



DREIA WELLS

GOING
DOWN
SMOOTH

PART **TWO**

AN OMEGAVEVERSE
NOVEL

GOING DOWN SMOOTH

AN OMEGERVERSE NOVEL, PART TWO

DREIA WELLS

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Going Down Smooth (An Omegaverse Novel, Part Two)

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When the world tells you no, stand on your soap box, raise your middle finger in the air and tell those bitches, yes. This book is dedicated to those who aren't afraid to make some noise and fuck some shit up.

“To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment.”

-Ralph Waldo Emerson

THE STORY SO FAR

We need a recap. So, I thought I would refresh your memories. Okay, where to begin? Oh yeah, as they say in all traditional novels...

Once upon a time there was a girl named Mercy. We met her at the beginning of part one running through the woods in the pouring rain. Mercy, the girl without a designation, was destined to be an Alpha, yet, as fate had it, she presented as an Omega. Adjusting to her new reality wasn't an option. She was thrown into a mating ceremony with her best friends; a group of four Alphas she'd grown up with. We find out that Mercy chose to reject them rather than doom herself to a life she considered would be nothing but a prison. Upon catching her in the woods, the Alphas, Knight, Nate, Trey, and Lox tried to convince Mercy to stay; rejection would ruin them in the eyes of their community. They pleaded with her to give them a chance to prove that nothing would change between them; that she was still their fellow Alpha. Mercy, in a state of heightened panic, was determined that leaving was the best decision. She ran. She rejected them, and Knight used his Alpha bark, sealing their fate, commanding her to never come back.

Five years later... Is it all coming back to you now?

Mercy returned home to attend her father, Benjamin's, funeral. Not sure what to expect, she told her best friend Freeya she intended to avoid her once best friends, pay her respects to her late father, listen to the reading of his will, then leave. Mercy was eager to get the hell away from Frankfort as

fast as her feet could carry her. Mercy had been on heat suppressants the entire time she was away. On the advice of her doctor, she came off her suppressants to avoid the possibility of long-term damage. Determined to tough it out on her own, yet realizing she couldn't, Mercy booked a slot at Rent-A-Knot back in Chicago. Little did she know coming off her suppressants when she did was the worst timing for herself. One sniff of her rejected mates' scents sent her hormones into overdrive, triggering her first heat.

After the funeral and an altercation with her sister, Faith's, Alphas, Mercy was reunited briefly with the men she walked away from all those years ago. Of course, she panicked and ran yet again, determined to get to her parents' pack house and hear the reading of her father's will.

As her heat began to worsen, she was convinced she could ride it out alone. But the close proximity of her rejected mates in her father's office only made things worse, and then the shit really hit the fan. Mercy was saved for last in her father's will, only to find out she was the sole beneficiary of Smooth Bourbon. That was what she'd always wanted, her dream, a future she never thought she'd have, everything she'd ever wanted. Ha! Nothing was ever that easy. Old daddy Benjamin put a stipulation in place: he gave Mercy the ultimatum to mate with her rejected Alphas, or she'd get nothing. The company would fall into the hands of her other father, Christopher, a power-hungry man who was determined to grow his super church and increase the influence of his backward-thinking congregation.

Mercy decided to accept the stipulations just as the heat took over. Knight convinced her that they wanted to help her through her heat, and to help her get her father's company. Most importantly, time and distance hadn't dampened their love and devotion to her. They still wanted her. Cue big mega swoon.

Mercy's heat lasted an entire week of smutty deliciousness. She woke, finding herself in a massive cabin her Alphas had built for her in the woods, with the hope that one day she would return to them.

The Alphas made a huge declaration of their love for her; kneeling at her feet, they submitted to her, claiming she was their Alpha; Pack Biggs became Pack Smooth.

Happily ever after, right? No, of course not. Mercy still had to claim her father's legacy and convince the board that she was the Omega for the job. Yeah, and let's not forget the whole 'they still needed to mate her, bite her, and claim her as their own,' thing.

Days later Mercy's bestie, Freeya, came into the picture. As Mercy's best friend and assistant, she moved to Frankfort to help Mercy with the takeover of Smooth Bourbon. Freeya was a Beta, rejected by her own family for not being the Omega they had wished for. She was lonely and longed for her own pack. Upon meeting Mercy's Alphas, her longing only grew. Later that night, at M. Bar, a bar owned and operated by Mercy's Alphas, Freeya had a chance encounter with a male Omega, Omari, and as they say in other stories, the rest is history.

Cue doom and gloom music.

Beta Stefan, a friend of the Alphas, entered the story, revealing he didn't like Mercy and that she was the talk of the town. He announced that Pack Biggs was defective and didn't deserve to be mated to her in the first place. Yeah, he was jealous. Nate lost his shit, knocked Stefan's teeth out, and fired him, telling him to kick rocks. Literally. But that was not the last we heard from him. Evil laugh. The guys weren't concerned about Stefan, he was harmless, right?

Mercy attended the board meeting, like the boss bitch she was, with one goal in mind. Freeya arrived, her scent changed, and with a secret of her own. She was now mated to the pack she'd met at the club. Pack Savoy: Avion, Omari, Vic, and Dex. She kept her new mating to herself, deciding it wasn't the best time to tell Mercy, so, she hid the bites.

They ran into Mercy's father, Christopher, on the way to the board meeting; his last-ditch effort to take away the company from Mercy. He failed, of course, but not before he insulted his daughter and left in a huff.

Mercy wowed the board, winning them all over with her plan for a new progressive Smooth Bourbon, with equal opportunities for Omegas in the process. Happily ever after, right? Nope, not even close.

The guys decided that with all the threats and protests surrounding Mercy's rise to power, she should have bodyguards wherever she went, especially at work because they were worried about her safety. Until then, she should have been safe at the pack house. No one would dare come into their territory to harm their Omega, their beautiful future mate. Well, that was where it got dicey.

Every Sunday, the guys hiked through the woods, a tradition they had kept up from their past with Mercy. Mercy decided she wanted to relax, kick up her feet, read some smut, and chill. Thinking that she was safe and protected within the walls of the house, they left her to enjoy her afternoon of romance novels.

Mercy got lost in her book, hoping to receive a call from Freeya. Her phone did ring but it was her sister, Faith, calling, her voice was full of terror and panic. Mercy went on high alert, not thinking about anything but getting to her sister. Faith told her she was hiding in the distillery at Smooth Bourbon. Mercy rode solo to rescue her sister from her abusive Alphas. The moment she arrived she immediately regretted her decision. Her instincts were screaming that there was danger all around her, but Mercy, super badass sister that she was, only wanted to save Faith. She fired off a text message alerting her Alphas to the situation.

Hearing Faith's cries of pain, she ran through the distillery, to find Faith being brutalized by her Alphas in a horrific display of domination. Seeing red, Mercy attacked Chasson viciously, they fought, and Mercy gave as good as she got, leaving a nasty scar as a present on Chasson's face.

As she was lying hurt on the floor, Derrick told Mercy that her death had been bought and paid for. Before he could kill her, a bomb exploded in the distillery, thwarting his plan and he had no choice but to abandon Mercy, leaving her behind as the building burned all around her.

Mercy's phone rang. It was her Alphas, telling her they were on their way, but they learned of Mercy's fate. Smooth Bourbon was on fire and Mercy was trapped in the building with no way out. The guys told her to hold on but as she took in more and more smoke, her attempts to drag her broken body forward appeared futile.

She told the guys she loved them one last time and everything went black.

Yeah, that cliffhanger was pretty brutal. But fortunately, dear readers, the story continues.

Now, I didn't give you all the salacious details in between the key events, but that is the story so far.

If you're ready for part two...go ahead...turn the page. **Be warned: There's some content in this book that may be triggering to some.**

ONE

MERCY



“**M**iss Smooth...”

I hear voices calling out to me, but I’m pulled under once more. The weight on my chest sends me down, down, down into the depths of my being. I can’t breathe...

I am still me. Same eyes, same nose, same untamed tresses, curly and wild, just the way I like it. I am still Mercy Smooth.

I clench the fists that rest on my knees, and release a slow breath, accompanied by measured blinks. I am still me. The only difference now is the hormones going haywire inside me. Despite my brain making me feel things I don’t quite understand, I persist that I am indeed still me. I am in control. Why wouldn’t I be?

The idea that Omegas can’t handle extremes, that we aren’t fit to handle the everyday stresses of the world. Yeah, that is utter bullshit. Yet here I am, sitting in the choir’s dressing room, staring back at myself. My brown skin is smooth, natural. I refuse to wear an ounce of makeup. If I am going to be handed over to my best friends like a box of fried chicken, then this is who they will get. Mercy, their Mercy. I look at myself in the mirror and divert my eyes. Ugh, I hate white. Yes, I am untouched, a virgin. The idea of being paraded around in front of guests at a ceremony I would rather skip, makes me feel dirty and used already.

I sigh.

“What about what I want?” I ask myself, not meaning to catch my mother’s look of disapproval in the mirror. I let my shoulders fall forward in defeat. I have asked this same question for weeks since my designation crash landed in my lap, changing my life forever. My mother tsks in frustration as she moves around the room we are in, waiting for the mating ceremony to begin. I glance up at the mirror again, catching my sister, Faith’s, eye roll.

“You should be grateful. You have Alphas who you are already comfortable with. Not all of us get that choice. So, stop complaining and accept your fate. Be glad they want someone as strong willed as you.” Faith frowns, something dark passes across her face, then she quickly glances away. She spots my floral headpiece made of white roses and walks over to me with it in her hands. I can only assume she is trying to distract herself from saying more or to distract me from asking her what the hell she means by any of that.

I sit up straight and look at my sister. She’s been mated for a year now and we’ve hardly seen her until recently. She reeks of her Alphas, their tainted scents offend my olfactory senses, making me scrunch up my nose. Dressed in a long sleeved, dark green turtleneck dress, she is completely covered, with a sleek high ponytail; Faith is perfection. There’s something though, something just doesn’t seem right, but maybe I’m seeing her differently because she’s been away for a while. Faith’s comment though...I shrug it off, for now at least. Her makeup is on the heavy side, which is new for her, but she’s still her beautiful self.

My mother claps her hands to get our attention. Faith stiffens with my wreath hovering over my head. My other sister, Grace, sits with her legs stretched out in front of her, her back against the arm of the couch in the corner, her face buried in her phone.

“I’m going to check in with your dads,” our mother says, as we all make the noncommittal hums of acknowledgement befitting two young adult women and a preteen. My mother stares at us, then mirrors Faith’s actions from earlier and rolls

her eyes. I guess she's had enough of our antics today. I shake my head. She wonders where we get it from.

“Miss Smooth!” someone shouts again as I regain consciousness. I’m coughing uncontrollably as I try to continue my journey to the ventilation grate on the side of the distillery wall. I drag my body along the floor as smoke and burning hot metal fly all around me. Each breath is labored. The acrid chemical smell burns my lungs with every inhalation. I know what too much smoke can do to a person... I know the longer I remain on the brewery floor...

I’m not going to make it. I can feel it. I keep passing out and know it is only a matter of time. I don’t know why my brain keeps taking me back to that moment in time, but I guess my thoughts are still laced with concern for Faith. Oh God, Faith. I collapse again, losing strength once more as I’m buried in my memories of five years ago... The day I ran.

“Mercy, I know you’re not happy, baby. But we’ve had this discussion for years when it was determined you were to present late. Now, we are here. You have a wonderful group of Alphas who already love you and are your friends. This should be a happy time. It’s what all of you wanted all along, now you can have it.” My mother smiles, as if her words are supposed to make me accept all of this and just be happy. I watch her slide out of the door and turn my gaze up to my older sister.

“Faith, are you okay?” I refuse to let that look on her face go. My sisters and I have always been outspoken, wild, and independent. No matter what my mother says about proper Omega decorum. But the light in my sister’s eyes has lost its luster, and honestly, I’m worried.

“I’m fine. Ignore me. It’s just an adjustment, being mated. Everyone has a different experience, and you will get used to your Alphas’ demands, urges, and needs,” Faith says as she comes to a stop behind me, no longer looking at me as she places the wreath to nestle it between my untamed curls.

“Demands, urges, and needs?” I question her, lifting my brow only to wince, hunching my shoulders as she stabs my scalp with a hairpin.

My hand goes up to shield my precious scalp from her assault and I grab her hand. “Ouch, Faith.” I hiss, sucking in a sharp breath through my teeth.

Faith looks up, lost in thought as she realizes with wide eyes that she’s stabbed me and shoots me an apologetic look through the mirror. She knocks my hand out of the way and adds a few more pins, careful not to decapitate me this time around.

“Yes, Mercy. You need to come to terms with the fact that you are no longer in control of what happens to you. All those dreams about running Dad’s company, going to college—none of that matters now. I wouldn’t be surprised if you’re not pregnant in a month or two.” Faith shrugs, and my heart begins to beat wildly in my chest. She can’t be serious. I’ve worked too hard for it to all go up in smoke...

Smoke...

My eyes burn as I blink back tears, the black smoke is so thick, it blocks out the sunlight coming from the vent beyond. My ribs scream as I pull myself forward. Almost there, Mercy.

“Songbird!” I hear Trey’s voice.

“Merce!” Nate screams from somewhere far away.

“She is in there! God Damn it!” Knight bellows, and I can’t help but smile through my pain. He is so mad at me.

“Mouse! Mouse!” Lox shouts. “Fuck your protocol! That’s my life in that building. I would rather die trying to get to her, instead of waiting. She is still alive. I can feel it.”

“Hold on, Mercy baby!” Knight calls out.

I want to shout and call out to them, but my vocal cords are rubbed raw and all I can manage is a raspy whisper.

When I finally reach the ventilation grate, I stretch out my arm in search of salvation, my limb is weak. My hand is shaking as I beat the metal grid with all my flagging strength. My body is screaming from pain as another explosion rocks the building. Panicking, I hit the metal so hard I know I’ve

broken something in my hand when I hear the crack of my bones, then excruciating pain.

Tears are running down my face from the sheer relief of making it this far. My Alphas are right outside beyond this burning hell. I try hard to listen for the sound of their feet coming to my aid, but I can't hear anything as the ringing in my ears gets louder. I keep banging my hand, my very broken, throbbing hand, until a wave of dizziness followed by more coughing has me passing out once more...

As I close my eyes, I wonder if it's for the last time.

I follow behind an eager Grace, who is bouncing on the balls of her feet. "Mercy, I can only hope I get to have mates like yours." She sighs dreamingly. "I mean, I wouldn't have grown up with them like you have, but a girl can only hope." She stops as we reach the foyer in front of the double church doors of the sanctuary, and turns to me, her bright smile and innocent brown eyes only make my heart hurt for her future. I don't want this. Faith is not happy, for reasons I am not sure of, but I could possibly guess by her reaction back there in the dressing room. What hope did my baby sister have? What about all the other Omegas out there wishing for the same, only to get the worst of their expectations. I smile at my sister, wanting to say all those things. I want her to think, to question, to not fall prey—

"I can only wish for the same for you, Grace," I say instead, reaching out to give my sister a one arm hug as my dad, Benjamin, marches down the aisle of the church with a smile that doesn't reach his eyes.

"Come on, Gracie girl, we are about to start," he says softly to Grace as she rushes past me, only to stop, turn, and blow me a kiss over her shoulder. I reach up and grab it out of the air and pat it against my cheek with a forced smile. I watch her join the rest of our family in the pews. Her pink thigh-length dress makes her look younger than she actually is. I am sure that was my mother's doing.

The church is packed on my side but only Trey's parents sit on the side of my soon-to-be-mates. Lox walked away from his

family, so I am sure this doesn't bother him at all. But Knight and Nate...well, I am sure the loss of their parents is sitting heavily on their chests on a day like today.

I watch Faith take a seat next to one of her Alphas, who grabs at her possessively, forcing her closer to his side. I can't tell which one it is from here, but it makes me bristle at the sight. My mother takes her seat at the front of the church next to my father, Edward, as my best friends Knight, Lox, Trey, and Nate stand with Christopher, the father who will preside over the ceremony, at the end of the aisle. It's like the wedding I never dreamed of having. At least, not like this.

We should have had time. I watch Christopher waving his hands, ushering people to take their seats; he is ready to wrap this up in a pretty bow and send me on my merry way. Another daughter put in her place.

My chest feels tight. This white monstrosity of a dress makes my skin itch. I wouldn't be surprised if hives start to appear up and down my arms. My anxiety is through the roof. But what can I do? It's not like I can run.

"You look beautiful, baby girl. Let's get this show on the road." My father holds his arm out, offering me a soft smile. I take it hesitantly, feeling slightly betrayed. Can't he see what this is doing to me? If anyone could understand my emotional state, it would be him. Everything has been turned upside down, yet they still force this on me without considering my feelings. My eyes sting. I look up at my guys once more, knowing this wasn't their choice but they are going through with it all the same.

I push down my tears as I try to find the silver lining in all this. Surely, once this is done and I am their mate, I will be able to get back to the way things were. Knight, Nate, Lox, and Trey won't imprison me. Maybe, just maybe, we can do this without any big changes. Gripping my father's arm tight, I offer him a quick nod, followed by a smile. We both face the crowd of onlookers; their bright smiles and nods of approval make my stomach turn and my palms begin to sweat. I search for reassurance, for anything to get my feet moving.

“So, once this is done, do you think I can come back to work with you?” I lean in and whisper, trying to sound hopeful, but my smile falls at the look of sadness and regret on my father’s face. He blinks slowly and his lips form a tight line of finality. As if he has put a wall up to shield himself from what he is about to say to me. It’s then that I know I’ve truly lost it all in one fell swoop.

“That’s not a decision for me to make. Your Alphas will take care of you now, Mercy. They will decide what you can and cannot do, within reason. I am sure Knight, Nate, Trey and Lox will allow you—”

“Allow me!” I shriek, not meaning for my voice to sound so shrill and loud. A few people begin to whisper as my father ignores my outburst and begins to walk me down the aisle. I guess he realizes that the sooner he can get me to my soon to be mates the better. The longer I remain in the entry way, the more of a scene I will create, and I am about to lose my shit. He gives my arm a little tug and I feel like he is dragging me down the aisle.

“Dad,” I say through gritted teeth that I know looks like a manic smile. “Please, don’t do this.” I want to drop to my knees and beg but I know it will do me no good. Plus, my mother would have a coronary if I embarrassed the Smooth name in that way.

“Mercy, baby girl, this is for the best.” My dad stops midway down the aisle and smiles down at me. “This is not—”

“Benjamin, is Mercy okay?” my mother interrupts him before he can finish what he’s about to say. I panic, looking around at the smiling faces as they watch us. Some of my extended family members gaze at me sympathetically, possibly thinking this is my father offering me a bit of encouragement to soothe my nerves. Well, fuck that.

“She’s okay, Sen,” he says, emotion thick on his tongue as he takes another step forward.

He tugs my arm again, and this time I dig in my heels. I can’t and won’t do this. I will not be their possession. I will not

be forced to live a life I don't want. If I have to run and hide, I will.

I look up to find the guys. They are all glancing my way, their eyes track my every move. Knight's jaw is clenched but that's his only tell that he is uncomfortable about what's happening. I yank my arm away from my father's so fast he doesn't have a chance to register what's happening until I am already running out of the church. I hear my name being called but I ignore it. I run for my life. Hiking up my dress as I reach the main doors of the church, I break into a sprint as thunder rumbles in the distance, followed by a deluge of rain.

“I can see her!” someone shouts.

The fog of my memories clears as the sound of banging and drilling digs into my pounding head. Every ache and pain makes itself known, sending a wave of nausea through me that threatens to send me under again. But I hold on to the sounds around me despite the pain.

“He-lp!” I croak out, unsure if my voice will be heard over the sound of their rescue attempt. I keep calling out, despite the metallic taste in my mouth and the pain in my raw throat, it's agonizing but I need them to hear me.

“She's alive. We found her!” another voice calls out.

I try to pry my eyes open, but the light is too bright as hands pull at my body, causing me to cry out hoarsely as they hit my broken ribs against the broken debris of the wall.

“Careful!” another deep voice calls out. “Get the oxygen! She's barely conscious.”

“Mouse!” I hear Lox first. If I could cry from the sheer relief of hearing his voice, I would.

“Mercy, baby, we are here,” Knight chimes in next, but I am being jostled, pain engulfs me as I am moved so fast, I only hear bits of arguments, threats, and pleas to come in the ambulance with me.

“Merce, sweetheart. We'll be right behind you,” Nate says from somewhere beside me. I try to open my eyes, but the

sweet relief of oxygen floods my system and all I can focus on is breathing.

“Why isn’t she opening her eyes?” Trey asks, his voice sounds panicked. If I could open my eyes, I am sure I’d see him clutching the baseball cap he had on earlier. I want to reach out and reassure him, to reassure all of them that I’m here. I’m okay.

“I am going to need you to move now, sir,” someone says. Thick straps band around my body. As a large pad is placed around my neck. I feel disoriented, all of this feels like an out of body experience. I thought I was dying, but maybe this is another dream, and I am willing my brain to believe I’m being saved.

“I know you’re her pack but without any mating marks we can’t verify any of these claims until we get to the hospital. It’s a protocol to protect all Omegas. You can follow us to the hospital, but we need to get her there as soon as possible,” a soft voice finally breaks through more of my fog.

“Fine,” Knight and Lox say at the same time.

A booming sound goes off, followed by the sounds of running, water being sprayed in the distance, and people screaming orders at one another. Everything begins to fade once more. The sound of sirens pulls me under, as everything my father built burns to the ground.

TWO

LOX



“I don’t care! I want her out of the ER and taken up to a private suite! I want it done now!” I shout at the poor Beta nurse. Her eyes widen for a second in surprise at my raised voice, then she fixes her professional mask on her face and addresses me calmly. I am sure she is used to assholes coming in, demanding things from her and any of the other nurses or doctors assisting the sick and dying.

The place is packed full of people in need, desperately in need of care. Who knows how long they’ve been waiting for assistance? I feel for them all, I really do, but right now, I will pull rank for my little mouse. I’m not just anyone. She must be new here because she doesn’t flinch or shy away in recognition. A portrait of my family hangs in the main atrium of this hospital; my father sits on the board, my family built this place.

Holding out her hands in a placating gesture, she approaches me like a cornered, injured animal. “Sir, she has to be assessed. We understand that you’re worried, but these things take time. Please, just give the doctors a chance to—”

“Not good enough!” I roar in her face. Yep, that does it. She flinches. I know I am causing a scene, and from the sound of the other nurses behind the desk, someone has called security. Good. Let them come. I grab at my locs, pacing like a caged lion. We’ve been here for two hours; she should have been assessed already. Fuck! We shouldn’t have left Mercy alone, we should have stayed with her today.

“Lox. Calm the fuck down.” Knight grabs my arm, pulling me away from the wide-eyed nurse but I yank out of his hold.

“No, Knight. If I can get her out of here faster, I will. She’s been here for hours now.” I round on him as he crosses his arms over his chest. I can tell he is just as anxious as I am, but I am beyond reason at this point. I lower my voice. “I don’t want anyone attempting to come in here and harm her further. If we can get her upstairs, we can monitor who comes in and out of her room,” I whisper through clenched teeth.

“I hear what you’re saying, brother, but throwing your weight around when you have no grounds to do so is only making things worse,” he replies in frustration, as Trey and Nate both stop their own pacing to join us. I know Knight is right. I gave this all up for Mercy and them. I have no say here, at least not anymore. I regret nothing.

“Nurse Braxton, I heard there is trouble. What— Maxim?” I watch Knight’s nostrils flare at the sight of the person behind me. Nate and Trey’s eyes widen a fraction as I bristle at the sound of my biological brother’s voice. How long has it been since I walked out on my parents? Since I left him to shoulder my supposed familial responsibilities.

“Doctor Loxley, this man is demanding—”

“I’ll handle my brother from here, nurse.”

She gasps. Yep, she gets who she is talking to now, but it doesn’t make me feel any better, only more irate at the entire situation. I turn slowly.

“Heath.” My younger brother is as tall as me, his skin a shade lighter, clean shaven, short neatly trimmed hair. He is the complete opposite of me; everything I am not, and I am okay with that. His crisp white lab coat covers his black trousers, white shirt and black tie. His lips form a thin line of disapproval that is so much like our father’s, I want to cringe. My brother and I haven’t spoken in years. This part of my life, the part where I walked away from my family and my duty as the eldest son, I avoided it like the plague. But with Mercy literally at the mercy of this hospital, I will take whatever bullshit he’s about to spew. I deserve it actually.

“I would have come out here sooner, considering who the paramedics rushed into my ER, but the nurse is right, she needs to be assessed properly. Miss Smooth is being moved up to the private wing as we speak,” Heath says, always the professional. He’s not one to air his grievances with me out here in front of everyone. Oh no, that’s not the Loxley way. Heath takes a step towards us and pauses. “I know how you feel about Mercy, she is your Omega, so emotions are running high. Let me escort you up.”

Trey pushes past me, followed by Nate as my brother turns on a dime and beckons with his hand for us to follow him. I stand frozen for a moment as they move past the nursing station and through the doors that lead to the main hospital. Yeah, he knows how I feel about her alright, enough to wash my hands of my entire family. I don’t know if he is being genuine or if that was a jab at my expense.

“She’s more than just our Omega, Heath,” I growl low in my throat. He turns and gives me a curt nod but doesn’t otherwise respond.

Knight tsks beside me. “You did all that and now you don’t want to move? Seriously, Lox, what did you expect when you came in here acting like you own the place? I know all this stirs up some shit you don’t want to deal with but maybe this is a good thing. Clear the bad blood with Heath, at least. Remember, you walked away from the life your parents wanted for you, and now he is shouldering it.” Knight pats me on the shoulder, but when I don’t move, he sighs. “Let’s go. Mercy needs us. She is first above all else.” Knight leaves me standing in the middle of the waiting room with the memories of the day I walked away from my family too vivid to push down.

“Maxim, I thought your friendship with the Smooth girl was a phase. I knew we shouldn’t have indulged your relationship with her. If your father and I thought for a second you would come in here with these silly ideas of walking away from your legacy... You can’t be serious.” My mother stared down her nose at me in disgust as she paced behind my father, who sat behind his desk in his study. He looked at me as if he

didn't know what to do with me. Disappointment was what came to mind; the only word I could put to the glare that was cutting through me like a knife. His hands were laid flat on the pile of papers in front of him, the only sign that this was affecting him was the sight of his fingers slowly clenching around the now crinkled edges of the pages. As much as their behavior used to make me fall in line, then I refused. He audibly sighed.

I had thought I would come home, gather some more clothes and sneak back out of the house before anyone noticed me. Of course, the family butler had notified them of my presence immediately. I'd been avoiding my parents for weeks since my sixteenth birthday. I knew it was coming; they'd thought they could arrange a pack for me, handpicked by them, including the Omega they'd chosen for me. It happened all too often with families like mine. When you came from a family of this stature, tradition and prestige was everything. It wasn't about what you wanted but what was good for the family image as a whole. I wanted none of it. I'd made my intentions clear, and I didn't want their legacy. I wanted my chosen brothers by my side, and I wanted Mercy. My little mouse.

"There's no point bringing me in here to lecture me. I have a pack and I have Mercy—"

"She has no designation, Maxim! She's not good enough. It doesn't matter who her family is. The Smooths, although prosperous and well-known, are not our equal." My mother clicked her tongue and I cut a glance to my father, who remained quiet. That was how it always went; he let my mother do the talking. I guessed he just signed the checks. Figured.

I stood. I was done listening, because this would go round and round in circles, and I would still have come to the same conclusion. I didn't want this life. I thought of my younger brother and sister, a pang of sadness hit me in my chest because I knew that what I was about to do would change everything for them. Maybe if I had never met Knight, Nate, and Trey there would have been a different outcome here. If I

had never laid eyes on mouse, then I would have gone along with my family's plans for me.

My father cleared his throat. "Maxim, if you walk out of here, you walk away with your trust fund and nothing more, Son. I'm not heartless, that money is yours by birthright. I only hope you make the most of it because that is all you will get from me. You will lose everything else. Are they worth it?" He tilted his head as if to study me. Was I being weighed and measured? Possibly. What was more important? Money or family? Blood or comfort? His words were both heavy and freeing at the same time. My mother went to speak but his hand shot up in the air, shushing her without even a backward glance.

At sixteen, you would think that this decision to walk away from my family would have been a hard one, but it wasn't. I had a family; a family of my choosing. I backed away from them both, and my mother's face crumbled. I was sure she was more sad about having to explain this to the women in the country club than she was about my decision to leave. My father gave nothing away though, as he watched me go.

"I'm sorry," I said, as I closed the door and left my family home for the last time.

The elevator door dings loudly, taking me out of my thoughts. This place is just one big trigger for me, and I've managed to avoid it for years.

The hallway before me looks like it would be more suited to an exclusive penthouse suite than a hospital wing. There's fancy ornate wallpaper, marble floors and freshly cut flowers in vases that could possibly pay the hospital bills of half the people we just left behind in the ER. It's all an illusion afforded by the rich to make them feel as if their lives somehow are more important; that up here they are invincible because they are paying top dollar. Well, right now, I will give whatever I have left to make sure Mercy is okay.

Fuck how I feel about this pretentious bullshit. I have to protect what's mine. I keep these thoughts in mind as I tell myself to pull it together. Someone tried to kill my little mouse

today and I need to be what this pack expects me to be: their enforcer. The fact that I am not out there right now in search of Faith and her Alphas is like an itch I can't scratch. Soon. I catch a glimpse of Knight turning the corner into a suite and I eat up the distance quickly, only to stop dead as I stand in the doorway.

"Fuck, Merce," Nate whispers, dropping to his knees beside her bed, his hand hovering over her bandaged one, but he doesn't touch her.

Mouse looks fragile in the middle of the bed. Her chest rising and falling puts me at ease. An oxygen mask covers her beautiful face as she lays unconscious before us.

Knight stands like a sentry at the foot of her bed while two nurses busy themselves with machines, tubes and monitors as they continue to set up around the room. Heath holds her chart, moving around the room, ignoring our presence for the time being as he softly gives orders to the nurses. Trey sits on the couch in front of the wide windows overlooking the night sky of Frankfort, his hat in his hands, glasses askew, jaw clenching and unclenching as he holds back his emotions. My packmate is barely holding it together. Now that I stand here, tapping into their emotions for the first time since we arrived, Nate and Knight are the same. Hell, I don't have to dig deep to know I am a loaded gun, ready, eager to fire on those who dared to harm my mouse. Our bond is a mixture of relief and boiling rage just waiting to spill over. All of us are struggling and usually we look to Knight to rally the troops but with the amount of guilt radiating off him, he's no good to us either.

I blow out a frustrated breath as all eyes glance my way. "Heath, can—"

"It's Doctor Loxley, and if you don't allow me to do my job, I will have to ask you all to stand outside until I am finished," Heath snaps, his careful façade falling briefly as he turns sharply and addresses me directly. "Like I said before, Maxim, wait, excuse me, Lox, I know how important she is to you all and I want to give Miss Smooth the best care possible." He turns his attention back to Mercy, giving me no time to respond. He's right, of course, I'm just impatient. I am

definitely not used to being put in my place by anyone other than my brothers and my little mouse, of course. This is his house, Lox, let your bio brother do his job. We watch them all work in silence until finally the nurses leave, pushing past me as they exit the room.

My brother turns, focusing his attention on Knight, then Nate and Trey, leaving me for last. “I take it you’re not bonded yet?” he asks, searching our faces for something I am not quite sure of before he continues. “She bears no mate marks—”

“Yet.” Knight cuts him off. “Not yet, but she will. We are her pack, and she is our Alpha, the head of our family, so please tell us what we need to know. There is no need to wait for her parents, Mercy is ours and we are hers.”

Heath’s eyes widen at Knight’s declaration, I am sure he didn’t miss the fact that Knight called Mercy our Alpha. “I understand. I am aware of your situation, news travels fast around here. I don’t know all the details of her father’s bequest, but it was all a bit unorthodox to say the least.”

“Oh, I am sure our parents had plenty to say about it all.” I laugh humorlessly. I am sure my mother took great pleasure in laughing at my so-called disgrace when Mercy ran the day of our mating ceremony. Now that she is back, and in our home, the rumors of Benjamin’s will and the stipulations behind Mercy’s takeover of Smooth Bourbon are probably the talk of the town, as well as in many social circles.

Heath clears his throat, clutching Mercy’s chart in his hands he ignores the jab at our parents and continues. “Miss Smooth has suffered a severe concussion, three broken ribs, second degree burns on her arms, along with a wrist fracture. Considering how long she was inside the burning distillery, she took in entirely too much smoke into her lungs, hence the oxygen machine.” He looks up from his paperwork and sighs. “She tried to speak during her assessment but on further examination it seems her vocal cords are damaged as well.”

Trey sucks in a sharp breath and stands in a rush. “How damaged? Will she need surgery? What about her hands? If

my songbird can't sing or play it will devastate her. On top of everything else this will only stress her more."

"Trey," Knight calls out, halting Trey's growing panic.

"I can assure you that she will heal in time. There should be no lasting damage, she just needs time to recover. However, what alarmed me the most were her hormone levels. I give it maybe a few weeks before she goes into heat," Heath says as he places her chart in the tray on her bed.

"She went through her first heat a week ago, Heath," I explain. "Why so soon? Is that normal?" I ask, looking at Knight who has the same confused look on his face as I do.

"According to her medical records, Mercy suppressed her heat until recently. At her age, she should have already had several. Honestly, her body is trying to catch up and level out. My advice is to keep her calm, allow her to rest and heal, with minimal stress," Heath says, but all I want to say is, it's easier said than done considering the shit storm that is about to come our way.

"You understand that she is the owner of one of the major Bourbon companies in the region that just went up in smoke a few hours ago. The press and the pressure from her board to recover the business quickly will put a lot of strain on her," Knight replies with a weary sigh. It's been a long day. We've only scratched the surface of the things we need to deal with before any of us can close our eyes.

Heath nods in understanding as he begins to exit the room. "Well, that is what she has you for. You treat her as your equal, and I can respect that, but biologically, especially right now, she is at a disadvantage. She is an Omega. She will go into heat again."

"Fuck," Knight says under his breath. "Thanks, Heath, I mean, Dr. Loxley."

I guess I am not the only one fumbling with proper names tonight.

"No problem, Knight. I will have security on the elevator leading up to this floor. I will make sure she has her privacy. I

will be around if you need anything else from me.” He goes to leave then turns back. “She should be resting comfortably for a few hours. If she wakes in pain call for one of the nurses.”

I watch my brother leave and follow him.

“Heath,” I call out, he stills but doesn’t turn to look at me. I get it. I don’t deserve more than he has already given.

“Thank you,” I finally say, but he just hangs his head and sighs.

“I’m doing my job, Maxim. My duty. You know, the one you basically threw in my lap when you decided to walk away.” He turns slowly and looks me in the eye. The hurt on his face breaks my heart. I did this to him. “Not all of us get to live the life we want or choose. So—”

“I won’t apologize—”

“I expected that, Lox. In fact, I knew you wouldn’t. If you felt differently, you wouldn’t have ghosted your brother and sister all these years.” He bites out through clenched teeth, attempting to keep his voice down.

“I didn’t have a choice, our parents made it very clear,” I reply, trying to contain my emotions and failing. I attempted to see my brother and sister over the years only to be told that I was no longer a member of our family. But what’s done is done.

“Oh, I am well aware. But it is good to see you, regardless.” Heath sighs. “Let’s not do this here. Your pack needs you, and I don’t feel the need to rehash old wounds. Not tonight anyway. I will be back later to check in on Mercy.”

Heath turns on his heels and leaves me standing there, my reply stuck to my tongue. I watch him go until he turns the corner out of sight. I didn’t expect to resolve our issues in one conversation, but I guess it’s a start.

THREE

KNIGHT



The room is silent apart from the sound coming from the beeps and hisses of the medical equipment connected to Mercy in various places on her body. For someone who usually looks and feels larger than life, my beautiful Alpha looks small and vulnerable as she lies still in the middle of the bed.

My stomach churns as I recall her voice on the other end of the line hours ago. *"I love you."* Three soul crushing words that felt like a goodbye. I thought we'd lost her. The life we'd built, waiting for her to return, even when we weren't sure she would, flushed down the drain in one swift move. We'd just got her back. Everything was as it should be. Mercy took control of her father's legacy, things were falling into place, we had our futures to plan with each other. This moment should have been a celebration.

This morning felt like a thousand light years away. Her carefree smile as she waved goodbye from her reading nook, it had all felt real for the first time since she returned. This would be our life; our future, a taste of things to come. As I had walked through the meadow of wildflowers outside our cabin away from her, I'd finally felt complete.

I grit my teeth at the thought of someone wanting to snatch the rug from underneath us for their own personal gain. Looking at her now, I see her eyes flit back and forth under her eyelids, brows creased as she frets, even in unconsciousness. We should have all stayed home today. Especially if she wasn't up for coming with us. We'd discussed the night before

that something was coming. Now I'm plagued with regret and a fucking blinding rage, a complete contrast to my feelings before. My emotions bubble underneath my skin like a wild undercurrent, searching and waiting for an outlet to let itself loose on those responsible. The bastards knew they couldn't touch her in our home and used her weakness against her. Faith. Her own sister.

The only person who knows about our Sunday hikes is Stefan...but they wouldn't have known if we would be out with her though. I guess they took a chance with the information the little rat gave them. Ultimately, it worked for them. I know this wasn't his idea. The little shit wanted to be a part of our pack so badly, it would only take a little convincing for him to fall prey to any manipulation. Not like it would have worked in his favor, Nate almost broke his jaw for the shit he spewed about Mercy. Stefan is only a small dim-witted fish in an ocean of bloodthirsty sharks. No, this is bigger than him. There is someone else calling the shots here and I can only guess who.

