



Pack

DECEPTION

PART TWO

WREN WHITE

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DEDICATION

To my readers. Your support keeps me writing, even when I feel like quitting.

TRIGGER WARNINGS

Brief mention of alcohol abuse, conversations about off-page miscarriage, mentions of emotional and physical abuse, and sexually explicit scenes.

ONE

SUMMER

MY THUMB TAPS *SEND*, and I stare at the single sentence that will likely turn my world upside down. The one I've spent the last five or so months trying to rebuild.

I know what you assholes did, and I'm going to make you PAY.

Sent to the three people who tried to ruin my life. Who lied to me, drugged me, abused me. Alphas, all three. Though how they call themselves that, I'm not sure. Cowardly is more like it. Disgusting, virulent cowards.

My adrenaline from the run over is starting to wane, the reality is setting in, and the shakes take over. Shudders ripple through me, adding to the growing tension in my body. I'm wound so tight, staring at the text, waiting for the response that'll damn me.

My phone pings, sending my heart rate through the roof, and a little whimper tries to break free, but I choke it down. It's not Pack Monroe, though.

BROOKLYN

Hey, cherub. You close? xxx

Two whole minutes. That's how long I was able to forget about the most recent betrayal. From another pack I thought was with me for me.

If she's ever going to believe she's our mate, it's now.

Just another group of selfish alphas ruled by their dominating nature. Their physical and societal need to be coupled up with an omega, no matter the cost. Mason though...

He should have been different. Just last week, he was nursing me through my post-heat aches and pains with no ulterior or sexual motive. With a glance at my unkempt bed, I can practically feel his hands kneading my muscles and the smell of the minty oil he rubbed into my skin. Out of the whole pack, he should have been my safe space. But he's just like the rest.

I exit out of Brooklyn's message without responding and click the side button of my phone, shutting the screen off. A muffled thud sounds as I toss it on my bed and pace the small space in between the bed and closet, trying to distract myself from my racing thoughts. I don't want to talk or think about any of them ever again. I don't want to see their beautiful, deceitful faces. It isn't a very realistic dream, I know that. They'll keep texting and calling when I don't show. Even if I respond to tell them I'm sick, they'll just insist on coming over to take care of me. All part of their caring ruse. It's still the beginning, so they have to keep trying. Until I have their bite marks, that is. Then, their true selves will start to peek through, little by little. That's how Pack Monroe did it.

When I first left them, I read about the term love-bombing. About how it's a form of emotional abuse where someone goes above and beyond for you in the beginning only to trick you into a relationship. After which, they start to tear you back down once you've been hooked. That's what I thought had happened to me before I saw Doctor Tanner, and she told me about the passion pack. Now, I'm not sure if there ever really was extra effort put in by my three current bondmates or if the drug just made me imagine the flattery and affection. Maybe they always were assholes, and I couldn't see past the cocktail of poison traveling through my veins.

Ping.

An involuntary twitch goes through my hand like my body wants me to reach for my phone, but my mind is rebelling.

Ping.

Ping. Ping. Ping.

Half a dozen messages come through before I can't take it anymore, and I check.

UNKNOWN

Stupid, useless cow. Have you had fun spreading your fat legs for everyone in a five-mile radius?

It's time to come home, omega. You've had your fun.

We'll forgive the disrespect this time, Summer. Don't push us past our breaking points.

HUDSON

Our table is ready, pretty girl. Are you on your way?

UNKNOWN

You think you can whore yourself out without any consequences? They'll get sick of you soon enough.

MASON

Mav's starting to get hangry. I'm pretty sure the elderly woman next to us heard his stomach rumble three times already. ETA?

With two quick swipes, I delete the notifications from Pack Whitlock and stare at the four texts from unknown numbers lighting up the screen. It's easy to tell which texts are Jade's. Since that ill-fated night when she slapped me hard enough to purple my face, I've thought nonstop about how she treated me. When the fog lifted from the drugs, it was easy to pinpoint how hateful she was. Vile and cruel. Obsessed with fat-shaming me. Of making me feel less than. Brody and Connor aren't saints; the goddess knows that, but they're more passive in their disdain. I can't say for sure which sent the other two texts.

The text telling me to come home most likely came from Brody. He was constantly micromanaging my time and activities. Always checking my phone to see who I was texting—which was nobody but them—or obsessively stalking my location on his Find My Omega app. Every time I looked at someone for longer than half a second, I was always flirting with them in his eyes. He'd definitely see my running away from them as just another snub. A chance to rebel from his tight control.

Connor was a little more vindictive than Brody, though certainly not to Jade's level. Anytime I wanted to do even the smallest thing for myself, I was selfish. Disrespectful. Once, I tried volunteering two days a week at a local library. It lasted one day. By the time I made it home, Connor was sitting at the kitchen island, glaring at the empty stovetop. The library closed at eight, so I was home before eight-thirty. But I usually had food on the table by six-thirty or seven, depending on their work schedules. He'd yelled that I couldn't even handle one day of working and keeping up with the housework. Spouting nonsense about how I must not care about us or our pack if I would choose a library over our home. At the time, it didn't seem like nonsense,

though. The hate and drivel wormed itself into my drugged-up brain and convinced me that if I loved them, I'd give them my all. Maybe it wasn't even the drugs, though; maybe I really am so screwed up and insecure that his words took root all on their own.

