yet,” she said, “I’m on break if you want to finish your coffee out here.”

“It’s so peaceful here,” I said as I leaned back in my chair.

“People don’t believe me but I always say this town has magic in it,” she said with a smile, glancing around her yard.

“I couldn’t agree more,” I said, holding up my cup. She clinked hers against it with a grin.

“We should go out.”

It was so matter of fact that I sputtered and her laughter filled the yard.

“I meant out on the town,” she snorted. “You’re gorgeous, but not my type,” she teased. “Plus, I think you’ve been spoken for.”

My cheeks heated and I ducked my head. I liked that she knew about them, that it was obvious enough that the Halston pack had taken an interest in me. Sure we weren’t formally courting or anywhere close to bonding bites... but the thought of another omega in their lives nearly killed me.

Yet there was so much to figure out.

“Okay, Autumn, don’t think too hard,” she teased. “So about going out?”

“Sounds good to me,” I grinned, pushing away my erratic thoughts before they could drown me. “What is there to do in Holiday Hollow?”

“Go to the bar,” she joked. “That’s about it unless we want to head out of town. But to be fair they do live music once a month. In a couple weeks it’s a local band, Hollow Chords. You’ll love them, they’re amazing.”

“It’s a date,” I joked. But inside I was doing a happy dance. I’d been so busy with school and internships that I hadn’t had the chance to keep many close friends. Claire was fun and sweet and I knew we’d get along great.

Another point for Holiday Hollow.

How was I ever going to choose?

CHAPTER 19

AUTUMN

It turns out I had quite a few dates on my docket, not just the upcoming one with Claire. We had to push ours back slightly since she got caught up between the business and holiday rush, which, between the work I was doing on marketing and planning the new products for the orchard and the sudden influx in my dating life, it worked out for both of us.

Between calling contacts, potential distributors, and making sure things were running smoothly on the project I was working on—a topic I'd been particularly hush hush about—the guys had taken it on themselves to take me on dates.

Okay, so Hunter hadn't asked me out on a date because he still couldn't get out of his head, but we still did things together when we were home, and all four of us as a group. Jack and Boone on the other hand seemed to consume my every waking moment outside of work, and I certainly wasn't complaining.

For the first time in my life, I was getting to experience what being a pack could actually be like. Not some carefully crafted fantasy, or the type of ads they tried to swoon omegas with to encourage us to pack up, but actually mundane daily activities too.

I knew way too much about them now, and they knew about me too. I knew I got to pick all the olives off Jack's pizza and eat them for myself and that Hunter had a pair of reading glasses he sometimes used at night when he read, a fact I couldn't help but find adorable. Boone had his schedule

he liked to stick to, but without fail, every morning whether I was around or not he would seek me out or send me a text, letting me know his plans for the day and making some with me in return.

A knock on my open door pulled me from my thoughts and where I'd been staring at my laptop, the mock label for this year's run of cider I was working on still in the final stages.

"Hey," Jack said. "I brought you a little snack. Thought you might want a little something before we head out."

"Is it time already?" I asked, looking at the clock and realizing I'd been working the entire morning and early afternoon without a break. "Sorry, Jack. I totally got wrapped up. Just let me save this and freshen up and we can go."

"Hey, there's no rush," he said, setting the plate down on the desk and wrapping his arms around me as he placed a kiss on my temple. "We can push our double date back slightly if you need, it's a rather casual one, if you need more time we'll make it work, Autumn. Whatever you need."

I tilted my head up to him, seeking his lips as my hands covered his arms wrapped around me. When Jack wasn't up to his favorite pastime of getting me to stuff my face fatter than a thanksgiving turkey, he was always making sure I had everything I needed. It was a new experience for me, having people think of me in that way, and it made that ache in my chest, the one I never realized was there, ease.

"I'm at a good stopping place," I assured him once we broke apart.

"I thought you already had labels?" Jack questioned, looking at the screen. "Wasn't that part of the branding package you put together?"

A smile sprang across my face. "One would think you know a thing or two about marketing now, farmer Halston."

"Well, I did have an excellent teacher. She's this brilliant, funny, clever, smart, sexy..."

“Alright, alright, babe,” I said with a laugh. “Flattery will get you everywhere. This is just a special edition label I was working on for the new batch we came up with. I was thinking of doing something a little unique and special for the festival run only. Something that people would either be excited to try or could have as keepsakes if they wanted.”

“See? Brilliant.”

“Let me eat this delicious snack and get changed and I’ll meet you downstairs in thirty?”

Jack nodded, squeezing me in his arms one more time. “That works. Boone will be home in a few and then we can ride all together. Wear something comfortable and shoes you don’t mind walking around in.”

“Still no hints?”

“Nope,” Jack said with a grin as he made his way to the door. “Wouldn’t want to scare you off before the fun starts.”

“I’m pretty sure that statement alone might do it.”

“Not a chance, pumpkin. We haven’t steered you wrong yet, trust us.”

He left before I could reply but the words were already on the tip of my tongue. I did trust him, I trusted all of them. Every single day they showed me why I could in more and more ways.

Once I finished eating, I slipped on a pair of jeans with a fuzzy black sweater I loved before grabbing my cute matching black hat and boots. The outfit was the perfect combination of practical and cute, and I found myself excited about the possibility of what the guys had planned.

Boone and Jack were already waiting for me at the bottom of the stairs, the two of them both in jeans as well that made them look positively scrumptious.

“If you keep looking at me like that, baby girl, we’re going to have to take you back up stairs,” Boone warned, his woodsy scent intensifying and filling my lungs.

I stepped into his waiting arms, burying my face into his chest, my cheeks surely flushed. A groan echoed through the room and I felt another set of arms wrap around me as Jack pressed against my back.

“I love this hat, pumpkin, but it’s not letting me kiss you all the places I want to,” he said, half amused, half aroused.

“You told me to get dressed,” I pointed out. “If we were going to have a date in bed you should have just said so.”

“Baby girl,” Boone said with a groan. “I’m trying to do this right. Date first.”

“Fine, fine,” I said with a sigh. “I guess you’re just trying to make an honest woman out of me. Although I’m sure if I just listed all the fun we’ve all had—”

“Enough, trouble,” Boone said, stepping back and tilting my head up for a kiss.

Once he was done, he kept his fingers on my chin and turned my head towards Jack as he watched his best friend take the same.

For pumpkin spice sake these boys were going to ruin me.

“Let’s go,” Jack said, a smile on my face. “We’re taking the truck.”

They led me out to Jack’s red pickup, the beta opening the door for me as Boone snatched me up and lifted me up onto the bench seat.

“So do I get to know what we’re doing yet?” I asked, holding both of their hands as we made our way out of the drive.

“We’re going shopping,” Jack answered, the excitement in his voice clear as day.

“Anything in particular?” Boone mumbled next to me, his hand squeezing mine. “What was that, bear?”

“For us,” he said, clearing his throat and speaking clearer. “We’re going shopping for us and for the house. We’d do it ourselves but we’d rather have your opinion.”

“Exactly,” Jack said. “You have exceptional taste, your choice in us says as much.”

“I think Hunter is rubbing off on you,” I teased him with a laugh.

“Maybe just a bit,” he conceded. “But we thought we’d make a date of it. A romantic stroll down Main Street, our arms linked and loaded with bags.”

“Can my mouth be loaded with treats too?” I asked.

It took one single second where the three of us looked at each other before we burst out laughing. I’d walked right into that one.

“We’ll grab a drink from Claire’s to fuel up and then we can stop at The Confectionary so we can get some of those chocolates you were raving about,” Jack agreed.

Once we all had our special Cedarwick caramel ciders that Claire whipped up for us and we were strolling down Main Street, I couldn’t help but appreciate the moment.

The crisp fall air swirled around us, the yellows, ochre, and burnt amber colors of the leaves dancing on the wind and adding to the magic charm of the city. The afternoon streets were filled with a variety of both locals and tourists, but it didn’t feel overcrowded. If anything, it felt like we were experiencing something special all together, the very thing that made Holiday Hollow what it was.

Jack and Boone steered me into one of the stores I hadn’t had a chance to go into before, a fantastic home goods store of sorts that had the absolute cutest stuff. Excitement filled me as I looked at all the fixtures and linens, the cute chairs and literally the cutest damn pillows I’d ever seen.

They were in the shape of apples. *Cute little baby apples.*

“I think we found the first thing,” Boone said, going over and plucking one and putting it into my arms.

I immediately snuggled it, the soft fibers feeling so good against my skin. If only it smelled better, maybe I could use it in one of the guys beds for my own pillow for a while. Lord

knows I was probably only in my own bed a couple of nights a week, and even then usually Jack or Boone stayed with me.

They started doing it after the storm and it was something that just stuck. Even Boone admitted that he'd been sleeping better through the night when we all were together.

"Okay, yes, this is totally mine," I agreed. "What's next? What are y'all looking for?"

"Sheets," Jack said, steering us to the wall of neatly folded colors that were broken down by textile. "Which ones do you like the best?"

"For what?" I questioned, looking at the wall of choices and then back to the guys.

"Well we need three sets," Boone said, running a hand over his beard. "One for my room, one for yours, and then one for the new bed upstairs."

It took a second for my brain to process the words. The only thing that was upstairs was the attic. *The nest*. The last time I checked it didn't have a bed in it.

"The bed Hunter ordered for the room came in yesterday while you were out meeting with mom and Boone grabbed the final pieces to finish the frame he made for it earlier at work," Jack said, answering my question. "Now all you need to do is pick out what kind of sheets you want. We figured you'd probably want to feel them and we weren't sure which color you'd prefer. Actually we should probably get a couple of packs for that bed, we don't have any spares like we do for the ones downstairs."

A squeak may have left my lips as I tried to calm my racing thoughts. Sure I'd bought a couple of things here and there, and things had been mysteriously appearing around the house like a special coffee cup just for me and the incredible blanket Hunter had covered me up with one night, that was obviously new and I promptly loved and claimed as mine much to the alpha's delight.

Of course, I may have asked him to have a movie night and all but curled into him, but that was pretty much the best

part.

“You okay there, baby girl?” Boone said softly into my ear. “Is this too much?”

I shook my head. “No...just a bit unexpected? I mean logically I know that I’m going to be using that space, but I think it just hit me?”

Jack crowded closer the two of them forming my own little cone of privacy.

“What just hit you?” my beta questioned.

“I’ve never actually had a nest before,” I admitted. “Well, I mean, I’ve always made a small area in my room, but never one that I was actually going to spend my heat in. Not one that I could actually pick out sheets for ahead of the time.”

A low purr spilled from Boone, the question in both of their eyes clear. “Why not, baby girl?”

“I was in school by the time my first one hit, and it made the most sense to just reserve one of the secure rooms in the city,” I said with a shrug. “You could only bring one bag of things with you, and they aren’t anything special, but it was the best I could make of the situation. I didn’t want to risk riding it out in the dorms and I certainly didn’t want to find anyone to ride it out with there, they’d take that as an invitation of some kind. That’s when I tried those suppressants I mentioned, but it didn’t work out, so I just kept using the secure rooms throughout school and then for my graduate program too.”

“Then today should be even more exciting and special,” Jack said, threading his fingers through mine. “We’ll make sure you have everything you need or want. No more sterile impersonal rooms that probably make your heat harder to get through.”

“Understatement,” I said, with a slight grimace. “You guys don’t have to do this for me though, I know I haven’t made any firm decisions about whether I want you guys there or not ___”

“And you don’t have to, Autumn,” Boone said, seriously. “This isn’t about that. This is about us wanting to do something for you where the only ulterior motive is to make you smile. Even you letting us shop and help this way is a gift for us.”

“It’s home,” Jack said, simply. “We want you comfortable.”

I sucked in a deep breath, clutching Jack’s hand and my apple pillow simultaneously. They might have said that this was a gift for them, but truly it was a tremendous one for me. Deciding not to overthink things, I gave them a smile and a nod as I let that tendril of excitement bloom in me.

“I’m not sure if they have it here, but do you think we could get some sheer curtains or a canopy too?” I asked, softly. “I love the skylight but I know I’m going to probably want to feel a little more enclosed sometimes.”

“We can totally do that,” Jack nodded seriously. “What color do you want?”

“Maybe a light gray?”

“Done,” Jack said, looking like a beta on a mission. “Let me go and grab one real quick while you and Boone finish deciding on sheets, I’ll be right back.”

Best date ever.

“Even better than the seasonal Halston bowlathon?” Boone teased, a rare smirk on his lips.

“Damn it, I only usually do that with Hunter,” I pouted once I realized I’d spoken my thought out loud. “But I don’t know, the sheer number of times the good Sheriff got a gutter ball and that sexy slide Jack does were pretty noteworthy. Now if you were shirtless when you bowled all those strikes I’d have to consider it, bear.”

“I’ll keep that in mind for our next *activity*.”

His words and smile were filled with an exciting promise that carried over throughout the afternoon.

I wasn't usually one for material items but I couldn't deny how much I loved every single item I ended up picking out, both for myself and them, and how much it meant to me that they'd thought to do this for me. Jack was right, the farm had turned into home for me these past couple of weeks, even if by circumstance.

They made me feel like I fit. And honestly, that little voice of worry in my head was growing smaller with each passing day.

CHAPTER 20

AUTUMN

I'd been hearing so much about the upcoming festival, it felt crazy that it was only a little over two weeks away.

There was still so much to do that maybe that little kernel of worry had flared up slightly. I'd barely managed to get a usable pie crust, and from all of the pies popping up in the kitchen from time to time, Jack had definitely perfected his.

Now here I was standing in the middle of the festival grounds, surrounded by tools, piles of lumber, and about half the town.

"This is crazy," I said. It was already overwhelming and we hadn't even really started.

"There you are!" Janet sang out. She looked all business today with her hair in a professional bun and wearing a white pantsuit. She had a whole stack of papers in her arms and was already counting out three for us. "I've got the information here, including the very precise booth chart we worked out. We've got it by crafts, produce and homemade goods, treats, and then the food is by the live band stage."

"Wow," I managed to choke out as I took it, flipping through the blueprints she'd crafted. "This is impressive."

"Oh, don't sound so panicked," she teased. "I stuck you and Jack next to each other and Boone is already out here being a gem and helping put the booths back together and fixing any that broke from the last festival."

Boone had done an amazing job on the booths, and I had to admit I was once again impressed by his skills. Each one was made of wood with hinges at the junctions so it could be taken down. They were locked in place and an awning was stretched over the roof of the structure. There was a counter at the front of the booth that was big enough I could load it up with pies, jams, and cider.

“Thanks, Mom,” Jack said as he flipped through his own stack of papers. “Can you sign us up for two tables each to put in our booth? I’ve seen what she’s got and it rivals mine.”

“Already done,” she said excitedly. “And I put in for an extra display in front of the grocery store to entice people over to the festival! You’ll be able to drop off some samples if you’re interested?”

“Count me in,” I said without hesitation. I was still trying to forge a name for myself out here so the extra advertisement couldn’t hurt. Claire had agreed to make some prelim batches of goodies that we could market together so it would work out perfectly.

“Wonderful,” she said before Jack could even ask. He snorted out a laugh but didn’t seem all that surprised.

“There’s Boone,” he pointed out instead. I grinned up at my favorite mountain of a man who dropped his drill and started walking our way. Neither one of us hesitated as he opened up his arms for a hug.

I loved how open to touch he’d grown to be. Over the last few weeks between the shared meals, dates and late nights, we’d grown closer than I’d ever imagined. Even though the guys alternated according to their own work schedules, we still found time to make it work. Even Hunter had stopped keeping his distance and I was seeing sides of him I didn’t expect.

He wasn’t just the flirty man I was used to, but now I was seeing the softer sides of him too. They weren’t often, but I’d seen him snatch things out of my way in the kitchen so I couldn’t accidentally hurt myself, and I’d seen him sit on the porch swing staring off at the sunset like he was contemplating all of life’s secrets. Those were the moments I couldn’t help

but appreciate. Sometimes I'd even sit out with him, the two of us enjoying the view in silence. Oftentimes Boone would come out and whittle one thing or another while Jack would lean up against the porch with a book in his hand.

Even I was opening up more. Sure they'd heard stories about my childhood, but now they were getting the business side of things as I worked through the chaos that was the farm now.

"You're always getting lost in there lately," Boone noted, tapping a finger on my forehead. "You doing alright?" The concern was etched into his expression and I waved it off quickly.

"I am, there's just a lot of final decisions to figure out with the orchard," I said. "That and the jobs in the city have been calling to check in lately... it's just easy to get lost in thought I guess."

"Well, we'll be here to bring you back," he promised. My chest tightened at his words, the heaviness in his words meaning so much more than simply keeping my focus on track. Boone was offering me safety, a place to belong, and a pack that I could rely on. It was just up to me to accept it.

"Thank you," I offered with a shaky smile before I was saved from letting the conversation get more intense by Janet running back to us.

"Boone!" she screeched out, her calm demeanor gone. The woman was panicked enough it had all three of us rushing forward. "It collapsed. I-I, don't know what happened!"

"Show me," was all he said, not asking for more information. It was for the best, she was near tears and it likely wouldn't have been understandable.

When we got across the fairgrounds we jumped into action. A group of men were lifting the heavy wood and metal of the booth from off of someone, a smaller leg sticking out.

"Theresa?" Jack questioned.

It took me a second before I could place her, finally remembering the beta from the diner. Poor girl was trapped

under the heavy wood and while the alphas and betas in the area all helped to lift them off of her I ran around back to see if I could help.

When I saw her tearful face tented between the joists I couldn't help but slide in, knowing I was probably the only one around that could fit. Boone and Jack would kill me for it but I didn't hesitate to grab her hand. She was cold and shaking, her hand clamping down on mine in desperation.

"Hey, hey, look at me," I told her firmly. My voice was confident and she glanced over, meeting my eyes though I knew her vision was blurred with tears. "This isn't exactly the best way to get to know you, but tell me what you're planning for your booth."

"What?" she choked out. The poor girl was staring at me like I'd grown a tail and three heads but she was also not shaking anymore.

"The booth. Are you representing the diner?" I prompted again.

"Yeah, Beatty is cooking up a bunch of baked goods to sell out here so I was measuring the space to see what..." Her words cut off with a groan of pain and the following whimper had me biting back my own tears. I wasn't good at seeing people hurting, especially when I couldn't do much to help.

"I bet she'll sell out fast. Her cooking was one of the things that had me excited to come back here," I told her quickly.

