



Kraken
The
Whip

VIOLA GRACE

♡ Betas In Waiting

Penny's life just flipped. She's been fired without cause, found by her stalker, and had to engage a lawyer. And her day is about to get worse.

Penny thought life was good until her ex-boyfriend comes into her office with his current girlfriend—her boss—on his arm. When the new girlfriend leaves them alone for a minute, he attacks with alarming brutality, but Penny is the one who loses her job.

After a few weeks, she gets a lawyer, who tells her she can call anytime. So, when she survives an attack by her ex, she calls him, and he meets her at the hospital.

Jax is an alpha with extras, and his situation is similar to Penny's. He has one appendage that she is aware of—his five-year-old daughter.

Over the course of a week, Penny has to go from nothing to being offered a pack-style living arrangement with Jax, his daughter, and another alpha who also has an aquatic adaptation. If she says no, they will still help but not give up, and if she says yes, she can throw a five-year-old's birthday party. It's no contest.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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Kraken the Whip
Betas in Waiting Book 12

By

Viola Grace

Chapter One

Penny staggered into her tiny house and shoved the door closed. She spoke to no one. “Well, this day was made entirely of suck.”

She walked to the couch, curled up, and cried. How could one day go so very wrong?

Penny jolted at a loud noise and realized it was her stomach. It had woken her up. She shoved a dinner in the microwave, turned on the television, and got her laptop out. She had lost her job because of an assault and jealousy, and those weren't emotions you could work with.

Time to look for a new job. School secretary jobs weren't thick on the ground, and she had just paid off her student loans, so her savings would only last three months or so. There was no time like the present.

She got a soda, started looking for ads, and found a few that could start in a few days. She would get back on her feet fast. That was just what she did. In a matter of seconds, she had applied for five jobs that wouldn't be concerned with her previous workplace.

Penny looked at the marks on her arms. Getting a job that didn't mind tattoos was tricky as well. She had managed at the school with long-sleeved blouses.

Her phone rang, and she answered it. “Hey, bro.”

“What's wrong, Penny? You are all over the map emotionally?”

She groaned. “I don't want to say.”

“Spill.”

“Fine. Remember Alwin?”

“The douchebag? Yeah.”

“Well, he showed up at work today.”

“*Yeah?*” She heard him cracking his knuckles on the other side of the country.

“To pick up his new girlfriend. The vice principal.”

“*Shit.*”

“I know, right? Well, I told her he was there, she said it would be five minutes, and he grabbed me and pushed me against the wall. He started kissing me, and I pushed him away, but he tore my sleeve. I was almost crying, but then I felt a hard slap on my cheek. The vice principal lost her shit and accused me of sleeping with him. She knew he had a side piece and was appalled that it was there at the school. So, you can guess what happened next.”

“*Fired.*”

“Yup. The VP is the principal’s daughter, so I didn’t stick around for her to hit the other side of my face. Alwin was laughing his ass off.” She sighed. “I am gonna miss that job. I liked the little faces in the morning.”

She and her brother chatted for a few more minutes, and he offered to look for jobs for her in the childcare field. She accepted, even if it meant moving cities.

She got up, tidied up, and went to bed. Tomorrow, she had to start her life all over again.

Three weeks later, she had three part-time jobs that came close to giving her an equivalent payday to what her school job had. She collected plates and brought trays to folks at the gloriously costly party to which she had been given the address.

Running into Artemis had been fun, but seeing Antonio, Dell, and Andrea was distracting.

There was a high-pitched squeal, and an Andrea-shaped missile struck her. “Shit! Hi, Andrea.”

She smiled at Penny. “You are here! That’s great. Come hug Dell.”

“I can’t, punkin. I have to get back to work.”

Andrea frowned. "I thought you worked for a school."

"I did. I got fired because of my ex. He caused a scene, and the school let me go." She skipped the details.

"Oh. That's too bad. The guys have been saying they need you to do some more work in motion capture."

"Oh, honey. I can't. I work seven days a week."

Her boss cleared his throat, and she tried to get Andrea off. The omega stuck fast.

Her boss walked up to her. "Well, since you are socializing, give me your tray, and your last cheque will be in the mail tomorrow, Penny."

Andrea finally relaxed and stepped back. "Did I do that?"

Penny drew in a deep breath. "Fucking hell."

Dell wandered over with a smile. "Hey, Penny. How are you doing?"

"Pretty good five minutes ago. Now I am fucked." She stripped off her blouse and the ribbon tie she had been wearing. Her camisole was white and had cute lacy details. Her markings were in clear relief.

Dell frowned. "What happened?"

Andrea swallowed. "She got fired for socializing."

Penny turned and walked toward the server's entrance. A huge wall appeared in front of her.

"Holy shit! Antonio. Fucking hell, don't do that."

Antonio frowned. "I will get your job back."

"That's nice, but it will only last until you are out of sight, and then I will be fired again. That's how it works."

"Tell me, what happened to your school job? You are not there anymore?"

"Why? It can't be fixed. She's poured salt on my reputation. I can't get any job around children again."

Antonio wasn't into people, aside from Dell, but he took her hand and led her over to the tables. She

explained the situation, and Dell came over to lean against him.

Antonio nodded. "I will see if I can find a new job for you. And a lawyer. You can sue them both for assault. You didn't fight back?"

"No. Not in school. Never in the school." She caressed her marks. "The kids don't need to see that. I also know I could sue, but I can't afford legal representation, and they probably erased the security footage anyway." She slumped.

Dell looked at her. "You look hungry. You should get some food."

Penny sighed. "I am fine, and that would be theft. I have been fired and should be on my way off the premises before they call the police."

Antonio looked at her hopefully. "Can you do any motion capture work this week?"

"Well, some time opened up, but I still want the money going toward the children's charity. Even if I can't coach anymore, the kids still need trips and uniforms. Do I need to book in or just show up?"

"Call me directly."

"What? Why?"

"Because I have a soft spot for marked betas. You shouldn't have to fight to live."

"I still have a few months saved up. I can get through the holidays."

There was suddenly a small voice screaming, "Miss Penny!"

Penny turned in her chair, caught the blonde projectile, and cuddled her on her lap. "Hello, Hailey."

"Where have you been? They just said you were gone and weren't coming back, but here you are."

"I had an argument with someone at the school, and when that happened, I had to leave. That's all. It happens

when you are a grownup.”

Hailey hugged her. “I miss you. You were so happy in the mornings; it helped my days.”

Penny smiled. “I miss you, too, and the other kids. Now, your dad is coming, and I need to be gone before Judge Hall gets here.”

Antonio frowned. “I will talk with him. He is related to events?”

“His niece is the vice principal.”

“Ah.”

Antonio smiled one of his rare smiles and got to his feet. He walked over to Delun and guided him aside to speak with him.

Hailey grabbed her arms. “What are these marks?”

“Beta marks. Once upon a time, I bumped into an alpha who was my match, and because men aren’t too bright, these marks appeared so that the next time he met me, he would know I was a beta who would be an omega for him.”

She blinked. “Oh, like Auntie Nora!”

Penny smiled. “And like Miss Dell.”

Hailey smiled and giggled shyly. “She’s tall.”

“She definitely is.”

Dell smiled. “How old are you now, Hailey?”

Hailey grinned. “I will be eight in three weeks. I am in grade three.”

“Okay, Hailey, I think your dad will feel better if you are with him.”

Hailey nodded and hopped to the ground. “Fine, but Liella cries every time she comes to school and doesn’t see you.”

That broke her heart. As Hailey walked away, Penny got up as tears dripped down her cheeks.

Dell got up and held her as she wept. “What is it?”

“Liella lost her mom. Her dad works a lot. She and I had a connection.”

She wiped her cheeks and smiled. “Kindergarten is brutal. Well, right now, it is.”

Antonio’s and Delun’s body language was now more relaxed, and Delun looked either resigned or disappointed. Hailey hugged his leg, and Antonio crouched down and spoke to her. She nodded with wide eyes.

Dell smiled. “He’s just asking Hailey if she can just forget about what she just heard because telling it would hurt you.”

“Is that fine?”

“It is just for a week or two until the charges are laid. Then she can tell anyone she likes. It will take a few hours to get the footage, but Antonio’s computer is in his car, so it will have to wait until we head back to the house.” Dell laughed. “Or maybe not.”

Amble wandered back to the party and brought Antonio his weapon of choice.

The dire wolf alpha walked to a nearby seat, opened his laptop, flexed his fingers, and got to work.

Dell continued to hold her until Antonio nodded. “Got it. Saving it on several servers.”

Delun had wandered closer and checked to see if Hailey was nearby. Then he said, “Play it.”

Penny tried to move, but Dell held her.

She heard her voice greeting him coldly but politely.

She got the VP’s attention, and the five minutes were declared.

The smarmy suggestions of Alvin wanting to get inside her and her typing could be heard as she stated, “No.”

The rest was her muffled shriek as he pulled her up by her hair. The grunt as he flattened her to the wall, and

the sound of tearing fabric as he clawed at her shirt and under her skirt. It played back in her senses.

Then came the finish—his girlfriend coming out, pulling them apart, and striking her across the face. After that, the lie spilled out of a smug Alvin, and she was fired.

Antonio looked at Delun and said, “I believe that qualifies for unjust dismissal. Not to mention the rumours and vile gossip that are being spread and keeping Penny from finding a new job in education.”

Delun nodded. “Right. I will stay out of the way and keep the family from participating in this. They started it; they need to finish it.”

Penny blinked. “Wow. For your family... that is huge. Thank you.”

“They will fight hard. Their egos are at stake.”

Antonio nodded. “I am contacting someone to help her fight. He should still be alert.”

Penny chuckled, but Antonio’s quick look told her that the man in question was exhausted. “Oh. Okay.”

Antonio checked his phone. “He would like to meet with you tonight to discuss the case. I will tell him about the financial compensation for him, and he can counteroffer.”

She nodded. “Okay, where do I meet you?”

Dell rubbed her back. “You will come with us.”

“Oh. Okay.” She figured that she could get a cab home. She had enough funds for an occasional cab or rideshare.

The helicopter ride wasn’t what she expected, but then that was how they had arrived at the party.

She kept her hands clenched together and breathed calmly through the short flight.

They landed behind trees and walked over to the country manor, where a familiar face stood on the patio with a sleepy little girl holding his hand.

The little girl was rubbing her eyes, focused, and she screamed, “Miss Penny!”

The nightgown was flipping around little feet, and when Liella launched, Penny caught her. Her father crinkled his brow in confusion. “Miss Briden?”

Penny kept walking toward him. “Ah. Hello, Mr. Yekerek.”

“You are the assault case?”

“It was an eventful last day at the school.” She smiled weakly. Liella was sniffing and holding her tight.

The computer came out, and she asked, “May I take Liella inside?”

Liella smiled. “I can show you my favourite toys.”

Liella’s father smiled. “Sure. Show her the toys.”

Penny asked, “Can I put you down, Liella?”

“Can you hold me a bit more?”

“Sure, little one. You have to steer.” Penny walked inside, took off her shoes, and walked in the little girl’s direction, up some stairs and into the playroom.

They sat and played with floppy dollies and stuffed bears. Every few minutes, Liella hugged her and eventually fell asleep with Penny leaning against the wall and the little girl against her side.

They were there when Mr. Yekerek came up. He smiled slightly and said, “I will take her.”

Penny nodded. “Thanks.”

He picked his daughter up, her dark hair swinging as she was carried to bed. Penny got up, stretched, and then headed downstairs. She met everyone out on the patio and smiled when Dell asked, “So, what is the playroom like.”

“The dad has a home office. All the toys are quiet, even if you slam them together at high speed. We really tried.”

Dell smiled. “Noted.”

Antonio's eyes lit up, and he made a note on his computer.

Mr. Yekerek came down with a smile. He turned to Penny. "She is very glad you are all right."

Penny nodded. "Me too. Dipping out that way wasn't my choice. They threatened me with a trespass order, so I just took my stuff and left."

"Sensible, but there are a lot of little kids who miss you. Liella has been inconsolable." He ran a hand over his dark hair. "So, Antonio is correct. This is definitely grounds for a lawsuit. So, what do you want from them?"

"I want them to recant the gossip with the school parents, and I want my job back." Penny knew what he would say next.

"That won't happen." He crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe. "I did a social media search, and your name and face have been dragged fairly thoroughly."

Penny winced and asked, "What would you suggest? Get a doc to confirm I'm a virgin? Put a banner ad up calling Alvin an attempted rapist?"

He frowned. "Seriously? You and he never had a physical relationship?"

"We had five dates. To be frank, I wasn't opening for him, so we had foreplay, but it was never game on."

Antonio and Amble nodded.

"Wait, so you can prove that you are a virgin?" His black eyes were intense.

"Well, I can prove that nothing larger than two fingers has ever rummaged around in there in the last year or so."

"Are you willing to testify to that after an exam?"

"Sure. No problem."

"Really? Most virgins are a little appalled about an exam."

She shrugged. "I have been assured that there is nothing exciting or unusual about me. An exam is just an exam."

He grabbed her arm. "What is this? You will need to cover it for court."

"I have plenty of blouses that will conceal them. The markings were not by my choice."

"Amazing work."

"I woke up with them one day with no idea how they got there."

Dell smiled. "Show him what they do."

She carefully pulled her arm away from him, focused, and whipped at the trees. Leaves fell in a slow green rain. She reeled them in and then flicked another one out, and she took off and ended up in the tree. She dropped to the ground and walked back toward the gathering. It took a few minutes before she said, "So, that's what they do."

Antonio was smiling, Amble was grinning, and Dell looked very pleased. Mr. Yekerek stared at her.

"I know, I should have used this against Alvin, but I had no idea he was going to attack me. We were at a school, for pity's sake. Little kids everywhere."

"Good. Lewd acts in front of minors. There was no expectation of privacy and a lot of minors." Mr. Yekerek nodded.

She nodded. "So, do you need anything else from me?"

His eyes were inky black, but she was sure his pupils moved. "No. I don't."

Penny nodded to Antonio. "Are you remaining here for a while?"

He nodded. "If you want to wait, we can take you back to the party."

She shuddered. "No. I am going to get a cab and go home. Possibly a pizza in the middle."

His eyes had understanding in them.

Dell hugged her, and her primrose scent made Penny drowsy. When she straightened, “Oh, no, you aren’t going to lure me in, you primrose-scented strumpet.”

Dell laughed. “Darn. My trap is foiled.”

Penny patted her shoulder. “I will be tired and vulnerable another day.”

Amble frowned. “Are you sure you can get a cab out here?”

“If not, I will walk until I can. These are good shoes.”

Mr. Yekerek said, “Go through the house. It’s faster.”

She nodded her thanks and walked past him. She could have sworn that she saw one of her black tendrils near her shoulder. She turned her head, but there wasn’t anything there. She walked through the very large home and out the front door. The night air was cool, and she began hiking to the main road. When she got to the tree-lined highway, she looked from left and right, and then she used her tendrils to swing her along. It was way faster than a cab for as long as she could keep it up.

By the time she got home, she was exhausted, and her tendrils were in for the night. She got into her house, locked up, and went to bed. She set her alarm for seven and checked her schedule. Tomorrow she was on the courier gig. Not a problem.

She pulled her blanket over her shoulder and tried to get to sleep. It was probably why her eyes were open when the hand closed around her throat.

Chapter Two

Penny sat in the hospital as a nurse cleaned the torn skin on her neck and the scratches and bruises on her arms.

She heard a familiar voice sobbing in a nearby room and snorted. “The loving girlfriend.”

Vanessa had to have excellent hearing. She flung the curtain back, and the nurse and police officer tried to get her to back up. She stilled and went cold.

She spoke softly to Vanessa. “The first time he hit me, I had told him no. I thought he was just frustrated, but I broke up with him via text, and he ghosted me. I came home from work and found him in my bed with a woman who was bleeding and half dead. I screamed, and my neighbours came running. I called emergency services, and they took care of her. Another beta, beaten nearly to death. Then, years later, he comes through the door to my office, asks for his current girlfriend, she greets him, and the moment she is behind a closed door... well, you know.”

“Stop talking to her, Penelope.” Jax Kekerek arrived, turned to look at her, and went icy. “Where is he?”

She grimaced. “Coma, over that way.”

Vanessa asked, “He really did this to you?”

She was about to give a sarcastic answer, but Mr. Yekerek shook his head. She said, “scuse me, I am getting stitches.”

The doctor pushed in and looked at the officer. “Get her out, and I am assuming Mr. Yekerek is your representative?”

“Yes.”

“He can stay if he has a strong stomach. This is a bite?”

“Yup.”

“Shit,” he muttered. He asked the nurse, “You cleaned it?”

“Yes.”

“A drain tube is going in.”

Penny asked, “Any estimate on the scarring?”

“Three inches, pretty jagged.” The doctor’s eyes said he knew what kind of a bite this was.

Penny met Mr. Yekerek’s eyes. “I am sorry for getting them to call you, but this is pertinent to the case.”

“Don’t worry about it. So, what happened?”

“Either he was already inside the house when I got home, which I doubt, or he broke in after I went to sleep. I was having a hard time sleeping, and I saw the hand coming for my throat, and then he lifted me out of bed, and I don’t know what happened next. I woke up choking and bleeding on the floor and called emergency services. That was when I noticed he was still in the room, so I got them to bring a second ambulance.”

She held still as the needle began its work. “And now we are here.”

She exhaled shallowly and waited for the fifteen stitches to be set. Alvin had tried to kill her. It was not a careful mating bite.

When the doctor checked her over, he looked at her. “Was there penetration?”

“No.”

“We need to make sure. A lot of assaulted women hide it.”

The nurse helped her into position, and the doctor put on the mining helmet and peered inside her. They did a rape clock, and he sighed. “Sorry, but it is necessary given his history.”

She nodded and put her legs together. “Oh. I am sorry, Mr. Yekerek. You shouldn’t have to deal with this.”

“This will be helpful. How are you doing?”

“Fine. Just need to do the photo shoot, and then I can get home and clean up all the blood.” She grimaced.

“And chunks of me.”

When the police photographer arrived, he was sombre. “Miss, I need some photos.”

“Right. Do you have a site or just right here?”

“Right here is fine.”

The nurse helped her off the exam table. The doctor left, and Penny was lined up against the wall.

Penny looked at the officer. “You can skip this part and stand outside the cubicle and maintain victim’s rights and dignity.”

The officer frowned. “What about him?” He pointed at the lawyer.

“If you just want to look, here you go.” She undid the wrap and dropped it. Yekerek started growling.

The officer swallowed. “I am sorry. I... I’m new.”

“Go guard the privacy I don’t have. Shutterbug, go to it.”

A few minutes of photos of her torso were done in near silence. When she turned, the nurse opened the bandages that were over the bite marks. There was a curse, and the photography continued.

When it was over, the nurse bandaged her up and helped her put the exam gown on.

The officer and a detective came in and got her story again. When they were done, they told her she could go.

The nurse said, “Do you have an advocate, miss?”

“Uh, I can call someone from the book club, I guess.”

Yekerek said, “I will take care of her. Is there a gift shop?”

The nurse nodded.

He stepped out and turned to Penny. “Remain here. I will be back in a few minutes.”

She sat and swung her feet while the nurse got the discharge papers. She signed herself out, and then

Yekerek handed her a bag, and she opened it to see a soft blue sweatsuit. She thanked him and pulled on the sweat pants before she opened her top to expose her bruised and torn torso. The sweatshirt with the cartoon bear felt wonderful on her skin. At the bottom of the bag, she found flip-flops.

“Wow. You are thorough.” She put the footwear on and eased to the floor. “I am all signed out. Good to go.”

He held his hand out to her. She frowned but took his hand. He smiled slightly. “I won’t bite.”

She shrugged. “Good. My nerves are fried, and I can’t guarantee my reaction.”

They walked out of the emergency room and to a very respectable sedan with a booster seat in the back. She smiled, wincing as her face pulled. “Oh, shoot. Where is Liella?”

“My sister lives nearby, and she came to watch her and get her ready for school.”

“Oh, good. I don’t want to scare her.” She winced as she buckled the seatbelt. She was sore as hell.

They were out of the lot, and Yekerek said, “You did that to him.”

“Probably. There was a lot of thrashing and attacking and trying to evade teeth. I was even crawling away, but he bit me on the back.”

The steering wheel squeaked under pressure. “Yes, I saw. How did you survive that?”

She touched an unbruised part of her face. “I hate to say it, but... practice. I have been physically training since the last attack. Running, weights, cardio, hand-to-hand combat. I am not very good, but I have a lot of stamina. That was helpful.”

He let out a slow exhalation.

She was dozing, but she looked around as the city dropped away. “I thought you were going to take me home.”

“I am. As you are also unemployed, I want to ask you something.”

She cocked her head. “You don’t look like the sugar-daddy type. Sorry, regretfully, no. I am in no shape to be cute and flirty.”

He snorted. “That wasn’t it. I would like you to be a long-term nanny for Liella. She was so happy last night when she saw you. I haven’t seen her face light up like that since you left the school.”

She smiled. “I like her, too. Will it mess with the court thing?”

“I don’t think we will have to go to court. I sent the notice to them this morning. I got a message twenty minutes later that they want to settle. So, how much do you want?”

She blinked. “I thought you had to tell them how much you wanted, and they negotiated.”

“The description here would be that *they done fucked up.*”

The whimsical note in his voice made her smile.

“I am going to need a note pad and paper... and possibly new fingernails.” She looked at the blood-crusted stubs.

“Why do you need to calculate?”

“I need to find a new occupation, the amount of time it takes to get certification, the tuition, food, etc., pain and suffering for pointing Alvin at me again. The loss of a much-loved occupation.”

He nodded. “That sounds about right. What do you think you would like to do?”

“Bend time back before this ever happened.”

He put his hand on the console between them and held hers carefully. “Can’t do that but can try and build you a better future.”

“To think I thought that moving out here would be good for me.” She groaned. “Now I have to tell my brother about this. That’s going to be tricky. He’s gonna pack up all the kids and charge out here.”

“He has kids?”

“He and his wife have nine right now.”

She saw the widening of his eyes and laughed. “Foster. He and his wife foster. They have a huge farmhouse and plenty of room.”

“Is he your biological brother?”

“Yes. Our parents died in a fire while at a vacation home. We were out overnight at a kids’ camp. No one in our family wanted to take us in, so we ended up in the system, and when we were separated, we tried to get visitation with each other. I am good at paperwork.”

“And your affinity for children began.”

“Yeah, and documentation. I really was a very good school secretary.” She sighed.

“Maybe something in the legal vein?”

“Oh. Like a legal administrator?”

He smiled. “Yes. I work from home a lot, and the value of an assistant in the house would be tremendous.”

“Oh, working for you?”

“I was not joking about a long-term nanny. I want stability for Liella. I want you for her.”

“Wow. That’s neat. I would love to be a nanny, but I feel that’s a burden on you. When Alvin gets out of hospital, he’s going to come for me. I don’t want to be anywhere near Liella at that time.”

He nodded. “He will be arrested when hospital releases him. There are cuffs on him already.”

She opened her mouth and then closed it.

“What is it, Penny?”

“I... there is another issue. I am useless four days every six months.”

“Menstrual cycle? That is spaced apart.” He turned off the highway and onto the road she had swung down the previous evening.

“No. Not really.”

“Just explain.”

“Heat. I go into heat.”

“Ah. That can be dealt with.”

“I do deal with it. It just involves a closed room, snacks, and a lot of crying and screaming.”

“No toys?”

“Um, no. I have never been able to get into that.” She shrugged. “I just wait it out. Now, Mr. Yekerek, when are you planning on telling me that you have tentacles made of shadows as well?”

He smiled. “I was planning on it soon. I am taking Liella to the beach this weekend, so that is when it would be obvious. Also, please call me Jax.”

“Is that your name?”

“It is.”

He pulled into his long drive and up to the house. “Have you eaten today?”

“Um, no. Not since two o’clock yesterday. The staff are not encouraged to eat at events.”

“So, that will be fixed. My repertoire is limited, but I can manage a lot of it.”

She checked her watch to see it was gone. “Oh, poop.”

“We will collect your things when the police have released the scene.”

“Uh, please, tell me how much to add to the claim for your services.”

He smiled. “How far did you have to get before a cab would pick you up?”

She frowned. “Cab? Oh, right. I walked home.”

“When did you get home?”

“Around two?”

He sighed. “The emergency call came in around four. I was called around six.”

She shivered. “And what time is it now?”

“Nine.”

“Wow. That is both fast and slow.”

When he stopped, she unbuckled her seatbelt with difficulty. Her joints were starting to stiffen up. She pawed at the door release, and he opened it for her. He gripped her forearms and helped her out of the car. She jolted with bits of pain from the claw marks. He let her go the moment she was out of his car.

“I will get you a notepad and pen. You do math, and I will make you some pancakes.” He walked her into the house and through it.

“It is a lovely house.”

“It was my parents. They have retired to travel the world. They always make it back for Liella’s birthday.”

“I have to ask about her mother. It will come up if I am taking care of her.”

“She and I were an arranged match. We were courting, and she got pregnant during our first encounter. She declared at that point that she wasn’t cut out to marry an alpha, but she wanted to raise our child together as room mates. That hurt a little, but I agreed.”

As he talked, they walked to the kitchen.

“When Liella arrived looking just like me, Eva signed her over and left with her boyfriend. I gave her a breeder bonus and sent her on her way. Her family was humiliated and just sends presents on Liella’s birthday, and my little girl is the jewel of the family.”

“Yes, she is.”

He opened a drawer and got her a pen and paper. She carefully settled on a high chair next to the one that had a set of steps next to it, and she got to work. While she wrote, she asked, “So, do you rescue damsels in distress frequently?”

He got a pan out and started to mix up the batter. “No. This is a first. I haven’t represented a client in this situation since my first years of practicing. I mainly do corporate law now, but suing is in my wheelhouse. I am using you as a piece of copyrighted material that has been infringed on.”

“That is a polite word for it. I feel infringed on.” She shifted. “All the pain is starting to light up.”

He paused. “What do you normally take for pain?”

“Regular ibuprofen. I am stupidly sensitive to meds, so I start with half a dose and take the second half if an hour has gone by and there is no change.”

He put the batter aside and walked around the corner, returning with a bottle of ibuprofen. He got her a glass of water.

She carefully shook out two pills, verified the strength and closed the childproof cap. She took the two pills. “Today, I am pretty sure I am still in pain.”

She swallowed and drank the water. “Oh, that’s better. I drink an obscene amount of water.”

He chuckled. She looked up at him, and he was standing there in a business suit, making her pancakes. Surreal.

“So, how long have you had your tentacles?”

“I was volunteering with a kids’ club, and we got a tour of the motion capture area of Antonio’s company. I bumped into someone, and the marks appeared one or two months later. Stupidest thing, and now all my blouses are opaque and go down to my wrists, or I can’t go to work.”

He flipped the pancakes and got out butter and syrup.

She smiled. “What am I going to do, get my opposite by flashing all kinds of wrist and forearm? Could be worse. Could be ankle.”

He stacked three pancakes and turned to slide them in front of her.

“I am afraid to say it, but I was the someone.”

Dark tendrils of tentacles came out of his waistband behind his belt, and he pushed the pancakes toward her with the tip of one black tentacle.

She looked at him. He shrugged and nudged the plate again. She grabbed the plate, and he pulled back with a suction cup releasing with a small pop. That made her giggle.

She lifted one of her battered fingers to the arched appendage, and he touched her fingertip. “Cool.”

Kekerek looked at her. “You aren’t freaked out?”

“No.” She extended her own tentacles and brushed lint off his suit. She pulled them back with a wince. “Nope. Pancakes now.”

She ate the pancakes and addressed the elephant in the room. “Eva couldn’t deal with it.”

“She could not, and Liella’s birth left her unable to have another.”

“Ah, so she scampered off with the boy toy and left you with your precious jewel.”

He smiled. “Yeah. But she is one hundred percent mine.”

“Yeah. I can see it in her eyes.”

She had a mouthful to deal with when he asked, “So, this is extremely unprofessional, but I would like to try dating you.”

“Can we wait until court is over and I don’t have a gaping wound on my shoulder?”

He blushed. “I guess. I also don’t know what dating is like for a single dad.”

Penny smiled. “Easy. We start with group dates. You, me, and Liella. We are a little backward in that I knew her before I met you.”

She laughed, “Oh, I just realized I am going to be taking Liella to school. That will be hilarious.”

She finished her brunch, and he took the plate away. “So, how do you want me to transport the little princess?”

“Do you have a car?”

“Scooter. I had a car but sold it in week one of my firing.”

“Put a new car on the list. The judge might not grant it, but you don’t know if you don’t file it.”

She nodded and put it on the list.

“I do have to ask, how are you still a virgin at your age? You are stunning, your body is very fit, and your smile is hypnotic.” He looked at her sheepishly. “And I know it is terrible to say that kind of thing after you were violently attacked.”

“Oh, the thing that got Alvin the most enraged... He couldn’t arouse me, and all the water-based lube just disappeared.”

“So, you haven’t ever...”

“If you are talking orgasms, I can manage those just fine on my own.”

“Geez.” The word out of his mouth was funny. He seemed so prim.

“If you are wondering about the possibility of us getting naked, I couldn’t tell you, but I can say that tapping that tentacle did more for me than Alvin and an hour of foreplay.”

“Shit.” He leaned back against his counter. “This is rather fast.”

“Now, to be awkward, did you need me to live here, or am I commuting?”

He frowned. "I thought you would stay here."

"You thought? When did you get this thought?"

Kekerek frowned and ran a hand through his hair. "When I saw Liella hug you, it just felt so right to have you here."

Penny smiled and knew what he had felt. *Family*. It hit when you knew things were right, and it was how her brother had gotten all of his permanent placements. The moment they arrived, they were family.

"First, I will be her nanny, then we will move onto a date, and after that, we will figure things out." She glanced down. "So, I need my clothes."

"We will swing by to get them when we pick Liella up from her half-day."

She looked at the clock on the stove. "Can I just nap in a corner for an hour and a half before it's time to go?"

