

A woman with long, wavy brown hair and blue eyes is looking slightly to the right. She is wearing a dark, sparkly, sleeveless dress. Her right hand is raised to her hair. The background is a dark, bokeh-filled scene with purple and blue lights, suggesting a night-time party or club setting.

HOW A
NAUGHTY OMEGA
FINDS LOVE

PARTY GIRL

RORY MILES

Party Girl

RORY MILES

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Author Note

HELLO.

Welcome back to the Omega Love world. Please note: this book contains triggers which include, but are not limited to: PTSD, childhood abuse, death of a child (background character - not related to the main characters), drug use, and gun violence.

Disclaimer: the contents of this book are in no way intended to diagnose or treat mental health issues. If you are concerned about the mental health of yourself or someone you love, please find local links to support services in your area.

Happy reading <3

To everyone who used to hate hugs.

PARTY GIRL

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Chapter One

WHITNEY

The Omega Council therapist's office is sterile and unwelcoming. White walls, small inkblot paintings in cheap plastic frames, a fake plant in the corner, and a faint undercurrent of lemon-scented cleaner coating the air. Linda, a short woman with pixie-cut black hair, peers at me over the rims of her tiny glasses. The spectacles make her look older than she is. Her face doesn't have many wrinkles, so she can't be much older than thirty. Her lips are pursed, waiting for me to say something.

She's always waiting.

I pick at my nails. "Things have been fine."

Not a complete lie, but the last thing I want to do is open up to the lady who was appointed to me because *the Omega Council has some concerns*. Apparently, getting cited for underage drinking a few times is a no-no. I haven't gotten citations for over two years—thanks to a handy-dandy fake ID—but they're still forcing me to come to these god-awful sessions. I never stopped breaking the rules, I simply got better about hiding what I do.

"How's your friend doing, the one you met last month?"

"Oh, um. We're not friends anymore." I don't even remember the name of the woman I'd made up to appease the therapist. Nothing like imaginary friends to help me seem normal in therapy.

She frowns. “Things were going so well. You were really excited about meeting her.”

I don’t tell her it was only a story I made up. I don’t tell her that I’m always excited to connect when I first meet people. I don’t tell her I fall in love at the drop of a hat, imagining a million different scenarios about what a future might look like between me and a man I’ll never be allowed to date. I don’t tell her I’m so desperate for attention that I fake my way into friendships until things start to get real. That’s when I run.

No. All of that is too honest for this therapy session.

“I know.” I shrug. “We were too different.”

Humming, Linda writes something in her notebook. The tip of the pen scrapes loudly across the paper, like nails on a chalkboard. “Do you often have a hard time maintaining friendships?”

“No. Lindsey and I have been best friends since elementary.” I shift in the oversized chair, trying to get comfortable. It’s too damn soft, and the long sleeve shirt I’m wearing is suddenly too hot. I push the sleeves up, wishing I’d worn a more summer appropriate top.

“And do you have any other friends?”

Considering I’ve been coming to her for a few years, I’m sure we’ve been over this before... and do I detect a hint of judgment? So maybe I’m not the type of woman to have a dozen friends. There’s nothing wrong with that. I like what I know. Lindsey is a little mean from time to time, but she always answers when I call and she never pries into my life.

“Not many, no.”

“One, two?” she queries, tapping the end of her pen on the notebook.

Monica, a friend from high school, moved to a different city and we never kept in touch. I tried to call her once, but she never called back. I didn’t take it personally. We really only smoked pot together. It’s not like we shared intimate secrets. If this woman were any other therapist, I’d ask her why I want to

connect with people so desperately but anytime something starts to click, I run. That would lead to more questions about my past, and I don't trust her with the truth. Anything I tell her will be weaponized against me. The Omega Council doesn't need any more reason to think I'm unfit for matching.

I watch the pen bounce, scowling. "Just Lindsey, I guess."

"No boyfriends?" Linda asks the question so casually, like we're old friends catching up, but I'm not stupid.

Omegas aren't supposed to date. They're also not supposed to use hormone suppressants so they can go out and get wasted and hook up with random betas or deltas. Whore is a word the Omega Council isn't afraid to lob around. Omegas are supposed to listen. Be good girls. No partying. No drugs. No fun. Unless you know how to find it. While most omegas do follow the rules, there are a few of us who beat at the bars of our gilded cages, pounding our fists onto the metal until it breaks and we can escape, if only for a little while.

"Of course not," I say, tipping my head to the side. "I'm waiting for my pack."

I'll say whatever it takes to get her to stop asking questions.

Just before an omega's twenty-first birthday, they take a compatibility test and get assigned to a pack. There's a fancy ceremony with pretty dresses and makeup. All of the fanfare is meant to make omegas feel better about the process. My heat is two weeks away, and if the therapist says I'm well enough, on Friday I'll be matched with a pack. It would be lying to say the thought of being given to a pack was fine by me. It's not okay, but it's better than the alternative. No match means I get kicked out of the apartment the council gave me when I turned eighteen and sent back to my parents.

That can't happen.

"Have you been drinking?"

"No."

"Drugs?"

“No.”

She lifts an eyebrow. “You’ll be fine to give a sample then?”

“Of course.” I hold her gaze. “You’ve been a big help.”

She’s been exactly no help. Still, Linda preens at my words, adjusting her glasses and grinning like she’s won the lottery. “It’s good to hear that, Whitney. You’ve come so far from the troubled omega you used to be.”

I return her smile, hoping it doesn’t look too fake.

“The cup is in the bathroom. You know what to do.”

“Right, I’ll be back.” I stand and take my purse. Linda is too naive and trusting. A smarter therapist would realize what I’ve been doing. There’s a chance that maybe she doesn’t care if I cheat on the piss test, but I doubt it. Linda thinks she’s doing good in the world. If she knew I had a cup full of pee in my bag, she’d be mad. I lock the bathroom door and grab one of the cups from the basket. Setting my purse on the edge of the sink, I quickly transfer the sample into the clean cup and shove the dirty one into my bag.

Lindsey has a guy, and thanks to him, whenever I have these appointments, I have what I need to pass all the Omega Council’s required drug testing. Lindsey has a lot of connections for a lot of illegal things, but that’s part of why I like her. She doesn’t ever ask why I need the things I do, probably because she’s used to people breaking laws and bending rules, and I never give her a hard time for using my apartment to stash her illegal supplies. Easy access to clean urine samples makes risking my neck worth it.

I flush the toilet, drop the cup off in the window, and wash my hands. Linda closes her notebook and studies my face when I sit in my chair.

“I know it’s been a long few years coming to see me, but I’d like to think we know each other fairly well.”

Stifling a snort, I nod and glance at my feet. “We’ve been seeing each other for a while.”

My self-help therapy books know me better than this lady.

“That’s why what I’m about to tell you is hard for me.”

My blood runs cold. She’s going to fail me. I’ll have to move back with my family. My throat constricts and my stomach turns, threatening to embarrass me. Keeping a calm façade on the outside, I meet her eyes, knowing she’s too oblivious to notice my inner turmoil. Linda means well, but she’s horrible at her job.

“I think you’ll make a pack very happy. They’ll be lucky to have you, but you should work on making friends. Maybe a delta within your pack. Being an omega is a lonely life if you don’t have someone to confide in. Alphas aren’t always the best of listeners.”

The relieved laugh I release is breathy. “I’ll work on it. I think you’re right... I need to make a better effort.”

She nods. “It takes two people to be in a friendship. Sometimes it’s hard, but you’ve made the effort. You’ll find more friends the harder you try.”

“Thank you so much for everything, Linda.” I put my hand over my heart and sniff.

“Don’t cry,” she says with a chuckle. “My mascara can’t handle it. So long as your results come back clean, you are well on your way to a new life. Don’t waste it.”

I nod and stand, shoving my purse strap on my shoulder and clutching it. “Thanks again.”

She walks me to the door, and we hug, albeit awkwardly, considering I don’t like her.

“Be a good omega,” she sing-songs. “I know you can do it.”



The apartment building for low pack omegas is dilapidated and in need of new carpeting. Long strings of shredded carpet cover the hall, and I trip on a tear, cursing and catching myself

on my door. I glare at the floor before letting myself in. It's almost five in the afternoon on a Monday. The good people of the world are finishing up work and heading home for a relaxing evening. What sort of trouble happens on a Monday?

Plenty, and I'm desperate to find it.

Four more days until the ceremony.

I dial Lindsey.

"Hey, chick. What's up?" Music blares down the line; a popular pop song with thumping bass assaults my ears.

"What are we doing tonight?"

She snickers. "You hard up for a drink, or maybe you need a little bump?"

"Only a few drinks." Cocaine and I do not get along.

Lindsey loves it.

"Boo, party pooper." She sighs and turns the music down. "There's a hot night club that opened a few weeks ago. That place is popping every night of the week. You game?"

"Pick me up at nine?"

"Sure thing. Wear something hot." She hangs up, and I sigh.

We're both low pack, but Lindsey doesn't like riding in my beater, and she hates when I look poor. I'm not sure if she realizes we're both actually poor, especially compared to the high packs, but I'm used to her insults. We've been friends long enough that they don't bother me. Lindsey is who she is.

I head to the bedroom and strip, removing the tracker taped between my breasts and putting it in the bedside table. As soon as I hit puberty, the Omega Council inserted a tiny chip into my forearm. They called it a safety precaution. I called it bullshit. They simply don't want to lose their precious cattle. Lindsey's brother helped me cut it out after I got cited for the second time. The scar has faded, but I still have to cover it with concealer so no one notices the faint white line. I keep the tracker taped to my body most of the time. When I go out, I

leave it in the drawer. No more citations and more freedom means I get to do whatever I want. I could still get in trouble, but with the suppressants and fake identity, the chances of me being caught are low. It's a risk I'm willing to take.

Besides, it's not like the Omega Council really gives a fuck about the low pack omegas. They're more concerned about pampering their high pack omegas in their fancy apartments on the other side of town. The only reason I got caught in the first place was because of the tracker.

By the time Lindsey arrives, I've eaten a few slices of pizza, showered, curled my hair, and put on a cute black mini-skirt and a light pink halter top. The nude heels are already starting to hurt my feet, but a few shots of vodka are all I need to forget about that. I grab a small clutch I found at a thrift store and put my phone and ID inside. Lindsey's car idles at the curb, and I hop in, barely closing the door before she pulls onto the road.

"That's what you're wearing?"

Streetlights flash over the car. I glance at my outfit.

"It's cute."

"If you say so." She ruffles her blonde curls and puckers her glossed lips at herself in the rear view. "The pills are in the dash. I'm getting my next pickup on Thursday."

Meaning she'll have more drugs to stash in my apartment while she slowly sells them off.

Wasting no time, I open the compartment and grab the prescription bottle. I take a suppressant and swallow it without water. A bitter taste coats my tongue, and I wrinkle my nose, waiting for the flavor to fade. The medicine will last until tomorrow morning, long enough for me to enjoy my night without having to worry about being targeted because I'm an omega. Sometimes it's nice to blend in with the betas and deltas.

"You good?" Lindsey turns up the music before I can answer, bobbing her head along to the electronic music.

This is how it is between us. We both like to party, but we don't ever talk about important things. She's a beta and always says she doesn't understand *omega stuff*. She has the pills I need, and I have a safe place for her to keep her supply. Our friendship isn't normal, but that's how we both like it. Hell, Lindsey not giving a damn about my life is part of the reason I haven't run from her. I suspect she feels the same way.

Lindsey pulls into a parking structure a block away from the club. She cracks a mini vodka and passes it to me. Once she opens one for herself, we cheers and drink them in one big gulp. We hiss at the same time, climbing out of the car and laughing at our matching reaction to the cheap alcohol.

Time to forget.



Four drinks later, the room spins, but the music vibrating against my skin keeps me on the dance floor. Lindsey and I grind against each other. A man with tight black slacks and a charcoal gray button-down shirt catches my eye. He's leaning against the bar, gaze traveling over my body. I turn, giving Lindsey my back and swaying my hips. His lips twitch into a smile, and I lift an eyebrow to say, *come over here then*.

He finishes his drink and prowls toward me. Forgetting about Lindsey, I push through writhing bodies and meet him in the middle of the dance floor. His skin is golden brown, and his eyes are dark green and hooded. A flash of white lights his face, highlighting a strong jawline with a bit of stubble. His jet-black hair is swept to the side, but one piece falls into his eyes as he tips his head down, gaze traveling over my bare legs.

"Hi," I say, wrapping my hands around his neck. My clutch dangles from my wrist. The zipper is secure, so I don't worry about losing anything. Liquor warms my stomach and makes touching a stranger easier. The fact that we're in a club full of people helps too. Safety in numbers and all that.

“I’m Asher,” he says with a wicked grin. I catch traces of his scent under the smell of liquor, sweat, and perfume filling the room. Cedar and musk. He’s an alpha.

I panic for a moment then remember the suppressants I took. He won’t know I’m an omega. I soften against his body, grinning when he places his hand at the small of my back and presses against me.

“I’m Whitney.”

“Dance with me?” he asks, swaying to the beat since I’ve already agreed. Asking is only a formality at this point.

Nodding, I hang on and follow his lead. He moves to the music, letting his body do all the talking. Asher is fluent in *these hips don’t lie*, and I match his movements. Heat floods through me the longer we touch and tease. My scent is muted, not nearly as sweet as it normally is, but it still cloys in the air, letting him know exactly what I’m thinking. Desire dampens my panties when he presses his leg between my thighs, giving me something to grind on. I should be ashamed of how I instantly press into his quad, but it’s strong and sturdy. His dark chuckle sends a shiver down my spine.

Pressing his cheek against mine, his lips find my ear. “Good girl,” he rasps.

I’m buzzed and horny. I take the open invitation and hold his neck and gently rock against his leg. A soft growl fills the air between us. I pause, shock flashing through me until I see him wet his lips and lower his face to meet mine. Our lips collide, and like thunder chasing lightning, I race to keep up. He groans when I softly bite his lips, and he squeezes my ass.

“Fuck me,” he mutters. He traces his tongue along my top lip and claims my mouth again, a soft rumble building in his chest.

This is the high I chase. Making a man, an alpha no less, unravel. I want him to throw me against a wall and fuck me until I forget my name. I want to watch his face crumple as he loses control and ruins me. I want to be wanted.

My phone vibrates in the clutch, startling both of us. We break apart, and I gasp for air, holding his heated gaze. The buzzing stops, but the moment is ruined. An upbeat song blasts through the club, and we continue dancing. His large hand holds me against him, but I don't mind. We edge closer, lips brushing until my phone rings again.

"Sorry," I say, pulling my hand away from his neck. The vibrator on this damn device is super-powered. I shoot him an apologetic smile and grab it, frowning at the screen.

Two missed calls from my mother. I haven't talked to her in almost three years. I start to shove the phone back in my tiny purse, but it lights up again, her name flashing over the screen.

Asher leans to talk in my ear. "Everything okay?"

"Uh, yeah. I'm sorry, I have to take this."

"Come back to me?" he asks, eyes lit with hope.

I grin and nod. I'm definitely coming back to him. We may not be able to fuck without my nature being revealed, but he's fun and distracting. Exactly what I wanted.

"Hello?" I answer the call, shifting through the crowd to try to find a hallway or quiet corner.

My mother's voice mumbles through the line, too incoherent to understand with the music.

"What?" I shout, slipping into a narrow hallway. The wall blocks some of the sound from the club.

"—she's dead."

"Who?" My stomach bottoms out, and my chest clenches. There's only one reason she'd call me. I know before she even says her name.

Granny.

The only person in the world I give a damn about.

I suck in a sharp breath, searching the crowd for Lindsey. Asher waves, but I ignore him as tears well in my eyes.

Mother hangs up on me, and I listen to the dead air. Granny is gone? Heat crawls up my neck, and my throat grows thick, a scream clogging my airways. The club is suddenly too loud, too crowded, too much. I press my hand against the wall when I stumble slightly, my knees weakening as I process.

“Hey, are you okay?” Asher asks.

I shake my head. “I need to leave.”

“I can take you home if you want. Do you need water?”

He’s being so nice. A tear slips down my cheek. A shudder racks my body, and I sag against the wall, resting my forehead against it.

“I have to go.”

“Okay. I hear you, are you with me? Can I take you home?”

Nodding, I stand straight and look at him. Every ounce of desire I felt before is gone, replaced with a numb and cold nothingness.

His brow furrows, noticing the change and tears. “Come on.” He grabs my hand and tugs me through the club. I spare one last glance to find Lindsey. She’s coiled around a man. There’s no reason to ruin her night. I face forward and leave the club with a stranger. Except this time there’s no happy ending.

I couldn’t tell you the make or model of his car, only that it drove and he put the temperature at seventy, the perfect mix of hot and cold. He pulls up outside my apartment, turning the car off.

“You live here?” he asks, voice filled with panic.

“Yeah.” I glance at him through bleary eyes.

“Are you an omega?”

A dangerous question.

“No, my sister is. Thanks for the ride.” I climb out, not bothering to wait for his response. I’ll never see him again.

My hand trembles when I reach for the door, body shaking with sorrow, but I manage to hold myself mostly together until I get to my apartment. Once the door is locked, I fall apart.

Chapter Two

WHITNEY

Funerals suck. Especially when your status as low pack means there is no police escort to the burial. Low pack means there is no fancy marble headstone. When you can't afford one, all the city gives you is a cheap wooden cross to put at the head of the casket and a plot in the section of the cemetery with too many weeds. Nothing says society hates us more than the giant *too bad, so sad*, they give when a low pack member passes.

Mother called on Monday night. Two days have passed since then, a blur of tears and hurt. Two days of wallowing in my apartment and dreading today. We buried Granny on Thursday, her favorite day of the week. She loved it because it was the day before the end of the work week.

“Dammit,” I mutter when my mother speeds through a yellow light. We just finished burying Granny and I'm supposed to be leading the trail of cars from the graveyard to her house for the repast, the part after the funeral where everyone eats and pretends life can carry on. I guess she forgot what common courtesy is. She didn't think to stop so we'd stay together. I know the way, but that's not the point. She's being an asshole, as always.

“Some things never change.”

She'll be pissed if I don't keep up, but speeding up means leaving everyone else behind. I weigh the options. Catching a dose of my mother's anger or leaving the people, who also have the address, behind to fend for themselves. The right

thing to do would be to wait, but my gut tells me to speed up to avoid a fight. Pressing down on the gas, I gun it to try and get through the light before it turns red, but I'm too late. The light changes. My heart jumps into my throat.

"Shit." I glance from side to side to make sure I'm not about to be T-boned. My gaze catches on a police car. The lights flare to life and the cop follows after me.

Seriously? On the day of my granny's funeral? Life has really said *fuck you* this week.

With a heavy sigh, I pull over, tears stinging my eyes. Today is the worst. I drop my forehead on the steering wheel and wait for the cop to come give me a ticket. The last thing I need is more trouble. Camila, head of the Omega Council, has already given me a verbal reprimand for the two underage drinking citations I received.

I should have waited, but Mother is already in one of her moods. The law doesn't care about Mother's mood swings, though. When the inevitable rap of knuckles sounds on my window, I suck in a shaky breath and lift my head. My old Honda has a crank window that's broken, and it takes a lot of muscle to get it to roll down. The officer's eyebrows rise as I begin the slow and painful process.

"Hi," I say once the window is down, giving him a weak smile that's accentuated with tears. Everything blurs, and I can't tell if he's mad or simply indifferent about pulling me over.

"Do you know why I pulled you over?" His voice is deep and stern. Cars rush around us, and he steps a little closer, resting his arm on the top of the car.

My throat aches from holding back a sob. My body flushes under his scrutinizing gaze. My hands tremble on the steering wheel.

"Yes." I bite my lip and try to blink my tears away.

"License and registration, please."

I take in a shuddering breath and reach for my glovebox, digging through the papers inside until I find my registration. I

set it in my lap, cringing when tears slip down my cheek and drip onto the paper. Furiously swiping at them, I grab my wallet from my purse.

“Ma’am, are you okay?”

Sniffing loudly, I shake my head. “My grandma died.” I grab my license. “Here you go.”

He stares at me, and I focus on a lamppost behind him. I’m too embarrassed to meet his gaze.

“I’m sorry.”

“Me too,” I say.

He sighs, and out of the corner of my eye, I see him glance at the papers I’m holding out. “Listen, you could have hurt someone, or yourself for that matter. You’re being matched tomorrow?”

He saw my license. He knows I’m an omega and that my twenty-first birthday is in two weeks. He’s smart enough to know what that means.

“Yes.” My vision clears of tears, and I take him in. He’s incredibly fit, but most cops are. Closely cropped brown hair, sun-kissed skin. He doesn’t have the pheromones of an alpha, so my guess is he’s a beta. Deltas generally don’t land good jobs unless they’re in a royal pack. Perks of being “in” with a purebred alpha.

“I’d hate for you to get in trouble the night before, especially with what happened to your grandma.” He pauses, gray eyes flicking between mine. “If you promise to stay out of trouble, I’ll let you off with a warning. I won’t write you up. Can you do that?”

“Yes, yes. I can. I’m so sorry.” Relief sweeps through me. Omegas who get tickets get in trouble. The Compatibility Ceremony is Friday night. One day is all I have until I’m matched with a new pack. Hopefully I’ll find a better life with them than the one I have now, but I’m not getting my hopes up.

“All right. Be careful and don’t break your promise. I take those very seriously.”

I give him a funny look, putting the license and registration in my lap. “I’ll be good,” I say. “Besides, it’s one night, how much trouble can I find?”

With a grimace, he glares at a car that passes a little too fast. “You’d be surprised,” he mutters. “Ma’am.” He dips his head, hooking his thumbs in his duty belt and strutting back to his squad car.

I blow out a hard breath. That was close.



I’d forgotten to roll my window up before I drove off from getting pulled over. I arrive at the dilapidated beige home I grew up in with a breeze rushing through the car. Luckily, I’m the first one here. The rest of our extended family is either lost or at a bar. I consider seeking out the latter when my mother’s shout carries from inside the house. I cringe, shutting the car off and cranking the window up. She’s always yelling. I hate this house. No more than 1200 square feet, with broken blinds and shingles missing, it’s obvious this home needs work. Not only on the outside, but on the inside too. It’ll take a lot more than a fresh coat of paint to fix the damage inside.

“Goddammit, Granny,” I whisper, swiping at my damp cheeks. She wasn’t supposed to die. She was the only one who gave a shit about me. She should be here.

Granny only had two kids, and my Uncle John died last year of a drug overdose. Mom and her mates are the only ones left with a house for hosting the repast, even if the place is a piece of shit.

Gripping the steering wheel tighter, I grind my teeth and try to work up the courage to go inside. I don’t live here anymore. I haven’t for three years. As soon as I was old enough to move into one of the apartments provided by the Omega Council, I ran fast and far away from this place. She can’t hurt me. At least, she can’t hurt me like she used to.

I *hate* having to come back. For Granny though, I can swallow my pride and make it through one afternoon. One afternoon of shit and barbs and hate. For Granny, I'll bear it.

Then never again. My mother will be deadlier to me than Granny. For all the shit she put me through, she'll cease to exist. I'll have my new pack soon enough. Things will get better.

They have too.

God, I'm so fucking pathetic. I sniff again. I probably look disgusting with snot and tears covering my face, but I don't care. Grief isn't pretty. It's raw and ugly and painful. I can't hold the emotions in, so they pour out of me with renewed force.

Someone knocks on the window of my rundown Honda, making me squeal in surprise. I clean my face with a tissue, scowling at my mother. Her lip is curled back and she has that half-crazed look in her eyes, reminding me of the pain she's capable of inflicting. She must be in pre-heat because she's been especially awful today and her pheromones are all over the place.

"What the hell are you doing? Come and help me get these goddamn casseroles set out. Everyone and their mother sent a fucking casserole." She sucks on the end of a cigarette, the cherry glowing bright red. She blows the smoke up and narrows her eyes. "Don't you embarrass me, Whitney Marie. I'm too old for your shit."

My shit? Does she mean me wanting love and attention? *Yeah, sorry I bothered you with my fucking needs, Mother.* She never gave a damn, and she'd hit me or beat me whenever I got in her way, like somehow I inconvenienced her, even though she was the one who decided to have a child.

"I'm coming," I say, giving her a tentative smile. "Just need to blow my nose."

She scoffs and flicks her cigarette into the street, not giving a damn that she's littering or that she could start a fire. Her blue eyes are icy and cold, brown hair stringy and in need

of a good washing. I used to think she was beautiful, but that was before I knew better. Before I realized what a monster she is.

“Hurry the fuck up, we’ve got guests coming.”

“Okay.” God, I hate myself. How is it that I can be so headstrong with everyone else, but she makes me feel like I’m five again? No spine. No will to fight. Only the survival instinct to please and not cause problems.

She turns and storms toward the house, her loose black dress flapping in the wind. Once the front door bangs shut, I pull down the visor and flip the mirror open. My mascara is a mess. I fix that first. When I’m done, I stare at my reflection. I look like my mom. My fingers curl into fists and I growl at the mirror. Only my dark blue eyes set me apart from her. My mother’s are the color of ice, cold like her heart.

Fuck her.

I don’t look like her. I look like who she used to be. I look like Granny. That thought calms me enough that I can gently flip the visor back into place and climb out of the car. With one last steadying breath, I solidify my mental shield. It’s only a few hours. I can do this. I pull the strap of my purse over my shoulder, grabbing on to the thin material like it’ll help anchor me in a turbulent sea. Even though I’ve read books to help me cope with being here again, no amount of mental preparation will make this experience easier.

Chaos is the only adequate word to describe what it’s like being inside the house. Mother is storming around the dining room, pushing my fathers’ chests and yelling at them to get their asses moving. She wasn’t always like this, was she? Did she ever love them? I don’t remember much about my childhood. There’s one good memory of her and me together. She took me to the park. We laughed and played. That’s the memory that made me think she was gorgeous. She was happy that day. The rest is a haze of screaming and... things I’d rather not think about.

Repression does wonders.

“Goddammit, Rodney. Stop drinking the fucking beer and get the fucking tablecloth on the table.” Her scent slaps me in the face. I wrinkle my nose and try not to breathe too much in. She’s definitely in pre-heat. Her pheromones are so strong, and with her heightened emotions, the scent blankets the house. The smell alone is enough to make me nauseous.

Only a few more hours. She can’t do much harm in a few hours, Whit. You got this.

“I’m going, Wendy! Give me a break, my mother-in-law died.”

I quietly shut the door, shrinking against it to avoid her vicious temper and gripping my purse strap tighter. Rodney has always been a jerk. I don’t think he’s my biological dad. Frankly, I hope none of the alphas are, but she’s been with them since before I was born. One of these assholes is my father. One of these men didn’t care enough to save me from her. They didn’t care enough to give me the time of day. All of them suck.

“She was my mother,” Mother hisses, cracking her palm across his cheek.

Even though I’m not the one under assault, I flinch. My stomach churns and bile rises in my throat as memories try to resurface. *Count your breaths*, I remind myself. That’s one of the supposed techniques, but they’ve never done much to help me. Still, I try to focus on my breathing instead of the havoc in the house.

Everything stops with that slap. Tim and Peter slide their gazes toward one another. Rodney’s eyes slowly narrow on my mother, and she finally loses some of her gusto. She looks down under the heat of his gaze, jaw grinding. She wants to keep fighting, but that would make him even angrier. I’ve never seen them hurt her, but that doesn’t mean they won’t. She’s always pushing their buttons, poking and prodding. Eventually, the beasts will snap.

For Granny’s sake, I hope that doesn’t happen today.

Opening and shutting the door, I pretend like I only just entered. “Hey,” I say, stopping halfway into the dining room where Mother and Rodney are standing. “Everything okay?”

Rodney sips on his beer, scowling at her. His cheek is red. “Fine. Your mother was going to the kitchen to make me a sandwich.” He pushes some of his alpha influence into his words. “I’m fucking starving.”

“Oh. I thought we were having casseroles...” I trail off when Mother whips her head in my direction.

The pure, acidic hate of her gaze used to hurt. “I’ll be back,” she says to Rodney, effectively ending further conversation.

Since Rodney isn’t going to help, I grab the tablecloth and spread it over the cheap dining room table. There’s a tear at the end of the autumn-patterned cloth. I tug it down a little further. It’s summer and the tablecloth doesn’t fit the season. Granny deserves better. She deserves pretty flowers in gorgeous vases, not this cracked plastic table covering.

“She’s being a bitch.” Rodney scoffs and takes another drink of his beer.

“Wendy needs a fucking knot and a whipping,” Tim grumbles to Peter.

Peter snickers. “She’s rank for it. We’ll deal with her after. She’s almost in heat, my cock is hard as a damn rock.”

As per usual, they talk as though I’m not in the room. I swallow my disgust and smooth the cloth, studiously ignoring everyone there. What they get up to during the heat is none of my business.

“Mommy, no. Please, no. I don’t want to go down there,” I scream, desperately trying to get her to see reason. “I’ll stay in my room. I’ll be good. Mommy?”

She pushes me onto the first step of the cellar and starts to close the giant door. “Get the fuck inside.”

My little body trembles, and I scream for help, banging my fist on the wood.

“It’s only a week, you dumb cunt,” Mommy hisses.

No. No, dammit. I prepared for this. I won’t let those memories fucking win. I’m not a kid anymore. I’m almost twenty-one for fuck’s sake. Traces of my pheromones tickle my nostrils. All I smell is my fear now, and soon enough they will too. I have to get myself under control. Feeling nothing is better than being scared. I glance around the room, listing the items I see in my head to keep my mind occupied. After a minute, my scent fades. The alphas don’t say anything. I assume they didn’t notice. That or they didn’t care what I’m feeling.

“Here’s your fuckin’ sandwich.” Mother storms into the dining room and hands Rodney his food. She didn’t bring him a plate. She glares at the other alphas.

Someone knocks before they can break into a fight.

“Well?” she demands, stabbing me with her eyes.

I glance around. No one makes a move to answer the door. “I’ll get it.”

Fuck you! I want to scream, but she’d take too much satisfaction in me lashing out. She likes it when I get crazy. It makes her smile like a maniac and makes me feel like crap. If she were anyone else, I wouldn’t tolerate it. She knows how to hurt me and she has all of my courage in her fist, clenching it tight to keep me in line. Parents shouldn’t have that sort of power over their kids.

My first cousin Dennis and his pack are at the door. I step aside to let them in, offering a kind smile. I don’t know them well, but they seem a hell of a lot more normal than my family. I guess having one dad that’s a drug addict is better than having an abusive mom. I wonder if his other dads were nice. His mom, Nancy, always seemed kind. She’s not with him though. Probably the smartest decision Nancy could have made.

Everyone shuffles inside, and I close the door, staying by it to avoid my parents.

I glance to the living room on the left. The clock on the wall is broken. It doesn't matter though. This will be over soon enough.



“Thanks for coming, Dennis. It was nice seeing you.” I give him a quick, awkward side-hug on his way out. I hate hugs, but thankfully it's over in half a second. The rest of his pack looks relieved to be leaving. Dennis is red-eyed and out of sorts. Granny meant a lot to all of us.

“Take care, Whitney. Good luck tomorrow night.” His omega wraps herself around him, comforting him with her touch. She nods at me and pulls him away. She's nice.

Not all omegas are like my mother.

Now that I think of it, I don't know anyone quite like her.

I don't know how she came from Granny because Granny was wonderful. She was kind. She smelled like cookies, she smiled like the sun, and she loved like it was free.

Standing in the threshold, I wait until they're all the way in their vehicle before closing the door. They're the last of the guests to leave. I should go now too, but Granny would want me to help clean up. Manners were important to her.

The house is strangely quiet. My dads sit on the worn-down couch in the living room, staring at some sporting event playing on the television. I quietly make my way into the dining room, hoping Mother went to take a bath or for a cigarette. I can get this place mostly clean in under five minutes. Five minutes, and then I'm free.

I pick up the glasses that were left on the table and carry them into the kitchen. The wall separating the rooms hid her from my sight, but I feel her eyes slice through me as soon as my feet hit the scuffed linoleum. Mother is leaning against the fridge, a box of cigarettes in her hands. She starts to pack them, the steady thwack of the paperboard against her palm violently knocks into me.

“Whitney Marie.” She rasps my name like she’s finally caught a thief she’s been hunting.

I set the cups in the sink and glance over my shoulder. “There’s not much to clean up. I’ll be done in a bit if you want to relax.” *Please go away.*

She snorts. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing. Prancing around in that top... What sort of omega are you?”

Turning toward the sink, I start the faucet. There’s no sense in trying to talk to her now.

“It was the only black shirt I had.” The shirt is flattering, but it’s not like I’m wearing a crop top. Looking sexy wasn’t at the top of my mind when I got dressed for Granny’s funeral. Mother doesn’t care about that though. I grab a grimy sponge and squirt a bit of soap on it. The glasses will probably still be dirty, but I’ve already committed to cleaning. If I stop now, it’ll only make her angrier.

“Your tits are everywhere,” she snarls. The thwacking of the cigarette pack stops, and the hairs on the back of my neck rise. Her worn-down heels clomp across the floor. She grabs my shoulder, squeezing tight enough to bruise. “Fucking skank. You think you’ll get your daddies’ love if you are their little whore?”

The tight grip reminds me of when she pinned me face first to the wall and punched me in the ribs, keeping me at the perfect angle so her knuckles could slam into my side over and over again. All because I looked at her the wrong way.

“You want them, don’t you?”

My heart breaks. This isn’t the first time she’s accused me of this. She thinks I want her alphas. She’s jealous of me. She doesn’t realize the only thing I want is a mom who loves me without hurting me.

Her lips brush against my ear, and I shudder. “You want their knots, don’t you, you fucking cunt?” She bites my earlobe, and I yelp.

Maybe it’s the grief from Granny’s death, or years and years of pent-up anger. Maybe it’s the stale smell of her breath.

Maybe it's the indents her teeth left in my skin. Maybe it's the way her fingers grip me even harder. Maybe it's everything, but something in me snaps.

Whirling around, I shove the palm of my hand into her nose. A sickening crack fills the air. My wet hand leaves a streak of water across her forehead. Blood rushes out of her nostrils and she howls in pain. Her fingers leave my skin, freeing me from her toxic grasp.

"I don't want you or your pathetic fucking alphas." I shove her chest. She stumbles back into the stove, her cigarette pack flying out of her hand and through the air. I go to hit her again then stop.

No. I won't become her.

"What the fuck is going on in there?" Rodney calls.

None of them even bothered to get up to see what was wrong. They're all so used to her hurting me. Fuck them. Fuck this house. Fuck my mom. Fuck the abuse. Fuck it all. I'm tired of being her punching bag.

"Nothing," I shout and rush from the kitchen while Mother is still distracted. I snatch my purse from the chair I hung it on earlier. Settling it over my shoulder like armor, I rush to my car. My hands are still wet, so I wipe them across my jeans before fumbling with my keys.

Tremors wrack my body. The key misses the keyhole. I glance over the top of the car, eyes widening when I see Mother racing for the front door. A bull charging toward a red flag. A shark zeroing in on blood. A monster. The metal slides in, and I unlock the door, hopping inside and slamming it shut. I lock the door and grab the wheel, screaming at the top of my lungs.

"Fucking bitch!" she yells from the side of the car.

My heart jumps into my throat. I start the car and peel out, narrowly avoiding hitting her when she tries to step in front of me. Flicking my eyes to the rearview mirror, I watch her bend to pick up a rock. She launches it at my car, face bright red and contorted in anger. Streaks of blood coat her lips and chin. The

rock hits my trunk with a solid thud, and I flinch. She can't hurt me. She won't come after me. She'll need to reset her broken nose, and she'll go into her heat soon enough. By the time she gathers enough of her senses, it'll be too late for her to find me.

Tomorrow night, my life changes for the better.

Chapter Three

WHITNEY

I get home a little after five. I didn't eat any of the food that was set out. My stomach was too sensitive, and I didn't want to risk vomiting and ending up in a vulnerable position. One thing about my mother is she knows how to take advantage of me when I'm least suspecting it.

I drop my keys and purse on the little table next to the front door of my apartment.

Unlike the house I grew up in, this place actually feels like a home. I don't have much, but the Omega Council assigned me to a furnished apartment when I turned eighteen. I didn't have to take it, but I wasn't about to stay in that place for longer than I had to. The walls are a soft cream color and the floors are clean despite being worn. My family isn't here.

That's the most important part.

Slipping off my shoes, I head to my bedroom to change. There's a singular key on my nightstand. Granny gave me the key to the safety deposit box when I turned eighteen, but asked me not to open it until after she passed. I haven't had the courage to go to the bank to see what she left me, but eventually I'll have to. I peel off the top and throw it in the trash. I can never wear it again without thinking about my mother. There are small bruises on my shoulder where she grabbed me. I push on one, hissing in pain. They'll linger for a while. I take off my pants and decide to throw them away as well. Today wasn't even about her and she ruined it.

Your mama loves you, baby. She just doesn't know how to show it.

Granny's words echo in my mind, and I scoff, shaking my head. Granny was convinced her daughter loved me. The only love I ever felt was when I was with Granny. When we baked tea-sized cookies. When we danced in the kitchen to old records. When we watered the flowers in her garden. That was all love. She let me in. She wanted me there.

I remove the tape and tracker from my chest, blinking back a fresh wave of tears. I have to do something or I'm going to end up crying all night long. Securing the tracker in the drawer of the bedside table, I grab the robe off the back of the bathroom door. I slip it on and send a message to Lindsey.

Whitney: Hey. What are you doing tonight?

I watch the little typing bubble, frowning at the device. My heat is going to come soon. I'm terrified I'll end up like my mother. What if I can't control my emotions? What if I hurt my alphas like she does? What if they end up hating me?

Lindsey: Hey, babe! Thirsty Thursday means party time. You down? It'll get your mind off of things.

Whitney: Pick me up?

Lindsey: Nine-thirty. I have some things to drop off, and I'll bring a few minis so we can pre-game.

I toss the phone on the bed and head to the shower. Four-ish hours to get ready. Four hours to stop overthinking my entire life.



By the time Lindsey knocks on my door, I've put on enough makeup to cover how red my eyes are. My hair is styled in soft waves, and I'm wearing the prettiest bargain store dress I own.

"Hey, Whity Whit." Lindsey smiles and takes me in. Her grin falls a little when she looks at my dress, but she quickly flicks her eyes back to mine. "How are you holding up?"

“I can’t talk about it. Are you ready?”

Her long blonde hair is sleek and shiny, her hot pink dress short and tight. She’s basically Malibu Barbie. She shifts, opening her giant purse. “Almost. I brought you something.” After a second of digging around, she pulls out a shimmering silver dress. “This is for you.”

“Lindsey,” I whine. “I can’t afford to pay you for that.”

“Come on, I’m not asking you to do that. I want you to have it. Consider it a thanks for letting me keep my stash here.” She shakes her purse, various pill bottles rattling around inside of it. “Besides, that outfit is not it.” She checks me out again, displeasure pulling at her lips.

Jerk.

I bristle. The dress isn’t as nice as the one she brought, but it’s pretty. The sky blue looks nice against my skin, and the material is soft and stretchy. I like it. Anger floods through me, and for a moment, I consider slamming her head into the wall. Realizing that’s fucking crazy, I simply take the dress from her.

“Hurry, hurry! I’ll put this stuff up and get us chasers for the minis.” She brushes past me, not noticing that she offended me. Setting her purse down on the coffee table, she takes the bottom cushion off the couch and begins stuffing her pills where the cushion and back of the couch meet. She’s the only one who comes to visit, so we’ve never really worried about finding a better spot to hide her drugs.

“Thanks for the dress.” I clutch it to my chest and rush to my room. Once the door is shut and I take a calming breath, I remind myself I’m grieving and yelling at Lindsey for talking shit about my clothes is only due to emotional overload.

I drop the silver material on the bed and pull off the blue dress. My bra will work for the new one. I pull it on, clasping the choker-style top at the back of my neck. Okay. To be fair, this dress is gorgeous. I twirl in front of my mirror. Tight in all the right places, glimmery, and soft as silk. Lindsey’s heart was in the right place.

“Whit! Get out here.”

“Coming,” I say, glancing at myself one last time. I smile, or try to. It’s more of a baring of teeth. I’ll definitely need alcohol if I’m going to socialize. Lindsey will be pissed if I scare the men off with my snarl.

“Two shots each,” she sing-songs as I step out of my room. “Let’s get ready to party, girl.”

The chaser is much needed. Lindsey’s cheap whiskey burns on the way down, and the soda helps with the sharp aftertaste. I gag a little, and she snickers.

“Weak.”

“Shut up,” I grumble, sticking my fake ID and key in my bra. “Ready?”

My tracker is safely on the bedside table. No one will know I’m gone.

“Of course. Did I tell you Mitchell is going to be there?” She sighs and launches into an in-depth plan of attack for hooking up with him tonight.

I pretend like I’m listening, but as we walk to the car, my mind drifts to everything that happened earlier. I give the recent memories a few seconds then lock them away, closing them tightly in a box at the back of my mind. Another day to forget.

Lindsey blasts some fast-paced electronic music and bops along to it. I take the suppressant bottle out of the glovebox and down two pills, grimacing at the aftertaste. Lindsey navigates toward downtown Dolin, and I lean my head against the headrest, watching the lights pass by. Warmth fills my belly as the alcohol starts to kick in. It’ll take more than two shots to get me drunk, but it’s a good start. Rubbing at my ear, I trace over the marks Mother left behind.

“Here,” Lindsey shouts over the music. “You look like you need this.” She passes me a vape pen.

I stare at it. I don’t typically smoke, but tonight is my last night to be wild and do whatever I want. I don’t have to

answer to my pack yet. Once I'm mated to a bunch of alphas, I can't be crazy. One last night of rebellion. That's all this is.

Sure it is, a voice whispers inside my head. I ignore it. I'm not worried about logic right now. My heart hurts, and I've cried more than enough tears for one day.

"Fuck it," I say, lifting the pen to my lips and inhaling.

"Hell yeah! This is going to be epic." Lindsey smiles and bobs her head, tapping her fingers to the beat on the steering wheel.

I give her the vape pen back and lean my head against the back of the seat, staring out of the window. She parks in an alley in the warehouse district behind a long line of cars. Stuffing her keys into her bra, she waggles her eyebrows at me before hopping out of the car. I follow her with less enthusiasm, but a little thrill of excitement rushes through me. It is technically illegal for me to be out right now. Omegas don't get to have fun. There's a strictly enforced curfew at eleven, and I'm sure as shit not supposed to be partying. Good thing I smell like a beta.

The sidewalk is deserted, but Lindsey takes off with purposeful steps.

Guess the party is this way.

"Hey, Ricky." Lindsey waves her hand at a bouncer and grabs my arm, dragging me toward the sketchy building with boarded up windows. There's no sign indicating what the property is. This building must've been vacant before it was turned into this club. Faint music pulses from behind the cinderblock walls and washes over me. The guy she's waving at is perched on an almost comically small stool, a touch of yellow light bathing his face. His lips draw back into a lazy grin.

"Hey, Lindsey. Who's your friend?" Ricky is a burly beta who grew up on our block. I pretend not to recognize him, but his eyebrows jump to his hairline as he takes me in. He breathes in and laughs. "Oh shit. Girl, you've got balls. Camila will have your ass if you get caught out."

“Camila is a bitch,” I reply. I know full well what’ll happen to me. I don’t give a damn, especially not with the buzz I have going now. “You going to let us in or what? Thinking about snitching?”

“There she is. I was wondering when you’d stop moping.”

I glare at Lindsey. “My grandma just died, Lindsey.”

“Oh, I know.” She chews on her bottom lip and makes a face. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Whatever,” I say, glancing at Ricky. “I need some alcohol.”

“Don’t worry, I’m no snitch. You can have your fun. If you’re looking for a good time, you’re in luck. Poppy is bartending tonight.” He gets off the stool and opens the door. “Try the vodka bomb.”

“Thanks.” I nod at him and head inside without my so-called friend. I strut down the dark corridor toward the music.

Lindsey’s heels clack on the tile behind me. “Whit, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that.”

“Forget it,” I snap. I slow down so she can catch up and soften my tone. “I want tonight to be fun.”

Threading her fingers with mine, she squeezes my hand. “Me too. I’m already buzzed.”

“Same.” I laugh, and we push through long, black velvet curtains.

Colored strobe lights flicker over a concrete dance floor. There are so many people dancing it’s hard not to feel a little excited. The DJ is on point, and the beat is upbeat and heavy enough that I start to sway to the rhythm.

“Drinks, then dancing.” Lindsey drags me toward the bar.

I quickly grab my ID so the bartender won’t be grossed out when I hand it to her. Lindsey offered to pay for drinks, and she has a card. No sweaty boob cash tonight. We squeeze between two groups of people, leaning against the bar top.

“It’s so busy,” Lindsey says, smoothing her hair. “Do you see Mitchell?” She whispers the question.

Surveying the crowd, I make a good-faith attempt to find the delta with a receding hairline. Honestly, Lindsey could do better, but Mitchell is a bad boy. There are way too many people here to pick his face out of the crowd. If he’s on the dance floor, I’ll never be able to tell.

“I don’t know,” I admit.

“What are you ladies having?” a voluptuous bartender with long braids asks.

“Two vodka bombs.” Lindsey checks with me and I nod.

Whatever will work.

“IDs?” She holds out her hand, and Lindsey and I hand over our identification. She checks them over and gives them back. “All right, babes. I’m Poppy. Two vodka bombs coming up.” She smirks. There’s something a little off about the look, but who am I to judge customer service faces? I’d probably sound fake if I had to work with people.

A song fades out and the crowd cheers as the next one fades in. Some women whoop from somewhere on the dance floor and the lights brighten and shift to green and blue, swerving over the room.

“How do you know about this place?” I ask Lindsey.

“It’s a new hotspot. This is the first rave they’ve thrown here. You’re literally making history tonight.” She squeals and thanks the bartender, handing over her credit card to start a tab. We both grab a shot glass filled with pink-tinted liquid. I sniff it. Vodka doesn’t have much of a smell, but I can tell there’s alcohol in the glass.

“Why is it pink?” Lindsey asks Poppy.

“That’s the bomb part.”

“So cute.” Lindsey clinks her glass with mine. “Bottoms up.”

I lift the drink to my lips and toss it back, gasping around the sharp burn chased by a fizzle on my tongue. What the hell was that?

Lindsey's eyes go wide.

Poppy cackles. "Three."

I inhale and the room expands, growing twice as large as it was a moment ago.

"Two."

My heart pounds against my rib cage. The veins on my wrists pulse in time with the beat.

"One."

Colors explode around me, shades I didn't even know existed fill the room.

"Boom."

"Oh, shit." Lindsey's voice is higher than normal. "What's happening?"

I turn to look at Poppy, but the bar stretches until I can barely make her out.

"Vodka bombs, babes. You knew what those were, right?"

"Bombs?" I ask, laughing a little. "Who serves bombs at a bar?"

Poppy's snort bounces from one ear to the other, sliding around in my head. "Fucking Ricky. You'll be fine. It wears off after a few hours. Go dance."

"Yes, yes." Lindsey gasps. "Dancing." Her nails dig into my skin, and she yanks me toward the swiveling floor.

When did it start spinning?

"This is a trip," I whisper, carefully testing the rotating floor.

Lindsey breaks into a hysterical giggle. "I'm. So. High," she says between breaths.

The floor stops spinning when I put my foot on it. I take another step, bracing for the spin, but it never comes. I glance around as people bump into me, waving their hands and dancing. They move around me like I'm a boulder in the middle of a stream, movements fluid and smooth.

I rub my eyes; the music stutters then switches into a frantic, anxiety-inducing track. Lindsey twirls in front of me.

"Come on, Whitney. Dance with me." She waves her hand around like an octopus having a seizure.

My laugh is high pitched, and she grins, swooping in to grab my hands. She moves my body for me as I lose it, cackling until my side aches. She whoops when the song changes and the rest of the crowd instantly shifts to fit the beat.

This is insane.

People start to scream. The music suddenly stops. Harsh, bright overhead lights come on. Lindsey is still dancing, waving our arms around.

"Nobody move!"

"What's going on?" I ask, voice sounding distorted to my own ears.

"Everyone down, now."

Men in full police suits rush through the building. I don't think this is a surprise Thunder From Down Under show. Those guns are very real and scary.

Lindsey is blissfully unaware of her surroundings, but I have enough sense to pull her toward the floor. I lie down like everyone around me. Lindsey rests her cheek on the dirty floor and sighs.

"It's like the ocean," she murmurs.

"The cops are here," I whisper.

"Mmm." She closes her eyes and hums to herself. She's so fucking high.

Officers walk around the room; their pounding steps vibrate through me. The closer they get, the more my heart clenches in fear. If they run my ID, they'll know it's a fake. I'm going to be in so much trouble. My mind starts to spiral. What if Camila shuns me? I'll be forced to leave society. Forced to find a way to live off the land. I've been forced to do things my whole life, but being shunned might be the thing that breaks me.

I gasp for air, chest suddenly tight and heavy. A cop nearby swings his head in my direction when I make a small choking noise. He steps over a couple of people and squats down, shifting his gun to the side and pointing it away.

“Are you okay?”

No. No. No.

Digging my nails into the floor, I try to cling to the filthy hardwood. I try to ground myself. Try to reel in the panic clawing at my throat. Try to keep my heart in my chest, but it's going to burst at any second. I'm screwed. I'm a low pack omega with nothing going for me.

“Hey, breathe. Hayden! We need a paramedic.” The guy reaches for me, his fingers morphing into sharp claws.

I recoil, scrambling to my knees. “Don't.”

“Easy,” he says softly, squinting at me. He holds his hands up. The monstrous claws are gone. “What did you take?”

“Nothing.”

The earth shakes and I whimper, covering my head and expecting the building to cave in. Earthquakes are a regular occurrence in Dolin, but I've never felt one so strong. The thudding races toward me, and I know at any second the earth is going to open and swallow me whole.

But then it suddenly stops.

I don't trust the quiet.

“Whitney?” A monstrous voice whispers my name.

“No.” I curl in on myself. “No.”

“You’re okay,” the monster soothes.

“What is she on?”

“One, two, three, boom!” Lindsey giggles.

“Fucking druggies,” a grumpy voice that isn’t the monster says.

“Vodka bombs.”

Each voice starts to merge together. I can’t tell who the monster is anymore. I’m scared to look, but if I don’t, I can’t find a way to escape.

Slowly lowering my arms, I tip my head up. A group of cops stands around me and Lindsey. Alpha and beta pheromones fill the air, wrapping around me like a noose.

Fuck.

“Whitney, it’s Hayden. I pulled you over earlier, remember?” I look at the guy in front of me, recognizing his gray eyes. His voice is less monstrous now that I can see his face. “Do you know where you are?”

“Dolin.”

“Excuse me.” A woman shoves past the cops.

Hayden doesn’t move.

She huffs and sits on my other side. “Hey, hon. I’m Maddy. Can you tell me what you’re on?”

“I had a vodka bomb.” And the alcohol before we left my apartment, but the vodka bomb had... something in it.

“Look at my light.” She holds up a tiny flashlight that’s as bright as a flash of lightning.

Thunder shakes the building. “I hate thunderstorms.”

“Pupils are blown. Do you know what was in the drink?”

“No.” I should have asked. My heart starts to race again when she straps a blood pressure cuff to my arm.

“Is she going to be okay?” Hayden asks.

I glance at him. “Why do you care?”

He makes a face but doesn't answer.

"Depends on the drug. She's tripping, that's for sure."

A few crashes of thunder make me flinch.

"I don't like storms," I say again, trying to get up.

"Shh, it's okay." The paramedic grabs me. "Sit here with me. The storm will be over soon."

"Hey. Knock that shit off," Hayden shouts. The other cops glare across the dance floor.

"Detective Jay told us to search the place," a far-off voice yells back.

"Sarge?" Hayden glances at the tallest guy in front of us.

"I'll take care of it. Arrest the omega and her friend."

"Yes, sir."

Their steps boom like thunder, and the fear gripping my heart eases. It's not a storm.

"I want to dance." Lindsey gets to her feet and dances around. Her movements make sounds. Her hips like the heavy bass of the EDM music from earlier.

"Find the bartender," the paramedic tells Hayden, words oddly in time with Lindsey's music. "Find out what was in that drink."

Chapter Four

HAYDEN

I don't want to leave her. Knowing that her grandmother died and that's probably why she's here, I feel obligated to stay and make sure no one treats her badly. It's a strange desire, given I don't even know her, but the urge is there. The paramedic clears her throat, so I nod and start stepping over bodies until I reach the bar. One by one, the other officers are logging people's details and either sending them home or handcuffing them. Tonight's raid wouldn't have been possible without the anonymous tip we received.

Illicit drugs have been taking over Dolin, and my department has been aggressive in trying to take them down. Somewhere in this crowd of people is a dealer.

"Hayden." Asher calls me toward the end of the bar where he's standing. He's interrogating a curvy woman who doesn't look too pleased about it.

"This the bartender?" I ask.

"Yeah. Poppy." Asher gives her a cold look. "She's not talking."

These busts go one of two ways. Either someone is willing to work with us, or they shut down completely.

"What's in a vodka bomb?" I ask, hooking my thumbs in my duty belt.

Poppy quirks her eyebrows. "Vodka."

"Nice try. What else? I know you got a couple of women high tonight. You either tell me what it is, or I arrest you for

narcotics trafficking.”

Asher whistles. “Sounds like a no-brainer to me.”

“Asshole,” Poppy mutters. Her face pinches in frustration, and her eyes slip to the side, glancing at the dance floor full of people.

Asher and I turn to see who she’s looking at. Some skeezy looking douche with greasy brown hair and a tracksuit. My money is on him being the dealer.

“Fine,” she concedes. “But I don’t want heat for this.”

I look at Asher since he’s technically the one that’s been working her.

“If you give us good intel, I can see that you’re not detained for any longer than you have to be.”

Drumming her fingers on her legs, she nods. “Vodka bombs have a hit of LSD in it too. Nothing crazy, just a little nudge.”

I scowl. “Do you tell your customers what they’re ordering?”

“Most times they already know. It’s not my job to babysit people.”

“Actually, it is. You can get in a lot of trouble, you know that, right?” Asher shakes his head. “No, you probably don’t, because I bet you’re not even certified.”

“I have a kid,” she blurts. “I need the money. It’s this or stripping.”

Asher blinks, not at all swayed by her sob story. “How many vodka bombs did you serve tonight?”

“Shit, I don’t count.” She cringes when he scowls. “I don’t know, less than a hundred.”

“What about that woman?” I turn and point at Whitney. “You serve her a drink?”

“Yeah, they asked for it, though. I didn’t slip them anything if that’s what you’re implying. I’m in the service

business, man. I'm only doing my job."

"So you're telling me that she knew exactly what you were giving her? She told you, please give me vodka with LSD?"

"Well, no, but her friend ordered it. I didn't realize they didn't know until they'd already taken it. By then, it was too late." She huffs. "Am I going to jail?"

"Yeah, you're going to jail, but you'll be out by the morning," Asher says, giving her a sad smile. "What's the dealer's name?" He jerks his thumb toward the sketchy guy.

"I'm not a snitch."

"Then you're not getting out by morning," I cut in. I hate riding her so hard, but this guy has been dealing more than a little LSD. We've had two dozen overdoses in the last month due to some coke he laced with fentanyl. LSD is nothing compared to fentanyl. I couldn't give a rat's ass about the acid, unless you count Whitney's unintended trip. That bothers me, but I try to push the woman out of my head.

"Fuck." She shakes her head and glares at the dude. "Fuck it. His name is Tony, but he goes by Sneaky."

"Of course he does," Asher mutters. "I'll deal with Poppy."

"Great." I tap the bar and smile at Poppy. "You did the right thing. You're lucky no one died tonight. Sneaky's been cutting his shit with fent."

Her eyes widen, and I nod. Yeah. She's damn lucky. Death would mean life in prison for her and that asshole.

I go back to Whitney first, keeping an eye on Sneaky. I wouldn't put it past him to run. He has to know we're looking for him now. Whitney is still freaking out, but Maddy is doing a good job keeping her and her friend mostly calm.

"LSD," I tell her.

She nods. "Makes sense. Whitney's having a hard ride but this one is on a good trip." She looks at Whitney's friend who is humming to herself and running her hands over the floor like it's soft grass. "They have any more of that back there?"

“Maddy,” I warn.

“Yeah, yeah. No drugs on the job, I got it.”

Snorting, I shake my head. “What you do on your own time is your business,” I say. She can smoke pot if she wants. The harder stuff makes me a little wary. I don’t want her screwing up her life because she wants to party.

“We got a runner!”

Fucking called it. I turn and see an officer tackle Sneaky who, as it turns out, is shit at sneaking. Go figure.

Whitney whimpers.

I focus on her and squat down again. “You’re going to be okay. By morning, you’ll probably hate me but you won’t be tripping.”

She stares at me with wide eyes. Her pupils are so dilated I can barely make out the blue of her irises.

“You broke your promise,” I say softly, but she doesn’t hear me.

Most people never do.

Chapter Five

WHITNEY

I'm shivering. There must be a cold front coming in. My apartment is usually warmer than this. I pull the blanket up to my chin then open my eyes and look down. This is definitely not my apartment. Sitting, I let the scratchy blue scrap of material fall to the floor. Rolled steel bars line the mostly concrete room. A stone drops into the pit of my stomach.

Memories from last night flash through my mind. Vodka bombs. Going to dance. The thunder. The cops. The claws. Hayden, the officer who pulled me over, telling the paramedic I was on LSD. Being escorted to a transport vehicle with a bunch of other people.

Shit. This is not good.

I glance around, squinting through the dull ache behind my eyes. A few other people are sleeping off the effects of last night. A shiver races down my spine. It's so cold. Grabbing the scratchy blanket, I wrap it around myself. Lindsey is snoring on a bench, legs splayed wide open. She's lucky everyone else is sleeping. I adjust her legs so she's not showing the whole world her very skimpy thong and sit next to her.

"I fucked up," I whisper, trying to brush my hair with my fingers.

All things considered, this isn't the worst moment of my life. There's a way out of this prison. When I was little, I never thought I'd make it out of my mother's house alive. There were times when I didn't think I'd survive the five-day stint

locked in the cellar while she and my fathers rode out her heat. This cell is like a five-star hotel compared to that place.

“Ugh.” Lindsey jerks awake, hands instantly slapping over her eyes. “Too bright.”

“Morning, sunshine,” I say with a lame laugh. “We’re in jail.”

“What?” She sits, dropping her hands from her face and groaning. “Shit. Not again.”

I raise an eyebrow. “Not again? You’ve been here before?”

“A few months ago.”

“Let me guess, no frequent flier miles?”

She snorts and gives me a look. “Why aren’t you freaking out? I had a meltdown the first time I was arrested.”

“It’s a little cold,” I say with a shrug. “But my mom’s not here.”

“Ain’t that the fuckin’ truth.” She scrubs her face. “Oh shit. It’s Friday.”

The Compatibility Ceremony is tonight. I should already be getting ready, going to a salon for a fresh haircut, but I won’t be getting matched tonight. Camila gave me one last warning before sending me to the therapist. I had one more chance. I worked so hard to pass that stupid test, but now I’ve fucked up my future. Only good omegas are rewarded, and I always end up in trouble.

“Rise and shine, ladies,” a sharp voice calls from down the hall.

Grumbles of frustration answer the man, but by the time he’s standing before us, everyone is sitting. The guy glares at all of us before glancing down at his clipboard.

“Whitney Marie Tolson.” He looks up expectantly.

Lindsey elbows me.

“H-here,” I say, walking toward the steel bars. I’m not surprised they identified me so easily. Facial recognition

software is a bitch, and the Omega Council has a database with all our information in it, and I'm sure they cross-check mugshots to that system.

“Omega. Age twenty?”

I nod.

He checks me out. “You’re being sent to the Omega Council for processing. Let’s go.” He pulls a key from his belt and unlocks the door, scowling at everyone else until he closes it. He’s so serious it’s almost laughable. Like they’d try to escape in a building full of cops.

“Arms behind your back.”

I do as he asks, shooting Lindsey a look while he clips cuffs around my wrists. I start to mouth goodbye but see she’s preoccupied talking to another woman in the cell. Giving it a second, I wait for her to look and say something. To say goodbye. For all we know, this could be the last time I see her. She never does. A disappointed frown tugs at my lips, but I quickly school my features.

She’s hungover.

Yeah, but she’s supposed to be your best friend.

The officer pushes my shoulder to get me walking, so I don’t have time to think over why I continue to let the people who are supposed to love me treat me like shit.

“Don’t push me,” I say, leveling him with a look.

His upper lip curls, but he simply grunts.

Great. I can stand up for myself with strangers, but not my friends and family. That’s not completely true. I finally fought for myself yesterday with Mom. After years of enduring her torture, I finally grew a spine. At least I did something.

We stop at a glass-covered window, and the officer tells the attendant my name. She gets up to retrieve my lone key from a plastic bin and pushes it through the little cut out section. Of course they confiscated the fake ID, so I grab the key to my apartment and hold it tight. I didn’t bring my phone last night,

but it's not like I have anyone to call. Not anyone that would care anyway.

The attendant buzzes us through the secure door.

"Go on then," the officer says.

I sigh and walk into the office area of the police station. Several men and women in uniform are busy behind worn desks. A familiar man rises from his desk and his gray eyes flick over me, as though checking to make sure I'm in one piece.

Why would he care?

His attention puts me on high alert. In my experience, it's better to stay under the radar. I quickly realize there's no escaping his notice. He grabs something from his desk and tucks it into his belt before walking over.

"Morning," he says, eyes still on me.

"Hey, Hayden." The other officer didn't even realize Hayden was greeting me. "You have this one under control?"

"I'll take it from here, Roger." Hayden glances at my arms, frowning. "Are the cuffs really necessary?"

"Protocol. Besides, she seems compliant now, but I bet she's a fighter." The guy snickers.

Hayden ignores him. "Ready?"

"Do I have a choice?"

He grimaces. "No."

"Didn't think so," I say. "Let's get this over with." The sooner Camila yells at me, the sooner I can be done with her. I don't know exactly what will become of me now that I've screwed my chances of being matched, but the ideas that come to mind aren't exactly fun.

There's the Omega Auctions, a place where troublesome omegas go to be sold off to the highest bidder, or there's being shunned. Since I'm from a low pack, and literally the lowest of the low, I worry the latter is my fate.

“Whitney?” Hayden’s voice draws my gaze to him. His eyes are lined with concern. “Did you hear me? I said the car is this way.”

“You’re not going to push me around like this guy?” I look at the empty space behind me. The other officer left.

“I’m not going to do that, and I’ll have some words with Roger when I get back.”

“Chivalry isn’t dead,” I whisper so softly I don’t expect him to hear it.

Hayden laughs under his breath. “Not entirely. Come on.” He walks away.

I either stand here like a stubborn brat or I woman up. It takes four quick steps to catch up with him. He side-eyes me, gaze piercing into me like he knows all of my secrets and he knows what I’m thinking. It’s unsettling. Must be a cop thing. He holds the door open for me when we get to it.

“See, chivalry.” He gives me a small smile before quickly growing serious when he sees two officers walking toward us from the parking lot. “Car’s this way.” He grabs my shoulder and guides me out of the doorway.

I suck in a sharp breath at the contact, hating that it’s almost the exact spot my mother grabbed me yesterday. Hayden shoots me a concerned look and removes his hand, settling for walking next to me.

“Damn, an omega, huh? She’s a looker, Hayden. Think she’ll want a date?”

I furrow my brow. What the fuck?

I’m used to men being like this. They all get out of sorts when they catch a whiff of my pheromones. Since I’m stressed, they’re probably a little stronger than usual. My scent attracts males of all types, but I was born to mate with alphas. That doesn’t mean betas and deltas are respectful. If anything, they’re the worst ones. Always desperate to try and find an omega they can knock up. They may not have knots, but their sperm swim the same direction as alpha sperm.

Hell, if it weren't for a horny beta hooking up with an omega over two hundred years ago, there would be no low packs.

"Shut up, Kyle. You couldn't get laid if your life depended on it," Hayden says.

The other two officers break into laughter.

"He owned you."

"Fuck you," Kyle says to his friend. "You still live with your mom."

The door cuts off the rest of their conversation.

Hayden sighs. "Sorry about that. Those guys are douchebags."

"I'm used to it."

"Right," he says, face scrunching in frustration.

I press my lips together and stare ahead.

Hayden's patrol car beeps when he unlocks it. He opens the back door and turns toward me. I avoid looking at him. He's attractive. That in itself is dangerous. I fall for all the wrong people. I befriend people who don't truly love me because it's easier to keep my guard up. Lindsey is the only person I let slip past my defenses. Growing up with her made me think she was different. I'm not very surprised to find she's just like everyone else.

All they ever care about is themselves.

"Watch your head," Hayden says, reaching for me.

"I got it," I say, but he still gently places his hand on my head to keep me from bumping it against the side of the door. The cuffs hurt my shoulders when I lean back. I scooch forward.

"I have to buckle you."

"I'm fine." I look at the floorboard. His patrol car is spotless. I expected it to smell like piss, but it doesn't.

“Please sit back,” he says, traces of frustration seeping into his tone.

“Are you going to speed, officer?” I meet his gaze.

“No.” He gives me a look.

“Then I’ll be fine. It hurts to sit back.”

“I’ll uncuff you. I’m not driving you anywhere without your seatbelt on.”

I bite my cheek to keep from snarking back. I do want the cuffs off, and if I piss him off, he might leave me in them. He leans into the car and reaches behind me, his ribs brushing over my shoulder while he works the key into the handcuffs. His brown hair is short, but it looks soft and his body wash smells like fresh rain.

“There. Buckle up.” He steps back and folds the cuffs before sticking them in a small pocket on his belt.

I do as he asks, and he nods, waiting for me to click the buckle. Once my seatbelt is secure, he shuts the door and climbs into the driver’s side seat. I stare out of the window while he drives us toward the fancy Omega Council building. Camila’s office is inside the convention center, conveniently located since that’s where the Compatibility Ceremony is held. The station is downtown too, so the drive will be short if not a little awkward.

“Do you want music?”

I flick my gaze to the rearview mirror where Hayden is watching me. “Do you ask everyone that?”

I’m being prickly, but I don’t trust his intentions.

“No.” He looks away and we fall back into the strained silence. After a few seconds, he turns on the radio which is playing a morning talk show.

“And in other news, low packs continue to protest outside of the Royal Council headquarters. We spoke with—” Hayden turns the station before I can hear the rest, stopping the dial on a rock station.