"Yeah right. The city has so much better food. Like Chinese," she said in a strained tone.

"You know, I never considered there wasn't one in town," I gasped. It had both of us laughing, though it cut off again when they shifted the boards. It felt like this was taking hours, though I'd likely only been here for a few minutes.

"We've got it! Crawl out if you can!" I wasn't sure who shouted it, but I scooted backward to give her room.

"I can't," she said. Her voice rose several octaves as she kept repeating it.

“We can,” I corrected her, grabbing her by both hands and grunting as I pulled with everything I had. When I smelled the spiced cream of Jack coming up behind me I nearly sobbed in relief. His hands moved in front of me, grabbing her with me and giving a pull, finally freeing her. To my surprise, instead of clinging to Jack, she clung to me, shaking as her tears finally broke free.

“Thank you,” she whispered when she finally quieted down. I simply hugged her tighter and rocked her back and forth until she was calmed enough for Janet and a few alphas with a med kit to step in.

“Hey, come here,” Jack said soothingly as he pulled me off the ground. I gave him a smile and shook out my arms like it could expel the extra tension. “Usually it’s not so chaotic during setup.”

Before I could say anything back Hunter was crushing me in a hug. His voice was harsh as he hissed in my ear, but the slight tremble in it and how hard he was squeezing me were dead giveaways that I scared the shit out of him.

“You do not put yourself in danger, do you hear me?”

His words were just shy of a bark and I knew from the way he clung to me just how much I terrified them.

“I can’t promise that. She needed me. Imagine if it was me under there,” I countered in just as quiet of a voice.

“You *were* under there,” he argued, emotion still thick in his voice.

“Sorry I scared you,” I said. “But I couldn’t not help her.”

A long moment passed between us before he squeezed me tighter, dropping a kiss into my hair, my whole body shuddering from the affection.

“And you thought you weren’t made for Holiday Hollow. That’s some small town caring if I ever saw it.” He finally released me and I was shocked Boone wasn’t next.

A quick glance around placed him next to the joists, inspecting it as if it had answers for him. The deep frown on

his face meant he was beating himself up so I gave the guys a quick squeeze before rushing toward him.

“Hey, bear,” I said gently. He jumped, not even noticing that I had walked up. “You know this isn’t your fault, right?”

His eyes said everything he couldn’t force out of his mouth. I sighed before pulling him in and this time Hunter and Jack joined in, flanking him so we were in an odd sort of huddle.

“It’s not,” Hunter agreed. “You reminded everyone that they’d need a final inspection and told them last year we should replace the metal.”

“I did,” he said. “But I should have insisted. This is on me. Is she okay?”

“She was shaken up, but our girl here crawled under there and calmed her down and pulled her out. They had her leg splinted but I think she’ll be okay,” Jack answered, giving me an apologetic look.

“You what?” Boone asked in a scary calm voice.

“I was safe. I wasn’t *fully* under the rubble,” I promised. My head was definitely under, but that was only a small fraction of my body and I had faith in the alphas and betas helping.

“Go spread the word. No one under their booths until I check the integrity,” Boone finally said, glancing around at the rows of tents.

“I’ll help you take this side, Boone,” Jack said quickly. “Hunter, you and Autumn go spread the word near the entrance.”

“Come on,” Hunter said, taking my hand in his and leading me out. We got more than one curious look at our joined hands, but everyone was too worried about Theresa and the collapse to give it many questions.

“Want me to drive you home?” Hunter asked as we finished our rounds. “I’ve got to stop at the edge of the field.

The Junior Deputies are meeting in about ten minutes. Enough time to run you back.”

“No it isn’t,” I argued. “You’d be late. Is it against the rules for me to stick with you until it’s over?”

His eyebrows rose but he simply shook his head no. “Come on, maybe you’ll learn a thing or two.”

I snorted at that. These men clearly still thought I was a city girl, unfamiliar with all of their outdoors activities. But they were wrong... or at least partly.

The Junior Deputies were adorable in their matching uniforms. The boys and girls were all around ten years old, donning shirts that had a sheriff’s badge behind the name of their group. They were all wearing a burnt orange shirt with their logo on it, though I wasn’t sure if that was for fall or all year round. Across their body was a sash that was full of badges, all varying in shape and color. It was like a Holiday Hollow version of the scouts, and from the farming and fishing badges, more fitting of their lives out here.

“Sheriff Hunter!” one of the boys shouted excitedly. “I practiced, look!” He held up a fishing pole, groaning at the knot that had formed in the line.

“Good effort, Charlie, but remember to always wind it up when you’re not using it,” Hunter reminded him patiently. My heart melted as he got down on one knee and helped the boy untie his line. The way Charlie watched the alpha like he was god’s gift to this town, was way too sweet.

“Hunter, look!”

The cries for his attention went on for close to ten minutes and the Sheriff talked to them all individually until everyone was happy. Only then did he stand and call their meeting to order.

“Now, remember, we’ve got a very important task this year,” he said solemnly. The boys and girls nodded, eyes wide as they hung on every word. “Are you ready to find out what it is?”

“Yes!” They cried out with enough enthusiasm to make anyone smile. I found myself eager to hear him explain.

“This year, the mayor asked us to kick off the festival by lighting the first pumpkins of the event!” The audible gasp had me cracking up.

“We get to play with fire?!” A girl shrieked excitedly.

“No,” Hunter corrected her. “We have special candles that won’t go out. The only one who gets to light a fire is the one who starts the bonfire.”

The round of protests that rang out had Hunter cracking up and holding up his hands to quiet them down.

“Can we see our candles?” Charlie asked.

Hunter walked toward the edge of the grounds and grabbed a box, bringing it back with him. He hadn’t lost his goofy grin yet and I found myself just as excited as the kids, dancing on my feet as I waited. He set it down and pulled out a small LED votive candle and when he flicked it on a small flame glowed at the top. Despite it being a fairly ordinary candle, the kids gasped excitedly at the fake flame.

“You will each get one and a pumpkin that we’ll be carving a few days before the event,” he started but again was interrupted.

“Hunter?” The little pyro girl whisper-yelled, giving me a shy look. “Is she coming?”

“Do you want her to?” he whispered back. She nodded quickly and her little cheeks turned bright pink. “Then I guess we better ask her...” he trailed off and raised an eyebrow in challenge. The entire group turned on me and started shouting out their questions all at once so I couldn’t actually make out what anyone was saying.

“I’d love to come,” I finally managed to shout over them.

“Who are you? Is he your boyfriend?” Charlie asked. The way his little face twisted in disgust had us both laughing.

“I guess you’ll have to wait and see,” I sang out, cackling with glee as I saw a faint blush creep up on the good sheriff’s

face. We were saved from further interrogation as parents started to come over and pick up their kids.

“You ready to head back?” Hunter asked me. “Jack has a roast in the crockpot.”

“Sounds perfect,” I grinned, walking beside him. Our shoulders touched as we left and I could feel his eyes on me more than once.

I’d always known there was more than met the eye when it came to Hunter, and I was glad that he was finally letting me see this different side of him. It made me see him in a new light, one that made that warm fuzzy feeling I had inside every time we bantered flare up and recount our night together. One that had me thinking about more nights sitting on the front porch together.

Over the past couple months our lives had become so intertwined, our daily routines blending into something I’d began to look forward to at the start of each day. Each of them had become something more to me than I’d expected, and I couldn’t wait to see what would happen next.

CHAPTER 21

AUTUMN

“Jack,” I groaned, leaning back in my seat as I looked back at the plate I decimated. “I think you’re trying to keep me fat and happy so that I’m never able to move again.”

He laughed, his blue eyes lighting up. “That’s the goal, pumpkin. You’ve figured me out.”

The pot roast was way too delicious than it had any right to be and the bread that Hunter had made earlier that day—yes you heard that right, the sheriff could also cook—with the fresh butter we’d picked up at the farmers market the past weekend almost did me in.

“Hopefully you’ll be able to move by the time we’re supposed to carve pumpkins,” Hunter said with a wide smile. “Those junior deputies of mine will probably hunt you down if you don’t.”

“You’re so good with them,” I said, the smile on my face that almost hurt from how happy I was. “I liked seeing you like that.”

He grunted, before tipping his head to me. “You were great with them too, sweetheart. I’d be afraid they’d cast me aside and replace me with you if they could.”

“They wouldn’t dare,” I said with a laugh. “Even with our outings I’m not sure I’m anywhere near sufficient in fishing or half the activities you teach them.”

“All in due time, darling, all in due time. Between Jack, Boone and now you we’ve got about half their field trips and

badges covered. But having a female presence they can look up to like yourself is something we've admittedly been lacking and is great for them."

"Surely your mom has gotten her hands on them a time or two," I said.

"Oh for sure, but she's *her* you know, running the town and taking care of everyone. You've lived outside Holiday Hollow and are a big time with your city experience and degree, not that one is better than the other by any means, but it's good for them to see both."

The warmth in Hunter's eyes made me melt, but it was the little victorious grin of glee on Jack's face that had me shaking my head. I loved that my beta didn't hold back with his affections.

Hell, when had I started referring to him as *my* beta?

Probably around the time he became your best friend and a daily facet in your life that you looked forward to each day, Autumn.

I couldn't deny my inner voice, even if I wasn't ready to think about all the future complications that might bring. As much stress and work as the orchard was turning out to be with this initial rehaul, there was still something for me to smile about every single day here. The majority of that involved the pack, and that was something I couldn't and didn't want to deny.

Each of them was worming their way deeper and deeper into my life.

"Alright, not to eat and run but I have to be up early in the morning to see the crew off. We're starting on another crop haul and getting ready for more influx at the patch," Jack said, rising and taking his plate with him.

"Leave it," I said, mustering the strength to take my own plate and meet him, taking his and giving him a kiss. "Thanks for dinner."

He hummed happily, his hands around my waist.

“Take care of her for me tonight boys,” Jack said, the intent clear in his face before he walked out of the kitchen, leaving me at the counter with a wide look after him.

Hunter chuckled, joining me in the kitchen and nudging my shoulder as he took both dishes from me.

“I think my brother is trying to set us up,” Hunter said in mock-exasperation.

“He should have stayed for the group orgy,” I deadpanned.

A choke sounded behind me and I turned to see Boone with his water glass, coughing into his fist.

“You’re asking for trouble aren’t you?” he questioned once he could breathe again.

“Always,” I grinned, turning back to Hunter.

His sleeves were rolled up, his yummy forearms on display as he took care of the dishes, and I tried not to linger too hard on the suds that trailed up them.

Maybe part of me wasn’t joking about that group action.

Unable to resist I took a handful of suds and blew them in the good sheriff’s face.

“You didn’t,” he said, his voice dropping low, a delicious thrill running through me as I looked between Boone and Hunter.

“What are you going to do about it, Sheriff? All these talks about handcuffs and still I have yet to see them. If you’re not going to share you could at least let Boone and I use them.”

“Why you little...”

He darted towards me, his sudsy hands going for the kill as he began to tickle me in earnest, the action so surprising I couldn’t help the peals of laughter that rolled from my mouth.

“Boone! Save me!” I pleaded between squeals as the other alpha looked upon us with amusement, a wide smile beneath his beard.

“You started that one, baby girl,” Boone said, finally rising from the table and bringing in his plate.

“Hunt!” I exclaimed, trying to get the alpha back and finally getting the spot behind his knee.

“That does it,” he said, his hands finding the underside of my thighs and lifting me on the counter in front of him, holding me in one place.

Our breaths came quicker, our hands stilling as we realized the position we found ourselves in. Hunter’s eyes were blown, his pupil almost entirely encasing his iris as his salty ocean scent swelled and left me leaning closer to him.

“Autumn,” he breathed my name like a prayer. We both took a long, shaky breath, as if we hadn’t already committed the scent to memory.

I didn’t dare move as he rested his head against mine, his hands tightening on my thighs as he wrestled for control of himself for a second.

While every part of me wanted to nudge him over that precarious edge he was balancing on with his self control, I knew I’d rather he come to me free and clear of the issues he was working through and I didn’t begrudge him that.

Our relationship had developed into something deeper than sex and I cared about him enough to give him an easy way out without making him explain himself.

“It’s okay, Hunt,” I said, nudging his nose with mine.

His eyes closed then as he whispered, “Sorry.”

“Don’t be,” I said, nudging him again so he’d open his eyes. “Just think of how much ammunition this gives me for teasing you in the future.”

Those blue eyes found mine and the relief in them was astounding as a laugh left him, the tension draining from his shoulders as he stepped away.

Boone was next to us, putting a pot on the stove, as he looked between us.

“Early shift tomorrow?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Hunter nodded. “I’m going to probably wind down and turn in too. You need anything else?”

“I’ve got it, brother,” Boone said, the two of them exchanging hugs before Hunter excused himself, leaving a lingering glare for me.

“It’s something special the way you all care for one another,” I said, swinging my feet as I sat on the counter.

“I’m grateful you brought us back together,” Boone admitted, his openness warming my heart.

Every day he seemed to be coming out of his shell more and more, he didn’t try to make himself smaller when I walked into the room anymore and he actively sought me out, both for conversation and affection.

We had a heart to heart not too long ago where he opened up about the frankly horrifying situation that Heidi had weaved. I was more than glad to hear that she had moved out of Holiday Hollow to say the least.

I respected that Boone did what he needed to do to put himself back together, and between learning of that and the anxiety that he’d been battling since his parents’ boating accident, I admired the man even more.

While I had only lost my mom, it was nice to have someone who understood what kind of hole that left sometimes.

“You keep saying it was me, bear, but you did all the work,” I said, the scent of rich chocolate and warm spices filling the air. “Please tell me you’re making our favorite cocoa.”

“I’m making our favorite cocoa,” he confirmed, grabbing down two mugs and setting them near the stove.

“You’re too good to me.”

“I don’t think there’s such a thing, baby girl.”

Turning off the burner I watched as Boone divided the pot between our cups.

“I need a hug,” I said, still swinging my legs as he grabbed the mugs and brought them closer. “And a kiss if you’re going to make me wait for it to cool down again.”

“You all but burned your tongue last time,” he said, wrapping an arm around me as he stood between my legs and tilted my head up for a kiss.

I groaned. “Yeah, but it was so worth it. I’d try to convince you to tell me your secret recipe so we could package it up, but I kind of like that it’s something special we can share.”

He smiled, placing another kiss on my lips. “Halston Hot Chocolate, our signature pack special. Between the pumpkins and the apples and this, we definitely have a spread.”

“Don’t think I didn’t notice you stockpiling the cider in the pantry,” I said, with a warm laugh. “What do you think, alpha? Can I have some now?”

A shiver ran through Boone as he picked up a mug, blowing on it slightly before handing it to me, his tongue darting out to wet his bottom lip.

He watched as I took a sip, the silky chocolate hitting my tongue first before the heat hit, a hum of delight leaving me as the flavors set in.

“Let me taste.”

I offered him my mouth instead of the mug, my hand reaching up to cup his beard as he kissed me more thoroughly, his tongue slipping inside.

Would it be too much to ask him to take me on the kitchen island? It was probably my favorite place in the house besides the nest I’d been filling with a mix of the things the guys had picked up for me and that I’d found on Main Street.

He pulled away, much too soon, a promising look in his eye as he went to clean the pan.

“You’re going to kill me tonight, aren’t you?”

“That’s definitely not in the plans,” he said, leaning against the other counter across from me once he was finished. “What do you want to do tonight, baby girl?”

“You,” I replied, completely serious. “You’ve been teasing me and tasting me, bear. Letting me touch you and have little tastes here and there. But I want more than a taste, I want the whole thing.”

A growl rumbled from Boone’s chest as he stepped closer, his eyes darkening in warning. “Autumn.”

“You’ve been holding back. Holding out on me. All I want you to do is hold me down and take me.”

He crossed the distance between us then, his hand finding the vulnerable skin of my neck as he collared his hand around it gently, forcing me to tilt my head up to look at him.

“You want this,” he said, seeing the answer in my eyes.

“Yes.”

“You need this.”

“I need *you*,” I countered. “All of you.”

“Once I touch you fully, I won’t be able to hold myself back, Autumn. I’ll take until you have nothing left to give me and then I’ll take more.”

I shuddered as the weight of his words fell around me.

Being the center of Boone’s attention had always been intense, but this felt *more*.

“That doesn’t change my mind,” I told him.

He purred, the sound so appreciative it made me preen and want to roll around in it. His hand moved up to cup my face as his thumb swept across my bottom lip.

We breathed each other in for a second, our scents swirling around us, rising in intensity as unspoken words raced between us.

What had started off as pure fun had turned into something more. It definitely wasn’t planned and it was messy and

complicated, but I wouldn't take it back, not when I could share a moment with Boone like this.

"I want you in my bed," he said, the promise in those words making me smile as I turned my head and kissed his hand before taking it in mine as he helped me off the counter.

We took each stair together without a rush, our hands clasped tight.

When we finally made it to the room, my fingers immediately went to the hem of my dress, pulling it over my head and tossing it to the side.

Boone was working the buttons of his flannel down as I turned back to face him, his eyes burning into me and raking over my body.

"Can I?" I asked, my fingers moving to cover his.

Wordlessly he nodded, his hands moving to brush against the bare skin at my waist. Once his shirt was off, he stood patiently still as I explored his chest and arms, the strong muscles underneath and the soft padding he had around his middle that was all covered with a fine layer of hair.

My hands drifted to his jeans, the sound of his buckle coming undone and our mixed heavy breaths adding to the tension of the moment.

"Have your fill now, baby girl," Boone said, his voice thick and heady. "Because once you're done exploring it's my turn, and I told you what's going to happen."

A shiver ran through me as I shoved his jeans and boxers down in one go, his thick cock bobbing up angrily, the tip already glistening.

"Fuck," I whispered, licking my lips, ready to dive in.

"Nope," Boone said, quickly picking me up before I could get to him. "I'm already desperate for you, Autumn. Another time, baby."

He placed me in the middle of his bed, his large frame immediately covering me and making me feel so incredibly small.

Combing a hand through my hair, he kissed me, a long and slow kiss that had me melting into the sheets. I felt so safe, so secure, and so sexy beneath him.

Squirming beneath him, I pressed every inch of us together, the smile he made against my lips letting me know he knew exactly what I was trying to do.

“Be good for me,” he said against my lips. “I promise it will be worth the wait.”

