



Out  
of  
Options

JILLIAN WEST

# Out of Options

**Jillian West**

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## Author's Note

Charlie's story for the most part is a light & fluffy romance. Once she meets her pack her men treat her very well, but there are a few things from her past that may cause some discomfort.

This book includes mentions of previous verbal & emotional ab\*se and a generally horrible ex. (It is "lived" on page for half of chapter one.)

**All of these things are wrapped up very quickly, but they will be touched on as Charlie and her alphas grow closer.**

Charlie lost her daughter's father in a random act of violence three years ago. She's still very much mourning his loss, especially in the beginning of the book. There are mentions of grief and losing a love one unexpectedly.

**>>>>Spoilers After This Point<<<<<**

I've set it up so you can skip the first half of Chapter One if you would prefer not to live through the ab\*se with Charlie.

**The Prologue should be safe as well as after the first half of Chapter One.**

There are very brief mentions of su!c\*de and s\*!cidal ideation. Charlie was pregnant when she lost Shane (her previous alpha) we do see the aftermath of that trauma even years later, but even those mentions are more from a secondary character trying to call Charlie's mental health into question.



**We don't wallow in the hurt and sadness, but it is mentioned and Charlie is learning to cope and move on. There is past hurt and pain, but this story is all about healing and moving forward.**

There is a kidnapping attempt. (I know it's difficult to gauge reactions, but if you've read my other books I'd say this is no worse or darker than the scene in *Damaged Princess*.)

Mental health is important! I always want my readers to know what to expect. If you have any questions or need something clarified please reach out through email or social media.

I'm happy to answer any questions you may have!!

If I've missed any things that should be listed please reach out to me on social media or email me and I'm happy to correct it.

# World Information

**This book is set in an alternate universe.**

**You will recognize many things as familiar, but there may be a few you don't. If you recognize the terms alpha, beta, omega then you're probably good.**

**If not, welcome to the omegaverse!**

Here's a small bit to get you started if you're unfamiliar with how things work.

Omegaverse is basically an alternate universe where similar to wolves or animal biology there is a hierarchy. Alphas are at the top. They're generally bigger, more aggressive, or dominant and they have a few extra features like a knot (think wolves but no shifting.) Betas are the regular humans. Omegas are the opposite side of the spectrum from alphas. They tend to be less aggressive, smaller, and they mate with alphas (and sometimes betas too, but omegas need the alpha to help them through their heat). Alphas and omegas have scents which attract compatible mates. Omegas calm an alphas more aggressive nature.

In my contemporary omegaverse books the world is very close to ours with just a few biological drives that are different & some extra features like alphas have knots & purr to comfort omegas, omegas and alphas have pheromones that attract compatible mates, and omegas have a heat cycle where they're super fertile. During this time it sends compatible alphas into rut. (Lots of practicing making babies.)

A few hundred years ago the birth rates for alphas and omegas were nearly equal. Nowadays there are nearly eight alphas born to each omega. As a result alpha packs have become the norm. Omegas are the center of the pack and as mentioned earlier calm an alphas more aggressive nature. Betas (the normal humans) do join packs sometimes, but their biological drives don't demand it like alphas and omegas.

These alphas growl and snarl, but you'll find no abuse from these men. There are no shifters in this book.

This is a reverse harem romance meaning our heroine will not choose between her love interests. She gets to keep them all.

I hope this helps clarify. You can always reach out to me via social media or email & I'm happy to explain further.

**Now on to the good stuff...**

# Prologue

---

## Kolt

The warm summer heat is oppressive. It's muggy in Florida. No part of me wants to know what it's like to live here year-round, but it is beautiful for a visit. The mid-afternoon sun glints off my sister Kathy's in-ground pool as I man the grill.

My packmates and I came to Florida to visit my sister's pack.

The fact Kathy threw a neighborhood barbecue to celebrate the Fourth of July is right up her alley. She's lounging on the steps to the shallow end with one of her alphas.

My packmate Roarke is stretched out across the steps in the deep end, drinking a beer and ignoring all the commotion. He's got his sunglasses blocking most of his face as he leans back against the edge. It's clear he doesn't want to be at a neighborhood get-together for people we'll never see again once we head back to Colorado in a few days. His long blond hair is pulled up in a ridiculous bun on top of his head, and more than a few of the neighborhood housewives are busy checking him out instead of their own husbands.

I roll my eyes because it's always like this. Women can't seem to help themselves where he's concerned.

"You might want to consider flipping those," a soft voice says from my right. I startle, dropping the spatula against the grill and barely catching it before it hits the ground. The metal

neck heated up at some point when I was daydreaming, and I end up playing hot potato with the damn thing.

“Oh no,” the woman says, grabbing the oven mitt I took off because it made my hand sweaty. She offers it to me.

I slam my hand inside and immediately get to flipping the burgers before they're unsalvageable.

I think they're *mostly* okay. Maybe a little crispy on one side.

“Thanks,” I say, taking the glove off and offering her my hand. “Kolton Holmes.”

“Charlie Geiger,” she says, grinning. After we shake, she immediately pulls her hand up to block the sun. I'm a big guy, so when I sidestep a foot, she instantly stops squinting. “Dang, you're good at that.”

“Yeah, my sister always complains when she has to look up at me on sunny days,” I say, laughing awkwardly. “I know just how to cast a shadow.”

*Really?*

That's what I went with?

The melodic sound of her laugh makes my heart race.

Charlie is a beautiful woman. She's at least a few years younger than me, but not so much that it would be weird. Her big blue eyes are almost too wide for her face, and there's a smattering of freckles across her nose and cheeks that really fit her to perfection. She's just really freaking pretty.

“About how long?” she asks, suddenly frowning.

*Shit*, I'm pretty sure I missed something while I was checking her out.

“Oh, for the food?” I ask, rubbing the back of my neck.

“Yeah,” she agrees, giving me a soft smile. “My daughter is convinced she's going to starve to death if I don't get her something immediately.”

My gut drops. I probably should have seen that coming. She's gorgeous, so it's no big surprise that she's taken.

Her long, dark wavy hair falls around her shoulders as she laughs, shaking her head. "It's okay. I'm sure I can run back \_\_\_"

"There are sides inside," I say, eyeing the grill. "Or the hotdogs will probably be ready . . ." I turn back to the grill. "Oh shit, probably now actually."

I immediately grab the tray on the shelf and start pulling off the hotdogs that are *definitely* done.

"Charlie, you made it," Kathy says, approaching us. She's wrapped in a towel and the ends of her hair are wet from the pool. "I'm so glad. Where's the little one? Is she with Brent?"

Charlie looks across the yard to where a few kids are playing near the volleyball net. I pick out her daughter with no trouble. Dang, she's little. She can't be more than three or four at most, but she's like a miniature version of her mother.

"Brent is with Jim," Charlie says, pointing across the yard to where a man stands with Jim, Kathy's alpha.

Brent is apparently Charlie's boyfriend? My eyes dance to her finger. No wedding ring or engagement ring. The wind blows, and instead of getting whacked with grilling food, I breathe in sweet orange cream.

I actually take a step to the side so I won't get smacked with it again. It's unlike any scent I've ever smelled.

Charlie and Kathy continue talking as I study Brent. There's something in his posture that I don't like. I'm also not a fan of the fact he's got his back facing his kid. She's playing ten or twelve feet away from a swimming pool that doesn't have a fence around it. Well, there's a fence around the backyard, but it wouldn't block her from stumbling into the water.

Charlie continues watching her daughter while the dick glares in our direction.

I shake out my shoulders and move to flip the burgers.

Impulses are weird when alphas and omegas are involved. I'm sure I instantly dislike the guy because I feel an unprecedented level of attraction to his omega. The sour-faced dick probably has every reason to be glaring me down.

Except he's not concerned with his daughter *at all*, and that puts my hackles right up.

"Burgers have probably two minutes," I say, turning to face Charlie. "The hotdogs are good to go, though."

"I think she'll eat a hotdog," Charlie says, giving me a small smile before searching for her daughter again. "Let me just grab her, and I'll come back to make it."

She sidesteps Kathy and heads off to grab her kid.

"Is that her husband?" I ask my sister in barely more than a whisper.

"No," Kathy replies, frowning. "She and Shayley moved in . . ." She frowns, tilting her head. "Maybe a month ago? Actually, I don't remember when exactly, but it hasn't been long."

"What's that guy's deal?" I ask, nodding toward Brent.

"Nothing, why?" she asks, sounding truly perplexed. "He's a police officer. He's lived next door since we bought this house."

I sigh, shaking my head. "It's nothing, I guess."

It's completely illogical. I legitimately just met the woman. It doesn't matter that I'm wildly attracted to her scent on a biological level.

It happens sometimes.

Alphas and omegas can be a perfect compatible match, but if they've already got a pack or found other suitable mates then it's just not meant to be.

I remind myself of that for the rest of the afternoon. Every time I catch a whiff of Charlie's sweet scent, I have to go over the facts in my head. She spends a while talking to Grayson, my other packmate, when she grabs drinks.



Gray has been manning the drink table for most of the day. Likely because he's limiting Roarke's alcohol consumption.

Roarke isn't a stereotypical drunk Irishman, but he does have a few concerning habits he picked up after an injury he sustained during his years in the service. Despite his flaws, he's still a damn good man. Even if I'm slightly annoyed by the never-ending female attention he's gotten *all damn day long*.

The one female who I wish he could charm has barely looked his way. Other than interacting with me to get food for her daughter and a brief talk with Gray when she needed drink refills, Charlie has completely stuck to herself.

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"Something doesn't sit well with me about that," I tell Roarke later that evening as we're waiting for the fireworks.

"What do ye mean?" he asks, glancing toward Charlie and Brent. His accent is thick and it causes his words to run together.

"I'm not sure," I say cryptically. My eyes have migrated back to Charlie all day long. The man she's living with leans in close to say something. Charlie doesn't smile or even seem at ease with him in her personal space. She actually goes a bit rigid. "No, I don't like that one *fucking* bit."

"Calm down," Gray says, coming to stand on my other side. The long black hair on the top of his head falls over his forehead as he leans in close. "She's an omega. She's likely overwhelmed from being around so many unknown people. I overheard Kathy mentioning that it's the first time she's met all the neighbors."

My jaw gets tight as it slides from side to side. "I don't think that's it." Something has my impulses going haywire.

"Want me to go over and insert myself into the conversation?" Roarke asks, stretching his arms over his head.

The white T-shirt he's wearing pulls up enough that the tattoos and scars covering his lower stomach are visible.

I grimace like I always do when I spot them. I managed to make it out of the service without a scratch, but Roarke can't get away from his reminders of that time.

"I'm not sure if that would help or make matters worse," I say, trying to get back to the topic at hand.

"Have you been around a highly compatible omega before?" Gray asks, but his tone isn't unkind. "It can be daunting. You know what they say. I get what you're insinuating, but I'm not sure I've picked up on that vibe."

I sigh, shaking my head. "I've never cared about compatibility or finding an omega, but I'm telling you, there's something I don't like about that guy. He's setting off my impulses."

"Well, I'll just go over and have a chat," Roarke says. He sounds peppy for the first time all day, like the idea of fucking someone up gives him a burst of energy when he's been sullen and despondent most of the day.

He swaggers off without giving us the opportunity to object.

"I hope I'm wrong," I mutter.

Brent wraps his arm around Charlie's back. I glance at Gray to see if he's picking up what I am, but he's busy watching Roarke. Yeah, he's definitely making sure our packmate doesn't have another beer on his way to investigate.

I wish I had another opportunity to talk to Charlie alone. We've hardly said anything to each other outside of the conversation at the grill, but she didn't seem afraid of me.

Or maybe I'm so desperate for an excuse to talk to her that I'm creating something out of nothing. At this point, that would be preferable to being right.

# Chapter One

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Charlie  
Six Weeks Later

Brent is screaming *again*.

It's becoming a more and more frequent occurrence, and over the last month, he really stopped pretending.

Part of me is grateful for the numbness that slips in during times like these.

The rest of me just doesn't care.

I don't have the energy to pretend this is unusual. It's just another day of the week.

He was charming enough when we met. He was the one guy who stuck around when I was heartbroken and lonely. We've been friends for years, but a few months ago he started pushing *hard* for a romantic relationship.

I've learned since then that he's the master at faking: there's the nice guy act, the funny friend everyone loves, the person you call when you need a favor, but once the audience is gone, things are very different.

My eyes squeeze shut as he tosses something across the room. It lands with that unmistakable sound of breaking plastic.

*At least it's not glass this time.*

I'll pick up the mess whenever his tantrum is over. It's just ramping up, so it'll take a while before he settles down.

I'm really grateful Shayley can sleep through almost anything. It also helps that her room is on the opposite side of

the house because the only thing that could make this worse would be for her to wake up right now.

I breathe through my mouth to try to settle my aching nerves. Being an omega around a furious alpha feels like the epitome of discomfort.

My urges demand I soothe his anger and try to calm him, but my brain recognizes how pointless that is. I'll never be successful.

My hands shake as I curl into the couch cushion and pray the numbing ache sticks around. It isn't drugs or alcohol; I don't use either of those.

I think it's my system shutting down to protect me.

It's a small respite from this hell, but it never lasts.

After the crisis, it will slowly disappear, and I'll be faced with all the emotions I'm able to ignore in the moment.

Still though, it's what I have, so I'll go with it.

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Kathy Diedrich, the neighbor from next door, finds me outside early the next morning. Shay is playing on the patio as I drink a cup of coffee and try to figure out what to do with the day.

"I saw Brent leave," she says, glancing around to make sure we are alone. "My brother got out of the military a few years ago . . ." She glances at Shayley. "Do you remember him? The giant with dark brown hair and a full mountain man beard. He was at the Fourth of July cookout."

I do remember. He was smiling and laughing. We didn't say more than a handful of words to each other, but he didn't seem to have that horrible energy that screams *dangerous* like Brent does.

"Anyway, after the military, he packed up with a group of guys who run a getaway for omegas. They were here with him . . ."

I swallow thickly. Very few people in our town look at me like Kathy is looking at me right now. Brent's family is one example. Then again, they know what hides behind his charming facade and fake smiles. It's too bad they didn't feel the need to warn me. Based on the way Kathy softens her voice, I guess she probably does, too.

My eyes squeeze shut as I let out a ragged breath.

I know what comes next.

I convince her I'm fine.

That Brent just had an off day and we'll keep it down.

Only I know from experience that'll never happen. He's gotten worse since I moved in with him. Of course he has. He knows he's in complete control now.

"Look, I know we don't know each other very well, but before I met my pack, I spent almost a year with a guy like Brent. No one believed that there was a problem because he was so damn good at pretending to be the best guy ever." Kathy shakes her head. "I was where you are, and it took longer than it should have to get out because I honestly thought I was the problem." Her eyes are pleading as they meet mine. "I can't sit over there night after night and worry about what you and your daughter are going through."

*Have I lost the ability to form a coherent reply?*

"I talked to my brother this morning," Kathy says. "Like I said, he owns a franchise of The Omega Exchange. It's one of the Colorado locations . . ."

My eyes study hers as Shay comes over.

"Up, Mommy," she says, trying to climb into my lap. I stretch a hand down and help her get settled. She won't be three until December, but she's tall like her dad. People always assume she's older than she really is.

Despite it still being the ass crack of dawn, she's a ball of energy, but she's also very intuitive to emotions. She runs her soft hand over my arm.

“She’s not his, right?” Kathy asks, blanching. “I mean, she’s too old based on how long you’ve been together, right?” She nods to Shay. “You’ve only been here a couple months and you’re not bonded . . . You can make a clean break.”

The last few weeks she pops over for a few minutes every time Brent leaves. I thought she wanted to get to know me as a neighbor, but the questions she asked about if I have any friends or family nearby suddenly make a lot more sense. I feel like she’s been working up to this.

“I’m sure you know how it goes. Everything is his,” I say, trying to keep the emotion from my voice. “Anything that was mine . . .”

“He destroyed or made you get rid of,” Kathy says, grimacing. “I know it’s scary to consider trusting someone, but I’ve been you. Brent doesn’t know we talk, so he won’t have a clue where you’ve disappeared to.”

“I’d literally have to leave with nothing, maybe a few of our clothes, but . . .” My voice is strangely hollow. That’s my go-to emotion lately. Numbness helps keep me from crying, which would only annoy him more.

Shay senses my discomfort and snuggles her face against my chest.

“My brother wanted to talk to you while he was here, but Brent was always around. Since it was the first time you came over, I hadn’t picked up on the signs yet.” Kathy’s shoulders slump like she feels bad she stopped them from intervening sooner.

I just don’t know how much longer I can do this. It hasn’t even been three months of living with him, but it feels like years have passed waiting for the other shoe to drop.

I’m so tired of trying to decide if this is the day he snaps and hits me or Shay.

I don’t want to do it anymore.

“Is that something you’d consider?” Kathy asks, studying me carefully. “My pack and I would make sure you got out of the house safely. The Exchange will pay for your tickets to

Colorado. Once you get there, you can stay in the employee housing. My brother said he'll have a job waiting for you if you want it. If not, there are other places around town where you could work."

"They won't try to force me into bonding?" I ask, running a hand over Shay's back.

"God no," she assures me. "It's a sanctuary for omegas fleeing a bad situation or even those who haven't found a match in their area."

"Can I think on it?" I ask.

Kathy nods. "Of course, there are other locations if you don't want to go to Colorado."

"Thank you," I say as she rises from her deck chair. "I'll let you know."



# Chapter Two

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## Charlie

It doesn't take long to determine Kathy is right. I knew it before she approached me. I accepted it while she was talking.

Planning takes less time than I expect. Within a week, I'm able to stash several garbage bags worth of things I know Brent won't miss over at Kathy's. I grab as many of Shay's baby books and special keepsakes as I can along with the box of Shane's letters and our pictures and trust that Kathy will keep them safe.

It's hard to know they aren't in the house with me, but I know they're better protected over there.

Kathy schedules everything. She comes over every morning after Brent leaves for work. The morning before Shay and I are supposed to leave, she asks me to have a brief conversation with her brother.

To say it's awkward would not do the word justice.

Kolton Holmes is commanding but kind. He's got a thick brown beard and blue eyes that are extremely expressive and friendly during the entire video call. I'm not sure where he is, but I'm pretty sure he's a passenger in a car based on the background noise and the way the phone bounces around during the video call.

He's straight and to the point. He recommends I double check that I've got Shay's birth-certificate, shot records, all my important papers, and my driver's license.

The way he calmly walks me through what to expect when I arrive at The Exchange helps settle my nerves.

We disconnect and Kathy gives me the same daily pep-talk she has each morning.

My nerves are shot by the time Brent gets home from work, but he goes out with his friends for a few hours.

I make sure I'm asleep by the time he gets back.

The next morning when Brent leaves for work, I pull out the note I wrote explaining that I'm breaking up with him. I leave it on the kitchen counter and pray I've got everything important. If I missed something, I know I'll never get it back.

At this point, I think that's a risk I have to take. I'm walking out with mine and Shay's lives. That's the most important thing. He's gotten more volatile since I moved in, and at this point, I don't think it would ever get better.

I think Brent expected my grief over losing Shane to magically disappear once I agreed to give him a chance, but that's just not how life goes.

I know I'm doing the right thing, even if it's one of the scariest things I've done.

It's not the worst, not by a long shot.

That would be giving birth to Shay alone when I'd just lost her dad. A ragged breath leaves my chest as the misery from those memories floods me like it always does when I let myself think about it.

I glance around Brent's house one final time, and I don't have an ounce of remorse about leaving.

I take Shay and two suitcases filled with the last of our important stuff and walk out.

I have to abandon so much that it takes my breath away when I think about it.

*You've got the things you felt like you couldn't live without. That's got to be enough, I remind myself.*

Kathy's alpha, Jim, helps load the suitcases into the back of their SUV while I strap Shay into her car seat.

Kathy smiles at me as I climb into the back seat. Jim gets in and prepares to drive away.

I don't look back because I truly know there is nothing left for me there.

Nothing outside of an early grave.

*If I was going to go that route, I'd have done it when I lost Shane.*

"Okay, so I have some information, and I'm not sure how you're going to feel about it," Kathy says, twisting back to squeeze my knee. "It's highly recommended in these situations that we take steps to prevent Brent from following your trail. We want to make sure he can't track your travel information. Because of that, we booked you a false flight to New York instead of to Colorado."

I'm pretty sure if Kathy and her pack weren't such good people, I'd absolutely be freaking out right now. I know two of her pack members are former military like Shay's dad. They own a construction company now, and they're pretty well-respected around town.

I've interacted with them less than I have Kathy, but they've never given me a sketchy vibe. Not even once.

If only I'd been smart enough to catch on to that feeling quicker with Brent.

If I hadn't been buried in grief and just trying to survive the days when I kind of wished I would have died right alongside Shane . . .

I can't even think about this right now or I'll burst into tears.

"Okay," I say, swallowing thickly. "Am I going to a different location?"

"Nope," Kathy says, giving me a chagrined smile. "We're taking you to a hotel to meet my brother's pack. They're going to drive the two of you out to Colorado and get you settled at

The Exchange. The flight is a decoy in case he manages to track your information.”

“I’ll have my own hotel room, right?” I can literally feel my level of panic rising.

What the hell am I doing?

What if I’m running from one bad situation straight into another?

Kathy’s eyes fly to Jim. He gives a nod, and I really start to freak out. No one knows I’m with them. The one person I would have told where I was going is the one person I’m currently running from.

Sometimes I’m really sure I’m a failure at this whole life thing.

“Of course you’ll have your own room,” Kathy says, digging around in her purse. “We’re going to ship the other stuff directly to Colorado as planned, but it’ll be delivered to my brother so there’s no postal trail for Brent to follow.”

“Okay,” I say, frowning.

It seems like they’re going a little overboard. I appreciate the effort, but who would even think of doing something like that?

“Listen, I want you to take this.” She hands me a brochure. “I didn’t want to risk Brent coming across it. Read through it. I think it’ll help you feel better like we’re not kidnapping you.”

“Kat . . .” Jim sighs. “Bad joke, honey.”

Kathy grimaces. “That was a bad one. I’m sorry. I know you’re stressed and it’s understandable. Read through that, it explains everything.”

I read through the brochure from The Exchange. It basically covers everything Kolton went over with me on the phone yesterday morning.

Leave cell phones and any other device that the person might track is one of the first bullet points after ensuring you have all your identification cards and important papers.

Shay starts to fuss and wiggle in her car seat, and I pat around at my feet for the diaper bag.

“Crap,” I hiss, shaking my head. “I’m pretty sure I forgot her bag.”

“Is there anything you absolutely can’t leave?” Jim asks, looking anxious.

“Extra diapers, wipes, her sippy cups, snacks, an outfit or two . . .” I trail off.

“We’ll replace it,” Jim says in a soft tone that I think is meant to be comforting.

I put my hand on Shay’s belly and try to soothe her, but I know my stress is bleeding into her.

“This is for you,” Kathy says, handing me a small manilla envelope. It has metal tongs holding it closed, but it’s not sealed. “I know you’re going to say no, but you can’t. It’s important to me that you take it.”

She shakes the package in my face until I take it.

“Go on,” she says, giving me an encouraging nod.

I fold down the tongs and gasp when I get a look inside. My head is already shaking.

“You can’t accept it blah, blah, blah. Except you can, and you will. Listen, I’ve been where you are. I can’t stand the thought of sending you off without enough that I know you’d be okay until you got on your feet. I trust my brother more than anyone. He’s just one of those good guys. He helps old ladies carry their groceries. The type to stop in the rain to help someone fix a flat tire. *But*, if you’re uncomfortable or decide that’s not where you want to be, you’ll have something to hold you over until you’re settled. Put it in your bag.”

“I can’t take your money.” My head is still shaking. “You don’t owe me anything, and you’ve already done more than enough.”

I try to hand her the envelope and she shoves it back.

“You have a baby to look after. I didn’t have that, and I know how hard it was for me. You’ll take it because your pride isn’t greater than your need to know you’ll always be able to take care of your child.” Kathy gives me a look that says *take the damn envelope and put it in your bag*.

Shay has been kicking her feet, but she starts to fuss.

I shove the envelope in my purse and zip it closed.

“Thank you,” I choke out.

“Life is going to get better from here. It’ll take some time, but trust me when I say that,” Kathy says, giving me one last smile before turning to face the front.

I’ve been on my own for so long that I think it became normal along the way to feel numb. If I’m not detached, then I’m sad and heartbroken.

I try not to let myself wallow in that for long periods of time anymore because Shay’s getting older, and I’m afraid she’ll remember me like this. It’s been three years since we lost her dad. I’m pretty sure I’m supposed to be starting to heal by now.

My head falls back against the seat, and I breathe through the overwhelming feeling like I’m failing at *everything*.

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We drive for an hour before Jim stops so I can run in and buy Shay a few snacks and drinks. Kathy comes in with me and she stocks the cart with diapers and wipes, a few toys, and extra snacks.

When I go to pay, she slides her card through the machine before I can dig the envelope out of my purse.

It’s a very humbling experience.

Honestly, I’m not really sure how much further I can fall. I want to protest, but I’m smart enough to realize that she was right.

I'm in far too dire of a circumstance to allow my pride to get the better of me. I change Shay and feed her a quick snack before we're driving again. The trip from Miami to Orlando takes close to four hours with traffic.

By the time we arrive, Shayley is officially done riding in the car. It's just after lunch time, but Kathy and Jim have to make the drive back to Miami by this afternoon so nothing seems suspicious to Brent.

The hotel Jim pulls into is fancy. The entire area we're in is close to the theme parks, and I know the hotels aren't cheap.

Shay runs circles around a picnic bench near the parking lot. There's a grassy area, and she's content being able to burn off some energy for a few minutes.

When Kolton appears, I instantly recognize him. He's tall, even for an alpha, and although he keeps his neckline trimmed, his beard is the first feature I notice as he approaches.

Shay runs up, wrapping her arm around my leg and pops her thumb in her mouth. Kathy heads to greet her brother, and I try to put on a brave face.

Life's been shitty since Shane died.

Really freaking miserable, but having Shay means I don't get to give up. If I want to really live again then I have to fight through the hard parts.

I have the benefit of understanding not every alpha is like Brent, and I think that goes a long way to keep me from completely throwing in the towel.



# Chapter Three

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## Kolt

I know I'm in an impossible situation before I even catch Charlie's scent. Long, dark curly hair falls around her shoulders in waves as she stretches a hand down to rub her daughter's back.

I've said more words to the kid than I have to the woman at this point. Once the fireworks started at the barbecue, I took a seat on the grass and the little lady chattered away. She's an adorable kid, that's for sure, but she's also hardcore frowning like she forgot me.

My eyes dance up to Charlie. She's curvy in the way most omegas are, but that's a passing thought because she looks a little like she's afraid of me.

It motherfucking kills me.

She's pretty; I've been able to recognize it since the first time I laid eyes on her. But it's the circles under her eyes that makes me very sorry we aren't in Miami.

Actually it might be a good thing that we aren't. If I went to jail for murdering her asshole ex then I wouldn't be around to protect her and make sure she's okay.

Those few days my pack and I spent at Kathy's back in July were some of the hardest of my life. Too bad my packmates and my sister convinced me not to intervene.

They're all on my shit list. I didn't need to see it with my own eyes or hear with my own ears because I felt it in my fucking gut.

I knew something was wrong.

I won't say I told you so because this isn't the type of situation you revel in being right about, but I won't ever let myself be talked out of trusting a gut instinct. Not ever a-fucking-gain.

The cop was on his best behavior the entire time my two packmates and I were close enough to put a stop to his bullshit.

I spent the remaining days of our vacation taking long walks around the block just itching to catch wind of something off. Then again, a six-foot-six mountain man and a drunk Irishman busting in the front door might have been more traumatic than anything.

Gray would've stayed back to bail us out. He was the one who pushed the hardest for me to mind my own business. I blow out a breath and shake away every bit of anger as I approach. Omegas especially are overly sensitive to the moods of alphas.

Charlie is an omega, and whether her daughter will be when she grows up remains to be seen, but what I won't do is let either of them think me being upset is directed at them.

"Hey," Kathy says, pulling me in for a hug. She might be my older sister, but she's a foot shorter than I am. I give her a hug and a kiss on the forehead.

I nod at Jim. He's standing back, close enough to keep an eye on Charlie, but not so near that he makes her uncomfortable.

"Charlie, this is Kolt," Kathy says, guiding me closer by linking our arms. "Kolt, this is Charlie."

"We got the introduction last time," I say, extending a hand. "We just didn't get the chance to say much more than that."

Charlie shakes, but her hand instantly goes back to cradling Shayley against her leg.

Shay is tall for her age, or at least compared to my nieces and nephews at her age. Her skin tone is several shades darker than Charlie's, which makes her big blue eyes stand out brighter in contrast. She's got a mess of long brown curls, and she's apparently mastered her mean look since I saw her last.

"Oh, I forgot," I say, reaching into my back pocket. "This is for you." I squat down, holding out the plastic cell phone. My heart aches with a painful twinge as she stares blinking but doesn't take it.

She was more carefree at the party. I'm hoping that was due to the environment rather than some trauma she's been exposed to since.

"You can take it," Charlie says, bending down and scooping up her daughter. The girl lies her head on her mother's chest and stretches out a small hand.

I stand back up and try with everything in me not to be a fucking giant. Un-fucking-fortunately, it's literally impossible, but I do duck my shoulders and try to seem less imposing.

My sister snorts, and I shoot her a look that screams *why do we have to be related?*

"Here you go," I say, tucking it into the curve of Shay's wrist. It's fairly heavy for being a toddler toy. She immediately pulls her arm toward her body, but she doesn't check it out.

Which is okay.

I'm sure this day has been stressful on both of them.

Maybe it's too young for her? Shit, the box says it's for ages twelve months to four years, but maybe she'd prefer a doll or something that doesn't make loud noises?

My palms actually sweat as I consider whether or not I have the time to run to a store and get back to do this reintroduction over again.

"Do you two want to sit and talk?" Kathy asks, glancing between us. "Or should we get the stuff moved over? We're on a time crunch if we want to get back before . . ."

“It’s completely up to you,” I say to Charlie as I finally get myself together.

“I don’t want to keep you,” she says, shaking her head at Kathy. “The traffic getting here was awful.”

“How about you take Charlie and Shayley up to their room while I help Jim get everything moved over?” I ask Kathy.

“We aren’t leaving now?” Charlie asks. Her eyes widen.

I start to wonder if my packmates and I royally fucked this up.

“We thought it might be better to pace the trip,” I say, trying to keep the low, gravelly tone out of my voice. It’s practically impossible, so I end up sounding like I’m whispering or possibly have a frog in my throat. “That way she’s not miserable and neither are you . . .”

“Isn’t it over a thirty-hour drive?” Charlie asks. “It’ll take days if you’re traveling to keep a toddler happy.”

“However long it takes is fine with us,” I assure her, rubbing at the back of my neck. I thought we were being considerate by not pushing or rushing to arrive at a given time, but now that I think about it . . . “If you’d rather us travel non-stop so we can get there, then we can do that. The guys and I can trade shifts and drive all night. It’s one of the ideas we bounced around.”

Kathy looks between the two of us and chuckles. “You’re both too polite to push your opinion on anything. Come on, Charlie. I’ll help you two get settled in the room.”

I hand Kathy the keycard and help get out the few bags Charlie wants brought up. Once they’re out of sight, I step back over to Jim.

I try to remind myself it might be the circumstances I’m seeing them in. But unfortunately, I’ve done a couple runs like this, rescuing omegas from bad situations or even escorting one from our city to another location across the country when none of the transit teams were available.

“Was it as bad as it seems?” I ask, but I don’t know if I really want the answer. I’m afraid my impulses will lead me to do something extremely fucking dumb if I’m not careful.

“We never saw bruises on either of them. That’s not to say they never existed . . .” He sighs, shaking his head. “A lot of yelling. Occasional breaking shit. That’s about all I can tell you.”

“Fucking Christ,” I mutter, heading toward his SUV.

I’ve never had the overpowering urge to comfort an omega before.

I’ve never had a single urge or attraction toward any of the omegas I’ve been around.

They warn us how undeniable the pull is between compatible alphas and omegas. But I’ve personally never experienced anything like the way I’m drawn to comfort Charlie and keep her safe.

Owning a franchise in The Exchange up until this point has been a business.

Gray, Roarke, and I blended well together, and I needed something to do after the military. Initially, it wasn’t even a thought in my mind that one day I might find my omega through the program.

The fucked-up thing is, that I didn’t really find her through it. I stumbled across her on my own, but I was too stupid to speak up when I had the chance. I’m pretty sure every day she spent trapped with that dickwad only made things worse, and that guilt doesn’t feel good stewing in my gut.

I sigh. All we can do is get her settled in a better situation and hope that she can see we’re nothing like that fuckhead.

Here’s hoping Roarke has better luck making her feel comfortable.

# Chapter Four

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## Charlie

That weird numb feeling that comes when I get overwhelmed is back. There's a very tall blond man with a wide smile lounging on the couch in the hotel room when Kathy opens the door. I vaguely remember him, but he's the one of their pack that I said the least to at the barbecue.

"Roarke," she says, carefully ushering me and Shay inside. "Come give me a hug."

Shay clutches the plastic phone tight between us as she buries her face in my chest. I wish I could hide, but I'm the adult in this situation, and I have to at least pretend to be tough. It's ridiculously hard when my instincts are pushing me to run and find somewhere safe to burrow.

"Kat," Roarke says, pushing himself off the couch and coming closer. "It's been ages."

"It hasn't even been two months, you damn goofball," Kathy says, allowing him to pull her into his arms.

"Well, it feels like it's been ages," he says in a thick accent I think might be Irish. His heavily tattooed arms flex as he hugs her.

Roarke is a big guy. If I had to guess, I'd say he's a few inches shorter than Kolt with a slightly smaller build. He has a mass of blond hair pulled up in a half up and half down style. His nose is a bit large for his face, but as he smiles down at Kathy, he gets laugh lines around his eyes and mouth. It's such



a strange feature to fixate on, but I couldn't rip my eyes away if I tried.

It's so familiar, but the same painful twinge I'm always faced with hits my stomach when I recall Shane's face.

Brent doesn't have laugh lines like that.

I think that says it all.

"Hello, there," Roarke says, grinning and waving a hand at Shay. She immediately goes back to hiding her face in my chest.

"I'm not that scary," he says, wrapping an arm around Kathy's shoulder and coming closer. "We met at the barbecue. I know it's impossible to forget this face." He points at his thick blond beard. "Kat, vouch for me here."

Kathy laughs. "He's *always* like this." She runs a hand over Shay's back. "He's really a bit like a hyper puppy. He's just a Great Dane and doesn't realize his size might come off as intimidating." With that she promptly elbows him in the gut. He lets out an exaggerated oomph and Shay frowns at him. "Her bags are right outside the door. Why don't you *pretend* to be a gentleman and bring them in?"

"Of course," Roarke says, flashing Kathy a glimpse of his perfect white teeth. He releases her, and she nods for me to follow her into the living room area of the suite.

"Are you okay?" she asks once he's out of earshot. "I know they'll have gotten you and Shay your own bedroom, but I can rent you a completely—"

"No, that's okay," I assure her. I've lived my entire life in and out of sketchy situations. I'm pretty sure I'm only still alive because I learned from a young age to read a person's energy.

That worked right up until I met Brent. I try not to beat myself up too much over that giant screw-up. I think he's actually a psychopath—or at the least a sociopath. It's hard to believe that I let myself fall into his trap.

I blame grief.

I glance away from Kathy's prying stare. "Honestly, I appreciate the offer, but at this point, if Brent does come after me, I like the idea he'll have to go through them to get to me."

They run a sanctuary for omegas coming out of a bad situation.

I *know* not all alphas are like Brent. I just have to keep reminding myself until it clicks.

If I let him completely destroy my ability to trust then he wins. I won't allow that. I'm not even twenty-four years old.

"If you're sure," Kathy says, still carefully studying me for any sign of discomfort.

Roarke comes in with an arm full of bags and heads toward one of the bedrooms.

"Please trust me when I say they're good men." Kathy sighs. She pats my arm before running a hand over Shay's head. "They'll help you get set up in Colorado. If you need anything, my home and cell number are written on a piece of paper inside the envelope I gave you."

"Thank you," I choke out as she pulls me in for a hug. When she backs away, I take a seat on the couch and rock Shay back and forth. I'm pretty sure I'm trying to comfort myself, not her, but my anxiety is through the damn roof.

All I want to do is nest.

Kathy says her goodbyes to Roarke and heads out.

Shay opens the plastic phone and jolts when the button makes noise. She gives me a goofy look and does it again.

"I like it," she says, grinning at me.

"It's nice," I agree.

"All right," Roarke says, coming to take a seat in the chair across from the couch. "How are you holding up?" He stretches back in the club chair languidly.

I don't know whether to laugh, scoff, or burst into tears.

“Fair enough,” he says, blowing air out through his lips. “How about a small treat?”

Shayley knows that word, her head tilts his direction.

“One for two.” He chuckles. “Those aren’t terrible odds.”

I snort. “It’s fifty-fifty. I wouldn’t bet my life savings on those stats.”

“No?” He grins mischievously. “I guess I’ve always been a risk taker. Well, since Mummy isn’t interested, would you like your surprise?”

Shay looks at me. I don’t know what to say. Roarke pulls a small pink gift bag from between the chair and the wall.

I blink like a fool for several long seconds. They’ve definitely got this routine down. They know how to gain the trust of the omegas and kids they’re transporting.

“Mommy?” Shay pats my stomach.

“It’s okay,” I say, letting her wiggle to get down. She keeps the phone Kolt gave her tucked in the crook of her arm and toddles closer.

“Here you are, little lady,” he says, dangling the bag strings on one tattooed finger. He stretches his arm out so Shay doesn’t have to get too close to take it from him.

“Thank you,” she whispers before grabbing the bag and dragging it back to the couch. My heart skips a beat as he grins at her. She climbs up into my lap. I take the gift, setting it aside so I can get her situated. It’s heavier than I expected.

“Ooo,” Shay coos, trying to pull the gift out. You can tell it’s packaged by a man. There’s no tissue paper or extra wrapping, which would be wasteful and unnecessary anyway.

I have no idea what it is at first, but Shay yanks with both hands. I hold the bottom of the bag so she can easily pull out her treasure. It almost looks like a tiny purse or briefcase. It has pink fabric handles, and when she opens it, there are all sorts of things to keep her busy: hook and loop letters, a clock that spins, buckles, and snaps.

I get a look at the outside and realize it can be flipped inside out to play with that side too. There are dolls sewn into the lining of one side of the purse and several keyrings of clothes that can be stuck on and easily removed.

“It’s for me?” Shay looks between me and Roarke.

“I picked it out just for you,” he assures her. His eyes glitter as he winks.

“I like it,” she says, nodding as she plays.

“What do you say when someone gives you a gift?” I murmur, patting Shay’s leg.

“Thank you,” she says, but her focus doesn’t leave her toy.

“Thank you,” I echo, my eyes flying to his.

“No need for any of that,” Roarke says.

There’s commotion at the door as Kolt comes in. He’s loaded down with bags and another guy follows him closely. I recognize him from Kathy’s party. He’s their third packmate.

“Gray grabbed some lunch,” Kolt says, making his way over with the bags of stuff.

“Charlie,” Gray says, offering a smile. He drops bags on the small table and pries a few more off his other arm. He’s got the slimmest build of the three of them, but somehow he has the most commanding energy.

He’s wearing a white button-down with the sleeves rolled up, dark jeans, and some type of dress shoe. I can’t tell any of the brands from here, but it’s clear it’s all high-fashion stuff. He’s clean shaven, but you can see the hint of a five o’clock shadow as he sets things down. His dark eyes meet mine for a moment before he goes back to what he was doing.

The top of his dark hair is longer than the sides. It falls over his forehead as he rearranges the stuff on the table. His hair is messy in a purposeful way. It has to be one of those haircuts that look like sex hair all the time.

They’re all packmates, but even back to our first introduction at the barbeque, Gray has always dressed more

like a businessman. I think it's something about the way he carries himself compared to the others.

Kolt heads to the desk with the bags of food.

"Mommy," Shay says, pulling on my shirt.

"What's up, sweet pea?" I ask.

"I wanna eat," she says, eyeing the bags of take out.

"We've got a few different things. I think Grayson wanted to spoil us all with a huge lunch," Kolt says, picking through the bags. "What are you in the mood for?"

Her small face frowns in confusion.

"We've got cheeseburgers, chicken sandwiches, a grilled cheese . . ." Kolt goes on reading the labeled take-out boxes. "I think this one might be for you." He grins, grabbing the white take-out container and coming over. He holds it on his outstretched hand and pops the lid.

It has chicken nuggets, fries, some cut up fruit, and a chocolate chip cookie in the corner.

"Fries," Shay squeals, clapping. "Can have it?"

Kolt's eyes fly to mine before answering. His brows raise, and I give him a nod to let him know it's fine.

"I knew it was yours because there's a giant cup of ketchup on the side." Kolt sets the tray down on the coffee table. "We don't have a highchair or booster seat with us . . ."

"It's okay," I assure him. "I can hold her and help her eat."

# Chapter Five

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## Grayson

Charlie is more timid than she was the last time we met. The few times we saw her while visiting Kathy, Charlie wasn't necessarily skittish, but she wasn't as meek as she seems now either.

Given the circumstances, it's understandable.

That doesn't make curbing my instincts any easier to control. She's a vulnerable omega with a daughter to look after.

Scenting Charlie's stress pheromones in the air is enough to set me on edge. My impulses ache with the need to solve her problems and set her mind at ease.

The best we can do in this situation is get her as far away from that shithead she was living with as we can. I was the only one of my pack to spend any real time talking to her during the barbeque.

I overlooked the signs. Omegas are more introverted than any other designation. I thought maybe talking to an unbonded alpha made her uncomfortable. I assumed she mentioned it to the asshole because shortly after our conversation, he glared at me for the rest of the night.

I can't help but wonder how I misunderstood the cues. Running a franchise for The Omega Exchange has helped hone my ability to pick out those in need. Or I *thought* it had. Stupid fucking pride. I allowed my ego to push me to make incorrect assumptions.

A hollow pit forms in my gut every time I think about Charlie and Shayley being stuck in that situation. Not that we could have forced her to leave, but we could've extended the offer much sooner.

Kolt continues passing out food, but I stand frozen, watching Charlie interact with Shayley. I'm not sure what draws me to her so completely. But from the moment I scented her at Kathy's, I was immediately enamored. Not just by her delicate orange-creamy scent either, but by the soft, melodic cadence of her voice when she spoke, and the tentative way she chewed her lip as she watched her daughter play.

I may have a slight fixation. I'm a fucking adult. I'm a responsible alpha, and I know now isn't the time for attraction or biology, but fuck me. I want to lift her into my lap and cuddle her close until she feels safe enough to come out of that shell she's built around herself.

"Gray?" Roarke asks, nodding to the coffee table that's now covered in food boxes. "Will you be eating with us?"

I nod, but my stomach protests the thought.

I've been on edge since we got Kathy's call verifying that Kolt was right all along.

I rummage through the bags on the table until I find the small tray I grabbed at the last store. It has a cushion filled with beads on the bottom and it's rounded to go around a tiny belly. It's essentially a children's lap desk for a small computer or drawing, but I'm happy I picked it up on impulse. It'll be perfect for a food tray.

I head over to the small kitchen and get it cleaned off.

By the time I make it back, Kolt is sitting on the floor near the edge of the couch. Roarke takes up one of the club chairs. I briefly consider the other, but apparently, I'm a glutton for punishment. I put myself down on the couch, leaving the middle seat free.

Shayley frowns at me. I give her a smile. Her big blue eyes are so expressive. I've got more questions than answers at this



point. Where is her father? Who is he? Is he an alpha? If so, why didn't he bond Charlie?

"Would you like to sit in the middle?" I ask. "That way Mom can eat, too. I grabbed this at the store."

I place the tray between us on the open cushion.

"Thank you," Charlie says, setting Shay's food container on it. I lift it up so she can place Shayley on the cushion. The girl still scoots close to her mother's side, but she smiles when I place the tray on her outstretched legs.

"Thank you," she says, grabbing a fry.

"You're welcome," I reply before catching Charlie's eyes. "What would you like?"

"Anything," she says, shrugging one shoulder. "I'm not picky."

"I'm not either," Roarke says around a bite of his burger. "I still have preferences. Which one tickles your fancy?"

"Is the grilled cheese claimed?" she asks, peeking at the boxes.

"It's the one right in front of you," Kolt says, grinning up at her from his place on the floor.

"Thank you," she says, grabbing the box.

I move to grab the take-out container closest to me and pop the lid.

"Milk," Shay says, gently tugging on her mom's arm.

"Oops," Charlie says, putting down her grilled cheese. "I'll get you—"

I've already set my container down and am halfway to the mini fridge. "I've got it."

I grab several bottles of water and the mini juice boxes we got for exactly this occasion.

"Are these okay?" I ask. "We got them earlier so they should be cool. There's apple juice or cherry. We'll have to pick up milk later."

“This is great,” she says, grabbing one of the juice boxes.

I hand the guys their waters and take my seat. It’s not necessarily tense in the room, but the conversation is stilted and there are so many things we need to discuss. Pushing in this situation would be the worst thing possible.

The resort is covered indefinitely until we get back. There’s no rush and there’s no need to hover.

Despite what my impulses are trying to convince me. Seeing Charlie so vulnerable and unsure is triggering my impulses, not just as an alpha, but as a man.

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Lunch continues to be quiet and borderline painful. After they finish eating, Shay climbs into her mother’s lap and falls asleep.

“I’m going to go put her down,” Charlie whispers, looking at me. “Would you mind pointing me to our bedroom?”

“Of course,” I agree, pushing myself up and leading the way. I open the door and move to flip on the small bedside light. The heavy curtains are closed, making it difficult to see.

Charlie follows me in, and I pull back the blanket on the side closest to the door. Shuffling around the bed, I grab one of the pillows, and she puts Shayley down and covers her up.

“Here,” I say, offering her the pillow. I know I’m being borderline pushy, but worrying about logistics and details seems to be my expression of affection.

I literally cannot curb the urge to try to put her at ease.

Rationally, I know she’s coming out of a questionable situation, and the worst thing I could possibly do is to come on too strong. But I physically can’t help myself. It’s an ingrained response to someone so vulnerable, *especially* when it’s clear she needs to be taken care of.

Or possibly I’m pushing my wants on her? It’s hard to say. But it’s clear she hasn’t had proper affection and comfort from

an alpha in at least the few months she was living with that asshole.

In all likelihood, it's probably been even longer than that based on . . . I don't even fucking know.

Gut instinct? No, that thought is ridiculous, and yet, I'm sure I'm right.

"Gray?" she asks, tilting her head up to look at me.

"Are you tired?" I ask. "If you are, you can nap."

"I'm beat," she says, sighing heavily. "But I know from experience, if I fall asleep with her for a nap, she'll wake up before I do. Somehow, I'm even more exhausted when it's time to get up."

I frown so hard I can feel my own forehead wrinkle.

"Once we get to The Exchange, you'll see our nurse practitioner. She'll be able to check all your levels and see if maybe you have a vitamin deficiency or it's possible you've got long-term exhaustion—" My words cut off when Charlie's hand lands on my forearm.

"That's very kind. I won't turn down free medical care, but it's likely a side-effect of having a toddler," she says, shrugging.

That could be it. It's a possibility, but I don't like not knowing for sure.

The strange flip-flopping in my stomach returns.

"If you won't be sleeping then would you like to join us to talk about a few things?" I ask, gesturing back out to the living room area of the suite.

"Yeah, I guess there are things to go over, huh?" She nods her agreement and turns to head out.

I glance back at the sleeping Shay and decide to grab the extra pillows from the closet just in case. I toss one on the middle of the bed in case she's truly wild while she sleeps and put another between her and the floor before flicking off the light and following Charlie out.

Her pheromones flood my nostrils.

I take several steps back and very unceremoniously readjust my sleeves to avoid the urge to bury my nose in her throat to breathe in more of that delicate, sweet orange scent.

# Chapter Six

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## Charlie

Grayson turns back and heads for the small closet area. The hotel is fancier than anywhere I've ever stayed. I've never seen a hotel room with an actual closet with a door. I blink in pure confusion as he grabs out several pillows and then places them around Shay.

I'm not sure why I get the strong urge to snap at him to stop. I know that it's completely uncalled for, so I keep my mouth shut, but it's hard. He makes his way toward me as I spin around to escape before I do something ridiculous like burst into tears because that's not his job.

It was really freaking thoughtful, but it's totally not his responsibility.

Roarke is still lounging in the same club chair, but Kolt is sitting on the couch I was on.

"You can have your seat back," he offers, moving to push himself up.

"No, it's okay," I say, taking the seat on the far side of the couch. I wish there were throw pillows or something to put in my lap once I'm settled in. My hands don't seem to want to sit still as Gray takes the last remaining club chair.

I keep my focus on my lap. I'm not sure, but I think I'm on the verge of having a panic attack or maybe just a normal breakdown. The urge to nest is almost uncontrollable.

"Did you decide if you'd rather us take turns driving or should we go along with the original plan?" Kolt asks, giving me an encouraging look.

“Whatever is easiest for you,” I say, trying to figure out exactly where my life went wrong.

Most omegas are born to large families. A huge percentage of those are wealthy packs. It’s rare for an omega to grow up the way I did, but it wasn’t an awful life.

My aunt and uncle took me in when my mom died. She wasn’t an omega, and it wasn’t a sure thing that I’d be one. My scent has always been on the sweet side to be a beta, but no one, including me, expected that I’d present.

That was when life took a downhill turn. I grew up poor; the kind of destitute where new shoes and coats were birthday and Christmas presents. But after it became clear that I was an omega, my aunt and uncle didn’t want the trouble of dealing with me anymore. I was too young to be matched through the Omega Protection Authority, so they sent me to a group home.

That was the worst thing they could’ve done because of my designation.

I got out eventually, and things took a turn for the better when I met Shane.

Life really was good for a couple of years.

*Until it wasn’t again.*

“Charlie?” Kolt asks. His brow furrows as he watches me.

“I’m fine either way,” I say, forcing myself to focus on the moment. “Do you know what job you’ll have for me once we arrive? You have an on-site daycare?”

“We do,” Gray says, nodding his agreement. “I took over for my family pack when my dads wanted to retire, but my mom wasn’t quite ready to throw in the towel. She still works a few days a week in the daycare.”

“That’s really sweet,” I say, giving him a tired smile. “She’s an omega?”

“She is,” Gray agrees. “You’ll meet her when we arrive.”

“There are several job options we thought you might consider,” Kolt says, turning to face me. “We’ve got the

daycare, which would be good because you could stay close to Shay. Then there's the restaurant, but it's busy and we didn't know if you've done that kind of work before."

"I have," I say, because I've got the strong urge to assure them that I'm not useless.

"The spa is another possibility," Roarke says, catching my attention as he grins. "It's quiet and we could use someone at the desk to check clients in and out."