“Not a fan of the protests?” I ask.

“Protests mean officers on duty to make sure people stay safe. Officer presence makes people mad. No. I don’t like them.”

“Fair enough.” I look out the window again. “They’re right, though. We deserve to be treated equally.”

He doesn’t respond. I didn’t really expect him to. The Royal Council has been our society’s governing body for a long time. Low packs have grown in numbers. When an omega gives birth to a beta’s child, and the child is an alpha, eventually that child will form his own pack with other low born alphas. Omegas are the only ones who can give birth to alphas, and while there have been omega-beta or omega-delta relationships in the past, the Royal Council has made it very clear how they feel about those pairings. They didn’t stop the relationships for a while, but once they realized the pure alphas were going to be outnumbered by low pack alphas, they came down hard on the packs. The last I heard of an omega-beta mate bond, the two of them ended up losing everything they owned and living on the streets. Most people wouldn’t dare to take that risk when there are more sensible pairings that don’t result in the wrath of the Royal Council. Generally, betas mate with other betas and deltas mate with other deltas.

“Maybe,” Hayden finally responds. “I don’t like the violence.”

“Change is rarely peaceful.” I swing my gaze back to the rearview mirror. “Low packs have been trying to push for equality for a long time. The good old RC doesn’t care. What else are we supposed to do?”

“I don’t know.”

I nod. Neither do I. I haven’t personally been a part of any protests, but I support them. We used to be able to start businesses, but the Royal Council recently passed a law that prohibits low packs from starting new businesses. Low packs aren’t allowed to own commercial property. We aren’t allowed to buy land to build new commercial property. The high packs live in giant mansions with marble floors. We... don’t.

The rest of the ride is quiet. Hayden pulls into the parking lot, and I try to open the door but it's locked.

"Safety precaution." Hayden hops out and quickly lets me out. "Are you going to run?"

I look down at my heels, which remarkably haven't caused too much pain. "Probably not."

"Probably?"

"Probably not," I correct, glancing around the mostly empty lot. Camila's fancy BMW is in its usual spot. My stomach flutters, and I ball my hands into fists.

"Right," Hayden says, noticing the change. "Camila is waiting."

"Isn't she always?"

He does a double-take when I say that, but I don't offer an explanation. I trail behind him on the way into the building to try and delay the inevitable. When we reach the hallways that lead to her office, Hayden rubs the back of his neck.

"I'm really sorry about everything that's been going on."

"You didn't force me to take the drugs," I say, eyeing Camila's door like it's a snake about to bite.

"No, but you didn't know what was in that drink."

I pause and he stops walking too. "How did you know that?"

"The bartender told me." He glances around before whispering, "If it were up to me, I'd let you go."

"Maybe it's not too late."

"I wish—"

That same, undeniable hopeful look flashes across his face. He's nothing like I'd expect an officer to be. We stare at each other for a couple of seconds until a door opens.

"Ah, Officer Hayden," Camila calls from a few feet away. "Thank you for bringing Whitney. I'm sure they keep you busy."

“Not a problem, ma’am,” Hayden says, voice more authoritative than before. He holds my gaze for another second before pasting on a fake smile and turning toward Camila.

Camila’s long, dark brown hair is pulled into a severe bun. Her cold eyes flick over me quickly. She focuses on Hayden, already writing me off.

“How old are you?” She tips her head to the side and checks him out.

I scoff softly. She’s mated. Shouldn’t she be the portrait of a good omega? Here she is checking out a beta while her mates are off doing who knows what. She cuts her gaze to me and scowls.

“Something you’d like to say, Whitney?”

“Actually—” I begin, because I’m tired of all the bullshit, but Hayden interrupts me.

“I’m twenty-four, and I’m with Pack Cocker, ma’am.”

Camila drops the sneer to smile at Hayden. “Interesting. Do you all have an omega?”

“No.”

“Do you think your alpha will ever take an omega?” She bats her eyelashes at him.

Hayden’s smile is forced.

She doesn’t notice.

“I don’t think so, ma’am.” His confession makes my brow furrow.

Why don’t they want an omega?

Camila sighs. “Such a shame your pack won’t take an omega. Too bad betas can’t take omegas. You have great bone structure...” She trails off, reaching up to touch Hayden’s cheek.

“Woow,” I say, shaking my head.

Hayden grabs her hand before it can touch his face, and they both give me surprised looks.

“Sorry about her.” Camila’s voice is sugary sweet. “That one is going to the auctions. Quite the rule breaker, hmm?” She lifts an eyebrow.

“Glass houses break too,” I mutter.

“Excuse me?” Her upper lip curls.

“Tell you what,” Hayden says, once again distracting her from me. “I’ll let my alpha know you asked. Maybe he’s changed his mind.”

Camila’s eyes flash with excitement, and she forgets about me for the prospect of matching alphas and omegas. “Wonderful. Tell him I promise to find the pack a worthy mate. No filthy beings like Whitney.”

My omega hackles rise. A soft growl escapes my mouth before I can control myself. She wants me to react. She’s like a chihuahua compared to my mom, I shouldn’t let her rile me up.

“See? She’s practically feral.” Camila gives him a knowing look. “You’ll have to excuse me while I deal with her. Let your alpha know I’ll find someone worthy of the pack.”

Someone who isn’t like me.

Hayden nods and walks toward me. He stops and studies my face, lips tugging into a frown. “I’m—”

“On your way out,” I cut in. “Thanks for the ride.”

“Anytime,” he says. “Try not to break any more laws.”

“It’s hard when they’re so easy to break.”

His head rears back in surprise, and I smile. Not a fake one either. It’s nice to know not everyone thinks I’m dirt because of how I was raised. I didn’t ask to be born into a low pack and I certainly didn’t beg my mother to beat me.

“Goodbye, Whitney.”

My name on his lips sounds like sin. It sounds like it doesn’t belong. It sounds too familiar. He walks away. I meet Camila’s disgusted gaze. She releases a low, threatening laugh.

“Some of you low pack just can’t help it, can you?”

“You’ll have to be more specific.” I plant my feet, refusing to walk toward her. She can come to me.

She takes the bait, prowling toward me like she’s a viper. She’s nothing more than a garden snake. Not even the flare of anger in her eyes scares me.

“Trash will always find a way to dispose of itself. You did me a favor by being reckless. Now I don’t have to persuade a pack to take you.” She stops a foot away from me. “Did you know that the matching software cycles through omegas based on rank? By the time it gets to you, all that’s left are old alphas who waited far too long to take a mate.”

“Why the auctions then?” I ask. “If that’s who I’m matched with, why send me to the auctions?”

Smiles shouldn’t look so wicked. “At the auctions, you’ll be humiliated. At the auctions, you’ll be sold for pennies on the dollar, and even that’ll be more than you’re worth. At the auctions, you’ll break. What would Granny say if she knew you were mouthing off to the head of the Omega Council?”

I laugh and shake my head. “You don’t know anything about my Granny.”

“I know she’d be ashamed.”

“Hit ’em back,” I say before slugging her in the gut.

Camila bowls over, grunting. “Cunt.”

Yeah. Granny might have been sweet, but she wouldn’t let anyone talk to her the way Camila did to me. She taught me how to defend myself from school bullies while my mother simply laughed and smoked a cigarette.

*“That child is getting beat on because she deserves it.”
Mother would look at me with disgust.*

“Then she needs to hit ’em back,” Granny would say with a growl.

“You little bitch,” Camila spits, clutching her stomach as she gathers herself. “Wilson!”

I wince at her shrill scream.

A beefy beta bounds down the hall, scowling at me.

“Take this mongrel to the warehouse.”

“Transport doesn’t leave for another—”

“I know when the transport leaves. Take her now.”

Wilson looks confused. “Should I stay with her?”

“No.” Camila seethes, catching her breath with a haughty huff.

“But she’ll be cuffed for the whole day.”

“I know,” she says with a cruel smile.

“All right.” Wilson grabs my biceps and leads me from the direction he ran. “I have to get my keys.”

Chapter Six

HAYDEN

Some beta loads Whitney into a van, handcuffing her to a bar on the back of the front seat. If she could kill a man with a look, the guy would be deceased. The beta climbs into the vehicle. I hold my breath while they back out. I grind my jaw when he leaves the parking lot with her and slam my fist against the steering wheel, shouting into the small space.

Whitney isn't mine to save.

Nothing has ever felt more like a lie than that thought.

Get it together, Hayden. You're a beta. You can't do anything to help her.

Asher could. I grab my phone and dial him before I can think better of it.

"What's up, Hay?" Asher's rock music filters through the speaker.

"Uh." Fuck. What can I say? *Let's go steal an omega?* No. That's stupid.

I can't save Whitney. She's beautiful. I know her grandma died and that's the only reason I want to help her out. Sorrow is my weakness, and Whitney is a fine art portrait of pain. Her blue eyes are tragically transparent, screaming for love. That woman is hurting.

But she's not mine to fix.

Even if I could save her, betas aren't supposed to mate omegas. The Royal Council would go out of its way to make

my life difficult if I ended up with an omega. It's not technically against the law, but there are things that can be done to make it clear you've fucked up. It's not uncommon for betas to end up homeless if they're found to have mated with an omega.

"Hayden? Are you okay?" Asher adopts his detective tone, ready to interrogate me and find out what's going on.

"Fine. You want to shoot pool tonight?"

He laughs. "Oh, I see. You're scared I'll kick your ass."

"You know what surprises me the most about alphas?"

"What?" he asks, completely clueless.

"How humble they are."

"Fuck you. Seven?"

I glance at the clock. The auctions happen around eight. I'll need a stiff drink to help me forget about her. I'll hang out with Asher to keep myself from going to watch alphas bid on her. The people who go to the auctions are the worst sort of alpha, and my body trembles with the urge to race over and bid on her myself. I can't do that though. I'm a beta.

"I'll buy the first round."

Asher whoops. "It's like you read my mind. I could use a fucking drink. There must've been an omega at the station. I've been hard as a rock since I smelled her."

"See you later." I hang up on him so I don't say something crazy.

Asher is my alpha. I'm not mad at him. I'm pissed at Camila. She didn't have to be so cruel.

"Fuck," I mutter.

I have to get out of here. The longer I stay in one spot thinking about her, the harder it'll be to forget her.

Chapter Seven

WHITNEY

The clock on the far wall of the cold warehouse reads four in the afternoon when Wilson escorts a small group of women inside. I stand from my squatted position, hoping they don't notice the almost dry puddle of piss. Camila left me here without so much as a bucket. I'm lucky I'm still wearing the dress from last night, otherwise, I'd be wearing pee-covered jeans.

The women are all too distraught to take notice of me. Wilson shackles them to the same railing I'm cuffed too, ignoring one woman's pleas.

"You have to listen. It wasn't my fault." Tears cover her face, and she glances at the other women. "It wasn't my fault."

"I'll only tell you this once," Wilson says once he finishes cuffing the other women. "Shut up or you'll be tazed. You can still be sold off if you're unconscious, got it?"

She sniffs and shrinks back.

"That's what I thought." Wilson looks at me, eyes dropping to the marks on my wrist and then lower to the spot by my feet. He makes a disgusted face. "The auction will start in a couple of hours."

When the large door slams shut behind him, the women start to whisper to each other.

"If we can get the handcuffs off, we can escape." The woman who had been crying starts to work her hands. It's no

use. Wilson made sure they were tight enough to dig into our wrists.

“Where would we go?” another woman asks.

“I don’t know, but I don’t want to be sold off. Come on, help me.”

“It’s no use,” I say, looking around the woman behind me. “I’ve been here all day, and I haven’t found a way out. You’ll only hurt yourself.”

“I don’t belong here,” the crying woman says. “This is all a mistake.”

“I belong here.” A leggy blonde shakes her head. “I hurt an alpha, but I’d do it again.”

“But I didn’t do anything wrong. My ex—”

“You had a boyfriend?” I ask the crying woman.

“Well, it was nothing serious.”

“Yeah, but omegas aren’t supposed to date.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “I’m aware of the rules. No one would have known if he hadn’t reported it.”

“Some boyfriend,” the blonde mutters.

“Shut up. He loves me. He’s stupid though, thinking reporting our relationship would solve our problems.” She sniffs again, releasing a shuddering breath. “He ruined my life.”

“Don’t let life make you its bitch,” the blonde says quietly. “You’re still going with a pack.”

“Yeah, but it’s not the same,” the other starts.

“Maybe,” I cut in. “But you weren’t shunned. If they’re awful, you can report them, and I’m sure Camila will help you find a new pack.”

“Camila won’t do shit to help us,” the blonde says.

I give her a look. While that’s probably true, I’m trying to give the other woman hope, and the blonde is making that impossible.

“I’m Whitney.” I slide my gaze over the other omegas. They’re all dressed more casually than me. “What’s your name?” I ask the woman next to me.

“Mila.”

“Amy,” the next one says.

“Candance.” The crier.

“Tiffany.”

The blonde tips her head. “Kiki.”

“I got caught partying.” I shrug. “I didn’t realize a drink had drugs in it, and now I’m here.”

Mila sighs. “I got caught with a delta.”

The rest of them tell their stories, almost ridiculous reasons to be deemed unfit for matching and most of them having to do with other men. Kiki kicked an alpha in the nuts, and she honestly doesn’t seem that bothered by being sent here. I wish I were as fearless as her. I’ve been in the warehouse long enough that I had time to feel sorry for myself. I’m done feeling bad about it now. Camila wants me broken, but I won’t give her that.

We fall into random conversations, each of us contributing in order to keep from freaking out about what’s about to happen. In a few hours, we’ll be sold to the highest bidder and that pack will be our fate. Around four-thirty, the door opens again. I brace for a wave of alphas, but a guard escorts an omega in the signature white dress from the Compatibility Ceremony toward the rest of us.

Her face is red and lined with anger. The beta drags her across the floor, and she scurries to keep up in the dainty heels she’s wearing. The rest of us watch as he attaches her to the same handrail.

“Don’t scream.”

For a moment, I think she might, but she grinds her teeth together.

“Good girl,” he snarks.

She jerks a little at that, but the guard is already on his way out.

“What’d you do to get in here?” Kiki asks the new woman.

“Fucked a beta at the Compatibility Ceremony and got caught.”

Kiki giggles. “Oh my God. So scandalous.”

The new woman gives her a curious look. “What did you do?”

Kiki tells her what she did, and the woman nods, a bit of a smile tugging at her lips.

“I have to pee,” Mila says, distracting me from my eavesdropping.

“You could go if you need to. I did.”

Her nose wrinkles. “I can’t.”

I get it. I told myself the same thing. After six hours though, I couldn’t hold it in any longer. Everyone falls into whispered conversation. Candace has a few more panic attacks about the auction. The closer the hour hand inches toward eight, the quieter she gets. Maybe she’s finally accepting her fate.

Around seven-thirty, alphas begin to arrive. I watch them strut toward the seats, chests puffed and eyes roaming over tonight’s selection. Their gazes are hungry, suits cheap and worn. Their smiles are wolfish and their collective scent makes my stomach turn. Omegas are supposed to be drawn to alphas, but I’m halfway to throwing up.

That’s probably the nerves.

A group of men, better dressed than the rest of the alphas, waltz in and take their seats in the middle of the crowd. They’re so out of place, but they don’t seem bothered by the scathing looks they get from the other men. I’m so busy staring at the crowd that I miss when one of Camila’s mates enters with his group of betas, until he crosses my line of sight. Eduardo’s steps are strong and proud as he steps onto the stage. He grins at the men and says hi to a few in the front

row while the betas come over and cuff us all to a chain. The one at the head of the line grips the thick metal links and glares at me.

“Start walking,” he hisses.

I scowl at him but do as he asks. Eduardo goes through the opening announcements while we’re led onto the stage. The betas stand behind us, hands stuck to the chain to make sure we don’t run.

Where would we go?

In a room full of alphas, there’s no escape.

“Let’s start the auction,” Eduardo says into the microphone, settling the crowd. He turns and gestures to the guard behind me.

My heart jumps into my throat. He unhooks me from the chain and drags me toward Eduardo. I want to dig my feet in, but I don’t want to show my fear. The audience is full of predators, and they thrive on fright. I shoot the beta a scathing look that he misses.

“We’ll start the bidding at four hundred dollars.”

Those words sucker punch the air from my lungs. Four hundred dollars? My eyes burn with indignation, but the alphas don’t notice. They toss out bids, not even bothering to meet my eyes.

“Seven hundred.”

“Eight,” another alpha tosses in his bet.

“Two thousand,” a sharp, feminine voice cuts over the next bid.

Eduardo makes a funny noise. “That’s not how it works,” he growls, holding the microphone away from his mouth.

I stare at the omega who came in last. Her chin lifts in defiance, and her nostrils flare.

“There are no rules except the highest bidder wins, right?”

Eduardo doesn’t answer.

“Two thousand then,” she says. “It’s all the money I have, but she’s worth way more than that.”

I swore I wouldn’t cry anymore, but this chick. Tears burn and I blink rapidly, staring at her with watery eyes.

She shakes her head, and I can almost hear her saying: *Don’t let them break you.*

Whoever this woman is, she’s so fierce I swallow my emotions and stand a little taller. Just because they’re auctioning us off doesn’t mean we have to be docile. Omegas are more than mates for alphas. If it weren’t for us, our society would be nothing. The hard truth is, our world is built on the fact that omegas give birth to alphas. They treat us like cattle when we should be the ones in charge.

“Ten thousand,” an alpha shouts, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Eleven.”

“Twelve.”

I don’t bother looking at any of them until the bidding stops at fifteen thousand. The alpha who bid on me has greasy blonde hair and yellowing teeth. His black suit is faded, but he’s wearing a gold ring around one of his fingers. He’s low pack... but he has fifteen thousand to drop on me. There’s no time to assess whether he’ll be nice or not because I’m pulled back into line and they begin the process all over again with Mila.

“Two thousand,” the same omega calls after a few bids.

Eduardo huffs and glares at her.

I bite my cheek to keep from laughing.

The one good thing about this auction? The woman pisses Eduardo off so much that his face turns beet red and a vein on his forehead pops out. She bids on every omega, including herself, until the auction is over.

Eduardo dismisses everyone, and the alphas rise from their seats, chatting each other up. The alpha who purchased me climbs on the stage and pays for me. His beady eyes are the

color of pitch and his fingers twitch at his side. I've never been around hardcore drug users, but this guy is the type. He snatches his card back from Eduardo and prowls toward me.

Everything else falls away when he stops in front of me and takes a long, freakish inhale.

"Nova will love you."

I want to ask who that is, but I don't. I'm still not sure what to think of this man.

"I'm Curtis." He checks me out. "I like your dress."

My stomach tightens with unease.

He grabs my arm and walks me out of the warehouse. A lone lamp lights the parking lot. Curtis' SUV is near the door. He manhandles me in that direction. A strong urge to stomp on his feet overcomes me, and I'm halfway to doing it when the pads of his fingers dig into my skin and he yanks me close.

"I'll break you if I have to," he hisses, leaning his face toward mine. His eyes are void of emotion, cold and dead. Unease skates up my spine, and I see my death in his nearly black eyes. Everything he wants to do is painfully clear in his irises. He'll finish what he started, he won't leave me broken like my mom... he'll destroy me. He'll *kill* me. This man is dangerous. He squeezes my shoulder a little harder. "Do I need to?"

I recoil and shake my head. That spine I'd started to grow shrivels under the weight of his stare.

"Good. Don't cause problems and I won't hurt you. Nova needs help at the club."

"The club?" I ask, looking around for someone who might help me.

I can't go with this guy. There has to be another pack.

"Twisters," he says, smirking when I realize what his club is. "Another omega stripper. You're going to make me rich."

I don't know how Curtis gets away with having omega strippers, but something tells me he has a knack for skirting

the law. Besides, he owns me now and he can do whatever he wants with me. Twisters, his club, has been around for over twenty years. Established before the Royal Council passed the bill that prohibited low packs from starting businesses... Twisters' reputation is known far and wide. A strip club where the strippers are drugged into compliant flowers. There's been more than one drug bust there, but somehow Twisters always escapes without being shut down.

Part of me wonders if it's because of the nature of the business, but the other part thinks Curtis must have one hell of a lawyer.

"Get in." He pulls keys out of his pocket and unlocks the vehicle.

I reach for the passenger door, but he tsks.

"In the back."

"Okay." I get in, sucking in a few sharp breaths while Curtis walks around to the driver's side. By the time he's in the car, I have my breathing under control.

He puts a hand on the steering wheel and glances at me, eyes dropping to my chest. "Fake tits will help."

I bristle. What's wrong with my B-cups? "I don't want fake boobs."

"We'll see about that. You'll double your money with a pair of double-Ds."

"Double your money, you mean."

His eyebrows pull together. "What'd you say?"

"I only mean the Ds would benefit you, right?"

"Shut up," he growls, turning around and starting the car. "Mouthy bitch. I'll give you a pass for that smartass comment, but the next one I won't let go. You're new, but don't try that snarky shit with me. Understand?"

I nod. "Can I get my things from my apartment? I left something important."

“You won’t need any of that shit. There are clothes at the club.”

“You don’t understand—”

The back of his hand cracks across my cheek. “I said shut up. Fucking fifteen grand,” he grumbles, pulling onto the street and racing away from the warehouse. He’s going so fast my heart kicks into a gallop.

He could cause an accident.

Perhaps that would be a gift; maybe then I’d find a way out.

Chapter Eight

ASHER

I ended up meeting Hayden around seven-fifty. At eight-thirty, we're one beer and a shot in, but Hayden is still agitated. His fingers tap on his bottle, and he keeps looking around like the boogie man is going to jump out. I finish my beer and set it on the bar top.

"All right, what's going on? Don't tell me you're fine either because I know you, dude."

He gives me a nasty look. "Nothing is going on."

"Right." I nod and tip my head at the bartender. She smiles and reaches into the fridge for two more domestics. "You're antsy as fuck. Are you expecting someone?"

"No." He chugs the half beer he has left. "It's nothing."

"Sure, pal," I say, shaking my head. "Did you get a look at the omega? I know Trev says we can't have one, but damn, man. I've never been so fucking horny."

"Why don't you go fucking jerk off then?" he snaps, scowling at me.

I narrow my eyes. "It's the omega, isn't it?"

"No." His brown hair looks halfway torn out. I guarantee this is about a woman.

"So she was hot."

"Two beers," the bartender says with a sweet smile. "Anything else you need?"

Yeah, wrong tree, sweetie. She's cute but not my type. I like my women feisty, and she's way too nice.

"Come on, Hay." I shove his shoulder.

He slaps my hand.

I make a noise, and he growls.

"Fuck you, Asher."

"Fuck you, Hayden. What the fuck is going on?"

"Hey. Chill on the fucks, okay?" The bartender glares at both of us.

A few other patrons are looking at us, ready for Hayden and me to break out into a brawl. I grab my beer, but my work phone starts to ring.

"Shit," I mumble. Trev doesn't ask me to bring it when I'm off duty, but it wouldn't feel right to miss his call if he needs me. "Sup, Trev?"

"I need you and Hayden. Sneaky led us to Twisters. We're raiding the place at ten."

I glance at my friend, the miserable dick. "I'm with him now. We'll be there within an hour."

"Bye." Trev hangs up, and I put my phone back in my pocket.

"We're on duty now." We haven't had much to drink and our enhanced metabolism means we're still sober. If Trev had called any later, we'd have to call a cab.

"Where?"

"Twisters." I stand, giving him a serious look. "Are you up for this? I need you present. No mistakes." Distraction can be the difference between life and death in these situations.

"I'm good." He tosses a fifty on the bar top—way more than our tab, but the bartenders treat us well here and we like to make friends with the civilians when we can.

We get in the car and start the drive from the dingy bar to the station. We're the last to arrive. I pull into the packed lot

and take one of the few remaining parking spots. Trev is wearing all his gear, bullet proof vest on over his uniform. He's telling an officer something, but his eyes shoot in our direction when we get out of the SUV.

“Full gear. You know how Curtis likes to play.”

Curtis is a piece of shit. We've never been able to prove that he's forcing his girls to work, but we all know that's what he's doing. I can't wait to arrest the guy.

“He's the distributor?”

Trev shakes his head. “He's the supplier. Sneaky is his minion. Sang like a sparrow about an hour ago.”

I open the hatch and reach for my vest. Hayden grabs the spare one and straps it on. We're in civilian clothes, but one of the officers hands us spare duty belts that are fully equipped. Once we're geared up, we walk to where Trev stands. Thirteen officers surround the sergeant.

Trev's gaze flits around the group. “I need focus and precision. We've done this a dozen times, but all it takes is one fuck up to lose someone.”

Being in law is like being in the military. Camaraderie is the only way you make it through. We've all been through shit, some more than others. I'd feel better if Avi were here; he's the best shot on the force. He's not ready to be back in the field though. He may never be.

“Follow the book. Everything has to be clean. No fuck ups or Curtis will be out in less than twenty-four hours. Tonight is our chance to get him for real.”

We've been trying for years.

I side-eye Hayden. His face is clear of whatever troubled him before, and he's checking his duty belt, making sure he has everything he needs.

Good.

He can't let an omega mess with his head tonight.

Chapter Nine

WHITNEY

Twisters is dark and seedy and gross. The air smells like artificial cotton candy, and the floor is sticky. Curtis glances at me over his shoulder to make sure I'm following. I know better than to disobey him in his domain. As soon as I'm alone, I'll figure out a plan. I can't stay with him. He's not going to mate me. My cheek aches where he hit me, reminding me of what he plans to do with me. Beat me into obedience.

I have to get out of this place.

A woman hangs on to a pole and moves her hips, head drooping. Her hair covers her face, but I'm pretty sure she's not aware of her surroundings. Some guy is trying to hand her money. She keeps swiveling her hips, completely ignoring him. The club is only half-full. Another group of guys are snorting lines of coke off a glass table top. Pretty ballsy to do that so openly, but I don't think Twisters has many rules.

Curtis lights up a cigarette and holds a door open for me. I walk into a dimly lit hallway, waiting for him to come in too. He blows smoke at my face.

"Third door on the left. I'll come get you in an hour. Be ready to shake that sweet little omega ass."

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from telling him no. An hour isn't long, but it might be enough to find a way out. He lets the door close, and instead of going to the third door like he told me to, I rush to the one at the end of the hallway. I twist the knob, but it's locked.

Fuck. I smack the metal door and turn, checking my options. I don't know what any of these rooms hold back here, but I know the third is probably the safest option. I doubt Curtis would take kindly to me snooping, and if anyone is in the other rooms, they'll rat me out.

A woman in a skimpy, cheetah-print thong bikini is lying on a threadbare couch. She startles when I enter, and her drug-glazed eyes meet mine. Taking me in, she slowly lifts her arm, like it's weighed down, and gestures to a rack of outfits.

"Pick one."

"Are you Nova?" Curtis had said Nova would love me, but this woman doesn't seem too excited to see me.

She nods then sighs. "Does it matter?" she asks, closing her eyes and turning to face the inside of the couch.

"I have to get out of here."

A soft laugh. "You won't."

Fuck. Forget her. I skip the outfits for now, searching the room for a window or a hidden door. There's nothing. My hands shake, and I lean against the wall, banging my forehead against it.

"Dammit." This isn't how things were supposed to go. I was supposed to be matched with a pack. I was meant to finally get away from my fucked-up life.

Fate really does hate me.

"Whining won't help," Nova says, voice husky. Her long, black curls fall over her shoulders as she sits and tips her head back. "The sooner you realize that, the better. Curtis doesn't like criers."

I let out a derisive snort. "I don't think Curtis likes anything."

"You're probably right." She sounds so tired. Standing, she holds on to the side of the couch to catch her balance. "Give it a second," she says, like this is a normal part of her day. When she finally rights herself, she steps into the tall stilettos in front of the couch and walks to the rack of outfits.

She wobbles a little, but she's still far more confident in those shoes than I would be. I catch traces of her omega scent over the disgusting perfume hanging in the air. Curtis must have bought her too.

"You're a size eight?" She looks at me. "You ever dance before?"

"At clubs."

She gives me a pitying smile, reaching for one of the more modest scraps of clothing. Missing the mark, she stumbles and falls into the clothes.

"Whoa, hey, are you okay?" I rush over and help her off the floor. Her skin is clammy.

She groans. "Fine, fine. A little dizzy is all." Grabbing my hand, she puts all her weight on me to pull herself up. I stumble slightly, but find my footing before I fall over too.

"Maybe you should sit down." I try to lead her toward the couch, but she wrenches her arm from my hold.

"I said I was fine. I have to dance soon."

"You can't dance like this," I say, grabbing her again as she starts to sway on her feet. "Are you drunk?"

She snorts. "Don't I wish. Curtis must've given me more smack than normal." Her eyes roll back in her head, and a funny grin pulls at her lips.

"Smack?"

"Mmhmm," she says with a happy sigh. "I want to lie down."

Finally, she has some sense.

"Let me help you." I hold most of her weight and walk her to the couch. Maneuvering her gently to the cushions, I turn and start to let go.

"Whoops." She squeals, dropping onto the couch. "So soft," she whispers, pinching her eyes shut. "Have you ever flown?"

I don't think she means airplane rides. "No."

"There's a needle in the dressing table." She smiles to herself and hums.

A loud commotion sounds from the club and shouts erupt. I don't know what's going on, but whatever it is may be the distraction I need to escape.

"Hey." I shake Nova. "Let's go." I don't want to leave her.

"Leave me alone." She smacks my hands away.

"We have to go, now." I start to haul her up, but she growls, her scent growing stronger with her anger.

"You're fucking up my high." Her palm cracks across my cheek.

My skin stings from the impact, and I release her, pressing a hand to the side of my face. "I'm trying to save you."

"I'm already lost," she says, settling back onto the couch. "Run if you want, but you'll never learn to fly."

I frown, pinching my eyebrows together. Why doesn't she want to leave? More shouting draws my attention. I look at Nova one last time, deciding to leave her. I won't force her to come with me. Slipping out of the dressing room, I hurry to one of the other doors. An empty office. No windows. I close it, eyeing the door to the club as I walk to the other one.

"Everyone on the ground," someone shouts.

I duck into the room closest to the main part of the club. It's a breakroom. A small table and chairs. An old microwave. A few lockers. Panicking, I rush around the room, searching for a way out. There. A small storm window. Snatching a chair from the table, I drag it to the window. I scramble onto it and yank the window open. It's small, but I think I'll fit. I place my palms on the flat part of the window frame to hoist myself up.

The door to the room is kicked in. I scream, losing my momentum and dropping back onto the chair. I look over my shoulder only to see a gun pointed at me.

“Hands in the air!”

“Okay,” I say, shooting my arms up. “Okay.”

Fucking seriously? Cops again?

Fuck my life, man. I want a damn refund.

“Slowly get off the chair,” the guy says, stomping toward me.

“It’s not what it looks like.” I step off the chair, but stay facing the wall. He didn’t tell me to turn around, and I’m not about to get shot. “I was trying to escape Curtis.”

“This ain’t my first rodeo. Turn.”

“I’m not lying.” I slowly move so I’m facing him. The light attached to the top of his gun makes it hard to see his face, but he’s wearing a vest and a tactical helmet. He’s geared up like he’s about to go to war. Maybe he’ll believe me if I explain everything. “Curtis bought me from the auctions tonight. I don’t want to work for him. I don’t want to take smack. Please,” I say, voice breaking a little. “I just want to go home.”

His gun is still pointed at me, but for some reason, I’m less afraid of the deadly weapon than I am of Curtis.

“Whitney?”

I furrow my brow. “How do you know my name?”

The officer sighs and points his gun toward the floor. My vision dances with black spots and I blink a few times to clear them.

“Hayden?”

His gray eyes slip over me. “Care to tell me why I keep finding you breaking rules?”

“I wasn’t breaking any rules now. I mean, I was escaping but that’s not against the law.” I think for a second, my eyes bouncing between his. “Is it?”

He grimaces. “You were fleeing when we raided the club. You realize how that sounds?”

“I didn’t do anything wrong. Technically, this is your fault for raiding the other club on Thursday.”

“Dammit,” he says with a small laugh. “Stop causing trouble.”

“I’m not causing it.” I drop my hands even though he didn’t tell me I could. If he wants to shoot me, he can do it. I’d rather die than stay with Curtis.

“Well, you have a knack for finding it.”

“Don’t I know it.” I sigh and chew on my lip. “Are you going to arrest me again?”

“Are you high again?”

I bristle. “No.”

“Do you have any illegal drugs or weapons on you?”

“Where would I hide them?” I look at my tight dress and run my hands over it. “It doesn’t have pockets.” Which is exactly why I wouldn’t have bought it for myself, but Lindsey thinks pocket dresses are dumb.

“You’d be surprised.”

“Hay,” a deep voice shouts from the hallway.

“First room is clear,” Hayden calls over his shoulder.

A couple of men rush down and kick in the other doors. Nova screams, and I cringe. I probably should have mentioned she was down there. Her high is definitely ruined now. Hayden’s gaze skates around the room.

“If there’s anything you need to tell me, now is the time to do it.” There’s an urgency to his tone, like he wants me to confess before the others arrive.

“There’s nothing to tell. I only wanted to escape. He drugged them.”

Hayden nods, not needing further explanation. “I know. He’s going to jail.”

“Curtis?”

“Yeah.”

“What happens to me?”

He shakes his head. “His property has been seized.”

“I’m not property,” I snip. “I’m a person.”

“I know that.” His gray eyes snap to mine, softening as he studies me. “I know that.”

I hold his stare, trying to understand the concern on his face. “Will you let me go?”

A rumbling growl tears from his mouth. “Who did this?” He places his finger under my chin and tips my head so he can inspect the mark Curtis left behind. It must be starting to bruise.

“You know who,” I whisper, looking at the wall. “Let me go.”

“I can’t,” he says so softly I almost miss the words.

“All good in here?” a man asks from the doorway. His dark black hair is swooped to the side, artfully styled in disarray. He’s geared up like Hayden, but I’d recognize that face anywhere. Asher. The man I danced with in the club. His green eyes slide in my direction, taking me in before looking at his friend.

Maybe he doesn’t recognize me.

Hayden jumps away from me like he was caught doing something bad. “It’s fine.”

“Trev wants us to bring everyone into the club.” The man wrinkles his nose. “This place reeks.”

“Come on, Whitney.” Hayden tips his head toward the hallway.

Asher’s eyes snap back to mine, recognition flashing across his face. His mouth parts to say something, then he frowns and closes it.

Great. He does remember me.

With a heavy sigh, I brush past Hayden. He inhales sharply, and I grind my teeth together. I hate my scent more

than anything because it's only brought me problems. Asher breathes in as I approach, a long groan slipping out of his mouth.

"Fuck," he mutters, quickly taking three steps back and into the wall behind him. "You're an omega."

"Do I know you?" I ask, hoping he'll play along. Alphas don't have to follow the same rules as omegas, but they're not supposed to take an omega unless they're planning on mating her. Considering how cozy we got in the club the other night, he was ready to fuck. He didn't know I was an omega. I doubt he would have been as forward if he knew what I was when we met. Alphas can have sex with whoever they want before they mate an omega. It's only the omegas who are supposed to be sacred and virginal.

Fucking Royal Council and their dumbass rules.

"Nope," Asher says, avoiding my gaze. His cedar scent is heady as it fills the hall. Masculine and alluring. Meant to draw me in.

"Seriously?" I glare at him. "I'm in the middle of being arrested. Keep your dick under control."

"If you didn't smell so damn good—" Asher begins, checking me out. There was a lot of chemistry between us the other night. He knows what we did was wrong, but he's about to tell on the both of us. "Why did you have to be an omega?"

"Sorry to disappoint," I say, tone curt.

Tension crackles between Asher and me. His scent is hard to catch under the sickly sweet smells coating every inch of Twisters, but I recognize the hints of it. He swallows, Adam's apple bobbing, and steps closer.

"You knew," he whispers, leveling me with an accusatory look.

"You weren't supposed to," I hiss.

Hayden glances at us, confusion lining his face. "Keep moving, Whit. Asher needs a moment. What the hell is wrong

with you?” Hayden scolds his friend behind my back. “You’re pissing her off.”

“Why do you care?”

Good fucking question, Asher. Why *does* Hayden care?

Chapter Ten

WHITNEY

Hayden escorts me into the club. All of the lights are on now, highlighting just how disgusting this place really is. Stained walls, dirty dance floor, and sticky carpet. He leads me to a group of women standing by the bar. Nova is half-asleep where she leans against the bar.

“She didn’t do anything wrong.” I don’t know that that’s true, but she’s high as a kite, and I guarantee Curtis had something to do with it.

“She’s not under arrest. The ambulance is on the way.”

I glance at Hayden. He’s busy scanning the club, making sure everything is in order.

“Am I under arrest?”

He side-eyes me. “No.”

Some of the tension between my shoulders eases.

“Stay here.”

“You’re new.”

I glance at the woman in a robe. “I’m Curtis’ mate, Shelly.” Her gaze strays over my body. “Such a shame you won’t be on tonight.”

Curtis has a mate and she’s okay with this?

An idea forms in my head, and I smirk, pulling a bratty face.

“Yeah, sorry you didn’t get a chance to shoot me up.”

“Listen, you little bitch.” The woman prowls toward me. “As soon as these pigs are gone, I’ll show you what it means to be part of Pack Ginty.” Her face is gaunt, and her breath smells like bourbon.

“You can try,” I say, shifting so I’m ready for her attack.

As predicted, Shelly tries to hit me. I dodge her uppercut and punch her in the vagina. For my plan to work, she has to lose her shit.

Her scream is shrill as her fist comes toward my face. She hits my temple so hard my vision dims and I lose my footing.

“The fuck is going on over there?” a guy shouts.

The last thing I hear before I fall unconscious is Shelly yelling at the cops.



“Look into my flashlight,” the paramedic instructs. “I’m starting to think you have a thing for me.” She shines the light into my eyes.

“What?” I’m perched on the back step of the ambulance, refusing to get onto the gurney because I’m not that hurt.

She laughs. “You don’t remember me? I’m Maddy. I checked you out after the vodka bombs.”

“Oh,” I mumble, wincing when she moves the flashlight over.

“No concussion, but you’ll be hurting for a few days.” She reaches into her bag and cracks a cold pack. “Hold this to your head. I’ll get you some ibuprofen.”

The parking lot is full of police cars. Curtis is led out of the club, hands cuffed behind his back. His gaze sweeps the parking lot until he finds me, upper lip curling.

“I’ll be back for you, baby.” His face is serious, and I know then that I’ve caught the attention of a predator and he won’t let me get away with hurting his mate.

I stiffen and glance away.

“Shelly will love having you as a pet.”

Closing my eyes, I block out the rest of his taunting. I had hoped with the bust and her attacking me, I’d be extracted from the pack. Curtis will find me wherever I go, and there will be hell to pay when he comes.

“Some alphas should be put down,” Maddy mutters. “Don’t worry about that guy. He can’t hurt you now.”

“It’s the future I’m worried about.”

She shakes a pill bottle and hands me a water bottle. “Don’t waste your now-time worrying about the future. Besides, I’m pretty sure that guy is going to prison for a long time.”

“What do you know?”

“I can’t say,” she says, pressing her lips into a thin line and placing three pills in my palm. “Take these.”

I wash the pills down with water and watch as more people are escorted to various police vehicles. A familiar mop of black hair breaks away from a small crowd of officers, walking toward where I sit.

Asher’s eyes are guarded as he flicks his gaze over me. “You okay?”

“Fine,” I say, glancing around him. I’d much rather talk to Hayden, even if he has some ulterior motive I don’t know yet.

“Is she good to go, Mads?”

The nickname gives me pause. I look between the two of them, trying to determine if there’s something there. Maddy nods. No blushing, no lingering stare, no change in body language. When I focus on Asher, I bristle, finding his attention on me and not Maddy. He watched me watch her. The small, cocky tilt to his lips is infuriating.

“She’ll be okay. No more bar fights, Whitney.” Maddy gives me a serious look. “You got lucky this time, but you’re not indestructible.”

“Understood.” I bite the inside of my cheek and search for Hayden again.

“He asked me to take you home,” Asher says.

I hate that he knows who was on my mind. I hate being so transparent. And I hate how my heart does a little flip at the thought of being alone with him.

“Okay.”

“Per protocol, you’ll have to reach out to the Omega Council in the morning for an alternative assignment.”

At least I’m not being detained again. It’ll be nice to sleep in my bed instead of a cold jail cell. I grimace at the thought of having to see Camila again.

Maddy gives me a sympathetic smile. “I swear he doesn’t bite. You’ll be okay,” she says, misunderstanding my worry.

Asher makes a noise and turns away. “We should go, things are settling down here. Do you need anything from inside?”

I shake my head. “No.” I didn’t have anything with me. All of my stuff is back at my apartment.

“See you soon,” Maddy says, patting my arm.

“Don’t count on it.”

She snorts. “Honey, I’ve been doing this a long time. Trust me, I’ll be seeing you again. Something tells me you like trouble.”

“Trouble likes me.”

“I believe it.” She tips her head to the side. “Be good.”

I can’t help but smile. “I make no promises.”

She laughs at that and grabs her bag, shoving in some of the supplies she took out for me back inside. “I’m going to make the rounds.”

Lingering in the back of the ambulance, I watch her navigate through the swarm of cops and head inside. Asher’s

attention is heavy, like the weight of the world comes with it, and I pull my shoulders back before focusing on him.

“Ready?” He studies my face, trying to figure me out.

“I guess.” I follow him to an SUV, raising my eyebrows when he opens the front passenger door for me.

“You’re not under arrest, but if you’re more comfortable in the back...” He trails off, letting me decide.

“This is fine.” I climb in, studying the concentration lining his face. I haven’t caught another whiff of his alpha scent. Whatever he’s thinking, he’s keeping control of his emotions.

He gently shuts the door and walks around the front of the vehicle. I buckle and gaze out of the side window. The car becomes a suffocating prison when he climbs in. Asher may be hiding his scent from me, but there’s a distinct aftertaste of it in the air. Being in the car with him is like waking up after smoking a cigar the night before. The taste of him lingers on the back of my tongue, my throat is dry, and my head is fuzzy.

“Are we going to talk about the other night?”

“Let’s pretend it didn’t happen.” I avoid his gaze.

He scoffs. “That’s not going to happen. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it.”

I glance at him, caught off guard by how forward he’s being.

Remembering he’s supposed to be mad at me, his gaze darkens. “You lied to me.”

“Would it have changed anything?”

He presses his lips together, refusing to answer. Hayden should have driven me home. Riding with Asher is going to be a special kind of torture.

“Where’s your friend?” I ask as he pulls out of the parking lot.

“I was wondering when you’d ask about him.” Asher’s comment makes me feel like a fool.

Breathing through my teeth, I fight off the sudden urge to snap at him. My omega hackles are up, but I won't let him rile me. The bitter scent of my frustration fills the car.

"Trev needed him for something," Asher finally says. "He wanted to take you."

"That's not why I asked." I glare at him. He thinks he knows me. The frustrating part is that he's not off base with his assumption.

"Okay." He shrugs and drives to my apartment, not needing the address since he's already taken me home once before. Tonight isn't so different from that night. My life is still a mess and whatever attraction there is between us is buried beneath the heaviness of reality.

"Music?"

"Sure."

The radio blares rock music, and I flinch, an ingrained reaction to louder than usual noises. Asher curses and turns it almost all the way down.

"Sorry."

"It's okay," I say, giving him a stiff smile. "It just surprised me."

He squints at me, like he can tell I'm lying.

Leaning forward, I turn the radio up and look out the window again. The conversation lulls, and while it's uncomfortable, it's easier than talking to him. He parks outside my apartment complex, turning the SUV off. He starts to get out.

"I can take it from here."

Pausing with his fingers on the handle, he studies me. "I'll see you inside."

"Thank you for the ride, but I'm fine." I quickly climb out and shut the door, making a break for my apartment.

His door slams shut a second later. "Whitney."

My stomach flips at my name on his lips. Intense need floods through me, driven by my hormones. The sweet scent of desire cloys. I was born to crave alphas, but he's not *my* alpha. He's an overbearing jerk who thinks he can tell me what to do because we kissed.

"Respectfully, fuck off, Asher."

"Now I can't leave you alone," he teases with a dark chuckle. "Let me walk you in, make sure you're okay."

Two more minutes tops. That's all I have left with him. I can handle that.

"Fine."

He closes the short distance between us with two big strides, grinning at me. "I'm starting to think you don't like me."

It's impossible to not roll my eyes. "Are alphas always this obnoxious, or are you just a diva?"

"I've done a few pageants."

"You're insufferable," I mumble, pushing through the lobby door and not bothering to hold it for him.

He grunts when the glass hits him but doesn't say anything else. I smash my finger into the call button for the elevator and cross my arms over my chest. Asher waits beside me. He scans the floor for threats.

"Always on, huh?"

"Have to be," he says without missing a beat. "A curse of the job."

The elevator doors swish open, and I scurry inside, used to the malfunctioning signal that forces them shut almost two seconds later. Asher makes a funny sound and practically jumps inside to avoid being squished.

"Jesus."

I bite my lip, shoulders trembling as I try not to laugh. He sees my struggle and scowls.

“Shut up.”

Losing control, I release a belly laugh, throwing my head back and clutching my stomach.

“It wasn’t that funny,” he grumbles, which only makes me giggle harder.

When I finally get ahold of myself, I take a deep breath. “God, your face.”

His eyes sparkle as he stares at me. “Yours is prettier.”

My smile drops. “Don’t do that.”

Panic flashes over his features. “I didn’t mean—”

“To hit on an omega who was auctioned off to the worst alpha to ever walk this earth?”

He cringes. “Uh, yeah. I’m sorry.”

We arrive at my floor, and I get out of the elevator without telling him it’s okay. I turn toward my door but stop when I see my belongings in a pile in the hallway. One of my suitcases is opened, a few pieces of clothing scattered around it.

The key Granny left.

My heart kicks into a gallop, and I rush to the mess, kneeling on the ground and furiously digging through my belongings. Clothes fly into the air. Jewelry falls to the floor. My phone is in the mess of things, but I toss it aside, tearing through everything until all that’s left is a backpack full of things.

It has to be here.

My lungs seize, and my hand trembles violently, making it impossible to pull back the zipper of the smallest pocket. I gasp for air, wheezing as I grasp at the metal.

If the key is gone... so is she.

I’ll never know what waited for me.

She’ll never be back.

She’s gone.

Sorrow surges through me, and a strong hand pushes mine away. Asher kneels next to me, and I glare at him through watery eyes.

“What are you looking for?”

“A key.”

“Let me help.”

Those three words knock the wind out of me, and I collapse onto my ass. He slowly unzips the smallest pocket, his large hand disappearing inside of it. Furrowing his brow, he shakes his head and moves to the next pocket.

I choke on a cry, trying my damndest not to let it out. I hate grief.

Asher opens the next pocket. He takes a deep breath and pulls out my more intimate belongings. I'd be devastated if I weren't so worried about finding the key. Thongs, bras. A small vibrator. The tiny box I kept inside my underwear drawer. I grab it from him and open it, sighing in relief when I see the letter she wrote for my eighteenth birthday still folded up inside. The paper crinkles when I open it, my eyes drinking in the sight of her elegant cursive.

I have this letter.

Clutching it to my chest, I flick my gaze back to where Asher sets the last of the backpack's contents on the cheap carpeting.

“Hold on,” he whispers, turning the bag upside down. Shaking it vigorously, as though willing whatever I'm desperate to find to appear, he stares at the backpack.

A flash of metal and a soft thud on the carpet makes me gasp. My heart swells, and I snatch the key, gripping it so tightly the teeth of it dig into my skin.

“Thank you,” I tell Asher.

He sits back, searching my face.

I don't wipe my cheeks. These tears are meant to fall. They don't hurt, not like losing Granny did.

“So they kicked you out already then?”

“Guess so,” I say with a sigh, staring at the bags on the floor that hold my belongings. I didn’t see the tracker in my searching. The Omega Council probably took it back now that I was auctioned off. I’ve officially worn out my usefulness, so there’s no need to track me.

“Come on, I’ll take you to your parents.”

Shaking my head, I set the key by my side and look through the bags for my wallet. “No. I’m not going there.”

“Okay. A hotel then?”

I nod. “I have some savings.” Granny gave me money from time to time and I’d been collecting it in an account. If only I could find my card, I could use it for a room. “It has to be here.”

I must have missed it during my first search. Surely, they wouldn’t take that too. Who am I kidding? I’m lucky they left me this much.

“Can’t find your purse?” Asher starts to sift through my stuff as well. “What does it look like?”

“It’s a small, black cardholder. I took it out of my purse the other night and left it on my counter.” Prime real estate for swiping. Maybe whoever packed my things stole it. I wouldn’t put theft past the other omegas in the building either. We all come from low packs. We all know what it’s like to want, some more than others. Then there’s Lindsey’s stash. Surely Camila would have made my life hell after finding that. Someone smart enough to realize the value of the drugs took them.

After five minutes of searching for the wallet, we give up.

“Fuck.” I shove my clothes back into one of the suitcases. “I’m not going back to my parents’ house.” Especially not after I broke my mom’s nose. The moment I fall asleep, she’ll be on me.

Asher gives me a confused look.

“You have to arrest me.”

“I’m not arresting you.” Pity colors his features. “There has to be someone else you can call besides your family. A friend?”

“Lindsey,” I say, grabbing my phone and dialing her.

One ring.

Two.

“Hey, Whit. How’s pack life?” Music blares down the line and some people shout in the background. She’s out partying.

Guess she doesn’t care if she gets arrested again.

“Uh, it’s okay. Can I stay with you tonight?”

“What?” she shouts.

Clearing my throat, I glance at Asher. He doesn’t look happy. I’m wasting his time.

“Can I stay with you?” I’ll have to tell her about her stash too, but I don’t want to do that over the phone.

“I’m not coming home tonight.” She squeals a guy’s name, and I can almost picture her giving him flirty grins while she half-listens to what I’m saying.

“Lindsey, I’m in a bind. I really need help.”

“I’ll call you back, Whit.” Lindsey hangs up.

I clench the device in my hand and glance away from Asher. “Okay. No, I understand. Talk to you later.” I pretend to hang up before sliding my gaze back to the alpha. “She was busy.”

“Call someone else.”

“I can’t.”

He makes a frustrated noise. “Now isn’t the time for pride. I’m not arresting you because you’re too ashamed to ask for help. Call someone else.”

“There is no one else,” I say, narrowing my eyes. “So you’re going to have to fucking arrest me unless you want me sleeping on the streets.”

“That’s not happening.” Asher shoves everything on the floor into the backpack and the suitcases, securing the key Granny left me in the front pocket. He grabs a suitcase and the backpack before standing and walking toward the elevator.

I scramble to my feet. “What are you doing?”

Bastard.

“Real fucking nice. I’m left with next to nothing and now you’re confiscating half of it?”

He stops and turns, arching an eyebrow. “Get your bag and get in the car.”

“I’m not going anywhere with you,” I shoot back.

“You were just begging me to arrest you. Do you want a place to stay or not?”

Fair enough. I really don’t want to sleep on the streets. I guess I could try to see if one of the other omegas would let me in, but they haven’t so much as peeked out of their apartments with all the commotion.

Every omega for herself.

The elevator dings. In my stalling, he called for it. I snatch the last suitcase off the ground and double check the floor. Granny’s key is in the backpack Asher has, safely tucked away in the smallest pocket.

I make it to the elevator right as it closes. Growling, I kick the metal doors and scream. A door opens somewhere in the hallway.

“Now you want to know what’s happening?” I yell, not bothering to look at whoever the snoop is.

The doors sweep open, and Asher gives me a funny smile. My backpack and suitcase are at his feet. “I wasn’t going to leave without you, it’s these damn doors.”

“Whatever,” I grumble, hopping on as they start to shut again.

“See? It wasn’t on purpose. I’m not an asshole.” He snickers. “Well, not *that* much of an asshole.”

“At least you’re honest with yourself.”

“I try to be.” He rubs his jaw. “I’m sorry about your wallet.”

Nodding, I swallow down my self-pity. I only had around three-hundred dollars, but it was more than enough for one night in a hotel before having to report to the Omega Council.

I could run. Now would be the best time to do it. Asher can drop me off at Lindsey’s house. I’ll pretend she texted me, and when he leaves, I’ll figure out what to do. That would involve sleeping outside though... and as an omega, that’s not exactly the smartest option. It wouldn’t be a good idea for a beta or delta female either.

Dammit. Shelly was arrested too. She’ll kick my ass if I show up.

“Can I have my own cell?”

Asher coughs. “Uh, sure.”

I ignore the weird strain in his voice. I’m certain it’s not every day someone begs to be arrested. We make it to his SUV without incident, and he sets my stuff in the back next to a large gun case and spare tactical gear. The sudden sound of crinkling Velcro fills the air.

“These vests are hell to wear for too long.” Asher undoes the straps on his shoulder and tosses it into the trunk. The vest lands with a heavy thud, and I stare at it instead of the tight undershirt which molds to a very ripped chest and stomach.

Asher is beyond in shape. He’s like one of those Greek statues. His coloring even faintly reminds me of pictures I’ve seen. Light brown skin, dark hair, full eyebrows. Soft lips.

Don’t think about his lips, Whit.

“Watch your head,” Asher says, lowering the hatch.

I cringe and step back, realizing I was being freakishly quiet. He probably thinks I’m—No. You know what? Screw what he thinks.

I'm tired of worrying about the small things. He can think whatever he wants. His pitying looks won't make me feel bad. I'm doing what I have to do to survive. I won't feel bad about it. With those thoughts powering me, I level him with a bored look.

“Let's go.”

His eyebrows jump in surprise. “In a hurry for a cold cell, huh?”

I ignore him and climb in.

My main focus is on figuring out what to tell Camila when I see her tomorrow. I have to find a way to convince her to find me a new pack.

I can only hope she doesn't hold the gut punch against me.

Chapter Eleven

ASHER

Whitney is too lost in her thoughts to pay attention to where I'm taking her. I'm not arresting her. She's not staying in a jail cell. It doesn't take a genius to figure out someone hurt her. Whitney flinches like it's going out of style, and when I mentioned going to her parents, she acted like I asked her to walk through fire.

The brave front she's putting on now is cute, but I'm not convinced.

She's terrified.

I fucking hate it.

Trev is going to be pissed, but it'll be too late. He's not an asshole either, and while he may not be happy about her coming into our home, it's only for a night. I turn into the residential street that leads to the house. The neighborhood is well kept, mature trees perched in front of modest but cozy homes. No one in this part of town is rich, but we're a lot better off than other low packs. For a fleeting second, I worry she'll hate the house, but I remind myself this is one night. She's not here to stay.

Whitney finally realizes that something isn't right. "Where are we going?"

"I need to change."

Something tells me if I told her I'm taking her home, she'd bail while the car was moving. While I admire her spunk, it

worries me. She's sort of reckless. She reminds me of, well, me.

"You couldn't have waited?" She wrinkles her nose. "Unbelievable. You're such an alpha."

"I'm sure you're trying to insult me, but I quite like being an alpha, so thank you."

She huffs and glares at me.

Smiling, I pull up to the house and park on the street. Avi's car is the only one here. At least she won't have to be confronted with an argument. I grab my phone and shoot off a quick text to let Trev and Hayden know I'm having a lady friend over.

It won't explain her scent, because omegas aren't supposed to sleep with people outside their pack, but at least I'll have a cover for her. Now the hard part is figuring out how to get her to agree to hiding in my room. My mind races at the thought of her in my bed, but I quickly shove those desires down.

She's not here to fuck.

She's here because she doesn't have anyone.

Not even a goddamn friend. That Lindsey chick sounded like an asshole. She hung up on her and Whitney tried to hide it. She didn't realize the volume was so loud that I heard everything, including Lindsey ending the call.

"Come on, I'll only be a second."

Step one, get her in the house.

Step two, find a way to keep her there without seeming like a creepy kidnapper.

Right, there are some flaws in my plan, but I'm making it up as I go.

I'm sure it'll be fine.

Avi's good at charming people.

"Can I use the bathroom?" she asks, following me up to the porch.

“Hell no.”

She doesn't laugh.

I glance at her with a playful smirk, only to drop it in the next second. “I was joking. Of course you can.”

The hurt look on her face is quickly replaced with annoyance. “Jerk.”

“Guilty.” I smile, this time trying to make her understand that I'm on her side.

The front door opens. Her gaze flicks over my shoulder and her eyes widen. Sucking in a sharp breath, she takes in Avi. I ignore the surge of jealousy. Abhishek is back and he has this effect on women, the fucking bastard. I can picture the women in his psych class panting after him while he's totally oblivious to their attention.

Asshole.

“Hey, Avi.” I turn to find him standing in the door without a shirt on. “Really?” I ask.

He gives me something that's supposed to resemble a smile. He hasn't truly smiled since the shooting. “It was hot in the house.”

“Can you put some clothes on for our guest?”

Whitney is speechless, probably drinking in the sight of his rich brown skin, soft black hair, and the ridiculously tight black sweats he's wearing. Avi is equally enraptured by Whitney, and I can't say I blame him. She's gorgeous, even if she is wearing day-old clothes.

“Avi, this is Whitney. She has to pee.”

“Asher,” she hisses.

“What? Do you or do you not?” I ask.

Avi and I both look at her, and she blushes.

“Uh, yeah.”

“Okay. Avi, move your ass and put some fucking clothes on.”

He runs his hand over his abs. Whitney's arousal sweeps through the air, and I clench my jaw, hating that she responds to him so easily. I went out of my way to make sure I didn't overwhelm her with my scent. Her omega nature makes her susceptible to alpha scents, and she was pissed at me in the club when she caught a whiff of mine.

"The bathroom is down the hallway. First door on the left." Avi walks away, heading in the direction of his room and hopefully to find a shirt.

Whitney clears her throat and snaps out of the spell Avi cast on her. "Thanks," she says before heading in. Her hips sway seductively in that ridiculously tight dress, which she's had on for at least two days. She can't be comfortable.

Hurrying to my room, I grab a pair of old sweats and the smallest shirt I own. Soft noises come from inside the bathroom. When she starts washing her hands, I knock lightly.

"I brought you some clothes in case you want to change too."

She doesn't respond. The water shuts off, and the door opens a few inches. Her gaze bounces between the clothes in my hand and my face.

"I have my own clothes."

"Oh." Yeah, I'm an idiot. "Do you want me to grab your suitcase?" I tuck the outfit under my arm, and she stares at it.

"Um. Sure. I mean, I guess if we have time."

"We have time," I assure her. "I'll be right back." Turning to leave, I scrunch my face together and let embarrassment wash over me while she can't see.

"You didn't change."

I glance over my shoulder. "What?"

"I thought you wanted a new shirt?"

Fucking hell, Asher. Get it together. "Oh, yeah. I got distracted. I'll change when I'm back," I say, instead of trying to explain myself.

Once I'm out of the house, I curse myself under my breath and replay the conversation in my head. I've never been this horrible with women. Usually I charm them with a smile and some quick-witted comments. Whitney isn't easy to read.

"You got this," I tell myself. "She's not going to bite."

My dick stirs, wondering if I asked her, if she would actually sink her teeth into my skin. I think about the last murder scene I investigated to calm myself down. Whitney isn't into me.

She's off limits.

Chapter Twelve

WHITNEY

Avi's door is firmly shut. There's no sound in the house but the ticking of a clock. Instead of standing in the bathroom like a weirdo, I make my way to the front of the house. The kitchen and living room are connected as one giant room. With the four doors I counted down the hallway—not including the bathroom—this house is a mansion compared to the one I grew up in.

I trace my hand over the glossy butcher block island. The house is cleaner than I'd expect for men, but there's still a small pile of dishes beside the sink.

"I was getting ready to clean," a deep voice says from behind me.

Taking a steadying breath, I look over at Avi standing next to the double-door fridge. I'm almost sad he put on a shirt, but it's probably for the best. My hormones are on overdrive because my heat is two weeks away. It's not his fault he's attractive and my body is basically screaming *take me now*. I've had sex before, with deltas I don't remember, but the attraction I'd felt to those men is nothing like what I feel around Avi.

Hayden and Asher stir the same feelings, but there's something about this guy that makes me feel safe even though I hardly know him. He tips his head to the side. Does he feel it too?

"You're hurt." His rich brown eyes are focused on my face.

Oh. I cup my cheek. “My alpha’s mate didn’t like me very much.”

He leans against the door of the refrigerator. “I suspect not. I don’t know any omega that would be happy about sharing.” A subtle hint of lemon and eucalyptus wraps around me. His scent is soothing. Calming.

“He didn’t want me for that.” I make a face. “I didn’t want him like that either.”

“I’m sensing there’s a story. Care to share with the class?” His lips kick up into a ghost of a grin that doesn’t quite reach his eyes.

“It’s nothing exciting. I got in trouble the night before the Compatibility Ceremony—”

“The dumbest event in the world,” he cuts in.

I chuckle. “Yeah, I guess it is. Anyway, I broke one too many rules and Camila sent me to the auctions. The alpha who bought me owned Twisters.”

“Did he?” Avi’s gaze darkens. “And he’s where now?”

“Arrested,” I say, giving him a curious look. “Why?”

“No reason. Are you hungry?” He pushes off the fridge, brushing his black hair off his forehead and opening the door.

“No. I’m not staying.”

“Where are you going?” Avi asks, surveying the food. He settles on a bottle of flavored water.

“Jail.”

He jerks around, incredulity painted over his face. “You’re not going to jail.”

“I asked,” I say with a shrug. “I don’t have anywhere to go. It’s only for the night,” I continue when his brow furrows, “then tomorrow I’m reporting to the Omega Council for reassignment.”

Avi processes what I’ve said for a few moments. “Asher said he’d take you?”

“Yeah.” I nod, checking the front door. Asher is taking his sweet time.

“You’re not going to jail.” Avi sounds so sure.

“Listen, I’m going. Asher is changing and then he’s taking me.”

“No.” Avi shakes his head, eyes glittering with mischief. “Asher’s not taking you anywhere.”

“If this is some alpha posturing—”

“It’s not,” Asher says.

I whirl around. He’s carrying all of my bags. His intentions become crystal clear, and I shake my head.

“I’m not staying.”

“Whitney,” he says, voice gentle and coaxing.

“I’m not some charity case.” I grab the handle of the suitcase in his right hand and yank on it. His grip is like iron. I tug again, glaring up at him. “Asher, let it go.”

He releases the bag.

“Good boy,” Avi whispers.

“Fuck you.” Asher flips off his friend.

“I’m not staying,” I say to Asher, holding his gaze. “Take me to jail.”

“What’s the difference?” he hedges. “Stay here. Like you said, it’s only one night. You’ll be more comfortable here than you will in a cell. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

I realize it’s odd for him to try and convince me to not go to jail, but my stomach tightens with unease. What does he want? I shoot my gaze to Avi. This is a trick.

“It’s not a trick,” Avi says quickly. “You’re safe here.”

Dropping my gaze, I shake my head and stare at my feet. “I’ve heard that before.”

Right before my mother locked me in the cellar.

I lost track of how many times I was shoved inside of the damp, dark, spider-infested room. Five days without a bathroom. Five days with cheap snacks and water. Five days of crying. Five days of hell.

“Whitney?”

“What?” My voice is hoarse, and I lift my gaze, staring at Avi.

“Wherever you went, don’t go there. I promise you, I’ll kill anyone who tries to touch you against your will, even if it’s one of my pack.” His gaze is hard and unrelenting. “You. Are. Safe.”

I swallow the lump in my throat and let go of the bag. “I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“No,” they say at the same time.

Closing my eyes, I let out a heavy sigh. “Don’t make this harder than it has to be. The couch is mine.” I look between them.

Lights flash over the living room.

“Shit,” Asher says, peeking out of the window. “Come with me.” He grabs the suitcase and hurries around me and down the hall. When he realizes I’m not following him, he turns. “Whitney.” There’s an edge of desperation in his voice. “Please.”

“It’s okay,” Avi says. “We need to talk to Trev first.”

He must be their other roommate. I’m not in a hurry to meet another alpha. I take the easy way out and follow Asher. His eyes flick between me and the door, like he’s expecting it to burst open at any second.

“Am I safe?” I ask, giving him a pointed look.

“Of course,” he says. “That’s not the issue.”

“Then what is?”

“It’s a long story.” He juts his chin toward his bedroom door. “Can you open that?”

The screech of the screen door makes my skin ripple with gooseflesh. Asher's jumpy and I'm starting to freak out. Dread pools in my stomach. I knew this was too good to be true. Wrenching the door open, I rush into the room. Asher grimaces and sets my things on the floor, shooting me an apologetic smile.

"It'll be okay."

He shuts me inside and retreats to the front of the house. I chew on my cheek and glance around. A lone sock lies next to the hamper. His bed is unmade. The computer desk is a mess, with an opened book turned over on the keyboard. A stack of papers to the side of that. Dirty coffee cups.

Muffled voices carry down the hall, snapping me back to reality. They're distracted for now. I drop to my knees and open the suitcase, grabbing clean underwear, soft yoga pants, and a long, loose T-shirt. I set the clothes on the bed and peel off the dress, sighing in relief as I kick off the heels. My feet ache, but the stretch of them being flat against the hardwood floor is divine. Slipping the thong off, I grab the comfy boy shorts and yank them on.

"Where is she?" a strong and familiar voice demands.

Hayden.

Footsteps pound down the hallway.

My heart flutters and starts to beat faster. Why is he here?

I pull the shirt on right before the door opens. "Jesus, fuck. I'm changing."

Hayden drinks me in, eyes lingering on my thighs for a second. "Are you okay?" A faint but distinct tang of arousal fills the room. I bristle as warmth sweeps over me, my body naturally responding to the desire.

Sometimes it sucks to be a horny bitch.

"I'd be better if you'd shut the door." I ignore the way my core clenches in need.

Guilt flashes over his face. "Sorry. I'll be out here when you're done."

The door closes, and I reach for the pants with trembling hands.

This is a horrible idea.

I finish dressing and brush my messy hair, braiding it once I'm done. I'm delaying talking to Hayden and whoever Trev is, but I have to gather my thoughts. Like Avi and Asher said, it's only one night. Worst case scenario, Asher will have to take me to jail. I take solace in knowing I won't be on the streets. Walking to the door, I open it and drop my hand to my hip, lifting an eyebrow at Hayden who's standing right outside the room.

"Care to explain why you felt the need to barge in on me?" I don't want him to know how this entire night is making me feel unnerved. My future has never been so uncertain.

Omegas are always matched with packs, unless they screw up like I did, but even then, they still eventually end up with a pack, because the only way alphas are born is from an omega. Betas and deltas can have children together, but they won't have alphas. For a long time, the only alphas were royal alphas, essentially purebred from the first alpha lines. That all changed when a beta and an omega fell in love.

