


*knot their
omega.*

HYP NOT LIZE

E. J. LAWSON

HYPNOTIZE

KNOT THEIR OMEGA

ELENA LAWSON



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CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

JULIET

[Chapter 2](#)

JULIET

[Chapter 3](#)

JULIET

[Chapter 4](#)

HUCK

[Chapter 5](#)

JULIET

[Chapter 6](#)

DEAN

[Chapter 7](#)

JULIET

[Chapter 8](#)

EVERETT

[Chapter 9](#)

HUCK

[Chapter 10](#)

DEAN

[Chapter 11](#)

JULIET

[Chapter 12](#)

HUCK

[Chapter 13](#)

DEAN

[Chapter 14](#)

JULIET

[Chapter 15](#)

EVERETT

[Chapter 16](#)

JULIET

[Chapter 17](#)

EVERETT

[Chapter 18](#)

EVERETT

[Chapter 19](#)

JULIET

[Chapter 20](#)

DEAN

[Chapter 21](#)

EVERETT

[Chapter 22](#)

HUCK

[Chapter 23](#)

JULIET

[Chapter 24](#)

DEAN

[Chapter 25](#)

JULIET

[Chapter 26](#)

EVERETT

[Chapter 27](#)

HUCK

[Chapter 28](#)

JULIET

[Chapter 29](#)

DEAN

[Chapter 30](#)

HUCK

[Chapter 31](#)

JULIET

[Chapter 32](#)

JULIET

[Chapter 33](#)

DEAN

[Chapter 34](#)

JULIET

[Chapter 35](#)

JULIET

Chapter 36

JULIET

Chapter 37

EVERETT

Chapter 38

JULIET

Chapter 39

DEAN

Chapter 40

EVERETT

Chapter 41

HUCK

Chapter 42

JULIET

Epilogue

SELECTION: Also by E. J. Lawson

CAPTIVATE: Also by E. J. Lawson

ONE

WAITING for your destiny in the back seat of a rented Buick is absolute torture.

Though there are three of us in the polished black sedan, the drive to the airport is eerily silent. Dad is driving, his fingers drumming on the steering wheel. Papa stares out the window from the passenger side, but his nervous energy fills the entire vehicle.

From the rearview mirror, I see Dad's lips are pressed together in a thin line, his forehead creased with worry. Every once in a while, he attempts to fill the quiet with small talk about the weather or the flight, but it only seems to make the tension stronger until the air in the Buick is thick as soup.

Difficult to breathe.

"We're proud of you," Dad says, the same four words he's been repeating to me on a loop since we got the news. "The Williams Pack is one of the most influential in the United States."

"I know," I say on a long sigh, but I put on a smile when he catches my eye in the mirror to put him back at ease. For generations, the Williams Pack has been an influential force in politics and the oil business. From the original members of the pack to the modern-day heirs, each one has made their mark on history.

And every time I think about it, I nearly have a panic attack.

Why did they choose *me*?

I don't want to tell Dad that every time he brings up the Williamses' influence in the world, my heart races faster than it did when they dropped me off at the Omega Academy four years ago. That too was a foreign and intimidating place at first, but ultimately it became something close to a home. I hope that happens with my new pack, too.

Finally, we see a sign for the little airport where Victor Williams has arranged for a private jet to pick me up. Papa, Dad and I flew into Anchorage, but we had to take a car from there to this smaller airport that will take me to the Williamses' property, an expansive area in the middle of the mountains—the middle of nowhere. From the pictures I've seen, it looks beautiful, but definitely isolated.

Desolate.

I still don't know how I feel about that.

The thought of being in the middle of a new state, one currently covered in a thick blanket of snow and ice, with a pack of complete strangers, is making me want to make a break for it.

Papa nervously runs his hands through his thinning hair. Despite being follicly challenged, he has an air of dignified maturity that has been hard-won during his fifty-five years on this earth. Losing your bonded Omega and newborn son during childbirth will do that. Despite the devastating loss, his strong features are softened by a kind gleam in his eye and a gentle smile on his lips, his unconditional love for me reflected in his expression.

Dad, on the other hand, is the absolute opposite of Papa. He has an air of mischievousness and a devil-may-care attitude that has resulted in good-natured pranks on both me and Papa. His still-dark hair is a mess of curls, something I didn't inherit at all. I have stick-straight blonde hair, just like my late mother. The memory of her sends a pang of grief through me and I swallow it down, pressing my palms together between my thighs as I watch the snowy landscape drift by out the window.

“Are you ready for this?” Papa asks me as Dad pulls off the long road and into a large lot where there are only a handful of other vehicles.

Ready? Is any Omega ever ready to join their Pack?

I mean, if we’d come together naturally...

If I’d had a chance to get to know them first...

Then maybe.

Taking a deep breath, I nod. Papa squeezes my shoulder and gives me an encouraging smile. He’s never been the talkative one of my two Alpha fathers—that’s definitely Dad—but he communicates with me in his own way.

“We should hurry, don’t want to be late,” Dad says with a determined voice as he parks as close to the entrance of the small airport as he can and steps outside. A blast of chilly air rushes into the car and I brace against it, pulling my jacket tighter against me as I exit onto the slippery ice-covered pavement.

Airport is a generous word for the long building squatting amidst the snow. It’s basically a hangar with what looks like a small front desk and security area no bigger than our basement back home at the entrance.

Dad goes to the trunk to gather my things and I immediately wish I’d kept the handmade blanket Mom made me out of the largest suitcase. I crave the comfort of it. Of my nest back home.

But I try to remind myself I’ll be making an entirely new nest soon. One filled with the scents of my Alphas.

It’ll be even better, I tell myself, but the words still feel like a lie even when they’re spoken within my own mind.

The weather has changed since Anchorage. Where this morning’s sun was bright despite the cold, now the clouds above are thick and gray. I look up to the sky, feeling a sense of dread. The air feels heavy, like being caught underneath a frozen blanket. An icy wind brushes past me as my fathers join me, each at my side.

“Those clouds don’t look good.” Papa frowns. “I hope your trip is safe. Maybe we should see if they’ll delay it.”

“I’m sure everything will be fine,” I assure him. He looks like he wants to give everyone in the airport a lecture about flight safety and I can’t stand to put this off another minute. The need to just get it all over with so I can have some kind of stability eats at me like a thousand moths.

“The Williamses will have spared no expense on their private jet. I’m sure it’s kept in perfect condition.” Even as Dad says the words, a shiver of fear runs through me.

I take a deep breath and will myself to stay positive. This is an incredible opportunity. I’ve worked hard to get the attention of the Williams Pack. I received good grades at the academy even though I felt like I had to study twice as hard as everyone around me.

I’ve never been good at book learning, which was the majority of the classes. Give me hands-on training any day.

Since Papa had some good connections, he was able to get my photo, transcript, and a scent sample up to the Williams Pack after they formally announced they were ready to begin the search for their chosen Omega.

They must have all liked what they saw, read, scented, because an offer came through just a week later. I hadn’t expected to be noticed by a wealthy pack so far away. They were the first and only pack that we’d considered.

With me being so fresh out of the academy, if this hadn’t worked out, it might’ve been months still until I found a pack to bond with. Maybe even until next fall, when the academy hosts their annual matching ball. The one I missed out on attending just weeks ago since the Williamses had already expressed a keen interest.

They have high standards and expectations, and when I think of all the options they must’ve had, I can’t help but question their choice in me. I’m not perfect by any means, and everything I know about them shows they strive for perfection.

It has to be based on my scent. That's the only thing that would make sense. If Victor felt it was a match for everyone, that would make sense.

Their pack is a larger one, it had to have been difficult for ten people all to agree on a scent they were attracted enough to for a formal claiming and eventual bond.

Though Victor Williams and I have had several video calls now, all of them pleasant if not a little formal, this entire deal wouldn't be properly cemented in my mind until we could meet in person. Not just Victor, but the whole pack.

Though both Dad and Papa assured me it was a done deal since we all signed the claiming paperwork a couple days ago.

The Williamses wouldn't revoke their decision unless there were extenuating circumstances out of everyone's control. They're eager to bond their pack to an Omega. Honestly? It sounded like a formality from how my parents talked about it. Like they just wanted the perks having a bonded Omega around would bring them.

I shake off the negative thoughts. Fake it until you make it, right? They must have seen something in me, even if I can't see it myself. Many other Omegas would give anything for a chance at a pack like this. I need to be at my best and count my lucky stars.

"Ope. Almost forgot," Dad says, pulling something from the inside of his jacket. "We have some things for you." He hands me a book and I feel my spirits lift when I see it's the newest standalone Omega romance title from Riley North.

"We know you love her work, and we figure it'll be good for the flight. Maybe distract you from your nerves."

I squeal as I pour over the book. The cover is gorgeous, an illustration of an Omega surrounded by Alphas looking at her like she's the most perfect creature on earth.

Will my new Alphas look at me like that?

"Thank you," I say, throwing my arms around Dad first, kissing him on the cheek.

I'm about to hug Papa too but he pulls a small, square box covered in blue velvet from his pocket. His fingers tremble as he hands it to me. "One more," he says as I open it to find a sterling silver heart on a simple chain. The heart is decorated with intricate filigree, all swirling around each other until the lines converge on a single small diamond.

"It's beautiful," I breathe out, lifting it from the satin lining. "Thank you so much."

"Open it," Papa prods and I do, finding it's a locket instead of a simple charm. Inside are two tiny photos. One of my dads together and another of my mom holding me when I was just a baby.

My eyes well up as I unclasp the chain and fasten it around my neck. My throat tightens as I realize the significance of the gift. It's a goodbye gift as I move on from one part of my life to the next.

Both of my fathers have damp eyes. I throw my arms around Papa and then tug Dad back into the group hug. We stand like that for a few breaths, the three of us huddled against the cold. I sniff as Dad pulls away and we all stand apart again.

I'll see them again, though likely not until the official bonding ceremony, and they'll be shooed away quickly after once I go through my first unsuppressed heat with my new pack.

"Someone's coming," he says as a tall guy in a suit approaches us from the front entrance. The thin man has dark hair slicked back away from his severe looking face, the style only accentuating what is already a really pronounced widow's peak.

He has gaunt cheeks and piercing blue eyes, and his expression is all business with barely a hint of a neutral smile. A Beta from his scent. My heart pounds as he draws closer, and when he finally stops in front of us, he looks me up and down with an unreadable expression.

"Miss Chase?" he asks.

I nod.

He hesitates for a moment before extending his hand. I take it and give him an awkward handshake.

“You can call me Juliet,” I say, hoping he doesn’t catch the squeak in my voice.

“Of course,” he says, the edges of his mouth tipping up again in that emotionless smile as he releases my hand. “I’m Nicholas. I work for Mr. Williams.”

I assume he means Victor, since he’s the highest-ranking Alpha of the pack, and not his father, Arlen. Arlen is retired and living somewhere in southern France, leaving Victor to run everything.

I remember my manners. “A pleasure to meet you.”

Nicholas nods, his gaze intense on my face. I can’t help but feel like I’m being examined, and I’m not quite sure what to say or do next. Luckily, he gestures at my suitcases, taking the attention from me.

“I’ll take your bags,” he says, reaching out for them from my dad, who hands them over as if they hold precious jewels instead of a few simple belongings. The Williams Pack was insistent I only bring the bare minimum as my every need would be taken care of.

“Come inside, let’s get you aboard the jet.” He nods at both of my fathers, turns on his heel, and goes back into the hangar.

“I guess this is goodbye, then,” I say, my lip quivering. I hug my fathers one more time. Tears well up in my eyes but I force them down and step back. The lump in my throat is almost too much to bear, painful in its intensity, but I hold strong and even manage a wobbly smile.

“Call as soon as you land,” Dad orders in a watery voice. “We want to hear all about the flight.”

“And don’t be sad, Buttercup,” says Papa, even though he’s already pulled a tissue from his pocket and is dabbing away a few tears. “We’ll see you in a few months for the

official bonding ceremony. You'll be so beautiful in your ceremonial dress, you'll see. And by that time, all this damn snow will have melted away. Or, well...most of it anyway."

He gestures at the snow like it personally offends him. It's a good thing I'm the one moving to Alaska and not him. I don't mind the snow, but he and Dad are more than content in the constant Arizona heat.

"I'll see you soon then."

I can't take any more of this, so I turn away and follow Nicholas into the hangar. My eyes sting with unshed tears, both from homesickness and apprehension. Still, every Omega eventually finds her Pack, right? This is all a part of the natural order of life; saying goodbye to our family and moving on to be part of something bigger than ourselves. With that outlook, I shove down any lingering feelings of doubt and steel myself to board the Williams Pack's private plane.

TWO

—
JULIET

NICHOLAS LEADS me through the quiet hangar, the sound of my heeled boots echoing back to us in the wide, empty space. A few people mill about or wait on long rows of empty seats, and I do my best to keep my head down and not make eye contact with anyone but the seemingly all-beta airport employees.

I can sense the presence of a few Alphas awaiting their aircrafts and the last thing I need right now is for one of them to catch my scent. I scrubbed as well as I could with the Scent Blocking Soap at the hotel last night, but I know it won't last, not with all the nervous sweating I've been doing.

Though sweating won't be a problem in here. The walls are made of long metal sheets and giant doors are opened to the airfield outside. If it's possible, it almost feels even colder in here than it does outside.

As we reach the other side of the hangar, me rushing to catch up with Nicholas' long strides, I notice a variety of small airplanes in various stages of repair and maintenance at the hangar's edge. Some planes are in disrepair as mechanics work on them, while others are being fueled and readied for flight. The smell of jet fuel and hot metal fill the air.

"There she is," Nicholas says, gesturing toward a small plane at the end of the building in front of a pair of open doors. "Charlotte. It's named after the Alpha's mother."

That seems like an awfully sweet gesture for someone so powerful, and I relax a little. My fathers always said you could

tell a lot about a man—an Alpha—by the way he treats his mother.

I didn't know anything about planes, but I felt like he was waiting for me to say something. So I choose a vague but complimentary adjective. "It's... impressive."

"It is," says Nicholas. "Charlotte loves to fly, and even had her pilot's license until she retired with Arlen."

That has to be a good sign, right? If the Omega mother of the current Alpha is into aviation, their fleet of private jets must be kept up to all the safety standards. Papa had nothing to be worried about.

Nicholas gestures toward the narrow stairs leading up in the aircraft. I trail my fingers along the cool metal railing as I ascend, admiring its sleek design. The plane is polished silver with blue and white accents. As we get closer, I see the Williams Pack symbol emblazoned on the side of the plane, a wolf howling above a snow-capped mountain.

The inside of the cabin is every bit as luxurious as I would have imagined. Plush leather seats, detailed woodwork that looks like someone polishes it daily—hell, hourly maybe—a big-screen television, and a crystal liquor cabinet. The walls are lined with displays showing photos and magazine covers from various notable events throughout the existence of the Pack.

There are probably what feels like a thousand more high-end amenities all around me that would take me days to discover. My homesickness fades into giddiness, and I feel a bit like a princess as Nicholas gestures to where I should take a seat.

He stows my bags away somewhere in the back and returns to sit across the aisle from me, tapping away at his cell phone. He's probably alerting Victor that I've been picked up. It makes me feel like a package at the post office, but damn, it's worth it for this plane ride.

"Victor will meet us when we land," he says, glancing up from his phone. "He looks forward to seeing you."

“And then what?” I ask, and he looks bemused by the question.

“Well, you’ll go back to the estate. You have your own suite. You’ll cease taking your heat suppressants, and once you go into heat, you’ll bond with Victor. After that, you’ll bond with the other Alphas.”

“I’ll only bond with Victor at first?” I should be embarrassed by this conversation, but that detail throws me, and I find myself needing an answer. Usually, an Omega will bond with all the Alphas in the pack during her first heat cycle with them.

“Victor wants to spend time with you first,” Nicholas says. “As Lead Alpha, he considers it his duty and right to, *erm*, get to know you before bringing you fully into the pack.” Color appears on his cheeks, and he returns his attention back to the device in his hands, ignoring me completely.

Conversation over, I guess. A pang of disappointment goes through me. I always imagined my Bonding surrounded by Alphas who loved me, in a warm nest for all of us. I’ll end up bonded to Victor’s other packmates, so I shouldn’t complain, but to spend time with just him first seems a little distant from that family feeling I’ve always pictured.

I hold on to the armrests as the crew boards the plane some minutes later. A single pilot and a stewardess with a cute blue neck scarf and a winning smile that immediately sets me a little more at ease.

When the plane finally takes off into the gray sky, it feels different than the large commercial plane we took to Anchorage. Every movement is more easily felt. My chest thrums as we gain altitude and soar away from the airport. I left my stomach somewhere back on the ground and I have to close my eyes until we’re through the clouds and nearing the end of our ascent.

I open my eyes, peeling my fingers from the armrests, gulping deep, slow breaths to steady my heart.

I focus on the steady hum of the engines reverberating through the cabin, but when I open the slider over the window on my left, all sense of calm is shattered.

The clouds around and beneath us are like gray wool, thick and uncomfortable as we glide above and through them. The cabin shakes as we press through another and panic starts to nibble at me, but after only a few more minutes, we're clear and I can breathe again.

Dinner is served as soon as our altitude levels out. The grilled salmon the stewardess brings me smells delicious, and my mouth waters. One bite and I'm moaning as smoky flavors hit my tongue. This is no cheap fish dinner at a chain restaurant. Even thousands of feet up in the air, the Williams Pack only deals with quality and elegance, and judging by the portion and the way the stewardess keeps refilling my empty champagne flute, they don't play around with moderation. I could get used to this.

I pick up the Riley North book after dessert, which was the best crême brulée I've ever had. I open it with eager anticipation, and I'm immediately enchanted by her beautiful writing. By the tenth page I'm completely committed and know I'll have the entire thing devoured within a day or two.

Like I always do with her books, I wonder how much of it is fantasy and how much is fact, based on her own experience in finding her pack.

Every Omega hopes they find true love with a pack who will treat them like a goddess. I want to imagine that it's my story that's written on these gorgeous pages, but I have to be realistic. There are bad Alphas out there, emotionally distant ones, even cruel ones who treat their Omega as if they're another business transaction. I only hope that isn't the case with Victor Williams and his Alphas, but I'm starting to fear it might be.

I've spoken with Victor in several video calls during the negotiation process. He's tall and handsome. He could definitely model for one of Riley North's book covers. With icy blonde locks that fall over his forehead in a perfectly styled

swoop, he actually looks like how she describes one of the Alphas in this book.

Victor's eyes are a dazzling blue, and he has a strong jawline, giving him an air of confidence and sophistication. The first time we spoke he had an easy smile on his lips that made me comfortable right away, though later, I wondered if it was genuine. Either way, it was a good smile. Overall, he was charming, but formidable as he assured my fathers I would be taken care of and given anything I desired. At the time, I couldn't help but be excited about the prospect of having a life that was free from financial worry.

They don't know I know it, but my fathers used up all their savings and the majority of the life insurance money from Mom's passing to put me through the Omega Academy. I have no doubt they lived on spaghetti for the last four years while I was gone, too.

I readily agreed to bond with complete strangers in exchange for security and luxury not just for myself, but for my fathers, too. Once I was officially the pack Omega, I was promised access to a monthly living stipend that was equal to what both my fathers normally made in a year. I could finally be the one to help take care of *them*.

But there's one thing that I felt was missing during my and my fathers' talks with Victor...

What about love?

I'd be taken care of physically and financially. He'd assured me of that. But what about emotionally? Romantically? Would those needs be filled, too?

And if they aren't, could I be happy anyway? I'll be given everything in the world—status, money, security. The omega contract was filled with more than I could have ever dreamed of, but nowhere in those pages was there anything about love.

Suddenly the plane lurches sharply, and my book tumbles to the floor, the pages bending. My seat shakes as we hit bump after bump of turbulence in quick succession.

I jab the stewardess button, my heart in my throat, but she doesn't come, and Nicholas isn't in his seat. I look behind me to see Nicholas stumble out of the bathroom, almost tripping over the stewardess as she straps herself into a folding seat near the staff kitchen with shaking fingers.

What's happening? I want to shout, but I can't find my voice. I grip the armrests, shutting my eyes tight, waiting for the moment of turbulence to pass.

What if something is wrong with the plane?

A wave of terror washes over me as I try to get a handle on my fear and stay calm. The plane veers again, and I close my eyes and try to focus on the sound of my breath. But that attempt is lost when the speakers above crackle to life.

"We seem to have hit a rough pocket of air, please remain seated with seatbelts securely fastened. Thank you."

I glance at Nicholas as he struggles to strap himself in and the plane continues to rattle and rock.

For once, his stoic expression is replaced by terror, and I know immediately that this isn't normal. If Nicholas is employed by the Williams Pack he's probably taken a hundred flights on this aircraft. He should be calm.

Why isn't he calm?

My stomach rushes into my throat as the plane jerks again and a cry claws up my throat. Objects fall inside the liquor cabinet and the sharp sound of breaking glass crescendos above the roar of the engine.

"This isn't normal turbulence, is it?" I ask Nicholas, and he shakes his head, white-knuckling his armrests.

No.

No.

This isn't happening.

I swallow hard, my heart thumping against my ribcage. The plane shakes even more violently, and tears sting the corners of my eyes.

A deafening *pop* explodes in my ears and the airplane rapidly lurches forward, my backside leaving the seat for the longest second of my life until it descends.

This isn't the steady, controlled decline of a plane descending toward a landing strip.

I'm thrown back in my seat by the sharp angle, my ears popping and my chest tightening. With a sudden jolt, oxygen masks drop down from the ceiling. I try to reach for the mask, knowing I'm meant to put it over my nose and mouth, but I can't seem to peel my hands free of the armrests. Can't seem to do anything more than cling to the chair like it'll save my life as tears streak down my face.

"We're going...attempt..."

The pilot's voice comes over the speakers again, but something must be broken because only every few words come through the static.

"Emergency landing..."

"Assume...crash position...bent over knees..."

Somewhere behind me the stewardess begins a murmured prayer and dark spots crowd my vision as I begin to hyperventilate, forcing my body to bend over my knees.

I cross my arms, gripping my opposite shoulders, the seams of my shirt tight in my fists.

I'm going to die.

My fathers won't know what happened to me. This plane could crash in the middle of nowhere and it'd be days before they found our bodies.

What if they never find us? What if our families never know what happened to us? We could just disappear, swallowed up by the Alaskan snow.

The terror is overwhelming, and I don't know how to make it stop. Nicholas makes soft whining noises from his seat that I can just barely hear over the sound of my own heartbeat in my ears. My breath is shallow and ragged, and I grow dizzy, probably from not having the mask on like I should.

The plane plummets toward the ground, and somehow, I know it'll only be a matter of moments before we crash.

It happens so quickly.

A mosaic of jerky, rapid movements that blind me with their intensity. The sound of metal crashing and tearing so loud I could go deaf. But not deaf enough not to hear the screams and the silence that follows them.

After, there is only cold and stillness and the flickering of flames against my sealed eyelids before everything fades.

THREE

THE COLD IS ALL ENCOMPASSING.

It seeps into my clothes, my skin, my bones.

I shudder against hard-packed snow, trying to peel myself away from its cold embrace. Getting to my feet feels more like climbing Mt. Everest, but once I'm standing, the fog clouding my thoughts begins to lift.

Snow is up to my knees, soaking through my pants, and the howling wind deafens my ears.

Where am I? Where are Dad and Papa? Why am I outside?

My lungs twist in my chest, aching from the cold, and I can't seem to get enough air.

I try to call out for Dad and Papa, but the sound gets swept away by the wind, my voice little more than a hoarse whisper.

I don't know which way to go. All around me is a blinding white world that feels like it's trying to swallow me whole. I can't see more than three feet in front of me as sharp snow lashes against my face and neck, sticking to my blonde hair.

I take a tentative step in what I think is a southerly direction. Then another. By the third, I *remember*. I remember *everything*, and I gasp, sinking back to my knees to scream into the roar of winter all around me.

I remember the crash. The jarring motion as the plane connected with the earth and part of it broke off, splintering away, exploding. The flames. The smoke scratching at my lungs. The heat. The screaming. Mine or someone else's?

I remember prying my seatbelt off and falling into the snow, hitting a branch on my way down.

And then the long cold.

“Hello?” I call in a rasp, coughing, drawing my arms in to wrap around my body, trying to keep in the warmth. “*Hello?*” I try again, hoping, *praying* someone else is alive out here.

I can’t be alone in the Alaskan wilderness in the middle of a blizzard.

I’ll fucking die.

I can’t die. Not like this. I haven’t found my pack. I’m still a virgin for fuck’s sake.

A feral sound escapes my lips as I huddle against the cold, anger and sadness and grief for the life I could’ve had swirling through me in tumultuous waves until hot tears sear down my frozen cheeks, turning quickly to ice.

No.

“I’m not dying out here,” I mutter to myself, squinting to see through the storm, gritting my teeth.

Shelter, my tired mind supplies. *We need to find shelter from the storm.*

My breath forms icy puffs in front of me, and my fingers are numb from the cold, but I look around frantically for some kind of shelter, anything that will keep me safe from the elements. Hell, I’ll share a cave with a fox or bear at this point if they’ll let me. But everywhere I turn all I can see is blowing snow and an unforgiving darkness.

The only way to stay alive is to keep going, even though every part of my body feels like it’s being stabbed with tiny needles. That’s good though, right? If I can feel pain, I don’t have frostbite, I think. I might have that wrong though. I kick myself for not brushing up on my winter survival skills before coming here, but who the hell would’ve thought this would happen?

I was supposed to be tucked away at a massive estate in the mountains with every luxury at my fingertips. A hot tub

and sauna in the pool area. A shower with a steam function. Wood-burning hearths in almost every room.

Teeth chattering, I try to imagine being near one of those hearths now and put one foot in front of the other, stumbling through the snow, trying to keep going in one direction. I'm not even wearing proper snow boots, just some dressy heeled leather boots I wore in an attempt to look classy and professional for Victor Williams. Some good it does me now. The snow swallows my feet with every step, soaking through the leather and my stockings, seeping into the seams.

I look around again, searching and listening for anything that can protect me from the storm, but there's nothing. Nothing for what feels like ages until a light appears in the distance, bobbing like an apple, taunting me to take a bite.

I don't know what it is—a house? A fire? My imagination? All I can do is keep walking in the direction of that light and hope for the best.

Every step feels like I'm getting further from that mysterious warm light, even though it remains ahead of me, and I let out a cracked sob. I just want to sleep. I fall to my knees, and pain flares in my shoulder. I must have hurt it in the wreck. But my feet? My legs? I don't feel them at all anymore. It's a weird juxtaposition between the fire-like pain in my shoulder and the absolute nothingness below my waist.

Tears pour down my face as I realize my body is done. Nothing but darkness surrounds me except for that stupid fucking speck of unreachable light.

The coldness of death wraps around me tightly. A small part of me wants to scream for help, but the other, kinder part says I should just close my eyes.

Rest, it coos. Rest now, Juliet. It's only a bad dream.

A COMFORTING SCENT fills my nostrils and envelops me like a warm blanket. It smells like pine trees and cinnamon. Like Christmas.

Like *home*.

It brings life back into my body and pulls me away from the brink of death. A newfound energy courses through my veins. My eyelids open, but they're still heavy, even with the warmth I now feel. It almost burns with its intensity against my chilled skin, but I don't care. Anything is better than the nothing that was there before.

I drift in and out of consciousness, dark spots blooming in my vision as I try to breathe past the lump in my throat and the blockage in my nose. I want more of that scent. It's so familiar and yet I don't think I've ever scented anything like it.

My body rocks against a warm chest and the gentle rumble of a purr confirms that someone is with me, someone real. If it's my imagination, I don't want to come back to my reality, because this feels so damn *good*.

"You're all right, Goldie," a deep, rich voice murmurs as arms tighten around me. "I'm going to get you somewhere safe. Somewhere warm."

His voice is like liquid velvet in my ear, gentle and reassuring. I hum in response, my lips not ready to form words. But I force my eyes to open, to see through the dark spots clamoring to blind me, and there he is.

My rescuer, and he's definitely real.

Dark-brown hair is coated in a dusting of scintillating snow. A short dark beard covers a strongly defined jaw, surrounding full lips. Above him, I see the silhouette of trees reaching toward the sky as snow continues to fall. I hear his footsteps crunching on the ground.

His brown eyes gaze down at me, concern etched into the lines around them.

The breath is stolen from my lungs at the sight of him. At the realization of *what* he is.

Instinctively, I attempt to reach out and touch him, my movements stilted and failing until finally I'm able to trace the line of his jaw with my index finger.

He startles, surprised by my touch.

“Are you the light?” I murmur aloud, and he frowns down at me, his dark eyes intent. “I tried...to follow you.”

He stares at me for a few moments, and I can feel the confusion radiating off him. He finally speaks, his voice brusque, but gentle. “What do you mean? What light?”

“The dancing light...in the dark,” I say, trying to moisten my dry, aching throat.

His frown deepens and then disappears as realization hits. “My flashlight,” he explains. “It’s in my pack. That’s probably what you saw.”

I nod, shuddering as a strong gust of wind hits us like a slap. I shut my eyes, burrowing my face against his chest. I sigh into him, my body feeling heavier.

He shakes me in his arms, enough to jostle me from the edge of sleep.

“I need you to stay awake,” he says. “Talk to me. Talk about anything.”

I try to stay focused, but my mind keeps trying to shut down. I’m so tired that all I can *think* about is being tired. “I want to sleep. Just for a few minutes.” My voice slurs through the words, like I’ve had too much champagne.

“No,” he says, this time with the sharpness of worry in his voice. He brushes away the snowflakes that have settled on my cheek and holds me tighter. “I know you’re tired, but fight it off for just a bit longer. We need to get you warm. Get you hydrated.”

The command in his tone is clear, and I find myself wanting to do exactly as he says.

I start talking about anything that comes into my head—random thoughts, funny stories from my childhood, memories of my dads—as we continue walking through the cold night together. He doesn’t speak but hums and nods every so often, encouraging me to continue even when my voice begins to rasp, the words coming painfully slow.

“We’re almost there,” he promises when I’m quiet for too long. “Just another minute.”

But I can’t do it. Not even for one more minute.

“Goldie? Goldie!”

But I’m already gone.

FOUR

DEAN AND I SPLIT UP, rushing to make sure everything's prepared and remains secure during the storm. Normally we have more time to get ready, but what was only meant to be a little squall has turned into a massive storm cell that will almost undoubtedly knock out all power to the property for days if not longer.

He's checking the electronic equipment, generators, and sensors.

I'm making sure all the animals are safe in the outer buildings. I'd call them barns, but they look more like fortresses with how much we've weatherproofed them. A necessity out here.

The walls of the structures are made from heavy-duty metal and reinforced with extra layers of insulating material to keep out any draft. We just redid the roofs this past summer to protect against heavy rains or, in this case, a shitload of snow.

We've even been able to install heating systems throughout so all the animals can stay warm and cozy in their own little stalls. Each building has enough space for them to move around when going outdoors isn't an option as well as an abundance of hay, straw, and feed so they always have something to eat.

Inside, they're all hunkered down, restless as they listen to the howling of the storm outside, but a few reassuring words from me and a little extra hay and they're ready to go back to sleep because I'm obviously their favorite.

After making sure every cow, goat, and chicken is nestled securely in their pens, I clomp through the foot and a half of fresh snowfall, pushing through the strong wind to get back into the main cabin.

A fire has been roaring in the hearth all day, battling for dominance over the cold. The fireplace itself towers over the room, constructed with expert skill and craftsmanship—and a lot of input from me because God knows I wasn't letting Everett or Dean design it, or it would be ugly as sin. Thick logs are stacked up next to it and I lob another one onto the burning pile before dropping my soaked gloves and scarf on the rug in front of it.

The crackle of flames and the smell of wood smoke hang heavy in the air, making me crave a good cup of honey-soaked tea and the rest of that mystery thriller Dean loaned me last week. If he says we're good to go with all our supplies, that's exactly what I'm doing for the rest of the night. No more going out into the storm for me unless I absolutely have to.

And where the fuck is Everett? I peer around the main part of the cabin, searching for him in the open kitchen and down the hall. He has his own cabin, smaller, separate from Dean and me, but he always comes to the main cabin during storms so we can divert all the generator power here.

"How's it looking?" I ask when Dean comes in a couple minutes later, shivering and stomping the snow off his boots on the mat.

He looks up at me, his cheeks pink and windburned. "Genny's doing its job," he says. "I'd consider that a win in this fucking weather." His shoulders relax and he exhales, unbuttoning his coat before he moves closer to the fire and rubs his hands together. "I was worried it wouldn't start up for a sec there, but I got it going."

"You always think that."

"Because there's always a chance it might not start up. The thing's getting old. And a storm like this? It's out of the ordinary." He removes his hat and shakes snow from it into the

flames of the fire. The moisture sizzles as he roughs up his hair with one hand, encouraging the blond ends to dry.

“That damn generator will outlive us both. Now come on.” I stride to the sofa and fall onto it. It groans, protesting on old springs as I pat the cushion beside me and waggle my eyebrows. “You’re frozen and I happen to be a walking furnace.”

He laughs and flops down beside me, leaning forward to seek out the heat from the hearth several feet away.

“You see Everett out there?”

Dean nods. “Went to the edge of the woods to check the testing equipment.”

“He shouldn’t go out there alone when it’s storming like this.”

Dean rests his hand lightly on my knee, his fingers drumming. “Try telling him that.”

I can feel his anxiety through the pack bonds even though he’s trying to conceal it.

“Everett can handle himself,” I start to say when Dean turns his attention to the door.

His hand stills on my lap mid-tap. “You hear that?”

I perk up, listening to the faint sound of crunching snow that turns into heavy footed steps on the wooden stairs outside the front door.

Everett bursts in, the storm on his heels, blowing snow in around him.

But it isn’t the melting mess in the entry that draws my eye, it’s what he’s clutching hard against his chest.

“Ev?” Dean hedges, disentangling himself from me on the sofa as we both rush to our feet.

What the fuck...

Everett’s breathing is choppy as he crashes through the cabin, leaving massive snowy boot prints on the hardwood.

Dean scrambles to shut the front door behind him with a curse on his lips.

Everett kneels near the fire, carefully placing the bundle on the rug next to the blaze.

He rises, the fire burning the ice off his snowsuit in wisps of steam.

He pulls the frozen tartan scarf from around his neck and mouth, dropping it to the floor. "Help me," he grits out. "We don't have a lot of time."

Without another word, Everett quickly begins to undress, shucking off layers of snow clothes and thermal clothing, pausing only to throw more and more wood on the fire until it's at a monstrous roar.

Dean and I glance at each other in stunned silence, edging closer to the small shape of a person curled into the fetal position on our carpet. Neither of us say it, but I know we're both thinking it.

Whoever it is?

They're too still.

"Everett..." I trail off, leaning down to one knee over the unconscious person as he continues to strip. "Where did you find—"

My words choke off as I scent her only a second before pulling back her hood to reveal her face.

The Omega is blonde with delicate features. Her skin is deathly pale, and her damp golden hair sticks to her cheeks, dripping with melting snow. She smells like strawberries and vanilla, and I can't help but lean in closer, inhaling her sweetness.

Her lips are slightly parted, and I notice the slightest rise and fall of her body as she breathes.

She's alive.

Her eyelashes flutter as if she's dreaming. I can't help but reach out and brush away the snowflakes resting on her

forehead. I notice a few freckles scattered across her nose, and my heart skips a beat. Even in sleep, her presence alone roots me to the spot, strikes me like lightning. Hypnotizes me. She looks like an angel fallen from the sky.

Snow Angel, my mind supplies and I find myself grinning.

“We need to get her body temp up, fast,” Everett growls. “She passed out a few minutes ago. She’s hypothermic.”

My stomach twists as I watch him discard everything except his boxer shorts and fall to his knees to begin removing her clothing.

I clue in to what he’s trying to do and begin to help him, gently tugging off her snow-soaked jacket. Peeling the wet jeans from her pale legs. We leave her in only a simplistic little soft pink bra and panty set, and despite her state it’s impossible not to notice her soft curves. The way her nipples are hard under her bra. The dimples in her lower back.

“Fuck, she’s injured,” Everett says and I spot the jagged cut along her shoulder blade. No longer bleeding, but gnarly and puckered and purple from the cold. It’ll need stitches.

“Grab the first aid kit,” Everett orders.

“On it,” Dean chirps before I can say it first.

Everett settles in behind her on the rug, pulling her frozen body against his wide chest, tucking her under his chin. He hisses at her coldness, but doesn’t relent, contouring their bodies together until her teeth start chattering, and then soon after, stop.

“What happened out there?” I ask, tearing the throw blanket from the couch to drape over them both.

Everett shakes his head in disbelief. “I was checking the northern testing site and saw something moving in the distance. By the time I got to her, she was nearly unconscious.”

Nearly unconscious seems an understatement. She looks half dead.

“Where did she come from?”

“I don’t know.”

“There’s nothing for miles out here. It doesn’t make sense. Did you see any—”

“*Huck*,” Everett says sharply. “I said I don’t know. I didn’t see shit. She came out of nowhere. I thought I was seeing things.”

“Got the kit,” Dean announces upon his return, and Everett shifts, allowing him access to her shoulder. His careful fingers trace the line of the cut, carefully prodding it to check for anything embedded in the skin.

We’re all silent as Dean rummages around, pulling out the items he needs.

“What about her ribs?” I ask, tugging back the blanket lower to find what is definitely the start of some gnarly bruising on her lower ribcage. “Think they’re broken?”

“Don’t know.”

“She looks like she’s been through hell. What do you think happened?”

“I have the same amount of information as you,” Everett mutters, irritation darkening his eyes. “She got stuck in the storm. Some sort of crash, maybe? Could’ve been from one of the ranger vehicles in the village.”

Dean cleans the wound with antiseptic and then sutures it. His focus is unwavering with every stitch. The Omega never stirs. I’m relieved she can’t feel the pain, but I worry what it means that it doesn’t rouse her.

Dean finishes patching up the wound with gauze and tape, then sits back on his heels with a sigh. “How’s her temp?”

“I think we’re out of the woods,” Everett replies roughly, his hold on her relaxing a little.

I reach over to rest a hand against her cheek, finding it warm and flushed red with heat. Her breathing has evened out.

“Let’s get a fire going in the spare room,” I say. “It will be easier to heat than the whole first floor. We’ll move her up

there. Dean. Go.”

Dean rises, packs his kit, and goes upstairs.

Everett raises a brow at me, uncoupling his body from hers, tucking the blanket tight around her as he does to preserve the warmth.

“We can’t just leave her here on the floor,” I explain. “I’ll go find her something dry to wear. Let’s get her changed and up in the spare bedroom.”

Everett stands but before he can bend to retrieve her from the floor, I step in, scooping her up into my arms.

She’s lighter than I thought she would be and her head rolls into my chest. I feel something in my core tighten and my grip on her tightens in response.

The instinctive urge to protect her fills me and I clamp my mouth shut against the swell of it, my nostrils flaring as they fill with the scent of her warm skin.

I can feel her starting to tremble again, and it makes my heart ache for her. I don’t know what kind of trauma she’s been through, but whatever it was must have been bad. As tenderly as I can manage, I carry her to the stairs. I try to choose my steps carefully, not wanting to jostle her any more than necessary.

The spare bedroom is cozy, even if it’s rarely used. At most, we’ve had a family member or two come to visit and stay with us, along with a couple of park rangers needing a place to stay during sudden storms. The walls are painted a soft yellow, and the hardwood floor creaks beneath my feet. The room has a plush bed with crisp white sheets and plenty of pillows and blankets.

Lots of pillows and blankets to make a nest, I think, and then I shake the thought away.

I lay her in the middle of the bed atop the blankets and Dean comes in with a pair of his flannel pajamas. They’ll be massive on her even if Dean is the trimmest of us, but at least they’ll be warm. Without a word, he helps me dress her, and I can already sense attachment forming from my fellow Alpha. I

can see it in the way he touches her—so carefully he’s afraid she might break, brushing her blonde hair back out of her eyes, supporting her neck as I tug the long sleeve shirt over her head. His sure, delicate actions make me more aware of the situation we’ve gotten ourselves into.

This is an Omega. An *unbonded* Omega by the lack of scarring around her neck. But that doesn’t mean she’s unclaimed. She could have a pack waiting for her somewhere, going insane with worry not knowing where she is.

At the very least she’ll have friends and family somewhere out there searching for her.

And here I am, my mouth watering at her scent. My pack brother staring down at her like she’s his reckoning and he’ll gladly kneel at her feet if she only asks.

~~This is the best thing that’s happened to us since we moved up the mountain.~~

This isn’t good.

“Who do you think she is?” Dean asks in a hushed tone, breaking the silence and the spell that was keeping us rooted in place around her. He tilts his head, examining her.

“Beats the hell out of me.”

She breathes softly through pouty lips that still have the faintest blue around their edges.

His brow creases with worry when she shivers, and he folds the covers over her, tucking her in tightly. He pauses, probably trying to figure out how best to take care of her without crossing any lines.

I’m having the same issue. I really want to crawl under the covers with her and hold her all night.

It might be a good idea...

It’ll keep her warm and we’ll be here if there’s a problem.

“We should leave her to rest,” Dean whispers before I can make the suggestion.

We stay like that for a few minutes, neither of us wanting to be the first to leave.

“We could always stay...”

Dean shakes his head, seeming to snap out of some trance. No doubt the same one that ensnared me downstairs.

“Come on,” he says abruptly, shifting on his feet before he turns away from the sleeping Omega. “It’ll be worse if she wakes up surrounded by Alphas she doesn’t know.”

I frown and move to follow him, but I can’t.

I can’t just leave her in here.

What if she goes into shock? Or stops breathing? Or gets a fever from an infection to her wound?

“I’m going to stay,” I say before Dean can vanish further down the hall. I drag the chair from the corner of the room and set it quietly down close by the bed, but not too close that it would be overly intimidating if she woke.

Dean nods without turning and continues back to the front of the cabin as I settle in, propping my feet up on the nightstand. I tug my phone out of my pocket and flick to a mindless war strategy game to pass the time.

Until she wakes up, I won’t be sleeping.

FIVE

MY POUNDING HEART WAKES ME.

Where am I?

I'm in an unfamiliar bed, and these aren't my clothes. I'm dressed in an oversized pair of plaid pajamas, and tucked under a fluffy comforter. There is something oddly comforting about this room, as if I've been here before. I can't quite put my finger on it, but the panic I felt the instant I woke recedes like a wave, clawing the emotion back out from the shore.

Scents I don't recognize fill the air, and I breathe them in deeply.

Pine and cinnamon.

Linen and cedar wood.

Chocolate and ginger.

Each of them is perfectly delicious, and I want more. I swallow, salivating, my legs twisting together in the sheets.

I sit up in the bed, and pain shoots from my neck to my chest. Touching the back of my shoulder, I feel a ridge of bumps under my fingertips. Craning my neck, I can just barely see the beginning of a long line of stitches. I run my hand down the length of them, feeling each bump like a tiny mountain. Who sewed these stitches into my skin?

The floor creaks in the hallway outside my room, and the door swings open. "Morning, Sleeping Beauty," says a deep male voice.

Chocolate and ginger.

An Alpha stands there, holding a breakfast tray. He's a handsome man with soft brown hair, inviting eyes, and a smile that has just a hint of mischief, like he was the kid always making trouble in school. He wears a crisp white button-up shirt, the sleeves rolled up to reveal powerful forearms. "Do you think you can eat?"

My fingers grip the comforter tightly, nerves on edge as the Alpha closes the distance between us. My instructor's words from the academy ring in my ears.

We must protect ourselves. Some Alphas can control their urges when near an Omega and for others, it isn't without a great deal of effort. And sometimes...sometimes they fail. This is why we must use heat suppressants while unbonded in public spaces. Scent blocker is also a helpful safeguard.

I blink, trying to remember something that nips at the edge of my mind, but other than my instructor's voice, the memory is slippery and difficult to grasp.

My stomach grumbles and the Alpha grins, not waiting for an answer as he places the breakfast tray over my legs so I can reach everything easily.

The salty smell of bacon and eggs mix with the earthy scent of freshly brewed coffee. The toasted English muffins are still slightly warm from the oven, and a plate of sliced apples sits next to them.

"Who are you?" I ask, tentatively biting into one of the apples, keeping a watchful eye on his movements. The crunch of the fruit is loud in the otherwise quiet room and I work to chew quietly, squirming in the bed.

"I'm Huck. But I think the more important question is who are *you*?"

"I'm Juliet. Juliet Chase."

"Juliet Chase," he murmurs, as if tasting every syllable. "Do you know what month it is?"

I pull a face. "January, I think."

He nods, pleased by my answer. “How old are you?”

“Twenty.”

“Do you know where you are?”

That’s the only question I can’t answer, and panic rises in my chest.

“No.”

As I try to push up even further on the pillows, my shoulder twinges again.

“Hey now, stay calm.” He comes to sit on the bed beside me. I should be scared—he’s an unknown Alpha alone with me in a bedroom, something the instructors at the academy were very adamant against—but his nearness washes over me like a comforting blanket. Something about his presence and scent feels so familiar. Like an old friend.

I sigh, breathing it in again, my core tightening. Huck looks at me with kind eyes, and when he reaches out to me, I flinch, until his fingertips stroke the back of my hand where it lies on the blanket.

I shudder, relaxing into the pillows with a sigh.

“Feel better?”

I bite my lip. “A little,” I admit before gently extricating my hand from his touch and reaching for the coffee. Hoping it’ll remove some of this awful foggy from my brain.

“How did I get here?”

“You were out in the snow, and one of the other Alphas in my pack found you.”

Visions of the wreck burst into my imagination, unwanted and vivid. A rush of nausea hits me and I set the coffee back down.

“Oh, God. The plane. It crashed.”

I think of all the people who were on board. Nicholas, the pilot, the attendant. Could they have survived, too? But I’ve already answered the question in the blackest parts of my

mind. There was no way they could've. It was a miracle I was still alive, and right now, I wasn't even sure if I was.

Sitting in this comfortable bed, with this handsome Alpha who doesn't make me feel threatened at all, with a tray of breakfast on my lap?

Was this...heaven?

Oh god.

My dads!

Has the wreck already been discovered? Would the plane have a black box? What even *is* a black box? Oh fuck. Did they think I was dead?

Huck's eyes flash with concern. He lets out an uneasy sound in the back of his throat. "*Shhh*, it's okay," he croons, sidling in closer so his leg presses against mine beneath the covers, bringing me warmth as he sets a light hand on my thigh. "You were in a plane crash. That explains your injuries... Do you remember what happened? Where you crashed?"

"I was... I don't know where...near here, I guess," I say lamely, trying to grasp at straws and make sense of the tangle of memories scattered in my mind. "I don't know how far I walked. Or how far your packmate carried me."

I remember his scent, though. Pine and cinnamon. And I remember the warmth of his arms, and how safe and protected I felt, if only for a few moments. I want to go back to that hazy place where pine and cinnamon meant peace and certainty. Something within me aches now that it's nowhere near me. How can I feel like that after only a few minutes with the man?

Huck's expression shifts into one I can't read. His brow creases. "You must have been terrified."

A lump forms in my throat, and all I can do is nod. Echoes of screams and twisting metal take over my brain, and I start to hyperventilate, paralyzed by the memories of the past twenty-four hours. I can't catch enough air, my lungs screaming in

panic. The breakfast tray over my lap suddenly feels like a cage, and I scramble to try to escape from under it.

Huck closes a large, steady hand over my ankle. At first, my instinct is to pull away, but his grip tightens, and he calms me with his deep voice. “Steady.”

“I... can’t... breathe.”

He rises and lifts the tray from my legs. My chest burns and my head spins and nausea swirls in my gut. I feel the sudden impulse to run, but logic tells me there is nowhere to go.

Huck hovers over me. “I’m going to hold you, okay?”

I stare up at him.

Hold me?

Huck sits next to me, the mattress creaking under his weight, propped up on the pillows, though he’s lying on top of the comforter while I’m still snuggled underneath. He places an arm around me and tucks me into his chest.

Instantly, my breathing slows as I lean into him, feeling his heartbeat against mine. His breathing is slow and steady, and soon, our rhythms match, and my body calms.

“That’s a good girl,” he says, kissing the top of my head. I don’t know how long we stay like that, but it’s long enough for his warmth to seep into the bed and my bones. Every breath I draw makes me feel more relaxed, and I’m about to doze off again when his voice stirs me.

“Come now, you should try eating something.”

He leans over the side of the bed and plucks the English muffin from the tray before handing it to me.

My stomach feels like it’s filled with rocks, and my body is so shaken from crying that I’m not sure I’ll be able to swallow anything, but I manage a few bites of the English muffin. It does taste delicious despite the way my stomach wants to rebel. I finish it, sniffing with each bite, and return to cuddling into his arms. The rational part of my brain is

screaming, but the instinctive part has taken over and it wants this. It wants him.

It craves the security I feel with his arms around me, even if the feeling is misplaced.

I've never felt anything like it before.

Wait—that's not true. I felt it last night, in that strange Alpha's arms.

Even the blizzard, which nearly killed me yesterday, sounds comforting now. The eerie yet beautiful soundscape is filled with the steady gusts of wind and the rhythmic pounding of snow against the windowpane.

"I need to contact my family," I whisper, leaning into his hand as he strokes my hair. "They'll be so scared."

"I'm sorry, baby girl. Our internet and cell signals are down. You probably won't be able to reach them until after the storm."

Dad and Papa will be terrified when they don't hear from me. If Victor Williams tells them that the plane disappeared, it'll break them, like when Mom and my baby brother died. I can't bear the thought of Dad and Papa hearing the news that their beloved daughter has vanished without a trace. I know how much they worry about me and care for me, and this would devastate them beyond words.

Even with that worry niggling at my brain, comfort and security thrum through my body. I realize my panties are dampening as I lay in Huck's embrace, and my eyes widen. My body is reacting to this Alpha, and he isn't the one I'm promised to.

Thank fuck I'm on heat suppressants.

...but the rest of my dose is in my bag, which is in the wreckage of the plane.

Shit.

My hand flies up to the heart shaped locket around my neck. It's still there and I heave a sigh of relief. But the quilt Mom made me...it was in my luggage.

Huck must sense my brief discomfort through the bonds because he pulls away, standing and taking the tray from the side of the bed. “Get some more sleep, baby girl. You’ll need it to heal.”

“I said my name was Juliet,” I snap, a little too harshly, and have to rein myself back, folding my hands together in my lap and bowing my head like I was taught.

He can’t keep up this *baby girl* nonsense, even if it sends a thrill through my body. I’m not his Omega.

He smirks as he takes in my words. I see the desire in his eyes, and it sends a tingle down my spine.

“Juliet, huh? Where’s your Romeo?” He winks as the words flow out of his mouth like honey, and my heart skips a beat.

Is this how an unclaimed Omega should feel around unmated Alphas? It’s nothing like I imagined. Whatever it is, it feels like electricity is running through my veins.

“Now go back to sleep, baby girl.”

SIX

THIS STORM IS a serious pain in my ass.

Not only are the generators having trouble, but it's made communication with the rest of the world completely impossible. Everyone else seems to take for granted how much work goes into keeping this place going. Now I have to do it with the scent of an Omega clouding my ability to think clearly.

I can't focus on the task at hand when her scent is lingering in my nose. Even if I manage to distract myself for a few minutes, her sweet aroma still finds its way back into my mind.

Fuck, she smells like roses. I want to bottle up her scent and keep it on a chain around my neck. I never expected anything could smell as amazing as that lost Omega up in the spare room.

It's been so long.

So long since we moved up here into the mountains.

So long since we've been around anyone outside of the pack with any sort of regularity. Never mind a fucking *Omega*.

I've never been so overwhelmed by pheromones, but now, my Alpha instincts are going wild after being stuck up here without any female company or Omegas around for hundreds of miles.

Usually, I spend some time with Huck when I need a little something more than my own hand for release, but the Omega

makes me insane, like my entire body is vibrating on a different level than usual.

I want her.

I *need* her.

But I have to tough it out and keep working through the storm. My role in this pack requires me to be constantly alert, troubleshooting any issues that may arise with our equipment.

I'm proud of the work I do, no matter how trying the situation is. Besides, Everett and Huck are useless when it comes to most technology, so someone has to be the computer geek around here. Even if that computer geek is currently being driven insane by the unclaimed Omega in our cabin.

I flick mindlessly through my phone, tapping the chess app my friend Miles and I built a few years back. There are no messages from him or anyone in the chat since we still can't seem to get a signal, but I can play against the computer. I sigh as I start a match, but barely get three moves in before I sigh and exit the app, unable to even focus on that one tiny ass thing.

"You know what else you need in the middle of the worst storm you've seen in half a decade?" I grumble to myself as I sit down in front of my laptop in the kitchen to check for a signal again. "More distractions. A pretty Omega with a whole hell of a lot of—"

"Talking to yourself again?" Huck comes into the kitchen, barely glancing at me or the laptop I'm monitoring. He has a dazed expression and there may as well be hearts in his eyes. He's already gone for the Omega. It's written all over his face.

Damn him.

He pulls out a pot and adds some butter, along with a bowl of carrots, potatoes, and onions he sliced up last night for today's meal. The fragrant scent fills the kitchen, and he finally speaks as he stirs the vegetables.

"She's awake."

“And?” I demand, wondering why he didn’t say this in the first place. “What have you found out about her?”

“Not too much,” he says, adding broth to the pot. “Her name is Juliet. She was in a plane wreck near here but isn’t sure where.”

A plane wreck? Where the hell had she been flying to over these parts?

“She seems like an academy girl. She’s got the look and that polite composure, even when she’s half-dead from exposure to the elements.” He grimaces in disgust. “I fucking hate the Academy.”

“We’ve talked about this,” I say, rehashing the same damn argument. “The Academy’s a good way for Omegas to learn the balance between their roles in society and the roles of an Alpha. I don’t like it any more than you do, and you know it, but we’re in the minority.”

“*Balance.*” He scowls again. “As long as they act like a perfect little princess, sure. It just pisses me off that they take individuality away from these Omegas in favor of fitting them into a mold that those rich and proper packs want. They want Omegas who are quiet and submissive. It’s wrong.” He sighs and then goes silent. I don’t push him further.

Huck was practically catatonic when his sister Laura joined the Omega Academy. And after she married into an aristocratic pack, he harbored resentment toward the entire custom, and his bitterness has only grown over time. He feels that his family has been forced to conform to a tradition they had no part in creating, one that favored those of higher status.

However, a smirk spreads over his face after a moment. “This Omega, however, does have a little fire in her. She’s already mouthed off to me once.”

“Really?” I let out a short laugh. “It seems like the Academy didn’t succeed with that one then.”

“I like her already.”

We both fall silent.

Logically, we've never wanted an Omega for our pack. We're pretty damn happy the way we are, and no Omegas are around to throw us into conflict or make us think otherwise. Besides, Omegas are rare enough in the world these days. Between disease and a low birth rate, not every pack is lucky enough to have an Omega. Might as well let another pack have one than take one ourselves. Especially when we'd be subjecting said Omega to a life in solitude up in these remote hills, in the cold.

But the idea of having an Omega in our Pack still draws me, if only by instinct, no matter how much I deny it. I want to know what it feels like to just be *near* one every day, to make them part of our family—our Pack. To love them and worship them, mind and body.

That certain call Omegas have on Alphas, that drive that compels us to find them and protect them, seems to already be happening with this Juliet girl.

“She smells amazing,” Huck says after a moment. “Like sweet strawberries and vanilla, all swirled together.”