Three options and none of them sound awful. I blow out a breath of relief. I know I should go with the restaurant because I'll make more in tips than I'd get at an hourly job, but I know I'm drawn more to the idea of the daycare or even the spa.

"No need to make any choices now," Kolt says softly. "You can give them all a go if you like and see which one is the best fit."

"I'm not sure how you can justify the cost of giving me a place to live and including childcare in that . . ." I sigh.

I can't let myself get bogged down in the negative. It's scary though. Anything that seems to be too good to be true . . . Usually is.

"Right," Gray says, standing up and pulling at his long sleeves that are rolled up around his forearms. He looks at Roarke. "Come along."

Roarke has a weird look on his face. It's somewhere between a bemused smile and a frown, but he pushes himself up and follows Gray into the other attached bedroom.

I twist on the couch, pulling my knees up to my chest.

Kolt offers a bashful smile. "They aren't very covert," he says, laughing and shaking his head. "I'm sure it's overwhelming being an unbonded omega surrounded by alphas."

I shrug because that does sound about right. However I don't think I'm afraid of them. Not even when it's all three of them together.



I'm definitely uncomfortable that they know the situation I'm coming out of, but I don't get the itchy feeling to run or hide.

I think it's just embarrassment at the fact I allowed myself to be treated the way I did.

My impulses tried to protect me from Brent, but I was too deep in grief to understand.

"You are safe with us," Kolt says. He looks so damn sincere that I nod my agreement. I don't want to come off like the scared rabbit that runs from everything.

"I believe you," I assure him.

He's such a big guy, but he's also really gentle. Maybe I am a bad judge of character because he doesn't scare me in the least. Then there's the fact he looks as uncomfortable as I feel. It helps put me at ease. He's got this vibe like the last thing he wants to do is stress or upset me.

"There are some things that we should probably talk about if that's okay?" he asks, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Okay." I give him a nod.

"Right, let's see," Kolt says in a soothing tone. "Did you take pictures of the note you left ending your relationship? Pictures of the condition of the house?"

I have the camera Kathy gave me in my purse. "I did."

"And you're taking suppressants?" he asks, sounding completely uncomfortable.

My face burns, but I assure him I am. I haven't been able to stomach the thought of a heat without Shane.

"Shayley doesn't belong to Brent, right?"

"She's not his," I say, trying to keep the quaver out of my voice.

"Is there any chance of her father looking for her or trying to petition for custody?" he asks.

“No,” I choke out. My jaw slides side to side, but I still feel the rolling wave of grief that comes anytime I think of him. My knees pull closer to my chest, and I bury my face in them, trying to breathe through the hurt. I’m not sure why it still feels like I’m bleeding out from an invisible wound, but even three years later, it still does.

“Shit,” Kolt says. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“I’m okay,” I tell him, refusing to look at him.

I feel the couch bounce slightly as he jumps up. He goes somewhere, and I hear the crinkling of a bag.

“This is technically from Roarke,” he says, kneeling at my side. “But it’s close, and I think maybe you need it.” He wraps a soft, fuzzy blanket around my legs and up close to my neck before tucking the edges around my back. “I wish I knew how to help you feel better.” He blows out a heavy breath. “My impulses are demanding I fix the problem, but . . .”

His huge hand runs over my back as his head shakes. He reminds me a little too much of Shane. Shay’s dad wasn’t just fifteen years older than me with the same kind of physical build. I think the reason Kolt feels so familiar is because of his temperament.

It’s the gentle giant thing.

It isn’t fair to either of us to compare Kolt to a dead man. It isn’t right. Using him as a replacement for what I lost wouldn’t be either. I honestly don’t know what the hell I’m doing with my life. Shane’s been gone for years, but I still miss him as much as the day I heard the news.

I know I’m the problem. I haven’t moved on. I think some of it is not understanding why.

The rest of it is just pure grief over losing my alpha.

Brent definitely isn’t a good guy or normal by any stretch of the imagination, but I do think I probably made matters worse with my inability to let go of the past. Then again, he knew I wasn’t ready to move on, but he pushed anyway.

I won't blame myself for his behavior. I offered to leave many times, but that only made him angrier. He wanted complete control over my life, and he wanted to erase Shane from my memory.

I realize I'm still staring at Kolt with tears in my eyes. He's still got a hand on my back and one on my shin, and he's patting me like he's desperately trying to figure out how to help me feel better.

It's that look of concern on his face that gets me. Nobody has looked at me like that in a long time. He's kneeling, but I scramble over into his lap. I don't think it's a conscious thought because I'm as surprised by my actions as he is. The blanket falls away as I land facing him. He hits his ass with an oomph, but immediately wraps strong arms around my back.

"Hey, you're okay," he murmurs into my hair.

It's totally uncalled for. I know it's not his responsibility to coddle or reassure me. My nose roots around his chest as my legs wrap around his back, and I just breathe. It feels so damn familiar that with my eyes closed, I could swear it's Shane.

He's so big and warm, and he feels like safety. Their scents are different, but Kolt's is just as comforting as Shane's was.

I'm never going to move on because I can't let go of the past. It feels like the pain is so intertwined with who I am now that I don't know what's left of me without it.

That's a staggering realization.

It's easier to hurt than it is to heal at this point.

"I knew I should have brought Motley. She's an excellent cuddler, and she always cheers me right up," he says, running a hand over the back of my head.

"Ohmigod," I hiss, trying to push myself out of his lap. "You have an omega? A girlfriend?"

They didn't bring her to the cookout, but that doesn't mean she doesn't exist.

"God no," he says, chuckling. He pulls me back into his chest. "Although the guys love to joke that she's my wife.

Shit, sorry that made it sound even worse. She's my Belgian Malinois. That's a dog."

"Oh," I whisper, suddenly feeling a bit sheepish. Sure, I've been all up in his business like I had the right, and I definitely assumed they didn't have a significant other because Kathy never mentioned one, but that's a terrible assumption to make. "I'm so sorry. I have no idea what I'm doing."

I move to once again push myself out of his lap. His hands are unbelievably tender as they hold me in place, but they're also firm in a commanding way that my instincts find reassuring.

"No, please don't apologize. My impulses are kind of frazzled as well, so please don't run either. I'm afraid I'd be tempted to chase you. Only because my instincts are screaming at me to comfort you. Which makes me sound like a total psycho . . . I'm not by the way. Well, not usually." He sighs. "I can't seem to stop talking so I'm going to redirect the crazy talk. Back to Motley. She found a baby kitten last year. The thing wanted no part of her, but I think she decided it was her baby. She carried it around in her mouth and licked it clean. I feel like you're the kitten in this situation, and I'm the overgrown mutt that won't let you escape . . . God, this also isn't helping, is it?"

I laugh, shaking my head. The fabric of his T-shirt is smooth under my skin. He smells like key lime pie and that fresh smell that comes after a solid rain.

The way he rambles puts me at ease in a way I haven't felt in a long time, or maybe it's the way he feels so sturdy under me.

"What happened to the cat?" I ask, breathing in a deep lungful of his pheromones. He smells slightly stressed, but not angry.

"She finally escaped. I told you she wanted no part of Motley's obsessive care. She ran out the door one morning and was adopted by Gray's mom. She tolerates Mot when we come for a visit . . ."

I laugh. That's kind of adorable.

"Motley just wants to love her, but yeah, the cat wants no part of it," he says, clearing his throat. His hand tenderly runs over my back. I look up and his face is bright red.

"How old is she?" I ask, snuggling back into his shoulder.

"Three and a half," he says, chuckling. "She was moping something fierce when she saw us packing and realized we weren't going to bring her along. But she's with Gray's mom."

"Ohmigosh. That poor cat will never forgive me for her torment." I shake my head, grinning for what feels like the first time in a long time. "I'm sorry you had to leave her behind."

"No, it's okay. She's getting spoiled like a kid at grandma's house. She takes up a lot of space. Even though she's a good traveler, I knew it would limit the hotels we could stay in. She's also huge, and I didn't know how you or Shay would react."

He really did put a lot of care and consideration into thinking it through fully. It makes me feel melty inside, and I have no idea why.

"It's great that you've got a support system in place so you have someone you can ask. You're lucky to have that."

"Definitely," he agrees. "Gray's family is still around the resort, and it's nice, especially for holidays. My family is in Tennessee, except for Kat, which you know."

I nod. I don't know what to say to not sound pathetic. My aunt and uncle are still alive, at least as far as I know, but they also didn't want an omega living with them. I haven't seen them since I was sixteen.

Shane has family, but after he died, they wanted no part of me or Shay. You'd think they'd want a relationship with their granddaughter, but it seemed like they were uncomfortable with the fact my designation didn't come attached to some well-known breeding lineage. It's not unheard of for there to be age gaps between alphas and their omega, but it was clear they were also not pleased with my age.

“So we’re thinking we can either all get a good night of sleep here and then head out first thing in the morning, or we can leave this evening and drive while you and Shay sleep,” Kolt says, still running his giant hand over my back. “It’s completely up to you.”

“I’m okay with either,” I reply around a yawn. I think his pheromones are making me sleepy.

“I guess we’ll stay here tonight then and see how it goes with traveling during the day,” he murmurs.

I nod my agreement, and a low purr vibrates from his chest. I realize I’ve been running my fingers over his pec and pull my hand down, but I don’t force myself to climb out of his lap.

An alpha purring to comfort an omega is basically the ultimate act of tenderness. I appreciate the effort.

I’m aware I’m on the verge of falling apart at the seams, or I was before Kolt let me snuggle up to his chest. It feels like he held me together with pure kindness when I was melting down.

Which is kind of disturbing when I let myself think too much about it.

# Chapter Seven

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## Roarke

“Animals, children, and now apparently, sad-eyed little omegas,” I say, tossing myself down on the couch.

Kolt has a way with everything from skittish animals to slow-to-trust humans.

Other alphas always size him up as a threat, and he could do some damage if he had to, but he’s not one to go for violence as anything except a last resort.

He shoots a look that says I’d better not wake her or he’ll rip my head off. They do make for quite the intriguing puzzle. She’s wrapped around my packmate, and her face is buried in his damn armpit.

Omegas are darling. They have the most bizarre impulses, and yet, as a designation, we can’t help but be drawn to them with a fierceness that is rarely matched.

“What’s the verdict?” I whisper to make sure I don’t wake the sleeping beauty. She’s sad, and it triggers every fucking impulse I’ve managed to ignore for the better part of my thirty-four years of life.

“Stay tonight, travel tomorrow,” Kolt replies in a weird, raspy voice that I think is meant to be a whisper.

“How’d that happen?” I ask, nodding to the two of them all tangled together on the floor. “Is that the blanket I bought her?”

“It is. She needed it,” he murmurs, studying her. “As for this? I’m not really sure. She seemed okay, but I asked about



Shay's dad and she shut down *hard*."

"Feck," I say, sighing and stretching back.

"Yeah," he says, but his focus is firmly on the omega wrapped around his chest.

My mind races. I often shut down when someone is sick or brings up my mam in general, so I definitely understand that it's possible to have triggers that other people don't necessarily understand.

Charlie is pretty. She's got a bit of a baby face that points to her being a few years too young for the likes of us. But then I've caught the look in her eyes a few times and thought, *she's seen some shite*.

I recognize that look. It's looking back at me every time I glance in a mirror. It makes it hard not to be drawn to her. She's got curves stacked in all the proper places to utterly entrance a man, or in this case, an alpha. The fact her scent makes my cock hard and has since the first time I met her isn't something I let myself consider too fully.

We're meant to escort her to the resort and help her set up her life. Nothing more.

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"Mommy?" Shay's small voice calls out. She sounds utterly terrified.

I'm up and headed to grab her before I can blink. I push open the door and wide blue eyes meet mine.

"Look at you," I murmur, giving her a smile. She's sitting up with her hair a mass of sweaty curls. She looks a bit of a mess. "Did you have a good nap?"

She blinks. The look quickly turns to the meanest of all mean-muggin' looks I've ever been given by a member of the opposite sex.

Women universally love me.

It's kind of my thing. If I can't win them over with a few well-placed smiles then my accent hasn't failed me yet.

Shayley is not impressed by either.

"Woke up cranky?" I ask, rolling my lips together to keep from laughing. "I feel you." I hold out a fist and she continues to squint at me. "Mummy's taking a nap because she was tired."

"Oh," Shay says, rubbing at her eyes with a small hand. She's clutching the comforter to her with the other, looking completely confused and slightly afraid.

"You want to go see her so you know she's okay?" I ask, rocking on my toes.

I'm not exactly sure what the fuck I'm doing. Charlie probably doesn't even want us interacting with her kid.

But she looked so peaceful sleeping on Kolt that . . .

Yeah, okay so it never actually crossed my mind to wake her.

I'm doing my best here.

Kids and I don't really mesh until they're old enough to tell me what they need. I didn't grow up with a brood full of siblings like Kolt or Gray.

"Okay," she huffs. She drops the blanket and stretches her tiny arms up.

Well shite, now I actually have to pick her up.

Which is fine.

It's totally not a problem.

I just need her to not burst into tears or scream bloody murder and we're good.

Totally golden.

Absolutely okay.

I very quickly realize I've never actually held a baby. Miniature humans are fine. I've cooed at them and

occasionally squeezed a baby hand when Gray or Kolt's siblings pop another one out.

So I've been in their general vicinity.

I can do this shite.

I can totally do it.

I square my shoulders like I'm preparing to take a punch and scoop her up with my hands under her armpits.

"Want to walk or should I carry you?" I ask, blowing my lips together.

Shay stares at me with her big blue eyes and shrugs.

That was not helpful.

I try to remember how Gray held his nephew, but when I crook my arm and try to lay her down into it she sits up giving me a look that would melt the skin off a lesser man.

She yanks on my T-shirt and then she's sitting on my forearm. It takes about four seconds of us blinking at each other for me to realize she's soaked and leaking on my arm.

To be fair, she did sleep for over an hour, possibly closer to two.

We need to buy Charlie a better diaper brand. They're obviously faulty.

"Well, what the hell are we going to do now?" I ask.

"Mommy," Shay says, pointing to the door.

"That's an option," I acknowledge. "Let's get a towel and wrap you up until we can calmly wake up Mum. She seemed right tuckered out."

I head into the attached bathroom and grab a towel off the wall. It takes a little maneuvering, but we get her covered. She looks like she had a day at the beach.

There's some mumbling that I believe ends with, ". . . drink?"

I quirk an eyebrow. This feels like dangerous territory. Like when your drunk friend says just one more, but they're

already shit-face wasted.

“I suppose,” I say, because no one should ever expect me to make good choices.

“I like juice,” she says. Her small head nods just to make sure I get it in case there were any communication breakdowns between us during that three-word sentence.

We head out into the living room area and Kolt is *still* studying Charlie like a total grade-A creeper.

“We have a slight problem,” I say, catching Kolt’s attention. “She’s soaked.”

“Gotcha,” he replies, running a hand over Charlie’s head. “Hey, pretty girl. I think it’s time to wake up.”

The process is slow going since Kolt seems to be trying to give her a chance to get her bearings. I shrug, grab a juice box from the mini fridge and pop the straw in. Her tiny hand grips a little too tightly, and half the juice squirts all over my shirt.

Shayley pushes her lips together, looking at me like she’s afraid I might be upset.

I shrug, grinning so she knows it’s no big deal.

“It’s better than pee,” I say, putting myself down on the couch with the wrapped-up Shay on my lap.

It takes a few minutes, but Charlie eventually joins the land of the living.

“Shit,” she whispers. “I’m so sorry. I never meant to fall asleep.”

“You needed it,” Kolt says, giving her a soft smile.

“I’ve got to check on Shay,” she says, rubbing at her eyes in a way that reminds me of a few minutes ago with her daughter.

“All good,” I say, waving to catch her attention. Then I nod to the soggy toddler on my lap.

Shay’s busy examining her busy board, and she barely looks up at her mum.

“We had a bit of a diaper explosion, but other than that, we survived,” I muse, giving her a wide smile.

I kept the kid alive for, like, five minutes with minimal supervision. I’m winning at this whole babysitting thing.

“Oh no,” Charlie says, popping up. She’s suddenly a lot more alert. “That’s my fault. She fell asleep after we ate and I didn’t think to change her.”

“She had a solid sleep,” Kolt says. “Just under two hours.”

Charlie comes over and stretches out her arms.

“Here go,” Shay says, handing me her mostly empty juice box.

“Thank you.” I chuckle as Charlie grabs her daughter and heads to change her.

Once she’s inside the room, Kolt sighs heavily. “I almost don’t want to make it to Colorado because then she won’t need us anymore.”

I give him a look that screams *be careful who you say that shit in front of*. I know what he means. He wants to be able to care for Charlie. But if she heard that, I’m afraid she’d worry we were like her ex.

We’ve already had this particular discussion.

Charlie is going to need therapy and some time on her own once we arrive at The Exchange. It’s not what Kolt wants to hear, but I know he understands that fact already, so I let it go.

---

We eat dinner in the hotel restaurant to get Charlie and Shayley out of the room. I’m not sure how I expected Shay to act, but for the most part, she acts like a tiny adult with fewer patience and a much more concise vocabulary.

The server continually flirts with me during dinner to the point I think Gray is going to force me to switch places so he’s closer to the edge.

Charlie doesn't say a word, simply keeps her eyes on her plate and ignores the blatantly uncomfortable situation.

The woman serving our table is a beta, unless my nose fails me. I hope she doesn't realize Charlie is an omega.

From the outside looking in, I imagine this could look two ways.

The first appears like Kolt, his wife, and child are out for dinner with two male friends, this especially might seem true since they share one side of the booth. It also doesn't help that Shay really only interacts with him and Charlie.

The second option is that we're a family pack and the woman is being a bit disrespectful with her flirtatious nature in front of my omega.

The server is pretty enough, but we're here for a single night, and even playful banter seems borderline disrespectful to Charlie.

I do my best to completely shut down every interaction, but Gray and Kolt seem annoyed. I'm generally the source of their displeasure. I'm not sure how else I'm supposed to handle the situation to appease them. I'm not engaging or encouraging her smiles or flirty comments.

How am I supposed to act in this situation?

I make jokes, trying to win over Shay and bring Charlie out of her shell.

Gray and Kolt continue to hover over everything, like if they only try hard enough they can will away all her past trauma.

Sorry to inform them, life doesn't work that way.

Grayson glares with a vengeance when I have a third beer delivered with dinner.

I'm six-foot-three with a solid build. I wouldn't be wasted from three shots, but I have a coke after because he might be right.

Drinking and domestic violence often go hand-in-hand. There's zero part of me that wants to remind Charlie of her ex.

After dinner, Charlie disappears into her room with Shay. I know it's going to be a busy day tomorrow, but when I try to call it a night, my brain refuses to shut off.

I push myself out of bed, get dressed in gym clothes, and go to the hotel gym to burn off some energy.

It's a little after one a.m. when I finally make it back to the suite. I aim to grab myself a bottle of water when I see Charlie sitting on the couch in the dark. She has the blanket I bought her wrapped around her shoulders and her knees pulled up to her chest.

I glance between her and the door to the room I'm sharing with the guys. I'm not sure it's actually my place to intercede.

It seems like maybe she needs a minute to herself.

But then I scent her stress pheromones. They're heavy in the air, and it's unusual to scent emotions other than arousal. Occasionally, things like anger, stress, and sadness can be picked up, and now is clearly one of those times.

I rock on my heels.

My head swivels from Charlie to the door to the bedroom. No one should sit around crying alone. Especially not an omega.

I'm sweaty from the gym, but I still put myself down on the couch next to Charlie. Her face pops up, and even in the mostly dark room, it's clear she's been crying. Her nose is red and her eyes are slightly swollen.

In most situations, I use humor to defuse deep emotions. The air is so tense around her that I feel like it might be insulting to try to find a way to make her laugh.

"I missed it," she whispers, shaking her head and swiping at her nose. "Three years today, and I didn't realize."

I frown because I have no idea what that means. I'm not a bloody fool. I comprehend that she forgot something, but I'm just not sure what it was that she overlooked and why it's so

devastating. I don't think mentioning it's no longer yesterday will help lessen her pain.

I go with, "You've had a lot on your plate."

I'm feeling rather useless.

"I didn't realize the date," she says, but it's muffled by the fact her face is buried in her hands. "Ohmigod, I missed it."

Jesus Christ, where's Kolt when I need him? Or Gray. He can be a bit cold and reserved at times, but even he's more in touch with his emotions than I am. In fact, I do my fucking best to ignore all difficult emotions on a regular basis. It's likely why I have such an affinity for ale and the occasional need for a hard liquor.

I bury that shite deep like a pro.

"Charlie," I start, but I've got not a single idea of what to say next. I'm guessing being an adult it would be improper to choose avoidance at a time like this. "Please tell me what's the matter."

"I turned on the TV for cartoons for Shay, and I saw the date on the guide," she sobs. "I didn't want Shay to sense my sadness, so I came out here. I also didn't want to wake her up with my crying."

"I understand," I tell her, stretching out a hand and patting her knee.

*For the love of God . . . Where are my packmates when I need them?*

"No, you don't," she whispers. "I'm a terrible person."

My jaw falls open as I try to figure out how the bloody fuck we ended at this destination. If she's questioning her character, she will absolutely never hear of the things that keep me up at night. The horrors of war haunt many men. It just so happens, I'm one of them.

"I hurt so bad, I don't know how to make it stop," she sobs out the words.



I'm still fucking frozen. My chest radiates with a painful thump just looking at her. There's no doubt in my mind, Charlie has more damage than any of us realized.

“Okay, lovely. I'm practically useless when it comes to making someone feel better, but I can't sit here watching this any longer.” I twist toward her fully and awkwardly stretch out my arms.

Alphas comfort omegas.

Omegas calm alphas.

We have a goddamn universal dynamic.

My impulses won't allow me to watch her suffering and not at least *try* to fix it. The fact I'm pretty fucking sure this isn't something that can be easily rectified doesn't stop me from trying.

Charlie's chest heaves with a sob. I grip her hips and lift her into my lap. The blanket gets trapped between us, but I remove it and tuck it around her back with the edges over her arms. She kneels over me, still snotty and tear stained.

“Oh, sweetheart,” I mutter, unsure of what to do next.

Kolt blinks at wild animals, crying babies, and heartbroken women, and they instantly trust him. I've not the first idea how to make this situation better.

“Are you feeling unsettled without a nest?” I ask, but even as I say the words, I know I'm off-base. What I don't know is how to broach the subject of what has her in tatters. “I know traveling can be hard on omegas, and it's a huge change.”

“I never really had a solid home after my mom died,” she says, still hovering over me. “Not until Shane, but we weren't married or bonded, and there was no will in place . . .” She sobs, shaking her head.

I finally wrap my arm around her back as the other hand palms her head. I pull her into my sweaty chest as she vibrates with how hard she's weeping.

My gut is a tangle of nerves. I'm guessing Shay's father won't be making any appearances because he's dead. Fecking

hell. How much torment has she lived through? She's younger than me by ten or so years, but she's suffered just as much.

"I forgot," she says, sounding hysterical. She's literally writhing around my lap in agony.

"You didn't forget," I assure her. "You lost track of the days."

My words don't seem to give her any comfort, but she does bury her face close to me. She doesn't struggle away from my comfort so I'm going to assume she needs it as much as I need to give it.

I don't know how we're going to accomplish it, but we are absolutely going to ensure she gets to a better place, both physically and emotionally.

I'm pretty sure I'm more cracked in the head than she is, but that's neither here nor there. She's got a daughter, and Charlie is young enough to bounce back with enough support.

I pray to Christ I'm right about that.

# Chapter Eight

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## Charlie

The next morning is awkward. I wake up drooling on Roarke's chest. At some point during the night, he stretched out across the couch with me on top of him. I'm wedged between the back cushion and his warm frame with the blanket wrapped around my back.

Morning wood is a thing.

Totally a biological reaction and in no way does it signal a physical attraction.

I get that.

I'm totally hip with knowledge. Except it digs very firmly into my pelvis and lower stomach as I try to climb off him to make a quick escape.

It becomes clear it's going to be one of those days when I'm finally coherent enough to take in my surroundings only to spot Kolt in the chair with Shay on his lap. She's eating a croissant and watching the muted television.

"Good morning," he says, giving a wave with the hand wrapped around Shays belly. She's got her head back against his chest, looking completely content.

"G-Good morning," I finally manage to stutter out.

My face aches from crying last night. The throbbing in my temples and neck doesn't help me seem any more put together.

"She woke up about an hour ago and wandered out," Kolt says, giving a chagrined smile. "I hope it's okay. I changed her and got her a cup of milk. Then we looked at pictures of

Motley while Gray grabbed some breakfast from downstairs . . .”

I’m sitting on the edge of the couch with Roarke’s hand on my thigh, and based on his soft snoring, he’s still asleep.

My mouth opens and closes, but no actual words come out.

“I didn’t mean to overstep,” Kolt says, raising his palms.

Shay frowns over her shoulder at him and pulls his hand back to run over her belly.

*Thank you.* That’s what I’m supposed to say in this situation, right?

I’ve never had help with Shay. Never once did Brent watch her so I could sleep. He wasn’t aggressive with her, not that I ever saw anyway, but he literally could not be bothered to put in any effort.

Shay’s small hand runs over Kolt’s as she pulls the croissant to her mouth with the other, and I’m still freaking dumbfounded. These men aren’t a replacement for Shane. They shouldn’t have to do anything more than what they already are. Giving me an out and an opportunity to live safely at The Exchange.

I shake my head.

“Thank you. I appreciate it,” I tell him. The words might even be true. I’m not sure. A ragged breath escapes as I try to get myself together.

“It was nothing,” Kolt says, sounding so damn sincere that I push myself off the couch with little concern for waking Roarke. His hand falls to the couch making me cringe.

I’m being rude.

I know that.

I just can’t seem to stop it.

“I need the restroom . . . Do you mind?” I nod to Shay.

“Of course, take your time,” he says, but I’m already in motion.

I bolt to the attached bathroom in mine and Shay's room. My hands hit the sink as I lean over it to hold myself up.

I'm not just a disaster, I'm also a shit parent. I didn't even kiss my daughter good morning.

I fled because seeing her so comfortable with Kolt was too much. It's really hard seeing Shay interact with him especially.

I think it's because he's so much like Shane, and I know I'll never get to see moments like these of her with her dad. My hands shake against the cool counter as I try to get myself together.

Tears burn in my eyes, and I have to focus really hard to keep myself from going out there and acting like a fool. Every impulse in my system wants to snatch her away and yell that it's not his responsibility to take care of my kid.

I know I'm being irrational. It's a giant overreaction, but guilt churns around in my gut thinking about how comfortable Shay looked with Kolt. She never even got to meet her dad, but Shane was so excited when we found out I was having a girl.

I shake my head, blowing out a heavy breath. My chest hitches as I try to focus on the here and now, but the pain is extreme.

Staying trapped in the past is toxic, not only for me, but for my child.

I know this, but it's still really hard because I don't know how to make the ache in my chest stop.

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"No," Shay whines as I try to buckle her back into her car seat. She's miserable, and I get it. It's boring and uncomfortable, but we just got done with an hour break. "No, Mommy!"

She starts to cry like she might have a full-blown fit, and God help me, but I feel like sitting down and commiserating with her.

“We’ve already been on the road for five hours,” Roarke says. “My legs are getting cramped. Maybe we could find something to do for a bit?”

“I’ll see what’s around,” Gray agrees.

We spend the next several hours at Tony’s Fun Center.

Shayley runs from each activity to the next. Kolt sticks close to her side like they’re best buddies.

Roarke gives me so much space that I think he’s afraid to make eye contact, like maybe he’s convinced I’ll burst into tears if he looks at me too long. My feelings about last night are complicated.

Roarke seems like he’s very at ease with women. He wasn’t flirty with the waitress at dinner last night, but he also didn’t outright shut her down.

Not that he needed to.

Obviously, we have no connection where he would need to do that.

Omegas are notoriously territorial, but I have no rights to any of them. Except he held me while I cried, even though he seemed totally out of his depth and simultaneously uncomfortable as hell. He stuck around.

Gray leaves for half an hour while Shay is playing. I’m not sure where he goes, but the arcade is in a strip mall of other businesses.

I know I had a nap yesterday and several hours of solid sleep on Roarke’s chest, but I’m beat. My headache is still lingering in full force, and I feel run down. I rest my hand on my head and close my eyes for a minute to see if that helps.

“Are you all right?” Gray asks, taking the seat across from mine at the table.

“I’m okay,” I agree, faking a smile.

“We should call it a night after this,” Gray says, grabbing a small bag from his side and putting it on the table.

“We’ve barely made it out of Florida,” I protest.

“Running yourself into the ground won’t get you anywhere if you need to recuperate from the trip once we arrive,” he says, pushing the bag in my direction.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a gift from the three of us.”

The bag has a logo for a big-name cellphone company. I reach inside and find a new smartphone.

“You need it. I’d rather you take it because I’m selfish, and I don’t want you thinking we’re purposely isolating you on this trip.” He frowns. “That was a terrible way to explain that we want to be sure you have a way to communicate with the outside world.”

“Thank you.” I stretch a hand across the table to squeeze his. “I left mine behind and . . .”

“You needed a phone. I’ll leave the choice up to you on if we leave after this or find a hotel close by,” he says, running his finger over the back of my hand.

Kolt approaches with Shay in his arms. Her hand is on his shoulder and her face is lying on his chest. It’s the giant monkey wrapped in her other arm that makes me do a double take.

“Oh my gosh,” I say, hopping up and heading to meet them. “What’s this?”

“It’s her emotional support monkey,” Kolt says, grinning a wide smile that takes over his entire face. “The Irish brute made a joke and it scared her.”

“I’m loud by nature,” Roarke grumbles, appearing by Kolt’s side.

“To make amends, he upgraded her prize . . .” Kolt nods to the two-foot-tall monkey. It has a potbelly, and Shay is holding onto it like she’ll never let it go.

“I think the wee one might be ready for an N-A-P,” Roarke says, spelling out the word. He gives her a goofy look and Shay snuggles closer to Kolt’s chest.



“Are you sleepy?” I ask, stretching out my hands for Shay. She comes to me, but shakes her head no.

“Mummy, you weren’t supposed to put me on blast,” Roarke says, tossing an arm around my shoulder. “How will I ever get the girl to like me?”

I laugh, shaking my head at the ridiculous look he gives me.

If he can ignore how I embarrassed the hell out of myself last night then I guess I can, too.

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The hotels in Alabama aren’t nearly as fancy as the one in Orlando. The guys stop at three different places, and I’m starting to get a little anxious by the time Grayson comes out of the third.

Shay’s asleep in her car seat, and we probably could have gotten another hour or two of driving in without her waking up. We’re in the middle row, Roarke is in the very back, and Kolt is in the passenger seat.

Gray climbs into the car and immediately spins to face me. “This hotel has two connecting rooms available. One has two queens and the other is a king. All non-smoking, of course. Will that work for you?”

“Yeah,” I agree. “That’s fine.”

---

We eat dinner that night in a small chain restaurant that’s kind of loud. It’s not a big deal, but for whatever reason, my impulses are over-stimulated by all the people and noise.

Kolt and I share one side of the booth with Shay in a booster seat between us. Roarke and Gray take the other side.

The meal is delicious, and Shay is surprisingly well behaved. Kolt takes up so much of our side of the booth that

he stretches an arm over the back.

“I’m stuffed,” I murmur to Shay.

“I like it,” she says, giving me a chocolate-covered grin.

“Me too,” Roarke muses, dropping his spoon on the plate of cake they’ve been sharing.

“Thank you for sharing with her,” I tell him, giving him a tense smile.

I haven’t felt overwhelmingly uncomfortable around him today, but maybe I have just a little.

He saw my breakdown up close and personal. I haven’t cried like that in front of anyone except Brent back when he was pretending to be someone else.

“Who could say no to that face?” he asks, smirking around his beer bottle. His blond hair is pulled up in a bun on the back of his head. He winks, and a weird fluttering bounces around my stomach.

Roarke is flirty and playful by nature. I’ve known guys like that before. He’s just friendly and fun with everyone. I can’t let myself get too attached.

My head falls back against the bench. Kolt’s hand tenderly runs through my hair, and it feels so damn familiar that my eyes fall shut. Shane did the same thing whenever I was stressed or tired, and it never failed to put me at ease.

“Mommy,” Shay says, patting my arm.

“Yes, sweet pea?” I ask, trying to will away the ache in my chest.

“I love you,” Shay says.

“I love you, too,” I assure her. She stretches out her arms, and I carefully lift her out of the booster seat and pull her into my lap. Kolt doesn’t stop running his fingers through my hair, and I don’t ask him to. It’s extremely calming in a strange way.

“Are we done?” Gray asks, eyeing the bill and dropping cash.

“We’re done,” I agree. “Thank you for dinner.”

“Anytime.” Gray scoots out of the booth.

I twist to slide out, and Kolt has already moved the booster seat so I can climb out.

“Are you going to let me carry you, ladybug?” he asks, holding an arm out for Shay. She looks up, nodding her agreement, and climbs right out of my lap. She walks across the bench into his outstretched arm.

I stare completely dumbfounded for several seconds before getting myself together.

“Come along, lass,” Roarke says. He’s waiting at the end of the table. “I’ll carry you if you’re jealous of the wee one.”

I snort a laugh, shaking my head.

Roarke pulls me up out of the booth and wraps an arm around my lower back. “Like sweet orange cream,” he murmurs, guiding us toward the exit. “That’s what you smell like. You are quite the delectable little omega, aren’t you?”

Even though I can recognize he’s just trying to be polite, my heart races at his words. I’m in run-down mommy mode all the time lately, but I do give him an appreciative smile.

I know I can’t let myself become reliant on their kindness. It’s a blessing to have help during the trip, but once we make it to The Exchange, they’ll go back to their lives, and I’ll start mine. It’s hard not to focus on how lonely and overwhelming all that seems.

As a designation, omegas are wimpy. We need alphas for their protection and their coddling. Add in the fact we physically need their pheromones to soothe our system, and it becomes an entirely different problem that I’m not ready to acknowledge just yet.

# Chapter Nine

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## Kolt

The ladybug and I are playing with a container of blocks that Gray gave Shayley when we got back from dinner. I offered to keep an eye on her so Charlie could shower in peace.

Shayley sticks another block on the top of her wobbly tower and looks at me when it stays upright. I give her a high five, and she squeals in delight.

“Are you listening?” Kathy snaps. “This is important, Kolt.”

“Sorry, Kat,” I say, grimacing even though she can’t see it through the phone. “What’s going on?”

“Brent came over for a visit tonight,” she says, sighing heavily.

I go rigid. I hate the fact she lives next to that asshole. I know Jim and her other alphas have been talking about selling the house just to get the fuck away from him.

“And?” I ask, trying to keep my voice level.

“He didn’t say a word about Charlie. It was weird as hell. He was on his best behavior, but it was plastic. He had a single beer with Jim and Reggie, asked to use the bathroom, and left.” Kathy sighs. “I think he was making sure she wasn’t hiding somewhere in the house.”

“Shit, Kat,” I growl.

It startles Shay, and I whisper a quick apology.

“It’s okay,” Shay says with an adorable frown on her face. “Don’t do it again.”

“I’ll try,” I agree, but it’s one of those things that’s almost impossible to control.

“You’ve already won over the little one?” Kathy asks, her voice much lighter.

“We’re getting there. Do you think he suspects something? Is there a likelihood he’ll try to follow her?” I ask, trying to keep my voice low. “Here’s another red one for your tower.” I hand Shay the block in an attempt to distract her.

“Thank you,” she says, and it takes some deciphering to figure out what she said. Sometimes her words run together and it’s freaking adorable. I find myself grinning down at her despite the severity of the situation.

“You know how men like that can be,” Kathy says, her tone strained. “He wants control. It’s a slap in the face she left before he was done with her.”

I try to stifle the growl, and it ends up coming out a choked cough.

“Bless you,” Shay says, trying to fit the two-piece block on top of one piece.

“Let’s swap those out,” I say, switching them out for her.

“Oh, good job,” Shay says, stretching to grab a few more.

“I don’t think he’s done trying to find her. I’ll put it that way. You know my guys. They aren’t that intuitive, but even they picked up on the weird vibe,” Kathy says.

“I don’t like that he’s right next door to you,” I tell her.

“My guys have already mentioned they want me to come work in the office for a few weeks,” Kathy says.

“Just be aware and keep us updated,” I say, giving Shay a goofy face to offset the serious tone of our conversation.

Kathy and I say our goodbyes and disconnect. I help Shayley pack up the blocks because she’s looking a little sleepy.

“I can . . . milk?” she asks, squinting and nodding her head full of dark curls.

“Yep, let me grab it,” I tell her, heading to the fridge.

Charlie washed out her cup and filled it just for this occasion.

Shay grabs the cup once I make it back and points at the television. Communicating with a toddler is a little like being in a foreign country. You both know a few words in common and the rest is gesturing and pure luck.

I get it settled on a channel with a cartoon I don't recognize and lean back against the headboard.

Charlie's been in the bathroom for a while. I get the feeling she hasn't gotten much time to herself lately. Maybe not since Shayley was born. Thinking of the little monster seems to summon her closer. She scoots over until her head is resting on my bicep. I chuckle as she grins around her cup.

“Motley is absolutely going to love you,” I tell her. “Just don't pull on her ears. They've never stuck up the way they're supposed to. She gets ear infections no matter how hard we try to keep them clean.”

“Oh,” she says, turning to face me. “She will like me?”

“Definitely.” I laugh. “I bet you'll have a hard time keeping her from following you around.”

“I like puppies,” Shay tells me. She asks for a television show I'm not familiar with.

“Sorry, kid. This television has serious limitations.” I grimace. We didn't pick the best town as far as quality hotels go. “We'll see if we can't find you a tablet tomorrow or maybe a portable DVD player since I don't know how Mommy feels about screen time.”

“I like puppies,” Shay says *again*.

“You want to see the pictures one more time?” I ask, pulling my phone out of my pocket.

“Yes,” she says with wide eyes.

So that's what we do. It quickly transforms into me telling her stories about a princess and her puppy on a great adventure.

Shay is passed out cold when Charlie comes out of the bathroom. Her dark hair is wavy and falls around her shoulders as she dries it with a towel.

She's got on a pair of cotton sleep shorts and a military T-shirt that's about five sizes too large. It's faded and worn. Fuck, it's familiar. I've got one exactly like it in my duffel bag. The guys and I packed light for this trip in order to save the majority of the room for Charlie's stuff.

Some of it is being mailed, but it's heartbreaking how little she has to start over with. It pisses me off that there are alphas out there that exploit the relationship between our designation and omegas.

Men like Kathy's ex and Charlie's piece of garbage former roommate. I don't like thinking of them as anything more than that. He didn't treat her well enough to earn the title of anything else. If I hadn't been deployed when the truth of Kathy's situation came to light, I might have done something stupid.

I'm glad that didn't happen because it's clear as hell that I need to be here for Charlie. She might not be quite ready to accept it, but I'm still going to do everything in my power to help out where I can.

Oh my god, I really am Motley in this situation and she's the kitten.

"Kolt?" Charlie tilts her head studying me.

Shay's still sleeping on my arm, and I carefully roll her off and get her settled on a pillow.

"Sorry," I whisper. "We were looking at pictures of Motley and then she wanted me to tell her a story about puppies, so I did, but I think I bored her to sleep."

She laughs. The expression changes her entire face, and my heart beats like a drum.



“Are you sure you guys don’t want to take this room?” she asks.

I run a hand through my hair as my face burns.

“It’s . . .” I groan.

I have no idea why they thought I’d be the best one to broach this subject. Except the few times we got a minute alone with Roarke today, he started to tell us what the hell happened last night.

None of us want her alone if she’s grieving. But more than that, it scares the hell out of me that Brent could show up.

Is it highly unlikely considering he was at Kathy’s a few hours ago? Yes, but theoretically, if he drove straight through, he could make it to us by morning.

In addition, it’s not the best hotel. Security isn’t terrible, but it’s not great. It’s like I’m mentally trying to convince *myself* when I need to be convincing *her*.

“Okay, so we thought maybe one of us could sleep in that bed,” I say, nodding to the bed closest to the door. “Just in case because . . .” I sigh heavily. “I’d feel better if I was between you two and the door. It’s totally up to you. If you’re uncomfortable then—”

“Yeah,” she says, taking a step toward me. “I think that would be okay.”

“I’ll run over and change into pajamas and be right back.” God, my face feels like it’s actually on fire. I’m thirty-two years old, and Charlie turns me into a bumbling teenager.

“That sounds good,” she agrees, hanging her towel over the computer chair.

I give a nod and head for the connecting door.

“And Kolt?”

“Yeah?” I ask, turning to face her.

“Thank you,” she says, and her eyes crinkle with sincerity.

“Always,” I say, turning to run.

The six-foot-six alpha bolts from the five-and-a-half-foot omega.

I'm pretty sure I meant to say anytime, but *fuck my life*.

Always seems a hell of a lot more accurate as far as what I'm hoping for.

I only need to figure out how to help her heal from whatever or whoever she's grieving. Prove to her not all alphas are like her fuckwad ex. And show her that she can trust me.

So yeah, that's totally feasible before we get to Colorado.

Fuck my life.

---

I'm not sure what time it is that I wake up to soft, whimpering moans, but I sit straight up. I'm out of the hard-ass motel bed and hovering over Shay and Charlie. Only it's not Shayley.

Charlie is dreaming something awful. She writhes around, and her scent is acrid. It's crazy how sensitive my nose is to her different smells. It's almost like I can pick out all of her moods, which is unreal, especially since she's taking suppressants. They *should* offset some of an omega's pheromones, but without using scent blockers, an alpha will still pick them up. Just normally not to the level of which I seem to be attuned to Charlie; they really should dilute some of that.

She's curled on her side in the fetal position even in sleep. When she starts to whimper, "No."

I've had enough. I can't listen to anymore.

"Hey, sweet girl," I murmur, running my hand over the back of her head.

"Shane?" she sobs.

No, definitely not. The name doesn't feel great slipping from her lips, but I'm also starting to put the pieces together.

“No, sweetheart. It’s Kolt,” I tell her, squatting down so I can look at her at eye-level. “I think you were having a nightmare.”

“I was,” she says, sitting up. “I think I’m going to be sick.” Her feet hit the ground and then she stumbles toward the bathroom.

I stand frozen for a couple of seconds. My impulses scream to follow her and take care of her. It’s a constant battle not to overstep too far. I’m aware I’ve done a pretty stellar job of walking the line—of weaving back and forth into and out of being too pushy.

The door is closed, but I hear the unmistakable sounds of gagging. My head falls back as it shakes.

Fuck me.

This is an impossible situation. Being an alpha around a vulnerable omega triggers every instinct in my system.

I rock on my toes and decide that if she doesn’t need me then she’ll tell me to go. I grab a bottle of water and her towel off the chair and head for the bathroom door.

“Charlie?” I knock lightly. The water in the sink is on and the toilet flushes. She doesn’t answer. I wait thirty seconds, which in fact, feel like several eternities, and call out again.

She doesn’t reply, so I try the handle because obviously boundaries went out the window some time yesterday when she snuggled up to my armpit and fell asleep in my lap like she’s *my* omega.

Charlie *is* meant to be my omega. I’ve known it since the first time I laid eyes on her. When her scent hit me, I knew I was well and truly fucked.

When the door opens, she’s sitting on the closed toilet with her face in the crook of her arm.

“Oh, sweetheart,” I murmur, moving slowly as I squat down in front of her. I crack the bottle of water and hold it out. “Here, you should have some.”

“I already brushed my teeth,” she says, taking it in spite of her words. She drinks a few small sips, and I give her the lid to close it. “I’m sorry I woke you up.”

Goddamn. It’s like I can’t help myself. I brush the towel over her face, wiping away the tears.

“Please don’t apologize to me. Not ever again, okay?” I sigh, shaking my head.

I know it’s a sign of past abuse to apologize for things when it’s completely unnecessary. She’s not as quiet as she was yesterday, but over the course of a day and a half, I think the times she’s apologized and thanked us add up to more than all the other words she’s said total.

I drop the towel over the edge of the tub and hold out my arms. Charlie isn’t slender as far as omegas go, but she wraps her legs over mine and ends up sitting on my thighs as I squat. I lift us both with no trouble. It requires a hand on her ass to lift her higher on my torso, but Charlie doesn’t seem to mind.

I carry her into the room and put myself down on the bed I was sleeping on. She stays glued to my chest, so she’s basically kneeling over my form as I lie against the headboard.

I realize pretty quickly . . .

Charlie is touch starved.

There’s a fancy medical term for the condition omegas develop when their needs are ignored for long periods of time, but I know it by the layman’s title. Omegas require physical touch and comfort. It’s a caveat of their entire designation, and it’s not optional. When they don’t have it, their system literally shuts down.

It’s not just touch either.

They need alpha pheromones to soothe them once they reach adulthood. There’s another substance they need from us, but even thinking about it right now kind of makes me feel like a dick.

The opposite side of the equation is true for alphas. Without omegas, we end up feral.

If we don't have regular contact with an omega, it can lead to hyper-aggression. It hits different alphas at different ages. Some never run into it during their entire life, even if they never bond with an omega, but most do. They develop an always-on-the-attack mentality. It leads to increased physical aggression, and it's hard to come back from.

I try to give Charlie that feeling of security and safety that I know she'll be craving, but without making her feel trapped. I wrap my arms around her back as my hand rubs soothing patterns.

She whines.

The sound makes me feel like I'll crawl out of my skin if I don't fix the problem. It's a biological reaction, the same way betas and omegas act when an alpha barks.

"Shh, sweet girl," I murmur against the side of her head.

The last thing she needs right now is for Shayley to wake up. The little lady is important, but if Charlie doesn't start taking care of herself, she's going to find herself completely tapped out.

To be a good mom, she has to have something left in the well to give.

"Tell me how to help you . . ."

She doesn't answer. Her head shakes against my T-shirt.

"Please?" I'm practically begging. I can hear the plea in my tone.

"I don't know how to fix it," she says. "I don't think I'm fixable."

Fuck, that doesn't sound good. I'm not a therapist, but her words send a jolt of terror through my system. Physically, I'm the stereotype of my designation, but not emotionally.

I don't like barking to get my way or force compliance. I'm not one to use my size to intimidate anyone. In general, I'm pretty easy going, and I'm okay with letting my packmates take control. The only thing I put up a fuss about was when Gray tried to say he didn't want dog hair in the house. I very

politely told him to fuck off and brought Motley home with me anyway. He still bitches about the hair to this day, but he loves the fury beast.

Charlie isn't crying, but she's got this weird hitch in her breathing that I think means she's trying to hold it back.

My mind races.

I'm an alpha.

This is my omega. She might not know it yet, but I do. She needs me to figure out how to make this better.

My mind files through facts I learned almost fifteen years ago in school. Omegas who panic should be brought to their nest if at all possible.

*We're shit out of luck there.*

Alphas should provide care and skin-to-skin contact to maximize pheromone absorption.

I gently bump Charlie forward and pull with a hand at the back of my neck. I toss my shirt aside and pull her back to my chest. My wrist wraps around her head as I run my fingers over her cheek. I can't see her face.

*I'm supposed to be purring.*

It takes a solid minute of focusing on breathing in deep hits of her scent before my body finally gets on board with what I need from it.

"That's it," I murmur, nuzzling my cheek to her head. "Just breathe."

I'm tall and I've got a solid build, but I'm also softer than most alphas. I'm strong as hell, but I'm not super cut or defined.

Charlie's warm breath puffs out against my skin as she cuddles closer, and all my self-doubts seem to melt away. Maybe being cushioned isn't a bad thing.

"Have you ever felt like maybe your soul died, but your body didn't realize it, so somehow you just keep living?" she whispers the words and my heart sinks even further.

A choked sound escapes my throat. My mind plays through things to say to give her reassurance, but I'm afraid I could make matters worse at this point.

"You're not alone," I murmur as she runs her fingers over my sternum.

"I know I'm not being fair to you. I'm sorry for that." Her voice trembles as she speaks. "I miss him so much, and you remind me of him."

"Shane?"

"Y-Yeah," she agrees. "He was always smiling. I should've realized that Brent doesn't have laugh lines. It's such a small thing, but I noticed that recently, and it really stuck with me."

"Shane is Shay's dad?"

"He was," she says with a hitch in her voice. "That's how I got her name. I stuck Shane and Charlie together and got Shayley."

Yeah, he's definitely no longer living. My assumptions were correct. It's not a great feeling to be compared to a dead guy, but I'm not going to let that bother me when she's obviously desperate for something to cling onto.

"Tell me about him," I suggest, running my fingers through her hair.

"I aged out of foster care while I was still in my senior year of high school. I worked at this seedy little diner near the interstate. Evening and night shifts because I was determined to graduate even though my teachers . . ." She shrugs. "I'm an omega. Everyone assumed I'd just apply to be matched, find a wealthy enough pack, and live the good life."

"Shit," I say, shaking my head. "Our society is really screwed up in some ways."

"Yeah," Charlie says, laughing mirthlessly. "Shane came in one night for coffee on the way home from his shift. He was a lot older than me, but he was just one of those really good human beings. It took a few weeks of him coming back every night before he even asked my name." She laughs, shaking her

head. “Once he realized I was living in a hotel, he brought me home with him, and I never left.”

My hands stall their steady pattern. I blow out a heavy breath and focus on not obsessing about the fact Charlie was an eighteen-year-old, unclaimed omega living in a fucking *hotel*.

“I think the age difference really got to him, especially at first. I swear I was head over heels gone for him, but he moved at a snail’s pace.” She chuckles. “I graduated and that helped. We’d just started talking about looking for a pack or possibly being matched through the OPA, but I ended up pregnant. He was pretty traditional. He felt like bonding should wait to see if we found a pack so everyone would be on equal footing . . .”

She’s quiet for so long I don’t think she’ll continue. “One night he was on the way home after his shift. He was an EMT. He stopped to get gas and . . .” Her breathing hitches. “There was a robbery.”

“Shh, it’s okay,” I tell her as she starts to cry again.

“I think I fell asleep waiting for him. In fact, I know I did. For whatever reason, I thought he forgot his keys and was knocking on the front door. It doesn’t even make any sense because he always came through the garage, but I was sleepy and out of it . . .”

At this point, I know what’s coming. I don’t even need to hear her say it.

“It’s okay,” I say *again* because I don’t have any other words apparently.

“Brent was one of the officers. They weren’t close, but they knew each other. I’d been asleep for hours while he was already gone. I had been sleeping for *hours* . . .” She looks up at me. Her face is a mask of pain and heartbreak.

“Oh, sweetheart,” I grimace, nuzzling my cheek to hers.

I realize pretty quickly that she’s not the only one crying. I can feel her pain as if it’s my own. I can’t even imagine what that was like. Not only losing the man she loved so



unexpectedly, but also to be pregnant at the same time. It's clear she's got no support system.

*What a fucking nightmare.* Only to then get trapped by Brent and his bullshit. Fuck me.

“It was three years ago yesterday,” she says, staring over my shoulder. “And it still hurts the same way it did when I heard the news.”