No matter. I got away from it. From them. A clean house and food on the table has taken a back seat to my own happiness and career. So, I clear their notifications and try to put them out of my mind. At least *halfway* out of my mind. Because now that I've sent the text telling them I'd make them pay, there's a big part of me that still wants that to happen. Even as the fear has seeped in some.

A heavy, shuddering sigh escapes from between my trembling lips. Goddess.

Pull yourself together, Summer.

With a shake of my head, I try to dispel the warring emotions and stiffen my upper lip. My phone vibrates in my hand—*again*—only this time, it isn't lighting up with a text. It continues to buzz, a constant loop, and when I turn it over, I see it's Mason calling. Since I don't want him to know I see his call, I don't reject it. It rings until my voicemail picks up. A relieved sigh escapes, only for it to break off when his name pops up again. I do the same thing, waiting for it to ring through. When it doesn't immediately ring again, I figure he must have gotten the hint. Only, a few seconds later, a voicemail comes through. My curiosity and impatience win out. With a few taps, I'm lifting the phone to my ear. His voice is warm and a little rough with worry. Despite myself, a shiver rolls through my body.

Damn, drugs! I can't trust myself with them until I know for sure they're out of my system. Though, to his credit, he is an excellent actor.

"Hey, babe, we're starting to get a little worried. Please call me back. Just let us know you're okay."

"Tell her we're coming to check on her," Maverick's muffled voice comes through a little garbled in the background.

"No, get back," Mason hisses back to him, voice now muffled as well. He must have put his hand over the speaker to growl back at Maverick. They're obviously still at odds with each other. I should feel guilty about it, but after what they're doing to me, I hope they never work things out.

"So just... you know, call me." There's an awkward pause, and then, *"Okay... bye."*

A burst of panic hits me at the idea of them on their way to see if I'm

home. No. Absolutely not. In a frenzy, I dart around the apartment, grabbing the barest necessities: toothbrush, toothpaste, pajamas, and work clothes for tomorrow. Within two minutes, I'm out the door, work bag and overnight backpack in hand, and locking up behind me. As I'm tiptoeing down the hall and out of the apartment building, peeking around every corner before I do for signs of any member of Pack Whitlock, I get the worst case of déjà vu. Back to a night when I was fleeing a different pack. Only this time, it's easier. This time, I'm not two years into a relationship or bound to three alphas.

I throw my hoodie up once I hit the sidewalk to try and hide my appearance in case I have to dart around a building to not be seen. There's nothing to be done about my scent. For that, I'm throwing up some prayers to the Goddess. When I make it far enough away from my apartment building, going the opposite direction as Nonna's, I pull my phone out and dial Ava.

"Summer?" She picks up just as I think I'm about to be sent to voicemail, and I could break down; I'm so relieved. "Everything okay?"

"Can I come stay with you tonight?" I know she can hear the tremble in my voice that I'm trying to fight back. I didn't even feel like crying until she picked up, and I thought about how pathetic my life was. But I did it. I called for help.

There's a slight pause on her end. I think she's contemplating letting me into her space. I've never been, and she's always managed to avoid inviting me over, always opting to come to mine.

"Are you okay?" Worry creeps into the apprehension lacing her tone. A knot lodges deep in my throat. She doesn't want me in her space, and I don't want to push her into doing something she's uncomfortable with. I push through and answer in a stronger voice.

"Oo-oh. Oh, yeah. Definitely. Just haven't seen you in a few days, is all," I lie through my teeth. It must sound as pitiful an excuse as it is because she sighs.

"I'm at the bar. Come see me." Better than nothing.

"Okay," I whisper and then end the call.



It's a Monday evening, so the bar is mostly empty. There's a small crowd of regulars, but the music is lower than normal, and nobody is yelling to be heard, so it's quiet enough. Ava isn't anywhere out front. I walk past the bar, nodding at Joe as he pours a drink for a pretty alpha woman, and head toward her office in the back.

Feeling a little unsure still, I knock softly before peeking my head in to see her mop of silvery hair in a messy bun on top of her head as she's hunched slightly forward, immersed in whatever's on her desktop computer. Her fruity scent is thick, coating every corner of the room. At the squeak of the door hinge, she glances up and smiles wryly at me, jerking her head for me to come in. I do and look around like I'm seeing the place for the first time. I'm not; I've been back here before but never really appreciated how unlike a bar office it is. At least stereotypically. I'd expect a mess. Papers everywhere, a ratty desk and chair, and maybe liquor bottles littering the surfaces.

This office is anything but. Ava's desk sits in front of the one brick wall, so her back sits toward it. The other three walls are black, and her desk matches it with some small gold accent pieces. The desktop itself is neat and clutter-free. Every paper in this office is scanned and filed away in the cabinets on the other side of the room. The only thing on it is her laptop, desktop, mouse, keyboard, cell phone, and one small pen holder that holds exactly one pen and one pencil. Not one liquor bottle or empty food container in sight. She's got a small couch in front of the filing cabinets and one chair directly in front of her desk that I walk toward.