I laugh out loud. “What are you talking about? She smells like roses, a whole garden full of them.”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, letting the scent of roses that permeates the entire house engulf me. I can smell a faint hint of the vanilla Huck's talking about but there's also jasmine and lavender mixed in with the heady aroma of rose petals, creating an intoxicating combination that's impossible to ignore. She's a whole fucking garden in one perfect scent.

Huck looks at me with a hint of amusement. “Roses? Well, that's cliché.”

I raise my middle finger, shaking my head.

He laughs, going back to stirring his soup, but I can see how on edge he is. I can see the ridge of his halfway hardened cock through his pants.

My dick twitches in response, but I don't think our guest would appreciate us fucking in the room next to where she's resting.

Still, I have a feeling Huck and I will be spending a lot of quality time together while she's here. We've got to work off these instincts, and I've got a million ideas on how. Hopefully Huck can control his volume during it. He's a loud one.

Everett usually goes off to his private workshop during our shenanigans, and even then, he claims he wears earplugs.

The sound of footsteps on the floor above us breaks that thought.

"I told her to get some rest," Huck grumbles.

He whacks his spoon against the side of the pot, and broth spatters across the stove.

"I'll go check on her." I stand and cross the room to the staircase.

Huck gives me a 'don't-do-anything-I-wouldn't-do' grin.

With each step I take, my heart rate quickens, and a flutter of anticipation builds in my chest, like a damn bird has made its nest in there. As I reach the landing, I see her bracing herself against the wall. She wears my flannel pajamas, and pride fills my chest at the sight, as if the pajamas are an extension of myself.

I made her warm. I took care of her. I did that.

I smile.

SEVEN

I'M AWAKENED by the sound of voices downstairs. Two different ones. Male, if I'm hearing right. I need to get up and move, to stretch out the overused muscles from walking in the snow. I slowly make my way out of bed. Every action hurts, but I push on until I'm in the hallway, leaning on the wall for a breather. It's going to take me at least twenty minutes to get downstairs at this rate. I wonder if my lungs are still messed up from the smoke.

"Watch yourself," says a voice from the stairs. Another Alpha appears at the top of the staircase. He nods at the stairs. "They're not up to code and steep as hell."

Linen and cedar wood.

He's every bit as sexy as Huck. His face is strong and masculine, with sharp cheekbones. His eyes are what draws my attention the most—bright and inviting, captivating in their intense blue gaze. His nose is slim and straight, leading to full lips. Smooth, tanned skin highlights the blond hair on his head, giving him an almost angelic look if it weren't for his absolutely sinful body.

And there I go again, salivating over another Alpha I can't have. My lips part, but I can't seem to say anything, frozen there in the hallway like a thief in the night. Like I've done something wrong.

"Let me help you," he offers.

"Um, thanks," I manage as he takes my elbow, pressing a palm to my lower back in an attempt to stabilize me. But after

only two steps, I wobble, and almost collapse, my knees too weak to support my frame.

“Okay,” he says on a sigh. “Let’s do it this way instead.”

Before I know it, I’m lifted into his arms and pressed against his chest. I let out a little yelp, but his smooth voice comforts me.

“It’s okay, I’ve got you. Just going to get you downstairs, okay?”

I nod, wrapping my arms around his neck to help him hold up my weight even though he doesn’t seem at all like he’s struggling.

As I rock against him, I can’t help but press myself against his neck and inhale his scent. He takes in a sharp breath, his grip on me tightening as a shudder runs through his body, but says nothing.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur, pulling my face away from his neck, my cheeks heating.

“That’s all right,” he says, and I can tell he’s trying to sound unaffected, but he’s speaking through his teeth and... holding his breath?

Warmth spreads in my chest and I relax into his hold as he carries me down the rest of the stairs.

The kitchen is a warm and inviting space, filled with the smell of something savory cooking on the gas stove. The counters are lined with colorful culinary tools and chopping boards. Huck leans over a pot, humming to himself. He moves his way around the kitchen with practiced ease, pulling ingredients from the pantry and fridge.

It reminds me of Sunday afternoons at home.

“We have a visitor,” announces the Alpha carrying me before he sets me down at a chair pulled up to a long wooden table. Huck turns to me and gives me a wicked grin.

“Well, hello, baby girl,” he says. “Looks like I should have come up for you instead of letting Dean manhandle you.”

The one called Dean shoots Huck an ominous look before holding out his hand in greeting. He's so formal despite the fact I just had my nose in his neck seconds earlier. I clasp his hand in mine and shake it. My fingers are small in his grasp.

"Let me get you some cider," he suggests, making his way to the refrigerator.

I watch Huck cook while Dean gets my drink. He deftly cuts up some meat, adding cubes of it to the bubbling pot that sits on top of the stove. Taking two cloves of garlic and crushing them between his fingertips, he releases their pungent aroma into the air, and I can't help my deep inhale. It makes whatever is in the pot smell even better, and I'm struck by how domestic it feels—comfortable, safe. Normal.

And wrong.

I shouldn't feel this at ease after what happened. People died. People out there likely thought I was dead, too.

But...I can't do anything about it until the storm clears enough for them to get a signal all the way out here.

Huck adds a splash of olive oil and some herbs from the windowsill, stirring the dish slowly with a wooden spoon. The smell is intoxicating, and I can feel my mouth watering as he carefully adjusts each ingredient in the pot.

As I watch the Alphas move about the kitchen, I realize how lucky I am.

To have been found at all is incredibly lucky.

But to have been found by a pack of—three?—Alphas who seem capable of controlling their urges in my presence, who seem kind and giving...it's more than any lost Omega could ever hope for.

Huck looks up at me, catching me watching him. "The stew should be ready soon."

I nod just as Dean sits down across from me, placing a cup of warm cider in front of me.

"Go on," he says. "Try it. We pressed it last month. We usually make about twenty gallons every fall and freeze it for

the year.”

I take in a sip of the fresh cider, followed by several more, relishing the spicy, sweet taste. “You really made this?”

“Believe it, baby girl.” Huck says, taking a seat next to me.

He places a firm hand on my arm, his thumb stroking the skin back and forth. It soothes me, and I want to curl up on his lap like a stray cat, but I don’t. Because that would be improper. My instructors would slap me on the back of my hands for even thinking it.

“Huck said you weren’t sure where we are,” Dean says, tapping away at a tablet that sits on the table between us.

He pulls up a map, displaying it on the screen, and zooms in to highlight a small town nestled among rolling hills that grow into a wide mountain range.

“That’s Sanford,” he says. “It’s barely big enough to be a village, but it has a supply store and a ranger station.”

He points out an array of winding roads that lead from the town toward the wilderness. Eventually they fade away, but he keeps scrolling.

“We’re here,” he says, pointing at the center of the map. I look closer and see a small lake surrounded by dense forests and mountains.

“You’re very isolated.”

The middle of fucking nowhere, really. A ball forms in my throat.

“We are,” he agrees. “But we like it that way. We do a lot of work with the environment, and it suits us.”

“Huck told me there’s no way to communicate with the outside world right now?”

If that spot on the map is really where we are, I’m not surprised.

Still, I need to reach my parents as soon as I can. They must be worried sick.

Dean nods. “We’re not usually cut off, but in a storm like this? I’m sorry. There’s no contacting anyone until it clears.”

Huck pets my arm some more, and Dean reaches over, running a finger down my forearm, leaving a trail of goosebumps in his wake. It feels so natural, and I can’t help but want more of their touch. Dean seems to realize what he’s doing after a few seconds and clears his throat, withdrawing his touch, blinking as though coming out of a daze.

I know the feeling.

The scent of the third member of the pack hits my nostrils just as the door swings open. It’s the Alpha from last night—my mysterious rescuer. He’s bundled up for the elements, carrying an armful of logs. Without saying hello, he goes straight to the fireplace, dumping the logs next to it as Dean rushes to secure the door behind him, shutting us in from the violent wind outside.

The Alpha by the fire rises, patting snow off his jacket as his eyes meet mine, dark and haunted. A sudden wave of warmth flows through my body, but it wanes when his intent gaze flicks away as if I’m nothing but part of the furniture.

He doesn’t say a word to me, but adds a few more logs to the pile before stripping out of his coat, hat, and gloves to hang them near the fire to dry.

The Alpha stands tall, definitely taller than the other two Alphas. With broad shoulders and thick muscles. His scent is a familiar comfort, sparking a distant memory of being held close and secure against his wide chest.

He carried me with such strength, yet he had been so gentle that the steady cadence of his long strides lulled me even through the fear and pain. Even now, I feel safe in his presence. But I wonder, too, as moments pass with him stacking logs neatly into their nook...

Why won’t he look at me?

“Generator looking okay?” the third Alpha asks Dean.

Dean scoffs at him. “You always sound so surprised. I do know how to do my job, Everett.”

The other man—Everett—tilts his head. “Yeah. Most of the time.”

The power dynamics in the room shift as the conversation progresses into rapid-fire discussions about technical equipment that I can’t follow at all.

Everett has to be the lead Alpha in the pack, his presence commanding and intimidating, like an army general. He speaks with a gruff confidence that seems to put Huck and Dean at ease, their stances relaxing as they listen. Occasionally, they cast glances toward me, almost apologetic looks as the conversation continues without Everett so much as looking at me.

I shrink into myself, wondering if I could make it back upstairs without assistance, if only to remove myself from the place I no longer seem to be welcome or wanted.

A wave of loneliness hits me, sharp and pure. I’m definitely on the outside looking in on a pack built on friendship, trust, and loyalty.

A deep yearning for that security hits me. I want to leave my chair and crawl into Dean’s lap, rubbing my nose against his neck for more of that amazing scent, but I don’t think Everett would take that well, and I don’t want to cause a rift.

I’m nobody to them. A lost Omega who I’m sure they’ll be glad to be rid of as soon as this storm passes.

“What about Goldie here?” Everett says, and I snap to attention. Finally, he’s talking about me, though why he’s calling me Goldie, I have no idea. Maybe because of my blonde hair, which lies limply against my shoulders, since I slept on it wet.

I must look like a mess, I realize for the first time since I inched my way out of bed, and pull my arms in tight, pressing my palms between my thighs.

“What about her?” Dean shifts slightly, angling himself toward me.

Everett stares dryly at the three of us. “We have to get her home.”

God, he sounds like he can't wait to be rid of me.

It's such a far cry from the way he treated me last night that tears sting my eyes. I look down in shame. I don't know these Alphas, and they don't need to know how their attention, or lack thereof, can affect me.

My instructors' words ring in my ears again. *It's basic instinct, and most of it is out of our control, but we still must try.*

Besides, Everett is right. I need to go home.

"Well, no one's going anywhere in this," Dean says, flicking a hand toward the window, where snow continues to batter against the glass. There's no telling the time, either. It's so gray out there it could be any time of day or evening.

Everett follows his gesture, pursing his lips. "Fine. Did we find out—"

"It was a plane crash," Dean supplied, interrupting him.

Everett's gaze flicks to me, only for a second, but I catch a glimpse of emotion. Pain. But then it's gone, and he nods to himself, his jaw set.

"We should go back to the crash site. See if anyone else survived. How many people were on that flight with you, Goldie?"

I gnaw on my bottom lip and don't dare look up from the table.

"Three, I think."

My voice sounds too high-pitched and I swallow, trying to rearrange my vocal chords and settle my nerves.

"You think?" He growls.

I nod hurriedly. "Me, an assistant, a flight attendant, and the pilot. Maybe a co-pilot, too? I don't know."

"Do you know what caused it?"

I lift my shoulders. "The storm, I think."

Everett nods again. “All right, we’ll go. The sooner, the better. No one can survive long in this weather up here. Not without shelter.”

A worrisome thought occurs to me and I blurt the question before I can think of how it might be received. “Can you look for my things while you’re there?”

Huck scrunches his nose. “You mean like your clothes and makeup and shit?”

“No,” I stammer, shaking my head.

“What could possibly be that important?” Everett asks.

My cheeks burn.

“I-I need my heat suppressants. They were in my bag.”

Without those suppressants, I’ll go into heat, stuck in a cabin in the middle of nowhere with three Alphas.

Just the thought of it makes me squirm, slick forming a damp spot in my panties.

“My last dose was right before I got on the plane. I can’t risk... I don’t want...”

What am I trying to say?

I take a breath and calm my nerves.

“I just need them, okay? It’s important.”

Dean’s eyes flash with lust, and he swallows audibly. “We’ll search the plane for your suppressants, and if we can’t find them, we’ll work out something. Maybe the ranger station has some in stock. Don’t worry.”

Too late for that.

“We’ll head out now.” Everett reaches for his coat. “Dean, you’re with me. Huck, you stay with her. Make sure she rests.”

He could have addressed that last part to me, but he didn’t, and I feel jilted somehow.

“Come on.” Huck holds out his hand and helps me to my feet. “After you’ve rested some more, we’ll draw you a bath. It should help with those achy muscles.”

Still wobbly, I take a few jolting steps, but then I give him a pleading look. I hate being this weak, but I'm getting nowhere fast. Picking me up in his arms, he carries me upstairs. The slamming of the front door shakes the frame of the house.

Dean and Everett's scents fade away, and I'm acutely aware of the fact that Huck and I are very much alone.

I cling to Huck, my arms wrapped around his neck tightly. His heart pounds against my chest as he heads up the stairs, trying not to drop me. When he gently sets me down on the unmade bed, I look at him with a renewed sense of worry growing in my chest like a weed. He stares back, the muscle of his jaw ticking.

Heat sparks between us like lightning, my skin aching to be touched. His eyes widen after a moment, and he stumbles back. A glance at his jeans shows his arousal, and my core aches to take care of it, slick all but gushing out.

Everett and Dean need to come back with my suppressants or we're in big trouble.

"I'll bring you some stew when it's ready, in the meantime get some rest and I'll be downstairs if you, *uh*, need anything," Huck grits out before turning and leaving me alone in the bedroom, overheated and completely confused.

I'm not supposed to be here. I'm supposed to be with *my* pack. *My* alphas.

My future.

EIGHT

“HANDS OFF THAT OMEGA,” I told Huck, giving him a firm look before we left.

She hadn't said as much, but a girl like that, pretty and pedigreed...there was no way she wasn't already claimed.

He'd rolled his eyes at me, but I know he'll behave. I didn't say a word to Goldie as we left, even though guilt still roils through me at the confusion—the hurt—I saw on her face. Better that she thinks I dislike her. Safer, too.

She's not meant to be here. Not meant for *us*. This way is easier.

Once the front door slams shut, Dean and I head to the garage and get on our snowmobiles. Hell, I'd get on the snowmobile and drive all night if it meant being away from the Omega while she's in our house, but I can't leave the others behind. The short distance between the main cabin and mine will have to be enough of a buffer until she's gone.

The Omega scares the hell out of me, but this arrangement is temporary.

Even if she wasn't clearly meant for another pack, we're fine just the way we are. We don't want her here. We don't need her here.

The snowmobiles roar in the muted silence of the storm. The biting cold seeps through my jacket, tries to tug off my scarf, stings my cheeks.

We keep an even pace. We know these mountains, but with the storm obstructing our view, the risk of collision is higher. Downed trees. Craggs in the rocks where the snow has fallen through. Shifting ice. Any number of things could earn you a one-way ticket to the nether out here.

We head down toward the flat spot near the river where most of our power equipment is positioned—a combination of micro-hydro generators, gasoline generators for when the river is frozen or too shallow, and solar panels. This grassy area is free from trees, so it works great for solar panels—when they aren't covered in several feet of snow. Still, it's sunny even in the winter. As soon as the storm passes, we'll need to get them cleared.

“Everything seems to be working,” says Dean after he examines the machines. His breath comes out in short, smoke-like puffs, and his face is illuminated by the flickering light of the machinery, revealing a frustrated grimace. “But with this predicted snowfall, we'll probably have to come back before sunset and check them again.”

That suits me just fine. More time away from our Goldilocks intruder.

“Follow behind me. I'll take you up past where I found her and then further to the south. I'm guessing that's where she came from,” I shout over the wind and turn to mount the snowmobile.

The machine roars as I rev the engine, and with a roar, we take off. Plowing through the snow, adrenaline courses through my veins, chasing off the chill, even though snow stings my face as I drive.

I keep an eye out for any signs of what happened to the plane, but all that meets me is a never-ending expanse of white. How the hell did that girl make it out here?

Finally, I see something in the distance—almost like a misshapen hill under all that snow—and steer the snowmobile that way. As we get closer, it's clear to see it's not a hill or pile of snow at all.

My heart sinks as I look at the crash site. I shut off the engine and step off the snowmobile, my stomach twisting into knots.

Twisted, charred metal sticks out of the snow, but already snow drifts have started to cover it.

Mother Nature reclaiming the plane for her own.

There's no way anyone else survived. Hell, there's no way Juliet should have survived it, but she did. I check anyway, carefully wading through the snow toward the bulk of the small aircraft, though it looks like the tail section is missing completely. I do what I can to unbury the opening, shifting great armfuls of snow out of the way to peer into the cavity.

I can just make out the shapes of a pilot and co-pilot mostly buried in snow at the helm, still strapped into their seats. The other two Goldie mentioned are nowhere to be seen, and that can only mean one thing.

Dean curses beside me. "No survivors?"

"Just Juliet," I say. "Unless a ranger managed to get news of the crash and picked up the others."

Dean's gaze darkens and I know he's thinking what I am. It's unlikely. No. More than unlikely, impossible.

No one would be getting a signal in this storm. Not even the ranger station.

"I tried to send a transmission out about the plane crash before we left," he admits. "I doubt it went through, but it will if we get a signal, even for a few minutes." He sighs, adjusting his hat to pull it down lower over his ears. "Fuck, this is a mess."

"Come on, help me look for those damn suppressants," I grumble.

I carefully step into the metal carcass, watching my step. I'm sure debris was thrown as it crashed, and all we need is for a piece of metal to slice through one of our legs to bleed out here in the middle of nowhere.

“Anything?” Dean calls after a few minutes of digging through snow and debris.

“No,” I holler back. “Let’s search the area for the tail.”

We find a body not twenty paces from the hull. A man, by the remains of his clothing, but there isn’t much left of him to identify who he is. Dean growls uneasily next to me.

“Why couldn’t we smell him?” Dean wonders aloud.

“He’s frozen solid.”

I smell death in the icy air, but it’s faint—so faint others might miss it.

As I look around the frozen landscape, I spot a wing jutting up from the snow, and behind it, a shape that looks like the tail.

“There!”

Dean follows me, stepping in the trail I carve through the thigh-deep snow as we near the other half of the plane.

It’s like we stepped into some kind of horror movie. Everything is coated with a thin sheet of ice from the cold, and what is visible is cracked and stained with smoke. And blood.

A chill runs down my spine.

Dean goes still, his gaze fixed on the smears of frozen red.

“You good?” I ask.

He nods.

We push on, feeling around in the snow for baggage or anything else.

At this angle, snow hasn’t filled the tail section and I’m able to get a good look at the interior. “There’s no way it was her jet,” I say aloud, and Dean gives me a funny look.

“This is a luxury jet,” I explain. “The private kind. But she wasn’t dressed in any of that designer shit. How did she have access to it? Who the fuck is she?”

Dean braces himself against the back of a frozen-solid airline seat. “What the hell are you, a fucking detective?”

“I don’t like this, Dean. Any of it. It feels... off.”

Dean begins scouring the plane. “Is that why you’re keeping your distance from her?”

I ignore him and start digging again. After an hour, my arms are sore from the repetitive motion, and I’m shivering despite the exertion. The chill seeps into my bones, damning the thick layers of clothing I wear. We need to get back to the cabin and warm up, but I haven’t found anything salvageable. And we definitely haven’t found the suppressants. Or even an intact bag.

“Let’s get back,” I say, giving up for now. “Whatever she brought, it’s not here. It either burned up or fell out during the crash.”

If the latter, it would be buried now, and only spring’s warmth would see it uncovered.

“Shit,” Dean says, shaking his head. “What do we do now? She’s going to go into heat in the cabin. There’s no way we’ll be able to keep away from her. I know I sure as hell won’t be able to.”

He’s not saying anything we haven’t all thought in the past twenty-four hours, but I won’t admit I may not be able to, either. Worst case, we’ll lock her in the spare room. Wait it out.

Most Omegas can get through a heat on their own, right?

And I’d managed through a rut or two without anything but my own hand, a bucket of lube, and ice-cold showers.

“We’ll figure it out,” I assure him. “There are ways around shit like this. Hell, we can go out to my cabin and she can ride out her heat alone in the main cabin. We’ll keep ourselves contained.”

It sounds like I’m describing wild animals, but then again, that might be an accurate description for an Alpha in rut.

“She’ll be in pain. Do you have some toys for her to use instead?” he snaps back, and I wince. “Or are you going to carve one out of wood?”

“Shut up,” I mutter. “Are you really going to force her to do something she wouldn’t have chosen for herself if she was of sound mind? Hmm? If she goes into heat, she’ll be lost to it. She won’t be thinking clearly. And she’s made it damned clear she doesn’t belong to us. We’ll have to go down to Sanford and find something. Either suppressants or a toy. Anything.”

“What about the Inn? We could bring her there.”

My hackles rise at the idea and I restrain the urge to snap at him, deciding to ignore him instead.

As much as I want Goldie out of here as soon as possible, I wouldn’t trust the townies down in Sanford with her for five fucking minutes. There hasn’t been an unclaimed Omega in that area for ages. They’d descend on her like wolves.

I turn to leave, but my foot crunches against something. I kneel, wondering if magically her bottle of suppressants have turned up, but instead, I find a book.

A romance book, by the looks of it. How the hell did this survive when the crew didn’t? It must have been lodged in one of the seats or tucked away in a bin. The edges are charred, the cover is damp, and there might be some pages missing, but the sultry looks between the Omega on the cover and the Alphas staring back at her definitely identify it as a romance.

I laugh to myself. If *that’s* what Juliet is wanting in her Alphas, she’s going to be very disappointed. She won’t get that from most packs I know.

Is she really naïve enough to think all Alphas are knights in shining armor with hearts of gold? Fuck, what do they teach those Omegas at the academy? Reality is much different and far less pretty.

I chuckle, sniffling as I wipe my nose on my glove.

Still, as we head away from the deadly site, I tuck the book into my jacket to bring back home to her.

NINE

AFTER FINISHING UP SOME CHORES, I find Juliet on the couch in front of the fireplace in the living room, shrouded in a blanket with a half-drunk cup of tea on the coffee table. She's got the blanket all the way up around her shoulders, part of it covering the top of her head like a hood. She looks...adorably ridiculous and something in my chest cracks at the sight.

I shake my head, scoffing quietly. She was meant to be resting after she finished her bowl of stew. And I'd asked her to call for me if she wanted to come back downstairs. I should be glad she was feeling strong enough to get down here on her own, but there's another part of me that's upset she put herself at risk. She could have fallen, cracked her head open.

I winced at the visual, immediately wishing I could scour it from my mind with a good chunk of steel wool.

Juliet hasn't noticed my entrance. Instead, she's staring out at the raging storm. Her attention is consumed by the world outside, but I sense she's not really looking out the window. She's lost in her own mind.

She's so damn beautiful.

And though I've only glimpsed one, her smiles are dazzling, and I crave more like an addict in withdrawal. I'm hypnotized by her presence every time we're in the same room. The whole damn house could burn down around us, and I wouldn't even notice.

I don't have a lot of experience with Omegas, but it can't always be like this, can it? It has to mean something.

I approach her quietly, not wanting to startle her. When I get close enough for her to hear my footsteps, she turns to me and offers a weak smile.

"It's getting worse," she says, gesturing out the window. "Are you sure the other two will be okay out there?"

I glance out the window at the snow. It's thick and angry, and I'm grateful to be inside with her, not stuck out in this blizzard with my packmates.

"They're the best men for the job. These mountains might feel frightening to newcomers, but it's home to us."

I scratch at my jawline and sigh. "I suppose you never got weather like this at the Academy?"

She stiffened. "How did you know I went to the Academy?"

"You walk like the floor's made of glass and talk like someone might bite your head off if you say the wrong thing. It's not hard to guess."

I clicked my tongue. "The Academy is many things, but subtle is not one of them. It leaves a mark."

Juliet fiddles with the teacup, turning it in circles on the table. "It's not as bad as all that," she argued without any real verve. "I mean, some of the instructors are super old-fashioned and a lot of the other students are...well, *snobs*, but it has merit. We learn a lot, not just about Alpha-Omega dynamics, but also anatomy and child-rearing and—"

"Sorry," I interrupt, swallowing my distaste for the whole institution. "I didn't mean to offend you."

"You didn't. I mean, you're not wrong. It's basically designed to keep Omegas firmly in their roles as bonded, as mothers, and not much else. I was just saying, some of it has merit. It isn't all bad."

"Nothing is, I guess."

Her blanket hood drops to fall over her shoulders and my gaze falls to her lips. Her cheeks flush and she looks away.

“I’m promised to a pack, you know,” she says, a muscle in her jaw flexing and my stomach drops out through my feet.

“I assumed,” I manage around the lump of disappointment in my throat. “I mean, of course, you are.”

Omega like her? How could she not be? It was just like Everett said, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t holding out a little hope.

She bites her bottom lip, drawing the blanket tighter around her shoulders.

“A pack that takes Omega traditions very seriously, I should add. And I’m stuck here with three Alphas, about to go into heat, no doubt already looking like I’ve been...”

She couldn’t seem to bring herself to say the words, and maybe it was better if she didn’t because I wasn’t sure I could contain a possessive growl if she finished that sentence. If she said she already looked like she’d been fucking us.

“If we’re speaking candidly, I think the bedhead suits you,” I say, trying to inject a lighter note for both our sakes. Just sitting this close to her was harder than it should’ve been. Everett said no touching, but what if I just...

Her cheeks burn red, maybe sensing where my mind went. “*Huck.*”

I cough, bringing myself back to reality. “Let’s finish your tea, and then I’ll run you a bath. How does that sound?”

She hums thoughtfully but shakes her head. “I shouldn’t... I can run it myself.”

I wonder what her worry is. Does she think I might try to push her boundaries when I know she’s promised to another pack? Admittedly, I want to. The thought of her naked body in the tub upstairs makes my blood rush and my inner wolf itch to break out. But it’s not just about that.

“If the others can’t find your suppressants a bath might deflect scent,” I tell her. “We have Epsom salts and oil

extracts. Not the same thing as a scent blocker, but it should be effective in the short term.”

...even though it'd be a damned crime to cover that scent.

“Oh.” She nods. “Okay. A bath sounds nice.”

I stand up and stretch. She rises with a wince, as if every movement costs her energy she doesn't have.

A reminder that she has not yet fully recovered.

I help her upstairs to my bathroom. When we built this place, we each wanted our own bathroom because honestly, I think we'd go crazy if we all shared. No one wants to get growled at by their lead Alpha through the bathroom door.

My bathroom is curated with clean lines and natural hues—just like the environment outside. It would feel wrong to bring modern designs into a house surrounded by nature's beauty. Like the fireplace, the copper tub in my bathroom is one of my pride points about the cabin. When the sun is out, the shiny copper glints from the rays through the window, and you feel like you're bathing in part of the sky itself.

“Are you sure we should be using the power for hot water?” Juliet asks nervously after the tub is a third of the way filled.

Oops.

“I didn't even think about that,” I say, because I was only thinking about her comfort and not our energy output, or anything else really. Shit.

“I guess it's a good thing Everett and Dean aren't here to see this; they'd have my head for using so much of the power supply.”

She lets out a small laugh. It sounds tired, but there's some happiness lingering in it, and I crave more. Those laughs feel like a secret only the two of us share—something no one else will ever understand.

I dump the salts and extracts into the tub, giving it all a good swirl before I hand her one of my towels, and she hugs it to her chest.

“I’ll wait in the other room,” I promise. “Just call if you need me.”

I duck out of the room before she begins to undress, but my cock is already stiffening at the thought of her nude body slipping into the bath. *Down, boy.* I re-tuck it into my jeans and sit on the bed to wait, plucking stray threads from the old comforter.

Minutes pass. I smell the floral scents of her bath wafting out the half-cracked bathroom door, but I don’t hear her enter the water. Her soft humming fills my ears, and soon my senses are drowning in Juliet. I fall back on the bed, sliding an arm beneath my head, and don’t feel a shred of guilt at the others being stuck out in the storm while I’m around the corner from a naked Omega.

Suddenly, she lets out a cry that disrupts her beautiful humming.

I jump up and call to her, stopping myself before I can go rushing in. “Juliet?”

“I’m okay,” she whimpers.

Okay my ass.

My jaw clenches at the pain in her voice and before I’m consciously aware of what I’m doing, I’m at the bathroom door. I knock one and push it open. “I’m coming in.”

She doesn’t answer, so I take that as permission to enter.

I find her struggling to remove her borrowed shirt. Her expression is twisted, nose scrunched, eyes fixed on the injury to her shoulder. She can’t lift her arm and it looks like she’s got the wiry ends of the stitches caught in the fabric.

Her gaze flicks up to me, and I see tears clinging to her lower lashes.

I grimace. “Easy, baby girl.”

A tear runs down her cheek as she tries again to slip the pajama top over her shoulders and winces, letting it drop with a little sob.

“I can’t do it,” she mutters, her voice barely more than a croak. She blinks back more tears and I realize it’s not just the shirt or her shoulder. It’s everything. The shirt was just her breaking point. I know that feeling. My heart aches for her. In this strange place, with strange Alphas, knowing her family is out there worried sick about her.

“Don’t you hold back any crying now,” I say, rubbing wide circles on her back. “You don’t need to be brave. You’ve got no one you need to impress here, just let it out.”

She nods into my chest, sniffing as she slowly comes back to a semblance of calm and pulls back, wiping her nose and taking a bracing breath. “Could you...do you think you could help me take it off?”

I bite the inside of my cheek, willing myself to remain unaffected by her request.

“Yeah, baby girl, I can do that. Stand up and place your arms a little bit away from your body if you can, I don’t want to hurt your shoulder.”

I slip my hands into the front of the shirt. She has already unbuttoned the collar. It just needs to make that last bit of distance over her shoulders.

Touching Juliet’s skin causes us both to startle as electricity sears us where our skin meets. My cock, which had barely begun to relax, jumps to attention, straining against my jeans. I inhale sharply, my mouth watering at her scent.

I swallow hard and slip the top from her shoulders. It falls to the floor, immediately forgotten as Juliet’s body is bared to me. She didn’t have a bra on underneath, and my hands clench at the sight of her full breasts. I want to cup them, to kiss them, to suck on them until she bucks against me. Fuck, they’re perfect.

And I need to stop staring.

“Can you do the rest on your own?” I ask, sounding like I’m in physical pain and fully aware of the change in my tone, but unable to control it because, well, *I am in physical pain.*

My gaze darts away from her, but not before I catch the dazed look of want in her eyes.

“Y-yes,” she stammers, and I half-jog out of the bathroom before I break my promise to Everett and put my hands on her.

I hear the sound of her slipping into the bath, then the small sigh she lets out at the warmth. I can’t help but smile—she’s finding comfort in something I provided for her. A low rumble emanates from my chest. If my Alpha instincts are this heightened from drawing her a bath, how will I act once I actually get to touch her?

No. You’re not supposed to think like that. She’s promised to a pack. You can’t touch her.

“Huck?” she calls, her voice tentative and shy. “The bubbles are, *um*, covering me. If you’d like to come back.”

If I’d like?

I’m back in the bathroom before she can finish the sentence. Juliet’s in the tub with a light layer of bubbles covering her body while steam rises off the water. Her cheeks are flushed with heat and embarrassment.

“You tell me if you get uncomfortable with me being here, okay?” I make sure she meets my pointed look and nods her agreement before I sit on the edge of the tub.

She bites her bottom lip, shifting under the water and I wonder...

I wonder if she wants to be around me as much as I want to be around her? If every time I leave the room she’s just counting the seconds until I’ll come back in, like the distance between us is fucking offensive and...

Shit. I’m a goner.

Bring it back, Huck. Take a deep breath.

She’s not ours. She’s not ours.

She’s. Not. Ours.

The scent of her bath fills my lungs, a delicate mix of lavender and jasmine that accentuates her Omega scent. For a

moment, I almost forget where I am. All my senses are filled with her to the point where I'm almost dizzy.

Then she speaks and I'm entranced by every word. "So, you knew I went to the Academy. Speaking from experience?"

"Not my own, obviously," I say, shifting my shoulders. "But yes, my sister is an Omega and she went there."

"And?" Juliet raises her eyebrows, already reading past my pleasant—and false—expression.

"I don't like what they teach Omegas," I admit. "She came back obedient, and posh, and polite. She wasn't the same sister I used to play tag with, or wrestle, or climb trees with. She was...different. A stranger."

Juliet is quiet for a long time, and I wonder if she's thinking up a counter-argument. But then she says, "I get that."

My eyes widen. "You do?"

"Between you and me"—she looks around as if someone from the Academy is about to burst into the room and catch her—"it does feel like the aim is to take away individuality. Having differing opinions isn't always tolerated depending on the class or the instructor." She lets out a small laugh. "Trust me, I was wrestling with my dads and climbing trees too before the Academy."

A flicker of sadness hits me in the chest. What parts of her personality is she hiding under that Omega Academy mirage? I want to undo every bit of conformist teachings they tried to instill in her, peel back her layers.

Fucking OA.

"But," she adds. "The academy isn't just about what they teach us, it provides Omega's with a safe place to continue learning in all subjects."

Another sad truth. Once a person presents as Omega, the world is no longer a safe place. It's either bond to a pack, go to the Academy, or be chaperoned by an alpha parent or guardian at all times while in public spaces.

“And it’s not just an alpha-dominated world anymore,” she goes on. “Things are changing. Slowly, but they are changing. There’s a viable treatment for Cervus now, so in a generation or two, Omegas won’t be as rare. And there’s power in numbers.”

“I hope we see that day,” I say. “That’s one of the reasons we moved out here. Society is broken, and while there might be power in the future for Omegas, right now, only the richest Alphas and their packs have the power to influence the masses or affect real change and they have no desire to break the wheel. Not when it spins just how they like it.”

She stiffens, and I wonder what I’ve said wrong. I was agreeing with her sentiment, wasn’t I? Oh shit. Maybe she’s from a wealthy family.

I didn’t mean...

I wait several minutes, muscles tense, and when she doesn’t respond, I feel an almost visceral need to change the subject, erase the last two minutes. I blurt out, “You know, before we start the rebellion, maybe you could let me wash your hair?”

She barks out a laugh. It’s not pretty or posh at all, but loud with a little bit of a snort to it. I love how genuine it is, and I grin at her before grabbing my shampoo bottle. “Come on, it’ll hurt your shoulder if you try to do it yourself and I give one hell of a scalp massage, just ask Dean. Lie back, baby girl.”

I perch on the edge of the tub and help Juliet wash her hair, massaging shampoo into her scalp until her lips open in a little ‘o’ and I feel her relax. I pour water over her head to rinse her off before starting in with the conditioner and then rinsing that, too.

The water cascades over her chest, running down her body and sending ripples of pleasure through me.

Her legs writhe a little in the water, the suds swirling around her. I trail my slippery fingers down the side of her neck, and she lets out a little whine that makes my dick so hard it’s painful.

She arches in the water, exposing a nipple and instinctively, I slip my hand down to her breast, rolling that nipple between my thumb and finger. She whimpers, pressing into my touch.

My breaths come hot and hard as I twist her soft skin between my fingers, drawing another moan from her lips that has me practically seeing double as I drop to my knees next to the tub and press my face into the hollow of her neck, every inhale of her scent shooting sparks through me.

Her warmth radiates against my skin and I sense the longing in her twisting movements.

I want her so badly I might combust, and my control hangs on by a thread. Hell, maybe half a thread. A thread of a thread.

“Wait,” she says, panting as she grabs my wrist. Her breath is shallow and quick. “It’s...it’s good, it’s so good...too good...I can’t...”

“Then I can keep going,” I murmur into her ear, but she shakes her head.

It takes every fiber of my self-control to pull back from her.

“I won’t do anything you don’t want me to.”

“I’m not your Omega, Huck,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. “The Williams Pack has probably already sent a search party out in the storm to find me.”

You’ve got to be shitting me.

Dread squeezes my chest like a gloved fist. I shoot to my feet, turning away from her to wipe my wet hands over my face.

There’s no fucking way.

Goddammit.

“Huck?”

I fill my lungs with hot air and snatch her towel from the chair.

“Come on, you’ve got to get out. The water’s getting cold, and I don’t want you getting sick.”

“Huck?” she asks, her brow wrinkled. “I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s fine,” I say, and if I sound a little cold, I really don’t mean to.

...of all the packs in the goddamned world. “Watch your step getting out.”

She wraps herself in the towel, and I look away, even though I want to rip the towel off her and ravish her. That’s never going to happen.

“I’ll let you have some privacy.”

With that, I leave the room, and this time, I don’t look back.

TEN

WHEN WE GET BACK to the cabin, Juliet is already asleep and Huck is sitting by the fire, staring into the flames. They flicker in the darkness of stormy twilight, crackling and popping. The shadows of the trees outside swirl across the walls, buffeted by the strong winds of the storm, but even as hail lashes against the windows in a torrent, he doesn't notice.

Something weighs heavily on his mind, and it's probably the same topic we're all thinking about.

The Omega.

"I need to try to get a message to Juliet's family," I say, snatching my laptop from the kitchen island before crossing the room and sitting next to him on the couch. "To tell them she's all right. They must be freaking out by now."

I open the laptop, knowing the attempt is futile, but I should at the very least get something keyed up to send in case the signal returns sometime in the night while we're sleeping.

Huck stirs and places a hand on my arm. "Don't tell them our location. And don't mention anything about us."

There's a flash of fear in his eyes that I don't understand, but I nod. He'll share when he's ready. Trying to pry things out of Huck when he isn't ready to talk is like trying to dig in frozen ground.

My fingers dance across the keys, but without an internet connection there's no way I'll be able to find out her parent's contact details so the next best option is to route the message

to the local news station with Juliet's name, her status, and a request to contact her family, but no information on where she is or who she's with. I put the message in the queue with the other one meant for the ranger station, which still hasn't sent.

It's the best we can do.

Everett comes inside, shaking snow from his dark hair. His breath comes out in visible plumes of frigid air as he stamps his boots. "How are we on food, Huck?" he asks in his non-sense tone, without even a hello.

Huck barely notices the sharp tone of voice. We're all used to Everett's gruffness. "The stew I made today will last through lunch tomorrow. If we want fresh meat, you'll have to go hunting. Anything else is going to be canned, pickled, or cooked from frozen. The fresh stuff is almost gone."

I groan a little. I love Huck's cooking, but pickled foods make my stomach turn.

He rolls his eyes at me, sensing my disgust. "You don't have to eat the pickled stuff."

"What about external contact? Cell signals, internet?"

Everett's dark eyes turn to me. His jet-black hair falls across his forehead in perfect disarray, because only Everett could spend the day crawling through a plane wreck and fighting a blizzard and still come out of it looking like a beefed up *GQ* model.

I shake my head. "Both are spotty. Nothing I've queued up has gone through yet but it will as soon as there's a break in the storm."

"And we checked the power sources today," he says, thinking aloud rather than telling us what we already know. "I wanted to check them again tonight, but the storm is getting worse, and we're all exhausted."

Him especially, though he won't admit it. The circles under his eyes are nearly purple, and he moves like he'll drop any minute. He's been pushing himself for weeks, even before the mess with Juliet, as fall faded into winter and the need to be vigilant with supplies became greater.

Everett never complains, of course, even though I know it's taking its toll. His skin is paler than usual from lack of sleep. And he's lost a few pounds. Nothing major, and he's still the largest of us, but enough that I know he isn't eating as much as he needs to sustain himself, just in case Huck or I could be left hungry.

He won't rest until everything is the way he wants it, until he's certain we're secure, but nothing can ever be certain or forever.

I'm not an idiot, it's residual from the accident years ago. He'll damn make sure we're good, but he might kill himself in the process.

"The biggest problem is the girl," he says gruffly, dropping into his faded leather armchair.

He's the only one who can handle that chair. It's too hard, the cushions practically petrified. A bit like Everett himself.

"We didn't find the suppressants in the plane crash, Huck. She's going to go into heat if we can't find another solution." He sighs heavily, running a hand through his hair. Tension swirls in the air as the potential disaster kicks up a lot of added anxiety that we don't fucking need right now.

Huck clears his throat. "Well, about that. There's a bit more I've found out from her."

Everett leans forward, elbows on his knees, hands tented. "What is it? What did she tell you?"

"She's promised to the Williams pack."

The words simmer in the atmosphere for a moment before realization comes crashing down on Everett and me. Everett's face becomes a mask of anger, his brows twisted, and lips pressed together in a thin line.

"I want her gone." He seethes through gritted teeth. "She needs to leave. Now. I don't want anyone associated with *them* tainting our home."

He glares at us, daring us to challenge him. His Alpha energy fills the air, thick and suffocating.

“Everett,” Huck pleads, but Everett growls at him. Huck snaps his mouth shut and sends me a pleading look, asking for backup.

“We can’t send her out in this,” I say, laying out logic. It’s better not to get emotional when Everett is like this, it only makes everything worse. “It would be cruel. And you said so yourself, taking her to town isn’t an option, it wouldn’t be safe for her, especially not if she starts to go into heat.”

“And she may not know what the Williams pack is like,” Huck added. “She isn’t bonded to them yet, only claimed.”

“*Or* she might be just like them,” he snarls. “She may already know what they did to us. What they took from us.”

“Be realistic. Taylor’s death may have ruined us, but it was just a day in the life for Victor Williams and his people. There would be no reason to tell their future Omega about him.”

At the sound of our lost pack member’s name, Everett hangs his head. After a moment, he glances up at us, the same sorrow we all feel reflected in his eyes. His voice, however, is still a shallow growl.

“*Fine*,” he seethes out through gritted teeth. “She stays until the storm passes but not a second longer. We’ll hand her off to her family directly or see her off on a plane and that’s it.”

“But what do we do about her connection to them?” Huck asks.

I agree with his concern. We might not be on the Williamses’ radar, but we don’t know for sure and it’s imperative we stay off it.

We don’t know Juliet’s true motives, either.

There are still too many unanswered questions, and we need to find some answers before we can just let her go.

“I could look into it when we get a signal back up,” I say, thinking aloud. “I have a few friends on the East Coast who keep up-to-date with inter-pack business, much more than we ever would. They might be able to find out how close Juliet is

to them, but you know those wealthy packs...it's likely they had an entire parade of Omegas vying for the position and chose her based on scent and pedigree and nothing more."

I glance at Everett for his reaction, but he's staring into the fire, lost in his memory.

"What if they faked the crash?" offers Huck, and I turn to him with a frown. "Think about it. Maybe they planted Juliet here to look into us. Maybe they know what we're planning."

"It wouldn't be the first time they've bent the truth for their own needs," mutters Everett. "And it wouldn't be the first time someone died because of it."

"I doubt it," I say, shaking my head. "That's a pretty deep conspiracy, even for them. Besides, too many people get involved in plane crashes. It wouldn't be worth the exposure. And the bodies... if they staged this, it means they were willing to sacrifice several of their own."

"Maybe," says Huck, fiddling with his fingers. "There's not much we can do by speculating. Let us know what your friends find out."

"If I can get ahold of them..." I trail off, already queuing up a few more messages to my contacts out east.

Everett stands, rolling his shoulders and grimacing at the stretch. "I'm going outside to cut wood."

"It can wait until morning," I protest, and it must be the last straw for his frayed temper because he snaps his head toward me, eyes flaring.

"No," he retorts. "It can't."

"Keep your voices down," mutters Huck. "She's going to hear us."

"Good," says Everett, yanking on his boots. "She'll have something to report back to her *pack*." He stomps out the door, slamming it behind him with an echoing boom, reverberating through the house like thunder.

"Fuck." Huck falls back against the couch like he's aged twenty years in the last five minutes, his bones sagging into

the cushions. “As if this whole thing couldn’t get any messier.”

He sits back up and meets my gaze as I finish my last message and add it to the queue.

I notice his fingers trembling and reach over to lay my hand on his, steadying him.

He sighs. “I like her, Dean. More than the scent connection. I’ve talked to her some. She’s...she’s kind of great. If she’s a fucking spy for them...”

The chances are beyond slim, and I don’t have to tell him that, but even the slightest chance makes me uneasy. Worse, even if she isn’t, she could be once she finally makes her way to them.

What will she say about the pack who saved her from the storm?

“We’ll figure something out,” I assure him. “It’ll all work out.”

I’m not sure if I believe that, or if he believes it, but it’s all I have to offer him for now.

Well, almost all I have to offer him.

I shut my laptop and set it on the coffee table, eyeing him up and down.

He’s been wound up since the Omega arrived. We’ve all been, but I can sense Huck is feeling it the strongest. Likely since he’s spent the most time with her, drowning in her pheromones. He even smells a bit like her right now, and I have to wonder if he broke Everett’s rule already.

I wouldn’t be surprised. Nor would I blame him.

“What?” he asks, catching me staring.

I smirk. “Take your pants off.”

His lips part in surprise. “Now?”

I nod. “Oh yeah. Now. Before Ev gets back. Before our little stowaway wakes up.”

I tug him closer, crushing my mouth to his.

His spicy-sweet taste stokes a warmth that spreads through my body. His hands move to my shoulders, gripping me tighter as he opens to me, letting me dip my tongue inside before catching his lower lip with my teeth.

Desire courses through my veins like a rampaging wildfire, the heat going straight to my cock. I pull back, and he gives me a wicked grin, slides off the couch, and drops to his knees in front of me.

I cock my head at him, my dick at half-mast already.

“I was meant to be taking care of you.”

“You are.”

I snort as he pushes my knees apart, nestling into the space between them. It's so *Huck*.

Unlike me, my packmate derives pleasure by giving it. He wants to be used. A vessel for pleasure.

Huck jerks the zipper down on my jeans, gripping the waistband along with my boxers to peel them off, forcing me to lift my hips for him. He leaves them caught around my ankles as my cock springs up, smacking me in the stomach.

I groan as he takes it in his fist, a shudder running down my back.

He shoves me back roughly and I clench my fingers in his messy hair, pulling tight, the way he loves it. He moans and shuttles his fist up and down my cock, taking a moment to rub around the slit, gathering the moisture there before bringing his finger to his mouth and sucking on it.

“Fuck my mouth,” he says with a growl.

It's the last thing he says before I tug him down and he swallows my cock in one motion. His hands move to my hips, gripping them hard as he swallows me down to the shaft where my knot is slowly beginning to swell.

Huck gags on my length and I let him draw back for short breaths before I thrust into his throat with a grunt. He chokes

and moans, his lips taut around my shaft.

He moves his hands to grip the edge of the sofa, fingers nearly tearing into the cushions as he takes everything I can give him. I piston my hips up into his mouth, holding his head in place as I do exactly as he asked.

I cease only for a second to let him catch his breath and he strokes me perfectly, swirling his tongue over the head, teasing me, starting an inferno of pleasure that quickly flares out of control.

He looks up at me with half-lidded eyes, and I can feel his every breath against my most sensitive skin. He releases my base and I drive back in hard, unable to get deep into his throat as my knot swells to fullness, pulsing with the need for release.

Huck grips it in his hand, swirling his hand around it back and forth, his touch lubricated by his saliva, pushing me to the brink of ecstasy.

“Fuck,” I curse, so close as I fuck into the heat of his mouth and his hand keeps its relentless pace around my knot.

We need this release like we need air. There’s too much tension and emotion in the cabin, and we haven’t touched each other in days. If we weren’t so needy, I’d take my time, savoring his hand and mouth and ass the way he deserves, but we’re both too wound up for anything more than this frantic moment on the floor in front of the fire.

“Touch yourself,” I snarl, my jaw clenching around the words.

He unzips his jeans, reaching in and taking himself in hand, tugging on his cock in the same rhythm as I piston between his lips.

Watching him bring himself to his own edge is what fucking sends me over.

“I’m going to—fuck—”

He sucks hard on my tip as I spurt into his mouth, waves of pleasure wringing every muscle.

Stars flash behind my eyelids, and I sink back against the back of the couch, shaking, pressing my palms into my eye sockets as I fight to catch an unbroken breath.

A second later, Huck groans as he comes, white streams shooting from his dick and hitting the floor. He rests his head on my thigh, breathing hard. I run my fingers through his hair, coming down from the high.

My knot pulses with a muted ache, still craving the slick heat only an Omega can provide. The image of Juliet comes unbidden to mind and I clench my teeth against it, trying to remember...she's not our Omega.

ELEVEN

HOLY SHIT.

I've never seen anything so hot in all my life.

I overheard them talking when I woke up. I thought I heard them mention something about the Williams pack so I snuck downstairs to eavesdrop.

Not my finest moment, but if they knew something about the pack I was intended for, I want to know. Besides, I was also curious to know if they found anything more at the crash site.

But by the time I worked myself down the first few creaky steps, far enough to see into the living room, Everett had already stormed out and instead of eavesdropping, I found Huck and Dean in the single most erotic act I've ever witnessed.

It felt like time had stopped, narrowing the universe down to just them. I couldn't move. Couldn't look away.

My chest had risen and fallen faster and faster with every moan that slipped past their lips.

It was like I was frozen there in that moment with them.

I should have turned around, gone back upstairs. It wasn't until they'd both come that the spell was broken, and I could shake myself out of it enough to move.

I've read about Alpha-on-Alpha action in books, but I've never seen anything like it in real life. Reading is one thing, though, seeing...that was something else entirely.

My arousal is a wild, living thing. A wave of energy, palpable and electric. My skin prickles as sweat collects on my forehead and slick pools in my panties.

It doesn't help it's been days now without my heat suppressants. I'm already feeling the effects of not taking them, and seeing *that* definitely didn't help.

Every time I look at Huck, Dean, or Everett, I feel myself flush with an almost illicit sense of desperation. I'm becoming increasingly aware of my own scent, and if we go on like this much longer, if I go into heat, it'll be like I'm a living homing beacon for their cocks.

I may not be experienced, but I know how this works.

I need to get my hands on some kind of suppressants, before it's too late to revert the effects of being too close to them.

Hopefully, the guys were able to find something in the plane wreck. Even a few pills might help stave it off a bit longer, but what happens then?

It's hard to think about anything logically with this wild sense of need pounding through my veins. The craving has taken over, overwhelming my senses and overpowering my rational thinking. My thoughts are clouded by anything other than Alpha, Alpha, *Alpha*.

Breathing tightly, I knock the back of my head against the closed door to my room and run my hand down my stomach, fingertips edging at my waistband. I bite my lip, knowing that touching myself will only make this harder. Make it worse.

Not to mention, the scent of my arousal will be even worse than it probably already is, letting the alphas downstairs know just how hot and bothered I am.

I'm shivering, but not from any chill.

There's an idea.

Before I can change my mind, I wrap the blanket from the foot of the bed around my shoulders and sneak from the

bedroom, creeping on silent steps down the stairs, not wanting to disturb the two lovers on the couch.

But when I peek into the living room, they're gone, and I take a sharp right around the banister to the narrow hallway where I'd noticed a back door earlier. I pass a stocked storage room and a closet sized bathroom before coming on the double doors leading to a deck that's snow covered despite the awning above.

I unlock it, opening it with a slow turn of the knob to step outside, softly closing it behind me. I hiss as my bare feet sink into the soft snow.

The night is cold, but the crisp air is refreshing against my heated skin. I slowly take a deep inhale and exhale, staring up at the sky. The stars are shining brightly somewhere above, but the storm clouds and snow have blocked any view of them. It makes me feel like I'm inside my own little snow globe, hidden from the outside world.

My arousal only fades a little when the cold wind hits me. The respite lasts a few seconds before I hear a grunt and the distinct *snap* of splitting wood.

I hold my breath, squinting through the snow to see Everett chopping firewood not ten yards from the base of the deck.

His coat is gone, and his plaid flannel shirt has been tossed on the wood pile. The wind blows fiercely, whipping the snow around him, turning his hair unkempt and wild. His presence is powerful and awe-inspiring, as if he were some ancient God of nature, at home in the snowy forests.

His rippling muscles and agile movements as he swings the axe making it seem like a graceful dance. The sound of the blade splitting the logs creates a rhythm broken only by the occasional *thunk* of an errant piece of bark or wood chip being tossed away in the process.

Moonlight plays off his glistening skin, and to my surprise, actual steam wafts from his back. I trail my gaze down to his pants, where his large bulge is very noticeable through his

tight jeans. I want to touch it, to bring him pleasure, and for him to bring me pleasure in return.

Suddenly, he stops and turns his head, his nostrils flaring. He's scented me. His entire body stiffens, and he gazes at me with a curious expression. He steps forward slowly, his body tense and alert. His movements are graceful yet deliberate as he closes the gap between us, taking one step at a time.

He comes to a stop in front of me and stands still for a moment, his head tilted to the side as he studies my face.

“Go back inside, you'll get sick.”

His words are lost to me. Lost to the beating of my heart in my ears and the wind.

I can feel the intensity of his gaze on my body like flames, and my breath catches in my throat. His amber eyes lock with mine, and I see something in them that makes something in my core feel weak and needy.

The alpha looks dangerous, but I want to touch him. His menacing energy radiates from him, practically screaming with his power. His dark eyes pierce through my soul, and his strength calls to me in a way I can't ignore. He might be off-limits, but it doesn't stop my body from trembling with desire.

The winter wind lashes against my skin as I reach out a trembling hand, pressing it to his chest in a daze. He flexes against my touch, his skin warm, damp with melted snow despite the chill in the air. His scent hits me, carried my way by an errant gust of wind and I whine low in my throat, my thighs pressing hard together.

“Do you feel it?” I whisper, and his eyes flare.

The wind howls through the trees, and I shiver, my breath fogging in the chilly air. It's as if the wind itself is scolding me for stepping out of line and breaking the rules.

He reaches out to cup my face, fingertips grazing my skin like a whisper of something more.

I tilt my head into his touch, my heart fluttering with anticipation, but I stop at the fury—no, the *hatred*—that

appears in his gaze. Like the flicking of a switch, the desire that'd been there a second ago has vanished without a trace, making me wonder if I'd seen it there at all.

The chill of the air feels insignificant compared to the chill of Everett's animosity radiating toward me. I step back, recoiling from him, my feet crunching in the snow, and it seems to startle him out of whatever reverie he's in. He storms away, clearing the steps back down to the woodpile in one long jump before striding right past it, into the trees.

"Wait!" I call out, but my voice is swallowed by the wind. I stumble down the few steps to the wood pile. "Everett!"

I want to know what happened. What I did to make him hate me so much. But he doesn't come back and I shiver against the elements, knowing that I'll only get lost in the storm again if I venture any further in this white wilderness.

I struggle to catch my breath, overcome with the ache of unfulfilled need, and the sting of his rejection.

Why doesn't he want me?

I shake my head.

Why does it matter?

Clarity comes back in bits and pieces, the feeling of overwhelming arousal fading away. Logic and thoughts that were blurred by need become crisp and clear. And then, the conversation I overheard before Dean and Huck's little sex show comes to mind.

"She's promised to the Williams pack."

Is that why Everett looked so disgusted with me? With himself?

Is it only because I'm already claimed or is there more?

I got the feeling they knew the Williams Pack, or at least knew *of* them.

The reminder that soon I will have to leave sends a pang of hollow sadness to my gut and I double over at the sudden visceral feel of it.

Maybe it was the stew.

There's no way I'm getting attached to these Alphas already. That's ridiculous. It's barely been a couple days.