# Chapter Ten

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## Charlie

“I think that’s to be expected,” Kolt says, staring into my eyes. He palms the back of my head so tenderly that my eyes slide shut. “Some things I think we don’t truly ever get over. I think maybe we learn to live with the hurt, but that ache is always there.”

He’s right about that. I can’t imagine a time when I don’t think about Shane on a daily basis. But I do think I’d like to be able to remember him without feeling like I’m drowning in the memories.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, shaking my head. “I didn’t mean to spew all of this on you.”

“God, Charlie. I need you to stop apologizing. Let me be here for you,” he says. His eyes rake over my face, and he looks so damn earnest. “You’re not forcing me to listen to your problems. I’m exactly where I want to be and with who I want to be with.”

I blink at him for several seconds before I nod my understanding.

Kolt is a really good man. He doesn’t have to listen to my crap, but he is anyway. He’s tender and puts me at ease in a way that’s difficult to comprehend because only one other person has ever made me feel this safe.

“I haven’t had anyone to talk to for so long . . .” I swallow thickly. “Brent couldn’t stand seeing my grief.”

“That’s because he’s a selfish piece of shit,” Kolt growls. “The way he acted and how he treated you isn’t normal. You

understand that, don't you, Charlie?"

"I do," I agree. "But I'm also pretty sure I pushed him to a bad place with my inability to move on from the past."

"No," Kolt says in a firm tone. "I've known men like him before. Nothing you did would've made him happy. There's something broken inside *him*, and he uses control to try to make himself feel strong and powerful to patch that hole."

I get what he's saying. I really do. I just don't think it helped matters that I wasn't able to let go.

"Listen to me, sweet girl," Kolt says, tilting my chin until I'm looking at his face. "It's true. Whether or not you believe it yet, it doesn't change the fact that men like Brent are never content. No matter how perfectly you acted, he would have always found something new to explode about."

Kolt continues to purr as he tenderly runs his hand over the back of my head. He's dangerous as hell because he's just so freaking peaceful.

I haven't been held like this in three years.

It's addictive.

Being an omega means it's difficult to survive on our own without alphas, and I don't mean financially. We crave physical affection from compatible alphas, and I've ignored that urge for so long that it's practically impossible to resist.

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The next several days of travel go relatively smoothly.

Kolt has quickly won over Shay's trust. I'm not sure how I feel about it. Seeing them interacting so easily makes my heart pang. It's hard to know she'll never get to meet her father and talk to him the same way she's chattering Kolt's ear off.

She asks to sit in his lap for dinner, and that hits me even harder. I know she's fond of him and he's extremely sweet and treats her well, but I worry what that'll mean for her when we

arrive and Kolt gets back to his normal life. Kids get attached really easily.

We're supposed to be arriving at the resort sometime tomorrow if Shay does well traveling.

I've texted with Kathy a few times over the last couple days. She never mentions Brent; just checks in to see how we're doing and bounces on to the next subject. I wish we'd gotten a chance to know each other better while I was in Florida. She's easy to talk to and her giddy excitement about the most random things seems to be contagious.

We're walking out of the restaurant that's directly next to the hotel we're staying in when Grayson links his arm with mine.

"She's out," he says, nodding to Shay, who is busy drooling on Kolt's chest.

The wind blows, and a shiver runs through my entire body. It's crazy how much colder it is here even though it's only September.

"Shit," Gray murmurs, running his hands over my arms. "It's cooling off quickly this year."

Shayley has a thin zip-up style sweater and long pants on, but I didn't think the weather would be this different. All my warmer clothes are being mailed by Kathy.

"I don't have clothes for this type of weather," I say, frowning down at my skirt and sandals.

"Would you be okay with Kolt and Roarke taking Shay to the hotel?" Grayson asks, gesturing to the line of shops. "There are a few clothing stores down that way, and I agree. Shayley needs a thick coat and a few warm outfits. The daytime weather should hold for another few weeks, but the nights especially will be colder as we get further into the mountains."

My eyes fly to Kolt's.

"I think she'll be fine," he says, running a hand over her back. "If she wakes up and needs you then we'll call

immediately.”

“You’re sure?” I ask, chewing at my lip.

“We’ll be okay,” Roarke says, smirking. His hair falls around his face as he nods to Kolt. “That one can charm anyone from old ladies to crabby toddlers. Relax and shop for a bit with Gray. You’ll make his entire night.”

I know they mean well, but it’s hard. I worked part time when Shay was a baby, but I ended up quitting once I realized I was making less than I was paying for daycare.

The one kindness Shane’s family gave me was allowing me to have the money that was left in our checking account and savings accounts. They sold the house right out from under me without a second thought, though, so I guess they figured it was enough to clear their consciences.

“Are there any outlet stores around here?” I ask, fidgeting. I’d much rather shop at thrift stores, but I know there won’t be any of those in this area.

“There are several specialty stores down that way,” Roarke says, giving a wave. “Have fun you two.”

“We’ll let you know if she wakes up,” Kolt says, giving me a soft smile before heading to follow Roarke toward the hotel.

“Let’s see what we can find,” Gray says, giving me a smile as he gently pulls me off toward the row of stores I can’t afford to shop in.

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I never counted the cash Kathy gave me, but I know it’s several *thousand* dollars. I could tell by the massive amount of hundreds that fill the envelope.

Grayson wears a white button-down with the sleeves rolled up over his strong forearms. He fits in just fine in the upscale clothing boutique. He’s wearing some type of men’s combat boot and dark jeans.

I never realized exactly how much he screams *wealthy*. It's not just the pricey watch that slides around as he moves, or the perfect haircut that screams expensive.

It's the entire well-put-together package.

I take a step back from him as he browses. His hair falls in his eyes as he flips through a rack of children's jackets.

They're cute, don't get me wrong. He pulls one from the rack and studies it carefully. It's a wool peacoat, but it's a dress style. It goes to mid-calf on a toddler if I had to guess. He's checking out the dark gray version with large round buttons down the front.

The style is absolutely adorable, and Shayley would look cute as heck in it.

Grayson is in his element. He's already got a couple of long sleeved T-shirts thrown over his free arm, and he pointed out an adorable set of boots to match the dress before looking for Shay's size.

The overpowering urge to bolt hits me square in the chest.

Shane grew up with money. His family is the kind of wealthy where their house is paid off, they've got several vacation homes, and they upgrade cars every two years because they want to—*not* because they're falling apart.

It never clicked that Grayson's family *owns* the resort. Seeing him here in a store I can't afford socks from is making me extremely uncomfortable. They haven't let me pay for a single thing on the trip, which I appreciate more than I can explain, but it's also not their responsibility to buy things for my daughter.

The hurtful things Shane's mom said to me the one time we met play through my mind. I didn't target her son for his money, no matter what she thought.

I loved him more than I think I love myself most days. I was complete with him in a way I'd never felt before.

She made me feel so small while simultaneously blaming me for his death, and all I wanted to do was curl up in a ball

and die with him . . .

But I couldn't because I had Shay bouncing around my stomach.

I felt her move for the first time three days after he died. There had been small flickers and times I wondered, but it was the first time I absolutely couldn't deny it, and I had no one to share it with.

I know I should have moved on by now, but I can't seem to shake away the memories. They've got a hold on me, and they won't let go. Or maybe that's just me. I don't know how to let go of the past because I'm not ready to leave him behind.

I take another large step back and bump into a clothing display.

A pulse of fear flickers through my system as I wait for Brent to scream at me for knocking something over.

I *know* he's not here, but my system expects it.

I aim for the hallway where I think the bathrooms are located, but there are only dressing rooms lining one wall and an emergency exit sign on the backdoor.

The second dressing room door is open.

I bolt inside, taking a seat on the bench in the corner, and bury my face in my hands. There are no tears, and I'm grateful for that. I don't want to embarrass Gray anymore than I already have. Making him walk out of here with a sobbing woman seems like a terrible way to repay his kindness.

I bet they can't wait to be rid of me.

"Hey," Grayson says, closing the door gently behind him. "Is it my taste in toddler fashion? It's bad, isn't it?"

An unexpected laugh bubbles out. It sounds a little hysterical even to my own ears. "No, not at all."

Gray comes closer and squats down in front of me.

"Want to tell me what's wrong?" he asks, running the backs of his fingers over my cheek.



My breath catches as his scent floods my nostrils. He's wearing some expensive cologne, but it only enhances his natural scent of tangerine and bergamot.

"I'm sorry," he says, sighing heavily. "I got excited thinking I might have a shopping partner. I do truly think the two of you need some warmer clothes. The coolest temperatures in Florida during the winter will barely touch where we'll be soon." His dark eyes sparkle in the artificial light. "Come on, I'll get you back to the hotel."

"I'm sorry," I tell him, looking at my lap.

"None of that, little one," he murmurs, tilting my chin until I look at him again. "Kolt mentioned your penchant for apologizing needlessly." His thumb is warm as it brushes over my skin. "I'd much prefer that you explain what I did wrong, so I don't make the same mistake twice."

"Nothing," I assure him. "It was nothing you did."

"Are you feeling the urge to nest?"

My head shakes no, but that might be some of it.

"I can't afford to shop here," I say, avoiding his eyes.

"I'd never expect—" he starts, but I cut him off.

"No, I know. But that's not your responsibility. I might not be in the best position to provide—"

Gray slides his hand over my mouth.

I blink at him in surprise, but not fear.

"No one is questioning your ability to take care of Shayley." Gray startles like he just realized he's been covering my mouth. His hand moves to tenderly caress my cheek. "Fuck, I'm sorry . . . See this is a proper example of when someone should apologize."

My face nuzzles into his wrist as he swipes hair away from my face. He gets very close to my mouth, and my heart pounds rapidly against my ribs. He stares into my eyes as his hand brushes over my skin.

It's such an intimate moment. I mean at least for me it is.

My nostrils flare as I breathe him in. My nose is very fond of the way Gray smells.

I think he's going to kiss me as he hovers his mouth only inches from mine. And I'm really shocked to realize I'm not appalled by the thought.

Gray is handsome and kind. The fact that he smells great and is obviously a compatible match only enhances my attraction to him.

He moves slightly and kisses my forehead.

My stomach sinks because I was really off-base about what was happening here.

"Let's get the few things I picked for the two of you and we'll call it a night," he says, standing.

He offers me his hand and pulls me into his strong chest. The long dark hair on the top of his head falls over his forehead as he grins.

Grayson is incredibly handsome in the classical way, but I've never been attracted to the clean-cut look. Gray doesn't even have facial hair. I've never once been attracted to someone without at least stubble.

Shane had a full beard and wore jeans and boots until they literally fell apart.

My hands clench at my sides.

I'm starting to get frustrated with *myself*. There's absolutely no chance I'll ever be happy if I keep living with both feet firmly planted in the past.

I have a daughter who is growing up more every day. I'm thankful it's highly unlikely she'll remember Brent, but I can't stand the thought of her earliest memories being filled with a mom who was too sad to smile and too broken to truly live.

I want to move on with my life and find happiness. I didn't have a big family growing up. It was always just me and my mom and that was okay until she got breast cancer and I lost her.

I was so unbelievably alone.

If God forbid something ever happens to me, I want Shay to have a whole family—a pack—to care for her and look after her.

I know these guys are only here to escort us to The Exchange, but I am at least going to try to start living again once I get there.

I don't want to be the timid, shy omega who runs from everything and ends up with no one.

That's not really living. It's barely existing.

I already put myself out there once before with Brent. I think I can do it again for the chance to end up happy. Maybe not just yet, but sometime in the near future.

“Let's see what you picked out,” I say, giving Gray the sincerest smile I can manage.

# Chapter Eleven

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## Grayson

The fact we pull into the resort late in the night isn't something I pre-planned. That would be weird. It just so happens that our last day of traveling and the least amount of miles ended up taking the longest amount of time.

Roarke is in the back row, but Charlie is in the passenger seat.

Shayley sweet-talked Kolt into sitting next to her after our last stop. I think Charlie wanted to whole-heartedly protest the distance from her daughter, but she's exhausted.

In the days we've been traveling, Charlie hasn't slept during the drive, not until today.

"Where are you headed?" Roarke asks as I drive past the entrance to the resort.

"To our house," Kolt says, his voice lined in disbelief.

"She's obviously exhausted," I say, keeping my voice low to avoid waking her.

"I'm not complaining," Kolt adds quickly. "Are you excited to meet Motley?"

"Oh yes," Shay says, clapping.

"Shh, let's keep our voices down since Mommy is tired," Kolt says.

"Right," Roarke adds from the back. "It's absolutely not because we're kidnapping the poor woman to our house."

“For the love of God,” Kolt hisses, “don’t even joke like that.”

“I can’t wait to see how this goes once we arrive.” Roarke chuckles, sounding tickled as hell.

It’s only a three-minute drive past the entrance to the resort and then I’m turning onto the road that leads up to the small cul-de-sac of houses.

The one on the far right is ours.

I grimace a bit.

It’s a monstrosity.

I inherited it from my parents pack when they chose to downsize after all my siblings left the nest. My parents now live on the far left of the same cluster of houses. Their home is much more reasonably sized. It’s of a similar feel to Kathy’s house.

*Maybe I could sweet talk them into trading?*

No, that’s ridiculous.

Christ, I’m having anxiety related to Charlie seeing our home. Her reaction in the store last night wasn’t something I anticipated, and that bothers me on an entirely different level.

Charlie is difficult for me to get a read on, but I’m generally excellent at adapting.

I intend to learn everything there is to know about her, so I never unintentionally walk us into a situation like I did last night.

I click the button to open the garage door and park the SUV.

I unbuckle and twist to face Charlie. She’s still curled up with the blanket Roarke gifted her wrapped up to her neck. Kolt handles helping Shay out of her seat.

“Charlie,” I murmur, running my fingers over her cheek. My alarm instantly ratchets up. Her skin practically scalds mine. I move to climb out, and Kolt is standing with Shayley in his arms. “I believe she has a fever.”

“Well, shit,” Kolt says, blanching and looking at Shay. “How about we go get Motley from Gayle’s?”

“Okay,” Shay says with wide eyes. “I like puppies.”

That nearly hundred-pound beast hardly qualifies as a pup, but I have more pressing matters to attend to.

I circle the back of the vehicle only to find Roarke is all up in her business as he unhooks her seat belt, carefully removing her from the passenger seat. His eyes meet mine as he cradles her in his arms like a bride. “If you haven’t already then it’s time to text Jess. Could you get the door?”

I follow behind him, fishing my phone from my pocket and unlocking the door into the house. I text our nurse practitioner and frown when I realize it’s nearly ten p.m.

How the hell did it take us so long to travel a few hundred miles?

“I don’t feel so good,” Charlie groans. “Where’s Shay?”

“No need to worry. She’s with Kolt collecting Motley.” Roarke strides into the house and through the laundry room. He heads into the kitchen and takes the back set of stairs to the second floor. “Seems like you’re a bit under the weather, lovely.”

“This isn’t the resort, is it?” Charlie asks, glancing around.

“We brought you to our house,” Roarke tells her, aiming for the guest bedroom.

I flick on the bedside lamp to give us some light.

Roarke pulls back the comforter with one hand and lays Charlie on the side closest to the attached bathroom. He sits on the edge, running a hand over her face. His eyes meet mine. Pure terror is plain to see.

*He’s going to run.*

I know it’s true before he makes a move to push himself up. The four of us together make quite the group. It just happens to be Roarke’s turn to let his damage show.

“I’ll wait for Jess downstairs,” he says, glancing between Charlie and the door.

“Maybe bring back a few bottles of water and the thermometer?” I suggest to his retreating form.

“Yeah, all right. Of course,” he says, his accent thicker than normal. His jaw is tight as he nods and heads out.

“You should probably go, too,” Charlie says, curling up into a ball. “I’m not sure what I caught, but I feel terrible.”

“None of that.” I pull her hair up and twist it, running my fingers down the crease of her neck. She’s burning up. I’d be mildly concerned she was going into heat, but none of the other signs are present. It’s highly likely she picked up a bug, nothing more. “Alphas take care of omegas. You, my dear, need to relax and let us look after you.”

Her blue eyes pop open. They’re bloodshot and glassy.

“I don’t know what I would do right now if I was alone. I know I’m not supposed to apologize or thank you . . .” She groans. “But thank you.”

I give her a nod. “I’m going to get a wet washcloth. You’re definitely running a fever.”

I head into the bathroom and grab several washcloths. Soaking them in cool water and wringing them out takes next to no time at all.

I drop them on the counter and check to see if Jess is on her way. It’s asking a lot out of her considering she works full-time at the resort medical center and *also* has a family of her own.

I see that she replied three minutes ago saying she wants a raise and she’s on her way.

I pocket my phone, grab the rags, and aim for Charlie. She’s curled into the fetal position on her side with the blanket pulled up around her neck. Her hairline is sweaty and her cheeks are red. It makes the few freckles that line the bridge of her nose stand out.



I sit on the edge and toss the extra rags on the nightstand. I wrap up her hair again and tuck it behind her on the pillow.

“Our nurse practitioner is on the way.” I run the cool cloth over her forehead before moving it to her neck. I’m not sure why, but it’s something my mother did for me when I was sick as a boy, so I’m guessing it has some function.

“Okay,” she says, trembling. “Wow, I knew I wasn’t feeling great when I woke up today, but it wasn’t until after dinner that it really clicked that I might be getting sick.”

I frown. “Why didn’t you say something? We would have stopped for the night at any time.”

“And waste money on another hotel room when we were so close to getting here?” she grumbles. “That makes no sense.”

I try to remind myself that she’s coming from a difficult situation where she did her best not to make waves. It doesn’t help.

“Your health is worth far more than a few hundred dollars.” My eyebrows rise as I give her a look that means I’m quite serious about what I say next. “You’re not troubling us. We could’ve sent one of the transit teams to retrieve you and Shayley. But all three of us agreed that it needed to be *us*. We wanted to be the ones with you.”

“I’m glad it was you,” she says, patting my thigh. “But I really don’t feel well, and I’m afraid there’s already a chance I’ve gotten you sick.”

I chuckle. “I’ll survive.”

“Hey, Mommy,” Kolt says, waving Shay’s small hand. “See, kiddo? She’s all right. It seems she caught a bug.”

“Where? I can see it?” she asks, tilting her head to look at Kolt’s face.

“Not a real bug, silly.” Charlie waves at her daughter. “Are you feeling okay? Not sick?”

“No,” Shay says, frowning. “I love you.” She wiggles like she wants to be put down so she can go to her mom.

“How about you help me feed Motley her dinner?” Kolt asks, tickling her sides.

“Mommy?” Shay asks, leaning in the door. “I can go?”

“You don’t mind?” Charlie asks, trying to sit up.

“Not a bit,” Kolt says, giving her a soft smile. “Rest up and feel better. That’s all you need to do.”

“Okay, thank you,” Charlie says, falling back into the pillow as Kolt and Shay head out.

“You’re a very polite little omega,” I muse, swapping out the rag for a new one. “But I must admit, I can’t wait for the day when you feel confident enough to expect *common decency*.”

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“I’ll run some tests if you’re not feeling better in a day or two,” Jess says, pulling off her gloves. “But honestly, I’m betting you picked up a virus on the trip. Get some rest. It’s outside of a heat, so any temperature above 104 give me a call. We allow a little more wiggle room with omegas and fevers, but drink lots of fluids. You’ll only feel worse if you get dehydrated.”

“Okay, thank you so much,” Charlie says, snuggling back into the bed.

“I’ll walk you out,” I tell Jess.

I give Charlie a quick pat on the thigh, letting her know I’ll be right back.

Roarke stands in the doorway watching Charlie.

“Would you stay with her?” I ask, but I don’t wait for him to decline. I follow Jess out until we hit the hall and eventually the stairs. “You truly think she’s okay?”

“I do,” she agrees, eyeing the front door. “Do I think the three of you are crossing a line by bringing her home with you? Oh yeah, I *absolutely* do.”

“She’s sick and has a daughter. The daycare isn’t open all the time. What would you have me do?” I bristle.

“I’d have you settle her into her own room in the resort and then help out if need be,” Jess says, shaking her head. “You’re lucky she verified she wants to be here. Otherwise, I would’ve called the OPA, bosses or not.”

“And how do we make sure she gets better?” I growl, glaring at my employee.

“Rest, fluids, and I’ll see her in a couple of days,” Jess says, sighing heavily. “I know none of you would put her in a situation where she was in danger *or* uncomfortable. But *she* doesn’t know that.”

“She’s been with us for six days,” I say, swiping a hand over my face.

“Yeah, I get it.” Jess sighs. “But I thought we all agreed to give her some time on her own . . .”

“I think she’s touch starved,” I say seriously. “We didn’t get a lot of time to talk because everyone has been around, but Kolt seems to think the condition is severe. You know how serious the effects can be on an omega’s health.”

“She needs a check-up and consult with psych before you even think of attempting to court her,” Jess says, hiking her bag further up her arm.

I blatantly ignore the fact that all three of us seem to have been inadvertently courting her from the very first gift.

“Right,” she says, turning to head out. “I should have seen that coming. I’ve never seen Kolt away from that dog for a few *hours* let alone *days*.”

“There wasn’t any room in the SUV,” I say weakly.

“Take care of your omega,” she says, waving a hand over her shoulder. “Try to think with your brain and not your impulses.”

I bristle because I *always* think rationally—*except* where Charlie is concerned apparently.

---

I wake up when the bed shakes.

Charlie groans. She's struggling toward the bathroom. I immediately pop up and follow her.

"Do you need to use the restroom?" I ask, wrapping an arm around her lower back and guiding her in.

I flip on the light and Charlie looks miserable.

"I do, but I'm also feeling a little like I might vomit," she whispers, refusing to look at me.

"Right," I say, glancing between the toilet and Charlie's slightly shaky form. "How about I get you settled and then I'll go for a bowl?"

"I'm fine. Just go. I didn't mean to wake you." She untangles herself from my hold, shuffling toward the toilet a few feet away.

Being an alpha around a sick omega is even more difficult than our normal dynamic.

She changed into one of Kolt's T-shirts after Jess left, and she didn't ask for help. I frown. I'm still standing inside the bathroom like a total voyeur to her private time.

"Gray?"

"Sorry," I say, shaking my head. "Are you sure you can . . . You're very weak and . . ."

What the fuck am I supposed to say?

That I actually wouldn't be opposed to it if she wanted to let me carry her to the toilet and help her use it?

Say that kind of thing to the wrong person and they legitimately run.

I learned that lesson the hard way.

"I'll be okay," she says, giving me a smile over her shoulder. "But I appreciate that you're trying to help. It's been

a long time since I wasn't completely alone."

"I'll grab that bowl," I say, leaving the door cracked.

I take the stairs at a rapid pace and hit the kitchen.

Roarke is sitting on one of the barstools, drinking a beer with several empty bottles in front of him. That's the last goddamn thing he needs to be doing, but there's no getting through to him.

"Do you think she'll live?" he asks, frowning at the countertop like he can't believe he said it out loud.

I desperately need to get back to Charlie, but it's plain to see that he's hurting badly.

"She'll be fine." I do my best to assure him while fishing a mixing bowl out of the cabinet under the island before grabbing a cold bottle of water from the fridge.

"My mam . . ." His accent is thick as hell when he's been drinking.

"Was a one in a million complication." I head over, giving his shoulder a squeeze. "Don't compare the two. If you're that concerned then sober the fuck up and take care of her. You'll feel better if you can see with your own eyes that she's okay."

I give him another pat on the back and turn to leave.

"Tell her I hope she feels better," he says, resting his head in his palms.

"Tell her yourself," I grumble, heading up the stairs.

Kolt kept Shayley tonight to see if we could reduce the risk of them both being infected.

Roarke is useless in this situation and Charlie needs me.

I feel like an asshole for not sticking around to try to help my packmate talk through his damage, but I know no one has put Charlie first for a long time. She's my priority as bad as it sounds and as real as the guilt that's stewing in my stomach.

I can't be in two places at once.

Until she asks me to be elsewhere, I intend to be by her side.

Charlie is sitting on the toilet lid when I make it back into the bathroom.

“Did you use it?” I ask.

Right then, apparently I have zero tact and not a single boundary to be found when it comes to Charlie.

“I did, but I really don’t feel good. I don’t think I should leave the bathroom just yet.” She wobbles as she leans up to look at me.

“Can I take your temperature?” I ask, placing a hand on her neck.

“I guess,” she agrees.

She’s a very good patient. I love the fact she’s not fighting my care. She clearly needs it as much as I need to give it.

I grab the thermometer off the bathroom counter and pop one of the covers on.

“Tongue up.”

She listens. I place it and gently close her mouth. My hand has a mind of its own as I run my fingers over her soft cheek. It beeps and I pull it out, checking to see exactly where we stand.

“Let’s get you back in bed,” I murmur, putting the thermometer aside and looking at Charlie.

“I don’t think I can. My stomach is rolling like I might be sick,” she whispers with pink cheeks.

“Then I’ll clean it up,” I tell her in as gentle of a tone as I can muster. “But you look miserable, sweet girl.”

“Okay,” Charlie concedes. “I really am.”

I don’t second guess myself. I scoop her up, grab the supplies, and carry her back to bed.

---

The next time I awaken, it's because Charlie is sweating against my chest. She's so hot that I pull the blanket off of us while swiveling around to grab the thermometer. I flick on the bedside table light and turn back to Charlie.

She's trembling in the cool bedroom air.

"Hey," I murmur, running my fingers over her cheek. I try to be gentle as I annoy her enough that she'll wake up. "I need to take your temperature."

Charlie groans and opens her mouth. I handle getting the device situated under her tongue and hop up to grab her another T-shirt. She's sweated through the one she's wearing and mine.

Now that she's in the cool air of the room, I imagine a damp shirt isn't helping anything.

I sit down on the edge of the bed as it beeps. I frown. It's 103.7 which is close to the top of what Jess said was okay.

"I need you to take something to help with the fever." I grab the medicine and her bottle of water.

Charlie is a grumbly patient, but she does her best to sit up and take the pills.

I'm absolutely in my element when I can care for someone completely, but we're still getting to know each other.

"Don't lie back just yet." I grip her arms, pulling her until she's once again sitting up and leaning against the headboard. "You're soaked in sweat. We need to change your sleep shirt."

Charlie frowns. "Okay."

She lifts her arms, and I carefully help her out of the old and into the new one. It fills my chest with pride that she trusts me to care for her.

I get her settled back into bed, facing my side, and quickly run to grab myself a new T-shirt. Once I'm done, I snuggle up

to her front, but I believe she's already asleep again. I'm torn. I can see the evidence that she's cold, but if her fever gets any higher, we may have to call Jess or take her to the hospital.

I settle for tucking the sheet around her front, but I leave part of her legs and feet exposed to the air. I set an alarm on my phone for two hours and make sure the volume is very low so it won't disturb Charlie.

I promptly lie awake, worried about her for the next several hours until it goes off then repeat the process for the remainder of the night.



# Chapter Twelve

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## Charlie

It's a few solid days of being extremely sick before I finally start to feel human again.

Roarke is nowhere to be found.

Kolt sticks with Shay, and I'm eternally freaking grateful for it. She hasn't shown any signs of catching whatever I've got.

Grayson is an excellent caregiver. He stays with me around the clock. No matter how sick I am, he's always there with his commanding, yet strangely soothing, voice to walk me through what we're going to do next.

I'm supposed to have an appointment with Jess for a check-up in the morning. I've been so sweaty and sick that I just feel gross.

Since Gray had a few things to handle he asked that I not leave the bed until he gets back, but I don't think I can go another night without getting clean.

I struggle through getting myself undressed and start the shower. I make it to the point where my hair is bubbly with shampoo when I start to feel really dizzy. I take a seat on the bench and rest my head against the wall.

"What the fucking hell?" Roarke growls. The shower door slices open and he climbs inside in a pair of basketball shorts and nothing else. "Charlie, lovely? Are ye all right?"

He hits his knees in front of me as his hands brush soapy hair away from my face.

“I think I ran out of energy,” I grumble. “But I really am feeling much better than I have been.”

“Right,” he says, snorting a laugh. “Let’s get you cleaned up. Is that okay?”

My cheeks burn as I realize I’m very exceptionally naked.

“Is the water too hot for you, sweetheart?” he asks. He’s so damn close to me, only inches from my face.

My head shakes and shampoo splashes against his beard.

“Let me help you,” he murmurs, standing up and grabbing the small sprayer wand I was going to use to rinse out my hair. My jaw falls as I take in his muscular form. His arms, chest, and abs are covered in dark tattoos, but he’s also got *a lot* of bright red scars in different lengths and severity covering his torso and a few over his shoulders. Some are so dark they almost seem purple. My heart pangs imagining how painful that many injuries must have been to recover from.

I don’t let my eyes linger because that feels rude. My arm wraps around my breasts as I cross my legs to give myself a little modesty. He’s incredibly well-built, and I’m the definition of an extremely soft omega.

“Head back,” he says, tilting my chin up slightly. He’s gentle as he cups the side of his hand over my forehead to keep any soap from running into my eyes.

My eyes squeeze shut as I remember the last time I showered with someone. There’s no way to think of the past without thinking of Shane.

“My hair might not be as long as yours, but even I understand the importance of conditioning,” he says, leaning to grab a few pumps out of the bottle. His warm, bare skin brushes my arm as I block my chest. “This is the benefit of having a full mane of hair. I’ve got you.”

He’s quick and efficient as he kneels in front of me, soaking my hair in the conditioner. His fingers brush my scalp as he massages it in.

I groan. My eyes pop open to realize they've been shut and Roarke is leaning even closer to my face. His hair is down and soaked from the overhead spray.

His blue eyes blink back at me as we stare at each other.

"It's definitely time to rinse," he growls close to my ear.

I feel silly with the way my stomach flip-flops in response to his skin so close to mine. He's reverent and careful as he finishes rinsing my hair. Afterward, he sprays off my body from my shoulders down, but he does his best to keep his eyes on mine.

"I'm going to grab a couple towels," he says, nuzzling his cheek to mine. He cuts off the water, and I shiver as cool air seems to flood the shower stall.

I give him a nod and fall back to rest against the wall. My life has been so different since they came into it.

My jaw falls open as Roarke stops by the shower door. He pulls down his basketball shorts and tosses them over the hanging rack on the wall inside the shower.

"I figured it was only fair," he says, winking over his shoulder before heading out to grab towels. His back is littered with even more scars. Some larger and more severe than the ones on his front.

I bite my lip.

I try to keep my eyes in appropriate places because I never once felt like he was objectifying my body. It's practically impossible as his long, thick cock bounces in front of him. It's hard and his knot is slightly swollen. I swallow thickly and glance back at his dripping shorts to keep from gawking.

He comes back with a towel wrapped around his waist. Once he's close, he twists a hand in my hair, squeezing out the excess water.

"Lean forward for me, love," he growls.

My nostrils flare with his scent as I comply. He smells delicious, like musk and sweaty man. It makes my pheromones come out in full force.

“Shite,” he groans. His hands are quick and efficient as he gets my hair wrapped up and balances it on top of my head. “Stand up for me. Do you need a hand?”

Sometimes his accent comes out thicker than other times. I’m very fond of his voice at all times. It’s low and growly but also melodic.

He extends his forearm.

I hold onto it as I pull myself up.

“Right,” he says, shaking his head and unfolding the towel. He wraps it around my middle and once the top is tucked, he slides his arms under mine. “You’re looking a little wobbly. After how I came upon you . . .” He frowns. “I’d prefer to carry you.”

“Okay,” I agree. He lifts me with ease, and my legs circle his ass.

They’re spoiling me rotten. It’s difficult to imagine what life will be like when Shay and I are on our own at the resort.

My face falls to Roarke’s shoulder. A weird whiney whimper escapes my chest.

“What’s the matter?” he asks, sounding like he’s on alert.

“Nothing,” I whisper, burying my face deeper into his warm skin. “Crap, Roarke. You’ve mostly stayed away. I hope I’m not still contagious . . .”

“I’m not afraid of the flu.” He lies us down facing each other. “Now, tell me what’s troubling you, little omega.”

The towel wrapped around my hair untangles as I gasp, shaking my head. “Not that,” I whisper. “Please, not that.”

“Little omega?” he asks.

I nod into his still-damp skin. “That was what . . .”

“I understand,” Roarke says, pulling the towel from under my head and tossing it away. “I’m sorry I haven’t been around much. It’s hard for me to be near someone when they’re very ill.”

“I don’t blame you. No one wants to get sick when they can avoid—”

“No,” he says firmly. “It’s not that. We moved to the States when I was nearly sixteen. It was the last thing I wanted to do. Not only leave home, but right before graduation. I was a bitter little shithead.”

His hand lands on my shoulder just above the towel, and he pulls me closer to his front.

“My mother begged me not to enlist. I did anyway. As soon as I got citizenship and was old enough. I don’t know that it was purely out of spite, but looking back on it . . .” He sighs. “I can see why she believed that was the case.”

“That’s rough,” I murmur, running my fingers over the tattoos on his chest.

I’m trying to give him comfort, but in all honesty, I don’t know if I want to hear what comes next.

It’s going to hurt.

The exhaustion I’ve felt from being sick is gone, and the overpowering ache of sadness and misery in my chest isn’t my own for once.

Something bad is coming, I can feel it.

“I was injured and sent home. I was going to tell my mam she may have been right. Only it was the peak of cold and flu season. She was sick when I made it back. I stayed with my brother’s pack. I was still healing up from my own injuries and . . .” His forehead falls to rest against mine. “There was meant to be plenty of time to reconnect. Only she got pneumonia, and within days—there was a blood clot in her lung. She died in her sleep.”

“Roarke . . . Shit, I actually don’t know what to say. I know from experience no one feels better from hearing the words I’m sorry. But I also am,” I tell him, running my fingers over the ache I can feel in his chest. It radiates in my heart, as well.

“I’ve got an irrational fear of things as simple as the common cold now. I’m fine when I’m the one who’s sick, it’s . . .” As he trails off, I nod into his skin. I don’t fully understand it, but I do get it overall. That irrational fear because of past trauma. God, do I ever understand that.

“Would you like to tell me what had you whining?” Roarke asks, tilting my face up until I’m looking at him.

My eyes squeeze shut as I bite my cheek.

“Come on then, I’ve told you my heart ache.”

My head shakes, but he holds my chin between his thumb and forefinger.

“The others are handling you with kid gloves. I don’t think that’s what you need. Although, I’ll be the first to admit I don’t even have my own head in order most days.” He shrugs. “Are you afraid of me, lovely?”

“No,” I hiss. “Hell no.”

“I didn’t think so,” Roarke murmurs, brushing his lips over my forehead. “And you shouldn’t be. If I had to guess, I’d say you’re lonely, aren’t you?”

I nod as my eyes slide shut again. “It feels like a worse betrayal than Brent because I didn’t think I’d fall for him . . .” I grimace. “That sounds terrible like I was using him, but it was more like he wouldn’t take no for an answer. I got tired of arguing, or maybe I felt guilty because he was so persistent. I thought I had to at least give us a chance.”

“I understand,” he murmurs, sliding his hand over the back of my head. “But I do hope you’ll open up to me one day.”

I bite my lip to keep from blurting out that I’m terrified of what happens when I have to leave their house. That I’m pathetic and afraid to be alone. It’s hard to admit even to myself how much I’m attracted to them and how little I want to leave now that I’m here.

“You’ve got the appointment in the morning for your check-up,” he says, his lips so close they practically ghost over

mine. “Get some rest. I won’t leave you. I find I’m desperate for a cuddle, too.”

I highly doubt he needs this to the level I do, but I appreciate that he gives me an out from having to ask him to stay. It’s crazy how easy it is to snuggle up to his chest and just breathe him in. He already feels so familiar.

---

Kolt tenderly wakes me up a little after seven the next morning. The red glow of the digital numbers on the clock catch my attention before Kolt draws it back to him. He grins a wide smile that I can’t help but mirror when he runs his fingers over my cheek.

“You’re much cooler this morning. That’s a great sign. How are you feeling?”

“Much better,” I assure him as I sit up. Cool air hits my nipples. My towel fell away while I was asleep, and I’m now flashing him my tits.

His eyes get wide as they pop up to meet mine.

“Gray has Shayley in the kitchen getting some breakfast. Why don’t you get dressed and come down?” he asks, backing away.

“More sleep,” Roarke groans, trying to pull me back into bed.

“Can’t do it,” I say, chuckling as Kolt bolts for the door.

---

Shay is a chattering ball of energy when I make it downstairs. I’ve never seen her so excited to talk about *everything*. I know I was sick for a few days, but I swear she mastered ten new words. She’s busy trying to explain about how Kolt took her to see the horses yesterday, and my jaw literally falls open.



Gray shrugs. “That’s just Kolt. We have horseback tours that go up the mountain. He schedules all the activities and makes sure the animals are cared for.”

“He does,” Shay says, crossing her arms over her chest and nodding her agreement.

I’m freaking flabbergasted.

“We had fun,” Kolt says, blushing. His beard hides most of it except for the red on the apples of his cheeks.

There’s something about that look on him and the way he jumped right in to looking after Shay like it was no big deal that makes me want to climb him like a tree. Which I’m aware is very opposite to my reaction during the trip, and it makes me slightly suspicious. My thighs clench together as I desperately try to figure out why I’m perfluming at the breakfast table.

“Oh, *shit*,” I whisper, glancing between Kolt and Grayson.

“Shit,” Shayley says, nodding her agreement.

I blanch, crap that wasn’t a parenting win. Not even close.

“What’s wrong?” Gray tilts his head to study my face.

“I can’t seem to remember, but I don’t think I’ve taken my suppressants at all while I was sick.”

“Did you give them to her?” Kolt asks, offering Shayley a piece of cut up banana.

“I didn’t.” Gray frowns. “She didn’t keep down the fever reducers, and honestly, it never crossed my mind.”

“It’s okay,” Kolt says, giving me a reassuring smile. “You’ve got an appointment with Jess, and she’ll be able to tell you what’s the best course of action.”

“It’s okay,” Shay says. She copies Kolt’s posture, and for half of a second, my heart twinges painfully. But my kid cheeses so hardcore that I can’t help the smile that crosses my face, too.

It’s dangerous for all of us how easily Kolt slipped into that role of caregiver for Shay.

I blink repeatedly as it gets hard to swallow.

Shane would've liked Kolt. He was open to the idea of a pack; it just didn't work out before I ended up pregnant. It's strange because I don't have a doubt in my mind that they would have gotten along really well.

---

Shay gets a brief check-up from Jess. The Exchange's nurse practitioner is friendly and smiles a lot.

I remember talking to her when I was sick, but it's all kind of hazy. That was the sickest I'd been in a long time.

Jess isn't like the other doctors I've seen. I don't even know her last name, and other than the white lab coat, she's in jeans and a T-shirt. She's young, maybe mid-thirties at most. She has reddish-brown hair and big brown eyes. She's beautiful and so friendly it immediately puts me at ease. I head out into the small waiting room with Shay on my hip. She didn't like a few of the tests, but overall, she was great during the entire exam.

Kolt's standing just inside the waiting room, leaning against the wall. A warm smile crosses his face when he spots us. My heart races as he lights up. He's wearing jeans, some type of work boot, and a dark blue long-sleeved T-shirt. It's such a simple outfit, but damn it fits him to perfection. He's hot as hell.

"Are you coming with me so Mommy can have her appointment?" Kolt asks Shayley.

Her head bobbles up and down as she stretches her arms out for him, but we're still several feet away.

"I've told you before. Dogs aren't allowed in my clinic," Jess says, rolling her eyes at Kolt.

"She's at the door politely waiting for the ladybug to decide if she's keeping us company." Kolt grins. He looks downright dangerous to my self-control with the sleeves pushed up over his muscular forearms.

My eyes fly to Motley. She is indeed sitting at the door. Her head is tilted and she watches like she's desperate for someone to invite her inside. She's big. She comes up to my belly button when she sits on her haunches.

I know she's not a German shepherd, but she looks like one with the tan and black coat. She's just a bit slimmer and has floppy ears. I've heard Kolt mention before that they're supposed to stand up.

"I wanna come," Shay says, wiggling out of my hold. I kiss the side of her head and put her back on her feet. She squeals and runs toward Motley.

The dog and I are still building trust, but Kolt doesn't blink as Shay wraps her arms around Motley's neck and kisses her furry snout. The pup, as Kolt calls her, simply rests her head on Shay's shoulder and lets my toddler coo in her ear.

"Thank you," I tell Kolt.

"Of course," he agrees, scooping up Shay. "I think we'll head to the nursery. Gayle has been very persistent about how much she wants to see Shayley again."

"Okay, I'll find my way there when I'm done," I say.

Kolt smiles. "Call if you need anything or even if you want me to swing back by and pick you up."

"Thanks," I say, biting my lip.

"Tell my kid I'll come have lunch with her when I'm done here," Jess tells Kolt.

"Will do," he agrees.

Jess smiles at me. "My youngest is only a few months older than Shayley."

Kolt and Shay wave goodbye as they head out. My eyes seem glued to his back in that tight T-shirt. Motley follows behind him without him needing to say a word.

"She really is well behaved for such a giant dog," Jess says, laughing as she draws my attention. "Come on back. Let's see what's going on with you."

---

After a myriad of tests and questions, Jess pulls me into her office to talk. She's polite and friendly. I'm not sure exactly why I'm on edge, but here we are.

"You've been on suppressants since Shayley was four months old?" she asks, looking over something on her computer.

"Yes."

"And prior to that you took them for close to three years during your late teen years," she says, tapping away on her keyboard.

"Right," I agree.

My eyes dart around the room as I desperately try to find something else to focus on. The office is small but cozy with pictures of Jess and her family lining the wall to my right.

"All right," she says finally. "I'm going to be really honest here, Charlie. We talked a bit about your mental health and where you are emotionally. We have a therapist that comes to The Exchange one day a week. He normally counsels new alpha and omega pairings, but I'd like to get you in with him immediately."

"Okay," I agree. That actually doesn't sound like a bad plan. I know I've got stuff I need to work on. If I don't tackle the hard stuff now, I'm afraid I'll only continue to get worse.

"Good," she says, smiling brightly. "The sadness and feelings you've been having are a sign of survivor's guilt. It's completely normal on top of processing the trauma of losing a loved one."

My jaw rolls side to side as I try not to focus on the pain that hits when she mentions Shane.

"I think the fact you're coming out of a difficult situation with markers of domestic abuse hasn't helped your healing process," she says, frowning. She stands to grab a couple of

pamphlets off a display on the wall and takes her seat. “Which in all honesty, for a beta patient, I’d recommend time before engaging in any new relationships.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready for that anyway,” I say, shaking my head.

“Can I be really blunt, Charlie?” she asks, leaning forward and giving my hand a squeeze. She slides the brochures toward me.

“Of course,” I say.

Isn’t that the point of communicating with your doctor? They can’t help you if you aren’t honest with them, and I want the same in return. I need her to be real with me.

“I think in addition to your grief, you’re dealing with a condition omegas develop when you take suppressants for long periods without a break. Some develop physical symptoms like hair loss, vomiting, headaches . . . the list goes on. In others it manifests differently. I’m starting to think that’s what’s happening with you.” She leans back, nodding to the pamphlets. “We all know alphas go feral without contact with omegas. There’s another side to that equation that we don’t hear about as often because it’s rare, but just as dangerous.”

I frown because she’s right. I don’t know what she’s talking about, but it doesn’t sound good at all.

“There’s a scientific name for the condition just like the hyper-aggression alphas develop when they’re kept from omegas long-term. The point is, I believe you’re touch starved.” Her eyebrows rise as she gives me a serious look. “Yes, it does have to do with physical intimacy with alphas, but more than that, it’s the lack of alpha pheromones that soothe and help to regulate your system. Alpha and omega biology is complicated. Even now, we don’t understand all the ‘whys’ of certain things involving alphas and omegas, but that doesn’t change the fact we know they’re true.”

“Why do you think that’s what I’m dealing with?” I ask as my eyes dance over the information on the papers.

“All the rapid tests this morning were negative. Does that mean you didn’t have a virus?” She shrugs. “It’s possible you did and it wasn’t one of the ones I tested for. What has me questioning things is that even Shayley didn’t get sick. After traveling in a confined space for days . . . It’s rare. Definitely not impossible, but it got me thinking.”

“Okay,” I say, still confused as hell.

“I think you had a severe reaction to being in close proximity to compatible alphas. Your system is set up to experience regular heats. Even under the most drastic of circumstances, it’s highly frowned upon for us to prescribe suppressants for over twenty-four months without a solid break in between. And that off period should be at *least* twelve months or four heat cycles.”

My eyes widen. I wasn’t aware of that at all.

I think my doctor in Florida felt awful for me, and even though she continually mentioned how questionable it was for my health, she never indicated it was outright dangerous. Or maybe she was trying to be gentle in the way she explained things, and I outright ignored it because I wasn’t ready to hear what she had to say.

“Severe long-term depression, anxiety, thoughts of hopelessness . . .” Jess raises an eyebrow. “These are all psychological symptoms we see in a small percentage of long-term suppressant users. The fact you’ve been off them for five days now and you seem in slightly better spirits, even by your own account, is enough to convince me I’m right about this.”

“I had no idea that was a thing,” I say truthfully.

“I believe you had such a violent reaction because your body knows they’re causing major harm to your system.” She gives me a serious frown.

“What does this mean for my heat? If I don’t restart them immediately, won’t it come right away?” I ask, suddenly feeling a hell of a lot more panicked.

“No, not necessarily,” she says earnestly. “We’ll know more when I get your lab results back tomorrow. Based on

what I've seen and the medical information I've read, it's a mixed bag. Some omegas end suppressants and have an immediate heat or waves of heat that start pretty quickly. Others who've been on them for a longer period of time may not have a heat for months. It's impossible to say for certain without looking at your blood work."

I sigh, rubbing my temples. "I don't have a pack or even a single alpha. I have no one to watch my daughter if I go into heat."

"We're a community," Jess says, giving me a soft smile. "I understand it's difficult for you to hear this, but I do think you've been negatively affecting your ability to heal and move on because the suppressants are messing with the chemical make-up of your brain. It's not just hormonal repercussions at this point. Your system needs a reset period to detox from the medications you've been taking." She gives me a very serious look. "I'm afraid, at this point, you're out of options. I don't think you can put nature off any longer, not safely."

"I hear you," I say as politely as I can manage. "What do I do if I have a heat before I find a pack? What should I do about my daughter?"

"Would you like me to refer you to the front office to be matched?" Jess asks, studying me carefully. "I'm not sure if you know this, but our location is one of the main refuge locations for omegas fleeing a bad situation. All locations will take any omega in need, but we're a hub. That's why we have a counselor who comes weekly."

I shake my head because I didn't know that.

"It's been this way since Gray's fathers opened this location. That's also why we have daycare services. There's at least one other single mom living on-site and searching for a pack. I'm sure we could set something up for the two of you to swap out care. Or there's Gray's mom. Gayle works in the daycare part time, but I know she wouldn't turn down the opportunity to babysit for a few days."

"Okay," I say, blowing out the breath I've been holding. I'm not sure what else I can say or do.

“You’re in control here, Charlie. No one is going to force you to bond. No one will move faster than you’re comfortable moving.” She leans forward, patting my hand.

“Right,” I agree. “You’ll set me up to see the counselor?”

“I will,” she says, smiling. “Do you want to start the process of being matched? It seems like Kolt is already half in love with your daughter . . .”

“He’s a really great guy,” I say, studying her face. “But I’m pretty sure they feel bad for me. None of them have indicated any interest in courting.”

“It’s not my place to get involved in any of that,” Jess says, standing. “But I will say that’s more than likely because they don’t want to rush you. They’re good men. Ultimately, the choice is yours to make. They may own the resort, but they would never force you to choose them.”

“No, I know,” I say, standing to follow her out.

We’re almost at the door when she turns to face me fully.

“Let me just say this. The Exchange employs ex-military teams specifically to get omegas out of bad situations.” Jess looks like she’s holding back from something, but she does finally go on. “They didn’t call it in. I know you met while they were on vacation, but even then, they could have called in a response team. They drove thirty plus hours each way to pick you and your daughter up.” She shrugs. “Take that how you will. Maybe I’m totally off-base, but I don’t think I am.” She gives my shoulder a playful bump with hers. “Are you excited to see the resort?”

“I really am,” I agree. “I heard there are horses.”

She laughs. “Yeah, that’s Kolt’s domain.”

“Thank you for everything,” I tell her as we make it to the waiting room.

“Absolutely. Listen, I’ll call tomorrow with your test results. You can stop back by and we’ll go over them together.”

“I appreciate it,” I say, preparing to head out.



# Chapter Thirteen

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## Kolt

I'm hanging around waiting for Charlie when the evening receptionist for the resort approaches.

We have a pretty solid pattern.

I try to avoid her.

She always tries to talk to me.

She's trying to do that now.

I don't understand why she wants to chat. I'm finding it difficult not to walk away and completely ignore anything she has to say, but I think that would be bad boss behavior.

Although, I'm absolutely not her supervisor. I just happen to own a decent percentage of the resort. Nothing like the pieces Gray and Roarke own, but enough that I feel confident considering myself an owner.

"Sorry, Lori," I say, eyeing the hallway that I'm waiting for Charlie to come from. "I'm in the middle of something, but you can talk to Gray or Hazel if it's important."

Hazel is Gray's administrative assistant. She's awesome. She basically ran the resort and The Exchange while we were away. She did an excellent job, and it's clear that woman needs a raise.

"No, I asked if you wanted to . . ." Lori says, but she trails off when I start walking away.

"I've been waiting on Charlie. It looks like she's done with her appointment," I say, giving a tight smile. "Have a great

rest of your day.”

Lori is young. I’m not sure exactly, but barely into her twenties if I had to guess. She’s friendly enough and a great receptionist, but I have no clue why she constantly stops me to talk about unimportant things.

I’ve tried to be polite in the past, but we don’t have anything in common. It’s hard to listen to her chatter about clothes and concerts.

My brain is currently obsessed with the fact I do not want Charlie wandering the halls without an escort.

“Hey,” I say, finally making it to her. “How was your appointment?”

“It was good,” she says, smiling. My heart races as I study her beautiful face. “Um, where’s my kid?”

“She’s in the daycare with Gayle. Do you want to check in on her?” I ask, placing a hand on her lower back. “I thought you might want to just so you can see with your own two eyes that she’s okay. Then I figured I’d show you the job options . . . if you want. There’s really no rush. If you’re still feeling bad, we can collect Shay and get home.”

Holy shit. It’s like I can’t stop talking. Did I seriously just call it *home* like it’s her house?

“Let’s check on Shay,” I say, guiding her past the check-in desk and down the hallway toward the daycare.

I type my code in on the keypad to get into the drop off area. There are cubbies on the left wall in bright colors and hooks on the wall for lunch boxes and jackets. There’s a door in the middle that leads to the daycare and a small office on the right.

Charlie immediately heads to the glass to peek inside.

Gayle is sitting in her rocking chair reading to a few of the toddlers and preschoolers.

“We can go in,” I say, squeezing her hip.