His lips slid from mine down to my neck, reverently kissing the tender skin there before he nipped me suddenly.

“Boone!” I gasped in shock.

He hummed against my skin. “More of that. Love hearing you say my name, baby girl.”

Scooting down his touch wandered as he sat up slightly, tracing my collar bones before the swell of my breasts.

“Please,” I asked as his fingers ghosted over my nipples, too light to provide the stimulation I desperately wanted.

His cock nudged against my thigh as he obliged, swooping his head back down to take one nipple in his mouth, his tongue swirling around it before he sucked hard. He repeated the attention on the other side until I thought I was going to go insane.

Mercifully, Boone moved down, his large hands spreading my thighs wide open for him as he knelt between them.

“You’re so wet for me,” he said in wonder, his fingertips trailing over the wet fabric of my undies.

“I want you so fucking much, Boone.” I bucked my hips closer to his touch. “Don’t make me beg.”

His fingers hooked into the fabric as he stopped and looked me dead in the eye.

“You never have to beg with me, Autumn. Never. But that doesn’t mean that I don’t want to hear it.”

Boone ripped the offending fabric from my body and dove in.

I didn't know what it was about the Halston Pack and the way they ate pussy, but I thought I was going to die from bliss.

There was nothing methodical about his movements, he smothered himself in me, licking me in long strokes, the stimulation of his beard against my sensitive skin adding a delicious contrast.

My hands found his hair, digging in tight as I felt the pleasure well inside me, my toes curling and my chest heaving.

Just when I thought I couldn't take any more he slipped two fingers inside me, instantly setting me off as I squirmed against his face, my slick coming hot and quick.

“Boone, oh fuck, please!” I begged.

He growled against my sex, the sensation doing wonders as he continued fucking me on his fingers, curling them in just the right way that had me right on the edge again.

“Be a good girl for me, Autumn. Come.”

His voice was darker, more commanding, his alpha vibes rolling off of him. It wasn't a bark, but I couldn't resist and I didn't want to.

I shattered, my release shooting out of me in a way I hadn't experienced before, soaking the bed and the man between my thighs.

It was the kind of mess I'd only made during a solo heat fest and a sudden wave of embarrassment found me.

I nudged Boone's head away from my thighs, not being able to meet his eye.

Not having any of that, he moved up to cup my jaw, his eyes searching mine. “What's wrong? Did I hurt you?”

He looked gutted at the thought, and I couldn't stand to let him think it was something he did.

Okay so he did sort of assist, but I knew it wasn't everyone's cup of tea.

“I made a mess,” I muttered, desperately wanting to look away.

Boone nodded seriously. “You absolutely made a mess, Autumn. And you know what? I loved it.”

“Really?” I asked my eyes shooting back to his.

His thumb stroked my cheek tenderly as he nodded again. Something settled inside of me now that I hadn’t completely ruined the moment.

“I more than love it,” he said, a slow and sinuous smile spreading across his face, his mouth and beard glistening from my release. “The fact that I can give you that? The fact that your pleasure is so intense? It does things for me, baby girl.”

He slid back down my body, his tongue lapping at the wetness of my thighs in long stripes, as if he wanted to clean every inch of me.

“What are you doing?” I asked, looking down at him.

“Savoring my reward. Now relax and enjoy, because I want another one.”

Boone took his time with me, and by the time he worked his way up my thighs and to where I wanted him most, my worries had faded.

I trusted Boone something fierce, and I believed him when he said he wanted this. And for fucks sake, it was my body’s natural response, I had nothing to be ashamed of, experiencing it with a partner was just different.

Two fingers toyed with the slick between my legs before pushing deep inside me again. His mouth went to my clit as he began working me again, all the while I stared down at him.

“Oh fuck,” I said, when he added a third finger in, his brown eyes sparking at my reaction.

“That’s it. Be a good girl and let me stretch you. I need to get you ready for my cock, baby girl.”

“Boone,” I groaned, my head tilting to the side as his thrusts grew stronger, seeming to hit that same sweet spot

inside me over and over again.

His grip on me tightened, his other hand moving to hold my hips down and pressing against my front. Somehow it made the pleasure and pressure that much more, and it wasn't long until I was gasping and clenching around his fingers again.

My toes curled as I gripped his hair sharply, his teeth lightly grazing my clit as he thrust again and again, not stopping as the white hot pleasure shot behind my eyes, my eyes screwing shut as I came even harder than last time, squirting all over Boone.

The man was a fucking trooper as I basically waterboarded him between my thighs.

I was shaking by the time he was done and he came to lay next to me, gathering me in his arms and holding me tight against him, his warmth wrapping around me as I took deep breaths of his warm woodsy scent.

“You did so good, baby,” he praised, placing a kiss to my hairline. “Thank you for giving me that.”

A little laugh escaped me as my fingers played with the hair on his chest. “Pretty sure I should be the one thanking you.”

He purred happily, his hands moving reassuringly over me.

I should have been wrung completely out after the three orgasms he'd already given me, but the truth is I wanted more. I didn't want to stop until I knew every inch of him, what he felt like inside me and what...what his knot felt like.

He was still thick and hard against my stomach and I couldn't help but let my mind wander.

I'd never let an alpha knot me before, and while I'd used toys that had knots to get me through my heats, I wanted to know what it really felt like, what Boone's felt like.

“What is it?”

I took a deep breath, pressing closer to him as I buried my nose to his neck. All I had to do was ask and I knew Boone

would give it to me. The things I was feeling between us, between all of them if I was honest with myself, were bigger and scarier than anything I felt before.

“Do you want to knot me?” I asked, instead of demanding like I wanted.

His hands paused in their sweep, staying at the swell of my hips as his cock jumped against me.

“I want everything with you, Autumn. But I won’t assume or ask for things you’re not willing to give.”

“And if I’m willing?” I asked before placing a hot open mouth kiss against his neck.

“You better be sure, Autumn. I told you I wasn’t playing games. I told you I’d take until you have nothing left to give.”

“It’s a good thing I’m not playing games then,” I told him, knowing I was about to get it.

Boone *moved*.

One minute I was cradled sweetly in his arms and the next I was pinned to the bed, his body framing mine once again.

Reaching a hand between us he guided the head of his cock through my slit, coating himself in my slick before notching himself at my entrance.

He didn’t stop, didn’t ask me a second time if I was sure, he just held my gaze as he gave me his cock, sinking in inch by inch.

“So thick,” I groaned.

“You can take it, Autumn. I know you can,” he said, sliding the rest of the way in until his knot pressed against me.

“Give it to me,” I said, a whine escaping my lips.

“So demanding,” he said, sounding pleased. “But I’m demanding too, and you’re going to give me another one before you get my knot.”

Boone canted his hips then, and while my thighs ached at the stretch it was nothing compared to the feeling of him

inside me.

“So good,” I muttered as he continued stroking in and out of me, filling me completely over and over again.

He was a fucking god between the sheets, every move so controlled and precise to drive me closer and closer to the edge. But I wanted to see him come undone like he had when he'd went down on me, his control out the window and the one thought was how much of me he could get.

“Autumn,” he groaned out my name, dipping down to take my lips.

“Harder,” I urged, digging my heels into his ass.

Boone complied, fucking me within an inch of my life, the sounds of my slick against his hard flesh filling the room like some obscene soundtrack.

“You're so tight around me, baby,” Boone said, sounding pleased as I began to flutter around him. “Now be a good girl and soak my cock so I can give you my knot.”

His words did me in and I felt myself fall, my slick streaming out of me. No sooner than it had started did I feel the increased pressure of his knot.

“Oh Fuck!” I screamed, causing him to pause slightly. “Don't you dare stop.”

He chuckled before he fed me the rest of his knot, grinding it into me and drawing out my orgasm.

Gathering me in his arms, he continued his ascent, his knot throbbing and swelling inside of me.

“Autumn...” The words were thick and heavy with the weight of emotion I saw shining in his eyes.

It was too much too soon and somehow not enough.

I took his lips in answer, afraid to speak the words too soon, as he pumped rope after rope of his hot cum inside me.

“So good,” I said, my words slurring slightly as another aftershock rolled through me.

He rolled us until he was resting on his back, cradling me to his chest reverently as his knot held all of his fresh seed inside of me.

I was going to smell like him inside and out, and the thought made me extremely happy.

“You’re mine, Autumn,” he said, the surety in his voice absolute. “Whether you go or stay, you’re mine.”

Boone’s quiet confidence about us spoke volumes, especially since I knew what a leap it was for him to take a chance on this in the first place. His faith in me, in us, and figuring it out was reassuring.

“I don’t have all the answers yet, and I don’t know how the future looks between the pack, but I know that this feeling between us and how it feels to be here in your arms, locked together and there’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

CHAPTER 22

HUNTER

The past few weeks had been torture.

Okay so not really torture unless it was the most pleasurable kind.

Autumn was everywhere. In our home, all over my brothers, hell, her scent, so sweet and honeyed, even lingered on my uniform, and I know damn well that I hadn't really touched her since that first night at the bar. Not in the way I wanted to at least. The subtle touches, hugs, and brushes were teases of what we could be.

It was a self imposed purgatory, I was well aware of that, but I didn't know what to do with Autumn. I never interacted with the woman I'd slept with after the fact. There was a reason my mom referred to them as holiday honeys, a fact that part of me was truthfully a little bit ashamed of. Not that I didn't enjoy casual sex, but it was the fact my pattern of habit had grown to an extent where even my own mother recognized it.

After the debacle with Heidi, and Boone deciding to move to the apartment, part of me couldn't forgive myself, and I wanted to make sure nothing ever came between us again. Sure I hadn't known she'd been seeing him for months only to drop him for a chance with me, but ultimately it didn't matter, that was in the past. Hence me sticking with no strings attached fun.

But now, with Autumn, I hadn't even thought of chasing any tourist tail. Since the very first time I tasted her on my

tongue it was like I was hooked, and that fucking terrified me. When I saw her under that collapsed booth I swear I lost years off my life.

Sure we flirted and had our banter, but I never took it past that, never crawled into her bed at night like the others. I knew I was confusing her, offering her the house and use of the nest, spending lots of time together, but not making a single overt move towards her. I could handle the pointed looks from Jack and Boone, but the little crease of concern between her brow was almost enough to do me in.

But somehow, despite the jumbled dynamic, Autumn and I had become *friends*. I enjoyed seeing and hearing about all the work she was doing for the orchard, how she lit up with ideas. She was so unbelievably smart and impressive.

In turn she listened to me talk about my day or my work with the junior deputies. If she was home, she always greeted me after a long day, and I'd become accustomed to her at our dinner table every night.

Which maybe was why tonight, I felt off kilter. After weeks of seeing her every night, Autumn was going out.

Out, out.

Out dancing and drinking.

Out without Jack or Boone by her side.

Out without *me*.

Her heels echoed against the hardwood as she came down stairs, the straps wrapping around her ankles, making her legs seem to go on for days. The bottom hem of her emerald dress swished against her knees and the material cinched just below her bust before it flowed up and wrapped around her neck, the sleeves fluttering against her arms.

The warmth of her brown hair, the auburn streaks that ran through it seemed to shine as they fell in loose waves down her back.

God I sounded like a complete fucking sap.

She was just going out for a night, it wasn't the worst thing in the world, right? I didn't have a claim on her.

But maybe I could if I got my shit together and stopped being so damn afraid of giving her my heart only for her to wreck it. I knew if I gave into Autumn, I'd never truly survive if she decided to leave after the festival.

"You okay, Hunt?" Autumn asked, the concern clear in her voice.

I hadn't even realized she'd made it the rest of the way down the stairs, joining me at the kitchen island.

"Yeah," I said, shaking myself out of it. "Just hungry."

For you because I can't forget the way you taste.

"Well, I hope you guys enjoy your pizza."

"We will, pumpkin. Have a good time with Claire and the crew," Jack wished her, sounding positively okay with the situation.

"Be safe, baby girl," Boone said. "Promise you'll text if you need anything."

"I promise," Autumn said seriously, coming to stand in front of Boone. She reached up to tug on his beard slightly.

He obliged, leaning down until their lips met.

"Are you saving one of those for me?" Jack asked hopefully, causing Autumn to laugh.

"As if you even need to ask," she said, digging her hands into my brother's hair and kissing him within an inch of his life.

The fucking pheromones in the room were insane. They were so thick I almost choked, playing it off as a cough.

"Don't worry there sheriff," Autumn said, patting me on the back. "I won't try to kiss you. I'll leave the CPR to the guys in case you need it."

I groaned. "You're a cruel omega temptress."

“The worst,” she agreed with a wink. “I redecorate whole rooms of your house, and make coffee, and lots of treats. For apple crisps sake you’d think I was a straight up heathen. It’s too bad you don’t like using those handcuffs of yours, I’m racking up offenses.”

“Make sure you don’t rack up any more tonight,” I countered back. “I’m off duty.”

“Har har,” she deadpanned, spinning on the toe of her heel. “Catch you guys later!”

The moment she left the house it felt like lead settled in my stomach. The boys and I grabbed our pizza and went to the living room, spreading out on the couches and not bothering to turn on the TV.

We ate in a comfortable silence, well, they seemed to be eating in a comfortable silence. My leg kept bouncing up and down, itching to do something.

“Are you guys really happy?” I finally asked, catching Jack mid bite.

He looked at me incredulously. “I’ve never been happier, Hunter. Seriously.”

“Same,” Boone said, looking at me thoughtfully. “Not just because of Autumn, though she is a large part of it.”

“What else?” I questioned.

“It’s us,” Jack answered. “It finally feels like we’re a real pack again. All of us together, the past is just water under the bridge. Autumn is icing on the cake.”

Boone nodded. “That. But also it feels like I can be *me* again. That I don’t have to hide parts of myself just because I’m afraid. I didn’t realize how much stress I’d put on myself. My anxiety has even settled out some.”

Guilt churned in my stomach. “I’m really sorry, Boone.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry for Hunter, you weren’t the one who was conniving, and I’m sorry I punished you and the pack for it.”

“You were just protecting yourself,” I said, shaking my head. “I missed you so much. I’m glad you’re back home. Please tell me you’ll stay even if she doesn’t.”

“I’m not going anywhere brother,” Boone assured, taking a sip of his drink. “I don’t think Autumn is either.” The confidence in his voice gave me pause.

“She’s invested in the town and the orchard. You’ve seen how hard she’s been working on everything and whatever secret meetings she’s been up to with mom. Hopefully she’s just as invested in us too,” Jack said. “She hasn’t said as much, but I feel it every single day. You could have that too, Hunter. You were honest that you needed some time, but even I have to admit, I thought you would have made your move by now. She’s going to think you don’t want her if you don’t give her any more to go off of.”

“I don’t think she takes it like that,” I said, shaking my head. “You see our banter, how we talk...I’ve been open and honest with her about everything and we spend time together everyday.”

“I know you’re trying, Hunter,” my brother said without any animosity in his voice.

“Her heat is coming soon,” Boone said, confirming what I’d expected when I caught her scent tonight. “She hasn’t said whether she wants us here during or not yet, but I’m missing a shirt or two.”

“She stole my blanket,” Jack said with a laugh. “What about you, brother? Anything missing?”

“One of my pillows,” I mumbled. “I didn’t realize that’s where it went.”

Another moment of silence passed, but I didn’t miss the look they exchanged between them.

“What’s holding you back?” Boone asked, blunt as ever.

I swallowed my pride, running a hand through my hair before answering.

“Me.”

“How so?” Jack questioned, his lips turning down. We were definitely a pack again, refusing to let each other hide from important conversations.

“I’m not built for a relationship. What if I do let myself fall for Autumn and then I end up messing it up for both of you? I’d never forgive myself. How could I take the chance?”

“The same way we’re taking the chance that she might still decide to leave after the Fall Festival. Tomorrow isn’t a guarantee, I know that better than anyone, “ Boone said. “But you better believe I’m not going to waste a single second with her, regardless of the eventual outcome. I love her Hunter. The kind of love that doesn’t have limits. Even if she leaves I’ll still be hers.”

“You’re not a bad guy, Hunter,” Jack said. “You never have been. I’ve never seen you treat a partner with anything but respect regardless of how fleeting the encounter might have been. You’d never treat Autumn poorly, especially not when it counts so much.”

The amount of faith he had in me took me aback.

Could I really take the chance? Would Autumn even want me after I’d been lingering on the edge for weeks, flirting but never taking that next step.

“Wait,” I said, my stomach turning suddenly. “Autumn’s about to go into heat.”

“Well, yeah,” Jack said, looking at me questioningly. “She’s been nesting for the past week. What’s your point?”

“My point is that our omega is about to go into heat and she just skipped out of here to go out! What if it hits her when she’s in the middle of the dance floor for Hollows sake?”

“The Becketts would give us a call,” Boone said slowly, the words sounding painful, the realization setting in with him too.

“Do you really want to take that chance?” I asked. “I trust the triplets, sure, but how many extra tourists do we have in town right now for the season?”

Boone growled.

“I don’t think she’d take it kindly if we asked her to come home the first time she actually made time to go out with friends,” Jack said wearily.

“Agreed. It’s not that I don’t trust her,” Boone said.

“It’s just everyone else we don’t trust,” I finished.

Boone nodded. “I don’t want to break her trust either though. As much as I want to shelter her, I can’t let her designation be a reason we treat her so differently.”

“So we don’t engage with her,” I said quickly, a plan forming. “By now they’re probably at dinner and will be heading over to Holiday Brews soon. We’ll just go there and snag a booth in the back, have a few brews, and keep an eye on things from afar. She’ll get to have her night out, just a bit safer. We won’t step in unless something happens.”

“Either way, we’ll tell her,” Boone said seriously. “Even if she doesn’t know we’re there all night with the mixed scents and dim lights, we tell her first thing tomorrow morning. No secrets.”

“No secrets,” Jack agreed.

“Deal,” I said. “Let’s get ready, we’re rolling out in ten.”

Who were we kidding? We were all changed and in the cab of my truck within five minutes flat. Thoughts raced through my head as we made the drive to the bar, heading in through the back and saying a quick hi before Adam Beckett came over himself to take our drink order.

“Hey guys, can’t say I’m surprised to see you here tonight, what took you so long?” Adam laughed.

I couldn’t help the smile that curled my lips, pleased to know that people knew that Autumn was ours. But wait—

“How did you know we were heading here?”

“Lindsay asked for the night off to go out with Autumn, Claire and Riley. It didn’t take much to put two and two

together. We're the only place to get a decent drink around here."