It feels a little like a walk of shame as I drop my two bags on either side of the chair and take a seat. I'm not sure why because Ava isn't the type to judge. Not for needing help, but I don't like feeling helpless. Or foolish.

Which is exactly what I am. A fool for trusting another pack so soon after learning exactly how cruel the world could be.

When the cushion deflates a little under my weight, I glance up to look at my best friend. She has leaned back in her chair, arms crossed, and is frowning at me. The same worry I heard in her voice on the phone is painting her features. I don't say anything, just stare at her as I try to work the lump from my throat and stop the tears from pricking my eyes. There's something about putting words to a hurt that makes it sting even more. Like alcohol on a burn.

"Do you want me to just start guessing?" She huffs after the silence has

stretched on a little too long. Apparently, that's all the push I need because the floodgates open up after that. Starting from the pregnancy scare, about avoiding the pack because I was worried how they'd feel about it, through to the actual appointment and learning I could be infertile. When I get to the miscarriage, my voice dips to barely above a whisper, and by the time I've finished with what I heard Pack Whitlock saying, her eyes are comically wide, and she's clutching her phone. My eyebrows dip when the first thing she does after my demoralizing monologue is unlock her screen and start typing up a message; her fingers fly across the screen before she hits send, locks it back, and places it face down on her desk again. I want so badly to ask who she just messaged, but it's not really any of my business, and maybe it has nothing to do with me.

"Okay. Wow. I'm not sure where to start." She puts her head in her hands, takes a fortifying breath, and then stands abruptly from her chair, making me startle a little in my seat. She walks around the desk before perching on the thick armchair next to me, grabs my head and shoulders in a side hug, and pulls me tightly against her body. Soft fingers stroke through my hair, and she continues, "I'm so, so sorry for what you've gone through. With the miscarriage and those pricks that drugged you. Nobody deserves that, least of all you."

My throat closes up again. A sob builds, and I shove my face further into her shoulder, soaking up the comforting touch, and let it rip out of me. "Shhhh, it's okay. Let it out," she soothes as I unleash months' worth of heartache into her Hog's Head t-shirt.

"I just don't know what it is. If I knew wh-what I was doing to a-attract them, I'd stop."

"They were predators, Summer. There's nothing you could have done," she pauses and then leans away from me, so I pull back, too, to look at her. "But... babe... Pack Whitlock is not like your old pack."

I feel my eyebrows pull down, and my head shakes in denial. "Ava, I *heard them*—"

She tilts her head and looks sympathetically at me. In a soft voice, she says, "Did you hear them admit to drugging you? Or that you are their mate?"

"To drugging me!" I growl back automatically, standing up and pacing her small office. The smell of burnt nutmeg surrounds us as my frustration and stress leak out of me in droves. But once I say the words out loud, I know they aren't true.

If she's ever going to believe she's our mate, it's now.

They never did say anything about drugs or tricking me into anything. But that doesn't mean anything. Their words were admission enough. Why else would I have developed these feelings so hard, so fast, for an entire pack of strangers? I mean, seriously. What would the odds be of me escaping a group of alphas that pretended to be my fated mates, only for me to run into the arms of my actual mates?

Slim to freaking none.

That's not my life. This isn't some fairytale. Good things don't happen to me. Not since my mom died, since I met Jade, and everything went to hell. It's much more likely that they're going to try to convince me I'm their mate, that they've poisoned me than it is that I actually am.

"Summer. They didn't drug you. I know that, and I know you do, too. They are *good*. You deserve something *good*. Look past your trauma and let yourself be loved."

Burning starts up again in my now dry eyes, and I shake my head in vehement denial.

Ava blows out a frustrated breath. "Oh, for fuck's sake. Come with me."

Two

SUMMER

AVA GRABS my hand and pulls me out of her office and deeper into the hallway—the opposite direction from the bar. At the end of the hall, just before we hit the wall, there's a thick black curtain to the right that I've never noticed before. She brushes it aside and pulls me across the threshold with her. Just beyond it is a set of stairs leading up to a door. Does she live here? Above the bar?

We trudge up the stairs, barely a creak beneath our feet. When we reach the top of the stairs, she pulls out a set of keys, ones I've seen her open the bar door with, but she fits a different one into this door. Yeah, she definitely lives here.

Ava tosses her keys on the tall decorative table to the left of the door as I look around. The space is a decent-sized studio apartment with the kitchen just ahead, and the whole bedroom slash living room off to the left. It's significantly larger than mine; that much is clear from the jump. But my eyes can't see anything past the crowded corner across from her bed, near her closet.

"It's..." *A murder wall*, I want to say, but hold my words back. But it's what it looks like to me. In every crime movie, there's one of these. It's a bulletin board with pictures, post-it notes with words scrawled messily on them, and different colored strings connecting each pinned item.

"My past," she murmurs. "It's my past. And my present. And my future." She takes a big breath and lets it out. "It's everything I am."

Her words are so sad, so *angry*, that I pause on my way over to it to look at her. I've never seen her look like this. I've seen her calm when she kicks patrons out, boisterous when she's interacting with the regulars, and even

pissed when she's having trouble with the books or on nights when everything seems to go wrong in the bar. This, though... whatever this is, hits deep for her. A fury unlike anything I've seen, including Jade before she backhanded me, lines every inch of her stunning face. A pain so deep in her eyes, I'm not sure how she's still standing. I'm almost afraid to move, to break the spell and wrap her in my arms so I can offer her any kind of comfort.