“No.” She gives me a soft smile. “She looks content.”

“Yeah, she abandoned Motley and me pretty quick once she saw all the toys and the other kids.” I laugh.

Motley circles our feet at the sound of her name.

“That little traitor,” Charlie says, stretching a hand down to scratch Motley’s ear. Motley immediately starts rubbing her entire body against Charlie’s leg. “No, I’m only joking. It’s good for her to be around other kids. She really hasn’t had many opportunities to play with children her age.”

“Do you want to check out the other jobs we talked about? We can check this one out last when we come back for Shay.”

“Yeah, that works,” Charlie says, smiling brightly.

Seeing her happy is addictive. It makes me desperate to figure out how to coax more of those grins out of her. Her light orange-cream scent fills the air.

I’m not sure, but it seems to be hitting me harder since she’s been without the suppressants for a few days.



We make a quick trip to see the restaurant, but Charlie shakes her head when I ask if she wants to head inside. We do stop by the café on the bottom floor to get Charlie a hot chocolate.

My heart races as I watch her smile when the woman behind the counter gives her extra whipped cream. I’m pretty sure my mom has a special recipe she used to make for my siblings and me when we were kids. I’m going to need to ask for it. Then I can have those smiles directed my way.

I briefly show Charlie the spa as we make our way around the resort. She seems more interested in it than she was with the restaurant, but I’m still not sure it’s the perfect fit for her.

Charlie’s jaw falls when I walk her out to see the stable. It’s not huge, but it’s perfect for the resort. Most of the horses are out on the trail with a tour. There are a few that didn’t go, and she is absolutely enamored.

I love how she leans into my chest and listens intently, even when I ramble. The cool mountain air should help to disperse Charlie's scent, but I swear my nose twitches every time I breathe her in.

I nod to the mom and her foal at the end of the row of stalls and Charlie gasps. "You can get a little closer, but she's in full mama-mode. I wouldn't put your hands inside without a treat. She's temperamental under the best of circumstances."

"That's so freaking cool," she whispers, keeping her voice low. "I don't want to make her uncomfortable."

She starts heading back toward the other end of the barn. I keep my hand on her hip and pull her in close to my side. It's easier to get whiffs of her delicate sweet scent this way.

"Ready to head inside and get Shay?" I ask as we head back toward the building.

"Yeah, I mean . . ." She pauses, frowning. "I think I'm supposed to stop by the desk and get information about possibly being matched. Well, as long as all my tests come back okay tomorrow."

I growl before I can stop myself.

I glance around for Motley.

Blaming the ridiculous behavior on my ferocious personal protection dog seems like a feasible option. Until I realize she's on Charlie's other side getting head scratches with her tongue lolling out to the side.

*Useless mutt.*

"You're going to be matched?" I ask, clearing my throat awkwardly as my face burns.

"Jess recommended not going back on the suppressants . . ." She trails off, kicking the toe of her shoe against the sidewalk. "It's something I'll have to figure out sooner or later."

"Of course," I agree, placing my hand back on her lower back and guiding her inside. "Let's do that tomorrow. I was hoping to cook tonight for you and Shay."

Charlie wraps her arm around my lower back and grins up at me. “What’s your specialty?”

“Anything on the grill,” I say, chuckling.

“Mmm, that sounds great.” She gives me a wide smile. “I remember how delicious those burgers were at the cookout.”

Yeah, Roarke and Gray better get on board real damn quick.

We need to have a pack meeting *immediately*.

Wooing must commence *now*. No fucking way is Charlie allowed to be matched to another pack. We need to make her so damn happy that she gleefully chooses us over anyone else.

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“She’s fine,” I tell Charlie, setting down my beer bottle.

“Yeah, but I should still go check,” she says, giving me a tired smile.

“Of course,” I agree indulgently.

Motley comes to our side as I offer Charlie a hand off the couch.

“We have a bit of a routine,” I tell her, placing my hand on her lower back. “While you were sick I mean.”

I pulled apart one of the twin beds in the guest room that we use for nieces and nephews when they come to visit. Until the toddler bed arrives, I put the mattress on the floor so Shay wouldn’t have a far drop if she rolls too much.

“Motley snuggles at the end of the bed,” I say as we head up the stairs. “I read a bedtime story then lie on the other bed for fifteen minutes. If she’s asleep, then awesome, but if not, I turn on the night light and leave Motley. Once Shay falls asleep, Mot wanders out.”

“She’s great,” Charlie says, grinning as we aim for the guest room.

“She’s a good kid,” I agree. “I was surprised she didn’t cry or fight at bedtime.”

“I meant Motley,” Charlie says, laughing. “But yeah, Shay’s always been easy. Even as a baby, she hardly cried and was just happy-go-lucky.”

We make it to the door. It’s open a crack, and I nod for Charlie to check. She sticks her head in and nods.

“She’s out,” she whispers.

“Motley does the same thing when we have family stay over. She always sticks with the kids until they fall asleep then she comes out.”

“Thank you,” she says, turning to face me. “For everything, but especially for looking after her while I was sick. Have I said that?”

“You have,” I assure her. My hands seem to have a mind of their own. One brushes over Charlie’s cheek as the other lands on her hip.

“I need to figure out where I’ll be working and I guess look into getting moved to the resort,” she says, frowning.

My heart sinks. Working is okay if that’s what she wants to do. I think it would be a good opportunity for her to make some friends and gain some independence, but I hate the thought of her and Shay being away from us.

“You know we were actually going to bring that up,” I say, pulling the door to Shay’s room closed a bit and aiming for the room Charlie’s been staying in. “We’ve been renovating some of the resort and . . .”

We make it into the room. I take a seat next to her on the edge of the bed.

“Okay, renovations and?” she asks, carefully watching my burning face.

“I’m sorry,” I say, shaking my head. “We are having some rooms redone, but that wouldn’t . . . I think I was going to lie to try to get you and Shay to stay here at the house. Can I just

ask instead? And we'll ignore the renovation comment completely."

"You want us to stay here?" Charlie repeats.

Her knee bounces like she's anxious. My hand lands on it, giving her a tender squeeze. I don't pull it away after and she runs her fingers over my skin.

"I do," I assure her.

"Gray and Roarke are okay with that?"

"They are." I nod. "The house would be lonely without the two of you. I've been drawn to you since the barbeque. I should have made more of an effort to—"

"No, Kolt," she says, climbing into my lap facing me. She kneels over me and rubs her cheek against mine. "Don't feel bad about that."

My face burns and I know I'm blushing. For whatever reason, I got my mom's fair skin tone and her easily embarrassed composure.

"I want to court you," I say, staring into her eyes. "I think I'm supposed to wait . . ." I sigh. "Actually I know I should be giving you time to feel comfortable in your place here. But I'm not willing to lose out on the chance to be with you."

"That goes for the three of us," Roarke says, poking his head in the door. "Although that dick gave you my first courting gift before I had the chance."

"Thank you for the blanket," Charlie says, grinning at him. "I do love it."

"There will be more," he says, giving us a nod and heading off. He very rarely stays still, especially in the evenings or at night. It's like if he sticks in one place his memories might catch up.

"I'm going to meet with the therapist that comes to the resort," Charlie says, grimacing. "It's been three years, but Jess seems to think the suppressants may have worsened my depression."



“I don’t think talking to Calvin is a bad thing,” I assure her, running my hand over the back of her head. “We want you to be happy and fulfilled.”

“Do you know, since being around the three of you, I’ve felt better than I have in years?” She shakes her head. “It makes me feel bad when I think about it, but I also realize Shane wouldn’t want this for me. You two would’ve gotten along.”

She’s kneeling over my lap, but I’m much taller than her. The way her blue eyes sparkle as she looks up at me from under her lashes makes it impossible not to do something crazy.

I’m not sure how it happens, but I roll us until her back hits the mattress and push my mouth to hers. My eyes are squeezed shut, but I can feel her lips part as she whimpers into the kiss. She wiggles under me until she can wrap her legs around my ass.

My hand brushes over her hair as I frantically try to get myself under control. I want her more than I’ve ever wanted anything. I’ve never been so desperate for someone in my entire life—not even as a teenager.

Our lips brush as I try to hold myself back from grinding into her. The way her perfume floods the room makes that practically impossible.

Well, fuck.

# Chapter Fourteen

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## Charlie

**K**olt's strong frame cages me into the bed. Instead of feeling trapped or guilty, I'm incredibly aroused by his sweet lime scent and the way his massive body dwarfs mine.

He growls against my lips and a whine escapes mine. There's something about the way his weight feels on top of me that makes me literally desperate for him.

I claw at his back over his T-shirt, and he lifts me with very little effort until I'm lying in the middle of the bed instead of with my legs hanging off the edge.

"Shit, Charlie," he groans. "You smell so good. I'm supposed to give you space."

"Space is overrated," I whisper. He's not the most coordinated as he devours me, but I do find his enthusiasm to be addictive.

Kolt changed into sweats and a T-shirt when we got back to their house. The material is thin enough that I can feel the weight of his cock as we writhe together. I thought I lost the ability to feel aroused when Shane died. For so long it wasn't even a thought in my mind.

"Christ," Kolt groans. His face nuzzles mine as he pulls back. I nod my agreement, licking my lips because I can still taste his tangy lime flavor on my tongue. "Okay, so I'm going to go because I don't want to push—"

"You're not," I assure him, giving his shoulder a shove. He rolls to the side and turns to face me, but I surprise the hell out

of both of us by rolling over on top of him. “It’s strange, but I crave closeness with you.”

I glance away because that sounded extremely freaking vulnerable even to my own ears.

Damn, what Jess said about being touch starved suddenly makes so much more sense.

“I’m here for whatever you need,” he growls as his hands land on my hips. “But I think we should start with a snuggle.”

“Okay,” I reply, blowing out a heavy breath and trying to settle my raging system.

“All right,” Kolt agrees, sounding like he’s struggling with the same thing. His massive hand pulls me down to his chest and then he’s rearranging us. His head lands on the pillow, and as I cuddle into his shoulder, my pussy rests right over his still very hard cock.

I shiver as I focus on not grinding over him. My body seems to be on a completely different page than my mind. I don’t think I’ve been this desperate for dick since I quit the suppressants the first time.

Despite the fact my nipples throb in time with the ache in my clit, I refuse to make him uncomfortable by moving faster than he’s okay with going.

Kolt groans, shuddering out a breath. “There’s plenty of time for that once you’ve been properly courted,” he says, running his hand over my back.

I have a very omega-like urge to pout, but I can wait a while. At least, I think I can.

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I wake up hot and achy. I haven’t felt this feeling in a long time. When starting a new packet of suppressants, I always experience a few rough days of a mini heat. More recently, it’s been closer to a week, but it was mostly tolerable.

I'm sleeping on my side, and as I blink awake, it's completely dark in my bedroom. It has to be the middle of the night. Every nerve ending in my system seems to be overly sensitive. There's warmth at my back and I scoot into it.

Kolt smells absolutely delicious. It makes my thighs clench, desperate for friction. His heavy arm rests in the indent of my hip as his hand cups my lower stomach. His fingers twitch as I grind my ass against his erection. He's so hard and it's nestled perfectly, but we're both wearing clothes.

Which is really annoying.

My lower stomach aches with the same cramping that comes during a heat. Holy crap, my system is all out of whack since I met them.

"K-Kolt," I whimper, trying to hold back from thrashing when the pain gets more severe. His hand is under the material of my pajama dress. His fingers are calloused as they brush against my soft skin, but I don't think he's even awake.

I know I'm on the soft side for an omega, but self-doubt isn't one of the issues I've got.

My hand cups his over the fabric, and I try to slide his hand up to my breast. He lets out a growl that makes me leak slick.

I roll over to face him. His hand slides around to my ass, and it's unreal how much of my backside he can grip in just that one hand.

He's still got the plain white T-shirt on, but it's sweaty when I bury my face in it.

"K-Kolt," I whimper, burying my nose as close as I can get. One of my arms is wrapped under my head and the other clutches his shoulder.

"What's wrong? Oh, sweetheart," he growls, sounding half feral. "You are hot."

"Yes," I groan, sitting up abruptly. He's not moving fast enough.

I whine. The sound escapes my chest as I fight to get my pajamas off over my head.

“Oh, *fuck*,” Kolt growls. “Okay, let’s slow things down.”

I ignore him, twisting my arm back to unhook my bra. My tits bounce as the straps fall down my arms. Then I’m plastering myself to Kolt’s front. He’s on his back, and it’s hard to get his T-shirt off when he’s lying on it.

“I need you,” I beg. My system is desperate to erase the space between us.

“You need me?” he asks, pulling my hair back from my face. “My knot?”

“Yes,” I whisper as my eyes slide shut. I’m attacking him and he just woke up. I’m crossing all sorts of lines and demanding like an entitled omega. “Shit, I’m sorry.”

“No, no more of that,” he growls, rolling us until he’s hovering over me. “Let’s see if we can settle this wave and then we’ll go from there. Okay?”

His cock is stiff against my lower stomach. I nod my agreement, but I’m also rubbing against him which is very at odds with my words.

My legs are trapped between his as he kneels over my thighs. He pulls with a hand at the back of his head and tosses the T-shirt away.

“Promise me that you’re not lost to the fog?” he murmurs as his forearms hit the mattress on either side of my head.

“I promise,” I say, staring into his eyes.

“They say omegas beg and demand when they’re lost to the fog,” he whispers, ghosting his lips over mine. “And I’d never forgive myself if I hurt you *or* took advantage of you in *any* way.”

“You’re not,” I assure him. “I get why you might be worried about that, but . . .” I don’t even know what to say. “I haven’t even received my check-up results.”

He’s right. I’m begging like an omega lost to the fog.

“I’m not worried about your damn test results,” Kolt says, kissing me thoroughly. “I won’t be able to stand *myself* if you’re upset come morning.”

“I wouldn’t be able to string together enough words to form a sentence if I was in full-blown heat. I know your dog’s name is Motley. Your sister’s name is Kathy . . . And I’ve got a massive crush on you, which makes me feel like a teenager.”

I frown because I absolutely didn’t mean to spew that last line of embarrassing information.

“I’ve got it bad for you, too, pretty girl,” Kolt growls. He finally lets his body fall against mine. Our mouths meet in a frantic kiss that has me attempting to wiggle up enough that I can grind his cock against my overly sensitive core.

“Stupid height difference,” I grumble, clutching at his lower back. “You really are a freaking giant.”

Kolt kisses and licks his way from my neck to my chest. I arch off the bed when his tongue flicks over my nipple. His right hand palms my entire other breast. My tits are huge, but his hand is massive.

“You do smell slick,” he muses, grinning as he teases me.

“I am,” I reply, trying to push his sweats down. “You’re trapping me to the mattress. How am I supposed to get anything done?”

“You’re supposed to lie back and let your alpha take care of you,” he says, chuckling against my sternum.

The thought of having an alpha again is as terrifying as it is exhilarating.

Kolt’s hand slides down my middle over my soft lower stomach and eventually into the band of my panties. He doesn’t follow his hand south. I’m briefly tempted to push on his head.

Deft fingers tease over the lips of my sex as our mouths collide in a desperate kiss.

“You are slick. Aren’t you, baby girl?” I can feel the curve of his smile against my cheek. He slides the pad of his thumb

against my clit and works his fingers along the inside of my labia, but he doesn't enter me.

I huff, trying to spread my thighs wider, but his legs are trapping mine close together.

"I don't have a thigh gap. You're going to have to give me some room if you ever plan to get inside me," I snap.

The stinging slap against my clit surprises the hell out of me. He couldn't get much force behind it because of my panties.

"No more of that bullshit," he growls. The next thing I know, he's kneeling next to me and pulling my panties down. "Unless you'd like that pretty ass spanked?"

I bite my lip as my chest rises and falls in rapid movements. I forgot how much I love teasing threats when they come from someone I trust. My nipples ache painfully in the cool air as I realize I'm actually trembling. His words didn't help. In fact, they made me ache even worse for him.

"Yes," I say, shaking my head. "I mean no. Not right now. But for the record, I'm not against that idea, but right now I just need you, Kolt."

Kolt curses up a storm, shaking his head. "Did he ever?"

"He never hit me," I say, pulling on his forearms. "And I'm not afraid of you. Truly, Kolton. I can see the differences in who you are. So please don't treat me like I'm made of glass."

"Got it," he growls, diving for my mouth. Once he's between my spread thighs, I use my toes to push his sweatpants down. They get caught on his cock as I stretch a hand down to palm his erection.

"I need you," I whine, baring my neck to him.

He pulls back, heaving for breath, and gently removes my hand from his shaft. His sweatpants are low enough I can see the root of his cock.

I whimper as my pussy clenches around nothing.



Kolt scoots down and stares at my cunt. My face heats as he teases a finger down the seam of my sex. I haven't really been into self-care for years now, and I'm kind of afraid he might be intimidated by my bush.

"Goddamn," Kolt growls, diving in. Apparently he's unfazed by a little hair. Huge hands slide under my ass as he pulls me apart and flicks his tongue over my clit. His beard is fluffy and tickles as it brushes my inner thigh.

My hand cups his head, teasing through his hair as my other flies to cover my face. I writhe around the mattress as he kisses the hell out of my clit. I'm not sure exactly what he's doing, but it feels great.

"Fecking hell," Roarke murmurs from somewhere to my left. "Might I join ye?" His accent is extremely thick.

Kolt growls. It vibrates against my clit, and I sob against my hand to keep quiet.

"Come on in," I gasp out the words as Kolt holds me in place.

Roarke's long blond hair falls around his face as he prowls closer. He's in a pair of sweatpants that hang low on his slender hips. I stretch out my hand as he climbs on the bed.

I'm pretty sure I should probably be overwhelmed right now. Two alphas are all up in my personal space, but all I can seem to focus on is the scent of their pheromones in the air.

"Can I kiss you, lovely?" Roarke asks, kneeling at my side.

"Yes, please," I beg.

Kolt chooses that moment to tease a thick finger inside me. I bow up into Roarke as he brushes his lips against mine. It's a single finger that Kolt is twisting in and out of me, but it feels amazing.

"More," I whimper into Roarke's mouth as my hand tightens in Kolt's hair. Everything gets hazy as Roarke purrs. His hands are tender but exploratory as he cages in the top half of my body. His hard cock bumps my side, and I realize it's within grabbing distance.

I wrap my fingers around it over his sweats and give him a teasing jerk. I think all three of us are surprised when I roll myself and tackle Roarke to the bed. Kolt looks at me like he might chase if I run, and it sends an undeniable thrill through my system.

“What are you doing? Hmm, you little vixen,” Roarke murmurs, pushing hair back from my face.

I shake my head without answering and scoot between his spread thighs.

“Is this okay?” I ask, glancing over my shoulder at Kolt and back to Roarke.

“I’m willing to be flexible, especially if it means I get to continue licking your pussy,” Kolt says, rolling until his back hits the bed. Then he scoots between my spread thighs and pulls me down over his mouth.

My nails dig into Roarke’s thighs as I try to keep myself upright. As he sits up, his abs flex, and I attack his mouth once he’s close enough. It’s a stretch to reach each other, but with a little effort, we do manage.

The kiss is frantic and dirty as he cups my tit, pinching the nipple.

Kolt really starts to devour me again.

My hands fall to Roarke’s waistband.

“Can I?” I ask, trying to pull them down.

“Right, I’m pretty sure this is supposed to be all about you, love,” he says, but he lifts up making it easier for me to pull his sweats and boxers down.

Kolt wraps his arms around my thighs. His hands land on my hips and lower stomach as he starts to grind me over his mouth. I love the way he’s holding me like I’m precious, but also the way it feels like he’ll never let me get away.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, getting ahold of Roarke’s cock. “Kolt, that feels so good.”

My eyes meet Roarke's as my tongue flicks out over the crown of his cock. His spicy scent is heavy in the air and it makes my thighs clench. Kolt growls, gently raking his teeth over my clit before burying his tongue in my hole.

“Jaysus fecking Christ,” Roarke snarls. His hands are gentle as he caresses my cheek and uses the other to fist my hair. “You’re going to get yourself into trouble with that naughty little tongue.”

I grin around his cock as my heart thunders. They’re strong enough to completely force me where and how they want me, but they’re both incredibly tender. It’s the heart of alpha and omega dynamics, and I really missed it.

# Chapter Fifteen

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## Roarke

The way Charlie's tongue seems to perfectly cup the underside of my shaft as she smiles at me is not helping my self-composure. Not in the fucking least. Her heavy tits hang against my thighs. They bounce with every grind of her cunt over Kolt's mouth.

We're supposed to be focusing on her, settling the wave of heat she's been hit with, and offering our omega comfort. Yet the urge to flip her over and rut her into the mattress is strong. Her nails scrape over my lower stomach, and the urge to cover my scars comes out of nowhere. She's got her own damage. It might be on the inside, but it's left wounds that are just as severe.

Instead, I stroke her cheek and stretch a hand down to palm her tit. Her tight nipple gets teased as she makes every attempt to swallow my cock. I'm goddamn obsessed with the way her throat convulses around my crown.

I let out a low, feral growl as she pulls back and gasps for air.

"Kolt, holy hell," she moans, diving back down my shaft. The head of my dick gets extra juicy as she gasps around it.

"Best not to talk with your mouth full, love," I muse, gently pulling her up with her hair.

She growls, diving back down. It's adorable. I grin like a fool until she cups my knot and flicks her tongue over the dripping slit. She continues to work me over as she comes, shaking violently and freezing. It's a beautiful sight watching

her shatter. The little vixen tosses herself back into blowing me.

Kolt growls under her.

“Would you like to switch?” I muse.

“No,” he snarls.

Charlie squeals. I have no idea what he’s doing, but her eyes clamp closed as she sucks me. She seems to be enjoying it greatly. She begins to cup and roll my balls, and fuck me, I’m totally done for.

“Charlie,” I choke out. “I’m there, love.” I try to pull her off my cock, but she only sucks harder. It’s an intense feeling as I hit the back of her throat. She swallows around my tip and the feeling of her throat massaging the head of my dick absolutely does me in.

I growl.

Kolt strangely enough mirrors the sound.

Charlie whimpers and sucks through every kick of my swelling shaft. She flicks and sucks to the point my entire body trembles.

“All right,” I groan. “Too much.”

Kolt’s scent floods the air, and it’s clear he quite enjoyed sucking her pussy.

I pull Charlie up and peck a kiss on her lips. She eyes Kolt hungrily and I realize her eyes are actually quite glazed.

Fuck me, tell me we didn’t take advantage of this situation. My gut sinks at the thought.

Charlie shakes out of my hold and rabidly attacks Kolt’s cock. She sucks the tip as he wriggles around.

“Shit, Charlie,” he groans as she pops off and moves to lick his cum off his stomach. “Oh, okay. I’m actually really ticklish.”

“You taste so good,” she whispers in between lapping up his cum.

Omegas are truly darling in some of their impulses. The image is hot as fuck as her tits sway and Kolt palms her ass.

“Are you settled enough to sleep?” he murmurs, pushing her hair out of her face.

“I think so,” she replies. Her hands fly to cover her face. “I mauled you both. Holy shit, I’m so sorry.”

“No, none of that.” He pulls up his sweats and guides her up to lie between us.

“We have no complaints,” I assure her, giving her an easy grin. “Rest now. We’ll check in with Jess tomorrow and see if she knows more about when your heat might hit.”

“Okay,” she agrees. “It’s just stressful. What am I going to do about Shay?”

“Families handle heats all the time,” Kolt tells her, kissing her neck. “Gayle and her alphas are only a few houses down. We’ll manage.”

“Okay,” she repeats.

“Trust us to look after both of you,” I murmur, scooting down and pecking a kiss on her lips. “The two of you are a package deal like Kolt and Motley. We’ll make sure she’s well cared for while we meet all your needs.”

Charlie swallows thickly, nodding her understanding. The tender bundle of omega then snuggles close between us and promptly falls back to sleep.

She wakes us twice more in the next few hours.

I briefly wonder if we’ll be able to manage her heat with just the three of us. Hopefully with the pheromone fog to help us along, we’ll be able to satiate her needs.

---

“Brent is missing from Florida,” Kolt says, glaring at his phone like if he wishes it hard enough he’ll be able to strike the asshole dead wherever he happens to be.

“What?” Gray asks, leaning forward in his chair.

“He hasn’t been home in two days,” Kolt says, reading the message.

“Maybe he got a new girlfriend?” Charlie says, coming to stand between me and Gray. “That would suck for her. I’m actually sorry I thought that.”

I reach for her, but Gray has already wrapped her up in his arms and is pulling her to sit in his lap.

“Don’t be too harsh on yourself,” he says, brushing his cheek against hers. They make quite the adorable image as she sits facing him with her feet on the ground.

“Mmm, chocolate,” Shay says from her highchair. Luckily Gray’s mom had plenty of stuff in storage from his sister’s kids.

Charlie makes a move to turn to face her daughter.

“No, she’s fine,” Gray says, tenderly holding Charlie’s face. “She’s quite enjoying the chocolate muffins my mom brought over for breakfast.” He pulls her a little closer and she doesn’t protest. “You do smell delicious.”

“Nope,” Kolt says, catching Shay’s small hand. “That’s one thing we can’t share with Motley. Chocolate makes dogs sick.”

“Oh no,” Shay says, shaking her head. “No chocolate.” She looks so serious as she frowns at Motley. “Can’t share.”

I think she enjoys copying any words Kolt uses. She hasn’t mastered all of them just yet, but she’s learned a ton since they’ve been here.

“Kathy says she thinks there’s a possibility he got our mailing information off the packages,” Kolt says, shaking his head. “He came over right after you left and the boxes were still in the guest room.”

“That will send him to the resort,” Gray says, brushing a hand over the back of Charlie’s head. “Not our home. We have full-time security at the resort.”



“The point is, you needn’t worry,” I tell her, stretching over a hand and giving one of her curls a gentle tug.

“I’m trying not to,” she says, but she’s unconvincing.

Gray grabs a chocolate muffin off the table and offers Charlie a bite.

“You need to eat,” he says, giving her a soft but stern smile. “With your heat coming up, it’s even more vital that you don’t skip meals.”

“Ayle!” Shay says, totally butchering Gayle’s name. She starts to try to push herself up in her seat.

“Careful,” Kolt says, dropping his phone and tenderly unbuckling the chocolate-covered toddler.

“Did you pick out the chocolate chips?” I muse, laughing. “I think she wanted to feed Motley the remaining muffin so she could have more chocolate chips.”

“That sounds about like every kid I’ve ever known,” Gayle says, coming up to the table. She grins wickedly when she spots Charlie on Gray’s lap.

“Oh,” Charlie says, looking up at Gray with what might be pure terror.

“I’m no teenager,” Gray chuckles. “She’s not going to get onto us for sharing a seat.”

“Most definitely not,” Gayle says, giving Motley a quick scratch before stretching her arms out for Shayley.

Charlie twists her neck at an awkward angle so she can check out the exchange. Shay climbs right over into Gayle’s arms like she’s known Gigi her entire life.

Gray runs his head over the back of Charlie’s head. She’s looking a bit overwhelmed.

“So I have several boxes of clothes and kids’ stuff over at the house,” Gayle says. “I was wondering if you and Shay would like to come look through it? It’s stuff I’ve been storing for my kids, but Gray’s sisters said you’re more than welcome to anything you can use.”

“I think I’m supposed to be applying for a job today,” Charlie says, pushing herself out of Gray’s lap.

“Oh, there’s plenty of time for all that,” Gayle says, hiking Shay up on her hip. “Or why don’t you take care of that and Shayley can come spend a few hours with me?”

“Grandmas are always pushy,” Kolt says, standing up and wrapping an arm around Charlie’s lower back.

“I can go?” Shay asks, nodding her head.

Charlie looks like a deer caught in the headlights of a car for several long moments before she finally nods.

“Okay, but not in your pajamas,” she says, grabbing her daughter from Gayle. “I’ll change her and grab some pull-ups.”

“That sounds great,” Gayle says.

Once Charlie is gone, Gray looks at his mom and explains the situation about Brent no longer being in Florida.

“You’ve got two ex-military packmates,” she says, looking at Motley. “And who was supposed to be a police dog before she got adopted and became the softest personal protection dog in existence.” She shrugs. “Keep close to Charlie.”

“The entire situation leaves a bad taste in my mouth,” I grumble, glancing at the stairs.

“Mine too,” Kolt agrees. “I find the entire situation of how he came to be in her life highly strange . . .”

Gray and I frown as he explains how Brent was the officer who notified Charlie of her alpha’s passing.

“At the very least, he took unfair advantage of the situation,” Gayle agrees, shaking her head. “But I hear someone coming. And I’ve got grand-baby fever something fierce.”

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“Whatcha doing, lovely?” I ask, peeking my head in Charlie’s door.

Kolt walked Gayle and Shay back to her house just to be safe.

“Looking for clothes. I’ve got an appointment with the counselor, and Jess texted to let me know my test results are in, but it’s kind of cold out there. I need to work. I have to make money,” she whispers. Her head hangs as it shakes. “I don’t even know what to do anymore. Everything keeps piling up, and all I want to do is nest.”

“Oh, sweetheart.” I cross the room in several quick strides. “Are you having guilt about last night?”

Her blue eyes blink as they meet mine. “No, not at all. Mostly I’m frustrated that my instincts push me to hunker down when I’m overwhelmed, and that’s the opposite of helpful. How am I supposed to get my life in order when all I want to do is hide away from the world?”

“At some point, I think you stop fighting your impulses and trust that nature designed the relationship between alphas and omegas for a reason.” I pull her into me with a hand on her hip. “I know things are new, but that’s how it goes when alphas find their omega and vice versa. Allow us to provide for you as nature intended. Omegas are the foundation of a pack. Your pheromones soothe us. In return, we care for and protect you.”

“It’s just hard,” she says, running her hands over my T-shirt. “When Shane died . . .” She sighs. “I told you my name wasn’t on the house. They did let me keep everything that was in our joint bank accounts, but they sold the house with almost no notice.”

“Come on,” I say, guiding her to the shower. “Let’s get you clean while you fill me in on the rest.”

The touches I offer while helping her out of her clothes and into the shower aren’t sexual. But there’s an intimacy that I’m quickly growing addicted to. They aren’t lying about the pull between compatible alphas and omegas.

Caring for her gives me a boost of energy that's difficult to explain. The feeling might be pride. It's hard for me to be sure. I've never had physical intimacy without sex, but I do know I crave Charlie's touches even though they aren't sexual at all at the current moment.

"Shane's mom thought I singled him out." She snorts. "He didn't have much to do with his family. Our house and the way he lived even before we met . . . It didn't even make sense. He drove a twenty-year-old, paid-off Jeep. I mean how would I have known?"

"Singled him out for what reason?" I frown because I'm not understanding what she's explaining. "Alphas are drawn to omegas."

"Right, sorry I don't even like saying it out loud. For his money," she mutters, staring at her feet. "I came from nothing and I know that, but that wasn't what—"

"No, don't justify yourself," I murmur, brushing my lips over her soft cheek. "I'm sure she was lost in grief and didn't consider what she was saying."

"She hasn't once asked to see Shay. Shane died while I was pregnant. I gave birth alone. They know I don't have any family and not one of them . . ." Her wet hair slides over my skin as her head shakes.

Well, that right pisses me off.

"And you'll never experience anything like that again," I assure her. My semi-hard cock brushes her stomach. I awkwardly clear my throat. "Ignore that. While I'm always wildly attracted to you, now is not the time. Lean back for me, so we can get on with washing your hair."

"Thank you," she says, closing her eyes and allowing me to tilt her head back into the flow of water.

"Always, lovely," I say, hoping to hell she can hear the honesty in my tone.

# Chapter Sixteen

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## Charlie

“We’re going with sooner rather than later,” Jess says, grimacing as she shuffles the papers with my lab results. She slides a sheet of paper at me. “I’d say a maximum of ten to fourteen days.”

My jaw falls. “Before I have a full-blown heat?”

“Yes,” she agrees, having the good sense to look guilty.

She goes on to explain how an omega’s body is set up to experience regular heats. They’re an indicator of good overall health because they come much less frequently in those with medical issues and as an omega ages.

“On the positive side,” she says, sliding a sheet of paper my way. “Your other test results are in, and you’re clean of any sexually transmitted infections.”

“That’s a relief,” I mumble, burying my face in my hands.

And it truly is.

I know I’m being petulant. I’m not sure why I’m so hesitant to have a heat.

Shayley is a big concern, but I also realize Gray’s family is close by and Gayle seemed more than happy to keep her whenever the need might arise.

“There’s a slight possibility that you can delay your heat with skin-on-skin contact. It doesn’t need to be sexual.” Her eyebrows rise. “Although we all know how things go when compatible alphas and omegas are involved. It’s nearly impossible to fight that instinctual pull.” She gives me a

friendly smile. “My suggestion is to give your body what it’s craving. Soak up some alpha pheromones directly from the source. Enjoy a bit of cuddle time. It should also help with some of the lingering depression, especially if it was caused by being touch starved. It’s no guarantee it’ll delay the heat, but —”

“Thank you,” I mutter with my face flaming hot.

“With how strongly your body was fighting the suppressants, I’d say it’s a good sign for your overall health.” She stretches back in her chair. “I know that’s likely not what you want to hear, but—”

“No, it’s okay,” I reply, finally getting myself together. “I’m an omega. Having heats is a normal part of our biology.”

“Would you like to discuss birth control options?” she asks, nodding to the wall of pamphlets.

“Yeah,” I agree. “I think that would be smart.”

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After my meeting with Jess, I immediately head to my first therapy session. It’s not a deep dive into things. Mostly we get to know each other.

Calvin says it’s fine to call him by his first name. He’s an older man with laugh lines and kind eyes. We briefly touch on Brent and a bit about how we met. That conversation leads to Shane, but then my hour is up. I’m grateful I didn’t have to get deep into those emotions.

On my way out, I’m shocked to walk into Roarke.

“I’ve an appointment, too,” he says, seeming sheepish. “I figure it might not be a bad plan. I’d like to eventually be able to care for you if you’re sick or . . .”

“That’s very sweet,” I whisper. He pulls me to him with a hand on my hip. The kiss is quick and playful. His lips are plush and soft against mine. I smile, shaking my head as I step back.

Gray pokes his head in the door as Calvin steps out to call for Roarke. I aim for Gray, and it's a little unnerving how excited I am to see him.

"I've missed you," he murmurs, dipping his cheek to mine. "Are you busy? Can I steal you away for a few minutes?"

"I need to get Shay," I say, letting him guide me out.

"I spoke to my mom right before I came in. Shayley is having quite the time while Mom forces my dads to get all the kid stuff out of storage." He chuckles, pulling his dingy phone from his pocket. He laughs, offering me the phone. "My mom has been known to go overboard."

I snort as I catch sight of the picture. Shayley is sitting at a toddler table in one of the heavy plastic chairs. She's pointing across the garage while two men pull bins off the shelves. She's got on a pink princess dress over her clothes, a pair of yellow kids sunglasses, and a tiara.

"Oh no," I whisper. "I hope she's behaving . . ."

"You should probably be complaining that my mom is a bad influence," Gray says, pulling me close to his side. "Trust me. My family is eating up the chance to spoil her rotten."

"I haven't been away from her this much since she was a baby and I spent a few months working to try to make enough to pay for the daycare."

"I know you want to get to work immediately," Gray says, guiding me into his office. "Did Jess give you any insight on what to expect with your heat?"

"Two weeks max before it starts," I say, chewing at my lower lip. "It's coming up faster than I thought it would."

"You do smell sweeter," he murmurs, running his nose up the column of my neck. "Quite potent indeed, little one. Is little one okay?" He spins me until my back hits the wall and he's caging me in. The combination of his cologne and natural bergamot-tinged scent flood my nostrils.

It makes my thighs clench involuntarily. His smell has a powerful effect on my system.



“Little one is good,” I say, staring up into his dark eyes. The long hair on the top of his head falls over his forehead as he stares down at me. That look makes it hard not to climb him, or possibly tackle him to the carpet and have my wicked way with him.

“You’re tempting me to forget what I had planned and instead . . .” Gray shakes his head, chuckling lowly. “My apologies. Your scent is definitely getting stronger and so it would appear is my reaction to you.” He nuzzles his cheek to mine and steps back. “I have a few things for you.”

He guides me over to one of the club chairs across from his desk and takes a seat in the other. He grabs a black and pink bag from a store I recognize and places it in my lap.

“I know shopping with me was a bit much, but . . .” He shrugs. “I couldn’t help myself. Go on then.”

I pull out black and pink tissue paper with the store logo on it and giggle when I get a look at what’s inside.

“So it might come off as strange to admit, and I’m just realizing I likely shouldn’t have opened with the lingerie store, but I did check the labels on your dirty clothes while you were sick. Which sounds terrible when I say it aloud.” Gray’s cheeks are tinged pink by the time he finishes speaking. “The point is, they should fit, and I aimed to stay close to the styles I saw you liked.”

“Thank you,” I tell him sincerely. My skin brushes over the smooth material of the bras and panties. They’re adorable and flirty, but still functional. Shane absolutely, under no circumstances, would’ve ever picked out clothes for me. He’d happily sit and watch while I tried them on, though. He had that same caregiver vibe that Gray has, but it manifested differently.

“They should fit,” he says, giving me an apprehensive smile. “Is underclothing crossing a line for courting gifts? If so, we can exchange that gift for one of these.”

My jaw falls as I realize there’s an entire stack of bags and boxes on the side of his desk. “All of those can’t be from you,”

I whisper, shaking my head. “I didn’t mean that to sound ungrateful.”

“It didn’t,” he replies, grabbing several clothing boxes from the top and helping me swap out for the bag I was originally holding.

I open the box and it’s a pea coat style dress exactly like the one he bought for Shay while we were traveling.

“I may have hopped on their website during the days you were sick. Is it cheesy? I suppose I just love the style. I also find it adorable thinking of the two of you in your matching coats,” he says, glancing away.

“I loved this in the store,” I tell him. “I can’t believe they had my size.”

I really am surprised. Those boutique style stores don’t seem to carry sizes that are meant for my hips and tits, but when I pull the coat out of the box it’s clear it’ll fit. The process continues through the entire pile of boxes near his desk until they’re all opened.

“You really thought of everything,” I muse, giving him a sincere smile. “Thank you. These boots are adorable.”

They truly are. They’re knit sweater boots, and I know from just the name on the box that they’re expensive. My first instinct is to again point out that I didn’t need anything this lavish, but I don’t want to make a big deal about it.

He picked beautiful pieces of clothing that I really needed. I shove the boots at the box on the floor and then I’m climbing into his lap.

Gray has the thinnest build of the guys, but he lifted me easily when I was sick. I kneel over him and bury my face in his throat. It’s weird because of his lack of facial hair, but his skin is smooth. I decide I don’t hate it. More than that, physical features are just a bonus.

It’s the inside that counts.

This man took care of me when I was embarrassingly sick. He let me snuggle up to his chest when I was feverish and

probably didn't smell great from all the sweating. He didn't hesitate to look after me despite the fact I very well could have been contagious.

"I really like you," I say, running my hand over his pec.

His hand tightens on my ass.

"The feeling is mutual, little one," he says, rubbing his cheek against the side of my head. I have the uncontrollable urge to shove my mouth to his. My lips brush over his and I grin.

"Your lips are so soft. I don't think I've ever kissed someone without facial hair." My cheeks burn.

"I'll never sport a full beard like Kolt or even Roarke, but I can grow in some stubble if it would please you," he says, smirking dangerously.

"I like you just the way you are," I assure him, pushing my mouth to his.

# Chapter Seventeen

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## Grayson

Charlie seems a bit distraught when she sees all the additional packages that were delivered to the house while we were out.

Kolt stayed home to wait for the delivery of Shay's furniture then spent several hours turning the empty bedroom into a toddler playground.

I'm not sure how Charlie will feel when she checks out the new bedroom, but we're about to find out.

Roarke has Shay in his arms as we head up the hallway. Charlie makes a move to head into the guest room where Shay has been sleeping, but I direct her further down toward the master bedroom.

The last door on the right is to be Shay's new room.

"What's this?" Charlie asks, frowning and glancing back down the long hall. The room we originally put her in was much closer to Shay's room. It just so happens the nursery is close to the master suite.

"Shay's got a bit of a surprise," Roarke says, tickling her sides. "Are ye excited?"

"Oh yes," Shay agrees, nodding wildly. "For me?"

"For you," I agree.

I've already texted Kolt and he should be waiting for us. I knock gently and Kolt steps out. His face is red and he's sweaty like he's put in serious work transforming the formerly empty bedroom.

“Hey,” he says, stretching an arm out for Charlie. The little omega heads straight into his chest. “How was your day?”

“It was good,” she says, leaning up to kiss his chin.

“Koko,” Shay says, stretching for Kolt.

“Little traitor,” Roarke grumbles, stepping forward to make it an easy transition. “If someone ever gets a delivery of little brothers and sisters . . .” He jabs a finger at Kolt, who now holds Shay and Charlie. “You’re not allowed to be the favorite.”

Charlie chokes on literally nothing. She finally laughs, and I blow out a breath of pure relief when she walks to Roarke, wrapping her arms around his middle.

“If it helps, I don’t have a favorite,” she whispers, pulling him down so she can kiss his cheek.

The Irishman grins a wicked smile.

“It does indeed,” he muses, winking at Kolt.

“Ready to see your courting gift, ladybug?” Kolt asks, hiking her up on his arm.

“Mm hm,” Shay says, nodding. They head inside, and I allow Roarke to guide Charlie in next before I bring up the rear.

“Wow,” Charlie says as her head swivels, taking in the room.

My jaw doesn’t quite hang open the way hers does, but I will say the room has been completely transformed. There’s a pale pink and lavender rug covering the beige carpet. It covers the majority of the floor and it perfectly matches the layered curtains that frame the giant window.

One side of the room has the white sleigh toddler bed and a toy chest at the footboard. There’s a completely assembled six-drawer dresser and a small toddler-sized table and two chairs.

“Good luck getting these to hold you up, mate,” Roarke says, nodding to the two plastic chairs.

“That’s what the rocking chair is for,” Kolt says, finally releasing Shay so she can check everything out. She immediately runs to the small bookshelf that lines the wall behind her table.

“Oh my,” she says, falling to her knees in front of it.

“Those are from Gayle,” Kolt says, moving one of the chairs so he can squat by her side. “Some of these even belonged to Grayson when he was little.”

“Whoa,” she says, giving me a smile. Her small face is framed in brown curls just like Charlie’s. She really is a very sweet kid, and it’s clear I need to put in more time with her so she’ll be comfortable with me like she is with Kolt and Roarke.

“How about I read you one of my favorites tonight before bed?” I ask, hoping she doesn’t shut me down.

“Okay,” she agrees.

I let out a breath of pure gratefulness that I haven’t neglected that relationship to the point of no return. In my defense, they’ve only been here a week, but I’m still sure I need to put in more time with Shay.

I got hyper-focused on Charlie because she was sick, and everything has been happening so quickly that it’s hard to keep up.

“You didn’t?” Charlie asks, spotting the giant dog bed in the corner.

“I figured she’d be in here a lot,” Kolt says, shrugging.

“That dog has a bed in pretty much every room of the house,” Roarke says, pulling up his long hair into a tie.

“Shall I start dinner?” I ask, taking a step back from Charlie’s overpowering scent. She’s getting more potent with each day that passes, and it becomes harder to keep myself off her.

They agree, and I kiss Charlie on the forehead before departing to cook. I need to give myself something else to think about outside of rutting my omega.

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“She’s out,” Charlie says, grinning softly as she nods to my chest. “And becoming quite spoiled with the three of you.”

“Not a chance,” I say, standing slowly to avoid waking Shay. “She’s finally getting the attention she deserves from someone other than you.”

I carefully make my way to the toddler bed and squat down to place the sleeping Shayley. She immediately rolls over and sticks her diaper-clad bottom in the air. She grabs the ridiculous two-foot-tall monkey Roarke gifted her at the arcade and wraps her arm around its neck.

I pull up the blanket and tuck it around her small frame before swiping my hand over her head full of curls. She really is precious. Quiet and a bit reserved until she gets to know you—with everyone who isn’t Kolton. But there’s something about him that wins over women with very little effort. Even though in the five years I’ve known him, he’s very rarely noticed and never returned the affection of an interested female.

It’s why it was so shocking to learn of his slight obsession with Charlie. After we returned to Colorado from Florida in July, she was all he spoke about.

“I heard there’s another surprise?” Charlie whispers, flicking on the monitor and grabbing the receiver.

“There is.” I guide her out and down to the master suite. “Now that the time has come . . .” I frown, wrapping my arm around her shoulder. “I’m a bit concerned that it’s going to come off as presumptuous.”

“Well, now you absolutely have to tell me what it is. Is it more *underclothes*?” The light tinkling laugh that accompanies her question makes my heart race. Seeing her happy is bad for my already paper-thin self-control.

“Are we doing the thing?” Roarke asks.



“That makes it sound slightly sexual,” Kolt says, grinning wickedly at Charlie.

“I’m not opposed to that,” she says, walking over to give the big bastard a hug.

Jealousy has no place in pack life. I’ve never felt an ounce of envy when Roarke dated in the past. Kolt is a bit of an enigma as he hasn’t brought a woman around in all the years I’ve known him, but even if he had, I wouldn’t have been jealous. I’ve dated here or there over the years, but in reality, I never saw much point in it. I always knew we’d eventually need an omega.

Now that she’s here, I don’t want to be left behind. I know she’s already broached intimacy with the others. That doesn’t bother me nearly as much as the fact she seems to find it easier to accept care from them than she does from me.

Which means I’m failing at something. I’m aware I’ve distanced myself from not only my packmates, but also close intimate ties due to my own past experiences.

I hover.

It’s what I do.

It’s how I show care and concern.

I micromanage any situation my romantic partner is comfortable with passing off to me. In order to combat that impulse, it’s necessary for me to pull back.

I have two settings: obsessively handling everything and standing back watching while *wishing* I was obsessively handling everything.

I’d very much like it if Charlie would allow me to do . . . Well, essentially everything for her.

I find I’m most comfortable when I can do everything from choosing the clothing she’ll wear in a day to setting up meals and ideally feeding her by hand. A huge part of me relished the time she was sick, which I’m aware sounds fucking horrifying. It’s still true because she surrendered all

her care into my hands. I found it wildly satisfying in a way that's difficult to explain.

My biological father also enjoys a level of control over situations that several of my other fathers found difficult to accept initially. They worked through their growing pains and accepted his idiosyncrasies. I'm lucky that Kolt and Roarke have no issue with me continually taking that apex alpha role.

In all honesty, I don't crave it as a physical thing, but a mental one. It's concerning every time I imagine how the conversation will go with Charlie. I've had several relationships unravel rather quickly after I explained my desires. It's unsettling because I'm not convinced that I wouldn't chase if she ran.

Alphas hunt omegas. It might be an outdated custom, but it's still at the foundations of our instincts. More than that, I could ruin my packmate's future with Charlie if I frighten her off. On the other hand, I know myself well enough to realize that no matter how strongly I try to cage those impulses, they will make themselves known at the most inconvenient of times.

"Hey," Charlie says, coming to stand at my side. "Are you okay? You seem a bit . . ." She hums. "Distant? Uncomfortable? I'm not sure the right word for it."

"Oh, little one," I murmur, leaning to nuzzle my cheek to hers. "I'm fine. You are very observant."

"Not usually," she says, wrapping her arms around my middle. "But I got a weird ache in my chest and felt like I needed to check in with you."

That takes my breath away while simultaneously causing my pulse to pound in my ears. It's an excellent sign that we are highly compatible.

"Let's show you your gift," I tell her, noticing how closely Roarke and Kolt are watching our exchange.

"Are you sure?" she asks, squinting up at me. The way her eyebrows draw together is utterly adorable.

“Come along,” I say, lifting her and wrapping her around my front. “Allow us to give you our first joint courting gift. The phone doesn’t count because it was a necessity.”

# Chapter Eighteen

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## Charlie

Gray smells stressed. I don't like it. It makes it nearly impossible to focus on what the guys are about to show me.

"This is going to seem extremely forward," Roarke murmurs, moving behind me.

Gray holds me close to his chest, but Roarke doesn't hesitate before pulling my hair to the side and kissing my neck.

"But it's not meant to be," Kolt says, flipping on the light in the corner. "There's no rush on moving in here. We just wanted you to know it's available and waiting for you . . ." He shrugs. "If or when you're ready to consider it."

My eyes bounce around the massive pack bedroom. I'm pretty sure my jaw actually falls open.

"Holy crap," I whisper hiss.

The room is incredible. It has pale gray walls framed in a thick crown molding that isn't just at the top and bottom. It also frames the lower portion of the wall in a pattern I don't know the name for. All I do know is it's beautiful and majorly fancy.

The center of the far wall is taken up by a massive four-poster bed that has dark gray and pale pink gauzy curtains that are currently tied back.

"We replaced all the furniture after we moved in," Gray says, smiling down at me. "I had no interest in keeping the bed

I was possibly conceived in.”

I snort, shaking my head. “I bet not.”

“The bed was designed by Killian Adler,” Kolt says, stepping over and nodding at the intricate woodwork.

“I believe it’s Killian Nash now,” Roarke says absently. “But yes, it’s all handmade. It cost us a small fortune having it shipped and assembled, but the quality is unmatched. He has a bit of a small business building furniture designed to meet the needs of family packs.”

“It’s beautiful,” I murmur.

Gray walks us closer to the dark wooden headboard. I’m no expert on bed sizes, but I think it has to be roughly the size of two king-size beds.

“The mattress was special ordered from a company that does pack beds and nesting mattresses. Would you like to check it out?” Gray asks, setting me down on the edge.

The three alphas circle, looking quite predatory, but I don’t feel overwhelmed or uncomfortable in the least. Mostly I’m still stuck on what’s bothering Gray. I feel like I need to approach the subject with him one-on-one when the others aren’t around.

“It’s very nice,” I concede, bouncing on the plush surface. The bed is covered with a thick down comforter in white with a dark gray pattern that perfectly matches the aesthetic of the room. “Your gift is a bed for all of us to sleep in?” I laugh. “I suppose I see why that might come off a certain way.”

Kolt glances around with a look of panic on his face. Motley actually comes up, brushing against his legs and trying to catch his attention.

“I’m just joking. It’s a lovely gift. As long as it’s never been shared with any other omegas?” I frown because that sounded rotten even to my own ears.

“We haven’t been with an omega before,” Roarke says, climbing on the bed. My back hits the mattress as his weight presses into me. “That goes for all three of us. Although I am

quite looking forward to knowing what it feels like to lock my knot inside you.”

“I want that too,” I whisper as his lips meet mine. His beard is scratchy and the kiss is much different from Gray’s.

Roarke is hyper and enthusiastic while Gray was slow and steady. He almost felt like he would consume me whole before I ever realized what was happening. Roarke kisses playfully and although I got a taste last night, I can’t help but wonder if he’s the same when he fucks.

My perfume radiates around us as Roarke grinds into me. My feet dig into his ass for leverage and then he pulls back. The pouty sound that escapes my lips is embarrassing.