As I prepare to go back inside, my gaze falls on Everett's plaid button-down hanging off the woodpile, brushed with snow.

My teeth click together as I'm overcome with an uncontrollable urge, snatching it up and taking it with me. The fabric carries his intoxicating scent and I press the wet shirt to my nose, inhaling deeply.

I sneak back through the door, my toes burning from the warmth inside after being frozen in the snow. I tiptoe up the stairs to my bedroom, close the door, and lock it.

I remove all my clothes, dropping them on the floor next to the side of the bed before I lie down across the plush mattress. The cool fabric of the sheets is instantly turned warm by my heated skin and I pull the covers over me, wedging Everett's damp shirt beneath my pillow.

With his scent still so bright in my nose, I slide my fingers under the elastic of my panties, finding my slick clit, swollen and sensitive. I dip my fingers into my slick and swirl the tip of my index around the bundle of nerves, bucking into my own hand as waves of pleasure start through me.

I cup my other hand over my mouth to stifle my own cries as I rub myself.

Self-pleasure was taught as a tool for self-preservation at the academy. A way to stifle our basic urges. Get through the worst of our heats. Some of the more old-fashioned instructors still frowned on it though, saying it ruined our 'purity.'

But at least self-exploration was all I'd practiced at the Academy.

Other Omegas, both boys and girls, would sneak into each other's rooms and experiment with each other. I'd even heard of one of the Omegas in my year sleeping with her beta history prof. Which was the rumor to why he'd been fired later that

term. I'd never done any of that, though I'd be lying if I said I wasn't tempted.

As for me? In those late nights I found out how to tease myself into a fever, rubbing against my slit until I was whimpering into my pillow. I would imagine different celebrity Alphas every time, wondering which fantasy would be most like the men I would end up with. Would they be like the prince and his royal pack overseas? Or like that one football player the whole internet has proclaimed '*Daddy Fox?*'

Tonight, that fantasy is Everett. I imagine him touching me, plunging his fingers inside me while cooing dirty words into my ear. I imagine him rocking his pelvis into me, his rock-hard cock thrusting deep inside me as his knot swells, filling me with a groan and telling me how perfect I feel as he forces his knot in, stretching me wide.

My abs tighten and my pulse thumps in my throat before I press down with one firm circle, and the world explodes into fireworks. I bite my free hand to keep from crying out, the pleasure overwhelming me. My entire body tingles in delight, every movement sending sparks across my skin.

I revel in the sensations as they ripple through me, each wave more intense than the last. Every nerve ending is brought to life, and I feel my blood pounding through my veins.

When I come back to myself, drenched in sweat and my muscles lax, I hear a low, nearly feral growl at the door. Then angry footsteps pound down the hallway, stomping loudly down the stairs.

And I know...it was him.

TWELVE

THE LIGHT of morning brings with it some relief—a good mutual orgasm will do that—but the atmosphere in the cabin is still tense. Being so close to an Omega has put us all on edge, and I can't imagine how Juliet is doing with all this Alpha energy crowding her. It's been far too long since any of us have encountered an Omega, and I'm worried it will tear us apart if we don't find a solution soon.

Either that, or we'll tear *her* apart.

Not good.

For now, my part is to make breakfast, and having a task to put my mind to is a welcome distraction. She hasn't come downstairs yet, but Juliet's scent is especially strong this morning. It woke me out of a dead sleep in the wee hours of the morning and I've been at half-mast ever since.

I've already made oatmeal and fried up some venison sausage thawed in the sink. I'm working on scrambled eggs when Juliet comes downstairs, dressed in another pair of pajamas, this time ones that belong to me.

They swim on her, but I can't help but be proud that I've once again provided something for her. She's even wearing my favorite pair of slippers; the ones Dean had that leatherworker down near the ranger station make. Like the pajamas, they are huge on her, but the sight of them brings a smile to my face.

She sits at the island counter, eyes wide as she takes in the platters of food I've prepared. "Did you make all this?"

“I did,” I tell her, sliding her a cup of the cider I’ve had simmering on the stove. “Help yourself. The fruit isn’t fresh, but I canned it in August. It tastes better than it looks.”

“I wish I knew how to do that.” She takes a sip of the apple cider and sighs in satisfaction.

“Maybe I could teach you.”

She has no idea how difficult she makes it to resist bending her over right here, right now. It would be so easy to take what I want. I doubt she’d fight me now. I sense that she’s as powerless to her desires as I am. A few sweet words in her ear, a well-placed hand between her thighs, my lips on her neck... and she would be mine.

Not mine. Not ours.

She’s theirs.

She blushes, not replying as she takes a plate and dishes herself the tiniest portions imaginable of each breakfast option.

I point my spatula at her with sharp accusation. “I’ve told you, this isn’t the Academy. *Eat*. You need to regain your strength.”

She glares at me for a moment, then darts her eyes to the venison sausage. She takes two, and I cheer inwardly. Fucking Academy ruining the joy of a good, greasy breakfast, just like they ruin everything else.

After she takes a few bites, she puts down her fork and fiddles with her fingers.

“What’s up, baby girl?” I ask, sensing her nervous energy.

“I, *uh*, I overheard you three last night,” she says, biting her lip. “I was on the stairs.”

Shit.

“What exactly did you overhear?”

A moment of thin, ready-to-shatter silence stretches between us, and for a moment I think she may have decided to hold her tongue. But then she dares a dangerous question.

“Do you know the Williams Pack?”

She’s lucky Everett isn’t in earshot.

“It’s complicated. Suffice it to say we aren’t their biggest supporters.”

I take a deep breath and try to find the best words possible to explain our relationship without hurting her relationship with them, as much as that idea stings. No need to frighten her about the den of animals she’s supposed to be moving into. Heathens, really.

“Did they do something?”

“They hurt someone we loved.”

“Your Omega?” she asks, eyes widening.

“No, not our Omega.”

That’s you, baby girl.

I clear my throat, shaking off the intrusive thought. “But someone very close, all the same.”

Her fingers shake, and she folds them into each other to keep them still, her chin jutting out. “Are you...are you going to make me leave?”

I abandon the spatula, taking the eggs off the burner to turn to her, laying my hand over hers. She looks up at me with round, sad eyes, and my heart sinks.

I lift her chin so she can see the truth in my eyes. “Never,” I tell her, a fire sparking inside at how strongly I want to keep that promise, even though I may not be able to.

Even though she could be working with the enemy.

But looking into those big doe eyes now, I can’t see how that would be even remotely possible. She’s too good. I can see it there, deep in her stare. Juliet is sunshine. Pure and perfect and warm.

If she knew what the Williams pack was all about, she’d never bond with them.

A fierce need to protect her from them nestles in my gut, taking root.

I haven't realized my grip on her hands has tightened until her throat bobs, her eyes darting between my face and our joined hands.

I release her, muttering an apology as I slide onto the stool next to her.

"We may have our differences with Victor Williams, but we would never send you out into this blizzard."

She probably overheard Everett's suggestion that we do exactly that, which is what prompted this. *God*, I could throttle him for scaring her.

"Even on the clearest summer days, this mountain can be a treacherous place. The snow has slowed for now, but there's more predicted in the forecast. Looks like this storm isn't over yet. Just sit tight here with us, and we'll look after you, baby girl."

Hopefully, she isn't considering running away after everything she overheard last night. These mountains are dangerous, and fleeing could cause more harm than good. If something happened to her...

I don't think any of us would be able to forgive ourselves. Not even Everett.

Besides, the thought of her being out there, alone and scared in these unforgiving mountains, fills me with dread.

"If the storm has slowed, is it possible to call my family?"

I clench my jaw, wishing I could give her that, but it still isn't possible. "No. But Dean managed to get some messages out sometime in the night last night. We've contacted the ranger station and the local news. Gave them your name and that you're alive and would like to get a message to your family. I'm sure they'll be finding out you're alive and safe and sound any minute now."

She visibly sags, blinking as her eyes well with tears that don't quite spill over.

“It’s all going to be okay, baby girl.”

But there’s something else we need to discuss, and it’s just as difficult of a topic.

I brush a strand of hair from her forehead and continue. “We need to talk about your heat suppressants. As you might’ve overheard, Dean and Everett couldn’t find them in the wreckage yesterday. And being in close contact with three Alphas is going to bring your heat on pretty fast.”

Just the mention of it makes my cock take notice, and my Alpha brain calculates all the surfaces in the kitchen where I could make her mine.

I swallow, bringing my focus back to reality.

“We’ll figure something out,” I say gently, trying to sound reassuring. “We have options that might help you manage your heat, but we need to discuss them.”

A flash of fear crosses her face before she audibly swallows and nods. “I thought they would find them, I really did. They were in my carry-on, and if I survived, I thought maybe the bag would have too, since it was near me. I’m sorry —” Her throat catches, and she takes a quick breath. “I’m so sorry.”

She’s speaking like it’s already happening. Like it’ll be all her fault if *we* can’t control ourselves.

That’s exactly the type of backward thinking I want to expunge from her mind.

We’d sooner force ourselves out into the snow and tell her to lock all the doors before we forced ourselves on her, unless...that was what she wanted.

Huck, I chide myself mentally.

Dammit.

Her shoulders droop in disappointment, and I itch to make any bad feelings of hers go away. My baby girl should never feel disappointment.

“Hey, you’re not a burden here. Never have been, never will be. And all’s not lost yet. I know a thing or two about medicinal herbs. I spent the morning flicking through some of our old herbology books and I think I can brew you a special tea, and maybe make a soap that’ll help block your scent a little better. They’ll help reduce the symptoms, but I don’t think either will be as effective as the pharmaceutical ones you were using.”

I pause for a moment, then add, “It’s all we have right now. We’ll just have to make do until we can make the trip to the ranger station and see if they have any in stock.”

I hope she doesn’t sense my doubt at that prospect. To my knowledge, there hasn’t been an unbonded Omega in these mountains for ages. There would be no reason to stock such a thing and even suppressants expire.

“This is such a mess,” she mutters, running her hand through her hair in frustration.

I couldn’t agree more.

Dean comes in, still in his boxers and sleep shirt, his hair sticking up everywhere like a dandelion puff. He yawns and reaches for a plate, filling it to capacity before he finally murmurs out a sleepy, “Good morning.”

He shuffles over to the island, his feet slapping against the wood as he goes. Yawning again, he plops down in a chair, stretching out his arms before reaching for the fork next to him. He shovels food into his mouth mutely, barely pausing between bites.

Dean’s never been a morning person. I pour him his coffee, plopping in one spoonful of sugar before setting it down next to his plate. He grunts his thanks, sipping it with a sigh.

His gaze wanders around the room while he eats, blinking sleepily as he takes in his surroundings.

As the coffee kicks in, he zeros in on my face, and winks, his gaze slipping to my half hard cock pressing against the soft fabric of my sweats.

To my surprise, Juliet blushes a deep rose color.

Oh, *shit*.

If she overheard the argument last night, then she must have heard or seen Dean and me—well, hell.

I hope she liked the show as much as I enjoyed participating.

I catch her eye and give her a questioning look, and she flushes harder.

Yep, she saw it all.

I'm a little turned on by the thought.

Dean, if he has noticed anything through his sleepy fog, doesn't seem to care. He simply grabs yet another sausage and stuffs half of it in his mouth, but not before making a lewd gesture with it.

I groan internally, tempted to reach over and cuff his ear.

“Dean,” I say, my tone a warning. He takes the hint and gives me a sheepish smile before focusing his attention back on his plate. If it's possible, Juliet's blush deepens even more and her gaze flicks away, but not before I catch the glimmer of amusement in her eyes.

The front door opens, and Everett comes in, pausing to shake off the chill of the morning and sniffing the air. His heavy footsteps echo throughout the room until he slips off his boots. His full lips are pursed, and his brow is furrowed.

“We're going to make some soaps and teas to hold back Juliet's heat,” I announce. Getting right to the subject is best when Everett's in this sort of mood.

He doesn't even look at her as he dishes out his breakfast onto a plate, practically throwing the food onto it like it's wronged him. “Good. I can hardly breathe in here.”

Juliet's small whimper feels like a sharp stab to my chest, one that sends ripples of pain throughout my entire being. The sound is so raw, rejection radiating from her sad eyes, reaching out to me and demanding acknowledgment.

I'm supposed to make the bad feelings go away, but I can't do that if we're the ones causing them.

The lines around Everett's dark eyes tighten, but that's his only outward reaction to the sound. Bastard.

"Everett," hisses Dean, but to my surprise, Juliet straightens, lifting her chin.

"It's all right," she says with a shrug. "I'm not offended. It's not like you're my intended pack and besides, it must be hard for all of you."

She stands and takes her plate to the sink, running water over it to rinse it.

"I'm going upstairs. Let me know if I can help with the tea."

She practically marches past Everett, the princess that she is, and I'm half-filled with pride at her attitude, and half in misery from her earlier statement.

It's not like you're my intended pack.

God, I wish we were. I glare at Everett, wanting to smack him in the head, but Dean speaks before I can say anything. "Why are you such a jerk to her?"

Everett stares back at us, his expression unreadable. No emotion shows on his face, and he doesn't respond to Dean's question. He's like a stone wall, unmovable and unbreakable, and if I hadn't experienced the gamut of his emotions over the years, I'd think he had none at all.

I shift uncomfortably on my feet, and the movement catches Dean's eye.

"You're not fucking helping anything," he says to Everett with a sigh. "Other than making her feel even more unwelcome here than she probably already does."

He heads out of the room, not looking back at where Everett stands motionless.

For a moment, there's a flicker of something softer in Everett's scowl, but it disappears within a second. "You'll

need willow bark for the tea,” he says, deadpan. “Be ready to go in twenty minutes.”

He leaves his plate untouched on the counter and storms back to the door.

I stare at all the dishes and uneaten and half-eaten food spread out all over the kitchen, knowing they’ve left it all to me to tidy away.

“Twenty minutes? You’ve got to be shitting me.”

Everett slams the door behind him.

THIRTEEN

I FIND Juliet curled up in a ball on her bed after the others leave.

Easing into the room, I see her eyes are red and puffy, and she looks even more fragile than when Everett brought her in from the storm. Was that really only a few days ago? I feel like she's been part of our lives forever.

She stares ahead with a wistful look in her eye, a stark contrast to the prideful girl who snapped at Everett at breakfast. Her hands are tucked in tightly against her chest. I sit on the edge of her bed, close enough that she can feel my presence, but far enough so as not to startle her, and rest a hand on her arm.

Her skin feels cool to the touch, and I curse quietly to myself, tugging the covers up around her huddled form before going to add another log onto the dying fire in the small hearth across the room.

“You shouldn't be in here,” Juliet whispers as I sit back down on the edge of her bed.

I settle in place, just being there with her for a moment, the action of remaining speaking louder than any words I could say. And I wasn't sure how I'd say them anyway. She isn't our Omega. I can't tell her that if she asked it, I wouldn't ever leave her side.

I never cared much one way or the other about adding an Omega to our pack, but now I know there will be a hollow place inside when she goes.

“I’m staying,” I say quietly. “Unless you want me to leave.”

She burrows into the blankets with a snuffle.

“Do you like chess?”

“Chess?”

I pull out of my phone. “It might take your mind off things. My buddy Miles and I built this app.”

I open it on the screen and show her. “Normally you play with the computer or with someone you know, there’s even a chat function—see?”

“You built this?”

I nod. “But since there’s no service right now it’ll only work to play against the computer or two-player style on the same device. It’s what I do when I need distraction. You can borrow it if you want.”

She blushes a little, licking her lips. “Maybe some other time. I don’t want to take your phone.”

“Why not?” I ask, scoffing. “It’s basically a high-tech brick until we can get service again.”

Juliet chews her lip and I know there’s more she wants to say, but doesn’t.

“What is it?” I ask, knowing I shouldn’t push her or pry, but unable to help myself. I can’t stand the sight of her hurting. “You can talk to me, you know, if you want.”

She purses her lips, gaze shifting over the blankets on her lap. “I don’t want to be the cause of any animosity between you and your packmates.”

I give her a tight smile because I can’t deny that she isn’t causing that. I could have slugged Everett in the face for how he was acting toward Juliet just now, but to be fair, I want to hit him at least a few times a week. Doesn’t mean I do.

She swallows hard, tilting her head to look up at me through watery eyes. “Especially with your problems with the

Williams pack. My pack now, I guess. That's probably why Everett hates me."

"He doesn't hate you."

"It's not official," she continues as if I didn't say anything. "...but about as official as it can be without an actual bond. Guess that makes me one of *them* to him. I'll be gone soon, though, and he won't have to tolerate me anymore."

She pulls the covers up to conceal her face, the lump of her body beneath shuddering with a quiet sob.

I peel the covers back, catching a tear on her cheek with my finger. "Sunshine, no one is counting the minutes until you leave. Not even Everett. And you're not gone yet. So, come on. Get dressed and you can help me with the chores. Maybe you'll feel better if you've done something to earn your keep?"

I give her a look that I hope conveys that it's ridiculous and no one expects that from her, but her lips part in a little 'o,' and hope erases some of the doubt from her big blue eyes.

"Don't worry about your shoulder; we'll find plenty of things you can do without it."

Juliet looks up at me with a doubtful expression on her face, but I see the determination in her eyes. She slowly pulls herself out of bed and wanders over to the bedroom closet.

I feel a pang of guilt as she rummages through the bin of all our old clothes we keep stored there, hating that she has nothing of her own. We'll have to do something about that.

She picks a pair of sweatpants that belong to Huck and a thick sweatshirt that belongs to Everett, though I'm sure the majority of their scent has long since left the fabrics since they've been in there for well over a year.

One of those things we always forget to haul to town to the thrift shop when we go.

Now, though, I can't imagine getting rid of any of them. Not while her scent lingers in their fibers.

She picks at the collar of the sweatshirt, sniffing it. Her eyes flash with sadness and longing. Stupid Everett.

Everything we could ever want is right here waiting for him in our guest room, and he can't see past his own stubbornness. I hope Huck gives him an earful while they're out foraging.

I leave her room so she can get dressed, going down to the hall closet to find her a snowsuit. It's cold out there, but it's the damp snow against her skin that will really affect her health if we aren't careful.

I take down the red one-piece snowsuit from the closet, the one Huck shrunk in the dryer last year, and a pair of thick winter boots for her small feet. I gather three thick pairs of wool socks to go with them, hoping they fill the gap and make walking easier.

The boots she arrived in aren't suited for the weather and her feet will freeze in minutes out there in the likes of them.

"I'm going to look like a snowman," she groans, looking at the snowsuit in my hand as she joins me in the hall.

"A sexy little snowman," I correct, tapping her on the nose.

She blushes, and I hold out the snowsuit for her to step into. I zip the suit up to her neck and tie on a white scarf and the only extra hat we have, it's floppy on her, and keeps falling to cover her eyes.

"Hold on," I say, folding the worn material up until it stays on without blinding her. "There," I say finally, patting her on the head. "That'll have to do."

She was right—she does look like a little red snowman, all puffy and fucking adorable and I'm half tempted to find her a carrot, just to mess with her.

I grab some work gloves from the basket in the hall and tuck them into her pockets as we make our way to the front door. The snow is still coming down hard, but the wind has eased some and I make a mental note to check for any replies

to my messages and try the radio to see if I can get through to the ranger station.

Juliet gasps a little at the chill. Her face is already turning pink with the cold, but I take her hand in mine and lead her further into the snow-blanketed world. “I’ll take you to the barn, first,” I say. “We have to take care of the goats and chickens.”

“You have goats?” she says, eyes wide.

“Where did you think your milk at breakfast came from?” I grin at her and lead her to the barn, never releasing her hand.

We make our way, the snow crunching beneath our boots, our heads bowed. Inside, I brush the snow from her cheeks and lead her to the goat pen. It’s small and cozy, with a pile of hay in one corner, providing a soft bed for Winnie and Maggie. They perk up when they see us, bleating in greeting as Juliet rubs their ears with fascination.

Maggie pushes against Juliet’s knees with her knobby head, trying to topple her over, making her laugh, while Winnie licks her gloves, cleaning them of any traces of snow.

She giggles, her eyes alight and a ball forms in my throat.

“I love them,” she says, allowing herself to be pushed down into the hay, where Maggie and Winnie lavish her with bleats and little kisses, looking for a treat.

“Oh my god,” she squeals. “Can we just stay here the rest of the day?”

I laugh at her and once we’ve got Winnie and Maggie packed full of treats and calmed down, I show her how to milk them.

Winnie nearly kicks over the bucket at Juliet’s first attempt, but Maggie stands still as she milks her. Juliet’s face screws up in a look of pure concentration as she works Maggie’s udders, careful not to hurt Maggie, but determined to get every drop of milk even while using only the one hand.

She’s a natural.

Whether or not helping with the chores would help Juliet feel more like a useful member of the household or not was yet to be seen, but I'd succeeded in my true purpose. She was good and distracted. Happy.

"What about the chickens?" she asks once we finish with the milk and tidy away the buckets.

I'd been planning to take her back inside, but who am I to tell a lady when she's finished?

I laugh quietly to myself, leading her to the other side of the barn, which has been separated and turned into a winter chicken coop. Inside, the coop is lit in a warm, friendly light, and makeshift aisles have been created to give the chickens plenty of room to move around. The smell of hay, dust, and feathers fills the air as a dozen chickens cluck contentedly and peck around for seed. Most of them are brown hens with speckled feathers, but we have a golden rooster with a bright red comb.

"That's Roosevelt," I explain, pointing him out to Juliet. "Huck's a history buff, so he named him. He doesn't crow—Roosevelt, not Huck—no matter what we do. He's just here to keep his girls happy, I guess, and not to be an alarm clock for his humans."

I cross my arms, surveying the coop and its residents, and let out a sigh. "Honestly, Huck is the one who usually takes care of the animals. I'm not great with the chickens."

Juliet chortles, pointing to my expression. "Dean, don't tell me you're afraid of chickens?"

"What? They're mean," I argue, feeling my eyes widen at the insinuation, going on the defensive. "They don't like me. They peck at my legs and that one," I point at Henrietta deep in the furthest stall, "she likes to chase me around screaming bloody murder."

"Fine," she says, still holding back laughter. "Then show me how to feed them."

I fill up the feeder with grain and then open the door to the coop area. "Toss it to them, like this," I say, demonstrating for

her.

The chickens appear to be sizing me up with their small black eyes, and I shift on my feet. As soon as Juliet tosses them the pellets, they turn into sweet, excitable creatures for her, just as all the other animals have. She's good with them, too, and I'm not surprised. Even Henrietta clucks happily as she pecks at the grain near Juliet's feet.

"Any more animals to take care of?" she asks when the bucket is empty, her eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Sorry, baby," I say, adjusting the wool hat on her head. "I just have to get more firewood. You have no idea how much we go through when the weather gets this cold. But you don't have to help with that—I don't think your shoulder can handle it. You just stay with me and keep me company."

She nods and follows me out of the barn, stopping only to pet Winnie and Maggie one last time.

I head to the firewood pile and take off my coat, throwing it onto a rack where we keep a few tools. Juliet leans against a nearby pine, her eyes on me. I give her a nod that she returns, but I see her eyes grow soft and hazy, sweeping over my body in a speculative glance.

Such a bad little Omega, eyeing me up when she has a pack waiting for her. I shouldn't encourage her.

Or...maybe I should.

She could still change her mind. The bond hasn't been made yet.

Hmmm.

Maybe I can make this more interesting for her. I unbutton my flannel top slowly, the cold air hitting my skin but not making me shiver. My skin is so hot that the chill feels like an icy balm. Once the shirt is unfastened, I shrug it off my shoulders, and it falls into the snow.

Juliet lets out a breathy gasp, and it's the sexiest thing I've ever heard.

“Like what you see?” I call out, and she nods, her cheeks pink. I grab the axe and reach for a nearby log. I quickly get to work, splitting the log into manageable chunks. The rhythmic *thunk* of the axe’s blade against the wood drowns out all other sounds except the pounding of my pulse in my ears. I’m only aware of two things—the burn of my muscles as I chop the wood and Juliet’s heated gaze on me.

The wind shifts and her mouthwatering scent fills me.

We need to get her that tea ASAP, or I might not be able to keep my hands off her much longer.

I look up to find her stepping forward.

She looks at me like there’s no one else in the world, her gaze filled with need.

I think I’m done with wood chopping for today. I toss the axe behind me. It lands somewhere in the snow with a *shhk*, and I know I’ll need to dig it out later or Everett will kill me but right now I don’t care.

I walk toward Juliet, meeting her halfway. She stops once we’re a breath apart and with practiced restraint, I raise a hand to gently loosen and untangle the scarf around her neck, gliding my thumb over her pulse point. Her heart is going a million miles a minute, and her skin is fiery to the touch.

The glassy sheen to her eyes tells me all I need to know but. “Sunshine, are you in heat?”

She shakes her head. “No. Not yet, but I...”

“What do you need?” I murmur, and her pupils darken.

With a tug, I pull her closer, my attention on her pillowy pink lips. My heart races as our eyes lock, and I can feel my pulse thumping in my veins. She’s so close now, and I’m painfully aware of her familiar scent, the warmth radiating off her skin.

“I’ve never been kissed,” she whispers just as I begin to dip my mouth to hers. “I don’t know what to do.”

My cock twitches, and I let out a possessive growl, overcome with the visceral need to be the *first*.

“We’d better fix that, then,” I murmur.

I wait one beat, then two, giving her a chance to say no. When she doesn’t protest, I lean down and take her sweet mouth with mine, doing my fucking damndest to give her the best first kiss any woman has ever had.

It’s light and innocent at first, and she lets out a little whimper-moan as her gloved hands grip the front of my jacket, keeping me close.

Her languid sighs linger in the air around us, whisper-soft cries that echo her need.

I guide her lips open with mine, deepening the kiss. I slip in, tangling my tongue with hers, and she trembles against me. Every inch of my skin feels electrified, and our kiss intensifies as I become lost in the sweet taste of her lips, inhaling my Omega.

There’s no Everett or Huck. No storm or plane crash. No Williams pack. Only Juliet and me and our bodies crying out for each other.

She pulls back with a gasp, her lips puffy and swollen. “Please,” she begs, and my pants grow even tighter at her cry. “I need more, Dean. I feel like I’m...like I’m—”

“I know,” I say on a hot breath, because I feel it, too. The need. Strong and insistent like a fist pounding a locked door, demanding entry.

“Will you touch me?”

I swallow at her request, feeling heat flood through my belly, engorging my cock in my snowsuit.

If I do this, it will change everything—what she means to our pack, what Everett will think. It could even endanger us with the Williams pack if they find out.

If she’s never been kissed, then she’s a virgin, too. Which was probably half the appeal for those motherfuckers.

Part of me wants to take it just so they can’t have it, but even hypnotized as I am now by her scent and her beauty and her *soul*, I can’t do that to her.

“I—”

She lets out a little whimper, her tiny fists in my jacket tightening.

There are a lot of things we can do that aren't fucking.

“Inside,” I order before scooping her into my arms. She places a hand on my neck, her touch sizzling every nerve, and I stumble slightly in the snow. Drunk on everything that is *Juliet*.

FOURTEEN

—
JULIET

DEAN YANKS the front door open so hard I'm shocked it doesn't fall off its hinges.

It swings back, crashing into the wall, but he doesn't even blink an eye.

He strides into the room, eyes blazing as he lays me on the couch in front of the fireplace. He towers over me, and I feel the intensity of his gaze as he looks down at me. My heart races in anticipation of what might come next, my body trembling with desire.

Without a word, he kneels beside me and tenderly takes my face in his hands. His lips press lightly against mine, sending sparks racing through my veins. He switches his technique back and forth between gentle and nearly feral, making my toes curl with anticipation.

His voice is rough and low when he speaks, like every syllable costs him something. "Tell me what you need. How to touch you."

My body tells me I need to be fucked, hard and fast, so I feel it for days. I want to listen to her and lean into that desire. All I'd have to do is say the words. *Fuck me. Use me. Make me yours.* He would obey. I can see it in his eyes.

My mind, though, is more logical. Still clinging to the thinnest thread of common sense, and my raging desire resents myself for it.

“I need to take it slow,” I manage through clenched teeth. “I need to take the edge off.” I know I’m being vague, but I don’t know how else to say it.

He exhales, his eyes darkening. “Me too, sunshine. Me too.”

He leans forward and kisses me, drowning me in his crisp linen and cedar wood scent before pulling back, staring at me hungrily. I bite my bottom lip, my gaze trailing over his muscles.

Dean’s chest is defined and toned, a masterpiece of strength and masculinity. His muscles ripple with power as he moves, accentuating his broad shoulders and solid frame. The smooth contours of his chest command attention.

I want to lick it. I want to taste his skin and see his eyes roll back with sensation.

And really, we’re already on our way to breaking all the rules, so why not? There’s nothing stopping me at this moment. I lean forward and let out a soft moan as I press my lips against his muscled chest, tasting the salty sweetness of his skin on my lips.

His eyes close in bliss as I kiss my way down the hard lines of him.

My hands wander over his chest, feeling the contours of each muscle and reveling in the warmth emanating from his skin. He gasps at my touch when I run a thumb over his nipple, surprised at my own confidence. I didn’t know I could make an Alpha feel this good, and a drunk sense of power ripples through me.

“Again,” he whispers, so I comply, running the edge of my nail along the hard nub. He shudders and circles my wrists with his fingers, pushing me away. He shakes his head, and says in a low rasp, “Your turn.”

Dean takes the hem of my shirt and lifts it over my head, exposing me to his lusty gaze. He takes in the sight of my exposed body, the swell of my breasts accented by my pink lace bra. It was the one I’d been wearing in the crash—one I

anticipated wearing in front of my new Alphas and pack. Now I find myself reveling in the attention Dean gives it, when really, I should be covering up and running away with my tail between my legs. The forbiddenness of it all only makes me want him more and maybe it's wrong, but it feels so *right*.

His hands roam over my curves. "So perfect," he whispers before his lips trail down to my neck.

His mouth feels like fire as it moves over my skin, sending shivers of pleasure down my spine. His breath is hot against my skin, intensifying the flames that persist just under the surface.

Hands sliding under my back, Dean unbuttons my bra, lifting the lingerie from my body and tossing it to the floor by the couch. I arch toward him. He grins at me, a little mischief sparkling in his eyes before he runs one single finger over each nub, slow as a tortoise.

He's torturing me. *Actually* torturing me. I whine, begging him with unintelligible sounds.

"I've got you," he concedes. His touch sends near-violent shivers through me, and I feel my heart pounding in anticipation. His hands close around my waist as his mouth finds one of my nipples, licking and teasing it in a way that sends sparks flying through my blood. His hands travel down to my hips, his fingers digging in as he pulls me closer.

After swirling his tongue around the tight little bud, Dean gives it a little flick, sending waves of pleasure throughout my body. I cry out, the sound echoing against the walls, underscored by the crackle of the fireplace.

Little explosions go off inside of me, quivering previews of what's going to happen. I arch my back, and he slides a hand into my jeans, undoing the button to give his large hand more room. He dips his hand underneath the fabric of my panties, and I moan his name as his fingers slide through me, parting me to apply pressure that makes me dizzy with need.

He nips at my lips again, and I moan. His touch sends a shock wave of pleasure through me, radiating from my core

and washing over every inch of my body. He tentatively enters me with the tip of his finger, and his eyes nearly roll back.

“Fuck, you’re so tight.”

His finger is big and thick, but there’s no discomfort. Our bodies are meant to be explored together in every way, and I’m more than ready for him.

His fingertips trail along my inner walls, teasing and tantalizing as they move. Every stroke takes me deeper into bliss until I’m trembling under his expert hands. His thumb finds my clit, rubbing and circling it with the perfect amount of pressure to send me spiraling even higher. My moans fill the room, joining in with the crackle of the fire and creating an intoxicating soundtrack.

Every nerve in my body is alive, and Dean must sense how close I am to flying off that precipice. He slides another finger deep inside of me and thrusts hard and fast. My breath catches as my pleasure climbs even higher.

Sensing my mounting pleasure, Dean lets out an animalistic growl that reverberates in the room. “Come for your Alpha, Sunshine.”

I careen over the edge, screaming with pleasure in a wave of bliss unlike anything I’ve ever experienced before. Touching myself has never felt like this, and I buck into his hand as I’m hit with smaller shocks of sensation until I hit the ground once more.

Dean kneels above me, unbuttoning his pants and releasing his thick cock. I’ve never seen one in person before, and though I’m dizzy from my orgasm, I can’t help but stare at it. It’s gorgeous, long, and girthy, with a slight tilt to the right. The reddish-purple head is swollen and shiny, and as he clutches it in his fist, Dean’s face twists into a mixture of pain and pleasure.

He gives it a languid stroke, bringing himself to his own orgasm but I’m aching to touch him. To taste him.

“Can I touch you?”

Pain crosses Dean's eyes as he watches me slide to my knees before him.

"Sunshine, you don't—"

"I want to try."

He clenches his teeth, giving a tight nod as I move in. Dean removed his hand from his large cock, his breathing coming quicker, erratic with anticipation as I take him into my hand.

He jerks at my touch, sucking in a sharp breath. "Fuck, Juliet."

I bite my lip, pressing up on my knees as I stroke him, watching as a perfect bead of pre-cum forms on the head of his cock.

I lean in and lick it off, tasting his salt.

His hand slides into my hair, gripping, not too tightly, just enough to send a shiver of pleasure through me at the knowledge that can make him this wound up with desire.

"Do it again," he groans, and I lick his tip a second time, drawing another shudder from his body. Beneath my hands, his knot begins to swell and I marvel at its beauty, my mouth watering, slick gushing between my legs, aching to be filled by it.

It's so...big.

I can't imagine it possibly fitting but I ache to try.

No.

I can't.

But I can do this.

I take Dean into my mouth, gently curling my hand around his knot. I have no idea what I'm doing, but I take him in anyway, licking and sucking, drawing little spurting moans from his lips.

"You're doing so good, Sunshine."

I preen at the compliment as his hand relaxes in my hair and his other one comes to join it, brushing my hair back from my face to hold it in a loose ponytail at the nape of my neck.

“Just like that.”

He starts to move, gently thrusting into my mouth, helping me give him what he wants. I curl my hands around the backs of his thighs, loving how he’s using me to find pleasure. I swirl my tongue around his tip and he convulses against me so I do it again. And again as he continues his steady thrusts.

I pull him closer, wanting him deeper and I look up through my lashes to see his eyes squeezed tightly in pleasure as he nudges the back of my throat and I open up for him, trying not to gag.

“Holy shit, Sunshine.”

I take him deeper, past the dam at the back of my throat, trying to show him I can take it. That I want it all.

Dean pulls back before pressing back inside, losing some of his perfect sense of control as his thrusts become more manic, more messy as he rocks his hips, fucking my mouth.

“Oh fuck,” he groans. “I’m going to—”

He tries to pull back, but I keep him where he is, my fist around his swollen knot kneading gently as he explodes.

Dean comes apart with a feral cry, coming into my mouth. The taste of him slides over my tongue and I moan as I swallow him down, my eyes watering.

He collapses over me, careful not to crush me with his weight.

“I’ve never—” I start, and he raises his head, his gaze sated and sleepy—and a little fearful.

“I know, Sunshine,” he says on a shaky inhale, pulling me tight, pressing a kiss to my hair. “You did so good.”

My skin prickles at the compliments, making me shiver with ecstasy. I want to do it for him again.

I’ve never felt like that. It’s never been like that.

We lie there in the firelight, our breathing heavy and our bodies intertwined. Something heavy passes between us, and a wave of sadness hits me. I want him. I want all of them. I'm already so attached that I know leaving them will break my heart.

"Come on," he finally says, nudging me. "Let's go get cleaned up."

He stands first, reaching a hand out to help me to my feet. I wobble a little, and he smiles at me. "That good, huh?"

"You have no idea," I sigh, my skin still tingling all over, in every place he touched me.

"I think I do," he says, taking my hand and leading me upstairs to his bathroom. It's not like Huck's. Dean's is made up of darker hues, making the room feel warmer, cozy like a cave.

He starts the shower, testing the water until the temperature is just right before leading me inside. The warm stream runs over our sticky and sweaty bodies, washing away the evidence of what we did downstairs.

He takes a cloth and slowly washes my body with it, caressing my curves and sending little shivers through me. We look into each other's eyes without saying a word. I'm not sure what I'd say even if I could speak, and I don't want him to stop touching me.

Was it just pheromones or something more, something deeper?

We towel off and as I make for the door, he calls to me.

"Where are you going, Sunshine?"

"I thought..."

"Stay."

My heart lurches in my chest, and in his eyes, I see the true meaning behind the word. He isn't asking me to just stay with him, but at least I can give him that.

Sensing my hesitation, he gathers up the blanket from his bed and follows me to the door. I bite my lip as he leads me back down to the couch, spreading the blanket out over us both in front of the fire. As we lie there in each other's arms, I feel my body turning to liquid against him, my limbs heavy with pleasure and exhaustion.

“Sunshine?”

“*Hmmm?*”

His arms tighten around me. “I’m glad you’re here.”

FIFTEEN

SEARCHING for the herbs for Juliet takes longer than I expected, and it's time we don't have. There's a clearing near the river where I know we'll find the bark but the other herbs we'll have to hope Huck already has in the cellar. With the snow it'd be impossible to uncover anything salvageable, but it doesn't stop us from giving it our best shot, digging down to the frozen earth in search of the weed that grows along the river in the fall.

We manage to dig up a whole patch, but frozen as it is, there's no telling whether or not Huck will be able to use it.

With the sun setting—damn these shorter winter days—and our time running out, Huck and I finish foraging what we need.

Hunting for herbs in a snowdrift isn't exactly how I wanted to spend my day, but it's better than being back at the cabin with Juliet. Numb fingers are still preferable to being suffocated by her scent.

I stuff the last of the weed into my sack as Huck yells out, "Oh man!"

I jog over to where he has dropped his shovel and is pawing at the ground like a hound dog going after its bone.

"Look there," he says, pointing at a clump of dirt, roots, and ice. "Lobelia and burdock. We'll need these, too. I think I can still dry them out. I *knew* there were a few patches here."

He removes his gloves and carefully starts to dig up the roots from the frozen ground, dirt caking under his fingernails.

“They’re great for clearing out congestion. And, of course, postponing the heat of an Omega.”

He continues digging until he has enough material harvested. After a few minutes, he stands up and shakes the herbs, dirt falling off the roots, which I gather is the bit that he needs.

“There. That should do it.”

He gathers the herbs into a small bundle and tucks them into his backpack.

“Next year, we’re making our own herb garden,” I huff out, stretching the kinks from my shoulders where I’ve been hunched over a shovel. At least here, deep in the trees, we’ve been protected from the worst of the wind and snow, but we’ll still need to trek back through it to get home.

“Why? You think we’ll need these again?” he asks playfully, and I give him a look.

There’s no way I’d do this shit twice. If I ever end up with a runaway Omega in heat in my house again, I’m moving to the Yukon.

Huck knocks my shoulder with his. “Joking,” he says pointedly. “But not about the garden though, we should have our own. You dig, I’ll plant.”

I shove his arm. I haven’t felt this playful in days, not since that girl arrived. Huck must sense it because he picks up a clump of snow and throws it at my face.

I drag my sleeve across my forehead, wiping away the ice crystals clinging to my eyebrows. “You little shit.”

Huck retreats, shifting his weight from one foot to another, before scooping down and retrieving another fistful of snow. He passes it back and forth between each hand to form a round ball and applies pressure, tightening and hardening the form.

I hold up a hand. “Don’t.”

He lets it fly.

It careens right at my head, and seconds before it can strike me in the nose, I weave, gather a fistful of my own snow, clench my hand, and sling it at him. It all happens so quickly he doesn't have time to dodge, and I hit him in the ear. He yelps, stumbles, and gives me a devilish grin.

We dodge and weave as each of us tries to take the other out. Every now and then one of us manages to make a direct hit, resulting in an even bigger battle. With both of us determined to win, neither of us will give up until we're both exhausted. He finally tackles me—well, I let him tackle me—and I feel his hard length even through his snow pants.

I never spend as much intimate time with Huck as Dean does, but that doesn't mean I don't crave it sometimes. Once, when Taylor was still with us, we were all close in that way. And often. But I...

"Enough," I say, pulling back. "This isn't the time or place. Our cocks will freeze right off."

He starts to laugh, but I can hear the strain in it as I shove at his shoulder.

We take a break to catch our breath as we sit against a nearby tree and observe the snow-covered landscape in front of us. The sun is slowly setting, although we can barely see the colors through the cloudy sky. The peacefulness of the moment envelops us, reminding me how much I love living out here, away from society.

Away from people like Victor Williams and his pack.

I glance at Huck, who studies me with a contemplative look.

"What?" I ask.

"Don't kill me for asking this," he begins, and I roll my eyes. Though he's probably going to bring up something about Goldie back at the cabin. Nothing good ever comes from a question started that way. "But do you think your issue with Juliet is because of what happened with Taylor?"

My stomach sinks, and I freeze. Huck bites his lip, shying away from whatever expression is on my face.

Taylor. *My Taylor.* Our lost Alpha.

Though we were a pack of four, there were special bonds between Huck and Dean—still are—and Taylor and me. The days we spent living together in Anchorage will always be my best memories, and even out here, sometimes in my sleep I hear him calling my name as if we're back there in that high-rise. As if nothing bad ever happened to him and he's still with us.

We don't talk about what happened with Taylor often. Five years ago, we had warned him against taking that dangerous oil rig job, but you couldn't stop Taylor from doing anything he had his mind set to. *"I'll be fine,"* he'd said, grinning at me with his mischievous green eyes. *"And I'll make enough in one summer to get that cabin you always wanted."*

The day he'd packed up to leave, he'd taken me upstairs, and had me fuck him into the mattress until we both saw stars. *"I just needed something to remember when it's lonely out there,"* he'd said, pressing his lips to mine in a rare soft kiss. I should have begged him to stay right then and there. Everything about the situation felt wrong.

Two months later, a steely-eyed lawyer from the Williams pack showed up at our door. In one hand, he had Taylor's death certificate. In the other, a check of compensation for our loss.

Hush money.

Blood money.

Numbly, I took it, along with his handshake and his mumbled, *"sorry for your loss."*

You don't think clearly when your heart is shattering, but I should have asked more questions. I should have torn the man apart.

Luckily, Dean did ask questions. He had his hacker friend he knew from college look into the files from the accident.

The files stated Taylor had been careless and hadn't followed protocol. That was bullshit. Taylor was a stickler for the rules.

Hell, he'd get on our case if we didn't floss correctly. There's no way he'd mess up something like how to wear a safety harness.

According to a chain of emails Dean found soon after, he hadn't messed it up. There was a long back-and-forth between the manager of the oil rig and Victor Williams, with a final email from Victor that simply said to "clean it up."

Our calls to the Williams pack weren't answered. And who could we go to with this? Everyone powerful was in Victor's pocket, and no one would believe us. So, we mourned our packmate, and our hatred for the Williams pack grew.

We took the compensation and built the cabin, but in addition, we now worked against anything environmental the Williams pack might have their fingers in. Ground leakage and contamination studies, oil spill cleanups and coverups, you name it.

Someday, we'll have enough data to take them down, but we aren't there yet.

Huck's still watching me with wary eyes, so I shrug.

"I didn't want her here *before* we found out who she belongs to."

"I'm not saying because she's going to Victor," he says. "But maybe you feel like she's going to replace Taylor somehow, you know, if she were to stay."

A twinge of fearful realization hits me.

And I want to tell him he's wrong, but maybe...maybe he's not.

Taylor takes up such a big part of my heart that even the idea of ever adding another person to our pack scares me to death. I *should* always feel this hollowness where Taylor used to be. It would be wrong not to. A betrayal.

I shrug again because my voice doesn't seem to be working.

Huck looks away, giving up the topic for now.

“We should get back,” he says at last, but I notice his eyes are a little damp. I’m not the only one who lost someone that day, and I need to be mindful of it. I reach out and clasp his shoulder, giving it a squeeze through his jacket. He grips my hand with his, squeezing me back before cocking his head, giving me a coy smile.

“Race you to the snowmobiles.”

He takes off running, and I follow, the snow crunching under my feet as I overtake him and win. I throw my head back in a loud laugh that echoes off the trees.

Huck starts up his snowmobile, shaking his head at me as I preen at my victory.

“You’re a good Alpha, Everett,” he hollers over a gust of loud wind, revving his engine. “Even if you’re a pain in the ass.”

“Hey—” I mumble in protest.

“Last one to the cabin gets laundry duty!”

The ride back is swift as we follow our previous tracks in the snow. We get back to the cabin to find Juliet and Dean laughing on the couch in front of the fire, wrapped together in one big blanket. Juliet is curled into Dean’s side, and he presses a soft kiss to the top of her head. I scent the air, and a growl reverberates in my chest.

He *touched* her.

I stomp toward them, thinking only *mine, mine, mine*, my instincts unsure whether to lash out at Dean for touching the girl, or the girl for touching Dean. My jealousy snaps through the bonds like an electric shock, and both Huck and Dean stiffen, eyes going wide, but it’s enough to make me stop in my tracks.

“Everett,” Dean says, his voice rougher than normal, his face going a little pale. As it should. The little shit got busy with the Omega while we were digging in the mud and snow.

Huck stands there with his arms slack at his sides. I wonder if he is imagining all the things Dean might have done to the Omega while we were out freezing our asses off.

“Did you have a fun time?” I say, each word slow and deliberate. His blush deepens, but at least he doesn’t stand down.

“He was helping me,” Juliet pipes up, and my attention swivels to her. “I needed help. I needed...relief.”

I should be able to help you, too, I think, a pang of jealousy and something like possessiveness twinging my chest. A vision hits me where I’m laying Juliet across the rug in front of the fire, tugging her pants down low and burying my face in her slick cunt, savoring the taste of her. I bet she tastes like the sweetest honey down there, if her scent is any indication.

“Did you knot her?” Huck mutters, breaking my reverie, my Alpha hearing catching the strain in his voice.

“No!” Dean and the Omega shout at the same time and somehow knowing he didn’t touch her in that most intimate—most primal—of ways soothes some of the rage still burning inside me.

“She’s not ours to keep,” I say fiercely, my heated gaze fixed on Juliet until she looks away.

They *all* need reminding.

Juliet hangs her head and I hate how I can sense her guilt and shame and sorrow. I don’t want her to feel that way.

I want to make her mine. To take care of her, to love her and protect her as my own. It’s the way I feel every moment of every day about Huck and Dean.

But it’s also the way I felt about Taylor, and look where that got me. I loved him. I took care of him. But I didn’t protect him, and now he’s gone.

At the thought of my lost packmate, I shake my head, trying to clear the spell of the Omega. When it doesn’t work, I

give them a decisive nod and leave for the night, heading to my own cabin instead of using the bedroom upstairs.

It's better for everyone if I am nowhere near that Omega.

SIXTEEN

HUCK COMES in from the kitchen after a half hour, carrying a large, steaming mug. His hands are stained green and yellow from working with the herbs, and he tiptoes as if he's carrying a rare Ming vase and not a cup of tea. Although, in this situation, it may be just as valuable.

“Your tea,” he says, handing it over to me. The steam wafting from the cup tickles my nose with a rancid door, but Huck's chocolate ginger scent is enough to make it bearable.

I have this longing feeling of wanting him to stay with Dean and me.

After what we did while Huck and Everett were gone, I'm scared that Huck is mad at me, too. I search his face for the hint of a smile, or forgiveness, but it isn't there. He returns to the kitchen as I wrap my hands around the hot mug and inhale more of the steam.

I stare down into the cup before glancing up at Dean.

He leans over to peer into the depths of the mug. “It looks...well, it looks interesting. Drink up, Sunshine.”

No joke. It's a pale greenish-yellow color, the same as the stain on Huck's fingers, and the smell is ashy and bitter. I take a sip and gag at the taste.

“It's not meant to be a pre-dinner cocktail,” Dean says. “Just take it all in one swallow.”

“That's what she said,” calls Huck from the kitchen, nearly making me spit out the tea. There it is. Reprieve. A break from

the tension. I lift my middle finger toward the other room and then drink the entire contents of the mug in a couple gulps before thrusting the cup toward Dean.

“Okay, I drank it,” I splutter, hacking and coughing. “Get this foul-smelling thing away from me.”

He puts it on the far end of the coffee table, and I take deep breaths, trying to get a fresher smell in my nostrils. “That was terrible. But thank you, Huck.”

“No problem,” he says, coming in with another mug. “Here’s a cocoa chaser. Don’t gulp this one, you’ll scald your throat.”

I take the mug and eagerly inhale the sweet chocolate scent. I take a small sip, letting it get rid of the rank taste of whatever herbs were in that horrid drink. Putting down the mug on the coffee table, I find Huck and Dean staring at me like I’m about to explode.

“What?” I ask, swiping at my face. “Do I have something on me?”

“Is it working?” asks Huck, tilting his head to the side like a curious pup. “Do you feel any different?”

I groan and throw my head back against Dean’s arm. He takes the chance to snuggle me tighter. “Give it a chance to work,” I laugh. “I’m no doctor but I don’t think anything works *that* fast.”

Huck lets out a dramatic sigh and sprawls in his armchair.

“What’s that saying about a watched pot? Come on, distract me with conversation,” I order, stretching out my leg and toeing his calf.

“What do you want to talk about?” asks Huck, toeing me right back. “The stock market? The history of Denmark? What you and Dean were up to while we were gone?”

I blush.

Should have seen that coming. He bided his time well.

Dean chuckles. “Ignore him.”

That's much easier said than done. I grasp at straws, trying to think of a way to divert the subject off of me. My mind conjures a flashback of Huck and Dean on this very sofa, as if handing me a get out of jail free card. I lift my chin. "Tell me about you two. How did you meet? How long have you known each other?"

Huck nods at Dean. "Dean and I have known each other since we were kids. We grew up in a pack outside of Chicago. We spent a lot of time together, mostly in the woods, building a treehouse, and fishing in the lake in the summer."

"Like a Hallmark movie," Dean says.

That last sentiment is a sweet one, but his voice is hollow and carries an edge.

I look up at him, wondering if he'll clarify, but he won't look at me.

Huck continues. "My sister was three years older than me, and she went off to the Omega Academy at fifteen, like most Omegas do. She came back...changed. She wasn't herself anymore, like I told you before. I hated it."

He shifts uncomfortably in his seat, and I can also see the weight of the memory pressing down on his shoulders. "I was your typical mouthy teenager, so I started asking questions. A lot of questions. As I got older, I started participating in underground Omega Rights movements, and went to some demonstrations. I got a name as a troublemaker. My sister did *not* approve."

He stops talking, and the room hums with silence minus the crackling of the fire. I lick my lips, wondering if I should accept that as my answer and wait for Huck to say something else.

"At the same time," Dean chimes in, "I was starting to realize that I didn't fit in with the rest of my family. They were focused on tradition, and I just couldn't get behind it anymore. And then on top of that, Huck and I realized our feelings for each other were more than best friends. That normally wouldn't be too much of a problem—it happens and it's how

many new packs are formed—but I was being groomed to join the pack of one of my dad’s business partners from childhood.”

He shifts next to me.

“I was never supposed to stray from that path. When my dad caught Huck and me together one night, everything exploded.”

His brows knit together, and I resist the urge to snuggle up and tuck myself under his chin, offering nuzzles of comfort. His gaze shifts to the fire, and the crackling amber flames reflect in his eyes.

“I thought I was going to get kicked out of the pack for sure. My dad was livid. He had devoted his entire life to ensure the success of our pack and he couldn’t accept that his only son would be the one to break from tradition. He lost control. Things were said that... it doesn’t matter anymore. In the end, my dad left with a warning: if I ever saw Huck again, I would be banished from the family pack.”

He looks at Huck, who picks at a loose thread on his pants and won’t make eye contact. “Huck wasn’t as lucky.”

Huck’s brow furrows. “His dad helped my parents finance our house and when it got out what was going on between us he pressured my family to kick me out. Used the house as blackmail. I was already in enough hot water, and the pressure from him was the final straw. They kicked me out when I was sixteen.”

“That’s terrible,” I mutter. “What did you do? How did you survive?”

Huck surprises me with a smile that crinkles the corners of his eyes. “I was homeless for a grand total of about four hours before Dean found out what happened, left his family and the pack, and showed up at the bus station looking for me.”

“The rest is history.” Dean shrugs. “I had a cousin in San Diego that we stayed with long enough to finish high school. After that, we got into a local college, worked our asses off, and became the fine gentlemen you see before you.”

I grin, relieved that the story has a happy ending. “So, it was a Hallmark story after all.”

The Alphas share knowing looks and nod in unison.

Huck smiles at me, his eyes soft. “We found our own way in the world and made our own family. Our own pack.”

Dean holds me a little tighter to him. “It’s amazing what you can do when you have something—or someone—to fight for. You can survive anything.”

I wish I could have a bond like that. I wish I could be part of *their* bond.

“Is that when you met Everett?” I ask, and to my surprise, Huck bursts into laughter, and Dean joins him. I look sharply between them, eyes narrowed. “What am I missing? What did I say?”

“Everett will kill us if we tell this story,” Dean says, chuckling, “but to hell with that. He’s probably chopping wood again.”

“Does he ever do anything else?” I muse aloud.

Huck snorts into his own cocoa. “Not since you got here,” he mutters.

I cringe. Have I really disrupted Everett’s life so much that he has to escape outside all the time?

“Unsurprisingly,” Dean says, “Huck and I were not looking to be part of another pack. We were young, we had each other, and that was enough. But one day, somebody”—he waggles his eyebrows at Huck—“got the idea to try a threesome.”

“And you got Everett to agree to it?” I squeak out. I can’t imagine it.

“We went to a bar,” says Huck, choking back a laugh. “And to ease Dean into the idea, I told him to pick anyone in the room, and if I couldn’t get them to come with us, we’d wait to try again. Dean decided to be difficult and picked the stony mountain man sitting in the corner.” He lowers his voice

to a gruff growl and mimics Everett's voice. "Give me whiskey or I'll hit you with my axe."

"How did you get him to agree?" I ask incredulously.

"Oh, I didn't," says Huck. "But he was with his best friend, Taylor, who was up for anything. *Anything.*" He waggles his eyebrows and accentuates each syllable. "Everett said no, Taylor smacked him across the back of the head, and the next thing I knew, we were all in a taxi on the way to Taylor's place. We had a hell of a night, but we saw something in Everett and Taylor that we knew we needed. Within a month, we had all gotten a high-rise together and become packmates."

I frown at the obvious—there are only three Alphas here, not four. Before I can ask, Dean rubs my shoulder gently and murmurs, "Taylor's not with us anymore, honey. He died a few years ago."

Grief for a man I've never met makes my throat tighten, but not enough to suppress the sob that builds in my chest. Huck's eyes widen, and in a moment, he's come over to the sofa.

He puts his arms around me, and I'm in an odd hug sandwich between the two of them that feels amazing.

"I'm sorry that happened to you," I say, a tear falling down my face. I can't understand why I'm crying over this unknown Alpha. I didn't know him. His death shouldn't affect me in this way and yet...

He could have been mine, I realize.

He *should* have been mine.

Just as something unexpected is growing between Huck, Dean, Everett, and me, he would have been part of that experience, no matter what the ending. Instead, I'm left with an ache wondering what he would have been like.

I feel suddenly selfish and greedy. I have no right to grieve him. He wasn't mine to lose.

“Hey,” says Dean, squeezing my hand. “Don’t cry for Taylor. If there’s anyone who lived life to the fullest, it was him. I could spend the whole evening telling stories about his adventures and barely touch the surface.”

