



THE
ALPHA
AWAKENS

ANNA FURY

ALPHA COMPOUND - BOOK 1

Steamy Omegaverse Romance

The Alpha Awakening turned men into raging beasts.
Will any women survive?

THE ALPHA AWAKENS

Alpha Compound - Book One

By Anna Fury

© Anna Fury Author

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This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental. However, if a real-life pack alpha shows up at my door tomorrow demanding entry, I'll say a quick prayer of thanks.

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To my tribe, a group of authors so effing fantastic, that I know I couldn't have written this book without y'all. You ladies were with me through every stage of this process, and you have my entire heart. Leah, Ava, Deysi, Opal - I adore my IFTA!

To my fabulous beta readers, who taught me that auburn and chestnut hair are not the same thing, and many other important life lessons...

Content Warning

The Alpha Awakens is an omegaverse romance, and omegaverse often deals with difficult topics like generalized violence, possessiveness, physical dominance, consent and more. This book is intended for mature audiences due to the dark themes prevalent throughout my writing.

It's never my intention for a reader to feel triggered by something in these pages. If you're worried, please feel free to reach out to me at author@annafury.com and I'll tell you as much as I can to make you comfy.

That being said, my alphas aren't aggressive douchebros. I wrote men I'd personally love. They're brooding, broken, and over-the-top wild about their women. They're fiercely loyal and amazingly creative (cough cough). They're basically the cat's meow ;)

Thank you and enjoy!

AF

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Author's Note

About the Author

MAL

I hate the grocery store. I hated it before the world spun off its axis, but now, I hate it with a ferocity I didn't know was possible. I look in my open fridge, frowning at the lack of anything palatable. If tumbleweeds could blow around in here, they would. Briefly, I consider texting my best friend, Pen, to see if there's anything edible in her apartment upstairs. Then I remember she's on night duty at the hospital starting tonight, so she's probably resting. Even so, she'd likely tell me this is a great opportunity to "get out of my head" and "lean into a growth edge," or some such nonsense. She's big on the whole *being your best self* thing, despite the completely terrible state of the world.

I dig around every single cabinet in my kitchen, hoping and praying I might have accidentally stuck a box of noodles, or something, in the wrong cabinet. The search is a bust, though, and the fact that I really need to go to the grocery hits me; I'd better get my list together.

Batteries, because a girl has needs. Ramen. Easy Mac. Being single and alone rocks. Although, with the post-pandemic state of the world being what it is, single and alone is preferable to the alternative. I don't even talk to my neighbors since the virus. You just can't trust anyone anymore, especially men. No one wants to be around when a dude Awakens.

Chewing my lip, I decide to text Pen anyhow and see if she wants to go with me. She texts back right away and says she's up for it and heading down.

Turning from the kitchen, I slip past the end of the island to grab my things but accidentally knock a stack of books and utensils off the countertop. They clatter to the ground, the books slapping flat on the floor.

The sound of the books hitting the ground rings out like a gunshot in my apartment. I wince and freeze, immediately transported back to the worst day of my life. Like a terrible movie, scenes from that day run through my mind in a never-ending loop as icy fingers grip my lungs.

M*y twin brother, Tyler, crashes through the front door of my parents' house, bleeding out of his eyes, nose, and mouth. Blood trails behind him as Tyler falls to the ground; my mother screams while my father dials 911. I can feel Tyler's death grip on my arm as I fall to my knees by his side and he thrashes wildly. When he goes completely still, my own heart stops, until Tyler sits up and looks at me through blood-filled eyes.*

He's different; I know it immediately. He is no longer my twin brother, but something sinister and deadly. Predatory eyes stare hungrily at me through my brother's familiar face, blood and saliva dripping steadily from one side of an angry sneer.

I yank my arm out of his hand just as the sound of his bones breaking cracks through the silence in our living room. My mother starts screaming as we watch Tyler's body break down and re-form like something out of a horror movie until my gangly sibling stands in front of us, nearly seven feet tall and built like a truck.

The first rage-filled roar that erupts out of Tyler's mouth has my mother flying to my side, grabbing me by the arm and heading for the door where my father fumbles with a shotgun. I briefly wonder where he got it from, then a boom nearly shatters my eardrums as my father lets off a warning shot into the living room. We scramble out into the street as Tyler roars behind us, and then there's the sound of hundreds of boots on pavement as a government task force piles into my family

home and drags my brother away, screaming. No, not my brother—a monster. Because that thing in my living room is no longer my twin.

Cold fingers move to grip my throat as I struggle to suck in a breath, panic bubbling up from my stomach as my cheeks heat and my chest flushes. I'm barely aware of Pen snapping her fingers in front of my face to get my attention. When did she come in?

“Mal, Mal! You're not there; you're safe,” she shouts in my face, snapping her fingers rapidly right in front of my nose. Sucking in a deep gasping breath, I flash my eyes to hers. They're green and familiar, and kind; I recognize my best friend and the familiar concern on her elegant Irish features. Pen strokes my hair gently as she counts with me.

“Breathe in, honey, ten counts and then out with me, ‘kay?” I can't even nod, but I watch Pen's lips as she starts with “one.” In and out, I gasp for breath as my first try barely fills my lungs. My cheeks and chest feel like they're on fire as I grip Pen's hand hard and try to follow her steady and patient breathing.

By “six” I can feel the air filling my lungs, and the intense panic that hits me when I remember Tyler's change is slowly receding. Pen rubs my arms helpfully as my breathing evens out and my cheeks flush again, this time with embarrassment.

“It's still happening, huh?” Her voice is soft and gentle, and I can barely look up as I nod miserably at her. So many random things remind me of the day I lost my brother to the virus. Most days my anxiety is what I'd call “light.” A little rumble in the pit of my tummy, a general sense that things aren't right, the need to hold my hand over my heart to make sure it's not beating erratically. But, occasionally, true panic hits me hard, and I feel physically awful. Pen says it's a normal response given the last three years of humanity's collective lives, but it still sucks. I'd love to think there's a future when books falling off the countertop don't send me

into full panic mode. But then, a lot of things send me into panic mode these days.

“You still want to go to the store?” Pen asks softly, her brows furrowed with concern. I nod because I think it’ll be helpful to just get out, even though getting out is terrifying.

“Okay then, let’s do something with this *hair*.” She giggles, grabbing a band from her wrist and pulling my limp brown hair up into a topknot. I’m sure it looks cuter because she’s a whiz with this sort of thing, where I normally can’t be bothered.

Staring up at Pen’s beautiful porcelain skin and wavy red hair, I chuckle in resignation. She looks like an athletic pixie, whereas I’m maybe five feet of curves with what my mama calls “extra lovin’” around the middle.

“Why are you so perfect?” I grumble half-heartedly up into Pen’s face, tugging on one of her perfectly braided pigtails. She chuckles and thumps the tip of my nose with a wink.

“You mean, why do I get such pasty, easy-to-burn Irish skin when you’re beautifully tan in the middle of winter? You mean, why am I built like a stick, but you’ve got the hourglass figure all women want? ‘Cause yeah, if that’s not what you mean, I don’t want to hear it, Mal,” she chides, stepping back to admire her handiwork. “Besides, someone should admire how hot you look in this pajama rock star ensemble.” Pen guffaws loudly.

Pen doesn’t do anything by half measures. Every smile, every laugh occurs at full volume, and it makes me chuckle reluctantly along with her, pressure easing in my chest. Her exuberance used to really fill a room *before*, when people still got together in groups. These days, her mothering of me is the only thing that keeps me sane. Especially after my folks decided they couldn’t stomach losing Tyler and moved all the way across the country to get away from his memory.

Thinking about that sours my temporarily improving mood, so I grab my bag while Pen watches me in silence. When we leave the apartment and close the door behind us, panic rises in my throat again. Swallowing it down, I follow

Pen's lean figure down three flights to the front entry of our building. She opens the door and walks out into the fading sunlight effortlessly, as if leaving the safety of our building doesn't matter to her. And I guess it doesn't, because she does this every day to go to work.

I peek out after her and scan the street, but everything is still. The city still smells like New York, the air thick and dense. Two solitary cars drive by, a far cry from the hundreds of honking cars packed like sardines, as it was *before*. It feels like the whole world is collectively holding their breath, waiting to escape from the pandemic that plagues us.

A few people walk up the street in our direction, their faces covered by hoodies, clutching their bags tight as they approach. No one waves or says hello. This is the new normal; at least, it's how life has been since the Awaken virus hit us three years ago.

Pen rolls her eyes exaggeratedly as she clomps down the stairs loudly.

"Mallory, honey, we're not going to get snatched off the street in broad daylight," she chastises, using my full name, which she knows I hate.

"We might," I tell her off half-heartedly as I join her. We practically jog up the street, holding our purses close. When we pass our neighbor on his way back to the building, I don't even look up at him, although Pen gives him a broad smile. He doesn't stop to talk to us though, and we both carry on in separate directions.

"What are you doing?" I whisper-shout as she chuckles softly.

"Mal, you can't ignore all men forever. If that dude starts bleeding and foaming at the mouth then, yeah, we'll run. But until then, he's just a guy." My heart pounds in my chest with anxiety, because she's right, but she hasn't seen what I've seen. She hasn't seen the virus turn a nice normal brother into a snarling seven-foot monster.

“Yeah, well, when you see a ‘dude’ Awaken in front of you, you’ll change your tune,” I snap. Pen doesn’t say much after that, but she sticks close to me as we power walk to the store. I’ve probably hurt her feelings, and she’s basically family, but sometimes I wish she’d be as scared as I am. Grabbing her hand, I thread my fingers through hers and squeeze, by way of apology. Pen squeezes back but doesn’t let go.

The walk isn’t long, but I’m on edge the whole time, my fingers clutching my bag and Pen’s hand so tightly they begin to cramp. The city feels uncomfortably calm, but even beyond that, the winter air is heavy, hanging over my head like a storm cloud.

Being out in public for the first time in three weeks dredges up memory after memory. This time, three years ago, I was heading to Panama with friends when the news showed a strange pandemic plowing across the East Coast. It appeared to only affect men, and it caused a terrible reaction that turned them into insane, savage monsters. Trip canceled, I fled home and watched the virus tear my family apart firsthand. Men like Tyler are called “the Awakened,” although I think that sounds a little too poetic for a bunch of raving lunatics.

The virus first hit here in New York, and when it did, the infected men wreaked havoc on the city’s population, leaving bloody remains everywhere. They killed men, women, and children, and the victims who weren’t killed were often horribly disfigured.

Glancing around nervously, I notice Pen is alert and aware, her jaw clenched in concentration. “How do you do this twice a day to go to work?” I ask her softly.

Pen smiles down at me and squeezes my hand. “I’m definitely more on edge now with the kidnappings, but I just try to stay safe, ya know? I don’t walk alone if possible, and I stick to the busy roads. It’s...okay.”

Chewing the inside of my lip, I nod and tuck my side in closer to hers for comfort. Women are disappearing with alarming regularity in the city, enough that the news has

warned women against leaving the house at all. It's ironic since the news also warns women about being anywhere near a man. Not sure who's expected to do the post-apocalyptic grocery shopping, but there you have it.

We round a corner, and the grocery store appears before us, brightly lit from within. *Safety*. I focus on the looming doors and pick up the pace, letting out the breath I'd been holding when the front doors whoosh closed behind us. There's instant relief in knowing that there are others inside the store. Safety in numbers is an illusion, though. If one of the men in here Awakens in the store, we all die.

With that grim thought at the forefront of my mind, we zip up and down a few key aisles, gathering everything on my list. I recognize a few of my neighbors, but as always, we no longer acknowledge each other. It's horribly depressing.

Checking out takes two minutes, and the young cashier gives us a sad smile when she hands me the receipt. We face the front doors again for the long trek back to my apartment when Pen's cell rings. I grit my teeth, shifting my bag over my shoulder as I pull my hood up over my hair.

Pen answers quickly, her voice carrying out of the store and into the empty street ahead of us. I glance around, dread pooling in my gut. Why can't she just pay attention to getting home? I barely listen to her conversation until I realize she's snapping two fingers in front of my face yet again, repeating my name over and over.

"Mallory, did you hear me?" she questions, her voice laced with concern. I jerk my gaze to hers as she continues. "The hospital called me in early for my shift. I'm so sorry; will you be okay walking back?" Her voice trails off as she bites her lip.

My face blushes as I realize she's leaving me, and I have to resist the urge to beg her not to let me walk home alone. Ultimately, I remind myself she does this twice a day every day, and if she's brave enough to do it, then I am too. True to my nature, I default to humor to deflect the situation.

“I think you forget I’m an investigative reporter; I’ll be fine,” I say lightly with a smile, trying to ignore the desperate panic that feels like it’s clawing up out of my stomach. My skin feels flushed and hot, and I wonder if Pen can see my cheeks burning.

She smiles brightly at me, twisting a piece of my hair around her fingertip and rearranging it up over my shoulder. *Such a mom.* “Text me when you get home, alright? I’ll try to come by when I get off.” I shift on my feet and hike my bag higher over my shoulder.

“Be safe getting to work, and don’t look in any dark alleyways,” I joke.

Pen giggles and hugs me tight to her chest, crushing us together. “I promise not to look into a single alleyway or doorway or even a hole in the ground, scout’s honor,” she whispers into my hair.

When we walk out the doors, Pen gives me a teeny wave before turning and heading up the street, pulling her hood up over her beautiful red hair. I watch her round a corner before turning back in the direction of our building. The empty street feels enormous and crushing now that I face the prospect of walking alone. I chide myself because, if I got out more like Pen did, I probably wouldn’t be so scared. Doing hard things helps us grow, though, at least that’s what she tells me. Tucking my bags tight up over my shoulder, I head back in the direction of the apartment.

Two blocks from the building, excitement at being nearly home floods my system, and I smile, relieved. I haven’t passed anyone, and I’m just about there. I pull out my phone and send Pen a triumphant text, but just as I send it, prickly awareness suddenly stands my arm hair on end. Goosebumps cover my whole body in a flash, and I dart my head around, looking for whatever’s wrong. The horrible feeling that I’m being watched chokes me as I snap my head from one side to the other. I don’t even realize I’ve stopped until I look into the alleyway across the street and see him.

MAL

Even from this far away, he's impossibly huge, partially shrouded in the darkness of the alleyway. It's chilly in New York this time of year, but he wears only ripped pants and a skintight shirt that reveals thick, muscular arms the size of tree trunks. The angles of his face are harsh, dirty blond hair falling over his left eye. He was probably handsome before the Awakening, but all I see now is a predator, my mind flashing immediately to my brother.

His hands are balled by his sides, and as I watch, he clenches and unclenches them several times. Obvious coiled tension in his too-still body tells me to scream and flee. This Awakened is utterly focused. On me.

Choking down a scream, I think fast as my heart hammers in my chest. Somehow, I know if I scream, it'll set him off, and he'll bound across the street in half a second and rip me in two. What would Pen do right now? She's so freaking brave, she'd probably fight him. But in my mind, I can hear her telling me to just get away.

So, instead, I do what I'd do with any wild predator. I turn my head from his gaze and walk quickly but confidently toward my street as anxious electricity prickles down the length of my body.

At first, I don't hear anything. I don't turn and look either, my legs burning as every nerve ending in my body ignites, begging me to move faster. I power walk the last two streets to

my building's front door, tears streaming down my cheeks as I shove my key in the door with relief.

Then I hear it. Deep, heavy breathing right behind me. I'm so terrified I can't even make a noise, my heart pounding like a hammer in my chest. Dread pools in my gut as I turn slowly around, and he's right there, not more than five feet from me on the sidewalk, still as a statue. Up close, he's massive, towering over me, even though I'm on the top step of my building. He must be seven or eight feet tall. He's absolutely silent other than the breathing, and the focus in his gaze causes my skin to prickle uncomfortably as the crushing fist grips my chest again. My muscles bunch involuntarily, preparing me to flee as terror claws at me, stars dancing across my vision.

With a sneer, he cocks his head to one side, sucking in a deep breath. A guttural noise rumbles in his chest as he starts toward me, two long purposeful strides that bring him right to my steps. Suddenly, an unbelievably loud roar echoes around us, shaking the windows on the front of my building.

It wasn't him, and he whips his head across the street, where a second Awakened is moving quickly toward us. The blond one snarls and turns away from me, facing off with the newcomer. This one is darker, bronzed skin peeking out of a hoodie that's pulled up over his head. I get a glimpse of light eyes before I realize this is my damn cue.

Scrambling, I fling the building's door open, slamming and locking it behind me before I flee up three flights of stairs to my room. I do run at this point, terror moving me faster than I've ever gone. I hear another roar outside as I slam my door shut and lock all three locks.

I fling my groceries on the counter in a hurry and scramble to my room, throwing myself behind my clothes in my closet. It's not a panic room, but it's all I've got. If either of them decides to come in here for me, it's game over. Adios, Mal. Nice knowin' ya.

Actually, a knife might help me a little bit, so I run to the kitchen and grab one. Then I run to the closet again, ensconcing myself as far back in it as I can, pulling dirty

clothes on top of me for some semblance of protective hiding. For the first time ever, I'm thrilled my closet is so messy because there are piles and piles of clothes and shoes and workout gear to hide myself under.

I don't know how long I sit there, my breathing wild and unsteady as my heart flutters in my chest before I start to think maybe neither of them are coming up here after all. Surely breaking into a building is likely to get them caught? According to the news, the government still rounds up Awakened occasionally. Shit, I should have called the hotline. Is it too late?

With a cautious look around, I crawl out of the closet and head back to the kitchen. I take a quick peek, but my front door is still intact, and my windows are still closed. I know I would have heard it if either of them broke in here, but I feel so incredibly exposed right now. Still.

For a moment, I think I should call the hotline and at least report what happened, but then I think back to the second Awakened and how he took the first one's attention off me. If that was just a ploy to snatch me up for himself, he would've come here already, right? Ultimately, I decide not to call, but I wonder if I'm going to regret that decision.

That's when the adrenaline finally wears off, and I collapse onto my sofa and sob uncontrollably. I cry and cry for everything the last three years have done to humanity. For the lost friends and coworkers, the lost connections, the death, and destruction. I cry for all of it, and when I'm finally done crying, I head into the kitchen to put away the groceries.

ORION

Tonight is destined to be a disaster. I look around my richly appointed room, angry at the situation I find myself in. Enforcer of the pack has a nice ring to it, but the practical applications of my role aren't pretty. Mitchell told me when he gave me this job that it wasn't gonna win me any friends, and that's proven to be true.

I growl in irritation as I pull a long shirt over my head, struggling to get it down over my bulky frame. I do what I can with Mitchell's hand-me-downs before slipping a knife and a syringe into my back pocket and turning for the door. I'm going to need to request a new kit soon.

Mitchell, our unofficial pack leader, stands in the doorframe silently, big arms crossed over his broad chest. I heard him coming up the stairs long before he parked himself in my doorway, and I suspect he's here for a pep talk.

"Try not to hurt him too bad, will ya?" he gruffs. "It shouldn't be that hard to bring him down." I nod, my frown tight as Mitchell turns to leave then comes back, clearly not getting everything off his chest. "I don't know why the Awakening hit Samson this hard, or why he can't just alpha like the rest of us, but take it easy on him, I mean it."

I nod again because we've had this conversation before, and I'm fucking irritated.

"Don't call it the Awakening, Mitchell," I growl. "You're the only one who still insists on calling it that, and you know we all fucking hate it." I'm being petty because this man saved

my life, but the Awakening is a government term. I transitioned, and now I'm a goddamn alpha, and that's all there is to it.

Mitchell nods and backs respectfully out my door but grumbles all the way down the stairs about young alphas and something about us not seeing the big picture. I don't have it in me to care tonight though. Big picture? I can't even focus on that because right now I'm still running around chasing Samson like a teenage babysitter, and I'm over it. Samson got himself into this mess, and it's my job as pack enforcer to get him out of it. We can't allow an alpha to destroy the fragile peace we've eked out here outside the city.

Not if he comes from our compound, at least. I can't speak for the wildlings who still live in the drains or God knows where under the city. Our packs generally avoid each other like the plague, and if the government wants to deal with them, that's fine by me. Although, I know Mitchell doesn't completely agree with me about keeping our noses out of other packs' business. But our pack here at the Compound, we play by rules we created when the government drove us out of our homes after the virus hit.

The rules are pretty simple: stick close to the Compound, fight for fun if you want, but no outside violence against normals and no killing inside the Compound. Mitchell created this place right after the virus first hit and men were turning into raging, out of control beasts. I don't know how he kept his shit together enough to repurpose the Compound into what it is today, but I'm grateful he did, grateful he found me and dragged me here before I did something I'd regret.

Shaking off the bad memories of the last three years of my life, I head downstairs and out the front door. A sparkling black F350 is parked out front, big enough for tonight's job. My packmate, Griz, leans up against the driver's side door, his enormous arms crossed over his chest. When I transitioned, I came out huge like all alphas, but Griz is something else entirely. He stands a good head taller than everyone but Samson, and his right hook will take you down a peg. You'd

think being bigger would slow him down, but of all fifty or so alphas who live here, he's the fastest.

"Let me guess," I snap, "Mitchell asked you to come talk me down so I don't stab Samson in the heart? I've already gotten the pep talk directly from him, so save your breath."

Griz chuckles but says nothing, which tells me I've hit the nail on the head. "Gotta wonder why he made me pack enforcer if he's gonna send you to keep me in check," I growl.

Griz's smile drops as he leans forward off the truck and comes closer to me, his face serious and drawn. "The Chemist thinks there's something about Samson's genetics that's causing this unusually long transition. He's coming down tonight to run some tests."

I nod because this makes perfect sense. If anyone can figure out what's going on, it's the Chemist. We're due for a restock on Samson's serum anyhow, and it's been a month or so since the Chemist was last here.

I cast a darkly satisfied smile in Griz's direction. "So, if the Chemist is coming, then he's bringing Jude, right?"

Griz's frown deepens as he clenches his hands by his sides. Jude Chen, the Chemist's daughter and assistant, is a freaking knockout. Beautiful olive skin, captivating dark eyes, red hair with a quiet and submissive demeanor. Everything that gets me and pretty much the whole rest of the pack revved up, despite the fact that she's completely off limits. I'm certain Griz has a secret obsession with her, and I love to tease him mercilessly about it. His eyes darken, and he growls a warning at me, balling his hands into fists as his canines elongate in anger.

"Don't go there, Orion," he snarls.

I'm right though, because the only thing Griz ever gets mad about is me joking about Jude. I shrug helpfully as I sidestep him and fold myself up into the F350, slamming the door shut before I can say anything else to rile up my best friend. Good thing I have places to go tonight, or he'd probably beat me to a pulp for fun right now. The last time I

joked about making a pass at Jude, he paid me back so good that I limped for a full week.

Tonight, my last view of the Compound is Griz, watching me with his fists still balled as I peel down the long driveway and out the front gate.

Forty minutes later I'm nearing the city, but Samson's scent is fading. Every time he goes wildling, I track him on the same exact path to the same exact neighborhood in Tribeca. He's never said if there's some reason he goes there, but there must be. We just haven't figured it out yet. Once we get him home and he comes to, post-serum, he claims to barely remember anything that happened. I'm sure it's a lie, but whatever the truth is, it's buried deep, and he isn't ready to share it.

Tonight, though, his scent fades out as I head up the backroads into Tribeca. It's still daylight, so I look around before pulling the truck over and hopping out to scent the air. I'm able to pinpoint where he veered off and headed somewhere new, so I hop back into the truck and open the window to keep tracking him.

All alphas have incredible sensory capabilities, but my sense of smell is better than Griz's even. Maybe the one thing I have up on him, I think ruefully. It's part of why Mitchell made me enforcer and not Griz. That and an uncanny ability to read other alphas.

It takes me another half hour to wind around to a new part of town that I've never tracked Samson to. We're only half an hour outside Tribeca, but this neighborhood is dirty and run down. The occasional person scurries up the street, holding their bags close to their chest. A pang stabs through me as I watch one guy power walk up the street, looking around fearfully the whole time.

The fucking virus did this to us, I reminisce angrily. When the first alphas turned, they raged against the world and what had happened to them. Many committed unspeakable acts of atrocity, leaving bloody wakes behind them. But just as many of us never hurt anyone. That little truth seems to remain

buried in the news, though, and alphas aren't allowed inside any major cities for fear they'll wreak havoc there. In fact, I'm pretty much not allowed anywhere. I can't hold a job, or vote, or go to a supermarket for fear the government will show up and drag me to wherever they've dragged other alphas to. Can't be anywhere good.

For the millionth time, I'm grateful for Mitchell and his compound, his money, his clothes... Not only that, but his guidance too. Because without him, I'd have to go and be a wildling underneath New York, I guess. It's the only other place to go that I know of. The only other place alphas gather together to fight against the world and maintain some sense of normalcy. Although, if Mitchell's theories are correct, the New York underground pack is the reason women are disappearing fast.

I pull the truck over in a darkening alley, looking up to see a few windows snap shut as the big diesel engine rumbles between buildings. No one likes to see newcomers in their neighborhood these days. Chances are good someone will call the hotline and let the government know I'm here once I hop out, so I need to move fast. Samson's scent is all over these streets, though, so I have my work cut out for me tonight.

With a sigh, I grab a hoodie Mitchell gave me, pulling it up and over my head before I get out of the truck. Then I step into the dimming light and head to the end of the alleyway.

I need to get this done fast.

ORION

The sights and smells of the city fill my nose now that I'm out of the truck, and a pang of homesickness stabs me so hard I can barely breathe. I try to shake my head to clear my senses; I'm on a mission here. But every time I come into the city to get Samson, it sets my mental state back.

I was a successful plastic surgeon before the shit hit the fan, and every time I have to come here, I'm reminded of the life I lost. Holding in an angry growl, I stop at the edge of the nearest building and just watch. Samson's scent is strong, along with the scents of every human in a three-block radius.

I try to filter out the noises that pepper my ears. Singing, fighting, people stomping around their apartments, people walking quietly up and down the street. A couple vigorously slamming their headboard against the wall over and over. God, I miss that. I haven't had sex in three years, but dating opportunities for alphas are nonexistent, and that's not likely to change. How Mitchell snagged himself an omega, a bonded mate, is beyond me, but I guess he's proof it's possible. I file that tidbit away for future thought because I need to zone in on Samson.

Still as a statue in the shadows, I concentrate on the sounds and scents of the city. I filter out anything I don't need, setting all that aside as I drill deep into my surroundings. I close my eyes and breathe deeply, slowly, as I search for him. Finally, I pinpoint his location, five or six blocks ahead of me. I peer around the edge of the building and see an alleyway there. I

don't know if Samson's in it, but it's a likely candidate, so I stride quickly across the street so we're on the same side.

If he really took the time, he'd be able to tell I'm coming for him. But when Samson is in wildling state, he's barely controlled and completely unfocused. He'll be surprised by my presence, just like every other time.

As I pace quickly and quietly up the street, sticking to the shadows, I sense Samson making a move. Across the street at the same time, I notice a female pause and stop, her gaze on the alley I thought he might be in, her eyes blown wide. She's short, curvy, and covered in so much clothing I can barely see what she looks like underneath it all. But that doesn't seem to matter to whoever she sees across from her in the alley because she's fucking terrified.

Shit. Samson's never focused on a person before when he comes to the city. This is new. New and very, very bad. I pick up the pace toward the alley so I can intercept him fast.

To my amazement, she tears her gaze from Samson and moves quickly up the street, not running, but not looking back either.

Good girl.

I watch with chagrin as he crosses the street after her, silent as a ghost, not even looking for cars or normals who might see him. I turn where I am and follow on my side of the street, just watching as he stalks her, his body tense and taut. I need to figure out how to head this off at the pass without her getting hurt in the crossfire.

Unfortunately, she's reached her building before I can do anything about him. She flies up the steps, shoving her key in just as he reaches the steps below her. I move faster up the sidewalk, because I don't think he'd actually hurt her, but I can't be sure.

Stepping into the street, I watch him cock his head to one side and breathe in deeply. Shit, looks like I was wrong because, even from behind, I can tell Samson is eyeing her like something he wants to take home and do depraved things to.

Reaching into my pocket, I bring out the spiked brass knuckles the Chemist made for me. So far, it's the only thing that truly takes Samson down when he's like this, and it looks like I'll be needing them tonight. Slipping them onto my right hand, I move swiftly across the empty street toward them.

The girl is still as a statue on the steps, her hood fallen around her shoulders. Now I see long chocolate hair, forest green eyes, and plump pink lips. Her mouth is slightly open as if she's about to scream. She's much too close to Samson for my liking, and this is new behavior for him.

I bellow out a warning roar as I rapidly cross the street. Samson's blond hair whips around as he eyes me warily, squaring for a fight. When he turns from her, the girl sneaks through the front door behind him and slams the door shut, locking it from the other side. As if that would stop either of us if we wanted to get in. Her footsteps echo behind her as Samson roars back at me, angry to see me here.

This time I don't bother talking to him. Appealing to his better nature hasn't worked out well for me in the past, so I go right in for the kill. Halfway across the street, I leap, watching him crouch low so he's ready for the hit. Even so, when our bodies connect and he lashes out, I'm already too close, and he goes flying, crashing into the building behind him. I can practically feel the windows rattle and shake when he roars back in anger.

Samson is up almost faster than I can follow, snarling and snapping as he comes off the ground swinging. The good news about Samson in his unfocused wildling state is that he's always unable to strategize his attack. Truly, I think it's the only reason I can best him like this because he's getting stronger by the day. Another odd thing for the Chemist to figure out, because Samson is the only one this has happened to.

Anger and frustration hit me hard when Samson snaps elongated canines toward my throat, clawing at me with both hands in his fury. We alphas fight for fun, and I fight to train for situations precisely like this one, but Samson would kill me right now if he could. Using that anger to fuel my focus, I hit

him with a right hook directly to the temple. The spiked brass knuckles sink into his flesh, popping blood vessels and making mincemeat of the side of his face. It brings me no satisfaction to feel his blood spray across me, dripping into my eyes and mouth.

Samson crumples to the ground in a heap, but he'll be up soon enough. We alphas heal fast, him faster than most. Reaching into my back pocket, I grab a syringe of the Chemist's serum and jab it right into Samson's neck. Motherfucker.

I dart a quick look up the street, but there's nobody around. One alpha roar in the middle of the city is about all it takes to clear a room, so I'm not surprised. Even so, any one of these people could have called the hotline, so I need to head out fast.

Sighing, I look at Samson, now limp on the ground. His temple is a bloody mess from the brass knuckles. It hurts me to do this to him, but he's endangering everything Mitchell and I have worked for, and we can't allow it. Grimacing, I reach down and grab Samson's bare foot, dragging his heavy ass up the street to where I stowed the F350.

Once I get there, I throw Samson in the bed and bind him down with heavy chains. He's not likely to wake up before I get back to the Compound, but if he does, he'll have a hell of a time getting out of them. After I'm satisfied that he's secure, I fold myself back into the cab and head for the safety of home.

What a fucking disaster.

MAL

Fuck this day—I need my mama. I pick up the phone and dial her cell, listening to it ring just once before she picks right up.

“Mallory, is everything okay, sugar?” my mama asks in her southern drawl. She and Daddy live in Seattle now, but she’ll never lose that Alabama twang. Gawd, just hearing her voice makes me want to break down and sob again. I choke back tears because if I start crying, the floodgates are never gonna shut down.

“Hey, Mama, everything is fine,” I sniffle. Silence on the other end of the line tells me she doesn’t buy this baloney at all, but she doesn’t say anything. “I just miss you so much,” I say softly.

“Mal, honey, you don’t sound fine,” she says gently, her voice soothing even though she’s so far away.

I do almost sob at that because she always knew what I needed. Some girls fight with their mamas but not me. She and I have been best friends since I was a little girl, even when other girls went through a crazy teenager phase. We never did that. We went on spring break together and had crazy adventures, just the two of us.

“Tell me what’s goin’ on,” she demands. I hold the phone away from my mouth and take in a deep calming breath. If I tell her about the Awakened who followed me, she’ll drive all the way out here to pick me up. That can’t happen. If it’s

dangerous walking to the grocery five blocks away, I can't even imagine a cross-country road trip.

"Just been a long day," I lie. "Phillip is up my butt about an article for the Friday column, and I'm stuck." I hear shuffling on the other end of the line and then my daddy's voice.

"Marilyn, is that Mallory? If you're talkin' to Mallory, I want to say hi to my girl." Then he must have grabbed the phone because I hear Mama chastising him in a muffled voice just as he comes on the line.

"Mallory, honey, how's it going, baby girl?" he hollers into the phone. His hearing must be getting worse because he's as loud as a bull on the other end of the connection.

"Bill, you're just shouting at Mal; give me that phone back this minute," Mama snaps. They bicker back and forth before Daddy grudgingly gives up the phone and Mama comes back. I miss them so much my heart feels motionless in my chest, the pressure just squeezing and squeezing me.

I twist my long hair around my forefinger, waiting for one or both of them to start up again.

"Don't mind your father," Mama begins. For the next ten minutes she lectures me on the necessity of getting out of the city and heading out to Seattle, but we set that plan aside pretty fast. She says she's heard there are bands of women traveling in caravans from coast to coast, but I just can't imagine it. Mama moves on to how Pen and I should move in together for safety. But if she saw what I saw today, she'd know there's nowhere safe from an Awakened.

After a few minutes more, we exchange our goodbyes, and I hang up. Time to set all that aside and get to work. Despite my day, I still have a job to do, so I sit down at my desk. I feel like I should take a shower, but I'm scared to go in there and shut the door. What if one of those Awakened comes back and finds me somehow, and just knocks my front door right off the hinges?

I want to slap myself for this train of thought. If one of them comes back for me, I'm toast anyhow. I've got my mace still, sitting in my purse, but chances are that's gonna piss an Awakened off more than anything.

Pen pops into my head at that moment with a disapproving glare. She'd tell me to put my big girl panties on and get right back to living my life. She'd tell me to stop being scared just because the world has gone to shit. She'd tell me a lot of things if she wasn't on duty at General right now. God, I wish she wasn't on nights this week. I need her realism and confidence. She's the bolster I need when our new world terrifies the shit out of me.

Shaking my head at my own stupid, irritating anxiety, I scooch the chair at an angle so I can see the main street from my writing window. Phillip is waiting for at least two articles, and I'm behind the deadline already.

The Hawk is a city-based news blog, and I write the lifestyle, love, and human-interest columns. Phillip will have my ass if I don't get at least three thousand words to him tonight; I should have sent them earlier. For a brief moment, I think about calling Phillip and telling him why I'm late, but then I imagine the convo in my head.

Sorry, Phillip. I would have done my job, but I was kind of busy being chased home and starting a fight between two Awakened right in front of my apartment building. And then I spent a while hiding in my closet for good measure.

Nope. Not gonna go there. I'm a weenie these days, but I can pull it together to get these words written. If I can't do this, there's no way Phillip will ever let me write about something more meaningful. My only goal at this job is to get to a place where I can write what I want without him shooting down every idea I have.

He's basically into sensationalism, and while we never print anything that's an outright lie, our articles don't feel like true journalism to me. I went to journalism school, so what Phillip does as editor feels like a cardinal sin to me. But it's a job, and it pays me enough to get by until something better

comes along. So, here I am, pecking away at my computer about the grocery shortage and a lady three blocks up who started a community garden.

I've actually got a great nose for a story, even if I'm not a cutthroat bulldog like a lot of investigative reporters. What I want to write are general interest pieces about the struggles women face now that nobody dates. Who's gonna go on a date with a dude when he could hulk out at any moment and go on a rampage? Most awakenings happened right when the virus hit, but they still happen with enough regularity that rule number one these days is "don't be alone with a man." I want to write the story of how incredibly hard it is for a man to get a job because no women want to be working anywhere near them.

I'd love love love to do a whole series on the families of Awakened men, and how things change for them. While the Awakened are utterly terrifying, I know what a loss it feels like to the families they leave behind. I've seen families go through it—damn, *I've* been through it—and I'd love to tell those stories.

Phillip shot my ideas down pretty hard when I presented them earlier this year, saying our blog is more lighthearted, and the public looks to us to be positive and optimistic. I've never agreed with that; our name is *The Hawk*, as in a bird flying high above the ground with incredible vision. We're ostensibly a news blog. The public looks to us for, gee, I don't know, news.

A whole series about real life after the Awakening shouldn't just be reserved for the huge news agencies. *The Hawk* has East Coast readership, but we started super-local in a small area of the city. We have a unique opportunity to tell the stories of the people who live here. If Phillip has his way, it'll be purely sensationalist hearts and flowers.

I jab the enter key hard, sending two optimistically lighthearted stories to Phillip's work email. Reaching under my desk, I pull out my Ideas Notebook. Faded edges and water stains mar the front of it. It's at least ten years old, but it's my

most prized possession. I've been doodling ideas in this thing since I was in high school.

The earlier pages make me sad as I flip through them for the millionth time. Hearts and Superman symbols and Mallory Kensington practice written a trillion times. I read a romance novel in high school, and the Duke of Kensington was my instacrush. Pretty sure I planned to marry him until I hit college and discovered other book boyfriends.

I smile as I flip through the pages and my topics get more serious. Journalism school was an absolute beast, and the outlines for almost all of my papers and big projects are contained in these beloved pages. For an hour, I reminisce on everything about my life that I've poured into this old faded notebook.

When I finally get to the first blank page, I smile a little deeper. Phillip may not agree with a single idea I have, but that doesn't mean they're bad. Just that for the audience hearing my ideas, it's a bit of a downer. For the millionth time, I think I really need to start job hunting elsewhere. At the very least I should start to prepare a series of stories about what I want to write.

Even if they never see the light of day.

ORION

Samson thankfully doesn't make a sound the entire hour it takes me to get us back to the Compound. I turn off the main highway down a dirt road, using my remote to get us through several layers of security gates. Not that anything is ever really secure from an alpha, but the Compound is heavily guarded, and I'm coming in the back way to take Samson to the Shed.

As I pull up outside the enormous outbuilding Mitchell had repurposed for us, I see a team ready to assist. Griz is there, along with Mitchell and a few others. Standing in the doorway are the Chemist and Jude. Hell yes, I smirk to myself. I'm gonna mess with Griz tonight, maybe flirt with Jude a little bit to fuck with him.

I park in front of the open garage door that leads into the depths of the Shed. Pacing to the back, I open the trunk to find Samson still passed completely out. Unfortunately, he's also bleeding profusely from his head wound. Mitchell and Griz happen to come around to the trunk at the same time, Mitchell watching in dismay as bright red blood drips in a steady stream down the bed and onto the gravel.

I'm just about to explain when he stops me with a palm in the air. "We'll download later," he snaps. "Let's get him into the Shed and cleaned up."

Yanking Samson to the end of the bed, I throw him up over my shoulder and follow the group into the Shed's dark interior.

It's our hospital, insane asylum, and research facility all rolled into one.

When the Chemist and Jude come down, they stay and work here, and no one goes into their wing unless invited. I wonder if Griz has ever been invited in...probably not. I think the Chemist would chop off anyone's nuts who got near his daughter. Then we'd be up shit creek without a paddle since he's the only one who knows anything about alphas. And, also, the only one who makes the serum we desperately need for situations like tonight. It's fucking fishy if you ask me.

I can hear a trail of blood drip steadily behind me as I follow Mitchell down a few dark hallways. He throws open the door to Samson's usual room, and I fling him down onto the bed. Damn it, I swear he's getting bigger. Last time I retrieved him, I carried him like a baby in my arms, but this time I had to throw him over my shoulder to get a good grip on him. I almost asked Griz for help carrying him, but I know I'd never hear the end of it.

The Chemist shoots me a dirty look as he studies Samson's temple. "I need space," he snaps at me, which is my cue to leave while they patch him up. Turning on my heel, I stop right beside Mitchell as he observes. He and Griz always observe this process, not fully trusting the Chemist not to fuck with Samson. But, at the same time, desperately in need of his help.

"We need to talk about tonight," I rumble at them. "He was different. He went to a different place, and he stalked a woman."

Mitchell's eyes snap to me and narrow, concern etched across his face.

"Are you certain?" he demands.

Rolling my eyes, I give him the look I always give him when he second-guesses me. He sighs because he's aware he does this, but crosses his arms over his chest in resignation. "Come find me in the greenhouse later; we can run a postmortem on the retrieval."

Reaching into my back pocket, I hand Mitchell the syringe I used tonight and leave. I've always hated that phrase "postmortem." It comes from Mitchell's days in sales, but it makes me think of dead alphas, something I've seen enough of to last me a lifetime.

Mitchell created a sanctuary for alphas here at the Compound, but we're never truly safe. At any moment, the government could discover a house full of fifty of us and just firebomb the place. Or the Chemist could sell us out. Shit, he probably works for the government, if I had my guess. We're just a teeny cog in the big scientific experimentation wheel. I don't know what the truth is, but most of us are so desperate for some semblance of normalcy that we cling to this place like a life raft.

All alphas are a substantial size, and powerful too, but we're not indestructible. Even we can't fight off an army, although God knows we tried to in the beginning. Since then, Mitchell's done his best to protect us here.

Before the Awakening, he had money, power, and influence. He's used all of that to take this compound off the grid. And because he's good to the people of the small town closest to us, they protect our secrets and help us get things we need. Doesn't mean they don't look at me with terror in my eyes when I run into town to get something. Maybe that'll change over time. I sure hope so, because if I never get to meet a woman and have her look at me with something other than horror, I may wither up and die.

That wry thought brings me back to the woman from tonight. The quick glimpse I got of dark hair, forest eyes, and those pretty pouty lips I'd like to see wrapped around my cock while she sucks me off. She was teeny, maybe five feet if I had a guess. I would dwarf her completely. I really need to get laid one of these days so I don't fantasize about every woman I come across. Knowing that's not gonna happen is a constantly festering sore in my gut.