The door closes with a soft click behind me as Lox walks over to the window and flops down on the couch next to a pensive Trey. His eyes are fixed permanently on Mercy, unblinking, as if she's a mirage threatening to disappear if he dares to look away. Mercy, our oasis, our life, our sustenance, she is the elixir of our existence, and we can't survive without her. I feel that more keenly now than ever.

"So, let's just get it out now, so that we can pick ourselves up off the floor and deal with this shit storm brewing around us. The way I see it, we can't afford to sit around and mope about what we could have or should have done. Mercy is a big girl. We can't stop her from doing what she wants to do or we're no better than the other punk ass Alphas out there locking down their Omegas like prisoners," Lox says as he sits back and leans his head against the pillows. I know for a fact that most of that was meant for me, so I take it as the reprimand it is and sigh.

"You're right. But it doesn't stop me from the guilt I feel. It is my responsibility—"

Nate tsks, cutting me off. “Not just yours, Knight. She belongs to all of us. We all decided she was safe enough to leave home, and technically, she was safe. We had no idea she would be lured to her demise by her own sister,” he says. The weariness in his voice makes my heart clench in my chest. My baby brother and I have had enough loss to last us a lifetime. I can only imagine where his head is at. He sighs, running his hands down his face and blows out a breath, finally rising to his feet to sit in a chair beside Mercy’s bed.

“I know,” I reply, because he’s right. I have always taken the lead in the matters of our pack, so it only seems fitting to take on the weight of what is happening now.

Trey clears his throat, as if he’s fighting to hold his emotions at bay. “Faith is just as much a victim here as Mercy. Who knows what they did to her, or threatened her with, to make that call.” He looks at me finally, his eyes shining with unshed tears and so much anger, it’s painful to keep our eyes locked. Trey is always so chill and collected, unflappable, but not when it involves Mercy, it’s always been this way.

“Look what they did to her. We can’t let this lie,” he says through clenched teeth. Trey’s voice is a low rumble of thunder. “Look. What. They. Have. Done.” His voice rises with each word, heavy and full of accusation as he gestures at Mercy. He pauses for a moment, lost in thought as he inclines his head, as if he’s hearing some unspoken revelation from beyond. We’re all losing the last dregs of our sanity over this. The behavior is so uncharacteristic of Trey that he holds all of our attention as we wait for him to speak. So much so, I feel the need to break the silence.

“Trey, we’re not going to let this go. Far from it,” I say with certainty as Lox nods slowly in agreement, still watching Trey’s profile in shock. Maybe even pride. He’s like two seconds from hulking out on us.

“Christopher. This is his doing,” Trey says finally. “There is no one else I can think of that would want the business, the property, so badly that he would go to these lengths to get it.” He blows out a shaky breath. “I want to kill him.” There it is. Point blank, no hesitation, he has said the words that I am sure

we would all agree on at this very moment. Father or not, Christopher is definitely the orchestrator behind this. I know it. We all know it.

Lox whistles in surprise at Trey's words. I look over my shoulder to see that Nate has the same murderous gleam in his eyes. I place my hands on my hips, unsure what to do with my two brothers. Usually it's Lox and I who need talking down from our malicious intent, Nate and Trey are the ones normally wrangling us in line. Right now, it's the complete opposite. Oh, don't get me wrong, Trey's revelation is no shocker. I think we all know who has the gall to utilize the people around him to get what he thinks he's entitled to. If Mercy wasn't laying here in this bed, have no doubt Lox and I would be on a rampage. The problem here is there are no checks to counter our balance. All four of us have retribution in our hearts and rage in our eyes.

I look once more at Mercy and try my best to consider what she would want right now. I know she wouldn't want Trey and Nate to go popping off without a plan. I need to rein us in. Turning, I pull another armchair from the wall and drag it to the foot of Mercy's bed and sit. Lox is right, this is not the time for misplaced guilt and internalizing my emotions about things I have no control over. Until our girl wakes and tells me otherwise, I'm going to do this my way.

I keep my voice calm as I glance at Trey. "I agree with you. This has Christopher written all over it. The fact that he was at Smooth Bourbon trying to convince the board at the last minute before Mercy arrived is not even the first indication of his treachery. Stefan, Derrick, Mal, Chasson, even Faith, are nothing but pawns here. So, we need to do this properly, brothers. As much as I want to lay that bastard on his ass, it won't be enough. We all know he's garnered too much power and will find a way to get away with this, while pointing a finger in our direction at the same time."

"Unless he's dead," Nate hisses out behind me. I close my eyes at the vitriol in his voice...his anger is like a thick fog rolling around us, matching Trey's thunder in equal measure. I'm not going to lie and say I don't feel the war drums and the

hum of vengeance in my blood, but we need to be smart about this.

“Exactly.” Lox leans forward, pointing at Nate in agreement. I roll my eyes and he shrugs. I guess I’m the only one who’s attempting to be level-headed then.

I sigh and shake my head. “Death is too easy. I want him to suffer. I want to take what he thought he was taking from Mercy. I want to burn his empire to the ground; I want him alive and in the front row to witness the chaos we will unleash. Killing him would only satisfy me temporarily. No. Total annihilation is what he deserves for touching what is ours,” I say the words with so much conviction that I know that I won’t rest until we get exactly the picture I painted.

“I almost doubted you, Knight.” Lox smiles menacingly. “I thought I was going to have to punch you all in the face to shake off the sadness in this room.” He reclines back on the couch again and closes his eyes.

“If we do this your way, then he needs to believe we are still in the dark about this,” Trey says, sounding a lot calmer now that I have given them a plan of action. “We continue under the guise of helping Mercy heal and rebuild, let it all play out while the guilty give themselves away.”

“I agree, that’s exactly what we should do.” I smile. Leaning forward, I brace my elbows on my knees. “Welcome back, Trey. Hulky green is not your color, leave the beast mode shit to Lox.” I chuckle when Lox’s mouth falls open at my supposed dig. Then he inclines his head and shrugs.

“He’s right,” Lox replies with a smile, completely unfazed.

“This is all fine and dandy. I’m all for a little slow burning revenge, but we don’t know how long Mercy is going to be in this hospital,” Nate says. I notice the slight panic in his voice, and I turn to see his face. He looks back at me, at all of us, as if we missed something somehow.

“Nate, what is it?” Trey asks in alarm.

Nate stands and walks towards us as he speaks. “Have you all forgotten that we were supposed to mate Merce. Claim her

in three days. If she is here in this hospital, unmated, Christopher will find a way to make that work in his favor. I don't doubt for a second that he will have the lawyers in this room checking for mate marks, just to get what he wants." He shakes his head and sneers. "We can't let that happen. She will be devastated."

Fuck. I didn't forget, but I did. With all the new complications in front of me, I forgot the most important thing of all. Making her mine, ours, officially. The one stipulation that can end it all, right here, right now.

"We won't let him in here," Lox replies. "He won't get near her. I won't let him."

"What if we have no choice? The lawyers in control of Benjamin's will, I'm sure, will be sympathetic to Mercy's situation but Christopher won't see it that way. He will demand it," Trey says matter-of-factly. "If he has gone this far." He points to Mercy. "There will be no stopping him."

Lox growls in frustration and looks at me. I know what he's thinking, I'm thinking it too, but fuck, I don't want to do it this way. Nate looks at us both as if reading our minds and turns away with his hands on his hips.

"She has to consent. She must. I can't bite her without it," Nate says quietly, almost pained.

"It's either that or she loses everything...we might lose *her* too," I say as my doubts creep over me once more. I believe that the requirements of Benjamin's will are not the only reason Mercy wants to be with us. I know that, but if she doesn't have her father's company, will we be enough to keep her here?

"So, just to be clear. You're all thinking we should bite her? Mark her now, outside of the traditional way? So when Christopher arrives in three days' time and demands to know if she mated—"

"He will get one big ass shocker." I smile at the thought of seeing his face as he loses yet again.

“I’m with Nate though, not without her consent. Even if she has to point to a written yes or no, I can’t do it otherwise. I couldn’t bear to look at myself in the mirror if we claimed her without her consent, regardless of the why,” Trey argues.

I think all of us can agree on that. Mercy fought hard for her independence, and I won’t take that decision from her.

“Lox, you need to tell Heath that Mercy can have no visitors for at least the next two days while she recovers. That should buy us some time,” I reply, hoping and sending a prayer up above that we can pull this off.

Lox nods in agreement. “If it was up to me, no one would see her at all. Heath promised to have security manning the floor, but I think I will get Dane and some of our guys down here as well. I want people here we all can trust.” He stands to leave, pulling his phone out, when Nate speaks.

“Time for what?” Nate asks.

“Time for Mercy to wake up,” I reply, feeling uncertain. All I can do is hope she comes to sooner, rather than later.

I look over at Mercy’s unconscious form and silently plead with her, please baby, please wake up.

FOUR

MERCY



Music wraps around my consciousness. The familiar warmth of a deep melodic hum that brings tears to my eyes. Trey. Even in my unconscious state, despite the music he's playing, I know the sound of his voice as if it was my own. I try to open my eyes, but my lids feel like they have been caked in cement and glued shut. My mind boots slowly, like a computer in need of an update as reality kicks in.

Then it all hits me. My last memories flash before me in a horrific display. The sound of my sister's pain-filled cries, Derrick and Chasson, the fire, and the acrid stench of smoke. Faith. Smooth Bourbon.

Is it all gone? All the thoughts threaten to send me spiraling, my anxiety spikes, making me want to run and hide, but there is nothing I can do but lay here. I feel like I've been put through a meat grinder, my body hurts in places I didn't know it could hurt. The feeling of being trapped only enhances my emotions as I lay here broken. Breathe. At least I can breathe.

Trey's humming continues from somewhere beside me, his voice undulates without words, calm and serene against the beep beep beeping of machines. My heartbeat speeds up rapidly as the memory of the events that brought me here come crashing down on me.

Breathe.

For a moment, in order to stave off my growing panic, I allow myself to listen to the movement around me. The quiet

shuffle of feet, the flipping of paper, and the beeping that slowly begins to ground me.

I'm alive.

I hold on to that realization as I try to force my eyes open once more. I crack one eye open for a fraction of a second, just enough for bright fluorescent light to blind me. My eye closes like a shutter slammed shut, and if I could move, my legs would be kicking in a toddler style tantrum. I just want to see.

Breathe, Mercy.

I lay there and breathe. At least I can breathe. I repeat it like a mantra as I try to forget how I struggled for every breath amongst the billowing smoke from the fire. My lungs still ache with every breath I take, along with a sharp pain in my ribs, but my mind circles back to the fact that I am alive.

So, I listen. Mostly I listen to him. Trey hums along to "*For All We Know*" by Donny Hathaway, Robert Flake on the piano of course. Another one of our favorites we would sing and play together when we were teenagers. My mother was in love with Donny Hathaway and made sure I learned to appreciate and love him too. I swear, she would have probably left all three of my dads for a chance to be with him if the opportunity had ever presented itself. Trey had no choice but to fall in love with him too. The moment he heard "*A Song For You*", he was a goner. Did he play this for me I wonder? Something my brain can latch onto in order to bring me out of my... Was I in a coma? I read once that music can affect the brain in the most unpredictable and profound way. I count myself blessed that he knew to reach me through one of the things I loved most.

A door opens and closes softly from somewhere in the room. "Her heartrate spiked a few times, nurse. Do you think she can hear me?" Trey says enthusiastically at the sound of more shuffling feet. The music lowers suddenly and all I want to do is shout at Trey to leave the volume where it is, or maybe he can keep humming instead. Anything to distract me from the memories of the trauma I endured at the distillery.

“I am here for her checkup, so let’s have a look, shall we?”
The nurse answers with a smile in her tone.

A door opens and closes again. The sound of heavy footfalls has me wanting to move my head to see who it is but all I can manage is a twitch.

“Did I hear you say she’s awake?” Nate asks with so much hope I wish I could reach out and take his hand in mine. My emotions rise up inside me once more and my heart hurts, it’s beating rapidly as the need to open my eyes consumes me. I want to see them. I need to see my guys and reassure them that I am here, alive and okay.

“See, that’s what it did a minute ago. Is she okay? Is she trying to wake?” Trey asks frantically. I feel sorry for the poor nurse who’s in the middle of taking my blood pressure. I wouldn’t be surprised if she had been well and truly harassed every time she walked in this room to check me over. Impatient Alphas.

“It’s a possibility. An accelerated heartbeat is definitely a good sign that she hears you,” she replies quickly, as if she’s shooing a fly. Yep, they’ve been pestering this poor woman.

“Merce, baby. Open your eyes. Let me see those beautiful browns,” Nate says softly. He’s so close I can feel his breath on my skin. His lips brush against my temple and his scent washes over me, clean, crisp apple goodness, making me inhale deeply, the sweetness hits the back of my throat, making me groan softly.

“Come on, songbird, come back to me, sweetheart. Come back to us. Open your eyes,” Trey says from the other side near my face, rousing me gradually with his chocolate and marshmallow scent invading my senses. He smells like coming home. I want nothing more than to open my eyes at this very moment.

The sound of shuffling is all I hear before a bright light explodes in front of one of my eyes as a gloved hand forces it open. My other eye opens, moving rapidly back and forth as I try to focus on what I’m seeing. The pin light feels like

needles piercing my retinas as I groan against the pain in my head.

“Mercy!” Nate shouts. “Oh, thank the heavens.” I try to turn my head but only manage to see his back as he moves away from the bed.

“N—” I try to call his name, but nothing other than the n comes out, falling from my lips. My eyes widen in panic as reality begins to set in. I can’t speak. Oh God, my voice.

“Shhh...don’t try to talk, songbird. You have vocal cord damage from smoke inhalation.” Trey touches my arm to get me to look toward him. It takes me a minute to focus on my beautiful Alpha. He smiles reassuringly. “You should be okay soon, baby, and we can sing to your heart’s content. Did you hear the music, sweetheart? I was playing it for you. Always for you.”

Trey’s in desperate need of a shave, with tired eyes behind black-rimmed glasses but there he is. I thought I would never see his face again. He bends down and kisses my lips so tenderly I’m teetering on the edge of a tsunami of tears.

“Miss Smooth.” The nurse comes into view at the foot of the bed. My gaze turns to her but in doing so I take in the state of my body for the first time. I can’t force my eyes away from the damage. My left arm is nestled in a sling, the cast feels tight and heavy against my tightly wrapped rib cage. I’m not sure how many ribs are broken but the pain from one is enough as I drag in a shuddering breath. My left hand is also bandaged, and I have several other bandages down my right arm. I’m a mess and I don’t even want to know what condition my face and hair are in.

My observation doesn’t take longer than a few seconds before my eyes travel up to meet the nurse’s kind ones. Her smile is warm and reassuring as she clutches my chart in her hands. I stare at her for a long moment, and I am sure she is possibly assessing that I am about to break into a million pieces. I want to speak but I can’t. I have so many questions. I want to see Knight, Lox, and where did Nate go? I need to know what happened to Faith and the state of the company. I

am helpless and confused and I want this all to be a bad dream.

“Songbird,” Trey calls my name and I turn my head and look at him through blurry eyes. My tears fall slowly down my cheeks in frustration as I lift my right hand and make a writing gesture.

Trey’s eyes light up in realization. “Yes, Knight bought a notepad and a pen for you just in case. Wait, let me get it.” He rushes over to a couch near the window, grabbing what he needs, then crosses back over to me.

“Miss Smooth, I’m nurse Jacky. I’ve been looking after you for the past two days and I am very happy you’re awake. Your Alphas are something else.” She chuckles, trying to lighten the mood as I get the meaning behind her statement. I can only muster a knowing smirk. Poor woman. “All your vitals are good right now, oxygen levels are much better, so you don’t need the machine anymore. I will leave you for a moment and go page Dr. Loxley,” she says, dropping my chart at the foot of my bed.

I watch her leave as Trey places the notepad and pen on my lap. Then he grabs the remote next to my leg and the bed begins to lift, tilting me up further into a sitting position.

“Is that better?” he asks. I nod slowly, mouthing thanks, as he rushes to the other side of the bed, grabs a water jug, and pours water into a glass with a straw for me. Oh, sweet nectar, my throat feels like it’s drier than Death Valley and I’m in need of an oasis. He holds the cup for me, and I take the straw in my mouth, drinking the water down greedily. I don’t stop until there’s nothing left and hurry to scribble *More* on the notepad. Trey doesn’t hesitate as he refills the cup and I drain the second glass finally satisfied.

Thank you, I write quickly.

“You don’t need to thank me, Mercy. I am here for you, songbird.” Trey leans in and kisses my temple as the door bangs open to reveal a wide-eyed Lox. He pauses, taking me in, his chest heaving, like he ran all the way from wherever he’d been prior. Knight appears behind him followed by Nate

as all three of them block the door. I raise my working good hand, and that seems to be all they need to come storming towards me.

“Mouse.” Lox reaches me first and wraps his big muscular arms around me gently. His scent of crackling fire and smoke doesn’t trigger me, it soothes me like a balm was applied to my soul. Surrounding me in his warmth, he holds me as if he never wants to let me go. If he could squeeze himself into my bed without hurting me, he would, and I would welcome it. I kiss wherever my lips can touch in quick succession, mainly his broad chest, but I don’t care. I relish the closeness.

“Mouse, damn it, woman. God damn it.” He pulls away and cradles my head in his hands, searching my face, letting his eyes roam all over me before he kisses my lips like I’m the most precious thing in the world. He wipes a stray tear from my cheek before he inhales and blows out a breath of what I can only assume is relief.

“You don’t get to play hero anymore, mouse. Do you hear what I’m saying? If you need an army to annihilate the bad guys, then we will be the first to run into battle. We will slay your dragons and anyone else who threatens your safety,” Lox says, leaving no room for me to protest. All I can do is frown at the implication of my weakness. He sighs as he reads me without me uttering a word. “I am not saying this because you’re weak, far from it, mouse. I say this because you are our general, baby. You tell us who to hurt and they will hurt. You are in command here, always.”

Yep, more tears. If I’m going to be vulnerable, then these four men are who I will let my guard down for. How do I respond to this man? My Alphas, who always put me first. Who give me choices and let me take the lead. Who’ve made me their number one. They love me, no, loved me from the very beginning, and it was me who was left to figure it all out on my own. I had to catch up, because they were already there with their hearts in their hands. I drop my head and write my reply, simple and easy. This is what I should have told them out loud years ago.

I hold up the notepad and turn it so that all four of them can see my feelings on paper and on my tear-stained face. *I LOVE YOU*. In big bold letters. I love them. They are mine and I'm theirs. I can't argue with Lox's request because it's not unreasonable. If I have learned anything from this, it's that I'm not a superhuman and I can't take on the world alone and without help. I have to learn to accept all my strengths as well as my weaknesses, embrace who I am one hundred percent without denial.

I'M SORRY. I quickly write, holding up the notepad once more. Nate frowns, and Trey, Lox and Knight all begin to protest at once, but I widen my eyes imploringly, underlining those two little words over and over again to emphasize my point. Damn, I wish for nothing more than to say this out loud. I want to express myself with more than just ink and paper. But I do owe them an apology. I shouldn't have left the way I did. I should have called and waited for them to go with me. If I had...well, I wouldn't be here, in this bed, battered and bruised without my voice.

"Mercy." Knight takes my chin in his hands and turns my face in his direction. I offer him a small smile and lean into his touch. My lips tremble, and I close my eyes briefly, refusing to let another tear fall. Knight is holding on to so much emotion that I can physically feel it battering away at my heart. "We can spend forever apologizing for the things we all did wrong here." He sighs and rubs my cheek with his thumb in gentle hypnotic strokes. "Baby, I'm just happy to see you awake and present. Right on time, Miss Smooth." He smiles and winks playfully, making me smile as well. Then his eyes shift to Nate, then Lox and Trey before he focuses his gaze on me again, I can almost sense the proverbial "but" before it happens.

I glance at the four of them, keeping the alarm off my face before mouthing, *What?* I brace myself for whatever they are about to say. I'm sure there's a list of problems that need to be solved and even as I think it, my thoughts turn to Freeya and I wonder why she's not here as well. I quickly store that question away for later as Nate clears his throat.

“Merce, we need to claim you.” His words feel like a bomb has dropped, as they all turn their attention back to me. Nate’s eyes are almost pleading and I’m not sure why. I have no problem being claimed, in fact, it is exactly what I want despite my father’s wishes. Whatever happens with Smooth Bourbon and everything else associated with it pales in comparison to the life I want ultimately with them.

I write out a quick reply and hold it up with a smile. *Okay.* When I get nothing more than tense smiles from them, I write, *What’s wrong?* and hold it up. Clearly, there is something I am missing about all this.

“Songbird, we’ve run out of time,” he says softly, offering me a sad smile. “We have to mark you now, right now.”

My eyes widen as I look to Knight, who simply nods in agreement. I thought we had more time. I huff out a frustrated breath, dropping my head as I quickly try to count the days and pause. Shit. I look up and they all wait for me to catch up, expectantly. I think about Faith, the phone call, Derrick’s flippant comment about my death being bought and paid for. Well, I didn’t die. My father, Christopher’s, fake smile appears unbidden; my stomach churns as I piece it all together in my mind. This was him. He arranged it all, and if I’m here in the hospital, unmated, with the will’s deadline looming...

I’m writing before I realize it.

Christopher? I look at them expectantly. Have they figured it out as well?

“Yes, mouse. I think we can all agree on that.” Lox nods, crossing his arms over his chest smiling down at me with what looks like pride.

Derrick told me my death was bought and paid for. I hold up the notepad as Trey and Nate both curse in unison.

“I’m going to kill him,” Lox mumbles as I hurry to hold up the notepad again. I can’t write down my thoughts fast enough.

My father wants me dead. None one of them flinch at my revelation, or deny it, because they know it is true. The words

bring tears to my eyes but fuck me if I let them fall. I mean nothing to him and neither does Faith. All he cares about is himself and his church. If Grace had something he wanted, he would use her as well.

“That’s why we haven’t allowed anyone to visit you, Mercy. We wanted to give you a chance to wake up so we can talk this through. I know this isn’t the way you would want to do this but—”

I don’t give Knight a chance to finish or explain further before I’m holding up the notepad with my decision.

Do it.

My entire life feels unorthodox, so why would this be any different.

I draw a line under the two words to hammer the point home. Christopher doesn’t get to come in here and attempt to take away what’s mine. Even if all I have of my father’s company is a pile of rubble and dust, I will rebuild it. Dropping the pen after I scribble my final thoughts, I hold it up for them all to see.

I gaze up at the four of them in nervous anticipation.

Claim me. I’m yours.

FIVE

MERCY



“Lock the door,” Knight commands, breaking the stunned silence in the room. Did they think I would put up more of a fight? I understand what’s at stake here. Would I have rather done this behind closed doors, in my nest after hours of being knotted? Hell yes. I’ve read that the pain of a nonsexual claiming bite can be excruciating. If only we were like the vampires in my romance novels, where the bite itself is practically orgasmic, I would call it a win. Well, as broken as my body is right now, I would die from such intensity. I’m already in pain, so what’s a little more?

“Get out of your head, Mercy. We are going to take care of you,” Knight says, pulling me from my thoughts. I nod slowly as Lox turns and marches towards the door and locks it. The audible click is loud in the now silent room. Lox saunters over to join the others as they circle the bed.

The change in the room is almost instant, a shift in their intention as their pheromones permeate the air, potent, intoxicating. They close in on me with heated stares, their eyes roaming over me, searching for a place to sink their teeth into my flesh. The thought of their mouths on me alone sends my heart rate through the roof. All of my senses ignite as their scents caress me, licking over my skin and making me want more than just their bites.

“Breathe, mouse, before the nurses come rushing in here to resuscitate you.” Lox smirks. All I can do is watch his lips, soft and demanding, luscious lips. I nod again, incapable of writing another word as they bear down on me.

“I had it all planned out, Merce. I have plans for your nest, and when it’s finished, we are going to bite you again, so this doesn’t count. Are you going to let me bite you twice, baby? I already have a place in mind, a place I don’t want anyone else to see but me and my brothers,” Nate says as he picks up my uninjured hand, brings it to his lips and begins to kiss each one of my fingers.

“Do you want that, songbird?” Trey chuckles at my eager nods. Yes. Fuck yes. They can bite me again. “Give me your mouth then, sweetheart,” he says, placing his finger underneath my chin and turning my face to the left as his lips collide with mine. I try not think about the fact that I’ve been unconscious for two days as he devours my mouth, deepening the kiss, drinking me in like a man on the brink of dying of thirst. My body melts into the bed, limbs pliant and languid as the pleasure of their kisses washes over me like a tidal wave. I can already feel my arousal as it gushes between my thighs, pooling on the sheets underneath me. There’s no room for thoughts of self-consciousness, this is happening now, and I am already lost to every sensation.

Holy hell. At least my pussy still works, and she is eager and ready to play. Unfortunately, the rest of me is screaming, ‘Down bitch, down.’ Taking a deep breath, I wince from the pain in my ribs as I allow myself to relax further, humming in contentment at their ministrations. Trey’s kiss doesn’t let up as he continues to assault my mouth with his. Nate’s kisses travel up and down my arm, soft and tender as two sets of hands run up my bare legs. Lox and Knight both ease the sheet up my body exposing me up to mid-thigh.

“God, mouse. Your pussy is making my mouth water,” Lox says with a growl, as Knight catches his hands and stops him from pulling the sheets up further.

“As much as I want the taste of peaches on my tongue, Lox, we are just going to have to yearn for what we can’t have. At least, not yet,” Knight says, as he leans down and plants an open-mouthed kiss on my thigh, mirroring his brother as he travels up and down my leg, driving me crazy with each brush of his lips.

Lox licks the inside of my left thigh alternating between flicking and sucking my flesh until nothing else matters but the complete and utter bliss I feel from them worshiping my body. Trey breaks our kiss, leaving me weak and panting as his kisses slowly trail down my neck, giving my sensitive skin the same tender, craze-inducing attention. My body is tingling from my head to my toes. If one of them so much as blows on my clit I will shatter into a million pieces. I'm so worked up that I don't register what's happening until their teeth bite down hard all at once, breaking my skin and lighting me on fire.

My head falls back against the pillow and my mouth parts in a hoarse scream as pain shoots up and down my body. My body shakes involuntarily, the heart monitor goes haywire as my heart beats rapidly. Warmth begins to spread up my limbs as pain turns into pleasure. It's like a dam has broken inside of me and I am flooded with emotions, relief, love, and lust in torrents; their emotions.

When they release me, I can barely keep my eyes open as they all begin to kiss and lick the spots they claimed as theirs. Trey's is between my neck and shoulder, Nate's on the wrist of my right hand, Lox and Knight both chose to bite my inner thigh, one on either side. "So fucking beautiful, Mercy. You're ours now, baby," Knight croons as he kisses his bite, sending delicious chills up my spine. All I can do is smile, high on the feeling of sensing their emotions for the first time.

My eyes close as they continue to tend to my bites. My final thought as sleep claims me once more is that my pack is complete.

My pack.

Mine forever.

SIX

NATE



Christopher did not disappoint us. His arrival at the hospital the next day is met with a barrage of questions from the press about Mercy's well-being and the status of her health, which, of course, he knows nothing about. We kept everything about Mercy's condition under wraps thanks to Heath, who seems to be getting on better with Lox as the days pass.

I watch the live stream from the multiple media sources who have set up shop outside the hospital for the past three days. Mercy has made headlines all over the world. Little did we know, our girl is making serious waves with taking over her father's business. With the new legislations and Omega-friendly cities and towns sprouting up all over the place, it is a welcome change to see progress being made.

As I watch with rapt attention from my phone beside Mercy's bedside, we listen with disgust to Christopher as he attempts to set back the movement of change. I hate the man. Considering he was a major figure in both Knight's and my life, I used to have respect for him. My parents never bought into his rhetoric on our societal structure and its relation to "God's word", so it's safe to say we never drank the brainwashing juice. When our parents died, the foundation of our own ideals had already been laid, so it was easy to ignore his prejudices, until now. Until he tried to kill my mate. Until he crossed the fucking line.

Turn it up, please. Mercy places the notepad in front of my screen blocking my view. I smile and turn the volume up on

my phone so she can hear better. I stand from the chair I'm sitting in, and she beckons me with her chin, gesturing for me to sit beside her. I carefully help her slide over to make room for me on the bed, mindful of her injuries as we both settle back onto her pillows. I catch her wrist and plant a kiss on the mark I put there. Her body shudders in response as I lap at the bite with a swipe of my tongue to further the healing.

“I applaud my daughter's efforts and my support for her will continue as she recovers. She is exceptional for sure. But if the burning down of Smooth Bourbon tells us anything, it's that the world is not ready for such a drastic change in our society's structure. The majority of our cultural beliefs revolve around the protection of Omegas, and there are a lot of people out there willing to do anything to protect the old ways. I hope no one intentionally meant to do my daughter harm and that this was a mere accident, but I will leave the investigations to the police. I will say this, you ask us to accept the changes, yet there are those who would counter and ask that those who seek this change respect our wishes for things to remain the same. The choice, should of course, be to their discretion.” Christopher's voice booms down the mic as a sea of hands shoots into the air to question him further.

He stands there in his pristine, navy-blue double-breasted suit, golden crucifix cufflinks gleaming in the morning sunlight, with Mercy's mother, Seneca, and father, Edward behind him. It's clear by the way Edward tucks Seneca under his arm protectively that they want nothing to do with the spectacle before them. Without Benjamin as a dominant Alpha, it is evident Christopher is loving his newfound control of their pack. Does he not understand that his own Omega is uncomfortable and wants nothing more than to be by Mercy's side? Can he not feel her emotions, or is he ignoring them?

“What a dick,” Trey says from the other side of Mercy's bed as he watches from his own phone. We opted not to turn on the massive flatscreen TV in the room out of sheer principle, plus Lox is grinding his teeth so hard from the couch he might tear the thing off the wall in outrage...the grip on his own phone is telling.

“So, you think an Omega can’t hold a position of leadership or power?” a random reporter asks from the crowd.

Christopher clears his throat and looks into the camera, as if he can see us watching him. “I’m saying that an Omega needs to understand their limitations. They need to understand their Alphas are there to protect them, nurture, and give them security in the home. It’s not the other way around. We all know biologically an Omega is meant to be cherished for what they can bring to the pack...the future, their family.” He smiles as another reporter chimes in before any other hands go up.

“You say you support your daughter, but your words contradict that. What is it, pastor? You either believe in change for all designations or you’re of the mind that oppression, forced marriages, and animal-like captivity of a human being should remain the same.” The camera zooms in on the reporter who is openly sneering at Christopher. I recognize her from the national news, Charlotte Matthews, an Omega who staunchly advocates openly for Omegas rights.

Christopher frowns at her accusation but he doesn’t falter. If there’s any sign her question makes him uncomfortable, he doesn’t show it. But we all know it has. His grip on the podium has tightened and his jaw flexes as he forces a smile. “Ms. Matthews, I assure you that change is not easy. There are those in our society who don’t see the world as you do. This is a highly polarizing topic in the world, and it’s important for me as a community leader to listen to the majority. My daughter, due to her nature, has always been an exception to the rule, therefore she should not be made the poster Omega for your little movement.” He smirks, and you can almost feel the tension in the crowd as the reporters scramble to process what he is trying to say. Of course, he is speaking of Mercy’s late presentation, as if that somehow made her different biologically, as if she is lesser. Mercy flinches beside me, and it only makes me murderous. I’ve never felt the need to inflict violence on a person, it’s not in my nature. But the driving urge to protect Merce makes me irrationally bloodthirsty.

“But that’s where you’re wrong. Mercy Smooth is the perfect example a lot of Omegas seek to emulate. She is a woman in a position of power, an Omega with a voice. One who can make changes in her community and the world,” Charlotte argues with her own knowing smirk of satisfaction.

“Power is relative, Ms. Matthews, it is fleeting and easily taken.” Christopher smiles a toothy grin, wide and predatory. “Now, as for your other claims,” he turns ignoring all the other questions shouted at him and gestures to Seneca. “Does my beautiful Omega look oppressed to you? I can promise you that our mating was not forced, and she goes where she pleases. So, again I say, nothing is wrong with the way things are. Why go against what God already deems righteous? Now, if you can all excuse me, my daughter is waiting.” Christopher turns and leaves the mic, leaving the reporters shouting after him as he storms through the doors of the hospital.

“Is he serious? He’s delusional!” Trey says in anger and frustration at the debacle we just witnessed.

“Obviously,” Knight replies then looks up from his own phone as he moves away from the door he was leaning protectively against. “Are we all ready for this?” he asks, eyes creased in concern, more for Mercy than the rest of us.

Mercy shoves my phone away, chest heaving in anger as she struggles with her notepad beside me. *I DON'T WANT HIM HERE!!*

“None of us want him here, baby. We need him to believe we don’t suspect him in any way. So, we will play the game. We will let him show us his cards, because he will. But he won’t come near you,” Knight says with sure certainty. He’s right. We need to pretend that we are none the wiser, but it still makes me bristle that we can’t hurt him here and now. I don’t want to play the long game, I want our retribution to be swift, brutal, and satisfyingly lethal.

Mercy frowns, then nods her head in agreement. I’m sure if she could speak beyond a hoarse whisper, we would be privy to more than a few phrases on pieces of paper. I bet she is practically screaming internally. Physically, he won’t get

near her, but his words are enough, sinking into her psyche like poison. The man is toxic, and he hides it with fake smiles and his bible. Again, I wonder how their pack ever survived with three completely different Alphas from the start.

“Well, he’s predictable, and it will serve us well in the long run. Just because we didn’t see the lawyers, it doesn’t mean they aren’t here. Christopher is doing exactly what we thought he would. So, we have an idea of what will happen next at least,” Knight says reassuringly.

“Mouse, look at me.” Lox stands and crosses the room until he leans over me to get to Mercy. “We got you. We are right here.” He points to his heart, and she relaxes in my hold. “So, whatever he has to say, let his words fly and land flat, baby. His words, his actions, they don’t mean shit. Remember you are in control. You know why?” He arches a brow at his question as he waits for her response.

Lox’s lips turn up in a smirk as Mercy mouths, *Why?*

“Because we see him, songbird. We are not in the dark about his intentions, and that gives us one hell of an advantage,” Trey answers before Lox can reply. Lox glances at Trey and points at him in approval. For so long our pack acted independently of each other, yes, we lived and worked together, brothers, but we were aimless. Finally, after all these years we are working as a unit, feeling, anticipating, and acting on one accord. All for her.

“Exactly—”

A knock on the door interrupts Lox’s words and Knight gives Mercy a nod of encouragement before he turns to open the door. I can feel us all mentally bracing for impact. I press a kiss to Mercy’s temple, easing off the bed to stand beside her, mirroring Trey on the opposite side, like we’re two watchful sentries.

The little bubble of protection we’ve created in this room bursts for the first time in days as Seneca rushes past Knight in a blur of gasps and tears with Edward and Christopher at her back.

“Oh, Mercy, baby girl. Thank God you’re okay.” Seneca is all tears and sobs as she looks Mercy over from head to toe. Her hands shake as she captures Mercy’s face between them. Mercy’s eyes spill over with tears as she and her mother have a silent conversation. After a moment, Seneca nods, searching Mercy’s face before she wipes the tears away.

“It can be rebuilt, but you, my dear, are only one person. You are important to a great many people, and not only the ones in this room. You are the glue in this equation, my girl. I know you will make it out all alright.” Seneca leans forward and touches her forehead to Mercy’s, then sighs. The entire room is respectfully silent as we watch them in their meaningful tableau, until a throat clears from the doorway.

I could have laughed at how right we all were, as two very awkward-looking lawyers arrive, interrupting a beautiful moment, their intentions more than clear. As they walk into the room, they announce to Mercy that they are here to finalize the will and need her to prove that she is mated.

“Christopher, why would you do this? This is not what we need to be focused on right now. In fact, why does it matter?” Edward turns and gestures at the four us. “We know these men; we’ve known them their entire lives. They all love her, isn’t that enough for now?” His eyes blaze with fury as he rounds on his packmate. It looks like he’s had enough of Christopher’s antics, and I am here for it.

Seneca also looks affronted by her mate’s behavior. Her face turns into a scowl as she holds Mercy in her arms protectively and stands between her and the lawyers. “You took this as an opportunity to...to what, Chris—”

Christopher clucks his tongue and pushes past Edward, but we don’t let him get far. Knight steps in his way, followed by Lox while Trey and I remain next to Mercy’s bed.

“Sen, listen.” He pauses, as if noticing his path has been blocked, he finally looks to Knight in disgust. “I need to get to

my mate and my daughter. Move.”

“No, you don’t, you can speak from here,” Lox growls through clenched teeth.

“If you think—”

“Why? Christopher. Explain!” Seneca shouts. “Hasn’t Mercy been through enough? Yet you have to push your agenda by attempting to what? Make a point. You’re not going to examine your daughter for mate marks. Benjamin wouldn’t ___”

“He’s gone, Seneca. It’s up to me to uphold his wishes. Mercy knows this,” Christopher says softly, all dutiful and concerned, as if his daughter isn’t laying in a hospital bed because of him.

I clear my throat, sensing Mercy’s distress. My girl doesn’t have a voice, so I will give her mine. “You don’t need to examine her,” I say, interrupting the continued back and forth. I look down at Mercy, who is speaking without words as I get her consent. She gives me a nod as I pick up her wrist and kiss it tenderly before I raise it for the others to see. Seneca sucks in a sharp breath of surprise and Edward smiles knowingly with pride in his eyes. Christopher on the other hand, keeps his face neutral, but he can’t hide the fury in his narrowed eyes. Bested, asshole.