"Uh huh sure," I said, narrowing my eyes. "And you have no other staff who could work the bar tonight so all *three* of you are here doing it yourselves. Something you haven't done in years."

A rumbling noise rolled out of the alpha. "You want a drink or not, Sheriff?"

"Two Hollow Harvest Brews and one Pumpkin Pale Ale, please," I said, stopping him before he could move away. "And Adam... I clearly don't have any room to talk, I'm sitting here aren't I?"

His tension broke, a grin across his face as we understood each other.

I was a bit surprised at how protective he was over Lindsay, and I wasn't sure that beta knew what she was in store for.

Our beers arrived a few minutes before their group did, and I swear every eye in the place drew towards them, their bright smiles full of happiness, laughter peeling from their lips as they marched their way to the bar with linked arms.

I couldn't take my eyes off of Autumn as she drank with her friends, feeling a sense of satisfaction at seeing her joy. She deserved this, and being close to her, ensuring she was safe was enough to quiet the panic that had raged inside me.

All I could think about now was joining her back on that dance floor like I had the first night I saw her here. The two of us danced and moved together as one, and then we did it all again at her place naked, and I never had a better night than I did that night. I'd never laughed or felt as much satisfaction from a partner before.

I shifted in my seat, my thickening cock growing uncomfortable as I thought about the taste of her on my tongue and how she felt around me, so tight and hot and wet.

Her heat was coming up, and I desperately wanted to be part of it. Even if it was only to make sure she was taken care

of.

Fuck, I loved her.

I fucking loved Autumn Cedarwick.

I would do anything for her. I'd be anything for her. Even if that meant she might break me.

I'd rather be in pieces knowing her touch than be whole and empty without her.

A tall alpha cutting through the crowd with a purpose towards my omega caught my attention, a face I'd never seen before.

When he stopped right behind her I was up and out of my seat, making my way towards them. I didn't know what the fucking he was thinking, but it better not be a single thought about my Autumn.

I heard my name being called out from my brothers behind me but I didn't dare stop.

Autumn was mine. And I was going to make damn sure she knew it.

CHAPTER 23

AUTUMN

“How did I not know your bosses were so hot?” I whispered to Lindsay as she stood at the bar and passed more drinks back to us.

The alpha behind the bar chuckled. “I don’t think your pack would take too kindly to you checking me out. But any friend of Lindsay’s is a friend of mine.”

“Well I don’t have a pack, sugar, and may I say, you are looking mighty fine tonight, Ollie,” Riley said, simpering at the man in front of him and giving him a full up down.

“If only I swung your way,” Ollie shook his head forlornly. “I’d eat you all up.”

“Oh honey,” Riley consoled him. “It’s okay. I’d chew you up and spit you out anyway.”

“For Hollow’s sake,” Lindsay said, throwing her hands up in the air. “Y’all can’t hold your liquor can you?”

“I’m holding it right here!” Claire said proudly, lifting her glass and giggling.

Lindsay led us back over to our table and I took another sip of my drink, loving the carefree feeling floating around my head. After so much the last few weeks, I was glad I could finally take her up on her offer.

I was a bit surprised to find out that she was best friends with Riley and had been since grade school, but as soon as I saw them together it totally made sense. They orbited each other seamlessly, passing things back and forth between each

other without a word, during dinner, while we talked and chatted.

The food was delicious and the drinks were strong, making for one very happy me.

“I want to dance again,” I said, looking at them expectantly.

Riley grinned, downing a big gulp of his beer before grabbing my hand and pulling me to the floor where the live music was in full swing.

We danced and sang along to the songs, Claire and Lindsay joining us on the floor. I was having so much fun and I vowed I’d get the guys to go dancing with me soon. Construction was finally on track and I’d found a copy of my grandparents’ cider recipe hidden in the dust jacket of their cookbook, and everything was just so *awesome*.

But it would be more awesome if I got to see the boys in their tight jeans shaking it.

Maybe if I called them they’d shimmy into their jeans and come.

“Autumn!” A voice called over the music, a hand settling on my shoulder and turning me around.

Confusion filtered over me as I stared up at the blonde alpha boasting a wide smile, until I realized I knew exactly who it was.

“Peter? What are you doing in Holiday Hollow?” I asked, still trying to catch up.

“I know the festival isn’t for another week and a half, but I wanted to come see you. I’m so glad I found you here!” he shouted over the music before pulling me into his arms for a hug.

My nose crinkled at his scent, as I returned his hug. It’s not that he smelled bad, I mean he smelled okay, but he didn’t smell like my guys and my body twisted as I realized I didn’t want anyone else touching me.

“Peter...” I said, knowing that I had to shut him down again once and for all. Regardless if I went back, I knew him and the future he wanted together would never come to be.

“Oh,” he said, drawing in a long awkward sniff of me, before pulling away quickly. “I guess you have been doing all right down here.”

“I’m sorry, Peter. I know you were hoping—“

“Autumn,” he said, shaking his head. “Yes, I’d be crazy not to want an omega like you and damn do I wish I would have worked harder to snatch you up earlier, but we’re friends. If you’re happy then I’m happy for you.”

“That means a lot, Pete. Thanks,” I said. “You can still—”

“Everything okay here?” A gruff voice asked, the alpha waves rolling off of him more intense than I’d ever felt before.

I knew from the strong ocean and driftwood scent exactly who it was. Turning I saw Hunter, much closer than I expected, his whole body framing mine as his eyes narrowed on Peter.

“Everything is good, Hunt,” I assured him. “This is Peter, a friend of mine from the city. Peter, this is Hunter. He’s the sheriff of Holiday Hollow and I’ve been staying at his family farm.”

Hunter’s jaw clenched even further from that, but he took a deep breath before giving Peter a somewhat cordial nod. “What brings you to Holiday Hollow?”

“I wanted to see what all the fuss was about and if Autumn needed any help with her big plans for the Fall Festival,” Peter said, giving me a knowing look as he turned back to me. “It seems she has all the help she needs here already though.”

“She does,” Hunter confirmed, his arms crossed over his chest.

Peter laughed, taking a step back with his hands held in the air. “Message received. Autumn, call me if you need anything. We’ll catch up later.”

“She’s not going to need anything from you later,” Hunter grunted under his breath, almost too low for me to hear.

“What the hell was that?” I asked, turning back to the table and grabbing my drink that was suspiciously already half empty. “Why are you so growly?”

Hunter mumbled a reply, looking over his shoulder. I followed his line of sight, where Jack and Boone were standing in front of the corner booth, watching us carefully.

“I didn’t like the way you introduced me,” Hunter admitted again.

“Oh my god, Hunter Halston!” I exclaimed, leaning closer to him and beckoning for him to lean down to me so I could whisper in his ear. “Are you jealous?”

“Sweetheart,” he said warningly, his hands landing on my waist and pulling me closer to him. I nuzzled into his front all but rubbing myself into him.

“God, you smell yummy,” I said. “We should do this more. Preferably naked.”

His chest shook against me.

“We’ll continue this conversation tomorrow, darling, once you’ve recovered. I didn’t want to interrupt your night, just wanted to make sure you were safe. Go have fun,” he said, placing a kiss to the corner of my lips before giving me one panty teasing grin and turning away to head back to the corner booth.

Damn, those jeans look painted on his ass. I wondered if he would shake it for me.

Ooo, I wondered if Jack and Boone had on jeans too.

“The good sheriff wants to eat you up my friend,” Riley said to me. “For Hollows sake is it always that *tense* between you?”

Claire nodded, her loose curls bobbing slightly. “I almost ordered us more snacks so we could watch.”

“It looks like someone has finally managed to reel him in,” Lindsay said with a knowing look.

A warm feeling filled me, one that wasn't from the alcohol flowing through my veins. “I don't know about that.”

“Honey, that man wanted to stake his claim on you just now. I'm surprised you don't already have bond marks across your neck. He wanted you to introduce him as *yours*,” Riley said seriously.

My eyes widened as his words sank in.

Fuck, I wanted Hunter again. I couldn't even tell myself I didn't.

There was a reason I'd taken his pillow and sweatshirt and buried it in my nest. Some days when we were hanging out together, it was all I could do not to jump him, the memory of our night together riding me hard. Or should I say the memory or daydream of me riding him hard.

I knew this was all new to him though, so I promised myself I wouldn't rush him, and our banter every day was too good to pass up.

“I think I more than like him,” I admitted, taking a sip through my straw only for it to come back empty.

“Of course you do,” Lindsay said seriously. “Now let's get another round of drinks and you can tell us all about it before we go dance our asses off some more.”

“Ooo, could I ask them to dance their asses off at the end too or is that breaking our group code?” I asked very seriously.

“Asking your pack to put on a show we can watch?” Riley said with a cackle. “Oh honey, no, that's a treat.”

Lindsay made some ridiculous motions to one of her bosses behind the bar and the next thing I knew he was headed our way with another round.

“There's a round of waters too,” he said, pointedly. “Need anything else, Linds?”

“Nope,” she said, snagging the drinks off the tray and ignoring the waters. “Thank you, Dustin!”

He shook his head, placing the waters on the table himself before whispering something in Lindsay’s ear on the way back to the bar.

“Do you more than like your bosses too?” I not so whispered once he was gone.

“What? No!” Lindsay denied it a little too heavily. “They’re like my brothers.”

“Sexy brothers,” Claire said, looking at me in agreement.

“Hey!” Riley said. “How come you never told me you think they’re sexy?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t know I had to, bestie. I thought it was just a given. Just like it’s a given that you’re sexy.”

“Wait, you think I’m sexy?” Riley asked, his attention solely on Claire.

“Come on, Ri. Don’t look at me like that,” Claire said, nudging him with her shoulder. “Of course you’re sexy. If none of your boyfriends told you that, then freaking good riddance to them. They didn’t deserve you.”

Riley paused, a look crossing over his face I didn’t understand before his signature smirk was back in place.

“Damn straight they didn’t,” he said with a laugh before turning towards me. “Come on boss, it’s time we down these drinks then shake it and torture those boys of yours who decided to crash our night.”

Grabbing my fresh drink, I raised it in the air, the rest of them joining in cheers before we all took long drinks and headed back out to the dance floor.

The music was more lively at Holiday Brews tonight than the last time I was here, the band playing an eclectic mix meant to get the weekend crowd out on the floor. We spun and drank and danced some more until the lights shined brighter and the heat from the eyes on me became too much for me to ignore.

Claire let out a cat call, the others joining in as I made my way to the booth putting a little more sway in my step. Although, that could have just been the drinks. Who cares? I just wanted to see them shake it.

“Having fun, pumpkin?” Jack asked with a wide smile.

“Yes, but do you want to make it even better?” I asked, returning his grin and holding my hand out for him. “Dance with me.”

“Your wish is my command,” he said, accepting it as I tugged him out of the booth.

“Don’t think either of you are getting out of it either,” I said, narrowing my eyes at Hunter and Boone.

“You want to see my moves again, sweetheart?” Hunter drawled.

I rolled my eyes at him. “Duh. Don’t you remember what comes after?”

Leaving him open-mouthed and stunned in the booth, Jack and I took to the floor, the beta showing some surprisingly good moves as we danced close, his knee wedged between my thighs.

Jack felt so good pressed against me. His creamy warm scent was barely discernible in the crowd, but I would have been able to pick it out anywhere. I pressed myself against him harder, uncaring if anyone saw.

“Careful, baby girl,” a familiar voice warned in my ear as a large set of hands came to rest at my waist, pulling me back slightly into his soft and strong body.

“He’s right sweetheart,” Hunter’s voice rang out to the side, crowding in next to us. “I left my cuffs at home.”

“I keep telling you to break them out, sheriff,” I said, reaching back for Boone as I rested my head against him, the four of us moving together.

“Soon,” Hunter promised, his offer stopping me in my tracks.

“You mean it?”

His hand trailed down my arm until he laced his fingers with mine, picking it up to kiss the inside wrist before rubbing it against his jaw, marking me with his scent all the while holding my eye.

“I mean it, Autumn.”

I gripped his hand tighter, taking greedy gulps of the three of them around me.

“I’m ready to go home and get naked,” I said, deadly serious.

If there was even a chance in hell I could end up in a sexy cuddle pile with the three of them together then I wasn’t going to waste one more second of it.

CHAPTER 24

AUTUMN

My head throbbed angrily as I woke, but from the sweat covering my body I had a feeling it had nothing to do with a hangover and everything to do with the three half naked men clinging to me. We were a tangle of limbs and it took all my strength to crawl out from under them and sit up.

Light filtered in through Boone's curtains and I took the quiet moment to study their sleeping forms as I let the grogginess fade.

Memories from last night replayed in my mind and I let out a contented sigh. It was sad that it took a night out of drinks and their bodies pressed mine to realize that my decision was made. Sure I'd admitted it in less words, but they were mine. And the more I thought about the city waiting for me, the less enticing it was. That life felt like eons ago.

I'd worked so hard to build a life here in Holiday Hollow, and for once in way too long I'd finally slowed down enough to let myself open up to more.

Not just the pack either. I had friends now, real ones. Between Lindsay, Claire, Riley, and hell, half the town, I finally felt like I really belonged somewhere. Then again, in a way, Holiday Hollow had always been home to me.

Seeing Peter last night was unexpected and I felt a twinge of guilt for how I had to dash his hopes, but the way the guys were there, ready to defend me, had a smile forming.

"You look happy," Boone noted gruffly as he pulled me from my recap. "How do you feel?"

“Hot,” I admitted. “I’m going to go shower I think.”

“No hangover?” he asked, surprised. I shrugged.

“My head hurts a bit and I feel achy but I don’t feel nauseous or anything like I usually do if I drink too much,” I explained.

Someone’s nose ghosted over my neck before Hunter let out a low groan. “That’s because it’s not a hangover. You’re going into heat, Autumn.”

I gasped, taking a quick stock of my body only to realize there was a dull ache between my legs and it wasn’t from the guys. They were gentlemen and refused anything more than cuddles before bed since I’d been drinking. Outside of that, the aches and feverish feeling were right in line with what I felt right before my heat hit.

“Shit,” I cursed. “My nest isn’t done.”

Before I realized what I was doing I was jumping up and climbing over them to gather their clothes from last night. I was on a one track mind now as I walked around, gathering up random things that stood out to me, a shirt here, another blanket, even a scarf that smelled just like my beta.

“Autumn, what are you doing, pumpkin?” Jack asked as he trailed behind me. I glanced down at the pile of stuff in my hand and the scarf I’d wound around my neck. I looked like a mess but I just shrugged.

“I have to get it ready, Jack,” I said in a tone that was harsher than I intended. He held up his hands in defense.

“I’m not stopping you, love,” he promised. “Is there anything I can do? Have you made your decision?”

My brain felt like it was already full of fog. It took a few beats for me to process what he was asking and I realized I hadn’t come out and said I wanted their help. But how they could doubt it was beyond me. Hell, they’d went shopping with me, gave me space, and our relationship had gone to several new levels since we’d first spoken about it.

“I want you guys to help me if you can,” I said, suddenly worried they’d deny it.

Footsteps filled the air before I was staring down at Boone’s feet. He tucked a finger under my chin and forced my eyes up to his.

“All you had to do was ask us, Autumn. There’s nowhere else we’d rather be,” he said gently. “We have stuff to prepare but we won’t let you be alone since it’s on the fringe right now. What can we do to help?”

“I never want to eat during heat, so I don’t care about that stuff,” I said. He let out a short chuckle.

“Oh, you’ll be hydrated and fed, you aren’t doing this alone,” he said firmly. There was no room to argue and I didn’t bother. I wouldn’t care about much but their knots very soon and having all three of their scents with me.

“I strung up your canopy and lights already. Why don’t you go up there with Jack and prepare while Boone and I make sure we have what we need for the week here?” Hunter said. His voice was low and rough and I knew my scent was already driving them mad.

Good.

“Okay,” I said as I finished my search through the house, stopping in their rooms for last minute things before heading upstairs. Jack tried to help but I ignored him, my mind was stuck on one thing and letting go of my collection wasn’t happening.

The attic looked amazing. The frame the guys mentioned ended up being a large platform bed with the biggest mattress I’d ever seen, not to mention it also felt like the best fluffy cloud ever. True to Hunter’s word, there was the sheer gray canopy the guys had bought on our shopping date hanging over the fluffy gray blankets. String lights lined the top of the canopy and around the windows.

The things I’d been collecting were now on top of the bed and I dropped to my knees on the mattress and arranged my new assortment of shirts, pillows, blankets, and the scarf

around the bed until I was surrounded by all of their scents, so strong that a slight surge of slick ran down my thighs.

A low groan had me glancing back at Jack who was biting his fist, the bulge in his pants showing that he'd scented my arousal easily.

"Whoops?" I said, but my focus was quickly back on the room. They'd set up a small mini fridge and snack shelf to the side and I saw my favorite cookies, chips, and drinks on it already. Someone had even placed a small orange pumpkin on top and wrapped lights around it all to match the rest of the room. "This is my new favorite place."

"Good, we want you to be comfortable," he said with a gentle smile. "You look good in here."

"So do you," I practically purred but he held up his hands.

"How about we shower and get you into something comfortable, food in your stomach, before this hits fully?"

I wrinkled my nose at the thought of leaving my nest but finally nodded and followed him out.

"What sounds good?" he asked as he led the way back down. The thought of food wasn't enticing at first but my stomach was empty and growled loudly at the temptation of home-cooked food.

"Is it too much to ask for brunch?" I asked hopefully.

"That sounds perfect. Why don't you go shower while I get started and send the guys off with a proper list," he offered. Standing on tiptoes I brushed a kiss over his lips and nodded.

"Thank you," I said, rushing off before I could tempt myself further. The moment I was in the shower a craving hit and I couldn't stop myself from calling out. "Boone!" Hopefully they were still here.

I apparently didn't need to worry from the thunder of boots on hardwood before the door was yanked open. My head poked out of the shower and I gave him a sheepish grin.

"Will you buy me some cookie dough ice cream while you're at the store? I just got a craving for it and it sounds so

good,” I pleaded pathetically. He gave me an exasperated laugh and nodded.

“Anything you want, baby girl,” he said as he came over and kissed me soundly. “But don’t scare me like that.”

“Sorry, I was just afraid you’d left,” I apologized quickly before ducking back into the shower and taking my time shaving and lathering myself in soap. Jack had apparently stuck a fall scented body wash in here and I didn’t hesitate to use it. The pumpkin vanilla scent was amazing.