Before I can, she shakes out of the daze she's in and walks over to it, nodding for me to follow. When I get close enough, I stare into her eyes, seeking permission, and she nods; I inspect the board with more scrutiny.

There's a couple—a man and a woman—smack dab in the middle, with the names Kyle and Nora Ellis pinned beneath it. I can't put my finger on it, but they look familiar. Maybe I've seen them at a charity event somewhere when I was with Pack Monroe. Right as I'm about to spiral into the where of how I know them, my eyes lock on three words. Big and bold and angry. I say angry because there are several black splotches like the pen was pushed too hard when someone wrote them.

Passion Pack Drug.

With wide, incredulous eyes, I jerk back around to Ava, who is staring intensely at me. "How? I don't understand..."

But then I notice something. Her slightly upturned nose and silvery blonde hair is almost identical to the woman in the picture. Looking between her and the board, I notice she's also got the same piercing green eyes as the man. "My name is Ava Ellis."

Is that the ground I feel brushing up against my jaw?

It has to be, with the way it just dropped at her news. "Your parents?" I'm suddenly incapable of full sentences.

"Created the passion pack drug." Though her face is grim, her tone now holds an immense amount of guilt. Guilt she has no point in feeling unless she helped them make it. Which there is no way she did. Not the Ava I know and love. Words elude me at her confession. It stunned me speechless.

She doesn't need me to respond, though, because she continues. "Which is why I *know* they didn't drug you, babe. I have devoted my entire adult life to stopping my parents. I know every symptom, every warning sign."

A knock sounds on the door behind us, and I'm so focused on Ava that I jump out of my skin. She sighs, "But since I figured you wouldn't believe me, I brought some backup." I would, though. Believe her. But now I'm worried she's invited Pack Whitlock here, and I'm not sure I'm ready to see them. I do

believe Ava. I trust everything she's saying.

That her parents created it.

That she's working to stop them.

That she knows the side effects of it, probably better than anyone.

But that doesn't mean she'd notice them in me. Does it? I mean, she only sees me at work. We spent a few hours together before my heat hit, and then again for girl's night, but that turned into me falling asleep at Pack Whitlock's house and her leaving early. Has she been around me enough recently to see the signs? I don't even feel different. Besides my absolute feeling of devotion for a pack I just met. Everything else about me feels the same. So, how would she be able to tell?

"Come in," Ava says, just loud enough for the person at the door to hear and walk in. Heels click against the hardwood floors, causing my brows to hit my hairline as Doctor Tanner strolls into Ava's studio apartment, medical bag in hand.

"Long time no see," Tanner says to me. No kidding, though. I was just in her office listening to her tell me I'm most likely not pregnant and even more likely to have suffered permanent infertility issues from the past two years. "I hear we have a medical issue to clear up." She sets her bag down on Ava's kitchen table and pulls out a chair, gesturing for me to take a seat.

"We do?" Why is my brain taking so long to catch up to why she's here?

"You do." Ava's voice is firm. "There's one way to know for sure if you've been drugged. You can listen to me reassure you all day long. But you can't argue with a blood test done right in front of you. Let us prove that they *love you* and have never abused your trust like that. Don't jump to conclusions so fast."

I skip over the word *love* before I start to panic...or blush. Of course, she's making too much sense for me to argue, so I nod dumbly.

"Pull up your sleeve," Doctor Tanner responds to my nod of acceptance. All business. She snaps on a pair of blue latex gloves and pulls a needle, four tubes, and a stretchy armband that'll cut off my circulation for the blood draw. She also roots around in her bag before pulling out a two-piece device, one part which looks a little like an old Nokia phone, only blue and gray. It's connected by a cord to a small black device with a power button.

"This is a portable test. I'll take the blood draws to the office and run them for a more detailed panel, but this one tests your saliva for any traces of amphetamine or methamphetamine, both of which are found in the passion

pack cocktail," she explains before I have the chance to ask.

One stick of a needle and a mouth swab later, I'm rolling my sleeve back down after Doctor Tanner tapes me up.

Small hands rest on my shoulders, and I look up to see Ava standing behind me, offering comfort while Tanner takes the swab and sticks it into her portable device. As it is beeping, reading my sample, and we all wait for the results, I get the overwhelming feeling of certainty. I already know what the screen is going to say. It's going to say that I've completely overreacted and jumped to conclusions about a pack that has been nothing but incredible to me. My mind and nerves are shot from the doctor's appointment and pregnancy scare. From the confirmation that Pack Monroe is the reason I lost my baby and possibly my future at ever having them. So, I projected that fear and anger on Hudson, Maverick, Brooklyn, and Mason. Unfairly.

The beeping stops. Almost comically, all three of us lean forward to look at the screen at the same time. Sure enough, shining back at me like a big middle finger is the word *NEGATIVE*. Ava's fingers tighten on my shoulders as she gives a reassuring squeeze.

"Well, unless you have any questions, I'm going to go back to the office and run the bloodwork." Her voice is kind as she glances at me in understanding. It's more than I deserve. I am such a drama queen.