One of the lawyers steps forward to get a closer look, while his partner opens his briefcase, sits on the couch and awaits instruction. Before he can ask to see more, Trey moves around Seneca to gently pull Mercy’s gown away from her neck to expose his mark. Mercy stares furiously back at a pissed off Christopher as the lawyer nods his head as if he’s seen enough.

“Thank you, Miss Smooth. Let me offer you my sincerest apologies for disturbing you during this difficult time. My associate and I will quickly sign off on the paperwork and make this official,” the lawyer says apologetically.

Edward blows out a breath, and to my surprise, shoulder checks Christopher as he passes him and crosses to the bed to

stand beside Seneca. “Mercy, honey, I am so sorry. Our intention was to come to check on you and make sure you were okay, not this.” He points to the lawyers and then to Christopher. “Please forgive us...this is just, distasteful.”

Mercy looks up at Edward, offering him a small smile, yet I know she wishes she could say more right now.

“Well, I am not seeking an apology. I did what had to be done! Someone had to maintain order here. And I had to make sure Mercy didn’t resist Benjamin’s wishes. You know how willful—”

“Enough! Christopher, leave. This is not the time or the place. Why is this such an issue for you? Our daughter has been hurt. She could have died, and yet you’re more worried about Benjamin’s will. I can’t believe you would be so heartless. The things you said outside...” She sighs, sounding tired and weary of all of this. It’s only been three weeks since Benjamin’s funeral, now this. “Leave this room, right now, please.” Seneca is visibly shaking with anger as she points to the door of the hospital room. She narrows her eyes at Christopher, as if she’s seeing him for the first time. I would love to film this exchange for the public. Christopher withers under her reproachful gaze, raising his hands in surrender, and I’m starting to wonder who’s really in control here. More importantly, how has Christopher managed to keep his dirty dealings secret from his entire pack. Momma Seneca is definitely not a push over but there’s a lot she’s not privy to.

“Sen, I—”

“Go!” Edward shouts, and I force back a smile as we all watch on in astonishment.

Christopher sneers at us all, including the lawyers. Clearly livid that things didn’t go as he planned this morning. Turning on his heels, he storms to the door, before he halts. “Mercy, I am glad you are well, daughter. I will continue to pray for your recovery,” he says, without even looking at her, then he opens the door and slams it shut.

Nothing about what he said sounded sincere, and it only makes me bristle further. This is no way near over, and as my

brothers catch my eye, I know they are thinking the same thing. We are going to have to double our efforts to protect Mercy.

It doesn't take long for the lawyers to sign off on the will, making it official. Smooth Bourbon belongs to Mercy now. Regardless of what is left, it is hers, despite Christopher's efforts.

By the time Seneca and Edward leave the room, with the promise to check in on her once she returns home, we are all ready to drop from exhaustion. Mercy yawns, triggering us all as I sit back in the chair I'd abandoned earlier.

Mercy writes, after a moment she shows me the notepad, the words are underlined to emphasize the urgency. *I want to go home*. My heart soars, not missing the fact that she called our home, *home*. All the work I put into designing something perfect with her in mind was worth it in the end because she came back to us. Now, I am going to build her the perfect nest so by the time she recovers completely, I can make good on my promise.

"I will go check with my brother, mouse, and have him come talk to you," Lox says quietly, leaving the room to go in search of Heath. After four days of no real sleep or proper food, I am looking forward to returning to our packhouse.

It isn't until the next day that Heath clears Mercy to be discharged from the hospital with strict instructions detailing her care for the next few weeks. With her injuries we know Mercy will need rest, and with the threat of triggering another heat, keeping her as stress free as possible is important. I honestly don't know how we are going to do that when we don't know the extent of the damage at the distillery. Knight and Avion both agreed that Freeya would be safer in their care, and she could deal with any questions and concerns from the board as Mercy's assistant and basically her second. So, at least, that's covered for now.

I guess all my concerns will have to wait. For now, I want to get my mate home and guard the gates.

SEVEN

FREEYA



“I can’t...I can’t take— Oh God!” I moan, my head falls back against the office chair as Omari punishes my clit between his teeth for the fourth time today. I mean, I shouldn’t complain, right? A woman can’t die from orgasms, can she? Googling it as soon as I can think straight again.

Omari slurps my arousal, as if it’s the last dregs of his favorite milkshake, humming appreciatively as he damn near works me out of this chair. “Please... Please, Omari. I have a conference call in less than ten minutes. I can’t—” I pant as my eyes roll into the back of my head like a woman possessed. “Need to do my job. Mercy... Oh, God... This is important.” My words fall on deaf ears as he lifts my legs, hitching them over his shoulders and pulls the chair closer to his face. Note to self, wear pants around these men from now on. I look down to where he’s hiding underneath the desk in Avion’s office, lips glistening, pupils blown wide with just a sliver of his jade-green eyes on display. He offers me a quick kiss to the inside of my thigh and smiles playfully at me.

“Well, I guess you better cum soon, Petal, because I’m not going to stop until you do. Do you think you can keep a straight face as I lick this plump pussy of yours? I’m tempted to experiment.” He winks and falls headfirst into my pussy once more.

This Omega and his filthy mouth are going to be the death of me. It’s been like this with them since the night they all claimed me as theirs. Their insatiable need to be with me and me with them. I didn’t know I could feel such a strong

connection with anyone, but Avion, Vic, Omari, and Dez are like something I never thought was possible. Almost too good to be true.

Is this how Mercy feels? There is so much I don't know about these men. In reality, maybe that's why I'm so afraid to tell my bestie. She's going to think I've been lobotomized and had my brain rewired. There's a part of me that's waiting for the other shoe to drop. For the ugly truth of this newly found pack bond to show me its true colors or their true intentions. Out of all the people in that club the other night, Omari found me, he wanted me, and so did his Alphas.

I feel like I'm floating on cloud nine. I know it's serious cliché material, but what goes up also comes crashing back down to earth at warp speed. Gravity is a bitch and I'm falling fast without a safe, soft place to land.

In the cold hard light of day, I jumped into this with both feet with my crazy ass baggage in tow, literally. I want, no, need to feel something, to carve out a little piece of this world that's only for me. My truth, ultimately, is that I no longer want to be alone, and now I have a pack. A very attentive, sexually generous pack.

"Fuck!" I scream as he pushes two fingers inside me, twisting them upward and tapping on my G-spot like he's communicating through morse code. Holy moly, I read you loud and clear. I'm wound so tight I know I have maybe a minute before I detonate all over his face. Omari wraps his lips around my clit and sucks so hard I cry out from both the pain and pleasure. My release is almost blinding as I buck up out of the seat while he licks and sucks me clean.

He groans in pleasure with his nose brushing gently over my sensitive flesh. "You taste so sweet, Petal. I can't get enough of you. Absolute perfection, Free," Omari says, planting delicate kisses on my skin, lapping at his mate mark as I try to catch my breath enough to gather myself for the upcoming conversation. I don't think we have time for round five, but with each stroke of his tongue over his mate mark, a pulse of need goes straight to my core. Hell, I don't think I'll survive.

“Omari, I know you all feel I need a distraction from everything that’s going on, but that doesn’t mean I need my pussy assaulted every hour on the hour,” I say with a plea in my voice. I don’t want to appear ungrateful for their attention, but damn. “I won’t have any skin left down there if you keep licking me like I’m a tootsie roll pop.” I chuckle as he pulls my dress down, sans panties because they are shreds which are tucked into the pocket of his jeans. This is my life now and I am ninety-eight percent okay with it. They were nice panties though.

“Fine, Freeya.” He pouts as he crawls from under the desk and stands at his full height. How he managed to get his tall, lean body underneath there is seriously circus-trick worthy. Standing before me, his dick hard and straining against the zipper of his jeans, my mouth waters as his warm sugar scent floods my senses. Omari places his arms on either side of the chair and leans in to lick the seam of my lips. I open them eagerly as I taste myself on his tongue, moaning in satisfaction. Omari kisses me breathlessly before he pulls away, our faces mere inches apart.

“Do you taste what I taste, petal? Pure ecstasy on my tongue, that’s all you.” Kiss. “I’m feeling clingy, and this is new.” Kiss. He sighs. “My hormones are all over the place and I can’t control myself at the moment.” Kiss. He leans in, forehead pressed to mine. “You are making me ravenous, Free.” He kisses me once, languidly drinking from my lips before he steps back and walks hesitantly away from me. His hands flex in and out at his sides, shaking them almost anxiously, as if he’s using all his willpower to put distance between us. It’s kind of cute and scary at the same time. I’ve never been on the receiving end of this kind of attraction, but I feel the same magnetic pull toward him as well.

“I don’t know how much you know about male Omegas.” He pauses, and I realize he is waiting for me to respond.

“Not a lot really. Male Omegas are extremely rare.” I shrug. “Mercy used heat suppressants, so she never went into heat until recently, so I have little information to go on. I know there are a lot of hormonal and pheromonal shifts though. This

is all new territory for me. All of it. You, Avion, Vic, and Dez, this dynamic is all new,” I fumble my words in reply, wringing my hands in my lap, wishing I had something more knowledgeable to say but I come up short. Omari is the first male Omega I’ve ever met, talk about red diamond type rare. So, I’m clueless. “Are you saying, you’re going into heat?” I ask, eyes widening as his words and actions all begin to make sense.

He paces slowly in front of the desk, his brows creased, lost in thought. But I wait patiently for him to reply as my eyes dart to my phone noting the time. I’ve been holed up in Avion’s office for the past six days, it’s become my crisis control command center. The events of last Sunday still feel too surreal to wrap my head around. I almost lost my best friend and I’ve been beating myself up about not being there since I got the call from Nate. I know I’m being irrational, but I can’t help but think if I had picked up my phone earlier... Wondering ‘what if’ won’t get me anywhere, so I’ve been holding down the fort for Mercy when all I want to do is run to my bestie and see her in the flesh.

Unfortunately, for whatever reason, Knight thought it was best that we were kept apart for the time being. My safety being a priority because I was Mercy’s second in command. She was discharged two days ago but I’ve been told that until she can actually speak to me, there’s no point in coming to their house. Well, if they think they can keep me away from her any longer, they have another thing coming. Alphas or not, I’m ready to beat a door down to get to her.

“Yes, well, no, I still have a few months to go, but I think the change in me is because of you,” Omari says finally, bringing me back to the present. I watch him sucking contemplatively on his bottom lip, making me wish I could soothe away whatever it is that’s making him feel edgy. I can smell the sharp shift in his scent and instinctively I go into Beta mode. I want to comfort him and fix it.

“Omari—”

“It’s different, though. At the moment, all I want is you. Your taste, your scent, just you.” My eyes widen at this news

and Omari takes one look at my reaction and groans in frustration. Poor baby, he looks so vulnerable as he attempts to make it make sense. “I don’t know how best to explain it, Free. All I know is I need you. Normally, Avion, Vic, and Dez are enough, they’ve always been enough. But you...you... I think you are my true mate. I don’t think, I know. I crave you. I think we are meant—” He blows out a long breath then stops pacing as my mouth falls open in shock. I don’t know what a true mate is, but Google and I need to have a serious talk. Omari raises his hands in a placating gesture, as though if he says any more, I might balk from the ridiculousness of it all. I mean, I’m not freaked out, I just need clarity.

I stand and move slowly around the desk and lean my hip against it, keeping the space between us. I guess it’s time to let my insecurities fly. “Omari, I’m just a Beta. Insignificant—”

“Don’t do that.” He stops me and closes the distance between us. “You are far from insignificant, and whoever planted those seeds in your head doesn’t deserve to walk in your presence. Freeya, I know all of this is sudden. As a pack, I thought we were complete. We never actively sought to add anyone else to our dynamic. But you...you are more, Petal. So much more.” He takes my hands in his and lifts them to his lips, kissing them softly. My brain is going a mile a minute because I can’t process what’s happening right now. I have nothing to compare this exchange to and I am left with a mouth full of questions that I am not sure I have time to get the answers to. For now, at least. I’m about to open my mouth to speak when my phone rings on the desk. Duty calls.

Omari drops my hands and steps back. “Go be bossy, Free.” He smiles that panty melting smile, but it feels forced. “Come find us when you’re done with your call.”

“Okay.” My voice sounds small and pathetic to my ears, and I pause for just a moment before I rush to my phone. I watch him leave, the door closing with a finalizing click. I answer my phone and do what I do best. Work. It’s familiar and the one thing in my life I’ve always been able to control.

Right now, my life is spiraling off course and all I can do is hang on for the ride. I have to remind myself that I put myself

here, and whatever happens next...well, that's on me now, isn't it.

An hour and a half later, my mind is still reeling over Omari's words. My bare feet carry me out of the office and into the rest of the massive high-rise apartment in the middle of downtown Frankfort. Floor to ceiling windows provide an unobstructed view of the city below. It's absolutely breathtaking and one of my favorite things about this place. The ground floor is all open planned, modern, sleek with streamlined furniture of dark hardwood and leather in the living room space, and glass and stainless steel in the dining room and kitchen areas. The second floor consists of various bedrooms with handcrafted beds, and plush furniture to rival any five-star hotel with drool-worthy bathrooms.

It's the type of place Mercy and I would salivate over as we pored through Architectural Digest on a Saturday morning with our coffees in hand and e-readers on our laps. Yep, that's the kind of friends we are, the kind that dreamed and planned for our futures together because at the time, we only had each other. Now, things are different. Hell, one of Mercy's Alphas is an architect; he could build her whatever she wants. And me, well, this is more than enough luxury.

I never got a chance to sleep in the temporary accommodation Mercy had planned for me days ago. My luggage is now unpacked in my own luscious room on the top floor with a view overlooking the city. Again, it all feels surreal. This can't possibly be my life, not after everything I've been through. All the pain, abandonment, and twisted words, sharp and barbed, latch onto my mind as a constant reminder of what I'm not. I can almost see the sour expression on my mother's face as she called me unworthy and unfit for even a fraction of the life I have now. My parents threw me out with nothing but my college education to look forward to and that was it. I made a life for myself and worked my way up on my own merits. I didn't need my family's name to help

me climb the ladder because I'm sure my mother struck me from the family tree like she never gave birth to me.

I'm no stranger to wealth. I grew up with a silver spoon in my mouth, until it turned into a rusty fork when I didn't live up to my family's standards. A beautiful, prim and proper Omega to be mated off to yet another rich and powerful family. You know, keeping the rich and powerful...rich and yep, powerful...blah blah blah. I'm grateful I didn't suffer that fate. My Beta status happened early in my adolescence, a dud in my father's eyes, but hey, they had other children to live up to their standards. At least they waited until I was eighteen to get rid of me. I will give them that much, for all the shit it was worth. I wouldn't change being a Beta for the world. Although, my parents' words always creep up out of nowhere to remind me I'm worthless. Which is why Omari's words seem to haunt me. "*You are more, Petal.*" I thought I was done allowing the words of others to affect me, obviously this is still, and maybe it always will be, a sore subject. I guess I need to immerse myself in positive affirmations until I really believe them.

You're a grown-ass woman, Freeya, woman up, I remind myself as the sound of voices has me picking up my feet, urging me forward. I smile at the strangeness of butterflies at the thought of being in their company. I reach the landing with a glass barrier that protects you from going splat on the ground floor below, stopping short before coming into view of the four men below.

"What did you tell her, Mari?" The sound of Dez's deep gravelly voice reaches my ears and my body instantly reacts. The need to crawl into his lap and curl my body around his is strong, but I resist. Curiosity gets the better of me and I remain hidden behind the hallway wall.

Omari whines. I don't need to see him to know that he is pacing like he was in the office earlier. "You mean did I tell Freeya I'm a crazy stalker Omega who can't keep his hands off her? Yes, I told her that."

"Calm yourself, mon cœur. Breathe," Avion croons, his voice is demanding but smooth as silk as he soothes Omari

with a low rumbling purr that threatens to bring me to my knees. Damn, these Alphas.

“I told her she is my true mate!” Omari blurts out in frustration.

“How did she respond to that, *mi alma*. Obviously it’s a lot to hear considering the bond between us is new. It’s not unheard of,” Vic says matter-of-factly, with a hint of his Spanish accent breaking through.

It’s at this moment I want to be brave enough to appear at the top of the steps and cut into their conversation, as if it’s okay that I’ve just been eavesdropping on them. I want to be able to take Vic’s face in my hands and ask him to explain it all to me while I comfort my Omega and tell him everything is going to be alright. But we aren’t there yet, are we? Who am I kidding? I’m not there yet.

“I don’t think she knows what it means, Vic. But then her phone rang, and I told her to find us after, but she’s been up in Avion’s office for almost two hours. What if she looks it up before I can explain, and she wants—”

“She’s our mate too, Mari. Freeya doesn’t seem like a woman who wouldn’t want an explanation. Communication, baby,” Dez says calmly. “If you don’t stop fretting, I’m going to have you sit on my knot,” he continues playfully, and the idea of watching them together sends a tantalizing thrill through me that has my feet moving before they can finish talking.

As soon as my foot touches the first step, four sets of eyes are on me, watching me make my way toward them. My hand grips the metal railing, their scent mingles together to make one heady cocktail of pure sexual delight. I clench my teeth to bite back the moan in my throat as I close the distance between us. Geez, how is this possible to want them all so much all the time? This can’t be normal, it’s like all rational thoughts die in their presence and I am a slave to their whims.

“Come here, *mon chéri*.” Avion pulls away from Omari, who immediately sits between Dez and Vic, tucking himself under Dez’s arm, watching me cross the living room with

hunger in his eyes. Avion removes his black suit coat and drapes it over the wine-colored leather wingback chair and sits, patting his lap for me.

Now is not the time to be shy, Freeya, I tell myself as Vic brushes his tattooed fingers down my arm when I pass him, catching the scent of mint, leather, and ink that is uniquely him. I approach Avion, his large muscular forearms on display as he rolls up his sleeves and holds his arms out for me. As soon as I'm within reach he yanks me down, like he couldn't wait to have me in his arms, his nose in my hair breathing deeply, then he sighs.

"Knight called and said Mercy wants to see you. I am sure the two of you will have loads to discuss." He pulls me closer, my back to his front as he continues, "How was your meeting?" he asks. My eyes are on the men in front of me. There's an intensity to their gazes. It makes me squirm on Avion's lap, making him suck in a sharp breath.

"Steady, mon chéri," he cautions me with a nip of his teeth to my neck, making me gasp in surprise. Honestly, the news about finally seeing Mercy is great, but I want to talk about—

Dez sighs. "How much did you hear, baby girl?" He smirks as Omari's eyes widen, pleading, like he's afraid I'm about to run for the hills. Whatever it is, it can't be that bad, right? I fold my arms over my chest protectively, trying to guard myself somehow before I reply.

Blowing out a breath, the words fall from my lips. "What's a true mate? Why is this revelation freaking Omari out? What...what—" my voice breaks, and damn it, my insecurities come flooding out like a tsunami. "Why me?" I ask, my voice barely a whisper, as I ask the question that's plagued me like a swarm of bees from the instant they claimed me. I can feel myself deflate as Avion's arms tighten around my waist, sensing my emotional decline through our bond.

Everyone is quiet for a moment, and I belatedly realize then that they are waiting for Avion to respond. He is the lead Alpha of this pack, so they are allowing him to speak first.

“Why not you, mon chéri? Do you not know your worth?” He shuffles me on his lap, shifting me sideways so he can see my face. Lifting my chin with his finger. “Look at me, Freeya,” he commands softly, and I comply, berating myself internally for my weakness, but I can’t help the vulnerability I feel because as I said before, I am waiting for the moment when it all falls apart. That or someone jumps out into the middle of the room with a camera crew and yells, ‘You’ve been Punked’.

“Regardless of Omari’s realization about you being his true mate, you are ours, we want you because deep down we all know that you complete us. In the past few days you’ve shown us your strength, integrity, and resilience when your best friend, and boss, needed you most. You’re intelligent, smart, beautiful, and you smell divine, mon chéri. But most importantly, you just slotted the last piece of the puzzle in place for us. You care, little Beta, the fact that the second question out of that sweet mouth of yours was about the wellbeing of Omari is enough for me,” he says, his words are so full of admiration that my heart is about to burst.

He leans forward and brushes his lips against mine and I try to keep it together. The last thing I want to do is sob like a baby in this Alpha’s arms, but no one has ever said so many positive, life affirming things to me in one sitting. Do you not know your worth? Well, no, Avion, no I don’t. I guess now, I have the chance to learn.

I swallow past the lump in my throat and turn back to the others. Avion’s grip on me only tightens further as he comforts me. “So, what does it all mean? Being your true mate and all?” I ask softly, watching Omari, who opens his mouth to speak but Vic reaches out his hand and stops him.

“I’ll put it this way, cariña. You are the only woman who can give us what we all truly desire. What Omari, being a male Omega, yearns for. What we’ve waited years to find because it wasn’t time to meet you yet,” he says so tenderly, almost awestruck, as those stormy gray eyes roam over me.

I stumble for my response; they watch me as if they’re holding their breath. Avion’s hands flex, gripping me, keeping

me in a firm embrace on his lap. I'm at a loss for words, they have done nothing but pour out their intentions to me, giving me everything I didn't know I needed in just such a short period of time. Why would I run? How can I? I clear my throat, pushing my emotions down to ask one more question, my voice cracking. "And what is that?" I whisper, what can they want that they don't already have. These men have everything.

Vic, looks at me and smiles, but Omari answers.

"A family."

A family. Simple. Easy. Terrifying. The other shoe and a big ass bomb just drop right in the middle of my lap.

EIGHT

TREY



“Damn it, songbird. Use the bell,” I yell in exasperation as I bound up the last flight of stairs. Rounding the corner, I bite back a laugh at the sight of Mercy in our bedroom where she sits up with a piece of paper rolled up like a makeshift megaphone. As soon as she sees me, she drops the paper and smiles, kicking the now redundant bell further down the bed. She scowls at the bell like it offends her for being in such close proximity. I see the tantrum building and I almost laugh at the aching nostalgia I feel from the expression on her face. A simpler time, indeed, and she always looks so damn cute even when she’s being bratty.

Adjusting the strap on her sling, she rolls her neck, indicating discomfort as it rubs her skin, then glares at me. “I’m perfectly capable of speaking, thank you very much.” I arch a brow, wanting to disagree, but she continues, slashing her uninjured hand through the air to cut me off. “Yes, I might sound like I’ve been smoking a pack a day for the last five years but at least I can speak,” she says with so much sass that I want to put her over my knee. Well, that’s an image. I picture it and quickly store the salacious thoughts away for later. It’s good to see her in good spirits, even though the past few days have been tough for us all.

Mercy begins to cough into her hand, breaking me from my thoughts. Focus, Trey. I immediately rush to the side of our bed for water. Mercy is the worst patient, she’s so stubborn and determined to pretend she didn’t get out of the hospital three days ago.

“And this is exactly what I meant, songbird. You’re chirping a bit too much too soon,” I say in an I told you so tone that only gets me a scathing look in return.

I sit on the side of the bed and shift round, holding the straw toward her lips and she leans in to drink until she has her fill. She clears her throat and sighs. “Seriously baby, please, use the bell. Don’t strain your voice if you don’t have to. You know this, Mercy.” I tsk, trying not to sound like a mother hen, but damn, one of us needs to fuss. Lox, Knight, and Nate give in every time. She’s been home three days and she’s been out for walks around the cabin, on the computer in her newly created office to attempt to deal with her business, and generally doing exactly what the doctors told her not to.

Sensing my growing frustration, she grabs my suspenders with her good hand and pulls me down for a kiss. My lips part, welcoming the connection. We both groan, mouths chasing one another as we kiss like two hopeless, love starved creatures. Desperation is all I feel with every lick of her tongue inside my mouth, and I reply in kind with the same pent up well of emotion.

Is it ridiculous to miss someone even when they are right beside you? Yes, I think so, answering my own question. I miss my songbird. Most of all her voice, commanding and seductive, wrapped up in a warm sultry blanket, the sound of her voice gives me delicious chills, it always has. I miss the way she sings and hums throughout the house, like a songbird, always happy and cheerful, delighting in life as a whole. It’s all the little things, like her early morning piano playing when she thinks we are all asleep. It had become something I looked forward to waking up to.

Damn Christopher. Damn him for taking away our peace. Damn him for trying to take away my heart, my one good thing. She’s my favorite music note, my clef, because Mercy ultimately is my key. She sets the pace and tone for my life’s symphony, and without her I’m sheet music with no composition.

I pull away breathless, not hesitating to nose my way down her neck until my lips skim across my mate mark between her

neck and shoulder. Mercy shudders, her scent thickening the air, sweet syrupy peaches, and my cock twitches in response. She scoots her body closer, her hard nipples jutting through her pajama top. The press of her eager body against mine, wanting me just as badly as I want her, instinctively makes my hind brain go into hyper drive. I lose the cup, placing it on the nightstand, before reaching around to grab the back of Mercy's neck. My fingers dig into soft, delicate skin, pulling her even closer. Her lips are swollen, pupils blown, her hair wild and messy as it tangles within my grip.

"Trey," Mercy whimpers in my hold, my name a plea on her lips. *Perfection*. I don't think, I just react, our lips crashing together once more in an almost feral kiss. I deepen my exploration of her mouth, bending over her, my knee braced on the bed, stopping me from draping my body over hers. I grip her breast in my other hand, pinching her hardened peak, humming in approval as she moans in response.

I want to take back what's mine, remind her body of my touch, erasing the damage done to her. I want to lose myself in her, an animalistic need to claim her all over again. A possessive growl crawls up my throat, and then reality hits like a bucket of ice water being tossed over my head. I immediately pull away. Leaving us both panting and bereft of each other. Shaking my head against the onslaught of spiraling thoughts, I surprise myself. I'm not usually so aggressive, but the past few days have made me edgy. A part of me was left in pieces after almost losing Mercy; my soul, left stripped on the ground. I need Mercy, I need her to put me back together again.

"Are you trying to distract me, songbird," I tease, mentally shifting gears, my voice deep and raspy as I move to stand, but her arm shooting out stops me.

"Is it working?" she tries to say playfully, like me, she's trying to compose herself, but I see nothing but a burning need in her eyes. We are both fighting ourselves, knowing we shouldn't take things too far. She is still injured, and we can't act on the fire burning beneath our skin. I will never hurt her,

regardless of the heady scent of her slick and my rock-hard dick in my pants. Pull it together, Trey.

Steeling my spine, I smile slowly and shake my head. “No. Not at all, songbird.” I smirk. “Now, what can I get you? You called me up here for a reason.” I step further away from the bed, adjusting my glasses as I focus on what’s important. My need to nurture her overrides my need to bend her over the bed and plunge my cock into her sweet-smelling pussy until she screams for my knot. Shit, wrong fucking thoughts, Trey.

“Are you hungry?” I ask, turning around in a circle searching the room for tasks to busy my hands. I find myself picking up discarded clothes from the floor and tossing them into the laundry hamper on the other side of the room. Apparently Lox has decided he doesn’t know how to use one.

“Yes, but that’s not—”

“Mercy,” I groan out, my sexual frustration overwhelms me. “Don’t finish that sentence.”

“I’m not the one with the dirty mind, Trey.” She chuckles. “If you had let me finish the sentence, I would have said, ‘Yes, but that’s not why I called you up here’.”

I pause, my mouth falls open in mock shock as I grab my chest in surprise. Yeah, I guess I am the one with the dirty mind and am no longer going to hide it as I adjust my erection in my pants, making her laugh harder.

“Laugh it up, songbird. It’s only going to make our reunion all the sweeter. Give me something to look forward to.” I raise my eyebrows suggestively and her cheeks flush slightly. She’s so fucking beautiful.

“Where is everyone?” She quickly changes the subject as she struggles against the mound of pillows attempting to get comfortable. Stubborn woman, just ask for help. Before I answer, I cross over to her, avoiding her swatting hand until she relents and lets me help adjust her body to prop against the headboard so she’s sitting upright. I pull the blanket over her body and lay the injured arm up on a pillow. She sighs in relief, and I can’t help leaning in and kissing her temple.

“Thank you, Trey. I love you,” she says, her face sobering. “I hate feeling helpless. I’m anxious and filled with nervous energy. I know being a brat is not the most ideal of behaviors, I’m sorry.” She flops her good arm up and down impotently. “I need to be working, to do something to keep my mind focused.”

I peck her lips quickly. “I love you too, songbird.” I step away and brush her face with the pad of my thumb. “I get it. You’re not one to sit idle.” I nod. “Which is why you have a list of visitors coming your way today.” She widens her eyes in surprise, and I can’t help but smile at the little wiggle-wiggle dance she does at this news. “But first, back to your first question. Nate is up in the loft working on your nest, being all Mr. DIY architect supreme. Lox and Knight are at M. Bar, doing business. I, on the other hand, am at your service, Miss Smooth.” I bow, making her smile. “So, let me get you breakfast. Then, I will help you shower and dress before Freeya arrives. Also, Knight called and informed me that the police will be stopping by as well,” I say, my own face going serious at the mention of the police.

“The police?” Mercy’s eyes narrow in suspicion. We’ve managed to keep them from questioning her so far, but we knew eventually that they would want an account of what happened last week.

“It was only a matter of time before they came around for a statement, Mercy. I am sure Freeya will catch you up on the news about the Distillery, but the building was still smoldering as of two days ago. This is a major incident, nationally newsworthy and the world has yet to hear what you have to say. There is pressure on all sides—”

She fidgets, I can feel her panic rise through our bond. “I can’t...what if...what if they can’t be trusted? What if my father has crooked cops working for him? What if this is part of his plan? I can’t tell them my sister lured me there. What if they try to arrest Faith? She is just as much a victim as me. Will they even believe me if I say it was my own fucking family? I mean, I wouldn’t call those pricks family, but semantics.” She shrugs helplessly, then her head drops into her

hand, and she begins to cough again. I grab her cup and fill it up with water. She drinks deeply, then takes a moment to clear out the cobwebs in her vocal cords. Then she looks up at me, her face pained, eyes watering, and lips pursed. “What if they try to say this was all my fault?” Her words all rush out in a frantic flurry, her brain dumping all her worries and fears out in one breath.

“Hey, hey. Why would they believe it was your fault, songbird? You were attacked, barricaded inside, and left for dead. I get you don’t want them to question Faith, but her Alphas, those assholes are going to be held accountable.” I try to keep my anger in check, taking the cup away, I place it back on the nightstand. I sit facing her, perched on the edge of the bed, and take her hand. “I want to reassure you; we are here, and we will back you, baby. You don’t need to worry, let us do that for you. We are all having trust issues at the moment, but this is protocol, you have to give them a statement.” I kiss her hand and blow out a long breath.

“I just wish I felt confident in the law enforcement in the town to do the right thing.” She sighs. It’s obvious Christopher has a long reach.

“Can I tell you something you don’t know?” I ask, attempting to reassure her and put her mind at ease.

She nods her head. “Yes, I will take all the reassurance I can get.”

“What if I told you that one of your sister’s Alphas is a detective?” Her mouth falls open in disbelief. I can almost see the wheels turning in the wrong direction. I laugh and continue.

“Songbird, there is no way Chasson, Derrick, or Mal have the mental capacity to be anything other than giant, entitled bitches.” I purse my lips in disgust.

Mercy frowns, then her mouth drops open in realization. “Grace, one of her Alphas is a detective. No shit?”

“Yep,” I say, popping the p. “I think Lox asked if he could be the one to come see you. Familiar face and all. I didn’t

question if it was a conflict of interest, but hey, you know Lox. He loves to pull the entitled card out when it comes to you,” I say, rolling my eyes. It is handy, though, despite where he stands with his family, the community still sees Maxim for who he is. Daddy money bags, only without daddies’ money. Ha. Daddy moneybags. Lox would kill me if I called him that.

“There is still so much I don’t know about them. I’ve never been formally introduced. During my father’s will reading, I practically ran for my life out of the room. I guess I will get a chance today.” She groans. “I’m a terrible sister. Grace is pregnant. Faith is fighting for her life on a daily basis. This is not how things are supposed to be, Trey.”

“Songbird, you’ve barely been home a month. Look at everything that’s happened to you in such a short period of time. Don’t be so hard on yourself. You have all the time in the world to catch up with them.” I glance down at my watch, noting the time. I don’t know Freeya very well, but she was very insistent on seeing her bestie today. She threatened to cut off our balls if we turned her away again. I don’t think she is the type to make empty threats, especially when it comes to Mercy.

Mercy nods her head. “You’re right. I’ve lost a lot of time with them, with all of you. I think I need to just clone myself. I’ve got a lot of relationship rebuilding to do.” She chuckles softly.

“Songbird, give yourself a whole lot of grace. Take life one day at a time. The people that matter the most and who want to rebuild those bridges will make a way for you.” I give her hand a squeeze and stand.

“Alright, oh old wise one.” She laughs. “Thank you, Trey. You’re the best nursemaid a girl could ask for.”

I throw my head back and laugh at my new title. “Nursemaid?” I arch a brow.

“Yes. Next time, wear an apron, preferably with nothing else underneath.” She attempts to sound serious, bossy, and demanding while raising her eyebrows suggestively, and we

both laugh. But I will consider it. I love this woman, and after the events of the past few days it's good to see her smile.

I lean in suddenly and scoop her carefully into my arms, making her gasp.

“Trey!” she shouts in surprise.

“It's time for your sponge bath, Miss Smooth,” I say with a smile.

Mercy giggles, her head is thrown back over my arm and the sound brings me joy. The sound makes me feel whole once more and I get my wish. Still a bit shaken, but whole.

NINE

MERCY



Sitting on the corner sectional downstairs in the living room, the big flat screen TV is on mute as I absently peer over Freeya's shoulder watching the stock market numbers scroll rapidly at the bottom of the screen. My eyes travel from the television then back to my best friend. Pausing, I watch her out the corner of my eyes as she recounts the number of video chats she's had with the board over the past few days. She hasn't noticed, but I'm not really listening, well, I mean, I am, but I'm mainly watching her. I can't figure out what it is yet, but something is off. I don't even know why I keep glancing up at the screen, it's as if the inanimate object stuck to the wall can somehow give me the answers I seek.

From the moment Freeya arrived with Omari and his Alpha, Dez, in tow, with barely an introduction between us all, she had immediately gone into Freeya assistant mode; my hackles rise just thinking about it. Yes, she greeted me with a hug, and we were both teary and full of regret for not calling the other first last Sunday. Then, she had gone on with the customary 'I could have lost you' crying, that had led me to more tears in return, because she was right. I could have died. I thought I was going to die, my tomb, a fiery distillery. None of the guys spoke, our watery reunion, though needed, felt strange because there was something else in the air. Freeya and I have been friends for so long, I know when she is holding back. Before I could start asking awkward questions, her guys followed Trey into the kitchen, with the excuse of letting us talk shop. I turned back to Freeya, to see the strained relief on her face before she launched into talks of Smooth Bourbon,

money, percentages, and numbers. My bestie radar was on full alert, usually it's her calling me out. I was almost giddy with excitement; it was finally my turn.

"Mercy," she calls my name, and I am so busy Nancy Drew-ing it, she has to snap her fingers, repeating my name for a second time.

"Huh," I say, turning my eyes from the television, I focus my eyes on Free, really taking in her appearance since she arrived. She's always so well put together, never a stitch out of place. Of course, she doesn't raise my suspicions there. Impeccably dressed, heffa. Her hair is up in a high ponytail as she sports a high collar with a frilly white sleeveless blouse, and high waisted blue jeans. The smooth dark brown skin of her face is makeup free, her eyes bright, lips shiny with a slight bruise marring the corner of her bottom lip. Well, fuck! Bingo! I narrow my eyes and lean forward to get a better look, but she returns my gaze with a glare of her own.

"Ah, Mercy, are you okay girl? Are you in pain?" she asks, deflecting. If she's figured out that I have noticed her lips, she doesn't show it. The second question catches me off guard and I reply with another nonword answer. No, Free, I am not in pain, just wondering why you're being secretive.

"Huh." I almost roll my eyes at myself for sounding like a cave woman. Apparently, I've lost all semblance of speech. Clearing my throat with a cough, I blame it on my recovering vocal cords. They are still recovering after all, so, it works. "I'm sorry, no, I'm not in pain. What were you saying?"

"Mercy, are you for real right now?" Her eyes widen as she places her tablet down on the coffee table in front of her with a huff of frustration. "I was saying, thank goodness your dad built a secondary warehouse where all the aging barrels and special blend barrels are stored. Which means the company won't take a hit in sales, in fact, they're up as well as the company's stocks.

"My idea," I say under my breath. The last idea my father had taken on board before my world had blown up and my body had betrayed me. I had been so proud when he'd told me

he thought building an offsite warehouse was a brilliant idea. “It will allow for more inventory, you’re thinking like a boss, baby girl.” My father had said, his eyes shining with pride.

“Why am I not surprised, Mercy. You’re always thinking bigger,” Freeya replies. “The board is happy, the world is supporting you, Mercy. This is big. I’ve already had to set up an account for donations, there have been several big ones from some very heavy hitters who want to help you rebuild.” Freeya’s smile widens, and honestly, the news floors me. Interesting, to say the least.

“Hmm. Well, the company has insurance, so there’s no real need for donations, our employees will be compensated. We will rebuild,” I say absentmindedly.

I can feel Freeya’s eyes boring into me, but my thoughts are too caught up on the unwanted attention. A part of me wants to believe in the goodness in humanity, that those who sought to help, really and truly wanted to. The darker part, the part of me that seems to be winning in my subconscious landmine, believes that nothing is done with good intentions. Help the poor little Omega rebuild her father’s company. The poor woman is too weak to sort out her own problems. I can see the condescending Alphas in power sitting on their high horses as they watch countless stories of my company going up in flames, deciding to give me a handout. They are all rooting for me to fail, to prove a point. To justify their reasonings for why the world should remain the way it is when it comes to Omegas. Fuck them. I don’t need their handouts, but I will indeed use them.