The smell of bacon drifted in, officially forcing me to hurry and finish up. I was even more starving now and I knew it was my usual pre-heat hunger hitting. I’d probably put the guys to shame with how much I could eat and I was even more grateful to have them. I usually got through with tons of takeout, securely delivered through a slot. Something they would be appalled to hear about.

As I got dressed I couldn’t help but let my nerves rise a bit. I’d spent my heats alone in a secured room, miserable. This was about to be different. I had real alphas to knot and a beta to keep me satisfied. They would keep me safe and comfortable and the thought alone had tears brimming in my eyes. I’d always been so fiercely independent that giving myself over to them felt significant. And this was yet another way I was slowly becoming part of this pack. And that thought no longer freaked me out.

Holliday Hollow was where I belonged.

And this pack was my home.

“Autumn?” Jack called out. “It’s ready.”

I was shocked it was done but with a glance at the clock I realized that I’d taken the longest shower of my life. I threw on a shirt I stole from Boone and wore my boy shorts underneath, not bothering with more. They were about to see only my naked body for days, it couldn’t hurt and I was way too hot for more than that.

“Oh my god, Jack!” I gasped as I took in the spread. In the time since we’d parted he and the guys had managed to get a

mix of breakfast and lunch items prepared. From sandwiches, to eggs and bacon, to french toast, and... “Are those tacos?”

“Yup,” he answered proudly. “Breakfast with chorizo and regular ones with beef and cheese.”

“This is beyond what I expected, Jack. All this for me?” I was touched. In fact my emotions were so all over the place my eyes watered again and I swiped at it angrily, embarrassed for being a huge sap. “Sorry, it’s so nice.”

“Uh, then why are you crying?” he demanded in panic. “Is something wrong?”

“No, it’s perfect,” I promised. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. And the guys just pulled up so you better dig in.” He threw me a wink and I grinned, giving him another kiss before taking the plate he offered and piling it high.

A low whistle sounded and Hunter laughed. “Damn, brother, did you cook up the whole fridge?”

“You’ll all need your strength,” he countered, unapologetic. “I’m taking care of my pack.”

“Don’t count yourself out, beta, you’ll be participating,” I called out before taking a bite of my taco and moaning at the perfect blend of spice and melted cheese. “Holy shit, this is so much better than my usual takeout.”

“Having a beta like Jack has its perks,” Hunter said proudly as he dropped shopping bags on the counter. Boone came in then, eyes wide as he saw all the food.

“Damn, I’m starving, let’s hurry this up,” he told the others, handing over bags before rushing back out.

“I’m going to carry up my laptop to the nest if you want to relax and watch movies after this until it hits,” Jack told me as he put away groceries. “I have to take a few more things up to the fridge there anyway.”

“You guys are spoiling me,” I told him as I shoveled food in like a starving woman.

“We are,” he agreed. “You deserve it, Autumn.”

“Stop making me sappy,” I whined as I forced myself to focus on grabbing a few more slices of bacon.

“What are you doing?” Boone asked as he brought in the last of the groceries.

“Making her cry,” Jack laughed and Boone snapped his attention to my face, looking relieved when I was smiling back.

“In the best way,” I promised. “This heat has me all emotional. You guys are just really amazing, I feel like I don’t deserve all this.”

“You do, and more,” Boone said without hesitation. “We’d give you the world if you let us, baby girl.”

I cursed again as a tear leaked out. “Sit down and eat before I sob all over the food.”

They laughed at that, all three of them getting everything put away. It was always amazing to me how easily they worked together. Soon they were at the table, staring at me in awe as I piled up thirds on my plate and dug right back in. I didn’t feel miserably full, in fact I had that hollowness that followed heat already forming.

Jack had a good idea about going upstairs, this wasn’t far off. I couldn’t believe I didn’t feel it coming on more last night. I’d never had them hit so fast. It was usually a slow build up, not a sudden change. Thank god it held off for the morning so we could prepare.

An hour later I was snuggled in Hunter’s lap while Boone rubbed my feet and Jack got a movie playing for us. It was comfortable, warm, and everything I could ever want.

I don’t think I’ve ever been happier.

CHAPTER 25

AUTUMN

I knew the moment my heat hit, the pressure between my thighs turning into a demanding, incessant need I could no longer ignore.

If someone didn't get inside me soon I was pretty sure I was going to die. A whine left my lips, the keening need escaping me as the ache grew stronger.

A growl answered my call, my body suddenly being pushed into the plush mattress.

Wild ocean filled my senses and without even opening my eyes I knew it was Hunter.

He tore my clothes off, the cool air on my sweat slicked skin, a quick flash of comfort before he was on me, his large hands spreading my thighs widely.

"Fuck, is he going into a rut?" Jack asked, his words not making sense as I nudged my hips up, riding the mouth that was currently devouring me.

Hunter's tongue struck hard and deep, but it wasn't enough. I wanted him deep inside me. I wanted his cock, wanted his knot. I wanted him so far inside me I'd feel him for days.

"Hunt," I begged, opening my eyes and trying to get his attention.

"Mine," he growled into my sex before quickly rising to his knees and pulling me flush against him.

With one vicious thrust he sank inside me to the hilt, my breath leaving me for a moment as he filled me.

“Yours,” I agreed, licking my lips as he canted his hips back. “More.”

Hunter gave it to me then, a scream leaving my lips as he rutted into me. He seemed bigger than I remembered and I couldn't think about anything else in the moment other than what his cock felt like inside me. Branding me. Owning me.

A hand collared my jaw, turning my attention towards Boone, the look in his eyes molten fire.

When words escaped me I tried to let him see that I was fucking fantastic.

From the purr of satisfaction that rumbled from his chest, I must have gotten my point across.

A sharp pinch to my clit had my attention turning back towards Hunter as Boone released me.

“Hands and knees, sweetheart,” he said, his voice just as thick and as deep as his cock currently was.

He flipped me over easily, my body immediately lowering to the bed as I presented myself to him, my ass high in the air as my face pressed into the sheets that already smelled like us, our pack.

“Need it,” I rasped.

“Then take it, omega,” Hunter growled, easily sliding back into me. “You look so fucking good like this. You're going to milk me dry and take all of my knot aren't you?”

“Please,” I begged, the force of his thrusts and the strong grip he had on my hips, already had me fluttering around him. “Need your knot, alpha.”

A delicious pressure began as Hunter fucked his knot into me, the sensation almost slightly painful before it popped in, lodging inside me and giving me exactly what I needed.

“Never gonna stop, Autumn. Never again. Just going to keep filling and filling you up until you're dripping with my

cum.”

I shattered as his knot swelled inside me, stream after stream of his hot release inside me. My mouth parted on a cry as my nails dug into the sheets, the pleasure exactly what I needed.

“Hunter,” I said with a groan as he kept fucking me.

His pace might have went from frantic to a slow measured thrust, but there was determination in the way he moved as if he were desperate to give me every single inch and ounce of him.

“That’s it, soak it all in. There won’t be a person in this town who won’t be able to smell me on you and know you’re mine.”

“Ours,” Boone corrected, his hand threading into the base of my hair and pulling me up until I could fully look at him.

My vision blurred in pleasure for a moment as I refocused on him, his thick heavy cock already in front of me, the tip glistening invitingly.

Wordlessly I opened my mouth, needing the taste of him on my tongue.

Boone traced my lips with the tip of his cock, smearing the pre cum against my lips before finally pushing inside. I groaned at the taste of him, desperate for more.

“Such a good girl,” Boone praised.

His grip tightened in my hair slightly as he held me still, the two of them working me back and forth between them.

All I could think about was them. How they filled me. How they tasted. How much I wanted their cum. How much I wanted them to mark me.

“Never going to stop, sweetheart,” Hunter said. “Never.”

His words lit up my body even more as he continued to grind his knot into me, his cock never softening as he pulled another orgasm from me, my slick coating everything.

I looked up into Boone's brown eyes, demanding he give me what I needed.

"Don't worry, baby girl," he said. "We're going to fill you up with so much cum you won't help but be satisfied. Here it comes."

He grabbed his knot, guiding my head down onto him further until my lips were kissing the back of his knuckles.

His release filled my mouth, salty and sweet and so fucking delicious. Combined with Hunter it provided a moment of clarity to realize that someone very important was still missing from my nest.

A whine left my throat as Boone combed his hand through my hair, letting me ease off of him.

"Jack?"

I needed him. The feeling in my chest tightening as I tried to look around for him.

"I'm here, pumpkin. I'm here," he assured. "Lay her down, brother. Let me see her."

A grunt left Hunter's lips as his arms went around my middle and he supported my weight as he turned the two of us on our sides. His knot was still inside me and I wiggled against him, trying to figure out if I could fit both him and Jack at the same time.

Hunter's hand slipped between us grabbing a handful of my ass before his fingers slipped across my soaked skin and against my currently unfilled hole.

"Need you," Hunter groaned, still rutting into me. "Can't stop."

His pace wasn't as frantic but I knew he still felt the same burning and twisting need that was eating me up from the inside.

Hunter's knot was fantastic, but I wanted more. I wanted all of them, on me and in me. I wanted to be covered and smothered in their scent and their cum.

“Take it,” I encouraged him as Hunter’s fingers began toying against my tight rosebud more insistently.

I reached for Jack who was now in front of me, my favorite beta, meeting me in a scorching kiss as his brother continued fucking me with both his cock and fingers, stretching me out and preparing me for what was to come.

There was a bit of pressure as he pulled out, his knot not all the way deflated, but that didn’t stop him from lining himself up with my ass and feeding me his cock slowly.

“Fuck, sweetheart,” Hunter growled as he bottomed out.

“Easy,” Boone’s voice boomed, the alpha’s grip behind me easing slightly.

“No, more,” I demanded. “Jack, want you in me.”

“I’ve got you, pumpkin,” he assured, his blue eyes now level with mine as he grabbed my thigh and dragged it over him. “You’re so damn wet.”

I felt him toy his cock along my clit, rubbing it back and forth until I was clenching and shaking again. I didn’t want him to drag it out, I just wanted him in me. Wanted to feel him inside me, filling me up with his cum and fucking his brother’s back into me that had spilled out.

I needed them to ease the ache.

When Jack finally lined himself up and sank into me I almost wept with relief.

“You love that don’t you?” Boone observed. “You’re doing so damn good, baby girl. It’s so beautiful seeing you taking them like that.”

For Hollows sake did I love it, the drag and pull as Jack and Hunter alternated their thrust, the delicious stretch that I felt deep in my body and soul as they took me. All that existed was this moment, all that existed was them.

Jack struck true, the curve of his cock hitting my sweet spot repeatedly, the pressure inside of me building to an unstoppable crescendo once again.

I began to shake between them, my heat soaked body a blur of pleasure.

“Come for us omega,” Hunter growled, pressing deeply inside me as Jack railed me again.

I snapped, coming undone as blinding light flashed before my eyes, my breath coming out in gasps. My slick was everywhere, the three of our bodies sliding even more rampantly against each other as my pack continued to work me through my release.

“That was so fucking hot,” Jack said before devouring my lips.

I heard Boones amused chuckle in the background and I imagined in a different time he might have said ‘I told you so.’

“Again,” Hunter groaned, his thrusts going faster, a different sensation beginning to build within me.

“I need it,” I rasped out, my throat dry from my screams.

Thankfully they both seemed to understand. Jack’s cock throbbed inside me, pulsing as he filled me with rope after rope of his hot cum, his brother doing the same as he pressed deep into my ass.

Part of me must have blacked out after that, the four of us a rotating mass of limbs and orgasms. Showers, snacks, and sex were had along the way but still the ache persisted, the heat slicking and coursing through my body an unrelenting beast.

“It’s going to be okay,” Jack said soothingly. “We’ll get you through this, pumpkin.”

“More.”

“Take a drink for me and Boone will give you his knot,” he promised.

I opened my mouth obediently, still grinding on my beta’s spent dick inside me.

“That’s it,” Boone encouraged as I took sips of the cool liquid, his hands settling on my lips as he lifted me off Jack

and settled me onto him.

Even with all our activities there was still the initial rush as he settled inside me, his thick cock branding me as his as he pulled my back flush against his chest.

“One more,” Jack encouraged, holding the straw to my lips as Boone slowly stroked into me.

Once he finished he ran a hand over my face, taking my lips in a kiss far sweeter than what I currently wanted.

“I’ve got her,” Boone said from behind me. “Why don’t you clean up and try to sneak in a small nap with Hunter while you can. I think we’re almost there.”

“No there,” I grumbled, forcing my hips down on him harder. “More.”

“Don’t pout, baby girl. I’ll give you more. I’ll give you my knot and all my cum. Just for you okay? Let our beta sleep so he can continue taking such good care of you later, okay?”

A sigh left my lips as I felt the promise in the way Boone’s thrusts grew more prominent.

“Kay.” I sighed, staring fondly after Jack’s cute ass as he walked away.

If my nest and my body wasn’t already saturated in his scent I would have tackled him.

A strong hand wrapped around my jaw, turning my attention to the side and back to my big teddy bear of an alpha. His lips met mine as his free hand wrapped around me, slipping down to my sex to play with me as he moved steadily inside of me.

When our lips broke apart, his brown eyes blazed into mine.

“Autumn.”

My name on his lips was a promise and plea, the weight of the word a vow my body understood even when my mind didn’t.

He lifted me off of him momentarily only to settle me right back on him, the two of us facing each other as I sat astride his lap, my arms wrapped around his neck.

The view was much better from here, and I couldn't resist running my hands through his hair and beard, before stealing another kiss, wanting the taste of him on my tongue again.

Using whatever strength was left in my body I moved with him, meeting him thrust for thrust as he gave me what I needed most.

As he eased his knot inside me, he grabbed a handful of hair at the nape of my neck, pulling my lips from his so he could meet my eyes again.

Words couldn't even come close to describing how they all made me feel. Sure my slick was dripping down his cock and all over the bed, but my heart was just as much of a mess.

As his knot swelled inside me, I leaned my head back into his grip, arching my neck up in invitation.

I watched the shudder wrack his body, his gaze burning brighter before he leaned in, his teeth dragging promisingly along my neck as he filled me once again, holding me tight through my own cries of pleasure.

“Soon, baby girl. Soon,” he swore.

I held onto his promise as I let the pleasure pull me under once again, knowing that the future would never be the same.

CHAPTER 26

AUTUMN

I woke up from my heat wrapped and surrounded with the men I'd spent it with. Even with their attentiveness I still desperately craved another shower, the sweat that clung to my skin not nearly as pleasant as the past week had been.

Okay, pleasant wasn't the word to describe it by any means. Life changing, world altering, best sex of my life? Sure. But as my lust filled brain cleared and I remembered everything we shared a sense of foreboding filled me.

I knew they were mine before the heat, but the last week solidified it in a way only a bond mark could top.

"That's way too many thoughts for someone who almost fucked us to death," Hunter murmured, pulling me closer to his side and planting a kiss on my temple.

I let myself sink into him, his warmth and ocean scent seeping into me once again. I knew if I wanted I could stay forever in his arms, and in this nest, the four of us making a permanent home together.

"It was intense," I admitted to him, keeping my voice down so I didn't wake Jack and Boone who were still sleeping beside us.

I knew they'd have to have been worn out too. I'd never spent a heat with anyone before and I guess my omega heart wanted to go for broke and show me all the things I'd been missing in my life.

"Intense good or intense bad?" Hunter asked, a purr rumbling in his chest as the alpha tried to help settle me. "I

didn't expect to go into a rut to start it off."

"Definitely not bad," I assured him, bending down to place a kiss on the arm wrapped around my chest. "It was just—"

I trailed off, not really knowing how to put into words what I was feeling inside.

"Let's shower," Hunter suggested, seeming to know what I wanted without me having to ask.

Then again, I wasn't the only one who was sweaty and wrung out. My body was sore in all the best ways, but the exhaustion was still very real.

Nodding my agreement, we carefully untangled our way out of the nest before heading downstairs. Hunter held my hand the entire way, not saying a word as he led me into his bedroom and to the ensuite he had there, taking a moment to start his large walk-in shower and check the temperature before we both stepped inside.

He didn't say a word for a moment, just held me beneath the warm spray as though he didn't want to let go of me, if only for a second.

"Hunt?" I questioned, knowing I wasn't the only one with something on my mind.

"May I?" he asked, picking up his shampoo that sat on the ledge, a look I couldn't quite place in his eye.

"Sure," I agreed, taking a step slightly out of the spray and tilting my head for him.

He took his time working the soap through my tresses, untangling all the knots, before shielding my eyes to rinse it before he began all again with the conditioner.

"The very first time I saw you after our first night together—when we ran into each other at the diner—I couldn't get past the fact that you didn't smell like me, that you didn't smell like our wonderful night together."

"Hunt—"

“Let me finish please,” he said, his voice softer than I’d ever heard it.

“Okay.”

“As much as I might have tried to fool myself, I knew then and there that you were something special. That you were something special to *me*, and I’m sorry it took me so long to get my shit together and tell you that.”

I turned around in his arms then, wanting to see his blue eyes as they stared down at me. There was no doubting the love in them, not even for a second.

“What changed?” I asked, raising a hand to caress his jaw that now carried a decent stubble from our week together.

“I stopped giving into the fear that was holding me back,” he said, turning his head slightly to kiss my palm. “I was so worried that I couldn’t give you the relationship you deserved, that I wouldn’t be able to, that I held myself back and ended up in a self fulfilling prophecy. As stupid as it’s going to sound, it was seeing you walk out that door without me, knowing that you could just as easily walk out of our lives at any time once you’re done here. And it wasn’t the fact that you could leave, because have no doubts sweetheart that we would follow, but it was the fact that you still didn’t know how much you mean to me.”

Tears sprang to my eyes, the water not doing an adequate job of cloaking them as emotion clogged my throat.

I knew Hunter had been holding back because of his past, but his reasoning, of wanting to give me what I deserved, was more than my heart could take.

I’d been so used to being a commodity, people wanting me for no more than my classification or how it would look to have an omega *choose* them and elevate their status. The guys didn’t care about any of that, and it made me realize that I had some very serious things to consider, and while I knew that it ultimately needed to be a group decision, I needed to think about what we all deserved now that we found ourselves so intertwined down the road we’d found ourselves on.

What started off as something easy going and light was still very much that, but layers of depth and love had now been baked into the foundation.