“We’ve got more to show you,” Roarke muses, wrapping his arm around my lower back and lifting us both. “It’s still very basic because we didn’t want to . . . Hey.”

Gray bumps his shoulder into Roarke’s. “Don’t ruin the surprise.”

“Come on, pretty girl,” Kolt says, heading across the room.

I glance at Roarke because he’s still holding me with a tight grip on my ass. He finally releases me, and I wobble a bit once I’m standing on my own. It’s crazy how aroused I am from just a few kisses and some slow grinding.

I give Roarke a pat on the chest and skip to Kolt’s side.

Courting gifts are way more exciting than I remembered. Or maybe that’s some of the fog of long-term depression lifting? I’m not sure, but the thought makes my heart wobble as I think of Shane.

I wrap my hand in Kolt’s and let him pull me along. I can’t stay trapped in the past forever. That doesn’t mean I have to forget the man I loved, but it also doesn’t mean I can live in grief forever.

That’s not fair to me or Shayley.

More than that, I can recognize it’s not what he would have wanted for me.

Shane's love was pure and totally selfless.

I know he would have liked Gray, Roarke, and Kolt.

"Sorry, Mot," Kolt says, pointing a finger back into the bedroom. "Back in the bedroom."

I frown because I've never seen him keep her from following him anywhere. We're standing directly outside of a small hallway.

"I'll let you decide if you allow her in," he says sheepishly, shrugging a massive shoulder. "This and the door directly across are two walk-in closets."

He briefly pulls the door open and allows me to look inside. Other than a few bins stacked in the corner and extra bedding, it's completely empty. We move a few feet down and there are two more doors. He opens the one on the right again and my jaw falls.

"Holy crap," I say again. I feel like that's the same thing I said when I got a look at the bedroom, but the bathroom is freaking unreal. There's a massive four-person tub, a separate walk-in shower, and a door I think might lead to a separate toilet. There's a huge counter with double sinks and it's all extremely clean and fancy.

I barely make it a few steps inside before Kolt is pulling me back out.

"Unless you need to use it," he says, pulling me into his front. "I'd rather we finally get to the exciting part."

"You're going to love it," Roarke says, popping over Kolt's shoulder and giving me a cheesy grin. "But if by some stroke of bad luck you hate it . . . Well, we'll blame Gray and his obsessive need to—"

"Stop," Kolt growls, surprising the hell out of me.

"I was just taking the piss," Roarke says, smirking. "You know that, right, lovely?"

"That means joking," Kolt says, nuzzling his cheek to mine. "It took me years to decode his Irish-English. It occasionally comes out as its own language."



I laugh as Kolt opens the door behind me and guides us inside.

“Ohmigod,” I whisper. “It smells delicious.”

“You’ll find we did what we could to prep it for you,” Gray says, smiling at me over Kolt’s shoulder. “Without taking too many liberties.”

Kolt puts me on my feet, spinning me around to face the room. My hands fly to my mouth as I let out the most omega-sounding squeal I think has ever escaped my lips. We’re standing in the entryway to the most incredible nest I’ve ever seen, including the ones I’ve looked at online and in pictures. The walls to our right and left are lined with dark wooden cabinets from floor to ceiling. There’s a few feet of carpet in a V shape, and I see Kolt is kicking off his shoes.

There’s a set of three stairs that lead through a small doorway. I immediately bound up them, and I don’t know where to go or what to look at first. There’s a small walkway that circles the nest in a square shape.

“Take the long way around and come back to this,” Roarke suggests, appearing at my side. He gives me a quick pat on the rump and I follow his instructions.

The carpet heads down, and I make a right then another, and I’m dumbstruck. There’s a very large picture window that extends up into the ceiling. You can see the mountains and trees in the background, but it’s the window seat that blows my mind. I’m honestly not sure that’s the correct word for it. It’s about the size of a full-size bed, and it’s covered with pillows and soft blankets.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, stepping forward to run my hands over the comforter covering the mattress.

This area is light and airy with an open feeling that might not work for the first few days of my heat, but the last few days something like this is incredible. Or even just to curl up and read a book while being able to look out at the view.

The blanket is cream colored, as are the huge cushions that frame the wall on either end. There are other pillows in

various shapes and shades of gray, beige, and pink.

“Do you like the window nest?” Gray asks, coming up and resting his hands on my hips.

“I love it,” I assure him, glancing up at him over my shoulder. “I’ve never actually seen anything like this in person.”

“I hadn’t either,” Roarke says, laughing. He looks at Kolt. “Would you like to check on the pup and the shorty?”

“Let’s do it,” Kolt says, moving to give me a quick kiss. “Enjoy the real nest.”

“Thank you.” I’m pretty sure they know there’s something Gray and I need to discuss. Or maybe he’s just feeling a little left out because he and I have barely kissed and . . .

“Come along,” Gray says, guiding me back around the square to the front of the nest.

Once we get back to the nest entrance, my brain short circuits. Their scents are stronger inside this area. There are an additional three steps that are covered in plush carpet. It has three walls to my left, right, and straight ahead. The ceiling has two large vents on either side, I’m guessing it’s a ventilation system.

Gray plays with a few buttons on the wall as my eyes take everything in. The nest mattress is extremely plush under my feet. I take several steps inside and fall to my knees because it’s like walking across a bed.

The lights dim as soft music starts to play.

“There are other options: nature sounds, rain, white or pink noise, waves crashing . . .” Gray looks at me, but I’ve already tossed myself down at the head of the nest.

“These pillows smell like you,” I whimper, pulling one to my nose.

“They do,” he agrees, knee-walking his way up to me. He removes the pillow from my face and tosses it down before lying next to me. His hand lands on my hip and he pulls me to

lie on my side facing him. My fingers fidget between us, and I'm not even sure why.

"There's something I should have addressed prior to expressing my interest in courting," Gray says, running his fingers over my lower back.

"Okay." I study him carefully because he seems anxious as hell and it's putting me on edge, too.

"Even among my packmates, I have a bit of an unavoidable urge to control situations." Gray pulls me closer as he scoots in to meet me. "It's one of those things I find difficult to ignore. My need to care for anyone in my life. It's of course a much deeper pull when it's someone I'm intimate with, and in your case, although we haven't taken that step yet . . ." He sighs. "It's practically impossible to avoid. I hover. It's what I do."

"And you're worried that I won't handle that well?" I ask, frowning at his chin. He's got me tucked against his shoulder and it's difficult to move as he palms the back of my head.

"I worry I'll scare you away and ruin not only what we have building, but also what you have growing with Roarke and Kolton." Gray sighs long and loud.

"You like control," I say, pushing back so I can watch his face.

"I need it," he murmurs.

"I do not," I assure him. "In fact, I'd go as far as to say I dislike having to be the one to make tough calls. I'm a very typical omega."

"It's a bit more than that," Gray says, his eyes sliding shut.

"The majority of alphas are Doms and the same goes for omegas being subs. Is that what this is about?" I ask, trying to force the pieces of this puzzle together.

"To a certain extent," he says in a strangely prim tone.

"And you're afraid because of Brent that means I won't handle being bossed around in the bedroom?"

“I’ll admit that has crossed my mind.” His gaze is fixed somewhere over my shoulder.

“Listen, Grayson,” I say, rolling over on top of my alpha. His hands meet my hips as I cuddle close. “I’m not afraid of you. I have actual life experience with another alpha. It helps me understand that not all men are like Brent. I’d even go as far as to say he’s the exception not the rule for alphas in general.”

“I hate even hearing his name from your lips,” Gray says, caressing my cheek.

“You do understand that I’m not afraid of you, don’t you, Gray?” I ask, staring into his eyes.

“You shouldn’t be, but I do wonder how you’d react to me asking for complete control.” His lips ghost over mine.

I grind over him without conscious thought.

“I think the only way we’ll know is if we give it a shot,” I reply, tenderly shoving my mouth to his. He rolls us until I’m caged under his strong form. “Shane was fifteen years older than I am. He was very much an alpha.” My eyes squeeze shut. “And I craved everything he provided. I’ve never felt safer or more cared for than when he was looking after me.”

“What kinds of things do you mean?” Gray asks, his hands slide up my thighs and under the hem of my dress.

The intense look on his face sends a jolt of pure lust through my system. He’s got that tall, dark, and handsome thing going for him, but it’s the desperate look of desire on his face that loosens my tongue.

“Shane handled everything from . . .” I blush. I don’t even know why. Gray and I are still getting to know one another, but I do trust him. “Let’s just go with everything. He was very bossy all the time. He wasn’t violent in the least, but he was quick to spank when I put myself in dangerous situations or didn’t listen when it was important. He gave me baths, brushed my hair, fed me by hand, and . . .” I whimper as my eyes slide shut. “I really miss him.”

“I know you do,” Gray says, kissing the edge of my mouth. “We don’t wish to erase him from your memory, only make room in your heart for us. If you think there’s space?”

“I know there is,” I assure him. It’s a wild feeling to realize it’s true. I’ve grieved and been stuck in limbo for three years, but I do think I’m in a place to start moving on.

“Let’s see if I can give you a small taste of what to expect,” Gray says, smiling mischievously.

“Okay,” I agree in a breathy tone.

The guilt is still there, but I’m also filled with a giddy excitement to see what the future holds.

I believe them when they say they won’t try to force me to forget Shane, and at this point, I think that’s the best I could hope for. I can’t bring him back no matter how much I beg, plead, or demand it from the universe . . . He’s still gone. But he’ll always live on in Shayley and my memories.

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The fact they’ve stocked the bathroom full of expensive products isn’t something I let myself stress about too much.

Gray carefully pulls my hair up into a tie before removing my clothing piece by piece in the most non-sexual, but still somehow extremely erotic way possible. He helps me into the massive tub before stripping naked.

The water is so hot it practically scalds my skin, but my aching muscles certainly appreciate it.

Gray’s lithely, muscled form slides into the tub at my side, and it’s difficult to look away. He’s so well-built it’s intimidating. I know I’m curvy and the stereotype for my designation. After I had Shay, I lost a considerable amount of weight while breastfeeding and when times were hard. Over the last couple years, I’ve gained most of that back.

I have no idea what to do with myself when he lifts my left leg out of the water and rests my heel against his shoulder.

Gray squirts out body wash that smells like roses before slowly massaging it into my calf. “Do you know what a Daddy Dom is?”

My eyes fly open as I realize they shut at some point. “I do.”

“I have many tendencies that fall in line with that role,” he says, working the body wash higher on my leg. “I enjoy dressing my partner, brushing their hair, helping them get dressed and undressed.” He winks. “Yes, sexually, but also simply after you’ve had a hard day and need some extra coddling. I like planning meals, and I’d love it if you allowed me to feed you by hand whenever possible.”

Shane did all of those things, and I never once thought it was odd or overly pushy. I hadn’t interacted with many alphas before him, and certainly none that were out of their teenage years.

I thought that was just part of the dynamics between alphas and omegas. But more than that, I know I’ll enjoy it if he handles those things so I don’t have to.

“I’m okay with all of that,” I tell him, stretching forward to squeeze his hand. “I don’t think it’s weird that you want to take care of me. I find the idea comforting.”

“How do you feel about diapers?” Gray asks, tilting his head and giving me a mischievous smirk.

“For Shayley?”

“For you, little one.”

“That’s probably where I draw the line,” I say, grimacing because I don’t want to hurt his feelings.

There’s a playful grin on his face and a twinkle in his eyes that makes me feel like he might have been joking with that one.

He puts my leg back into the water and pulls me to kneel over his lap on the opposite side of the tub.

“Carrying you to the restroom? Helping you use it if you’re under the weather?” His hands run over my back.

Steam rises in the air, and he looks so damn hopeful that I don't immediately object.

"If I'm not feeling well? I could probably handle that."

"Shaving you?" He grins, and it's a devastatingly handsome smile.

"If it makes you happy . . ." I bite my lip. "Grayson, I'm not going to complain about you pampering the hell out of me. Who would? I don't know. I've always been on my own since I was barely into my teenage years. I didn't have the foundation most omegas start with because I didn't grow up in a pack. It sounds bad, but I like the idea of not having to worry about everything. I'm okay with handing off those sorts of decisions as long as when something is important to me that you assure me I'll get a say. That you won't just steamroll over me because I dislike confrontation."

"Fucking never," he growls, diving forward and capturing my mouth in a slow but incredibly dirty kiss. Hot water splashes around us as I grind over him. His hands on my hips seem to perfectly trap me to his strong form.

Gray proceeds to give me a very thorough cleaning that feels more like foreplay than anything I've ever felt. He carefully shaves my legs and smirks, running his fingers over my sex.

"We'll handle intimate hair removal another day." He wraps us both up in fluffy towels and guides us to the bedroom.

"Unless you need the nest?" he asks, pulling on a tendril of hair that escaped the towel.

"No, I'm okay," I say as my hands rest against his muscular chest.

"How do you feel about lying down and letting me give you a massage?" Gray asks, dipping his mouth to mine.

"Okay," I agree.

I'm quite breathless all of a sudden. I think it's the combination of the look of hunger on his face and his

pheromones flooding the air.

“You won’t need this,” Gray growls, pulling at the edge of my towel. “On your belly, little one.”

I stare, blinking for several long seconds as my nipples ache in the cool air.

“Now,” Gray growls. The sound does indescribable things to my insides. I scramble to comply. My stomach hits the mattress and then Gray’s warm skin is hovering over mine. “For the record, I absolutely can’t wait until you’re comfortable enough to be a brat. That means I get the joy of punishing you.”

I gasp, burying my face in my arm because that thought makes my thighs clench and Gray’s cock is heavy against them.

“Oh, sweet girl,” he murmurs, kissing over my shoulder. “Relax and enjoy.”

The drawer on the bedside table opens. The squirt of liquid makes me tremble, and I have no idea why. Then Gray’s hands are caressing my skin and teasing me in the best ways possible.



# Chapter Nineteen

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## Kolt

“Well, shite,” Roarke groans. “I had hopes we’d come in to find the beginnings of our very first foursome.”

“Keep it down,” Gray murmurs. He’s in only a pair of boxer briefs. “She was tired. She fell asleep during her massage.”

“Shay’s still asleep. I’m hoping she won’t be afraid when she wakes up. It’s a new room, but I did tell Motley to stick in there,” I say, dropping the monitor on the bedside table and turning up the volume a bit.

“Are we all in here tonight?” Roarke asks, tilting his head and studying Charlie’s bare backside. “Because I sleep the best when she’s snoring on my chest.”

“That’s the downside of pack life,” Gray says, running a hand over Charlie’s skin. “Having to swap out nights close to our omega.”

“It has benefits, too,” I remind them, pulling off my shirt. “Also I’m totally fine if she needs to sleep right on top of me. Then you assholes can have either side.”

“I’m strangely proud of you right now,” Roarke says, holding out a fist for me to bump.

I chuckle. He’s been known to have nightmares. If he sleeps better touching Charlie then I can take one of their sides tonight.

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“Kolt,” Charlie whispers. Soft hands skate over my chest and around my neck. “Kolton?”

“What’s up, sweetheart?” I mumble, still half asleep.

“I need you,” she whispers, wriggling her front against mine.

I know for a fact Roarke was between us when I fell asleep, but he often slips out to the gym to burn off energy when he can’t crash.

Charlie whines, and I slap a hand over her mouth. The dirty little omega licks my palm. A feral growl rattles out of my chest in response. She’s very naked. Her skin burns as she slides her leg over mine. My boxers don’t do much to hide how hard I am. When she moves her leg, it positions my cock between her thighs.

Her fingers wrap around the base of my shaft over the material as she flicks her tongue over my hand again.

“You need me?” I ask very close to her ear. “You know Gray’s over there right?”

Her eyes sparkle as she nods her agreement. The way she trembles against my chest nearly triggers my impulse to roll over and trap her to the mattress to prevent any chance of her escaping me.

“What do you need? You need to come?”

Charlie nods.

“You want my fingers?”

She shakes her head.

“My mouth?”

She shakes again.

“You want my cock, baby girl?”

She nods frantically. I finally move my hand as my forehead falls to hers.

“I want that, too,” I assure her.

Charlie doesn't hesitate. She pushes her lips to mine and releases her hold on my cock to slide her hand down the front of my boxers. I palm the back of her head as she wiggles against me. Eventually she gets frustrated with the material and tries to yank them down.

I comply by pushing up on my forearm to give her enough space to pull them down. I kick them off as she scoots up close to my neck and tosses her leg back around mine. We lie face to face, but she's so much shorter than me it's clear this position won't do anything but frustrate both of us.

Her warm breath fans over my pec as she jerks the head of my cock against her pussy. It's so close, but so damn far away. Luckily, I have long arms. I put a hand on her ass and tilt her enough I can tease two fingers down the lips of her sex. She's completely drenched.

A feral growl escapes and Charlie clamps her free hand over my mouth to keep us from getting caught. Not that I'd mind if Gray wanted to join in, but the thought does send a thrill directly to my balls. It's kind of hot being sneaky.

The way her tiny hand doesn't even manage to wrap all the way around my cock makes me a bit nervous. I'm a big guy and Charlie is small in comparison.

I get it.

Alpha and omega biology is designed for the two to go together, but I've had a lifetime to learn that if I'm going to have sex with someone, it takes a considerable amount of prep work. Not that there have been a lot of women, but I don't think we can go from sleeping to fucking with no effort on my part.

I slowly twist a finger between her lower lips and groan when it dips inside her. She feels like nothing I've ever experienced. Her warm, wet walls immediately clamp down on my finger and the feeling takes my goddamn breath away.

Her pussy immediately begins to ripple around my finger. I know I haven't done nearly enough to get her there, so I'm going to guess there's some biological function for the way she seems to be milking me as I finger in and out of her.

"Holy shit, Kolt," she whispers against my lips. Her hand is still loosely jerking me, but it seems like I distracted her.

The thought makes me grin. I've never been the guy women chase, and I don't have tons of experience, but I do have patience and a desire to make this good for her.

"I need you inside me." The way she curls into my chest and whimpers like she's in pain gives me pause.

"Am I hurting you?" I ask, trying to pull out my finger.

"Hell no," she snaps. "You're teasing me. I need more than a finger."

"How about two?" I ask, testing her with my pointer and middle finger.

"I need to be knotted," she says, nodding. "I ache and I'm hot. It's getting worse."

"Shit," I whisper as she plasters her tits to my chest and tries to aim my cock toward her core.

She's an omega having a wave of heat.

That means it's time to be the alpha in this situation and do the damn thing. Alphas aren't meant to hesitate or second guess. I've never been great at that, but for Charlie, I can do this.

I roll her onto her back, hover over her on my forearms, and will myself to purr. Once that starts, I bump her face to the side and lick down her neck. She's starting to beg and whimper, so I position my free hand over her mouth again. It makes her dig her feet into my ass even harder.

She just feels so damn small under me. The last thing I want to do is hurt her. I suck my way from her neck to her clavicle and eventually wrap my tongue around her hard nipple. My cock is sticky and leaking all over her lower stomach. I'm a fucking giant, and she's tiny in comparison.

This is going to take some maneuvering. I'm busy sucking on her other tit, but Charlie has different plans. She stretches an arm down and grips my cock. She tilts her hips and shimmies a bit while I'm still focused on sucking on her perfect tits. The next thing I know, she's dipping my cock into her wetness and grinding her hips until I'm inside her.

The stretch of her pussy around my crown is so intense I pull away from her tit.

"Holy fucking shit," I growl. I have to grit my teeth to avoid sinking them into her. She's so fucking warm and tight that I freeze. I'm completely unsure what I'm supposed to do with myself.

"Kolt?" She looks so nervous as she stares up at me that I finally get my shit together. I've got her caged into the mattress, but I wrap my forearm around the top of her head and lower the top half of my body onto hers.

"You good?" I whisper against her cheek.

"So good, but I need more of you," she begs as her feet push against my ass.

"You want more of my cock?" I taunt, running my teeth over her neck.

"I need *all* of you," she whispers.

"I'm hanging on by a thread here, baby girl," I warn her, pulling out and thrusting back in. I'm still only giving her the first inch or two of my cock, but her pussy is juicy, and the way she clenches around me spurs me on.

I palm the top of her head as our tongues meet in a frantic kiss. There's no way Gray's still asleep. When I look over he's facing us, watching the show, but Charlie is staring up at me, desperately clawing at my back and ass.

I wish it were brighter in the room so I could see everything. I pull back until I'm kneeling and bring her legs to rest over my hips. I plant my hands on her ass and lower back and fuck her on my cock. She covers her face with her hand and begs.

“You needn’t hide,” Gray murmurs, leaning over. “Can I join you?”

“Please,” she whimpers. He tilts her head toward his and they share a kiss as he teases her tight bouncing tits.

I can see it all, but I’m obsessed with the way her perfect pink pussy stretches around my crown. She’s nowhere close to taking all my shaft, but when I pull back, I’m covered in her slick, and it has a violent effect on my brain. It makes it real goddamn hard not to slam Gray out of the way and sink my teeth into her throat as I fill her to the brim with load after load of my cum.

“Fuck, sweetheart,” I growl as her inner walls clench. “It’s like you’re already trying to milk my cock. Are you trying to embarrass me?”

“Harder,” she demands. “I need you. Stop teasing me. I’m not going to break.”

“Is that right?” I muse, pulling out of her completely.

“No,” she whines.

The sound instantly sends my instincts through the roof. I pull her up and flip her over.

“Hands and knees for me!” I bark. It’s unintentional, and even Gray looks surprised.

“Okay,” Charlie whimpers, scrambling to comply.

Gray scoots over under her top half and leans against the headboard. Her forearms fall to his shoulders as her tits press against his bare chest. His legs are on the outside with hers between his. I suppose group sex was something we were always going to have to learn to navigate. I kneel on my left knee and put my right foot flat on the bed to give myself some room to move.

Gray kisses the hell out of Charlie as I spread her ass to give me a view of her slick pink pussy. Her hourglass shape is even more pronounced when she’s bent over, and it’s doing crazy shit to my baser urges.

“Kolt,” she sobs my name into Gray’s mouth, and it finally breaks through my trance on exactly how much I want back inside her.

I shove two fingers into her pussy and get them nice and slick before wetting the head of my cock. This position is totally different, and I need to be sure I don’t hurt her.

Charlie whines.

The fog hits me as I slam inside her. The noises she makes sound like desperate pleasure. I say a silent prayer to thank the universe, considering I could have majorly fucked up just now.

She wiggles her hips as her tits bounce on Gray’s chest.

“Holy fucking shit,” I choke. “Goddamn, Charlie. I feel like I’m splitting you in half.”

Charlie doesn’t seem to be in pain, she squirms, impaling herself further down my throbbing shaft.

“Holy *fuck*,” I groan. “Look at you. You’re taking my cock *deep*. You’re such a good girl. Perfect tight pussy wrapped around me. Oh, sweetheart.”

Charlie whimpers, wiggling her hips.

“Rub her clit.” Hopefully Gray understands that was meant for him because I’m still busy staring at Charlie’s heart-shaped ass. I never understood the term before, but yeah, it’s safe to say I finally get it. My forearm wraps around her middle, and I pull her up until she’s kneeling against my chest.

“More, Kolton,” she sobs.

“Are you okay?” I growl against her neck. The position makes her inner walls tighten up even further. I feel pretty damn useless at the moment. It’s like I don’t know what to do with myself. “Charlie, answer me.”

“Knot,” she gasps, sliding a hand down and feeling where my cock disappears inside her. “I need you. I’m so good.”

Gray finally acts. He leans in, swirling his tongue around one of her nipples and teases her clit.



“She does feel warm, doesn’t she?” he asks before switching to the other heavy tit. “I think it would be best if you rut into her and settle the wave.”

“Yes, Kolt, do that,” she begs.

“I’ve never knotted anyone. I don’t want to hurt you,” I whisper as my eyes fall shut.

Charlie doesn’t hesitate. She rises on her knees and falls hard over my cock. All the breath seems to evaporate from my lungs as my knot barely slides inside her. It’s actually not even all the way in, but I thrust up until it’s fully settled inside her.

“Holy fuck,” I growl. “I . . . *Wow.*”

My hands hold her to me in a bruising grip. Charlie grinds her hips, sliding back and forth as my knot swells, locking us together, but it’s like I’m frozen.

The rolling waves of spasms that are happening just inside her cunt are too much. It teases and tantalizes my knot in a way that makes it throb and swell even larger. The pressure is so tight that I’m afraid to move at all.

“You’re sure I’m not hurting you?”

“You feel so good,” she moans.

“Why don’t you lie back so Charlie can ride you,” Gray suggests.

She’s been softly begging and I’m still frozen.

I give a ragged nod and carefully lower my back until my ass hits the mattress. It takes some work, but then my legs are facing the headboard up by Gray.

My hands hold Charlie in place over me as she faces him. It’s reverse cowgirl at its finest.

“I believe you short-circuited Kolt,” Gray says, nuzzling his cheek to Charlie’s. “Ride your alpha.”

Charlie softly begs for both of our bites, but Gray silences her with a kiss. My hands feel huge wrapped around her hips. She knows exactly how to grind to make my cock leak.

My hand lands on her lower stomach, and I bite my cheek to keep from rambling out crazy talk of breeding her full of my baby.

“Kolt,” she moans.

I lean up, framing her back and licking her neck. She’s sweaty as I fist her hair, tilting her head back so I can kiss her.

Her body contracts over my length as I swell, and it’s clear I’m not going to be able to last.

She begs into the kiss as my hand tightens in her hair and the other caresses her soft lower stomach.

“*Fuck, baby,*” I growl, still desperately trying to hold back the crazy talk.

Gray smirks at me around her tit as his fingers brush my hand. He’s absolutely working her clit, and I’m grateful for the backup assistance because I’m barely coherent with the fog so fucking heavy.

“Harder,” she begs. I’ve got no idea who she’s talking to. “Pull my hair harder.”

I comply, yanking at the base of her skull, and it makes her leak around my shaft. My knot swells even larger as she squirms against my chest.

“Goddamn,” I growl as my hand locks down on her lower stomach. “I’m about to explode. Fuck, that’s it, baby girl. Milk your alpha’s cock. I’m going to breed you full of me. Keep grinding *just* like that . . .”

Gray snorts.

I don’t care.

Alphas breed omegas.

It’s not just a biological impulse, it’s something I want more than anything. I want a house full of kids, another couple dogs, and to keep Charlie for-fucking-ever.

I’m going to keep her so goddamn happy that she never thinks of leaving us. If she tried, I’d have to track her down

and drag her back. Then try even harder to keep her happy while apparently hiding my crazy.

My knot pulses as my cock jumps inside her. She falls back, leaning into my chest as she shakes and begs. Her tight little cunt milks me in waves, and before I know it, I'm scraping my teeth over her shoulder.

"Bite me, Kolton," she begs. Her hand falls to rest over mine on her lower stomach. "Bite me, now!"

"I want to so badly," I growl, licking and sucking. "But not just yet."

She pouts quite effectively as she comes down from her orgasm, but I continue to assure her I'll sink my teeth in one day soon. I may also continually ramble about breeding her, but I'm not judging myself too harshly because she doesn't appear to be appalled by the thought at all.

# Chapter Twenty

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## Charlie

Gray wakes me up with tender murmuring as he runs his hand over my back. I'm still half asleep as he guides me to the bathroom and helpfully hands me my toothbrush with toothpaste already on it.

"Thank you," I mumble, rinsing my mouth out.

"Do you need the restroom?"

I nod.

"How about I set out some clothes while you handle that?" he asks, smirking wickedly.

"Yeah, okay," I agree, pulling up Kolt's shirt and heading for the toilet.

Gray seems downright giddy that I don't immediately kick him out.

"I'm too tired to argue with you this morning," I grumble, stabbing a finger in his direction.

Gray chuckles, and the sound sends a shiver through my entire body. I vaguely remember him carrying me to the bathroom last night and demanding I use it so I don't get a urinary tract infection or something. Which is incredibly unsexy to think about.

"I'll be right back with clothes," he says, sounding entirely too pleased with himself.

I'm grumpy and exhausted. Heats throw off everything, and I know from the little experience I have that mine is

coming up fast. I'm worn down, overly sensitive, and extremely horny.

I finish using the bathroom, but my hands fly to my face as I gasp. The thought sobers me up real damn fast.

Panic sets in as I consider what I did last night. I should probably sit down with all three of them and explain the situation, but I'm mortified that I let the fog take over.

I think speaking to Kolt one-on-one might be best.

Gray comes back before I'm finished washing my hands. He slides up behind me, teasing me with his warm skin as he lifts the shirt over my head.

"Kolt took Shay to grab breakfast from the resort," he murmurs, kissing my neck. "Are we continually overstepping? I worry we're completely hovering and you'll get tired of it sooner rather than later."

My hands hit the bathroom counter as I shudder out a breath. Our eyes meet in the mirror, but he's so freaking hot it's hard to keep my brain focused. It's the haze that comes with pre-heat, and I know that. I just don't fully know how to fight it.

"I've never had help with Shayley," I tell him, trying to keep the emotion out of my tone. "It's a blessing to have someone else to share that with, but I'm really not sure it's fair of me to accept it so easily. Especially because all of this is very new."

"My mother did warn me that mommy guilt is often extreme and it rarely makes logical sense," he says, cupping my breast as he kisses over my shoulder. "You've accepted our bid to court you. The goal of courting is to gauge long-term compatibility. We're not just romantically courting you, Charlie. Shayley comes as part of your package deal, meaning we have to put in work getting her comfortable with us. We have the same responsibility to show you that we can be what you both need."

"I'm a little concerned all of this is a dream I'm going to wake up from," I say, squeezing his arm. "It's everything I

didn't know I needed."

"You're not dreaming, little one," Gray says, kissing the side of my head. "But you do look exhausted. Are you feeling the urge to nest?"

I nod. "But I also need to see Shay and check on her. I know she gets bored when I've tried to force her into nesting with me in the past."

"Let's get you dressed," Gray murmurs, running his hands over my stomach and hips. "Then we can check on Shay and decide if she'd like to go to daycare for a few hours or if she'd like to visit with my mom again."

I open my mouth to protest that it isn't Gayle's responsibility to look after my kid, but Gray bites my shoulder giving me a low, playful growl.

"If you continue to dispute the fact we now share a responsibility to look after Shayley." He pinches my nipple hard. "We might have to pause our morning plans while I put you over my knee."

"Sorry," I mumble, swatting away his hand.

My perfume decides it would be an excellent time to come out in full force, completely undermining my attempt to pretend like I dislike that idea.

Gray growls, spinning me around and kissing the hell out of me.

"Time for me to show you how I can care for you," he murmurs against my lips.

He grabs the stack of clothing and carefully squats down.

"Lift up," he says, tapping my leg.

I comply and his hands slide up my calves to my thighs as he pulls the panties on. He continues upward as he teases his hands over my skin.

"Turn around for me, little one." He pulls my hair to one shoulder and kisses across it before grabbing one of my new bras and helping me into it. "God, your tits are pure fucking

perfection, but they're heavy." His warm breath fans over my skin as he clasps the hooks.

Who knew *getting* dressed could be so sensual? I definitely didn't.

Gray smirks, catching my eyes in the mirror as he grinds against my ass to stretch and grab the dress he picked out. It's a dark gray sweater style and it's adorable. It's also soft and extremely comfortable.

Gray pulls it over my head and spins me around to face him. He pecks a quick kiss on my lips as his hands land on my waist.

"I truly do love that you let me care for you," Gray says, nuzzling his cheek to mine. "It pleases my impulses on a level that's difficult to understand."

My hand runs over his chest as I try not to blush.

"Mine too," I assure him.

"Let's see what Kolt brought back for breakfast," Gray says, pulling me along to head downstairs.

My silly heart races. I really did forget how amazing it feels to be taken care of by a man I trust.



"Can I talk to you?" I ask Kolt after breakfast.

"Go on," Roarke says from his spot on the floor. He's playing with Shayley. He gives a wickedly handsome grin. "I assure you, I can keep her happy for at least ten minutes."

"Thank you," I say, grabbing Kolt's hand and leading him out the sliding glass door.

Motley is sniffing around, but other than that, we're alone.

"What's up, sweetheart?" Kolt asks, frowning as he runs his hands over my arms.



Gray picked out a long-sleeved sweater dress, and it's warm, but my legs are cold once the wind blows.

"Charlie?" Kolt says, tilting my chin up.

"I . . ." It seems I've run out of words. Instead, I wrap my arms around his middle and bury my face in his arm.

"Did I hurt you? Do something you didn't like?"

"God no," I assure him.

He blows out a breath of relief. "Right, so talk to me."

"I saw Jess and I think I mentioned my test results were clean?" I frown. "Didn't I?"

"I don't think we ever talked about it after your appointment, but I wasn't concerned," he says, guiding us over to a thick canopy-covered swing. He takes a seat and pulls me into his lap facing him. "Is that what's bothering you?"

My head shakes. "I need to tell you something, but I don't want you to be upset."

"I'm going to be really honest. Your anxiety is bleeding into me, and it's hard to fix the problem because I don't know what it is," he says, bumping his cheek with mine.

"I hadn't really worried about birth control because the suppressants I took covered that," I whisper, cringing. "Then I missed them when I was sick, and I talked to Jess about options. I did get the shot, but she said because of how omega biology works, it might not take effect until after my heat. Ohmigod, I'm so sorry."

My face burns as I cuddle closer to his chest. His hands are still tenderly running over my back and surprisingly now my ass.

"Is that right?" Kolt growls.

I nod. "Yeah, but I didn't even think about that last night, let alone warn you and . . ."

Kolt doesn't let me finish. He pulls me up with a handful of hair and slams his mouth into mine. I'm so shocked that I freeze for several seconds before eventually kissing him back.

“First of all,” he growls between frantic kisses. “Birth control is never solely on the female’s shoulders. I’m an adult, and I absolutely should have had enough presence of mind to ask before I stuck my bare cock inside you.”

I shiver at his words as the most amazing flashbacks play through my mind. My pussy aches, tightening over nothing as I remember how full I felt with him inside me.

“Secondly,” he grins against my lips, “I really like the thought of fucking my baby into you.”

I whine in response, which doesn’t help either of us keep our composure as I grind over him.

“I think this is something the four of us should discuss,” he says, pulling my head to the side with one hand in my hair. He continues kissing and licking his way down my neck as my hands dig into his shoulders. “Probably tonight after Shay goes to bed, but there’s also nothing to be done about the fact I drilled my cum into you over and *over* again last night.” He sounds so pleased with that fact that I smile despite how crazy the entire situation is.

They say things move fast when an omega meets their pack. But I haven’t felt rushed or uncomfortable at all.

I bite my lip thinking it through. Everything has happened exactly how I would want it to be if I did it over again.

“I’ve actually got to run to the resort and get some work done today,” Kolt says, drawing me out of my thoughts. “But I think Roarke planned to stick around the house with you and Shay. Unless you want me to bring her with me?”

“No,” I reply, shaking my head. “I think I’d rather keep her close, but I can’t tell you how much it means that you’ve all been putting in the work to get to know her.”

“Sweetheart,” Kolt murmurs, nuzzling his cheek to mine. “I think you underestimate exactly how strong our urges are to keep you safe. Shayley is a part of you, and that fierce protectiveness immediately included her from the very first moment.”

I feel like they've all said some variation of the same thing, but it's been difficult to trust because Brent's an alpha too, and he never wanted anything to do with Shay.

"Thank you," I whisper, and this time, I kiss the hell out of him.

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"This child smells rotten," Roarke says, quirking an eyebrow at Shay. "She also ran to the corner and told me not to look at her. I think it might be time to consider potty training."

"Aww," I say as Shay runs into my shins. "Do you need to be changed?"

"Yes," she says, glaring at Roarke. "No look at me."

Roarke covers his face with his hands and peeks between his fingers.

"Let's go get you cleaned up," I tell her, aiming for the stairs.

"I'm heading out," Kolt says, pulling me to him. "You two have a good day with Roarke." He kisses Shay's forehead and my temple.

I take Shayley upstairs, and she chatters away while I clean her up.

"Do you want to start to try to use the potty like a big girl?" I ask, tickling her sides.

"I don't know," she says, shrugging and wiggling away from my fingers.

She follows me into the bathroom across the hall while I wash my hands.

I think she likely could have been potty trained by now, but I put it off. I was afraid she'd have accidents in Brent's house, and I wasn't prepared to deal with his freak outs if she peed on the couch.

This place is so many times nicer. Not that Brent's house wasn't, but it was upper middle class, and I'm pretty sure this house is worth millions.

I pull Shay up, wrapping her around my front as I head back downstairs.

It's a really good feeling to realize I don't need to put off toilet training any longer. If Shay has an accident then I'll clean it up. I don't have a single worry or concern that it would be an argument or an issue, and that's a really damn good revelation to have.

"I love you," I whisper, kissing the side of Shay's head.

"I love you, too," she says, smacking a slobbery kiss on the edge of my mouth. "I wanna play."

Shay wiggles. I let her down once I reach the bottom of the stairs, and she runs right back to Roarke.

"All clean?" he asks, smiling as Shay nods. She climbs right into his lap and goes back to building her tower.

My heart pangs because I'll never get to see her interact with Shane this way. It's also clear that I was failing at giving her a full life because I was barely living. I shake away the sadness and head in to join them.

"We've got room for Mummy," Roarke says to Shay. "Don't we?"

Shay frowns over her shoulder and Roarke chuckles. She scoots over onto one leg and Roarke holds out an arm for me.

"You might have a fight on your hands. It doesn't seem she wants to share my affections," he says, laughing.

I chuckle, taking a seat next to his other side. He pulls me back into him as he starts to purr, and I realize I'm so totally freaking done for.

These men are incredibly dangerous to my heart.

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“Gayle is here,” Roarke says a while later. He leans against the doorframe. His hair is up, and he’s got his sleeves pushed up over his muscular forearms.

I pull Shay’s blanket up and tuck it around her. My eyes fly back to Roarke and he’s scratching his chest. The red scars that litter his form don’t take away from the extreme amount of well-defined muscles, and even though they aren’t visible at the moment, I know they’re there.

I kiss Shay’s head and aim for Roarke. The urge to climb him is strong.

“You’re looking a little hungry, lovely,” he growls, sliding his hand up the back of my dress.

I groan, burying my face in his soft T-shirt. “I’m sorry. It’s probably going to continue to get worse.”

“Not complaining a bit,” he says, palming my ass cheek. “Didn’t you have some errands you wanted to run?” He bites his lip. “Not that I’m opposed to climbing into the nest and meeting your other needs, but that can come later if you have something important that we should handle.”

“I was wondering if you’d take me to the store?”

“I think that’s a fine idea,” he says, giving me a quick but dirty kiss that makes my thighs clench.

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Gayle stays with the sleeping Shay while Roarke takes me to the nearby mall. I nearly protest until I realize there’s a big retail store with everything from home goods to baby stuff.

“It just so happens it’s in the mall,” he says, pulling the SUV into a parking spot. “I do like the idea of buying you both a few things while we’re here, though. If you don’t think that’s too pushy of me to suggest. If it is then that was purely hypothetical.”

I laugh, shaking my head as he climbs out and comes around to open the door for me. I’m in the new boots Gray

bought to match my coat, but I still feel tiny pulled in close to Roarke's side.

"Let the adventure begin," he says. He pulls open the door into the mall and holds it for me. The way his hand immediately lands on my hip once we're inside is ridiculously addictive. "I think it will be smart to end here." He nods to the doors of the store I originally came for. "Clothing and naughty lingerie barely take up any room, and it'll be easier to carry around with us as we go."

I laugh but let him lead me off toward whatever store he has in mind.

The first two stores go fairly well, but I'm starting to notice a trend among all of the women. Every single female who comes across him seems to be enamored with him.

Roarke isn't overly flirty, but he is friendly and jokes a lot. I know I'm being ridiculous, but I can't seem to stop myself from pouting.

I wanted to spend this afternoon getting to know him better, but all the sales ladies keep striking up conversations.

I know he's not doing a damn thing wrong; he always redirects the conversation back to what we're looking for. He's affectionate and sticks close to my side, but some of the salesgirls are young, like barely eighteen, and they don't have the hips or the baggage I've got.

I grab the dresses I'm supposed to be trying on and head back to the dressing room I used a few minutes ago. I hang them up on the hook, and I'm in the process of spinning around to lock the door when Roarke pushes his way inside.

He makes a show of clicking the lock and gives me a dangerous smirk. His massive form prowls closer. I back up, slowly blinking because he looks downright predatory.

"You seem fussed," he says as his forearm hits the wall above my head. "What's the problem? Hmm, love?"

"There's no problem," I lie, gently shoving his chest. "You should go. I'm sure your fan club will be looking for you."

Roarke chuckles a low, throaty sound that confuses my system. “They say omegas are very territorial when it comes to their chosen alphas,” he muses very close to my ear. “Are you jealous, lovely?”

My eyes squeeze shut because I’ve always been a really bad liar. But in for a penny in for a pound.

“No,” I scoff. “I’m only trying to pick a few outfits, so I can get home and check on my kid.”

“I do love that you’re already thinking of our house as your *home*,” Roarke says, kissing my neck. “But I’d like it if you were honest with me.”

“I am,” I say, giving his chest a shove. “You should get back to entertaining the sales ladies. I won’t be too long.”

It takes less time than I can blink before he’s spinning me around. He brings both my arms up and traps them with his left hand.

“Did you think I’d let you blatantly lie to my face?” he growls, scraping his teeth over my neck. “I’ve no interest in anyone but you. I wouldn’t have handled another man flirting with you half as well as you have.” He pulls my dress up around my hips with his free hand. “Fecking hell, I know Gray picked this. I’m going to have to thank him for that.” He snaps the string on the side of my thong. “I’ve not been in a relationship before. You’ll have to forgive any minor missteps I make. Granted, I’ll never truly step out of line. I have too much respect for you and my packmates to ever do something truly disrespectful, but I thought I was being a doting boyfriend.”

He continues to tease the globes of my ass with his right hand.

“You didn’t do anything wrong,” I whisper, staring at the floor. If he wasn’t holding my hands trapped to the wall then I’d be covering my face. Embarrassment burns through my system. I was kind of awful to him for no reason. He can’t control other people, and he was doing everything he should have been doing. “I’m sorry.”

“Aww, love.” He nuzzles his cheek to mine. “You will be.” His hand lands against my ass several times in quick, but firm slaps.

I gasp, biting my lip to hold back my noises. The store has low music playing in the background, but I definitely don’t want to draw any more attention to this than necessary.

“Next time, I’ll take the truth,” he growls, giving me several more swats. “How am I supposed to fix a problem if you aren’t honest about one existing?”

Hearing him focused on ensuring things work out between us sends my arousal skyrocketing. My stomach flip-flops as my thighs clench. Yeah, Roarke is extremely dangerous to my self-control.



# Chapter Twenty-One

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## Roarke

I've got an unhealthy obsession with the way my palm print decorates Charlie's luscious ass. My hand slides around her hip and into the top of her panties. My dick feels like it's about to break through my jeans.

My nose twitches as I breathe in her soft orange-cream scent. I still haven't had the opportunity to bury my face in her cunt, but I'm not sure this is the ideal location, especially with her heat on the horizon.

My cock digs into her ass as I tease over her tight clit. "You know the best way to make it clear who I belong to?"

"What's that?" she asks, wiggling her ass cheeks against my insanely hard erection.

"I should probably walk out of here bathed in your scent. Then they'll have no doubts about who owns me."

"I don't love that word, but that does feel *really* good," she says, nodding as her head rolls back against my pec.

"I know how to make it feel even better," I muse, releasing her hands. "Keep them here or you'll be quite pissed."

I replace my right hand with my left to tease her clit. Then I use the right to pull her hips back and tease my pointer and middle finger to enter her hole from behind. Her pussy is already so slick that I have to stifle the snarl that wants to escape.

Charlie obediently keeps both hands on the wall. She does bounce on her knees a bit as her ass cheeks cup me perfectly

over my jeans. The desperate gasps that escape her mouth as I work her clit are almost too much. My instincts demand I pull my cock out and slam inside her. I need her to smell like me. That way no other assholes would dream of touching her.

“Fuck, lovely,” I groan in her ear. “You’ve no idea how badly I ache to soak you in my cum. I want to wreck your tight little cunt.”

She tightens over my fingers as I crook them, looking for the spot that will send her soaring. I continue to lightly tease her clit with my thumb on my other hand.

“I don’t regret coming down your throat the other night, but goddamn. I wish I’d jerked off all over your pretty little pussy and fingered *every* drop of my hot cum back inside you.”

Charlie thrashes. I briefly wonder if I’ll have to abandon her clit to slap a hand over her mouth.

“Shh, keep it down, love,” I growl. “Unless you want to get caught. Do you want to let them see me ravaging your slick cunt?”

She whimpers.

“Kiss me,” I growl. Because even though I’m willing to taunt her with the idea of it, I’m not letting anyone else see her like this.

She tilts her head enough that I can seal my lips to hers. By the way her channel clamps down on my fingers, I’m guessing it was just in time too. She trembles against me and comes all over my hand.

I know I can’t fuck her here. Not with how juicy my hand is and how sweet she smells, but I really damn wish I could.

My shaft is pulsing in my jeans. I want to lock my knot inside her more than I’ve ever wanted anything in my life.

I’m desperate for relief, but I’m willing to wait. The first time I slip my cock inside her, I want to be able to take my time and remember every look on her face.

---

Charlie blushes something fierce when we both stumble out of the dressing room. I'm literally bathed in the scent of her cunt.

The saleswomen don't say a word to me during the entire checkout process. Charlie never got to try on the last few dresses, but I buy them anyway.

She needs options.

I don't care if she ever wears them, every woman deserves a closet overflowing with clothes they can examine only to decide they have nothing to wear.

We walk by the food court. We both hit the bathrooms because Charlie demands I wash my hands.

I quite enjoyed having her completely covering me, but I suppose it is the respectable thing to do. My cock is finally starting to settle down as we make it into the huge retail store on the way to the parking lot.

"Planning to take my advice?" I ask, nodding to the display of toddler equipment I think is meant for potty training.

"Yeah," Charlie agrees. "I put it off for a while because . . ." She sighs. "I just did."

"Aww, love. Not ready for the little lady to grow up?" I gently pinch her chin.

"I guess I wasn't since I didn't push the issue," she says. "I think some of it was that I didn't want her to have accidents because I was afraid it would start fights."

My head gives a clipped nod and I release her.

I go back to examining the wall of toddler toilets. Christ, I legitimately hate that piece of shit.

"Let's get one of each style to give her options?" I suggest. "The kind that fits on the grown-up toilet. Oh, but then she'll need the stairs because she is rather short." I toss one of each

into the cart with our other bags. “Then we’ll get this one because it’s pink.” I grab the one that’s toddler sized and toss it into the buggy. “What else?”

“There are a couple other things,” she says, quickly trying to walk out of my hold.

I gently clamp down on my grip, giving her a look that says *out with it, woman*.

“I need to grab panties and pull-ups for Shay and . . .” she mumbles something I absolutely cannot understand.

“Lead the way,” I say, squeezing her ass.

I’m absolutely flabbergasted at the number of items Charlie requires for the little monster. Perhaps we should’ve commandeered two carts. We circle baby clothes for what seems like twenty minutes, but I distract myself with children’s slippers. They match towels with animal heads. When Charlie is preoccupied comparing sizes on something, I casually toss several into the buggy.

I’m slowly winning over the little lady, but I don’t have a natural affinity for children the way Gray and Kolt do.

I come to a display of stuffed animals with cardboard books that tell a mini story about the character.

I immediately chuck the monkey into the cart because Shay is inseparable from the giant one she got at the arcade—especially at night. That means it’s a safe bet she loves all monkeys.

Glancing over at Charlie, she’s still examining toddler underclothes like this one purchase might make or break the child’s entire future.

She’s still preoccupied, so I toss in the turtle too because he has a cute hat.

By the time I make it back to Charlie, she hasn’t moved.

“I haven’t had this much trouble choosing a purchase,” I say, scratching at my jaw. “Possibly ever.”

“I’m just not sure if I should buy the size she’s in now,” she says, wiggling a hand. “Or the one she’ll inevitably grow into within a few weeks.” She shakes the other.

“No one wants saggy drawers,” I say, grabbing both. “Likely that goes double for high-strung toddlers.”

I toss both packages in and begin to push us away from the children’s area.

“That’s like twenty-five dollars’ worth of underwear,” Charlie hisses, trying to grab at the buggy.

I slap her ass and keep moving.

“I’m going to go ahead and recommend you don’t ask Gray what he spent on those three strings you’ve soaked through.” I grin as I bite her cheek playfully.

“Ohmigod,” Charlie says, laughing and shaking her head. “You’re right. I probably don’t want to know.”

“Where are we heading?” I ask, meandering down the aisles.

“I’m guessing near the pharmacy?” she mumbles.

“Right this way, lovely,” I say, guiding us toward the medications and personal care items.

Charlie grabs several bottles of children’s fever reducers. I quirk an eyebrow because now I’m wondering if Shayley is sick or something.

“I don’t want to need them and not have them,” she says, shrugging. “It’s something I’ve always kept on hand.”

“That makes sense,” I agree.

Charlie glances around and hums. “Do you need anything else?”

“No, we’re here for you,” I remind her, smiling at the look of discomfort that crosses her face. Finally it registers she’ll likely need lady products for after her heat. I’ve heard it’s hellacious once the cramps set in. I guide her down the aisles until we find the stuff I’m pretty sure she’s too embarrassed to ask for.

Which is actually incredibly fucking cute.

Only Charlie aims for the other side of the aisle.

“What are we looking for?” I ask, running a hand down her side to her generous hip.

“Stuff,” she says, nodding to the condoms and lubes. “My birth control might not be effective until after my heat and . . .” Her small hands fly to her face. “If you could just pick something and that way we can leave, that’d be great.”

“I was under the impression you and Kolt . . .” I smirk.

She doesn’t see it because she’s still groaning into her hands.

“We did,” she says, nodding.

“I hate to give you a sex ed lesson in the middle of—”

She smacks me in the gut. I fail to hold back the chuckle that escapes.

“You’ve got a child. Don’t tell me sex is an uncomfortable subject,” I murmur, pulling her hands down.

“I’m trying to be proactive because I forgot to warn Kolt ahead of time,” she says, squinting up at me with a very serious frown.

It makes it very hard not to devour her whole. She’s so fucking sweet and downright dirty when she’s lost to the fog and begging.

I can’t help myself.

I wrap my wrist around the back of her head, bend practically in half to get down to her mouth, and tenderly rake my teeth over her bottom lip.

She gasps.

Her hands land on my hips as she stretches up.

We share a delightfully slow and especially naughty kiss in the middle of the contraceptives aisle.

“We can grab something if it’ll make you feel better, but honestly, condoms aren’t recommended for use when

knotting,” I say, shrugging. “I’ve no experience with that, but they’re highly ineffective with the friction and multiple . . .”

*Multiple loads, come shots, cream pies.* I mentally run through ways of finishing the sentence.

Charlie chews at her bottom lip with wide eyes. Since I’m *finally* growing up into a respectable alpha at the age of thirty-four, I don’t say a single one of them.