"Curl up on the couch."

"Nope. I have open wounds on my back and don't want to mess up the furniture." She smiled. "Kitchen chairs are fine with me."

He nodded and got a black fuzzy throw from the living room, wrapped it around her, and tucked her into a corner of the couch. "I will contact you when it's time to leave. We should get you some wound dressing."

"Right. Phone, watch, wallet, clothes." She mumbled as she leaned against the back of the couch. She was out in a minute.

Chapter Three

Kekerek shook her good shoulder gently. “Penny. It’s time to go.”

She nodded, swung her legs out, and stood up. “With you, Mr. Kekerek.”

He smiled. “Call me Jax.”

“Mr. K while I am your nanny.”

He held her elbow, and they walked to the front of the house.

She settled carefully and buckled up. They drove off and were on their way to pick up Liella.

“So, you, obviously, know where to drop her off and pick her up.”

She chuckled. “Yes. I do. I am just thinking I should have stayed in hospital for wound-care advice.”

“I can manage it. You can’t reach most of it comfortably.”

She nodded. “Are you going to go get her?”

“No. She runs to the car, and I come around to open the door for her.”

“Warn her about my face. Tell her that I got hurt and hugs have to be careful. We will explain it later when she can see me talk to her. Please.”

He nodded. “So, what kind of nanny do you think you will be?”

“One who cares about her charge. I have always liked Liella.” Penny sighed. She didn’t say that she had dreams of her, the little girl, and a dark-haired man at the beach. She didn’t want him to think she was crazy. She wasn’t a stalker, but there was something about his daughter that made her soul settle. Yeah, it was creepy.

“How do you know Antonio?”

“Oh, I do some motion capture modelling for the game developers. They overlay fantasy species on me and put them in the games. The whips that I use make for very specific female characters.”

“Oh, the tentacles.”

“Yeah. If you ever need landscaping done, I can cut trees down with them.” She chuckled.

“That’s cute. So, how do you know Dell? She isn’t involved in the game design.”

“We have bumped into each other in the mocap area. When another friend arrived a few weeks ago, we had a fun morning recording stuff that will never be used. The tech was great.” She paused. “If you talk to people from accounting, Dell said she was going to pay it out of pocket, just for the fun and games. So much giggling.”

“What did you do with the videos?”

“What?”

“The end product.”

“Oh. I don’t know. I think the tech trashed them.”

He snorted. “I really doubt that.”

The school loomed, and she felt equal measures of fear and sadness. He pulled up in the pickup zone and parked. She waited and watched as the teachers and little ones came out. They usually watched over them until the last of the little ones were with a parent or a nanny.

Mr. K walked toward the kids, and the bullet of energy that was Liella bolted toward him, her little backpack bouncing and legs pumping.

He crouched, and she launched herself toward him. He started speaking to her, and she started to quiver with excitement. He continued to speak to her, and she calmed and nodded.

He hugged her and took her hand as they returned to the car. He opened the door, and Liella hopped inside. “Hello, Miss Penny. I hear you aren’t feeling well.”

“That’s right, Liella. I will be fine and able to hug by the weekend. My face is ugly colours, so don’t be scared when you see it.”

“Okay. Do you feel bad?”

“Aches and pains.”

“Okay.”

“We are going to go to my house so that I can get clothes and my watch and phone. Then, I am coming back to your house and getting changed into comfortable clothes, and then you and I will have a talk about what you want and what I want out of this serious business.”

“Serious?”

“Me being your nanny.”

There was happy squealing and the kicking of little feet.

Mr. K smiled and drove to the nearest pharmacy. He went in and came out in under five minutes. She set the bag under her legs, and in the gap in the plastic, she saw the very large box of condoms.

She jolted and looked at him. “You have a girlfriend?”

He smiled as he got them back on the road. “Not yet.”

Leilla said from the back seat, “Daddy says I keep him so busy that he doesn’t have time for a silly girlfriend.”

“Okay. Good to know.”

Mr. K’s lips twitched. “You are on Atherton.”

“Yes. How did you... oh, police report. Right.”

Liella gasped. “You saw police?”

“Yup. A whole bunch of them. And I got to ride in an ambulance.”

Liella asked her questions the whole drive. The police car and neighbours showed Mr. K where to park.

He pulled up, and she smiled. “Do I need you for this?”

“If you are in for more than five minutes, I will come and get you. Or just wave, and Liella and I will be there right away, right?”

Liella yelled, “Yeah!”

She headed to the taped-off area and spoke to the officer. “Hello. This is my house, and I need to get my identification and phone and stuff.”

He brought up something on his phone. “Your name?”

“Penelope Briden. I would show you ID, but it is all inside. I can show you the fifteen stitches if you like.”

“Just a moment.”

Her neighbour rushed up to her. “Oh, dear, Penny. You look terrible.”

“Thanks, Mrs. Kanhurst.”

The officer came back. “They are still gathering evidence.”

She wanted to cry, but she turned and waved.

Mr. K came out, Liella was freed from the car, and they walked toward her down the sidewalk.

The officer scowled. “Who is that?”

“My lawyer and his charming assistant.”

Liella’s eyes got wide as she saw Penny’s face.

Mr. K got out his identification and spoke quietly to the officer. The officer left and came back with another officer. He was quite a bit bigger than the beta next to him, and he spoke with Mr. K about damage, evidence, and restricted access.

Mr. K turned toward her. “Do you mind if they go through your phone to see if you have had any contact with him?”

“I last checked my phone at about ten last night. Anything after that I haven’t seen.”

He leaned down, and she gave him the access code. He went under the yellow tape, and Liella moved against

Penny's leg. "I will stay with you, Miss Penny."

The alpha officer looked at Penny and said, "How are you doing, Miss?"

"Patched up and coloured up. Looking forward to a nap."

"I am sorry I wasn't able to accompany you to the hospital."

She blinked. "Oh, you were one of the responders?"

"I was. You were a little distracted."

Her chest was rising and falling. She could hear her own breath wheezing in and out of her lungs. The air smelled like blood. She could also smell Alvin's musk in her nose, and it was making it hard to breathe. Footfalls were pounding up to her bedroom, and she looked at the outline of an alpha in her door. She screamed.

"Oh. I yelled at you. I am sorry."

He smiled slowly. "It's fine. Another dark figure in your doorway was a little too much."

She wanted to turn and look behind her. That was a flirting smile.

Liella said, "Victims of violence need people to be nice. You are being weird."

The officer in plain clothes stood straight.

Penny looked at him, and he blushed. He had sandy blonde hair, azure eyes, and now, red cheeks. "Wow, Liella, nice call. Plus, someone who flirts with a woman who was just fighting for her life is tacky."

He fidgeted. "Sorry, Miss. There is just something about you that says you are fine."

"It must be that I am standing next to a child who has no business knowing what happened last night."

His eyes widened. "Geez. Right."

Mr. K came out of the house with the broken door surrounded by claw marks. Alvin hadn't picked the lock; he had ripped off her door. Her lawyer and employer was

actually bristling. He had her purse and nothing else. “Uh-oh, that isn’t good.”

“What isn’t good, Miss Penny?”

“I am guessing that the angry alpha destroyed my clothing in some way.”

The detective nodded. “Scent contamination. He was in rut.”

Liella looked up at Penny. “What’s that?”

“It’s when a male alpha gets angry and smelly, and it lasts for a day or two.”

The detective shrugged. It was an accurate description without mention of the sex drive.

She stroked Liella’s hair as Mr. K approached. He held up the bag. “Wallet, watch, phone. I am assuming he told you about the clothes.”

Liella looked up. “Does this mean we have to go shopping? Can we go to Auntie’s?”

“I called her already, and yes, we can.”

“And then chicken nuggies?” Liella looked at him with wide eyes.

“Yes, then chicken nuggies.” He looked at the detective. “I just have to talk to the policeman for a minute, and then we can go see Auntie.”

Mr. K looked at Penny. “Can you take her to the car?”

“Sure. Come along, Miss Kekerek. The sooner we are ready, the sooner chicken nuggies can happen.”

Liella took her by the hand, and they walked to the car. She watched Liella wrestle with the door and went to help her. “Try it again when you are six.”

“That is in two weeks.” Liella smiled as she scrambled into the car.

“Well, what do you want for your birthday?”

She stood there and listened to the wish list. It was sweet.

When Mr. K put his hand on her arm, she winked at Liella and got into her own seat. She made sure all of her cards, cash, and phone settings were where she had left them. She put her watch on with a relieved sigh.

“Your watch is special?”

“Yeah, my brother’s family gave it to me last year.” She smiled. “All eleven of them signed the card.”

Liella’s amazed voice came from the back seat. “You have eleven brothers and sisters?”

“I have one brother, one sister-in-law, and nine nieces and nephews.”

“Are some of them my size?”

“Three of them.”

“Can they come over and play?”

“I can ask them to come over, but you have to get permission from your dad first, as it is his house. And you will ask him when you are facing him and not while he is driving because you want to make sure that you are both paying attention and having a talk.”

“I ask him stuff in the car all the time.”

“Does he forget stuff?”

Mr. K smiled.

“Sometimes.”

“Then, for stuff you want him to remember, ask him face to face. Then, you can negotiate by watching changes in his face.”

Mr. K looked at her. “I don’t think it is proper for her to learn that right now.”

“She’s a tiny person in a world full of tall adults. Some very tall adults. Learning to read expressions is an excellent skill.”

He grinned. She saw his teeth, and against normal impulses, she wanted to touch the double canines on his upper jaw.

He glanced at her. “You are staring.”

Start here “Oh, yeah. Sorry. I haven’t seen double canines before.” She kept her fingers locked to together on her lap. The pull she felt to him was extreme, but it was really strange.

“Daddy has a lot of pointy teeth.” Liella confirmed it.

“Yes, he does.” She sighed and watched where they were going. She was sure they were getting close when Liella yelled, “Auntie’s store!”

A mall with a bunch of stores lined up on their left, and he turned into it with the green arrow.

Penny could hear Liella’s little feet kicking against her seat with excitement.

They parked in front of a boutique with a scripted sign that Penny was having difficulty dealing with. She got out of the car and took Liella’s hand for their walk to the store. It felt nice to have her purse back.

Mr. K looked from left to right, and then they all crossed the lot to the shop. A soft chime rang as they entered, and Liella bolted into the shop. “Auntie Gen!”

Penny swayed and straightened. She followed the little girl into the store. Mr. K was behind her.

They got closer, and the dark-haired woman with midnight blue eyes started with a smile that got weak and trailed off. Penny looked at the woman. “Please, allow me to apologize for my face.”

“No. I am sorry for staring. My brother said you were injured, but I didn’t expect...”

“Oh, neither was I. Your store is lovely.”

“Oh, thank you. I am sorry. My name is Gen.”

Penny took the extended hand carefully. “Penny.”

“Penny’s going to be my nanny when she feels better.” Liella smiled.

Mr. K asked, “Did you get some outfits together?”

“I did. I want to grab Penny and go next door for a few minutes. We won’t be long.” Gen held her palm out, and Mr. K put his wallet in her palm.

She came around the counter and then told Liella, “We got some new earrings that Karoline is putting on the display. We will be back in ten minutes.”

Gen grinned at her brother, and he just arched a brow before they left the shop and headed next door. It was a lingerie shop, and Gen went directly to a display with an adjustable bra. “I notice the blood mark on your shoulder, so you need a bra with changeable straps.”

“Oh, yeah. Bite mark.”

“An alpha mark?”

“He tried to make it a killing mark, so more slashing and tearing.”

Gen stared, and Penny shrugged. “I wouldn’t put out, and then I ghosted him and moved. He found me in the small hours of this morning.”

“So, how did you get in touch with Jax?”

“Oh, he had agreed to take on my unlawful dismissal case last night. I was attacked by the same ex at work, and as he was currently dating one of the administrators. I was fired. So, a friend brought me over to their place, and Liella and I hugged, we talk about the merits of the case, and my friend provided the video of the attack in my office.”

Gen shook her head. “So, this morning?”

“The police asked if there was someone they could call, and I mentioned Mr. Kekerek. This was related to the case, after all.”

“Uh, right. So, wait... you are Miss Penny.”

“Yeah. Rather messed up right now, but yes. I was Miss Penny.”

“Was?” Gen was getting bras and two sets of panties for each one.

“Well, they have been gossiping about me and even if I did get my job back, the parents that I deal with on a daily basis would no longer have respect for me, which would hamper my relationship with the kids. It’s such a delicate power dynamic that I have already begun mourning it.”

“What kind of gossip?”

“Well, based from Vanessa’s scream, it would be that I was screwing her boyfriend in my office. Considering that the video showed him pulling me out of my chair by my hair because he hates being ignored. Then there was clawing at my neck and tearing my clothing. Then Vanessa came out and hit me while he smirked.”

Gen sighed. “She was always a little too focused on male companionship. What about her mother?”

“Aya just told me that I was fired while Vanessa sobbed against Alvin’s chest. The video makes me so mad but also lets me know that it happened the way I thought.”

Gen shopped angry, and Penny said, “Whoa. I am not turning into a cam girl. I don’t need that much satin and lace.”

Gen looked at the dark rainbow in her hands. “Screw it. You are getting it all.”

“Great. He will just probably bill me for it.”

“Jax doesn’t work that way. You are the first genuine damsel in the stress to ask for his help. And Liella loves you. She always talked about Miss Penny. She likes your pretty hair, your dark eyes, and a few other things.”

Gen hauled everything to the counter and smiled at the assistant. She opened the wallet and held the featureless black card between her fingers.

Penny watched the total rising with horror, Gen put a hand over her eyes and whispered, “Don’t look.”

“Fine. Do they have sports bras?”

Gen cackled and a shop assistant returned, and Gen muttered, “Good.”

The checkout got three contributions to it, and then the folding and rustling began.

Gen kept Penny’s head turned away from the total on the till. The card went through with a discrete beep, and then Gen punched in an authorization code. She tucked the card back into the billfold and made a happy sound. “I do love spending my brother’s money.”

The collection was in two matte bags, and Gen took them with a smile. “I love shopping here. They just get the hell out of my way.”

She lifted her head and sailed out while Penny followed her in a daze.

They returned to Gen’s boutique, and the triumphant sister handed the wallet back to her rueful brother. Penny looked at him. “I am so sorry. She just... went.”

He looked down at her. “It’s fine. She knows what she doesn’t have access to.”

Gen pulled four bags out from behind the counter. “Here you go. Enough wardrobe to get you through a few weeks.”

“How much is dry clean only?”

Gen smiled. “Most.”

“Crud.”

Mr. K took the bags and said, “We have a weekly pickup and drop off.”

She nodded. “What is the parcel delivery situation where you live?”

“Standard couriers.”

“Cool. Mail to the house?”

“Box at the end of the drive.”

Gen smiled, and she winked at Liella, a gesture that Penny caught.

Liella blinked. “Does this mean you are moving in, Miss Penny?”

“For a while, until your dad finds me too annoying.”

There was squealing and dancing. Apparently, none of the other nanny’s were live-in. Liella started to make plans for sleep overs, popcorn, cupcakes.

Penny smiled. “We have plenty of time. Some stuff will have to wait until I am feeling better, and we will know that by when the colour is gone from my cheek.”

“Okay. Will that take long?”

“About two weeks. When the colour is gone, I am finished healing.”

“Okay. You got more purple today.”

“Yeah, that happens. It will be purple and red, then blue, green, yellow and then normal.”

“Can you write it down?” Liella was counting on her fingers.

“I can, as soon as I get a piece of paper and a pen.”

“I have crayons in my playroom.”

Penny smiled. “That’s right. You do.” She smiled. “Thank you very much, Gen. Thank you, Mr. K.”

Gen smiled. “My pleasure. I put one of my business cards in the bag. Put it in your phone so that if you need an emergency sitter, you can call. I don’t mind.”

Mr. K smiled. “She really doesn’t, and please, call me Jax.”

Penny fidgeted. “Fine, Jax.” She flicked her gaze to his, and his pupil’s widened, and he exhaled sharply. His posture straightened, and he looked electrified.

Gen muttered, “Whoa.”

Liella stared at him with wide eyes. “Daddy, are you angry?”

“No, baby. Why would you say that?”

“You look dangerous. Did Penny make you mad?”

Jax looked at Penny, and the heat was in his expression. “No, she didn’t make me mad.”

She looked to Gen, and Gen’s eyes were wide in laughing amazement. “No, I haven’t seen him like this before.”

Jax snorted. “Funny, Gen. I will be taking my ladies out, and we are going to get some chicken nuggies.”

Liella shot her arms in the air and shouted, “Woo!”

Penny kept her mouth shut until the bags were in the trunk and they were all in the car. She murmured softly, “Your ladies?”

He smiled. “In a general reference.”

“Uh-huh.”

They got fifty chicken nuggets and salads and a kids meal from the local takeaway. The moment they left the line, Liella shouted, “Start the clock!”

Penny blinked. “The clock?”

“One-oh-five.” He grinned. “We try to get the stuff home in twenty minutes.”

She watched as he kept to the speed limit but guided them home and parked as he said, “One-eighteen.”

Liella worked out the math. “Thirteen minutes!”

Penny was smiling, and it hurt, but she couldn’t stop herself. It figured that a single dad would have games that involved racing and time trials.

Penny carried the food into the house, and Liella ran ahead to open the door. Her little hands put the key in, and the door swung open. They walked into the house, and Jax came in behind them, the shopping in his hands.

“Everybody wash your hands, and then we are going to have a proper lunch at the table. Right?”

“Yes, Dad.” Liella ran off to the bathroom.

Penny washed her hands with dish soap in the kitchen sink, wincing as all the split nails and torn cuticles got soapy.

She sighed, and then two arms appeared on either side of her, and Jax washed his hands, as if the gesture was the most natural in the world.

“So, you knew that you speaking my name would have that effect?”

She waited and then turned to face him. “Well, you know what they say about calling the devil.”

He looked down at her and dried his hands behind her back. “What do they say?”

“He might just show up.”

He bent his head toward her, and the clatter and giggle of Liella made him sigh. He whispered, “If we get the settlement, I can heal you. Well, if you are my mate, I can heal you.”

She frowned. “What? Why?”

“It’s a fairly intimate method. It might be appalling to you.”

She pressed her lips to his ear. “Does it involve the tentacles?”

He nodded his head.

“Not a problem... unless you stop.” She had no idea where the boldness was coming from, but he had an astonished and pleased expression on his face. She patted his chest. “Chicken nuggies.”

He stepped aside, and she sat down near Liella as the little girl divided the nugget boxes and dips fairly, then gave Penny her salad and Jax his three.

They started to eat, and Penny asked Liella, “So, little miss. What do you want to do in the afternoons after school?”

“Can we go to the park? Or play soccer or paint?”

“Yes, yes, and yes.”

Jax asked, “You can really do all of that?”

“I am a certified teacher. I can do all that and more.” She waved a chicken nugget covered with hot mustard in

the air.

Jax blinked. “You are a teacher?”

“Yeah, but pickings are slim for good positions, and I can also do paperwork and general office shenanigans.”

Liella giggled at the fun word, and Jax had a calculating gleam in his eyes.

Chapter Four

His phone went off when he was on the last box of nuggets. He excused himself, and Penny grinned and pulled his box of chicken nuggets toward her. She was ravenous.

She pulled her phone out and went back a few months before she scrolled forward slowly, and she saw the red splorch for the following Monday. Five days to her heat. Lovely.

“Miss Penny, are you okay?”

“Yes, Liella. I am fine. Well, as fine as I can be. I just have an... appointment next week. It will keep me busy for a few days, and then I will be back to take you to school and pick you up.”

“Oh. Can you take me tomorrow?”

“You don’t think my face is scary?”

Liella cocked her head. “Not so much. It just makes me sad that you got hurt.”

“Oh. That’s nice. I am glad. It will be dark tomorrow.”

Jax came back and raised his brows. “Really?”

She slid the box back with the last two nuggets in it. She nibbled at the nugget in her fingers. He kept making eye contact, and she looked away.

Liella took her packages to the recycling box. Penny did the same, and then she was dragged outside in her sweats and flipflops.

The play structure was very impressive. Liella ran up and slid down the slide and then played on the rope bridge and went to the other side where she declared herself queen of the castle. Penny sighed and watched the little girl play, wishing that she could play as well, but she felt like hell.

Jax came to stand next to her. “You are looking grey.”

“Oh, good. I match the way I feel.”

“Go for a nap.”

“I need a shower.”

“Right. They accepted your terms, and I added twenty thousand for your car. They understand how badly they messed up. Vanessa was also attacked when he wanted to get into your file for your address. He was obsessed with you, but she still went to see him in hospital.”

“Oh. Hooray.”

“You knew.”

“Oh, yeah, I knew that. Why else would he date me with nothing actually happening?”

“There is something about you that draws certain alphas. Why did you go out with him?”

“Technically, I didn’t. He stalked me. Going out with him kept him calm and kept me in one piece.”

He was tense. “We will have a meeting with the administrators, and you can sign the contract and the NDA.”

“No. I will obscure the financial aspect, but I am going to keep the right to tell people as they have already told anyone who would listen that I am a whore who was using my position to seduce alphas coming by the school.”

“How do you know that?”

“I am still in the group chats for teachers and parents.”

“Ah. Can I see them?”

She opened her phone and passed it to him. She looked at the screen and yelped then opened the chat windows.

“What was that?”

She twisted her lips. “Standing paintball appointment?”

He snorted. “Really.”

“Oh, I will need four days off to scream in a small room.” She shrugged. “And one day to recover. After that, I will be back at work. I swear.”

She felt a caress on her cheek and leaned into it. It was cool and warm at the same time.

“Do you think they will be done with my house by then?” She rubbed her face against the shadowy tentacle as it stroked her cheek. It left a slick residue, and she blinked.

“That’s different.”

He smiled. “I can put it on you, and it will accelerate healing. Did they use nullifier solution on you?”

“Powder and spray. He was super smelly.”

“That is why I can’t smell you. What is your normal scent?”

“Um, it’s really light. Wildflowers at the beach.” She hesitated but then asked, “If I take a shower, can you help put bandages on the big injuries?”

“I can. How long do you need?”

“About six minutes. This isn’t a fancy shower. I am just trying to get the blood out of my hair and the memory of his hands off my body.” She shivered.

“I would offer to help, but Liella is rioting with excitement, and I don’t think I could keep her out of your room right now.”

“Shit. I have a room?”

He smiled. “It’s the one with all your bags in it.”

“Oh. Upstairs or...”

“Upstairs. I will distract her for a few minutes and then be right up.”

“Thanks. I will keep a towel on just in case she breaks in.”

“Good plan.”

She walked upstairs, removed her new clothes, and dropped them on the floor as she picked off the bandages against proscribed wound treatment, but she needed to get clean.

She kept the water cool, washed her hair, conditioned it, and then used body wash to clean everything else.

When she was clean and the water was clear, she wrapped herself loosely in a towel and towelled her hair before looking for a brush. She sat on her bed and brushed her hair. Her door was closed, and she kept an eye on it until there was motion at the corner of her eye, and the bookshelf swung open. Jax pressed his finger to his lips. Her cheeks got pink when he unbuckled his belt and unbuttoned his trousers.

Several tentacles came out of the skin around his hipbones. He kept his gaze locked to her face as he approached. The first touch made her inhale and then exhale in short gusts. He slimed her face, the shoulder wound, and her back. She held the towel to her chest as he caressed her back, and the burning ache eased up. She was going to still smell like an alpha, but she actually liked this one.

Penny sighed softly as his careful touches moved over her back, and then he stepped closer to her. His hands touched her shoulders, and she wrapped her tentacles around his wrists. He whispered, "So, heat on Monday?"

"Yeah. Now I just have to find a place to do it. I don't want to freak out that close to Liella."

He kissed the top of her head. "We have a nest. Soundproofed, and supplies can be added tomorrow. It can be ready when you are." He groaned. "The timing of this is not what I hoped."

"No shit." She leaned into his hands and nearly passed out. She was so tired.

"Okay. You need a nap in the worst way." He lifted her in his tentacles, peeled the bedding back, and tucked her into bed. "Sleep as long as you need."

She nodded. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

“Aside from me wanting to get inside you? You didn’t do anything wrong. You tried to do your job, and your employers brought a dangerous alpha into the workplace. That irked me.” He smiled and stroked her hair. “And Liella thinks you are her favourite person in the whole world.”

She smiled and rested, safe, warm and with the feel of Alvin gone.

* * * *

The door swung open, and Jax smiled at his daughter wandered in, holding a dolly made of floppy cotton.

He spoke softly as Penny started to breathe slowly. “What are you here for, Liella?”

She crept closer. “Is she sleeping?”

“Yes. She hasn’t slept since she was hurt last night.”

“She’s really tired then.”

“Yes, she is.” He had already put his tentacles away, but his daughter had seen them before at the beach. It was part of being part of their family. This is what he was.

“Can I touch her hair?”

“Be careful, and don’t wake her up.”

She reached out and touched Penny’s hair. “It’s soft.” She came to a decision and put the dolly next to Penny.

Jax smiled. “Okay, let’s let her sleep.”

They walked out of the bedroom, and he picked Liella up. She whispered something in his ear that made him answer, “Maybe. We will see.” His smile was on his lips for three hours afterward. Liella had given her resounding enthusiastic agreement.

* * * *

Penny woke up in the dark of the night, and she breathed shallowly until she felt the soft dolly in her arms. She sat up and let tears of relief cruise down her face, checking her watch and seeing that it was just after three. The same time the attack had come twenty-four hours earlier. She got up and pulled her towel out of the bedding, taking it to hang it up in the bathroom.

She remembered seeing a nightgown in one of the bags, so she picked it up, snapped off the tag, and put it on. She headed downstairs to get a glass of water, and after she had ingested three glasses, she knew she wasn't alone anymore.

“Hey, Jax.”

He was wearing pyjama bottoms and nothing else. She had the feeling they were just for her.

“Are you rested? Liella was worried when you missed dinner.”

“I feel better. Waking up was a bit of a bitch though.” She smiled. “I have to thank Liella. Her dolly snapped me out of the panic.”

“May I check on your stitches?” He walked to her.

She nodded. “Sure. You’ve seen it all several times anyway.”

She tried to pull the neckline to one side, but it wouldn't go far enough, so she pulled the nightshirt up and over her head. He paused and then he stood next to her. “Is this an invitation?”

“I want proof that I haven't just closed my eyes and I will wake with Alvin's hand around my throat and his scent thick in the air.” She looked up at him.

“Is that an invitation?”

“Have you checked the stitches?”

“Yes, they are healing well. Things are closing. You can put the nightwear back on.”

“Did you check my back?”

He made a strangled sound. "Turn around."

She turned her back to him, and he examined the two bite marks. "They are sealing as well. You don't need to worry about bleeding through."

She pulled the nightshirt back on and turned back to him. "Now it's an invitation."

He cuddled her against him and leaned down for a kiss. She followed his motions, tilted her head, slowly running her hands up his chest. His tongue slid across hers, and it bent and flexed in a way that made her knees go weak. He gathered her up and held her against him. She scraped his skin with her stubby fingernails and noticed that her sex was going through a weird metamorphosis. She felt slick and relaxed which were two things that she normally didn't feel.

She felt seeking touches on her thighs and didn't stop kissing him as the tentacles moved under her nightshirt and slid into her. She gasped and broke the kiss as the unfamiliar sensation of something wiggling into her confused her. It didn't hurt. It went in narrow and widened as he remained there and got thicker. There was definitely some stretching going on.

"Are you all right?"

She nodded against his cheek and gasped and trembled. She held onto his shoulders and felt more slow widening. "Ooohhh."

He crooned in her ear, and she panted. "You feel like heaven."

"You feel persistent."

He chuckled. "I will stop for now. Well, in a moment."

She looked at him but clenched her eyes shut when a tentacle circled her clit, prodding and slicking her. Penny whimpered as he found the rhythm she liked, and her hips rocked on the appendage inside her.

She gasped, the pressure inside her built until she jerked, her body trembled as pressure turned to pleasure, and she moaned as the soft pulses ran through her.

Writhing around her legs and lower back was like a slow massage. She drooped in surrender, and Jax kissed her temple and tilted her head back for another kiss. “You are the one for me.”

She shuddered with an aftershock and nipped his lips. “What was your first clue?”

“Liella loves you. She asked if I could find a way to keep you.”

“Warn me when she starts asking for a sibling. That’s when I start negotiating.”

“Negotiating?”

“One genetic kid and one foster kid. They need placement, you have a large house with a big yard and a live-in nanny.”

He raised his brows. “This sounds like something you will need to negotiate hard on.”

She laughed. “I can negotiate for a good cause. I will convince you.”

“If you can convince Liella without emotionally damaging her, I will consider it.”

She sighed and checked her watch.

He was mock-outraged. “You were timing me?”

“Well, we have to get it done in less than twenty minutes, or it isn’t hot.” She smiled.

“Cheeky. Well, you need more rest. Do you want to return to your room?”

“What are the chances that Liella will come into your room?”

“About ninety percent. We have a procedure.”

She nodded. “Okay.” She felt warm and dozy. “I think you should get out of me.”

He chuckled. “No. This feels nice.”

It did feel nice. It felt wonderful.

He walked with her still attached and headed up past her bedroom and into his. He moved straight to the bed, flipped back the blanket, and carefully arranged himself and her. She had to ask. “This doesn’t feel awkward to you?”

“Nope. You can even close your thighs, and I can still get in.”

“Wow. That can go on a t-shirt.”

He chuckled and rubbed her back. “Get some sleep, Penny.”

“Are you going to stay in there?”

“Yes. It is uncomfortable?”

She wrinkled her nose. “It feels like I have a slicked-up foam bat in there. Keep the squirming to a minimum.”

“You are dealing with this rather well.”

Penny looked at him. “Consider my last forty-eight hours. This is actually comforting.”

He frowned and then his expression cleared. “Tomorrow—or rather today—you and I will have a discussion.”

She nodded. “Sleeping with the nanny. Tacky.”