"You don't need to run it. I believe this one." My head jerks toward the negative results.

"Actually, I'd still like to run your labs. The swab confirmed you haven't been ingesting it recently. But, as we know, you have had it in your system in the past. I'd like to see if there are still traces in your system. If we're lucky, you've metabolized it quicker than expected, and you'll be able to take your suppressants again."

Hope lights up my face, and Doctor Tanner gives me a soft smile in return. Just as quick as the hope came, though, my face falls into a confused frown as something hits me.

"Is something wrong?" Ava walks around the table until they're both staring at me with puzzled looks.

"Uh... it's just. I realized I haven't been able to feel my bondmates since... Well, I don't really know how long it's been. I didn't even notice." In the beginning, I had trouble even concentrating for longer than a few minutes at a time; they were throwing so many emotions at me. Then, with time or distance—I'm not sure which—their emotions and voices faded to a dull

whisper. One I could block out with a little effort and continue on with my day. This is different. I don't hear or feel *anything*, and bonds don't just disappear. Once you're bitten, that's it. You have a physical and mental link to someone else until one of you dies.

"I can see you still haven't finished reading the literature I gave you," Tanner chuckles, a twinkle in her eyes that confuses me, given the situation.

Just as she's about to continue, Ava interjects. "It's because they're your mates."

"Ava!" Tanner scolds. "You should have let them tell her."

Ava rolls her eyes at Doctor Tanner, and it strikes me that they know each other on some level. They've got a level of familiarity that two strangers don't have. "Please. If they had just sat her down and told her sooner, she wouldn't be in this mess."

Can't argue with that logic. Though a part of me wonders if I'm still swimming in so much trauma from Pack Monroe drugging me, I wouldn't have believed them even if they did just come out and tell me.

Tell me I'm their fated mate. For real this time.

Euphoria washes over me. I can feel my cheeks stretching into a Cheshire grin as their faces pop up like a picture show, and I imagine my mates.

All of us sitting around the dinner table the last time I was at the pack house, and Maverick had cooked his mom's apparently infamous chicken piccata. I remember looking around the table and seeing Brooklyn lean over and punch Hudson in the shoulder for stealing food from her plate. Mason was talking about his time in Iceland on the Laugavegur Trek, a conversation in which Maverick was completely engrossed, smiling softly at his best friend and boyfriend. Glancing around at all the love on display in that dining room, I had thought *I wouldn't mind growing old with this pack*.

Now, I might just get to. Unless they hate me for thinking the worst about them. That thought is sobering, and suddenly, the only thing I want to do is go see them.

I must have missed some conversation while I was stuck in my own thoughts and daydreams because by the time I look back around the room, Doctor Tanner is shutting the door behind her, and Ava is lost in her own head, eyes unseeing but pointed in the direction of her murder wall, for lack of a better word.

"Ava," I say, nudging her gently on the forearm. "I'm going to head out." She jerks at the contact, startled, before looking back down at me.

"Huh? Oh... okay. Yeah. You sure? You're okay now?" Her concern warms my heart. I love this girl.

"Are you?" I counter, eyebrow quirked and nodding pointedly at the corner. Her returning smile is sardonic.

"Good as I'll ever be." Boy, I hope that's not true. She deserves so much better than the pain swimming in her piercing green eyes. But I hold my tongue, wrap her in a bone-crushing hug, and say goodbye.

"Thank you. For everything." I throw as much emotion into the words as I can, my throat closing slightly with it.

"Anytime, babe. *Anytime.*"

Then I'm out her door, ready to find my mates.

THREE

BROOKLYN

"WOULD you guys calm the fuck down," I hiss at the three brutes crowding the door to Summer's apartment complex. Her *very* run-down apartment complex. The day when I beg her to move into the pack house with us is looming closer and closer. Especially when I realize someone wedged a rock between the doorframe, so there are virtually no safety measures in place for my mate. Save for the lock on each person's door, I suppose.

"What stupid fuck did that?" Maverick grumbles, opening the door and then aggressively kicking the rock out of the way so the lock will engage behind us.

"Probably just someone who realizes they forgot their building key. It's not that grave of an offense, Mav." Mason rolls his eyes, equally snarky as Maverick. That's how they've been recently. Since Summer's heat, when Mav decided not to tell Mason his own mate was in heat. I knew immediately, thanks to Hudson. So that made Mason the only pack member not to know.

I would have told him... I just assumed Mav already had.

He's been pissed at Maverick ever since. Locking his door at night so Mav can't sneak in to sleep with him, talking to him only when he has to, and getting frustrated over the smallest of offenses. I get it; I really do. Maverick messed up, but they need to work through their shit and fast.

"Just be quiet, both of you." My voice has a little bit of a growl to it, not quite a bark, but enough to tell them I'm not messing around. Mason shuts up immediately, but Maverick bristles a little. It's in an alpha's nature not to back down from a challenge. But we established hierarchy before we even created the pack, so he rolls his shoulders, cracks his neck, and nods at me submissively.

Hudson is already at the elevator, tapping his foot and holding the doors open for us to get in. The fact that he hasn't said a word since we left Nonna's and just been stoic and determined worries me a little. It's not his personality. Even under stressful conditions, he always finds humor in it.