“Speaking of rebuild. I thought because of their connection to you and Smooth Bourbon, maybe Nate would be interested in the distillery’s redesign?” Freeya asks with excitement, but I’m so lost in my own thoughts, I don’t answer her question.

The world has turned its eyes on me. I didn’t ask to be a poster woman for the liberation and equal opportunity representation for Omegas. For so long I fought against what I’d become. I pushed it down, suppressed my heats, attempted to ignore my designation. But in the end, it all caught up to me. I know who I am in my soul, but maybe there are others

like me, who need to see that I am embracing my duality. My Omega body and my Alpha heart—my Alpha soul.

My mind wanders back to the activist who exchanged words with Christopher outside the hospital the other day. *“Mercy Smooth is the perfect example a lot of Omegas seek to emulate. She is a woman in a position of power, an Omega with a voice. One who can make change in her community and the world.”* At the time, I didn’t think too much about what she was trying to say, but then I think of my sister Faith, how helpless and hopeless she’s become. I want to do more. I want to make a difference.

“Earth to Mercy. Maybe today wasn’t a good day to debrief you,” Freeya says, her concern pulling me out of my thoughts. She moves closer to me on the couch and grabs my good hand. “We can put a pin in this, Mercy. You want to discuss something else?”

She offers me a half smile of encouragement but the last thing I want to do is talk about my trauma. I don’t want to talk about the nightmare of suffocating, of the fire and smoke that I still smell, as if I remain trapped in the building. I can’t tell her that I may not be able to step back into the one place that has always felt like home to me. I can’t tell her that every time I close my eyes, I hear my sister calling out to me, screaming in terror and I can never reach her. Her cries went unanswered as I ran in a dark maze, mute, unable to call out to her. I haven’t even mentioned it to my guys. I am well-read enough to realize I may have PTSD, but I am not ready to crack open my head to a professional, not yet. My father fucking screwed me over, and I want to make him sorry for taking away my happy place. For taking away the good memories of my dad and replacing them with horror. I hate him.

I stay quiet for a long time, just breathing, calming my rising heartbeat due to the panic threatening to claw its way out of me, because, yeah, I didn’t want to talk about it. “I want to start a foundation. I think those donations we are receiving will go a long way.” I turn, attempting to angle my body toward her, but damn my fractured arm. Huffing in defeat, I continue, but not before Freeya shifts to sit on the coffee table,

seeing my struggle and accommodating. This, this is why we are besties.

“In fact, I think we should hold a gala, invite all the activists, law makers, and politicians who support Omega rights,” I say, my mood brightening and chasing away the darkness, my spirit renews as the ideas fall from my lips. For the next hour I talk about charities and new employment terms and conditions concerning Omegas within Smooth Bourbon. Without a doubt in my mind, I know I will be taking more Omegas on board as soon as we are operational again. Freeya jumps up and scrambles for her tablet as she notates it all with rapt interest, adding some of her own ideas as she goes. When I finally finish, I’m exhausted, throat aching, but filled with purpose, almost like myself again. Almost.

She whistles. “Damn, Mercy, this will be major, you know this, right? How do you think your father will react to your open opposition to his teachings. Not only him though, there are going to be a lot of people who won’t like what you’re doing. Me, I am all for it. I am ready to burn the system down right along with you.” She frowns. “This is only going to make you more of a target for scrutiny, being the first Omega CEO has already done that,” she says with a shrug.

“Fuck Christopher! I want to piss him off. The more upset he is, the easier it will be for him to make a mistake. If he comes for me again, I will be ready, and this time, it won’t be Smooth Bourbon burning. As for everyone else, let them come at me. I won’t hesitate to show them who I really am.” I can feel my anger rising with each word. I won’t be made a victim and I won’t be painted as weak on the world stage. This Omega has an Alpha bite, and I will not let my father or anyone else stand in my way. I will decide my fate, not them. If I am a catalyst for change, then I want to be a fortified foundation for those who want to make a difference. I will construct change for Omegas, brick by fucking brick, for all the Omegas of the world.

“Well, you have my support.” Freeya squeezes my hand and I sigh feeling satisfied. I figuratively went on an emotional rollercoaster and now my thoughts have come full circle. I’ve

dealt with my own shit, well, some of it. But the woman next to me is still hiding from me and she thinks I haven't noticed in the slightest.

"I know you have my back. It's why I keep you around," I say playfully, making her roll her eyes.

"You mean, you couldn't live without me." Freeya sticks out her tongue and stands, crossing over to her bag, she slides her tablet inside. With her back to me, I dive right in.

"So, are you going to tell me what's going on with you and the Omega and his pack? Or are you going to pretend like I don't know you well enough to know something is happening between you all?" I watch her straighten, back ramrod stiff, then she blows out a long exhalation of breath. Freeya's hands go to her hips and her head falls forward. I can only assume she's giving herself a pep talk. Her silence worries me further.

"Free, what's going on?" I ask softly, all my interrogation tactics fly out the window as my concern grows for my friend. She doesn't turn around but looks over her shoulder toward the hall that leads to the kitchen. The sound of male laughter drifts towards us, it's a good indication they are all getting along and are distracted. Freeya quickly unzips her jeans and turns toward me with the waist band down over her hip.

She watches me expectantly, her face neutral, giving away nothing. I lean forward to peer, in stunned silence I gaze at a mate mark on her hip. My mouth falls open, but she doesn't stop there. Zipping up her jeans she pulls her blouse up to reveal her pink lace and satin bra, she steps closer, eyes flicking back to the hall then to me.

"I have one on my breast." She tips forward showing me the mark on her left breast hidden away by the lace. "I have one on the base of my neck." She lets go of her blouse, fingers brushing over the fabric of the high collar. Clearing her throat, Freeya walks towards me and sits in front of me on the coffee table again. "The last one, well, girl, it's in a place only meant for my Alphas and Omega to see." She looks down and the O shape I've formed with my mouth only widens. She waits for me to blow up, to mouth diarrhea at her but I am too shocked

to speak. It takes me a second to process that my best friend is mated.

“Free—”

“Tada! I’m mated!” she says with her arms spread wide in some grand gesture of surprise. My mouth closes slowly as a surge of protectiveness washes over me. Freeya is a grown woman, and she deserves nothing but the best. She deserves the God damn world and for men to worship her at her feet. Not assholes with nefarious intentions. If they—

“Was this consensual, Free? And if they’ve threatened you, please tell me now.” I hold out my good hand and she automatically reaches for it and pulls me up from the couch. The pain in my rib’s smarts, stealing my breath but I clench my teeth to stifle a groan. Fuck, I am in no shape to go into bat here. But I will.

“Yes, Mercy. I said yes. I agreed to be their mate,” Freeya’s words fly out of her mouth in an attempt to stop me as I turn on my heels and make my way toward the kitchen.

“Freeya, you don’t even know them. What you just said sounds more like a business arrangement than a heartfelt commitment,” I reply, as I attempt to speed walk but only make it five whole steps, before I stop. Wincing in pain I pant for breath like I just ran a marathon.

“Mercy, stop, please. You are supposed to be resting here. That was our agreement. I can visit as long as you don’t overexert yourself!” Freeya pleads, trying to steer me back around to the couch but I swat her hand away.

“I’m fine. I need a minute.” I slowly turn and take shallow inhaleds to ease my aching body. “Who’s going to protect you, huh?” I pant, trying to catch my breath. “When did this happen, Free? Are you sure they didn’t coerce you?” I ask in disbelief, but by the frown on Freeya’s face I want to suck my words right back into my mouth.

“Please forgive me that I didn’t ask your permission, Mercy. Or should I call you Alpha, now?” I rear back in shock at the sudden outburst of anger. Well, hello, hand to the face.

“I mean, come on.” Her arms flap up and down in exasperation. “Matings happen like this all the time. Don’t they? Every. Damn. Day. I wish I’d had the opportunity to grow up with my mates, to know them as well as I know myself. What you have is rare and you should be grateful for your connection with those Alphas. You walked away, rejected them, and they still love you despite that. Rare, Mercy. You know what I felt the other night when Omari approached me in that club? For the first time in my life I sensed recognition, my soul reached out to its twin. When I met my Alphas, I felt the same pull to them. I don’t know how else to explain it. They are mine, Mercy. I know that in my heart. But you’re questioning me, like I don’t have the good sense to think for myself. Mercy, I wanted this. There was no manipulation here. I said *yes*.” The last word was through clenched teeth. She’s clearly pissed.

Well, fuck. I stand corrected. “Free, look, I’m sorry. I wouldn’t be your best friend if I didn’t lose my shit and go all rabid guard dog on your behalf.” Her face softens slightly as she bites her bottom lip in an attempt not to laugh. I bet I look a mess, all breathless trying to march into the kitchen to faceoff with an Alpha and an Omega. “I didn’t mean to imply that you can’t think for yourself. This is big news. Life changing news, Freeya. You’re right, who am I to say anything about your mating when I ran away from something one of a kind for years. I don’t deserve them, but they love me, and mated me regardless of my hardheadedness.” Freeya’s eyes widen, and it’s my turn to show her my own mate marks as I raise my wrist first and then pull back my shirt to show her Trey’s mark on my shoulder.

“And my other two, well, they are for my Alphas eyes only.” I shrug and smirk, making her laugh.

“I guess I should have started off my visit with girl talk first, then we could have eased into the show and tell.” Freeya sighs. “I wanted to tell you, I was going to tell you last Sunday but—”

“I get it.” I wave her off, not wanting to think about last Sunday. “But just so you know. As soon as I catch my breath, I

am going to limp in there and give them the ‘hurt her and I will kill you’ speech.” I try to make light of the situation. I would never attempt to negate her feelings, especially ones that are soul deep.

“Free, you are my family. All the family I had for a very long time. I consider you part of my pack, you know. I mean, unofficially.” I try to hide my emotions, but my damn lip starts to wobble as a tear escapes. I wipe it away and Free’s eyes begin to water at the sight of me getting all watery. “I will not cry, damn it. But you are my girl, I care about you, and I want you to have the world. So, they better give you just that,” I say with all the attitude I can muster. Freeya steps into my space and wraps me in a hug.

“I love you, Mercy. I’m so happy you didn’t die. I would have had to find you in the afterlife and drag you right back.” She wraps her arms around me and hugs me carefully, as I do the same. Our lives are changing fast, everything is changing all around us. But I am determined to hold on to the good moments because they can all vanish in the blink of an eye.

“Damn, Free, morbid much?” I pull away and turn toward the kitchen once more.

“When it comes to you, I mean every word,” she replies, grabbing my arm and helping me walk toward the kitchen.

I have an Alpha and an Omega to threaten.

TEN

KNIGHT



“You must think we are fools,” I growl, removing my cufflinks from my shirt methodically, taking my time as the sound of grunts and flesh hitting flesh sends a thrill through me. I don’t usually get my hands dirty, but for this, I will make an exception. For my mate, I will make an exception.

My *mate*. Fuck. My Mercy.

I didn’t want to claim her the way we did but we have years to make it up to her. Years to claim her repeatedly, my teeth, my tongue, my knot buried deep inside her delicious peach-scented pussy. She has us all. Fuck, my dick is hard at the mere thought of all the making up we have in store for us. It sucks that my baby is injured, the sight of the cast on her arm, the wrap binding her broken ribs, sends me spiraling, my rage is so potent, I have no choice but to leave the house under the pretense of working from M. Bar.

From the force of the blows being delivered, Lox is feeling the same pent-up rage as I am. Since the moment we brought Mercy back from the hospital, he and I have been out doing what we do best, getting answers. Christopher might have his hands in every pot in this town, but we are not without our connections. Hence, our relationship with Pack Savoy. Dez Savoy runs and operates a private security company, his arm reaches across several states and a few European countries, his specialty, finding people. But the weasel behind me wasn’t hard to find at all. Dez delivered him to our door this morning before he took Freeya to see Mercy. I guess our packs are

family now considering he is mated to Mercy's best friend. There are only a few Alphas I can tolerate, my brothers, Dez, Avion, and Vic. So, not much of a hardship there.

"Please...he promised—" The sound of another grunt pulls me from my thoughts as I roll up my sleeves.

"Oh, little Stefan, I don't care what he promised you," Lox says, his voice low, menacing, and dripping full of hatred. Punch. "I knew you were a fucking rat." Punch. "I only tolerated you for Nate's sake, because he has a good heart and takes pity on the weak." Punch. "Well, you don't have to worry about me caring at all...I only have one heart to give, and it already belongs to the only person that matters. You know, the woman you assisted in trying to murder."

Another punch, followed by the satisfying sound of the crunch of a bone and a mangled scream has me finally turning around to face a bound Stefan. His head lolls to the side, saliva drips from his mouth, his dark brown skin blackened by bruises and blood all over his face. He sits in a chair in the middle of my office, hands tied behind his back and bare chest exposed with rope crisscrossing him.

Lox worked him over enough for the blood to drip down on the floor, the plastic tarp underneath him was a last-minute decision. I knew this wasn't going to be a nice, tidy question and answer session, so we had to improvise. It's not like I have a torture room in the basement for moments like this, but as Mercy gets more and more media attention, it might be something to look into. Okay, I am not going to call myself Don Knight just yet. Ha.

I consider us all simple business owners, Nate has his architecture, Trey his music, Lox, well, Lox is my right-hand man in all things. I'm not some mafia crime boss, I have a business degree and take routine hikes and live in a cabin in the woods. I'm a big man, but I by no means walk around beating the living shit out of people for shits and giggles. I have Lox for that. But that doesn't mean I won't crack a skull or two when the opportunity presents itself. We need information, and we need it now.

I hold up my hand and Lox stops before he lands another blow. Stefan is a small man. I don't want Lox to break him too much before I get all the information I need from him. It takes me three long strides to stand before Stefan, he must be in some serious pain by now because he looks like he's about to pass out. I watch his body sway like a pendulum in the seat before I react.

I slap his face hard, then snap my fingers in front of him as he jolts upright. "Tell me, Stefan, how long have you been working for Christopher Smooth?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest as he struggles to hold his head up. He opens his mouth, and I can almost taste the lie on his tongue. I hold up my finger to stop him. "Please, make this easy on yourself. Do. Not. Lie. To. Me. I promise you will leave this room in pieces if you do." Okay, maybe not in pieces, but damn, the fear in his eyes at my words makes me give him the biggest toothy grin I can muster. That's right motherfucker, I'm unhinged, like nothing you've ever seen. We almost lost her. I think of what could have been, and I harden myself like steel.

"I...I... Christopher... Two years now," he barely gets the words out, blabbering the entire time, but I stopped listening as I hear two years come out of his mouth. I look at Lox and step back in shock, turning to control my reaction, giving him my back. This happened right under my nose.

"Excuse me." Lox steps up and yanks Stefan's head up to look at him. "Did you say you've been working for him for two years?"

"Yes," Stefan replied.

"Why?" Both Lox and I say at the same time.

"Why would he send you to infiltrate our pack when Mercy wasn't in the picture?" I turn back to face him while Lox forces his face to turn in my direction and holds him steady. When he doesn't answer right away, I begin to lose my shit. "Answer me! Why?"

"He...he wanted me to keep an eye on you. In case she... she came back or contacted you." He sniffs at the blood pouring down his nose, sucking it back in, and continues. "He

wanted to make sure she was gone for good. If she returned... he knew... Benjamin would give her everything to have her back. So, he wanted me to... to try to become a member of your pack. She could have been mine too by now... if ... if—” Crack.

Lox hits Stefan so hard he knocks him and the chair over. I only give him an impatient smirk and he rolls his eyes. “Like he would ever become pack,” Lox scoffs, then leans down to grab the back of the chair, making Stefan groan from the tightening rope about his hands and chest. “Mercy would eat you alive, you measly little worm. If she wasn’t injured, I would leave you tied up until she is ready to come here and do this herself.” Lox spits on Stefan’s shoes in disgust. With a jerk of my head, he steps back, his chest is heaving.

Blowing out a deep breath, I compose myself. “Christopher wanted you to spy on us. Make sure Mercy never contacted us. So, you befriend my brother, the only one of us nice enough to give you an in, to what end? If Mercy never returned, then what? You would have been exactly where you were a few weeks ago. A lackey. You’re a weak Beta, Stefan, why would I want to taint my pack with your deficiency?” I ask, baiting him. I want him to get angry, judging by the way his nostrils flare, it’s working.

“Benjamin! When Christopher found out he was sick, he thought he was close to getting what he wanted, but he didn’t anticipate Benjamin calling you into his office months before he died.” He pauses, sucking in a deep breath.

I know exactly what day he’s talking about. The day Benjamin, Christopher, and Edward were having a heated discussion about Benjamin selling Smooth Bourbon. I interrupted them but not before Benjamin called him out about the sale to fund Christopher’s fucking church. Benjamin knew, he was the lead Alpha, of course, he always had his eyes and ears on his pack. It’s what a good Alpha does. “He didn’t anticipate... the will... the—the deal he made with you and your pack.” Stefan’s words begin to slur. “I wasn’t able to get the intel because... because—”

“Because what, Stefan?” I asked in annoyance as Lox takes a step toward him ready to go to town on him again.

“Because—”

“Because I never trusted you!” I shout, cutting his ass off. I would never have made him privy to such sensitive information, hell, I kept it from my brothers until recently. I am sick to my stomach. All of this sneaking and conniving, for what? So Christopher could create a mega church with cult worthy beliefs. Please, I’m not going to let him have it and neither will Mercy.

Stefan begins to cry. “Please... I didn’t know what his plans were for Mercy. He organized that with Derrick, Chasson, and Mal. He knew—knew Mercy would come for Faith. Faith didn’t have a choice. She does what—what she’s told.” He sniffles. “After I left your house before the board meeting, he told me to lay low. So, I did. I had nothing to do with the fire...please.”

“If he told you to lay low, then why were you still lurking around the Bar yesterday? You weren’t trying to hide, Stefan, you were caught in broad daylight snooping around here. So, tell me why?” Lox asks curiously, stepping up to Stefan once more in preparation to pound into him again. Stefan shrinks back and whimpers.

“Christopher wanted the schematics to the cabin, wanted me to access the cloud to get Nate’s drawings,” he says it so fast. Lox and I go deathly still in shock. What the actual fuck?

“Spill it, Stefan, don’t leave me hanging in suspense or so help me!” Lox growls.

“Christopher is desperate, he must deliver what he promised. There are a lot of powerful Alphas who don’t want things to change. The best way to do that is...is to control the narrative. What better way to do that than through the bible?” Stefan shrugs, clearly, he doesn’t believe the words he’s saying himself, yet he followed this asshole. “The schematics were a contingency plan. If Mercy didn’t die...he would hire a team to make her dis—disappear. He was going to sell her.” He really begins to cry once he’s finished. This is it. I don’t want

to hear another word. “Please...please, it was the last thing I was paid to do. I was going to leave, lay low. I promise.”

“Oh, no need to beg, you’re going to lay low alright. I’m going to make sure you do exactly what Christopher asked of you. He won’t know where you’re hiding,” I say sweetly, as if he has given me everything I need. I look over at Lox. He’s moving before I can say anything.

“You—you...you’re going to let me go?” Stefan sounds surprised but relieved. “You’ll never see me again, Knight. I will leave Frankfort now.”

“I know, Stefan, lay low, deep underground. I’m going to personally make sure you do.” I smile menacingly at him, my eyes filled with my own promise as the door opens and two of Dez’s security team members follow Lox into the room.

“I want to thank you, Stefan,” I say kindly. The shift in my demeanor seems to have him straightening in his chair as the two men come into view.

“What—”

“I think he’s given us more than enough, Knight, don’t you?” Lox asks with a nod to the men.

“Indeed, brother, indeed.” I turn and roll my sleeves back down, wondering why I didn’t take my pound of flesh. I guess there’s no need to when I know his end. “You can take him away. Oh, and boys, make sure it’s slow,” I say as Stefan begins to plead for his life screaming, kicking, and crying as they drag him out of my office. His cries fade until there is only silence.

“I want to fucking kill Christopher,” Lox says finally. “His plan is to sell her, make her disappear, Knight. Traffic her.” He begins to pace as I slide my last cufflink into place and grab my coat. I don’t even bother cleaning up my office. M. Bar is closed until further notice. We have other things that are more pressing.

“He didn’t get the schematics and our security is ironclad. Dez made sure of it. Plus, we have our own men in place. Nate

and Trey are home with her. Mercy is fine,” I say as my phone rings in my pocket.

“I know she is, but Christopher is the lowest of the low, he won’t stop until he gets what he wants. If what Stefan said is true, then this is bigger than we thought. There are bigger players in the game, Knight. We can’t let our guard down for a second. We can’t let them get to her again,” Lox says fervently as he follows me out of my office, only stopping to lock it.

I don’t answer him right away, choosing to pick up my phone instead. “Dez.”

“Knight. My men are handling your rat problem as we speak,” Dez’s deep voice booms down the line as laughter catches me off guard from the background.

“You’re still at my house?” I ask as Mercy’s sweet laugh makes my heart pound with just the sound of her happiness.

“Yes. Freeya wants to have lunch here, so we are hanging out. You have a spitfire on your hands. The little Alpha threatened to cut our, and I quote, *‘dicks and balls off and shove my knot down my throat if I ever hurt Freeya’*. I mean, not a man’s balls, Knight.” He chuckles nervously, and I can’t help the laugh that escapes me. Of course she threatened him. That’s my girl. I’m just glad Freeya came clean, one less secret to keep, but it wasn’t our story to tell.

“Well, I’m not surprised there, Freeya is her pack,” I say seriously. I know how much they mean to each other. They were each other’s lifeline. I get it. I will protect Freeya just as fiercely because I love Mercy.

“I told her to put her knife away, Freeya is in good hands,” Dez replies. “But before we get into our own bro chat.” Dez pauses, the sound of him moving away from the noise in the background is a dead giveaway that he doesn’t want Mercy or Freeya to hear what he has to say. Good. “I want you to know that Derrick, Chasson, and Mal have taken Faith from their pack house. According to my team, it looks like they took her and ran.”

“How much of a head start?” I ask, shooting Lox a worried look.

“In my opinion, the minute they found out Mercy was pulled from the Distillery. They’ve had a few days to get as far away from Frankfort as Derrick’s money can get them. So, they could be anywhere.” Dez tsks in irritation.

“I wonder if they were told to lay low,” I mutter noncommittally down the line, recounting Stefan’s words from earlier. Of course, Christopher would demand they disappear so no one could question them. Well, he underestimated me, my brothers, and our friends.

“Is that what the rat confessed?” Dez asks, hearing my musings.

“Yes,” I reply, my own irritation returning now that we’ve hit a dead end. I know we are going to have to play the long game here, but for Mercy’s sake I want it all to be over as soon as possible. The sooner someone is held accountable, the better. Namely, Christopher. I know we are all ready to move forward with our lives. We’ve waited so long for this moment, for Mercy, for peace, for our futures to begin. I don’t want to waste another minute.

“He can run but he is a wanted man. I applaud you for your diligence in giving Mercy’s clothes over to Detective Franklyn. The information he’s given me is they already have proof Derrick was there that day. The blood on her clothes was both hers and his. The case is being built discretely so that Christopher doesn’t get wind of what’s happening. They won’t be able to hide from us for long. I will find them, and most importantly, Mercy’s sister.”

I sigh as Lox and I reach the exit of the bar. “Thanks, Dez, I owe you for this.”

“It’s in my best interest to take down as many of these assholes as possible, you are helping me in the long run. But, most importantly, a threat to your mate, is a threat to mine, and we can’t have that,” Dez says as the sound of feminine voices filter down the line once more.

“Indeed,” I agree. I hang up the phone without a goodbye, our conversation over now that Mercy and Freeya are in earshot. I am sure by the time we get back to the packhouse, they will still be there.

“Home?” Lox finally asks. Opening the driver’s door of our SUV we’d left parked haphazardly by the exit, I climb in beside him, full of the weight of the news we are about to deliver.

“Home.”

ELEVEN

LOX



I am used to it being the four of us. My brothers and I created a nice cozy corner in the middle of the woods. It was easy to hide away from prying eyes and the whisperings of pity every time members of the community saw us out on the streets. Even though we run a massive night club, seclusion is what I prefer the most. Growing up the way I did, always in the spotlight, impressing the blue bloods at every party and family gathering, I grew tired of posturing. Ultimately, I wanted the quiet life, I always have. It's why it was so easy to latch on to my pack brothers and Mercy. The peace and tranquility I've only felt in their presence made walking away from my family the best decision of my life.

Now that we are all together again, with my little mouse under the same roof, all I want to do is hide away from the world once more. But I can want in one hand and shit in the other, guess which hand will fill up the fastest. Yeah, no, I would rather not picture my hand with piles of shit in it...I digress. Our pack house is just that, ours. I've grown more and more protective of our safe haven now that Mercy is recovering. All of us have. Even with all the security around the perimeter, our own team of security personnel picked by me, I still bristle at the sight before me when Knight and I arrive back home.

"It's okay, Mercy. If you don't want to recount this today, I can always arrange for another time to drop by." Alister Franklyn stands close to the door, his back to us as he speaks softly to Mercy. She grips her shirt with her fist, and her eyes are slightly panicked. Freeya and her very pregnant younger

sister, Grace, are on either side of her. Nate and Trey stand at her back with their arms resting reassuringly on each shoulder. She blows out a breath, then relaxes further when she looks up and spots Knight and me.

My eyes roam the room. Although there isn't a hostile person in the place, I still feel my hackles rise as a sense of claustrophobia makes the room suddenly feel too small. I growl under my breath at the change in Mercy's scent, it's sharper, the peach scent almost overripe. She's afraid, and I want to make them all leave.

Dez stands close to Omari, whose eyes keep wandering to Freeya, who despite being seated, has her arm outstretched on the back of the sofa with his hand in hers. James, the Beta amongst Grace's pack sits on a bar stool they must have pulled out of the kitchen, watching everything with a cool casualness that belies his bouncing leg, as he eyes his Omega, ready to whisk her away at any moment. I guess I should be grateful Vic was in his shop when we passed it on the way home, and Avion is always in the wind. Shun and Kennan, Grace's other Alphas aren't here either. I don't know if I could cope with so many Alphas in one room if they were all here.

Knight nudges me in warning, and it's only then that I realize that I am practically baring my teeth at our guests. "Lox." He passes me, shaking his head with pursed lips as he crosses the room and takes a seat. I offer everyone in the room a tight smile and blow out a slow breath, focusing only on my mouse. She needs my calmness, for her, I let my unease go.

"It's fine. I needed a minute," Mercy's voice wavers a bit before she clears her throat and begins to recount the events of last Sunday.

We all listen, allowing her to get through it all without asking too many questions. The last thing she needs is to have to stay in that headspace for too long. Hearing her recount the events enrages me all over again. I see it's affecting Nate, Trey, and Knight as well. Even Dez turns away to hide his own anger as she talks brokenly about what they did to Faith in front of her.

How could Christopher have given his daughter over to them? Did he love her at all? Did he love any of his daughters? Thank goodness Edward is Grace's biological father and wanted her to pick her own pack. Alister, Keenan, Shun, and James treat her like a little princess. They are perfect for her. We have Mercy, at least Benjamin died with the knowledge that we would take care of her. Yet, Faith, she is attached to criminals who assault and abuse her. She deserves better. I hope we find her before it's too late.

Mercy looks exhausted when she finally finishes. She really doesn't remember much after she passed out on the floor as the fire crew pulled her out of the ventilation grate. Her skin is ashen, and I can tell by the way she bites her lips that she is trying not to cry. This has been too much for her, but knowing my mouse, she won't say anything. Damn her for trying to be so brave.

I don't think my little mouse knows that we've picked up on the fact that she's not sleeping. How she lays awake after waking up from several nightmares during the night. It's only been a week, so we wanted to give her space to work it out on her own, or at least talk to us about her struggles in her own time. None of us want to make her feel as if she's weak, even though all I want to do is wrap her up in my arms and carry her away from all this shit. So, if it's space she needs to work out her demons, then we are all committed to giving her the room for that.

It took a bit of deliberation. For two mornings we secretly debated around the breakfast table while Mercy was sequestered away from us in our bedroom. I'm surprised we came to an agreement at all, considering we all have our own opinions on what we thought would help her the best, but in the end, we all knew what we had to do. We wait, we watch, and most of all, be patient. Mercy is not meant to be managed. We are to support her with as much normality as possible, at least, for now.

"Have you been able to question Faith's pack? I mean, Chasson has a cut on his face, surely that's enough to prove he was there. I don't want Christopher trying to spin this—"

“Mercy, baby, Alister and Dez have DNA samples of the blood left on your clothes that day. We recovered Derrick’s DNA, we have the proof we need. It’s just...” Knight shifts in his seat, not really wanting to tell her this now. But both Grace and Mercy need to know there’s a possibility they will never see their oldest sister again or she’s—

“Just what?” Mercy asks, watching all our faces. I know she can feel it. All nerves vanish from her face, her eyes harden as she looks from me, to Knight, then Alister.

Alister and Dez both nod in Knight’s direction giving him the go ahead. He might as well snatch the Band-Aid off now, we are all here to deal with the fallout. Someone will have to share this with Edward and Seneca, but it can wait for now.

“Mercy, Dez’s security and the police have been looking for Chasson, Derrick, Mal, and Faith. Their pack house was vacant and—”

“Wait, are you telling me they took her and ran?” Mercy eyes go wide with panic. “No...no...no. They hurt her. We need to find them.”

“Alister, tell me you know more,” Grace pleads, her hand rubbing her belly protectively as tears spill from her eyes. “Faith has been through so much. What if...what if they... Oh God!” She buries her face in her hands and sobs. James springs into action easing his way between the coffee table and the sofa, picking Grace up in his arms and cradling her in his lap. Mercy attempts to move but James is a big guy.

“Come here, mouse.” I reach my hand out to her, Nate and Trey both help her to stand as she crosses the room to me. I gather her in my arms, gently tucking her under my chin with her back to my front. Alister turns his eyes on Grace but also on Mercy as he speaks to both of them.

“We know they are no longer in the state. We put out an APB in the surrounding states, but with Derrick’s money, they could be anywhere. We’re not talking about a pack fleeing in a car cross country. They could have fled the country altogether.” Alister grimaces at Grace’s distress, as she cries

harder. Mercy's hand tightens around my arm, the only indication she's near breaking point.

"So, you're saying the men who tried to kill me, who assaulted and raped my sister in front of me, won't be brought to justice!" Mercy snaps, a growl rumbling up her chest, making Nate, Trey, and Knight gravitate to her protectively.

"Oh, they will be found. I promise you that, Mercy," Dez finally speaks. "Where the police fail." He looks to Alister and raises his hands in surrender. "No offense, Alister," he continues, "is where I thrive. My security team is far reaching, even if they fled the country. I have eyes and ears everywhere. I will find her. I will find them." The determination in his voice makes Mercy's body relax into me. I hold her to my chest, lending her my strength, keeping her steady.

"Thank you, Dez," she says with a sigh.

"I think we should get Grace home," James breaks the silence and Alister nods.

"Yes, please forgive us. With the baby coming soon..."

"She doesn't need the added stress." Mercy nods, wiping a stray tear from her eyes. "Get my baby sister out of here."

"I think we all should get out of your hair. It's been a long day for you, Mercy," Freeya says, standing up and moving toward her men. "You know how to reach me, but I will get right on to everything we discussed earlier."

Mercy nods, not responding as everyone says their goodbyes. Hugs and kisses are exchanged, with promises to call and check in with any new updates. Alister and Dez both reassure her that the minute they catch wind of Faith, she will be the first to know. Somehow, the five of us are all standing on the front porch of the cabin, watching taillights vanish into the night as Mercy slumps, knees buckling.

"Mouse?" I scoop her up in my arms as Knight opens the front door for me to carry her in.

"She overdid it today," Trey says in concern as he follows behind me. "We have to remember; she doesn't need additional stress either. The last thing we need is for her

hormones to go berserk. Going into a heat right now would be ___”

“Fucking inconvenient,” Mercy mumbles against my chest. As much as I enjoy fucking my mouse, and boy do I need the release, she is in no shape physically or mentally to go through another heat.

“Let’s get her up to bed,” Knight says as we file in. He closes the door and locks it behind us.

“I can’t believe those bastards fled,” Nate says through clenched teeth. He huffs, redirecting his anger as he moves around the room, grabbing cups and tidying the space. None of us talk, letting him stew in his outrage, we leave him to it. He will calm down once he’s cleaned the entire ground floor. Now is not the time to rehash anymore of this.

We all move in silence around the main bedroom. Trey pulls one of our t-shirts from the wardrobe and tosses it to me. From the scent, it’s one of mine. I catch it and carefully help Mercy out of her clothes, her body sways on the bed, eyes blinking as I pull my shirt over her head.

“What if they kill her? They didn’t hesitate to hurt her in front of me. Like she didn’t matter... Like they didn’t love her... So much animosity. What did she ever do to them?” A tear falls down her cheek as I ease her cast through the sleeve. I lean down and kiss away the tears and scoop her up in my arms as Knight pulls the covers down for me to place her in the middle of the bed.

“I promise you, baby, we will all do what we can to bring her home. They never deserved her, and like so many other packs out there, they get away with their abuse. The world turns their backs on Omegas once they are mated. No one wants to talk about the ones who are silenced behind closed doors.” Knight kisses her temple as her eyes flutter closed.

“I want to make it better, for her, for all of us,” she whispers as she lets sleep take her.

If anyone can scream loud enough to get her voice heard, to make the world stand up and want to change, it’s my mouse,

and despite my need to hide her from the world, I will stand beside her and be her shield.

TWELVE

MERCY



Google says that journaling plays an integral part in the healing process, especially when it comes to trauma.

Writing down my emotions on these pages is helping me comb through my feelings. I feel more in control not having to speak about it out loud, there's clarity after I finish a page, dare I even say peace. I still refuse to share this with the guys, choosing to self-medicate instead. Is it considered self-medication if I am writing in a journal instead of talking to a paid professional?

I'm not drinking more than normal, a glass of wine before bed to help me sleep. Not that I'm doing much of that. It has gotten so bad I've asked Knight, Nate, Trey, and Lox if I can sleep alone. I can't face them. They know I'm struggling, and God bless them for letting me work through it myself. I'm stubborn. One of my many tragic flaws, but the last thing I want to be is weak. I know there's only so much leeway they will give me until they stage an intervention.

I don't want to feel like what happened to me broke me in any way.

With my sister missing, the guilt I feel only sends me spiraling. So, here I am in the middle of the night, the house is quiet as I sit downstairs in my reading nook. The moonlight shines through the window, bathing me in pale blue and grey light. A pin light illuminates the pages over my head as tears stain my cheeks.

Maybe, I am broken. It won't be the first time I've been referred to as such.

Trauma is funny that way. During the day it's easy to put on a mask and pretend I'm absolutely fine. I have so much going on with Smooth Bourbon, keeping busy helps me forget. With all my big plans for the future, the rebuild, and correspondence between the board, it's easy to get lost in my work. But at night, in my dreams, there's no escape. There is nowhere to hide from my subconscious mind.

OCTOBER 17TH (EXCERPTS)

THE SMOKE WAS SO THICK, AS IF IT WAS AN ENTITY, IT CLAWED AT MY THROAT. I GAGGED AND CHOKED, UNABLE TO SCREAM FOR HELP. I FELT AS IF I WAS DROWNING, LOST IN THE BLACK VOID AS IT PRESSED IN ON MY BODY, FORCING MY LIFE OUT OF ME. THE FIRE WAS AN IMPENETRABLE WALL THAT CLOSED IN ON ME, AS IF IT WOULDN'T BE SATISFIED UNTIL IT CONSUMED ME. THE ENTIRE TIME ALL I COULD HEAR WAS THE SOUNDS OF LAUGHTER, THEIR LAUGHTER, MIXED WITH MY SISTER'S SCREAMS.

I WOKE IN A POOL OF MY OWN SWEAT, DESPITE THE GROWING CHILL IN THE AIR. I KNOW IT'S JUST A DREAM, BUT FOR SOME REASON I STILL FIND IT HARD TO BREATHE. I FOUND MYSELF WANDERING THE HALLS, MY HAND HOVERING OVER THE DOORKNOB OF KNIGHT'S ROOM. THEN LOX, NATE, AND TREY...STALKING THE HALLS LIKE A GHOST. A GHOST OF MY FORMER SELF. I WANT TO SEEK THEIR COMFORT, BUT I CAN'T.

I FEEL LIKE I AM REVERTING BACK TO OLD HABITS. RUNNING. FUCKING PRIDE. OR IS IT FEAR? THE FEAR OF ME FINALLY ACCEPTING MY OWN WEAKNESS. I'M JUST A WEAK OMEGA PLAYING PRETEND. I'M RUINING THIS, RUINING US BECAUSE I'M TOO...OBSTINATE? WE ARE ALL PASSING SHIPS IN THE NIGHT. THEY TIPTOE AROUND ME, ALLOWING ME TO WALLOW, BUT I CAN SEE THE LONGING IN THEIR EYES, FEEL IT IN OUR BOND. I'M CAUSING THIS CHASM, AND HERE THEY ARE WAITING FOR ME, YET AGAIN.

NOVEMBER 7TH (EXCERPT)

A MONTH HAS PASSED, AND ALTHOUGH MY BODY IS HEALING, MY HEAD HAS OTHER IDEAS.

MY MOTHER CAME TO VISIT, AND I BARELY RECOGNIZED HER. SHE SEEMS HAUNTED NOW, WITH EVERYTHING THAT'S HAPPENED LATELY...MY FATHER'S FUNERAL, MY NEAR-DEATH EXPERIENCE (THAT'S WHAT I'M CALLING IT NOW), AND FAITH STILL MISSING... SENECA SMOOTH HAS BECOME A GHOST AS WELL. I'VE NEVER SEEN MY MOTHER SO UNKEMPT, ARRIVING AT OUR DOORSTEP, DEVOID OF MAKEUP, IN JEANS AND ONE OF MY FATHER'S OVERSIZED CARDIGANS. EDWARD'S OF COURSE.