"I didn't know you were changing." Hayden takes in my new clothes. "How's the cheek?"

"It hurts."

He nods and lifts his gray gaze to meet mine. "Trev needs to talk to you."

We head to the living room where the rest of the men wait. Asher and Avi are sitting on the couch, lounging like they don't have a care in the world. That all changes when I walk in. Asher stiffens and zeros in on me. Avi leans forward and rests his arms on his thighs, cutting his serious gaze to the man who can only be Trev.

At least six feet tall, Trev is the epitome of tall, dark, and handsome. Umber skin, honey-brown eyes, long, thick eyelashes, and full lips that are pulled into a slight frown. Trev's arms are crossed over his chest, biceps bulging. He

stares at me, picking apart my weaknesses and sniffing out my vulnerabilities. No words pass between us, but his attention is so intense it strips me to the bone. His gaze flicks to my cheek, to my fingers which are curled into fists, and to my mouth which is half-opened to say hello.

“No.”

“No?” I repeat, sounding like an idiot.

“You can’t stay.” He gives Hayden a look that says so much it might as well be Latin to me. “She has a tracker in.”

“Actually, I don’t.” I raise my arm and point to the barely there scar. “I took it out.”

That doesn’t appease him.

“So you’re a criminal.”

“I’m not a criminal,” I say with a frown.

“Were you not arrested?”

I scoff. “Yes, but I’m not—”

“I’ll take you to the station.” Trev starts to turn.

“Trev, come on, man. She doesn’t belong in a cell.” Asher shoots to his feet.

“She’s not going to jail.” Hayden steps forward and grabs my elbow, like he’s worried I’ll run.

Pulling my arm out of his grip, I step away. “I don’t need your help.”

He looks at me, confusing emotions dancing in his pretty irises.

“If he wants me gone, I don’t want to stay.” I glare at Trev. “For the record, I asked to be taken to jail. Asher was the one who brought me here.”

Trev scowls.

“It’s one night,” Asher says, walking toward his friend. “Look at her, man. Shelly will tear her apart if we lock her up tonight.”

Irritation flares across Trev's face. "She's almost in heat."

"She can stay in my room. She'll be gone by morning," Hayden says.

Avi stands to join the conversation. "She—"

"She is in the room," I snark. "I don't want to cause a fight. I'll grab my things and we can go." Spinning on my heel, I rush to Asher's room. An anger-fueled flush crawls up my neck. What a jerk.

I can't blame him, though. He's looking out for his pack, and I *am* an unmated omega. Even if I'm not in heat yet, I'm a temptation they don't need. Alphas and omegas are drawn to one another like magnets.

Heavy footsteps stop outside Asher's open door. I finish zipping my suitcase and close my eyes, praying for patience.

"Hayden, I'm not staying."

"One night." Trev's voice surprises me, and I pivot to look at him. "That's all you get. You fuck with my pack, I'll make your life hell."

I laugh. "I've been in hell since I was born."

His head rears back at that, and he considers me, honey-brown eyes slicing through my confidence. "Stay away from Hayden."

"Maybe you should tell him to stay away from me," I say, standing and stepping toward him. "He's the one that comes to me."

"He's a beta."

"I'm aware."

"Curtis is your alpha."

"That asshole is nothing to me." I shake my head. "So long as he and Shelly are in jail, Camila will auction me off to a new pack." My stomach growls.

Trev rubs his jaw. "You're hungry."

“The Omega Council doesn’t feed their prisoners.” I break eye contact. “I won’t fuck with your pack. I’ll leave if that’s what you really want.”

“It would be safer if you left.” Blunt as hell. “But Asher is right. You don’t have anywhere else to go, and while I may want you gone, I can’t let you stay on the streets.”

“Wow, thanks.”

He sighs. “Don’t make me regret this.”

Chapter Thirteen

AVI

Hayden is pacing the length of the living room, glancing toward the hallway every few seconds. He's acting strange, and it has everything to do with a certain omega. Leaning back on the couch, I tap my fingers on my legs, waiting for Trev to talk to her. Making her leave is wrong. My body revolts at the thought. That should be enough to tell me we should let her go. The last year has taught me that our jobs will only cause pain. I never want to be the reason someone's heart breaks again.

"She's hungry." Trev glances at me. "Can you make her something?"

Happy to leave the memories of the worst day of my life behind, I stand to help. Trev can make sandwiches and eggs. He'll complain about it the whole time. Hayden would jump at the chance to help the woman, but I suspect Trev doesn't want Whitney anywhere near our beta.

"Any special requests?" I ask her, grabbing a pan.

"Whatever is fine." She slips around Trev and perches on the barstool. Her fingers tap on the counter, a nervous tick.

"How about a grilled sandwich?" It's fast and easy, and better than a regular one.

Whitney nods. "Perfect."

Hayden and Asher are in the living room, doing a shit job of not staring at her. Trev stands with his arms crossed,

scowling at the both of them. I sigh and start grabbing the ingredients.

“You guys should clean up, you smell like cotton candy.”

“I hate that place,” Hayden says.

“Maybe we can finally shut it down. Curtis is finished.” Asher sniffs his shirt and cringes at what he finds.

“What about the dancers?” Whitney asks.

Trev clears his throat. “They’ll find work elsewhere.”

“Oh? I didn’t realize the police force was hiring strippers.”

I burst into laughter, shaking my head and focusing on making the sandwich, keeping an ear tuned in to the conversation.

There’s an awkward lull. I check on Whitney. She’s staring at the guys, face lined in confusion. I follow her gaze to my pack. They’re all staring at me like I’ve grown a second head. I lower my eyebrows.

What the fuck is their problem?

Trev cuts his gaze to Whitney. “He drugs them.”

“They need somewhere to go. Somewhere safe. What about Nova? She needs help.”

Asher and Hayden exchange looks, the one they’ve been trading since I was put on leave. Pity. Worry. I hate that look. Focusing on the sandwich making, I half listen to the rest of the conversation.

“She’s at the hospital.” Trev sounds tired. I’m surprised he hasn’t snapped at her. Usually when he’s exhausted, he’s grumpy. This fatigue is more about not knowing what to do than it is about needing sleep.

“And where will she go after that? Another omega auction? You know Camila won’t match her with a pack after what she’s been through.”

“I don’t know what will happen to her,” Trev admits.

And that's the problem we've been struggling with since we found out what a piece of crap Curtis is. His lawyers are the best of the best, and we haven't been able to find a way to take him out of the game.

"You can't shut Twisters down."

I place a bit of butter in the pan and turn the stove on, waiting for it to melt. "It's not up to us," I say, helping Trev out.

"It's not right for them to lose their job because Curtis is an asshole."

Turning to face her, I lean against the counter. "I agree."

Her lips press together. She's not convinced.

"The club could be put up for sale or torn down."

Trev scrubs his face. "Nothing is happening with the club until we know for sure the charges will stick."

"So you're going to wait until it's too late to help them?" Whitney asks, nostrils flaring.

"I'm doing what I can for now." Trev walks toward her. "Tonight I'll rest easy knowing he didn't drug you and force you to dance."

Whitney loses some of her steam.

Trev stares at her. "I'm not trying to be a dick."

Asher coughs, and I cut my gaze to him. His lips are pulled down, but there's no hiding the smile he's fighting. He's such a child sometimes, but it's part of why we love him. Even during a conversation like this, he can find something to lighten the mood.

"Believe it or not, I've spent time trying to figure out what to do for them. But like Avi said, it's not up to us. The Royal Council will do what they do. It's our job to protect people. I can only do so much for Nova, and then it's out of my hands." Trev gazes down at her. "She's safe for now."

The anger in Whitney's eyes is deeper than just tonight. There's too much rage for this to only be about the dancers.

“She’s not safe until you know a pack will treat her well.”

Tension crackles between them. Trev is perceptive, and his posture softens as he realizes some of the fight is personal for Whitney.

“I can’t control that,” he whispers, regret coloring each word.

Silence blankets the room, stifling further conversation. The butter is sizzling. I carefully place the sandwich in the pan and watch the clock. The conversation is too intense. There’s too much wrong with the world. Whitney wants more than we can feasibly give, and it’s another failure to add to the list.

We can try to help people, but at the end of the day, none of us are safe. So long as the Royal Council rules our society, we’re merely puppets to a master who wants low packs to lose.

I’ve been doing a spectacular job of failing so far.

Chapter Fourteen

WHITNEY

The house is quiet. Asher's bed is the perfect blend of soft and firm. His sheets smell like him—musky and earthy. The bedside clock reads three in the morning. I haven't been able to sleep. Avi made me a fancy grilled cheese with turkey and Swiss cheese, but not even that made sleep come.

I'm tired, but wired all at the same time. Too keyed up from the last forty-eight hours. My eyes ache. Rubbing them to ease the dryness, I turn on my side and let out a long breath. Unease swirls in my stomach. I punched Camila and I wouldn't put it past her to shun me. She's vindictive like that. Images of her cruel smirk and ill intentions flash through my mind. I can't report to the Omega Council.

The only safe choice is to run. I don't know where I'll go, but once I'm out of Dolin I can find a small town to hole up in. There's bound to be a low pack in need of an omega. Taking mates out of desperate need isn't ideal, but it's better than the unknown. At least this way I'll be in control.

Settling on my decision, I slip out of bed and quietly get dressed, pulling on Asher's black hoodie he left on the desk chair. I'll need it for cold nights. Layers will save me from freezing and there's enough room underneath to have at least three of my shirts on. I load up my backpack with essential supplies. The box from my dresser. The key Granny left me. As many clothes as I can stuff inside. I decide to leave my phone so they can't track me.

The zipper sounds like a bullhorn in the otherwise silent house, but the men have to be dead asleep by now. My flats aren't ideal for walking, but the only other shoes I have are cheap flip-flops and high heels. I settle the bag on my back and gently ease the door open, waiting for a breath to make sure no one rushes out of their room.

The doors remain closed.

Someone is snoring.

The ticking clock mocks the erratic beating of my heart.

Suddenly I'm seventeen again, opening my bedroom door to leave before my mother goes into her full heat. I shake myself out of the memory, focusing on the present. I exit Asher's room and leave the door open. Walking on the edge of the hallway to avoid creaking floorboards, I slowly edge toward the door with clammy palms. My breath comes out in harsh exhales as I lose the battle with the past.

"Where the fuck do you think you're going?" My mother lights a cigarette, giving away her location at the worn dining room table.

"To Lindsey's," I lie. I don't have a plan. I only know that I have to leave before her heat begins.

"You didn't ask permission." Twin streams of smoke shoot out of her nostrils, giving her a beastly appearance.

"I thought it would be better..." I trail off as she stands, stepping toward the door. "I'll be gone. You'll have them all to yourself." Desperation drives me to appeal to her ego.

"So you admit you want them?" She growls, stomping toward me.

"What?" My heart sinks, and my throat closes. I dash for the door, but she tackles me to the ground, digging her fingers into my hair and roughly wrenching my head back.

"I see the way you watch them," she hisses, digging her elbow into the space between my shoulder blades. "Daddies' little girl."

Fingers curl around my shoulder, ejecting me from the past.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Trev’s words trigger me.

I scream and yank out of his hold, stumbling into the wall. My panicked eyes find his face for a millisecond, registering the surprise. He steps away, holding up his hands to show he’s not going to hurt me. My heart pounds against my chest, and I suck in a ragged breath. Then I run. I burst out of the house, the screen door banging into the side of the house.

“Whitney,” he roars my name.

My breath catches in my throat. Phantom pain rips across my scalp, my mother’s relentless hold reaching through the years to torment me. My legs tremble as I race down the steps. I trip on an uneven patch of sidewalk and go down, tumbling into the grass.

“Stop.” Trev pushes the command at me when I start to get to my feet. “You’re okay.”

My entire body stills at the demand. Humiliation races up my neck and heats my cheeks with the last of his words. The moisture from the damp grass seeps through my pants. The night air is cool and someone nearby is smoking a cigarette, the smell kindling memories of me pinned to the floor, my mother’s knee pressing into the space between my shoulder blades.

“Fucking slut,” Mother growls into my ear before slamming my head into the floor.

A strangled cry works its way out of my chest, my body betraying me and showing the world how pathetic I am. I run my hands over my hair, wincing at the touch. It’s been years since she’s had me in that position, but the pain covering my scalp and face is tangible. Wounds that never fully healed. The agony of it all burns through me, ripping holes in the mental shields I’d built up. I gasp for air. Once. Twice. It’s not enough.

Her hand covers my mouth, and her fingers pinch my nose closed, robbing me of air. "See how they like you when you're dead."

"Whitney?" Hayden's voice breaks through the memory.

My lungs expand, drawing in precious oxygen, and my body shudders with its arrival, almost unsure of how to handle the very thing that will keep me alive. Heart pounding a mile a minute, I search for the voice that saved me from reliving more of her abuse. Hayden drops to the grass in front of me, gray eyes wide and full of fear.

"Hayden," I say, reaching for him.

His hands are warm, enveloping my palm into his firm hold. "I'm here."

Those two words shouldn't make me sigh in relief. That simple fact shouldn't loosen the tension between my shoulders. His scent shouldn't bring me peace. It's not right. It's not fair. It's not possible. I can't trust him. I don't trust anyone. The last person I trusted—Lindsey—showed me who she really was. I'd known her my whole life. Twenty-four hours isn't long enough.

But, he's here.

"I'm... I didn't mean to—"

"It's okay," he says, scooting closer to me. He doesn't try to hug me.

I'm too keyed up to accept that sort of affection.

"I don't want to go," I whisper, praying he'll understand.

"You won't have to go," he responds, just as quietly.

"Hayden." Trev's words are quiet, but he demands Hayden's attention.

"She's okay." Hayden never breaks eye contact. "Can we go inside?"

I nod, swiping a tear from my cheek.

Weak. Weak. Weak.

Hayden and I rise to our feet and walk to the house. Trev barely shifts out of the way as we walk inside. He's so close his breath brushes over my face. I pull away from it, ignoring the frown that tugs at his lips.

"What happened?" Asher is standing in the living room, tracking my movements with worry creasing his brow. "Are you hurt?"

"No." I sit on the couch next to Hayden, body still stiff with adrenaline. The pillow Asher was using brushes against my legs.

"She screamed," Trev says. "I didn't hurt her."

"Phantom scars," I explain, staring at a picture on the wall. "I'm fine."

No one speaks.

In the back of the house, Avi snores. At least he won't see how pathetic I am.

"Why did you run?" Trev asks, crouching in front of me. "Why?"

I grimace. "I wouldn't expect you to understand."

"Try me."

Glaring at him, I summon some of my spine to answer. "Omegas are like cattle. You all pretend like we have it good. The Omega Council shoves propaganda down our throats like it's water, telling us how to behave and please our pack. If we fuck up, we're treated like pigs."

"Pigs?"

I nod. "You heard me. Cattle have more value because they can give more. Pigs are meant for one thing and one thing only. Slaughter."

"Cattle are slaughtered," Trev says.

"Yeah, but some are kept for dairy. For a time, they're more than food. They produce. Omegas who are matched are like cattle. Omegas auctioned are like pigs. Curtis is the

butcher. If Camila doesn't send me back to him, it'll be some other alpha with a knife."

"They're not going to kill you," he tries to reason.

"No, they'll only drug me and force me to dance, entertaining people against my will. I'd rather live on the streets than live like that." I dig my fingernails into my thighs, resisting the urge to scream at him.

It's not his fault he doesn't get it.

It's society's. The Royal and Omega Councils are the rotten core of spoiled fruit. Omegas are the fleshy pulp. The alphas are flies.

Trev glances away, rubbing the back of his neck. "I don't think Camila knew—"

I scoff, cutting him off. "That bitch knows. She doesn't give a fuck, that's the problem. No one does."

"I do," Hayden and Asher say at the same time.

"Now you do, only because I'm here in your living room as proof. What about before? What about when I'm gone?" I laugh. "This whole world would be lost without omegas and look at the way we're treated."

"There are good packs," Trev says, sighing. "I hear you. The way we follow along with the Compatibility Ceremony is feeding into the narrative that it's fine. How do we stop it?"

Therein lies the problem. The only people who can stop it are the idiots who made the ridiculous laws to begin with. The Royal Council, for all their riches and fancy education, are stuck in outdated and inhumane practices.

"I don't know," I confess.

Asher's dark green eyes fill with pity. "If I had more influence, I'd do something."

"You have influence." I stand and step toward him. "Use your voice. Stand up for what's right."

"You sound like the protestors."

I'm not the only one who hates how our society operates. Groups of low packs have begun petitioning, fighting out against the unfair treatment. They're not fighting for omegas though. No one fights for omegas.

Perhaps it's time we start fighting for ourselves.

"Maybe," I say, stepping back. "But at least I don't sound like I've been brainwashed."

True, I wanted a pack. I wanted to escape my mother's reach. I wanted to be far away from her and my fathers. All of that was driven by survival. If all of that didn't matter, I wouldn't want to be matched. It's so... cold. There's no passion in being assigned to a pack because you fit with their personalities.

If I dig down deep to what I would want, I'd want passion. The kind of love that steals your breath, makes your heart sing, and heals your wounds. The fictional sort of romance that gives you butterflies.

"It's late," Trev finally says. "We should sleep. You can stay in my room."

I deflate. He won't let me out of his sight now that I tried to run.

Hayden squeezes my leg. "You're exhausted. I'll make sure you're safe from Trev. He's all bark and no bite."

Trev raises his eyebrows, like he disagrees with that statement, but he doesn't correct his friend.

"Fine," I say. I am tired and my attempt to escape only made me more so.

Tonight I'll give in.

Tomorrow I'll figure out a way to get out of meeting with Camila.

Chapter Fifteen

HAYDEN

Around four, Whitney finally falls into a deep sleep. The bruise on her face pisses me off more than I care to admit. I don't like that she's hurt. Trev is lying back in his recliner, staring at the muted television in his room. I promised to keep her safe and that meant staying in his room too. She allowed me to sit on the other side of the bed but gave me her back. I pretended not to hear the soft sniffles as she settled in.

Some of her hair has fallen across her face, and it takes all of my self-control to keep my hands in my lap, rather than reach over and brush it away.

"She can't stay," Trev whispers.

I slide my gaze toward him. "Why not?"

Trev glares at me. "She can't stay with us."

"We can give her a place to stay until she figures out what to do." It's insane, hiding her from the Omega Council. But we could make it work.

"Hayden." Trev levels me with a hard look. "You're a beta."

"You think I don't know that?" I whisper yell, hoping we won't wake her up. I glance at her. Her breathing is even and she hasn't moved. "Come on, Trev. Even you're not this big of a dick. She obviously needs help. We can offer to help."

His face darkens. "Do you know what they would do if they found her here?"

Of course I do. We'd be stripped of everything. Home, jobs, money. We'd probably be shunned. The probability of them finding out, or even giving enough of a damn about Whitney to search for her, is low. No one cares about low packs.

"It's the right thing to do." I bump my fist against where my badge would usually lie. "What type of people are we if we don't help? That's what we swore to do. To protect."

"The protocol—"

"Don't talk to me about the protocol."

Whitney rolls over, and we both hold our breaths. Her eyes are closed, brow furrowed. Is she dreaming about whatever terrified her earlier? I can't slay those demons... and that really fucking sucks. I never want to see that much pure terror again. No one should ever be that scared. Whatever happened to her, it must have been awful.

Trev drops it and turns off the TV, leaning back and closing his eyes.

The discussion is over.

But the fight is far from won.



My phone chirps at seven in the morning, waking me and Trev. We both slip out of the room and head to the kitchen for coffee. Avi and Asher are sitting at the breakfast bar, sipping out of worn mugs. Avi flicks his gaze between us, noticing the tension.

"What happened?"

"I already told him about Whitney," Asher says. "Why do you guys look like you hate each other?"

"I don't hate him." I bristle, grabbing a mug and waiting for Trev to finish filling his up. "We can't send her to the Omega Council."

Trev releases a long, tired sigh. "It's protocol."

I look at Asher and Avi. "Come on, you can't tell me either of you is comfortable with sending her back to be auctioned off again, not after what happened with Curtis." Taking the coffee pot from Trev, I fill my cup.

"I don't like it," Asher says. "Curtis isn't even the worst of the alphas that go to those auctions."

"We can offer her a safe place for a while." I glance at each of them.

Avi leans his forearms on the counter. "What's the harm?"

"You know what the harm is," Trev says with a shake of his head. "She's going to go into heat. She can't be here for that."

"Unless she becomes our omega," Asher suggests, earning a withering scowl from Trev. "What? Come on, she'd be safe that way."

"Don't you think she's been through enough?" Trev asks, setting his mug on the counter. "What happens when one of us dies?"

"That's unlikely." I tap my fingers on the coffee cup.

"But it's possible," Trev says.

"Any alpha from any pack could die at any point," Asher argues. "That's a weak excuse."

"You don't even know her," Trev snaps, slamming his hand on the counter in front of where Asher and Avi sit. "She's already messing with Hayden's head."

I scoff. "That's dramatic."

"No, it's not. Betas and omegas aren't supposed to be mates. If she stays, you're going to want her. You're already half in love with her."

"I am not." I sip my coffee to hide the guilt. I do like her. What's wrong with wanting to help her?

“I know you,” Trev says, stepping toward me. “She’s the perfect amount of broken, isn’t she?”

Glaring, I set my cup aside. “What are you insinuating?”

“You want to save her. Hayden wants to swoop in on his white horse and carry the princess off on his trusty steed.”

“A bit rude of you to assume Avi would offer rides,” Asher quips.

Trev and I ignore him, gazes locked.

“You’re not thinking straight. You’re a beta, Hayden.” Trev’s eyes are hard and unrelenting.

“You keep saying that like I’ve somehow forgotten. I’m painfully aware of where I stand within this pack.” I toss a scowl at Asher and Avi because neither of them spoke up on my behalf.

Asher snaps to first, coughing and glancing away. “Ease up, Trev.”

Swallowing the angry words I want to throw at them, I simply deaden my gaze and turn, heading back to my room without another word.

Chapter Sixteen

TREV

The door to Hayden's room snaps shut. Fuck. I know I was harsh with him, maybe overly so, but the man has to get a grip. Last night he watched over her, staring at her like she hung the moon. The fool doesn't realize how dangerous she is, not only for him but all of us. She's technically property of another pack. Curtis hadn't marked her, though I don't know why, but he bought her. The law says that she's his.

No matter how fucked the legalities may be, I'm not convinced we should be the ones to save Whitney. She's beautiful, but she's going to be the reason my pack is ripped apart. If anything happened between her and Hayden, there would be hell to pay. The Royal and Omega Councils would press charges because she belongs to Curtis. Hayden's life would be ruined. All because of a pretty omega with sorrow-filled blue eyes and a smile that makes my heart ache.

It doesn't matter that she's made Avi laugh—a real, genuine laugh that made my heart swell with thanks. He's been so subdued lately, like he's forgotten what joy is. All it took was a snarky comment from her to bring back some of the Avi we all used to know. She'd be good for him, but it's all too complicated.

Avi and Asher are staring at me. I glare at them and raise an eyebrow, asking *what* without words.

“Asher told me about last night.” Avi runs his hands through his hair. “She needs help.”

“You’ve taken a semester of psychology and suddenly you’re an expert?” I bite out, instantly regretting my words.

Avi’s eyes darken. “Don’t be an asshole to me because you can’t control your emotions. You know it’s more than a semester and yeah, maybe I am an expert in trauma. Isn’t that why you put me on leave?”

“Avi, you know it had to be done.”

Anger lines his forehead. “Is it because of my mental health or because I almost died? Maybe you’re the one afraid to lose someone.”

“Uh, guys?”

Avi and I look at Asher. A weaker man would flinch at the heated scowls, but Asher simply makes a face and tips his chin in the direction of the hallway. “Whitney is waiting for you two to stop arguing like a bunch of pre-heat omegas.”

Whitney scoffs. “Not even omegas are this dramatic,” she mutters in a husky, sleep-tired voice.

Bracing myself for her arresting gaze, I slowly turn and take her in. She’s still wearing those tight yoga pants. Damn things should be illegal. I clench my jaw and school my features.

She’s only an omega.

Not the devil.

Stop being such a dick, I tell myself, because even I’m tired of how moody I am with her in the house. She did nothing wrong, and I can’t hate her for merely existing and smelling wonderful.

“Contrary to popular belief, I don’t need help. I need coffee.” She tosses a haughty look at Avi.

Knowing she’s not familiar with the kitchen, I grab a mug and fill it up for her. Twenty seconds later, I hand it to her. She eyes it like I poisoned it.

“If you don’t drink it, I will.”

“Of course you would,” she says, taking the mug, carefully avoiding touching my hand. “I’m going to drink this on the porch so you all can finish your fight. Once you’re done, you can decide who’s driving me to the Omega Council offices.”

Asher grinds his jaw and widens his eyes at me, expecting me to tell her she can stay.

Whitney saunters to the door, exits, and closes it behind her.

“Give her a week,” Avi says. “Please.”

It’s as close to begging as he’s ever come. He didn’t even sound this desperate when I told him he was on indefinite leave. Closing my eyes, I exhale and nod. “Fine.”

I better not regret this.

Chapter Seventeen

WHITNEY

About ten minutes after I stormed out onto the porch, Trev comes outside. I'm sitting on one of the steps, and I don't bother scooting over or looking at him. He's determined to hate me for whatever reason, and I'm still too sleepy to pretend to be nice.

"You can stay."

"No." My face hurts from where Curtis and Shelly hit me, but I've taken worse hits.

He makes a noise. "No? Why not?"

"For some reason, I thought alphas were smarter." I sip on my coffee. "I'm not staying where I'm not wanted." Standing, I turn to face him, meeting his guarded honey eyes. He's wearing sweats and a white tee that stretches tight across his muscled chest.

"They want you to stay," he says.

"And you?" I walk up the steps until I'm a few inches from him. "You don't like me."

"That's not true." He doesn't offer an explanation.

"I'm not convinced. You look at me like I'm going to hurt your pack."

He shrugs. "You could."

Holding his gaze, I frown. "I won't." The rest of his pack has been nothing but nice, if not a little overbearing. I don't know why he's so worried.

“Do you really want to face Camila today?” he asks, changing the subject.

“No,” I say, looking away. “But I don’t want to be a problem.” I don’t want to accept the offer to stay, but I’d do almost anything to avoid the bitch.

Past experiences are screaming that this act is to get me comfortable. Then, once they have me where they want me, the claws will come out. They always do.

“Then don’t be,” he says, opening the door so we can go inside. “If you want to leave, I’ll take you to Camila.”

This is an opportunity I can’t afford to miss. Whatever bad comes from it, I’ll survive. If there’s anything I’ve learned, it’s that I can survive.

Aside from pinning me down and taking me against my will, there’s nothing these alphas can do to truly surprise me. Beatings I can take. Cruel words I can swallow.

“I’ll stay,” I say, following him into the house. “But I’m sleeping on the couch.”

Asher snickers. “Good luck with that.”

I narrow my eyes, ignoring how adorable he looks with sleep-rumpled black hair. “I’m serious.”

“I know.” He smiles. “But you don’t know Hayden.”

I carry my mug to the coffee pot, which has a fresh batch of brew in it, and ignore the pull Asher has. He makes me want to find trouble. He makes me want to talk back. He makes me want to smirk. That’s the problem though, isn’t it? He makes me feel.



Everyone but Avi leaves for work. He settles onto the couch and turns on the TV as soon as the door shuts, navigating to a streaming app. I stay, leaning against the counter, nursing my coffee. Bob Ross’ face shows up a few seconds later, ready to

walk people through painting a valley spread out at the bottom of a mountain.

“Are you going to stand there and pretend not to watch, or are you going to sit down and relax?” Avi brushes his black hair off his forehead but doesn’t move his attention from the screen.

I sit at the far end of the couch and tuck my feet beneath me, focusing on Bob. Avi’s lemon and eucalyptus scent fills the space between us.

“Grab a bit of Van Dyke brown and just tap, tap, up like that,” he says, somehow making a tree trunk with a knife-looking tool.

“It’s always Van Dyke brown,” Avi observes.

“Now, we grab the brush and some of the Van Dyke. Watch what I do here...”

My thoughts wander while Bob continues to explain. *She needs help*, Avi had said. If I’m being honest, it was a fair assessment. I hate that I let those fears overcome me when Trev came after me, but it’s hard to stop my body from reacting to being chased. There were too many nights growing up when I tried to flee, tried to find a way away. I failed every time, sort of like last night. Avi lays his head back on the couch and I shift, studying the side of his face.

Noticing my attention, he slides his gaze toward me. “What’s up?”

“I don’t need your help.”

He searches my face, lips pressing together.

“I don’t,” I say again when he doesn’t answer.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yeah, I mean I can’t force help on you if you don’t want it.” He shrugs. “I thought the same thing, you know? That I didn’t need help after the shooting. I was wrong.”

I chew on the inside of my cheek.

“Oops, well, that’s okay. We’ll just turn it into a happy, little bird,” Bob says, fixing a mistake he made on the canvas. Not even his error can distract me from the opening Avi is giving me.

“What happened?”

Avi releases a hard breath. “This talk needs more coffee,” he mutters, standing and going for a fresh mug.

I follow him to the kitchen, abandoning Bob and his happy birds. Avi busies himself with the coffee, and I slide onto the barstool. A hangnail catches my attention, and I pinch it between my fingernails, ripping it off. There’s a tiny bit of pain, but the break of the hangnail from skin is oddly grounding. Steam curls out of a mug Avi places in front of me.

“It was a Tuesday. The sort of day that’s so unassuming you almost forget about it altogether, you know?” He looks at me for confirmation.

“I guess,” I say, not really understanding.

“Tuesday isn’t Monday and it’s not Friday. It’s not the middle of the week or close to the end. It’s just there.”

I nod, sort of getting it now.

“Right, so my Tuesdays were pretty normal. Some routine patrolling, answering a few calls. For the most part, that day was pretty calm.” Something strange flashes across his face, pain and frustration and shame all in one look. He takes a long drink, like he’s gathering strength for the next part.

Joining him, I blow on my coffee before taking a sip, giving him all the time he needs. My finger is bleeding a little where I ripped the hangnail. I tuck it into my fist and squeeze, ignoring the slight ache.

“The call came in around three in the afternoon. A couple of guys robbed a bank and took off through a residential area.”

My stomach hollows. Oh no.

He sucks in a sharp breath. “I was close. I got there first. The guys were speeding down this street. I went after them, but not too fast because the houses, you know? It’s not safe to

go so fast. Anyway, my lights didn't do shit to stop them, and they crashed into this car... a mom on her way to pick up her kid from school." His eyes mist, but I don't look away. You don't hide from someone bearing this much to you, you look them in the eye and help them carry the burden, if only for a while.

"It's okay," I whisper, taking another drink.

His gaze tracks the mug, but his focus is far away. "Their car was fucked. I slammed on my brakes to keep from rear ending them. There were three of them. The driver got out first, right before me. He had a bag, and he ran." Avi takes a breath, grinding his jaw. "I got out to chase him, but the other two had guns."

Right before me, Avi shatters at the memory of whatever happened. He makes a strange noise then clears his throat.

"Before I could even grab my gun, they opened fire." Tears flow down Avi's cheeks. "It all happened so fast. I dropped to the ground, but then I heard this mom screaming at the top of her lungs as the guys took off. Her screams. I've never. I've never heard true pain like that. I shouldn't have chased them through the neighborhood. I should have—" He chokes off, shaking his head and covering his eyes.

"Oh, Avi." I jump off the stool and go around the counter to wrap my arms around him. "You didn't know."

Curling into the embrace, he drops his head to my shoulder. He sobs, and the sound is wrenched from somewhere deep inside of him, so achingly tragic my cheeks grow wet too. "Two kids," he says, voice hoarse. "I killed them."

"Avi," I say, pulling back. "You can't blame yourself for what those assholes did." I run my hand over the top of his head, desperately trying to take some of the pain.

His body trembles. "It is my fault," he whispers. "Their bullets went wide and hit two little kids playing in their front yard. They died because those guys were trying to shoot me." Avi falls apart again, clinging to me. All I can do is hold him and try to soothe some of his agony. My shirt is damp from his

tears, and my own face is a mess, but I try not to let him know I'm crying too. Deep down, I know this man would never intentionally hurt a child. I think he knows it too, but that doesn't change what happened.

"Their names were Quinn and Colin," he says against my shirt. "They were twins."

"Avi..." I trail off, because nothing I say will change his mind or fix what happened.

He nods. "I fucked up."

"No," I rush. "No." I push him back and force him to meet my gaze. "You did your best. Those jerks killed those kids. You're not defined by that moment."

"You want to know the worst part? They got away." Avi steps back and grabs a paper towel, cleaning his face. "I didn't even stop them." He crumples the towel in his hand. "My whole career, I had one priority, and that was to protect people." Scoffing, he throws the balled-up paper towel onto the counter.

Shifting on my feet, I cross my arms over my chest. "I'm so sorry."

"Yeah, well,—" Avi grabs his coffee. "My point was, I was put on leave until the investigation was over. When I came back, I couldn't keep it together through my first shift. I got put on leave again and I got help. I refused therapy for a while, but Trev finally got mad enough and convinced me to go."

"He bullied you into it?" I ask, resisting the urge to roll my eyes. Sounds like something he would do.

"No," Avi says. "Asher and Hayden were fucking around last summer with fireworks. All it took was one firecracker to send me into an episode. Post-traumatic stress disorder is the official name. One minute I was in the living room, the next I was back on that street, listening to that mother scream about her babies."

"Therapy has been helping?"

“Yeah,” he croaks, a stray tear tracking down his face. He bats it away. “I can think about it without breaking down... but apparently, talking about it with someone new is still hard.” He glances at my shirt. “I didn’t mean for it to get so heavy.”

“Don’t apologize. I’m glad you told me, but you didn’t have to.”

“I know,” he says. “But I wanted to. I don’t know what happened to you.” He steps closer, brown eyes searching. “But I know the symptoms of what you’re experiencing.”

Stiffening, I take a step back and paste on a fake smile. “I’m okay.”

He makes a face.

“Really, I’m fine. Trev freaked me out when he ran after me. Asher probably made it sound worse than it was.”

“It’s okay if it was worse than what Asher said.” Avi sighs and grabs his coffee. “Look, you don’t have to tell me or talk about it, but you have to work through your shit. Otherwise, it festers inside of you and you rot from the inside.”

I wrinkle my nose. “Is that why you smell?”

“Brat,” he says with a soft laugh. Letting me win, he lifts his chin in Bob’s direction. “Would you look at that? Thirty minutes and he made a masterpiece.”

Turning, I study the close up of the painting on the TV. “I don’t know, those birds look pretty pissed to me.”

“Bob says otherwise. Come on, the next one is my favorite.” Avi nudges me with his elbow when he passes, grinning at me like he didn’t bare his soul a few seconds ago.

He’s almost as good at shutting off his emotions as I am.

“Exactly how many times have you watched this?” I ask, continuing to ignore the heavy moment where he saw too much of my pain.

I’ve mastered the art of pretending like everything is fine, so the rest of the morning, I spend joking and teasing Avi

about his Bob Ross obsession. He doesn't pressure me to talk about my past or bring up therapy again, but his story plays on a loop in the back of my mind.

Maybe talking to someone—who isn't Linda—would help... but that would mean confessing everything that my mother did. I'm not even sure I remember all of it; there are some gaps in my memories and I'm terrified to find what lies under the black veil my mind draped over those moments.

Chapter Eighteen

ASHER

Curtis Fucking Bell sits across from me and Trev, a strange glint of triumph in his gaze. I don't know what he's so goddamn happy about. The charges we have on him are enough to throw his ass in prison for a long time.

"Which one of you is the good cop?" he taunts, leaning forward. "Maybe you?" Curtis looks at me. "You're too soft to play the bad guy."

I bristle. The fuck? I'm not soft.

"Where'd you get the drugs?" Trev asks, interrupting Curtis' bullshit.

"Yup. Knew you were the tough one." Curtis leers at Trev. "What drugs?"

"Don't play stupid," I say, tapping the table. "We found your stash in the supply room of the club. Cute little hiding place, behind all your towels. Not even in a wall or anywhere semi-difficult to find."

"That must be Nova's. She's a junkie."

I snort. "Nova had twenty-kilos of heroin?"

"We have witnesses that say you drug your girls." Trev leans back in his seat and glares at Curtis. "Is that how you get them to dance for you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about. Say, did you call my lawyer?" The skin under Curtis' right eye twitches.

“You never asked.” I’m being a dick, but this guy was too close to Whitney for my liking. And that other omega, Nova? She was halfway to an overdose when we busted down Twisters’ doors.

“I’m not saying shit until you get my lawyer in here.” Curtis stubbornly lifts his chin and smirks. “Run along and make your boyfriend a cup o’ joe.”

“Stop talking,” I say, leaning forward.

“Or what, pig? You going to punch me?” Curtis leans forward, sucking in a breath. He pauses and narrows his eyes. “You smell like that bitch.”

“That’s enough,” Trev barks, smacking his palm on the table. “I’ll call your damn lawyer. Come on, Asher.”

I shove away from the table, fuming. Trev grabs my shirt and drags me out of the room, pushing me into a wall once the door closes behind us.

“The fuck are you doing?”

“Did you hear him?” I ask, storming up to him.

Trev scowls at me. “Of course I did.”

“He’s a bastard. You know those drugs weren’t Nova’s.” I turn to look at the door, fuming.

“Yeah, well, losing your shit and fighting with him isn’t going to help the case.” Trev places his hand on my shoulder. “She’s in your head, dude. Why are you so upset about an omega you barely know?”

Scoffing, I shove his hand off of me. “It’s not about her. It’s everything. This guy—” I cut off when I see another officer approaching.

Trev nods at him then leans closer. “Don’t tell me what I already know. I want this dickwad behind bars as much as you, but we have to keep our heads. Take a walk. Tell Marty to call his lawyer on your way out.”

Growling, I spin on my heel and stalk away. Trev may be right but that doesn’t mean I like it. Curtis is a slimeball, he

has no right to even think about Whitney. I don't know her, but I know for damn sure she deserves better than that asshole. I'll do whatever I can to keep her from going back to him, even if it means defying the Omega Council.

"Marty," I say, rapping my knuckles on his desk. "Call Curtis' lawyer. He's refusing to talk."

"Yes, sir." Marty picks up the phone.

Hayden walks into the precinct with a coffee in hand. "What's going on?"

"Curtis is lawyering up."

"Damn, you don't think he'll get bail, do you?"

"He pays top dollar for representation..." I trail off. I don't know if he'll get out on bail. I sure as shit hope not, but there's nothing we can do to stop it.

"Shit. I should call Whitney."

Raising my eyebrows, I take his coffee. He's too distracted by the omega to react to my thievery. "She's fine with Avi."

He bristles. "I know. I meant in case Curtis gets off."

"Why don't we wait until we hear from the lawyer before we scare her?"

"Good idea." He walks off, completely forgetting about his drink.

Fine by me, I need all the caffeine I can get after staying up late. I head to my desk to do some admin work while I wait, shooting glares at the holding room Curtis is in.

He better not get out again.



"You're fucking kidding me," I tell Trev five hours later. "What did the judge say?"

Curtis got bailed out and is being processed. In less than ten minutes, that shithead will be free, at least until his official

hearing in three weeks.

“That he wasn’t a flight risk. Set his bond at ten-thousand.”

Crumpling a piece of paper in my hand, I growl. “That’s nothing to him. He’s a drug dealer for fuck’s sake.”

“I know.” Trev yawns and rubs his face. “I’m beat.”

“Did you even sleep last night?”

He shakes his head. “I didn’t want to risk her running again and that little freak-out bothered me.” Trev’s eyes skate around the room and people pretend to diligently work. As soon as he goes back to his office they’ll be back on their phones.

Hayden appears from the breakroom, annoyance rippling over his features. “Seriously?”

“Nothing we can do, you know that.” Trev squares his shoulders toward the beta. He doesn’t normally pull the alpha card, but Hayden is ready to fight and that’s not a good look in front of other officers. Trev is his superior.

“I’ll follow him. He’ll break at least one law within twenty-four hours.” Hayden flicks his gaze to me.

“You can’t stalk him, Hay,” I say with a sigh. “I don’t want him out either, but we’re going to have to wait for the trial. Unless he plans on running, he’s going to prison.”

“He’s gotten out of charges before,” Hayden mutters, turning when a door opens.

Curtis struts out, securing a watch to his wrist. He scans the room, a wolfish smile tugging on his lips. His beady eyes find the three of us. “Time to go see my woman. Always a pleasure, boys.”

“See you in three weeks,” I say, scowling at him.

He snickers and shoves the door open, whooping and jogging toward his lawyer. The black vehicle waiting for him is too damn expensive for a low pack to afford. How can Curtis, a low pack alpha, pay high pack lawyer retainers? Oh

yeah, he's a damn drug dealer. Not only that, he's responsible for the current overdose problem Dolin is having. How many people will he kill with his fentanyl-laced heroin before his trial?

Too fucking many.

You smell like that bitch. “He knows Whitney is at our house.”

“Shelly is still locked up,” Hayden says, reading my mind. “Fuck.”

I stand and grab my things. Hayden is already halfway to the door. I don't ask him to wait; if Curtis is going to find Whitney, he needs to get there ASAP.

“He probably has a girlfriend,” Trev says, eyes narrowed in disapproval.

“If you bought an omega, would you let her go if you knew where she was?”

“I wouldn't buy an omega.”

“Don't be a stubborn asshole, you know what I mean. You don't like her, I get it, but she's under our protection.” I shake my head and brush past him.

“I never said I didn't like her.”

“Well, you have a funny way of showing that you do. I'll call you when I get there.” I rush to my SUV. Right as I hop in, Trev storms out of the building and heads toward his vehicle. I smirk, knowing he's probably pissed at himself for feeling any amount of emotion. It's not that he doesn't like Whitney. He's afraid she'll make him feel. And he hates it.

I check for pedestrians and cars before peeling out of the parking lot and onto the road. My flashing lights and siren clear the road. Trev's Charger bears down on me, pushing me to go faster.

Hopefully we're not too late.

Chapter Nineteen

WHITNEY

Despite being stuck inside a house, time flies. The late afternoon arrives quickly. Avi made us big salads for lunch, but my stomach grumbles with hunger. I place my hand over it, shooting Avi a worried look. We've moved on from Bob Ross to a house renovation show, and the hosts are busy planning out a new floor design for their newest project.

"Do you like Indian food?"

I've never had enough money to eat out. "I don't know," I confess. "I'm not a picky eater though."

"I'm craving rogan josh." He glances at the ticking clock on the wall. "We'd have to start now. Are you up for trying something new?" He turns the TV off and brushes some of his black hair out of his face.

"Only if I can help make it." I don't want to owe these guys more than I already do. If he's going to make dinner, I'm going to contribute.

"It's really a one-person job," he says with a gentle smile.

"I can help. I'll cut up the meat."

"I'll cut up the lamb. You can make the rice."

"Okay," I say instead.

We head into the kitchen. Avi puts on a rock station and gets to work. He pulls out a round machine. It's not a crockpot, but it sort of looks like one. I wait for instructions, watching as he pulls out ingredients and lays them on the counter.

He hands me a measuring cup. “You’ll need that.” Singing along with the song, he moves to the cabinet on the far right. He grabs a container of rice and sets it next to me on the counter.

“Have you ever made rice before?”

“My mom used to have the instant kind that cooked in under a minute.”

Avi balks. “Okay, well, let me show you how it’s really done.” He opens the machine. “This is a rice cooker, and it’s about to be your new best friend. You’ll need two cups of rice,” he says, pointing to the container.

I measure the rice and dump it into the container.

“And four cups of water.”

“That’s a lot of liquid,” I mumble, watching him fill two bigger measuring cups to pour in.

“That’s what it takes. Close the lid and hit cook.”

I do as he says. “Is that it?”

“You’re a true chef now.” He nudges me with his elbow. “Now go relax while I get the rest ready. Do you want a drink?”

“Yes.” I glance away before he can see how eager I am for alcohol. It’s probably better if I don’t drink, but I’m not going to worry about what I should and shouldn’t do. Trev’s hospitality—if you can even call it that—is on a timer. So is my freedom.

“There’s beer, vodka, gin, and I think Asher hid some whiskey in his room, but if you ask me nicely, I’ll go find it for you.”

I chuckle. “That’s okay. I’m good with vodka. Do you have any club soda?” Aside from shots, that’s about the only way I know how to mix it. I don’t tell Avi that though, he likely already thinks I’m pathetic with my instant rice upbringing.

“Yup. The lower cabinet next to the fridge has all the stuff you need. Ice is in the freezer. I can make you a martini later if you want, maybe after dinner?”

“That sounds amazing.”

He hands me a cup. Squatting down, I open the cabinet and stare at a very full liquor shelf. It takes a moment to spot the vodka. They don't buy the cheap stuff, that's for sure. I grab it and a club soda bottle and busy myself with preparing my drink while Avi works on the lamb.

I sip on the drink, taking a seat at the bar and watching Avi work. The carbonation fizzes on my tongue and the vodka is smoother than what I'm used to. Avi chops like a madman, and before I know it, the lamb is cut. He pulls out a pot and adds something that looks like butter, turning on the stove to melt it.

“What's that?”

“Ghee, it's clarified butter.”

“Oh. Where did you learn to cook?”

“My mom.” He spares me a glance before starting the next part. “She always said cooking brought her peace, and when I moved out and in with these guys, I finally understood. Plus, Hayden is the only one who knows how to cook anything, and even then, my food is better.”

“My mom always had me cook.” I stare at my drink, ignoring all the memories that want to flood my brain. The way her face would contort with rage when she didn't like what I chose to make.

His back is turned toward me as he works, dropping onions into the sizzling pot. He works silently for a few minutes before adding ginger and garlic. “So what's your favorite thing to cook?” He shifts through the spices on the spinning stand on the counter, grabbing what he needs and adding them to the pot. Avi moves like a well-oiled machine, opening a can of tomato puree next, while I contemplate his question.

Honestly? None of what I made was fun. It was something I had to do to stay out of trouble, and half the time not even

that saved me from her wrath. I'm in the middle of trying to figure out how to tell Avi that when tires squeal outside. He drops the spatula he was holding and whirls around, shifting from relaxed to high alert in a matter of seconds. Reaching back, he turns the stove off.

"Stay here," he says.

I sip my vodka to hide my scoff. Like I'm going to listen to that. He rips the door open and prowls outside. I slide off the stool and set my drink down, slinking to the door. The late afternoon air is stifling, the final stand of summer settling over the earth until it gives way to fall and cooler temperatures.

The car is still on, but Hayden doesn't seem to notice once his eyes land on me. He disregards whatever Avi was telling him and rushes to me, jumping the two short steps and landing in front of me on the porch. He reaches for me then thinks better of it, balling his hands into fists at his sides.

"What an entrance," I say, checking him out in his uniform. I prefer him in sweats and T-shirts personally, but no one asked me.

"I couldn't stop thinking about you." His gray eyes widen slightly like he didn't mean to say that out loud.

"None of that, Trev won't approve." I tsk as two more police vehicles roll up. "Did something happen?" Trev and Asher jump out and head over, both of them puffed up and agitated.

"Curtis got out. He knows you're staying with us."

Dread drops in the pit of my stomach like a ten-pound weight. "How?"

Hayden shakes his head. "I don't know..."

"That's my fault," Asher says. "He smelled you on me."

My cheeks heat. I didn't think my perfume was that strong, but my heat is only two weeks away. "Fucking hormones," I mutter. Every day they'll get stronger. Every day my scent will grow more potent.

Avi meanders back into the house, mumbling about finishing dinner.

“He’d be an idiot to try and come here. Trespassing will revoke his bail.” Hayden studies me. “Do you have something he wants?”

Trev runs his hands over his jaw. “Of course she does, she’s an omega, Hayden. What do you think Curtis wants?”

“He doesn’t want that.” I don’t know why I’m so sure of that fact, but I know Shelly would cut his dick off if he went near another omega. She doesn’t seem like the type to share.

“Well, he wants something,” Trev says.

“And what? Sex is the only thing you think I have to offer?”

Asher whistles and takes a few steps away from Trev, shaking his head. “She’s got you there, dude.”

Trev’s gaze hardens. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Whatever,” I say, shaking my head. “Avi needs my help.”

I leave the three of them on the porch to worry about what Curtis might do. I’m with Hayden, Curtis would have to be an idiot to come to their house, especially after he made bail. There’s no way he’d risk jail time just to come get me. I shudder at the thought of having to go back to the club.

Avi has dinner under control. I make myself another drink.

“You okay?” he asks, side-eyeing me as I fill my cup with ice.

“Why wouldn’t I be?” I close the freezer and move to the club soda.

“Because the alpha who purchased you like livestock said he was coming to see you?”

“He probably wanted to piss them off is all. Curtis hardly knows me.” I mix the vodka and club soda half and half in the cup.

“Hmm.” Avi grabs my drink before I can take a sip. He takes a big gulp, lifting an eyebrow when I make a frustrated noise. “That’s a lot of vodka for a woman your size.”

“I can handle my liquor.” I snatch the glass back and refill it. “If you wanted one, you should have asked.”

“I don’t drink.” He runs his finger over my arm, the lightest of touches that sends gooseflesh chasing after it.

“You just drank from mine,” I say, looking at him.

“To stop you from drinking more than you should.”

“You’re not my father.”

Discomfort flashes across his face, and he steps back. “I’m not trying to be.”

I frown, hating the distance between us. This afternoon had been really nice... but now it’s like we’re complete strangers again. There are unmistakable traces of pity in his gaze too. He feels sorry for me. “Stop trying to fix me,” I mumble.

Staring at the sauce in the pan, he presses his lips together and nods.

Mad that I feel bad for making him feel bad, I turn and head to the couch. Maybe space will help. We’ve spent a lot of time together and that’s bound to get old quick. Hayden, Asher, and Trev come inside a few minutes later. Trev and Asher head to their bedrooms, but Hayden comes straight to me, dropping at my side on the couch.

“Can I have a drink?”

“I can make you one.”

His hand falls on my leg when I start to get up, warming my skin through the fabric of my yoga pants. “Of yours. Maybe we can share? I don’t want you to leave.”

Unsure of how to respond, I simply hand him the glass. He takes a few sips before returning it.

“Was Avi nice?”

“Of course he was,” I say, gaze straying to the man in question.

His brown eyes are on me, and I smile a little, hoping to let him know I’m not mad at him. Everything is so fucked up, and I took out my frustration on him. He returns the gesture.

“Bob Ross marathons?” Hayden asks.

I chuckle. “Yeah.”

“That guy knew how to paint, that’s for sure. What do you like to do for fun? Do you paint?”

Taking a drink, I frantically try to think of something interesting. I don’t paint. I don’t knit. I don’t really read... not because I don’t like it, but because I never had the time to go to the library or money to buy new books. My favorite thing growing up was sitting with my grandma in her garden, but I hate the way dirt feels under my fingers. It reminds me too much of that old cellar... all the nights spent crying for someone to let me out. Clawing at the locked door. Sleeping with my cheek pressed against the dirt covering the crumbling concrete. God, my life is fucking pathetic.

The only thing I’ve ever done for myself was buy a few cheap model cars from a thrift store. They were missing pieces, but everything else faded away while I followed the instructions. The amount of focus needed to build them didn’t allow for my mind to wander.

“For fun... uh... I guess I like building model cars.”

His eyes light up. “Really?”

“Yeah.” I shrug. “I don’t keep them if that’s what you’re thinking. I only like to make them. I give them away to kids.”

“Random kids or...?” Hayden reaches for the glass, and I let him take it, not at all bothered by the way his fingers brush over mine. There’s something familiar and comforting about this man. Like no matter what happens, I can trust him to take care of me.

“No. I took them to the orphanage.” Since I only made two, it was probably cruel of me to donate them, given the

number of kids. If I had more money, I would have built a hundred. The Royal Council likes to pretend the orphanage doesn't exist. The building is run down, but the employees were kind and seemed to care about the kids.

"Oh," he says, a thoughtful look crossing his face as he takes a drink. "That was nice of you."

"Cars won't save those kids." I take the glass from him.

"No, but it will make them happy."

I pick at a string on the couch. "Yeah, well, that's my hobby. What about you?"

"I like hiking and writing."

"You write?" I turn toward him and sip, watching as his cheeks pinken.

"Mostly rambling. Nothing worthwhile." He gestures to the empty cup. "I'll make another one?"

My stomach is warm with alcohol, but not enough to be drunk. "Sure." He takes the glass from me, and I lean back, tracing a little crack on the ceiling with my eyes. Letting my mind wander, I space out while Trev and Asher come into the room. They talk with Avi, but I don't pay attention to the conversation. All I can think about is Hayden hunched over a desk with nothing but a candle lighting the paper as he writes.

The couch shifts, and I right myself, smiling at the beta. "Don't think I didn't notice you changing the subject. What do you write about?"

He narrows his eyes and takes a long drink. "I said I hike too."

"Everyone can hike, not everyone writes. Do you write fantasy? Some epic adventure-style stories?"

"No." He hands over the drink. "You're not going to let this go, are you?"

"Nope."

He stands. "Come on then."

“Where are we going?” I follow him down the hall, not letting Trev’s heated gaze on my back get to me. He doesn’t like me, I get it, but I’m not going to stop talking to Hayden because Trev’s a jerk.

Alpha and beta scents coat the air, teasing my senses and awakening something deep inside of me. A carnal desire. I don’t hate the emotion, which surprises me most of all. Maybe it’s the vodka making me stupid, but my fingers ache to touch Hayden. To caress the five-o’clock shadow.

“Into my secret lair,” Hayden whispers in a menacing voice.

“Nerd,” I say, taking a healthy gulp before entering his room and closing the door. Hayden smells like the first few minutes before a thunderstorm, and in his room, that scent slaps me in the face and burrows inside of me. I inhale, against all better judgment, savoring the fresh, earthy air. Does he like to stand in the rain or does he run away from the moisture?

His room is nothing fancy. A simple queen-sized bed on a frame, no headboard. Dark green comforter, light green pillowcases. The space is pretty tidy for a man, based on my limited experience. There’s a laundry basket next to the closet. I set my drink on the dresser and take in the rest of his domain.

He has one picture on the wall, and it’s of him and what must be his mom. A woman with gentle eyes, the same gray color as his, and streaks of white in her otherwise dark hair. She’s smiling in the picture, but the hollow, sad look in her gaze is painfully familiar. This is not a happy woman. She loves her son, I’m sure, but something in her is broken.

Pulling my attention from the picture, I turn and find Hayden with his back to me, hands busy unbuttoning the front of his shirt.

“Should I leave?” I ask, moving toward the door.

“No, I have a white tee on under. I just need to get out of these clothes.”

Out of respect, I should avert my gaze. I don’t because I have absolutely zero shame with the buzz. Besides, he’s not

getting naked. I'm not technically being a creep, right? His arms flex when he reaches back and pulls the shirt down, revealing a tight undershirt. When his hands fall to his belt, I bite my cheek. Is he going to take his pants off too?

God, I hope so.

No. Those are dangerous thoughts. I shouldn't want him to strip. I should be focusing on his writing. That's why we came in here. Besides, I have no money to give him if he suddenly decides to give me a lap dance. I snicker a little but stifle the sound with a drink.

"Why are you laughing?" Hayden turns around as he finishes unbuckling the duty belt. He holds the straps in his hands and raises his eyebrows.

"Um, no reason." My eyes stray to where he holds the belt, and I swallow, heat crawling up my neck the longer I stare.

He removes the belt and gently places it on the desk, leaving the gun in the holster. I lift my gaze to meet his. The same curious desire fills his irises. He bends down, maintaining eye contact while he unties his boots. One at a time, he slips them off with careful control. Setting them down, perfectly aligned before straightening and prowling toward me.

I step back into the dresser, unable to escape his approach. He stops a few inches away, his toes nearly brushing mine. His eyes drop to my lips, and he leans forward. My breath hitches when he presses against me, reaching one of his hands around me to open a drawer. My softer body molds to the hard muscles of his chest, like we're meant to be smashed together. A perfect contrast of masculine strength and feminine softness. It would be easy for him to overpower me, but I'm not as scared as I should be. I lean into the touch, craving it within the most primal part of me. His warmth envelops me, telling me there's nothing to worry about, even though I'm not sure I can trust that feeling.

The drawer shuts with a soft thud, and he steps back, giving me room to breathe. I suck in a sharp breath. Hayden

watches me for a second before holding up what he grabbed. A small black notebook.

“I haven’t shown anyone what’s inside here.”

“You don’t have to show me,” I say. “I didn’t mean to pressure you.”

He comes a little closer, stealing my oxygen once more and searching my face. “Trust me when I say no one is pressuring me into anything. If I didn’t want you in here, I wouldn’t invite you.”

“Okay.”

“I’ll give you the same courtesy. Do you want to be here, Whitney?” He lifts his free hand and trails a finger up my arm. “Do you want to leave?” He traces the hollow of my shoulder through my shirt.

This is wrong. He’s a beta and I shouldn’t be playing with fire, but the burn of his touch is too damn delicious to deny. I shiver a little and wet my lips, shaking my head.

“I need to hear you say it,” he says softly, placing his hand at the base of my neck. He flexes, but doesn’t hurt me. “Do you want to leave?”

“No,” I rasp, tipping my head back and staring into his eyes. We share a few breaths, standing close enough to kiss, but neither of us closing the gap.

“Good,” he whispers, brushing my nose with his.

I lift up and try to capture his mouth. He uses his hand to force me back down and shakes his head. Rejection crashes over me. A gut-wrenching reminder of how pathetic I am. How easily I fall into traps. He was never going to let me kiss him. Was this some sort of cruel game? Tease the poor omega and hurt her? I drop my gaze, hating him a little for making me feel safe.

“You’re trouble.” His thumb strokes my neck, and I close my eyes at the touch, wishing I could hate it. “Don’t hide from me. I want to kiss you, but not when you’ve been drinking.”

Those words soothe some of the hurt, and I look at him. His eyes are hooded, and he presses a little closer, keeping his hand on my throat. A possessive and claiming touch that makes my stomach flip. His scent grows stronger, as if the skies opened up and began pouring rain in his room.

“When I take you, you’re going to be sober. When you give me full control, I want to make sure you mean it. Do you understand?” His words are softly spoken but there’s undeniable command in them. If I didn’t know better, I’d think he was a natural born alpha.

“Yes.”

His grip on my throat tightens. “Good girl.”

Those two words send a trail of fire straight to my core. My need to be loved roars to life and my heart seizes on the praise. An unbridled need for more rushes over me, but I bite my tongue to keep from begging. I’m so fucked in the head.

He releases me and sits on the bed, giving me a moment to recover before he says, “Let me read to you.”

Brushing my hand over where he held me, I take a few steadying inhales. My heart is hammering, my scent rampant with need and lust. I don’t know how he’s resisting the smell. Anytime my fathers caught a whiff of my mother’s heat, they practically went feral. I was taught most men—regardless of if they’re alpha, beta, or delta—react the same way.

With nothing but patience and control, Hayden waits for me to sit next to him before opening the book and scanning the contents. He flips the pages like one might touch a lover, with gentle care and reverence. I never thought I’d envy paper.

He clears his throat, the deep reverberation sending a rush of gooseflesh down my arm. In a matter of minutes, Hayden has ensnared me. Does he realize what he’s doing?

“Promises,” he reads the title of the page. “Words are such simple things. A combination of vowels and consonants. Mouths piece together sounds, our brains processing these noises into coherent sentences. Promises are spoken without much thought or regard. They’re so easily broken. To most

people, promises aren't really promises. They're a string of words. But promises aren't simple. Broken promises can shatter a person. Broken promises slice into veins, releasing the blood of trust. Promises will leave you broken."

Whoa. I furrow my brow and withhold all questions. He closes the book and laughs a little, shaking his head.

"My writing is basically a bunch of rambling. It's a little silly now that I read it out loud."

"I don't think it's silly."

He glances at me, gray eyes guarded. "You don't?"

"No. Not if you wrote it and you believe it."

Don't break your promise.

That's what he said to me the first time we met. I didn't think much of it at the time. Then when he found me at the club, he sounded so disappointed. Some of that is starting to make sense, but I don't know enough about why they matter to him this much. Obviously, it's important.

A fist raps on the closed door. "Hayden." Trev is annoyed, go figure.

"Yeah?" Hayden asks, staying next to me. He shifts so our thighs are pressed together, somehow providing comfort with the smallest of gestures.

Trev opens the door, scanning the room with critical eyes. He zeroes in on the book in Hayden's hand and where our bodies touch.

"Dinner is almost ready."

"Okay," Hayden replies.

Trev glances at me. "We should help get the table ready."

"Oh, right." I stand and walk to the door. Hayden's stare burns into my back. Trev doesn't move out of the doorway, instead, he turns so his body takes up the entire space. I stop in front of him and scowl. "Excuse me."

He tips his head and inhales, eyes dilating when he scents my perfume. Frustration flashes across his face, and he flicks his gaze to Hayden. “This can’t happen.”

“Fuck you,” I say before thinking better of it. “I mean, who are you to tell him what he can and can’t do?”

“Hayden is a beta, Whitney.”

“I’m aware.”

Trev growls and presses into my space. The approach is so unlike Hayden’s, more predatory, that fear rushes up my spine. “You’re putting us all in danger. Betas and omegas aren’t allowed to have feelings for each other. Are you really so selfish you’ll risk his life?”

Reality smacks me across the face harder than my mother ever did. I deflate, shoulders hunching, and shake my head. He’s right, whatever is happening between Hayden and me isn’t safe.

“I’ll leave.”

“No,” Hayden says, voice firm and hard. “Leave her alone, Trev.”

“Hayden. She’s—”

“I said leave it!”

Hayden’s shout surprises me, and I jump, startling both of them into silence. I cringe at my stupid reflexes and wish the floor would open up and swallow me to save me from this embarrassment.

“You’re okay.” Trev’s tone is gentle and at odds with the man he was just moments ago. “No one is going to hurt you.”

“I’m not trying to be a problem.” I dig my fingers into my palms and stare at him, refusing to be seen as weak. “Move out of my way.”

“Whitney, I’m sorry,” Hayden pleads, but I shake my head.

“Don’t make this harder than it has to be,” I tell him. “Move, Trev.”

“Stop her,” Hayden demands, releasing a frustrated growl.

Trev shifts to the side, barely giving me enough room to pass by him. I glare at him and shuffle out of the room, stopping short when his fingers wrap around my wrist, the touch soft.

“I’m sorry.” His face is filled with regret, and I actually think he means it. “Don’t leave.”

“I’m not staying if you’re going to be an asshole to me.” I look over his shoulder at Hayden. “I wish things were different.”

“Dammit, Trev,” Hayden says under his breath.

The alpha stiffens and his eyebrows pull together. “If I promise to be better, will you stay?”

“Promises are only words,” I whisper.

“Not in this house.” Trev steps closer, dropping my wrist. “We don’t say things we don’t mean. We can’t.”

Hayden probably has something to do with that, and it means a lot to Trev if he’s willing to give me his word. I haven’t seen anything I’d consider nice in Trev, but he’s hated the idea of me staying since he met me. I suspect if Hayden hadn’t yelled at him a few seconds ago, he would have gladly let me walk. Trev doesn’t want Hayden unhappy. They’re a pack, and while Hayden is a beta, he’s an alpha for all intents and purposes. I haven’t met many packs with the same dynamic, but Asher and Avi don’t treat Hayden like an outsider either.

“I like him.” Honesty never hurt anyone. “I want you to know I would never hurt him on purpose.”

“Things are complicated enough as it is,” Trev says, scrubbing a hand over his face. “We’re letting you stay when you should have already reported to the Omega Council. If we’re caught... I don’t know what will happen, but it won’t be good.”

I hadn’t fully thought through what it would do to them if we were caught. The Royal and Omega Councils are high

pack. We're low pack, and even if we had high pack status, hiding an omega is illegal. These guys have broken laws for me, and I didn't even bother to say thank you.

"I appreciate you letting me stay, I really do." I hold out my hand, a peace offering. "Can we start over? I'm Whitney."

Trev stares at my hand for a second before placing his much larger palm against mine. "Trev. I'm not always a dick."

"Just when you have an illegal omega in your house?" I ask, grinning.

"Something like that," he murmurs, a smile tugging at his mouth. "If we don't set the table, Avi will throw a fit."

Trev walks around me, giving me a wide berth, and heads to the kitchen. Hayden grabs the glass off the dresser, leaving his notebook on his bed. His eyes rove over me.

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," I lie. Trev rocked my world with those hard truths he dropped. Pursuing anything with Hayden would be selfish. I'm foolish for thinking anything good would come of it. Has life taught me nothing? How fucking dumb am I? Self-doubt swirls through me, but I shove it down, grinding my jaw to stop the ugly words whispering through my mind. Those aren't my words. Those are my mother's. They don't own me.

Hayden watches me while I try to get a handle on my emotions, no judgment or pity crosses his face. He simply waits for me to rein in the vile self-hate.

"I'll survive," I decide, remembering he doesn't like broken promises. I can't say I'm fine, but I know I'll get through this. I've made it through too damn much to break after a fight with an alpha.

"I'm not letting you go," he says in a gravelly whisper. "Do you understand? You're *mine*."

Warmth pools in my core, and I bite my lip, shaking my head. "You shouldn't say things like that."

"It's true. I'll handle Trev."

“I don’t want to put you in danger.”

He releases a dark chuckle. “I’m not afraid.”

“You should be,” I say, walking backward. “The high pack doesn’t give a shit about us. They could ruin you.”

“They can try,” he says with a self-assured nod, prowling after me.

The way he’s staring at me is giving me too many filthy thoughts. I turn and meet Trev at the table, sorting the silverware while he places oversized bowls around the worn surface. Hayden makes a new cocktail while Avi and Asher finish up dishing dinner into a giant dish. A large bowl of rice sits in the middle, fragrant and mouthwatering. Avi’s lamb dish is pungent but in a good way.

“Can you warm the naan?” Avi asks Asher while he carries the bowl of rogan josh over. His eyes light when he sees me. “I’m not being cocky when I say this is the best I’ve ever made this dish.” He places it on the table. “Spatulas,” he mutters to himself, returning to the kitchen.

I shake my head and look at Trev. He’s staring after Avi with a funny look on his face, like he’s done something fascinating. Tipping my head to the side, I study how oddly calm Trev is. Almost like the fight between us never happened.

He bristles when he realizes I’m staring. “What?”

