



Ω
RUNAWAY
omega

BELIEVE
IT OR

Know

PART TWO

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR
HARPER WYLDE

believe it or knot

BOOK TWO

RUNAWAY OMEGA

HARPER WYLDE

contents

[Synopsis](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Want More?](#)

[To My Readers](#)

[Also by Harper Wylde](#)

synopsis

Fate gave me everything... and then my past came back and stole it all away.

In the blink of an eye, I lost my freedom, my fated pack, and my only shot at happiness.

Alone and outnumbered, I'm held captive by my worst nightmares. My old pack thinks I'm worthless and weak, but I'm not the same Omega they once knew. They have no idea how hard I'll fight to get back to *them*—the six men who claimed my heart. My scent matches. My perfect pack.

I'll go to any lengths, walk through any hell, if it means getting to see them again.

Now that I've had a taste of love, I'm not giving it up.

I know my mates are coming for me, but if life has taught me anything, it's that sometimes, you have to claim your destiny for yourself.

The promise of our future hangs just out of reach, dangled in front of me like a carrot on a stick. But I'm done being a pawn in the wicked games of others.

There's power in being an Omega, and for the first time in my life, I'm ready to embrace who I am.

I'm Demi Leigh, an Omega who never used to believe in happily ever afters. But since I met my pack, I know they exist.

And I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make mine come true.

Believe It or Knot: Part Two is the second book in a reverse harem (MFMMMMM) Omegaverse duet (now complete) with no choosing, no cheating, and a guaranteed HEA! Please read the content warning at the start of the book for possible triggers.

one



DEMI

I USED to think of prison as iron bars and concrete floors, but any room could become a cage if you weren't free to leave. If the only freedom you had were the dreams you escaped to in the darkness. Dreams so sweet they left you wistful and empty when you woke up and they faded away....

The creak of a heavy door startled me out of a light sleep, stealing the remnants of those precious memories from me. My eyes flew open while my heart fluttered into an anxious panic.

Sitting up, my hands clutched at the sheets, balling the fabric so tightly I was sure the wrinkles would become permanent creases. Teeth gritted, I longed for a weapon to close my fist around, for a way to defend myself against the Beta, who entered my room carrying a tray of bland-smelling food.

The meager contents, a plate, cup, and napkin, left me crestfallen. I'd have to eat with my fingers if I ate at all. Anton didn't trust me with a spoon, let alone a fork or a knife. Probably because I had tried to attack the first guard who brought me sustenance with my utensils.

Unfortunately, none of my attempts to rescue myself had worked.

The small room I considered a cell had just the essentials: a bed, a bathroom, and a table with two chairs bolted to the floor. There were no windows to tell the time, no superfluous items that could serve as weapons, and no way to figure out where I was being held or how to escape. Surrounding me on all sides were smooth, dark grey walls that sucked up the overhead light until it felt like I was living in a storm cloud.

Funny. I'd always liked the rain, but I might have to rethink my affinity for storms after this. I was so tired of staring at the drab color I could cry.

I blinked back the tears, refusing to show that kind of weakness in front of one of Anton's lackeys.

At least your prison is better than it could be. It had a toilet and a sink. A spoiled princess I was not, but no woman wanted to pee in a bucket or a hole in the ground. A shiver wracked me just thinking about it.

I sniffled, but if I were being honest, it wasn't the holding cell making me cry. It was the hopelessness that threatened to consume me every minute that ticked past.

Don't think about them, I warned, swallowing around the lump clogging my throat. My eyes squeezed shut, and I willed the images—the memories—that flooded me to go away before I broke.

The tray hit the table with an unceremonious thud, making me jump. I glared at the annoying blonde Beta, who smirked back cruelly. His scent—an overwhelming blend of pine and oakmoss—swelled with obvious arousal. I'd bet my next breath it had nothing to do with me and everything to do with his little power trip. He got off on lording his minuscule authority over me, practically high off of it.

“Eat. That's an order,” he spat, glaring down at me like I was the bane of his existence.

Yeah, well, the feeling is mutual, buddy. I glowered, summoning all the hatred that had built and festered inside me over the last seven days.

Seven equal rips on the edge of my sheet marked how long I'd been here based on how many meals the guards brought. Three a day—breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The portions were small, and the food all hand-picked according to the diet plan Pack Silver forced upon me. But it was nice to know they weren't planning to starve me. It meant they wanted me alive, and that was reassuring even if everything else was shitty.

“I'm not hungry,” I replied flatly to the Beta, arching a brow when his fingers curled into fists and he took an angry step toward me. My bravado was all for show. None of it was real, but I'd be damned if I lowered my guard.

He sneered, eyes flashing with fury at my defiance.

“Careful,” I warned, taking a chance. “I don’t think Pack Silver will tolerate anyone putting hands on their *property*. Especially a Beta.” I spat the last word like the designation disgusted me, though it was the farthest thing from the truth.

Referring to myself as a possession made bile rise in my throat. Anton didn’t care about me, except in sick and twisted ways, but it was the principle. Regardless of his designation, the guard would pay for laying a hand on me. Only Pack Silver was allowed to hurt me. They’d never tolerate anyone making a move against someone or *something* they considered theirs.

However, since Anton viewed Betas as second-class citizens, the punishment for the offense would be more severe, which the guard seemed to understand.

He backed off, the threat hitting its intended mark. Face contorting in anger, his teeth clenched and his nostrils flared. The acidity of my scent—soured from distress—made his nose wrinkle in disgust. The stench of burnt sugar and acrid berries permeated everything. It soaked the walls, the bedding so drenched it would take a hundred washes to recover.

“Pack Silver doesn’t give a shit about you,” he growled.

My chin jutted up rebelliously. “Go ahead then. Hit me.”

The Beta’s gaze roamed the room, his jaw ticking again. Retreating to lean against the wall, he ignored me, pretending I didn’t exist while waiting for me to eat.

I released the smallest breath of relief and relaxed marginally. Moving to take a seat at the table, I pushed the limited food options around my plate. Unable to help myself, I stole glances at the walls between meager bites—searching.

I suspected the room was under surveillance. The Beta had all but confirmed it. There were no visible cameras, but I felt eyes on me. Like a mouse trapped in a maze, my masters were watching, wondering what I would do next. Anticipating my next move.

The joke was on them because I didn't have one. They'd imprisoned me as desired, and my hope slipped away with each passing day.

My pack. They weren't coming.

Every morning when my eyes opened, I prayed I'd find this nightmare over—nothing more than a bad dream that left me shaken but otherwise unharmed.

Sadly, *devastatingly*, the actual dreams were the ones that warmed me while I slept. The ones where my mates—Jamison, Thane, Eli, Knox, Leo, and Hades—were with me.

It was hard to wake and realize nothing had changed. I was here. In this empty room. Alone, save for whatever Beta babysitters were on duty, rotating in and out at set intervals.

I couldn't bring myself to contemplate what it meant that my men hadn't found me yet. Could I be that hard to find? Ferreted away in some underground bunker somewhere? Or was it possible that—

I swallowed, my throat tightening so fast it was like I was having an allergic reaction to the stale air. The anxiety that lived within me spiked at the thought I *refused* to allow myself to think. And, yet, I couldn't ignore the terror clawing at my chest or the awful reality I had to face.

The accident. The crumpled SUV. The guys' unconscious, bleeding bodies as I'd been dragged away from them....

It was possible that my mates were dead.

Pure agony stabbed through me, the grief so thick and consuming it was a miracle I choked back the sob that threatened to break free.

Not now. Not in front of your enemies.

The torrent of emotion building inside me deserved more respect than to be released before *them*. They didn't deserve my tears. My fear.

But they *did* deserve my anger.

Lucky for them, I had rage in spades. It built in my muscles like lactic acid, every part of my being demanding revenge for all the things they'd done. The time I'd never get back. The mates they had *stolen*. And all for what? Greed? An inability to let go of someone they viewed as their property?

It made no sense. I wouldn't wish Pack Silver on my worst enemy, but the facts remained the same. Anton, Huck, and Reed were attractive, wealthy, and politically connected. There were bound to be Omegas at the OMA who would line up to become theirs. Yet, they'd bought me—under the table—and refused to let me go.

I didn't understand it. Honestly, there was nothing special about me. Sure, I was pretty enough. I came from an upstanding family, and I had a pleasant scent that clearly appealed to Pack Silver. However, the same could be said of hundreds of other Omegas.

What did they get out of whatever deal my father had struck when he sold me off? I was missing key puzzle pieces, which irritated me as I sat alone in this stuffy room with only my thoughts for company.

Another week passed in much the same vein. Guards came in and out with meals. The cuts and gashes that littered my skin continued to heal, and the shoulder I'd dislocated in the crash—set by Anton's personal physician after the fact—ached a little less each day. The dangers of my concussion were past, and while I remained weak, some of that was my fault from lack of nutrition. I'd finally had to cave and eat enough of the food that arrived like clockwork to keep up my health. It tasted like ash in my mouth, chewed and swallowed purely for sustenance.

I was curled in a ball on the mattress, my fingers playing over the fringe at the edge of the sheet that marked my imprisonment, when the distant clang of metal doors echoed faintly. A cry that sounded feminine followed it. I'd heard it before, and I sat up swiftly and hurried across the room on shaking legs. I sank to the ground, pressing my ear against the cool surface of the wall, listening for signs of life.

Throughout my captivity, I'd wondered if I was truly alone. Anton, Huck, and Reed hadn't returned since that first day, and while that was a blessing, it was also a curse. I had more questions than answers, and desperation had officially set in. I felt like a patient in an insane asylum, locked away in near solitary. It was enough to make me stir-crazy. Was I hallucinating? Had I finally cracked?

I barely heard the sound of footsteps before Doctor Jenkins unlocked my door and walked in. It swung shut with an ominous thud as I scrambled against the wall.

"Ah, Mrs. Fenway," he greeted sternly in lieu of a smile or any form of friendly bedside manner. "Please, sit."

"Go to hell," I spat, content to stay where I was.

"Suit yourself." He wrenched open his medical bag and procured a vial and syringe. A ball of lead formed in my stomach and it churned in warning, threatening to upend the meager few bites of food I'd eaten.

Cowed and frustrated, I clenched my teeth and forced myself off the floor. Moving woodenly, I took a seat at the table.

"Smart choice." The doctor smirked in victory, but the expression was there and gone in an instant. Reaching into his bag, he pulled out a file folder and slapped it down on the tabletop before me.

I stared at it, then blinked up at him, refusing to take the bait and open it. Whatever was inside wouldn't be good news, whether it was about me or my mates. Anton was too vindictive to expect anything else. And if it was about the men who were meant to be mine.... My lungs twisted, fighting me with every breath I took.

I just couldn't look.

Instead, I held onto the images of them smiling and happy the morning after my heat, when all of us were together and excited about our future.

"Aren't you the least bit curious about what's inside?" Doctor Jenkins prodded, a bushy grey eyebrow raising in

question.

“I figure if it’s important enough, you’re going to tell me anyway.” I shrugged, expression as bland as the food they served.

His eyes crinkled in the corners as he narrowed them. “Your test results. Nothing I didn’t suspect when your pack recovered you from your little... *excursion*.” He flipped open the folder and pointed to what looked like lab results. “Proof that you, my darling, clearly went through your heat *without* your Alphas. Your blood draw revealed elevated hormone levels, which were unsurprising given you were *drenched* in the scent of other men when you were rescued.”

I shivered from Thane’s nickname for me on this man’s lips. Pure revulsion sent another wave of bile up my throat. I swallowed it down before I spewed it all over the asshole’s white lab coat.

“You want to know why I went into heat?” I sassed back. “Because Anton *drugged* me. Except that’s not shocking to you, is it? Seeing as you’re the one who most likely supplied him with the Anoravel.”

He adjusted his glasses, his expression turning hard and hateful. “Your accusation doesn’t require a response, but even if it were true—and I’m not saying it is—that heat would have hit you weeks ago. These hormone levels were far more recent.”

I clamped my mouth shut, lips pressing into a thin line. Arguing with this man was pointless. He wouldn’t listen.

He didn’t give a rat’s ass what Anton had done or the ramifications, and he obviously had no interest in hearing about an Omega on the run, suffering through a forced heat. He didn’t care that I’d found my pack—my perfect scent matches—or that being around such incredible men had kicked me into a second heat so quickly after my first abated.

Those memories were mine. They were all I had left, and I wouldn’t taint them by sharing the details with the likes of him.

“Unfortunately, there’s nothing you can say that will change the facts, Demi Leigh,” Doctor Jenkins chastised. “You’re spoiled goods. I know it. Pack Silver knows it. Your father knows it. It incredibly disappointed him to learn of the shame you’ve brought upon his good name.”

Wait.... My father knew? He knew and hadn’t tried to rescue me from this hell? Obviously, he wasn’t an upstanding person since he’d sold me to Anton, but hearing of his utter abandonment hurt more than I’d expected.

“You’re nothing but a disgraced Omega now,” Doctor Jenkins continued without missing a beat. “You don’t know how great you had it, but there’s no undoing your mistakes. Your fate is sealed.”

I swallowed, trying to figure out what he meant. “You could let me go,” I rasped, appealing to the doctor’s better nature. Surely he wasn’t born evil.

The door opened with an ominous creak, followed by the all-to-familiar sound of dress shoes clicking against the floor. I traced the shiny black oxfords up to a pair of dark grey slacks, a finely tailored jacket, and a crisp button-down until I was staring into Anton’s glacial eyes.

“It’s far too late for that, pet.” His smirk was brutal and ruthless. “If only you’d behaved, you would have had everything—the power and prestige of an influential pack. Children to raise, and well-endowed Alphas to bed. Instead, you turned out to be nothing more than a whore willing to spread her legs for any scum with a knot.”

It was stupid. I knew that before I did it, but it didn’t stop me from surging from the table and spitting on Anton. It dripped down his cheek as his eyes went murderous.

The man had raped me. Attacked me. Destroyed me. I wanted to tear him down, to do so much more than just spit on him, but it was a start.

His glare sliced me into ribbons while he ripped out his pocket square and mopped his face clean. “You always were an unruly horse that needed breaking.”

My chin jutted up insolently. “Fuck. You.”

Anton balled his fists, crushing the fabric, and took a barely restrained step closer.

The door opened and Huck and Reed’s scents washed over me, making me want to gag.

Huck’s hand landed on Anton’s shoulder, holding him back. “Don’t damage the merchandise. It’s not worth it.”

“Merchandise?” I questioned rebelliously.

Anton’s entire demeanor shifted, somehow turning more dangerous and predatory. A victorious glint shone in his eyes.

“Why yes, my little pet.” He stepped into my space and gripped my arm, yanking me closer until his breath fanned over my face. Revulsion and anger mixed into a wicked storm that raged within me. “You’re a business venture that’s gone south, but you should know that I never cut my losses. I don’t lose, and I *always* recoup my investment.”

two



DEMI

ANTON'S GRIP on my arm bruised as he led me down a long hallway. Everything was sterile, with white tile floors, grey walls, and an antiseptic smell. There was nothing distinguishing about the place other than the notable lack of windows and the bright fluorescent lights that were poor replacements for the sun.

Doorways were dispersed at even intervals, each one closed, just as mine had been for the last two weeks. I couldn't help but wonder where they led. Were there other small, prison-like rooms behind them? What the hell was this place? And more importantly, what had Anton meant when he said *merchandise*?

You have to get out of here.

I squirmed as I was practically dragged down the corridor, doing my best to stall and come up with a plan. It was futile. I was too weak from everything I'd been through, but I'd be damned if I made whatever Pack Silver had planned any easier.

Using what little strength I had left, I fought back. Despite how my shoulder ached, I tried to loosen Anton's grip. And if that didn't work, well, at least if he was going to drag me out of here, he'd have to *actually* drag me.

"If I were you, I'd choose to behave," he threatened with a low hiss. "Or would you rather I drugged you again?"

"I have sedative options if you wish, Mr. Aster," Doctor Jenkins offered dryly from where he followed behind us, clearly not impressed with my resistance.

My heart stuttered at the threat, and I stopped struggling. Being sedated would ruin any chance I had to find a way out of this.

“Wise choice,” Reed praised, sending me a vile wink over his shoulder from where he led the way. It made my skin crawl like millions of ants were marching along my arms and down my spine.

I ground my teeth, glaring straight past him. I wouldn't give any of them the benefit of a reaction.

Think, Demi, I scolded internally.

Truthfully, Anton taking me out of that tiny little room was the best chance I had at escape since he'd captured me. Transitions often created points of weakness, right? If I wanted to save myself, this was it.

As if sensing my thoughts, Huck stepped to my free side and wrapped his hand around my other bicep like a manacle. Between the two Alphas, they effectively jailed me as we walked to an elevator and took it up several floors. The door opened with a ding and I was led into a dark parking garage.

So, they'd kept me in a basement level of some larger complex, then. Hidden away, underground.

No wonder my pack hasn't found me. I tried to hold on to that small grain of hope, hoarding it like the precious treasure it was. It was possible they were still alive and just hadn't located me yet. *Please, please let it be true.*

My heart thundered as they led me toward a dark, unmarked van that looked sketchy as hell. I slowed, digging my heels in to stop the inevitable, but it was no use.

Anton released me like I was dirty and he couldn't stand touching me for another second. Using the momentum, Huck used his grip on my other arm to spin me into his chest. My nose wrinkled automatically as his burnt chestnut and charred oak scent wrapped around me. I recoiled from his touch as he tucked a lock of my hair behind my ear, but I tried to suppress the shiver of disgust that rolled through me. If he noticed, it would only add kindling to his hate-fueled lust.

He always loved it when I fought back.

“You were fun while you lasted, little sparrow,” he purred, leaning down and slamming his mouth over mine. My lips

ground into my teeth as I pressed them together to keep him out.

A sharp bite stung my bottom lip as he nipped—*hard*—breaking the skin and leaving me bleeding. He sucked at the wound, then pulled back with a satisfied growl. His hands fell away as he adjusted his growing erection.

This was my chance. *Go! Run!*

I shoved him away, and he chuckled sadistically. Turning on my heel, I didn't waste a second. I took off, my feet slamming against the concrete as I pushed myself as fast as I could go.

Thudding footsteps echoed mine. My heart burst with panic and adrenaline, and I dug deep for any dregs of strength remaining, begging my body to move quicker. Reed's ominous laugh sounded so close to my ear, my pulse stuttered in fear.

I felt his breath on my neck just before powerful arms wrapped around my waist and he caught me. I flailed as he lifted me off my feet, pressing me into the barrier of his chest.

“So predictable,” Reed purred, returning me to the others despite my protests.

With my arms pinned helplessly to my sides, I wrenched myself back and forth in his grip. Kicking and crying out, I did all I could to break free. To get away. To save myself.

“You know we like it when you struggle.” He licked a line up the side of my neck before burying his nose in my hair and inhaling deeply. “Fuck. Are you sure we have to do away with her? I always liked her scent.”

“We'll find a better Omega,” Anton replied tersely.

A better Omega.... It hit me then. *Really* hit me. They were getting rid of me.

With an exaggerated sigh, Reed set me down, spun me, and pinned me against the van. My hand shoved at his chest, attempting to keep some distance between us. All it did was make him crush me into the metal, his eyes flaring from my tiny, pained gasp.

His thumb pressed into the wound on my lip, smearing the blood around. Pressing his thumbnail into the cut, he made it worse, ripping it open even more. I winced, unable to suppress a whimper.

Reed's half-hard dick was a fiery brand against my stomach, and I wanted to vomit. "I'll miss the sweet sound of your cries, little mouse."

"Such a shame. I thought you might be the one we kept, sparrow," Huck commented, absently flipping a knife through his fingers as he watched Reed and me. "Luckily, we've got plenty of other little birds to choose from."

My head swam as I realized this was them saying their goodbyes. I was both elated, yet terrified. It seemed like a blessing in disguise, but there was no way they were letting me walk out of here free and clear. Hence the freaky van.

"Please," I begged, "just let me go."

Anton tsked. "Oh, Demi. Such illusions. That's never going to happen. You were expensive, and, as I said, I'm not keen on losing money on an investment."

"I am *not* an investment," I growled.

"That's where you're wrong. Your father traded you to me for a hefty favor, and I need to recoup my losses."

Trying to stall, but also devastatingly curious, I asked, "What kind of favor?" Whatever it was, it couldn't have been worth trading his daughter's *life*. Was my father really that much of a monster?

Reed smirked viciously, all too happy to fill me in. "He gave us *you* and a venue to hold our quarterly *events* in trade for pushing through some legislation that gives him the rights to redevelop the downtown strip of Silver City's riverfront. Once those properties are torn down and rebuilt, he will have the potential to earn billions in profit."

"And we'll make a nice little cut from every sale," Huck bragged with dollar signs in his eyes.

The truth sank through me like an untethered anchor in the deep sea. My heart dropped to my feet. I'd always known my father had betrayed me, but hearing it stated so bluntly and learning the ins and outs of their deal *stung*.

My own flesh and blood hadn't cared about me more than money and opportunity. I'd been worthless to him. No... *worse*. I'd been so valuable he'd treated me like an asset. A thing. A *possession*. And Anton viewed me just the same. I was a chess piece they moved at will. Chattel to be traded or sold whenever it suited them.

I'd never felt so dirty and meaningless.

"I'm nothing if not a businessman," Anton smirked, his glacial eyes glittering with opportunity. "There were other developers that propositioned me for the same deal. I almost accepted one of them until your father sweetened the bargain by offering me his delectable Omega daughter to seal our arrangement. If only you'd behaved like a good little Omega, you would have been growing round with our child. You could've lived a life of luxury."

Reed groaned as though the idea of me bred turned him on. My stomach soured, and I barely contained the urge to wretch when his hand snaked down my body to splay over my stomach like he was envisioning what would've happened if Anton had successfully stopped me the night I ran.

"All you had to do was take care of your pack and we would have spared no expense on your upkeep. But you had to fight back, didn't you?" Anton prodded, the question rhetorical. He wasn't looking for an answer. He wanted to put me in my place—beneath his shoe. "You had to run, and now look at you. A whore for another pack who only wanted a warm hole to sink knot-deep into. You're ruined goods, Demi Leigh, and soon, you won't be our problem any longer."

I shoved at Reed again, trying to dislodge him from where he pressed against me. Tsking, he grabbed my wrists and pinned me like a butterfly to the back of the van. He grinned as he held me hostage, enjoying my anger and disdain.

I growled, furious. “I’m not your pet,” I spat. “Fuck, I’m not a *pet* at all. I’m a person. An Omega. I don’t deserve to be treated as property. That’s all I’ve ever been to you.” Derision dripped from every word.

Anton’s eyes flashed with challenge. “You’re wrong. Omegas are meant to serve. They need an Alpha to obey. It’s biological. A part of your nature you’ll never escape. Detest it all you like, but Alphas are superior. You’re nothing without us. I’m the one in charge here, Demi.” With a flick of his hand, he motioned to Doctor Jenkins, who crossed the lot from where he’d been lurking in the shadows since we got off the elevator.

“It’s ready for you.” He handed a syringe to Anton before being dismissively waved away, and my entire body grew cold.

No! Not again!

“You belong to me until I say otherwise. You’re an asset of Pack Silver, which makes you mine to do with as I please. And today is your reckoning.” He popped the cap off the needle and despite how much I struggled in Reed’s hold, regardless of how much I screamed and fought back, I couldn’t stop the sharp jab in the fleshy part of my outer thigh. Tears tracked down my face as Anton held up the empty syringe with a cruel, vindictive tilt to his lips. “All set. Your future awaits.” He nodded toward the van.

Tears dripped down my cheeks as I glared at him. The power was out of my hands. I’d been kidding myself to think I held any at all with Anton, Huck, and Reed. I couldn’t change what was happening and probably had little time left before whatever he’d drugged me with kicked in.

But I still had choices, and one of those was to use my remaining time as wisely as possible.

My throat was raw from screaming, my voice raspy as I pried for more information. “How did you do it?”

“Do what?” He peered down his nose at me like I was barely worth his time or the energy it took to hold a simple

conversation.

“Erase my name from the Omega database.”

He cocked his head, eyes crinkling in the corners as his gaze narrowed. “How do you know about that?”

“I have my ways.”

“And I have mine.” He was silent for a beat, so quiet I didn’t think he’d deign to answer me until he shrugged a shoulder, deciding that conceding this small bit of information couldn’t damage him. “It’s the first rule of business, and one you’d do well to remember. Money motivates people. You can buy just about anything these days, including paying some lowlife who makes minimum wage to scrub a name off a list.”

I scoffed. It was always about money or power. Often, both, all wrapped up together in a neat little bow.

This man *ruined* my life. And for what?

All the loathing I felt for him built in my chest until I couldn’t hold it in any longer. “I *hate* you.” There wasn’t a strong enough word to convey just how much enmity I held for Anton and his pack.

He huffed a sarcastic, unamused laugh. “Trust me, the feeling is mutual. You’ve been nothing but a headache and a disappointment. It’ll be so sweet to watch your downfall.”

“No. It’ll be sweet to watch *your* downfall.”

Anton stalked forward, shoving Reed out of the way and gripping me around the throat. His fingers squeezed enough to cut off my oxygen supply as he lifted me onto my tiptoes. “I’d like to see you try, *pet*.”

Oh, I’ll try. And I’ll succeed. As I gasped for air, I vowed that he wouldn’t see me coming. One way or another, I was going to take this man down and ruin him the same way he’d ruined me. I didn’t know when or how, but I’d make this pack rue the day they learned my name.

Anton hauled me away from the van, keeping a tight shackle on my throat. I scratched at his wrist and hand, trying to loosen his fingers. Huck flicked his knife shut and pocketed

it, then wrenched the back doors open as the rapid beat of my heart spread whatever poison they'd injected me with.

Anton shoved me toward Reed and Huck.

“Toss her in and let's go. I won't be late for our own event. We have some high-profile *investors* coming tonight, and they're all going to want attention,” Anton ordered, dropping the syringe to the ground and smoothing a hand down the sharp line of his tailored suit, straightening it like he'd just walked out of a business meeting rather than an abduction.

I was out of time, and dread shot through me as the others dragged me toward the van.

“Stop! STOP!” I screamed at Huck when he lifted me as though I weighed nothing and tried to shove me into the vehicle.

The back had two doors which swung outwards, and I used my feet to catch the edge of the frame, trying in vain to keep him from getting me inside. He growled and repositioned my struggling body. Twisting and flailing, I fought with everything I had as he forced me into the creepy-ass van. Pain shot through my hip as I landed on the rough metal floor.

“You brought this on yourself, little mouse,” Reed patronized, wagging his fingers, waving goodbye, as they slammed the doors shut. “Such a waste of a good pussy.”

Banging on the back, he signaled whoever was in the driver's seat that they were good to go. The van lurched forward, and I scrambled for the doors. The handles wouldn't budge, no matter how hard I wrenched them. They'd locked in me from the outside with no way to escape.

My head swam as I watched Anton, Huck, and Reed saunter toward a black town car. Reed walked backward, tossing me a wink and blowing me a kiss before swinging around and sliding effortlessly into the sleek vehicle. It was much more their style than the dark, shoddy work van.

My ride, on the other hand, had no windows on the sides, and an internal metal wall blocking off the front cab. It didn't stop me from banging on every available surface and begging

for mercy. For freedom. My nails chipped and bled as I tried to pry the doors open. My fists were sore from how hard I pounded on the small back windows, hoping they'd crack, then break.

Sweat beaded on my forehead and my growing headache thundered while the world spun. Everything turned fuzzy at the edges. I listed sideways as the van bounced over a speed bump. My shoulder slammed into the wall, and I groaned, reaching to rub at the sore spot sluggishly.

Why are my arms so heavy?

Holding onto my thoughts was like trying to grip smoke. They slipped right through my fingers, the fog settling over my mind, making it hard to remain coherent. I blinked, practically falling asleep as I slumped to the floor of the van. Lashes fluttering, I begged my body to cooperate and stay awake.

Need to fight. Escape.

I swallowed compulsively as my fingertips began to tingle, the numbness spreading through me.

What was I saying? I couldn't remember. Need to sleep.

Giving up the struggle, I let my eyes fall closed and embraced the peace the darkness offered. It wrapped around me like a blanket. *I'll rest. Just for a second. Just for one....*

three



DEMI

FRAGMENTS OF REALITY filtered through the haze of disorientation. I remembered nothing about the ride in the van. Only darkness, tinted windows, and the nauseating rocking of the vehicle as it traveled.

I'd slipped in and out of consciousness, clawing to those moments of lucidity. I could only guess how long I had been out of it..

My brain was fuzzy and disoriented as dark-clad men dragged me from the van. I was too drowsy to remember their faces or any defining details. Even their voices sounded like they were echoing down a long tunnel. It felt like I was viewing the world from underwater. Everything swam in and out of focus. My vision was soft around the edges, shaky and unfocused.

After that, there were nothing but snapshots, the images glitching in and out like a faulty connection on an old TV. I couldn't distinguish between what was real and what wasn't. The deep blue of the night sky. A tall, old building made of glittering glass. Infiltrating pools of warm light from distant street lamps. An alleyway straight out of a slasher movie. A dark doorway that led to more darkness—always darkness. And my father's smiling, unmoving face... on a real estate sign?

The next thing I knew, I woke up all over again. This time, cold and half-naked. I pushed myself up despite the tingling and numbness in my hands and arms, only to bang my head into the steel bars above it. The curse I released slurred on my lips until it sounded like a mishmash of syllables rather than a legit word.

Blurry colors coalesced into a clearer picture the longer I stared, revealing a line of cages in a dimly lit room.

Where the fuck am I?

The sound of whimpers and crying created a sorrowful song that echoed around me as I blinked and tried to get my bearings. Darkly colored walls adorned with modern art boxed us in, and the smell of new paint still clung to the air. Black marble tile covered the floor and the overhead lights were soft tungsten, kept low and, dare I say, calming. The space was reminiscent of a spa.

I scoffed. *Yeah right.*

The cages instantly destroyed any sense of tranquility. I gripped the bars, testing their strength even though my arms shook and my muscles refused to work properly. Putting my weight behind the movement, I shoved my shoulder against the bars to bend or break them.

“It’s no use,” a woman spoke from the next cage over. “Don’t hurt yourself.”

I glanced at her, forcing the dizziness to settle enough that I could focus on her hopeless face. Her brown eyes were red and puffy from crying. Black hair hung limply past her shoulders, and like me, she wore nothing but a bra and underwear.

“Everyone tries to break out when they first wake up, but it never works. These cages are so strong they could hold a small elephant.”

I eyed the confines. “Maybe, but they’re sure not big enough to hold one.”

With barely enough space to crouch, standing or stretching was out of the question. Hoping to get more comfortable, I curled into myself, bringing my knees to my chest and wrapping my arms around them. The hug helped, and, blinking rapidly, the tears mercifully abated. I couldn’t risk starting to cry when I needed to think. Besides, once I started I may not stop, and remaining alert and cataloging my surroundings was pertinent if I was going to get out of this.

You’re a fighter, Demi Leigh. Don’t give up.

I could almost hear Jamison’s voice telling me to be strong; Leo reminding me I was capable; Thane promising me

I was theirs; Eli urging me to hold on; Knox vowing they'd find me; and Hades swearing he'd make anyone who hurt me rue the day they were born.

Closing my eyes, I pictured my mates and held onto their memories like a lifeline.

Now get to work.

There were two exits, one on either end of the room. Grates covered wide looking air vents, but they were too high to access without a ladder or stacked furniture. Or maybe a pile of cages. But none of those would be an option unless I could break out of the cage and make it past the guards.

It took ages for me to come to that conclusion, my brain rebelling as I put it to work.

I rolled my head toward the woman next to me. "Were you drugged too?"

My neighboring prisoner nodded, shoving a hand through the dirty strands of her hair with a wince that told me she was trying to piece it all together, the same as I was.

"What do you think they gave us?" I asked, aware that my words were barely discernible. Thick and dry, my tongue seemed like its new goal was to choke me from the inside out.

"I don't know. Some kind of date rape drug? I feel... disconnected and hazy."

I nodded. "Like the world is vague and bleary." Hell, I was still fighting off the exhaustion threatening to drag me under again.

Her eyes watered while I swallowed past the lump in my throat. It was difficult to reconcile that this was actually happening. I was locked in a cage barely bigger than a large dog kennel with the door padlocked shut.

Trying not to draw attention to myself, I squeezed my arms through the slim bars and worked the lock, testing its strength. It wasn't going to budge. I ran through different combinations next, using any number that might be significant to Pack

Silver. I hadn't seen them since they'd left me in that blasted van, but I knew they were behind this.

Why else would they boast about an 'event' they were holding? This was all part of it. Anton said he wanted to see my downfall, and boy, what a fucking show he was getting. My attention immediately scoured the room, looking for any glimpse of cameras. If they were there, they weren't obvious, but I counted eight guards—all Betas—blocking the exits. They wore black from head to toe, donned Kevlar, and carried large, scary-looking guns. Weaponry was foreign to me, but I knew these were serious assault rifles.

A guard with piercing blue eyes and a mop of brown hair caught me looking and sent me an unsolicited wink. I glanced away quickly and pulled into myself. Taking a deep breath, I exhaled slowly, noting the sour scents filled with fear and despair. *Omeegas*.

Oh gods.

My mind raced with possibilities.

"Omeegas. We're all Omeegas." I shook my head, pressing my fingers into my temples. I murmured jerky, half-formed sentences, mostly to myself, while I tried to make my lethargic brain hold on to the ideas forming. The answers taunted me, just out of reach. "They're holding an event. Recoup his investment. See my downfall."

"What are you mumbling about?" The woman next to me arched a brow, looking at me like I'd gone crazy in two seconds flat.

I didn't have time to respond because the Beta guards moved off the doors in unison, letting in a group of Beta women who sneered at us. The thoughts that were forming vanished as the Omeegas all cried, sobbed, and begged to be let free, but they should've saved their breath. None of it was worth it. The women's hatred was easy to see.

There had always been animosity between Betas and Omeegas. We had the one ability they didn't—we could take an Alpha's knot. Alphas sought Omeegas but often settled for

Betas. While that didn't apply one hundred percent of the time, it was the broad assumption. These women had been classified as second best, and it wasn't fair. Designations had ruined all our lives. Unfortunately, I doubted they saw it that way.

To them, *we* were the problem.

There was a fat chance in hell these women would help us, and trying to convince them to do so would be fruitless.

Besides, as Anton had said, money was a powerful motivator. They were most likely getting paid to be here. Between their prejudice and financial gain, I realized none of them would be swayed by sympathy or bribes.

We were on our own.

I was on my own.

A guard accompanied every woman as they each chose a cage. A smug blonde sauntered up to mine with the guard who'd winked at me.

He dropped into a squat before the bars and cocked his head, catching my attention. "Let's get you outta here, dollface," he practically cooed.

Padlocks rattled throughout the room as the guards unlocked our prisons and pulled us out. A hand shackled my arm in a imprisoning grip. I wanted to fight back, but just standing took considerable effort. Tingles shot through my limbs and I swayed on my feet. Each step felt slow and heavy, as though I were walking through molasses.

"Easy now," my guard murmured. His scent hit me then, a citrusy chemical tang that seemed... off.

The Beta woman assigned to me rolled her eyes at the weak, stumbling mess I'd become. "Omegas." She spat the designation like it was a curse, purposely bumping into me as she blazed past. "Can't do a damn thing to help themselves. It's unbelievable that Alphas fall for this helpless crap."

I thought about snapping back at her, but it wasn't worth the energy. Walking proved challenging enough as they herded

us like cattle out of the holding area and into yet another hallway filled with doors. They steered me through one into a small, empty office, effectively separating us.

“It’s not the Ritz, but it’s better than the cage, yeah?” my guard said as he helped me inside and finally released me.

“She doesn’t deserve the Ritz,” the blonde muttered, and, with a wave of her hand, dismissed the guard with the scent that tickled my nose. “You can go.”

“I’ll be right outside if you need anything.” He said it to her, but his eyes remained on mine.

He stepped into the hall and my gaze slid past him to the Omega I’d momentarily befriended earlier. We shared a frightened look before the doors were shut and I was alone with the angry blonde.

“Gods, your scent is even worse in a confined space.” She wrinkled her nose, looking absolutely pissed that she had to be here with me.

The feeling is fucking mutual.

Waving a hand to fan away my stench, she laughed dryly. “I don’t know what the Alphas find so appealing. You smell like sour jam and rotten flowers.”

I didn’t dignify her rude comments with a retort. What was the point?

“You have a name?” she questioned.

I stayed silent.

Snearing at my lack of conversation, she spat, “Well, you’re a friendly one, aren’t you?”

She glared.

I glared back.

With an exaggerated sigh, she shoved my shoulder and directed my attention towards a make-shift, portable shower that someone had set up in the corner. “That way. Let’s get this over with. The sooner we get you cleaned up, the sooner I

won't have to be stuck in here with you. The event starts in an hour. Let's get moving."

Without my consent, she prodded me into the tiny stall. There was hardly enough space to turn around, let alone hold two full-grown people, but the woman shoved her way in behind me and demanded I strip.

Embarrassment scalded my cheeks as she forced me to undress, helping me along when I refused. Clothes shed, I covered my nudity while she stepped out and turned the shower on. Cold water sluiced over my head as she barked orders to bathe. I did my best with limbs that didn't want to cooperate, afraid she'd try to help again if I didn't comply.

No way in hell.

I scrubbed my hair and skin until I felt cleaner than I had in weeks— a small, silver lining, even if the water was freezing.

After toweling off, the Beta dragged me into a chair where she dried and curled my hair into pretty waves. My head lulled on my shoulders. Smooshing my cheeks with a hand cupped beneath my chin, she held me still while she did my makeup; applying foundation, painting my eyes, and coating my lips in a dusky shade of pink that highlighted the curves of my mouth.

The entire time, I fought off the sleep that wanted to claim me. It would be so, *so* easy to fall into the blanket of exhaustion that lured me back toward the brink of peacefulness I'd succumbed to earlier.

Stay awake, Demi. Pay attention! Those clear thoughts were scattered amongst the distracted ones. Why was it so hard to focus?

"There," the Beta cooed proudly. "Now you look somewhat presentable. You'll have a new pack in no time, though may the gods help you with the turnout we're having tonight. The Romano Mafia is here, as well as a few of the gangs from the lower west side. They're absolutely ruthless.

You'd have to be insane to let them stick their dicks in you, not like you get a choice."

She smirked, as though picturing my brutalization brought her joy.

Sadistic bitch.

She sighed dramatically, her demeanor turning cocksure. "I guess that's one good thing about being a Beta. My body doesn't rule me. I rule my fucking self, thank you very much," she rambled while I blinked, trying to process the long stream of words pouring from her cherry-red lips.

Mafia? Gangs? Who the hell was Anton in bed with? My brain couldn't make sense of it.

"I don't want a new pack," I slurred.

The Beta smiled cruelly. "Well, I heard you fucked it up with Mr. Aster. Your loss. That man is sex on a stick, and so are his packmates. Now that I know their beds are empty, maybe I can entice them to see the value of having a Beta between their sheets."

My stomach churned from how misinterpreted I'd been. I wanted nothing, abso-*fucking*-lutely *nothing* to do with Pack Silver. I wanted *my* pack. *My* men. *My* mates.

Either way, she was testing me. Trying to get under my skin. I could've laughed at how off-base she was. "You can have 'em. Bring Tylenol, though. You'll end up battered and bruised. They like it rough."

"Mmm, all the better. So do I." She practically had hearts in her lustful eyes. She had to have a screw loose to actually be interested in sadists like Anton, Huck, and Reed, but hell, more power to her.

"All the happiness to you, then." I'd done my part. I'd warned her. If she didn't heed the advice, then may the gods have mercy on her soul.

She stood back and eyed me skeptically. "You really don't care if I move in on them?"

“Be my guest.” I waved half-heartedly toward the door, hoping she’d go after what she wanted and leave me alone. “Anton prefers red lace lingerie. Huck loves a little pain with his pleasure. And Reed is a fucking psycho who likes the chase. Good luck.”

“Hmm,” she huffed, crossing her arms under her breasts and narrowing her gaze at me. She studied me for a long moment. I stared back, wondering what she was looking for.

Did I have something on my face? Was my jaw slack? Was I drooling? My cheeks and mouth felt just as tingly as the rest of me, so I couldn’t be sure.

Finally, she cocked her head and said, “I don’t know if you’re trying to help me or fuck me over.”

“Honestly, neither.”

“Well, I guess that’s something.” Relaxing, her expression turning slightly less hostile, she shrugged. “Maybe you’ll get one of the good packs.” A tinkling laugh that grated on my nerves slipped out of her. “I should say *better* packs. None of them are *good*, but they’re not all terrible. Apparently, there are even some rich mercenaries in the crowd tonight, you lucky bitch.”

Better packs? Mercenaries? Another surreal wave of confusion hit me, jumbling my mind and muddling the pieces of the puzzle I was desperately trying to cobble together.

Gods, I couldn’t hold on to a thought to save my life. *Literally.*

“I don’t understand what’s happening,” I told the blonde.

“You’re getting dressed now.” She enunciated each word like I was a toddler.

Not what I meant, bitch.

Rolling her eyes, she pulled me out of my chair. I gazed down, realizing I’d been naked this entire time. Humiliation stung my cheeks, but I didn’t have the wherewithal to try to cover myself up. Didn’t matter anyway, because the woman tugged a nearly sheer dress over my body, then helped me step

into a thong and shimmy it up my thighs. Apparently, that was as good as it was going to get.

My ass and nipples were on display in the glittering fabric that clung to my curves, leaving very little to the imagination.

A sharp knock sounded at the door, and she gave me one last spritz of hairspray before ushering me back out into the hall.

four



DEMI

THE SAME GUARD escorted me down a long hallway, and two other Omegas and their entourages joined us. Once again, my cage neighbor and I exchanged terrified glances. But behind the fear, the same fire I felt inside of me burned in her eyes. We were down, but we weren't broken. We were prisoners, but we weren't victims. An instant bond of solidarity formed between us.

“What's your name?” I whispered, desperate for a small dose of humanity.

She sniffled, blinking back the glimmer of tears while she fought to hold on to her determination. As she looked at me, I witnessed the clash of emotions—hope, desolation, and anger—warring for supremacy. “Julia. Yours?”

I linked my hand with her and gave her a squeeze I hoped would reassure us both.

“I'm Demi.”

That was the extent of our conversation as they herded us into an elevator that, after a quick, quiet ride, spat us out on a floor teeming with security.

I couldn't focus on any of the armed guards once I spotted the tall, hulking man with slicked back short brown hair. Huck leaned against the wall, waiting, only pushing off and crossing the hallway when he noticed me.

He stepped into my path, separating me from the other Omegas. I released Julia, who gave me a worried glance before being forced farther down the hall with the others. They disappeared through another door, leaving me behind.

“There you are, little sparrow. Don't you look delectable?”

The Beta woman assigned to me smiled coyly at Huck. “That was all me. You should've seen her before I got her clean, made-up, and dressed.” She twisted a lock of her blond

hair around her finger in a weird display of flirtation. Her arms pressed into the sides of her breasts, forcing them up and together.

Now it was my turn to roll my eyes. *Gag me.*

I must have said that out loud because Huck tensed and he growled low in his throat.

“Seems you’ve lost all the manners we beat into you, Demi Leigh, but if you’re so keen for something to gag on, I’ve got what you need right here.” He wrenched my arm, twisting it behind my back and forcing me into the solid line of his body. My shoulder screamed—the same one that had been injured in the crash and hadn’t fully healed yet. The muscles ached, and I gasped in pain. Using his free hand, he grabbed mine and shoved it against his crotch, making his point.

His cock was growing hard beneath my touch, and I wanted to vomit.

“Get off of me,” I demanded, but the way my words ran together lessened their impact.

“I hate to interrupt this cozy moment,” my guard interjected, “but I’m under strict orders to see the Omega inside.” He jerked his chin toward the doorway everyone else had gone through.

The guard was the lesser evil, and I prayed Huck would release me.

Unfortunately, luck was rarely on my side.

Glowing at the guard, Huck growled, “Change of plans. You’re dismissed. I’ll see her inside myself.”

The guard paused for a beat too long before he gave a sharp nod and backed away, though his focus never left us as he stationed himself along a wall with the other security personnel.

The blonde Beta cooed, “He’s right, you know. She’s due backstage any minute, but if you’re looking for a warm mouth, I’d be happy to get on my knees for you while she’s otherwise preoccupied.”

Oh yeah, I was definitely about to vomit. Huck didn't respond. Hell, he didn't even look at her. His gaze trapped mine as I wriggled in his hold, trying to break free. The hand holding his family jewels tightened into claws. Unfortunately, he liked the pain.

"Let. Me. Go," I ordered.

"Fuck, I'm going to miss you. If Anton didn't need a compliant Omega by his side for his upcoming political campaign, he'd see you were worth keeping just so we could enjoy breaking this new fight in you. If the woman he's got his eye on didn't have such high expectations of a monogamous relationship, we'd have you both." He leaned in and dragged in a lungful of my scent. "Godsdman, even the sourness of your fear turns me the fuck on. I'm half tempted to lock you away for myself, visit you whenever I can break free. Keep this pussy just for my knot."

"I'd let you keep her as a secret toy if that made you happy," the Beta inserted, trying her best to draw his attention toward her and off of me.

Huck growled, releasing me so he could rear on the woman. For once, her presence was appreciated.

"Get away from me, you overzealous cunt," Menace coated Huck's warning, giving her a small taste of just how dangerous he could be. "Your desperation is making my dick go soft."

I rubbed at my shoulder and wrist, retreating from them.

"Huck," Reed barked, sticking his head out of the infamous doorway a few yards away. I refused to contemplate what lay on the other side. "We're waiting on Demi. Can you get your mind off your dick for one damn second and think about what Anton will do to us if we're late?"

"I was just saying goodbye to our little bird."

"Yeah, well, hurry your asses. Our investors aren't thrilled with the wait. We said our goodbyes. We all agreed on this course of action."

Reed held the door open while Huck ushered me away from the pouting Beta with a hand firmly on the nape of my neck. I didn't have a choice but to follow him through the doorway. It slammed shut with an ominous thud as the two men led me into a busy room where makeup artists and wardrobe assistants fussed over the other three girls, who all wore similar sheer dresses and heels.

The light scalded my eyes and made me wince while a headache flared, spearing through my temples. I groaned and pressed my fingers over the aching spots, wishing I could claw out my brain just to make the anvil stop.

Huck and Reed shooed away the little entourage of worker bees who swarmed to help me. Reed snatched a pair of glittery heels from an assistant and dropped to a knee before me, picking up one bare foot and then the other as he dressed me like a doll. Tiny straps fastened around my ankles, ensuring the pretty shoes wouldn't fall off if I made a misstep.

Randomly, I was grateful. If I got a chance to run, they'd stay with me. Then again, running in heels was no picnic, especially slim, pointed stilettos such as these. I'd probably fall and break an ankle before I got away.

Speaking of....

"Get off of me." I kicked at Reed's chest, almost successful in knocking him backward.

It seemed my strength was slowly returning, and I hoped whatever they'd drugged me with was wearing off.

He groaned, and Huck said, "See?"

"Where has this spitfire been for the last year?" Reed's eyes dilated as he rubbed absently over the spot my heel had connected.

"Anton doesn't realize what we're giving up for his ambition." Huck released a lecherous purr. "So what if she's been with others? I'll punish her by fucking her hard every damn day until she forgets the feel of any other knots except for ours. We can keep her chained so she can't run, and have

fun breaking her all over again. Soon enough, she'll go back into heat and we'll get her good and bred."

"Fuck." Reed adjusted his erection in his perfectly tailored black slacks. Both men wore designer suits and ties, looking as though they'd just walked off the set of Men-In-Black or James Bond. Except they were far from being the heroes of this story. Dread crawled down my spine and my head pounded in time with my heart from the way they were talking about me.

"Fuck it. Go talk to Riccardo. Make the reserve high. Maybe it won't be met."

Reed nodded, his eyes hooded and dark as his attention roved over me. He thumbed the scabbed wound on my lip, pressing it until it hurt. "Be good."

It was as much a goodbye as it was a promise he'd see me again. It left me unsettled. My stomach churned, bile scalding the back of my throat. I looked for my exits, noting the doors and wondering where they led. The large number of people prevented any escape attempts. But then, the room's chaos could be advantageous if I could slip away from Huck. Surely, there were more important places for the man to be.

"You should go." I nodded toward where Reed had just disappeared. "You don't want to keep your investors waiting."

Huck arched his brow. "Suddenly you're so worried about our business? When have you ever cared about our work?"

Dammit. He was right.

At first, when I was still under the illusion that Pack Silver might be a good pack, I'd taken an interest in Anton's political career and the role Huck and Reed played as his advisors: managing his image, running his campaigns, and organizing events that kept their names on everyone's lips. Once I got a taste of their vileness, however, I'd withdrawn from caring what they did. As long as it took them out of the house and away from me, they could've been selling drugs and I wouldn't have found the energy to care.

Huck must have seen the way I scrambled for an explanation. He stalked toward me like a predator cornering its prey.

I backed up, the blasted heels catching on the back of my dress, sending me stumbling into the wall. Everyone in the room purposely ignored Huck as his hand collared my throat and his fingers squeezed, cutting off my air. I gripped his wrist.

How many times was I going to end up in this position?

I tried to knee him in the balls, but the dress constricted my movements. The fabric groaned, threatening to tear from the force of my offensive maneuver.

Weirdly, I didn't want that to happen given it was the only covering I had to keep my modesty even slightly intact. Then again, if it meant getting away from Huck, I'd run naked through the streets to obtain my freedom.

His grip on my throat shifted until he was squeezing my cheeks, puckering my mouth like a fish.

"Open up, little sparrow," he sang sadistically. Reaching into his suit jacket, he procured a tiny white pill in the shape of a square and shoved it past my lips. "I think you're coming back to your senses a little too much."

I spit immediately, trying to get it out of my mouth, but he shifted once more, covering the lower half of my face with one large hand while the other flipped open the knife he always carried. Sharp steel bit at the tender skin of my throat. I stilled, eyes widening.

"That's right," Huck boasted pridefully. "You know what that is. You've been under my knife before, haven't you Demi?" I shivered in response, remembering the sick way this man liked to play. "Now, you're going to let that pill dissolve on your pretty tongue so it ensures you're a good girl for us tonight. Behave a little longer, then you're free to misbehave all you want. It'll either turn me on or you won't be my problem any longer. One way or another, this'll all be over soon."

Chalky and bitter, the pill broke down against my will. Whatever it was acted fast. Within minutes, a sweet numbness stole through my body. A fresh wave of lethargy washed over me, so strong it erased all the strength I'd slowly been regaining.

I slumped against the wall, Huck's face splitting from one to three. Which image was the real him? A slow blink. He chuckled, a dark, twisted sound.

"That's it, sparrow. Let it make you nice and relaxed." Shifting his knife, he nicked a spot behind my ear and licked up the blood that beaded. With the slightest nudge, my head rolled sideways, giving him better access. "A minor wound in a hidden place the other Alphas will never see. One last, small taste." He sucked and then released me as a man with a headset rushed into the room, barking orders.

Flipping his knife closed, Huck pocketed it and pulled me away from the wall. "That's our cue."

I swayed on my heels. The floor wouldn't stay still beneath me. My heart galloped and my skin felt too tight. The glitches were back. My mind was malfunctioning. Time seemed to slow and speed up all at once, and I didn't know how much had passed.

At some point, Huck disappeared. Thank goodness.

A number was pinned to the thin shoulder strap of my dress. I traced it with a fingertip, following the lines and working to place them.

"Fifty-Four," the tall, slim man with the headset called. He had brown, slicked back hair, and a clipboard in his hands. There was something smarmy about him that made my skin crawl. Or perhaps the drugs were responsible for the sensation.

The room spun, and I stumbled while standing perfectly still.

"Fifty-Four," he announced again, enunciating the words in a clipped, aggravated tone.

The man walked past me, tapping fingers on the board in a quick, agitated rhythm. I hyper focused on the pitter patter,

noticing the scars that slashed across the backs of his knuckles on one hand.

The beat almost sounded song-like, and I swayed.

His attention skated over me, noting my tag, and he sneered. “There you are.” With a hand on the small of my back, he gave me a harsh shove forward. My legs wobbled, my heels making me feel like a baby deer finding its feet for the first time.

Rude. Was that really necessary?

“Get moving. You’re supposed to be in line already,” that irritating voice called again as his tart cherry scent, reminiscent of cough syrup, made my nose wrinkle. “And where is your attendant?”

The blond Beta woman from earlier rushed up. “I’m here,” she snapped, out of breath like she’d been running.

From what, I didn’t know.

I blinked, trying to get my mind to sharpen through the haze.

“Best to keep to your station, Darla,” the man glared at her, then finally, blessedly left, taking his stench with him.

With a quick fluff of my hair, Darla straightened my dress and unsmudged my lipstick. I stared at her, full of confusion, wondering why she was making such a fuss.

Apparently, I wasn’t doing the right thing, because she scoffed, rolled her eyes, then grabbed my arm and forcefully moved me as the line shifted.

I glanced back down at the white tag attached to my dress—more like a slip or lingerie. *Slutty* lingerie. “Five. Four,” I muttered, my brows drawing together as though I was solving a complicated math problem.

“Gods, you’re really out of it, aren’t you?” I blinked up at my escort.

Was that pity I saw in her eyes? A little late for that, wasn’t it?

Darla sighed and shook her head. “I hope you get a better pack than those assholes. It’s obvious they don’t know a good thing when they’re looking at it.”

She was referring to herself, of course. Not me.

I snorted a laugh. “More like a *sure* thing. Don’t know about *good*.”

Stopping to leer at me, she sniffed haughtily. “Have a good life.”

Sarcasm. I was pretty sure that was sarcasm.

It was ridiculous, really. She was angry because the devil had spurned her. *What a fool*. Didn’t she know how lucky she was that Pack Silver didn’t want her?

She shoved me toward a waiting guard. I stumbled, almost falling. The man caught me, and I realized it was the same man from earlier with the chemical-tinged scent. It wafted up my nose—making me sneeze.

“Time to line up, doll.”

Doll. Why was everyone calling me a doll today? Was it because I looked pretty? Or breakable?

He led me into a room made of glass. There were windows everywhere, letting in the dark night sky and the lights of the city that spread out in all directions.

“This’ll all be over soon,” he promised, escorting me up the stairs of a makeshift stage that took up one end of the room.

Placing me beside the other women, he left me there, then jogged back down the steps to stand at the bottom. Bright lights blinded me, making it hard to see. I tried to block them out with my hand, but there were too many. Beyond the retina-scalding beams were dark shapes. Men.

No. Inhaling, I noted the various scents in the room. Not just men. *Alphas*. A lot of them.

Drinking down another gulp of air, I sorted through their signatures, hope blooming and then dying between one breath

and the next.

None of them were familiar.

None of them were mine.

Anton appeared on stage, holding a microphone. “Gentlemen, I present our prized Omega of the evening, number fifty-four.”

Fifty-four. Not Demi. Just a number.

He clasped a golden collar around my throat that matched my dress. I reached for it, running my fingers over the smooth surface. The metal was cool against my overheated skin. I didn’t want it on. My fingers curled over it, tugging hard, but it wouldn’t budge. I grew increasingly agitated the more I yanked.

All the while, Anton rattled off my stats like I was some prized racehorse he wanted others to bet on.

When he finished, he looked at me with wickedly gleaming eyes that flashed beneath the bright lights. The man was an evil predator, thriving on misplaced power and the fear he inspired. A metallic clang sounded as he clipped a glittering leash to my collar, pulled me to the center of the stage, and prodded me onto a round pedestal.

“Let’s find out how much you’re worth, shall we?” he whispered.

Worth? His earlier words ricocheted through my mind. *I always recoup my investments.*

Passing off the mic to an announcer, he flipped on a fan behind me, blowing my scent into the room. Growls tore through the crowd I couldn’t see.

What the hell is this? What’s happening?

All my instincts screamed at me to fight. To run. To get the fuck out of here. But I was so weak I could barely keep my thighs from shaking in the unfamiliar stilettos. My body wouldn’t cooperate and my brain was so fuzzy it felt like I had soda bubbles in my head.

What was that called again? Oh yeah, carbonation.

My head was carbonated. My scent was rotten jam. I was just a delightful buffet of fear, anger, and confusion.

“We’re going to start with Omega Fifty-Four. Do I hear fifty-thousand?” The man with the mic briefly paused before pointing into the crowd. “I’ve got fifty. How about seventy-five?”

Wait a minute...

It finally clicked. The picture I’d been trying to form all evening belatedly came together, even as my thoughts immediately threatened to scatter again. I grabbed onto the understanding that had just dawned, refusing to let the moment of clarity, of *reality*, go.

“One hundred and fifty thousand. Do I hear one-seventy-five?”

My heart stopped beating, and my blood ran cold, because... *holy shit*.

They were auctioning me off.

five



DEMI

FOR THE SECOND time in my life, I was going to be sold. My head spun, partly from the realization, but mostly from the drugs. The lights were blazing hot, making sweat start to bead on my skin.

“Two-hundred and seventy-five thousand. Do I hear three-hundred thousand...” the announcer droned on as I blearily stared past the blinding spotlights and squinted into the crowd. I wanted to make out faces, but all I saw were splotchy shadows.

I dazedly glanced around, trying to note the exits. I had to get out of here. Desperation burned within me. I needed hope—to know there was a light at the end of this fucked up tunnel. Instead, my gaze landed on the blasted guard at the edge of the stage, the only onlooker who was close enough to see clearly. All his attention was focused on me. He sent me another one of his cursory winks and then mouthed something my muddled brain couldn’t quite comprehend. Was that a countdown?

3...

“Do I hear four-hundred-and-twenty-five thousand?”

2...

“I’ve got four-twenty-five. How about four-hundred-and-seventy thousand?”

1....

The announcer’s words were cut off as an explosion rocked the building. “Holy shi—” he cursed before reverb squealed from the microphone as it was dropped. Screams filled the air, followed by a mixture of crying Omegas and cursing Alphas.

I stumbled off the pedestal and fell to my knees as the room shook. My ears rang while glass shattered all around me, pouring down like sharp, glittering rain. The leash attached to

my collar went slack, and I pushed myself to my feet, wobbling on the spikes of my heels.

The world was still moving, twisting and twirling, making me sick. Were the drugs causing hallucinations? Or was this really happening?

I blinked, urging myself to wake up from this nightmare, but when my lashes lifted, the same insanity ensued. Adrenaline pumped through my veins, helping to clear some of the haze.

Chaos reigned everywhere. Smoke filled the room and infiltrated my lungs. I coughed hard, desperate for clean air.

Oh gods. The mayhem was real.

The spotlights, which had been set up on stands, had been knocked over from the force of the blast, crashing to the ground and plunging everything into darkness except for the flames that surged along the far wall. Flailing blindly, I threw my hands out, trying to find my way to an exit.

Anton was yelling and barking orders somewhere behind me. I was so intimately familiar with the tone of his voice I could pick it out in a crowd. What that said about my level of abuse, that my body was instinctively tuned to react to him, that I was primed to hear him, even amidst such a cacophony, I didn't know. But I hated it. I hated how afraid I was of him. That no matter how angry I became, it paled to the terror that clawed through my chest at the idea of him getting his hands on me again.

I pressed on, trying to remember the layout of the stage and where the doors were. Somewhere in the muddled recesses of my mind, that small, steady voice of reasoning screamed at me to run.

I only made it a few fumbling steps when that damn guard reappeared in front of me.

“Told you it would be over soon. It's time to go, doll,” he drawled, smacking on a piece of cinnamon gum. Pulling the pin on a smoke bomb, he tossed it into the fray with a

wickedly dangerous grin. Bending at the waist, he dug his shoulder into my stomach and upended me.

The world tipped, and I cried out as the guard carried me out of the destroyed room like a sack of potatoes. He banded his arm around my legs, effectively holding me hostage while I struggled in vain.

“Put me down!” I demanded, but the slurred quality of my voice took away any sense of authority.

“No can do. I’m under strict orders to deliver you unharmed.”

Deliver me? To whom?

A second guard appeared beside us. I pushed off my captor’s back to get a better look, trying to memorize as many details as I could in case they’d be useful later. The newcomer, a blond with equally striking blue eyes, eyed me appraisingly. “You got the package?”

Another loud smack of gum. “Yep.”

A sharp slap on my ass had me growling like an angry bear. “I’m a person, not a package!”

“She’s a feisty little Omega.” The blonde grinned. “I like it.”

My captor chuckled. “Help the others grab as many of the Omegas as you can and meet us at the rendezvous point. Use the side door.”

“On it.” The blonde took off, and I craned my neck to see him bleed into the pandemonium.

All around us rose the sound of growling Alphas, their scents sharper and more pungent with their anger and trepidation. Smoke still filled the air, billowing from the fire and exacerbated by the smoke bombs. The acrid scent of it all burned my nose.

“Demi!” I could’ve sworn I heard the sharp cry of Knox’s voice. Tears came to my eyes as I hopelessly posted off the guard’s back and searched wildly for him in the foggy haze coating everything.

“Knox!” I tried to yell, but it was merely a croak of sound.

I searched wildly.

Nothing. He wasn't there. My mind had to be playing tricks on me. I was alone, save for my new captor.

“Who the hell are you?” I asked as the floor moved beneath me again.

The guard set a brutal pace as he hurried backstage and through an unfamiliar door. He practically ran down another long hallway and took an exit that led to a staircase. I ascertained we were in some sort of office building—a fancy one full of modern art, dark colors, and glass.

Unsurprisingly, Mr. Gum-Smacker didn't answer.

My stomach protested against the jarring jabs of each step as he jogged down with me still flung over his shoulder. I was almost certain I was going to hurl all over this guy's ass and the backs of his shoes.

It'll serve him right for carrying me like this...

Cool night air grazed my mostly bare skin as he pushed through a door at ground level and swept me out of the building of horrors.

The world tipped once more while he bent and carefully set me back on my feet. Blood rushed to my head.