“Remember when he talked us into walking the Great Wall of China?” a voice says from the corner of the room, and we all look up, startled. Everett is there, leaning against the doorframe and I wonder how long he’s been there. A distant look is in his eyes and though they’re full of grief, there’s the happiness of a memory there, too, gleaming under the glassy surface of his honey brown eyes.

“God, yes,” breathes out Dean, his eyes tracking Everett as he crosses the room to sit in his big leather armchair. “I didn’t think Huck would make it.”

“I thought it was just a couple flights of stairs!” complains Huck. “No one told me any differently!”

Dean flicks him on the forehead, and the atmosphere instantly changes as the men tell me stories about their adventures with their lost Alpha.

Dean pulls out his phone, showing me pictures, and at one point, they have me laughing until I can barely breathe at some story of the four of them getting lost hiking the Appalachian Trail.

Only Everett remains quiet, lending his deep voice now and then to add color to a story, but mostly listening to the rest of us with a small sorrowful smile. As the night grows old and we start yawning, I realize the back of my neck is cool, and my body doesn’t ache. Unless it’s a placebo effect, Huck’s tea seems to have helped after all.

At least for now.

“We should all get some sleep,” Dean announces. “It’s late.”

I stand to go to bed, stretching as I yawn, and feel eyes on me.

Everett stares up at me from where he’s sitting in his chair, elbows over knees, hands steepled at his lips.

I offer him what I hope is a look of understanding. He makes more sense to me now. And if he still wishes it, I'll do my best to stay away from him.

“Hey, Goldie?”

“Yeah?”

“I got something for you.”

He gets up from the chair and goes to his jacket hung up by the front door, tugging something from the inside pocket before returning.

“Found it in the wreck.”

He hands it to me and I gasp at the familiar cover, hugging the book to my chest. It's all but ruined, but it looks like most of the pages are still readable. Tears well in my eyes, remembering my Dads as they gave it to me to read on the flight. I hope the message Dean sent out has reached them by now. I hope they've stopped worrying.

I sniffle, wanting to hug him but knowing he probably wouldn't like that. “Thank you,” I say instead, giving him a grateful nod.

The fire in his gaze ignites a small flame inside me, and when I drop my gaze I see his fists are both clenched tight at his sides. Knuckles white.

“You're welcome,” he says in a rumble and I turn away, muttering a quick goodnight before I do something he might not like. His scent is thick in my nose; winter woods and warm cinnamon and I know I'll be snuggling his stolen shirt tonight as I fall asleep just so I can keep that scent there, deep inside my lungs where I wish it could stay.

SEVENTEEN

OUTSIDE, the storm takes a violent turn, but inside the cabin, the next few days carry on without incident, and a certain ease settles on the house.

At first it's all laughs. Huck teaches Juliet how to jar soup so it stays fresh longer. Dean and her play that chess app he built all hours of the night. Apparently, she actually beat him once, a feat neither Huck nor myself have ever accomplished.

She helps with laundry. She sings along to Huck's old Sinatra records while he and Dean spin her around the living room floor in front of the fire.

Watching them...seeing them so happy...makes me feel guilty as hell and I don't have it in me to force them to keep their distance anymore. Not with everything I can feel through the pack bonds. They want her. They care for her.

And in the middle of the night, I wake, stirred to the brink of madness from their desire for her through the bonds. As if my own wanting for her wasn't enough.

At least Juliet's heat seems to be holding off for now, but the tea is already getting weaker, each dose less and less effective. Which means she's drinking more of it, and soon Huck won't have anything left to make more.

The ease of a couple days ago is already fading. She's jumpy around us now, as if she's had too much caffeine, and she spends hours in her room, reading the nearly burned book I rescued from the wreck. Mostly, however, she stays away from us, locked in her room until it's time for the next dose.

Last night, her scent came and went until the constant blooms of her aroma drove me crazy and I left on the snowmobile, choosing to spend the night hunting instead of breathing her in.

I could see the tension in Juliet's eyes as I left. She knew why I was leaving, but she didn't try to stop me. She didn't say it, but I got the feeling she understood that if I stayed too close, I might lose control and succumb to my animal instincts. I wasn't as strong as the others in that way.

As I rode along the snow-covered landscape, I took deep breaths of clean winter air, allowing it to cool my burning desire and clear my mind, but I knew that within days it would be no use. The hunt would satisfy me some, but not in the way I craved most.

Only a certain golden-haired Omega could do that. No matter what I do or where I go, there is no escaping her presence. It seems like all of nature is inviting me back home to her.

Which is probably why I'm here right now, sitting in the fucking armchair downstairs in the middle of the night instead of sleeping in my cabin where I should be.

What if the Williamses come for her?

What if a bear gets inside?

What if...

There are too many what ifs.

As long as she's a guest of my pack, she's my responsibility to take care of. I won't see her hurt or harmed on my watch.

Besides, my old lazy boy recliner is comfortable enough to sleep in, if you like a firm mattress, and don't mind the odd lump.

I'll be gone before anyone else wakes up. They won't even know I slept down here.

I clench my teeth, considering the door and my smaller one-man cabin a one-minute walk away through the snow, but

I can't go. I can't put my damned finger on it, but something's wrong. I can sense her discomfort. And that's crazy since we haven't even claimed her, never mind bonded her, but I can just feel it.

She needs me here.

What's that?

I strain to hear over the low roar and crackle of the fire, but I swear I heard...

There it is again. Is she awake?

I rise, careful not to make a sound as I pad across the floor and grip the stair railing to listen more closely.

A pitiful whine peels out from her bedroom upstairs and my heart pounds as the sound sinks into my chest and twists.

Goldie.

I race up the stairs and rush to her room. When I push inside, she's still lying in her bed; her cheeks flushed as she kicks back the covers.

Her scent hits me like a brick fucking wall and my nostrils flare.

The tea is failing.

I check myself, fingers curling in at my sides.

She isn't in heat yet, but if this is even a tiny preview of what's to come, we're all fucked unless we can find her some suppressants and stop this thing in its tracks. I'm no longer certain the distance between the main cabin and my own will be enough if we need to separate.

My cock hardens to steel in my jeans, and I clench my jaw, taking small sips of air to keep my head straight as I move into the room.

It breaks my heart to see Goldie like this, and I ache to console her, but I don't trust myself to go any closer.

Footsteps thunder in the hall, and Huck and Dean appear, breathless and wide-eyed. "It's coming," I say ominously. "Get

a damp cloth.”

Dean nods and dashes off while Huck rushes to pull her into his arms, hushing her as he brushes strands of sweat-dampened hair from her forehead until Dean returns.

Huck takes the cloth, dabbing at her forehead.

“Your tea isn’t working,” I tell Huck as Juliet shudders in his arms. “We’ve got to try something else.”

Dean presses the back of his fingers to her neck and pulls away with a hiss.

We were idiots to think a couple of stupid boiled plants could fight against our body’s instincts.

Huck holds her tightly as she nuzzles into his chest. “What else is there to try? The herbs are all we have.”

“When I was with her,” Dean says slowly, “and I mean *with her*... It seemed to help. Between that and the tea, maybe...”

I shake my head. It’d help all right. It might take the edge off, but it would also push her headfirst into her heat.

Already, Dean and Huck’s pupils are dilated just from being in the room with her, and it’s only been a few minutes. Dean’s chest rapidly rises and falls, and a bead of sweat runs down his temple. No one here is in their right mind.

Me most of all.

Much longer and all three of us will be in rut and then where would we be?

Fucked. That’s where.

Despite the urgency of the situation, I take a deep breath and try to stay focused. Dean and Huck look at me, searching for direction. Orders. Despite my best efforts, I can’t promise them anything but the truth.

“She isn’t fully in heat,” I say. “Imagine how we’ll be in a few days. Hell, maybe a few hours.” I pointedly look at Huck’s sleep pants, which are tented with his erection, before returning my attention to the girl.

Goldie's still mostly asleep, oblivious to the panic all around her.

Dean tries to wake her with a glass of cold water pressed to her lips but she refuses to drink. She only moans, pressing her forehead into Huck.

"We're going to need to head down to the medical station and pick up some suppressants for her," I decide. Huck and Dean exchange glances, but I continue. "They have to have some. Even if they're expired, take them anyway. We can double the dosage. It has to work."

Dean raises an eyebrow. "Who do you want with you?"

I can tell he doesn't want to leave the Omega, neither of them do, so they won't like this.

I sigh and shake my head. "I'm not going. You two are."

"What?" Huck snaps.

"Someone has to stay here and look after her. Someone who can keep their distance. I know you both think you're helping, but being close to her is only going to make this worse. I can keep my distance. You can't."

"But if she goes into full heat, you might not be able to," Huck argues.

Both dread and arousal snake through my blood at the thought, twisting around each other until they're one and the same.

"What's your plan if she does go into heat?" Dean demands and heat races up my back at the insinuation. "Or if you go into rut?"

I swallow hard, my chest tightening. "I'll lock myself in my cabin until you get back with the medicine."

Although, I don't know if any lock on the property would be able to hold me back if I'm in full rut.

The rangers better have some fucking suppressants.

"Everett, be realistic," Dean protests. "That's cruel, for both of you. If she goes into heat, and you go into rut, then

fuck her. It's natural and it will relieve you both. You aren't taking advantage of her. You'll both want it. You'll both need it. You would be hurting each other by denying it."

"And what about Victor Williams?" I snap. "What's he going to think when his precious pure Omega shows up covered in our scent? Ruined? He'll know what happened. He'll make hell for us, and he'll make her life worse. He'll reject her. Then who will take her?"

Huck opens his mouth to protest but closes it again, his shoulders slumping. I know what he would say but he knows better than to utter it.

My words hang in the air for a moment, and Juliet stirs, a wordless murmur coming from her cracked lips. "Leave as soon as the sun rises," I instruct the others, never taking my eyes from the girl. I'd rather they left now but I wouldn't ever send them out in this storm at night.

"That should give you enough time to get down there before the station closes, even if you have to take it slow. If it's too dark to make the trip back tomorrow, the rangers have extra cots at the station and I expect you to use them. Don't put yourselves at risk. Now, go on. Get some sleep."

Sunrise is just a few hours away, and they'll need all the energy they can get. They tear themselves from the Omega at my command, trading her heavy comforter for a thinner blanket and placing a fan in the room first to try to cool her down.

I wait until they've gone to retrieve the med kit, returning with my skin bristling as I go to her.

The bed creaks as I sit next to her, fussing in her sleep.

Tentatively, I reach out, lifting her onto my lap, trying to rouse her from sleep, but she's still so out of it.

"Goldie?"

I give her a little shake but she lets out a whimper at the movement and I wince. "I'm sorry," I whisper, feeling so helpless in the face of her pain.

I unzip the med kit, searching for the sedative I keep there. We've only used it once, when Huck dislocated his shoulder and we had to reset it. I think this instance warrants another use. I gather up the bottle and syringe.

"Goldie," I whisper, kneeling next to the bed. "I need to give you some medicine, okay? It'll help you sleep."

I set the sedative on the table and prepare the syringe. Once it's filled, I pause for a moment, watching Juliet's face for any sign of awareness.

"Goldie," I try again, leaning in to scent her neck, unable to help myself. My nose brushes the soft spot just below her ear and my lips pull back over my teeth.

She gasps softly, her eyes rolling open.

"Everett?"

I pull back, regaining control, clearing my throat. "Goldie, can I give you something to help you sleep?"

Her eyelids flutter back closed, but she nods, letting out a little whimper.

I sigh, glad I won't have to inject her without her permission, though I'm not sure how coherent she actually is.

Her eyes remain closed, and her breathing has a hitch in it.

Taking a deep breath, I carefully inject the sedative into her arm. A tightening of the skin between her brows is the only indication she's felt anything at all.

As I wait for it to take effect, I stroke her hair gently, murmuring soft words of comfort I know she can't hear.

Soon, her fitful breathing turns deep and even. A wave of relief washes over me as her body relaxes and the tension in her face eases away. Juliet is asleep, but I still feel the weight of responsibility for the struggles we'll both face tomorrow. I continue to stroke her hair, wishing I could do more besides hope for the best. Like that's ever worked for me before.

At this rate she could be fully in her heat before the others leave at sunrise.

As I rise from the bed, her pillow shifts and my lips part at the edge of plaid fabric peeking out from beneath. I tug the shirt free, my jaw snapping closed. I thought it'd been buried in the snow.

Goldie took it that day out in the snow. She's been sleeping with it.

I should take it. The less alpha scent she has around her, the more likely she'll be able to keep her heat back, but I can't bring myself to remove it. A muscle in my jaw ticks and I put it back where I found it, tucked beneath her pillow.

I think about what Dean said, about just giving in to our instincts and our need for each other. This much is true—I can't stay near her for much longer without giving in to my primal urges, but she belongs to another pack. Our enemy. The enemy that took Taylor away from us.

I could fuck her, just to spite Victor. The thought pops into my mind, but besides the satisfaction of revenge on Victor, it brings a tsunami wave of guilt with it. It won't bring Taylor back. And I'm not sure it's what Goldie would want when she's in her right mind.

She was adamant when she first came here that she wasn't ours.

Goldie deserves better than to be used as a tool for revenge.

I press my lips firmly together to lock away the anger that threatens to spill out. Taylor's rugged face flits into my mind, and determination rises within me, forcing me up from her bed, and out of the room.

EIGHTEEN

THE SUN IS BARELY visible through the tall, entwined trees around the cabin when I send Huck and Dean off to go to the ranger station at the base of the valley.

I escort them to the garage, a small and unassuming building at the edge of the property that could be used for any sort of storage. We keep our snowmobiles here, along with the various supplies for maintaining them at peak condition. They're the only way off the top of the mountain this time of year, and we can't have them fail us.

Not being able to get off the mountain under our own power is practically a death sentence.

"The snow's coming down again." Dean looks up at the sky, and the storm clouds darken his gaze. "That second storm cell looks like it's going to merge with the first. *Damn*. I thought we might get a reprieve."

I glance upward at the heavy, gray clouds interspersed with occasional glimpses of the sun, glimpses that are becoming less frequent as the minutes pass.

I thought the new storm cell would hold off until tomorrow or later today at the worst, but we're going to get hit again, and hard.

We step into the garage and are greeted by the smell of oil, gasoline, and snowmobiles—a familiar, comforting scent that does little to calm my growing worry for Huck and Dean. After all, they're about to take off down the mountain against the unyielding power of Mother Nature in all her fury.

I quickly go over the snowmobiles one last time, checking for any signs of wear or tear and ensuring they're fueled to bursting. There's nothing, no frayed wires or oil leaks. Gas tanks filled to the brim.

Once I'm done, Huck and Dean mount the snowmobiles. Their heads are bowed, eyes fixed on the horizon. Huck's fingers tap at his thigh. He's ready to go.

"Be safe. Be careful."

Although I'm looking right at Huck and Dean's faces, it's Taylor's confident smile I see instead.

"Turn back if you hit any obstacles. Keep your eyes peeled. Tree branches might be coming down with the weight of the snow, or they're buried under the fresh powder. One pass over a branch and—"

"We know," they say in unison, staring at me like I'm their overbearing older brother.

"No joy rides," I remind them as they start the engines. "Conserve your fuel."

They nod their goodbyes, too focused on their mission for many words. I have no doubt they'll make it to the ranger station in record time despite my warnings to take it slow.

The snowmobile engines fade away into the distance, and soon a peaceful silence settles over me once again. I pull my jacket up around my neck and watch until the snow drifts swallow them up before I return to the cabin.

The house is quiet and still, as if trapped by time. Juliet is still asleep upstairs, but the effects of the sedative will wear off soon, and I expect she'll be up soon after that. The fever that comes with heat doesn't allow an easy rest, and she needs to eat to prevent any nausea from the medicine. And to keep up her strength.

I should make breakfast, I guess. I'm no cook. That's always been Huck. Taylor too, although his talent was more about all the different ways to cook steak and not so much actual nutrition.

I can do eggs and bacon just fine though.

Opening the fridge, I survey its scarce contents. Eggs—check, though there are only just enough for the two of us. I'll have to head to the coops to gather later today.

Bacon...

I scavenge through jars of canned veg and fruit, coming up with a half-pound of bacon that's still not fully thawed from the freezer, but it'll have to do.

As I start collecting the supplies for the meal, Juliet's familiar scent reaches my nostrils before her footsteps even touch the stairs. She smells comforting and warm, like a strawberry garden in July, right down to the warm soil.

Through the open doorway, Juliet gives me a disbelieving look as she descends the stairs, her sleepy eyes passing over the empty living room and crackling fireplace. "Where are the others?"

She pauses halfway down the stairs, as if she's unsure about coming down to the first floor without the rest of my pack present. As if being alone with me is the worst fate imaginable.

It probably is. It's not like I've been exactly nice to her.

She's a little shaky, and paler than she should be, but all in all, the night spent in the fan-cooled room with the sedative to help her sleep seems to have helped a bit.

"They're going to the ranger station at the bottom of the valley," I explain. "They're going to try to get you some heat suppressants from the doctor there."

Juliet pales and bites at her chapped lips.

"They shouldn't have gone out in this."

Her voice trembles and she clears her throat, shifting her gaze toward the window where the storm outside is picking up in intensity. "They could get hurt in this kind of weather."

"They know what they're doing," I say, perhaps a little too gruffly. If I were being honest, I'd tell her I hated sending

them out in this, especially going such a long distance and I never would've done it if it wasn't for the acute need for suppressants.

If I'd known her heat would come this quickly, I'd have sent them sooner, though, avoided this whole thing.

Goldie bites her bottom lip and reaches for the stair railing, fingers curling around it until her knuckles are white. I feel immediately guilty and soften my tone.

“They've been dealing with this kind of weather for years, so there's nothing to worry about.”

I say nothing of the risks they are about to face—heavy snows, strong winds, and rough terrain.

“Besides, about halfway down the mountain, where the path opens up to the road, we've got the truck. It puts most military vehicles to shame.”

Honestly, the truck—which Huck affectionately calls Bertha—is the only reason I felt any confidence at all sending them down the mountain. The truck is a behemoth, with thick treads that chew through deep snow and huge tires designed to handle treacherous terrain.

Despite my words, Juliet looks unconvinced. I can understand her concern; these are the two people who meant the most to me in the world, and I know Juliet shares a special bond with them too, despite trying to deny it.

“The worst of it should be over soon,” I offer as a last attempt at comfort. “This second storm cell is smaller than the first.”

She looks out the window again, and I follow her gaze, watching as the snowflakes stick together and turn into clumps along the windowpanes.

There is nothing more I can say to make her stop worrying. I motion toward the plate of bacon and eggs, and she sits down to pick at her food. We sit in the quiet of the early morning for a while, the tension between us a growing, living presence. I eat at the other end of the kitchen, keeping as much distance

between myself and her as possible while still keeping an eye on her.

Finally, Juliet breaks the silence with a frustrated sigh.

“I hate this,” she says, poking listlessly at her breakfast.

I raise a suspicious eyebrow. “The eggs?”

“No,” she retorts, before looking up at me apologetically.

“I hate not being able to do anything about all of this. The weather. The crash. The heat. I’m just stuck here. A useless Omega who is nothing but a pain in everyone’s ass.”

She skewers some eggs and lifts them to her mouth, where, just an inch or two shy from her lips, they fall back down to the plate. She lets out a furious groan that’s part growl and hangs her head.

“You’re doing...all right,” I mumble. “All things considered.”

She gives me a sarcastic look that almost makes me laugh at the drama of it.

I don’t know how to comfort an anxious Omega with words. I don’t know what to do with an Omega at all. I know what my body tells me, though.

To touch and to comfort. To pleasure.

The things I can’t give her without changing everything.

I try to change the subject. “How are you, *uh*, feeling?”

Juliet sighs and scrunches up her nose in distaste. “Like my skin is on fire and my vagina is going to spontaneously combust,” she blurts out before she has a chance to catch herself.

Her eyes widen and sweep up to me, and a torrent of apologies fall from her lips as I try to hide my smile. She quickly claps her hand over her mouth, taken aback by her own outburst. “I can’t believe I just said that.”

I can’t help but burst into laughter. She stares at me, incredulous, her hand coming away from her mouth, as I wipe

tears from the corners of my eyes with my thumbs.

“I shouldn’t have said that,” she repeats, shaking her head, but she’s looking at me differently now, like she’s just seen me for the first time.

“Don’t worry, Goldie,” I say. “I won’t tell your Academy instructors about your dirty mouth. It’s kind of refreshing, to be honest.”

I offer her a playful grin and she rolls those pretty eyes of hers. We sit in silence for a few more minutes, the only sound the clink of our forks on our plates.

“Look,” I finally say with a sigh. “I’m not great at talking, not like Dean and Huck. I’ve always been like that. But, *uh*, I’m sorry for the way I’ve treated you. It’s not you or anything you’ve said or done. It’s the way I am.”

“So, asshole is just your default setting?”

I gape at her.

She giggles and I relax, realizing it’s a joke, but she isn’t far off.

It never was my ‘default setting’ before. But I guess it is now.

“Yeah. Guess you could say that.”

She nods, her eyes searching mine. I feel a little unsettled under the intensity of her gaze. I can see she’s trying to understand me, but I’m not sure if I want her to.

“It’s fine.” She folds her napkin and places it on the table. “I know Victor and his pack are extremely powerful, and power always leads to enemies. Besides, they’re in the oil business, and I can’t imagine that sits well with a bunch of environmentalists like you guys.”

Juliet is nowhere near the full truth, but I nod anyway, taking a sip of coffee.

“Besides,” she continues, “my parents put all their savings into my education, and even though I wasn’t the best student, I worked as hard as I could to get good grades. There was so

much being put into my future, I had to pick the best pack I could, you know?”

They aren't the best pack, though, not by a long shot.

I hold my tongue, nearly swallowing it when she adds, “And Victor has been kind to me. I look forward to getting to know him better.”

I nod, but inside my head, I'm screaming. Victor may be kind to her now, but who knows what he will be like in the future. I can't say anything—or maybe I just don't *want* to say anything, because I'm just that much of a coward.

We've all heard the rumors about their pack. How they bring in betas from Europe to fuck and discard like candy wrappers.

I take another sip of coffee, letting it sit heavy on my tongue. “You do realize he might not be all he seems?”

Juliet gives me a quizzical look. “You don't even know him,” she says. The words are light and airy, but they carry a warning with them that I choose to ignore.

“Sure,” I clip. “Whatever you say.”

My fist clenches the handle of my coffee mug, and before I know it, it shatters in my hand. Hot coffee splashes all over me, and I jump up, cursing.

“Are you all right?” she asks, eyes wide as she stands, reaching for her napkin and rushing over with it. She leans forward as if to dab at my shirt, and I leap back. I can't let her touch me. Not now. I'm too upset, too possessive-feeling, too angry. She steps back, a hint of hurt in her eyes.

“I'm fine,” I snap. “Damn mug. Probably had a crack in it.” Coffee drips from my chair to the floor, leaving droplets on the hardwood.

“Sure, definitely the mug's fault,” she says in a deadpan voice. “Come on, don't be a baby.” She reaches forward again and begins to dab at my shirt with the napkin. It doesn't help at all, but I let her try, loving her nearness and simultaneously hating myself for loving it. Finally, I push her away gently.

“It’s all right,” I say, looking anywhere in the room but at her, grateful for the strong coffee smell to help drown out her scent.

“I’ll just go upstairs and change.” My voice comes out hoarse, and my pants are decidedly tighter, my cock aching to be touched by her slender fingers. She gives me a long, studious look, and then nods slowly.

“Right. Okay, then.” She doesn’t seem to know what to do or say next, so she just stands there awkwardly, looking at the coffee stain on my shirt and then back at me.

“I’ve got to get to the chores,” I say. “You can just leave your plate by the sink. I’ll take care of it later.”

“I’ll come with you,” she pipes up, and I freeze in place.

Her face reddens, and she corrects, “To do the chores. I have to stay active. It helps with the heat. The longer I sit still the worse it’ll be.”

Active. I can think of a lot of ways to stay active.

Most involve my tongue, my cock, and her sweet, slick pussy.

My jaw ticks and I clear my throat.

“Sure,” I say, stepping away from her, putting a chasm of empty air between us. “But we should try to keep our distance.”

She nods tightly, moving back a couple paces.

“See you outside, Goldie.”

NINETEEN

—
JULIET

IT'S NOT *you or anything you've said or done. It's the way I am.*

Why would Everett say something like that? Is that the entire reason for his dark broodiness, or is there more?

I dress quickly, and by the time I'm downstairs, he's already out the door. That's Everett; always one step ahead and never waiting for anyone else to catch up. I tug on boots and that godawful shapeless snowsuit Dean made me wear. Grabbing my gloves, I race out through the door to catch up with him.

The snow crunches beneath my feet as I chase after Everett, my breath clouding in the chilly morning air. He strides ahead with purpose, not bothering to look back or slow down. His dark hair is tucked away beneath a wool cap, and his expression is stoic; any hint of warmth I'd glimpsed inside is gone.

He's a mystery, an enigma, and I want to take that one step closer so badly it hurts. But he won't let me in; Everett is a fortress of solitude, an island unto himself. All I can do is walk beside him in the snow, content with the little moments he chooses to share with me.

Naturally, he heads over to the wood pile to chop some firewood. He slings his coat over the tool rack, and he's hacking at the wood as if it has wronged him somehow. When I step into his vision, his rhythm with the axe stutters slightly, but he recovers quickly.

His movements are graceful and methodical; with every swing of the axe, he sends chunks of wood flying away from him as though they were almost eager to be released from their binding. The rhythmic *thunk* sound fills the air around us, and I can feel the heat of his determination. He stops only to adjust his grip, and then he continues with a renewed vigor.

Fuck.

I look around, searching for something to occupy me. When he said chores, I'd been hoping he'd have a few things I could help with. To keep my body and mind busy with something that might distract me from the clenching in my core and the heat making my neck and temples damp with sweat.

My body aches everywhere. I need something. No not something, *someone*. Everett. I need his hands on me, his mouth on me, his cock inside me, knot claiming me.

Desire surges through my veins like molten lava, burning everything it touches. But one clear thought comes through the feverish haze.

Everett doesn't want me. Not like that.

Instinctively, he may want to knot me, but that's nothing more than body chemistry.

I look at him, a deep pang of longing twisting my chest as I admire his silhouette, the lines of his muscles as they strain against his shirt. I should go back into the house because being next to him like this and yet being rejected is tearing my heart in two.

"Stop looking at me like that, Goldie," he growls, snagging his axe on a log as he pauses his work. He yanks off his flannel, tossing it next to his coat on the rack. Steam comes off his sweaty shoulders as snowflakes melt on his caramel skin, giving him an aura of danger.

A single bead of sweat drips down the side of his forehead.

Touch me. My throat goes dry. Just touch me.

If only Dean or Huck were here. They'd be watching me like a hawk, identifying my need and taking care of it. They wouldn't knot me if I asked them not to, but they'd fix this. Fix *me*. Make it easier to breathe.

Which is almost definitely why Everett sent them away.

His eyes are on me now, heat spearing me from his flame-like gaze.

He has to want me. He has to feel this pull between us, whether it's only pheromones or something more. He can't deny the electricity between us.

The heat radiates off him in waves, and I swear it's like we are stuck in a force field of energy.

So, I do something incredibly stupid as he impales his axe in the chopping block and begins gathering up the split logs from the snow.

I tug my scarf free from my overheated neck and discard it with his shirt, unzipping the snowsuit to get a reprieve from the waves of fire.

Everett's back stiffens and I know he's scented me in the air.

I walk right up to him, bending to gather logs right next to him, an ache buried deep in my core coming to the surface so sharply that I let out a low groan of discomfort.

"Fuck...Goldie..."

The logs fall from his arms as he turns, prying me upright, his nostrils flaring, pupils dilating as he breathes me in.

It's been a long time since I've gone through an unsuppressed heat and I know this is only the start of the pain and manic need to come, but already I'm willing to do almost anything to make it stop. To douse the flames, if only for a second.

His scent rushes over me, making me shudder as I inhale winter pine and spicy cinnamon.

Everett's grip on my arm tightens and I do something even more foolish, a little gasping cry coming from my throat as I press my lips to his, giving in.

A jolt of pleasure courses through my veins as our lips meet, and it feels like letting go of every worry, every painful moment, and every fear, trading it in for absolute desire and need. I wait for him to push me away, knowing it's a very real possibility, but... he doesn't.

At first, he doesn't move. He is as still as his axe trapped in the wood. And then his lips part ever-so-slightly and I feel the shift.

Everett groans into my mouth, kissing me back just as fiercely. His hands claw me close, pressing me tightly against him, almost crushing me as he deepens the kiss. He tastes like maple syrup and mint, and something wholly Everett, something I desperately need.

His tongue delves into my mouth, stealing all the breath from my lungs, exploring my mouth and making me tingle all over. His lips are hard on mine, sending a spark of desire through me that makes my core ache.

He tosses off the ratty cap holding my hair down, throwing it somewhere in the snow, and I'm sure it will be lost during the snowfall. He runs his hand through my hair, tugging on it, yanking me closer as if trying to meld us together. The kiss is strong and fierce, and so Everett that my eyes sting with happy tears. I don't want this kiss to ever end, but it does, and in the worst way possible.

Everett yanks away from me, panting, his eyes filled with rage.

He balls his fists at his side, his back stiffening. I half-expect him to wipe his mouth with the back of his hand in disgust. Shame flashes through me, and I stumble backward, trying to get as much distance from him as I can. He kicks over a stack of piled logs, the muscles in his back rippling as he pushes his hands violently through his hair and turns to me with a crazed look in his eyes.

“We can’t do that, Goldie,” he growls, his jaw tense and eyes stormy as he throws an arm to the cabin, pointing at the door. “Get back inside.”

With that, he turns away, picking up the axe and splintering a log so roughly that the ensuing crack sounds like lightning. I turn away from him, blinking back tears, and run into the house. I don’t stop until I’ve slammed the door to my bedroom and raced to the bed, snatching up a pillow to scream sob into the soft fabric.

He doesn’t want me.

He’ll never want me.

I need to leave.

Before anything else happens.

Before leaving becomes impossible.

I dig my fingers beneath the other pillow, dragging out his plaid shirt and tossing it as far away from the bed as I can before curling into a ball on the mattress, clutching the pillow to my chest like it’ll somehow be able to fill the hole Everett punched there.



THE KNOCK on my door comes a few hours later.

I jolt awake, blinking as I come back to reality. My dream had been all sensation, Everett’s arms and mouth worshipping me, wanting me. Waking up is a slap in the face, reminding me of his coldness. But not even that can temper the flames in my core. I shift my legs and feel slick dampening the skin of my upper thighs.

A shiver of need races down my spine and a spasm twists in my core, drawing a little whimper from my lips. I reached between my legs, looking for some form of relief from the heat coming on like a runaway freight train now.

I suck a breath in through my teeth at the insane sensation that rips through me as my fingers brush over my slick-

covered, swollen bud.

“Juliet?” Everett says through the door, and I cringe at the use of my proper name. I’ve gotten used to hearing Goldie, and now my name sounds wrong. Like he’s drawn yet another line in the sand between us.

I remove my hand, wincing at another cramp as I pull my knees in tight to my chest.

“Can I come in?”

“No.”

“Goldie, please,” he says, and I watch the handle twist. “I just—”

“Don’t!”

But he’s already opened the door and I clench my jaw as his eyes widen at my aroma. I have no doubt he can scent the slick freely leaking out of me now.

His Adam’s apple bobs.

“What do you want?” I ask, eager to rush him out of the room before we do something he’ll regret.

He stands stoically in the doorway with his hand gripping the doorknob. “We should talk about what happened,” he says, stepping inside the room like you might see someone step toward the edge of a cliff.

Instinctively, I back away from him, hugging my pillow to my chest for comfort as another tremor racks my body.

I don’t say it, but I’ve been thinking it for hours: even if Dean and Huck manage to find suppressants at the ranger station, they’ll be useless now. It’s too late to stop my heat.

We’re all fucked.

I just hope they’re smart enough to bring me something back to use to get through it. But I can’t picture a ranger station in the Alaskan mountains stocking dildos with inflatable knots.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” I say, hating how my voice shakes. “I kissed you, you didn’t want it, end of story. I can handle a little rejection, Everett. I’m a big girl.”

“That’s not—” He runs his hand through his hair, gritting his teeth, probably coming up with another thousand excuses for why we’re wrong together. I don’t care, and I don’t want to hear it.

I’m not theirs, anyway.

“Don’t worry, Everett,” I say in my best trained Omega voice. The one they all refer to as my “princess” voice. “The storm is already slowing down. Huck and Dean will be back with the suppressants, communications will be back up, and I’ll be out of your hair.”

I expect some sort of angry snarl from him, but instead, he looks stricken, his face cracked with emotion. For once, it makes me furious to see it. I’m tired of this rotation between bored indifference, to uncontrolled anger, to soft tenderness, and back around again.

A pain goes through my belly, and I flinch. I wipe at my forehead, and my hand comes back slick with sweat. Damn.

Everett zeroes in on my face, closing the gap between us with practiced strides.

I back away, but he pressed forward anyway, reaching out a muscled arm to gently tap the back of his hand to my forehead.

Just like his presence, his touch fills me with that annoying mix of absolute comfort and complete frustration.

“It’s too late now,” I mutter as he drags his hand away, a vein in his temple throbbing. “By morning, I’ll be in heat.”

He lets out a long sigh and drops his hand. “But you’re not yet. Not quite.”

...or else you wouldn’t be able to control yourself.

“Lay down, Goldie. I’ll be right back.”

Everett disappears through the door and comes back a minute later, throwing his head back as if he's just swallowed pills, with a damp rag in his hand. He frowns at me, probably because I haven't moved to lay down.

I glower at him but crawl under the thin cover.

“What did you take?”

His brows lift, but he sighs, answering me. “Rut suppressant. My third dose today.”

“*What?*” I snap.

“I haven't had a rut since Taylor...and I don't want to. I take them when I need to.”

I shake my head at him. Heat suppressants have been regulated, made as safe as possible for Omega consumption on a regular basis. But rut suppressants? They're dangerous. Especially if taken in too high of doses. They're meant only to be taken in the most severe of circumstances where there is no other option.

“Everett, you shouldn't be taking those.”

He shrugs, sliding in next to me on the bed.

“If you think there's no stopping it now, you might as well be a little more comfortable. I'll stay as long as I can take it.”

He reaches over and slides the cold cloth over my forehead and down the side of my face to my neck, holding it there against me. It feels amazing, and I can't help but moan and press closer into the rag.

His gaze catches on his shirt discarded on the floor and something crosses his face that I can't decipher. It looks something like guilt. At least he doesn't seem angry that I clearly stole it.

My cheeks flush as he turns back to me, saying nothing about the stolen shirt as he pulls me against his side.

I want to tell him I'm not interested in pity comfort, but it feels too good to pass up.

Though the cloth feels heavenly against my skin, my teeth begin to chatter and I can't stop shivering. Shit, that's new. Now my teeth hurt on top of everything else.

My head feels heavy after not very long and I lean against him, losing my grip on reality.

I can barely keep my eyes open. The sensation of the fabric against my skin is a small comfort, but it doesn't seem to be enough.

With his scent in my nose, my thirst for him only grows until I'm not sure it's a comfort having him here with me, or something more like torture.

"Scoot over, if you can," he murmurs, and I oblige, though every muscle hurts to move. I'm starting to feel fuzzy, dizzy even, my thoughts appearing and disappearing like snowflakes in the sun.

He lies next to me and pulls me against his chest with a low grunt. Instinctively, I nestle into his embrace, rubbing my cheek against his comparatively cool skin. Silence fills the space between us, but unlike before, it's comfortable and peaceful. The steady, rhythmic beat of his heart under my ear is like a lullaby, calming me, soothing the pain away. I take a deep breath, inhaling his heady scent.

And then, he purrs. Fucking *purrs*.

The sound ripples up my spine and settles in my chest, and I answer with a purr of my own.

"Don't do that," he mutters. "It'll only make this harder."

"I can't help it," I say back, snuggling closer against him. I want to plaster us together.

He purrs again and gives out a sigh of resignation that almost makes me laugh.

Deal with it, big guy. You're purring because you like this.

"The others will be back soon," he promises, running a hand through my hair. "Just hang on a little longer, Goldie."

...to take care of me, is what he doesn't say.

Because he won't do it himself.

TWENTY

I GRIT my teeth as the wind whistles through my three layers of clothing, snow lashing like tiny pin pricks against the bits of my cheeks bared to the air between my goggles and scarf.

The visibility is practically zero.

We know this path, but the terrain becomes almost foreign when any landmarks are completely obscured by thick sheets of snow.

Meanwhile, Huck is over there whooping and hollering like he's at an amusement park. Sure, there's a bit of an adrenaline rush when navigating tricky terrain while the snow and wind whip around me, but I'd prefer to not be on the verge of impaling myself or wrecking my sled at all times.

It takes over four hours to get to the little garage where Bertha is parked and we have to dig out three feet of snow with old shovels to give her a chance in hell of getting out onto the snow-covered road.

As we get inside, blocked by the elements, Huck tears off a glove to press his first two fingers to his lips and touch them to the hood of his pride and glory.

She's a beast of a machine. Tires half my height or better, a lifted chassis, chrome everywhere. She's a Frankenstein of modifications made just for life on the mountains.

"I've missed you so much, baby," he says, running his hand down her like you might trail your fingers down the

elegant form of a naked body.

“Just get in and quit fawning over her,” I say, shoving at his arm playfully, hoping he doesn’t think it’s so cold that we’ll need to use the block heater to get his lady warmed up before driving. If he does, we could be here another hour minimum before we can get moving again.

“That’s what she said,” he says with a wink, but he opens the door and slides into the driver’s seat, lovingly patting the dashboard like a long-lost friend and I sigh in relief.

I climb up into the passenger seat, and Huck turns the ignition. The roar of the engine echoes off the metal walls. He chews his lip and I know he’s thinking he’d have liked to use the block heater first but he says nothing, grinding his teeth as he reaches for the shifter.

“We can give her a few to warm up,” I offer, but he shakes his head, listening to her chuck diesel for a moment before making his decision and putting the beast into drive. “No time,” he says. “We need to get home to our Omega.”

Huck eases Bertha out of the garage and into the snow-covered landscape. The path down the mountain widens from this point into a bumpy dirt road, and it’s about a four-hour drive downhill to the little settlement where the ranger station is. This is the easy part. The way back will be the real challenge.

The wheels churn the snow beneath us as Huck guides the truck onto the road and starts the trek down. I grip the door handle tightly, feeling the power of the engine rumble through my hands. Huck flips on the headlights, and I see tiny particles of snow illuminated in their glow.

We drive for almost an hour, the sound of seventies rock the only noise in the truck’s cab until Huck switches the volume off and takes a deep breath. “So, what really happened between you and Juliet?” His eyes are fixed on the road ahead, but his fingers tap anxiously on the steering wheel.

“Nothing serious,” I say carefully. “She just needed some attention from an Alpha.” I reach for the volume knob to turn

up the music and end the conversation, but Huck bats my hand away from the controls.

“Did you get some attention back?” he asks with an amused smirk. I give him my best drop-it look and force his hand away from the volume button with a smack. He takes the hint and allows me to turn the music back up.

I’m not sure why I don’t want to tell him about what happened with Juliet. Maybe I want it to be this sacred memory between us, because if she doesn’t stay, it’s all I’ll ever have of her. One single moment in time, frozen forever.

We finally arrive at the remote military settlement around two in the afternoon. It’s nestled pretty deep in the wilderness, far from the hustle and bustle of the city. Pine trees surround the clearing, giving it a sense of protection from the elements as well as a certain level of privacy, like the village itself is a secret.

There are only a few buildings other than the ranger station, which is a stark, military-looking building made of concrete. The station stands tall against the backdrop of pine trees, looking almost imposing but also radiating a sense of security. In front of it is an old-fashioned flagpole with a tattered American flag flapping in the air.

We park Bertha in the station’s lot, but before I can exit the truck, Huck points out through the windshield. “I don’t recognize those vehicles.”

I squint where he’s pointing. Two black SUVs are parked in front of the station. These are luxury vehicles, sleek and powerful-looking—a stark contrast to the military Jeeps and rusted civilian trucks sitting next to them. Their windows are tinted dark, so dark it looks like paint.

“Keep your eyes open,” I say, and we exit the truck, heading into the station. We make our way down the hallway toward Dr. Morrison’s office, and I recognize the familiar faces of several researchers and soldiers I’ve worked with over the years. They wave to us as we pass, but their eyes are full of worry. The atmosphere in this place is tenser than usual, and I’d bet money those strange cars have something to do with it.

“Good to see you two again,” the older man says, shaking our hands. He’s a big man with a broad chest and muscled arms that seem to strain against the fabric of his uniform. His face is tanned and weathered from too many years of exposure to the elements; deep creases bracket his mouth and eyes, proof of countless hours spent in Alaska’s unforgiving wilderness.

He has all the decorum befitting his colonel rank, but he’s a man who loves living up here in no man’s land over any of the military perks he could get back in more civilized posts. “What can I help you with?” he asks, his voice carrying his unmistakable Southern drawl.

“We’ve got an odd situation on our hands,” I begin, taking a seat in one of the faded leather chairs in his office. “An Omega ended up at our place with no suppressants.”

Dr. Morrison looks at us over his silver reading glasses, one gray eyebrow raised. We haven’t fooled him one bit. “She just *ended up* there? Not because of, say, a plane crash or something?”

I meet his gaze and fold my hands, neither confirming nor denying his statement. I’m not spilling anything about Juliet, not yet. He stares at me for what feels like an eternity before finally speaking again.

“Well, whatever the case may be,” he says, “She’s going to need suppressants, or she’ll go into heat fast. I take it you don’t want that to happen?”

That’s so far from the truth I almost laugh. I’d love for it to happen so I could make Juliet mine once and for all, but that’s not the path we’re choosing. “Correct, sir.”

He nods his head thoughtfully and shuffles through some papers on his desk. “Well then, I’ll give you what I’ve got in the back. No guarantees it isn’t past its expiry, but I know I’ve got a little back there from when the Creemores first brought their new Omega home.”

He glances up at us with a knowing look before continuing. “And be sure to stay discreet—word of an Omega

on the loose could spread like wildfire and bring all sorts of unwanted attention your way.”

It’s obvious he means whoever is in the mysterious car, and I nod, grateful for his discretion. “Thanks, Doc.”

We wait in his office while he disappears into a back room, coming back with a paper bag holding the suppressants. I exhale in relief at the sight, although part of me wishes we could not have to do with suppressants at all.

“I can’t give you a script,” he says in a low voice before handing them over. “Not without having seen the patient myself. So it goes without saying, boys, you didn’t get these from me.”

We start to turn away but he stops us with a sharp cough. “It’s not my business, but I assume you’ll be returning your houseguest to her family once this storm clears?”

My jaw tenses and I’m glad it’s Huck who answers, because I’m not sure I can lie to Morrison with a straight face.

“Who do you think we are, man?” Huck scoffs. “We’re gentleman.”

“More so than any of the riffraff in town or in these parts,” he chuckles. “Up the mountain is probably the safest place for a girl like that until this storm clears. Go on, boys. You better be getting back.”

We head down the hall toward the main lobby, if it can be called that. More like a bare room with guards. There’s a commissary and a little store, so we head toward the store for some supplies, passing by the guards, who give us a nod of acknowledgment.

The store is small but well-stocked with essentials. Several shelves are filled with canned goods and other non-perishable items, as well as some snacks and drinks and other necessities. We usually make a trip down here in late winter, when all our fresh food is completely depleted.

I spy a little pink winter hat on a nearby shelf and smirk, swiping from the pile of grays and blacks. I think she’d like it,

and it'd be a huge upgrade from the threadbare thing she's been using.

At the front of the store, two alphas in expensive suits are speaking with whatever poor beta soldier drew the short straw for working the store counter today. Looks like Tommy. His gaze darts toward us briefly before going back to the alphas, but it's too late. They whip their heads around, catching sight of us.

"Here comes trouble," Huck grumbles as the two men approach us. The two men are at least a half foot taller than the beta soldier, with broad shoulders filling their tailored suits. They stalk forward like they own the place, sharp eyes honing in on us—and the white paper bag in my hand.

I don't bother to hide it. If they're Alphas, they'll scent even the smallest whiff of Juliet on our clothes.

"I don't believe we've met," says the first man. Even his voice sounds fucking rich. Slick and smooth. "I'm Roger Mayson. This is my associate, John Franklin. We're here on behalf of the Williams pack."

A beat, and two.

He wants us to introduce ourselves, but I simply raise an eyebrow. His lip twitches, just barely, but enough to show discomfort.

"Are you soldiers here at the base?" he asks. He knows full well we aren't by our clothes alone but sure, we'll play that game.

"We work up on the mountain," I say. That's all he's getting. Fuck if I'm giving him our names.

"*Hmm,*" he says, sending a quick glance toward his associate. "We're looking for a missing Omega. There was a plane crash a week ago, and we've been led to believe she survived."

I swallow hard. My instincts want to tell them to fuck off—Juliet is ours. But I can't make that decision for her. It wouldn't be fair. Besides, she's under our protection, at least until this storm is clear of the mountain.

“Yeah, we know about her.”

Huck’s eyes widen, but I ignore him, continuing as I consider the legality of the situation and pray they don’t have supporting documentation on hand.

“She’s in our cabin. We offered her shelter from the storm and with no kin to take responsibility for her we have an interim responsibility for her wellbeing.”

The Alphas tense, and another silent conversation is held between them. “We’ll take her off your hands. Just show us the way.”

“No,” I say. “We don’t know you. She can be retrieved by her family when the storm passes.”

Huck shrugs at them, backing me up.

“She belongs to the Williams pack,” the one on the right says and it looks like he’s about to pop a blood vessel.

“Do you have the claiming paperwork? Surely the Williams Pack knows the rules of Omega custody.”

“Take us to her.” The second man, John, speaks up for the first time. “We need to make sure you’re telling the truth.”

“No paperwork, no Omega,” says Huck. He bumps my shoulder with his. “Come on, let’s go.”

I turn to leave, but I give the Williams alphas one last warning glare. “You want her? Bring the proper paperwork, and we’ll go from there. Until then, she remains with us until her family reclaims her.”

With that parting shot, I lift the pink hat into the air and wave it at Tommy. “Put this on my tab, would you?”

“You got it, Dean.”

I follow Huck to the parking lot, rushing to catch up.

“This isn’t buying us much time,” says Huck as he starts up the truck. “We should’ve denied it, Dean.”

“Then what? There’s no way they didn’t scent her on us. They would’ve come either way. This way at least we can’t get

raked over the coals for trying to hide her.”

“Fuck,” he hisses. “Was any of that shit you said legit? About us having interim whatever, was that true.”

I nod. “As I understand it, yeah. You know how it is, man. Possession and nine-tenths of the law.”

“Fuck, that’s sick. She’s a person not property.”

“Try telling them that.”

“What are we gonna get from this? A few days at the most? You know they’ll get the paperwork ASAP. They’ve got connections everywhere.”

I settle back against the truck seat, closing my eyes and gripping the bag of suppressants in my hand. “Well, then hopefully, it’s enough time.”

“Enough time for what?”

“To get Juliet to change her mind.”

Huck says nothing, and I don’t have to open my eyes to know he’s in shock from that statement. I don’t care. After meeting those guys, I’m only handing Juliet over if she really wants us to.

And deep down, I don’t think she does.

Huck drives for several minutes before he lets out an exasperated sigh. “Looks like they aren’t going to wait for the paperwork after all.”

My eyes fly open. “What are you talking about?”

“We’ve got company.” Huck nods toward the rearview mirror. I whirl around to look through the back window.

“Shit.” One of the SUVs from the parking lot is on our tail. “Can you lose them?”

Huck’s answering grin is all the answer I need.

TWENTY-ONE

WHERE ARE YOU?

I squint into the torrents of snow, pulling my jacket tight against the chill wind. There's no sign of them returning yet, and I'm standing on the edge of an abyss, knowing I can't take another minute with Juliet as her heat tears through her.

I managed to find a little vibrating toy in Huck's nightstand and I've cleaned it and set it on the bed in my cabin, where she's going to have to stay until they get back. There's a fire roaring in the hearth and the small space is tight and warm and waiting for her.

She's stubborn as a damned mule. When I told her to hole up in the main cabin and that I'd take the smaller one-man structure, she refused. Teeth chattering and face flushed, she demanded that she be put there instead so that the three of us would all be able to be comfortable in the main house while we all waited out her heat.

I didn't have the heart to argue with her.

When I get back to the main cabin, she's waiting near the front door, her boots on and a thick blanket wrapped around her shoulders in place of the snowsuit she should be wearing.

She looks so pale and something in my stomach knots at the sight of her like this, the empathy I feel winning out over my alpha instinct to make her mine, if only for a moment.

“Can you walk, Goldie?”

She nods and I open the door for her. But she gets three steps before a little whimper crosses her lips and she almost falls to her knees in the snow.

“Dammit, Goldie.”

I sweep her up into my arms, blanket and all, ignoring the painful engorgement of my cock in my pants, my knot already swelling.

Control yourself, I hiss in my own head, rushing to get her safely locked away in the cabin, but I can already feel it.

The fog of primal need in my head like smoke, obscuring rational thought as my cock pulses in my pants. I took two goddamned rut suppressants already today and when I get back to the main cabin, I’m going to need at least two more.

I kick the door in to the small cabin and lay her in my bed, covering her with blankets, but she kicks them off immediately, moaning about being too hot.

I ignore her; it’s the fever from the heat, but she still can’t freeze to death. I go into the small main area of the cabin and add another log to the fire before checking that she’ll have everything she’ll need.

The inside of the cabin is sparse compared to the main one. I wonder what she thinks of it compared to the coziness of the other house. It probably makes me look like some crazy prepper living alone in the wilderness, but it’s what I like. Uncomplicated.

I stoke the fire and fill a bowl with cold water from the small corner sink to bring to her. I’ll leave after this, locking the door to keep her in—and me out.

She mumbles something incoherently under her breath and shifts around. I dip a soft rag into the cool water and dab away at her forehead with gentle strokes.

She sighs contentedly at my touch, but then starts to shiver despite being bundled up in blankets. Her skin is hot to the touch, but the shivering is causing her teeth to clench, chatter, and clench again. I can only imagine the ache in her jaw and her whole body. Every muscle is rigid with strain and tension.

I watch her hand move beneath the blankets, touching herself, trying to quell the ache between her thighs. I scent her slick and almost go to my knees, my head spinning at the intensity of the mouthwatering aroma. Gritting my teeth, I shake off the lingering dizziness and pry myself away, moving to the door.

I need to go back to the other building. I need to stay away from her. Dean said she's a virgin. I won't take her like this. I won't have her first time be a violent experience.

"Stay with me." Juliet's voice can barely wrap around her whisper. She shudders and draws her knees up to her chest. "Please, Everett. I need...I need..."

"Huck and Dean should be back with your suppressants any minute, Goldie. Stay strong."

She moans, a sound that sends lightning to my cock. "Stay."

"I can't," I murmur, backing away from her.

I can't stay here while you're in heat. Don't you understand? I can't. I'm going crazy from wanting you. I won't be able to stop myself. And the Williams pack? They want you pure, baby. You won't be if I stay.

I force myself out into the snow, but I don't leave, not yet.

Instead, I huddle down in the snow outside the door, listening for Juliet, my heart twisting at every cry of anguish she gives.

I wish I were stronger. I wish I could touch her, taste her, without losing myself to my own primal instinct. I think in vicious circles until I've almost got myself convinced that I *can* keep control of myself, but then she screams.

A scream of pain and fury and a frustration so acute it burrows into my bones.

Fuck this.

I rush back inside to find Juliet sprawled on the floor, writhing in pain. The window is wide open, letting in the cold

night air, but Juliet's face is flushed with heat. Contorted with agony, and my heart jumps into my throat.

"Juliet, no," I plead, kneeling next to her and sliding my arm around her back. She clings to me tight like I'm an anchor, her sweet perfume filling my nostrils and making me dizzy and hard and absolutely feral with need.

And it's done. It's over.

The fight to stay away from Juliet has been lost forever.

Maybe I was never winning anyway.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

"Okay, baby, I'm going to make that pain go away."

My primal side is driving now, and there's no way I'm getting the wheel back.

She lets out a little gasp and twists out of my hold, scrambling backward until the bed blocks her from going any farther.

"Everett?"

Her glassy eyes dart between mine, no doubt they're dilated black.

"Ev?"

I rise to my feet and she inhales sharply, grabbing a book from beneath the bed to chuck it at me. It lands with a hollow thud against my chest.

"Everett!"

She climbs awkwardly onto the bed, chucking pillow after pillow at my face, and even though there's a part of me that recognizes what she's doing, that growl in my soul persists, a mantra that can't be unspoken.

Mine. Mine. Mine.

"Everett, stop!"

Tears spill down her cheeks.

"Go away!"

“You need a knot, Goldie,” I purr, the vibration building in my chest even as my fists clench. Every cell in my body aches to be with her, and I can taste her sweet scent already. I’m hungry for it, dying for it.

Her hands ball into defiant fists at her sides, but her body shudders as she’s wracked with another wave of pain. She’s trying to be strong, I can see it in her eyes, but the pain is eating her alive.

She puts her hand up, silently commanding me to stay back. Minutes ago, she was begging me to stay. Now she has the resolve to honor our boundaries? *Now?* Once I’ve already completely lost it?

I keep going, determined to ease her pain and make things right. I reach out for her, and she backs away, pressing herself against the wall so tightly, it almost looks like she’s trying to disappear inside it.

She’s still shouting too; telling me in no uncertain terms that she doesn’t need my help. But I know she does—deep down, she knows it too—so I keep moving forward until there’s barely an inch between us, her curse-filled pleas reduced to background noise. Static in my ears.

“It’s okay,” I tell her softly as a tear slips down her cheek and I reach for her. “This will make everything better.”

She smacks my hand away, even though she’s trying not to double over in pain.

“I won’t be a fucking pity knot!”

Her words snap through the blanket of fog in my skull, and I recoil, offended at the ridiculous and wholly *wrong* insinuation.

“You will never be a pity knot,” I growl. “*Never.* I’m the one who found you, Goldie. I brought you up the fucking mountain. I brought you into our lives. You are *mine*. You have been since that first night.”

“What?” the word falls in a watery mumble from her lips as she looks at me agape.

I shake my head, holding myself back only long enough to tell her what I should've told her days ago.

“The only reason I kept my distance, Goldie, was because I knew you'd leave us. We can't keep you.”

I hate how the thickness of emotion taints my voice, but I'm powerless to stop it as I finish. “And I knew if I let myself love you, I wouldn't survive watching you leave.”

She gasps, and I'm on the bed in a flash, burying my face in the side of her neck, pressing my lips to the heated skin there as her tiny arms wrap around me, a little sob blooming in my ear.

I open my mouth to taste her, scraping my teeth along her slender neck, fighting the primal need to claim her in the most ancient and permanent of ways.

She shivers under my touch, letting out a little cry as my teeth skate over her skin.

“This isn't fucking pity, Goldie,” I breathe in a husky whisper against her ear, feeling her melt into me. “I want you more than anything I've ever wanted in my entire fucking life, even if you're not mine to want.”

I push her against the wall, smelling her sweet scent as I lick a path up her pulse point. She whimpers and throws her head back to give me better access.

“Tell me to leave,” I murmur, practically begging. If she did, I'd try harder than I'd ever tried to do anything in my miserable life to protect her virtue.

“If you don't want this, tell me to leave and I'll...I'll make myself go.”