“Nothing.” I grip the back of the chair and look away. He’s so confusing.

Asher warms a pan on the stove and drops the flat bread into it. Hayden claims the seat next to where I stand and passes me the glass. With the truce between me and Trev, I decide it’s okay to keep drinking. Had he continued to be a jerk, I’d work on sobering up.

But being sober means overthinking everything that’s happened. A steady buzz settles over me. I smirk at Hayden and sit, savoring the drink while Asher finishes the naan. Trev clears his throat and sits at the head of the table. I try not to stare at him, but my eyes flick to him every few seconds, my

body coiled tight and waiting for an outburst. Sensing my attention, Trev glances at me. Hayden takes the glass from me, earning a scowl from Trev. He doesn't like that we're so comfortable with each other.

I'll handle Trev.

You're mine.

Bold declarations for a beta. I have no doubt in my mind Hayden knows what he's doing—defying Trev means there will be a fight. I don't want to be the reason for it, but I also don't agree with that idiotic mindset. There's no valid reason an omega can't take a beta as a mate other than the Royal Council wanting to maintain control. Not that I'm thinking about mating Hayden, it's much too soon for that. Besides, I'd need alphas as well, and while Asher and Avi are nice, Trev would never go for it. He's barely tolerating me as it is.

“And we're ready.” Asher places a plate of warmed naan on the table.

Avi grabs my dish and fills it for me. He sets it down, then passes me a piece of naan before serving himself. The guys wait patiently. Asher goes next, then Hayden, and finally Trev. It's odd he's last, considering he's sitting at the head of the table. Glancing around the table while he spoons rice into his bowl, Trev checks that everyone has something to drink.

“This smells amazing.” I take my first bite and hum in appreciation. “Tastes amazing too.” It takes all of my restraint to keep from digging in like a starved dog. My stomach grumbles softly, but no one notices.

Preening, Avi sits a little straighter and thanks me.

“Aw, he's blushing,” Asher says, pointing at Avi with his naan.

“Asshole,” Avi mutters.

“Guilty.” Asher smiles around a mouthful.

“That movie is streaming tonight,” Hayden says.

“The one with John Trento?” Trev scoops some of his rice and meat with his spoon and takes a bite.

“Yeah. I’ve heard good things about it.” Hayden dips his naan in the gravy-esque sauce.

I follow his lead, ripping a small piece off of mine and sweeping it through the sauce. The naan has garlic and butter flavoring that complements the dish. Subtle hints of cinnamon burst across my tongue, making my mouth water for more. I lose the battle with myself and lean forward, eating without restraint. Bites that are larger than is proper fill my spoon, and I make little noises of delight, reveling in the taste of the savory curry. I’m so absorbed in eating as fast as I can, I zone out of the conversation. Only when I use the last of my naan to clean the bowl do I realize no one is talking. I lift my gaze and take the four of them in. They’re staring at me.

“What?” I demand.

“You eat like you’ve been to prison,” Trev says, frowning.

Hayden tenses beside me, slipping his hand beneath the table and placing it on my thigh. I furrow my brow. Did I miss something?

“Which is odd because you’ve never been.” Asher points at me with his spoon. “And you didn’t grow up with brothers.”

“How do you know that?” Humiliation works up my neck, heating my face.

“When we book people, the system links profiles to their family and pack,” Hayden explains. His thumb rubs over the material of my yoga pants, distracting me from where the conversation is heading.

“So if you didn’t have brothers—”

“Are you thirsty?” Hayden cuts in, interrupting Asher.

“Uh, sure. I’ll make it.” I grab the glass and escape. I learned to eat as quick as possible when I lived with my mother. The longer I stayed at the table with her, the more likely I was to make her mad.

A solid thwap sounds behind me.

“Ow, what the fuck?” Asher asks.

I don't look back. I don't listen to the whispered conversation. I don't let myself feel. I make the drink on auto-pilot, thinking about pruning roses with Granny.

"They're hardy," she'd say, chuckling at the flowers like they were real people. "For something so pretty, they sure are tough." Wiping her brow with her arm, she grinned at the plant and told it how well it was doing. When she finished, she came and sat beside me, touching a bruise on my shoulder. "What happened here?"

"I fell," I lied, too afraid to tell her the truth.

Granny lost her mates last year, and I didn't want to be another reason for her to cry.

"You have to be more careful; you keep showing up with bruises. Is everything all right? Someone being mean to you at school?" She wrapped her arm around me.

"No." I stiffened in her hold. Granny always hugs and kisses the side of my head. I never know what to do with the contact. I endure it, wishing she'd stop the whole time. She noticed my discomfort and pulled back. My mind screamed for her to stop, but I never voiced the word.

It didn't make sense to hate the love she offered, while yearning for it at the same time.

"I'm going to talk to your mother. Make sure she keeps an eye on your friends. You shouldn't let them beat up on you because you're small for your age."

"I'm fine," I said quickly. "Please don't tell her. Really, the girl is a bully but the teacher talked to her. She won't do it again." Words spilled out of me, a downpour of desperation. If she said something to Mother, I'd earn more of her anger. Granny couldn't say anything.

Granny's face wrinkled with confusion. "Well, all right. I hate knowing someone hurt you. Breaks my heart."

I died a little that day. Granny could never find out what Mother did. She'd already lost so much. I couldn't be the reason she lost her daughter too.

Lifting the full glass to my lips, I take a few big drinks. Tears threaten to fall, but I don't let them.

Weak little bitch.

No.

She's not here. She can't hurt me. I deserved better than her growing up. I deserved someone who knew how to love like Granny did. Hayden's scent surrounds me, and he places his hand on the small of my back. I breathe in, letting Hayden's perfume ground me.

"Are you okay?" He stands next to me, facing the cabinets so the guys can't see our conversation.

"I think I'm full," I say. "Can I go lie down?"

"You don't have to ask permission," he says, taking the glass from my hand. "Call me selfish, but I'd love to have you sleep in my bed. Trev doesn't deserve to have your scent all over his sheets."

I laugh softly. "And you do?"

"I'd like to think so." He links his fingers with mine and leads me to the bedroom. No one says anything to protest, which is a relief since a fight with Trev would ruin whatever semblance of calm I'm clinging to.



Sleep comes easy. I wake a few hours later when Hayden climbs into bed, wearing shorts and a T-shirt. The bed dips, and I roll over, lifting onto my arm.

"I'll go to the couch," I say.

"You're fine," he breathes. "You'll keep me warm." He scoots as close as he can without actually touching me.

"What about Trev?" I don't really want to leave the bed. Sometimes I have to sleep alone, and other times I crave being next to someone. Tonight is one of those nights.

"Screw Trev. He'll get over it."

Smiling, I burrow down and tuck my hand under the pillow, staring at Hayden.

The light from the hallway is seeping through the cracks of the door, brightening the room enough I can tell he's looking back. His mouth is pulled back in a lazy grin, and he edges closer, our legs brushing under the comforter.

"What's your first good memory?" he asks.

"Planting flowers with Granny." That's easy. She was always my world.

"I'm sorry she's gone."

I nod, resisting the sorrow that wants to pull me under. I'm too tired to be sad. "What about you?"

"My dad took me and my mom to a theme park. I was six and I threw up." His smile falls and he glances at the ceiling. "That was before he left."

"Do you want to talk about it?" I whisper.

He shakes his head. "No. Not tonight." Rolling back to face me, he places his hand on my hip. "Do you want to talk?"

"No," I say, scooting even closer and burying my head against his chest. Hayden rests his chin on my head and holds me tight. "Words have no meaning anyway, remember?"

"Most of the time they don't." He rubs his palm over my back. "You should sleep."

"Don't tell me what to do," I quip around a yawn.

"Not yet," he says so softly I almost think I imagined the words.

His heart is a steady rhythm that I focus on. Hayden's arms protect me from the rest of the world. That thunderstorm scent wraps around me and lulls me into sleep, promising a dreamless slumber. I relent and give in.

Too often my mother finds me in my dreams.

I'll take this reprieve to gather strength for the next nightmare.

Chapter Twenty

TREV

At six in the morning, my phone rings, shocking me awake. I grumble and grab it off the bedside table, answering it out of obligation.

“Yeah?” I rasp.

“The Omega Council requested a meeting.”

I sit, rubbing my eyes. “Captain? It’s Sunday.”

“Who else would it be? Days don’t matter when the Omega Council calls. We’re on at eight. Get your ass out of bed and get ready.” His wife says something in the background. “Trev doesn’t deserve your coffee, Amy.”

“Like hell I don’t,” I say with a laugh. “She knows how I like it.”

“If she wasn’t madly in love with me, I’d be pissed she offered to make you some.”

Standing, I switch the phone to my other ear. “We all know men are dead to Amy now, Cap. I’ll see you at the station at six-thirty?”

“Sounds good, we need to go over what happened at the Twisters bust.”

“See you soon.” I hang up and toss the phone on my bed. “Fuck,” I say to the empty room. Did Curtis rat us out? I wouldn’t put it past the bastard. Yanking on a fresh uniform, I grind my jaw and try to think of a plausible reason as to why we’d let Whitney stay that won’t end up with us all in jail.



“Sergeant,” Captain Riley says, handing me a tumbler. He’s waiting outside my office.

I nod. “Captain, tell your wife I said hello.” Unlocking the door, I let us both in. It’s almost seven now. Only an hour until the meeting.

He narrows his brown eyes on me when I turn to face him. “Watch it, kid.”

“Easy, easy. I don’t want any trouble. I have my own problems.”

“Oh? Got an omega for your pack?”

Realizing my slip, I clench my jaw and shake my head. “No, but we’ve been talking about finding one. Asher and Avi want one. I’m not so sure.”

“I’ve heard they can be a handful.” He chuckles. “It’s not so bad being a beta every now and then.”

Captain Riley is a beta and the only one of his kind to be ranked so high within the Dolin Police Department. The more official titles are typically reserved for alphas, but the captain has proved his worth time and time again. He was one of the best detectives our force had.

“So, what’s this business about the council?”

He grimaces. “Camila wanted a meeting. She’s searching for an omega and wanted to talk to the man who ran the raid.”

“Did she get the write-up?” I sip on the coffee, sighing in appreciation. Riley’s mate adds milk and drizzles caramel in it. It’s a better cup than I would have gotten inside the office.

“Sent it over to her the morning after, but she’s a bit intense.”

Intense means she’s a jerk. Riley doesn’t like to openly talk badly about people, but I’ve learned his code over the years.

“I’m not sure what else I can tell her, but I’m happy to go over it again with her.” I take my seat and lean back, meeting the captain’s gaze.

“Do you have anything you need to tell me?” His eyes are hard and scrutinizing, the old detective in him coming out to play.

“Aside from the fact that your wife makes a damn good cuppa?” I laugh, playing off the question. If I were guilty, I’d be defensive.

“You’re lucky I like you, Trev.” Riley taps my desk with the edge of his tumbler which is nearly identical to the one he handed me. “Print out a few copies of that write-up. I’ll be back in about thirty. We can drive together.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, wiggling the mouse of my computer to wake it up.

A knock sounds on the frame of my door twenty-five minutes later. I lift my gaze from the computer and smirk.

“Five more minutes.”

“You sound like my goddamn teenager. Let’s go.”

“Ricky sounds like a good kid,” I joke, grabbing the stack of papers, the tumbler, my keys and wallet.

“Smartass,” Riley mutters. He walks to the front doors, and I shut my office before jogging to catch up. “I’ll drive.”

I simply nod because I expected that. He likes to be in control, and that means he sits behind the wheel whenever we go places together.

The drive doesn’t take long. Riley grills me about the raid the whole way. I stick to the truth, for the most part. Technically, Whitney coming to our house happened after the raid. I’m not lying when I say she was being checked out by the paramedics last I knew. Asher was supposed to drive her home. I’ll have to lie about that part—say he dropped her off at her house. My gut clenches at the thought. Lying to the

Omega Council isn't the smartest thing to do, but I'm not about to throw Asher to the wolves. That man can't lie for shit.

I don't know what her home life was like, but I'm guessing her parents are assholes. That might work to our advantage.

Once we get out of Riley's car, Riley stops talking. His features pull into a hard mask of *don't fuck with me*. I follow his lead, walking into the building and to the elevator. I press the call button, listening to the engines whir as the elevator descends. The doors open and a woman stops at the sight of us.

"Ma'am," Riley says, letting her off before we get in.

The floor we get off on reeks of pissed off omega. My upper lip curls, but I force it back down, refusing to react. I have to be cold and calculated here. There isn't room for emotions.

The captain stops outside of a shut door and knocks, shooting me an appraising look. The back of my neck prickles in warning. Does he suspect me? There's no way he can. If he had something, he would have told me by now. Riley doesn't like to sit on information, and he likes me. Riley was the one who trained me, and he's sort of like a father to me. He's given more shits about me than my real father, and has been a lot kinder too. If anyone deserves to be called dad by me, it's Riley. I doubt he'd put me on the spot. The slim chance that he brought me here to watch me burn isn't comforting, but I have faith in him.

A woman with a sharp nose, hair pulled up in a tight bun, and a smile that's closer to a sneer than a grin opens the door. "Come in," she says, scent sickly sweet.

"Camila, I'm Captain Riley and this is Sergeant Post." Riley stands behind the cushioned chairs in front of her large desk.

The omega puts her hands on her desk and stares at him, tipping her head to the side and fluttering her eyelashes. "Please, sit. Would you like some coffee?"

I almost snort at the thought. She doesn't know who she's talking to.

"I'm good, thanks." Riley takes his seat and looks back at me, tipping his head toward the other one.

Camila's hawk-like gaze zeroes in on me. "They sure do make you officers tall."

"Post is a sergeant, ma'am." Riley doesn't give her room to bullshit, and I admire him for that. He has a way of making it clear that even though we may be beneath the high pack, they're not going to put us down.

Me? I'd just be pissed and short with her. Guess that's why he's the captain. He's good at schmoozing.

"Oh, of course," Camila says with a quick laugh.

"And he's damn good at his job. We brought you a copy of the report, in case you missed the one I sent earlier."

I hand her the report and sit, spine straight and face blank.

"I did read that, but I'm a little embarrassed to admit I didn't understand most of it." She gives an impish grin that doesn't reach her eyes.

She's trying to play us.

"That's all right, ma'am. I can explain it to you in layman's terms."

The slightest of scowls is her only reaction. She doesn't like being called stupid.

"Please, call me Camila," she finally manages.

"Of course, ma'am." I shake my head. "Sorry, Camila. What would you like to know?"

"Why don't we start from the beginning. Who is Curtis and what happened to the omega he purchased, Whitney something or other?" She scoffs. "Some low pack degenerate."

I slide my gaze to Riley. His jaw is clenched but this is the part where we shut up and let the high pack omega say her ugly words. She doesn't even notice her slip, staring

expectantly at me. I launch into a long-winded explanation of who Curtis is and why we raided his club, giving her every minor detail she doesn't need.

“Interesting. So let me make sure I understand. This Curtis fellow was drugging his employees?”

“And selling drugs.”

“Right,” she says, studying me. “What happened to Whitney?”

“Well, as you know, we held her overnight when we arrested her.”

“The day before she was auctioned, I do recall.” Her eyes flare with anger.

I make a mental note to ask Whitney why Camila hates her so much.

“She was hurt by Curtis' omega. The paramedic attended to her and one of my detectives took Whitney to her home.”

“Which home?”

“I'm sorry?”

“She had an apartment and a home. Which home did your detective take her to?”

Fuck.

“I don't know for certain, ma'am, but I'm sure he took her wherever she asked.”

“Interesting. Did she have her things?” Camila leans forward slightly, squinting at me.

“I'll be honest, I wasn't paying that close attention to her. We made a lot of arrests that night.”

“I'm sure you did. Cleaning up Dolin like you should. Let me ask, do you think this detective could come in to talk to me?”

“He's off today, but I can call him.” That's a lie, but maybe she'll let it go if he isn't working.

“Do you mind?” She pretends to pout. “I hate to think of that poor omega out there without a pack. Her heat will be happening soon and she’ll need alphas to take care of her.”

“I understand, let me step out and give him a call.” I nod to Riley and get out of the seat, walking to the door with unhurried steps.

God-fucking-dammit. Fucking Asher.

He should have known better.

Dialing his number, I walk down the hall, clenching my free hand into a fist.

“What’s up?”

“Asher.”

He sucks in a sharp breath. “What happened? I’m almost to the station.”

“I need you to come to the convention center. The Omega Council wants to talk about what happened during the Twisters raid. Guess that omega you took home turned up missing.”

I give him all I can. There are cameras lining the hallway and they’re sure to have microphones. Asher curses down the line.

“I’ll meet you outside.” I hang up and head back to the office. “He’s a few minutes out. I’ll go wait for him so I can show him the way.”

Camila beams at me. “Thank you so much, officer.”

“Sergeant.” Riley cracks his knuckles, grinning at her in a kind but menacing sort of way.

“Sorry, I keep forgetting.” Camila places her hands on her cheeks. “I’m so embarrassed.”

Sure you are, fucking jackass.

“No harm,” I say, tapping the door and leaving Riley with the shark. I keep my face blank and head to the parking lot. My skin is crawling and as soon as I step outside, I take a deep

breath. Careful not to give away anything with my body language, I patiently wait by the door.

Asher's SUV tears into the parking lot. I scowl at the damn fool as soon as he gets out, surprised to find him smiling.

"Hey, Trev." He struts over to me like a man without a care.

I could strangle him.

"You ready?" I whisper, barely moving my lips. There are cameras everywhere.

"I got this," he replies just as softly, still grinning. "Buy you a beer after work?"

"Not before you finish that stack of paperwork on your desk."

We joke back and forth, pretending like everything is fine. Camila knows we're pack, so silence between us would be awkward. To get through this, we have to act as normal as possible. I try not to shoot Asher too many worried looks.

The last time we played poker, the man turned bright red when he lied about his hand. I don't like doubting him, but he doesn't have the stomach for lying to someone like Camila. She's a wolf pretending to be a lamb, and Asher is wholly unprepared.

"Right in here." I walk in before him, giving him time to adjust to Camila's nauseating scent. "This is Asher, ma'am."

She smooths her shirt. "Please, call me Camila. You're making me feel old." Her tinkling laughter grates on my nerves.

"Pleasure to meet you, Camila." Asher gives her a megawatt smile. "You wanted to speak with me?"

"Yes, yes." Camila leans back and crosses her legs. "Sergeant Post was telling me you took home the omega from Twisters. You know she's turned up missing?" Fake lines of concern line her face.

I fight off a sneer.

I'm not sure I understand why I dislike this woman so much, but she makes my skin crawl, and my gut is rarely wrong about people.

“Oh?” Asher raises his eyebrows. “I didn't know that.”

“Where did you drop her off?” Camila leans forward, dropping all pretenses of being a docile omega. “Did you hurt the poor thing?”

“What? Of course not. I took her to her house and dropped her off, just like Sergeant Post told me to.”

Good. He doesn't offer her more than what she asked. Asher looks genuinely perplexed. Maybe I've underestimated his acting skills.

“Which home?”

“Some small low pack house. She said her family lived there...” Asher trails off and looks at the captain. “You know I'd never hurt someone. I swore an oath—”

Captain Riley holds up his hand to cut him off. “Of course we know that, don't we, Camila?”

She pauses, pursing her lips and flicking her gaze between the three of us. Reluctantly, she nods.

“Ma'am, I'm sure you're distressed. An omega without a pack or anyone to take care of her is great cause for concern, but I don't see how my men and I can help you any more than we already have. Unless this Curtis fellow files an official missing persons report...”

Camila sighs, wiping her eyes, even though they're as dry as a desert. “I get so worried about her out there alone.”

Riley offers a small smile. “I'm sure. If you need anything else, give us a call, but like I mentioned, runaway omegas aren't under our jurisdiction. The Omega Council took responsibility for those matters.”

“Right, of course.” Camila's expression sours. “Let me know if you hear anything.”

“You’ll be my first call,” Riley says, dipping his head. He stands and eyes me and Asher. “I know these two have work to get done, so if that’s all...” Riley trails off and heads toward the door, not entirely giving her an option to protest.

“Thank you for your time, gentlemen.” Camila stands and watches as Riley walks into the hallway.

“Have a great day,” I say before nudging Asher and following Riley out of the building. Riley is silent, staring at the two of us with a knowing look. I clench my teeth together and look at my phone to keep from giving myself away.

Once we get outside and we head to the cars, Riley clears his throat.

“I don’t know what you two have gotten into, but you reek of omega. Camila may not have noticed it, hell, I barely did until Asher showed up. Do I need to be concerned?”

“No, sir.” I shake my head. “Nothing to worry about.”

He glares at Asher.

“No, sir.”

Scoffing, he opens his door and grips the frame of the car. “If you’re going to go around breaking rules, at least be smart about it.”

He climbs inside and slams the door. I wince and slide my gaze to meet Asher’s. We don’t have to say anything to understand what we’re both thinking.

We have to protect her from Camila and Curtis. The Omega Council prides itself with producing quality omegas, like they’re products rather than people. Whitney has already been auctioned once. I don’t know if they’d auction her again, and the only other option left would be to shun her. I can’t let that happen.

Whitney is under my protection, and I’ll do anything to keep my family safe. Now that she’s tangled up with my pack, I have to keep her from the people who want her the most.

“Damn fools,” Riley mutters to himself as he pulls out of the parking lot.

I look out of the window, not bothering to correct him.
He's right. We're idiots to think we can keep her safe.
But damn if I won't try.

Chapter Twenty-One

WHITNEY

The other side of the bed is empty when I wake up. All around me is the smell of rain. Snuggling into the blankets, I inhale deeply, savoring the way Hayden's scent stirs things inside of me it has no right stirring. The door opens, and I peek over the comforter, grinning when Hayden stops at the end of the bed, wearing nothing but a towel around his waist. I avert my gaze out of respect, a little embarrassed by the sudden surge of desire.

"You know it's almost eight-thirty, right?"

"I wasn't aware I had to be awake at a certain hour." I sit and tuck the blanket under my chin, quickly dropping my gaze down his washboard stomach before meeting his intense stare.

His top teeth scrape over his bottom lip. "You're trouble, you know that?"

"Me?" I ask.

"You." He steps back and holds on to the towel to keep it from coming undone.

Pity that.

"Cover your eyes."

"I can leave," I say, scooting toward the edge of the bed with the blanket still cocooned around me.

"Stay."

Like it's been waiting for the command, my entire body goes still. My breathing is shallow, my heart fluttering inside

of my chest as I wait for what he's going to say next. I don't understand the reaction I'm having to him. I'm attracted to him, that's certain, but the way I want him to say something else. To tell me what to do... that's not something I'm used to. Every hookup I've ever had was in dark rooms and the sex I had was rough and dirty. Like a secret I was never meant to tell.

“Close your eyes,” he says, voice rough and husky.

This time I listen, pinching my eyelids shut. His footsteps are so soft as he walks around the bed, stopping in front of the dresser. I hold my breath as he opens a drawer. Fabric falls on the floor. Hayden is naked in front of me. I resist opening my eyes to take a peek at him. The crisp cologne of his body wash tickles my nose. I breathe him in, core clenching with his proximity. His clothes rustle as he dresses. Even though my eyes are closed, his gaze burns into me.

“You listen so well,” he says softly, still dressing.

I bite my lip, unsure of how to respond. His feet pad closer, toes brushing against mine on the floor. Hayden tugs on a lock of my hair, and I look up at him, forgetting about what he told me to do. Good thing he's fully dressed. I might attack him if he were still naked. I've never been so excited about sex.

I've never been this hungry.

He leans toward me, forcing me to shift back a little. The blanket falls off my shoulder and his attention strays to my neck. Slowly coming closer, he gives me time to back away before his lips press against my throat. I tip my head back, gasping when he scrapes his teeth over the sensitive flesh. My pheromones flood the room, sweet and needy. Hayden presses his forehead against my shoulder and inhales, gently but firmly grabbing my left hip with his hand.

“Trouble.”

“This is your fault,” I reason, pulling back to study his face. “If you weren't so—” I cut off, waving my hand up and

down to try and explain what he is. Controlling doesn't sound right. Dominating?

“Do you like it?” He stays crouched over me, his own scent intensifying the longer we stay like this.

I scoff. “I think we both know the answer to that question.”

“I have to go to work,” he says, stepping back.

I instantly miss him pressing into my space. “Do you ever have a day off?”

“Monday and Tuesday.”

Those are strange days to have off, but he is a cop. They probably all have different schedules so someone is always on duty.

“We're all off on those days,” he says, reading my mind. “We lined up our schedules and there are plenty of other bodies to take our place.”

“Guess that means another Bob Ross marathon.” I glance at my bags in the corner, remembering the key Granny left. “I need to go to the bank.”

“You can't. Not with the Omega Council looking for you.”

“Do they even know I'm missing?”

He grimaces. “Trev texted me before he left this morning. He got called in to debrief Camila on what happened the night we raided Twisters. She specifically wanted to know about you.”

My eyes widen. Would Trev sell me out?

“You're safe,” Hayden reassures me.

“How can you know?”

“Trev doesn't like the Omega Council any more than you do. Plus, telling them we have you would mean our entire pack getting in trouble. Trev would never do that.”

I close my eyes and exhale. “This is so fucked up.”

“So long as you're with us, you're—”

“Don’t make promises you can’t keep,” I interrupt him, shaking my head and looking around the room. “I should leave. This is too dangerous. I appreciate you wanting to keep me safe, but I can’t put you and your pack at risk.”

“You know I’ll hunt you down if you leave.”

I shiver a little at the possessiveness coating his words. “Hayden.” There’s no point in reasoning with him. I should leave, but I don’t really want to. The whole pack knows the risk and they haven’t kicked me out.

Hayden hooks his finger under my chin and tips it up. “Will you stay?”

“Okay.” I blink, staring at him through my lashes.

A smirk cuts across his face, and he traces his thumb over my lip. “Good girl.”

My mouth parts a little, butterflies erupting in my stomach at his praise. He traces my lower lip again before stepping back. Reaching to adjust himself, Hayden clears his throat and watches me stare at his crotch.

“You’ll make me late if you keep looking at me like that.”

I snap my eyes up, heat flaming my cheeks. “Sorry.”

“Never apologize for wanting me. Look all you want, it’s all for you.”

Swallowing, I nod and pinch my eyebrows together. Hayden is so direct, I kind of envy how confident he is with his sexuality. I’ve always treated mine like something to be ashamed of. Especially since the Omega Council always said we were only meant to be with our chosen pack. The suppressants helped me hide who I was while the drugs and liquor helped me explore. This is the first time I’ve been sober and so open about my desires.

“I’ll see you later tonight.” His focus lingers on me for a few seconds before he leaves. The door clicks shut behind him, and I stare at the wood, wishing he’d come back.

My core throbs with need. I flop back on the bed, burrowing deeper into the blankets. The ache between my legs

doesn't fade. I need to come or I'll stink up the house with my pheromones all day long. Slipping my fingers beneath my panties, I play with my clit until I have to stifle a cry. I bite my cheek and press down hard, grinding against my hand. My hand does little to soothe the ache Hayden left me with.



AVI

A trail of frustrated sexual energy chases Hayden out of the house. I watch him walk to his car with a semi. My coffee is halfway to my mouth when I realize I'm smirking. That's been happening a lot the last forty-eight hours. At dinner last night, Trev stared at me like I lost my damn mind when I grinned at Whitney. I knew I'd been having a hard time getting back to who I was after the shooting, but I hadn't realized I'd stopped smiling. At least, not until Whitney fell into our lives. I guess I'm a sucker for feisty women. I can't help but grin every time she puts Trev in his place.

I take a long drink, wondering when she'll tell me about her past. It took me a long time to open up to someone. My therapist isn't anyone the pack knows, so that helped. The guys and I don't talk about it much, but we've had a few heart-to-heart conversations about it. Most of the time, we try to pretend like it never happened and I try to act like I'm not broken inside. My illness impacts them, and I hate to see them suffer. I won't hide my PTSD, I can't, but I can hide my depression. Or at least I thought I could.

Trev's been watching me more closely than he usually does. He's the perceptive one and his attention means I haven't done as great of a job as I thought. There are pills, but I haven't wanted to go on them. Not because I'm worried about becoming a zombie—I know the doctor can adjust the dosage and medicine to try and help find the right chemical balance—but because I'm too stubborn to admit things have gotten that bad. For all my talk about sharing trauma, I do a shit job of talking about my other mental health struggles.

Resolving to talk to my therapist, I walk toward Hayden's closed door to see if Whitney is hungry. Her scent slams into me like a freight train carrying gallons of the world's sweetest perfume. Heady and rich like chocolate. I can almost taste her arousal. My dick hardens in my pants, and I bite back a groan when a tiny moan floats through the door.

Fuck. She's masturbating.

I have to get out of here. I speed walk to my room, throw on a running outfit and shoes and set the coffee on my dresser. Before I leave, I open the window in my room and the two in the living room, hoping the fresh air will help her scent dissipate.

Yesterday was nice. Today will be torture.

Chapter Twenty-Two

WHITNEY

The bruises Curtis and Shelly left behind are slowly fading. They don't hurt anymore and I don't bother covering them with makeup. After a quick shower and a fresh set of clothes, I venture out of Hayden's bedroom. I'm a little annoyed that I can't go to the bank, but I understand why it isn't a good idea. Figuring out what's in Granny's safety deposit box will have to wait. Avi is nowhere in sight. A strong breeze rolls through the house, causing gooseflesh to ripple over my skin. I rub my arms and shut the windows in the living room. I look outside while shivers wrack my body. The summer mornings are beginning to cool. Fall is so close.

It's Sunday, so there are a few kids out playing and chalking on the sidewalks. A group of moms stands together, chattering and watching their children. My upper lip curls in disgust. Happy families and nice parents. Can't relate. I spin from the window and march to the kitchen, searching for coffee. I'll never have children. Omegas are supposed to want them, but I can't stomach the thought. I'm too afraid I'll fuck them up like my parents did me. I'd like to think I wouldn't beat any kids I had. There's too much uncertainty, and I don't want to become a monster. No babies means I never have to find out if I inherited my mother's heavy hands.

I'm supposed to feel some sort of emptiness if I don't become a mother, but all I can think about is what I can do for others. I could help those children in the orphanage. I could build more toys for them to play with. I could be kind to them.

I could do so much, but only if I find a way to avoid getting in trouble with the Omega Council again.

Choosing a large mug, I fill it and add a little sugar and cream. Black coffee is for demons. I leave the living room and walk through the house, searching for Avi. His room is at the end of the hall, door left ajar. I push it open a little more, sweeping my eyes over the space. He's not here. The dark wooden dresser holds a brass figure playing a flute. I don't know much about Hinduism, but I recognize that the statue is one of the gods. His bed has a dark orange comforter and his pillowcases are red and gold. Avi likes color, and for some reason that makes me smile. His room reminds me of sunshine and warmth.

“Whitney?”

I jump, spilling coffee all over myself and the floor. Turning, I take a few steps away from his door. “I was just looking for you,” I say quickly to explain my snooping. My heart pounds in my chest, and I flick my gaze around the hall. He's cornered me.

There's a light switch between Asher and Trev's door. The bathroom door is slightly open. I continue cataloging things in the hall to distract myself from my racing heart.

Sensing my discomfort, Avi shifts to the other side of the hallway, giving me an escape. “I'm not upset.” He's covered in a thin sheen of sweat, his light gray shirt damp from his run.

Coffee drips down my hand and onto the floor. “Shit. I'll clean that.”

“I'll help,” he offers, but I shake my head, rushing past him and into the kitchen. I spill more of the hot liquid in my haste, but I'll wipe those spots up too. I grab the towel from the counter and get it wet.

Avi quietly grabs another and wets it, helping me even though I told him not to. He heads to the bigger spill so I squat down and wipe the smaller spots near the end of the hall.

“I'm sorry.”

“Who made you feel like you had to say sorry for accidentally spilling something? Accidents happen.”

I pause mid-wipe and frown at him. On a good day, my mother would have flipped out and called me names. On one of her bad days, she would have smacked me. Avi’s focused on the floor. I press my lips together and clean, standing when I finish.

“There, no big deal,” he says, rising up and carrying his towel to the sink. “What do you want to do today?”

Setting my rag at the edge of the sink, I lift a shoulder. “I figured we’d have another Bob Ross marathon.”

He laughs. “That’s a Saturday activity. Today is Sunday.”

“What’s a Sunday activity?”

“I usually paint or color in adult coloring books.”

I’ve seen those books in the store, fancy designs that are meant to be calming. Coloring is usually something kids do. I can’t remember a time when I colored at home. We had coloring sheets at school, but some of my classmates would bring pictures they colored for their teachers. It always made me feel inadequate.

“I’d really like to color,” I finally say.

“Coloring it is then. Let me shower and grab the stuff.” He wrings out the wet towel and hangs it over the edge of the sink next to the rag.

Taking his place, I rinse my rag and wipe off my mug. I pour some more coffee in it then go sit at the breakfast bar, wondering if there are parents out there that truly don’t get mad about the messes their kids make. Avi made it sound like my reaction wasn’t normal. I know plenty of people who freak out when they spill something. It’s normal.

Avi returns a little while later with two coloring books and a sleek black pencil box. He sits next to me, handing me one of the books. I take it and set it down, staring at the cover with wide eyes. This is not what I expected. A giant FUCK YOU in

bright colors with fancy filigree all around it shocks a laugh out of me.

“Oh, yeah.” Avi chuckles. “I meant adult when I said adult.” He holds his coloring book up. That cover has a half-naked man ravaging a woman in a skimpy lingerie set.

I laugh again. “You color porn.”

“This is not porn,” he defends. “This is passion.” He flips through the pages, showing me various couples in different scenarios. Toward the end, there are pages filled with orgies, multiple men to one woman.

I snatch the book from his hand and flip to those pages, staring at one of the group scenes. “Wow.” Every hole on this woman is full and another man stands next to her so she can jack him off.

“So maybe it’s a bit like porn,” Avi says, grabbing the book and closing it. “I can get a different one.” His face contorts with embarrassment.

“Oh no you don’t. I want to see you color that with a straight face.”

A blush crawls up his neck. “If you insist.” He glances away. “Asher got it for me,” he explains.

“Of course he did.” I snicker and open my book. It’s not nearly as exciting compared to his, but I settle on a page that declares *Suck My Dick*. It only seems fair, considering I’m making him color in his porn book.

“Next time I’ll grab the other one,” he mumbles, opening to a page he’s been working on. A woman wearing a strap-on has a man bent over a couch while she pegs him.

I choke on my coffee as he starts to color the dildo scarlet.

“Are you kink shaming me?” he teases.

“Nope,” I say, averting my gaze and taking my own colored pencil. Try as I might, I can’t keep my eyes off his page.

Avi's right-handed, so I get a full view of his work. He colored the strap-on a bright, fire engine red and made the bra she has on the same color. The man's eyes are wide and his mouth is parted in pleasure. She's so in control. He catches me peeking and gives me a wicked smile.

"Like it?"

"Do you?" I ask, not caring that it might be rude.

"Not a fan of pegging, but she's hot," he says. "What about you?"

"I don't know... I like how she's the one in control."

"That's sort of why I like it too. She's dominating him, but that's so unheard of." He rubs the back of his neck. "I don't know, I found the picture and couldn't stop looking at her."

"I get it," I say, going back to coloring *Suck My Dick*.

He taps my paper. "Do you like that?"

Pausing mid-color, I lift my gaze to meet his, but he's focusing on his page again, patiently waiting for my answer. "I don't know, I've never tried," I confess, looking away. My hookups only involved kissing and sex. I wasn't about to go down on a man I barely knew. At least with sex, there were condoms that provided a sense of security. They're not foolproof, but they're better than nothing.

We fall into a comfortable silence. Most guys would use this as an opening to hit on me, or try to take things to the next level, but Avi simply colors like we never discussed anything sexual. We do this for another fifteen minutes before he drops his pencil and stretches his hands.

"I think I like it because of the control."

"Huh?" I ask, sticking my tongue out while I finish filling in a fancy design under the word dick.

"They both have the same thing. The woman is in control." He gets off the stool to refill his mug with coffee. "Omegas never have that."

My forehead wrinkles. "That's because our society sucks."

He snorts. “Sometimes it really does, doesn’t it?”

I hum in agreement and keep coloring. I’ve almost finished all the fancy parts. I’m saving the words for last. Settling in at my side, he flips to a new page and starts coloring again. Over the next hour, we drink coffee and color. The subject doesn’t come up again, but my mind keeps returning to the concept of dominating an alpha. I always liked watching when the men I hooked up with would fall apart. Would I like control? I don’t think I’d enjoy pegging someone, but I wouldn’t mind giving head. I press my thighs together and try not to think about running my tongue over Avi’s shaft.



The rest of the morning passes and we find ways to keep ourselves busy. At some point, Avi opens the window again. We watch a few episodes of a show I love, snack, and talk about random things. There’s a noticeable tension between the two of us, like the conversation earlier opened up the possibilities between us. I’m still a little horny from Hayden, so the new dynamic with Avi and me only adds to the frustration.

Avi gets up from the couch to refill our waters, giving me a minute to breathe without his scent suffocating me. The early afternoon breeze from the open window helps too. Sunday is pretty noisy on their street, and I turn around to scowl at a car that screeched to a halt outside. The guys live close to a stop sign and people speed through the neighborhood like there aren’t kids on the block.

A beat-up SUV is half on the curb next to the driveway. I stand and squint, trying to see what the driver is doing behind the tinted windows.

“What the hell?” Avi asks, setting our glasses down.

The doors to the vehicle open and the barrel of a semi-automatic rifle crests the top of the frame. Curtis sneers at the house; two men toting guns climb out of the SUV too, pointing them toward the house. Their fingers twitch toward

the safeties. I gasp and grab Avi's hand just as he yells, "Whitney, get down."

We hit the floor before the first shot is fired, but the rat-tat-tat of bullets follows seconds later. Glass shatters, raining down on us. It's so loud, like sitting right beside the band at a football game. Each bullet that strikes is punctuated by a loud thwack, the sound reverberating over my skin in a tangible wave of terror. Avi stares at me, eyes round with fear. I glance around, deciding that getting to the back of the house is the safest option.

"We have to crawl," I say, starting to head across the floor. I avoid the glass on the ground but there's no reprieve. If anything, the bullets come faster, or maybe that's my heart that's beating so loud it sounds like gunfire. I glance back to check on Avi, but he's still in the same spot, eyes closed as he shakes his head back and forth.

"Avi."

He doesn't look at me. His jaw works, and he gasps for air, like he's choking. I get on all fours and crawl to him, shaking his shoulder.

"Avi."

Jerking away from me, he scrambles back with a strangled cry and presses his palms into his eyes. Sunlight streaks through the bullet holes in the wall above his head. We don't have time for this.

I need a weapon.

The shooting stops.

"Whitney," Curtis hollers, sounding like the demonic version of my mother when she's pissed. "Come out here."

Fuck.

"Avi," I whisper, gently touching his shoulder. "We have to go."

"No. No. NO," he says, each no louder than the last.

My heart aches for him, but if he's not going to help me, I need to figure things out and fast. Curtis will only wait so long before he starts shooting again, and Avi is in the line of fire. I tug Avi to the floor, forcing him to curl up on his side near the dining room table.

"Avi," I try again, smoothing his black hair away from his eyes when he opens them, but he doesn't see me.

His gaze flicks around the room, his breathing frantic and panicked.

"You're okay. I need a gun."

His chest starts to rise and fall faster as a full-on panic attack takes over, rendering him helpless. I hate to leave him, but I have to find something to fight these guys off. I'm not going back with Curtis. I'll let him shoot me before that happens. Making a split-second decision, I hop to my feet and crouch as I run toward Hayden's room.

Bullets follow after me. My heart jumps into my throat and my fingers tremble as I reach for his closet door. I shove at clothes and uniforms and shoes, finding nothing to help. Whirling around, I scan the room.

The bed.

I dive to my knees, reaching under and grasping for something. Anything to help. Adrenaline surges through me when Curtis calls my name again, taunting me. He sounds closer. I pray Avi stayed on the floor. If he gets up, Curtis will shoot him. My fingers grasp at a cool metal double barrel, and I almost cry in relief, snatching it from under the bed.

A shotgun.

Not as useful as a semi, but it'll do. I break it open. Empty. Fuck. I reach back under the bed with both hands and find a small box, ripping it open and loading two shells into the gun. I snap it closed, holding the barrel up and shoving extra shells into my pocket.

Peeking down the hall, I hold the gun close to my body and take a steadying breath. The gunshots have stopped, and I can't see Avi. I hear him though, breathing heavily like he's in

pain. I drop to my knees and shuffle forward until I can see past the kitchen cabinets. Avi's still on the floor, lost to a memory. He's openly weeping now, but I don't have time to help him.

Curtis and his men climb onto the porch, their forms blocking the late afternoon sun. I press against the wall and point the barrel at the door and take the safety off. Everything slows down and the door handle twists, painfully slow. Then it twists again and again. It's locked.

Curtis kicks the door. My lungs seize, and I forget how to breathe. Blood rushes to my ears and the wood thuds again, cracking with the force of the strike. Avi sobs, but luckily the men outside can't hear him over the racket Curtis is making. I look down the barrel at the door, forcing air into my body and steadying my hands. When the door finally breaks and swings wide, I fire without thinking twice.

"There you—" Curtis' words are cut off by the shot. He clutches his stomach and stumbles slightly, snarling. "Fucking bitch."

One of his men steps up to catch him, so I shift the gun slightly, breathing out and pulling the other trigger. The shot hits him in the shoulder. His body spins back and the hand he had extended toward Curtis pulls the alpha back with him. I don't watch them fall. I lower the gun and break it open, reaching into my pocket for more ammo. The shells drop over the floor.

A body crashes into me, knocking me back. My head cracks against the floor, and the gun flies out of my hands, clattering across the floor. Stars burst across my vision, and I gasp for air, wheezing as the guy comes down on top of me, grasping for my arms.

I wrench them away and scream, gouging Curtis' man with my nails and thrashing against him. Desperately trying to buck him off to no avail.

"Stupid cunt," he growls, bouncing on me.

Air is snatched from my body. It takes a second to think straight, but then I slam my head forward, refusing to be weak. I lived my life cowering, taking beatings. No more. I will die before this bastard restrains me. Sensing my will, he roughly grabs my neck and squeezes, yellowing eyes bugging out as he snarls.

A pan smacks into the side of his head, knocking him right off of me. I clutch my neck and stare at Avi whose face is still lined with worry. He glances at me for a second, then drops onto his ass and drops his head into his hands, rocking back and forth. I scramble off the floor, wrapping my arms around him and whispering reassuring words that feel hollow and taste like ash as I speak them.

I only give him a minute before I'm up and moving. Curtis and the other guy are gone and so is the car. I scan what I can see of the front yard, sighing in relief when I see no sign of them. I grab Avi's phone from the counter, and I race back to him to unlock it with his face, finding Trev's number and calling him. I don't know why I pick him, but it feels right, so I don't second guess myself.

Four rings later, he answers.

"Hey," he says.

"Trev?" My voice comes out as a rasp, and I clutch my neck, scowling at the asshole who choked me.

"Whitney?" he whispers, static crackling down the speaker like he's turned away from someone for privacy. "Is everything okay?"

"Something happened," I say, surveying the porch. "I need you."

"Is Avi okay?"

I glance at the alpha. "He will be. Curtis showed up with two guys... someone probably called the cops..." I trail off. I should run.

"Don't move," he says, reading my thoughts. "I'll take the call and get the guys on it. Hayden, Asher," he shouts away from the phone. More rustling and movement before he

breathes, the sound coasting down the line. “Can you take Avi to my bedroom?”

“I think so. One of them is still here.” The guy is out cold.

“There are cuffs in my top dresser drawer. Can you cuff him to something?”

“I’ll try.”

“Good girl. I’ll be there soon. Stay in the back.”

“Okay,” I whisper.

“How bad is it?” he asks quickly before I can pull the phone from my ear.

“It’s bad, Trev.”

“Fuck. Okay. Give us ten.” He disconnects the call, and I clutch the phone, letting dread win for a full second before I shove that emotion aside and do what he asked. The drawer is filled with socks and boxers, but I find cuffs at the bottom. They’re heavy in my hands as I rush back to the man. He’s lying in the middle of the hall. There’s nothing to cuff him to... unless I use the dining room table. He could get out if he wakes up. I chew on my lip, eyeing the pan.

I’m going to hell. For sure.

I pick it up and smack him in the face again, hoping it’ll keep him knocked out a little longer. Dropping it with a thud, I grab his feet and pull him toward the table, grunting and squatting a bit so I can maneuver him across the floor. Thank fuck it’s wooden. I cuff him around a wooden leg and step back, frowning, but deciding there’s nothing else I can do.

Avi is still sitting on the floor. I brush my fingers on his arm, whispering his name. He glances up at me, eyes rimmed red and face pale.

“I’m sorry.”

“Shh,” I tell him. “It’s okay.”

Grabbing his arm, I help him stand and lead us to the bedroom. He doesn’t say anything else. Once we’re in Trev’s

room, I shut the door and shove the dresser so it's blocking part of the door, preventing it from fully opening.

Trev's comforter is slightly ruffled. He has four pillows, but only one where he sleeps. His room smells like orange and cinnamon. Minutes tick by. I name off more things, wearing a hole in Trev's carpet as I pace. I stop when I hear someone step onto the porch. Curling my hands into fists, I listen, trying to discern if the newcomer is friend or foe. We'll be useless against guns, and I was too frazzled to think of grabbing the shotgun and more shells.

So fucking stupid.

"Whitney?"

Trev's voice in the hallway sends a flood of relief through me. I sigh and uncurl my fingers, glancing at Avi. He's still recovering from his episode. I think he might be in shock, but I'm not a doctor. He's not very responsive and that bothers me most of all. I flick my gaze over his body, making sure I didn't miss a bullet wound. There's no blood.

"Hang on," I call. The carpet bunches underneath the dresser's weight, but I shove it mostly out of the way and rip the door open.

Trev is on the other side, chest heaving and eyes wild. His brown eyes inventory me before jumping to Avi. His face crumples, and I step aside so he can go to his friend.

He surprises me when he stands in front of me. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm okay."

"You're covered in blood." His eyes drop to my cheek and then my arms.

I jerk my head back in surprise and lift my hand, swiping it across my face. "I broke his nose."

Something akin to pride shines in his eyes. "Good. What about your arms?"

"Scratches, but I'm okay. Avi needs help," I whisper the last part.

He turns away and goes to Avi, squatting in front of him. Avi nods at whatever Trev is whispering. Feeling like an intruder, I slip out of the room and meet Hayden and Asher in the hall.

Hayden snatches me into his arms. I fight out of his hold so I can breathe, giving him a reassuring smile. Hayden's fingers link with mine, and I don't pull them away, knowing he needs the touch more than I do. Usually I hate displays of affection like this, but Hayden has a way of making me forget about all my hang-ups.

Asher touches my arm. I turn toward him, trying not to react to the worry he's wearing like a second skin.

"I'm okay," I say, explaining the blood. "Avi isn't hurt." But he's also not okay.

Pressing his lips together, Asher shakes his head. "If Curtis had—"

"But he didn't. He's gone now. He's not dumb enough to try again." I don't wholly believe that statement, but I'll say just about anything to help them relax.

"Your neck is bruised. Are you hurt anywhere else?" Asher asks.

"I should probably clean my face."

He and Hayden share a look, but I brush past them on my way to the sink.

"I'm calling Maddy," Asher says. "Avi might need her too."

"Go. I'll stay with her." Hayden waits for me to finish cleaning up. Once my face is dry, he tugs me into his room, shutting the door and guiding me to the bed. I sit on the edge of it, tucking my hands under my legs to hide the fact that they're shaking.

"Is Avi okay?" I ask quietly.

"He'll be all right." Hayden sounds so sure. "Trev is the best person to help him right now."

I hate that I couldn't help. Suddenly, it hits me that I don't know this pack very well and I don't fit with them. I chew on my lip and ignore the ache to belong. Now is not the time for my damn attachment issues.

"I'm so sorry." Hayden drops to his knees in front of me and rests his head on my legs.

I brush my hand over his hair. "It's not your fault."

"We should have left someone to watch the house."

"Then you would have put yourselves in danger. What if the cop you placed on guard told the Omega Council? You didn't do anything wrong."

He cups my calves with his hands and holds on to me. "And we can't report it now unless we want cops crawling all over the place."

"News flash, this place is filled with cops." I gently tug on his brown hair.

Rolling his head to the side, he looks up at me. "Brat."

"We should start cleaning then. What are we doing with that guy?"

"We'll have to take him in. I'll say I found him passed out somewhere." He sits back and runs his hand over his face. "I don't want to leave, but—"

"Trev and Asher are here now. I'm safe."

He stares at me, gray eyes piercing. "I wish I weren't so worried, but they're the best people I know to leave you with for protection."

I nod and lift the corners of my mouth slightly. "I'll be okay."

"I don't like it."

Narrowing my eyes, I lean forward and poke his chest. "Don't make me feel weak."

"You're not weak," he says quickly, standing and adjusting his pants. "I'll be back within the hour." He drops a quick kiss

on my lips before I can get up and leave.

By the time I make it out of his room, he's already informed the guys where he'll be going and storming toward the front of the house. I'm not ashamed to admit I check his ass out. Something about a man being angry on my behalf is so damn sexy. He drags the guy Avi knocked out to his car. I check the street, but no one is outside right now. The gunshots probably terrified the neighbors, but the cop cars are here now.

A beat-up sedan pulls up to the curb and my stomach flips. I open my mouth to warn Hayden, but he waves at whoever is inside.

Maddy, the paramedic, walks toward Hayden's patrol car. They have a short conversation before she adjusts the big bag hanging off her shoulder and heads toward me.

"I knew you couldn't stay away," she says when I meet her at the door. She takes in the mess. "Wow. What happened?"

I press my lips together.

Maddy releases a breath. "Asher called me because he trusts me, but I get it. My orders are to make sure you're okay and then check on Avi." She points to a barstool, and I take a seat. Grabbing a few things from her bag, she sets them on the counter before shining a light at my face. "Your bruises from the other night are almost gone. Follow the light with your eyes."

"I didn't hit my head." At least, not very hard.

"Follow the light," she says again, moving it across my line of sight. I do as she asks, letting her poke and prod me. "What happened to your neck? Those are new marks."

I reach up and touch the bruises, still unsure if I can tell her the truth.

"I like these guys and I don't think they'd hurt you, but you'd tell me if you weren't safe, right?"

"It's not like that," I say.

She arches an eyebrow. "What's it like then?" Rubbing her hands together to warm them up, she eyes my throat. "I'm a

friend of the pack, Whitney. I'd never sell these guys out. They're the closest thing to brothers that I have."

I study her face. "How do you know them?"

Gently, she touches my neck, pushing and feeling for any sign of serious damage. "Asher and I grew up on the same street. Our parents were friends. He went to the academy, and I became a paramedic."

"So you see each other a lot?"

"Only on the job and on the occasional barbeque our parents hold. They're a great pack and we're friends, but my mate and baby take up most of my free time."

Some of the jealousy that had been building inside of me subsides.

"The guy Hayden has in his car was choking me."

"Asshole," Maddy mutters, removing her hands from my neck. "You'll be okay. Maybe a little sore, but within a few days you'll be back to normal." She starts to shove her supplies in her bag. "One last thing."

"Yeah?"

She zips her bag. "Don't hurt them, okay?" It's not a warning so much as a plea. Maddy really cares about these guys.

"I'll try not to."

Patting my thigh, she nods. "Thank you." Maddy heads down the hall and softly knocks on the bedroom door, joining Asher, Trev, and Avi.

Unease settles in my stomach at being left alone. Instead of going to join them, I search for a broom and dust pan, stepping around debris and glass. Being in this room makes my heart rate skyrocket, but I breathe through my nose, counting the inhaled and exhaled. My mind starts to wander. I count the pieces of glass I sweep up instead. Cleaning will help me stave off the panic that's slowly building in my chest, threatening to take over at any second. I sweep the space three times before all the bigger pieces of glass are cleaned up.

I shoot my gaze down the hallway, straining to hear anything. They still haven't come out. My heart falls a little, but I shove away all of my emotions. Avi needs them. I'm the reason this happened. I grab a towel and get it wet, wiping down the counters, table, and windowsill. Once that's done, I search the front of the house for a vacuum. The closet by the front door is filled with coats. I close it and head to the one in the hall. Bingo.

Trev and Maddy emerge from his room as I start to roll the vacuum out.

Trev furrows his brow. "What are you doing?"

"Cleaning."

"Oh," he says, face smoothing. "I'll do that. You should rest." He reaches for the machine, but I pull it out of reach.

"It's not a big deal."

He squints at me and steps closer. "Give me the vacuum."

"No." I scowl at him. "I need to do this."

"Whitney," he warns, but my growl shuts him up. His eyebrows jump to his hairline. "Fine. Clean if you must."

"I must," I say with attitude.

Maddy chuckles, and both of us glance at her. I'd forgotten she was in the room.

"Trev is right, you know. You should rest, but I get it if you need a distraction. Don't work too hard, okay?"

I nod, and she smiles at me.

"I'll see you soon."

My mouth is half open to retort *don't count on it*, but the last time she told me she'd see me again, she was right. She says bye to Trev and leaves the house.

Trev's fingers brush over my knuckles. "I'm sorry."

I soften to the regret filling his voice. "It's okay. I just have to do something."

"Let me help you."

“It’s your house.” I shrug.

He nods and watches me push the vacuum into the living room. I uncoil the cord, shooting secretive glances in his direction when he starts to clean the counters. I don’t tell him I already did that. He’s determined to be useful. Asher stays in the back with Avi. I want to go to him, but I don’t know if he’s ready for me to bombard him. I stay and clean. Hayden arrives a little while later, carrying in a few pieces of plywood.

“The neighbors are asking questions,” he tells Trev as he leans the plywood against the back of the couch.

“Fuck.” Trev slides his gaze in my direction. “We’ll be back in a few minutes.”

“I’ll be okay.”

Making a face like he isn’t so sure about that, he rubs his forehead. After a few seconds, he nods. “Let’s get this over with.”

Watching from the safety of the kitchen, I make sure the guys are safe while they talk to the neighbors about what happened. There are frantic hand gestures, but after about ten minutes the guys manage to calm people down and everyone heads back to their homes.

Hayden comes over to me once he’s inside, checking me over once more. “We have to fix the windows.”

“Do what you have to do. I’ll keep cleaning.”

He and Trev head to the garage—which doubles as their shop—and they cut sections to cover the holes in the windows. They’ll have to call someone to fix the walls and door, but for now they rig it so it shuts and locks, reinforcing the broken section with plywood too.

When they’re done, they step back and study their handiwork, while I finish digging bullets out of the couch. My hands tremble as I hold the small handful of metal, and my chest starts to tighten. Had we not noticed Curtis and his men arrive, we’d be as good as dead.

The thought is jarring, so I clear my throat, holding out my hand. “Do you need these?”

Hayden and Trev turn.

“Trash them, we didn’t file a report, and I wiped the call log.” Hayden glances at Trev. “Hope that’s okay.”

“Good thinking.” Trev claps him on the shoulder. “We shouldn’t stay here tonight.”

“Where would we go?” Hayden asks. “The only place we could go is Asher’s mom’s house.”

They slide their gazes to me. Once again, I’m the reason things are complicated.

“I can stay here. You guys should go.”

“No,” they say at the same time, venom covering the word.

“If it isn’t safe, you should go. They want me.”

“Whitney, I’m not—”

“You’re not staying here alone.” Trev cuts Hayden off, slicing his hand through the air. “Don’t suggest something so ridiculous again.”

I scoff. “Fine. Have it your way. We can all just die when Curtis comes back.”

He snarls, but Hayden puts his hand on Trev’s chest. “Easy, don’t bite her head off because you’re mad they got to us.”

“We’re going to Asher’s. Say we’re getting part of the house renovated.” Trev pins me with a look. “You’re coming too.”

“What about the Omega Council?”

“They’re the only ones who know who you are. We’ll lie and say you’re our omega now.”

“His mom will be pissed.” Hayden grimaces. “You know how she gets.”

“She’ll be fine,” Trev snaps. “You’re going to have to pretend to be our omega,” he says to me, coming closer.

“Asher’s mom will expect you to act like it too.”

I bristle. “I can act like an omega.”

“An omega about to be mated? You don’t have mate bites yet so you’ll have to convince her you’re excited to be ours. What are you going to tell her when she asks about the bites?”

“I’ll figure it out,” I say through gritted teeth. “I’ll say I wanted to wait for my heat.”

Trev chuckles, eyes dropping to my lips. “You’re going to have to pretend like you like me.”

“I never said I didn’t like you.”

“Oh?” He quirks an eyebrow.

“Fine, you’re an asshole sometimes, but I don’t hate you. It’ll take more than a few cutting words to make me hate you.”

“You’re a bundle of joy to be around,” he drawls.

“Fuck you.”

“Soon.”

I gasp and step back, letting him know I’d never. He simply smirks like he’s won this round of verbal sparring. I don’t understand him.

“Come with me,” Hayden says, pulling my attention away from the rude-ass alpha.

“Gladly.” I shoot a venomous look at Trev.

He licks his lips.

My core clenches despite my every instinct telling me to avoid him like the plague. Messing with Trev is like playing catch with a bomb.

Chapter Twenty-Three

TREV

Hayden pulls Whitney down the hall and I adjust myself in my pants as soon as he closes them in his room. I'm a bastard for being turned on right now, but she's so easy to rile up. I glance around, releasing a hard breath when the reality of the day slams into me. The Omega Council and Curtis are looking for this woman. Common sense says to give her up, but something about that doesn't sit right in my stomach. Camila is a ruthless bitch, and Curtis will eat her alive.

Whitney isn't exactly fragile, but she deserves better than those two assholes. Asher comes out of my bedroom. His eyebrows are pinched together, and he doesn't say anything to me until after he drinks a full glass of water.

"He's in rough shape."

"I know," I say.

Maddy did all she could, but she's only a paramedic. Aside from a few scrapes, Avi wasn't physically hurt. An incident like this could set Avi back. He's made a lot of progress with therapy and being off work, but today is even more reason to keep him off duty. As much as I hate to admit it, my friend is still a work in progress. Whitney makes him smile though, and for that I'll make sure she's safe. It's not smart to stay with her as she gets closer to her heat, but it's the only choice that makes sense.

"Can you call your mom? See if the guest house is open?"

Asher has two older brothers, but they have their own homes. He grew up better off than the rest of us, but he's still low pack. The mother-in-law's quarters is a cute two-bedroom cottage style home with a lot less space than this place. Being cramped in a house with an omega near pre-heat is going to be torture. I'm already semi-hard thinking about it.

"Yeah. I'll start packing." Asher runs his hand through his hair.

"Good. I'll get Avi's stuff ready."

He turns to leave but pauses and glances at me. "We could have lost them both."

It's inconvenient that losing her would hurt. Things are already complicated enough.

One thing I know for certain? Nothing about that omega is simple.

Chapter Twenty-Four

WHITNEY

We finally leave the house around six-thirty. It's hard to believe four hours have passed since Curtis rolled up to the house. It feels like it's been a week. I ride with Hayden on the way to Asher's mom's. Staring out of the window, I move my gaze to the side-mirror, checking to see if I can gauge Avi's mood. We're stopped at a stoplight, near a nicer part of low pack territory, and Asher's behind us. Avi's hand rests over his mouth, and he's looking straight at me. I smile a little, but he doesn't return the gesture. I didn't expect him to. He dips his head slightly and I sigh, glancing at the homes with warped chain-link fences.

There are no white pickets in low pack neighborhoods. Maybe a split rail fence if you're lucky. I try not to react when we turn into a neighborhood with two-story houses. The homes are all well-kept and the grass is green, no brown patches in sight. Chewing on my lip, I breathe deeply to settle my nerves. The chances of his family being like mine are low, but not impossible. I realize not everyone grew up like me. I try to give his family the benefit of the doubt rather than assuming the worst.

We park outside a cute house with white siding and blue shutters. The front door is bright yellow and has a pink flower wreath in the middle of it. It's all so cheery. Hayden leans over and glances at the house through my window.

"Yeah, his mom likes to decorate."

"It's cute," I say, meeting his gaze.

“Melanie is sweet.” He kisses my cheek.

My stomach flutters. “His dads?”

“They’re hilarious. But don’t worry, we’ll be in the back house. You won’t have to see them unless you want to.”

I nod and unbuckle. Behind us the guys are already getting out of their cars. Hayden shuts off the car and we meet them at the short sidewalk that leads to the front door. Taking the spot next to Avi, I brush my fingers over his. He hooks his index finger around mine for a second, squeezing gently. Trev zeroes in on the contact, and we break apart like we just got caught fucking in public.

“It’s fine. You’re our omega, remember?”

“She is?” Avi asks, voice light and hopeful. He seems more like himself now.

“Only for our stay,” Trev says at the same time I say, “Yes.”

I press my lips together and hold Trev’s stare as he clears his throat.

“For our stay,” he pauses to make sure we all get the point, “Whitney is our omega. It’s the only way this works.”

“You can pretend,” Asher says with a heavy sigh. “I’ve never been a good actor.”

I frown, but he swoops in and gives me a side hug before my insecurities can eat away at me.

“Welcome to Pack Cocker.”

“Cocker,” I repeat, trying not to laugh.

“It never fails,” Trev says with a light chuckle. “Let’s stick with Whitney being new to our pack. The last Compatibility Ceremony matched us together. We didn’t tell Asher’s mom because we didn’t want a big celebration.”

We all nod in agreement.

“She’s going to be so annoyed.” Asher straightens his shoulders. “I’ll go first.”

“Probably best since this is your family,” Hayden mutters.

“Shut up.”

“Children,” I scold, earning a tiny grin from Avi. He’s resurfacing, and it makes my heart swell with gratitude. “Don’t make me send you to your rooms.”

“Will you spank me?” Asher asks, turning and walking backward up the sidewalk.

“Don’t threaten me with a good time,” I tease, loving the way his bark of laughter makes Avi’s almost-grin turn into a full smile.

Hayden’s shoulder brushes against mine and his lips touch the shell of my ear. “I like when you flirt with my pack.”

My stomach flips. “I’m not—” I stop trying to defend myself. I was flirting with them.

“You are, and it’s sexy as hell.” Hayden eases back when Asher raps his knuckles on the door.

There’s one painful minute, filled with anticipation, where I think about every possible scenario for things to go wrong. Every dreadful encounter races through my mind, until the yellow door opens to reveal a woman wearing the biggest smile I’ve ever seen. Melanie. Asher is on her in a second, hugging her tight to him. She’s shorter than he is, curvy, and has on a cute pink and white blouse and black slacks. So fancy for relaxing at home, but some people enjoy dressing up. Not everyone is as fond of yoga pants as I am.

“Hey, Ma,” Asher says when he pulls back. He sticks his hands in his pockets and rocks back on his heels. “I have something to tell you.”

Like a heat seeking missile, Melanie narrows her eyes at him and then cuts them to our group. She finds me in less than a second. Her mouth parts a little, and she smiles. Frowns. Scowls and glares at Asher.

“What is this?”

I take a step back, but Avi grabs my hand and pulls me to his side, shaking his head hard. Hayden presses into my side,

and much to my surprise, Trev steps back and reaches for my other hand. I stare at his waiting palm before taking it, remembering what he said. We have to pretend to make this real. A good pack protects their omega.

“Ma, meet Whitney. Our omega.”

Asher’s mom breaks. A handful of emotions flash over her face. Happy. Sad. Excited. Angry. Annoyed. Finally, remorseful. She shoves past him and marches down the three porch steps and up to Trev. For a short woman, she’s fierce. She takes up space, and when she bares her teeth at him in what I think is meant to be a smile, he releases my fingers and steps aside.

Betrayal rushes through me, but when I’m pulled into the softest hug, I forget about Trev throwing me to the wolves. Asher’s mom isn’t a wolf, but I can’t help how I stiffen in her hold.

“I’m sorry, Whitney. I didn’t mean to scare you,” she says, quickly pulling back and giving me a good once over. “You are beautiful. I’m afraid they don’t deserve you.”

My lips kick up. “Oh, I know.”

She chuckles. “Pretty and funny.” Tossing a glare over her shoulder, she pins Asher with a look. “You better not do anything to fuck this up.”

I laugh, then quickly stifle it. “Asher is amazing, ma’am.”

“Ma’am?” His mom turns back to me. “Please, call me Melanie.”

“Okay.”

She surveys the men. “You all look hungry and tired.”

“I could eat,” Hayden says.

“You always want to eat,” she retorts with an eyeroll. “I swear he’s a garbage disposal.” She pulls me away from Avi and Hayden. “Come help me finish dinner and tell me why these fools didn’t let me throw you a proper welcoming party.”

I look back at the men. Avi shrugs. Hayden raises an eyebrow. Unreadable and intimidating as ever, Trev simply watches Melanie take me. She pats her son's shoulder as we go inside, the touch oddly threatening, but not in a malicious way. More like he's never going to hear the end of this.

The inside of the house is as cute as the outside. Champagne walls, one dark blue accent wall in the living room. It's an open concept layout like the pack's house. Melanie makes a sweeping gesture with her arm.

"Welcome to my home. I'm finishing the asiago chicken pasta." She releases me and walks to the gas stove. A nice black pot holds boiling water and noodles. Taking a wooden spoon from the counter, she stirs it and tsks. "One more minute."

I linger on the other side of the counter. The house is nice. Not millionaire nice, but the dining room table is hardly worn. The pretty blue and white rug underneath has no loose threads. The counter is granite, but nothing overly obnoxious. A simple brown and black slab. The cabinets are older, but the coating on the outside is still in great condition. Melanie and her pack take care of things. By the time I stop inspecting things, Melanie is dumping the noodles into a strainer in the stainless steel sink.

"So, Whitney, how are they treating you?"

"They've been wonderful." I rest my hands on the cool granite.

She lifts her eyes to meet mine, the steam from the noodles and hot water rises between us. "Even Trev?"

I nod. "He's nice."

Snorting, she shakes her head. "That man is not what I'd call nice, at least not when you first meet him. He's a cactus. If you take the time to avoid spines, you might find something a little sweet. So, how has he been?"

"He's hard to read."

Two hands land on my shoulders, and I stiffen enough for Melanie to notice. My mind flashes back to an unpleasant

memory, but I smile and play it off. Melanie is watching me with new curiosity, and I don't like it. Smells that don't belong in this home tickle my nostrils.

Stop. Stop. Stop.