He patted her lower back. “Get some rest. You will need it.”

He rubbed her arm, and she tucked her head against his neck and let herself relax.

* * * *

Predictably, Liella opened the door and whispered, “Daddy?”

He beckoned to her, and she hauled in her blankie and jumped on the bed. She stared at Penny’s head and shoulder. She blinked. “Can I still cuddle?”

He grinned. “Yup. Come on, and I will hold you.”

Liella smiled and curled up against Penny's back. He held them both, and Liella giggled.

He spoke quietly. "Why are you giggling?"

"She's staying. You never have ladies in your bed, and Hailey said that when it happens, she's staying and gonna be my mom. That's how Hailey got her dads."

"Well, you probably aren't wrong, but I have to talk to Penny about it. She's for us, and we are for her."

Liella buried her face against Penny's back. "She smells good. Like wildflowers and you. That's how a mom should smell."

Penny's scent had started getting stronger as he remained inside her, slowly and carefully making room for himself. He had eased his tentacles out half an hour earlier, anticipating that Liella would make her normal appearance. Penny was perfect. She was sweet, smart, and affectionate to his daughter in a way that he knew was genuine. The two were the perfect pair. All those years since Liella's mother had left her with him didn't mean anything. Penny made it all better.

Liella was sleeping deeply, and Penny was snuffling softly. Jax felt a thousand feet tall. This was what he had hoped for with Liella's mother, but she had flinched away from him when his markings were exposed. He hadn't even brought out the tentacles, and their one night had been their last night. Penny was a very different case.

He checked his watch, and he had half an hour before Liella had to get up and ready for school. Best half hour of his life so far.

* * * *

Penny turned slowly to see the little person curled up against her. She stroked Liella's hair. An arm pulled them both back against Jax. Liella laughed. "Daddy hugs a lot."

Penny smiled and didn't mention that there was one arm around her waist and under the covers there was one hand on her breasts. "Having a good time, Jax?"

He chuckled. "I have my girls together. I am having the best time."

His watch pinged. "And now I have to get up, and Liella has to get to school."

Liella slithered off the bed and pulled her blanket onto her head. "Can, Miss Penny take me?"

"Sweetie, I don't have a car yet."

"You could take Daddy's car and then come back home with donuts. He likes donuts."

Liella waited, and Penny made sure her nightshirt was on when she sat up. "Good to know. Did you know that I know how to make donuts?"

Liella grinned. "Can we make donuts?"

"We can after school." She swung her legs out of the blanket and smoothed her clothes down to midhigh. "Do you need help getting dressed?"

"No. Daddy does a check to make sure it all works." Liella and her blanket ran out of the room making happy noises.

Jax wrapped his arms around her and pulled her back. "Do you need help getting dressed?"

"No, I had your sister as my personal shopper." She looked over her shoulder. "Don't you have to make breakfast?"

He narrowed his eyes. "She sleeps in until nine on the weekends."

"Hah." She kissed him quickly and wiggled out of his arms. "See you downstairs."

He grinned and flipped the bedding aside. She glanced over her shoulder as he turned to make the bed. Her channel clenched when she saw the tentacle markings that went up to his shoulders and wrapped down his

biceps. He turned and looked at her, a surprise expression lit his features.

She mumbled. "Later." She turned and left his room, walking to hers. She didn't want to distract herself by trying to find the conjoining door. *Wait, why the hell is there a conjoining door?*

She got into her room and went to get ready. She was racing a five-year-old and someone who had to make breakfast.

Chapter Five

Penny headed to the kitchen wearing the most casual of the outfits Gen had picked out. It was a long-sleeved blouse and a pencil skirt. “I am going to have to order some more practical stuff.”

Jax smiled as he stirred a pot of oatmeal. Liella was sitting at the table and colouring a picture.

The tub of crayons was in high circulation.

“Miss Penny, do you want to colour with me?”

“Sure.” She sat down and drew the bus that her brother drove when they went anywhere with the kids. She had been in touch with him, and he wanted to know more but was relieved that she was safe. She drew the kids and her brother and his wife.

A bowl arrived at her elbow, and she smiled. “Thank you.”

Liella said, “House rules. No colouring when there is food on the table.”

“Oh. Thank you for telling me.” Penny put her crayons back in the bucket and folded her picture for disposal.

“No! I want to keep it.” Liella held it to her chest. “Please.”

“Okay. I labelled all the people. It’s my brother’s family.”

She looked to Jax. “Do you have any chocolate chips?”

He frowned. “Why?”

“Because it’s the only way I can eat oatmeal. There’s a group-home issue.”

He nodded and went to the pantry.

She took a spoonful of the oatmeal and smiled. She needed ten chocolate chips, and when they had melted, she dove in.

Liella said, “Dad puts fruit in mine.”

Penny finished her oatmeal and then went to slug down a few glasses of water.

Jax smiled. “Not your favourite?”

“Not really. But I can eat it.” She shuddered.

Liella smiled. “I like oatmeal.”

Penny smiled. “Good. It’s good for you.”

Liella finished her bowl, grabbed her drawing, and Penny saw something familiar. “Liella, what is your picture about?”

The little girl looked at her and then whispered to Penny, “I don’t want to show Daddy.”

Penny took the page that the little girl handed to her and blushed. “Oh. Okay. It’s a good picture.”

It was basic but still understandable. Liella was wearing a blue dress and standing next to her dad. He was wearing a dark suit, and on the other side, Penny was wearing a white dress.

Jax said, “Okay, bug, we need to get going.”

Penny rolled up the picture and handed it to the little girl. “There you go.”

Liella beamed. “Will you come with us to school?”

She smiled. “Well, since I am already dressed, I may as well.”

They got shoes on, and Jax got his daughter’s snack kit from the fridge, and then they headed out to the car.

When everyone was buckled up, off they went.

Penny stood next to the car as Liella hugged her and Jax before jogging to the entryway where a stunned Vanessa looked at Penny and her green face. A moment later, the owner of the school came out with a cautious gait. Jax took Penny’s hand and said, “Don’t worry. You haven’t signed anything yet.”

She nodded and looked at her ex-boss and the person she had considered a friend. Aya looked at her and reached for her hand, but Jax was holding it.

“Penelope. I can’t express the regret for the events of the last few days.”

Penny moved closer to Jax. “Try.”

“Can we talk about this in my office.”

Penny recoiled. “No. I am not going back in there.”

“We want you to come back.”

“I can’t. I have been watching the parents here. A few kids have come by to greet me, and their parents pulled them away.”

Aya looked embarrassed. “I didn’t know what she was saying. We are trying to halt those rumours.”

“When you have gotten to every person that the rumours have reached and the kids can come up and say hello without being hauled away, I will consider it. You and your daughter have ruined my position here. If you manage to fix it, I will consider it.”

Aya blinked. “I heard you were bitten.”

Penny nodded and eased her blouse to one side. “I got my hand into his face to redirect so he didn’t tear out my throat, but he was definitely trying for it.”

She winced and covered her mouth.

“He also trashed my wardrobe, ripped off the front door of my house, and all for unrequited lust.”

She covered the fifteen stitches.

“How is it healed as much as it is?”

Jax said, “I have similar skills to your brother with a different methodology. Now that Liella is in class, I will expect you to crack down on any rumours and bullying. I have told her to expect and report it. If anyone comments on her new nanny, I will hear about it.”

Aya blinked. “New nanny?”

Penny waved. “Hiya. Since the rumours have rendered me unemployable and the rumour that I stole your daughter’s boyfriend in the office is all over the parents’ group online, damage control is going to be extreme and nearly impossible.”

Aya blinked. “The parent’s group has it?”

“Yeah. I haven’t commented because of the legal issue, but they are having a lovely time chattering about me.” She looked at Aya. “Because of her bad taste in men, my life and career are over.” She looked at her ex-boss. “So, that happened.”

Jax put his arm around her waist. “Your life isn’t over. This is just a rough adjustment.”

Aya’s eyes widened. “Were you two seeing each other before this unpleasantness?”

Penny stiffened in outrage. “I would never sleep with a parent while I was employed at the school. A friend brought me to him for the unlawful dismissal suit. Then I was attacked, hospitalized, and he was the only person I could call. So, I called and he showed up.”

Aya reached out and pulled her hand back. “Penelope...”

“I am one of those freaky betas, and he is the matching alpha. I have been aware of that all school year, but I never said a thing to him. But, now, no barriers in our way.” She leaned against Jax and could feel his confusion. Penny smiled. “I haven’t told him that, so surprise, Jax.” She smiled up at him.

He patted her hip. “We are going to discuss this.”

“Figured.” She looked Aya. “Watch out for Liella. She’s excited to have me in her life, and I don’t want her feelings hurt. As I am no longer bound by my employment, I will not be delicate in exposing anyone goading their children into being bullies.”

“You have a grudge against my school?”

“No. But I know that any correction of attitudes needs to come from you and your daughter. They won’t listen

to me. I am the tramp, after all.”

Aya winced. “I will get on it. I am so sorry for how this turned out. I never thought Vanessa would find a man so... horrible.”

“He looks pleasant enough... until you say no.” She smiled slowly. “I made sure his face matched his soul.”

“My lawyer is coming by with the settlement. I will sign it and call a parent-teacher meeting to clarify matters.”

She shrugged and smiled at Liella, who was frantically waving from the kindergarten window. She waved back. Jax waved as well.

The picture that Liella had drawn that morning was pressed against the window. Penny turned pink.

Aya looked. “What is that picture?”

“Oh, just a drawing Liella did at breakfast. Just her and Jax.”

“And you in a wedding dress.” Jax chuckled. “No wonder you changed colour.”

Aya smiled. “When Delun married Lexa, it was a quiet affair, but Hailey was delighted to get a father. Well, three, but her official parent is my brother.”

Penny leaned back. “What are you saying, Aya?”

She grinned. “Nothing. I will correct what I can and make sure I get the worst gossips in for a chat.”

Jax wrapped an arm around Penny’s waist. “We have to get her stitches out at hospital so they are documented. After that, I can complete the healing.”

Aya nodded. “You have a similar talent to my brother.”

Penny nodded and innocently said, “He doesn’t do it with his mouth.”

Jax wrapped her in his arms. “You are whetting her curiosity.”

She blushed. “I... think I have to go.”

She heard a soft sound and looked up. The entire kindergarten class was pressed against the window and giggling and pointing. The teacher was trying to get the kids under control, but she grinned and waved. Penny wave and smiled, then yelped as Jax kissed her, and there was more thumping on windows. Other classes were now involved.

Aya cleared her throat. “All right. You have gotten things started. I am going to be getting calls.”

Jax slowly lifted his head. “That was just for me.”

It had been a sweet kiss, but she was still dizzy.

Penny nodded to Aya. “Let me know how things go. I still have my phone.”

The principal and owner of the school nodded. Jax kept Penny in his embrace, and he walked back to the car. Penny blushed as she saw over a dozen moms and nannies who were watching.

Jax murmured, “Come on. They now know they can quiz me about anything. My number is on the phone tree. Can I discuss your situation?”

“Sure. You pretty much were there for everything.” He held her door for her as she settled and buckled up.

He walked around the car and got in on his side. Other parents were pulling out, and they all seemed to be heading in the same direction.

She looked at him. “You had to do that?”

He smiled. “You are lucky you weren’t up against the car. I kept the children in mind. Most of the families have alphas and fairly intense relationships with either omega or beta. The kids have seen people kiss before. The parents have never seen *me* kiss someone before so that will trump some of the gossip about you.”

Penny sighed. “Thanks for throwing yourself on that particular sword.”

He was grinning as they headed for the hospital. “You know I am stifling a comment.”

She crossed her arms. “Yeah. I guessed. Why not go to the clinic?”

“You are a victim of violence, and Dr. Polwin won’t make a fuss about the accelerated healing. He’s seen it before.”

“Where?”

“I was a police officer before I finished. I was at a few shootings and had to do some first aid, so I used what I had.”

“Is that why the detective let you into my house?”

“That, and I would have just shoved him out of the way. I was still on patrol when I finished my law degree and then went off to articling.”

“He was looking at me weird.”

Jax frowned. “He was?”

“Yeah, Liella plastered herself to me and told him he needed to be nice to someone who was hurt. He seemed to remember that I had been chewed on at that point.” She grimaced. “He was still creepy though.”

“Interesting. He hasn’t said anything.”

“It’s only been a day.”

He smiled. “Oh, yeah.”

She wrinkled her nose, and when they got to hospital, he escorted her into the admitting area and asked for the doctor.

“Patient’s name?”

Penny said, “Penelope Briden.”

She checked the roster and smiled. “There you are. Please, come with me.”

They followed the receptionist to an exam room, and the woman said, “Please, get into a gown.”

Penny got changed while Jax observed, and she used change room techniques to show as little as possible.

He folded her clothes and set them aside. “So, how are you feeling about things?”

“Things?”

“Us. Things.”

“Oh, those things. Things are going fast.”

He brushed her hair from her cheek. “Yes, but we are working off your own schedule. There is no way that I could ignore your heat, no matter how tightly we seal you up.”

“Ah. That.”

“So, why did you go red and white at Liella’s picture?”

“Oh, kids look at the world with the best case scenario burning in their minds. Practicalities don’t enter their heads.”

“Liella is perceptive, and as I have not brought another woman around the house, she is drawing inferences, and I don’t think she is wrong.”

She gripped his wrist, and her tentacle held him. “I mean, just because we are a match doesn’t mean we have to...”

She looked into his dark eyes, and the astonishment was blatant. Penny stared into his eyes and saw tenacles against the whites of his eyes. He whispered, “I think you know that it does. Now, why didn’t you flirt with me when you worked at the school?”

“Um, because I worked at the school? I am a beta working for alpha-heavy families. If I started getting hot in the office, it could be awkward. You guys are really scent-sensitive. I would have been fired before I could get the nerve up to present.” She smirked.

He kissed her ferociously, and she went limp.

A cleared throat got Jax to back off a little.

She looked at the doctor and licked her lips. “Hello, Doctor.”

Jax's eyes were still weird, and the doctor chuckled. "Oh, so you have a little mate. Finally."

The doctor asked her to loosen her gown so he could get at her shoulder. He grinned when he saw the mark. "What's the rush?"

Penny mumbled. "I am going into heat in a few days."

"Omegas go into heat. Betas cycle."

"Well, my semi-annual cycle is about to hit, which will leave me desperate and wailing for a four days. No food, minimal drink, and I am weak and aching when it's over. My period wasn't like that."

The doctor blinked. "You are one of those betas? I have been hearing about the fake omegas."

"I am a beta, just an enhanced beta. I don't pretend to do anything else."

The doctor chuckled and glanced down and stared. Penny followed his gaze and blushed as she unwrapped her tentacle from Jax's wrist. "Oh, how embarrassing."

"Enhanced indeed. I would love to see what else you can do."

Penny grabbed her phone and pulled up some raw footage. "I can do this." She turned the video toward the doc, and Jax looked over his shoulder as she used her tentacles to climb, swing, and whip a car into two pieces. Then she used one to grab a soda.

"Wow. Why is that stuff familiar?"

She smiled. "You may have seen the footage with a monster overlay. It is part of the advertising campaign for a new video game expansion."

"Right. I saw that a few days ago." The doctor looked at her tattoos. "I would love to examine them."

Jax shook his head. "No. They are the same as mine, just a different location."

"Ah. Well, I do have that data."

Penny asked, "You catalogue unusual alphas?"

“Mythical alphas. I can’t help it. I am fascinated.”

Jax looked at him. “Shall we? You can clip and talk.”

The doctor took the hint and swabbed the area before starting to clip and tug. “So, were you born with this adaptation, miss?”

“Oh. No, it developed a few years ago after I bumped into a certain someone at the game company. You know, dark hair, pretty dark eyes, and frowning into a file folder, he collided with me, pardoned himself, and walked away.”

Jax chuckled. “That sounds like me.”

She smiled as the snipping and tugging continued until the stitches were gone.

“Jax will have that sealed and healed in no time.” He checked his file. “You had bites on your back?”

She nodded.

“Pivot.”

She turned, and he opened the gown. She felt his fingers pressing against sensitive skin. “It’s looking good. I am sure that Jax will have you all healed in a matter of days. I will just snap some status photos, and you can get dressed.”

She sat and waited while the clicking took in her damage.

“Now I just need to take a picture of the side of your face.”

She nodded and closed her eyes. He turned her head and then took a photo. “I will make a note that she has been treated by an alpha with a healing affinity.”

“Why?” Penny held the back of her gown closed with one hand.

Jax said, “The judge will ask about disfiguring marks. The doc’s report will explain why you don’t have them.”

“Oh. All right.”

The doctor finished, made some notes, and nodded. "All right. It has been charming seeing you. Jax, it is nice to see you are thriving. How is that little girl of yours?"

"Growing with every day and planning how to make Penny into her mom."

Penny grabbed her bra and slipped it on under her robe, and the robe fell as she got the hooks connected and fluffed herself back into the underwear.

She slipped her arms through the sleeves of the blouse and fastened the small buttons. She grabbed the skirt and pulled it up her legs, then hopped to the floor and pulled it into place. She wiggled a bit and let the gown drop to the floor, then she zipped up the skirt and fastened the hook. When she had the blouse settled and picked up the gown, she looked at Jax's glowing eyes. "What?"

"I will explain it to you later." He took the medical gown from her and tossed it into the hamper. "In great detail."

"Well, miss, take care of yourself, and Jax, take care of her. You have waited forever for a proper match. Don't let her get away."

Penny took Jax's hand, and he squeezed it. Jax asked, "Is this one on victim's services?"

"Yup. She can have one more check. This one is good."

"Okay."

"Does she need an internal check?" The doctor grinned.

"No, I did one last night. She's fine."

Penny's face was on fire when Jax led her out of the exam room and back out to the parking lot. She muttered, "Did you have to say that?"

"Doc minored in alpha-beta mating biology. He looks at us as subjects that can offer commentary."

He walked her to the car door and smiled down at her. "Penny, may I kiss you?"

“You are asking?”

He nodded. “Liella reminded me that manners mattered. If I want to make a good impression, I need to be polite.”

“Lean down here.”

He leaned in.

“Closer.”

He bent further. She leaned in and pressed her nose against his neck, inhaling his scent and humming lightly. She whispered, “Oh, should I have asked?”

He turned his head and scented her. In her high heels, her feet tensed and toes tried to curl. His nose rubbed her neck, and she curled toward him. A heavy giggle was building as he rubbed his nose against her neck. He brushed his lips against her neck, and the giggle broke loose.

He lifted his head and grinned. “Ticklish?”

Her eyes widened, and she shook her head. “No. Absolutely not. Hey, can I raid the pantry to make donuts?”

“Nice diversion. Yes, you can.” He pressed a quick kiss to her forehead and opened the car door.

She got in and buckled up. He walked around to the driver’s side, and then she heard some one call out to him.

The detective walked up to Jax and spoke to him for a moment. He paused and looked at her several times through the window. He waved at her, and she frowned.

Jax looked at her, and then the detective and then he laughed. He shook his friend’s hand and got into the car. He buckled up with a grin on his lips. “What is your problem with him?”

“He was hitting on me while I was stitched up and covered with blood.”

Jax laughed. “He’s coming over for dinner.”

“Why?”

“Because he’s a suitable second for you, and while I wish I could keep you to myself, it will be frustrating for you.”

She glared at him. “You are already going to hand me over to someone?”

He turned to her. “That isn’t it. Your body is going to call, and I am going to answer, but I am a male, and you will either incapacitate me, or I will be unable to help you through it. You have had a heat before. You know that your body is going to call constantly for four days.”

She winced. “Yeah. Right to the end.”

“Would you prefer to be cared for and satisfied or desperate and trying to wake me up?”

She made a face. “The first one. I am a cuddler. He’s a complete stranger. You, well, I looked into you a bit, so it was less scary when I met you.”

“I am glad you weren’t scared. Keeping my tentacles under control around you is a part-time job.”

She pressed her hands to her cheeks. Penny could feel the appendages moving around her and inside, her and she looked out the windshield. “I don’t pay overtime.”

He laughed, and they were on the way home.

She felt someone following them and saw the heavy SUV in the sideview mirror. *Fuck.*

Chapter Six

When they got back to the house, Penny was about to get out of her side when the door opened and a hand extended to help her out. She looked at him and stared for a moment. He was looking at her with outward calm, but there was dancing excitement in his gaze. She put her hand in his, and he sighed in relief and helped her to her feet.

Penny walked with him into the house, and he took her to the living room. She blinked. “You know your way around.”

“Glad you think so.”

“In this house, detective.”

He chuckled. “Your attacker hasn’t woken up yet—”

“Good.”

“—So I have a few questions for you.”

She grimaced. “Right.”

He sat in an armchair and pulled her to stand in front of him. “That won’t do.”

He picked her up and cuddled her against him. She blinked and remained stiff.

He rubbed her back. “Don’t be worried, pet. I am not going to do anything.”

“You picked me up and dumped me onto your lap like I was a toy.” Penny crossed her arms and glared at him. “I don’t even know who you are.”

“Oh. I thought Jax would have told you.”

“I know you and he were police people together.”

He snorted. “That is cute.”

She shrugged. “I am not interested in the terminology.”

“Well, I am Thorstien Winghurst. I am a detective, and I used to work with Jax before he got all snooty. My parents live nearby. I have one brother who’s an accountant who specializes in auditing. His name is Banner.”

“Oh. Why the infodump?”

“I believe Jax told you that he mentioned we were compatible.”

“He didn’t say compatible, he said you and he had similarities. Based on your scent, you are some kind of ocean beast.”

He smiled. “I am.”

“What kind?”

“A big one. I smelled our compatibility in your blood, but that would not have gone over well at the scene. May I take it in directly?”

She sat and narrowed her eyes at him. “Where?”

He chuckled. “Your neck.”

Penny wrinkled her nose. “Fine.”

He moved her hair aside and pressed his lips to her neck.

She widened her eyes. “You are licking.”

“Taste is my thing unless we are under the water.” He licked and sucked at her skin.

She muttered, “What happens under water?”

“It’s a surprise.” He traced her skin with a tongue that didn’t feel right.

He raised his head and smiled. “You taste like dawn.”

She felt him slide her blouse back into place.

He nodded. “Jax first. I get it.”

She looked at him. “How is your girlfriend?”

He paused. “What?”

“I smell a female. Beta, no extra scent layer.”

His golden skin turned pink. “You detected that?”

She eased off his lap. “Yes.”

She walked away from him, and Jax passed her with some documentation in his hands. “Uh, Penny?”

“You two chat. I am going to get a glass of water.” She got a glass of water and drank.

Jax walked in and leaned against the corner. “What happened?”

“I caught the scent of a beta woman on him, fairly fresh. Whatever stupid check in my brain that you passed ran into a concrete building with him. I went from warming up to stone cold.”

Jax nodded. “The scent was his sister-in-law. His brother’s car broke down, and Thor is giving him a drive to work, so Eleanor hugged Thor this morning and gave him a lunch.”

She rubbed her head. “It would explain it, but I am not in control of this.”

She set her glass down and looked at him. “So, what do I do about it?”

Thorstein came into the kitchen. “He goes out, showers, comes back with scent swatches from his family. Eleanor is huggy.”

Penny frowned. “Scent swatches?”

Jax smiled. “They are for you to learn his family scents so that they don’t freak you out.”

Penny sighed. “Did your sister-in-law just have sex before she hugged you?”

Thorstein frowned. “I don’t know. I didn’t ask. Banner didn’t smell like it.”

“Well, she was horny. So... try and skip that on the samples.”

Jax leaned in and sniffed. “Whoa. She’s right.”

The detective sniffed, and then he tasted. “Bleah. Oh, that’s gross.”

Penny looked at him. “You still have to finish your day at work, right?”

He sighed. “Can I get a kiss before I go?”

She looked at him. “Take your jacket and shirt off.”

To her surprise, he peeled the fabric off and set the jacket and shirt on the counter. Penny blinked as Jax lifted her and set her on the counter a few feet away from the offending fabric.

Thorstein walked up to her and leaned down with her between the hands he rested on the counter. She leaned toward him, and his lips molded over hers, teasing her. She flared her nostrils and could catch a faint hint of his sister-in-law, but it wasn't as strong, so she touched his shoulder and opened her mouth to him. When his tongue touched hers, he groaned and shivered. She had no idea what she tasted like, but he was enthusiastic.

She touched his neck and pushed back with two fingers. He sighed and slowed the kiss, backing up gradually until cool air whistled between their lips, and she sat back with her eyes opened. Jax was grinning.

Thorstein had a stunned expression as he licked his lips. “Wow.”

Penny blinked and lowered her gaze then jerked it up when she saw what the kiss had encouraged.

“Uh, put your shirt on.”

He smiled and got dressed. He put his tie on and knotted it without looking, which was an excellent skill.

“I will discuss things with my brother and his wife. First, my brother. He will help me figure out what to do.”

Jax smiled. “We will have a family introduction day.”

She looked at him. “Can I invite my family?”

“Of course. We have tons of space. When can they come?”

She went to look for her purse and found it in the living room. She picked up her phone and felt roiling

nausea. She threw her phone to the couch and crouched with her arms over her head. Her blood roared in her ears, and her mind went blank. Alvin was awake.

She gradually got to her feet, grabbing her phone and opening it. She walked to Jax, and he frowned at her as he looked at the phone and then cursed. Penny got another cup of water in her violently shaking hand. It took both hands before she could get the glass to her mouth. She heard them talking, but she just got another glass of water.

She knew what not to say, but she thought it. *I should have killed the fucker.*

Detective Winghurst looked at her and said, “He’s still in hospital, under restraint.”

“Oh. Great. Glad to know he has his phone.”

“They are taking it away from him and putting it into evidence.”

“Delightful.” She got more water.

Jax rubbed her back. “Why do you drink water when you are upset?”

“Because it occupies me and doesn’t cost me anything.” She gulped the water down. “One of my foster mom’s got me doing it.”

She drank slowly and let the water cool her down.

Jax rubbed her belly. “That’s a lot of water.”

Thorstein looked at Jax’s hand enviously. He finally shook off his focus. “You are filing for a restraining order?”

“Yeah. The form has already been filed. Now we wait for a judge to sign off on it.” Jax sighed. “We will add the threats to it.”

Penny caressed Jax’s jaw and then headed to the pantry. “I have to get the stuff ready for when Liella comes home. Damn. I should get out of here.”

Jax's eyes widened, and Thorstein looked shocked. "Why?"

"Because Alvin's family is loaded, and they have good lawyers. They are going to get him out, and if he comes at me again, I am not going to pull my punches." She shivered. "Then I get locked up."

Thorstein frowned. "Why would you get locked up?"

She smiled. "I am a woman raised in the foster care system with no parents. I am maladjusted and violent." She shrugged. "I have a juvenile record."

Jax cocked his head. "Why?"

"Not all of my foster parents were in it to help kids. They tried to traffic me." She shrugged. "Thankfully, they were the minority."

"But your crime?"

"Oh, I beat the hell of that little shit and his wife." She grimaced. "Fortunately, I wasn't eighteen, so it's a sealed record."

"Does Alvin know about it?"

Penny looked at Thorstein and answered, "He mentioned something about it when he was trying to kill me, and we all know they are never as sealed as they are supposed to be for folks with money."

She got more ingredients and put them on the counter.

Jax wrapped his arms around her and kissed her temple. "I wish you didn't have any difficulty or trauma, but I am very glad you are here."

She checked her watch, and it was only five after ten. "Why is it that the horrifying days have time that crawls?"

Jax murmured, "Can we finish your healing?"

"Uh, sure. It might keep me from drinking."

He smiled. "Let's head upstairs, so you can feel a bit more secure."

She nodded and he picked her up. She curled against him, and he headed upstairs. She wasn't surprised when Thorstein walked up the steps behind her, but she asked, "Where did you go?"

"I locked the doors."

She exhaled. "Thanks. That helped."

Jax smiled. He walked to his bedroom and set her on her feet. He stripped off his shirt and unbuckled his belt. "This will go faster if you take off your clothing. It is going to get a little messy."

Thorstein smiled. "I don't recall you needing anyone to disrobe for healing, Jax."

Penny chuckled. "It's okay. These clothes are all dry clean only. I don't want him getting any goo on them."

Jax grinned. "It's slime."

"Yeah, well, I am taking my underwear off to save it from your mucous." She got out of her clothing and put it to one side.

He held his hand out, and Thorstein watched in shock as she walked up to Jax and turned into the embrace of his tentacles. His tentacles smoothed thick stuff over the scarring tissue. He eased her close, and she breathed in his scent and relaxed.

The other tentacles moved over her slowly, and Thorstein muttered, "That isn't fair."

Jax whispered in her ear, and Penny parted her thighs.

She pressed her head to Jax's neck and breathed in as he slithered into her delicately.

Thorstein thudded to the wall, and when she looked, he was seeing through narrowed eyes. He was watching with his hands clutching his head.

Jax asked her quietly, "Can I move a little?"

"Yeah. Maybe he shouldn't watch. He seems... upset."

The alpha in question growled. "I will manage."

"Are you sure? You look uncomfortable."

Jax's tentacle was moving inside her and another was stroking her clit. She closed her eyes and tried to blank her mind as she enjoyed the touch, but flickers of the texts went through her thoughts. They were vile, violent, and if he had his way, she would be dead in a number of brutal ways. She had never read pure hate before, but that was what ended upon her phone and was now stuck in her head.

Jax stroked her cheeks and kissed her temple. She turned and held him, wrapping her arms and legs around him and holding tight. He moved his hands over her back, and the sensitive spots were gone. She shivered and let the tears fall. Jax kissed her and lifted her chin. He ran his thumbs over her cheeks. The tentacles stopped teasing her, and they receded and left her alone.

Thorstein asked, "What happened?"

"She read the texts."

"Oh."

She looked at Jax. "I am gonna take a shower."

He nodded. "Go ahead."

"You don't get it on you?"

"Nope. My skin absorbs it right away."

"How about your pants?"

"Those I am going to change." Jax grinned.