I DON'T THINK CHRISTOPHER HAS SPENT MUCH TIME AT HOME LATELY. I WANT TO THINK IT'S GUILT THAT KEEPS HIM AWAY FROM HIS MATE, THAT HE'S OUT THERE LOOKING FOR FAITH. HA, IT'S LAUGHABLE THAT I STILL WANT TO ASSUME HE HAS ANY REDEEMABLE QUALITIES. NO, HE'S OUT THERE PLOTTING...WAITING FOR ME TO SLIP UP SO HE CAN GET ANOTHER CHANCE TO TAKE ME OUT.

IS THIS REALLY MY LIFE RIGHT NOW? HIDING OUT IN MY OWN HOME, BEHIND MY ALPHAS AND A BUTTLOAD OF SECURITY, FROM MY OWN FATHER. FUCK ME. I NEED TO PULL IT TOGETHER. I CAN'T LIVE LIKE THIS.

TREY LEFT A NUMBER FOR A PSYCHOLOGIST IN MY OFFICE YESTERDAY. HE DIDN'T ASK ME IF I SAW IT OR PRESSURE ME FURTHER. HE JUST LEFT IT THERE. I CAN HEAR HIM PLAYING THE PIANO IN HIS MUSIC ROOM AND I WANT TO GO TO HIM, SIT DOWN BESIDE HIM AND JOIN IN. MUSIC IS JOY, MY JOY, IT'S ALWAYS BROUGHT ME BACK TO MYSELF, BUT I CAN'T FIND IT IN ME TO PUT ONE FOOT IN FRONT OF THE OTHER. MAYBE TOMORROW. I KEEP TELLING MYSELF TOMORROW WILL BE BETTER. I WILL BE BETTER. IF I KEEP SAYING IT, EVENTUALLY IT WILL HAPPEN.

NOVEMBER 30TH (EXCERPT)

I MADE A PROMISE TO MY THERAPIST. (YES, SO THAT HAPPENED LAST WEEK. TREY FINALLY WORE ME DOWN WITHOUT EVEN SPEAKING A WORD). I'VE BEEN TALKING TO HER VIA VIDEO CHAT. IT SEEMS I AM NOT QUITE READY TO LEAVE THE HOUSE YET. I TRIED, BUT WHEN KNIGHT REACHED THE END OF THE DRIVEWAY I BEGAN TO PANIC AND BEGGED HIM TO TURN AROUND. NO IN-OFFICE VISITS FOR THIS GIRL. OH NO, APPARENTLY, I'VE DEVELOPED A BIT OF AGORAPHOBIA AS WELL.

I REALLY NEED TO STOP GOOGLING; I'M BECOMING A BASKET CASE. BUT I PROMISED HER I WOULD FIND A WAY TO RECONNECT WITH MY PACK. OVER THE PAST FEW WEEKS I'VE DONE NOTHING BUT DISTANCE MYSELF FROM THEM. I MISS THE EASE WITH WHICH WE EXISTED BEFORE ALL OF THIS HAPPENED. I AM DETERMINED TO GET IT BACK. WITHOUT THEM, THERE IS NO HEALING, NOT MENTALLY OR EMOTIONALLY AT LEAST. I NEED THEM. I KNOW THAT NOW.

AFTER HOURS OF SPILLING MY GUTS TO THE POOR WOMAN, I UNDERSTAND THAT WHAT HAPPENED TO ME AND MY REACTIONS AFTER IT DOESN'T CONSTITUTE WEAKNESS. EVERYONE HANDLES TRAUMA DIFFERENTLY. I KNOW I HAVE A LOT OF WORK TO DO, BUT I WANT MY LIFE TO RETURN TO NORMAL. WELL, AS NORMAL AS IT CAN BE CONSIDERING MY GROWING MEDIA PRESENCE. POOR FREEYA HAS BEEN HANDLING IT ON HER OWN. I FEEL HAPPIER THAN I'VE FELT IN A LONG TIME. NOW, LET ME GO FIND TREY, MAYBE A LITTLE MUSIC THERAPY WILL DO ME SOME GOOD.

DECEMBER 8TH (EXCERPT)

LOX PUT HIS FOOT DOWN AND FORCED ME TO LEAVE THE HOUSE TODAY. WITH MY CONTINUED THERAPY, IT WAS LESS DISASTROUS THAN THE LAST TIME. #WINNING. I DIDN'T KNOW I NEEDED IT AS MUCH AS I DID. GOD, I MISS THE FREEING FEELING OF JUST BEING OUT IN THE WORLD. I RETURNED TO SMOOTH BOURBON FOR THE

FIRST TIME SINCE THE FIRE, AND ALTHOUGH I FELT THE RISE OF PANIC CREEP IN, I OVERCAME IT.

I. AM. NOT. BROKEN.

I WAS ABLE TO WALK THROUGH THE SITE WITH LOX, KNIGHT, AND TREY BY MY SIDE, AND I FELT LIKE ME FOR THE FIRST TIME IN A LONG TIME.

THE RECONSTRUCTION OF THE DISTILLERY IS GOING WELL, AND NATE, WELL, LET'S JUST SAY I DIDN'T KNOW HARDHATS WERE MY KINK UNTIL I SAW HIM IN HIS TRUE ELEMENT. MY VAGINA YAWNED AND STRETCHED AND THEN SAID HELLO. I DON'T KNOW WHAT I WOULD HAVE DONE WITHOUT HIM AND FREEYA WORKING TIRELESSLY TO KEEP EVERYTHING MOVING WHILE I FOUND MY WAY THROUGH THE RUBBLE OF MY OWN LIFE.

Closing my journal, I slide it into my bookshelf, satisfied with my entry for today. I smile because I am writing in it less and less. I'm sleeping better as well. I still have the occasional bad dream but with the help I've been getting, I am coping with them better. I guess the only thing left to do is keep my promise and heal my bonds. My men have done nothing but support me and nurse me back to health, giving me their love and devotion even when I pushed them away. Again. I love them. I love them more now than I ever did before and I want to show them just how much.

THIRTEEN

NATE



“I don’t see the point in this,” Lox groans for the fifth time. I swear he is this close to getting a snowball to the face. The thought fills me with sweet satisfaction, but his retaliation for hitting him sobers the urge.

“We all agreed to this, Lox. It’s for Mercy. You should be happy to hike through the snow in search of a Christmas tree,” Knight replies as he leads us further into the woods around our property with an axe over his shoulder, looking like a proper lumberjack, sans beard.

“I want to see the smile on my songbird’s face. She’s been coming back to us day by day. Getting into the Christmas spirit will be good for her. She finally agreed to play with me for Pack Night at the bar. I would climb a mountain if I knew it would bring her happiness and dig the tree up with my bare hands. Quit your bitching, Lox,” Trey says, followed by a grunt as Lox punches him in the arm.

“Yeah, like you would really risk frostbite on those delicate hands of yours.” Lox chuckles as he dances out of the way of Trey’s fist. They both wrestle playfully behind us and the sound of their laughter eases more of the tension I’ve been carrying around with me for weeks.

“I can’t believe it’s been two months. I’ve been so busy with the construction of the new distillery; time has passed in a blur. Mercy needs this, we need this. Decorating the house will bring us together. We need a pack activity,” I say enthusiastically.

We all woke this morning to a world bathed in white. I think that's why we picked this spot to build our house. The picturesque scenery didn't disappoint in winter. Mercy immediately went to her reading nook downstairs, and instead of her journal she picked up her e-reader as she gazed at the snow-covered meadow outside the window. The small change in her behavior has motivated me further. Christmas is days away, and with the Gala and pack night performance coming up, we need to spend time with each other. We need her and she needs us.

"I agree. Mercy barely registered Halloween, and we all know it's her favorite holiday, Christmas being the second. Thanksgiving, well, that was a bust. She refused to leave the house and didn't want to see her parents. With Faith still missing and Grace due any day now, she won't want to bother. She will throw herself into Gala planning," Knight replies, nodding his head as he speaks.

"Well, I know what pack activities I'm up for and it involves my very blue balls," Lox grumbles and we all sigh in unison. It's been a long two months, but with Mercy recovering and her pushing us out of the main pack bedroom, well, my hand is a poor substitute for the real thing.

I turn and roll my eyes. "It's not like you were fucking everything that moved before Mercy came back to us, Lox. Heath only gave her the okay for normal activities two weeks ago. We need to let her come to us."

"Nate, shut up." I turn opening my mouth to reply and get a mouth full of snow. I wipe my face with a growl and take off after him. I laugh carelessly, bounding after Lox as he disappears behind trees, avoiding everything I throw at him.

"I understand she is recovering, asshole!" Lox shouts dodging another snowball. "I'm just saying I miss my mouse and would rather have her pussy hug my knot than freeze my precious balls off in cold weather in order to hang Christmas lights." He dances between the trees taunting me, only to be ambushed by Trey and Knight who both pummel him with snowball after snowball.

“You bastards!” he shouts, holding up his hands in surrender as we all double over laughing.

“It’s Loxy the Snowman,” Trey says breathlessly while reaching in his pocket to grab his phone and captures a picture of Lox covered in snow. Our phone chimes seconds later and a picture of Lox covered in snow appears in our group chat.

Our laughter dies as we all wait in anticipation for our girl to reply. It doesn’t take her long; the sound of her pinging back brings a smile to my face.

Mercy: Loxy the Snowman is hot! What are you guys up to?

Lox: Mouse.

Knight: It’s a surprise. We’ll be back soon. Make sure you’re dressed warm, baby girl.

Mercy: What’s my surprise? Lox with icy balls? LOL!

Lox: Are you offering to warm them up for me, mouse?

All of our eyes are locked to our phones as the dots appear on the screen. The anticipation of her answer, the thrill of the playfulness through our bond, it has my dick standing at attention. This is not what I had planned, but fuck, I miss her, all of her.

Mercy: If you’re a good boy, maybe.

Nate: Baby, I will be your good boy, always. Do I get a reward?

Trey: Hey, we should all get a reward, we’ve all been good boys. Haven’t we, songbird?

Mercy: Yes. Yes, you all have. Come home to me.

Knight drops the axe and curses, “Fuck.”

“Yes, fuck the tree, let’s go home,” Lox says, as he knocks the snow from his clothes as he begins to walk back the way we came.

I want to join him; I want to race and see who can get home the fastest, but one look at Trey and I know what he’s thinking.

“I think we should still get the tree. We should decorate it; we can do both.” He shrugs with a sheepish expression on his face, eyebrows raised, smile all teeth. He looks comical.

Knight swings the axe over his shoulder and starts to walk in the direction of the spruce trees in the distance. “Trey’s right. Nate, this was your plan, let’s see it through. We have all day.” Knight begins to move as our phones ping once more.

Mercy: Don’t make me wait too long.

Lox growls in response and I shift my stiffening cock as we all follow Knight. I don’t think we’ve ever moved so fast in our lives. Snow be damned.

MERCY

I watch them leave from the window of my reading hideaway, e-reader in one hand, coffee in the other. Damn it feels good to have the use of both my hands. I bite my bottom lip as they traipse across the snow-covered meadow, the song “Hi Ho” from Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs echoing through my head. Well, in this case four Herculean wanna-be mountain men in jeans, snow boots, and heavy, woolen plaid sherpa coats. They were so cute this morning, I took photos of them without them noticing.

I can hear them whistling, Knight leading the way with a huge axe over his shoulder. They are putting my Alaskan lumberjack romance fantasy to shame. I’m not going to lie; it is definitely a turn on. I almost wish I was with them. I love the snow. When I woke this morning, the sight of the blanket of white on the ground put me in a better mood almost immediately. I had to fight back my sadness as I thought about Faith. Dez’s latest update was that Derrick chartered a private jet, but their destination is still unknown. Instead of letting it bring me down, I shook it off, determined to enjoy the day.

I know what they are up to. It wasn’t hard to miss Nate’s enthusiastic speech about decorating the house for Christmas. I guess he thought I was still lost in my trauma-induced fog and not paying attention. Most days I know I’ve been putting one foot in front of the other, working like a mindless zombie. ‘One day at a time,’ my therapist says to me on a daily basis. I checked out on them, and it’s no one’s fault but my own. I still feel guilty over the time we’ve lost with each other. After I watched them disappear into the tree line, I jumped to my feet, wanting to prove to them that I am awake and present. I’ve missed so many holidays these past few months, I will not miss Christmas.

Rushing through the house, I yank the front door open, knowing exactly who’s on the other side. “Dane!” I shout his

name in excitement, surprising the massive Beta. His eyes widen at the sight of me, he's obviously not used to seeing me out and about these days. My heart pangs with guilt once more but I push those emotions down and lock them away.

"Miss Mercy, is something wrong?" Dane asks, all bundled up like a gigantic polar bear, the bright blue puffer coat he is rocking only makes him bigger. The knitted cap with ear flaps hanging loose on the side of his face is the icing on the cake. These men look adorable dressed for the winter. His Omega must love to knit. Maybe I should learn to crochet? My mother would love that. I almost snort at the ridiculous thought. I make a mental note to order my guys matching winter hats with a massive pom pom on top.

"I need your help. How many of you are on duty this morning?" The authority in my voice snaps him into work mode as he eyes me warily. I almost laugh again. This man towers over me, could easily crush me with his pinky finger, but at the sight of me he almost shrinks down to size. It's a heady feeling to feel like my old self.

"Six of us around the house and six around the perimeter of the property," he replies. His eyebrows shoot up nervously as he watches me rub my hands together with glee. Well, that and the cold seeping into my bones.

I have one more question before I put my plan into action. "How long do you think my Alphas will be?" I tilt my head at the question, surprising myself at how easy it is to call them my Alphas these days.

"Lox said it will take them about forty-five minutes to reach the—" he pauses, trying to stop himself from telling me they went to cut down a Christmas tree. Little does he know I've figured it out already. "Forty-five minutes there and back. Why?" he tries to quickly deflect. Okay, big guy, I will let you think you've fooled me.

I tilt my head innocently, and his eyes narrow. "Oh, Miss Mercy, I don't know what you're thinking, but Knight will have my head."

“How do you feel about Christmas decorations?” I jump up and down, my excitement building in anticipation. I love Christmas, my decorations are usually up the day after Thanksgiving. Freeya used to hate it. She was in the mind that Christmas decorations went up the week before Christmas. You know, the whole ‘trimming the tree leading up to the day, nonsense’.

“I was just on the roof of my house last night. Lacey was determined we get the house decorated. I can’t deny my girl.” He groans, then smiles as if lost in his own memories. He lifts a brow. “What do you have in mind, Mercy?” he asks. In the past few months I’ve learned a lot about the Head of security. His pack consists of two Alphas and their Omega Lacey. They have two little boys and another baby due next Spring.

“I’m going to let you in on a secret. I know what they are up to, and I want to do something for them as a surprise. Do you think you guys can come in to help me put up the decorations around the house? With all of you helping we could get it done with time to spare before they get back?” I ask, putting my hand on my hips, hoping I am conveying that no will not be acceptable.

“I don’t know if the guys will be okay—”

“They can be mad at me. I gave you the order,” I say, pushing my hip out, attitude at the ready. “I want to see them try to be upset at me for this.” I open the door and step back inside. The freezing temperature makes me wish I put on a coat before I came out here. I watch him hesitate for a second before he turns his attention back to me.

“Forty-five minutes. You have forty-five minutes. If I am not back here on this porch. Lox and Knight will rip my ass apart. My girl likes my ass, Miss Mercy, so...” He smiles and walks away to speak into his earpiece as I bounce up and down clapping my hands in excitement.

I am midway through wrapping the garland on the staircase banister when my phone pings in my back pocket. I pause and look around, marveling at the twinkling lights all over the ground floor. Faux pine garlands hang in loops from

the ceiling, with red, black, and green plaid ribbon. Wreaths hang on the doors and white lights illuminate each room, like a winter wonderland. The only thing missing is the tree. With all these men at my command, I could take over the world with how fast they managed to get everything put up for me. Many hands make light work as my mother used to remind my sisters and me when we complained about helping her, but now I see exactly what she meant. Apparently, Nate, being the architect and designer he is, decided this year's theme was country chic. Who knew my sweet Alpha tapped into his inner-Martha Stewart from time to time. I absolutely love that about him.

Pulling out my phone, I snort out a laugh at the sight of Lox covered in snow. His handsome face frowning at the snowball plastered on the side of his head. Trey calling him Loxy the Snowman did not help his mood at all. I keep working as I reply to their teasing texts when an idea forms in my head. I can't deny the simmering need that makes me clench my thighs together at the memories of their lips, hands, and teeth on my skin the day in the hospital as they claimed me. Trey's devouring kisses all those months ago.

Things had gotten so bad, my urges, my sexual needs were pushed aside. I've been merely surviving, but I want to live. The same phrase kept coming to me, like a whisper in the back of my mind, the same words I kept saying to myself over and over again. I am alive. I did not die. I refuse to give credence anymore to those negative thoughts that feed my trauma; soul crushing feelings that swallowed me whole for months. I choose. I choose them. They are mine, and I want them, now. Happy with my newfound strength I keep working, only to pause again as Lox's message comes through.

Lox: Are you offering to warm them up for me, mouse?

I stare at the screen and smile. They've been so patient. I can put them out of their misery and get lost in the four men I love. Orgasms should be prescribed in my opinion.

Mercy: If you're a good boy, maybe.

I reply quickly, covering my mouth to hold back my laughter as Dane approaches me, eyebrows raised in question. I can almost hear them groaning from here. I bite back another laugh. I miss being in a good mood.

“I think they might be arriving back earlier than you expected.” I hold up my phone but not high enough for him to see the messages and he hums in response.

Holding his hands up in surrender, he backs away. “I don’t want to know. Being in the house is going to send them into a tailspin with all of our scents everywhere. We are finished. I was coming to tell you we were making our way back to our posts. I will have the rest of the guys carry the boxes out to the trash. The sooner we get out of here the better.”

My phone pings in rapid succession but I don’t look while Dane and the rest of the security team rush around the rooms tidying up the mess we made. Checking my phone again, I type out a quick reply, then another one knowing I won’t have long until I am bombarded with my Alphas’ pheromones. I am going to give myself over to them, ready and willing.

Mercy: Don’t make me wait too long.

But first, I’m going to make them beg for it.

FOURTEEN

NATE



Two Christmas trees. Knight chopped two down, deciding we should put one in the middle of the driveway in front of the house. Like he was worried about decorations, I wasn't buying it for a second. None of us complained when he chopped down the first tree, growling, then proceeded to chop another one down. My brother was practically vibrating with need after Mercy's message almost an hour ago. We all were, as the urge to rut took hold. Those animalistic impulses that we push down most days were riding us hard. Which is why as we all rounded the corner of the house with the two trees dragging behind us, we all paused.

My sniff is audible as I take in Mercy's rich peach scent, and I can't help the snarl bubbling up from the back of my throat. *Mercy.*

My brother's growl as well, trees forgotten as we all jog up the steps to the house, stopping abruptly as the direction of her scent changes. We all turn in the direction of Dane, who for some reason is laughing at the sight of us. Does he think this is a game? Did he touch my baby? My Mercy. Our Mercy. I know I'm not thinking straight, but fuck it, I bare my teeth at him. Dane's smile falters as he holds up his hands in surrender as Knight steps forward. I don't have to see my brother's face to know his expression mirrors my own.

"Dane. Was Mercy out here?" Knight asks as he takes another deep breath. "Explain to me why you smell like her. Do it quickly because I don't know how much control I have left." Knight holds out his arm to hold back Lox, who hasn't

said a word this entire time. Silent in his approach and a lot scarier, that's saying a lot because none of us are small men.

“Miss Mercy, I mean, Miss Smooth, asked us all for help this morning inside the house. She wouldn't take no for an answer. She's the boss ultimately, right? She assured me that you would rip my ass apart if we didn't help.” He shrugs, hands still raised as he continues. “So, I took some of the guys inside to help her. Fair warning, when you walk inside, you will smell a bunch of Betas, but no one touched her. We are all mated. Remember that,” he says the last part slowly, reaching the prowling beasts inside all of us. I take a deep breath, shaking my head to clear it.

“Why would she need your help? Did something happen? Did Dez or Alister call?” Trey asks in concern as he brushes past us all to go to the door. It hadn't even dawned on me that maybe she was in distress after hearing from one of them.

“Hey.” Dane snaps his fingers getting our attention. Then he laughs as we all turn our heads as a unit. “Go in the house. I will take care of the trees before you all go raging bull on me and the rest of the team.” Dane steps in front of Trey and opens the door wide for us. With another knowing smirk he gestures wide, arm swinging inward allowing us entry. Neither one of us saying anything as we barrel past him. As the door closes, I swear I can hear him say, “Crazy-ass hormone-fueled Alphas”.

Lox lets out a long whistle of surprise, pulling me from my thoughts as I take in the room in front of us. All those edgy emotions fall off my shoulders as I see the twinkling lights; the aroma of mulled wine and cinnamon permeates the air, along with Mercy's delicious peach scent, strong and potent. Whatever remained of the Betas scents is barely noticeable. None of that matters as Christmas has exploded all around us. Everything I had planned, executed to perfection by my beautiful Omega, my Alpha. She heard me and she surprised us by beating us to it. Wreaths and garlands hang all around us, satin ribbon tied in big bows, and pinecone mantel pieces placed on top of the fireplace. How she was able to get gun

toting, big-ass, scowling security guards to do this is awe inspiring.

“I have no words,” Knight finally says, breaking the silence as we all take in the room in wonder.

“Mousy, Mousy, where are you, beautiful?” Lox calls out as he walks slowly through the room.

Trey runs out of the room without a word as I turn in a circle bumping into my brother as I go. “She heard us talking, Knight. Why are these damn decorations making me so emotional? Fuck! You know I hate crying.” I wipe a tear that escapes my eyes as Knight turns to me with understanding on his face. Instead of giving me shit about it, he pats my shoulder, not judging me in the slightest.

“Nate, she’s come back to us for a second time, that’s why. I don’t mean physically; I mean mentally and emotionally. So, revel in it. Fuck, shed a tear, because what you’re feeling is undying love, brother. It’s the kind of love that invokes a myriad of emotions. You love her. So, bask in it,” he says as Trey runs back into the room, wiping his glasses on his shirt with a boyish smile on his face.

“The entire ground floor is done. We just need the trees. But I think by the hungry looks on your faces the trees can wait. I think I need to thank my songbird personally.” Trey turns and heads to the stairs.

“Mousy, mouse, are you going to make us come find you?” Lox calls out to her again, but she doesn’t respond.

“We can smell you, baby girl. You can’t hide from us,” Knight says as we make our way up the first landing, then the second, walking down the hallway until we reach the door of the main bedroom.

“Well, fuck,” Trey says, causing us all to pause, crowding the doorway.

“Who said I was hiding? The object of this game was for you to find me,” Mercy purrs as she crosses one bare leg over the other. My heart skips a beat and I think I might have died

for a second as my brain tries to compute what it sees. I have lost all capacity to think as all my blood rushes to my dick.

Mercy sits in one of the white wingback chairs, her wild tresses tamed in two braids down her back, her lips are painted a dark wine color, but the rest of her face is absent of makeup. The reflection of firelight in her brown eyes flickers like two burning flames, making her look otherworldly. Her chin tips up, elongating her neck, allowing my eyes to travel down her body in one sweeping motion. *Holy shit.*

She sits before us in a red lace bra, her breasts almost spilling over the top, begging to be licked, bitten, and sucked. I don't know how long we all stand there salivating over each and every inch of her exposed flesh. With the way she's sitting, I can only see a trace of red lace along the curve of her ass. Her chest rises and falls evenly, waiting patiently, like the queen she is.

Knight steps forward impatiently, hands flexing at his sides, eager to go to her, but she holds up her hand and stops him. He stills obediently and she smiles.

Mercy tsks. "Nope. I think we all know who's in control here. Don't we, Nate?" Her question catches me off guard because I thought she was talking to Knight. I swallow and step forward, but she stops me with her hand as well.

"Baby, tell us what you need," I say, holding my hands out at my sides, unsure what else to do. She wants to have control, then so be it, I relinquish mine.

Lox growls. "Damn it, mouse. I am going to bend you over my knee and—"

"Kneel," Mercy commands, flicking out her hand and pointing to the floor. Her luscious lips spread in a wide smile. My dick is weeping with just the thought of them wrapping around my cock. One word. That's all she has to say, no need to say more. Trey and I obey, falling to our knees without any resistance.

Knight hesitates for a second, searching her face, as if he is checking that she is truly okay before he too inclines his head.

“Alpha,” he says reverently before he slowly bows before her. His knees hit the floor, but my brother, with his flare for dramatics, takes it further, placing both hands on the floor as well. Mercy doesn’t react to Knight, her eyes rise to Lox, who I assume still stands.

Mercy uncrosses her legs and spreads them wide, the smell of her arousal mouthwatering. Power smells divine on her and I can’t wait to have my fill. She crooks her finger in Lox’s direction. “Come here, Lox.”

The room is quiet, the crackling of the fire the only soundtrack to her relaxed display of control. Her dominance of this situation, absolute. Lox moves finally, coming into view as he weaves through our kneeling bodies until he’s standing beside Knight. His chest heaves as he fights his instincts, but he holds himself in place.

“Good boys get rewards.” Mercy raises a brow at Lox. “How can I warm you up, Loxy, if you don’t obey your Alpha?” she taunts before she shrugs in a ‘suit yourself’ type of gesture that would normally have me laughing at her antics. Trey snorts softly beside me, just as amused.

“I guess you’re going to have to watch the others have their way with me then. I give myself up willingly to you, Knight, Trey, Nate,” she says with a sigh, leaning back, her body melting into the chair in total surrender.

“Oh, little mouse, I have no problem kneeling for you. I know who you are to me, Alpha, always. I stand transfixed because you’re a fucking supreme goddess, commanding not only us, but those men outside to do your bidding. Your power grows, your light shines, even when you’ve felt as if you’ve been drowning in the shadows. I will slither on my belly like a snake before you if you want, but don’t doubt my devotion, mouse, never,” Lox finally replies, falling to his knees before her, bowing his head.

My heart pounds in my chest from his words, heartfelt and raw, leaving Mercy speechless. She tries to reply but nothing comes out. Only a lone tear falls down her cheek, but she quickly wipes it away.

“I want you. All of you. I’m yours,” she whispers as she rises from her chair to stand before us. “I thought I needed to control this moment. I thought it would help me open myself up to you, but I never needed that before, and despite everything going on inside here.” She taps her temple. “I don’t need it now. I love you. So, all I want right now is for you to show me you love me back.” Mercy kicks off the black stiletto heels she is wearing, before reaching behind her back to unclasp her bra, letting the straps fall down her arms and fall to the floor. She stands there, giving us a view of her full breasts, nipples hardening as she waits expectantly.

When we don’t move right away, she hooks her fingers into her red lace panties, but Knight stops her.

“Don’t,” he says, voice deep and husky. “Get on the bed, baby,” he commands softly.

My eyes eat up every step she takes as she makes her way to our bed. She crawls on her hands and knees to the center of the bed, ass up in the air, eliciting a hiss from my lips.

“Knight?” Trey says my brother’s name in question as he groans desperately, watching avidly as Mercy lays on her back in offering.

Knight stands and grabs the chair Mercy was sitting on when we arrived and moves it to the foot of the bed, sitting before her. “Trey, Nate, show our Alpha how much you love, need, desire, and yearn to worship her.” He gestures toward the bed. Trey and I both shed our clothes as we cross the room to her.

Climbing onto the bed, Trey takes her mouth in a brutal kiss, groaning in what seems like relief as his lips devour hers. Mercy moans, body arching up off the bed as one of his hands finds her breast, cupping it, his nimble fingers plucking and pinching her hardened nipple, then repeating the action with the other one. He swallows her cries of pleasure, drinking from her lips like a thirsty man as he plays her body like one of his instruments.

Making my way up the bed, I lay on my belly between her legs. My tongue trailing the sensitive skin on the inside of her

thighs, until I hit her delicate covered bud. My eyes roll back as I savor the delicacy of the scent that is her slick. Reaching up, she muffles a gasp as I rip the panties from her body and toss them behind me. Her pussy is screaming to be eaten, and I quickly oblige. My girl has waited long enough. Now is not the time to tease as I flatten my tongue against her slit, licking in long, slow strokes. Mercy's body tries to buck off the bed, but Trey holds her in place as he continues to kiss her breathlessly. I wrap my arms underneath her legs, stilling her movements, as I take my time, giving her pussy all of my attention. Her arousal pools on my tongue and I gulp it down like it's the very life's blood that keeps me alive.

"I can't get enough of you, baby. You taste so sweet, like peaches and cream." I groan, exploring every inch of her. "Like summer on my tongue, even in winter," I say, flicking my tongue rapidly against her clit to emphasize each point. Her body bows once more in response.

Mercy breaks her kiss, gasping for breath as Trey continues his torture, leaning over her and licking his mating mark. I feel her body shudder underneath me. "Oh God, please, Nate, please," she begs, panting and screaming. Trey wraps his lips around one of her nipples and I do the same with her clit, sucking hard.

"Cum, mouse," Lox says. I don't have to see him to know that he is barely holding on.

"Cum, Mercy, soak Nate's face, baby girl," Knight commands. Mercy detonates, crying out as her pussy floods my mouth. I take it all, licking and sucking her clit as she rides out her release, but we don't let her rest. Trey and I switch places, working in silence as he settles between her legs, lining up his cock, he slides into her slowly. Mercy keens as he stretches her, until he bottoms out. I hold my dick in my hands, stroking it up and down eagerly, giving it a squeeze as precum leaks from the tip.

"Sing for me, songbird, let me hear you, baby, before you swallow Nate's dick," he croons as Mercy's high-pitched cries pierce the air. He begins to move with long, languid strokes, letting her get used to his dick before he begins to pick up the

pace. Mercy's body bounces with each thrust, her head thrashing back and forth, lips parting in a silent scream.

Her eyes meet mine and she whimpers, "Nate."

"You want my cock, baby? You want to swallow me down, let me fill you with my cum?" I stroke her face tenderly and inch closer before taking my cock and tracing her bottom lip.

"God, yes." She pants as she parts her lips and waits for me. I slide my cock inside, feeling her warmth as she closes those wine-stained lips around me and swallows.

I throw my head back as pleasure rolls up and down my spine while she sucks and strokes my dick in time with Trey's thrusts.

"Do you like it when we fill you up, songbird?" Trey rocks into her body hard and fast, but Mercy's mouth is relentless as she nods her head yes, deep throating my cock, making me see stars.

"Fuck baby." I bite out as my balls tighten, my orgasm happens unexpectedly, climbing up from the base of my back, up, and out of my mouth in a hoarse curse as I cum in her mouth.

"Give us one more," Trey says, reaching for her clit, circling it with his fingers. Mercy releases my cock, cum and drool dripping from her chin, but I lean down and lick it from her lips, tasting myself, and loving every minute of it.

"Cum for us, baby," I whisper against her lips, and she explodes once more. I crush my mouth to hers and drink in her pleasure as she cums hard, her body thrashing underneath us. Trey fucks her through it until his head tilts back and he finds his release.

When I look up, Knight and Lox are both undressed and moving to either side of the bed, eyes blazing as they take in our already spent mate.

"Oh, little mouse, I can't wait to wreck you further," Lox says, climbing onto the bed as Trey pulls out of her to allow Knight to take his place.

“Oh God, why are there four of you again?” Mercy chuckles weakly as I kiss her once more before letting my brothers take over.

“I’m going to fuck that pretty ass of yours, baby girl. While Lox has your pussy. Do you think you can take both of our knots, Mercy?” Knight swipes his fingers down her slit and scoops up Trey’s cum as it slides out of her and on to the bed. He licks their combined release on his fingers and hums in approval. I know I just came, but damn, my dick gets hard at the sight.

Mercy’s eyes widen at Knight in question, but she nods eagerly, desperately. She’s never taken two knots at the same time before, not even during her first heat. But the mental image of her being stretched and stuffed to the max, locked between the two of them, makes me salivate.

“Trey’s already made you so dirty for us, mouse. I think you can take both our cocks and more,” Lox says as he lifts her up into his arms and lays back on the bed, taking her with him. Mercy’s body is limp from exhaustion as he drapes her on top of him, sliding her legs on either side of his waist.

“Sit on Lox’s cock, Mercy, let him give you his devotion, baby girl. Let us both.” Knight points to the nightstand and I don’t hesitate to grab the lube we keep there. Tossing it to him, I watch from the sidelines as Lox speaks softly to Mercy before kissing her. Mercy cups his face between her hands and deepens their kiss, their tongues tangling together in a slow, steady dance.

Knight strokes his cock, pouring lube into his hand and coating his length in preparation as Mercy breaks her kiss long enough to slide her dripping pussy down Lox’s stomach before lifting up on her knees to take him inside of her.

“Lox, baby, you feel so good,” she cries out as she fully seats herself, their hips kissing. Lox pulls her towards him and attacks her mouth, both groaning in pleasure.

I watch Trey, who’s now taken the seat at the foot of the bed, his cock in his hand as he strokes leisurely, watching the show. I watch from the side of the bed doing the same.

“Knight!” Mercy shouts as he works her ass with his fingers, stretching her with one, then two digits, while Lox pumps up slowly inside her.

“Play with your clit, baby, be a good girl for Knight,” I tell her as she rocks her hips gently back and forth. Her fingers dance down her skin as she finds her clit and begins to circle and tease herself. She’s only taken us like this in her heat haze, so I am sure she is feeling all of it without the soothing effects it induces.

“Breathe, Mercy,” Knight says softly, stroking his hand down her back as he pushes his cock inside her. Mercy keens, gritting her teeth until Lox kisses her deeply, sliding his hand between their bodies so they can both work her clit together.

“Baby girl, you feel so good,” Knight praises her as he slides his cock all the way in, pausing to let Mercy adjust. She groans into Lox’s mouth, but he doesn’t break the kiss as he nods to Knight to move. They start off slowly, alternating their thrusts, in and out, until Mercy can do nothing more than take what they are doing to her body.

I pump my cock faster as they pick up speed. Mercy’s cries echo around the room, and I have no doubt the Betas outside can hear her.

“I can’t...please... I need, Knight, Lox, please!” Mercy shouts as they both pound into her.

“Cum for us, little mouse, cum so you can take our knots,” Lox pinches her clit, and Mercy’s body goes still for a mere second, her mouth open, head down against Lox’s chest before she screams. It’s as if time stands still, an intake of breath, suspended for mere seconds, then the world rights itself. I see the moment Lox and Knight both knot her at the same time. Mercy’s eyes widen as she sucks in a deep, shuddering breath, she grips Lox’s arms in a vise grip before she cums over and over again. Tears run down her face as they spill inside her, locking her between the two of them.

“Oh—God!” Mercy cries out, her words strained as she straddles the line between pain and pleasure.

The sight is so erotic, so filthy, that I am cumming again, spilling into my hand and onto the floor.

“Shit.” I run to the bathroom to grab a wet cloth for me and Trey. Tossing one to him, we both clean up the mess on the floor and bed. Lox and Knight collapse on their sides, gently maneuvering a comatose Mercy between them.

Dumping the towels in the laundry bin, Trey and I both find a spot on the bed, instinctively needing to be near her. Our Omega, our Alpha, our everything.

“Are you hurt, mouse?” Lox asks, kissing her temple as Knight kisses down her shoulder. Yawning, she stretches, making them both groan from the movement.

“No, not even a little bit.” She smiles dreamily, making me snort at her dick-drunk expression.

“Thank you,” she says, yawning again, eyes closing.

“Why are you thanking us, songbird?” Trey asks from behind Lox, his hand seeking hers over Lox’s shoulder.

“For loving me, for not giving up on me, for letting me find my way back to you,” she says as sleep begins to weigh her down.

None of us reply because we don’t need to. We waited five years to love her again. There’s no way we could ever stop, no matter what comes our way. I will take all the bad that life has to offer just to have one good day with Merce at my side.

“I guess we will deal with the tree tomorrow,” I say, making my brothers groan.

FIFTEEN

FREEYA



“Cariña, if you keep squirming on my lap like that, I’m going to bend you over my tattoo bed and fuck you senseless.” Vic kisses the back of my neck, sending shivers down my spine, and I want to forget why fucking wouldn’t be a good idea. Of course, those promises only make me squirm more. Tightening his grip on my hips, the hard ridge of his cock digs into my ass.

“Because we don’t have time. Mercy will be here soon, and you know I like to draw out your pleasure, cariña,” Vic replies, pulling my earlobe between his teeth, making me hiss.

“Did I say that out loud?” I say in surprise as he lifts me from his lap and swats my ass.

“You say a lot of things out loud, but I won’t recount what you were screaming last night as you came all over Dez’s cock,” Vic says playfully, making me blush. These men. I go to sit behind his desk, well, it’s more of a drafting table than a desk. Vic owns a tattoo shop, Deviant Ink in downtown Frankfort, only a few blocks away from M. Bar. All my Alphas have their own businesses, and damn if it doesn’t make life interesting. I don’t think I will ever get bored.

I watch him work, prepping his table, the scents of antiseptic, cleaning products, and candy give off a strangely comforting feeling. We both fall into an easy silence as he moves around the room. Pictures of his artwork in black and white, and color tattoo sketches line the walls. Along with images of models and some very famous celebrities sporting his ink. Vic, I’ve learned, is very sought after with a waiting

list a mile long. Which is why when Mercy called me yesterday and asked if Vic had any availability, I wasn't sure she could get an appointment, especially not the next day. But for Mercy Smooth, he made an exception. "Anything for your best friend, cariña, she is familia," he said without hesitation when I asked.