Ultimately, I find myself wondering what drew Samson to her of all women. I loved women before the Awakening, but now that I can't have one, the longing is bone-deep. I'd like

nothing better than to cherish and adore a partner who feels the same way. My body aches for a woman to use up every fucking inch of me. But no matter how desperate I am to do that, it isn't gonna happen.

That woman tonight was absolutely terrified of Samson. When I roared to get his attention off her, she looked up at me like she was seeing the Devil himself coming across the street. Three years after my transition, and I don't think I'll ever get used to that look.

Grimacing, I head out into the night and toward the main compound. I need a damn shower.

ORION

An hour later, I've washed all of Samson's blood off me, scraping it out from under my nails where it dried. The scents of the city still linger, captured in the dirty clothing that's now piled on the floor. Turns out Samson scratched up my neck and face pretty good, and I didn't even notice before now. It'll heal fast, but right now it stings like a mother. Slapping some antiseptic on it, I grimace.

Why I took the enforcer gig, I'll never know. At first, I was honored that Mitchell trusted me to help keep everyone in line so we can build something here. But now? Now I find myself extremely tired of chaining Samson down every week because he's unable to get ahold of himself.

Even so, there are other things on my mind besides Samson. Things like stroking my cock until I come, thinking about the pretty pink lips of the girl Samson tracked. Why her, I wonder again as I settle onto the edge of my bed. I flop back, one arm back up over my head as I take my cock in hand and give it a few firm tugs. Damn it, that feels good—better than it usually does. Which isn't saying much, since being an alpha means living with the worst case of blue balls ever. Unless you're Mitchell, I guess.

Swerving swiftly away from thinking about Mitchell while I stroke my cock, I think back on the girl again. I remember how her green eyes went wide when she saw me. I want to yank on that long chestnut hair and wrap it in my fist with her on the bed underneath me. She was short, and I thought I noticed a nice rack below the baggy hoodie she tried to hide

under. Her nipples are probably a beautiful dark pink, maybe even brown, I muse as I grip my cock harder, trying not to groan in my room. Heat curls low between my legs as I picture her pretty tits, heavy and full in my hands.

I let my imagination think of a series of dirty things I'd like to do to her, starting with a nice, long round of foreplay. Eating pussy was always one of my favorite pastimes, and I bet hers tastes fucking fantastic. I bet she's all-natural down there, gorgeous dark curls hiding a sweet prize from me. I imagine her spread open, her body inviting me to lean in and stroke between her legs. She'd be so wet by the time I was ready to slide inside her...

Suddenly, frustratingly, I explode hard enough to see stars, my whole body gripped up tight and tense as my hand and stomach are covered with sticky cum. Too damn fast. I barely got my imagination going.

Groaning in frustration, I tug on my hair with my free hand until my scalp tingles. Staring up at the beautiful burlled wood ceiling of my room, I close my eyes and grit my teeth.

I hate this, I think vehemently.

Mitchell has done what he can for the pack, but the thought of having only my hand to myself for the rest of my life just makes me...overwhelmed. I don't want this to be all my life's about, but I can't change it either. I want to rail about it, to scream in anger and beat something bloody. But nothing can help any of us now, much less more violence.

With a sigh, I sit up and use my towel to clean up. I should spare my brothers the scent of what I just did by showering again, but I just can't be bothered right now.

There's a stack of new clothing on my bed that I didn't notice when I came in. Must be from Mitchell's tailor, who thankfully re-measures us every couple of months to account for general muscle growth. None of us are expanding like Samson, but we do put on bulk easily with training and a good diet. Throwing on a new pair of jeans and a V-neck tee, I check out my reflection in the mirror.

I wasn't necessarily vain before the transition, but I always took care of myself. Always ate well, worked out, kept my eyebrows from looking like a caveman's. A fat lot of good any of that does me now, but I can't break those habits. It's stupid, but it feels good to do something normal, so I've never stopped. I trim my brows real fast and throw some gel in my hair before heading downstairs. Passing through the entryway, I head down a hall that leads toward one of the common gathering areas.

Calling Mitchell's property a compound sounds militaristic, but that's basically what our pack of alphas is. The Compound itself sits on a hundred acres of dense forest in upstate New York, punctuated by one of the grandest homes I've ever seen. I don't know who designed this place back in the day, but the house itself is beautiful. Rich mahogany walls and floors in every room, a library to die for, room after room of gyms and training arenas, and a couple of pools. Mitchell added on in the three years we've been here, and now there are a couple extra wings to house new alphas we find.

When I pass through the first common area, I see Griz heading in the opposite direction. They must be done with Samson, and if the state of Griz's clothing means anything, it was a rough go.

"Had to hit him with the knuckles, huh?" Griz asks me with a huff, rolling his eyes.

"Chemist had 'em made specifically for Samson," I quip helpfully. "You know that." He nods because he was there when the Chemist gave them to me. The metal is infused with the serum we use to knock Samson out, one of the first experiments the Chemist had us try.

"I know, but I don't like it," he replies evenly. "I know it can't be helped right now, but I wonder if there's a better way," he muses, suddenly contemplative.

"Like what, therapy?" I snort.

Griz shrugs but looks thoughtful. Neither one of us likes seeing what happens to Samson every couple of weeks, but so far, there aren't any other good options.

“Jude thinks he’s actively repressing something, like PTSD,” Griz says softly, big arms crossed over his chest.

“We’ve all got PTSD, man, and the rest of us aren’t going wild,” I remind him.

Griz nods again, chewing on the inside of his lip while he thinks. “You have the best intuition out of all of us; does he seem different to you lately?”

I have to think about that for a second because my intuition has always felt foggy and cloudy around Samson. When I see my other brothers in my mind, I see them as colors, and those colors mean something to me. Griz is a comforting golden blue mix unless he’s angry about Jude. Mitchell’s a deep emerald green, a color I associate with loyalty and leadership. I read my brothers this way, and I can tell who needs my attention as a result. But Samson? Samson is almost absent of color, and I’ve never experienced that before.

I tilt my head back toward Griz. “He’s the same to me, even when he goes wildling,” I confess to him. “There’s just a total lack of input, no sense or intuition to color how I see Samson.”

Griz frowns but nods as he runs one big hand up over his shaved head. I can sense that it pains him to see a brother struggle like Samson does, and for none of us to be able to help him.

“If there’s a better way to deal with this, Mitchell and the Chemist will figure it out,” I say as I clap Griz’s shoulder.

He nods once, although he looks unconvinced. As our pack strategist, it’s his job to consider all of the angles.

I leave Griz deep in thought as I make my way through the common room, stopping to handle smaller infractions with a few brothers before I go to meet Mitchell. He’ll be in the greenhouse, most likely. He’s almost always in the greenhouse because it’s *her* domain—his mate, Alice. There was never a woman living on compound property until Mitchell came stumbling in one night, a badly wounded woman in his arms.

We nearly lost her, but a few former doctors are living here now, so between us, we managed to save her life.

When Alice recovered from whatever happened to her, she only had eyes for Mitchell, and that's never changed. There's a deep bond between them that the rest of us are absolutely jealous over. Even so, I don't begrudge Mitchell his happiness, because he deserves every second of it.

Mitchell was the one who picked me up out of a pool of my own blood and dragged me here, saving my life. He stitched me back together and taught me that we aren't monsters. That what happened to us when the virus took over doesn't completely define who we are.

Let him have his happiness. But fuck, I'm jealous. I want that, and the transition made it so that pussy is pretty much all I think about. That and not dying. I'm happy for him, I think. Until I hit the door to the greenhouse and hear them. A deep guttural groan reaches me, and I grimace, realizing I've caught them going at it. Again.

Fuck, it seems they're constantly going at it. But she's his omega, and it's relatively new, so I guess this is how it is. The whole damn greenhouse reeks of sex as if he's had her on every surface in here. I attempt to hold my breath as the scent of pussy and cum flood my nose. Making a mental note not to touch anything at all, I step back out of the greenhouse doors, plopping down on the bench, which I now suspect was installed out front for precisely this purpose.

Ten long-ass minutes later, I'm getting huffy. Sexy time is cutting into debrief-on-the-retrieval time, and irritation gnaws at my gut. I must have started growling at some point because I hear Mitchell call out for me from inside the greenhouse. Flinging the door open hard, I stalk into the greenhouse to find him.

"Time to open a damn window, Malice," I growl as I round a corner to find Mitchell zipping up his fly.

He growls at the couple's name I made up for them. It absolutely only suits *him*, because he's a tough motherfucker. But Alice is the sweetest, most gentle person on the planet.

After she recovered, I used to love trying to rile her up, but it's not actually possible because she's so damn reasonable. Tipping my head, I give her a sly little wink. Pretty sure she loves the nickname.

“Cuttin’ into debrief time, you little minx,” I chuckle.

Alice smiles in that shy way I know Mitchell adores and steps closer to me. She gestures for me to lean down and runs her fingers across the healing gash in my neck.

“You should let me stitch that up, Ri,” she whispers softly. The fact that Alice cares at all about my comfort is one of the million reasons we all adore her. I'm starved for affection, and I close my eyes as she feels around my other facial cuts and determines nothing is life-threatening. She steps back with a darling little harumph and puts both hands on her hips, glaring at Mitchell.

“Mitchell, you better be nice to Ri because he already needs stitches, and I don't wanna be fixing him up all night.”

Mitchell tips his head respectfully to her, his gaze turning to molten heat as soon as she turns to leave us. I listen for her to close the door of the greenhouse before I brace myself for a tongue lashing.

Our pack alpha surprises me when he sags up against a table, rubbing both eyes as if the weight of the world is crushing him. It probably is in many ways. I can't imagine it's easy being in charge of fifty of me.

Thank God, there's only one of Samson, I think ruefully.

“Tell me everything,” he says. “Leave out no detail, even if it doesn't seem important.” I nod quickly and launch into the whole story as Mitchell listens in grim silence.

When I finish, he sighs again and looks up at the ceiling of the greenhouse, deep in thought. “The Chemist says Samson is deteriorating, but why, we aren't sure.”

This isn't a surprise to me, but it feels like a devastating blow nonetheless. When Samson isn't raging like a beast, he's quiet and kind. He was a freaking English professor before this, for Gods' sake.

“What about the growth, though?” I ask. This is one piece of Samson’s story that I find myself thinking about a lot. Mentally he seems to be getting more and more unstable. But physically, he’s growing about twice the rate the rest of us are. Not just the usual alpha strengthening we realize is now the norm. He’s literally getting bigger and taller, no matter what happens to him otherwise.

Mitchell shakes his head. “No explanation on that yet, but the Chemist is hearing stories of a similar alpha in Canada. They’re trying to track him down to see how he and Samson might compare.”

“Trying to capture him, you mean,” I snap angrily. I don’t like retrieving Samson, but even he himself has asked me to do it. The idea that the Chemist is trapping alphas for his own experiments rubs me the wrong way. We’ve lost brothers to the government and citizen militias already. There’s enough danger in our world without the Chemist being part of the problem.

“I don’t like it any more than you do,” Mitchell mumbles. “But for now, I’d like you to do something.”

And here it comes, my next assignment, I suspect. Even so, I’m not ready when Mitchell opens his mouth.

“Go back to the girl he was stalking and watch her. See if you can figure out why her, if there even is a why.”

Well, hot fuckin’ dog. My night is about to get a shit ton more interesting.

MAL

I spend an hour on my Ideas Notebook before my brain fizzles out. This long-ass day has taken me on a rollercoaster. Stick a fork in me, world, I'm done. It seems like I should cook some dinner, but I can't find it in me to care about food right now. All I want to do is cuddle up with a good book and maybe fall asleep after having another good cry.

My apartment is pretty small, but I do keep one of Mama's old bookshelves next to my desk. It's lined with just about every Ruby Dixon novel ever written, alongside my other favorites from Finley Fenn, Ivy Knox, and dozens of other romance novelists I adore. What I need right now is an escape from reality, because my reality today pretty much sucked.

Although, being honest, I did survive, and that's a win. Not one, but two *Awakened* were right there in front of me on the street. Somehow, I came out of today with my whole body intact, so there's that. Another plus—I haven't experienced a complete mental breakdown from stress—second check in the win category for today.

I sort through the books for a minute and settle on *When She Purrs* because I'm pretty sure it's my favorite right now. Tugging blankets off my bed, I create myself a snuggly burrito on the sofa.

For the next two hours, I lose myself in a dream world of abducted women and their sexy alien mates. I'm just getting to the spicy stuff when I feel that familiar heat deep in my

tummy. Ruby writes some quality sexy time, and I'm feeling the need for sure. Laying the book down gently on the table, I head for my room and grab my teeny vibe. This thing has all the settings, and in a post-virus world, it's a girl's best friend.

Settling back onto the sofa, I part my legs and reach down with one hand, touching myself through my pants. I deserve to feel good after the day I had.

ORION

I'm genuinely shocked that Mitchell asked me to go back and observe this girl, but I don't waste a moment on protest. I'd be an absolute bald-faced liar if I said I was anything other than thrilled. Heading back to my room, I grab darker, long-sleeved clothing and a mask to pull over the lower half of my face. It's later in the evening now, but covering up my tan skin will keep me better hidden in the shadows.

I head back into the city in a much less conspicuous Honda. Way less cool to drive, way less likely to get the government called on my ass. Parking the Honda beside the girl's building, I step out and do a full circle. Her scent is strongest on the alley side, so I clamber up a fire escape to see if I can pinpoint her apartment. Turns out I don't even need to do that because one of the only windows on this side must be her office.

She sits tucked up tight in a chair, typing away deftly at a keyboard. She must write a lot because she's incredibly fast, her brow furrowed in concentration. Without the hoodie and all the baggy clothing, it's easy to get a better look at her. Longer hair than I remember, hanging loose in brown-gold waves around her shoulders. It's hard to see her eyes in the low light, but I smile with satisfaction when I see she does in fact have a great rack. Boobs big enough to spill out of my hands. Just the way I like them.

For hours, I watch her in total silence. Easiest stakeout ever, although nothing is really coming to light that would

indicate why Samson would follow this girl versus any other. She's beautiful, and she smells good even through the rickety window. So, did she just happen to be there on the street? Wrong place, wrong time? I don't know, but I'd hate to go back without an answer. Honestly, there may not even be an answer. Who knows what goes on in Samson's head?

The girl finishes typing whatever she was working on and brings out a tattered old notebook, flipping through its pages for the better part of an hour. Then she pokes around at something I can't see beside her desk, coming away with a book. She disappears from my view into what must be the kitchen or bedroom, coming back with a pile of blankets that she arranges on the sofa. When that's to her liking, she reads for a few hours. Eventually, she heads out of the room and comes back with something in her hand.

I realize with a jolt that she's grabbed a damn vibrator, settling herself back onto the sofa comfortably. Her hand slides down her stomach, slipping between her legs as she rubs gently. She throws one arm behind her head as she dips the small vibrator underneath the waistband of her pants, circling slowly. I hear a soft little moan as she jerks her hips up to meet the implement.

I don't know if I'm still breathing, but I can scent her from across the alley—the strong, heady tang of arousal. Her natural scent is layered beneath like warm caramel and vanilla. My chest is heaving as I gasp for air, my mouth open as I flex my head side to side to drag in deep, greedy breaths. Leaning forward on the fire escape, I rock my hips up against it involuntarily.

Friction, I need some fucking friction.

Growling low in my chest I focus on her steady, strong movements, the way her hips are rocking up to meet the vibrator tucked so neatly between her thighs. It's possible I'm going to lose my mind right here watching her. My self-control is slipping by the moment as she gets more into it.

Precum leaks steadily onto my jeans, soaking the front until I'm a sticky mess. I'd curse my bad luck if I wasn't so

fucking horny from watching the show. I was fine. I was totally fine when I was watching her do normal person things. But now she's masturbating, and every move she makes is calling to a primal, animal side of myself that I try hard to keep locked away. Truth be told, I've been on edge ever since I came in my hand too quickly earlier.

She picks up the pace, hips moving in time with the hand now circling beneath her pants. With complete desperation, I wish she'd throw those pants off and let me get a better look at all of her. A groan slips out from between those pretty lips. It's a deep, needy sound that feels like she's yanking hard on my cock with that petite hand.

Her cries start to get louder, more desperate as she chases her pleasure. A few more seconds, and she comes hard, crying out in ecstasy as release hits her. At the same time, I gasp and see stars as my orgasm hits me, my eyes completely focused on her as she thrashes, my hips steadily fucking the fire escape railing. I come and come against the hard metal as I watch her, trying to remind myself not to make a sound even though my dick has absolutely taken over all rational thought.

This is what it's like being an alpha. Constant, near maddening arousal, orgasming in the presence of women, I guess. Add this shit to my list of frustrations. I didn't even get to touch her.

But why couldn't I now?

Because it's illegal, I snap at myself. And fucking wrong.

The devil on my shoulder says otherwise though. With conscious, rational, enforcer Orion-thought a distant memory, and my dick still hard as a rock, I hop silently down the fire escape and head for the front of the building. Jimmying the lock quickly, I close the door behind me and take the stairs four at a time. At the very least, I could attempt to be a gentleman, I think at the last second. So, I ring her doorbell and wait. To my surprise, she must be expecting someone because she whips the door right open and gasps when she sees me standing there.

I give her a megawatt smile, the one that always got me pussy in my football days.

“We met earlier,” I purr at her, my voice husky even to my own ears. “You should invite me in,” I suggest, leaning forward into the open doorframe. Time to get this party started.

MAL

Okay, so vibrators are great, but there's just no replacement for a real hard man, and I'm missing that after a lukewarm climax. My body feels limp and partially satiated, but I'm still antsy and anxious. It feels like par for the course, basically. Frowning at the window, I sigh. I don't know how long I can go on like this.

Turns out I don't have to wait long at all. It's late, but when I hear my bell ring, I smile. That'll be Pen, fresh off her 12-12 shift. Unfortunately, when I fling the door open, ready to spill the tea on my day, a gigantic man is standing there. No, not a man. Not anymore. An Awakened. In fact, I'm fairly certain it's the tan one from earlier today who maybe, possibly...basically saved me.

The blood drains immediately from my face and heads to my heart, which is beating fifty miles a minute.

Jesus, take the wheel, I think suddenly, because this is about to be my last day.

He must be back to finish whatever they started earlier. Then he flashes a deep smile at me and leans into my doorway, propping one elbow up as he gets in my space. I'm frozen in place, absolutely taken unawares by his sudden presence.

Shit fuck, what are my options here? He surprises me by speaking before I can even get my thoughts together.

“We met earlier,” the Awakened growls, his voice a shockingly deep baritone that travels straight to my core. “You should invite me in.”

The smile hasn't left his face, but I'm utterly dumbfounded because he's here, and he's speaking English, and he's asking to come into my apartment. I can't focus on a damn thing right now, my mouth agape as he stands there, smiling like this is just normal playful banter.

When I don't say anything, he shrugs, looking up and down the hallway before drawing his gaze back to me. Up close, I can see his eyes are a steely gray, light, and shocking in comparison to his burnished skin. I'm fucking thrilled to notice he has no fangs when he smiles. Not that it's much consolation, because everything else about him tells me he was built for killing.

"I'm not here to hurt you," he rumbles, "but I could smell your sweet pussy from across the street, and I'm gonna go mad if I don't get a taste of it."

Say what now? I'm so shaken that I don't even know how to respond to that. He must take my silence as an invitation though, because he strides into my apartment, looking around as if he's scoping the place out. Ultimately, he sits himself at my bar, swiveling on the stool so we're facing one another. Even seated, he would tower over me if I got close to him, which I don't plan to.

I briefly consider making a run for it since I'm still holding on to the door handle, but I won't make it far, and lord knows my neighbors won't help. I'm wishing like hell right now that I had called the damn hotline to report his ass. What do I even do with this new turn of events? Is this a thing Awakened do, and I'm just not aware?

I'm not ripped to shreds yet, though, so maybe there's hope. Frankly, I don't have a lot of options here. He came right in my damn door, and I didn't even protest. When am I going to grow a backbone? Apparently, not even when death himself is staring me in the face.

The Awakened cocks his head to the side, smiling deviously as he takes me in, his gaze practically a caress as he stares at my body. I bring my thumbnail up to my mouth and start nibbling because I need somewhere to focus under his

scrutiny. My heart is still beating out of my chest, and a beast is sitting in my kitchen talking about oral. There's an overload happening in my brain circuitry that I'm not certain I'll recover from.

"I don't have any money," I finally say in a small voice. He can't possibly have come for what he said, so he must need cash or maybe food. Although, based on the size of him, he's eating regularly and well. He flashes me that megawatt smile again and stands, showing me his palms as if to suggest he won't hurt me.

Yeah right, buddy, I wasn't born yesterday.

"I'm not here to hurt you, I promise," he begins in a deep voice. "And I didn't come here for money. It kills me a little inside that you think I would hurt a woman, but the news hasn't done alphas any favors. All that being said, I did come here because I want something."

And here it is, I think grimly.

Now we're getting to the heart of the matter. Where's that damn hotline number because, if I make it out of here alive, I'm reporting him and putting them on speed dial. Backbone found.

"I meant what I said," he growls when I don't move an inch. "Shut the door and come on over here."

I absolutely want to do almost anything else, but I'm at his mercy inside this tiny apartment. Slowly, I do as he told me. The sound of my bare feet on their death march across the tile floor seems incredibly loud, but when I look up at his face to see if he's going nuts yet, he looks focused and thoughtful.

Stopping a few feet from him, I do my best not to shiver or scream, lifting my chin up to meet his eyes. It's amazing how humanity is just existing and carrying on right outside my window, but nobody knows what's happening in here. Nobody knows I let an Awakened right into my apartment. Nobody knows what he said he came here for.

He leans forward, reaching out and running his enormous hand down my side, sliding it right down over my ass, which

he uses to pull me right between his now-open legs. I'm frozen, utterly terrified at what might come next. Before I can start crying, he tips my chin up with his other hand, his gaze intense, but not entirely unkind.

"Alphas aren't all the monsters you see on the news," he rumbles. "When I saw you earlier touching yourself, my blood sang for you. But I'll make you a deal because I can see you're terrified." His voice is completely reasonable, despite an odd reference to singing blood, a statement I can't begin to unpack right now.

A niggling bit of doubt starts to plant itself in my mind, the sense that there's more to his story than my initial impression. It's the same instinct I use when I'm sniffing out a story. A slight churn in my gut that feels dangerously like excitement and thrill.

I examine his face for any sign he's about to go for my throat, but what I see there shocks me. Pure sorrow has taken over his previously intense gaze. He looks so fucking sad, as if the weight of the world rests on his enormously broad shoulders. As I look at him, intensity floods back in, his pupils going wide the longer I stay silent.

When I don't make a peep, he continues, "I don't get many chances to make a good impression, but I'd like to make a good impression on you now that I've imposed. So I'm gonna kiss you now, but when I'm done, if you want me to go, I will."

My eyes narrow as I scan his face. This feels like some kind of a trick. Doesn't he mean since he came here to eat my heart or pillage me or something? He came here to kiss me? I don't believe it, but I can go along with it if it gets me safely out of this predicament.

My story instinct kicks in hard again, and I realize I'm about to go along with this deal. Mostly because I have few options, but partially because he's like a juicy lead, and I desperately need all the info. Nodding slowly, I will myself to stand utterly still between his tree-trunk thighs. With one hand

still on my ass, he brings the other to my hair and gently fists it, drawing my head backward.

I feel horribly, incredibly exposed with my throat bared right in front of his face. That is until I feel him drag the tip of his nose up along my skin, scenting me deeply. Sparks fly along my skin in response to his warm nuzzle, my body utterly betraying me. No one has touched me in three years, and sensory overload threatens to rip down any logic I was grappling with. He finishes with a gentle nip under my ear, drawing a surprised squeak from me. My body is on high alert, but it was unprepared for the overload this is turning into at his light touch.

Despite my initial terror, I'm absolutely aroused. The Awakened growls deep, just under my ear, and then begins to plant soft nips all the way back down my neck, finally biting me gently where the shoulder and neck meet. The logical part of my brain tells me his nip felt like sharp teeth, but I hadn't seen fangs. A tiny betraying moan comes right out of my mouth as he hisses in pleasure.

Suddenly, I betray logic by wishing we had met at another time. A time when I didn't have to be terrified of everything, and we could just date like normal people. Or be friends with benefits. Or maybe even a super-hot one-night stand. This feels almost normal. Minus the teeth and the bargaining.

Then all rational thought leaves me completely when he draws his tongue right up the center of my neck, biting me hard under the chin. My throat is right between sharp canines, but somehow, I can't find it in me to be terrified just now. Surely, if he was going to kill me or abduct me, he already would have.

Feeling suddenly reckless, I reach up and wrap both arms around his neck, leaning into him. For a half-second, he pauses, surprised, before looking directly into my eyes. He's waiting for the okay, I realize, so I give him another nod, the tiniest of gestures. Something about that small movement seems to unleash him because at once, he's nipping, licking, sucking, and kissing every inch of my neck and shoulders, and

I *cannot* get enough of it. He unleashes lips and teeth on me until my panties are a soaked mess of arousal.

With a deep groan, he reaches his second hand around to meet the first, grabbing both ass cheeks to heft me up off the ground and into his lap. I'm high enough in his arms that my chest is at his eye level, an unnerving turn of events. Even so, I can't help but notice that my nipples are so close to that wicked mouth, and I want him to put it on me.

He smiles, looking up from my chest, a dark smirk on his slightly parted lips. Now that I'm only partially horrified at his presence, I'm more aware of how shockingly handsome he is. High cheekbones, five o'clock shadow, light eyes even though his skin is the color of fresh bread, a dark shock of hair that flops over one eye.

I wonder who he was before the virus. Someone's brother, son, friend? A little pang of sadness hits me for him in that moment, because I've never seen this side of an Awakened. But if he's right, and they aren't all monsters, then I can't imagine how lonely that life must be.

When he reaches up with one hand and yanks my shirt up over my head, I start to rethink my generous assessment of him. And then that wicked mouth comes down and closes over my nipple, and I lose track of all higher thought. He works me over masterfully, drawing noises out of my mouth that I've never heard as he nips one breast and then the other. I don't even realize how good it truly feels until he chuckles and growls, and I feel it right to my core.

Tugging me back down to his eye level, he laughs softly again before bringing my fisted hair around to the front and inhaling deeply.

"You smell like fucking sunshine, vanilla, and lust," he purrs, tugging my hair close to scent it. "And I'm gonna kiss you now."

I smile because that bargain is long forgotten, and I'm only halfway dismayed to find myself enjoying this transaction in a way I probably shouldn't. He leans in, licking my bottom lip gently before taking it between his lips and sucking. I groan

softly and shift my hips in his lap when he growls, a sound that emanates deep from his warm chest. My heart is beating wildly in mine as he leans in even closer, slanting his mouth over mine gently. He dips his tongue in, tangling it with mine expertly, in a way that suggests he's capable of dirty, beautiful things in the bedroom.

When a moan escapes me, he lifts my arms up around his neck and goes wild, pulling me in closer to his chest. His skin through his shirt is scorching hot against my breasts, and the rub of him against my nipples sends sparks skittering along my skin. He claims my lips with deep, bruising kisses, his hand still fisted in my hair. I'm powerless in his arms as he plays my body like an instrument, and I can't get enough.

His scent is uniquely masculine, strong and dominant, but warm and enticing. Every inch of my body is on fire as I give back to him, sucking on his tongue while he snarls into my mouth. I may not have invited him in, but if he stopped right now, I'd be beyond disappointed.

Suddenly, he pulls away with a deep gasping breath, his eyes focused and intense. "Am I scaring you?" His voice is soft, hesitant, and the only response that makes sense is for me to lean in and nibble that beautiful plump lower lip. He purrs at me like a damn cat before continuing, "If I'm not scaring you, then I wanna taste your sweet pussy." His voice drops an octave and caresses me at the same time, my entire body taut and tense in anticipation of him.

The Awakened stands and turns, depositing me on the counter before stepping back and snatching his shirt up over his head. I lean back and get a good look at yards of thick, bunched muscles and washboard abs I'd desperately like to touch. Dropping his shirt on the floor, he leans his thickly muscled figure over me, pressing me back onto the counter.

"Watch me taste you," he growls as I throw my head back, closing my eyes. At his command, I prop myself up on my elbows and admire the view. Soft lips nibble and kiss their way down my stomach, stopping at my waistband. He grabs hold of my pants, slapping me lightly on the butt to tell me to

help. I shift my hips up, and he rips my pajamas and underwear off in one swift move, exposing me completely.

Snarling possessively, he brings warm hands to my knees and presses them outward so he can look at me. It feels awkward and terrifying and thrilling all at the same time. I want to clap my knees shut, but he's staring at my lady business like I'm a precious gem he's about to steal, licking his lower lip slowly.

When he leans forward and licks me from bottom to top, my hips dart up to meet his warm tongue. Oh-my-holy-christ, I could die from that feeling. He licks me twice more, slowly, savoring every inch of me. I'm moaning; I'm soaking wet; I'm dangerously close to begging for more. Because I need more of this, more of his dangerous intensity. I feel more alive right now than I have in three years.

"More," I whisper, clapping my hand over my mouth as soon as that cursed word leaves it.

"You need more, baby girl?" he questions with a satisfied chuckle. Another slow insanity-inducing lick has me panting.

Baby girl? I could get real used to that nickname coming out of his beautiful mouth. I groan as he leans in and begins to suck gently on my clit, warm fingers beginning to explore between my thighs.

The combo of his lips on me and his hands exploring is wreaking havoc on my sanity. Suddenly with a loud pant, all the wind whooshes out of my lungs, and I come hard enough to see black stars behind my eyes. I strain not to scream out in intense pleasure, but I'm barely controlled, fucking his face as he continues teasing my clit with his lips and tongue.

I come down slowly, chest heaving while I try to catch my breath. Reality swoops in and reminds me what just happened, so I blink my eyes open slowly to see what he's doing. I'm unprepared for the raw hunger on his face, the desperate need as he brings his fingers to his mouth and licks me off them.

There's an unspoken question in his gaze. I'd know it anywhere. He wants more, but he wants my consent. Despite

how we got started, it makes me feel powerful that he cares to ask, so I nod, just enough to encourage him. Faster than I can blink, he pulls me up off the counter, stalking into my bedroom where he lays me gently on the bed.

I am not this girl, typically. But I *am* a reporter, and that bulldog side of my mind wants to know every surprising thing about him.

He stands and takes a step back, unzipping his fly slowly, gaze intense on mine. I feel like I should wilt under his stare, but I feel powerful and sexy and desired. And it's nice.

I watch as he kicks his jeans off and I'm presented with all seven feet of Awakened male, complete with a probably proportional but still entirely too big cock. He fists it while I watch, groaning as he slathers precum all over it. By the time he crawls back over me in the bed, I'm soaking wet.

Gently he reaches down, parting me around the head of him as he teases a few inches in and out. His thumb finds my clit and strokes with gentle, precise deftness. I should be terrified of this dark monster looming over me, but the way he's worshipping my body just tells a different story. I'm out of my mind with desire as he teases me with his hand and the barest hint of his dick.

I had my concerns about our fit, but so far so good. In fact, so far so great. He's huge, but he rubs right up against a delicious spot inside me that makes me squirm.

Then he slides another few inches in, and I feel a stretch. Tensing up, I look up at him, but his eyes are closed, his brow furrowed. I feel my heart start to flutter wildly as he pushes in farther, and it's more than a stretch; it's starting to sting. He's splitting me in two with his monster cock, and I asked for it.

Another few inches and I bite my lip against the stretch. It's too much too fast, but I don't know if I can stop him. We both wanted this. Even so, it hurts like a mother, and I have to grit my teeth against the pain to keep from crying out. My legs tense up as I try to close them, even though he's parked firmly between my thighs. I find myself panting against the pain as I squeeze my eyes shut hard.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. Why the hell did I think this would work? He sinks out and back in deeply, and a whimpering sob slips out of my lips.

ORION

I didn't expect the woman to let me in, but now I'm slipping softly in and out of her wet pussy as she moans softly underneath me. She's perfection, soaked and silky and caressing my cock in a way that's gonna make me come much too quickly.

I thrust harder, picking up the pace as I sink farther and farther into her heat. Moving slowly, because I do tower over her, I suddenly realize she's no longer meeting my hips with hers. Then a horrible sob reaches my ears, a sound filled with terror and pain. When I look down, the expression on her face withers my soul.

Hands fisted in the sheets, she's biting her lips and squeezing her eyes tight. She's not looking at me or urging me on. This is hurting her. *I'm* hurting her.

Appalled, I slip out of her as gently as I can, backing up and sinking off the bed and into the wall. I'm so stunned that for a moment, I can't do anything other than press my back up against the wall and stare at her. My breath comes in short, rapid bursts as the horror of what I did threatens to choke me.

She sits up in the bed in surprise, giving me a half-smile that doesn't reach her eyes as she presses her thighs closed. It feels like a slap in the face to watch her shut down so fucking fast.

"Why'd you stop?" she asks, but I know a hopeful lie when I hear it. Shaking my head, I grab my pants and stand to yank them back on. This was wrong. This whole thing, even if

she eventually wanted it. I had a chance with a woman, but it's literally physically impossible, which means I'm probably going to be alone forever. I want to sob and apologize, but I just need to get out of here.

She doesn't say anything else, so I go into the other room to find my shirt. Tugging it on, I gather my thoughts and try to figure out what the fuck I should do about this situation. I stride back to her room. I need to get this off my chest before I never see her again.

She's pulling a shirt on warily in the corner, but she turns when I tower in the doorway. Fucking beautiful. Light from the streetlamps outside filters in, illuminating her from behind. She's all delicate, lush curves, and she still smells like me, and the combination of that visual is almost enough to overwhelm me. My hopeful mind is telling me to drop to my knees and beg her to ride me, to take this at her pace, but it doesn't seem like a good idea. I want to beg her to let me try again.

Instead, I say, "I didn't mean to hurt you, and I think it's best for me to go. I'm probably a monster for coming in here and doing what I did, but I'm not monster enough to take pleasure in a woman's pain."

Her eyes widen in surprise, but she gives me a quick little nod of understanding. Those beautiful lips open to say something, but I don't think I can stand to hear it.

Without waiting to listen, I turn to flee the apartment, my soul shredded. I can barely draw in a breath as despair crushes my chest. I'm a monster, and I will be alone forever.

On my way out, I notice a stack of awards and cutout articles stuck to her fridge. Every article is written by the same author, *Mallory Smythe*. That must be *her* name.

She's a fucking reporter. Great.

ORION

An hour later, I'm back at the Compound with the smell of pussy fresh on my skin. I should shower, but then it'll be gone forever. I'm not ready to feel quite that miserably alone, so I head to the common room to find company, hopefully Griz or Connor. I also owe Mitchell an update, so I pick up a walkie from the community pile and ping his channel.

"Mitchell, update on the female," I snap with more vehemence than I mean.

"Come on back to the greenhouse," he growls. Of fucking course. I swear to God, if I step in there and the place reeks of sex, I'm gonna lose my mind. Heading through the library, I almost miss the tall figure tucked into a chair in front of the fireplace.

Samson's eyes meet mine, and he inclines his head to the side in thanks. I should probably stop and talk with him about his latest retrieval, but I don't know if I have it in me tonight. Talking about it will mean thinking about her, and I desperately need to *stop* thinking about her.

Samson doesn't look much worse for the wear at this point, other than a deep green and black bruise on the right side of his face. I notice there's a glowing neon patch attached to his neck, and I wonder if it's something new the Chemist is trying. I hope they find something to help him soon because we can't keep going on like we are. I'm stretched so thin tonight, I feel like I might snap in two.

With that depressing thought top of mind, I pass through the library and the main house and into the greenhouse. Thankfully, when I throw the door open, Alice is nowhere to be seen, but I scent her, so she must have been here just before me. Grimacing a little, I realize I never did let her stitch me up. I'm probably about to get a tongue lashing for that, so I make a mental note to find her later and ask for help, even though I'll be healed by the time I find her.

Mitchell eyes me up and down when I round the corner and come to a stop in front of him, missing nothing. He closes his eyes and scents the air deeply, scowling the whole time.

I didn't even bother to hide the smell of *her* on my skin. There's no energy left for it, not after the emotional, moral, and physical disaster that was my night. Mitchell's eyes snap open to meet mine, intense but understanding. I came back from my mission smelling like a female and looking miserable. It's not hard to figure out things didn't go well.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he questions quietly. I know exactly what he means, but I don't want to talk through the part he's referencing. I also don't want him thinking I went nuts and truly hurt someone, but I don't have a great explanation for my behavior tonight.

Shaking my head, I get on with my download. "There's no discernible reason Samson would follow this particular girl, and I watched her for a long time. Hours," I report.

"And?" Mitchell commands.

"I went to talk to her to see if there was anything else, and things got...heated. But I didn't find anything, and I left." That's about all there is to say if you boil it down for simplicity's sake. But I should know Mitchell wouldn't leave it at that.

"You went to talk. And it got heated," he repeats my words back to me.

I nod, stiff-lipped as anger starts to spark along my muscles. Replaying what happened tonight is the last thing I want to do, but it's difficult not to discuss her when she was

my mission. Even so, the alpha in me doesn't like being forced to relive it by my pack leader. Mitchell must sense my simmering anger because he shrugs his shoulders as if it doesn't matter anyhow.

“Anything else I should know?” he asks.

That's a loaded question because I should probably mention she's a fucking reporter. But I desperately don't want to admit any more than I have by showing up smelling like pussy. My head's a jumble as it is. Although, if there's any blowback to what we've built here, it would be all on me. Mitchell needs to prepare for that.

Sighing, I run both hands through my hair, unable to bring my eyes to meet Mitchell's. “She's a reporter.” I cringe. “She reports for *The Hawk*.” When Mitchell says nothing, I look up at him, but he's deep in thought, stroking his beard.

Suddenly I feel the need to escape him and his non-judgmental judgment. To escape the horror of what I did earlier. To escape Samson and his shit. I need out. I must be the worst enforcer any pack has ever had, if other packs even have enforcers. When Mitchell keeps thinking, I get the sense I'm being dismissed, so I turn to go. He doesn't say a word, but I feel his eyes on me until I turn the corner and leave the greenhouse behind.

My first thought is to hit the shower, but my mind is such a mess that I know I need to clear it first. Heading down one of the newer wings, I cross their training courtyard and leave the main compound. Trekking across the sparring courts, I head for the dark of the forest.

It's early in the morning now, and the woods are dark and quiet. Tugging my shirt up over my head, I deposit it on the fencepost that marks miles of trails that crisscross Mitchell's acreage. It's entirely likely I'll see one of my brothers if I take the usual route, but I'm not up for it right now.

The woman's scent is still so strong, but the memory of our night is a crushing weight my brain can't seem to get out from under. I hurt her tonight. I hurt a woman who didn't ask

for any of what I did to her. To say I feel disgusted is putting it mildly.

Maybe this is what it'll always be like as an alpha, I think with a scowl.

I pick up a jog for the first few miles of the property's trails, then I cut left and head into the national forest. Peace, silence, night. I need all of it to crowd out the tangle that's currently roiling in my head.

Picking up the pace, I move faster and faster until I'm covering the ground at a rapid clip. I push myself hard up and over the low mountains that mark this part of upstate New York. The night's cold bites into my skin, but I deserve the pain. I push and push my body, anger and upset mingling with endorphins in my system to keep going and going and going until I've knocked out almost forty miles based on the changed terrain. That's a new record, even for me.

My muscles quiver with exhaustion as I finally stop and tilt my head up to look at the moon. She calls to me too, just like that little female I hurt tonight. Closing my eyes, I lean my head back and feel the moonlight wash over my skin. It's the gentle caress of a lover, the beautiful slip of moonlight that steals over me. Even so, when I beg for relief from the tumult of my brain, the moon doesn't respond. She never responds.

I turn and look back toward the Compound with a sigh. Time to head back, I guess.

MAL

When the Awakened leaves, I realize I don't even know his name. I slept with a virus-laden beast whose name I absolutely don't even know. Well, I kind of slept with him until I literally could not. I can't decide if Pen would clap me on the back for getting semi-laid or screech in horror about the transfer of contaminants.

The truth is, I'm shaken to my core by his little visit. I replay the whole thing in my head a few times, still struggling to wrap my head around it. He talked to me. Like a human being. Like a human being who still has the power of conscious thought. The concept that Awakened possess their original faculties has conveniently been left out of the news.

Then I remember the whole *scenting me from across the street and wanting to taste me* thing, which is definitely non-human, and maybe a little concerning? But, also, absolutely the most intense orgasm of my entire life. And then there's the fact that after said mind-blowing orgasm, he stopped when the sex wasn't good for me. Immediately.

My mind is whirling around, revisiting all the little details of tonight and trying to file them into some sort of order that makes sense. I sit up a while longer in case Pen does actually swing by, but there's no telltale knock for a couple hours. A shame really because I need to spill the tea and get some feedback here.

Eventually, I go to bed, the scent of the Awakened still lingering in my sheets.

ORION

Sun filters through my window, warming my face. It's early, but I hear a soft knock on my door anyhow. I groan in pain, my muscles sore from last night's punishing eighty-mile session. I sit up in bed and scent the air; it's Malice. Highly unusual for them to visit me together, at six a.m. Damn it, I've only been asleep for two hours.

Standing with a wince, I tug on a pair of gray sweatpants and pad to the door, throwing it open wide. Alice smiles brightly at me and holds up her sewing kit.

"You look like shit," Mitchell grumbles behind her.

"By all means, come in," I growl.

Alice breezes past me and begins setting up her kit on the table in front of my fireplace. Mitchell steps in quietly after her, closing the door behind them. He's just about to say something when Alice pipes up cheerfully.