When we're in the elevator, he crosses his arms and looks straight ahead. I nudge him with my shoulder. "You good, big guy?" His eyes trail down to mine, straight face still fixed firmly in place.

"We shouldn't have gotten rid of her security."

A blow to the face would have hurt less.

He blames me.

It *had* been my decision to stop the twenty-four-hour security, though. Hudson was against it, and so was Mav. But Mason agreed it felt like too much of a violation. After all, she's been starting to spend so much time with us; we *are* her security. But he's right. If I hadn't gotten rid of them, at least we would know where Summer was right now. One call to the detail watching her and we'd have answers.

It's likely not as sinister as it seems. Maybe she got caught up at work or just forgot we were meeting for dinner. Still, the what-ifs can be crippling. What if a group of alphas cornered her on her way to the restaurant? What if she got hit by a car? What if her past caught up to her?

A side eye tells me Hudson has gone back to staring at the elevator doors. Just as the ding sounds, he's moving. They haven't even opened all the way, but he turns his body to squeeze out of them. In six long strides, he's at her door. At complete odds with the tension roiling through him, he taps gently on her door and in a soft voice calls out. "You in there, pretty girl?"

In a tight semi-circle near her apartment, we all lean in and listen.

Nothing.

Three more soft knocks. "Summer?" Hudson calls out again, a little louder this time.

Crickets.

It doesn't sound like there is any rustling of clothes, no TV static in the background. I shove my ear directly against the door, the boys leaning in, too, when a phone chimes. The sound comes from our side of the door, out in the hallway, so we startle back. In my haste, I shove into Mason, who bumps into Maverick.

"Shit!"

"Oof."

"Quiet, dipshits," Hudson growls at them. If Summer is home, she would have probably answered the door by now, but still; he's not wrong. We don't want anyone coming out to investigate a bunch of people crowded around her door like literal stalkers.

"It's yours, Brooke."

"Oh, right. Yeah." I feel so off-kilter right now, and I definitely don't want to look at Hudson for fear of feeling like an even worse pack leader. Snagging my phone from my back pocket, I whip it around and tap the screen to see a text from none other than Ava Ellis. There has to be a reason she's texting me. I don't believe in coincidences, so I'd bet all the money in my bank this is related to Summer.

AVA

Meet me at Hog's Head.

"Why does she want us to meet her there?" Maverick huffs, and I elbow him in the ribs for looking over my shoulder to read my text. I don't know the answer for sure, though, so I shrug and start walking back to the elevator. The rest of the pack follows quietly.



The Hog's Head is dead. Well, deader than a weekend. Hudson doesn't wait for instruction, charging through the back hallway to where we know Ava's office is. The rest of us saunter up to the bar top and sit in front of Joe, another bartender. He's not nearly as pretty as Summer, though.

"Hey, Joe, have you seen Ava?" I ask him.

"Huh?" He looks up from where he's mixing a cocktail, but the question registers in a second because then he answers. "Oh. Nope. Last, she said she was going back to work on the books." His head jerks toward her office, where Hudson is making a reappearance, even more ill-tempered than before.

At my raised eyebrow, he just shakes his head and then walks to a back booth, plopping in the cushioned seat. Sighing, we follow. I've already sent a few texts back to Ava asking where she is and what she needs us to meet her for. Even asking if Summer is with her. No reply. It's an awkward twenty

minutes or so. We're just sitting here silently, watching the front door and the back hallway for any sign of Summer or Ava. All the while sending periodic texts to both women.

It's not until I see Doctor Elizabeth Tanner coming from the back hallway that surprise and worry start swirling around the table like a visible maelstrom. We scramble out of the booth and are in her space in two seconds flat. The graceful doctor doesn't even ruffle a feather. Instead, she looks at us with barely concealed humor while she shakes her head. "I should have known it was you guys from the start. It was too much of a coincidence." I frown back at her in confusion. "Summer's just upstairs. I'm sure she'll be along in a minute." Too much of a coincidence? While I'm thinking on her words, Mason gets right to the meat of things.

"Why is she here?" Mason questions.

"Is she okay?" Hudson, the voice of reason, follows with more urgency.

"She can tell you why she's here. But she's fine." Dr. Tanner pauses in a completely non-reassuring way, "Physically." All of a sudden, her earlier words make sense, and every muscle in my body locks up. *It was too much of a coincidence.* She means meeting Summer and then us finding our mates. Summer is the omega who was drugged for two years; I'm sure of it. Physically, she's fine. Of course, she isn't fine mentally. Not if I'm right. Who could be fine, ever, after what she's suffered?

"What did you—" Mason begins, but Dr. Tanner holds her hand up to stop his question.

"I cannot discuss patient care with anyone without direct consent. Even you guys." That is why we always get her for home care if we can. She's direct, patient, moral, and ethical. Always. I respect the hell out of her.

"Please send me the bill." I thrust my hand out to shake hers, assuming the role of pack alpha. Dr. Tanner shakes mine and then breezes by. We stand there for a few minutes, watching where she left in a little bit of a daze, when the smell of honey and nutmeg fills the bar.