"Maybe I should get a tattoo along with Mercy today," I say absently. Vic pauses mid wipe, grey eyes catching mine, his pierced eyebrow lifts in question. He looks at me for a long moment, like he's picturing exactly what he would put on my body, then he smiles. Yep, I'm going to be sitting with wet panties until we get home.

Vic is classically handsome, a mix of Spanish and African descent, with golden brown skin, black, spikey hair tipped white. He's covered in tattoos with a septum piercing in his nose. A combination of bad boy, covering up the nice geeky man on the inside. Not only does he own his own tattoo shop, he's also extremely smart with an IQ even my mother would approve of. He's not just a pretty face.

"Do I get to decide what goes on your skin, carina?" he asks, sauntering over in a pair of black jeans that hug his muscular thighs and a white t-shirt with the Deviant Ink logo, consisting of a Sugar skull with pens and paint brushes pouring out of its mouth. He turns the swivel chair I'm in to face him then braces his tattooed arms on either side of me and leans in.

"Yes," I say breathlessly, trying and failing to swallow past the lump in my throat. My body immediately reacts to his closeness, and I know he knows it. Vic takes a deep breath and brushes his lips against mine. "I'm going to have to make good on my promise, carina. You're all wet and ready for me, aren't you." He kisses my lips and steps away from me, leaving me wanting. "For what I plan for your ink, though, I think we can do it in private, in my bedroom." He raises his eyebrows suggestively, making me huff out a laugh as someone knocks on his door.

"Come," he calls out, winking at me as I pull myself together.

“Yo, Vic. Your next appointment is here,” his receptionist, Bryce, yells through the crack in the door. I spring to my feet, bouncing on my heels because it’s been weeks since I’ve seen Mercy in person. These past few weeks we’ve been corresponding through video chats and text messages as we prep for the Christmas Gala we’ve been planning. The first of many events she has planned in her relaunch of Smooth Bourbon to the world. My girl has had a tough time for weeks, but although she’s been down, she’s been moving forward with her goals. Thank goodness she started speaking to a therapist, I thought I was going to have to drag her out of the house myself. But she’s here. Finally.

“I will go and get her,” I say to Vic. I follow behind his receptionist as he leads me through the empty parlor. Four tattoo stations line the walls, two on either side, with a smaller set up than Vic’s. The walls are painted black with a large brightly colored graffiti version of the logo on full display when you enter, just behind the receptionist desk. Black leather seats line the front windows, with side tables full of tattoo magazines and the various tattoo artists’ sketch books on top. Everything is clean and tidy, dark and gothic in design, befitting a modern tattoo parlor, not the dives you fall into on a drunken night out, that’s for sure.

I spot Mercy easily, her small frame sandwiched between Lox and Knight. Both of whom are busy with their heads down, focused on their phones. Outside in front of the shop, is their head of security, Dane, who stands sentry. Between the three of them, I doubt anyone would stand a chance if they tried to come for her here. Just as I’m about to call her name in greeting, my phone pings in my pocket. I watch the receptionist say something to Mercy, who catches my eye and stands. Waving them over with my hands, I reach for my phone to see there’s an unknown person who has sent a text to me.

UNKNOWN: Freeya Stuart. I’ve finally found you.

I pause at the sight of my full name. Not a lot of people know my last name, well, the correct spelling of my last name.

I tense up seeing it now. My hackles rise, especially with the person on the other end being unknown. I keep a low profile; I have for years after my family disowned me. No one knows this number except for the people that matter. I want to brush it off. They know your name. I think to myself as my hands hover over the screen. Trying to keep my cool, I reply.

Me: I didn't know I was lost. Who is this?

UNKNOWN: Someone who you will meet very soon.

Me: Excuse me, how did you get my number?
How do you know me?

I type furiously, the last message makes me suck in a breath of shock I didn't realize I was holding until I sway on my feet from lack of oxygen.

"Freeya," I hear Mercy call my name but don't answer as my phone chimes again.

UNKNOWN: You're a Stuart, Freeya. They've had eyes on you this entire time. Did you really think you were free?

"Freeya." Mercy's concerned face comes into view, her face is so close that I startle and take a step back. Not wanting to face what I just saw on my screen, I shove my phone in my pocket and try to ignore it. They've been watching me. Keeping tabs. What could my family want with me now after all these years? After all this time?

Clearing my throat, I steady myself and force a smile. "I'm fine. Fine. Someone from the office sent me another article about you." I shrug but my lie feels heavy on my tongue. "It's my job to filter all the good ones and the bad."

"Was this a bad one? You looked terrified just now," Knight asks, arching a brow at me. I can tell he's not buying my lie one bit. By the amused smirk on Lox's face, neither is he.

“I’m sorry, Free. We can get Miss Caroline to deal with the press, you have enough on your plate,” Mercy states as I take her arm in mine and lead us all to Vic’s office.

“No. It’s my job as your second to deal with all things Mercy Smooth. You have the people out there who love you and sing your praises, and those like Christopher who wear their hate against change on their sleeves,” I say as Vic opens the door to his office to greet us. He shakes hands with Knight and Lox, and they all fall into a quiet conversation as I usher Mercy toward the tattoo bed.

“Are you sure you’re okay? I’ve never seen you look that way,” Mercy leans in to whisper to me as I pull up two chairs beside the tattoo bed. I know for sure that Knight and Lox will want to be in close proximity to her even with them being in the same room.

“Seen me look like what?” I ask nervously. Yeah, you are not hiding anything at all. Good job, Freeya.

“Scared,” Mercy replies.

I pause and turn towards her, hoping the guys don’t hear me. The last thing I need is for Vic to worry and start questioning me. I have no idea who the unknown person is, and I definitely don’t want to talk about my family. At least, not at this very moment. We are all still getting to know one another. I don’t want my pack to regret their decision to mate me. I won’t let my family come back to haunt me, not now. Not when I am finally finding my feet.

“It’s nothing I can’t handle, Mercy. I promise,” I say clapping my hands in excitement and forcing another smile. I lied. Again. I’ve never lied to or held anything back from Mercy. She knows about my family and what they did to me. But I can’t place my drama at her feet, she’s got enough going on. I don’t want her to worry about me as well.

I think this is something I have to show Dez. He will know what to do. Whoever or whatever this person is, he can help me solve the mystery. But I don’t want to bring trouble to their door. Ugh, fuck my life.

“Miss Smooth. What can I do for you today?” Vic asks, pulling me from my thoughts as he crosses over to the tattoo bed Mercy is sitting on. Knight and Lox both take the seats I placed by her side as Mercy holds out her arms to Vic.

“I want to take something ugly and make it pretty,” she says confidently, not a shaky tone at all. I forget my own shit for the moment as I focus on my best friend who’s been fighting her own battles.

Knight tsks. “Baby girl, what have we told you? Your scars are your journey, and they are by no means ugly.”

“Mouse, have I not kissed them enough?” Lox asks, making Mercy’s cheeks heat, and I playfully gag in disgust.

“Oh, come on, not in front of the bestie, please.” I roll my eyes, throwing my hands up in exasperation as Vic laughs.

“Should I counter that with my own dirty words for you, *carriña*. It only seems fair.” He winks and I shoot daggers in his direction as he focuses on Mercy once more.

“How do you feel about flowers?” he asks as he turns and grabs his sketch pad from his worktable and brings it back to her.

“I like flowers. What do you have in mind?” she asks curiously as he flips a few pages and stops, pointing to something on the page. From where I’m sitting at his desk, I can’t see what they are looking at but by the look of awe on Mercy’s face, I think she likes what she sees.

“A lotus. It’s a flower symbolizing resilience, strength, and rebirth. It grows up out of the muck and mire, but its blooms are pristine, perfect even, despite that. I think it’s fitting. They come in various shades of purples, pinks, yellows, and whites. I can connect each flower with running vines up your arm and we can color and shade them in one sitting. I work fast but I won’t lie, it may hurt a bit.” He grimaces as he begins to study the scars on her arms. “I can work around the scar tissue here and there,” he points out, eyes focused, concentrating on each mark on her arm. He turns her arm up noticing the mark on her wrist.

Mercy smiles and shrugs. “Not a scar. It’s Nate’s mating mark.” She laughs as Vic’s eyes widen in surprise.

“Who knew Nate was a savage?” Vic asks, his eyebrows raised in approval as we all laugh.

“Hey, my brother had to improvise.” Knight chuckles, making Mercy blush again. I know they had to claim her in a rush, so I’m not surprised her bites are all over the place.

My phone chimes again, but I force myself not to look as I keep my attention in the room.

“I think lotus flowers are an excellent choice,” I say to Mercy, distracting myself and offering my girl a lifeline. She’s going to be beet red if they keep talking. Alphas have no shame it seems.

“Well, let’s get you tattooed,” Vic says as he snaps on his gloves and begins.

“I make good on my promises don’t I, *cariña*?” Vic’s body covers mine from behind as he sucks on my bare shoulder where his mate mark resides. My eyes roll to the back of my head as he slams into me, his reverse prince albert piercing making me cry out each time the circular barbell hits home.

“Yes!” I shout in pleasure. He kicks my legs out further, forcing me to arch my back as he shifts his hips, changing the angle as he drives into me. I bite down hard on my lip, groaning against the leather tattoo table Mercy had laid on getting her tattoos done only an hour ago.

“I enjoy fucking you, *cariña*. You scream so beautifully. You are so perfect.”

He grabs my ponytail and yanks my head back and to the side; his lips latch onto mine as he kisses the oxygen right out of my body. Vic’s kisses are pure ecstasy, I can kiss this Alpha and lose myself for hours without coming up for air. Damn him and his talented tongue.

“Vic!” I cry out and take a deep life affirming breath as he pushes me back down against the bed and slaps my ass.

“Yes, baby, say my name!” he replies. His slight Spanish accent coming through, the sound alone makes me moan as he massages my ass so hard I know he’s going to leave a mark. “Fuck, Freeya!” he shouts, and I know he’s close, he only says my actual name before he comes. In such a short period of time I have learned them all so well. His fingers find my clit and he works my sensitive flesh hard, making stars burst behind my closed eyes.

My phone chimes and my orgasm wanes for a second as my eyes spring open in panic. Then it chimes again.

Vic growls. “I won’t cum, not until you do, cariña. I am all for delayed gratification, but Omari is blowing up your phone. We mustn’t keep our Omega waiting now, must we?” he asks through clenched teeth, and the relief I feel for it being Omari and not this unknown stranger sends my orgasm crashing through me like a freight train. I scream Vic’s name over and over again, a prayer, a chant, I don’t know, but I let go as I cum all over the tattoo table. I’m so wet I am sure there’s a puddle of my release dripping to the floor.

“Freeya!” Vic roars finding his own release, his hand pressing me down onto the bed as he spills his cum inside of me. I’m breathing so hard, my lungs sting, but that could be because I have a heavy-ass Alpha pinning me down. Vic gets off me and I sigh in relief; my lungs fill as he pulls out of me. I don’t move from my spot as he moves around the room. The water turns on from the other side as I watch him clean himself up before he grabs our clothes and brings them over to me.

He drops to his knees and groans. “Cariña, seeing my cum leak from this pretty pussy of yours makes my cock hard all over again.” He licks the inside of my thigh, making me squirm as my phone chimes again. Vic tsks, saying, “But alas, if I fuck you again, the urge to knot you will be too tempting.”

My phone chimes again, and I squeeze my eyes shut in frustration, hoping like hell Vic can’t see who it is from where

he is.

“Come on, Free, let’s get you cleaned up and go home to our Omega. By the sounds coming from your phone, he has been away from you too long.” Vic hurries to clean me up, helping me dress quickly. I shove my phone in my pocket, turning it on silent as we leave Vic’s shop, trying to ignore the buzzing as we make our way home.

“Mari, let her get in the door before you carry her off to your room. We will not see either of you for the rest of the night,” Dez admonishes our Omega, his hazel eyes sparkle with delight at the sight of me. He grabs me from Omari’s arms and my Omega pouts as Dez wraps his strong arms around me and kisses my lips.

“You smell like Vic, baby. Has he already been in your pussy today? I bet you’re still dripping.” He lifts his brow in question, making me blush. I am not a blusher, but fuck, their dirty mouths do things to me.

Vic walks by us but not before he swats my ass as he passes. “You’re damn right I have, and I would still be inside of her if Omari here wouldn’t lose his shit and bar me from his nest.” I cover my face with my hands as Dez puts me on my feet, letting my body drag down his muscular frame, his hard dick more than obvious as it presses against my stomach.

“Don’t be shy, baby. You love our filth, and you know it,” Dez says, leaving me to watch him walk away, his ass and thighs in the combat pants he’s sporting make my mouth water.

“Come on, Free.” Omari lifts me from my feet and walks toward the dining room. “We can eat dinner and then you’re all mine.” He kisses my cheek, and I can’t help my widening smile as the large black marble table comes into view as well as Avion who’s sitting at the head of the table waiting for us.

“You’re home!” I shout, wiggling out of Omari’s hold to get to my Alpha. God, I am such a sappy sucker for them. If you’d told me months ago I would be squealing in delight and leaping into the laps of my future mates like a kid in line to see Santa, I would have laughed in your face. But here I am falling

into Avion's lap, wrapping my arms around his neck, breathing in his scent like Omari does me.

"Did you miss me, mon chéri?" Avion laughs, it's a deep chuckle that vibrates his chest, making my heart warm as he makes room for my body between the seat and the table. I raise up and pull back so I can see his gorgeous face. I reach up and run my hand over his short cut, the black waves feel like silk to the touch, and he closes his eyes at the contact.

"Yes," I say earnestly, because I truly did. Avion runs his family's international export business and it requires him to fly via his private jet back and forth to France once a month. Considering it's the holidays, I was worried he would be stuck across the Atlantic and we would have had to spend Christmas without him. At least, that is what he told me before he left. Yep, I am needy, so sue me.

"I can't stand to be away from Omari or you, mon chéri. I was determined to get things wrapped up, especially because Dez may be leaving for a quick trip away himself," he says, making me turn toward Dez. My mouth falls open to voice my concerns as he and Vic bring food to the table, followed by Omari who is carrying a bottle of wine under one arm, with plates and silverware in the other. I don't register the food, although the smell of marinara sauce hits my nose, the thought of eating makes my stomach churn suddenly.

"Do you have a lead? Did they find her? Does Mercy know yet?" I ask in quick succession, making Dez hold up his hand for me to calm down as he sits beside us. Avion wraps his arms around me tight and pulls me back into his lap.

"I'm not sure, but I got word that Mal was spotted, so I can only assume they are all together. This is good news, it means, they didn't leave the country. I haven't told Mercy yet because I don't want to get her hopes up," he replies, sounding exhausted as he reaches for the bowl of Caesar salad and begins to put some on a plate.

"Don't worry, cariña. We won't miss Pack Night at M. Bar. Dez might not be there but the rest of us will be. I know how much you want to support your bestie," Vic reassures me with

a wink as they all begin to plate up the chicken parmigiana and salad, passing the bowls and French bread around as they prepare to eat. My stomach crawls but my buzzing phone only sours my stomach.

“Cariña, you need to eat. You barely touched your burger at lunch today. Are you sure you’re feeling okay? You’ve been a bit off since this morning.” They all look at me with worried expressions on their faces. Avion shifts me in his lap to get a look at my face as my phone buzzes again.

“Are you getting work messages at this time of night, mon chéri? Your phone has been buzzing like mad. I almost thought you had a vibrator inside you, but you would be cumming all over my pants if you did,” Avion says, trying to make light of his question, but I drop my head as the infuriating buzzing continues.

“Freeya,” Dez’s deep voice penetrates my defenses, and I know I have to deal with this now before it gets worse. I don’t know what the messages say or why I’m being bombarded with them by a stranger, or at least I don’t think it’s a stranger.

“Free?” The sound of Omari’s panic has my head snapping up as my eyes well with tears. Oh fuck, the last thing I need is to cry right now. Why am I crying? Geez.

I wipe away the stray tears, angry with myself for the outward display of vulnerability. I begin to tell them about the random text messages I received today from my unknown stalker. They all remain quiet until I reach into my pocket and pull out the still vibrating phone and place it on the table.

“Why didn’t you tell me, cariña?” Vic asks calmly but his face is anything but. He’s pissed at me. “You are just as much a target now as Mercy.”

“Baby.” Dez sighs and picks up the phone. “You have to let us know everything. Your safety is paramount, especially until things die down with Mercy and the media. Open your phone and let me look.” He holds up the phone to my face and I shift in Avion’s lap nervously because I haven’t seen anything since Mercy arrived at the shop. I actively ignored each text for the rest of the day. Dez flicks through the texts

and we all sit in concerned silence as his face morphs into a boiling rage. His lips thin in disgust, the crease between his brows deepen with every swipe of his thumb.

“Your last name is Stuart?” he asks without looking at me as he pulls out his own phone and sets it next to mine. Using whatever smart technology he has I can see him transferring the texts from my phone to his.

“Dez, we already know that about her. What’s wrong?” Avion asks. If he is worried about any of this he doesn’t show it, he just holds me tighter. In that moment, I know I need to be a hundred percent honest. I haven’t told them about my family or who my family is. All they know is that I am a lone Beta, bestie and assistant to Mercy Smooths.

“I changed the spelling five years ago.” My voice cracks as I wipe away another tear. I spell it S-T-E-W-A-R-T instead of the spelling you can see on the screen.”

Dez sighs, absently rubbing his hands down his face. “That’s why I couldn’t find any real information on you, only the last five years of your life in Chicago. Fuck, Freeya,” he bites out the last words in frustration. I want to be outraged that he did a background check on me but with one look at Omari, I deflate. Of course, he did. Rightly so. He has to protect his pack, and I am an unknown.

“Why did you change your name, mon chéri?” Avion asks, rubbing my back in gentle circles, soothing my nerves with each stroke of his hand.

“Lay it all out for me, baby, because what I am seeing here has been going on for years, unbeknownst to you,” Dez says in concern.

Before I ask him why he thinks so, I blow out a breath and I tell them everything. Who my family was, the rich and prominent Stuart family. How my parents wanted me to be an Omega and had gone as far as arranging a mating ceremony with a pack of Alphas from other rich and powerful families.

“My story is the complete opposite to Mercy’s, she ran, deep down she was meant to be an Alpha. Yet, biology

laughed in her face and made her an Omega. Me, well, fate kicked me in the ass and made me a Beta. I was disowned.” I hang my head, only hearing the growls of their disapproval as I continue. “My father said I was ‘*an embarrassment, a disappointment, a weak Beta had no place in a family of Alphas or useful Omegas*’. So, they called off the mating ceremony and made me disappear. I left for Chicago, with my college education paid for and nothing else. I met Mercy, who was on the run as well and the rest is history. I changed the spelling of my name because I didn’t want anyone to question who I was. I know there are a lot of people with that name, but I wanted to disappear. They probably struck me from the family records, so I decided to do the same. I should have said something, but honestly, Dez, I didn’t think it was important until now. Until some unknown person said they’ve always had eyes on me,” I finish, my voice weak, exhausted as I cradle my face in my hands.

“You’re my true mate, Freeya. You were meant for me, for us. You are not a disappointment. You are mine.” Omari stands and circles the table, pulling me from Avion’s lap. Placing me on my feet, he kisses my tears and wraps me in his arms.

“I’m not upset, baby,” Dez says softly. “But there are pictures of you and Mercy from what I am assuming is years ago. Recent ones from outside Vic’s shop, our high rise. Whoever this person is, they know you personally. I can only assume it’s a male.”

“So, not a recent stalker from all the media attention then,” Avion says, lost in thought as he reasons it all out, grabbing my hand, he squeezes it in support. God, I love this man. But I can’t and won’t confess that here and now. Not like this.

I turn in Omari’s arms and face Dez. Vic has moved to stand behind him to look over his shoulder. “How do you know it’s a man?” I ask, so afraid of the answer that I’m shaking.

He turns the phone and holds it up for me to read. I gasp at the sight, stumble back into Omari’s arms.

UNKNOWN: You belonged to me long before you ever belonged to them. I will make you forget them.

UNKNOWN: Look how much you've grown, butterfly. I've missed you so.

UNKNOWN: See you soon. 🌀

SIXTEEN

TREY



I hit the final note of “Knocks Me Off My Feet” by Stevie Wonder then adjust myself on the bench, taking my hands off the keys and placing them in my lap. The crowd is thrumming with electricity as shrill whistles and applause breaks out all around me. Of course, my glasses choose that moment to shift on my nose, making me have to push them back in place.

I live for this feeling. The roar of an audience is like nothing else, as I let myself get lost in the music. I’ve missed this. With Mercy recovering these past few months and the obvious threats being thrown at us from the left and right, M. Bar has been closed. But with Christmas and New Year around the corner, Knight was determined to have one big Pack Night show.

There are so many packs here tonight that Dane has had no choice but to turn people away. We are at capacity; everyone wants to get a glimpse of the famous Mercy Smooth. She hasn’t been seen publicly since the day we walked inside Smooth Bourbon for the board meeting all those months ago. She’s kept a low profile, holed up behind the closed door of our pack house and away from the media frenzy surrounding the fire.

In the past two months, protests and calls for change have been happening in every state. And that’s just in America. Omegas all over the world are crying out for the ability to make a life of their choosing, and all eyes are on my songbird.

The lights from cellphones shine all around me as I reach for my mic and swing it closer to my mouth in preparation to bring her out.

“How are ya’ll doing tonight?” I say with a smile. It’s such an easy question, a call from me and answer by them, causing more cheers and claps in response.

I look out over the crowd; my eyes catch sight of my parents. My mother is beaming proudly up at me as my father wraps his arm around her protectively. Sitting at the table next to them are Edward and Seneca. Christopher, of course, is nowhere to be found. He’s been absent from any family activities, and I wonder if Seneca is the reason for it. I doubt he would miss a chance to be out in the crowd in an attempt to grab some media attention for himself. His followers have been out in droves, speaking against Mercy and the cries for change in the community. I incline my head slightly in Seneca’s direction, she studies me, arms crossed over her chest and offers me a nod of approval in return. Considering this woman taught me everything I know, the reason why Mercy and I play in the first place, I will accept it with pride.

“There is a lot about my mate,” I say with another silly grin, and the crowd loses it once more. *Mine*. They all settle down and I continue, especially when I see Nate and Knight with Mercy at the top of the stairs. She’s probably rolling her eyes at the fact that I am drawing this out. “Yes, there’s a lot about Mercy Smooth that many don’t know. She is a complex woman, my Omega, our Alpha,” I say. I hear a few gasps of surprise at my declaration. My brothers and I had all agreed that we had no problem with telling the world just who she is to our pack, so I call her Alpha. She is the head of our pack. “But tonight, she is going to come down here and play with me, aren’t you, songbird?” A spotlight comes on, shining down on the second piano in front of mine as another one shines down on Mercy at the top of the stairs.

She smiles, waving shyly as everyone in the room gets to their feet. Knight and Nate escort her down through the crowd, weaving through tables like her personal bodyguards to

raucous applause. The sight of her takes my breath away as she takes the steps one at a time.

Her hair is wild, corkscrew curls frame her face, almost shielding her protectively as her brown eyes meet mine. With minimal makeup, her face glows a shimmering gold, and her favorite wine-colored lipstick makes her look radiant. If she's nervous, I can't tell. She rolls her bare shoulders back and stands straight as she approaches her piano.

She wears a champagne-colored strapless dress that falls to her ankles, with a split exposing her entire right leg as she walks. I shift in my seat, unobtrusively adjusting my cock at the sight of her silky brown skin on display. But the most noticeable change in her appearance is the striking black and green vine tattoo which runs up and down her right arm, bright pink, purple, and blue lotus flowers bloom strategically over each of the burn scars she received from the fire. Striking and beautiful, she was determined to show off Vic's work to the world tonight. Although the tattoos are still healing, Vic said they should be fine by tonight. Well, Mercy is definitely pulling off the classy, 'rock chick' look tonight.

The applause dies down as she takes her seat and slides closer to her piano. I feel like I am floating in an alternate universe, this can't be my life. The woman I have loved for as long as I can remember, my mate, my songbird, is sharing the same stage as me. It used to be something we talked about as kids. Of course, Seneca only taught Mercy to play to make her more appealing to a mate, even though Mercy fought her every step of the way. To Seneca, Mercy was only meant to play behind closed doors, oh, and church, of course. Those ideals are archaic and have no room in the world today. My songbird was born to shine, and everyone will finally see her for the spectacular woman she is.

"Ready," I mouth to her, and she nods her head slightly. Honestly, when I approached her weeks ago, I wasn't sure she would be up for this. Her anxiety had gotten so bad she barely walked outside. But here she is. Hell, it was her idea that we play together.

“I’m more than happy to sit back and watch you play, songbird,” I said to her as she sat at the piano, poised to play.

She took one look at me; her reply was all it took to convince me. “No, we should do a duet. Isn’t the point of all of this to aim higher?”

“Yes, baby, yes, it is,” was the only answer I could give.

I adjust my glasses and count to three in my head, my fingers begin to play the haunting melancholic notes of Beethoven’s “Moonlight Sonata.” A few seconds later, Mercy begins to play the second part of the music, while I maintain the background melody. Our pianos work seamlessly together, as if only one of us is playing. With the spotlight only on us, the audience seems to disappear, and for a moment it is only us. I can make out Knight’s large frame at the bottom of the steps and I can almost feel his eyes locked on Mercy. Her head is down as she concentrates, leaning into every note with such practiced ease it would appear she does this professionally.

Then, like we practiced, a striking key change shifts the mood as we transition from classical to jazz with a skip of a heartbeat. My head snaps up, our eyes lock and Mercy pounds out in quick succession Duke Ellington’s, “Take The ‘A’ Train.” I counter with my piano, following her lead as we hit each note in a quick synchronized dance. Pure joy erupts on her face, her smile is so bright as she winks at me, as if this is our little secret.

I don’t have to see Seneca’s face to know she’s smirking knowingly at us. She treated playing like this as a test, and Mercy wanted to show her mother she still has it. Hell yeah, she does. I hold back my laugh as my mind wanders, letting those childhood memories of mine in, how I used to bite my lip in concentration as I stumbled over the notes that at the time seemed impossible. I blink, only to be brought back to the present by yet another shift in Mercy’s playing.

The piano slows as the modern notes of “The Journey,” by H.E.R. begins. This is the moment I’ve been waiting for. The moment my songbird opens her mouth and graces the audience with her soft alto voice. I don’t even think she realizes I’ve

stopped playing as she holds all of us in the palm of her hand. The lyrics speak of facing adversity, and struggling through life, but never giving up, about being strong, and coming out on top. As always, the perfect song.

My heart aches as I think of the last few months of her own journey, watching her struggle but not wanting our help, and how she would get lost in her journal for hours to cope. I wore her down, placing card after card wherever she spent most of her time until she finally chose to speak to a professional. It was, no, it is still her journey.

Mercy's voice rises and falls, flawlessly changing octaves, she vocally runs near the end, holding each life-altering note, and I forget to breathe as she hits the last key, letting it ring out over the quiet bar, finally looking up. Well, fuck. I'm so in love my heart could burst.

"Thank you," Mercy quietly says into her mic, and the crowd goes wild. I don't know what to do with myself as I stand and clap for her. Everyone is on their feet, shouting and cheering, lights from phones recording her every move. This is truly a moment to remember, and I will hold it in my heart forever. I will make it my mission to have her play with me more often at M. Bar. By the smile on her face, I think Mercy will agree.

"Mercy Smooth, everyone," I lean into my mic and say her name as everyone continues to clap until I give the cue to the DJ to start to play. The spotlights go out and the normal ambient lighting of the bar comes on again as I rush over to Mercy and take her into my arms. I don't think I can hold back from touching her much longer as my lips find hers and I practically carry her off stage.

"Merce, you are truly a wonder, baby," Nate says in awe. He reaches his arm out to her as I put her on her feet to walk down the steps.

"I'm going to have to put you on the payroll, baby girl," Knight says as she reaches the last step. He takes her hand in his and we follow him through the crowd until we reach our parents' tables.

My parents stand as we approach, my mother is a mess of tears as she holds out her hands to me. “Oh, Trey, seeing you perform never gets old,” she says, pulling back as my dad lays a hand on my shoulder, his eyes full of pride. My Beta parents have never shied away from showing me their love and affection, so when they sandwich me in a hug, I bask in it.

“You did well, Son,” my father whispers, and I catch the intended double meaning. I pull away as my mom approaches Mercy.

“It’s so good to see you, Mercy, sweetheart. I just witnessed magic.” She hugs Mercy as Knight and Nate give them room. People are starting to hover around us, trying to get pictures, but I can already see security coming toward us to stop them from getting near Mercy or our parents.

“Seneca, you must be elated. Look at your baby,” my mother gushes, her petite form bouncing with joy.

“I taught her well. I am glad some things stuck. That goes for you too, Trey,” Seneca says with a smile. I know that it’s all the praise we are going to get from our former teacher. She doesn’t have to say more, I can see happiness in her eyes as she attempts to hold back tears.

“Yes, ma’am,” I say in reply as Edward hugs Mercy, rocking her gently in his arms. He pulls away as the crowd starts to get loud. “Well, us old folks should leave you to it. But I will say, Knight, this is not what I expected. I will definitely bring Seneca back here. Your parents would have been proud of you, of this place,” he says gesturing around the bar. Knight nods his head solemnly and Nate freezes, his head drops as he looks away uncomfortably. Losing their parents is something they will never get over, no matter how many years they’ve been gone.

“Thank you. I can only hope so.” Knight reaches out and shakes Edward’s hand as they start to leave.

“Thank you for coming,” Mercy says to her parents, then turns the same sentiment to my parents as well. “I hope we get to see you for Christmas. We kind of went overboard at home and Christmas threw up all over the place.” She laughs,

scrunching her nose sheepishly. The expression is cute and playful, another step forward in her healing.

“We wouldn’t miss a chance to stop by,” my dad says, clapping me on the back as we watch them go. I make a mental note to see my parents more often. As I look at Knight and Nate, I’m reminded of how lucky I am because not all of us have parents to hold on to.

Lox appears out of nowhere and wraps his arm around Mercy’s waist, picking her up, he makes her shriek in surprise. Her arms wrap around his as he buries his face in her hair, rubbing his nose into her neck and face, scent marking her. “Little mouse, I don’t know if I like you entertaining all these packs looking the way you do. I know they’re all mated but I still don’t like the looks you’re getting,” Lox growls, making Knight, Nate, and I start scanning the room.

I don’t see anyone alarming other than a few people looking at Mercy more in respect and adoration, but I don’t say it. I shake my head at his antics, biting back a laugh. Nate eyes me and he does laugh, making Lox give him a death glare. Lox can be an Alpha-hole when he’s surrounded by so many Alphas, other than us.

“Down boys, nobody is going to touch me. Your pheromones are so strong right now, I’m practically invisible.” Mercy playfully hits Lox’s arm as he carries her through the crowd and towards the stairs to the VIP section.

“Well, it’s best we get you somewhere safe, regardless. I may need to have a discussion with that dress though, baby girl, especially your thigh.” Knight arches a brow, eyes heated as he climbs the steps backward, declaring his intentions without saying a word.

“Knight Biggs, in fact, all of you, I will have you know I love this dress. I just got it.” Mercy pouts when not one of us says a word. She looks sexy as fuck, and I’m about ready to rip the damn thing off her with my teeth.

Mercy sighs. “Can you at least let me attempt to remove it on my own? At home would be preferable,” she says, as if

she's negotiating a deal, making Knight stumble up a step as his head tilts back in laughter.

"We can make it tantalizingly slow, mouse. Unwrap you like a present, an early Christmas present," Lox says as he playfully nips her bare shoulder.

"Oh, Merce, I'll buy you another one. Hell, I'll buy you a closet full if we get to rip them off you whenever we like," Nate says as he takes up the rear of our group.

I follow without a word, savoring every happy moment. Happiness, as they say, is fleeting, and we haven't had much lately.

"Okay, fine I—"

Mercy's words die as Knight freezes at the rope off section of the VIP room. The smell of warm sugar, fuck, so rich it smells caramelized, hits the back of my throat and I go on high alert. A growl sounds from beyond the top of the stairs and I can hear Avion spitting French profanities before he appears in front of Knight.

"Knight, we need a quick exit and fast." Avion's suit looks slightly disheveled as Vic comes into view looking out of sorts as well, his pupils are blown with a wild look in his eyes I know all too well. Plus, he's sporting a massive hickey on his neck.

"Fuck, guys, sincere apologies, but Omari is a few days away from his heat. Freeya was determined to see you play, Mercy. We thought if we were up here and out of the way he would be okay. Dez is away and fuck—" Vic says, watching something behind him with widening eyes, Omari growls again, followed by a long low moan. Well fuck.

"Freeya. Is she okay?" Mercy asks, but by the sound of things, Freeya is just fine.

"As you can see, we are running out of time. He's begging and pleading for her; at the moment, she's resisting her urges to take care of him. This true mate business, honestly, is unprecedented territory for us." Avion rubs the back of his neck as Knight snaps to attention. I don't think any of us

knows the full extent of what it means to have a male Omega, they are so rare. A true mate, though, is a complete mystery to us. Omari's scent is strong, even with mated packs downstairs...he's bound to draw attention.

"My office is up through that door." Knight points to the 'do not enter' sign over a side door hidden by a silver velour curtain. "Here's the key, I think it's best we stay out of your way," he says handing his keys over to Avion.

Freeya moans again and Mercy whimpers, her head falling back on Lox's shoulder. Are Omari's pheromones affecting her hormonally? I can't help but wonder as I watch my girl squirm in Lox's arms. This is a learning curve for all of us. "There's an emergency exit that leads to a fire escape. It will take you to the back parking lot," Knight says as Vic turns and rushes back to where the couches are.

"Gracias, Knight. Mercy, you were amazing tonight by the way," Vic says before he turns and springs into action. The only thing I see from behind Lox's back is Vic practically dragging Omari through the door to Knight's office, followed by Avion who has to scoop Freeya up in his arms. They rush out, and the last thing I hear before the door slams shut is Omari yelling for his Petal.

Knight goes to lift the rope, but Mercy reaches out her hands to stop him. "His scent is too strong. I can't go anywhere near it. Take me home." She pants.

"Mouse, are you—"

"Please." Mercy whimpers. "I'm okay. I just...fuck, rip the dress off, just get me home," she pleads, and it's our turn to scramble.

"Your scent hasn't changed, baby," Nate says slightly confused by her reaction as he turns and hops down the steps two at a time. We follow hot on his heels as Lox scoops Mercy up in his arms bridal style.

"Not my heat...knot," she says breathlessly. "I need a knot, now!" she all but barks the command and my dick goes rock hard.

“Shit, mouse,” Lox groans and I guess he’s had the same reaction.

If our Omega needs a knot, then she has four ready, willing, eager, and able.

SEVENTEEN

MERCY



I'm not in heat. I'm not in heat...I'd better not be going into heat, or Omari and I are going to have fucking words.

I say the chant in my head over and over again as I'm handed over to Trey in the back seat of the SUV. Nate jumps in beside me and slams the door as Lox takes the driver's seat. Knight is having a hurried conversation with Dane and my nerves are fraying as my impatience grows. What the fuck is wrong with me? I've never been in close proximity to another Omega, especially a male going into heat before. But his smell, God, I felt like I needed to bite my pack and guard them against him. It's the first time I have had the desire to do so. Is that what this is? Do I need to claim what's mine?

"Knot," I whimper as I claw at Trey's clothes. I rip the buttons of his black button-down shirt and he gasps in surprise.

"Songbird, who is ripping off whose clothes now? Breathe baby." He runs his hand down my heated skin, and I suddenly feel crazed, unhinged. Is that the word? Hell, I don't know.

"Do we know what's happening here?" Nate asks, looking at me like I've grown two heads. I straddle Trey's hips, my long skirt covering his lap, but my split gives me access to move freely.

"No, but if you don't give me your mouth right now, I'm going to scream," I say as I reach for him. Nate scoots closer and attacks my mouth. Good boy. With my hands free, I find Trey's belt and begin to unbuckle it to free his cock. I rock

back and forth, feeling it twitch beneath me and I moan in satisfaction into Nate's mouth.

"Baby...Mercy..." Knight says my name in warning, but I break my kiss and growl at him from the backseat.

"If I want to fuck in the back seat, then that's what I'm going to do, Knight!" I snap, my neck turning around like I'm possessed. Maybe I am. All I need is to spray everyone with pea soup and we'd have the makings of a horror film.

"Mouse," Lox calls my name, his voice soothing and calm, but I'm having none of it. I need to fuck, to be knotted, and bite. It doesn't matter in what order. Yep, I have officially lost my mind.

"Mouse, tell us what you are feeling? Like Nate said, your scent hasn't really changed," Lox tries again, and I growl in response, deep and guttural.

"Use your words, songbird," Trey says as he finally decides to assist me, lifting his hips so I can yank his slacks down. His cock springs free and I sigh in relief before finally answering Lox's question.

"Territorial. I felt the need to hide you all away from him. Omari's scent put me on edge, triggering this deep enrooted need to mark and claim you as mine," I say as I rip my own thong off, making a note to myself that I no longer need panties around my men.

I grab Trey's cock and run my hands up and down his shaft, catching his precum as his head hits the back of the seat. "I feel the need to claim you," I say as I rise up on my knees and lower myself back down, my pussy swallowing him up as my ass hits his thighs.

"Well, fuck me, this shit is... I have no words, songbird." Trey groans, his eyes closing blissfully. I smile slowly, beaming with pride. Nothing feels sexier than bringing a man to his knees... My pussy is powerful. Their kryptonite.