"Mitchell needs to talk to you about a girl, so I pretty much insisted I tag along and get you sewn up. That okay?" She blinks up at me with those big sweet eyes, and I just can't tell her no. The gashes on my neck are mostly healed at this point, but I won't deny Alice a thing; none of us deny Alice. She could get away with murder around here if she wanted to.

"Of course, Alice," I say softly to her, reaching out to squeeze her arm gently. Satisfaction rolls off Mitchell in waves. He loves how Alice dotes on us and how we all adore her in return. God forbid anything ever happens to him, but he's aware we'd watch over her if something did. Alice is

pack. I pace to my reading chair and lower myself gingerly down into it, grunting as my muscles scream and resist.

“Hard night?” Mitchell asks.

I nod, not bothering to dive into any more backstory, although we both know the backstory is what he’s asking about. “Did forty miles out and back,” I say with a scowl, avoiding *other* topics.

Alice rubs antiseptic gently on my neck before turning to ready her needle. Mitchell sits himself in the wingback across from me, crossing one leg over the other. He looks relaxed, but I sense a little anxiety, which does nothing to improve my mood this early.

“I’ve got to ask you to do something I don’t think you’re going to like, but I need you to do it anyhow,” he growls. So much for a gentle lead-up.

“Sounds like a great start to my day,” I quip with fake cheerfulness.

Alice turns back to me and begins sewing the first of three gashes closed. She’s deft with the needle, working quickly and quietly while Mitchell and I stare at each other with hostility. He asked me to be our enforcer, but that doesn’t mean I have to like it. Can’t imagine what he’s going to ask me to do that warrants a six a.m. visit and Alice poking at my neck with a needle.

“Let’s just get on with it, shall we?” I snap, glaring at Mitchell.

“I want you to ask that reporter to come here,” he responds with all the authority of our pack alpha. I guffaw at that because there’s no way in hell I’m doing that. But when I look back at Mitchell, he’s deadly serious.

“Why?” I demand. “Why would she want to come here? What reason could you possibly give her to entice her to do that?” No normal in her right mind would willingly come into a compound with fifty alphas. Not with our reputation.

Mitchell sighs, frustrated as if he’s having to explain himself to a child. “Ri, we can’t keep flying under the radar

forever. None of us are happy like this, and eventually, someone's going to realize a pack lives here, and we'll be on the run. Again," he says meaningfully, side-eyeing me.

"Being on the run sucks," chirps Alice helpfully from my neck.

Mitchell gives her a thankful wink before turning to me to continue. "We need someone to see a different side of us, to see our perspective. Public opinion of alphas is terrible, and nobody's going to change that narrative *for* us. I've reached out to a few reporters in the past."

"Let me guess," I snap, "not one of them had any desire to be anywhere near a huge group of raging lunatics?"

He nods, and I lift my hands in exasperation. Obviously. *Obviously*, this is a horrible fucking idea. Alice moves on to the second gash, and I have to work hard not to swat her away like a fly. This conversation is making me fucking angry.

"Mitchell, women are disappearing in the city, and any good you do with a reporter is gonna be overshadowed the minute someone else gets yanked off the street in broad daylight." I hit home with this statement because Mitchell pauses and thinks, crossing his thick arms over one another. *Gotcha motherfucker*, I think smugly.

"I can't touch Arkan now," he admits finally, "but I'm putting things in place to change that soon."

I roll my eyes because he's been saying this for a while, but Arkan represents a potential future threat to our security, even if we mostly ignore each other now. The alpha we have planted in his pack hasn't given us a good in yet.

"Let's table the Arkan discussion for now," Mitchell announces. "He's only part of our issue. I'd still like you to convince this reporter to come here for a few weeks, maybe even a month." It's a directive, and I like it not one little bit. Another reason I shouldn't have taken the enforcer job.

"I doubt she'll say yes," I argue. "She was terrified of me last night, and things didn't end...well," I explain with a quick

glance at Alice. She turns my face back toward Mitchell and keeps on sewing.

Surely she's gotta be nearly done, I think absentmindedly.

I'm starting to suspect she's just a diversion tactic so I'll agree to this nonsense.

"I think she will come," Mitchell counters, "because reporters love a story, and if you talked with her, you're already different than her preconceived notion."

"This is a terrible fucking idea," I snarl again. "But if you want to do it, send someone else." As soon as the words leave my mouth, I want to take them back. The thought of Griz or Connor or any of my brothers going to Mallory Smythe's apartment makes me wanna rampage. It'll be me and me alone if it has to be anyone at all.

"Never mind," I backtrack, "I'll do it. But for the record, this is a horrible fucking idea."

Mitchell nods with a pleased smirk on his ugly face. "I'll let Griz and Connor know, and they can prep the rest of the pack," he says as Alice wraps up her sewing project.

My neck feels like a fucking pincushion. Feels like she sewed everything up twice. Shit, maybe she did. Malice at their finest.

Alice rubs my arm in solidarity and looks at me as Mitchell stands to leave. They must have discussed this ahead of time, because Mitchell paces for the door and opens it, breezing through and leaving Alice behind with me. She sighs and lovingly tucks my rogue hair back behind my ear.

"Mitchell said you had a rough night with the girl. If you want to talk about omega stuff with me, you can."

I nod, unable to respond but grateful again for the love Alice has for all of us. Clearly, she and Mitchell don't have issues like I had yesterday, so I don't know how she could help me here. Alice rubs my shoulder and sees herself out, leaving a soft, gentle floral scent behind her. It's calming when Alice is here, I think. As soon as she's gone, my dread ratchets right back up.

An hour later, I've fussed over my hair and tweezed the shit out of my eyebrows, but I still don't feel ready. I have no idea what I'm gonna say to this female after last night's shit show, but I guess I've got forty minutes to figure it out.

MAL

The next morning, I wake up to a world that feels different somehow. I feel, well, I think I feel *calm*. My body feels sated, sore between my legs but generally fucking fantastic. When I think of the reason for that soreness, a pool of heat starts up low in my belly. I need to get that shit under control, though, because last night was a *near* disaster for my lady cave, and for some reason, my body is conveniently choosing to forget that.

My first thought is Pen and how I'm desperate to fill her in on last night. But when she's on a four-day "hell week," as she calls it, at the hospital, she's practically a zombie. I usually don't see her until she's had a day of rest afterward. Even so, I can't resist shooting her a quick text to let her know I'm home and safe. I'd hate for her to worry.

I debate showering because I need it, but I can still smell him, and I'm not ready to give that up. In the end, I do it because last night was absolutely a weird fluke, and it's never happening again, so it's time to move on. Even so, as water sluices down my body and washes away all evidence of him, a twinge of sadness settles in my gut.

I shower fast and then sit myself in front of my laptop to get ahead of my articles for the week. Phillip sent over a few edits, surprisingly few for the word count I sent over. Pleased, I edit the articles and return them to him through our shared server. On the docket for this week is more fluff about how to stay in shape at home and ten safe date night ideas. The second

in particular gives me pause because I absolutely do not want to write that shit after last night.

Bringing up my computer notes app, I start to jot down a few ideas anyhow. Despite how much I hate the dumb shit Phillip makes me write, it *is* still my job. After ten or fifteen minutes of hemming and hawing, I finally get into a flow, a story outline taking shape. It's not journalism I'm proud of, but it pays the bills for now.

Not for the first time, I think about starting to apply for other positions. The thing is, this is a *really* bad time to be job hunting. The world has basically gone to shit, and available jobs are few and far between. I should probably just be grateful for the shit job I have because at least I have one right now.

I'm deep in thought on that depressing topic, so when my doorbell rings, I jump a foot in the air. My heart races a mile a minute as I whip around to face the door. It's not even nine yet, so Pen is undoubtedly cute-snoring in her apartment still, and she sleeps like the dead. I pace quietly to the door and wish again that I had a peephole. Steeling myself, I unlock both locks but leave the chain attached, opening the door just a little.

He's standing at my front door. Again.

My belly flips over twice just as my lady parts start humming. Mentally, I tell them to simmer down, because we confirmed last night that his monster dick is not compatible with my J. Even so, I already feel slick between the thighs just looking at him.

He stands awkwardly in the hallway, shoulders slumped. The look on his face says he's unhappy to see me, which I guess isn't surprising... Even so, it stings. The Awakened blinks twice and then runs a hand through his hair nervously. I bite back the urge to tuck it behind his ear for him. My brain needs to stop whatever it's doing.

"This is awkward because of my behavior last night, but may I come in for a moment?" His voice is still the deep

baritone I fantasized about in the shower this morning, my lady bits doing a happy little dance.

I nod, closing the door to take the chain off before opening the door wide to let him in. I'm not sure I trust myself to speak yet because now that he's standing right here, my body has taken on a mind of its own, and I can't explain it.

Okay, body, I think, time to return to our regularly scheduled programming. My brain feels like it's going haywire.

"Listen, Mallory," he starts. I shudder immediately. *He knows my name.*

"Just Mal," I say with a grimace. "Nobody calls me Mallory but my father," I explain gently.

He nods and looks around uncomfortably. Something about his demeanor makes me feel sorry for him, so I head to the kitchen and gesture to my Keurig. He definitely needs coffee. Do they *drink* coffee?

"Coffee?" I ask, holding up my favorite mug. It says "What the fucculent?" in bright green letters, so I probably look like a crazy plant lady. He nods thankfully and drops down onto one of my barstools, the old wood creaking under his enormous weight. Weight that felt amazing when he was rubbing it on top of me last night.

What is happening here? Last night I was terrified, but this morning I cannot stop fantasizing about every inch of him, especially now that he's here, in glorious, seven-foot person. I absolutely cannot sleep with him again, but when I cast a cautious glance at him, his gaze is intense. If he smelled me from across the street yesterday, I wonder what's going on now?

"About last night," I start awkwardly, figuring we better just clear the air upfront. He holds up a palm to stop me.

"I don't think I can ever apologize enough for hurting you, but that's not why I came here today."

Well, okay then, I think in disappointment. How I've gone from utter terror to blatant desire in twelve hours is something

I can't begin to understand. My mind is a dark and twisted maze of nonsense all of a sudden.

“Okayyyyy,” I say sagely, “how can I help you then?”

He gives me a beleaguered sigh and looks at the coffee as I set a cup in front of him. Suddenly, I wonder if he's in some kind of trouble for coming to me, and now he's got to shut me up. That thought stops my heart cold, gripping my lungs in an icy fist. He must sense a change in my demeanor, though, because he looks up and shakes his head at me.

“Hell, I'm fucking this all up,” he growls, mostly to himself. Then his gaze snaps back to me, gray eyes striking this close up.

“I live with a pack—a group of alphas—about an hour north of the city, in a home there. Our pack alpha wants you to come observe us and write about us for your paper. If you're willing,” he adds.

All I heard was *pack* and *alpha* and *observe*. He must be out of his damn mind.

But then the word “okay” flies out of my mouth before I can stop it. Surprise and suspicion dart across his face, but he nods grimly, not looking at all pleased with this turn of events.

“You hoped I'd say no,” I whisper softly, looking for confirmation. I don't know why that feels like such a knife to my heart, but it does. I don't want to go, but I don't want him to *not* want me to go. I'm an absolute disaster right now.

He doesn't respond other than to say, “Pack warm; we'll be there a couple of weeks, most likely. I'll be waiting out front in the black car.” Then he turns and strides out the door without another word, pulling a hood up over his head as he goes.

ORION

I slip quietly out of Mal's apartment. Mal. Even her name feels good on my tongue, just like her body felt good on mine last night.

No. I've got to shut that down hard. We tried, and it wasn't possible. When she opened her door and stood there looking at me, I could still smell myself on her. She'd showered, but I rubbed myself over every inch of her last night, and that won't go away soon. It fills me with intense pride and longing, and I want more of it. And then she agreed to come to the Compound. Why? I don't know if I'm distraught, or fucking thrilled. I think I'm the former because now I'm going to be watching and obsessing over her for at least two weeks while she lives in my house.

Ten minutes later, she comes striding down the steps of her building dragging a big ass overnight bag. I hop out fast to grab it from her, tossing it in the back seat of the black Mustang I picked out today. She thanks me and slips into the car, but not before the sweet caramel scent of her skin snakes its way into my senses yet again. I'm hard as a rock for her, and there's nothing to be done about it.

The next few weeks are going to be an absolute nightmare. I wish to God she would have said no, and I could have just gone back to my miserable existence.

Hopping into the driver's side, I glance quickly at her before pulling away from the curb. She looks behind us in the mirror, and I wonder what she's thinking. Probably wondering

if she's going to regret this choice. I know I already do. Damn Mitchell and his plotting and plans. This absolutely doesn't feel like it's gonna work out well.

We drive in complete silence for ten minutes, the only noise the roar of the big-ass engine Mitchell upfitted the Mustang with. Usually, I enjoy this car, but today it just feels too loud and uncomfortably small. I'm not sure I can take forty minutes of silence. Why did I not say anything when she asked if I hoped she'd say no? What an awkward-ass way to start a car ride.

"I need to pick up some things in town before we head to the Compound. You alright to come with me?" I ask gently, glancing over at her quickly.

"Compound?" she squeaks.

I nod. "It's just what we call our place, but I promise it's a lot less sinister than the word compound implies."

She grits her teeth but nods, looking out the window. Her body is tense and tight, and I know it took a lot of courage for her to come with me, even though I didn't sell this trip at *all*.

Maybe I should just try being me and see if we make any progress. My patients used to say I had a great bedside manner, but I know I'm out of practice.

"I know this is uncomfortable, but I'm grateful you agreed to come, even though I didn't say that upstairs," I start. She darts a glance over at me, flashing me the tiniest of smiles before looking back out the window. I continue, "Do you want to ask me anything about alphas? I'm an open book."

She doesn't say anything for a moment, but then she reaches into her bag and pulls out a tattered notebook and pen, the one she flipped through last night before everything went to shit.

"I'd like that, if you truly don't mind," she says softly.

I nod in response, flashing her what I hope is a comforting smile.

“Why alphas? The news calls you Awakened.” Her voice is soft inside the loud car.

This has always been a touchy topic for me. “Awakening implies enlightenment, and that’s not how it felt for us,” I start. “We prefer to say we transitioned, and we call ourselves alphas because that’s where we are in the food chain now, physically, at least. The reality is a lot darker, obviously,” I finish.

Mal scribbles furiously in her journal. “What errands are we running?” she asks, changing course.

A safe topic. I can do that. She smells so damn good right now. Sitting this close to her is making my brain go nuts.

“There’s a small town about half an hour from our Compou—home,” I begin. “We have a working relationship with the people there. They allow us to trade in their stores and don’t call the task force on us. In return, we help them when they need extra manpower.”

She flinches at that because I’m sure the task force is an uncomfortable reminder when she’s sitting next to an alpha in a small space.

“What do you trade for?” she questions, scribbling something in her notebook.

Glancing over quickly, and then back to the road, I think about it. “Our size is an issue, so there’s a tailor who custom makes clothes. A couple farmers trade manual labor for meat and veggies, and there’s a small outdoor goods store. That’s about it. It’s a teeny town, but it’s off the main drag. We can trade there without really worrying about normals rollin’ through.”

Mal nods, scribbling furiously in her notebook while I try to keep my eyes on the road. For the next ten minutes, she grills me on everything we do in town. How did we set up the relationship at first, who manages it, how do we keep the peace? What do we trade with? Are the people afraid of us?

That last question is sobering because, despite the peaceful relationship we’ve worked to build, most people *are* still afraid

of us. And that's exactly why Mitchell thinks a reporter telling our side can help us. I don't know if it'll ever be enough, but maybe he's onto something.

Minutes pass more easily as she opens up, peppering me with questions about the town and how we get our supplies. She's horrified when I mention that we have to get custom clothes made because we can't go buy them. She hits me with question after question, and I can sense her unease morph into something more comfortable. She's in her element like this, digging for truths.

I reach down to shift the car between answers and happen to notice that her eyes are on my hand wrapped around the gearshift. She bites that beautiful bottom lip as I tug the shifter, fingers caressing the top of the knob. The scent of arousal hits me hard when she shifts in her seat, gaze darting up to meet mine. Her cheeks turn bright pink as she breaks my stare.

I want to close my eyes and breathe her in, but I'm in the damn driver's seat. I settle for a deep chuckle and a slow inhale, sensing her squirm in her seat. She may have been terrified of me last night, but the dynamic between us has changed anyhow. Her mind is working with logic, but her body is working with instinct, and it's trying hard to connect us.

I stroke the gear shift lightly, smiling with my eyes on the road. I shouldn't be playing with her like this; I can't have her, but it's nearly impossible to resist her when she reacts to my presence like this. I'm only human...well, a transitioned human.

Ten more minutes go by, and she hasn't asked me anything else, but the scent of her is blooming inside this small-ass car. Reflecting on last night, I try to bring back that horrible sensation in my gut when I realized she was hurting, but even that can't overpower the signals her body is sending me now.

"Tell me something about yourself, Mal," I ask out of the blue, my voice husky to my ears. Maybe I can get her to open back up by talking about her family, her life, her friends. She

shrugs, though, not responding immediately. “Why’d you let me in?” I encourage her, shooting a wink in her direction.

She gives up a tiny grin at that and starts chewing on her nail. “Did I have another option?” she snarks back at me.

I frown because it’s a reminder that she didn’t think she could tell me no at first, but when I dart a quick glance over at her, she’s smiling. For the next few minutes, she asks me other surface-level questions, and then we see the first sign for Parrish.

MAL

Why'd you let me in? Pfft, as if I had a choice. It makes me smile though, and my body starts humming right along with the throaty engine in this car. I swear I can smell him from over here, and it's a turn on. When he caught me looking at his hand on the shifter knob, I thought I might die. But his hands are so beautifully manly, and those hands did depraved things to me last night. They're huge, but the fingers are long, delicate, and precise.

I looked away immediately when he caught me, but my brain is doing a scene-by-scene replay of the countertop last night.

As I stare pointedly out the window, I notice a road sign that tells me we're about ten minutes away from the town of Parrish, New York. That must be where we're heading. I didn't grow up around here, but I've got a good sense of the area... Even so, I've never heard of this place.

As we get closer, a welcome sign tells me that 250 people live here. So, it's a very small town. I wonder again how the Awakened—no, alphas, as he keeps referring to them—were able to establish a working relationship with the people here. He said someone called Mitchell got it going at first, but I have a lot of questions on that topic. I guess Mitchell's the one who asked him to bring me to the Compound.

Compound. It just sounds awful. I'm almost scared to see what conditions they're living in, now that my brain is rewiring itself to think of Awakened as normal men. Well, not

normal, but perhaps victims of the virus in a way I never thought of before *him*.

Looking around as we roll through dense forest, I think back to when the virus first hit, and groups of Awakened banded together and attacked small towns like this one, burning their way through the countryside and leaving bloody bones behind them. Why is this group different? Was it an active decision they made to be nonviolent? Are they the only group like this? I'm pondering that when we hit the Parrish town limits, the downtown just ahead of us.

As we ease into the edges of downtown, we roll past the Parrish town hall, the rumbling of the Mustang's engine reverberating off the old brick storefronts. The car rounds a slight bend, and then I see an absolutely picturesque downtown, something straight out of a storybook. There's a teeny post office, a gas station, a couple of residences that seem to double as offices. Nothing touristy really, but beautiful and picturesque none the same.

The alpha pulls over in front of a two-story blue building that appears to be a general store. Folding himself up out of the car, he comes around and surprises the hell out of me by opening up my door.

Trying to make up for previous bad behavior, I think primly.

I would tease him about it, but I get the feeling he's still pretty raw about last night. It should be me feeling angsty about that, but every nerve in my body has decided to tune itself to him instead. It's weirding me out and turning me on at the same time.

Before I step up out of the car, he turns and heads for the door. I'm woman enough to admit that I stare at his ass the entire time. He's wearing tight jeans that seem barely able to contain his thighs, thick as they are. From back here, he's juicy muscle, broad back, and a hard ass I could bounce a coin off of. He grabs the door for the general store, opening it for me. But as I pass him, he leans in and buries his nose in my hair, inhaling deeply.

“You smell so fucking good, aroused like this,” he growls in my ear as my panties turn into a wet puddle. “I’m trying to be a gentleman, but your body is calling to me. Again,” he purrs.

I have no idea how to respond to this, despite my body’s obvious desire to hear more. Just as I open my mouth to say something, anything, he continues.

“My name is Orion since you haven’t asked.”

Oh, fuck.

Before I can think of an indignantly apologetic response, he breezes past me and up to the counter. An older gentleman nods his head and disappears behind the counter without saying a word. *Orion* turns and leans up against the counter, watching me as I pace around the store, my face blazing from our doorway encounter. Totally understandable I wouldn’t have grabbed his name last night. But for the last hour in the car? It honestly never occurred to me a single time, busy as I was grilling him about his life. Apparently, I can be a dick when I’m feeling awkward.

Orion remains leaning up against the counter, thick arms crossed over his muscular chest. I can feel the tips of my ears on fire though, so I busy myself poking around each aisle. The store is tiny, so my perusal, unfortunately, doesn’t take very long.

When the shopkeeper comes back, I understand why we stopped. The elderly man hands Orion three gigantic paper bags full of folded clothing, calling out a woman’s name at the same time.

“Margie, can you bring the rest please?” A lovely older lady with flaming red hair comes out of the back room, struggling under the weight of a fourth bag. Orion strides quickly down the counter, leaning over to grab the bag from her. He throws it over his shoulder with the others and heads back to deposit them in the car. In his absence, the air in the store feels stifling, both people staring at me openly.

Margie looks at me like I'm about to try to steal something. "Orion get himself a girlfriend?" she asks curtly.

I shake my head. "Just a friend," I respond softly. I know better than to call myself a reporter right now.

She quirks one penciled eyebrow up high in disbelief. "A friend, huh? That's what we used to call ourselves back in the day, eh, Bill?"

Bill chuckles and yips, "I know that's right."

If I could sink right into the floor, I think I would. Instead, I fiddle with the hem of my shirt as I glance around desperately, willing my brain to come up with an appropriately snarky response. I was never very good at on-the-spot comebacks though.

Orion blessedly shows back up at that moment. He pulls a wad of cash out of his front pocket—how he fit that in there with how tight they are, God knows—and divvies some out to Bill, who nods and tips his head to Orion, stowing the cash in an ancient register.

It's a marvel, watching this. An Awakened, no—an alpha, doing errands like any other human.

Margie crooks her finger at Orion, gesturing for him to come close. When he leans down, cocking his head to the side, she whispers something in his ear before darting a glance at me. He nods his agreement and heads back behind the counter with her.

Peeking his head back around the corner, he gives me a little wink. "You comin'?" he grumbles at me. I wish they sold ladies' underwear in this place because my panties are a damn mess.

I follow Orion and Margie back behind the counter into a small office. A woman about my age sits behind a cluttered desk, clutching a thin baby to her chest. The baby looks listless, and I immediately get a bad feeling. Babies should be fat, chubby, and drooly. This one is thin and limp against its mama's neck.

As I watch, Margie grabs an old black bag from the corner and sets it on the desk next to the young woman. Wordlessly, Orion opens it and reaches in, drawing out an old stethoscope. I'm shocked when he leans over, and the woman gently places the quiet baby in one of Orion's big hands. Slowly, he pulls the baby up to his chest, head to heart, humming softly as he places the stethoscope up under the baby's shirt.

The child doesn't whimper or make any noise at all when the cold metal touches his back, and a pang of nerves hits me. This baby is sick, like, really sick. Why on earth aren't they at a hospital? Why is Orion here, doing this now? What if I'd said I didn't want to run errands?!

My nerves ratchet up when Orion strides across the office and sits quickly on the only free chair, which puts him right next to me. I back a little farther in the corner so I don't get in his way when he lays the baby face up on his thighs. It shouldn't be an absolute turn on to me, watching him fuss over this child, but it is. Despite my growing concern for the child's wellbeing.

Orion lifts up the child's shirt and softly probes his abdomen, feeling around with a frown on his face. Then he brings the stethoscope to the baby's tummy and listens in a couple different places. When he's done with that, he tugs the tiny shirt back down over the child's flat stomach and stands, bringing the baby up close to his face. It's fascinating when he breathes deeply over the baby's stomach, then in the baby's neck and under both arms. Orion frowns at whatever he finds but paces across the room to return him to his mother.

"Kayla." His baritone fills the room. "I know Doc doesn't seem concerned over Ty, but he's not presenting as normal. At six months, he should be growing much faster than this. I don't like the lack of noise in his gut, and he smells...off to me."

The mother nods miserably and sucks in a deep breath as if she knows this already but doesn't know what to do about it.

Orion's voice softens as he continues, "I know it's scary to go against the man who doctored you as a child, but Ty is sick,

and he needs more care than an old country doctor can provide. I'm begging you, please take him up to Utahan."

The mother, Kayla, nods as tears fill her eyes. Margie steps in and wraps one thick arm around the woman, rubbing her shoulder softly. Orion returns the stethoscope to the faded black bag and nods to both women. Kayla sobs out a thank you and cocks her head over to rest against Margie's.

"Time to go, Mal," Orion says softly, ushering me out with a hand on the small of my back. We walk silently to the car, although he does open the door for me again. I pause before I get in, though, meeting his steely eyes. He looks concerned and worried, and it makes my heart hurt to see.

"I have a lot more questions now, after that," I say, my voice firm.

Laughter sparks in Orion's eyes as a deep laugh booms out of him. "Of course you do," he says. "Just took me baby wrangling to get you opened up, huh?" he jokes.

I shoot him a dirty look but hop back into the car, smiling as he shuts the door and joins me from the other side.

MAL

“So, you’re a doctor?” I begin as Orion pulls away from the curb. He shakes his head firmly, glancing over at me, the corners of his mouth quirked up slightly.

“No. Well, I *was*, before. Plastic surgeon. I did a rotation in obstetrics, though, and it was actually what I wanted to do until my father convinced me that plastics was a better career choice.” He sounds bitter about that part, regretful.

“But the people here come to you for help?” I ask, wondering how that all got started. He shakes his head again, a lock of hair falling across his eyes. I’ve seen it do that a few times today, and I have to *once again* resist the urge not to tuck it back behind his ear.

“Looking after people like this is new. Bill had a small stroke one day while I was in the store, and I was able to help him until the paramedics arrived. Ever since, their family has come to me as a, well, let’s call it a second opinion. The town doctor is past his prime, and, frankly, a menace. I just hope they take Ty up to Utahan because he needs a real doctor.” His voice is short and curt.

All I can do is nod and think of Pen because, knowing her, she’d snatch that kid up and haul him to Utahan herself, but she’s not here. God, I miss her. Thankfully, she’ll be off work in a couple days, plenty of time for me to download on this whole crazy adventure.

“Why’d your father want you to go into plastic surgery?” I probe.

Orion grimaces but glances at me with a sad smile. “He thought plastic surgeon sounded a whole lot better than a simple OB, and I was young and impressionable enough to go along with it,” he says. “Not that it would have mattered because, when the virus hit and I transitioned, I lost it all anyhow.”

I get the sense he means a whole lot more than just his career, but I’m filled with sadness for him. A day ago, I was terrified when we met, but now I can barely remember that feeling. He’s been thoughtful and gentlemanly since, even though we got off to an awkward start. And then I made it more awkward by not even asking the most basic polite question—his name.

“Your dad sounds like a dick,” I say wisely.

Orion surprises me with a deep belly laugh that sends my lady bits humming along in time with his voice. After that, we drive in companionable silence while I ponder my next line of questioning. I’m deep in thought about Orion’s past when we round a corner and he pulls the Mustang off the main road and onto dirt that makes me worry for the safety of my butt bone.

We crawl up the road at the speed of molasses, the Mustang bottoming out a time or two until we reach a gigantic wrought iron gate that looks completely out of place in the middle of thick, dense upstate forest. Orion rolls down his window, and I notice a keypad sticking up on a tall dark pole. Okay, so this place has security. I’m not sure if it makes me feel better or worse. How hard would it be for somebody to rescue me if I need it? Pretty damn hard, I’m thinking.

He punches in a long code, and the gates swing inward, letting us through. Orion pulls the Mustang through the gates, waiting for them to shut behind us with his eye on the rearview mirror.

“Expecting company?” I chirp, my voice high with nerves. He shakes his head but smiles.

“Thankfully no, but it would be a shame if the pack enforcer didn’t notice someone following him onto the Compound property,” he snarks.

I snigger in response, but my jaw drops as soon as we drive around a bend and I see the biggest fucking estate I’ve ever laid eyes on.

“Are you kidding me?” I marvel in wonder as the Mustang purrs smoothly up a now paved driveway. The longest, most gorgeous tree-lined driveway I’ve ever seen. Ending in the biggest, most grandiose *house* I’ve ever seen. Calling this a compound is utterly ludicrous. This is an estate, an extremely, over-the-top fancy expensive estate.

The front of the house looks like something out of a romance novel, all tall columns and beautiful curled detail everywhere you look. The front is gray stone with a long set of steps leading to a gigantic double door. But, as we pull closer, I can see more modern-looking wings hanging off both ends of the main building. Orion follows my gaze and points to the additions.

“When Mitchell repurposed this home, most of the main house got turned into living quarters for those of us who came with him. The newer guys move into one of the two wings there, and there.” He points them out. “I’ll give you a tour when we get inside if you like.”

I nod because I’m too busy taking in every detail of this gorgeous home. It looks absolutely enormous, but I guess it’d have to be to house fifty men.

“Do you get new men often?” I ask.

He chuckles. “We call them packmates,” he says with a grin. “And, no, not often. Once in a blue moon, we’ll find someone, or they’ll come to us from another pack, but mostly we keep to ourselves.”

That explanation will do for now, but a million questions are swirling around in my brain. Packmates? I find my mind wandering to all the shifter novels I’ve read, and it’s a touch discomfiting.

“Are you gonna turn into a wolf at the full moon?” I ask quietly, but seriously.

Laughter sparks in Orion’s eyes as he opens his mouth to say something but thinks better of it. “If I do,” he says, “it would be an interesting new development.”

“So, not a no then, I guess.”

Orion shakes his head with a smile on his face. “This isn’t a romance novel, Mal. We don’t turn into anything else; we don’t have fated mates, and our basement door isn’t a portal to another dimension.”

I guffaw at that because he obviously must have read a romance novel or two in his day. “You read romance?” I ask incredulously when I’m done laughing.

He smiles sadly at that but nods. “When I turned sixteen and started getting interested in girls, my mother gave me some of her romance novels to educate myself on women,” he explains as if that’s totally normal.

“Remind me to thank your mama,” I quip with a little smile, although his face is suddenly sad.

“I haven’t seen her in three years, but maybe one day.” His voice is wistful, depressed, and I’m reminded again how the virus took something from him too.

We’re silent the rest of the way up the driveway, and I resist the urge to reach over and hold Orion’s hand. When we finally pull up in front of the house, he parks us and turns to me from his side of the car, a serious look on his face. I shouldn’t have mentioned his mama.

Shit, that was thoughtless.

“It was incredibly brave of you to do this,” he starts. “I can’t imagine how you’ll feel walking into a home with fifty alphas, but I’ll be right there the whole time, okay? If you ever need a minute, just let me know.” He’s got an incredibly sincere look on his face that warms me right up.

“So, what...” I joke, plucking at the end of my ponytail, “we need a safeword if I’m feeling squeamish?”

Orion's eyes blaze at that comment, and I want to facepalm myself for saying that. Why the frick did I mention a safeword?

“Indeed,” Orion responds darkly. “Let’s adopt a safeword right now in case it’s ever too much for you.” There’s so much innuendo there, I don’t even know where to start unpacking it. Ultimately, though, we land on the word *noodle*.

Safeword determined, Orion grabs my bag, and we head for the front door.

ORION

I don't know how Mitchell prepped the pack, but when I lead Mal up the steps, the front doors are thrown wide, and Griz steps out with a smile on his dark face, hands easily by his sides. He's doing his best to look non-threatening, but Mal stiffens like a board next to me, grabbing on to my forearm and squeezing me half to death.

Chuckling, I take her hand, throwing her bag up over my other shoulder, and lead her up the main steps. I can't imagine how she sees him, big as he is, even compared to me. Thankfully, of all of us, Griz is the most easy-going despite his military background. I suspect Mitchell calculated this and sent Griz out first, as our most likely ambassador.

When we reach the top of the steps, Griz steps forward slowly and extends his hand like any normal would. "Mallory, I presume? I'm Griz," he says brightly, flashing her his own pussy-winning smile.

Mal looks at his hand like it's a snake but eventually takes it and shakes, her eyes wide as she looks him up and down. I know we can both feel the anxiety rolling off her in waves, so Griz steps back, letting her look, not making any sudden movements.

"Is Griz short for—" she starts.

"Griswold," I pipe up helpfully as he groans, shaking his head.

Mal laughs and peers up at me with a little smile on her face. "Is that true?" she asks, turning back to him.

I belly laugh at that because it *is* actually true. He's officially got the worst first name on the planet.

"My Kenyan parents thought Clark Griswold was the most American thing in America, so when we came here, they changed my name legally, but I prefer to say it's short for Grizzly," Griz quips. "Makes me sound cool."

That makes Mal laugh, and seeing my packmate elicit that reaction from her brings me a sudden feeling of rightness. It feels like I brought my girl to meet the guys for the first time, and they got along, and it's so good that my heart clenches up at the normalcy of it.

"Well, it's really nice to meet you, Griz," Mal chimes back in. "And I'm genuinely excited to tell your story."

Griz beams at her before waving us into the house behind him. Bringing her here is like looking at the Compound in a totally new light, and I'm fascinated as she lets go of my hand and follows Griz through the front doors. She gazes around in wonder at the grand entryway, its stark tiled floor and expensive inlaid wood walls probably not what she expected. The giant curved staircase that leads up to the living wings grabs her eye, and I find myself musing on exactly what she makes of this. She probably thought we lived in a tent camp. I've got to hand it to Mitchell, this home makes a strong impression.

"You'll be staying in my room," Griz begins. "I'm moving out for the week." He turns with a smile, grabbing Mal's bag from me before either of us can protest.

"Oh no, I can sleep anywhere; don't go to the trouble," she answers, worry obvious on her face.

"No trouble at all," Griz responds amiably. "My room is next to Orion's, and we thought you'd be more comfortable close to someone you've met, rather than in one of the new wings with a bunch of guys you don't know."

Fucking Mitchell. This has him all over it. It's probably true she'll feel better close to the one alpha she knows, but still.

Griz beams at us both and turns to leave, heading up the stairs with Mal's gear.

I want to get Mal comfy and settled, maybe give her a quick tour, but I know Mitchell will want to meet her first. He's likely to have thoughts on how this should all go, and I imagine he's gonna want to be clear with her about it upfront.

"I'd love to give you a tour," I start, "but we should probably meet Mitchell first. I think he wanted to go over a few ground rules with you."

Mal nods as if that's absolutely fine and gestures for me to lead the way. I turn and head toward Mitchell's office, surprised when we don't pass any other brothers on the way there. That'll be Mitchell's doing also, not to overwhelm her the minute she walks in. I half expect to see heads peeking out from behind every corner and door as we head to the back of the main house where Mitchell's office is.

As we get closer, I scent the air quietly and sigh, because I can already tell we're gonna be waiting a few minutes. We round a corner and come to the beautiful double ash doors that mark Mitchell's study. Alice is in there, and the door's closed, so that means they're going at it and don't want to be disturbed. Mal can't hear it, but I can, even through the door.

"What's going on; is this the place?" she asks quietly.

I tug her to the side of the door, standing next to her as I lean up against the wall. "It's gonna be a minute or two," I say sarcastically. "They're *busy*."

Her eyes go wide as she snaps a look at the door and then back at me.

"How do you know?" she asks softly, "I can't hear anything."

I grin wickedly at that because she has so much to learn about what alphas are capable of. "You already know how good my senses are," I tease her, loving the pink that rises in her cheeks. I watch her swallow hard, darting another glance at the door and back at me. She says nothing while we wait. A long minute passes, then five, then ten.

“Should we go ahead and do the tour?” she asks helpfully, but I shake my head. There’s no good reason not to do the tour right now except that I can’t stop looking at her, and I love that she’s squirming under my gaze.

Turning to face her, I cross my arms and stare instead. She’s so fucking beautiful, long chocolate hair trailing down past her shoulders. She stands outside Mitchell’s door quietly, looking around with interest. Because we’ve got a few more minutes, I let myself really admire her for the first time today. She’s wearing a white tee that hugs her natural tits and athletic pants that leave almost nothing to the imagination. She has thick, muscular thighs I want to feel wrapped around my waist while she rides me.

God, I want her.

She catches me staring and rolls her eyes, muttering something about men under her breath.

“If you didn’t want me looking, why’d you wear that tight-ass shirt?” I ask, smiling as she rolls her eyes again.

“Maybe I didn’t wear it for you, but for myself, because I fucking love this shirt,” she snarks.

She’s right, of course; she can wear whatever she wants. It’s not her fault she’s so stunning I can’t take my eyes off her. I marvel how two hours in the car together has given her the confidence to sass me already.

Maybe I’ll spank her later, I muse.

The backs of those pretty thighs would look good with my handprint on them. No, I won’t be spanking her later because she doesn’t belong to me, despite my obvious inability to distance myself like I should.

“How long can this possibly take?” she sighs, rolling her eyes, yet again, at the door.

I laugh at that, my impatient little minx. Well, not mine. Pushing up off the wall, I cage her in with my arms, pressing my chest lightly to hers. “When an alpha fucks his woman, he takes his time. We could be waiting a while,” I purr.

Her cheeks redden, a blush moving across her ample chest as her body responds naturally to me. I lean in more, feeling the tips of her breasts tickle softly against my chest.

“Really,” she snaps. “That hasn’t been my experience.”

What the *fuck* did she just say?

Growling, I lean in close, bringing my lips to her neck, just below her ear. I don’t think she even realizes she arches her back to bring her chest closer to mine, her lips parting as her pulse quickens. The natural predator in me relishes her rapid heartbeat, the slim expanse of her neck as she cocks her head to the side to give me access.

“She’s sucking him off,” I whisper low in her ear, letting my lips brush her neck lightly.

Mal gasps. “You can hear that?” she hisses at me.

I growl again, not moving an inch. “I can hear everything,” I begin. “He’s fucking his omega’s mouth hard and deep, begging her for more, faster.”

Mal groans and then bites her lip to cover up the noise. Bringing one hand down from above her head, I run it down her side and up her back between her shoulder blades, pulling her close to me. Her soft breasts press up against me, and I feel her nipples rubbing me through her shirt. It’s hard not to throw her up against the door when she’s like this, pliable and willing in my arms.

“He’s close,” I breathe in her ear, her arousal blooming like a flower all around us. Letting out a desperate groan, I nip at her neck. “He’s almost there, Mal, so fucking close to coming in her pretty little mouth.”

The scent of Mal’s lust is mixing with the scent of mine, turning into an intoxicating combination that’s overriding all rational thought in my brain. I could take her right now up against this wall and not think twice. Except I do think twice because we don’t fit that way. Even so, the teasing is fucking perfect. A few weeks of this is gonna kill me.

Mal squirms in my arms, impatient for something she’s not gonna get. I start a Mitchell’s-gonna-come countdown when a

violent, gasped roar shakes the wall behind us. Mal jumps in my arms, causing my lips and teeth to slide all the way down her neck to where her shoulder meets. Groaning, I lick that tender spot and bite her softly. Not enough to break the skin, but enough to torment her. She holds a desperate noise in, and I release the bite and back away, heading to the opposite side of the hallway. Leaning up against the wall again, I flash her a cocky grin.

“They’ll need a minute to clean up.”

Across the hallway from me, Mal’s chest heaves, her body tense and tight, her mouth slack in disbelief. As I watch, she recomposes herself, straightening up, her mouth firming into an irritated line, although she can’t force the blush from her cheeks or the scent that tells me she needs more.

“Bastard,” she says, looking at me. This newfound fire between us, this bravery she has now that we’ve spent half a day together, I like it. I like it a lot.

But I better not get used to it.

MAL

If I thought my panties were a disaster earlier today with the doctor scene, they're absolutely toast now. Orion and I may not have fit together last night, but my body does not recognize that fact as legitimate. Not one bit. All of me is on sensory overload right now, and I'm not sure what to do to bring myself back from the edge of the abyss.

Ultimately, I decide to create a list of things in my brain because it helps me when I'm trying to think through something new. Or distract myself from the smoking hot alpha eye-fucking me from the other side of the hallway.

Right, a list, don't get distracted, Mal. He's just trying to knock you off your game.

So, what have I learned today? First of all, normal people trust Orion with a baby. *Swoon*. Next, the alphas live in a damn mansion, and to think I was worried they'd be roughing it in a hovel. Pfft. Then there's the fact that Orion isn't the biggest alpha; Griz was probably a full head taller than him, and bigger and wider. How big do they get? Giant-sized?

And, finally, Mitchell, the one who invited me here, clearly doesn't care about schedules or decency. Orion didn't seem to care either, which means I have a lot to learn about alpha decorum.

I shouldn't have found it so hot for Orion to dirty talk in my ear while his pack leader was getting busy behind closed doors, but I wouldn't have stopped him right then if he'd tried more.

So, there are four surprises to start my day, and it's been maybe two hours since Orion showed up at my door... I knew I was in for a wild ride when I said yes to him, but now I'm wondering if I'm in over my head.

While I'm pondering that conundrum, I hear light footsteps and the office doors swing wide open. A blonde woman peeks out and smiles broadly at Orion before looking to her left and seeing me. Blue eyes light up as she waves us into the office. Orion puts his hand on my back as we walk through the door side by side into a gigantic office.

"It's not nice to make your guests wait, Malice," Orion jokes to the enormous alpha seated behind a beautiful black desk in the corner.

"Mitchell, you said they weren't here," the woman cries out in distress, stalking toward the big alpha and slapping him on the arm playfully.