A growl rips from Hudson before he charges our mate and picks her up in a tight hug. Her feet dangle a foot from the ground, but she wraps her arms around him and buries her head in his neck as one of his massive paws holds her head to him. The possessive bastard starts rubbing his face all over her hair, scent marking her. A chuckle slips out of me when I see Summer shudder at the move. Then I can't take it anymore; I want in on that action.

"My turn, you big oaf." He lets her down reluctantly, and then it's my turn

to tug her into my body. She melts against me, her gingerbread scent better than any aphrodisiac, and it calms me instantly. I don't feel the overwhelming weight that I was carrying on my shoulders until it falls right off with her in my arms.

"Are you okay, cherub?" She pulls back to look at me, even though I want to keep her pressed as tightly against me as I can.

"I'm so sorry," she starts, and then, to my absolute horror, tears start streaming down her cheeks. I wipe each one, but they're coming faster than I can brush them away. She's not blubbering, though; instead, she's just staring up at me with big doe eyes, slowly turning a darker shade of pink. It's like all her pain is internalized except for the wet tracks on her face. Or at least she's trying to keep it all inside. Part of me is a little unnerved that she feels like she can't cry. The other part wants to pull her into my lap and purr for her.

Going with my instinct, I let a rumble work its way up my chest until it vibrates out and through her. After a few seconds, a lovely little sigh escapes her, making me just the tiniest bit smug that it was me who got to comfort our mate when, looking around, the other three desperately want to.

When the tears dry, I ask, "What are you sorry about, Summer?"

She looks like she may just start crying again, so I run my fingers through her soft brown curls. Her head leans against my hand, and then she whispers out her confession. "I thought you guys were drugging me." The last two words are so soft, I barely hear them... and almost wish I hadn't. She thought...

"I know you didn't, and I also know... um, well..." She blushes a pretty shade of pink and starts stuttering over her words.

"Know what, pretty girl?" Hudson asks, stepping up to my side so he's within reaching distance of our mate. Maverick and Mason take a few steps closer, too, all of us huddling around her.

"Well, Doctor Tanner mentioned... that you guys might be my," her throat clears, "my mates. Fated mates, I mean. Like, *from the Goddess.*"

Mason snickers a little. From the corner of my eye, I see Maverick elbow him a little but put his hand over his mouth to hide his own mirth. Summer's stumbling and blushing is making this situation almost downright comical when, in reality, it should be a very serious conversation. Hudson is not so easily amused by the news.

"She should never have been the one to tell you that," he growls, fisting his hands at this side, jaw working.

"No, you dumbass, you should have." All our eyes shoot over to where Ava is leaning against the wall, arms crossed over her chest, glaring at us. "And she didn't, I did. Because you had every opportunity to be honest but didn't. Which caused a series of completely unnecessary events, and now you have to deal with that." Summer stiffens a little in my arms. For what? I'm not sure, but it makes me growl at Ava. It's the first time I've ever done it. Even as an omega, though, and having an alpha growling at her, with two others pissed off within close proximity, she doesn't so much as tremble.

"Oh, spare me. I'm the one who just calmed your mate down off a ledge." Her gaze lands on Summer; she softens a little and continues. "Happily, of course. But one she shouldn't have ever been on in the first place. You're welcome, by the way." That bit was directed at us, not our mate. The growl died down in my chest at the way she spoke to Summer just now. Like she didn't want to be one more bad thing that happened to her today.

"We were just trying to—" Maverick starts, obviously feeling a little defensive at the perceived attack on our intelligence.

"I don't really care what you were trying to do. We're here now. So maybe you should all head home and actually... I don't know... have a conversation?" She tosses a backpack that must be Summer's over to Maverick. He catches it easily, and we all look back to Ava. Turning on her heel, she pivots and walks back the way she came, leaving us standing there with our wrists red from the metaphorical slap she just gave us all.

"Well," Hudson begins, "that sounds like a hell of a plan to me. Let's go, mate." His cheeks stretch into a proud grin when he says *mate*, and he swoops down toward Summer. One arm around the back of her thighs, he lifts her off the floor to carry her over his shoulder. Her torso hits his back, and her tiny hands rest on his ass as she pushes herself off his body.

"Hey! Put me down," she giggles. He ignores her half-hearted protests. "Let me go, Hudson!" Red crawls up her cheeks as blood rushes into her upside-down head, but the smile doesn't drop an inch.

"Never, pretty girl. I'm never letting you go, now." His words are a declaration and a fervent promise. One I feel in every ounce of my being.

Ditto, cherub. You're stuck with us now.

FOUR

HUDSON

MY CHEST FEELS TOO TIGHT. Not in a good way, either. The way it probably should feel with my mate draped across my shoulder, her honey and nutmeg scent coating my clothes in an unintentionally claiming way. Especially now that she *knows* she's my mate. The secrets and evasions for everyone's own good can stop. So why don't I feel better? It still feels like an elephant has found its new home right atop my ribcage.

Images of the four of us standing outside Nonna's Italian restaurant, desperately trying to reach Summer, of us outside her door with no answer, come back to the forefront of my mind. My heart starts to race a little faster, and I bring my hand, the one not currently holding Summer, up to give her a slap on her perfect ass to distract myself and everyone else. They'll be able to tell if my scent sours from the fear, still holding me in a vice-like grip.