"Merce, do you know how hot you look right now? All beautiful, primal, and sexy." Nate pulls the top of my dress

down, exposing my breasts, my nipples pebbling, even with the heater warming the car.

I rock my hips, making Trey hiss as Nate lowers his head to my breast to pull my nipple into his mouth. The sound of their moans and groans only turns me on further. As I roll my hips, pushing Trey deeper, my eyes never leave his as I take what I need. I need him.

“You feel so good, Trey. Do you know how much I love you?” I ask softly, suddenly feeling more relaxed now that I have one of them inside me. I don’t give him a chance to reply as I lean forward, sandwiching Nate’s head between my breast and Trey’s chest before my mouth finds his.

“I need to breathe, but death by breast? What a way to go.” Nate’s muffled voice vibrates my nipple, but he soon gives up his ministrations as he comes up for air.

“Lox, drive the God damn car faster. I think my cock is going to explode,” Knight’s deep voice sounds pained as his hand hits the roof of the car as Lox puts his foot down. I lurch forward and Trey’s grip on my hip tightens as he breaks our kiss.

“Fuck! Fuck! Mercy, shit.” Trey squeezes his eyes shut as I ride him hard. I can feel his knot inflating but he’s trying to hold back.

“Give it to me, Trey. Don’t deny me, baby, please!” I beg as my head falls back and I moan in pleasure.

“Songbird, in the car?” he asks, uncertain of my request, knowing he will be locked inside of me for a while.

“Yes!” I growl as Nate’s hands find my clit, pinching it hard. My orgasm slams into me at the same time that Trey thrusts up brutally, his knot pushing into me and locking us in place. His head falls back as he shouts my name and I scream as I cum over and over again. I rip his shirt, bringing it over his head like a feral beast, and I don’t think, just strike, my teeth latching on to his shoulder. I bite down hard, making him groan as he paints my insides with his release. Trey’s blood

fills my mouth, hot and coppery tasting with a hint of his hot chocolate and marshmallow. I suck and lap at the mark.

The car jolts as we come to a stop, but I don't look to see where we are as I take care of my bite on Trey's shoulder. Mine. *All mine.*

"Yes," Trey says softly as he kisses my hair, then the side of my face until he reaches my shoulder where his bite is.

"Yes what?" I ask, pulling back to look at him.

"Yes, I do know how much you love me." He smiles, all freshly fucked, glasses askew, and handsome. Mine. Eventually my brain will come to its senses, but for now my head turns and I eye Nate like he's my next meal. The same feeling bubbles up inside me as Lox and Knight jump out of the car and march toward the house.

"Take me inside," I say, kissing Trey's lips. "I'm nowhere near finished." It will be a long night, but by the end of it, I will sink my teeth into them all.

The early morning light filters through the parted curtains as I rub the sleep from my eyes. I guess removing what little makeup I wore last night was not on the agenda considering my lids seem to be glued shut. I try to move only to feel the weight of limbs holding me down.

I close my eyes and listen to their breathing. I'm taken back to the moment when I woke up like this after my heat broke. Just like then, their heavy breathing and Knight's snoring soothed me, bringing a smile to my face. I want to stay right here, naked, tangled in their arms and legs for as long as I can.

Unfortunately, nature calls, and someone's head is pressing on my bladder. They have experienced a lot of moments with me, but me wetting the bed is one I want to hold off on for maybe another twenty to thirty years. I remember my mother complaining about her bladder never being the same after she

had all of us. So, I'm sure I have that to look forward to down the line, but not today.

I wiggle my body from underneath Trey's arms and sit up. He is asleep on his side, facing me, and my eyes find my mating bite. I lean down and kiss the spot between his neck and shoulder, making him groan softly in his sleep. Last night was a bit of a blur. As soon as we walked in the house and Trey's knot deflated, I went for Nate. We didn't even make it to our bedroom. Let's just say that I will look at the downstairs sectional, the stairs, and eventually the shower differently. I claimed them all as mine.

The clawing need to make them mine abated and now I feel perfectly fine. I can only assume Omari's scent triggered that instinct in me. There are still a lot of things I need to learn about being an Omega. Not only did I suppress my heat, but I also refused to learn anything else about my designation. My parents never gave me a chance to adjust when I presented, they just immediately threw me into a mating ceremony. I resented them for it, I ran from my mates and lived in denial. Now, though, with the help of my mates, I am figuring out what it means to be an Omega every day. I already have the Alpha part in the bag.

I slide from under Lox's leg and rush into the bathroom. Making quick work of my morning routine, I tiptoe through the room and dress quickly in a pair of jeans and one of Nate's blue and yellow plaid button-down shirts that falls to my knees like a dress. Grabbing a pair of fluffy socks to protect me from the cold, I leave the room only to stop and admire the still naked, unconscious men laying in a dog pile in our bed. To think I made them sleep in their own rooms while I worked through my shit, it makes my heart ache. I made a promise to myself that if I'm struggling in the future; I will communicate. If I have panic inducing dreams, I will seek their help and comfort. No more running, no more hiding. Therapy for the win. I make my way downstairs following the trail of discarded clothing, picking them up as I go until I reach the bottom step, gasping in shock at the state of the gown I wore last night.

“Damn it, guys,” I curse quietly, doing a little dance of frustration as I pick up the ripped dress. “Nate, you owe me a dress,” I say to myself as I make my way to the kitchen, dumping the clothes in the laundry room on the way.

“Crazy Alphas, ripping my gown like savages,” I mumble as I shuffle into the kitchen, heading for the coffee pot. As I set the machine up, I stare out at the fresh snow covering the ground as the sun slowly makes its appearance over the trees.

I spot Dane walking up the drive and bite back a laugh as he trudges in yet another colorful knitted hat, this one Christmas themed. I think I need to meet his Omega soon and thank her for making my morning. Seeing me through the large kitchen windows, he waves, and I wave back, laughing, which, of course, makes him roll his eyes. Yeah, you know I’m laughing at your hat big guy.

I grab myself a cup of coffee, then grab a travel mug and fill it up for Dane. If the poor Beta is going to stand out in the freezing cold to protect me, then it’s the least I can do. I walk toward the front of the house, whistling to myself, only to collide with a wall of muscle. The momentum has me stumbling back as I fumble like a quarterback going for the game winning touchdown. The travel mug is caught quickly, but my mug falls out of my hands, and I watch it hit the floor in slow motion, mourning the loss of my precious. Yep, coffee is to me is as the ring was to Gollum.

“Seriously!” I shout as I point to my coffee on the floor in horror. Knight smirks and holds up the travel mug. Well, he did save that at least. I stare at his bare chest, mouth falling open like a gaping fish as I spot my mating mark on his right pec. My eyes travel south, taking in his rippling abs and that hot as fuck V leading down to nothing but the glorious sight of grey sweatpants. *Jesus*. Why? I rebuke you! Grey sweatpants, you will not distract me this early in the morning.

“You have a travel mug too, baby girl,” Knight says with a knowing smile as he holds out the mug to me all innocent. Like he didn’t come down here to tempt me with my claiming bite on display. I almost hiss and form a cross with my fingers as I back away from him. I grab my favorite mug off the floor,

thankful that it didn't shatter, and march back to the kitchen in search of a mop.

"Take it to Dane. The poor man is probably freezing his Beta balls off!" I shout back as I grab what I need and make it back to the hallway to clean up the mess.

I hear Knight talking to Dane, followed suddenly by the sound of cellphones going off. I lean against the mop handle and listen. The sound of hurried footsteps above me suddenly makes me panic. I drop the mop and rush toward the living room as Lox bounds down the stairs, only to stop midway when he sees me, his eyes wide in alarm. Knight pushes the front door open in a rush as he and Dane fall into the house. Everyone's eyes are on me, and all the happiness I felt when I woke earlier drains away.

I step forward as Nate, then Trey, comes to a halt behind Lox. "What?" I ask.

"That was Dez. They found her, Mercy," Knight says somberly. I take another step forward. I need to see the message myself.

"Okay. That's good, right?" I ask, but no one says anything. I wring my hands in Nate's shirt, feeling their emotions bombard me. Anxiety. Fear. Sadness.

"Mouse, we—"

"No!" I shout, wondering why the hell they just won't spit it out. "That's good, right!" I turn to go and search for my phone, but Knight's words stop me dead in my tracks.

"Mercy, Dez said when they found her, she was barely alive. She tried to kill herself. They found her passed out on the floor of the hotel room they were staying in. Chasson, Mal, and Derrick left her there. Left her there to die." His words are like a knife to my heart. They bring me to my knees. Flashes of my sister's screams that day in the distillery, the image of their assault, and how they dragged her away from me as I was gasping for breath. I don't realize I'm sobbing until strong arms lift me off the floor and I am surrounded by their scents.

“Dez tried to reach us last night, they brought her back via private jet. He didn’t trust the local hospital just in case her pack tried to collect her. Heath admitted her to the VIP wing. They are treating her now,” Knight says reassuringly, and that news snaps me out of my trance.

“We need to go to her now. I don’t want her to be alone.” I wiggle out of Lox’s arms and hurry to gather my things while the guys all scramble to do the same. I will protect my sister this time. I vow I will not fail her. Those assholes won’t ever touch her again. That’s a promise, a threat, and a fucking fact.

EIGHTEEN

KNIGHT



The ride to the hospital is the complete opposite to the one we took home from M. Bar last night. It was a turning point for all of us. None of us knew Mercy would react to Omari's presence like that, stimulating our Omega's frenzy; her overwhelming need to claim us and mark what was hers. I can still feel her teeth on my skin from where she bit me right above my heart in the shower last night. We were already hers, but now we belong to her, mind, body, and soul. This morning I felt the full effects of our connection, I could feel her everywhere, her happiness, her joy, and the very moment that she spiraled into darkness at the mention of Faith.

Mercy sits between Lox and Nate, staring straight ahead at nothing. I can feel her misery through our bond, and right now, and until we know the full extent of Faith's injuries, Mercy will be lost to us. I know my baby girl; she's still holding onto a lot of guilt. The fact she couldn't save Faith months ago was the main thing fueling her nightmares, night after night. As if she could have taken down an entire pack of Alphas to get her sister out of there. I've always admired Mercy's unwavering tenacity, but when I think about how much worse things could have gotten that day...well, fuck. I grit my teeth and swallow down my anger. I think it is best for all of us to remain as calm as we can for her today.

I sigh from the driver's seat. My hands grip the steering wheel tightly as I navigate through the freshly fallen snow on the ground. I can feel the tension in the car. Trey is practically vibrating with the need to speak, his knee bounces nervously as his eyes keep shifting to Mercy through the mirrors. For

Mercy's sake we all remain quiet. Lox's arm is outstretched behind Mercy's back, I catch his eye in the rearview mirror, inclining his head as we have a silent conversation. She's not okay.

Pulling the car into the closest parking spot, I turn off the engine and check our surroundings. The hospital is not as busy as it was the last time we were here, there are no reporters or protesters, so I immediately relax.

Nate opens his door and Mercy moves so fast he doesn't even get a chance to step out of the SUV. Mercy vaults over his legs and takes off.

"Mercy!" I yell her name across the icy parking lot as she practically ice skates to the emergency room entrance of the hospital.

"Fuck, mouse, slow down!" Lox shouts at the same time, but Mercy disappears inside without giving us a second glance.

"She's going to be the death of us all!" Nate says in exasperation. "She charges into danger headfirst. I think she was a shieldmaiden in her former life."

Trey snorts and looks up lost in thought. "A shieldmaiden. Mercy. Well, that's an image I need to recreate next Halloween," he says humorously.

I know he's trying to make light of our situation and I am grateful for him and my brother. "Nate, you have to stop binge watching Viking television shows," Trey continues with a chuckle.

"Hey, we've all had some lonely nights these past few weeks. I've binge watched a lot of television. I have a vivid imagination," Nate replies as we dash through the ER without being stopped. The nurse takes one look at Lox and points to the elevators.

Lox clears his throat as we file into the elevator, sensing his trepidation, the mood sobers around us. "We need to keep our guard up. We have no idea where anyone is right now. Christopher, Chasson, Derrick, or Mal. We don't know if this

is another set up. Dez will want to get home to Omari. I am sure he will leave some of his security team here, but we will all need to be vigilant,” Lox says as the elevator doors close, taking us up to the VIP floor.

The doors open and we come face to face with an exhausted looking Dez, his eyes have dark circles underneath, his shoulders are pulled forward as he braces himself against the wall. Our eyes meet and he straightens to his full height, going into soldier mode with the flip of a switch. He’s in full tactical gear; black combat pants and a long sleeve shirt with a vest loaded with gear on top. Even from where we are all standing, you can hear the soft murmurings of his team through the earpiece that hangs loose around his neck. Guns are strapped in holsters around his waist; his eyes are sharp, despite his obvious sleep deprivation as he scans the elevator for threats unknown.

“I was on my way down to catch you,” he says, shifting out of the way to let the four of us into the hall. Shoving his hands in the front of his pants pockets, he rocks on the balls of his feet as the elevator doors close.

“Dez, you look like shit,” Lox says, taking the words right out of my mouth. Who knows what conditions they’ve been in or what they’ve had to do to get Faith to safety.

“Well, it’s been seventy-two hours without much sleep. We’d been monitoring three possible locations where we thought Faith and her pack were hiding out. It wasn’t until Faith tried to run that we could pinpoint where they were. I only wish we hadn’t waited another couple of hours to make our move. According to one of my guys, she attempted to fight, but Chasson managed to wrangle her back into the hotel without drawing too much attention to them. The men I had watching that location aren’t field guys, so they weren’t equipped to try to rescue her during the altercation. By the time I arrived at the location, they had already abandoned her. I don’t know what went down for sure, but she was beaten badly. The hotel room was trashed. The door to the bathroom was off its hinges, which means she tried to lock herself inside, but the worst part is that they left her to bleed out from

the wounds she inflicted on herself,” Dez says as he barely contains his anger.

“She cut her wrists?” I ask matter-of-factly. We all know exactly what he meant when he said the wounds were self-inflicted. I can only imagine how helpless she felt. That her only means to escape her tormentors, because they don’t deserve the titles of mates, was through death.

Dez sighs wearily and runs his hand down his face. “I’m just glad we found her when we did. We stabilized her and I called Heath here at the hospital. It took us a two-hour flight to get here from where she was. I still have some of my team in the area searching for the bastards, but I have a feeling they are long gone.”

“Do you think they will try to return to Frankfort?” Trey asks.

“If they do, we will be waiting. But regardless, I won’t rest until they are found. The abuse Faith has suffered— I’m just tired of finding Omegas this way,” Dez says furiously. Again, I can’t imagine what he has seen when he’s out there finding Omegas like this on a daily basis.

“Dez, I am pretty sure you are anxious to get home to your pack. I see you already have some men stationed in the hall and Dane is on his way here. Go home.” Lox steps forward and pushes him toward the elevator.

Dez opens his mouth to argue but I stop him. “Do you want us to carry you out of here? You’ve done more than enough for us. We can take it from here.” I smirk, folding my arms over my chest and blocking the hallway.

Dez gives us a small smile. “Yeah, Omari is a few days away from his heat, so I may be unreachable, but my team is at your service. I will be in touch.” He waves as we watch the elevator doors close.

“Geez.” Nate blows out a breath. “It’s Alphas like them that make you want to go out and commit murder. Faith must have felt she had no way out.”

“I guess she felt she didn’t. She was trapped. How many years did we all notice the abuse and do nothing?” Trey agrees angrily, adjusting his glasses on his nose aggressively. Does it make us complicit because we hadn’t wanted to get involved? If so, what about this community? No wonder people are protesting in the streets. No one wants to feel less than human, and to some extent, that is how some of these Omegas see their lives—as less.

“At the end of the day, with the law as it stands, it is not in their favor,” Lox says, throwing his hands up in frustration as he speaks passionately. “To the outside world, everyone saw the perfect pack. Rich and influential. The only reason we knew different is because we grew up with her. We saw the shell she’d become. But who were we to go against her mates? Our hands were tied. No, Trey, don’t put that guilt on yourself or anyone else. Christopher looked the other way. Her own damn father!”

“But there is hope,” I interject as I try to find the positive in this terrible mess. “We must protect that hope. Protect her. All eyes are on Mercy. She’s become a symbol, a beacon of light for so many. Hell, we witnessed it last night at the bar. Benjamin knew this, he knew his daughter was special. Even after she ran, he still left her the company and made sure we would be by her side. He believed a woman in her position could provoke change. It’s such a massive weight for her to have on her shoulders and we have to help her bear the load. This whole entire situation goes against an Alpha’s instinct, but nothing about our pack is ordinary. So, we will go in there, support her, and pick up the pieces when she falls apart.” I watch my brothers’ faces, feeling their anger subside through our bond. That is the best rallying of the troops speech I can muster.

With that said, I turn in the direction of the rooms, and my brothers follow behind me as we pass two of Dez’s security team members. The closer we get to the room the more anxious I become, a sense of foreboding washes over me. Mercy is safe, she has her sister back. I believe the words I’ve just spoken to my brothers. There is a light at the end of this dark-ass tunnel. As much as I want to believe we are coming

to the end of all this... something tells me that this is far from over.

“I won’t leave her. I want to be the first face she sees.” Seneca’s voice breaks as she holds Faith’s hand in hers. She sits beside her bed as tears run down her cheeks, the emotion in the room is so thick it takes my breath away.

My mind takes me back to the day my parents were killed. I remember this exact same breathlessness, and for a second, I stand there frozen in the doorway. Edward stands at her back trying to lend her his strength, but he looks just as broken as she is.

“Sen, Mercy and her pack are here. You need rest and food —”

“NO!” Seneca shouts, making me jump, pulling me out of my own trauma haze. I am not used to Seneca raising her voice. Growing up in and around their pack house, she never needed to, and for some reason we’d always fallen in line for her, and that went for her children and her mates. Or so I thought. But this woman, the sudden rage on her face, it surprises me. I shift nervously at the door, my brothers at my back, and I wonder where Mercy is. I look at the closed restroom door on the other side of the room and I assume she is inside.

“This is my fault. Don’t you see, Edward. I did this to her. I allowed you all to raise your daughters as you saw fit. I gave you each a child. Yes, they were all your children, but Faith is Christopher’s daughter, Grace is yours, and Mercy belonged to Benjamin. I thought...oh God, I thought I was doing something good. Teaching the girls what they needed to survive this world as Omegas in hopes that when it came to them being mated, you would all make the right choice. Oh, how wrong I was!” She angrily wipes away her tears and sniffs, yet I can tell her anger is growing. “Christopher can be so convincing, the church, his followers, his beliefs. He swore

to me Faith would be okay, that he chose her the perfect Alphas. But I watched from afar as my daughter died a little every time I saw her. They kept her from us for months at a time. How was I to know? Damn it, how was I to know? She never said anything because I taught them to accept their Alphas' wishes— Oh God, why didn't she tell me?" Seneca crumbles, her head falls to Faith's bed, and she sobs inconsolably.

We all move into the room and take up a post against the wall by the door and my eyes narrow on the restroom door. Is she okay? I can feel her distress through our bond, and I assume it's because she's seen the state Faith is in and can hear her mother.

Faith lays unconscious on the bed. Her face is swollen with black and purple bruises on one side. If I didn't know it was Faith, I wouldn't be able to recognize her. Her head is partially covered in bandages, and there are actual handprints marring her neck. With her gown covering her body, who knows what scars she hides underneath. But what's most noticeable is her wrapped wrists, the bandages stopping just shy of her elbows. No one should ever be made to feel that their only way out is through death. The fear and despair she must have felt, I can't imagine.

"Where is Merce?" Nate whispers as he rubs at the center of his chest with a frown on his face, and I gesture to the closed restroom door. He nods then turns to whisper her location to Trey and Lox. I look over my shoulder just as three sets of eyes train on the restroom door. If she doesn't come out soon, I am going to go get her myself, something feels off. Come on, baby.

"Sen, I won't let you blame yourself. She's my daughter as well. He convinced me and Benjamin also. We knew they were traditional in their beliefs, but I never thought they would do this to her. Lead her to want to...to ...take herself away from us." Edward's voice falters, but he holds back his tears and looks over to where I'm standing with Nate, Knight, and Lox. His eyes narrow as he looks toward the door, but he turns his eyes back to us. "Christopher is not allowed in this

building. I won't allow him to hurt anyone else I love. As far as I'm concerned, he is no longer pack," he says, his voice full of determination. I couldn't agree more, Edward. I couldn't agree more.

"I will make sure security knows this," Lox says as he excuses himself from the room. I go to turn and follow him out, just in case one of us needs to find Dane to relay this information, but Edward's words stop us both.

"Where's Mercy? Did you leave her at home?" Edward's question sucks all the oxygen out of the room, and I feel the world shift on its axis.

My unease, the anxiety I felt as we approached the room, slammed into me like a battering ram. My heart pounds in my ears and my adrenaline spikes. I don't know what makes me rush to the restroom door and open it, I know she's not there, but there is a part of me that hopes it was that simple. That it was a mistake; that they missed her coming into the room somehow. All a fantasy on my end.

Lox growls. "What do you mean? She is here. She arrived with us." Lox's eyes widen, then they shift to me. "No!" He turns and runs out of the room yelling at the security team to follow him.

"Fuck!" Trey and Nate shout as they turn and run out of the room to follow Lox.

"Knight?" Seneca calls out to me as I jog across the room. I pause at the doorway.

"Knight, where is Mercy?" Edward asks, his eyes wide with panic.

"She was with us. She ran ahead, I assumed she made it up here before us. When I saw the restroom door closed, I didn't question it." I hang my head because I've failed her yet again. Fuck. "I'm sorry. I'm not sure where she is. I can only hope she got lost on her way up, but I will find her." I attempt to reassure them both, but I don't stick around for their reply as I run down the hall in search of my mate as the sound of Seneca's screams filter to me down the hall.

NINETEEN

MERCY



“M ercy!”

“Fuck, mouse, slow down!”

I hear Knight and Lox call my name, but I don’t hesitate as I slip and slide toward the entrance to the emergency room. I make it inside without wiping out and rush over to the reception desk. The nurse sitting in front of me looks up, then does a double take when she, I assume, recognizes me. I’m so used to flying under the radar, this easy recognition is going to take some getting used to.

“Miss Smooth, ah...ah... How can I help you?” she asks with a kind smile.

I lean in, not wanting to be overheard. “I am here to see Faith Douglas.” I cringe at the sound of her pack’s name as she begins to type on her computer, but I quickly throw out, “Ah, check Faith Smooth?” I question, hoping Dez changed her name back to our family’s pack name for discretion. I drum my hands on the desk and wait.

“Oh yes, Faith Smooth. She’s on the VIP floor,” she says quickly, then points me to the elevator down the hall. I turn to see if the guys have caught up yet, but I don’t see them. I almost stop to wait for them, not wanting a lecture about going somewhere without them, but I toss that thought out of my head as I thank the nurse and jog toward the elevators. I’m in a hospital, Dez is here, possibly my parents, so I am safe here.

The entire ride over, all I could think about was Faith and everything she had been through. I thought about every

moment I saw her after she was mated and wondered why I didn't question her more. I remember the day of my would-be mating ceremony and her cryptic statement about Alphas demands, urges, needs, and how I should be happy I was being mated to Alphas I knew and grew up with. If I knew then what I know now, I would have grabbed both of my sisters and ran.

I reach the elevator doors and press the button to go up and wait. I sigh and try to prepare myself for what I'm about to see.

“Mercy?”

I turn at the sound of my name and smile at the woman rushing toward me. “Miss Caroline?” I raise my eyebrows in question, wondering what she's doing here, then quickly dismiss it. She could have a family member here she's visiting. Before I can ask her more, the elevator dings and the doors open. I hurry inside and she rushes in behind me.

“Oh, Mercy, it is so good to see you,” she says as she scoots past me, hands clutching her purse to her chest as she leans against the back wall. I turn and face the doors as she blows out a shuddering breath.

“Are you okay?” I ask as I reach over to press the button with Executive Level written on it. Looking over my shoulder, I see she's shaking slightly. It's only then that I realize she's not wearing a winter coat, hell, she's not really dressed for the weather outside at all. Is that a night dress?

“I'm fine, Mercy,” she replies quickly. Something feels off about her.

“Miss Caroline, is your pack okay? Are you visiting one of your mates? I didn't know any of them were sick,” I ask, trying to keep her talking. At her age, she should retire, and I know eventually she will, but she was determined to help with my transition, especially after the fire. For all I know, Miss Caroline is a patient and she's wandering around the hospital confused.

“Oh no, I'm here to visit Faith. It's such a shame what happened to her. I have to say I was worried sick, I am just

glad she was found. You know, you girls are like family to me. Especially you, Mercy,” her reply has me freezing in place. My mind races because there is no way she could— Wait.

“Miss Caroline, how do you know Faith—” My words are cut off by a sharp sting to my arm, followed by the sound of a sob. I turn around fully, ready to interrogate her, and see tears on her face. I step forward and she steps back, then she moves around me as the elevator begins to spin. It jolts to a stop abruptly, pitching me to the back wall. A wave of nausea hits me. I throw my hand out to grab the guard rail but miss it. I hit the wall and slide down, my legs no longer want to work.

“Miss Caroline... How? What did you do to me? Why?” I ask as my vision begins to blur.

“I’m—I’m so sorry, Mercy,” Miss Caroline stammers, her eyes wide, looking almost crazed. “They came to my house, took my mates and me,” she says in a panic. I try to blink, to focus, but I am failing. “He said they would kill them if I didn’t find a way to get you to them. He sent me here. I had no way of knowing you would be here. I—I panicked. How was I supposed to get to you? I told them it was impossible, but they gave me no choice. You being here. Oh God, it was by chance that I stumbled across you. I’m so, so sorry, Mercy.” She turns to push a button and the elevator comes to life. I can just make out that we are moving down again.

“Miss Caroline, ple—ase,” I whisper, my words slurring. I don’t know why I am begging, whatever she gave me is working fast, my fate, whatever it is, is sealed.

“I would never hurt you, Mercy. You know that, right? I had no choice. Oh God, I had no choice.” She sucks in a deep breath. Her entire body is trembling from what I can only assume is fear. She lifts a phone to her ear. I didn’t even see her reach for it as I try to widen my eyes to help me listen. No, wait, that’s not right.

“I—I have her. We are coming down now,” she says, voice shaking nervously as she listens to whoever is talking to her on the other end.

“You promised me. I did what—what you asked. Just set them free.” She cries, and all I can do is feel sorry for her. They used her and her family to get to me. Here’s another person’s life in jeopardy because of me. When is this going to end? It ends when I’m dead, Mercy Smooth.

“It’s okay, Miss Caroline.” I wave my hand at her in an attempt to reassure her. Why? Because drugs do terrible things to your brain. “It’s going to be o—kay. We will get through this to—gether.” I slur once more as the elevator doors open.

“Well, fuck me. The old bitch did it.” I don’t see him, but I hear him. The voice that has haunted my dreams for months. Derrick. I can’t cry out for help, no one’s going to help me this time. I can’t even help myself. I try to fight the effects of the drugs, but it’s useless. My eyes close as I’m yanked off the elevator floor to the sound of Miss Caroline’s sobs. I’m sure they will be added to my nightmares.

LOX

There are times like this when I wish to truly embrace the possessive Alpha-hole nature that I push down inside of me. Mouse's safety is more important to me than her feelings, and I should have done what I planned to do months ago. There are instances where I would rather her hate me for my actions. I love her, and eventually she would forgive me, but if she didn't, then I could live with that. I would knot my way back into her heart if I had to. If this situation wasn't life or death, then I would take her home, bend her over my knee, and take it out on her nice, plump ass. Fuck. This can't keep happening. I should have implanted the tracker under her skin like I intended. When we get her back, I'm not giving her a choice. I'll be damned if someone takes her from us again. If she wants a crazy stalker-type mate like the ones she reads about on her e-reader, then she's just created one.

"We need to get to the hospital's main security room, check their system, and do a more thorough check with their cameras," one of Dez's security team members says quickly as we all pile out of the elevator onto the ground floor.

"What's your name?" Nate asks the guy as we run behind him. Ever the sensible one, yes, we might need to learn names considering we are going to be relying on them to help us out. It's a nice thing to do, and I am all out of nice at the moment.

"Quincy. I'm Dez's team leader. Don't worry, we will find Miss Smooth," he says confidently. Pointing to another guy to his right, who I hadn't really paid attention to, I hadn't even realized he was clutching his laptop like it was his lifeline until now. "This is Malcolm, Mac for short, he will be doing the heavy lifting once we get into the system." Mac nods at us all in greeting but his steps are steady and controlled as his fingers drum rhythmically against the laptop.

"How could someone reach her so fast? We were right fucking behind her," Trey asks in frustration as we make our

way down the main hospital corridor. Patients are being wheeled around for treatment, some in walkers attached to drips, and some in beds as we pass. We are given a wide berth as people stare at us apprehensively. I am sure the manic look I am sporting did the trick.

We all turn a corner like men on a mission, and a woman shrieks in horror as she sets her widening eyes on the security team in full tactical gear. I'm sure the sight of big, six feet plus men in black, with guns and knives strapped to them, will scare the shit out of anyone inside a hospital. She holds her chest as she slumps against the wall trying to catch her breath. None of us stop, but I hope we didn't just give the woman a heart attack.

“Well, I am sure we are about to get some answers,” Knight says, answering Trey's question from earlier. “But can we all tone down the menacing expressions on our faces? This is a hospital, and I don't want to be responsible for scaring someone to death.”

I grunt in response as we reach the main door to the security room. Quincy knocks on the door, and we wait impatiently for someone to answer.

“Greg, I told you we don't...” The security guard stops whatever he was going to say as he glances at the army at the door. I can see him visibly swallow as his mouth opens and closes in shock. Geez, he is supposed to be a security guard. Why the hell does he look like a frightened deer caught in headlights?

Knight clears his throat, then leans forward to read the man's name tag. “Sam, we have a situation, and we need access to your security cameras. Our mate is missing, and we need to see if it's possible she's still in the hospital.” The man nods but doesn't move, so Knight continues, keeping his voice calm. How the hell he is managing to be polite is beyond my comprehension. I would rather have knocked the man out and stepped over his unconscious body to get what we need, but this works too. “Time is crucial, Sam. So, can we come in?” Sam nods his head and moves out of the way to make room for all of us.

Mac sits down at the desk; candy wrappers and empty coffee cups litter the counter, making him scrunch his nose in disgust. Sam sees the look and nervously scrambles to remove the trash so that Mac can get to work. Mac grabs the office chair closest to the multiple monitors in front of us. Each screen gives us a glimpse of the different corridors and treatment rooms throughout the hospital. We all crowd around the chair Mac's sitting on as Quincy leans forward and points to a screen in the right-hand corner for us to focus on. It's the reception desk in the ER.

"Start at the ER entrance and go from there. You guys arrived about thirty minutes ago, so let's rewind from there," Quincy states. All we can do is wait. The tapping of fingers typing away with speed and precision is the only sound in the room.

"There she is!" Nate shouts in surprise as Mac stops the rewind and lets the footage playback. Sure enough, there's my little mouse speaking to the receptionist. There's no sound but I am sure she is asking for Faith's locations. She turns a few seconds later, as if she is waiting for us, but then she waves to the nurse and walks down the hallway to where I know the elevators are. Damn it, mouse, if you had waited just a few minutes.

"Bring up the feed near the elevators. The ones leading up to the VIP wing." Quincy quickly barks out the next task and the monitors change as we watch him rewind until we see Mercy approach the elevators. She's waiting patiently, still looking out for us when a woman rushes toward her.

"Wait, wait. Is that Miss Caroline?" Knight asks, pointing to the screen as his eyes narrow at the screen in confusion.

"Why would Miss Caroline be here this early? Is she sick?" I ponder out loud not expecting an answer.

"She looks a mess. Are you guys seeing what I am seeing? She's not even wearing a coat?" Trey says with suspicion, making me look closer. Miss Caroline's appearance is nothing short of impeccable every time I've seen her, but looking at

her disheveled hair pulled up in a loose bun, in what looks like —

“Is she in pajamas?” I ask incredulously as I look at my brothers, my mouth falls open in horror.

“Let’s watch and see what happens,” Knight says as he turns our attention back to the screen. I see their mouths moving and wish these cameras had sound so we could hear their exchange. The elevator doors open, Mercy walks in, and Miss Caroline follows in haste. Then, we lose visual on them.

“Elevator cameras, Mac, stay with them,” Quincy commands harshly, but Mac doesn’t react, he immediately gets to work bringing up the camera in the elevator.

“I got eyes,” Mac confirms as he adjusts the camera, zooming in on Mercy with her back to Miss Caroline, who is looking more and more anxious by the second.

I growl in frustration as I shift from foot to foot. “I hate that we can’t hear a damn thing.”

“Unfortunately, I can’t get you audio. Most buildings don’t have that type of surveillance. It would make our lives ten times easier if they did,” Mac says matter-of-factly as he continues to click away at the keyboard.

“Wait, what is Miss Caroline doing?” Nate’s panicked question brings me back to the monitor screen. I see Mercy is talking to her, but Miss Caroline slowly pulls something out of her purse, her hand is shaking as we watch in what feels like it’s in slow motion when she plunges a needle into Mercy’s arm.

“What the fuck!” I shout, my heart begins to beat wildly in my chest at the sight of Mercy stumbling toward Miss Caroline only for the older lady to evade her. We all watch in stunned silence as the elevator stops abruptly. Mercy hits the back wall and slides to the floor like a rag doll. It’s clear that whatever was in that needle was meant to incapacitate her.

“Why? Why would Miss Caroline do this? She’s been supporting Mercy and Freeya for months now. This is not the

woman we grew up with. Something is wrong!” Knight begins to pace in the tiny room we are in.

“Does she support Mercy’s father, Christopher? Could he have gotten to her somehow?” Quincy muses out loud but none of us reply. My eyes are on my mate as her body slumped further to the floor. It is clear Miss Caroline is in distress, her hands are flailing wildly as tears run down her face. Knight may be right, but I can’t find it in my heart to care about her after watching this.

The elevator begins to move again. Miss Caroline pulls a phone from her pocket and begins to talk into it. She is sobbing, but all I want to know is who she is talking to.

“Where are they going?” Quincy asks, his eyes searching until he finds Sam, the security guard, holding up the back wall behind us. “Sam, where would you exit if you didn’t want someone to see you. Is there any access—”

“The maintenance level, sir,” Sam says nervously as he walks forward. “This elevator goes down to the maintenance level. It’s used mostly by janitors and morticians. There’s an exit that takes you out near the incinerators and trash disposal,” he replies a little more confidently now.

“Mac!” Quincy shouts.

“Yep!” Mac replies, pulling up the cameras on the maintenance level just as the elevator doors open.

There’s an audible gasp as we take in the scene in front of us. Quincy curses under his breath and pulls out his phone, typing furiously. “Dez is going to lose his shit. How did they manage to arrive without our notice? I need to call our team back. They are still out there looking for these assholes,” he says frantically.

We watch in horror as Derrick, Chasson, and Mal wait by the elevator, then my gaze shifts as Derrick walks toward a semi-conscious Mercy in the elevator. Chasson yanks Miss Caroline out of there and hits her over the head with the butt of his gun. Mercy is clearly trying to fight to stay awake, but the drugs are doing their work. The room erupts into growls of

rage as Mercy passes out and Derrick puts his hands on our mate, lifting her up and tossing her over his shoulder.

“Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!” Trey shouts in panic as he snatches his glasses off his face.

“Is there a camera out back?” Knight asks with the same level of panic. My eyes don’t leave the screen as Mercy’s unconscious body swings back and forth. Chasson practically drags Miss Caroline along the floor like she’s a dog on a leash. All I see is red, and their blood will be on my hands.

“Here,” Mac says to get our attention. A black van sits outside of the exit doors, the front view blocked by a massive trash disposal, but we can see the back door easily enough. We watch helplessly as Mal opens the back doors and Miss Caroline and Mercy are tossed inside. They all rush to jump into the van and seconds later they are speeding away with my life, my future, my everything.

“I can tap into traffic cameras but it’s going to take me a minute. Is there a way you can track her?” Mac turns in the swivel chair, waiting patiently, as all four of us pull ourselves together. This is not the time to fall apart, we have our mate to save.

“Her phone!” Nate snaps. “She should have it on her. I doubt those idiots patted her down.”

“Okay, I can work with that. Give me her number,” he says, gesturing for Nate to move in next to him, and both of them get to work.

“I’m calling Alister. Dez is not available, I don’t want to trouble him with this. Plus, we need the local police. Who knows what we are about to walk into,” Knight says, seeming to have regained his composure. He puts his phone on speaker.

Alister picks up, but there’s screams of pain in the background. “Knight. Shit, I hope everything is okay, because whatever it is, I’m a little busy having a kid,” he says frantically down the line.

“You’re not having the kid! I’m having the kid! You all are standing around doing fuck all!” Grace’s voice booms, then

she groans in pain. Holy shit. The baby is coming.

“Alister, look, Mercy has been abducted from the hospital. It’s complicated, and too long of an explanation, considering your current situation. I am calling because we need police support,” Knight says quickly as we all continue to hear Mercy’s sister scream through the speaker.

“Everything is happening today. I want to know more, but now is not the time. I am going to call my partner who is up to date with what’s going on with Mercy. I will give him a call and he can meet you with a team of police. It looks like we are all here. If I can, I will try to come and find you when he arrives. Okay, let me make some calls. I need to go,” Alister says as Grace screams his name as the call cuts off.

“Okay,” Knight and I both say as we turn our attention to Quincy, who was listening in on the call.

“We are tracking her location now,” Quincy says.

“So as soon as we get a lock on her location, we are going for her. We don’t know what kind of danger she’s in.” Knight states, leaving no room for any argument.