She got up and walked to the bathroom and rinsed off, getting the tears off her cheeks and trying to get control over her emotions. She didn't want to slam herself against Jax because she was scared, but that is probably what was going to happen. Thorstein would be the same. Guilt was riding her hard.

She turned off the shower and wrapped herself in a towel. She faced herself in the mirror and tried to convince herself to just go out and get dressed. She steeled herself and went out, pulling on her panties and then dropping the towel to put on her bra.

Jax was gone, but Thorstein was sitting there on the bed. “Penny, not to be indelicate, but do you uh... shave?”

She pulled on her blouse. “No. Everything from the neck down fell out and stopped growing when the tentacles showed up. Bald as an egg.” She shimmied into her skirt. “Dealbreaker?”

“Uh. No. Not at all.” He looked at her. “Why were you crying?”

“I am using you two. I have never read hate before, and the threats were vile. I feel like I am trapping you two using... uh...”

“Sex.”

“Yeah, that. I have gone through life trying to be useful, not using others. This is going against everything I have ever tried to become.”

He reached for her, but she raised her hand. “Not until you don’t stink.”

“Ah. That. I don’t have much of a sense of smell in the air. It was why I was sent into your home first. My vision is exceptionally keen, but the scents of musk and blood are faint. Even faint, I knew what he had done to your bedroom.”

“Yeah. Great. I am really missing my wardrobe.”

“You have a lot of exercise gear.”

“Of course. Well, I *had* a lot of exercise gear.”

“Why?”

“Well, with the tentacles came a craving to use them, so I took up free running.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. The area I lived in was quiet, and I could really catch some air.”

He blinked. “You went out alone? At night?”

“Sure. I worked days.” She smiled. “I have some sports bras, but I have to get the address to send stuff here.”

“Stuff?”

“Sneakers and leggings. Jax isn’t going to let me shop for myself for a while.”

“Which is right. You are going into heat in a few days. We don’t want to lose sight of you.”

“We?”

He smiled. “It’s a *we*.”

She nodded. “You work shift work?”

“I am days but on call on rotation.”

She had put her shoes on and was walking out of the room. “I am worried about Liella. I shouldn’t be close to a child while this is going on.”

“Liella has a protective community around her. No one will get near her.”

“She doesn’t know you very well.”

“When Jax became a father, he threw himself into it. There wasn’t much chance for a party animal like myself to compete with that little angel. I faded into the background, and we communicate via text and phone to keep in touch.”

“Oh.”

She saw some bowls and whisks had been assembled next to her donut supplies.

“Where did Jax go?”

“He got a call and had to take it in his study.”

She checked her watch, and there was still half an hour before Liella had to be picked up. Penny picked up her phone and started to look for a car. She hated being stuck.

Thorstein leaned on the counter. “What are you doing?”

“Shopping for a car so that I can pick up Liella if Jax is busy. I am leaning toward small SUV.” She paused. “I guess I should wait until I have a link, right? If I am not

bound to Jax, there is no point.” She rubbed her temples. “This change of state is hard.” She had a thought. “Get your sister-in-law to go see a doctor. The smell that is repelling me could be hormones produced by illness.”

“Why would you think that?”

“They don’t seem right. So, either she is insane, or she is another kind of sick.”

Thorstein nodded. “I will mention it to my brother. He will be able to suggest that she get herself checked. He also knows someone who can sniff out illness, so he might have him over.”

She was relieved. “Good.”

She started measuring dry goods for the donuts, and she got everything ready for when lunch was over. She put all the items back in the pantry and settled them where they belonged.

When she was done, Thorstein was at the table working on his phone. He mentioned without looking up, “He’s taking her tomorrow. His car is ready to pick up this afternoon.”

His phone suddenly rang, and he got up to answer it. When he finished the call with “On my way.” She knew that play time was over.

He reached for her, and she held him off with a spoon. “No. I don’t want to get sick.”

He growled and turned to leave, stalking out of the house and locking the door before he left. He closed the door with a thud and having arranged her project into a small space on a corner of the counter, she went to sit at the kitchen table. A few seconds later, she was looking for cars again. She had a few favourites, but she leaned toward the blue ones. Picking a car by colour was stupid, but she did it anyway. She checked her bank balance and savings. She could afford a new car, but buying one used made more sense. Sometimes she hated being practical.

Jax crouched next to her. “Look these documents over. Sign them if you are comfortable. I got them to remove

the NDA about the facts, but as the truth is the only way to regain a respectable societal position, it has to come out.”

She read the document. It outlined Vanessa’s failings and culpability for the false allegations and dismissal, and it held Aya responsible for upholding the dismissal and the security breach that allowed Alvin into the computer system for her address and phone number.

The assessed penalties were itemized.

It was a quarter of a million dollars. She exhaled slowly, and then her eyes bugged out. The signature was in place already. “Why would she do that?”

“Aya felt terrible. They are going to hold a parent and teacher conference to make sure that everyone has the correct version of what is going on, but Aya is acknowledging that their actions not only forced you into dangerous work but also into a mating that wasn’t of your own choice in order to insure your protection.” He chuckled. “Plus, she is a daughter of Lady Fen. She has money to burn, and this is her formal apology.”

She looked at the number that was three times the original settlement. “That’s too much.”

“It’s what she assessed her personal damages to be. So, you can take it or not.”

She bit her nail. “My nieces and nephews do need a college fund. I am assuming Liella is taken care of.”

He grinned. “She is.”

She picked up the pen. “So, all I have to keep my mouth shut on is the money?”

“Not even. They are on full disclosure if you need it. Basically, they trust you to stick to the truth. Where is Thor?”

“He had to work.”

“Ah. That happens.”

She frowned at him. “I know you are working on this for me, but aren’t you working for Antonio?”

He chuckled. “He gave me a few weeks off when I told him you were going into heat and everything else that was going on.”

“Oh. Well, that’s... embarrassing.”

“Why?” He smiled. “In standard terms, it is more embarrassing for me to lose all focus when my lady looks at me and I still don’t care.”

She blushed. “So, I sign this now and then this stops?”

“We still have to get Alvin behind bars, but that is next.”

Penny nodded.

She took a deep breath in, exhaled, and then she signed, dated, and followed the little arrows as she worked her way through the stack of paperwork. “I am going to have to plant a tree somewhere to make up for this paper.”

He laughed. “Two more.”

She kept signing and twisted her lips. “Great. Now I have to redo my will.”

Jax looked delighted. “You have one?”

“Of course. I update it every two years.”

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but I think I am in love.” He kissed her lips and took the copies away from her. He whisked them away to his office and was probably scanning them, while she reeled with that in her head.

Penny contacted her brother and let him know that she was inviting his family to Liella’s birthday. Confirmation would come soon, but she was going to book hotel rooms for them. She needed to see them.

He sent back a happy face with a thumbs-up.

She smiled at the text and sighed.

Jax came back. “Time to pick up Liella.”

“Of course. Just texting my brother to bring the kids for Liella’s birthday. I have booked hotel rooms nearby

so you won't be swamped. She wants to play with a lot of other kids for her birthday."

He smiled and put his hand on her lower back as he escorted her to the door. "That isn't all she wants for her birthday."

"Oh. I am trying to get what I can lined up for after the... next week."

Jax nodded. "You are a prepared person. It's a good thing and comforting. I haven't been away much from Liella since she was put into my arms, but I think I could actually go and have a meeting at the headquarters without checking my phone twelve times an hour."

She smiled as she got into the car. She buckled up, and he headed to the school.

"They said they were issuing a cheque today, so Aya might have it for us when we get there."

"What?"

He sighed. "They feel very bad and want this wrapped up. If they dawdle, you can sue them in a public forum. They don't want that."

"Oh. Okay."

He drove her to the school, and they waited for the littles to be released in a tiny flock.

The teacher came out, and at Jax's nod, Penny got out and greeted the excited Liella. She swung her into her arms while the kindergarten class swirled around them with the kids greeting *Miss Penny* in excited tones. They were always excited to show her their pictures, and it took a while before grinning parents pried their children from the pack and hustled them back to the vehicles. Liella waved at her friends and giggled as she was carried to the car on the most popular adult in the area. Liella took off her little backpack and set it to one side, then got into her booster seat and waved at her dad.

Penny closed the door and turned, then yelped as Vanessa stared at her. "Mom got this ready. I am so sorry."

“Yeah, he’s texting me hate and threats right now, so that’s great.” Penny shrugged.

“Do you... do you know why he was obsessed?”

“Oh. I didn’t want him. I went out with him because he asked, and I thought it was time I started dating. I was mistaken, but he wouldn’t get lost after we broke up because he was a brutal nightmare, and he found me when I moved, so I moved again.”

“I didn’t know what he was.” Vanessa’s shoulders slumped.

“I get that. It doesn’t excuse what he did. Check his rap sheet. It is illuminating. I didn’t know he was out until he walked into the office with you.”

“I... can we discuss this another day?”

“Sure. You know where to find me.”

Vanessa nodded, stepped toward her, and then paused and stepped back. It was a good call. Penny got back into the car, and she held the envelope in her lap.

“You don’t want to open it?”

“Not until I can get sick immediately after.”

He nodded and headed home. When they arrived at their house, lunch was taco salads.

Penny slunk into the living room and opened the envelope, exhaling as the million dollars was there, made out to Jax Kekerek Attorney for Penelope Briden.

She exhaled and put it in the envelope and walked back to the kitchen where Liella was arranging the tacos into bowls to toast them into the right shape.

Jax glanced at the letter. “So?”

She handed it to him. “It’s for you.” She exhaled slowly.

He glanced at it, slid it partially out of the envelope and nodded. “Right. It was made out by their lawyer. This is standard. I will issue you a cheque.”

“No. I mean, not for the whole thing. Take out a fee or something. Add to Liella’s college fund or something.”

“Penny, at this point, Liella could go to university on the moon and have enough for a PhD.” He turned and checked the spiced beef, and then he watched over Liella while she used a plastic knife to cut up tomatoes.

“Oh. Well, for the clothes?”

He smiled. “My pleasure.”

She sighed. “Fine. I will use a chunk of it for crime scene clean up.”

“Taken care of.”

Liella blinked. “Daddy, Miss Penny looks *mad*.”

Jax looked at her face. “Right. A charity?”

Penny’s eyes narrowed. “Fine.”

“Will you rinse and slice the lettuce? Liella prefers long strips about a quarter inch thick.”

Liella was pointing at Jax, and Penny smiled. “Liella prefers. Right.”

She nudged her way in, washed her hands, and got to work. She supervised Liella a little as avocados were the next thing to fall under the plastic knife.

Chapter Seven

Making donuts with Liella while Jax went back for a conference call was a lot of fun. There was a lot of flour flying around, but when it came to tidying up, the little person on the step stool scrubbed carefully. The donuts and holes rose while they cleaned up, and when the donuts were fried, Liella waited eagerly for them to cool so they could dip them in glaze.

Penny looked at the excited and satisfied expression on Liella's little face. She was delighted.

"Miss Penny, I didn't know you could make donuts at home. Can we bring one to Daddy?"

"In a few minutes after we put the glaze away. We want to let the glaze get hard, so it isn't so messy to eat."

Liella looked at some of the holes. "Can we try those?"

"Of course. A chef always makes extra for testing."

They each picked up a chocolate-glazed donut hole. They tapped them together and took a bite. The little girl was so excited. "Miss Penny, these taste so good! Can we make them tomorrow?"

"I think that we need to only make them every week or so. That way, they won't become boring." She got a plate and a stack of napkins, put a donut on the plate, and said, "You carry it, and I will knock on the office door."

Liella carried it carefully, and Penny knocked on the door. Jax said, "Come in."

Penny opened the door and let the little girl in with her prized offering.

She heard Jax exclaiming in excitement and Liella laughing with that infectious giggle. Penny went to sit down at the kitchen table, and she answered a few check-in texts from friends. She grinned when she got a text from her brother letting her know they were good to travel for Liella's birthday party. The inflatable castle was

confirmed, and Gen had provided links to the birthday girl's favourite cake.

Penny chuckled, and a dark little head pushed under her elbow. "What are you doing?"

"Plotting and scheming, little one."

"Do you have pictures of your family?"

"Oh, sure." She flipped to the gallery, and Liella flicked through the pictures like a pro.

"So, Liella."

"Uh-huh."

"What do you want for your birthday?"

"A party."

Penny grinned.

"What else do you want as a present?"

"For you to be my mom and maybe a baby brother."

Penny felt that she had been whacked in the head with a rubber mallet. "What?"

"I want you to be my mom, and I want a baby brother."

"Uh-huh. Why do you want me to be your mom?" Penny couldn't stop herself.

"You are pretty. You always smell good. You are nice. Everybody in kindergarten wants you to be their mom, even when you worked at the school. The other moms even smile when you are around. They don't smile for anybody." Liella smiled. "Oh, and Daddy wants you to be my mom, too."

"Ah. Do you know why?"

"He really likes you, too. He thinks you are funny and smart and said he would even share his office with you if you wanted to do schooling. Will you get to colour at school?"

Penny paused. "Maybe not, but I would put in a break for colouring. Should we do that now?"

“Yes. Can the donuts sit on the counter?”

“Yes. At this point, the glaze is acting like a food container. It is keeping it fresh. Is there anything else you want for your birthday?”

Liella looked up at her. “Nope.”

“Oh geez. I am going to get those crayons.” She set Liella on the floor with her phone.

“So, when can I call you Mom?”

Penny got the paper and crayons. “Um, I guess that is up to your dad? I think he would feel sad if he wasn’t your only parent. He’s been alone for a while.”

Liella climbed onto a chair and smiled. “He says he’s done being alone. He has me, so he isn’t alone, but I think he wants a grownup lady.”

“Um.” She started drawing an archway in a forest with leaves and branches, flowers came into play. When she realized what she was drawing, she crumpled it up and carried it to the garbage.

“You should recycle that.”

“No, some things need to be thrown away.” She sat down and drew a rose on the new paper.

“It was pretty.”

“It was silly.” Penny smiled. “Sometimes adults are silly.”

They drew for another half hour before Penny asked, “Liella, do you have a back yard?”

“Yeah.”

“Can you show it to me?”

“Sure. We have to put the crayons away though.”

“Of course.”

They tidied up and went for a walk outside in the back yard. Penny smiled. “I love swings.”

Liella ran to the smaller swing, and Penny sat on the larger. The beams above had been reinforced, and she

smiled. “Your dad swings with you.”

“Not as much lately. He is busy.”

“Is it because I am here?”

The little girl looked surprised. “No, he is spending a lot of time with me now that you are here. I want you to stay.”

“Uh-huh. Why do you want me to be your mom?”

“I don’t have one, and you are better than the other moms at school.” Liella kicked her feet as she played.

“I had no idea there was a rating system.”

Liella nodded. “You are the best.”

Penny continued swinging, and Liella ran up to slip down the slide and then up again.

Jax came out of the house, and there was the remains of a donut on his mouth and cheek. “I was wondering where you were.”

Penny pushed off with her feet. “I like swings, and she likes climbing.”

He caught her swing and pulled her toward him while he bent down. She licked at the chocolate glaze and asked, “Two donut afternoon?”

Liella yelled, “Dad! I told Penny that I wanted her to be my mom for my birthday. When can I start calling her Mom?”

Jax blinked. “Ah. You will have to ask her.”

“She said to ask you because you are the dad and you might not want to share me.”

Penny blushed. It was always fun to be caught in her own words by a child. They were devious.

“Well, I think that you could call her that now if you like.”

Liella giggled and yelled. “Yay!”

She started going berserk on the play structure, and Jax looked to Penny and grinned. “Congratulations. You

are Mom.”

“I barely felt a thing.”

“I will do better on that for the next time.”

Penny’s face was hot and going to stay that way. “Yeah, you can stop talking.”

Liella made a noise and jumped off the structure and into Jax’s arms. “So, how long until I get a brother?”

Penny rubbed her forehead. “A while.”

“It takes time, and I will need the help of Detective Thor, and we will need to wait until Penny is ready.”

“She has to get hot. That is what Hailey said at recess.” She nodded authoritatively. “And then the daddies have to cool her down, and when they leave the nest, she has started the baby. Hailey’s mom had two babies, but I just want one.”

Jax shrugged. “It might not be a boy. We might not get one right away, and then it will be a few months, and we have to try again.”

Liella sighed. “Okay. I will ask Hailey. She knows how long it goes.”

“It takes just about nine months when it works. That is how long I waited for you.”

“Oh, with the other lady. She didn’t like us.”

“No, she didn’t, but she went her way, and I got you. Where did you find out about her?”

“Auntie Gen told me when I asked her where I came from.”

Penny started to swing.

“Daddy, what is for dinner?”

“We are grilling today because Detective Thor is coming for dinner.”

“Oh. Corn?”

“Corn.”

Tiny little arms shot into the air.

Penny smiled. This was going to work. She just had to figure out where she wanted her career to take her next.

She continued to swing and then stopped and stretched. She kicked off her shoes and ran across the yard. She had expected Liella to run after her; she was not expecting to be scooped up and gently tackled to the grass.

Penny gasped, Jax's eyes gleamed, and Liella giggled happily. "We caught you!"

"Uh, yeah. You did." Penny looked at Jax. "Somehow I forgot something important."

Liella laughed. "What did you forget?"

"That when facing daddies carrying little girls, don't run."

Jax's eyes were gleaming with amusement. "Important thing to remember."

"Yeah. Funny guy."

He kissed her, and Liella giggled.

Penny lunged toward him, and the kiss deepened. He rolled to his back and Liella, got loose and giggled back to the play structure.

Penny lifted her head, but he threaded his hand through her hair and pulled her head back to his. They continued kissing, but then Penny heard a shriek, they parted, and she flashed her tentacle out to catch the falling Liella, pulling her across the yard into Penny's arms. "Gotcha."

Liella's eyes filled with tears, and she clung to Penny's neck. There were sobs and an explanation, but she was chasing a bug and went past the protective barrier.

Jax stroked the back of Liella's head. He murmured to Penny, "I haven't come up with a method to keep her in yet, but this is why she doesn't play without me there. It was terrifying when she was three."

Penny nodded. "You could put in some bark mulch for protection. It will make the landing a bit more springy." She smirked. "It even comes in pink."

Liella lifted her head. "Pink?"

"There you are. Scare over?"

"Yes."

"Want to go swing?"

"Yes. Will you come with me?"

"Yes. And then I will tell you the tale of my cousin, Ven. She plays a sport called roller derby, and she can show you how to fall safely."

"What's that?"

"I will show you on my computer. Oh, shoot. My computer is at my house."

Penny kept an arm around Liella and swung on the swing.

Liella frowned. "You aren't staying here?"

"I... think so. Pretty sure." She kissed Liella's forehead. "I want to, but the older I get, the harder it is to keep starting over and over and over."

Liella frowned. "But I thought you wanted to be my mom."

"I do, punkin. But I am also saying that I might get confused or sad or upset. I have to fit all of my life into your life and your dad's life, and now Detective Thor's life. It's a lot."

She swung slowly back and forth, and Liella leaned against her chest. Jax met her gaze. "It's that rough?"

"It's pretty rough. I realized that when I was needing a quiet corner and didn't have one. My old place I had a small deck with a bistro set. I would sit out there and just process things I had seen. I am in need of a place to process."

He nodded and sent a text.

“Telling Detective Thor to do something?”

He nodded. “Yup. Looking for your computer. Your chargers. All the stuff that daily activities require.”

“Right. I also have a favourite coffee mug that looks like a kitten.” She didn’t, but it was going to be fun seeing what Thor came home with. Jax nodded and sent a message.

She kept her laughter in and rocked Liella slowly. She looked to Jax. “Does she still take naps?”

“Yes. Can you carry her?”

“Sure.”

Penny got up and walked across the yard to the back door and into the house. She felt the floor and remembered that she was covered in grass and her feet were bare.

She carried Liella up the stairs, and Jax led her to Liella’s bedroom, which was at the end of the hallway. Jax turned the bed down, got the little shoes off, and Penny settled Liella into place. They walked into the hall, and she exhaled when they were down the hallway. “It’s like you have done that before.”

He nodded and pinned her against the wall. “If circumstances hadn’t shoved us together, would you have even bothered to seek us out?”

She tightened her lips, and then she looked up at him. “No. You already have a child, so I am not necessary to provide one. I think that what drives me is to be needed and that isn’t really the situation here. I have needed you, and I am not a fan of that.” She grimaced.

“Go back to school. Change your career path to one you can do anywhere.” Jax leaned down. “But stay with us, please?”

She touched his cheek. “Part of me knows that I belong with you, but other parts are freaking out.”

“Do you think that your heat will make you feel... comfortable?” He asked with raised brows.

“No. I am doubting my ability to walk afterward, in fact.”

His smile was slight. “We will be careful. You aren’t an omega.”

“Oh. Yay. That is true. I am definitely not an omega.”

She checked the time, and it was nearing three. “When is Thor coming?”

“Knowing him, a moment after you let him in.” Jax smirked.

She blushed. “Funny.”

“He’s supposed to pick up a few things and then text when he’s on the way.”

She rolled her lips together. “He’s gonna be a while. You might want to tell him to give up on the mug.”

Jax smiled. “Let’s let him look for another half hour. I am curious as to what he will bring home.”

“He’s moving in, too?”

“Yeah, he will have the room across from ours. Your wardrobe is through the connecting door.”

She winced. “Is there a nest?”

“Yes, but Liella will go to stay with Gen next week.”

Penny exhaled in relief. “Oh, good.”

He cupped her jaw. “The idea is so that you have a place you can relax without fear or worry.”

“And so I can run for it.”

He nuzzled her cheek. “It would be a short exercise. There are very few things that are faster than a rutting alpha.”

She snorted. “I have seen the news reports. The guy on the pixelation sometimes is not fast enough. Alpha domestic issues always make the headlines.”

He chuckled. “Would you like to see the nest?”

“How long will Liella nap?”

“An hour.”

“Fine. Let’s go.”

She smiled, and he nodded. He took her hand, and they headed down to the main floor.

He walked to the pantry and swung a shelf aside, smiling at her surprise. “Keeping a breeding couple safe has always been paramount in my family.”

“Well, hiding behind the icing sugar would insure it, if it makes you peckish.”

He smiled, and they continued into the basement. “This is the secure path to the nest. There is another access point in the basement, also concealed. I thought this was more fun.”

She laughed, and they were in front of a blank wall. He pressed the door, and it swung inward.

She walked inside and looked at the comfy bed, benches, pillows, throws. It was designed to be soft and comforting. “Your parents were never upset by your lack of omega?”

“They have Liella to carry on the family name. They are very content with it.”

She smiled. “That’s good.”

She picked up some of the throws and folded them over her arms. “Liella would lose her mind playing down here.”

“Yeah, that isn’t going to happen. This is a no kiddo zone.”

Penny smiled. “Good to know. Do you know if she is an omega yet?”

“Definitely not. She’s pure beta.”

“Okay.” Penny walked over to the soft surface and sat down to roll over on it. It was super soft and bouncy. She exhaled and realized that she probably could physically relax in this space. Jax crouched near her feet.

“So, Penny, do you think you can be comfortable here?”

She ran her hands over the surfaces around her. “Yes. Pretty sure I can.”

His hand curled around her ankle and he tugged her toward him. “Pretty sure?”

“Pretty sure is all you get.”

He wrapped a hand around her hip and leaned in to kiss her. “I will take it.”

She smiled and kissed him then whispered, “How long until you tell Thorstein about the cat mug?”

He kissed her deeply, his tongue sliding along hers before he lifted his head. “Another twenty minutes.”

She laughed and kissed him, holding on as he teased her and slowly hypnotized her with kisses and caresses she would have killed for as a lonely teen.

Penny stroked his hip with her knee, and he paused mid-make-out to reach for his midsection. She knew the sound of his belt buckle, and the touch of his tentacles against her leg made her giggle. He had just gotten one of the tentacles under the elastic of her panties when she gasped. The next moment, he was inside her, and she arched up. He provided his own slick, so he went in easily.

“If you knew what watching you did to me, you wouldn’t be comfortable in a room with me.”

She arched and hissed. “Comfortable is not the word. Is there a support group for folks who have sex with tentacles?”

He chuckled. “Not that I have been able to find. On the plus side, if I use a topical numbing cream, I don’t even know it’s me.”

She paused, stared at him, and then laughed while the appendage inside her stroked rapidly over her g-spot until the laughter caught on a scream. Jax murmured to her and traced his lips over her cheeks and chin. Her

body throbbed around him and hanging onto him was all she could think of.

She was breathing in short gasps because he hadn't ceased moving inside her. When her body slowed, she shuddered. She looked into his dark eyes. "So, when you come, is ink involved because if it is, you are going to need special sheets."

He grinned. "I don't ink in this form."

She rolled her hips against him. "Are you sure? Feels sticky. Have you gotten me as open as you would like?"

He groaned. "Your words are driving me nuts. You are almost as open as I need you to be, but at this point, I just want to stay inside you."

Penny smiled. "Which will change the moment that Liella gets up."

"Yeah. You have no idea how much I am looking forward to next week." He grinned. "I get to be a grown up without having to cover up."

"So, does Thorstein have an unusual colouration or whatever?"

He grinned. "Does he have tentacles? No. His cock is more... well, you will find out."

She pinched his waist. "That's just mean. This is not the kind of suspense I enjoy."

He chuckled. "It isn't something I can really describe. Just like I can't describe my own."

She opened her mouth and closed it again. "Right."

He leaned in and nuzzled her. "But he does purr. Sort of."

She blinked. "Sort of?"

"I have only heard him do it after a big dinner with dessert." He pressed soft kisses along her jaw. "But I am guessing he will do it with you, too."

She blushed and caught his lips with hers. He was still sliding around inside her until her breath hitched, and

she arched against him. She whispered what she had planned for Liella's birthday, and he grinned. "I think she's going to love it."

"I don't think I am getting her what she wants for her birthday. What else can I get her?"

He gave her suggestions, and they gave her ideas, and then she was thrashing against him trying to cum. He didn't leave her desperate for long. She screamed and kept her arms around him as her body rioted, and he kept moving inside her.

When she slowly relaxed onto the soft surface under her, she swallowed. "I am beginning to see the appeal of a nest."

He smiled and kissed her forehead. "Me too."

The noise that he made while withdrawing from her was a very wet slurp. She put a hand over her forehead. "Oh, that is distressing."

He laughed. "Get used to it." He patted her thigh and reached to a cupboard. He got wet wipes and cleaned her up and then himself.

Chapter Eight

Everything went back into storage neatly, and she sat up in her damp underwear. Penny worked her skirt back into position and sighed. “Where did I put my shoes?”

He helped her to her feet, his own appearance serious and tidy.

“You think you will be able to manage in here?” he quietly asked.

She nodded. “I am sure I will.”

He smiled. “Let’s head to the family room and we can discuss a few things.”

“Don’t you have work things to do?”

“I am taking time off so we can settle in. I do believe I have mentioned that before.” He put his hand at the small of her back.

“Dude, if I am not acting as Liella’s proper nanny, or whatever else is on your assignment, I am going to need some exercise gear or casual stuff or something. I mean, I don’t even have jeans. I miss jeans.” She sighed as they walked upstairs.

“Ask Thor. He might be willing to take you shopping.” He smirked and squeezed her butt.

“If I had a car, I could just go.” She smiled. “If I got my scooter, I could use that.”

“We are not trying to stop you from travelling, but logistics haven’t lined up. Mind you, we know you can get into town on your own if you have to.”

“Without stealing your car.”

“Yes. Avoid that. I don’t have Liella’s booster seat in my other cars.”

“Wait. Other cars?”

“Sure. I have a collection. The others are all standard transmissions.”

She looked at him. “Can I see them?”

“Of course. As soon as sleeping beauty is up so she doesn’t freak out.”

“Right. Is it far?”

“No. The garage is just through the woods. I try not to make things too flashy, but the vehicles belonged to my father, so a mechanic comes in regularly to maintain them.”

She grinned. “I can help with that.”

“Really? You like cars?”

“The more you know how they work, the easier it is to negotiate for serious repairs. Same with home repairs.” Penny smiled. “I am very good at patching drywall and replacing electrical sockets.”

“Wow. Actually, there are a bunch of small repairs around here that need to be done. If you could make a list, we could get a contractor in.”

“I can probably fix most of the things around here if I’m allowed to.”

He brought a hand to his lips. “My home is your home. Fix it or bash it up.”

“Do you have a toolbox?”

“I might.”

She sighed. “Can you tell Thorstein to skip the mug and get the toolbox? It’s in my entryway, next to the shoes.”

He grinned and brought out his phone, tapping with a smirk. The phone chirped back immediately registering a new message. Jax laughed. “He’s got it, and he’s pissed. And he’s on his way back here.”

“Great. As long as I get my tools.” She started to look around and spotted things that needed to be fixed. Loose knobs, drawers that didn’t quite shut, small dents in the wall. They all made her eager to get her kit in her hands.

Jax walked them into the family room, and he sat on the couch, easing Penny against him. He answered his messages, and she napped while they sat in the warm, quiet space.

The thud of the door made Penny jerk awake, but she wasn't alone. Liella was curled up against her belly, and she also started stretching awake.

Thorstein walked in and saw her stretching against Jax. "Aw, not fair."

Liella stretched, mimicking Penny. "Hey, Detective Thor."

"Hello, Liella."

He beckoned to Penny, and she got up to walk out of the family room and around the corner. He wrapped his arm around her waist and lifted her to the wall, pinning her against him.

"So, was it funny?"

"The mug hunt? Yeah. I kept telling Jax to tell you to stop, but he kept saying later."

He looked at her with his pretty eyes glittering. He leaned in close and licked her skin, dragging the pointed tip over her cheek and down to her jaw. "You two were playing."

Penny squeaked. "Playing?"

He leaned back and gave her a serious look. "And then you needed a nap while he remained smug."

She blushed. "Did you get my toolkit?"

"It's by the door."

"Yay. Thank you."

He tapped his lips.