Sweet mercy. I was going to be sick.

I stumbled, reaching for something to keep me upright. My hand flailed through the night air since there was nothing there to catch myself on.

“Easy,” Mr. Gum Smacker soothed. Unexpectedly, his strong, tattooed arm came around my waist. Capturing one of my wrists, he stooped from his tall height and wrapped my arm around his neck, holding me carefully upright. With a quick jerk of his head, he readjusted the dark hair that had fallen over his forehead without letting me go.

As much as I resented having to do so, I leaned heavily into his side and accepted his support, unable to maneuver on

my own in any coordinated way.

I didn't want to let myself be lured into a false sense of security. This guy was still the enemy, but at least he'd gotten me out of there. That was something, at least. I hadn't been sold, and I was still alive. All silver linings. His motives for breaking me out, however, remained a mystery.

"What's happening?" I slurred as he helped me away from the burning building.

"Jesus. How much shit did they give her?" Another man rumbled.

My gaze snapped in his direction, my reaction time a few beats too slow. The second I set eyes on the newcomer, my heart stopped. The Alpha who stepped out of the shadows of the alleyway was absolutely massive, reminding me far too much of Hades with his height and the breadth of his shoulders. Dark ink covered every available surface of his pale skin, much like my own gentle giant. Suddenly, I couldn't breathe, my grief so heavy I was sure it would crush me.

Hades. My mates. My pack.

Just the phantom echo of Knox's voice had sent my heart into a spiral. I should be with my men, but instead, I was half-naked in a sketchy alleyway with more unknown Alphas who, if my assumptions were correct, had just *blown up a building*.

My life was like a blockbuster. Everything felt surreal. I almost expected to wake up because none of this could truly be happening. Of course, I'd been expecting as much for the past two weeks, yet here I was.

If I closed my eyes, I could almost picture my nest—the soft blankets and fluffy pillows covered with the scents of my men. I wanted to be back in that safe space with a need so voracious, I couldn't put it into words.

Lids pressed firmly shut, I lost my sense of awareness and swayed on my feet.

Mr. Gum Smacker's hold tightened, making sure I was anchored securely to his side. "I know," he agreed. "She's high as a fuckin' kite."

“Much as I hate to admit it, it makes sense. They can’t have uncooperative Omegas causing problems. It’s not as though they’d line up willingly to be sold like cattle.”

Expensive cattle...

“It was a sick fuckin’ display, let me tell you,” Mr. Gum Smacker practically growled.

On that, we agree. Who was this guy?

“But it was fun as fuck to cause mayhem and break up their little Omega boutique.” Disdain dripped from those last two words, and it made me feel marginally better about having been kidnapped—or saved, I wasn’t quite sure yet—by him and his ragtag group of friends. “Slade’s trying to bring out the other Omegas and then we need to get the fuck outta here before any other Alphas catch our trail and come pouring out the side door.”

Slade had to be the blond one who’d willingly rushed into the fray. I tried to follow their conversation, but my mind was blurring over words as we moved further down the shadowed alley and away from the building.

My feet hurt, and I didn’t want to be here anymore.

I must have said it out loud because the Hades knock-off growled and stepped forward, scooping me off my feet bridal style and carrying me the rest of the way to the alley’s entrance where a dark stretch SUV idled. The door opened, and I was passed to yet another Alpha, this one with black hair and ethnically tan skin. His eyes were a stormy grey, and he had a short, neat beard covering the lower half of his face.

They moved so synchronously, they must’ve been a pack. “Who are you?”

“I’m Ronan,” he all but purred, sliding into the middle seat with me on his lap to make room for the others to get in as well. “And since I’m sure there hasn’t been time for introductions, this is Enoch,” he nodded toward Mr. Gum Smacker, “and Lawson,” he eyed the Hades knock-off.

The manners that had been drilled into me from birth almost had me replying ‘It’s nice to meet you’ on auto-pilot,

but I swallowed them down because none of this was nice or normal or even fucking sane.

“The other team is on their way to meet us,” Ronan told the others.

Other team?

“Scratch that,” Slade grunted, jogging to catch up with us and ducking his head through the door and into the vehicle. “They got the other two Omegas that were on stage out, but the rest had already been ushered away by the backstage crew. Everything is fuckin’ crazy in there and I couldn’t track where they took them. I aroused too much suspicion and some Alpha assholes are on my tail. We need to hit it.” He crawled into the SUV, shut the door behind him, and squeezed past us to sit on my left. “Tell em’ we’ll meet them at the rendezvous point.”

“Fuck,” growled Lawson, grabbing a field radio that had been clipped to his jeans and talking into it.

“The package has been secured. Pull back.”

The car was tense and silent for a moment, and then the door was ripped open. I swallowed a scream as another man slid into the seat beside me, caging Ronan and me between himself and Slade. He depressed a button on a remote in his hand and an explosion went off, this time from a dumpster in the alleyway, cutting off the men I could see charging toward us. Fire erupted, debris flying everywhere.

I gasped and flinched from the unexpected bang and searing heat before the door was pulled closed to shelter us.

Ronan, who refused to let me off his lap, soothed a hand down my back. I tensed, hating his touch, though I knew he meant it to be a comfort. “It’s just Felix. He’s one of ours.”

One of *theirs*. Not *ours*. There would never be an ‘our.’

“Who the hell are you people?” I rasped, but as I predicted, they didn’t answer.

Lawson banged his fist against the divider between where the driver sat and the rest of us were situated in the back. The

car moved instantly, pulling away from my past and taking me into an unknown future.

“Please.” I couldn’t stop the tears from forming. All the anger and bravado I’d had earlier melted away as a new wave of panic consumed me.

“Don’t worry, doll. We’ve got you,” Enoch promised. His light blue eyes reminded me of Leo’s, and my heart lurched.

“Don’t call me that,” I demanded, putting as much fire as I could muster behind it.

Their pet names weren’t welcome. I wanted to tell these men I wasn’t theirs, that they’d stolen me for nothing. I already had a pack—even if my heart worried for their safety and my mind preyed upon my fear that the worst had happened. However, whether they were gone or not, it wouldn’t change anything for me. I was taken in this life and the next. My heart was spoken for, my soul claimed by six of the most incredible men. They were mine, and I was theirs, and nothing would change that. Not distance, not circumstance, not even death.

Enoch shoved a hand through his locks. Shaved in a close crop on the sides, his hair was wild and untamed on top. As he studied me, I noted there was something dangerous about him, but I couldn’t pinpoint exactly what it was. Just a sense—a knowing. The scar cutting through the left side of his lips only added to the effect. He sat furthest away from me, his intense gaze unwaveringly focused on where I was cradled in his packmate’s arms.

I should’ve fought and demanded to sit on my own. I didn’t want these Alphas touching me, but I was bone-wearyingly tired of being strong, and the further we drove away from Pack Silver and that shit show of the auction, the less anger I had to fall back on. The armor that had manifested as the sharp bite of an attitude slipped away. I was left raw in the wake of it, every nerve exposed to the air.

Reading the change in me, Enoch leaned forward and braced his elbows on his knees, folding his hands together. Belatedly, I wondered if it was an effort to make me feel more

at ease, knowing his hands were occupied and wouldn't be used as weapons.

"You're safe now," he promised, but it held no weight. I didn't know him or his pack. I had no idea what sort of people they were.

Scratch that. I did. Mercenaries. The kind who blew up buildings to steal Omegas.

Safe my ass. I wouldn't be safe until I was back with my men. *Where are they?* They wouldn't stop looking for me. I knew that much.

"None of us are going to hurt you," Lawson vowed, sprawling in his seat.

The Alpha was so large he took up nearly two spaces all for himself. No wonder they needed a limo. Would he even fit in a regular-sized vehicle?

My drug-riddled brain conjured up a vision of him in a clown car, and I chuckled, then full-out laughed until I cried. The release of emotion drained me. The pounding in my head grew worse, and against my better judgment, my head lulled into the shoulder of the man beneath me.

"Easy," Ronan rumbled, taking another chance and rubbing his hand up and down my back soothingly. His skin was a few shades darker than a deep suntan, and his eyes were so grey they bordered on black, like his hair. "You're coming off of some pretty powerful drugs if I had to guess."

I nodded. "They jabbed me with something and then, before the auction, they shoved a pill into my mouth. I tried to spit it out but—" I trailed off with a sad shrug, wondering if these men would even care. They hadn't seemed happy about it earlier, but they didn't appear at all worried about causing explosions that may have hurt people. So, who knew where their moral compass lay?

"Cowards," Lawson stated with a disgusted curl of his lips.

I studied the knock-off, noting the many differences that set him apart from my Hades. His long, ash-blond hair was pulled into a bun at the back of his head. A scratchy-looking

beard covered the lower half of his face, at least two inches in length. Wrinkles in the corners of his eyes aged him, and I wondered how old he was. It was an easy assumption to guess he was the pack leader. The others deferred to him.

He was the person I needed to bargain with. Maybe they could be swayed with money. Jamison would spare no expense to get me back in one piece.

The car lurched sideways as the driver made a hard turn, and I gasped, throwing my hand out to steady myself. Arms tightened around me like a seatbelt as my palm landed on the muscled leg of the guy next to me. This one had been silent the entire time, and I felt him tense under my somewhat accidental touch. I ripped my arm away like he'd burned me, flushing with an apology on my lips.

Gods, I want out of this car.

“Don't mind Felix. He doesn't talk much, and he's got a thing with physical touch.”

“S-sorry,” I murmured.

“Hold tight. We're being followed.” Lawson peered out the back window murderously.

Felix dug a small device out of a black duffle on the floor of the car and opened his window. Leaning out of it precariously, he tossed it toward the car tailing us before righting himself in his seat and closing his window again. With a hint of a smirk tipping the corner of his lips, he pressed a button on a small remote in the palm of his hand and set off another explosion behind us.

I gasped as the force of the blast rocked our own vehicle. Flames erupted, brightening the night and acting like a blockade that kept our pursuers from following.

Our car made yet another hard turn, and my stomach roiled as a tornado twirled in my head. Swamped with dizziness, I sagged against the firm chest under me.

“She's looking a little green,” Slade warned from my other side, daring to slip his hand under the hem of my dress to rub

my ankle. It wasn't a terrible breach of contact, but it wasn't at all comforting, either. I didn't want their hands on me.

"D-don't," I warned at the same time the leader barked, "Slade."

"Shit. Sorry." He withdrew quickly as I pressed my own to my abdomen, willing my stomach to settle. "The Alpha in me is fuckin' desperate to make her feel better."

"Don't I know it," Ronan rumbled quietly.

"I'm—" I was going to say *already taken*, but what came out next was, "going to be sick."

It was all the warning they got before I leaned over and lost the meager contents of my stomach all over the floor and Ronan's shoes.

six



DEMI

DESPITE THE RIOTING in my stomach, I took in my surroundings as we drove through the city. The buildings changed from old brick warehouses lining run-down streets to tall, glittering skyscrapers in a nice part of town. I didn't know where Pack Silver had taken me after the accident, but I remembered traveling long distances through the haze of my concussion. After that, there'd been nothing but that tiny little room without windows or any identifying details. I could've been in an entirely different country and never have known it.

Now, however, I recognized the familiar scenery of Silver City. Of course, Anton would bring me back to his territory. It was the one place where he had the most power, where he felt most important. Thankfully, it was also the one place my guys would know to search.

I held onto that hope until the car edged along the city limits and pulled into an old airstrip I hadn't known was still active. My heart plummeted as I spotted the gleaming jet sitting on the taxiway before an old rusted hanger that had seen better days.

I'm sure there were plenty of Omegas who would freak out over a pack with a private plane, but unless they were going to take me to Vermont themselves and hand deliver me to Jamison and the others, I wanted nothing to do with it.

I had to face the music. If they got me on that jet, the odds of my guys finding me would severely diminish. Sadness spread throughout my chest, threatening to choke me. My heart cried out for my men, breaking at the very real possibility I may never see them again. Tears spilled down my cheeks.

"Fuck. I think she's going to hyperventilate," Ronan warned as the car pulled to a stop.

I scrambled from his lap and wrenched the door open, accidentally kneeling Felix in the groin in my desperate attempt to get outside. Night air wrapped around me as I leaned heavily on the trunk, partly because I wasn't sure I could support myself on my own, and partly because I was almost positive I was about to....

I bent at the waist as my stomach spasmed and I got sick one more time.

The mercenaries piled out after me.

“Damn.” Lawson reached to pat my back, stopping at the last second as if he'd thought better of it. Or debated whether I'd welcome his touch.

Somehow, that made the tears fall faster. Hating these men was supposed to be easy, but they were showing me a side of themselves that wasn't inherently evil. I'd expected worse. Much worse.

Slade threw his hands up and backed away. “No offense. I don't do well with... that. I'm a sympathetic vomiter. Thrower-upper. I don't know, I just can't. It took all my self-control not to lose my cookies in the car and I'm tapped out.”

I swiped my hand across my mouth as he moved farther and farther away. I would've laughed at the sheer distress on his face if the circumstances were different. “It's okay. I understand.”

Slade shoved his fingers through his blond hair. “Godsdammit. You're not at all what I expected. Most of the Omegas I've met in the past have been selfish, entitled creatures. No wonder everyone wants you. You're too fucking sweet for your own good.”

Everyone wanted me? Too sweet? Huh? I shook my head, not following. Was it because I was still coming down from the high? Or was I truly missing something? My brain couldn't compute.

Ronan handed me a water bottle, and I rinsed my mouth out as Lawson sighed.

“Don’t get any ideas,” he warned Slade, casting a knowing glance at his packmate. “As long as everything seems legitimate, we’re going to see this through.”

My brows furrowed. “See what through?”

The others eyed me but didn’t answer.

“It’ll be legit,” Enoch promised, then tossed me a small case of Tictacs.

Trepidation mixed with my confusion as I sucked on the tiny mints. I was spinning out, tired of being in the dark about everything for the last two weeks. This was my life, and I needed to find a way to take charge of it again.

Instead of waiting for answers they didn’t seem inclined to give me, I switched tactics. “Please. Please don’t take me wherever it is you’re planning on taking me.” I waved my hand toward the plane, proud when I stood a little straighter, my body cooperating for once. The drugs were slowly wearing off. Soon enough, this day would be nothing but a memory—or a cautionary tale. “I already have a pack.”

Lawson stared so intently his gaze could’ve seared a hole straight through me. “Can you tell me who your pack is?”

“I...” I fidgeted with the TicTac container, realizing I’d never asked my mates what their official pack name was. *Oh, fuck.* Embarrassment stained my cheeks, the anger at myself and at this situation heating my face until I felt like a cooked tomato. “I don’t know their pack name,” I admitted abashedly, “but their leader is Alpha Jamison from Maverick Falls, Vermont. If it’s money you’re after, I promise he’ll pay for my safe return.”

If my inklings were correct, Jamison was well off. And if for some reason he didn’t have the funds, I knew he’d find a way to make a deal, regardless.

They all exchanged a silent, weighted look.

“And this pack... you *want* to go back to them?”

My eyes glistened with fresh tears. “More than my next breath.” I prayed they believed me. “We’re scent-matched.”

Ronan hummed thoughtfully. “That’s pretty rare, or so I’ve heard.”

“What do you think, boss?” Enoch leaned against the car, looking at his leader. “She seems to be telling the truth.”

The small plastic container dug into my palm as I squeezed it tightly. “I have no reason to lie to you...”

The roar of an incoming vehicle interrupted my plea, and the guys turned as one, positioning themselves around me protectively as they surveyed the road. Another large SUV rounded the corner at top speed, lights bouncing over the rough gravel, dust flying in its wake as it slowed to an ear-screeching halt.

The doors flew open, and my heart stopped as I peered around the hulking men blocking my path.

A sob broke free as I spotted Jamison running full tilt toward me with Hades, Knox, Eli, Thane, and Leo flying out of the back, hot on his heels. The mints dropped forgotten to the ground, and I took off, shoving my way past Lawson and Ronan so I could meet my mates halfway.

“Jamison!”

“Demi!” Jamison didn’t slow, and neither did I.

He reached me first, and I launched myself at him with a choked cry. He caught me effortlessly, the two of us colliding with the force of tectonic plates. Our coming together was an earth-shaking, bone-rattling, soul-fusion. We slid into place in each other’s arms as though we were two halves of the same heart.

“Demi. Demi. Demi.” He chanted my name like a prayer. Like I’d become his religion. His sole purpose for breathing.

“Oh my gods. Are you real?” I cried. “Please. Please tell me you’re real.” I’d dreamt of this so many times it was hard to convince myself I hadn’t conjured him out of thin air, a mirage that would surely disappear.

“I’m real, Little One. I’m real and I’m right fucking here. I’m never letting you out of my fucking sight again. You hear

me? I'm never letting you go." His grip was crushing, squeezing the breath out of me, but I didn't care. I soaked up the feel of his body pressed against mine. The familiar bonfire and whiskey scent that was purely his filled my lungs and settled the unceasing turmoil my soul had been subjected to these past few weeks.

My feet dangled well off the ground, and I peppered kisses over his face, rubbing my cheek against his dark beard to feel the scratch of it. It'd grown longer in our time apart, as if he couldn't be bothered to shave. As if he'd spent every spare second searching for me and was just as wrecked as I'd been during our time apart.

Arms around his neck, I clung to him and crashed my lips down on his own. I drank him in as I devoured his mouth, taking and claiming everything he had to offer. Gone was the shy Omega I'd once been and in her place was a woman with clarity over what this pack meant to her. My tongue swept past his lips, and I reveled in the low, sultry, masculine moan he rewarded me with.

Hands were everywhere as the rest of my pack surrounded me, wrapping me in their combined embrace. Snippets of their voices floated to me as they all talked at once.

"Thank the gods."

"... missed you so fuckin' much."

"We were worried sick, Sunshine."

"... you okay?"

"Fuck, you scared us!"

"... been wrecked without you, Love."

Emotions ran thick in each sentiment, echoing the desperation I'd felt during our separation.

Hands smoothed over my hair, down my back, some touching my arms and others wrapping around me and Jamison in a group hug I never wanted to be released from. Good on the promise he made, Jamison never let me go. He held me steady, kissing my forehead and face, drinking me in

like I was an apparition he was afraid would disappear. I understood because I felt the same exact way about all of them.

Their combined scents surrounded me—coconut, citrus, spices, apple pie, chocolate, caramel, campfires, and whiskey. It was musk and man and everything right in the world. These men were pure comfort, and for the first time in weeks, I felt safe.

“Share,” another growly Alpha demanded a moment before I was ripped out of Jamison’s arms. I giggled as Knox stole me, and the sound was almost foreign after two weeks of hell. Two weeks of not knowing whether my mates were dead or alive. Two weeks of torture, worry, and heartache from being apart.

Knox grunted as I melted into him, and I glanced up at his ruggedly handsome face, worried because the sound had been tinted with pain. The only answer I got was a kiss on the crown of my head as he cradled me against him as though I were a precious, breakable, priceless artifact.

“Sunshine.” The name was nothing more than a choked murmur rife with emotion. The feeling behind those syllables sent another wave of tears blurring my vision.

I slid my hands up his chest and dug my fingers into his platinum blond hair, reveling in the juxtaposition of the nearly shaved sides and longer locks on top. The man was built like a Viking god. A warrior. A protector. I pulled his forehead down to rest against mine, just breathing him in. Knox was all muscle and strength. A perfect shelter. A safe refuge. His coconut and sweet cream signature washed over me, reassuring me I was home in his arms.

It didn’t matter where I was as long as I had my pack at my side.

“I thought we’d lost you. You were right there, within arm’s reach, and then you were just fucking gone. I could live a thousand lifetimes and never experience more crushing heartbreak than I did when I woke up and found you were missing. I’m so—” Knox choked, the words living and dying

on his tongue before he tried again. “I’m so fucking sorry I didn’t protect you.”

“It wasn’t even remotely your fault,” I promised, kissing one cheek, then the other. I ran my nose along his and my next sentiment ghosted over his lips. “You’re what kept me alive. You kept me going. I knew you’d come for me. I could hear you in my dreams, promising you’d find me.”

“Always, Sunshine. I will always come for you. You’re a living, breathing part of my soul, Demi Leigh. I love you. I love you so fucking much.”

“I love you too. More than you know.”

With a possessive groan, Knox bent me backward with the force and magnitude of his kiss. Every stroke of his tongue was a promise, every growling moan a vow. I was breathless by the time he was done with me, my head spinning all over again—presently, from the sweet lack of oxygen.

“That’s lovely and all,” Thane teased from where he patiently waited, giving his pack-brother time to kiss the shit out of me, but there was a harrowed edge to his voice. “But we’re never going to need to find her again because there’s no way we’re ever going to do a repeat of the last two weeks.”

I reached for my sweet chef and stepped into his open arms.

“Come here, darling,” he commanded, and I wholeheartedly obeyed. His blue eyes swam with the same emotion that made the world suddenly blur behind a fresh sheen of tears. I blinked them back.

Cupping his face, I smoothed my thumbs over the curve, golden stubble shadowing his strong jawline as his hand went to the back of my neck and gripped me firmly. Pleasant shivers rolled through me from the dominant contact. Popping onto my toes, I kissed him sweetly, pouring all the love I felt for him into every soft movement of my lips. He matched every motion, and when I pulled back, I stared into his cerulean blue eyes, making sure he saw the truth swimming in my green ones.

“Never again,” I promised, fully intending to never be separated from him or the others as long as I still breathed.

seven



DEMI

“GODS.” My voice wavered as my fingers skimmed over a massive wound that cut across the side of Thane’s head. It wrapped around part of his forehead. While it was scabbed over and clearly healing, it remained red and angry. “The last time I saw you, I couldn’t tell if you were still breathing.” My throat swelled with the memory, making it ache to swallow. “I was so scared. I thought you were.... I thought you might be....”

“Shhh.”

Thane’s arms tightened around me, one hand smoothing down my spine as he buried his head into the crux of my neck and inhaled deeply. I did the same, taking a drugging hit of his chocolate and caramel scent. He smelled like decadent hot cocoa on a cold winter’s day. I wanted nothing more than to curl up with him and forget all the bad things in the world.

“It’s just a scratch.”

An inelegant, purely sarcastic snort escaped me. “That is not just a scratch,” I scolded. “That’s a wound that most likely came with a little side effect called a concussion. I should know. I had one myself.”

“You had a concussion?” Eli asked as he reached for me next. His gaze rapidly scanned what he could see of my body, cataloging for possible injuries. His hair was beyond mused, as if he’d run his hands through it a million times, and his warm, amber eyes were tired behind his black-rimmed glasses, the corners pinched with worry lines. He looked like hell.

I empathized, sure I appeared the same.

“I did.” I rubbed my forehead, my fingers skimming over my own wicked scab hidden just beyond my hairline. “But I’m okay now.”

Eli's palms hovered over my body, and he skimmed them along my arms, noting every scab and scratch before he captured my hands in his. "I'll be the judge of that. I'm dying to give you a full exam, Love. I need to make sure you're alright, for my own sanity."

"Okay, but Eli?"

"Hmm?" He was distracted, his eyes wild as he continued his visual assessment of any bodily harm I'd incurred.

"Kiss her, you idiot," Hades grunted, pressing closer to me. His heat licked along my back, sending a delicious shiver of warmth down my spine. "Some of us are dying to steal her from you."

Eli gazed toward my giant mate, and he narrowed his eyes. I snickered, and Eli had the decency to smirk when his attention slid to me once more. "You think that's funny?"

"Mmhmm," I hummed, reaching for my doctor and pulling him by the collar of his rumpled button-down. I drew him to me and arched into his body as I sealed my mouth to his. It only took him a nanosecond before he melted into me. We were wrapped around each other like twisting ivy. There was so much desperation behind the way he nipped and sucked on my lips that I was left breathless as he reassured himself I was okay with every graze of his tongue. When we finally parted, I sucked in a breath, losing myself all over again in the fire burning in his amber eyes. "I was miserable without you, and I'm finally happy again," I whispered.

"Baby—" Hades rasped, as though that one little statement had upended his world.

"Us too, Love. You have no idea how lost I've been. Not knowing if you were okay. If you were hurt—" Eli swallowed as renewed panic dampened that earlier fire.

I took his hand and pressed it to my cheek, nuzzling into his palm. "I'm all right."

"I think we're all going to need reassurance of that for a while, Honey. We've been—" Leo swallowed. "We've been a fucking mess."

Eli reluctantly released me so I could jump into Leo's arms. He caught me easily, gripping my ass and holding me close. I couldn't get my legs around his waist because of the chafing lace dress, and I growled in frustration, planning to burn this thing to charred ash the second I could take it off. There would be so much satisfaction in seeing it go up in flames.

Slowly, he lowered me down his body until my heels were touching the ground. Every hard inch of him teased me along the way, my body singing for the sculpted lines of his.

Hades moved to my back, wrapping my hair around his fist and tugging gently until I'd craned my neck to gaze up at him over my shoulder. Pure need and possession dominated his features.

"You better get used to having a bodyguard, Baby Girl, because I'm gonna be stuck to your pretty ass like glue from now on."

"If you were expecting to hear any complaints from me, you're not going to get any."

"Good," he growled and then leaned down and brutalized my mouth in the most toe-curling kiss. It wasn't just a meeting of our mouths, it was a claim that told the world exactly who I belonged to. I was a panting mess when he finally let me come up for air. "Now kiss my best friend, Baby, and show him just how much you missed him too."

Leo groaned. "Why is that so damn sexy?"

Hades grinned wickedly as he used his fist in my hair to direct my attention back to Leo. This wasn't the time or the place, but my core fluttered nonetheless. There was something about being told what to do in a loving yet dominant way that just *did* it for me.

"Come here, Honey, and let me taste you so I know once and for all you're not a dream."

Leo brought one hand to my chin and tilted my head for his descent, and then I lost myself in the fantasy of being pressed between two men. I arched between them as Leo

explored every inch of my mouth, not pulling free until he'd sufficiently staked his own claim.

During our time apart, I'd nearly forgotten how overwhelming it was to be loved by all of them. They made me feel wanted and desired, cherished and safe.

"That was quite the reunion," Lawson rumbled from where he waited patiently near their SUV.

Shit. I'd almost forgotten about them and I didn't know what to make of their patience while I reunited with my mates.

Tension stole through Jamison's shoulders, and he straightened. "Just a minute," he grumbled. "Come here, Little One."

All my men stood close, forming a circle with me at the center. It took me a moment to realize it was because they were blocking the sight of me from the other pack. Jamison's fingers made quick work of his button-down. Ripping it off, he settled it over my shoulders, letting Knox pick up the task of pulling the sides closed. He buttoned it up, covering the sheer dress and saving what little modesty I had left. I'd been practically naked in front of so many eyes today it barely phased me, but I knew when my head stopped buzzing and the effect of the drugs fully wore off, I'd be more embarrassed. Right now, I was virtually high off the scent of my mates and the euphoria of being back in their arms.

I lifted the shirt to my nose, loving the blend of Jamison's signature mixing with the others. They wrapped around me like a hug while someone smoothed a hand over my hair and Knox held me close. None of them were able to stop touching me. I understood because I felt the *exact* same way about them.

Deciding I was modest enough, Jamison turned to face my 'kidnappers' and I couldn't help but notice the sickly yellow bruises covering his left arm. My stomach flipped every time I noted another of their injuries, and I had a feeling there were quite a few more that weren't as visible. Just as Eli wanted to examine me, I wanted to run my hands over each one of them

to ensure they were really okay. But I couldn't do that until we'd settled matters with the Jacobs pack.

I had no idea what to expect from them. Clearly, they had to see I was already spoken for. That what I'd told them was true. If they decided they wanted me back, they'd have to fight through my pack to get to me. Our seven to their five. Then again, Felix and his penchant for explosives could easily decimate us all.

Protectiveness surged in my chest, and I wanted to shove all my men behind me to defend them—no matter how silly that seemed, given I was all of five-foot-two to their towering six-plus feet of solid muscle.

“Thank you for getting Demi out,” Jamison stepped away from our group, with Knox taking up the space beside him.

My jaw dropped open. *Wait—what?*

Lawson moved to greet them, with Slade, Enoch, Felix, and Ronan at his back. I watched the reunion while Hades—who stood behind me—settled his hands on my shoulders possessively, while Thane and Leo took up positions at my sides. Eli positioned himself out front, not blocking my view but putting himself in a position where he could easily shield me.

Knox reached for Enoch, shaking his hand first and then embracing the man with pats on the back like they were old friends. Meanwhile, Jamison offered his hand to Lawson, who shook it before giving him a sharp nod.

“Glad we got the right Omega out of there,” Lawson said. “We weren't able to save them all.”

“I know.” Jamison sighed. “Thane tried to follow the others, but when all hell broke loose, we lost track of them in the mayhem. I'm forever indebted to you for saving my mate.”

Thane intertwined his fingers with mine and gave them a gentle squeeze. “We couldn't get close to the auction,” he explained. “Anton knew who we were. The bastard put a bolo out on us. Luckily, Knox had contacts and reached out to his friend Enoch.”

“Our pack has a special set of skills.” Enoch shrugged like he was telling me they could knit instead of explaining that they were some sort of mercenary group—the kind who didn’t mind leaving a trail of destruction, fire, and blood in their wake.

Not that I was judging, mind you, since I was free and back with my pack. But it was almost laughable how much he downplayed their job.

“I went to the academy with Enoch,” Knox clarified, “but instead of joining the force as I did, he met and became a part of Lawson’s pack.” He nodded toward the other Alpha.

“I used to be in the military, and I now run my own security company.”

“Is that what you’re calling it?” Knox smirked.

Lawson chuckled. “On the surface.”

I studied the pack who’d kidnapped—er, *saved*—me. “You all planned this?”

Slade shoved a hand through his blond hair. “Not without the help from your pack. Jamison and Knox scoured every sliver of information they could find until they figured out what Anton’s plans were and sent us in to get you out. Lawson and Ronan went in as buyers and made sure you were on the sales docket. Felix is our resident explosives artist. He caused a distraction so that Enoch, who disguised himself as a Beta and snuck in as a guard, could get you out. I was his backup and on further extraction, along with your pack, who was finally able to get into the building while security was otherwise distracted from our little blast.”

I shook my head at the complexity of their plan. If one part was unsuccessful, I’d still be in Anton’s clutches. A shiver slid down my spine like icy fingers, the phantom dread making me nauseous all over again. What would have become of me if they’d failed?

Sensing my stress, Hades massaged his thumbs lightly over my shoulder blades. I played with the sleeves of my borrowed button-down, which fell well past my fingertips,

while I worried about the other Omegas. Someone had said they'd only been able to get the three of us who'd been on stage out. What would become of the others? Guilt swamped me that I was the focus of the rescue and not the others. Their uncertain futures hung heavy on my conscience.

"Where's Julia? And the other Omega?" I questioned, pulling free from my mates and glancing toward where the SUV sat, doors open, headlights spilling across the gravel drive.

"Who?" Knox asked, brows furrowed.

"Julia. My cage-mate." I craned my neck, searching the vehicle, expecting to see the girls hopping out of the backseat to join our weird little party. It was strange they weren't already with us unless something had happened to them. *Oh gods*. I hoped they were okay.

"Cage-mate?" Jamison growled angrily.

I winced. "That's not important right now."

"The fuck it's not," he muttered, reaching for me. He stepped close and wrapped a hand around the side of my head, pulling me in and kissing my temple possessively.

I gazed up at him, looking for answers. "Julia was one of the other Omegas on the stage with me. Slade said you guys got the three of us out."

"The two other girls were pretty heavily drugged." Eli winced. "They're in the backseat of the car, resting and trying to come out of the haze."

"We'll get 'em," Ronan called, slapping Slade's chest with the back of a hand before he took off and jogged toward the forgotten vehicle.

My pulse fluttered faster as I blinked between the SUV and where my pack surrounded me.

Enoch winced. "They drugged all of them with some pretty potent shit. I lost sight of Demi for a little while and couldn't stop those fuck-faces from messing with her without

having blown my cover. They gave her something else in the form of a pill before I found her again.”

Hades looked one part distressed and two parts murderous, as did my other mates.

Eli blew out a long, slow breath that belayed his stress and anxiety. “I’ve never been so scared in my life, Love. Losing you, not knowing where you were or if we’d be able to get you back, aged me at least fifty bloody years.” He pulled me into his arms again and cupped my face, studying my eyes. Shaking his head, he sighed again. “I can tell you’re still coming off of something from your pupils alone. I’m not going to be able to rest until I get you on that plane, give you a proper exam, and make sure you’re going to be alright.”

“Eli,” I called softly. “I’m fine. I promise.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Dizzy. A little nauseous. Tired. Bleary. I think the adrenaline helped shake some of the haze, but everything still feels surreal. But as long as all of you are actually real... I swear I’m alright. I have you back. I don’t need anything else.”

“Oh, Love.” He crushed me to his chest, cupping my head and holding me close. He pressed kisses to my hairline while I listened to the steady beat of his heart, losing myself in the rhythm.

“I was terrified I’d lost you,” I told him, my words barely above a whisper.

He laughed, the sound wrung out and weary. “I was petrified, Demi. I’ve never been so panicked. My Alpha went positively feral without you. You’re mine, Love. Do you hear me? *Mine*. I’m going to ensure nothing and no one can ever take you from me again.”

It was an impossible promise to make, but it was exactly what I needed to hear. A tear slipped free, trailing down my cheek to soak his shirt.

“Demi?” The soft feminine voice cut through the night and I lifted my head to see Julia and a red-headed Omega leaning

on each other as they stumbled our way with an exasperated Ronan and Slade following behind.

“Julia!” I breathed, pushing out of Eli’s hold and going to her. My men parted for me, reluctantly letting me go while staying close.

I wrapped her in a hug, being careful in case she was injured. We didn’t know each other at all, but we’d been through something that bonded us for life.

“Are you all right?” We both said it at the same time, then laughed lightly.

“Yeah.” Julia nodded slowly, like she was still taking stock of herself to make sure that single word was true. “Yeah, I’m okay.”

“If it wasn’t for you, we never would have been rescued. Thank you.” The red-headed Omega whose name I didn’t know reached for me and gave my forearm a squeeze. “I’m Adeline.”

“Demi,” I responded in kind, introducing myself.

“You saved our lives. I truly believe that.”

“No. That was all them,” I insisted, motioning toward the men. “I had no idea they were coming to our rescue. I mean, I hoped and prayed, but I felt just as bleak.”

“They came for *you*,” Julia stated. “And thus we have you to thank.”

I flushed and ducked my head, unwilling to accept their praise when I had nothing to do with the reason we were still alive and belonged to ourselves rather than some vicious pack.

Lawson cleared his throat. “As much as I want to allow this little reunion to continue, it’s best if we get out of here before anyone catches our trail. We shook our tail, but some of the other buyers were on to us. It’s not safe to linger.”

“Lawson’s right, Sweetness. We need to move.” Jamison stepped to my side and held out his hand, not forcing me to take it, but waiting patiently.

I slid my palm into his and let him draw me close.

“Is that your plane?”

“It is.”

The breath whooshed from my lungs. I’d known he had money—or at least guessed as much—but having it confirmed was something else entirely. Money didn’t matter to me, but I was damn grateful for a way to get out of this godsforsaken city.

“Can Julia and Adeline come with us?”

“I wouldn’t dream of leaving them here where it’s unsafe.”

I knew as much about his character, but it was still a relief to hear. I felt bonded to these girls, and I wanted to see them safely back to whatever lives they’d had before they’d been taken. Or whatever lives they wanted if the ones they’d come from weren’t safe to go back to.

Speaking of lives to go back to...

Jamison and my pack surrounded me as we headed to the plane, letting Pack Jacobs and the girls board before us. Tipping my face to his, I studied his sapphire-colored eyes, which appeared even darker under the deep night sky. “It’s not safe to go home, is it?”

He shook his head, cupping my cheek and stroking his thumb along the curve. “No, Little One.”

Slowly, sadly, I nodded my understanding.

Once again, Anton had taken something from me. Something I loved. But at the end of the day, home was wherever my pack was. I missed Vermont and Maverick Falls. I missed their house and my nest. But as long as I had my men—my *mates*—I’d never have anything to complain about.

Still... that left one important question weighing me down. “So, what do we do now?”

eight



DEMI

“WHERE ARE WE?” I peered out the window of the moving car, taking in the change of scenery from lush green grass and trees that were just beginning to turn color to sea grasses and rocky terrain.

After a three-hour plane ride, I had no idea where we were and hadn't cared to ask until now. I trusted my men. Besides, my stomach had been too upset on the flight, and I'd spent most of it curled up with my mates trying not to be sick. The six of them had taken turns holding me, murmuring soothing, sweet words about how much they'd missed me and doing all they could to make me comfortable. Their scents were distressed and worried.

Eli had done all he could to give me an impromptu medical exam in the back of the cabin, but I knew he was aching to get me alone so he could do a full workup, blood draws included. Though how he'd be able to process it, I had no idea. We weren't in Vermont, that was for sure. I kept catching glimpses of the ocean outside the car window.

“Welcome to Cliff Side, Maine,” Leo murmured gently, smoothing a hand along my leg, but unlike with Slade earlier, I welcomed his touch. “Our home away from home.”

I hopped out the moment the SUV pulled to a stop, needing solid ground that wasn't moving. Between the waning effect of the drugs and the motion sickness, the entire trip had been a bitch.

Placing my palm over my churning belly, I peered up at the seaside mansion that looked like something straight out of a movie. Three stories tall, it sat cliff-side, towering into the sky as though it was trying to meet the gods. Above, clouds spread out in every direction and seagulls cried, their squawks blending in with the steady sound of crashing ocean waves. It wasn't the sprawling, beautifully restored Vermont farmhouse

surrounded by trees and hills, but it was stunning in its own right. There was a beachy flair about it with its sea-green siding and wrap-around porch.

“Wait... you own this?” I looked between my mates, in awe of how handsome they were in the early morning light spilling across the horizon. Each one of them was banged up and a little worse for wear, but bruises, cuts, and broken bones would heal with time. We were alive and together again, and that was all that mattered.

Jamison moved behind me, wrapping his arms around my middle. I covered his hands with my own. Warm breath caressed my ear as he murmured, “We have a few real-estate holdings, but none of them were safe to use since they were in our names. We purchased this using a shell corporation, making it much harder to trace back to us, and more importantly, you. But ultimately, we bought it with you in mind. Do you like it?”

Like wasn't a strong enough word. “It's gorgeous.”

“*You're* gorgeous.” Eli slid into the conversation.

I smiled. “Such a smooth talker.”

He pushed his black-rimmed glasses up his nose with a sexy, crooked grin. “Only for you.”

A light chuckle slipped out, and Jamison pressed a kiss to the top of my head.

“You guys are sickeningly cute,” Slade commented as he opened the trunk of their own SUV and started unloading their luggage.

Thane shoved his hands in his pockets, but his attention never left me as he replied, “And proud of it.”

“Are you feeling better?” Jamison rumbled.

I took a minute to assess how I felt, knowing he wanted the truth rather than a platitude. “Now that we're not moving, yes. But I'm honestly exhausted. I can't seem to shake how tired I am.”

“That’s probably from the drugs. I wish I knew what the fuck they gave you,” Eli stated unhappily.

“I know, but as long as it wears off, I don’t care.”

“Come on, Baby.” Hades gestured toward the house—if you could even call it that—with a jerk of his chin.

“Go with them.” Jamison nudged me gently, motioning to my other mates while he hung back to talk to Pack Jacobs.

I hesitated, torn because I didn’t want to be separated from any of them after the trauma of the last two weeks. I also felt marginally bad about leaving Julia and Adeline behind, though they’d seemed to relax marginally throughout our trip, even allowing Eli to give them both check-ups.

As if he read my concern, Jamison smiled. A small curve of his lips. “Don’t worry, Sweetness. I won’t be long. The guest house is right over there, and once I help Pack Jacobs and the two Omegas settle in, I’ll join you.”

Well, that... made sense.

I relented. “Okay.” I popped onto my toes and gave him a quick kiss. “I’ll go. Just give me a second.”

Wrapping my arms around myself, I crossed to where Julia and Adeline stood near Pack Jacobs, both wearing oversized shirts that had been given to them by Lawson. I pulled them off to the side.

“Are you guys alright with staying here? At least until we figure out our next move?”

Julia was quick to assure me. “Are you kidding? This place looks incredible.”

“I don’t have mates to get back to like you did.” Adeline shrugged, not offering more.

I wondered what her story was. Where she’d come from and who might be missing her. Same for Julia, but neither seemed ready to jump into sharing their backgrounds.

“You’re welcome to stay as long as you need,” Jamison offered. “There’s food and a bedroom for each of you.”

“I’d blow someone for a hot shower,” Julia practically moaned, and Ronan coughed, smothering his startled amusement.

I snort-laughed, grateful for the dose of levity we all needed. “How about a *free* shower? I’m sure this place comes with hot water.”

“I’d take cold water as long as I can get out of this dress and scrub the entire night off of me.” Adeline visibly shivered. “Then I want to fall into bed and sleep for a week.”

I couldn’t argue. “You and me both.”

We parted ways, Jamison helping Pack Jacobs, Julia, and Adeline settle in the guest house that sat off to the right, down a winding brick path that led to the main residence. I watched him go, noticing the limp in my mate’s step as he led the way.

Meanwhile, Hades, Leo, Thane, Eli, and Knox headed inside and straight for the staircase that wound to the second story, where we were apparently staying.

“Come here,” Hades held out his hand, and I took it, loving the feel of his large fingers encompassing my smaller ones. There was something innately secure about my giant mate. He looked scary as fuck, but inside, he was a cinnamon roll—soft, gooey, and so damn sweet. He tugged me toward a door and hit a button. It opened, and I belatedly realized what it was.

“This place has an *elevator*?”

“It better. No one wants to climb up and down three stories a million times a day.”

I gave him an exaggerated once-over, letting my gaze crawl over every inch of his muscled body. “Puh-lease. I think you climb stairs for fun. You work out daily. This can’t be your limit.”

He grinned, his warm chocolate eyes sparkling. “Oh, Baby. A few stairs aren’t gonna kill me. I could climb to the tippy top with you hanging on my back like a monkey. But I was trying to be sweet.” The jovial glimmer dimmed as he grew more serious. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed your thighs

shaking from weakness and the strain of those heels. I figured you'd been through enough today and the elevator might be nice."

I squeezed his fingers and tugged him, pleased when he obliged and slid closer because, let's be honest, Hades was a mountain and I couldn't move him unless he wanted to be moved. "That was very gallant of you."

"Besides," he pulled me in and hit the button for the second floor, effectively closing us inside, "then I can do *this* in private."

Pushing me gently against the wall, he cupped the side of my neck and tipped my face up with his thumb under my chin. His mouth descended and grazed over mine. Once. Twice. I melted into him, holding on to his waist for dear life. I felt bandages under the cotton when my fingers curled into his shirt, and I softened my touch, not wanting to hurt him. The desire to pull back and demand he tell me where he was injured and how badly swamped me, but he deepened the kiss, unbothered by any pain or discomfort.

For now, I let him distract me, but none of my men would get away without their own physical inspections. As much as they wanted to make sure I was alright, I had the same overwhelming need with each of them.

Hades slotted his thigh between my legs, adding delicious pressure right where I needed it most, sending my thoughts scattering. The ride was short, but he took his time, sipping from my lips instead of devouring me hungrily. Each one left me just as dizzy and high. It was a greeting, a reintroduction, a promise of how much we loved and cared for each other. It was a core memory, something I wouldn't forget for as long as I lived.

I was still pressed against him, arching into his leg, when the doors opened.

"You stealing our girl?" Leo stood on the other side with his arms crossed, one thick brow raised at Hades, who pulled back from me with a shit-eating grin.

“Damn right. There are six of us. I gotta nab those special moments wherever I can with you greedy assholes around.”

Leo barked a laugh and held out his hand for me. I took it, letting him lead me from the elevator. “He’s not wrong. We’re all desperate for ‘Demi time.’”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I promised while I scanned him with a critical eye. I thought there were shadows of bruises along his cheekbones. Squeezing his fingers reassuringly, I added, “And I’m just as desperate for time with each of you.”

“Good. But right now, there’s a bathtub with your name on it,” Knox called from a door at the end of the hall.

My feet were killing me, but I made it down the hallway and into a massive master suite that had double doors and a huge bed spanning the far wall. Light infiltrated the room from tall windows that faced the ocean. White plantation shutters were open, letting me catch glimpses of the deep blue sea beyond the rocky shoreline. A set of French doors opened onto a large balcony that I could picture lounging on in the mornings as the sun rose over the waves. It was picturesque and peaceful.

“This is perfection,” I sighed, loving our home away from home. I still ached for the comfort of my nest, but I tried not to let that bother me. I wasn’t in heat, and as much as my Omega craved the den-like security and solace it provided, I didn’t need it as long as I had my men surrounding me.

The only one missing was Jamison as Knox crossed into the bathroom, where Thane was dropping a bath bomb into hot, soapy water. The scent of honey and vanilla rose into the air.

Eli sidled in with some Epsom salts in hand. “I thought it might aid with any aches and pains you have.” He added it to the tub, and his glasses fogged momentarily from the steam.

“Thank you. All of you.” My fingers were already fumbling on the buttons of my borrowed shirt.

“Here, let me help you with that.” Knox’s growly voice echoed in the pretty ensuite. He made fast work of undoing the

fastenings and sliding the shirt off.

Hades, who squeezed in behind me, lifted the blasted dress and shimmied it over my head and off my arms. Knox dropped to a knee and hooked his fingers into the sides of the thong, drawing it down my legs. I braced myself on his shoulders as I stepped out of it, wobbling on the heels still attached to my feet. He helped me with those too until I was blissfully naked.

Usually, I would have been shy, but I'd gone through heat with this pack and knew they loved every inch of me. Nevertheless, I would've been apprehensive of letting them see me completely bare without the haze of heat to distract us if I wasn't so thankful to get the clothing Anton had provided off of my body. My skin crawled just thinking about why I'd been dressed up like a sex doll and paraded around with barely anything on.

Knox kissed every bruise and cut as he made his way back to his feet, and the bathroom grew tense as they all watched. I saw the intensity in their stares, the unasked question.

Knox's hands stroked lovingly along the curve of my hips. "We can talk about this later," he offered, his voice low with an undisguised, dangerous edge, "but I need to know. Did they..." I studied him as he swallowed—*hard*.

"We know they hurt you," Leo interjected, his own tenor raw and raspy, "but did they *hurt* you?"

They meant sexually. Had I been assaulted again? Had they raped me?

Hades was statuesque, his muscles so taut I thought he might break, while Eli watched every micro-expression on my face, analyzing not just my answer, but my body language. Thane was behind me where I couldn't see, but I felt his tension as though it were a palpable thing.

I shook my head. "They didn't touch me... not like that. Not that I know of."

Hades growled a purely animalistic sound before cutting it off and scrubbing a hand down his face.

I answered before he had the chance to ask. "The drugs..."

I closed my eyes, taking stock of my body. There was no soreness, and I was pretty sure I hadn't been taken advantage of. I absolutely hated the missing blocks of time. There was nothing but black nothingness where there should have been memories.

"I passed out for a while and everything went fuzzy." I rubbed at my forehead, trying to remember. Around the dark gaps of absent time were snippets of moments that wouldn't quite string together. "But I'm almost positive no one touched me. If I'd been sold—" I couldn't even fathom what my fate would've been. Unspeakably awful. Those packs were vicious, and they had expectations for their new Omegas.

"We were never going to let that happen," Eli rasped solemnly.

"Agreed." That came from Hades, who was barely holding himself together.

"Thank you," Knox whispered. "I know that was a difficult question."

I nodded and tucked my chin, staring at the modern tile. If my answer had been different, would it have changed things? My mates knew some of the abuse I'd suffered at the hands of Pack Silver, but it was only a drop in the bucket. Would they view me differently if I told them all of it? Would I be spoiled goods like Anton had said?

Anxiety crept up and tears pricked my eyes.

"Demi," Knox barked gently, and the Omega in my snapped to attention. "Look at me," he demanded.

My chin raised, and my gaze glossy and unfocused.

Easing to close the distance between us, Knox cupped my face in both hands and smoothed his thumbs softly along my lower lashes, gathering the moisture on the pads of his fingers. "I only asked because we need to know how to take care of you. It's a delicate subject, and we'd rather not make any missteps. You understand that, don't you?"

Sniffing, I nodded.

“Tell me why you’re upset.”

How did I explain this? “I don’t want you to view me differently...” It was partly true. I couldn’t bring myself to voice the rest.

“Never,” Knox answered, and the others chimed in with their agreement.

“You’re precious to us, Darling. And nothing—absolutely *nothing*—will change how much we love and respect you. Do you understand?” Thane pressed, moving behind me and tipping my chin in his direction.

“Okay,” I agreed waterily.

He leaned down and kissed me sweetly, and the nerves jangling inside me settled.

Drawing in a deep breath, I let their combined scents wash away the rest of my stress. The next exhale was healing, and I nodded. “Okay,” I said again, believing it more the second time.

“Alright, Baby. Let’s get this collar off.” Hades handed Knox a pocket knife with other utility tools all tucked into the handle.

Flipping open the lock pick, Knox caught my eyes and cautioned, “Hold tight.”

“I almost forgot about the collar.” I flushed, hating that they’d seen me in the demeaning thing. My fingers curled around the smooth metal, but without the key, it wasn’t coming off on its own.

Knox bit his lip as he focused on the small keyhole, jimmying the pick this way and that until it finally opened with a snick. I breathed a huge sigh of relief as he removed it and tossed it in the trash.

“All better,” he murmured. I ran a hand over my neck, grateful to feel nothing but skin.

“Thank you.” Emotion clogged my throat, making my words tight.

In answer, he kissed my forehead and motioned me toward the tub.

I caught the murderous flicker on Thane's face as he stared at the glint of gold visible in the bin, but when I turned his way, he cleared his expression, settling for a smile that didn't fully reach his eyes.

"Hopefully I got the temperature right." He offered me his hand, and with his help, I eased into the steaming water.

I grasped on to the change of topics like a drowning man to a life raft. "It's hot and I love it."

Thane seemed to realize that and helped me steer the conversation back to shallower depths. "Darling, it's not hot... it's a degree short of scalding," he teased.

A grin blossomed after I released a happy sigh, letting the bath blanket me in its warm embrace. "Like I said... *perfection.*" Appreciation filled me for how caring these men were. Each one sported their own set of cuts, scabs, and injuries. They'd obviously been through the wringer too, and yet they were taking care of me when they should have been focusing on themselves. I peeked at each of them. "You don't all have to stay with me if you want to go get cleaned up, too."

"Are you trying to say we stink?" Leo grinned in that boy-next-door way of his.

"I mean. We might." Knox lifted his arm, giving himself a cursory sniff.

I giggled despite myself. "No. It's been a long two weeks and I want you to take care of yourselves. I'm—" I sobered, swallowing as I forced the words out. Truth was, I wanted them here, but I didn't want them to feel like they had to sit around and watch me bathe. "I'm okay now." I swished my arms through the growing pile of bubbles that covered the top of the scented water.

"We're not going anywhere, Baby," Hades promised.

As if to punctuate that point, Leo hoisted himself onto the vanity counter and shot me a playful wink. "Besides, the view here is amazing."

Feeling lighter than I had in weeks, I smiled, and it filled my whole body. “You’re right. Knox *is* pretty damn handsome.”

Groans of protest rose around me.

Thane threw a hand over his heart in mock offense and said, “Hey! What about me?”

Eli smirked while Knox cockily propped a shoulder against the wall, crossed his arms over his chest, and shot me a wink before following it up with a, “She’s not wrong.”

Leo chuckled and shook his head. “*Not* what I meant, Honey.”

I giggled. “You’re all very handsome,” I placated.

“And you don’t know how to take a compliment. He was obviously talking about you and what a sexy picture you make. All that nakedness teasing us from under those damn bubbles.” Hades bit his lip, and something about the motion sent my lady bits fluttering again.

I’d been through trauma—we all had—but my reactions to them were visceral. My body, mind, heart, and soul knew I belonged to them. No matter how much time had passed, no matter how much shit we’d lived through, they were my safe harbor. Falling back into our usual banter gave my heart wings. This was family. Pack. *Love*.

“Relax against the edge, and I’ll wash you,” Knox ordered gently, already moving to kneel at the side of the tub and grabbing a waiting loofa. Lathering it with soap, he ran it along my shoulders, down my back, and over my chest and stomach. It wasn’t sexual, but tender and caring. After taking his time with each leg, he cleaned my core, then slathered his hands with shampoo and washed my hair. His fingers were magic, massaging my scalp and making my eyes droop.

Tiredness caught up with me as the warm water beckoned me to relax, easing the soreness in my muscles. Tension bled out of my shoulders and limbs.

My head lulled against the tub, and before I knew it, I drifted off. At some point, someone lifted me from the tub,

dried me with a fluffy towel, and settled me in bed. I barely opened my eyes, snuggling into the soft blankets with the scents of my mates surrounding me. For the first time in weeks, I slept soundly.

nine



KNOX

I COULDN'T STOP LOOKING at her. She was here. She was really fucking here.

“You okay, over there?” Eli asked softly, keeping his tone to a low tenor so as not to wake our sweet mate.

“Yeah.” My voice was rough, gritty, and raw, baring just how shaken I'd been these last two weeks. “It's hard to believe she's fucking real.”

Eli nodded, his gaze dropping to Demi. She looked so damn peaceful, an angel here on earth. Her rosy lips were slightly parted as she breathed, her hair spread out around her like a halo. The desire to kiss each of the freckles dusting her nose rode me, but I didn't dare wake her. My baby had been so exhausted, she'd passed out during her bath. I'd scooped her up, uncaring of the water that'd soaked my shirt. With the guys' help, we'd gotten her dried off and tucked into bed. She'd been so tired she hardly roused, settling right back into a deep sleep the second her head hit the pillow.

We'd barely left the room since, only slipping out for essentials, like food or bathroom breaks, and always in shifts. None of us could stand the idea of leaving her alone. It would be a long time until we gave her space to so much as change without company.

Waking up after the accident and finding her missing had been the worst moment of my entire life. The agony and sheer panic still echoed in my chest. It'd follow me forever like a ghost with a vendetta.

I'd been in love with her before she'd been taken, but it was only after she was gone that I realized she wasn't just the woman I loved—she was my whole fucking heart. I couldn't breathe without her. Didn't want to live in a world where she wasn't with me and my pack. Not knowing where she was, if she was safe, or what those assholes might put her through had

nearly killed me. I'd barely slept or eaten, spending every spare second putting all the resources at my fingertips to work, trying to find her.

It had taken us three days to figure out Anton brought her back to Silver City. Though we'd all suspected he'd return to his turf like the little bitch he was, we hadn't had concrete proof until we got our hands on his personal flight manifest and the security footage from the private airstrip. And yet, despite our best efforts, we were unable to track down where he'd hidden her.

I shoved a hand through my hair, tugging at the longer strands, enjoying the small bite of pain. I deserved so much more of it, because—*fuck*—I still didn't know where he'd kept her, and it *killed* me. She had been held captive, waiting for me to come to the rescue, and I hadn't been able to locate her.

Fourteen days we'd been apart, and I had no clue what those assholes had done to her—what kind of abuse she'd suffered at their hands. She'd told us they hadn't raped her—thank the gods—but abuse came in many forms. All kinds of terrifying ideas played through my mind. I couldn't fucking stomach it.

Ultimately, I'd failed her, and that was something I'd always have to live with.

It wasn't until Jamison got wind of a black market Omega auction that we started putting the pieces together. There were rumors that Anton was the host of the events—and like dogs chasing a bone, we hunted for any additional information.

After sleepless nights and consuming too many energy drinks, we finally found a pack who had been invited, yet held zero loyalty to Pack Silver. Anton was a slimy bastard who had burned some bridges in his rise to power. Not everyone kissed his ass the way he thought they did, and that'd worked to our advantage.

Armed with fresh intel, we connected Demi's father to the auctions, and the specifics of his arrangement with Anton surfaced. It felt like a bomb had dropped on us when we realized they'd been working together for the past year.

Held quarterly and never hosted at the same venue twice, the last three auctions had taken place at a property either owned or represented by Roger Fenway. It became clear that Pack Silver had struck a deal with the businessman, and in return, they paved the way for his revitalization of the waterfront, an endeavor that made millions of dollars.

They all deserved to rot in prison for the rest of their days for what they'd done.

"You should get something to eat," Eli sighed, attention scrutinizing me in that 'doctor's way' of his. He could just look at a person and know what they needed. "Don't think I haven't noticed you've been sustaining yourself on Red Bull and the occasional sandwich, which you only ate when it was shoved under your nose. She's home and she's safe. I'll keep an eye on her while you're gone."

My stomach chose that moment to growl, but I still didn't move.

"You're no good to her stressed out, hangry, and tired," he reminded me.

I blew out a breath and accented. Because, *dammit*, he was right.

Hades and Leo were sleeping on either side of Demi, finally able to rest now that she was safe. They lay just behind Eli and me, who'd been the lucky bastards that'd claimed the spots directly next to her. Knowing there were three of my packmates with her in case she needed us was the only reason I forced myself out of bed. I stood at the end, staring at Demi's small form. My heart squeezed.

Godsdamn, when did I become this Alpha? My whole world was wrapped up in that one sweet, sexy, sleeping little Omega. It was shocking how much life had changed since she walked into it. It was scary as fuck having my heart live outside of my body—proven by what we'd recently been through—but I wouldn't go back. I'd been living my life on empty without even realizing it, and now that I had Demi, I had *everything*.

There weren't any other words to describe how I felt.

I was so completely gone for my ray of sunshine.

Before her, my world had been cloaked in darkness, and now—now I could *see*.

I forwent grabbing a shirt as I left the room and padded down the stairs, hungry and ready to eat. The sooner I grabbed food, the sooner I could get back. Didn't matter if Demi slept the day away. I'd happily watch over her while she dreamed.

Oh yeah... I'd definitely turned into a sap. And you know what? I embraced it.

I walked into the living room with a goofy grin on my face that died the moment I saw Thane, Jamison, Enoch, and Lawson gathered around a laptop with creased foreheads, drawn brows, and matching frowns marring their faces.

All those good feelings vanished as I went on high alert. "What's going on?"

* * *

JAMISON

Knox walked into the room with a rare smile on his face that faded away the moment he spotted us gathered around the laptop that sat on the kitchen island.

“What’s going on?” he asked roughly.

Knox had always been observant. It was a key part of what made him an incredible police officer. I knew he read the tension in the room as he crossed to where we were.

“See for yourself.” I angled the laptop, so we all had a decent view.

Together, we stared at the punchable face of Anton Aster on the news, sweet-talking the anchor who was about to shove a microphone in his face.

“I’m here with Anton Aster, mayor of Silver City, who was hosting a charity event late last night at the brand-new Fenway Center on the waterfront when an explosion rocked the building just after midnight, abruptly ending his event and sending some to the hospital. Can you comment on the events of last evening, Mayor?” the female anchor asked, angling the microphone his way.

“I certainly can,” he smiled, charming the woman with his intense gaze and an overly plastic smile.

She flushed, batting her lashes at him as he leaned into the mic, bringing himself closer, to her delight.

“I’ve been informed by the fine men in uniform that there was a gas leak in the building, which unfortunately led to the explosion,” Anton explained. “It’s rare, but these things do happen from time to time. The Fenway Center was recently constructed and not yet open to the public, which is why, when the developer, Roger Fenway, graciously offered to lend me his space free of charge for our charity event, I couldn’t say no. Though none of us expected a night of philanthropy to turn

into such an explosive evening.” He laughed at his own joke, and the anchor chuckled weakly, clearly aware it was too soon for such levity.

There was a slight change in her demeanor—less flirtatious and more investigative.

“As for the Fenway Center,” he continued, “there is extensive damage to the top floors, but the fire has been extinguished and I’ve been told the building is structurally sound.”

“What about the four men taken to the hospital and the subsequent car explosion a few blocks from here? Are they related, and do you have any comments?”

Anton’s eyes narrowed on the woman as he caught onto the change in her posture. A forced smile tilted his mouth, and he cleared his throat before spinning another tale. “There’s no way the two events could’ve been related, given the explosion here at the Fenway was, once again, found to be a gas leak. I don’t know anything about a secondary explosion a few blocks from here and would direct any further questions about that *separate* incident to the police. As for those hospitalized, I have heard that...”

I tuned him out, frustrated by how easily he smooth-talked his way out of giving true answers. We listened to his bullshit responses, barely containing our growls at his nonsense.

“Is that Anton?” Demi’s sweet voice cut through the broadcast, and I shoved the laptop shut before turning to face her. Her worried expression caused a little crease between her brows.

Despite her concerned look, she was an absolute vision. Brown hair spilled around her shoulders in soft, untamed waves and she wore a t-shirt and a pair of someone’s boxers—Leo’s, I believed. Her sweet berry and black honey scent teased me to distraction as she moved closer.

Eli was behind her, following her into the kitchen.

“You were supposed to be asleep,” Knox grumbled.

Demi instantly bristled at his tone. I sighed, ready for the fallout, though I understood where he was coming from. He didn't want her to have to deal with anything related to her old pack or the aftermath of earlier. Neither did I. She deserved to rest, relax, and let us handle the tough shit for a while. She'd been through enough to last five lifetimes.

My mate crossed her arms, and though I read her irritation loud and clear, I couldn't keep from noticing the way they pillowed her breasts. They were squeezed together, and the position made her nipples stand out more prominently beneath the fabric.

Fuck, she's gorgeous. Even in her anger. Or maybe more because of it. That silent strength, that push back, sparkled in her eyes, and damn if seeing it didn't turn me on.

"I woke up. Is that not allowed?" she sassed.

Knox seemed momentarily taken aback. "Of course it is," he mumbled, looking sheepish.

Directing my thoughts elsewhere before I was hard enough to ache, I cut in to smooth things over. "We just wanted you to get your rest."

"She started to stir as soon as you left the bed." Eli appeared guilty, wincing when Knox shot him an exasperated look. He held up his hands in mock surrender. "I know. I'm sorry."