One, two, three moments of silence. And then—

“Knot me,” she whispers. “Please, Everett. It hurts. I need you to knot me. I want—I want it to be you.”

Heat flushes through me in a wave of raw animal possession. My grip on her tightens until I'm shaking.

“No going back, Goldie. Not after this.”

My heartrate is through the fucking roof as I look deep into her eyes. My Goldie is gorgeous, innocent, and from this point forward, all *mine*.

That pleading look in my Omega's eyes acts as a firing shot, and I slam my mouth down on hers.

And I kiss her.

Hard. Powerful.

All-consuming.

Lips and teeth and tongue clash into each other, and it's still not enough. And because this girl will never stop surprising me, she pulls back and gives me a wicked grin—and drops to her knees.

“Goldie, fuck,” I curse as she cups my aching dick through the denim of my jeans. She unfastens my jeans and smiles up at me.

“No boxers?”

“No boxers,” I grit out, and she releases me into her waiting hand. She licks around the head, and I groan, the muscles in my neck straining. I place a hand in her hair, twining the tendrils around my fingers, wanting to throw her against a wall and have my way with her, but forcing myself to be patient as she takes me into her wet, waiting mouth.

She moans around my length, sucking hard, her tiny fist wrapped around the base of my cock, where my knot is already half swollen.

“Enough,” I growl out, unable to wait even another second before I'm inside her.

“On the bed,” I bark, and she pulls off my cock with a loud pop just as I pick her up, her slight form weighing nothing in the face of the unfettered adrenaline coursing through my veins.

I toss her on the bed. Her knees fall open, but she's still in Dean and Huck's castoff clothes.

“I’m sick of you wearing anything that isn’t mine,” I bite out before I reach for the pants, yanking them roughly down her legs, baring her to me. Her eyes widen, but I go to Huck’s t-shirt and tear it right off her, the ripping sound echoing through the air. “From now on, you wear what’s mine, or you’re naked. Nothing else.”

“Y-yes, Alpha,” she breathes out, pupils dark and wide, making me preen.

I tear my shirt off, buttons popping everywhere. My jeans are already unbuttoned, so I let them fall, stepping out of them before I cover Juliet with my naked body.

My cock twitches against her soft belly, but that’s not my destination. I cover her with hot, wet kisses, moving down until I’m faced with her dripping wet pussy.

And I lick.

She screams, bucking against my mouth, and I grab her thighs, pinning her to the bed.

“No fighting me, Goldie,” I growl against her sweet core. She whines, thrusting her hips up. “This slick cunt is *mine*.”

“Oh god, Everett, *please*.”

Her fingers twist in my hair but she stops trying to fight my hold on her thighs and I reward her by sucking on her clit, hard. Working it with my tongue and teeth and lips.

“More, more, more,” she chants, her hips working into my mouth. She tastes like honey and strawberries. Her slick covers my lips and drips down my chin, and I can’t get enough.

I’ll never get enough.

“My fucking Omega.” I nip at the side of her thigh, rubbing myself against her, marking her with my scent before diving into her sweet pussy again. “*Mine*. So fucking perfect.”

“Everett,” she whimpers, keening as her thrusts against my mouth become harder, faster. And then she’s coming, her taste exploding on my tongue, sweet and delicious and all because of me.

“Fuck, you taste incredible,” I say, lapping at her slick as she trembles under my torturous tongue. “Like every dirty dream I’ve ever had.”

“Please, Everett,” she says, and I will never get enough of that word coming out of her mouth. “Please. Knot me. I need it. I need you.”

My cock throbs against the side of my thigh, the tip swollen and dark. I give it a few strokes to ease the ache.

“Brace yourself, Goldie,” I warn.

“I want it,” she says, eyes flashing. “Make it hurt.”

“I’ll do it quick.”

I line myself up with her dripping pussy, rubbing my cock in the sweet liquid until I’m covered in her essence and almost ready to burst without even having entered her.

Then, in one move, I slam into her all the way to the start of my knot. She gasps and I want to force it into her here and now, but not before I draw another orgasm from her heat stricken body.

Her face contorts in pain but then she throws her head back. “Oh god, Everett, you feel so good.”

Fuck, she has no idea.

“Knot me, Everett. I need you to—”

“Not yet, Goldie.”

I fuck my Omega with languid strokes but before long I’m pistoning into her sweet slick pussy, driven wild by my own need, firmly in rut territory as I ravage her.

Her arms wrap around me, our moans rising in tandem as heavy breaths pour from our lungs.

I slow, afraid I’ll lose the battle and lock myself in her before she comes, but she digs her nails into the grooves in my lower back and growls. “Don’t stop,” she whimpers. “I’m—I’m going to come.”

“Say no more, Goldie,” I keep the pace, baring my teeth as I rock my knot against her swollen bud at the apex of each thrust, each pant growing louder and louder as she comes undone beneath me.

There’s a moment when I consider what could happen if I knot her. If I fill her with the seeds of my release. But something instinctive and primal and raw whispers back with the need to breed her. To fill her with a baby that’ll tie her to me forever.

I black out at the intensity of the pleasure, unable to think straight anymore. Unable to do anything but touch and feel and fuck.

I growl as my release threatens, every muscle coiling. It takes a mammoth effort to brace my knees on the bed and force my knot into her. She claws my back, crying out her own release until her hips are finally flush with mine and I see fucking stars.

She may be a virgin, but I’ve never knotted anyone before, and I can’t imagine it gets any better than this. I groan as I pour into her and she trembles against me, her breathing erratic and pulse quick as a hummingbird beating through her chest into mine.

“Look at you,” I pant, pulling back so I can see where we’re joined. “Look at how you’re stretching around my knot. Such a greedy girl. Such a greedy little pussy.”

She lets out a begging whine, shuddering as her fingernails dig into my back.

My sweet little girl likes dirty talk.

“*Mmmm*, you feel amazing,” I say, eyes rolling back into my head as my cock twitches inside her, one orgasm rolling into another, deeper sort. One that radiates through my knot, making my lower stomach tight and warm.

“So fucking tight.”

“It’s...so big,” she manages, her voice breaking, half-drunk with lust, but there’s a note of surprise in her voice. “It feels...amazing.”

I run my hands up and down her sides, soothing her as she comes back to earth. "I never knew it would be like that."

Me either, Goldie. Me either.

I kiss her, over and over, moving my lips down to her neck where my bite would be.

Where it should be.

And then, I pray to whatever deity is up there. I pray to the mountains and the wilderness around me, that I can keep my perfect Goldie here with me.

Forever.

Because even if she tries to leave me now, I'm not sure I can let her go.

TWENTY-TWO

THE BASTARDS ARE CHASING US. Actually *chasing* us, in the middle of a damn snowstorm.

I grip the oversized wheel of the truck and floor it up the icy mountain path. Behind us, the black Lincoln of the alpha's employed by the Williams pack is matching us in speed. There's no way their SUV can take on Bertha. And no way they can match the experience we have driving these roads.

At least, I hope so, or we've got bigger problems.

"They want a chase? Let's give them a chase." My heart races as I push the vehicle as far and as fast as I dare along the winding mountain path. The terrain is treacherous, with dips and sudden turns that make the whole vehicle shake and clatter. Even at the lower, less jagged parts of the mountain, sharp turns still exist. We lurch around one bend, and my stomach flies into my throat.

"Fuck," spits out Dean, eyes wide, one hand hanging onto the door handle as we fishtail slightly. His skin has a greenish tint and I feel his anxiety through the bonds, making it harder to keep my own in check.

I make an effort to keep my footing secure on the accelerator, revving up more speed every chance I get even if it means risking tipping over the cliff edge.

A glance in the mirror shows me our tails are still there, their sinister presence refusing to be shaken off. Panic and adrenaline mix in my blood, a heady mix that makes me feel

like I'm high. My heart is thumping so hard it might jump from my body completely.

"Do you think we can make it to the garage?" Dean asks as we fishtail again, tires struggling for purchase. The car behind us spins too, gaining us a few precious moments.

"Yes, just hold on!" I yell as we make another sharp turn, the tires spinning uselessly in the snow. The truck skids, and I'm forced to counter-steer to keep us from crashing into a snowbank. Bertha is shaking, barely able to take the strain of this relentless pursuit.

And then, the tires catch on a patch of ice hidden beneath the snow and we spin.

And spin and spin.

Everything is a whirl of white, until finally we stop, Bertha jarring as a plume of snow explodes up around us.

We're stuck, the left half of the truck in an embankment. I slam my foot down on the gas, but all the tires do is turn and scream against the snow, turning it slick and smooth.

"Fuck!" I slam my hands on the wheel before I throw my weight against the door handle and open it enough for me to squeeze out into the cold night air.

The biting wind stings my eyes as I force them open to check the damage. The side of the embankment is steep and slippery with ice.

"I'll dig, you drive," Dean says, appearing with a shovel. He fumbles his way through the snow toward the back tire, where we're stuck the most, and starts digging around it.

I can't see our pursuers, but that doesn't mean they aren't there. I can hear their engine on the wind, so they can't be far. For the first time ever, I wish Bertha was a less obnoxious color. White would have been smart. At least we'd have stood a chance of blending in.

"Be careful," I say and climb back into the truck. Applying pressure on both the accelerator and brake is a dangerous

dance between the two. I hold my breath and wait for the tell-tale shift of the truck.

It takes a minute or two—minutes we don't really have—but then we're out of the bank. I move a few yards forward before parking and leaning over, throwing open Dean's door. He appears, face red from the wind and exertion. Just as he climbs back into the cab, the headlights of the other SUV bounce in the rearview mirror.

"Let's not do that again," he says, gulping in air.

The road twists and turns ahead of me like a writhing snake, always teasingly out of reach. We bump and thump along its surface, and I grip the steering wheel harder to keep control, especially as the threat of losing control again hangs over us. It isn't easy when my palms are sweating.

The other car's engine revs behind us as we careen around another bend. Dean rolls down the window, sticking his head out for a better look. The air through the window is brisk but welcome against my overheated skin. He takes a sharp intake of breath as we swerve, nearly bumping his head.

"We're close," I shout over the gusts of wind. "A few more miles, and we can turn off. The bend is hidden enough that we should lose them."

Snowflakes tumble down and around the truck, each one carrying with it potential danger. The wind whips past us in a relentless attack, battering us and threatening to blow us off course.

"Almost there!" I yell, but I'm interrupted by a loud thud followed quickly by an immense jolt that shakes us both in our seats.

"Holy shit!" Dean shouts. "Those motherfuckers! Did they actually just *shoot at us*?"

What the hell?

Another bullet ricochets off the metal of the truck, and I flinch, filling with rage and dread.

Nobody fucks with Bertha.

I focus on the road ahead, jaw clenched tight, head dipped low as the snowflakes illuminate in the headlights.

“Do something!” Dean shouts in a panic. “If they take out the tires, we’re screwed.”

I swerve hard to avoid a fallen tree branch as Dean scrambles around under the seat, pulling out the rifle we keep there for hunting.

My stomach lurches as he pushes two shells into the chamber and cocks it.

The next time they shoot, I register where they’ve hit Bertha. Uncomfortably close to the wheel well. Dean’s right, they’re trying to shoot out the tires.

His jaw clenches almost as tightly as his hand around the barrel of the gun in his lap and I picture Juliet back at the cabin. Picture these fuckers getting their hands on her while she’s almost in heat.

I give him a tight nod. “Do it, Dean.”

The seconds pass by, and I tense when Dean finally growls, pushing himself halfway out the passenger side window to fire off a shot.

He curses under his breath as a return shot from the Williams pack glances off my side mirror, taking off a piece of the casing with an ear-splitting screech.

Shit. That one was too fucking close.

I press down harder on the gas pedal, urging the truck forward faster through the snow and sleet. Dean grabs his seatbelt with one hand to brace himself from being thrown around inside the truck.

All around us are shadows of evergreen trees swaying in the wind alongside snowdrifts piling up along the side of the road. It mars together into a blur of white and gray outside our windshield; making me dizzy if I look anywhere but straight ahead through the snow.

“Dean,” I warn, “we can’t lead them home.”

As I say the last word, he squeezes the trigger. There's a loud bang, and he hollers in excitement.

"Got 'em!" he whoops, tucking himself back into the cab, red-cheeked, with a flash of exhilaration in his eyes.

"Fuck, seriously?"

In the mirror, I see the front tire of the Lincoln is shredded and barely hanging on, bouncing against the icy ground as the vehicle careens around, slowing.

"Nice shot!"

The SUV skids, metal grinding against ice like a razor blade slicing through glass. It loses all traction and spins into a snowdrift, plowing into it with a thud that reverberates through the quiet night air. The headlights flicker until they die completely and the car is obscured by falling snow as we speed away.

"Let's get out of here," I shout, slamming my foot on the accelerator and speeding away from danger with a screech of tires. One final gunshot rings out behind us, but we're too far away for them to see us.

So long for now, jackasses. Enjoy the mountains in the middle of the storm.

The engine grinds and groans under strain and then finally, we're at the turnoff for the storage building. I slow for the turn—no sense in fucking everything up right at the finish line—and head toward the garage. I slide home inside and turn off the ignition. Only now do I allow myself to relax—just barely—before exhaling sharply in relief.

"That was too close," I pant shakily, feeling my limbs tremble from fear and adrenaline.

"We handled it," says Dean, a glint in his eyes. "Your driving needs a little work though."

"Fuck off." I smack his arm before bursting into relieved laughter.

"Well," Dean says, turning back to face me with a grin, "if the Williams pack didn't like us before..." He trails off into

silence, and I nod in agreement.

We've made some pretty powerful enemies today, and we weren't on good terms with them to begin with.

Everett's going to be fucking furious.

"What are we going to tell Juliet?" I ask, wiping sweat from my forehead.

Dean lets out a long sigh. "Fuck, I don't know. The truth, I guess."

"The truth." I smirk at him. "That we refused to bring them to her and had a fucking gunfight on the mountain road?"

He flinches.

"That's one way to put it."

Now we just have to figure out how much of the truth to leave out. Would it be better to let Juliet keep on believing that her intended pack is a bunch of Prince Charmings, ready to sweep her off her feet? Or should we tell her everything, every skeleton in the closet that we've found about Victor?

"We could downplay what happened," I offer weakly, but even then, it doesn't feel right. I can't lie to Juliet. I don't want to.

Dean stares at me skeptically before shaking his head. "We'll just have to tell her the whole story—warts and all—and hope she makes the right decision for herself."

Warts and all. Yeah, that's going to go over real well.

TWENTY-THREE

—
JULIET

EVERETT'S steady breath is warm against my neck in the darkness. His heart beats a slow rhythm under my ear as I lie on his chest, happy and sated. His hand drifts over my back in circles, tracing lazy patterns.

I feel amazing. The pain is still there, but it's manageable. My skin is still warm, but no longer burning. There's still the pang of need between my thighs but it's not a bone-wrenching, gut-twisting thing anymore.

My first unsuppressed heat lasted a few days, but with Everett's knot, this one might pass with just a little more help. Likely due to the copious amounts of disgusting tea still lingering in my system.

I wonder if Huck knows of a tea that might prevent...other things. Now that Everett has filled me with his seed. There's been no need for birth control until now and though I know the chances are slight, with the vast majority of Omegas struggling with fertility these days, there's still a possibility. Though I doubt I'll be any exception.

I bite my lip, somehow unable to be sorry for it. To regret even a single second.

"Feeling better?" Everett's voice breaks the silence, low and calm.

I nod in response, not wanting to break this peaceful moment just yet. But even so, his simple question draws an involuntary smile to my face.

“Much better,” I whisper into his chest. Snuggled up against Everett with the night air caressing my skin from the crack in the window, it feels like all that pain has melted away—like I’m almost reborn again.

We lie there for what feels like hours, simply listening to each other breathe. His arms tighten around me as darkness begins to fall and the temperature outside drops.

A soft purr rumbles through my chest, but instead of answering with his own, he suddenly stiffens and I feel something shift in the air. Something that makes my chest hurt and the purring stop dead.

“What is it?” I ask, sitting up.

Everett jerks his chin to the window, his face unreadable. His hand around my waist tightens.

“The storm’s passing,” he says with a dark finality.

The storm?

Wait.

Does he still think I’m going to leave him soon?

Am I planning on leaving soon?

A weight settles guiltily in my stomach, souring whatever meager meal still languishes there.

What have I done?

I’ve broken my promise. My contract.

But the mere *thought* of leaving now makes me want to hide beneath the covers with Everett and never come back out again. They can’t come to collect me if they can’t find me. Maybe the guys could say I died in the crash after all.

I imagine the headlines...Williams Pack’s intended Omega burns up in fiery crash over Alaska.

A pang of sadness fills me thinking of my parents and knowing it’s too late now for that anyway. Dean said his transmission got through. Everyone already knows I’m all right.

“Once the snow clears, you can go home...” Everett breaks into my reverie with a soft murmur, almost as if he can’t bear to say it out loud. His voice is heavy and hoarse. A few moments of tense silence follow, and then he adds, “I want you to stay, Goldie.”

“You do?” My words come out barely more than a whisper.

He doesn’t speak, just gives me a slow nod, eyes cast to the rough wood roof above us. His throat bobs as he swallows back any other words.

Everett wants me to stay.

Every hurt feeling he’s caused in the past few days melts away, gone because of that single sentence.

“Stay,” he repeats softly, as if still trying to come to terms with saying it out loud. His eyes search mine for an answer, but I’m too overwhelmed to form any.

I want to stay with him. There’s no doubt about it. But is it the right thing to do? My fathers sacrificed so much to get me into the Williams pack. Turning away from that future would be a slap in the face.

But I need Everett. I need Huck and Dean. I need to be with them, to live with them, to love them. Surely, my fathers would understand that. They loved my Omega mother, and they love me more than anything in the world. They would want me to have love as well.

I attempt to steady my shaking hands. “Everett,” I say slowly, “are you asking me to be your Omega?”

I need to be sure before I can ever begin to make this choice. I’ve only known him—known them—for what? A little over a week now? Maybe ten days?

In my heart, I this feels *right*, but in my head...

You know them better than you know the Williamses and you were going to bond to them, the thought races through my mind and the truth of it stings. I’d spoken to Victor several

times over video call and the phone, but I haven't even *met* the others in his pack.

"Everett?" I press, needing a response, placing a hand on his chest to feel his strong heart beating below.

His gaze intensifies, and he nods slightly in response before looking away, seemingly unable to meet my eyes any longer.

Yes.

He was saying yes.

"I want to stay," I blurt out. "I want to be your Omega. I don't want to bond to the Williams pack anymore. I-I can't. Not after... it wouldn't feel right."

His eyes practically glow as he dissects the stream of words that spurted out of me. "You would stay with us? Be our Omega?"

He sits up, his large hand grasping at my arm, fingers tightening around the muscle. "Don't say this unless you mean it, Goldie."

My throat burns with emotion.

"I mean it."

With every single bit of my heart, I mean it.

I lean over to meet his lips with my own. Tasting him. Feeling the rasp of his short beard against my jawline. Inhaling his herbal scent. Loving the way his hands shift around my waist to grab fistfuls of my ass.

I'll have Everett-print bruises on my hips tomorrow, reminders of this perfect night.

He breaks the kiss, resting his forehead against mine as he runs a finger down my breast, making the nipple pebble under his touch.

"You just took your first knot, baby. We should take it easy. I don't want to hurt you."

I shake my head against his. “I’m fine, Everett,” I say, shivering as he tweaks my nipple between his thumb and index finger. “Touch me. I need this. I need *you*.”

His eyes grow feral, and he moves to the other breast, rolling and pinching until my eyes roll back. I move to straddle his hips, stroking my slick clit against his hardening cock. He grunts, gripping my hips harder, fingers tight against my skin as I rub myself all over him and he rolls his hips, stroking himself against me, but not entering. Not yet.

He presses a callused thumb between my thighs, starting a slow swirl against my clit, making me buck upward.

The new angle makes his erection nudge at my entrance.

I reach for it, holding it in my hand. The sight of it makes my mouth water. His flushed cockhead tapers into a long, thick length that I can barely fit my fingers around. A single drop of pre-cum drips from the little slit in the top. I swipe a finger through it and bring the moisture to my mouth. Licking. Tasting.

It’s bitter and salty and sweet all at the same time. All male. All alpha.

All Everett.

“Goldie,” Everett says, my name like a holy prayer on his lips. I grin down at him, and he inhales sharply, pupils darkening. A slow growl reverberates in his chest, predatory and possessive.

I lift myself up and over his hips, take his cock in hand, and slide down until our pelvises meet. We groan in tandem, and the sound would be almost like anguish if it weren’t for the vibrations of pleasure underneath.

I’m so full, and it’s perfect. It soothes every ache, every need I have strumming through my body. I don’t know what I’m doing, but I know what feels right, so I raise myself and then drop down again on his dick, swirling my hips as I chase that perfect friction.

My breath hitches as he drives into me from below, helping me set the right rhythm. I swivel my hips in figure

eights, and he grinds against me with every movement.

Another orgasm starts to build, a sweet ache that tenses my belly, but I keep losing it. “Everett, I need to come...please, make me come...”

Everett takes over, grabbing me by the hips and whirling me until I’m flat on my back. He grabs my ass, lifting me and squeezing it in both hands as he pumps into me. At this angle, he’s hitting a spot inside me I didn’t even know I had, and I let out a deep, throaty moan.

“Right there,” I breathe out, my whole body trembling. Our eyes lock, his gaze dark and intent. Biting his lip, he thrusts to find the best angle.

“Eyes on me, Goldie.” He punches into me again, and I cry out. My body is rigid as steel, my back arched as I climb and climb that peak of ecstasy. I slip my hand between my legs, rubbing my swollen clit in tight circles.

“Right there—”

And then I’m gone, shattering into a thousand pieces as he pistons into me like a madman. Hot white stars flash behind my eyes, and pleasure zings through every nerve in my body.

Everett lets out a massive growl and pumps into me a few times more before I feel the block of his knot beginning to swell at his base.

And I need it.

I need it so fucking bad.

“Knot me again,” I all but beg, fingers clamping around his flexed biceps. “Please.”

He bares his teeth in a groan of passion as he continues to fuck me, adjusting his angle, getting ready to force in the knot.

He bends my legs up, pressing them into my chest and I grip the space beneath my knees, giving him the wide opening as he kneels over my folded body and gives one great growl as he stuffs me full.

I cry out, wriggling against him, welcoming the hard flesh into my body, sheathing it in my warmth.

“Oh, fuck, Goldie,” he groans, and he twitches again, filling me with his cum. My legs fall free and he slumps against me, our hips locked together.

I wrap my arms around him as he presses his cheek to my chest, just above my breasts, breathing heavily, trembling and sated.

“This,” I say, a smile pulling at my lips. “I want this, forever.”

He runs his hands through my hair for a moment before he murmurs, “Then it’s all yours, Goldie. Forever.”

TWENTY-FOUR

I START up the snowmobile and back out of the garage, immediately feeling the rush of cold air on my face as I rev the engine. Huck follows close behind me, and we take off up the mountain. We zigzag back and forth, taking random turns in order to remain undetected even though we're pretty confident the alphas are long gone.

Things got too close back there. My heartbeat spikes every time I think of that bullet that nearly grazed Huck, instead hitting his side mirror. We could have lost him.

They could've killed him.

I went through that kind of loss once with Taylor. I think a second time would kill me. And both cases would be because of Victor fucking Williams.

For the first time in days, the turbulent snow has cleared and the sky is a deep, dark blue, void of clouds or stormy gray hues. Little flakes still fall softly around us, but it's nothing compared to the torrents from an hour ago. We're finally getting a break in the weather.

When we get to a clearing not too far from the cabin, I roll to a quick stop and check my phone signal, logging into several of the home-built apps I have to monitor our tests and communications.

"All connections to the outside world are back up," I tell Huck in a feigned cheery voice.

I'm anything but cheery. Connections to the outside world means connections to the Williams pack—which means Juliet could be gone in a matter of days. Or even hours.

“Oh,” is all Huck says, and his expression falls.

“Once we tell her everything, if she still wants to go, we'll have no choice but to let her,” I murmur, clearing my throat to cast off the gravelly rasp of emotion forming in my throat. “If she's going to leave, now's the time to do it. While the weather is clear.”

“I know,” he mumbles. “Doesn't mean I have to like it.”

“We'll still have us. We still have Everett.”

It was enough before. It will have to be enough now.

The cabin welcomes us home. We park the snowmobiles and walk together toward the house, our feet crunching through freshly fallen powder that is still untouched and unblemished. Inside, I stop short when I see Juliet and Everett sitting on the sofa.

Together.

Cuddling.

Everett is cuddling with another human being.

“What the fuck?” I breathe out.

Huck stares at them, slack-jawed and wide-eyed.

“Hey, guys! You're back!” Juliet chirps happily from her spot in Everett's lap. Her voice is animated, excited, and relieved, like a balm on an open wound, but I shift on my feet, discomfited by the sight in front of me.

What the hell happened while we were gone? Her entire demeanor has changed. There's a newfound sense of calmness and serenity in the way she carries herself, the way she snuggles into Everett's embrace.

Her scent is literally fucking everywhere, but the scent of her coming heat is muted now, fading.

And Everett just smirks at me. The bastard. His arm is draped protectively around Juliet's shoulder, and for once, his face isn't etched with worry or concern—only contentment.

“Oh, you got some!” Juliet says, rising and reaching for the white paper bag full of suppressants. “Thank you so much. I'm so glad you both made it back safe.”

She throws her arms around my neck. I stand frozen, not wanting to move from the spot and break this moment, knowing there may not be many more like it in my future.

This is probably the happiest I have seen her in days, yet my heart still drops at her gratitude. It feels like so much more than a thank-you for arranging for suppressants. It seems like a thank-you for everything we've done.

Is she preparing to leave?

I wrap my arms around her, squeezing her tight, pressing my face into her neck to breathe her in, savoring her scent, locking it away into memory. She smells like Juliet all right, but she also smells like Everett now, too.

“You're acting...different,” I mutter, rubbing at my face where she kissed me.

Everett clears his throat, and there's a warning pulse through the pack bonds.

Oh.

Oh, fuck.

“You knotted her?” I snap, meeting Everett's gaze. His back straightens, and a low growl echoes from his chest.

“I had to,” he says. “Things were out of control.”

“I'll bet they were.” I tear off my coat with a growl. “I'll just fucking bet they were.” Another warning pulse comes through the bonds, one that distinctively means *watch it*.

My face heats up as I stand there, watching the two of them together. I want to scream, to demand answers from him, but Everett's eyes flash, all Alpha, telling me to calm. I take a few deep breaths and focus on keeping my anger at bay.

That's not easy, not when all I can think about is Everett and Juliet together. Everett in bed with her, fucking her, touching her everywhere, *knotting her*. I told him. I *told him* she was a virgin.

"You knotted her?" Huck repeats my earlier question, oblivious to my darkening mood. "Damn man, didn't think you had it in you."

Sure, nice work. I'm all for Everett claiming Juliet as ours—which he clearly didn't, judging by the lack of bite marks on her neck—but I'm the one who pushed for helping her through her heat. I was the one who kept being denied. I was the one who touched her first, soothing her oncoming symptoms.

But no, send Huck and Dean down the mountain, and Everett gets to play.

I glance at Juliet for her reaction. She's blushing, of course. But then I remember one important fact, one that will blow this all up in our faces even more than it has.

"Wait a second," I say slowly. "Aren't you supposed to be, you know, pure for the Williams pack?"

She turns even redder, if that's possible, and reaches for Everett's hand. To my surprise, he takes it, entangling his fingers with hers.

Huck lets out a long whistle at the two of them, and I send him a glare.

I don't know what's going on here. Have they come to some sort of arrangement?

Because Everett wouldn't...

I mean, he basically vowed never to bond to an Omega or add anyone new to this pack, *ever*, after Taylor died.

I throw a hand through my hair, taking a deep breath.

We'll have to talk about this later.

"Communications are back up," I say, my voice bitter. "You can contact your family, Juliet. I can set you up with a

call right now, if you can wait for me to get my laptop hooked up.”

Juliet’s mouth forms a small *O*. “My family. Right.” Apparently, she’s forgotten her family while snuggling up to Everett.

I stalk off to my bedroom to grab my laptop, cords, and microphone. A knock at the door interrupts me as I’m winding up wires into tight balls. “What is it?”

Everett walks in, his expression unreadable.

“I’m not going to apologize. It was necessary.”

We both know what he’s talking about.

“Was it?” I ask, throwing a cord on the floor. “Was it really?”

“Yes. It was.” He bites his lip. “We were both in pain, Dean. I’ve never felt anything like it. Worse than any rut I’ve ever had and I was eating fucking suppressants like candy.”

I sigh, rubbing at my forehead. “We’ve talked about that. It isn’t healthy.”

He grunts and I know he won’t apologize for putting his health at risk, either.

“But I don’t get how her heat is almost completely faded already. I mean, that shit lasts days usually, right?”

“The fuck should I know?”

I rack my brain. “The tea. The tea Huck made. It must’ve been a partially suppressed heat.”

Ev’s brow shoot up. “If that was what a suppressed heat looks like...”

Another pang of jealousy rushes through me and I can see on Everett’s face that he senses it through the pack bonds.

“Look...Dean, I had no choice—“

“*Fine*. Fine, I get it. I just—“

“You’re jealous?”

“No, not jealous...” I don’t know how to describe the feeling. “Well, I don’t know, maybe a little, but it’s more like I...I missed a chance. She probably won’t stay with us in the end, you know? If it came to having to knot her, I was hoping, I don’t know, that it would be all of us.”

Everett’s brows lower and a darkness passes over his eyes and I can sense through the bonds his claim on her. Just me mentioning her leaving us is filling him with dread and insecurity.

Fuck. He’s as gone for her as Huck and me.

We’re all fucked up for her. She holds our bare, bleeding hearts in her tiny hands and I’m not sure she even knows it.

“She wants to stay,” he says finally.

The world falls down around me and I startle myself with a choke of a sob in my throat that I have to beat down with clenched muscle and held breath. “She what?”

“She wants to stay,” he repeats, mouth curved in a hint of a smile. “She wants to be our Omega.”

“What about the Williams pack?” I stammer, too afraid to accept his words as truth.

“We’ll figure it out. There has to be a way to get her out of the contract.”

“Well, about that...” I sink down on my bed and gesture for him to do the same.

“When we were down at the settlement, there were two dipshits there from the Williams pack sniffing around. Looked like hired muscle. Big guys with suits, walking around like they owned the place. They caught Juliet’s scent on us. They know she’s here.”

“What?” Everett’s spine stiffens, and I hold out a hand to stop him from barging out of the cabin right now. His expression is grim, like a soldier ready to go into battle. I wouldn’t be surprised if he did.

“I told them they need the proper custody paperwork, and then we left. But that wasn’t enough, I guess. They chased us

halfway up the mountain. We lost them in a spinout just before the garage. But it's only a matter of time before they're swarming all over our property."

"Like a pack of rabid dogs." Everett spits out a slew of curses before he stands, raking his hands through his hair. "This is bad, Dean. They'll start all sorts of shit with us. And if they trace us back to Taylor's death, you know they'll stir that up, too. And who knows how they'll be with Juliet."

"They're going to be a problem," I say. *Problem* being the tamest of words to describe those fucking guys.

"When are they not?" Everett rumbles, searching my face, his brows knitting. "What? There's more you aren't saying."

I swallow, nodding. "They shot at us. Tried to take out Bertha's tires on the mountain road. Almost fucking hit Huck."

Everett drags a hand down his face with a growl.

I sink lower into my bed, feeling the weight of everything crushing my chest. We've done our best to protect Juliet, but it hasn't been enough. Now, not only are we facing potential conflict with the pack, but Juliet could suffer some very damaging consequences. The thought of what they might do to her in retaliation sends an icy chill through my veins.

Of course, there's the possibility that they won't want her anymore now that she's 'impure,' which might work out well for us, but they wouldn't hesitate to smear her good name to any tabloid or online platform that'd listen. No one fucks around with the Williams pack and gets away with it.

Everett stands there, running his hands through his hair again and again.

"What do we do now?" I ask.

I'll do whatever Everett says, but at the moment, my protective instincts are so high that I just want to go downstairs, pick Juliet up, and bring her in here. To keep anyone and anything evil away from her.

And maybe knot her, too. I wouldn't turn that down.

“The only thing we can,” he says. “Tell her everything, and then let her make her own choice.”

“Then we do it right now. Before she talks to her family. I think everything needs to be out on the table. She needs to know what she’s getting herself into if she decides to honor her contract with the Williamses.”

He nods gravely. “Alright. I agree. We do it now.”

TWENTY-FIVE

“I’M FINE, I PROMISE,” I say for the millionth time as my parents talk over themselves in their excitement to hear my voice, but all I can think about is everything the guys just told me in the other room. My mind is racing with all the information they shared about the Williams Pack. My stomach sour and in knots.

I can’t believe I almost...

Fuck. I feel sick just thinking about being in the same room as those people, never mind bonding to them. Every shady thing they do in their business, not to mention what they’re doing to the environment, and worst all, what they did to Taylor...

I clear my throat, trying to refocus on the video call.

Through the laptop screen, Papa’s eyes are lined with stress, and I swear Dad has lost weight since I saw them last. Guilt digs at me at the thought of them worrying about me all this time when I was perfectly safe.

“We were devastated when we heard about the crash,” repeats Papa, relief palpable in his voice. “And then when we heard you were okay but stranded, we didn’t know what to think. We couldn’t get to you. And the crash is on every news channel out there. Everywhere we turn, there’s a reminder of how we almost lost you.”

“I was spared from the worst of it.” I swallow hard, remembering the terror of those moments before impact. Even

now, it gives me nausea to think about it. “The others on the plane weren’t so lucky.”

Tears spring to my eyes, and I blink them back.

Reassuring them is impossible when I can’t even calm myself. I still haven’t been able to shake the images of twisted metal and broken glass from my nightmares. The smell of thick black smoke. And the bitter cold trek that followed.

“A miracle,” sighs Dad, voice cracking. “A goddamned miracle.”

A miracle? Maybe. But if so, that miracle is named Everett, because I’d be dead without him.

“You look well, considering,” Papa says. “Your cheeks are rosy. That’s not windburn, is it?”

“No, not windburn.”

Despite the tears, I feel calm, calmer than I have in a long time. My skin is cooler, my mind clearer, and with a couple of near-expiry heat suppressants making their way into my bloodstream, my heat feels like it’s fading fast.

“Well, what’s going on with you?” Dad’s eyes squint. “You’re not on drugs, are you?”

I burst into laughter. “No, Dad, I’m not on drugs. Just the effects of healthy mountain air, I guess.”

I can’t really tell them I lost my virginity to an Alpha yesterday, or that I took my first knot and absolutely fucking loved it.

Not exactly the conversation you have with your parents. Especially not your *alpha* parents.

Papa chuckles and shakes his head in amazement. “It certainly looks like it did something for you. I haven’t seen you smile like that in ages.”

Alphas.

Better than any drug.

Dad smiles, but his eyes are still filled with worry. “Well, whatever it is, I suppose we should be grateful.” He pauses for a moment before continuing softly, “I’m just glad you’re safe.”

And then we move on from the relatively safe topic of my health to the one thing I don’t want to discuss.

“We’ve been in contact with Victor several times,” says Dad. “His lawyers, too. We’re all trying to piece together what happens next. But they still want you in their pack, honey, despite everything.”

“Everything?” My eyes narrow. “What does everything mean?”

“Well, since you’ve been found by another pack...” Papa’s voice trails off, and he clears his throat. “Their legal team thinks there was foul play.”

The idea is so absurd that I laugh out loud. “Foul play? They think the guys kidnapped me?” I laugh again, but it fades.

My parents are definitely not laughing.

“Oh, come on,” I scoff. “You can’t be serious. I would be dead if it weren’t for this pack. I almost was dead, lost out there in the snow. Would they rather I had died instead of being saved by another pack?”

“No, honey, it’s not that,” Dad begins, but I shake my head. My parents exchange a quick glance, but neither of them responds.

“You know that isn’t what happened! These guys saved my life. They gave me shelter. They’re the only reason I’m still alive. Why would they try to kidnap me? What would be their motive? They don’t have any incentive to do something like that.”

My hackles rise with the instinctive reaction to defend what’s mine.

“We don’t know that,” Dad says gently. “It’s possible they could be using you as leverage against the Williamses for

some other nefarious reason..." His voice trails off, and my heart sinks in my chest.

Leverage against them? They would never do that. They care for me. They want me. Hell, they might even love me.

I might love them, too.

"No way," I shake my head firmly. "These guys have been nothing but kind and helpful to me since I arrived here. They've kept me safe, fed me well, and even taken care of me when I was ill. They would never hurt me like that."

My nose wrinkles. "The Williamses on the other hand..."

"What was that, honey?"

I shake my head. "Nothing."

"All right, all right." Papa holds up his hands in submission. "But the Cooper Pack hasn't done anything to you, have they? The legal team says that if they touched or harmed you despite the knowledge of the Williamses claim on you that—"

"I was not harmed," I bite out. Touched, yes, but I'm not going into that. "They haven't done anything to hurt me or crossed any boundaries they shouldn't have."

Or at least, boundaries that I didn't want them to cross. All the others were pretty much open borders as of yesterday.

Papa sighs heavily, his shoulders drooping. He rubs his hand over his face before looking back up at me with a tired expression.

"All right, Juliet," he says wearily. "I understand how you feel about this pack, but keep in mind that you've already chosen your pack—promises were made. Contracts signed. And if any alphas from that pack up there in the mountains were to cross one of those boundaries by touching or harming you in any way, then there would be consequences for them as well as for yourself."

"It's even worse if the Omega has been bonded against her will—" Dad begins.

I groan, yanking at my shirt collar, showing nothing but smooth and unbroken skin.

“Do I look like I’ve been bonded? No bites, Dad. No bites.”

“Juliet,” he starts slowly, “you know that a bond between an omega and their alpha is not always freely given. And not always on the neck where people can see.”

I take a deep breath and try to keep my temper in check. “I haven’t been bonded. There’s no bite mark on my neck *or* any other part of my body.”

“Good,” says Papa, gripping my Dad’s shoulder and pulling him back against his chest. “Real good. Victor’s lawyer says as long as you’re unbonded and still willing to be their Omega, they will drop all legal charges against the mountain pack.”

My stomach drops, and everything comes to a standstill.

Hot tears sting my eyes.

What?

I try to wrap my head around what they’re saying, but I feel like I’m going to throw up.

“They can’t do that,” I mumble through a sob, trying to think of a way out of this. “They didn’t do anything! The Williams pack can’t charge them with shit.”

Dad scratches the back of his neck. “Apparently, one of them denied your return to the Williamses. Even...shot at the Williamses’ associate.”

I’m shaking my head, hot angry laughter threatening in my chest.

But there’s no sense in arguing with my parents. Telling them that the Williamses were the ones who shot first would only stress them out even more.

I can’t imagine any of my alphas willingly acting violently toward anyone unless it was the only option.

“Like we said, honey,” Papa adds. “The Williamses will drop all charges against them if they’ll just return you to them peacefully. I can see they’ve made an impression on you. It’s the kind thing to do, hon. For their sakes. The Williamses don’t mess around, not when it comes to their pro—”

Papa cuts himself off, stopping himself before he can say *property*. A sizzle of rage ricochets up my spine.

He clears his throat, starting again. “Not when it comes to someone as important as the Omega that is to be bonded to their pack for life.”

Something tightens in my chest, twisting and twisting until I can barely breathe. Until I’m not sure I want to. Because I’m starting to understand what they’re saying. The Williams will use their wealth and power and influence to steamroll the Cooper pack into the earth if they don’t get back what they believe to be theirs.

“What if they had touched me?” I all but mumble. “What if I *wanted* to stay? Would they let me go then?”

Dad’s jaw tightens and Papa consoles him with a soft squeeze of his shoulder. “No, Juliet. If those mountain men have touched you, we’ll all be in a world of trouble.”

We.

Not just me. Not just the Cooper pack.

But them too. My parents. They made certain assurances. They signed their names next to mine on the claiming agreement.

They can’t afford a legal battle with the Williamses.

No one short of being a billionaire could.

I have to leave them.

I have to leave Huck, Everett, and Dean.

How could I have been so naïve?

“Fine,” I say, weariness overcoming me. A bone deep exhaustion that I know is only cloaking the inevitable pain to

follow. But I block it out, keeping my thoughts blank. Not wanting to feel it. Not yet. Not with them watching.

“What happens now?” my voice comes out in a dead monotone I barely recognize.

Papa and Dad share an uncomfortable look and I know they’ve sensed the shift in me, even through the screen of Dean’s monitor.

“They’ll send a helicopter for you tomorrow,” says Papa. “Likely first thing.”

Tomorrow morning? I’m not ready to say goodbye, not that soon. A sob swells in my chest and I bury it down, tightening the muscle around my chest to keep it in.

“I’ll be ready.”

There’s a beat of silence before Papa breaks it.

“Juliet?” he asks, a soft note to his voice. “Is there anything you want to tell us? If...I mean, you know we would never want...”

I think of Everett’s hands roaming my body, of Dean’s kisses, and Huck’s embraces.

I think of the laughter around the breakfast table, working in the barns with the animals, and even the guys constantly chopping wood. Nights spent together in front of the fire.

This is *home*. And I have to leave. And it’s not fair, not one bit of it.

But telling them that will only make this harder. It’ll only force them into feeling guilty, or worse, trying to fight for my freedom of choice and winding up smacked down by the Williams.

“Nothing at all,” I lie, attempting a smile. “I’ll see you soon, ’kay?”

I hang up, unable to hold it in any longer. As soon as their image blinks out, tears brim in my eyes. Sadness, guilt, and regret press down on my chest like an anvil, making it difficult for me to breathe.

Drowning me.

Tomorrow, I'm leaving to be bonded with someone I've realized is a monster. Because only a monster could threaten the people who saved their so-called beloved.

What kind of life will I have with someone like Victor? Will it be any life at all?

I promised Everett I would stay.

I can't take that hope away from him. I just can't. He's suffered too much.

Sobs shake my body, but I work to keep them quiet, not wanting to upset the others.

There has to be an alternative, some kind of solution that would let me stay here on the mountain without risking legal charges against the pack or my family. But there's nothing I can do; Victor has all the power here...right?

A seedling of an idea starts in my brain, unformed and unready, but it's there. Maybe there is a way...

And maybe, if they still want me after this, I'll get to stay with my mountain pack for good.

But first, I have to leave them.

TWENTY-SIX

I SIGH LOUDLY, running a nervous hand through my hair as I pace across the living room. Dean stands next to me, his eyes glued to the door handle of the other room while Huck is busy giving the animals a quick feed out in the barn.

I hear Juliet's muffled voice coming from the other side of the door as she talks with her parents.

It's been almost half an hour now. We said we would give her privacy, but I hate being a whole room away when she's in an emotional situation like this.

Dean turns to me, worry etched across his grim face. "Do you think she's okay? She's been in there for a while."

"I don't know," I reply, but something feels off. "It's hard to hear. I think she'd be happy to talk to her parents though."

Unless she's telling them now that she's decided to stay with us, but we haven't hammered out the details on all that yet. I'm sure the Williamses will make it hard, but I don't care. Juliet is worth all the trouble in the world.

"Should we go in there?" Dean asks, legs already shifting as if he's about to run in and rescue her from some imaginary villain.

"No, give her a few more minutes." As the words leave me, the door creaks open, and Juliet walks in. Her face is pale, her eyes red-rimmed, her shoulders slumped.

My baby's hurting, and I don't know why.

“Goldie,” I say, taking a few halting steps toward her, but Dean gets there first. He touches her arm, and to my surprise, she stiffens at his touch, shrugging him away. His arm falls, as does his expression, and I stop in my tracks, rooted in place.

Ice creeps into my veins, slowing my thoughts, laying frost over my newborn heart.

No.

She lets out a tiny snuffle. Such a small sound, but it gets through the frost, and I wince, feeling her pain like it’s my own.

She’s so fragile. Vulnerable. I want to scoop her body up in my arms and take her upstairs, tuck her into my warm, safe bed, and hold her until the pain and the fear I see in her eyes disappears. But right now, I don’t think she wants that.

“What happened?”

“I just...I just want to be alone for a little while,” she says, voice shaking. “I’m going upstairs to get my things together.”

Get her...things together?

A wobbly intake of my breath passes her lips and I watch the lower one quiver before she can hide it from me. She wrings her hands in the hem of her shirt, unable to look at any of us as her face pinches, and before she even speaks I know I don’t want to hear whatever she will say next.

“Goldie?” Her name is a plea.

Don’t do this.

Don’t fucking do this.

“My pack will be here in the morning to get me.”

She turns toward the stairs, but with her words like the crack of whip against my soul, I rush forward, a growl in my chest as I grab her arm, yanking her close enough that our chests are pressed together. Her breathing quickens into stuttering gasps.

“What do you mean, *your pack*?” I demand.

My voice is low, deadly, and I want her to take it back.

I need her to *take it back*.

Blistering heat crawls up my back and the edges of my vision darken.

“Goldie!”

I shake her and I should let her go but I can't. I can't. *I can't*.

“*Everett*,” Dean warns, but I growl, dogging him. He doesn't want to fucking test me right now.

“You said we were your pack,” I sneer into Juliet's face. “What changed?”

My grip tightens as she tries to escape from me, but I pull her close, rage and desperate longing at war with each other until one wins out over the other and I crush my lips to hers. Fire blazes through my veins, but whether it's lust or love or anger, I can't tell.

I kiss her hard, and she whines into my mouth, almost bending to my will, but then she's stiff against me, unyielding and cold.

My lips break from hers and she looks at the floor, her cheekbones flaring as she clenches her jaw.

“We're your pack,” I say, as if I can will her to agree. “We're your pack and you damn well know it.”

Juliet's eyes are like frosted glass as she yanks herself back, unfazed by my anger. She wipes at her mouth with the back of her hand and she might as well have slapped me across the face.

The effect is the same. A shifting of perspective. A jarring realization slamming into place.

She's already made up her mind.

“No,” she says firmly, straightening her sleeve where the imprint of my fingers is still crumpled in the fabric. “You aren't.”

She turns and all but runs up the stairs. Runs away from me. From us.

“We took you in, fed you, *healed you!*” I yell after her retreating figure. *We loved you* is the only thing I don’t say aloud, because I can’t bring myself to admit it. “You said you would stay!”

She doesn’t respond or give me the courtesy of looking back at me.

I stand motionless, unable to follow her up to her bedroom for fear of what I might do with the raucous riot of emotions swirling through me like a fucking hurricane.

My blood is boiling, and if I go up there right now, I might do something I’ll regret. Like force the bond. Hold her down while I take what should be *mine*.

She’s a liar. A filthy, goddamned liar. She got me, Dean, and Huck to fall for her, and it was all some little game.

And I was the idiot who believed it. The idiot who fell in love with her.

Chest heaving, I pick up the nearest chair and hurl it across the room with a cry of anguish, watching as it shatters in an explosion of wood upon impact.

I stare down at the shattered remains, my hands shaking with rage and a deep-seated anguish that has been festering for weeks.

Huck rushes in from outside, no doubt sensing the shift through our pack bonds. His gaze lingers on the broken chair before it flits to meet mine.

“What the hell, Everett?” he exclaims. “What’s going on?”

Dean speaks up before I can even open my mouth. “Juliet’s leaving,” he murmurs, reaching out to touch Huck’s arm as if to comfort him too. “The Williams pack is coming in the morning to take her away.”

He pauses for a second and then adds with a hollowness to his stare, “She chose them.”

“Like hell she did,” Huck mutters, wrenching away from Dean’s grasp.

Before we can stop him, he sprints upstairs, wood creaking in protest under his thundering footsteps.

It won’t help.

I saw her stoic expression. She’s made up her mind. She doesn’t want us, and maybe she never did. I press my palms against the cold wall behind me and squeeze my eyes shut, willing myself to calm down.

“Well?” Dean says, gesturing to the empty stairwell. “How are we going to fix this?”

My teeth grind together as I let out a deep sigh of frustration. I open my eyes, glaring at Dean. “Fuck, D. You know, for a smart guy, you can be really thick sometimes. There is no fixing this. She made her choice.”

He shakes his head adamantly. “She belongs with us.”

“No,” I growl. “She doesn’t. She never has.”

He might think there’s a chance of saving this, but I know better. We’ve already lost her.

It was doomed from the start and if they’d just listened to me, stayed away from her, they wouldn’t be feeling the holes punched through their chests where a part of her had started to take hold.

My fists clench at my sides as I try to contain the roiling fury building inside me. It doesn’t matter.

“So what? You’re going to let her go? Just like that?”

“It’s not my choice.” I glare at him, unable to deal with the grief that shines through his eyes. “I can’t make her stay against her will. I won’t. If she doesn’t want it, then I don’t, either.”

“I know you better than to think that you’d knot an Omega you didn’t really care for,” Dean points out quietly. “You could have found a way to settle her without it, but you cared for her enough to ease her pain. You wanted her enough to fuse her to

you in the most intimate way possible. You claimed her, Everett. Maybe not on paper, but in here.”

He thumps a closed fist against his chest.

“And look where that got me!” I spin around and glare at him, my anger flaring more fiercely than before. “It was just instinct. Nothing. *Fuck!* It didn’t mean *anything!*”

Dean reaches for me, but I don’t want his comfort, not now. I have no comfort to give him back—no comfort to give myself either. I need to get out of here, to run away. To go so far away that my broken heart will be too worn out to hurt.

“You can keep lying to yourself,” Dean seethes as I begin to storm away. “But it won’t help us convince her to stay.”

“She made her choice,” I snap for what feels like the tenth goddamned time. “We told her every dirty rotten thing about those assholes and she *still* chose them. What do you expect me to do? Chase after her? Beg and plead for her to stay? I’m not the begging type, Dean.”

“No,” Dean says calmly, crossing his arms. “I just want you to fight for her.”

“What good will it do?” I demand, my voice rising in volume. “She made it clear she wasn’t interested in staying with us. How am I supposed to fight when she’s already given up?”

I turn away from him again and pace around the room once more as I struggle to contain my rage. No matter how hard I try, it’s impossible to shake off this bitterness that lies heavy on my heart. It’s a stone pressing down into the depths of an endless ocean, and I’m drowning right along with it.

I pick up one of the broken chair legs and hurl it toward the fireplace. I’m not aiming for anything in particular, and I regret it immediately as it flies toward the framed photo of Taylor on the mantle. It slams into the frame, glass shattering everywhere. The frame crashes to the floor, and I run toward it.

Dropping to my knees next to it, I try to rescue the photo of Taylor, but one of the jagged shards cuts my index finger.

“Fuck!” Blood seeps from my wound, gathering around my knuckle in a bright red pool that smears over his image.

I want to move, but Dean clamps on to my arm, holding me so tight that I can barely breathe.

“Dammit, Everett.” Dean pulls me into his embrace, ignoring how I tense up, forcing me to keep still.

I won’t fight him this time, too worn out to protest. I grumble under my breath and reluctantly let him hold me while liquid pools in the corners of my eyes. I pinch it away, sniffing.

“We’ll get through this,” he says, pulling back. “We’ll figure it out. We always do.”

“Sure,” I say gruffly, needing to get out of here.

I disentangle myself from Dean’s arms and carefully tuck Taylor’s photo into my pocket as I stand and make a break for the front door, yanking it open.

I feel Dean’s eyes on me as I leave, so I quicken my pace and yell over my shoulder that I’m going to chop some more firewood.

At this rate, we’re gonna be stocked up for firewood for at least the next three years.

Shaking my head in frustration, I march out into the cold winter night. The chill bites into my face and hands as I pull up my collar to stay warm. The air smells of wood smoke and pine trees, crisp and clean, but as always, Juliet’s sweet scent is woven into it, taunting me.

How long will it take for her to fade?

A day? A week?

I can’t decide if I want every trace of her gone as quickly as possible or if I would rather her linger with us, a ghost to fill the void she’ll leave behind tomorrow.

I grit my teeth as I press my thumb and forefinger against the bridge of my nose, but it’s too late to ward off a headache.

It's like a vise grip, enough pressure to make me wince in pain.

My breaths are shallow and quick. Every inhale is like dragging a razor blade through my brain as I try to contain my temper, the excess testosterone wreaking havoc in my skull. An acrid taste of bile lingers on the back of my tongue.

“Fuck!” I tip my head back and roar into the night, my breath creating a column of steam in the air.

I grab an axe and storm off toward the nearest pile of logs, the need to break shit a violent demand with every broken thud of my heart.

TWENTY-SEVEN

I LEAN on the doorframe into Juliet's room, watching her as she packs up her belongings, which really aren't hers at all.

After I gave her the sewing kit last week she's been altering all the clothing from our cast off bin. Adjusting waistbands. Cutting tight collars lower. Twisting and re-sewing the halter part of our summer tanks to fit her better.

She tucks away one of Everett's plaid shirts, unaltered, covering it over with the scraps of my and Dean's clothing that has become hers.

Her slender fingers brush lovingly over each item before packing it away, as if she's trying to capture every feeling and thought that each brings with it.

"You should design clothes," I say with an air of nonchalance. She jumps at the sound of my voice. "You'd be good at it."

She squints at me, confusion in her eyes. "What are you talking about?"

"Designing clothes," I repeat, sauntering into the room. "You have such a creative eye for fashion. Especially when it comes to upcycling Alpha clothes."

She lets out an amused huff. Not exactly a laugh, but it's all I'm going to get. She's trying so hard to keep her features composed and hide that she's about to cry, but I can tell.

And if she's sad, it has to be because she doesn't want to go, right?

There's something more going on here. Everett is just too thick headed and trapped in all his ugly feels to notice.

If I can just figure out what it is, I know I can fix this.

"We want you to stay," I say quietly. "You do know that, right? You have a place here, with us."

Her lip quivers, and she throws the next folded shirt into the suitcase with more force than needed. "You're making this harder than it has to be," she bites out. "You should go, Huck."

"You don't have to choose the Williamses. They're monsters, Juliet. We won't force you to bond or anything, but we could come up with something. Whatever the problem is here—whatever's happened—we can fix it."

"It's not something you can fix."

"Well, the chickens have grown attached to you. If you leave, they won't lay eggs, and we'll starve to death."

I clutch at my heart dramatically. "You don't want us to starve, do you?"

The smallest hint of a smile starts to grow, but it's chased quickly by a heart wrenching frown that makes her lower lip tremble. "I doubt Victor Williams is worried about the emotional welfare of your chickens," she says in a watery voice, forcing a huff of a laugh.

"He should be," I say gravely. "Chicken psychology is no joke. He could cause an uprising."

She lets out a little laugh, and it's the most beautiful sound I've ever heard. Musical and light, like happiness threaded through the wind.

I can't grab hold of her laugh, but I can grab hold of her, and it's even better. I reach for her hand, entangling her fingers with mine, and pull her close. She doesn't protest, not when I tilt her head up, and certainly not when I take her mouth with mine.

She kisses me for only an instant before she pulls back, eyes gleaming with unshed tears. "This will just make it worse," she whispers.

“Then let’s make it worse.”

I pull her back to me, anxious for her lips. Anxious to feel every one of her kisses, to swallow every one of her moans.

A sob breaks free of her lips, and I can see in her eyes she wants this, too, consequences or added pain be damned.

And maybe, just maybe, being with me can help change her mind. Make her stay. Tie her to us in one more way that isn’t as easily severed.

I trace a finger down her jaw, letting it drop to her collar. She shivers as I draw a soft line down to the swell of her breast.

She doesn’t tell me no and I can see the battle raging behind her eyes.