I shove the panic down, pulling my lips up so hard my cheeks start to ache. The harder I try, the more I feel like Melanie notices me, which I hate. Usually people don't pay this close attention. They don't want to see things that make them uncomfortable, so they believe the mask. They ignore the eyes.

A solid, muscular front brushes against my back.

I glance at the cabinets behind Melanie and count the knobs, distracting my brain.

"I promise I'm playing nice, Melanie," Trev says softly, almost like he's trying not to startle me any more than he already has. His front presses into my back, and I force myself to melt into his hold. As his omega, I'd be comfortable with his touch by now, and I suspect nothing gets past Melanie. I'll have to do my best masking to fool her. Trev smells like leather, orange, and cinnamon. His heat wraps around me, protective and a little possessive. His touch is safe. My heart doesn't calm though, if anything, it starts to beat faster the longer he holds me. Now my racing heart has more to do with the strong alpha behind me than it does fear.

The upside to being an omega is my body craving an alpha's touch. The pheromones I'm giving off should help convince her.

Tipping my head back, I reach up and touch my palm to his cheek, arching my back a little. "Nice enough," I whisper, batting my eyelashes at him. My ass rubs against his crotch and he grunts.

His honey-brown eyes blaze and flick to my lips. "I can be nicer," he says. Trev's gaze devours me, making me wonder if he'd be as thorough with his lips.

"Sure you can, pumpkin."

Melanie chuckles, and I blush, embarrassed that I forgot about her for a second. Trev is distracting.

“I see you have him handled. He needs someone to put him in his place.”

I drop my hand and start to take a step away, but Trev’s hand finds my stomach and he pulls me back against his body. I sigh and roll my eyes, earning another laugh from Melanie.

“I remember when I was a new pack omega. They’ll ease up after a few years.”

“Lying again, love?” A man with a slight accent enters the room. His blond hair is cut short, but his scruff is unkempt. The blue shirt he’s wearing matches the accent wall.

Melanie picks up the strainer and dumps the noodles into another pot filled with a creamy white sauce. “I’m not lying.”

“I’ve never stopped wanting to touch you.” As if to prove his point, he swoops in and snatches her by the waist, kissing her a little too intimately for being in front of guests.

“Dad,” Asher groans. “Sorry, guys.”

“Don’t apologize for love.” An older version of Asher struts into the kitchen, wearing a nice pair of jeans and a black shirt. “Love is unashamed.”

The blond man ravishes Melanie until Asher’s dad takes her from him. Asher mutters *unbelievable*, while Melanie is showered with affection and kisses. Another man comes in, his hair more gray than brown. He arches an eyebrow at the show and looks at Asher.

“What did you say?”

Asher huffs. “Don’t blame me.”

“Hmm. But it’s so easy,” the guy says with a playful wink. He notices me in Trev’s arms and tips his head to the side. “Mel, did you know there’s an omega in the kitchen?”

Melanie swats at Asher’s lookalike and extracts herself from his grabby hands. “You think I didn’t notice, Cody?”

Cody grins. “I know you did.” He goes and kisses her too, only less intimately than the others. His hand drops to her ass though.

“Get a room,” Asher says.

Avi laughs and everyone stops to look at him. He bristles and stops smiling. “Don’t do that.”

“Sorry,” I mumble.

“It’s okay,” he says to me. “It’s the rest of them I don’t like staring at me.” He steps forward and pulls me from Trev’s arms. “Stop hogging Whitney.”

Trev’s fingers linger on me as long as they can, until Avi has me far enough away he can’t hold on without following us. Holding me against his side, Avi walks us to the couch and away from the collective attention of Asher’s family.

“You okay?” Avi asks softly for only me to hear.

I nod and lean into his touch. “I’m good.”

“They’re a handful.”

“I heard that,” Melanie shouts.

Asher’s dads walk over and sit on the couch opposite Avi and me.

“I guess you heard, but I’m Cody.” The man with the gray hair points at Asher’s almost twin. “This is Johnathan”—he jerks his thumb toward the other guy—“and Tim.”

“Hi.” I wave, cringing a little at my awkwardness. “I’m Whitney.”

Tim, the blond one, nods. “How long have you been with the pack?”

“Only a few days,” I say, sheepishly glancing at my hands.

“Ah, so you’re not in *that* much trouble,” Jonathan says to Asher and the guys. “I think we can find a way for Melanie to forgive you. Why didn’t you tell us you were going to the Compatibility Ceremony?”

Hayden takes the seat next to me, resting his hand next to my leg on the couch. He doesn't touch me, but his fingers twitch a little. I suspect he's restraining himself because he's a beta.

"It was a last-minute decision," Asher says from the stove. He's taste testing the food for Melanie. She watches him with a doting, motherly smile that makes my chest ache.

"And we were a little distracted once we got Whitney home," Trev says, casually leaning against the counter.

"I bet," Cody says. "Remember when Melanie came home with us?"

Tim snorts. "You mean when she slapped you because she found the underwear in your room?"

I raise my eyebrows in question.

"We had a maid come clean the house before the ceremony. While we were out, she invited her mate over and they had sex on my bed." Cody blushes a little and slides his gaze to Melanie. "She stole my heart with that slap."

"Sounds so romantic," Asher mumbles.

Melanie swats his arm, and he chuckles, giving her a quick hug and kiss on the side of the head. Everything is so sweet. Affectionate. The opposite of everything I know. It's making me a little nauseous.

"What have you guys been up to?" Avi asks, changing the conversation before they can start asking about the matching.

I cross my legs so Melanie's mates can't see me link pinkies with Hayden. He squeezes my finger softly and the tension in my shoulders eases. The guys fall into conversation, and I sit as still as possible so as not to draw attention. The longer they talk, the more at ease I feel. The two packs are close, having known each other for years. Usually, I hate sitting and listening to people who have been friends for so long rehash their history, but the conversation is fascinating and I learn a few important things about Pack Cocker.

They all met when they were thirteen at a lake party. Asher's parents had met up with a handful of friends and when the guys realized they'd been inseparable for the whole trip, the pack was formed.

They've lived in the house Curtis destroyed for three years.

Hayden may be a beta, but apparently, he's just as bossy as an alpha when he's drunk.

Trev saved a puppy from drowning.

Asher loves to joke—who knew?

Avi has always been more reserved, but on one camping trip he drank too much and streaked through the campgrounds.

When Melanie announces dinner is ready and everyone stops sharing old stories, I find myself a little sad. I liked learning about them.

We sit around a dining room table. Melanie sits at the head of the table and the men all take seats at the side. I hesitate, glancing at the other end and the remaining empty chair. Trev is sitting closest to the end and pointedly looks at the seat.

“Omegas get the best seat,” Melanie says with a playful smile. “I trained your men well.”

Asher woofs like a dog, and Avi cracks a big grin.

“If the shoe fits.” Melanie gestures toward the chair. “Take your seat, love.”

Once I'm seated, she fills her plate and hands the dish filled with the pasta to Tim. Her mates all pass the bowl down the line until Cody hands it to me. I raise an eyebrow and he shrugs.

Omegas go first.

“How progressive,” I say. Dinner smells delicious and I take an extra big helping before passing the dish back to Cody. I give Trev an apologetic smile, but he shakes his head.

“It's their house.” He takes a sip of water.

“It’s how it should be.” Melanie adjusts her napkin before placing it in her lap. “An omega is what makes a pack. I don’t insist on being pampered, but the men have always treated me like I’m their prize. I loved it enough to start teaching these young guys to do the same. I hope they’ve learned their lesson.” She gives them all a long, appraising look.

“Of course we did, Ma.” Asher smiles at her. “Whitney is our princess.”

I growl a little, and Melanie laughs.

“What’s wrong with being a princess?” Asher asks.

“Aside from being helpless to the whims of others?” I stab a piece of penne.

Trev leans toward Hayden. The movement is so subtle I almost miss it, but he totally flinched. I smirk and take the bite, chewing to hide the smile. He’s afraid of me. Maybe not scared for his life, but he’s totally scared.

“Fine, our queen,” Asher says, correcting himself. “She’s our queen.”

“Good boy.” Melanie pats his arm.

Dinner flies by after that. I eat and listen to more stories, chuckling at the ridiculous things the men used to get into. I insist on cleaning since Melanie cooked, and she lets me under the condition that she helps. She shoos the men out to the covered patio. Everything is going great until she sets a pile of plates next to me and presses close, leaning in enough to make me uncomfortable. I freeze, hating that she’s about to turn into what I’ve always come to expect of omegas.

“I love my son and his pack.”

I flick my gaze to hers and nod. “They’re really great.”

Her eyebrows pinch together, and she studies my face a little too intensely. “Have they hurt you?”

“What?” I almost drop the plate I’m rinsing off, but I recover nicely and set it down before I can break it.

“Earlier, when Trev touched you, you were scared. Did he hurt you?”

Sighing, I shake my head. “That had nothing to do with Trev and everything to do with me. The guys have been really sweet, Melanie.”

“You’d tell me if they weren’t? I may love them, but I won’t hesitate to report them if they’re abusing you. I noticed they haven’t claimed you yet, you can still find a new pack if they’re not treating you right.”

“They’re not hurting me.” I shut the water off and turn toward her, meeting her concerned gaze. “They’ve been nothing but kind. I wanted to wait for my heat for the mate bites.”

She stares at me for a full minute before nodding. “Oh good. I’d hate to go to jail for murder.”

I burst out laughing, and she pats my back. The touch is gentle and loving. She starts to bring me the rest of the dishes, and I get busy cleaning, wondering if she really thought Trev and the guys were capable of hurting an omega. I guess it’s not unheard of, but those guys aren’t even close to abusive. Melanie starts wiping down the counters. When she’s at the counter next to me, she pauses and gives me a look I’m all too accustomed to.

I remember six times when I’d gone out with my mother right after she beat me. She never cared about hiding bruises, and when we’d go through the checkout lines at the grocery store, the nice lady at the register always gave me the same sad smile. Like she knew exactly what had happened and knew she wouldn’t be able to help me.

The crazy thing is, if she had reported my mom, it may have helped. There are people who foster omegas. She could have saved me. Sometimes I think about that woman late at night, wondering why it never crossed her mind to call the cops on my mother. The cashier had plenty of time to get our address when she carded for the booze. That look of understanding and sympathy probably hurt me the most.

Being seen but not helped? That shit stuck with me.

Melanie is giving me the same look as the cashier, only this time, it's different, because Melanie truly couldn't have stopped what happened. She had no way of knowing. Unlike the cashier, Melanie would have called the cops. I know that without a doubt. Still, the flash of pity in her eyes makes my hackles rise.

"Whitney—" she begins, but I cut her off with my hand.

"Don't. Please." I avoid her eyes and finish loading the dishwasher.

There's a long pause before she relents and simply says, "Okay, love."

I release a heavy breath and drop the last of the silverware in. She hands me soap and grabs two wine coolers from the fridge.

She offers me one. "It's nothing fancy."

"This is perfect."

"Do you want to see the guest house?" She waggles her eyebrows at me, and I wrinkle my nose at the obvious suggestive nature of her elation.

Aren't moms supposed to be embarrassed at the thought of their kid having sex?

"Don't give me that look. I know what happens when an omega goes into heat. You're going to love it, so long as you have everything you need for your nest. When is your birthday?"

I think for a second. "Nine days."

She grimaces. "Not much time then. Your pre-heat will be intense the first time. Did your mom tell you about it?"

The question is so innocent that I don't think she meant to pry.

"Um, my mom was sort of out of the picture." That's easier than explaining that my mother locked me in a cellar every time her heat hit because she thought I wanted to sleep

with my fathers. That might be a bit too much for the first day we meet.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Well, don’t worry, I’m an expert.” She winks at me and leads me out of the house.

The men watch us walk across the patio, their conversation lulling. I glance over my shoulder to make sure they’re all okay. Melanie’s mates are staring at her like she hung the moon. My guys are not far off that mark. Nerves flutter in my stomach, and I try not to read too much into it. We’re pretending.

Well, Hayden isn’t. I know he likes me. The others? They’re all putting on a show so as not to raise suspicion. They’re doing a damn good job of it too. I almost believed the affection written across their features.

My silly, attention-starved heart doesn’t understand like my mind does. It beats a little faster, hoping that this is what we’ve been waiting for our whole lives.

Belonging.

Love.

Being cherished.

Now I understand why people say hearts can’t be trusted.

Chapter Twenty-Five

ASHER

Once Mom closes the door behind Whitney, my dads whistle all at once. Something they must have practiced because their timing and pitches all match. Jonathan is my biological father, but that doesn't mean I love the other men any less. It also doesn't mean they annoy me any less when they all turn toward me, waiting for an explanation.

"Really?" I ask, looking to Trev for support.

"Your family, dude."

"Chicken shit," I mutter, earning a soft pop on the back of the head from Tim.

He never liked cursing.

I rub the spot he swatted and glare at him. "You're lucky I don't kick your ass, old man."

"I'd like to see you try," he says with a smile. "Watch your language."

"I'm an adult," I point out.

"You know, if you were an adult, you wouldn't need to say that you were an adult."

"Tim"—I pinch the bridge of my nose—"you know what? I'm not even going to try and argue with your logic."

"Good, you'd lose."

Cody laughs. "So, tell us about your omega. She's sweet."

“If you count things dipped in bitters sweet,” Trev says under his breath.

Avi elbows him. “She’s nice. It’s not her fault you’re insufferable.”

“Melanie is feisty too, but that’s not a bad thing.” Jonathan slides his gaze toward the guest house. “You’ll come to love it.”

Trev presses his lips together.

“Yeah, so she’s really cool,” I say, trying to fill in the details of a story that doesn’t actually exist. “You know the Compatibility Ceremony is a lot, but as soon as I held Whitney in my arms, I didn’t want to let her go.” I think back to the night we danced together. I didn’t know she was an omega then, but I still didn’t want to let her go.

She was still addictive before I smelled her omega scent. The loose way she danced with me. The seductive smiles and sensual touches. I wanted to lose myself in her that night. Now that I found out she’s an omega, it only makes me want her more. She could be *it* for our pack.

If only things weren’t so complicated.

“Are you ready to give her what she needs when her heat comes?” Tim drums his fingers on his leg.

Honestly, I haven’t thought much about what Whitney might need. She was never supposed to stay with us longer than a day. Now she’s with us indefinitely. Trev is slowly warming up to her. He doesn’t think I notice the way he watches her, but every once in a while, his curious gaze wanders in her direction and it isn’t hard to know what he’s thinking. He’s got a complicated past, but he’s never had a hard time trusting the pack. We’ve known each other forever though.

We hardly know Whitney. I hope we can trust her. I hope she can trust us. Sometimes, the easiest thing to break is trust. I shake my head and listen to the last of what Avi is saying. He took over when I didn’t answer, and he has it under control.

“Where will Hayden go?” Cody asks.

That's another complication.

"I'll stay in the house," Hayden says, like it's simple.

"You'll be hard as a rock." Jonathan wrinkles his forehead.
"Are you sure that's a good idea?"

"Someone has to make sure they're all safe." Hayden shrugs. "I can handle the side effects."

I glance at Trev. When her heat comes, will Hayden be a part of it? There is something between them, and it wouldn't feel right to exclude him. Trev shakes his head slightly, telling me to forget about it.

I can't though. We need to make a plan so we don't end up fighting.

That is, if Whitney even wants us to help during her heat.

Chapter Twenty-Six

WHITNEY

The guest house is nice. Cozy. There are only two beds. Once the guys finally come in, I'm standing in the hallway, staring at the biggest room and chewing on my lip. This is going to be fun. There are five of us. Two people can fit on the other bed, but three people will have to stay on the bigger one. Common sense tells me to take the couch. I can't help wondering if Hayden will share a room with me. He made promises earlier, and I'm eager to see more of his dominant side.

"Yeaaaah." Asher stops beside me and glances between the rooms. "It's a little smaller than our house, but we'll make do. Trev can sleep on the couch."

"The fuck I will," the grumpy man says, grabbing a beer from the fridge.

My empty wine container sits on the counter. There wasn't nearly enough alcohol in the one drink. I sigh and turn from the rooms, bumping Asher's shoulder on purpose.

"Hey."

"Oh sorry, didn't see you there."

"Liar," he whispers, grabbing me around the waist and yanking me against his front. My muscles tighten, and I forget how to think for a full second. The room warps. Stains grow on the walls, threadbare carpet replaces the nice tile. Even the smells change. Tobacco, alcohol, and poison.

“Stupid. Fucking. WHORE.” Mother’s arms are like iron, pinning me against her as she drags me toward the cellar. Her pre-heat pheromones smell like acid, tainted with her fury.

“No. Stop! Let me go.” My pleas are pathetic and broken.

“Asher,” Trev barks.

His anger brings me back, but the memory rides me like a beast ready to sink its fangs into my skin. I flinch when he growls. I’m still trapped against Asher’s chest. A strangled sound leaves my mouth. My lungs seize as I struggle to breathe and fight off a flashback. Trev drops his bottle on the counter and storms toward us, his glare slicing through Asher, whose arms are still holding me hostage. Asher realizes his mistake. He releases me and moves back, giving me plenty of space and raising his hands to show he’s not a threat.

“I’m sorry.” Remorse coats his words like honey.

I try to open my mouth, try to tell him it’s okay. It’s not his fault. I’m the damaged one. I can’t say anything though. All I can do is suck in sharp breaths, hoping my lungs don’t burst from how hard I’m suddenly panting. Sweat pools on my lower back and my hands grow cold. My heart is hammering against my ribcage so hard I worry my bones will shatter.

Trev stops in front of me, a fierce presence that somehow keeps me from losing myself to a moment I’d rather not relive. He lifts his hand, slowly reaching toward me. His palm rests on my cheek. With the most understanding look in his eyes, he stares into my soul. Trev flips the pages of the diary I keep tucked away, scanning the contents with nothing but concern. There’s no pity. He’s worried, but he doesn’t feel sorry for me.

There’s the time Mother beat me in the kitchen, hitting me over and over again with a wooden spatula.

Another when she cornered me in the bathroom and shoved my head into the wall because I used her conditioner. At the time, we only had one bottle.

There’s so much more written in that journal of pain. So much I try to hide. Trev doesn’t know all the ways she tortured me. He can’t know everything that she’s done. But his face

darkens as if he does, eyes flashing with violence. The anger isn't directed at me. No. The look on Trev's face promises retribution. I grab his hand, leaning in to the touch. My tears coat his hand, but he doesn't care.

I suck in a shaky breath. "I'm okay."

"Who?"

"No," I say, holding his gaze.

He starts to speak again, but I pull his hand away. Turning his palm, he captures my hand to keep me from running. His face turns from angry to desperate. Trev is a natural born protector. It's not his job to protect me though.

"No." This time my answer is firm.

A deep rumbling builds in his chest. He doesn't like my defiance. That's too damn bad. I'm not going to tell him who or what happened. He already saw too much. They all did. I flick my gaze to the side. Hayden and Avi are standing side by side, equally displeased frowns on their faces.

I shake my head. "I'm not your charity case."

"Who the hell said you were?" This comes from Asher who is still behind me.

"You don't have to say it." I glance over my shoulder, hating how far away he is. He moved all the way down the hall, like he thought the extra distance would help erase the last few minutes.

"You're not our charity case," Hayden says.

He and Avi slowly walk toward where Trev and I stand. They're afraid I'll startle. I rub my hands over my face and groan.

Great. Now they're going to treat me like I'm porcelain.

"Just don't grab me from behind or pull my hair," I grouse, dropping my hands to my side. "I can't handle that."

"I'm sorry," Asher whispers.

“It’s fine.” I walk around the men and grab a beer from the fridge, using the bottle opener Trev left on the counter to open it.

“Melanie is so nice.” The four of them trade looks. I ignore them and keep talking. “Did you grow up in this house?”

Asher’s lips twitch into a frown but he quickly pulls it into a smile that doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Yeah. They made the guest house for Mom’s heats.” He makes a face, suddenly realizing this home has seen a lot of ass.

“Don’t worry, she reassured me this is all new furniture. She hasn’t nested out here since you moved out.” I pat his arm.

His eyes drop to the tile.

“Sanitizer,” I say with an eye roll.

“Can we talk about something else?” His voice goes a little high.

“Sure. Who’s going to get me dessert? I’m starving.” I lean against the counter and take a long drink.

“I’ll get it.” Avi stops next to the counter on his way out, ready to say something, but then he thinks better of it. He and I aren’t so different. I’ve freaked out twice while staying with these guys. Avi’s only had one flashback.

At least I excel at something.



I’m wide awake. Sometimes if a flashback is bad enough, I can sleep for days. Other times I can’t sleep because I’m afraid of the nightmares that might find me. Tonight is one of those nights. I count my inhaleds and exhaleds, trying to quiet my brain, but within a few minutes, my mind switches gears and tries to make me relive every horrible moment of my childhood.

Hayden and Avi are in the king bed with me. The nightlight in the plug illuminates the room with a soft golden

glow. Avi's snores are soft, not the annoying kind, and he's sleeping on his side. Hayden is on his back, his hand behind his head and his breathing steady. I roll over and stare at him. The stubble on his jaw has grown in; he's a few days past his last shave. I scoot a little closer to his warmth, wishing I'd thought to check the thermometer before going to bed. I was hot when I climbed in. I pushed the comforter off. The guys didn't seem to mind and are sleeping comfortably.

"Come here."

I stop breathing and look at him.

Did he say that or did I imagine it?

He moves his hand from behind his head and pulls me into his side. I hook my leg over his and wrap my arm around his middle. His shoulder is a little too high to be the ideal sleeping position, but I'll take a little discomfort over freezing my ass off. My calf rests near his crotch, and I shift a little, intentionally brushing against him.

"Trouble," he whispers.

I bite back a grin and wiggle again, this time rubbing my body against his side. The room fills with his scent. Thunderstorms and desire. Not as potent as an alpha, but still pleasant. I tip my head back, catching his gaze. I run my hand over his stomach and bite my lip as I feel him up, inching lower and lower. He hisses when I brush my fingers over his hardened length.

Hayden is thick and long, bigger than I've ever had, just the thought of him inside of me makes my pussy pulse with need. He sits and takes off his boxers and shirt, hardly moving so as not to wake Avi. Rolling onto his side, he grabs my ass and flips so he's on his back and I'm straddling him. I glance at Avi, but he's still fast asleep. My core clenches at the thought of getting caught, and I rub myself over his cock. He feels so good and there's still a thin layer of underwear between us.

"Take your shirt off," he whispers, tugging on the hem of it.

I sit and yank it off, grabbing the backs of his hands as he palms my tits. Squeezing and tugging, he toys with them until I get tired of waiting. I put my hands on either side of his head and lean forward to capture his lips. He turns his head, and I growl softly, earning a dark chuckle.

“So impatient,” he teases.

“Hayden.”

“Yes, trouble?”

“Don’t make me feel silly.”

He shakes his head and moves his hands to my ass, pushing his hips up so I can feel all of him. “That’s all for you.”

“Then kiss me.” I go for another kiss and he rolls over, flipping me onto my back and completely forgetting about our bedfellow.

Running his nose up my throat, he tsks. “I’ll let you kiss me once I’m sure you’re ready for me.” He hooks his fingers in my underwear, and I lift my hips to help him slide them off. Two fingers stroke through my folds and tease my clit. “If it weren’t for Avi, I’d draw this out, but I want to be inside of you before he wakes up.”

Pushing his digits inside of me, he swirls them and peppers my chest with kisses. He takes a nipple between his teeth and tugs. My back draws off the bed and he withdraws his fingers to trace my lips with my essence. I suck them into my mouth, lapping up the sweet taste and smiling when he moves into position. His thick head presses into me, stretching and readying me for his full girth.

“Fuck her already,” Avi mumbles.

I gasp when Hayden slams into me, turning my head to see Avi staring at where our bodies are joined. His lips pull up into a lazy grin, and he lifts his gaze to meet mine.

“How does it feel?”

Hayden grinds his hips into mine, letting me adjust to his size before pulling out and thrusting in again. I grab his hips

and hook my ankles around his legs to rock in time with his movements.

“Tell him.” Hayden pulls all the way out and I practically whine at the loss.

“Wonderful.” I reach for Hayden, wrapping my fingers around his shaft. “So big and warm.”

“I think she needs to be turned over,” Avi says to Hayden.

“Good idea. Come here, trouble.” Hayden grabs the backs of my legs and drags me down the bed, crawling backward until his feet hit the ground. “Are you okay with that?”

He’s worried I’ll freak out, but this is different. I’m horny as hell, and I know it’s coming.

“So long as you fuck me, I’m more than okay with it.”

They both laugh, and I roll over with Hayden’s help. He angles my hips up, taking the pillow Avi offers and placing it under me. I get comfortable on the bed, resting my forearms down and arching for Hayden.

“Such a good girl,” Avi praises, appealing to the broken part of me that never feels good enough.

“What about you?”

Avi smirks. “I’m going to watch you scream his name.” He stands and takes off his boxers, dropping back onto the bed and lazily pumping his fist over himself.

“If it’s too much, let me know.” Hayden grabs my hips and lines up with my core.

“What if I want—” I cut off in a moan when Hayden thrusts in.

“Hard and fast,” Avi says, licking his lips and staring at my face. “Break her.”

A little tremor of fear works through me but it quickly flees when Hayden fucks me from behind like he’s trying to break the bed. His skin slaps against mine, and his cock destroys me in the best way.

“I want to spank you. Is that okay?” he asks.

I nod. “Yeah.”

“Good girl,” he says seconds before a sharp sting of pain shoots through me.

I cry out in pleasure, pushing my hips back. Hayden smacks my ass again before resuming his hard thrusts. Fisting the comforter in my hands, I watch Avi jack off while his friend fucks me. Hayden hits a spot deep inside of me, and I nod my head.

“Right there,” I pant.

“Just like that?” he asks, hitting the same place again.

“Yesss.”

“You’re taking my dick so good, trouble.”

I pant and cling to the bed, completely letting go so I can enjoy what Hayden is giving me. The best damn orgasm of my life. It starts slowly, friction and warmth and a tingle of pleasure. Then it builds, drawing to a slow crest until the sensations are almost too much to handle. I press my forehead into the sheet and pull on the blanket, trying not to beg him for release. Hayden’s palm cracks over my ass again, shoving me off the ledge. I moan and gasp his name, squirting all over him as stars burst across my vision and my lungs seize.

“Damn, that was hot,” Avi rasps from where he sits.

Rolling my head to the side, I smile and laugh as Hayden starts to slow his pace. He hasn’t come yet.

“Come on.” He pats my ass, but I refuse to move.

“Just leave me here to die.”

He laughs. “You’re not done yet.” Pulling out of me, he carefully picks me up around the waist and drops me on the middle of the bed. I get on my hands and knees and crawl toward Avi, swatting his hand away from his shaft.

“I think I can help you.” I wrap my lips around his tip and suck, earning a deep moan of pleasure from him. I’ve never been with an alpha, but in class I learned they only knot when

they're inside of an omega. I can safely give him head without worrying about my throat being ripped apart. Thank fuck for that because his skin is silky soft and I love how he's already looking at me like I hung the moon.

Hayden grabs my hips and moves me until he finds a comfortable position. This time when he pushes into me, it's gentle and slow. I take Avi fully into my mouth. He gathers my hair and holds it back to watch me blow him. Gazing up at him, I slowly slide my mouth all the way up and come off of him with a small popping sound. I've never done this before. I lick from the base of his cock all the way up, loving the way his teeth dig into his bottom lip when I take him into my mouth again and start mouth fucking him like I mean it. My technique isn't the greatest, but he doesn't seem to mind. Hayden pumps into me a little faster, careful not to go too hard so I can keep doing what I'm doing to Avi.

"I'm going to come," Avi says, trying to move out from under me.

I hum in approval and try to take him deeper into my mouth. Hayden's thrusts become frantic, and I hum again, bobbing my head faster and faster as Avi's dick starts to pulse and twitch in my mouth. Salty cum hits the back of my throat, and I swallow, taking it all in.

"Fuck," Hayden grunts, thrusting into me one final time before pulling out and coming all over my back.

I finish swallowing and wipe my mouth, resting my cheek on Avi's hip. "I have an implant."

"Probably should have discussed that first," Hayden says, wiping off my back with his boxers.

"That was amazing." I kiss Avi's hip before moving to lie next to him. "Did I do okay?" He knows it was my first time doing that.

Avi rolls over and kisses me. His tongue swirls over mine. "You did so well," he murmurs against my lips.

Hayden drops on my other side and snuggles in, holding me. It's strange that I don't hate cuddling. Usually this is a big

turn off, but I'm so tired it just feels right. I wrap my arm around Avi's chest and he rubs it, releasing a heavy sigh.

"Trev is going to be pissed." Hayden doesn't seem to care.

"Let him be mad. This was amazing." Avi kisses my forehead. "You were perfect."

"You're only saying that because I gave you head."

He shakes his head. "No. You are perfect."

"I'm so tired." I fake a yawn to change the subject.

"Sleep." They both speak at the same time.

So I do.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

WHITNEY

Monday arrives in the form of hot bodies pressing in on mine and two boners. I bite back a grin and glance at Hayden and Avi. They're still sleeping, oblivious to how they've come a little closer and are poking me with their morning wood. Avi's longer black hair is disheveled and his mouth is slightly parted; an ungraceful snore slips past his lips. At least it's not the obnoxiously loud kind.

"Wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey." Asher opens the door, eyes wide with mischief as he takes a deep breath. "I knew I smelled something very omega last night."

"Bro." Hayden scrubs his face with his hands as he sits. "You're the biggest boner killer in the world."

"Hmm, I don't know, I'm still a little hard," Avi mumbles, ruffling my hair.

I pull the blanket over my head and groan. "Kill me now."

"Trev might—oh hey, speak of the devil and he will appear."

Silence fills the air, and I burrow further into the blanket, hiding from his reaction.

"You don't know how to stay out of trouble, do you?"

I bristle and shove the fabric away, ready to tell him to fuck off, but he's looking at Hayden.

"Are you going to tell?" Hayden raises an eyebrow.

“Of course not, but that’s not the point.” Trev swings his gaze to mine. “This is dangerous.”

“More dangerous than hiding me from the Omega Council?”

He scowls. “Next time, I’ll give you up.”

“You’re acting like a child.”

“No more than you. I told you what would happen to Hayden, and you still don’t give a fuck, do you? Do you get off on the idea of his life being ruined? Is that it? Make you feel important?”

“It’s not like that. I like him.” I glance at Hayden, desperate for him to understand it’s not a game to me.

He nods and rubs my leg.

“You don’t care about him. How could you? You barely fucking know him.”

“He’s a good person,” I growl, body shaking with anger.

“Or maybe you’re so desperate to fill that hole inside of you you’ll risk his life to make yourself feel better.”

“Screw you.” I sit and smack the top of the bed.

“Trev,” Avi barks, but Trev ignores him.

I’m so angry the shout doesn’t faze me.

“Is that what you want?” Trev reaches for his belt buckle and undoes it with a flick of his hand, a practiced move that would be impressive if we weren’t fighting. “Maybe a little more dick will put you in line.”

Asher shoves his chest hard enough to make Trev stumble. “You’re being a fucking asshole, Trev. It’s not like Whitney forced herself on Hayden.”

“She didn’t,” Hayden confirms. “Don’t insult her.”

“We’re not going to tell anyone about this.” Avi sits and wraps his hand around my waist. “And you owe her an apology.”

Fuming, the alpha grinds his jaw as his friends race to my rescue. I hate the discord and the fact that some of what he says is true; having sex with Hayden was, and is dangerous. If the Royal Council found out, they'd make his life hell. Trev and I glare at each other. Both of our chests are heaving from the anger we're holding on to. For a second, I recognize the fire in his eyes. The fight he can't let go of because he ran from confrontation for too long, and now he'll charge head on into a fight before thinking any better of it. I smirk and shake my head.

"You think I'm the childish one?"

"Yeah, I do." His chest puffs a little.

"At least I know I'm fucked up. You act like you're fine, but I see you, Trev. That little whisper of rage in your ear? I've heard that." Unease flashes across his face. I laugh and rise to my knees, letting the blankets fall away. The shirt I stole from Avi in the middle of the night barely covers my ass, but it's long enough that I don't feel exposed. I've worn dresses this short. "You're not better than me. You're exactly like me."

"The fuck I am." He growls and storms out of the room.

I catapult over Avi's legs and follow him, unable to let it go now that he started in. Trev wants to throw words? Well, I learned from the master and I'll be damned if he makes me feel inadequate.

"Oh now we're done talking? You want to tear me down, but the second I do it back, you run?" I hear the guys enter the hallway behind us, but no one tries to stop me. "Too scared I might call it like it is?"

He whirls around and storms toward me. His anger is like coming home. A chaos I'm familiar with. Havoc I can breathe in like air.

"What is it with you? Huh?" he asks, voice quiet but angry. He stops an inch from me, but I refuse to move.

This man wants to scare me, but he's too considerate to use my triggers against me. I kind of hate that. It would be easier

to dislike him if he stooped that low. But no, Trev simply towers over me and lets his size do the intimidating.

“You’ll have to be more specific.” I narrow my eyes and inch closer.

He takes a step back to keep from touching me. “You’re going to ruin us.”

Those words smack me in the face hard enough I drop my gaze and lose some of my fight.

“I’m not trying to.”

“That’s just it,” he whispers. “You don’t even realize the power you hold.”

With that, he turns and leaves. The front door bangs closed behind him, and my emotions war inside me. Is he right? The men behind me were willing to stand up to him on my behalf. They chose me over him.

For an alpha who isn’t used to that sort of rejection, that has to hurt. I suck in a hard breath and pick my head up. Trev is scared. There’s something in his past I don’t know about, and while that won’t excuse his actions, it explains the outburst. I know better than anyone what the past can do to your emotions. His job is to protect his pack, and I’m already fucking their lives up. They can’t hide me anymore.

No matter how much I enjoyed my time with them, despite being somewhat of a prisoner, Trev is right. I don’t know them.

Tonight, I’ll leave them for good.



I don’t have a lot of time to plan since the guys have the day off. Trev doesn’t come back until after breakfast. He sets four grocery bags on the counter and looks at me. I grab the cup I’d been reaching for in the cabinet and gently close the door. Resting my hip on the counter, I watch him sort through the items.

Asher is in the living room, and he looks at me, lifting his eyebrows to ask me if I need him. I shake my head and roll the cup between my hands. I clear my throat.

“I’m sorry for fighting with you and putting the pack in danger.”

Trev’s hands pause inside of a bag, shoulders unbunching. “It’s fine.”

Right. Guess I don’t get an apology. You know what’s shitty? Working so hard to recognize your faults and then dealing with people who make you wonder why you even try to make yourself better. I fill my glass with water from the fridge and press my lips together to keep from saying something rude. I’m not as mad as I was earlier. I can keep myself in check.

“I’m sorry too.”

I turn around. He’s no longer unloading groceries. Trev’s arms are crossed over his chest and he’s leaning against the counter, eyes on the floor.

“I was being an asshole.”

At least he can admit it.

“So... friends?” I stick my hand out.

He eyes it, face twisting with discomfort. “We’re good.” He shakes my hand, holding it longer than necessary. “Don’t hurt them.”

“I won’t.” Not after tonight anyway.

It’s a little vain to think they’d cry over losing me, but it’s a nice thought. To be so wanted. I hate that I let myself fall into this situation. I know I have attachment issues. I know better than to let my guard down. I’m too messed up to be the omega this pack needs. They deserve better. That much I do know.

Trev drops my hand but searches my face, as if sensing something is off. I smile and take a drink of water. I point to the groceries. “I’ll make dinner.”

“Okay,” he says, furrowing his brow. “I am sorry.”

“I know. Me too.” I set the cup down and help put away the groceries, distracting him from worrying about me. Avi and Hayden come through the front door, faces red from their run. I grab two cups and fill them with water and hand them to the guys. They both gulp them down. Avi looks fine, but Hayden not so much.

“How was it?”

“I hate running,” Hayden mumbles, dropping the glass on the counter. “I need a shower.”

Avi slides his gaze toward his friend. “You’re out of shape.”

“I don’t see how that’s possible, I’m literally a shape.” I giggle, and Hayden winks at me. “Besides, I don’t have as much time to run as you do.” Hayden heads down the hall for his shower.

“That’s not an excuse. When’s the next fitness test?”

Trev gathers the bags and puts them in the cabinet beneath the sink. “A few months. You know that doesn’t really matter though, right?”

“It should,” Avi says. “How can you count on him to save lives if he bitches about running after the first mile?”

“When the time comes, he can handle himself. He may not have endurance, but he’s strong.”

“I don’t know,” I muse. “He seemed to do just fine last night.”

Asher snorts. “Sex is totally different.”

“When was the last time any of you had to run more than a mile to save someone?” I drum my fingers on the countertop. No one answers. “Right, so why does he need to be in better shape?”

“So I can enjoy my run without listening to him complain like a baby.” Avi refills his glass and nudges me with his elbow. “Maybe you’ll come with me next time.”

“Don’t count on it.” I may be restless, but I’m not *that* desperate for something to do. “I’ll stick with my yoga.”

“Speaking of... when are you starting?” Asher turns on the TV and stands, stretching his arms over his head. “I need to limber up.”

I want to ask why, but I think I know the reason. “Let me change and find a video.”

“I’ll get Melanie’s yoga mats.”

Normally I do it on the carpet since I could never afford a nice mat, but I won’t say no to proper equipment.

“Thanks.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

HAYDEN

My cock jerks to life when Whitney moves into downward dog, her perky ass rising into the air and taunting me. I watch her flow through to a chaturanga. She's stronger than she looks, and Asher is a hell of a lot more flexible than I thought. I'd join them to stretch out my legs, but the view is too damn beautiful to pass up.

"Can I talk to you?" Trev appears at my side.

I let my gaze linger on Whitney, taking in the slight flush of her chest and the way her breaths come in soft pants. I thought yoga was supposed to be relaxing.

"Yeah," I finally say, pulling my eyes from the temptation in the living room.

Trev leads me outside and we sit on the patio furniture in Melanie's backyard. I cross my ankle over my leg and lean back, waiting for him to lecture me. He's staring at the guest house.

"Do you like her?"

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

He glances at me. "You're already so defensive."

"It's kind of hard not to be. You made it clear you don't like this."

"You understand why though, right? It's nothing to do with you being a beta, at least not for me. You'll end up in more trouble than it's worth."

“How do you know the trouble isn’t worth it?”

He presses his lips together and looks at his hands. “What happens when she mates with Avi or Asher? Will you still feel the same without that bond?”

I notice he doesn’t include himself. Does he really think the pack would mate an omega without him involved?

“The pack will decide what’s best when the time comes.”

“The best thing for us is to not let her stay.” Trev clenches his jaw.

“We’re not—”

He holds up his hand. “Let me finish. That’s the smart thing, and you know it. Our lives would be less complicated. We wouldn’t be breaking laws.” He rubs his hand over his jaw. “She can destroy our lives.”

“She won’t.”

“I hope not.” He holds my gaze. “I don’t want to give her up either. I’m scared of what happens when this situation implodes. What will be left of the pack?”

Trev’s always held too much responsibility on his shoulders. He’s the de facto leader and we all let him take charge. It made the most sense and Asher and Avi had no interest in being the head of the pack. Pack Cocker wouldn’t be the same without him.

“What would your dad tell you to do?” I ask, knowing it’ll make him a little upset.

Trev’s dad is a total asshole.

“He’d tell me to leave the bitch on the curb.” Trev lowers his eyebrows as if to ask *where are you going with this?*

“Right, but he wouldn’t ask you what the pack wanted, would he?”

He shakes his head.

“So why don’t you ask the pack?”

Sighing, he sits back. “I don’t have to.”

“Maybe not, but isn’t it a discussion worth having? If she stays with us through her heat, we all need to be on the same page. Is she going to be Pack Cocker’s omega or not?”

“She hates me.”

“No, she hates how you talk to her. Try treating her like a friend rather than an enemy.”

“I hate when you’re right,” he grumbles.

“We may like her, but we won’t pick her over you. We shouldn’t have to. If it’s meant to be, we’ll find a way to make it work.”

“You’re not worried about the mate bond?”

“No.” I’m not. I still plan on biting her, if only to leave my mark.

“I don’t want you to get hurt.”

I grin at him. “And that’s why you’re a great alpha.”

“I hate praise,” he says, looking away. “All right. I’ll talk to them later. I assume you want her to be the omega?”

“Yeah. What about you?”

He shrugs. “Don’t worry about me.”

Doing the opposite of what he just said, I watch him walk back into the house. I do worry about him. Trev is always worried about everyone else. He’d like Whitney, and if he’d get over his beef with her, they might actually become close. They’re a lot alike. Stubborn and hotheaded and lacking love.



TREV

After a few hours in the house and scheduling a contractor to fix the damage Curtis did to our real home, I go out for a run. I don’t like running partners. It’s better to be alone with my thoughts. Melanie’s neighborhood is fairly big. I set off toward the west to hit the road that makes a big loop through

the homes. Rock music blares in my ears, but it's not enough to distract my mind. Like it has for the last few days, my brain focuses on one thing: Whitney.

Hayden was so nonchalant about the situation. He's caught feelings, and I don't think he fully understands what it'll mean if she becomes the pack's mate. The bond is a tangible thing. My dad made sure I knew how much his bond with my mother meant and how much he hated the fact that she left him. I was five when she fled his physical abuse. He never raised a hand to me, but some wounds are below the surface. Whitney reminds me of myself, only more damaged. I grind my jaw when her terrified face flashes through my head.

She hasn't said who hurt her, but the more I'm around her and the more I witness how deep that abuse went, the more I want to destroy whoever did it to her. I know some of that protective instinct comes from never being able to protect my mother. If I were big enough, I would have killed my dad for hitting her.

I wasn't though.

For a long time, I was so mad at her. How could she leave me? Then as time went on and I began to understand the only way for her to truly escape him was to leave society—to live with those who have been shunned and live off the land—I forgave her. She didn't want to put me through that. At five, I would have been in danger. She had to have known he wouldn't physically hurt me, otherwise I don't think she would have left.

Who am I kidding?

All I remember is the way she smiled and smelled. Her grin was like a ray of sunshine, and she smelled like cookies and love. Her hugs felt like home. It's ironic she went to live off the land, but I'm the one who's felt homeless since she left.

The rest of dad's pack died in a tragic car crash before I was born, leaving my pregnant mom and dad behind. I was always curious to know if they were as big of assholes as him, but he refused to talk about them. The only time he deigned to speak to me was to tear me down. As soon as I turned

eighteen, I moved out and left him to live out the rest of his miserable life alone.

Once I graduated from the academy, he tried to call me. I never answered. There's nothing left for me there, only pain and misery. I kick up my pace, outrunning the past. Outrunning the memory of my dad telling me how pathetic I was.

The crazy thing about all of this is I want to save Whitney. I know she'll be safe with my pack. I know she'll never have to fear being hit again. I have been a total dick, but I hope she'll forgive me. I'll find a time to talk to her and explain why I was so harsh with her.

I can only hope that I'm not too late.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

WHITNEY

There are enough ingredients to make fried chicken. I start making dinner around five. I'm in the middle of cracking eggs into a shallow bowl when Trev comes into the kitchen. The other guys are out helping Melanie's mates install a pergola in the middle of the yard so she can have a rocking chair under it. They've been at it for a few hours now, and once the cursing started, I promptly removed myself from the area. Sometimes men get so angry about building things.

"Do you need help?" Trev asks.

I toss the egg shells and wash my hands, eyeing him. He's not as sweaty as I'd expect, and he's looking rather hopeful.

"You can peel the potatoes and then start on the corn."

"Okay." He grabs a peeler from a drawer and sets to work.

I return to my side of the counter and mix up the dry batter. A little flour and panko bread crumbs. We only ever had flour growing up, but sometimes Granny would make dinner for me and she always used panko.

"Would you rather have white wine or red wine for the rest of your life?" Trev asks suddenly.

"Uh, red." I've only had some cheap wine, but the white is usually overly sweet, like a juice box.

"Hm. No chardonnay?"

"I've never had it," I confess, grabbing the chicken from the fridge.

“I usually drink beer, but on hot summer nights a nice cold glass of chardonnay is amazing.”

“Okay.” I try not to sound rude, but I’m a little thrown by his sudden change. I don’t want him to go back to being an asshole, but at least I know what to expect with that version of Trev.

Laying the chicken out on the cutting board, I butterfly the breasts and cut them into smaller chunks. I set the knife down and frown a little. I don’t remember being taught to make this. But somehow, I know how. I’ve made more than enough to have it down. I pinch my eyebrows together and wash my hands again before seasoning the chicken with salt and pepper.

I’m used to missing memories. I remind myself my entire childhood was a shit show and there’s no reason to try and figure out why this particular piece is blank. It’s never good when I dive down into those moments that my mind has locked away.

“Mountains or the ocean?”

“Both,” I say absentmindedly. It’s too early to start the chicken. I grab a big pot and fill it with water, standing next to Trev, who is busy peeling the last potato.

“Good choice. Never been?”

I shake my head.

“I think I like the mountains better. I’ve only seen the ocean once, but the water was freezing and it was too windy.”

Is he trying to make me feel bad? Maybe this is a game called: *tell the poor omega everything she’s missed out on.*

“Summer or winter?”

I jerk the faucet to the off position and level him with a look. “What are you doing?”

The potato almost slips from his hand, but he catches it. “Making conversation...” He trails off awkwardly.

“Why?”

“Do you want me to be rude?”

“No, this is just different.”

“Well, I’m trying to make up for being a jerk.” He gives me a devastating grin. “I was a grade-A asshole.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, you were.”

“Ouch.” He finishes peeling the potatoes and starts chopping them. I move closer to him so he can drop them into the water.

“I was kind of a jerk too,” I whisper.

“Only a little, but it was warranted.” He scoops up a handful of potato slices and pauses. “You know it’s easier if you put them in before the water.”

“It’s already full.”

“But if you dumped it—you know what, never mind. This is fine.”

Oh, is he stopping himself from micromanaging me?

“Such progress you’ve made.”

“Shut up,” he mutters, plopping the potatoes in so they splash me.

“Hey.”

“I tried to tell you.” He drops another handful, and I growl, but he only smirks and releases another round.

“You’re a pain in the ass.”

“Right back atcha, darling.”

I roll my eyes and carry the pot to the stove, turning the burner on high. He grabs the frozen corn and a bowl, but I stop him.

“You have green onions and garlic. Let’s sauté those and cook the corn in the pan.”

“That actually sounds good.” He leans against the counter while I chop the green onions.

“Who taught you how to cook?”

I stiffen, but recover before he can notice. “Uh, I guess my mom.”

“Did you guys bake cookies and stuff together too?”

“Not exactly.” The words come out bitter and coated with disdain.

“Oh.”

Out of my peripheral, I watch him rub the back of his neck. Me and my trauma make great company, I know.

“My Granny and I baked together,” I say, giving him something to work with. “She made the best mini-chocolate chip cookies.”

“I made holiday cookies with my mom once.”

“Only once? What did you do, burn them?” I waggle my eyebrows at him, but realize he’s not smiling. “Oh God. Did she die?”

“No.” He presses his lips together.

“You don’t have to tell me. I get it.”

He shakes his head. “No, it’s okay. She left me when I was five.”

Oh wow.

What would make an omega leave her child? That’s a dumb question. What would make an omega beat her child? I don’t know why I’m surprised there are more shitty mothers out there.

“Do you know why?” I turn the burner under the cast iron on low and pour a thin layer of oil into the pan.

“Never really had the chance to ask her, but I know it’s because of my dad.”

I glance at him, waiting for him to fill in the blanks. It would be rude to continue prying if he doesn’t want to share that much of his life.

“He would hit her.”

Sucking in a sharp breath, I put my hand over my chest. “You saw him do it?”

He nods, and my heart aches for the man. No child should ever have to see that.

“I’m so sorry.”

“You didn’t do anything.” He lifts a shoulder like it’s not a big deal.

“She left you with him? Did he hurt you?” I can’t help the flare of anger in my voice. Shitty parents can get fucked.

“He didn’t hit me.”

But his father did hurt him in other ways. Emotional and verbal abuse isn’t any better. Sometimes people like to brush that sort of hurt under the rug—*so his father was a little mean*—but those people either haven’t dealt with their own trauma, or will never understand what it’s like to have the person who is supposed to love you unconditionally intentionally wound you.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I check the water on the potatoes. Still not boiling.

“Do you?”

I think he meant to deter me, but it only seems fair to give him a little of my history, since what he shared was so personal. He didn’t ask me for the information. I’m a little more open with the thought of sharing.

“My mom used to hit me.”

His face remains blank, but his eyes squint a little, a hint of anger burning in their depths. I kind of like that he’s mad on my behalf. He doesn’t say anything.

“A lot, actually.” I laugh and face the stove, even though I’m not doing anything. I can’t look at him while I tell him this. “When her heat would come, she would lock me in the cellar.”

“The whole time?” he practically growls the question.

I chance a glance at him. “Twice a year for five whole days. There was food and water.”

He scoffs. “That doesn’t make that shit okay, Whitney.”

“I know.” I swallow and look away. “I know that now. For a long time I thought I was bad and deserved it.”

“You didn’t.”

“Neither did you.” I blink and take a deep breath. “Homemade macaroni or boxed?”

“Boxed is disgusting.”

“Hear, hear.” I laugh and we fall back into a lighter conversation of would you rather. Neither of us wanting to go back into the heavier details of why we’re so fucked up. I do understand him a little better now, and it’s nice to know I’m not the only one in the house with a crappy family.

The truce between us won’t change my mind. I’m still leaving so the pack can live a life they deserve.



Midnight arrives and I sit in the bed, glancing at the men. Hayden and Avi are asleep. I get up and use the restroom, waiting to see if anyone stirs. The door to the bedroom Trev and Asher are sharing is firmly shut. I wait a full five minutes before grabbing the backpack from the bedroom. I packed earlier while the guys were busy watching a basketball game. I only had a short amount of time to get it ready without them suspecting anything. I packed one change of clothes and made sure the key Granny gave me was securely nestled at the bottom. Grabbing Hayden’s phone, I slip out of the bedroom and move toward the front door. The floors don’t creak—I checked earlier. I only have to get out of the front door and hop the fence in the backyard.

The lock makes a soft snick when I undo it and I pause, heart hammering. Blood rushes through my ears as I wait for someone to rush out of the bedroom and catch me. No one comes. I release a soft sigh and ease the door open, carefully

closing it and making sure the knob lock is engaged. Melanie's house is dark, but she left on the light in the small courtyard. Her new pergola is constructed, but the rocking chair is still boxed up. I eye her windows, making sure no one is watching, before moving to the fence. It's a short chain link and I hop it easily enough; years of running around with Lindsey taught me a few things.

I walk down the alley, going a few blocks before unlocking Hayden's phone. The facial recognition gives me a hard time, but I watched him type in the passcode after dinner.

2222.

Why a cop would have such an easy code is beyond me, but it works in my favor. I dial Lindsey's number. It rings four times before she answers. I check the street from the edge of the alley. I'm lucky this isn't a neighborhood that likes to party. The streetlamp is the only thing on, lighting my little pocket of night.

"Hello?" Music blares in the background, and I hear people shouting and laughing. She must be at a party.

"Lindsey." I breathe a sigh of relief. "I need help."

"Whitney?"

"Yeah. Can you come get me?"

She pauses. A familiar song is playing, bass thumping in time with my heart.

"Lindsey?"

"I'm at a party, Whit."

"I know, but I really need you. I promise I'll explain everything."

She huffs. "You didn't even call me, you know? I lost my whole stash and you didn't even apologize. What kind of friend does that?"

The audacity of this bitch. I didn't call her? Excuse me for being auctioned off to a douchebag. I don't say all of the

things I want to, since I still need her help, but anger starts to simmer in my gut.

“I’m sorry, you’re right. Will you come get me? I can text you the address.”

A guy talks to her, and she answers him, leaving me hanging with nothing but the dance music to keep me company. I grip the phone in my hand, grinding my teeth together to keep from bitching her out.

“I’m a little busy right now.”

“Lindsey, please. I’ll make you breakfast.”

“Bye, girl, talk to you later.” She disconnects the call.

I hold the device to my ear, blinking and trying to process what the hell happened. She’s mad at me? For what? I’ve never done anything to her but be a friend, albeit a bit distant. But that’s how we work. We’ve been friends for almost our entire lives.

What the fuck?

The phone makes a satisfying crack when it connects with the gravel, the screen shattering with the force of my throw. I growl and kick it, instantly regretting destroying Hayden’s property.

“So, the plan didn’t work?”

I squeal and whirl around. Trev is wearing joggers and a hoodie. His hands are inside the sweater’s pocket, and he stares at me with guarded eyes.

“What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same thing. Where do you plan to go?” He takes a few steps forward, standing next to me near the edge of the alley.

“Anywhere,” I say with a shrug.

“What about the Omega Council?”

“I’ll figure it out.”

“You can stay with us.” His gaze trails over me, inspecting for injuries.

“It’s not safe.” I hold on to the straps of my backpack and look around again. The longer we stay in one spot, the more likely it is someone will come across us.

“Going out on your own isn’t safe. Stay with us.”

“You don’t even like me,” I say with a laugh. “Shouldn’t you be happy?”

“I’m sorry for making you feel that way. I like you. I like that you make Avi smile, like he used to before the shooting. I like that you treat Hayden like he’s just as important as the rest of us. I like that you and Asher share the same sense of humor.”

“That sounds like you’re worried about everyone else but yourself.”

“Don’t worry about me.” He sighs. “Whitney, don’t make me beg you.”

Studying his face, I chew on my cheek. “I don’t want to hurt them.”

“Leaving would hurt them. If you stay, we’ll do everything we can to protect you.”

“Why?”

He steps closer and grabs my hand. “Because, I’ve started to realize that you’re pack. The thought of anyone hurting you makes me want to tear the world apart.” Slowly lifting my wrist to his mouth, he watches me for any sign of protest. “We’ll figure out the complicated parts later. Deal?”

I’m so shocked by the offer that I don’t know how to react. My heart skips, anxious to belong. My mind is unsure, but I simply watch as he places his lips on my skin. He doesn’t mark me. Trev is waiting for permission. That alone is enough to make me want to be in his pack. These guys are the men I dreamed of while locked in the cellar. A pack who would take care of me. A pack who could save me from my family. Am I ready to be part of their pack?

Trev traces his teeth over my skin, teasing me with the prospect of what he's offering. I shiver and swallow the lump in my throat.

“Okay.”

He bites me before I even finish the word. A sharp sting of pain is accompanied by an invisible thread that connects the two of us together. It's not a mate bite—those are only given during sex—but it's a promise.

One I'm terrified he'll break.

Trev kisses my arm before tugging me against his body. His arms envelop me, and he holds me like I'm preparing to break. It isn't until he says, “Welcome to the pack,” that I realize I'm crying.

Chapter Thirty

WHITNEY

The walk back to the house is surprisingly pleasant. Trev keeps his arm around my shoulder, and I find it easy to lean into his side, not because I need the support, but because I relish the safety. I crave the protection he's giving me. Those desires come from a lifetime of being in unstable environments. This is the first time, outside of going to Granny's, that I know nothing bad will happen. At least not tonight.

"What about the Omega Council?" I ask.

"We'll find a way to make it work. For the time being, they have no idea where you are. You having the tracker removed actually works in our favor."

"Maybe this isn't the smartest idea."

Trev chuckles. "A little late for regrets, Whit."

I nudge his side. "Don't give me shit for worrying about you guys. Everything you said was right, you know? I am a danger to you all. You probably should have let me leave."

"Maybe, but it's too late now." Tugging me closer, he kisses the side of my head. "Besides, I like that you worry about us."

He's changed a lot in the last twenty-four hours. My heart is hopeful that it's genuine and he's not going to flip a switch and become a monster. We hop the fence to get into the backyard. I land on my feet and stare at the guys who are all waiting with crossed arms and scowls.

“Oh hi. Nice night for a stroll.”

“They all know you tried to run.” Trev grabs the backpack off my back. “Come inside and we can have a conversation.”

“How very adult of you,” Asher says to Trev. He keeps his gaze on me. “I have half a mind to spank her for being naughty, but I don’t know if she’d like it.”

“If you do it right, she’ll love it.”

I widen my eyes. “Hayden!”

“I can think of a few ways to teach her not to leave,” Avi says with a smirk.

“Come on.” Trev’s soft bark spurs me into action.

My feet move at his command and I growl a warning. “Don’t you start pulling that shit.”

“I only want everyone inside. I’m tired.”

Glaring at his back, I march behind him and the guys fall in behind me. Once the door is shut, Hayden captures my lips and gives me a tender kiss.

“Where were you going to go?” His gray eyes drill into me.

“I don’t know,” I confess.

“Don’t do that again, okay? You’ll break my heart.”

Laughing, I pat his chest and glance away. “It’s a little early for that.”

“Maybe for you. I fall fast and hard.”

“Wow.” My forehead wrinkles, and I try to figure out what to say, but he suddenly stiffens and leans in, sniffing me.

“You smell... different.” He glances over my shoulder at Trev who is casually leaning against a wall.

“She’s pack. Our omega.”

That declaration sends a jolt of surprise and warmth through me.

“You didn’t,” Asher says.

“I think he did,” Avi replies.

“She’s pack?” Hayden asks.

“Normally you guys are quicker than this.” Trev huffs, and I chuckle, shaking my head.

“He offered and I accepted. Are you okay with that?” I glance at all of them, trying to gauge their reactions.

“Are we okay?” Hayden’s incredulous tone almost makes me laugh again. Only his hands tightening on my arm keep me from giggling. I’m the most worried about how he’ll take the news.

“She’s insane,” Asher mumbles.

“Completely delusional if she thinks we’re not okay with it,” Avi agrees.

“You guys are freaking me out.” I look over my shoulder at Trev.

He shrugs. “They’re your pack now. Too late to ask for a refund.”

“I don’t want a refund,” I grumble, turning back to the guys. “So... I’m pack.”

Hayden’s lips crash into mine, and his hands cup my face. His tongue traces the seam of my mouth, and I open to him, letting him claim me in front of all of them. Trev would have never let me in the pack if he wasn’t okay with this on some level, but I still want to make sure Hayden and I can continue exploring our relationship. He grabs my wrist and breaks away from our kiss, gasping for air and kissing the mark Trev left behind.

“May I?”

A blush crawls up my neck. “This is so awkward.”

“I need you to say yes.” He’s not smiling. The guys are all silent, also waiting for my decision.

I’m not used to this sort of power over my life. It’s strange, but I love it.

“Bite me already,” I urge, helping my wrist meet his mouth.

His bite doesn't hurt as much as Trev's, since I know what to expect. My heart pounds and my chest grows tight; a sudden spike of panic tries to take over, but I slowly breathe in and out. This is my choice. They're not like Curtis, or my parents. These guys are good. Still, I end up counting the number of tiles immediately surrounding me to cope with the sudden bout of anxiety.

Hayden kisses my wrist and lifts his gaze to meet mine. “Welcome to the pack.”

Asher nudges Hayden out of the way and saves me from having to respond.

“Don't think I've forgotten about the spanks.” He slowly leans in, making his intentions to kiss me super clear. I hate that they're so worried about freaking me out, but I like how gentle they're being right now. Asher teases my lips with his and breathes me in, groaning before pressing his mouth against mine. “Maybe we can sneak out to a club and finish what we started,” he whispers while kissing me.

“She's not going anywhere.” Trev shatters the sinfully dirty image I'd been building in my mind.

Party pooper.

Asher takes my wrist in his hand and raises it to his lips, pausing to wait for my nod before he marks me as well. My entire body heats, from the ever-growing bond or from the intensity of the moment, I'm not sure, but his bite feels as right as Trev's and Hayden's did. My stomach doesn't turn in warning. My heart beats a little faster and a silly grin splits my face. What I thought was a panic attack is actually excitement. The emotion is heady and intense, almost enough to make me feel buzzed.

“You're ours now.” Asher kisses me again, a little rougher and a smidge desperate compared to the last one. “I've been thinking about you since that night,” he confesses for only me to hear.

My smile grows, and he steps aside so Avi can claim me too. He's more controlled than Hayden and Asher, but his eyes sparkle with excitement, and his boyish grin is heartbreakingly sweet.

"You belong with us, you know that, right?"

I hesitate to agree. Part of me doesn't feel good enough for these guys. They're all so good. I've only ever been trouble and bad.

"Those are your demons speaking."

How is it that I never have to say anything, but he knows exactly the demons I'm battling?

"They're so loud." I hold his gaze, his kind brown eyes making me realize my self-doubt is my worst enemy. I won't let it take more away from this moment than it already has. "I belong." My voice is soft and the words come out as more of a question than a statement.

Avi nods. "You do."

"So do you." I reach for him and go on my toes, taking control of this kiss. Avi needs as much reassurance as I do.

His hands grip my hips, and he lazily sweeps his tongue over mine, caressing and savoring me until my core throbs with need and my scent is thick enough to choke.

"Open a damn window," Trev grumbles from behind me.

"Nah. I think you need this," Asher says. "She's delicious, isn't she?"

Avi breaks our kiss, and I turn my head, eager to hear Trev's answer. His eyes burn through me. Swallowing, he rasps, "yeah," just as Avi's teeth sink into my skin. I gasp but hold Trev's stare, watching him try to breathe through whatever my scent is making him feel. Avi kisses up my arm and buries his face into my neck, breathing deeply and kissing over my pulse point.

"This changes everything." Avi's words brush over my skin and sink into my soul.

Trev pushes off the wall and goes into his room, shutting the door with a soft click. The barrier bothers me. I want to beat it down and make him come back out, to join in whatever is about to happen, but something tells me he needs the space.

He needs time to process.

Time to regret.

Chapter Thirty-One

TREV

Leaving the room went against everything I wanted to do, but the longer I stood in that room and smelled her desire, the more inadequate I felt. My packmates have all gained her trust and affection, and I'm simply the alpha standing in her way. She was going to leave tonight because of me, and I don't think my pack would have forgiven me for driving her away. I tried to make things better, but I was too late. The damage had already been done.

It's a miracle she agreed to let me bite her, securing her as part of our pack. She surprises me in the worst way. I never know what to expect and that makes me feel out of control. I like to know what to expect. I like the known. She gets mad enough to yell at me and call me on my bullshit, and then she's soft enough to comfort me while I confess what my father did to my mother. She's barbed wire and a warm blanket on a cold night. She's pack.

Our omega.

I scrub my hand over my face and bang my head against the door, pinching my eyes shut and breathing through my teeth. She smells so sweet and her pheromones cling to me. Crossing the room, I open the window and suck in a lungful of fresh air, hoping it'll help my cock soften.

Someone knocks on my door.

"Come in."

"You planning on beating yourself up all night?" Avi asks.

I turn away from the window and cross my arms. “I wanted to give her time.”

“She didn’t want you to leave.”

He has no idea how much I want that to be true, but deep down I know I make her uncomfortable. It’ll take time for us to find how we’ll work together as packmates.

“Is she okay?”

“Asher and Hayden are distracting her.” He sits on the edge of the bed. “We could go help them.”

I frown. “I can’t.”

“You can, but I won’t push you. You’ll warm up to one another. I know you like her. She’s afraid to like you, but you made a lot of progress with her tonight. It was smart to send you after her.”

Smart. I was so adamant that I go after her, the guys were all too worried about arguing with me. I wouldn’t have fought them, but I would have insisted on going. The fact that they trusted me to bring her back meant a lot, and I’ll do whatever it takes to make sure Whitney feels at home.

“You’re thinking too hard,” Avi says.

“Don’t you want to go join them?”

“I do, but I don’t want to take away from Asher’s experience. He’s ravenous.”

“What did he mean about the club?” I ask, remembering what he said to Whitney.

“You know him. He likes to go dancing. It sounds like they met before he drove her to our home.”

“I guess I shouldn’t be surprised she was out partying too.”

He smiles. “We’ll have to watch the two of them. They’ll give us premature gray hair.”

Grunting, I turn back to the window and stare into the night. Whitney’s moans are like torture, but I grind my teeth

together and control all my impulses that would have me barging into the other room and shoving her down on my knot.

Fuck my self-control.



ASHER

Her moans are the prettiest damn thing I've ever heard. My face is buried between her legs and her thighs squeeze my head, trying to keep me right where I am. I run the flat of my tongue over her clit, circling it as I slip two fingers inside of her. Her walls are soft and warm; her slick drenches my hand, and it takes all of my control to keep from ripping my shorts off and thrusting into her. She's going to come all over my tongue before I fuck her.

Hayden is sucking on her tit, and I watch him bite down. While his teeth are pinching her nipple, I stroke the spot deep inside of her, drawing out a rasped "yesss" from Whitney. Her hips buck, and she presses her cunt against my face. I smirk and tease my tongue through her folds, lapping up every drop of her pleasure like the greedy fuck I am.

"Asher," she gasps.

"Shhhh," I say against her skin, using the tip of my tongue to tease her clit. "I'm about to make you come." I flick my tongue as fast as I can, slowly working my fingers inside of her. She whimpers and grasps at the sheets. I don't stop until she's moaning my name and her cum coats my fingers. Once I finish cleaning her, I sit up and stick my fingers in my mouth, sucking them clean while she watches me with parted lips. Hayden kneads her breasts and glances at me.

"I think Whitney needs a knot." He turns to her. "Would you like that?"

She nods.

He pinches her nipple, earning a yelp. "Use your words."

"Yes," she says quickly.

“Yes what?”

“I want a knot.”

“Good girl,” he purrs, dropping a quick kiss on her lips. “Eventually that mouth will be wrapped around my dick, but I think Asher deserves some time alone with you.”

Hayden climbs off the bed and grabs his clothes. I crawl up the bed, not bothering to watch him leave because Whitney’s gorgeous blue eyes are on my cock. I’d be lying if I said that didn’t boost my ego. She strokes my shaft with her hand, lifting her gaze to meet mine.

“Will it hurt?”

“No, your body is built for my knot, baby. I’ll make sure you’re ready before I lock in.”

She smiles. “You’re pretty confident.”

“When you look at me the way you are now, I feel like a goddamn king.”

Sitting up on one arm, she pulls my lips to meet hers with her other hand. I come down on top of her, pushing her onto the mattresses and dropping my arms on either side of her head. Precum drips out of my cock, and I tease her entrance. Her sweet and chocolatey scent strengthens. I ease into her, sucking in a sharp breath when her walls wrap around me like an old friend.

“Fuck,” I mutter, savoring the spot. Slightly rippled on the inside, Whitney’s pussy is the most addictive thing I’ve ever experienced, and I’m not even all the way inside of her.