"What are you two going on about?" Demi glanced between them. "What am I missing?"

"I told him to go eat because he's been living off of energy drinks. He didn't want to, but I pushed. Technically, I'm responsible for accidentally waking you up."

Demi rolled her eyes playfully, some of her ire bleeding away. "I'm pretty sure I slept for an entire day, judging by the sunset outside." She motioned toward the wall of windows that let in a beautiful view of a fiery ocean. "Besides, I'm hungry too."

"I'll make you something. What would you like, Darling?" Thane was already moving, practically dancing around the

kitchen island and back into his domain. Grabbing ingredients before she'd even answered, he started scattering things across the counters.

My guess? The man would make a little of everything in case she changed her mind or had a craving. Knowing him, he'd create an entire meal plan based on her favorite foods and then always have them available.

She paused, her hesitation clear as her gaze roamed his injuries. "You don't have to cook. I can just get a snack."

"I'm sorry, but that option isn't on the menu. Want to try that again?" He smirked at Demi's exaggerated sigh.

"Are you sure?"

"One-hundred and ten percent."

"Okay, then. Surprise me?"

An incredulous expression crossed Thane's face. "*Surprise you?*"

"Anything you make will be delicious. So yes. Surprise me."

He grinned at the compliment. "Alright. I can do that. How's your stomach feeling?" His attention followed her hand as it covered her belly.

"Still a little unsettled, but I'm doing a lot better than I was."

"Something light then." He went to work, flitting around the kitchen as he dedicated himself to the task of feeding our mate.

Returning her focus back to me, she padded closer. I swiveled my seat to face her and spread my knees to make room, hiding the wince that wanted to break across my face from the wound on my outer thigh. It pulled painfully with the movement, but I didn't give a fuck about a little pain. I much preferred to have my mate as close as humanly possible. She didn't stop until she was right against the line of my body. Her arms wrapped around my neck as she settled against my chest. Her breasts—unhindered by a bra—pressed against me and I

felt her nipples harden behind the borrowed t-shirt she wore. I was almost positive that article of clothing belonged to Hades, if the way it swam around her was any indication. I liked her soft and pliant like this. I also liked her in our clothing, covered in the scents of my pack.

“I didn’t catch all of what he was saying, but it seems as though Anton talked himself out of yet another suspicious situation, didn’t he?”

I settled my hands on her waist. “We don’t have to talk about him, Sweetness. We’ve got it under control. There’s nothing you need to worry about.”

Her brows pinched together. “That’s... sweet, I think? But that’s not how this relationship is going to work. My whole life, people I should have been able to trust have kept me in the dark about things. Things they said I was too naïve, or stupid, or hormone-driven to understand.”

I growled, disliking the disparaging way she spoke about herself, even if she was repeating things others had said to her in the past. I wanted to hunt down everyone who’d ever hurt her and teach them a lesson. But more importantly, I didn’t want to be someone whose name ended up on that very same list.

My hands gave a light squeeze to her hips, and my thumbs rubbed gently along the dip of her waist. “None of that is true, Little One. And it’s not the reason I wanted to shelter you from this.”

“I know.” She nodded absently, biting her lip and worrying it between her teeth. Finally, she exhaled and relented. “But it doesn’t change the fact that I want to be involved. Whatever your reasons for keeping things from me, they’re not good enough. I deserve to be an active participant in my own life, and while I love how protective and caring you all are, I don’t want to be kept from the hard things just because you’re trying to shield me.”

Sharp claps broke out from where Enoch and Lawson had moved off the side, giving us the illusion of privacy while

eavesdropping on every word. I rolled my eyes as Enoch let out a whoop of support. “You tell ‘em girl. Here, here!”

The tension in the room deflated with Demi’s snicker and the curl of her lips.

Blowing out a breath, I agreed, even though my instincts were screaming at me to keep her safe and unburdened. But she was right. Demi had been through hell, and she deserved to know what was going on, especially when it directly affected her.

I filled her in on the newscast that the building had been one of her father’s new constructions, and the way Anton skirted any blame for the explosion. It also meant his true purpose for being in the Fenway Center at that time of night wouldn’t come to light. He’d effectively squashed it.

“He’s going to get away with it, isn’t he?”

Growls and scoffs rolled through the room, sounding from each Alpha.

“He’s guilty, Darling. We’ll find a way to nail his ass for his crimes.” Thane called over his shoulder, watching the stove carefully so he didn’t burn Demi’s breakfast. Dinner? Whatever meal it was. We were wildly off schedule, but I didn’t care what you called it as long as she ate.

In the short time we’d been apart, she’d gotten thinner. I wanted her healthy and cared for.

“Besides,” Knox grinned, looking smug. “We didn’t walk away from the auction without some leverage.”

“Leverage?” Demi gazed over my shoulder at my packmate.

Digging into his sweatpants, Knox procured a flash drive and waggled it between his fingers.

“What is that?” she asked airily, eyes glued to the small device.

I gripped her chin gently, bringing her attention back to me. Stroking my thumb lightly along the line of her bottom lip, I gave her a little hope. “Evidence of what Pack Silver was

up to last night. Pictures and videos from the auction. It's not incriminating enough to crucify him, but it's a hell of a start."

ten



DEMI

MY SPOON CLINKED against my bowl as I scraped up the remnants of my meal, then popped it into my mouth with a contented sigh. “That was delicious.”

Thane made an enormous pot of chicken soup, a spread of gourmet sandwiches, homemade potato salad, and a vegetable tray for dinner, providing our guests with a range of choices. Pack Jacobs had piled their plates high, then disappeared to the outdoor deck to eat, offering my pack and I precious time alone.

Julia and Adeline were still asleep, and I didn’t blame them. If I weren’t so hungry, I probably would’ve crawled back into bed already.

Instead, I’d opted in favor of food and had promptly devoured a bowl of soup since my stomach hadn’t fully settled. Luckily, my hunger had come roaring back, allowing me to eat as much as I had.

Staring at the bottom of my empty bowl, it took all my self-restraint and sense of decorum not to lick the last droplets of creamy broth I’d missed.

“Do you want seconds?” Hades asked from where he sat at the table, studying me intently.

Shaking my head, I smiled to myself when I noticed more than one of them tense, ready to spring from their chairs if they caught even a hint of a nod. “I don’t want to push my limits. It’s been a while since I’ve eaten this much.”

Unhappy grumbles rose around the table, and I dipped my flushed face. I’d probably said too much.

It hadn’t escaped my notice that all my men were paying close attention to me, making sure I ate, anticipating whether I wanted more food or a warm drink. They were treating me like

a princess, and though I could certainly feed myself, it was nice to be so thoroughly cared for.

Especially after... well, *after*.

I'd learned from the meals we'd shared in the past that they derived pleasure from seeing to my needs. They always made sure they served me first and didn't eat until I'd taken a bite. It was funny, really, since my upbringing had taught me to wait on Alphas hand and foot. I shook my head.

What a change.

If I had to assign their attentiveness to a love language, it might be acts of service. Then again, they were also incredible, with words of affirmation, quality time, physical touch, and gifts too. Admittedly, each one spoke to the Omega side of me that needed love, attention, and support. They provided a safe place for me to thrive.

I just hoped I offered them as much in return.

Lately, I felt all I'd done was create stress and heartache. Even now, sitting around the table, they looked haggard and tired. Though the accident and subsequent kidnapping hadn't truly been my fault—in the sense that I never, *ever* intended for it to happen—I was still the one who'd brought Anton and Pack Silver to their doorstep.

They'd been hurt because of me. They *almost died* because of me.

There were days in captivity when I'd wallowed in the sorrow of that knowledge for endless amounts of time. Although the past twenty-four hours were filled with adrenaline and happiness from the rescue and reunion with my mates, I continued to bear the guilt of causing trouble in their lives. Anton had hurt them to get to *me*, and I'd have to live with that forever.

“Hey.” Eli captured my chin and dragged my attention his way. Concern covered his face, and he cocked his head, studying me closely from behind his black-rimmed glasses. Somehow, he always sensed when I was even the slightest bit

upset or off-kilter. He read me so easily. “What’s going through that beautiful mind of yours, Love?”

I nibbled on my lip, debating how much to share. I didn’t want to lie to them, but omitting the truth might be for the best. If they understood the depth of my guilt, they’d definitely try to talk me out of it. But it was my burden to carry.

“I’m fine,” I promised.

And it was true. I had them.

I was free from Pack Silver once more and back in their arms.

I had food and the essentials.

Hell, I had *more* than the essentials. The house they’d bought was incredible and more than I ever would have asked for—if I asked for anything at all.

Yeah, that was something else I struggled with. It was still hard for me to acknowledge what I needed out loud, but I was working on it. For now, though, I was content, if not swallowed by remorse for what I’d put them through.

“I’m not convinced that’s true,” Jamison rumbled, unsatisfied by my answer.

“Fine rarely means fine, Honey.” Leo shot me a knowing look.

I smiled, willing the expression all the way up to my eyes so they believed me. Because I wasn’t ready to bring this party down with my internal turmoil. I parted my lips, about to give them another platitude, when an unhappy rumble vibrated Jamison’s chest.

“Demi,” he scolded lightly. “You don’t need to hide your feelings from us. The last two weeks tested us all, and we haven’t even scratched the surface of everything we’ve survived. We want to know every detail of what you endured during our time apart. Parts of it will make us angry—”

“Fuck, let’s not sugarcoat it.” Hades shrugged, owning his feelings on the matter. “Most of it is going to make us angry.”

Jamison's eyes narrowed intently. "Hades is right. Thinking about anyone else laying a hand on you, mistreating you—" he swallowed back the enraged grit that entered his voice. "The Alpha in me can't stand the idea of you being hurt. Yes, I'm angry. On many levels, we all are, but it's not at you. *Never* at you."

"Just at the situation," Thane added. "But that doesn't mean we don't want to know, Darling. We can't support you and provide what you need unless we understand what you went through."

"I could say the same for you," I murmured, eyeing their injuries and hating that I hadn't been there to take care of them and help them heal.

From what I could tell, Hades and Knox both had broken ribs. I'd spotted the bandages wrapped tightly around their abdomens, and it explained Knox's pained grunt when I'd hugged him earlier. A brace covered Knox's left knee, half-hidden by his shorts. Cuts and scrapes covered Hades' arms and legs, and I'd caught the shadows of discoloration under his white t-shirt, hinting at more wounds.

Similar bruising peeked out of the V of Eli's button down, discoloring his collarbone before dipping out of sight. A shallow cut arching over one cheek and scabs across his knuckles were the only other outward signs of the accident I could see on him.

Red, healing burns marred Jamison's face from the impact of the airbag and there was something wrong with his leg, too. I'd caught him wincing whenever he moved it, and, despite his best efforts, he couldn't hide the pronounced limp when he walked.

Then there was Thane. The cut across his forehead continued to heal, and his bruises had yellowed. But the most blatant of his injuries were the deep gashes along his right forearm I hadn't seen until he pushed his sleeves up while he cooked. There were long lines of stitches holding the wounds together, and I knew Eli had been the one to patch him up.

Though Thane tried to downplay his pain, I'd noted the stiff way he held that arm, intentionally trying not to use it—much.

And Leo? Bruising ringed his eyes—having recently turned from mottled blues to unsightly yellows—and the more I studied him, the more I noticed the crooked tilt to his nose. Broken and reset, the asymmetry of it added a ruggedness to his boy-next-door features that hadn't been there before, though it didn't detract from his handsomeness in the slightest.

Eli watched me catalog their injuries with a knowing gaze, full of understanding and patience. He knew exactly what I was doing—blaming myself. Worrying over them. Wishing I could rewind time and fix everything.

“You can help me check on everyone and change bandages later, if it'll make you feel better,” he offered with a small smile.

I didn't try to hide the rush of relief that idea provided. A swift breath whooshed from my lungs, and I nodded earnestly. “Yes, please.” It wasn't a solution, but it was a start.

“It's a date.”

“What kind of date is that?” Thane teased, crossing his arms. He winced and readjusted, favoring his wounds.

Eli chuckled. “The kind you go on with a *doctor*?”

“I don't know. Sounds like you're trying to put her to work, to me. Where's the romance?”

“You'd make her cook. That's work.”

Thane scoffed. “That's *fun*. There's a difference.”

“Maybe for you, but it's not romantic.”

“I'll have you know cooking together can be *very* romantic. It takes teamwork and timing. It's an intricate dance that teaches trust and patience.” Thane paused, letting those sentiments sink in.

I opened my mouth to comment how sweet that sounded when Leo, who was holding back a laugh, shook his head. His sparkling eyes told me to wait.

Not even a beat later, Thane continued, “Besides, I can think of plenty of delicious foods and sauces I’d like to lick off of our Omega.” He grinned blindingly, sending a wink my way.

An immediate blush stained my cheeks, but a wide smile of my own blossomed.

“Like this?” Swiping my finger into the creamy broth at the bottom of my bowl, I smeared it across Thane’s cheek, then leaned over to lick him clean with one long swipe of my tongue.

Giggling, I stole his empty bowl and stacked it with my own so he couldn’t retaliate. Pushing back my chair, I left the howling men behind as Thane’s eyes heated. The heaviness of his gaze followed me all the way to the kitchen while I sucked the remnants of dinner off my finger.

It felt good to flirt and tease. It was almost... normal.

Depositing the dishes into the sink, I turned on the water to wash them by hand when heat suffused my spine.

“There’s a dishwasher for that,” Jamison murmured as his large hands found my waist. The stroke of his thumbs over the curve of my hips sent pleasant tingles skittering throughout my body. Leaning down, he kissed the crown of my head.

“I know, but I don’t mind. It gives my hands something to do.”

I waited for him to make some sexy remark about finding other, more *pleasurable* tasks to occupy my hands. Fates knew after my little display at the table, it would have been perfectly placed amidst our banter, but it didn’t come.

“Demi.”

I paused, dripping soapy water. Jamison slowly turned me to face him. With a dishtowel, he dried my skin and then lifted me onto the countertop. Those same large hands landed on my thighs and he spread my legs to make room for him to move closer.

“I know I can be a pushy bastard,” he said as I wound my arms around his neck and buried my fingers in the hair at his nape, “but I’m not letting this drop, Sweetness. I’m thrilled to see you smiling and flirting, and I don’t want to ruin any of it. But you’ve been through so much. None of us know where your head is at or how to move forward, and while I know you don’t want to relive the past two weeks, we need to understand. *I* need to understand.”

I turned my face away, teeth clamping down on my bottom lip. The cut in the center pulled, making it sting, but I welcomed the bite of pain. It helped to sharpen my thoughts.

“It’s normal to have some PTSD from all of this. To be scared to talk about it.”

I shook my head. “I’m not scared. It’s just... nothing happened. Literally nothing.”

Hooking a finger under my chin, Jamison steered my attention back to him. “Explain.”

I shrugged, blinking up at him as the desolation I’d experienced came rushing to the forefront. But it could have been so, *so* much worse.

I told him as much, filling him in on the bleak existence I’d lived through: the small, windowless room, the near isolation, the doctor who’d fixed my shoulder without pain meds, the endless quiet, and the terrifying visions of their SUV, smashed to pieces, that ate away at me like acid.

Through it all, my fear for them had been the worst kind of torture, but I hadn’t been touched. Hadn’t been *forced* like I’d been in the past. Pack Silver had left me alone. So, as difficult as seclusion had been, it had also been a blessing.

“And what happened after they took you out of the room?” Jamison prodded gently, digging for more.

Things got a little dicier during this part of the story, but I didn’t hold back. I recounted my goodbye with Pack Silver and what I could remember of the auction despite my drugged haze.

All the while, Jamison listened stoically, his hands on my thighs rubbing up and down in encouraging, comforting strokes. When I was done, he was silent, as were the men who'd fallen quiet in the other room. They weren't far enough away not to have overheard our conversation.

“Abuse comes in many forms. I'm immensely grateful they didn't force themselves on you—” Jamison paused, swallowing roughly past the unspoken ‘this time’ I knew was on the tip of his tongue. “But that doesn't mean their treatment didn't impact you.”

Knox's chair scraped against the floor as he stood and came to join us in the kitchen. He cupped the side of my face and I nuzzled into his palm. The warmth of their scents quieted the discord rioting inside my chest. I didn't want them to worry about me. They'd done enough of that already.

“There's a reason prisons use solitary as a punishment, Sunshine. You never should have had to go through that.” His hand shifted a little lower, and he gently ran his thumb over the scabbed split on my bottom lip. “And the cages? The auction? That was some dark shit. They're going to pay for what they did to you, Demi Leigh. And when they do, you'll never have to worry about them again.”

I held onto that promise, burying it in my heart and hoping it would grow so that I had just as much faith that the worst was over. It was hard to believe, but I so badly wanted to.

eleven



ELI

MY PHONE DINGED, and I quickly picked it up. Thumbing the volume button, I silenced the notifications as I stared at the incoming texts.

Knox: Who's got eyes on our girl?

Looking down at the Omega curled against my side, I smiled and juggled my cell, texting back the best I could with one hand. No way in hell I was disturbing my mate to free the arm she was currently using as a pillow.

Eli: I've got her. We're in the media room.

The room sat on the third floor, located in one of the rounded turrets. Windows surrounded us, but this space was as close to a nest as this house had, something we'd be rectifying if Demi decided she liked it enough to keep.

There were cream cushions covering the floors and blankets were spread around the room, along with pillows of all sizes. She'd felt them all, choosing her favorites while I flicked through the guide on the TV, making a mental note to order automatic blinds for the windows.

Even without that 'closed in' feeling a true nest provided, tension had bled out of Demi the second she'd created a soft little bed, snuggling down in a bed of her preferred materials.

A reality singing show played quietly on the screen beyond, something where the singers dressed up in ridiculous costumes and the judges' panel had to guess who they were. I could see the appeal. It was just enough mystery to be entertaining, and the talent was surprisingly decent. All that mattered was that Demi seemed to like it. The mindless entertainment had lulled her right to sleep.

Nuzzled against me, she breathed rhythmically, snoring this soft, innocent little sound I could listen to forever. I was just happy she was resting. After all she'd been through, she needed time to regain her strength.

Gazing down at her, I noted how much her face had thinned. She hadn't eaten enough while we'd been separated, and I was sure the stress she'd been under hadn't helped matters.

It boggled my mind how she'd downplayed her time in captivity. It spoke to her strength, but it also spoke to the sheer depth of abuse she'd suffered in the past if being kidnapped and held hostage for two weeks with barely any human interaction wasn't viewed as all that traumatizing. She hadn't said it exactly like that, but it'd been pretty damn close.

It broke my heart how much damage she'd endured. I didn't truly think any of us understood the severity of what she'd suffered in the past.

Jamison: How's she doing? Afraid I pushed her too hard earlier.

Thane: Nah. We needed to know, and whether she admits it or not, she needed to talk about it.

Leo: Hades is currently killing the punching bag in the gym trying to work out his feelings on the subject.

Eli: Don't let him reinjure himself. Those ribs are still healing.

Leo: On it.

Knox: I wanna nail these bastards and put them in the ground.

Jamison: Death is too easy an escape. They need to be locked away on life sentences and made to suffer daily the way they made Demi suffer.

Leo: I'm with you, but Hades disagrees. Said anyone who hurt his mate doesn't deserve to keep breathing.

I glanced down at Demi, at the way her lashes rested against the creamy curves of her cheeks. She was beautiful on the outside, but she was even more gorgeous inside. This woman was sweet, innocent, and *good*. How anyone could treat her so poorly confused the absolutely shit out of me.

I was inclined to agree with Hades. I wasn't a violent person, but in this instance, I wanted blood, vengeance, and retaliation.

Pack Silver wasn't worthy of the air they breathed.

No one deserved to be abused but Demi, least of all. She didn't deserve any of the shit she'd lived through. I wanted to fix it, but since that was impossible, I'd settle for erasing it from her mind and replacing all the bad memories with far better ones.

Eli: Do we have a plan?

Knox: Going over all the pictures and videos in detail with Jamison, Lawson, Enoch, and Felix. What we've got is pretty damning.

Jamison: We need to discuss our next move. Threatening Anton directly...

Thane: ...

Knox: Or going the more official route and handing over what we have to the proper authorities.

If we went after Anton directly, we could warn him off Demi. We could free her from him once and for all. It was possible he'd try to retaliate and get his hands on the evidence, but blackmail was often an effective tool. More than likely, he'd let her go to keep his sins buried.

If we went through the authorities, we'd have to turn over the evidence and trust others to handle the situation properly. I didn't particularly like putting Demi's safety in the hands of strangers, though I'd like nothing more than to see Anton in handcuffs, being shoved in the back of a cruiser.

I wasn't the best equipped member of my pack to make such a call, but knowing the guys, we'd all get an equal say. Though Jamison was the official leader of our pack, we functioned as a democracy rather than a dictatorship. We'd put the decision to a vote to decide the majority. Whatever option won would become our course of action.

Eli: Demi gets a vote.

Truthfully, her opinion mattered more to me than any of the others. I'd heard what she'd told Jamison about wanting a say in her own life. She didn't want to be sheltered from the hard things.

Texts of agreement popped up one after the other. Satisfied, I set my phone down and tucked my arm under the back of my head, content to endure reality TV and watch my mate sleep. Lightly, I kissed my Omega's hair and breathed in her sweet berry and honey scent.

Demi was incredibly strong and capable, but all her life people had looked down on and diminished her. First, for being a woman, then designating as an Omega. Not only were they things she had no control over, but they were also two facets of who she was as a person that made her so damn special. It was a shame the men in her life up to this point had made her feel belittled and unimportant when she was anything but. Every woman deserved to feel like the incredible goddess they were.

I wanted Demi to embrace every facet of herself. To see the beauty and light she brought to the world.

Attuned to my girl, I noticed the second her breathing changed pace, morphing from steady, peaceful draws to fast, choppy gasps. A small cry broke from her chest, and she writhed in her sleep, clearly distressed.

“Demi,” I called softly, not wanting to startle her awake, but instead, rouse her gently. “You’re having a bad dream, Love.”

Eyes moving rapidly behind her lids, she whimpered.

“Shhh,” I cooed, rolling onto my side and cupping her face. I rubbed my thumb along her skin. “You’re safe.”

“Eli?” Demi’s lashes fluttered open, and she blinked, taking in her surroundings with a confused little wrinkle creasing her forehead.

“Yeah, Love. It’s me. We’re at the seaside chateau in Maine. You’re safe. Everyone’s here. They’re just in other parts of the house.”

Blowing out a long breath, Demi nodded and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. “Fuck,” she whispered. “The nightmare felt so real.” A full body shiver wracked her. “I was terrified to wake up and find all of you were just a dream.”

I pulled her with me as I rolled onto my back, settling her over my chest. I rested her hand over my heart, letting her feel the steady thud of it. “I assure you, we’re very real. I’m right here with you.”

“I dreamed of all of you a lot,” she admitted. “You were all I thought about. Every morning when I’d start to wake up, and I knew you were going to fade away...” she trailed off, a tear trailing down to soak my shirt.

“Demi.” Her name was a supplication. The brokenness in her voice reflected what she felt, and I had the overwhelming desire to fix it.

“It’s okay.” Her gaze slid away.

“No, Love. It’s not.” I waited until she turned back, but when she did, those mossy green eyes glassy with unshed tears were nearly my undoing. “Being alone and isolated isn’t a normal state for humans. We’re social creatures, which is why what you went through had significant impacts on you, even if you don’t realize it yet.”

“Like my nightmares?”

“To start.” I knew firsthand that PTSD could rear its ugly head in many different ways. Trauma wasn’t a one-size fits all.

Folding her arms over my chest, she propped her chin on them and gazed up at me. Her fingers drummed to the steady beat of my heart.

“You sound like you know a thing or two about being alone.” She studied me intently, eyes sparkling with concern.

That was my girl—always worried about others when she should be focused on herself and her own needs. She was so damn tenderhearted. Her compassion was one of the many things I loved about her.

Knowing she wouldn’t let it drop, I sighed and shoved my arm under my head again, getting comfortable for this conversation. “You could say that. I was alone a lot as a kid.”

Sympathy overtook Demi’s expression. “I know how difficult and lonely that can be. You didn’t have any siblings?”

I smiled softly. “I wished for them every day, but alas, I remain an only child.”

“Having a sibling always sounded like having a built-in playmate for life. I wanted a little brother or sister so badly, but my parents said one was enough.”

I grunted my disapproval. “Given both our backgrounds, it’s probably good neither of our parents produced more children to potentially abuse. Your mother sounded lovely, but I cannot say the same about your father.” Tension stole through me. “And my own parents were far too busy living their lives to be bothered raising me. From the time I was of age, they shipped me off to boarding school to become someone else’s problem. I only saw them on holidays—when they weren’t traveling to exotic destinations, that is. I think I saw more of our butler, Jeffery, than I did Pauline or Edward.”

Demi winced. “You call your parents by their first names?”

Probably looking sheepish, I shrugged. “They never really felt like parents. I started calling them by their proper names to be ornery when I was a teenager, and it stuck.”

“Did it ever bother them?”

I laughed dryly. “They’d have to have actually cared about me for it to matter to them. I think the worst reproach I received was a narrowing of their eyes or the quirk of an eyebrow.”

“They don’t deserve you. You’re an incredible person, Eli. And that’s all thanks to your own fortitude.”

“I assure you, I only turned out as the man I am today because of some good friends I made at school, a handful of influential professors who had my best interests at heart, and the campus doctor, who would swear there was a day he didn’t think I’d pass third grade let alone medical school. I think I spent more time getting patched up in his office than I did in class.”

Demi scowled. “Were you picked on?”

One of my shoulders lifted. “Who wasn’t? But it was mostly my own antics that landed me on his examination table.”

Her expression eased with a chuckle. She smiled, flashing those white teeth at me, and it brightened some of the gloom that had moved in when recounting my lonely childhood.

“So you were a little troublemaker, were you?” she teased.

I grinned cheekily. “I was a little shit with a chip on his shoulder who instigated more than one schoolyard brawl.”

“And to think,” Demi sang, “you turned out so respectable.”

“Respectable, am I? Because I can think of more than one ‘unrespectable’ thing I’d like to do to you right now,” I rumbled, testing the waters.

None of us had touched her in that way since we’d gotten her back. We wanted to give her time and space to rest and heal, but I’d seen that beautiful spark of hers dim when the opportunity arose for us to make a move and we held ourselves back.

I respected the hell out of my pack brothers, but they weren't always right. This was one instance where I disagreed with the majority to let Demi initiate intimacy, which could be hard for Omegas who needed to feel loved and pursued. Many times, they required their Alphas to take the lead.

Demi had all but expressed her desire for us to take charge during her heat, and if my instincts were correct, that extended outside of her nest.

She practically beamed, her smile chasing away any remnants of our heavy conversation. "Can you, now?"

"Mmm, you make it easy, Love. You're bloody gorgeous, even when you've been teary eyed." I reached up and traced the drying trail her tears had left in their wake.

"Bloody gorgeous. Love. I'm beginning to think this boarding school you attended was abroad."

I chuckled. "You'd be correct. England practically raised me."

Demi bit her lip, her face flushing before she said whatever was running through that interesting mind of hers. "The first time I met you, I thought you had the slightest accent."

I let myself fall deeper into my British lilt. Like riding a bike, it came right back, thick and robust. "Does that mean you like it, Love?"

This time, when she shivered, it was for all the right reasons. "It's sexy. You sound like Henry Cavill."

I rolled us over, pinning her beneath me. "I don't believe I like you thinking of sexy actors when I have you under me."

She giggled, tipping her chin up in defiance. "You're the one who called him sexy."

"You're sexy."

She rolled her eyes. "Not even close. I'm practically swimming in Hades' shirt, I'm not wearing any makeup, and I have no clue what my hair looks like, but I'm sure it's a nest of frizzy curls."

I drank in the sight of her sprawled against the soft cushions. There was more color in her face now, that hue of pink so damn pretty. Freckles dotted her cheeks, and I wanted to kiss each and every one.

Unable to resist, I leaned down and pressed my lips in a line from the apple of her cheek down to her ear. I licked along the outer lobe, loving her responsive shiver.

“You have no idea what you do to me, Love.” Taking her hand, I boldly skimmed it down my abs, sucking in a breath and releasing a groan when I settled her palm over my erection. “You feel that? That’s all for you.”

twelve



DEMI

ALL THE BREATH went out of me at the feel of Eli in the palm of my hand. He usually wore slacks, but tonight he was dressed down in a pair of sweatpants that let me feel *everything*.

“Is this okay, Demi?”

The husky question drew my attention from where I touched him back up to his face. There was a hint of hesitation in his warm amber eyes that I wanted to chase away.

Despite his uncertainty, the question sent a thrill through me. He cared enough to make sure I was comfortable, and he’d stop if he encountered even a trace of reluctance or doubt.

I tightened my fingers around him and stroked firmly, reveling in the way his eyes fell closed and he swallowed—*hard*.

“Fuck—” he rasped.

“I think that’s the idea.”

Amusement worked into his gaze as I pumped my hand again, wishing I could feel him for real and not just through the soft cotton.

My heart jumped when he groaned and dropped his head to kiss along my throat.

“You have no idea what you do to me.”

His hand slid under my shirt and skimmed up my stomach to my breasts. Deft fingers captured a nipple and pinched. My mind scattered as whatever thoughts I’d had were replaced by sharp, overwhelming bliss. That simple caress lit me on fire. Each tug shot straight down my body, making my core wet and sensitive.

I’d worried our time apart would change things—that they’d touch me differently or treat me like porcelain. But the

way Eli settled his body over mine before taking my other nipple into his mouth—shirt and all—chased away any concern I had.

He was just as eager, just as *hungry*, as I was.

His teeth scraped against the sensitive flesh, and the damp fabric clung to my skin. The combination left me gasping. Hand and mouth worked in tandem until I was writhing, desperate for more.

Dragging my arms above my head, he crossed them at the wrists as he pinned me beneath him.

“Keep your hands here, understand?”

“Yes,” I whispered, willing to do whatever he asked as long as it meant he kept going.

“Good girl,” he praised as he released me, then kissed down my throat, nipping at my breasts before making his way lower. Fingers skimmed along my sides, raising my shirt higher and higher until it caught on my tits.

There was something erotic about seeing Eli gazing up the line of my body, his eyes dark and lustful.

“Can I take your shirt off, Love?”

To answer him, I reached down, intent on ripping it over my head myself, but he tsked and gave an unexpected spank right over my clit. It wasn't enough to hurt, but the shocking pressure made me yelp in surprise. I yanked my hands away from the hem as the sharp sensation blossomed into heat that left me panting. My face flushed and my chest heaved.

Eli smirked, knowing exactly what he'd done to me. “What did I say about keeping those arms where I put them?”

Obediently, I set them over my head once more, crossed at the wrists. The idea of having to hold the position and not being able to use my hands to help or touch him in return made something in my belly coil tighter.

“Now, let's try this again. Can I take your shirt off, Demi Leigh?” Eli asked, arching one dark brow. Waiting. Daring me to say no.

I bit back a sarcastic remark, knowing if I sassed him, it would only prolong my torture. Being naked in front of him was my ultimate goal. I wanted his hands and mouth on my body and his cock sinking deep inside me. Everything ached, and I was pretty sure I'd burn up like a phoenix if he made me wait much longer.

"Yes, please." I bit my lip, uncaring that the healing cut stung slightly from the abuse.

Eli pursed his lips, not quite convinced. "I can't tell if you're being an adorable little brat for me or actually trying hard to obey like a good little Omega."

"I'm trying to be good," I promised, then let that sass I'd been holding back come flooding forward, "but if you don't hurry up, I might have to take matters into my own hands."

A flash of challenge glittered in his amber eyes, and a wolfish smile curled his lips. "I'm going to take that as a yes to my previous question."

"Yes. All the yes."

The shirt was gone before I'd even finished saying the words, and I giggled at the new, frantic edge that seemed to come over him.

"You're so fucking pretty." He stared down at me with such intensity, I wanted to squirm.

My cheeks flamed brighter, but there was no time for embarrassment to rise because he set his teeth into the sensitive skin of my side just hard enough to raise goosebumps on every inch of my body.

"Oh gods..."

In between kisses trailing down my stomach, he smirked slightly and said, "You can call me god if you want to, but I answer to Alpha just as well."

His hands were hot on my thighs as he abruptly spread them apart, dipped his head, and sucked directly over my clit through the thin material of the boxers. Back bowing sharply, it took everything I had to keep my arms above my head. I

wanted, so badly, to reach down and dig my fingers into his styled brown hair. Seeing it mused while I held him right where I needed him was so very tempting, but fear that he'd stop kept me holding still. Somehow, that ratcheted up the heat pouring through my veins another notch.

A breathy, "Please," slipped past my lips.

Deep and raw, Eli's groan rumbled against my core as he hooked his fingers into the sides of the boxers and dragged them down. "So fuckin' pretty when you beg."

I helped him, removing one leg, then the other, boldly dropping my knees open when I was bare before him. I knew what I wanted and had zero hesitation. Not with the reverence crossing Eli's face.

Amber eyes locked on to my bared pussy, he used his thumbs to spread me wide and slid his tongue from entrance to clit. The breath seized in my lungs as a full body shiver tumbled through me from the tips of my toes to my outstretched fingertips. He licked in hard circles around my clit before sucking it into his mouth. It'd been too long, and there was no stopping it. *I shattered.*

Eyes squeezed shut, I rode the waves of pleasure as he worshiped me with tongue and teeth, never ceasing the targeted, intoxicating pressure. It was too much. Too intense. I couldn't think, couldn't do anything but react.

Disobeying, my arms dropped, and I buried my fingers into his hair, curling them tightly, unsure whether I wanted to pull him away or hold him against me. I tipped from one orgasm right into the next, barely aware of the high-pitched cries echoing into the room.

Finally, blessedly, he relented. I was still trembling as he chuckled, easing me with light kisses before blazing a path back to my breasts, giving each one attention before I dragged him up the rest of the way. His lips were shiny with my release, and I studied his tongue as it snuck out to lick my essence. Pulling him down, I sealed my mouth to his. There was something filthy and hot about tasting myself on him.

He kissed me back without hesitation, settling his hips between my still spread thighs, letting me feel the steel-hard bar of his cock.

“It’s not fair,” I panted. “You’re wearing far too much clothing.”

I felt his smile against my lips. “That can be easily remedied.”

It took him less than thirty seconds to strip and reclaim his place over me. The heat of his body pressed against me renewed the arousal singing through my veins. I drank in the sight of all his bare skin, wanting to trace the lines of hard muscles with my tongue... until my gaze caught on the healing bruise that cut diagonally across his right collarbone. I thought nothing could dim my pleasure and happiness, but seeing him injured instantly twisted my stomach.

Trailing my fingers over it gently, I asked, “Does it hurt?”

He huffed an unexpected laugh. “I could be missing a leg right now, and it wouldn’t hurt, not with your taste on my tongue and your slick pussy rubbing against my cock.” A devilish smile curved his lips as he hoisted my leg higher up his hip, changing our angle. “Now where were we?”

I couldn’t answer, couldn’t do anything except gasp as his head grazed over my sensitive clit. I rocked up against him, eyes rolling back at the pleasure.

He hissed in response, then demanded in a low, guttural voice, “Say it, Love.”

Knowing exactly what he wanted, I whimpered, “Please. Please, fuck me.”

“Please, fuck me...” he trailed off, waiting for me to finish the request.

Slick dripped at the demand, and my walls clenched around nothing. “Alpha,” I breathed.

“Good girl,” he praised, then rewarded me with the slow, steady plunge of his cock. The angle was perfect as he drove

forward, then stopped, making me whimper and strain against him for more.

“Eli!”

“Fuck,” he exhaled raggedly. “I forgot how beautifully tight you are.”

Wanting, *needing* more, I squeezed around him, and his restraint blessedly snapped.

With a curse, his hips thrust and he sank all the way in, his knot teasing my entrance. The stretch was deliciously intense, almost but not quite uncomfortable. I felt impaled, full to bursting, and yet I still yearned to take the rest of him. Pausing, he let my body adjust. Or perhaps he was just trying to torture me some more. I couldn't tell.

My walls fluttered and twitched, an orgasm rising surprisingly fast, looming just out of reach.

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck!”

He hadn't even moved yet, and already we were dancing on the razor's edge. Everything felt heightened, as if every single nerve ending had been electrified.

Pulling out only to thrust in once more, he set a slow but steady pace. Light sparkled behind my eyes and the heat simmering in my veins flared hotter, brighter. I clawed at his back and dug one hand into his hair, holding him close as he fucked me, rocking my body with every plunge. My heart thundered, my pulse racing in my neck like a trapped bird.

“Oh, gods, I'm...” My words bled into an inarticulate keening. It felt good. *Too* good. I wasn't going to last. I ached for him. *Burned* for him.

The steady rhythm he'd set broke, and he thrust faster, harder. “Fuck, yes, Love. Come for me. Let me feel you milk my cock,” he rasped, lips against my ear.

As if my body were his to command, bliss rose fiercely, crashing over me in a wave.

The veins in his neck stood out as he struggled to ride out my release without following me over, but his efforts were

futile. Like me, he was too far gone.

“Ah, fuck!” He slammed deep, groin grinding against my swollen clit as he filled me with his knot, heightening the already exquisite pleasure wracking me.

Arching into him, I screamed his name.

“That’s it, Love. Take it all. Let me feel you milking my knot. I’m gonna fill this sweet cunt until you can’t take anymore.”

I felt him pulsing as I shook and writhed along with him, feeling every hot jet of cum. True to his word, he filled me until it leaked down my thighs.

Breathless and sweaty, Eli was a comforting weight as he relaxed over me. I flexed around him, smiling at the shudder that rolled through his body.

“Careful, Love,” he warned, voice husky and heated as he nipped lightly at my throat. “It’s been too long since I’ve had you. Unless you want round two...”

Gods, do I ever. I wasn’t sure I’d ever get enough of my men. I was about to say as much when a small yawn chose that moment to slip out. *Dammit.*

The teasing glimmer in Eli’s eyes eased, and he kissed my forehead gently.

“I think I wore you out enough for one evening.”

“I wish I could say you didn’t.” The greedy part of me wanted to do that all over again.

Carefully, Eli rolled us onto our sides, still locked inside me, and cradled me in his arms, brushing the damp strands of hair off of my face. “We’ve got the rest of our lives to play, Love. You’re still healing. Rest now. I’ve got you.”

The rest of our lives. Nothing had ever sounded better.

thirteen



DEMI

THE MOON WAS high overhead and the wind coming off the ocean chilled me as I sat outside with the other girls. Another day had passed, the three of us sleeping off the remaining remnants of the drugs and regaining our strength. I didn't know about the others, but after fourteen straight hours of sleep cuddled up with my pack, I finally felt more like myself.

I curled into the blanket I'd stolen from inside, burying myself deeper and tucking my legs into the weathered Adirondack chair I'd claimed. Julia and Adeline were similarly bundled, each with their own chair and steaming mug.

"Normally, I'd say this situation calls for a glass of wine," Adeline commented, "but this hot chocolate is the best I've ever had."

"It really is," I sighed happily. After being drugged, I didn't want to feel even the slightest bit impaired, so I'd asked Thane to make hot chocolate instead. The mug warmed my cold fingers as I stared out at the blanket of stars dotting the velvety black sky.

"It's perfect with the chill of fall in the air," Julia whispered.

It didn't escape me that we were talking about the weather, starkly ignoring the topic of what we'd all been through. That conversation was inevitable, but I understood the desire to maintain a sliver of normality. To pretend that things weren't so topsy-turvy and we were just three friends having hot cocoa on a crisp night.

Adeline shrugged. "I think that's the wind coming off the ocean, more than it's autumn. Then again, I don't live in a place where there are four distinct seasons, so maybe I'm wrong."

And there was my opening. “Where are you from?”

Nobody liked when people pried into their business, but learning more about these women also seemed imperative. We’d just survived something awful together, and that bonded us. I wanted to help them get back to their families. I couldn’t do that if they didn’t open up a little.

As it stood, I’d barely been able to convince the guys to give me this time alone with the other Omegas. It wasn’t because they wanted to be overbearing or had issues with me making friends. It was simply hard to be separated again so soon—even if we were just a room away. I disliked being apart from them as much as they hated letting me out of their sight. Logically, I knew it was silly, but I didn’t question the intensity of those feelings. I’d never get enough of them, and after being separated, I was especially needy. Call me crazy, but I wanted to koala myself to them and never let go.

“I live in California, but I was on my way to Nebraska when I was taken...” Adeline visibly shivered, turtling into her blanket like it could shield her from all the bad shit in the world.

“Nebraska? Damn. Why were you going to the middle of nowhere?” Julia asked, taking a sip of her drink.

“I was going to meet with a potential pack—but I never made it.”

“Oh, Adeline...” My heart hurt for her.

“It’s okay. I mean, it’s *not* okay, but it’s not like I was already claimed, like you.” She brushed off my concern, but the tears in her eyes told a different story. We sat in silence for a little while, just listening to the waves until she spoke again, her voice soft and timid. “I’ve been with the OMA for a few years. This was the first pack that reciprocated my interest after our initial meetings. It hasn’t been an easy journey. And now this. They probably think I stood them up.”

“Wait...” I shook my head, thoroughly confused. “Excuse my ignorance, but how is that possible? I thought Omegas basically had their choice of packs once they came of age.”

Julia shot me a baffled look. “You speak like you haven’t been through the process yourself.”

I glanced away, almost embarrassed to answer and share my own experiences. “I haven’t. There’s a whole story there. But this isn’t about me right now.” I tilted my head, trying to catch the red-heads attention. “Adeline?”

“I’m not a typical Omega,” she whispered, clinking her nails against the mug nervously. “There’s something wrong with my uterus. I-I can’t have children. To say that’s a deal-breaker for most Alphas is an understatement. Every time I choose a pack that smells wonderful to me, they turn me down once they learn of my deformity.” She winced and her pale skin pinkened.

Julia made a low, angry sound of distaste. “Their fucking loss,” she spat protectively. “And good riddance. Being a breeding machine isn’t the be-all, end-all. There’s more to Omegas than going through heats and growing round with child. I, for one, don’t want to have children. But it’s not like I get a choice in the matter.”

“I’ve always wanted to be a mother,” Adeline admitted sheepishly.

I hadn’t given it much thought, not actively, anyway. When I’d been with Pack Silver, it was my greatest fear. But now? I could absolutely picture a little one running around with Jamison’s eyes or Thane’s smile. Any of their features would be adorable in miniature, and I realized that my fear of having children had changed into a dream. “Me too,” I added, surprising myself.

“But it just isn’t in the cards for me.” She blew out an emotion-ridden, shaky breath. “Not naturally, anyway.”

I reached for her and squeezed her forearm in support. “There are many ways to have a family. Don’t count yourself out. You deserve to have everything you’ve dreamed of.”

“That’s easy for you to say. You already have such an amazing pack.” Wistfulness entered her tear-filled gaze. “You’re so lucky.”

I nearly snorted, swallowing it back the moment it started to form. Instead, I ended up half-choking, half-coughing. I banged a fist against my chest, winced, and apologized. “Sorry. I don’t think I’ve ever been called that before.”

“Trust me, it’s true.” She sounded almost offended.

“You’re right,” I said somberly. “Finding my pack was pure luck and I don’t take them for granted. Let me explain.” It took a few minutes to fill the girls in on my history. How my father had traded me. How I’d suffered under Pack Silver’s treatment. How I’d done the scariest thing in my life thus far by fighting back and running for my life. But when I got to the part where I met my mates, I had to agree—fate had smiled upon me, as Thane liked to say.

I told them everything, down to my kidnapping and nearly being sold at auction. They listened with rapt attention.

“Damn. And I thought my life was dramatic.” Adeline shook her head, dazed. “Maybe we do need wine.”

I almost agreed. Almost.

“What about you?” I stretched my foot out and bumped it into Julia’s leg. Then immediately curled up under my blanket again with a small shiver. The ocean breeze was doing the most to turn us into popsicles, but I didn’t think the girls would be so candid inside where it was warm because then we’d be surrounded by Alphas. So many Alphas.

“My family is... complicated,” she said with a sigh.

“Come on,” Adeline whined good-naturedly. “We shared our stories. Embarrassing parts and all. Give us the deets.”

Julia cracked a smile and rolled her eyes. “Fine, fine. But no judging, okay?” She was teasing, but there was a hint of apprehension there, too.

We crossed our hearts, leaning in as though she were departing some big secret. She peered over her shoulder before continuing. Whatever it was, she didn’t want everyone to know.

“I’m part of the Cristenello family.”

“And they are...” Adeline trailed off, digging for my information.

At the same time, I gasped and leaned even closer. “No way. Really?”

“I feel like I’m missing something.” Adeline glanced between us, clearly not understanding the bomb our new friend had just dropped. “Spill. I don’t want to be left out!”

“The Cristenellos are, how do I put this—” I hadn’t figured out the politest way to explain before Julia blurted it out.

“We’re mafia. Or, at least, my family is. I wasn’t really given a choice, born into it and all that.”

“Wait... for real?” Adeline’s eyes grew to the size of saucers.

Julia blushed and tucked her dark hair behind her ear. “For real. We’re pretty well known in Silver City.”

“Try all of New York. The Cristenello name is legendary.” *For being dangerous*, but I kept that thought to myself. No wonder she’d remained so cool under pressure when we’d been in the cages. Obviously, she’d been upset, but she also hadn’t reacted like most of the other Omegas—almost as though she’d been conditioned to expect the worst out of people, like I had. “I can’t believe Pack Silver crossed your family.”

It was shocking. Anton was a sadistic asshole, but he wasn’t stupid. What was he getting himself into? I wouldn’t lie. I hoped it was the start of his self-destructive downfall. You didn’t cross a family as deadly as the Cristenellos and get away with it.

“I don’t think he knew who I was.” She looked from me to Adeline, taking in our rapt attention, then laughed nervously. “I can practically see the questions on your faces.”

“No offense, but you’re terrible at girl talk,” Adeline teased, falling into the easy rapport we’d built. Though we were talking about heavy topics, like kidnapping, it was easier to pretend we weren’t. “More details, woman. Stat.”

My eyes were wide. “Exactly! Like, how did he not know who you were?”

“You know how you said you had trouble making matches?” Her gaze collided with Adeline, who nodded. “Try being a part of such an infamous family. It’s been hell trying to make a match. There are plenty of packs who want nothing to do with the daughter of Vincent Cristenello. And the ones who do? They’re just as much trouble. So, I decided to change my last name on the registry to distance myself from my family and their reputation. Unfortunately, I think that may have made me a target.”

The pieces started coming together. “Because it seemed like you were just a lone Omega with no family...”

“... and no one to miss me. You catch on quickly.”

“Trust me, I’ve been thinking about this non-stop since I figured out what Anton was up to. Black market Omega auctions? You’ve got to be kidding me. I knew I was in the devil’s lair when I was trapped under his roof, but I never realized the extent of his vileness. The entire pack is rotten from the inside out.”

“I don’t know how you lived with them for so long.” Pity poured off Adeline like water down a waterfall. I felt the unseen barrage of it.

“Me either,” I whispered, pushing all the bad memories to the background when they tried to surface and steal my joy. “But that’s all over now.” I smiled at the distant sound of masculine laughter that filtered to us from inside.

Julie smirked and waggled her dark eyebrows suggestively. “What’s it like to have a pack full of sexy Alphas?”

“And a Beta,” Adeline corrected.

Waving a hand through the air, Julia blew a raspberry. “Semantics. Betas can be just as ‘alpha’ as Alphas. And they have the benefit of not having a knot.”

Adeline looked truly confused. “That’s a benefit?”

I giggled, smiling to myself behind the rim of my mug. And despite my flush, I answered, “Oh yeah. There are definitely benefits to being a Beta. Don’t get me wrong, Alphas knots are... phew—” I fanned myself.

“Orgasmic?” Julia offered helpfully, with a wicked smile.

My blush deepened, but I didn’t let that stop my nod. “Being knotted is incredible. But Betas—” I bit my lip, wondering how much to share. “Let’s just say they’re not hindered by having to stop because they don’t lock into place.”

Julia made an obscene little gyrating wiggle in her seat. “They just keep going, like the Energizer Bunny!”

Adeline’s mouth popped open and her face went as pink as mine. “I never thought about it like that before, but holy hot damn.”

We broke into giggles and it felt... nice. It’d been a long, long time since I had girlfriends to laugh with.

Finally sobering, I answered their original question. “But seriously? Being with the right pack is unlike anything I ever expected. We’re so in tune with each other. They’re sweet and protective. They lift me up and show me what life is really supposed to look like. Where I’m weak, they’re strong, and I like to think I compliment them in the same way.” I sighed happily. “Each one of them is so different, and yet we fit together like a puzzle—every piece important to the overall picture. I grew up outside of a pack.” Though I didn’t like talking about my past, I forged forward, “My father was an Alpha and my mother a Beta. I used to think I’d be content with that kind of relationship. That was before I became an Omega, obviously, and now I realize how wrong I was. I wouldn’t be happy without each one of my men. They all complete a part of me that was missing.”

“That’s beautiful.” Adeline sniffed.

“It is. I know there will be challenges. Any relationship has ups and downs, but we just... fit. We’re all committed to working through any disagreements or hardships. Luckily, they’re all excellent communicators.”

Adeline blinked back her tears. “That’s what I want. So, *so* badly.”

I reached across her chair and squeezed her forearm supportively. “I know you’ll find the right pack. Don’t give up hope.”

I looked at Julia, who had a pensive look on her face. “You too.”

“Thanks.” She smiled softly, but it didn’t seem like she took my words to heart. I understood. I couldn’t promise her the same kind of love I’d found, but I hoped for it. For each of them. I’d do whatever I could to help them find similar happiness.

“So,” Julia cleared her throat, and the mischief I began to realize she wore as a mask came rushing back. “How are they in bed?” she grinned unabashedly.

“Julia!” Adeline scolded, completely embarrassed, and yet I sensed her curiosity too.

I ducked into my blanket and squealed. “Ohmygods.” But then I peeked out and my smile was all they needed to see.

“That good, huh?”

My eyes rolled orgasmically, and they laughed. “Yeah,” I said, “that good.”

fourteen



LEO

IT WAS incredible to see Demi smile. Laughter filled her eyes as she filtered back into the house with the other Omegas. Julia and Adeline seemed more relaxed than they had earlier. I didn't blame them for being wary of us. This house was full of Alphas, and we were strangers to them. But what the girls had gone through, what they'd survived, bonded them. They trusted Demi, and seeing her come out of her shell did my heart good.

"Hey." I smiled at her, easing over to their group as they placed their mugs in the sink.

The rest of my pack chatted with Pack Jacobs on the couches in the living room. Given that the floor-plan of the house was rather open, I felt their attention without having to look.

We had unanimously decided that I'd be the one to initiate a conversation between us and the Omegas. Since I was a Beta, we figured the girls would be more receptive to my presence. I had no issue with acting as a liaison if it helped. At heart, I was a people pleaser. I wanted what was best for everyone, and Demi's new friends were no exception.

I just hoped their talk had gone well and Demi had gotten them to open up. Thus far, we knew next to nothing about them other than their names, which, while helpful, wasn't enough to reunite them with their packs or families.

It was killing all of us not to know where they'd come from or who may be out there looking for them. Were they in danger like Demi had been? Or were they just unfortunate victims, stolen from their lives without a trace?

Someone out there had to be worried about them. I knew what it was like to miss someone so badly you couldn't think straight. To yearn for someone so much you closed your eyes and begged the Fates for their absence to be a cruel nightmare

you'd wake from. I didn't wish that type of desperation on anyone.

So, yeah. We'd help Julia and Adeline get back to their families or packs. They didn't have any bite marks visible, but it was possible they were courting a pack, much like Demi was.

My packmates and I had no problems being around the other Omegas now that we had Demi—our perfect scent match. But Pack Jacobs' tension was obvious in every shift they made as they tried their best to contain their reactions to the women. They sat on the far side of the living room, and while they were mostly under control, our pack placed ourselves as a buffer between everyone.

It was hard for available Alphas to be around unclaimed Omegas whose scents were compatible, but as long as the women didn't go into heat, everything should be fine. Yet, as I glanced back and forth between the men in the room and the ladies, I decided that taking extra precautions never hurt anyone.

Regardless of how grateful I was to Pack Jacobs, their presence incited a deep desire to claim Demi once and for all. I may be a Beta, but she could still wear my bite mark alongside those of her Alphas. The scars would be a sign that she was taken—that she had the love and support of a powerful pack behind her. More importantly, her scent would subtly shift. Between that and the crescent-shaped scars, she'd be off the market for good.

“Hey.” Demi gave me a sweet smile and sidled up to me.

Her arms immediately went around my waist, and I wrapped her up. Everything about my girl was soft and inviting. A blanket hugged her shoulders, but her nose was freezing.

“Chilly outside?”

“Yes, but after being trapped indoors for two weeks, barely seeing the sun or feeling the wind, bracing ourselves against the cold was so worth it.”

Anger and guilt swamped me in equal measure—anger at what she'd been through, and who put her through it, compounded with the guilt that we hadn't found her and saved her a hell of a lot sooner. I couldn't overcome the feeling of failure. My muscles tensed.

“Leo.” Demi rubbed my back, peering up at me with concern in her eyes. “I didn't mean to make you upset.”

Of course, she sensed my emotions. Hell, she probably smelled the subtle change in my scent at how pissed I was that she'd been taken. That we hadn't been able to protect her. Again, I may only be a Beta, and I may be more laid back than my other packmates, but I was just as protective.

I blew out a harsh breath. “Sorry, Honey. It's going to take me some time to forgive myself.”

“Hey,” my mate cooed softly, reaching up and cupping my face with chilled fingers. “Don't shoulder the sins of others, okay? You saved me, Leo. You and our pack, along with Pack Jacobs. You did everything you could do, and you got me out.”

Her hands threaded into my hair and tugged. I went without complaint as she dragged me down. The first kiss was sweet and tender, but the second was all-*fucking*-consuming. Her lips parted and her tongue swept out to tease the seam of my mouth. I opened for her with a groan, deepening the kiss as I dug one hand into the hair at her nape, the other going around her waist to crush her to me.

I almost forgot we had an audience until one of the Omegas snickered.

“Get a room, you two,” Slade bellowed from across the house.

Demi backed off slowly, unabashed if not slightly pink-cheeked. Her fingers went to her rosy lips, pressing against them as though I'd put her in a daze.

I smirked, enjoying seeing her flustered and blushing.

“Sorry,” she apologized to the other girls sheepishly.

“Puh-lease.” Julia waved dismissively. “If I had a pack, I’d be sucking face too. In fact, I wouldn’t have even left the bedroom. I don’t know how you pried yourself away to hang out with us instead. Maybe your sexy doctor should examine your head again, just to make sure you didn’t do any permanent damage.”

Well, that was one packless Omega, and I had no doubt the eavesdropping fuckers in the other room heard every word.

“This is your Beta, right?” Adeline smirked conspiratorially and Demi straight up laughed.

I was pretty damn sure I was missing something, but I didn’t shy away.

Still holding onto Demi, because I wasn’t about to let her go voluntarily, I offered my hand to Julia and then Adeline. “The one and only. I’m Leo. Nice to officially meet you.”

“*And* he’s sweet? Damn,” Adeline sighed dramatically. “Some girls get all the good fortune.”

“Don’t give up, remember?” Demi scolded lightly.

Adeline nodded, but there was no spark of hope behind it. I noticed, and I was sure the rapt audience in the other room did as well.

And there’s confirmation of the second. Adeline was definitely available, too. Plot twist. This could create potential complications.

I eased away from Demi and shoved a hand through my messy brown hair. I hadn’t taken time to get it cut recently. It curled wildly around my ears and fell across my forehead if I didn’t brush it back.

Clearing my throat, I did what I’d been sent to do. “We were hoping you all would sit down with us and have a chat.”

Demi looked from one girl to the other. The other two Omegas exchanged wary glances, almost nervous to join us in the living room where the others’ conversation had died to embers.

“You can trust them,” my mate promised.

“Alright,” Julia agreed, then Adeline. They clasped hands and followed us.

The kitchen opened into the living room. A TV sat on the far wall, and three large couches occupied the room, forming a U shape that offered plenty of seating, all within view of the screen. On either side of the TV, in opposite corners, sat two reclining chairs with wooden arms and sea-green nautical upholstery that fit the theme of the house. They faced toward the couches, and Lawson was seated in one. Enoch leaned on the wall beside him while Slade lounged in the chair as though he owned it. Ronan took a spot on the floor beside him, his back to the wall and one arm braced against his bent knee. Felix, the quiet one who hadn’t spoken a word since he got here, leaned nearby with his arms crossed.

Our pack took up the two couches that faced each other, with Demi settling between Jamison and Thane while Eli and Knox made themselves comfortable on the other. Hades opted to stand behind Demi like her bodyguard while he gently played with the ends of her hair. I took the spot in front of her, content to sit on the floor just to stay close.

Julia and Adeline settled close together on the last remaining couch, as far away from the Alphas as they could get and still remain in the room.

“I know you don’t know us well,” Jamison started, addressing the two women. “But you’re safe here and among friends. Our original goal was to get Demi back from Pack Silver, but once we learned the scoop of what they were planning with the auction, we immediately knew we wanted to save as many of the Omegas as we could. We’d hoped to get more than the three of you out, but unfortunately, Anton had fail-safes in place for emergencies. The Omegas backstage were gone before we could reach them.”

“I’m pretty sure there were nine of us.” Julia’s forehead wrinkled as she recounted the day. “That’s how many cages I counted when I woke up.”

“That’s how many I counted too,” Demi added.

I half expected Jamison to make another growly comment at the mention of cages. That they'd caged Demi made him see red. Hell, it made all of us see red.

Instead, he kept his cool, swallowed down his anger, and simply nodded, sharing a look with the other pack leader. "That's what Lawson saw on the sales docket as well."

Lawson leaned forward, bracing his arms on his knees and folding his hands. "They had a catalog with details on each woman—no names, of course, but identifying information on your looks, your medical record, your age."

Adeline sucked in a sharp breath, flushing. "First, that's sickening. Second, where did they get our *medical records*?"

"My guess?" Julia crossed her arms and legs, looking pissed. "They stole our information from the OMA. If they could take us so easily, official records would be a piece of fucking cake."

"Were you both with the OMA?" Ronan asked, suddenly more alert.

Julia nodded. "But in different locations."

"So nothing can be traced back to a particular office."

"Exactly. I was in Riverton, New York, and Adeline was traveling from California to bum-fuck nowhere when they took her."

"I thought you were in Silver City?" Adeline cocked her head.

"Yeah, but I was trying to distance myself from my family, remember? I hoped a fresh start in a new town might increase my chances of finding a match."

I had so many questions, and I could tell the others did too. I figured we'd let that blow past and stick to the more pressing topics, but Ronan couldn't seem to contain himself.

"Why couldn't you find a match?" His brows were drawn down in utter confusion. I understood. Hearing that an Omega struggled to find mates when there were thousands of packs waiting to be chosen was mind-blowing.

Julia scoffed. “That’s none of your business.”

“It might be helpful,” Lawson added objectively.

“Julia.” Demi shifted on the couch to face the other two women. “He’s right. These men are on our side. I think we should give them all the information we have and see if they find any of it useful. If we could help save the other girls or even stop this from happening to others, it’s worth it, don’t you think?”

Adeline worried her lip nearly to the point of making it bleed as she exchanged a heavy look with Julia. Finally, their shoulders sagged, and the fight bled away.

“Fine,” Julia said at the same time Adeline whispered, “You’re right.”

Demi was tense as she helped fill in the gaps, explaining the other Omegas’ backgrounds to the group. I wrapped my fingers around her ankle and stroked her smooth skin. I couldn’t stop a proud smirk when she relaxed, the tension seeping out of her little by little.

When she was done, Jamison sighed and shoved a hand through his black curls. “I don’t know how they’re getting their information, but it’s clear they’re targeting vulnerable Omegas.”

“Ones with no perceived families to cause a scene when they go missing.” Knox stroked a hand down his beard. “The question is, how are they erasing them from the registry? I can’t imagine vanishing Omegas would go unnoticed.”

Tension stole back through Demi, and I gave her ankle a reassuring squeeze. I wondered if she was thinking about her own screwed-up family situation. If I ever met her father face to face, I was going to punch him so hard, he’d be shitting teeth.

“Anton is bribing people at the OMA for the information,” Demi said, and the entire room grew quiet. Blushing from the attention, she shrugged uncomfortably. “When he drugged me, I tried to use the time I had left to get details out of him.”

“Smart thinking, Baby,” Hades praised.

“He all but bragged that money is a powerful motivator. I have no doubt that’s where he’s getting his information from. He’s targeting Omegas he doesn’t think anyone will miss and then paying to have their names scrubbed off the Omega Registry, essentially making them disappear.”

“Then he’s selling them on the black market and lining his fucking pockets.” Hades was a beat away from going on a murderous rampage. I knew my best friend, and he couldn’t take the idea that someone he loved had been so close to danger. Especially someone as vulnerable as Demi. It brought his own trauma right back to the surface, and when he got scared, he got angry.

“He’s using the money he makes from the Omegas to fund his run for the governorship. I heard Reed and Huck talking about it.”

“Fucking sick bastard.”

“Well, we can tell you that the missing Omegas aren’t disappearing unnoticed,” Enoch chimed in, sharing a look with Lawson, who leaned back in his chair and gave his packmate a silent nod. “The director of the OMA, Chaddrick Hurst, hired us to look into the vanishing Omegas. The authorities have been working on the case for a while now, but there’s only so much they can accomplish legally.”

“It’s all that damn red tape,” Knox grumbled.

“Exactly. When they weren’t getting results fast enough, they reached out to us. We have a reputation for getting shit done.”

“We need to figure out which OMA employees Anton has in his pocket. Felix,” Lawson barked, drawing the attention of the silent man in the corner. “Can you see who accessed the Omega Registry when each of the girls’ names were erased and cross reference the IP to see if they were done by the same person? We need to learn how deep the corruption lies.”