"I would have said anything to keep you from stopping, Alice," the big man purrs at her, reaching out and snagging her around the waist. He pulls her in close, kissing her delicate shoulder as she hides her face in her hands.

"I'm so embarrassed," she moans, dropping her hands back down, rubbing her fingertips together anxiously. A pang of jealousy hits me because they're so beautiful together. Mitchell looks at this woman like his world is centered on her, and nothing else will distract him from it. But she's only looking at me with worry in her eyes. "Men, ugh."

I roll my eyes in solidarity with her, trying to ease the tension. She laughs at that and steps out of Mitchell's arms, coming around the desk to hold her hand out to me. "I'm Alice, Mitchell's omega, as you probably *heard*," she says sarcastically, glaring back at Mitchell.

When I look at the pack's leader, he's absolutely unfazed, flinty blue eyes focused on me now that Alice isn't in his arms. Reaching out, I shake Alice's thin hand and marvel at how small she is in comparison to the gigantic man seated behind the desk. How does *that* work?

I need to get my head out of the gutter. And maybe introduce myself.

“No worries,” I quip lightly. “I’m Mal, the reporter.”

Alice nods and gives me a shy smile, darting a glance at Orion.

“Maybe I should change your nickname to *menace*,” Orion teases her as she blushes. She slaps him on the arm but gestures us to the chairs in front of Mitchell’s desk.

Mitchell’s booming voice surprises me when he speaks next. It’s low and deep like Orion’s, but there’s nothing about it that attracts me. Thank God. My mind is already in a tangle about Orion, and finding multiple alphas attractive sounds like a nightmare. Or fun? I’m not sure.

“Please, Mal, have a seat. I’d like to go through expectations for your time here and introduce you to someone.”

I suddenly feel like I’m sitting in a professor’s office in journalism school again, and I shift as I settle into the seat. When I look up at Mitchell, his gaze is intent on me. This is a man very much accustomed to getting what he wants; that’s clear from his posture and calm demeanor. He absolutely expects this interaction to go the direction he’d like it to go in. That’s immediately galling to me because I already work for a man who stifles me, and I’m not anxious to repeat that experience here. But I nod at Mitchell anyhow, gesturing for him to continue. Might as well hear what he has to say before I launch into a diatribe about liberating my creativity.

“Mal, you agreeing to come here is the first step of hopefully many where alphas can change our narrative.”

I smile slightly because I do hope to help with that, to uncover the secret truths. After all, apparently the news doesn’t do that now *at all*.

“You’re welcome here for as long as you like, but I’d love for you to get a good sense of our daily routine and what alphas are like, living together in a compound like this. We’re pretty fucking normal in a lot of ways,” he says seriously.

Alice is watching him with a little smirk on her lips, probably thinking about his giant di—

“But I think you’ll find we’re pretty different in a lot of ways too,” he continues, his eyes unsmiling now as he grows serious. “For example, our size, our senses, the bigger differences you’ve probably already noticed. We live in this compound, but we aren’t safe. The government hunts us; citizen militias hunt us. Hell, other packs hunt us from time to time. I’m desperate to shed some light on how we’re able to live peacefully when we’re given the chance to.”

I nod because none of this is truly news to me, and this is what I want to write. There’s a lot to unravel there, though, with the *hunting* and the *packs— plural!* —and the *militias*. I reach into my purse and grab my notebook, jotting down a few ideas while Mitchell waits.

When I’m done, he continues, “I don’t want to color your view by telling you much more; I’d rather you get a sense for us yourself. That being said, I’ll ask that you leave the Chemist out of your articles if you happen to meet him. We need his help, and exposing him would harm us irreversibly.”

When I glance around, both alphas and Alice look stricken, as if the thought of this Chemist guy not helping them would be the worst thing ever. Noted. I can stay away from that topic if I need to.

“Not a problem,” I say. “Are there other topics you definitely want me to cover or avoid?” Better to know upfront.

Mitchell shakes his head, steepling his fingertips as he thinks from behind his desk. “I really want you to write what you see, to show us for what we are: different but not bad. Not all of us anyway.” Mitchell’s face is thoughtful, and I can see he believes this will truly help his cause.

I hope he’s right, but I have my doubts that *The Hawk* will actually publish my articles. We can cross that bridge when we get there, though.

“Finally, we have a few security measures to discuss,” Mitchell says offhandedly. “As Orion is the pack enforcer, I’d

like he and I to review all articles before they're sent to your editor. We don't want to censor you, but I'd like to ensure that we're not giving away anything about our location. We're not safe, not even here."

I nod again because it's sobering to hear him say that. This house may be beautiful, but it's a beautiful prison because these men are basically trapped.

Mitchell isn't done though. "In addition, feel free to keep your phone and laptop, but you won't be able to contact anyone. We scramble cell signals out of the Compound so they can't be traced."

Say what now?

"I'll need to contact my editor, though, and let my best friend know I'm here. She'll be off duty in three days, and she'll be worried," I start as Mitchell holds up a hand to stop me.

"You can contact them both, but it has to be done with my help from this office. We don't have widespread cell and computer use here in the Compound, mostly just walkie talkies. There hasn't been a need for it," he says, his voice solemn.

Of course they don't need cell phones. What for? They probably can't call their families, go on Instagram, read Twitter, or any of the other things I've absolutely taken for granted. I feel like a jerk for being depressed for the last three years. But I also feel uncomfortable that there's no help coming for me because I can't reach out to the world outside the Compound gates. That fact is really unsettling, but I try to remind myself that a lot of journalists put themselves in a bind to get at the truth. Also, Pen is stuck at the hospital for a couple more days, so I'll wait until she's off duty and call her to tell her what's going on.

"Speaking of editor," Mitchell continues. "What's the likelihood your editor will be happy to run a story that puts alphas in a positive light?"

I tense up because the answer is *not at all fucking happy*. Mitchell must see it on my face, though, because he nods and just says, “Let me help you handle that if it comes to it.”

“Are you going to torture him?” I ask, blurting it out before I can think better of it.

Mitchell laughs, but it’s a dark, twisted noise that doesn’t bring me an ounce of comfort. Alice nods in solidarity with him, and when I look at Orion’s face, he doesn’t seem fazed by this at all.

So, I guess we’re going with the possible torture route.

“Probably not,” he says, his voice a deep growl. “But I’m not above it if he won’t support you. Honestly, we should talk about the fact that publishing stories about us might put you in some danger. I want you to be aware of that before we do it,” Mitchell says honestly.

“What do you mean?” I hadn’t really considered this angle, but it’s a good point. The task force collects alphas and drags them to who-knows-where. Me showing the world there’s a more positive side of alphas is going to ruffle feathers. I should be fucking terrified, but instead, I find myself energized, ready. This is the kind of reporting I’ve always wanted to do, and I’ve never gotten the chance because Phillip is such a total douche.

“It’s possible the government will target you,” Mitchell says, his voice booming into the quiet office. I can almost feel Orion tense next to me as he absorbs what Mitchell means.

“I hadn’t really considered that, but I’m willing to risk it,” I hear myself saying, the words spilling out as they did when Orion invited me here. “For a long time, I’ve begged Phillip to let me run stories about alphas and the families left behind, and he’s always told me no. Whatever comes next, it’s worth it.”

Somehow, I don’t recognize the reporter who’s speaking out of my mouth right now. This girl is less afraid than me, but in my heart of hearts, I know this side of me was always there, hidden beneath a layer of heartache and loss. It’s just that

losing Tyler nearly beat this out of me, but being here, now, brings that desire back. I'm going to write this fucking story, and it's going to be amazing.

Mitchell nods. "On a lighter note, I've assigned you a partner for the duration of your stay. He should be here shortly."

A partner? Orion freezes in his chair next to me, stiff and even more tense than he was. I don't need to look at him to feel the angry vibe he's putting off.

If Mitchell notices, he doesn't say a thing about it. "Connor was a wildlife photographer before the transition, and he's been here since the beginning. He'll be a great help and support to you."

At that precise moment, there's a booming knock on the door, and I leap up in my seat. When Mitchell barks out gruffly, the door opens, and another alpha male walks in, smiling broadly at me. He's not as tall as Orion, but he's broader for sure, a gigantic red and black flannel shirt rolled up around his enormous forearms. He steps quietly to the side of the desk, nodding to Mitchell but avoiding Orion's gaze.

"What have I missed?" he asks genially, smiling.

I like him. I like him immediately. He looks like a gigantic teddy bear. I don't know why I'm not terrified, but something about this mountain man alpha puts me at ease.

Mitchell makes the introductions. "Connor, meet Mal. Mal, meet Connor. I'll leave you two to get acquainted."

Connor nods and tips his head to the side, the universal signal for *let's go*. Just like that, we're dismissed. Alice kisses Mitchell on the cheek and then breezes out of the room to go...somewhere. Beside me, Orion is still a seething pit of anger, stiffly seated in the chair next to mine. I don't know what to do about it, though, so I give him a little smile and follow Connor out of the office.

As we leave, I can feel Orion's gaze hot on my back, my body tuned in to his. He is fucking livid.

ORION

Everyone files out of the office but Mitchell and me. I watch Mal follow Connor out and decide that, suddenly, I hate Connor. I hate Connor a fucking lot. Shifting in my seat, I grit my teeth until I hear the doors snap shut. Once they do, I'm across the room in a flash, teeth at Mitchell's throat. He growls a low warning at me but doesn't move to defend himself otherwise, his eyes icy as ever.

"Why?" I snarl, ready to rip his throat out. "She's my responsibility; I'm the enforcer; I protect the pack."

Mitchell's return stare is a challenge. He's my pack alpha, and I have no right to get in his face like this. But my raw emotions are overwhelming me, and I want to rip him to shreds. Connor? Connor, really?

"Take your hands off me, Orion," Mitchell says, growling a warning. "Connor was a professional photographer before, and she'll need photos for her articles." His voice is reasonable, and I can't argue with this, but I fucking hate it. "Anyhow, I want her to get a completely neutral view of us, not one tempered by," he looks me up and down meaningfully, "lust."

When Mitchell leans in close to my ear, my first instinct is to turn and elbow him hard in the gut. Only some small miracle keeps me from doing it. "If you think I didn't hear that little charade outside my office door, you're sorely mistaken." His voice is a deep unspoken command. *Get your shit together.*

“Besides, you have other duties as enforcer, and there are other things that need your attention.” *Like Samson*. He doesn’t need to say it, but I still need to debrief Samson, not to mention train with some of the newer brothers.

This day has gone to absolute shit. Without responding to Mitchell, I turn and stalk out of his office, my mind a furious mess. He’s right; I do need to get it together. While the work Mal is doing is important, I have other equally pressing things to attend to. Things I’ve neglected for the last twenty-four hours because of a female I can’t have anyhow.

I should go find Samson and knock that out, but all I wanna do is track down Connor and Mal to see what they’re doing. The idea of her spending alone time with him for the next month or so makes me wanna rip his head off. If it can’t be me, why can’t it be Griz? Connor’s too...I don’t know. He’s too *something* to be trusted with Mal.

Likable, that’s the word I’m hunting for. He’s too likable to be trusted with Mal. All day long, every day. Fuck.

I really need to start calling her “the reporter,” because I’m going from *Mal* to *mine* way too fast.

MAL

I hate leaving Mitchell's office with Orion angry like that, but I can't assume that his duties lie in babysitting me all day long. I wave a tentative goodbye and head to the door where Connor waits, a genuine smile on his handsome face. I can feel Orion's anger like a raging wind buffeting me side to side, but I also know that I'll learn new and different things through another alpha's perspective.

No good journalist ever got anywhere by interviewing one source, I think to myself in my most reasonable tone. Still, my heart hurts.

Connor's bright smile is infectious, however, and I find myself returning it easily. When the doors shut behind me, I feel a slight twinge of anxiety at leaving my safety net, but Connor shuts that down fast.

"Listen," he says conspiratorially, leaning in like he's about to whisper a secret in my ear. "I don't know what kind of headcase you are to agree to spend several weeks here, but I'm gonna show you a good time."

I guffaw at his absolute directness, and the twinkle in his eye tells me he's only kidding with the innuendo. Probably.

Waving for me to follow, Connor leads us away from Mitchell's office and back past the gorgeous entryway I originally came through. I marvel again as I look around at the beautifully tiled floor and expensive inlaid walls. I try hard to remind myself that gorgeous surroundings can't make

someone happy, but this house makes an incredible first impression.

I follow Connor down a long-windowed hall that opens into an enormous two-story great room. Staring in wonder, I realize it's two stories of library. Two stories of floor-to-ceiling library. My creative juices are flowing like crazy just looking at all the books. They cover every wall like a beautiful tapestry of history, emotion, and beauty. The only surface not covered in books is an enormous stone fireplace that anchors one wall. Plush leather chairs form a comfortable seating area in front of it, and I'm in heaven.

Several other cozy sitting areas are scattered to my right, situated under floor-to-ceiling windows that look out onto a sparring ground of some sort. We haven't met any other alphas yet, but I can see a whole group just outside the window. It looks like they're running through some kind of training drills. Training for what, I don't know. Without really meaning to, I walk over to the window closest to me and peek out at them. Connor comes to join me, his gaze grave when I turn to look up at him.

"What you're doing for us could change our lives," he says softly. "We can never thank you enough for taking the chance and coming here."

I turn, surprised to find tears in my eyes at his serious tone. Connor smiles softly and claps me on the back like I'm one of the bros. He must forget about our size difference, though, because I go flying forward, smashing up against the window and bouncing back off it, up against his broad chest.

"Oh my god, are you okay?" His voice is a deep, shocking boom right in my ear.

I shake my head and burst out laughing because he just looks so unbelievably concerned, and it's kind of...funny? Quickly, he cracks a huge grin and claps his hands together. Changing the subject, I see.

"Let's just move right along," he says nervously. "Why don't we come up with a plan to get you familiarized with everything over the next few days?" He looks down at me,

smiling, although I can see he's still anxious, and it makes my heart squeeze a little for him. This man is a gigantic softie. I want to pet him like a teddy bear.

Chuckling, I sink into the nearest wingback. It's comfortably oversized and perfectly plush. I could easily grab a book from these shelves and lose myself for hours in this room. We've also got a pretty great view of the sparring grounds still, which is fun but, honestly, a little distracting.

For the next half hour, Connor grills me on what I know so far, and what I'd like to learn. We make a plan to tour the house today, meet a few of his brothers at dinner, and then, bright and early tomorrow, we'll begin with some interviews. I mention that I'd definitely like to interview Alice and Mitchell at some point as well, because Mitchell seems to be the instigator behind this place, and I want to understand that more fully. How did this property come to be? How do they maintain it? What do they do all day? My questions are endless.

Once I've done that, Connor thinks a few days to write would be helpful, and then we can come back for more research as needed. He rolls his eyes when I mention that I'm not supposed to interview the Chemist person, saying *let me handle that*. I adore his entire plan and his enthusiasm to boot. I haven't seen any of his past work, but the way he lays out our plan tells me he's super methodical. I can't wait to see what he snaps for our articles.

After we settle on our plan, Connor declares himself starving and ready for elevenses, and I'm so thrilled to hear a Lord of the Rings reference that I nearly pee my pants with excitement. Plus, I'm starving and thirsty now that I'm paying attention to something other than my terror at coming here.

Connor points out the different rooms as we pass, but I've seen most of the main house, I think. Ultimately, he leads me to a gorgeously alpha-sized kitchen for snacks, digging through three side-by-side refrigerators before he finds his favorite yogurt. I want to tease him a little because shouldn't he be eating the hearts of his enemies or something?

Ultimately, I find some string cheese, apples, and every bubbly water known to man. I'm a happy girl.

With snacks in hand, Connor proceeds to lead me on a quick tour of the main house and wings. It turns out that, while the house is big, it's not insanely big. The first floor is a giant library, sunroom, greenhouse—which we don't tour yet—dining room, and Mitchell's office. The second story is split into two main sides by the grand staircase, five alphas' rooms on each side. Leading off of either side of the main house are two modern wings, each with their own sparring court and exceptional room for congregating. Basically, the entire house is a giant U with training grounds between the prongs.

Along the way, we meet a few more alphas, but not as many as I'd have thought. Connor says Mitchell told everybody to keep their distance until I'm comfy. Which is nice, I guess.

When we've seen everything, Connor shows me to my room to unpack. There's a quick reminder that dinner's at seven, and he kindly offers to retrieve me if I can't find my way back to the kitchen. He's lovely, but I'm an introvert, and I need a little time to myself, so I wave him off and tell him I'll see him at dinner. Once Connor goes, I turn to my room for some peace and quiet.

The room itself is gorgeous, all thick dark wood panels and a gigantic four-poster bed big enough for ten people. It must have been custom-made, but then, this is Griz's bed, and he's humongous. I find my bag on the bed and start unpacking everything, making piles of like items so I can find them easily later. I was never one to put things away in drawers when I travel, but I'm absolutely a pile maker.

When I'm happy with that, I tug my notebook out of my bag and sit in front of the window. Making a few notes about my first impressions, I find my mind wandering to Orion. I haven't seen him since the office, but I know he was raging about the whole Connor assignment thing.

When I look down at my notes and see scribbling about the alpha's hearing, I get an idea. Orion scented me through a

window across the street, so I know that sense is strong. But I wonder if everything is strong. Can he hear me through these thick walls? I find myself wondering if he's next door right now, getting ready for dinner also. It's in half an hour, so there's a good chance. Honestly, I'm feeling kind of ready to poke the bear because he was such a tease earlier. So, in an absolutely normal tone of voice, I call out our safeword.

Half a second later, I hear thundering footsteps in the hallway.

Shit.

ORION

Normally, I'm able to filter out the sounds of my brothers in the rooms next to mine. We all have exceptional hearing, but nobody wants to listen to someone pound one out or snore all night long. I've gotten pretty good at tuning that out and focusing elsewhere.

But Mal is already in Griz's room next door. I can hear her humming as she walks around, checking the room out. There's silence for a few minutes, and I wonder if she's fallen asleep. Until I hear it.

Noodle. Her voice is low, but it's so clear. Our safeword.

Immediately, I fling myself up off the bed and out the door, striding down the hall and throwing her door open. I barrel into the room and look around for any threat, but there's just her, sitting smugly in a chair by the window, utterly unsurprised to see me.

"Your hearing is better than I expected," she says with a wink. "Noted." Reaching down, she doodles something in her tattered old notebook.

Noted? She just used our safeword to call me like a dog, and all she can say is "*noted*"?

"There are a lot better ways to get me in here when you need me than using our safeword," I purr at her, stalking to where she sits beneath the windows. She looks up at me, all brown-haired beautiful innocence, but I can see through it now. She acts shy and mild because she is, generally speaking,

but something about me brings out a bratty side of her that I'm liking far too much.

When she says, "I don't know what you're talking about," I do the only thing I can do with a woman who misbehaves like this. Reaching down, I pick her up and throw her over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes. I fantasized earlier about seeing my handprint on her pretty thighs, and I'm gonna fulfill that fantasy right now.

She squeals for me to put her down, but when I toss her on the bed and she bounces, big tits and all, her eyes are full of heat. She glares at me, and I glare at her, and then I climb on top of her, right in the bed, wrapping my left hand around her pretty neck as I grind my hips against hers.

Mal arches up into me, naturally submissive to my alpha nature, and it makes everything inside of me seize up and tense. I squeeze her neck hard enough to dominate her, and then I nip where her neck meets her shoulder enough to break skin. She yelps, but the scent of her arousal floods the room, and I know if I reach down to touch her, she'll be soaked. Perfect. Because I'm not giving her an inch of me until she begs, not after the little stunt she just pulled.

"I'm not a dog to be called at your every whim, Mallory," I breathe in her ear.

"And yet here you are," she mocks me, bucking her hips up against mine, looking for friction I plan to deny her.

I laugh out loud because every second of sass I get from her is going to result in punishment. She just doesn't know it yet. Letting go of her neck, I scoot down until I'm eye level with her sopping wet cunt, and then I bury my face between her legs and inhale.

So good, so fucking good, I might lose my mind. I yank her athletic pants halfway off and bury my tongue between her thighs, sucking and licking until she's an absolute mess, half a second from coming. And when she is, I grab her up, flipping her in one smooth move so she's face-down on my lap, ass up in the air like a prize, just for me. Mine.

Mal yelps her aggravation as I clamp one leg over both of hers, holding her steadily in place. My dick's so hard it might fall off, but I can't let her behavior go unpunished. I'm an alpha, top of the food chain. It's my nature to be dominating and possessive, and the fact that she's gone from terrified normal to sultry minx in about twenty-four hours riles me up. I'm all kinds of hot because of it. Wicked glee rumbles in my belly because I know she isn't done sassing me, and I can't wait to see what she comes up with next while I dominate her.

When I bring my hand down onto her ass for the first time, she screams, bucking against my legs as she grabs at the sheets and the edge of the bed, desperately trying to escape me. I chuckle, a deep, low noise that seems to travel right into my lap where my dick is rubbing up against her soft stomach. Running my fingertips over her red ass cheek, I stroke and stroke to ease her irritated skin. And then I spank her again and again until she stops raging, and I can barely breathe through the scent of her arousal.

I give her ten good lashes before dipping my fingertips between her thighs. She's wet, sweet creamy slick dripping all down her thighs. And it's all for me, I think with pride.

Time for the finale of this little lesson. I buck her up off my lap, letting her fall on her ass on the floor, hard. She hits the ground with a yelp and a hiss, anger radiating off her in waves. If looks could kill, she'd split me in half with the vehemence from her eyes.

When I look down and her eyes flash in anger, I know she's mine, my woman. She'll only ever defy me like this because she wants what I'm gonna give back. I bring my dripping fingers to my mouth and suck her off them, groaning as her intricate flavor bursts across my tongue. And then I get up, looming over where she's still splayed on the floor, letting her see how hard spanking her made me.

"Dinner's at seven, Mal," I growl at her. "See yourself down there." With a smirk, I take my leave, feeling her eyes on me until I shut the door behind myself.

MAL

D*inner's at seven, Mal; see yourself down there?* Is he fucking joking? I've never been so angry in my entire life. I'm so riled up, I don't even have room to be angry about the blue balls—or whatever a sexually deprived vagina is. Every nerve ending in my body is on fire, and if flames could shoot out of my eyeballs, they would. Glaring at the door, I look around for something to throw. Then I take a deep breath because throwing something will just give Orion satisfaction, and I'm not about to do that.

Half of me wants to go next door and rip my shirt over my head, just to show him my tits and then deny him. But the other half of me wants to completely ignore him and figure out a way to torture him back. I don't know how this day turned into a whole lot of him teasing the shit out of me and me getting nothing out of it, but I'm not here for it.

Ultimately, I decide Orion is a beautiful distraction, but the reason I came here is bigger than he and I. Moving purposefully, I change into my Alabama tee and jeans, and stuff a sweater in my bag. My Ideas Book goes in the bag too, along with a couple of extra pens. I'm not necessarily planning to grill anyone at dinner, but it would be nice to be prepared, just in case. I'm careful not to make any noise that could be construed as me stewing or raving over here in my room, and when five to seven rolls around, I'm feeling vindicated. Orion can go fuck himself.

Checking my reflection out one final time in the mirror, I smile. I've got this. Opening my door as if I've got no care in

the world, I step out into the hallway. Three alphas are walking toward me. *Shit*. This is my first encounter without the buffer of Connor or Orion, and my introverted self is suddenly horrified. They all stop the moment they see me, and now we're all looking at each other in complete and awkward silence. Anxiety hits me hard out of nowhere, and I find myself trembling, my heart beating a mile a minute. What if they attack me? *Shit*, I really don't want to holler out *noodle* in front of these three, and I also don't want to give Orion the satisfaction of saving me for real. The only thing that's happening is I've met three people in a hallway.

I can get it together.

Before I can really lose it, one of them hollers out, "Roll Tide!" with a loud whoop, and all is right with the world. I burst out laughing because Alabama football can really just unite people anywhere. When I start laughing with relief, they join in and come closer, introducing themselves quickly before offering to walk me to dinner.

Brady's the tall dark one who shouted "Roll Tide," and he introduces himself as the pack shrink. That's amazing to me, and a reminder that all of these men had full lives before the Awakening. They had medical practices, businesses, and careers. They had families and normalcy. It makes my heart ache for them.

Grant and Rico are the other two, both good-looking all-American types. Brady tells me the three of them came to the Compound together after Mitchell found them living in the national forest in upstate New York. That was nearly three years ago, and they've been here ever since.

Apparently, these days, Brady does his best to support the mental health of the pack, working with Orion to assess brothers at risk and what progress they make through training and therapy sessions. I'm fascinated about that and ask if I can schedule a time to interview him. Grant and Rico were apparently both professional athletes before the Awakeni—no. Before the *transition*. I try to remind myself to use their terminology when I tell their story. These days, they plan training sessions and help new brothers get acclimated,

although they tell me they haven't gotten anyone new in months.

I follow my new friends downstairs, ultimately heading to the back of the house where the kitchen is. I'm amazed when Brady pushes open what I thought was a door to outside, but it opens into an enormous long room with a steeped high ceiling. It feels like I just walked into the Hogwarts Great Hall with its long rows of tables and tall angular ceiling. Brady points out Connor sitting at one of the long tables to our right and asks if I'd like to sit with them. I tell him I'd love that; his story is fascinating, and I want to know more. With a kind smile at me, he ushers me to Connor's table and seats me between them.

I don't think Orion's here yet, but I can't help a surreptitious glance around to be sure. Connor thumps me on the nose as I get settled on the bench.

"Not here yet," he says with a wink in my direction. I'd love to feign indignation, but it's really, *really* hard to get anything past these alphas. Beyond just the advanced senses, their intuition is freaking spot on. I'm adding it to my notes for sure.

"Where's your room?" I ask him, trying to change the subject. I thought he told me it was upstairs, but I'm on such info overload that I'm not sure.

"Other side of Griz's," he says with a guffaw and a face full of innuendo. I swear my cheeks feel like they're going to burst into flames with embarrassment. He probably heard all of it ALL OF IT. I want to scream out my mortification and maybe go hide in my room. Connor just laughs louder, though, and then leans in close to my ear while I bury my face in my hands.

"Don't worry, sweet girl, I've got plenty secrets of my own," he whispers conspiratorially in my ear. At that exact moment, I feel the air in the room change, and when I look up, Orion's standing there, watching Connor whisper in my ear.

I feel Connor straighten up next to me, although he doesn't move away by much, simply staring back at Orion. It feels

oddly like a challenge, and the tension makes me feel sick to my stomach. Without a word, Orion turns and strides up the room, seating himself next to a gigantic Middle Eastern alpha I haven't met yet.

“Christ, you're in for it later,” Connor jokes, slapping me lightly on the back. This time I only fly forward about a foot before he apologizes and giggles like a schoolboy.

I don't know how dinner's going to work, if they've got cooks or helpers or whatnot, but based on the way almost everybody is sitting to wait, somebody will bring food at some point. Connor chats jovially with the alpha next to him, a handsome Black man who flashes me a quick smile before needling Connor about something.

Grateful for a teeny minute to myself, I look around the room. It's filling fast, and it's honestly intimidating to see so many alphas in a room together. I try hard not to glance at Orion, but there's a pull between us that I'm finding very difficult to ignore. He's deep in conversation with the alpha to his left, his face concerned and worried. But then, almost as if he feels me looking, he glances further back, and our eyes meet.

I snap my lips back together in a frown and turn away, trying to get out from under his intense gaze. Bringing out my notebook, I jot down a few notes about the alphas I met in the hallway. Time for another list, I think. Brady offered to be one of my first interviews, so what do I want to know from the pack shrink?

What's the general state of mind of an alpha here? How do you assess happiness, or determine that someone needs therapy? Same as with humans? What would an ideal world look like to an alpha? How does being an omega work? I wonder if he sees Alice at all in his capacity as a therapist here.

Looking up and around the room, I'm in awe. There are alphas here of every color. This room is a veritable smorgasbord of cultures, none untouched by the transition. I see Orion and Mitchell at the middle table, the former doctor

and the billionaire salesman. Connor next to me was a well-known photographer; we've got a few pro athletes and a psychiatrist. So much knowledge in this room that's lost to normal society because alphas are shunned. I know why we shunned them, but looking around this room of quietly talking males, it feels wrong.

My mind drifts to Tyler as my heart clenches in my chest. If he had transitioned somewhere other than the middle of the city, would he be living in a sanctuary like this right now? Is there a chance that he's still alive somewhere, under the control of the task force? Surely, the government must know that alphas don't all remain wild beasts. Just looking around this room, that's painfully clear.

I'm pondering how best to tell the human-interest piece of this story when Mitchell suddenly stands up at the head of his table and clears his throat. The whole hall goes silent, every alpha trained on their pack leader. It's kind of fascinating because humans would look around, glance at their phones, get distracted. But these alphas are glued to Mitchell as if he's about to make an incredibly important proclamation.

"Brothers, I know better than to stand between a pack and its dinner, so I'll keep this short." Someone in the audience groans audibly, and there's a smattering of laughter in response. Mitchell's face splits into a wide grin, Alice giggling in a seat next to his.

"We're lucky to be joined this week by Mallory Smythe from *The Hawk*. Please feel free to invite Mallory to interview you this week if you're comfortable with it. I'd like her to get a really good sense of what we're about during her time here. That being said, please keep it top of mind that she's the first normal brave enough to come into a home with almost fifty brothers. We've gotten comfortable here, but let's ensure she feels comfortable as well."

It feels awkward to be talked about as if I'm not here, but thankfully there's still a bizarre situation happening where everybody is intent on Mitchell, not looking around for me at all. It's...odd. I desperately want to tug my notebook out of

my bag and take notes on what I'm seeing, but it feels like that would be awkward.

Thankfully, nobody has to give Mitchell the hook, and he wraps up by thanking the pack again and shouting, "Bring on the food!" The kitchen doors open then, and four alphas come in pushing huge carts laden with food trays. They move down each of the rows, throwing trays onto the tables.

I wonder who gets stuck on kitchen duty, I think wryly as the pack starts to dig in.

Almost on cue, Brady leans over and points out the alpha closest to us. "We all serve kitchen duty on a rotating basis," he says. "Ends up being once every couple of weeks, but it's helpful for everyone to take part." He goes on to tell me how most of the Compound is run like this. They can't trust normals to come in and be hired for jobs like landscaping or tending to the house or any of those other things you might hire someone to do. So, the alphas have a schedule, and they take turns with literally everything.

I'll admit, the idea of watching Orion pushing a lawnmower around or cleaning a shower gets me all kinds of hot, but I try to shove that down when Connor catches me looking up at Orion's table *again*. The smug look on his face tells me I'm going to be hearing about this for days.

The alpha on our row makes his way to where we're sitting, throwing down a tray of gorgeous mashed potatoes, a huge smoked brisket, and several trays of braised vegetables. It looks so fucking good, and all I've eaten for three years is pizza and ramen. I make a note in my book to ask about who plans the meals, and I turn to Connor to ask if he'll shoot dinner sometime. Having pics of this beautiful food and the camaraderie would be great for the article. Coming together at a table over food is so absolutely universal that I think it'll really tug at some heartstrings. I know it's doing a number on mine to watch these guys.

Dinner is a rowdy affair with plenty of banter and teasing, along with really fucking great conversation. It's exhausting for me to be *on* for a full hour, but it's so interesting that I'm

not ready for it to end. Connor regales me with stories of a time he got captured in South America shooting native tribes in the jungle. The dark-skinned man Brady was speaking with earlier introduces himself as Rahid and tells me all about his days as a cellist for the New York Symphony. He offers to play for me sometime along with an interview, and I will absolutely be taking him up on that. I'm fascinated as I listen to them, and by the end of dinner, I feel like I have an amazing new group of friends.

As things wind down, Connor turns to me with a broad smile and a wink at Brady. "Mal, you ready for some football?"

"Say what now?" I grin, confused.

"As you might imagine, alphas need to let off a lot of steam," he explains. "So, we train and work out in the daytime, but after dinner, we sports. We sports a lot. We sports *hard*."

I giggle at the ridiculousness of his explanation, but truth be told, I'm torn. I haven't seen fifty people in a room together in years, and I'm mostly an introvert anyhow, so I'm wiped. But, on the other hand, I'm also dying to get another glimpse into alpha life.

Ultimately, he and Brady badger me into coming to watch for a little while before retiring for the night. Dinner finished, we stand and start to file out of the great hall and into the outdoors. I make a point not to look over at Orion, although goosebumps steal across my skin, and I feel like he's standing right behind me. It's odd, this level of awareness I have for him. It's disconcerting, but I manage to shrug it off as Connor helps me out the door and into the open area between the house's more modern wings.

What I'm not ready for, however, is how freaking brutal football is when alphas play it. When we filed out of the great hall—I'm totally going to call it that—and into the interior field between the new wings, I thought someone would have set up a goal post, and they'd do a flag football thing. What I wasn't expecting was how suddenly fifty shirts came flying

off, shoes got kicked aside, and the game got started with a scuffle.

Turns out alphas love to fight while they're playing football. I sit, horrified, for half an hour watching them bloody each other up and down the field before I've had enough. When I look up and see Orion sporting what looks to be a broken nose and several deep facial gashes, I roll my eyes but can't help the smile that breaks across my face. He looks completely pleased with himself. It's obvious by the hoots, hollers, and general merriment that their super aggressive football game is totally normal.

After I catch myself yawning for the fifth time, I pack my notebook back into my bag and stand to stretch. I rub both sides of my neck and decide it's time to hit the hay. Connor and I already have a plan for tomorrow, and I'm beat. I feel like I should say goodbye to someone, but the only one not participating is Mitchell, sitting on the sidelines with Alice wrapped around him. He's kissing her slowly, a gentle tease as he whispers something into her lips. She looks back up at him with such adoration in her eyes, I can barely stand it. I wish for a second Connor was here with his camera, because the image is so beautifully powerful and raw. Maybe we can recreate it later.

"Beautiful, aren't they?" a deep voice cuts in to my immediate left. I jump in surprise as I dart a glance at the voice's owner and freeze.

It's the alpha who initially tracked me to my apartment, the totally unhinged one whom I saw before Orion. At that moment, I realize that I don't know what I thought happened to him, but I sure as shit didn't realize he lived here.

Immediately, my breath starts coming in stilted, panting gasps as terror claws its way up my throat. I stumble back away from him but hit the bench and fall on my ass hard, one hand flying up to my throat protectively as my heart beats fast enough to rattle my chest. The alpha eyes me warily, his hands clenching and unclenching by his sides, his head cocked as he assesses me.

When he takes a step toward me, a hysterical scream burbles its way out of my throat. My heart pounds in my ears as I curl into a ball, throwing my arms over my head. I close my eyes and scream for Orion, over and over and over again.

ORION

I've got my fist pulled back, and I'm ready to clock Brady right in the face when I hear it. A shrill scream that tears at my lungs until I'm scrambling to draw breath. In a flash, I drop Brady into the mud and whip my head around, and what I see freezes my heart. Without conscious thought, my body moves at the speed of light toward Mal. Because right in front of her stands Samson, a smirk on his face as he watches her scream.

I lose track of every noise, everything around me with the exception of Mal. My heart in my throat, I watch in horror as she scrambles backward away from Samson and falls on the ground on her side. He lurches forward, an arm outstretched right as I arrive on scene, barreling into him from the side.

Samson flies hard into the wall behind us, snarling as he breaks the gray stone and leaps back up to his feet. Mitchell is between us in a second, but my only worry is for Mal. Leaning down, I scoop her up into my arms and stride across the field, into the house, and up to Griz's room.

Kicking open the door, I set her down in front of the fireplace, flipping the gas logs on as I turn to her. Without saying a word, I examine every inch of her, finding no trace of a wound other than the heart beating out of her chest. When our eyes meet, hers tear up, and then she's flinging herself into my arms, great heaving sobs wracking her entire body.

I'm a wreck as I wrap my arms around her, pulling her in close. I nuzzle her neck, her shoulder, her hair to comfort her,

rubbing one hand up and down her back slowly. After a few minutes, her heartbeat slows and her sobs dissipate, and she looks up at me with an absolutely miserable expression on her face.

I never fucking warned her that Samson was here. I planned to, but he was supposed to stay at the Shed for a couple of days, and I wanted her to get settled. This shit is on me.

“Why...why is he here?” she sobs suddenly, eyes red-rimmed as tears continue to stream slowly down her cheeks. I kiss them away as I tip her chin up higher and kiss it too. Every inch of this woman is perfect, and I want to spend all my free time worshipping her.

“Mal, the alpha you met tonight is Samson; he’s one of our brothers.”

She sucks in a breath at that and starts shaking her head vehemently. It doesn’t take a genius to know she’s about to pack a bag and hitchhike home, so I wrap her hands behind her back in one of mine, and I bite down on her shoulder to ground her. I don’t know why I know it’ll work, but as my teeth sink ever so slightly into her skin, she sighs and relaxes slightly, cocking her head to the side to give me better access. When she’s pliable in my arms again, I keep going, because we need to get all of this out right now. I can’t keep Samson locked up forever.

“When you met him, he’d gone wildling. It’s what we call alphas when they first turn, and they have no control. For some reason, Samson still gets that way, and the Chemist has to sedate him. I’ve had to bring him back here a couple of times when he runs. I meant to warn you, but Samson had agreed to stay out at the Shed for a couple of days until we could properly introduce you two.”

Shit, there was a lot to unpack there, and now she’s staring at me with narrowed, angry eyes.

“Why do you let him stay here if he’s nuts?” she spits at me.

Sighing, I let go of her hands, which immediately come up to cross angrily over her chest. “Samson is unique, and we don’t know why. He’s deteriorating mentally, but physically he’s growing bigger and stronger constantly. If we let him loose into the world, there’s no telling what would happen, what he’d be capable of. Everyone, including Samson, is safer if he stays here. At least here, the Chemist can help us.” It’s a shit explanation, but there it is. We can’t control Samson if we let him leave, and he doesn’t want to go.

Mal still looks fucking angry, but there’s just no good response. “Well, I don’t want to see him. Keep him away from me,” she retorts.

I shake my head because we can’t keep him chained up for weeks while she’s here. “Mal, I think you should interview him.” She starts shaking her head right as I get an idea. “I still need to debrief with him on what happened when he followed you, and it would be a good time for you to get to know him.”

“Get to know him?” she hisses. “I don’t want anything to do with him.” I shake my head in disagreement because I do think it’ll help. Samson isn’t a complete psychopath. I hate the idea of her meeting him and being terrified, but sometimes it’s better to rip off the Band-Aid.

“You were terrified of me when we met,” I say silkily, planting a kiss at the base of her neck. “But that turned out alright.”

She steps closer to me again, those gorgeous tits brushing up against my still-bare chest, drawing a deep groan from my throat.

“Of course,” I say with a grin as I nip at her skin, “I was trying to lick your sweet pussy, so it’s a little different.”

“You think?” she snaps, but the rage is gone from her voice.

I reach down, running my hands over her full ass as I haul her up into my arms. She wraps herself around me as if it’s the most natural thing in the world, and when I lean in to take her

mouth, she opens for me, blossoming like the rarest of flowers. I start slow, gentle, a little tease of soft lips against hers.

I nip her full lower lip before sucking on it while she hisses. Then I slant my mouth over hers and kiss her deeply, running my tongue along the tip of hers, devouring her slowly, sensually. My body is completely in tune with what she wants, and when I pick up the pace, she's ready for me, the scent of her slick filling the air.

Mal gets needy, kissing me back with barely contained emotion. Everything she experienced tonight, every minute of anguish, pain, and fear, she channels it into searing energy that scorches my fucking soul. She's wild in my arms, everything free and beautiful that an alpha could want in a woman.

And she's mine.

MAL

When Orion kisses me, the last ten minutes fall away, forgotten amid the flurry of peppered kisses and languid strokes he's making with his wicked tongue. He starts slowly, tasting and teasing me even though I'm still shaking with the tension of being terrified.

One by one, I will my muscles to unclench and relax, and the feel of Orion's soft lips on mine helps. Kiss by kiss, my focus turns to Orion's mouth. He's masterful with his tongue, teasing me until he deepens our kiss and I can't think of anything, or anyone, else.

I rip my Alabama tee over my head and unclip my bra. I need to get my bare breasts on his beautiful, warm skin. As soon as I lean into him and my chest touches his, we both groan our pleasure. Orion purrs deep in his chest at me and hauls me up higher so he can suck on both nipples, teasing and taunting me until I'm practically purring back. My hips are moving against him without me even meaning to. I need more than this. I need all of it. Even if it didn't work last night.

God, was that only yesterday? I feel like I've lived a lifetime since I met him. All I know is that I've learned a lot about him in the last twenty-four hours, and I want to know everything there is. I want to know what makes him crazy, what makes him feel good, and I want it now.

"Sit down, Orion," I instruct him, my voice laced with lust. With a questioning look, he lowers us gracefully into the oversized chair in front of the fireplace. He protests as I keep

going, but his protest turns into an intense growl when I plant myself between his thighs, spreading them apart with my hands.

“Get rid of these pants,” I order.

He bucks his hips up and slides everything off in one smooth move, and I get to see him fully naked for the first time. Well, I saw him before, but I was still sex-drunk, and I didn't pay enough attention. I'm really *seeing* him this time, admiring every inch of his gorgeous body. He was already shirtless, but now I get to see how the tapered vee of his abs leads to powerful tree trunk thighs and his still enormous dick, hard at attention for me. I was too scared of it yesterday to admire it, but today I'm all about it.

I reach out and touch it, watching in fascination when it jumps in my hand, and he lets out a deep hiss of pleasure, hips pumping up to meet me. Orion throws his head back and pants as I run my hand loosely up and down him two, three times. His skin is smooth, hot velvet beneath my fingers.

“Look at me when I touch you,” I demand, the same thing he said to me yesterday.