I had my offers in the city calling still and my unfinished work at the orchard and with the community. My body and mind were both exhausted, and I knew that if I didn't take the time to really sit down with my thoughts that I'd regret not making a conscious choice about it.

I'd asked for Boone's bite during my heat, and I knew that I had wanted Hunter's as well in that moment.

I rested my head against Hunter's chest, silently absorbing his comfort until the warm water ran out and he reached around to shut it off. It was when he was methodically drying me off that my eyes finally caught his again, the questions in them still present.

"I didn't expect you to get so soft on me, sheriff," I said, the words barely more than a whisper.

A chuckle escaped his lips. "This is the only time, sweetheart. There's not a moment around that I don't smell that fresh fall scent of yours and it doesn't have me hard."

A smile stretched my face before I took his lips, deepening the kiss briefly before pulling back.

"You mean a lot to me too, Hunt." The look of relief that fell across his face made my next words more difficult. "A lot has changed for us, and I'm not questioning the pack or how I feel about all of you, but I need a night to really think about what happens next."

He blew out a harsh breath, his grip tightening on me as if he didn't want to let me go.

"That's going to be a hard sell for everyone, sweetheart."

"I know," I said seriously. "Let's go make breakfast and we can all talk about it."

I was surprised to find both Jack and Boone already in the kitchen, the two of them already changed and freshly

showered. I guess I didn't realize how long Hunter and I had been up there together.

"Morning," Jack said, passing me a delicious plate of three orange pancakes that had candied nuts and whipped cream adorning them. "Pumpkin pancakes for their namesake. Sweet and delicious just like you."

I groaned. "I thought we agreed that making me blush on purpose was off limits."

"Pretty sure that was all you, baby girl. I for one, enjoy making you blush," Boone said, snagging me and pulling me onto his lap before reaching over and putting my plate back in front of me.

"Kiss," I said, turning back to my bear of a man before repeating the same action to Jack.

The four of us started devouring breakfast, the rations of bacon and sausage disappearing at an alarming rate as well. I didn't realize how hungry I'd been and it wasn't until I was full that I knew I'd delayed the conversation for as long as I could.

"Is something wrong with the food?" Jack asked, his brow furrowed.

"Not at all," I assured him. "I just need to talk with you all and speaking from experience on how the last time I left the house went, I'm not sure it's going to go over well."

"I might have strong armed that one," Hunter admitted.

"But we agreed with it," Boone countered, resting his chin on my shoulder. "We haven't discussed it all together but if that's a boundary, we'll respect it, Autumn. We just wanted to make sure you were safe."

"I know," I said with a nod. "You guys really didn't try to interfere until Peter showed up."

"And is Peter still in town?" Jack asked.

I shrugged. "I honestly don't know. But this isn't about Peter. It's about the city, and the orchard and *us*."

Boone purred behind me, his woody scent rising to meet the hint of struggle in my voice.

“How long do you need?” he asked, the words surprising the shit out of me.

“Just the night.”

“You can use my old apartment if you want,” Boone offered.

“Just like that?” I asked, concerned about his anxiety.

“Just like that.”

“I can pack you up some food to take since there probably isn’t much there,” Jack said, nodding as he turned away, refusing to meet my eye.

“You’re not going to fight me on this?” I questioned looking at all of them.

“I know what it’s like to need time to sort your thoughts,” Boone said first. “You’ve always made plans for your life, I wouldn’t expect you not to make one now that you’re reassessing what you want in life. You’re not leaving us, Autumn. I know that in my heart. If I thought for a single second that were the case then my actions might not be as noble as they are now. As long as you text us when you get there and let us know when you’ll be home, it’s up to us to handle the rest on our end.”

“He’s right,” Hunter agreed. “We might not always be perfect, but we’ll always be there for you, Autumn. Even when something you need might not be what we necessarily want. I think I speak for all of us, when I say we want you here with us. If this is what it takes for you to be able to come back to us with a clear path forward then so be it.”

Hunter came up to where I sat on Boone’s lap, giving me a coffee flavored kiss, before walking out of the room.

“Let me know before you head out, please,” Boone said, his arms tightening around me as he placed a kiss on my ear. “Don’t worry about me, baby girl. Everything is going to be fine. I’ll give the two of you a moment.”

As Boone left the room, Jack still didn't turn to look at me, busying himself with cleaning up the kitchen from the feast he made.

"Let me help you with that," I said, rising out of my stool to join him. "You know you don't have to go through all this trouble, right? As much as I love your cooking, a girl can stomach a bowl of cereal every now and then."

"You're worth more than a bowl of cereal," Jack said, still not facing me as I helped grab the dishes and started loading them into the dishwasher.

I couldn't take the tension between us. Jack was always the sweetest with me, the one who I'd instantly felt a fast friendship with that had grown into something more. He was one of the first friendly faces I'd met in Holiday Hollow and seeing him now without that ever present smile I'd grown accustomed to, was killing me. The last thing I wanted to do was hurt any of them.

"Jack..."

He turned to me then, tears gathered in his own eyes that tore at my heart.

Shaking his head, he started towards me. "No, don't say my name like that please. I'll get over it, whatever you need, Autumn. I'm just—"

"Scared," I finished for him, wrapping my arms around him and tucking my chin into his neck. "I'm scared too, Jack. I never expected this. Not here, not now."

"Is it really the worst thing?"

"No, no it's not Jack. But as much as you guys talk about what I deserve, y'all deserve the same thing. You deserve someone that is going to put the pack first, and I need to figure out with everything going on, how I can be that person and still be true to myself."

"You already are that person, pumpkin. But, if you need time to organize your thoughts and realize it yourself, I respect that. We'll be here when you're ready," he said.

“It’s not like I’m disappearing for a week or anything,” I said, nudging him.

“I’d hope not,” Jack laughed. “The Fall Festival is in two days.”

“For Hollows Sake!” I said, pulling back to look at him. “Did we really burn a whole week?”

“Totally worth it,” he said, his smile now back on his face. “I hope it was just as good for you.”

“You know it was,” I said, stealing another kiss from his lips. “Thanks for taking such good care of me.”

“Always,” Jack promised. “So Boone’s apartment...any chance you want a ride? I could get together some of that food for you.”

“I was actually thinking of going to Claire’s for the night,” I said, knowing I wanted to talk out the situation with someone.

Claire, being a great friend and an omega herself, was my first choice. She knew the situation I’d found myself in, knew what it took to get ahead in business, and I trusted her to be upfront and honest with me.

I hadn’t talked to my dad since my birthday, and this wasn’t the kind of thing I’d ever feel comfortable talking with him about, especially since he’d never chosen the pack life. I wished like hell my grams were here, and while I knew I could talk to Janet, it didn’t feel right since the decision would ultimately affect her boys. Claire was the perfect choice.

“Just let us know if we need to come save you ladies from any bottles of wandering tequila,” Jack said.

“None of the hard stuff for me tonight,” I promised. “I have a pie baking date tomorrow with this beta I know.”

“Oh, do you now?” he questioned back with a knowing grin, the tension between us dissipated.

An hour or so later, after multiple kisses and promises to text, I was on my way to Claire’s with my laptop and a change of clothes.

Claire welcomed me into her little cottage, the place teeming with little bits and bobs everywhere that were as colorful as the omega herself. She'd taken it easy on me the first part of the day, letting me work on my laptop as she did some ordering for her inventory, a mindless television show playing in the background.

"Alright, out with it," she said, closing her laptop in a huff. "You come over here smelling like you just had the dicking down of your life and yet here you sit, with me, on your computer. Not that I don't love your company, Autumn, but what the fuck?"

"I'm just trying to make sure I make the right decision," I said with a groan.

The last thing I wanted to do was tell the pack I wanted them forever only to later regret giving up the opportunities I had back in the city.

"Well you sure as hell aren't going to—" she paused, looking at my spreadsheet, before giving me a what the fuck look, "find it in this."

"I know! I just worked so hard to get to this point, Claire. You know how it can be for us. If I give all of that up will I still be happy? Or will I turn into some miserable version of myself and in turn just bring them down?"

"There's a logical answer to all of this, that you pretty much have all figured out."

Claire crossed her arms, staring at me expectantly, like she was just waiting for me to connect the dots.

"You're going to have to help me out here, Claire. I don't exactly have all the time in the world right now with the festival coming up."

"Exactly," she said. "For Hollows sake Autumn, this isn't the city where you have to fight tooth and nail to prove who you are. You can have it both ways if you want it! Think about all the work you've been doing on the orchard and the festival. You're turning that into something *more*. It's not set in stone that you have to up and walk away from that."

A moment passed between us as her words sunk in. I'd been working for months with Janet and the community, putting together a rather impressive project I hadn't even clued the guys into yet. It was the kind of thing marketing and business majors would have salivated getting their hands on at a firm and yet here I was, doing it on my own.

"I'm an idiot, aren't I?"

"You're an idiot," she agreed. "But at least you have a pack who loves you enough to let you come to that decision on your own."

The doorbell rang just then, and I looked at her curiously.

"Did you order something?" I asked.

She pulled the front door open, and I caught a glance of a familiar red pick up pulling from her drive.

Claire reached down, hefting a basket up, before hip checking the door to close it.

"It looks like that pack of yours also loves you enough to feed our faces tonight," Claire said, grabbing a container and opening it, the smells of pumpkin and tomato and savory herbs and cheese filling the room.

I was up and on my feet in an instant, knowing that smell and salivating over the container of homemade pumpkin lasagna Claire was holding. Jack had made it for me once before and I may have held a whole pan hostage for myself. Before I could grab a fork and dig in, I saw the rest of the basket.

My favorite blanket that Hunter had got me was at the bottom of the basket, along with a couple of servings of Boone's favorite hot chocolate that I loved to steal sips of, to top it all off there was a bottle of cider, the little hand drawn label on it doing me in.

Instead of the one I had painstakingly crafted with the orchard's new branding, there was a hand drawn one. Four poorly drawn figures stood side by side, they weren't much more than stick figures, but it was easy enough to discern who was who was who.

The tallest figure of the bunch had on a pair of handcuffs, the one next to it had a huge smile with a pumpkin in one hand while he held hands with the figure that I assumed was supposed to be me, an apple drawn on my dress. On my other side, slightly bigger than the other figures was one with a full beard, holding my other hand.

Cedarwick's New Traditions was written across the bottom, trees drawn on the sides of the four of us standing together, but what really got me was the fact that each of the guys had apples for eyes, like all they could see was me.

"I love them so much."

"Yeah, but you already knew that," Claire pointed out. "You just didn't want to say it in case you ended up moving back to the city and breaking your heart and theirs."

"They've been courting me the whole time, and I never put it in perspective, gifts here and there sure and the stuff for the nest, but taking care of me in such profound and basic ways too. They said they'd move with me."

"Now you're trying to break my heart," Claire said, with a faux pout. "You know you don't want to go back to the city. Not when you're surrounded by all of this."

"You sound like Riley," I said, with a laugh. "But you're right, I don't want to go back. I don't want to leave the orchard or everything I've worked so hard to build and I don't want to leave my pack. Plus, this town, you, Riley... I've never really had a lot of friends."

"There we go," Claire said, sounding pleased. "Now let's enjoy all this cheesy goodness and let me try this new cider of yours before you go back and mate their asses. I doubt we'll get another night alone for a while after that. I'm surprised they aren't camped outside my damn house right now."

Cracking open the cider and dishing out the lasagna, we curled up on her sofa, my blanket wrapped around my shoulders and smelling of home as we made plans for all the exciting things we could do now that I was officially staying.

Now I just had to think of a way to tell the guys, and I couldn't think of a better thing than what I had planned to show them at the Fall Festival. They deserved something special, to feel as loved and as cherished as they made me, and I would make sure they felt it too.

CHAPTER 27

AUTUMN

The next morning the pack welcomed me with what was turning out to be our habitual breakfast gathering. They'd showered me with love and affection, letting me know how much they missed me without pressing me to share what I'd decided.

It wasn't long after that we transformed the kitchen into pie headquarters. The festival was closing in and Jack and I were definitely feeling the pressure.

The entire house smelled like pure heaven. Jack and I had an array of pie shells ready to be filled and baked. He was making pumpkin of course, while I was sticking with apples. Riley had helped me pick out our best apples for today.

I didn't care at this point who won the contest. Spending the afternoon dancing around the kitchen with Jack as we worked in perfect harmony was a win all in itself.

"You forgot butter," he teased me as I sliced up the dough to form a lattice pattern. Wadding up a scrap piece, I launched it at him, getting it stuck right on his cheek as he gaped at me. My laughter turned into a shriek as he stuck his fingers in the flower and flicked it at me, raining the powder all over me and the dough.

"Children," Boone chastised half-heartedly from his spot at the table. He looked up just as Jack and I looked at each other, matching grins forming as we planned silently to team up on him. "Oh hell no, I'm out. I've got to run anyway."

He rushed out of the room, taking the notebook he'd been writing in with him. The poor guy was writing down every safety concern possible for the festival tomorrow.

"I'm taking the oven first," I declared as I perfected the lattice then laid the cute apple dough cutout I'd paid on top, using a scoring razor to cut details into the leaves coming from the tiny stem.

"Okay, I'm starting to get worried," he muttered playfully as he looked over my shoulder at the finished product. I was making at least four of them, backups just in case something went wrong. "Why four again?"

"In case one fails, one drops, someone bumps me and screws it up, and one to spare that will be perfect after all that," I said. "Too much can go wrong and this is my first real impression in town."

"You're overthinking, pumpkin," he said gently as he hugged me from behind. "I usually make two, just in case."

"You don't have a whole legacy to live up to, they know you're good," I countered, letting a bit more of my vulnerability slip.

"They'll all be impressed. The cider was amazing and so is everything else you made," he said, forcing me to turn around and kissing me softly. "You're perfect, and now the whole town will see it too."

"I can't believe it's tomorrow. I'm a mixture of insane excitement and too many nerves to handle," I admitted. "Plus, I still have to make caramel apples tonight. Maybe next year I'll team up with Claire and sell pies, or hand pies, something different."

"We'll need a bigger kitchen for next year," Jack joked. Our eyes met and I couldn't help but smile, some of my tension draining. He was right, I was definitely overthinking all of this. We'd spent so long talking about it, preparing for it, that I didn't want anything to go wrong.

"Are the guys gone tonight?" I asked as I stepped out of his hold and grabbed my finished pies to slide into the oven,

setting the timer.

Jack went back to pouring his pumpkin mixture into his empty pie crusts before answering. “Yes. Boone and mom are going over his extensive list of safety suggestions, which half of she’ll talk him out of. And Hunter’s on duty. He switched shifts so he was off tomorrow to spend with us.”

“Perks of being the sheriff,” I joked. “Holy hell we created a mess.”

“That’s alright, I’ll wash, you dry,” he offered as he finished filling them and sat his bowl among the rest next to the poor sink.

“Sold,” I agreed easily as I grabbed a fresh dish towel to start drying as he filled the sink.

“Did you ever go to the festival as a kid?” he asked as he scrubbed.

“Not all of them. We all know Holiday Hollow has a never ending list of festivals,” I laughed. “But there was one year that grandma insisted we come down because two of my grandpas were participating in the talent show.”

“Oh my god, I remember that one,” he laughed. “Didn’t they sing *I’ve got you babe?*”

“Yes, and they tried to do dance moves and ended up falling all over each other. Everyone thought it was a comedy skit so they played it up after that,” I said, cracking up at the memory. “I’ve never laughed so hard in my life.”

“Those two were hilarious every time they came over. They were the lighthearted to your other grandfather’s seriousness. A good mix,” he said as he handed over a clean mixing bowl. I dried it and set it back on the stand. “They’d be proud of you, Autumn.”

“I like to think so too. I’m a good mix of all of them and with Riley and the farmhands he found, we’ve got the perfect team. I’m glad Cedarwick Orchard isn’t just a thing of the past anymore.”

The timer went off and I hurried over to pull my pies from the oven, pleased to see they were the perfect golden brown. I set them on the cooling racks and Jack adjusted the temperature and got his pies ready to go while getting them in the oven.

“Can I confess something to you?” Jack said as he watched me wiping off the counter, bent over.

“Of course,” I said, not catching the innuendo in his tone at all. Until I looked back and saw his eyes trained on my ass.

“I’ve always wanted to fuck you right on this island,” he admitted. All thoughts of cleaning were gone and I tossed the rag at the sink so I could focus on him.

“This very island?” I teased as I climbed on. His eyes were hooded as he watched me stand up and slowly peel off my apron, tossing it aside. Every piece of clothing I slowly slid off for him as I put on a show.

Unlike the impatient alphas he leaned against the counter and watched until I was naked and finally laid myself down on the surface.

“What now, Jack?” I challenged. That had him moving forward and grabbing my ankles, mercilessly tugging me to the edge and spreading my legs.

“Now, I’m going to have a little feast,” he teased, bending down and licking a stripe over my pussy. Just the strip tease alone had me turned on but as he teased and sucked at me expertly I was practically feral for my beta.

The cool counter felt amazing under my heated skin as Jack took me to the edge of my control and tore right past it, tongue fucking me until I was calling out his name and covering his face in my slick. He hummed appreciatively as he meticulously cleaned every ounce of slick I gave him.

His face glistened as he pulled back and the adorable grin on his face had my chest warming. This man was perfect. A mix of sweet and caring and playful. He was the levity of our pack and in that moment I couldn’t stop the words from falling from my lips if I wanted to.

“I love you, Jack,” I said. His fingers faltered as he unbuttoned his pants, eyes wide in awe.

“What?” he asked like he didn’t hear me. I laughed and sat up, reaching for him until he was close enough then kissing him with everything I had. When I pulled back he was breathless.

“I said, I love you, beta,” I teased. “Let me bite you?” My fingers trailed over his bare neck, pausing where his shoulder and neck met. He shivered as my nail teased over the sensitive flesh. “I want everyone who sees you to know you belong to me.”

“Autumn,” he said cautiously. “I’m not an alpha, neither are you.”

“I know,” I laughed. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t claim my beta if I want to. So, can I?”

“Yes,” he agreed, “but only if you wait until I’m buried inside of you.” I groaned at the husky quality of his voice and the fingers now teasing over my skin. “How fitting we do it here, in our spot.”

It really had become our spot. Dinners cooked together, teaching me how to make pies, where we had our best heart to hearts.

“Sold,” I said. “Now get naked, beta.”