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his. The kiss deepened a heartbeat later as his tongue slid along hers, and she sighed and tilted her head to get the kiss to

the point where she was moaning and he was cupping a breast while he pressed her into the wall.

“Mr. Thor. Why are you kissing my mom?”

Thorstein lifted his head, his chest heaving. “Because she is going to be my mate, too, so that you and Penny will have alphas to look after you.”

Liella smiled and nodded. “So you have to kiss her, too.”

He nodded. “I do. Your father got to kiss her before I did, so it’s not fair, and I have to catch up.”

Liella nodded. “I am gonna get some water.”

Thorstein watched her walk toward the kitchen, and then he looked Penny in the eyes again. “Where were we?”

“You were going to show me my computer and my toolbox.”

He sighed. She looked at his resignation and slumped shoulders. Penny grabbed his jaw and turned him to her, kissing him with her arms around his neck. She felt his grin against her lips, and she realized she had been suckered.

She tried to pull back, but he stroked her neck, and she felt a rumble coming from his chest. It wasn’t a growl; it wasn’t a purr; he was rumbling hard. He slid her skirt high to press his hips against hers. She closed her eyes as she sprinted up the path of arousal, but just before she would have screamed into his mouth, he stopped.

She broke from his kiss and breathed harshly.

He whispered, “That was fun.”

She narrowed her eyes and turned to face him. “Dangerous precedent.”

“What?” He grinned.

“To determine that I can’t count on you for pleasure. Dangerous precedent.”

He looked at her and slumped. “Shit.”

“Not falling for that one again, but yeah.”

“Yeah. A better idea would have been arm wrestling with a penalty.” She squirmed. “Down now.”

He sighed. “I really wanted to do better.”

“Tell that to the five-year-old behind you.” She smiled.

He looked around and saw Liella. “Right.”

Liella was watching him with narrowed eyes. “What are you doing with my mom?”

Penny laughed out loud and went to get her tool box.

Thorstein blinked. “Are you going to run around fixing things?”

“Yeah. That’s the plan.”

He held up a finger and left out the front door, returning a moment later with a bag from a familiar sporting good store. “Here. I got you this because I figured that Jax would keep you in office-ready clothes all day.”

She took the huge bag and dropped it on the floor. She pulled out jeans, leggings, sweats, loose t-shirts, running socks, and a set of sneakers in the same brand she had at her place.

“Aw, sweet. This is great.” She jumped up and hugged Thorstein. “Thank you.”

He hugged her back. “Forgiven for my gaffe?”

“Yup. But remember that around kids, the opportunities are small. They are quick, and they are nosy.”

She grabbed the bag, flipped it over her shoulder, and sprinted up the stairs to her room. Chortling, she picked out a shirt and jeans. The socks felt like heaven.

She wiggled her toes and looked up at the knock on her door. She looked toward the door, got up, and went to open the door. She was unsurprised to find Thorstein. “What’s the password?”

He smiled. “Comfy jeans?”

She nodded. "Close enough."

He stepped into her room and looked around. "It is just as neat as the ones at your house."

"Just a habit I got into."

He sat on her bed. "Are you okay with this? With me, I mean."

She sat next to him. "I am okay with it. I have watched omega education films, have talked to friends who are upgraded betas and their alphas. I understand how it works. I just never thought it would be directed at me. It's like guns. I know how they work; I just never want one pointed at me, let alone two of them."

He sighed. "I guess. I hadn't thought of it like that."

"Well, unless you were in a locker room with guys who were aroused and eight-and-a-half feet tall, that would be the only correlation."

He laughed. "Yeah, that would be disturbing. I am glad you have more calm than I would."

She smiled. "I am okay with things. So, tell me... can the cleaners get my house habitable?"

"They are working on it. What the hell is he eating?"

Penny smiled. "Knowing what I know now, I think he's a skunk."

His eyes widened. "That would do it."

"So, how big is a leviathan in the open ocean?"

"I dunno. I grew over time. My head's about twelve feet tall and I have a lot of teeth."

"Wow, so you are either a giant floating head, or you are a hundred feet long."

He grinned. She saw the double canines and reached up to tap them. He blinked. "What was that?"

"I like your teeth."

"I like everything about you."

“That’s... I am sure you date regularly.” She frowned at him.

“Less than you think. He’s fussy.”

“He?”

He tapped his chest. “The leviathan.”

“Huh. I hadn’t thought about it. They are separate consciousnesses?”

“Yup. Sometimes they whisper. Sometimes they shout. The animal instincts are hard to deal with in polite society at times.” He asked, “Do you know what gave you the marks?”

“Oh, what is giving the marks in general? No. Not a clue. All we know is that it is localized to this area for the ladies. The guys don’t seem to have any geographic restriction.”

He chuckled. “I would apologize, but it means that we can find you.”

“Yeah. Most of the alphas finding their matches aren’t dicks. Some are, and some just need to understand what just landed in their lap.” She shrugged. “And some never thought this was possible and are treating the betas like gold diggers.”

“What do they do with their new mates?”

“They get rough or reject her, and she gets angry.” She chuckled. “I guess that is where the beast kicks their asses.”

“Do you know any unmatched betas?”

“Sure. A bunch. Some have physical marks, some don’t.”

“Is there a record of them?”

“I think the ones that want to find mates are in some kind of database.”

“Were you?”

“No. I knew where my mate was. Saw him drop off his daughter every day and was content with that.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I already dealt with Alvin. Being up close and personal with alphas again wasn’t on my wish list.”

“Ah. I pulled up his file.”

“Yeah. He likes torturing betas, but that is never the first thing we see.” She shrugged.

“How is his other victim?”

“Working as a bodyguard with my cousin. She had just gotten off a nasty breakup when she went for drinks with him. She was drugged and brought to my apartment, and when I got there, I saw the broken lock and called the police right away. The rest is in the report.” She sighed. “That was a rough night.”

“Yeah. He landed a few punches on arresting officers. He could hit.”

She paused. “Yeah. He could go from zero to rage in a moment. Imagine being half his size.”

“How was the deposition and testifying?”

“Irritating. I had to use holiday time, but I was glad I was there as moral support. We got through it.”

She paused. “You... were there?”

“Yup. I had just sat my detective’s exam and was on patrol. Calls were coming in from your entire building. Running into an apartment where two women were managing to keep an insane alpha at bay wasn’t something that we were used to dealing with. You two were battered and bloody, but you were still standing... at least you were until he was hauled out of the room. Then you two collapsed, but you still insisted she get medical attention first.”

Penny shrugged and was calm when she explained. “She was hurt worse.” He sighed and slumped her shoulders. “She was. She’s good now. Well, as good as she could be.” She paused, “So, what I am getting is that you arrived after I have had the snot kicked out of me. You need to get faster.”

“When we are linked I will be able to feel when you are stressed.”

She shivered.

“The thought freaks you out?”

“I haven’t had a lot of fun being bitten by alphas.” She grimaced.

He slowly wrapped an arm around her and rubbed her arm. “Mating marks are different.”

“Are they? My body isn’t an omega’s. I am not quivering to be bitten.”

He stroked her neck. “This is true, but as no aquatic omega has been seen in centuries, my beast is delighted that you have appeared. He understands your hesitance and will be very careful until he can lend you some of his strength.”

She blinked. “I can borrow it?”

“Yes. And from Jax as well.”

Penny smiled. “Does it weaken you two?”

“No. Consider it as you getting a portion of the adrenalin surge we will get feeling you stressed.”

“That sounds... interesting.”

“It is an excellent self-defense mechanism.”

She smiled. There was a small knock, and she got up to answer it. Liella was there with her dolly. “Daddy says it is time to get dinner started, and he needs both of you.”

“We will be right there, little bit.”

Liella smiled. “You look relaxed.”

Penny smiled. “Thank you.”

Thorstein wrapped an arm around her waist from behind and kissed her temple. “We are on our way.”

She was picked up and walked down the hall. Liella turned to the alpha. “My room is back there. If I fall asleep on the couch, that is where you take me.”

“Good to know. What if Penny falls asleep? Where do I put her?”

“In her room or in Daddy’s room.”

They were now on the main floor, and Penny was being held the same way Liella was holding her doll.

She was carried into the kitchen. Jax looked from Liella to Thorstein, and he snorted with laughter. Jax smiled. “I got the groceries from your truck and thought we should get started.”

Penny tried to get down, but she was held. “Come on. I am a very good cook.”

Thorstein said, “Your mates are trying to prove that they are useful and not helpless in the kitchen.”

“What? Were you planning on bench pressing the grill? I know Jax can cook.”

She looked up. “Liella and I are not helpless either.”

Liella squealed, the doll went flying, and she pushed her step stool to the kitchen sink.

Penny looked up at Thorstein. “Don’t even think about it.”

He laughed and carefully set her down on her feet. She slipped and slid in her socks to stand next to Liella, and they washed their hands. Penny asked, “So, what can we make?”

“The vegetables and whatever you like.” Jax smiled.

She looked at the offerings and took a bunch of things, including vegetables and ground pork. She got a bowl and soaked the vegetables while Liella bathed them like baby dolls. When she found the kebab skewers, she walked carefully with them while the other two were making rubs and glazes.

Penny grinned. It was a cook-off. She spiced the pork and made the skewers on the flat blades. After the meat was done, she washed her hands, and she and Liella cut the peppers into large chunks. They made long skewers of peppers, onions, tomatoes and mushrooms. Olive oil,

salt, pepper, and some balsamic vinegar was drizzled over them. They covered them with plastic wrap and looked over where the men were wrestling with steaks and ribs. They washed their hands and then got lemonade and went to sit outside near the grill. She winked and got the gas grill warming, and then she lit the charcoal grill.

When she was ready, she brought out the skewers, rubbed an oiled cloth over the grill, and then she got grilling.

Liella came by and asked, “Is it really hot?”

“Yes, that is why I am using this special cover to turn them, so my hand doesn’t hurt.”

“It smells good.”

“Yup. Can you get your dad to get me a clean platter?”

“Yes, Mom.”

Every time she heard that, Penny’s heart thumped. She knew that Liella was desperate for a mom, but it felt so right that her heart hurt every time.

Liella came out with a large platter across her arms. Penny got a piece of meat, blew on it, and tried it. “Yay. Done.”

“Can I try a piece?”

Penny blew on another piece of pork and waited until it was cool enough before she gave it to Liella’s baby-bird mouth. Her eyes widened, and smiled. “That’s really good.”

They got their food inside before the guys had even made it to the grill. Penny turned off the gas grill and covered the charcoal grill.

Jax and Thorstein watched them make it to the table. Penny pushed the meat and vegetables off the skewers, then went for her favourite part. Sauces.

The guys were using sous vide units to get the meat to the ready stage. Everyone ended up around the table, dipping the grilled stuff in half a dozen sauces.

Jax grinned. “Okay, ladies win appetizers.”

Penny was sitting next to Liella. “Now, we figure out which of them realized that there aren’t any starches to go with dinner.”

Jax and Thorstein looked at each other and made faces.

Penny got up and asked Jax a quick question. He nodded. Five minutes later the potatoes were in the pressure cooker and the accoutrements were arranged and ready for the emergence twenty minutes later.

By the end of the evening, they were all stuffed, and Penny had the meat sweats. Jax and Thorstein had given her bits of meat off her plate, and she knew alpha courtship when she saw it. Liella was asleep against Jax’s side.

Thorstein did the dishes, and Jax took Liella to bed. It was a bath night, and she was brought downstairs as Jax brushed her hair.

She was pink-cheeked and sleepy-eyed, but by the time her hair was dry and smooth, Liella was asleep again. Her pink bunny slippers were adorable.

Jax grinned and picked her up. “Now off to bed, little princess.”

The little girl was carried to bed.

Thorstein came out of the kitchen, scooped Penny up, and set her on his lap. “I liked grill night. I didn’t know that Liella could use a knife.”

“Just the hard plastic one, but the more she uses it, the better she will be at kitchen work. Knowing how to feed yourself and prep a nice dinner goes across all genders.” She sighed and held his shirt with her fingers. “A nice thing to do for yourself after a cruddy day at work.”

His warm hand at her back and the other wrapped around her thighs made her drowsy.

“It looks like you are drowsy from dinner.”

She mumbled. “We ate for two hours straight, and I ended up with your food and Jax’s.”

“I thought you were going to say you were stuffed.”

“Too tired to play with words.” She grunted. “Too full.”

He chuckled.

“Darn. I fell into your dastardly trap.”

He rubbed her back.

He tilted her head and kissed her jaw.

“Dude, I warn you, could be a kiss, could be a belch.”

His shoulders were shaking as he whispered against her mouth. “I have honestly never gotten that threat before.”

She kissed him and didn’t burp.

Chapter Nine

Being in bed with two naked alphas was... odd. Tonight was a test to see if they could manage as a trio. The rules about when Liella came in and how fast bedding had to cover people were discussed. The rules of the house with a child in it were definitely different.

She wasn't sure what was going on at first when Thorstein move down her body and caressed her breasts. Jax told her what he was doing, explaining that he was memorizing the important parts of her... by taste.

Tentacles started to move over her, and Jax told her that his focus was touch.

Penny knew that. She inhaled sharply when Thorstein went past her navel and between her thighs. At that point she lost track of things entirely. There was groaning, there was sweating, and Jax got tentacles into places she would have normally smacked him for, and then the first wave of orgasm struck, and she felt a burn at the side of her neck and the pulse of another orgasm ripped through her.

A pinch and then burn on the inside of her thigh ran through her like fire. She was going to ask what the hell that was, but her mind was distracted as she started to feel emotions that weren't hers. Thorstein was a cool wash of excitement, and Jax was a smug vortex. Penny slumped between them. She was doomed.

Her lips quirked. Happily doomed.

She woke to a soft sound in the hallway. There was a soft tap on the door, but she froze. Panic flashed through her, and Jax and Thorstein were on alert. They covered her when the door shredded inward.

She heard a growl, and she recognized it. Alvin.

Thorstein lunged at him and was hit to the side. Jax wrapped him in tentacles, and Alvin fought for freedom.

Penny got out of the bed, and he looked at her, foam dripped from his lips. She was content to let the guys wrestle him until she heard a small voice.

“Mom?” Liella stared at the group, and her little voice got Alvin’s attention.

When he turned his head and grinned at the little girl, control broke. Penny lifted her hand, and she sent a pinpoint stab through his eye, into his brain and scrambled it around. She put her t-shirt on as he thudded to the ground. Penny grabbed Liella and carried her away. “Sorry, sweetie. The bad man is down.”

Jax walked up to her wearing jeans, and he wrapped his arms around them both. “Thor is dealing with it. There is no visible mark on the outside of his body. What did you do?”

She explained in his ear, and he smiled and nodded. “A jellyfish.”

She shook, and Thor, wearing jeans, came to her and checked her for damage. She was being prodded along the emotional range, but she was fine. Nice and cold and relieved.

Jax said, “Let’s go outside and wait.” He took Liella out of Penny’s arms, and she made a sad sound.

Thor picked up Penny and carried her down to the main floor and out to the front as the vehicles came in silent.

The front door had a lot of damage to it, and she was amazed they hadn’t heard it.

When the investigating officers arrived, Thorstein took point and led them to the bedroom. Penny stood while officers ogled her, and Jax suddenly lifted his head and walked over to hold her. “Sorry. Liella is asleep in the car. She recovers fast.”

She nodded. “I should have grabbed jeans.”

Thorstein came back with bags, including a little backpack for Liella.

The gurney was wheeled in, and four techs and officers could be seen through the window to march up the stairs to retrieve the body.

Thorstein said, “We have to stay out until tomorrow. They will call when they are done. He wandered around, following your scent for a while. The tracker is following his path, and he waited until your scent was strongest.”

She muttered, “That would describe it.”

He paused. “And they need the clothing you were wearing.”

She looked at him. “Out here?”

He lifted a blue bag. “A change of clothes and your purse and phone are in here.”

“Okay. Where do I have to hand over the shirt?”

He took her to a beta who ran the lab area. She held out a paper bag in her gloved hands. Penny took the shirt off, and the woman looked at the red marks that covered her. It turned out that Jax had suckers on his tentacles if he wanted them. “Are you all right, miss?”

“I am fine. This part was fun.”

Thorstein chuckled, and she got a sports tunic on and the leggings went on with just a wince. The sandals went on, and she still felt cold.

She frowned. “Jax and Liella are going to Gen’s?”

“Liella is. She has school tomorrow. We are going to his beach house.” Thorstein held her close. “The need for the nest has been explained, so they aren’t going to rush it but are going to make it a priority.”

She watched the body being brought out of the house, and she buried her face in Thorstein’s chest. She muttered, “You were on time.”

He held her close. “I am really glad we were.”

Jax walked over with Liella, and they all stood until the tech said, “Sorry, but... pants off.”

Penny took their little girl and held her, walking behind the vehicles so the guys could have privacy and Liella could be cuddled by her unofficial parent.

Jax walked over in dark sweats and a sweatshirt. “Thor has very relaxed ideas behind clothing. How are you little princess?”

He reached for his daughter, but Liella nuzzled against Penny. “Mom’s cold.”

Jax wrapped his arms around both of them and said, “We are going to try and warm her up. Can Aunt Gen pick you up tonight?”

“Yeah. Tomorrow is pet day. People bring in pets, and I don’t want to miss it.”

Penny smoothed her hand over the little girl’s head. “That would be an important day. Are you going to draw the pet you want afterward?”

“Yes.”

Jax rolled his eyes. “I have been dreading that.”

Penny smiled.

Ten minutes later, Gen and her husband pulled up. Jax tried to take Liella again, but Penny nodded to him. She would explain it in a moment.

They walked over to Gen, who came out with pinched and worried features. Her husband, Dan, looked at the departing ambulance and whistled. He walked around and spoke to Liella. “Hey, peanut. You are going to stay at our place for a few days.”

Liella buried her face against Penny. Penny walked away from the noise and bustle, and she spoke quietly to Liella. It took a few minutes, but the little girl began to smile. Penny picked her up again, and Liella hugged Jax. She whispered, and Jax looked like he had been hit. He nodded, and then Gen took her with a smile. “So, how long do you think we will need to play sleepover?”

Thorstein made his way over to them, and Jax asked, “How long do they need it?”

“Forty-eight hours or less. There is no blood and no weapon. If the pathologist says it is natural causes, it is natural causes.” Thorstein smiled. “When I get the call, we come home.”

Liella smiled. “And when they come back, Mom will be warm.”

Jax ruffled her hair. “Do you want to make her officially your mom?”

The little girl frowned. “I call her mom, so she is official. Is that not right?”

“It is right for the house. There is some more paperwork for me to do to make her your mom forever, but I think we can get it arranged.”

Liella was hugged by everyone and handed off to her aunt.

When Liella asked why she couldn't come with them, Penny smiled. “Because we are taking Thor's truck, and he doesn't have a booster seat. And your seat won't fit his truck.”

Jax smiled, and Thor looked amazed as the little girl accepted the logic. When Liella and her little backpack were on the way, Penny exhaled and slowly toppled to the ground.

Thor picked her up and was going to call for help, but Penny looked at Jax. “Just five and a bit years of stress and fear leaving. I had no idea it was holding me up.”

One of the detectives came over to ask her more questions, so she replied with all involvement mentioned but her own. She mentioned Alvin's foaming mouth and the leer he gave to Liella then the seizure.

He nodded and smiled. “That's more or less what the others said.”

She looked at him, and he grinned. “I am Brooks. I get partnered with Thor frequently.”

She gave him a raised brow. “At work.”

“Right. At work.” He blushed.

Thor came up behind her and asked, “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. It’s fine. Brooks was just telling me that you partner often. I was just making clear that the partnership wasn’t going to extend beyond work hours.”

Thor nodded. “That is a definite. I am on leave for a week starting now.”

Brooks nodded. “Enjoy your family time.”

Penny grinned. “I will.”

Thor snorted. He took her hand, and they walked to the truck. Jax had the bags in the back seat, and when Penny tried to climb into the back, Thor carried her around the truck and shoved her across the front seat. She squirmed to the middle and buckled up. Thor got in, and the truck rumbled to life.

Jax asked, “Do you remember where it is?”

“Yeah.”

They got onto the highway in the small hours and headed for the coast. She leaned against Jax, and a tentacle caressed her jaw and went down the neckline of the exercise tunic to play with her breasts. She yawned and dozed lightly as they drove for hours until the sun was gleaming at them across the ocean. Thor drove them to the beach house, and it was another private manor with a white beach and open coastline.

She was yawning after trying to stay awake all night, and Jax hauled her out of the truck while Thor got the bags. There was a digital key that he said out loud as he punched in the code, and then they were inside an open white and tan space. It looked bright and comfortable, but she just wanted to nap. She heard thudding and scraping outside for a moment, and then Thor came in.

There was excitement in him, and he grinned. “Let’s spend the morning on the beach.”

She blinked. “I don’t have a swimsuit.”

Thor dug through the bag and held up some tangled straps and bits of fabric. “Yes, you do.”

Jax chuckled. “I didn’t know when we would get here, but I hoped. I know you aren’t aquatic, but we are, and days like this are what we live for.”

She groaned. “If I put on the suit, can I nap?”

“Yes. Thor put up an umbrella and a chair for you. You change, and we will get you some ice and lemonade.” Jax grinned. “Then we will charge into the waves and show you what we can do.”

She was set on her feet and rubbed her eyes. Thor got the suit and walked her into a large room. He peeled off her tunic and got the bikini top on, turning her and getting her breasts settled in the cups. He knelt, and the same procedure held for the bikini bottoms. She yawned as the black fabric was snugged into place, and he kissed the inside of her thigh where he had marked her.

She patted his head, and he grinned. “Coming down from the shock of killing for the first time?”

She blinked. “Trying to purge the feeling of scrambling his brains around and around.”

She looked at the tentacle that had done the job. “Is there a towel around?”

He opened a cupboard and got her a pale blue towel. “Come on, Penny. Let’s get you rested.”

She chuckled and followed him outside. He spread the towel on the lounge chair, and a covered cup with a straw was on a small table at her side.

He kissed her and grinned. “Are you comfy?”

She nodded. “I am comfy.”

He grinned. “Excellent.”

Jax came by from inside the house and kissed her before they both stripped down and headed for the water.

She watched them walk, and then they ran. When they hit the water, they changed.

She sat up in amazement as Jax became a squid nearly thirty feet tall, and only parts of Thor could be seen at any given time. He was really big.

They swam out to sea, and she was alone with the rushing of the water. It lulled her to sleep that was only occasionally haunted by Alvin and turning his head toward Liella.

Penny sat up and watched for signs of her fellas on the horizon. She could feel them relieved and enjoying themselves with icy water on their skin. She drank the lemonade and looked up at the high sun. They had been there a while, and as it was off season for the beach, Penny was cold.

She went inside and looked for something to wrap around her. She found a jacket in the other room and put it on, sticking her hands in the pockets. There was something in one, and she pulled it out. *Oh*. It was a picture of Jax and what must have been Eva, here at the beach house. He was wet and grinning, and she looked ill and fairly pregnant.

Penny put the picture back in the pocket and hung the jacket up again.

She settled for grabbing a throw off the couch and going back outside to wait for them to quit playing monsters. She brought her phone along and grinned when she got a photo from Gen and Liella.

She texted, *The boys have gone playing in the water, so I am here on the beach*. She took a photo with the drink straw in her lips and a funny face.

She got a surprising text and had to think about. Then, she got a heads-up that the thirst traps were being scattered throughout the internet. She shrugged and opened the attachment then blushed. The overlay had been black scales and a lot of tentacles that moved

restlessly. It would definitely appeal to a certain audience.

There was a rush of water, and she quickly put her phone down. A huge sea serpent was writhing toward her across the sand. She put the wrap down and walked over to Thor. "Who's the big boy?"

She laughed as his eye focused on her. "No, I am not going to touch you. You are slimy."

He opened his jaws, and his tongue licked her from ankle to neck.

"Eww."

His tongue lashed out and picked her up, then he worked his way back into the water, keeping her head above the surface.

A tentacle wrapped around her ankle, and Jax pulled her away from Thor. He held her against his skin, and she looked up to his huge eye. "Hello, Jax."

He wiggled happily, and it came across their link. She stroked Jax. "I would love to stay out here and play, but the water is cold. I am still cold." His weird lid shot across his huge eye, and he carried her to the beach. He let her loose, and she washed off the monster slime. She made it out of the water with blue lips chattering.

She staggered to the beach house and started a shower, waiting until it was warm before she stepped in. She could feel her skin again when she turned off the water and dried off.

She wrapped up in the sheets and snuggled in. The guys could play without a witness.

Penny woke up with heat blazing around her. She was bracketed on either side, and she squeaked, "I need to move."

They leaned back, and Jax smiled. "Thanks for letting us play."

“No problem. Well, a little problem. You do realize it is fucking cold out there?”

“When you went warm and then cold, we figured that out.” Thor sighed. “We normally hit the beach in the summer, but it doesn’t matter to us.”

“I would have been fine with more clothing.”

Jax nuzzled at her neck. “We like you with less clothing.”

Her phone started to chime in the other room, and it got more and more insistent. She groaned.

Jax sighed and got her phone. She thumbed it open, and the messages were from all of her socials. She was being tagged on the thirst trap, and the last message was from the tech who didn’t realize that attaching the human models wasn’t a good idea.

“Oh heck.” She sat up and started to flick through her social medial accounts, and she turned them off. She muted her emails, and then she flopped back. “Damn it. Promotional error.”

Jax scowled. “Someone screwed up?”

She looked at him and blinked. “Shit. Yeah, if I want to consult legal, that would be you.”

He nodded. “Shoot.”

She explained what had happened, and he groaned, got his own phone, and started to text the office. He paused and looked at his phone. The music was familiar, and her eyes got wide as she jumped for the phone. “Nope. Nope, you are not watching that. It’s not good for your eyes.”

He stretched his arm out of the way and watched the whole thing before he arched his brows. “Really?”

“Uh, yup. So, I have every tentacle aficionado who also games trying to ask me to slime them on all of my accounts.”

Thor leaned up on one arm. “What’s going on?”

“Well, Penny did a live action thirst trap, and they have put a kraken overlay on it, and then some twit attached her name to it instead of the character name.”

Thor grinned. “If it makes her this uncomfortable, can I see?”

Jax replayed it and handed the phone over. Penny tried to wrestle or block the phone, but Thor just watched it with wide eyes. When it was over, he played it again.

She swatted his belly. “Knock it off. You will go blind.”

He grinned and turned as his thumbs worked. She figured it out, “Do *not* put it on your phone.”

She wrapped her tentacles around his head to blind him, but he laughed. “Too late.”

Jax’s tentacles wrapped around her hips, and he slipped into her, but it felt different from the normal widening tentacles. This was thick, hot, and not that flexible.

She released Thor as Jax started to move. “I swear if you ink, you are a dead man.”

He whispered in her ear, “I told you, I don’t do that on land.”

Penny clutched at the bedding as he rocked into her. Thor guided her over him, and she took his cock into her grip and then her mouth as Jax rocked back and forth. Thor cursed and gripped the bedding so that he didn’t force her head down. It was polite, but when she flicked the small opening in his tip with her tongue, he went off with a groan. She ducked, but the arc splattered over her head and shoulders.

Jax laughed, and she growled. He used a tentacle to stroke her clit, and then he pounded into her until she howled, and he was right behind her. His own shout was buried against her neck as his chest heaved for air. Thor ran his fingers through her hair, and he chuckled. “Sorry.”

She snorted as hands rubbed it into her skin and hair. “Do you have any idea how weird that is?”

Jax chuckled. “It’s like fingerprinting. Liella would approve.”

She snorted and tried to get up, but they flattened her back onto Thor. Jax chuckled. “I missed a spot.”

Jax sighed. “I ordered them to remove the posts of all the images they sent out with model information. I also sent a note to Antonio as two of the ladies are in his pack.”

Penny nodded. “That will be effective.”

Jax looked at her and flipped her over. “Now, as for my retainer.”

She stared at him and said, “Fine, but I am charging you for teaching Liella to cook.”

“I charge more per hour.” He pulled her thighs up and parted them.

She muttered, “You have no idea how much I charge.”

He licked between her thighs, and she arched into his mouth. His tongue moved and kissed everything. No part of her was left without a caress, and she felt her body getting slick. Again.

Every caress made her creep closer and closer to insanity. She tried to jerk her legs, but he held them back and up. Thor stroked her hair and then stroked her breasts. She enjoyed the play until she shrieked and thrashed against his mouth. Her body clasped his tongue, and she moaned. “Okay, you win. The cheque is in the mail.”

He replaced his tongue with fingers that twisted and undulated. He chuckled. “I am not ready to hear final arguments. I need to hear the stenographer read back the last few pages.”

She wasn’t sure what he meant, but when his tongue went back to her clit, she moaned. “Oh, come on!”

Thor murmured to her that they were trying to get her body prepared for her heat. If they could convince her to take them when she needed them it would go very smoothly.

It wasn't the worst way to spend a day at the beach.

Chapter Ten

The trip home on Saturday was done in a comfy haze. The cleaners had already been through the house, and Gen's husband had repaired the doors. Penny sat leaning against Jax, and she asked him a question. "Jax, did you tell Liella that Eva left because she got cold to you?"

"Uh, yeah. How did you know?"

"Because that is why she wouldn't let go of me that night. She thought if she let me go, I would get cold and leave you."

Thor muttered, "Oh, my god. That is so cute."

Jax hugged her close. "I think that I have something that we can tell her about you."

"Were you serious about me legally adopting her?" It seemed safe to ask when they were approaching the city.

"I would love that, and I know that she would love that." He paused. "Would you love that? I am not sure that I even asked you."

She smiled. "I would love it. It is a quick start to a family and takes the pressure off."

"Oh, that is what you think. She has put in an order for one brother, a sister, another brother, and two sisters."

"Wow. Really?"

"Yeah, she's already written her wish lists for the next decade. And a mom that goes to all of her school stuff and that makes cupcakes for her birthday for her class."

"I can do those things. Oh. I got a strange email before we came out here."