She rocks her hips, forcing me deeper inside and I groan, claiming her lips with mine. Her tongue is needy and sweeps over mine. I rock my hips side to side, loving the little noises she makes to encourage me. I bite her lip and then kiss her, thrusting all the way in so I can swallow her moan with my tongue. Whitney stretches to accommodate me.

“You feel so good,” she whispers against my mouth, turning her head to rest it against my shoulder while I grind into her.

“It’s about to get even better.” I gaze between our bodies and start to rock in and out, working her until her walls clamp and tighten.

Wrapping her arms around my middle, she presses her luscious tits against my chest. Her hardened peaks scrape over my skin, and I thrust a little harder. Her breath catches, and before she can inhale, I pound into her again. I fuck her hard and fast and her body responds; her sweet slick covers my dick and wets the sheets.

“Are you ready?” I kiss the edge of her mouth. “I want to knot you so fucking bad.”

“Do it,” she says, dragging her nails across my back. “I’m on birth control.”

I pause for a second. I’m such an idiot, I didn’t even think about that. She kisses me before I can apologize, and when her ankles hook behind the back of my legs and pull me deeper inside of her, I forget all about what she said. The base of my cock begins to swell and I suck her bottom lip into my mouth, slowly thrusting until I’m swollen and we’re knotted together.

“Oh god.”

Chuckling against her lips, I shake my head. “My name is Asher, and if I hear you say oh god again, I’m going to find that fucker and rip his head off.”

She huffs out a laugh. “You can’t kill a deity.”

“Watch me.” I pull back as far as I can with the knot and thrust into her, watching her pretty titties bounce with the movement. I do it again just to watch the way they rise and fall.

Whitney grabs her breasts, rolling her nipples between her fingers. I meet her gaze, catching her wicked smirk. “What?”

“Those are mine.” I swat her hand away and suck her left nipple into my mouth, lazily pumping into her. Pinching and tugging on the other one, I coax her into another drawn out moan. Her fluids coat my skin, and I inhale deeply, burying my head against her neck. My teeth ache to sink into her skin and officially mate her, but it’s too soon for that. She’s barely

joined the pack, and she was terrified through that process. I settle for dragging my teeth over her skin and sucking on her neck, leaving a different sort of mark behind.

“Asher. Oh fuck.”

“Good girl, coat my cock with your slick, baby.” I fight the urge to dig my fingers into her hair and pull it. That’s one of her triggers. I bite her neck lightly, careful not to break skin. I pepper her neck with kisses and bites until she grabs my hair and drags my lips back to meet hers. Growling into her mouth, I clutch her ass with both of my hands and grind into her, stimulating her clit with my lower stomach.

Whitney falls apart in my arms over and over until the bed is soaked through and her skin is flushed pink. I take every orgasm from her like the precious gift it is, locking away the memory of the way her lips part and her moans pitch high. The way her body arches into mine and how her legs tremble, the way her pussy clamps down around me and pulses as she squirts all over me. I take everything Whitney is giving me and more. I claim her with my body until our voices twine together and we shatter at the same time, my dick twitching and pulsing as I spill the last of my seed inside of her and my knot fades.

Collapsing, I rest most of my weight on my arms and drop my forehead against hers. We share breaths, both of us panting. She’s the first to recover, kissing my cheek and running her hands up my back. Her nails tickle, and I move my hips to get away from it, earning a soft moan from her.

“I don’t want to get up,” I admit, moving my semi-hard cock inside of her.

“I don’t want you to either, but I need water.”

Stealing another quick kiss, I gently slide out of her.

“Where are you going?” She pouts her lip.

“To get you water.” I don’t bother with clothes, heading into the kitchen buck ass naked.

Hayden glances up from the show he’s watching when I enter the main part of the house. “Sounds like it went well.”

I snort. “You could say that.”

“I don’t want to lose her.”

Pausing with my hand on the cabinet door, I toss a look over my shoulder. “Then we better make sure she knows she’s not allowed to leave.”

He levels me with a serious look.

“I’m only partly kidding. If she really wants out, she can go. I only mean we need to show her what it means for her to be our omega.” I open the door and grab a glass, remembering that I left her waiting and she’s thirsty.

“I hope that’s enough,” Hayden says as I fill up the cup.

“It will be,” I reassure him and head back to the bedroom, wishing I felt as confident as I sound.

Maybe a few more orgasms will help make it harder for her to leave.

Chapter Thirty-Two

WHITNEY

Tuesday morning I wake to an empty house. By the time I make it to the kitchen around ten, the coffee has turned cold. I dump it out and start a fresh batch. A note catches the corner of my eye, and I pick it up, reading the sloppy handwriting.

Avi went to his psych class and the other three went on a quick shopping trip. Hayden signed the note with an angular heart, and even though the shape is a little aggressive looking with its sharp points, I can't help but grin. He's adorable.

While the coffee brews, I turn on the TV and use the smart apps to get to a music streaming service. I hum along to a popular pop song, cleaning up the coffee table and washing the two dirty cups I found. The guys cleaned up after dinner last night, but whoever wiped down the counters did a horrible job. With the coffee machine and music as background noise, I set to work scrubbing and drying the counters until they're clean the way I like them.

I'm in the middle of starting a load of laundry when I suddenly realize I'm playing the role of Betty homemaker. With a strange smile, I grab a cup and fill it with coffee. If this is what my life is going to be like, I honestly can't complain. Having to fix the counters is a hell of a lot easier than having to worry about being beaten or forced to take drugs and dance against my will. My nature as an omega makes sliding into the role easier. My instincts drive me to make sure things are nice and tidy.

The guys arrive back home a little while later, catching me snooping through a hallway closet. I slam the door shut and lean against it, grimacing like I got caught stealing cookies.

“Oh, hey.”

Asher lifts an eyebrow. “Why do you look so guilty? Did my mom leave something embarrassing behind?”

“You’re not mad I was looking through her things?”

“Hell no,” he says with a laugh. “This is your house now. Look all you like, babe.”

I wrinkle my brow. “I wanted to make sure we had plenty of blankets.”

“It’s still summer. Are you expecting a cold front?” Trev asks.

Hayden gives him an incredulous look—mouth half open and face contorted in disbelief. “Omegas like blankets for their nest.”

“Shit, right. Sorry.” Trev drops a paper sack on the counter and slowly approaches me, holding out another bag that looks suspiciously expensive with its fancy paper and dainty string handles.

“What’s that?” I warily eye the bag.

“A gift.”

“For what?”

He rubs the back of his neck with his free hand. “Uh, for joining the pack, I guess.”

“I don’t want to owe you.” The words slip out before I can stop them. Old habits die hard. I don’t like owing people favors; it only leads to drama.

“It’s a gift,” he says again, this time sounding confused. “Why would you owe me anything for a present?”

“Never mind.” I wave my hand to shoo the words away. “Thank you for the—” I lift an eyebrow.

“Clothes.” He hands me the bag and this time I take it.

“Right, thank you.” I hold the bag at my side, and he blinks, waiting for something.

“Oh my God, you two are ridiculous. Open the damn present. Trev spent thirty minutes picking it out.” Asher huffs.

“Shouldn’t it be, oh my Asher?” I ask, batting my eyelashes at him.

His chest rumbles with a purr, and he runs his hands through his hair, pushing the dark locks to the side. “Only in the bedroom.”

Trev is still standing in front of me, and his eyes are starting to shutter, like he’s locking himself away from me. I clear my throat and squat down, placing the bag on the floor and opening it. Pushing the pale pink tissue aside, I suck in a breath when I see the softest pair of pajama shorts I’ve ever seen. They’re mint green and made of silk. There’s a skimpy tank top to complete the set, but it’s what’s under the pajamas that takes me by surprise. More than a dozen thongs and boy shorts lie at the bottom of the bag. Different colors, patterns, materials. He must have bought one of every type.

“Trev,” I say softly, shaking my head. “It’s too much.”

“It’s not enough. I didn’t want to buy more clothes without talking to you first, but I felt safe getting those.” He pauses, and I glance up at him. “Do you like them?”

“I love them.” I beam at him.

His face softens and a look of pride flashes across his face. “Good.”

I hold his stare for a moment and something shifts between us. The rest of the tension between us slips away and I rise, wrapping my arms around his middle. It takes him a minute, but he slowly hugs me back, and when he relaxes, I know we’ve overcome our biggest obstacle. Our past.

Trev and I only want what’s best for the pack, and now that I am pack, we can work together to protect them.

After all, it’s only been two days since Curtis’ attack, and I know in my bones he’s not done tormenting me.



Hayden is late coming home from work on Wednesday. I wanted to call him, but I broke his phone. He hasn't had time to get a new one yet. I sit at the window and stare at the backyard, willing him into existence.

"He's okay. Sometimes there's a last-minute call. I'm sure he'll be done soon." Asher stands next to me, staring across the lawn. The rocking chair beneath the pergola sways in the early evening wind.

Trev is showering and Avi is busy cooking something that smells delicious. I pick at the skin around my nails.

Turning to him, I ask, "What if Curtis got him?"

"He didn't." Asher takes my hand and smooths the skin I'd been picking. "He wouldn't want that."

"Habit," I say, glancing out the window once more. Just then, the door to Melanie's house opens. Hayden comes out carrying two giant bags from some craft store. Irritation flares in my chest.

"Go easy on him," Asher murmurs.

I stop on my way to the door, realizing I was about to storm out there and go off on Hayden like my mother would yell at her mates. That thought steals away the last of my frustration, and I take a few calming breaths. I can wait for him to get inside and explain. There's no reason to go yell at him.

"Do you want to help set the table?" Avi offers me a way to distract myself so I can get ahold of my emotions.

"Of course."

By the time Hayden makes it inside, I'm grabbing plates from the kitchen cabinet. They're heavy in my hands, but I focus on the weight rather than the urge to drill him with questions. He didn't do anything wrong.

“Hey,” he says with a grin. “Sorry I’m late. I made a few stops. I got a new phone, but I was afraid I’d ruin the other surprise if I called.”

Asher flicks his gaze to me. “What did you get?”

I count my steps to the table and say each of the guys’ names while I set out the plates in their spots. Instead of answering Asher, Hayden joins me at the table. I look at him, but quickly look away when I see the frown he’s wearing.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lie. “Dinner is almost ready.”

“Tell him,” Trev says from behind me. “We don’t hide things from each other, okay? We talk about it.”

“Did something happen?” Hayden sounds so confused.

I grip the back of a chair so tight my knuckles turn white. “Not really.” I sigh and glance over my shoulder. Trev tips his head up to say *go ahead*. “It’s going to sound crazy,” I warn, meeting each of their gazes. Asher, Avi, and Trev already witnessed the psycho, but repeating it out loud will really drive home that I’m fucked up.

“I like crazy,” Hayden whispers.

I smile a little and look him in the eye. “I was worried about you. I didn’t have a way to contact you, and I didn’t know where you were. When you got home, I got really mad.”

“Why did you get mad?” he asks, more curious than annoyed.

Thinking it over for a minute, I struggle to articulate why. Eventually, I say, “I’m not really sure? I saw you with the bags, and then I was instantly mad that you weren’t on a call or anything for work.”

The guys are quiet. I drop my eyes to the table, studying the wood grain and counting the moments until they decide it’s time for me to go. I’m too much of a mess.

“Why didn’t you get mad at me when I came in?”

I pinch my eyebrows together. “I was mad, but then Asher told me to go easy on you and I realized I was acting like my mother.”

Silence again.

It stretches until heat begins to crawl up my neck.

“I get it. I can go if you want,” I say to the table. “I’m really sorry.”

“Look at me,” Hayden demands, sounding like an alpha.

“It’s okay. I wouldn’t want to live with a crazy omega either.”

“Whitney. Look at me.”

I tear my gaze from the table and stare into his gray eyes. His face softens, and he shakes his head.

“That’s not how it works. We’re a pack. We’re not going to abandon you because you’re human.” I start to say something, but he puts his hand up to stop me. “You didn’t give in to your emotions, and that’s what matters. You didn’t yell at me.”

“I wanted to. If it weren’t for Asher, I would have.”

He shrugs. “So what? Asher helped you? That sounds a lot like pack to me.”

“I don’t want to become her.”

Trev is really the only one who knows about my mother, but Hayden nods in understanding. He’s piecing it together. He might only have a small portion of the entire damaged picture, but he’s getting it.

“And I don’t want to be like my father who always broke his promises. I don’t want to ever be the reason you wait at the window for me to show up.”

“How did you know I was waiting there?”

He frowns. “I didn’t. It’s what I used to do every weekend he was supposed to come pick me up. My parents weren’t together, and on his days, I’d sit and wait for hours.

Sometimes he'd show up late, other times he wouldn't come at all."

"I'm sorry."

"Nothing you did. It's something that's stuck with me though. I try to keep my word. Would it help you if I text you on Avi's phone when I get off and let you know if I have any plans?"

"I don't want to be controlling." I shake my head and bite my cheek. "It's okay."

"No, it's not. It's not controlling to want me to communicate. You expected me home, and I didn't show up for an hour after I was supposed to arrive? I'd be a little worried too."

I was more than a little worried, but I get his point.

"I guess if you want to send a text."

"We all can," Trev says. "We should anyway, with Curtis out there. It's good to know what's going on. That way if something does happen, we'll know when to call in the cavalry." He places a plate of toasted garlic French bread on the table. "Now, who's hungry?"

Trev breaks up the tension and we all settle in to eat the delicious spaghetti Avi made. I sit at the head of the table, per Melanie's guidance, and the guys don't even blink twice.

"What did you get anyway?" Asher asks Hayden while filling my plate with a giant spoonful of pasta.

"Model cars."

I suck in a breath and glance at him. "You did?"

"I hope you don't mind. You mentioned you liked them, and since we'll be here awhile, I figured you might like something to do."

A grin spreads across my face. "Thank you."

Chapter Thirty-Three

WHITNEY

We settle into an easy routine over the next few days. The guys go to work, and Avi and I stay home and hang out. I work on a model car while he tells me about his classes and how he's planning to use them as a way to help himself recover. Eventually, Avi wants to be a therapist. I admire his drive. Starting over on a new career path is hard, but he's energized and truly seems to care about helping people process their trauma.

The guest house is fairly secluded, and we hardly see signs of Melanie and her mates. By the time Friday night rolls around, I've officially been with the guys for an entire week. It feels like it's been longer. The pack bond has brought us all closer, and now that Trev isn't trying to convince the guys that I should go, life is peaceful. I hate that I can't leave or go to the bank for Granny's things, but I understand the dangers. Curtis is still out there, and if anyone from the Omega Council spots me, we'll all be screwed.

"Do you need help?" Avi's black hair is damp from the shower he just took.

"Nope. I'm almost finished." He and I have been sharing the cooking responsibilities. Tonight, though, I wanted to make my favorite dish for them.

Blackened chicken. Cheesy broccoli and rice casserole. Sautéed spinach with bacon. And fresh baked chocolate chip cookies for dessert. Nothing too fancy, but I hope they like it.

Granny used to make this for me, and I loved it. Avi grabs a beer and sits at the bar, watching me mix up the cookie batter.

“You’re working too hard.”

“It makes me happy.” I shrug.

“Because you don’t have time to think?”

I lift my gaze and look at him. “Are you trying to psychoanalyze me again?”

Dropping his eyes, his cheeks turn a little pink. “Sorry.”

“Trev didn’t tell you? I figured you guys would all know by now.” I add in the chocolate chips and stir. There’s an electric mixer, but I’d rather do it by hand. I swear something about the elbow grease used to stir the batter makes the cookies taste better.

“He hasn’t said anything. Trev wouldn’t tell us unless you wanted him to.”

I stop mixing and rest my hands on the edge of the counter. “My mother abused me. She was a bitch and I’ve learned enough now to know I deserved better.”

He sips on his beer. “Did you talk to your therapist about it?”

Snorting, I shake my head and begin searching for the plastic wrap. “Tell the Omega Council snitch Mommy used to hit me and lock me in a cellar? Hell no. They wouldn’t have let me find a match. They don’t like damaged omegas.”

“If you think about it, everyone is damaged.”

“You know what I mean.”

He picks at the label on the bottle. “Yeah. I get it. She’d lock you in a cellar?” The compassion and hurt on his face makes me uncomfortable, so I avoid looking at him.

“It started when I was five or six, I don’t really remember the exact age, only that I was little. Her pre-heat would come, and she’d lie to Granny and tell her I was spending the week at a friend’s house.” The casserole has ten minutes left. I turn on the burner and start coating the chicken in the seasoning. The

work distracts me from the truth I'm spilling. "Granny never knew and I didn't want her to be mad at me too. I never told her."

"From what you've told me, she would have been pissed at your mom."

I press the spices into the chicken with one hand, patting it to help them stick. "Yeah, well, I was too young to realize that." I forgot to put a little oil in the pan and a faint burnt smell fills the kitchen. "Shit," I mutter, grabbing the cooking spray and coating the pan. I turn the burner all the way down. My chest tightens a little, and I can almost hear my mother screaming at me for burning dinner. I take a shallow breath and try to pick up where I left off, but I can't remember what I was saying. Moisture fills my eyes, but I blink it away, anger rushing through me in a sharp contrast to the sadness.

Goddamn her.

I can't even cook without memories of how she treated me resurfacing. I was fine telling Avi what had happened. I was detached as I worked, but the stupid hot pan and her ugly words. I take a sharp inhale, hating how weak I sound. Hating how ridiculous I probably look. Hating that she has such a grip on me after all the years and the distance I've put between us.

"Hey," Avi says softly, his fingers closing around my wrist.

"I can't breathe."

"It's okay." He places my clean hand on his chest and takes a breath, letting me feel his chest expand. "In for three, hold for six, out for nine."

My eyebrows pinch together, but I follow his count. He holds my gaze and continues counting out loud, walking me through the technique until I get it. I curl my fingers slightly, gripping his shirt and waiting for my body to relax. It takes a few minutes, but eventually the panic that was clawing at my throat subsides.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, releasing his shirt and stepping away.

“It’s okay. These things will happen. As much as it sucks, it’s part of recovery.”

I press my lips together and work on setting the chicken in the frying pan. “Sometimes I feel like I’ll never get better.”

Avi’s quiet for a moment. “I know what you mean.”

And the truth is, he does. He’s experienced memories so powerful they rip you from this moment and thrust you into the past, forcing you to relive every horrifying second in excruciating detail.

“I hate her.” I wash my hands and grab a towel, drying them and tossing the fabric on the counter.

“She deserves it, but you also deserve to let go of the emotions.” Avi moves back to the fridge and grabs two beers. I take the one he hands me but I don’t drink it. I’m still too keyed up from the panic attack to drink. Alcohol will only make me feel more out of control, and I’m worried I’ll freak out again.

There are only so many times a woman can freak out in front of the men she’s attracted to before it starts to bruise the ego. And to think once upon a time I considered myself strong. I haven’t felt very much strength around these men.

The broccoli and rice timer dings. I set the beer down and sigh.

I turn off the oven and the timer. “There’s too much emotion. Even if I tried to let it go, I don’t think I’d stop being angry.”

“I’m not saying you have to stop being angry, but you should try working through some of those traumatic events, so at least they lose some power. Right now, they’re so strong because you repress them.”

“So, what? I don’t have a therapist I can trust, and I wouldn’t be able to leave even if I did have one.”

“My experience is different from yours, but I think some of the same techniques I’m learning in therapy and class could

help you..." He trails off, not forcing the methods on me unless I give him permission.

Staring at the chicken frying in the pan, I exhale. "Tell me what to do."

"Whatever you do, you have to understand it's your decision and it might not work. Therapy isn't one size fits all."

"I get it." I glance at him, imploring him to see that I'm ready. "What does the doctor order?"

He smiles a little at the nickname. "Well, there are a few things. Some are small, some are a little more intense. The easiest is to talk to your inner child. Basically imagine you as you were when you were little and tell her what happened wasn't what she deserved. Give her the love you never got."

"Okay. That's easy enough."

"Right. There are going to be some emotions you may not be prepared for. Basically be ready to cry." He laughs and shakes his head. "I did some work on silly things like bullies, but it still helped me realize those kids were jerks, and I wasn't any of the things they said I was. My family moved to Dolin, and I was the only kid with a heavy accent in my class. They were pretty nasty about it sometimes. So much so that I worked to get rid of the accent and sound like everyone else. Now it seems dumb. I changed who I was to escape their comments."

"Bullies aren't silly."

He nods and changes the subject. "So yeah, that's a good place to start. When you're feeling strong, you can think about some of those things that happened and try to see them as an external party. Detach yourself from the event and point out all the things that are wrong with your abuser. Explain to yourself why what they did was wrong and that no matter what you may have done to set them off, their loss of control wasn't your fault."

Grabbing tongs from the drawer, I adjust the temperature on the chicken and flip them over. "And when I start to panic?"

“Remember the breathing. You may find the first few times hard, but if you keep trying, keep relaxing your body and detaching yourself from the moment, you should be able to replay those memories and sort of heal yourself from the inside.”

“And this works?”

He shrugs. “A lot of therapists do something that’s similar. Since you can’t go see one, this is the do-it-yourself fix. I think the biggest thing is to take it slow and if it doesn’t work or feel right, don’t do it again. If you don’t like working through it alone, maybe we can find a way for you to talk to a therapist. I had a hard time working through my own trauma, and you have a lot more to process. The first time I had an intense session with my therapist, I came home and crawled into bed.”

“So am I traumatizing myself to process my trauma? That sounds counterproductive.” I glance at him over my shoulder.

“No. Think of it more like how you feel after a good cry. The strange sense of relief that comes once you let it all out... it’s sort of like that.”

“I’m surprised you’ve cried hard enough to know that feeling.”

“Crying is an essential part of the human experience.”

“Now you sound like a doctor.”

He laughs and sips his beer. “Thanks for humoring me. You do whatever you’re ready for, or nothing at all. It’s your decision. I only want to share what’s helped me.” He walks over and eases his arms around my waist, hugging me.

I stiffen at first then turn and hug him back. It still feels a little funny, but I don’t hate it.

“Part of me thinks I’m dreaming and you guys are all figments of my imagination. Or maybe Curtis drugged me.” I pinch his arm.

“Ow.”

“Just checking.”

His chest rumbles with a laugh and he holds me tight. “So long as I’m living and breathing, I’ll be here.”

“Thanks, Avi.”

A few seconds later, I reluctantly pull away and return to the stove. Dinner is almost ready, and the guys will be here any minute. I count to one hundred in my head to avoid any memories.

I’ll try out one of Avi’s suggestions tonight.



“Damn this is good,” Asher mumbles around a mouthful.

They got home a little later, so they’re all still wearing their blues. As promised, Avi’s phone lit up with a text to let us know what happened and when they thought they’d get home. I’m not sure how I feel about it, but I liked knowing what was going on. I would have been worried if they’d all been late. Avi grabbed everyone a drink, sensing they needed them after a long day.

“Thanks. How was work?”

Asher shakes his head. “Don’t ask.”

Oh. I wrinkle my forehead. I didn’t think the relationship was going to be like this.

“Asher,” Trev says softly. I glance at him but he’s looking at the other alpha. He stabs his fork in my direction.

Asher looks up from his plate. “I didn’t mean you couldn’t ask. It was a shit show, and I’m annoyed with the world.”

“Have you heard about the protests going on?” Trev asks.

Nodding, I take a drink of beer. Lindsey had gone to a few. As an omega, I never felt safe going, though I sort of agree with what the low packs are pushing for. The Royal Council purposefully makes laws to keep the purebred alpha packs ahead of the rest of us. Elitism at its finest.

“We spent half the day downtown making sure the Royal Council felt secured.”

“Assholes,” I mutter.

“Sounds about right. I hate them.” Asher takes a sip of his beer.

“Me too,” Hayden says. “They don’t give two shits—”

Trev sighs and sets his fork down. “Can we talk about something else?”

“Avi likes to color porn.”

“Damn, spilling my secrets.” Avi sends me a wink.

“He showed you those?” Hayden chuckles.

“Yeah. He especially liked the pegging scene.”

Trev snorts and drinks his beer.

“Don’t kink shame me,” Avi teases.

“I told you I would happily do it to you if that’s what you want.”

His eyes sparkle with mirth, and he growls a little. “I’m going to make you pay for that smart little mouth.”

“Oh yeah?” I lift an eyebrow.

“Spanking doesn’t work,” Hayden says. “Tried it, she likes it.”

Asher cackles, and I throw my napkin at his head. “You’ll be lucky if I ever sleep with you again.”

“Don’t start lying now.”

I narrow my eyes at Asher but don’t threaten him anymore. I liked his knot a little too much to never have it again.

“I meant I’ll find something for that mouth to do. Whitney likes giving head.”

Heat crawls up my neck and I widen my eyes at Avi. “Too far.” Especially since I’m not very good at it.

“Why? We’re all pack and they should know how much you love it.”

Despite being embarrassed, desire unfurls inside of me, and my scent collides with Avi’s. Trev groans and finishes his beer in three gulps.

“Like goddamn torture.” He storms to a window and yanks it open.

I falter a little. He doesn’t like my scent? When he turns back, his eyes catch mine and his nostrils flare. A trickle of his own desire mingles with mine, and my doubt disappears.

“Tonight is movie night,” I say to him. “Maybe we can watch something educational. Something that’ll teach me how to be good.”

Confusion lines his face for a moment. “Yeah?” he asks when he gets what I’m implying.

“How else am I supposed to learn the right way?” I look at Avi. “Besides, he likes to watch.”

Trev still doesn’t know I’m going to make Avi wish he’d never embarrassed me by using Trev as my test subject, but I don’t think he’ll complain when his cock is in my mouth. I smirk to myself and lean back in my chair.

“Trouble,” Hayden whispers, his hand finding my thigh under the table and squeezing it.

Only he would see through my plans. We trade knowing looks while Trev starts clearing the table. Asher is midbite when his plate is torn away from him.

“Hey, I wasn’t done.”

Trev shows him the now empty dish. “Sorry, did you want to lick it.”

“Fuck you,” Asher says half-heartedly.

“You wish.”

“I hate when he gets cocky,” Asher mumbles.

“I don’t know,” I muse, watching Trev clean. “I kind of like it.”

He slides his gaze in my direction, a tiny smirk tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Why don’t you find something,” he says to me. “We all need to get cleaned up.”

I swallow and nod. “Okay.”

Am I really going to watch porn with these guys?

Yes. Yes, I am.

Chapter Thirty-Four

TREV

I beat Asher and Hayden. It helps that I made it to the shower first thanks to a carefully placed elbow. My cock is painfully hard as I slip on a pair of joggers and a T-shirt. Never in a hundred years would I have thought Whitney would seriously be up for this. Avi is sitting by her on the couch, and I snag the other spot next to her. Small frames of various videos are lined up across the screen.

PassionMovies.

Not the site I've used in the past, but the little snippet shows plenty of flesh, and hey, porn is porn.

I clear my throat. "Find anything interesting?"

"Yeah," Whitney says, voice a little strained. She's nervous.

"It's not too late to shut it off," I say quickly.

"I'm not afraid." She bristles next to me, and I fight the urge to sigh. She's always so prickly with me, but I suspect that's how we'll always be. Besides, I kind of like the way her chocolate scent sparks with a flare of cinnamon meant just for me.

I love cinnamon.

"What'd I miss?" Asher comes into the room with his arms over his head to pull his shirt on.

Avi snickers. "We weren't going to start without you."

“Shut up,” Asher says, eyeing the couch. “Guess I’ll take the floor.” He parks himself between Whitney’s legs and lays his head back on the cushion, grinning at her. “My new favorite place.”

The flush that crawls up her neck is cute, but it’s her scent that has us all moaning. Hayden comes in and sits in the chair, shooting us all a haughty look. Whitney glances around for a way to make room. I pat my leg. She levels me with a tiny glare.

“It’s the only way he’ll fit.”

“That’s what she said,” Asher mutters. His head is tipped to the side as he studies the various selections, and I don’t even know if he realized what he’s said or if it’s a natural response he’s unconscious of.

“Fine.” She scoots onto my lap, resting her back against the arm of the couch. “Is this okay?”

I grimace when my cock tries to slap her ass in hello. “It’s fine,” I reassure her.

Once Hayden is on the couch, she starts flicking through the options. The search bar at the top reads *good blow job*. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from smiling at it. She may be aroused, but she’s still nervous. Hell, I’m anxious too. I’ve never watched porn with a woman.

Would it be bad manners to jack off with her in my lap?

Maybe she’d like it... no. I shake my head. That’s crazy. I’ll have to wait until we’re done and sneak off to the bathroom to stroke one out, something I’ve been doing too much as of late.

“This one,” she says to herself and hits the play button.

Unlike porn I’ve watched, the beginning is more like a movie. A young woman in college is studying in the library and some hot dude sits down at the end of the same table. They have a small spat where she’s fuming and he’s smirking like a damn bastard. A few days pass with the same sort of scenario, but every time he moves a little closer. Sometimes he compliments her, other times she can’t stop staring. Then

things get steamy. They're in the library late at night with no one else around. The chick snaps at him and he says, "I have something better for you to do with that mouth," and then she drops to her knees.

Whitney leans forward, palms resting on my thighs as she watches the woman stroke her tongue up the length of the dick—which is honestly the biggest thing I've ever seen, but I digress. Chocolate and raspberry fill the air so thick I can't make out my own scent, but I know I'm sending off alpha pheromones. It's impossible not to be turned on when she slips that dick into her mouth and hollows out her cheeks.

"Oh," Whitney says like she's discovered the answer to an impossible problem.

I move my legs to ease some of the discomfort, but Whitney's ass drops onto my dick, and I freeze. Her nails dig into my sweats, and she shifts, accidentally rocking against me. I bite my cheek and drop my head back, praying for restraint. She moves again, this time it's obvious it's intentional, and I lose a little control.

"Do you want to practice?" I ask while the porn continues to play in the background, the guy's moans and grunts filling the air. The woman uses her hand with her mouth, nostrils flaring while she breathes through her nose while she works.

Whitney looks at me over her shoulder, eyes hooded as she licks her lips. "Maybe," she whispers.

I lean into her space and kiss the edge of her mouth. "On your knees, Whit."

Instead of fighting, she turns and slides down between my legs. I lift my hips and shimmy my pants off, ignoring the envious looks from the rest of the pack. She stares at my dick with wide eyes, and I feel a swell of pride when she traces one finger over my length.

"Don't laugh at me." Her breath brushes over me, and I flex my ass to make my shaft move toward her mouth. She gasps and grabs it. Her soft fingers close around me.

I make a noise, and she eases her grip, shooting me an apologetic look.

“Sorry,” she says so close to the head of my cock.

“It’s okay.” I reach for her cheek and rub my hand over it. “You didn’t hurt me, only surprised me.”

Precum beads at the head, and I swear her eyes sparkle with desire. She flicks her tongue over the tip, lapping up the cum. I run my thumb over her cheek again as she places her lips around me and swirls her tongue.

“Good girl.”

Her eyes find mine, and I die. Those pretty blues hold my gaze as she slides her mouth down me and hollows her cheeks like the video showed. The inside of her mouth is soft and warm, and when she makes a small noise, the vibration makes me want to grab her hair and help her. Since I can’t do that, I settle for cupping her jaw and watching her figure out what to do.

She goes a little too far and gags, throat constricting around my length and I stop breathing. Her eyebrows pinch with concentration, and she does it again, pushing until she can’t take me and her body reacts.

“Lucky bastard,” Asher mumbles, but I don’t think Whitney heard him.

“Fucking perfect, Whit. You’re sucking my cock so good.”

Her lips pull back into a smile, and she redoubles her effort, finding her stride and making me forget everything but the way her lips feel around me. Pressure builds and my cock pulses.

“I’m going to come,” I tell her, trying to move her off of me, but her hands come down on my hips and she starts to bob her head faster, cheeks pulled in tight while she finishes me and my seed spills into her mouth. She swallows like a seasoned pro, but her eyes fill with moisture, letting me know the experience was a little overwhelming.

She pulls off of me with a pop and wipes the edges of her mouth. “Was it okay?”

“You asked Avi the same thing.” Hayden laughs a little, and she scowls.

“Sorry,” he says, waving his hand. “You finished him in under five minutes, trouble. That was a damn good blow job.”

Her answering grin has me carefully pulling her into my lap and kissing her. My cum left a salty aftertaste, but it doesn’t ruin the moment, if anything, it only makes me more determined to make her feel good too.

“Come with me to the bedroom?”

“Okay,” she breathes into my mouth.

I stand and carry her to the bedroom I’ve claimed, leaving the guys to fend for themselves. They’ve all had pieces of her. Tonight she’s mine. I set her on the bed and step back, pulling my shirt off and tossing it onto the floor. Her lips are a little swollen, bright pink from sucking me off.

“I bought you something.”

“Another present?” she asks, sitting and crossing her legs on the bed.

“Well, it’s for both of us.” I open the closet and grab the black gift bag. Inside is the highest rated vibrator with a wide clit teaser. The lady at the shop guaranteed Whitney would love it, but as I place the bag in front of her, a swell of worry fills me.

What if she hates it?

“Is it fuzzy handcuffs?”

I raise an eyebrow. “I have real handcuffs, if that’s what you want.”

“Maybe another time,” she says, pulling the black tissue paper out of the bag. She stares at the package for a moment, chewing on her bottom lip.

“Take it out,” I say, sitting on the edge of the bed. I’m completely naked, but I don’t really give a shit.

“You bought me a vibrator?” She holds it up and stares at it with confusion lining her face.

I take it from her, opening the package and taking out the pink device. I washed it earlier with soap and water. It’s ready to be used.

“I bought *us* a vibrator,” I correct. I let my gaze trace over her body and click the on button. The machine is quiet, but with the silence between us it may as well be a damn jack hammer. I turn it off.

Silence.

“Take your clothes off.”

She pushes her hair behind her ears before sliding off the edge of the bed and pulling her shirt and bra off. Her fingers pause on her pants, and I press the button again, filling the room with the soft buzzing of the vibrator. With trembling hands, she slides her pants and underwear off. I recognize one of the thongs I bought her and purr, loving that she’s wearing it. She stands in front of me, and I click the vibrator off and toss it on the bed, standing in front of her and looking into her eyes.

“When you gazed up at me while you were sucking me off, that was the hottest shit I’ve ever experienced.”

Preening, she boldly takes a step forward and rests her soft, full tits against my chest. “Watching you crumble was the highlight of my day.”

My chest rumbles and her fingers play with my happy trail, tugging gently on the hairs.

“Aren’t you supposed to be showing me how to use my new present?” she asks, kissing my jaw and moving back to the bed. She perches on the edge of it, and I prowl toward her, placing my hands on her shoulders and pushing her back onto the mattress. I take her nipple into my mouth, nudging her legs open with my knee and placing my thigh against her wet heat. She moves her hips so her cunt rubs over my skin, begging me for the touch she so desperately needs.

I run my tongue over her nipple and grab the vibrator, running the length of the soft silicon between her folds. Flicking the on switch, I let the vibration run over the length of her before turning it off and teasing her entrance with the tip of it. Whitney's knees start to close.

Tsking, I push the top of it inside of her. "You're going to need to relax." I flick the vibrator on and off.

She releases a slow breath and nods, dropping her legs open.

"Good girl," I purr, pushing the vibrator deeper into her.

"Oh," she whispers, glancing between our bodies.

"Good?" I turn it on and let it run, slowly working it in and out of her. The clit teaser runs between her folds as I move it.

"Great." She nods and drops onto her back, cupping her breasts.

I press the next setting, increasing the intensity of the vibration. Her back arches a little, and I thrust the vibrator all the way in, centering the teaser over her clit. Using the same muscles I use to jack off, I pump the length in and out of her, testing out different thrusts to see what gets the biggest reaction.

Hard thrusts and a moderate pace draw a moan from her lips.

"That's it," I tell her, maintaining the same pace and force. Her eyes squeeze shut, and she pinches her nipples, gasping for air and trying to clamp her legs shut. I use my legs to push them open and don't stop what I'm doing until she shatters and screeches, the sounds almost inhumane as she comes and her body trembles from the force of the orgasm.

"Holy fuck," she pants, rocking her hips in time with my now slower thrusts. "Do it again."

I smirk and set to work, giving this omega every damn orgasm she orders from me and then some. I make Whitney cry so loud that Hayden barges into the room. She's too busy

fisting the comforter and panting to notice him, and once he sees she's fine, he quietly makes his exit and leaves me be.

For the night, I make Whitney my puppet. I learn what makes her hips jerk. I learn what makes her eyes widen. I learn what makes her nails dig into my wrist. I learn every beautiful sound she makes until there's nothing left to learn.

Chapter Thirty-Five

WHITNEY

Somewhere around orgasm number seven, I forget how to think. Eventually, Trev takes mercy on me and lets me fall into a blissful, pleasure induced sleep. I wake up around three in the morning to soft snoring. Trev is fast asleep but Asher's missing. With a little frown, I carefully climb off the bed and tip-toe out of the room. I creep over to Avi and Hayden's room and peek inside. They're both crashed out, but Asher isn't in there either. A soft click comes from the front of the house, so I quietly pad down the hall.

Asher is at the stove, mixing something in a small pot. He glances over when I step into the kitchen.

"Couldn't sleep?"

"No. You?" I hoist myself onto the counter next to him, resting my back against the top cabinets. "What are you making?"

"Hot chocolate, want some?"

"Sure." I run my fingers over the boxers Trev let me borrow.

"I wake up around three or four a few times a week. Hot chocolate helps me relax, and sometimes I can fall asleep again." He grabs two mugs from the cabinet and pours the drink inside. "You're in luck, usually I make two servings for myself." He hands me a mug.

"Oh, I don't want to take your stuff, I can have water." I don't take the mug.

“Don’t be ridiculous. I want you to have this.” He slowly eases the drink toward my mouth. “Please take it or this is about to get really awkward.”

I chuckle and grab the hot chocolate. “Thank you.”

Beaming, he nods his head and takes a sip. “Of course. Come sit with me.”

We move into the living room and sit side by side on the couch. He places his arm over my shoulder and I scoot a little closer, basking in the physical contact.

“You know I used to hate hugs for the longest time?”

“Yeah?”

I take a sip of the drink. Rich, creamy chocolate at the perfect temperature. “Yeah. Granny hugged me all the time. It wasn’t until recently that I started enjoying them.” I glance at the brown liquid in my cup.

“Hugs are awesome,” Asher says gently. “I’ll hug you whenever you want.”

I smile at him and push my sorrow aside. It hasn’t gotten any easier to talk or think about her. They say time heals all wounds, but I don’t see how that’ll be possible with Granny’s death. The grief is like a knife to my gut.

“My mom gives the best hugs. She was always so open with her affection.”

A sharp stab of jealousy hits me. I used to fantasize about living in a functional family. In the cellar, I’d trace little stick families in the dirt on the floor and make up stories to help pass the time.

“Melanie is amazing,” I muse instead of continuing down that path. Those thoughts will only ruin the moment, and I’m tired of letting my mother destroy the good things in my life.

“If you ask her for a real one, maybe you can experience the epicness of her hug.”

“I feel like you’re overselling it. What if it’s not as epic as you say and then Melanie gets all sad because I’m

disappointed in her hugging abilities?”

Asher scoffs. “Impossible. Hey, have you ever been out to the White Wash waterfall?”

“No. I haven’t really hiked before.”

“We’ll fix that. It’s so gorgeous out there.”

“I probably won’t be able to though, with everything going on.”

“You will,” he says adamantly. “I’ll make sure of it. I’ll sneak you out if I have to.”

“Something tells me Trev would be pissed.” I take another drink and hum in appreciation.

“Oh, he’d fucking hate it.” Asher laughs. “He’ll survive.”

“So your family is awesome. No tragic backstory for you?” I ask with a bitter laugh. It’s not that I want him to have had a bad life, it’s only that I feel a little dramatic with all of my baggage.

“Eh, not really. I’ve been really fortunate, and I definitely don’t take it for granted. Trev’s dad is—” He stops when he realizes his mistake. He doesn’t want to share someone else’s secrets.

“An asshole, he told me.”

“Asshole doesn’t seem like an adequate word, honestly. My dads hate him, and it takes a lot for them to hate someone.”

I rest the back of my head on his shoulder, and we sit in silence for a little while, drinking our hot chocolate and simply enjoying the early morning hour. The quiet isn’t awkward with him; it’s the most natural feeling in the world. But eventually more questions come to mind.

“You guys come here a lot?”

“We don’t visit as much as we should. Work gets in the way most of the time. Most holidays we spend here. Avi’s family lives a few cities over, and Hayden’s mom joins us here.”

“I take it Trev’s dad doesn’t get an invite?”

“Nope. That bastard can rot in hell.”

“I know a few people that belong there.”

He hums. “I’ll be happy to send them there for you.”

Digging my elbow into his side, I roll my eyes. “Don’t try to be a hero.”

“Comes with the job,” he whispers into my ear, kissing the side of my head. “But seriously, if I wouldn’t end up in jail, I’d take care of them.”

“Aw, you’d murder for me? That’s almost better than buying me diamonds.”

“Almost? Whitney, I’m offering you the blood of your enemies and you still think diamonds are better?”

“Fine, bloodshed might be better than a silly rock.”

“Damn straight it is. Especially for your mom.” I stiffen a little, expecting him to want me to rehash my history, but instead, he says, “Maybe my mom will adopt you.”

“Well, technically since we’re pretend mates, she sort of has.”

“That’s true.” He leans forward and sets his mug on the coffee table before coming back to snuggle.

We fall quiet again, but the thoughts racing through my mind are so loud I worry he’ll be able to hear them. The screaming insecurity that’s telling me I’m not worthy of that sort of love. I don’t deserve his mother’s affection. I don’t deserve kindness. I pinch my eyes shut and relax into his hold. He runs his thumb over my shoulder and tells me random stories from his childhood, as if sensing my need for distraction. He talks until my eyes grow heavy and all those thoughts give way to sleep.



Saturday I wake up after the guys have gone to work. Asher must have carried me back to the bedroom because I'm under the softest comforter in the world. I roll onto my side and pull it closer, cocooning myself while I let my eyes adjust to the daytime. The bedside clock reads almost eleven in the morning. Using coffee as motivation, I roll out of bed but keep the blanket wrapped around me.

I probably look like a gremlin, but this blanket is too damn soft and the thought of leaving it behind makes my heart hurt. Avi left a note that he went out for a bit, but the coffee pot is full and that's the most important part. Grabbing the biggest cup, I fill it and drink it as quick as I can. Then I refill it and add some milk, intending to savor this serving. My stomach growls so I shuffle around with the blanket and search for food. I grab a jar of pickles, sausage, and some leftover broccoli and rice casserole.

About three bites into the meal, I realize how disgusting it should be all together. It doesn't taste bad to me though. I continue like a happy little creature from a cave, bringing the fork into my blanket cocoon to take bites. A soft knock sounds at the door, and I growl a little, more pissed about not being able to finish my food than I am surprised that someone is here.

"Whitney?"

Asher's mom sounds so energetic even through the door. I'm going to need another three cups of coffee before I can be on that level. Who wakes up happy like that?

Monsters, that's who.

"Melanie isn't a monster," I say out loud to myself, setting the fork down. I answer the door with the blanket around me.

She takes me in, her lips tugging into a genuine smile that feels like sunshine and rainbows.

I bristle. Why is she so happy?

"Oh, honey. It's starting." She reaches for me, but I take a quick step back and snarl.

My outburst surprises the both of us, and I narrow my eyes, unable to help the growl that rumbles in my lips.

“Ope.” She chuckles. “Pre-heats are fickle things. Are you hungry?”

Well, shit. The blanket makes a lot more sense now.

“Ravenous.”

“Do you feel like salty or sweet food?”

“Both.”

She grins. “I’m the same way. I have the perfect thing for you. I’ll be right back.” She dashes away with a little skip to her step.

Her cadence shouldn’t piss me off as much as it does. Bet she wouldn’t be so happy if her feet were broken.

Whoa, Whitney. That’s a little psycho.

I remind myself that Melanie is a sweetheart and my emotions are fueled by omega pre-heat rage. It’s not her fault I despise joyful things today, it’s the damn hormones. Leaving the door open, I return to my strange combination of food and happily stuff my face until she returns.

“Here we go. Sea salt brownies and my favorite crack chips.”

“I can’t have crack, Melanie, I’m on an all carb diet.”

She giggles. “These have all the carbs and none of the drug—they are addicting though.” Taking the seat next to me at the table, she places the containers of food in front of me. “What else can I get you? Do you feel like stabbing things yet?”

I choke on my coffee.

“Definitely stabby then. Don’t worry, I have a rage station in the garage.”

“Rage station?” I ask, interest piqued.

“It’s the best, especially those first few days when the hormones hit you so hard you want to punch a puppy.”

“Melanie, your son is a cop, you can’t punch animals.”

“I know, I know,” she says like she’s being scolded. “That’s why I had my mates build me a rage room.”

I stare at the little bits of rice left on the plate, wondering if it would be weird to lick them off. Melanie scoots the chips toward me.

“Crack.”

I side-eye her and grab the bag. “You’re funny.”

“Of course I am. Where do you think Asher gets it from?” She sighs and glances around. “Things smell like they’re going well.”

I scrunch my nose. “Don’t embarrass me.”

“It’s okay, honey. I have sex too.”

“Melanie,” I complain, sticking a chip in my mouth.

“Fine, fine. Bring the chips, let’s go rage.” She pats the table and hops up, still cheery as hell.

“If these have real crack in them,” I warn her, shoving another chip into my mouth.

“They don’t, I promise. I may have had an extra shot of espresso in my third cup of coffee this morning.”

“That explains everything.” I grudgingly leave the blanket behind and follow her outside to the side door of the two-car garage. There’s a cute red sedan on one side but the other is partitioned off with thick plastic that hangs from the ceiling. Inside, a drop cloth is spread over the ground and pieces of fabric and porcelain cover the floor. On the wall is a variety of weapons, for lack of a better word. A sledge hammer, garden shears, a dagger, a bat, a golf club, and a few other sharp objects. A big plastic bin holds pillows, cushions, and random dishes and pottery.

“Thanks to the thrift shops, you can unleash all the omega anger on these without worrying about destroying my property. Safety first.” She points to an extra set of safety goggles sitting on a worktable.

I set the chip bag down and put on the goggles. Eyeing the wall, I grab the dagger. It's heavier than I expected, but the weight feels right in my hand. Melanie claps and grabs a bigger cushion that was probably from some outside furniture. Setting it on the ground, she gestures me forward, her eyes lighting with excitement.

"This is the best part," she whispers.

"Why are you whispering?" I ask, dropping to my knees like I've done this a thousand times.

"I don't want to interrupt your moment." She sounds so serious right now, like this is some sort of sacred ritual.

I wrinkle my brow and shake my head. "This whole thing is weird."

"Stab it," she urges, still keeping her voice soft.

Resisting a laugh, I scowl at the cushion. It's an ugly puke green color and the fabric is rippled. The material would definitely leave marks on my legs if I sat on it while wearing shorts. The thought makes me irrationally annoyed, and I breathe in, savoring the unstable and slightly terrifying rage that comes at the thought of those stupid lines denting my skin.

"Fucker." I stab the thick cushion, the blade sinking in deep.

"Harder," Melanie whispers.

"That's what she said," I say on instinct, remembering Asher's joke from the other day.

Melanie laughs, and I stab the cushion again, this time ripping it open from one end to the other. Fluffy foam-like material spills out of the gouge. I stab the material a few more times, growling when the tip of the blade snags on a string. Tossing the weapon away from where Melanie stands, I use my bare hands to begin ripping the cushion apart.

"Stupid." Fabric tears and the guts of the cushion begin to drop to the floor. "Shit." I shove my hand into one of the holes and rip the insides out. "Dick." I shake the remainder of the

fabric and pull it again. A satisfying rip cuts through the air, and I heave out a breath, throwing the scraps to the ground.

A soft giggle fills the air. I slide my gaze to Melanie. Her hand is covering her mouth and her shoulders shake.

“What?” I ask, bristling.

“Stupid shit dick,” she says around gasps.

“It made sense in the moment.”

“Let’s do another.” She grabs a big vase and sets it on a pedestal that’s bolted to the ground. “Hurry!”

I hop up and rush to grab a bat. “What’s the rush?”

She shushes me. “Hit it!”

Pinching my eyebrows together, I swing the bat and shatter the vase. Pieces fly out around the room, a few tinier parts hitting my goggles. I guess safety really does matter when you’re breaking stuff like this. I stare at the cushion and pieces of porcelain on the floor, a strange smile pulling at my lips.

“Good girl. A few more?”

I lift my gaze and nod.

She answers my smile with a cackle and a grin. “The rage is strong in this one.”



After destroying several things, Melanie and I have a quick lunch and I help her clean out her garden beds. She tried to get me to go back inside and rest, but now that I’m out of my blanket cocoon and not angry, I don’t want to be alone. We work side by side for a few hours until Avi shows up.

“Melanie, Whitney isn’t free labor.”

She takes off her gloves and smacks them against his arm. “She offered to help.”

“She showed me her rage room,” I explain, shoving my spade into the dirt. We were in the middle of clearing out some

iris bulbs that were overgrown.

“Did she now?” he asks, walking up to me and stealing a kiss. “Did you break things?”

“Be careful not to make that one mad,” Melanie says.

“Ah, so you two are fast friends then? Besties in rage?”

“Whatever.” Melanie and I share a look that says *he wouldn't understand*. Alphas have their own rage filled instincts, but it's nothing compared to the pre-heat hormones an omega goes through.

He glances between us. “You're both sunburned. Maybe now is a good time for a break?”

“Are you done out here?” I don't want to leave her alone.

“We did more than I originally planned. The rest can wait. Go rest and enjoy Avi's company.” She winks at me, and I make a face.

“You're embarrassing her,” Avi chides.

“She'll get used to it.” One of Melanie's mates appears, and she squeals when he lifts her over his shoulder and smacks her ass.

I laugh and shake my head, glancing at Avi. “If you try that—”

“I wouldn't,” he promises. “Do you want to watch something?”

“Maybe Bob Ross?” I ask, oddly hopeful. His voice is so soothing and while simple, the paintings are beautiful.

“Of course. Come on. I'll make some popcorn. Tonight is pizza night so we don't have to worry about cooking.”

We head inside. I wash my hands and grab a quick drink before sitting on the couch and turning on the TV. It's nearly four o'clock and the guys will be home soon. The channel that comes on is a breaking report of a high-speed chase. There are several cop cars racing after the guy. He hops a curb and crashes through a fence before careening around the corner and gaining some distance.

The popcorn starts to pop, and Avi joins me on the couch.

“This idiot. He’s going to hurt someone,” he mutters, shaking his head. He shoots off a few texts.

“The guys?” I ask, pointing to the phone.

“Yeah. Making sure they’re good.”

We watch the chase. Avi’s phone stays silent. The popcorn finishes, and he sighs, running his hands through his hair before grabbing it. He returns and sets the bowl on the coffee table, but neither of us touch it. The chase continues and the guys never respond to him. He and I trade concerned looks, watching as the bad guy hits the fender of a cop’s SUV. Unease churns in my stomach, and I pull my legs to my chest, resting my chin on my knees. Avi wrings his hands and curses under his breath a few times.

The guy ends up T-boning another police car, and the chase ends when he tries to run. I release a sharp breath and relief washes over me. At least it’s over now. My stomach feels funny since the guys haven’t responded to Avi’s texts, but they’re probably too busy to reply.

Everything will be fine.

The device lights up on the table, and Avi snatches it, answering the call. “Yeah?” I try to listen, but the voice is too muffled for me to make out. Avi’s knuckles turn white as his grip tightens on the phone. “Is he okay?”

I drop my legs and scoot closer. He shoots his gaze in my direction and puts the phone on speaker so I can hear the end of what Hayden is saying.

“—checked out now, but he should be fine.”

“What happened?” I ask, voice frantic.

“Hey, trouble. Everything is fine.”

“Hayden,” I growl at the phone. “What happened?”

“Trev stopped the guy with his car.”

I suck in a sharp breath and glance at the screen. They’re replaying the final moments of the crash, the smaller car

smashing into the driver side of Trev's vehicle and propelling it to the side.

“He's okay?”

“He'll be fine. A few scratches, but it looks like there's no concussion.”

Avi drops his hand to my knee and squeezes it. “Tell him to write the report in the morning.”

“Captain already told him to go home after. That was a solid hit.”

Hayden's words aren't very reassuring, but he said Trev was fine. No, he said Trev had a few scratches. Like big ones or little ones? I swear if that asshole leaves Trev with new scars, I'll find him myself and kick his ass. Castration is illegal, but no one has to know about that... I could bury the penis. How deep would the hole have to be? Maybe a foot? Do severed cocks decompose? Is that even how castration works? Whatever, I'll bury the balls.

“Whitney?”

I glance at Avi. The phone is on the table again and the call ended. I didn't even hear the last part because I was fantasizing about castration. Blinking, I try to clear the violent images from my head. It doesn't work.

“I need the rage room again.” I rush into the garage and break things while I wait for the guys to show up.

Chapter Thirty-Six

WHITNEY

Hayden comes inside first. He stops in front of me where I stand with arms crossed by the door. His gray eyes take me in and the exhaustion on his face softens to sweet affection.

“Hey, trouble.”

“Are you okay?” I ask, digging my fingers into my arm to keep from grabbing him and clinging to him like some sort of desperate fool.

“I’m good. Better now that I’m home with you.” He grins and closes the distance between us, dropping a lingering kiss on my lips. “You smell so good.”

“Thanks, it’s the hormones.”

“Pre-heat?” He steps back and searches my face. “Do you need anything?”

I shake my head. “I’m fine. A little grumpy, but Melanie helped me find a way to deal with that.”

Asher and Trev finally come in. My tall goofball is wearing a grin that draws me in, but I plant my feet. I’m falling way too hard for these men, and I’m going to scare them off if I suddenly go stage five clinger on them because of my hormones. Asher comes to me without me saying a single thing. I lift my chin to meet his gaze, and his eyes sparkle with mirth.

“You’re cute when you’re grumpy.”

“Shut—” He kisses me before I can finish my sentence. Tongue tracing the seam of my lips, he breaks through some of my stubbornness as I open to him and let him claim this moment the way he wants to. My nails cut into my skin as I continue to resist every instinct that is screaming at me to wrap my arms around him and never let him go.

He pulls away first. “No, you shut up,” he whispers before placing a chaste kiss on my lips.

“You’re a jerk,” I mumble, shaking my head.

“I like you too, baby.”

I glower at him, but he simply snickers and glances at Trev. Remembering that he was hurt, I flick my gaze over his body. There’s a bandage on his wrist and a few minor scrapes on his face. Hayden wasn’t lying when he said Trev was okay. Trev’s honey-brown eyes drink me in with the same fervor. A purr rumbles in his chest.

“Whitney.”

My name is like sin on his lips. Each syllable a coaxing reminder of every orgasm he gave me and how I trembled beneath his touch. How I craved his mouth on mine. I swallow those emotions, but my scent betrays me. The men inhale deeply, a soft chorus of purrs and growls filling the room.

“It’s the hormones,” I say with a huff.

“Don’t lie to me.” Trev undoes his duty belt with one hand and carefully places it on the counter, holding my gaze the entire time. “Are you going to keep standing there like you’re not desperate to touch me?”

I bristle. “I’m not desperate.”

“That’s a damn shame,” he says, taking a step closer. “All day long, all I could think about was getting back to you and holding you.”

“You missed me.”

He nods. “And you missed us, but you’re mad. Why?”

“Hormones.”

“No, I don’t think it’s that.” He takes another step and Asher, Hayden, and Avi all circle in behind him. They close in on me and my heart races, my mind screaming at me that now is the time to run.

I ignore my instincts. “What makes you think you know me?” A growl chases my words.

Trev stops a foot away from me. “You’re scared of how you feel.”

“I don’t feel anything,” I say, stepping into his space and poking his chest.

“Oh yeah?” He grabs my wrist and holds me in place. “Then why is your heart racing? Why is your scent all over the place?”

“I’m in pre-heat.”

“Sure, but that doesn’t explain the sour worry mixed in with your anger and fear.”

Turning my head, I stare at a spot on the wall. “I didn’t want you to be hurt.”

“Look at me.”

“No.” I grind my teeth together and lower my eyebrows, wishing I had laser vision so I could obliterate the small discoloration on the otherwise bright paint.

“Look at me, Whit.” Trev’s alpha command is firm but gentle.

Whipping my head in his direction, I set my angry glare on him. He steps closer and my heart skips. He moves my hand and places it on his shoulder, easing his other arm around me.

“I’m sorry.”

His apology confuses me. I’m the one being grumpy.

“What for?”

“For scaring you.”

“You didn’t—” I cut off when Avi clears his throat. “It’s fine,” I say instead with a shrug. “I have no right to be angry.”

Pinching my eyebrows together, I stare at Trev's badge. They're not my pack. Having sex with them was a bad idea, especially with my heat nearing.

Trev lifts my chin. "You're our omega."

"That's cruel." I try to pull away, but he holds me tighter. "I'm pack now, but I'm not your omega. Not in that way."

"I'm not pretending right now, Whitney. You're ours."

"What if I don't want to be?" I snap.

"I told you not to lie to me." His eyes search my face. "Will you be our omega?" he asks, taking a different approach.

"Now you want to ask." My attention moves to his lips when his tongue flicks out to wet them. "You're such an alpha."

"I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing."

"I will when I stop fucking up."

I shake my head. "You're not fucking up."

"Tell me how to make this better." He sounds desperate as he glances at his friends for help. "We want you to really be ours. No more pretending for Melanie's sake."

"The Omega Council will never allow—"

"They can go fuck themselves," he growls.

I bite back a smile.

"You like that?" he asks with a soft growl. "Camila's a cunt."

"Yeah, she is," I say softly, beaming at him.

"You didn't answer," Avi says.

"She doesn't have to," Trev says, tipping his head. "She's already ours, aren't you, Whit?"

Biting my lower lip, I nod once. "And Hayden's," I add, to be clear. I meet Hayden's gaze over Trev's shoulder.

“You can’t get rid of me now,” Hayden supplies.

“It’s settled then.” Trev brushes his soft lips over mine. “There’s no running now.”

I steal a kiss from him, and his chest rumbles in appreciation. Asher whoops and swoops in for a hug from behind but he stops mid-motion when my hold on Trev tightens.

“Sorry, I got excited.”

Relaxing, I breathe and step away from Trev and open my arms to Asher. “Come on, I heard you learned how to give epic hugs.”

His grin is so goofy I can’t help but laugh as he picks me up and spins a little, resting his head on my chest and squeezing me. Their joy is almost enough to distract me from the nagging worries in the back of my mind.

Curtis is still out there.

The Omega Council will never allow this. What happens when they find out Pack Cocker bonded with an omega?



After Avi falls asleep, I grab Trev’s shoulder and shake him. His eyes pop open, like he wasn’t even close to sleeping, and I squint at him.

“What is it?”

I shake my head and stand, gesturing for him to follow me. The soft blue glow of the nightlight plugged into the wall is the only thing that keeps me from stubbing my toes on the way to the bedroom door. Trev follows me out of the room.

“Whi—”

“Shh,” I say over my shoulder, reaching back for his hand and dragging him to the living room.

He falls silent and follows me. I lead him to the couch and pull him close, rising onto my toes to tease my mouth over his

lips. He tries to slip his tongue into my mouth, but I pull back and shake my head.

I grab his hips and turn him so he's standing in front of the couch. "You drive me crazy, you know?" I whisper, placing my hands on his chest and pushing him onto the couch. He lands with a grunt and tips his head back, waiting for my next move. "You make me mad," I tell him, looking him in the eye as I grab for his shorts.

Trev lifts his hips as I hook my fingers into his basketball shorts and briefs. I slip my bottoms off too, keeping on the shirt I stole from him to sleep in. His thick erection sways in the open and I stare at it, running my thumb over the bead of precum at the tip.

"You piss me off." I straddle him and place my hands on the back of the couch, gazing down at him. "You make me so wet," I whisper, rolling my center over his erection. "So fucking hot," I rasp, lowering my face until our lips are inches apart. "If you die, I'll kill you."

He releases a sexy, throaty laugh and grabs his cock, helping me position myself. "Worried about me, Whit?" he asks, jerking his hips up so he slides in a few inches.

"Shut up." I claim his mouth with mine, sinking onto him and letting his girth stretch me with a tiny bite of pain. He's so goddamn big, but it feels so freaking good. His hands find my ass, and he forces my hips to roll over his length. I break away from our kiss, and he kisses my chest. He's so tall my tits are in the perfect spot for his lips and tongue to tease my nipples.

Lifting his hips to meet mine, Trev and I fall into a fast and needy rhythm, our bodies perfectly aligned and in sync. Trev looks at me through his lashes, teeth tracing over my nipple before he grabs my boob with his mouth and bites down. He's not gentle, but he's not savage about it either. The sharp sting of pain makes my toes tingle, and I tip my head back, moaning and bouncing on him. Trev splays his hands over my back and pistons into me, taking back control and forcing me to come.

"You piss me off too," he says, kissing my neck. "You're a fucking brat." He sucks on my throat and drives up into me.

His dick swells with his knot until we're locked together.

Gasping, I lean forward and wrap my arms around him, letting him take total control as we ride out the knot.

"You're mine," he whispers against my skin, peppering my shoulder and neck with kisses. "And I'll piss you off if it means this is my reward."

I giggle and melt in his arms, earning a deep, rumbling purr.

"That's it, Whit. You're fucking mine."



"Are you sure you can't stay?" Melanie asks again while the guys carry our things past her and to their cars. We're standing outside the guest house, and she's wringing her hands so much I fixate on the action.

"The house is fixed, Ma," Asher says over his shoulder.

And Curtis was found dead in a warehouse on Sunday from a gunshot wound to the gut. He'd been there for a few days before the body was found. The police assumed he'd gotten into a fight with another thug and left it at that. I'm not sad he's gone and I don't feel guilty for his death. If he had survived the wound I gave him, he would have killed me. Shelly is in jail and facing a life sentence for her part in what happened to Nova and the other dancers at the club. With everything Curtis owned being seized, she won't be getting out.

Despite all that, I'm still a little nervous about returning to the pack home. The house that will be mine now too.

"What about the rage room?" Melanie asks quickly.

"I can come visit." It's Monday and my heat is two days away. I won't need the rage room until my next pre-heat, and now that I've been introduced as the pack's omega, I don't see why I couldn't come back.

She gives me a stern look. “You better. Will you be okay during your heat? You know what to expect?”

“I’ll be okay.” Having the sex talk with Asher’s mom is not on my bucket list. Neither is fucking her son for five days in a row in her guest house.

“All right, I’ll stop. I only want to get to know my daughter-in-law. She’s more than I could have ever wished for.”

“Melanie.” I blink away moisture. “I might hate you if you make me cry.”

She chuckles and reaches for me. Since she’s so sweet and gentle, her movements don’t set off a reaction. The more the men openly offer me affection and hugs and kisses, the more I find I crave it. Melanie’s arms close around me, and she sighs, holding me tight. It takes ten seconds for me to melt in her arms and really hug her back. Twenty for my heart to warm. Thirty for the hug to speak to something inside of me, as if Melanie is whispering *it’ll be okay* to my soul. When she pulls back, part of me wants to grab her and bring her back. I settle for a warm grin instead.

“We can rage together again soon.”

“We better.” Melanie’s mates and mine join us in the courtyard.

I blink, thinking over that last thought. My mates. These guys are mine. Avi comes to my side and grabs my hand, squeezing it twice to let me know he sees me struggling and I’m not alone.

“Ah, young love.” Melanie makes a cooing sound and leans into Jonathan’s side. “What about babies?” she asks suddenly, grabbing her mate’s shirt.

The guys all look at me. My face scrunches and tension pools between my shoulders.

“I, uh, don’t really think I want any.” I hadn’t considered that maybe the guys might want them.

“Me either,” Trev confesses.

“I don’t really care either way,” Avi says. “Whatever Whitney wants.”

“Same,” Hayden and Asher say at the same time.

Relief floods through me. If any of them really wanted children, our relationship wouldn’t work. I don’t trust myself enough. I could end up just like my mother, and I refuse to traumatize a child like she did to me.

Melanie nods in understanding. “Oh, that’s fine. You do whatever makes your pack happy. Asher’s brother had a baby, so I can get snuggles when he comes to visit. You have your blankets?”

“Are you sure it’s okay for me to take them?” I’ve started to hoard soft things and Melanie insisted I take the ones I’d piled on the floor in one of the bedrooms.

“Of course. Keep them. I have plenty.” Her eyes water a little, and I look away so I don’t start crying. My hormones are all over the place lately.

“We’re going to go before you start crying, Ma.” Asher hugs her. “Thanks for letting us stay.”

“Don’t keep her away from me,” she says, patting his arms.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Asher glances at me. “She’s pack.”

“Come on.” Hayden grabs my hand and pulls me toward the door. Avi releases my hand and I shoot him an apologetic look. “We need to go now or Melanie might try to keep you here forever.”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” I whisper.

Hayden side-eyes me. “Troublemaker.”

“You like it.” I smirk at him. “Can I drive?” I ask when we reach the car, hoping he’s not one of those douchey guys that refuses to let a woman drive.

Hayden glances toward the house. The guys haven’t made it out yet. Taking the keys from his pocket, he sighs. “Don’t

make me regret it.” He pushes the keys into my hand.

“I promise to follow all of the rules, officer.”

Squinting at me, he growls softly. “You’re begging for a spanking.”

“It’s funny you think that’s a punishment.” I unlock his squad car and climb in.

“Don’t touch the computer.” He settles in beside me and shuts the door, buckling himself in. “And if you want to make it out of here without Trev seeing, you have thirty seconds.”

“Shit.” I stick the key in the ignition and buckle, pulling away from the curb just as the guys make it to the front yard.

“Go, go, go,” he says, laughing when I squeal and we take a corner a little too fast. The model cars in the back seat rattle around. “Easy, trouble. No wrecking the car.”

“You told me to go.” I shrug but slow down all the same.

We beat the guys home, and I don’t wreck the car. Hayden takes the keys from me and pulls me into his side, walking me toward the house.

“You go in, and I’ll grab your blankets.”

“Thank you,” I murmur, gazing at his home.

Our home.

The windows, door, and walls are fixed. The contractor did such a good job I can’t even tell there was a shooting. The house has a strange vibe and my skin crawls. Bad mojo coats the air and even though I know it doesn’t make any sense, I can almost taste gunpowder.

“Everything okay?” Hayden sets my blankets on the couch and comes over to me, cupping my face in his hands. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t like the way it feels in here,” I confess, looking down. “It’s silly.”

“No, it’s not. Let me try to help.” Hayden lights a few candles and opens the window a little, letting in a soft breeze.