He smirked at my orders and took his time sliding his jeans off of his hips, even bending over so I had a shot of his ass as he pushed them off and kicked them aside along with his boxers.

I let out a startled yelp as he launched himself on the island. The moment I laid back he straddled my hips and leaned down to kiss me again.

“I’ll never get bored of how good you taste,” he hummed against my lips before trailing soft kisses and bites down my neck and to my breasts. My body felt like it was on fire for him as he explored with his mouth and hands, rolling my nipples between his fingers and grinding his hips into mine.

“We have pies baking, no taking your time,” I warned him desperately. Was I using it as an excuse to get him inside of me? Absolutely.

“You want me that bad, omega?” he teased as his hand finally reached my hip, sliding over my thighs and between my legs. My breath hitched as he teased me but didn’t give me more.

“Yes,” I breathed out. “Please, Jack.”

“Then get on top, Autumn,” he said roughly. “I want to watch you take what’s yours.”

There was no hesitation as I let him flip our position and climbed on top. Using my hand I guided him to my entrance before sinking down on him in one move.

We’d had our sweet moments, but this was not that. It was me showing him how much I wanted him. No. Needed him.

My hands braced on his chest as I started to move, grinding over his hips as our eyes met. It felt so much more intimate but I couldn’t look away. He made me feel so sexy, powerful, as he watched me with every ounce of lust and adoration he could manage.

My legs shook and my pussy clenched around him. But I wasn’t ready to come yet, I wanted to come together.

“Come, pumpkin,” he urged.

“No,” I refused. “Together.” My breath was ragged, my voice a desperate plea as he gripped my hips and took over. He fucked into me, taking over, still watching me as he used me to bring himself to the same precipice I was teetering on.

“Now,” he ground out, the muscles on his body tensed as he fought against his own release. This time he gave me no choice, grinding my clit down on him until I was practically sobbing with relief.

“Yes, Autumn,” he praised as my pussy clenched around him, forcing him to come with me.

Taking that opportunity I leaned and bit down hard on his shoulder. He gasped, hands bruisingly gripping me as he came

hard. Hearing him lose his control nearly had me coming again.

Before I pulled away completely I licked over the imprint I'd left behind, satisfied that it was deep enough to leave a mark.

“Fuck, I never expected to like pain during sex but that was amazing,” he breathed out. I laughed softly as I stared down at my work, tracing it with my finger now.

“My mark looks good on you beta,” I teased before pulling off of him. I climbed down and headed for the bathroom to clean up real quick, wanting to be in his arms.

When I got back, clothed again, he was sanitizing the counter with just his jeans hanging low on his hips. I wrapped my arms around him and rested my cheek on his back for a moment. He let me as he finished then tossed his rag aside and turned.

“Autumn.” His voice was so serious that I looked up at him. “I love you, too.”

I smiled at that. “Really?”

“I have for a while. That first moment I met you I knew that I was ruined for any other woman. There’s a reason I call you pumpkin.”

“Why is that?” I asked, my voice choking with emotion. He kissed me softly before answering the question.

“It’s not just a silly pun. Pumpkins are my world, Autumn. And now so are you,” he said reverently.

“I didn’t expect it to turn out this way, but you guys are my world too.” Our moment was interrupted as I smelled something burning and wrinkled my nose.

“Is something burning?” he asked before both of us gasped and he gently moved me aside to rush over and grab the pies out of the oven, letting out a relieved sigh when they came out perfectly. A piece of crust on his backup pie had broken off and fallen to the bottom, burning.

“They’re perfect,” I said with relief.

“So are you,” he agreed. We both couldn’t shake our goofy smiles as we got the pies cooling and started on the rest of our festival treats. It was the perfect start to my first Fall Festival and I hoped they only got better every year after.

CHAPTER 28

BOONE

The Fall Festival was easily one of my favorite days of the year in Holiday Hollow. Though since Autumn has been in our lives there have been a lot of favorite days. She's brought life back into not just me, but the pack. I'd let my own anxieties take too much away from me for too long.

Then along came our omega. She was full of life and was the kindest woman I'd met. I'd been standoffish at first but was glad that I let her dance right past my defenses.

Seeing Holiday Hollow decorated for the festival with Autumn was like watching it with fresh eyes. Her excitement was rubbing off on me and the others. All of us were grinning like the Cheshire Cat, not a care in the world.

We hadn't talked about her night with Claire when she came back yesterday, but I felt her resolve and her affection more steadfast than ever.

My omega had her arm hooked in mine, dragging me down the sidewalk toward the festival grounds like she couldn't get there fast enough. I felt lighter than I had in years and I had a feeling she was going to personally make sure that we all experienced the festival to the fullest.

The town had gone all out this year. Orange twinkle lights lit up every business and they had fall decorations on the sidewalk. Janet had even made sure to hang up pumpkin lights from every light post. I think having Cedarwick apples back in the mix gave the whole town new life.

The scent of fried food and sweet treats hit us first, then the noise. It was a familiar nostalgic moment that had me feeling like a kid again for a moment. Even after my parents were gone Janet made sure that she treated me just like her boys, giving us money for tickets so we could ride the carnival rides until we were dizzy, then waiting at the food booths to make sure we had plenty of treats.

“This is what heaven feels like, I’m sure of it,” Autumn announced as she twirled around, looking like a fall goddess in the warm afternoon sun.

Her hair glowed with hints of red under the light and her eyes were dancing with excitement. She’d put on a cozy orange sweater and form fitting jeans that teased me with every sway of her hips. A plaid wrap rested around her shoulders and she had on knee high brown boots that made her look impossibly more incredible.

Hunter’s hand rested on her lower back as he urged her to start walking again. Even he’d changed since he’d finally given in to her. I hated to think how much he’d distanced himself so I didn’t get hurt again, and I was too in my own head to notice. I was so glad that had changed. That we’d changed and grown as a pack into something whole. Complete.

“No overthinking,” Autumn ordered me, tapping my forehead. I blinked down at her and grinned.

“I would never,” I deadpanned. “I’m coming.” She gave me a side eye but started walking again.

“I didn’t expect so many people to be here already,” she said, a hint of worry clinging to her words.

“It’s always like this. The carnival opens for the kids early, the vendors all set up around this time, we have an hour before we’re technically open for customers,” Jack reassured her. “Mom plans this thing meticulously. Don’t worry.”

“Now who is overthinking,” Hunter teased, earning a hip bump from Autumn.

The crowd was thick and it took everything in us to keep together as we pushed our way through the crush of people toward the vendor booths we'd pretty much already set up.

"At least we brought the pies in before all this," Autumn joked. "I'd have dropped them, backups and all."

"That's why I said we should bring over supplies earlier," I told her. "We think of everything."

"Aw, my alpha in shining armor," she cooed at me and I felt my cheeks heat.

"Be good, baby girl," I warned her and from the heated look she shot me after, she read easily between the lines.

"When is the contest? I didn't read mom's itinerary," Hunter admitted sheepishly. "All I know is the Junior Deputies are setting the festival off officially at five-thirty."

"It's at five," Autumn answered. "Riley is watching the booth for me from about five to six-thirty, or however long it takes, so I can see both. I can't miss the cuties and their fake candles either."

Hunter beamed down at her and brushed a kiss across her forehead. His way of showing how happy she made him.

"I better go get things set up there. You need me for anything?" he asked us all.

"I'll help out," I promised him and he gave a nod and a silent warning to keep our pack safe while he was away. It was unnecessary but I couldn't fault the alpha for his instincts.

"Are those all from the farm, Jack?" Autumn asked as she pointed at the enormous display of pumpkins of all shapes and sizes. Janet always picked out the smallest for the kids and the biggest were on display and set up on hay bales for pictures.

"Yes," he said proudly. "We always set those up after the booths are set and I'll have someone out here during the season to sell our stock to the town and the tourists who'll be coming in."

"Have you ever done pick your own?" she asked curiously.

“With our house being right there we don’t,” he admitted. “Maybe I’ll have to take that empty field outside the festival grounds someday and do a DIY patch.”

Her eyes lit up. “That’d be so exciting! I want to make that an option for the orchard in the future. I’ve got big plans.” She sounded so mysterious but she’d been dropping hints for weeks about her plans. Jack looked ready to ask but Janet’s excited voice cut him off.

“There you are!” She was beaming as she crushed us each in a quick hug. “Everything is coming together beautifully this year!”

“Don’t jinx it, mom,” Jack joked and she rolled her eyes.

“Karma wouldn’t dare mess with me,” she laughed easily. “Do you need me to send anyone over to help you guys set up? Our two prime vendors.”

The fact she was just as proud of Autumn as she was for Jack was great. She’d already accepted her as one of her own before we even knew she was ours. We hadn’t told Janet anything, especially not before Autumn made her final decision, but I think she knew. Mother’s intuition was a strong thing.

“I’ll help out, we’re good I think,” I told her. “We know you’re busy.”

She let out a laugh. “I’m only happy when I’m busy, you know that, son.”

I shook my head but couldn’t hide the smile on my face. “Don’t we know that.”

She rolled her eyes. “These three acted like I tortured them on weekends when I put them to work. Yet look at how good of men my boys grew up to be.” She patted our cheeks lovingly before disappearing, not caring that she’d just embarrassed us both.

“She’s the sweetest,” Autumn said without skipping a beat. “Let’s dive in, guys!”

Our omega went from sweet and happy to a drill sergeant in the blink of an eye. She was clearly nervous so I didn't hesitate to do as she asked until she was satisfied everything was perfect. Her booth was covered in jugs of cider, caramel and chocolate covered apples, bundles of apples to sell, and a few jams and apple butter she'd whipped up. Her and Jack had been up half the night finishing everything. And yet somehow they were the first to get up this morning.

Just as she finished, people started flooding the vendor section. She met the crowd with a bright smile, falling confidently into her role. Jack was charming as people started heading for him. The two of them were definitely the personable ones in our pack.

"Cedarwick is back?" a customer gasped as she dragged her pack behind her. "The baby is sure happy to see this!" She rubbed her swollen belly before ordering her alpha to buy one of everything. Which he happily did. At her shouted words half the crowd came over and I didn't get a chance to slip away since she needed someone to hand over the items while she handled the money.

Riley swung by just before five, the crowd had barely dwindled though.

"Business is booming!" he said excitedly. "I may have been spreading the word. Sorrynotsorry."

"You're the best," Autumn praised over her shoulder. He had one of their new hands by his side, the younger beta standing behind him awkwardly as Autumn let Riley take over.

"Ready, baby girl?" I asked, happy to get out of there. Until I saw how pale she was.

"God, I was, but then I realized this is it. Oh god, what if I get last place?" The horror on her face had me pulling her in. She breathed in my scent and I let her have a moment as we awkwardly walked like that out of the booth and behind it. Jack joined us and brushed his hands through her hair.

“Breathe, Autumn. This is what we prepared for. You’re going to kick my ass so I don’t know what you’re worrying about.”

She let out a small laugh but took one last breath before bolstering her confidence. I tried not to show how much it affected me that she’d chosen me as her safe space. When I told her that I’d take all of her and demand more... I meant it. She had all of me in return. There was no going back.

“Okay. Let’s go,” she said, trying to convince herself as well as us.

She let us lead her over to the stage where Janet had the pie contest set up. The judges table had no less than ten pies in front of them and Janet was waiting for the crowd to amass a bit before she let out a shrill whistle.

“Thank you for coming to our annual pie contest! This year we have more contestants than ever! From left to right we have a blueberry pie from Betty Clayton, then a strawberry rhubarb from Kay Fisher.” She went down the list until she got to the final two, her voice perking up as she proudly announced Autumn and Jack. “Then finally we have Jack Halston with his classic pumpkin pie. And this year, we have a Cedarwick classic, apple pie, from Autumn Cedarwick! Judges will now taste and judge on presentation, taste, and how unique they are.”

The crowd cheered and Autumn bounced on her toes as the judges were served a slice of each, writing down scores on their papers. I’d never cared much to watch this but always showed up for Jack who had won a few over the years. Now I was just as anxious as I watched, hoping with everything I had my girl wasn’t disappointed in the end.

After what felt like an awkward twenty or so minutes of the crowd watching the judges eat, Janet was back with the microphone and a piece of paper.

“We had an amazing assortment of pies this year, you should all be so proud of yourself. First we will announce fourth through twelfth place,” she started, calling out names

one by one. Jack and Autumn both let out an excited squeal when their own names weren't called.

"Now if I could have Kay Fisher, Autumn Cedarwick, and Jack Halston to the front!"

"Oh god," Autumn said, practically hyperventilating as she dragged Jack to the front, only stopping when she saw Hunter walk up. He said something that had her ducking her head and blushing furiously before making it to the stage. He strutted over to me and clapped me on the shoulder.

"Look at how our girl is taking this town by storm. You guys seemed busy out there today," he noted.

"That's an understatement. I wouldn't be shocked if she's sold out by the time we get back to Riley," I answered with a chuckle.

"With Riley I wouldn't doubt it, the man has charisma."

We quieted down as Janet pulled out three ribbons. Autumn and Jack stood with an old omega between them.

"In third place we have Kay Fisher!" she announced, pinning the ribbon on the woman's shirt. Kay let out a little shimmy before fist bumping, an old alpha in the crowd returning the gesture. It was adorable how proud she was.

"Oh man, this might be trouble," Hunter laughed uneasily.

"In second place is Jack Halston with his pumpkin pie!" she announced and Jack turned to Autumn and pulled her into a bone crushing hug, the two of them dancing before she'd even gotten to call out to the crowd. "Which leaves us with Autumn Cedarwick coming in first! She had extra points for presentation and has blown the judges away with her spin on a classic dessert. Care to say a few words, Autumn?"

For once there was no overthinking as she took the microphone and put it up to her mouth.

"I'd like to thank Jack for not only lending me his kitchen, but making sure I didn't give up on perfecting my pie. He'll be a hard one to beat next year." She let her words hang in the air as she made eye contact with all three of us. Janet whispered

something to her and she grinned. “And I’m happy to announce that Cedarwick farms has decided to work with our lovely Mayor’s office to create a community space. The old farmhouse is being renovated now and that project will continue through the spring for it to become the Cedarwick Community Center, that will give our Junior Deputies a place to meet and learn as well as have a community garden and plenty of events with the orchard itself.”

“Holy shit,” Hunter gasped. His voice cracked a bit and I leaned in until our shoulders were touching to offer silent support. She’d taken one of the most important things in his life and did something amazing for the kids.

The cheers were so loud that she couldn’t talk again until Janet let out her whistle again.

“More details will be released later. For now I’d like to thank my pack, Jack, Boone, and Hunter, for giving me so much more than I expected when I returned. And I’m happy to say, that Holiday Hollow is officially my home, if they’ll have me.”

She handed the mic back to Janet but it didn’t matter, we were already rushing up to join her. My focus was on my girl and the bombshell she just dropped.

“You’re staying?” I asked bluntly, needing to hear her say it to us. We ignored Janet who called the contest to a close and the crowd started leaving. But the world could burn around us for all I cared.

“I am,” she said, laughing as tears started to fall. “I want this. I want you. This is home now if you’ll have me?”

“It’s been your home, I’m glad you finally see it,” Hunter said gruffly, pulling her in for a kiss. Jack was next, giving her a hug and swiping at his own tears.

“I love you,” he whispered softly before gently pushing her toward me.

“You alright, bear?” she asked me softly. The worry in her face wouldn’t do.

“I’m more than alright, Autumn,” I answered as I kissed her soundly. “You’ve made me the happiest alpha. I couldn’t have let you go easily.”

She grinned up at me. “Now you don’t have to. I’m yours, Boone. All of yours.”

THE JUNIOR DEPUTIES were practically vibrating with excitement as they held their little candles. I’d watched Hunter start this program and cultivate it over the years until it was as successful as it was now. The kids loved it, but even more than that, Hunter did too. He was good with the kids and I couldn’t help but glance over at Autumn who was helping turn over a few candles that the kids were holding upside down.

The two of them were a great team, getting the kids settled as Janet stepped in next to them.

“Thank you to everyone attending our annual Fall Festival. This year is proving to be one of our most successful ones yet. And to kick off the rest of the festivities, we have our very own Junior Deputies here to light the first pumpkins of the year.” The kids squealed in excitement and had to be shushed, the crowd laughing softly at their outburst.

She stepped aside and waved up Hunter who had a bright smile on his face. He held out a hand toward the kids.

“We are honored to be here and my Junior Deputies have a little something to say too,” he revealed with a glance at them.

“Happy Fall Festival!” They all screamed, clicking on their battery operated lights. The cheers rang out as the kids filled the pumpkins with their lights. Autumn ushered them away as Hunter lit the large pumpkin, a real candle inside of it.

“Let the festivities commence,” Janet called out, dismissing everyone. The kids ran toward their families and I felt my chest warm at the sight of Hunter putting his arm around Autumn.

Seeing my pack truly come together was everything I'd hoped for and more. We'd always been strong. Two alphas who worked well together and a beta who was our balance. Sure, we'd let life and complications get in the way, but when Autumn came into our lives we realized just how far we'd fallen from what we wanted to be, and we were able to get back to who we were at the core, a pack through and through. Now, with one extra member, the missing piece to our puzzle.

In my heart I knew that this Fall Festival would always be my favorite. This was the one where we found our pack finally falling completely together and I didn't think I could ever be happier than I was in this moment.

CHAPTER 29

AUTUMN

As much as I loved everyone's excitement for the new community center partnership out at the orchard, I couldn't think about anything except dragging my pack home and claiming them as mine in every way possible.

I'd already done so in front of everyone in Holiday Hollow but it wasn't enough.

After I'd run off the stage and into the guys' arms, the crowd had converged, offering congratulations and raving about Cedarwick's and how proud my grandparents would be of me. Having a place where kids could learn about local agriculture and how business worked would be a great opportunity. The small patch of land I planned for the community garden would be beneficial as well.

I'd been watching Hunter when I mentioned the junior deputies and I knew how much that meant to him as well. Getting to help with the pumpkin lighting ceremony was just the icing on the cake. Ever since that night at the bar, when Hunter finally decided to stop holding back, he'd been no holds barred, the last final piece of the puzzle clicking in seamlessly and creating the best picture of my life.

"Alright ladies, why don't you come with me over to Claire's booth?" Riley spoke up, gesturing to the crowd who'd gathered as he laid on his charm. "She can tell you about all the goodies her and Autumn have been cooking up and have plans for."