"What?"

"Aya wants me to come back as the school secretary."

Jax laughed. "You are shitting me?"

"No. I am definitely not."

Thor asked, "You mean the place where *he* first saw you and you got fired?"

"Yup."

Jax kissed her head. "What do you want to do?"

"Come back at half-time for the rest of the school year, so I can take Liella to and from school."

"And then?"

"Figure out if I need a mat leave next year."

The truck shuddered.

"Thor! Eyes on the road." Penny muttered.

"Sorry, the thought of an adorable beta all round and soft with a baby is very distracting."

Jax's hand clenched on her, and he pulled her in tighter. "He's not wrong."

"So, will Liella mind if her first sibling eventually isn't her full sibling?"

Jax laughed. "I think she won't care if it is a potato, as long as she can dress it up and teach it things."

She smiled and that was a bit of worry removed.

The new door needed to be stained, but Dan had fitted it well. When Gen and Dan arrived with Liella, Jax opened his arms, and the little missile came out of the car and hugged him. She squeezed him around the neck really hard and whispered in his ear, then he let her go, and Penny caught her. She held her close and said, "So, how was pet day?"

"Oh, it was the best. I want a puppy. I drew a picture of it."

"Can I see it?"

"Yes, but Daddy says you have to go with him next week, so I have to go with Auntie Gen again." Liella sighed.

“It will only happen two times a year at the most. It is like a beta honeymoon. A time when the adults go away, so they get used to each other.”

Liella blinked. “I thought that was why you were sleeping in Daddy’s room.”

“Oh, remember I was hurt? He was healing me.”

“Oh. Right. Your face was blue.”

“Yes. My face was blue.”

She set her down and said, “Do you want to have some hot cocoa?”

“Yes, please.”

“Then thank Gen and Dan for keeping you for the few day and tell them you are looking forward to next week.”

“Why?”

“Because it will make them feel good.” She smiled, and Liella ran over to talk to Gen and Dan.

Thor walked up to her and hugged her. “That was a good thing.”

“Yeah, you won’t be thinking so kindly of me when we check with Jax if we can get a dog, and you are assigned to find a nice big dog that looks cute in puppy form but is protective and good with kids.”

He grinned. “I have a cousin who is a registered breeder. They might have a litter ready to find homes.”

“First, we ask Jax. But this will be a way for you to buy your way into Liella’s affections.”

“Do I have to do that?”

“Dude, she’s five. A dog that is taller than she is will remind her about you every time she sees it. Jax looks like her, and I look like her, so it is easy for her to accept that I have a place in her life.”

Thor blinked. “Right. Good point.”

Liella was holding a picture in front of Jax and pointing out the puppy dimensions.

Penny nodded to the father-daughter moment. “She’s going for the hard sell.”

Thor smiled.

“I owe her some hot chocolate. ‘scuse me.”

She headed inside and inhaled the smell of wood. She loved woodworking.

She walked into the kitchen, and the place smelled extremely clean.

She got a pot, some chocolate, milk, cream, and a whisk. While the milk was heating, she found some marshmallows and made enough for all of them. It was a nice big pot.

She hummed, found some vanilla and a dash of cinnamon, and kept working on her project until the chocolate was frothy, smelled amazing, and in four mugs topped with marshmallows. She walked to the door and saw Gen and Dan were still there. “Does anyone want hot chocolate?”

She poured two more mugs when the in-laws walked in and dotted them all with marshmallows. They all gathered around the table and sipped.

Liella had insisted that her mom sit next to her dad. Gen had looked on with astonished amusement, and Dan quietly sipped at the hot chocolate.

They had a nice family moment while Jax and Gen were talking about their parents. Gen looked at Penny. “Do you have a big family?”

“I have a brother. He’s married, and they have nine foster children. They are going to be coming to meet Liella soon.”

Gen smiled. “Right. So, you three are going to have a honeymoon this week?”

Penny blushed. “Yeah, it seemed the easiest descriptor.”

Jax sighed and turned to Liella. “Penny is about to go into heat.”

The little girl's eyes widened. "Oh, you are trying for a baby."

"Yes, nugget. We are. That is why Thor joined us, in case all the trying makes me tired."

Penny smacked her head with her palm.

Jax ruffled her hair. "You have to stop thinking like a beta. Liella learned all this at school. There are a lot of alpha-omega families who have kids at that school."

"I am a beta." She mumbled it into her hand.

"You were. Now you are something else."

She finished her hot chocolate, and Thor took the mug away. Jax thanked his sister and her husband again, and Gen grinned. "This is the most appreciated I have felt in years. No problem on taking her for Sunday night."

Penny raised her head. "I will bring cupcakes on Friday."

Liella squealed and clapped.

Jax frowned. "Will you be up for it?"

"Yeah, if not, you can help."

Thor smiled. "I can make cupcakes."

"Great. Someone can lend me a car tomorrow, so I can go get stuff for it? I think we drank most of the chocolate today."

Thor smiled. "It was good."

Jax nodded. "It was. Make a list. We will get the groceries delivered."

Penny looked at him. "I am doing something on my own. You can come with me, but I am driving."

He frowned, blinked, and leaned back. "Right. We have been treating you like a captive. You are going to be closer to your heat tomorrow, and it isn't really safe for you to be running around."

She thumbed her way around on her phone. "Right. The nearest all-night market is only fifteen minutes

away. Thor, give me the keys to the truck.”

He sighed. “I will drive. Just tell me where.”

They got up, Jax blinked, and Liella frowned. “Where are you going, Mom?”

“I am going to the store. I live with you, not for you, your dad can explain the difference. See you in an hour or less.”

When they were on the way, Thor asked, “What was that?”

“I am about to spend close to a week trapped in a box with two horny alphas. I just want to do something normal before that starts.”

He sighed. “I’ve got it.”

“Plus, the cupcakes have to be ready to go for Friday morning.” She smiled. “It’s a huge thing for kindergarten kids. It is the first mass socialization where they are providing the treats.”

“Oh. Got it. So, this grocery run is making you feel normal.”

“Yup. And I am also making four gluten-free, sugar-free cupcakes for the kids with dietary restrictions.”

He chuckled. “You take this seriously.”

“Oh, you have no idea how serious this is.”

They made it to the store, she got a cart, and ten minutes later, she was standing in line. Thor was blinking in surprise. “That was faster than I thought.”

“I know what I want when I see it.”

She moved her items onto the conveyor belt and pushed the cart through. A rogue chocolate bar dropped onto the belt with her groceries.

Thor smiled. “Tax for gas.”

She nodded. “Fine, but you have to share. Jax’s house is short on junk food.”

He grinned, and another chocolate bar appeared. She snorted. “Oh, this is where you don’t share.”

He laughed and hugged her, pressing a kiss to the top of her head. The clerk bagged the groceries while watching them with a smile. When it came to paying, a huge hand suddenly blocked her card, and she heard a beep.

“Really?” She kicked him in the shin. Then she glared at him and said, “Thank you.”

He laughed. “Good thing you are still wearing flipflops. I will rub your feet when we get home.”

The beta clerks looked at them as he carried the groceries and sighed. Penny said, “Don’t let this fool you, he’s a butt head.”

Thor picked her up and carried her out with her drumming her fingers on his forearm.

He was snickering. “My mom is going to kill me.”

“Why?”

“I didn’t tell her about you, and she owns the store. She’s going to hear about it and check the security camera.”

“Oh, dear. Good thing or bad thing?”

He started the car and grinned. “My mom killing me?”

She shrugged. “Still haven’t heard the answer.”

“Shut up, Penny.”

She laughed, and they headed home. They had been driving for five minutes when his phone rang, and he rolled a look to her. The display said *Mom calling*.

“Hey, Mom. How are you doing?”

“Thorstein Winghurst! What were you doing carrying that young woman out of the checkout?”

“She was the free gift with purchase, wasn’t she?” He grinned.

“She didn’t look impressed with you. Who is she?”

“Her name is Penny, and she’s my mate. I share her with Jax. You remember him.”

“You have a mate? Get your ass back here so I can meet her.”

He smiled. “Yes, Mom.” He disconnected the call and grinned. “Her name is Magda.”

“Oh. Good. Nice to know.”

They did a U-turn and were back in the parking lot in five minutes. There was a woman with honey-brown hair in a thick braid waiting for them. She was wearing a white button-down shirt and black slacks. Penny smiled when she saw the hot pink and gold sneakers.

She slithered out of the truck and walked around to stand next to Thor. He took her hand and went to introduce her to his mother. Magda looked her over, and then Penny was caught up in a bear hug by a woman her own size. She huffed and looked to Thor. “I see where you get it.”

He grinned. “Mom, that is Penny. Penny, that is Magda Winghurst. My little mom.”

Magda set her on her feet. “Call me Mama.”

“Uh, Mama. It is nice to meet you.”

Magda cupped her jaw and turned her head. “You are going to make very cute kids.”

Thor sighed. “She’s a shared mate, Ma.”

“Yeah, but she’s adorable. She is definitely going to make cute kids.” Magda looked at Thor. “Now, refresh me on Jax?”

He sighed again and took out his phone, showing her something. “Oh, my goodness. This little girl is so cute. Is it his?”

Penny paused. “The little girl is the daughter of my heart, not body. I have just started up with her dad and Thor.”

She pulled out her family and asked Jax if they could invite Thor's family to the party the following Saturday. When he sent an agreement, she grinned. "Okay, all families will meet next Saturday at Liella's birthday party. There will be plenty of kids running and shrieking and a bouncy castle." Penny grinned. "And cake and maybe pony rides. It depends on when my heat ends. Party starts around two."

Magda nodded. "I will coordinate with you during the week."

Penny opened her mouth. "Uhhh."

"Mom, Penny is going to be out of touch this week. And I am on holiday, and Jax is as well. We will all be out of touch until Thursday."

She laughed. "That sounds like a heat."

Penny blushed. "Yeah, sounds like. Feels like it, too. Desperation, hunger, black outs, the whole works. A few days and then it's over." She shrugged.

Magda blinked. "So, then... there is a high chance of you getting pregnant."

"Eighty percent if they do it right." Her tone was wry.

Thor wrapped his arm around her. "What constitutes doing it wrong?"

She looked at him. "How's my hair?"

He grinned, snorted, and then fell over laughing.

Magda looked at Penny. "Inside joke?"

Penny shook her head, "No, he definitely wasn't inside."

She blurted out a laugh and helped her son to his feet. Penny smiled. "Well, it has been a rough couple of days, and Thor is going to need his rest if his aim is to improve."

Magda finished snickering. "I think I like you a lot, Penny."

Penny hugged Magda and grinned. “Nice meeting you, too, Mama Winghurst.”

Magda paused. “I don’t suppose you are going to marry one of them?”

“I don’t think it is strictly necessary, is it?”

“No, but do you have any kind of registration or formal agreement?”

Penny got nervous. “No. We don’t. You are making me a little uneasy.”

Magda blinked. “Shit. I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“No, no. It’s something I should have known. I have heard enough families discuss that kind of thing; I just never attached it to myself.” She shrugged. “Too late for that.”

Thor pulled her to him. “It normally isn’t done in these cases.”

“No. As long as you two declare for the kids that are yours. It will be cool, and they get legal support. Rough start all the way around.” Penny smiled. “I have been in rougher situations.”

“I think we need to discuss this stuff. Sorry, Mama. Got to go.”

“Go. Talk it over. Send me the address and time.” Magda smiled. “I love a good party.”

Thor let go of Penny and hugged his mother then took Penny’s hand. He tucked her back in the truck. He kissed her softly and closed the door.

She slid over to the driver’s seat and held out her hand when he opened the door. “Keys.”

He locked eyes with her and started the truck with the fob. She scooted the seat to a comfortable position, and when he was grumbling and buckled up, she put the truck in gear, and they were on their way back home.

Thor observed. “You have driven a truck before.”

“Yup. I can also drive standard.”

He chuckled. "That must make Jax nervous."

"Not yet, but it will."

"Why do you have a relationship with vehicles?"

"One of the best foster homes I was at when I was sixteen. Mr. Johnston told me that if I was going to start dating and a boy said he had car trouble, I had better be able to fix it."

Thor chuckled. "That must have been surprising."

"It came up twice. I stopped getting asked out after that. Everybody thinks that foster kids are an easy target. Between the mechanic skills and me holding the tire iron, it kept invitations out to a minimum."

Thor was still grinning. "If I ever meet Mr. Johnston, I want to shake his hand."

"Sorry. He passed away five years ago. He was a great guy. His wife taught me to cook. They were determined to make me as self-sufficient as they could. I was with them until I aged out, and then I lived with my brother while I went to university to get my degree."

"Your brother was also in care?"

"Yeah, for a few years. We kept in touch when we weren't placed together, but when he aged out, he got some of our family money and went to school, met his girlfriend, and when I aged out, they had waited to have the wedding so I could participate. I got to be the grooms maid." She grinned.

She put on her blinker and did her shoulder checks before they took the off ramp toward home. She could hear tapping on his phone. "Telling Jax about meeting your mom?"

"Uh-huh."

The truck slowed as she drove down the residential pathways. She noticed that the lot that Jax's home was on was rather large. Well more room to run around on.

She slowed and turned onto the long drive and started on the path to the house, putting the truck in the spot

where Thor had parked before. She put the vehicle into park and pressed the off button.

When her seatbelt snapped free, Thor grabbed her and pulled her onto his lap. “I am sorry that procedurally you fell through the cracks.”

“When I was talking with the support group, they mentioned that things are confusing. We aren’t really *real* as far as the regulations are concerned. No longer a beta and not an omega. With you two being practically scent blind, there is no chance that my scent will make you unstable with it. There is no need to lock down a scent gland I don’t have.”

“You have a scent. It comes out in your skin. Do you know what a Jacobsen’s organ is?”

“It’s an olfactory sensor.”

“Well, both Jax and I have one. If we part our lips and pull in air, we can taste you.”

She swallowed. “Oh. Well, anyway, there isn’t a social ritual for this.” She flicked her fingers between her and him, and then the house where two silhouettes were waiting in the doorway. “And them.”

He chuckled. “Well, it looks like they are coming to the truck. Are you all right?”

“I am fine. I knew to expect a bit of a tangle. I just need to know one thing?”

He swung the door open, and she hopped out. “Which one of you has better dental?”

Thor smirked. “We will debate it.”

“You can’t debate dental insurance. It either is or it isn’t.”

Chapter Eleven

Penny heard the rustling, and Thor followed her with the shopping. She caught Liella, lifting her up and asked her. “Is Auntie Gen still here?”

“No, she and Uncle Dan left, but she said you had to teach her how to make it. Uncle Dan drank all of it!”

Jax smiled and put his arm around her. “He honestly did. You have another fan.”

Thor chuckled. “Mama loved her.”

“She thinks I will make cute babies. I want to make tiny bikers.” She scrunched her nose at Liella. “I am going to win.”

Liella asked, “Can I be a biker?”

Jax squeezed Penny’s waist. “We will discuss it again when you get your first licence. Liella.”

“Well, she is going to learn how to fix cars. She can start that when she’s eight.”

Liella giggled and squirmed to get down as she ran to do a cartwheel.

Thor passed them and he said, “That is impressive.”

Liella smiled. “Miss Penny showed me how to do it at school when Daddy was coming late.”

Penny tried to look innocent as she tiptoed away from Jax, and he grabbed her and pulled her back. “Are you an adventurous influence on our little girl?” He wrapped his arms around her.

“Oh, no. That was the school secretary trying to distract a little girl who had little patience.”

“Have you come to a decision regarding your workplace?”

“I want to go back. I miss the kids.” She sighed. “But, if I get any attitude, I will quit.”

He hugged her.

“After next week, of course. If they agree, I go back to work the Monday after Liella’s birthday. Mornings only.” She smiled. “Fortunately, I can get the paperwork up and running in an hour. The rest of the day is just visiting the classes and delivering copies of projects. If Aya agrees, I will know how desperate they are.”

“Do you need to use a computer to write things up?”

“Yeah. I don’t know where mine ended up.”

“I put it on a charger while I was worrying about you being out there with Thor.”

“Worrying?”

“He eats more junk food than I am comfortable with.”

She looked back at her blond mate. “Well, hooray for junk food. If it built that body, yeehaw.”

Thor grinned happily at her admiration.

Jax made a sound that was a low throb her body heard but her ears didn’t. It was a sound you could feel.

Her knees buckled, and he caught her. “What was that?”

He smirked. “I can do that because I don’t eat junk food.”

Thor laughed. “And what Jax isn’t telling you is that I can do that as well. It’s how we communicate at long distances.”

Liella buzzed back into the space, and Jax picked her up for bath time and to get ready for bed. Penny headed to the kitchen and unloaded the bags that she had collected at the grocery store. When everything was put away, she folded the bags and rolled them up. Thor wrapped his arms around her and whispered in her ear, “Don’t you have an email to send?”

“Yeah. There seems to be a pile of junk food in my way.”

He chuckled. "I will move when you give me my candy bar."

She blinked and groped for it. "It's here." She lunged to her left, her fingers found the packet, and she had to pull it toward her slowly. "Here you go."

"Put it in my hand."

"Dude, I don't bend that way." She bent her wrist and stabbed him in the arm with the chocolate.

He bent over and chuckled. "Yeah, I have you good."

"I am melting your bar."

"Not even close." He rolled his hips against hers, and she caught his meaning.

"You are going to have a difficult time when you go to work if you keep sporting this."

"I am a detective now. I can control my inner perv and keep it for you."

"I feel blessed. Take your damned chocolate bar. I have to write a ridiculous return to work proposal."

He laughed and let her go. She slammed the candy to his chest and headed for the study, getting her laptop and trying to come up with a way to ask for an ideal schedule for work. She shrugged and put her demands in, her first available date to return to work, and the likelihood that she would be requiring mat leave before the next school year was over. When it was done, she nodded and sent it off. The rest was with the administrators.

She got up and stretched, folded her laptop, and headed upstairs. Jax was sitting next to Liella's bed and reading a book. Liella was wearing pink pyjamas and a big smile when she saw Penny leaning in the doorway.

Jax looked up and asked, "Did you want to take over and find out if the moon goes to sleep?"

"No, I know that one. I am good."

Penny walked up to Liella and kissed her forehead. “Night, sweetie.”

“Night, Mom.”

That bit of electrical happiness went through her. It hit her every time Liella called her Mom.

She headed to her bedroom and put on a nighty and robe. She got ready for bed and sat against the headboard catching up on her email. She let her body fully relax for the first time in weeks. When hands lifted her and carried her, she chuckled. “You smell like chocolate, Jax.”

He chuckled. “Thor shared his bar.”

“He’s good that way.”

He stroked her head. “Sleepy?”

“Just... not scared. I haven’t been that way for a while. It’s... relaxing.” She smiled and looked up at him as he settled her into bed.

“Go brush your teeth.”

“I can’t. Thor’s in the bathroom.”

She laughed lightly. “Glad to know you won’t share a bathroom.”

He kissed her, and she tasted the chocolate. It was good chocolate.

Jax was kissing her with his weight pressing her into the bedding. She ran her nails down his back and arched her hips into him.

Thor tapped his shoulder. “Go brush your teeth, dude.”

Jax groaned and got up. “I am going to be quick.”

Thor nodded, dropped onto his vacated spot, and he took over the kiss. She grinned and paused to ask him to roll to his back.

When Jax came back, she was slowly riding Thor, and he was gripping her hips and making that thrumming sound at random moments.

Jax moved behind her, gathered her hair, and pressed his mouth to his mark as his tentacles crept under her nighty and made her gasp as she was completely filled front and rear.

She muttered as she arched and twisted against both of them. "I didn't think this through."

Thor was sweating and grinned. "Thinking is overrated."

Jax murmured, "I like it when you thrash as you cum."

Thor gritted his teeth and arched. "Oh, me too. So fucking hot."

She groped at either of them. Trying to get a handhold as Jax's tentacles were everywhere, and the one moving in her ass kept getting thicker. Thor stretched her, Jax was taking her to the edge of comfort. The teasing tendrils circling her clit combined with the churning inside her had her covering her mouth as she screamed.

Jax pulled her hand away, and her cries echoed in her room. She heard them following her as her hips moved left to right with hard jerks.

Jax was crooning to her, and he kept her on the edge until she slumped onto Thor. He caught her and stroked her back. "Well done, I give you a nine out of ten."

"Wait. You are judging me?"

He chuckled.

She turned to Jax. "You had better stick the dismount."

He started laughing, and Thor could feel it through her.

She needed a shower after all.

Penny sighed in the clean sheets and was snuggled between her two partners. "So, I sent off my employment proposal. They would be idiots to accept it."

Jax chuckled. "Gen has been telling me that the phone tree lit up. The parents at the school are demanding your

return. The kids as well. You are well respected and loved at that school.”

“I thought they would believe Vanessa.”

“They did, until Gen called a parent gathering at her place and showed the initial attack video, then images of your bruised face and the police report from the night at your house. I released it all as your attorney. Time was a factor, and you were worried about your job. It was just waiting until you were ready, so when I told Aya you had recovered, she sent you the offer.”

She smirked and rocked her hips against him. “Thanks, puppet master.”

He slid his hand down her belly and murmured, “Now, about that thirst trap.”

Thor slid down in the bed, pressing kisses to her skin. “I have it saved in three places.”

Jax laughed. “Antonio fixed the doxing. He made a virus to seek out the other versions and destroy them, but he gave us ones that didn’t have any interference.”

She had her eyes closed as Thor went down her body, and she paused. “What? Plural? I thought there was only one.”

“Did you only shoot one?”

“No. We messed around for a few hours. Arty is really good at that stuff.”

Thor mumbled, “I like the one with you perched on the chair.”

“No.”

Jax laughed. “Yeah. I can barely tell which of the tentacles were your legs.”

“Oh, boy. Tension is coming back.”

Thor moved up her body. “We will relax you, mate. Promise.”

His lips returned to her belly, and he was as good as his word.

The little knock started their morning, and Thor flipped behind them. Penny called her in once she was sure everyone was covered and their morning went into the comforting pattern of breakfast and then sitting around to plan their day.

Penny got a text and dropped her phone.

Liella looked up from colouring and said, “Is something wrong?”

“Uh. No. Yes. Maybe not? Where is your dad?”

“In the office. He isn’t usually there on a Sunday, but he’s there today.” She shrugged. “Can we go out to play later?”

“Sure. Or we can make donuts again. I think Thor ate all of the other ones.”

Liella giggled. “Yeah, it was Uncle Thor.”

“Maybe we should make a batch all pink. Do you think it would slow them down?”

“Yes!”

“If we have any left over, you can bring them to Auntie Gen tonight.”

Liella sighed. “I don’t want to go. Can’t I stay here?”

Penny’s shoulders slumped. “I wish you could. You have to go because we are going to try to make you a brother or sister. That means that your dad and Uncle Thor have to concentrate with me. Babies are serious things, so it takes a lot of time. Your dad might forget to make breakfast or drive you to school, so Auntie Gen said she would help to make sure that you were taken care of while we try and get you that brother or sister.”

Liella smiled. “You are really going to try?”

“We will try, but you know it takes a while.”

“I know. Thank you for trying.” She scrunched her shoulders together.

“Of course, sweetie.” She had to ask, “Why do you want a brother or sister?”

“Hailey has two, and she says they are the best things ever.”

Penny laughed, “And she told you how they came.”

“Yeah, you get hot and go away with your mates, and when you come out, we wait to find out if you are having a baby. If not, you try again later in the year.” Liella smiled. “You are here now. There will be a baby soon.”

Penny just stared at the little girl’s complete faith, forgetting what had caused the conversation to start with. When she saw her phone, she remembered.

She smiled and got up, walking around the table to grab her phone then going to the office where she knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

She opened the door and smiled at Jax. “Hello.”

He gave her a concerned look. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine. A little more interested in watching you two lift heavy objects but nothing too intense yet.”

He pulled her onto his lap. “What is making you pale and nervous?”

“You can see the pale and feel the nervous?”

“You guessed it.”

She opened her phone and handed it to him.

He started to laugh. “You got your job back.”

“Yeah. I did. Half days for the rest of the year. One day a week during the summer, just for filing of new paperwork.” She smiled. “And if you want to go to the beach for a week or two, they are flexible with the times that I come in.” She sighed. “Now I definitely need a car.”

He pressed his head to hers. “Do you have one picked out?”

“Yup.” She flicked through her phone and showed him. “It’s blue.”

He nodded. “And you added a booster seat for Liella.”

She grinned. “I did. So, this is what I want to spend the settlement on.”

He blinked. “How expensive is it?”

“Brand new? About sixty thousand. This is used, so it’s thirty-six.”

He looked at it and made some notes. “Did you want your cheque? I have to give it to you soon for legal reasons.”

“Oh, sure.”

He reached into a drawer and handed her a slim piece of paper. “There you go. Deposit it and contact the dealership.”

She nodded.

“But first, accept the agreement.”

She blinked. “Right. Important. I just got a little overwhelmed that they gave in to my demands.”

“The kids and parents love you, as well as most of the staff. They came out on your side in a battle you didn’t know was happening.”

She smiled. “That is so sweet.”

“Yeah. And I didn’t have to lift a finger. Gen and Liella did all the organizing.” He looked happy about that.

She paused and looked at the cheque. “You made this out to the wrong name. You got the first and last right, but why is Kekerek here?”

He reached into his desk and pulled out a ring box. “I promised Liella that we would do this at her birthday, but I can’t keep a secret, so here we are.”

“That is a bad trait in a lawyer.”

He smirked. “I know, but I want to tell you all the fun things I have planned for our little shoal.”

“Fun things?”

“Camping, trips to the beach, family holidays, going to theme parks.” He laughed. “PTA, school events, ballet classes.”

She smiled at his litany of things to do with children. And then he looked at her. “Weekends away while Gen babysits, or we get an official nanny.”

“Gen and Dan don’t have kids?”

“No. They aren’t able to. There are options, and Dan could afford it, but they are invasive, and he doesn’t want to put Gen through that.”

She smiled. “Maybe they should adopt.”

“Maybe. You haven’t answered my proposal.”

“What proposal? You showed me a ring box. One of Liella’s green army men could be in there.”

He smiled. “I haven’t done this before.”

She whispered instructions, and she got to her feet while he slipped to one knee.

“Penelope, will you marry me and legally adopt Liella?”

She grinned. “Yes.”

He opened the ring and slid it onto her finger. He stood up, hugged her close, and lifted her for a kiss.

He smiled and opened a folder on his desk. The marriage license, registration for the Penny Shoal, and legal adoption of Liella was there in front of her. She shrugged and signed it all.

“But you are going to have to change the check. I am keeping my name so that we are all different and choosing to be together.”

He frowned. “That isn’t normal, is it?”

“Jax. I lost my family and all I had was my name. I was a little girl, and I lost ballet lessons and game nights with my family and laughing during the holidays. Now, they live in my brother, and they live in me.”

He nodded, and there were tears in his eyes.

She bit her lip. "I can hyphenate if it is essential."

He pulled her against him. "No, that wasn't why I teared up. I was imagining Liella in your situation, and I don't know if she could have come through it the same way."

"She has Gen and Dan, your parents. She would have been okay." She stroked his jaw.

"I'll take your name."

She smiled. "Lovely gesture, but switching all your credentials is ridiculous. I am me. I have a brother that has passed the name on to three of his kids who wanted to take it. It's been a year of confusion for me, I am keeping another part of myself until I am ready to let it go. A name change can always happen when I am comfortable with it. I mean, I am guessing that you still want to marry me."

He smiled. "I do."

She kissed him. "I do, too."

He lifted her left hand and kissed the new accessory. "Fine. As long as you still smile when you see me, you can keep your name with my blessing. Will you take Liella to ballet as well?"

"What do you mean... as well? I am not rejoining the flock of kids. I am too old for that."

"If Liella asks you to go with her, will you?"

"I will take her, sure."

"And if she asks you to dance with her?"

She looked up and saw his dark gaze glittering at her. "Don't you dare suggest this to her. I will ask her if she is interested. If she isn't, we can show her cousin Ven in roller derby and see if she likes that instead."

He narrowed his eyes. "You wouldn't."

"Why not? Ven's great. She's responsible, wears safety gear, is an excellent judge of character." She smiled.

“Don’t worry. You will meet her on the weekend. She’s coming with my brother and his wife. I would trust her with my life, and I have.”

He stroked her hair. “Then, I will trust her. Now, I need to get this paperwork over to the judge.”

She snorted. “You know a judge who works on Sundays?”

He grinned. “Of course. So do you.”

She blinked. “Oh. He agreed to sign and file?”

“He did. If I get it over there, he will be happy to have the rest of the day with his family. Are you up for a trip over there?”

She nodded. “I am guessing that Liella is coming, too?”

“And Thor.”

“Okay. Now?”

“May as well. He’s already signed the registration papers for our union.”

She blinked. “Is that what that is?”

“Yeah, it is us declaring that we are responsible for any children you produce, no matter which one of us is the father.”

“Oh. Ohhh.” She blinked. “Yeah, that could be confusing.”

“It makes us agree to become a unit, not individuals.”

She nodded and headed for the door. She opened the door, and Liella thumped into her. “Get your shoes on, sport. We are going on a car ride to Hailey’s place.”

The little girl squealed, and Thor looked over from the kitchen. Penny looked at him. “You, too, muscles. Road trip.”

He grinned. “Flatterer.”

He turned to head upstairs. She yelled, “It was my way of saying you need to put a shirt on!”

Five minutes later, they were on the way to Hailey's house. It was time to make things official.

Chapter Twelve

Penny was standing next to her guys while Liella screamed, “Mom! Hailey is going to show me the babies!”

Penny walked over to her. “Babies like things calm and quite, okay?”

“Yes, Mom.”

Hailey grabbed Liella’s hand and said, “I have her, Miss Penny. I will show her how to handle a baby.”

Penny stood straight and looked at Lexa. Lexa smiled. “We have a nanny. The twins are safe.”