“Better?”

“Not really,” I confess, glancing around with a frown. Curtis left bad mojo in the pack home.

“What’s up?” Trev asks when he enters to find the both of us staring at the living room.

I sigh. “It feels off in here.”

He sets his bag on the dining room table and glances around. “What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Like it’s not home anymore.”

“Home.” Trev cracks a smile as Asher and Avi come in.

“Why is he smiling like that? It’s terrifying.” Asher shivers and gives me a funny look. “This is your fault.”

“She said this was home,” Trev says.

“Ah. I see.” Avi winks at me. “She’s claiming our space.”

Hayden walks to the middle of the living room. “What if we move it around?”

The idea sends a jolt of excitement through me. “Yes. God, you’re so smart.”

“Really?” Asher deadpans.

“Shh,” I tell him, joining Hayden. “Hear me out, the couch could move here.” I point to the back wall so the couch could face toward the window. “And the television here.” I walk him through my plan while the alphas watch us, entirely uninterested in the planning we’re doing.

Right as Trev gets bored and decides to try and leave the room, I race over and grab his wrist. “No, no. We need big strong alpha muscles to move things.”

“You have two other alphas, Whit.”

“This is a group project. Don’t be dead weight.” I pull him to the center of the living room where Asher and Avi have met Hayden. “Good luck!” I slip out of Trev’s reach and grab my pile of blankets off the couch. “I’ll work on snacks after I find a place for these.”

“Whatever room you want,” Hayden says. “Make sure you’re going to be comfortable. We’ll fix this space.”

Relieved they don’t think I’m silly, I head down the hall. Hayden’s room is nice, but he has two windows, and it’ll be too bright. I want something dark and cozy. Like a cave. I check out Asher’s room, but it also has two windows and the closet is too small.

“Perfect,” I whisper when I come into Avi’s room. One window with blackout curtains, plenty of floor space, and he has a lot of pillows on his bed. I lay out the blankets to see how I feel about it. The three I brought from Melanie’s house aren’t quite soft enough, so I grab the comforters off the guy’s beds. At seven blankets thick, it’s finally soft enough. I’m still missing pillows, but the guys can grab those when my heat starts. I don’t want to totally strip their beds. Satisfied with the beginning of my nest, I head back to the kitchen. The guys are quiet as they work, like they’ve done this a thousand times and already know when and where to put things to make the transition as seamless as possible.

Twenty minutes later, things are moved and the mojo is feeling much better. The couch facing the window was a good call. We’ll be able to see the road and anyone coming up the sidewalk.

“Uh, babe, you realize we just had lunch, right?”

Melanie made some amazing sandwiches as a farewell meal, but I’m starving.

“Uh, Asher, yeah, I know.” I wave my hand over the small plate of crackers and cheese. “This is for you guys.” I grab the big plate full of meat, fruit, cheese, crackers, and nuts. “This is for me.”

“I like nuts.” He pouts.

“There’s nothing wrong with that.” I pop an almond in my mouth.

He scowls. “You know what I mean.” He reaches for my plate.

“Touch my food and I will stab you with a rusty spoon.”

“Is that even possible?” Avi asks, grabbing water from the fridge. “I mean, spoons aren’t exactly stabbable objects.”

“Anything is stabbable with the right motivation.” I scoot toward the end of the counter, far away from the guys, and set my plate down. “Oh, I claimed your room for my nest. I hope that’s okay.”

“Of course.” Avi runs his hand through his hair. “Does this mean you like me best?”

The other alphas in the room growl, and Hayden shakes his head. “Don’t set them off. I’ll be the one to clean it up. Are you thirsty?” Hayden asks me, taking the cracker and cheese out of Asher’s hand and popping it into his mouth.

“Asshole,” Asher grumbles, building another sandwich.

“Nah,” I say around a mouthful of grapes.

“You need to at least drink water.” Hayden grabs one from the fridge and sets it in front of me. “Drink.”

“Yes, daddy,” I tease.

“Not my kink, trouble, but spanking is still on the table. Just tell me when.”

“Maybe after my snack.” I’m actually really thirsty, so I take a big sip to appease him. “Where’d Trev go?”

“Miss me already, Whit?” Trev rounds the hall corner.

“Don’t get cocky.”

“Little late for that.” He swipes a piece of meat from my plate, and I growl. Avi takes it out of his hands before he can eat it and hands it back to me.

“Thank you, Avi. At least one of you knows how to treat an omega.”

“What about all those orgasms I gave you, Whit? You forget about those?”

My cheeks heat and desire flares inside of me.

“No sex. You need to rest until your heat.” Hayden moves Trev a few feet back and the alpha lets himself be manhandled.

“Fine, but only because I know you’re right.” Trev gives me a slow once over. “Make no mistake, when your heat hits, I’m going to beat that pretty pussy up.”

“Oh my god.” I nearly choke on the food in my mouth and the guys all laugh at that, like what Trev said isn’t a big deal. My vagina begs to differ. She is very, very excited about the prospect of him pounding into me, so much so that my panties get a little wet and my walls clench in need.

“No. Sex,” Hayden orders, squinting at me.

“This is torture,” I say with a shake of my head. “Honestly. Worst pack ever.”

“I’m going to spank you.”

“You said no sex.” I make a face and shove a cracker sandwich in my mouth.

“I don’t have to fuck you to bend you over my knee, trouble. Keep it up and see what happens.”

My stomach quivers, but deep down, I know he’s right. When my heat hits, it’ll be five days of non-stop sex. Rest is super important right now and now that I’ve eaten, I am a little tired.

We finish our snacks and decide to watch a movie. The guys asked for the week off, making some excuse about Asher’s mom needing help so they could be home during my heat. The couch isn’t big enough for all of us, so Hayden and I snuggle on the recliner until the others get jealous. I switch laps throughout the movie, loving how easy things are.

If things could stay this simple, that would be great.

Chapter Thirty-Seven

WHITNEY

I'm sitting on the couch, sipping my second cup of coffee when I see her. Every ounce of happiness drains out of me. Dread floods through me, weighing my soul down and reminding me I'm not this happy omega. I'm a broken, foolish girl who can't do anything right.

"Stupid little bitch," she hisses in my ear.

Avi is humming at the stove while bacon crackles in a pan, oblivious to the sudden panic settling its arm around my shoulder like an old friend. Avi's door opening woke me this morning and I didn't want to leave him alone. Now I regret waking because my mother is marching up the sidewalk. I set my coffee mug on the table and stand, stiffly walking to the door.

I count my steps on the way. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six.

"Do you want scrambled or over easy?" Avi asks.

I open the front door. The smirk she gives me makes my stomach flip.

"Whitney?" Avi's voice sounds far away as mother places her foot on the step.

The wood groans under her weight, a warning sound that makes my heart rate spike.

"I've been looking for you," she says with a sneer. "Shoulda known I'd find you slutting around."

Confusion and fear and frustration clog my throat, giving her a moment to take another step up the stairs. Her foot thuds on the wood, and I take an instinctive step back.

“You can’t run now,” she hisses.

“Whitney?” Avi’s fingers brush against my forearm, and he steps in front of me. “Who’s our guest?” Avi may be the gentle one of the group, but he’s still intimidating at over six-feet.

“I’m her mother. Who the fuck are you?” She’s yelling so loud the rest of the guys are bound to wake up.

I don’t need to live through the embarrassment of all of them meeting her.

“It’s okay, Avi. Let me talk to her.” I place my hand on his back but he refuses to move. Appreciation swells inside of me, but the longer I make her wait, the more rambunctious she’ll get. “I’ll be fine,” I whisper, slipping around him.

“Call for me if you need me.”

Mother’s scowl is so fierce and full of hate.

How did she become this person? I don’t understand what made her so angry. Maybe she never wanted children.

“What would Curtis think?” she asks, sliding her gaze over Avi. “I don’t think he’d like another pack touching what he owns.”

My shoulders tense. “How do you know Curtis?”

I don’t bother telling her he’s dead.

She snickers and takes the final step onto the porch, meeting me in the middle of the wooden floor. “It took me a while, but I finally found out who bought you. Lindsey’s a dear family friend.”

Betrayal slices into me. Lindsey told her about Curtis?

“What do you want?” I ask, voice cold. She’s not here for a family reunion.

She eyes the house, seeking a way to find something to her advantage no doubt. "I know my mom left you something."

Crossing my arms, I raise an eyebrow. "And?"

"She was my mother. It's only right that you give me whatever it was."

"You don't even know what she left me," I say, a hard line wrinkling my brow. "And she left it for me. Not you. You have no legal right to it."

She advances so suddenly that I gasp and stumble back. "Still a weak little bitch, I see."

"Why are you so cruel?"

"I wouldn't have to be if you weren't so disgusting." She spits at my feet, and despite years of her nasty words, shock courses through me. I turn to leave her on the doorstep, but she snatches my arm by the biceps. Her fingers bite into my skin with a bruising grip. "You're going to give me whatever it is."

"I'm not giving you anything." Though my words are bold, my voice trembles a little as her dull blue eyes drill into me. So many years wasted on her, hoping she'd change. Hoping she'd see me. "Why do you hate me so much?"

My whispered question makes her pause, and for a second, her grip loosens. I wrench out of her arms and shove her chest.

"Get away from me," I growl, so angry she didn't even try to deny it.

"Don't you fucking touch me, omega slut." She rears her hand back to strike me, but before she can, a dark hand wraps around her small wrist.

"Touch her and I will make you live to regret it." Trev yanks her toward him like a rag doll, snarling in her face and releasing a harsh growl. "You have no power here."

Mother's face turns bright red. "How dare you touch me. You don't think I know the good ole O.C. is looking for your whore?"

"Stop talking," he barks in her face.

The command snaps her mouth shut, and she fumes, her breaths coming in hard pants.

“You don’t come to our house and threaten our omega.” Trev glances at me, the anger on his face giving way to concern. “Are you hurt?”

I’m tempted to say yes to see what he’d do, but all I want is for her to leave. “No.”

His eyes narrow and cut back to my mother. “If I catch you at our house again, I’ll throw your whole pack in jail.”

“You can’t do that,” she snarls, breaking through his alpha command.

“Watch me.” Trev releases her wrist and spins her around. “Run before I decide it’s a good day to break the law.”

“Camila is going to enjoy ripping your pack apart.” Mother glares at him then turns her sights on me. “What is it they say? Like mother, like daughter.”

Trev walks after her as she leaves, looming behind her like a rain cloud threatening to unleash a nasty storm.

“You okay, trouble?” Hayden brushes his knuckles over my arm to let me know he’s at my right side.

I shake my head, glancing over my shoulder to look at Avi and Asher. They both look concerned too. “I think I need a drink.”

“What if we try something different?” Hayden asks.

Turning, I study his face. “You don’t think I should drink?”

“It’s early. Do you really want to get drunk?”

“I don’t want to feel,” I say, glancing at Trev as he comes up the steps.

“She’s going to be a problem.” Trev’s jaw ticks.

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s not your fault,” he assures me, but that’s all it feels like.

“Who’s going to believe her?” Avi asks. “I wouldn’t think she’d be a reliable source based on her appearance and the boozy smell she wears like perfume.”

“That’s a touch judgmental,” I murmur.

“Maybe, but I’m trying to think positive. If she thinks anyone is going to take her seriously, she’s mistaken. I doubt the security at Camila’s office would even let her into the building.” Avi glances at Trev.

“I hate to admit it, but he’s right. Your mom has an aura...” He trails off.

“She looks crazy, you mean?”

He grimaces. “Yeah.”

“Well, if you think we don’t need to worry.” I shrug.

“We should worry a little, but I wouldn’t count on anyone taking her seriously,” Avi says. “It’s shitty they’d pass judgment, but it works in our favor.”

“Here, I have something to show you. It’ll take your mind off things.” Hayden gestures to the side of the house and walks down the steps.

Eyeing the street, I make sure my mother is truly gone before following after him. Trev quietly follows us, but Avi and Asher head back to the kitchen. I try to catch his gaze to see what he’s feeling, but he avoids me. I shouldn’t take it personally, but it’s hard when the drama my mother caused is the reason for his sour mood.

“Have you ever thrown an ax?”

“Uh, no.” I stop beside Hayden and take in their backyard. Two metal stations hold a few varieties of axes and two targets painted on boards at the end of the yard are enclosed under a mesh netting.

“It may not be Melanie’s rage room, but I think you’ll feel better once you try it out.” Hayden steps up and grabs an ax. He positions himself in front of a spray painted line and hefts the ax over his shoulder and throws it. The blade sticks into the worn target with a solid thwack.

“I don’t know how to throw it.”

“It’s easy,” Trev says, lacing his fingers with mine and pulling me toward the other lane. He runs his thumb over the back of my hand. “The easiest way to learn is overhand.” He demonstrates how to throw it, and I practice without holding anything a few times before he lets me try a real one.

“I’m next,” Asher says as he and Avi come around the side of the house.

“You’ll wait until Whitney is done.”

Grumpy Trev is my favorite.

“He can go now, Hayden isn’t throwing in his lane.” I bump my elbow against Trev’s side.

Trev searches my face and presses his lips into a line, reluctantly nodding. “Follow the rules. One thrower at a time.”

“Yes, sir.” Asher steps up beside me, spinning an ax and winking at me. “Ladies first.”

“Chivalry isn’t dead,” I say, staring at the target and adjusting my stance.

“You always come before me,” Asher says just as I prepare to release the ax. I let go too late and it clatters to the floor in front of the target.

“Don’t distract me with sex talk.” I scowl at him even though this is better than dwelling on my mother’s visit and her threats.

He throws his and hits near the center. “If you can’t focus beyond a few dirty comments, you’ll never be good at this.”

“I can ignore you.” I grab another ax and breathe out, settling my nerves.

I bring the ax back and start to move just as Asher says, “Watching you handle that ax has me a little hard.”

“Fucker!”

“You said you could focus.” Asher gives me a pointed look and grabs another ax, not even bothering to look at the target.

“Like I said, if you can’t focus when I’m talking about my dick”—he throws the ax—“then you’ll never be any good.”

“Do you really want to taunt me when I have a deadly weapon in my hands?” I point the final ax from my station in his direction.

“Easy, trouble.” Hayden grabs the last ax and stares at Asher until he relents and joins Trev and Avi at the small metal table set on a slab of concrete. “Think about what makes you mad and focus on that. I promise you won’t even hear him.”

“That’s a bold promise.”

“I don’t make promises I can’t keep, remember?”

I eye him. “All right. I’ll try.”

“Good. Breathe in, focus on that anger, breathe out, and let it fly.”

Picturing my mother’s face at the center of the target, I do as he instructs. Asher’s saying something, but all I can see is the face that looks too damn much like mine. The ax hits the board and sticks at the very edge. Nowhere near the middle, but far better than my last two throws.

“Atta girl.” Asher whoops as Hayden and I collect our axes from the end of the lane and bring them back to the holders. “Keep it up and soon enough you’ll be a hotshot.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I glance at Avi with a hopeful look.

He grins. “Breakfast is ready.”

“My hero.” I pretend to swoon, then my hormones get the better of me, and I race to the front of the house.

“Save some for the rest of us,” Asher calls after me.

I growl to myself because I’m hungry and sharing is the last thing I’m willing to do. Well, at least with food. They can share me all they want. This whole no sex until my heat business sucks. Maybe if I ask nicely, Asher will take me to his bedroom. He’s definitely the weakest link. Deciding I

should heed Hayden's spank warning, I decide to ask for ice cream as a substitute.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

WHITNEY

I'm in the middle of showering when I hear shouting. Rinsing the conditioner from my hair, I listen to see if I can make out the words but the water is too loud. I finish up and shut off the shower, wrapping a towel around myself and tip-toeing to the door.

"It's her decision. You shouldn't be touching any of it." Avi sounds pissed.

"Dude, I heard you the first time, okay? She's going to like this, trust me." Asher scoffs from somewhere farther away.

"Whatever, it's your funeral when she sees how you messed up her nest."

My ears perk up at the word and a soft growl builds in my chest. I rip the door open and storm into the hallway. Avi glances at me and pulls an *I'm really sorry* face. I narrow my eyes and march past him and straight into his room where I had all of my stuff. Key word: my stuff. Not Asher's. Well, technically a blanket or two belongs to him but that's beside the point. This is my nest.

Asher is standing barefoot on Avi's bed, hanging a string of lights around the border of the ceiling. The bright overhead light was traded out for a dim bulb that casts a comforting orangish glow. There's three diffusers running, filling the air with a blend of myrrh, sandalwood, and musk. My blankets bed is still on the floor, but now there's a mattress under it and a stack of a dozen towels at the side of Avi's dresser.

“Asher,” I say when I finally snap out of my surprise. “What are you doing?”

“I’m.” He pauses to hook the string of lights to the final wall hook. “Fixing your nest.”

“What was wrong with my nest?” I growl the question, clenching my fists at my side.

Hopping off the bed, Asher stands in front of me. “Nothing.” He sticks his hands in the pockets of his jeans. “I wanted to help. You didn’t get very much, and you deserve more than a few blankets on the floor.”

I want to be mad. Really, I do. I’m annoyed, sure, but the changes actually make the place more cozy.

“You should have asked.” I shake my head. “You can’t go around changing my nest without permission. It pisses me off.”

“Shit. You’re right. I’m sorry, babe. Do you like it? I’ll take it all down if you don’t.” He moves to grab a diffuser.

“Don’t you dare.” I adjust the towel, securing it with my hand.

He flinches at the hardness of my tone, but a smile cuts across his handsome face. “You like it?”

“Yes, I like it. Punk.”

“I knew she’d love it,” he tells Avi who is still standing in the hall. “Before you had a nest... but this”—spreading his arms, he does a spin—“this is a mother fucking nest. A fuck nest.”

“A boink bunker.” Hayden appears at my side.

I startle and step away, glaring at him.

“Sorry.” He gives me a sheepish grin.

“It’s fine.”

“A rut hut.”

I growl at Avi the same time Asher and Avi burst out laughing.

“Never mind. That was a dumb one,” Avi says, fighting a smile.

These men. I swear. I don’t know why I agreed to be their omega. Okay, that’s a lie. I really like them, and I can’t wait to have their mate marks on my skin.

“No, dude. A fuck nest for the fuck fest.” Asher pulls out his phone, furiously typing.

“So help me if you are texting your mother about the nest.” I don’t finish the threat.

“Dammit,” he mutters to himself.

“What is it?” I walk over and peek at his phone. “Urban Dictionary? Seriously?”

“I thought I’d coin the phrase but it turns out someone already did that in 2011. Assholes.”

Hayden snickers. “Remember when he got in an argument with Uriel in middle school because they both swore they invented the word chillaxin?”

“Yeah and it turns out they’d both heard it in a song.” Avi joins us in the bedroom and rolls his eyes. “They were both so pissed at each other, but turns out they stole the phrase from someone else.”

“Can you really steal that phrase?” I ask, sitting on the now soft bed. I spread the towel over my lap and press my legs together. They’ve all seen me naked, but I’m not comfortable flashing the vag around. “Whose mattress is this?”

“I guess it’s only stealing if you insist you made it up but you really didn’t and that’s Asher’s bed.” Hayden joins me and nudges me. “So you have to decide. Do you want to call it a fuck nest or a boink bunker.”

“Oh my god. No. Neither. Where’s Trev?”

“Why? Going to sic grumpy butt on us?”

“Maybe,” I grumble. “Why can’t we just call it a nest?”

Trev stops outside Avi’s door, eyeing all of us. He has a bag from a department store in his hand. “Wow. This is nice.”

I glare at Asher. “Someone helped themselves to my nest.”

“Fuck nest,” he whispers.

“For the last time, we’re not calling it a fucking fuck nest.”

“I know we’re not calling it a fucking fuck nest, that’s redundant, but fuck nest—”

“Stop teasing her.” Trev cuts Asher off. “I have a present.”

“Oh, see. An alpha who knows how to give gifts.” Asher pouts, and I feel a little bad for guilt tripping him. I smile and give him a quick kiss. “Thank you for the renovated nest. I love it.”

“You’re welcome. I promise to ask next time. I only got excited.” He beams at me, so proud of his handy work.

“Whit,” Trev says. “Come here.”

“Another vibrator?” I ask, leaving Asher’s side.

“Another one?” I hear him ask Hayden and Avi. I don’t stick around to hear the answer.

Trev opens his door and tugs me into his bedroom, tossing the bag on the bed and slowly pushing me against the wall. He’s so gentle about it that I don’t panic. His lips trace over mine in the barest of touches, and I grab his shirt, smashing my mouth to his. Laughing, he deepens the kiss for a moment then breaks away.

“Go look at your present.”

He’s lucky I’m excited to see what he got. I rush to the bed, taking out the tissue and the prettiest dress I’ve ever seen. The fabric is soft and the top is pink with a navy blue empire waist skirt.

“This is gorgeous.” I glance at him. “I don’t have anywhere to wear it.”

“You will. I’m sorry we can’t go out now, and I’m sorry it’s not a nicer brand.”

I balk. “This is nice.”

It may not be an eight-hundred dollar dress, but it's a hell of a lot nicer than my thrift store finds. My heat is so close and my emotions are so overwhelming. I'm fighting tears of joy right now. I turn away from him and blink to clear them.

"I love it."

"Put it on?"

I look at him over my shoulder. His eyes are hooded, and he leans his back against the wall, patiently waiting for me to drop the towel.

"My hair is still wet."

"The dress will dry."

True. I turn and unwrap the towel, holding it open as his hungry gaze rakes over me. My nipples automatically harden and my perfume floods the room, so strong it almost overwhelms me. Trev's nostrils flare, and he steps toward me. Heat rushes through me, and I release a soft pant, letting go of the towel.

They've been denying me sex for almost two whole days. I'm so fucking horny, I don't wait for him to reach me. I grab my breasts and roll my nipples between my fingers, whimpering when that's not nearly enough to ease the intense need.

"Trev?" Why does my body hurt like this?

"Whit," he growls my name. "We need to go to your nest."

My heat.

He opens the door and holds his hand out to me. I see the desire to grab me, but he holds himself back. I take the three steps and grab his hand. Asher, Avi, and Hayden are still in the nest when we come in.

"Someone fuck me."



TREV

Her scent is like death by chocolate. Sweet, a touch of bitterness, and so rich I almost come at the smell of it. Whitney grabs for my pants as I help her get on the mattress on Avi's floor.

“Whit, I'm trying to be a gentleman.”

“Fuck. Me,” she snarls.

“You heard the woman,” Hayden says, taking his shirt off and dropping his pants. He grabs his erection. Asher and Avi follow suit until I'm the only one still wearing clothes. My own cock twitches in my pants as Whitney's nails rake over my shaft through the material of my slacks. The guys start stroking themselves, and I rip my attention from them and to the woman who means everything to me.

She collapses back onto the bed and moans, running her hands over her breasts and down her stomach. I rip off my clothes, tearing my shirt in the process, and come down on top of her, taking over where her finger teases her clit. She's soaking—her slick coating the insides of her legs—and already ready for a knot. I won't knot her until I give her the first orgasm of her heat. I claim her mouth, capturing her tongue with mine and teasing the sensitive bundle of nerves until she gasps and bites my lower lip, tugging on it with a throaty moan as her body tenses. Her chest and neck turn red, flushing with her impending release.

I pinch her clit, and she releases my lip, dropping her head back to shout her release as her come covers my hand. My dick pulses, and I growl with my own need. Gathering her sweet essence onto two fingers, I slip my digits into her mouth as I enter her with one hard thrust. Her tight walls clamp around my shaft, desperately trying to keep me inside of her.

Sucking on my fingers, she holds my gaze as I rear back and slam into her again, startling a gasp from her lips. I move my hand to her left tit, kneading and squeezing as I set a steady but punishing pace. Whitney gasps for air, but I thrust a little harder, making it impossible for her to catch her breath as I destroy her.

“Trev,” she moans, nails digging into my ass. “Please, I need it.”

“Need what?” I ask, dropping my mouth to her throat. I kiss and lick and bite, teasing her with exactly what she needs.

“Knot me. Bite me. Mate me,” she says between pants, rocking her hips in time with me.

“Mine,” I whisper against her skin as the base of my shaft swells, stretching and locking us together. Once we’re stuck together, I slowly gyrate, teasing my teeth over her throat. “Mine,” I say again and strike, marking her as Pack Cocker and forever my omega. There will never be another woman. Never another omega. It’s only ever been Whitney for me. The only woman I ever want to scold me. The only woman I ever want to moan my name.

A bond that is only broken by death snaps in place between us, tethering our souls to one another and making me want her even more.

She makes a soft noise, and I swirl my tongue over the bite, soothing the wound before taking her mouth with mine. I slip my hand between our bodies and tease her clit again, helping her come while I spill every ounce of my seed into her body. She cries out over and over and over until the first blanket is drenched in our juices and she’s murmuring my name with a pleased little grin.

When my knot fades about fifteen minutes later, I flop onto my back and pull her close. Whitney rests her head on my shoulders, rubbing her pussy over my side, already begging for more. I release a dark chuckle and kiss her shoulder before climbing off the bed so Avi can take my place. My dick is painfully hard again, so I stroke it, watching her stare at Avi with stars in her eyes.

She’s ours.



AVI

I've never wanted something so much in my life. When Trev bit Whitney, I was so jealous I nearly stormed over there and ripped him off of her. The only thing that helped me keep my cool was knowing that soon enough, Whitney would be mine to take. As soon as she's on the bed, I climb on, dropping kisses up her legs until I reach her apex.

I bury my face between her legs, not giving a damn that she's covered in Trev's cum. This is our omega and his taste mixed with hers is divine, like a spicy chocolate that melts in my mouth. I run the flat of my tongue over her and reach up with my hand to tweak her nipple. Whitney watches me between her legs with an almost feral grin, there's something distinctly predatory about the omega. Like she knows she's about to get everything she's ever wanted, and she'll destroy anyone who gets in her way.

Humming, I close my mouth around her clit and insert two fingers into her, sliding them through her slick and curling my fingers to tease her G-spot. Whitney thrusts her hips up, and I smile against her, redoubling my efforts. I eat her out like she's a five-course-meal, savoring every last drop until she squeals as she comes all over my face. I clean my lips with my tongue and kiss my way up her stomach, stopping at her breasts even though my cock aches to be inside of her.

I suck on both of her nipples before nibbling up her neck and capturing her mouth. She moans and grabs my dick, putting her ankle around my leg and pushing me inside of her. I hiss against her lips, loving the soft rippled texture of her walls running over my length. Whitney begins to rock her hips so I flip us, placing her on top and grabbing her ass, helping her ride my dick until she comes down on top of me, grinding and writhing until she finds the release she seeks. Heat spreads between us as my knot grows. I'm not ashamed to knot her so soon—this is all I wanted. This is all she wanted. She rolls her hips, scraping her tits over my chest.

“Give me your neck,” I rasp, kissing her hard before she tips her head back, letting me mark her. I ride the high of the mate bite, pumping in and out of her until her body tightens and her pussy squeezes around my dick, milking me as she

cries out in pleasure. I kiss up her neck and cup her face in my hands, giving her every piece of myself until we're both panting.

She slows on top of me so I roll us, placing her on her back. I drop my forehead against hers and stare into her gorgeous blue eyes while I grind into her, her wet heat coating my skin like a fine sheen of sweat. Whitney's scent wraps around me and burrows into my skin, sinking into my bloodstream and finding a home inside of my soul. The bond only makes me come harder, my knot pulsing with each release. I want her to reek of us by the time we're done, to smell like each of us so every man that ever sees her knows exactly who she belongs to.

Whitney's body arches against mine, and I kiss her again, lazily grinding and tilting her hips so I can hit her G-spot. She mewls, spurring me to thrust a little harder, hitting the same spot until she screams my name and collapses. Strands of her dark hair cover her forehead. I gently push them aside and work her over until my knot fades.

I rest my forearms on either side of her head and kiss her deeply, stealing her breath until she presses on my chest to get air. Her sexy grin makes me hard all over again, but I know better than to be selfish right now. We have five days of heat. There's plenty of time to bury my cock in her warmth. I lick the spot where Trev and I claimed her, leaving more of my scent behind.

"Avi," she murmurs, wrapping her arms around my middle. "Happy little orgasms." She giggles and runs her hand over my abs, reaching for my cock.

"So many happy orgasms," I whisper against her forehead, kissing her temple. "As much as I love the way your hands feel around my cock, Asher's waiting for you."

"Mmkay," she says, her eyes halfway shut. She's already getting sleepy.

"She's all yours," I tell Asher, turning her so he can take her hand without freaking her out. I don't know if she'd freak out during her heat, but it's best to be mindful of her triggers.

“Hey, baby,” Asher scoops up from the bed and she instantly wraps her legs around his waist. “As much as I love the nest, I think I want to fuck you against the wall. Maybe bend you over Avi’s desk.”

“Yessssss.” Whitney’s happiness is the only thing keeping me from telling Asher to fuck off, but her pleasure comes first.

Asher can take her however she wants.



ASHER

Bending that sweet ass over is my first priority. I shove the stack of papers over, shooting Avi an apologetic smirk as I slide Whitney down my body until her feet hit the floor. She tips her head back and licks her lips. I bend to capture her tempting mouth in a rough kiss before turning her around and placing my hand in the middle of her back. I wait for her to tense or freak out, but she leans into my touch, pressing her ass back against my swollen length.

“Put your arms on the desk,” I tell her, easing her forward until she rests her tits on her arms and glances back at me. Her round ass taunts me and I run my hand between her legs, stroking through her folds as I find my position behind her, leveling the head of my dick with her center and teasing her hot core with it. She whimpers and pushes her ass back, making my cock slip through her folds. I tsk and grab her hip and my cock with my other hand, pressing it into her center and easing inside of her. Whitney bites her lip, and I watch her as I slide deep inside.

Her nostrils flare as my scent wraps around us. I smirk and playfully smack her ass, moving in and out of her until she begins to demand more, pushing her ass against me with each thrust. I run a finger down her spine, purring when she arches and wiggles at the touch, her core involuntarily clenching around me.

Spreading her ass cheeks, I tease her smaller entrance, easing a finger around the rim of her ass.

“Asher,” she gasps, grabbing hold of the edges of the desk as her body starts to tense.

“Yeah, baby? You want that?” I ease the tip of my finger inside of her.

She moans and nods, moving her body in time with mine.

“Just like that, huh?” I ask, thrusting into her harder. “You want my finger in your ass?”

Whitney can only make small noises of encouragement, too lost in her feverish need. I squeeze her ass cheek with one hand and slowly slide my finger in.

“I got you, baby.” I move my finger in her ass in time with my thrust, pumping into her and holding off my knot with a clenched jaw. I want to knot her so bad, but I’ll have to turn her around for that. I don’t want to bite her from behind. “You’re doing so good,” I tell her, picking up my pace.

I clench my ass and slam into her. The desk groans as it scoots across the floor, I take small steps to keep my dick fully inside of her until she slaps the top of the desk, releasing an angry little growl as her core starts to clench and pulse. I add another finger in her ass, earning a shout of pleasure as her slick covers me. She soaks the front of the desk with her juices, and I smile in triumph, slowing my thrusts and gently easing my fingers out of her ass. She groans in protest when I slide out of her, but I help her turn around and lift her by the back of the legs, guiding her thighs around my waist. Walking her to the nearest wall, I plant her back against it and slide into her hot center again.

There’s no holding back my knot now. My cock swells until I’m tightly nestled inside of her, pumping my hips in a steady rhythm as she captures my mouth. Her tongue traces desperately across my lips and I open for her, sucking on her bottom lip and fighting for control of the kiss. She growls against my mouth, and I relent, letting her demanding tongue steal my air.

I rip myself away from her kiss, nuzzling her neck and preparing to bite her before it’s too late and I have to wait for

the next time I knot her. With nothing but carnal desire, I take her neck between my teeth and claim her. My heart skips a beat as the bond snaps into place, an invisible thread pulling taut between us. My stomach flutters with happiness, and I growl in approval, grinding into her and working her clit with my abs until her cum coats my dick and my smile hurts.

This is my omega.

I can't wait to give her the world.



HAYDEN

As soon as Asher pulls out, I steal Whitney from his arms. He releases her without a fight. Whitney releases a soft moan and leans against me. I guide her to the bed and lay her down, spreading her legs and positioning myself between them. She runs her hands over her body and writhes under her own touch.

“More,” she rasps, the scent of her slick filling the air as her body begs to be touched.

I may not be an alpha, but I'm hard as a rock for her. I don't have the desire or time to play with her like I'd like to. Teasing the head of my cock through her soaking folds, I kneel in front of her and watch her body arch and writhe. Her chest rises and falls as her skin flushes, eyes snapping to meet mine. There's a violent promise in her irises, like if I don't fuck her right now, she'll rip my dick off. Biting my lip at how hot she is right now, I tilt her hips with my hands and slide into her, sheathing myself until I'm balls deep inside of her. Whitney moans and mumbles incoherently, all encouraging sounds that make my chest swell with pride.

I hold her hips off the bed and slam into her. She reaches over her head, gripping the top of the bed and lifting herself in my hands. Her breasts bounce with each thrust I make. I slam into her hard enough to shove her head a little off the edge of the bed. She mewls, and her body slackens in my hold.

Shifting so her ankles rest against my shoulders, I slide my thumb over her clit, drawing another purr of approval.

I grab her left ankle with my free hand and kiss it, teasing my teeth over her skin as I pinch and tease her sensitive bundle of nerves. Her cum covers my cock, and I move a little slower, determined to give her stars before I finish. Just before she can come again, I pull out of her and draw her body up toward my face. I lean forward and bury my mouth in her cunt, cleaning her with my tongue while she grinds against me.

Her hand finds my side, and her nails dig into my skin as her thighs tighten around my head. I release a throaty groan over her clit before sucking and running the flat of my tongue over her. She squeezes my head between her legs and rubs her delicious fucking pussy all over my mouth, making sure I memorize her taste. Lowering her hips onto the bed, I claim her lips and tease my tongue over her, letting her taste her sweet essence as I enter her again. I hold her head and thrust into her hard enough her jaw drops open, her pupils dilate. So I do it again. Whitney hooks her ankles behind the back of my legs, pulling me deeper into her.

“One of these days I’m going to make you crawl to me,” I whisper against her mouth. “I’m going to have you begging to suck my cock.” I thrust my hips again, relishing in the way her tits smash against my chest. “One day, trouble, I’m going to spit in that pretty mouth and face fuck you.”

She makes a noise that tells me she’s close. I kiss her again and keep my steady but punishing pace. I swallow a moan and rip my lips from hers, dropping my mouth to her throat and breathing in her chocolatey scent. Whitney’s pussy clenches, and I slam into her again, running my teeth over her skin.

It isn’t right. I shouldn’t, but all I want to do is mark her too. Claim her next to where my brothers left their bites, reminding Whitney that while she may have alphas, she has me too. She needs all of us. My chest rumbles in approval when she squirts, and I place my teeth on her neck, hesitating.

“Please,” she whines, turning her head to give me better access.

I can't deny her. Sinking my teeth into her skin, I pick up my pace, jack hammering into her until my cock pulses and my name tumbles out of her mouth in a throaty rasp. The bond hits me so hard I pull my mouth from her throat, sucking in a sharp breath and staring at her while our souls twine around one another. The tether between us strokes over me with a soft caress. I shudder and grow hard all over. Our heartbeats and breaths sync until we become one rather than two separate beings. Her eyes glitter with what looks like tears, but a second later, she barrel rolls me, landing on top of me and riding me like she's trying to stay on a bucking bronco.

I'm too shocked to do anything but hold her hips as she takes control. Whitney holds my gaze, forcing me to watch her dominate me. Demanding my attention and taking the pleasure she needs.

That's when I realize I didn't make Whitney mine, she made me hers.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

WHITNEY

Waking from the heat is like waking from a coma. Five days is a long time to spend having sex. By the time my heat ends, I'm so exhausted I fall asleep in the bath Hayden drew for me. The guys showered first, letting me sleep in, but it's the middle of the afternoon and hot water sounded like a dream for my aching muscles.

"Trouble, you're not supposed to sleep in the tub."

Slowly opening my eyes, I groan. "It's so comfortable."

"I know, but it's dangerous. Come on, let me help you out."

"I can do it." I stand and pull the plug, letting water drip off of me before grabbing one of the dark blue towels.

Hayden holds his hand out for me.

I take it and step onto the bathmat. "Are you going to treat me like I'm fragile forever?"

"I'm treating you like I care about you." He takes the towel and starts to pat me dry.

"I'll allow it this one time. I'm so sleepy."

He hums and continues drying me off. Reaching his arms behind me, he fluffs my hair before lightly squeezing the water out of the ends.

"What happens when my mother goes to Camila?"

The first thing the guys did when they woke up was check their phones. There were no missed calls. No emails demanding they give me back. No mail in the mailbox or notices on the door. For now, it seems that we're safe.

"She would have by now, don't you think?" His voice is light but there's a hard crease on his forehead.

"I don't know." I chew on my lip and his gaze catches mine.

"We'll do whatever we can to protect you."

"How can you protect me, let alone yourselves, from the Omega Council? They're high pack."

"I can't say how, but I can promise we won't let them take you without a fight. You're ours now. This bond"—he gestures between us—"shouldn't be possible, but here we are. You're bonded to all of us. They won't take a bonded omega away from her alpha pack."

"What if that's not enough?"

He shakes his head. "Don't think like that. We can't control the future. Don't waste your now worrying about later."

Lifting my hand, I grab the back of his neck and bring his lips to mine for a quick kiss. "I don't know why, but you ground me in ways that shouldn't be possible."

"I know what you mean." He kisses my cheek and moves his lips to my ear. "You're under my skin. In my head. I can't breathe without thinking your name."

"Flattery will get you nowhere." I laugh, but in my heart I can't help but hope his words are real.

"You don't believe me?" he asks, grabbing the lobe of my ear with his teeth and tugging lightly.

"I want to."

"Someday I'll help you heal that heart." His breath is hot against my ear and his words strike a chord I'm not ready to hear.

I pinch my eyes shut. “I have to pee.”

Easing back, he searches my face. He knows exactly what I’m doing, but Hayden doesn’t pressure me. He never has. He’s too good.

“Promise me one thing?” he asks.

I hold his gaze, knowing the weight of a promise in this house. “Maybe.”

He wraps the towel around my shoulders. “Every time you look in the mirror, I want you to tell yourself you’re worthy of love. Can you do that?”

“You want me to talk to myself?” I chuckle a little, but he doesn’t smile.

“Promise me, trouble,” he says in a hushed tone.

“I’ll try,” I say, giving a little but not committing to what he’s asking. I don’t want to break my word.

“We’ll start with that.” He kisses my forehead and leaves the bathroom.

I don’t have to pee, but I sit on the toilet lid and clutch the towel around me. My heat is over and the hormones have faded, but my heart feels like it was raked over hot coals. I swallow the sadness and suck in a few sharp breaths before looking in the mirror.

I can’t bring myself to say it out loud. I say the words in my head. The first time feels silly. I do it again, staring at my reflection. Nothing changes. I don’t magically feel like I’m good enough for these men, but I did what he asked and that makes me happy.

Maybe one day I can believe the words.



Because they were off for so long, the guys go back to work on Tuesday. I said the words to myself in the mirror and it was a little easier. It’ll take time before I begin to believe them. Avi

went to his classes early, mentioning something about an important presentation. I keep checking the window as though the Omega Council is going to come tearing down the street at any second to take me. I start working on a model car while I watch a marathon of Golden Girls. Asher shows up around three in the afternoon.

“Hey.” I turn off the TV, eyeing the bag in his hands. “You’re home early.”

“Miss me?”

I roll my eyes. “Maybe.”

He smirks. “Missed you too, babe. I got you a present.” Taking the seat beside me, he hands me the bag.

“You really shouldn’t have.” I open the plastic white bag and stare at the new phone box. “A phone.”

“Yeah, so you have a way to call us—or text me nudes.”

“I’m not sending you nudes, pervert.” I chuckle and open the box. The rose-gold device is sleek and way nicer than any I’ve ever owned before. “Wow.”

“On a scale of one to ten, how mad would you be if I sent you dick pics?”

I give him a look. “Where would you take them?”

“So you wouldn’t be mad?”

“I mean.” I think about opening a random picture of him fisting himself. “I guess not, but I’m more concerned about you getting hit with indecent exposure.”

“Don’t worry about me and Sergeant Tom.” He rests his arm on the cushion behind me.

I burst out laughing. “You named it?”

“*He* doesn’t appreciate being made fun of.”

“But Tom? Why Tom?”

Asher grins and tickles my neck. “It sounded right.”

“You’re such a dork.” I turn on the device and follow the prompts. Asher tickles me a few more times until I glare at

him and growl. He backs off with a chuckle.

“Okay, okay. I’m thirsty. You want a drink?”

“I think I’m okay.” I set a passcode and put the phone on dark mode.

Asher grabs a beer and a bag of chips before plopping down next to me. “The car looks nice. Are you done?”

“Not yet. I have to finish a few details.”

“I wonder how Avi’s presentation went.”

“Oh yeah, he mentioned it. Do you know what it was on?”

“He was writing about PTSD. He didn’t tell you about it?”

I shake my head and put the phone on the table, shifting to the side to face Asher.

“Huh. I thought he would have mentioned it because he wrote about you too.”

Immediately stiffening, my face contorts in annoyance. “What do you mean he wrote about me?” Betrayal cuts through me. I told him so much. He was so easy to talk to, and I just let him in like he could be trusted. I should have known better. God, I’m so stupid. This was always too good to be true.

“Dunno.” Asher pops a chip in his mouth then glances at me with wide eyes when he realizes that I’m mad. “I don’t think it was bad, babe.”

“How do you know that?” I stand and put my hands on my hips. “My life isn’t some case study for you guys.”

“Whitney,” Asher pleads. “I’m sure it isn’t like that.”

“How can it not be? He’s writing about PTSD and other than himself, the only experience he has is watching me. So what, he’s telling the entire class what a basket case I am?”

“Babe.” Asher puts the bag of chips and beer on the table.

“No.” I slice my hand through the air. “I need some time alone.” Exiting the house, I head to the back and grab one of the axes, flinging it without aiming. It misses the target, but I

don't even care. I grab another and throw it, growling at the target when I miss.

How could he?

Chapter Forty

AVI

Class ends and I rush out, checking my phone for any updates. Asher texted me right after I finished my presentation. He told Whitney about the presentation. Aside from me mentioning I was writing a bit about her, he didn't know what I had written. He didn't know the intimate details and now she's pissed. If I can get to her, I can explain and help her understand I didn't use her for her story. That is, if she'll listen to me.

Following the speed limits on the way home is annoying, but I won't be the reason anyone else is hurt. I promised myself I'd never cause someone pain. Knowing Whitney is at home hurting destroys me. She's probably assuming the worst. I know I would be. I grip the wheel a little tighter. By the time I make it home, my fingers ache and my stomach is churning with unease. I pull on my backpack and head toward the house. Asher meets me on the porch.

"Hey, man. She won't come out of Trev's bedroom." His hair is a mess, like he's been running his hands through it.

I shoulder check him as I pass. "What did you say to her?"

"Nothing. Well, not much. I only mentioned you wrote a paper."

Trev and Hayden are sitting at the kitchen table. They're usually off before I get home and tonight is no different. Trev's covering his mouth with his hand, but he's seething. Hayden drums his fingers on the table and manages to be more intimidating than Trev even though he's a beta.

“You better fix this.”

I scoff. “I’m going to.”

Hayden nods. “Good. If she’s not better in twenty minutes, I’m going to kick your ass.”

“That won’t fix things,” I say, glaring at him as I make my way down the hall.

“Maybe not,” he calls after me, “but if it makes her happy, I’ll do it.”

Asshole. I shake my head and stop in front of Trev’s door. My heart is pounding in my chest and my hand shakes as I lift it and knock.

“Go away.”

Utter dejection coats her words.

“Can I explain? It’s not what you think.” I drop my forehead on the door. “Please, Whitney. Talk to me.”

The door wrenches open, and she gives me a scathing once over. The hate she’s sending my way doesn’t bother me, it’s the undercurrent of vulnerability that guts me. I suck in a lungful of her sour scent.

“Not what I think?” she finally says. “I’ll tell you exactly what I think. I think you saw an opportunity to practice what you’ve learned and you took advantage. Did the class love it when you told them about my trauma? Did they applaud you for being able to help with my panic attacks?”

“That’s not what it was about,” I say, sticking my hands in the pockets of my jeans.

“Then what was it? Tell me. What was the reason?”

“Can I come in?” I glance down the hall. The guys are all standing at the end of it, arms crossed over their chests. Their sympathetic anger is palpable.

She peeks down the hall and some of the anger bleeds from her face when she sees the rest of her mates. “Fine. You have five minutes.” Stepping aside, she glares at me as I enter Trev’s room.

“The paper I presented on was about linking common symptoms of a disorder with personal experiences.”

“Please, tell me how my personal experiences are your own.” She huffs and paces in front of me.

I sit on the bed to give her space and control of the room. “They’re not.”

“Exactly.” She stops and spears me with a look.

“I’m not sure what you’re thinking, but it might be better if you read the paper?” I slip my bag off my back and unzip it. “The first two pages go over the disorder and some of my own issues with it.” I hold the paper out for her to take. “The part about you is on the third page.”



WHITNEY

I snatch the paper and shake my head. “A whole page, huh?”

“Please,” he says in a tortured voice. “Just read it.”

I narrow my eyes on him and work my jaw. “I trusted you,” I whisper before studying the first page.

Like he said, the first two pages go over PTSD, CPTSD, and common and differentiating symptoms. I scan through it, noticing a few things that remind me of some of my episodes. Most of these I’ve read about. The books I’d bought to help me understand myself described the same things. The middle of page two goes into Avi’s trauma and how it affects him. I glance at him before turning the page. His eyes are on me, and his lips are pressed into a thin line while he waits for me to finish.

Taking a deep breath, I steel myself for the worst and read the page about me.



Recently, I met someone with CPTSD. The person I met had been through a lot, years of things I won't detail in this paper, but enough trauma to have made a lasting impact. When you hear about PTSD, usually the most severe cases are discussed. Or maybe it's the severe cases that garner the most interest; no one cares about the person who suffers, for the most part, in silence. Unintentionally and almost unknowingly, I had developed a bias in my mind to automatically associate someone with PTSD—in either form—with someone who couldn't function normally within society.

I couldn't have been more wrong. Normal, of course, is subjective and in itself a social construct, but for the purposes of this paper, normal refers to a competent individual who can live and thrive on their own. Society has the tendency to shame people into silence about their mental health. The powers that be almost don't want to acknowledge that they themselves have traumatized us in their own ways. Before the shooting, I didn't even begin to comprehend how complex the disorder was.

As I began to address my PTSD with therapy and self-care practices, some of those biases began to break. I could function, but I was too dangerous to be allowed on the job. My inability to react as needed when guns were drawn put everyone around me in danger. At first, I was mad and that led to more internalized suffering. I spent close to a year withdrawing and shutting out my pack. It took meeting my friend with CPTSD to wake me up. If my friend had gone through worse—for years longer than I had—how could they still smile? How could they still banter and stick up for themselves despite years of being torn down?

It wasn't until I met my friend that I realized it was okay to laugh again. It's okay to smile. The friend may never know all the ways they've helped me, but I hope one day to give them what they gave me.

A reason to breathe without thinking every intake of air is in vain.



He didn't even refer to me as female. He went out of his way to make sure I wasn't identifiable. I'm officially an asshole.

"Avi," I say softly, chest tightening with emotion. "It's not in vain."

He's staring at his hands in his lap. "I know that now."

"I'm so sorry." I sit on the bed beside him and wrap my arms around him. "I should have trusted you."

"Don't apologize. I meant to tell you before but with everything going on, it never felt right." He looks at me. "I'd never use you for your story."

I hug him tighter and nod. "Trust is hard."

He laughs. "I know. One day you'll know deep down we'd never betray you."

"I hope so," I say with a sigh. "Have I mentioned how much I hate my mother?"

"A few times." He pats my arm, kissing the side of my head and enveloping me in his arms. "You deserved better."

Chapter Forty-One

TREV

Days pass without incident. Whitney is constantly on edge, jumping every time a car door slams. I can't blame her. Her mother's threat was a desperate attempt to get what she wanted. I'm so damn proud of Whitney for standing her ground against the bitch. Especially since I know how paralyzing it can be to confront your abuser. The one time I saw my dad after I'd left the house, I felt small and stupid.

On Sunday, we're all hanging out in the kitchen eating lunch when a solid knock hits the front door. Whitney drops her sandwich and flicks her gaze around us.

"I'll hide."

"Under my bed with the gun," Hayden says.

Her eyes round with fear. "Do you think I'll need it?"

"Better safe than sorry. Worst case scenario, we shoot our way out of this." Hayden glances at me, and I dip my head in agreement.

There's no way anyone is taking her away from us. We're lucky our shifts changed. We moved our days off to help cover for the guys who were on while we were out during Whitney's heat.

The knock sounds again and Whitney makes a mad dash down the hall. Once Hayden's door snicks shut, I open the front one, glaring at a large alpha in an expensive suit. A fancy sports car is parked at the curb. His watch looks like it costs more than the suit. High pack.

“Can I help you?”

The guy appraises me with keen, mismatched eyes. “Trev?”

I cross my arms and widen my stance, feeling the guys fan out behind me in the living room. “Who wants to know?”

“I’m Cory, a Royal Pack ambassador.” His gaze moves to the guys. “Is this your pack?”

“Yeah.” I rub my head. “Care to explain why you’re here? I’m assuming this isn’t a social call.”

“You assume correctly. I’m here to follow up on an investigation Camila did. The missing omega.”

I keep my face blank. “She didn’t write a report?”

“Oh, she did. Cornelius wanted me to personally come talk to the alphas who last saw the omega. Make sure there’s nothing inappropriate going on.”

“You lost me. The omega was dropped off at her family home.”

“Right... I checked with the mother, and she seemed surprised to learn her daughter had been brought home.”

I lift an eyebrow. “Okay.”

Cory narrows his eyes. “She didn’t remember anyone dropping her daughter off, but apparently the mother likes to drink.”

“So you found the omega?” I ask, wrinkling my forehead to look confused.

“No, actually. The mother didn’t know where her daughter was, which made me think that perhaps the daughter had never come home after all.”

“Do you want us to issue a missing persons? I was under the impression that Camila would handle the case. Had I known this was still an issue, I would have acted sooner. The chances of finding a missing person after forty-eight hours aren’t good.”

“I know.” Cory inhales deeply, eyebrows pinching together.

I stiffen and step onto the porch, easing the door shut. Whitney’s scent is probably all over the place. I should have closed the door to begin with. “Listen.” I lower my voice to make it seem like I don’t want the rest of my pack to hear. “How much heat are we going to catch for this? My guys did their jobs, but we can’t be responsible for an omega making reckless choices.”

“No, I suppose not...” Cory trails off and tips his head. “Your house smells like chocolate and cinnamon.”

“Candles.”

He frowns. “I don’t have to tell you what happens when you break the law, do I? You are a cop after all.”

“What are you getting at?” I scowl at him and tighten my fists at my sides.

“My visit is just the beginning. The Royal Council seems to think you have something to do with the omega’s disappearance. You’re legally obligated to help with the investigation.”

Keeping my lips pressed together, I simply stare at him. He’s trying to scare me into a confession. That or he’s got some other motive. Either way, I don’t trust him. He’s high pack. He’s the Royal Council’s lapdog.

Releasing a hard breath, Cory rubs his hand over his jaw. “I’m not sure what you’ve gotten yourself into, but a smart pack would know they’re being watched. Every move you make is being monitored. If there’s any evidence of the omega in this house, you know what they’ll do.”

They. He speaks as though he isn’t a part of it.

“You’ll send your dogs in.”

“It’s not my choice.” His eyes grow cold. “If it were up to me, none of this would matter.”

“How sweet, the high pack alpha dreaming up ways to make the world better.” Yeah, I’m being a dick, but my

hackles are up and it's either this or punch him in the face.

"I'm not the only one." He steps closer. "Sooner or later, something's got to give."

"And Cornelius is going to be the one to make things better?" I scoff and jerk my thumb to the side. "Get the fuck off my porch."

Cory growls, his alpha instinct not appreciating me commanding him. "Don't be stupid. Your pack will be fine, but the omega?" He pushes into my space. "She won't be, and the only person you'll have to blame is yourself."

I hold his stare, refusing to budge. "I don't know what you're talking about."

His derisive laugh sets my teeth on edge. "Your left eye twitches when you lie, did you know that?"

I blink. "Are you done?"

"I can only hold them off for so long." He takes a step back. "Pack Cocker is under official surveillance."

"And when the omega turns up somewhere else?"

He shakes his head. "We both know that won't happen." Turning, he walks down the porch steps and pauses, glancing over his shoulder. "Your file lists your pack as unmated, but your house smells like a fresh heat."

Grinding my teeth, I hold my ground and stay silent.

"I suggest investing in air filters." With that sage advice, the asshole turns and heads back to his sporty car.

I stand on the porch long after he leaves, seething. They've been watching us? For how long? It can't have been long. Whitney's been outside recently. Cory said his visit was the beginning. I can only take that to mean the surveillance has just begun. Spinning on my heel, I stalk inside the house. The guys are waiting for me on the other side of the door, faces drawn and lined with worry.

"We should run," Asher says. "My mom would be happy to let us stay."

“No. Nothing can change.” I look at Avi. “Everything has to be status quo. Anything out of the ordinary will give them an excuse to break our door down.”

Avi nods and glances down the hall. “I’ll make sure she’s safe.”

“What about when you have class on Tuesday?” Hayden drums his fingers on his pant leg. “She can’t be left alone. Maybe I can take a personal day.”

I grimace. “No. She’ll have to stay alone.” They all growl, and my own rumbles in my chest. “Trust me, I don’t like it either, but one wrong move and it’s over.”

“I don’t like it,” Hayden says.

“I’ll be okay. It’s one day.” Whitney walks down the hall, carrying Hayden’s shotgun. “They won’t take me without a fight.”

My chest tightens as she approaches. The thought of losing her—No. I can’t even think about it. She stops in front of us, the barrel of the gun directed at the ceiling.

“You’ll need more than a shotgun.” I glance at the guys. “We’ll leave her with a rifle.” More bullets means less reloading and less chance of her being hurt. “And she’ll have her phone. We can check in every hour.”

“Do you think we should be worried? What if he was bluffing?”

“I don’t think he was. At the very least, we should be prepared for the worst-case scenario. Especially with your mother’s threat to tell Camila.”

“Will it ever end?” Whitney asks.

It kills me that I can’t give her the answer she wants. This is our life now.



Wednesday, I'm in the middle of lunch when my phone rings. The captain's number flashes across the caller ID so I drop my sandwich and pick the phone up.

"Captain."

"I need you on a call. Some high pack omega was attacked. SWAT is on the way, but I need someone I can trust to do a good job on the ground. Go see what's happening."

"You have the address?" He rattles it off, and I scribble it on a scrap of paper. "Got it. I'm on my way."

"This is Pack Bullet. They're important."

Cornelius' son's pack. The highest pack. Fucking hell.

"Understood, sir."

He disconnects the call, and I shove my phone in my pocket and grab my keys off the desk. Asher is at his desk, so I grab him and we take my SUV out of the city. The high pack homes out here range from mini-mansions to actual mansions. Out in Apan Valley, there are no low pack homes. The only reason someone from a low pack would be out here is if they were working, cleaning up after the rich and privileged.

The driveway to the mansion where the attack happened is long and lined with trees. Asher whistles and mutters something about rich bastards under his breath. I grunt in agreement and pull off to the side, parking away from the rest of the emergency vehicles. I spot Morris.

"Come on," I say to Asher, jumping out of the car and strutting over to the detective.

He sees me coming and pulls away from an EMS to meet me in the middle of the driveway. "Hey, Trev. Captain called you out?"

I nod. "Yup. Same old, same old." I tip my chin toward the house. "Status?"

"Right. The pack omega was inside. The perp disabled the alarm system and came in through the back. She fought him hard and managed to hit the panic button. Cut him. But he got

her down in the end. We found him pulling her down the stairs.”

“The omega?”

“She’s okay. Getting checked out now. She’ll be lucky if she doesn’t have a concussion. Bruising on her ribs. Nothing felt broken, but I’m not a doctor.”

“And the perp?” Asher asks, eyeing the mansion.

“Inside. She gave it to him good.” Morris laughs. “It’s too bad he knocked her out. I bet she would have given him a run for his money.”

A car tears down the driveway and the three of us step to the side. The man behind the wheel doesn’t even blink twice when he rushes by us. He’s going so fast he has to pull a dangerous maneuver that sends the car careening to the side.

“Who the fuck is that?” Morris barks toward the vehicle.

Three alphas jump out, wasting no time dashing into the home. I recognize one of them as the alpha who came to our house to inquire about Whitney.

“Looks like the pack is all here,” I mutter, glancing at Morris. “Once the perp is done with the EMS, I’d like to talk to him.”

“Yes, sir. So long as I can listen in for my report.”

“Of course. Thanks, Morris.”

A shout comes from inside the house and Morris huffs.

“Damn alphas,” he says before turning and running to take care of things.

I snicker and study the property. “The security system on a place like this has to be near impossible to disable.”

Scrubbing his jaw in contemplation, Asher nods. “There are three cameras in the front and a small Ascension sign in those bushes.” He points to some shrubs.

Sure enough, there’s a little sign for the best security company in all of Dolin.

“There’s no way this guy disabled the alarms by himself.”

Asher shrugs. “Guess we’ll have to wait and find out when we talk to him.”

While we wait, we check in with the rest of the team. No one has more information. An onsite security guard was knocked out during the attack, but he has no recollection of what happened. Morris escorts the perp to where Asher and I are waiting by the cars, sitting him on the top of the hood of the nearest vehicle. His hands are cuffed behind his back, but that doesn’t mean he won’t run. If he’s desperate enough, he’ll run.

The guy’s gaze bounces between me and Asher.

“What’s your name?” I put my hands on my hips to take up more space.

“Elliot.”

“Tell me what you did.” I use my alpha bark on him. He’s a low pack alpha, but I’d bet my money my command is stronger than his.

He scowls. “Took down the alarm system.”

“No shit,” Asher chirps.

“Look,” I say, stepping closer. “Let’s not make this harder than it has to be. Tell me what I want to know and we’ll be done.”

Face turning red, the guy grinds his teeth.

“I’m good with the hard way,” Asher says with a wicked smile.

I shoot him a warning look, but I don’t have to worry about Asher. The guy starts talking.

“It wasn’t my idea. The pack was the target. The omega was in the way.”

“So you weren’t there to hurt her?”

He gives me a cold look. “The order was to take out the pack. She was pack.”

“Why?”

“Aren’t you tired of the bullshit?”

I keep my face blank. I know exactly what he’s hinting at, but I can’t afford to play into that line of conversation. We’re at a high pack home. He wants to bring up shit that’ll get us all in trouble.

“How does killing this pack help you?” I ask instead.

“It’s not just one pack.” He smiles and flicks his gaze between me and Asher. “If they’re all dead, who’s going to stop us?”

“You’re targeting Royal Council members,” I surmise.

“To start.”

I growl a little. “Killing everyone who gets in your way?”

“Why not?” he asks with a laugh. “Over half the packs contract with Ascension. We have an in that they won’t suspect. Do you really want to stop this? This could be the change we’ve been waiting for.” He leans forward, eyes glinting with excitement. “When the high packs are gone, who do you think will be in charge?”

I snort. He’s trying to butter me up? “Get this fucker out of my sight. I need to make a call.”

“It doesn’t end with me.” The guy tries to resist Morris, but the detective is strong and quick. He grabs Elliot by the arm and hauls him off the car. “The revolution is on the way.”

Pressing my lips into a thin line, I wait until he’s well out of sight before cursing under my breath.

“It was bound to happen,” Asher says, running his hand through his hair. “There’s only so much people will take from the royals before all hell breaks loose.”

“I know.” I clench and unclench my fingers. The annoying thing is I agree with most of what Elliot wants to change. I’ll never endorse violence though.

Unease bunches my shoulders, and I dial the captain to give my report, praying the Royal Council will see reason

before things turn really ugly.

Chapter Forty-Two

WHITNEY

Hayden wraps his arms around me from behind. The only reason I don't flinch or freeze is because he made enough noise to wake the whole damn house.

"Good morning," he whispers against my neck, inhaling my scent and pressing his semi against my ass. "Did I mention how much I love the model cars you're building?" He grinds into me.

"You're going to make me so sore I won't be able to have sex for weeks," I lie. I am a little sore, but honestly, I think I could go for another round. Last night he pulled me into his room and didn't let me sleep until I screamed his name and my toes curled.

"I'll be good," he says much to my disappointment. "I'll make the eggs."

I'm standing in front of a pan of bacon, impatiently waiting for the coffee to finish brewing. "We should get one of those single cup coffeemakers."

"So we can waste plastic?"

I frown. "They make reusable filters."

"Between the five of us, when all is said and done, is it really faster?" He cracks an egg into a bowl and shoots me a curious look; a piece of his brown hair falls across his forehead.

"I guess not after you all have to wait for your cups, but since I'd go first, I'd have my coffee faster." I brush the lock

back and sigh, leaning my hip on the stove. I'm dangerously close to the bacon but I don't mind being popped by grease when Hayden is near.

"So this is you being selfish. Now I understand."

I elbow him. "That's not what I meant."

"No lying, trouble." Another egg is added to the bowl.

"Whatever," I grumble, flipping the bacon. "So long as there's coffee, I'm happy."

"Is that all it takes?"

I nod. "I'm pretty easy."

"I know you are." He chuckles and dodges the elbow I try to dig into his side. "Easy, trouble. I'm just a beta."

"I'm just a beta," I mock, grabbing a mug and filling it. I purposefully hand it over to show that I'm not selfish.

He eyes the mug and shakes his head. "I'll wait."

"If you insist," I whisper, bringing the glorious bean water to my mouth.

The rest of the guys wake up a little while later and we eat while watching the news. Things have been tense ever since that omega from a royal pack got attacked. I'm gobbling my fourth piece of bacon when a breaking news story starts. Avi stops eating and turns up the volume.

"—reporting for the first time in its history, the Royal Council is opening up seats to low pack alphas. Now this comes after Lucas, son of Cornelius, took his seat as head of the council yesterday, Rob, and I have to say, Lucas does not mess around when it comes to driving change. The alpha has been an advocate for low packs since he began working with the council and while it's taken the council over five years to listen, it seems like they're finally taking this alpha seriously." The woman turns to her co-anchor.

"I agree, Tasha. This might be what the world needs to end the tensions between the packs."

“It’s a start,” Tasha cuts in, “but we both know there’s a lot more to address than who sits on the council.”

Rob nods. “Check back with channel four news for the latest updates on the royal council changes. It’s time to check in on the weather—” Avi turns the TV off in the middle of the guy’s sentence.

Silence fills the space for a few minutes while we all digest the change. Tasha was right. There’s a lot more to address than who has a seat at the table, but this is the biggest leap toward progress the council has made in decades.

“Shit,” Asher says, swiping my last piece of bacon.

“Hey.” I reach for it, but he stuffs it in his mouth. “Asher,” I whine.

“Here, Whit.” Trev hands me two pieces of bacon.

“Thanks.” I take them and give Asher a smug look before saying, “That was unexpected.”

Avi leans back in his seat and fiddles with his fork. “Really unexpected.”

“It’s a start,” Trev says. “That’s all that matters.”

“It’s good for alphas,” I say, taking a sip of coffee.

“We can’t hope for a complete revolution,” Trev warns. “Camila is still out there, and it hasn’t even been a week since the Royal Council paid us a visit.”

“I’ll stay inside.” I drop my gaze and grind my teeth together. I’m beginning to hate this whole staying under the radar shit. Before, I could at least go outside. But now? I’m stuck in the house twenty-four-seven.

“I’m sorry,” he says, voice quiet.

Lifting a shoulder, I shake off my frustration. “Nothing we can do about it except hoping Camila meets an untimely demise.”

“That’s grim.” Hayden sips his coffee. “Maybe she’ll choke on her alpha’s knot.”

I smile at the thought and the topic changes.



“This is my favorite episode,” Avi says, plopping down beside me with a bowl of popcorn. “So many happy trees.”

“Do you think he secretly hated trees? Like maybe in his spare time he took a big chainsaw and cut them down?”

With a handful of popcorn halfway to his mouth, Avi gives me a horrified look. “Don’t ruin Bob for me.”

“I’m just saying. Ted Bundy worked at a crisis center. Everyone has a dark side.” I lean back on the cushion and prop my foot on the table, watching as the psycho—AKA Bob Ross—starts to paint another tree.

“Bob Ross is not a serial killer.”

“I didn’t say he was. He only destroyed the environment in his spare time.” I reach for the popcorn, but Avi pulls it to the side so I can’t reach. “Hey!”

“No popcorn for you until you admit he’s not crazy.”

I lift an eyebrow as Bob starts whispering about how pretty the brown he’s using is. “Nobody who whispers like this is sane.”

Avi scoots to the other end of the couch. “How dare you? Bob is a sweetheart. You know he used to be in the military —”

“Again, Ted Bundy was a sweetheart too. Or so they thought until...” I draw my thumb across my neck and make a dying noise.

“You’re kind of a jerk, you know that?”

I stick my tongue out and stand. “I’ll make my own popcorn. Who knows what sort of creepy stuff you’re into.”

Avi laughs and shakes his head. “If everyone has a dark secret, what’s yours?”

“You already know it,” I say over my shoulder. “I’m an omega on the run.”

“Technically, you’re walking.”

“Shut it.” I grab a bag of popcorn and set it in the microwave for two minutes and fifteen seconds. Two minutes and thirty is too long, the popcorn always tastes funky. Two fifteen is the magic time. While I wait for it to pop, I go stand at the window in front of the dining room table. It’s a Saturday, so the street is at its most active, kids running and playing while the parents chat. I smile to myself as I watch two kids ride bikes down the sidewalk.

The microwave beeps.

“Oh, so you like to stare at your neighbors. Should I get you binoculars for your birthday?”

“Maybe,” I say, pulling my gaze from the kids as I start to turn. A woman standing behind a car catches my attention. She’s parked directly across the street and her phone is pointed at the house. Her camera flashes. I frown. “Hey, there’s—” I stop. Will he think I’m paranoid?

What are the chances she’s an Omega Council spy? What if it was the reflection of the sun?

The woman brings the device to her ear and starts walking down the sidewalk. She lifts her hand to wave at a group of moms and I shake my head. She probably has one of those flashing ringtones.