“Look, I know you want to go in there with your guns blazing, but we have to do this right. If we rush in or make ourselves known too soon, we could end up getting her killed. Let’s wait for Alister’s partner, liaise with his team, and then we go and get your mate back,” Quincy replies, his hands raised in surrender as he tries to reason with Knight and me.

“Damn it,” I mutter under my breath. Who knows where they are taking her? What might they do to her? I can’t just sit here and do nothing, but Quincy is right, we can’t just rush in without a plan.

“Found her!” Mac shouts as Nate whoops in excitement.

“Where?” Quincy asks.

“Guiding Light Baptist Church” Mac says, slowly reading the name.

The room goes quiet at the sound of the name. Quincy looks puzzled as he glances at our unreadable faces. “Do you

know that church?”

“Yeah, it belongs to Mercy’s father, Christopher.”

TWENTY

MERCY



My head pounds with the blinding intensity of a migraine. My limbs are weighed down with what feels like cement blocks as I lay on my side unable to move. The pain radiating from my side is my only clue to how rough my captors have been. I am not sure if anything is broken or not. I can only hope the extent of my injuries consist of nasty bruises. I don't think I could go through the pain of broken ribs again.

The sound of muffled cries next to me fills the air as my brain slowly takes stock of my body and surroundings. The smell of incense, candle wax, and the paper from what I can only assume is hymnals and bibles hits my nose. Instantly I'm on high alert. I have inhaled those scents my entire life and would know them anywhere.

I am laying on the floor of my father's church, and from the smell, we are in the sanctuary, possibly tossed between the pews. My arms aren't bound, and neither are my legs, but whatever they've given me keeps me immobile. All I can do is lie here and wait.

The sound of a door swinging closed followed by the sound of several heavy footsteps has me going limp. Maybe if I can pretend to still be knocked out, it will give my guys time to find me. I can feel their anxiety, fear, and urgency, so I know it's only a matter of time before they arrive. The devastation I feel through our bond makes my throat burn as I fight the need to cry. I know they will only blame themselves for this. Like before though, this is on me.

Mercy, Mercy, didn't you learn your lesson? I feel a sense of déjà vu as I tell myself I should have waited. But I was in the hospital, which was full of security, I should have been safe. Nobody would suspect the little old lady following me into the elevator. I know it's not my fault exactly, but I can't go through my life with my Alphas glued to my hips. Well, Lox may beg to differ, especially after my second brush with death and danger in less than three months. I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't secretly inject me with a tracker. God, if he did, I will be more grateful than angry. We will have a talk about boundaries, of course. But with my growing list of enemies and bad guys popping up like targets at a shooting range, maybe a tracker would be beneficial. Hmm ...maybe I need to learn to shoot as well. I make a mental note to beg Freeya to get Dez on board with her learning too. I think we both need to up our self-defense game.

"How much ketamine did you give her, you imbecile?" The sound of Christopher's voice makes chills run down my spine, and I'm immediately pissed. I'm so angry at him for everything he's done to me, to Faith. I want to get up from here and beat the shit out of him. My father, the man who used to bandage my knees and carry us on his back through the woods. He should be saving me, not trying to kill me or go through with whatever bad intentions he has in store for me.

"Enough to put down a fucking elephant, that's how much," Derrick sneers, then chuckles from somewhere in the room.

"You fool, if you harmed her before I can get what I need, I will kill you myself! Do you know how many things have gone wrong these past few weeks? I can't leave anything to chance. This should have all been over by now. If Stefan had come through with those schematics. But no, he's M.I.A., possibly dead in a ditch somewhere. I underestimated Knight and Lox, formidable, but not enough to save her in the end." Christopher snarls in outrage. I try to keep my breathing steady so no one notices I am listening.

"Do you see this scar she left on Chasson's face? I'm not taking any chances with this feral bitch. She needs correction.

Knight and his pack have no clue how to tame an Omega like her.” Derrick’s words only fuel my hatred for him, Chasson, and Mal.

Who the hell does he think he is? I need to be corrected, tamed! Fuck you, Derrick! Is that what they did to my sister, corrected her, tamed her? No, you fuckers broke her to the point she wanted to die.

“Maybe when you get what you need you can give her to us. Faith was defective. She tried—”

“I will not have you talk about my daughter in such a way!” Christopher shouts. Like he actually gives a damn. If he feels so passionately about the horrendous things they are saying about her, then why did he give her to them? He has no idea of the damage he has caused.

“Look, we didn’t expect her to harm herself in that way. She can usually take a hit and keep on ticking. I think she finally reached her limit. By the time we found her, she was too far gone to save,” Mal says so nonchalantly that I want to rip him to pieces.

“Enough!” Christopher roars. “I don’t want to know. I stand to lose too much, sacrificed so much for the greater good. My mate, my pack, have all but abandoned me, and now my daughter is lost to me,” he states. I guess hearing about your daughter attempting suicide, which is a big sin in his eyes, is just too unbearable for him to hear. He knows she’s alive, it’s why he sent Miss Caroline to the hospital. But there is no way in hell Derrick and his packmates will set eyes on her again.

Wait, did he just say his mate and pack? I didn’t get a chance to see my parents, but if this is true, then is it possible they know what he’s done? I know my mother and Edward have been keeping their distance and Christopher hasn’t been home since the day she made him leave the hospital. Maybe he knows he’s lost them both.

“Look, just make yourselves useful. Get them up. You’d better hope she is okay. She is worth more alive than dead, you fool,” Christopher says, as if I’m some priceless object and not

a human being. I feel a harsh hand wrap around my ankle and suddenly I am being yanked forward and tossed onto a pew. My body immediately slumps to the side. I may be awake, but I don't know if I can sit up yet.

A wave of nausea hits me suddenly and I have no choice but to visibly retch, my mouth opens with an audible gag and the men in the room go quiet. Tears sting my eyes and my stomach contracts again, bile and saliva pool in my mouth, making me drool. I would be embarrassed, but I really don't give a shit what any of them thinks.

“Oh good, you're awake,” Christopher beams at me, looking like a psychotic maniac. “Mercy, you have caused me a lot of pain and suffering, Daughter. Too much. I always knew you would be a problem. If you had never come back... well, you wouldn't be sitting here, but you know your dad always spoiled you, even in death. Ben always believed you would return, you know. He and Edward were always hopeful. I am glad you ran, it put me one step closer to my goal. Power. Control. If you had gone through with the mating ceremony, he would have eventually handed you the keys. You didn't deserve that.” He shrugs as Derrick lifts my body into a sitting position and holds me there.

“Fu—ck you,” I spit out along with some more drool that's making its way down my chin. Disgusting.

“So willful,” Derrick says as he grips my hair tight and forces my head to look in Christopher's direction.

Christopher claps his hands as no one in the room is paying any attention to him. “Now. Your transport will be here soon so let me get to the point of all this,” he says as the sound of Miss Caroline's sobs interrupts him.

“Ple—ase, Christopher you promised. I did what you asked. Why am I still here?” I can hear regret in her voice as she looks over at me. I can barely see her out of my periphery. She has blood stains down the side of her face, her clothes are torn, and my heart aches at the sight. She didn't ask for this.

“Oh, but, Caroline, I'm afraid I can't let you go. Your mates understood that when I put a bullet in their heads. I

thought you would understand it as well. I can't have any witnesses, you know," Christopher says so compassionately, it's borderline psycho. I look at this man, he is a stranger to me. How did my mother, sisters, and myself ever love him?

Miss Caroline screams, her voice rising higher and higher at Christopher's confession. Tears run down my cheeks as I watch her fall apart mourning the death of her mates. "You son of a bitch! She didn't deserve any of this! How could you be so cruel? What the fuck is wrong with you?" I shout, surprising myself at the strength in my voice, in fact, I feel as if I can finally sit up on my own. I yank myself out of Derrick's hold as another wave of nausea hits me as heat washes over me in an intense wave. Oh no. Please, God, no.

"I did what you said. I got her to you. I did what you said!" Miss Caroline pleads, grief-stricken as she rocks back and forth in her seat. She looks over to me, her teary eyes meeting mine. "I didn't mean you any harm, Mercy, I would never hurt you, I would—"

The sound of a gun going off startles me, my body jerking in fright. My heart pounds as I watch blood and tissue spill from a hole in the middle of Miss Caroline's head. Her body drops, folding in on herself like a puppet whose strings had been cut by the puppeteer controlling her in the seat, as screams, my screams, fill the air.

He shot her.

He shot her right in front of me. My body begins to shake uncontrollably at the sight of her lifeless body.

"She is a loose end. I can't have her telling anyone what happened here today. Shhh...Mercy, shhh ..." Christopher says calmly. "Now, what I need you to do is sign over Smooth Bourbon. This is not a negotiation, but a demand. Just your signature and you get to leave here unharmed."

"Hell no!" I shout. "You're fucking mental. I will never sign anything over to you, so if you're going to kill me, then do it. If I die, the company goes to my mates, and there's no way you will get your greedy, dirty, motherfucking hands on it," I say as my anger rises.

Am I afraid? Fuck yes. Do I want to die? Hell no. Am I going to need another ten years of therapy on top of all my other trauma? Absolutely. But I will not let this motherfucker win. Yep, profanities are all I can muster as adrenaline floods my limbs. The need to do something, anything, to put some distance between myself and them, is strong. I know I can't fight four Alphas, but if I can just get to my feet.

"Oh, Mercy, you talk a big game," Christopher says as Derrick grips my shoulder tight, pinning me to my seat. I don't react to the pain. I'm too busy trying to find a way out of this. Mal and Chasson grab Miss Caroline's body and I watch in relief as they leave the room with her corpse. Okay, two Alphas out of the way, the odds are suddenly in my favor. "I won't harm you, Daughter. Like I said before, you are worth more alive than dead. You're being sold. There are a lot of buyers eager to get their hands on the infamous Omega who believes she can be an Alpha." He spreads his arms widely, like he's doing me a kindness as he offers me a satisfied smile, his eyes filled with a manic sort of glee. I struggle in Derrick's hold again, but his grip only tightens as Christopher turns and reaches for a stack of papers.

"Now, we are running out of time. Your chariot awaits, you have a plane to catch, then you never have to see me again. You will vanish, poof, and I will tell the world that you ran. You know all about running, don't you, Mercy? Your Alphas will find a new Omega. They are used to rejection. They will get over it, again. Now, sign." He holds out the papers and pen expectantly. I eye the pen, look up at Christopher, and smile slowly.

I grab the paper between my fingers and his eyes light up with delight. He thinks I am going to give him what he wants. "You're right, I am good at running," I say in mock sadness, letting him see that everything he just said has cut me deeply. And the Academy award goes to... I know I won't get but one chance, and with the drugs still in my system, I don't know how far I will get before they catch me, but I have to try. I have to try. I press the pen to the paper and hang my head in defeat. Everything happens in a burst of speed, well, as much speed as I can summon. I strike out, jabbing the pen upward

and behind me. The sickening squelching sound makes my stomach roll with nausea. Derrick roars, releasing an ear-piercing scream. He releases his hold on me to cover his injured eye. Another gunshot goes off, making me flinch, but I don't give myself time to wonder who could be coming through the door as I make myself move. Christopher bellows in outrage behind me as I spring to my feet and take off down the aisle toward the front of the church. I hear pounding feet behind me, but I don't look back. I do what I do best. I run.

TREY

“Target has been spotted. I have visual inside the church,” the voice of one of Dez’s security personnel says quietly in the earpiece I’m wearing.

We are all hidden in the shadows amongst the trees surrounding the church. The sun is beginning to set, and I am just happy that we’re finally here. My songbird is inside, so close, yet too damn far away. It took hours for Alister’s partner to arrive at the hospital with a team of police officers. It took even longer for them to come up with a plan that wouldn’t lead to Mercy getting hurt in the process.

“There are procedures put in place for a reason,” Brad, Alister’s partner kept reminding us every time one of us snapped in frustration at the delay with their incessant need to plan.

“Roger, that, Mark,” Quincy’s voice breaks through the silence.

The four of us know these woods like the back of our hands so we were allowed to take point as we made our way through the trees from a side access road. Police surround the perimeter so no one can get away. Derrick, Mal, and Chasson evaded Dez’s team once, Quincy is not about to let it happen a second time. For what they did to Mercy, and to their own mate, they deserve to rot in jail.

I scan the trees, noting my brothers’ locations and I realize that I am closest to the front door. It would be so easy to reach the steps and make my way inside, but I know that’s not the plan. I am not usually the one to go charging headfirst into danger, but my love for Mercy has made me see an entirely different side to myself. I am practically bouncing with nervous energy. I can feel Mercy’s panic, and it only makes me want to get to her. I know I am not the only one. Lox is gripping the tree so hard, I’m afraid for the bark. Knight is behind me at an angle, his eyes fixed forward as he watches

the front of the church. I turn and see Nate is not far behind, he is crouched low to the ground, as if he's ready for a gun to go off, signaling the start of a race.

"We have eyes on the van, Brad. You might want to call the coroner, we have a visual on two males and a female body," one of the police officers whispers, his voice strained. "I will continue my recon around the back of the church," he continues before it goes quiet again.

"Coroner's enroute, but they will hang back until we are done," Brad states matter-of-factly. My thoughts turn to Mercy. Who knows what Christopher is doing inside, what any of them are doing? I'm even worried for Miss Caroline. It was clear earlier that she had been threatened. Who did those bodies belong to? Miss Caroline is a Beta. Her pack consists of two Alphas and their Omega Betty. I hope, oh God, I hope it's not them, I wonder as the sound of a gun goes off inside.

"Gun shot! From the inside! I heard someone scream!" One of the security guys shouts as things suddenly become a blur of motion. Police and security personnel scatter in different directions, urgent whispers and fingers pointing to give the signal to go inside the church.

"Everyone move slowly toward the church. I repeat, slowly, do not rush it. We do not want to harm our targets. Keep your wits about you," Quincy says in quick succession as we all begin to move. Keeping low, I inch toward the front, watching my steps as we walk across the parking lot.

It only takes a few minutes for someone else to speak through the earpiece. "We have movement coming out of the back exit. Two perps carrying a body." Then he shouts, "Freeze!" All hell breaks loose as another gun goes off. Some police officers and security personnel break away from our group, their guns at the ready as they make their way to the back of the church.

"What the fuck is happening?" I look over and shout to Knight as a blood curdling scream can be heard from inside. We look at one another, then we are sprinting. Lox, Nate, Quincy, and Brad all catch up to me as we make it to the

bottom of the steps. I can hear the sound of something crashing to the floor just beyond the doors followed by the slow curling of smoke underneath the door.

“Fire!” Someone calls behind us but I don’t listen. I’m running, no longer caring what happens to me. Mercy will not be trapped in a burning building again. Especially not this place.

“Trey, wait! You have no way of knowing what is beyond that door, we need to wait!” Brad shouts as I reach out for the door handle, only for it to fly open right in front of me. I stumble back but manage to stay on my feet as smoke pours out into the evening. Someone coughs as they collide against my chest with a force strong enough to send us both to the ground. My arms wrap around her easily, I don’t need to see her to know it is my songbird.

Mercy coughs. “Trey! Oh God, Trey. It’s you. I knew you would come.” She coughs again but smiles up at me as I crush her to my chest.

“We will always come for you, songbird,” I say as I rock her gently in my arms, leaning in, I note how hot she is. I kiss her forehead once again to confirm it. She’s burning up. I climb to my feet, holding her against me. Her eyes glaze over and roll back into her head as she goes limp in my arms.

“Mercy! Mercy!” I shout in alarm, fear and panic make me shake her body, but she doesn’t wake, her head lolls to the side. Turning, I call out for help, dashing down the stairs carefully, as my brothers crowd around me. Knight takes her from me, and I let him as we run down the drive to the sound of an ambulance in the distance.

I don’t know what else is wrong with my songbird, but one thing is for sure, she’s going into heat.

TWENTY-ONE

NATE



“Nate,” Mercy whimpers, her body writhing in pain as I hold her in my arms in the back seat of the SUV.

Once we got her to the ambulance she began to wake, and the shift in her scent even had the Beta paramedics on edge. The stress of the day, and the events of the past two months, triggered her heat. Heath warned us. It’s why I worked tirelessly to get her nest finished. I had plans to surprise her for Christmas, but we had decided to plan for the eventuality. We knew it could come unexpectedly. But tonight, of all nights. We didn’t even get to talk to Quincy or Brad as the paramedics cleared her, stating she would still feel the effects of the ketamine she had been shot with earlier. We ran through the trees, Lox carrying Mercy close to his chest, as we all jumped into our car and sped off home.

“I know, Merce. We are going to take care of you, baby.” I brush her hair back from her flushed and fevered face and run my nose along her hair. “We got you, just hold on,” I reassure her, keeping my grip tight around her body as Trey rubs her legs that are laying on his lap.

“Ple—ase Nate, it hurts. I need you...I need you all,” Mercy murmurs. Her breathing is rapid, her eyes are dilated, and her scent...is absolutely mouthwatering. I shift in my seat, my cock hard as I try to take shallow breaths to maintain my own control. I look over at Trey, and his eyes are closed as he too tries to keep it together. Mercy, especially now, is in a fragile state, mentally and physically.

“They couldn’t contain the fire, the church is burning to the ground,” Knight says as he types away responding to a flurry of messages. The phone chimes yet again and he curses under his breath.

“What?” Lox asks as he makes a wide turn onto the access road leading towards our home.

“They arrested Chasson and Mal, but Derrick and Christopher never made it out of the building. The fire must have gotten out of control as they tried to catch Mercy. They will confirm if their bodies are in there once they get the fire under control,” he says as he reads the message out loud to us. “Apparently, the bodies were of Miss Caroline’s pack—”

“What about Miss Caroline?” Trey asks in concern as Mercy moans in my arms, burying her face in my chest.

“Dead. The police officer that apprehended Chasson and Mal said they were carrying her body out from the back of the church,” Knight replies solemnly as Mercy begins to sob. Her keening cries echo throughout the car, her pain, grief, and the weight of what she witnessed is like a punch to the gut. All I can do is hold her tighter, as if I can somehow physically force the pain from her body.

“I couldn’t save her. He...he shot her right in front of me. Miss Caroline...it wasn’t her fault. It wasn’t her fault. He used her to get to me. He... Oh, God... He shot her,” Mercy says between sobs. I rock her gently as she clings to me.

“I’m so sorry, baby. I’m so sorry. You’re alive. You’re safe,” I state, hoping my words will give her comfort. I look at Trey, feeling helpless, not knowing exactly what more I can do or say after something like this.

“Songbird, we will make it right, I promise. Let’s just take care of you first,” he says calmly, soothing her with his touch as he continues to rub up and down her legs rhythmically.

I watch as Lox brings the SUV to a stop in front of our house. Everything becomes a blur as we rush to get Mercy inside.

Mercy gasps in surprise as she lays eyes on her nest. Knight places her on swaying feet and we watch in anticipation as she inspects her first and only nest. If she doesn't like it, then I will start from scratch. But I can only hope that this is enough.

I restructured the attic into an octagon shaped room, building additional walls to create the shape. The room is cozy with enough room for the five of us to fit comfortably. I didn't want Mercy to feel uneasy with a room that was too big and spacious.

Tear drop shaped lights hang from the ceiling, giving the room a soft glow she can control by a dimmer switch in the wall built low enough for her to reach it from the bed. The lights create an illusion of twinkling stars, making it feel as if you're outside under the night sky. There is a refrigerator built into the wall, that can be accessed by the push of a concealed panel, that we have already stocked with fruit, water, and other snacks Mercy loves. We are prepared.

The bed dominates the room, taking on the same octagonal shape, raised slightly on a platform, surrounded by soft downy carpet. Various pillows of different shapes and sizes, in hues of blues, greys, and creams line the floor all around the bed. The bedding itself once belonged to each of us from our individual beds. The blankets overlap the bed in a mis-matched patchwork style that I know she appreciates, as she launches herself into the middle of the bed.

Mercy sighs and takes a deep breath, and moans, twisting, she buries herself within the bedding. "Perfect, Nate," she says as she begins to strip, not caring at all where her clothes land around the room. She keeps her heavy-lidded eyes on each of us the entire time, enticing us with her soft brown skin, full breasts, curvy hips, and thighs, and fuck, her scent. It is already perfuming the room in a heady cocktail of lust and desperate hunger.

"I want...no, I need... Knots...now!" she whines. We lose all sense of self as she invites us into her nest.

I don't remember much after the need to rut took over; all my coherent thoughts pushed aside for more primal urges. My instincts take over, and all I can feel and taste is the sweet nectar of Mercy's peach scent. The writhing of our naked bodies as we relentlessly fulfill her needs over and over again. The sounds of pleasure, moans and groans, the praise, the slapping of flesh, the taste of sweat-soaked skin under my tongue. The feel of my knot locking inside the warmth of her pussy, as I fuck her from behind. The feral growls as my hand seeks to push my cum back inside her, keeping it there where it belongs. Finally, the taste of blood on my tongue as I claim her again, re-marking her, my brothers doing the same as we make good on our promises to do it properly. All the while she begs and pleads for more, as days turn into nights and nights turn into days. In the end, when the fog clears, waking up in a pile of naked limbs, not knowing where I begin or end. I feel the comfort and contentment of my pack, in the middle of it all our Omega, our Alpha, our Mercy.

MERCY

“Merry Christmas,” I say to Faith, my hand wrapped tightly in hers, as I fight back the tears in my eyes at the sight of my battered sister. She is alive, and she will heal eventually. I smile, refusing to think about everything that’s happened the last few days. The fog of my sudden and unexpected heat has cleared, and now I am left to deal with the fallout of my compounded trauma. The best way I can do that is to redirect my thoughts elsewhere instead of letting it swallow me whole, like it did after the fire.

“Technically, Christmas is over, but the actual day is relative, I mean, come on, we all know it’s not Jesus’s birthday.” Freeya’s laugh rings out from my phone, her smile bright. She insisted on a video chat because she wanted to be here in spirit.

My entire family is crowded into Faith’s room in the VIP wing. Grace sits next to me with our brand-new sleeping nephew, who she places in Faith’s arms for her to hold. Alister, James, Kennan, and Shun surround her, beaming with pride at the sight of their new addition. Knight, Nate, Lox, and Trey stand on the opposite side of the room behind my parents, who sit in chairs right next to Faith’s bed.

“I guess you’re right, Free. When we celebrate Christmas is unimportant. What matters is that we are here together,” I say with a smile and joy in my heart. I look around at the people I love and realize that I don’t want these moments to be fleeting. I feel as if I missed out on so much of their lives when I ran, and I don’t want to squander it for another minute. I want to spend holidays, birthdays, and all the celebrations in between with them all.

“I’m just happy that all my daughters are in the same room,” my mother replies, wiping away a stray tear from her eyes. My father Edward wraps his arm around her and holds her close.

After my heat broke, the guys told me what happened after I stumbled out of the front doors of the church. Honestly, when I entered the church foyer, my intention was to knock over the tall votive candles to create a distraction, to do anything to give me an advantage. What I didn't consider was how fast the fire would spread, trapping Christopher and Derrick inside as the church burned down around them.

Do I feel guilty? No. But I am sure that will be something else I need to add to my running list of worries for my therapist. But no one in this room even mentions Christopher's death and I think my mother and Edward will find a way to come to terms with everything he did in their own time. Right now, keeping things light for Faith is what's most important.

"Well, don't worry, Momma, you may as well get used to seeing us all the time," Grace says mischievously, "you'll be seeing me a lot, my wonderful babysitter." She winks, making us all laugh. My mother rolls her eyes playfully, but baby Timothy better get ready for his first piano lesson.

"He's beautiful," Faith says, her bandaged arms hold out Timothy towards me, and I hesitate for just a second before I stand and delicately wrap my arms around him and cradle his tiny body to mine. Sitting, I settle in next to Grace, my eyes shifting to my mates, their eyes searching mine wishfully. Not yet, boys, not yet, I think to myself as I lean in and give my nephew a good sniff and sigh as he lets out the cutest little baby yawn. Ignoring my screaming ovaries, I turn my attention to my sister.

"Open your gift," I say to Faith, gesturing toward the tiny box I placed beside her when I arrived.

"Wait, Mercy. I need to tell you I'm sorry," Faith says, her voice barely a whisper as she picks the box up.

"No. You don't owe me anything, Faith. Nothing that happened, and I mean nothing, was your fault," I say adamantly. She was not responsible for her pack's actions. Chasson and Mal will pay for their crimes as they rot in jail.

"In time, we will sit down together and have a good heart to heart, but for now, let's just take it all one day at a time," I

say reassuringly. My sister has a lot of baggage and a lot of healing to do, and I want to be there for her every step of the way. Hell, we will probably sit side by side on the therapy couch.

Faith nods in understanding as we all watch her open her present. The idea came to me as I thought about what my sister needs right now. What could we give her to help her rebuild her life brick by brick. She removes the ribbon and opens the box. She looks at me, then my mates, her eyebrow raised in question. “A key?” She holds up the key and my mother smiles knowingly, and Grace chuckles. This is not just a gift from me, but from us all.

“For your new home,” Nate states. “We are going to build it for you.”

“On the land beside our house so you will have your space yet still be close to family,” my mother says, her voice wavering with emotion. “You are free, baby. We just want to keep you safe,” she continues.

“You will never be alone,” Grace says, reaching out her hand to Faith and squeezing it tight. My sisters and I had always been close, friends actually, and I was looking forward to making up for lost time, while dragging Freeya along for the ride.

“Never alone,” I repeat, emphasizing Grace’s words. I know it won’t be easy to be around my sisters all the time due to our nature, but damn it, I am determined to get back a semblance of the bond we used to share. I guess only time will tell, but just being in their presence right here, right now, it’s a start.

I look at my family and my mates. I think about all the things that could have gone wrong, how my life could have been different if the cards hadn’t fallen the way they had. I would still be lost, running from who I am, instead of embracing who I was meant to be. I think about how I was only living a half-life until the day I returned to my family and began to breathe again. Will it always be easy? Of course not, this is my life I am speaking of. Will I resist my Omega urges?

Yes, I am sure I will, but I will learn and grow, no longer wanting to fight the changes in myself, but accept them. I have my mates, who love me and remind me every day that I am more than just my designation. I am their Alpha, and for me, that is enough.

“I want to help, you, Mercy,” Faith says, pulling me from my thoughts, my eyes focus on her determined ones. In that moment, I see her light, the fire brimming just below the surface. It is all I need to see. Her Alphas thought they broke her, hell, even I thought they did, but she was still there, just beneath the surface.

“Hell yeah!” Freeya shouts in excitement, making everyone laugh at her antics. She’s been a quiet observer until now.

“Help me—”

“Change the world, sister, change the world,” she says fiercely, as her fist wraps around the key like it’s a lifeline. I guess in a way it is, and it will be for many more Omegas like her in the future.

Because I will make sure of it.

EPILOGUE

MERCY



3 months later

I watch Charlotte Matthews from the podium as she commands the crowd with her passionate speech on Omegas' welfare, rights, and laws. Shoulders back, chin raised in defiance, almost daring someone to stand up and tell her she's wrong.

She's wearing a long navy-blue sequin gown with a heart-shaped neckline. She looks stunning. It is a far cry from the jeans, t-shirt, and combat boots she wears when she's taking her message to the streets. I have gotten to know the activist over the last few months, and she has definitely encouraged me to speak out publicly.

A month ago I made my first television appearance where I sat down with a news reporter to discuss the events surrounding my life a few months ago. Everything from the fire to my kidnapping, to my father Christopher's attempts to sell me to the Omega trade. My life became an open book to the public; but not only me, my entire family. But the shocking news didn't stop there. Alister had discovered evidence that Christopher wasn't acting alone, the biggest surprise was that the corruption led to the mayor of Frankfort as well. I guess he didn't want his city to change either and getting rid of me was the best way to silence my voice.

Strong arms wrap around my waist pulling me back against a hard body, when his lips brush against the nape of my neck, his warm caramel scent hits me and I sigh. Knight. "Baby girl, this dress is getting ripped to shreds as soon as we

get home. You know that, right?” he purrs in my ear, his voice a deep rumble of deliciousness, making me clench my thighs together in need. His fingers dance up my bodice until they brush against my already hard nipple through the satin fabric. I gasp at the contact, needing him to stop, but damn, I want him to continue.

“Knight,” I say breathlessly, wiggling out of his hold. My red, satin floor-length gown has a halter top neckline but the back leaves nothing to the imagination as it plunges to just above my ass. My hair is pinned up in a tidy, yet tousled updo. I will never tame my curls, not completely. My red stilettos give me the height to put my ass to his groin and rub against his hardening length. So yeah, I need to put some distance between us.

“Fine, I’ll stand down for now. Honestly, I came to check to see if you are okay. I know you get nervous when you speak publicly,” he says, turning with a smile, my heart bursts with love for his concern.

His black tuxedo fits him like a glove, his beard and hair neatly trimmed to perfection. Those lips that I love to kiss, all plump, luscious— Think about my speech and not about the fine as hell Alpha in front of me.

“The more I do it, the better I will get.” I wink, turning back toward the stage as I wait for Charlotte to introduce me. With everything that happened over Christmas, it’s safe to say that we were in no condition for a Christmas Gala, so we postponed everything until the spring. With the loss of Miss Caroline, I helped Freeya, along with her newly hired assistant, Kiah, with the planning and I think it all worked out as it should, for the best.

We gave Miss Caroline and her mates a private memorial soon after the New Year. Nate worked so hard before Christmas that we were able to open Smooth Bourbon’s distillery earlier than expected. The board is happy we are back to producing at full capacity, profits are up, and I have a new team of Omega employees. Despite the initial public protests, I wasn’t surprised that so many Omegas applied to work for me.

“Baby girl, I have no doubt you’re going to kill it. You always do. It’s because you speak your truth from your heart. When you do that, people stand up and listen. We will be right here when you finish,” he says, leaning in to kiss the corner of my mouth. Yep, I’ll let him rip this dress right off me, later. They’ll just buy me new ones.

“Where are Nate, Lox, and Trey?” I ask. Things have been so busy since we arrived earlier, I haven’t laid eyes on them yet.

“Oh, you know Freeya has given them all, including her own pack, some last-minute tasks. I think Vic has threatened her several times tonight for being a bossy Beta.” Knight smirks. “But don’t worry. They will be here waiting for you like always,” he says with a wink then steps back against the cream-colored gauzy drapes of the massive marquee the event is being held under.

I decided to hold the Gala right here at Smooth Bourbon in the forest clearing next to the building. Although it is Spring, the air still holds a pleasant chill for an event like this. Red and white decorations, the color of my new foundation, are strategically placed all around the structure. Red and white roses, satin ribbon with huge bows on the back of the chairs, and banners with the foundation’s logo hang from the ceiling. And the central piece is a red heart with a white Omega symbol inside.

“And now, the reason why we are all here tonight. Let me introduce the CEO of Smooth Bourbon, Miss Mercy Smooth.” I catch the end of Charlotte’s speech, pulling me out of my head, and I’m mentally preparing myself for what I’m going to say tonight. I didn’t plan a speech, I never do. I just speak my truth as Knight said, and honestly, it feels right. When she calls my name, I move over to the platform and step up to the podium. I offer her a hug and my quiet thanks before I turn and look out at the sea of round tables filled with supporters, my family, and friends.

I blow out a breath and smile. “Hi. I’m Mercy Smooth, and I want you all to help me make a difference. I started the Have Faith Foundation to help support Omegas in a variety of ways.

Those who have been abused, who seek refuge after being snatched away from their families and trafficked, we will help them. For those who seek the education they were denied, and those, who like me, refuse to accept their designation out of fear, or who also like me, identify as more than an Omega. Everyone here in this room sits next to an Omega, whether female, or on the rarer occasion, male. They are your mothers, fathers, sisters, and brothers, but most importantly, your mates. I won't list all the different relationships, or I'll be up here all night." I smile and pause as the audience chuckles then settles. "I guess what I am trying to say is if you love the Omegas in your life, don't you feel they deserve the same quality of life as everyone else? What it all boils down to is freedom and choice. Not a decision made for them or on their behalf, but their true autonomy. This is the change I am talking about. Because until we do this, there will always be a need for foundations like mine. Activists like Miss Matthews, and victims, so many victims. We are a room of like-minded people from all walks of life, business executives, public figures, politicians, and general everyday beings, lending our support to those who want to change the status quo. To shake things up. Even though we are still a minority, our voices and stories are beginning to be heard. It's a step in the right direction, but it is an uphill battle we all face. So, in the end, I leave you with this. Change doesn't happen overnight. It's a slow burn, sneaking up on those unaware, until it's all-consuming and all they see. Let it be all they see. Thank you." I step back and nod, then step back to the mic. "Enjoy the rest of your night." I nod my thanks feeling overwhelmed by the standing ovation.

I stare out into the crowd and see my mother and father, my sister Grace and her mates. My eyes land on Faith, who claps with tears in her eyes. Lox's brother Heath is even here with his pack. I search the crowd for Freeya but only spot her pack members as they stand clapping from their table. Knowing her she's probably organizing something last minute with the caterers. She's worked tirelessly to pull this night off and I owe her a lot.

Stepping down from the platform, I am met with four gorgeous, bright smiles. They stand shoulder to shoulder clapping with the rest of the crowd. Lox wolf whistles, his eyes shine with pride.

“Beautiful as always, songbird.” Trey says as he opens his arms wide for me. I close the distance between us and let his hot chocolate and marshmallow scent soothe my excited nerves. He wraps his arms around me and holds me tight. Nate presses at my back, and soon I am sandwiched in by all four of them.

“We are proud of you, Alpha,” Knight says, as the applause dies down, and the world begins to fade as I get lost in the presence of the men I love. The men who I ran from, yet they never stopped loving me in return. They believed in me even when I didn’t believe in myself. They gave me their hearts and I gave them mine in return. I’m lucky to have them walk into the future by my side. A future where no matter what comes our way, we will face it together as equals, as a pack.

THE END

WONDERING WHERE FREEYA WAS AT THE END OF THE STORY?

Click here and sign up for my newsletter to receive the Bonus
Epilogue:

<https://bookhip.com/DFACCGT>

You don't want to miss it.

DID YOU ENJOY GOING DOWN SMOOTH PART TWO?

Please Consider leaving a review on Amazon and Goodreads.
If you want to shout it from the rooftops, then please go right
ahead. Reviews help authors get more recognition and
promotion.

To be honest, I am eager to know what you think.



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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Ya'll alright? Did you check out the bonus epilogue? If you did, I've already started on Freeya's book, so put down those stones and pitchforks please. I am working on several WIPs at the moment, so it's coming, I promise.

I hope you enjoyed the ending of Mercy's story though. She and the guys will have a bit of a cameo in Freeya's book, so you will get a few more glimpses into their lives after the events of this book. Well, if you read Freeya's bonus epilogue it's about to be all hands-on deck. So, I hope you are ready.

The second half of Mercy's book was a challenge for me. My muses were all over the place. So much happened to me this summer, I felt like it took me a lifetime to complete it. I took a break between finishing HellNight Academy and starting this book. Writer's fatigue was weighing me down and my husband took my laptop prisoner. Just when I felt ready to start again, I lost one of the most important people in my life and my world came to a screeching halt. My grandmother meant the world to me, and I will miss her dearly. I stopped writing for a few days because the words weren't coming, and I couldn't keep it together long enough to write a sentence. I knew I had to say goodbye first before I could focus on Mercy's story once more. It was as if I could hear my grandmother speaking to me and telling me to pull it together, finish what you started. So, I did. Grief is a hard pill to swallow, with lasting effects that linger on without an end. But I am taking it one day at a time. You have to know, when I finished this book I felt as if a weight was lifted, and I could finally breathe. Yep, I did another happy dance!

I wouldn't have made it without the love and support of my number one: My husband. Thank you for the love, the hugs and kisses, most importantly, the bravery to tell me when to close the laptop and sleep.

I want to thank my biggest fans: My mother and sisters for all their support and love. For being my sounding boards and keeping me on track. Yeah...Yeah...it's possible because I make it possible. (See how I did that.)

To my kickass team of Editors: Lin and Toni. You make it all come together. You make it make sense. Where would I be without you? I don't ever want to find out. I'm staking my claim!! (OK, did I go too far?) Thank you so much for hanging in there with me through my 50/11 books.

To my Beta Team: Erin and Stacie, those eagle eyes are always watching, catching the little things and helping to polish my pages. I am truly grateful.

To my PA: Laura Martinez, thank you for your support. You are always there to remind me to do things when my brain is not quite working the way it should.

To my ARC team/Instabloggers/Booktokers: Thank you for reviewing and showing my books love! Thank you for sharing my work to the world. I appreciate every bit of content!

Big thank you to my author buddies: YD La Mar, Jade Royal, and Lawrence Hall, my ride or dies!! You all keep me laughing and keep me motivated! Hustle hard people!!

To May Nicole: You are a plethora of knowledge, and I am so grateful for your words of encouragement and support through this crazy indie author life. You are a star!

Finally, to my Readers: Phew ya'll, I am going to cry! Book number seventeen!! I owe it all to you! Thank you for loving my stories. Thank you for joining me on another adventure. Your support means the world to me. Thank you for spreading your love for my books. You all make my world go around!!

Until the next tale.

Dreia Wells

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Undreia Capewell (**Dreia Wells, D. Sparks**) was born and raised in Houston, Texas, but lives with her husband and son in England. When she's not writing, she is reading everything under the sun. Her love of books inspired her to follow her dreams, and here we are. Undreia desires to explore different genres, mainly Paranormal Romance/Urban Fantasy, but as D. Sparks she will write Contemporary and Dark Romance. She has so much more she wants to share and lots of stories floating around in her head. So, follow her down the rabbit hole, who knows where it all may lead?

Check me out on social media ... go ahead, stalk away.

Join my Facebook readers group! [Dreia Wells and All her Crazy](#).

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