Penny rubbed the back of her neck. “Good, because I think Liella thinks a baby is a kind of a pet. It makes me slightly nervous.”

Lexa smiled. “Are you...”

“Oh. No, definitely... mostly sure not.” Penny frowned. “Tomorrow my heat is due, so I have a pretty good chance by the end of the week.”

Lexa smiled. “Excellent. Are you coming back to the school?”

“Yeah. The week after this one. It will be a relief.”

Lexa laughed. “I understand.”

Penny blinked. “Oh, no. I miss all the kids. I miss the routine. I am going to be going back mornings only for the rest of the year, so I can drive Liella to and from school.” She shrugged. “Next year it will be full time if everything is normal.”

“By that you mean not pregnant.”

“Yup. Their dicks aren’t enchanted. It doesn’t work every time.”

Lexa patted her arm. “Cling to that.”

Delun Hall was signing the legal declarations and the adoption of Liella by Penny.

Lexa chuckled. “She calls you Mom already?”

“Yeah. I am another thing that she will take on as a pet.”

They chuckled and talked about shenanigans at the PTA.

Delun finished the paperwork, sealed it, and put it in his briefcase after writing *File Rush* on it.

He and Jax shook hands, and Delun looked over at her. “Do you know what kind of a man you have here?”

Jax had an expectant look on his face.

“Lawyer? Good man? Giant talking squid? Excellent dad?”

Lexa said, “What?”

Penny let her tentacle writhe in the air a little. “Well, he isn’t a bear.”

Delun looked at her and blinked. “Excellent father material.”

Penny snapped her tentacle back around her wrist. “Oh. I know. It’s why I called him for help. I didn’t expect what happened, but I am very glad he showed up.” She grinned. “And I am glad that Thor was lurking around looking pretty as well.”

She squeaked as Thor picked her up and squeezed gently. She felt a low throbbing in her body, and she saw Jax and Thor open their mouths slightly.

Lexa and Delun smiled, and the judge licked his lips. “That’s coming from her?”

Penny froze. “Aw, hell. Not yet.”

Delun nodded, “It’s light, but it’s there.”

“Fucking hell!” Penny growled. “I was going to make donuts today.” She looked at Delun, “Is the paperwork done?”

He grinned. "It is. It should be processed by Thursday or Friday."

"Great. We are done here?"

He nodded. "Yes. I think the girls like playing with each other though."

"Next Saturday is Liella's birthday. Kids from the school are being invited. The back yard is going to be swarmed with children."

Lexa blinked. "You are organizing it after a heat?"

"It's already set. Bookings are done, and Gen is going to circulate the invitations tomorrow."

Lexa smiled. "If there is anything I can do, let me know. I know you are going to feel like hammered hell."

"I am only dealing with two of them, and their parents seemed to have trained them to obey teacher voice."

Delun laughed.

Thor squeezed her. "You know she did."

Jax inhaled, and his eyes widened. "Thor, put her down."

He whined. "Why?"

"Your hugging is turning her on."

She blushed. "Unfortunately, I think he's right. Jax, get Liella and we will make a run for it."

Thor slowly put her down, but he didn't let her go. Jax wandered off in search of his offspring.

Delun followed and went to show him to the girls.

Lexa smiled. "I am glad to see you getting back on your feet, Penny."

"Well, getting them to put me down is trickier than I expected."

"Yeah, that's hard at the beginning. How many classes are invited to the party?"

“I told Gen to ask the kindergarten and next two grades. The ones that have recess together.”

Lexa smiled. “It sounds like fun. I can ask my sister-in-law to bring some horses if you like. She loves them and will take the kids on rides with appropriate headgear.”

“I don’t want to pull on other parents. Especially if they aren’t related to the school.”

Lexa chuckled. “Yet. Wait four years, and their little one is going to be waiting at the school with mom and dad and uncle Alexi. All the relatives with kids in the area really wanting to keep Miss Penny happy.”

“Yeah, I still don’t understand why.”

“You let Aya keep her mind on classes, recruitment, and events. She literally didn’t have to do any of the day-to-day. Same with Vanessa. You let them work with the kids, parents, and teachers, and handled everything else without even batting an eye. When you were gone, they realized how much that was worth to them. Oh, and you also dealt with a lot of the minor parent stuff, and the kids knew that they could come to you, and you would take them to the nurse. Hailey often talks about how nice you were when she skinned her hand and that you stayed with her until the nurse got it cleaned and put a bandage on it.”

“Ah, that is how I found out about Delun. Hailey showed me the next day, very proud. I knew there were healing alphas, but I hadn’t really thought much about it.”

“It is handy and disconcerting.” Lexa smiles. “One of yours heals?”

“Discussing that involves a large amount of items to distract me from the technique.”

“It hurts?”

“No. It’s slimy.” She sighed.

Thor squeezed his arms around her slightly. “Penny.”

“Well, it is.” She looked up at him, and her body thrummed again.

Lexa’s nostrils flared. “Oh, I haven’t ever been around someone when it was just starting. You smell... pretty.”

Penny smiled. “It isn’t roses.”

Jax carried a pouting Liella. Penny was upset as well. “I am sorry that you didn’t get to play. Were the babies cute?”

Liella smiled. “So small and cute.”

“Well, the hot part is starting, so things have to go fast but steady right now. Are you ready to help with the project?”

Liella’s eyes got excited. “So that’s why we have to go?”

Jax’s eyes got wide. “We have to go now, or we will have to get a car.”

Penny smiled. “Give me the keys. I am still fine.”

He looked at her and handed her the keys.

“Okay, fam. Let’s get going. Thanks, Judge Hall. Nice seeing you, Lexa.”

Lexa nodded. “Nice finally getting a chance to talk to you.” They made their way to the front door.”

Hailey came out. “Bye, Miss Penny; bye, Liella!”

Liella waved before the door closed. “Bye, Hailey!”

They got into the car, and Jax closed his eyes when he buckled up.

They got going, and Jax managed to open his eyes on the highway. “Wow, you are a pretty steady driver.”

“Yeah, and I can balance marshmallows on my nose.”

She moved through the Sunday traffic with ease, and ten minutes after leaving the Rose Sloth, she was at home, and Jax looked a little green. Penny moved around the car and opened all the doors, catching Liella and calling Gen. She apologized about the short notice, but she was going off earlier than they expected. Gen

chuckled. She said everything was ready, and she was on her way.

“Come on, Liella. Let’s get your bag ready for a few days.”

Jax came inside looking less carsick. “I will do it. I know which stuffy she needs.”

He kissed Penny’s cheek and plucked their daughter out of her arms. “Make sure Gen has what she needs for invitations and that everything else is on alert on your phone.”

She grinned. “Already done, confirmed, and she has the invitations done. She sent me a photo.”

Liella grinned and yelled, “There will be invitations?”

“Yup. Kindergarten, grades one and two. Everybody is invited.”

Liella went berserk as she was carried upstairs. Apparently, school was great and moms were great.

Thor wrapped his arms around her and hugged her. Her body started humming again. He laughed. “That is a fun trick.”

“Stop it.”

She looked at him, and his eyes were dilated, and he was definitely aroused. He smiled slowly and turned her toward him as he lifted her up. “My mom would be so happy for a first grandkid.”

“Well, you know how this works. It’s going to be squids versus eels.” She smiled. “Now I just need a stripey nighty to act as referee.”

He chuckled, and Liella came down with her favourite stuffy, and Jax had her pillow and a bag with her school uniforms and other stuff.

They all sat around in the living room with Liella sitting on Penny’s lap until Gen arrived.

Gen and Dan showed up, took custody of Liella. When the little girl was on her way to her aunt’s house after a

lot of hugs and kisses from her parents, she was gone.

Jax sighed and locked the door then he picked her up.

They made it to the nest, Jax closed the door, and set the security system that she didn't know about.

“What's that for?”

“The main floor is rigged with motion sensors. If anyone comes in, we will know.”

“You didn't mention that.” She peeled off her clothes and looked at Jax. He was staring with wide, dark eyes. Thor was down to his skin and making a little comfy zone for her on the bedding.

When she was nekkid, he held his arms out to her, and she crawled into his arms. He held her tight, and her body throbbed wildly with her skin against his.

His cock moved against her belly, and she felt his pulse speeding to match hers. She looked up to meet his gaze, and he smiled. “Omega's impulses in a beta's body.”

She pulled his head down to her. “Shut up.”

He grinned and kissed her while gently compressing her, and she felt the slick making it outside her body. Thor's cock moved into her, and as he thrust, she lost focus and just let them make her feel good.

Penny woke up between them, warm and clean. The bedding under them was clean as well. She sighed. Her heat must have broken a few hours ago.

She put on the dress and turned her phone on. It was only Wednesday. That was short. So, either her body was reacting to the attention, or there was no reason for it to demand it anymore.

All the confirmations were in for the party, and she sent acknowledgements. Verified the address and nearest cross street.

Friday was still cupcake day, and she sent a note to Gen that she would be able to bring Liella over Thursday

after school. Penny felt like she had been hammered, which wasn't too far from the truth.

She was still sleepy, so she turned her phone off again and crawled back between them, cuddling to Jax's chest while Thor rolled toward her, and she heard a grumble from him. Her dress was unzipped, and he had her undressed with the fabric by her feet in less than two minutes. He sighed happily when he pressed up against her, and he licked her neck.

Time for a nap.

By the time they got upstairs again, it had been the slowest waking that Penny had ever had. Every time she started to move, they soothed or fucked her back into a nap. It was evening when she got to keep her dress on for the walk up the stairs. They were both just wearing underwear. Hers had gone missing.

Jax smiled. "What are you in the mood for, Penny?"

She looked at him seriously. "Potato chips. Hot dogs."

He narrowed his eyes. "Really?"

"Yeah. Something must have gotten into me."

Thor belted out, "Hah!"

Jax groaned. "Fine. I will place an online order. Don't tell Liella."

"Don't tell her what?" Penny looked at him.

"That we have access to delivery here. He had a false page put on his phone and a block on his standard router that makes it look like there is nothing in the area. You have to switch routers to get access." Thor grinned.

Penny gasped. "That is evil."

Jax sighed. "She had an obsession with cupcakes that bordered on the pathological when she was two. That's when I talked to one of the programmers at work, and he created this system. Since she could prove it on anyone's phone, we just use the second router when we showed her. She hasn't caught on yet."

“Fine. Hot dog, just mustard, bacon, and cheese, fries, apple pie, and ice cream.” Her stomach rumbled. “And maybe a bacon double cheeseburger.”

Jax sighed. “Fine. Thor?”

“That sounds good. I’ll have what she’s having.” Thor grinned. “Extra burger though.”

Jax opened his app and started to place the order.

Penny walked up to him and drew her fingers up his inner thigh. “What are you having?”

Jax narrowed his eyes at her. “Can I put you in a time out? It works for Liella.”

“Sure. I will just go sit in the corner.” She trailed away from him and wandered to the table. Grabbing a chair and sitting facing the kitchen, she pulled her legs up and crossed them.

She put her fingers on her knees and inched her skirt up a little.

Jax glanced at her, and she moved her skirt up a little more.

Thor looked over and laughed. Jax looked up, and as she met his gaze, she pulled her skirt up another inch.

He sent the order. And looked at her. “Fine. I get the idea.”

“What? You didn’t set a time to the time out, so I am just entertaining myself.” Another inch.

His voice was low. “What are you doing?”

“Counting how many times I can pleat my skirt. I am up to five.”

She smiled and folded it again, which wouldn’t have been an issue but for her folded posture.

Penny waited another minute, and then she folded the skirt up so that if they had been crouching, they could see everything. “Am I out of timeout yet?”

Jax nodded.

She smiled brightly and walked toward him. “Cool. How long until food’s here?”

He checked the app. “Thirty-five minutes.”

She nodded. “Right. Don’t forget to reissue the check with my name only so I can head out to look for a car tomorrow after I drop Liella off.”

“I thought you picked one?”

“Ah, that one was sold while I was otherwise occupied.” She shrugged. “It’s just a car. I can find something else. I don’t like driving your car though.”

He frowned. “Why not? It is stable and sensible.”

She reached up and squeezed his cheeks. “So are you, but I don’t want to drive *you* to the nail place for a manicure. My cuticles are a mess.”

She started to tick off things. “Or the grocery store or the supply store for the bake sale.”

He perked up. “Bake sale? I didn’t think that the kindergarten kids participated in the bake sale.”

“They don’t, but there are always parents who forget something for the older kids, so I bring some different stuff so that the kids don’t feel like crap.” She smiled. “Like a tithing system.” She shrugged. “Usually crispy rice cake.” She blinked. “Oh, shoot. I am going to need to get stuff from my house.”

She looked at him seriously. “You should know this now, I do a lot of baking.”

“Are you going to keep your house?”

“If the cleaners got the stench out, yes. I will list it with a property manager and rent it out, once I figure out where to stow my stuff.”

Jax nodded. “There is room in the garage.”

“Good because I have a freezer full of snacks. Lots of cookies.”

Thor yelled, “Hooray!”

Jax paused, “When I brought Liella there to pick up the uniforms, you had a plate of cookies on your desk.”

“Yup.” She patted his cheek. “I keep them free of the most common allergens and had a special stash of gluten- and sugar-free cookies in my desk in case of skinned knee or emergency.”

He smiled. “You really do like kids.”

“I really do. They have the least resources of any demographic and can be gaslit effortlessly.” Her eyes went wide. “OMG. I can volunteer at the drop-in centre again.”

Thor asked, “Drop-in centre? The one on Jefferson?”

“Yeah. I used to coach basketball.”

He grinned. “I coached soccer a few years ago until my schedule got busy.”

Jax asked, “Do they still teach dance?”

“I will ask Mom. The store sponsors a lot of the classes there.”

They opened phones and tried to find out what classes were still being offered.

The food arrived, and Jax collected it, Penny got paper and crayons, and then they started to list options that used to be there that were now gone. They ate and tried to figure out how to get sources and educators to this useful and once-vital centre. They would have to go through the coordinator and administrative panel, but they might be able to get back on the roster. They also had to make sure there was still interest in some of the classes. Penny had only been away for a month, so if someone had taken over the basketball team, she wasn’t needed, but she could do other things. A basic cooking class was always useful for teens.

Jax was offering a class on tenant law.

Thor wanted to get back on the field.

Penny asked, “Can you do that?”

“Sure. As I am now in a domestic partnership, I go further down the call list when I am off duty. If you end up pregnant, I go to the bottom of the list.”

Penny paused. “Dude. You guys are not going to watch my belly for nine months.”

Jax snorted. “Of course not.”

Thor nodded. “We will take turns.”

She sighed and finished her hamburger. “Weirdos.”

They looked at each other and nodded.

Jax got her a new cheque, and she scanned it into her account. She had to confirm the total three times and got a notice that the funds would be held until the deposit was confirmed.

She folded the slip of paper and sighed. “Well, that’s done.”

She looked at Jax. “You have to stop wasting money.”

Jax blinked at the takeout.

She shook her head. “Big box of condoms. I don’t remember seeing one.”

He grinned. “Well, if I put one on every tentacle, you would fall asleep. Only the important one got a hat.”

“Oh. That one.”

Thor laughed. “I am not going to answer that comment. It wouldn’t be good for my health.”

“Fine. But I don’t want to have kids more than every two years. We are going to get through that large box.”

Thor snickered, “Faster than you think. You feel like home. The hottest, softest place to be with the most amazing sounds.”

She opened her mouth in surprise. He kissed her, tangling his tongue with hers. He leaned back and licked her lips as he went. “And you taste amazing.”

She blinked. “And your burger had more pickles than mine.”

They removed all traces of takeout and sat in the back yard while they burned the greasy paper in the firepit.

The fire burned out, and the stars above them moved in a glittery dance. When Thor yawned, she yawned, and he laughed. They all turned in and tangled together. There was a lot to do tomorrow. She was going to be baking like a fiend, and she still had to find a car she liked.

Jax pulled her close. “Stop planning world domination.”

“I just want to get a comfy SUV that doesn’t cost a bajillion dollars to fill.”

He stroked a hand down her side and murmured, “We can look online tomorrow and go around to a few places.”

Thor mumbled against her shoulders, “I’ll drive.”

Penny chuckled and felt their hearts beating against her. She relaxed, and she smiled against Jax’s chest as she slept warm, safe, and exhausted.

Chapter Thirteen

Pulling up at the school without someone driving her made her smile. Jax had called ahead and let the school know that she was authorized to pick up their daughter. She parked and got out of her vehicle, walking toward the door when the teachers came out to release the littles.

Liella's expression lit up when she saw Penny, and she talked to the adult behind her. Penny walked toward Aya, and she looked at the concerned face. "Aya, what's wrong?"

There was a tap on Penny's shoulder, and she turned to see a golden and lovely woman with huge blue eyes. "Hello. Are you my daughter's nanny?"

Penny felt Liella grabbing her leg; she stroked her hair. "No, I am afraid you don't have a child at this school. This is my daughter."

Eva stared at the glittering ring on Penny's hand. "That ring used to be mine."

Liella scowled at her. "Daddy bought it for her and showed me when he got it. It's not yours."

Eva blinked.

Penny smiled and picked up Liella. "You surrendered your rights and now have none. I have legally adopted her and am now her mother. If your current boyfriend wants a child and this was your best option, hire a surrogate."

Eva started to cry. Liella said, "You aren't supposed to cry if you aren't sad."

Penny smiled. "That's right. Now, Dad is letting Thor cook lunch. I think we are having something deep fried."

Liella grinned and clapped.

Aya spoke softly. "Penny. Can you come in a moment?"

Penny nodded to Eva and turned to walk into the school.

“We need to do your ID kit. Jax already called in, but you know the rules.”

“Of course. I wrote the rules.”

Aya smiled. “You are coming back Monday?”

“I am.”

The older woman hugged her and Liella at the same time.

Her identification was copied. A photo of her and Liella were taken. A single photo was taken, and she signed the sign-out book.

Liella looked at the school secretary’s desk, and she went, “Wow. What happened?”

Aya blushed. “We are going to be very happy to have your mommy back.”

“Do you have a stay-away order for Eva?”

“Yes, it’s on file, but we are overwhelmed.”

“Okay. I am going to leave the school now, and if she gets in my way, she might need to be picked up off the ground.”

“She has bodyguards.”

“Them, too.” Penny smiled brightly.

Liella smiled. “Mom has tentacles like Daddy does.”

Penny blinked when she remembered that Liella had seen her use them.

Aya looked hopeful. “Back to work on Monday?”

“Back to work half days on Monday. Office should be looking normal by eleven.” She smiled.

Aya nodded. “Fantastic. I now have an enhanced beta in the family. I understand a bit more of what you are dealing with.”

“Does she do office work?”

“Um, no. She’s an fighter.”

Penny smiled. “That skill would be handy around here.”

Aya’s expression fell.

Penny sighed. “I meant dealing with the kids.”

“Oh. I will stop apologizing eventually.” Aya smiled. “Once you are back to work. Where you belong.”

Liella wrapped her arms around Penny’s neck. “She belongs with me and Daddy and maybe Uncle Thor.”

Penny patted her back. “There may be some ruckus if Eva gets close to Liella. I will be directing her to scream until she sees me or Jax or Thor coming for her.”

“I can do that.” The little girl sounded weirdly determined.

“You know about Eva?”

“Dad told me that she didn’t want us, so we don’t want her. We have you now. You are better than she is.” She was smug.

Penny held onto Liella and answered her phone. She sighed. “Yes, Jax. Eva was here. I am fine. Liella is fine. We are all fine.”

“Is she still on premises?”

Aya checked the security cameras. She nodded.

“Yeah, she’s still here.”

“I am five minutes away. Stay there. Her husband wants a child.”

“Shit. Right. I am going to clean up my desk a bit. Can we go for chicken nuggies after you have a chat with her?”

Liella started bouncing and squirming.

“Yes, we can get chicken nuggies afterward.”

“See you soon, sweetie.” Penny smiled.

“Bye, Dad!”

He chuckled and hung up.

Penny smiled. "Can I walk the halls a little?"

"Sure. We have some new artwork in the halls, and there have been a few prizes for the display case."

"That sounds like an excellent way to kill a few minutes."

They walked the halls, and little kids and older ones stopped to smile at Miss Penny and ask her how she was doing. The kids also invariably said she was pretty.

Aya smiled. "They are right. You have colour in your face, your eyes are sparkling, and there is a settled look to you."

"Settled?"

"You look happy. Relaxed. The tension is gone."

"That happens when you lose a stalker." She smiled and held Liella's hand as they looked at the art projects.

Liella asked, "The angry man in the house?"

"Yup. That was him. Oh, is that one of the flowers from the garden?" She picked Liella up and lifted her up to the picture that one of the sixth graders had created.

They talked about the artwork until she got a text from Jax. "Okay, Daddy is ready for us to come outside."

Aya sighed.

They walked back to the main doors to see a bunch of alphas and a crying Eva. Jax and Thor were talking to a sandy-haired man who immediately looked at Penny and then Liella who was clinging tightly.

She walked between them, and they each slid an arm around her.

The sandy-haired man looked at Liella. "Hello, little girl."

Liella tried to burrow into Penny.

Penny whispered, "It's okay. You are okay."

Liella nodded. "Hello."

“Your mother has said that you want to come live with us.”

Liella frowned at Penny. “You said that?”

“No, sweet. He means the blonde lady.”

“Oh. Birf lady. She didn’t like Daddy, so she left me with him.”

The other alpha blinked. “You don’t know her? Your birth mom?”

“No. Today is the first day.”

Eva started sobbing louder.

Penny stroked Liella’s hair and smiled. “Sir, this is the first time she has seen Eva. I have seen her in a photo, and she never had an intention to be part of the family. She was pregnant and looked like she was facing a prison sentence while this goof looked weirdly hopeful.” She bopped Jax with her head. He turned his head and kissed her.

Jax murmured, “Goof?”

“The look on your face when you watch us eat your cooking. Goof.”

Eva’s sobbing stopped. “Do you know what he is?”

Penny got a tissue out of her purse and had a tentacle deliver it to a shocked Eva. “Seriously? You have a hanging booger.”

The woman shrieked and hid behind one of the bodyguards.

Penny shrugged and pulled back her tentacle, and she tucked the tissue back in the purse.

The alpha stared. “Oh. Shit. So you are exotics.”

Penny muttered out of the corner of her mouth, “Is that a thing?”

Thor chuckled. “It’s a thing.”

“And your new beta is one of *those*.”

Liella whispered, “Are you one of those?”

“I must be.” She booped her nose against Liella’s.

She looked at the new alpha and smiled. “And I have legally adopted this little bundle of giggles, who is amazingly accepting, though I think she believes a *mom* is some kind of pet.”

The sandy-haired man smiled slightly. “Does she?”

“Yeah, she caught that attitude from her dad.” She bumped her hip against Jax.

Jax snorted. “So, Thomas, as you can see, Eva has misled you. She has no contact with Liella and even dying her hair would not disguise the fact that she has my features. She has the mother that we have both chosen.”

Penny rolled her eyes.

She sighed and shifted Liella as the weight got a little heavy. Jax took her as he talked to Thomas, and Penny shook out her arms. Thor wrapped his arms around her, and she murmured to him, “What’s with the suit?”

“We had to do some legal registry stuff.”

“Were you buying a boat together?”

He snickered. “We were not.”

She heard Thomas say something. “I really wish we could have a child together.”

Penny raised a hand. “Contact the Monarth Clinic. They can walk you through the options. A few of the parents here at the school have had success creating a biological child with their help.”

Thomas blinked. “Really? They deal with alpha-beta unions?”

“Almost exclusively.”

Jax frowned. “You were told this?”

“Uh, it might have been that or it might have been that I was a weekend and evening answer service.” She smiled brightly. “I never missed a bill payment if there were daylight hours to make money.”

Penny checked her watch and said, “This has been fascinating, but the kids are coming back for afternoon classes, and we are going to have a large audience. Plus, someone is owed some chicken nuggies.”

Liella stuck her hand out, and Penny squeezed it. “Thor, did you take Jax’s car?”

“We did.”

“Liella, do you want to ride with Dad or with me?”

Jax was kicked in the chest as Liella launched herself, and Penny caught her.

“Right, well you all can stay here and freak out the toddlers, but we have a date with nuggies.”

Thor chuckled. “Your car sounds more fun. Can I ride with you?”

“Up to the little princess.”

Thor leaned down to Liella, and she gave him a kiss. “He has to carry the tray.”

Penny curtsied to Thomas, wiggled her fingers at Eva, and winked at the bodyguards as they reached her car, and she used the fob to slide the rear passenger side open. Liella scrambled onto her booster and buckled in.

Penny closed the door and looked at Thor. “Do you want me to tuck you in?”

“We will save that for after the nuggies.”

They got in the car and made their way to the restaurant that they were going to dine in. Thor sent Jax the text and got an acknowledgement and a request.

“Well, we are having a table for six. They have questions.”

“Okay. We can do that, but they are buying the nuggies.” Penny smiled.

There was a wait and a ping, and Thor grinned. “It’s a deal. Did you really work for a fertility clinic?”

“Sure. Even when I was at the school. It was how I spent my weekends.”

“So, you are very aware of how soon you can expect to see signs of pregnancy.”

“Yup. If the egg found a friend, it should start tucking in anytime after Saturday until the following Friday. After that, give it a few days, and then I start checking.”

He smiled. “We will be able to tell earlier.”

“How?”

“You will taste different.”

She put on her indicator and pulled into the parking lot. She glided into an open spot, and they got out.

The restaurant was more expensive than the standard takeout place, but they put in the table request. Liella was looking around. “Do they have chicken nuggies?”

“Yes. They do.” She smiled. “I have taken my nieces and nephews here. They definitely have them.”

“Why do we have to go here?”

“Because Dad and Thor look pretty, and we want them to show off. You get to watch all the servers being silly over them.”

Liella started to watch the hostess and her blush and gaze toward Thor. Thor noticed, huffed, and he grabbed Penny, kissing her thoroughly in the foyer.

Liella gave her high-pitched giggle, and Thor lifted his head with a smug expression. He moved his head slightly, and the hostess looked flushed and dazed, but she wasn't fixated on Thor anymore. Penny turned her head and laughed. Jax had come in.

Jax looked at Penny and Thor, walked up to them, and pulled Penny out of their third's embrace. She was treated to a slower kiss, but it was the excited childish clapping that broke the kiss. At some point, he had lifted her high, so now, he slid her down his body, and he sighed slowly.

“I am guessing that this is a member of your party?”
The hostess's voice was weak.

Jax kept an arm around her. “And these are the last two.”

Eva and Thomas came in, and they were led through the restaurant to a nice quiet area where a long table was ready for them. Eva and Thomas sat on the edge, Penny sat in the middle, and Liella sat next to her. Thor sat next to Thomas and Jax sat across from his daughter.

The kids menu was presented to Liella, and Penny helped her navigate to the nuggies.

She picked a nice fettuccini alfredo with grilled chicken.

The server came by, took the orders, and then smiled when she said she would be back with drinks.

Thomas asked. “What is involved in getting a surrogate?”

Penny smiled and said, “It is long, expensive, but you will get your own child if all is successful. It will be a lot of work for both of you, and there will be weeks of discomfort while Eva is coaxed into producing eggs, but if you are healthy and your eggs are good, it should be a one and done. Even a woman in her forties can produce four eggs in a harvest cycle, depending on personal circumstances. Once you have the eggs and Thomas’s contribution, they have a party in a petri dish, and the blastocysts are created, graded, and frozen. At this point, the hunt for a surrogate kicks into high gear if you don’t have one for the fresh blastocysts. Anyway, if you find someone who works for you and who will treat themselves the way you would treat yourself during a pregnancy, you make the contract.”

Eva asked, “What if they can’t have a successful delivery?”

“Oh, these women are married to alphas who agree to help others have families. Frankly, some of the husbands have pregnancy kinks, but who cares. The ladies have already had their own kids. But the women are doing this to help you, and any verbal abuse will get you blacklisted from the possibility of having a second surrogate. There

are tons of contracts involved, and they protect you and them. The fees are generally reasonable.”

Eva whispered, “Why would they do it if they already had children? Who would go through that again?”

“People who love kids. If I am compatible with those two bozos, we are going to have a bunch of kids. I have lived a life alone and one with a large family. I like the family much, much more.” She smiled to Eva and squeezed her hand. “And you provided me with the starter kit.”

Liella piped up. “That’s me!”

“She’s frighteningly aware of conversations.” Penny smiled, and Eva laughed.

Drinks came, food came, more questions were asked, and Penny walked them through standard procedures and which doctors to ask for.

After dinner, Penny took Liella to the restroom again. When they came back, Eva asked, “Could you show me where to go?”

Penny could see a conversation was being requested.

As soon as they got into the restroom, Eva asked, “How can you stand... those things?”

“I like them. They make me feel secure and wanted. I developed this alteration because my brain was already wired for him and Thor. My body came later.”

“Thomas really wants a baby. What if he wants the surrogate?”

“He will have to get through her husband.”

Eva blinked. “Oh. Right.” She smiled. “You didn’t have to be nice, but you are. Thank you.”

“You are welcome. You weren’t ready for the first situation with Jax, but you didn’t hide his little girl, and you left him to it. Thank you for that.”

They hugged, washed their hands, and returned to the table.

After lunch, they went their separate ways. When they got home, Liella was put down for a nap. Penny walked into the kitchen and started to pull out ingredients for cupcakes.

When she put the liners in the pan Thor got excited. “You are making cupcakes?”

“Yes. Tomorrow is the day before her birthday, so she brings the cupcakes to class. For the next thirteen years. And the same if we have any other kids.”

“So, definitely.” Thor leaned against the counter. “Trust me, if you are able, we are determined.”

“Uh-huh.” She finished lining everything up, and then she yawned. “Right. Well, butter is warming up, so I am going to grab a nap. I am running out of opportunities, and tomorrow is going to be insane. Saturday will be a bit of a tornado. By Sunday I should be dead.”

“I am going to make sure that you get a solid nap in.”