When Orion brings his head back down, his gaze is hot on mine, pupils blown wide as he inhales. I'm sure he can smell how fucking wet I am, how my body is awash in pheromones and adrenaline. I'm running on a high right now, and I want to make him feel it too.

Leaning forward, I take his thick mushroom head into my mouth, sucking lightly on it as he gasps, abs arching into me. I can sense that he'd like nothing better than to pound into my mouth, but he's holding back, waiting for me to do what I want with him. It's a heady, powerful feeling to have control over him, so I take him as deep as I can, sucking and licking, watching him slowly lose control. I let myself go wild on him, despite the fact that I can't take that much of him into my mouth. He doesn't seem to care, though, lost in the pleasure of my touch.

“Mal, gonna come. Stop, I can't hold back,” he pleads, fisting a hand in my hair.

I hum and chuckle with a mouthful of dick because I have no intention of stopping. I work him with both hands, lapping the head of him as he whines for me to *please stop*, that I don't know what I'm unleashing if I keep going. My own body is on fire watching him enjoy this, that sensitive place between my legs throbbing in time with his deep groans.

“Gimme teeth, Mal,” he moans. Something about that doesn't really surprise me, and I drag my teeth along the sensitive head of him as he throws a hand up and grips the back of the chair, his hips bucking up into my mouth. I nip along the length of him as precum leaks steadily down his shaft. Licking it all up, I take him deep and work into a frenzied rhythm of sucking and biting.

Orion trembles under my touch, and I feel myself smile around him. He releases a string of expletives into the room as he fists my hair in his hand, but he doesn't push or shove me down, even though I know it would be so easy to. Instead, he grips my hair tight as he starts to lose control, a deep growl bursting out of his chest before he shoves his forearm across his mouth and screams into it.

I'm so turned on by the wild noises he's making that I reach down between my thighs to stroke myself, moaning around his cock as he hisses and snarls. His orgasm subsides slowly, his cock incredibly sensitive as I nip him over and over. I lick him clean, feeling triumphant as my fingers swirl over my sensitive clit. He doesn't need to return the favor, but I'm absolutely getting myself off right now.

Until someone knocks at the door and Orion snarls, my lips popping off the head of him.

“Go the fuck away,” he shouts, pulling me into his lap. He takes my mouth forcefully, his tongue exploring every inch of my mouth, tasting himself on me. I'm rocking my clit up against his still-hard erection when the knock comes again. I'm so close, I want to sob, but whoever it is knocks a third time as Orion groans, standing with me still wrapped around him.

He kisses me softly, reaching between us to stroke my clit until I'm panting and half a second from coming. Then, horrifyingly, he sets me down on the floor while I get ready to beg.

Drawing in close to my ear, he nips the lobe softly. "We'll finish this in just a minute, as soon as I get rid of whoever is in my way."

Motherfucking door-knocking asshole. Somebody better be dying.

MAL

Orion pulls his jeans back on, stalking to the door while I throw my shirt on and watch him. I start biting my nail when he flings the door open and scowls at whoever's out there. All I hear is, "We need to debrief, and I'd like to offer an apology." When the voice's owner appears, peeking his head around the door, I realize it's the one alpha who does actually scare the shit out of me.

"Now's not a good time, Samson," Orion snaps gruffly.

"Even so," Samson says, pushing his way into the room, eyes intent on me, "let us get this over with."

Orion steps quickly around him, placing a hand on Samson's chest to stop him. A grim smile crosses Samson's face as he raises both hands in the air. He looks at me and back at Orion, his gaze cool and assessing.

"Your bond is strong, Orion; you'll need that," he says, his voice deep and cryptic.

I don't know what the fuck is going on here, but I find myself backing toward the fireplace, looking around for anything I can use as a weapon. Orion's here, and I'm sure he's capable of holding his own, but Samson is easily a foot taller and seems twice as broad.

His blue eyes are locked on me, hands still in the air as he strides slowly toward the fireplace. Orion steps quickly to stand in front of me as Samson approaches the chair. He inhales deeply, crooks a brow at us, and chooses the chair opposite the one I just tortured Orion in. I'm gripping Orion's

arm tight enough to bruise him, but when I peek around him, Samson is there, coolly assessing the both of us. Somehow his gaze feels utterly intrusive, as if he can see completely through me.

“Mallory, I believe I owe you several apologies,” he starts. Samson taps on his neck, where I notice he’s got a glowing green patch applied. “This patch assists in keeping me from going wildling, so I can assure you, you’re completely safe around me right now, although I’m certain it’s hard to feel that way. Please, have a seat and let us chat.”

His speech is odd, stilted somehow, as if English isn’t his first language, and so he learned a more formal version of it. I look up at Orion, but there’s a warm look on his face that tells me he’s okay with this. Shit. All I wanted tonight was to turn in early.

Orion must sense my concern because he turns to me, tilting my face up to his, his eyes worried and serious. “Mal, I think it would be best to get this over with, but if you aren’t up for this right now, I’ll kick him out.”

I’m absolutely not up for this right now, but I’d also rather get it over with, so I nod unhappily at him, indicating we should continue.

Orion takes a seat in the only remaining chair and pulls me into his lap, settling me up against his chest with a possessive hand on my thigh. Well, okay then.

Samson simply smiles as if he holds all the world’s secrets and rests the side of his face against his thumb and forefinger. “Mallory,” he begins, “what background has Orion given you regarding my behavior when we first met?”

I’m about to speak when Orion cuts in, “Why don’t you tell me what you remember, Samson?” he asks abruptly.

“You know I remember next to nothing,” Samson retorts as if they’ve been through this millions of times.

“Next to nothing isn’t nothing,” Orion counters. “Spill it; I can smell the lie on you. Why track Mal? Why didn’t you go to Tribeca?”

Samson is silent, thinking until Orion continues, “You changed course before you hit Tribeca, why? Why Mal, and why that night?”

I’m silent because I’d like to know all of this as well, and now that Samson is sitting thoughtfully in a chair in front of me as opposed to looking at me like a piece of meat, I’m feeling less terrified.

He’s just like the rest of them, I try to convince myself.

“What were you going to do to me that night?” I ask softly, startling even myself. Samson blinks fast a few times, the expression on his face pained.

“You owe her an answer, Samson,” Orion says. “Mal came here to help us.”

“Indeed,” Samson agrees thoughtfully. “Mal is going to change our lives, certainly.”

I shudder at his words because they’re so formal, and it feels like he’s talking about something more than newspaper articles. Samson is silent for so long that I think he’s just going to ignore the question, but then he starts speaking, and I’m entranced.

“I don’t often remember much from when I go wildling. I always go to Tribeca, drawn by something I can’t quite remember. And, upon my and Mitchell’s direction, Orion always retrieves me. This time, I sensed something different. I don’t remember anything but a sense of peace, of connection. And that drew me to you, Mallory,” he says softly, his direct gaze blazing a hole through mine. Orion is stiff as a board behind my back, tense and angry.

Samson rolls his eyes. “Not that type of connection, Orion. Mallory is not *my* omega.” Orion only relaxes slightly behind me as Samson continues, looking back at me.

“Mallory, I don’t know much about what’s happening to me. I don’t understand why I get...instincts or senses. I don’t even know what to call them, honestly. What I do know with certainty, is that you are somehow part of the answer.” Samson’s face is as serious as a heart attack, but I don’t even

know what to think, so I turn my head away and glance around the room, as if that will give me the answers I desperately need.

Orion huffs out an irritated sigh as he leans forward around me. “That’s about as clear as fucking mud, Samson,” he snaps, crushing me tighter back into his chest.

The alpha across from us simply shrugs and unfolds himself up and out of the chair. It creaks when his massive weight leaves it, and I have to lean way back into Orion to see Samson standing above us.

“Mallory, will you accept my apology?” he asks gently. He looks truly concerned as he gazes down at me, brow furrowed and lips pressed together tightly.

My heart squeezes a little for him, even though I don’t think I want to like him. So, I do the only thing I can do, which is nod quickly but not say a damn thing. My thoughts are all turned around, and I really need a few moments to sort through this fucking night before my head explodes.

He must sense how overwhelmed I am because he tips his head in a nod at us both and turns to go. I’m shocked at how quiet he is as he leaves. It feels like a totally weird juxtaposition with his immense size.

After the door clicks closed quietly, I turn in Orion’s lap to see he looks equally as confused as me.

“What the fuck is going on here?” I shout in frustration.

Orion shakes his head at me, his gaze worried and thoughtful. “I don’t know, Mal, I truly don’t, but I’m gonna find us some answers.”

ORION

After Samson takes his leave, I'm completely unsettled. He's never admitted to remembering a goddamn thing, but now he's feeling some deep instinctual connection to Mal? I don't like it; it's, well, shit... it's disturbing. When Samson is in his right mind, he's thoughtful, well-spoken, kind. I've never seen him so cool and assessing. I've never seen him stare through me like he could see my innermost thoughts.

And his comment about my bond with her? It doesn't make any sense. There's a big fucking dose of sexual tension, and I want this girl, but some kind of a bond? It's been twenty-four hours; that shit doesn't exist in real life. Does it?

I really need to chat with the Chemist about this because he said Samson was deteriorating mentally, but this feels different. This felt like he had more clarity than I've seen from him in a long time.

Now that Samson is gone, I feel uncomfortable leaving Mal alone. She's been lost in thought since he left, scribbling furiously in her notebook. I offer to stay with her if it'll make her feel safe, but with a thoughtful look on her face, she says, "I think I need some alone time to process."

I get it, even though I don't like it. Leaving her behind, I go next door to my room and try my best to fall into a fitful sleep.

After a while, I hear her crawl into bed and eventually start snoring softly. When I'm content she's happily asleep, I let

myself go too.

The next morning, I decide I need answers. The Chemist has been holed up in the Shed for almost two full days, and he usually reports something to me by now. When I wake up, I hear Connor next door with Mal, talking about their plan for the day. I have to believe Connor can take care of her, or I'll go mad, so shoving that down, I dress and head to the Shed to sync with the Chemist.

When I get to the Shed, I see the hospital is actually full. Guess football was a little crazier than usual last night. I can hear Amin chiding someone for getting too aggressive while he stitches them up. He was an ER doc before the transition, so he and I end up tending to most of the medical treatment. Although, I suppose that'll mostly fall to him now that I'm enforcing instead.

Striding past the clinic, I head into the furthest back laboratory, opening the door abruptly to let myself in. Jude's dark head snaps upright, but she smiles softly at me. I love teasing Jude, and she and I have a tight friendship when her father isn't around. But as soon as he steps into the room, she's quiet and distant. I've always wondered if he gets physical with her because the change in her demeanor with him around is night and day. I like to think she'd confide in me if she felt in danger around him, but she never has, and I've asked every way I can think of.

Ultimately, I keep my eyes on the Chemist, because if I discover he's hurting Jude, I'll rip him limb from limb, despite how much we need him.

"Hey, Judey," I say softly to her, her smile broadening at my nickname for her.

"How are things, Orion? It's good to see you," she chirps happily in response.

"Don't you mean, how's Griz?" I tease with a wink in her direction.

Jude flushes red and bends her head back to her work, pretending to ignore me. I'm tense after last night, though, and

where I'd usually tease her further, today I want to get right to the point.

"Jude, tell me what you know about omegas," I ask.

Jude looks up, about to speak, when her father sails quietly into the room, a bundle of papers clutched to his chest. "What do you need to know about omegas?" the Chemist asks me tersely, not looking up. "And don't think you're going to get out of a lecture about the brass knuckles," he snaps.

"You gave them to me, Robert," I say evenly. "And they worked."

"I believe I specified for you to use them anywhere but the head," he quips angrily.

I roll my eyes but wink at Jude. She doesn't return my humor today, simply looking over at her father before returning to the slides she's preparing.

"Jude, are my slides ready?" he demands.

"Just about," she responds softly.

"Send them to my workstation quickly," the Chemist says.

"Tell me what you know about omegas, Robert," I press.

He sighs, looking up from his workstation. "Nobody really knows much about omegas, Orion," he answers, his voice clipped and irritated. "Alice has been kind enough to sit for many tests and inquiries on this subject, but so far, we can't find anything unusual about the connection between her and Mitchell."

"So, it's like any other dating couple, is that what you're telling me?"

"Appears so," he retorts.

I don't believe that shit for a second. When I think of how I feel when Mal's around, it's different than anyone I've dated. It's secure and strong and deep. And when she sucked me off last night and I came in her mouth, I felt like my soul was being torn down and rebuilt. There's something different about our connection; I'm sure of it. This motherfucker knows

something, and he's just not spitting it out. Okay then, two can play this game.

"What about omegas in other packs?" I ask him, knowing it's unlikely he'll respond. He's never shared much about other packs he works with, but I have to assume ours isn't the only one.

"There aren't omegas in other packs," he lies.

Watching Robert Chen lie gives me a taste of ash in my mouth. I can't explain my sixth sense about things, but my throat tastes burnt right now, so I know I'm hearing bullshit. Robert Chen is an excellent liar, but he doesn't know I can sense this, so he keeps lying to me anyhow. Alright, that's how we'll play it.

"Samson says Mal is my omega," I say, just to see what will happen.

The Chemist's face darts up from his paperwork, his eyes cool and assessing on mine. "He knows this how?"

"Didn't say," I reply genially, crossing my arms over my chest. "He announced it like he was talking about the weather. But he's right; she is mine, and I need to know what to expect." This is a partial lie on my part, I don't *know* she's mine, I just want her to be with every fiber of my being.

"I don't know what you should expect," he lies again, "but perhaps congratulations are in order."

There's a little visual standoff between Robert and me as he fiddles with his slides and looks at me, gaze unwavering. I can see the truth though. He wants to sort through what I've just said because it excites him. Alphas are just lab rats to the Chemist, and he's desperate to pick us apart and figure out how we tick.

When I glance at Jude, she's chewing her lip anxiously, darting glances at her father as he returns his attention to the stack of reports on his desk. Prickly awareness starts at the back of my neck as I watch Jude glancing at her father, who's carefully avoiding looking at me. I'll need to corner Jude later about this if I can get her away from Robert.

“Let’s talk about Samson, then.” I listen to the Chemist drone on about how Samson’s genetic code is shifting and changing, and that’s why he’s getting faster and stronger senses. When I ask about the patch on Samson’s neck, the Chemist tells me he’s trialing it, but it seems to be working so far. It’s filled with enough serum that Samson can adjust it himself if he feels like he’s about to go loco.

Eventually, there’s nothing else to say, so I take my leave and go. But I can feel Jude’s eyes burning a hole in my back as I pace out. She knows something; I can feel that too, so I resolve to come back to her soon and get more details.

Ultimately, I leave the Chemist feeling angry. Angry that he’s a lying, manipulative asshole, but we need his help. Angry that his daughter is scared to death of him but won’t let me in. When I think about it, I’m angry at almost everything right now.

MAL

I sleep like shit after Orion takes his leave, and when my alarm goes off the next morning, it's all I can do not to pull the covers over my head and die. Yesterday was such a rollercoaster, and I don't honestly know if I can do that for two or three weeks. Scratch that, I know I can't. I'm not built out of whatever it takes to handle that level of stress.

With that sobering thought at the forefront of my mind, I get up and run through a quick shower. Connor should be here around seven-thirty a.m. to walk me to breakfast, and then we've got a pretty full day planned. I'm seriously considering asking him to break our day into two when a knock comes at the door.

I almost shout "come in," but what if it's someone I don't know? I'm just not up for surprises today. Quietly, I stride to the door and peek out. Thankfully, it's Connor with two cups of coffee in his hands. He gives me a quick assessing look and then hands me a coffee.

"I should have put vodka in yours," he says jovially. "You look like shit."

"Gee, thanks, Connor," I say sarcastically, swatting his arm. When I pass by him, he grabs the pencil holding up my messy bun and sticks it in his back pocket when I holler at him. Reaching forward, he shakes out my hair, drawing it into a twist up over my shoulder. When our eyes meet, he gives me a soft smile and a quick arm rub.

“Much better.” His voice is soft. “Now you look ready to tackle this day.”

I snort because only Connor could tell me I look like shit in one breath and gorgeous in the next and be believable.

“How are you holding up after last night?” he asks casually, crossing his arms quietly over his broad teddy-bear chest. “I didn’t realize you weren’t aware Samson lived here. I’m so sorry; I would have warned you.”

I can tell he feels guilty, but it’s exhausting managing other peoples’ emotions, so I just shrug. I don’t want him to feel bad, and it’s not his fault, but I’m still a little overwhelmed by yesterday’s events.

“I’m surprised it didn’t occur to me to ask when I met Orion,” I start, “but everything happened so fast.”

Connor snorts at that as my face goes hot and bright red. So I grab my bag and my coffee, and we head downstairs. When we pass by his door, he has me stop so he can grab his camera bag and belt, and then we head for the kitchen.

Turns out alpha breakfast is an entirely different affair than dinner. The doors to the Great Hall are open, but there’s no standard kitchen duty, according to Connor.

“Everyone fend for themselves at breakfast and lunch,” he tells me when we walk into the kitchen; several alphas are there already in various stages of cooking their breakfasts. Six or eight loaves of bread sit on the countertop, as well as a platter of sausages someone was kind enough to leave out.

“Grab what you want, Mal,” Connor instructs me as he makes a sausage sandwich and pours a cup of juice. The light is really beautiful this early in the morning, streaming through the windows that line both walls of the kitchen. I must have a thoughtful look on my face because Connor hollers at me to *hold it right there* and whips out his camera.

“Connor, I’m not the subject,” I gripe at him, but he swats my concern away.

“No, but seeing you casually sipping on coffee in a kitchen full of alphas makes it clear that you’re unafraid, and it’s

beautiful,” he says simply.

Grudgingly, I agree to the photos as I look around the kitchen. I recognize Rico buttering a piece of toast when he looks up and waves at me, but I haven't met the rest of the alphas yet. Several of them take the time to introduce themselves, but plenty don't, opting to carry on about their day as though I'm not there. Which is honestly fine by me.

After we eat our fill, Connor pulls out a sheet of paper, and I realize he's got a printed schedule based on what we discussed yesterday. I guffaw when I see it, but the serious look he turns toward me tells me he is truly not kidding.

“Lead the way,” I jest as he gets going on a long diatribe about schedules and the importance of time management. Apparently, we're going to the training grounds first, and then we'll sit in with Brady for a little while.

“Connor, what is everybody training for?” I ask.

He sighs a little, his body tense when I take a quick peek over at him.

“We're relatively safe here, but an alpha is never truly safe anywhere. The government actively hunts us; citizens hunt us; other packs will sometimes hunt us. Alphas need to be prepared to fight for their lives because you just don't know when you'll need to.”

I frown because I've always seen alphas as the thing to run from, but they're running too in their own way.

“Also, it's an outlet,” he continues. “Especially for the younger, newer brothers. Once you're fully transitioned, it's like a total mental breakdown. You're almost the person you used to be, but you can't be with your family, your loved ones. You can never go home again. It's hard on all of us, but especially hard the first year or so.”

I reach out and squeeze his hand because he sounds so incredibly sad. He squeezes mine back as we exit the kitchen, and we're back on the football field. The scene is drastically different today, though, small groups of alphas working together on drills with and without weapons.

Connor leads me around the field, helping to prompt conversation whenever I'm not sure what I should even ask. I learn a lot over the course of the next hour, and Connor shoots a million photos. Once I feel good about what I've learned, he says we should hit up Brady's office. We pace across the fields, past the house's leftmost modern wing, and back into the woods a bit.

"Feels like you're leading me out to bury me in the woods," I joke with Connor. He grins as we follow a steep rocky trail back up and around a copse of trees. When we get around them, we come to a gorgeous little clearing with a beautiful stone house. There's obviously a fire on since smoke is coming out of the chimney, and it looks so incredibly inviting, I can barely believe my eyes.

Brady throws open the door, eyes sparkling as he waves a greeting. I'm struck by how handsome he is, how absolutely normal this interaction is. It's a raw reminder of the job I'm here to do. When I saw my brother transition, he wasn't like this. But would he have been, eventually? I don't know how to wrap my head around the possibility that Tyler is out there somewhere, under lock and key with the Awakened task force. The alphas who live here aren't what I thought—at all. Yeah, they're enormous and initially terrifying, but they're also intuitive, thoughtful, kind, and funny. Except for Samson.

Brady throws his arms around me in a quick hug and gestures to us both to come in, telling me we should sit in the kitchen during his session. One of the younger brothers is scheduled today, and while he's happy for us to listen in, he thinks he'll be able to share more if he doesn't have to see us. I'm so grateful he agreed to let us listen at all that I don't even care about that. Connor and I settle ourselves around the kitchen table. Well, I settle myself, and Connor grabs four different bags of chips from the cupboard and starts piling them in his face.

"God, how do you eat so much? It's like ten a.m. and we just had breakfast."

"Mal, we had breakfast at 7:43 this morning, and I'm bulking, so gimme a break."

I snort at that. Bulking? Hardly. He's already built like a freaking Mack truck.

There's a quick rap at the door, and then a handsome Indian alpha strides in. He introduces himself as Aadrik and thanks me for being willing to stay in the kitchen during his session. I thank him profusely for even allowing me in, and he nods quietly before seating himself in a chair in front of the fireplace. I watch Brady fold himself confidently into the chair across from Aadrik, and then I retire to the table to snoop. Although it's hard to hear over Connor's fucking chip crunching.

Brady begins the session by asking how Aadrik feels about what he shared the prior week, and I listen sadly as he talks about his distress that his family wouldn't allow him to stay, how he's still angry but trying to understand. As he shares, I realize he must have transitioned but tried to remain at home with his parents, and they wouldn't allow it. That kills me because the idea that an alpha post-transition would still be kicked out of a family home just sounds so horrible. Aadrik got fucking abandoned, and he's devastated. The more he talks, the angrier I get on his behalf until Connor finally reaches over and pats my thigh gently.

"This is somewhat common, Mal," he whispers. "Many alphas only experience the wildling state for a short time and try to go back to their old lives. I've never known one to be successful at it, though, and the news doesn't cover it."

I'm so fucking mad for him, Aadrik, and every one of them, that I see red. When Aadrik mentions having bad dreams about the wildling phase, I perk up. I haven't had the guts to ask Orion or Connor about this yet, but I'm insanely curious. The wildling phase is all I ever see on the news, but what's it like from their perspective?

I hear Brady probing for details from Aadrik, his voice a steady chant.

"What do you remember, Aad?" he asks quietly. I can almost hear Aadrik shudder, his voice broken and desperate.

“My mother screaming, my sister throwing vases at me. But all I could do was rage. It was like seeing my family through a lens and being unable to shake it. And, somehow, I knew that if I stayed, I would hurt them.” Aadrik’s voice cracks a little before he can continue.

“But you left?” Brady asks.

“Yes, I fled from them because I could not bear to see the look on their faces any longer. I ran through the rage until I came to an old bridge near our home, but out in the woods away from people, and I stayed there for three days until the madness passed.”

“What did you do during that time?” Brady continues to question him gently.

“I cried,” Aadrik says, his voice breaking. “I wept because I saw alphas on the news, and I knew that I had become a monster, and my life would never be the same.”

“Do you still see yourself that way?”

There’s a pause before Aadrik responds. “No, but it is hard not to feel rejected by my family for something I could not control.”

My heart feels stuck in my throat as I listen to Aadrik’s story, and even Connor next to me sits silently grim-faced. I brought my notebook to take notes, but the pen hovers uselessly over the page as the tears threaten to come. Struggling to keep them at bay, I grit my teeth and close my eyes.

Brady’s voice is calm, soothing as he walks Aadrik through their schedule for the next few sessions. My resolve strengthens as Aadrik takes his leave. For a few moments, I scribble furiously in my notebook, ideas pouring out of me while Brady walks Aadrik out.

After he leaves, Brady comes to sit with Connor and me, his face morose.

“Connor tells me Aadrik’s story is common; how do you deal with this all day?” I ask him.

He sighs, snatching a bag of chips from Connor and huffing when he discovers it's already empty. Brady tosses the bag at Connor's face playfully. "If I were still in my old practice, I'd go to therapy myself to ensure I dealt properly with everything I take on. Since that's not an option, I talk to Mitchell or Orion," he says, his gaze steady on mine. Something about his admission warms my heart, that Orion is the safe place Brady can turn to, to talk through his challenges.

"You know what, this shit is heavy. Let's go have some fun," Connor quips suddenly, reaching across the table to tug on my hair playfully. It reminds me so much of Tyler for a second that I feel my throat choke up and unwanted tears spring to my eyes. I close them to try to stop the flood, and I hear Connor get up quietly and head into the entryway, fumbling around for something.

When he steps out of the room, Brady hikes his chair over next to mine and takes my hand, placing it over his heart. He's warm, strong, and comforting underneath my palm as his heart thumps a deep, steady rhythm.

"Mal," he says softly, thumping his fingertips on the back of my hand. I blink my eyes several times, willing the tears to move the fuck on, but he reaches out and strokes them away as they slide traitorously down my cheek.

"These stories are heavy, but what you're doing by being here—it's everything to us. Aadrik has hope for the first time because of you."

I nod as hot tears stream slowly down my cheeks and my breath comes up short.

"If you ever want to talk about it, the chair is open, okay?"

I nod again as I breathe in deeply, wiping the tears away quickly as Connor stomps back into the room.

"Damn, Brady, you're the shrink; you're supposed to stop...this," he says, gesturing at me with feigned disgust, as if the sight of tears is more than he can possibly stand.

Leaning down, Connor reaches his hand out to mine and drags me up out of my seat, slapping me playfully on the back.

“Mal, this was a rough first day, I’ll admit.”

“Ya think?” I snap back at him with more vehemence than I really feel. “Honestly, I take that back. It is hard, but I want to tell this story because the whole world has preconceived notions about you. I had them too, and if Orion hadn’t shown up when he did, I’d still be afraid in my apartment, thinking you were all monsters. It’s not right.”

Connor and Brady both nod solemnly, just as Connor brings up a set of keys on a keychain shaped like a pair of boobs, nips and all.

“Boobs?” I huff, raising one brow as a distracted giggle erupts from my throat. Connor waggles his thick brows at me as Brady groans.

“We should not take her up there,” Brady starts. “Orion will lose his mind. It’s not gonna take him long to figure out where we took her.”

Connor hoots with excitement, hopping in place. “That’s exactly why we’re gonna take her. I can’t wait to ruffle his feathers. It’s been too long since my last practical joke.”

Brady chuckles in response.

I’m stuck looking between the both of them, standing there smugly. “Take me where, exactly?” I ask apprehensively.

“Two words, honey,” quips Connor. “Hot. Springs.”

I suck in a breath as I chuckle before returning Connor’s smug gaze. Oh yes, I like this idea very much.

“Let’s fucking do this,” I say, holding up my palm for a high five. Connor slaps it hard enough to make me wince, just as Brady shouts for him to take it easy.

MAL

Turns out the boob keychain was for an ATV parked out behind Brady's cottage, and I get the somewhat weird experience of riding sandwiched between Brady and Connor for ten minutes as we bounce along a bumpy dirt path. You'd think it would feel insanely sexual because they're both beautiful, kind, and confident, but somehow that spicy element is missing completely.

Once we get to the hot springs, though, I can see why Connor wanted to come here. As soon as Brady helps me off and I turn around, I've got an eyeful of nude alphas. My first thought is honestly a quick kick of anxiety that jolts the breath out of my chest, but Brady puts his hand on my forearm and rubs it gently, coming around to look in my face.

"You're safe here, Mal. I promise," he whispers softly.

I nod and suck in a ragged breath, willing it to fill my lungs. Eight or ten round pools of steaming water are sprinkled along the edge of a gently winding river, each one full of alphas who all now look our way curiously.

"Alrighty, Mal, let's get this party started," Connor says with a wink as he steps to the closest pool, stripping off all his clothes and cannonballing in. I swear he's like a bull in a china shop. I wonder if he was this way before the transition...I'd bet a million dollars he was. Next to me, Brady gently strips his shirt over his head, holding it wide around his perfect hair.

"We, uh, probably forgot to mention the hot springs are a naked affair," he chuckles, slipping his pants down muscular

hips. I gulp and try my best not to ogle him because, like the rest of the alphas, he's stacked with layers of muscle.

He turns so he faces me, away from Connor, who's hollering for us to come in. "If you aren't comfy going in with your underthings on, I will happily take you back. This was probably a bad idea," he says conspiratorially.

"Oh, it's definitely a bad idea," I respond, "and I can't wait for Orion to show up." With that announcement, I strip my shirt and pants off. Thank God, I always loved matching bra and panty sets because I can almost convince myself I'm wearing a slinky black bathing suit.

It's hard not to feel ten sets of eyes on me as I slip into the hot pool across from Connor, and I wonder what the other men are thinking. When I glance quickly around, I don't recognize any of them yet. My skin feels chilled despite the warm water, and my teeth chatter nervously until a huge splash of water hits my face.

"Lighten up, Mal; let's plan something devious," hoots Connor from across the pool.

Bubbly joy splashes up my throat as I dash across the pool and sling water in Connor's face. Brady jumps out of the way as I turn to him next, and then all three of us are splashing water back and forth across the pool until I can barely breathe for all the water in my lungs. I'm cackling hysterically when Connor yanks me by the arm up close to his side.

"Shit, here comes Orion; I can smell him," he says. "Time to fuck him up."

I chuckle but lean in with a devious wink. "What did you have in mind? 'Cause I'd love nothing more than to get him back for that spanking. I mean, who does that?"

Brady snorts behind me as Connor chuckles. "Some women like to be spanked, you know, turns 'em on."

I roll my eyes as Connor leans in close. "I'm gonna pretend we're getting wild in the pool, maybe push you up against Brady like we're sharing. And then I'll get real loud

until Orion tries to beat my ass. You down?” His voice is a deep grumble in my ear.

“Oh, I am so down,” I say. “Let’s make this good.”

Connor drags me through the pool, half drowning me in the process before he pushes my back up against Brady’s chest and straddles us both, caging us between his arms.

“He coming yet?” Connor asks Brady, a wild gleam in his eye. I can’t see Brady behind me, but I feel him shift to look around Connor, who’s practically vibrating with glee.

“Mhmm,” Brady says evenly, “this is a bad idea.”

“Oh, we know,” I joke, slapping Connor on the arm. “Get going, big guy.” What I’m unprepared for is how Connor starts enthusiastically air humping Brady and me in the water, so much so, that huge waves are spilling up over the edges of the pond.

“Oh yeah, that’s it,” Connor hollers at the top of his lungs, turning his head slightly to look over his shoulder. I’m dying to look around him and see the look on Orion’s face, but I’m too busy gripping Brady’s legs to avoid getting drowned playing my own damn practical joke.

“Yes, girl, you know how to treat a man,” Connor shouts, right about the time he’s forcefully yanked from in front of me and hurled across the rocks, splashing noisily into the next pool. A cacophony of hoots rises up all around us and then stills as all eyes turn to Orion.

He stands in front of me in the spring, dripping wet in a tight tee and jeans. Every muscle stands in stark relief to the fabric plastered across his skin. His chest heaves in anger, his lips pulled tight, hands fisted at his sides. Prickly awareness skitters up my neck as Brady leans into my ear.

“Time to go, Mal.” He pushes me gently off his lap and toward Orion.

I walk slowly across the pool, Orion’s gaze possessive and furious. Without warning, he leans forward, picking me up bodily and throwing me over his shoulder. Orion leaps out of

the pool, not saying a word, and takes off at a jog through the woods with me across him like a sack of potatoes.

Behind me, I can hear Connor shout, “Time for lunch!”

ORION

Blood pounds through my veins as my canines elongate painfully in my mouth. They almost never do that unless I'm actually fighting for my life. But right now, I'm so fucking mad, my vision is red, and the hand gripped on Mal's ass is tight, bruising. I knew Connor had plans to take her to Brady's today, and the hot springs weren't a stretch when they were late for lunch. Alphas tend to congregate out here at the springs because it's a peaceful place and removed from anything that reminds us of our lives before.

But right now, I can barely see past the white-hot anger coursing through my veins. I can't decide if I want to spank her again, fuck her against a tree, or just throw her down and tease the shit out of her. I'm feeling positively violent, and I wish I'd ripped Connor's stupid man bun a little harder when I sent him flying.

I jog quickly until I'm several miles from the hot springs, and then I set Mal down. Pacing back and forth in front of her like an animal, I stare her down. But the woman who was terrified of me not long ago stands there with a smirk on her face, crossing one arm over the other.

It's a useful distraction because it pushes her breasts up, plumping them for me, and I want to put my hands on them. Which is exactly what she wants. So instead, I step to her and wrap my hand around her pretty thin neck, backing her down onto the ground. Straddling her, I hold her up to me by the throat, her upper body dangling above the forest floor.

Her pulse pounds under my fingertips, and I squeeze hard until her breath is short and raspy. Good. I want her life in my hands right now. I want her pliable and submissive. Although, I suspect if I let her go back to Connor right now, they'll think up some other stupid shit to do to rile me up.

Sometimes that feels like Connor's primary goal in life, especially since I became the pack enforcer. I should be proud and happy that he's taken so well to Mal and that in a short time they've become fast friends. But, instead, I want to rip the smug smile off both their faces.

Leaning into her, I nip her lower lip hard, hard enough to draw blood. The tangy scent of it stokes a fire deep in my belly. There's something about this female bleeding for me while my hand is wrapped around her throat that's an absolute turn on. Seething anger curls itself around, deep in my gut. I want to take it out on every inch of her.

"Say you're sorry," I snap into her lips, lapping at the blood welling from the cut I made. Mal groans, pumping her hips up to meet mine.

"Never," she gasps between ragged breaths, her hands coming to mine. I squeeze a little harder. Surprisingly though, the hard edge of my anger softens and drains out of me. I don't want to fight her; I want to be in sync with her, in every way possible.

"You make me crazy," I admit, kissing her battered lower lip. "You make me want things I have no business wanting."

Mal's eyes flutter up to meet mine, and I'm struck again by her sheer beauty. Burnished olive skin, dark, wet hair clinging to her chest. Right now, I'm torn between taking her back to the Compound to towel dry every inch of her, or taking her back to the hot springs to throw her in.

"Why shouldn't you...want those things?" she gasps innocently, licking at her lower lip.

I lean back on my heels, wrapping her thick legs around my waist as I nuzzle her neck. "Because we didn't fit like that," I admit. "And it kills me because in every other way you

feel right to me.” I can’t bear to look at her right now, so I bury my face in her shoulder and sigh.

Mal doesn’t say anything to that, but when I sink my teeth lightly into her shoulder, I feel her ease, her comfort. My confession makes her peaceful, and I don’t even know what to think about that. We sit quietly for a few minutes, but eventually, I let go of my hold on her neck and pull us to a stand.

“I’m so mad at you,” I say half-heartedly into her ear. My breath tickles her neck, and she shivers as goosebumps rise to the surface of her beautiful skin.

“Maybe I’m just angling for another spanking,” she snarks back.

That pulls a chuckle from my throat, and I wrap my fingers through hers as I toss her up on my back and head toward the Compound. We’re probably ten miles out, and even though I’d swear I’m mad and still feeling violent, I don’t want her walking ten miles in cold, wet panties. I’m not a total asshole.

Mal wraps her thin arms around my neck, resting her cheek against my ear, and ten minutes in, I hear soft snoring. Damn her, but it’s beautiful.

ORION

After tucking Mal into her bed, I decide I'm still in desperate need of answers. My deep pull to her is growing stronger by the second, but I'm terrified that I have no idea what that means. Since I got no help from the Chemist, I decide I need to take a different tack. I'll get some things done with the newer brothers, and then I'm gonna talk to Alice. She offered to help me with omega stuff, and now's the time.

Are there repercussions to claiming Mal as mine? What will it mean for Mal if she accepts me? I need to know all of this, because if it's going to detract from Mal's life in any way, then I won't push her because her happiness comes before mine.

I spend most of the afternoon training a group of four alphas who joined us about six months ago. They came from the city where they were hiding with their family. Somehow, someone ratted them out, and the alpha task force came to get them. They ran and almost got caught until Mitchell and I found them and brought them here, but it's been a hard transition. I've never heard of a family accepting an alpha after the transition, so it's especially devastating for them.

We take a few hours to go through basic reconnaissance using their heightened senses, and then I put them through a grueling thirty-mile run before we practice with knives for a while. Their instincts are good, but they still need a lot of practice. When I can see their energy finally flagging, I release them for the night. They're still so broken after having to leave

their family homes, and I make a note to sync with Brady about these four. Talking with him will help them.

Maybe what Mal's doing will help too. I have to believe it will, or I'll go crazy. I haven't seen her in hours, and I can tell. Even after the workout, my body is tense and tight, and all I want is to sink myself deep inside her until she's limp and sated. Plus, I'm still mulling over what Samson said last night: *she's not my omega.*

It doesn't take a genius to read between the lines of what he said, but I've got concerns. Dinner's not for an hour, and I need to learn everything I can from the only omega I know. Alice and Mitchell seem blissfully fucking happy, but Alice isn't Mal, and I don't know if the same things would make my mate smile.

My mate. I let that phrase rumble around in my head to see how it feels. Peace and contentment steal over me like a revelation. She's mine; I know it. But what if being mine isn't what's right for her? That thought steals the breath from my lungs, but I resolve that I'll never force Mal into something that will limit her. With that sobering thought top of mind, I start hunting around the Compound for Alice.

I'm relieved when I find her already in the main house's library, tucked in front of the fireplace with a book in hand. She smiles when she looks up and sees me, but the smile drops away as she scans my face.

"You okay, Ri?" she asks me softly.

I nod, unsure where to start.

"Omega stuff?" When I don't respond, she unfolds her legs and pats her lap. Alice has always been my therapy, her kind nature and gentle hands a comfort to me for the last two years. Where Mitchell is gruff and hard, Alice is all soft kindness, and most of the pack relies on her for that kinder perspective.

I lower myself onto the sofa quietly, letting my head fall into her lap. Closing my eyes, I let her stroke my hair out of my face. She calms me like this, with her gentle voice and

smell. “How can I help?” she starts, opening the door for me to ask her anything.

“I think Mal’s my omega.”

Alice nods.

“You knew?” I’m surprised.

“It’s obvious, Ri; your connection feels strong, like a tangible thread between you. I don’t know if everyone can tell, or just Mitchell and me because we’re connected in a similar way. But, yeah, we could tell immediately.”

I nod because, when I think about her, it feels that way to me too.

“Does she know yet?” Alice prods.

I shake my head because “yet” isn’t the right word. Mal will never know if I determine that claiming her is going to affect her negatively somehow.

“I need to know more about what it means, Alice, because if I determine being my omega is going to limit Mal, I’m not gonna tell her.”

Alice slaps me on the arm. “It doesn’t work like that, Ri, and it’s not fair of you to just choose not to tell her. You need to trust her to make decisions with you; don’t do it on her behalf, or you’ll really piss her off.”

I frown because Alice has a point, but she doesn’t know Mal. Mal is a gentle soul, even though being around me brings out a whole other side of her. She’s being pushed right now in incredibly uncomfortable ways, and I don’t want to add being a mate on top of that because being mine means not going back to her normal life after she’s done writing about us.

Shit, she probably shouldn’t go back anyhow because once she opens this particular can of worms, she may not be safe. The thought sours my gut as I imagine a task force dragging Mal off to some government stronghold for interrogation. Fuck that. Not my girl.

I change the subject with Alice. “I need to know what changed with you and Mitchell once he claimed you.”

Alice blushes at that, no doubt thinking of their first time. She sighs and leans back into the sofa, absentmindedly playing with my hair still. After a long moment, she starts, “The claiming itself was...hot. Intense. As you’re probably fantasizing about all day long right now.” She winks at me, and I smile. She’s right, I am thinking about it all day long and trying hard not to act on those thoughts since the first time was a complete disaster.

“Afterward, though, we felt more connected. Even when Mitchell’s not in the room with me, I can feel where he is.”

That’s new, and...interesting. I can always sense Mal when she gets close, but I can’t pinpoint her on the property.

“Even off property,” Alice continues. “The few times you’ve gone out to run errands with him, I always know where you are.” She says this gently as if it’s an admission she’s never told anyone else.

“Also,” she continues offhandedly, “it gave us both a deeper intuitive connection to the pack. That’s how we know how to handle things that come up. It’s just an intuition that guides us. Like when we came to your room at six a.m. to tell you to get Mal. We both just knew I should go along too.”

“You’re really earning the nickname right now, friend,” I say. “Any other side effects? Anything negative or limiting?” It feels rude to ask her that, but Alice is one of the few people I’m always honest with. She’s pack, my pack, and one of my closest friends.

She huffs in exasperation, still twirling my hair around one slim finger. She chews her cheek while she thinks, and I’m glad to see she’s considering it.

Finally, she’s done thinking. “I could never say anything negative about the connection itself, and I’d never change it. But being Mitchell’s omega specifically carries extra weight since he’s in charge. You’re my pack, but I have a responsibility to all of you because my mate is our leader. Most days it’s a blessing, but some days, it’s a burden.”

I grimace because she's so honest in her response to me. Mal would face the same thing because being the pack enforcer would mean she also doesn't make friends the way I don't always make friends. I don't know if her tender heart can handle it.

"Stop it, stop whatever you're thinking," Alice admonishes, "because she's worth it. You're worth it. It's not your job to decide what Mal can and can't handle, and it's a real dick move to assume you should be in charge. What you should do," she says in air quotes, "is tell her everything and let her decide how to live her life."

Alice's explanation makes a lot of sense from a logical perspective, but we're talking matters of the heart, and it's my job to protect Mal's.

Suddenly, I get the prickle along my neck that tells me she's close, and when I glance at the door, she's standing there, watching us. It doesn't take a genius to know what it looks like for me to have my head in Alice's lap, so I leap up and stride toward her.