“What’s up?” Avi asks from the couch.

“Nothing,” I say, grabbing my popcorn and putting it in a bowl. I rejoin him on the couch as Bob starts yet another tree. “Imagine him just: chop, chop, chop.”

Avi pauses the show and turns to me. “We don’t support Bob slander in this house, okay?”

“Fine. I’ll leave him alone.” I sigh and chew a piece of popcorn.

“Good.” Avi starts the show again.

Bob finishes up the branches on an evergreen. “And there. Another happy little tree.”

“Chop.”

Avi glares at me.

“Okay, okay. I’m done,” I say with a laugh. Bob continues painting, but I spend most of my time glancing back at the window. I see the woman pass once more. She gets in her car and drives away. The unease never fades though. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to relax until the Omega Council forgets about me. Knowing Camila, she won’t stop searching for me until she dies.

Chapter Forty-Three

WHITNEY

The following Tuesday, I wake up with nerves fluttering in my stomach. Not even Asher's scent can calm me down. His bed is warm and soft, but dread continues to coil through me. The guys are all at work already, and Avi is heading to his classes soon. That means I'll be home by myself. Part of me wants to beg Avi to stay, but the rational side knows that's silly. I'm a grown-ass woman. I can handle a few hours alone.

I haven't noticed anyone else standing outside of the house, but I've also been avoiding the windows. Avi is bustling around in the kitchen when I finally crawl out of Asher's bed. My core aches with after sex pangs, and I grin to myself, wondering if I should text him a nude like he asked.

"Morning." Avi hands me a coffee and gives me a kiss. "Asher treated you well, I see."

"You all do." I rest my hip against the counter. "What's going on today?"

"I have a test." He drops two pieces of bread in the toaster before grabbing the spatula for the eggs.

"Are you ready?"

"I think so. I've studied all I can."

I take a sip of coffee. "You'll do great. You've been working really hard." And he has been. Every night after dinner this last week he's disappeared to his room to study for a few hours. Yesterday, we made a deal to spend tonight together, and I'm happy he won't be skipping his books to

spend time with me. I don't want to get in the way of his dream.

"Thanks." He makes a plate for the both of us, buttering the toast and carrying the food to the bar. "Do you mind if I leave a little early?" His forehead creases with worry.

They've all been like this, almost afraid to live their life because of me. I hate that.

I sit next to him and set my coffee next to my plate. "Of course not, do your thing. I have a hot date with the beachfront reno show and a model car."

"Those homes are so expensive."

"But waking up to the ocean at your front door is worth it, don't you think?"

He shrugs. "I'm more of a mountain man."

"I like the mountains too, but the water is so pretty. I'd love to see it someday." I take a bite of toast.

He raises his eyebrows. "You've never been?"

"No. We were super poor, and my mother never would have taken me even if we had money."

His mouth turns down but I wave my hand.

"It's a bucket list item. When we don't have to worry about the door being busted down, we can all go together."

"It'll be the first thing we do," he swears to me.

I smile. "Deal. Thanks for making breakfast."

"I like when you eat my food. It's selfish." He smirks.

"Well then, I love selfish Avi."

"Good," he says around a mouthful of egg.

We finish eating, and I clean the dishes while he gathers his things. I'm in the middle of drying a plate when he stops at my side. He put on a nice blue shirt and dark wash jeans. I'm so used to him in sweats, but he cleans up good, even if it is super casual.

“You’re sure you’ll be okay?”

I can see him thinking of ways to get out of his test to stay home with me.

“I’ll be fine.” I set the plate down and wrap my arms around his neck, teasing his mouth with mine. “And after you ace that exam, I’ll show you some things I’ve learned.” I press my lips to his as they spread into a smile.

“More porn?” he whispers when I pull back.

“Don’t judge me. What else am I supposed to do while you’re all gone?”

“You don’t even watch the beach show, do you?”

I bristle and step back. “I do, for a little bit.”

“Uh-huh. Well, I’m going to go before I’m too hard to think straight.” He dives in for another kiss, and I giggle, pushing him toward the door.

“Good luck,” I sing-song.

The door shuts with a soft thud behind him, and I deflate, all of my elation draining out of me when the silence of the house settles around me.

It wouldn’t be so bad if I could go outside.

Eyeing the door, I contemplate if I can sneak around back without anyone noticing.

That’s a bad idea. The guys would be so upset.

Grumbling to my inner voice of reason, I go back to drying dishes.

This sucks.



After about an hour of working on a shiny blue Chevelle, I set my tools aside and curl up on the couch. The beachfront renovation show wasn’t doing it for me so I switched it over to old faithful. Bob Ross puts me into a peaceful sleep, but I

wake up with a jolt. I grab the remote, but the show is on auto pause after cycling through who knows how many episodes. Slowly sitting up, I glance around to figure out what woke me. Nothing fell over. I eye the curtains which are firmly shut, blocking out most of the sun and any Omega Council prying eyes. I won't be able to relax until I look outside. Fear churns in my gut as I rise from the couch, taking tentative steps toward the window, half expecting the door to be kicked in.

Grabbing the soft fabric, I pull it a few inches to the side and take in the quiet street. Everyone is either at work or school. One lone car drives by, but the driver doesn't even do a double take. With a chuckle, I shake my head at my paranoia and let the curtain fall back into place. I lick my dry lips and grab some water. Mid drink, I hear footsteps in the hallway. The sound sends a surge of fear through my nervous system, and I grab a knife from the butcher block.

"Who's there?" I ask, setting my water down and switching the knife to my dominant hand.

Silence.

The hairs on the nape of my neck rise, like the hackles of a cat, and I take a step back. I'm cornered, but at least I know no one is behind me. Another soft footstep.

"I have a knife, and I'm not afraid to stab you," I warn, tightening my grip.

A man wearing all black and a face mask rounds the corner. He sets the sight of his rifle on me and takes the safety off. "We can do this the hard or easy way, omega." His eyes are nearly black and void of emotion.

"Camila sent you?" I flick my gaze over him. Black fatigues. Heavy duty boots. A gun at his hip and the hilt of a knife sticking out of his boot. There's no other explanation. My mother could never afford to hire someone like this.

"Drop the weapon or I'll shoot you. My orders are dead or alive, you get to choose which option I pick." His voice brokers no argument.

He's an alpha.

I lower my hand and place the knife on the counter. “You don’t have to do this. I’m not hurting anyone.”

The guy walks toward me, the barrel of his gun pointed straight at me. I take quick steps back to avoid it but my back hits the wall. Pressing the metal into my shirt, he leans closer.

“Dead or alive.” His eyes bore into me, stripping away all hope. This man will kill me, but isn’t dying better than being sent back to Camila?

My chest tightens, and my heart pounds against my ribcage while my mind races through the decision. The pack. If I die, it’ll destroy them. I could fight and die, but the men will be ruined. As much as I want to save myself, I can’t do that to them.

“Fine.” I glare at him and place my hand on the gun, pushing it to the side. “I’ll go with you.”

“Turn around and put your hands behind your back.”

Grinding my jaw, I do as he asks. I wait for cuffs, but something pricks my wrist. “Ow, what the fuck?” I look over my shoulder, and the guy tosses a used needle onto the counter. “What did you do?” My vision starts to blur, and the last thing I see are those beady eyes staring at me.

Chapter Forty-Four

WHITNEY

My palms brush over gritty concrete. The cool air in the room has me shivering as I wake, blinking to clear my blurry eyes. I'm on the floor. Warm, yellow light spills through a small gap between the door and the ground, illuminating the room. No, not a room.

I sit and glance between the walls that can't be more than five feet apart.

A cell.

My hands shake as I run them over my clothes, checking for any injuries. Other than where the man had injected me with a sedative, I'm fine. I suck in a hard breath as my stomach swims with anxiety. Heart racing, I carefully push off the floor and stand. The room is hardly big enough to move around in. A small five by five square. No bed.

No furniture.

No food.

No one.

Memories flood my mind, a torrent of emotion accompanying them. A familiar earthy scent fills my nostrils. A smell that doesn't belong in this place.

"No." I shake my head, backing against the far wall as my vision begins to blur. Strong fingers grip my arm, and I scream, smacking at invisible hands. "She's not here," I whisper, biting my cheek to try and ground myself.

Phantom lips brush against my ear, and the back of my head aches where my mother always held my hair. “*Down you go.*” Her voice in my head is like a viper sneaking through the grass, striking me without warning.

Mother shoves me into the cellar, and I stumble before tripping over my own feet, falling to the floor.

“Please. No.” I gasp for air, clutching my chest. I can’t breathe. The walls of the tiny cell close in, pushing me further down into the memory. Further into a place I’d never thought I’d return. My legs give out and I slide down the wall, whimpering as the past and present blur together until suddenly I’m a child again, small and helpless.

The door slammed shut hours ago. Her sickly-sweet scent lingers in the air, reminding me of why I’m in here.

Her heat.

I bang on the cheap wood, hoping someone will hear me and save me this time.

“Help me! Hello?” Tears are streaking down my dirty face. I swipe at them, smearing the dirt across my cheeks. It’s so filthy down here it’s like each breath I take is coated with dust.

“Help me,” I scream again, but my voice is hoarse from yelling. My hand aches from banging on the door.

Nothing ever changes.

No one ever comes to save me.

They must think I deserve it too.

Bright light invades my vision, and I blink, trying to see whoever opened the cellar door. Shoes scuff across the ground, and I shrink into the wall. There’s no escape though.

“What’s wrong with her?” Camila asks.

I furrow my brow. Why is Camila here?

“She’s having some sort of panic attack. What do you want me to do?” Someone squats in front of me.

A man. An alpha. I blink, trying to figure out which reality I belong in. Neither is good.

“Snap her out of it.” Her voice is angry and I cringe away from it.

“Please,” I whisper.

Strong hands grab my shoulders and shake me.

“Stop it.” I smack at the guy, breaking out of my confusion. The Omega Council. The guy at the pack house. Camila. “Leave me alone.” I kick the guy in the stomach, but he doesn’t budge, only grunts at the impact.

“Feral bitch,” Camila mutters as a palm cracks across my face, whipping my head to the side. “You think I forgot that little sucker punch?”

Blood fills my mouth, and I whine, trying to scramble away from the alpha, but he shoves me to the floor on my stomach, digging his knee into my back. My cheek presses into the dirt and a scream tears from my lips. I buck, but it’s no use. He’s too strong. That doesn’t stop me from trying. I writhe and growl, desperately trying to escape him.

Never again.

I said never again.

I can’t be in this place.

I can’t be here with them.

I can’t.

I can’t.

“I can’t,” I sob, banging my head against the floor. Once, twice, three times. The pain distracts me from everything else.

“God, she’s pathetic.” Camila’s words barely register in my head. “She can’t be auctioned. Send her with the batch of shunned omegas.”

“They leave on Friday,” the guy says, putting his palm against my head to keep me from thrashing. “You think she’ll last that long?”

“Sedate her if you must. She’s not worth my time.” Heels click sharply against tile, receding deeper into whatever building I’m in.

The plastic cover of a needle clatters to the floor in front of my eyes. My body seizes for an entire second before I begin fighting his hold. Screaming so loud my own ears ache from the reverberation, the high-pitched cry is more animal than human. I scrub my face over the ground, not caring when the concrete tears my skin. Not caring as white hot pain erupts across my cheek.

I have to get him off of me.

I have to fight. Growling, I thrash with every last ounce of energy, my hips rising off the ground and making his knee on my back slide to the left. I do it again, but he shoves his other knee into my side, stealing the breath from my lungs.

“Fuck,” the guy grunts, stabbing my arm with the needle.

Wheezing, I try to shrink away from the sharp tip. “No, no, no, no. No. NO,” I say, voice laced with a savage rasp as heat races to where he injected me with the sedative.

“No,” I whine, but no one is listening.

No one cares.

The alpha gets up, but my body is too heavy. I can’t move. I can’t run. I can’t escape.

This is exactly like the cellar, only the sedative will save me from the worst of being locked inside this place. Tears fill my eyes, and I pinch them shut.

Maybe it’s better this way. The guys won’t live in fear anymore. I’ll be gone and they can move on. That is, if they’re not locked up too. The Royal Council will deal with the alphas, and they’re notorious for letting alphas get away with shit no omega could ever get away with. If it were up to Camila, I’m sure they’d be in here too.

I’m glad they’re not here.

My fate has always been twisted. I was never meant to be happy.

Chapter Forty-Five

AVI

We're sitting in a small conference room, waiting to meet with Lucas, the head of the Royal Council—or rather, the Council as they're now calling themselves. They've yet to select low pack members to join them. Right now, all they've given us is a promise of change. I glance at Trev, but he's glaring at the wall. Asher has his head on the table, and Hayden's arms are crossed over his chest. He feels my attention and looks at me.

“I'm sure—” I cut off. I'm not sure of anything.

Whitney was gone when we got home, and Trev got the call to come to Council headquarters a few minutes later. We didn't have to say it out loud to know what happened. They found her.

We're fucked.

The door opens and Lucas comes in, wearing a fancy suit that costs more than my entire wardrobe. His eyes scrutinize me first before slipping over the rest of the pack. He sits at the other side of the table and drops a small stack of paper on top of it, drumming his fingers on the report.

“What I've read here is disturbing.” His voice isn't loud, but it's still full of authority.

None of us speak.

He sighs. “If my father were here, he'd want you all to be punished. Lucky for you, I'm nothing like him.” Lucas rests his forearms on the table, staring at Trev. “You knew the risk.”

“She doesn’t deserve whatever you’re going to do to her,” Trev growls.

“I agree.”

Asher’s head pops up from the table, and he scowls at the alpha across from him.

“Why?” I ask.

“The woman I love was auctioned off too.” Lucas slides his gaze toward me. “And as much as Camila badmouths her, Reagan is amazing. A brat, but she’s not as horrible and worthless as the head of the Omega Council wants everyone to think.”

Trev and I exchange a look.

“What are you saying?” Trev runs his hand along his jaw.

Lucas shakes his head. “I’m saying, you’re free to go.”

“Where is she?” Hayden demands.

“The Omega Council has her now.” Lucas studies the beta. “Word is she’ll be shipped out with the next batch of shunned omegas.” Growls sound around the room, and Lucas holds up his hands. “Again, I agree.”

We all fall quiet.

“How do we get her back?” Asher whispers the question, almost like he’s afraid to speak the words.

Lucas clears his throat and slides the stack of papers toward us. Trev grabs it, mouth turning down as he flips it over.

“Everything you need to know is in there. You’re cops, right?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“Good. You’ll need gear.” Lucas glances at the door. “You have five days before they transport her.” He stands and stares at each of us. “If I were you, I wouldn’t waste any time. Camila is an animal.”

“And yet she’s still the head of the Omega Council.” Hayden scoffs.

“Not for long.” Lucas walks to the door. “Find somewhere to hide for a week or so. Come see me when it’s safe.”

“When will that be?” I ask, pinching my eyebrows together.

“As soon as the bitch is fired.”

The door closes behind the alpha.

“What is going on?” Asher asks. “He wants us to break her out?”

“Yeah,” Trev says. “This has the guard shifts and the blueprint of where Whitney is.”

“Can we trust him?” Hayden takes the packet from Trev, skimming the details. “How do we know this isn’t a setup?”

“We don’t.” I glance at my pack mates. “But if this intel is good, we need to move as soon as possible.”

Trev nods and shoves away from the table. “Let’s go make a plan.”



I drive us to the rundown building in the center of Dolin. The upstairs houses administrative offices for Omega Council employees—the low pack staff gets the shitty building while the high pack staff get the swanky offices inside the convention center. It took us two days to come up with a solid plan. The captain called us all in after he heard what happened with Whitney. He wasn’t happy, but no one got suspended so that’s all that matters. I don’t think the guys could survive without their jobs. Then again, I used to think the same thing and I’ve done fine.

“Who’s leading?” I ask, running everyone over the plan. I’ll be staying in the car for obvious reasons.

Streetlights flash in the dark car. It's half past eleven. The shifts don't change until midnight. We're hitting at the end of the shift so the guards are tired.

"Trev," Hayden and Asher answer.

I flick my gaze to the rear view. Trev's face is a mask of indifference, but that's how he prepares for things. Inside, he's running through the risks and things that could go wrong.

There's no better alpha to run point on this operation.

"What happens if you get separated?"

"Get out as quick as possible and rendezvous over on Carter Street." Trev meets my gaze in the mirror, and I nod.

"Good. I'll be waiting. Check your earpieces." I turn onto McMillion, slowing to a stop a block away from the building as the guys run checks on their radios.

"One, two, three." Trev's voice crackles on my own device. We're on the same channel so I can feed them information from the outside and listen in on what's happening.

"Ready?" I look at each of them.

Asher cracks his neck and nods, angry lines etching across his face.

"Let's go get our girl," Hayden says. His fingers twitch toward the door so I ease off the brake, slowly rolling toward the entrance.

I don't say good luck, that's asking for something bad to happen. So I simply watch them pull down their face masks, hop out, and run across the dark street. My baseball cap hides most of my face and we took off the license plate. Not that being discreet matters. I imagine once they find out Whitney is gone, they'll know exactly who took her. Continuing on to Carter Street, I keep a death grip on the steering wheel.

I should be with them, but I'm a liability. There's an open space between a van and a truck. I take it and check in with the guys.

“Good?”

“So far, heading toward the first guard now.”

Grinding my teeth, I settle in and listen. The silence crackling down the line is killing me, but I focus on my breathing to stay calm. Everything will be fine. We’ll save her and find a hotel to hole up in until the heat dies down. The back is full of clothes, food, and water. We have enough to last a week.

Hopefully that’s long enough.

Chapter Forty-Six

WHITNEY

While the sedative is kind enough to keep me asleep for most of the day, there are times when I wake up panting. Panic swelling in my chest like a balloon. There's nothing to count to distract my mind. All I can do is breathe like Avi taught me and wait for my body to relax. Only I'm not in the safety of the pack home and this crappy concrete cell doesn't exactly inspire calmness. I have no idea how much time passes, only that the same alpha guard comes back and each time I fight him, he wins.

I woke a little while ago, mouth dry and eyes bleary. No one has come to save me and I've given up hope. Who knows where the guys are? Or if they would even be brave enough to defy the Omega Council to break me out. I had hoped they would be, but after my fourth dose of sedative, my confidence in them is waning.

There's a tray of stale food. Old bread, cheese that's a little too blue for my liking, and an apple that's too soft to be good. I don't trust the food anyway. Picking up the Styrofoam cup that's half filled with water, I sniff it to make sure there's no obvious poison. There's nothing to be done for anything that's untraceable, but I'd rather not drink tainted water if I can avoid it. I gulp it down, groaning when there isn't enough to come close to quenching my thirst. My stomach cramps, but I grind my teeth together.

I refuse to eat that food. Especially not with the bucket of my own piss and shit sitting in the corner next to it. A loud

bang comes from the hall, and I jump, scrambling to the corner of the room and crouching low.

“What the fuck are you doing?” a guy shouts.

Rapid pops sound, and I cover my ears, blocking everything out but the count of my breaths. The door rattles, and I press into the wall, growling at whoever is out there. I may be weak, but I’ll fight back to the best of my abilities. Ever so slowly, the handle moves down, and light floods the room as the door opens.

Hayden rips a mask off and stands there, his hand splayed across the metal as he takes me in. I’m filthy. The room reeks. I’m trembling even though the beta before me is mine. He slowly lowers to his knees, resting his hands on his legs and staring at me.

“Trouble,” he croaks.

That’s when I break. My movements are slow, but I crawl to him and climb into his lap. My fingers grip his shirt as I cling to him, searching his face. He feels so real, but I could be dreaming. Another sedative induced vision. In the past however many days, I’ve seen my mother, Lindsey, and Granny. They were never warm though. Hayden is warm and his chest rumbles with a purr. He smells like rain and feels like home.

“Hayden?” I ask, staring into those tragically beautiful gray eyes.

“I’m here.”

“We need to move,” Trev’s voice comes from behind Hayden.

I lift my gaze to meet the alphas. I can’t get a read on his emotions, but it’s dark, and my eyes are already blurry again. Hayden adjusts me in his arms and stands, cradling me. I wrap my arms around his neck and rest my head against his chest.

“Hey, babe,” Asher says from the side.

“You guys came for me,” I say, pinching my eyes shut when Hayden starts to walk. I’m not entirely sure I’ll keep the

water down.

“Of course we did,” Trev says. “I’m sorry it took so long.”

“You’re here now.” I groan, and Hayden stops walking.

“You okay?”

“A little nauseous, but I’m fine. Get me out of here.”

“We’re on the way out,” Asher says, but I don’t think he’s talking to me.

My eyelids flutter when I try to open them, weighed down with exhaustion.

“You’re safe now, trouble. I got you.”

I know you do, I want to say, but it’s like my body is shutting down. Everything is heavy and my brain forces me to sleep.



“Wake up, Whit.” Trev’s voice is soft and his fingers brush over my arm, carefully so as not to surprise me.

I blink a few times, my eyes adjusting to the darkness. Trev and I are the only ones in the car. He’s sitting next to me in the back seat, enough space between us that I don’t feel trapped. We’re parked outside of a hotel room. I glance around and take in the building. It’s run down and the doors are all on the outside. The light above our door is out, but the curtains let out some of the soft glow from the lights inside the room.

“Where are we?”

“Near the south edge of the city.”

Deep in low pack territory.

I suck in a full breath, my muscles relaxing for the first time in days. Trev’s face is lined with concern, more open than it was when they came to rescue me. I stare at him for a few moments while I gather my thoughts.

“Are you okay?” he asks before I can think of something to say.

A lie is on the tip of my tongue, but it doesn't feel right to deceive him. “Not really,” I say, voice shaking slightly as emotions try to overwhelm me. I push it all down, not ready to process what happened yet.

All in all, it could have been worse.

I could have been awake for all of it.

They could have hurt me.

I should be thankful, right?

“I should kill her,” he whispers, clenching his fists on his knees.

“She's not worth it.” I reach for his hand, grabbing it and uncurling his fingers and putting my palm in his. “You can't.”

“I won't, but I want to.” Even though it's dark, I swear I can see a glint of rage in his gaze.

“What now?” I ask, squeezing his hand. “What do we do?”

“We'll be safe for a while. They can't trace us to this hotel. Right now, all I care about is you. What did they do to you?”

I shake my head. “I don't want to talk about it.” I glance at the room. “Not right now.”

“We should go inside.” He starts to pull away, but I tighten my grasp and scoot across the seat, turning so I can climb into his lap and straddle him. Then I release his hand so his arms can wrap around my waist. Trev presses his cheek to my chest, and I cling to him, running my nails over his back.

“I didn't think I'd see you again,” I confess, staring out of the back window.

“Let's get you inside for a shower.”

Trev guides me inside. The guys all give me space while Trev turns on the taps. I want to go to all of them, but I smell embarrassingly disgusting. Trev kisses my forehead, not even cringing at the amount of grime covering my skin.

“Take all the time you need.” He shuts the door behind him, but I open it. He turns back around with lines of confusion covering his face.

“I need it open,” I whisper.

Understanding smooths his features, and he nods, leaving the door ajar so I can shower without feeling trapped. The hot water is divine but even the warmth isn't enough to soothe the ache in my chest. I need my mates. Need their scents covering me. The water is filthy as it washes the dirt from my body. Grabbing the hotel bottle of soap, I scrub my body until my skin is red and the water runs clear. I quickly shampoo and condition my hair, desperate to get back to the men and let them distract me. A fresh set of clothes sits on the counter. They even remembered to bring my clothes. The thoughtfulness makes my chest tighten, but I swallow back every emotion and pull on the soft underwear, yoga pants, and T-shirt.

Trev meets me at the door when I finish. I immediately wrap myself around him, soaking up his body heat. His hands run all over me, sending gooseflesh chasing after his touch.

“You're ours,” he says, pulling back to look at me. “Mine. You know that? We'd never let anyone keep you from us.”

Dragging my nails up his back, I nod. “Yours.” I rub against him, desperate for a distraction. Anything to keep the memory of the alpha with the needle from invading my brain. Something to make me feel something other than terror and sorrow.

“Whit.” He frowns. “You need time. We don't have to do this.”

Leaning toward him, I bring my lips to his throat. “What I need is an alpha knot to help me forget everything.” I lick his neck before placing a kiss against his skin.

His chest rumbles, but he shakes his head. “It's too soon ___”

“No,” I snap, grabbing the back of his neck with my hand and pressing my lips to his. “Please.” I trace my tongue over

the seam of his lips, but he denies me entry. "I'm so wet," I whisper against his mouth, grabbing his erection. "Please," I say, this time with tears filling my eyes.

He stiffens, and I wilt with shame.

What am I doing? I'm trying to force myself on him so I don't have to feel.

I drop my gaze and step away. "I'm so sorry."

Cupping my face with his hands, he shakes his head and pulls me back against his body. "I don't want to hurt you, but it's too soon for me. I'm hard because you're irresistible but my stomach is still in knots. I thought we lost you, Whit. As much as I want to make love to you, I just need to hold you."

I drop my gaze and nod, understanding even though the rejection stings a little.

"And it would be selfish of me to keep you to myself. They all need you too." His thumb brushes a tear away. "We love you."

I suck in a sharp breath and glance at the other men sitting on the bed. "Don't say things you don't mean."

"I mean it. I love you. We love you. I don't care how soon it is or the insane circumstances were in."

My heart trembles in my chest. Do I give him that much of me? Who am I kidding? I've already given them all of me. They're my mates. They're my whole world.

Dropping my forehead to his chest, I fist the fabric of his shirt in my hands and release a shaky laugh. "This is insane."

"Isn't that what love is?" he asks, kissing my nose. "You drive me crazy, you know? No one gets under my skin like you do."

"You're being too nice." I pull back, and his hands trace down my arms.

"Asher's staring at us like a puppy who was denied a treat," Trev says with a smile. "You should go to him."

I pause. "You don't want me to say it back?"

“You don’t have to.” He shrugs. “I see it in the way you trust us. I hear it in the way you whisper my name. I smell it in your scent.” He places his finger to the pulse point on my neck. “I feel it in the way your heart skips when I touch you.”

“This feels like a dream.”

He pinches my ass and I yelp, swatting his chest.

“Asshole.”

“Brat,” he says, stealing another kiss before guiding me toward where Asher is now standing. He’s blocking Hayden and Avi—both of whom look none too pleased about it. Asher’s green eyes drink me in. His body practically shakes as he holds himself back. If he weren’t worried about how I’d react, I’m sure he would have tackled me by now.

I stop a foot away from Asher and beam at him. His black hair is messy, and his forehead is creased with deep lines.

“Remember the first time we met?”

He nods, eyes flicking to Trev. “Yeah.”

“I’d never met anyone as handsome as you.” I reach up and run my fingers over his forehead to try and smooth the lines. “Then when you drove me away from Curtis’ club, I was so mad. So mad because you found out who I really was. I wasn’t the woman you’d almost hooked up with anymore.” I frown a little, not entirely sure where my words are taking me, but I can’t seem to stop them. “Then you took me home.” I move my fingers down to the collar of his shirt and drag him closer. “I never thanked you.”

Going up on my toes, I kiss Asher like I know he’s dying to kiss me, ravaging his mouth until he finally loses that control he’s clinging to and grabs the backs of my thighs. I jump and wrap my legs around his waist and he carries me to the bed.

We kiss until I can’t breathe. I rip my mouth from his and bury my head into his neck, breathing him in. His fingers hold my hips, but like Trev, he doesn’t push me for more even though my own scent must be rank with need. Asher holds me until Avi clears his throat.

“Think they have Bob Ross?”

I laugh against Asher’s neck before climbing out of his lap and going to Avi. He kisses me with more reservation, but his hands find my ass and press me against his body. I’m only a little mad he doesn’t rip my clothes off and fuck me on the floor.

“I’m so sorry we failed you,” Hayden says.

Extracting myself from Avi’s hold, I stand in the middle of the room and scowl at all of them.

“You didn’t fail me.”

No one speaks.

I growl. “The Omega Council coming for me was inevitable.”

Avi shakes his head. “We should have—”

“Nothing you could have done would stop Camila. She gets what she wants, no matter the cost. We should be thankful we’re all alive.” I put my hand on my chest. “I never once blamed you for what happened.”

The alphas all look at the ground, shame coloring their features. Alphas and their damn egos. I shake my head, at a loss for words.

“You saved me,” I whisper. “That’s all that matters.”

“Trouble.” Hayden approaches me. “I think right now, all we need is to hold you and know you’re safe. The rest will come later.” He takes my hand, pulling me toward the bed. “You can be the little spoon.”

We climb into the bed and the guys join us, snuggling in until the king size bed is impossibly full. As their heat and scents wrap around me, I realize this is what I needed more than anything. Sex would have distracted me, but this sort of gentle love somehow heals my wounds more than I ever thought possible. I’m in no way close to being over what happened, but with these men surrounding me, I know that my wounds—old and new—will heal.



A noisy car pulls up outside the hotel room the next morning. I sit up and blink away the sleep. Trev is peeking through the curtains.

“You sure we can trust her?”

Asher covers a yawn before responding. “She’s practically family.”

“Who is she?” I say, voice groggy.

“Maddy.”

The paramedic. I cover my face with my hands and groan. My hair is a mess, and I just woke up from the hardest sleep I’ve ever had. Stumbling away from the bed, I make it to the bathroom right as Maddy knocks on the door.

I do my best to make myself look presentable, finger combing my hair, smoothing my stinky shirt, and splashing water on my face. The cuts on my face have scabbed over. I end up washing my face before I finally rejoin everyone in the bedroom.

Maddy is sitting at the table in the corner. Asher hands her a small bag full of phones and she pushes a few burners toward him. Her eyes move from Asher to me, face flashing with ire. “What did they do to you?”

“Hey, Maddy.”

Abandoning her bag and the table she marches toward me, eyes flicking over every inch of me. “You’re so pale.”

“Thanks.”

“It wasn’t a compliment. Can we have the room?” She extends her hands toward me, and I place my palms in hers. She squeezes my fingers then turns my arm over so she can inspect the faint bruises on my wrist.

None of the guys move.

Maddy huffs and looks over her shoulder. “Beat it. I need to examine her without you guys hovering. Go wait in the car or something.”

Trev makes a face, but Asher stands and pulls him toward the exit.

“Are you okay with this?” Hayden asks on his way to the door.

“Yeah.” I’d rather her inspect me alone. They’re already so keyed up from rescuing me.

“We’ll be right outside.” Avi slides his gaze to Maddy. “Be gentle.”

“I’m a trained professional.” She arches an eyebrow at him.

Avi nods and closes the door behind the four of them. Maddy mutters about ridiculous mates under her breath and turns back to me, a small, placating smile stretching her lips.

“Sorry. I figured it would be better for them to leave.” Her eyes search my face. “You showered?”

I nod.

“Good. First things first, tell me what happened.”

For some reason, Maddy instills confidence, so I tell her about the sedatives. I tell her about Camila. The way the guard held me down. Everything comes pouring out until I suck in a sharp breath.

“Jesus. I heard Camila was a bitch, but that’s next level cuntry right there.”

I laugh a little. It’s either that or cry. “Level 30 cuntry.”

“Okay. Can you take your shirt off for me?”

She’s here to help. I don’t fight her. Maddy examines me with a careful touch and kind eyes, distracting me with ridiculous dating stories and other random things she thinks of. When her fingers find my cheek, I close my eyes.

“Have you heard of karma?”

“Of course,” I say as she spreads an ointment over the wounds.

“Given all that Camila has done, I think karma is about to rock the bitch.”

“One can dream.”

Maddy washes her hands and then comes back, sighing heavily. “I wish there was more I could do. You said your head feels a little fuzzy?”

I nod.

“That’ll fade over the next day or so.” She glances at my hair. “Do you want me to brush your hair?”

My hair is one of my biggest triggers, but I’m already tired again, and I know my hair is a mess. “Be gentle? No pulling.”

Understanding flashes across her face. “I have soft hands.” She grabs a small brush from her bag and pats the bed. I sit on the end of it, and she sits behind me.

I tense a little.

She gathers my hair and puts it all on my back. “You know Asher used to pick his nose and eat the boogers?”

“No, he didn’t.”

“He did. He so did.” Maddy laughs, brushing the very ends of my hair. The knots are small and she eases the brush through them.

“That’s disgusting.”

“And he’s your mate,” she says, sounding forlorn.

“He’s outgrown it at least.”

“Are you sure?” She works her way through my hair, but the conversation is distracting enough that I don’t freak out.

“God, I hope so. Maybe I should ask.”

She shushes me. “Don’t you dare. He’ll hate me.”

“So you guys have been friends for a long time?”

“Yup. So long that no matter how grown up he got, he’ll always be that booger-eating rascal down the street.”

I chuckle a little. “You’re really nice.”

She hums. “Only because I like you.”

“Are you hitting on me?” I ask, referencing the running joke between us.

“Maybe. What are you going to do about it?”

We both laugh. She starts at the top of my head, carefully running the bristles of the brush through the length of my hair. There are minor snags but nothing that makes me tense or panic. Maddy is the most patient hair brusher in the world. When she finishes a few minutes later, she pats my arm and climbs off the bed.

“There. Better?”

I nod. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.” She makes a face. “Actually, maybe not anytime. You and I can’t keep seeing each other. At least, not like this.”

“Are you breaking up with me?”

She hands me the brush. “I’m breaking up with you as a paramedic. I fully expect you to call me to hang out once this all blows over. I could use a friend.”

“Me too.” I clutch the handle of the brush. “But I don’t know if we’ll ever be able to hang out.”

“Don’t forget about karma. I have faith she’ll take care of the bitch.”

“I hope so.” I chew on my cheek and blink slowly. “I’m already tired again.”

She nods. “Yeah, you should rest. I’ll get out of your hair and tell the guys they can stop pouting. How much you want to bet they’re cursing me to hell and back for kicking them out?”

“Moody alphas,” I say around a yawn.

“Mmhmm. Okay, love. Rest up and call me when you’re ready to hang out. Asher has my number.” She gathers her things and twinkles her fingers in goodbye.

I wave and smile, wishing we could hang out. Maybe someday.



I stand in front of the mirror, brushing my teeth. Living in a hotel hasn’t done great things for my skin. The scabs on my cheeks are nearly gone and the bruising on my back where the alpha pinned me with his knee has faded. Leaning over, I spit and rinse, setting my toothbrush in the little cup beside the sink. I press my hands into the counter.

“You are worthy of love,” I whisper.

Hayden says something to Avi right outside the bathroom door, so I leave it at that, hoping one day it’ll do the trick.

It’s been three days since the guys rescued me. They brought plenty of clothes and food. Hayden even remembered to grab the key Granny left me, not that it’ll do me any good to have it. It’s not like I can mosey into the bank where they’re most likely monitoring to see if I’ll show up. Despite knowing the Omega Council is out there searching for me, there’s been no word of the men breaking me out.

The news coverage has focused on the changes within the Council, but we still turn on the television every morning and evening to see if the Omega Council has issued anything about my disappearance.

I make a beeline for the bed when I exit the bathroom, hoping none of them heard me giving myself a pep talk.

Trev is on one of the burner phones, discussing a case, so when I turn on the TV, I immediately lower the volume. Avi, Hayden, and Asher come join me on the bed. They’ve been following me everywhere and while the hotel has been nice, I’m anxious to get out of here and have more space. Living in a small room with four men is a lot to handle. They’re not

gross or anything, but I'd still like alone time. Time to decompress and be alone with my thoughts. Maybe I can take another bath, though my skin has barely recovered from the one I took a little while ago.

"Now onto another breaking story. Camila, the head of the Omega Council, has been fired." The anchor laughs a little. "You heard that right, folks. There's a new boss in town, and she just so happens to be Pack Bullet's omega."

The other cuts in, "And if that's not nepotism, I don't know what is."

The first anchor chuckles. "Well, all we can confirm right now is that Camila has been fired and the warehouse that used to be used for the omega auctions has mysteriously burned down." She makes a face at the camera. "A strange coincidence if you ask me, but the fire chief has ruled the fire an accident."

A familiar face flashes on the screen, and I scoot down the bed for a closer look. "I know her," I mumble, trying to figure out how as the newsfeed cuts to a live recording.

"Reagan, what can you tell us about becoming head of the Omega Council?"

The woman with light brown hair and fire in her eyes smirks at the camera. "Only that changes are being made, and to any omega who suffered at Camila's hand, she will face the consequences."

The live recording cuts off, and the anchors appear on the screen again.

"There you have it, a bold statement from the new head of the Omega Council."

"Oh my god!" I hop off the bed and turn toward the guys. "She was auctioned too."

Trev hangs up his call and glances at the screen. "They said she was Pack Bullet's omega?"

I nod. "Yeah, I remember her. She bid on each omega and herself. It was crazy." I dig my fingers into my hair. "I have to

go see her. I can fix this.” I gesture between all of us.

“I don’t know,” Avi says. “What if she’s no better than Camila?”

“You don’t understand, she was outraged. She was so pissed she didn’t care who she made mad that day. If anyone can understand what I’ve been through, it’s her.” I give them all a pleading look. “This could be our chance.”

The men all turn to Trev, and I look at the alpha too. “Please. Let me go talk to her.”

“Lucas said his mate was auctioned...” He trails off and rubs the scruff on his jaw. “I think Whitney is right. This is the best chance we have. Lucas let us go and now his mate is on the Omega Council.”

“It’s settled then. I’ll go see her.” I grab a dress Trev bought for me and hurry to get ready.

Asher climbs off the bed. “We’ll come with you.”

I shake my head. “No. I need to do this alone.”

“Whitney, it’s not safe.” Trev crosses his arms over his chest.

“This is the safest it’s ever been for us,” I say, shaking my head. “I understand why you want to come, but I need to talk to her without you guys there. Omega to omega.”

They all exchange glances, clearly not happy with the thought of me going alone, but Trev finally sighs and nods.

“But you text me the second something feels wrong.” He hands me my cell phone which I left on the table.

“Deal,” I tell him, heart racing as I run a brush through my hair.

This is our chance.

Chapter Forty-Seven

WHITNEY

Avi's car idles outside the Omega Council headquarters. With a little convincing, I got the key and was able to come on my own. As much as I'd like them here, I needed to do this alone. I tighten my grip on the steering wheel and glance around. There are no guards. There are a few cameras on the outside of the building. I don't know if this is a good idea, but I have to believe that with Reagan as head of the Omega Council, she'll pardon me. She was auctioned off. She knows what it was like to have no choice. I flip the visor down and check my makeup. I put on mascara and a little bit of pale pink lipstick before leaving the hotel. I'm wearing the navy and pink empire waist dress Trev bought me and a simple pair of flats. This is the nicest outfit I had at the hotel, and hopefully dressing up will help my case.

I could have worn jeans, but with Reagan living with *the* Royal family, I didn't want to look ridiculous. I want to make a good impression. Well, a good second impression. Our first time meeting wasn't on our best day. My burner phone vibrates, but I stick it in my purse and ignore it. If I text the guys now, I might chicken out and drive back to the hotel. They're my safe haven and this is nerve wracking. I breathe deeply to calm my fluttering nerves and climb out of the car.

No one races out to arrest me. It's silly to assume a guard is watching the camera closely enough to spot me, but this is the Omega Council we're talking about. History has shown they're not the most reasonable organization. The lobby of the building is clean and sterile, almost corporate feeling with

mass manufactured art and furniture. A few cute plants are the only thing that save the place from looking cold.

I breeze over to the elevators and press the call button, looking around like a paranoid crackhead. My gaze catches on a camera situated in the middle of the two elevators. Unease fills my stomach, but I ignore it.

Reagan isn't going to shun me.

That's a bold assumption, but I believe it. She was so mad at the auctions.

The elevator doors swish open, and I step inside, adjusting the strap of my purse on my shoulder and pressing the button for her floor. The same one Camila used to lord over. The elevator music is bright and cheery and makes me smile a little. I focus on my breathing like Avi taught me, counting the inhales and exhales. My panic attacks have gotten a bit easier to manage with the new technique, but that tightness in my chest hasn't disappeared. It'll take more than a few deep breaths to work through my anxiety, but I'm a work in progress. Another thing Avi taught me.

Even though I think I'm doing good, something will happen and make me feel like I've lost all my momentum. The truth is, those moments are opportunities to strengthen my understanding of my triggers and how to handle the aftermath. Being taken by Camila's men set back some of the progress I'd been making, but I'll be damned if she makes me weak. I've been through worse than those few days in that cell. My own flesh and blood has punished me harsher than the Omega Council. Not knowing my fate has me wanting to run and continue hiding, but logic tells me that's not the right answer.

Hence the stress-inducing trip to see the fiery omega who pissed off Camila's mate at the auction. The elevator arrives at her floor, and I walk to her office. The building is surprisingly empty given that there's a Compatibility Ceremony happening in a few short days. Her office door is slightly ajar. I take a deep breath and knock.

"I swear, Lucas, if you didn't bring me curly fries, I'm going to be pissed."

Oh great. She's hungry. Everyone knows a hungry omega is a dangerous omega.

I clear my throat. "Um, hi, Reagan."

A rolling chair scoots across the floor. Reagan appears at the door a few moments later. Her light brown hair is swept into a sloppy bun, and she's wearing jeans and a T-shirt. I'm way overdressed. I glance at my dress. I should have worn the pants.

"Can I help you?"

I lift my gaze to meet hers, and her eyebrows pinch together. She looks at me a little harder.

"I know you. What happened to your face?"

"Camila happened, and we were auctioned together." I smile, then worry that's an odd reaction to my statement and drop it.

Her nose wrinkles. "Oh right. That was probably the second worst day of my life." She opens the door a little wider. "Would you like to come in?"

"Sure." I walk into her office and take in stacks and stacks of paper on the desk. "What was the first?"

"What?"

"The first worst day?"

"Oh"—she laughs—"probably when I thought I was going to die."

I raise my eyebrows, but she shakes her head.

"It's a long, boring story." She walks around her desk and sits, gesturing at the empty chair across from her.

"Death hardly sounds boring to me." I take the seat and meet her gaze. Best to just dive in, no? "As you know, I was auctioned off. I was sold to Pack Ginty, but then they were arrested for dealing drugs. I was taken in by another pack, and I'd like to request the Omega Council's official blessing to stay with them. Without repercussions for what they've done."

She growls softly. “And what did they do to you?”

“No, no,” I say quickly. “They didn’t do anything to me.” I glance above her head and say, “they lied to the omega council and hid me,” in one breath. “And they broke me out of where Camila was holding me. She was going to shun me.”

“Did they now?” She doesn’t miss a beat. “Well, Camila was a bitch, so I can’t say I blame them.”

My mouth opens in surprise and she studies me.

“Are they nice?”

“They’re the best,” I admit.

She picks up a handful of paper stapled together. “You know the interesting thing about these tests?”

“No,” I say when I realize she’s waiting for me to answer.

“While it’s a bit obscene to think that you can find your match based on a compatibility test, the test isn’t that bad at finding matches that work well together. The pack I ended up with was actually my top match. Isn’t that fucking wild?”

I shrug. “Maybe that was a coincidence.”

“Maybe.” She stands and goes to a filing cabinet. “What’s your name again?”

I tell her and she pulls open a drawer, digging through files until she finds what she’s looking for.

“Here. Those are your top matches.”

Taking the small packet, I glance over the pack names. Pack Cocker isn’t on the list. I hand her the papers.

“My pack isn’t on there.”

“Fuck.” She huffs and glares at the packet.

“Sorry?”

She sighs. “No, it’s fine. I had thought I could make some small changes with how things were done and everything would work out for the best, but I’m starting to think that it’ll be more complicated than that.”

“So what’s your plan?”

Sitting down, she flips through the pages of another test result. “I honestly don’t fucking know. My mates support me in whatever I decide, but they don’t see anything wrong with the test.”

I laugh. “That’s because it’s all they’ve ever known, and the men always received the benefit.”

“True.” She tosses the papers onto her desk and kicks her foot up on her desk. “What the fuck do we do, Whitney?”

She’s asking me? I take in the stacks of results and think it over. Maybe knowing if you’re compatible with a pack isn’t the worst thing, but perhaps there’s a better way to find matches.

Shaking my head, I lift a shoulder. “What if you give them options? Like pick your top five packs sort of deal?”

The idea doesn’t sound horrible, but it still doesn’t address when the compatibility test fails.

“Options. I like that.”

“It may not be the final solution though. There are a lot of things you could try... but each change will take time. If one fails, you can always try another.” My phone vibrates in my purse, reminding me of the reason why I came to see her. “So, about my pack.”

“Oh, yeah. Fuck it, they’re good.”

I burst out laughing. “You’re so different than I expected.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” She smooths her messy bun. “So when can you start?”

“Huh?”

“I’m hiring you whether you like it or not. Does Monday work?” She flashes her teeth at me and patiently waits for me to cave in.

I have a feeling that smile usually gets her what she wants.

“I don’t know much about... things.”

She tries not to laugh. “Well, I think you’ll do just fine with... things,” she whispers the last word, making me chuckle.

“If you say so.”

“I know so.” She holds out her hand for me to shake. “Ready to fuck shit up?”

“I don’t know if this is the best thing that’s ever happened to me or the worst,” I admit, placing my hand in hers.

“Definitely the best.”



The ocean is not the first thing we do with our newfound freedom. The day after I meet with Reagan, the guys come with me to the bank. It’s been so long since Granny died and so much has happened, but as soon as I step foot inside the building, all of that grief resurfaces. The manager opens the safety deposit room for me, and the guys wait in the lobby, giving me space to see whatever it is Granny left me but staying close enough I feel secure.

There’s no reason to worry anymore, but we have yet to relax and live like a normal pack. Number one-hundred-thirty-six is near the bottom of the column of drawers. The key is heavy in my hand as I slip it into the keyhole. Sucking in a deep breath, I unlock the door and grab the small metal box and take it to the table in the middle of the room. A quick glance around proves there are no cameras in this space and that the manager is waiting outside as promised. Total privacy.

Flipping the lid open, I scan the contents. A few pictures of us. A key on a keychain. Some flower seeds—who knows how old they are—and an envelope. I grab that first and pull out a few pages of folded paper. Granny’s handwriting is instantly recognizable and a small, sad smile tugs at my lips when I see my name at the top of the first page.

Whitney,

By now I'm probably long gone. I want you to know that I love you with all my heart and those afternoons we spent in the garden together were some of my happiest days. I left you some seeds to plant your own, though they may not be any good by the time you get them in the ground. It's the thought that counts, right?

I'm honestly not quite sure how to go about bringing this up, and I'm ashamed I'm too much of a coward to tell you now before I die. I'm not sure exactly what goes on in the house with you and your mother, but I have a feeling it's not good. Perhaps she's too harsh or overly critical, whatever the case, I see you hurting, and for that, I want to apologize.

Your mother's heart was broken before you were born, and your fathers never fixed that wound. I had hoped they would, with time, but it seems as the years passed, it festered and turned your mother into the woman she is today. Sometimes I don't even recognize her, but her anger is my fault.

She fell in love with a beta. Even managed to mate with him before I found out what was going on. I reported it to the Omega Council, hoping it would save the both of them... that was a mistake. Your mother was matched with her pack and the beta ended up killing himself. Your mother was never the same.

I'm not telling you this to convince you to forgive her, only you can decide if she deserves that. You may never forgive her and that's okay. I'm only writing to let you know that in every story there is a villain, and I am your mother's.

The deed to the house is in your name. I've left you everything I own, which isn't a lot, but you deserve all of it and more.

I'm sorry for everything I've done and everything I didn't do.

Love, Granny

Sucking in a sharp breath, I drop the papers into the box and grip the edge of the table. She knew something was wrong? All this time I was convinced she didn't see it, but she did. Obviously, she didn't know the extent of how bad Mother had gotten. She should have asked. Maybe she was afraid to know. I scowl at the safety deposit box, blaming it for my sudden burst of anger instead of Granny. It doesn't feel right to be pissed at her, but I am.

I pick up the letter and read it again. Granny made a mistake. I can forgive her for that. My mother though? She made the choice, over and over. She never tried to change. She never cared. I can't forgive her. I won't. To the best of my abilities, I'll work to heal my inner child. I'll give myself everything my mother should have given me.

Granny's house is smaller than the pack's, but it could serve as a rental. We could save money. Go on trips. Enjoy our lives rather than just living them. I take the pictures, the deed, the key, and the keychain. I drop the letter and the flower seeds into the trash.

I'll start fresh and plant my own garden.

Quietly closing the box, I slide it back into place and lock the door. I glance at the trashcan, debating on whether or not I should keep the letter. Words are cheap. It hurts to know at the end of the day, all Granny could give me were words. They didn't change what happened and it doesn't excuse her willful ignorance. Granny meant the world to me for so long, but now my world has changed.

I've found... a part of myself I didn't know existed. I crave hugs. I long for kisses, and I cherish the sweet caresses my mates give me. I'm not afraid of love anymore.

Exiting the room, I hand the key to the manager and sign the paperwork to close the box. I meet the guys in the lobby and they all turn to look at me.

"Ready to go home?" Hayden asks, gaze flicking to the things in my hands.

“Never been more ready,” I confess. “Take me home.”

Epilogue

WHITNEY

ONE YEAR LATER

Reagan throws a stack of papers into the trash with a growl. I sit and wait for her to finish throwing her fit. Every option we've tried to help omegas find their match has failed. Giving them options worked for a while, until one omega couldn't decide on a pack that felt right. We switched things up after that, pulling in some of the less compatible matches to see if that helped.

It didn't.

"Goddammit." Reagan smacks the desk.

"I know you're angry, but what did the desk ever do to you?"

She glares at her bestie, Amelie, who is leaning against the wall by the filing cabinets. I press my lips together to keep from giggling. I swear half the time the two of them hate each other, but they have this strange connection I find myself envying from time to time. Lindsey, basically my one and only friend, wasn't exactly the best person.

"None of it is working. I thought it would work." Reagan seethes behind her desk.

I'm perched in the chair across from Reagan. "What if you made an app?"

“An app?” She drops into her seat behind the desk, eyes lighting with interest.

“An app,” I say with a nod, leaning slightly forward. “Preloaded with all the same data. The omegas and alphas can use it like a dating site, like the ones betas use.”

“And then omegas and alphas can swipe through to find someone they might be interested in?” Amelie walks toward the desk.

“Yeah! We can still vet the alphas, make sure they don’t have violent pasts or something, but we’ll have to know no matter how hard we try, we won’t be able to stop something bad from happening.”

She frowns. “I don’t like that.”

“You can’t control people.” I shrug at her and Amelie.

“Ain’t that a bitch?” Reagan rolls her eyes. “Right, so without lingering on the potential negatives, an app could be the solution we’ve been looking for. Omegas will have more freedom than ever before.”

“What if they don’t want to find a mate?” This from Amelie.

“Then they don’t have to,” Reagan says, like it’s as easy as that.

I frown. “The Royal Council—”

“The Council,” she corrects, “will kindly stay the fuck out of my omega business. Besides, Lucas will keep the alphas in check.”

“You really think they’d be okay with it?” I like my idea, but it’s a longshot to get everyone else to see the value.

She grows serious. “I really don’t care what they think. I’ve stopped giving a shit what anyone thinks. I don’t want kids, hell, I almost didn’t want mates. I won’t force someone into pack life if they don’t want it.”

“I respect that.” And I do. Over the last year, I’ve gotten to know Reagan fairly well, and she’s awesome, if not a little

cranky from time to time. Hormones will do that to a woman though. “And, the best part is, we can fix things in real time. If the app isn’t working one way, we can adjust the programming.”

“Programming,” Amelie mutters. “Now you’re losing me. I’m going to go get snacks, you bitches are always hungry, right?”

I snicker and she grins at me.

“There are plenty of software engineers out there,” Reagan begins, completely ignoring Amelie as she plans out exactly what we’ll do to make the app happen.

“I’ll be back with snacks,” Amelie informs me on her way out.

“How long does an app take to develop?” Reagan wonders out loud, fingers drumming on the top of her desk. “I’ll call Lucas.” She lifts her gaze to meet mine. “When do you go on vacation again?”

“We leave tomorrow.” I check my watch. I’m supposed to get off in twenty minutes so I can go home and pack.

“Right. Okay. Don’t worry about this. I’ll get everything started while you’re soaking up the sun.”

“Are you sure? I might be able to cancel—”

“Hell no. Go to the beach. Your mates would kill me if I made you stay.”

I grin. “They’re not that violent.”

“Shoo, shoo.” Reagan stands and gestures me toward the door. “Your ass better be tan by the time you come back.”

Standing, I grab my bag from the floor and hoist the strap onto my shoulder. “I hope you’re not planning on checking.”

“So long as you enjoy yourself and don’t worry about work, I won’t, but I swear, one text from you and I’ll fire you.”

“Wow. Who knew being dedicated could get a woman fired.” I raise my eyebrows and shake my head.

She narrows her eyes at me. “I’m not joking.”

“I know,” I say with a smile. “It’s why I love having you as my boss. I can’t wait to hear how things are going when I come back.”

Reagan twinkles her fingers. “Okay, byeeeeee. Have fun!”

Laughing, I leave the room and race for my car. It took almost an entire year of saving up to buy us all plane tickets to some fancy island resort, but we finally did it. I’m officially going on my first beach vacation tomorrow, and I can’t wait. I make a quick stop at a store and buy the slinkiest bikini I can find. I may not be going through my heat, but I’m determined to make my mates absolutely feral on vacation.



My car idles outside an orphanage while I wait for Hayden. He texted me earlier that he was going to run a few minutes behind. I’m tempted to call him and tell him to forget about it, but I made so many model cars it doesn’t feel right. Most people put them on a shelf to admire. While they aren’t the most practical of toys, I like to think they’ll be so shiny and big the children won’t care.

Hayden parks next to me, and I flick my eyes to the clock on the dash. Four-fifteen. The office officially closes at four-thirty. I suck in a sharp breath and climb out of my new Honda. Technically, it’s a few years old, but I was able to get rid of the beater and pay for a better car thanks to Reagan giving me a job.

Popping the trunk, I grab two of the four giant bags in the back.

“Hey, trouble.” Hayden kisses my cheek and takes the other bags. “Sorry I was late.”

“No worries. Everything okay?” Unease swirls through me. I still don’t enjoy wondering if they got hurt while I wait to finally hear from them, but it’s part of being their omega. I’ve learned to be patient and hope for the best.

He smiles at me, gray eyes warming as he closes the trunk and we stand in front of one another behind my car.

“I was going to wait to tell you until we were home with everyone but, fuck it. Camila was arrested today.”

I almost drop my bags. “What? What for?” The grin on my face is a little cruel but fuck that woman.

“False imprisonment. Guess Camila never had official legal authority to hold omegas. I forget the exact number of omegas she’s charged with imprisoning, but it’s big. There’s no way that woman is getting out of a life sentence.”

I squeal and do a little dance, stopping in the middle of a bounce. “Sorry, is this wrong?”

Hayden laughs. “Nope. She deserves it. Be happy.”

“I can’t believe it,” I say, shaking my head and walking around the car. We still only have about ten minutes to drop these cars off. “Who ordered it?”

“Lucas.” Hayden takes the lead and opens the door for me.

“Holy crap,” I mutter to him under my breath, shooting him a disbelieving look before entering.

The office of the orphanage is really a closed off foyer. A woman with horn-rimmed glasses looks up from her computer, eyes bouncing between me and Hayden before sliding down to the bags.

“Can I help you, officer?” She rises from her seat but stays behind the desk. “If it’s one of the children—”

“No, ma’am. Sorry I didn’t have time to change. Everything is okay, my mate here wanted to come by.”

The worry on the woman’s face smooths, and she glances at me.

I clear my throat and stop staring like a fool. “Right, uh, I made these. I hope there are enough.” I walk over and set the bags on the floor, reaching in for one of the plastic boxes that holds a cherry red model Corvette.

“Oh my,” the woman says, taking the car from my hands. “You made this?”

“Well, I assembled them. The wheels roll and the doors open. I know they’re a little extra, but I thought the kids might like having something of their own. I made forty, but if you need more, I’ll make them. I’m going on vacation so I wouldn’t be able to make them—”

“Honey, you’re rambling.”

“Oh,” I say with a laugh. “I don’t know why I’m nervous,” I tell her. Part of dealing with emotions that overwhelm me has been to be honest with people about what I’m feeling.

The woman stares at me, light green eyes shimmering. “It’s okay. I understand. You’re so sweet for making all of these. Forty is plenty, and the kids will love them. Do you want to see them?”

My heart rate spikes. “I don’t think I’m ready for that yet.”

“That’s fine, honey. What’s your name?”

“Whitney.” I glance at Hayden as he comes to stand beside me. “And this is Hayden.”

She smiles at us. “I’m Lizbeth. Thank you so much for thinking of the children. They’ll be delighted.” She sets the car down and comes around the desk. Before she can even open her arms, I move toward her and meet her halfway.

Hugs don’t bother me so much anymore.

Lizbeth’s embrace is warm and calming. It’s nice to know the kids have her. She snuffles and steps back.

“Sorry. Some days are harder than others and this gift came at just the right time.” She eyes the two of us. “If you ever want to volunteer, let me know. I have all the paperwork here and you can come in anytime to get it.”

I hadn’t thought about volunteering, but honestly, I don’t know if I’m ready to immerse myself with kids. I don’t know how it would impact my mental health, and I’ve been doing so well this last year.

“Thank you, Lizbeth,” Hayden says, sensing my struggle. “I know you’re getting ready to close, so we’ll get out of your hair.”

She beams at both of us. “Thank you two again. Really, this is so sweet.”

Hayden wraps his arm around me and leads me to the door. I wave bye to Lizbeth.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m good,” I say as we make our way toward the cars. “I don’t think I want to volunteer.”

Hayden lifts a shoulder. “That’s okay. Do what you’re comfortable with.” We stop in front of the vehicles. “Race you home? We have to finish packing.”

“Eat my dust, copper.”

“Trouble,” he warns. “No breaking laws.”

“Fine,” I huff, rolling my eyes. “I promise.”

And I keep that promise.



Opening the video conference link on my laptop, I wrap my shawl over my shoulders and gaze out at the ocean. The suite we got has a cute patio with a comfy table and chairs. The guys are all inside drinking coffee and planning for the day. We arrived yesterday and after a fun picnic dinner on the beach, we had a few drinks and watched the sunset.

The screen blinks and Cordelia, my therapist, pops up on the video call.

“Hey, Whitney. How’s the beach?”

“Amazing,” I say with a smile. “It’s so nice, look.” I turn the laptop and show her the ocean for a few seconds. “I wonder if Reagan would hate me if I decided to stay here forever.”

Cordelia laughs. “I understand that feeling. The ocean always makes me feel amazing.”

“Yeah.” I set the laptop down facing me again.

“So, anything new to talk about?”

With a little encouragement from Avi, I contacted Cordelia. We’ve been seeing each other for six months, and unlike Linda, the Omega Council snitch, Cordelia actually gives a crap and she recognizes when I’m struggling or withholding things.

“I went to the orphanage.”

“Oh, how’d that go?” She raises her eyebrows and sips on her coffee. Her mug says *Therapy or Die*.

“Good. Well, a little different than I thought, but still good. The lady asked me if I wanted to volunteer or see the kids, and I said no.” I frown. “I’m not sure why the thought of being around them bothered me so much, but I really didn’t want to do either of those things.”

She hums. “I think that’s okay, though. You weren’t comfortable and you were honest about it. It would have been worse to lie, don’t you think.”

I sigh and stare at the waves crashing onto the shore. “I guess. I’m just worried about how I’d treat them, you know?”

“Because of your mom?”

“Yeah.” I glance at the screen.

Cordelia sets her coffee mug down. “Have you heard anything from her since you sold Granny’s house?”

I had considered keeping the home, but in the end, it didn’t make sense. With the letter Granny left me, it felt like the house was baggage. The last thread tying me to my past. I was ready to move on, and since the deed was in my name, I sold it and we saved the money. Eventually we’ll buy a new house, but there’s no reason to rush into moving. We’re taking our time to find the perfect pack home.

“I haven’t heard from her,” I finally tell Cordelia.

“And how does that feel?”

I shrug. “Honestly, it’s fine. I’d rather not see or talk to her ever again. Not even if she wanted to apologize.”

“That’s your boundary to keep. You know I don’t push reconciliation. Sometimes it makes more sense to withdraw from those who hurt us.”

“I know.” I lean back in the chair. “So, anyway, I’m not ready to take on meeting a big group of kids, but maybe someday.”

“Or maybe never, that’s okay too.”

I smile at her. “Have I told you how much I like talking to you? You’re so different from Linda.”

Cordelia snorts. “I hate to say bad things about any therapist, but Linda is hardly what I’d call a therapist.”

We share a laugh.

“Anything else you want to talk about? This is your time, but I don’t want to keep you if you’re busy. It’s okay to miss a session.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” I tease.

She rolls her eyes. “No, but you know what I mean. I’m really proud of you, Whitney. Enjoy your vacation, okay?”

“Fine, but we’re meeting when I come back.”

Grinning, she leans toward the camera. “As if I’d let you stop coming entirely. I said take a session off. See you when you get back.”

I twinkle my fingers and exit the video conference.

The sliding door to the suite opens, and Avi takes the seat next to me. “Breakfast is ready. How was your call.”

“Good. Cordelia practically hung up on me.”

“She’s excited for you to relax. You should be too. Asher wants to go ziplining.”

“Oh really?” I grab the computer and stand. “And who put him in charge of activities?”

“You know, sometimes he talks so loud we sort of let him take control so he’ll stop.”

I giggle. “Be nice, he’s excited.”

“I am being nice. That’s the truth.”

Elbowing him, I roll my eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Let’s go eat.”



Water rushes over my feet, the cool temperature refreshing compared to the hot summer air. Trev and Asher are playing catch with a football a few feet over and Avi is crashed out in the chair under the umbrella. I glance over my shoulder, catching Hayden’s gaze flick from my ass up to my face. The skimpy dark blue bikini has definitely had the effect I wanted thus far. The guys almost didn’t let me come out of the suite, but I threatened to withhold sex, so here we are.

His gray eyes drink me in, and he runs his thumb over his lower lip. The dirty thoughts inside his head are written all over his face. I smirk and run my fingers over the scrap of fabric covering my ass.

He rises from his seat, strutting toward me. I turn and meet him halfway up the beach.

“What are you doing with that bikini, trouble?”

I bat my eyelashes. “What ever could you mean, officer?”

“Don’t call me that.”

Pouting, I sigh and nod. “Fine, daddy.”

“I’m going to smack that pretty ass.”

“I’m counting on it.” I wink and he growls, grabbing my hand and dragging me toward the suite.

“Save some for us!” Asher calls after us, and I giggle.

Hayden’s been known to put me out of commission from time to time. As soon as the door closes behind us, Hayden walks me into the wall and gently places his hand on my

throat. I stare up at him, feeling nothing but excitement. I love when he looks at me like I'm the sole reason he exists. That power is addictive.

“Remember what I told you during your first heat?”

I frown and shake my head. I hardly remember either heat—the hormones and sex make everything blur together.

“I said I was going to spit in that pretty mouth and face fuck you.”

Sucking in a sharp breath, I try not to look too excited about the prospect. Hayden's opened me up to a lot of possibilities, but this is a level of intimacy I've never tried.

I remove his hand from my neck and drop to my knees instead of responding. His eyes flare with heat, and our scents collide in the air, heady and horny and needy. Reaching for his swim shorts, I lick my lips and maintain eye contact as I pull them down to his ankles.

He rubs my cheek before leaning over and grabbing my chin, firm but not rough or violent.

“Open your mouth.”

I do, and he spits in it, his saliva mixing with mine and making my mouth water.

“Good girl,” he says, guiding his cock toward my mouth. “Now take my cock.”

No more instructions are needed. I circle my tongue over the mushroom tip and take him fully into my mouth, opening my throat and breathing through my nose. He grunts when I hollow out my cheeks and slowly glide back over his length. His hand smacks against the wall, and I grab his legs, winking at him to let him know I'm ready. Slowly at first, Hayden begins to thrust his hips, and I breathe and take him, letting his thick length go as far as he likes. Then he moves faster. I hum in approval and dig my nails into his skin. A feral growl rips from his lips and he fucks my face just as he said he would.

Those gorgeous gray eyes turn stormy as he watches me take everything he has to give, pride shining in their depths

when I gag a little but maintain control, taking a deep breath so I can continue taking the punishing pace.

“Fuck, trouble,” he whispers as his dick pulses in my mouth. I hum again, letting the deep reverberations run over him as his thrusts grow erratic and his muscles tighten. He practically whimpers my name as he comes, and I smile with his cock in my mouth, triumph racing through me.

He wasn't in control in that situation. I was.

Just then, the door bursts open and the guys barge in, stopping short when they find me on my knees. I slowly lick Hayden's dick clean, watching as each of them grow hard in their shorts until I place a chaste kiss on Hayden's tip.

“Oh hey,” I say, running my thumb over the corner of my mouth. “Welcome home.”

THE END

Acknowledgments

****Please note: Triggers related to childhood sexual assault and abuse****

I'll be honest, I'm not a crier, but Whitney's story had me in tears two or three times. My mother had a rough childhood, and she chose to break the cycle of physical abuse. It wasn't easy and breaking the cycle came with its own set of problems and issues, but she did it. She never raised a hand, fist, or belt to us. I'll never fully understand what it was like for her growing up, but I can tell you she's one of the strongest women I know.

Recently, I realized I had my own trauma to address, and I began to understand some of the things from my childhood. I also began to remember things I'd blocked out. It's taken me years to feel valid in saying that I'm a victim of childhood sexual assault. It's taken me years to understand a five-year-old cannot consent and I am not guilty or responsible for what was done to me. I don't know that I've healed, but I'm working on processing and finding ways to help my younger self know she did nothing wrong.

Anyway. Crying again. Gah. I hope this book has helped at least one person know that they're not alone. That's all I wanted to do. You're not broken or worthless or invalid. You're worth the world and you deserve kindness and love.

Thank you for reading Whitney's story.

A huge shout out to my alpha and beta team who helped me make sure this manuscript had everything it needed. I appreciate those who came forward in my reader group and shared their PTSD stories with me and offered to help review the content of this book. I am humbled and grateful that you'd trust me with your stories and that you'd take the time to read Whitney's and give honest input.

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Love, Rory.

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About the Author

Rory Miles is a fantasy romance author. She loves cats, memes, gifs, books, writing, her children and her husband. Especially when he makes fried chicken. She loves writing about romantic shenanigans and does her fair share of reading. Her all time favorite books are: #whychoose.

For new on more adventure filled romance, make sure to follow her on Facebook and Instagram.

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