“It won’t change anything,” she warns, a hitch in her voice as I cup her breast in my large hand, hating the clothes covering her but loving that they’re mine.

She should always be dressed in my things. I rub her nipple through the fabric, and her hips sway toward me, a muffled cry slipping past her lips into my mouth as I kiss her again.

I slip her shirt up and over her blonde hair, then toss it in the corner. She can pack it later. Her nipples greet me, perky and pointed, flushed a rosy red. I palm one breast in each hand, testing their perfect weight, squeezing and tugging at the nipples as she shakes and bites her bottom lip.

Her back arches instinctively toward me, and I dip forward, sucking one perfect pink nipple deep into my mouth, lavishing it with my tongue. I brush the other with my thumb, circling it with feather-soft movements, a slow mimicry of my tongue’s actions.

She cries out as I switch from tongue to teeth and pushes my head away. “The bed,” she pants. “Take me to the bed, Huck.”

I shove her borrowed suitcase to the floor, clearing the bed. It might be a rough-hewn wooden bed with flannel sheets, but

I lay her out like she's a princess on the finest silks, slipping her pants down to bare her to me. I strip off my clothes and climb naked over her, pressing my erection against her thigh. Juliet reaches down, gripping my length, and I bite out a curse.

"Careful there, baby girl," I say through gritted teeth. "We don't want to end this party before it's started."

She grins up at me and tugs harder, and my head falls back. She feels like heaven, and this is just her hand. I can't imagine what it'll feel like inside her perfect wetness.

I pull away from her hand and slip my hand between her thighs while laving kisses up and down her neck. She's dripping with slick, hot and ready for me, and it makes my mouth water. I find her clit and press my thumb on it, and she jolts as if I've shocked her.

"There," she begs. "Oh god, I need more, Huck."

"Whatever you want, baby girl."

I rub her in tight circles, marveling as her body bows and breaks underneath me. She arches up with a cry, skin flushed as she comes from my touch. Slick floods my fingers, and I bring one to my mouth, licking her sweet nectar from my skin.

She gasps for air, and I place a soothing palm between her breasts as she comes back down from her pleasure.

"Ready?" I murmur, and I don't know if I'm asking her or myself.

"Ready," she says, and I line up with her core, easing myself inside her, already feeling my knot swelling and the threat of my release rushing through my groin.

Her mouth drops open in a soundless gasp as I fill her completely, my knot still small and soft enough to fuck her all the way to my base for a little longer.

"Fuck," I curse, stilling my movements. "*Urgh*, this is amazing, baby girl. You feel so good."

I take a deep breath to bring myself away from the edge, even though my cock begs me to rut into her with fury.

“Make love to me, Huck,” Juliet murmurs and I can see in her shining eyes how much she wants this, and it heals...and *it hurts*, because she’s also looking at me like she’s already saying goodbye. “Please.”

Whatever you say, baby girl.

I roll my hips back before thrusting into her again, groaning as she cries out and claws at my back, leaving her marks all over me. I set a steady pace between her milky thighs, rubbing my nose into her neck, unable to get enough of her scent, and wanting to leave her with a little piece of me before she goes.

If she goes.

I brace my arms against the mattress and growl as I begin to pick up speed, grunting with every thrust, trying to hit as deep inside her as I possibly can until my knot impedes me.

She shudders against me, crooning in pleasure, hips meeting mine as my swelling knot pops in and out of her, growing larger by the second. Soon, it’ll take a gargantuan effort to force it in and I don’t know if she wants that. I don’t know if I should knot her, because like Everett, once I do, I know watching her go will be almost impossible.

Her breath is ragged, her abs tightening, and she’s right on the edge of another soul-consuming orgasm—when the door bursts open.

Dean growls low as he enters, slamming the door behind him.

“You started without me,” he accuses in a deep, lust-thickened voice from behind us.

“There’s still room for one more.”

“Please, Dean,” Juliet says, her words wavering as I fuck her, casting the air from her lungs with each powerful thrust. “I...want you. I want to feel you. Just once. *Please.*”

I sense Dean’s anguish, his hesitance, but only for an instant before I hear him stripping, his heavy belt clattering on the floor.

The mattress dips as he climbs onto the bed and into my line of sight. Dean gazes down at Juliet fondly.

Her body heaves with each of my thrusts and he reaches down to touch her swollen lips, running his fingers over her lower one. She opens for him and his own lips part in wanting as he sinks his fingers into her mouth and she takes them in, sucking until his cock is full and heavy between his legs, throbbing in time with his pulse.

“I want to taste you,” Juliet begs, pretty blue eyes looking up at him, pleading, shifting from his mouth to his cock.

The idea of watching that almost has me coming on the spot, but I stop myself,

reluctantly pulling out from Juliet’s warm, dripping core as Dean leans over and kisses Juliet for a moment, slow and languidly. “Come here, baby,” he says, pulling her to the edge of the bed. “Do you trust me?”

She nods, her eyes glazed, drunk on lust.

He situates Juliet so her head hangs over the side of the bed, her hair nearly touching the floor. I grin, because this is something he’s tried with me, and it’s pretty damn hot.

“Open for me, sunshine,” he says, tapping her swollen lips with the purple head of his cock. She obeys, and he slides the tip inside. She closes that pretty pink mouth around him, cheeks hollowing as she lets out a moan around him. He growls and gives a gentle thrust into her mouth, stretching her jaw, testing her limit.

“Look how perfectly you take that cock,” he murmurs, sliding out before pushing in deeper, until I see her throat swell with him. “That’s my girl,” she shivers, continuing to fuck her mouth.

Her eyelashes flutter, and her hand snakes between her legs toward her clit.

“That’s mine,” I chastise, batting her hand away as I climb back over her, sliding down until my mouth is level with her.

She's laid before me like a feast, and I'm going to enjoy every taste.

I dive into her slit, licking a hot line from core to clit, absolutely loving how she bucks into my mouth. I groan at the taste of her sweet slick. How could anything taste so perfect? She writhes on the bed as Dean pumps into her, unable to do anything but take and give pleasure.

"That mouth," Dean pants. "So fucking good. Open wider for me, sunshine."

She's close, her thighs shaking. Her hands grab at the sheets, but she can't get purchase, and she lets out a muffled frustrated wail around Dean's cock. He grins and pulls out slowly, and she gasps for air.

"Come here," I say, sliding her closer to me. I take her hands and fist them in my hair. "Your turn to drive."

She keens and lifts her hips toward my mouth.

Okay, baby girl. I get the hint. I push her legs open and dive back in. Slick floods my tongue as my baby girl bucks into my mouth, fucking herself on my tongue until her tiny pants grow loud, until she's coming on a scream, twisting as the orgasm wrings her inside out.

I sit up and wipe my damp mouth. "Five stars. I'd definitely dine here again."

She tries to laugh between gasping breaths, her eyes glazed with lust.

"We're not done yet," Dean chimes in with a wicked smile. "Let me have a turn with our girl."

I take a step back, and Dean takes over. He flips her around with ease and grabs her hips, pulling her to the edge of the bed to enter her in one hard thrust. It's rare that I get to see Dean inside someone else anymore, and it sets my blood on fire. I grip my cock and start jerking as he takes her. Need pulsates through me until I'm so hard it hurts. The best kind of pain.

Juliet's sharp cries echo in the small room. Dean's arm muscles strain as he holds her, nearly lifting her pelvis off the bed as he fucks into her. Her nails scratch lines along his arms as she throws her head back, gasping.

"More," she begs. "I need more."

I move next to her and put my free hand on her nipple, toying with it, pinching and twirling as I squeeze my shaft. She bites her lip hard enough that a drop of blood appears, and her eyes roll back.

She chokes out another orgasm and call me crazy, but I'm keeping a motherfucking tally. I need to know how many we'll have to beat next time.

Dean slides free of her and she hugs her legs to herself, still coming down from the wave of her last orgasm. My packmate's knot is swollen—large and round at his base, tinged reddish purple and glistening from our Omega's slick.

I ache to taste him, but he gestures to Juliet between us.

"Finish what you started, Huck," Dean commands. "It's only fair."

Dean moves onto the bed, adjusting a sex-drunk Juliet on the bed so she's facing the right way. He spreads her legs for me, holding them open.

My baby girl moans, biting her lower lip as she struggles to raise her head and look at me through glistening eyes. She reaches for me through her haze, already arching her back, ready to take me.

My balls tighten as I move in and she locks her legs around my waist, ready for the grand finale.

I climb over her, pushing into her slick, warm core with a groan that Dean steals from my lips in a feral kiss.

"Fuck our girl like you mean it, Huck," he orders as he pulls away, continuing to hold her legs open for me.

I drive into her like a madman and Juliet, realizing what's just above her, opens her mouth to take Dean back in, sucking savagely at his length, making him coil for his own oncoming

release. I feel his pleasure through the pack bonds and it mounts on top of mine, doubling it and my eyes roll into the back of my head as I grit my teeth against a growl.

My baby girl shrieks around Dean's cock as she comes one final time, legs shaking and clenching around me. It's enough to set Dean off, and he fucks into her mouth once, twice, and then groans as he pours into her throat.

"Baby girl, I...I..."

Fuck. My knot aches with the need to be pushed into my Omega and I squeeze my eyes closed, trying to hold it back as my own orgasm threatens.

Dean pops out of her mouth and she swallows his seed down before crying out. "Knot me, Huck."

Oh fuck.

She doesn't have to ask me twice. I bend to brace my elbows on the mattress, using the force of my next thrust to slowly force it into her.

My knot is the largest of us three and she sucks in a breath of pain as I work it into her.

"That's it, baby girl," I croon. "That's it, you can take it."

Once I'm over the hump, I force it the rest of the way in in one quick thrust, the sensation casting me from the edge of fucking oblivion.

The immense squeeze of her sweet, warm pussy milks me dry as I come into her in powerful spurts. I fall forward, covering Juliet's body with mine as I gasp and groan through it, locked inside of her.

She whimpers, another shiver of pleasure rolling through her body.

"Fuck, baby. It's like you're made for me."

She buries her face in my shoulder and wraps her arms around me, her body shaking with a sob that wrecks me.

My throat burns. It didn't work.

It didn't change her mind.

I hold back the dam of my emotion, feeling the need to be strong for her. Whatever the reason she's choosing to go, I have a feeling it was the hardest choice she's ever had to make, and I just know in my bones that she wouldn't have made it if she felt there was an alternative.

We'll get her back. I don't know how. Or when. But we will.

I press a soft kiss on her neck, right where my bonding mark should be.

Where it will be. When she's ready.

TWENTY-EIGHT

—
JULIET

DEAN AND HUCK'S warmth radiates through my naked skin. They both have their arms around me, holding me tight, keeping me safe. A shield of alpha flesh and bone.

If only it were enough to protect us all.

We lie there for what feels like an eternity, none of us wanting to be the one to break this moment of perfection. At least I'll have this.

This perfect memory. One of many I'll secretly revisit in the privacy of my own mind if I fail and am forced to bond to the Williamses.

I try to imagine myself with them. Maybe they aren't as terrible as the guys made them seem. Maybe I could learn to love Victor and the others in his pack. Maybe in a few months or years, I won't pine for the men on the mountain who saved my life anymore.

It feels like a betrayal to even think it and I wash the thought away with a heavy sigh.

Dean kisses my neck gently, attempting to soothe me while Huck lightly rubs circles on my lower back. The sensations leave me feeling content and satisfied yet desiring more at the same time.

Taking Huck's knot was amazing. If it's possible, his felt even larger than Everett's, but I was so gone to my heat when Ev knotted me, I can't trust the truth of my own memory of our joining. There's hardly any tangible thing there. Just

senses. Taste, sound, touch, smell. And pressure. Beautiful, glorious pressure in all the right places.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. It takes all my strength not to break into sobs as they gently brush the hair away from my face and wipe away a few escaped tears.

“What’s wrong, baby girl?” murmurs Huck, kissing away a teardrop.

“Nothing,” I whisper unconvincingly, but it’s not true, and we both know it. I have to leave them, and even though I’m going to fight to come back, there’s a chance I won’t be able to.

It’s that underlying fear that keeps the tears coming, fear this might be the last time they hold me close; fear I won’t be able to come back; fear this beautiful moment we share will be one of our last.

Dean gets out of the bed and disappears, coming back in a moment with a wet rag. The washcloth is cool against my warm skin, and it startles me at first, but then I relax into it as the sensation sends shivers down my spine while he cleans me. Huck keeps me steady in his embrace, whispering soft words of comfort to me. Words of love.

After cleaning himself, Dean tosses the cloth over on the table, and Huck lets out a disappointed grunt.

“Dude,” he says, waving at his soft cock with a flourish. “What about me?”

Dean rolls his eyes and retrieves the rag, going to re-wet it before returning. He swipes half-heartedly at Huck’s groin a few times before smacking him in the face with the cloth. Huck grabs it from his hand and throws it at Dean’s chest, where it bounces off and lands somewhere on the floor.

“That’s enough, children,” I tease, and Dean climbs back into the bed. The two of them make a cozy cocoon around me, and I nestle as deep as I can between them.

“You don’t have to go,” Dean says after a moment.

I bite my lip. Not sure I should share with them what I'm thinking. What I'm planning. I don't want to give them hope only for my plan to fail.

"But if you do go tomorrow," Huck adds when I don't answer. "And you decide you don't want to stay...we could help you escape."

Huck tiptoes his fingers down my arm. "All you have to do is get in contact with us, and we'll storm the castle and steal the princess, just like in the movies."

Yeah, and spend the rest of their lives in a prison cell, or worse.

I laugh at the mental image of the three Alphas riding into the Williamses' mansion on horseback, swords at the ready like some medieval fantasy story. "If I need three knights in shining armor, I'll let you know."

Dean doesn't laugh with us. He props himself up on one arm and gazes at me. "You don't have to do this, Juliet. I get it's some morbid sense of duty the Omega Academy drilled into you. But you can choose for yourself what makes you happy. You *can* stay. You'll be safe here, with us."

I stay quiet, because I must, but I want to make that hopeless expression on his face disappear. Instead, I lean over and kiss him gently on the cheek. The expression doesn't go away, but he returns the affection with a kiss on my forehead.

"I..." I start, but stop myself. I'd thought to tell them at least about the Williamses' threats against them, but I doubt they'd care. They'd say bring it on and then spend years and all their money in court fighting to keep only to lose in the end anyway.

"What is it, baby girl?"

"It doesn't matter," I sigh. "But I want you to know, all of you, that this is the only way."

Their energy shifts and tension fills the air.

"For now," I add, unable to help giving them at least a glimmer of hope. "I need you to trust I'm doing this for the

right reasons and if I had any other choice, I—”

“We trust you,” Dean interrupts. “You don’t have to explain yourself to us, sunshine.” He holds me tighter. “Just come back. Please.”

I can’t promise them anything and I need them to understand that it’s a shot in the dark. “Don’t wait for me, okay?”

Huck snorts and Dean joins him.

“*Hey*,” I scold them, but I hear the words they aren’t saying as if they’ve spoken them anyway. It’s in the way they touch me. Nuzzle me. Caress me.

They’ll wait forever.

Which means, I *have to* find a way back.

“You should sleep, baby girl.”

“I don’t want to.”

Dean hushes me, tugging the blankets up to cover us. “We’ll stay with you, sunshine. As long as we can.”



WHEN I WAKE, Dean and Huck are still asleep and the repetitive *thwack, thwack* outside my window tells me Everett is up chopping wood again. Or maybe he never stopped.

Careful not to wake the others, I slowly disentangle myself from the alphas in my bed and tip toe across the floor, gathering a couple articles of clean clothing from my bag on the floor.

I shut the door behind me, padding into Huck’s room and through to his bathroom where he helped me bathe when I first got here.

As I’d hoped, the salt and oil and herb concoction he made to act as a scent blocker is still in a shallow wooden bowl next to the tub.

My teeth clench in my jaw as I work the taps, beginning to fill the tub.

It feels like a sin to soak off their scent from my skin, but I can't show up at the Williamses reeking of other alphas. Especially not in certain places I know they marked me with their scent. The soak won't get it all, but it'll erase enough that I can explain away the rest as being from borrowing their clothing.

I dump the entire bowl of homemade blocker into the waiting water and step over the side of the tub, hissing at the overly hot temp of the water. That was probably overkill, but I want to be thorough. For this to have even a remote chance of working, I need to be seen as pure. Unspoiled. Otherwise Victor will know and he'll make good on his threats to my parents to take the Cooper pack down and no doubt begin a lawsuit against me and my family as well.

Once I can only faintly scent Huck and Dean and Everett on my damp skin, I get out and rush to dress in the stitched scraps of their borrowed clothing, grateful that at least I can take these small pieces of them with me.

When I rush from the bathroom, hair still soaking wet, Huck is bursting from my bedroom, his tired eyes wide and wild, face pale, until he sees me standing in his doorway.

"Oh, thank god," he breathes, rushing to pull me into a tight hug. "I thought...fuck, I thought you left."

I sense the moment he realized I've washed their scent off me by the way his body stiffens, but I'm grateful he says nothing.

Dean leans against my doorframe, a blanket around his shoulders as he yawns, smiling sleepily at me, though it doesn't touch his eyes.

We're probably all wondering the same thing.

How much longer do we have?

Minutes?

Hours?

Not enough, that's for sure.

"Huck! Dean!" Everett's gruff voice carries up the stairs from the front of the cabin. "Get to your chores. The solar panels need clearing and the animals need tending."

Dean frowns. "We'll do it later, Ev," he calls down.

"No, you'll do it now."

The door slams behind him, shaking the cabin and something in my core shrinks back, becoming small and fragile.

"He's going to regret the way he's acting when you're gone," Dean growls, shrugging off the blanket and affording me a clear view of his beautiful body. All long lean lines and sculpted muscle.

Dean storms down the hall to his room.

"I'm sorry, baby girl," Huck offers. "We'll do the chores as fast as we can."

He pulls away, backing into his room, kicking up a pair of work jeans from the floor to jerk them on. "Seriously, like, give me ten minutes. No, five. I can do it all in five."

I try to smile, but it comes through a grimace instead.

"Don't rush."

He snorts. "As if."

He pulls on socks and a long sleeve shirt just as Dean exits his room fully dressed, too. He pauses to press a kiss to my cheek, continuing down the stairs. "Back in a jiff, Sunshine."

I watch them go with a hollow ache in my stomach, but I have the house to myself and it's an opportunity I won't waste.

I pad down the stairs after they leave, standing in the living room, taking it all in—all the memories of Everett, Huck, and Dean over just a couple short weeks. My gaze is drawn to the sofa first, where I curled up with each of them at some point.

I think of the way Huck tucked his head into my neck, his deep sighs as he settled into me. The fireplace, where we spent

some nights talking almost until daybreak, laughing and telling stories.

The suitcase is like a time capsule, providing a reminder of how far I've come since Everett scooped me up out of the snow. Inside the bag are my hastily sewn clothes I made during my stay here. Each article is made from bits and pieces of clothes of my future Alphas: flannel shirts, old sweatpants, worn-out undershirts. The fabric is soft and worn, but it still holds their scents.

This suitcase may look like it holds nothing but rags, but for me, it holds more than just fabric. It's a symbol of me changing what's important. Not money and wealth and status, but the love of three Alphas.

My fingers tremble slightly as I tuck a few more items into my bag. I grab the compass first, the one I stole from Dean's room, tucking it deep into the suitcase. I move on to the folded-up map from the little shelf in the living room, the one the guys used to show me where we were when I first arrived.

I really wish I had paid more attention in geography class when we learned all this stuff, but I'll figure it out as I go.

I unfold the map before me and spread it out on the floor. Using a red pen, I mark out a red line and trace it with my finger. It's the road in from the village where the ranger station is. I mark an X where the guys showed me the cabin is, praying my memory has held.

The flight was meant to land at a private airstrip just... there. And my parents said it was only a two-minute drive from the airstrip to the Williamses estate.

I try to gauge the distance between approximately where the Williamses are and here. It can't be more than twenty or thirty miles in a straight line. But there are no straight lines on this map. Only jarring squiggles and the messy circles that denote elevated topography.

Twenty or thirty miles in a straight line will feel like a thousand miles once I'm on the ground. But I'd cross double

that distance if it meant I could stay here, in the mountains with my alphas.

These mountains aren't kind to strangers.

Their warnings ring in my ears, but am I really a stranger anymore?

I look out the window to the rise of white-capped peaks in the distance. No. We're not strangers anymore. We're friends. These mountains will lead me back to them. I just know it.

I tuck the map away in my bag, burying it at the very bottom with the stolen compass. We'll call it borrowing, for now. I am definitely going to return these items.

Because I am definitely going to be back.

Maybe.

Hopefully.

Because if I want to stay with Huck, Dean, and Everett, I'm going to have to do it on my terms. I'm not going to let the world treat me like some helpless Omega. Making all my choices for me.

This is *my* life, and I'm taking it back. I'm making the choices now—not my parents, not the Williams pack. Not even Huck, Dean, and Everett, though I'm doing all of this for our future together.

Mostly, though? I'm doing it for me.

I respect how the guys are willing to fight for the land and to fight to keep Taylor's memory alive. I also respect that they want to keep me from getting caught in the middle of it.

But I also fully intend to get in the middle of it.

And no one is going to stop me.

TWENTY-NINE

IT GETS COLDER INSTEAD of warmer as the day wears on, but I'm sweating like crazy trying to get this damn machine to work.

Everett hands me the drill as I start cleaning off the front panel of the generator. I'm pretty sure one of the sensor wires is messed up. I'm already frustrated, and we've barely started the repair. I spent a good chunk of my time over the past year perfecting this generator, but one little storm and now everything's gone to hell.

The same applies to our Juliet situation.

"I just don't understand," I say for the millionth time, chiseling away some ice on the panel. "I thought Juliet would stay. Do you think it's being out here? I know it's hard being up in the mountains, away from the rest of the world, but I thought she liked it. I thought she was like us."

She definitely liked us last night, when Huck and I were deep inside her. Her reactions as she came, her sighs and screams—those weren't faked at all. My stomach clenches and my cock hardens just remembering her sweet warmth.

But in the end? She's still leaving.

She's been packed up and ready to go since dawn.

They'd said morning. At least that's what Juliet mentioned, but it's close to evening now, the sunlight tinted orange as it drains away.

The waiting is killing me. If they're going to take her I wish they'd come and do it already. The anticipation is keeping me on edge. Making me ache to be back in the cabin with her, keeping her close until the end.

But there are things that need doing. Some desperately so since we couldn't do them while the storm raged outside.

"Guess not," says Everett, adjusting his work gloves like we're talking about the weather. He's cut himself off. I can sense it in him, the wall he spent most of last night and this morning building with every swing of his axe. Replacing every brick Juliet tore down over the last couple weeks.

"It's not easy being out here. It's hard, and it takes a certain kind of person to make it. I guess the Omega isn't that kind of person."

The Omega?

"I would have hoped she would at least go back to her family," he adds, emotionless, but I can see the curl of distaste in his lips. "If she wanted to leave the mountains so badly. I mean, now that she knows how bad the Williams are. What they did to Taylor. What they're doing to the earth."

His jaw clenches, and he looks away as though trying to distance himself from his own words. "I suppose the money and the prestige still got to her."

I want to tell him he's wrong, but the truth is I just don't know.

Huck seems to think there's some other reason. Earlier he was humming to himself as he fed the chickens. *Humming*. When I asked him what the fuck he had to be so cheery about, he said *you'll see. I got a feeling*.

Like he knows something we don't.

Juliet hinted there might be a way for her to return but I know better. I know that once Victor Williams gets his greedy hands on her he'll never let her go.

"Do you think they'll cut her loose if they find out...you know, that she isn't pure?" I ask Everett as I start removing the

panel.

I inspect every inch of the device, paying extra attention to each sensor wire, and come across one that's clearly damaged. It probably got hit with some moisture and then froze and thawed repeatedly until it was completely ruined.

"What do you mean?" Everett asks, tilting his head down at me.

"You know. Now that you've fucked her?" I take a wrench from his outstretched hand as he rolls his eyes.

"You've done just as much as I have," he says. "Don't think I can't smell her all over you. But as for the Williamses, it's hard to say. I have no doubt they want their Omega to be 'unspoiled' or whatever bullshit, and the Williamses always get what they want."

"You don't think they'll hurt her, do you?" I ask, pulling back. I'll throw Juliet on the back of the snowmobile and take off before I'll let one of them cause her pain. "If they find out?"

"Nah." Everett shakes his head. "There's a legal responsibility. They won't risk the bad press that comes from turning away a survivor of a plane crash, especially when Omegas are becoming increasingly scarce and Cervus is making many unable to bear children. No, they'll keep her in the pack, living a life of luxury and comfort...just hidden out of sight like some dirty secret."

I grind my teeth in frustration, tossing the wrench at the busted generator. It clanks off the side and sinks into a snowdrift.

"That's ridiculous," I growl, glaring at Everett. "She didn't do anything to deserve that."

Everett gives a careless shrug. "The law says they're responsible for her. They have to care for her whether they want to or not. Doesn't mean they have to give her freedom. Or love."

He says the last word like it's dirty, spitting it from his mouth.

I shake my head in disbelief at the injustice of it all. Everett was helping her, for fuck's sake. Keeping someone like her hidden away and out of sight because of one night in bed is ridiculous. What a waste of Juliet's life for such a stupid notion of purity.

I open my mouth to protest, but Everett raises a silencing hand. "She still wants that over us, Dean. She chose *them*. Don't fucking forget that. Whatever life she'll lead with them after she leaves this place is on her."

"Did you care about her for even a damned second?"

He whirls on me, throwing me up against the genny with a fist curled in the front of my shirt. His face twists, in anger, in anguish and I can feel it all through the pack bonds, everything he's trying to hide from us, in a moment of transparency before his wall snaps back down and he releases me with a hiss, tipping his head up to look at the moon in the daylight sky—like it might whisper an answer to him.

"I'm sorry, Ev."

"You idiots." Huck's laugh rings out across the clearing as he hikes toward us, carrying an extra set of tools. I groan inwardly as he approaches, knowing he's probably been listening in on our conversation and is here to join in. The last rays of sunlight glint off of his copper hair, giving it an orange hue. He looks unfazed by the cold, swinging the toolbox carelessly in one hand while he strides up to us with a smirk on his face.

His eyes crinkle when they meet mine, and he plops right down next to me in the snow. "Can't you two thickheaded jackasses see it? She's a sharp one. And when has she *ever* led you to believe she'd rather riches over a true home? *Hmm?*"

"She's leaving, Huck," I grumble. "Just because she let you knot her doesn't mean she owes you anything."

He punches me playfully in the shoulder, unfazed by my dig. "You should know, you were there." He winks like we share some monumental secret. Like he knows I know I'm lying.

“Didn’t do your mood any good though.” He reaches into his toolbox and pulls out a replacement wrench, handing it to me.

I take the wrench from him, gritting my teeth to keep myself from snapping at him. “Don’t get your hopes up. I don’t think this will turn out the way you think it will.”

Everett grunts in tacit agreement, but Huck shakes his head. “Pay attention, and she’ll surprise you. Juliet is stronger than either of you are giving her credit for. She’ll be back. I don’t know how I know, I just do.”

“If that were true,” Everett says skeptically, “she wouldn’t leave in the first place.” The statement hangs between us like a heavy weight as we stand in awkward silence until Huck breaks it with a sigh.

“You still don’t get it,” he says, reaching down and grabbing a handful of snow. “But you will. I’m not spelling it out for you.” He throws the snow in Everett’s face, who sputters and spits like a wet cat as it gets in his mouth.

“Why do you have to be such a fucking child?” grumbles Everett once his face is clean again. “You’re worse than Dean.”

“That’s because despite all the evidence, I’m the smarter one,” Huck says with a feigned snooty tone. “And you’re just a boneheaded fool.”

Everett tackles Huck, pinning him to the ground and shoving a handful of snow in his face, radiating alpha energy.

There’s anger there, but it’s born of grief and frustration and I know he won’t hurt Huck.

He’s like a big old grizzly bear, arms and legs thrashing around as he pins Huck down with no sign of relenting. Huck does his best to squirm out of Everett’s grip, but it’s no use; Everett has him firmly in place. His cheeks are flushed from the cold, and a few snowflakes remain tangled in his dark hair.

I move back to a safe distance away from the two of them—I’m not getting drawn into their wrestling match. Still, I

can't help but smile at the two grown men acting like a couple teenagers in a bar brawl.

“Ow!” Huck protests as Everett slams him down into the snow, finally keeping the slightly smaller alpha down. “That doesn't count! You had me at a disadvantage!”

“Oh, please,” Everett scoffs, but he rolls off Huck anyway, lying next to him in the snow, their breaths fogging up from their mouths in spurts as they catch their breath.

“Boneheaded fool,” Everett mutters to himself, scoffing. “You're such an ass.”

“Me? Really?” Huck asks incredulously and Everett's jaw clicks.

Huck scrambles to his feet, brushing snow off himself indignantly before turning around and offering his gloved hand to Everett.

Everett studies it for a moment before taking it and letting Huck help him up from the snow.

Though there's still that undercurrent of heartbreak, raw and aching, relief and love also pulse through the bonds between us.

We head back to the cabin, exhausted, searching the skies for any sign of a chopper come to take away our Juliet. I don't want to live without her, but if I have to, at least I'll have these two knuckleheads with me to get through it.

THIRTY

—
H U C K

I ABANDON the pot of stew on the stove and rush to the window as the unmistakable whir of chopper blades fills the air.

An approaching helicopter swoops closer. The familiar logo of the Williams pack covers its sides in bright green and white letters. It's a modern monstrosity of sleek metal and bright paint and it doesn't fit here in our little part of the world.

My heart sinks at the sight. I'm not disappointed in Juliet leaving. I know my baby girl has something up her sleeve. But if any of those Williams Alphas lay a single finger on her, I'll lose my mind. She's mine—ours—and always will be, no matter what.

Even if they bond her, I won't give up.

Bonds can be broken over time.

I'll hold her through the pain until they've faded enough to be replaced and then I'll cover Victor's bonding mark with my own, like covering a tattoo. We'll make it better.

It scares me how deeply I feel as if I could do anything for her.

Dean and Everett will figure it out soon enough. They have to trust her.

I know I'm right. I'm always right.

Upstairs, I hear Juliet shuffling about and I know she'll be down in a few minutes.

I want to go up to her, but instead I shove my arms into my jacket and quickly head outside, where Dean and Everett are already waiting.

I clench my teeth as the helicopter comes closer and closer to us, realizing they plan to land in the small clearing between the barn and Everett's cabin. Dean's face is set in a stern expression, but anger bubbles beneath his stoic surface. Everett looks pissed off, his arms crossed over his chest like a wall.

The helicopter lands, kicking up plumes of light snow and throwing all over the freshly cleared walkways, lashing it against us.

Two men in suits walk out, but I don't think they're the men from down the mountain. Good thing or else Everett is liable to kill them.

"Those the two asshats who shot at you?" he asks gruffly, right on cue.

"Nah. Different guys."

They're clean-cut, with smart suits and polished shoes that are useless in this kind of environment. Their cold gazes drift around our property, unimpressed and entitled.

Behind them are two armed guards, their faces hidden beneath camouflaged helmets. But it isn't just their uniforms that stand out. Each one of them carries an assault rifle, with a magazine and muzzle pointed straight ahead.

Oh, I'll have none of that, thank you very much.

"You won't need those guns here," I call out, striding toward the helicopter. They don't break rank at my voice, although one of the men with the rifles pauses. My hands rest comfortably at my sides, and I'm sure it's clear to them I'm unarmed. "Might as well put them back."

The one who paused lifts his head slowly and meets my gaze with a carefully measured look of surprise. His face has been hardened by years spent carrying out the orders he's been given—I recognize the type immediately. He won't give in to

intimidation easily. It will take more than a few words to get them to back down.

“We’re here on orders,” he finally states after several long seconds have passed between us in silence. “These are protection in case of *wild animals*.”

His lips twitch with cold amusement.

“Wild animals,” I huff, glancing toward his nametag. *Jameson*. I’m remembering the name of everyone who comes near my Juliet. “Sure. Whatever you say.” It’s almost as if they’re daring us to make one wrong move.

That’s it.

For all we know, that’s exactly what they want.

“Huck,” says Everett in a warning voice. “Don’t interfere.”

He’s come to the same conclusion as I have. The Williamses *want* us to fuck up so they have an excuse to use their muscle and hired guns.

I back down. I won’t have my packmates hurt, and I won’t have Juliet witness any bloodshed. She’d only blame herself.

Juliet comes out of the cabin at that moment, small suitcase in hand. She’s still wearing the clothes she made from all our hand-me-downs, looking like some flannel-clad Bohemian princess. She’s left the red snowsuit inside even though I heard Dean tell her she can keep it.

Her expression is one of complete neutrality as she strides confidently toward us, going first to Dean.

The sun glints off her blonde hair as it spills down her back, tiny specks of gold glittering in her waves. Our Goldilocks.

“Dean.” She gives him a light hug that he hesitantly returns. His hands are clenched fists against her back, his arms hovering over her waist. The gesture seems almost robotic, like a habit he can’t be bothered to break. “Thank you for all you did for getting me in contact with my family. I really appreciate it.”

She squeezes his hand and moves on.

Dean doesn't say anything or move; he just stands there, his expression unchanging as if carved from stone. He looks so distant and withdrawn that it almost breaks my heart.

C'mon, Dean. You've got to have a little faith. You've got to trust Juliet.

"Huck," she begins, stopping in front of me. I give her a warm smile, even though there's ice in my veins.

"Thank you for taking care of me. For feeding me. For everything. I really appreciate all that you did and I hope you know that."

Her eye twitches, just a little. The whole speech sounds rehearsed, like she's on a TV interview. Her words are forced, hiding a deeper meaning she's trusting me to understand.

I'm sure the lawyers are nodding along, finding loopholes in every sentence. Not to mention, I'm pretty sure the goons are secretly recording all of this.

"You're welcome," I say as politely as I can, but I end it with the smallest wink. Her eyes flare just enough to indicate she noticed, and her cheeks flush a delicate pink. Then, she moves on to Everett.

Good luck with that one, baby girl.

"Everett," she says, but her voice dips in the middle, wavering.

"Without you, I would have died out there. Thank you for finding me and providing me with shelter for all this time. I really—"

Before she can throw out her usual line of appreciation, Everett grunts and storms off toward the main cabin and she cuts herself off, watching him go.

Her chin wobbles and she blinks rapidly as the cabin door slams behind us.

I clear my throat and my baby girl sniffs, straightening her spine before turning back around.

Damn you, Everett.

He made her cry. I hate him for it. He'll hate himself for it, too, when she's back.

Because she will be back. Make no mistake about that.

If she isn't, I'll go get her back myself.

Juliet's breath comes out in clouds against the cold air as she walks next to her armed escort. She looks so frail surrounded by their burly forms. The snow crunches beneath their feet as they make their way toward the waiting chopper, leaving behind footprints that will be gradually erased by wind and weather until nothing remains to prove they were ever here.

The helicopter blades rotate faster and faster as Juliet reaches its side. She steps up and into its open door, glancing back once more at the main cabin.

After her escort is completely loaded onto the aircraft, it slams shut after her. In this one moment, everything changes: a part of me goes along with her, one that I'm not sure will be returned.

My arm hangs limply at my side as I force myself to watch until the helicopter disappears from sight, not allowing myself to turn away until there is nothing left but a faint echo of the blades and a lingering tightness in my chest that burns all the way up my throat.

Even knowing she'll do whatever she can to come back, I wouldn't wish watching her go on anyone.

Juliet is in their hands now, and I swear, if any of them so much as lay a finger on my baby girl without her consent, I'll make sure they pay heavily for it.

"And that's that," says Dean, letting out a long exhale.

"Is it?" I give him a look, and he shrugs.

"How do you think he's feeling?" He jerks a thumb in the direction of the main cabin where Everett went.

"It's Everett. I think he's going to break something."

Dean winces. “Just one thing? I’ve got some really expensive equipment in there.”

A crashing sound comes from inside. Then another.

“That one sounded like glass,” I muse, stroking my chin. Another explosion comes from the house, sounding like broken wood. That better not be my sofa.

“There’s not going to be a cabin left when he’s through, is there?” Dean groans.

“Come on.” I clap him on the back, and we head into the cabin. Just as the door opens, one of the bar stools from the kitchen comes hurtling toward us, narrowly missing us and hitting the wall instead. It splinters into pieces.

My jaw drops as I take in the disaster area before us. Dean groans again and steps over a pile of debris. We make our way carefully through the room, stepping around broken pieces of furniture and piles of junk. The kitchen stools seem to be particularly active today—another one comes zipping across the room like a rocket and nearly takes out Dean’s foot.

By the time we turn the corner to find Everett, however, he’s staring stoically out the window, his chest heaving.

“Ev, did the stool offend you?” I ask carefully, trying not to provoke him.

“I tripped on it,” he says.

“What about the coffee table?” I ask, pointing to the splintered remains of our coffee table. The one we picked out together in Anchorage last winter.

“I tripped on that, too.”

His jaw flexes and I can see the gleam in his eyes. The one that tells me he’d rather go on breaking things than feel the thing he needs to feel.

“Mmhm.” I shiver as I step into the kitchen. The culprit for my chills is a jagged hole where one of the windows used to be.

“What happened to the—”

“Huck,” Everett warns, raising a single eyebrow.

Fine. I’ll let him have his tantrum. Knowing Everett, he’ll have it all fixed up and good as new by morning or at least patched until he can replace anything that’s broken.

I head toward the shelf, rummaging through the cups, wanting to get myself a cup of coffee before he busts the fresh pot of java I just made.

“Where’s my coffee mug?” I ask, pushing aside our various dishes. I have one of those fancy travel mugs that keeps the temperature of your drink, no matter how hot or cold it is outside.

“Tripped on it,” comes Everett’s snide reply.

That motherfucker. I head over to the broken window and look through the suspiciously coffee-mug-shaped hole in the snow outside.

“You’re buying me a new one. That sucker was sixty bucks,” I grumble, jabbing a finger at him as I sit at the thankfully intact kitchen table that we rarely use and growl for them both to sit.

I shiver, shaking my head as an icy wind sweeps inside. Breaking a window in the middle of winter, in the middle of Alaska. What was he fucking thinking?

We sit in silence for a few moments before anyone speaks up again. “So...” I finally say, prompting Everett to look up from his hands in his lap. “What are we going to do about Juliet?”

Everett opens his mouth then shuts it again without saying anything, so I turn my attention to Dean instead. He lets out an exaggerated groan.

“You’ve got to let this go,” he says. “She left. She’s not coming back. No matter what she said.”

He rubs at his chest as if he physically aches to be separated from her.

I know because I’ve got the same ache in my chest, too.

“What did she say?” Everett asks, and I hurt at the hope in his eyes.

“She...*hinted*...at trying to come back,” Dean says and I can sense he doesn’t believe it’s possible.

“What?” Everett growls.

“Listen,” I say, my tone serious for once in my life. “I don’t know any more than that, she didn’t tell me anything, but we do know the Williamses. It’s not that hard to figure out, is it?”

They both stare at me, clearly not understanding where I’m going with this.

I’m surrounded by idiots.

I sigh. “Aren’t either of you the least bit surprised that those monsters aren’t coming for us?”

“They still could,” Dean pipes up.

“No,” I argue. “I don’t think they will. And *I think* we have Juliet to thank for that.”

“You don’t mean—”

“Yes,” I interrupt Dean. “I would imagine the Williamses threatened some form of legal action if Juliet didn’t honor her claiming contract. Maybe not just against us, but probably her parents, too.”

“So, you think...” Everett trails off, his brown eyes shifting over the table as he works through it. “You think they bullied her into leaving us?”

I sit back in my chair, nodding. “Yeah. That’s exactly what I think they did.”

Everett rises, covering his face with his wide hands. I think he’s furious again, but then, he laughs. A sarcastic, rude chuckle. “Wow, Huck. Really?”

“Yes, really.”

He shakes his head, settling those hard eyes on me as he leans over the table, placing his palms flat against the wood.

“She would’ve told us that. She knows that we wouldn’t have allowed it.”

“You just don’t get it, man.”

Everett snorts before walking away from the table, hovering at a distance while he stewes.

“You think that’s all true?” Dean asks quietly and I can already see the gears turning in his eyes.

I nod. “And I think she might need our help to do whatever it is she’s planning.”

“I don’t know,” says Dean, but it’s more of a begrudging remark than an all-out damnation of the idea.

I see the doubt in Everett’s eyes when he turns back to face us. He’s been let down too many times, and now he’s afraid to believe. I know that deep down, he’ll do anything for Juliet. Anything for our pack.

“What are you thinking?” Dean asks. His laptop is on the table, and I push it toward him. He stares at it and wrinkles his nose.

“I know your hacking days are behind you, but do you think maybe you can dust off that evil mastermind cape? You got that friend down south, maybe he can help you.”

“Huck Camden, are you asking me to hack into the Williamses security system?”

I snort at him. “Can you do it or not?”

Dean takes the laptop from me and flips it open, running his fingers over the keys. Different emotions pulse through the bonds from him. Fear. Mistrust. Anger. But underneath, there’s the slightest inkling of something more—hope. Maybe even a little thrill.

He’s been wanting to try to do this for years but Everett always said no. That it was too risky. That we’d find a way to bury the Williams pack another way.

But right now, he isn’t telling Dean no. He isn’t saying anything at all.

THIRTY-ONE

—
JULIET

I CLING TIGHTLY to the armrests of my seat in the helicopter, my knuckles white from gripping them so hard. It was hard enough to leave, the least they could've done was come retrieve me over land.

I was in a goddamned plane crash for fuck's sakes.

Pressing my head firmly against the back of the headrest, I try to focus on the landscape outside the window as the muffled whir of the chopper blades fills my ears through the oversized headset covering them.

Outside, the sun shines brightly, making every snow-capped peak sparkle and shimmer like diamonds sprinkled across a blanket of pure white. The treetops are so close that I can make out every branch, almost as if I could reach out and touch them.

A wave of homesickness washes over me, and my throat tightens.

Home. This is my home, my real home. And it's so beautiful.

A beta woman with bright blue eyes sits next to me and I feel her shift, trying to get my attention.

She wears a crisp white lab coat, and her blonde hair is pulled back neatly into a bun. Once we're higher over the trees, she holds out her hand to me.

"Hello, Juliet," she says into the mic on her headset, her voice gentle yet professional as it comes through my headset.

“I’m Dr. Travis. It’s very nice to meet you.”

“You too,” I say in return, putting on all the polite airs I learned at the Academy. I clasp my hands together in my lap and look up at Dr. Travis again, trying to remember everything I learned at the Academy. Everything I’ve somehow managed to forget since the guys found me.

“Poor dear. You’ve been through quite the ordeal, haven’t you?” she asks as she begins to check my vitals, shining lights in my eyes and wrapping a blood pressure cuff around my arm.

I take a deep breath, trying to keep my composure as she inflates the cuff.

Despite the warmth of her hands, I can’t relax. What if she can tell what Everett, Dean, Huck, and I have been up to?

“Do you feel okay?” she asks with a concerned look on her face and I want to believe her sincerity, but I can’t. Not if everything the guys said about the Williams pack is true.

“I’m fine,” I reply, trying to sound convincing. My voice is barely above a whisper, though. Everything we’ve done over the past few days weighs heavily on my mind, and if she discovers it, all my plans are ruined.

She stares at me for a few moments before finally nodding. “Good,” she says in a gentle voice, “I’ll just finish up with the preliminary checkup, okay?”

Once she has finished taking all the necessary readings, she smiles reassuringly. “You seem to be in decent health, considering the trauma you’ve been through,” she says with a slight smile on her lips. “But there are still signs of dehydration and exhaustion that we should address.”

Not from what you think it’s from...

“I recommend bed rest for at least one or two weeks so your body can properly heal. We’ll also want to do an X-ray on that shoulder just to make sure everything is okay. Is there anywhere else you sustained injury?”

My heart pangs in my chest, but I shake my head.

“That’s good.”

“Thank you again,” I add, shuffling a little further from her as she puts away her supplies. “I-I’m glad to get proper medical care.”

She nods and returns to her tablet to make notes. I let out a deep breath. So far, so good.

I cautiously glance at the two soldiers with assault rifles. One of them is tall and muscular, with a strong jawline, while the other is shorter, his face framed by a short black beard. They’re both Alphas, and their pheromones flood the closed helicopter cabin.

My body barely responds, and even though I’m on suppressants now, I know it’s more than that. I’ve found my alphas. And these men are not them.

No one else could replace them now.

“We’ll be arriving at our destination soon,” one of them says to me, his voice deep and authoritative as he shouts to be heard without a headset on.

I clear my throat nervously before giving them both a polite nod of acknowledgment, silently going back to watching out the window, trying to judge the distance, count the miles, between where they’re taking me and where I belong.

Within another few minutes, the estate comes into view. A colossal structure made of hard lines in the snow. Walls of white and black and massive windows that reflect the light.

It’s a modern-day castle surrounded by smaller buildings designed in the same style.

Not so long ago, I might’ve thought it chic. A piece of art.

Now, it looks like a prison.

It looks out of place amid the natural beauty all around it. Not an accent, but a blemish on an otherwise perfect canvas.

My heart is pounding in my chest as the helicopter descends. A layer of sweat forms on my palms, and I draw several deep breaths to calm myself.

From the window in the door of the chopper, I see the mansion's grand entranceway and imposing façade closer up. Everything immaculate. Unspoiled.

Cold and empty.

As the chopper lands on the lawn, my heart beats faster. Ready or not, I'm here at last.

A wheelchair waits for me near the entrance along with a friendly paramedic who smilingly greets me as I disembark from the aircraft.

"Miss Chase," he greets with a nod of his head. I smile at him and gently scent the air. He's a beta, too and not one I recognize from the pack photos Victor sent.

Where are all the Williamses? I would have thought they'd be here to greet their Omega, especially after I've been so high-profile in the news.

Actually, if I was being honest, I thought they'd be the ones to come and collect me at the cabin. Though I was glad they didn't. I don't know how the guys would've taken that. Especially if Victor himself had been there.

I take the paramedic's outstretched hand and cautiously settle into the wheelchair. Even though I think it's obnoxious and entirely unnecessary, I recognize the longer I remain in it, or in a state the doctor has deemed to be fragile, the better for me...and all my intents and purposes.

The beta pushes me toward the entrance.

"Where are we going?"

"Don't worry, Miss Chase, I'm just here to make sure you get to your room as quickly and comfortably as possible." His words are kind and reassuring, but all they manage to do is set me on edge.

The paramedic is chatty as he guides me into the house, telling me little tidbits about the property—its history, different remodels, and guests who have stayed here over the years. The information is interesting enough, but useless for my plans and most of it filters in one ear and out the other as I

try to commit the layout of the estate to memory. Still, I nod and act appreciative as he speaks.

We make our way around several corners until we reach a grand wooden door leading into what looks like a foyer. The walls are painted white and decorated with gold trimmings and antiquities from around the world. A huge crystal chandelier hangs from above that radiates a warm glow throughout the room.

It's beautiful, but I crave the quiet warmth of the cabin and the smell of wood burning in the hearth. This room smells... clinical. Like bleach and antiseptic.

The paramedic wheels me up to an elevator at one side of the room and loads me onto it before pressing the button for my floor number, the topmost floor of this sprawling mansion. That's a little concerning. I'd rather be near the ground floor if I need to escape from the premises quickly.

"Do you think you can walk into your room?" the paramedic kindly asks when we reach my bedroom door.

"I think so," I say, feigning a weaker voice. He helps me from the wheelchair and holds my arm as we go inside.

Like the rest of the house, the room looks like something out of a Disney castle. The walls are a glossy ivory color with gilded accents along the crown molding. A stately four-poster bed is the centerpiece of the room, its frame composed of dark mahogany wood and topped with intricate gold engravings. Thin white drapes hang from each post, and the floor is covered in plush white carpet that feels soft beneath my feet.

Well, at least I'll be comfortable while planning my escape.

A knock at the door startles me, and I look up to find Dr. Travis smiling at me. "What do you think of your room?" she asks.

"It's wonderful," I say. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Now that I've got Jacob here"—she gestures to my friendly paramedic—"I'd like to do a full body examination if that's okay with you."

I swallow hard. “I...suppose so.”

“Mr. Williams had clothes ordered for you, and your closet is well-stocked. I took the liberty of bringing out a nice fluffy robe for you to wear during the exam as opposed to those dreadful hospital sheets we normally use.”

She points to the bathroom, and I head in. A peach-colored robe lies on the edge of the oversized bathtub. I undress and check over myself in the mirror, looking for any bruises or love bites or any indication of the sinful things I’d done with this body more than twenty-four hours ago.

There’s nothing, but I leave my panties firmly in place as I change into the robe.

I come out, covering myself tightly with the bathrobe. Dr. Travis gestures toward the bed. “We’ll do the exam here where you’ll be more comfortable. Go ahead and lie down.”

I take a deep breath as I make my way to the edge of the bed and sit down, stiffer than a board. I feel the doctor’s analytical eyes on me, studying me even though she remains silent.

“Are you all right? You look pale.”

“Fine.” I swallow, swinging my legs up onto the bed and lie down, keeping my knees pointed away from her so my robe still covers me properly. “Just very tired.”

“Poor dear. We’ll be quick.”

Jacob has a kit filled with medical supplies that he unpacks next to me on the bed. He takes my vitals again while periodically making sure I’m comfortable throughout the process. I’m not, of course, but I tell him I am anyway.

Dr. Travis checks the rest of my body starting from head-to-toe, feeling along each part of me for any signs of abnormalities or irregularities. She spends several minutes at the wound on my shoulder.

“These stitches are rough,” she says disapprovingly, looking at where Everett stitched me back together. “It’s

probably going to scar. I'll see if the plastic surgeon in town has any openings this week. He'll get that fixed right up."

I run my fingers up and down the ridge of scar tissue. "No thank you," I say. "I...I want to keep the scar. To remember."

"To remember?" Dr. Travis tilts her head. "To remember what?"

"The plane crash," I make up quickly. "That I survived."

Dr. Travis gives me a sympathetic look before speaking. "I see," she says. "Such an ordeal for a little Omega like you. If you ever need help processing your grief, we have counselors who specialize in this kind of thing. Survivor's guilt is no joke."

She takes a few items from her bag and sets to cleaning the area around the jagged scar thoroughly with an antiseptic cloth, poking and prodding, muttering about checking to make sure they removed all the stitches properly.

The injury stings, but nothing like it did before. Then, she readjusts her gloves.

"Now comes the more sensitive examination. Jacob, could you give us the room, please."

Jacob nods and leaves, shutting the door behind him and my pulse skyrockets.

"Now, Juliet," she says, laying a hand on my shin that I'm sure she thinks is supportive, but her touch only puts me even more on edge and I reflexively pull away.

"I've been instructed to examine you for signs of sexual assault," she says like she didn't just detonate a bomb in the room.

Shit. I've been violated in all the best ways, but that's not what she means.

"No." I shake my head vehemently and clasp the robe even tighter around me. Dr. Travis pulls back, startled and I swallow hard, trying to rein myself in. Recognizing how I must look.

“I haven’t been violated.” I manage to get out through the buzzing in my skull.

“It’s a simple exam, Juliet. It’ll only take me a moment and then I can leave you to rest. I promise to be as delicate as I can.”

“I haven’t been violated,” I repeat, and Dr. Travis looks at me doubtfully, her eyes flitting between my fist clenched in my robe and my face.

“It’s been a long day. A long couple of weeks,” I add when she looks like she might still press the matter. “I...I can’t go through that. Not right now.”

“But—”

“I’ve never had anyone touch me down there before,” I blurt, piling on the lies. “I’m not...*prepared*.”

Lies, lies, lies, but she seems to buy into my act.

“I understand, but I assure you I am a trained professional, Miss Chase. This is a routine examination and one I perform fairly regularly.”

I don’t reply, willing her to see that I will not budge on this. I know this won’t exempt me from the examination entirely, but maybe I can buy myself some time.

“Very well,” she says finally, removing her plastic gloves. “You get some rest now, okay? We can complete the exam tomorrow.”

“I will. Thank you, Dr. Travis.”

She smiles tightly at me and packs up her and Jacobs’ tools. Within a few moments, she’s left the room, too.

Once I’m alone, I carefully get out of bed to inspect my surroundings. Opening the little drawers in the desk and vanity. Rifling through the sheets in the little linen closet.

I’m not sure what I’m looking for, but anything that might be damaging to the Williams pack if it goes public. Anything to keep them away from my pack back in the mountains. Leverage. I need leverage.

But there's nothing at all in this room that would help. It's full of pretty, unsubstantial things to keep their Omega happy and quiet. Nothing more.

Creeping to the door, I quietly turn the handle and peer outside, but Dr. Travis is still in the hall, talking in hushed tones with Jacob and another man mostly obscured by a turn in the hall.

The scent of alpha hits me, strong and cloying.

I quickly shut the door, flick off the light, and crawl back onto the bed, pulling the blankets up over my body. I still just as the door clicks open.

"Juliet?" a familiar voice calls, and I stay silent and still beneath the covers, feigning sleep.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

Please go away.

Go.

Go.

The door closes, sealing me back into darkness, putting a solid wall between me and Victor Williams and I sigh in relief. My bones sag into the fluffy mattress and despite my longing for the cabin, the feather filled pillows and warm duvet feel too good to deny how tired I truly am.

I won't accomplish much as exhausted as I am. For now, I'll sleep.

My plan to infiltrate the Williams pack starts tomorrow.

THIRTY-TWO

—
JULIET

I SIT IN MY BEDROOM, picking at the breakfast that was delivered to me early this morning on a literal silver platter. It's decent enough, but not nearly as delicious or comforting as the food Huck makes at home. The eggs are too runny and lack flavor. The toast is chewy. Even the coffee tastes a bit watery and acidic compared to the locally roasted beans Huck uses at the cabin.

I miss him and the way he serves everything up with a cheerful smile on his face.

Sure, the betas who delivered the breakfast were all smiles too, but it didn't feel right. They were customer-service smiles, not loving ones. More polite than genuine.

Not that I don't appreciate their friendliness. It's not their fault their Alphas are a bunch of megalomaniacs.

"Come in," I call out when there's a rapid knock at the door. Luckily, I got dressed before breakfast, because two beta males enter dressed in matching gray suits, each with crisp white shirts, polished black shoes, and black briefcases in hand.

Lawyers. Different from the ones who accompanied the doctor and muscle on the helicopter ride. How many lawyers do they have?

Behind them, a female Alpha enters. Her scent fills the air around her, wafting into the room. It's warm vanilla with a bite of something like sour cherry, sweet and tart. It sticks in the back of my throat.

Her figure is slim and tall, her posture ramrod straight. She wears a professional black pants suit made of silky fabric that accentuates her curves. The dress shirt underneath adds a bit of modesty to her appearance, with the top two buttons left undone to reveal a hint of cleavage. Her dark-brown hair is pulled back in an elegant bun.

I can't help but stare. I recognize her from the photos Victor sent of the pack.

I assumed the woman in the photo was a beta. Not even part of the pack.

Victor never mentioned her.

In fact, he rarely spoke of any of the others in the pack when we talked.

Something inside me crumples, realizing how foolish I'd been. How little I knew about the pack I'd willingly signed my life away to.

What was I thinking?

The female alpha cocks her head at me, curious.

Female Alphas are extremely rare, rarer even than Omegas. I've only seen one or two in my life, and I've never met one in person.

"Good afternoon," she says in a smooth voice that resonates throughout the room. "We're sorry to have come without warning."