The look on Mal's face stops me in my tracks. Surprise, disappointment, bitterness. I feel a tug between us, a delicate tether that needs a chance to grow stronger. There's a thread of something, consciousness maybe, tying me to her, but it's fragile, shimmering softly even as its bright sheen darkens.

Alice was right. I should have been honest upfront with Mal, and now I'm going to have to fight for the chance.

MAL

I don't bother looking at Orion during dinner, listening instead to Connor and Brady banter back and forth like a bunch of frat brothers. They're both in shockingly good moods tonight considering the emotional day. When I really stop to think about it, *emotional* is what Brady does all day long; it's his job here. I don't know how he handles it. After the training, the therapy, the joking, and a marathon writing session, I'm wiped. Well, I was feeling reinvigorated after knocking out six thousand words, but now I'm just slumped miserably at the table.

I've felt a connection to Orion since we met, but seeing him with his head in another woman's lap shattered that illusion for me.

Orion doesn't come find me, either, and after dinner, I beg out of football, choosing instead to head back up to my room. I move quietly around, not wanting to make it seem like I'm angry or stewing over here. But I fucking am.

Earlier, he and I connected on such a deep level. We shared something we've both been trying to steer clear of. When I saw Samson and lost my mind, Orion was the one to catch me. I thought it...meant something? But maybe it's just an alpha thing, and any of them would have stepped up if Orion hadn't gotten there first. When I think of anyone but Orion holding me to their broad chest, biting my shoulder with my hands behind my back, it makes me feel sick.

I've got to shake this because I'm here to do a job, and Orion is a huge distraction. I'm starting to wonder if I'm so desperate for male affection after three years without it that I'm reading too much into our interactions. Reminding myself that he's also starved for affection, I ultimately decide I'm just going to let it go.

He's gorgeous, enticing, sinful, and thoughtful, and he's got the body of a sex god, but I don't need this hot and cold mixed messaging. It's been two days, and I'm sick over it. I mentally slap myself and try to shake it off.

Pulling out my phone, I frown at the complete lack of signal. Mitchell told me that's how it would be, but it's still disconcerting. I hope I'm not missing much. Probably not, the only ones who ever call me are Pen and Phillip, and Pen's still on night duty for another two nights. I make a mental note to ask Mitchell if I can check in with them both tomorrow. God forbid, I forget to tell her I went somewhere; she'll think I got kidnapped.

After a hot shower, I decide that I'm not letting the situation get me down, so I sit down and knock out another few thousand words with my tunes on. I'm humming along to Daddy Yankee because I adore reggaeton when I hear a quick rap at the door. Good grief. This day just won't leave me the hell alone.

When I open the door, I'm both surprised and not to see Orion standing there, a concerned look on his face. I leave the door open but turn back into the room, planting myself in one of the fireside chairs with my arms crossed.

Orion comes into the room, shutting the door quietly behind him before striding to the chair across from mine. He looks at it, seems to think better of it and picks me up, wrapping me around him before sitting in my own damn chair.

Well, that's one way to do it, I guess. I'm still upset though, so I move to get up, but Orion holds my hips in place, one big hand on either thigh. When I look down, it's hard to believe his hands wrap a good chunk of the way around my leg. So fucking big. So beautiful. A surgeon's hands.

“We’re gonna talk now, Mal, and I want you right here when we do it,” he insists.

I should protest, I really should, but the look on his face is so sincere that I find myself totally silent. He takes my silence for encouragement and starts running slow circles on my thighs, his gaze thoughtful on mine.

“What you saw earlier didn’t mean anything,” he starts. Before I can shake my head, he stops me. “I know, I *know* what it looks like, but Alice has been one of my oldest confidantes for three years. I went to her to talk about you.”

Me? I’m...taken aback to hear that. Well, no, I guess I’m not totally surprised. When I met Alice, she joked around with Orion, and even though I haven’t interviewed her yet, I know she’s close with a lot of the pack.

“Why me? What about me?” I ask gingerly. I’m terrified of what he might say, but his gaze goes heated as he lifts my chin toward him with a fingertip.

“You feel it, don’t you?” he growls, bringing his lips close to mine. “This connection between us, this need.” He’s so close to kissing me, and I hate how much I want it right now. Orion leans in and takes my lower lip between his, running his tongue lightly along it as I pant into his mouth.

“This is more than just lust, Mal,” he purrs into my lips, planting a soft kiss on them. “More than a quick fuck. I have so much to tell you, but I need a few days to prepare.”

Wait, what? I scowl immediately because this conversation is baffling, but he captures my mouth, more forcefully this time. When we part, his chest heaves slightly with need, and I have to resist the urge to reach out and caress him.

“I wanna tell you everything, everything about me, about us, but can you give me two days?”

When I look up at him, he’s so honest, so sincere that my prior anger dies on my lips. Instead, I hear myself saying *yes*, and smiling when he moves in for another kiss.

“I’ve been thinking about this mouth for the last two hours,” he groans. “What you did to me last night was the

fucking highlight of my year.”

I chuckle because I’d be down to do it again if I wasn’t pretending to be mad.

“I know you’ve had a long couple of days, but can I stay and hold you tonight?”

A deep sense of contentment steals over me as I nod. Orion stands with me still wrapped up in his arms, and I tuck my face into his neck as he paces to the bed. Gently, he lies down, wrapping strong arms around me as he fits my body to his. Orion’s fingers stroke lazily down my back as I drift off, and the last thing I remember is an overwhelming feeling of home.

MAL

When I wake in the morning, an odd feeling of unease lies in my stomach. The bed next to me is cold, so Orion must have left sometime early this morning. Yesterday, he said he'd be gone to "do some things." I guess I'll know more in a couple of days, but it's a frustrating position to be in. I should probably have mentioned to him that I'm a terribly impatient person, and I hate suspense.

I drift off again, and when I finally wake up, it's to Connor's happy face as he looms over the bed with my coffee.

"Connor, are you ever not happy?" I gripe, throwing an arm over my eyes.

Yanking the covers off in response, he gives me a fake happy smile and slaps the coffee in my hand. "I've been banging at your door for ten minutes, Bama Babe, and you never answered," he offers cheerfully.

I groan because I feel like I'm hungover. My mouth is as dry as a cotton ball, and I can barely swallow, watching wryly as Connor whips out a damn printed schedule for today.

"I don't know where you find your energy, but I wish to God it was infectious," I complain as I roll upright and the blankets slide down. I yank them up before a tit pops out, but Connor just chuckles.

"Don't worry about hiding those *things* from me; you aren't my type, Mal."

I shoot him a wounded look as he waggles both bushy eyebrows at me.

“Are you ever *not* a complete goof?” I roll over and find my shirt while he contemplates the question. I manage to get it up over my head without denuding myself in front of him, and he’s actually seriously considering my questions. “You have to think that hard about it, huh?”

Connor smiles, then looks at me with his eyeballs crossed. “The answer to your question is...nope,” his lips pop, and I can’t help myself but fall into a fitful giggle. It occurs to me, suddenly, that the reason I like Connor so very much is because he’s a lot like my twin brother; there’s a familiarity between us that reminds me of Tyler.

My face falls as happy memories bombard me one after another. Tyler and I in ballet together, eye roll; Tyler and I racing through my parents’ backyard and ripping down my father’s prized tomato plant. Twins often have a special connection, and Tyler and I always planned to grow old together and marry a set of twins just like us so we’d never be apart.

“Mal, what’re you thinking about?” Connor’s voice breaks through the ruckus in my brain, soothing and calm as ever.

I sigh but look directly up at him from the middle of the bed. “You remind me of my twin brother,” I say.

Connor’s typical smile falters. “How’d you lose him?” His voice is the softest I’ve ever heard, as he sinks onto the edge of the mattress. Sighing, I pick at the edge of my tattered shirt as tears prick my eyes. I really don’t want to start today crying, but I suppose at some point I need to talk to someone about this, maybe even Brady.

“He transitioned, right in the beginning, when the attacks were all over the news, but it was still so fresh and nobody really understood what was happening.” Saying it out loud pulls me right back to that day, to the loud stomp of boots as I watched soldiers tear Tyler out of our family home and throw him into an armored car, roaring like a caged beast. I shudder,

wincing slightly as Connor pulls me into his lap, tucking my head under his chin protectively.

I shouldn't let him, because I just got upset with Orion for doing this very same thing with Alice, but my heart feels so tender and hurt right now. I'll apologize to Orion when he gets back, because this level of friendship is such a blessing, and he deserves to have it with her.

"The task force people tracked him to our house while he transitioned, and they arrived before he could..." I trail off, because what can I really say? Before he could rip us limb from limb? After spending days here, I'm wondering if that would even have happened. I'm second-guessing the whole thing, but Tyler is still long gone.

"How do you feel about it now, after being here?" he asks. "Is being around us just a constant reminder for you?"

I close my eyes and breathe in Connor's familiar scent, somehow comforting me in its steadiness. The usual fray in my brain when I think of Tyler isn't so awfully terrible right now with someone to help me through it. I need Orion but pause as I think of how to even explain that to Connor.

"Honestly, I'm second-guessing that day after being here. What if Tyler's out there somewhere, living like a lab rat in a government facility? I can't stop thinking about it now that I know alphas are different from what the news told us." It feels like a confession, to admit that I went right along with what the news said was true and didn't bother to question any of it.

Connor doesn't respond but rumbles deep in his chest, and it warms me up from the inside out as I hide my face in his ever-present flannel shirt. "Are you purring?" I whisper into his chest hair.

He lets out a loud barking laugh and throws me out of his lap, hard enough that I bounce once in the middle of the bed before landing indelicately in the middle, completely uncovered.

"I don't purr," he says seriously, "but I'm more than happy to comfort certain wounded puny humans when they're about

to cry. Because if there's anything at all I can't stand, it's women crying." Connor shudders as if the thought of tears is horrifying, and a little giggle burbles up out of my throat.

"Now that you're sufficiently returned to a normal state of being, get your ass dressed and meet me in two minutes."

Connor strides to the door, and I throw a pillow just as he opens it to leave, but to my amazement, he snatches it right out of thin air as if he fully expected the throw.

"Don't talk about my ass," I yell, throwing another one, which he catches with equal ease.

"Never planning to stop," he says helpfully before slamming my door loudly.

Pulling out my notebook, I make myself a note to shoot some pics of Connor and his effervescent happiness. If anything could win over the prickly hearts of the world, it would be him. Throwing on pants, I grab my gear and meet him right outside my door.

Apparently, today we've got back-to-back interviews with Alice and then Jude Chen, the daughter of the Chemist. I don't know how Connor managed to finagle that, but I can't wait. The Chemist hasn't come up in any of my interviews so far, but Samson mentioned him two nights ago. It's an angle I need to look into, even though Mitchell told me not to mention him. I still think it's worth understanding what his role here is.

Speaking of Samson, I let Connor know that Orion suggested I interview him, and to my surprise, Connor agrees and even suggests he'll be happy to sit with me if it'll make me more comfortable. Fuck yes, it will. I'm grateful for his steady support, especially if the dreaded interview happens while Orion is gone.

After snagging some bagels, Connor leads me through the great room and a series of long halls, and then I'm looking at an honest-to-God greenhouse. It looks like something out of a fairytale, all black iron and floor-to-ceiling windows. Connor holds the door open, and when I step inside, the air is bright and crisp. There must be flowers growing in here.

The greenhouse is honestly enormous, I realize as Connor leads us down a hall of plants and into another large partitioned room. The first area had rows and rows of seed starters, but this second section is a veritable jungle. Plants spill out of every container, draping themselves across every surface. I feel like I've stepped into a forest when Alice rounds a corner, her face breaking into a huge smile.

“Oh, you're here, perfect! You can do my watering rounds if you don't mind,” she says to Connor, handing him a gigantic watering can. Connor salutes Alice dramatically and heads off into the depths of the greenhouse.

I shuffle my feet, feeling awkward based on yesterday, but Alice puts my mind to rest. “Orion told me he was gonna talk to you, but I'm basically his therapist. Please don't think there's anything going on there, 'cause gross.” She puts a finger in her mouth and fake barfs as if touching Orion is the most disgusting thing she can imagine. It makes me giggle and simultaneously miss Pen because having a girlfriend has been my only human connection for almost three years.

“Orion has been one of my best friends for a long time,” she continues softly, turning to look at me. I'm surprised to see her eyes shine with tears. “When Mitchell first brought me here, I was banged up pretty good. Shitty ex.” Alice rolls her eyes and swipes a few stray tears away.

“Orion patched me up, and now I get to be with Mitchell every damn day, and I'm so grateful for it all.” She sighs and looks up at me with a shy smile. “So, how do you wanna do this?”

While my heart aches to see Pen, I'm also fucking thrilled to make a new friend. “Would you be open to talking more about how they saved you? I think it would be great for the story to show alphas as heroes, but I understand if it's sensitive and you'd rather not.”

Alice sucks in a deep breath but nods as she chews the inside of her lip.

“I've never really spoken about this with anyone but Mitchell, Orion, and Griz. But if you think it'll help...” Alice's

voice trails off, and I know she's hoping I'll say no.

"I do think it'll help the story, but let's do this. Tell me about it, and I'll write it in, and then when you proof everything, we can take it out if you're not feeling it."

She brightens at that and reaches out to squeeze my arm in thanks. It surprises me, but for a moment the greenhouse is quiet, and Alice and I just stare at each other and come to a silent understanding. It feels oddly bonding, despite our tumultuous moment yesterday.

Breaking the moment, I grab my notebook and hop up onto the nearest clear table. I prepared a list of questions to ask Alice, but I find, as she talks, it's easier to let her lead the conversation. She talks through Mitchell saving her from her abusive ex-husband, and Orion patching her up after. She tells me how being mates with Mitchell is the best thing she's ever done in her life, how taking a chance on him was the easiest decision she's ever made. She tells me how hard it is to be the mate of the leader, but how Brady helps her work through her feelings about it.

"Honestly, if we didn't have Orion, I don't know what we'd do," she admits.

"What do you mean?"

"Ri may complain about being the enforcer, but he's perfect for the job. All our packmates look up to him because he's steady, level-headed, strong. Reliable."

My heart squeezes a little because I know what she's saying is true. I've seen it the last two days in the way he's always checking in on someone or speaking with his packmates. He has an important place here, and they need him. My stomach flips a little bit, wondering how this will all change when my stories go live.

For an hour, I sit, and Alice talks. It's incredibly enlightening to hear about the pack from a leadership perspective. She tells me about Mitchell's role as leader, and how their bond allows them to intuit the health of the pack, which is fascinating. That intuition guides them to focus

Orion's efforts alongside his own uncanny ability to read people. Griz is the only missing piece of leadership that I haven't learned much about. He's been largely absent since I arrived, but Alice tells me he spends a lot of time at the Shed with the Chemist and Jude when they're here.

Her voice dips suggestively when she spills the beans that Griz has the hots for Jude. Apparently, there's a lot of pining happening between the two of them, but the Chemist is a huge blocker. We giggle like school girls for a long time until Connor comes back and scoots onto the table next to me, demanding to know the gossip. When he mentions he caught Griz and Jude at the hot springs one night, alone, we fall onto the floor chuckling and taking bets on how long until they get together.

The whole experience is so surreal, it makes my heart ache. This is what life was before the virus hit us all, this close connection between friends. I've always assumed the virus was some government experiment gone badly. If that's true, screw whoever created it and robbed humanity of beautiful moments like these.

After a round of fitful giggling, Connor looks at me mischievously. "Hey, you wanna go meet the Chemist? We could wait, but I love to just pop in and surprise him while he's working, gets him all riled up, and we might get some good intel that way."

"I have to say, I love how you think," I quip as I hop off the table and we bid Alice goodbye.

"Stay safe, troublemakers," echoes behind us in the greenhouse as we pass the long rows of seedlings and head for the door.

Connor leads me through the house and out the front door and then groans impatiently.

"What's up; what's going on?"

"Normally there's a damn row of ATVs parked here, and there's not even one right now. The fuck?" Connor groans in frustration.

“Can’t we just walk?”

“I mean, it’s three or four miles from here. How fast can you do that?”

I roll my eyes upward as I try to work that out, and Connor chuckles. Before I know what’s happening, he picks me up, slinging me onto his back like a child riding a horse. My heart beats fast in my chest at the sudden movement, but I can’t help the guffaw that burbles out of my throat.

“Giddy up, asshole,” I chuckle once I’m situated. “How about a warning next time you plan to throw me around?”

Connor laughs loudly and takes off at a rapid jog. Honestly, it’s pretty uncomfortable because his jog would be my balls-out run-for-the-hills sprint. He’s so fast that tears pool in my eyes from the wind whipping us as he runs. Minutes pass before we arrive in front of a gigantic metal outbuilding. It looks oddly ominous to me, black metal walls and roof. Not a single window to be seen.

“Welcome to the Shed,” Connor says, sliding me gently off his back.

“What happens at this place? It looks like a garage?”

“It *is* a garage, Mal,” he snorts before his face falls, lips pursed together. “It’s also our hospital and research lab.”

I have so many questions about this because I’ve heard one or two mentions of “the Shed,” but it hasn’t come up that much in my interviews so far.

“Mitchell didn’t want you to interview the Chemist, but I don’t agree with him. He’ll probably beat my ass later for bringing you here, but I’m gonna lie and say we came to find Samson for his interview.”

Every single one of my muscles stiffens at that, and I stop in my tracks, eyes darting up to Connor. He turns when I stop, the edges of his eyes crinkling in a kind smile.

“You’re safe with me, Mal. Samson has his moments, but when he’s on a sufficient amount of the Chemist’s serum, he’s

low-key. I would never let him hurt you; you believe that, right?”

I nod because, intellectually, I know he’s right. My body just remains scared shitless of Samson. Heart pounding rapidly, I follow Connor when he turns and heads to the Shed door, opening it wide.

When I pass through the door into a dark hallway, every sense in my body tells me to stop and run. Connor runs straight into me, knocking me forward before catching me with lightning-quick reflexes.

“I’ve really got to stop accidentally knocking you around, or Orion will have my ass,” he mutters under his breath. “Let’s see if we can find Jude and Samson. Orion said they were running some tests on him today.”

Shuddering involuntarily, I follow Connor. Up ahead, a row of windows lit from within illuminates the hall we’re in. When we get there, I peek into the window and realize it’s a hospital room—sterile, white, devoid of anything personal but a bed. Samson sits on the edge of the bed, one arm extended for a small woman standing next to him. That must be Jude. God, he’s humongous. He towers over her, even seated on the low bed.

Samson’s head snaps up and looks at Connor and me through the window. Did he sense we were here? Shit, he probably heard my heart beating a mile a minute in my chest.

To my surprise, his face breaks out in a welcoming smile, and he says something, although I can’t hear it through the glass. Connor must be able to, though, because he returns the smile and gives Samson a thumbs-up.

“He wants us to come in. Let’s go, you big weenie.”

I’m too fucking terrified to yell at Connor for calling me a weenie, so instead, I grip the back of his shirt for comfort as I follow him around a corner and to the door of the room. When Connor opens the door, I suck in a deep breath to try to steel myself. I really, *really* don’t want to go in there with Samson. Reminding myself that everyone thinks this is a good idea, and

they know him better, I allow myself to be dragged into the room, still holding on to Connor's shirt. I'm grateful he doesn't swat my hand away, although I know he'll be poking fun at me for this later.

"Mal, lovely to see you again," booms Samson's deep voice into the room. I feel like it reverberates all the way into my bones as I peek out from behind Connor.

The woman next to Samson turns with a smile and steps forward to shake my hand. "You must be Mal; I've heard so much about you," she says in a friendly tone. She's...well, she's a knockout. Short like me, Asian, but shocking red hair that seems totally out of place. This must be Jude, the Chemist's daughter. Mustering up my confidence, I step around Connor and shake her hand enthusiastically.

"I'm Jude. I'm not here all the time, but my father and I come down a couple of times a year to help out and do some research," she offers, smiling broadly.

When the door opens and Griz steps in quietly, Jude's eyes snap to him, and there's such a look of longing on her face, it's almost palpable. I don't have the heart to look at Griz, so I turn toward Samson instead. He watches me as Griz walks toward the bed, with an "I told you so" grin on his handsome features. Behind me, Connor elbows me in the back suggestively. I swear I want to slap them both and shout, "I get it! There's unresolved sexual tension; let's move on, people!"

Griz hands a tray covered in needles and tubes to Jude and then steps back, leaning up against the wall beside Samson, who looks at Jude and nods.

"Mallory, Jude, and her father are attempting to understand why I am the only alpha still having periods of incoherency," Samson explains. "Jude, perhaps you can explain a little further what you're looking for."

"And why you're here, in general," Connor adds, next to me.

I would high five him right now if it didn't feel inappropriate. For the next few minutes, Jude gently extracts

vial after vial of blood from Samson's arm. She explains what they're looking for in his blood, but it's truthfully a lot of medical mumbo jumbo that doesn't make much sense to me. I notice she's careful not to explain how she and the Chemist started working with the pack. Nobody presses her, but it's clear she's dancing around that part of the conversation.

I open my mouth to ask her directly when the door slams open again and an older Asian man walks in, wearing a long white lab coat. He stops abruptly when he sees us in the room, the frown on his face turning into a deep scowl. This must be Jude's father. His cold demeanor almost seeps into the room ahead of him, and suddenly, I feel sorry for her. This man looks like an absolutely miserable person to be around.

The Chemist takes another step forward, eyes glancing over at Connor and me. "Get out," he says simply, a commanding tone in his voice. I would blanch if Connor hadn't already stepped in front of me protectively as Griz presses forward into a stand.

"Don't talk to Mal like that; we just came to interview Samson," Connor growls at the Chemist. His tone is low and threatening, surprising me. He's never been anything but cheerful and goofy, but his tense posture and clenched hands tell another story. His fierce protectiveness actually gives me comfort. When I dart a glance at Jude, she appears stricken, clearly unhappy to see her father.

The Chemist continues, unfazed by Connor or the look on her face. Glancing unaffectedly at me, he pushes his glasses up his nose as if to get a better look.

"Ah, Orion's omega. If you haven't come for us to run tests on you, then there's no reason for you to be here. You can interview Samson when I am through with him."

Jude sucks in a breath just as I step around Connor, tilting my head to the side.

"What do you mean, 'Orion's omega'?" Jude whips her face back and forth between her father and me as I repeat the question. What the fuck is he talking about?

“Ah, I see,” says the Chemist, steepling his fingertips together in delight. “He hasn’t actually told you.” His voice is laced with acid. This man is evil to the core; I can feel it as I stand here, dumbfounded. “Well, that is a horse of another color. It seems you have things to discuss with your alpha. Once that’s done, come back. I’ll need to run tests on you now that there are two omegas here.”

“What the fuck do you mean, I’m an omega?” I start to shout, just as Connor turns, wraps both arms around me, and carries me out of the room.

The last thing I see as I leave is Samson’s face, and he looks almost...remorseful.

ORION

I'm gone for almost two days, but I've planned a huge surprise. I'm ready to tell Mal the whole truth about what's between us, or at least what I know about it. I pray to God that she hears me out and doesn't run away screaming, and I worry a little at what I've missed for two days.

The drive back to the Compound feels like it takes a year, and my heart pounds in my chest the entire time. I rub the back of my neck absentmindedly as I think about Mal, wondering how she'll react tonight.

When I get back and park the Mustang, Griz meets me in the Shed's big open garage. The look on his face is anything but comforting. My heart leaps in my throat.

"She talked to the Chemist," he says, arms thrown wide as if to say "you should have known she would."

"About?" I ask gruffly, although I'm pretty damn sure I already know. Shit, I'm gonna need to accelerate my timeline.

"She came to interview Samson, but the Chemist let it slip that she's an omega. She didn't take it well," Griz grumbles apologetically.

I'm in no mood to hear this, I just need to get to her. Jogging into the house, I head to my room and pack a bag for a few days. I don't hear Mal in her room, so I close my eyes and think about her. I can't feel her close by, so I'll have to go hunt around the old-fashioned way. It's almost dinner time, and if her past schedule is any indicator, she'll come back to her room to write before dinner.

There's an uncomfortable pressure in my chest as I think about her finding out my big secret before I could tell her. I want to scream at somebody, but I need to keep a cool head. It's time to win my girl over. Resolve seeps through my system as I steel myself.

I prop myself up against her door and wait. Not long, it turns out. Connor leads the way, smiling half-heartedly when he sees me waiting at Mal's door. He makes an excuse to Mal and then steps aside, and I see her for the first time since yesterday morning.

She stops, startling a little when she sees me. I watch her lips part open ever so slightly, her heart beating faster when she catches me leaned up against her door. She's so fucking beautiful; I can barely stand it. Pushing myself away from the door, I take two steps forward until I'm right in front of her.

Connor sweeps past me with a knowing wink, but I don't watch him go, and neither does she. This close, she has to look up to meet my gaze, and despite the fact that she's probably hurt or angry or both at discovering the mates scenario without me telling her, she's also relieved and happy now that I'm back.

"Miss me?" I ask with a smirk, keeping my fingertip under her chin.

She sucks in a breath, no doubt to verbally slap me with a snarky remark, so I lean in and take her mouth instead. Sliding my tongue softly between her lips, I moan when she sucks on it, my thoughts going right back to a few nights ago when she had her mouth all over my cock. We deepen the kiss until I'm lost, desperate to pull her up into my arms and take everything until I hear a wry cough behind me. Whipping my head around, I seamlessly place Mal behind me to see who the fuck snuck up on us without me noticing.

Samson. I should have known. Mal peeks out from around my back and gives Samson a quick nod. She doesn't seem terrified, so hopefully, they made their peace while I was gone, with Connor's help, no doubt. I made him swear up and down that he'd work on it, and I wouldn't have left at all if it wasn't

critical for me to do what I left to do. I'll dive into that later after I've had a chance to talk with her.

With a smirk, Samson passes us, hands in his pockets as if he has all the time in the world. I notice the green patch on his neck is glowing brighter, and I wonder if it's been refilled, or strengthened somehow. I make a mental note to ask the Chemist, because he's only had the patch a few days, and it was supposed to last for months.

Mal watches Samson go, a thoughtful expression on her face. I watch her until she looks up at me and blushes, pink flushing across her cheeks and chest. And now I'm just ogling her fantastic full breasts, imagining the last time I had my mouth on them, and how I'm doing that again as soon as I get a chance. But I need to set that aside for now because I have plans for us tonight. Plans that involve telling my little reporter everything, showing her all the broken and twisted parts of me, then praying that she won't discard me like a piece of trash.

I grab Mal's hand, dragging her door open as I guide her through. When she's in, I look around for her bag and throw it on the bed.

"Mal, pack a bag for a couple of days; I'm taking you away for a night or two," I start.

She looks up at me, confused, about to say something before I stop her. I've got this all planned out.

"I owe you a lot of answers, Mal, and I know you have questions. And you're probably angry with me for not being upfront with you about certain...things."

Mal's lips are pursed in a line as she crosses her arms. Yeah, my girl is angry, and she has every right to be. I'm hoping my plans for tonight will dissolve that anger and get her the answers she's entitled to.

"I want to take you to a place from my life before the transition. I want to show you everything there is to know about me and answer all your questions. I don't want secrets

and tension between us, Mal, not when you mean so much to me.”

She’s flushed, angry but intrigued, and I can sense that she wants to believe me.

“Plus,” I continue, “I need to worship your body, and I need a private space where I can do what I want without worrying about others overhearing.”

Her scent blooms when I say that, and it makes me smile. She needs it, just as she’s needed it since the day I showed up and asked her to come here.

With a quick nod, she sets about the room gathering a few belongings. When she goes to grab her notebook and phone, I shake my head.

“You won’t be needing those,” I say darkly, “because you’re not gonna have any free time to write.” My voice is a dark hint at the pleasure I hope she’ll let me bring to her this evening, and she throws the tech aside as if it doesn’t matter at all. When she’s got everything, I sling her bag over my shoulder and take her by the hand.

Mal’s quiet as I lead her down the hall and stairs, and out the front door. I left the Mustang parked out front, so I open the door like a gentleman, although I still stare at her tits when she gracefully lowers herself into the bucket seat. When she catches me, she throws her head back and snorts, and I respond with my own deep chuckle. I’m probably becoming predictable, but I can’t find it in me to care.

When I sink down into the car, Mal looks over at me with a devilish glint in her eyes. “Where are you kidnapping me to this time, Orion?” she asks, her voice a sultry tone.

“I didn’t kidnap you last time,” I gruff, because she came of her own accord.

“I don’t think I would’ve minded if you had,” she says thoughtfully. And that gives me all kinds of ideas. Ideas like Mal running from me through the woods and me chasing her until I catch her and throw her to the ground underneath me.

Ideas like Mal screaming out her pleasure to the moon while I fuck her deep up against a tree, bathed in moonlight.

Mal chuckles at the deep rumble in my chest, the intense look I know must be on my face. She's toying with me, so I need to get it together. Smiling, I reach my arm over and grip her thigh with my hand, stroking her softly through buttery yoga pants. Thank God someone invented yoga pants, and I get to be this close to her gorgeous skin.

Mal wraps one arm through mine on the center console and leans into me, and this. This is it. This is heaven on earth.

I hope tonight doesn't fuck that up.

MAL

Orion's up to something, but he promised me answers, and something tells me tonight is a turning point for us. It better be, because that little bomb the Chemist dropped on me has me concerned, to say the least. Connor refused to answer a single question about it and just kept telling me to talk to Orion.

I'm lost in thought about how unsettled I am when Orion's voice breaks through my process.

"What are you thinking about, Mal?" His voice is a deep grumble in my ear, his nose tickling my neck. I shiver at the goosebumps that rush over my body as Orion inhales deeply and sighs. "You smell like absolute heaven, and I can't wait to lick every inch of you," he growls. A little desperate noise comes out of me before I can stop it, and I know I'm blushing.

"Just wondering where you're taking me, and why the Chemist thinks I'm your mate," I snap. Orion has been vague about this trip, but I suspect all of this is interconnected.

Orion smiles apologetically, grabbing my hand and kissing the back lightly.

"I owe you so many apologies, Mal, and I promise I'm gonna get to that. My family has a cabin upstate, and I spent a ton of time there my whole life. They don't use it anymore, but I'm taking you there for a couple of days. And we're gonna talk, and I'm gonna answer your questions about this thing between us."

"Th...thing?" I stammer.

“I know you know what I mean, Mallory,” he says sternly. “The intense attraction, how we’re completely attuned to each other, how when I bite you it calms you. There’s a reason for all of it.”

I know this already, and in my heart of hearts, I know what the Chemist said was true. I belong to Orion in a way I’ve never belonged to anyone, but I’m incredibly concerned about what that really means.

My heart is thundering in my ears as I think about what he just said. Then my mind settles on how our semi-disastrous first bedroom attempt has always been a blocker for us. Even so, we’ve barely kept our hands off each other.

“Tell me about this cabin,” I manage to get out, desperate not to have to respond to him quite yet.

Orion smiles at me, taking my hand and placing it on his thigh. “We’ve had this cabin since I was a kid, and we used to come hunting and fishing up here in the mountains. I haven’t been back to it until the last two days, when I came to prep it for you.”

I don’t even know what to say to that, but when I look at Orion, he just looks pleased.

“We’ll be there in twenty minutes,” he says, “it’s not terribly far from the Compound.”

We drive in silence the rest of the way, and when Orion pulls off the main highway onto a teeny dirt road, a pang hits me. He’s taking me to a place from his childhood, a place that’s deeply personal to him. The car winds through groves of alder trees, beautiful now that the sun is headed down for the night. Orion keeps us on the road for a couple of miles, past a gorgeous lake and between two gigantic boulders that sit like sentinels on either side of the road. This property is utterly picturesque. But nothing prepares me to round the boulders and come into a clearing with the cutest cottage I’ve ever seen.

It looks to be just one story, a huge wraparound porch filled with rocking chairs welcoming us first. The whole thing is covered in cedar shake siding, trim painted a deep hunter

green, although all the windows are framed in white. The front yard looks like someone really took the time to garden there in the past, but it's been a little neglected since.

Orion turns to me in the car. "Mal," his voice is serious but calm, ready. "This place represents my whole life, the family I left behind when I transitioned. And I want to share it all with you; I don't want anything between us. I want you to know everything, and this is the place I can show myself to you."

I look at him, my heart breaking again for everything he's lost, and the only thing I can do in that moment is lean in to brush my lips against his.

"I'm ready," I say.

Getting out of the car, I reach for my bag, but Orion grabs it with a wry look at me. "A gentleman never lets his woman carry her bag," he gruffs sternly.

"Oh, are you a gentleman now?" I ask with my own guffaw. "'Cause I'm pretty sure you're a dirty tramp."

Orion feigns mock surprise before throwing my bag to the ground and hefting me onto the front of the Mustang. "A gentleman carries bags but drops to his knees to lick pussy," he purrs onto my lips. "A gentleman holds open your car door and then destroys you in his bed. A *gentleman* does all that, and a whole lot more, and when a gentleman finds out he and his woman don't fit in the bedroom department, he comes up with alternative solutions."

I'm panting into Orion's lips when he kisses me deeply, his tongue on mine as we devour each other. "Definitely wanna try that again, though," I murmur when he breaks the kiss. "Maybe it was just first-time nerves," I chuckle.

Without a word, Orion turns and pulls me into his arms, kicking the front door open to carry me across the threshold like a bride. When he sets me down and I get my bearings, I get a chance to glance around.

To the right of the front door is a little drop space with a table and a big framed painting of a lake. On the left is a long hallway, the walls completely covered in family photos. I step

to the first one and see a handsome couple and three young boys.

“Is this you?” I ask Orion, pointing to the smallest child. He smiles and reaches out, pointing to the eldest.

“I’m the oldest,” he says, his voice solemn.

The boys have their arms thrown around each other and look to be just a few years apart. It’s a beautiful memory of a happy time, and it definitely makes me want to sob my heart out and throw my arms around him. I glance at his mother, a tall blonde beauty with the same gray eyes he has. I wonder if he’s anything like her, or if he’s more like his father. I wonder where his whole family is now since he hasn’t seen them. I have so many questions.

When I finally glance at his father I gasp in shock, then whirl around to Orion. “Your father is Artur Leivan?” I ask incredulously.

Orion nods sadly, his gaze intent on mine. I wonder with horror if he knows that New York’s longest-seated senator is now famous for supposedly putting his own son down like a dog when he Awakened. I suspect Orion does know this based on the distraught look on his face. I can’t even stop the tears that stream down my cheeks as I fling myself up into his arms.

Orion strokes my back as I sob quietly into his neck, whispering to him how sorry I am, how devastated I am for him. He says nothing but comforts me until I’m just a hiccupping bleary mess. When I can look at him again, he strokes my damp hair out of my face.

“This house has sad memories, but it has beautiful ones too, Mal, and I want you to know all of it. I want you to know everything.” His voice is gentle and kind, and I kiss him hard on the lips in response. I want to know all of it too, every fucking memory, every moment of his life.

We walk slowly down the hall, Orion pointing out his brothers in the pictures, and I watch as they get older until all the pictures are three handsome grown men. The end of the hallway holds a series of photos from what looks to be a pretty

recent trip, the whole family in Hawaii, arms wrapped around each other in a big five-way hug.

I don't even have words for the love in these pictures, and when I turn to Orion, he's watching me with a faint smile on his face. I suck in a deep breath to keep myself from crying again as he reaches out and takes my hand, guiding me out of the hallway and into a bright living room with skylights and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the dark forest behind the cabin. It's quaint and cozy, and looks like the kind of place a family would have decades of memories in.

Every surface of every wall in the living room is covered in more photographs, some still in their frames and some tacked directly into the wall. I step close to one: Orion graduating from medical school, shaking his father's hand. There are deep gouges in the picture itself, and the wood behind the photo is gouged as well. They look like...claw marks?

Orion comes close to me, wrapping both arms around my waist as he buries his nose in my neck. I can sense his unease in the way he rocks us side to side smoothly as if he's too anxious to remain still.

"I transitioned here," he says softly in my ear. "This is where my life changed forever. I came up here for two days to get the cabin back into working order so I could bring you here, show you this place that's such a part of my childhood, such a part of what I am now."

I'm speechless, tears threatening to spill from my eyes again when I turn to him and see that he's barely holding himself together. His eyes are full, tears beginning to slide down his cheeks as he clenches his jaw and his lip wobbles slightly. I'm aching to wrap him in a hug, but he takes me into the center of the room and points to the corner, where the wood is deeply marred, claw marks ripping into the wood so deeply I think I can see the fading light outside.

Orion is transfixed as he looks at that corner. "When I transitioned, I was up here with my girlfriend at the time." His voice is unhappy, sour at the memory.

“We were cooking dinner when I started bleeding onto the countertop. I’ll never forget how she took one horrified look at me and bolted for the door. Two years together, a lot of happy memories, and she left me here.” The first tear slides down his cheek as I grip his hand and pull it tightly to my heart. If I could wrap my entire body up around his right now, I would, to protect him from all of this.

“I can remember every minute of the transition: the rage, the anger, the power as it changed my body. I ripped the cabin to shreds, almost burning it down, although somehow, I had enough presence of mind to use the fire extinguisher,” he says bitterly. “And when that was done, there was a voice in my mind screaming for me to run, to get out, to be let out into the world, to destroy. But I was terrified of that voice because I’d seen alphas on the news, and I knew what they were capable of.”

“So, I dragged some tow chains from the garage and wrapped them around myself, locking them and throwing the key into the kitchen. I felt wild, unhinged, and terrified that I wasn’t in control of myself. For four days, I forced myself to lie in the corner, even though the madness was so strong; I nearly clawed the wood all the way through,” he admits quietly. “Somewhere, on day five, sanity started creeping back in, and I didn’t feel...murderous anymore.”

“That was the day my father came to the cabin with a gun to see if it was true. I guess Serena must have told him what happened, and he couldn’t believe it. I was cleaning up when he and my mother arrived. She flew across the room into my arms to hug me, not caring if I was a monster. But my father yanked her away from me. I’ll never forget how he screamed at me that the only good Awakened was a dead one, and then he shot me right in the chest while my mother screamed.”

I’m frozen in place as Orion recounts this tale, and all I feel is a deep, consuming rage for him.

“I wanted to murder him then, to kill him for trying to kill me. Whatever the virus put inside me demanded I do it in retribution. But it hurt; it hurt so bad,” he sobs as he sinks into one of the fireplace chairs and pulls me into his lap. Orion’s

tears fall freely as he recounts the rest of his story, his tears seeping into my shirt. I wrap my arms around his neck, pressing my forehead to his for comfort.

“I had enough adrenaline, I guess, to get me out of the house, even though he’d shot me at close range. He followed me out of the cabin, but alphas are huge and fast, and he couldn’t track me. Mitchell found me in the woods and dragged me to the Compound, and I’ve been there ever since.”

“Oh my god, Orion,” I cry quietly, “I’m so, so sorry. Why did you want to come back here now? Fuck this place,” I snap vehemently.

Orion chuckles sadly but tilts my chin up to look at his, planting a gentle kiss on my lips. I’m fucking angry for him.

“You *are* an omega, Mal,” he admits softly, his stormy gaze steady on mine. “You’re *my* omega, and I brought you here so you’d know everything there is to know about me before you accept me—or don’t. Because being mine means staying with me, it means giving up *other* things.”

Things like my previous life, my apartment, and maybe my freedom?

Panic hits me hard because there’s so much to unpack in his statement. An omega? Even as I ponder how ridiculous it is, I know it’s true. There’s a reason that a house full of fifty guys did nothing for my libido unless Orion was in the room. The strength of our connection in less than a week is absolutely undeniable. The need I have to know him, to protect him, to adore him. It’s not something I’ve ever felt for a normal human. I felt the truth of it as soon as the Chemist said it.

“Come here, baby girl,” he whispers, pulling me to his chest as his teeth sink gently into my shoulder. Immediately, the panic begins retreating, my heart slowing back down as his bite calms me. Why does this work on me? Because I belong with him in a way I’ll never belong to anyone. I know it.

I sigh in Orion’s arm as he releases his teeth, licking my skin before looking at me.

“Mal, I need you to understand what being an omega means, and I don’t even really know, to be honest. All I know is you’re mine, but it’s your choice if you want to claim this bond or not. Whatever you want to do, I’ll respect it, because your happiness comes first.”

ORION

Mal settles fast in my arms because that's the effect I *should* have on her, but I'm not done. I decided that while I don't fully know what it means to take an omega, I've got a sense, and that intuition I've always relied on tells me I need her to complete a part of my soul. But the hopefully honorable part of my spirit knows I won't force her into a bond if she doesn't want it. Because that's what this is. If we sleep together, it'll seal us as two halves of something that can never be torn apart. If we bond, she won't be going back to her old life, not without me.

Mal needs to see every dirty, horrible thing about my past, and she needs to see the beauty that's there too. I'm cracking myself open for her to see every inch of who I am so she can decide if I'm worth taking a chance on.

"Talk to me, Ri," she says, the first time she's ever called me any sort of nickname. The intimacy of that shortened form fills me with male pride and something dangerously close to hope.

"I've spent time with Alice trying to learn more about what being an omega really means, and I tried to talk to the Chemist. What it boils down to is that we don't know much at all. Mitchell and Alice are happy, and that's all I need to know to know I want to claim you."

"But what does that even mean, to claim me?" she asks, a frown on her delicate features. She radiates uncertainty,

unease, and I want to kiss her until all of that worry has faded to nothing.

“It means I’ll take you, physically,” I say, my voice dropping into a huskier tone.

Mal blushes and fidgets in my lap, fiddling with the edge of her shirt, but when she turns her face up at me there’s a delicious spark in her eyes.