Felix nodded and left the room. I’d seen the man work. He was a whiz with computers and electronics. His happy place was behind a screen, away from people.

“Depending on what we find, that leaves one last important question.” Lawson turned his full attention to Adeline and Julia. “We need to figure out our next move. Who can we call to let them know you’re alright?”

Adeline wrapped her arms around her middle and hugged herself tightly. “I don’t have anyone,” she whispered. “My parents are gone and I don’t have any extended family that I know of.”

Julia, on the other hand, winced. “My father is going to absolutely murder me, but I need to let him know I’m okay before he kills anyone else looking for me. I’m sure enough blood has already been spilled.”

Slade laughed delightedly while Ronan’s brows lifted in surprise, trying to decide if she was being literal or figurative. “Who did you say your father was again?”

Demi chuckled behind me like she was hiding something, and I arched an eyebrow at her, wanting to know all her deep, dark secrets.

Shrugging noncommittally, Julia replied, “I didn’t.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re nothing but trouble?”

She gave a self-satisfied chuckle. “Probably because I am.”

“Alright, in the morning, we’ll reach out to your father. What about you, Adeline? Would you like us to advocate on your behalf with the OMA?”

Adeline, who’d seemed to curl further into herself, nodded. “Yes, please. I-I think I’d like to go home.”

“Addy, are you sure? You could come and stay with me for a while...” Julia offered, reaching for the other woman and giving her forearm a reassuring squeeze. Adeline covered her hand with one of her own.

“I’m sure. I’m running out of time to make a viable match. I want to see if I can salvage the meet and greet with that pack. Maybe if they realize I never intended to stand them up, they’ll give me a second chance.”

I exchanged a questioning look with Eli, wondering what it was about this Omega that made her feel unmatched.

Adeline glanced around a little desperately, as if looking for a way to direct everyone's attention off of her and onto something else. Her gaze landed on my mate.

"What about you, Demi?" she prompted.

I felt my Omega jolt slightly with surprise. "Me?"

"Yeah," Julia chimed in. "I know your situation differs from ours, but you must have thought about it. What's *your* plan? You can't hide out here forever."

Twisting around, I peered up at my mate, wondering what she would say. We hadn't gotten that far, too caught up in just having her with us again. The original plan had been to register her with the OMA so we could make our courtship official, but now I wasn't sure it was worth the risk.

"Oh, I uh..." Demi blinked rapidly, like a deer in the headlights.

My pack shifted uncomfortably, glancing at each other, looking for answers none of us had yet.

"I guess we're not sure yet?" she asked more than stated.

When the silence dragged on, I came to her rescue. "We're still figuring it out."

I sent her a wink, and she smiled, but the expression was fragile and unsure. I was dying to get her alone so I could fix whatever we'd just fucked up.

Conversation resumed, flowing around us, but Demi remained silent. There was a pensive, worried frown pulling at her lips, and she wouldn't quite look at any of us.

Well, fuck.

fifteen



DEMI

IT WAS hard to say goodbye to Julia and Adeline. In the short time we'd known each other, we'd become fast friends. The trauma the three of us shared would bond us for life, but our friendship had deepened in the days since.

I'd never spent time with other Omegas, and I had to admit, it was nice to be around women who understood.

We were all vastly different and led separate lives, but somehow I knew we'd always remain close.

"Promise you'll stay in touch, okay?" Adeline sniffed as she squeezed me tight.

Pack Jacobs waited by their SUV to take her to the nearest OMA office, where Julia and her family would join them.

Chaddrick Hurst, the director of the Omega Matching Agency, had flown in and was meeting them there. After the ordeal we'd gone through, he'd made special arrangements for both Julia and Adeline, promising there were extra precautions in place to ensure their safety from now on.

However, it was the news that the FBI would be undercover to keep close tabs on them that helped ease my anxiety over watching them leave.

"Cross my heart," I vowed, trying to bury the sadness I felt when she pulled back and smiled softly.

"Are you sure you don't want to come with us?" She eyed the waiting car. "Mr. Hurst has been very accommodating. I know he'd extend the same courtesy to you and your pack."

Did I want to meet with the director of the OMA, fix my status as an Omega, and officially choose my pack? Truthfully, yes. I did. But after the hesitation I'd sensed in my men the other night, I wasn't sure if it was the right decision.

After my heat, they'd been intent on claiming me. But then the accident and subsequent kidnapping happened and now all I felt from them was uncertainty. Had they changed their minds? We hadn't had enough alone time to really get into that conversation. And honestly? I was scared.

What if they didn't want to officially claim me anymore? A huge part of my heart rebelled at the notion, promising that could never be true. But the doubt? The doubt consumed me like an untamed wildfire, burning up all my good intentions and leaving scorched earth behind.

Anton's voice taunted me. *You're nothing more than a whore willing to spread her legs for any scum with a knot.*

You were fun while you lasted, little sparrow. This time, it was Reed's condescending jeer that stabbed at me.

I wasn't good enough.

I was spoiled goods.

I wasn't worth the trouble.

My mind conjured up all kinds of self-reproach.

"Since our first attempt to go to the OMA turned out so spectacularly, I think we just need more time to figure out what we want," I admitted, hoping that was the extent of my pack's uneasiness.

Adeline must have seen the question in my expression, because she took my hand and squeezed reassuringly. "Those men are crazy about you. Don't doubt them. They're probably just scared. And hell, I understand why. I'm scared too. For all of us. But we can't find our 'happily ever afters' without taking a leap of faith." She pressed a folded piece of paper into my palm. "We deserve to put this all behind us and find happiness. Promise me you'll go after what you want."

Tears swam in my vision, and I nodded. "As long as you do the same."

She blew out a breath and cut her gaze toward the waiting vehicle. "Believe me, I'm being as brave as I can possibly be. I'm not a social butterfly like Julia. It takes serious effort for

me to be around people, and I don't trust easily. But all of this will be worth it if I find my pack."

"You will," I promised, having a good feeling about her future even if I was uncertain of my own.

Nodding toward my mates, who were giving us the space to say our goodbyes, she said, "Those men you have are a gift. Trust that they only have your best interests at heart."

I let her words bolster me, let them chase away some of the fear that had slithered in earlier.

Julia appeared out of nowhere and slung her arm over my shoulder. "But know you might have to give them a swift kick in the ass to get them moving in the right direction."

Adeline smiled and the tension in me broke as a laugh bubbled up. "Is that all?"

"Eh. Men rarely know what's good for 'em." Julia smirked before growing more serious. "That pack is head over heels for you, but I think they're too afraid to let you out of their sight again, so they're hesitant to go to the OMA."

I sighed. "I know, but we can't move forward without taking a risk. Adeline's right. I don't want to hide forever."

"Then you need to tell them that," Adeline intoned softly.

Julia moved to Addy's side, and they faced me together, like this was an intervention. "This is your life, Demi. Others have meddled in it for too long. Find your backbone, girl, and stand up for what you want."

Adeline nodded sagely. "Believe it or not, you're in charge of your future."

Their words echoed in the back of my mind as I watched them leave.

Adeline slid into the SUV with Pack Jacobs, who shook hands and slapped backs with my pack, making us promise to call if we needed any further help, before heading out.

Julia's family had pulled up in a line of sleek black town cars. Five older gentlemen poured out of one vehicle while

four younger versions stepped from another, all dressed in impeccable suits. They looked like distinguished businessmen, and if it weren't for subtle hints, such as the gold rings each of her fathers' wore or the split knuckles her brothers' sported, I would never have known they were dangerously respected leaders in the organized crime world.

She ran to them, letting them engulf her in hugs, kisses, and fast flowing Italian. When their reunion was over, one of the older men broke from the pack and escorted Julia back to us.

"Papa, I want to introduce you to Demi."

"My dear." He held out his hand, and I tentatively placed mine atop his.

Sweeping down, he brushed a mock kiss along the backs of my fingers and then released me before my pack could work themselves into intimidating growls. Jamison's hand came down on my shoulder possessively.

The last thing we needed were more enemies to contend with, but mischief swirled in the older man's eyes. "I remember what it was like when my pack brothers and I claimed our Omega." He motioned to the other distinguished men behind him—Julia's other dads. "We were so possessive of Julia's mother, we could barely tolerate another Alpha looking at her, let alone touching her. She used to swat at us and tell us to take our caveman behavior elsewhere."

"We can relate." Leo sheepishly smiled and rubbed a hand along the back of his neck.

Thane's lips curled upward unapologetically. "It's hard to fight the instinct to hide our mate away from the world and keep her to ourselves."

"Exactly. Though hearing it out loud, I see how it could be construed as 'cavamanish'," Knox admitted, as he stroked his beard.

"Don't care one way or the other," Hades growled. "I'll fully embrace being a possessive asshole, if it means keeping Demi safe and happy."

“A man after my own heart.” Julia’s dad covered his chest with a weathered hand and bowed slightly. “If I may introduce myself. I’m Emilio Cristenello, and my family and I are forever indebted to you for saving our crown Jewel.” He gave Jamison a swift handshake.

Julia rolled her eyes. “How many times do I have to tell you not to call me that? I’m not some spoiled princess,” she griped while I smothered a snicker with a hand over my mouth.

“You may remind me as often as you like, Julia, but it will not change the term of endearment. You are my only daughter, and you have put me through hell these past few weeks.” The look he sent her was withering, and yet somehow full of love. A dad looking out for the best interests of his little girl.

My father had never looked at me that way. Like he’d tear the moon from the sky if it would keep me safe.

That one weighted stare conveyed the depth of Mr. Cristenello’s love for Julia.

It flayed me open.

“Perhaps you could cut your old man some slack since you nearly gave me a heart attack, *mio piccolo tesoro*.”

Julia hugged her dad’s arm, leaning her head against his shoulder. “Papa. Mi dispiace.”

He kissed the top of her hair and something in me drew tight with longing for a similar relationship with my own father. It would never happen. I thought I’d made peace with that a long time ago, but seeing Julia with her family surrounding her had reopened an old wound.

Why was I so emotional about this? About everything really...

As if reading the wave of sadness crashing through me, Jamison wrapped his arm around my shoulder and pulled me firmly into his side. His sapphiric gaze was an ocean of worry. I sent him a wobbly smile I hoped would placate him for now.

“As I was saying,” Emilio turned his attention back to Jamison and the pack surrounding me. “Thank you for saving my Julia.”

Jamison nodded once. “I can assure you, we would have done the same for any of the Omegas. I just wish we had gotten more of them out.”

“But we’re happy we saved our mate and were able to rescue Julia and Adeline in the process,” Thane added, thumping Jamison on the back.

“Of that, I have no doubt. To lose a child is a special kind of hell, but to lose your Omega...” Mr. Cristenello trailed off, kissing the inside of his bent knuckle and motioning to the sky above. “It’s like having your soul torn in two. I wouldn’t wish that pain on anyone. I commend you for doing what you must to get your mate back and am grateful it worked in our favor as well.”

The rest of Julia’s family joined the gathering, and everyone talked for a while longer. My men stayed close, not missing the interest Julia’s four, very unattached, very *Alpha*, brothers took in me.

A short while later, I hugged Julia goodbye and watched her slip into her own car as she heckled her brothers the entire time. But I didn’t mistake their sibling rivalry for anything but love. Relief swam in all their eyes and every gesture, while teasing, held affection. They were happy to have her home, and it was heartwarming.

Emilio shut the door after them and motioned us over toward his own vehicle. Lowering his voice, he kept it just between us as he clamped Jamison’s shoulder and leaned in. “You reach out if you ever need anything. I meant what I said. The Cristenello family is forever in your debt.”

“Thank you.” Jamison and Knox exchanged a look. “We may take you up on that.”

“Remember, we share a common enemy. Our vendettas are the same, and my people... let’s just say they’re not afraid to get their hands dirty.”

I soaked up every word, my mind spinning from all the hidden agendas. Instead of wondering, I outright asked, “Will you be retaliating against Pack Silver?”

Emilio’s eyes hardened for a split second, making him look every ounce the intimidating mafia boss, before the more jovial side of him made a reappearance. “While I appreciate your inquisitiveness, these aren’t affairs a sweet little Omega needs to concern herself with. As I often tell my Julia, business matters are men’s work.”

No wonder Julia had such zeal. She had to fight to be heard among a family full of well-meaning, if not overbearingly Alpha, men.

“On the contrary,” Jamison interjected. “Demi is perfectly capable of being engaged in the conversation.”

My gaze snapped to his, eyes widening. I was pretty sure my mouth popped open in shock. Jamison was a hard nut to crack on a good day. It was almost impossible to read him and he was one of my most protective Alphas.

I knew he wouldn’t tolerate anyone disrespecting me—accidentally or otherwise—but I was surprised by how fiercely he defended me when another Alpha tried to leave me out of a conversation that he himself wished to avoid.

He wanted to shelter me from the raw, gritty details that were sure to stress me out. It was his way of protecting me, and I understood it, even though I disagreed.

That he’d truly heard what I’d said the other day and taken it to heart warmed my own. Right now, in this moment, he was proving he’d not only listened, but recognized where I was coming from and why it was important to me.

I was a gaping mess as he continued, “And since these matters directly affect her, we believe she has every right to be a part of the decisions made going forward.”

Be still my heart...

“I commend you for your progressive thinking. Alas, I am a bit more of a traditionalist, but if you approve, then I’ll answer your mate’s question.” Emilio inclined his head in

defeat, then locked his attention on me. “So as not to incriminate myself, let me just say that the actions taken against my daughter will not stand. We will be looking for the right moment to *pay our respects* to our so-called mayor and his band of merry misfits. Does that bother you, my dear? I have heard through the grapevine you used to court them.”

“Another decision that wasn’t of my making,” I clipped. “And if I’m blunt in return... No. It doesn’t bother me in the least. Karma’s a bitch.”

The answer had burst out of me with an angry lilt, but I found the sentiment truthful. I didn’t care what happened to Anton, Huck, and Reed as long as they got their just rewards. Lock them behind bars or spill their blood. I just wanted them gone.

Arrivederci, assholes.

Maybe it should have scared me that I felt so disconnected. These people were flesh and blood, but at this point, I was so jaded and fearful, I just wanted the threat they posed removed. For good.

I didn’t want to deal with them anymore, and I didn’t want to spend my life looking over my shoulder, afraid of the shadows.

Emilio smiled at me, then eyed my pack. “Perhaps my traditionalist views need to bend. She is a firecracker, this one. Much like my Julia.” Wrapping things up, he nodded toward Jamison. “My offer still stands. And on that note, we have another meeting to get to.”

With a fond goodbye, we waved Julia off. I watched the cars until the last one disappeared down the drive. My fingers were still tightly clamped around the piece of paper Adeline had shoved into my hand. Smoothing out the creases, I gazed down at the scribbled name and phone number.

“You okay?” Thane asked, stepping to my side and rubbing a hand up and down my back.

I folded the paper up and slid it carefully into the pocket of my jeans.

Turning, I wrapped my arms around his middle and rested my cheek over his chest, listening to the steady thrum of his heartbeat.

“No,” I admitted truthfully, “But I will be.”

sixteen



HADES

I CLIMBED the narrow steps that led to the widow's walk above the house, trying to figure out where Demi had run off to.

I'd woken to find the spot she'd fallen asleep in empty. Like a roundhouse kick to my already broken ribs, it had jolted me awake, sending worry through my veins. Hand skimming the sheets, I'd discovered the slight Demi-shaped indent losing its warmth. Wherever she'd disappeared to, she hadn't been gone long. Sitting up, I'd searched the lumps of my packmates beneath the tangle of blankets, trying to see if she'd snuck off to cuddle with one of the others, but she wasn't there.

I'd immediately jumped out of bed to search the house, finding the kitchen, living room, and media rooms still and quiet.

Stressed, heart beating a little faster the longer I went without locating her, I'd taken the stairs two at a time and checked every damn guest bedroom, every pseudo nest that overlooked the ocean, and even got nosy enough to peek into the bathrooms. When I'd discovered the decks and hot tub were also empty, there was only one place left to check.

And if she wasn't there, I was going to lose my absolute shit.

I squeezed my large frame the rest of the way up the too-small staircase, shivering as the wind whipped around me. This high up, the breeze coming off the ocean cut right through you.

Fuck, it's cold up here.

But all thoughts of being uncomfortable fled at the sight of Demi standing by the railing, picking at the chipped paint, framed against the dawn sky. I huffed out a breath of relief.

The sun warmed the horizon, painting the world in an array of fiery colors that brought out the copper highlights in her otherwise dark brown hair. Framed by the clouds with the stretch of ocean beyond, she looked ethereal.

My angel.

My whole fucking world.

I made sure to make enough noise as I moved behind her so as not to startle her. Scaring my mate wasn't the plan. But wrapping her up in my arms? Fuck yeah, that was happening.

My Omega was so small against me as I pulled her back into my chest, my arms engulfing her in a full body hug. She settled her head against one pectoral as I folded myself around her. Despite the size difference between us, we moved together like we'd choreographed a dance. Somehow, we just *fit*. Small hands slid over mine, soft yet chilled, and I hoped she absorbed some of my lingering heat before the icy wind stole it away. Tangled together, I rested my chin atop the crown of her hair.

"Found you," I rumbled. Dipping down to draw in a deep inhale, I reveled in the sweet scent of black honey, sugared berries, and something deeper. Smokier. *Sexier*. The unique signature was all hers, and it turned me the fuck on every time I got a hit of it. This close, with her curvy body pressed against me, I was a fucking goner.

I shifted, trying to keep my hard-on from digging into her lower back. Apparently I hadn't done a good job, because she wiggled against me, making me stifle a groan. *Little minx*.

"I wasn't hiding," she promised.

"No? I couldn't find you."

"I've been up here the whole time. I just..." She sighed.

"Just what, Baby Girl?"

I wanted her to open up to me. She'd been pretty damn quiet since the other two women left. That their absence had affected her so much had surprised me. I'd been so focused on getting some alone time with Demi, I hadn't considered how

lonely it must've been for her these past few years with no family or friends to speak of.

I wanted to be enough for her, but that was short-sighted and brutish of me. My girl deserved to have a well-rounded life, and that included friends. I could share some of her time if I had to, no matter how much it would pain me to do so.

Was she missing the other Omegas? Or was her somber mood related to something deeper?

Leo was of the opinion that we'd fucked up the other night when everyone had been talking about the next steps. I hadn't seen what we'd done wrong. We'd been truthful. How to move forward wasn't something we, as a pack, had talked about at length. There was no question we wanted to claim Demi as ours, but each of us had serious PTSD from our first attempt.

Nightmares still haunted me. I had a feeling they would for years. Maybe for the rest of my life.

Regaining consciousness, bleeding and broken, unable to fucking breathe right, had scared me in ways that had nothing to do with the physical injuries I'd sustained. The first glimpse of the crushed SUV that contained my entire world inside had wrecked me. My ribs still ached, and I had the remnants of road rash across my abdomen and back as a testament to that horrible day, and though the wounds would heal and disappear, the fear would live with me.

Every time I thought back to that nightmare, I pictured waking in the middle of the road in a pool of my own blood. There was a surreal haze over the entire ordeal, but I remembered dragging myself over to the vehicle and pulling my injured packmates out one by one. Seeing them unconscious and wounded had sent dread racing through my veins, but finding Demi gone had been the most terrifying moment of my life—and that said a lot given the horrors I'd lived through.

Realizing those assholes had taken her and not knowing if she was okay, not being able to keep her safe, fucking *destroyed* me.

Bringing myself back to the present, I tightened my hold on my girl, reminding myself that she was real and right fucking here. I'd barely slept while we'd been apart, but on the nights I'd managed it, I'd reached for her, trying in vain to drag the mirage of her from my dreams into reality.

If she heard the uptick of my pulse or the ragged change in my breathing, she didn't comment. But she snuggled deeper into my chest, soothing some of the turmoil.

"What's wrong?" I prompted again when it was clear she wasn't planning to continue her earlier thought.

"Nothin'."

Arching a brow, I leaned to the side and waited until she relented and turned her face to peer up at me.

Was that guilt I saw in her pretty moss-colored eyes? The green was warmer amid the sunrise, but the nervousness was impossible to miss.

"I don't think I believe you, Baby Girl."

Avoiding my gaze, she zeroed in on the crashing waves below. As much as I wished she'd share whatever was bothering her, I contented myself with just being together. Holding her. Breathing her in. Having her against me. Before long, a soft smile curled my girl's lips.

Tipping her head up, she propositioned, "Swim with me?"

I raised a dark eyebrow. That was the last thing I expected Demi to say. "Swim? Out there?" I jolted my chin toward the ocean, hoping she'd laugh and tell me she'd meant in the hot tub or something.

Now *there* was an idea I could get behind. I could think of more than one entertaining way to enjoy ourselves in the steaming hot water. *With jets.*

"Where else?"

I opened my mouth to tell her exactly the kind of dirty fun my mind had conjured, but before I could, she fucking pouted at me.

“Please?”

The tremble of her bottom lip was straight up unfair. Narrowing my eyes, I countered, “You know the water’s gonna be fucking freezing, right?”

“So?” She shrugged. “It’ll be fun.”

Fun? I could think of far better uses for our time, but I couldn’t deny her. The way her eyes sparkled with hope. The way her cheeks turned pink from the wind. The way her hair danced wild and free around her shoulders.

She was a temptress.

A godsdamn siren.

This was going to be a problem, because I’d never say no to her.

With a grumble, I relented. “Fine. But then you’ll tell me what’s wrong.” It wasn’t a question, but a demand. A bargain. A compromise.

A victorious little grin curved her bow-shaped lips, and my heart damn near squeezed out of my chest. Seeing her happy lit my whole world on fire. In the best way. Making Demi smile like that had become my entire reason for living.

Like the whipped Alpha I was, I let her lead me...

It wasn’t long before we were picking our way down a sharp set of stairs that had been carved out of the cliff side. They led down to a rocky beach, the pebbles smooth from the constant barrage of waves. The chill of the wind cut straight through us, but my little slip of a mate didn’t seem to notice or care that she was shivering or that goosebumps coated her skin.

Going ahead of her to make sure she didn’t slip or fall, I turned when I got to the bottom and easily picked her up. Pivoting, I let her slide down my body slowly as I deposited her safely on the rocky shoreline.

Chin tipped upward, arms around my waist, she smiled coyly at me. “Are you coming in with me?”

My thumbs slipped under the soft material of her shirt to rub along her sides. “Not a chance. But I’ll be your own personal lifeguard.”

There went that damn lip again. It jutted out, taunting me, tempting me to lean down and bite it. Then steal a kiss. Or maybe ten.

“Please?”

I made her work for it, begging and pouting and pleading with me to move my stubborn ass into the water with her. Choppy waves crashed against the rocks, frothing and foaming, leaving small pools in their wake as she pulled on my arm. I didn’t budge, but her efforts were endearing.

Making a production of hemming and hawing, I put on a good show until finally surrendering.

“Fine, fine,” I sighed, appearing totally put out, but on the inside, I was smirking.

Demi gave an ecstatic little yelp of delight, and a bright smile blossomed on her delicate face. She shimmied in a triumphant dance that made me groan from the way her luscious curves brushed against the muscled line of my body.

I had the sneaking suspicion she knew *exactly* what she was doing to me.

Godsdamn, my dick couldn’t get a break. I’d barely gotten rid of my last erection and here I was again, steely hard and nearly dripping. My balls ached, and the need to sink knot deep into my beautiful mate was difficult to ignore.

Gathering the threads of self control, I smothered the desire to throw her over my shoulder and carry her back to my bed. I’d behave—for now.

The only reason I leashed the craving for my Omega was because I was having too much fun seeing her smiling and playful. Light had re-entered her eyes, chasing away the shadows.

Call me a selfish bastard, but I wanted both—her happiness and her pleasure.

Right now, we'd enjoy the brisk temperature and the ocean, but I had every intention of making good on my earlier fantasies. When this was over, I'd drag her pretty ass back inside and warm her up. With my tongue. My hands. My—

“Are you coming?”

Not yet, I wasn't. But soon, I hoped. Really fucking soon.

seventeen



HADES

PICKING up on my utter distraction, she playfully swatted me, then proceeded to use all her strength to drag me toward the water's edge. I walked slowly behind her, enjoying her huffing and puffing and the way her breasts strained against her tight fitting tee.

Anyone looking would know I wasn't putting up much of a fight, otherwise I wouldn't be moving an inch, but I relished the narrowing of her eyes, the stubborn set of her mouth, and the way her tongue peeked out on the side as she concentrated on getting me to do her bidding.

Fuck, she's adorable.

Giving in, for good this time, I took her hand and interlaced our fingers with a chuckle. Skin flushed, eyes bright, Demi beamed up at me as I walked her to the waves. Pausing right before they touched her toes, she bravely shed her sweat pants and t-shirt, making me swallow my tongue at the sight of her grey-green bra and panties. The matching set did just enough to cover the parts of her I desperately wanted to bare.

Pretty sure I bit my lip to keep from putting my mouth to her skin and forgetting all my good intentions.

Two weeks ago I feared I'd never see her again, but here she was, like a sea nymph, the sun haloing her dark brown hair, her skin flushed pink, setting her freckles into stark relief. Her eyes sparkled, and if it were possible, I fell a little more in love with her.

"You know the water's gotta be in the fifties. You won't be able to stay in for long," I warned as she started backing up, pulling me along with her.

"Don't be an old man and ruin all the fun," she teased, splashing headlong into the ocean.

Five steps in, she sucked in a sharp breath and spun around with wide eyes. Squealing, teeth chattering, she launched herself at me and climbed me like a tree. Her nipples went to diamonds behind the thin fabric of her bra.

“Ohmygods, it’s fucking *freezing!*”

Chuckling, I walked us deeper into the ocean’s depths, welcoming the cold that lapped at my overheated dick. My legs quickly went numb, but I’d endured worse. Boosting her with an arm under her ass, I lifted her high against my chest so none of the water touched her. She clung to me like a monkey, wrapping her legs around my body.

“I tried to tell ya.”

Looming above me, Demi stuck her tongue out, and I almost nipped at it for fun.

“It was worth it.”

I arched an eyebrow. “You were in the water for five seconds, tops. That was worth it?”

A secretive smile curved her lips, and she dug her fingers into the hair at my nape, tugging gently. “*You* make it worth it.”

The ocean wasn’t cold enough to stop the heat that raced right back to my length. Water trailed down her neck, and I had the overwhelming urge to lick it off her skin. The tip of my cock brushed against the edge of her ass, and I barely restrained my moan.

Demi’s pupils dilated, the mossy-green of her eyes turning into a moody forest of color.

All her attention dropped to my lips, and I hardened further, despite the icy waves licking at my thighs. I slid a damp hand into her hair and gently fisted it. Slowly, sensuously, I dragged my girl down until her mouth covered mine. Lips full and warm, she eased into the kiss with the ferocity of a lion chasing a gazelle. I’d gladly be her prey as long as she didn’t stop sweeping that wicked little tongue across my own.

Fingers tightening in my hair, she tugged and set me ablaze. Lowering her carefully, I took one nipple in my mouth, then the other, sucking and biting them through the lace of her bra. Reluctantly, I released them and lowered her the rest of the way, settling her core over my cock. I promptly grunted when she rocked into me, nearly coming from the contact of her fabric clad pussy.

I wouldn't last a second if I got her slick and bare against me.

“Are you needy, Baby?” I managed to murmur between hungry kisses.

Unwilling to part, she hummed her need, showing me with her body more than words just how much she craved me.

Chest to chest, her erect nipples grazed my pecs, sending lightning straight to my balls. Having her warm and pliant against me stood out in direct opposition to the waves attempting to knock us over.

Widening my feet, I planted myself against the rolling tide, making myself as much of a force as the ocean itself. There was no way in hell I'd let Demi fall into the ice bath below. As it was, her legs and ass were partially submerged, but I was doing a good job of keeping her warm.

Holding her weight, I let Demi rub herself on me like a cat with a scratching post. Her heels dug into my ass as she ground down on my cock, the fabric of her panties wet with a mixture of ocean water and slick.

“That's it, Baby Girl. Use me. Get yourself off,” I purred, then gave into the temptation to lick the salt off the column of her neck.

She tipped her head back as my mouth sucked and licked. My teeth ached to sink into her flesh and mark her once and for all as mine. Captivated and damn near ravenous, I scraped the sharp incisors over her pulse point, feeling her buck wildly at the tease.

Hands on her ass, I helped rock her over my length faster and faster, loving the way the swells of her breasts heaved as

she neared orgasm.

It wasn't long before she fell over the edge, keening her bliss as she came for me.

She'd barely crested the first wave when she pleaded, "More, Hades. Please. I need you."

All my good intentions flew out the damn window. I couldn't deny her.

"How am I supposed to say no when you beg me so prettily?"

Her forehead creased as she pulled back, searching my face. "Do you want to say no?"

I huffed a laugh. "Absolutely the fuck not. You have no idea how hard I've been trying to behave. I wanted to drive into you the second I spotted you looking like an angel on the balcony. And now here you are, my wicked little sea goddess, tempting me to sin."

A sharp jerk was all it took to rip her sweet-smelling panties free. Fuck, what I wouldn't give to wrap them around my cock later and relive this moment all over again while I fucked my fist. With five other packmates, there were bound to be nights alone when I had nothing but my hand for company and her scent on my pillow. So I balled them up and shoved them into my pocket while Demi arched a brow at me.

I smirked and shrugged unapologetically. "Just keeping the oceans clean. Saving sea turtles and shit."

She didn't buy it for a second. Then again, she didn't say no, either. Perhaps the vision of me touching myself, thinking about her, turned her on. I'd heard our girl could be quite the little voyeur, or so Knox and Thane had said. Her heat had confirmed it, too. Demi wasn't as innocent as she looked. Not when it came to me and my pack.

And I wouldn't change a godsdamn thing.

"Well, as long as it's for the sea turtles, I guess I'll allow it," she so graciously deemed with a knowing, cheeky grin.

“But if everyone’s always so intent on destroying my panties, I’m going to have to start buying them in bulk.”

Unrepentantly, I canted my hips into hers. “Or you could just save a step and not wear them.”

“Maybe I will.”

“And maybe I’ll reward you the first time I catch you nice and bare for me.”

Shoving my shorts low on my hips, I freed myself, my cock undeterred from the sloshing water or the temperature. Demi was hot against me, her center warm and ready. I grazed the head along her opening and groaned raggedly as she gripped me in her palm to line me up. Slowly, she sank over me, spearing herself on my length one inch at a time.

“Gods, I forgot how huge you are,” she hissed, throwing her head back as my girth stretched her and my piercings slid inside, one after the other. “Ho-ly *fuck*,” she panted.

Just listening to the curse on her lips did it for me. Unlike myself, Demi rarely used foul language, and there was something so hot about hearing it spill from her mouth. I jerked, burying myself deeper while my cock throbbed. I would never survive this. My mate felt too good, wrapped around me nice and tight.

Finally, mercifully, she took me fully, her sweet little cunt resting against my already swelling knot. We breathed each other in and then I moved, lifting her and dropping her over my length. Her keen was music to my ears, and I did it again, setting a slow, steady pace.

“Hades! Sweet fates, I’m not going to last. You feel so damn good filling me up.”

“Baby Girl,” I growled. “Keep talking dirty to me and see how long *I* last.” It was a challenge. A dare. A prayer and a plea. I loved hearing filthy things spill from her pretty mouth.

Her fingers tightened in my hair, bordering on pain. It set me off, and I fucked her harder, thrusting up into her as I slammed her over my cock.

Demi gasped and moaned. “I’m dripping for you. Gods, you’re going to split me in half.”

“Need me to slow down?” I didn’t want to, but I would. I never wanted to hurt her, and I knew I was a lot of man to accommodate. It could be a blessing and a curse, and though my Omega was built to take me, that didn’t mean there wasn’t a need to work up to it. There was a reason I’d made her come first beyond just common courtesy and being a gentleman.

“Don’t you dare,” she commanded.

“Fuckin’ hell. You squeeze me so damn good.”

Biting her lip, she stifled a cry. “I think I’m in love with your dick.”

“That’s all you want me for, hmm?” I teased. “This big. Thick. Cock. Fucking you, nice and fast.” I punctuated each word with a sharp snap of my hips.

“Sweet mercy,” she gasped as I changed the angle. “You’re going to make me come!”

Driving into her, I made sure my piercings rubbed against all the sensitive spots along her inner wall. Her pussy fluttered, squeezing me. My cock was weeping, my balls desperate for release.

Fucking hell, I was ready to explode.

“Come for me, Baby Girl. Come for me right the fuck now.”

As if I commanded her orgasm, her pussy spasmed and her entire body shuddered as she crashed over the edge. Mouth parting on a scream the noise of the ocean swallowed, she ground down on me and tightened her fingers in my hair.

Lightning zipped along my spine and my balls drew tight as pleasure overwhelmed me. My cock pulsed while Demi milked me for all I was worth. With one last thrust, I slammed her down over my rapidly swelling knot, reveling in her incoherent cries as our bodies locked together. Every little rock sent off another round of fireworks in us both as she writhed, and I grunted with each pull against my knot.

Nothing would ever feel as heavenly as being knotted inside my woman

I lost track of how long I kissed her as we came down from the high of endorphins.

“My perfect mate,” I murmured. “So sweet and sexy.” The warmth of my voice held a hoarse rasp as I buried my face against the crux of her shoulder and neck, just breathing in her scent. “Watching you come is so damn beautiful.”

She shuddered through another aftershock as I purred, my chest vibrating smoothly.

“So is watching you.” She stroked her fingers over my forehead, brushing along the edge of my hair.

We floated while the waves lapped at our skin. I didn’t move until Demi shivered, this one different from the pleasurable trembles still tumbling through her at intervals.

Turning, I carried her back toward land as she clung to me like a little koala. We needed a towel, or maybe an encore in the hot tub, just to warm the hell up. Before we’d reached the shoreline, however, Jamison’s stern voice bellowed from the house, beckoning us home.

“Oh.” That tiny squeak of a word seemed to shift everything.

Despite the distance, I was tempted to throw a rock at him for disrupting my plans and making Demi tense.

Was she bothered about being caught together in public? Embarrassed she was still locked on my cock?

One of the best things about the house we had bought was that there weren’t any close neighbors. Our little cove had been completely private. The only people who could’ve seen were my packmates, and we’d done nothing Jamison and the others hadn’t witnessed during her heat.

There was no reason for her to be ashamed or embarrassed.

The pack wanted Demi to be confident in her sexuality. None of us would make her feel bad for expressing herself physically, and though we all yearned to bury ourselves in her

all the damn time, we'd promised there wouldn't be any jealousy when she chose to spend alone time with one of us.

I longed to pry into the deeper reasons behind her tension, but the mask she'd worn earlier descended once more.

Huh. What's that about?

"You okay?" I asked, gliding my hand up and down her spine.

"I hope so."

That answer left me reeling.

Luckily, my knot deflated, and I was able to set her down. Rinsing off in the water, we climbed from the waves. I righted my shorts while Demi pulled sweatpants and a tank over damp skin.

Together, we headed inside to find the pack positioned tensely around the main floor. Six pairs of eyes landed on her while mine zeroed in on the strange man standing in our living room.

eighteen



DEMI

CONFUSION EBBED through me at the sight of the older gentleman wearing a crisp, tailored suit, standing with his hands behind his back. I'd expected to walk in and find my pack unhappy, but a visitor was the furthest thing from my mind.

I tugged at my damp shirt, sure I looked like a drowned rat with my dripping hair. Overly aware of my lack of panties and the scent of Hades on my skin, I shifted uncomfortably. Who was this guy and why was he here?

Unease rose as swiftly as a tidal wave, rearranging my insides until it felt hard to breathe.

"You must be Demi," the man bowed slightly, keeping to his side of the room.

Agitation prickled just under my skin like an itch that couldn't be scratched. The Omega in me didn't enjoy having unknown visitors in the house—especially ones I hadn't invited in. Thankfully, my mates stood between me and the stranger, able to lunge in front of me at any moment. And while more trouble was the last thing we needed, their protective stances helped me feel safe.

"It's nice to meet you." The silver-haired man smiled nicely, and the expression seemed genuine enough.

"Um, you too?" The awkwardness had me fidgeting with the hem of my shirt as I glanced from man to man, wondering if any of my mates had any idea what was going on. Their somber expressions said they understood more than I did.

Maybe they knew who this was?

"I apologize for showing up uninvited," he continued, "but I thought I'd pay my respects in person."

Was this one of the guys' fathers?

Everyone had been sleeping when I'd slipped out to the widow's walk earlier, but now they were dressed and groomed, each looking like they'd just walked off the pages of a fashion magazine.

Worried about first impressions, I combed my fingers through my salty hair and tugged at my clothing. There was nothing I could do about my state of dress, but hopefully, I appeared presentable enough that the gentleman wouldn't dismiss me out of hand.

With no genuine family of my own, I wanted to endear myself to the families of my mates. At least, the ones who deserved my kindness.

As the silence stretched, I came back to myself. What was I doing? Startled and feeling a little frazzled, I jumped into action and rushed into the kitchen.

An Omegas place is to serve. The rule had been beaten into me until it was ingrained, first by my father, followed by Anton.

Ripping open the fridge, I pulled out some fruit and cheese, preparing to make a tray of snacks for our guest.

"Please excuse our lack of preparedness. None of us were expecting company, but I'm sure I can whip together some appetizers."

I threw a few blocks of cheese onto the counter, along with grapes, strawberries, and blueberries. Thane liked to eat candied nuts, and I dug in the pantry next, barely suppressing a fist bump as I whipped around and set it with the other staples. I could make a tray of snacks with these. It wasn't fancy, but it would have to do.

Tucking my hair back, I winced at the dampness. "And I apologize for looking like a sea creature. I was... taking a swim." Despite how hard I tried to glaze over what I'd been up to earlier, my face flamed.

Thane, who'd followed me into the kitchen, probably intent on throwing me out of his domain, cleared his throat, scrubbing a hand over his mouth to hide his knowing smile.

Jamison, bless the man, came to my rescue, earning himself brownie points I'd be sure to reward later.

“Demi, this is Chaddrick Hurst, the director of the OMA.”

I froze, the hand holding a knife hovering over the block of cheddar. Carefully, I set it down. The earlier heat that suffused my face drained until I was sure I was devoid of color.

Not a family member, then.

My hands grew cold and clammy, and I shifted my weight from foot to foot, unsure if I should run and hide or own up to the decision I'd made that led to this unexpected visit.

“That... makes sense, actually.” I worried my lip and looked guiltily at my men.

All morning I'd been stewing over how to tell them I'd called the OMA to learn more about the process of registering as an Omega and matching with a pack. And not just any pack—*this* pack.

Surprise?

Insecurity ate at me as worry and doubt swam through my mind and heart. No matter how hard I tried to reassure myself that these men still wanted me, that we were perfect scent matches, I couldn't shake my uncertainty. Not about them—I wanted them more than I needed air or water, or craved chocolate—but about *me*.

A lifetime of trusting the wrong people, of being beaten down and made to feel insignificant, was hard to overcome. Maybe I wasn't worthy of such a pack. Maybe the hesitation I'd sensed in them the other night stemmed from them realizing they could do better than a broken, scarred Omega with trust issues.

What if they'd changed their minds about me? Or wanted me 'just for now'? Being temporary terrified me because I yearned for so much more.

Anton's voice was stuck in my head, taunting and torturing me. *You're just a warm hole to sink knot-deep into. You're ruined goods, Demi Leigh.*

“Baby...” Hades rounded the kitchen island, concern eddying through his expression when he caught sight of the emotions I was sure were playing across my face.

I fidgeted with my hands and implored him—all of them, really—with a pleading tone. “I can explain. I promise.”

Chaddrick Hurst interjected, “There’s no need, my dear, especially since there isn’t much to tell.” Inclining his head, he addressed Jamison, who clearly stood out as the leader of our pack. “Demi called my office with some questions and left a message for me with my secretary. Instead of returning her phone call, I thought a visit may be in order to set her mind at ease about the OMA and our process of placing Omegas with compatible packs.”

An unhappy sound rumbled from Hades’ chest as he turned, giving me an excellent view of his ass and muscular shoulders. He half-blocked me from sight like my own personal bodyguard. “She has a pack. Us.”

Mr. Hurst nodded sagely. “I thought you’d say that. However, Demi is not currently in our system nor does she have a recognized pack, regardless of how much you may wish otherwise.” Leaning to the side to see around Hades’ bulky frame, he leveled his attention on me, and earnestly added, “I’d like to help change that, if you’ll let me.”

“How did you get our address?” Knox interrogated, physically placing himself between me and the director.

I didn’t miss the flex of his fingers, primed to reach for the gun tucked into the back of his jeans. His shirt covered it, but the bulge was unmistakable. He was armed and ready. Somehow, that made me feel better.

Mr. Hurst gave him a droll look. “You are all informed that I’m working with the FBI. Do you really think they don’t know the location of your safe house?”

“Who else has access to that information?” Eli demanded before Knox could stop his growl long enough to ask the question himself.

Mr. Hurst sighed. “Normally, I don’t take well to others issuing orders, but given the circumstances Demi has endured, let me assure you that no one else has that intel other than the agents working this case, Pack Jacobs, and myself.”

Sharing a look, Eli and Knox backed off, somewhat appeased.

Ever the businessman, Jamison motioned toward the couches. “Perhaps we should get more comfortable before we continue this conversation.”

Nothing was going to make this talk less uncomfortable, but I agreed anyway.

Thane sidled up to me before I could leave the kitchen and gave me an encouraging wink. “Don’t worry, darling. I’ll take care of this. Go get settled and I’ll be in with refreshments.”

I would’ve rather stayed and helped him, but I forced myself to face the music and padded into the other room after my mates. The cut on my lip had been rapidly healing, but with how hard I bit it, the sting was back.

“Demi,” Jamison called, holding out one hand and tapping his lap with the other.

Dirty and damp, I hesitated. “I might get you wet.”

I saw the innuendo cross his mind as his gaze flashed with amusement, but it quickly faded, replaced by something far more disconcerting. Questions filled his sapphire-colored eyes, coated with wariness as if he were afraid I wouldn’t welcome his touch.

Yeah, no. That look had to go.

I slid my fingers effortlessly into his and let him pull me down. The stoic man tugged me close, and the persistent tension he always wore melted away as I relaxed into him.

The rest of my pack settled around us while Chaddrick Hurst took one of the accent chairs in the corner, close but not *too* close.

He obviously had experience working with Omegas. He kept an ample distance so as not to pose a threat to my Alphas

while remaining close enough for me to scent and see. His hands rested harmlessly on the armrests, and he smiled his thanks to Thane when he handed him a drink. With a tray of snacks placed on the coffee table between everyone, my chef perched on the arm of the couch, staying nearby.

“Now then, do you want to tell us why you reached out to the OMA, Sweetness?” There was no condescension in Jamison’s voice.

I could’ve shrugged or played coy, but a deep, yearning part of my heart knew this discussion was inevitable. We needed to get onto the same page, and while I would’ve loved to have privacy for such an important talk, I ignored Mr. Hurst and pretended he wasn’t eavesdropping.

Shifting on Jamison’s lap, I gazed into his face. Even though I sat on his thighs, I didn’t tower above him but remained at eye-level. “Do you want the long or the short version?”

“Always the long version, Sweetness. I believe I speak for all of us when I say we want to know everything you think. Everything you feel. There’s no thought too small or emotion too inferior. Every part of you matters to us, Little Omega.”

My eyes misted. “I wasn’t sure how you felt after your hesitation the other night. Julia and Adeline both had solid plans for going back to the OMA, fixing their status, and making matches. I don’t want to live in limbo forever. This”—I motioned to the room at large—“is such a beautiful house. I love it. But it’s not home.” I gestured from my chest to his, then swept my hand toward all my other mates, making sure they knew this included them as well. “*This* is home to me. *You’re* home. And I don’t want this to be temporary. But if it is, if you’ve changed your minds since my heat—“

Jamison growled so viciously, I hiccuped and recoiled in fear even as his fingers tightened possessively on my waist to keep me from going far. “Demi,” he practically barked. “Do you really believe we think this is *temporary*?”

I couldn’t tell if his disbelief or anger edged out for the win.

“I didn’t,” I whispered. “Until the other night. No one had an answer on what our next steps should be. You all seemed... uncertain and indecisive. I thought...”

“You thought we’d changed our minds,” Leo picked up where I left off, smoothing the rough edges between Alpha and Omega with his never-ending sixth sense as a Beta. He always knew exactly what we all needed. “You thought we didn’t want you anymore.”

I shrugged, not denying it. “Or at least, had your doubts about claiming me.”

“Never,” Hades rasped. “You’re ours, Baby Girl. That means for *life*. No way is another pack getting their hands on you.”

“Which was one of our concerns with going to the OMA. We were worried about putting any more undue stress on you by making you go through the rigorous matching process,” Eli added.

“And we’d be lying if we said we don’t have some trauma from our first attempt. Gods, Demi.” Knox swallowed, running a hand over his platinum beard before continuing roughly, “We almost lost you. I mean—*fuck!* We *did*. For weeks. And it killed every single one of us inside.”

“So yeah,” Thane jumped in. “We’re gun shy. Scratch that. I can’t speak for the others, but I’m fucking *terrified*. Putting your name back on the registry before we’ve dealt with the threat of your old pack seems counterintuitive. I need you safe more than I long to give in to my desire to sink my teeth so far into your throat they’ll be able to see my mark from space.”

I snort-laughed, and my tension broke. “I don’t know whether that image is sweet or its own brand of terrifying.”

“Sweet. We’re going to go with sweet.” Thane grinned, and the brightness of it eased more of the stress that had a chokehold on my heart.

Jamison murmured, “Never doubt our devotion to you, Demi Leigh.”

I winced at his use of my full name.

Gazing into his gruff face, I cupped his cheek and scratched my fingers through his dark beard. “Are you mad?”

He arched a questioning brow, but his fingers played against the skin of my side. “Do I sound mad?”

“I don’t know,” I hedged.

“Demi, look at me,” he ordered. “I may be slightly cross that you didn’t come to us with your concerns, but I’m not mad, Sweetness. *Never* mad. I do, however, hate the idea of you worrying about our intentions. I thought we made it abundantly clear that you’re ours, Little Omega. Body, heart, and fucking soul. You own each of us. There’s not anything on this earth that could keep us from you. Not your old pack or the OMA’s rules.”

Mr. Hurst coughed, then cleared his throat, hiding a smile. “Sorry. Don’t mind me. I’m an Alpha with his own Omega, so I understand exactly where they’re coming from.”

“Does that mean you’ll help us?” I asked with an edge of pleading. I needed this one thing in my life to work out.

“The rules we have set in place are there for a reason,” he said evasively. “They ensure every Omega is afforded the very best match possible.”

“So I’d have to go through the whole process of matching with a pack?” Distress and concern wormed their way in, making me question everything I thought I wanted. “If there’s a chance I’ll end up with a different pack, I don’t want to do this.”

Growls tore from my men. They echoed in my chest.

“These are my mates, and I won’t be separated from them again.”

“A lovely sentiment, and one I will not contest as long as they remain your choice at the conclusion of the matching process.”

Thane shoved a hand through his golden hair, appearing troubled. “We’re scent-matched. You know that, right?”

“I thought that may be the case,” Mr. Hurst murmured, more to himself than to us. “But it only augments my point. You should have no problem letting her explore her options, knowing she’ll come back to you in the end,” he challenged.

Hades crossed his arms, and Eli looked pained. Jamison narrowed his eyes resolutely while Thane tipped his face to the heavens, praying quietly to the Fates. Leo’s head dropped into his hands and he dug his fingers into his messy brown hair while Knox’s jaw ticked and he blew out a bolstering breath.

It was Knox who broke the silence. “What about her safety?”

“Obviously, we need to earn your trust, given recent events, but with the help of the FBI, Pack Jacobs, and your own pack,”—he nodded toward the rest of the guys—“we’re well on our way toward containing the breach. Now that we know the mastermind behind the abductions, we’re monitoring his every move along with those of his packmates. I feel as though I can confidently say we at the OMA can and *will* ensure Demi’s safety as we figure out this unprecedented situation together.”

As nicely stated as it was, I couldn’t quite tame the undulating anxiety in the pit of my stomach.

Putting myself out there with OMA was risky.

Then again, so was remaining unbonded and living my life in hiding.

There were no perfect choices, and the stakes were high.

You wanted control over your own life, Demi Leigh. So, take it.

Standing from Jamison’s lap, I turned to face them all. Tucking my hair behind my ears, I took a deep, steadying breath. “I’d like to go to the OMA and make our relationship official. I’ve spent too much time hiding, and I’m done. I want your bites on my skin, and I’m desperate to claim you all in return. What do you think?”

Six purrs rumbled to life, creating a soothing vibration that beckoned to me. The thunder of it sank into my veins and set

me on fire. Those sounds were a declaration—a promise that preceded the crescent-shaped marks that would soon decorate my body like natural tattoos.

These men? They only purred for *me*.

“We want to claim you as ours, Little Omega. That has never and *will* never change,” Jamison vowed.

Thane clapped and released a whoop of excitement with a million-dollar smile curling his lips. “I vote yes. You’re stuck with us for life, Darling.”

I laughed. “Good. I want to be stuck.”

“I’m so damn glad we’re doing this.” Leo was up from his seat and across the room, scooping me up and swinging me in a circle before setting me back on my feet. Silver-blue eyes stared intently down into mine. “I love you, Honey, and I can’t wait until you’re wearing my mark.”

“I love you too.” I beamed.

Slightly more reserved, Knox narrowed his attention on Chaddrick Hurst. “Can you promise that we’ll be matched at the end of this process?”

The man steepled his fingers and tipped his head to the side. “As long as it’s what’s in her best interest.”

Hades looked a step away from pummeling the dude and ending the whole situation *his* way.

With a sigh, Mr. Hurst appealed to their logic. “Look at it this way. If you are what she wants after looking at all her options, there won’t be anything standing in your way.”

“Why doesn’t that make me feel better?” Hades grumbled.

“I cannot give you an unequivocal yes because ultimately, the decision lies with Demi. But if you are scent-matched, as you say you are, there’s truly nothing to worry about.”

With a huff, Hades ignored the man and gave me his full attention. “You really want to do this, Baby Girl?”

“There’s no rush. We have time to think about this,” Knox reasoned.

“But,” Eli narrowed his eyes on the two hold-outs. “We’re on your side, no matter what, Love. The decision is yours,” he promised.

For once in your life, trust yourself.

Glancing at each of them, I nodded. “Yes. I want to make you mine, as long as you’ll all still have me?”

Jamison surged forward and scooped me up, hugging me to his chest as the rest of my mates surrounded us. “No more doubts, Sweetness. When this is over, you’ll never question our intentions again.”

With a kiss to the top of my head, Knox strode over to the director, who stood and took his outstretched hand. “We have one thing in common, Mr. Hurst. We all want what’s best for Demi. But make no mistake, we intend to prove that’s us.”

nineteen



DEMI

THE OMA OFFICE was modern and comfortable, but I couldn't stop myself from freaking out, regardless. Located a few towns over, the hour-long ride had been stressful. My guys were tense, and though they tried to remain upbeat, their scents belied their anxiety. I was a mess of nerves and nausea by the time we arrived later that afternoon, freshly showered and dressed.

"Everything is going to be okay, Darling," Thane promised as we sat in the cushy waiting room. His hand collared the back of my neck, squeezing with just enough dominance to ease my growing panic. I basked in his chocolate and caramel scent, letting the warm notes remind me I wasn't alone.

My mates surrounded me, either sprawled in chairs or pacing the lobby. I took comfort from their nearness and focused on my breathing.

"C'mere," Thane commanded. Pulling me into his lap, he braced my back against his arm as I curled up sideways and rested my head on his chest. "We're not going to let anything bad happen to you. You're safe," he murmured. "And when we leave here *together*, you'll finally be free. We won't have to hide anymore."

"That sounds too good to be true." I wanted to trust it, but until I walked out of here with my name officially attached to theirs, I'd hold my breath.

"It does. But it's happening. And you know what?"

"Hmm?"

"When this is all over, we're going to take you on a date."

I perked up, lifting my head and gazing down into his sparkling cerulean gaze. "A date?"

"Absolutely. You deserve it, Darling. You've been so damn brave and strong. I think a little pampering and a good time on

the town is overdue.”

It had been years since I’d had the freedom to go out in public, first because my father had been hiding me away, waiting for the day he could use me as a bargaining chip, and then because Anton refused to let me leave the penthouse, high on his own power trip. He’d thrived on making me obey whatever contrived rules he set.

The Omega in me preened at the idea of dating and romance. A true courtship, the way it was intended to be. I dreamed of dressing up and looking nice for my mates. Of being shown off and thriving under their attention. Of not having to hide.

I’d never been proud of my designation before, but on their arms, as *their* Omega? That was a different story entirely.

So when Mr. Hurst appeared with one of their Omega ambassadors, I ignored my pounding pulse and tried to conceal my trembling hands. I wanted this, and that made the stress worth it.

“Demi, this is Ava, the manager of the Bridgeport Omega Matching Agency,” Mr. Hurst made the introductions.

Ava’s copper-colored hair was pulled into a high ponytail that swished when she walked, and her skin was a beautiful, deep brown. Curvy and confident, she wore a bodycon dress that clung in all the right places without being overly showy—cute yet professional. I instantly wanted some of her poise. By comparison, I felt underdressed in my jeans and long-sleeve, v-neck henley. I liked it because it was a partial button-down, hugged nicely, and had decorative buttons on the cuffs, but I looked comfortable compared to her stylish dress.

Boldly crossing through the throng of my Alphas and Beta to shake my hand, Ava greeted, “It’s lovely to meet you, Demi.”

“You as well.”

“If you’ll come this way, we’ll get started.”

“We’re coming with you,” Hades stated, leaving no room for arguments.

Ava cocked her head, not the least bit intimidated. “I’m sorry, but this is a process Demi has to go through on her own. We need her most honest answers on the questionnaires without worrying about what others might want to hear, and your scents would only taint the scent binders she needs to go through. Rest assured, I’ll return her back to you as soon as possible.”

“Yeah, that’s not happening.” Knox crossed his arms, facing off with the manager, anger contorting his features.

Thane tried to look encouraging, but it didn’t reach his eyes. Eli, on the other hand, looked stricken while Leo tipped my chin up.

“We’ll be right here, waiting for you,” he vowed, then kissed my forehead sweetly. “Don’t worry about this lot. I’ll make sure they behave while you’re gone.”

“Fuck—” Hades growled, then scooped me up and cradled me against his chest. He purred, and I melted. “What Leo said. I’ll be right fuckin’ here. Yell loud if you need me and I’ll break the damn door down, alright?”

I giggled, picturing a Hades-sized hole in the wall. Nothing would keep him away if I needed him. That visual helped me relax as much as his purr did.

Jamison rolled his neck, inhaled, and released it before reaching for me next. “It might make me sound like a possessive bastard,” he admitted as he wrapped me in his arms, “but I don’t like having you out of my sight.”

Footsteps sounded behind us, and my pack whipped around, surrounding me protectively.

I barely caught a glimpse of the blond woman before bulging biceps and strong backs blocked my view.

“What about conducting the initial intake appointment in one of the conference rooms instead? They’re glass, if I remember correctly.” An unfamiliar voice chimed in, slightly out of breath. More than a little amused, she added, “There *is* an Omega behind this wall of testosterone, isn’t there? Sweet mercy, Alphas are so overprotective. It’s just little ol’ me.”

“Kimber?” Knox straightened and rushed forward, pulling the smiling blonde into a hug. I peeked through the hole he’d made in their protective wall. Lifting her off her feet, he mumbled, “Thank fuck you made it.”

“I don’t think you’ve ever been this happy to see me before,” she laughed.

“Shut up and just enjoy my show of appreciation.”

She squeezed him back. “I jumped in the car the second you called and drove straight here. Took me three hours, but I made it. I’ll always come when you call.”

“Who’s Kimber?” I whispered to Thane.

Leaning down, he answered, “Kimber is one of Knox’s sisters.”

“Sweet baby Jesus, you didn’t even tell her about me?” Kimber swatted Knox, who winced playfully like she’d had the power to actually hurt him. She didn’t. Not much taller than me, she barely cleared his shoulder.

Knox rubbed a hand along the back of his neck as led her over. “Demi, this is my sister. She works for the OMA in northern Maine. I thought she might be able to help us. Outside of our pack, there’s no one I trust more than my family.”

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said, unsure if I should offer her a hug or a handshake.

She made it easy and decided for me, pulling me into a warm hug before stepping back and holding me at arm’s length.

“You didn’t tell me how pretty she is! You’re stunning. How did you end up with my behemoth of a brother? He doesn’t deserve someone as gorgeous as you.”

“Thanks for that,” Knox jibbed dryly.

I laughed, a smile coming easily. Somehow, Kimber had completely distracted me and set me at ease.

“I’m serious. I need all the details after we’re done with this. But first, Demi and I have some business to attend to.” Linking her arm with mine, she tugged me over to Mr. Hurst and Ava, who watched the chaos with bemused expressions.

Wasting no time, Kimber introduced herself, and after checking her credentials, it was decided that Kimber would accompany me and conduct my intake appointment with Ava.

Grabbing her laptop, Ava escorted me into one of the glass conference rooms, where I had a clear view of my pack. With a deep breath, I walked through the door, waving at my mates before settling into my chair.

More than ready to get this over with, I rubbed my hands together and nodded at Ava and Kimber. “Let’s do this.”

“I’m glad to see your enthusiasm. You’re going to need it.” Ava smirked and opened her laptop conspiratorially.

Gazing at Kimber, I shrugged, the motion asking for more clarification.

She snickered. “Oh, sweet Demi. You have no clue what you’re in for. Buckle up. This is about to be an experience.”

“I thought I was just answering a few questions. How hard can it be?”

Kimber chuckled. “A few?”

My heart sank. “That bad, huh?”

“It’s one step closer to sealing yourself to my brother’s pack, if that helps. Though how you’ll deal with six stinky men who forget to put the toilet seat down and leave hair shavings all over the sink, I do not know. Trust me. I lived with Knox. It’s not pretty.”

Ava pressed her lips together to hide a smile. “I thought our job was to *help* Omegas match with a pack. Not talk them into becoming *spinsters*.”

“You’ve obviously been at this longer than I have. Teach me your ways, sensei.” Kimber teased, bowing playfully.

Ava snorted and shook her head, but then a wicked light sparked to life in her eyes as she leaned forward in her seat like she was departing a secret. “If you need some incentive to match with a pack, I’ve heard the sex is incredible. Especially when you go through heat.”

A blush stained my cheeks, the warmth scalding as it traveled down my neck.

Ava narrowed in on the rosy hue, and she reclined in her seat. “Though it seems you already know all about that, don’t you?” There was no judgement in her tone, only curiosity and maybe a hint of wistfulness. “You went through heat with that pack?”

“I did.” I wouldn’t be ashamed of it. My heart felt like it could explode with love and happiness. “And you’re right... it *was* incredible!”

“Ew! *Gross*. You’re talking about my brother. I need brain bleach or a rewind button. Preferably both,” Kimber whined. “I am never going to forgive you for that.”

I laughed until tears watered in my eyes, but it wasn’t long before we’d settled and Ava got to work asking me a million and five questions about myself while my men hovered right outside.

* * *

JAMISON

“I fuckin’ hate this,” Hades grumbled as he stood beside me with his arms crossed. Feet wide, shoulders braced, he looked like an immovable statue.

Hell, I’m sure we all seemed like statues, standing in a line with our noses practically pressed against the glass of the conference room. We’d taken on the persona of bodyguards, but there was no way any of us were leaving Demi alone in there.

My attention remained riveted to her profile, watching for signs of distress. The second she seemed troubled, this was over.

The desire to claim Demi was strong, but I wouldn’t put her at risk to do it. All my instincts screamed at me to get her the fuck out of here. Putting her name on the registry would make her a target all over again if Anton caught wind of it. The smarmy bastard would never let her go. He was the kind of man who didn’t tolerate a slight. With a fragile ego and a vindictive streak, he was dangerous—an unstable stick of dynamite that could blow at any fucking second.

I wanted Demi far away from the blast whenever he detonated. And I knew he would. The asshole would retaliate once he realized we’d taken our mate back and cost him the half a million she’d nearly sold for. We’d already tarnished Demi in his eyes, and now this.

There was no way in hell he’d let that drop.

Which is why we needed the leverage. Blackmailing him to leave Demi alone was a solid option, but it didn’t sit right with me.

Anton had the world at his fingertips, ripe for the taking. If the rumors were true, he’d be announcing his run for governor at his charity gala at the end of the month.

He didn't deserve any of it. Not the fame. Not the money. And especially not the power.

Spiteful as it may be, every cell in my body wanted to see him rotting behind bars. Knowing he'd wake up every sunrise and think about who put him there would fucking delight me.

"There's a reason they do the process this way," Thane muttered, mostly to himself, as if he were trying to convince his Alpha to stand down.

"Doesn't make it any easier. I don't want her in there." Knox had been starkly against the idea of going to the OMA, not because he didn't crave to have Demi as his mate, but because his job required him to always see the 'what ifs'.

It helped that Kimber was in there, but while I trusted her, I could admit it was a little awkward. Knox was semi-estranged from his family, and in a roundabout way, that was partially my fault.

His younger sister, Kaylee, had set her sights on my pack before her brother became one of us. While we'd been vetting Knox as a packmate, making sure he'd be a good fit, his sister had misread our frequent visits. Though none of my packmates had given her any special attention, she'd become infatuated, and when Knox joined our pack, it made her dream of having a relationship with us impossible. Her hopes of becoming romantically involved were dashed, shattering her crush.

The decision had created a rift in their family. His parents had been disappointed while Kimber flocked to Kaylee's side, helping her nurse a broken heart.

Knox had kept his distance ever since.

I'd always thought that divide was perpetuated by both sides. But seeing Kimber today had changed my mind on the situation. It was clear she wanted a relationship with her brother. Perhaps it was time to encourage Knox to let bygones be bygones.

This was a huge first step in mending fences.

“We can trust her, right?” Eli’s cheeks puffed as he blew out a stressed exhale.