She looked at him, and he picked her up and carried her upstairs, whispering the different ways he was going to make sure that she stayed in bed for at least an hour. She snorted. “Aren’t you done yet?”

“Oh, no. We are just getting started. We intend on exhausting you for decades.”

He steered her into bed, and out of respect for the lovely job that Jax had done, he flipped a light blanket over the made bed. Jax was a remarkably cheerful neat freak as long as he was properly thanked for the housekeeping he loved doing.

An hour later, she was sleepy, and Thor had gone through a few condoms so she wouldn’t spend the afternoon sticky.

Thor used his body to cover her, and they were tangled together and moving slowly when the door opened. Jax laughed softly. “Looks like nap time all around.”

She smiled. “May as well make the most of the time off.”

Jax chuckled. “And we need to make sure that you are relaxed for your role as mom and school secretary.”

She laughed. “I didn’t know I had to get into training for it.”

Thor circled her hips, and she shuddered while clinging to him.

Jax joined them, and by the time they let her nap, she was limp with a slight smirk on her lips.

Jax was with her after the nap. “You were kind to Eva.”

“I saw a picture of her at the beach house. She looked like she was in over her head. This is indelicate, but did you guys keep having sex after she got pregnant?”

“No, it was a lucky shot, and she didn’t want anything to do with me afterward.”

“Too bad. Based on what I have seen in other betas, if a compatible alpha continues a relationship with her, her body doesn’t have basically an allergic reaction to the baby.”

“Really? Geez. Antonio’s beta doesn’t have any problem.”

“You mean Dell? His wife? Yeah, he is attentive, and she is one of a kind.” She laughed. “Your boss is *extremely* attentive.”

Jax snorted. “Mental images I do not need.”

“Aw, I have a few of you and Thor that I am going to keep in the mental carousel.” She turned and looked over her shoulder. “Did you slime me?”

He held his finger and thumb a small distance apart. “A little. Thor was using a condom?”

“Yup.”

“That’s why.”

She figured out that it was integral to him getting inside. “Aw, come on. That’s not fair.”

“It absorbs, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah, but there are... side effects.” Aftershocks that lasted hours and were distracting as hell.

He nuzzled her neck. “I know. You told me during your heat.”

“Is that why you guys are jumping me every four to six hours?”

He laughed. “Yes.”

“I thought what happened in the heat stayed in the heat.”

“It isn’t fight club.”

She giggled and then had to try and figure out an outfit that would provide a bit of cool air for her lower area. Jax didn’t drip... his cum gelled and absorbed. So did Thor’s, but it was a softer set. Her body absorbing it caused the pulsing and fluttering.

They got showered and dressed, then she went to her room and looked for something good to spend the day baking in. She picked a long tunic and leggings. The sports bra held everything where it was supposed to be, and the sneakers and puffy socks made her feet feel happy.

Her hair went up in a ponytail, and she headed downstairs after making sure that Liella was still asleep. Dang. The little girl had needed less of a nap than she did. Well, it was a good thing that she had folks looking out for her. She was getting old.

Chapter Fourteen

The sacrificial cupcakes were going a little too fast. Thor was eating them with a look of bliss on his face. Penny sighed. “How can you look like that and eat like that?”

He smirked. “I spend a lot of time in the gym. So does Jax, but he is sneaky about it.”

Penny’s phone chirped. “Oh, cool. They have made it in and are checking into the hotel.”

Jax frowned. “A hotel?”

“Yeah. I mentioned it. Since they are home schooling, they got authorization to bring the kids to the city for a long weekend.”

“Why would they need authorization?” Jax frowned.

“Foster kids. You can’t just cruise around with them without notifying social workers.”

Liella lifted her head from her assigned position putting sugar tiaras on the cupcakes for her class tomorrow. “Wait. Are these my cousins?”

Penny smiled. “Yup. All of them.”

Liella started to vibrate in place.

Jax smiled. “Can I have your phone?”

Penny unlocked it and passed the phone to him while she got another round of cupcakes out of the oven. She slid in another waiting pan and went about her tasks while trying to keep Thor from eating everything.

Jax murmured, “Hey, Liella, did you want to take ballet classes?”

Liella blinked. “I don’t know what that is.”

Thor gasped in shock. He brought up a video on his phone of a little girl’s ballet class and slid it over into the princess zone.

Liella started to bob in time with the music, and Penny smiled.

Jax continued to text and chuckled. “If you want to learn, Penny said she will go with you. She took classes when she was little, so she needs to learn again, too.”

Penny growled. “I thought we were going to look into that. I haven’t even found a studio.”

Jax smirked. “Thor knows some people.”

Thor grinned. “You could say that. My Aunt Becca has a dance studio.”

“Yeah, he danced through his football years.” Jax was chortling.

Thor smirked. “That’s actually how Jax and I first met. We agreed to say it was during police training, but we actually met in dance class. My aunt needed guys in the class to do the lifts. We were equipped for it.”

Penny blinked and then laughed. “Right. Well, Liella?”

The little girl was still bobbing along to the video. She looked up at her name. “Can I do this?”

Thor smiled. “Aunt Becca is coming on Saturday to meet Penny and you, Liella. She can show you how to start things.”

Penny snorted. “Will she bring a portable barre?”

Thor grinned. “She totally could.”

Jax asked casually, “How big is this party going to be?”

“Uh, about seventy-five kids, parents, your families, my family. So... two hundred people at a conservative estimate.”

He grinned. “You think this can be pulled off?”

“Edgar and Janie are pros at this. I am pretty good as well. Tomorrow the setup starts, and Saturday things should be a riot.”

Jax asked, “Can Antonio and his group come?”

“Sure. Will you man the grill? We are just doing burgers, dogs, and on a separate unit, veggie dogs.” She smiled. “There will also be a lot of cake, ice cream, veggie platters, etc. I think I even ordered a tower of cream puffs.”

Jax smiled. “Your family is staying here. We have tons of room.”

Liella looked up with wide and astonished eyes. “I can have a sleepover?”

“Yes, but you still have to get to sleep on time.”

“Okay, Mom.” She beamed. “Thanks, Dad.”

“Edgar said he would bring the food for dinner. I wonder if he knows how much alphas eat?”

Penny nodded as she made up another double batch of cupcakes. “He has an idea.”

They could feel her amusement, but she wasn’t saying anything. Her family would be here in an hour. Everything would be explained then.

Edgar and Janie were standing there when Penny opened the door. She screamed happily and jumped up to hug them. The two alphas held her, and Edgar whispered, “You are okay?”

She looked at him and smiled. “I am okay. He’s gone. I have my job back, a nest egg, a daughter, a fiancé or a husband, and a backup butthead in case one gets tired. It’s been interesting, but Saturday’s party is as much for me just stretching as it is for Liella.”

Janie chuckled. “You always were an overachiever, sissy.”

Hands gripped Penny’s hips, and she was pulled back against Jax.

Jax grinned. “I’m, Jax. That’s Thor, and that is my little Liella. Welcome to our place, everyone.”

“Thor, Liella, this is my brother, Edgar, and my sister-in-law, Janie.”

Liella blinked and stared. “They are alphas. She’s a girl alpha.”

“Yes, missy. They are.”

Jax stepped aside, Edgar and Janie assessed the area, and then a sharp whistle and the stampede came in with cousin Ven bringing armloads of takeout into the house.

She paused. “Penny, you are looking well. Hello, Jax. I am cousin Ven. Table?”

“Table. We will buffet it.” She had to raise her voice over the kids chattering and introducing themselves to Liella as their new cousin.

The kids had every skin tone and height, and Liella called out, “We are going to play in the back yard.”

Ven nodded, “I’ve got ‘em.”

Jax slowly closed the door. “Your brother is an alpha and so is his wife.”

“Yup. There they are. Right over there.” She smiled. “And you saw cousin Ven.”

“Yeah, are those... feline markings?”

“The spots? Jaguar as best we can tell. Hands and forehead are the visible ones, but her back has a wedge of them as well. I think she mentioned her feet had darkened as well.”

“Does she know who her match is?”

Penny froze, got him to drop her, and pulled him outside to explain the highlights of the horror that Ven had been through. When he had gotten himself off the verge of tears, he nodded. “Right. So, he’s out of the running.”

Ven called out through the door, “And she isn’t desperate. If my right hand gets tired, I use my left.”

He snorted, and the tension was broken.

They went back inside, and Ven looked at them with her feline eyes smiling. “Don’t worry. The sadness flips to rage at the lightest invitation. I really hate my ex.” She

paused and smiled brightly. “Just like every dumped beta in history.”

Penny hugged her. “Holy shit. Are you working out?”

“I have been hanging out with Edgar and Janie, what do you think?”

Penny grinned, and they all headed to the table where paper plates were being used to support the variety of food. Ven walked to the door. “Kids! Food!”

By the end of the night, Liella was just as smudged and exhausted as her cousins. They were taken to bathe in shifts, and the nine kids were filed into bedrooms. The adults sat around in the kitchen while Penny kept baking cake after cake.

Janie asked, “How many double cakes are you going to make, Penny?”

“Seven. Last one is in the oven. Then, I will cover them up and get them ready to ice tomorrow night.”

The cupcakes were boxed up and ready to travel. Thor was still eating his cupcakes and ignoring it when she slapped his hand.

Everyone she loved was here in this house. It was going to be loud and frustrating at times, but there was love already. It was growing with every day. Now if she could find a way to distract Thor from the cupcakes, life would be close to perfect.

Penny sat with a cup of coffee and relaxed with some other parents as the kids played in the bouncy castle, lined up for ponies, got face painting, or a beginner ballet class from Thor’s auntie.

Ven was walking around and keeping things under control. Her close-cropped hair stuck out and up, but Liella already knew that she would easily carry the little girl on her back. The birthday girl was riding her new cousin, and they walked over to the ballet area where Ven took on sudden grace as she stepped and moved to

the music using formal motions, and Auntie Becca looked shocked.

Thor asked, “Penny, precious. Has Ven taken ballet?”

“A bit. She was getting back to it after she got back to herself. It looks like she graduated to pointe shoes.” Penny smiled. “And she can still do backflips. I didn’t know she could combine the two.”

Thor was stunned. “She can do acrobatics?”

Edgar chuckled. “Sure. She joined a circus, took it over, started a roller derby team, bought us a huge plot of land for the kids, and the house outside of town will be ready next year.”

Penny stared. “Seriously?”

“Seriously. She says if she runs out of money, she will just start over again.”

Penny blinked. “Ah. Right. Yeah, I guess she is used to it.”

“Her hair is very short.”

“Yeah, I think it was the last thing to change, and since she used to have long golden hair that guys constantly commented on, she chopped it off.” Janie sighed. “She’s still seriously hot though.”

Penny and the others nodded. Seven o’clock was looming, and she got to her feet, ignoring the twinge in her abdomen as she went to get Liella. Liella was learning first position, and Penny smiled. “Hey, sport. Do you know whose parents are picking them up?”

One of the little girls and Tobin raised their hands. “Okay. It’s almost seven. Time to get ready to head home.”

Liella got her shoes on, and they moved off the temporary platform, heading for the other groups of kids. They got fifty kids ready for pickup, and the gift bags were handed out as Liella thanked each for coming.

The parents looked at their exhausted and smiling children and drove off after congratulating Penny on her

return to the school.

Liella blinked. “We have to say goodbye to everyone?”

“They all brought you presents, so yes. You are the hostess, so you have to thank your guests.”

“Okay. Can you carry me?”

With the first round of kids gone, they walked through the house to the back, and the twinging got worse. Jax walked up to them and took his little girl as Penny gasped and got settled on her chair. Thor was grinning, but he got up and sat next to her, pulling her to sit across his lap. He put his hand over her belly, and she moved him to where her body was twinging.

Jax asked, “What is that?”

“Her birthday wish.” Penny grunted as things contracted hard and then relaxed. She leaned against Thor.

Edgar looked at her. “You are...”

“Yup. Dot, dot, dot all the way.” She gave her brother a thumbs-up. “Another cousin. Before you wonder, I already talked to Ven. She’s all for it.”

Janie frowned. “Really?”

“Yeah. She hugged me and asked to be godmother.”

Edgar asked. “What did you say?”

“Of course she is.” Penny sighed. The warmth from Thor’s hand was relaxing her, and she felt herself dozing off. She forced herself to straighten and look around to see what needed to be done. The bouncy castle guys met her gaze, and she nodded. The kids had left the castle for the ballet lessons and pony rides.

Edgar and Janie grinned and nodded. “We’ve got this.”

A group of adults came around the corner, and Jax smiled and went to hug the dark-haired couple. “Mom, Dad. Glad you made it.”

Thor waved at his mother, Magda, and the man who must be her husband. “Hey, Mom; hey, Dad.”

The couple walked over, and Penny tried to get out of his lap, but he held her against him. “Penny’s outdone herself tonight, so she’s taking a break.”

Magda smiled. “How many kids are there?”

“Right now? About thirty-five. Fifty just left.” She smiled. “My brother and sister-in-law have nine, so that boosted the numbers.”

Magda blinked. “Why so many?”

“Because this is the first school year birthday party. It will be talked of in myth and legend on the playground. Unlimited cake. No one got sick. Bouncy castle, ponies, face painting and ballet lessons, though it was your sister that provided that.” Penny smiled. “In my time working at the school, I have heard the kids talk about parties and make more of an effort with kids if they had a good time and went home full and happy. So, I made that for Liella.”

Jax had returned to her. “Is that why?”

“Yup. Edgar, Ven, Janie, and I know how hard it is to make a peer group accept you. So, it is easier to start when they are starting out.”

Edgar got a sad expression, “Aw, Penny.”

She touched her cheeks and felt the tears. “I am so sorry. I am just a little overtired.” She sighed. “Sorry I am working things out with hospitality.”

Thor hugged her, and her body started humming.

“Don’t start, Thor.”

He blinked in confusion, and then he started laughing. He hugged her gently and nuzzled her cheek. She felt warmth and caring through their link and the same from Jax. She smiled. “It has been an excellent party.”

“It has been.”

“And Liella is completely hooked on ballet,” Penny grumbled.

Edgar laughed. “You used to be great at it. You even taught Ven.”

She blushed. “I never got to pointe shoes. She’s way past me now.”

Janie chuckled. “It was never a race.”

“Ah. That’s right. Well, Madame Becca is going to have a packed course the next time she runs a class.”

Jax grinned. “Don’t worry. You won’t be the only mom. Lexa is signing up for it with Hailey, and Dell just thinks it will be a hoot for her and Andrea to take it so she can lift Andrea.”

“Oh, if we get to lifts, you and Thor are volunteering to come and lend a hand. Isn’t that what alphas are for? You know, lifting heavy things?” She flapped her hand.

Thor whispered in her ear that Madame Becca would be careful or Magda would beat the hell out of her.

“When I get bigger, you are going to have to check my foot placement for me,” she muttered.

He grinned and whispered what he wanted to watch through the next nine months. Oh, yeah. He was the one who went for her boobs first off.

She tried to get up to meet the Kekereks, but Thor kept a grip on her waist.

Jax’s mother grinned. “It’s fine, dear. We will meet again soon. We are in town for a few weeks before we head south again.”

She smiled. “I look forward to meeting you again. In the mean time, there is still plenty of food and less cake than there should be... Thor!”

Her chair chuckled. “You are an excellent baker. I am going to have to start chasing bad guys in order to stay in shape.”

“Try a mirror, you cake-sucking fiend.”

His father laughed. “Sorry, he gets that from me.”

Magda pinched the bridge of her nose. “And I own a store with a bakery in it. He eats my profits regularly.”

There was an evil spark in his eyes, and he opened his mouth.

Magda turned on him, “If you are going to say what I think you are going to say, you are going to be sleeping alone indefinitely.”

Penny pressed her lips together. It seemed that Thor got *that* from his father as well. He was chuckling under her, and he got the joke.

Jax was smirking, and then Liella ran to them hauling Ven by one hand.

“She’s a ballerina! She can twirl and turn and everything.” Liella was excited.

Ven smiled. “You can learn to do all that, except for the tumbling. You have to do that at school first to see if you like it.”

Liella nodded and then tried to get Ven to dance. Ven shook her head. “It is hard to do on grass, shorty, and I am a little sore after frolicking over there. I need to keep practicing.”

Penny listened to the conversation as her new relations got food, warmed it up, and dug in. When Thor’s dad started on the desserts, there was no stopping him. Magda yelled with him, and then she took some of the cakes and the compliments started. Jax’s family was more subdued, but they went through the cakes nearly as fast as the Winghursts.

Penny breathed slowly and leaned against Thor, and she let herself sleep.

She woke up between them and cursed. “I can’t believe I fell asleep.”

Jax kissed her. “And hello to you, sweet.”

She looked at him. “Does Liella hate me?”

“Of course not. She saw how hard you worked to make the day good for her. She’s very happy about it. She had a very good day. I wouldn’t have thought of most of that stuff, including the older classes.”

“That will keep her from being bullied.”

“Holy shit. You really were using this as a way to set Liella up for life.”

“Yeah. My mother did the same for me and Edgar when we were little. It helped until we had to change schools.”

She checked her watch, and it was only eleven at night. “Did everyone get home all right?”

“Yes. It’s done. Cleanup is done. Castle and ponies have been removed, and Thor and I helped his aunt with the barre and floor. Edgar and his crew took care of the food, tables, and dishes. We got it done.”

She nodded and relaxed. Thor kissed her neck and said, “And now we have all this time to do our own pregnancy check.”

He rolled her to her back, bent her legs back, and tormented her with his tongue until she whined softly and her body clenched. He sat up and licked his lips and looked at Jax. “I think we need a second opinion.”

Jax nodded, and the tentacles eased into her. Carefully, he repeated the stimulation that Thor had put her through and the same slow treatment, and he nodded to Thor. “It’s yours.”

Thor carefully wrapped around her while Jax was still inside her.

It was a sweet and tender night, but part of her would have preferred sleep.

The next day, the bus with her family drove off, and she and her new family waved them off. Ven hugged Penny and said, “I guess I have to stop hiding with Edgar and Janie.”

“Do you think it’s a good fit for you?”

Ven ran a hand through her hair. “If he genuinely needs me, yes. I am the one constantly leaning on others. It would be nice to be in that position for once. Ford did the matchmaking with Luna scowling at him, so it should be solid.”

“But, you are so good by yourself.”

Ven sighed. “I go through life without anyone to touch. No one but family even hugs me. My appearance is either startling or freakish.”

“Or cute. You are very cute.” Penny stroked her cheek.

Ven turned her head to the side and rubbed her cheek against Penny’s palm. There was a light purr from her, and Ven smiled. “See? Family only. I just want someone to touch me because they want me. You guys are safe now, all set up. My charities are good and managers have a grip on the business. Why not spend some time with someone who finds me attractive? Even if it is only because my scent comforts him.”

“Where did you meet him?”

“At the opening of the new roller derby club. I did a demonstration and then was meeting with some of the investors. His alpha came up to me, which was a little freaky, but we had a chat and came to an agreement. He gets a year from me to help me through his issues, and I get three million dollars for the charities.” Ven chuckled. “I can keep in touch. I will just be out of town for a bit. I have asked for family birthdays back here.”

Penny nodded. “No matter the money, just come home if anything upsets you. Okay? Liella will offer an invitation at the drop of a hat.”

“She wants to learn pointy toes.” Ven smiled. “She’s a lovely little girl. I look forward to seeing you prancing around in a leotard when I get back.”

“My birthday is in eight weeks. I want to see you here.”

Ven smiled. “I will be here.”

Penny asked quietly, “Why was Ford involved?”

“Oh, the alpha and omega are feline. Since Ford has an omega and four feline alphas, I guess the omega in question thought he would be the best gateway to an introduction.”

Penny scowled. “I still want to meet him before you run off to live with him.”

“Not going to happen. Even I have only met him for about half an hour. He seems cute and sincere, and there are shadows in his eyes that I want to help push away.”

“You don’t need to save someone to prove something.”

Ven smiled. “I really do. Now, I have to get to the airport, and I am putting my car into long-term parking. I will be back in eight weeks.”

Penny smiled. “I will start calling if you are a minute late.”

They hugged and Penny sighed at how soft Ven was. Kittens would envy her.

Penny stepped back to Jax and Thor as Ven drove away. Penny looked up at Jax, opened and closed her mouth, and burst into tears. Ven’s story was complicated, terrible, and very sad, but she had authorized family to share it if necessary. Penny sighed and calmed herself. It wasn’t yet necessary.

Liella ran up and held her around the waist. “Best weekend ever.”

Penny chuckled and then realized that Liella was talking to her tummy. Apparently, even a sister would be good now that Liella had experience watching groups of siblings.

Jax was laughing, Thor was laughing, and Penny was smiling as they went inside to pick out her outfit for her return to work the following day.

The family was getting ready to ease back into normal life, or as normal as it could be, but they were doing it

together, and Liella was excited that her mom would be in the office, at school.

Penny tapped Thor in the gut. “You think you are going to still fit into your suits?”

He grinned. “I will just have to work it off.”

Jax snorted.

The day was spent making shopping lists, schedules for when people were due home, and a list of favourite foods and least favourite foods. Lunches were made and stowed in the fridge, and then it was time for reading and quiet time before dinner. Jax was in his office, Thor was on the couch, and Penny and Liella went outside to sit on one of the wooden chairs big enough for an alpha, curled together with Penny reading her tablet, and Liella working through a reading primer.

Jax joined them fifteen minutes after they settled. He lifted Penny up and settled both of them on his lap. Liella grinned.

Thor came out and sat next to them with a book, holding Penny’s hand. Penny smiled as they all sat together reading until it was time to make dinner. They wouldn’t always be so cute with each other, but for now, it was a warm and secure feeling that wrapped around her.

The principal and vice principal met her on Monday, waited until she was in the office, and converged on her. The hugs from the other women brought tears to her eyes. Penny mumbled, “You are just happy that I now have a designer purse, right?”

Aya laughed, and Vanessa snorted. Aya looked at her. “Get back to work, Penny. We are glad you’re back.”

Penny turned and stared at her desk. It was covered in flower arrangements. The other two giggled their way back into their offices, and Penny yelled, “How am I supposed to find my desk?”

Vanessa stuck her head out and said, “Pruning shears, agent orange? Take your pick. Glad you are back.”

Penny started shifting the sixteen arrangements off her desk. “Glad to be back.”

Two hours later there was a soft knock and a small voice. “Miss Penny, I need the nurse.”

Penny smiled. “Then let’s go.” She flipped a small shirt over her arm and got to her feet.

She put her *Back in five minutes* sign on her desk, took the six-year-old’s hand, and walked Benny to the nurse.

“Nurse Harcourt, Benjamin has another nose bleed. He also feels a little warm.”

“Thanks, Miss Penny. Glad to see you back.” The nurse put the steps out, and Benny wobbled up onto the exam table. He kept tight to Penny’s hand as the nurse removed the wadded bloody tissue, and she soon got him to cooperate into getting the bleeding to stop.

They cleaned him up, and put the shirt on that Penny had brought along. She took the bloody shirt and winked. “I will have it back before lunchtime, Benny.”

He grinned, and she walked him back to class. She took care of the blood stains, put the shirt in the wash, and returned to her desk. She continued to tidy things, and at one point, Aya stuck her head out. “Still glad to be back?”

A small knock sounded on the door before a little girl opened the door with a stained shirt. She had been sick. “Miss Penny?”

Penny sighed. “No where I would rather be.”

She got up, grabbed a clean uniform shirt, and took May’s hand. She didn’t know when the kids had started coming to her to take her to the nurse, but Harcourt didn’t mind the extra hands, and the kids liked getting cleaned up before they went back to class. May’s condition was going to need a parent to pick her up.

Harcourt nodded, “She has a fever. Call her mom?”

“On it.”

May nodded. “I want my mom.”

“I will find her, May. You put on this clean shirt, and I will get your mom on the phone.”

Penny patted May’s head and went back to her desk to track down Aubrey Willis. Aya came out, took a deep breath to speak, and returned to her office when she heard Penny on the phone. Aubrey was refusing to pick up May, knew that she had a fever, and had sent her anyway. Penny hung up and called Ember Willis. “Hello, Madame Willis. I am Penny, calling from May’s school.”

“Oh, no, is something wrong?”

“May has been ill and needs to be taken to a doctor, and then she needs to rest for the day. I am not qualified to assess, but she is vomiting and has a fever. A doctor is needed.”

“And Aubrey isn’t answering.”

“She is refusing to pick May up, and May needs to see a doctor.”

“I am on my way. My driver, Maxwell, will come and get her. Is that acceptable?”

“Physical description?”

“Six-six, a scar from forehead to chin on the left side, pretty blue eyes.”

“Got it. He just needs to knock at the office. I will put her in the quiet room.”

“Thank you, Miss Penny.”

Penny got up and walked back to the nurse’s office. She crouched next to the bed. “May? Can you come with me? Your grandma is sending Maxwell to pick you up. I will put you in the quiet room.”

“Okay.” She took May’s hand and walked her into the office and opened the slim door that had a bed and a basin in it. The air system was slightly warmer than the

surrounding air to help the kids relax. It was handy for muscle sprains.

She washed the little shirt and got Benny's shirt out of the drier, hung it up and gave May's shirt the same treatment.

She got back to ordering supplies for the school and the art classes. A strange man came into the school and said, "I am here for May Willis."

Penny smiled. "Who are you?"

"None of your business. Her mom told me to get her."

"Well, her mother has already stated that she is not going to pick her daughter up today. So, who the hell are you?"

He lunged for her, and she snapped a tentacle around his neck, forcing him into the wall with a thud. She squeezed rhythmically. "Now. Who. Are. You?"

Shockingly, he told her everything she wanted to know.

She nodded and got her own phone, texting Thor what she had learned.

Another man came in and said, "She isn't with the nurse!"

Penny grabbed him around the throat and squeezed until he dropped to the ground.

The door opened again and a hulking figure said softly, "You called Madame Willis?"

The scar and pretty eyes were exactly where they should be.

Penny knocked out the chatterbox and said, "You know what is going on?"

"Miss Aubrey has been kidnapped. They wanted to get May, but Miss Aubrey sent her off with the driver. Nasty ex-boyfriend."

"Where will you take May?"

“To her doctor. You said she was sick. Can we take these two?”

“The police are coming for them.” She felt the throb in her link. “Please stand away from the door, Maxwell. They are coming in agitated.”

He walked to stand next to her desk, and Thor came through and walked right up to her, picking her up for a hug. “Are you okay?”

“It takes one hundred and eighty seconds to strangle an adult male to unconsciousness.” She smiled brightly.

He kissed her, and Maxwell snorted. She heard cuffs snicking and turned to see the other officers hook up the two henchmen.

“What about him?” Thor gestured to Maxwell.

“He’s authorized pickup for the little target who has flu-like symptoms.”

Maxwell flared his nostrils. “She’s behind that door?”

Penny nodded and squirmed to be let go. Thor set her down, and she went to May. She was burning up. She picked her up. “She needs a hospital. Now.”

Maxwell touched her cheek and said, “May?”

“Maxwell? Did Grandma send you?”

“She did.”

Thor looked at the little girl with the hot spots of colour on her skin and said, “I will give you an escort.”

Maxwell nodded. “I will take it.”

Thor nodded. “Good work, Miss Penny.”

“Gogogogo.” She waved him off. “Sweetie.”

He grinned, and the officers with him snickered.

Penny got the feeling he was going to be Detective Sweetie for a while.

She put her sign up and went to check on the nurse. Harcourt was shaken, but she said, “Who were they?”

“Kidnappers. You are good?”

“Yeah, he shook me and yelled. Then came for you. Are *you* okay?” Natalie Harcourt asked.

“Sure. I am done hiding my light under a bushel, so to speak. Brace for a wave of the flu. May is on the way to the hospital. She looked horrible.”

The nurse nodded. “I think that her mom gave her something to make her vomit. Probably to get her somewhere safe.”

“Right. Kids who are throwing up are isolated. Glad you are all right.” Penny stalked back to her office and set everything to rights before she resumed her work until noon.

When the next small knock struck, Penny looked up. “Come in.”

Liella walked in with a bunch of her classmates. “Mom, we are here to help carry the flowers.”

Aya grinned. “Glad to be back at work?”

“Sure. Blood, vomit, a rush of kindergarteners fighting over roses and daisies? It’s the life. See you tomorrow. Supplies will be in Wednesday.”

Aya closed her eyes in relief. “Thanks for coming back. I really know you didn’t have to.”

She opened the side door and hatch on her car while the little ones marched out. “I love the kids and am good at the work. If May’s grandmother calls, find out her situation. She was very ill.”

Aya nodded, and Penny picked up the last flowers and brought up the end of the strange parade. Liella was organizing everything in car, and Penny crouched so that all of the little ones could shake her hand or hug her. Smiling parents waited as the small ones burst into running to get to their parents and caregivers. Penny secured the flowers, closed the hatch, kissed Liella on the cheek, and closed the door.

Time to eat their pack lunch with Jax, and then Liella would get a nap and Penny would get to unwind in her own way before Jax had to get back to enforcing copyright infringement and writing contracts for models and voice actors.

Domesticity had its perks.

Author's Note

Well, unless you missed foreshadowing, you understand that cousin Ven is next up. Hers is a tragic tale of a broken heart, a lost child, a brutal attack, and the long road home. Fortunately, that happens before the book starts. There are some dumb and stubborn alphas, a sweet and scared omega, and a beta who just wants to be loved, but she will settle for holding hands.

Thanks for reading,

Viola Grace

About the Author

Viola Grace (aka Zenina Masters) is a Canadian sci-fi/paranormal romance writer with ambitions to keep writing for the rest of her life. She specializes in short stories because the thrill of discovery, of all those firsts, is what keeps her writing.

An artist who enjoys a story that catches you up, whirls you around, and sets you down with a smile on your face is all she endeavours to be. She prefers to leave the drama to those who are better suited to it, she always goes for the cheap laugh.

In real life, she is now engaged in beekeeping, and her adventures can be found on the YouTube channel, Mystery Bees Apiary. Just look for the cartoon kittens.