“When I take you, I’ll bite you, right here,” I say as I stroke her shoulder tenderly, watching goosebumps rise to the surface of her beautiful burnished skin. She sighs softly before letting her head fall back into my hand. I nip and kiss my way up her neck before gently biting her throat, grounding and connecting us. The energy between us is practically tangible, swirling around us as I sit with my omega straddling my lap. Right where she should be.

Please, let her accept me, I think as I remove my hold on her beautiful throat.

Mal sits back upright, her gaze intense and needful on mine. “What do we do now?” she asks, her voice husky with need.

“Now, I’m gonna cook you a meal, and I’m gonna tease you relentlessly, and when that’s done, I’m gonna get on my knees in front of you and beg you to choose me,” I say honestly.

Mal’s scent blooms in the small cabin, filling my nose with her obvious desire. She likes the idea of me on my knees in front of her, and I’ll admit the mental images scrolling through my head right now are almost enough to make me lose control.

But this night is about her knowing everything there is to know about me and making a choice. I just need to make it an easy one. Mal laughs as I stand up with her still wrapped around me, striding into the kitchen, where I set her on the countertop.

I reach into a drawer and hand her a cassette tape I made yesterday.

“Wait, is this a playlist?” she asks incredulously.

I nod and smile because I named the cassette Mal + Orion with a bunch of hearts. I'm a total sap, but for this girl, all the hearts are never enough.

"This is so high school," Mal giggles, smiling up at me as she slaps it into the radio on the countertop, pressing play with a little chuckle.

Stepping toward her, I run both hands up her exposed thighs and kiss her lower lip before bringing my mouth to her ear and nibbling.

"Yeah, but it's got a really wicked build," I whisper into her ear. "We're gonna start with a little 'Body Like a Back Road,' and by the time we get to 'Soldier of Love,' I want your slick to drip all over this countertop."

Mal gasps at my dirty mouth, but her scent unfurls in the room, filling my nose as I sigh, pleased.

For the next half hour, we talk about anything and everything as I cook a meal for us. She teases me when I drip water into an oil-filled pan and flames shoot up, threatening to burn the microwave above the stove. She begs me for happy stories about my childhood, and I oblige while I try not to burn the entire dinner.

When she goes silent, I look over to see her biting her lip anxiously.

"Mal, what is it?" I ask.

She shifts on the countertop and crosses her hands in her lap. When she looks up at me, there are tears in her eyes. I cross the kitchen in a heartbeat, pulling her into my arms as I tuck her chin up so she looks at me.

"Tell me," I demand, my alpha nature demanding her compliance. A single tear slides down Mal's cheek, and I kiss it away when she sucks in a deep breath.

"I want to tell you about my brother, my twin," she says softly into the quiet cabin.

Twin? I'm floored, but I take a step back so I can attempt to be a good listener, although I keep rubbing her back softly,

her hips pulled in close to mine.

“You shared so much with me tonight, and I need to do the same,” Mal starts, her voice wavering slightly. “My brother, Tyler, and I were always inseparable. He was a lot like Connor, actually. I think that’s why I enjoy Connor’s company, because it’s like hanging out with my brother.”

“Did your twin hump you in hot tubs?” I snort, my mind darting back to that scene from earlier.

Mal’s laugh tinkles in the quiet of the cabin. “No, God no, nothing like that. Personality-wise they’re just super similar, and it makes me miss him,” she trails off.

I’m about to ask what happened, but I can guess. Mal’s knowing look when she glances up at me is a stab to my gut. She’s lost people the same way I have, and I’m devastated for her.

Pulling her in close, I tuck her face into my chin as I stroke her back, and she whispers into my neck, “He burst into the living room one afternoon, bleeding all over the place. And he transitioned right there while I tried to do CPR. When it was over and he stood up, he was different. And the way he looked at me,” she sobs quietly into my neck as anger for her roils in my stomach. I can’t imagine if I’d been in the same room with someone when those first waves of anger hit.

“My mother and I managed to run to the door while he watched us like some kind of predator, and I just...I didn’t recognize him at all. My father let out a shot into the living room to scare him, but he’d just started toward us when we ran out into the street. He must have started the transition somewhere more public because the task force was already on our street, and I watched as they dragged him away.” I can feel Mal’s tears streaming down my neck and onto my shirt as she wraps both arms up around my neck.

For several minutes, she sobs and sobs, and I do my best to comfort her, to ease the grief that’s choking her right now. After a little while, her sobs die, and she pushes back away from me, wiping at her tear-stained cheeks.

“When you first came to my apartment, and you spoke to me, I was terrified.”

I blanch because I know it’s true, but in my lust-fueled haze at the time, I more or less forced my way into her apartment. It wasn’t my proudest moment, and I feel ashamed about it now. Especially given this context about her brother.

Fuck, I’m an asshole.

“But now,” Mal continues, “now I can’t stop wondering if he’s alive somewhere.”

I don’t have the heart to tell her I haven’t heard anything good about the task force. But, then again, the only knowledge I have is hearsay. I remind myself there’s always hope, even in the darkest of places. Mal is proof of that.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper into the space between us. “I’m sorry you went through that and had to see him that way. And I’m sorry you don’t have answers about him after the transition. If I can, I’ll help you find him.”

She shudders a final sob and leans in to peck my lips. “I just felt like you should know,” her voice scatters softly.

“I want to know every single thing there is to know about you,” I reassure her. “Your light and dark, and everything in between. That’s what I wanted this trip to be about.”

Mal half smiles at me as I turn back to the stove, unsure about leaving her across the room. The bond between us feels both fragile and strong right now. Strong because we’re opening up and sharing, and that’s how it should be. But fragile because that bond hasn’t been cemented yet, and it needs to be.

I finish cooking quickly, and my omega plates everything up for us and carries it out to the back porch, where I’ve set up a little table. For two lazy hours we eat, talk, and drink, until my girl is recovered, tipsy, and horny as hell.

After we polish off our second bottle of wine, I grab our plates and throw them back in the kitchen. Opening the fridge, I take out a strawberry shortcake I baked yesterday after Bill

helped me get the groceries. It's been sitting there for twenty-four hours, so it should be perfect.

When I close the fridge door, Mal is there, giving me a look that drips sex. Her hands play at the edge of her tight-ass t-shirt before she rips the whole thing over her head. I set the cake down before I drop it and ruin dessert. Mal's looking at me like an alley cat in heat, and I want both my hands free for her next move.

Slowly she reaches back behind her, unclasping her bra and revealing herself to me one torturous inch at a time. I'm panting with need by the time she throws her bra to the ground, every inch of her skin exposed to the cool air inside the cabin.

"You mentioned something about getting on your knees and begging if I remember correctly," she teases me, one beautiful brow arched up.

Without a word, I rip my shirt over my head and sink to my knees in front of my omega. My pants feel incredibly tight, and the scent inside this teeny kitchen is throwing my libido into overdrive. I can smell the slick dripping from between her pretty thighs, calling me, begging me to service my omega.

Mal steps close enough that I can lean down and nuzzle her chest, and I'm just about to when she puts her palm flat on me to stop me.

With a desperate whine, I glance up at her, only to find a devilish smirk on her face. She wants me to work for it. It's obvious in the way she's taking charge here. Good thing she has no idea how I plan to flip the script on her in a moment. I can play along for now, but claiming an omega is all about a balance of control. I'll claim her tonight, but only because she allows me to, only because she trusts me enough to become mine.

I'd say I'm well on my way to getting a yes.

MAL

If watching Orion pull a strawberry shortcake out of the fridge wasn't panty-melting enough, him dropping to his knees in front of me does the trick. His frustrated whine when I place a hand on his chest to stop him from touching me amps up my desire. He may be bigger and stronger, but I feel in control right now, and it's a heady, powerful feeling.

Orion clearly had a plan outlined for this evening, but I've heard enough. We don't know what accepting him as my alpha really means. There could be consequences we can't foresee. What I do know, deep in my bones, is that he's mine, and there's unresolved business in the form of a bond that's not yet complete.

Our first disastrous attempt at sleeping together is a distant concern in my mind as I step in close to him, threading my fingers through his chestnut hair. With a quick tug, I yank his head backward, biting his neck just under his chin, the same way he does to me. It appears to have the opposite effect on him. though, as he growls and squirms underneath my teeth. Interesting.

When he does this to me, I calm and sink into him, and my brain goes completely still and silent. But when I dominate him, he's skittish and anxious and ready to move. Chuckling inwardly, I grip his hair harder and bite all the way down his neck, Orion's growling a deep vibration that shoots down my throat and straight into the pit of my stomach.

I lean deeply into his chest, relishing the feel of his bare skin against my nipples as I wrap my arms around his neck. Bringing my lips to his ears, I nip him hard, smiling as he bucks his hips up against me.

“Time to beg, alpha,” I command, my lips nipping the edge of his ear. Joyous glee sparks in my stomach when he leans away from me slightly, his cheeks flushed as he inhales over and over, scenting me with desperation clear on his face.

“Please, Mal,” he moans, turning my arm over to nip his way up the inside of my wrist. I shake my head to clear the lust-induced haze that’s clouding all my senses. We’re both so turned on, and the longer I tease him, the harder it is to maintain any semblance of control.

My heart beats a mile a minute as he dips his head low and takes one of my breasts into his mouth, sucking on as much of it as he can before licking my nipple, nipping it slightly until it’s pebbled and sensitive. I gasp when he ducks over to tease the other one, moaning when he takes both my hands and locks them behind my body in one of his. This is the moment I’m no longer in control, I decide, so I nudge my alpha to get him to look at me, and I beg him to choose me too.

“Take me, Orion, please,” my voice is a sultry whisper between us.

Orion’s face transforms from tortured to wicked as he picks me up, throwing me over his shoulder. We turn out of the kitchen, and he strides briskly across the living room and into a cozy bedroom tucked beside the fireplace. He sets me down on the edge of the bed and kicks off his pants, letting me see his entire naked form for the first time in days. I whine as he kicks his pants away and runs one beautiful hand up and down his cock, which is rock-hard and already leaking precum steadily from the tip.

Orion crowds into my space on the bed, pressing me down into the soft mattress as he kisses his way down my stomach. The gentle touch of his tongue is setting off fireworks between my legs, and I have to strongly resist the urge to spread them

wide and shove him between them. He chuckles, and I wonder if his crazy alpha intuition is telling him what I want.

Sitting up on my elbows, I watch Orion as he shifts my hips up, gently removing my pants and throwing them aside. I pray he's about to dive in tongue-first, but he runs both hands up my thighs and presses them out to the side, baring me completely to him. I don't even have it in me to be shy about this, because the look on his face tells me he's overwhelmed by what he sees. His pupils are blown wide, deep breaths racking his chest as his jaw tightens, and the hands on my knees grip me a little tighter.

I whimper under the intensity of his gaze until he looks back up at me, cracking a smile that's so devastating I can feel my heart split wide open. Orion reaches out and puts his whole palm between my legs, covering my pussy as his thumb starts to stroke my clit gently. My hips pump up of their own accord as I throw my head back. I'm immediately lost in warring sensations, the cold nip of the air in the room versus the warmth of his palm and a delicious, coiling sensation deep inside. Orion's building up a heat inside of me that's ready to ignite as he continues his slow stroking.

His other hand snakes between my legs, and I feel one finger slide easily inside me, bending to stroke a spot that sets off stars behind my eyes. His thumb continues soft circles around my clit, and before I know it, my body curls in on itself and explodes, clenching hard around Orion's finger as he moves it slowly in and out of me, completely in control of my pleasure.

I can't tell if I'm screaming or stone silent, but sparks flash behind my eyes so hard that half my senses feel completely burnt away. Orion slips his finger out from between my legs and climbs over me on the bed, sucking one sensitive nipple into his mouth as my hips move up to meet him. Every inch of my skin is on fire as I rub my hips against his warm skin. Orion chuckles, letting my nipple pop from between his teeth as he wraps one arm around me and flips us easily, pulling me up so I'm straddling his chest.

For a long moment, I feel my alpha's gaze slide down my chest, down my stomach, so intense, he might as well be touching me with his fingers.

"You look good here," he growls at me, reaching both big hands around to cup my ass. My brain is mush, totally unable to come up with an appropriate response when he pulls me deftly forward, settling me on his face. The first gentle licks he plants inside my thigh are enough to start me quivering again.

Leaning up against the headboard, I throw my head back and let a wave of emotion wash over me again. Pleasure, connection, desire, submission, power. All of those emotions swirl in my mind as my alpha takes my clit into his mouth for the first time and sucks gently. A heaving gasp erupts from my throat. I'm so sensitive, maybe too sensitive after that first earth-shattering orgasm. But Orion doesn't stop, big hands massaging me from behind as pressure builds again.

Between my legs, Orion purrs, and I feel it all the way in my core. Waves build again until suddenly he just...stops. I whine, desperate for more, pumping my hips up against his beautiful mouth. He chuckles again, but manhandles me off his face and down his stomach, kissing me deeply while he moves me. Desperation claws its way through my chest, snarling and snapping for more of him. I need more of him. All of him.

There's no need for Orion to tell me why he stopped us when I was right on the edge. The alley cat inside me takes over, and I move farther down his scorching skin until I'm straddling Orion's hips. His cock is a hard bar between my legs, steadily leaking as he rocks his hips slowly against mine, his shaft moving rhythmically against my clit. I reach out, placing both hands on his rock-hard stomach to ground myself.

Later, I'll tease him mercilessly, but for now, I'm claiming him. I shift forward, holding myself up on his abs as he reaches out, rubbing up the outside of both my forearms. His touch is gentle, reassuring, but his fingers grip me hard when I line his cock up with my pussy and seat him fully inside me in one swift move.

Orion roars out a string of curse words as I gasp. I'm stretched so widely around him, my body screaming against the intrusion. It hurts, and for a moment I'm brought back to how we didn't fit before, and sorrow hits me. Maybe I can never have this man, no matter how much I fucking want him, no matter how soaked I am for him.

Quietly, Orion pulls me forward, up off him ever so slightly. Fingertips skim down my back as he buries his face in my neck, murmuring against my skin, telling me how much he wants me. How he'll never stop wanting me, and how he's mine until the day he dies.

My thighs unclench slowly, my back relaxing as my alpha sinks his teeth lightly into my shoulder. He holds me there for a moment, but when he releases the bite, I go limp, sinking down onto his chest with my cheek against his heart. He's still buried deep inside me, but the pain fades as I listen to the steady thrumming inside him. Orion's fingers run softly down between my ass cheeks as he presses up against my back hole. I want to stiffen up, but his gentle pressure is a tease my body wants more of.

I'm soaked between my thighs, and he gathers that up and uses it to press into me from behind, one long finger penetrating me in a way that shouldn't make me so hot. My cheeks flush immediately as a small moan rips from my throat, my pussy contracting around him.

Orion groans, biting his lip. It's not hard to imagine what he's thinking right now, and what I want more than anything is for him to fling me against the wall and fuck me deep. But I just can't. I need more warm-up than this.

He moves his finger in and out slowly, pressing me back upright so he can circle my clit with his other hand. My pussy releases a flood of liquid, soaking his cock as I relax, bit by bit. That initial biting pain feels like a distant memory as I lift myself off him and back down again. My body is distracted by his hands all over me, goosebumps covering my arms and legs. He fills me again, and this time the pain is minimal, but deep inside, he rubs right up against a sensitive spot. I moan, because the pain fades, and it just feels good.

I raise and lower myself slowly a few more times, keeping my eyes on Orion's as he teases me with both hands. I'm simultaneously limp and taut, my body needing more of him. I need him to be in control, and as soon as I think it, he growls and flips us, pressing me back into the pillows.

"Hands on the headboard, Mal," he commands.

Immediately I reach up and grab on as he brings both hands to my knees, pushing them toward my chest, sinking in and out of me slow but deep. My pussy is clenching and unclenching steadily around him, but he keeps up a slow and steady pace, letting me get used to his girth, his incredible length. I cry out when he sinks just the tip in and out five or six times, his rounded head brushing up against all the beautiful spots inside me that seem made for him now.

"More," I gasp, "harder."

This slow tease is good, but I want Orion unhinged. I want all of him, not the held-back version he's giving me right now. My body is absolutely ready for it, the wet smack of his hips meeting mine an almost obscene sound in the tiny room. The bed creaks loudly underneath us as Orion snaps his hips forward hard, shoving me bodily against the headboard.

I gasp out as a deep rumble starts in the pit of my stomach, building and building with every pump of his hips, every brush of his warm skin between my thighs. I force my eyes open so I can look at him, my alpha, but when our eyes meet, his are a burning summer storm, ready to crackle and explode in a shower of lightning around me.

Orion threads one arm around my waist, using his other hand to bring my arms around his neck. When that's done, he places one broad hand on the headboard behind me, and uses that leverage to fuck me in his lap, pushing harder and faster as I moan. I'm overwhelmed by his unique scent as it explodes around us, by the feel of his arm supporting me as he yanks me up off his cock and back down again. Over and over. He builds and builds, wild above me until I detonate in on myself, screaming his name. And when I do, Orion sinks his teeth

deep into my shoulder and comes, bellowing into my neck as he claims me to be his.

In that moment, with sparks exploding behind my eyes, I feel him deep in my soul. There's an unleashing between us, a tearing down of all the walls, a banishing of the challenges we've faced so far. In that moment, Orion and I stand clear in my mind's eye. Two souls connected in a way that can never be broken. Tears stream down my cheeks as my alpha finishes bellowing his release into my shoulder.

Orion's broad chest heaves against mine as he releases the claiming bite and pants into my neck. Bringing his forehead to mine, he kisses me deep and slow, nipping my bottom lip softly.

"And now you're mine, eternally," Orion whispers into my lips.

"Good, because I'm gonna need that again, Alpha," I growl at him in my best come hither representation.

Orion chuckles, leaning back against the headboard as he pulls me into his chest. "Give your old man a moment, Omega," he rumbles.

I chuckle but stroke my fingertips down his muscular chest. His skin is incredibly warm, his heartbeat fast and deep. Closing my eyes, I focus internally to see if I feel differently. I can't tell, but I do know that a deep peace has stolen over me, and lying here in Orion's arms feels like perfection. His heart beats in time with mine, deep and steady like our connection.

We're silent for a few minutes until I get a prickly sense of unease down the back of my neck. When I look up at Orion's face, dread pools in my gut. Something's wrong; something's very wrong.

Orion's hand still rests on my lower back, but his jaw is clenched so hard it looks like he's trying to stop himself from screaming.

"Ri, what's wrong?" I ask urgently. "Talk to me."

Orion doesn't open his eyes but shakes his head, gripping my hand to his chest. "Heart pounding...so hard," he gasps.

My heart begins pounding in my chest too, so loud I hear it in my ears. I don't know what to do; I'm not even sure what's happening. But then a deep ragged cough bursts from Orion's throat, accompanied by a mouthful of bright red blood. It spatters across both of our chests, coating us immediately as I scream.

Scrambling off Orion's lap, I grab a towel that's sitting next to the bed and desperately wipe blood off his chest. Orion gasps for air as more bright blood flows freely from his mouth.

My stomach drops when I look at him and it's now steadily leaking from the corners of his eyes as well. It's the transition; it's like he's going through it again, but how? Why?

My mind buzzes like a hornets' nest as I sort through my options. He needs medical help, but I have no phone, and I don't know if a doctor would even help him. Orion groans as he coughs up more blood on the bed, scrambling to all fours as he hacks, his muscles flexing rigidly under too-hot skin.

"Ri, we've got to get back to the Compound," I say suddenly. If he goes down in this house, there's no way I'll be able to move him. If anybody can help us, it'll be the pack.

Orion's head lolls to the side as he slides in a heap off the bed and onto the ground. Leaning down, I wrap an arm around him, begging him to help me get us upright. Orion grunts as he pushes up and off the floor, struggling to stand. He's an impossible weight on my shoulder, and I sob under it as his eyes roll back in his head. Terror grips my heart in an icy fist as he stumbles, falling face-first to the ground. I look frantically around the cabin for anything I can use to help him, but there's nothing.

I get on my knees in front of my alpha, and I beg him to help himself. I beg and plead, and I tell him how fucking in love I am and how I'll never forgive him if he gives up on us now. My big strong mate sobs as he slips in the pool of blood underneath his prone form. Reaching down, I grab him by the arm and help him drag himself down the picture-studded hallway to the front door. When we get to the steps, he slides

himself painfully down each one with me lifting just the parts I can.

Running back inside, I snatch the keys off the counter and fly back out to the car. There's so much blood, but Orion has himself propped up against the car door, one hand thrown listlessly across his stomach as he grits his teeth in pain.

I fly like the wind to the car, ripping the door open so I can pull and heave Orion inside. He's frothing at the mouth now, his eyes rolled back deep in his skull, and I'm so terrified I'm losing him that I feel inhumanly strong. Screaming at Orion to help me, to help us, I push and drag him until his top half is in the back seat. Throwing his lower legs in, I slam the door closed and leap into the driver's seat.

Terror pushes me to concentrate, despite the fear ripping its way through my body. My chest is constricted tight, my heart pounding as I jam the keys in the ignition and start the car. Orion groans in the back seat as I reach back with the towel to push his head until he's sideways. He could choke on his own blood and die before I get to the end of the driveway.

"Mal, I love you," he croaks, lips cracked and bleeding as froth streams from his mouth in a steady line, pooling on the floor of the car. I whip us out of the driveway and fly down the dirt road, hanging a left on the main highway. For twenty excruciating minutes, I talk to Orion, begging and pleading with him to stay with me, to hold on because I need him so very much.

We make it fifteen minutes past Parrish before I realize I don't know where the turnoff is for the Compound. Racking my brain to remember that first day, I try to remember where we turned before we came to the gates. Was there a big boulder by the side of the road? I feel like there was some kind of mark, but my brain is so overloaded, I can't picture it right now. Screaming in anguish, I turn the car around and head back, craning my neck forward to look out for anything that appears to be the dirt path for the Compound.

I watch a minute, two, then three on the car's radio before sobs start to wrack my frame. Orion is silent in the back seat,

and when I look back at him, he's stone still, although his chest moves up and down ever so slightly. Up ahead, I think I see a giant boulder by the side of the road, but when I get there, there's no road leading away from it. Just something I remembered that wasn't right. The silence in the car is deafening, a heavy weight crushing in on me because I finally found a piece of my soul, and I'm losing him with every second that ticks by.

It's clear I can't find the fucking road, so I do the only thing I can think of. Yanking the car door open, I head deep into the woods and start screaming for someone, anyone. I scream for Mitchell, for Connor. I even scream for Samson. I scream and scream until my voice is gone, my lips cracked and bleeding. The forest is so fucking silent, it feels like a graveyard. And that's what it will be if I can't get help for my alpha.

"Mal," the voice is urgent, a loud roar up ahead of me. When I tilt my head up, I see a figure outlined in the shadows of the forest. Samson.

There's no energy left in me to feel horror that it's him, of all the alphas. All I have left is the need to help my mate. I stumble forward, falling to my knees as I scream out for help. Samson flies down the hill, faster than I've ever seen an alpha move, scooping me up into his arms as he runs for the car.

When we get there, he lowers me gently into the passenger seat, darts a quick glance at Orion in the back, and runs to the driver's side. Throwing the car into gear we take off up the road, and I sob with relief when he pulls us off the concrete and onto dirt.

"Tell me everything, Mallory," Samson commands, and I do. Starting with the claiming and the bite and that beautiful moment of connection where it was just us. All the way through the blood and the choking and dragging him to the car.

Samson is quiet, grim-faced the whole time I speak. I'm a hair's breadth from screaming at him to say something when we pull up in front of the Shed.

“Can you walk?” Samson asks, and I nod as I throw myself out of the door. Yanking the door behind me open, Samson grabs Orion under the arms and throws him over his shoulder. Tears stream hot down my cheeks when blood and bile flow out of Orion’s mouth, staining the driveway as Samson strides quickly to the door. Throwing the door wide, Samson starts bellowing for Jude, and thirty seconds later we’re joined by her and a grumpy-looking Chemist.

“Jude, call Mitchell and Griz,” snaps the Chemist as Jude rushes away to another room. Samson kicks open a door and walks into what looks to be a hospital room. He sets Orion gently down on the bed and steps away as Jude flies back into the room with medical equipment and a rolling cart full of supplies.

She glances over at me, still naked and covered in blood. But there’s nothing left of me to look at because if Orion dies, my soul will disintegrate into a million pieces and scatter across the stars. I know I need to stay out of their way but all I want to do is comfort my mate, stock still on a sterile, white hospital bed as blood continues to pool beneath him.

I notice Samson step into my side vision, and I turn to thank him, but he rips the shirt up over his head and hauls it down over me.

“I know you probably don’t want to leave his side,” he says softly. “Can I get you anything?”

My lip wobbles as I hold back tears.

“He’s gonna be fine, Mallory,” Samson says.

I nod, but I don’t feel like this is going to be fine. Horror coils in my stomach as I watch Jude intubate Orion while the Chemist hooks machine after machine up to him. The machines kick to life, and a flurry of beeping and buzzing fills the sterile room. It’s almost a relief to hear the steady fast beat of the machines.

Jude is shouting statistics at her father as he notes them rapid-fire on a clipboard. When she hollers out Orion’s heartbeat, my eyes flit to the machine, and I focus on the

number. It sounds so fast to my ears, but I have no idea what's normal for alphas. For a short moment, the beats speed up until they're impossibly fast, Jude shouting at her father for... something.

Every voice, every sound in the room begins to fade and mute as I watch Orion's heartbeat numbers jump up and then start to slow. Tears stream down my cheeks as the numbers drop down fast until the beats are so far apart that he must be dead.

I'm praying the Chemist has a process for this. Surely, he must have seen this somewhere before. Samson pulls me to his chest, tucking me gently to him as he rubs my back.

"I know this is terrifying, Mallory. And I don't know how I know, but please believe me when I say Orion will recover from this."

I nod again, desperate to believe he's right. But something about the pack's resident loony telling me things are going to be fine doesn't really set my mind at ease, although I'm aching to think it's true. Samson rubs my back with his thumb until Mitchell bursts into the room and demands to know what the fuck is going on.

I retell the whole story again as Mitchell listens incredulously.

"This didn't happen to you when you claimed Alice?" I don't know how to bring it up, but Orion was worried about the repercussions of the claiming, and, well, here we are.

Mitchell shakes his head and turns to the Chemist. "What's going on, Robert?"

The Chemist shakes his head at Mitchell before pointing at the heart monitor. "This is new, Mitchell; I've never heard of this," he says, but there's a wild glee in his voice that makes me want to slap him.

Orion isn't a human being to him; he's a test subject. And something new and different is making the Chemist practically giddy. I don't even realize I'm snarling and heading across the

room until Samson snags me around the waist and pulls me to his side.

The Chemist assesses me with a cool gaze before jotting something down on his notepad. Jude shoots her father a quick glare before coming around the bed to address me directly.

“Mallory, Orion’s heartbeat is slow, but it’s still beating. My father and I are going to do everything in our power to save him. If we can,” she adds, her voice apologetic. “It’s true we haven’t seen anything like what Orion’s exhibiting, but he’s so strong. If anyone can survive whatever this is, it’s him.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” I snap, unable to hold my temper any longer. Where’s mild-mannered Mal when I need her? I’m a raging tempest right now, bent on figuring out how to help my mate.

Jude shakes her head. “We don’t know, Mal; I’m sorry. All we can do is monitor him for any change.”

I shake my head because it’s not good enough, not nearly good enough. But I don’t have any other choice. She must sense my distress because she reaches out a hand to me.

“Come talk to him, Mal; just come be with him and talk to him right now. He needs your support now to heal from whatever this is, and my father and I will be right here to help if you need it.”

Anxiety finally rears its ugly head as panic crushes my chest. What if he doesn’t recover? What if he recovers but he’s...different? What if the Orion I’ve fallen in love with doesn’t come back? I need air as a heavy fist crushes my chest and dots dance in front of my eyes.

“Mal, do you need a minute?” Samson’s gruff voice cuts in.

When I nod, he guides me out of the room and back down the hall. I gasp for breath as I notice Orion’s blood trailing the entire length of the hallway. I can see the door at the end of the hall, and my only thought is that I need to get to it, that

everything will be fine if I can just get outside and see the moonlight, feel the cold air on my skin.

I burst through the door just as it gets hard to breathe, sobbing as the chilly nighttime air hits my bare skin, goosebumps rising along my arms and legs. Bending over I put my head between my knees and inhale deeply, over and over. I count to ten, ten times, focusing on the feelings coursing through my body from the top of my head to the tip of my toes. It's a coping mechanism I learned from a therapist, and while it doesn't kill my anxiety, it usually helps me rein it in.

Today, it's like chipping away at a mountain with a nail file. Deep, heaving sobs wrack my body as I struggle to breathe, just as I notice Rico suddenly standing next to the car looking worried.

Samson quickly explains as Rico nods and offers to stay with me for a minute. Their conversation blurs to nothing in my mind, fading into the background as I replay the evening and struggle to get past the horror threatening to choke me to death. I don't notice Samson return inside until Rico offers me his coat, putting it over my shoulders as he asks if I need anything.

When I turn to respond, I'm stunned to find a rag held over my nose and mouth. I inhale without meaning to, surprised as the ground rushes up to meet me.

ORION

Mal. Mal, my mate, my omega. I'm boiling inside my skin, and the only thing I can think about is her. Where is she? She was close, but I can't sense her presence now. I'm floating in a moon-bathed sea of darkness as my soul calls out for her. Vaguely I recall finally claiming her tonight; pride, lust, and desire pushed me to sink my teeth into her delicate neck, to fuse us into one being for a perfect moment.

But, after that, there's just been pain and darkness. She's not in my arms, and I can't move, lost in an endless expanse of near-black nothingness. There's nothing here but me and the moon. I close my eyes and feel the moonlight dance across my skin, sinking deep into me to stir my very soul. Eyes closed, the moon's power begins to twist and swirl in my stomach. I've been calling to the moon constantly since my transition, and now she calls me back, whispering for me to join her.

Deep in the recesses of my mind, I sink to my knees, opening my arms to embrace the gentle caress of moonlight as it lights me from within. A dam breaks somewhere deep inside, and the rush of padded feet meets my ears, a sense of belonging and togetherness washing over me like a well-loved blanket. I smell the deep mossy dampness of a forest; my senses overloaded with new sights and sounds as the blackness lightens and deep woods come into view.

When I look to my left, a wolf stands in a clearing, illuminated by the moon's light. I scent her faintly, understanding innately that she's the one who brought me to

this place. We stare at each other for a long minute before she cocks her head to the side and assesses me.

Mal, I think. I need her; I need my mate.

The black wolf howls out, and wolves suddenly appear on every side of me. Black, tan, brown, every color under the sun. They gather around the black wolf and me in the clearing, and lifting our heads to the moon, we howl a song of thanks to our mother.

I blink my eyes, and the scene is gone, but pain rushes up to hit me harder than I've ever felt. I'm burning from the inside out, awareness of a second consciousness a sudden intrusion. It feels desperate to claw its way up and out of my pitiful body to be free. I scramble, feeling my body fall to the floor as bones crack and break under the pressure of another form.

Barely registering the screams of alarm and shouting around me, I rip, roar, and snap my way through the human form of myself until I'm finally free of it, kicking torn clothing aside as I take in my surroundings, my senses suddenly, inexplicably crystal clear.

I'm in a room, a hospital room. The room my mate followed me into, although she's not here now as I whip my head around to look for her. I recognize Jude Chen, pressed hard into the corner, a look of utter terror on her face as her father stands gleefully next to her. Partially in front of them both stands my pack alpha, Mitchell. I struggle internally against trying to dominate him because I know immediately that he can't shift. He doesn't have a dual consciousness the way I do now. Next to Mitchell stands Samson, a darkly twisted expression on his face.

"Where is she?" I bark out and realize I'm incapable of speaking English in this form.

Samson chuckles as he tucks both big hands into the pocket of his jeans. He's shirtless. Why the fuck is he shirtless, and where's my goddamn omega?

Snarling, I advance on him, but Samson drops to a knee in front of me and bows his head, submitting to me in my stronger form. When he hits the floor, I see my reflection in the window behind him.

I'm...enormous, towering over everything in this room. Somehow, I'm unsurprised to see a deep gray wolf staring back at me. I'm still there in the eyes, a dark stormy gray just like my weaker form's. Dipping my head down toward Samson, I whine, and he knows what I mean immediately.

"Outside," he says with a smile, cocking his head to the side. The smile falls from his face as he inhales. "Wait, I can't sense her." His voice suddenly sounds worried as he springs to his feet.

I'm out the door just ahead of him, sprinting down the long, familiar hallway to burst through the door at the end. Mal, Mal, where is she? She's not outside the door, but she's been here because I can smell her. Samson bursts out just after me and drops to all fours next to the discarded Mustang that's still dripping my blood.

"Rico," he snarls as Mitchell catches up with us. The ground reeks of Mal and some sharp burning chemical that hurts my throat to breathe in.

Samson turns to report something to Mitchell, but I'm lost in a whirl of emotions. My mate is gone, and Rico was here. He must have taken her, but where, and why? Rage and hate so strong I can barely stand it bubble up in my chest, and I let out a howl that shakes the car next to me. I feel Samson's desire to return it, even though he can't take a wolf form. His eyes spark as he looks from Mitchell to me.

"We need to fucking retrieve her," he snaps. "Get back into your other form, Orion." His voice is a deep command.

The alpha sense inside me bows to him in this because he's right. I don't know how to shove the wolf back down deep, but I beg and plead with myself, and bit by bit, my larger form curls in on itself until I'm a naked alpha again, panting with the exertion of changing. My legs shake under the weight of my body, exhaustion threatening to pull me under. But I can't

let it, because somewhere out there is my girl, and he fucking took her from me.

Rico's gonna die tonight.

MAL

When I come to, I blink, but my eyes feel like a million pounds of sand are rubbing around behind my eyelids. My mouth is dry as a desert, and something stinks to the heavens. The last thing I remember is Rico's face, and that memory sends me jolting upright, only to hit my head on something unforgiving and metallic.

"Careful, honey, you're in a cage," comes a soft female voice close to my ear. Startling, I back up and hit a wall, or rather a series of bars, struggling to see in the low light.

"Where am I?" I snap. "What's going on; where's Rico?"

"We're underground, under the city," someone whispers. "The Awakened took us." Her voice is timid and terrified.

Oh fuck. I'm kicking myself right now for letting a panic attack take me outside and away from Orion. What the fuck is going on?

"What are we doing in here; how long have y'all been here?" I ask even though I can barely see the women outlined on the other side of what's apparently a cage.

"Couple weeks, maybe," one says. "What day is it?"

"I don't know," I admit, biting my lip nervously, "somewhere around September twentieth, though." I've honestly lost track, being at the Compound, which isn't like me, but I've had other things on my mind.

"Shit, we've been here a month," snaps one of the girls. She huffs something under her breath and moves into the

center of the cage. I gasp out loud when a sliver of light falls across her face and she's totally nude. Dirt cakes her from head to toe, her once-blonde hair greasy and stained with God-knows-what. These women smell terrible, and I can only imagine how long it's been since they had a bath.

"Looks like you got snatched up, same as we did," she says, the lilt in her voice telling me she's a southern transplant too. Blue eyes flash in anger as she continues. "An Awakened grabbed me on my way home from work one night. Kylie back behind me got stolen right out of her apartment, and Mim had car trouble, and they took her waiting for a tow truck."

"Why?" I whisper-shout. "Why bring us down here?"

"This is where they live," she says conspiratorially.

My stomach pools with dread because the news has reported alphas living under the city, but it's actually, terrifyingly true. "Do you ever get out of this cage?" I ask, horrified.

Two of the girls nod while the third sucks in a deep breath and looks out between the bars as if she can't bear to think of it. The first girl glances back at the silent one, Mim.

"They need women to create some kind of bond that changes them, makes them bigger, faster," offers Kylie quietly, glancing quickly at Mim.

"Oh my god, what kind of change?" I snap, harsher than I intended, but flashbacks from tonight are flying through my mind, and I'm wondering if whatever's happening to Orion right now is what they're trying to recreate down here.

Just as she's about to answer, a door I can't see opens on loud creaky hinges, and two alphas enter. I recognize Rico immediately, a snarl ripping out of my mouth when he steps into the room. The alpha in front of him bares his teeth in a terrifying smile as he flashes a light at us. The blonde and Kylie crouch in the corner of the cage, covering Mim from the alphas' view, not that it will matter. We're absolutely at their mercy here.

Rico says nothing, not meeting my eyes or looking anywhere but into the distance. Bastard. If I ever get out of here, I'm gonna gut him, which isn't like me. But for him, I'll make an exception to my don't-kill-anybody rule.

The other alpha steps close to the front door of our cage, setting down a camping lantern, his face finally illuminated. He's...horrific. Big as a house like all alphas, but a jagged scar runs down the entire left side of his face, turning his cracked lips into a permanent sneer. His black hair is greasy and bedraggled, and the smell of body odor almost knocks me to the back of the cage. He seems totally unhinged, leering at me as I look back at him.

"I'm Arkan," he says, his voice cracking in a way that suggests he doesn't use it all that much. Instinct tells me he doesn't expect me to respond as he continues. "Rico tells me you sparked the change in an alpha at Mitchell's. You're gonna tell me about that now," he orders.

I shake my head because I don't know.

"I don't know what happened," I say honestly.

Arkan bangs one huge hand up against the bars, rattling the cage as the other women shriek in terror. He brings his scarred face close, dark, merciless eyes peering right into my soul.

"You may not know what happened, girl, but you're gonna tell me what you saw, and you're gonna tell me now," he spits, saliva running from the corner of his scarred mouth down his chin. He's absolutely disgusting, and all I can think is that this is the Awakened I've seen on the news. This completely unhinged, violent beast is what everyone is so terrified of.

"What for?" pops out of my mouth before I can stop myself.

One of the girls behind me whimpers, but Arkan rears back and laughs maniacally, the cruel sound echoing in the dark room. He leans forward, unlocking the cage and yanking me forcibly out by the arm. I flop gracelessly into a freezing wet puddle in front of the cage, right as he fists my hair and drags me upright.

I refuse to scream for this motherfucker, but I'm also not ready to die, so I grit my teeth and scramble to my feet as quickly as I can. Without looking at me, Rico opens up the door, and Arkan shoves me toward it without a backward glance. Rico doesn't follow us through, but I hear him turn back into the room as the girls start screaming.

I'm half a breath from screaming for help when Arkan pushes me out a door and into an abandoned subway tunnel. Large square pavers line the walk, but piles of trash on the tracks indicate trains don't come through here. The roof above us is an intricate stained glass lit from somewhere.

I resist the urge to scream for help. Even if we're somewhat close to the surface, there's no way I can escape him. We follow the curved tunnel for ages before Arkan shoves me through a door and into what looks like some kind of makeshift hospital. Several dirty beds litter one side of the room, although they're empty now.

A disheveled elderly man jumps to his feet as Arkan slams the door shut, placing broken reading glasses on his face as he begins wringing his hands.

"Got one," says Arkan as if that's all the explanation needed. "I'll be back in an hour; give me results." Without another word, he turns and stomps out of the room, slamming the door shut behind him. I'm pretty sure I hear a lock, which is completely terrifying.

"Erm, hello, I'm Ralph," the elderly man says. "Please, have a seat."

"No, Ralph, I don't think so," I say coolly.

"Come sit now, before Arkan comes back," he snaps.

Despite Ralph's obvious age, he's still got 100 pounds on me, and he knows the lay of the land here. His face crumbles, and he takes a dirty rag from his pocket, mopping his brow. He shuffles to a desk and flips a switch, and suddenly three computer monitors whir to life. Oh thank God, maybe we can use them to get help.

Ralph turns to me with a sorrowful look on his face as he gestures at the screens. “No connection to anything, I’m afraid.” His voice is sad and broken. “Just medical software.”

“For what?” I ask, steely anger flashing its way down my spine.

“Trying to understand the transition,” he responds as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “I’ll need to take your blood since you sparked a shift in your alpha. We’ve only seen it once, and it’s not enough data to get all the men here changed.”

“No, the fuck you won’t,” I snap. “No one is getting close to me with a dirty needle down here under the fucking city, I can promise you that much.”

Ralph sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose before dropping his hands to his side and glaring at me. “If you don’t submit, I’ll be forced to call Riven, and he’s worse than Arkan, so, please.”

I highly fucking doubt that, but there’s no way this whacko is going to run a bunch of mystery tests on me in the world’s most disgusting lab. Backing up, I pick my way around the garbage littering the room and press my back to the door.

Ralph sighs again and then taps on a steaming pipe next to his workstation four times. Not thirty seconds later, the door is flung open and nearly broken off its hinges as a gigantic pale alpha barrels into the room.

“What the fuck is it, Ralph?” he spits, his voice dripping with hatred. Then his head turns to me, and he breaks into a smile that causes my blood to freeze. This must be Riven. He crosses both broad arms over his chest and looks at my tits, working his way down my body as my skin crawls, heart thumping loudly in my chest.

I flash a glance at Ralph, who’s currently wearing a smug look on his face. Before I can glance back at Riven, he reaches out and grabs me by the arm, dragging me kicking and screaming to Ralph’s workstation. Riven sighs, belabored, and

sinks into a chair, wrapping giant arms around me to hold my arm out in Ralph's direction.

When Ralph turns to a dirty old lunchbox and roots around, I start hollering for Orion. I can't help it, and I know he's not coming, but I need to do something. Ralph is unfazed as he brings a needle out of the lunchbox, surprisingly removing it from protective plastic and shoving it unceremoniously in a vein.

I start to hyperventilate when I see how much blood he's extracting, but mercifully, stars begin to dance behind my eyes. The last thing I picture before the ground rushes up to meet me for the second time tonight is my handsome mate.

ORION

It only takes me ten minutes to get myself ready. Griz, Samson, Mitchell, and I meet back at the Shed with four bags of guns, extra clothes for myself and Mal, and one very distraught Alice, clinging to Mitchell's arm.