"It's all right," I reply, trying to remain calm under their intense scrutiny. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm Melanie, and this is Scott and Brad. They're two of our top lawyers here at the estate." She smiles a bit too sweetly and takes the arm of one of the plush armchairs against the wall, dragging it next to the bed to sit down. "We've come to see how you're settling in."

"I'm doing very well, thank you," I say, trying to keep my voice shy and composed.

Melanie's intense gaze sends a chill down my spine. She smiles, but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. It's clear this is a rehearsed speech designed to make me feel comfortable and welcome, not words spoken off the cuff.

"It's so wonderful that you made it here safe and sound," she says in a flat tone. I try to keep eye contact with her, determined not to let her see how unnerving her presence is, but it's hard when her dark eyes are so cold and dismissive.

"I'm the second-in-command here at the estate." She pauses before adding pointedly, "I report directly to Mr. Williams."

It all sounds so official. Almost militant.

Not at all like the pack I'd imagined being a part of someday.

"It's nice to meet you," I manage to say, though my throat feels like it's closing up on itself from fear and nerves and that thick scent filling my nose.

It's not *unpleasant*, but there's something in it that is almost...repelling? Not a match for my own body chemistry.

Melanie doesn't respond right away. Instead, she simply stares at me for several moments before nodding once in acknowledgment of my greeting.

"Mr. Williams chose you personally, did you know that?"

I feel my heart racing in my chest as I nod nervously in response.

She continues, "You should be honored. He rarely takes an interest in such things, but he wanted to be involved in the Omega selection process once it was decided we should bond one and further grow our family."

I shudder at the insinuation.

"He immediately wanted you after receiving the scent sample that accompanied your application."

She casually sits back in the chair, cocking her head at me. "Of course, Victor doesn't do spoiled goods, but that doesn't

mean you can't still play your part."

I flinch as if slapped.

She knows.

Or maybe she's guessed.

Either way, I can't let the guys go down for this.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't lie to me, Juliet. I have the best nose in this house. Probably the best nose in this *state*. I can smell them all over you. You just went through a heat, did you not?"

She can scent that, too?

I clamp my mouth shut.

My stomach lurches as she looks me up and down, her lips curving into a cruel grin. I swallow hard, a lump forming in my throat. I glance at the two lawyers, but they don't react to her revelation at all, their expressions carefully neutral.

"Of course, as our new Omega, you will be an ambassador for the Williams pack, so to speak. There'll be people that want to talk with you."

My brow furrows, and she continues. "There's a media circus around the plane crash, and since you're the only survivor..."

"They'll want to interview me," I fill in.

Fuck.

I need to be out of here before any of that happens.

Melanie leans closer, taking my hand in hers as if to be comforting. Her eyes are unblinking, piercing right through me as if she can see all the secrets I'm trying so desperately to hide.

And then, in a soft yet firm tone, she tells me, "Juliet, you have nothing to be afraid of."

It's the most terrifying thing I've ever heard.

She releases me, stands, and smooths her pants. “Just keep your head up and stay focused on what’s important—representing your pack with dignity and grace.”

Her gaze travels over my entire body, and she makes the slightest grimace as if she can’t imagine I’m capable of either.

My fists clench under the covers.

“Of course, we’ll hold off on that until you’re feeling better. You poor thing. You’ve been through so much.”

She’s a snake, there’s no doubt about it, but I smile politely and nod. “Thank you, Melanie. Your kindness means everything to me.”

“Yes, I suppose it would.” She gives a quick wave in farewell and leaves me alone with the two lawyers.

My stomach flips as I look up at Scott and Brad, unsure which is which. They both stand before me with stern expressions. After talking with Melanie, I don’t know if I can handle anything from them.

But to my surprise, Brad smiles kindly. “Miss Chase, we’ve got a welcome package we’ve put together,” he says. “May I?”

I nod.

He brings over a flouncy gift bag covered in ribbons. He lays it on the ground by my chair. “First off, we’ve gotten you a cell phone. Our tech manager already programmed in your parents’ cell numbers, so you can call them as soon as we leave, if you like.”

He hands me the device and continues with a smaller box. “This smart watch is connected to your account. It also helps us track you during any trips into town or in case you ever wander too far from the property.”

“I can leave?” I ask before I realize how the question must sound.

“When you’re well, of course. Though you’ll be escorted anywhere you wish to go. And you’ll need protection detail.”

“Protection?”

I understand the escort. That’s law. No Omega can be out in a public setting without a legally appointed escort. Usually, a member of their family or pack. But the other part...

There are dangers associated with being an Omega in this world, but he didn’t seem to mean the usual sorts of risks.

“Mr. Williams is a very powerful Alpha,” soothes Scott, holding up a placating hand. “It’s the same kind of security we would give to the loved ones of a celebrity, or someone in politics. It may seem like an overreaction now, but Mr. Williams only wants what’s best for you.”

He pauses for a moment before continuing, “It’s really nothing more than a precautionary measure. We’ll be able to get help faster if something does happen.”

“I see. Thank you, Scott.”

“And look!” Brad holds out the watch, tapping the screen. “It’s even got the pack logo as a background. All these devices were specially made just for the pack.”

Wow. Apparently I’m part of a brand, now. I wonder if they’ll put the logo on my underwear.

“And lastly, here’s a new laptop,” Scott says, reaching into the bag. “We’ve taken the liberty of preloading some slideshows and documents that will help you familiarize yourself with your duties.”

My...duties?

“Thank you both, I really appreciate it,” I say. A bitter taste rises in my throat as I force a smile. They seem to mean well, but I know better than to trust anyone here now.

“We’re so happy to have you here,” says Scott, holding out his hand for a polite handshake. “We’ll leave you alone to get acclimated.”

“I appreciate that,” I reply, trying to mask my true feelings behind a thin veneer of politeness. “I’ll be sure to contact you if I have any questions.”

The two men exchange looks before gathering up their bags and making their way toward the exit. I thank them for what feels like another dozen times—damn Omegas always having to act grateful—and close the door behind them.

Time for step one of the plan.

I log into my phone and start playing around, adding a few apps in case my phone is being tracked. I download a bunch of pointless games—Candy Crush, Solitaire, Tetris. Things that would keep an airheaded Omega busy and quiet.

And then, a chess app called Game of Kings. Dean showed it to me a few days ago. He built the app with a college friend, and they use the built-in message board feature to communicate in secret with each other. I grin as I think of how proud Dean was to show me his project—and his high score, of course. He'll be even prouder when he sees what I do with it.

I create a profile, choosing the username SunshineGirl, and then navigate to the match screen. I scroll until I find the username DGenerate—Dean's ridiculous username that he made when he was in his self-professed 'edgy' phase. I send him a match request, along with a message:

Sunshine Girl: Hey there! Just moved into a new place and I'm safe but bored. Lost some stuff in the move but I'll find it. Wanna play?

I hope that's enough of a message for Dean to figure out without being suspicious enough to tip off whatever tech geek is monitoring my devices. I have to be extra careful in my wording if I want him to get the message without raising any red flags elsewhere.

Even more so, I hope the guys aren't so furious with me for my little deception that they don't respond at all. If that happens, everything is hopeless—but it's a risk worth taking if I want my pack back.

THIRTY-THREE

I **SPLAY** out on the couch, arm braced behind my head, staring at the ceiling.

There are cobwebs in the corners, and I wonder how long they've been there. If Juliet noticed them.

The incessant ticking of the clock over the mantle gives me a headache, inching time closer to tomorrow and further away from yesterday and our time with Juliet.

I did some preliminary work hacking into the Williamses' system last night. It's a strong system, no doubt about that. Designed by the best. It took me a few hours, but eventually, I was able to penetrate their system and look at what was going on inside. Hopefully, without detection.

I'm not sure it matters, though. What good is it if Juliet doesn't want to return? If Huck is wrong and she doesn't have a plan at all.

If Juliet's really gone for good, then...

I don't want to think about it.

My eyes are heavy from lack of sleep, but I don't want to do anything else besides lie here and wallow in self-pity for a few more hours until someone forces me off the sofa. And who's going to do that? The others are in just as bad shape as me.

Huck's making a venison stew in the kitchen because that's a normal thing to do when it's nearly midnight and he's

already stocked the freezer with enough of it to last us a month.

He's not humming or throwing jokes like he normally would. I think it's the quietest he's ever been while cooking, and that's saying something.

Everett is whittling in his big armchair, hunched over, brows wrinkled in concentration. I don't think he's making anything. The hunk of wood he started with three hours ago is just a spiked stick now. Maybe he's preparing to fight vampires, I don't know.

I shift in my spot on the couch, feeling like a caged animal about to bolt. A notification chimes on my phone, and I check the screen. It's from my chess app, the one I built with Miles, but it's an unknown username, sending me a message and a game request.

Ugh. Not now.

I go to swipe the notification away when I catch the username attached to the invite.

SunshineGirl.

"Guys!" I shoot up from my sprawled position on the couch, my heart in my fucking throat as I shakily toggle over to the message attached to the invite.

"Guys, you have to see this."

Huck runs behind the couch to check my screen over my shoulders, but Everett saunters over, radiating storm clouds as he gives me a suspicious look.

"Hey there," Huck's breath tickles my neck as he reads out loud. *"Just moved into a new place and I'm safe but bored. Lost some stuff in the move but I'll find it. Wanna play?"*

He frowns down at me. "Is this a sexting thing? Have you been sexting while playing chess?"

"No, it's not a sexting thing! Look at the username!"

Huck squints at my screen, then steps back with a loud whoop, clapping his hands. "I knew it! I knew it! I fucking

told you. Yes!"

"What is it?" Everett comes over and snags the phone from my hand. He reads the message several times, mouthing the words silently. His eyes light up when he realizes what I'm so excited about, but his face remains covered in a cautious mask.

"SunshineGirl?" His eyes widen, and he fumbles the phone as he hands it back to me. "It's Juliet?"

"It's Juliet," I affirm. "It has to be. I've been calling her Sunshine for weeks."

Everett stands there, eyes wide, trying to process the news.

"I told you so!" crows Huck, shooting finger guns at Everett. Everett grabs one of his fingers and gives it a squeeze.

"Say *I told you so* one more time," he growls. "I dare you."

Huck leans forward and smacks a kiss on Everett's cheek. "I. Told. You. So."

Everett slaps him on the back side of his head, ignores Huck's consequent protest, and turns to me. "If that's really her and she really has some kind of a plan, what do we do now?"

"Give me a minute to think."

And to recover from the simultaneous shock and guilt racing through me. I should have trusted her. Huck did, after all. Why couldn't I?

But that doesn't matter now. The best way to make it up to Juliet is to help her with whatever she's planning. To do that, I'll need some help of my own.

I hunch over the phone, dialing Miles's number and putting him on speakerphone. I haven't called him in months, but we're nerds. We prefer texting anyway, or sending messages through the chess app. Which, by the way, I'm beating him, 611 games to 598.

There's a click on the other line, and then Miles's voice, gruff as if I've woken him but eager. "What have you done now?"

“Miles, old buddy,” I greet loudly, imagining him wincing and pulling the phone from his ear. “I’ve missed you. How are things there?”

“Things are good,” he says, clearing his throat. “Really good.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah, we’ve been pretty busy. We found an Omega.”

“No fucking way.”

I want to say *so did we*, but I’m trying not to get ahead of myself, and I need a minute to process this.

“You might know her. She’s an author. Riley North. Her book was on the bestseller list for like a month.”

Everett and I share a look. Juliet must’ve read that burned up book three times since Everett returned it to her.

“Yeah. We have heard of her, actually. Apparently, it’s a really good book.”

Truthfully, I thought that hard-ass Alpha leader of his would never bend on his Omega moratorium. Apparently, I was wrong. “Congratulations, man.”

Miles laughs. “Yeah, it was a surprise for all of us. Riley’s been with us for about nine months now. She’s...well, she’s amazing. Absolutely amazing.”

“Good to hear. You deserve all the happiness you can get. And how’s everyone else?”

“Fantastic. Fox’s team is going to the semi-finals this month.”

“No, shit? I’ll get with my bookie.” I made two grand the last time Fox’s football team went to the semi-finals.

“You should. And Levi’s graduating soon, and Thane has enrolled himself in culinary school.”

Everett clears his throat and taps his foot. “Maybe we can have social hour another time?”

“Yeah, yeah,” I say. “Look, Miles, speaking of Omegas, we need some help with ours.”

“You found one too?” His surprise is apparent, even over the phone.

“We sure did,” I reply with an air of pride. “Well... Well, in a manner of speaking, anyway. We’re not bonded yet, but she’s ours. Definitely ours. But that’s where we need your help. She’s not with us right now.”

“Where is she?”

I swallow hard. “The Williams pack compound.”

The line is silent for a moment before he speaks again. “You never make things easy, do you?”

“Of course not. Where’s the fun in that?” I take a deep breath. “We can make this work if we plan it right.” My mind races as I consider different possibilities and strategies. There must be some way of getting her out without putting her in too much danger or stoking tensions between our two packs even more than they already are. Not that I’m scared of them, but if it means biting back my pride to get my girl, I’ll do it.

“We need whatever information you can get on how to infiltrate the estate, maybe find where they keep their secrets, if you know what I mean. I know we’ve looked into it before, but it’s different this time.” A lump forms in my throat. “This time, we’ve got someone on the inside. Someone we need to get out.”

“I get it, man. I really do.” There’s the sound of Miles tapping away at a laptop, hands whirring over the keys.

“I’ve already managed to get into their security system, but I’ve hit a wall. And I can’t seem to tap into audio, only video, and only certain areas. It isn’t enough.”

“I see.”

“Do you think you can do it?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

He scoffs. “Please. It’s me. I could break into the Royal Palace if I really wanted to.” He pauses. “Good thing for them,

I don't want to."

"I don't need *the* Queen. Just *our* queen."

Sappy, I know, but I mean it all the same.

"Here's what I can do. I can probably find some backdoors for the security systems in the mansion and a few options for where they may keep their files. They're likely electronic. I doubt I'll be able to pull anything through without being there in person to extract them onto a drive. But that's where your Omega could come in handy if she's on the inside. It'll take me a day maybe. Two at the most to get in and get a lay of the land. Do you have that long?"

"Do I have a choice?" I tug at my hair. "Whatever you can get us will be appreciated. I want her out of there as soon as possible."

"I'm on it. And Dean, congratulations."

I end the call and grin up at Everett and Huck. "Looks like we're getting our girl back."

"I told you—" Huck begins, and then he ducks at Everett's annoyed glare. "All right, what do you need us to do?"

I reach for my phone. "Help me make a very *unsuspicious* reply to our girl."

THIRTY-FOUR

—
JULIET

THE GRANDEUR of the lavish dining hall is almost oppressive as I take my first steps inside. Every corner of the room drips with opulence, from the gilded wallpaper to the crystal chandeliers that light up the area like stars in a night sky. The long mahogany table in the center of it is especially impressive, with gold place settings laid out on either side.

All these rich people, throwing away their money on pointless luxuries. Everything on that table could pay my family's mortgage for an entire year. The fact this whole dinner is in my honor makes me a little queasy in retrospect.

This is my first time meeting most of the pack. I've been pretending to be too weak to meet with anyone, spending most of my time in my room messaging back and forth with Dean. And beating him at chess, though he'll never admit that. He's having his friend on the other side of the country hack into the system at the compound to find any weaknesses in their security.

Or at least, that's what I think he was trying to tell me in the careful messages we've been sending back and forth.

Every time Dean messages me—no, every time DGenerate messages SunshineGirl—he tells me to be safe. To not put myself in danger. In so many words.

And they wonder why I couldn't tell them anything before I left. They never would've let me go. I doubt they're happy about it now, but I've explained my plan the best I could. To gather damning evidence of their business practices in the oil

industry. If the guys are right, there should be a mountain of cover ups.

One in particular I'd love to get my hands on.

If I succeed, not only will I win my freedom, but I could give my pack everything they've been fighting for since moving up the mountain.

"Ready for dinner?" a voice asks, startling me out of my reverie. A young woman, a familiar-looking Beta, looks back at me expectantly as we stand in the doorway. She wears a beautiful gown and her hair is swept up in an elegant bun, accentuating her delicate features.

"I can't wait," I say. "The chef here is really amazing."

"I know, right? You're Juliet? I'm Rosie. I've heard so much about you."

Rosie. I knew I recognized her. Rosie Ritter, one of the big news anchors in Anchorage. She was on the television in the airport when Dad, Papa, and I arrived weeks earlier. Before everything changed.

A few people in the room glance our way, so I quickly move into my usual routine—I sway a little, acting light-headed. Rosie immediately coos and crooks her elbow toward me.

"Here, take my arm," she says. "They said you were still so weak. You poor thing, you've been through so much!" Her tone is as syrupy as honey, but her eyes flash with hunger, as if she wants to devour me whole. She gazes at me with such intensity that it pains me to keep eye contact with her. "After you're feeling better, you must do an interview with me. Promise?"

"Of course." I link my arm in hers, acting as if her support is the only thing keeping me from fainting. "I'd be honored."

"Such a sweet thing." She guides me to a smaller table and pulls a chair out for me.

"Oh, I don't know if this is where I'm sitting," I protest, but she waves a hand.

“It’s not time for the main meal yet,” she says, taking a seat next to me. “You can go on up to the main table when they start serving. For now, visit with me and keep me company.”

Looks like I’m stuck here for a while. I glance toward the head table where a few of my alleged future Alphas are already seated. I catch a glimpse of Victor in the next room, talking to someone over a tumbler of gold liquid.

HE LOOKS like a lion surveying his pride. Or his next meal.

Gone is the warmth from our first video call together. Now, he holds a cold indifference as he gazes out over his pack slowly filtering into the room for dinner.

Our eyes meet, and a shiver of fear hits me. His nostrils flare as he catches my scent, but then he recovers, giving me a simple nod before going back to his conversation with Brad, the beta lawyer from yesterday.

“And who have we here?” A young Alpha steals the seat next to me. His scent is overwhelming, sharp and spicy. I suppose at one point in my life, I would have found him extremely attractive. Like most of the Alphas here, he exudes power, and his frame is expansive and strong. He has chin-length blond hair with a slight wave to it. Ice-blue eyes and a killer smile. Broad shoulders that taper to a trim waist.

He does almost nothing for me now, even if my Omega biology begs to differ, making my thighs squeeze.

One hand rests casually on the table, long slim fingers absently playing with a single napkin as he gazes at me. His voice is deep and smooth when he speaks, with a hint of amusement in it. “You must be Juliet.”

“That’s me.” I give a small smile. “And you are?”

“I’m Bryant. One of the Williams pack Alphas.” His voice drips with innuendo, and his eyes are filled with heat. This man is already picturing me naked, begging for his knot.

“It’s lovely to meet you.”

“I’d heard you were unwell. I hope you’re feeling better soon.” He pats my hand and then covers it with his own, leaving it there. Claiming me, in his own subtle way. He smiles at me again, and I fight the urge to squirm in my seat.

“You look beautiful tonight,” he comments, his voice still rich and velvety.

“Thanks,” I murmur, trying hard not to immediately pull away from his touch. I’m supposed to want this. To want *them*.

He continues to study me like he’s trying to figure me out. His thumb rubs gentle circles on the back of my hand, and I suppress the shudder running through me at his touch.

He mistakes it for a shiver of pleasure and grins.

This is going to be a long night.

Rosie and Bryant strike up a conversation practically over my head, only addressing me to make a few patronizing comments here and there. When I can’t stand it anymore, I wince and rub my leg through my dress.

“Are you all right?” Bryant inquires, his face scrunched with concern.

“Oh, yes,” I say. “Just some lingering aches. I’m going to take a walk, stretch out the muscles a bit.”

“Would you like company?” Rosie asks. She probably is more concerned with getting a few quotes from me for her next piece, not my actual welfare.

“No thank you,” I say. “I’ll only be a moment.”

She smiles at me like I’m a toddler before resuming her conversation with Bryant. I head out of the room, limping appropriately, even though the feigned limping makes my muscles ache. I need to familiarize myself with the layout of the compound, and this ‘light exercise’ gives me a chance to explore the ground floor.

The lawyers who brought my phone and other electronics to me did show me how to access a map of the estate on my

phone, but certain areas are unlabeled and I'm worried I might get lost anyway.

It isn't the Alaskan wilderness, but the estate is so big, it might as well be.

I walk slowly down the corridor, glancing at each room I pass. The place is huge and labyrinthine, with long white hallways that stretch on for what seems to be an eternity. Everywhere I look, I notice tasteless displays of the pack's wealth and power.

My gaze lands on a beta security guard pacing the hallway ahead of me, and my stomach clenches nervously. He watches me carefully as I approach, scrutinizing my every move. I'm sure he's familiar with my profile and photo because he bows his head as I approach.

"Are you all right, Miss Chase? Do you need any assistance?"

"That's very sweet of you," I say. "But I'm just taking a quick walk. Stiff muscles."

"Very good." He returns to his pacing of the hallway.

As soon as he's gone, I limp along faster than before, desperate to escape the confines of this prison-like mansion that reeks of opulence yet serves only to make me feel caged in by its luxury.

I want to go back to the mountain. I want to go back *home*.

I wander around for a bit before returning to the dining hall. More guests have settled in their seats for the meal.

Mostly alphas. A couple betas.

Their scents fill the space, clogging the air with pheromones that will only strengthen in my presence.

I take small sips of air, willing my own body chemistry not to react as I go to the main table, where I'm seated in the head seat across from where I imagine Victor will be seated.

Bryant is seated next to me, and on the other side is Melanie, who looks positively feral as I approach.

Conversation quiets for a moment as Victor takes his seat opposite me, far at the other end of the table. One of the staff pulls out his chair for him and he folds himself into it, lifting his arms as they lay a napkin across his lap and push him in, filling his glass.

No one speaks until he takes the first sip from his glass and snaps his fingers for the waitstaff to begin bringing out the meal. Only then does the hum of several hushed conversations around the table resume.

“Miss Chase.” Melanie almost sounds bored as she speaks her delayed greeting, but the dislike in her eyes shines through. “I heard the doctor attempted to pay you a visit this morning but you refused to see her. Is everything all right?”

I smile tightly. “I wasn’t feeling very well this morning.”

“Sorry to hear that. You look well now.”

I incline my head as the waitstaff bustles around us as they bring out crystal platters of food and fragrant wines. The strong smells make my nervous stomach turn, and instinctively, I push the wine glass away. Melanie watches me with sharp eyes and a cruel smirk on her face. If I make one wrong move, she’ll report it back to Victor.

“Something wrong?” she asks, tutting disapprovingly. “You aren’t still ill?”

“No, I just haven’t got my appetite back yet.”

“Ah, good. You did spend a lot of time with those heathens up in the mountains. I’m glad you didn’t come back with something...disagreeable.”

She flicks her gaze toward my belly.

I grit my teeth. Did she really just insinuate that?

“Of course,” she continues, sipping at her wine. “We do have the best doctors in the state. They can help you take care of that if there’s something to be taken care of.”

I’m going to murder her. I’m going to murder her and feed her body to the wolves.

But that can come later. Right now, all I can do is take small bites of my food while faking interest in the conversations around me. Even hers.

Victor taps a small knife against his glass not long into the meal, standing to make a toast to his new Omega.

I try my best to look the part of the perfect Omega through the meager couple sentences he utters across the table. I try so hard that the words he speaks barely register and I hope I raise my own glass at the right moment after a pause.

It seems I do, because everyone else shouts, “To Juliet,” and drinks.

Through the meal, Victor watches me. He makes no secret of this. Staring at me openly from across the table. Like he wants to fuck me into oblivion. Like he wants to throw me from the balcony.

I’m not sure which emotion I see simmering behind his eyes is stronger, but they are both there, in alternating intensity.

By the time the desserts are brought out, I can’t stand the tension anymore. I rub at my temples and let out a small moan.

“Miss Chase?” Melanie inquires.

I wave her off politely, pressing a hand to my chest and wincing. “I feel a little ill,” I say, my voice warbling. “I’m going to go back to my bedroom. Please excuse me.”

“Of course,” she says.

I stand quickly, and as I do, Victor’s cold eyes track me from the end of the table. He raises a single eyebrow in inquiry, and I smile shyly. He barely acknowledges me before turning back to the Alpha at his side, resuming their conversation.

I’ve got to get out of here.

I practically run to the elevator, my heart rate never slowing until I’m in my bedroom with the door locked and the Williams Alphas far, far away from me.

THIRTY-FIVE

—
JULIET

THE NEXT MORNING, I step into the elevator and press the button for Melanie's floor—yes, she has a whole floor of rooms—feeling a shiver of unease go down my spine. Last night's walk around the ground floor was nothing compared to this.

When I told Dean I could only hold off the doc for so much longer, our plans had to be sped up. Whether or not Victor will cast me out for my impurity, this will all have been for nothing if the bastard decides to take the Cooper pack for everything they're worth. Or worse, if he tries to have them incarcerated for their so-called crimes.

My phone feels heavy in my pocket, and I reach inside to grasp it tightly, knowing that soon, Dean will call me. They've found a way to patch the call through so it will look like it's coming from my Dad.

I'm so excited and nervous to hear his voice that I can barely contain myself.

The elevator slows as it reaches Melanie's floor.

Something in my stomach sinks but I force myself to push on. Knowing my Pack is counting on me.

It's go time, and every second counts.

So far, my "poor frail Omega" label makes me all but invisible; no one notices me or even pays attention to me and the ones who do only spare a second to ask if I'm all right or whether I need anything.

But my luck can't last forever.

"Here goes nothing," I whisper, my voice shaking.

As I wait for the doors to open, a laugh comes from someone on the other side of the wall. It's not Melanie's—not evil enough—but whoever it is, they're still a potential witness.

Taking one more deep breath, I steel myself and step out of the elevator. Two housekeepers are talking and laughing over their cart.

"Good morning," I say, trying to keep my voice steady.

The two women look up from their conversation and smile politely. "Good morning to you too," one of them says.

I give them a nod of greeting, and they smile at me again, bowing their heads a little in respect before they go right back to their gossip session.

Stepping around the corner from them, I brace against the wall for a moment to catch my breath.

My phone buzzes with an incoming call. It says Dad on the screen, but I know better.

I answer the call and insert my wireless earbud, eager to hear his deep voice.

"How's the bitch's floor?" he says in greeting.

I hold back a snort. I wasn't kind in my description of Melanie's lovely personality, and his hackles went up immediately. He threatened to hack into her computer and replace all her files with tentacle porn.

It was tempting. Really tempting. But I told him to hold back. Besides, the slippery bitch might be into that, and I don't want to do her any favors.

"It's so good to hear your voice."

"You too, Sunshine. Say hi to the guys."

"Hi!"

"Hey, baby girl," I hear Huck call.

There's a rustling sound and a curse from Dean before a heavy breath comes down the line and I shiver.

"Goldie?"

My heart sings. He's speaking to me.

It's more than I'd hoped for.

"I'm here."

A soft growl. "I could throttle you for putting yourself at risk like this."

I bite my lip.

"Have they touched you?" he demands, his tone sinister. "Are you all right?"

"I'm okay," I reply, hearing Dean wrestle the phone back from Everett.

"Sorry, Sunshine. Remember, it's your Dad calling. Cameras."

At his reminder, I have to resist the urge to look up to the ceiling where I'm sure I will find one at the apex of every corner.

"Right," I reply, clearing my throat, schooling my face. "How's Dad?"

"Daddy's just fine, Sunshine," he replies, and I hold back a chuckle. "How's the bitch's lair?"

"It's cold and boring, like her," I whisper. "You're tracking me?"

"Of course," he says. "But that means someone else could be, too, so you need to hurry. Miles can only loop the video for so long before they're going to notice."

I center myself, attempting to calm my breathing.

"Just give me a minute."

"Sorry," he says, instantly placating. "You take all the time you need. But, uh, maybe don't need too much time, okay?"

I suppress a laugh and take a deep breath. “Okay, I’m ready. Which way?”

I head down the hallway to Melanie’s office, following Dean’s instructions.

“According to her schedule, she’s in a meeting until lunch,” Dean says. “But that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be careful.”

“I know.”

Freakin’ protective Alphas.

“She could come back for something in her office that she needs. Or to take a call. Or to get something from her purse. Or to, I don’t know, have a romantic liaison with her secretary.”

“Dean. You have to chill. I got this.”

He exhales a loud gust of air. “Sorry. Nerves.”

“Do you have her door unlocked yet?”

I don’t want to test the knob in case it sets off an alarm.

“Wait. Any second now.”

I hear his fingers typing something.

A ping through the phone and the door clicks.

“Thank you, *Miles*,” Dean grits out excitedly. “Go, Sunshine. All doors on that floor are unlocked for the next thirty minutes.”

“I shouldn’t need more than ten.”

I open the door and step inside, keeping my back pressed to the wall like I’m in a spy movie. The first thing I notice is that there are no cameras in here.

“I’m in,” I say in my best Mission Impossible voice, suppressing a giggle.

I hear Huck chuckle in the background, but Dean says, “Focus, baby. We’ll have all the time in the world for jokes once you’re back here. Safe.”

My pulse spikes at the reminder of everything that's at stake here.

My shoes make soft squeaking noises on the polished marble flooring. The air smells like stale perfume. An L-shaped desk stands in the corner of the room, and a computer monitor glows blue.

I ignore it. Thanks to Dean's friend's intel, we know that they keep paper records like it's the fucking stone age. Probably don't trust their cyber security, or their staff not to leak things they don't want getting out.

Anything I could use will be secured in a room that has the ability to turn into a contained furnace with the push of a button. Can you say fire sale? *Everything must go.*

I'm jumpy, half-expecting alarms to go off at any moment and announce my presence. But nothing happens as I slip past Melanie's desk without incident. I've gotten this far. All that remains now is finding what I'm looking for without being seen—or worse yet, discovered by someone else.

“Okay, their file room is the—” Dean begins, but I interrupt him.

“A big metal door with a big scary lock?” I supply, looking at, well, a big metal door with a big scary lock.

Jeez, Melanie. Way to make your file room conspicuous as hell.

“That's the one. There should be a place to put a five-digit code. It changes every hour. The code is 60098. Do not fat-finger it. You'll set off an alarm.”

“I have very slender fingers, Dean. You should know, you've felt them around your—”

“Not now,” he demands, inhaling sharply. “I do not have time to take care of a throbbing erection right now.”

“Throbbing, huh?”

“Juliet. Please.”

“Okay, okay. I’m putting in the code now.” I set down the phone on a nearby shelf and type the numbers in slowly, making absolutely sure not to hit another key accidentally. The lock beeps three times and turns lime green. “I did it!”

“That’s my girl.”

I step into the safe, my heart thumping with a mixture of unease and excitement. It’s one thing to plan a break-in. It’s an entirely different experience to stand inside the target. Adrenaline rushes through me, and I shake my head to clear it.

I flick on a light, scanning the shelves and drawers as my eyes adjust. There’s potential evidence everywhere.

I open the first drawer on a long cabinet and find it filled to bursting with bundles of cash.

What the fuck?

I go to the next one and find a row of neat folders with blank labels. Inside them are photographs. Each file containing pics of different people in compromising positions.

Is that the state senator?

Holy shit.

It’s a blackmail treasure trove.

“Find anything yet?”

“Define *anything*.”

“What is it?”

“Just give me a minute.”

I press on, stuffing the photos back into their folders before racing through more drawers until I find what I’m looking for. I need real tangible evidence. Documents signed by Victor or Melanie. Authorizations. Cover ups.

It takes me a few minutes and each one feels like a century and I get the distinct feeling I’m running out of time.

But then I find it.

A filing cabinet filled with labeled files. One says *Payoffs*. Another says *Undocumented Spills*. I take both of them, along

with one labeled as False Docs.

I stack the files on top of one another, trying to figure out how the hell I'm going to get them back to my room. Or out of this estate. They're thicker than I'd imagined they be.

I'm in a baggy sweater, leaning into the whole *I-still-feel-like-shit* routine, but I'm not sure it's baggy enough to conceal them.

"I got them," I tell Dean.

"Yes!"

I continue fingering through the other files. There's still one more thing I need to find, but I don't see anything that could be what I'm looking for.

"Get out of there, Sunshine."

"Not yet."

"What do you mean, not yet?"

I slam the drawer shut and move to the next one.

"Juliet?"

I flip through a few different folders, my stomach turning at the contents. "This is awful. Dean, the pictures—" I swallow a lump in my throat and quickly shut one folder filled with details of a covered-up sexual assault case. The Alpha who did it? None other than my dinner companion, Bryant.

I was going to bond with them. I was going to take his knot, grateful for the opportunity. I can't think about it anymore or I'll vomit.

"I know, baby, it's bad stuff," Dean murmurs into the phone. "Just take pictures of everything you can."

Pictures. Right. Why the fuck didn't I think of that?

"Will it be safe to use the phone to send them to you?"

"Hang on."

I wait, still searching through the documents, getting frustrated as I still can't seem to find the one thing I wanted most out of this mission.

“Yes,” Dean says finally. “Miles says send them in batches and delete them and the whole text conversation afterward. They’re getting sent copies of your text conversations but the software they’re using doesn’t pull photos. It’ll take them a while to figure it out and by then Miles will have remotely wiped any trace of them from your phone.”

Sounds way too high tech for me to understand but I say okay and set to work, tearing open the files I’ve already compiled, snapping photo after photo, careful to get every single page, and send them in batches of ten before erasing them.

When I’m finished with the folders, I stuff them back into a random cabinet and that’s when I see it. A cardboard box in the corner, gathering dust, with *COOPER* on the side.

“Oh god.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a box,” I tell him, my stomach flipping as I kneel on the floor. “It has your name on it. Well, the name of your pack.”

“We’re kind of a big deal.”

I snort softly and kneel next to the box. It isn’t sealed.

“What’s in it?” asks Dean, but his voice is shaky and nervous. I don’t blame him.

I pull off the lid, looking down at haphazard mounds of paperwork inside. It looks like someone’s been in this box recently. Probably as soon as they figured out where I was.

“Paperwork, mostly. Dossiers with your profiles. Good Lord, they’ve even got your college transcripts.”

I take some snapshots, skimming the words as I do. “A C- in Pottery, Dean? Really?”

“It was harder than I thought.”

I start to laugh, but it’s cut off when I get to a folder at the bottom that’s labeled *T. Redding*.

My heart beats so fast I can feel it in my throat. I take a stuttering breath and reach for the folder with trembling hands.

For a moment, all I can do is stare at it, almost too afraid to open it. But I swallow hard and flip to the first page. And begin to cry.

“Baby, what is it?” Dean asks softly.

“I don’t want to send these to you,” I whisper. “I can’t, it’s...”

The air leaves my lungs in a rush and bile rises in my throat, but I force my gaze down to the contents of the folder anyway. Inside are pictures of Taylor taken from every angle—his broken body lying still against the cold surface beneath him, his limbs bent at impossible angles and his neck cocked unnaturally to one side. His eyes are closed like he’s just sleeping peacefully but it’s not peaceful—it’s wrong, terribly wrong.

“It’s okay,” Dean says, but his voice is shaking. “Whatever it is, just send it. We need it all.”

I take pictures of all the evidence. The ache in my chest solidifying into something hard and sure when I find the accompanying documents. The doctored autopsy report and other cover-up documents. Letters from lawyers back and forth. All of them with Victor’s signature on them.

And then, at the back of the folder is a small plastic baggie stapled to the thick cardstock. Inside is a silver necklace with a dog-tag style pendant bearing a stylized etching of a mountain.

The bastards kept a memento. I tear it from the back of the folder and tuck it in my pocket. I box the rest of the evidence up carefully, only keeping the folder on Taylor out.

“I’m done.”

Really, I’m so done. I just want to go back to my room—no, back to my cabin, with my Alphas—and have a good cry.

Checking the room to make sure it looks the same as when I arrived, I close the door to the file room. The lock beeps and turns bright red.

“Heading back to my room now. Am I clear?”

“Clear,” Dean says, and I can hear the tension in his voice. No doubt he’s looking at the photos I’ve just sent and my heart breaks for them all. But this is what I wanted to give them. The weapon they need to prove Taylor’s death wasn’t a blameless accident, but a result of Victor’s own greed and negligence.

I wipe my eyes and sneak out of the office and down the hall. No one is around, not even the housekeepers from earlier. I really pulled it off.

I head back to my room, forcing myself to walk slowly. I’m a poor, injured Omega to these people. Every few feet or so, I place a hand on the wall as if stabilizing myself and draw a few bracing breaths.

“Almost there,” I whisper into the earbud once I’m back on my floor, headed toward my bedroom. “I’ll check all my supplies and be out of here after sunset.”

“We can’t wait to have you back,” Dean says. As I walk down the hall, the walls seem to close in around me, like they know what I’ve done and are judging me for it. My hand shakes slightly as I reach for the door handle of my room. Once inside, I finally release a sigh of relief and lean against the wall for support.

“Hello, Juliet.”

I gasp, my eyes flying open to find Victor Williams himself is standing inside my room. His smile is faint, barely lasting a few seconds.

When did he get in here?

“Victor,” I say too loudly, too brightly, hopefully enough for Dean to hear it. “It’s good to see you. What are you doing in my room?”

“Fuck,” Dean says in my ear.

Victor cocks his head at me. “Where have you been, little Omega??

THIRTY-SIX

—
JULIET

VICTOR EYES me suspiciously as I fumble for an excuse. His voice is harsh and accusing as he speaks again. “I asked where you were?”

“Oh,” I say carefully, shying away from his angry glare. “I was just visiting with Bryant. He was showing me around the estate.”

Instantly, Victor’s demeanor changes. Rage flares in his eyes, hot and cruel. And I realize I’ve said the wrong thing.

“Did you let him touch you?”

My heart sinks, and I take a step back, fear coursing through my veins. I feel the tension in the air. I’m shocked at his accusation and the Jekyll and Hyde flip of his personality.

The Victor I knew only through video calls leading up to my official claiming was nothing but a mirage. An image projected through a screen. I can see now who he really is. *What* he is.

“No,” I reply, voice trembling slightly, eyes downcast to the floor in standard Omega submission. “He didn’t touch me.”

The silence stretches on for what feels like an eternity before he finally speaks again. “Look at me when you talk,” he says in a low voice, icy cold anger dripping from each word. My gaze snaps up to meet his seething one, legs shaking with apprehension.

I'm frozen to the spot, unable to do anything but stare back at him with wide-eyed fear. He seems like he's about to snap, a cracked glass ready to shatter into pieces at any second.

He takes a step closer and hisses, "What were you doing with Bryant?"

"Juliet, what's happening?" Dean asks in my ear, and I jerk the earbud out, tapping it twice to end the call.

Victor eyes the little bud as I stuff it into my pocket with my phone, flicking the switch to put it on silent mode in case my Alphas are stupid enough to try calling me back.

Thankfully, Victor doesn't ask about the earbud, and I hope he assumes I was just listening to music.

"Juliet, I do not like to repeat myself."

My throat feels dry as I stammer out an answer. "I was just talking with him," I whisper, my gaze flicking away nervously.

He reaches toward me and yanks at the collar of my blouse. His eyes narrow into slits as stares at my skin.

"No bonding mark," he says flatly, letting go of me. The fury in Victor's eyes is like a fire, blazing and all-consuming. He looks ready to explode with anger, and I don't want to be there when he does.

"I was only visiting with him," I manage to choke out. "He was helping me get comfortable."

Victor's face is stony, not giving away any emotion. He steps closer to me, invading my personal space. I swallow hard, too scared to speak up for fear of making the situation worse as he looms over me.

"Look at me," he commands quietly but firmly, and I force myself to look up into his dark eyes. What other choice do I have but to obey him?

"Is this how you're going to act in my home?" he asks, an edge of anger hidden beneath the surface of his words. His hand moves up to cup my chin. "Are you going to need *constant* supervision? Hmm?"

“What? No!” I shake my head vigorously.

His Alpha scent grows with his rage, the heady wood-smoke smell tinged with something acrid, like burnt hair. It’s so overpowering I can’t think straight.

Every nerve in my body is tense and alert, prepared to run at any moment. My heart pounds erratically in my chest, and beads of sweat drip down the back of my neck. Despite this, I force myself to remain still, not wanting to make any sudden movements that could be misinterpreted.

Victor’s gaze intensifies and he speaks again, this time his voice dark and threatening. “Why so timid?” he growls. “Answer me. Is this really how you want things between us? Do you think this kind of taunting behavior will get you anywhere? Trying to use *my* packmates as a means to make me, what? *Jealous*? As if that might win you some affection.”

He scoffs, his words sending a chill down my spine when I recognize the glint of something near madness in his eyes. Something cold and calculating. Smart.

An icy fear grips me as I try to summon the courage to speak up for myself. He hasn’t shouted, but something unspoken and terrifying lurks beneath the surface of his words, just as startling as any shout.

I open my mouth to protest but all that comes out is a feeble croak. Victor takes advantage of my silence and presses his point further. “You need to learn respect,” he says firmly, tightening his grip on my chin until it’s almost painful.

“If you don’t, I’m going to have to teach it to you.”

Victor pushes my face away as he releases my chin. He scents the air as he walks around me, like a vulture circling its prey.

“You don’t smell like Bryant. You only smell like *them*.”

“Them?” My voice shakes. His musky pheromones invade my nostrils, filling me with dread and thank whatever higher power out there has made his scent wholly unattractive to me. I’d vomit on him here and now if my body reacted in any way to his Alpha but in disgust.

“Don’t think I can’t smell those heathens in the mountains all over you. You stink of them. They ruined you, didn’t they? That’s why you continually refuse the examination I requested.”

He smirks and extends out a hand, tracing my arm with the tips of his long fingers before tugging on the fabric of my dress.

He exhales sharply, turning away from me as if contemplating something before meeting my gaze once more with an unnerving intensity. “I bet you enjoyed it, too. I bet you enjoyed every one of their filthy touches. I thought you would be different. A quiet Omega from a nowhere town with a soft countenance and the gleam of innocence in her eyes. I knew when your parents told me you were pure that it was true. But they were wrong about you, too, little Omega. You’re nothing but a cheap whore.”

He grabs me by the arm and yanks me to his chest, scenting my neck. He runs his hot tongue up to my ear, and I shiver, twisting away.

“Please,” I beg, twisting my arm. “Let me go.”

I wriggle to free myself from the firm grasp of his hand, but he tightens his grip, sending a wave of pain up my arm. My head spins, and it’s hard to concentrate on anything other than the terror coursing through me. His breath hot against my skin.

“You could have had it all,” he snarls, spittle flying from his mouth as he speaks. “But look at you now, dirty and broken.”

His hand moves to my chin, forcing me to look him in the eye again. “Do you like how it feels? Does it make you wet?”

He chuckles darkly as he takes in my expression of revulsion.

He brings his face to mine and kisses me deeply on the lips. It’s nothing like the kisses of my pack. It’s raw and violent and forced.

“That *taste*,” he purrs against my mouth even as I squirm and whimper in his grasp. I don’t have time to attempt a scream before he takes another kiss from me.

No, *kiss* isn’t the right word. He violates my mouth, drawing blood and a soundless scream from my throat.

I taste copper in my mouth as he pulls away with a sneer on his lips.

“You already opened your legs for them,” he snarls, lip curling in disdain. “It’s only fair that I get a taste, too.”

I can barely breathe. His face is contorted in rage, and he’s still holding my arm, squeezing harder and harder with each passing second. Tears well in my eyes as the panic takes root and I can’t move. I feel weak. So weak. Like I could crumple into dust.

Victor grabs my blouse, ripping it down the middle as if trying to tear away any remaining shred of dignity I have left. Buttons go flying everywhere, and I flinch as they clatter against the floor.

My heart races as my mind whirls, desperately trying to search for a way out. I attempt to wrench away from his grasp and stumble backward, but he tightens his grip. He slams me against the wall, and I can feel the coldness of it seeping into my skin.

“You’re mine now,” he snarls, running a finger over my cheek. “And I intend to *take* what’s mine.”

“No, I-I’m not ready,” I attempt to plead, blubbering, having to forcefully evict the words from my mouth when they keep trying to stick. “Please, Victor.”

He draws his teeth along my neck, biting but not breaking the skin.

Searing panic races through me as I realize he could force the bond. Here and now. And I wouldn’t be strong enough to stop him.

“*Please*,” I whimper. “I’m not ready.”

He chuckles darkly against my neck. “As if I’d ever bond with you now.”

He licks the spot where his teeth were only a second ago, tasting me.

“My pack will happily use an Omega, they might bond you, if I will it, but I will never claim spoiled goods as my own.”

Stark relief crashes down over me despite the venom in his words. He may take my body, but he won’t bond me and I have no right to feel so relieved and yet I do.

Tears track down my cheeks as his hands roam over my body possessively.

“You belong to me,” he whispers, tracing circles around my neck with one hand while the other slides under my skirt. A chill runs through me as his fingers find their way between my legs, pushing against the fabric of my underwear until I can’t take it anymore.

The fear coursing through me threatens to paralyze me, but every last bit of strength in me fights back against what Victor is about to do.

“Please,” I whimper desperately, barely able to keep myself standing. One last plea before I’m going to have to fight back. Because I won’t let him take me. Not while I can still at least *try* to do something about it.

“Hush now. Open your legs for your master.”

Suddenly, an ear-piercing alarm blares through the compound. Time stops as I stand frozen, unable to move in terror and confusion. My palms are slick with sweat, and my breathing is coming faster now—each breath shallow and panicked.

“Son of a bitch.” Victor wrenches away from me, lifting a phone to his ear and barking orders into it. My heart pounds a million miles a minute, and I feel like I’m going to faint.

The silence in my room is deafening, interrupted only by the occasional siren’s wail from outside and Victor’s rasping

voice.

“Stay here, I’m nowhere near finished with you,” Victor says, not taking the phone from his ear. His face looks stern, but his eyes betray his anxiety.

That alarm is something big, something unexpected enough to rattle the Alpha.

He throws the door to my room wide open. As he slams it shut behind him, the lock clicks. I run to it and twist the knob, but it doesn’t budge. The line around the knob, the one that’s always white, is now bright red.

I’m trapped. Trapped like an animal in a cage. I let out a sob.

In my pocket, my phone vibrates, and I wrench it free, dropping it on the floor with clumsy fingers before I’m able to pick it back up and answer it.

“Dean?”

“Oh thank god.”

A little sob escapes me.

“I’m here, Sunshine. Breathe.”

“He was going to…”

“I know. I got Miles to set off the alarm. We can see the bastard rushing to the surveillance room. You’ve got time, but you’re going to need to get out, baby, right now.”

“Now?” I plead desperately, my voice strained, too afraid to hope, too frazzled to be able to think clearly. “I-I’m not ready. I-I,” I choke on my own words, mind racing a million miles a minute as I fight for control.

I wasn’t made for this shit.

I press my hand to my chest to quell the riot of its beating.

“You can do it, Sunshine. I know you can.”

For a moment, I wonder why I can’t hear Huck or Everett there with him anymore and a terrible feeling grips me. “Where’s Everett? Huck?”

“Don’t worry about them. I need you to worry about you right now. I’m getting Miles to unlock your door. He’s going to clear a path for you to the garage. You’re going to have to steal a snowmobile. Can you do that?”

I stiffen. “I’ve never driven one.”

“It’s easy, Sunshine. So easy. Put your earpiece in. I’m going to walk you through it on the way.

A sliver of hope spikes through the cloud of terror engulfing me, and I can breathe easier again. His calm sureness is making me stronger.

I’m getting out. It isn’t the way I planned, but it’s happening, and it’s happening now.

“Get what you need. Dress warm.”

I shove the earpiece in and rummage through my bag, finding the small knapsack I put in there. It held my few toiletries that I brought here, but it was never meant for that. I toss out the few things inside and stuff it with the items I stole from the cabin, along with a water bottle and a few apples and granola bars I squirreled away from breakfast.

I pull a sweater on, then rush to the stocked closet for a jacket. A fancy light gray one catches my eye and I tug it on, fastening the obnoxious silver and crystal belt and zipping it all the way to my chin. I don’t see snow pants, but there are boots that look warm enough and I pull them on.

I fight to get the backpack on over the puffy coat and then tug my pink hat over my head, and somehow it feels like putting on armor. Like nothing bad can happen to me as long as I’m wearing it. And maybe that’s foolish, but I’ll hold onto anything that gives me strength right now.

“I’m ready.”

My heart feels like it’s trying to break out of my ribcage as I stare at the door. That thin red line separates me from freedom, but the thought of going home gives me the strength to carry on. Dean’s voice echoes in my earbud as he encourages me one last time. “You can do this.”

The light turns from red back to white.

I close my eyes and wrap my fingers around the cold metal, steeling myself before sweeping the door open.

“All right, Sunshine. Time to get out of there. I’ll lead you to the garage but then you’ll have to ditch the phone so they can’t track you.”

A sliver of ice lodges in my throat.

“You have the map, and the compass. You can do this.”

“What if I get lost?”

“I’ll find you, Sunshine. I will *always* find you.”

“Okay,” I sniffle.

Time to get the hell out of here.

THIRTY-SEVEN

THAT BASTARD WAS HURTING our girl, and all we could do was sit and listen.

I'm choking on panic as Dean hangs up the phone. "I'm gonna kill him. I'm going to kill Victor Williams."

I leap to my feet, knocking the chair over. It clatters to the floor, and a resounding crack sounds as one of the legs splinters. Dean and Huck stare at me, eyes wide.

"Everett, sit down," says Huck in a hoarse voice. "You'll never make it there in time to stop anything. We don't know he's going to hurt her."

"The fuck we don't."

"We have to stick to the plan." He reaches for my arm, but I wrench it away. I can feel his panic just as strong as my own through the pack bonds.

"Fuck the plan." I grab my winter coat and hat, throwing them on as I storm out of the house.

"Everett!" yells Dean, but the last syllable is drowned out by my slamming the front door. The cold air chills my skin, but I'm too consumed by panic and rage to notice or care. I hear Juliet's panicked voice in my brain, over and over, like a knife cutting through any other thoughts rattling around in there. I clench my fists because I need to punch something, right now, but I'll have to wait until I get to the Williams estate.

What the fuck else would that bastard be doing in her room, waiting for her there alone?

We all know what he's capable of. Who he is.

It was bad enough glimpsing those images of my Taylor coming through on Dean's phone. I'd almost grabbed my axe and gone for a fucking murder spree right then. The only things stopping me were knowing Taylor wouldn't want that, and knowing there was nothing that could bring him back to me.

But I *could* stop this. I *can* bring Juliet home before the unthinkable happens.

I sprint to the garage, cursing when I hit the button to open the door. Has this damn thing always been so slow to open? By the time it's halfway up, I've already ducked inside and started up the snowmobile.

Huck and Dean's shouts echo across the yard, but once the garage door is up, I'm out of there. There's no time to waste, not even to argue with them about what to do. I rev the engine, and I'm off. I won't let Victor hurt Juliet—and I won't let anyone stop me from getting to her as soon as I can.

I speed along the mountain path, barely feeling the power of the machine beneath me. Barely feeling anything, really, except pure, unadulterated rage. My girl needs me. My Goldie needs me.

The snowmobile roars as I cut through the soft snow, leaving a spray of snow in my wake.

This is heavy snow, not the powdery stuff that works much better with the snowmobile, but I'll take my chances. My heart races as I push the vehicle to its limits, taking tight turns, whipping around trees.

I gun the engine of the snowmobile, streaking through the wilderness with reckless abandon. The cold wind whips against me, biting at my skin even through my thick winter gear. I'm going too fast—much faster than I should be—but I don't care.

She needs me.

It's my job to protect her, and I won't fail again.

I will not fail her.

The snow-covered landscape stretches out before me, a vast expanse of untouched white. The sky is a deep blue hue with not a single cloud in sight, while the sun gleams brightly overhead. It shouldn't be this goddamned beautiful, not now. Everything looks so fucking normal, peaceful even, when it shouldn't. Not when the woman I love is in danger. It should be dark, cloudy, stormy. Hell, the skies should be on fire.

Every bump, snowdrift, and rock send me into the air, but gravity always brings me back down to earth. With each jump, my stomach seems to drop out from underneath me, only to fill back up again when I land back on the solid surface of the mountain.

I'm going to mangle this damned machine before I'm through, but I can't seem to bring myself to care.

Cold wind bites into my cheeks, and I squint into it as I speed ahead, wishing I'd had the clearness of mind to grab my goggles at least. Or fucking gloves. My fingers sting and ache, stiffening in the cold already.

But what's a few lost fingers in the face of my Omega being violated by that fucking monster? How could I be so foolish? How could I have thought for even a second that she would just up and abandon me. Abandon *us* for something as stupid as wealth or power.

That's not my Goldie. I should've known better. I should've trusted her.

I'll make it up to her.

This is me making it up to her.

My next landing is too hard, too uneven, and it throws me off balance, sending the snowmobile careening towards a large rock in its path. I grit my teeth, growling, trying to steer away, but there's no chance. I'm going too fast, and I can't correct it no matter how hard I wrench the handlebars to the side.

"Fuck!"

The snowmobile slams into the boulder with a loud thud, throwing pieces of metal everywhere and causing sparks to fly from where it collided with stone. There's a half moment where I'm flying—my body airborne, weightless as a bird—before gravity drags me down and my body crashes into something solid. There's a sound like splitting stone echoing in my head before everything goes dark.

WHEN I WAKE UP, I'm lying in a crumpled heap on the ground. A gnarled tree looms over me like an ominous sentinel. Snowflakes swarm around me, each one reflecting sunlight back to me before they melt away in the frigid air.

What happened?

Suddenly, the memory of Juliet's panic floods my brain, and I try to sit up. My shoulder throbs with pain, and a spike of pain hits my skull so strong that I roll over and retch into the snow.

I'll take a few minutes to get my bearings before I get back on the snowmobile.

Wait, where is the snowmobile? I can barely turn my head back and forth, but I can't find it in my limited peripheral.

The faint sound of engines rumble in the distance as I lay helplessly in the snow. My head is spinning, like I just got off the world's tallest roller coaster. My eyesight is blurry, and the trees around me look more like melting blobs of green and brown than actual firs. I close my lids, trying to dull my senses. Maybe it'll dull the pain, too.

"Everett!" Dean shouts, his voice filled with worry. I can't tell if he's close or far away, and it hurts too much to open my eyes and tilt my head toward him.

"I'm fine," I mumble, wincing at the sound of his footsteps crunching in the snow, coming closer and closer. It's so fucking loud, like every step is right next to my ear.

Panic ricochets through the pack bonds, making my stomach turn.

“You fucking idiot,” he stammers next to me, and I finally open my eyes to stare at him. He kneels beside me, his jaw clenched in anger.

“I love you too,” I say, and his eyes flash with rage.

“Snowmobile’s trashed,” calls Huck from a few feet away. “Looks like he was thrown. There’s no prints in the snow from him crawling over there.”

“You could have died,” Dean hisses, but it’s a show. All I can feel from him is a bone-deep worry that triggers knots of guilt to form in my gut.

“We have to help Juliet,” I whisper, dizzy as I try to move. “We gotta get to her. Throw me on the back. You drive.”

“You’re no good to her dead,” he snaps and there it is. Now he’s angry.

He brushes hair away from my forehead, and I grunt when it sticks and pulls at the skin. “You’ve got a massive cut here. You’ll need stitches.” He brushes the rest of my hair from the wound, and then picks up a small handful of snow, using it to clean the cut. When he’s done, he presses my hat to my forehead.

“Can you hold that there while I take a look at the rest of you?” he asks. I raise my shoulder to take the hat, and growl at the lightning strike of pain that shoots through the joint.