Leo turned sharply toward the doctor. “Who, Demi?”

Pinching the bridge of his nose above his glasses, Eli shook his head. “Bloody hell. Of course not. I meant Kimber. No offense, Knox.”

“None taken. I trust her, but I know some of you may have your reservations.”

The FBI had questioned us about her involvement in setting up our first meeting at the OMA, insinuating that she could’ve been involved in leaking information about where Demi was located as well as when her appointment was. Anton had somehow gotten his hands on that intel, but none of us had truly thought Kimber was to blame.

Someone, somewhere, worked as a mole, passing valuable information off to Anton and then using their access to delete vulnerable Omegas out of the system, essentially turning them into ghosts. Both Felix and Knox had used their considerable skills to try to track the IP address, unfortunately, with no success. Whoever was accessing the system was using multiple overseas VPN tunnels to obscure their connection, making it nearly impossible to trace. Undeterred by the challenge of foreign jurisdiction, Knox had already put his buddies at the station on the task of trying to untangle the web, as well as putting in a request with the FBI. With their extensive resources, we hoped they’d be able to make progress where we’d stalled.

There was nothing more frustrating than being unable to protect Demi. Unseen threats were stacking against us, and all I could do was prepare myself for the inevitable fallout while making plan after plan on how we could keep our mate safe.

For an Alpha who thrived on control, the entire situation left me disgruntled and ill-at-ease, both things I tried to hide from my Omega.

“Kimber is harmless,” Thane said, never taking his eyes off Demi. He stood beside me, one arm crossed over his chest,

supporting the elbow of his bent arm as he scrubbed a hand over his shadowed jaw. “She doesn’t have a shady bone in her body. Besides, her interrogation came back clean. It couldn’t have been her.”

“Thanks for having my sister’s back. And mine,” Knox murmured.

“Always, brother.” Thane reached over and fist bumped our packmate.

“While I agree Kimber is innocent, the problem remains that someone *isn’t*. And right now, we have no idea who’s responsible,” I grumbled, capturing the attention of all my packmates. Though everyone except for Leo was an Alpha, they deferred to me. It was a heavy responsibility, but one I usually welcomed. “As soon as this is over, we need to decide what to do about Pack Silver. I won’t leave Demi’s safety to chance, living on a hope and prayer that they don’t come after her a second time.”

“Agreed.” Thane nodded and clamped a hand down on my shoulder. “Besides, I don’t want her constantly looking over her shoulder. You should have seen the hope in her eyes when I told her we would take her on a date once we were officially courting.”

“Fuck. Does anyone else find it tragic that she gets so excited over such simple things?” Hades questioned roughly.

“I want her excited to date us, but yeah. It does, because it’s one more sign of how sheltered and abused she’s been these last five years.” Thane shoved a hand through his hair, tugging at the golden strands.

“If our girl wants to date, then we date. Demi gets whatever she wants.” Knox shook his head. “That’s the only reason I’m here right now. My instincts are screaming at me to take her home and lock her away until Anton, Huck, and Reed no longer pose a threat, but I won’t have our woman feeling like we don’t want to be with her. That can be just as damaging.”

Knox was right, as usual. Demi's emotional wellbeing was as important as her physical safety.

The six of us lapsed into silence while we watched Demi answer more questions that Ava quickly typed into the computer. My Omega stretched, looking tired, but I didn't interrupt. She knew we were here, watching, and if she wanted our interference, she'd let us know.

For now, I contented myself with imagining all the ways I could mete out punishment to all those who'd hurt her, and dreamed of the day we'd finally be free of deadly threats.

twenty



DEMI

THE SCENT BINDERS made my nose tickle and elicited a sneeze. I couldn't help myself. I turned my head into my elbow and let out three in a row.

"This is torture," I complained, eyeing the numerous cards I needed to sniff. Scent cancellers sat beside me, and I lifted one of the little bags to my nose and breathed deeply to clear out the irritating smell of burnt popcorn. "I hope for this Alpha's sake that there's an Omega out there who just adores the scent of slightly charred kernels." I handed the card back, motioning for Ava to slide it back into place and turn to the next pack.

It stood to reason that if one Alpha didn't appeal, none of the others in the pack would either. And even if they did, how could you have a relationship with a pack when one of their member's scents repulsed you?

Bad as I felt, it wasn't worth the time to test them all when there were so many to get through. Maybe I'd feel differently if I didn't have six sexy-as-sin men standing shoulder to shoulder on the other side of the glass who smelled like a wet dream. It made me appreciate their incredible signatures all the more.

And how wonderful they were to me.

I knew if I so much as blinked wrong, they'd force their way in and rescue me.

I'd admit, the process wasn't fun, but it was harmless, thus far. Sniffing cards was the hardest part, but all it required me to do was sit here.

I could easily deal with a bit of uncomfortableness in order to pair with my men.

Just a little longer and this will have all been worth it.

Kimber took the next scent card from Ava, testing it herself before shrugging and handing it to me. “Try this one. This is from Pack Kilpatrick.”

Suppressing a sigh, I took the card and tentatively breathed in the aroma. Wrinkles creased my nose, and I immediately jolted away from the acrid signature. My stomach revolted, and I gagged. I held the card between two fingers like it would bite me at any second.

Despite the thick glass, I heard a deep, masculine chuckle. Twisting in my seat, I sent a glare to the culprit—a certain golden-haired, blue-eyed chef who appeared way too satisfied that I was rejecting pack after pack.

Thane smirked unrepentantly and bounced his eyebrows as if to say, “Having fun yet?”

I pursed my lips, because, yeah... this wasn't a good time. However, I was overly aware that I'd asked for this, and I decided to pull up my metaphorical big girl panties and plow forward.

This would all be worth it soon.

Shivering outwardly, nausea rolling through me, I waved the card for the women to take back.

“That's a definite no, in case you missed the vomit that tried to spew across the table.”

At the mention of disgusting bodily fluids, Kimber jumped from her chair and snatched one of the pouches of scent cancellers. “Easy. Breathe this in, and I'll get rid of this for you.” She gently extracted the card from my fingers, taking one more whiff of it before handing it to Ava. “Weird. It smells like puppies to me.”

“Puppies? How does a man smell like puppies?” Ava's brows drew together in confusion.

“Don't ask me. Check it out for yourself.”

Without delay, she brought it close to her face and inhaled. The two of them laughed and compared notes, talking about the earthy scent underneath.

I shook my head. “I don’t know what you’re smelling, but it’s definitely not *puppies*. That stench is worse than a stinky dog who’s been outside for too long. It’s musty and awful.”

Thankfully, the next few were far more tolerable—s’mores, a mocha latte, sandalwood and honey, warm cotton, and one that smelled like ocean mist. None of them called to me until Kimber smirked mischievously and handed me another card.

“How about this one?”

Coconut and sweet cream—a pina colada on a hot, sunny day. There was no doubt in my mind this was Knox’s scent.

“Yes,” I breathed, clinging to the card, unwilling to hand it back. “Finally.” *This* was my pack.

Ava smiled gently. “How about this one?”

Another card, this one Thane’s. Salted caramel and dark chocolate—rich and decadent, like an expensive chocolate bar.

Card after card, I scented.

Leo’s warm apple pie with cinnamon and vanilla.

Eli’s chai tea signature—cloves and spice with a hint of sugar.

Hades’ fresh citrus with a bubbly edge and a splash of strawberry, like my favorite Sunrise Mimosa.

And last, Jamison’s bonfire and whiskey scent, full of warmth and musk.

Somehow, they all worked together seamlessly and left me breathless and panting.

“This is them. This is my pack.”

“Congratulations, Demi,” Ava smiled. “You’ve officially matched with Pack Maverick.”

Pack Maverick. My heart swelled, and I practically hugged the cards.

“Can we be done now?” I sincerely hoped they said yes.

Kimber and Ava exchanged a glance, but it was Ava who answered, “Usually Omegas pick three packs that appeal the most to them, and then meet and greets are arranged. But, in your case, Director Hurst has arranged for special accommodations to be made. Are you sure you don’t want to scent more packs? Make sure there’s no one else who interests you? I know you went through heat with Pack Maverick. You’re not feeling pressured to choose them, are you?”

“I can assure you, despite how intense they may seem,” I glanced toward the men watching me closely on the other side of the glass, “they’re not pressuring me in any way. I knew we were scent-matched the moment we met. Going through heat with them only deepened our connection. The entire reason I came in today was to make our match official. I’ve sampled some terrible signatures in that binder, but I’ve also found some pleasant ones. None of them compare to Pack Maverick. Scenting their cards is like falling into the coziest nest you could imagine and being cocooned in warmth. It sounds cheesy, I know, but that’s how far gone I am for these men. They’re mine,” I stated confidently. “We could sit here all day, scent every damn card you have, and I wouldn’t find another match as perfect for me as them. So I’ll rephrase the question. Do you really want to waste more time trying to force something that will never happen, just for the hell of it?”

Kimber grinned widely, flashing a perfect set of white teeth. “I knew I liked you.”

“Dammit. So do I,” Ava conceded, then laughed. “I like an Omega who knows her own mind. If you’re comfortable and happy, that’s all I can ask for.”

“I promise, as long as I can be with my pack, I’ll never be unhappy again.”

Ava closed her book with a resounding thud, and I breathed a sigh of relief. My nose ached and my ass hurt from sitting in this chair for so long.

“So we’re done?”

“Not quite.” Ava had the decency to look remorseful. “Every Omega gets a physical and blood work as part of the

matching process.”

With a resigned sigh, I asked, “And *then* we’re done?” Somehow, four hours had already passed. I was exhausted and hungry.

“That’ll be the last of it,” Kimber promised. “Ava and I will get your official courting documents in place while you’re in with the facility doctor, and then you’ll be free to rejoin your pack.” Standing, she gathered the binder from Ava and strode to the door, opening it for me to walk through.

I had barely stepped past the door frame when six men crowded me and pulled me into a group hug, all talking at once.

“Are you alright?” Jamison rumbled.

“That took fucking ages,” Hades growled.

“You’d think they were giving you the inquisition instead of making you fill out a dating questionnaire,” Leo complained.

Eli smoothed his hand down my spine. “As comical it was to see you physically rejecting pack after pack, are you feeling alright, Love? You look a little green around the edges.”

“You do look a little pale. Can we take you home yet?” Knox questioned, being so damn gentle with me I wanted to cry.

“Are you hungry? I brought some snacks for you.” Thane shoved a homemade granola bar into my hands, urging me to eat.

Unfiltered emotion eddied through. I sank into their warm embrace, letting it rejuvenate me enough that I could make it through the rest of this process. The overwhelming desire for my nest filled me, making me itchy and on edge. Having their combined scents on my skin helped tide me over until we got home and I dragged them all into one big puppy pile on the bed with me.

Just a little longer.

I sniffled and then laughed at the picture we must make.

“I see why she wanted this pack. Not only do they smell amazing, but she’s got them whipped already,” Ava whispered none too quietly to Kimber. “I approve.” She shot me a wink before shooing the men away. “Demi’s almost done and then you can pamper her to your heart’s content. She just needs to meet with our physician and get some blood work drawn while we finalize your paperwork. You’ll be out of here in an hour.”

And not a minute too soon.

* * *

ELI

It was easy enough to charm my way into Demi's doctor's appointment, and now that I was here, I was grateful I'd had the foresight to be pushy. As a fellow doctor, I tried to be respectful of other physicians' domains. No one liked a meddling mate, but the moment the older gentleman sauntered into the room and began Demi's physical exam, she tensed tight enough to break.

The doctor and I exchanged a look, and he quickened his pace, going through the routine of checking her heart and lungs, followed by her eyes, nose, and throat. Sitting on a stool, he rolled over and positioned himself in front of her. Demi crossed her legs tightly and her face drained of color. Fiddling with the fabric gown she wore, she wouldn't make eye contact.

"Do you have to do one of *those* exams?" she practically whispered.

Fury and anguish tangled in my chest as I realized her reaction most likely stemmed from negative exams she'd endured in the past. Bloody *hell*. What had Anton and Pack Silver put her through? *Those fucking bastards*.

"Given the circumstances and your history, if you'd feel more comfortable securing your own gynecologist, I will make a note that you'll be setting up your own routine care once you're settled with your pack. As long as that's not a make or break for your Alphas, of course." He sent me a questioning glance, and I shook my head.

"It's not a problem for us. I'd be happy to help Demi find someone she's comfortable with for her OB-GYN care. Maybe someone female?" I took a chance and glided my hand down her back, hating the feel of the sterile cotton covering her soft skin. The gowns, while a necessity, really were scratchy and starched.

“Yes, please,” she answered, far too formally for my liking.

I pulled her into my side and kissed the top of her head while the doctor removed his medical gloves with a rubber snap, then discarded them in the bin.

“All that’s left is the blood work. I’ll send in our best phlebotomist, Penny.”

“Excellent. Thank you.” I nodded my thanks, glad when he took his leave.

“Are you alright, Love?” It was the most benign question I could come up with when what I really wanted to do was demand who’d examined her in the past and what, exactly, they’d done. The more I learned about Demi’s history and all she’d survived, the more I agreed with Hades.

I wanted her shitty old pack buried six feet under. And they weren’t the only ones. Whatever doctor broke the Hippocratic Oath to do no harm deserved a spot right alongside them.

“I’m ready to go home,” she said woodenly.

“We’re almost done. I promise.” I would have scooped her up and carried her out of this blasted office myself if it wouldn’t forfeit the matching process. Waiting and finishing her medical appointment meant we’d officially have the courting documents saying she was ours.

She hadn’t suffered through all the questions and scent binders, only to give up in the home stretch.

Luckily, Penny walked in a moment later, rolling a cart with her. The woman was an Omega herself. Middle-aged and motherly, she helped Demi relax with small talk while she checked her arms for a viable vein and went to work drawing her blood.

I held her hand the entire time, a soft smile curving my lips when she squeezed tightly as the needle popped beneath her skin. Thank fuck she was an easy stick, and within minutes, all her vials were full of vibrant, red blood.

Releasing the tourniquet, Penny praised her and even gave her a hug on her way out the door, promising they'd send the results to our home address since they were keeping her name out of the computer system as a safety precaution. As old school as snail mail felt, the less chance there was of Anton finding Demi, the better.

With my arm around her shoulders, I led her from the room and back down the winding corridors, hoping I'd find my way back to the waiting room without issue. This place was enormous, and a fucking maze.

I pulled Demi closer as we squeezed against the wall, allowing some other Omegas to pass by.

"Thank you," she breathed the further we got from the office.

"You never have to apologize for needing support, Love. That's what we're here for."

"I didn't realize it would bother me so much," she admitted.

My jaw jumped, but I forced myself to relax for her sake. Often, Demi misread our anger as being directed toward her—another conditioned response from her past—and I couldn't bear for her to think I was cross with her for her reaction. "Triggers can manifest in unknown places. Now that we know doctor appointments are a source of stress for you, we can better prepare for them in the future. Was it the doctor himself or the entire exam that made you uncomfortable?"

"He did nothing wrong, but I think it was the doctor himself."

"He reminded you of someone." It was a statement rather than a question.

"Dr. Jenkins. He's Pack Silver's personal physician, though, in my experience, he does more harm than good."

Doctor Jenkins just went on the top of my shit list.

"He's the one who set your shoulder without pain meds?" I couldn't quite keep the growl out of my voice.

“Among other things.” She dipped her head, shielding her face behind a curtain of wavy brown hair.

I almost laughed wryly, anticipating the moment the others got hold of this information. Especially Hades. We’d have to restrain him from going on a murderous rampage. Then again, letting him loose tempted me.

One way or another, the doctor would pay.

That was five names. Five people who’d harmed Demi. Five lives that needed to be destroyed.

Lost in blinding rage, I led Demi around the corner, not truly seeing anything but red.

She bumped into a tall, wiry man with slicked back, brown hair who scowled down at her like she was scum on the bottom of his shoe. An official-looking badge was pinned to the breast pocket of his button-down sporting the OMA’s infamous logo, along with his name—Issac Rigby. He carried a clipboard and had a Bluetooth headset attached to one ear. There was nothing overly defining about him other than a scar cutting across the knuckles of his right hand.

“Watch where you’re going, *princess*,” the man, a Beta, spat. A beat later, he paused and narrowed his eyes further. Something akin to interest flickered through the dirty brown depths when Demi got the courage to lift her face and apologize.

A growl tore from my throat in warning. “No one talks to my mate that way,” I snarled.

At the same time, Demi stuttered, “S-sorry.” Her voice was meek, her body trembling.

I pulled her around to face me, cradling her against my chest as I glared at the bastard until he reluctantly moved on, striding down the hallway, engrossed in his phone.

Demi froze. Her hands were ice, and her complexion, which had already been pale, went positively white.

“He’s gone.” I worked to ease my voice from the angry bark it had been to something calm and soothing.

“I... I think I know him.”

“What? How?”

She closed her eyes, shivering and breathing in short, shallow bursts. A moment later, I realized she was reliving a memory.

“I think he was there that night.”

I didn't have to ask which night she was talking about.

I wasn't the best fighter in our pack, but I could hold my own. I was already turning, prepared to throw punches, but the man disappeared down another hallway while Demi grabbed my arm and pulled me toward the waiting room.

“Demi, Love, I need you to let go.” My teeth were gritted, my tone furious. Not at her, but at *him*.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, I knew it wasn't worth jeopardizing Demi's safety to satisfy a vendetta. I needed to get her back to the safety of our pack. Then we needed to get the hell out of here. As tempted—*so damn tempted*—as I was to track the bastard down and give him a taste of his own medicine, reason won out.

Demi first.

Jamison was already on his feet as she dragged me through the doorway and back toward our pack, easily reading the distress in her pretty green eyes.

“What's going on?” he demanded.

Sucking in a deep breath, I whipped around with fury radiating from every cell in my body. “We need to leave. Now.”

“We don't have the paperwork yet,” Leo countered. “Ava should be out short—”

I cut him off. “Demi's in danger.”

I didn't know how one of Pack Silver's lackeys was here, in Maine, but it couldn't be a coincidence.

Anton was looking for her.

Hades picked Demi up, tossing her over his shoulder like a caveman and marching toward the exit, while Jamison barked, “Explain.”

I gave them a quick, two-second rundown as I kept pace with my pack, who moved with the precision of a well-oiled machine.

Demi banged on Hades’ back, demanding to be put down. Begrudgingly, he set her on her feet after she groaned that the position made her feel sick. Too tense to appear sheepish, he wrapped his arm around her instead, keeping her close.

Thane ran outside to retrieve the car while the rest of us paused by the glass doors, surrounding her with our bodies to keep her out of sight from anyone who may stumble into the lobby. I itched with the need to get her out of here, but it wasn’t smart to rush outdoors where there could be more threats.

“I recognized him,” Demi said, smoothing a hand over her rebelling stomach. “The scars on his knuckles. Those angry eyes. The clipboard. He was there at the auction. I swear he helped run it.”

She dug her hands into her hair, pressing fingertips against her temples as though she needed to soothe a headache that formed from the effort it took to dredge up the image. It bothered her that she couldn’t connect all the pieces from that night. The drugs had muddled her memories, but her intuition was rarely wrong.

Knox strode back toward the hallway we’d emerged from earlier, gun in hand. “Go. I’ll call Lawson and his contact at the FBI. But first I’m going to see Hurst and have him lock down the building.”

“No! I don’t want us to split up,” Demi cried as Thane pulled up out front and Leo reached for the door.

Knox crossed the space separating them in five long strides. Wrapping his free hand around the back of her neck, he held her possessively and claimed her mouth, giving her a breathless kiss that left her reeling and flustered.

I couldn't explain it, but it was hot watching her with my pack mates.

Her fingers went to her lips as he gazed down at her with obvious devotion. "I'll be home as soon as I can. Now go. I want you out of danger."

"Stay safe."

"As long as you promise to do the same." Gazing at Jamison, he nodded once. "Take care of her."

"You know I will," he swore vehemently. "Call me with updates."

With that, we swept our mate into the waiting vehicle.

Settling her into the middle seat with Leo on one side and me on the other, I buckled her in and bundled her against my chest as the car veered onto the road.

"Everything will work out," I soothed, sharing a weighted look with my pack mates over the top of her head. "I promise."

It was a vow I planned to keep, come hell or high water.

twenty-one



JAMISON

IT TOOK us two-and-a-half hours to make the one-hour drive home. Thane took detour after detour, making sure we weren't being followed on our way back to our seaside haven. Everyone remained tense and on high alert, and not much changed once we got our mate safely ensconced in the house and bundled into a makeshift nest in the media room.

We piled pillows and blankets all around her and she snuggled in, covering herself with her favorite blue blanket.

“Do you think he was there for me?” Her voice was small and mousey, timid. Shaken. “Or were we just in the wrong place at the wrong time?”

Fucking hell. I wanted to lie to her and tell her it was the latter, but I'd promised not to sugar-coat anything. She wanted to be an active participant in the difficult conversations, and this situation qualified. If I glazed over the danger she was in, she wouldn't appreciate it when she was less scared and thinking more clearly later on.

“I hope to hell it's a coincidence, Sweetness, but we can't take that chance. We've got to assume he was there looking for you.”

She nodded, the blanket pulled up past her chin. Only the top rounds of her cheeks and those mossy green eyes peeked out.

Hades settled in behind her, pulling her back against his chest while Leo sandwiched her from the front. Visibly shivering from the relief their closeness brought, she breathed deeply and let her lashes fall closed.

“That's it, Baby Girl. You're safe. We're right here and we're not leaving your side.” Hades wrapped his arm around her waist, sliding his hand between her and Leo and splaying his fingers over her stomach.

Leo tucked her hair back and ghosted his fingertips along her forehead and down her cheek, back and forth, petting her until she melted. Thane laid down near her head, propping himself up on an elbow and playing with the ends of her hair, while Eli took a spot at her feet. Tangling himself with the others, he maneuvered himself until he rested his head on her legs.

I took a seat near Thane, staying close, though the Alpha in me wanted to fix the problem that sent her seeking the comfort of a nest in the first place.

It wasn't long before Demi fell into a deep sleep and I could breathe marginally easier.

"We need to get her home to Vermont. I know she likes it here, and it's safe, but it's not enough for her," Leo said in hushed tones. "She needs her actual nest."

"Agreed. But first, we need to decide what to do about Pack Silver."

"Fuckers will not lay a finger on her while I'm still breathing." Hades' timbre was deep and growly, and he propped his head on his hand, gazing down at our sleeping mate.

"I'm ready to bury them all," Eli declared matter-of-factly, but there was a hardness in his eyes that spoke to just how upset he was by what transpired at the OMA office.

I didn't think we had the full story. "What aren't you telling us?"

Eli swallowed a rare growl. Out of all of us, he'd always been the most composed. I could count the number of times he lost his cool on one hand, but he was dangerously close to the edge as he recounted Demi's appointment with the doctor.

A deep, angry burr of sound tore from my chest as he relayed what he suspected she'd been through during past exams.

Fuck! I was going to lose it.

Silence stretched in the room as we all ruminated over what we'd already known. Our woman was a survivor. I despised every single person who'd ever hurt her and mentally added Doctor Jenkins to the list of perpetrators.

"I want to put them in the ground as much as the rest of you. But we need to be smart about how we move forward. If we take the proof we've amassed directly to Anton and try to blackmail him to stay away from Demi, what guarantee do we have that he won't retaliate and try to get his hands on both our mate and the evidence? It's what I'd do if I were him. I wouldn't leave incriminating footage in someone else's hands," I reasoned. "We've all met him. We all know what he's like. Anton values power above all else. The moment we become a threat to everything he's built, he'll feel cornered and lash out."

"And since he's not an idiot, much as I wish otherwise, he'll make a calculated move," Leo murmured, keeping his voice quiet enough not to wake Demi.

"You want to go to the FBI with what we have?" Hades sounded incredulous.

"Hades," I warned, disliking the edge of disrespect he balanced on.

"Fuck. Sorry," he grumbled. "I just hate the idea of leaving her vulnerable and trusting others to handle such a fucking important situation. I've never killed a man before. I'm not a murderer, but I wouldn't hesitate to take out her old pack if it meant she'd be safe once and for all."

"And if the police caught you, she'd never forgive herself. Despite how we feel, murder is still against the law."

Thane tore his attention from Demi long enough to nod in my direction. "You know Knox would agree with you, Jamison. So that's two votes for utilizing the FBI. I'll vote the same. Leo?"

Guilt crept over his features. "The last thing any of us need is to borrow more trouble. In my mind, there's only one viable option. I'm sorry Hades. I know you feel differently, but

you're practically my brother, and I can't let you, or anyone else in our pack, make a decision that could tear us apart. What happens if you got caught and went to jail? Demi wouldn't survive that. We need to go to the FBI."

No matter what Hades, Eli, or Demi voted, we already had our majority.

Eli released a pent-up, stress-filled breath. "For what it's worth, I think we need to see what the FBI can accomplish. Anton deserves to be taken down. I want that bastard to lose everything he's built. But if that doesn't work, I have no problem contacting Pack Jacobs. If they don't do the dirty work themselves, I'm sure they know someone who could take care of our Pack Silver problem."

Hades was silent for a long moment. "They get three days," he conceded, "and that's honestly more than I'd like. Three days, and if Anton and the other rat bastards aren't in fucking handcuffs, we make the call."

I shoved a hand through my black hair and nodded. "Fair enough. I'll reach out to Lawson and arrange a meeting with his contact at the FBI. I want this handled as soon as possible."

"We've got her," Thane murmured, knowing what I needed to hear in order to leave her behind. I didn't want her out of my sight, but as the head of our pack, handling these things fell under my jurisdiction.

Bending over her, I brushed my lips lightly over her forehead and then stood and forced myself from the room before I changed my mind.

Cell already in hand, I dialed Knox first as I headed for my home office and opened the safe that contained one copy of the evidence I'd made. I had that shit backed up to the nth degree—physical copies, digital copies, all of it.

"We haven't fucking found him," he answered on the first ring. "I don't think we got shit locked down fast enough."

My jaw ticked, and I pinched the bridge of my nose, warding off the headache building. "We've decided to go to the FBI. Take these fuckers down once and for all."

“As soon as I’m done here, I’ll head straight back. You calling Lawson to set a meet?”

“He’s my next call.”

“I’ll be there soon.”

The line disconnected, and I held the cell in my hand, praying to whatever gods were listening that I made the right decision. I’d never shied away from the responsibility of safeguarding my pack, but holding Demi’s life in my hands was a weighty thing.

She was relying on me. They all were. And if I was wrong?

I couldn’t go down that road. I had to trust myself and my instincts. The moment I started to doubt, everything would fall apart.

Dialing Lawson, I set our plan into motion.

* * *

Demi padded into my office looking every bit the picture of sin. Wavy brown hair spilled over her shoulders, slightly mused from the nap she’d taken with the rest of the pack. Lips, swollen and rosy, told the tale of sweet kisses shared with my pack mates.

Fuck, I wish I’d been there to watch.

Instead, I’d packed an overnight bag while I waited for Knox to arrive home, then went over the details of our upcoming meeting with the FBI. As soon as he finished packing his own necessities, we’d be heading out.

“I heard about your plans,” Demi chastised, those very same lips I’d been admiring moments ago jutting out in a pout she didn’t even recognize she made. “I thought you were going to include me in your decisions.”

Scooting my chair away from my desk, I patted my lap, over the fucking moon when she responded without hesitation. Her hips swayed as she rounded the desk and sat sideways on

my lap. My hand came down on the bare skin of her thigh, my thumb massaging circles over the skin visible below the sleep shorts she'd put on.

“I am, and I always plan to. You're a part of this pack, Sweetness. In fact, you're the most important member.”

Looping her arms around my neck, she leveled me with a sardonic look. “Now you're just trying to flatter me.”

I smirked. “Maybe. But I'm also being truthful. You're the center of this pack, Demi. You complete a part of us we always knew was missing but could never fill. The idea of you in danger is as maddening as it is time-sensitive. None of us were about to wake you up to make you vote on an issue that had already been decided by the majority. Though I will admit, your vote holds more weight and counts for more than any of ours individually.”

“Again with the smooth talk,” she sassed, and I swatted the side of her ass lightly.

She jumped, but the blush that blossomed across her cheeks told me she liked it.

“Be careful, Little Omega, or do I have to remind you who's in charge around here?”

Tipping her head and smiling saccharinely, she said, “According to you, that would be me.”

With a low, quiet chuckle, I redirected the conversation. “Are you telling me you'd have voted differently?”

Hesitating, she bit her lip, chewing on the delicate skin.

Lifting my hand, I dragged my thumb down the center of her bottom lip to free it from her abuse. Chest heaving, her breath hitched. Surprising the ever-loving fuck out of me, she nipped at the pad of my thumb before soothing the bite with the lave of her tongue.

Godsdamn. My cock twitched to life, growing hard underneath her.

“Answer me, Demi.” I used her actual name for effect, and her eyes darkened from the dominance I infused in my tone.

“No. I would have voted the same way, but that doesn’t mean I like the plan.”

“You’re worried.” It didn’t take a genius to figure out where her reluctance stemmed from. Her scent gave her away, soured with apprehension and fear.

“I can’t lose any of you. Going up against Anton feels overwhelming and scary,” she acknowledged.

“We will not let him get to you, Sweetness. Trust us?”

“I do. Irrevocably.”

“Then trust us to not only know what’s best for our pack, but to keep ourselves safe as well. We’ll be back before you know it.”

Curling further into my lap, she tangled her fingers in my hair and pulled me in for a kiss. I let her take the lead for a moment, relishing the feel of her soft lips slanting over mine. The wet glide of her tongue against the seam of my mouth had me growing harder, and I groaned before wrapping her up in my arms. Gathering her hair in one hand, I used it to guide her head. Changing the angle, I deepened the kiss, stealing back control and plundering her mouth.

I damn near came out of my chair when she sucked on my tongue, pressing her ass tightly against my arousal.

“Fuck, that’s my good Little Omega,” I praised as she perfumed for me, needy and aching for more.

The desire to bend her over my desk and drive her to distraction rode me, but the sound of footsteps echoing down the hall brought reality back all too quickly. There wasn’t time, but at least I’d been able to return her scent back to its rich sweetness.

Knox and Thane entered the room, their eyes immediately darkening from the tangle of scents and the delectable aroma of Demi’s arousal in the air.

“To be continued,” I purred quietly.

“I’m going to hold you to that,” she whispered back, boring her gaze into me as though she could engrave the

promise on my very soul.

Standing, easily lifting her with me, I carried her bridal style and crossed the room. I passed her to Thane, who pulled her tight against his chest.

“Keep her safe.”

“Always.” He nodded.

With one last inhale of Demi’s rapidly souring scent, I added, “And distracted.”

twenty-two



THANE

JAMISON AND KNOX had left two hours ago, and it was impossible not to notice the stress radiating from Demi. Her scent was a riot of too-sweet sugar and berries left in the sun too long.

Sitting on the counter, she swung her legs, trying her best to be good company while I cooked dinner. But I could see it in her eyes—her thoughts kept wandering off as she worried about her missing mates.

No matter our assurances, she couldn't seem to help herself. My lips parted with my desire to assuage her unease, but then snapped shut as I changed my mind. Telling her again that the guys would be fine would simply fall on ears unwilling to listen. I understood. If the roles were reversed, I'd be in a fucking panic over her safety, too.

Instead of dragging her into meaningless conversation and trying to distract her, I left her to her own devices and hummed as I worked. The tune was catchy and modern, and soon I was singing quietly to myself, hoping that the music would calm her spirit the way it always did for me.

I smiled to myself when I saw her head perk up and felt her eyes on me as I diced the eggplant I'd be using to add robustness to my homemade tomato sauce. The slices weren't as even, given I was using my left hand to wield the knife thanks to the injuries on my right, but they'd have to do.

I chopped peppers next, then chunks of tomatoes, adding it all into the pot and stirring it over low heat. The whipped ricotta was prepped, and the halibut was ready to sear as soon as I set the sauce to simmer.

Sitting up a little straighter, Demi braced her palms on the counter and curled her fingers over the edge. "Where did you learn to sing like that?"

“Nowhere, really,” I admitted. “I never had formal training. It’s just something I picked up as a kid.”

Demi gaped, shaking her head slowly. “Thane, that’s incredible. I swear you have perfect pitch. That’s a gift.”

“Nah.” I shrugged. “I just do it to pass the time while I’m cooking.”

“A hobby within a hobby? I feel like there’s more to the story.” She tilted her head to the side. “Will you tell me?”

Unease twisted through me. Sharing my past and getting vulnerable were things I rarely did. I was the fun packmate. The lighthearted relief. I was trying to brighten Demi’s mood, not drag her down with my pathetic sob story. And, yet, denying my mate anything she asked was practically impossible.

Way to go, Thane, I chastised as I concentrated on chopping the fresh herbs.

Really, I should be over my lousy childhood by now. I was a grown-ass man, not a little kid waiting on his parents to decide they gave a shit.

Besides, my story wasn’t nearly as traumatizing as Hades’. She’d probably think I was overly sensitive. How had I gotten myself into this mess?

“Darling,” I hedged, trying to ease out of the impending conversation and find a way back to safer, happier waters. We’d had enough heavy stuff for one day.

I would sing for her or make her favorite snacks. Hell, I’d been dying to lay her back against the marbled countertop, rip her little shorts off, and make *her* the meal as I feasted on her delicious pussy.

Oh, yeah. That last one definitely held merit. But before I’d reached to turn the stove off, intent on showing her a good time, she hopped off the counter, ruining my well-intentioned plans.

Pressing her curves against my back, she wrapped her arms around my middle.

“I don’t know what’s going through your mind right now, but you can tell me anything. I’ll never judge you or compare you to the others. I can feel your tension.” She squeezed me tighter for a moment, her hand flexing on my abs. “Trauma is relative. It shapes us and makes us who we are. No matter how hard we may wish otherwise, the only way to move on is to accept what we’ve been through and find a way forward in *spite* of what we’ve survived. It’s something I remind myself of every day.”

“When did you get to be such a little therapist?” The playful note was back in my voice.

Really, it shouldn’t surprise me. Demi was the most empathetic woman I’d ever met. Somehow, she just knew what the rest of us were feeling—what we needed. She gave us the space to heal. Or be ourselves. Or just gave us permission to take a minute to breathe.

I felt her smile against my back. “I’m brilliant. Haven’t you figured that out by now?” she teased.

I knew she was joking, but I wasn’t. “Yeah, Darling. You are.”

Shifting around me, she settled her back to my front and gently took the knife from my hand, replacing me at the cutting board. She was small and warm. In no time at all, I gave in to temptation and buried my nose in her hair, dragging her scent into my lungs.

Fuck me sideways. I’d never tire of the way she smelled.

My arms went around her, and I placed my hands over hers to guide her movements, showing her how to chop the herbs. The rhythmic thud of the knife thudding against the cutting board settled something deep within me as we worked in tandem.

Cooking was cathartic, and with her signature wrapped around me like a hug, I found myself opening up. “I think you know I grew up next door to Jamison. We’ve been best friends for as long as I can remember. He’s like a brother to me, not just because we’re a pack, but because his parents practically

raised me. I think I spent more time in his house during my childhood than I did in my own.”

“His parents sound wonderful.”

“They are. Someday soon, you’ll get to meet them.”

I could tell the idea made her nervous, but she shook it off quickly. “I’d like that.”

Demi fell silent afterward, just listening and absorbing my story.

“My own parents never wanted much to do with me. I think they had me out of social obligation because it’s what Alphas and Omegas are supposed to do when they form a pack. With three dads and a mom, you’d think one of them would’ve cared, but whenever they paid attention to me, it was cold and detached. For the longest time, I thought I could earn their love by performing well in school, getting good grades, and taking an interest in extracurriculars they’d be proud of. But after a while, I realized they would never change. They didn’t want kids, and though I was never any trouble, they barely tolerated me.”

“Thane.” My name was a whisper tinged with sadness.

I shrugged, grasping at the nonchalance I didn’t feel. “I learned to live with it and spent most of my time over at Jamison’s. When we were of age and realized we’d mesh well in a pack, he made me his second. From there, we built our own family, claiming Hades and Leo next. Then we met Eli and Knox at one of the Alpha socials and knew our pack was complete. Well, until you, of course. We were never whole without our Omega.” I leaned to the side and pressed a kiss against her throat, right over her fluttering heartbeat, living for the tiny gasp she gave me.

“After that,” I murmured near her ear, “I decided to only focus on the things I truly loved. You asked where I learned to sing. Truth is, I sang to fill the silence that always seemed to plague my home. It’s also how I learned to cook. For a few years, we had a chef named Louie, who taught me everything he knew. I spent all my time in the kitchen just to have

someone to talk to. When he was gone, I continued cooking, finding it a respite from the loneliness. Somehow, when I'm behind the stove, nothing can touch me."

"That's how I feel about painting. I can lose myself in the colors and the endless choices. Building layer after layer makes me content in ways not much else does."

"You like to paint?" I asked, shocked I didn't know this about her. It shouldn't have surprised me. There was so much more to learn about each other, but the wistfulness in her voice that belied her obvious love for art felt like something I should've already known.

"I'm not Monet, but I like to dabble with landscapes, mostly."

"We're going to have to get you to paint a mural in the nursery. Maybe woods with a stream running through it and cute little fuzzy creatures."

Demi's hand paused, the knife hovering over the last of the herbs that still needed to be chopped.

"Nursery?"

I laughed nervously, realizing we hadn't really talked much about what the future could look like other than explaining our plans for the house in Vermont and our hopes that we'd all move into the master bedroom together, leaving the plethora of other rooms for kids and guests.

"I don't know how you feel about it, but yeah, I'd love to have kids someday. I want to fill every single room and have little versions of ourselves running amok. Managing the restaurant is great, but my true dream is to cook for big, chaotic family dinners where everyone comes home and eats around the same table. I'm so damn tired of the quiet. Houses like ours deserve to be filled with noise and love, making memories that reflect a life well lived."

I held my breath, waiting to see how she'd react. Her scent stayed the same, and she hadn't frozen in my arms. Never in my life had I laid myself so bare before someone. I didn't love the feeling, but I wouldn't hold back in front of my mate. If

she disagreed with my vision, we'd work through it. But as my heart thudded loudly inside my chest, I hoped she saw our future the same way I did.

Demi leaned back into me. "You're tired of being alone."

I released a pent up breath. "Yeah. I am. But with the pack and now *you*... I know loneliness is a thing of the past."

Setting the knife aside, she turned in my arms and laid her hands on my chest. "Your dream sounds incredible, Thane. I never had much in the way of family either. And I haven't had the luxury of dreaming about the future until recently. You've all already given me a family, and I'll always be grateful for that, but I already know it could be so much more. I want to make that picture you painted come true. I want to have your babies and give them the life most of us never had."

Sweet fates...

She wants to have my babies. I was pretty damn sure my heart stopped beating as I pictured her adorably round with our child. Suddenly, I understood Eli's breeding kink. The desire to fill her with my cum over and over again until she was bred made my dick hard.

Capturing her face between my palms, I kissed her, showing her without words just how much she'd affected me.

When we finally pulled back, breathless, our chests heaving, I grinned down at her. "We could go get started on that dream right now."

She laughed, eyes sparkling. "What about dinner?"

I shoved a hand through the longer strands of my golden hair. *Fuck.*

I was half tempted to leave everything as it was and let it spoil while I whisked my Omega upstairs and buried myself between her sweet thighs.

"We could order take out?" I offered.

Her eyes grew incredulously wide. "You've already made all of this, and the smell of it has been making me hungry for the last hour."

“*You’re* making me hungry,” I growled good-naturedly.

“*After.*”

Sighing, I relented. “I guess I can wait for dessert.”

There were two things I didn’t mess with—sharks and food.

The first was just plain dangerous, and the second was pretty much my life.

If I didn’t have a pack to feed and expensive filets of fish ready to cook, I may have bent my own rules, just this once. But as much as the Alpha in me wanted to make good on my promises, the desire to tend to Demi’s other needs took precedence.

She hadn’t eaten since that morning, and she’d been starving at the OMA office before all hell broke loose. After that, she’d lost her appetite, took a nap, and then said goodbye to two of her mates. Her stomach chose that moment to growl, solidifying my decision to behave myself. Regrettably.

But later... Later we were going to practice making those dreams of mine come true.

We lapsed into comfortable silence, cooking together like we’d been doing it all our lives. Demi helped baste the fish and plate the meal, beaming with pride at the presentation as we set the table. And all the while, I sang for her.

She’d popped back onto the counter and swung her legs while I aerated the wine.

“Your voice is beautiful. Deep and rich. I wish I could sing like that.”

“Darling, if anyone has a beautiful voice, it’s you. I guarantee you’re a natural.”

She snorted unbelievably. “I doubt we’ll ever find out. Being musically inclined was never my gift.”

“Pfft. One of these days I’ll catch you singing in the shower or rocking out to some car karaoke.” I winked. “You can’t hide that pretty voice from me forever, *mate.*”

She giggled, and it lit up my whole fucking world.

Mission. Accomplished.

“Then I’ll have to be extra vigilant to keep you from finding out just how much I sound like a dying cat when I try to sing anything.”

“Mark my words, Demi Leigh,” I tipped a wine bottle in her direction, “I’ll catch you in the act, and no matter what you sound like, it’ll be beautiful.”

“In the act? Are things getting naughty in here already?” Leo waggled his eyebrows as he entered the room. “Because if so, I want in on the action.”

A sweet, rosy blush stained Demi’s cheeks.

“Nothing untoward is happening. Thane is just teasing me mercilessly for no reason at all. I’m the victim here,” she complained with mock offense.

“That’s a shame.” Leo braced a hand on either side of her thighs and leaned in, overwhelming our mate with his scent and proximity.

“I-It is?”

“Absolutely.”

“The lack of spice or the victimization?” she breathed, her eyes unfocusing as Leo stroked the outside of her thighs with the edges of his thumbs.

He closed the distance between them. From my vantage point, it looked like he ghosted his lips over the shell of her ear as he added, “Definitely the spice. But what is it he’s teasing you about, Honey? Need me to beat him up for you?”

I scoffed. “Like you could.” I talked a big game, but I was all bark and no bite. Leo spent way more hours in the gym than I did—given that he owned one—and while I was an Alpha and stood an inch taller, it wouldn’t give me any advantage over the Beta.

“Is that a challenge? Because if so, you’re on.” Leo grinned and flexed one impressive bicep.

“I would. *Really*, I would, but I’m still healing.” I favored my right arm, babying the stitches that were already dissolving.

Leo rolled his eyes. “Uh-huh. That’s what I thought.” Turning back to Demi, he doubled down on his previous question. “So, what is Thane teasing you about, hmm?”

“He thinks I can sing, but I keep telling him he’s very, *very* wrong.”

Leo’s eyes heated. “I don’t know, Honey. I’ve heard what you sound like when you’re moaning for us, and it’s the prettiest damn sound I’ve ever heard.”

Demi went beat red. “That is *not* the same thing.”

“On the contrary. You have a beautiful voice, whether you’re singing or screamin’.” I grinned, wagging my eyebrows.

“Thane!”

“The man speaks the truth.” Leo resumed his position, pinning her between his arms.

“It’s *not* happening.”

“Which one?” I pressed. “The singing or the screaming?”

“Either, at the rate you’re going,” she sassed, leaning back on her hands.

Leo gave her a Cheshire grin. “Oh little mate, challenge accepted.”

twenty-three



DEMI

“COME ON, HONEY. SING FOR US,” Leo pleaded relentlessly while I leaned back in the hot tub and let the jets pound the stress out of my muscles.

Dinner had been delicious, the sauce, butter, and sweetness from the ricotta all blending into a delectable meal that danced across my palette. I never would have thought to pair those ingredients together, but the results had been so mouthwatering, I’d had seconds. Followed by dessert.

Thane was a master in the kitchen. I already saw my future—fat, happy, and well-fed.

I was going to have to be careful how much I let him feed me, or I’d lose my figure entirely. Then again, with Hades’ and Leo’s expertise in the gym, I could probably convince them to create an easy workout for me that would burn enough calories, so I could continue to gorge myself on all the delicious recipes Thane created. Life was about balance, after all.

Like juggling the two men in the hot tub with me, doing their best to persuade me to embarrass myself by belting out a tune of my choosing.

“I don’t see what I get out of this,” I commented, eyes closed, relishing the way the jets worked on the knot in my shoulder I hadn’t been able to massage myself. I’d always had one shoulder that tensed more than the other when I became stressed.

I squealed as Leo pulled me from my seat and settled me on his lap, then groaned when his fingers went to work on my back and shoulders. Strong thumbs dug into the muscles, melting me in an instant.

“Gods,” I breathed, pulling my hair into a messy bun so he had free access to my neck and back. “Your fingers are magical.”

“Now there’s an idea,” Leo murmured, voice hotter than the water we soaked in. Unadulterated amusement filled his tone.

“I like where your head’s at,” Thane chimed in, while I did my best to focus past the exquisite relief of muscles and tendons being forced to relax.

“Huh?” I couldn’t get my brain to cooperate when he was touching me like this.

“Maybe we could persuade you with a reward.”

“A reward?” I parroted as Leo skimmed his nose down my throat, stopping to place his teeth over my pulse point while his fingers continued their ministrations. I gasped, arching against my Beta.

The scent of my arousal shot into the air, and if my cheeks weren’t already warm from the water, they would’ve flushed.

Leo hummed. “It would have to be well-earned, of course.”

“Naturally,” Thane agreed.

“The prize awarded based not solely on participation, but effort.”

What were they talking about?

“Wouldn’t you concur, Honey?”

“C-Concur?” My brows drew together as I turned to gaze down at Leo, noting his self-satisfied smirk over how distracted he’d made me.

“Mmhmm,” Leo hummed.

“I—Um—Yes?”

“Excellent,” he purred. “Let’s hear it, and then we can get to the fun stuff.”

“Excuse me?”

“You’re going to sing for us, Darling.” Thane’s smile filled his voice. “Then, *and only then*, do you get your reward.”

Deep, dark woods of Kentucky. What had I gotten myself into?

“And we decided this—”

Leo chuckled. “While you were blissed out on my fingers.”

“You made that sound *so* dirty,” I shot back.

“It could be dirtier if only you’d sing for us.”

Oh. *Oohhhh*. Well, when they presented it like a treat...

Was I really thinking about doing this?

“Would you like that?” Thane asked huskily. “Leo fingering you while I suck on that pretty little clit of yours?”

Sweet mercy!

My thighs squeezed while the idea of them working me in tandem filled my mind with erotic images.

“Or maybe you want to watch me fuck my fist while you straddle Thane and sink knot deep on his cock?” Leo murmured, his breath tickling the sensitive skin of my neck.

“Then again,”—Thane leaned back in his seat, spread one arm along the back of the hot tub, and dipped his other beneath the line of the water—“perhaps we should punish you for refusing to please your Alpha and Beta.” His arm flexed, and I just *knew* he was stroking his cock. “Maybe we should make you watch us touch ourselves while you’re made to keep your hands far away from that needy little pussy.”

Holy *gods*. Even the torturous option sounded delicious. My body squirmed, and I pressed my legs together, needing friction at the apex of my thighs.

“Uh, uh, uh, Demi Leigh,” Leo purred. “Open that pretty mouth of yours and sing for us. Then you’ll get to come.”

Fuuuck. My body ached, my breasts sensitive and heavy. Standing, I slipped away from Leo and took a seat on the opposite side of the hot tub.

“I can’t think when you’re so close,” I admitted.

Drawing in a steadying breath, I gathered my courage, closed my eyes, and sang.

The first notes were airy and unsure, but the further I got into the lyrics, the more the world dropped away and I fell into the music. It wasn't perfect by any means. I wasn't kidding when I said I wasn't a singer. There were wobbly tones and misplaced breaths, but when I cracked my eyes open as the last note faded, both Thane and Leo wore matching looks of complete and utter devotion.

"Told you," Thane purred. "You have the sweetest voice, Darling. I could listen to you all day long."

I pressed my hands to my cheeks, but the heat radiating off my fingers did nothing to cool the warmth in my face.

"Nothing is sweeter than you." Leo crossed the tub, his chest cutting through the water. His arms came around me and lifted. I clung to him breathlessly as he set me on the acrylic edge. "Your scent." He kissed my neck. "Your voice." His lips slanted over mine. "Your pussy." Hands landed on my knees, and he pushed my legs apart.

Leo dipped down, humming appreciatively, as he placed a kiss directly against my core. Without warning, he sucked my clit through the thin fabric of my bathing suit, making me gasp and cry out from the sudden burst of pleasure.

"Such beautiful cries," Thane rasped, his hand still working under the water. I watched the movement, the ripples across the surface, the way his head tipped back. His eyes never left mine.

Repositioning me, Leo helped me stand and stripped my bikini off until I was naked beneath the starlit sky. He took my place sitting on the edge and pulled me into his lap with my back to his front. One after the other, he hooked my legs over his so I was straddling him, reverse cowgirl style. Spreading his thighs, he opened my own for Thane's viewing pleasure. My pussy was on full display, but I couldn't dredge up even an ounce of embarrassment.

Thane rumbled a groan, his gaze traveling over all my bare skin down to my sex.

“Fuck,” he bit out. “It’s just as hot to be on this side of things,” he commented, remembering the time he’d fingered me while Knox touched himself to the show. His role was reversed this time, but I wanted him to enjoy it just as much.

Biting my lip, I wound my hands up and around Leo’s neck as he cupped my breasts, teasing one nipple to a tight peak, then the other. They were so sensitive, and the pleasure shot warmth straight to my core. It lit a spark under my skin, starting the blaze.

Leo’s hands fell to my legs, teasing the soft skin of my inner thighs. Using his thumbs, he spread my lower lips wide for Thane’s perusal.

“She’s already wet, but I bet she could use more,” Leo challenged.

Thane immediately stalked across the tub and braced his hands on either side of us. Eyes locked on mine, he bent and spit on my pussy.

Oh. My. *Fuck.*

I bit my lip as it dripped down my entrance.

Spreading the slickness, Leo caressed my folds, then ran his fingers in teasing circles around my clit.

“Damn, she’s pretty,” Thane praised. His attention stayed on my center as Leo pet me, getting me nice and wet for them.

Leo dipped a finger into my opening, groaning over how slick I’d gotten. “She’s already so fuckin’ wet for us.”

“Give me a taste.”

My eyes went wide as I focused on Thane, who opened his mouth as Leo withdrew his fingers. Gripping the other man’s wrist, Thane locked his gaze on mine as he sucked my essence off Leo’s skin, getting a taste of me.

Pussy spasming, fresh slick coating my thighs, my perfume shot into the steamy air.

“Fuck, she likes that.” Leo sounded awed.

Releasing his packmate, Thane licked his lips, eyes hooded. “There’s my dessert. Sweet jam and honey.”

A shiver racked me, and it only grew as Leo impaled me on his fingers once more. Air stalled in my lungs, and I couldn’t make a sound. The stretch was delicious.

I dropped my head against my Beta’s shoulder and arched my back. He stopped moving, torturing me, buried to the hilt.

It wasn’t nearly enough. I needed him to *move*. “*Please*. I need more.”

“I like it when you beg, Honey,” Leo uttered against my ear. “It makes me so damn hard.”

Unwilling to deny me, he gave me what I wanted. The slow drag of his fingers sent stars bursting behind my eyes. I whimpered, tangling my fingers in his messy hair. I fisted them tightly, begging without words for him to keep going.

“Faster,” Thane ordered.

Leo complied, fucking me with his fingers as I rocked into his hand. His steady pace sent sharp-edged ecstasy twisting through me, each thrust rubbing along all the sensitive spots on my inner walls.

Maneuvering between my spread thighs, Thane lowered his head. Gaze holding mine, he ran his wet tongue from where Leo’s fingers pistoned into me, up to my clit. After that one long lick, he circled it, making me burn brighter.

Crooking his fingers, Leo applied sweet pressure to the most sensitive spot inside of me, sending my pussy into a wild flutter. I moaned, writhing between them.

Beneath me, Leo’s cock dug into my ass cheek, making me ache for a more fulfilling stretch.

“Hold her still,” Thane demanded, then buried his face back between my thighs, losing himself to his task.

His wicked tongue was *everywhere*. Licking and kissing and sucking, he drove me closer and closer to the edge while

Leo held me steady with an arm locked around my middle. Restrained as I was, I took their pleasure, forced to ride the waves right to the cliff. But they never let me fall over.

“Thane! Leo!” I was past caring how loud I was or if my other mates heard me. “I thought this was supposed to be a reward,” I cried. “Not torture.”

“You want to come, Demi?” Leo nipped at my ear after he rumbled the question.

This I could ask for. “Yes! Please, yes!”

The two men stopped, ending their torment and pulling away.

Head spinning, I tried to make sense of it. The burn in my veins simmered, unsatisfied. I needed the tiniest spark to go over the edge, but my pussy was empty, my clit abandoned.

I whimpered, but Thane shushed me gently. “Don’t worry, Demi. We’re not even close to done with you. But when you come, I think it should be on Leo’s cock.”

In the next moment, they repositioned me to kneel on one of the bench seats, with my forearms resting on the edge of the tub. Leo stripped, his long, steely cock jutting against his stomach. Peering over my shoulder, I watched him stroke it from root to tip before blessedly lining up, gripping my hips, and thrusting deep.

Leo didn’t hold back. He took me hard and fast, and I loved every minute.

“Ung—*Fuuuck!*” Indiscernible syllables fell from my lips as he drove into me mercilessly. Shifting my body the slightest bit to the side, Leo aligned my core with the stream of a jet. The sensation of pulsing water against my clit had me keening into the night.

I shattered into a million glittery pieces.

“Yes, yes, yes!” My body needed this, and I rocked back into him while he fucked me through the waves of my orgasm.

Without a knot, his hips pistoned as my first climax ebbed, and he drove me toward a second. I tried to make it last, but it

wasn't long before I broke apart again, this one more intense.

My pussy tightened as he sheathed himself one last brutal time before he groaned, low and loud. He came on the tail end of my bliss, filling me to the brim with hot spurts.

My fingers curled into the edge of the tub as I held on for dear life. Raw sounds of pleasure echoed through the night as Leo jerked to a finish.

“Come here, little Omega,” Thane demanded and pleaded in the same breath.

Leo leaned down and kissed the side of my neck, then slipped free. I took Thane's outstretched hand as he glided me across the pool of water and settled me on his lap, straddling his waist. His cock found my entrance like a heat-seeking missile, and I wasted no time sinking over him.

* * *

THANE

Demi's scent surrounded me, sweet as sin and twice as maddening. The desire I felt for her drove me out of my mind as I watched her fuck my packmate. Her beautiful curves were on display for us, and she was the most stunning creature I'd ever laid eyes on. Blissed out in pleasure, she lost the decorum and inhibitions that usually held her back, and her cries filled the night as she creamed on Leo's cock.

Her thick, rich perfume sent coherent thoughts scattering as my world narrowed to my blazing need. I *had* to be inside of her.

Momentary jealousy stole through me as Leo and Demi came together, but it passed just as quickly. I wanted to share in their pleasure, but I wanted to bury myself knot deep in my mate more than I wanted a quick jerk. Squeezing my cock to hold back my release, I reminded myself she'd be mine in a matter of seconds. This was our Omega, and I knew she could take more.

She could take *me*.

As soon as Leo released her, I had her across the hot tub and straddling my thighs, sinking over my cock like a warm, wet present. Pussy slick with my friend's cum, she stretched to take my girth. I swallowed back curses, trying to think of something—*anything*—to keep from going off like a shot.

Demi was the only woman who could make me feel like a crazed Alpha in the throes of his first rut. Planting my feet, I thrust upward to meet her downstroke, colliding in blissful agony. My balls slapped her ass, my knot beginning to inflate. Her inner walls squeezed me so damn tight, I thought I might die and go to heaven.

Hands gripping her narrow waist, I lifted her and dropped her over me, setting a pace that had us both gasping and

groaning. Her nails scratched down my chest, making me moan as she left little red trails in her wake.

Fuck yes, Darling. Mark me as yours.

“Thane! Oh gods, you make me feel so good.”

My hips stuttered on my next thrust, jerking from the sheer pleasure of her praise.

She remembered.

I fucked her with the force of a hurricane, and a deep ache throbbled to life in my knot. I wanted to impale her on it and never fucking leave her addictive pussy. Every cell in my body channeled fire and lust.

“So big, so hard. Gods, I love the way you fuck me. More, please! I need all of you!”

I drowned in the scent of honey, sugared berries, and spice. Her hips arched, and I took her ass in my hands, kneading the supple flesh. Hard, erect points, her nipples grazed my chest, adding extra sensation I hoped helped her spiral higher.

She was close. I could feel it in the way her walls fluttered around my cock, see it in the way her eyes widened.

“That’s it, Darling. Come for me,” I grunted.

I slammed her hips down, stretching her over my knot, buried to the hilt. The exquisite squeeze sent lightning zipping down my spine while my balls drew tight, ready to explode. It was impossible to hold back. With a roar, I let loose, filling her with jet after endless jet until spots danced in my eyes.

Demi’s head dropped back on a scream, grinding down on my cock and finding her own release. Her pussy fluttered wildly, milking me for everything I was worth.

“Fuck,” Leo rasped, watching Demi shudder and writhe.

“Godsdamn, Darling” I panted, clutching her limp form to my chest. “I’ve missed you so damn much. You’re a goddess, and I think I just had a fuckin’ aneurysm. We should make this a nightly ritual.”

“As long as I don’t have to sing first.”

I smirked, knowing I'd never agree to such ridiculous terms. "I make no promises."

Her laughter floating on the night breeze was the best thing I'd ever heard—almost as sweet as her singing.

twenty-four



DEMI

IT HAD BEEN two days since Jamison and Knox had left, and I was going out of my mind with worry. The problem was, so were my other mates. They tried their best to put on a brave face, but the tension in the house was palpable. Until we were all together again and had some word on the Anton situation, we wouldn't be able to relax.

Grabbing the cup of coffee I'd just made, I stirred in cream and sugar. The heat warmed my hands through the ceramic as I added it to the tray that already held four other cups, along with a variety of biscotti Thane had baked earlier. The man was a cooking and baking machine, especially when he was stressed.

I carried everything into the living room where Leo, Thane, Eli, and Hades sprawled out on the couches. A movie played on the TV, our fourth or fifth one today. Distraction was our coping mechanism of choice.

Four sets of eyes landed on me as I rounded the couch.

"What's this?" Eli sat up a little straighter, eyeing the tray. He looked moments away from leaping up to take it from my hands.

I smiled but shook my head, letting him know I had it under control.

Carefully, I set it down on the coffee table and handed Eli his first. "One cappuccino." Then Leo. "Coffee, cream, six sugars." Thane was next. "A macchiato, and last," I gave Hades his mug, "a mocha with an extra shot of espresso." I beamed, proud I'd finally mastered their fancy coffee and espresso machines, and remembered their preferred drink choices.

Taking my own mug, I settled on the couch between Hades and Leo, snuggling into the cushions and breathing in the sweet scent of my overly sugared latte. Like Leo, if my coffee

didn't taste like dessert, I didn't want it. The other guys liked their caffeine strong.

Warm gazes slid over me as they each murmured their appreciation, and I relished the way some of the anxiety faded from their eyes.

"Thank you, Love," Eli said before testing his drink and humming his delight. He settled back into the couch, looking comfortable in a pair of sweats and a tight-fitting tee. Seeing him dressed down sent butterflies free in my stomach.

Smiling behind the rim of my mug, I took a sip. Providing some much-needed comfort for my men made me feel lighter. The stress had been getting to all of us, leaving us strung tight and ragged. I leaned my head against Hades' shoulder and stretched my legs to brush against Leo. My Beta rubbed distracting trails up and down my shin, teasing the skin just behind my knee and making me giggle.

The movie played while we relaxed around each other, and eventually, Thane moved to sit in front of me. My fingers combed through his hair, enjoying the texture difference from where it was shorter on the sides and longer on top. I handed my empty mug to Hades and grinned as I set to plaiting tiny braids in Thane's hair.

I'd completed four of them when Thane caught on, turning to arch a golden eyebrow at me.

"What are you doing to my head, Darling?"

I blinked angelically, hoping my face was the picture of innocence.

"Don't worry," Leo chuckled. "You've never looked so beautiful."

"Oh, I'm just getting started. I haven't even had a chance to paint his nails yet!"

Thane's eyes grew comically wide. "Wait, what?! When did I sign up for a mani and pedi?"

I smirked. "Lucky for you, I have little in the way of makeup and nail polish. So you're off the hook, but I *am*

finishing your hair.” Swirling my finger through the air, I told him to turn back around.

Grabbing my wrist, he brought my hand to his mouth and kissed the fleshy part of my thumb before releasing me and doing my bidding.

“Good boy,” I teased, but I didn’t miss the shiver that racked him.

I knew *exactly* how much I enjoyed being called their good girl, and to see I could have a similar effect on one of my Alphas sent my heart pounding faster. I made a mental note to use the endearment the next time I was intimate with Thane.

“I think I love your praise kink as much as you do,” I leaned down and whispered against his ear, loving his corresponding groan.

“Fuck, Darling. You’re getting me hard just thinking about the things you say to me.”

“Behave for me and let me finish braiding your hair, and maybe I’ll reward you this time.”

“My head is yours,” he rasped.

“I know.” Innuendo dripped from every word, and Thane shifted, clearing his throat as he grabbed a throw pillow and covered his lap with it.

I smiled. Being so in charge of Thane’s pleasure made me feel powerful in a way that quickly became addicting.

Mindlessly, my hands worked through the motion of braiding while Hades’ stroked his fingers up and down the side of my neck, making me suck in sharp breaths.

I don’t know how long we sat like that, savoring each other’s company while we waited for news, but the content bubble we’d created popped when Eli’s cell rang sharply through the room.

He jolted, setting his mug down with a thud, and reaching for his phone. His breath whooshed out of him, his expression turning strained as he stared at the name of the contact scrolling across his screen.

He winced when he glanced my way, and I knew his answer would disappoint. “It’s the hospital. Probably checking on my extended leave.”