"Don't go, Mitch," she begs him as he delicately tries to extract her from his arms. Anger rises in me, and I growl at Alice. Mitchell's head snaps my way as he returns it, and only Griz stepping into my face stops me from ripping into our pack alpha.

Hot anger seeps through my veins as I throw everything into an SUV and hop into the driver's seat. Samson hops into the passenger seat and opens the sunroof, sticking his head out like a dog. I watch him cock his head to both sides, searching for Mal's scent as Griz and Mitchell pile into the back of the SUV.

The last thing I see in the rearview mirror is Alice sobbing, head in her hands as she watches us drive away. Normally, that sight would bring me to my knees; she's one of my closest friends. But tonight, all I can think about is my girl and getting her back in my arms.

They're not far ahead of us, but Rico has the advantage of knowing where he's going, and we're flying blind. Did he just want her for himself? Red clouds my vision as my heart beats wildly, and I growl again as Samson reaches down and pats me on the shoulder.

“We’ll get Mallory back tonight; don’t worry, Orion,” he says.

I shake his hand off my shoulder because underneath the anger, there’s just raw terror. We *will* get her tonight, but what shape will she be in, that’s anybody’s guess.

I pray for time to speed up as we follow Samson’s instinct into the city, pulling off under an abandoned bridge where the scent starts to mingle with others. I park the SUV in the shadows under the bridge as we file quickly out of the car, grabbing bags. Two homeless men sit around a fire in a barrel, eyes wide when they see us. They don’t run, though, which tells me they may be accustomed to seeing alphas.

Stalking to their fire, I demand one thing: “Where?”

With a shaking hand, the older of the two points to the recesses under the bridge where I can see a dark hole.

He doesn’t say another word, but he doesn’t have to. The scent of fear and piss rolls off him into the night. My brothers will be able to see in the dark with our heightened senses, but after my second transition, all of my senses are...more. I step to the dark opening, sticking my head in as I close my eyes and scent the darkness. Alphas, a lot of alphas. Fuck.

Samson pauses next to me, cocking his head side to side inside the cavern.

“What’s the plan?” I ask Griz. He’s the strategist, and I don’t want to fuck this up.

“Samson with Mitchell, you and I together,” he says, laying out a strategy to come at the alphas from two sides.

I’ll wolf out if I need to, but we’re gonna save that particular surprise for an absolute emergency. Our primary objective is to get in and out fast with Mal, even if we have to meet up elsewhere later. If we can just get her up above ground, we should be relatively safe.

My wolf urges me on, worry for our mate spreading through my veins like ice. This location confirms that stealing Mal is somehow Arkan’s doing. The idea that I lived with Rico for three years and didn’t know he was working for

Arkan doesn't sit well with me. I knew Mitchell planted Rico here to report back to us, but he's been back at the Compound dozens of times in three years, and I never picked up on this. I'm the pack enforcer; this is exactly the kind of shit I should know. I'll rectify that situation if I get the chance, and after I get my girl.

The four of us step into the tunnels and then split up. The scent is strong from both directions, but if anyone can find her, it's Samson and me. He and Mitchell head left, and Griz and I take the right. Me first, because my senses are stronger.

There's no life under these tunnels, which is odd because I know the homeless tend to congregate in the old abandoned railway stations. Griz and I walk silently for half an hour, stopping once or twice when Mal's scent gets strong, stuffing itself into my nose. She's close, but the underground tunnels are eerily silent as we descend further and further into the darkness.

Huge footprints in and out indicate this is a highly traveled area, but I'm seeing no one. Griz and I don't say a word, but he's tense behind me, and I know he's on the lookout for an ambush.

It feels like we're walking right into one, but I can't stop, not until she's safe and with us again. The wolf consciousness inside me invades my thoughts, reminding me that we need her, that we love her, that she's ours completely. He sends me an image of how he'd like to view her through my eyes when I fuck her. He's desperate to know her now that he's unleashed.

The silence is almost deafening as light starts to filter in ahead of us. We must be under the city, but close enough to the surface for the neon lights to shine down in this part of the tunnel. It's hard to believe a pack of alphas is living right here just below millions of normal feet. Griz and I pass through the tunnel, sidestepping the light as we move quietly along, Mal's scent stronger and stronger.

We round a corner, and I can hear deep alpha voices far off. I don't scent Mitchell or Samson, so it's not them. There's rowdy laughter, but I get the sense it's too far for them to hear

us if we're quiet. A locked door to my right smells strongly of Mal, and I resist the urge to kick it down. Reaching into his bag, Griz pulls out a pair of wire cutters and snaps through the lock, catching it before it hits the ground. He opens the door quietly as I peek my head into the room. She's not there, but a cage in the center of the dank room is horrifyingly full of naked normal women.

Griz flies past me and drops to his knees in front of them as they throw themselves against the back of the cage, clearly terrified. I dart a look back behind us as Griz starts grilling them about Mal. I'm looking for signs that Mal was here as Griz introduces himself quickly and promises to get the women to safety. They're wary but desperate, so they sit quietly as he cuts the lock off their cage.

Stepping out of the cage, they stand tall and stretch, and my heart aches for them even as I grow more concerned for my omega. I'm distracted when one of the women darts out the doorway before I can stop her. Shit, the last thing we need is them giving our position away. I growl at the other two, but they file behind Griz, quiet while he explains who we're looking for.

"They'll have taken her to Ralph," says the blonde woman, pointing to the right, down the hallway. "Bout ten minutes down that way."

I sense Griz's hesitation before he says anything, but he doesn't want to leave them. "Are there other women down here?" I ask urgently. The blonde shakes her head.

"Don't know, but I assume probably so because we hear screams from time to time," her voice trails off as her lower lip wobbles.

I resist the urge to rant and rave that we don't have time for this, but instead I turn to Griz. "Get them out of here; I'll go for Mal."

He nods quickly because his protective nature is riding him hard.

“Try to find the other one if you can,” I say as I turn and leave them behind. I hear Griz asking the women if it’s okay to pick them up, and then I’m out the door.

Moving quickly up the curved brick tunnel, I follow Mal’s scent until it feels like she surrounds me. Another locked door means she’s probably here, so I snap the lock with the wire cutters I picked back up and dip quietly into the room.

It’s dank in here, musty and moldy, and the floor is absolutely covered in garbage. Immediately, I see Mal, slumped in a chair with a needle hanging out of her arm as an older man arranges dozens of vials of blood on a tray next to her. I have to resist the urge to roar, knowing it could bring Arkan’s pack down on us. The man’s head snaps up as I stride across the room and backhand him away from Mal. He flies up against a wall, cracking several bricks before he slumps down onto a dirty cot.

I fly to Mal, kneeling next to her as my heart beats wildly in my chest. Hot anger slices its way through my veins as I extract the needle and toss it aside, ripping my shirt to wrap it around her arm. On the workstation next to her are dozens of vials of blood, the wolf inside me whining anxiously as Mal’s head lolls to one side. Her eyes are rolled back in her skull; she’s barely conscious.

Throwing her up over my shoulder, I turn for the door just as instinct tells me someone’s coming. I set Mal carefully back into the chair and duck behind a dirty brick pillar in the room. Senses attuned to the slightest movement, I sense the alpha before I see him step into the room. He’s taller than me, broader, with dirty blond hair brushing his shoulders.

“What the fuck was that noise, Ralph?” he snarls, just as he begins scenting the air. Instinctively, he drops down into a fighting stance, and I know I don’t have much time before he sees me.

Like a flash, I dart from behind the pillar, knocking him sideways into the wall as I draw extended claws across his throat. He gurgles, trying to back away from me, but he’s not

likely to recover from that wound. I brought out the wolf claws for this motherfucker.

Frenzied, I turn to grab Mal just as the bleeding alpha reaches an arm out and bangs on the pipe next to his head four loud times.

Well, shit.

ORION

The distant rush of footsteps reaches my ears, a whole group of alphas, more than I can possibly take on, even in wolf form. I fly across the room, flinging Mal over my shoulder before turning and sprinting out the door. I skid out onto the brick walkway, dodging columns and stray garbage as I fly up the tunnel in the direction I came from.

Moments later, a strangled roar behind me tells me the pack has found their fallen brother. A wicked, disturbed cackle echoes up the tunnel toward us. I hope and pray that Samson and Mitchell are somewhere close by, but I can't risk calling out for them.

Out of the darkness, a big black alpha darts out from a side tunnel, knocking me into the curved brick of the subway. I nearly drop Mal, and I can't endanger her by setting her down as the pack draws closer. He jabs a dirty broken pipe at me while I dodge around him.

I'm faster than he is, thanks to my wolf, but I'm quickly losing time before his packmates catch us. Kicking out fast, I catch him in the chin, and he goes down hard, head hitting a trash can as he falls. With a moan, he slumps to the brick, holding a gaping wound in the back of his head. It's not life-threatening, but I pray he's seeing stars right now as I resettle Mal in my arms and sprint up the tunnel.

I'm nearly to the light again when I hear a pack coming from the opposite direction. They round a bend in the tunnel, and I see them, dozens of them, all headed straight for us. My

wolf howls in anguish as I turn back in the direction I came from; we're cut off, so there's no chance of escape that way.

Sprinting faster than I've ever gone, I cross the tracks and head down a side tunnel into complete blackness. I can't hear feet in this direction, although the faint sound of someone breathing tells me we're not alone.

Rounding the corner of an abandoned railway car, I skid to a stop and scent around. Wolf. It's strong and heady, and my wolf snaps to attention inside me as we assess the threat. He's strong, and we jointly whine in anticipation of a fight.

In horror, I watch as an enormous gray wolf slinks out from the shadows of the end of the tunnel, walking toward us as if he has all the time in the world. I can't get past him with Mal in my arms, but I'm sure as shit gonna try. There's not a lot of time, and my only option is to get around him before I'm cut off completely.

Leaping straight up and onto the railway car, I make a run for the end of the tunnel, keeping my eye on him as he silently watches me. I leap for the opening just as he makes a nearly impossible jump, colliding with us mid-air and knocking me to the ground. The wolf opens long gashes down my back as I howl in pain and curl up, almost crushing Mal beneath me. I feel my wolf begin to take over, ready to protect our mate, just as the pack catches up with us.

Mal is yanked from my arms, and blows rain down on me until darkness takes me completely.

MAL

Moaning, I open my eyes, my mouth like dried cotton, yet again. This is happening far too often for my liking. My head is groggy, and I can barely focus in the dim light. I am horrified to find I'm in some new hellish landscape, surrounded by dirty, bedraggled alphas in a cavernous room with a giant chair in the middle like a throne. The scarred alpha, Arkan, sits on the chair like some kind of macabre king, his twisted grin directed right at me.

How did I get here? Where's Ralph?

A steady stream of alphas crowd into the room and surround Arkan's makeshift throne. His sneer gets bigger and bigger as I slowly come to, shaking my head to clear the fog. My limbs feel weak from the blood loss, and I struggle to scratch my way through the haze across my vision.

Rough hands drag me closer to Arkan, tossing me down right at his feet. I notice his dirty boots are both missing shoe strings, and there's a hole in one toe. Living underground hasn't treated him kindly.

Arkan says nothing, so I take the opportunity to glance around slowly. The room is brighter than everywhere else I've been, but the light is still low enough that it's hard for me to see. Row after row of soiled alphas surrounds Arkan in the center of the room. They're all dirty, disheveled, and unkempt. I notice for the first time that these alphas are tall like mine, but they're thin, their skin sallow and unhealthy-looking. This is a desperate mob.

Arkan doesn't bother to look at me as his voice booms out into the dark room. "Another omega, brothers. I told you there were more out there, and I was right. *Again*," he adds meaningfully. There are a few sounds of agreement, but it's otherwise silent. "Bring him," Arkan snaps, and the alphas part as two of them drag an unconscious figure into the circle next to me.

Orion. My heart beats out of my chest as they throw him on the ground in front of me.

He came for me; he must have, and fierce love and pride swell so fast in my chest, I feel like it'll explode out of me. I dart to him, draping myself over his upper body, the need to touch him so strong it overwhelms me. Blood covers Orion's face, streaming down his neck and onto his shirt. A deep sense of unease seeps through me as I sense Orion's pain and anguish.

This close, it's almost as if what he's feeling can transfer to me, and I realize that must be the bond. He's passed out from his wounds, but there's a peaceful feeling of connection now that my hands are on his chest. I don't know how the bond works, but I think hard about how much I love him, and I hope and press that feeling toward him.

"See how she's drawn to him, brothers?" continues Arkan, droning on about omegas.

My thoughts flit around in my head so fast that Arkan's speech turns into a blur as I try to understand this deeper connection to my alpha. Closing my eyes, I will myself to concentrate. It's confusing, the way my emotions mix with Orion's right now, but I suspect it would get easier to read over time—if we had time. We don't though, because I can't imagine that Arkan has anything good in store for us. So, I let my alpha's unconscious emotions wash over me, and I try to comfort him, praying he can feel my intent.

I run my hands over him, feeling for wounds, and he's black and blue, cut all over the place. Horrifyingly, I find at least two deep stab wounds in his stomach and dozens of deep purple bruises on his face and neck. My face heats, frenzied

fury building in my chest as I round on Arkan with hate in my heart.

“I’ll kill you, you bastard,” I spit.

Arkan’s split smile taunts me as he grins and looks around at the mob. “A worthy omega for one of you, as soon as we kill the alpha,” he says.

The room erupts into a cacophony of hoots and shouts of agreement. *Kill the alpha?* Did I hear that correctly? I throw myself over Orion’s chest and hiss at Arkan. They’ll have to take Orion from me over my dead or dying body because there’s no other way this ends.

Between us, I sense that Orion is waking up, and there’s... something else. A deeper, more primal set of emotions that twists and swirls through Orion. In my mind’s eye, it’s almost like differently colored wisps of smoke, winding and dancing with one another. I don’t understand it, but even so, a sense of contentment and rightness settles over me like a blanket. He’s mine, and he’s here, for however long we have.

My face and neck are low over Orion’s, but when he tips his nose gently into my shoulder, I wonder if I’ve imagined it. Through the bond, his emotions deepen into steely anger, sharp focus, and relief to have me so close to him.

Above us, Arkan drones on about finding omegas for every alpha in the room, but I only have eyes for mine. Hidden behind the curtain of my hair, Orion’s lips move softly, and then I feel the tip of his canines sink ever so slightly into my neck. Holding back a gasp, I grit my teeth against the onslaught of images that rocket through my brain the moment his teeth connect. The hospital room, padded feet running through a forest, Orion waking up. A gigantic wolf. I’m too confused and overwhelmed by what I see to understand it, as Arkan builds his pack into a wild crescendo of anger and need. The sounds of snarling, out-of-control alphas reverberate around the room.

I know Orion and I don’t have much time, but he releases my throat, drawing my hair away from my face. When I look down at my alpha, he smiles up at me as if I’m the center of

his world. Orion winks at me, and my brows furrow just as a loud boom shakes the room and all the lights go out.

Arkan roars out a challenge as shots ring out into the room, several alphas dropping to the floor next to us. Orion struggles upright with me in his arms, one hand over his bleeding stomach as he darts through the confusion and toward a dark tunnel. Before we can get there, a gigantic disheveled alpha crashes into us from behind, sending us flying into the wall. Orion curls up to take the brunt of the impact, but I fall out of his arms and onto the dirty concrete below, all the breath knocked from my lungs. My mate stands slowly upright, picking me up and pressing me behind him as the other alpha bellows angrily.

Insidious, dark terror curls itself around my heart as I struggle to get air back into my lungs. Glancing up, I watch a horrifying scene unfold in Arkan's throne room. Through unfocused eyes, I see Mitchell fighting two thin alphas in the center of the room. He's clearly stronger, faster, and they go down fast, but four more take their place. I want to scream out for Mitchell to be careful, but instead, I gasp as I watch him go down under a pile of dirty, bedraggled bodies.

Samson barrels through the room, issuing a challenge to Arkan, his roar nearly shattering my eardrums. I don't have time to watch Samson ripping alphas away from Mitchell because the one in front of us leaps for Orion at the same time. Holding back a scream, I dart out of arm's reach and curl myself up as small as possible in the corner of the room. Orion grapples with the alpha, but his wounds are bleeding profusely as the alpha pummels him in the stomach repeatedly.

Through our bond, I can feel Orion's anger and focus. I sense that he needs a moment, so I look around for something, anything, to distract the alpha attacking my mate. When I find nothing, I steel myself, standing up tall. It's time to find my spine and help my mate save us.

Adrenaline courses rampantly through my veins as I roar with all the fury I can muster, running the ten feet between us to leap up onto the alpha's back, wrapping my arms around his neck, and squeezing as hard as I can.

MAL

There is nothing in the world as terrifying as watching your mate attack another alpha. This motherfucker could snap me in half in two seconds, but I need to buy Orion time. I feel his desperate need for a distraction screaming along our bond.

The alpha grunts in surprise as my arms wrap around his neck, and he darts both hands up to remove me, leaving his core vulnerable. Orion sees his chance to pummel him hard in the chest as I fly from his back, landing with a grunt and thud not far away.

I'm alright, so I nod at Orion when he looks over at me; we need to take out this alpha to get out of here. Orion's features change for a moment, rippling oddly in the dim light. I stare at him in amazement as long black claws emerge from his fingers to slice across the alpha's chest, and next, his throat. Red blood sprays over both of them as the dirty alpha gasps, both hands flying to his neck. He falls to the ground, twitching behind my mate as he runs to me, hauling me up in his arms.

I sob, wrapping both arms around his neck, and between us, the bond hums with urgency. There are no words, not right now when we're still in danger, and Orion purrs deep in his chest, attempting to calm me. Then we turn into the room.

I gasp as we watch Samson grappling with a big alpha who's trying to push Samson's larger bulk away from him. I hear a crunch and a crack, and Samson drops a limp body to

the floor with a sneer. Arkan roars when the other alpha falls, and then time slows as Samson and Mitchell leap for Arkan at the same time.

The sound of Arkan's bones starting to crack and break fills the cavernous room. Samson lands on top of Arkan, crushing him to the ground as his fists begin to pummel Arkan faster than I can even see. Arkan's roars morph into wet, squelchy gasps as Orion turns me away from the gore, escaping out of the hall.

Orion sneaks up tunnel after tunnel, away from the main room, dodging disheveled alphas running from the fight. We round a deep bend and run straight into Rico, and Orion hisses in pain from the weight of our impact as I fall to the ground. I leap upright with an angry snarl and launch myself at Rico's face when I notice his pained expression and the unconscious woman gripped in his arms.

Mim.

"Let her go, you bastard," I snap as Orion yanks me back to him.

My mate pauses for a second, and I know he's debating if it's worth it to kill Rico now or get us out of here. Finally, another deep boom sounds, and Rico darts off without a backward look. My heart aches for Mim, but through the bond I can feel Orion's strength fading. He can't save her and get us out of here. He grunts in pain and continues the way we started, even as I try to slip out of his arms. I can walk.

"No, you're not leaving my arms, Omega," my alpha commands.

I go silent, wrapped around my mate's neck. He's right; I can't see anything in the dark, can't hear anything other than the occasional shout or roar fading behind us.

Finally, I think I see moonlight ahead, filtering through the tunnel's deep blackness.

When we escape the last edges of the tunnel and come out under a dark bridge somewhere in Queens, I sob with relief as Orion stumbles to the ground, not letting me go.

He holds me in his arms, whispering in my ear how he'll never let me go again. How he'll protect me forever because I am his, and he'll always come for me.

When footsteps approach, we look up to see Griz, his face awash with a mixture of relief and concern. The other girls from the cage are in the SUV behind him, sobbing while cuddling, trying to console each other.

“Mim?” one of them asks, her eyes hopeful.

I can only shake my head; I can't even meet her gaze as I hear her break down.

Griz leans down to grab my hand, helping me up. Once I'm on my feet, he turns to Orion, who's holding stomach wounds that are still bleeding profusely.

“We gotta go. Now.”

I nod my agreement and put Ri's arm around my shoulder to help him to the car. We all climb in, grateful for the huge SUV they'd brought with them, leaving the other car beside us for Samson and Mitchell to get home in.

I hope they're okay, I say a little prayer for them as we drive off into the night.

Griz stops by the hospital and lets the girls out quickly as we hide behind the tinted windows. I see him giving them words of comfort and a small hug, then he jumps back in before someone can call the hotline. We don't say another word as we drive back to the Compound.

Back home, I think to myself. *Because that's what it feels like to me now—home.*

MAL

For one full day, Orion and I sleep. We don't talk about the tunnels, about the terror of almost losing our bond. We talk only about the future, and how to make it for ourselves despite all the things we can't control. We talk about my brother, Tyler, and how we're going to start figuring out how to find him...if he's still alive.

The morning of the second day, I wake up with a horrible sick feeling in my stomach. Pen! She got off her shift at noon yesterday, and if she isn't already freaking out, she will be shortly when she can't get ahold of me. I dress and fly down to Mitchell's office while Orion snores softly in our room.

An alpha I haven't met yet, Anson, comes in to help me hook up a phone I can call Pen with. Mitchell's worried that my cell will be tracked as soon as my articles go out, and he doesn't want to put my only friend at risk.

I ring Pen, but she doesn't answer, so I leave her a long-winded message with instructions for how to get ahold of me. They sound convoluted, but Anson promises me it'll work.

While I'm there, he and Mitchell help me send my first articles to Phillip. Unsurprisingly, Phillip calls them a sham and refuses to print a single word.

I'll admit, showing up to his dingy apartment with Connor, Mitchell, and Orion in tow felt good, like really good.

When I knocked on his door and he swung it open to meek little Mal, I'll never forget how fast his face paled.

“Ma—Mallory?” he questions me. I’m not a shifter, but even I can smell the rank dread rolling off Phillip as he looks up at my fierce mate and my pack.

“We need to discuss my articles, Phillip,” I say sweetly, stepping past him and into the apartment. I practiced my speech all the way here, complete with comebacks and everything. I’m ready for this motherfucker. As soon as he turned down my work, I knew it was time to take Mitchell’s tack.

“I’ve spent the last two or so weeks with a pack of alphas outside of town,” I explain, “and you’ll be publishing those stories in *The Hawk*.”

Phillip doesn’t have the nerve to correct me as Connor, Mitchell, and Orion file into the room, Orion taking his place next to me with his hand on my lower back, a gentle reminder that he’s here for me, standing by me, always. Through the bond he sends me his strength, his pride and thankfulness for what’s happening right now. I send him love straight back.

“You’ll be publishing my articles, or there will be changes around here,” I quip easily.

Phillip pales even further, taking on a sickly green hue. He’s about to say something just as Mitchell cuts in.

“Mal will be sending you her articles on a regular basis, and you’re going to publish them, or you’ll be replaced as *The Hawk*’s editor—by Mal.”

Phillip sputters an angry indignation, but I put my palm up to stop him.

“I don’t want your job, Phillip,” I snap. “I want to do the fieldwork, but if you’re unwilling to publish the real, unvarnished truth, I will take over.”

Phillip looks at my pack and nods quickly, abruptly.

“And if you think you can find some way to subvert this agreement,” Mitchell purrs. “I’ll feed you to the pack under the city. They’re...unwell. You won’t last long down there,” he finishes darkly.

At that, finally, Phillip's eyes roll back into his head, and he passes out flat on the floor.

I turn to Mitchell with a chuckle. "You're gonna feed him to the pack under the city."

Mitchell shrugs, giving me an evil grin. "I told you the day we met, Mal, I'd do it if he didn't support you."

I nod, giving his arm a quick squeeze because it's so true. Mitchell told me he'd back me up that first day in his office, and he has every day since.

I look around at my pack, my heart full.

ORION

We drop Mitchell and Connor back at the Compound as I explain that Mal and I have one more stop to make. She smiles at me, my gorgeous omega, as she waves goodbye to our packmates in front of our home. We're both rejuvenated from our full day of rest, but what we're headed to do now is causing a pit of dread to roil in my stomach.

Mal rubs my arm quietly as she watches me, concern on her beautifully delicate features that I can feel humming comfortingly through the bond.

"You sure you want to do this?" she asks kindly.

I nod because I really do. Mal's articles go to print tomorrow, as long as Phillip complies with our detailed requests. Life is going to change, and I want to get ahead of some of it. We drive in peaceful silence as my wolf rumbles in my chest, practically purring like a kitten as Mal strokes us.

An hour later, I turn off the highway, winding back through four miles of dense hardwoods, the hardwood forest I ran through as a boy with my younger brothers. Past the lake where my father taught us how to fish. When I pull the SUV up in front of a stately Tudor, Mal gasps.

"You grew up here?" Her voice is filled with wonder and awe as my chest constricts. The home I grew up in. I haven't been here in three years, not since before the fateful trip where I transitioned. My father has a state-of-the-art security system,

so he'll know we're here shortly. I keep myself in front of Mal in case he comes out swinging a gun again, which is likely.

Ten seconds later, the front door flings open, and my mother flies down the steps, throwing herself up into my arms as tears stream down her face. She sobs into my neck how much she missed me as I squeeze her tight. She's aged, thinner and frailer than before. When she hugs me, I feel like a child again as she squeezes me, loud sobs wracking her tall body. When she finally looks up, I'm struck anew at her gray eyes, just like mine, that look back at me. Her eyes dart to my right, and she lets out a little squeak of surprise, wiping her tears quickly as she smooths down her skirt.

"My goodness," she says politely, "I'm so sorry I didn't..." But emotions overwhelm her again, and she breaks down into deep sobs right in the driveway as I hold her hand.

I hear my father's voice next. "Elizabeth, why is the damn front door wide open—"

My father stops, eyes wide as he takes in me and Mal, my mother sobbing at my feet. He lets out an angry roar as he runs back into the house, no doubt to grab a gun. My mother gets to her feet, gesturing for Mal and I to wait as she rushes in after my father, dragging him back out the door by his shirt.

He protests, but Mal and I are still rooted in the same spot, and that makes him pause. My wolf growls in my chest as my father descends the stairs slowly, and I'm struck with the reminder that I look so much like him, except for my mother's gray eyes.

"Orion?" he asks. "Is it...can you understand me?"

I snort because it's utterly ludicrous, but I try hard to remember that they only have what they've seen on the news to inform them about alphas. There's a lot of water to put under the bridge between us, but I feel a responsibility, a weight in my chest to attempt to repair our relationship.

"There's a lot you don't know about alphas," I start, "and I'm here to change that."

My mother nods and sighs happily, tears still streaming down her elegant cheeks. My father nods, still wary until I reach back and grab Mal's hand, pulling her in close to me. She smiles at them both before stepping forward and reaching out her hand to them.

In that moment, the love I feel for her is deeper than anything I could ever have imagined. Fierce primal pride threatens to overwhelm me as I watch my mother step forward and introduce herself to my omega. My father introduces himself next, although it's a cooler introduction than I'd fucking like.

Mother ushers us inside, and for the next hour I share the last three years of my life with them. My mother cries multiple times, and my father tears up at least once, although he remains leaning up against the kitchen sink as if he can't quite believe what he's hearing.

My mother talks to me about my brothers, how they're both safe but don't visit in case they transition, and it makes me sad, although I understand. After that, it feels like there's nothing more and everything more to say. Being back here has exhausted me, and my wolf is ready to hide in a cave with our mate for a week. I don't share that particular news with my parents because they're not ready. They're barely ready to accept me as I am now, much less a hulking shifter. Plus, I haven't shown my omega yet, and she'll always be the first to know.

After a round of awkward hugs, we take our leave, and I pile my girl back into the now-clean Mustang for the hour-long trek home. She's silent almost the whole way, although I can feel through our bond how hopeful she is.

"What are you thinking about?" I ask softly when she turns to look at me, her brow furrowed adorably.

Mal huffs a little impatiently as she squints her eyes together and crosses her arms. "I know we talked about just trying to put the past behind us, but all I can think about is how fucking mad I am at your dad. I still can't believe he shot you, and you're a good enough person to try to get around

that. You're nicer than I am," she huffs finally, crossing one slim ankle over the other. That last bit makes me guffaw because I'm anything but *nice*.

"It's gonna take us a while, Mal, but they're my family, and those were different times. If we're going to move forward, we have to show everyone we're different. But, yeah, I don't know if I'll ever get over it."

She nods in agreement, placing her hand over mine on the shifter knob. "Was it worth it to see your mama though?" she asks with a little smile.

I nod because it absolutely was. She tried to stop him that day, and today when she saw me, I sensed no reservation. It felt like being...home. Although walking into the house I grew up in and seeing my father for the first time was still unsettling.

At the end of the day, home for me is Mal, wherever we are. Life has changed. I've changed, and so has she. And what she is, is a perfect complement to my wolf and me.

"On another note, Mal," I say, letting the timbre of my voice drop low, "I still need to introduce you to him."

She nods because she knows what I'm talking about theoretically, although the look of disbelief on her face when I filled her in on what happened when she got taken is one for the history books.

"You haven't grown any more, though, have you..." she asks with a mischievous smirk, brow raised in question.

I shake my head but chuckle; she has no idea what she's in for.

MAL

After the exhausting meetings with Phillip and Orion's family, we return to the Compound and completely crash. He wants to introduce me to his wolf tonight, and I'm torn about it. It's hard to understand what it really means, and I'm a little scared *my* Orion will be different. That the Orion who fucked me into the headboard in a quaint cabin will never exist again, even though he's seemed himself for the last twenty-four hours.

Moonlight streams through the windows of his room, where all my stuff is now. It streaks across the bed and wakes me up. I sit up on my elbow, resting my face on my hand to watch my alpha. He's so peaceful right now, and that peace seeps into my bones as I watch him. When the moonlight crosses his face, Orion's eyes snap open, and for a moment they're not the usual gray, but a striking pale green, a black pupil blown wide as his wolf looks at me.

I squirm under his gaze because it's so animalistic and intense, but I remind myself this is who he was before; the wolf just buried deep before now. And I released him.

"What's it like?" I ask him, not even sure which of them I'm addressing right now. Orion blinks, and his eyes return to the stormy gray I've always loved. He knows without me even clarifying because he smiles, reaching out to tuck a strand of my hair behind my ear.

"It's...comforting," he says finally. "Like I fully understand myself, like he and I want all the same things, and

we're partnered to get them. We're in agreement that you're the primary thing we wanna get." Orion chuckles as he tips my chin up gently.

"Would you ever want to chase me?" I ask him, the words slipping out of my mouth before I even realize I've said them.

Orion's nostrils flare as he pushes up in the bed, pressing me back down into the pillows as he rocks his hips up against me. "You want to run from us, my little prey?" he asks with a chuckle.

His hard erection rubs everything the right way between my legs, and I moan, arching my back to get my breasts as close to his lips as possible. His heavy weight on top of me always feels so damn good, I could almost come from rubbing up on him like this. But I need more, and I whine when he reaches down and nips my shoulder.

A deep growl rumbles from Orion's throat, and I realize it's both of them. Briefly, I wonder if they can fuck me at the same time, both of them present but obviously not in wolf form. He must have an idea what I'm thinking, because Orion sits up off me, pulling me up with him and off the bed.

"Yes, we can," he purrs. "Let's go for a run in the moonlight, omega. I'll give you a head start, and when I catch you, we'll fuck you up against a tree until you're screaming for mercy."

Orion throws on a pair of jeans but nothing else, and in the darkness of the room, his wolf eyes shine brightly at me. Through the bond he sends me his want and desire, and the fire building in my core is stoked higher and higher. They want this chase, and I cannot wait to see how it ends.

I don't even bother with much other than a thin nightgown, and then I take off running. Out of our room and down the stairs two at a time. Griz and Jude chuckle as I fly past them with a wave, through the common room, out the doors into the common area, and toward the woods.

I feel rather than see Orion as I reach the edge of the forest. When I turn back, he's at the Compound doors wearing

nothing but his jeans, broad chest heaving slightly as he watches me. And then he takes off, so fast I know he'll catch me before I get far. His arms pump as he crosses the training grounds at breakneck speed, every muscle in his abs flexing and moving. It would be so easy for me to stand and watch him in awe as desire, heavy and thick, swirls deep in my gut, but I promised him a chase, and I want it.

Turning on my heel, I sprint for the depths between the trees. I follow the wooded training path for a few heartbeats before heading straight out into the brush, leaping over logs as I run and run. The sound of my heartbeat pounds in my ears as blood rushes to my limbs, spurring me onward. I feel so fucking free, running like this with my mate giving chase. It's a primal, heady feeling to know my alpha wants me and me alone.

Behind me, I hear distant footsteps growing closer. Even though it's Orion, and he belongs to me, the thrill of the chase draws goosebumps to my skin, and I resist the urge to scream out in terror.

Rounding a bend, I dart between two boulders and into a clearing, when suddenly something barrels into me and sends us both flying. I do scream then, as I hit the ground with one strong arm around me. Orion takes the brunt of the impact, rolling us easily so I'm flat on my back, and my mate straddles me with his broad chest heaving. A wicked smile splashes across his face as he leans forward, drawing my wrists above my head as he kisses my chin.

"You should run from me more often, omega," he growls in my ear. "Waiting sixty seconds to chase you was a delicious fucking torture."

Kissing his way up my jawline, he looks down at me, and I see his wolf; I know it's time for me to uncover my alpha's last secret, this side of him I haven't known yet. Orion sits up above me, reaching one hand between my thighs to stroke my slit gently. I'm soaked for him already, my pussy clenching on nothing because I want him so damn bad. I moan as he slides two fingers into me, curling them to hit my G-spot. Fingers still curled inside me, he moves down my body, faster than I

can follow. His gaze trained on me, I squirm as he leans down to lick me softly.

I'm a hair's breadth from coming when he hops up agilely, unzipping his pants and kicking them down off muscular thighs. His erection bobs at the vee of his abdomen, the head already leaking thick, sticky precum. I whine, I want him so badly, my clit hot and throbbing. Orion grins, and then I watch in fascination as the wolf eyes come through again, green and intent on me, as they both send their desire for me through our bond.

I sit up, drawing my legs underneath me to pop up to a stand as Orion's features shift and change slowly. His ears and nose elongate, and he drops to all fours as I hear a terrible cracking noise and he grunts hard. Fur sprouts from every visible surface of his skin as a long tail emerges from the base of his spine, thrashing about in agitation. It takes maybe thirty seconds, but standing before me now is an enormous onyx and gray wolf, his beautiful fur peppered with all the colors of Orion's eyes. The wolf doesn't move, even as my chest heaves with excitement. The rational side of my brain tells me to run, but the instinct building in my chest wants to touch him.

The wolf lowers his head slightly, dipping it to the side as he looks at me. I get the sinking suspicion he's trying to make himself somehow less intimidating, which is basically impossible, but appreciated, nonetheless. Through our bond I send him my happiness, my pleasure at finally meeting him like this.

I take a step forward, and he sits down, looking for the life of him like a gigantically overgrown house dog. With a smile, I close the distance between us and reach my hand out. My fingertips tremble as my heart pounds and my lips part. The rational side of me rears its head again and begs me not to put my fingers within snapping distance of his huge teeth.

But the wolf nudges his nose forward into my hand, rubbing his head along my palm and the inside of my arm. It's such an Orion move that I chuckle, and he butts the top of his head up against my chest, rubbing it along my stomach as I run both hands along his beautiful ears.

Bringing my eyes back to his, I smile. “Are you really in there, Ri?” I ask.

He whines slightly, huffing impatiently at the same time, a move I take to mean the wolf is a little jealous. I scratch him behind the ears and under the chin as he closes his eyes and leans into my palm. Running my hand along his cheek, I trail my fingertips through beautiful thick fur, down and along his side. His wolf is pure muscle, huge and strong. I walk down his side and run my hand down his tail from the base to the tip, tugging on it lightly with a chuckle. The wolf whips around, snorting as he shakes his head, butting me lightly as if to chide me.

“Boy, I’d love to know what you’re thinking right now,” I say softly as I look into green eyes that are starting to feel more familiar.

Thirty seconds later, my alpha is back in human form, a desperate look of desire on his face. Without tearing his gaze from mine, he steps forward, picking me up and backing us into the nearest tree, the rough bark picking slightly at my skin. I moan as he presses up between my legs, holding me in place while he brings both hands around to the front of my modest nightgown, ripping it straight down my chest and tossing it aside.

And then it’s just he and I, and the moonlight as Orion’s gaze travels down my neck and my chest to the place where his cock is rubbing between my legs. He moans as he watches the tip of it leak steadily, pooling between us. I press my hips up against his as he leans in, his kiss desperate and needful, his tongue claiming my mouth in a way that has my head spinning, the feeling of completeness washing over me as we worship each other.

“How do you want to be fucked by us, Mal?” he purrs at me while he circles my clit with his thumb. “I can sense you want it hard, and he does too.”

“How hard?” I gasp out as he nips his way up my neck.

“We want to claim every part of your body over and over, and then come deep inside you with our teeth buried in your

throat,” he whispers.

It shouldn't be so hot for him to talk like that, but I'm soaking wet, our bodies making sloppy noises as I rock against his hand.

Orion lifts me higher and impales me down on his cock, bellowing out a sound between a snarl and a moan when I'm seated fully on him. I gasp as he fills me, panting for breath as my body fights the intrusion. He's still enormous, and I feel stretched almost to the point of pain, but my body recognizes my mate now. So when he reaches down between us and begins to gently stroke my clit, and my body relaxes, a shiver washes over me as the sensations become too much and I writhe on top of him.

Orion draws himself out of me slowly and thrusts back in, my back rubbing against the tree bark. Out, in, out, in, he goes slow and smooth, stroking my clit the entire time. I can already feel the orgasm I was on the cusp of before stirring again, deep in my belly.

“More,” I demand. “I need more, Alpha.” My voice is husky in my ears.

Orion snarls again, and the wolf shows through, green eyes flashing in the moonlight as he slams into me harder and harder, the wood cracking behind us with the force of his thrusts. I'm screaming and moaning as he pumps into me, leaning in and nipping at my neck. I can't tell if his longer fangs have come out, but when he bites between my shoulder and neck, I start coming, seeing stars and the moon behind my eyes, and I don't stop for what feels like ages. As I come down, I can see he's close to coming too, his mouth open as he pants for breath, green eyes wild as he presses his forehead to mine.

“Gonna...knot you now, Mal,” he gasps, sliding in and out, hard and deep. “Couldn't do it...before,” he pants, “but it's... time. Open for me, Omega,” he commands.

I hang on for dear life as my alpha fucks me hard into the tree and then bellows his release, his roar shaking the ground underneath us. My body flushes as his release tips me over the

edge into orgasm again, pleasure shooting down the bond between us.

Almost immediately, his cock swells to fill my pussy, locking us together, until I'm lost in a haze of pleasure, just my alpha and me. Orion roars again as he pumps me full of his seed, my pussy clenching on him over and over as I milk him through intense orgasm.

We come down slowly, gasping for breath as Orion's eyes fade to gray again and he chuckles. Pleasure and contentment dance down our bond, and Orion pulls me away from the tree, brushing bits of bark off my back and out of my hair. His knot still fills me, and I've just come harder than I thought was possible, harder than I ever have before—it's slightly uncomfortable. I know better than to move, though, and he starts stroking down one of my arms to relax me. When it finally deflates enough to be removed, we part, and he tucks me into his chest, pacing quietly back toward the Compound, toward our room, toward our life.

"I love you, Mal," whispers my alpha quietly into the dark forest night.

Burying my face in his neck, I kiss him softly, chuckling when my alpha shudders and growls in pleasure. "Predictable," I joke into his neck. "Saying sweet words, but you've only got one thing on your mind."

Orion reaches around to tickle me affectionately as I squirm in his arms.

"You've been the one thing on my mind since the moment I saw you, baby girl, and nothing will ever change that."

"Then, I love you too," I whisper sincerely into his beautiful burnished skin. I know when my article hits the newsstands tomorrow, it'll stir up a shit storm to deal with. But I'm ready, because with Orion by my side, I know we can handle anything.

THE END

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The end.

I can't believe I finally got to write those words on a book that came barreling out of my brain and into my google docs. When I set out on this author journey, I outlined a ten-book series of sci-fi novels (Oh I'm def still writing it!). I totally intended to publish that first, I really did.

But then Orion and Mal started screaming in my head, and I couldn't ignore Mitchell, and *OMG* Connor. And what about Samson and his poor battered heart? I couldn't stop listening to any of them as they stomped around loudly in my head. These characters consumed all my waking thoughts until I got *The Alpha Awakens* written.

I hope you loved them as much as I loved destroying their lives and rebuilding them again muahahaha. Pfft, that's what they get for shouting at me at 3am or while I was in the shower. Payback is a bitch!

Book two is all about Samson and the wild woman who's gonna bulldoze herself right into his tortured brain. I've already cried four times writing certain scenes, and I can't wait to introduce them into the world this fall. As of the date I pressed publish on TAA, I'm 50K words through book two - it's coming soon!

<3

AF

If you loved *The Alpha Awakens*, please consider leaving a short review on Amazon and/or Goodreads - wherever you like to review!

Signing up for [my newsletter](#) will get you the FREE prequel to *The Alpha Awakens*, in which we learn how one of our MCs is actually the cause of the virus and (gasp) it's all a big huge mess!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Anna Fury is a North Carolina native, fluent in snark and sarcasm, tiki decor, and an aficionado of phallic plants. Visit her on Instagram for a glimpse into the sexiest wiener wallpaper you've ever seen. #ifyouknowyouknow

She writes any time she has a free minute - walking the dog, in the shower, ON THE TOILET. The voices in her head wait for no one. When she's not furiously hen-pecking at her computer, she loves to hike and bike and get out in nature.

She currently lives in Raleigh, North Carolina with her Mr. Right, a three year old tornado and two lovely old dogs. Anna LOVES to connect with readers, so visit her on social or email her at author@annafury.com.

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