“Your shoulder’s fucked, isn’t it?” Huck says, kneeling next to me and taking over to keep pressure on the wound in my forehead. “You’re going to be out of fun for a few days. Thank fuck for Alpha healing time, or I’d have to listen to you bitch for the next two months.”

His skin is pale as he glowers down at me with an added, “Jackass.”

Where Dean is all ire and worry, Huck is pure relief through the bonds. He takes off his other glove and places two fingers against my neck. “His heart rate is steady at least.”

“Good.” Dean palpates my shoulder, and I let out a stream of curses. “And this is dislocated. I can’t set it in place until we’re back at the cabin. You’re going to have an uncomfortable ride.”

“We aren’t going back to the cabin,” I growl. “We’re going —”

“*Back to the cabin,*” Huck presses. “What the fuck are you going to do, Ev, bludgeon them with your arm hanging out of its socket.”

“She’s already on her way back to us,” Dean explains and I snap my attention to him even with the world seeming to spin around them both.

He meets my stare, nodding. “If you’d just waited five goddamned minutes you’d have been there when Miles and I got her down to the garage and onto a snowmobile. She’s got her map and compass. We had her remove the LoJack and she’s ditched her phone so they can’t track her.”

A lump forms in my throat. “She’s okay? He didn’t touch her?”

His expression tightens. “He didn’t rape her and he didn’t bond her, but the fucker definitely touched our girl.”

Anger swells in my chest, but all it does is make me fucking dizzier as

Huck helps him lift me onto Dean’s snowmobile. Despite their wrathful moods, their movements are gentle, minimizing the pain, as best they can anyway. I vomit again from the agony in my skull before I’m finally secured on the vehicle.

“Hang on,” says Dean, and he starts the snowmobile. The sound is too much for the pounding in my head, and when he takes off, I must pass out against him because the next time my eyes open I’m laid out on the floor in front of the fireplace like a cadaver.

Dean kneels next to my injured shoulder. Huck is straddling my hips, a look of determination in his eye.

I know where this is going, and it’s going to suck.

“Whiskey first?” I plead, but Huck shakes his head, his sweat-dampened hair stuck to his forehead.

“You’ve got a concussion. It’s too risky to give you anything.”

“Fine.” At least I tried. “Do it then.”

Huck leans forward, holding me down with his own body weight, pinning down my good arm with his own.

Dean takes a deep breath, and yanks at my arm. The pain is unbearable, and I bellow out every curse word I can think of as my eyes sting. I writhe under Huck, and if he hadn’t been there, I probably would have wrestled myself free from Dean out of sheer instinct, making the injury even worse.

My shoulder is on fire, flames of pain licking up and down my entire arm. But then there’s a loud, nauseating snap, and the pain is reduced to a dull, burning ache.

“Fuck,” says Dean, rocking back on his heels. He tears at his hair with trembling fingers. “That was awful.”

“You don’t say,” I mutter in a deadpan voice. My throat is raw, and the words are clipped and hoarse.

“We’ll put you in a sling in a bit,” says Dean, sliding a pillow under my elbow to prop my arm. “Huck’s going to stitch your head. I’m done playing ER for the afternoon.”

Huck jabs a needle into my head, but the adrenaline from getting my shoulder shoved back in place makes me barely feel the pain. He stitches me back up with cold, efficient movements, and continues to glare at me long after he ties off the thread.

“What the fuck were you thinking?” Dean snaps. “Even if going after Juliet were the right thing to do—which in this case it isn’t, not yet—you left without us. We’re a pack, Everett. We’re family. We don’t go Lone Ranger and leave the others behind.”

Humiliation burns my cheeks. I hate that Dean and his hacker friends were the ones to save her when I couldn’t. But it’s not fair to be angry with them over my inability to do what

they can. And on top of it all, I made them waste time and energy on my injured ass.

I resist the urge to argue. To snap that I need to protect our girl, choosing my words more carefully instead. “I lost my head. I’m sorry.”

“You’ll be even sorrier when Juliet really does need your help and you’re too messed up to do a damned thing.”

“I couldn’t just sit here.” I swallow. “Even now. She can’t be left alone out there to find her way back to the cabin. She doesn’t know these mountains. The terrain. She could get lost. Be injured. We need to go—”

“You’re not going anywhere.”

“The hell I’m not. I’m not going to sit here on my ass while—”

“You can, and you will,” warns Dean. “I’m going to see if I can meet her part way. I gave her the location of the lake in the valley.”

“The fishing hut?”

He nods. “It should be easier for her to get there. All she has to do is follow along the dried-up creek bed, the mountains will funnel her in.”

It’s not a half bad plan, actually. Harder for our girl to get lost using that route.

“And once you’ve rested and had a chance to heal up, you and Huck will take the truck on the old dirt road through the pass and pick us up. We’ll ditch the Williamses snowmobile in the caves, and I’ll follow you back on mine to the garage.”

I nod, too tired to argue anymore.

“You’ll go now?” I press, gritting my teeth to stay awake.

When he doesn’t respond immediately, I reach out and grip the front of his shirt. “Dean?”

He covers my hand with his, squeezing it. “Yeah, Ev. I’ll go now.”

“And you’ll find her.”

He nods and I release him, trusting them to do what they need to without my help.

“We got this, Ev,” Huck adds, and I wince seeing him thread a hooked needle and hold it to the flames in the hearth to sterilize it.

Dean rises.

“Don’t ever do something like that to us again,” he says, shooting me a hard look. “Or I’ll kill your stubborn ass myself.”

THIRTY-EIGHT

—
JULIET

I KEEP my head low as the snowmobile shoots out of the garage, hunching over to make myself less visible. Dean promised me there wouldn't be any guards out this way, that Miles diverted them all to the main estate, but still I glance around in all directions, scanning for any sign of movement. All I see is a thick blanket of snow-covered trees surrounding us, so I take a deep breath before hitting the accelerator how Dean explained.

I'm instantly thrown back against my seat as I shoot off with lightning speed, snow billowing behind me like a white cloud in my wake. The wind whips through my hair and stings my skin, but everything else fades away into nothingness until all that's left is just me and this powerful machine flying through the wilderness.

I don't let myself accept that I've succeeded until I've been in the trees for a solid ten minutes, following a path in a southeasterly direction.

I might die in a blazing snowmobile fire, but I escaped.

My heart thuds in my chest as I grip the handlebars of the snowmobile and gun the engine. The rumble of the motor is like thunder, and I feel it reverberating through my body as I speed away. The trees zip past me in a blur, blending until they become one solid wall of white on either side.

I concentrate on keeping myself focused, pushing aside any doubts or fears that arise. My gaze darts around continuously, searching for the slightest sign of movement or

guards. Every second feels like an eternity, I spot nothing but towering evergreens, their branches laden with snow and glittering in the dying sunlight.

The air is icy cold against my skin as I crest over hills and navigate tight curves; adrenaline coursing through my veins as I push forward faster and faster. Getting more confident in my ability with the machine the longer I drive.

I'm already soaked through from sweat despite the frigid temperature, yet this only fuels my determination to get away safely. Time passes quickly, and before long, all my worries are forgotten; replaced by a sense of exhilaration that only comes with freedom.

I'm going home. I'm going home to my boys.

The snowmobile is a far cry from anything I'm used to, though I did drive an ATV once while camping with my parents. It vibrates under me, jolting me around as it careens over the frozen landscape.

It takes nearly an hour for me to get comfortable, but I've got hours ahead of me before I get to the rendezvous point. Every turn of the handlebars takes me deeper into the wilderness and every couple miles I stop to check the map against the compass until I think I've found the gap between two mountains that Dean described to me. It stretches out into the rapidly darkening night like a sparkling white road. Like Dorothy's yellow bricks, leading her all the way home.

I press on, navigating with maybe not confidence, but at least hope. I'm practically flying at this point, the wind stinging my cheeks and making my eyes water.

The snowmobile's tires crunch over deep pockets of powder as I keep my speed up. The path ahead of me is wide open, but I'm still mindful of the dips and bumps that can send me flying if I don't take them slowly. No sense crashing when I'm this close to the finish line.

The sun has just fully set when the channel finally opens up ahead.

I spot a distant speck of light in the growing dark. The fishing hut Dean promised he'd be waiting for me at.

I've made it.

The door of the hut crashes open, and Dean runs out.

I pull right up to the nondescript building and cut the engine, nearly tripping as I hop off the vehicle in my excitement.

"Juliet!" he shouts, picking me up and spinning me. "You did it! I knew you would, I knew it! That's my girl!"

He buries his face in my neck as we sway, his breath on my skin warm, like a gentle caress. Every inch of me is alive with electricity, and his scent is damn near overwhelming. I can't get enough of it, burying my face in his neck as tears of relief sting my eyes.

His hands are rough but gentle, sending chills and sparks through me as his fingers slide up my arms. My lips find his, and everything else melts away.

The cold air around us evaporates as the kiss intensifies, and I feel a flush of heat.

Dean's fingers trace the curves of my body, and I shiver. Despite the bone deep exhaustion, despite the cold, despite everything, I can't think of anything I need more right now than to feel him touch me.

He pulls away from me, panting.

"Not now," he says, adjusting himself without embarrassment before reaching over to cup my cold cheeks in his hands. "Take a breather, Sunshine. You need to rest."

I don't want a breather. I want him.

But I obey, following him inside, where he has hot soup cooking on the stove.

The space is small and warm from the woodstove, filled with the orange glow of flames from the little smoked glass window in the stove. There's a lifted bunk fitted with a thin

mattress and a couple rough-looking blankets. A tiny two-man table with only one chair.

Dean indicates the bed, where a change of clothes sits. Thick sweats that smell of Huck and a massive sweater that looks like it's Everett's.

“Change into something warm and dry while I grab you some food.”

He dishes me out a bowl of soup as I change out of my wet clothes. No sense getting pneumonia, although if I have my way, I'll be climbing out of these clothes again in a few minutes.

“Where are the others?” I ask, sipping the soup and savoring the taste as it warms my body. I instantly know he brought it from home. That Huck cooked it.

“They'll be here soon. They're in the truck, and that's always slower.”

“Good. Then we have time.”

“We have time?” He squints at me. “Time for what?”

I stand up, taking his empty bowl to put it on a small table next to him as I slide onto his lap.

“Juliet—”

“Stop talking.”

I shut him up with a kiss and he groans into my mouth, wrapping possessive arms around me, holding me tight against him. “As you wish.”

THIRTY-NINE

“GET ON THE BED,” I order, seizing the bottom of my shirt, nearly tearing it off me in my need to get my hands on my Omega.

A glorified cot might not be the most romantic setting for my first true time with my future bonded, but really, I don't think either of us cares at this point.

She trips in her haste to get out of Huck's sweats, and I see the glisten of slick already dripping down her thighs, making me rock fucking hard.

Her skin is flushed and I watch as she sucks in a breath through her teeth, trembling lightly.

Her floral rose scent fills the tiny hut, thick and beautiful.

She can't be in heat again already, can she?

But I remember learning about spontaneous heats and as I watch her position herself on the thin mattress, I wonder.

I stop wondering when my core tightens with the need to get inside my Omega.

She may not be in a full heat again, but I hope she is soon. Then we can knot her. Bond with her, make her ours for good.

She makes a crooning, whining sound, reaching for my stiff cock, but I push her hand away. “Lie on your side,” I command, and she does, bracing her head against the crook of her arm. I crawl beside her, hooking myself around her body, big spoon-style. I thrust my cock a little between her thighs, gritting my teeth as I draw my swollen head through her slick.

“Dean, I need you,” she pants, wriggling that tight ass against me, trying to take me inside.

“I’ll take care of you, Sunshine,” I promise, gripping her waist before I reach around to her belly, tracing soft circles into the tender skin there, moving lower and lower until my fingers reach her swollen clit. I barely brush it with my index finger, but she bucks against me as if I’m already inside her.

“That’s it, Sunshine,” I soothe. “Fuck my fingers.”

She whimpers and parts her legs so I can reach between them to the treasure I’m seeking.

I run my fingers over her slit, gathering up her moisture and rubbing it into her clit like its massage oil. I bite my lip so hard that it almost breaks the skin, wanting to stop these games and just plunge inside her heat, but I’m going to take my time. I’m going to tease her until she’s crazy with wanting my knot.

I nip at her neck, licking and sucking the skin. Marking where my bite will eventually go. As I do, I plunge one finger, and then two, inside her wet warmth. She cries out, and I cup her mound, grinding the heel of my hand into her clit while I work my fingers in and out of her entrance. She takes my wrist in her small hands and guides my movements, using me as a tool to fuck herself. And *goddamn* if that isn’t the hottest thing I’ve ever experienced.

“Please, Dean,” she begs.

I sit up, flipping her flat on her back to climb down between her thighs, eager for my dessert. She moans at just the feel of my breath against her.

“So sensitive,” I coo, running kisses up along the inside of her thigh. “Look at you shiver for me.” I bite the softer flesh near the top of her thigh, and she jumps before squeezing my head between her thighs as I rub my scent all over her, marking my territory.

“I need you,” she begs.

She starts to sit up, but I place a hand on her sternum, guiding her back down on her back. I place my mouth over her

swollen bud and give the gentlest kiss. She whines, thrusting into my mouth, spreading her slick on my lips and chin as I press my tongue flat against her clit.

She wails as I run my tongue up and down her slit, digging my fingers into her hips.

My cock is hard as iron, aching, and I rub against her calf to ease my own need.

“Spread your legs, Sunshine,” I say, pushing them apart. “I want to see that perfect pussy of yours.”

She obeys beautifully, letting me see her slickened pink lips, her tight core. Her thighs are shaking, she needs to come so badly. I thrust my fingers in again, fucking her from between her legs, and lean forward to suck on her clit again. Giving her everything this time.

“Dean!” she shouts, and then she’s coming, clutching my hair as she rides my tongue and hands. I groan at the taste while I rub soothing caresses down her thighs as she comes down from the crest. When she can catch her breath again, I tap her slit gently, making her curl in with a gasping sigh.

“On your hands and knees,” I order.

She grins, a drunken look in her eyes, and rolls over onto her stomach. She braces on her hands and knees, peachy ass in the air. I lean in and bite the tender flesh, and she shrieks.

I laugh as I grab her hips again and guide myself inside, seating myself in her tightness. I moan, my eyes rolling back into my head. I’m so fucking deep in her, ready to spend any second.

“What do you want, Juliet?” I ask, running my hand down her sweat-dampened spine. “Slow? Hard?”

She turns to me with a mischievous smirk. “I want it all.”

So, I fuck her, pulling out and thrusting in with increasing speed. My thighs slap her ass while other wet, obscene noises fill the hut. I’m craving her mouth, her kisses, but there’s no way I can stop long enough to reach for her.

My Omega lets out a whimper and I watch her reach between her legs, balancing on one arm as she strokes herself while I pump into her from behind. The brush of her fingers against me as I thrust, knowing what she's doing, it's almost too much and I moan, letting her hear my pleasure as my knot begins to swell.

“Dean—*oh god*—I'm going to come. I'm going to come,” she chants, pushing back with her hips on my cock, tensing her muscles around my length. I growl, the sound echoing through my chest. Has anything ever felt this good in my entire life?

“Oh, fuck,” she wails, rubbing her clit furiously. She comes with a broken cry, her body shaking, inner walls milking me to my own release.

I can't wait anymore.

“Hold onto something, Sunshine.”

She drops her hand back to the mattress, fisting her hands in the blanket beneath us as I grip the apex of her thighs and press into her, filling her with my knot, feeling her take me in, pressing on all the right places to make me come undone.

I groan as I pour into her, curses forced through clenched teeth as I ride out the longest orgasm I've ever had in my life.

My knot swells to fullness even as I spill inside of her, stretching her around me, and she quivers as it hits the tender nerves inside, her thighs pressing tight.

I twitch once, twice, and then the pressure is too much. I'm coming again as my knot swells to its largest. Dark spots dance in my vision and as I fall to one side, I take her with me, holding her against me as I fight to retain consciousness.

“*Mine*,” I murmur, breathless, kissing her neck, her shoulders, anywhere I can reach. Anywhere I can worship.

“Yours,” she whispers back, “I'll never leave you again.”

“I don't think I'll let you,” I say, and she lets out the lightest purr that makes my own chest respond with a deep purr of its own.

“And neither will we,” a voice says from the front door.

I startle, but I can't move because we're still locked together by my knot. I can't even turn my head to see who is there, although from the emotions coming through the bond, I have a strong suspicion.

"Huck?" I call out. "Everett?"

"It's us," Huck replies before coming into my peripheral vision. He leans down and kisses Juliet, long and deep. When he pulls back, he's smiling, but his eyes are glittering with emotion. "Welcome back, baby girl."

Juliet mumbles something unintelligible, wriggling against my knot until I gasp.

"None of that," I say. "We've got visitors." She reaches back and gives my thigh a playful smack.

Everett comes over next, stripping his coat off and offering it to Juliet. "Jesus, Dean, it's freezing in here. She'll catch her death of cold."

"Mm mm," she says, reaching up for him and pulling him down for a kiss. "It's fine in here. Not too hot. Not too cold. Just right."

He looks around the room skeptically. "Are you sure?" he finally asks, as if expecting a different answer this time.

"It's perfect," she says as she beams up at him. I couldn't agree with her more.

My knot relaxes enough that I can work it out of her, wincing at the sensation of removing it a little too soon.

Down, boy. You'll get plenty of chances to knot her again. She's with us forever now.

Juliet sighs forlornly at the loss of it, but climbs out of the bed, and I feel a pulse of that arrogant Alpha satisfaction as my release drips down her thigh. She drags a blanket around her naked body, looking up at Everett like he alone holds the key to her happiness.

She accepts a warm hug from Huck before he backs down, plopping himself in the little chair by the table as Everett and Juliet stand off.

A pang of jealousy hits me in the chest, but I think my way through it.

Juliet knows she hurt Everett by leaving. By not telling him her plan. That she intended to come back. He has a right to be upset. But so does she for the way he reacted. Just wait 'til she sees the damage back at the cabin. The extent of the injuries he's hiding under his hat and jacket.

A moment of silence passes between them. She reaches for Everett, but he grabs her by the arm, dragging her into his arms one handed as he cuddles her to his chest.

She wraps her arms around his neck and lets out a little snuffle. "I'm sorry."

She hasn't noticed the armless sleeve on his left side, but he doesn't seem to need it anyway, lifting her easily with the one arm, holding her tight.

"Ready to go home, Goldie?" he murmurs, kissing her blonde hair. She looks up at him with the widest smile. Our beautiful Omega.

"I'm ready," she says. "Take me home."

FORTY

GOLDIE IS IN MY ARMS, where she belongs. Safe and sound.

The warmth of her body radiates against me, and I can feel the gentle rise and fall of her chest with each sleeping breath she takes in front of the fire back at the cabin.

The sensation is trance-like, almost surreal, as if we're in a dream world where nothing else matters. I look down at her face and my heart swells with affection.

Her long eyelashes flutter ever so slightly as her eyes shift in her sleep, and her lips curve into a faint smile.

My shoulder aches like hell, but it's worth it to have her in my arms.

I'm never letting her go again.

I want to enjoy this moment while we can.

The Williamses will have noticed Juliet's gone by now, and if they have half a brain between them they'll know where she's gone. We'll need to start making moves of our own to assure her safety and ours. To make it so they can't ever take her from us again.

They'll answer for what happened to Taylor.

And we'll use the rest of the evidence against them to buy Juliet's freedom until we can find a way to safely take them down for good.

“Everett?” my Omega murmurs, her lips moving softly as she wakes, adjusting her body on my lap, making the couch beneath us creak.

“Yeah, Goldie?” I ask, gazing down at her and wondering how the hell I’d ever tried to resist that face. That scent. The beauty of her soul.

“What’s wrong with your shoulder?” she asks, her face twisting before her eyes bug open wider, noticing my forehead. “And your forehead?”

Shit.

“Well...” I hesitate, and she lifts her head, sending a raised eyebrow my way.

She presses the sweetest kiss to my lips, rendering me speechless and using the opportunity of my distraction to disentangle herself from my arms.

Reluctantly, I let go of her, and she threads her fingers in mine. Her hand is so delicate and soft, I brush my thumb over her knuckles repeatedly, just needing to feel her.

“What did you do?” she asks again, more firmly this time.

“I may have gone running after you and wrecked the snowmobile,” I admit, rubbing at the injured shoulder.

She stares at me for a long moment. “Not the blue one?”

“Yes, the blue one.”

“Damn,” she says, eyes twinkling. “That was my favorite.”

I tickle her with my uninjured arm. “You’re more worried about the snowmobile than me?”

“You’ll heal. The snowmobile won’t.”

Her laughter subsides, and she cups my cheek gently, making a purr start in my chest and my eyes close to her touch.

“I’m so glad you’re all right,” she whispers. “And thank you for caring for me enough to do something so completely idiotic.”

“Caring?” I huff in exasperation. “I don’t care for you, Goldie. I fucking love you. You’re stuck so deep in here,” I press a palm to my chest. “That I don’t think I’ll ever function right without you again. When I thought I lost you...”

I shake my head, jaw clenching, not even wanting to remember what it was like.

“It’s you and me from now on, Goldie. You and me, and those two idiots outside.”

“What two idiots?” asks Huck as he throws open the front door. “The only idiot I know in this house is the one who got himself thrown off a snowmobile while on a murderous crusade. A *pointless* murderous crusade.”

I flip both Huck and Dean off, and haul Juliet back to me, nuzzling into her neck.

“Fine, I’m an idiot too,” I murmur against her warm skin. “Can you live with three idiots, Goldie? Can you love us, too?”

She throws her arms around me, touching her nose to mine with a glassy sheen in her eyes. “I already love you. All of you. So much.”

FORTY-ONE

A WEEK LATER, Dean and I sit in the kitchen, huddled over his laptop.

I can hardly believe my eyes as we scroll through the photos Juliet sent him from the Williams pack. There's evidence of corruption, betrayal, and underhanded dealings everywhere we look. I'm shocked by how far and wide this web of lies has spread throughout Alaska—it seems like every other pack in the area has been caught up in the Williamses' scheme.

All this, and much more. So much worse.

My shock and disgust mount with each new photo, and Dean is just as shaken. He runs his hand through his hair in frustration.

We'd only needed to send him copies of one of the files we have to buy Juliet's freedom. Victor Williams dropped her like a hot coal, terrified his misplaced claim on her would see his empire burned to the ground.

He tried threats with us, but Dean had safeguards in place for that. Well, Dean and his old pal Miles. If anything happens to any of us or our home, every file we have on the Williams will be made public. Miles will trigger the release. And if anything were to happen to him as well, everything will go live all on its own with no one there to stop the weekly scheduled send-outs.

I pity anyone to ever cross Miles, or my Dean.

They could bury you with a few strokes of their keypads.

“I had no idea it was this bad,” Dean says, highlighting more usable sections that we missed in the first couple rounds of checking out the intel.

“It’s unbelievable,” I murmur to Dean, shaking my head as we continue scrolling through the photos Juliet sent. “I mean, look at this document. It shows there was a secret agreement made between the Williams and the Foucaults that completely contradicts what’s been portrayed in the media. They’ve bought their silence on that spill back in August.”

Dean nods grimly.

I rub my forehead in disbelief. “And then there’s this one,” I say, pointing out another contract between the two Alphas that would allow them to keep the profits from illegal activities within their packs. No reporting, no evidence, other than what is in these photos.

“This is way beyond anything I expected.” I sigh, feeling overwhelmed by all the evidence we’ve come across.

My mind races with questions. Who else was involved? How long have these schemes been going on? Could other packs be tangled up in similar webs of deceit? It makes me sick to think about it, but at the same time, we’ve got a responsibility to do something with this information. Juliet risked her life to get it, after all.

The implications are staggering. If these photographs were to get out to the public, there would be huge amounts of backlash against them. Legal inquests.

It looks like they’ve been manipulating people for years without anyone ever catching wind of it. It makes me nauseous to think about all the innocent lives affected by their actions.

Not to mention, the lives that appear to have been taken along the way. The evidence on that is spotty at best. But there’s enough documentation here to insinuate certain actions may have been taken to ‘remove’ certain people from the equation. People we know from local obituaries citing heart attacks and freak accidents.

I never imagined any pack could stoop this low, not until Taylor died. But now I'm staring at undeniable proof right in front of me, and it leaves me feeling hollow inside. It's difficult to come to terms with the fact that something so dark could exist undetected for so long, but apparently, anything is possible when the rich and powerful decide they can play God with everyone else's lives.

Then we flip to a file about an Alpha named Bryant and the terrible cover-ups regarding the women he raped. Bile rises in the back of my throat. This man would have bonded with Juliet if things had been different.

"You think they'll try to come for us?"

A muscle in Dean's temple flexes with his jaw. "I want to say no, but they could. I think we should release some of this to the public. Do it covertly. No paper trail leading back to us. That way, the Williams will be too busy putting out fires to worry about us."

"Fuck." I rake my hands through my hair. "We'll have to be careful for a while."

Because of Juliet, we will finally be able to take the Williams pack down and venerate our fallen pack member. We can prove his death wasn't his fault. It makes all the hard work worth it.

Just when I'm ready to write down ideas to keep the cabin safe until the Williams are behind bars where they belong, a moan comes from the other room.

Dean drops his pen and when he lifts his head his pupils are dilated.

My nostrils flare. "You smell that?"

Juliet's been coming into another heat the last day or so. She left her suppressants at the Williamses, and starting them and stopping them so suddenly must've triggered another heat. That or her body just knows she's home. She's safe. And it's time to bond.

We all decided she should let it come instead of rushing to find more suppressants. Each of us overeager to bond her.

“Already?” Dean asks and I watch his throat bob as he swallows and casts his gaze in the direction of the living room, just out of sight around the edge of the wall.

I take another deep lungful of Juliet scented air and shudder, my cock thickening in my pants. “Oh yeah.”

He takes off at a sprint, almost knocking the stool over. Horny bastard. But then again, adjusting my cock in my pants as I follow him, who am I to talk?

We enter the living room, practically crashing into the coatrack only to find—as I predicted—Juliet naked and writhing on the sofa, and Everett smack between her legs, feasting on our Omega.

“Nice,” I breathe.

My cock stiffens immediately at the sound of Juliet’s little whimpers. Her head is thrown back in ecstasy, sweat beading on her forehead. She lets out a little “Ah... ah... ahh...” noise that makes my pants tighter, and then she’s coming against Everett’s mouth, her body thrashing as she chases her pleasure.

Fuck, that’s hot.

Her tiny fist squeezes into one of the pillows of her makeshift nest.

She’s been gathering things for days, piling them all into the living room. There are clothes and pillows and blankets and fucking bear pelts everywhere. Even more than I saw in here a few hours ago.

We thought she’d nest in the spare room, but she said this room felt right and who the fuck are we to argue?

She comes down from the high slowly, her eyes fluttering open. Her mouth is swollen and pink from biting her lip. She gazes up at Dean and I with a drunken giggle.

“It’s not me,” she mumbles in a giddy daze. “It’s Everett. I swear. He started it.”

Everett grunts but doesn’t pull away from her core.

“He could go pro with this skill,” she says with a shiver as he continues to lap at her.

That I can agree with. He once sucked my cock so well that I swear he sucked part of my soul out, too.

I smile at her.

She smiles back, cheeks flushed a pretty pink.

My cock aches with the need to rut into her, to knot her. To breed her.

That damn scent of hers isn't helping, either. It blooms and clouds around us, thick and tantalizing.

“Want me to take over?” I ask as Everett sits back, still gazing between her legs like he's looking at the holy grail.

My baby girl sits up, tucking her legs underneath her. She smooths down her tangled hair, and then crooks her finger at me. “Come here, Huck.”

I come toward her, and the way she sits on the couch has her face directly in front of my groin. She gives me a wicked grin.

“God, yes,” I breathe as she unzips my pants, and tugs them down, along with my boxers. Dean sits down next to her, undoing his own fly to take out his cock, stroking it while he enjoys the show. Waiting for his turn.

The anticipation kills me. Not just of feeling her mouth on me. Of feeling her sweet pussy clench around my knot, but this is *it*. We've all talked about it. Agreed.

Tonight, when I knot her, I'll bond her, too. We all will.

Juliet blows a stream of air on my cock, and I shiver, even though I'm burning up with desire. She dips the tip of her tongue in my slit before swirling around my swollen head.

“Baby girl, that's perfect,” I say, throwing my head back. She snakes her hands around my thighs, and pulls me closer, taking me in her warm mouth inch by inch.

“Move your hips,” she murmurs. “Use me, Huck.”

I grin down at her, and I thrust hard between her lips. She moans, and the vibrations around my sensitive flesh nearly have me coming right then and there. A jolt of pleasure shoots through my body at the slide of her tongue against my length.

And I use her. I use her exactly like she wants, and she fucking loves it. And I find I love it, too, even though I'm usually on the receiving end in this scenario.

A sense of power floods me and I grip her hair in my fist, pumping between her perfect lips.

She moans and hums around my girth, her hand trailing down between her legs to touch herself.

The slick sounds of Dean pumping his own cock next to us add to the fever inside me, and within minutes, my knot is already swelling big and tight and I growl at the primal need to knot my Omega.

I pull out from her lips and she gasps down a breath.

“Was that what you wanted, baby girl?” I murmur, gripping my knot with a tremor rolling down to my toes.

“Yes,” she says, her fingers rubbing lazily at her core. “And now I want more.”

FORTY-TWO

—
JULIET

“MORE?” Huck says, his voice smooth and playful. “More is something we can definitely do.”

My last heat was a terrifying thing, the need pulling at me, and I felt like I was all alone even though I was surrounded by the Cooper pack.

This time, the need ripples through me like a gentle wave, electrifying my nerves one by one. My skin heats, but it doesn't burn. My core clenches and it aches, but it aches so good, knowing it's about to be given exactly what it needs.

“Fuck,” I bite out as Huck throws me a little roughly back onto the makeshift bed of pelts and pillows I've built on the floor in front of the sofa where there used to be a coffee table.

He's power drunk and by the size of the pupils in his eyes, I know he's edging into rut territory. I've never seen him so gone to his primal side and it turns me on so much I feel a gush of slick flood my core.

“Simmer down, boy,” I joke in a breathy voice as a cramp twists in my stomach and my pussy throbs.

He gives me an apologetic smile. “Sorry, baby girl.”

“It's fine. The nest is soft. I can't wait to feel you all in here with me.”

And inside me. Definitely inside me.

Thank fuck I'm already naked, thanks to Everett's attention. The only problem is the rest of them.

“Chop chop!” I clap my hands. “I need to see some naked Alphas. Now!”

Instantly, they all scramble to take off their clothes while I lie back and enjoy the view. But it isn't fast enough, and my body aches. It's not as pleasant as it was just a few minutes ago.

I need to be knotted, *now*.

“Huck,” I beg, since he's the first to be completely naked, and he's still so hard, his cock dripping. All for me. “I need you. Please. Hurry.”

He climbs over me with hooded eyes, his lips parted in desire. His hand dips between my legs, swirling in my slick before he cups my mound.

He rubs against it with the heel of his palm, making tight little circles until I'm reaching for something to hold onto as my orgasm rushes at me full tilt.

Dean's arms wrap around me from behind and I tangle my fingers with his as he holds me in place while Huck makes me come on his hand.

He groans as he lifts his fingers to his lips and sucks them off, one by one while I shake and shudder against Dean and the alpha scented items cushioning my body.

“Delicious,” he growls, and I reach for his arm, tugging him close to me. I'm whimpering, panting, and begging like a wild animal.

“I'm ready for you, baby girl,” Huck says. “I'm ready.” His cock is long, hard, and unyielding against my thigh. Knot bulging.

I reach for it, covering it in my slick, pumping it in my fist until he's guiding it toward my slick core. I open my legs wide for him.

“Knot me, Huck.”

One punch of his hips, and he's inside me, and I scream.

His groan is guttural, primal.

He braces himself on one arm while his other hand circles my nipple, pinching and twisting until it rides that sweet line between pleasure and pain.

I clutch at his arms and the ridges of muscle on his biceps, writhing against him as he fucks me, pours into me, legs shaking.

“I’m yours now,” he pants, gliding his teeth along my shoulder, causing me to suck in air. His body tightens as he reaches the spot he wants and I twist my head away, baring myself to him, body tingling in anticipation.

He curls a hand around the back of my neck, holding me there gently as he lets out a possessive low growl and bites down on the sensitive skin at the base of my neck. I gasp, but where there should be pain and agony, there is only bliss, skyrocketing me into an orbit of pleasure. I fall apart as his knot seems to swell to greater heights, locking us together, pressing on the most sensitive of nerves inside me.

And then, he’s right there.

Not with me, but inside me. Inside my chest, my heart.

It’s like touching starlight and I whimper as a single tear tracks down the side of my face.

“Is that the bond?” I gasp out.

Huck drags the back of his hand across his mouth, staring down at the bonding mark with raw emotion on his face, his hunter green eyes damp.

“That’s the bond,” he says, dipping to press a kiss to my forehead. “You and me until the end, baby girl.”

It’s beautiful. It’s everything I’ve ever wanted.

“I love you,” I whisper, holding him tight against me, chest to chest.

“And I love you.” We hold each other, soft and sweet. The others give us our space, going for water and more blankets and clean clothes for me to use once Huck’s knot is deflated enough to slip out.

It's at least twenty minutes until he's able to pull it out, and I think I doze off in his arms for a few minutes because I groggily wake when he pulls free of my warmth and replaces himself with a warm wet towel to clean me.

The soft brushes of the warm cloth stir my need again and I clamp down my jaw against a moan, twisting into my nest of stolen clothing. Pressing my face into a sweater that is all Dean.

My need instantly ramps up again, a dull cramp making me pull my legs in and double over as heat races up my back to take up residence in my cheeks.

I open my eyes in search of an Alpha to sate me. To bond me and join the place in my heart where I can feel Huck.

But when I find Dean, I see he's already a little busy.

Everett lays flat on his back, eyes rolling into his head as Dean sucks on his cock, inch by delicious inch. He bobs his head over and over, twisting his hand around the base, getting Everett wet and sloppy. Everett grabs Dean's hair, pulling him down onto him, holding his face flush with his pelvis and not releasing him until Dean's eyes water.

Dean pulls off and gasps for air before diving right back in, swallowing Everett to the hilt until he can't anymore because Everett's knot is building fast, making it impossible for Dean to push to his base, but it doesn't stop him from trying and I watch as Dean licks around Everett's knot, making my grumpy alpha shiver with pleasure.

My mouth waters as I watch, rapt and silent, like if I make so much as a tiny sound it could break the promise of this moment. I've never seen Everett be intimate with Huck and Dean and it's...it's fucking beautiful. And it feels right.

"Shit, I'm coming," Everett yells before he stiffens, pumping his hips into Dean's mouth. Dean takes it, sucking greedily, gripping Ev's knot as he pours down Dean's throat, though some of Everett's cum spills from the side of his mouth, dripping down his chin.

His Adam's apple bobs as he swallows, looking up at Everett with lust-filled eyes. He swipes the drip of cum from his chin and *fuck*, I need him. I need him now.

I whimper and reach for Dean, kissing him, tasting Everett's release on his tongue. He gasps in surprise before bending to my desire, bringing a hand up to cup the side of my face, hooking it around the back of my neck to deepen the kiss and draw a moan from my chest.

I try to pull him on top of me, but he shakes his head with an evil smile, breaking our kiss.

"None of that," he says. "I saw you ride that snowmobile the other day. Let's just say I was a little jealous."

I grin at him as he lays down in my nest, his cock saluting the ceiling and making my mouth water. He reaches out for me. "Ride me, Sunshine."

I bite my lip, blushing as I crawl over him. I straddle him, and he grips the base of his cock as I slide down until I'm fully seated and gloriously full. He lets out a string of curses and drives his hips up into me, grabbing me by my hips to guide me into movement, showing me how.

He's been such a good instructor.

"Just like that," he instructs with a grunt. "Roll those beautiful hips. Take what you need."

His grip on my hips tightens. "Fuck, you feel amazing."

I do as he said. With his hands to guide me, I roll my hips, moving him inside me, rubbing myself on his base. It feels... incredible.

A stuttering breath escapes my lips as I claw at his chest, riding him, my movements turning chaotic and messy, but in the best way.

"That's it," he croons, pulling me back and forth over him, making each stroke of my hips stronger, harder, faster. "Such a good girl."

I bounce on his dick, adjusting until every roll of my hips makes him hit that magical spot inside me.

“Your cock feels so good inside me, Dean,” I grit out, my breaths coming faster now as I chase my release with frantic moans. My vision whites out, and I throw my head back with a scream. I move faster and faster until I’m careening over the edge. With a hoarse cry, Dean curses and I feel his knot start to swell inside of me.

“Oh fuck, Sunshine, don’t stop. *Don’t stop.*”

It’s hard and my body shakes, but I keep rocking my hips over him as his knot swells into me, pressing so perfectly on that spot, just *there*.

“It’s...it’s happening again,” my voice comes out a high-pitched cry as Dean’s knot swells to its fullest and his grip on my hips turns bruising.

“Come for me again, Sunshine. Come on.”

And I do. I bend against him, dark spots in my vision as he grips me tight around my middle, coming inside me.

Roughly, quickly, he pushes my hair away from my neck and I don’t have time to prepare myself before his teeth tear into my neck just under Huck’s bite. His bond hits me like a lightning bolt, and I gasp at the intensity of the emotions pouring out of him. So much love. So much fucking love from this man.

His flame joins Huck’s in my center and I snuffle against Dean’s shoulder, unable to contain the swell of emotion rumbling through me. He begins to purr and distantly, I hear him making comforting shushing noises in my ear as he brushes his hand gently over the back of my head, holding me to him.

“Love you, Sunshine.”

I hold him tighter. “Love you, Dean.”

I open my eyes to find Everett on the couch with Huck and flush knowing they watched us, but also so glad they were there to witness this. It should be something we all experience together.

My lips pull in a tired smile and Everett's answering grin is so full of warmth I want to cry again. He's happy. He may not have bonded me yet, but I can feel it. I can see it. And it makes me so damn happy, too.

Huck's arm is around him and Everett looks so at home with his touch. More comfortable than I've ever seen him. His gaze lifts for only a moment to the mantle above the fireplace and I know he's looking at the photo of Taylor there, set into a new frame.

He sighs contentedly and when his eyes meet mine again, he leans over his bent knees to reach for me, brushing the hair from my face as Dean's breaths even out beneath me. "My Goldilocks...I'm so glad I found you," he says softly and something in my belly twists into a beautiful ache that races all the way to my toes.

I kiss his hand and a lopsided grin pulls at one corner of his lips.

"Me too."

I wouldn't trade my three growly bears for anything else in the world.

"Sleep now, Goldie. I'll need you good and rested for when it's my turn."

I shiver at the promise in his words, sinking onto Dean as Everett drags a blanket over us both, tucking us in.

The next time I open my eyes, the darkness out the windows has brightened with the pinkish light of early dawn.

Dean is still curled up with me, big spoon style and I feel a pull on my neck. I reach up, finding a bandage where the bonding marks of Huck and Dean slowly heal. I smile to myself in the quiet of early morning, pressing my hand to my chest, where I can still feel them, proving this is all so very real. And not just the best dream I've ever had.

A cramp twists uneasily in my stomach and I hold in a groan of discomfort, not wanting to wake Dean as heat licks up my spine.

Even after all of that last night, somehow, I've still not sated it. It's been so long since I've had a fully unsuppressed heat I've forgotten what it's like. How it can last for *days*. I just thought...with all these alphas taking care of me I'd be through it faster.

Careful not to jostle Dean, I push up from the mound of comfort items that makes up my nest in front of the fireplace. The blanket falls from my shoulders as I stare into the burning embers.

“Morning.”

I gasp, turning to find Everett standing behind the sofa, his big meaty hands gripping the back of it as his honey brown eyes trail down my bare back, setting my skin on fire.

Huck dozes softly on the couch, his mouth open just a little, but he closes it as he wakes, blinking until he sees me and smiles.

“Morning, baby girl. How are you feeling?”

“No,” Dean groans, pulling the blanket up over his head. “Not morning. Not even close.”

I laugh and Huck slides off the sofa, stretching before going to the kitchen. “I'll make some coffee.”

“You're my hero,” Dean calls after him groggily, his voice muffle beneath the covers.

But I can't take my eyes off Everett. His jaw flexes as he watches me like a hunter might its prey.

My lips part as I squeeze my legs together, feeling warm slick already forming between them, leaking down my thighs. The next cramp of need pushes me to action.

I kick off the blanket and climb on my hands and knees toward Everett. Presenting myself to my Alpha, the way Omegas have since the beginning of time. Presenting myself to one of the three men I love more than anything in this world.

He smiles down at me, bending to trace his fingers down from my temple to my chin. “So beautiful,” he says. “Turn

around for me, Goldie.”

I do as he bids, turning so my naked behind is facing him.

I shiver as his fingers trace my ass, my hips, and the lines of my slick covered thighs.

His pants hit the floor behind me, and my skin rises with goosebumps.

“Ass up, just like that.”

I arch for him, letting out a moan of surprise when he kneels behind me and takes me into his mouth, lapping slick from my sensitive clit.

He fists a hand in my ass cheek, kneading the skin and muscle there as he eats me alive.

“Fuck, Goldie, you taste like heaven.”

I rub against his mouth, my hands turning to claws against the hardwood as he brings me closer to the release, alternating between sucking on me and lapping strongly at just the right spot, in just the right rhythm.

“Oh, Everett,” I pant and his grip on my ass tightens as he feasts on me, savaging my pussy with his tongue until I gush into his mouth and he growls possessively, drinking me up as I scream my release.

“I’ve been waiting my whole life for you,” he says in a husky tone and I feel the press of his cock against my opening and keen in anticipation, bending my chest to the floor, begging him without words to take my body. Take all of me.

Everett thrusts inside with a gravelly shout, holding at the hilt for a moment until I’ve adjusted to his massive size. Only then does he begin to move, driving into me with almost reckless abandon, each pump strong, filling me deeper and deeper until he bottoms out with a bellow, hitting something inside me that almost hurts, but scratches an itch I didn’t even know I had. It erases the ache of my heat in my core, replacing it with a new kind. A sweet kind that hurts *so good*.

“I’ve never felt anything this *fucking good*,” he growls, panting as he fucks me. “I love you, Goldie. Have since that

first night. Always will.”

He leans back on his heels and guides me until I’m sitting on his cock, my spine against his chest. His hand comes around my throat, holding me still, applying only the slightest pressure that has me groaning and gasping for more.

He fucks up into me, faster and faster, the movements more and more jagged until I feel the swell of his knot and he holds me up by my hips, fucking into me just to the top crest of it until it’s good and fully inflated.

He growls, one hand on my waist, the other tightening around my throat as he draws me down one last time, using all his muscle strength to force his knot into my slick core.

Everett comes with a shout and I come with him, the exquisite pressure of his knot pushing me over the edge until I’m falling, spiraling, crying out his name.

My alpha bites into my flesh on the opposite side from Huck’s and Dean’s marks, and I explode into a million bits of agonizing pleasure, each shock twisting and wringing my body until I’m completely satiated. I wriggle against him, reveling in his gasps and groans as the bond takes hold and he swells to his fullest, spilling his release into my core.

I fall against his warm chest, legs wobbly and arms weak as Everett tucks me against him, his knot firmly in place inside me. He leans against the back of the couch, both of us panting as the bond burns brightly between us. He presses soft kisses against my neck, my shoulders, my spine.

“Bring her to the nest,” I hear Huck murmur and my head spins as Everett lifts me with him when he stands, our bodies locked together. And then he’s kneeling and I feel the soft pillows and clothing on my nest and sigh happily, smelling chocolate and ginger. Linen and cedar wood. Pine and cinnamon.

Everett’s massive body curves around mine like a bear and Dean comes to lie on my other side, softly brushing the sweat-dampened hair from my forehead.

Huck finds a spot curled up against my legs and he presses soft kisses to my calves. My knees. Anywhere he can reach.

I close my eyes, running my hands through Huck's hair absentmindedly, treasuring this perfect moment.

"You're one of us now," Everett whispers softly in my ear as he nuzzles my cheek with his nose. His warm breath tickles my skin and sends happy shivers down my back. "From now on, we're together. No other packs will tear us apart. This is our home, our pack."

I tilt my head, kissing him. Claiming him in my own way. "Our family."

EPILOGUE

EVERETT

THE SUN BEATS down on me, heating my skin and scenting the air with the aromas of warm earth and wood. The temperature's been hitting nearly ninety the past week—maybe not as hot as it could be, but for us at this altitude, at this time of year, it's a heat wave.

My Goldie works by my side, weeding between the zucchini plants that still have several weeks of harvest left in them. Her hair is pulled up off her neck, a few stray curls coming loose from the headband she has tied around it.

Even in working clothes—overalls and one of the t-shirts she stitched together from our old clothes, she manages to look startlingly beautiful. In fact, I've never seen her more radiant. Her tanned skin glows under the warm orange glow of the sun and she sticks her tongue out the corner of her mouth, wrestling with a particularly stubborn weed, I feel the bond between us pull tight.

When she finally gets the root out, she grins triumphantly, giving me a look that says she knows exactly how amazing she is thank you very much.

I chuckle before going back to my own unruly patch of weeds. The occasional breeze sends a cool wave through my body, bringing with it a relief from the intense heat. It doesn't take us much longer to finish the task to Juliet's meticulous standards and we stand back to admire our handiwork.

The garden looks better than I could have ever imagined, and a lot of that is thanks to Juliet. As soon as the snow started

melting, she threw herself into reading everything she could about growing fruits and vegetables, and she and Huck redesigned our entire garden.

It's already more efficient than it has ever been, which I appreciate, because picking green beans is really not my thing.

She's already coming up with ideas for next year's garden. What she doesn't know is that the guys and I have been designing her a greenhouse for her birthday. I can't wait to see her face when she sees it. Although, we may never see her again after that, because she'll probably move in there just to watch over her plants.

"You happy here, Goldie?" I ask and she gives me a strange look, like I've just asked her if water is wet.

She leans over, bumping her small shoulder into my arm. "Of course, I am," she replies with a short laugh.

A smile pulls at my lips and I lift my brow in challenge. "Even if you can't watch the Royal Selection on live TV?"

She snorts. "Uh *no*. Dean already promised he'll set me up a live feed."

It's my turn to chuckle now. Of course, he did. He'd do anything for her. Any of us would.

"I'm not missing that. Huck already promised he'd watch with me."

I shake my head. It's unbelievable to me that they're still going ahead with the age-old tradition. It's practically archaic. A bunch of Omegas all vying for the chance to be bonded into the royal family? Sounds like a shitshow to me, but no one asked my opinion.

"As long as you don't want to trade in your garden trowel for a tiara and join them," I grumble to myself, knowing I'll never be able to give her diamonds and gold.

Goldie threads her fingers in mine, inclining her head to the strawberry patch on our right. "Nope," she says, popping the 'p' with a mischievous look. "As long as Huck keeps making me jam, I'm here to stay."

More strawberries are ripening in the patch, and the few spots of ruby-red color pop out against the lush green foliage surrounding them. We have nearly a bushel picked, thank fuck, because Huck can't keep up with Juliet's demands for his fresh jam.

It's all she's wanted lately, even when the rest of us are sick of it. But what Goldie wants, Goldie gets, even if it's a pantry full of jarred jam to last us through Armageddon.

I lean over and kiss the top of her head. "Then I better tell him to get his ass back to the canning shed."

She laughs and we both sigh, looking out over the property. It's so beautiful this time of year. I never noticed much before.

I'm tired, but it's a good kind of tired. Not like the tired we've all been the past year, after months of trials and evidence-gathering against the Williams pack. A few weeks ago, Victor and most of his Alphas were convicted of bribery, fraud, and a whole mess of other charges that will ruin them permanently. Our inquiry into what happened to Taylor opened up the door for so many others to come forward with evidence-backed stories of their own.

We're safe from them at last and it's like the air itself is lighter. Easier to breathe knowing we don't have to watch our backs as much as we have since this all began.

I look out at the Alaskan wilderness and feel a sense of pride and purpose. This is my home, and I've fought like hell to keep it. I plan on making it our home for generations to come.

Of course, we've been working on that second generation pretty much since the start. Juliet hasn't been on birth control since the crash almost eight months ago, and she's starting to worry she's barren. Fertility problems have been an issue for Omegas, especially over the last decade. But Dean has a friend named Thane, who might be able to help her with hormone therapy if she needs it.

I'm not worried. Whatever happens, it'll come in its own time. Just like with the Omega that surprised us all.

Later, we sit outside to watch the sunset, curled up around a bonfire. The smell of freshly cut grass is thick in the air from when Dean mowed earlier, mixed with the sweet scent of ripe fruit from the other plants that we have grown this season. Huck roasts marshmallows, making s'mores for those of us who want them. I'm content to snack on the chocolate bars, and Dean has marshmallow smeared on his cheek. Juliet kisses it off him, and he pulls her onto his lap.

Then he freezes. I tense instantly, all senses alert for danger as I sense the shift in him.

His eyes widen, and he runs his nose up and down her neck, scenting her. He pulls back, standing up, and Juliet nearly falls on her ass.

"What's wrong with you?" he asks.

She gives him a glaring look, but there's a chuff of a laugh on her lips as she looks down at herself, searching for something amiss.

"*Um*, excuse me?" she asks with a raised brow, rising to stand with hands planted on her hips.

"You don't smell right. Something's wrong."

He pulls out his phone, but I stop him with a hand. I know I'm not one to talk when it comes to overreacting, but I've gotten better.

"What are you doing?"

"Calling the doctor down at the base. We can get there in a couple of hours if the roads stay clear. She could be getting sick. Can't you smell that?"

"Nothing's wrong with me!" Juliet protests. I reach a hand to her, pulling her onto my lap.

"She looks fine to me," I say, pressing a kiss to her forehead and then licking my lips. "Tastes fine, too," I add, trailing additional kisses down her temple, cheekbones, jawline. "In fact, she—"

Then I stop, too. Run my nose up and down her neck, just like Dean did. And then I let out a growl, low and possessive.

“Goldie,” I murmur, huskily, my nostrils flaring at the new edge of earthy sweetness to her scent that was definitely *not* there a few days ago. “Do you have something to tell us?”

“We’re out of marshmallows?” she offers hopefully, and another growl rumbles in my chest.

“I wasn’t sure yet,” she explains in a rush. “I didn’t want to get anyone’s hopes up.”

There are tears in her eyes now.

“You’re pregnant,” I say, and instantly, there’s chaos. Huck starts whooping and clapping, and I think Dean will cry; he puts his face in his hands and I watch his back hitch up as he fights to get control of himself.

I pull her against me, crashing my mouth into hers, and I can barely breathe between the emotions flooding me and the taste of her sweet lips.

“Are you sure?” Juliet asks when I pull away, her breaths uneven as she holds back emotion. She places her hand on her belly, and I swear my heart nearly bursts at the sight. “A baby? Really?”

Her lips split into a grin, and she lets out a tiny, teary laugh. I place my hand over hers on her belly, bringing her other hand to my lips to kiss each one of her fingers. Her joy is contagious, saturating the air between us, pulsing strong through the bond.

I tell her that I love her, over and over, before planting sweet kisses all over her face and neck.

“I told you so!” crows Huck. “I knew it! She was sleeping too much and always harping about my damn jam!”

“It’s good jam!” Juliet protests again, but Huck doesn’t care. He picks her right out of my arms, bridal style, and spins with her. She doesn’t stop laughing, even as he kisses her.

She wraps her arms around Huck’s neck, enraptured by him.

I want to freeze this moment and keep it here forever; the smell of the bonfire, the sound of our laughter as we tease each other, and the constant warm hum of the bonds reminding us that we're a family.

"My baby girl," he murmurs against her lips. "And my *baby* baby girl." He runs his hands over her belly as he puts her down.

"Could be a boy," she points out. "Or maybe twins. My grandma on my mom's side was a twin."

Well, shit. I didn't think of that.

More than one?

I don't know whether to be excited by the idea or if I should start investing in diaper stocks.

I let out a string of curses, and she cracks up again. And then she bursts into tears, burying her face against Huck's shirt. Because, you know, hormones.

"Aw, baby girl," he coos, stroking her hair. Dean comes in front of them and wraps his arms around both Juliet and Huck, and I join them, bringing my arms right around all three of them. We're a crazy mix of limbs, hugs, tears, and love.

My family. My pack.

I take a deep breath, inhaling their comforting scents and the warmth radiating from their bodies. I'm surrounded by so much love that it feels surreal. For the first time in a long time, it doesn't feel like something is missing.

I feel...whole.

I guess we'll have some news to share with Juliet's fathers when they come up for her birthday, soon. They're good men. I know they'll be thrilled to become grandparents. They were already talking about moving closer the last time they came up. Turns out they love it here.

"Maybe..." Juliet says when her happy tears stop. "Maybe we name them... Taylor."

I freeze and something in my throat thickens.

Goldie rubs the pendant around her neck, the one she stole from a file in the Williams compound over a year ago. The one she never takes off.

The one that breaks my heart and heals it all at once, every time I see it. He would've wanted her to have it. To have a part of him.

We go silent for several moments, and she bites her lip. Nervous.

"That'd be nice," I say, voice cracking. "I like that. I like it a lot."

"And it works for a girl or a boy," Huck adds.

"It's perfect," Dean says with a kiss to Goldie's hair.

And then we're all over her again, hugging her and kissing her and doing everything we can to make her laugh.

Our pack is a little wild, and a lot wonderful. We may not be conventional, but we are just fine with that.

This is the way our Pack is meant to be, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

Thank you so much for reading HYPNOTIZE. I absolutely loved writing this story and I hope you enjoyed reading it, too. If you did, I would love for you to leave it a review!

For bonus material and announcements about the next book in this standalone series, [SELECTION](#), sign-up for my new [omegaverse-only newsletter!](#)

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SELECTION: ALSO BY E. J. LAWSON



[Available July 2023](#)

I've been selected. One of forty Omegas from academies across the globe.

...a one in forty chance to be bonded into the royal pack.

It has to be a mistake. The selection committee never would've chosen me. I don't even pay my own tuition. I'm a scholarship student from the freaking *Burm*.

I should know better than to hope, but after I meet the royal alphas, I can't help it.

Kaz, Wolf, and Tai are everything I've ever wanted, and our bodies call to each other in ways we're powerless to control.

Not that it matters since the Queen herself has forbidden them from claiming me. I'm too clumsy. Too opinionated. *Too poor*.

But when the royal pack continues to send other Omegas home instead of me, it becomes harder to accept the inevitable truth...that I'm Knot Their Omega.

CAPTIVATE: ALSO BY E. J. LAWSON



[Available Now](#)

I don't need a pack. I'm doing just fine on my own.

Until one tiny mistake has me perfuming enough to draw every enforcement officer in a ten block radius.

I know what awaits me if I go into custody as an unclaimed Omega, so when a *blazing* hot and surprisingly kind Alpha throws me a life raft, I grab hold with both hands.

Only problem? He didn't exactly clear his claim on me with his pack. They don't want an Omega. Especially Thane, who seems to be calling the shots.

At least they're letting me stay until they find another pack to take me. I should be grateful, but being trapped in a mansion with four unbonded Alphas that smell like heaven is pure torture.

Fox, Miles, Levi, and Thane are everything an Omega could ever want, but there's a reason I was in hiding.

I have to remember... I'm Knot Their Omega.

[CAPTIVATE](#) is a standalone Omegaverse romance told in multiple points of view. It includes MM and MMFMM and a happily ever after is guaranteed.

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