Instead, I bite my lip and shrug while raising my eyebrows because I’m sure she gets the picture.

“Then what in the hell are we supposed to do?” she hisses, gently smacking me in the abs again.

I chuckle, shaking my head. I’ve got an obsession with her now that she’s getting bolder and growing into her own.

“We fuck the hell out of you and see what happens. That’s my guess,” I say, guiding her toward the checkout counter. “I know I personally won’t be able to watch you in pain and not . . .” I laugh. “Do everything in my power to make it better.”

There’s a weird, warm feeling in my chest as I pull her close.

Oh, fuck me.

I like the idea of fucking Charlie full of my baby a little too much for it to pass as civilized.

---

Charlie squeaks a bit like a dying chicken when we start to unload the cart onto the conveyor belt.

“Holy shit, Roarke,” she says, laughing as she shakes her head. “You’re officially worse than shopping with a toddler. Even Shay is usually happy tossing one or two things in.”

“It’s no matter,” I say, giving her a wicked grin.

“Fine,” she says primly. “I’m sorry, but you’ll have to pay for the things you added.”



I growl, yanking her into my chest. “How about you never bring up something as trivial as money when you’re with me again? Can we make that agreement, love? Especially when it’s things the two of you need. I didn’t get blown half to hell with faulty equipment to horde that payday to the grave.”

Charlie frowns, but I appreciate she doesn’t ask for details in the line. “Thank you,” she says, stretching up and kissing my cheek.

“See,” I say, grinning at the old woman behind the counter. “I much prefer this version of the conversation.”

We quickly handle paying. I’m a little shocked when the total comes out to be close to four-hundred dollars. Not that it matters, but it does help me understand some of Charlie’s anxiety.

Kids are fecking expensive.

Luckily between the three of us, we can more than provide for Charlie and an entire brood of little ones. Well, unless she starts putting them in gold plated diapers or something equally ridiculous.

We’re nearly to the car when Charlie goes stiff. I’ve got my arm wrapped around her, and although it’s not my favorite to have her on the side with traffic, I’m also pushing the over-full buggy. It has not only our purchases from the last store, but all the stores.

“What’s the matter, love?” I question, quickly swapping sides with her.

Charlie looks across the row of cars and shakes her head. “Nothing . . . I think it was nothing.”

“And if it wasn’t nothing,” I say, carefully scanning the area. “Then what was it?”

“Brent,” she whispers. “I thought I saw him for a second, but then he was gone. I’m sure it was nothing.”

“Come along,” I say, pulling her toward the car. “Let’s get home.”

---

Kolt sits on the couch, scratching Motley's ear. His leg is shaking violently where it's crossed over the other. "Kat said he hasn't been home since the other day. I reached out to a friend who is good with computers. I didn't want to get any of the staff involved in anything . . ."

"That's understandable," Gray says, staring at the stairs to the second floor. "You didn't see anyone?"

"No, I didn't. I got Charlie in the car, and even after, I casually circled the parking lot a few times to check."

I set down my beer, frowning at the bottle. I've no stomach for it at the moment. In fact, most nights since Charlie and Shayley joined us, I don't drink at all. At this point, I think I grabbed it more out of habit than actual desire for the ale.

"Merrick and I served together. I trust him only slightly less than one of us," Kolt says as Motley tries to climb up into his lap. That dog is supposed to be personal protection, but she's more in tune with emotions than any animal I've ever seen. Especially when it comes to Kolt. "Anyway, I saved his ass while we were overseas. I've told him a million times that he doesn't owe me anything." He looks at me. "You know how it is. But he's always said to call if I needed *anything*. He's next level with computers and all things technical. He's for hire now-a-days, but from what I understand, he got blown up when a job went bad—" He freezes, looking at me. "Sorry, this was an actual house explosion."

"It's no matter," I assure him. "Go on then."

"He's still recovering, but he's going to see what he can find out about Brent. Whether or not he's still on active duty with the force. He'll also look into his finances. If he used a credit or debit card for gas anywhere in our vicinity then we'll know for sure he's in Colorado." Kolt sighs, gently shoving Motley to the cushion next to him. "You're a heavy old lady. You're not a pup anymore." He's still scratching her ear and spoiling the hell out of her.

The fact Gray hasn't mentioned Motley on the furniture is a good indication his mind is elsewhere.

"It could've been someone with a similar build," Gray says, leaning forward and steepling his hands. "I'd still rather not take any risks. What options are available to us?"

"He's a fucking cop," I grumble. "He goes missing and people put in real work to find him."

"I don't like the idea of hiring that out anyway," Kolt says, shaking his head.

"Are you planning to do it? Off the corrupt as fuck asshole?" I ask, scoffing.

"No, I don't think that's the way to go at all," Kolt says. His leg is still violently shaking.

"Charlie and Shay are safe enough with us, but it might not be a bad plan to stay at the resort during her heat," Gray suggests. "Honestly, I have no idea."

"I filed a report with the extraction teams," I say mindlessly. "So there's a paper trail that proves she came from a bad situation."

"We also have the pictures Charlie took before leaving. I went through them when we first got back, while she was still sick," Kolt says. "She got pictures of holes in the wall, broken things, and her letter breaking up with him."

"Does anyone else find it highly suspicious that Brent was in the picture at the time of her alphas death?" Gray asks in a low tone, still eyeing the staircase. "I know we've touched on this before, but it's really niggling at the pessimistic side of my brain."

"I did ask Merrick to see what he could pull up," Kolt says in barely more than a whisper. "I had the date due to it being the three-year anniversary while we were traveling. With Charlie's information and Brent's, I'm hoping he'll be able to pull the police records. She sobbed out sparse details, but it was difficult to understand. I think it was a robbery gone wrong when he stopped for gas after his shift."

“Christ,” I hiss. “For some reason, my brain instantly went to a car accident. Murder is an entirely different level of trauma, isn’t it?”

“Definitely,” Kolt agrees.

“There’s not much that can be done outside of staying vigilant. We don’t leave Charlie alone until we have more information,” Gray says, glancing between us. “Put the mutt on full alert at night if she even remembers how to patrol.”

“No one doubts your abilities,” Kolt says, scratching Motley, who looks at Gray because Mutt is what she thinks her name is where Gray is concerned. “She’ll protect us. That training doesn’t just disappear, and she had her refresher course when we were in Florida for the Fourth of July.”

“Fair enough,” Gray mutters. “Hopefully it’s a moot point.”

“We keep the security system armed and make sure Charlie is always with one of us until we know more,” I summarize. “Are we riding out her heat at the resort?”

“I don’t know how Charlie would handle Shay being at my mom’s,” Gray says, shaking his head. “I guess we should ask her what she thinks.”

“That sounds fair,” I agree.

# Chapter Twenty-Two

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## Charlie

“Are you sure you wouldn’t be more comfortable in the nest?” Gray asks, carefully guiding me to have a seat on the couch in the upstairs living room.

“I’m positive.” I take the middle seat, but scramble into his lap once he’s seated.

“You’re unsettled.” He carefully tucks the blanket tighter around my shoulders.

I shrug. “I’m okay.”

“I don’t think *either* of us bought that lie,” he murmurs.

“I don’t like the idea that Brent could be in town. I’ve tried to convince myself that I didn’t really see him, but I’m pretty sure I did.” My hands rest between us as I pick at my nails.

Gray’s warm hand lands on mine, settling my fidgeting. “If you think you saw him then we believe you.”

“I kind of hope I am wrong.” I chew at my lip. “That would be a better option than if he actually came out here.”

“Do you feel like there’s a chance he would come looking for you?” Gray asks, running his fingers over my jaw.

“I don’t know,” I admit. “I’m not sure why he was ever interested in me to begin with. I’d met him a handful of times at events and things with Shane. Brent was friendly. At one point he told Shane he wanted to court me. Then Shane died and . . .” I shake my head. I really don’t want to think or talk about that.

“He was killed during a burglary? Is that correct?” Gray asks in a soothing tone.

“He always stopped at the same store after his shift. Sometimes he brought me a candy bar or whatever I was craving. They said he interrupted a robbery. The store employee was also killed.” My eyes squeeze shut. “Their security cameras weren’t helpful. They never caught the guy or even had any real suspects from what I understand. It was a really rural area and . . .”

“I get it,” Gray says, pulling me close to him. “God Charlie, how I wish I could go back in time and change that for you.”

“Me too,” I agree in a shaky tone. “I haven’t been able to talk about Shane without breaking down since it happened. At first it was pure grief. Then I think some of it was Brent’s frustration that I couldn’t let go of the past. I think it was just him, though. Him trying to erase Shane from my memory made it so much worse.”

“I agree. There’s also the fact you’ve gone off the suppressants. That seems to be helping your overall mood. Being out of that toxic environment is doing a world of good, too.” He nuzzles his cheek to mine. “I do think you’d feel more secure in the nest. What’s troubling you?”

“I don’t like that our room is at the end of the hall,” I whisper as my eyes clench closed. “It just feels like someone could come in and steal her . . . The house is so big that I wouldn’t even know. I mean I know it’s safe, and I sound like a lunatic. I’m sorry.”

“Omegas feel safest in confined spaces, especially when approaching their heat.” Gray kisses my cheek. “Would you feel better if we stayed at the resort for the next week or two until your heat hits and we have more information about Brent’s location?”

“I don’t know,” I tell him, staring up into his eyes. “It’s hard to say because everything feels really . . .” I struggle with choosing the right words to describe what I’m feeling. “Out of

control? Overwhelming? I think I'm afraid of making a bad call."

"That's understandable," he agrees, running his hand over the back of my head. "Well, should we all get our sleeping bags gathered to sleep here in the living room?" He nods across the hall. "We've got a front row seat to keep an eye on Shay's room."

"No," I scoff.

"Should we move Shay into the bedroom with us?" he asks in a level tone. "I'm afraid what that might mean with your heat creeping up, but if worse came to worst then one of us could sleep in her room with her. I wish I had all the answers for how to help you feel better, but I'm equally unsure in this situation, little one."

"Me too," I whisper. "I know I'm overreacting. I get that Motley would bark and there's a security system . . ."

"But that doesn't change the fact the house is big and open. It's also not what you're used to," Gray says in a placating tone. "Not one of us will be upset. I just need you to tell me what will make you most comfortable."

My mind races because I know I'm insanely lucky that I met them. I'm pretty sure no other alpha pack would be so understanding. They've gone out of their way to make me feel safe from day one. I really wish I knew for sure if that was Brent or some figment of my imagination. In general, I'm not lucky, so I don't want to hope for the best and end up being wrong.

"If we stay at the resort, what will we do about Shay?" I ask, fidgeting with my hands again.

Gray gently grips them in one of his and pats them as he brings them to rest between us.

"She can stay with my mom and dads. They're more than capable of keeping her safe. By your own admission, Brent was never interested in Shayley. Only in you. Or we could ask my mom if she would mind staying at the resort for a few nights," Gray offers.



“That feels really pushy,” I tell him, shaking my head. “If I saw Brent then he was following me. I think that means we’re right in assuming he doesn’t want Shay.”

“I grabbed the baby gate from Gayle’s,” Kolt says, coming up and sitting on the edge of the couch. “I put it up in Shay’s door. Motley is pouting, but she’ll eventually settle in. She can clear the gate if she wants to, but in the past, she’s been pretty good about staying put. Although she’ll likely curl up with Shay, so she might be covered in dog hair in the morning.”

“That’s okay,” I say, twisting to kiss his cheek. “Thank you for everything.”

“Always,” Kolt says, looking so sincere it’s impossible not to believe him. “Should we go to bed?”

I glance at Shay’s door and back to the bedroom at the end of the hall. I guess I’m used to growing up poor or even lower middle class where all the bedrooms are right on top of each other. Those fifteen feet feel like an eternity away from her. But I’m pretty sure that’s just my impulses overreacting.

“Let’s go,” I agree.

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Kolt lies on one side of me. Gray is behind me softly snoring. I’m still not sure where Roarke is. I’m guessing he’s in the gym. I know he has trouble sleeping.

Glancing between the two snoozing alphas, it’s pretty clear they don’t have that same problem. I slide down the bed and head to find Roarke. He was on edge when we got back.

My feet hardly make a noise as I head down the hallway and hit the stairs. I know the small home gym is off the corridor that leads to the garage. I don’t make the turn to head in that direction because movement catches my attention in the kitchen.

“Hey,” I murmur once I reach Roarke’s side. He’s sitting on one of the barstools, drinking a beer.

“Charlie,” he growls. His scent floods my nostrils as he wraps his hand around my throat. He quite efficiently uses his forearm around my ass to lift me and then I’m sitting on the countertop in front of him. “Whatcha doing, love?”

His grip tightens around my throat.

My core immediately considers it as an invitation. I’m wobbling on the edge of the cool surface. My fingers wrap around the edge as my legs curve around his shoulders for stability.

His hair is down. It falls around his face as he stares up at me.

“Do you intend on answering me?” He sounds gruff and dangerous, but the tender way his thumb caresses my cheek tells a completely different story.

“I came to check on you,” I say, swallowing thickly.

“Is that right?” He releases my throat, wrapping that arm around my lower back. It helps me feel more secure in the position. He kisses his way up my thigh with licking flicks of his tongue.

“Yeah,” I agree in a shaky tone.

“You’ve probably gathered that I have trouble sleeping,” he muses, pulling up the edge of my sleep shirt. “I do have several ideas on how you can help burn off this remaining energy if you’re interested?”

“Um, yep.” I nod like a bobble-head.

Roarke growls. It’s a low, menacing sound that vibrates around the open kitchen as he dives forward, licking my sex over the material of my panties.

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he snarls, lapping at my clit over the material. “I crave you with a level of fierceness I’ve never felt. The pull between compatible alphas and omegas is talked to death when we’re growing up. They literally slam it into our skulls that we have to be careful because biology can override logical sense.”

The way his warm breath fans over my clit is not helping my composure.

“Roarke, please,” I beg, yanking on his hair. “I need you.”

“I need you more than you know,” he muses, tonguing me over the panties. “Fuck, you’re already so slick. I haven’t even gotten started, dirty girl.”

I bite my lip, shaking my head. That bemused smile on his face only makes him more handsome. He’s right. I am extremely wet from practically nothing.

His thumb teases over the seam of my sex as he bands his arm around my back tighter. I’m trembling and desperately trying to hold onto the edge of the counter and his hair to keep myself upright, but it’s tough.

“That can’t be comfortable,” he growls, biting my inner thigh without breaking the skin. “Let’s take this elsewhere. I want to take my time while I eat you alive.”

He grins predatorily, and I shiver in response. I’m desperate for him, and the sexy smirk he shoots my way proves he knows it. He yanks me to him.

Roarke is strong as hell. I’m not light. I’m actually quite sturdy for a woman, and he holds me with my pussy in front of his face and stands. My legs fall over his shoulders as I let out an embarrassing squeak. He doesn’t wobble. I don’t feel like I’m in danger of falling as he walks us over to the couch.

“One of these days, I’ll flip you over and lick your pussy just like this,” he muses. His warm breath fans over my sex, and my inner walls clench involuntarily. “Do you think ye could suck me off upside down?”

I’m not sure, but I’d love to find out.

He casually squats down and lays me out across the long end of the sectional.

My feet fall to hang over the edge as he crawls on top of me. The look of desire on his face ratchets mine higher. My pussy leaks as a wave of aching hits me.

Thick lips meet mine in a tantalizing kiss while his calloused hands slide up under the sides of my pajama shirt. He bunches it above my tits and grins as he flicks his tongue over my nipple.

“No,” I snap. “No teasing. I need you. Your knot.”

Roarke chuckles darkly. “You’ll absolutely have it, but just not yet. You’re not boiling. Let me have my fun. I’m desperate to bury my face in your tight little snatch.”

He efficiently grips the front of my panties in his huge hand. I arch toward him as he pulls them down and wraps my legs around his shoulders. My hands fly to my face.

“Nah, love. I need to see every look on that beautiful face while I fuck your world up,” he growls, wrapping his fingers around both of my wrists and pulling my hands down.

“Watch me.” He grins, biting his thick lower lip before licking me so slowly it’s hard not to grind up into his face. “Fecking hell, Charlie. I found my new favorite dessert. Your pussy tastes like sweet orange cream.”

He licks and sucks with purpose.

I’m fairly sure he’s trying to drive me insane. His chest vibrates with a ragged purr, and it makes my nipples ache painfully.

“I need you inside me,” I whimper.

“Will my tongue suffice?” he asks, smirking as he sucks each of my lower lips into his mouth with a flick and a suck. His teeth gently rake over my hood as he works his way lower.

I moan long and loud as he fucks his tongue into my hole. He uses the exact amount of pressure on my clit to get me close to the edge, but then he pulls back.

It’s absolutely maddening.

I huff and it makes him chuckle.

My hands fist on the couch cushions to keep from pushing him where I want him. Omegas are notoriously bad about delayed gratification.

Roarke growls into my pussy, and the sound is purely animalistic. He continually brings me to the very edge and then smirks as he backs off.

“I’m going to hurt you if you don’t make me come,” I snap, yanking his eyes up to meet mine with a handful of his hair.

“Is that right?” he asks, wiping at his face, which is covered in my slick.

“Yes,” I say, stretching to grab the front of his T-shirt. He obviously worked out before I found him in the kitchen because his scent is still extremely strong, and it’s doing wild things to my system.

“Do you trust me, lovely?” he muses, pulling out of my reach. He yanks the T-shirt off with a hand at the back of his neck, and my eyes stay glued to every one of his abs as they flex.

“Yes, definitely,” I agree, licking my lips.

“Then run,” he says. “And know that *when* I catch you, I’m going to mount your tight little cunt and rut the fuck out of you.”

The oversized T-shirt I’m wearing falls over my skin as I scoot back on the cushion. My foot lands on his stomach. I give a playful little shove as I push off and twist, scrambling to my feet.

Roarke chuckles. It’s low and throaty.

I have to fight the urge to circle back to climb right on his cock.

My impulses want to please my alpha, which makes the situation even more complicated because he told me to run.

I know alphas love to chase.

Something in my system craves being hunted and captured. Knowing he’s going to fuck me into oblivion when he catches me only seems to heighten my arousal and my panic.

I circle through the kitchen and laundry room. I'm not afraid of him at all, so why is my system so overloaded with adrenaline that it's practically impossible to make a plan?

I hit the back stairway, but I'm not a quarter of the way up when Roarke snatches me with an arm around my middle. I dangle in the air for a second as he scrapes his teeth over my right shoulder. It's on top of the material of my sleep shirt, but it's animalistic in a way that makes my pussy tighten around nothing.

He carries me to the landing between floors and shoves my hands down on the stairs heading up. My toes barely touch the ground with how spread out he's got me. He rips the shirt up as his left hand lands on my hip. The right connects with my ass several times in rapid succession.

"Knees here," he growls, pushing them to rest on the bottom step. The tips of my toes slide around the floor as he pulls my head back with my hair. "I'm going to fuck you now, love. If you take my cock like a good omega and keep it down then I might even let you come."

I'm still jacked up from the way he teased me like crazy.

"I'll be good," I promise as his hard cock bumps around my ass. I can feel the material of his basketball shorts as it brushes my thighs. "I need you so badly, Roarke."

"Goddamn," he growls, thrusting into me with no further warning. "Jesus fucking Christ, Charlie. I'm going to fill you so full of my cum there'll be no doubt who you belong to."

My hands slide around the carpet as he powers in and out of me.

"Who knew stair fucking could be so convenient?" he muses, pulling me up until I'm kneeling. "Grind on my shaft. That's it. Take all my cock like a good girl."

The whine that escapes my lips is embarrassing as hell.

"Feck me, you got even slicker," he says, sounding impressed or possibly shocked. "Tell me who owns your tight little snatch."

“Y-You do,” I sob.

He’s still got one hand in my hair, pulling my head back at an awkward angle, but the other is plastered to my middle. I wrap my hand around his to keep myself up right. He’s grazing spots inside of me that I forgot existed.

“Who’s that, love?”

“You,” I moan.

“I think you can do better than that. Tell me who is knocking the bottom out?”

“Alpha, please,” I beg as it finally registers in my hazy brain what he wants to hear.

“What a delicious surprise,” Gray murmurs, taking a seat on the step in front of my face. “Here let me help with this.”

Roarke and Gray finally fully remove my sleep shirt.

“I had no idea I’d come out to find this,” Gray says, looking at Roarke as he pinches both my nipples.

Roarke snarls. “I need to knot you, lovely.”

“Yes, please,” I beg. “Knot me, please?”

“I’m really enjoying the show.” Gray chuckles. His hand slides down the front of his sweats and then he’s pulling his cock free and working it over.

“We’ve really got to keep it down,” Roarke says, biting my shoulder without breaking the skin. “You should cover her mouth.”

Gray slaps his free hand over my lips and smirks wickedly.

Roarke thrusts.

I’m happy Gray is muffling the sounds I make. They’re that ridiculously loud.

# Chapter Twenty-Three

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## Grayson

Watching Roarke fuck the hell out of Charlie on the back stairs is absolutely one of the highlights of my life so far.

I've always had a voyeuristic side. He's got her up on her knees. Her pussy looks stretched to capacity around his glistening shaft. He slams her hips down again, and she gasps against my palm.

"Fleck me, you're going to take my knot *now*," Roarke snarls. His accent is so thick it's difficult to understand him as his words roll together. He releases her hair to pull her up again, and when she falls this time, his slightly swollen knot slips inside her. "That's it, dirty girl. Scream for me."

An impressed sound escapes my lips.

Charlie thrashes like she can't decide if that hurt or felt *amazing*. The whimpering, whining moans that slip out around my fingers point to it being a pleasurable experience.

Roarke's head is tilted as it rests against the back of her head. His chest is heaving, and I'm jealous for several seconds. I'd like to know what it feels like to bury my knot inside her.

*Our time will come*, I remind myself. My cock pulses as I realize I've been squeezing the hell out of it.

I remove my hand from Charlie's mouth and study her. Her stomach is soft and covered in small white and pink stretch marks. I find I'm strangely attracted to the idea of watching her stomach swell with another baby.

I know my impulses are purely hedonistic when my brain starts filing through ways to trap her into carrying our baby. Now is truly the perfect time. Blame it on the birth control inconsistency. It's an asshole thought to have considering she's not even fully comfortable in her place here with us. But she would be if she had that reassurance, right?

God, it's difficult to tell what's a logical thought and what's pure insanity as her perfume floods the small corridor.

My hand wraps around my knot as it pulses in response to her delicately sweet scent. The fingers of my other brush her clit. I have to fight the urge to pull them away to lick any drops of slick off them. There's a thought, burying my face in her cunt sounds quite delightful.

"Keep strangling my cock like that, dirty girl, and I'm going to paint your cunt in my cum." Roarke scrapes his teeth over her neck and, for a moment, my heart stops thinking he'll bite her. "Fill you up until I'm dripping down your thighs."

"Yes, please," Charlie whimpers. "Bite me, alpha."

Roarke growls a dangerous sound as his eyes meet mine. I move to knock him back because that look says everything. He's truly lost to his impulses. I know the second his teeth strike her shoulder that I'm too late.

Charlie convulses, whining and continuing to beg through her release. I ignore my cock and pop up, framing her front to keep her upright.

Might as well ensure she enjoys herself. I brush my fingers over her clit and swirl my tongue around hers as she whimpers into my mouth.

"Roarke," she whines. "I can feel everything you're feeling. Holy shit."

He's still high on the rush of claiming his omega. He ruts into her as much as the position will allow and eventually pushes her so far into me that I have to lean back. My ass hits the carpet of the stairs as he pushes her down doggy style over me. Her hands rest on my shoulders as he snaps his hips into hers.

“God yes, just like that,” Charlie sobs. “*Fuck me.*”

“I’m going to breed you,” Roarke growls, licking over his bite. “Fuck you full of my baby. You’ll never be rid of me now, love.”

I continue to brush my fingers over her cheek and try not to be furious with my packmate. He best pray she doesn’t hate him when this night of fuckery is over. Charlie eventually wraps her tiny little hand around my exposed cock, and now I’m the one gasping.

“Scoot back,” she grumbles, wiggling her hips until Roarke pulls her back several feet.

Then the naughty omega is wrapping her mouth around me. Her warm tongue flicks over the weeping slit. I have to wrap my hand over my mouth to keep relatively quiet.

“I’ve never felt anything like the way your pussy is milking me,” Roarke growls. “Damn, Charlie. I can feel how badly you want to taste his cum. This is unreal.”

The jealousy slams back at full force until Roarke guides her head further down my shaft.

“You like being used,” he says, kissing her temple. “I find that incredibly fucking hot. She wants you to fuck her face and make her gag.”

Charlie’s eyes squeeze shut, but Roarke slaps her ass several times and she grins around me.

“You want that?” I ask, tenderly brushing hair back from her face.

She nods, cupping the underside of my shaft with her tongue, and I give her exactly what she wants.

“I’ll never deny you anything, little one,” I growl. I wrap a hand in her hair and give my abs and obliques the workout of a lifetime as I fuck up into her sweet mouth.

Roarke groans, shuddering as he comes again, and it clearly triggers Charlie’s finish. She whines around my shaft, and the look on her face combined with the dirty image of watching her tits bounce does me in.

“*Fuck*. I’m about to fill your mouth,” I growl, tenderly trying to pull her off in case she’s not prepared for the load I’m about to bust all over her tongue.

She slams back down, hollowing her cheeks and sucks every drop from my jerking cock.

A string of barely coherent words spill from my lips as she sucks like she’s desperate to taste me. My muscles finally stop spasming and my eyes pop open.

Roarke is wrapped around Charlie as he heaves in air trying to catch his breath. Charlie smiles, squinting as she looks up at me, and my heart races. She’s absolutely perfect, and she’s never getting away now.

“Are you okay?” Roarke asks, tilting Charlie’s face to his.

“I’m good,” she says, grinning at him as she runs her fingers over his hand. “Are you?”

“Never better,” he assures her. “But I do feel like we’re going to need to get off Gray eventually, and my knot is nowhere close to being ready to deflate. I’ve never been locked inside someone. I kind of wish we were face to face right now.” He moves and they both groan. “Will you help us up?”

“You’re going to carry her up the stairs while she’s facing me?” I ask, scooting up the stairs and out from under them.

“We’re out of other options unless we all sit here for fifteen or twenty minutes,” he says, chuckling.

“All right,” I grumble. “Let’s get you to bed safely.”

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“Are you truly okay?” I ask Charlie a while later.

Kolt is snoring on the far edge. Roarke is still locked inside her, or I assume he is. He’s plastered to her back as she faces me.

“I think I am,” she mumbles sleepily. “I can’t blame being lost to the fog because I wasn’t. Not fully to the point where I didn’t know what I was asking for.”

I scoot my nude form even closer to her front. She cuddles into my armpit, and I barely stifle the chuckle. She’s utterly adorable. My mostly hard cock bumps around her thighs.

Charlie runs her fingers over my skin, and it causes my chest to vibrate as I purr. There’s little doubt in my mind. We might not be there yet, but I am well on my way to being head over heels for her.

It’s not quite love *just* yet. It’s more of an overpowering urge to care for her and keep her safe. That alongside the warm and fuzzy feeling that floods my chest when she smiles.

Yeah, I’m pretty sure that’s the makings of falling in love. I honestly couldn’t say with any certainty as I’ve never loved anyone outside of a family connection, but I’m self-aware enough to realize that’s what this is.

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The next several days are filled with erratic waves of Charlie’s heat. My mom is always on standby to take Shayley, but at least thus far her actual heat hasn’t hit.

All three of us stick close to Charlie and Shayley. Shay spent the morning running to her new toddler potty only to absolutely not use it. It’s still cute as hell. Shay gets fussy just before dinner time. Charlie takes her up to put her down for a late nap while I’m busy preparing dinner.

Kolt comes in, tossing himself onto one of the barstools as I pull the potatoes out of the oven.

“What’s up?” Roarke asks, pushing himself up to sit on the bar.

“Asshole,” I grumble. He knows I hate it when he does that.

“You’re so damn envious you can’t stand it,” Roarke says, chuckling. “It’s okay, I get it. I would be, too.”

“Merrick sent over the copies of the police reports and . . .” Kolt shakes his head. “It was fucking brutal. Both the store clerk and Shane Barrett were shot execution style. The interior cameras were taken out upon entry and the exteriors had been broken for weeks. Some punk teenagers threw rocks at them. The owner hadn’t had a chance to get them replaced.”

“Jaysus Christ,” Roarke says with wide eyes.

“Brent is on leave from the force. He put in for emergency family medical leave and it was granted. Where he is or what he’s doing remains to be seen,” Kolt says, his jaw tight with tension.

Motley comes up, bumping his leg with her head. He immediately stretches a hand down to rub behind her floppy ears.

“He hasn’t been using his cards?” Roarke asks, turning to face him.

“Apparently not. He left his cell phone behind, too. Merrick is efficient. He said there were no pings on his plates at any toll booths and that alone is extremely unusual. In that area of Miami he was passing through them twice a day.” Kolt sighs.

“Have Jim or Kathy noticed anything? I take it he hasn’t been home?” I ask, frowning.

“They haven’t seen him coming in or out,” Kolt says, glancing toward the living room. “Go check on Charlie and Shay.” He points, and fuck if I know how the dog knows what he wants her to do, but Motley takes off toward the front stairs.

“Plan of action?” Roarke asks, grabbing the huge jar of pretzels and shaking some out.

“It’s definitely possible she did see Brent,” Kolt says. “I’m not sure what that means.”

“If he’s got some type of obsession with Charlie then he’s obviously a danger. Can we file a police report?” I ask, glancing between my packmates because this is not my domain.

I enjoy shopping, decorating my home, micromanaging my submissive’s care, cooking the occasional dinner, and running the resort. Anything outside of that is not my realm of expertise. Both Kolt and Roarke were in the military and have more of an idea how law enforcement and those things work. Or I assume they do.

That’s the benefit of a pack; each member has strengths where the others have weaknesses.

“There needs to be something to report,” Kolt says, shaking his head. “If he shows up and makes threats or . . .” He sighs. “There has to be some actionable offense. We can hire personal security. See if any of the security from the resort want to take extra shifts keeping an eye on the house at night, but even then . . .”

Charlie bounds down the stairs with Motley at her side.

“Shay’s out,” she says, frowning when she sees the serious looks on all of our faces. “I knew you felt weird in the bond.”

She comes into the room and walks into Roarke’s legs. He smirks down at her from his place on the countertop.

“Have we made a plan for your heat?” he asks, dipping his nose to run down the column of her neck. “You’re getting sweeter by the day.”

She’s also been nesting an exorbitant amount the last two days.

“I don’t really want to leave my nest,” she says, poking out her bottom lip. “I guess if it’s safer, but then I’ll be farther away from Shay, and I don’t love that idea either.”

“We considered hiring security to keep an eye on the house at night,” Kolt confesses.

“Why don’t you and Kolt go up and snuggle in your nest,” Roarke offers, running his fingers through her hair. “No

complaining. Gray and I will finish dinner.”

I give him a look of surprise, but then I realize that he’s got a direct line to her feelings and emotions that Kolt and I do not have the benefit of.

“Come on, sweetheart,” Kolt says, pushing himself out of the chair and holding out a hand. “I purposely kept my T-shirt from after my run out of the laundry.”

Charlie frowns, shaking her head. Eventually she gives up the fight and laughs as she walks into his chest.

“Thank you,” she mumbles as he leads her away.

Once they’re gone, Roarke looks at me and shrugs. “What can it hurt? We’ll ask around, and if no one wants the extra hours then we can reach out to an actual personal security company. At least for the days we’re out of it for Charlie’s heat. It’ll make us all feel better, and the cost is negligible.”

“Fair enough,” I agree.

In this situation, it’s far better to be safe than sorry.



# Chapter Twenty-Four

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## Charlie

Later that same night, Kolt carries me to the nest from the bed.

“You’re unsettled,” he says, giving me a chagrined smile. “It’s setting my instincts off something fierce.”

“I’m not,” I grumble as he heads in the door to the nest and up the stairs. He pulls the baby monitor out of his pocket and sets it aside.

“You are,” he counters. “Keep lying and you might find yourself over my knee.”

“I never sleep well right before a heat,” I reply as he sets me down on the nest mattress.

“Don’t you think being in your safe place will help soothe your impulses?” he asks, pulling off his shirt and lying down next to me.

He stretches over me, grabbing the super fluffy blanket I cuddled up with earlier today. His sweaty T-shirt from his jog is rolled up in it and it falls out between us.

Kolt doesn’t often grin the way he’s smiling at that damn shirt.

“You have nothing to smirk about,” I grumble, grabbing it and preparing to toss it to the side.

I’d kind of like to keep it close to the pillows so I can smell it while I’m falling asleep, but he also looks like he won something seeing that.

When I go to toss it aside, I catch a whiff of it.

Somehow it ends up plastered to my face while I breathe it in.

I'm almost afraid he's going to try to take it and I'll have to fight him for it.

Being an omega is legitimately weird sometimes. It's a dirty T-shirt. No one in the world wants it except me. And holy fuck me do I want it.

My impulses want him to run a mile so he's nice and sweaty and manly smelling and then I'll make him lie in my nest and roll around naked . . . Until it's completely saturated in his man funk.

"You know you can get up close and personal, right, sweet girl?" he murmurs, pulling the shirt from my hands and tossing it away. "I'd much prefer you soak up my pheromones directly from the source."

I'm mostly on my side facing him, but also partially on my back. Kolt pushes on my shoulder with one of his huge hands and then I'm lying flat while he hovers over me.

"I've got an equal obsession with your scent," he growls, running a single finger down my sternum.

I'm currently wearing one of Roarke's T-shirts as a pajama dress, but the material is thin enough that I swear it feels like his touch scratches over my skin. He circles my tit and follows the curve up under and around before sliding it over my now very hard nipple.

"It's kind of embarrassing how much time I've spent plotting Roarke's murder the last few days." He grins, before sliding his finger over to trace the same pattern on the other breast. "It gives me comfort knowing you're ours, but that alpha instinct to claim and not share is really damn hard to ignore at times."

"I never meant for you to feel left out," I assure him as my hands dig into his shoulders.

“You haven’t,” he says. His lips are so close I can feel his breath fan over my skin, but he doesn’t kiss me. He does grind his bottom half over mine. It teases my clit before he slips down, bumping against my hole as he swivels his pelvis and does it all over again. “I grew up in a pack. I’ve always been good about sharing.” He laughs. “Except when it comes to you.”

I open my mouth to speak, but Kolt shoves his tongue in it instead. My hands slide up and twine behind his neck. Kolton kisses me like he’s trying to make a point. I’m not sure what that point is, but I’m absolutely here for it.

It takes some serious focus, but I manage to pull my legs from under his. I wrap them around his ass, and it allows me to gyrate my hips against him in return.

“I will share,” he says, between slow, emotion-filled kisses. “Because Gray and Roarke are my packmates, and more than that, because it’s what you need.” His huge hand runs over my hair as he stares into my eyes. “You won’t be alone. Not from here on out. No matter what, you’ll always have us. An entire pack of alphas at your back.”

My eyes clench closed. The wave of emotion I’m hit with isn’t as strong as in the past, but it still aches in my chest. Shane always said the same type of things.

I truly believe Jess was right about the suppressants not helping my healing process. I know I’ve still got a long way to go. I need therapy, and that isn’t going to magically go away, but I can recognize that I’m not nearly as bad off as I was when I left Florida.

I’m not sure if it’s the distance from the memories, or having their support and being able to talk about Shane without being told to shut up and move on already.

It’s made a world of difference.

“I believe you,” I assure him. He’s still staring at me with hunger, and I think that look is a bit of desperation. Although, I’m not sure what he’s desperate for.

“I want a bond with you whenever you’re ready,” he says, brushing his nose against mine. “Not because you bonded Roarke and I’m jealous. I want that connection with you. I want to know when you hurt or when you’re struggling. I want to be able to give you a hug or hold you without you even needing to ask. I know I’m not super eloquent like Grayson, and I can’t bust things out in a melodic tone like Roarke. I just want to be in your future.”

My heart races. He’s absolutely the perfect man for me. The blatant way he spews out his feelings is exactly what I need to feel safe.

His forearm frames the top of my head as his huge body traps me to the mattress, and I feel safer than maybe I ever have. More than anything, I believe his words are true. I don’t have a single doubt about if he’s being sincere or not.

I might have fucked up royally with regards to trusting Brent, but that’s the thing.

I never fully did.

Not even when he was still pretending.

I’ve known Kolt for such a short amount of time, but I knew Shane was trustworthy from that very first night.

Kolt, Gray, and Roarke feel the same way that Shane felt.

They feel safe.

It’s what I imagine home feels like.

“I want a bond with you, too,” I murmur against his lips as my tongue teases, demanding entrance into his mouth. I pull a hand off his neck and bring it between us. I’m able to get it down the front of his sweatpants and wrap it around his cock before he notices.

“Oh, baby girl,” he growls, sounding like it’s a warning. “I’m on edge. I haven’t felt this feral . . . ever. I’ve never been this close to snapping.”

“I guess it’s a good thing that I’m not afraid of you,” I say, giving his cock a solid jerk.

“These off,” he says, bumping my neck to the side and kissing down my throat. He carefully holds himself up on one palm and pulls at the front of my panties with the other. He’s still so focused on teasing my neck that I help him remove my bottoms before pushing down the sides of his sweats.

He kicks them off, falling back on top of me. He uses my hair as leverage, pulling me up into him. It hurts for several seconds, but omega biology is excellent about turning pain into pleasure. He gets the shirt off over my head and slams me back against the mattress as he cages me in again.

“Please don’t make any sudden movements like you might run. I honestly don’t know what would happen,” he says, grimacing. “I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t let you get away, and I’m afraid I might bite.”

He looks so serious that it’s wrong to laugh, but the thing about Kolton is I have zero fear where he’s concerned. Not a single drop of it, but he also looks a little miserable following his confession like he’s ashamed of what he admitted.

“I like to sniff your sweaty man funk after you work out,” I say, giving him a reassuring smile. “Sometimes when you’re asleep, I cuddle up close and bury my face in your armpit. If I’m not facing you then I scoot my ass to your cock and wiggle until you clamp a hand on my stomach and start to purr in your sleep.”

“What?” he asks, chuckling.

“Yeah, it’s weird. Okay? I know that. I still do it. Do you know why? Because it makes my impulses happy. Once they settle down, I sleep better than I have in years. It doesn’t make sense, but I think that’s part of the pull they warn alphas and omegas about. They just don’t warn us of all the bizarre details.” I shrug because I’ve rambled for so long my face feels hot.

“Oh, shit, Charlie,” Kolt growls, burying his face in my neck. “You’re really warm.”

“Mmm hmm,” I agree. “You know what would probably help that? You slamming your knot inside me. Let’s get on

with that.” I claw at his back. “Now would be good.”

Kolt smiles against my cheek. “You really think you can handle my cock with no prep?”

“I think I’d like to find out,” I whine. He’s taking entirely too long. We’ve had sex several times over the last few days, and he’s got a bit of a habit of making sure I’m to the point of having a meltdown before he finally slides inside me.

I’m not afraid of or intimidated by his massive dick. My body is legitimately built to handle alpha cock. I wiggle my very wet pussy against the head of his shaft. His crown bumps my clit, and I tilt my hips to force him against my opening. Kolt growls, but the sound only makes my tits feel heavier and my cunt ache.

“Do you know how many fantasies I’ve had over the last few days of putting my baby inside you? God, Charlie. It’s like all I can think about.” Kolt thrusts, but just the thick mushroom head slips inside me. My body immediately tries to determine if the intrusion is his knot. “That’s weird as shit.” He chuckles. “Feels so fucking good, but it’s bizarre.”

His scent floods my nostrils as his arousal permeates the air. His warm skin presses into mine, and it makes me crave him to the point of it being an unhealthy obsession.

“The thought of watching your belly get big and seeing you grow our child.” He laughs. “It makes me feral as hell. Are you afraid yet, baby? The crazy talk only gets worse from here.”

I’m not sure why, but the idea turns me on, too. It’s what alphas and omegas do. We fuck like bunnies and pop out entire litters of baby alphas and omegas.

“It turns me on also,” I admit, biting my lip. I have no idea why. Maybe it’s the whole primal breeding impulse. It could be the fact that it feels like the ultimate unification. I freaking have no idea, but I do know Kolt will be an excellent father.

I mumble something to that effect, and he slams into me *hard*. It hurts like hell for several seconds before my system helps convert it into pleasure.

I whine, thrashing under him, and demand more despite the ache.

“Goddamn, the thought of fucking you while your belly is big and round with our baby,” he growls. He moves back until he’s kneeling. His hands span from my hip over my thighs as he slides and pulls out. He uses his grip as leverage to literally fuck me on his cock. “You smell even sweeter the closer you get to your heat, and I swear, it’s turning me into a fucking savage. All I want to do is mount your slick little pussy and fuck you full of my cum over and over again until there’s zero chance you aren’t bred.”

One hand lands on my lower stomach as he teases my clit.

“Kolt,” I whine, thrashing around. “I need more of you.”

“You want me to fuck you deep?” he asks, sounding quite pleased.

“Yes,” I sob.

He stretches over me until one palm hits the mattress near my head. He pulls my right hip up over his and then he ruts. I’m not sure I ever fully understood the concept until Kolt snaps his hips into mine. I slide up and he pulls me back down as he pounds in with eager force.

Incoherent begging slips from my lips as I plead for his knot and his bite.

He snarls, “Fuck, baby. You can’t beg like that unless you mean it.”

I bite my lip to hold back the demands, but he’s hitting some wicked spot inside of me that makes it impossible to hold back my pleas.

“I’ve never wanted to consume someone whole,” he growls, sealing his lips to mine.

I mostly sob into his mouth.

The kiss is frantic and dirty and uncoordinated as hell because I’m hit with an orgasm so powerful it makes it hard to tell what’s reality. I do know my nails rake down his shoulders and arms as my body tries to lock him in place.



“I’m going to knot you now,” he growls against my cheek as he slams the last bit of himself into my tightening core. “Oh, fuck. I’ve never felt anything . . . Jesus Christ.”

“Bite me,” I beg. He shakes his head, and it makes his cheek bump mine. “Now, Kolt!”

The waves of my orgasm are still not fully subsiding, and I blame it on the way his knot swells, locking him just inside my opening.

“Goddamn, am I hurting you?” he groans. “I swear that’s the bottom of your pussy bumping the head of my cock. Fuck, I’m going to come.”

I nod, scratching his back and demanding his bite. Then shaking my head because he’s not hurting me, in fact, it feels great.

Everything is hazy, but not enough that I don’t know what I’m asking for. The animalistic noises he makes as he ruts into me are indescribable. I feel like I’m just lying here doing nothing, but apparently, I’m screwing up his world as catastrophically as he’s wrecking mine.

Kolt groans as he pulls my mouth to his. He swells impossibly hard.

“I’m going to make you mine,” he snarls, biting through the skin of my lower lip.

It’s painful, way more so than Roarke’s bite. I go rigid under him as it sends me into a tailspin of rebounding pleasure. I’m able to feel his orgasm as if it were my own. Which triggers mine, and it seems to go on and on as we feed off each other’s arousal.

Kolt eventually jolts and his eyes meet mine. He looks remorseful and my heart aches. He tenderly licks over his bite as I gently run my hand over the back of his head to comfort him.

“I’m so good,” I whisper, but it’s muffled since his mouth is still pressed to mine. I have a very small amount of practice with Roarke, and I use that to send my emotions to Kolton.

He caresses my cheek with his thumb.

“Holy fuck, Charlie,” he whispers, sounding truly reverent. “I can feel you in my soul.”

“I know, me too,” I assure him.

“You can feel that? How much I care about you?” he asks, pecking a kiss on my lips.

I nod.

Talking becomes difficult as I’m hit with the waves of his emotions. He’s pure steady comfort and affection. He’s peaceful in a way that almost seems to balance my soul.

My eyes squeeze shut as a sob rattles in my chest. It’s staggering to realize the depth of his feelings *for me*.

“God, that really is incredible,” he whispers, smiling against my cheek. “You know I’ve got you, right? I’m always going to be at your side from here on out.”

I know he’ll do his best, and that’s all I could ever ask for. It’s a profound feeling of utter contentment that radiates in my chest and through the bond. It doesn’t take long for Roarke to pop in. He’s lighthearted and happy.

“Damn,” Kolt says, shaking his head. “That is strange. I’m getting pulses from Roarke. It’s like his scent faintly tinges the air and then I know what he’s trying to say.”

“I still don’t fully understand how it works, but it’s the most amazing thing I’ve ever felt,” I tell him.

“You’re the most amazing thing I’ve ever felt,” he says, grinning and shaking his head. “Damn, Charlie. Everything just changed for the better.”

He shoves his mouth to mine. We both smile into the kiss, and I focus on the warm fuzzy feeling that fills my chest.

# Chapter Twenty-Five

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## Roarke

The crotch goblin is not impressed with finding my smiling face when she toddles out of her room.

“Mommy?” she asks, glancing down the hall toward the master bedroom.

“She’s still sleeping,” I reply, squatting down.

“Koko?” she asks, pulling her hand up to wipe at her face.

“Sorry,” I say, stretching out my arms. “You’ve got me and Motley.”

Shay glares like she can’t believe she’s stuck with me. It makes me chuckle. She’s a moody little thing when she first wakes up.

“I can probably swing chocolate chip waffles or pancakes if Gray isn’t awake,” I offer, wiggling my hands.

“I like it,” she says, meandering closer. “Chocolate chips.”

She’s like a skittish wild animal that might bolt at any moment. Her huge blue eyes squint like she’s waiting for a reply. I’m beginning to believe the lass doesn’t think much of me.

“Everyone likes chocolate,” I say, shrugging.

“You will change me?” she asks, continuing forward until I wrap my hands around her belly and lift her.

“No one wants a soggy bottom,” I say, grimacing a bit. “Well, at least you’re verbal. A newborn would have no hope of giving me the steps.”

“Huh?” she asks, frowning again.

I glance at my phone still plugged in by the couch in the small living room that I slept in last night.

“I could probably do a quick web search for steps on changing a toddler’s diaper, but I’m going to trust you on this one,” I tell her heading into her bedroom.

“Okay,” she says like she has no idea what the hell I’m going on about.

I slept close by last night. Charlie has been increasingly worried that she did see Brent. The fact she and Kolt bonded gave me a perfect excuse to give them some space.

Motley circles my feet as I put Shay down on the changing table. She lies back, and I pump myself up to do the damn thing.

I’m absolutely not waking Charlie for an early morning diaper change. We’re bonded. She’s stuck with me for life and that means I need to prove I’m respectable stepparent material.

“All right, don’t fall off,” I instruct her, stepping over to the dresser. “Any idea where Mummy put your new clothes?”

“The bottom,” Shay says, sitting up and pointing. I squat down. “Yep, that one.”

I grab out a pair of pink underclothes. “Are you going to use the toilet if I put you in these?”

Shay pulls her pointer finger to her mouth and chews at it near her molars.

“Are you getting some new teeth?” I ask, grabbing a dress out. “Do you have trousers to match this?”

“I don’t know,” she says, shrugging. It all comes out as one long word, and it’s utterly adorable.

“Right then,” I grumble, swiping a hand over my face. “Without pants it’s easier to pee, but your legs might be cold.” It’s my turn to frown. “We’ll turn up the heater.”

“Okay.”

“I feel like you’re just agreeing to be agreeable at this point,” I mumble, glancing around for baby wipes. “What do I dry you with once we rinse your bottom?”

“I don’t know,” she says with wide eyes.

“Well, what do you know?” I ask, grinning because she really is cute. Some of the looks she gives me reminds me so much of Charlie.

“I like chocolate chips,” she says with the utmost seriousness.

I snort, shaking my head. Kids are wild. It’s definitely a process of getting used to taking care of someone outside of myself, but I don’t mind.

The house is livelier and more fun than it’s ever been.

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“This absolutely isn’t what it looks like,” I say, lying my ass off.

“Really?” Charlie asks, blowing her lips together. “It looks like Shay is eating chocolate chips out of the bag by the *handful* while you burn pancakes.”

“Okay, so it is what it looks like,” I say, chuckling.

“Oh no,” Shay says, clutching the bag to her chest. “This mine.”

“I actually understood that,” I say, offering the little lady a fist to bump. “We’ve got like a ninety percent success rate with communication this morning.”

“Sorry to inform you, but these are not yours,” Charlie says, plucking the bag from Shay with some major resistance from the little one.

“That’s not nice,” Shay says, crossing small arms over her chest.

“Thank you for letting me sleep in,” Charlie says, wrapping her arms around me from the back and squeezing me

tight. “I believe I’m supposed to have my second appointment with Calvin today.”

“Me too,” I agree, pulling the pan off the burner. “I feel like maybe we should all eat breakfast at the resort.”

“Okay,” Shay agrees. She reaches over grabbing her juice box.

“She’s like a very bossy, tiny person,” I muse, wrapping an arm around Charlie and pulling her in front of me. I grab Shay with my free arm and set her on the ground. She shrugs and heads off toward the living room. “I genuinely did try. Though, I fully admit, I’m not a cook.”

“I feel like you’ve got more experience being the fun uncle,” Charlie says, laughing.

“That’s probably true,” I agree, nuzzling my cheek to hers. “Although, I’m getting plenty of practice just in case.” My hand comes to rest over her stomach. “I’m sure you’ve noticed. You’re not even in full-blown heat, but it’s impossible to keep the three of us off you.”

“I need the pot, mister,” Shayley calls out from the living room.

“What?” Charlie asks, snorting a laugh.

“Go on then,” I call over my shoulder. I’m still unable to look away from Charlie’s smiling face. She’s so fucking beautiful it takes my damn breath away. “I told her that her toddler potty is like a chamber pot.” I shrug, laughing. “She thought that was cute. Although, for the record, she’s wildly unreliable on accuracy for when she actually needs to use it. I finally put the damn thing in front of the tele and told her to lounge for a while.”

“Ohmigosh.” Charlie chuckles, leaning up to kiss the edge of my mouth. “That’s really sweet. Thank you.”

Her mouth meets mine for a slow kiss, and I’m pretty damn sure I’m rocking this whole parenting thing.

“I’m done,” Shay calls.

I grin wickedly. “Sorry, Mummy.” I spin back toward the kitchen to clean up. “Tag, you’re it.”

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Calvin and I have danced around each other at the resort for years. He’s tried to pin me down on several occasions to encourage me to *discuss my trauma*.

I found out the hard way that not all equipment is created equally. Really, what else is there to say?

I dodged him like a pro until Charlie came into our lives. It feels mildly irresponsible to ignore my damage when she’s working on hers, so I’m giving counseling a try.

The getting-up-there-in-age alpha is not pleased to learn Kolt and I bonded our omega so quickly.

In fact, I’d go so far as to say he’s actually displeased.

I’m waiting for my appointment, which is to immediately follow Charlie’s visit, when Kolt pops in.