My heart fell.

Slipping from the room, he answered, the soft murmur of his voice fading down the hall as he dealt with work.

All the guys had taken a leave of absence from their jobs after the accident. They needed the time to heal, but I also knew I was the main reason they’d stayed away. We couldn’t exactly return to our life as normal until we were positive we were safe. Guilt rose swiftly until every part of me overflowed with it.

But my own needs quickly fell by the wayside as I read the tension in the room, specifically the way Hades’ fist was clenching his mug. I worried the ceramic would shatter at any moment. Leaning across him, I covered his hand with my own and took the cup. Setting it on the end table, I scrambled into his lap and curled up against his chest. Pressing as much of myself against him as I could, I tried to soothe him.

My inner Omega did a victorious little shimmy when he wrapped his arms around me, cradling me gently despite the tautness in his muscles. Hades was endlessly gentle with me. Given he could crush me easily, his tenderness always made my heart swell.

My scary tattooed giant was a big ol’ cinnamon roll on the inside.

“Fuck,” he rumbled, and I felt the tension ripple through him. “I was hoping—”

“I know,” Leo sighed. “We all were.”

We’d all expected that call to be from Jamison or Knox. Obviously, since they hadn’t called, they were busy dealing with the case against Pack Silver, but from this end, it was torture to be removed from the situation. Coping with not knowing what was happening or how it was going was an exercise in faith and patience. I had copious amounts of the first, but the second was dwindling.

Especially because I worried about my mates' safety.

Anton, Huck, and Reed were ruthless when someone got in their way, and they were powerfully connected. Taking down a popular politician wouldn't be easy. The face he showed the world was starkly different from the monster behind closed doors. Exposing his sins would hopefully sway the general public to our side, but I had no doubt there would be fallout from making such a calculated move.

Anton had backup plans for his backup plans. I hadn't voiced my concerns, choosing to remain optimistic, but there was a high probability that the mayor of Silver City would have a contingency plan in place.

As scared as I was, I trusted Jamison and Knox to handle things. They were both massively protective of me and the rest of the pack, and they were endlessly determined to end this and secure our future. They were honorable, dependable, and more than capable. Pack Maverick was just as powerful, and we had the benefit of the truth on our side.

Channeling my belief that everything would be alright, I followed my instincts as I snuggled into Hades. Warmth and security filled my chest, and I pushed it outward, wanting to soothe my mates. A rumble built from the center of my being, vibrating through every part of me.

For the first time in my life, I purred.

The soft burr thrummed into Hades while Thane and Leo turned toward me with wide, surprised eyes.

Eli walked back in as he disconnected his call, freezing when he heard the feminine whir. "Fates..."

Leo whispered, "Are you—"

"Purring?" Thane murmured.

Eli came around the back of the couch, and together, the rest of my mates reached for me, placing their hands on my body to feel the calming vibrations for themselves.

Their muscles relaxed and some of the distress drained away. They instantly mellowed.

I relished their touch and let the burr grow until it turned into a resounding drone.

“Demi, this is unbelievable, Darling,” Thane murmured.

“I didn’t think Omegas purred for their mates,” Leo said softly, awe in his tone.

Eli smiled down at me lovingly, his amber eyes glimmering with warmth behind the black frames of his glasses. “Another perk of being scent-matched.”

“Fuck. It’s like a drug,” Hades groaned.

A honeyed chuckle sounded, and Eli said, “Wait until the others get a load of this.”

Leo grinned boyishly, amusement filling his silver-blue gaze. “I can’t wait to see the shock on their faces when they find out.”

“When they get home, I’ll purr for all of you,” I promised.

“A puppy pile? Count me in!” Thane kissed the center of my palm, nuzzling his cheek into it when he was done. The light scruff of his beard abraded my skin, and I scratched my nails lightly over his jaw, enjoying the texture.

Love swelled within me. Knowing I could take care of them and help them the way they always did for me filled me with such satisfaction.

Things were almost perfect. Almost.

As soon as Jamison and Knox walked back through the door, I’d finally be at peace.

Deep in my bones, I felt the winds of change. We were on the cusp of something great. The future we’d all worked so hard to build was nearly within reach. But like a house of cards, setting this last piece into place could send our hopes and dreams crashing to the ground.

Waiting to find out if we could live out loud or would have to stay hidden was excruciating, but I had to remain strong for my men.

Wiggling deeper between my mates while the movie played on the screen, I continued purring while I watched the door—waiting for the moment I could breathe again.

twenty-five



JAMISON

KNOX and I stood in the doorway of the media room watching Demi sleep amongst her other mates. Splayed over top of Leo, she used him like a body pillow. Thane slept on her other side, his arm tossed over her waist while Hades snored softly from where he sprawled near her head. Eli slept near her feet, his glasses still on and some fantasy book with a dragon on the front draped over his stomach.

Knox huffed a laugh and scrubbed a hand down his face. “Fuck, it’s good to be home.”

It fucking was. It’d been a long two days, and I wanted nothing more than to join the rest of my pack in the makeshift nest Demi had created. But first...

“Go shower,” I told Knox, unwilling to disrupt the peaceful slumber of everyone when we smelled of gunfire and blood. I didn’t want Demi to see us so disheveled. Neither one of us had taken time to clean up after everything had gone down, too eager to get home to our Omega.

Knox gazed down at himself, grabbing the edge of his shirt and taking a healthy sniff.

“Damn, I smell terrible.”

Our soured signatures permeated the cotton, and I knew if we woke Demi now, she’d react to the multiple emotions she’d be able to smell on our clothing. Her scent was already distressed, even in sleep, and I wouldn’t make it worse. When I roused her from her dreams, I wanted her to be overjoyed to see us. Not fucking wrecked over what we’d been through.

Slipping away, Knox and I padded to our own rooms. Under the stream of hot water, I braced my hands against the tile and let the day wash down the drain.

Fuck, that’s nice. The heat relaxed some of the lingering tension in my shoulders. Flicking my hair back, I scrubbed

with body wash that enhanced the natural notes of my scent and then stepped from the shower and wrapped a towel around my waist.

I took time to shave, cleaning up the line of my beard and slapping some aftershave and deodorant on. Feeling more human, I stepped from the bathroom, steam billowing out around me.

And I froze.

Demi blinked up at me from where she sat at the end of the king-sized bed. Wrinkles were already visible along the front hem of her t-shirt as she crushed the fabric in disquieted hands.

“Sweetness,” I growled. “What are you doing here? You were supposed to be sleeping.”

Not that I didn’t welcome her presence. Her bare legs were on full display, giving me dirty visions of them wrapping around my waist when I pushed her back into the mattress and buried myself in her sweet cunt.

Focus, you asshole.

Something was wrong. My mate was worried, and instead of coming to me while I showered, she’d chosen to wait. I instantly hated the idea of her sitting out here alone while she was upset.

Why hadn’t she come to me? Was she afraid I’d be cross at the perceived interruption? I thought we’d moved past that, but I could be a gruff bastard, and I knew Demi struggled with just how Alpha I was. Out of the entire pack, I radiated stern, dominant energy more than the others.

I thought we’d moved past that. Thought I’d assuaged her fears. I wanted her to know she could come to me whenever she wished. For her, my door would always be open, as would my arms. My bed. Anything she fucking desired.

“Is it over?” she whispered, voice mousy and timid.

Suddenly, all the pieces clicked. She *was* scared. Just not of me. *Thank fuck.* But I didn’t want her frightened at all.

“Oh, Little Omega,” I said roughly and crossed the space separating us. I dropped to my knee before her and took her hands in mine, saving the edge of her shirt from further abuse. “Yes. It’s over.”

Her beautiful green eyes instantly watered. “Sweet mercy, really?”

“I’d never lie to you about something so damn important. We got the rat bastard.”

“What about Huck and Reed?”

“They’re both in custody, as well. The pictures and videos we took corroborated the buried financials the feds were able to dig up and tie back to Anton. The authorities are hunting down all their known associates as well. It’s over, Sweetness. You’re free of them.”

Tears poured in earnest down her cheeks, and she threw her arms around my neck, nearly unbalancing me. I righted myself easily and grinned into the crux of her neck as I wrapped her up in my arms.

“It’s alright, Little Omega,” I rumbled. “Let it out. You’re safe now. You’re always safe with us.”

I purred for her while she cried until she hiccuped. It broke the emotional well that had built, and eventually, she laughed.

Pulling back, she swiped at her wet cheeks. “Oh my gods, it’s really over.” She was still processing.

“You’re free, Demi.” I let that sink in. “You still want us now that your life is your own?” I asked, the question barely more than a gravelly rasp.

Demi froze. “Jamison...” The airy way she uttered my name shot through my chest like an arrow. “Are you really asking me that?”

I turned my gaze away, swallowing hard. Fuck. I wasn’t a vulnerable guy. That side of myself rarely made an appearance. But here I was, kneeling before her, laying myself bare. She held my entire heart in her hands.

She cupped my cheek, guiding my face back toward hers. I stared up at her, marveling at how fucking pretty she was.

“I would never hold you to a decision you made when you believed you were in danger. I love you, Sweetness. So damn much. My heart knows you’re my Omega. But I can’t bite and claim you unless I know this is what you want beyond a shadow of a doubt.”

“It’s your turn to listen now,” she ordered, adding a little growl behind her words.

Fuck, she’s adorable.

Like the good Alpha I could be, I shut up.

“You’re *mine*, Jamison.”

Her claim ran through me like a drug, making me fucking euphoric.

“Your entire pack belongs to me as much as it belongs to you. And someday soon, I plan to sink my teeth into your neck and mark you for the world to see, the same way I hope you’ll do to me. And I’ll wear your claim proudly,” she promised. “I’ve never been so certain of something in my life, and I’m not saying that out of misplaced loyalty or pressure from being scent-matched. I don’t need any other options. I love you. Heart, body, mind, and soul.”

I surged to my feet, cupping her face as she stood along with me. Her nipples grazed my abdomen as she breathed sharply. Fire burned in her mossy green eyes. Leaning down slowly, letting her anticipate every damn second it took me to close the distance between us, I claimed her mouth.

It was no paltry kiss. The full force of my Alpha nature surged forward. I *devoured* her, stealing each breath before feeding it back to her. Each tiny gasp she released settled in my balls as my cock went hard as steel. The bar of it pressed against the soft curve of her belly from beneath my towel.

Sharp, fast pain seared my lower lip as she nipped me hard, then sucked to soothe her bite.

A growl suffused my chest. “You want to play, Little One?”

“Maybe I want *you* to play.”

“Oh, I’ll play, Demi Leigh. But I’m the one in charge here.” My desire was a lion in a cage, roaring to be released.

She tipped her chin up, challenge flashing through her eyes. “Are you sure about that?”

I hummed, loving the fight in her. “I guess we’ll find out. On your knees, Sweetness.”

A pleased shiver trembled through her. Attention locked on mine, she slowly lowered to the rug.

“Take your shirt off for me.”

My cock jumped as she obediently pulled it over her head. Brown hair tumbled down her shoulders, the strands long enough to tease over her breasts. The sharp points of her nipples peeked out through her tresses, begging for attention.

My fist closed over my cock, stroking it from base to tip. Pre-cum leaked from the ruddy tip, slicking my downward stroke. Demi licked her lips, and her hands grazed up my muscular thighs.

I trembled. She was fucking right. I might have her on her knees before me, but she was the one in charge.

“This cock is mine, Alpha.” Her hand replaced mine, and I closed my fist over hers, showing her exactly how I liked to be touched. I hissed as my knot thickened, not fully, but enough to send lightning licking at my balls when her dainty fingers closed around it and squeezed.

“Open your mouth, Little Omega.”

I pressed the head of my cock against her lips, almost perishing when her little tongue snaked out to lap at the shiny bead weeping from the tip. She hummed, her eyes blown wide with lust.

“You taste so good,” she murmured and then took me into her mouth.

My hand sank into her hair and I fisted it, using the hold to guide her over my cock. Inch by inch, she sank down my shaft. I hit the back of her throat, but there was still more of me to take.

I pulled her off, then repeated the motion, my thighs tight with strain as I held back from fucking her face the way I badly wanted to.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Her throat was tight, and my balls ached from the sharp pleasure of her swallow rippling against me.

“Holy gods, Demi,” I groaned.

She tapped my thigh, and I immediately pulled out.

Her lips were rosy red, her cheeks stained nearly the same color. Green eyes as dark as emeralds sparkled up at me. “More,” she demanded. “I’m your Omega. I’m made to take you. I won’t break, Jamison.”

“I won’t be gentle,” I warned.

“Good.” Her lips curled. “Use me, Alpha.”

Fuck.

Me.

On a growl, I sank back into her warm, inviting mouth, and this time, when I hit the barrier at the back of her throat, I angled her and drove deeper.

“Ungh—*Fuuuuck.*”

I swore that being buried in my woman was a spiritual experience—as close to heaven on earth as it got.

As promised, I didn’t hold back. I fell into the storm of fucking her throat. Her moans vibrated through my cock, sending the thick vein that ran along the bottom throbbing.

Godsdamn, I wouldn’t last.

My knot thickened further with each brush of her lips over the sensitive spot.

Sinking deep, I held her nose against my pelvis, daring myself not to cum while her throat spasmed. I let her breathe, then repeated the sweet torture again. And again. And again.

The scent of Demi's perfume filled the air, telling me she liked the way I owned her body. I could smell the scent of her slick and knew she'd soaked her panties, her pussy desperate to be filled the way her throat was.

Half-high off her pheromones, I fucked her mouth, letting go of the tentative control I had left. My hips jerked, and I groaned.

"Fuck, Sweetness. I'm going to come, and you're going to swallow every last drop, understand?"

She whimpered, her nails digging into my thighs as she held on for the ride.

My balls drew tight, my knot threatening to swell. I pulled out enough to tighten my fist around it as my orgasm hit. I spilled my cum across her tongue and down her throat, groaning as she obediently drank me down.

Incredible possessiveness overcame me, knowing she carried a piece of me deep inside of her.

My legs shook as she slid me out of her mouth. Capturing a drop that slipped free with my thumb, I pressed it back between her lips. Her suckle roused my cock all over again.

With a growl, I picked her up and tossed her on the bed.

"Present for your Alpha," I demanded, barely holding back a bark—my need for her was so great. Rut snuck up on me hot and fast, and I held it back by a tentative thread.

On hands and knees, she arched her back and wiggled her ass enticingly. The little minx glanced over her shoulder, all but daring me not to bury myself to the hilt.

With a rumbling growl, I was on her. I buried my face in her perfect little pussy, plunging my tongue deep. Juice coated my tongue, and I sucked her outer lips, needing all of it. I worshiped her with my mouth, licking and teasing her until her fists clenched the sheets, her cries filled the room, and her

thighs shook around my face. Then and only then did I circle my tongue around her aching, needy clit, snapping her control and sending her careening to the heavens.

A hoarse, nearly silent scream ripped from her as I latched my lips around her clit, flicking it mercilessly with my tongue until she begged for mercy.

Kneeling behind her, I pressed my hand between her shoulder blades and pushed her down onto the mattress, leaving only her ass in the air. "Don't move."

"Yes, Alpha," she panted.

Releasing her, I stroked my cock while she squirmed, but stayed where I put her. "Good girl," I praised.

A shiver wracked her, and I lined up at her entrance, teasing her with just the tip.

"Alpha..." she gasped, resting her cheek against the blankets. She bit her lip, her fingers curling into the sheets as I tortured her.

"You'll take what I give you and be grateful for my cock, Demi Leigh."

"I need more!" she dared to challenge.

I spanked her ass, rubbing the spot warm as she gasped then moaned into the feeling. "I'll never leave you unsatisfied, Little Omega. But you have to earn your next orgasm. You're going to take four more spanks for me. Then and only then will I sink knot deep into your pretty little cunt and give you what you want."

"Alpha! Please!"

"Shhh," I soothed. "I'll count it for you. One." I pulled back and smacked her ass. Not enough to truly hurt, but enough to garner her attention.

She jolted, then moaned again as her ass cheek bloomed pink. I could see the outline of my hand on her creamy skin, and my cock jerked against my abdomen, strings of pre-cum dripping down my length. I counted out two more, hard as a fucking rock at the sight of the glistening slick coating her

thighs. Knowing she enjoyed my particular flavor of fun had my head spinning with all the things I wanted to introduce her to.

“Four.” I gave her the final spanking, marveling at the gorgeous red color of her skin. I smoothed my palm over the abused curve of her ass, soothing the sting into the undeniable heat I knew settled deep in her pussy.

“Jamison! I need you,” she begged, and I didn’t make her wait any longer.

“I’ve got you. Hold on, Little Omega.”

She braced herself as I gripped her hips and thrust deep. That first plunge rocked her and sent my eyes rolling back in my head.

“Oh, Demi. You feel so godsdamn good wrapped around my cock, Sweetness. That’s it. Squeeze me for all I’m worth.”

I set a steady pace, then pressed my fingers against her clit.

“So swollen for me. Does that feel good?” I circled, and her whole body shook.

I smiled as she gave me my answer with keening moans. Another wave of slick eased my way, and I canted my hips faster, fucking her good and deep while I played with her pussy.

My release barreled at me hard and fast. Gritting my teeth and holding on to the last dregs of my control, I braced for it.

“You’re going to come for me now, Demi.”

“Oh, please! Oh gods. Please!”

I chuckled, draped myself over her back, and whispered in her ear, “Come, Little Omega. Right. Fucking. *Now.*”

I slapped her oversensitive clit on the last word, and she screamed as she fell apart for me. Her whole pussy seized, squeezing so damn tight I thought I might die from the sheer bliss that licked up my shaft.

With one last thrust, I buried myself knot deep inside her. It swelled impossibly large, and she keened, rocking against

me, diving from one orgasm into the next.

“That’s it, Sweetness. Take what you want from me.”

I pulled her hips back into mine, helping her as she ground against my knot.

“Look how hard you’re coming for me—taking my knot like a good girl. You ready to be filled, Sweetness? Ah—*Fuck*. I’m gonna come.”

My own release mounted, and I shouted as it overwhelmed me. White hot pleasure licked down my spine as I exploded and filled my mate with my seed.

Heaving for breath, I rolled us and pulled her into my chest, getting more comfortable while I remained cocooned in the tight vice of her body.

She hummed sweetly. “That was—”

“Incredible.”

She giggled, and the sound gripped my heart, refusing to let it go.

“I love you, Sweetness.”

Her lips curved. “I love you too,” she sighed sleepily.

“You ready to go home?” I murmured, tracing my fingers over the dip of her waist. She was so soft and feminine against me. I’d never tired of the feel of her velvety skin.

Suddenly awake, she gazed sharply over her shoulder, her eyes glistening. “Really?”

“I wouldn’t tease you about something I know you want so badly.”

“We can go back to Vermont? To Maverick Falls?”

“If that’s what you’d like.”

“Yes. I love it here, but I miss home. I miss my nest.” The last part, she murmured quietly. “It’s crazy to call it mine. Really, truly mine. I tried so hard to have faith that everything would work out, and here we are.” She shook her head like she

still couldn't believe it. "All that's missing are your bites on my skin."

A purr rumbled to life in my chest at the idea of marking her. "Soon, Sweetness." I leaned down and kissed her neck, right over the spot I planned to sink my teeth into.

I hoped she'd go into heat again before long. The overwhelming need to mate would help ease any pain she'd experience from our bites, but we might not be able to wait that long. The desire to claim Demi rode my Alpha, driving me to near madness anytime I was this close to her. My teeth ached just thinking about it. If she didn't go into heat, there were other ways to ensure she was blissed out before we marked her.

But first... *home*.

"Sleep now. We'll pack in the morning, and once we're home, we'll plan our bonding."

My mate yawned, innocent and sweet, and nestled deeper into my body as she closed her eyes. Bracing myself, I groaned from the delicious tugs against my knot. Wrapping my arm around her, I covered her belly with my hand and held her still against me.

As I watched her relax and drift off, I couldn't believe what a lucky bastard I was.

Her unending trust in me was as astounding as it was addicting, and I knew then with indisputable clarity that I was as obsessed as I was in love.

This woman was mine. *My Omega*.

I'd do whatever it took to keep her safe and happy for the rest of my life, because I was never, *ever* letting her go.

twenty-six



THANE

I PUSHED my shoulder against the door of the nest, careful not to jostle the tray of food and spill the tea as I ducked inside. It had been a week since we'd been home, and already I knew I'd never grow tired of seeing Demi sprawled out comfortably in the center of her nest. Blankets and pillows surrounded her on all sides, some of them ruffled and tossed back from days of having a big old slumber party together in this room.

She hadn't wanted to be alone, and we were more than happy to oblige whatever our lady wished. Our mate slept better when we all surrounded her, our various scents weaving together in a perfect harmony. The blend of our signatures was like catnip for our Omega.

Demi, who out-slept us all this morning, snored softly. The sound was fucking adorable.

Keeping my balance as I crossed the cushioned floor, I dropped to my knees and set the tray to the side. Unable to resist, I cuddled up to her side and propped my head on my hand as I stared down at her sleeping form.

A large part of me didn't want to wake our girl, but it was past eleven and she hadn't eaten since last night.

"Demi," I called softly, gently brushing the hair off her cheek. "Wake up, Darling."

I cooed to her twice more before her lids fluttered open.

"Hi," she sighed as she stretched. "Did I oversleep?"

"Not at all, but I made you breakfast and wanted to make sure you ate something."

Her hand went to her belly, and she winced.

Immediate worry infused my chest. "You okay?"

Sucking in a deep breath, she blew it out slowly, then nodded. “Yeah. Sorry.”

I eyed the eggs benedict on the tray, wondering if I should switch it out for some toast. Opting to ease her into eating to make sure her stomach cooperated, I handed her the London Fog.

“Try the tea. Hopefully, it’ll help settle your stomach.”

She waved her hand through the air as she sat up. “I’m fine. Really. Now that I’m up, I’m starving.” Her stomach chose that moment to rumble its agreement.

Still, I made a mental note to make a pot of soup for lunch, something brothy and easy to digest, just in case she was coming down with a bug.

I watched her like a hawk through the first couple of sips, but when it seemed she’d keep it down, I relaxed. Propping some pillows against the side of the nest, I helped Demi arrange herself, propping her up and then settling the tray over her lap.

“What did I do to deserve breakfast in bed?” she took another sip, then picked up her fork, taking a tentative bite of the eggs benedict. Her moan made me smile. “Gods, this is delicious.”

“As delicious as the taste of my cu—”

“Thane!” Demi screeched, picking up a small throw pillow and tossing it at me.

I chuckled, recalling last night and the insatiable way she’d sucked me off. And she hadn’t stopped there, taking one after the other of us, claiming we tasted just like our scents and she was *hungry*. Sweet Fates. The idea of her craving me woke my cock right back up.

Not now, I practically groaned.

We had plans today, and I wouldn’t fuck ‘em up just because I was eager to feel my woman’s lips wrapped around me again.

As if on cue, Hades knocked on the door and strode in, hunching because of the low ceiling. His full attention settled on Demi like she was the sole reason the sun rose each morning. “You sleep well, Baby Girl?”

“Mmhmm,” Demi hummed around another bite.

“Good. How would you like to go out today?”

Demi swallowed fast, nearly choking. “Out?”

Hades smiled, his grin lopsided. “Yeah, Baby. Out.”

Narrowing her eyes, not sure she believed him, she clarified, “As in, outside? Or out into the world to see and do things?”

I stifled a laugh, rubbing a hand over my mouth to hide the corresponding smirk. It sounded like our Omega was going a little stir-crazy, tired of being in seclusion.

Hades shook his head, amused. “Leo and I thought we might take you by the gym—officially this time. Show you where we work. Maybe go out to eat after.”

“Like on a date?” Demi’s eyes sparkled with hope.

“Yeah, Baby. Exactly like a date.”

The squeak that sounded from Demi was inhuman. Shoveling two more quick bites, downing a few gulps of tea, and shoving a biscotti between her teeth, she scrambled out from under the tray of food. With the cutest little hop and wiggle, she pulled Hades down to her level and smacked a kiss on his cheek before running for the bathroom, yelling about how she had to get ready.

Her perfume hung in the air, rich and sweet and happy.

“She’s not too excited,” I quipped, stealing a bite of her abandoned breakfast, hoping, belatedly, that she’d eaten enough to hold her over. I’d send some snacks with Hades and Leo in case she got hungry before they grabbed food later on.

“I’m fuckin’ thrilled she’s excited, but it also makes me so damn angry,” Hades grumbled, and I understood what he meant.

It was the first time in years she'd been allowed to go out on the town.

The government strictly forbade Omegas from being out in public unless chaperoned by their pack or family members. The isolation and loneliness we forced upon them after designating was wrong on so many levels. I understood the need to keep them safe, but not at the expense of their mental and emotional health.

Our mate struggled with both. Given all she'd been through, it was understandable, and something my entire pack determinedly wanted to help her with. As someone who struggled through his own fair bit of trauma, I knew healing was a journey. Every step mattered, and we'd be there for her through it all.

Dating Demi, making her happy, and showing her how much we loved and cared for her was the first step in the right direction. But it didn't mean her reactions, as wonderful as they were, didn't pierce us straight through the heart.

Something as simple as exploring the gym or eating out shouldn't be a novelty, and it made me sad that such regular activities the rest of us took for granted made Demi light up the way she had.

The gravity of what she'd been through hit me anew.

"Make sure she has a good time." It was an order as much as it was a request.

Luckily, Hades seemed to share my train of thought.

"I intend to."

* * *

LEO

“Oh, fuck, Honey. Just like that,” I groaned as Demi did something wicked with her tongue.

Her lips curved as much as they could while being stuffed full of my cock. A soft moan vibrated up my shaft, and my fingers tightened in her hair as I thrust deep. She took every inch like the good little Omega she was.

I guided her on and off my cock by the high ponytail she wore, her lips pink and swollen from my abuse. She gazed up at me with hooded green eyes full of pleasure and lust, and I about lost it.

I wasn't going to last much longer, but I was remiss to let this end.

It felt too good.

She felt too good.

I jolted and hissed when one hand cupped my balls, tugging and squeezing lovingly. She surprised me further by massaging my ass with her other hand. Boldly, she reached between her legs, gathered some of her slick, and then grazed a finger over my back entrance.

I hissed from the strange sensation, but it felt *good*.

Circling, she teased overly sensitive, puckered skin.

No one had *ever* touched me there.

“Holy shit!” The feel of it was intense, but I forced myself to breathe out and relax, willing to let her explore.

Gently, she eased her finger inside, making me suck in a sharp breath. Swirling her tongue over the head of my cock, she distracted me as she worked deeper inside.

The first graze against my prostate had me yelping with surprise, and Demi hummed excitedly before pulling me from

her mouth.

“Do you like that?” she asked, gripping the base of my cock and stroking me as her finger rubbed over the spot again. “I read about it in a romance book and wanted to try it...”

I groaned loudly. “F-Fuck!”

“I’m going to take that as a yes.” She smiled, then took me back between her lips. Flicking her tongue under my glans, she swallowed me whole, letting her throat squeeze tight.

Dual sensation overwhelmed me. Every muscle in my godsdamn body went taut as pleasure filled me. My balls grew heavy. Trembles started in my thighs as sweat beaded on my forehead. My cock throbbed.

Wild and untamed, I used Demi’s ponytail and fucked her mouth. The jerks of my hips were unrefined, but I was past careful control.

In fact, I was pretty damn sure control was just an illusion. Demi *owned* me.

Her finger increased the pressure against the sweet spot in my ass, and I fucking *flew*.

Unable to stay quiet, I shouted and grunted, the carnal sounds echoing off every hard surface in the gym.

My release rolled through me with the force of a tsunami while her finger continued to rub, prolonging my orgasm. I shot jet after jet down her throat, filling her with my seed. The ecstasy was so intense I had to lean back against the mirrored wall just to keep upright. My legs shook like a newborn baby deer.

“Holy *shit*.” I shoved a hand through my hair as I rested my head against the reflective glass, focusing on breathing. Despite the thundering of my heart, I swore it nearly stopped when I came, and though I was in shape, I couldn’t quite catch my breath.

I was still returning to earth as Demi popped off my cock and licked her lips, making sure she swallowed every last drop.

Jesus-fucking-Christ.

Not for the first time, it hit me how *incredible* my woman was.

My entire world tilted on its axis. Other than being buried inside my Omega, I'd never felt anything as earth-shattering as that blow job.

"I thought you were supposed to be teaching Demi while I set the schedule for next week," Hades chastised from where he leaned in the hallway's entrance that led further into the gym—and the office he'd disappeared to while Demi and I decided to have a little fun.

The smirk that curved my lips was full of mischief. I leveled my gaze on my packmate while I tucked my dick away. "I *was* teaching her. Just not self-defense." I tossed a wink to Demi, who giggled and took my extended hand as I helped her stand.

"Besides, I thought this was a date. And aren't dates supposed to be fun?" Demi blinked innocently at Hades, and he softened before my eyes.

"Yeah, Baby. They are. Did you have fun turning Leo into a puddle for you?"

"I did. I could do the same for you... if you'll let me." Her expression turned hungry, and I bit my lip to hold back a groan at how hot it would be to see her doing the same thing for my best friend.

"Not a chance."

Her face fell, and Hades immediately cursed. "I didn't mean it that way. Of course, I want to see you on your knees for me," he rasped.

His eyes darkened, and I knew he was picturing Demi sinking to the ground and doing her best to swallow his monster cock.

Fuck, I was getting hard again.

He cleared his throat, but his voice remained raw and husky. "But as fun as that would be, I made plans for our day

that I thought you'd enjoy. This is supposed to be a date."

"Don't blow jobs happen on dates?" Demi crossed her arms beneath her chest and cocked her head in challenge.

"T-They do." Hades swallowed, quickly losing the battle. He was wavering. It was all over his face. And in the tent of his pants. "But I brought you here to show you the gym and introduce you to some of the classes we teach. And," he checked his watch, "I made dinner reservations."

He did? Damn, Hades had stepped up his game.

"I want to show you a good time, Baby Girl, and afterward, you can do whatever you want to me as long as I'm allowed to reciprocate."

Demi dropped her arms and walked toward Hades. "That's actually very sweet. I guess I can wait for my dessert until after dinner." Popping up on her toes, she kissed his cheek, and he gave her one of his rare, genuine smiles. The kind that reached his eyes and lit him up from the inside out.

Demi was the only woman he ever smiled for like that.

Mate. The word echoed through my mind and resonated deep within my chest.

I'd never been this in love before. It still astounded me that this little Omega was ours, but I was addicted to her already. A lifetime together would never be enough. She was embedded in my soul, her name carved on my heart.

"There's a brand new set of workout clothes. I put them on the counter for you in the women's bathroom," he told her, and the way she beamed made me wish I'd thought of it.

Omeegas notoriously loved presents, and I made a mental note to find something meaningful to give her as a bonding gift.

Unable to hide her delight, she practically bounced in place. "I'll go wash up, change, and be right back."

We watched her go, our eyes unrepentantly glued to her ass and the enticing swing of her hips.

“Tell me I did the right thing,” Hades grumbled, adjusting the bar of his cock so his erection was less noticeable.

My lips tightened as I tried not to laugh. No matter what the man did, he’d never be able to hide that anaconda.

“You were very noble,” I said.

“That’s not really an answer.”

Crossing to where he stood, I slapped him on the back, laughing. “No, I supposed it isn’t. What can I say? As long as you don’t tire her out too much during your self-defense class, she’ll have enough energy to play later.”

The stricken look that crossed Hades’ face made me chortle harder, but I also knew he’d never sacrifice her safety in the name of pleasure. This may be a date, but we’d both had ulterior motives. Demi had been in too many precarious situations in her life not to have a basic understanding of how to get herself out of tricky holds or fight back in meaningful ways. She may be small, but we both knew she could be mighty. Once we taught her how to move and leverage the power she had into effective strategies, she’d be much better off.

Afterward, we planned to reward her efforts with copious amounts of food and a good time out on the town.

I realized our mistake as soon as she skipped down the hallway.

“Godsdamn,” Hades grunted, tipping his head to the ceiling and praying for guidance before regarding our beautiful mate once more.

I, on the other hand, couldn’t pry my eyes off of her—or the tight, clinging spandex that hugged every delectable curve of her body.

“Alright. Here I am.” She gave us a little spin, smiling brightly. “Where do you want me?”

Riding me on the weight bench. Bent over the treadmill. Up against the mirrors. Doggy style on the mats.

Fuck. The options were endless.

If we got through this without giving her half a dozen orgasms, it would be a miracle.

A few minutes later I watched as Hades gently took her to the mat, pinning her beneath him when she failed to get out of the hold he was teaching her to escape.

When her eyes dilated and her hips arched, I realized just how screwed we were.

Metaphorically, of course, because we were determined to behave.

But *damn*.

Tipping my head skyward, I beseeched those same deities Hades had prayed to earlier and begged for mercy.

Or inhuman self-control.

There was no way either of us would survive the night without it.

twenty-seven



DEMI

I WAS LAUGHING when I walked back through the front door, full and happy after a night out with Leo and Hades. I couldn't remember the last time I'd eaten at a restaurant. Being in public was reinvigorating. The scents. The smells. The people. But it was the two men keeping me safe and protected throughout the evening that warmed me the most.

The people of Maverick Falls were wonderful. I'd finally gotten to meet Rita, the owner of the sex shop—The Lusty Leopard—as well as her packmate Dakota, who owned the clothing boutique—The Naked Zebra. The rest of their Alphas had respectfully kept their distance while their Omega Rylee nearly plowed me over with a hug, then promptly dragged me off to the side for girl talk.

I wasn't used to being touched so casually, but their acceptance set me at ease and made me feel welcomed. Like maybe, just maybe, this town could become my home, too. Not because I belonged to Pack Maverick, but because people liked and appreciated me for who I was as an individual.

Rylee thrived with her pack, often spending time at her mates' various businesses, unafraid to be seen in public. Most shockingly was her pack's support over her own passions—refinishing old furniture and selling it at various artisans' fairs. I'd never heard of an Omega earning their own money, but the idea intrigued me.

Hades and Leo had assured me they'd always take care of me—financially or otherwise—and while I appreciated the sentiment, I had to explain that it wasn't the money, but about being self-sufficient for the first time in my life that held appeal.

No one had expected me to amount to anything past my Omega status. Knowing I could prove them wrong sparked

something in me I couldn't deny. I wanted to prove anyone who'd ever underestimated me wrong.

They'd both shared secretive smiles at that, leaving me to wonder what they were saying to each other without words. I hadn't gotten to ask because dessert appeared: lava cake with the most decadent chocolate center. My mind melted at the first taste.

What could I say? I was easy to please and not difficult to distract, something that would work in my mates' favor in the years ahead.

"Did you have fun tonight, Baby Girl?" Hades asked, rubbing a large hand down my back while Leo sent a text before tucking his phone in his back pocket.

Grinning up at my mountainous mate, I hoped he could see my effervescent happiness. "It was a perfect date. Even if my arms feel like jello and my abs—which I now know I possess—ache from our lesson." I chuckled, rubbing a hand over the soft plane of my stomach.

"You won't be so sore next time," Leo promised. "You'll grow stronger after every class and the movements will become second nature. Did you like the restaurant? We would've taken you to Thane's place, but thought he should be the one to take you to his restaurant for the first time. Since he was, uh, busy tonight, we took to another local favorite."

Hades shot a glare at Leo, who shifted from foot to foot and shrugged before he noticed me watching.

I cocked my head.

Huh. Thane was busy tonight?

Unease crept in, but I shut that shit down fast. I trusted my mate. Hell, I trusted *all* my mates. There was no reason to feel wary.

Still, Leo was full of restless energy beside me. If I hadn't caught their little exchange, I would've wondered if he'd had too much coffee at dinner. The man couldn't seem to stand still.

“Dinner was delicious...” I said tentatively, gazing from one sheepish man to the next, on edge.

His phone chimed, and he dug it out, breathing a sigh of relief.

Oh yeah, they're up to something.

“Lucky for you, the night’s not over yet.” Leo grinned, and it instantly eased the tension coiling in my stomach.

At least it’s a good something.

Relief was sweet, but I still arched a brow at them questioningly and propped my hands on my hips.

Hades chuckled and brushed a kiss along the top of my head on his way to the kitchen to put our leftovers in the fridge.

“I think the jig is up,” he hollered, as I slowly trailed after him.

“I know you’re up to something,” I said in my best detective voice, like I’d just caught them red-handed. “You should just tell me.”

“And where would the fun be in that?” Grinning like the Cheshire cat, Hades bowed at the waist and motioned for me to follow Leo down the hall.

My Beta offered me his hand, waiting for me to take it. “Come on, Honey. You trust me, don’t you?”

I pursed my lips. “Implicitly. But that doesn’t mean I’m not suspicious as hell. Why is the house so quiet? Where is everyone?”

“That’s for us to know, and you to find out.” Hades murmured into my ear as he slid up behind me.

I shivered pleasantly as his hands found my hips.

“Now, are you going to take Leo’s hand? Or am I going to carry your pretty ass down the hallway so we can surprise you?”

“I don’t think you’re supposed to tell someone you’re going to surprise them before you surprise them,” I commented cheekily.

The sharp, playful smack on my ass made me yelp.

“The sass on this one,” Hades growled.

“And there’s more where that comes from,” I taunted, “but if you want to spank me, I suggest you take me upstairs, lover boy. I wouldn’t want to make Jamison’s office or the library smell like our nest. Think of the books!”

Hades snorted but pressed a hand to my lower back and guided me down the hall anyway. Resigned to my fate, I took Leo’s hand, reveling in the feel of his thumb stroking along the backs of my fingers.

We passed Jamison’s office and stopped outside the closed door to the library. Inside was a room lined with shelves of books and a nook with a picture window that had a view of the barn and pastures beyond. Other than my actual nest, it’d become my favorite spot in the house. The first time I saw it, I’d wanted to curl up on the lone loveseat and read the day away.

It couldn’t be a coincidence that this was the door they’d stopped before.

“What are we—”

“Shhh, Baby Girl. We may have spoiled *having* a surprise for you, but *what* that surprise is remains a mystery. Close your eyes.”

I glanced at Leo, who widened his stance and crossed his arms with an arched brow, waiting for me to obey his friend. My sweet Beta wouldn’t budge, and I let my lashes fall closed even as my lips tugged up.

I couldn’t lie. This was exciting. They’d intrigued me.

Maybe they’d added a romance section? Or replaced the loveseat with a couch large enough for one of them to cuddle up with me while I read?

Hades covered my eyes to make sure I wasn't peeking, and together, they led me inside.

I blinked when I got my vision back, first taking in the sight of all my mates standing around the room, smiling with anticipatory expressions.

Gods, they're all so handsome.

That was my first thought. But my second...

"Oh. My. Gods."

"Welcome to your sanctuary, Love," Eli swept his hand to the room at large.

"What have you done?" My hands went to my cheeks as I stared around, wide-eyed, unsure of where to look first.

Gone was the dark cherry color of the shelving. They'd repainted them a modern dark grey and lined them with beautiful lighting that *changed colors*. The soft glow made me giddy, as did the variety of new romance books that filled the shelves. My fingers itched to skim over all the colorful spines. A round, fluffy, nest-like bed sat in the center of the room, inviting me to curl up and read in utter luxury.

But it was the copious amounts of art supplies lining the shelves across the room that captured my full attention. A beautiful wooden easel sat in the window nook, tempting me to come fill the canvas with the autumn landscape that lay beyond the glass. There were brushes in all different sizes and more paints than I could count—watercolors, oils, acrylics, pastels. They had installed a small portable sink in the corner, so I wouldn't always have to go to the kitchen or bathroom to clean my brushes.

An array of green plants had been set around the room, bringing life to the space.

There were overhead lights and soft lamps, giving me options for whether I was reading or painting.

I spun in a slow circle, taking in all the small details I'd missed on my first pass, like the small fox figurine on one shelf—my favorite animal—the basket overflowing with my

favorite snacks, and the purple blanket on the nest that carried each of their scents. The mouthwatering blend reached me where I stood, beckoning me to jump in and snuggle deep.

“I don’t know what to say.” I was speechless. Surprised didn’t cover the depth of the emotion.

Shocked. Astounded. Flabbergasted.

“This was the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me,” I whispered, voice tight as my throat swelled with emotion.

Don’t cry. Don’t cry. Don’t cry.

A tear slipped free, anyway. Their love for me was evident in every thoughtful detail. I’d never felt so cherished.

My Omega preened with delight, doing a little happy dance while I sniffled and wiped at my cheeks.

“Those are good tears, right?” Thane asked, suddenly on alert.

I nodded. “The best.”

“Do you like it?” Jamison rumbled.

“Like it? I fucking *love* it!”

“I don’t know why it’s hot when you curse, Sunshine, but hell. Gets me hard every damn time.” Knox adjusted himself while I laughed and blushed.

“It’s because she has such a sweet mouth,” Eli teased. “It’s always surprising when something dirty slips out.”

“Our innocent little mate.” Leo grinned, hands tucked in his pockets.

“Please.” I waved away their banter. “You all know by now I’m not innocent.” Especially Leo, given our playtime at the gym earlier.

“On the contrary. You’re an angel,” Hades declared. “We just like corrupting you.” He smirked and his eyes heated like he was thinking of all the wicked things he wanted to do to me, right here in my new studio.

I have a new studio!

“This is surreal,” I breathed, turning in a slow circle again, then giving in to the temptation to check out the easel. I ran my fingers over it lovingly. “How did you know?”

“I told them,” Thane murmured. “You seemed as passionate about painting as I am about cooking. We wanted you to have everything you need to pursue what you love.”

Jamison added, “But it was the answers you gave to the OMA that helped us create this haven for you.”

I knew the OMA would share my questionnaire with my future pack. It helped facilitate and streamline the ‘getting to know you’ process between Alphas and Betas and their new Omegas.

But I’d never expected... *this*.

“It’s filled with all your favorite things. We each picked out something special for you.” Eli pointed to the adorable little fox. “That’s from me, as are some of the new books.”

“And those,” Thane jutted his chin toward the bowl of snacks and the owl holder that held an array of paintbrushes, “are from me.”

Knox led me over to a collection of candles, holding one up for me to sniff. A fresh woodland aroma filled my nose. Pine and Balsam. Eucalyptus and Cedar. The scent was clean without the chemical tang cheaper candles had.

“I know our senses often work together, and I thought these might help set the mood for whatever you’re painting and bring the scene to life.”

I beamed up at Knox, curling my fingers into the neckline of his shirt and tugging him down. We hadn’t had much time together lately, and I missed him.

“I love that idea.” I proved it by kissing him and putting into feeling what I couldn’t say with words.

“Hey,” Thane complained good-naturedly. “Where’s my kiss?”

“Yeah, and mine.” Eli ribbed, eyes sparkling behind his glasses.

Laughing, I bounced across the room and kissed one, then the other, showing them the same amount of appreciation and love.

My Omega was beaming by the time Hades and Leo sandwiched me between them, each stealing a kiss of their own. “These are from us.” They handed me a brand-new cell phone and a set of AirPods. I gaped at the expensive presents, shaking my head slowly. “These are too much.”

“Nope. They’re just the tip of the iceberg, Honey. There are so many ways we want to spoil you, but these will let you listen to music while you work,” Leo said, showing me how to use the music app pre-installed on my phone. My fingers itched to explore the music selection and build a playlist.

But Jamison took my hand next and tugged me free from the others, hoarding me for himself. I wrapped my arms around his waist as he tucked me into his arms and stared down at me.

The sun had dipped below the horizon, bathing the room in the warm colors of the sunset. Jamison’s sapphiric gaze captured mine intently. “I took a different approach to my gift for you,” he told me.

“You didn’t have to get me anything, but whatever it is, I’m going to love it.”

Murmuring low and deep, he dipped his head, his lips grazing my ear as he said, “Try all you want, Little Omega, but you’ll never convince me not to spoil you with presents. You forget that your signature gives you away.” He inhaled deeply and purred. “I can scent your happiness, Demi Leigh, and it’s the most potent drug for my Alpha.”

I shivered, basking in his warmth and the rumble in his chest.

“Come here, Sweetness, and let me show you what I’ve done.” Jamison pulled me over to the nest-like bed in the center of the room and settled me in his lap. Thane handed him a laptop, and Jamison balanced it on my legs and opened it.

On the screen was a popular website where artisans sold their wares. I scanned the page and gasped.

There at the top was a beautiful logo in shades of yellow, pink, purple, and blue.

I blinked. Then blinked again as I read the words ‘The Honeyed Easel’ flanked by a hand-drawn image of a paintbrush dipping into a honey pot surrounded by berries and foliage.

“Wait...” I twisted in his lap to see his face. “W-What is this?”

“It’s a storefront where you can sell your paintings. I’ve already registered the business for you, but if you don’t like the name, it’s easy enough to change with a form.”

Tears obscured my vision. This was Jamison’s way of supporting my dreams, the same as he’d done for Thane’s restaurant or Leo and Hades’ gym.

“A-Are you serious?”

“I can’t tell if you like what I’ve done, or hate it. Did I overstep?” Jamison appeared wary. “You’re going to have to give me more to work with, Sweetness,” he admitted gruffly, “because I can’t get a read on you.”

I jumped him, sending him tumbling to the cushions, grateful when Thane caught the laptop as it tumbled sideways.

“Is she trying to kill him or kiss him?” Eli mused teasingly to Leo.

“Oh my gods!” I cried and kissed his neck. His face. Anything I could reach.

“I think she answered your question,” Leo stage-whispered.

Jamison laughed, a deep, hearty sound that made my heart leap.

“I’m glad you like it.”

I stared down into his handsome face, running my fingers across his bearded jaw. “I *love* it. Name and all. Who knows if

anyone will ever want to buy my work, but it's exciting to think about."

"Paint it and they will come," Jamison rumbled. His complete faith in my abilities astounded me, especially because he and the others had never seen my work.

"Wait here." I scrambled off his lap and rushed through the house to the master bedroom where my belongings had been moved. I swiped my sketchbook off the dresser and raced back down the stairs. Tucking my hair behind my ear, suddenly nervous, I handed Jamison the book. "These are some rough sketches. I wasn't allowed to paint much in my previous life, so I drew the ideas in my head, hoping one day I'd be able to put them down on canvas."

I held my breath while I waited for his approval.

"Demi," he breathed, flipping page after page, studying each one. "These are gorgeous. You're so talented, Sweetness."

The others gathered around, murmuring their agreements and choosing favorites, making me flush with pleasure.

Cutting my gaze to the easel, I itched to unwrap one of the new canvases and get started right then. The sun was gone; the sky grew darker by the minute, but I didn't care. I could paint one of the many landscapes that lived in my mind, or find a reference photo online.

As though being drawn by a siren's song, I took a step in that direction, an idea already forming of the first thing I wanted to paint to christen the studio and—more importantly—this new life of mine.

"May I?" I asked, biting my lip and staring down at the canvas waiting to be filled with life and color.

"The room is yours, Sweetness." Jamison stood and passed me back my sketchbook before kissing the top of my head. "This is your haven. Your space. Paint away."

And I did.

Splashes of color bloomed beneath my brush in much the same way I'd come to life the moment I met my mates. Each line, each stroke, created something beautiful from nothing.

twenty-eight



DEMI

I TRIED NOT to snort-laugh as I watched Hades, Knox, Jamison, Eli, and Thane arguing over where to hang the large canvas. It had taken me two days to finish the elaborate painting—a picturesque landscape of our home against the autumn-colored rolling hills of Vermont. It was cozy and peaceful, and the moment my men had seen it, they wanted to hang the canvas on the wall along with the corresponding one I'd painted of our three little goats and our horse, Maple, grazing in the vast pastures. The paintings were perfect complements, but apparently, my mates had different ideas of where to display them.

“We should hang ‘em by the front door. There’s plenty of space on this wall if we take down all the other shit on it,” Hades cocked his head, hand on his chin, doing his best impression of the ‘thinking man’ pose.

“Yeah, but then people won’t see them until they’re leaving the house. We should hang them somewhere more prominent,” Eli argued.

“I vote they hang in the kitchen.” Thane stalked into his domain and pointed to the decorative brick wall. “If we put them here, they would get the attention they deserve.”

Hades crossed his arms and raised an eyebrow. “You’re just saying that because you spend all your time in the kitchen and you want to hog ‘em.”

“I *used* to spend all my time in the kitchen,” Thane stressed. “I can now attest that I spend an equal amount of time in our nest.” He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

This time, an unbidden, inelegant snort erupted from me before I could stop it, but I smothered it quickly with a hand over my mouth and an innocent look on my face.

I mean... the man wasn’t wrong.

In fact, we'd all been spending a lot of time together in my nest.

A flush of heat worked through me, starting at my cheeks and spreading down my neck to my chest. I fanned myself as I sat at the kitchen island, admiring my mates as they crossed the house, still arguing, while Leo made me a cup of tea.

I almost winced when he handed it to me, not because I didn't want it, but because my body was suddenly hot.

He tilted his head, reading me all too well. "You okay, Honey?"

I took a sip and hummed from the delightful notes of vanilla and bergamot.

"Just a little warm now," I admitted with a shrug.

It wasn't surprising, given the envelope stamped with the OMA logo that Eli had given me the other day. It arrived alongside my questionnaire, and while my men had immediately opened and devoured the answers to the million-and-one questions, they'd been respectful of my private medical information.

That alone spoke volumes about what good men they were. An Omega's pack was granted complete autonomy over her, but they respected me enough to treat me as an equal. They honored boundaries I hadn't even set, yet felt intimately personal and important.

The unopened letter had contained my lab results from the dreadful physical at the OMA, and while most of the results were normal, I'd been shocked to see my hormonal levels trending toward yet another heat cycle.

Normally, Omegas went into heat once or twice a year. This would be my third one in less than two months' time.

Of course, the first one was forced. I could attribute the second to finding my mates. But the third?

Eli believed it all related back to the dose of Anoravel Anton gave me. The natural cadence of my cycle had been

disrupted, and being around my scent matches increased the hormonal reaction in my body.

It explained my tiredness, the sore boobs, the flashes of heat, and the occasional nausea, though. My hormones were raging, and if my symptoms were any indication, my heat would hit within the next few weeks.

Ready or not, here comes another sex marathon.

The thought brought back memories of my last heat and all the incredibly naughty things I'd done with my mates. I couldn't lie. Going through heat again certainly held some appeal, but I felt bad they'd have to give up their lives yet again. Eli and Knox could be out of jobs soon, given how much leave they'd had to take. Luckily, my other mates ran their own businesses, which allowed for more flexibility, but I was sure being gone for long periods strained things.

Guilt nibbled at the edges of my excitement, sending me into a confused headspace.

Somehow, Leo easily read my shifting mood.

"C'mere," he purred, taking my hand and pulling me off my seat.

"What's going on?" I asked as he tugged me through the kitchen, fully admitting to being lost in my own little world.

The others were already in the living room, debating another spot to hang my paintings. Leo led me to the couch and before long, we'd snuggled up together with the fireplace burning and a family comedy show playing on TV.

"Seemed like you needed some Beta cuddles."

I nestled deeper into his side, breathing in his apple pie scent and enjoying the softness of the throw.

"I always need snuggles from my sexy Beta."

"Careful. You keep inflating his ego like that and he'll be dragging you off to the nest again." Hades winked at me, sending the butterflies alight in my stomach.

My scent spiked, and Leo chuckled. “Somehow, I don’t think she’d mind.” Then to me, “Your scent is all over the place today. You need some attention, Honey?” His hand landed on my leg, moving in teasing strokes up and down my upper thigh. Close and yet so very far from where I needed him. “I could help distract you from whatever is bothering you and ease the ache your scent betrayed all at the same time.”

“I like the sound of that,” Thane growled lightly, stealing the spot on my other side. His arm sprawled across the back of the couch behind my shoulders, his fingers playing with the ends of my hair. “These guys don’t need my help to hang stuff up.”

A ticklish caress against the side of my neck had me squirming from their attention. Another wave of my perfume lifted into the air and I blushed.

“You’re both dangerous. You’re going to bring my heat on faster.” I bit my lip, chewing on the abused flesh.

Growing somber, Thane adjusted in his seat so he could see me better. “Is that what you’re worried about?”

“You’ve all given up so much time for me... I don’t want to be the reason someone loses their job or things with your restaurant or the gym or the bar go south because of your absences.”

Jamison sauntered over, the click of his shoes preceding his hand collaring my throat and tipping my chin up. My head rested against the back of the couch as I stared up at him. His face was upside down as he loomed over me, but it was easy to see the stern slant of his brows.

“Little Omega, these aren’t things to worry about. It’s why we have business managers and faithful employees. Our businesses run with or without us. You’re our priority. You don’t need to feel bad about going back into heat. In fact, I’ve been hoping you would.”

Shock ebbed through me. “You have?”

The sapphire color of his eyes darkened. “We want to bite you, Sweetness, and claim you as ours. But none of us want

you in pain for the event that will bond us as your pack.”

“We want you deep in your heat fever and blissed out on our knots before we bite you, Darling,” Thane rumbled seductively, those wicked fingers grazing the sensitive spot at the crux of my neck and shoulder where one of them would bite me someday soon. “You won’t even feel the sting of pain, just the soul-deep satisfaction of our bond snapping into place.”

“You want that, don’t you?” Leo hummed, the sonorous sound lulling me deeper into their fantasy.

“Yes. Of course, I do.”

“Then don’t worry about going back into heat.” Jamison caressed my cheek. “It’s a blessing that it’s happening again so soon. We want to claim you, Demi, and as long as we have your permission, we’re going to bond you to us as soon as the fever strikes.”

“You don’t even need to ask. I’m yours already, with or without the claiming bites. You have me—heart, mind, body, and soul.”

“Just as you have us,” Jamison all but purred.

Leaning down, he gave me an upside-down kiss, his mouth slanting possessively over my own. I nipped his bottom lip, reveling in the savageness of his moan.

I was about to tempt him into taking me to my nest along with the others when the chime of the news interrupted the show we were barely watching, effectively drawing our full attention to the TV.

There, in high definition, was Anton walking out of the jail in a crisp, perfectly tailored suit with Huck and Reed flanking him. The camera angle shifted to a news anchor talking about their immediate release and wrongful arrests.

“Wait—” I shook my head, living in an alternate reality. “They had evidence. W-what happened to all the proof of his guilt?”

The news anchor's monolithic voice continued while my mind spun.

This can't be happening...

"The fuck!" Hades growled from behind me just before something breakable crashed into the wall.

Whatever he'd thrown shattered, but I didn't fault him for the outburst because I felt the same way. My muscles froze with shock and indignation, holding back the fit of anger that threatened to swallow me whole. The world slowed, the droning tone of the news anchor fading away until all I heard was my heartbeat.

Thump, thump. Thump, thump. Thump, thump.

"Demi. Darling," Thane slid off the couch and crouched in front of me, gripping my biceps gently and begging me to look his way, but I couldn't take my eyes off the screen. They were glued there, watching my worst nightmare play out before my eyes.

The footage flashed again, and this time the air stalled in my lungs. An older, distinguished man with salt and pepper hair wearing a slate grey suit had his wrists cuffed behind his back. He ducked his head, never once looking directly at the flashing cameras going off in every direction. Focus on his shiny black shoes, he let the officers lead him into the station without a single uttered word of his innocence or a plea for help.

I didn't need to see his face to know who they'd taken into custody in Pack Silver's stead. I knew that profile. The slant of the nose. The familiar cheekbones. It was my father, Roger Fenway.

The man was guilty of crimes of his own that I wanted to see him atone for, but this wasn't the way it was supposed to happen. Anton, Huck, and Reed deserved to be behind bars for their sins, and now they were... they were...

My ears rang with a hoarse keen, I belatedly realized resounded from my throat. Sorrow coated the desolate notes, a song of hopelessness and despair.

Immediately rounding the couch, Jamison lifted me into his arms. With an arm under my knees and another behind my back, he cradled me close and headed for the stairs, carrying me to our nest and settling me in the center. My other mates surrounded me on all sides and their purrs blazed to life, cocooning me in comfort.

I sank into it, squeezing my eyes shut against the tears, but try as I might to hold on to my hope, it slipped through my fingers like grains of sand.

Nothing would fix this. This changed everything.

twenty-nine



KNOX

“RECITE IT BACK TO ME,” I prompted Demi, who looked too fucking cute with her winter jacket zipped up past her chin, covering her bow-shaped lips.

The chill in the air had turned the tip of her nose an endearing shade of pink and her cheeks had more color in them than I’d seen in days. Not hard to do since she’d spent nearly the last week curled up in her nest, her scent giving away how fucking terrified she was.

“Treat every firearm as if it’s loaded,” she recited, voice muffled behind the thick material of her coat.

“Good. Next rule?”

“Always be aware of where your muzzle is pointed.” She rubbed her hands together to keep her fingers warm.

I nodded my approval, and she rattled off the third rule without my prompting while I paced in front of her like a drill sergeant, hands clasped behind my back, combat boots kicking up dust along the outdoor gun range at the back of our property.

“Keep your finger off the trigger until you’re ready to shoot.”

“Good girl,” I praised, and a genuine smile lit up her entire expression. “Two more.”

“Don’t aim at anything you’re not willing to destroy, and last, know your target and what’s behind it.”

One corner of my mouth hitched up as I drew to a stop in front of her. “You’re a quick learner.”

She tugged down the edge of her jacket, exposing her grin. “I have a good teacher.”

It was the flirtiest thing she’d said to me in days, and I drank it in like a man dying of thirst.

This was exactly what we both needed. Time out of the house. *Together.*

But more importantly, she needed to feel in control again.

I wanted to help her take back her power.

Gripping her hand, I led her over to the pavilion, showing her the variety of guns I'd brought with me from my personal arsenal. There were several more expensive options, but I picked up the Hi-Point 9mm.

"This may not be the fanciest option, nor the most attractive, but this gun is nearly indestructible and will stand up to all types of abuse."

"You think I'm going to abuse it?" She arched her eyebrow, sending me a skeptical look.

"No, but it's better to have a weapon that can be chucked, dropped, run over, or buried in the sand and still fire when you get it back. Reliability is key. Besides, this one has an external safety."

Demi bit her lip, gazing at the black handgun I held. "And that means..." she hedged.

I chuckled and showed her the switch. "As long as this is engaged, it won't fire. I find it's an important feature if you want to keep your sidearm loaded and chambered. In a life or death situation, not having to chamber a round can save you critical seconds."

She hummed her assent as if she understood what I was talking about, though two little lines formed between her brows as she stared at the weapon like it might bite her at any moment. "Function is certainly more important than style."

I grinned. "This is a 9mm, which means it takes one of the most common types of ammo. That'll benefit you. If you ever run out, you can just pilfer someone else's."

"Right, right." She nodded, pursing her lips.

"Does it help if I tell you it comes in sparkly pink or pink and purple camo?"

Her eyes lit up. “I do like pretty things.”

This time, I outright laughed. “I know you do, Sunshine. We can get you a pretty version. But for today, we’ll practice using this one.” Little did she know I’d already bought her a present, but that was a surprise for later.

I spent the next half hour showing her all the moving parts, teaching her how to drop the magazine, check if the gun was loaded, and how to take it apart and put it all back together again. Walking through it a dozen times helped set her mind at ease until her shoulders relaxed and her movements became more fluid. I placed the unloaded gun in her hands and studied her as she ran through the motions, gently instructing her along the way.

When I felt like she had a handle on it, I stepped up to her back and wrapped myself around her petite frame. Her scent blanketed me like the warmth of a fire on a cold, blustery day. Smooth, sweet honey and sugared berries that made my mouth water and my cock twitch to life.

I took a moment to breathe her in before I made myself focus past the allure of her signature and the temptation of her soft body against mine.

My arm came alongside hers and I covered her hand with my larger one.

“Never fire until you’re absolutely ready,” I murmured against her ear.

Focusing past her delicious curves was difficult, but I walked her through how to chamber a round, flick off the safety and take aim, making sure she kept her finger firmly on the outside of the trigger guard. I never let her fire.

Over and over again, she practiced until I felt confident in her abilities.

Reluctantly stepping back, I showed her how to take the proper stance. I smiled and motioned toward the target set up a short distance away. It was better to start close and work toward targets farther downrange.

“I think you’re ready.”

Demi's eyes widened. "To actually shoot something?"

"It's a paper target, Sunshine, and we're alone out here. As long as you don't point the barrel in my direction, there's nothing here you can hurt," I promised. "We've been making enough noise that there aren't any critters around, either. It's perfectly safe."

"You really think I'm ready?" Her bottom lip was between her teeth in her telltale sign of worry. It was a tic of hers, and I wanted to brush my thumb down the center to free it.

"We're just working on the basics, and you've mastered everything I've taught you so far," I murmured, pride and admiration warming my deep timbre. "It's time to see how your aim is."

Setting the safety, Demi moved toward the pavilion where I taught her how to load the magazine. She put on a pair of hot pink earmuffs I bought to shield her ears and save her hearing, and then took her spot.

Slowly blowing out a deep breath, she focused on her stance, then lifted her arms, the gun an extension of her hands. Flipping off the safety, she took aim, sighting down the barrel with a slight tilt of her head. The light breeze whipped at the braid she'd woven her hair into this morning. Staying utterly silent so as not to distract her, I drank in the sight of her. Seeing her like this, powerful, with a weapon in her hand, was sexy as hell.

Her finger squeezed the trigger, and the shot fired, piercing through the bottom of the paper.

Demi gasped, blinking rapidly at the target.

"I did it," she breathed, slowly, engaging the safety and lowering the gun. Even in her excitement, she kept a level head about the kind of power she wielded, but the bright, shining smile she sent my way showed exactly how happy she was.

"You did it, Sunshine," I purred. "I knew you'd be a natural at this."

Demi dismissed my praise all too easily. “I wouldn’t say that. This is harder than it looks on TV, and I barely grazed the target, but it was so damn *fun*.”

“Sunshine, you hit the target on the first shot. Do you know how rare that is? I know rookies who couldn’t do that.” She blushed and tried to wave off the compliment, but I wouldn’t let her. “You’re the most selfless woman I know, and I understand that it makes you uncomfortable when all the focus, all the *praise*, is on you. But you should own your accomplishments. Believe in yourself as much as I believe in you.”