I shot Riley a grateful look to which he just threw me a knowing wink, leading the crowd away from me and my pack.

“Let’s go home,” I said, linking my hands through Jack and Boone’s as I looked at Hunter.

He tipped his hat to me in acknowledgment before he turned and led us through the crowds and back to the car. He’d been dressed in his uniform for the festival, and I couldn’t help but admire the view of his firm ass. Maybe I’d place my mark right there.

“I know you love my ass sweetheart, but maybe try to think of something else so we all make it home safely,” Hunter said, looking over his shoulder with a knowing smirk.

“Did I speak my thoughts aloud again?”

The grin on his face got wider as he held the door to Jack’s truck open for me, hoisting me up before leaning closer into me.

“No, but you will soon enough,” he said. “Drive safe you three.”

As Hunter made his way to his patrol car, I couldn’t help but sigh. “Would it be an abuse of power if he turned on the lights and we followed him so we could get home quicker?”

“He’d do it for you in a heartbeat,” Jack said, climbing in next to me.

It was all I could do to not go ahead and jump the two of them on the ride home. My heat had only ended a couple of days ago, but the desperation in which I wanted them almost seemed as great. Only now, my head was clear, and my heart was full.

There was only one way this was ending, and that was with their bites on my skin and our bond fully in place.

The tension was palpable as we pulled into the farm, the cruiser already parked. Hunter leaned against the side, his arms crossed against his chest looking every inch of the alpha he was.

“Nest, now. You’ve got a ten second head start and then you’re ours.”

A thrill shot through me at his words, my feet already sprinting to the porch and up the steps. I’d just reached the banister of the stairs when I heard them start to follow and I urged myself faster, desperate to win a race I knew I was destined to lose.

They were on me as soon as I made it to the landing, arms swooping under my legs as Boone pulled me to his chest, his warm woodsy scent flaring around us. They didn’t stop or pause until we made it to the nest.

“I love you, baby girl,” Boone said, his chest rumbling out a pleased purr.

“I love you too, bear.”

“Are you going to be a good girl for us? Hunter has a little surprise for you.”

The clink of metal caught my attention, a pair of shiny handcuffs dangling from the good sheriff’s fingers.

“What do you say, sweetheart?”

I gave the three of them an excited smile. “I say it’s about damn time.”

“Why don’t you help her out of her clothes brothers?” Hunter said, taking a seat as if he was in for a show.

Boone sat me lightly on my feet as Jack swooped in, his fingers going to the hem of my shirt as he held my eyes. He was already shirtless and my eyes held his as he made me the same before they flicked to the mark at the base of his neck that I’d given him the day before.

“I’m glad you insisted,” he said, his voice no more than a whisper between the two of us as his hands found the tab of my jeans and Boone unfastened my bra. “When I woke up this morning and looked in the mirror and saw it, it didn’t matter if it wasn’t traditional or not, because it’s a true bond, pumpkin. I feel you wherever I go, regardless of our designations.”

He dropped to his knees in front of me, stripping me of my jeans before his hands found the side straps of my panties. Jack's mouth pressed against the already damp material, kissing my core. A groan escaped his mouth and it was echoed from the warm body that pressed into me. I was pleased to find that Boone has stripped as well.

"I want your bite too, Jack."

My voice carried through the nest, the man on his knees before me stilling for a second before his entire body shuddered.

With hooded eyes he dragged my panties off the rest of the way before guiding my legs apart.

"Hold her for me," Jack said, the intent in his eyes clear.

He was going to ruin me in the best way.

Boone's arms swept under mine, supporting me as Jack dove in, hiking one leg over his shoulder and licking a firm, full stripe through my slit before latching onto my clit and sucking it hard.

Pleasure shot through me and I bucked my hips to meet Jack's mouth, his fingers swirling my slick around my opening before pressing deep inside.

While Jack had always been sweet, he was anything but as he ate me like a starving man, making me writhe in Boone's hold as I chased the building pleasure coiling inside me.

"That's it, baby girl," Boone praised, his thick cock gliding between my cheeks teasingly.

A low whine escaped as I looked down the length of my body, to where Jack's blue eyes were locked on mine.

His glistening mouth broke away momentarily while he added a third finger, taking my breath away once more as he played me skillfully, knowing exactly how I liked it after countless nights together. Which is why I was half surprised when his eyes flicked behind me momentarily, his fingers pausing briefly and slicking through my slit to where Boone's hard and heavy cock nudged against my ass.

“Give it to her,” Jack told him, notching his best friend at my entrance. “I’ve got her good and ready for you.”

Boone pressed in, his arms around me tightening slightly as he bent me forward more and back into Jack’s awaiting mouth.

Without missing a beat, my beta dove back in, licking and sucking on my clit as Boone thrust hard and deep, branding me as his over and over again.

It was so fucking hot and I couldn’t help the rush of pleasure that left me, all three of my men letting out rumbling noises of pleasure as the scent of my arousal grew even thicker in the room with my release. When I saw my beta reach one hand down to start stroking himself I nearly died, the only thing keeping me up was their hold on me.

My body shook, my thighs quaking as Jack and Boone’s grip tightened on me, the two of them continuing to build me up and break me down all over again.

“You certainly like that don’t you, sweetheart?” Hunter asked. “You’re about to come all over my brother’s face again aren’t you?”

A gasp escaped my mouth as Boone hit my sweet spot as Jack grazed his teeth over me.

“Your alpha is waiting on an answer baby girl,” Boone spoke into my ear.

“I love it!” I sobbed, answering Hunter. “I-I’m—”

Jack pulled his mouth from me, his fingers replacing his touch as his lips trailed my upper thigh. He sucked the skin into his mouth, the graze of his teeth making his intent clear.

Boone did the same, placing a hot open mouth kiss on my neck as he gripped me even tighter.

“Come.”

I shattered. Twin sets of teeth pierced my skin at the same time, pulling another cry from my mouth as Boone swelled inside me, his knot teasing at my opening but not pressing in. Even without that it was overwhelming, the string inside me

pulled taut and as I came back down to their soothing hands I could feel the shift inside me.

I would no longer be alone, not for a single second. If I thought I couldn't love them any more than I did before, I was wrong.

My mind kicked back online as Boone pulled free, and I realized that he hadn't knotted me, because the night was far from over. Still, as he turned me around in his arms, Jack moving to stand behind me, I felt my mouth water.

I'd already bitten Jack, but I wanted my mark on Boone as well.

Holding his beautiful brown eyes my hands moved to his jaw, tilting it to the side.

There was no more build up, no lingering or teasing as I bit him and claimed him as mine.

Boone let out a long groan, his entire body shuddering again. The happy glow of warmth and love inside me expanded.

The ache in my thigh had me reaching behind me to my other mate and pulling him to our sides.

Jack's hair was disheveled, his clear blue eyes bright and happy, and from his delicious spent cock hanging between his legs, he'd found the whole experience just as incredible. Although, I wish I could have taken my time exploring each delicious inch of him.

"Next time, pumpkin. With how absolutely fucking perfect that moment was I couldn't hold back. Plus, I still think you have one more alpha waiting on you. How he's been patient for this long is beyond me."

"He's waited this long," I mused, turning a wicked grin towards Hunter. "Plus, he got one hell of a show. "

"And we're about to put on one of our own."

Hunter stalked towards me, crowding the three of us until he was everywhere. He'd thankfully shed his uniform

sometime during his voyeur expedition, leaving the hard planes of his body exposed.

His salty ocean scent was like a swirling storm, one I had no fear of, about to crash down.

Hunter took my wrist, placing a tender kiss on it before fastening one metal cuff on it, taking care to make sure it was comfortable.

“If you end up liking those, we should get you some lined ones,” Jack said, his hands still moving teasingly over me, stopping only when he cupped my breasts, his fingers toying with my nipples.

Hunter nodded in agreement. “Maybe have Boone fashion some new additions to our headboard as well. For tonight though, we’ll have to improvise. You call the shots omega. Tell me how you want me.”

His offer reminded me of our first night together when he’d told me to ride him and take what I wanted, but the hazy heat memories I had of him coming completely unhinged still raced through my mind and I wanted to experience that with a clear head.

“I want you, in control and relentless. Taking what’s yours while I make you mine.”

A purr rumbled through his chest as his hand came to cup my sex, two fingers sinking into me without preamble, before drawing them out and raising them to my lips in offer.

“My brothers did such a good job of getting you ready for me,” Hunter said, his fingers pushing deeper into my mouth as I cleaned them.

“Hunt...”

“I’ve got you, Autumn,” he assured, before moving to grab my other wrist and fastening the other cuff on. “Let’s place these pretty little cuffs around my head, that way I’ve got you right where I want you and you can’t let go.”

There was a stretch in my body, Hunter’s height making it so I was on the tips of my toes. His gaze turned predatory and

I knew that he was about to fulfill my very wish.

He took my mouth in a harsh kiss full of tongue and teeth, his hard cock pressing against me insistently.

The next moment he bent wrapping his hands around the back of my thighs, hoisting me up against him, his cock slipping against my sex and pulling a whine through me.

A wave of lust flowed through the bond, a hand brushing my ass and reaching between us before Hunter was notched at my entrance and I was sliding down his cock.

Hunter fed me every inch, his palms sliding up to grab the bottom of my ass, before pulling out slowly, and doing it all over again.

There was a reverence in the way he touched me, a peace between us that hadn't been there before. As fantastic as he felt and as much as I loved him, I still wanted to push him. Wanted that banter between us that made me feel alive. I knew I was asking for trouble, but I couldn't stop the words from smiling from my lips.

“Is that all you've got, sheriff?”

A growl tore through Hunter, my alpha turning us away from the rest of the pack as he carried me over to the window that overlooked the field, pressing my back into the cool glass before thrusting into me mercilessly.

“Is this what you wanted? When you said you wanted me relentless is this what you pictured? Cuffed and helpless and speared on my cock? Letting me take you as hard and as fast as I want until I come inside you and fill up my little omega?”

A moan fell through my lips as I clenched around him, the quick snap of his hips pushing me right back to the edge once again.

“You call this hard?” I taunted.

A challenging growl escaped him as he doubled his efforts, the squelch of him fucking his best friend's cum into me filling the room. My eyes locked on the man in question, him and my beta now lounging on my nest, enjoying the show. There was a

knowing that trickled down the bond, a peace at letting Hunter and I have this moment.

“Eyes on me omega,” Hunter said, pressing me more insistently against the glass, his knot pressing against my entrance.

“Please,” I said whining desperately, wanting the stretch and sensation.

“So polite when you want to be,” he said with a hint of a laugh, feeding me his knot.

My breath caught as he worked himself inside, the cocky smile on his lips giving me the urge to roll my eyes. But I was in no shape to manage that as I hung on for dear life, my feet not touching the floor, my cuffed hands looped around his head, completely at his mercy.

“You’re so full of yourself,” I said with a groan instead.

“Pretty sure you’re the one who’s full of me sweetheart. Now let me feel you flutter that pretty little pussy around my cock like I know you want to. Drench me, omega.”

His words rocked through me, his knot swelling even more as he grinded his hips into me.

“Bite,” I gasped out, wanting both at the same time.

“Fuck,” Hunter cursed, his mouth moving to the opposite side of my neck of where Boone bit me. “You’re mine, Autumn. Ours. Forever.”

His teeth pierced the sensitive flesh of my neck, a sharp pain coursing through me and setting off my orgasm as Hunter’s knot pulsed and he groaned against my neck, his tongue soothing his bite as he filled me to the brim.

Another piece of my soul intertwined and I felt a wholeness, a completeness that I’d never known.

When he lifted his own head I took my opportunity, fastening my mouth to just below his Adam’s apple and claiming him as mine. Now everyone would know he was mine every way, there would be no hiding or mistaking my mark.

“Territorial little thing,” Hunter said, sounding pleased. “With Jack’s shiny new bite I should have known.”

“As much as I’m yours, you’re mine. All of you.”

“Come on mate, let your pack get you settled,” Hunter said, carrying me over to the nest where Jack and Boone waited, their hands finding me instantly.

“Let’s get these off,” Jack said, undoing the cuffs before tossing them to the side before Hunter settled on his back, me still locked on top of him.

Boone took my wrists, rubbing them tenderly as we all whispered words of affection and love between us.

If you would have told me I’d end up in handcuffs my first night back home in Holiday Hollow I’d have called you crazy. Now, I couldn’t think of a better start to the rest of my life.

EPILOGUE

AUTUMN

My life the past few months had been insane. Of course, love was kind of insane itself, and that's exactly how I wound up packing up the last of Boone's apartment with my pack and friends.

"Are you going to miss this place?" I asked my bear as he taped up another box.

"Not at all," he said, stopping what he was doing to come place a kiss on my lips.

Our bond thrummed happily, the emotion pure bliss as his thumb stroked over the spot on my shoulder where my mark lay.

"Hey, no hogging our omega," Hunter said, pulling my back to his chest and locking his arms around me.

"You should totally hog her," Claire piped up, her curly hair wrapped up in a messy bun on top of her head. "All three of you should."

"And let us watch," Riley chimed in, the two of them turning together at the same time and high-fiving.

"I'm pretty sure the two of you put on enough of a show for the whole town," Jack said, giving the two best friends a look as he walked out of the bedroom with another box in his arms.

"I don't know what you're referring to Halston," Riley said, turning his head up as he narrowed his eyes.

“Hey now,” Jack said, setting his box down and holding his hands up in surrender. “I’m just saying half the town has bets on when the two of you will realize you’re meant for each other.”

Claire rolled her eyes before bumping her shoulder against Riley’s.

“Of course we’re meant for each other,” she said. “I’m pretty sure we realized that in middle school.”

“Exactly.” Riley shot her an adoring look, but I didn’t miss the slight downturn of his lips when he looked away. “So what do we have left? I was promised pizza and beer in return for my fabulous muscles. Now that I’m a partner I should definitely be getting paid accordingly.”

After all of Riley’s hard work, and the fact that he was basically running the entire crop and production side on his own, I thought it only fitting that I make him a partner at Cedarwick’s. There was no way in hell that I could do it without him. Especially, since I had a lot on my plate itself.

Not only would I be partnering with Holiday Hollow on the hands on community space at the orchard, but I would also be helping the locals with their own business and marketing needs. To top it all off, in conjunction with Claire and one of the firms I’d made a counter offer to, Cedarwick goods and products would be available to more than just our little town.

I wouldn’t be making them myself, a small relief, and we agreed to start out on a small scale to make sure quality control was kept in check. Either way, it was an exciting step forward.

Optimistic people always say that you can have it all if you want it enough. I liked to think of myself as a realist. The fact that I was able to stay in Holiday Hollow, with my pack, and still achieve my dreams that I worked so hard for felt surreal at times.

A wave of love and reassurance flowed down the bond, Hunter’s arms tightening around me.

“Let’s head back home,” Boone said, as he looked over the now sparse apartment. “The fridge is stocked and we can pick up the food on the way.”

“Why don’t you ride with the guys so you can pick out what you want?” I offered Riley. “Give me and Claire a little time to gossip.”

Riley chuckled. “Whatever you say, boss.”

“Oh hush,” I said, shooing him out the door.

Jack gave me a knowing look, looking back and forth between the two. “Have fun, pumpkin.”

Claire surprisingly didn’t say anything at my offer, acting suspiciously docile as the guys made us promise that we’d drive the whole two miles safely.

I gave her all of one minute before I turned to her.

“Okay, what the hell is going on with you and Riley?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she said unconvincingly.

“I know you’ve both been best friends since grade school, but the looks you’ve been giving each other lately are a whole lot more than friendly.”

She shook her head, her curls bouncing slightly. “There’s no way that Riley looks at me like that, you know he’s into guys.”

“And…”

“And what?” She asked exasperated as we finished loading the car and hopped in. I didn’t answer until we were driving down the road.

“Sexuality is fluid, Claire.”

“Okay so maybe he’s never explicitly said he’s only into guys but he sure as hell has never dated a woman before,” she reasoned. “Even if I *hypothetically* happened to be madly in love with the man, he’s had every opportunity to express interest if it was there.”

“*Hypothetically?*” I teased.

She stuck her tongue out at me playfully, but I knew her heart was wrapped up in the situation underneath.

“Look, I won’t push you on this, but all I’m saying is that wouldn’t you rather know for sure? I know you don’t want to risk your friendship, but Riley seems like the kind of guy you could have a reasonable conversation with about this and he wouldn’t judge you or treat you any differently than he does now.”

“I think I’m rubbing off on you,” Claire grumbled. “That’s totally something I would say. No—actually I would have probably pushed you already.”

The two of us shared a laugh, pulling into the farm that had become my home. A newly crafted path leading to the orchard was visible on the side.

“Well, I for one, am glad you pushed,” I said, looking at my future. “Now I have a home and life full of family, friends, and love to look forward to.”

Holiday Hollow had that small town magic that brought people together exactly where they needed to be. I couldn’t wait to see what magic it would work next.

The End.

If you loved Autumn’s book, then preorder Claire’s book here:
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WANT MORE HOLIDAY HOLLOW?

If you have a sweet tooth, be sure to check out Claire's story next in *Crushes and Confections*!

With a beta best friend who is clueless of her affections and a certain alpha chocolatier who has more going on than meets the eye, it's sure to be a wild ride.

Check it out here: [*Crushes & Confections*](#)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Holiday Hollow started over a year ago and ended up taking a very different path that was lighthearted and fluffy and exactly the kind of sweet book that was fun to write and break up some of the more complex stories I tend to do. Through it all, Jarica has been a dream to work with again and I can't wait to see what magic this little town has in store next!

As always to Sue and Desiree, I adore you, and I'm so thankful for your friendship and support!

Until next time, Chloe

I've always been a sucker for sweet and fluffy reads. Holiday Hollow definitely didn't disappoint. It was refreshing and exactly what I needed right about now!

Thanks to the amazing betas who read through this book, I appreciate you all!

Writing with Chloe is always fun and I can't wait to see where this little town takes us!

-Jare

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Threadline Agency - PNR RH Standalone Series

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ABOUT CHLOE

USA Today Bestselling Author Chloe Gunter currently resides near the Appalachian Mountains and writes the RH novels that she would want to read, all of which include a little bit of suspense. When she's not working or handling her 'domestic engineering' roles as a wife and mom, you can find her seeking out the next escape room for her bucket list.

www.chloegunterauthor.com



ABOUT JARICA JAMES

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