Apparently Calvin called him in upon discovering we’d bonded. He spends the next thirty minutes talking to the three of us before releasing Charlie to go with Gray. He takes the next fifteen minutes to lecture me and Kolt about Charlie’s healing process.

By the end, I do feel like a righteous asshole. However, Calvin ends our meeting by saying he saw the signs coming a mile away.

“Then why the hell have you raked us over the coals for the last forty-five minutes?” I ask, completely flabbergasted.

“I needed to know the two of you were firmly on board with Charlie’s needs,” he says, shrugging.

Kolt nods his agreement like the proper suck-up he is.

The bastard.

“Are we done for today?” I ask. I’m quite ready to be done with this therapy session and get back to my omega.



“We are,” Calvin agrees. “I’ll see the two of you next week unless Charlie’s heat hits. If it does then we’ll aim for the Thursday after it’s finished. In which case I might want to pencil in some time for Gray, too.”

I snort, shaking my head.

Kolt and I head out, but something is making me quite unsettled, and I can’t seem to figure out what it is.

# Chapter Twenty-Six

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## Charlie

Gray collects me from my counseling session. We make a quick trip to the daycare to check on Shayley.

“She seems worn out,” Gayle says, nodding to Shay. She’s playing with another little girl about her age, but she does look tired. “I was thinking I could bring her home with me. I was off an hour ago and . . .” She shrugs.

“What about a car seat?” Gray asks, giving his mom a look I can’t decipher.

“I have one,” Gayle says. “It’s new. I bought it for just this type of occasion.”

“She pushes,” Gray says, laughing under his breath. “It’s just what she does. I think my sisters are thankful there’s someone new to distract her.”

“I’ll just bring her with me. She can have her nap in her bed at Gigi’s and then have toddler time after,” Gayle says, patting me on the arm. “Last time she was over she had grape juice with cheese and crackers while I had a glass of wine. It was adorable. We’ve dubbed it toddler time because your fathers love to say I’m cranky after a nap, too.”

“I have no idea what that means,” Gray says, pulling me firmly into his chest. “It’s truly up to you.”

“It’s fine,” I say, smiling up at Gray. It’s kind of unreal how they just brought Shay and I home with them and everyone went with it without a second thought. But what I’m definitely not doing is complaining.

Life is totally different with a support system.

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Gray and I walk them out because even though I trust Gayle, I'm still a mom, and I need to check out the car seat and make sure it's buckled in properly.

I mumble a quick apology for being so ridiculous, but Gayle simply gives me a tight squeeze and assures me she understands.

"I'm a mother and an omega. I completely get it," she says, hugging me again before climbing in her car.

Gray plants a hand on my hip and guides us back inside. We stop at the café on the first floor and he smiles.

"You haven't eaten since breakfast and my impulses demand I feed you," he says, biting his thick lower lip.

There's something about that chagrined smile that makes me want to climb him. I think maybe it's the way his dimples pop. He has grown a few days of stubble, and that might be to blame, too.

I know I have a bit of an unhealthy addiction to facial hair.

He purchases two sandwiches on thick honey wheat bread. One ham and Swiss and the other turkey with cheddar. He grabs two bottles of water and our food and guides us to his office.

Gray takes the seat next to mine on the couch and feeds us both. It's strange to be so well cared for, but not unwelcome. It hits every single one of my submissive buttons to eat from his hand while he tells me what an excellent job I'm doing and praises me for being a good, sweet girl.

"You really are deliciously sweet," Gray murmurs, wiping his hands on a napkin and nuzzling his cheek to mine. "If you can hang around fifteen or twenty minutes, I'll finish up and we can head home."

"Okay," I agree.

Gray hops up and heads to his desk. It hasn't been long, maybe five or ten minutes when his office phone rings.

The concerned look on his face instantly sends my hackles up.

He immediately makes two more calls. One to Calvin and one to Jess. I'm on edge as he approaches me.

"There are several officers in the lobby," Gray says, pulling me out of his chair. "They're here to do a welfare visit."

"On me?" I ask, frowning.

"Apparently so," he growls. "I'm having Cal and Jess meet us in the lobby, but I'm guessing they'll also want to speak to you."

"That's okay," I say, but my stomach drops.

I know I've done nothing wrong, but my hands still shake.

I don't know how anyone knows where I am or who could possibly be concerned with my safety outside of Brent. Only he's not really worried about me.

"Let's go," I say, heading for the door. It's the last thing I want to do, but I get the feeling this isn't a situation that can be ignored.

# Chapter Twenty-Seven

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## Grayson

“I’m really glad Shayley is with your family,” Charlie says, sticking close to my side as we head for the lobby.

Roarke heads our way with Jess and Calvin. Kolt stands with Motley at his feet, and she’s got a leash on for the first time in a *really* long damn time.

Charlie stumbles forward when she gets a look at who is standing next to the officers.

Brent Robinson.

Her asshole ex is standing with his arms crossed, casually talking to the cops.

“Charlie, God, I’ve been so worried about you,” the dead man walking says, taking a few steps toward us.

Motley steps between us and Brent. The dog never growls, hardly ever barks, but she reads the room well at this moment. She sounds half feral as she snarls.

“Sit,” Kolt says, running a hand down her neck.

Motley bristles but listens. Kolt stands, also blocking us from Brent.

“Why are you here?” Kolton directs the question at Forest, the chief of police for our sleepy mountain town.

“We need to speak to Miss Geiger,” Forest says, crossing his arms over his chest. “Where is your daughter?”

“I’m not sure what’s going on here,” I say, leaving Charlie by Roarke before approaching the chief. “But I will have

Wahler here before you can blink if you don't change your tone real goddamn quick."

Forest takes a step back. He knows Thomas Wahler has been itching to eat their department alive ever since his younger brother and partner in their firm was picked up on bogus charges for driving under the influence. Except Timmy Wahler wasn't driving at all. He was sitting in his parked car in his driveway when he was set up. But that's an entirely different story.

"Call your lawyer if you'd like," Forest says, coming up to my side. "I still need to speak to Miss Geiger and verify that her daughter is okay."

"Shayley is fine," I say, eyeing Brent. I'd love to know what he said to Forest to get him this worked up. I look at the chief. "I think you and I should continue this conversation in the conference room."

"With Miss Geiger?"

"Without him." I nod to Brent.

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Forest asks Charlie a round of questions that make me even more suspicious of why they're here.

"You should speak to Calvin," I tell Forest, moving to usher Charlie out. "She's answered your questions. You know why omegas sometimes end up at The Exchange. I find it *really* fucking insulting that she's being forced to answer questions like she did something wrong."

"The situation calls for due diligence on our part," Forest says, rolling his eyes.

"And you've done it," I snap. "Speak to Calvin and Jess. If you have any other concerns that Charlie might be a threat to herself or someone else after that then contact Wahler. I won't allow you to make matters worse by vilifying a victim."



“That’s what this was about?” Charlie whispers. “You think I’m a danger to myself or my daughter?”

Forest has the good sense to grimace at the pure mortification lining Charlie’s tone.

“I’m sorry if you were made to believe that, but all I did was leave a situation that wasn’t healthy for me or my daughter. I actually agree with Gray. I don’t have anything else to say about this.” Charlie shakes her head, covering her mouth with her hand.

“You’ve said everything he needs to know,” I assure her, squeezing her hip. “And make sure your fellow officer is escorted off the property and knows he’s not welcome back.”

“He is a fellow officer,” Forest grumbles, readjusting his belt. “You had to know I couldn’t ignore such accusations.”

“Hopefully they’ve been put to rest,” I say, offering the chief a tight smile. “And in the future, don’t bring a goddamn abuser with you into my facility. We’re a sanctuary for omegas, and you’ve brought a problematic alpha, not just to our door, but inside the safety barrier we provide.”

My fury reaches dangerous heights as I guide Charlie out. The more I think about it, the angrier I become. I’m calling Wahler and putting him on high alert. This entire situation leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

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The four of us are back in my office, but it feels stifling with all of our tension heavy in the air.

“Well, we officially know you weren’t wrong,” Roarke says. His posture is tight with tension as is his jaw. He’s got the small bundle of omega plastered to his front. The short-sleeved T-shirt he wears flexes over the muscles on his arms, and I wonder exactly how much time he’s been putting in at the gym while we’re all asleep.

“I’d rather have been mistaken,” Charlie mutters, burying her face closer to his armpit. “Have we got a plan for what to

do about my heat?”

“There’s a security company one of the guys recommended,” Kolt says, shoving his hands in his pockets. “Adam worked for them for a while, but he quit because it was a lot of traveling. The owner of the Colorado office is a former military guy by the name of Griffin Stone. Adam is going to give him a call and put us in touch.”

“Thank you,” Charlie says, stretching out a hand.

Kolt immediately pulls his hand from his pocket and grasps hers, pulling it to his mouth. I loathe that I’m the only one without a bond to give me insight where her head is at.

“I’m so embarrassed,” Charlie says, shaking her head. “He made them think that . . .”

Yes, we all know exactly what Brent insinuated to put the chief on such high alert. Of course all situations regarding child safety and welfare should be taken seriously, but the entire thing leaves me feeling rather rabid.

The way Charlie immediately had to defend herself and the fact I’m sure things wouldn’t have gone half as smoothly if Jess and Calvin weren’t available to vouch for her mental health and state of being.

Charlie gave her consent for them to discuss her, but goddamn, I’m still furious. We’re supposed to be protecting her and insulating her from any trouble.

Charlie untangles herself from Roarke and comes to stand in front of me.

“Are you okay?” she asks, tilting her head and blinking her wide blue eyes.

“Christ,” I murmur, yanking her into my chest with both hands on her ass. “I’m fine, little one. I’m frustrated that—”

“No, no more apologizing for things that are outside of your control,” Charlie whispers, pushing up on her tiptoes to kiss me.

My tongue swirls over Kolt’s bondmark, and Charlie trembles against my chest. The kiss is tender and filled with

emotion. I might not have a bond to show her how I feel, but I do everything I can to pour my affection for her into the slow licking kiss.

“I already texted Gayle and your dads,” Kolt says as we pull apart. “Let’s collect the ladybug and get home.”

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Charlie obsessively nests the rest of the day. She understandably doesn’t want Shayley out of her sight.

Shay isn’t as impressed by the nest. She wants to play in her bedroom, and eventually Kolt promises he’ll keep eyes on her at all times if Charlie will let him.

There’s a tense few seconds before she agrees. I have no interest in cooking tonight, so we order take out from a bar and grill not far from the resort.

Roarke heads to pick it up, and when he gets back, he casually pulls me and Kolt aside.

“You’ll never believe who I saw,” he says, giving us a look that means our first guess is probably the correct one.

“Brent?” I growl.

Kolt is still watching Shay play in the living room. She’s busy showing Motley how she can build . . . something. I’m not exactly sure what. The overgrown mutt lies there watching Shay. I believe she truly can sense all of our stress.

“Brent having dinner with Lori,” Roarke says, keeping his voice low. “I don’t believe they saw me, but someone tell me what the feck that’s about.”

“Who’s Lori?” Kolt asks. “Wait, you mean the chatty receptionist that—”

“That’s had a crush on you for ages?” Roarke snaps. “Yes, that would be the one.”

“Lori . . . What?” Kolt asks, glancing away from Shayley for the first time.

Honest to God, if he were anyone else, I'd accuse him of playing stupid. The sad part is I know he's not. The man truly is oblivious to all attempts to flirt with him made by the opposite sex. Or he was prior to Charlie.

"Why would she be with Brent?" Kolt asks, still looking between us like he's expecting one of us to say we're just kidding about Lori's massive and well-known crush on the giant alpha.

"Not a fucking clue," Roarke says, swiping a hand over his face. "But I don't like it."

"Griffin Stone called while you were gone," Kolt says, with his gaze back on Shay. "He'll have two employees on shift at all times. Four people total. A day and a night team. They won't be close contact unless it's called for, but we can only keep them for nine days. He's got a window of availability in his schedule, but then they'll head to another job already on the books."

"That makes me feel a lot better," I say, blowing out a breath of relief. "Hopefully, Charlie's heat will have hit and be over by then."

"I'll say a prayer," Roarke says sarcastically. "But we all know my luck doesn't hold for shite."

"It'll give us a chance to relax during Charlie's heat," Kolt says, making his way over and digging in the bags. "They'll be able to keep eyes on the entire cul-de-sac from my understanding. Although, he did mention they'll want to tap into the outdoor cameras to help watch both houses."

"That makes sense," I agree.

"You hungry?" Kolt calls to Shay. "I see chicken tenders and fries."

Motley, who has been lying down simply watching, perks up at his words.

"Umm, yes," Shay says, pushing off the floor and running into the kitchen.

“I’ll see if I can convince Charlie to leave the nest to eat,”  
I tell them, grinning at Shay on my way by.

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

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## Charlie

The night passes with my anxiety through the roof. I read Shay a bedtime story in the nest. She looks at me a little funny when she sees I'm wearing Kolt's T-shirt and a pair of Roarke's basketball shorts that are way too big. I wrap us both in the blanket that smells like Gray and do my best not to burst into tears.

Brent is here. He hasn't given up on finding me, and he actually came halfway across the country. I don't understand why. I really don't.

If I thought he was worried about me doing something like hurting myself or Shay then at least I could see a purpose for his trip. But even then, he could have called the local police department, and as an officer, I'm sure they would have looked into his concerns.

The whole thing makes me so sick to my stomach that I'm worried Shay is picking up on my tension.

"Mommy, you sick?" Shay asks, tilting her head and looking at me over her shoulder.

"No, I'm okay," I assure her, squeezing her tight.

"I love you," she says. Turning to face me, she wraps her arms around my neck and hugs me tight. "I take care of you?"

"No," I tell her, biting my cheek to keep from bursting into tears. She shouldn't be worried about me or trying to take care of me. I'm the adult. "Let's see what happens to Mae and her band of misfits."

“Okay,” Shay agrees, kissing my cheek before turning around to sit in my lap.

I continue to read until Shay snuggles back into my chest and stops asking questions. That’s usually a pretty good sign she’ll be asleep within minutes.

The more I think about Brent, the more upset I get *again*. Even right after Shane died, Brent was one of the only people who visited me in the hospital. He brought gifts for Shay and even drove me home when they released me. He’s always known I was devastated by losing Shane, but even in my darkest moments, I was never truly suicidal.

I mean yes, I had moments where I wished I were dead so the pain would stop, but I never got to a point where I even vaguely considered it as an actual option. If I hadn’t been pregnant with Shay, it might have gotten to that point, but I wasn’t just living for me.

I was living for the both of us. I knew Shane was so excited that we were having a girl. I had to keep trucking along *no matter what*. No matter how sad or heartbroken I was, I had to keep living.

And I told Brent that many times over the years when he was still pretending to be the nice guy.

I thought he was checking to see if I was okay and possibly gauging where my head was at.

I’m actually starting to question myself and if I’m crazy . . .

Did I ever give him the impression that I’d be capable of that?

No, I know I didn’t.

The only reason he would have said those things now would be to hurt me and to call my sanity into question. It really makes me wonder if I didn’t have Gray, Roarke, and Kolt, would those officers have believed him?

If I hadn’t seen Calvin, would they have dragged me away for some mental health hold? And God, what would have



happened to Shay if they did that? I bet Brent would have graciously offered to look after her only to force me back to him once the doctors released me.

It's absolutely terrifying to think about the level of power he's had on me the last few years.

I didn't have a ton of friends after Shane died, but I did have a few. Over the last year especially, Brent isolated me from even the couple people I still had in my life outside of him.

And. I. Let. Him.

That's the scariest part of all. I didn't put up much of a fight because it wasn't worth the confrontation and misery that came when he wasn't happy.

"Hey, sweetheart," Kolt says, crawling into the nest. "She's out."

"Yeah," I agree, gently rocking her in my arms.

"How about I take her to bed?" he offers, brushing his fingers over my cheek.

"Okay," I say, letting him scoop her up.

"Gray's going to sleep on the couch in the upstairs living room tonight," Kolt says, kissing my cheek. "Motley will be in with Shay. Give me just a second to get her settled and I'll be back to cuddle you."

"Okay," I agree, curling up on my side in the fetal position. It doesn't take long. There's no clock in the nest, but I'm guessing it's less than five minutes before he's back and wrapping himself around me.

"Brent will not touch either of you," Kolt says, sending pure comfort through the bond.

I'm not sure why, but it only makes it harder not to burst into tears. I hate that I'm the wimp who shuts down under pressure. I want to be stronger and braver, but my instincts scream to run and hide.

Only I've never learned how to hide from my thoughts or the dark and ugly feelings that make themselves known when I'm alone.

"I don't know what it is you're thinking," Roarke says, crawling into the nest on the other side of me. "But I don't want you to keep that garbage stewing inside. I'm the master of ignoring the hard shite. So I've no room to talk on this particular matter, and still I suppose I'm a hypocrite because I can't stomach the thought of you doing the same." He lies down facing me and brushes tender kisses over my forehead, each cheek, my nose, and eventually pecks my lips.

"We're here for you," Kolt murmurs, wrapping his arm around my middle and pulling me back into his chest. "Let us bear your burdens for you, sweetheart. I assure you, my shoulders can carry a lot."

Roarke stares at my face, quirking an eyebrow as he gently caresses my cheek. Kolt's warm, steady comfort engulfs my back, and I blubber out everything I'm thinking.

I tell them how embarrassed I am that Brent came in and accused me of being a danger to my own child.

How frustrated I am that I let myself get so emotionally beat down that I actually appreciated the numbness that came when he blew up. Because in those moments, I didn't even hurt about losing Shane.

I hysterically cover how much I miss him and how hard it's been being alone. But then also how weak that makes me feel because I should be able to handle life without anyone at my side.

"I do feel better lately," I say, staring into Roarke's blue eyes as Kolt's hand drifts over my stomach from behind. "I know Shane would've liked you guys. I want to be a better mom for Shayley."

"No one is questioning you," Roarke barks. I jolt because now that I think about it, they hardly ever bark. "Think about it, love." He nuzzles his nose to mine. "He knew you weren't going to leave with him, right?"

“Today?” I ask.

“Yes,” Roarke says. “So why did he come? To rattle your foundations. Perhaps he thinks you’ll run from us and try to disappear to somewhere he doesn’t know about. He couldn’t have anticipated that we’d bond so quickly. If nothing else, we know he wants control.”

“If he can’t physically control you then mentally controlling you would be the next best thing,” Kolt says into my hair. I can’t see him, but he’s still sending me pure reassurance that everything is going to be all right. “Sweetheart, you’re having a conditioned response. Your system is waiting for the explosion that isn’t coming because Brent isn’t here. Or that’s what I think . . .”

I carefully roll to face my gentle giant. He looks so worried, and now that I’m not so focused on myself, I can realize some of the anxiety and concern I’m feeling is coming from my guys because they’re worried about me.

It’s so easy to recognize now that I’m paying attention. Feeling their thoughts, worries, and how concerned they are about me only makes it more difficult.

It’s very hard not to blurt out something ridiculous like *I love you*.

I haven’t felt this way about someone since Shane, but I’m capable of realizing that I do. I also won’t be ashamed of that.

It’s not a betrayal because he would want me to live my life, fall in love, and be happy.

“I think you’re right,” I tell Kolt. “He couldn’t get to me physically, so he was determined to get at me emotionally. I’m sorry that it was successful.”

“No, don’t apologize.” Roarke runs his hand down my side now that I’m facing Kolt.

“Do you both know how much I appreciate you?” I ask, looking between them.

“We do,” Kolt assures me.

“Now rest,” Roarke says, running his fingers through my hair. “Let your alphas look after you.”

I fall asleep really fucking grateful that they came to Kathy’s for the Fourth of July.

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The next morning I wake up feverish. It takes no time at all to realize my heat has hit. I stagger out of the nest looking for the guys, and once I make it downstairs, I’m surprised to see two men I don’t recognize.

“Charlie,” Gray says, coming closer. He runs his hands up my arms. “You’re definitely warm.”

“Where’s Shay?”

“She’s with Gayle,” Kolt calls out.

“Who are they?” I ask as Gray carefully guides me back up the stairs.

“They’re half the team from Stone Security,” Gray replies as we head back up.

“Thank you,” I call out, waving before we get so high they won’t be able to see us anymore.

“Fucking hell,” Gray growls once we reach the second story. “Your scent alone has my cock throbbing.”

“Wait,” I grumble, spinning around. My hands land on Gray’s chest, and I have to shake my head to focus. His pheromones are thumping in response to mine, and it makes it difficult to think rationally. “Shayley?”

“She’s with my mom and dads,” Gray says, brushing sweaty hair back from my face. “You began to perfume in your sleep quite heavily last night. We already warned my mom that this would likely happen.”

“Oh,” I say, plastering myself to his front. “Do you think she’ll be okay?”

“She’ll be fine,” Gray murmurs, wrapping an arm around my ass and lifting me.

I scramble up him, burying my face in his throat once I’m close enough. His masculine scent is doing funny things to my insides.

“My sister plans to bring her kids by for a few hours this afternoon. My mom has a plan to possibly keep my youngest niece so Shay has some company. We can call and check in any time you’d like,” Gray says it all as he walks us into the bedroom and toward the nest. “You’ve never had a heat as a mother, right?”

“No, I haven’t,” I tell him as he walks up the last few stairs to the nest.

“My mom is an omega as are both my sisters. Families adapt and handle heats regularly,” he assures me. “Nature dictates biology, and you’re not doing anything wrong. I know it’s stressful to be away from her, but they will care for her like any other grandchild. She’ll come back spoiled rotten and demanding to go back to Gigi’s for another sleepover. I’ve heard my oldest sister complain about it for years.”

“Okay,” I say because I really do trust Gayle, and Gray’s right, I don’t have options. My heat is here. “You smell so good.”

“You do too,” he growls, brushing his hands over my face. “Are you clear? Not lost to the fog yet?”

“I’m clear-headed for the moment,” I tell him, frowning at the look on his face. It’s very serious and it worries me for a second.

“I’d like permission to bond with you at some point over the next few days,” Gray says, smiling. It’s a real grin that makes his dimples pop.

“Yes,” I whisper, pulling him to me with the hand on his neck. “God yes, I want to bond with you.”

“Good,” he snarls, taking my mouth in a savage kiss. “That’s really good because honestly? I’m not sure I could stop myself if I tried.” He yanks his long-sleeved T-shirt off,

chucking it aside, and stares down at me like he's about to royally fuck my world up in the best way possible.

Gray falls on top of me, kissing me again and literal heat pulses through my system. I whine into the kiss as I grind up into him, but it's not nearly enough.

I sob a plea for his knot as he yanks down Roarke's basketball shorts. I'm still in them and Kolt's T-shirt, but Gray isn't messing around. He manages to get me nude from the waist down while I'm still lost to his frantic kisses.

"I've got you, little one," he murmurs, pulling me up until he can get Kolt's shirt off over my head. "God, I want those tits in my mouth."

"Yes, but I need your knot," I moan, trying to push down the sides of his sweatpants. I don't even know what time it is, but I'm sure it's relatively early because Gray always changes into clothing before he even cooks breakfast.

"And you'll have it," he assures me, pinching both my nipples. "My fat cock buried in your tight little cunt. I'm going to fill your sweet pussy with load after load of my cum."

I whine, begging as I thrash around the nest mattress.

Gray stretches over me, holding himself up on one palm as he yanks his sweats down with the other. He nibbles at my nipples as he switches hands. Then he's kicking the rest of his clothing off, and his warm skin presses against mine.

"You've already got my cock leaking," he muses, smirking dangerously. "My impulses demand I make use of the fertile omega begging for me."

I sob, clawing at his back and ass. He looks entirely too smug, and he hasn't done anything yet.

"Oh, fuck me," he snarls, running his fingers down my slit. "You're leaking slick."

I glance away. Apparently he doesn't want me as badly as I want him. Not even half as much or his heavy cock would be inside me instead of bouncing around my stomach.

“Sorry, little one.” Gray chuckles. “I need to bury my face in your cunt.”

“No,” I whine as he crawls down, settling himself between my legs. “Fine then, but can’t I suck you off at the same time?”

“You’re not in control,” Gray says, slapping my pussy with surprising force.

I think we’re both surprised by how loud it makes me moan.

Gray grins.

“Trust your alpha to take good care of you,” he growls, staring straight at my dripping sex. “Feet flat on the bed and spread your knees wide for me.”

I huff. I’m feeling especially pouty at the moment.

“Now, Charlie!” he barks.

It startles me into action. My feet plant on the bed, and I force my knees out. Gray licks my clit in tantalizing flicks of his tongue.

I arch off the mattress, but Gray slides a hand up my middle, holding me in place. He cups my left tit, pinching and tugging the nipple. I writhe in response as the fog slips in at full force.

I beg, plead, and demand things that I’d be embarrassed by if I were more coherent.

“Okay, pretty girl,” Kolt says, climbing into the nest.

Gray snarls in response, and it makes me leak slick. My legs tremble, and he only clamps down harder.

“I’m not a threat to you,” Kolt says in an even tone.

Gray growls louder, but Kolt ignores him completely. He climbs up next to me and leans over my top half, pinning me even more fully.

My impulses freaking love it. Kolt grins into the kiss as he teases the tit Gray isn’t holding. I’m a wiggling, sobbing mess.

“Fuck my mouth?” I manage to ask between frantic kisses.

“Not just yet,” Kolt says.

Gray slides two fingers inside me, and my body immediately clamps down. He rolls his tongue around my clit, and I explode in an unexpected orgasm. I tremble against their tight holds as every nerve ending in my body lights with pure bliss.

“That was sexy as fuck,” Roarke muses from somewhere. I have no idea when he joined us, but I do wish he’d get closer.

I beg for his cock, but he simply chuckles. “Looks like you’re plenty looked after at the moment. I think I’ll enjoy the show while I can. We’ve got to pace ourselves if we’re to keep you satiated.”

I grumble something that doesn’t make any damn sense as Kolt pins my arms above my head and twists to suck my nipple into his mouth.

“Move,” Gray snarls.

Kolt laughs good-naturedly. “Sorry, man.”

Gray crawls over me, and in one solid thrust, he buries himself inside me. I arch off the nest mattress, but Kolt still pins my arms.

“I quite like the image of you spread out for us,” Gray says, chuckling darkly. “Completely at our mercy.”

“I’m not afraid of you,” I snap, trying to tilt my hips to ride him from the bottom. “Knot, please, alpha.”

“She’s playing the alpha card,” Roarke says. “She definitely knows how to appeal to his ego.”

Gray raises a hand, flipping off his packmate, and then uses those fingers to teasingly brush over my clit.

It feels incredible, and that’s about the last coherent thought I have for a while.

Gray pushes his mouth to mine as he pulls my legs up so they rest over his thighs. He ruts in and out in deep, snapping



movements that make absolutely embarrassing sounds slip from my lips around the kiss.

“Can I bite you?” Gray asks, nuzzling his cheek to mine.

“I’ve only been begging for that for the last damn hour or something,” I huff and immediately seal my lips by rolling them together.

“Oh, little one,” Gray says, sounding totally amused as he pulls out of me. “Present for your alpha.”

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

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## Kolt

Roarke releases an impressed sound as Gray pulls out of Charlie. I'm not sure when I released my hold on her hands, but I scoot back, watching how this is going to play out.

Charlie huffs an annoyed little whimper and glares. "I flip over and you *finally* knot me?"

"You get on your hands and knees for me and I'll spank your naughty ass," Gray growls, giving her a serious look. "Maybe if you beg pretty enough *then* I'll shove my cock back inside you."

Charlie whines in response. The bond is still so new that I don't fully know how it works, but unless I'm focusing, I usually don't pick up much. Except apparently at this very moment. Her aching desire for Gray hits me square in the heart and the dick.

Charlie hits her knees with the top half of her body plastered to the nest mattress. Gray's shaft bounces around her ass as he positions himself behind her.

"Beg for me, little one," Gray says, sliding his hands over her ass.

Charlie grips the sheet in her fists and shakes her head.

"No?" Gray sounds utterly delighted by this turn of events. His hand lands against her ass with considerable force.

I lean forward because my instincts don't like anyone hurting my omega, not even my packmate, who I trust. Being

an alpha is complicated.

Charlie moans. The sound doesn't indicate discomfort. She wiggles about as Gray continues to pepper her backside with loud slaps. She buries her face in the sheet, shaking her head like she's trying to keep from giving into Gray's demands.

"If you want me to fill your tight little cunt up then you need to ask for it." Gray chuckles.

"Please, alpha," Charlie sobs. "I need you."

Gray grins. His left forearm wraps around her middle, pulling her up and into his chest. They share an open-mouthed kiss that has their tongues tangling in the air.

Roarke got nude at some point. He crawls over, kneeling in front of them. Charlie's tits bounce as she shimmies against Gray's front.

Roarke watches with rapt fascination. He's never been good at delayed gratification, but Gray is very much on the opposite side of that scale. He enjoys dessert slowly rather than gobbling it down like Roarke.

"Are you going to stuff her full of your cock or should I?" Roarke asks, working his shaft in one hand while he palms her tit in the other.

"Both," Charlie begs, nodding frantically. "I want both of you."

I know it's a biological reaction and not something that she can control, but her pheromones flood the air like she planned to entice them.

Gray growls, low and dangerous. "If you want my cock then beg for it, little one."

Roarke swipes his thumb over the dripping slit on his dick.

Charlie watches hungrily as she begs.

The look on her face is so desperate that *I* develop the irrational urge to climb over, shove Roarke out of the way, and offer up my cock.

“You may have her mouth once I’m inside her,” Gray muses, teasing his fingers over her clit. I can see how slick she is from here. My mouth actually waters.

Charlie whines, her arm flies to cup her middle.

Roarke curses.

“Get inside her or I will,” he snarls.

Gray gives him a dubious look, but still positions his cock, sliding inside her. “That’s it, let me in.”

Charlie falls forward into Roarke’s chest as he chuckles. Her pheromones are flooding the nest, and a growl I’m not expecting rattles out of my chest.

“I need you in my mouth,” Charlie whimpers.

“I think you should let Gray ravage the fuck out of you while I watch,” Roarke says, pinching her left nipple. “I’ll jerk off, and if he’s not knotting you when I’m ready to bust, maybe he’ll let me slide inside you.”

“You want to run a train?” Gray asks, watching where he disappears inside her.

“That is quite the dirty image,” Roarke says, fisting his shaft. “You know that’s the shite my dreams are made of.”

“Deviant,” Gray mutters. “Fuck, little one. Keep tightening up your sweet pussy *just* like that.”

“Yes, I’m obviously the exception to the rule in our pack,” Roarke chuckles.

Charlie sobs something that I can’t make out. Her nails scratch down Roarke’s chest, and he growls in response.

I finally fully stretch out and yank down my sweats. The three of them make for an absolutely delicious image, but mostly, it’s the looks of complete ecstasy on Charlie’s face.

“Holy fucking hell,” Gray snarls. “I need to switch positions. Partially because your slick little cunt was about to embarrass me during our first real time together. Also because I intend to bite you as I come and this position won’t work.”

I'm kind of impressed he's still able to form complete sentences. When her body began to try to milk the cum from my balls, I was barely coherent enough to keep myself upright.

Gray pulls out and tosses himself down. "Climb on!" he barks.

Charlie scrambles to comply.

"No knotting just yet," he says, brushing his fingers over her cheek.

Roarke knee-walks over to their side and begins to tease her tits. I enjoy the show as they bounce. I really wouldn't mind sucking on them myself, but I know this is really the first time Gray has been inside her. He helps her grind over him, and I take it all in. We've finally got our omega. No one will take her from us. There's not a goddamn chance in hell that'll happen.

Charlie whines, her head falling back. It's sexy as hell as her tits bounce and her nipples tighten.

"I'm going to bite you now, little one," Gray says, sitting up and brushing his lips over her neck.

Roarke moves out of the way and continues working his dripping cock. I definitely don't think there's a way Charlie makes it out of this heat without one of us putting a baby in her.

I casually grip my knot in one hand as the other works over the crown. My eyes fly back to my packmates as Charlie freezes. Gray strikes her throat on the right side. Her hair may cover it sometimes when it's down, but it's clear he wanted no doubts that she's claimed.

"Gray," she sobs, wrapping her arms around his back. She's still very much coming. I can feel it in the bond.

"Hold on, little one," he growls, pulling her legs up. Then he flips her until Charlie's once again pinned to the mattress as he powers in and out of her while licking over his bite.

"Fecking hell, that's intense," Roarke groans. He stretches over, running his hand down Charlie's hair. She's so fucking

beautiful with her eyes squeezed shut. I can only see the side of her face, but as her eyes open, she looks at me, and there are tears in the corners.

That's when I stop just watching and crawl over. She extends a hand, and I pull it to my mouth, kissing her palm. My chest radiates with warmth. Our pack is finally complete. Well, until we ensure that Shay has a whole house full of brothers and sisters.

Gray slams into Charlie several more times and groans an obscenely satisfied sound. They share a kiss as he stares into her eyes, and I finally realize the warm feeling is love. I'm not sure if it's purely my emotions toward Charlie or if the bond is blending all of us together.

"I love you," Gray says, swiping his hand over Charlie's cheek. "We're all on the same team now. From here on out, if you have a problem, we all do. You were always meant to be with us. I know it's quick, but—"

"I love you, too," Charlie sobs, pulling his mouth to hers. They kiss as Gray continues to fuck in and out of her.

"Not to be a dick, but yeah, mine is about to explode. I'd really like to spill my load in Charlie's well-used cunt," Roarke growls, thrusting up into his hand.

Gray sighs, pecking a final kiss on Charlie's lips and rolling away. "This is why I didn't knot you on our very first fuck. Because I'm a damn good packmate."

Roarke shoulders Gray further out of the way and kneels between Charlie's spread thighs. "Fecking hell, he filled you right up. Didn't he, love?"

"I love you," Charlie whispers, her eyes clamping closed.

"I love ye, too," Roarke agrees, running the head of his cock through her cum-soaked pussy. "I'd also very much *love* to drill my cum into your cervix and ensure you soak up every drop."

"This is what we're stuck with for life," Gray says, stretching out next to them. "Don't worry. I'll accept him to keep you, little one."

Roarke slams inside her.

Charlie sobs.

“I’m going to make this quick,” Roarke muses. “Don’t want to leave the big guy hanging for too long.”

I give him a nod of appreciation as he pulls Charlie’s left leg up to rest on his shoulder.

My jaw drops.

I didn’t know that was a thing we could do.

Certainly not without helping her stretch first.

Roarke falls atop her and pulls the right leg around his ass. He looks at me and smirks. “Yes, I found this out the other night. I’m not sure if it’s all omegas or just *our* omega, but she’s *very* bendy.”

“Harder,” she demands, clawing at his ass.

“Your wish is my command,” he growls, pushing his mouth to hers.

And that’s exactly what he does. He slams into her so thoroughly that I’m a little worried for her pussy. Heats spur on rutting, though. And she does seem to be really loving it based on the noises she’s making.

Roarke’s muscles bulge as he holds himself up, grinding against her clit. I work myself off with a loose grip. If this is a pack bonding exercise then I’m not going to be the one to fuck it up. It’s real damn hard not to grip my knot and jerk off all over the floor as they both come.

Roarke stares down at her, planting a quick peck on her lips. “You’re up, mate.”

He pulls free of her, and the slick sounds her pussy makes spurs me to crawl a little faster. She’s drenched in their cum. It makes for a tantalizing image.

“I love you, sweet girl,” I tell her, holding myself up on my palms.



“I love you, too, Kolton,” she says, smiling shyly. Her cheeks are pink, but I’m going to guess that’s from all the fucking. I brush my nose against hers as my cock bumps her soft lower stomach.

“I’m going to lock all of our cum inside you,” I growl.

I hold myself up on one palm as I position myself at her opening. There’s no resistance when I push inside her. She stretches around my crown like she was made for me. It’s fucking weird feeling their cum leak out as I power in and out of her. My balls slap against her ass as I watch myself disappear into her tight channel.

I grunt as I thrust the final bit. My knot was already slightly swollen from watching the show they put on.

Charlie thrashes around the bed. Gray and Roarke approach. Each of them take a side and help to tease our omega. The way her body clamps down on my knot makes it hard not to snarl at them and knock them out of the way. But this is Charlie’s heat. It’s not about me.

The milking waves of Charlie’s orgasm trigger my own. I don’t have a chance of holding off as I buck into her, snarling like a damn lunatic.

Her pheromones tinge the air, and the fog creeps in with staggering force.

# Chapter Thirty

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## Charlie

I understand why omegas have such a reputation for being spoiled and demanding. I'm pretty sure I've begged, pleaded, and ordered my alphas around more in the last couple days than I've ever tried to control something or someone in my damn life.

I definitely don't remember it being this bad during the few heats I rode out with Shane. Gray gives me a serious look as I cross my arms over my chest like a petulant teenager.

"I'm not leaving," I tell him, giving him the stink eye. "I love this nest."

Gray stands at the edge of the window nest. He gives me an indulgent grin.

"I know you do," he says, "but you're perfuming again, little one. If Brent wasn't an issue, I'd fuck you here and now. Unfortunately, there's a security team out there somewhere, and what I won't do is risk anyone seeing you . . ."

"We can be so sneaky," I muse, twisting toward him and spreading my thighs. I'm in one of Kolt's T-shirts and nothing else. I'm surprisingly coherent at the moment.

"Charlie," Gray growls.

The sound sends an unmistakable thrill through my entire body. I love the bond. It's incredible, and it gives me insight I normally wouldn't have.

Gray sounds frustrated, but in reality, the bond says he really wants to snap and fuck me through the mattress. He

doesn't give a shit who is or isn't watching. He just wants to claim me.

My finger swirls around my right nipple before I dance my hand down my middle. I'm pretty sure with me facing away from the window, no one would be able to see specifics. If the security guys caught wind of Brent anywhere around, they'd notify us and the police, which means . . .

I pull up the hem of the shirt and spread my knees.

All three of them have done an excellent job of keeping me well-fucked and meeting all my other needs. Gray is big on food. Roarke is an excellent shower partner. Kolton is the absolute best snuggle buddy in the entire world. He's not as cut as Gray or Roarke, but it also means he's softer to lie on. I'm soft, too, so I appreciate it.

I cup my tit with one hand and spread my lower lips with the other. The slightly unhinged look on Gray's face only spurs me on.

"You think this is the way to get what you want?" he asks, leaning against the wall of the hallway that circles the nest.

I shrug. All three of them have been extremely indulgent. I frown. Maybe I'm turning into a spoiled omega? My nipples ache as a wave of heat starts building. I'm probably not helping my system to relax. Okay, I'm definitely not. I circle my clit and slide two fingers down to tease my hole.

"That is quite the tantalizing view." Gray bites his lower lip, grinning wickedly. "When did you become such a brat? Huh?"

"Are you going to make me beg, Grayson?"

"I do love listening to you sob out demands for my cock," he says, sounding quite entertained. "But I think you're playing with fire, little one."

"What?" I ask as Gray hits his knees in front of me. The bench seat for the window nest places me at exactly the perfect height for his warm breath to fan over my inner thigh.

Gray leans forward, giving my clit a teasing, swirling lick. My legs hang over the edge, and my feet hit against the baseboards as I wiggle.

“You think if you push you’ll get your way,” Gray says, slapping my hand away.

I really frown at that. I definitely didn’t mean to upset him or push too hard to get what I want.

“But you might end up learning an important lesson,” Gray continues, shoving two fingers inside me as he teases my clit.

“What’s that?” I ask, trembling in response to the way he works my body.

“That alphas don’t always concede to your demands,” he says, blowing warm breath over my pussy. “You said you were open to me taking your ass. Is that true?”

I freeze. Did I say that? Well, damn. It does sound vaguely familiar. I’m pretty sure I was nice and hazy when he asked.

I nod.

“I haven’t done that in a long time though,” I tell him truthfully.

“I have no problem taking my time,” he says, flicking over my clit with his tongue.

I’m already really slick, but Gray uses that to his advantage. He works me over with two fingers as I hang off the edge of the window nest. Maybe he was right about it being too visible?

My mind wanders as my anticipation and a twinge of worry take over.

“I’ve got you, little one,” Gray says, smiling up at me.

I know he does. Truly I trust Gray not to hurt me. I guess I’m actually rather boring because I wanted a quickie in front of the window and that seemed kind of risky, but now he’s turning this into a whole thing.

Gray continues to tease my pussy, but he doesn’t let me come. Not even once. Every time I get very close, he pulls

back and keeps me right at the edge. Eventually, once I'm so wet it's embarrassing, he uses his other hand to tease my pussy and then he ever so carefully teases that finger into my ass while his original hand goes back to teasing my cunt.

It's a slow process.

I feel like I'll combust if he doesn't stop teasing and tormenting me, but I do appreciate that he's taking time to prep me. Once he's got two fingers in my ass and is able to scissor them without any discomfort, he pulls me up off the nest mattress.

"Kneel with your elbows on the cushion," he says, shoving his tongue in my mouth. The kiss is frantic as I wiggle, desperate for friction on my clit.

We pull apart, and I whine in response. He helps me kneel on the floor with my arms on the bench of the window nest.

"Goddamn, you have no idea how badly I want to feel you come around my cock," Gray growls, licking over my neck. He shoves his cock inside my pussy and thrusts several deep pounding movements that nearly send me over the edge.

As quickly as he entered me, he pulls out again, and this time, I feel his tip press against my ass.

"No, little one," Gray says, running a hand over my hip and the other over my clit. "Don't hold your breath. Breathe in for me."

I listen and he pushes inside me. My hands slide around the cushion as I look for something to hold onto. It's painful, but not completely unmanageable. Within seconds, he's gently moving deeper inside me, and I realize I don't hate it.

"Are ye in her ass?" Roarke asks, squatting down next to us.

"I sure fucking am," Gray replies sounding winded.

"Well then, let me assist," Roarke says, pulling my mouth to his. When he yanks on my hair, my ass contracts around Gray involuntarily.

“Goddamn,” Gray snarls. “Right, you think you can fuck her if we’re both kneeling?”

“I think I’d love to find out,” Roarke says, pulling his T-shirt off and tossing it behind him. He crawls over, puts his hands on my hips, and lifts me slightly to face him. “You look wrecked.”

“I’m good,” I assure him, leaning up to brush my lips over his cheek.

“I’m not sure kneeling is going to work,” Roarke says, laughing. “We have a perfectly comfortable nest, and we’re fucking on the hall floor near the window. Let me slide my legs between yours. She can ride me while you fuck her.”

“Fine,” Gray grumbles. Between the two of them, the repositioning takes a bit of work, but we manage. Gray finally completely pulls out of me and helps me to slide down Roarke’s length. “Down on his chest.”

I scramble to obey, tossing myself down on Roarke’s chest. He jumps inside me, and I get a little self-conscious that I’m pretty sure I’m dripping all over him.

The thought doesn’t last long as Gray gently teases his way back inside my bottom. His hands grip my hips, pulling my cheeks apart as he works in and out slowly. The result is crazy as he pulls them forward and down. It makes it feel like he’s using my body to massage Roarke’s cock. Well, and his too once he gets further inside me.

“You’re pretty well stuffed,” Kolt says, appearing from nowhere. He grins. It’s a playful smile that sends my pheromones flooding the air.

I nod to the bench at my left. “Have a seat, and maybe if it’s the right height . . .”

Roarke teases my clit relentlessly. It’s hard to focus on any one thing for long.

“I can do that,” Kolt muses, stepping around the three of us. It’s not easy, but he gets to the seat.

Roarke bucks up into me from below. “It’s an unbelievably tight fit,” he muses.

“In-fucking-deed,” Gray growls.

“Are you going to service all three of your alphas at once, love?” Roarke asks, giving me a dangerous smirk. “Or perhaps it’s us who are servicing you?” His long blond hair falls around him, and he’s just incredibly freaking hot.

I stretch forward, kissing the hell out of him.

Roarke gently pushes me up. “You can’t tease the man with a blow job and then get distracted. Don’t worry, mate. I’ve got you.” He chuckles, giving my chin a soft shove in Kolt’s direction.

Kolt’s thick cock is only inches from my mouth as I attack it hungrily. I’m insanely aroused, but not completely lost to the fog. Kolt’s salty taste hits my tongue. I wish I could suck him deeper, but in reality, I’m probably not even taking half his dick.

“That’s it, beautiful girl,” Kolt growls, palming my head. “Suck me *just* like that.”

Gray continues to work in and out of my ass.

“Goddamn, love,” Roarke groans. “You’re dripping all over me. Such a good girl, taking every inch of your alpha’s cock.”

Gray growls, “It’s almost too much when you clench.” His forehead rests on my shoulder as his chest heaves.

Roarke runs his fingers over my clit as he continues to coo soft praises that make my insides light up.

Kolt wraps his hand around his knot. It’s hard to make eye contact, but I finally manage it. He’s just so damn big. He’s purring and it makes me melty inside. My gentle giant winks, running his other hand over my hair.

I let myself focus on trying to swallow more of his gigantic shaft.



The fog slowly creeps back in, and I let myself get lost to the sensations and pure freaking bliss as my alphas service the hell out of me.

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The next several days are filled with waves of my heat. I compulsively nest until the guys demand I let them turn on the ventilation system.

“It’s getting a little ripe in here,” Roarke says, chuckling. “It smells like my laundry basket after the gym.” He frowns, then cracks up laughing. “Or possibly when I was a teenager.”

I squint because I’m not sure I get that joke.

“Shayley has been asking for you,” Kolt says, leaning in the doorway of the nest. “Gayle has kept her busy and she’s more than happy to keep her an extra night or two, but if you’re a little clearer . . .”

“Yes,” I agree, nodding wildly. I’ve been pretty out of it, but I am feeling more coherent finally. “I’d love to see her, but I’m a little anxious what happens if another wave hits.”

“Then one of us will distract her and my mom will take her back for another night,” Gray says, appearing at Kolt’s side. “It’s not an exact science, but you’ve got the three of us to help you manage.”

“Thank you,” I say, pushing myself up and heading to hug him.

“Always,” he says, kissing my temple. “But let’s get you a shower first.”

Kolt laughs and Roarke joins him.

“Hey, if I smell like sex then the three of you do, too,” I grumble.

“I don’t think we’d mind a group shower,” Roarke says, coming to join us. “Not a bit.” He scoops me up, heading off, and I grin at Kolt over his shoulder.

“I love you,” the big guy mouths.

I smile, shaking my head and mouth the words back.

# Chapter Thirty-One

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## Roarke

The four of us share a tantalizing shower to ensure we don't smell like dirty sex. We get very naughty in the shower, but we're all adults, and after that, we keep to snuggles and kisses.

It's been six days of heat sex, but even now, it's not a sure thing that additional waves won't hit. It's to be expected. Jess mentioned it would likely be worse since Charlie was on suppressants for so long.

All three of us have snuck over to see Shayley during the last few days. Charlie had short spurts of coherence, but for the most part, she's been well and truly lost to the fog. Luckily, Gray's family is close by and is used to dealing with heats. Both Gray's sisters are omegas, and it's clear Gayle is happy to keep Shay as long as necessary.

She brings Shayley over for dinner, and the little terror falls asleep in Kolt's lap before dessert. We're having a bit of a late dinner at nearly seven thirty, but usually, she holds on until at least eight thirty or nine p.m. before going to bed.

"We had a busy day," Gayle says, grinning over at Shay. "I worked at the daycare this morning. Then Shay and I spent a few hours shopping. Have you met Jones? He's a lovely young man. Carried our bags around the mall and didn't complain once."

"Jones?" Charlie asks, scooting closer to Kolt's side. He immediately stretches his free hand over the back of her chair, so she can snuggle into his chest and be closer to Shay.

“The private security,” Gray reminds her. “Although, to be fair, he definitely went above and beyond his job description if you dragged him around the mall carrying your purchases.”

“Nonsense,” Gayle chuckles. “I’ve been bringing night shift dinner for days, and the day shift gets lunch when I’m not working.”

“Always so pushy,” Gray says, shaking his head.

“That’s just Gayle for you,” I say, pushing my plate away. “Are we keeping the little one?”

Charlie nods before catching herself. Her eyes dart around the table like she’s looking for guidance on what to do in this situation.

“Have the cramps started yet?” Gayle asks, ignoring the rest of us and staring straight at Charlie. “That’s usually a pretty good indicator that the end is coming.”

“No, not yet,” Charlie says, blinking repeatedly. “Oh man, it’s been so long I forgot all about those.”

“I’ve been here close to an hour and you’re still settled,” Gayle says in a tone that indicates she’s quite excited about something but attempting not to show it.

“Mom,” Gray says, sighing heavily.

“It was just an observation,” Gayle says, leaning forward. The wide smile that crosses her face makes me mildly suspicious. “Are you going to keep Shayley?”

“Yeah, we’ll manage,” Kolt says, grinning down at the drooling toddler.

“Call if you need me,” Gayle says, pushing up from the table and bolting for the door. “Or just ring the doorbell and wake up your fathers.”

“That’s not suspicious at all,” I muse, laughing and trying to figure out why the hell she’s suddenly so damn thrilled.

The front door closes.

Gray frowns. “I need to text my dads. She really shouldn’t be running back and forth without an escort.”

“The security team is out there, but I agree,” Kolt says, teasing a hand through Charlie’s hair.

“I’ll bet she’s already on the phone with my sisters,” Gray says, laughing.

“All right, I’m feeling like I’ve missed something important. Would someone mind filling me in?” I glance around.

Gray is typing away on his phone. Kolt looks downright peaceful holding both of our girls close. Charlie is the only odd one out. She looks a bit like she’s trying to compute a difficult math problem. I glance between the three of them again, but no one speaks.

I pull my phone off the table and ask the almighty search engines what it means when an omega doesn’t have cramps following a heat.

“Holy shite,” I hiss, dropping my phone on the table. “You could be pregnant?”

“There’s no way to be sure,” Charlie says, stretching a hand out to squeeze my thigh. “I remember when I found out I was pregnant with Shay, the doctor couldn’t confirm it immediately.”

“Wait, isn’t that what not getting the cramps means?” I ask. “And what a terrible indicator, by the way.”

“If they don’t start sometime soon then I’ll take a test in three or four weeks,” Charlie says, grimacing.

“Are ye upset?” I ask, studying her carefully.

“No,” she replies. “It’s just quick, but I also know Shay would be closer to four even if I was pregnant right now. I always wanted her to have siblings close in age. It was so hard when my mom died and I was all alone.”

“It’s not a sure thing,” Kolt says soothingly. “My motto is let’s see what happens. If so, that’s great. If not, we’ll handle it as it comes.”

“Okay,” Charlie agrees.

“I’m going to carry Shay up and get her settled in bed,” Kolt says.

“I’ll lock up and set the alarm,” Gray says.

“I’ll take our omega up and pamper her then,” I reply, standing up and pulling Charlie out of her seat.

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Charlie doesn’t feel comfortable being in the nest. I think the bed in the master bedroom is the maximum distance from Shay.

Charlie wakes me up in the middle of the night. Initially I think it’s for another wave of her heat, but she doesn’t seem interested in my cock.

“What’s the matter, love?” I ask, brushing my fingers over her cheek. Once I’m awake enough to focus fully on the bond, I’m hit with a dizzying wave of pain that makes me groan.