Her forest green eyes went soft. “I promise I’ll try.”

“Good,” I rasped. “Because you’re an incredible woman, and I’m never going to stop telling you as much. Besides, I know the Omega side of you secretly likes it.” I smirked as she dipped her head, embarrassed to admit to the primal need.

“I do,” she murmured. “But it doesn’t make it any easier to accept compliments.” Shrugging sheepishly, she admitted, “I’m trying, but it’s still new to me.”

“I wish that weren’t the case, but I’m happy to spend the rest of my life telling you how amazing you are and building up your confidence until you can see what I see. An incredibly strong Omega. A survivor. A fighter.” I nodded toward the paper with one perfectly round bullet hole scorched through it. Jutting my chin downrange, I said, “Why don’t you shoot again? You’ve got seven more rounds before you have to reload. Remember to count your shots, so you always know how many rounds you have left.”

We spent the rest of the afternoon shooting together, and she grew more confident by the hour. Her first sheet was riddled with randomly placed holes, but her second and third showed tighter groupings, revealing how rapidly she’d improved.

Taking off her earmuffs, she beamed at the paper, pride radiating from her as if it were one of the beautiful masterpieces she’d painted.

“I can’t believe I did that,” she breathed, still in shock. “Look! This one was even close to the center.” She stuck her finger through the hole to the right of the bullseye.

“Like I said, you’re a natural.” Guns stashed away safely, I settled my hands on her hips and pulled her close. “It’s a fuckin’ relief to know that you can shoot and have decent aim. I needed to know you could protect yourself…” My voice trailed off, going jagged around the edges.

Fucking Pack Silver. Just the notion that she could be in danger made every muscle in my body draw taut. Not much terrified me, but the thought of my mate in the crosshairs of such a vindictive asshole and his fucked up friends sent a dagger of ice straight through my chest.

My fingers tightened on her waist, and I dragged her closer, enfolding her in my arms.

Every protective instinct I had fired off like a shot. It took everything in me not to toss Demi over my shoulder and lock her away in a tower like a coveted princess. I’d be the damn dragon that guarded her.

Or worse, I’d seriously debated finding a way to microchip her so I could always find her if, by some cruel twist of fate, her old pack got their grimy hands on her again. The thought was unfathomable—and I wasn’t talking about the microchip.

Luckily, I realized how insane those urges made me sound, and I pushed the Alpha instincts down to levels she would consider more acceptable. Besides, I still planned to convince her to let me put bluetooth trackers in the soles of her shoes.

Demi was a fighter. She was smart, strong, and now capable of protecting herself. The pack and I had agreed we would always be her first line of defense, but if she ever found herself in a precarious situation without us around, we wanted her equipped with all the necessary skills needed to fight back.

Now that I knew she could shoot, I could breathe a little easier.

“I got you something,” I rasped, swallowing down the gravelly tone of my Alpha.

My mate lifted her chin, those green eyes sparkling up at me with surprise and pleasure. “A present?” Eagerness had her practically bouncing on her toes.

Fuck, she’s cute.

“Yeah, Sunshine. A present. You want it?”

With her arms around my waist, she squeezed me tight. “In what world would I ever say no to that question?”

“So that’s a...”

Her eyes rolled, and she smirked. “Yes, please.”

A rumble sprung to life in my chest at those two little words. I wanted to hear her asking so nicely for another, far more *carnal* kind of pleasure. For now, I reluctantly detached myself from her and reached under the table for the charcoal-colored case with a red bow placed dead center.

Demi practically glowed with delight. “Is this what I think it is?” She clapped her hands together in excitement, and I tucked my own deep into my jeans pockets to keep from reaching for her all over again. The next time I touched her, I knew I wouldn’t want to stop, and I needed to see the look on her face when she opened the case.

I tilted my head toward the present. “Open it and find out.”

Her squeal made me laugh as she undid the latch and peeked inside. A brand-new gun sat nestled in cushioned foam. “It’s the pink and purple camo!”

“Do you like it? I can exchange it for the sparkly version, if you’d rather.”

“Are you kidding me? It’s gorgeous. You can’t have it back.” Picking it up, she hugged the unloaded sidearm to her chest like I’d given her a fluffy stuffed bear instead of nearly seven inches of cold, hard weaponry. Tucking it back into the case, she crossed to me and slid her hands up my chest. “Thank you for teaching me to shoot. I admit, between Hades training me in self-defense and you showing me how to use a gun, I feel safer.”

I tugged her into my body, holding her against me. “Good, because I’ve been going out of my mind knowing you’re in danger.” Yeah. That was an understatement, but I didn’t elaborate. “Teaching you to shoot was as much for my sanity as it was to help you feel powerful and in control of your life again. I got you a few harnesses so you can conceal carry. I want you to keep your gun on you, understand?”

Her nose wrinkled. “Even in the house?”

“Can never be too careful. You’re too damn important to me.” Clenching my jaw, I ran a gentle thumb across the upper curve of her cheek. “You’re my Omega. I can’t live without you, Sunshine.”

She was my light, my sole purpose for living. Before her, I’d been going through the motions. Now, my life had meaning—*her*.

Expression soft, she pushed up on tiptoe. I bent, meeting her halfway, and took her lips in a hungry kiss.

Her moan instantly fractured the control I’d been struggling to maintain all fucking day. Lifting her off her feet, I spun her around and pressed her against the post of the pavilion, ravaging her mouth.

Legs wrapping around my waist, her hands fisted in my hair, and she returned my hunger with a ravenous one of her own.

Those lithe fingers of hers tightened, and I felt the tug *everywhere*. The intoxicating mix of pleasure and pain nearly sent me into rut. Pinning her to the post with my hips, I cupped her cheeks in calloused palms and slanted my mouth over hers, deepening the kiss, taking everything she was offering and more.

Her smooth, velvety skin suddenly blazed with warmth, telling me her heat was flaring. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I registered the shift in her body temperature for what it was—a pre-heat flare.

I groaned as her perfume flooded the air. “Tell me to stop.”

“Don’t stop,” she panted, rocking against me.

My cock throbbed.

“*Fuck.*” The growl vibrated outward. This woman would be the death of me, but I couldn’t deny her. I ground against her, giving her friction where she needed it most.

“*Yesss.*”

Gripping her ass, I spun swiftly and sat her on the picnic table, freeing my hands to tear at her clothes, my need riding me too hard to go slow.

Just as frantically, she pushed the jacket off my shoulders and rucked my shirt upward. I paused just long enough to rip it free while she fumbled with the fastening of my pants, breathy little whimpers escaping with every heave of her chest.

Her blasted coat was in the way, but my hands were fucking shaking from the wild, untamed force of my desire for my mate. Once again, that knowing in the back of my mind recognized the signs of rut. I was so damn close to tipping over the edge. Gritting my teeth, I scrambled for my self control, calming the tremor in my hands enough to unzip her jacket and slid it off her arms.

Her shirt was next. I pushed it above her breasts and tugged the edge of her bra down until I could wrap my lips around one of her pert nipples, unwilling to undress her completely in this cold, heat flare or not.

I was trying to protect her, not get her sick.

At Demi’s first moan, my mind went blank, all my thoughts falling away except for the overwhelming need to please my Omega. Back bowing, she gasped as I lavished attention to first one breast, then the other until she was shaking and tugging at me urgently.

“Oh gods! Please, please, please...” It was a breathy litany falling from her lips, one I couldn’t—*wouldn’t*—refuse.

My cock ached as I tugged her jeans and panties down to her ankles, leaving them bunched around her boots. The sharp zip of my own jeans opening was the only noise other than the rustling of golden fall leaves and our mixing breath. Fumbling

for my discarded jacket and shirt, I laid it out on the table behind her, creating a soft surface for her to lie against.

Seeing her there, splayed before me, her lips swollen and pink, her nipples tight little buds, slick already coating her pretty pussy, had my cock weeping. Slowly, torturously, I stroked myself from root to tip.

Her eyes darkened, and that talented tongue slipped out to lick across her lips.

Godsdamn. Everything she does is tempting as hell.

“If you’re just going to stand there and watch me...” She bit her lip again, but this time, it was a purely teasing expression. Her hand slid seductively between the valley of her breasts and down the soft curve of her stomach. I let her graze her fingers over her clit, stroking myself the whole damn time.

“Does that feel good, Sunshine?” I purred. Watching Demi get herself off was hot as fuck, but I’d only let it go so far.

Her pussy *belonged* to me.

And so did her orgasms.

“Mmhmm,” she hummed, her lips parting as she teased herself.

Gripping her wrist, I slowed her motion and pulled her hand away from her core, dipping down to suck her glistening fingers into my mouth. Her taste burst across my tongue—honey and summer jam.

“I need... I need...” Demi stammered as I popped her free, but refused to release her wrist so she could go back to pleasuring herself. Instead, I gathered the other and pinned them both above her head in one hand.

“I know what you need, Sunshine,” I said lowly, the deep rumble a promise that I’d give her everything she wanted.

Making good on that vow, I lifted her bound legs and propped them on my shoulder.

A breath whooshed from her lungs as she realized my intent. I grazed the head of my cock against her entrance, using her slick to coat myself.

“Please,” she begged.

That one word tested my restraint, and the careful control I’d fought for bowed like a reed in the wind.

Lining myself up, I pushed in slowly, grateful I had enough wherewithal left to be gentle with her. Both of us groaned as I sank deep, her body stretching to accommodate.

“Fuck, you’re tight,” I rasped, trying to keep from shooting off like a teenage Alpha experiencing his first rut.

I rocked back and forth, giving her one inch at a time, gritting my teeth with the effort to go slow until I was finally, *blissfully*, seated fully inside her. My knot, already beginning to swell, stretched her entrance, but I wasn’t ready to lock together yet.

I stilled, letting her feel all of me. Her pussy fluttered over my cock, her scent billowing into the breeze, and I swore being buried inside my Omega felt like *home*.

I drank in the sight of her, splayed out before me like the greatest gift, her mossy green gaze bright with desire. For *me*.

Gods. That’d never stop blowing my mind.

Withdrawing just as slowly as I’d claimed her, I let her feel every ridge and vein, then plunged deep once more, shaking her petite body.

Again and again, faster and faster, I took her. I wrapped my hand around her legs, keeping her locked in place. I released her wrists and braced my palm on the table above her shoulder as I pistoned my hips.

“*Ho-ly fuck!*” she cried, clawing at my thighs, the only thing she could reach. And not once did I look away, memorizing the pleasure playing across her delicate features.

Her head tipped back into the wooden tabletop, her lips parting as she moaned and keened her pleasure. It echoed off

the trees as sharp and piercing as a gunshot. I fucking loved that I made her scream.

Her walls spasmed, and she inhaled sharply, brows tenting as her pleasure wound tight. And then she was there, falling apart beneath me. She squeezed my cock with the waves of her release. My cock throbbed, pleasure tingling down my spine.

“That’s it, Sunshine. Shatter for me!”

Incoherent cries fell from her lips, but I didn’t once slow.

I tried to hold back, to fuck her through her orgasm, but my own rose and quickly pulled me under. One, two, three more thrusts, and then I slammed deep, filling her with my knot. It swelled, locking us together, each euphoric tug setting off a new set of fireworks in us both as she writhed against me.

A choked growl reverberated from my throat as I came apart, a shudder rolling through me as I filled her.

The release was so intense, I had to suck in air afterward, little dots swimming before my eyes from all the blood that had rushed south.

I caught myself on my arm so as not to crush her, gazing down at her with emotion tightening in my chest.

Her eyes were hazy with pleasure, her cheeks flushed, her body languid. I studied every beautiful one of her features, committing them to memory, so I’d always remember this moment. We shared a smile, and I kissed her nose, her eyelids, then her mouth.

It was a whisper of a graze, but it was just as claiming as our earlier fevered kisses. “Mine,” I growled. “My Sunshine.”

“My Alpha,” she sang, her voice a beautiful feminine lilt.

I groaned from hearing her address my designation.

thirty



DEMI

IT HAD TAKEN me three days to come up with a plan, but watching Hades pace, I got the distinct impression that my men didn't like it. Sucking in my cheeks, I held back a snort at the understatement.

"You can't be serious." Hades shoved a tattooed hand through his brown hair. "There's no fuckin' way we're going to let you do this."

"It might be the only way," Eli chimed in from where he leaned against the wall, watching each of us, cataloging everyone's reactions. "Logically, it makes sense."

"Demi is our *Omega*," Knox growled, eyebrows slashing downward. "We're not putting her directly in the path of danger."

I sighed in exasperation. "Don't you see? I already am. We're bidding our time until my old pack makes a move. The only reason they haven't is because of how scrupulous the media has been." The constant news coverage of my father's case, Anton's political career, and Pack Silver's crusade to clear their names had kept them too busy to pursue me for revenge.

But I wouldn't escape their wrath for long.

Vengeance over their ruined auction and my role in their arrests was inevitable, and I'd spent too many sleepless nights envisioning the fallout. I couldn't—*wouldn't*—sit around and wait for them to make a move that could get me or one of my men killed. I'd barely survived the first time I thought I lost them. There was no way in hell I'd do that again.

It was riskier to sit around and wait, and I told the six overprotective men surrounding me exactly that.

My hands twisted the hem of my t-shirt as I pleaded with them to understand where I was coming from. It had taken me

a long time to be okay with even suggesting something so reckless, but I was desperate.

“I don’t see another way,” I finished, squaring my shoulders and projecting more confidence in my plan than I truly felt.

Inside, I shook. What I suggested was borderline insane, and if I pulled it off, there’d be a shadow on my soul that may never wash clean. But the sacrifice would be worth it if it saved my pack.

My future with these incredible men was balanced on a knife’s edge. Anton, Huck, and Reed scared me, but losing my pack? That *terrified* me.

“Please let me do this,” I begged. “Wearing your marks proudly is a dream that feels so close, yet so far away. How can I accept all of you as my mates and let you mark me when I don’t know if we’ll ever have the future we’ve promised each other?”

I wanted the picture Thane had painted of love, laughter, and a life full of little versions of ourselves running around someday. It was beautiful, but it was also a dream that could just as easily fade away as come true.

“I don’t want to spend my life sequestered away, living in fear. I want to love you out loud. Is it too much to ask to be free to walk down the street, holding hands? Or to be able to go out to eat without worrying news of us will get back to the sadistic assholes who ruined my life? Living life always looking over your shoulder isn’t living at all. This is the only way. Let me fight for our future the same way you’ve all fought to keep me safe.”

Leo moved in front of me and cupped my face between gentle palms. “Of course, it’s not too much to ask. Don’t you think we want those things too?”

I wrapped my arms around his waist and hugged myself to him until there was no space separating us. “I know you do. That’s why this plan makes sense.”

“It also greatly increases the likelihood that something will happen to you.” His thumbs stroked over the arches of my cheeks. “Do you really expect us to live with ourselves if something goes wrong and you end up hurt?”

“Or *worse*,” Hades grunted.

“You know I don’t want Demi in danger any more than the rest of you,” Eli reasoned. “But we’ll be right there with her the whole time. Statistically speaking, this really is our best choice.”

“I don’t know.” Uncertainty wavered in Thane’s cerulean gaze. He looked... disheveled. Like he’d continuously run his hands through his hair since we started this conversation. “On one hand, I agree with our Omega. Sitting around, waiting for the other shoe to drop is no way to live our lives. On the other, we can protect you within these four walls. Maybe with enough time, Pack Silver will move on and all this will become water under the bridge?”

“I think we all know Demi isn’t a woman you can easily forget.” Hades’ lips twisted when he realized his point gave me an edge, and it wasn’t in the direction he wanted me to go.

I turned in Leo’s arms, resting my back against his chest, and eyed the one man in the room who’d been eerily silent. “Jamison?”

My tall, dark, handsome Alpha heaved a heavy sigh that spoke of his reluctance before he’d uttered a single word.

“I don’t relish the idea of Pack Silver so much as laying eyes on you again,” Jamison said in a voice so low, so deadly, goosebumps rose along my skin. After a long, weighted beat, he relented, “But this isn’t my choice.”

I blanched. “You’re our leader.”

“And you’re our center.”

I blinked. Surely I couldn’t be understanding him correctly. Was he really... putting this decision in *my* hands?

He strode closer, each thud of his shoes echoing the beats of my heart. Towering above me, he traced his fingers over my

forehead, down my cheek, and along my throat, brushing back my hair and wrapping his hand around the nape of my neck. It was a move that was both possessive and tender.

My chin tipped upward, and the breath stalled in my lungs at the emotion swirling in the sapphiric depths of his gaze.

Gods, this man was beautiful. Powerful and strong. I leaned into that strength, hoping to siphon some to shore up my reserves.

“You’re also my whole heart, Demi Leigh. I love you. Enough to realize when I’m being an overbearing, greedy Alpha-hole. Do I want to yield to my caveman instincts and lock you away where I can keep you safe and protected? Yes. But I know I’d lose your respect if I dared to try that tactic.”

I softened, though I should probably have been arching an eyebrow at him.

“I love you too,” I promised, “but you’d be right.”

“I heard you when you said you wanted to be an active participant in your own life. No matter what you choose, the pack and I will stand beside you.” His gaze flicked to the other men in the room, who, somewhat begrudgingly, nodded their assent.

Attention settling back on me with stomach-fluttering intensity, he leaned down and slanted a slow, luxurious, toe-curling kiss over my mouth. His tongue slid between my lips and glided against mine in an erotic dance, as though we had all the time in the world to enjoy each other. Finishing it with a nip of my bottom lip and one last graze across the corner of my mouth, he pulled back just enough to stare down at me as though he were memorizing the way I looked at that very moment.

“This decision is yours.”

thirty-one



DEMI

I STEPPED through the entrance into the grand ballroom and barely stopped my jaw from unhinging at the sight of the opulence before me. Crystals dripped from the chandeliers high above, casting pearlescent light down on the colorful crowd below.

The partygoers were dressed in a variety of colors and fine fabrics. Everywhere I looked, there were crisp tuxedos, dresses draping to the floor, and diamonds sparkling on elegant necks in clear displays of wealth.

They're like peacocks strutting around, flashing their pretty feathers.

I smoothed my clammy hands down the sleek lines of my emerald dress, knowing I needed to blend in and yet feeling like the lone beige crayon in a box full of atomic tangerine, jazzberry jam, and tickle me pink.

An ill sense of detachment flooded my senses.

I'd been raised in these same circles, and yet I'd never felt like more of an outsider.

This wasn't my life anymore—if it ever had been.

Yes, my pack had money. We'd always be comfortable, and I'd want for nothing. But my mates didn't flaunt their wealth as a status symbol. Hell, even Jamison, who held large shares of his family's multi-million dollar companies, owned his own bar and often worked behind the counter.

It was one of the many things that made Pack Maverick different from the kinds of people I'd known my whole life. I'd never appreciated those differences more than I did now, standing in this ballroom, surrounded by pompous behavior and unhappiness masked behind contrived smiles and saccharine greetings.

The room and the patrons may be beautiful, but an inky feeling crawled over my skin. This was the last place I wanted to be.

This was your idea, remember? Get through tonight and you'll never have to be around these people again.

Blowing out a breath, I used my vantage point at the top of the steps and surveyed the room at large, looking for my target.

"You doing okay, Sunshine?" Knox's voice in my ear almost startled me, but I schooled my features at the last moment, remembering the nearly microscopic earpiece he'd given me. My hair concealed it, tumbling in loose curls past my shoulders.

"Mmhm," I hummed to myself, hoping he could hear me. The din of the room was at a low roar, but I didn't want to chance talking out loud and drawing unwanted attention.

My fingers traced over the heart-shaped pendant hanging off the delicate chain clasped around my neck. A tracker lay inside. Knox's brilliant idea; one that helped him feel more in control of such a reckless situation. He could follow my movements through the ballroom, and knowing he'd be able to find me if something went awry helped ease some of the anxiety thrumming through me.

The overwhelming scent of 'Alpha' flooded the room, mixing with the less potent aroma of Betas and the chemical tang of scent blockers the few Omegas in attendance wore. The cacophony of the blend made my nose ache.

Spotting my objective across the room, I slowly made my descent. By the time I reached the bottom step, I'd drawn the attention of nearly every Alpha in the nearby vicinity.

Trepidation skittered down my spine from the weight of their perusal, but everything was going according to plan. I needed their eyes on me and the low hush of their murmurs spreading like wildfire.

I needed Anton to know I was here.

A low growl sounded in my ear as I moved deeper into the room, the sea of Alphas and Betas parting for me as I passed them by. A stir of low rumbles flowed in my wake, and I caught slivers of hushed conversations.

“A lone Omega?”

“Where are her chaperones?”

“She doesn’t appear to have claiming bites.”

“I cannot believe we agreed to this,” Hades’ low, angry voice filled my head.

Truthfully, I couldn’t either. We’d argued over my plan these past two weeks while we put all the moving pieces in place, but though they’d all agreed this was our best shot at ending the situation with Anton, when push came to shove, I’d half expected them to forbid me from going through with it.

Entering a room full of Alphas without a chaperone could classify me as being ‘too stupid to live,’ but I preferred to think of this as a strategic move. Dressed in the emerald gown I’d chosen during my shopping trip with Eli, my neck and shoulders were bare, revealing unmarked skin. I felt beautiful. And with my new gun strapped to my thigh, accessible through the slit halfway up my leg, I felt stunningly badass.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous. Everyone is leering at you.” A possessive growl ripped through my mind. *“Remind me again why this was our best option, Sweetness, because I’m about to pull you out of here and go with my first instinct to lock you away.”* Jamison sounded just as unhappy as Hades, but I couldn’t help the smile that curved my lips.

Despite his brutish nature, it was sweet, really.

I gazed across the room to where I knew he would be, grateful when the crowd shifted and I caught a glimpse of him through the dense masses.

Jamison stood transfixed, his sapphire eyes locked on mine for the briefest moment. Knowing he was here with me felt like a lifeline as I drowned in a churning sea.

Gods, he's beautiful. He cut a stunning figure. Tall, with muscles the fine lines of his dark black tux couldn't hide. He was all broad shoulders and strong hands, which currently gripped a glimmering glass full of amber liquid. Whiskey, just like his scent. I could almost smell him from here—the warm bite of liquor, a bonfire on a cool autumn night, the crunch of colorful leaves on a forest path. His blend of spice and musk had become as familiar to me as my own signature, which was currently heavily masked by scent blockers.

It took every particle of my being to stay rooted to my spot when all I wanted to do was cross to him and let him envelop me in the safety of his arms.

His fingers tensed on his tumbler while his other hand curled into a fist. His jaw clenched, the muscles jumping, and I knew he wanted to cross to where I stood. Instead, he forced himself to relax and smoothed a palm over his hair.

Slicked back on the sides, the short curls on top were styled into a neat riot. His beard, trimmed and groomed, created dark lines against bronzed skin just as sharp as the contrast of his black jacket lying over the crisp white button-down. He'd undone the top button, revealing his muscled chest dusted with hair. I nearly swallowed my tongue.

Jamison looked like a dark god, and I pressed my thighs together to ease the growing ache. Heat flushed through me, and I nearly fanned myself.

Not now. I willed the reaction down, running through all the reasons a pre-heat flare would be inconvenient at the moment. But later?

I was determined to get all of my men to dress up and take me out once this was over. A real date. One where they whisked me off to my nest afterward...

Damn, is it hot in here, or is it just me? I prayed for the former.

Dark brows lowered as Jamison studied me across the expanse, and I read his pure desire to get me out of this lion's den.

I shook my head lightly, hoping he'd understand my signal to stick to the plan.

Snatching a drink off the tray of a passing server, I almost gasped when the man shot me a wink.

Those familiar cerulean eyes, the styled, golden hair, the shadow of a beard on his strong, angled jaw, and his honed body hidden by a server uniform—a take on a tuxedo, complete with tails. *Thane*.

He was there and gone before I could fully react, which was probably a good thing. The tease of his scent hit me like a bolt of lightning. My mouth watered at the decadent hint of chocolate and caramel that lingered as he slid gracefully through the crowd, serving tray held high.

Another wave of heat washed over me, so potent it left me dizzy for a moment.

I took a sip of champagne, hoping it would cool me down and give me some liquid courage to see this night through. A buzz wouldn't hurt either.

Maybe it would distract me from how sexy my men looked all dressed up.

"Don't drink too much," Knox warned, voice rough and all business. *"You need to stay in full control of your faculties."*

Sighing, I set the glass on the next tray that passed, letting a random server carry it away.

What I wouldn't give for some water for my parched throat and warm cheeks.

My flush deepened when Knox rumbled, *"Good girl."*

I cleared my throat, glancing discreetly around the room, wondering where he hid that gave him such a good view of the room, and, more importantly, of me. Nothing obvious jumped out, but that was probably a good thing. If I couldn't see him, hopefully, Pack Silver couldn't either.

I forged my way through the crowd, marveling at the way the Alphas parted ways to let me pass.

Small cocktail tables were set up along the perimeter and a dance floor occupied the middle of the room. While there were only a handful of Omegas in attendance, several bejeweled Betas danced with partners to the string quartet playing to the right of the stage.

A number of security personnel stood along the walls, and one of them grinned at me when my gaze skirted over him. I knew those royal blue eyes and that messy blond hair. He lifted his wrist as though he were talking into some hidden comm device, and I caught sight of the snake tattoo peeking from the sleeve of his all-black suit.

That's Slade. The rest of Pack Jacobs was here too, scattered throughout the room in various capacities, offering me more protection and backup. The reminder that my men and I weren't alone steadied the rapid beat of my heart.

He looked like a member of the president's secret service, which made sense, given how highly Anton thought himself. He'd hired a private security firm after his stint in jail. Felix had somehow hacked their database and inserted Slade and Enoch as employees.

Thanks to the quiet man's expertise, it hadn't been as difficult as I'd originally thought to sneak ourselves in on the fringes of this event, posing as staff and benefactors.

Anton had no idea we were coming for him.

You've been nothing but a headache and a disappointment. It'll be so sweet to watch your downfall. The memory of his words poisoned the back of my mind as I wove through the crowd, trying to cut a path to the other side of the room where Anton, Huck, and Reed were mingling near the stage.

I needed to be front and center when he stepped to the dais and took the microphone.

"Demi!" a feminine voice called just loud enough to stop me in my tracks. I whirled and spotted a beautiful woman in a sleek black gown slipping through the crowd.

"Julia!" I breathed and threw my arms out a second before she was close enough, then wrapped her in a hug.

“Everything is set,” she murmured right against my ear, barely a whisper of sound.

Pulling away, she tucked a lock of dark hair back. She’d styled it to droop seductively over one eye, obscuring part of her face while the rest had been pinned into a fancy hairdo. With a full face of heavy makeup, I barely recognized her, which had been her goal.

Omegas naturally drew attention, but even I would have trouble reconciling the woman before me with the one from the auction if I didn’t know any better.

She motioned toward the four towering men who surreptitiously surrounded us like human shields. “Demi, these are my brothers, Dimitri, Giovanni, Tommas, and Marco.”

“You can call me Mars,” the last one smiled charmingly, the expression only slightly diminished by the scar cutting through the left side of his mouth.

Julia rolled her eyes. “They’re my chaperones this evening.”

Luckily, Pack Silver had no idea who Julia’s family was and wouldn’t suspect anything amiss about her brothers attending the gala, if they even spotted them amid the sea of guests.

I dipped slightly, giving them a polite greeting that didn’t involve me offering a hand or any form of physical touch. The growls in my ear were already on edge. It wouldn’t be smart to antagonize my mates more than this entire charade already did. I wouldn’t give them any reason to expose themselves prematurely.

“I recognize you from the beach house in Maine,” Dimitri said. “But it’s nice to officially meet you.”

“You as well.” I kept my tone distant, yet polite.

“Everyone is staring,” Julia muttered with a wrinkle of her nose.

“Good.” I nodded through my apprehension, refusing to look around to verify if what she said was true. I kept my

shoulders squared and my chin held high.

Don't let them see your fear.

This night couldn't be over soon enough.

"I should be used to it as an unmated Omega," Julia admitted, "but damn. All these Alphas are intense."

"We should never have agreed to let you come tonight," Dimitri scolded, looking mad at himself, but mostly at his sister for working her charm on him. I had a feeling as the baby in the family, she got her way more often than not.

"Pfft. Like I would have let you leave me behind when my friend needed me."

"Godsdamn," Tommas rasped, leaning closer and setting off another chain of growls in my earpiece. "I think your scent is bleeding through the blockers."

Blood drained from my face. "Is it bad?" I inhaled deeply, but all that did was overwhelm me with the scent of *Alpha*.

I had to admit, Julia's brothers smelled good. Not nearly as good as my men, but they weren't repulsive like half the other smells swirling in the room. I caught a mixture of sandalwood, honey, leather, and mint. I had no doubt if they registered with the OMA, an Omega would snatch them right up—mafia ties be damned.

"This isn't good..." Leo hedged.

"Who's closest?" Hades demanded.

"On it!"

"There is positively *nothing* bad about your scent," Tommas responded suavely. Gaze hooded, he dragged in another hit of it. "It's not too strong, but *fuck*—"

"Are you feeling alright?" Giovanni asked, concern knitting his brow. "You're looking a little—"

"Pink," Mars finished.

He was right. The warmth from earlier hadn't dissipated, and the blaze I felt in my cheeks had most likely left them

rosy. I pressed my hands against them, and my fingers felt cool in comparison.

“Gio! Mars! You’re not helping,” Julia snapped, smacking her brothers with the back of her hand, one after the other. “And I could say the same for you.” She whacked Tommas next.

Tommas rubbed his chest absently with a sheepish expression. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re stunning...”

“How would a woman take that the wrong way? It’s a compliment.” Dimitri arched an eyebrow at his brother.

“It doesn’t matter how she takes it because she’s *taken*, you nitwits,” Julia bit out. “Gods, I never should have agreed to let you be my chaperones tonight.”

Giovanni smirked. “I don’t see any bite marks.”

Snarls of rage tore through my ears, making me wince. “Julia’s right. I’m taken. And this isn’t helping anything.”

The surrounding men stiffened a moment before someone shoved their way through their tight circle

“Heathens. All of you.” A masculine voice grumbled before I was tapped on the shoulder.

I turned, already smiling from the scent that tickled my senses like a breath of fresh air—cloves and spices with the sweet edge of sugar.

“May I have this dance, my lady?” Eli offered with a gentlemanly dip of his head.

A grin curled my lips even as apprehension sent a shot of adrenaline through my veins.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” I murmured, trying to keep the exchange solely between the two of us. We weren’t supposed to be seen together.

“Trust me?”

“Always.” I slid my hand into his and let him lead me onto the dance floor and away from the four Italian men I’d

attracted by accident.

Strong arms closed around me, boxing me in as one hand held mine and the other wrapped securely around my back in a formal embrace. Before long, Eli and I were sweeping around the room, my dance training coming back to me with each step.

His arm tightened, drawing me closer. He kept his head tilted toward me and dipped downward, obscuring as much of his face as he possibly could. “You doing okay?”

“Honestly?”

His lips tipped in the corners. “Always,” he parroted my previous reply.

“I knew this would be difficult, but it’s way more nerve-racking than I expected.”

“Bloody hell, is that an understatement. The guys were about to lose their shit when Julia’s brothers descended.”

I huffed a laugh, some of my tension bleeding out of me. “You make them sound like vultures.”

“Every Alpha in this room has their eyes on you right now, Love. Wishing they were me. Wanting a taste of you.” His eyes darkened, and I licked my lips. Gaze falling to my mouth, he groaned quietly. “Don’t look at me like that,” he whispered harshly.

“Like what?”

An eyebrow rose toward his hairline. “Like you’re remembering what I did to you last night... with my tongue.”

Another burst of heat detonated inside me, and my chest heaved as my thoughts went fuzzy—doing exactly what he told me not to... *remembering*.

“Fuck, Demi.” His eyes grew comically wide. “You’re perfuming.”

He was right. My scent was growing thicker in the surrounding air.

Shit. This is bad. This is really bad.

I opened my mouth to say... what, I wasn't sure. But Knox's urgent voice cut through the melee of panic.

"Incoming!"

My fingers flexed in Eli's hand, and then I was pulling away. "You need to go," I ordered urgently.

Eli's gaze went wild. "I know I approved of this plan, but I can't just leave you here. Your skin is flushed and," he reached for me, feeling my rising temperature. "Bloody hell, are you going into *heat*?"

"No," I spat far too quickly to be believable. "I'm fine. My scent will only taunt them further."

"Demi—"

"Do you trust me?" I threw his words back at him.

He sucked in a breath, his eyes pinching in the corners. "Always," he breathed.

"Then go," I begged. "Let me finish this."

He backed up two steps, holding my gaze for a long heartbeat before he turned and strode away. My eyes stayed fixated on his retreating form, wishing I could run after him and beg him to whisk me away from here.

Goosebumps erupted down my arms and fear skittered along my spine as the scent of burnt chestnuts and charred oak reached me.

Gods, I wanted to vomit.

I sucked in a bolstering breath, but my heart refused to settle. It beat beneath my breastbone faster than the wings of a hummingbird.

"*You've got this, Sweetness,*" Jamison rasped.

Sweet Fates. I hoped he was right.

"Hello, *little mouse*. Isn't this a surprise?"

My stomach twisted at the sound of his voice, and I turned in time to catch the malicious glint shimmering in Huck's ruthless brown gaze.

It felt like all eyes were on us as he bent gallantly at the waist and captured my hand without asking permission. His fingers squeezed a little too tightly, and his smile bordered on a sneer.

“Seems I finally caught you. Surely you won’t deprive your old Alpha of a dance? It’s the least you can do after all the trouble you’ve caused.”

thirty-two



DEMI

WHERE ELI'S arms had been a welcomed embrace, Hucks' were a cage I couldn't escape. The heat that had been burning below my skin instantly cooled.

With the bar of his arm against my back, he tugged me too close and swept us around the elegant ballroom. To onlookers, we appeared to be a striking couple, my steps matching his broader ones as we danced in perfect harmony.

My skirt swished around my legs, flying behind me with every twirl. But his fingers squeezed mine enough to make me wince. His eyes narrowed into intense slits of anger as he stared down at me like a bear ready to rip me apart with his claws.

“What’s a timid, little, *unclaimed* Omega doing out without a chaperone?” Huck’s smooth timbre did nothing to soothe and everything to antagonize. “Did you think attending our soiree unattended would get our attention so you could beg us to take you back?”

My stomach tried to crawl up my throat at the idea that I’d *ever* beg them for anything—least of all to take me back. The idea was so asinine that I could’ve laughed. Or vomited. Either one, really. It was as equally nauseating as it was hysterical.

But he wasn’t all wrong. I *did* want their attention.

“You’re only partly incorrect. Well done.”

Huck growled, the sound a low, menacing warning. “Which part?”

I smiled sweetly, knowing it came across sarcastically. “That’s for me to know and you to find out, I suppose.”

“*Careful. Don’t piss him off too much, Sunshine. He’s got his hands on you. He could hurt you before I could get there to stop him.*” Knox growled the last part like he couldn’t stomach watching this from the shadows.

I didn't blame him. I could barely stomach it either.

The song changed, and Huck growled at the few Alphas who dared come close enough to ask for the next dance, intent on keeping me for himself.

Strings blazed to life, another elegant tune, and Huck whirled me in line with the other dancer.

"If only I'd known..." he growled beneath the beats of the quartet.

I turned my head sharply away, looking for any familiar faces in the crowd as I spun past. An ally. A friend. Anyone who could intercede and get me out of this vile man's arms. My skin crawled everywhere he touched.

"We're still here with you, Sweetness," Jamison reassured, voice quiet enough not to be overheard through my earpiece. *"You're doing great. Keep Huck occupied and get to the front of the room."*

Right. This may not be part of the plan, but I could use our dance to my advantage. I could use *him* for once.

"Known what?" I asked saccharinely, taking the bait as I gently nudged him toward my destination.

"How much trouble you'd cause. I wouldn't have held back so much had I realized how resilient you are and what a pain in my ass you'd become."

I scoffed and whipped back to look at him. "You think you 'held back' with me?"

Was he serious? Echoes of his abuse played like a twisted movie in the recesses of my mind. Every hit, every punch, every time he held me down and—

I swallowed the bile that rose and scalded the back of my throat.

"You're a sick bastard."

He growled, the sound low and menacing, then hauled me closer until our bodies were flush. "Never said I wasn't. And yet, here you are, practically *begging* for my attention."

I turned away sharply to hide my disgust, and Huck buried his nose into my hair, breathing deeply.

“This scent—” he groaned. “You purposely didn’t wear enough scent blocker, did you? You wanted to draw in the Alphas.” His hold nearly squeezed the air out of my lungs. “Wanted to make me jealous.”

Adrenaline shot through my veins.

“We need to get her out there! Now.” Hades’ quiet roar in my ear created a cavernous ache in the center of my chest. I wanted to be back in their arms. Back in my nest. Back with the pack who made me feel like I was home.

But surrendering to the urge would mean failure, and that wasn’t an option. It had taken nearly all my courage to walk into this ballroom, breaking every Omega protocol, and if I gave up, all of this—especially this confrontation with Huck—would be for naught.

Worse, I’d be front and center in Pack Silvers’ minds and at the top of their retribution list once again. They’d come for blood, and I wasn’t about to give them the satisfaction of sending me back into hiding to protect both myself and my pack.

I discreetly shook my head even as my heart squeezed, hoping Hades and the others picked up on the subtle movement.

I was done letting Pack Silver rule my life.

“She’s got this. Give her time,” Leo interjected on my behalf.

“You alright, Demi? Blink twice for yes or one slow one for no,” Knox added, giving me an easy way to communicate back without giving away the comm device in my ear.

I blinked twice.

“Good girl,” he murmured.

I would have preened from his praise if I weren’t pressed against the hard lines of Huck as he led me across the floor.

That was the biggest difference between these two packs. Pack Maverick believed in me, while Pack Silver underestimated me.

If everything went according to plan, tonight they'd find out just how much.

Resolve straightened my spine, and I narrowed my eyes at Huck in return.

"You're absolutely deranged," I spat back.

Gods, it felt good to say that out loud. Gone was the cowering little Omega I'd once been, and in her place stood a woman who knew her own mind and strength. One who'd tasted the life she deserved and planned to do whatever it took to claim it for herself.

Pack Silver thought they'd seen the fight in me, but I was just getting started.

Huck's gaze flashed with feral light and, without faltering a single step, he leaned down, nearly brushing his nose along mine. "Then why are you here, *pet*, if not to get back in our good graces?"

I didn't know how to answer. Having a conversation with Huck had not been part of the plan.

Thinking quickly, I said. "I'm here to ask Anton for a favor."

"*Demi*," Jamison warned, but I tuned him out.

Huck laughed mirthlessly. "You came to ask us for a *favor*? After your *fuck boys* got us arrested?" His hand slid down to grip my ass. "Oh *pet*, before we'd even consider hearing what you want, you have a shit ton of groveling to do. On your knees. On your back."

His eyes darkened, and he licked his lips at all the wicked ideas running through his deranged mind.

"I knew those other Alphas wouldn't bite you," he gloated. "They only saw you as a hole to fill. You're our leftovers, *Demi Leigh*. You're ruined goods. A reject."

“I’m gonna fucking kill him,” Hades hissed lethally.

“You know that’s not true, Sunshine. Don’t let him get to you,” Knox coached.

“No one will ever want you—though I’m still willing to make an exception and keep you as a side piece.” Huck squeezed me closer, making sure I felt the outline of his erection against my stomach.

Hades barely kept himself together. *“If he doesn’t take his hands off her—”*

“Our new Omega never has to know.” Huck nodded toward where Anton chatted with a wealthy benefactor, a beautiful young Omega hanging on his arm. “Besides, she does exactly what we tell her to do. Boring, if you ask me, but convenient if it means she won’t ask questions and I get to keep *you*.” His hand squeezed my ass, kneading it as he ground against me.

I suppressed a wince at my pack’s quiet snarls, but I couldn’t keep my body from tensing. Not breathing, I counted my steps, ready to use the top of the count when I stepped forward to plant my knee strategically between Huck’s legs. It wasn’t the kind of retribution I wanted, but *damn*, would it be satisfying.

I couldn’t snap back at the ridiculousness he spewed without giving myself away, so I stayed silent. Almost.

“I’d move your hand if I were you,” I warned. “You don’t want to be nursing bruised balls when you have to be on stage in five minutes.”

He nearly groaned. “See? There’s the fun I miss. I can’t wait to break you all over again.” Then, as if he finally processed what I’d said, he pulled back and his eyes narrowed further. “What makes you think we’ll be on stage?”

I rolled my eyes. Thanks to Slade’s and Enoch’s infiltration of the security team, I had a minute-by-minute breakdown of this evening’s events, but that was my little secret.

Instead, I said, “I lived with you for eleven months. I think I know a campaign event when I see one.” I nodded toward the wealthy benefactors scattered across the room. “Pack Vanmoosan, famous for their foothold in the oil industry, Pack Tillman, who earned all their wealth in tech, the Gleason pack who comes from old world money, and then there are the Bandermonth, Rothe, and Williamson packs, all whom recently inherited money from their trusts, just to name a few more.” Out of all the packs I’d pointed out, only one had an Omega. No doubt Anton had persuaded them to invest in his political aspirations with promises of stricter rules for Omegas and an imbalanced matching process that favored the wealthy. Already, he was setting himself up to climb the rungs of political success by establishing the basis of his campaign. “This is a fundraising event for Anton’s political aspirations—which I assume he’ll be making a speech about in oh—” I checked the large, gilded clock across the room, squinting to read the time. “Four minutes and counting.”

“I’m impressed you know your patrons. Perhaps we underestimated your *usefulness*.” He looked equal parts suspicious, but just as I predicted, he steered me off the dancefloor to the right of the stage.

I was still a few paces off from being positioned front and center for Anton’s big speech, but the element of surprise had been ruined, anyway. He knew I was here, but that wouldn’t stop me from fucking with his head while he gave the most important announcement of his political career thus far.

I just needed to antagonize him enough that he’d storm offstage at the end of his speech, follow me down the hallway to the left, and out the side door where I’d have reinforcements waiting. I was the bait in a pretty dress, a shiny lure to draw Anton’s attention.

“Does that mean I’m right and he’ll be announcing his run for governor of New York?” I inquired innocently.

Huck dropped his arms and gripped my bicep, none-to-gently steering me around the side of the stage.

Ouch! Wait a minute—

“*Demi! Where the fuck are you going?*” Jamison demanded.

It was darker over here behind the main lights, and I swallowed as Huck growled at one of the backstage hands to make himself scarce.

He released me with a shove and I turned, holding my hands out like I could stave him off.

“I’m only going to ask you this once, Demi Leigh,” he spat my name like it was bitter on his tongue. He prowled forward, and for every step of his advance, I retreated.

“*Fuck!*” Hades roared.

“*Quiet,*” Knox ordered. “*She needs to focus and we need to hear.*”

“What game are you playing?” Huck pushed me against the wall flanking the stage, crowding into my space. My fingers flexed near the slit in my dress while I tuned out my mates’ concerned murmurs in my ear. “You missing these dicks?” He grasped himself obscenely. “Or are you here for some ill attempt at revenge?” His fist slammed down next to my head, making me jump and gasp. “Because you’re sure as hell not here for a favor or to lend your support to Anton’s run for governor.”

“My business is with Anton,” I said, hating the slight waver in my voice. Chin jutting up, I faked confidence I didn’t feel.

“*We’re on our way, Sunshine,*” Knox promised.

Huck’s chest puffed up with his self-inflated ego. “Anything you have to say to him, you can say to me.”

I laughed wryly, leaning into the bitter, condescending edge. “I believe Anton would have a thing or two to say about that. You’ve never been the one in charge, Huck.”

I stuck the proverbial knife into that sore spot and twisted.

“In the hierarchy of your pack, you rank *last.*”

A snarl ripped out of him, and I smiled. It was the wrong move to make because pain blossomed through my cheek as my head whipped sideways from the force of his backhand. The earpiece flew out of my ear, clattering to the ground.

Reed's shoes clicked along the floor, landing on either side of the comm device while I cupped my cheek and tried to keep the tears from slipping out.

Fuck, that hurts.

“What's this?” Reed tsked, picking up the earpiece and twisting it between his fingers. “Looks like our little Omega brought backup for whatever little plan she's concocted.”

Distantly, I heard the growls on the other end of the line before Reed dropped it back to the ground and smashed it to pieces with the heel of his shoe. Plastic skirted along the floor while I watched on in horror, praying I hadn't just ruined our entire mission.

“You couldn't stay away, could you, *pet?*” Reed's grin was maniacal, his eyes flashing with malicious intent. “Wait until Anton gets a load of you.”

Huck's blade whipped out and pressed along my side, a kill shot if he was so inclined to actually stab me. I froze, only moving to slowly lift my arms in surrender.

“Walk,” he demanded.

My pulse fluttered in my neck like a trapped bird as I followed their demands, passing through a doorway behind the stage.

“Change of plan, Rigsby,” Reed told a man with a clipboard, and my eyes widened as I recognized the same asshole from the auction and the OMA. If I had any doubts, the scar on the backs of his knuckles confirmed my suspicion. “Delay the speech by half an hour. And tell our top investors they can pick up their packages before the end of the event at the west entrance at half-past eleven.”

The smarmy man's eyes lit up when he saw me, gleeful I'd been apprehended. “Absolutely, sir. Should I arrange a sale for this one again, now that you've reclaimed her? I have a

waitlist and could easily erase her name from the OMA database once more.”

“No,” Reed snapped. “That will be all. Send Mr. Aster back. We have business to deal with before we commence with our evening.”

I knew the ‘business’ he spoke of was me, but my mind was still stuck on the information I had gleaned.

My mind spun. “You’re selling Omegas? *Here?*” No wonder there were so many single packs at tonight’s event.

“Damage control after your pack’s little stunt lost us a shit ton of profit,” Huck snapped. “Now we have too many Omegas with no place to go.”

Fuck! I needed that earpiece to get the message back to Jamison so they could intercept the women who were being sold.

“Gotta get rid of ‘em somehow. It was this or wait another quarter for our next event. But you don’t need to worry, *little mouse.*” Reed captured a lock of my hair and twirled it around his finger. “You’re not for sale. Not this time.”

thirty-three



DEMI

IF I THOUGHT Huck and Reed were formidable, they had nothing on Anton.

His rage was an oppressive cloud bearing down on me from the moment he stepped backstage. With Huck's knife aimed at my kidney and Reed's strong grip on my upper arm, they hauled me outside through the wrong door.

No, no, no! My entire plan hinged on drawing these men out on the other side of the building. We were in the wrong place at the wrong time. My heart pounded harder as I fished for an idea, *any idea*, to get this night back on track.

As it stood, I'd royally fucked up. I'd broken Knox's first rule: never end up alone with Pack Silver.

Once again, my fingers flexed like I was a gunslinger in an old western. The weight of the weapon concealed on my thigh beneath the skirt of my dress was a beacon of hope amid this shitstorm.

Your pack is coming.

Any minute now, I expected my men to burst through the doors, tracking the locket that hung protectively between my collarbones, but I needed to be prepared, regardless. If they didn't make it in time, I had the power to save myself.

You're strong and capable, I reassured myself as I ran through the rules Knox had drilled into me when he taught me to shoot. I didn't relish killing a man, but I also didn't relish dying. Or being tortured first.

Anton had that glint in his eyes that terrified me. It was cruel, calculating, and ruthless. He wouldn't hesitate to make me suffer—a fact he'd proven time and time again—and to make my mates suffer by association.

"You shouldn't have come back, Demi," he warned as he spun to face me. "It proves how stupid and naïve you are to

think you can challenge me. In my city, no less. Did you really think you could show up at my event and I wouldn't know it?"

I jerked my arm out of Reed's grasp, careful not to impale myself on Huck's knife.

"Of course not," I scoffed. "I'm not an idiot, Anton. I *wanted* you to know I was here."

Right, Demi. Poke the bear, why don't you?

It wasn't smart, but damn if his attitude didn't chafe in the worst way. Besides, if I could keep him talking, it would stall whatever horror he had planned for me, giving my men time to catch up.

I may have lost the earpiece, but that wasn't my only trick. I kept my hands loose and ready, though I wanted to reach up and grip the locket to remind myself I wasn't alone. Not truly.

I just needed to last a few more minutes, and this nightmare would be over.

"By all means," Anton threw his hands out by his sides, "you have my attention. But before you spin lies, perhaps *this* will help you think twice." With a snap of his fingers, another door farther down the side alley opened.

Two goons appeared, dragging something between them.

No.

Not something.

Someone.

"Thane!" I breathed, lurching forward before Reed stopped me with a condescending tsk and a brutal grip on my arm. All the blood rushed from my face and fingers until I was as chilled as the Alaskan tundra in the height of winter.

Bruised and battered, Thane's cheek was red and swollen. His lip was split open with blood pouring down his chin, and he winced like they had kicked his abdomen. Repeatedly. He hung between the two guards, barely staying on his feet as they dragged him down the asphalt, stopping off to our side.

They dropped him before Anton, who waved the men away with a dismissive, “That will be all.”

“What have you done?” The usually sweet tone of my voice had dropped an octave, deep and angry.

Thane barely made it to his knees, his sorrowful gaze instantly finding mine. “Demi. Run!” he rasped, spitting blood out of his mouth as he tried to talk.

“It’s far too late for that.” Anton reached behind him and drew a gun out from beneath his jacket where he’d concealed it. Cocking it, he aimed it at Thane. “Think carefully before you answer, *pet*. Or your *fuck toy* will pay the price. What did you plan to do this evening?”

My eyes narrowed. If it was honesty, he wanted...

“I planned to give you one last chance to renounce your office and turn yourself in for your crimes against Omegas. And against *me*.”

Anton had the audacity to chuckle. “You were my property, free to do with as I pleased. As for your other accusation, why would I ever concede to any wrongdoing?” His head cocked to the side. “They’ve cleared me of all charges, not that I can say the same for your dear ol’ dad. The fool, signing documents that implicated him in the auctions without question. The man only had dollar signs in his eyes. He couldn’t see the bigger picture.”

“Turn. Yourselves. In.” I demanded.

“*Omegas* do not issue orders to *Alphas*. Perhaps you need a reminder of who’s in control, Demi Leigh.” Anton’s gaze hardened, and I quailed.

I knew the extent of his cruelty and didn’t want to experience it ever again.

With a wry twist of a smile, Anton shifted his grip on his gun and slammed it against the side of Thane’s head.

A startled, distressed cry broke from my lips as my mate crumpled to the ground. I lurched forward to go to him, only to be yanked back and restrained by Reed. The muscles in my

arm screamed while I growled like a caged animal, trying to break free. Thick, potent anger mixed with the sharp bite of distress while my gaze stayed glued to Thane's groaning, writhing body. He dragged himself onto his hands and knees, trying to make it back to his feet. And failed.

My heart plummeted and the icy chill spread inward as I faced an unnerving reality. Anton would never stop hunting me. He'd never stand to see me happy and thriving, free of oppression. His inane need for power had morphed into madness, and I'd become his fixation.

Omegas weren't people to him. We were objects to own and manipulate. To be used. To serve and enslave. I threatened his authority just by existing beyond the boundaries he'd set for me.

My attempt at freedom directly opposed the fundamentals of his beliefs and the foundation on which he'd built his campaign. And he didn't plan to stop at the governorship.

Reed and Huck may have wanted to keep me, to hide me away and use me for their own sick, twisted pleasure, but Anton would never allow it.

I embodied everything he hated, and he'd sooner snuff me out in an effort to regain his authority than let me live even a tortured existence at the hands of his pack. There were plenty of other Omegas to sate his lust with. He didn't need me.

No. On the contrary. Between the control I threatened and the secrets I knew, he wanted to *destroy* me and everyone I loved.

Anton inhaled and groaned. "That's it, pet. Let me smell your fear. It always gets me hard." He reached down with his free hand and adjusted himself behind the tailored fit of his slacks.

Stomach tight, I ripped free of Reed's hold and rubbed my arm.

"Such a feisty little bird," Reed taunted, grinning, then licking his lips like he couldn't wait to taste me again.

Ignoring him, my mind whirled through every possibility while I drummed my fingers through the air, needing the movement to retain any lingering warmth. I was running out of time, and help wasn't here yet. Thane was hurt, and I was in danger.

There was only one solution, one wildly reckless conclusion I could come to.

I needed to destroy him first.

My fingers ached, ready to fly, to protect both myself and the man I loved.

Anton first. Then Huck and Reed. I played the scenario through as my fingers parted the slit in my skirt, brushing against the bottom of my holster.

"Last chance," I warned, taunting Anton further, daring him to swing the gun in my direction and off of my injured mate.

"No, Demi. That was *your* last chance." His eyes seemed to glitter with malice as he nodded at Huck.

"Finally, I get to play," the knife-wielding maniac purred as he moved faster than lightning.

"Demi!" Thane rasped.

I couldn't draw my weapon fast enough. Between one heartbeat and the next, Huck had me pinned against him with my back to his front.

Dammit!

His knife landed at my throat. Cold metal bit into my skin, slicing just enough to make me breathe shallowly as I felt the first trickle of blood dribble down my flesh.

"No!" Thane coughed, then groaned, slumping to the ground.

I gasped, not for myself, but for my mate.

But I couldn't worry about him yet.

Free yourself first, then check on Thane.

Anton thought he had me, but I wasn't the same timid Omega I'd once been.

I was already moving. Hades' words echoed through my mind from all our self-defense classes together.

Smaller than Huck by over a foot and at least sixty pounds lighter, I was at a severe disadvantage when it came to brute strength. Grabbing his hand, I heaved the knife away as much as I could, which wasn't much at all. A few spare centimeters, but it was enough to keep him from slitting my throat as I moved.

Leveraging all my power, I dropped my shoulder and rotated into his body, ducking out of his hold and whirling. In one fluid movement, I wrenched his arm behind his back as I pivoted, using my momentum and his own strength against him. Thrusting upward with all my might, I bent his arm at an unnatural angle.

Go for the small joints, Hades had instructed, and I followed his advice now, prying the knife out of Huck's hand as he screamed from the pain I inflicted on his knuckles.

Quick as a cobra strike, I palmed the blade while Huck grunted and cursed, but before he could move a muscle, I drove the knife between his legs, angling to castrate.

Being short didn't come with many advantages, so I had to use my reach and force effectively.

A helpful little trick I'd picked up from a women's self-defense video on YouTube.

Huck screamed and dropped to the ground, and I knew I'd hit something vital.

Served him right. I never wanted him to touch another woman again.

The knife clattered to the ground alongside Huck, and I kicked it out of the way as Reed charged me with a psychotic roar.

I reached for my gun. The weight felt good in my hand, and I flipped off the safety.

Always know your target and what's behind it.

Reed. Anton.

Anton. Reed.

I saw them both so clearly.

Gripping the gun with both hands, I pulled the trigger, once, then twice, before Reed collided with me and I slammed into the asphalt. My head cracked back against the ground with a sickening thud and I struggled to fill my lungs. Dots swam in my vision and I blinked, trying to clear the picture.

Reed loomed over me as I writhed on the ground, doing my best to breathe. He gripped his arm as blood spurted out of the bullet wound in his bicep.

I did it. I hit him. Pride swelled in my chest as I watched him bleed. *I fucking shot him.*

I wasn't vindictive by nature. The Omega in me didn't thrive on violence or conflict, but there was a sweet sense of justice that came from protecting myself out of necessity.

Demi—one. Reed—zero.

“You fucking *bitch!*” he raged, knocking the gun out of my grip and closing his hands over my throat, cutting off my air supply.

I scrambled to pry his fingers off my neck, but at this angle, it came down to strength more than agility. The world spun, everything going hazy around the edges.

I pushed at Reed's arms, his slick blood making it hard to find enough purchase to pry him off.

My lungs burned and my heart screamed as darkness descended, promising to blanket me in pain-free bliss. I clung tooth and nail to the edges of consciousness, then let my palm skirt along the rough ground, searching for something—*anything*—that I could use as a weapon. The cool bit of metal grazed across my fingertips and I strained for it.

The uneven sound of Anton's shoes on the pavement had my eyes widening as his large frame blocked out the

moonlight above, casting me in shadow. Palm pressed against the wound in his thigh to staunch the bleeding, he growled the most menacing sound I'd ever heard.

Until the cold, metallic click of his gun echoed through the night.

The barrel swung toward my head, and my life flashed before my eyes... but the only parts that mattered were these last few months with my mates.

Amidst the turmoil we'd survived, they were my happiest memories. Each one of my men completed a part of me that had been achingly empty before we'd met.

Jamison with his steadfast strength and support. I'd been terrified of him at first, unable to read him, but the closer I drew, the more I realized that beneath his gruff exterior and need for control was a man who carried the weight of his pack on his shoulders. He dedicated his life to taking care of those he loved, nurturing them, and watching them grow without ever needing credit or recognition. Selflessly, he gave everything to his packmates, and now, to me.

Thane with his endless humor and easy smiles. He lit up my life, chasing away the shadows I thought would live with me forever. But beneath his mirth was a man who just wanted to be loved. To be chosen. To be *seen*. He thrived on praise and was just as quick with kind words and encouragement. He was a dreamer and had given me the love and safety I needed to realize I could be, too.

Leo, who, like his scent, was warm and comforting. He'd felt like home from the moment I laid eyes on him. Without pushing, he'd fostered my confidence and shown me what my life could be. It was because of him I'd learned to trust again. With his endless empathy, he always seemed to know what everyone needed and gave it freely without ever needing to be asked. I couldn't imagine where I'd be today if I hadn't run into him that fateful day in the gym. He'd changed my life, and I didn't know how I'd ever be able to repay him.

Hades, whose scary, tattooed exterior had frightened me until I'd glimpsed the cinnamon roll underneath. I had no

doubt he could back up his bark—or growl, as the case may be—with an equally terrifying bite, but he'd proven time and again that he'd never hurt me. He may be growly and possessive, but he'd protect me and our pack—his chosen family—until his dying breath, going to the ends of the earth to ensure our safety and happiness.

Eli, who nurtured and healed both medically and otherwise. He'd repaired my heart one piece at a time, giving me the power of autonomy. He advocated for me until I could advocate for myself, standing by my side in solidarity instead of in front of or behind me. His faith in me never wavered. He showed me the beauty in life, and in myself.

Knox, with his intense strength and level head. He was my unwavering safeguard. My shelter. My foundation. The rock on which I stood. He'd taught me resilience and helped me realize I had power even when I felt powerless. He saw my strengths instead of my weaknesses. Because of him, I felt bold and brave. No one had ever cared about me with such vehemence—such force.

That fierceness lent me strength as I stretched another inch more and curled my hand around the hilt of my gun.

My throat burned, my lungs aching from lack of oxygen, but I gathered the remainder of my strength and lifted my arm.

Don't aim at anything you're not willing to destroy. Knox's words stayed with me as I set my aim.

The world slowed, and I watched the muscles of Anton's neck strain in anger as he yelled his rage, his finger tightening on the trigger.

This was it. I was going to die.

But I'd be damned if I wasn't taking Anton down with me.

My finger squeezed.

The balance had to be righted; justice served. There was no world in any universe where he lived while I died.

Chaos erupted through the alleyway, but it was too late.

A gunshot tore through the night.

thirty-four



HADES

I DIDN'T LIKE THIS. Not one fucking bit.

Heavy footfalls echoed down the quiet hallway as I raced toward Demi's last known location, according to the tracking device Knox had convinced her to wear. I'd kiss the man if I swung even remotely in that direction, but I'd have to find another way to show my gratitude when this night was fucking over because the locket tracker had been a stroke of brilliance.

The need to get to my woman was as vital as fucking breathing. I'd known this plan was a bad idea from the start, but I'd figured my vehement protests against it had more to do with my usual brutishly protective nature than any sixth sense about how this night would transpire. Turns out, hindsight was a bitch.

Seconds felt like hours as I tore through the halls, questioning every choice that led me to this moment.

Once my mate set her mind to something, nothing would sway her. But I should have found a way. I should have stopped her. Fucking hell, I should have tracked Anton and the others down myself and killed them with bare hands before they had an opportunity to even breathe in her direction.

My heart thundered like the beat of racing wild stallions.

Hang on, Baby Girl. I'm on my way!

Approaching the east exit, Jamison huffed through the comms device in my ear that we all wore.

"Almost there," I growled.

Another hallway intersected mine, but I didn't stop moving, not even when Leo skidded around the corner and joined me as we rushed for the exit at the end of the hall. I slammed into the handle, forcing the door open so hard it protested with a loud creak, ready to come off its damn hinges.

Night air surrounded me, tinted with the scent of gunfire. Terror tore through my chest like a living beast when I spotted Demi on the ground with Reed overtop of her, strangling the life out of my mate's nearly prone body.

No! No! Fuck, no! I took off at a sprint, my vision hazing red. Pure, unadulterated rage blazed bright and hot within me, curling my hands into fists as it seared through my veins. I pumped my legs, pushing every physical limit I had to get to her faster.

The hair on my arms and legs lifted as I spotted Pack Silver's furious leader draw to a halt beside Demi. Anton towered above her, his face a twist of fury as he aimed the barrel of his gun in her direction.

Her arm swung up at the same moment, her gun shaking in weakened fingers.

Chaos erupted in the alley as my pack poured out of the various exits and converged on the horrible scene, but we were too late.

A crack as loud as thunder forced the air from my lungs, stopping my fucking heart. I couldn't breathe... couldn't think.

"Demi..." My voice was a hoarse variation of itself, barely audible past the cacophony of shouts.

Jamison and Knox reached her first and ripped Reed off of our mate, dragging him away cursing and screaming, but all I saw was the gentle whoosh of Demi's arm as her muscles gave out and it fell lifelessly back to the ground.

A savage, vicious roar sliced up my throat. Pushing harder, I closed the distance, sights set on the man who'd stolen everything from me. I threw the considerable heft of my weight straight into Anton as he staggered backward to escape the collision.

Together, we fell.

The sickening crack of his skull against the asphalt wasn't nearly enough to quell my tempestuous fury. A violent storm of rage ravaged my insides as I drew back and threw a

powerful punch to the asshole's face. The crunch of bone and cartilage was satisfying, but I needed more.

More blood. More penance. Just... *more*.

I barely felt his weak attempt to fight back.

He shot Demi. He. Fucking. *Shot*. Her.

My fist punctuated each word, each thought, until my knuckles were bloody, but it wasn't enough. It would *never* be enough.

Through the craze of white-hot wrath, I heard Leo murmuring to Demi.

“Open your eyes for me, Honey. Fight. Please, Demi. Fight.”

Beneath me, Anton wheezed, his face an unrecognizable, pulverized mess. Despite my size and overall appearance, I wasn't violent by nature, but there wasn't an iota in me that felt remorse for beating the ever-loving shit out of this man. He'd hurt Demi. Repeatedly. He'd drugged her, raped her, beat her, tried to fucking *sell* her.

And that only covered the basics.

Demi had lived through a world of emotional abuse we'd only tapped the surface of, and all her suffering traced back to the worthless pile of shit lying on the asphalt, groaning as he rolled to the side to nurse his injuries.

I seethed above him, clenching and unclenching my fists as I tempered the desire to end him. The world would undoubtedly be a better place without him in it, but I wasn't a killer.

I leaned back on my heels as Lawson reached my side. A large hand landed on my shoulder and brought me out of my head, grounding me in the present.

“I've got him,” he vowed. “Go. Your Omega needs you.”

I staggered to my feet, noting Jamison subduing Reed with his arms wrenched behind his back while Knox dolled out his own brand of justice. Across the alley, Eli knelt at Thane's

side, where my packmate had collapsed on the pavement. Fuck, I didn't know what had happened, but he didn't look good.

Eli's gaze collided with mine, and his voice cracked with emotion in my earpiece. "He's okay. Demi?"

His question cut through the frenzy whirling through my head, narrowing my sole focus on my precious Omega.

"I don't—" I swallowed, then tried again. "I don't know if she's breathing."

I stumbled toward her, my heart lurching at the sight of how still she was.

Suddenly, I was a child, right back in that fucking kitchen, finding my parents' overdosed bodies cold and unresponsive.

Not again. Not fucking again.

Losing my parents had been difficult, but they weren't good people. The culmination of a lifetime of bad choices led to their deaths. But Demi? She didn't deserve any of this. She was warm and good, selfless and sweet. The world would be a darker place without her light, her love, her laughter.

Demi, Demi, Demi...

Her name was a litany, a chant, a prayer—the very beat of my fucking heart.

I was nothing without her.

I dropped to my knees before her, and Leo moved back, allowing me to see her fully.

"Baby—" The choked sound stuck in my throat, torn apart by the agony that threatened to destroy me.

More reinforcements arrived, but I couldn't bear to pry my gaze off my beautiful mate. There was blood. So much blood.

Hands hovering over her body, I searched for the bullet wound I could apply pressure to. Anything to stop the bleeding. To give her more time. Belatedly, I noted the shallow rise and fall of her chest, and my lungs finally expanded enough to draw in a ragged, unstable breath.

“She’s alive,” I rasped so my packmates could hold on to the same frayed, tattered hope I did; the belief that our world wasn’t shattered when we’d just made it whole.

Demi completed us. She was our center. Our sole reason for existing. And I didn’t know what would be left of us if we lost her.

Having turned Anton, Huck, and Reed over to Pack Jacobs, the rest of my pack fell to their knees around us, their hands grazing over her hair, her arms, and her legs.

“Sweetness,” Jamison breathed.

“Where is she hurt?” Eli’s eyebrows slanted inward, creasing his forehead as he, like me, scanned her for injuries, assessing her health in a way I couldn’t. He had a critical eye for these things that came from years of training.

“I can’t find a wound.” There was no burble of blood, no gushing bullet wound.

“The gun fired. I thought—” Leo’s eyes were round and terrified, his face pinched with the same agonized worry we all felt.

“Demi. Sunshine,” Knox called, placing his hand over her chest just to feel her breath.

“Darling,” Thane rasped, pressing his own bloodied lips to her forehead as he leaned over her. “I’m sorry. I’m so fucking sorry.”

“Please, Baby Girl. Come back to us,” I pleaded harder than ever before, praying to any god who would listen. “We can’t live without you.”

Jamison, face stoic, leaned close to her ear and barked, “Demi.” Alpha authority prickled through the air, sending goosebumps rising along my extremities.

Unconventional, but if there’s ever a time to use a bark—

Demi’s lashes fluttered against the curve of her cheeks, and then they lifted.

“Baby!” I pressed a fist to my lips to hold back the sob of relief rising in my throat. I swallowed, jamming it back down, but it didn’t stop the single fucking tear that escaped and dripped down my jaw.

Demi’s brows furrowed adorably. “You’re... crying.” Her voice was a strangled rasp, the words gravelly and raw in her ruined throat. Bruising already ringed her neck like a macabre necklace that would take weeks to heal.

“You’re alive. We almost lost you,” I explained through the riot of emotion welling from the center of my chest.

Arm trembling as she lifted it, Demi cupped the side of my face, brushing her thumb over the wet trail, soothing the ache in a way only my Omega could. I covered her hand with mine.

“I’m okay,” she promised.

“You’re not.”

She swallowed and winced, but took stock of herself. “I am. My head hurts. So does my throat, but I’m... I’m not shot.” She appeared as surprised as the rest of us.

“Where does your head hurt?” Eli prompted, his fingers gently lifting and prodding, checking for head wounds. His fingers came away bloody, and his wild eyes swung to ours.

“Hospital?” Jamison asked, barking the question like a demand.

“There’s no question. She needs a CT. Maybe an MRI.”

“I’m okay,” she parroted again.

I shook my head. “You’re going to the hospital, Baby Girl. My heart can’t take anymore. I need to know you’re alright.”

“Can you stand?” Knox was ghastly pale, but he was holding his shit together better than the rest of us.

“I think so.”

I offered her my hand and gently helped her sit, then pulled her gingerly to her feet.

She swayed, and I was fucking done.

I bent and easily scooped her up, cradling her in my arms and safely against my chest. A roiling, unsettled part of me calmed as I held her.

“I’m sorry.” Her face fell as the weight of the evening barreled down on her.

“Shh, Baby Girl. You did so well. So fucking well.”

Her eyes brightened slightly. “I used one of the maneuvers you taught me.”

“Good girl,” I praised, loving how she nestled deeper into my arms.

She blinked up at me, sniffing against the torrent of tears I could tell she held back. “I wouldn’t have had to if I hadn’t ruined everything.”

I growled and turned swiftly as Leo and Eli joined me at my side, supporting Thane, who leaned heavily between them. Jamison and Knox kissed Demi’s head on their way past to deal with the shitshow we’d blocked out while we took care of our Omega.

“Does that look ruined to you?”

Pack Jacobs stood guard over Anton, Huck, and Reed, who sneered at us despite their bloodied wounds. I appreciated the mercenaries hadn’t underestimated Pack Silver’s penchant for violence and their indomitable will to live. Those three were like cockroaches, infestuous and difficult to extinguish.

Besides, everyone knew injured dogs were far more likely to snap their razor-sharp teeth. Anton, Huck, and Reed were formidable in top condition. I didn’t want to guess how vicious they’d turn when backed into a corner.

Out of the shadows bled more reinforcements. Emilio Cristenello’s shoes clipped as he walked toward us, drawing Anton’s attention. The sniveling Alpha looked like he was about to piss himself when he recognized the dangerous man who drew to a stop before him.

“Mr. Aster,” Emilio greeted with a hardened expression. “It’s about time we made each other’s acquaintance, though I

can see from the fear in your eyes my family and I need no introduction.”

“M-Mr. Cristenello,” Anton stuttered over his words, scrambling for his careful composure even as he bled out on the ground from not one, but *two* bullet holes.

“You shot him, Baby,” I whispered quietly. “Fucking *twice*.” I was so proud I could dance.

“I did?”

“Yeah, Honey. You did,” Leo murmured, just as awed.

“We apologize for the change in plans,” Jamison greeted Emilio and his family. “Things took a detour, but we appreciate your flexibility.”

“Seems I underestimated your little Omega. She’s quite the fighter, that one.”

“I wish she hadn’t had to fight, but we’re all immensely proud of her strength and fortitude.” Jamison turned and gave Demi a small smile. But the tightness at the corners of his eyes belied just how worried he was about her.

We were all done with this entire charade and were ready to get Demi out of here.

“Thank you for offering us your services.”

“A man is only as good as his word, and you have mine. We’ll have this little situation cleaned up in no time.” Emilio snapped his fingers, and his sons stepped forward, carrying black hoods.

Julia stood off to the side, arms crossed, looking smug as hell and entirely unbothered by the blood and gore painting the alleyway.

“No! Wait!” Anton held up his hands, though it cost him. More blood gushed from his wounds once the pressure against them was released. “I don’t know what kind of deal you’ve struck, but I can do better than whatever they’re offering you.”

“Money isn’t everything,” Emilio scolded. “Revenge is a far better currency.”

“Revenge? Whatever I have done th—”

Emilio slashes his hand through the air, silencing him. “You stole my daughter from me,” he motioned toward where Julia stood.

She gave Pack Silver a little wave of her fingers, her eyes narrowed to slits. Her family’s bloodthirstiness didn’t phase her at all.

“Does she look familiar to you?” he taunted Anton. “What about you?” He shoved a finger into Reed’s face as he swayed on his knees, swallowing as he shook his head. “She should. You tried to sell her in your last ill-fated auction.”

Anton’s mouth gaped open and closed like a fish.

“W-we obviously didn’t intend to make a move against your family. Whatever happened was clearly a misstep on the part of my organization. If you’re willing to strike a deal, I’d be more than willing to cut you in on the profits going forward. Surely a businessman such as yourself can see the value in—”

Emilio looked as annoyed as he was murderous. “Gods, does this man ever shut up?”

Demi shook her head and croaked, “He likes to hear himself talk.”

Anton growled while Huck continued his whimpering, holding his balls like a wounded animal. Blood stained his crotch and my brows rose in surprise.

Holy fuck. Did she...

My eyes widened as I gazed down at my mate. I hoped like hell my suspicions were right and Huck was down a set of cojones. Or that she’d at least given him a back-alley vasectomy.

I cringed and my balls drew up just thinking about it. But he deserved every ounce of pain and more.

My Omega was as badass as she was beautiful. I was immensely proud of her for protecting herself and finally

taking a stand against her abusers. That I helped play even a small part in her taking her power back lit me up inside.

“Your sins against my family are only a fraction of what you’re about to atone for.” Emilio nodded toward our pack, specifically Demi, who leaned more heavily into my chest.

“Speaking of sins,” Demi’s gaze found Lawson amidst our small gathered crowd, “The other Omegas are here somewhere. Pack Silver arranged sales for them and planned to hand them off after tonight’s function. They’ve got to be inside somewhere.”

Lawson was already moving. “Don’t worry. We’ll get them out and make sure they’re safely reunited with their families or packs.” He motioned for the rest of his pack to follow, and they moved swiftly back inside to rescue the others.

Emilio nodded his approval, then swung his eyes on Jamison. “Never let this one go. She’s a treasure.”

“I don’t plan to, sir.”

“Go,” he waved us off. “Take care of your precious Omega and cherish her all your days. There’s nothing more sacred than the bond between an Alpha and his mate.”

“We will,” Jamison vowed, turning his back on Pack Silver for the last time. Knox jogged after him, our pack surrounding Demi as shit got real.

Anton pleaded for his life as he realized the depth of trouble he had found himself in.

“Seems your transgressions have caught up with you,” Dimitri grinned wickedly as Tommas wrenched Anton’s arms behind his back and secured them with zip ties.

One of the black, hooded bags descended over Anton’s head before the pair of brothers dragged the man to his feet and hauled him toward the black town car that pulled to a stop at the end of the alleyway.

Jamison and Knox moved in front of me, blocking Demi’s view of the proceedings.

“Don’t watch, Sweetness,” Jamison ordered, and I turned around with her in my arms so she wouldn’t be tempted to look as Huck and Reed were similarly dragged off.

I nuzzled my cheek against the top of her head, murmuring, “Whatever happens now, it’s out of our hands.”

“I thought I killed him.” Her shoulders shuddered.

“No one would have blamed you if you had,” I promised, squeezing her tighter against me. “But none of us are leaving this alley with blood on our hands.”

“We asked for the favor,” she countered, not looking fully convinced.

“*I* asked for the favor,” Jamison stated firmly, taking any and all blame onto himself. “Your soul remains as bright and unblemished as always, Sweetness.”

Demi’s lips parted as if she was about to argue.

“Let us shoulder this, Sunshine,” Knox said gruffly. “We’d dance with the devil himself if it meant keeping you safe.”

“We’re free now,” Thane breathed, wincing from the effort and gripping his ribs.

A tear tracked down Demi’s cheek as she gazed at Thane, worry shining in her mossy green eyes. “We need to get you to a hospital.”

“I could... say the same... about you,” he gasped.

“Let’s get you both out of here,” Eli compromised.

“Agreed,” I said, setting a course for the car so we could get both Demi and Thane the medical attention they desperately needed. “The sooner we can get you taken care of, the sooner we can go home.”

“Home,” Demi sighed. “You have no idea how good that sounds.”

“Yeah, Baby. I do.” I promised.

Home. Where I had every intention of claiming my Omega and making sure she was happy and cared for every single day

for the rest of her life.

thirty-five



DEMI

I TWIRLED AROUND the moment I stepped through the front door, doing a happy dance as the scents of home embraced me like a warm hug. It had been a week since the fateful night of the gala, and I was as thrilled as a kitten with a fresh bag of catnip to be home.

Walking through the front door felt somehow achingly familiar and yet vastly different. Perhaps because this time, I walked through the door as a truly free woman.

No more hiding. No more fear.

My life was my own to do with as I pleased.

And I knew exactly what—or should I say, *who*—I wanted.

“Feel good to be home, Baby?” Hades grinned, smacking me on the ass on his way past, carrying a suitcase in his hand with another slung under his arm.

“It feels incredible,” I sighed, any remaining tension flowing out of me.

Even Thane was in good spirits. His face was a mottle of fading bruises and his ribs would be healing for the next four to five weeks, but he grinned widely as he spotted the tail end of my terrible dance moves.

“Careful,” Eli warned, but his words were gentle and his smile warm. “You were just cleared from concussion protocol.”

“I’m not jumping off a cliff,” I teased, but the rawness of my voice somewhat diminished it. My throat was still mending, but luckily, no permanent damage had been done. I twirled one more time for effect. “I’m dancing around my living room. And now I’m heading into my kitchen.”

“Godsdamn, I enjoy hearing her call this place *hers*,” Leo rumbled.

I grinned and put a little extra swing into my step as I sashayed my way into the kitchen.

Thane picked up his pace, entering right behind me, but I caught his wince from moving too fast as he covered his ribs with his forearm.

“Hey,” I called softly, going to the cabinet and retrieving some pain meds. I filled a cup with water and crossed to him, holding out both with an insistent look. “Take these. The last time you had anything for the pain was before we boarded the plane.”

He arched an eyebrow. “You don’t have to take care of me, Darling.”

“I’m your Omega. It’s in the job description.” I shrugged, a small smile playing across my lips.

Thane scoffed. “And here I thought it was *my* job as your Alpha to take care of *you*. I was getting ready to make you something to eat. Are you hungry?”

I bit my lip as he popped the pills and tipped the water back, watching the way his Adam’s apple bobbed as he swallowed.

I wanted to say yes, but it certainly wasn’t for food.

Reading me easily, Knox smirked on his way past. “Oh, she’s hungry alright.”

I flushed, and Thane’s confusion cleared a second later as he caught on.

“Ohhh. You’re *hungry*, are you?”

“Starving.”

I’d been fighting off flashes of pre-heat during my hospital stay, but my body seemed to know I needed to heal—as did my mate. Thane had been admitted with me, and the guys had taken turns rotating throughout our rooms while we recovered enough to go home.

I hadn't wanted them to know, and subsequently worry, so I'd taken cold showers and shoved ice under my arms to keep my body temperature low. Anything to hold out a few more days.

The plane ride back to Vermont had been torture. Bathed in all their scents in such a confined space had brought the heat roaring back to the surface. It simmered just beneath my skin, threatening to flare at any second.

I was ready to give myself over to the blaze, but only if all my men were ready to surrender with me—and I was worried about Thane.

“I could scent you throughout the entire fucking flight.” Jamison's tenor was as smooth, husky, and warm as his scent—and just as heady. His words caressed the back of my neck as he moved behind me and wrapped an arm around my waist, hauling me back against the hard lines of his body. A possessive rumble vibrated through him and into me.

I shivered, and my blood warmed.

“Why didn't you tell us you were fighting off your heat?” he demanded gently.

Thane's eyes widened. “You are?”

I blushed. “I didn't want to worry anyone. Especially if you weren't all up for it. I figured if Thane was in too much pain or if you guys were too tired, I could always ask Eli for a suppressant.”

“There's nothing on earth that could keep me from taking you to your nest, Darling.” Thane's voice deepened, his eyes already darkening as he inhaled deeply, sensing the subtle changes in my scent.

Eli moved to my side, turning my face toward his as he studied me carefully from behind dark-framed glasses. “Are *you* up for it?”

I closed my hand around his wrists, stroking my thumb over his pulse point.

Damn, the man had beautiful forearms—strong and ridged with ropey veins.

“I promise you, I feel fine. The doctor cleared me for *all* activities.”

“Are you asking us to take you to your nest, Baby Girl?” Hades asked, leaning against the doorframe that led into the den, cracking open a bottle of water and taking a swig. His head cocked to the side as he watched me like a predator waiting to give chase to its prey.

A shiver of delight tingled down my spine, and I nearly squirmed in place. My panties were already damp. I was losing this fight—if I was fighting at all.

“Before you answer, know this, little Omega,” Jamison interjected, drawing me in with his darkly seductive tone. “If you say yes, you’re agreeing to be ours. *Forever*. I speak for the pack when I say that we’re in love with you, Demi Leigh. You’re our mate. Our perfect scent match, and if you say yes, we plan to bond you and make you ours, in every way possible.”

Visions of me impaled on their knots with their teeth in my flesh, branding me as theirs, sent a dizzying wave of arousal through me. The heat in my veins reached new heights, and the growls that rang through the kitchen confirmed I was past the point of no return.

With that one declaration, Jamison had brought my heat roaring to the surface, sending my perfume spiraling into the air.

“The answer is easy,” I proclaimed boldly. I knew what I wanted, and it was them. “Make me yours. Claim me, mark me, bond me. My heart already belongs to each of you.”

“Music to my fucking ears,” Leo declared. Sweeping in between Jamison and Thane, he snatched me off my feet and booked it to our room, chuckling at the growls that followed in our wake as the others gave chase.

He passed through the bathroom and into the nest, laying me down in the center. Soft blankets cushioned me on all

sides, soothing my Omega's need for comfort while the low, rounded room catered to my need for security—a safe space to let go and lose myself to the fever of my heat and the mindlessness that would ensue.

The faded mixture of our scents wrapped around me, reminding me that the last time I'd been in heat, I hadn't allowed myself to dream this pack could truly be mine.

Everything was different now. For the first time in my life, I was truly free to find my happiness. And that's exactly what I was going to do.

Leo moved back, leaving me panting and aching for my men.

“Where are you going?”

“Don't worry, Honey. You're going to get everything you need,” he promised, his hands trailing to the hem of his shirt as he lifted it up and away.

I nearly drooled from the definition of his abs, wanting to lick my way down each ridge, valley, and plane.

My thighs pressed together, seeking friction where I needed it most as my blood boiled. This heat was coming on surprisingly fast. Then again, I had been suppressing it for over a week.

“You're not close enough,” I whined, and Leo chuckled.

“I'm not the one you need right now.”

My brows drew together. “Of course, I need you.”

“You'll have me. I promise. But right now, you need one of your Alphas.”

One by one, my men filed into the small room, and I moaned as they began to strip. The sight of all that bare skin, revealed inch by inch, had my panties wet and my nipples peaked.

Jamison was the first to reach me, but it wasn't long before the others surrounded me as well. One after another, they kissed me like I was air and they were suffocating. In short

order, I was bare before them, my clothes stripped away by urgent yet tender hands.

They touched me everywhere, fingers and mouths caressing every inch of my body, feeding the fire in my veins instead of satisfying it.

Sweat glistened on my skin as the heat raged inside me.

“Fuck, you’re already burning up,” Jamison growled against my mouth. He pulled back, eyes dark with love and lust.

“This feels even more intense than last time,” I admitted.

“That doesn’t surprise me.” Eli gazed down at me from behind the dark frame of his glasses. “It’s rare for an Omega to go through several heats in such quick succession.”

“But you don’t need to worry, Sunshine,” Knox insisted, even as he moved back to sit against the wall. A lock of platinum blond hair fell across his forehead as he tipped his head back against the cushions, content to watch for now. “We’ve got you.”

“I trust you.”

His hazel eyes heated at those three little words, and he grasped his heart like I’d given him the greatest gift.

The others fell back as Jamison prowled forward. Large hands skimmed up my thighs before he slowly pressed them open. The intensity of his focus felt like a physical caress, and my pussy pulsed around nothing.

“Jamison...” His name was a supplication on my lips. Already, I ached to be filled, hating the emptiness.

He kneeled between my legs, tall and powerful, his arms, chest, and abdomen rippling with muscle. A hard, thick cock hung between his thigh, the knot at the base already visible, tempting me with the pleasure I knew it would bring.

A purr flared to life in his chest as he drank in the sight of me, bared before him, just as greedily. The man had barely touched me, and yet, my pulse raced and my nipples drew tighter.

With a torturously slow stroke of his cock, he settled on top of me, then captured my wrist and placed a kiss to the center of my palm.

“Are you ready for this, Sweetness?”

“Yes.” There was no hesitation. “I’ve never been more ready for anything.”

All my life I’d wished for the family I never felt I had. One who protected and cherished and *loved*. Stumbling across Pack Maverick had been the biggest blessing I’d never truly dared dream for.

“There might be some pain,” he warned with a wince of apprehension.

I cupped Jamison’s face, stroking my thumbs through the coarse hair of his beard. “I’m not scared. I can take it.”

Gods knew after everything I’d survived last week, a few bites weren’t going to break me. Besides, it was debatable that they’d even hurt.

To make my point, I spread my thighs around his hips, already panting with anticipation.

“Then say it, Sweetness. Tell me what you need,” Jamison rasped, his sapphire eyes blazing as he held my gaze.

“Bite me, Alpha. Please. Make me yours.”

The feverish plea obliterated his lingering hesitation, and his restraint snapped, as I knew it would. His eyes fell closed and the sound he made was a cross between a growl and a groan.

It was primal and savage and brought about a fresh wave of slick. The fever ratcheted higher, threatening to pull me under.

“Please,” I breathed once more, and finally, Jamison moved.

His fingers slid inside me first, teasing and stretching to ensure I was ready to take him, but he shouldn’t have worried. Their earlier touches had thoroughly prepared me. Besides, I

was his Omega, his perfect compliment, and I'd been made to take him.

Notching himself at my opening, he pushed inside with one powerful plunge.

Oh *gods*.

My fingers dug into the toned muscles of his back, begging him not to slow. He was all broad shoulders and sinewy muscle, and I scraped my nails along his bronzed skin, throwing my head back and squeezing my eyes closed so I could just *feel*.

It had been far too long since I'd had him, and I was desperate for more.

Every stroke was deep and untamed, the force of his raw, powerful need driving me toward the edge. My heat overwhelmed me, and I let go, embracing the freefall as the fever rose higher.

I *burned* for my mates.

“More! I need more.”

Already, I was mindless as movement drew my attention to Leo, who kneeled at my side.

He stroked himself once, twice, then angled himself at my lips. “Open, Honey.”

I did what he asked, letting him claim my mouth. The taste of apples and cinnamon burst across my palette, adding another layer to his intoxicating scent. My pussy fluttered as I took them both, pulling a groan from Jamison as his hips stuttered.

“Fuck, Sweetness. Do that again,” he demanded.

I squeezed around him, loving how I made him lose his carefully honed control.

The erotic rhythm they set had stars bursting behind my eyes, and before long, my back arched as my pleasure ripped through me. Leo withdrew from my mouth, letting my scream of release fill the room.

Jamsion's pace faltered, his thrusts becoming rough and erratic before he cursed and slammed deep, filling me with his knot. The stretch was blissful, and I craned my neck, baring my throat, wordlessly begging for his claim.

We hadn't discussed where he wanted to bite me, but I instinctively knew he wanted it in a place everyone could see.

With a snarl, he laved the bare skin of my throat before sinking his teeth into my flesh. Ecstasy, unlike anything I'd ever experienced, detonated inside me.

One release bled into another as my world rearranged itself. I could almost feel the thread of connection spanning between our chests. And then he was there, in my head, in my heart, in my very soul.

The depth of his love for me stole my breath, stunning me with its ferocity. There was no beginning and no end. No conditions or reservations. My eyes flew open, and I stared at him in complete awe as my stoic Alpha lost himself in the pleasure of my body. His hips rocked, his swollen knot sending sparks of bliss firing through me as he grunted one last time and filled me.

On instinct, I dragged him down and nuzzled my lips against the crux of his throat. Without hesitation, I bit him back, hoping he'd feel the same flood of love in return.

"I love you, Little Omega," he rasped, his knot already deflating so he could withdraw. "Today. Tomorrow. Forever."

"I love you, too." It didn't need to be said. He knew. And yet, I wanted to give voice to the all-consuming emotion filling me to overflowing.

As much as I reveled in this rare moment of vulnerability, the fire licking through my veins wouldn't rest.

Leaning down, Jamison kissed me, and then he was gone.

Before the whimper rising in my throat could break free, Leo was there, taking his place above me, inside me.

Calloused hands cupping my cheeks, he held my gaze, murmuring words of love as he set a brutally fast pace.

Thankfully, my men seemed to understand what I needed. We'd have an entire heat to sate ourselves in every way imaginable, but right now, my Omega was desperate to be marked.

"That's it, Honey." His silver-blue eyes held mine. "Take all of me."

Without a knot, he seated himself to the hilt with every plunge, hitting deep, hidden places that made my toes curl.

Faster than I thought possible, another release consumed me. I broke apart on a cry, and Leo struck while I was at the height of my bliss. He chose my wrist, his teeth leaving me with a crescent-shaped mark that would scar to a silvery sheen.

"Gods," he groaned, feeling the same overwhelm of my emotions—including the pleasure he gave me with every stroke of his cock.

Arching up, I bite him back, leaving a similar, smaller crescent on his shoulder, feeling that same connection form between me and my Beta.

Leo took me harder, faster, until he spilled into me with a grunt and a string of unintelligible curses.

Using a move Hades had taught me, I rolled Leo until our positions were reversed.

He chuckled darkly, his hands landing on my hips to hold me steady, locking me against him with his grip rather than a knot. I leaned down and claimed his mouth the way he'd claimed my body.

I pulled back just far enough to meet his eyes. "You're mine now," I whispered, brushing the tip of my nose across his. "No take-backs," I promised, knowing he needed to hear the words to go along with the physical proof of my claim. "I love you, Leo."

His throat moved in a hard swallow and his fingers tightened on my hips. "I love you so fucking much."

"You're my rainbow," I whispered, keeping my tone low and just between us. It was a reference to our very first date

when he'd promised me that life was worth living and there would be a rainbow after the storm.

This pack was my second chance. They'd seen me through the rain, and added beautiful, vibrant color back into my life.

Hand cupping the back of my head, he dragged me down for a soul-shattering kiss, showing me without words exactly how much I meant to him.

I sucked his bottom lip before pulling back, my heat already nipping at my heels. The reprieve between orgasms was short, but I was grateful for the few minutes I had with each of my mates as we basked in the glow of our bonds.

Four more naked, aching hard men waited for me on the fringes, and I lifted off of Leo and crawled across my nest.

"Which one of us do you want next, Darling?" Thane asked, cerulean eyes hooded as he studied my every move.

"You," I breathed. "But gently."

"I'm not breakable," he huffed.

I kept my disagreement to an arched brow and crawled carefully into his lap.

He was already hard for me, his cock curved upward against the chiseled planes of his stomach.

I reached for him, stroking my hand from root to tip before I lined him up. So damn slowly, torturing us both, I sank down until he was buried inside me, filling the insatiable ache.

"Fuuuuuck," he hissed, his head tipping into the soft wall of the nest. "Ride me, Darling. Take what you need."

"Gods, I love the way you stretch me," I moaned, tipping my head back until my loose hair tickled the small of my back.

Thane reached up and lightly collared my throat, careful of the lingering bruises I wore like battle scars. The possessive hold erased the illusion that I was in charge just because I was on top. I bit my lip as he set the pace, guiding me with a steady hand, squeezing just enough to make my pussy throb.

“Thane!” His name was a rasp of air, a desperate plea, one he was all too willing to answer.

I rode him for what could've been minutes or could've been hours. Time was irrelevant here.

“Fuck yes. Take my knot, Darling.”

A choked moan was my only reply as he pulled my hips down, impaling me fully.

He swelled inside me, pressing against every delicious spot along my inner walls, but he didn't stop. I keened as he continued to rock me over him until I couldn't take the stimulation any longer. Fireworks glittered behind my tightly clenched lids as I came for him.

His distant roar was my only warning before he pulled me closer and sank his teeth into the curve of my shoulder opposite Jamison's bite, filling me with his release at the same time.

I was still shaking when I took his hand and reciprocated his bite with one of my own. I grinned down at the rapidly healing mark I left on the fleshy part of his thumb.

“I want you to see it every time you're cooking or working in the kitchen,” I panted. “A constant reminder that you belong to me. Always.”

More than my other mates, Thane needed to feel loved and accepted. Chosen.

“As if I could ever forget,” he murmured, voice low and husky with emotion, those cerulean eyes shining with love.

I felt him soften inside me, causing the unfulfilled heat to surge anew, but I pushed it back, worry snaking past the endless need still riding me. “I didn't hurt you, did I?”

“Not even a little.”

I opened my mouth to reply when tattooed hands landed on my hips from behind and dragged me up and off of Thane's cock. The sensation and unexpectedness shocked a moan out of me, answered by Hades' deep chuckle.

“Thane’s fine, Baby Girl. But I’m fucking dying here. It’s my turn.”

thirty-six



DEMI

I REACHED AROUND and playfully smacked him. “You could have waited until I’d finished having a moment,” I scolded.

Hades shrugged unrepentantly. “Seemed over to me.”

“You’re a brute.”

“And you fuckin’ love it,” he purred, sending a shiver down my spine without having to even touch me first.

Fuck. He was right. I *did* love it.

“On your hands and knees, Baby Girl. And if I were you, I’d find something to hold on to.”

He placed me back on the soft cushions, and for a brief second, I debated challenging him, but before I could, his hands landed in the center of my shoulder blades and he pushed me gently until my chest grazed the mattress.

“Present for your Alpha, Baby. Show me what’s mine.”

His voice was all hunger and confidence, and my body obeyed, my back arching submissively.

A few strokes later and he’d worked his massive length inside of me. My thighs shook with the effort to stay on my knees as the rungs of his piercings lit up all my sensitive nerve endings.

Fingers curled into the blankets below, I held on as he took me in hard, punishing strokes. His hips canted, and the small, erotic grunts he blessed me with fanned the flames of my need until I was an inferno.

“Yes! Yes! Yes!” Unintelligible words fell from my lips as I careened toward my fourth, or was it fifth, orgasm of the night. My head spun, my pussy spasmed, and my throat ached as I cried for mercy until pleasure stole my strength.

I collapsed against the mattress as Hades drove into me, filling me with his knot and then his cum. Full to bursting, it took me long moments to realize he hadn't bitten me.

"Hades—" Alarm shot through me, but before I could work myself into a good panic, he shushed me and smoothed his hand down my side. Braced on an arm to keep his weight off my back so he didn't crush me, he waited a few heartbeats until his knot released.

I felt empty as he slipped free and kissed his way along my spine.

"I've been thinking about where I want to bite you," he admitted as his lips whispered over the curve of my back. "And I've decided on the perfect place."

I relaxed into the mattress, figuring he was heading for my thigh or an ankle or somewhere equally innocuous. A sharp pain stung my right asscheck a second later, making me squeal and gaze over my shoulder in shocked disbelief as the bond locked into place.

"You bit my ass!" I didn't know whether to laugh or swat him all over again while the high of his endorphins, the depth of his love for me, and his bright, fizzy amusement echoed through my chest.

Hades smirked smugly down at his handiwork, his warm brown eyes sparkling with mischief. "Fuck yeah, I did. And now every time you sit down, you'll think of me. This ass is *mine*."

"You- you... brat!"

"You wanna spank me?" He waggled his dark brows, gazing up at me.

It was tempting. So damn tempting!

Narrowing my eyes, I shifted my weight until I knelt in front of him, pushed him onto his back, and climbed on top of him in reverse.

"What are you... Godsdamn." With my dripping, glistening pussy stunning him to stillness, I bent low and

struck. “AH! Fuck, Baby!”

Amused chuckles filled the room from my other men as they realized the devious brilliance of my plan.

Much like Hades had done, I smiled down at my handiwork; a perfect bite ringing the base of his shaft. “This *dick* is mine.”

“Come on, you big baby. You can’t tell me that hurt any worse than those piercings did,” Leo ribbed his best friend. “Besides, it’s hot as fuck.”

Hades reared up and lifted me against his chest. “I was expecting the piercings!” he countered. His expression changed as he bent to see his new mark, shock bleeding to reverence as he admired the healing scar. “But... you make a good point.”

Eli shook his head at our antics, smiling down at me as he offered me a hand. “How are you feeling, Love?”

“Tired, but not nearly done.”

My heat had given me the smallest reprieve as I claimed Hades, but I still only had four connections thrumming in my chest. I felt... incomplete.

Eli appraised Knox, the two sharing silent communication and coming to an agreement.

“How do you feel about taking both of us?” Eli offered.

I squirmed as unquenchable hunger flared brightly. “Gods yes.”

“Thank fuck, because I don’t think I can wait patiently any longer,” Knox growled, already prowling across the nest.

The two of them pressed me between them, Eli claiming my mouth while Knox kissed gently over the healing bites on either side of my neck, his fingers trailing over the one on my wrist at the same time. Each graze sent a new tingle of awareness shooting to my core, almost like invisible strings connected each of the marks directly to my sex.

Well, that was... *new*. Not unwelcomed, but surprising.

“Fuck, do you feel that?” Leo whispered loudly from somewhere beyond the center of the nest.

“Hell yes, I do,” Thane groaned.

“Godsdamn. I didn’t know we’d be able to feel...” Jamison’s words trailed off into a grunt as Knox licked across Jamison’s mark.

“I have no idea what they’re talking about, but it’s making me jealous,” Knox growled.

Eli chuckled. “I believe they’re discussing the fact that when you touch one of her bites,” he purposely skimmed his fingers over Hades’ mark, making the big man shout in surprise while I squirmed from his touch, “the owner feels an echo of it in his own mark.” He nodded toward the man in question, who was giving his groin a startled look.

It took half a second for the implication to sink in past the need thrumming inside me, but when it did, I couldn’t stop a snicker.

“Fuuuuuck, that’s going to complicate things.” Hades’ cock had already reawakened. He was half-hard without a single physical touch.

A wicked grin curled my lips as I debated whether or not I could make him come just from stroking his mark on my ass.

As if he was wondering the same, he met my gaze and arched a brow, reaching down and running a finger along the ring of my bite.

Lashing fluttering, I bit back a moan, feeling that touch as intensely as if he’d reached across the room and caressed me himself.

Heat flared back to life, and I reached blindly for Eli and Knox.

“Gods, that seems unfair,” I commented through the haze of lust threatening to drown me. “Each of you only has one bite. I’m going to wear six. *Six!*”

If they touched those marks with any sense of coordination, I’d be a puddle. From the low, masculine

chuckles suddenly filling the room, I knew they were thinking the exact same thing.

Knox captured my chin between his thumb and forefinger, turning my face toward his. Leaning over my shoulder, he claimed my lips, devouring me and driving all the thoughts from my head.

His tongue worked to assuage the heat burning up my insides, but it wasn't enough. I hooked my arm around his neck, dragging him closer and deepening the kiss while Eli cupped my breasts. Bending, he laved his tongue over one taut peak before sucking it into his mouth.

Fates, I was never going to get enough of this. The combination of their hands on my body, their mouths working in tandem... I writhed between them, frantic for more.

“That’s it, Sunshine,” Knox encouraged. “Show us how much you want us.”

Together, they fanned the flames into a wildfire, until I begged and pleaded for them to make me theirs.

Slowly, Knox readied me to take him from behind, then cautiously, tenderly, pushed inside. Breathing through the stretch and initial discomfort, I tried to stay relaxed until he was fully seated.

“Fuck, Sunshine, you feel so good,” he groaned, harsh breaths warming my neck. “Now, wrap your legs around Eli. Let him sink into that pretty pussy.”

I did as he instructed, letting Eli help position me over him. Canting his hips, he took control and notched himself in my opening, coating himself in my wetness before gradually rocking deeper... and deeper still.

I’d done this before, had expected the sublime stretch, but the bliss of being taken by two of my mates still stole my breath.

My head dropped back against Knox’s chest as they moved in perfect synchronization, trapping me between them.

“So good! So, *so* good!” I moaned deliriously as pleasure coiled in my belly, ratcheting higher and higher.

The room was filled with our scents, my perfume at its strongest. It soaked the walls and wove into every pillow, every blanket, creating a heady mix that sent my thoughts scattering.

Eli’s purr sprang to life, followed rapidly by Knox’s, just as their pace quickened. The vibrations traveled along their pistoning cocks and into me, making my eyes spring wide and startling a cry from my lips. Sweet mercy. It felt like I was suddenly being fucked with sex toys.

My hands scrambled, clawing at their shoulders and necks until I finally found purchase in their hair. I held onto both Eli and Knox as they ravaged me, taking and giving in equal measure.

Release built rapidly, growing and swelling until I knew it would drown me. A few more strokes and the wave crashed through me with such force, I didn’t know up from down, left from right, or where I stopped and they began.

I screamed, arching between the two rock hard bodies of my mates. With one last thrust, Knox, followed by Eli, slammed home and knotted me. The fullness was *devastatingly* perfect, sending me careening into yet another orgasm before the first one had fully ebbed.

I lost myself to the frenzy as they pulsed and throbbed, branding me with hot ropes of release.

Eli dipped his head and his teeth left their mark, ringing my left breast.

The golden threads of our bond wound stronger and solidified in place. His love was an endless ocean, as wide as it was deep.

Eli turned his face into my hair, his lips grazing across my ear with his whispered vow, “I know you can feel how much I love you, Demi, but I have to say it, anyway. I will love you until my dying breath, and even then, I know I’ll love you into the afterlife. You’re my world, the very air I breathe, and I

promise I'll strive to make you happy every day for the rest of your life."

It was the most romantic sentiment I'd ever heard, and my heart squeezed.

"Eli," I sighed his name and stole a kiss, pouring everything I had into the unhurried lip lock. I rested my forehead against his when my lungs protested the lack of oxygen, whispering, "That was beautiful."

Desperate to show him I felt the same, I debated where to sink my teeth.

"You should bite him somewhere visible too," Knox stated, grazing his fingers down the side of my throat, sending tingles of delight across my nerve-endings. "It'll help with the flirty nurses at the hospital."

Flirty nurses? Oh, hell no. A surge of possessiveness rose, and my eyes narrowed in on a spot high on Eli's neck.

The doctor grinned, enjoying my jealousy. "Mark me wherever you want, Love."

"I'm all for a visible claim." Suddenly, I was questioning the wisdom of biting Hades in a place no one but me would ever see. These men were *mine*, and I wanted the world to know it.

Eli tipped his head, and I had to admit, the submission looked damn good on him.

I laved my tongue along the corded muscle of his throat, enjoying the flavor of his skin—chai and spices. The spot I'd settled on was perfect, easily seen above the neckline of his scrubs or any button-down he wore. It only took a moment to stake my claim and leave him with the natural tattoo that symbolizes our mating.

"Mine," I murmured, peppering kisses over the mark and then up to his ear where I licked the shell of his ear, reveling in the wracking tremble that worked through him.

He purred. "Don't worry, Love. You're the only woman I'll ever have eyes for."

Five bonds now lived in my chest. I just needed one more.

Knox.

A few moments later, both men were able to disengage, and they laid me gently against the soft blankets. My fingers skimmed over Knox's arm as he stood and disappeared.

Chest tight, I reassured myself nothing was wrong, that he'd be right back, but the Omega in me whimpered, regardless. For as much sex as I'd had, for as many perfect golden threads now resided in my heart, I was still fragmented—unfinished.

I needed my last bond.

I needed Knox.

Water ran in the bathroom, and then he reappeared with a wet washcloth.

The vice released its death grip on my lungs as he settled beside me. It was ridiculous to have been so unsettled when he'd only been mere feet away, but logic didn't exist in the middle of this hormone fest.

"You were worried," Knox commented, rather than asked.

Could he read the anxiety on my face? The tension that had tightened my otherwise languid muscles?

"It's silly."

He tucked a lock of my hair back, murmuring, "If it bothered you, it's not silly. Everything you feel is important to me, Sunshine. I won't leave again. I only went to get you this."

Gently, lovingly, he spread my thighs and cleaned the glistening mess they'd all made. The cloth tenderly abraded my skin, stoking the burning embers of my heat, before he discarded it off to the side.

"Knox." His name was a hoarse command.

"Where do you want to bite me, Sunshine?"

I rolled into him, both of us lying on our sides facing each other. Shimmying down, I didn't wait, branding him with a mark right above his heart.

The rough pads of Knox's fingers ran adoringly over the light wound, and he stared at me with no small amount of awe, experiencing the extent of my affection and devotion.

"Now you know everything," I murmured, gazing up at him, memorizing every facet of his astonished, wonder-struck expression.

"Fuck, Demi. It's so much more than I dared to hope for."

Knox slid down my body until his nose practically nuzzled my center. Grabbing my knee, he lifted my leg up and plunged his teeth into my inner thigh.

The last connection snapped into place, sending bright, glittering light bursting behind my closed lids. I gasped, throwing a hand over my heart as the intensity of our completed pack bonds wove together. Those individual strands became stronger together, forging into something unbreakable.

Tears slipped from my eyes as a sense of peace and undeniable rightness stole through me.

Suddenly, my entire pack was there, surrounding me, touching me, kissing and worshipping every inch of my skin. Their love sang through my mind and resounded in my heart.

Purrs built in their chests and the comforting burr lulled me into decadent relaxation. I fell into it, taking the small reprieve my heat gave me now that I'd had them all.

"Your ours. Our Omega," Jamison declared.

Shocking my mates who hadn't yet heard it, my own purr rumbled to life, adding an extra layer to the contentment and happiness I knew they could feel. It radiated outward like an ever-growing ripple, starting small and growing until it turned into an unstoppable wave. Their answering joy warmed me from the inside out.

A few months ago, I never could have imagined this would be my life; proud to be an Omega, free, with a pack of my

own. But now that I had them, I was never letting them go.

“My pack. My family. My home,” I murmured, snuggling down in their warm embrace. “Just... *mine*.”

epilogue



DEMI

TWO MONTHS LATER

I WAVED to the last patron, tucking away the money they'd pressed into my hand as I watched them carry off their newly acquired painting.

"Damn, Honey. You really cleaned up." Leo gazed around my nearly empty booth, pride shining in his silver-blue eyes.

I threw my arms out and swung in a slow circle, careful not to move too fast, and set off a wave of queasiness.

"Gods, I was nervous, but it went so much better than I expected." I beamed.

When Jamison first suggested I sell my artwork at the annual Maverick Falls fair, I was skeptical that anyone would buy one of my paintings. But with my men's encouragement, I took a leap of faith, shelled out the vendor fee, and spent the last two months painting my ass off so I had enough stock to sell.

Selling one painting would have been incredible, but my entire collection? I was still registering the miracle.

Thane caught me in a hug, kissing me thoroughly before gracing me with a wide, bright smile. "Once again, the Fates are on your side."

"Nah, this wasn't fate," Hades countered as he helpfully started breaking down my display. "Her work sold because she's got raw, natural talent. All she needed was a venue to showcase her art, and I knew the people would flock to her like bees to honey."

Leo turned his ball cap around, settling it on his head backward before scrubbing a hand over the lower half of his

face, deep in thought. “Do bees flock to honey?”

“Feels right.” Hades shrugged noncommittally.

“Bears would flock to honey. Bees make honey. They’d flock to pollen,” Thane chimed in helpfully as he counted the money in my cash box.

“Or flowers,” Leo added, invested in the argument.

“Only because flowers have pollen. Ergo, I win.” Thane grinned cheekily and waggled his eyebrows.

I bit my lip to hold back a smile as the three of them kept bantering.

“What’s gotten into them?” Knox entered the booth and tipped his head in the other’s direction. His platinum hair was still damp from the station’s dunk tank, but he’d switched out his police uniform for civilian attire.

I pulled on the towel that hung around his neck and drew him in. Pushing onto tiptoes, I kissed one corner of his mouth, then the other, working myself up as much as I captured his attention.

Picking up on my light, effervescent happiness through the bond, Knox trapped my face between his palms, stole a full, deep kiss, and then arched a brow when he pulled back. “Are you going to tell me what’s got you floating on clouds? Surely it can’t be the three musketeers over there.” He jerked his head in their direction without ever breaking eye contact.

Caving to my bubbly mood, I bounced on my toes and nodded toward the barren displays. “Look.”

Finally prying his gaze off mine, Knox peered around, and a slow, deliberate smirk tugged at one side of his mouth.

“You did it, Sunshine. You sold them all!” He sounded awed—not surprised, but wonder-struck. All the way here, he’d insisted I’d sell out by lunch. It’d taken a little longer than that, but I was just tickled that he hadn’t been wrong.

“All except for one,” Eli commented. I turned in time to see him and Jamison entering the booth carrying two trays of fair food—hot dogs, hamburgers, gyros, a mountain of fries,

and soft drinks. They set it all down on one of the empty tables lining my booth.

The mixed scents made my stomach lurch, and I pressed the back of my hand against my mouth, willing the nausea down.

“Are you holding this for a customer?” Jamison asked, picking up the canvas wrapped in brown paper and glancing around as if he expected patrons to appear out of thin air. The sun was dipping toward the horizon, the lights of the rides and the soft illumination of string lights and lanterns setting a soft glow against the emerging twilight. The only people left in the fairgrounds were the vendors who were packing up.

All my men turned to me, probably picking up on the slight distress I was trying to conceal as I worked to block out the smell of food making me queasy. Swallowed, willing the sick feeling away, a smile wobbled on my lips.

“That’s actually something for all of you.” I twisted my hands together. I’d had to paint it once my mates were asleep, sneaking out of bed and down to my studio every night for the past week. I’d kept it hidden at the back of my stack of canvases so they wouldn’t catch sight of it before I was ready.

Leo came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my middle. “You painted us something?” He kissed my temple as I leaned back into him and placed my hands over his.

“Can we open it here or do we need to wait until we get home?” Hades asked as Jamison set the painting on the table between us.

All my men surrounded it, staring down at the brown wrapping like it was Christmas, and they couldn’t wait to tear into their gift. Their enthusiasm was endearing—especially because it was only a painting.

I bit my lip and nodded. “You can open it.”

Eli smirked. “How do we want to do this? Each of us takes a corner?”

“Fates, just open it already. I’m dying here,” Thane rubbed his hands together eagerly, and somehow I could picture him

as the kid, shaking all the boxes to guess what was inside while he waited for permission to rip into them.

I snickered and tipped my head to the side to gaze up at Leo. “Don’t you wanna open it with them?”

“I think I got the best job. Holding onto you. Besides, I can see just fine from here.” He stroked his fingers over his mark on my wrist and made me shiver. I nuzzled closer, content to be in his arms.

Jamison hooked his thumb into the corner and ripped the paper. Between them, they tore the wrapping away and stared down at the picture of the savannah dotted with animals—an elephant, a giraffe, a hippo, a lion, and a gazelle. The style differed from my usual realistic flavor. It was done in oils, the animals a little more impressionistic.

Thane’s eyes snapped to mine from across the table, wide and searching.

“Demi...” Jamison rasped, seeming to have landed on the same conclusion, his narrowed gaze barely dragging from the painting to where I was nestled in Leo’s arms.

My Beta had stilled behind me, barely breathing.

“This is very cool,” Hades murmured, still studying the landscape. Bracing his elbow on the arm that crossed his abdomen, he cupped his chin, thinking. “We could hang it in the entry.”

I bit my lip to keep from laughing. “I actually had another idea for where we could hang it...” I let the words trail off, looking at Knox next to see if he’d figured it out.

His brows were drawn so far together, they were practically touching.

“The stairwell needs art too,” Hades continued, completely oblivious.

Leo, who must have caught on already, chuckled, the rumble vibrating into me as his hands splayed over my stomach.

“It’s for the nursery...” I whispered.

Eli scooped up the painting, continuing to scan the image before he gazed up, face slack, eyes wide. “You’re pregnant?” His voice was awed.

Hades jolted, as startled as a deer caught in the headlights. “Did he just say—”

“Pregnant. He said pregnant...” Knox parroted, staggering backward and throwing a hand over his heart like it was about to beat out of his chest.

I couldn’t tell if he was happy or terrified. And what about the others?

The whole booth went silent in complete shock.

I understood. It was a lot to take in. My brain was spinning, and I’d known for a week.

You’re pregnant. There’s a little life growing inside of you.

I dug into my pocket and pulled out the most recent pregnancy test, thankful it was clean and had a cap. Two pink lines stood in stark relief against the sea of white.

I held it up for them to see. “That’s what it says.”

My heart squeezed as Leo’s palms stroked soothingly over the still-flat plane of my stomach, his purr blazing to life as he sensed my apprehension.

Gods, I wanted them to be happy about this. What if they thought it was too soon?

Tears watered in my eyes, and I blinked them back as I gazed at the stunned expressions on my men’s faces.

“Are you happy?” I asked quietly.

I didn’t know what I would do if they weren’t. Thane wanted a house full of kids and he’d made it sound like the rest were on board with that vision, but this would be the true test. More than one of them had spoken about knocking me up, but a kink during sex differed from the reality of having a baby.

And yet, I could picture our growing life so easily—a family, our house filled with love, laughter, and warmth.

I knew each of my mates would make amazing fathers, and for many of us, be the parents we never had.

“Sweetness...” Jamison’s emotion-laden voice broke the silence, pulling me back into the present.

Utter chaos erupted.

Whoops of excitement filled the air. A pent-up breath rushed out of me and the vice grip on my lungs eased. My pack surrounded me on all sides, their hands grazing over my arms, my back, my sides, my hair—anywhere they could reach.

And I reached for them too, sharing this moment of pure joy.

Peace washed over me, and a love greater than any I’d ever known swelled in my chest as my world instantly changed. They wanted this and were just as excited as I’d been when I’d found out.

“Demi! Darling!” Thane picked me up and spun me around. I laughed even as the fast motion incited another bout of queasiness.

“Careful with her!” Knox chastised. Stealing me from his packmate, he tucked me against his chest like I was breakable. “We all know she hasn’t been feeling well.” The grazing touch down my back helped lessen the churning in my stomach.

“Sweet Fates. No wonder you’ve been nauseous lately.” Thane shoved his hand through his golden hair. “It was morning sickness this whole time.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t realize it sooner,” Eli added. “The signs were all there.”

“Gods, we’re such idiots.” Knox shook his head, then leaned down to give me the gentlest kiss. “You’ve been tired lately, too.”

“And your breasts have been sore,” Leo supplemented sheepishly, remembering when he’d tried to play with them last night and they’d been overly sensitive—and not in a good way.

“Oh my gods, could you say that any louder?” I snickered, sending an apologetic look to the lady in the next booth.

“Probably,” Hades shrugged.

“Do you really want everyone in a five-mile radius to hear about my *breasts*?” I challenged quietly, crossing my arms under my chest, which I belatedly realized only drew more attention to the body parts in question.

Hades’ attention immediately dropped, and he mumbled, “No. You’re right. Those are just for us.”

I pressed my lips together to suppress a laugh as he became thoroughly distracted. Bantering with his stubborn ass was one of the many highlights of mated life.

“*Fuck...*” he rasped. “Your tits are going to get *huge*.” He was practically salivating, and I smacked him lightly, already blushing.

“Stop,” I scolded, but secretly, I loved it.

I loved him.

I loved *all* of them.

“You’re carrying our baby,” Leo murmured in my ear, still sounding stunned.

Jamison came around the table. Capturing my chin between his thumb and forefinger, he tilted my face to his. “How do you feel about this, Little Omega? Are *you* happy?” he rumbled, swiping a tear I hadn’t even realized had fallen from my cheek with the pad of his thumb.

I gave him a watery smile. “These are happy tears. I promise.”

It hadn’t escaped my notice that Jamison hadn’t voiced his own feelings on the news. I stepped into his body and placed my hands on his chest. His heart beat rapidly.

“I know this is shocking news. None of us planned for this to happen, but it’s always possible when an Omega is in heat, even with birth control. Are you—”

“Demi Leigh,” he scolded lightly. “If you’re about to ask me if I’m upset about this, you can save your breath, Sweetness.” He covered my hand with his own. “You feel that?” His fingers tapped to the rhythm of his heart. “It beats for *you*.”

Taking one of my hands, he pressed a kiss to the center of my palm and slowly lowered himself before me.

I gasped at the sight of such a powerful Alpha on his knees.

His hands slid my t-shirt up and splayed over my stomach. Pressing a kiss against the soft slope of my belly, he murmured, “Hi, little bean.” His thumbs stroked over my bare skin. “I’m one of your dads.”

“Holy fuck,” Hades cursed roughly, eyes comically wide before a huge, goofy grin dominated his features. “I’m gonna be a *daddy*.”

“Yeah, you are,” Leo clamped him on the shoulder. “And you’re probably going to have to get that cursing under control. Little ears, my friend. Little ears.”

“Aw Fu—” Hades winced, eyes darting to me, “—udge.”

Eli chuckled. “You’ve got a while before it becomes a problem. You’ll get there.”

“Dibs on being called ‘Papa!’” Thane raised his hand in the air.

Eli moved to my side, cupped my face, and gave me a heart-wrenchingly sweet kiss. “How could you possibly worry we wouldn’t be happy about this? You’re our entire world, Demi Leigh. We’ve dreamed for years about finding our Omega and filling our home with kids. The day you walked into our lives, you made our hearts whole.”

I knew he was right because I felt exactly the same way. The day they found me, my universe changed for the better. Each one of them completed a part of me I hadn’t even realized was missing. I’d been living half alive until we’d met, and now? Now I couldn’t imagine my life without them.

I loved these men more than painting, more than chocolate, more than air itself. They were a living, breathing part of me I could no longer survive without.

And every single day, these men showed me the same resounding love in return. It echoed through the bonds in my chest, nearly taking me to my knees with the strength and breadth of it. This life was more than I ever could've imagined, and I held on to it with a fragile kind of hope, praying nothing would come along and tear it away.

After everything I'd been through, it was ingrained in me to expect the worst. Sometimes I woke at night absolutely terrified it would all vanish before my eyes.

It had taken a good therapist to realize that kind of reaction had become ingrained after years of abuse, but it was something I was working on. Thankfully, my men were endlessly patient and often understood my insecurities and fears thanks to the bonds that allowed us to feel echoes of each other's emotions.

Even now, they surrounded me, letting their purrs grow until they blanketed me in comfort.

"I shouldn't have doubted," I whispered. "It's just that I know this changes everything."

"For the better," Jamison rumbled, still on his knees before me, his thumbs still moving in wide strokes over my skin.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, my fingers playing in the hair at his nape as I gazed down into his sapphire-colored eyes. With a deep breath, I released any tendrils of doubt I had left and let his utter faith that everything would be alright wash over me. As I'd done endless times before, I borrowed his strength and promised I'd do my best to emulate him.

Faith took daring confidence. It was taking that first step when you couldn't see the ground through the fog. It was holding onto the light when all you felt was darkness. It was knowing the storm would end, even as wind whipped around you and thunder cracked overhead. It was believing in the rainbow that would color the sky afterward.

Faith wasn't easy, but nothing in life worth having ever was.

Thanks to new friends and faithful allies, Pack Silver had disappeared for good, unable to torture any other Omegas. After days of Felix's tireless hacking, he'd eventually found hidden logs Anton had kept from each auction detailing every sale. With the help of the FBI, Pack Jacobs had extracted every woman who'd been sold, arresting the packs that had taken part in the illegal acquisition of Omegas.

Each one of us had been saved and given a second chance at life, and I wouldn't waste it.

The residents of Maverick Falls had welcomed me with open arms. The gym and the restaurant were all thriving, despite the time my men had spent away, dedicated to keeping me safe. My small painting studio had taken off. And now we were pregnant, expecting a little bundle of joy in seven months.

So, yes. Today, I chose faith. I chose to believe in happily ever afters, and this new little life marked the beginning of ours.

Resounding love and excitement colored the bonds, filling my chest with contentment.

"We have something for you," Knox whispered, digging into his pocket and pulling out a small box.

"We bought it today and were planning to give it to you when we got home later, but I think this is the perfect moment," Thane took the box from Knox, then passed it to Hades.

"We love you so damn much," my gentle giant murmured, kissing the top of my head as he passed the box to Leo.

"You're already mine, Honey," Leo said, then smiled mischievously. "No take-backs," he mirrored the words I'd uttered to him after our bonding. "But this is a little something extra to remind you how much we adore you."

I tried to protest. "You guys didn't have to do anything."

“Shh, Love,” Eli soothed. “Let us spoil you a little.”

I arched a brow at him. “You spoil me every day.”

“Good. Then we’re doing something right,” he grinned and passed the box to Jamison, who leaned in and kissed my belly one more time before pulling back enough to gaze up at me.

“Demi Leigh, our Little Omega,” Jamison rumbled. “I can’t begin to tell you how much I love you. There aren’t enough words to describe the feeling that lives in my chest every waking moment.” He pushed a burst of love through the bond, stealing my breath all over again from the strength of it. “What I do know is that a lifetime of loving you will never be enough. You’re sweet and smart and so damn giving, and you’re going to make the most amazing mother. You already wear each of our marks, but we’re greedy and want more.” He flipped open the box, and I gasped.

There, lying in a sea of dark velvet, was a rose gold band with seven brilliant diamonds. Each one was encased in a scalloped millgrain beaded border. It had a distinct vintage look, though it sparkled as if it were brand new.

“There’s a diamond for each of us,” Thane whispered.

“Though the middle stone is larger than the others,” Eli added. “It represents you, at our center.”

“We want you to be ours in every way,” Hades purred, wrapping his arms around my middle gently.

Leo’s fingers brushed against my wrist, directly over his mark. “Right down to your last name.”

Jamison took the ring from its nest and set the empty box down.

“What do you say, Sunshine?” Knox asked hopefully.

Jamison held up the ring, taking my right hand in his. “Will you marry us, Demi Leigh?”

Tears blossomed behind my eyes, but I blinked them back, wanting to memorize every detail of this moment so I’d never forget the love shining in their eyes or the hope sliding through the bond as they collectively held their breath.

“Yes,” I whispered, then shouted it at the top of my lungs, “Yes!”

I bounced up and down on my toes while Jamison laughed and tried to get the ring on. It hugged my finger perfectly and sparkled in the emerging sunset, a blaze of color catching in the glittering diamonds.

My men surged around me, kissing and hugging me, hands skimming over my belly that would grow round in the coming months.

This was love.

This was happiness.

This was worth the broken road it had taken to wind up right here, with these men.

My pack. My mates. And soon, my husbands.

The silvery sheen of my bite marks already adorned their skin, but now they would be mine in every way imaginable, and my heart wanted nothing less.

I would become Demi Leigh *Maverick*—the last name we’d all take as one unified pack.

Shedding my past and claiming my future had never felt so right.

It had taken me a long time to realize you couldn’t see the stars without the darkness. The journey to get here had been long and arduous, but there was beauty in survival and strength in healing. I’d come out the other side stronger for all I’d lived through.

But now? Now I chose to live in the light.

Because believe it or not, happily ever afters did exist.

And I finally found mine.

The End

There will be more in the Runaway Omega world, coming soon!

want more?

Interested in getting extra scenes of Demi and her pack? Or maybe you'd like more information on the next Runaway Omega book featuring Pack Jacobs and their very own Omega?

Come join my newsletter to stay up to date on upcoming books, release dates, teasers, extra content, giveaways, and more!

Newsletter

<https://geni.us/harpersnl>

To all my beautiful readers,

Thank you so much for reading Demi's story! I hope you loved all the ups and downs and the way the characters grew to get to their Happily Ever After. I've absolutely loved creating this world, and I'm excited to explore the other stories that are living in my head for some of our side characters!

For updates, sneak peeks, giveaways, and more, I'd love for you to come and join my newsletter [here](#).

I also have a Facebook group called [The Wylde Side](#) where we can talk all things books and I share teasers, character art, and everything in between. I hope to see you there!

Until next time,

Harper Wylde

also by harper wylde

*All ebooks available exclusively on Amazon and *free* to read with Kindle Unlimited*

RUNAWAY OMEGA

Believe It or Knot: Part One

Believe It or Knot: Part Two

PHOENIX RISING

Born of Embers

Hidden in Smoke

Spark of Intent

Forged in Flames

Blaze of Wrath

Changed by Fire

Beauty from Ashes

Glimmer of Cinders

THE VEIL KEEPER

Shadow Touched

Blood Bound

Tethered Magick

Rising Darkness

A COURT OF GILT AND SHADOW

Within Obsession and Lies

Through Illusions and Deceit

Amidst Secrets and Shadows

Upon Crowns and Bones (tbd)

THE HUNTRESS

An Assassin's Death

An Assassin's Deception

An Assassin's Destiny

STANDALONES

Goddess of Chaos