“Could you grab me . . .” She frowns. “Maybe a towel you don’t care about. I think it’s safe to say the cramps have started.”

I’ve never put much effort into anything in my life, but goddamn, I put every ounce of determination I have into not letting my disappointment spill through the bond.

It’s not a bad thing at all.

It simply means we get more time to practice and the opportunity to help Charlie feel more secure in her place here.

I hop up and head to grab a towel.

I’ve no idea if they’re important.

They all look the same to me.

Similar to how I wrapped up Shay on our introduction in the hotel, I bundle up Charlie and carry her to the bathroom.

She looks more than a bit miserable.

“I’ll grab you clothes, and I believe you’ll find the cabinets stocked with necessities,” I assure her.

“Thank you,” she says.

I head off and gather her several options for clothing. I’m surprised to find Charlie in the shower by the time I make it back into the bathroom. Her pain radiates in the bond with staggering force.

The universe or biology felt like showing its ass the day they decided women should feel this agony on a regular basis. I strip down and climb into the shower to take care of my omega.

“Oh, no way. I’m gross,” she groans, clutching at her middle and spinning away from me.

“None of that,” I growl, wrapping my arms around her. “If I get to enjoy the benefits of heat sex then I can definitely handle the aftercare required to take care of my omega.”

“You’ve been warned,” Charlie grumbles.

“Indeed,” I muse, rubbing my hands over her shoulders and down her arms.

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We hunker down for the next few days. Gray and Kolt take turns going into the resort to check on things and handle a few requirements.

Charlie, Shay, and I stay in the house. Shayley is doing fairly well on potty training. The grumpy child still never looks excited to see me when she wakes up, but I’m pretty sure I’m slowly winning her over.

*Maybe.*

It’s late in the afternoon.

Charlie and I are lounging on the couch with the tele playing in the background when Shay comes over.

“Up, mister,” she says, climbing close to my other side.



I chuckle because she's exceptionally cute with very little effort. I know she likes to lie on my side while I purr, so I toss my arm over the couch. She picks at my shirt, snuggling close and watching the television.

It doesn't take long before she nods off. She's a very good kid. I'm not sure what all toddlers act like, but in all truthfulness, she's a damn dream.

"You doing okay over here?" I ask, sliding my hand down Charlie's hip on my other side.

"Yeah," she agrees. "I do think I'm finally starting to feel better."

"Are you disappointed?" I ask. I'm not sure if that's the right emotion that I'm picking out in the bond, but it does feel like it.

"Not disappointed exactly," she hedges, shrugging. Her hand comes to rest on my purring chest.

I don't often think about Shay's dad, but I do wish I could've met the bloke. Both of his girls are cuddled close to my side. It's a strange feeling. When I got blown to hell overseas and then came back only to lose my mam . . .

It was an ugly time.

I didn't have much to live for.

I had my own fair share of survivor's guilt.

It's hard to feel that way with regards to Shane because I never met the man, but I agree with Charlie.

I think we would have gotten on well together.

I'm sad he'll never get to see his daughter grow up or spend a lifetime loving Charlie.

That thought smacks me right in the gut.

I've put off growing up. Some of it is that my damage is ugly.

It was easier to ignore it rather than face it.

The irresponsible fuck-up who puts off dealing with trauma is a thing of the past.

I intend to be the man Shayley and Charlie need me to be.

“I think I was a little excited,” Charlie whispers, stopping her pattern over my chest. “It’s silly—”

“It’s not,” I assure her, kissing her forehead. “But we might just make sure you miss your appointment for your next shot.”

“You’re bad,” she says, leaning up and kissing the edge of my mouth.

“For you, love? Always,” I murmur against her lips.

And I well and truly fucking mean it. I intend to always be at her side from here on out.

# Chapter Thirty-Two

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## Charlie

Things go back to normal after my heat finishes.

The guys have a meeting with their lawyer this morning that I'm pretty sure is about me. I try not to let it bother me that I'm not included in the discussion, but I also kind of don't want to be.

The security guys' last day was yesterday. We haven't seen or heard from Brent. The fact Gray's family is right across the cul-de-sac does help to put my mind at ease a little.

Shayley is playing in the living room, and I'm finishing up the dishes from breakfast. The guys spoiled me rotten through my entire heat, so I got up early to feed them before they had to head out. I know Kolt is planning to swing back by to check-in before he heads to the resort.

Gayle is supposed to be coming over anytime to take us to the grocery store. I know she was bummed to learn we wouldn't be adding to our pack. At least not this heat, but she did an excellent job of talking up the benefits of having extra time to prepare.

She's a very sweet woman.

All of Gray's family accepted me and Shay from our very first introduction. It's completely opposite of the rude awakening I got with Shane's family, but he was always honest about the reasons why he distanced himself from them.

I guess I just thought, what woman wouldn't want to meet her grandchild? I'm scrubbing the hell out of the bacon pan and lamenting the fact I forgot how much I dislike dishes

when Motley gets up and meanders outside through her doggy door.

Gray's right. She's a hairy beast of a dog, but she's a great family pet. Motley is patient with Shay, and it's crazy how she keeps an eye on her. The other day Shay went to find Roarke, but she missed the door to the gym and was about to head into the garage.

Motley stood in front of it and wouldn't let her pass. We didn't have a dog when I was growing up. I never realized how ridiculously smart and attentive the right breed could be.

Someone knocks and the alarm system beeps as the door opens. It was locked, but I know Gayle has a key.

I quickly finish up as Gayle comes around the corner into the living room.

"Ayle!" Shay squeals.

Motley bounds through the doggy door to check things out, but her demeanor instantly changes upon seeing Gray's mom. Her entire body starts to wag as she comes closer for scratches.

"Ready to grab some groceries?" she asks, scooping up Shay and turning to face me.

"Absolutely," I agree.

---

Gayle really is awesome company. It's hard not to miss my mom when I spend time with her. The grocery store she takes us to is one of those upscale markets with tons of organic food.

I have sticker shock checking out the prices, but I have Gray's credit card and a list he made of a few things he hoped I'd grab. I have to take a few breaths when I realize how much a couple of the items cost.

Shay and I rarely ate out before Brent and I moved in together. After, I still cooked, it was just the things he asked

for. I'm not a chef, but I know how to make casseroles or meat and potatoes.

Seriously though, some of the meals he asked me to get ingredients for cost more than I normally spent on an entire week's worth of groceries.

Gayle pushes Shay in her buggy, and at some point during my trip down the frozen foods aisle, we get separated. I'm bent over, digging out frozen fruit that someone apparently uses for smoothies, when a loud clanging catches my attention.

I jump, dropping the frozen bag of strawberries. My head whips around, and I'm pretty much trapped inside the open freezer door.

The night receptionist has her cart bumping into mine and mine is now completely blocking my path. I frown, trying to figure out what the hell is happening.

"Lori?" I ask, running my hands over my arms.

I've never been introduced to her, but I do recognize her from my time at the resort.

"I guess you got what you wanted," she says, glaring at me. "It's too bad they couldn't see who you really are before you managed to trap them for life."

I blink like a deer frozen in headlights. I've never had someone I don't even know single me out in an act of aggression or confrontation.

I can't push the heavy cart forward because the freezer door blocks it. Instead, I lean back into the cold storage area and slide the cart to the other side.

Lori's hands tighten on the handle of her cart, and for a second I think she might ram it into me. I've heard the guys talk. I know she had or has a crush on Kolt.

I'm also kind of appalled that an adult thinks this type of situation is acceptable.

I glance both ways, hoping Gayle will appear, but it doesn't seem likely. There aren't any other shoppers around either.

“The truth will come out about who you really are,” she snaps, stabbing a finger at me.

My mouth opens, but no words come out. I’m not great with confrontation, but I’m also an adult, and I don’t know that anything can be gained from trying to defend myself to the obviously heartbroken woman.

“I’m sorry,” I say, sliding down the edge of my cart until I can grab the handle. “We don’t know each other. We haven’t said a word to one another before now, and you think it’s okay to act this way?”

My hands shake as I pull the cart in reverse. I’m actually starting to move from shocked into anger, but I don’t think snapping at her would help.

“He said you’re a master manipulator,” Lori says, chuckling derisively. “Yeah, I see it.”

My shoulders tense as I turn the buggy so I can get the hell away from her.

She’s obviously talking about Brent. The guys mentioned how Roarke saw her with him. I look back to make sure she isn’t following and head off at a rapid pace.

I catch up with Gayle and Shay in the deli. It quickly becomes clear that she shopped for my kid while we were separated.

We spend the rest of the trip through the store sticking close together. I don’t mention Lori. I’m still mulling over that entire exchange in my head.

I’m kind of hurt that she thinks so lowly of me. Although I can recognize that she doesn’t know me well enough to make an accurate judgment, it still hurts. I know my guys settled to be with me.

I guess it’s just embarrassing to realize other people recognize that fact, too. How she treated me and talked to me is exactly how Shane’s family and friends acted toward me once he was gone.

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Gayle drops us off at home. She helps tote everything in before saying her goodbyes. Shayley runs into the living room and starts pulling goodies out of her toy box.

I'm still mulling through the Lori situation and finishing putting away the groceries when the doorbell rings.

I frown, glancing over my shoulder as I shove several packages of meat haphazardly into the refrigerator.

"Ayle," Shay yells, running out of the living room. The alarm system beeps signaling that the door has been opened and my heart stalls.

"Get back here," I hiss, coming around the corner from the kitchen into the formal entryway.

I trip over my own feet, stumbling forward several steps.

"No," Shay says, kicking and fighting as Brent lifts her into his arms.

"Brent," I say, slowly moving forward. I want to run in the opposite direction, but the only thing in the world that could force me to him *is currently being held to his chest*.

"Hey, Charlie," he says, grinning predatorily. "Come on out and join the party."

"Put her down," I beg as my arm wraps protectively around my middle.

The thought of getting any closer to him sends a wave of revulsion through my system.

He takes a few large steps back.

I realize pretty quickly that he's luring me outside, but I'm out of options.

"What is it that you want?" I ask, holding my hands up in front of me. "It's okay, Shay. Everything is fine."



She's crying and wiggling like she always does when she wants to be put down. Brent puts his hand over her mouth, I'm guessing to muffle her screams, and fury pounds through my system.

"What do I want?" Brent laughs. "The same thing I've *always* wanted—you."

"Okay," I agree, slowly hedging my way forward. "I'll come out if you put her back inside and close the door."

It's not ideal, but at this point, I know someone will stumble across her in a few hours at most. That has to be better than being trapped with Brent when he's finally gone off the deep end . . . right?

I have no idea. I'm terrified of making a bad call, but I do know that I can't fight him if he's using her to keep me in line.

I'm also pretty sure I watched a how to survive a kidnapping video, and one of the first rules was: don't allow yourself to be taken to a second location.

That means once I get outside, I have to fight.

Brent wraps an arm back, and when he pulls his hand to face me, there's a gun.

"I don't want her. I never wanted her," he snarls. "I'll have you one way or the other."

My hands are still up with my palms facing him. "I won't fight. Let her back inside."

He's standing under the covered walkway that leads up to the front door. He waves the gun indicating that I should come outside. I do, and he slides back against the wall as I pass.

Brent had to remove his hand from Shay's mouth to grab the gun, and she screams bloody murder when he puts her inside and closes the door. He keeps the gun pointed at me through the entire experience.

I stare, praying that she can't get the door open.

"Head for my car," he instructs. "You highly underestimate what I'll do to keep you. Shane tried to force us apart, and

look what happened to him.”

“What?” I snarl, turning back around.

Brent gives me a condescending look like I’m stupid.

“He didn’t want to share.” He shrugs. “Not with me. I had no choice but to make sure he could no longer stand in our way. Keep walking, Charlie.”

Shayley is banging on the door and my heart throbs. She’s screaming and crying, but all my brain can seem to process is what Brent just said.

“You had something do with the robbery?” I sob, my hand flying to my mouth.

“The robbery . . .” Brent chuckles. It’s a vile sound that makes me want to claw his eyes out. “Was a very convenient excuse. He was so predictable with his habits.”

My head shakes violently as I lean against the wall for support. Everything is hazy and I feel like this isn’t real. There’s no possibility this is reality. My brain can’t even process that there’s a sliver of a chance he could have had something to do with Shane’s murder.

Brent grabs my arm and tries to guide me down toward his car. He steps out from the wall to the garage and something slams into him.

The brick that lines the edge of the garage scrapes against my cheek and arm.

I stumble trying to right myself as Brent hits the ground hard.

He screams. It’s an agonizing sound.

Motley viciously attacks Brent’s arm and shoulder. She snarls. I spot the gun a few feet away, and even though I’m a little intimidated by Motley in her current state, I still slide up behind her. Her head tilts as she growls, but I know she’s not a threat to me. I think she’s just checking to make sure I’m not another bad guy.

Brent punches and eventually tries to roll over. I grab the gun, but I don't have the first clue how to use it. I do briefly consider attempting to learn. He needs to die. I honestly don't know what to believe. I don't want to think it's possible he killed Shane or hired someone to do it, but I guess maybe?

My hand shakes as I point the gun at Brent, but Motley is all over him. I can't hurt her, even to end him.

"Charlie?" Gray's voice shocks the hell out of me.

I spin around, but he's not there.

"The police are on their way," Gray says.

I notice the doorbell camera light up the way it does when someone's speaking through the intercom.

"We're coming too, sweet girl. Go back inside," Gray instructs in a firm, but tender tone.

I glance back at Brent, and Motley is standing on his back. She's not attacking unless he moves, but there's blood all over Brent's side and arm, also his neck and back, too.

He's got his face buried in the grass as he starts to try to army crawl away.

"Charlie? It's Kolt. We're unlocking the door. We locked it remotely once Shay was inside. Go on in. Motley will keep him busy."

I look back at Brent and to the door. I'm still holding the gun, but I know I have to get myself together to check on my kid. Sirens fill the air as I stagger back toward the house. I think I'm in shock. My chest rises and falls in rapid movements, but I swear there's no oxygen in the air.

I stumble up the sidewalk and gently push inside. Shay is right inside. I open the top drawer of the massive sideboard cabinet and set the gun in it as Shay tries to climb my legs.

"We're okay," I tell her, picking her up. I peek out the window and almost have a heart attack. The cops have their guns drawn and pointed at Brent and Motley.

I stumble over to the door and yank it open.

“Motley,” I call. “Ohmigod, do *not* hurt her.” I slap my free thigh and call for her repeatedly. She doesn’t immediately respond like she would for Kolt. He’s said before that she’s trained to disregard commands from anyone who isn’t him. It’s part of why he had me and Shay practice bossing her around one night out in the yard. I thought it was silly at the time.

My head shakes as I sob. “Motley, come on!”

She glances back at me then snarls at Brent. She spins around and runs into the house. I slam the door and slide down it while I cradle Shay to my chest.

Motley immediately paces the area and comes back to my side.

“I love you,” Shay says, cuddling her face to my neck.

“I love you, too,” I whisper. “Are you okay?”

“That scare me,” she says. Her breathing hitches, but she seems to be at least reasonably okay. All things considered.

“Thank you,” I sob, stretching a hand out to Motley. I honestly have no idea how she got out. The fence around the backyard is six feet tall. “You deserve a steak for dinner.”

Motley nuzzles her nose to Shay’s shoulder and then her ears perk up. They almost always lie down in a floppy way. She immediately runs off, and I hear her growl low and dangerous before Kolt calls out, “No, all good.”

There’s some commotion and then I spot him.

“Charlie?” he yells, making his way around the corner from the kitchen.

Gray and Roarke follow him in along with two officers. Motley runs to me and Shay and stands between us, growling like she can’t decide if she’s letting them get close.

“Hey, it’s okay. You did so good,” Kolt says, falling to his knees and nuzzling his face to hers. Motley still looks on edge as she paces around.

Kolt knee-walks over to us and Shay chucks herself at him.

“Oh, ladybug,” he says, wrapping his arm around her back. “Come on.” He stretches his other arm, and much like my kid, I throw myself at him.

“Come on, mongrel,” Gray says, squatting down next to Motley. She glances at him, but still watches the two officers. “I’m going to put her in one of the rooms.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Roarke says. “She’s still got blood on her muzzle.”

“Ohmigod,” I sob, burying my face in Kolt’s neck.

“I’ve got you,” he assures me.

“Did you hear what he said?” I whisper, clutching at Kolt’s strong form.

“We did,” Roarke says, coming to squat at our side. “We’ve got it on recording, too. God, Charlie . . .” He cuddles close, running a hand over Shay’s back. “I love you both.”

“I don’t like it . . .” Shay says, pointing to the door. “That.”

“He won’t bother us again,” Kolt says, nuzzling his cheek to the top of her head.

# Chapter Thirty-Three

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## Grayson

I guide Motley into the downstairs guest bedroom, and she gives a considerable amount of trouble, trying to run back out as I close the door. She whines for three seconds before I hear her nails scraping over the blinds. We'll likely need to replace those, but it's not even a minor concern in my mind.

I owe both Kolton and the mutt a heartfelt apology for all the times I've grumbled about her. I swipe a hand over my face and square my shoulders.

Charlie finally has answers about what happened to Shane. If Brent fucking Robinson can be believed. That piece of shit deserves to rot in jail at the very least. The hurt and heartbreak he's put Charlie through will begin again if his words were truthful.

I stomp down the hallway and out to check on my pack. The four of them are cuddled together on the floor just inside the entryway.

The police officers are watching with wide eyes. Our sleepy mountain town rarely has this level of insanity occur. They talk with their heads together. The stress is just beginning. They'll need statements, and I'm sure Charlie and Shay need to go to the hospital to be checked out.

"We were told there's a gun?" one of the officers says, taking a step toward me.

I quickly head over to speak to Charlie. She tosses herself at me. I stand with her wrapped around my torso. I'm so

fucking grateful that she and Shay are okay.

“Where’s the gun?” I ask, running my hand over her cheek.

Charlie nods to the giant sideboard cabinet.

The officers split up. One begins opening drawers while the other heads to the front door.

“Gray,” Thomas Wahler calls through the open door.

Damn, he got here quickly. Then again, the guys and I were in his office having pack paperwork drawn up when I got the notification on my phone about the alarm being activated.

Which lead to me immediately pulling up the outdoor cameras and the audio. Wahler called 911 while we ran the hell out of his office.

Roarke carefully maneuvered us home, ensuring the eight-minute drive took half that.

“Are they all right?” Wahler asks, stepping inside.

“Hardly,” Roarke snaps.

At the same time Charlie says, “We’re okay.”

“I told the chief they want medical attention prior to answering any questions,” Wahler says, loosening his tie. “This is terrible circumstances to be meeting under, but I’m going to make sure they handle everything the right way.”

“Thank you,” Kolt replies. He’s rocking Shay against his chest, and I think there are tears in his eyes as he glances at Charlie.

“Damn good thing you kept up Motley’s training,” Wahler says, glancing at the cops with disdain. It’s no secret that he’s had it out for the entire department since that disaster happened to his younger brother Timmy.

“I love you,” Charlie whimpers, trembling against my chest.

“I love you, too.” I nuzzle my cheek to the top of her head and try my damndest to purr.



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The officers ask Charlie several questions, but Wahler explains we've got everything on tape.

They'll still need to get Charlie's full statement, but it can wait until both she and Shayley receive medical attention. Kolt brings Motley to my parents' house.

They desperately want to see Charlie and Shayley, but they understand that now isn't the time.

The remainder of the day is spent getting Charlie and Shayley checked out at the hospital down the mountain. They're okay, but the doctor highly recommends counseling for both of them.

I text Calvin asking for the name of a child psychologist in the area, and he assures us he'll have a list within a day or two.

Shayley seems to be okay, but only time will tell.

By the time we make it back to the area, the police are gone. The front yard is currently a crime scene, so we opt to stay at the resort.

Wahler texts to let me know they'd like to speak to Charlie in the morning, and he assures us that he'll sit in on the meeting.

I vaguely wonder if he's the right person for the job until I remember that he did criminal defense for years before moving into litigation.

Charlie is quiet even after we make it into our room at the resort. It's late in the evening and none of us have eaten.

My mom brings Motley over. She has a pan of lasagna and a giant bowl of Caesar salad that she drops off before heading out.

Charlie thanks her, but it's clear she's still quite dazed. The bond is utterly useless to decipher anything. I know she can't fully block her feelings, but all I can pick up is numbness. I'm

not sure if it's a defense mechanism or what, but it's extremely concerning.

Shay eats well at dinner, although the rest of us mostly pick at it. Which is one step above Charlie.

After dinner, Kolt takes Shay to get her ready for bed. Charlie protests, but I pull her into my lap.

"I need you to eat at least something," I tell her, staring into her eyes.

Charlie opens her mouth to complain, and I give her backside a soft smack. "Trust your pack to look after both of you. Please, little one? Don't shut us out right now."

She frowns but nods her agreement. I pull her full plate over, and she opens her mouth for a bite of lasagna.

I grab her sweet tea and offer her a drink.

It's a slow process, but eventually she eats enough that I feel satisfied she's got something in her system. She lies her head on my chest and simply breathes. I wait a little and then a bit longer, but she doesn't say anything.

"What can I do to help you?" I ask, palming the back of her head.

"I'm okay. Really, Gray," she says, running her fingers over my chest. "I can't decide if I believe him. I think . . . It's so much worse if he did it. You know?"

"Shit." My chest rises and falls as I sigh. I haven't the first idea how to fix this for her.

"I think I need to keep Shayley close tonight," Charlie says, stretching out a hand to scratch Motley's head.

"How about we all snuggle up together? I know we're all going to need to stay close tonight and the room has a nest."

We do keep a suite at the resort for when the snow is bad and driving home is a pain in the ass. Luckily it's equipped with a nest, and the bedroom I usually sleep in is the master, so it's easy enough to put us all together.

"Yeah," she agrees. "I really do love you, Gray."

“Oh, little one,” I murmur, pushing out of the chair. “I love you.”

We all spend the night cuddled close to our omega. Shayley sleeps in the nest and Motley stays close, too.

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The next morning Roarke and I have to be escorted into the house to pick up clothing and other belongings, which is insane because he barely stepped a foot inside. Other than the gun being in the house, the crime occurred outside.

It’s technically considered a crime scene and none of us argue the point.

The few days that follow are insanely busy as Charlie gives multiple statements to the police and has more than one emergency session with Calvin that lasts hours. The only plus side is that she can walk right up to our suite following an appointment.

The pediatric trauma counselor Calvin recommends is only a half an hour drive.

Charlie and I bring Shayley for her first visit. We’re allowed to sit in the room and supervise the introductory session, although we both stay back to ensure the counselor can properly do her job.

She recommends additional visits over a period of the next three to six months to see how Shayley copes before evaluating and going from there.

We’ve got a list of behaviors and signs to watch out for, and Shayley’s next appointment is scheduled by the time we walk out of the pediatric practice.

Brent immediately lawyered up, but he’s looking at attempted kidnapping and a slew of other charges that, according to Wahler, are more severe and hold a longer penalty because Shayley was involved. He’ll see jail time here in Colorado no matter what.

When the judge denies bail, we all breathe a sigh of relief.

Wahler informs us that with the new information on Shane's murder, the police department in Florida will be taking another look at the case with the added perspective that Brent could be responsible.

Kolt also reaches out to the same military buddy that got us the initial information on Shane's case. I have no idea what he might be able to add, but none of us are willing to turn down extra help.

Charlie draws into herself for a few agonizing days. She's set to see Calvin again in the morning, but she's a mess in the bond.

The only reason I'm not totally losing my shit is that she hasn't pushed us away. She showers regularly with Roarke, and unless she's playing with Shayley, she cuddles up with Kolt. She allows me to feed her and dress her—to look after her basic needs that she's been neglecting a bit.

It's hard not to wish I could completely read her thoughts in the bond. Feelings and impressions are great to a point, but they leave a lot to be desired when trying to figure out where her head is at.

I know it's in my nature to hover and try to fix things, but everything in my gut tells me this is something Charlie has to mentally work through on her own.

It goes against every impulse in my system, but I don't push or try to force her to talk *to me*. I can understand that she needs to emotionally work through some of her thoughts with Calvin first. I still can't manage to be physically very far from her, but I am trying to grow as a person.

What I want isn't nearly as important as what Charlie needs, so I do my best to care for her in the ways she's okay with right now, and we're all very clear we're here for whatever she needs, whenever she needs it.

# Chapter Thirty-Four

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## Charlie

The next morning I wake up tired. My entire body feels like I got hit by a delivery truck. I think it's from all the stress. More than anything, I'm frustrated, both with myself and the entire situation.

Roarke accompanies me to Calvin's office and tenderly pulls me into his chest. "I love you," he murmurs, nuzzling our noses together.

"I know," I tell him, giving him a soft smile. "And I love you, too."

"Good," he says, squeezing my ass. "Do you want me to stick around while you're in there?"

"No." I give him a final peck on the lips. "I think I'll be okay."

"Fair enough. Call me if you need me." He kisses me absolutely senseless and heads off.

My appointment this morning is really early since Calvin is fitting me in on a day he wouldn't normally be at the resort.

Our session goes pretty smoothly until he says, "There's a possibility you'll never know what happened. You've been living with that unknown factor for three years. Will knowing give you any real peace?"

I mull that over for more than a few minutes before responding. Even after our session is over it still sticks with me.

I'm headed toward the stables to find Kolt when Lori comes out of the small café on the first floor. With everything else going on, I'd actually forgotten about the crap that happened in the grocery store.

I don't say anything on my way to the barn doors.

"Could I talk to you for a second?" Lori asks, following me relentlessly.

"No," I say, spinning back around. If my time with Calvin has taught me anything, it's that I don't have to subject myself to toxic people and unhealthy situations. "Not if you're going to speak to me the way you did last time."

Lori sighs, shaking her head. "I wanted to apologize. The way I acted the other day and the things I said . . ." She frowns. "Why haven't they fired me yet?"

Now it's my turn to frown.

I'm pretty sure even if I'd mentioned what happened between us, that wouldn't be grounds to fire her. From what I've heard, she's good at her job.

It's just me she has a major problem with.

"You don't need to worry about your job," I say, turning to head outside. "Not because of me anyway."

"You didn't tell them?"

"No, I've had . . ." I pause because I know she's heard about Brent. Everyone in the entire resort has heard about it. "Other stuff going on."

"I really am sorry about that," Lori says. "I know it doesn't mean much now, but I am remorseful. I think I let myself believe him because I was heartbroken."

I freeze because that sounds *very* familiar. I fell into the same trap with Brent.

Part of the curse of being an omega is that I can feel her sincerity or, at the very least, the echoing pain that radiates when she thinks about whatever the hell it is she's thinking about.

“That’s how Brent operates. Try not to beat yourself up too badly,” I tell her, giving her a tight smile.

“I just . . .” Lori steps in front of me from where she stood at my side. “I think he did that with a lot of people. Told them that you used your daughter’s father. I don’t know if you knew that. He definitely was dead set on turning me against you. Not that it took much. I don’t know. Shit, I’m trying to make amends, and I don’t think it’s working.”

“He told who that I was using Shane?” I gasp, carefully studying her face.

“Friends, coworkers, family . . .” She shrugs. “I don’t know, he just rambled about how he was the only one who stuck by your side, but after all of that shit he did, I realize it was him twisting the truth to make sure I saw you the way he wanted me to. I wouldn’t be surprised if he did the same thing with other people.”

My mind races. There were friends and coworkers that I honestly expected to reach out after Shane’s death. Add in the way his family talked to and about me, and I’d say it’s a very good possibility she’s right.

“Thank you,” I tell her, stepping back and preparing to head toward Kolt.

“No problem. I hope we can be . . .” She sighs. “Friendly? Not enemies at the very least.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I give her a clipped nod and head off without looking back.

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Kolt is in his office with the door pulled partially closed. Motley lounges in her dog bed, but her head pops up when I step to the doorway and peek my head in.

Kolt is digging in the bottom drawer of an ancient-looking filing cabinet. I’m afraid if I startle him, he’ll bump his head.



“Listen, I deep dived into Brent Robinson,” a gruff male voice says on speakerphone. My eyes fly to it where it lays on the desk. “There’s a lot of details that won’t make sense to you, but I can explain them if you need to hear them to believe what I say next.”

“Merrick, you know I trust you,” Kolt says, tossing a file down on his desk. “Go on.”

“Robinson had a college girlfriend go missing under *extremely* suspicious circumstances. He was never even considered as a serious suspect because he was at football camp during the time of her disappearance.”

“What?” Kolt chokes out.

“She’s not dead,” Merrick continues. “Trust me, it was my first thought, too. She ran. I spoke to her myself. Robinson had some major red flags while they were dating. He followed her around, isolated her from her friends, even roughed her up a few times based on her account. She bolted across the country to get the hell away from him. That speaks to his pattern of stalking and shitty behavior.”

“Right, but he’s going to do jail time now, right?” Kolt asks. “Like . . . there’s no way he can weasel out of this.”

“Anyone who would take credit for two execution-style murders . . .” He hums. “I’ll put it this way, I wouldn’t feel comfortable taking my chances that he doesn’t get off on some random technicality. He’s obviously not all there. That crime scene was fucked, and you know what I do for a living.”

My heart sinks recalling the details of how they said Shane died.

He goes on while I’m still trapped in the memories. “He lawyered up immediately. He’s a cop. About to be a former one, but he knows the system. I’m thinking he’s going to go with some type of mental health defense for the attempted kidnapping and claim he lied about killing Shane Barrett. That’s just my gut feeling.”

“What do you recommend?” Kolt asks, grabbing something else from the bottom drawer.

“That’s up to you. It comes down to which route you feel comfortable going. You can give it a roll in the legal system, or I have a friend who brokers transactions like the one you’d need. Brent’s in county lock up . . . I’m not sure if that would make it easier or more difficult. You want me to touch base and find out?”

“Does he mean . . .” I pause when Kolt spins around. He drops the file and papers fall around him. “Like making sure Brent is *never* a problem again?”

“It’s one of a few possibilities,” the voice replies.

“Charlie,” Kolt says, coming close and pulling me into his chest.

“I think you should close your door when discussing important stuff,” I say, pushing it closed. “And for the record, I’m not appalled by that thought.”

“Damn,” the guy on the phone says. “Good for you. I’ll touch base and see what options are available, but next time no speakerphone.”

He hangs up without another word.

“I didn’t know Merrick was going to go there with the conversation.” Kolt frowns, studying me carefully. “Did you really mean that?”

“Definitely,” I tell him, staring straight into his eyes. “I’ve thought a lot about it. I do think Brent was telling the truth. I don’t want to take any chances. I want him to pay.”

“Okay,” Kolt says, palming the back of my head. “Let’s discuss it as a pack tonight.”

I nod my agreement. Kolt pulls my mouth to his, and I try not to feel like a horrible human being for feeling giddy about the idea of Brent getting *exactly* what he deserves.

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It’s later the same night.

Shayley is asleep in her bed. Well, technically it's Kolt's room at the resort, but she's been sleeping in there the last few nights.

My guys and I are in the master bedroom, which is technically Gray's room.

Gray paces the floor near the end of the bed. Kolt is stretched out over one side, and I'm mostly lying on Roarke's chest on the other.

"I'm not sure it will give you any real solace." Gray swipes a hand over his face. "I'm actually afraid it might weigh on your conscience."

"It's possible," Roarke murmurs, brushing his lips over mine. "Vengeance can't erase the past."

I sigh.

I know what they're saying.

I really do hear them.

I guess I'm just a vengeful person because I want Brent dead.

I want him to *pay* for what he did to Shane. The hell he put me through is secondary to the fact the man I loved lost his life, and for what? Because he didn't want Brent as a packmate?

I know I never would have considered Brent's bid to court without Shane's approval. Much like my guys now, I genuinely trusted Shane's opinion.

"We technically don't need to make any decisions tonight," Kolt says, rolling over to face me. "Why don't we agree to see how things go? If it looks like he might get off then we'll reevaluate."

"That will also give you time to fully consider your feelings on the matter," Gray says, gently pushing me and Roarke more toward the middle of the bed. "Does that work?"

"Okay," I agree as Gray leans over Roarke to kiss me thoroughly.

Kolt's hands slide over my hips, and for the first time in days, I feel a real pang of arousal.

"That's an excellent view." Roarke chuckles.

"It's not bad from back here either," Kolt adds, cupping my ass.

"You're always beautiful, little one." Gray nuzzles his nose against mine. "But I do love when your lips are extra puffy from my kisses."

I tremble against Roarke's chest as he begins to purr. My thigh rests over his cock, and it jumps as I wiggle.

Kolt grips my hips and helps me maneuver until I'm straddling Roarke's cock.

Gray grins, tilting my head to face Roarke. Their pheromones are heavy in the air, and I scramble to shove my mouth to his.

"No rush, lovely," Roarke murmurs, between kisses. "We've got all the time in the world."

# Chapter Thirty-Five

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## Kolt

Life goes on.

Charlie takes the job working as a receptionist in the spa. She loves her job and the people she works with. I think the further removed we get from Robinson, the better Charlie seems to be doing.

It takes a few weeks, but Charlie decides she's ready to go back to seeing Calvin one day a week.

Shayley is a chattering bundle of pure toddler energy, but she bounces back from the Brent situation really well. Better than any of us could have expected under the circumstances.

I'm just coming in from my morning run with Motley when my phone buzzes in my arm pouch.

I make it in through the garage door to the hallway by the kitchen, and Motley barrels past me. I drop her leash on the hooks on the wall and aim to grab a bottle of water. I never leash her unless I have to. The other houses on our cul-de-sac belong to friends, and no one else is ever around on the trails we take, but I do bring it just in case.

Charlie is standing in front of the kitchen island. Shay's sitting on it, drinking a cup of something and looking cute as ever.

"Koko," she says, grinning when she spots me.

"Hey, ladybug." I give her a kiss on the head.

"I want down," Shay says.

I grab her and set her on the floor as my phone vibrates against my arm again. I pull it out as Charlie snuggles up close to my sweaty chest.

“You always smell delicious after a run,” Charlie murmurs, stretching up for a quick kiss.

“Motley,” Shay yells, “that’s mine. Bad girl!”

Charlie laughs against my chest.

“Put it down, Motley,” I call out, but I don’t look away from Charlie’s beautiful face. I’m not exactly sure how I got lucky enough to end up with the most beautiful woman on the planet, but I sure fucking did.

My phone lights up in my hand to remind me I’ve got a text. I frown at the screen when I realize it’s from Merrick.

“Consider my debt repaid,” Charlie says, reading the screen. “What does that mean?”

“We served together,” I reply mindlessly. “But he never owed me anything for doing the right thing.”

“Wait, what?” Charlie asks.

“Something felt off, and I pulled him back. It just so happened that a bullet landed where his face was three seconds earlier, but that’s how it is in combat.”

“Wow,” Charlie says, cuddling closer.

A link pops up from an unknown number. It’s a popular news site for the closest big city.

“Are you seeing this?” I ask as I read through the brief article. It’s only basic information as it was posted to the site ten minutes ago.

“He’s dead,” she whispers. “Holy shit, Kolton.”

“Are you okay?” I ask, setting my phone down on the counter.

“I’m so good.” Charlie nods with wide eyes. She grins a huge smile, and I finally take a breath.

“This will self-destruct in . . .” an eerie voice says from the speaker on my phone as it counts down.

I flip off the camera because I have no doubt Merrick can listen and see on any electronic device he wants to.

“It’s Merrick’s idea of a joke,” I grumble, lifting Charlie and wrapping her around my torso. “He’s about to wipe any contact between us.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Charlie whispers, stretching to get close to my ear. “So I take it Brent didn’t magically grow a conscience?”

“I’m going to go with no,” I reply, nuzzling my cheek to hers. “I didn’t ask him to—”

“I know,” she agrees, cutting me off. “But I won’t lie. I’m really happy he owed you a favor and took the initiative to repay it.”

“I’m happy if you’re happy,” I say truthfully. I set her down on the counter as she wraps her legs around my ass and hugs me tight.

“I really do think I’m okay,” Charlie says, but it’s muffled by my sweaty T-shirt.

“Mornin’, mister,” Shay squeals. She’s obviously talking to Roarke since that’s what she calls him. “Hey, Gray.”

They say their hellos and then Roarke and Gray make their way into the kitchen.

“You aren’t going to get onto our omega for having her arse on the counter?” Roarke chuckles.

“No, I think I’ll give her a good morning kiss,” Gray says, shouldering me out of the way. “I received a call from Wahler while I was getting dressed, but I’m—”

“Brent’s dead,” Charlie says, grinning from ear to ear.

“I knew that shite was suspicious,” Roarke says, stretching his arms behind his head. “How do we feel about this turn of events?”



“I’m happy,” Charlie tells him, before pushing her mouth to Gray’s.

“Well then, let the happily ever after begin,” Roarke says, chuckling.

# Epilogue

## Roarke

“I’m beginning to think we might need to add another alpha to our pack.” I laugh, yanking off my shirt and tossing it aside.

“Don’t even joke about that,” Gray grumbles. “Is Shayley settled?”

I nod. I successfully kept Shayley alive for the walk to Gayle’s. I don’t think any of us were expecting another heat to creep up so quickly, but it’s incredibly convenient having extra care always at the ready. This makes two heats since the first that came right after Charlie made it to us.

“Are you coming?” Charlie asks, wiggling her ass. She’s bent over doggy style in the nest and her eyes are glazed as they meet mine.

“Not yet, but I’m about to be,” I say, shucking off the rest of my clothing in quick succession. “Did you know six out of every hundred people get pregnant while taking that birth control shot?”

Charlie grunts, completely ignoring me and diving back down to suck Gray off. I move up behind her, teasing her ass and staring at her extremely slick pussy.

“You’re very close to the end of the shot’s effectiveness anyway,” Gray says, brushing his fingers over Charlie’s cheek.

“Let me live in the fantasy,” I murmur as my cock leaks at the thought.

My knot throbs in time with my pulse. I'm very fecking fond of the idea of locking myself in Charlie's tight little snatch and staying for a while.

"I'm here." Kolt sounds winded as he makes his way into the nest.

Charlie pops off Gray's cock and gives him a playful smile. "You're just in time."

Kolt immediately trips over his own socked feet as he scrambles to undress.

I chuckle, shaking my head.

Fecking hell.

Life is really goddamn good.

I'm just quite grateful God or the universe decided to gift us Charlie.

---

"The cramps could just be a bit delayed. The same as the last couple times," Charlie grumbles, tossing her leg over mine. We're cuddled close in the window nest. "Let's not get our hopes up until we know for sure."

"Okay," I agree indulgently.

A pulse of undeniable excitement flickers through me at the thought.

I want her knocked up immediately.

The thought of her belly swelling with our baby makes my dick jump.

My sweet little omega isn't burning up anymore, nor does she smell as sweet as she has the last few days.

I'm always wildly attracted to her scent, but her pheromones no longer have me trapped in the mindless haze of rut.

Although it has been nearly five days of straight-up dirty fuckery. That might have something to do with the fact that I'm no longer a rabid animal about shoving my cock inside her.

I sit up against the cushion and Charlie climbs over me until her pussy rests right over my shaft.

She's in one of my T-shirts and I'm only in thin sweats.

Hmm, maybe she's not so settled after all. She stretches for my mouth as she grinds over my thickening length.

My hand wraps around her throat as we kiss, and she whimpers into my mouth. I give her a light squeeze as my thumb brushes over her soft skin.

Her pheromones thicken in the small alcove nest despite the relatively airy design.

"Are ye desperate for your alpha's cock? Hmm, love?" I smirk as I bite her cheek playfully.

Charlie nods against my hold on her throat.

"Go on then," I growl.

Her small hands slide over my skin as she runs her nails over the indents of my abs. She works my sweats down as I use my feet as leverage to make it easier for her.

Charlie whines as her tiny fist wraps around me. I give her neck a tight squeeze as she jerks me a few times and lines me up with her opening.

I bite my lip to stifle the snarl as she sinks down on me. Omegas truly are God's gift to alphas. She doesn't even make it halfway down my throbbing length before she has to rise on her knees and do it all over again.

I release her throat to help her rise and fall. Her mouth parts as her head falls back. She's incredibly beautiful, shivering as she takes more on each fall over my length.

"Aww, fecking hell." I guide her mouth to mine. I wish I could suck her tits or lick down her lithe neck, but the height difference combined with the position make that bloody

impossible. “You’re such a good girl. Taking my cock like you were made for it.”

It’s my turn to groan as she leaks around my shaft.

“Want my knot, love?” I growl.

Charlie sobs, resting her face against my chest. It makes it easier to flip us. I roll us until her back hits the cushioned mattress.

She smiles up at me and my fucking heart races at the sight.

“Let’s see if we can ensure you’re good and fucked full of our baby,” I growl, diving down for a filthy kiss that has our tongues meeting in the air.

Charlie wiggles and finally manages to dig her feet into my ass as she grinds under me. The little vixen shimmies until my knot slips inside her.

“Oh, dirty girl.” I chuckle. “You want to be rutted through the mattress?”

“Yes, please,” she begs.

I brush my hand over the top of her head as I snap my hips as much as I can with my knot locked inside her.

“I’m going to fill your tight little cunt full of me over and over again until my seed takes.” I bump her chin to the side and suck my way down her neck. “I’m going to breed you full of my baby.”

“God yes.” Charlie thrashes. “Please, Roarke. Rut deep.”

“Gladly,” I groan.

# Epilogue

## Kolt

“I’m so sorry,” Charlie says, shoving the take-out container off her giant belly and sitting it aside. “Say that one more time.”

“There’s a woman in the lobby by the name of Shannon Barrett,” Lori says, fidgeting in the doorway of my office. “She’s currently talking to Gayle, but she asked for you.”

“What the hell?” Charlie whispers, pulling her legs off the coffee table and struggling to sit upright.

I immediately stand and help my wife do the same.

“Shane’s mom?” I ask, running my hand over our baby.

“Yeah,” Charlie whispers as her eyes squeeze shut.

“Do you want me to go see what she wants?” I ask, trying to keep the growl out of my voice.

Charlie is seven and a half months pregnant. She doesn’t need any more stress than she’s already got.

She’s happy and obviously excited for the baby, but she’s also turned a little obsessive about our well-being.

It’s understandable considering the way she lost Shane. I think because she was pregnant when he died, it brought up a lot of those fears. We literally do not leave the house after dark and none of us mind. Her mental health is far more important than anything we could need to do that late in the day.

“I don’t know,” she whispers, swallowing thickly. “I think I have to talk to her.”



“No, you don’t,” I growl.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Lori says, looking slightly uncomfortable. “They’re actually coming down to the barn now. Do you want me to head them off?”

I blink in surprise.

Lori and Charlie are far from friends, but I have seen them talk casually a few times around the resort.

“No,” Charlie says, pulling her shoulders back. “That’s okay.”

“You’re sure?” I ask, studying her carefully.

“I’m positive.”

“Okay, I’m heading back to the desk,” Lori says, closing the exterior door that leads back toward the resort.

The irrational urge to lock the door before that woman can get inside rolls over me suddenly.

Charlie is doing great. She doesn’t need any setbacks.

“What exactly is this?” I growl at Gayle and Shannon Barrett as they step inside.

“Kolt,” Charlie says, tugging on my hand.

“I sent Shannon a letter and a newspaper clipping that included the details of Brent’s arrest,” Gayle says, offering a chagrined smile. “I made it really clear what an *asshole* she’d been considering the entire situation. Excuse my language, but I was very upset about the way she treated you.”

I blink repeatedly because Gayle never curses.

“I let it sit around for months before I opened it,” Shannon says, frowning at Charlie. A grimace covers her face, and she sobs into her hands. “I’m so sorry. Oh God, she’s right. My son would be appalled by the way I treated you . . .”

Charlie leans in close to my side as we listen to the details of how Brent reached out after Shane’s death pretending to be one of his close friends.

“He really was a psychopath,” I grumble, holding Charlie tight.

“I know I really don’t deserve it and that we’ll probably have to work up to it . . .” Shannon’s voice breaks. “But I’d love to meet Shayley some time.”

Charlie frowns at the woman who made her feel like garbage when she lost Shane.

“I can’t say anything with any certainty right this second,” Charlie says.

I’m proud of her for standing her ground.

“I’ll consider seeing how things go,” she finally finishes in a firm tone. “Only because of Shayley, but I don’t feel comfortable promising anything right now.”

Shannon moves forward to hug Charlie, and a low, feral growl fills the air.

I glance around expecting to see Motley, but it quickly becomes clear that was me.

Charlie swats my ass and laughs.

“I imagine that’s a thing with all alpha fathers,” Shannon says, hugging Charlie.

---

“How are you feeling about seeing Shane’s mom?” Gray asks, tenderly massaging Charlie’s hip and lower back as she lies on her side.

I’m facing her and the belly jumps, moving wildly.

I grin.

It’s an indescribable feeling knowing our unborn baby is moving around in there. My hand falls to rest over her taut skin.

Charlie shrugs.

“Little one,” he murmurs, leaning down to kiss her shoulder.

“Honestly, her apology doesn’t mean much to me. That time in my life . . .” Charlie sighs. “She only made me feel worse. I’ve moved past it, but I haven’t decided as far as Shay goes.”

“That’s okay,” I assure her. “No choices need to be made right now.”

She chews at her lower lip. “Shannon is one of the people Shay could talk to who actually knew her dad. But I also know Shane distanced himself from his family for a reason so . . .”

“We’ll have to see how much effort she puts in and gauge her intentions,” I say, leaning over to peck a kiss on Charlie’s nose.

“I love you,” she says, going in for a tender kiss. “She definitely won’t be spending any time with Shay without supervision. It’s hard because Shayley is going to grow up. She’s going to want to see Shane’s baby pictures and hear what he was like as a kid or . . .” She sighs. “I just don’t know. What do you think? Am I being a pushover?”

“I do think people can change for the better,” I tell her nuzzling my cheek to hers. “But this choice isn’t something to be made hastily.”

Shannon better be genuinely ready to make amends and be a decent person, or she can see herself out.

I’m very slow to stand up for myself, but my girls are a different story.

---

“Can we come in?” Gayle asks, peeking her head around the door to Charlie’s hospital room.

“Come on in,” Charlie calls out, readjusting herself in the hospital bed.

Gayle files in with Shannon.

Shane's mom has Shayley on her hip and she looks extremely uncertain on if she'll be sent away. She happened to be in town visiting Shay when Charlie went into labor.

"Is that him?" Shay asks, wiggling to get down.

"Yep," I say, scooping her up. "Ready to meet your little brother?"

"I think yes," Shay says, nodding and looking very serious.

"Let's wash your hands so you can get a proper introduction," I suggest.

"Okay," she agrees. We head over to the sink, and Shay lets me scrub her small hands and forearms. "He will like me?"

"Oh, ladybug," I say, chuckling. "He's going to love you."

"Thanks for coming," Charlie says.

Glancing back, I can see she's talking to Shannon.

The relationship is tentative at best, but I know Gayle has become a buffer between the two. It's convenient because Shayley can spend time with her other grandma without Charlie having to.

It's clear Charlie and Shannon will never be close, but they're working on at least being friendly.

We head back over, and I place Shay on Charlie's other side.

"He's little," Shay says as Roarke helps situate a pillow in her lap. "Thanks, mister."

"You're a cute little bugger," Roarke muses, kissing her forehead. "I missed you."

Gray smiles softly from his spot leaning against the wall as he talks to his mom. Gayle is smiling from ear to ear. I think she's having to fight her urge to elbow us out of the way and snatch the baby up.

"What's he's name?" Shay asks, squinting at the baby as Charlie places him on the pillow.

“Shawn,” Charlie says, grinning from ear to ear as we all pull our phones out to snap a million pictures.

“He’s precious,” Shannon says, still keeping her distance, but watching like she’s desperate to get closer.

“After Shay’s done, you can hold him if you’d like,” Charlie says, giving her a tight smile.

Shannon bursts into tears and heads for the sink.

“You really did good,” I murmur, taking the spot Shannon vacated.

“Yeah, *we* sure did,” Charlie says, smiling from ear to ear.

I lean over, tenderly pulling her mouth to mine for a quick kiss. She’s absolutely the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.

# Epilogue

## Grayson

“Have I told you lately how absolutely delectable you are, little one?” I ask, tenderly pinning Charlie to the door that leads back inside the house.

“Once or twice today,” she says, smiling brightly as she wraps her arms around my neck.

It takes some work with her very pregnant belly, but I manage to fit my knee between her legs and kiss her deeply. My heart races like it does every time our mouths meet. It’s been a whole lot of years since we picked her and Shay up in Orlando and our lives truly began.

“Oh man,” Charlie says, gasping for air as we pull apart. “You, little lady, are taking up all my air these days.”

I laugh, running my hand over her extremely round belly. I don’t think she was even this big with the twins. Or maybe I’ve forgotten.

We certainly do have a knack for keeping her knocked up. Although we’ve all agreed that this will be the last addition to our family. I think all of us were content to stop after the twins, but Charlie was desperate to try one more time for a girl.

None of us could deny her.

“Come on,” Charlie says, gently pushing me back. “It’s going to be crazy in there. I can feel it in the bond.”

I laugh because she’s probably right.

We walk in and freeze. We've only been gone for a little over two hours. Long enough for a nice, relaxing dinner date, but the house is clearly in shambles.

"I told you we should've had a pack date and left the kids with my mom," I say, squeezing Charlie's hip.

"This isn't what it looks like," Roarke says, with one of the twins under each armpit. They're sideways in the air like Superman.

I frown because both boys are nude. They're two years old now and complete and utter terrors.

"They don't know how to hit the pot," Shayley says, shaking her head. "You two have terrible aim."

"Potty training you was never this difficult," Roarke grumbles. "I blame you for giving me unrealistic expectations on children."

Shayley snorts. She's growing up so damn fast, and she's the spitting image of Charlie. She laughs and bounds toward the stairs.

"Yes, thank you," Roarke says. "Run off and abandon us to the insanity."

"Sorry, mister. They're your kids," Shay singsongs, disappearing from sight.

"It smells like pee in here," Shawn says. He glances at the kitchen, which is also a mess, does a double take, and heads off, following his sister. "Come on, Logan. Run or they'll make us clean."

Our six-year-old grimaces and follows the older two kids out.

"You could be helping," Roarke grumbles to Kolt, spinning around to face him with the boys still under his arms. They laugh like they're having the time of their lives.

"I'm making my mom's hot chocolate to help offset the fact that she's going to come in to find the place . . ." *He* does a double take when he spots us. "Oh, hey, sweetheart. How was your date? I've got extra whipped cream and sprinkles."



I snort.

There's absolutely no controlling the chaos with five kids, two dogs, and another baby on the way.

But as Charlie bursts into a fit of giggles, laughing against my chest, I realize I wouldn't have gone with any other option.

# Afterword

If you enjoyed, or even if you didn't please consider leaving a review.

Thank you for taking the time to read Out of Options.

You can reach me at [JillianWestAuthor@gmail.com](mailto:JillianWestAuthor@gmail.com) with any questions, comments, or feedback.

**Thank You!!**

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