"Ouch," she hisses, and then smacks mine back in retaliation. It feels like little more than a feather dusting across my pants, making me chuckle.

We get to Mav's Wrangler, parked in the lot next to Brooke's matte gray Hummer, and I deposit her in the back seat of the jeep, sliding in next to her. Wasting no time, I pull her back into my lap and wrap the belt around both of us.

"Safety first," I whisper, kissing her neck and loving the way she shivers in response. My dick twitches as her full body shiver causes her to rub against my zipper.

Mav climbs into the driver's seat, starts up the car, and waits expectantly for the passenger side door to open. But all three of us look up in time to see Mason hop into the Hummer with Brooke.

Ouch.

I raise my brow at Mav when he looks back at us in his rearview mirror. With just a shake of his head, he puts it in reverse and follows Brooke home. Both my arms are wrapped around Summer at this point, so I feel when her stomach contracts slightly. I lean forward to see her worrying her bottom lip, eyes darting between Mav and the back of Brooke's car.

"They're going to be okay, pretty girl. Don't worry about it." My words are whispered directly into her ear, so Mav can't hear over the hum of music filtering through the speakers. She nods at my reassurance, looking anything but reassured.

Maybe I'll lock them in a room tonight to work through their shit while I keep Summer all to myself.

The sun shines through the window, lighting up the small slivers of honey in my mate's brunette hair, making her look like the Goddess herself.

Yeah. She's all mine tonight. Brooke, Mav, and Mason be damned.



We're all conjured in the living room of the pack house, Summer sitting on Mason's lap as a weight settles over us. It's time for the conversation we've all done our best to avoid. Part of me wonders if that's why Summer chose Mason to sit by. With three alpha marks on her body, something tells me that's where her issues stem from. An alpha's presence right now could do more harm than good—mates or not—depending on her story.

Mason's got one hand wrapped around her hip, the other playing with her fingers in a flirty, casual way. It seems to be working to relax our mate because she's staring down at him adoringly. The soft smile doesn't stay long, though. Brooke sits sideways on the same couch as them, turned toward Summer, and then grabs onto her feet as she starts talking.

"I need to apologize for not initiating this conversation sooner, cherub." Brooke looks so guilty, I chime in.

"It's on all of us, Brookie."

She shakes her head without looking my way. "No. I'm Pack Alpha. It's my responsibility. That blame lands on me." Those words are directed at me. But her next ones are for Summer. "The second we all saw you, we knew you

were ours. The guys came home from the bar that day, and they couldn't shut up about their beautiful omega mate." Summer blushes at the words, but fuck if they aren't the truth. We were completely enamored from the jump. "I wasn't there, obviously, but the second you stepped foot in the conference room that first meeting with Jerrick, it was obvious for me, too. I broke up with my girlfriend the minute we left Pen2Paper Press."

My brows hit my hairline when Summer growls at her words. It's sort of cute because it isn't a deep growl. More like a kitten purring, but it gets her point across all the same. Our omega is just as territorial of us as we are of her. "Don't worry, sweets, there's no contest. She was the worst." Brooke rolls her eyes at Maverick's words, but they do what he intended, and Summer relaxes again into Mason's chest.

"Why didn't you guys tell me you were my mates when you found out?" Summer's words are quiet, and Brooke leans back, rubbing the back of her neck a little in shame. Or maybe embarrassment. I know I'm feeling a little bit of both.

"For me, at least, I thought you were rejecting me," Mav says, chiming in. "You looked at me like I was every other customer. Didn't acknowledge the bond at all. I was crushed." I watch the devastation trickle into Summer's features, broken-hearted for something she couldn't even control. She's too good for us. "But then when you didn't bring up the bond at all or verbally reject me, I started to wonder why. You clutched your stomach soon after, and I thought there might be something wrong with you. Then, all the times after that, I didn't want to overwhelm and scare you off."

"It was pretty much the same for all of us, babe," Mason confirms, holding tight enough to her hip now that I can see the whites of his knuckles and the indenting of her skin. It's like he's scared she'll jump up and leave. Everyone nods when Summer's head swivels around to each of us for confirmation.

"I guess I get it. I also probably, um, wouldn't have reacted well... or believed you, really, if you had..." My breath catches in my throat. We're finally going to find out more about our tight-lipped, *marked* mate. Goddess, I'm not sure I even want to hear her story at this point, but she makes eye contact with me, so I put on an encouraging face.

"You've seen my mate marks... during my heat, I assume." Her face and neck flushes a pretty shade of pink, and some of her perfume wafts towards me. My dirty girl. Imagining the way Mav and I took care of her.

Great. Now I'm hard when we're trying to have a serious, important conversation.

"Yeah, pretty girl. I remember." My voice is rough, and judging by the vein popping out of Mav's forehead, he's not faring so well, either.

"Right." She clears her throat. "Well, I have... *had*... a pack not too long ago. Three alphas." Yep, there goes my heart. Ripped right out of my chest. The living room becomes suffocatingly drenched in burnt sandalwood and rotten citrus and lavender. But Summer musters on. "We met a few years ago, and it was great. Maybe not electric or that kind of all-consuming passion right from the start, but I liked them. One day... it all just changed. They were *everything* to me. I knew they were my mates. Everything hit me at once. The next few years were perfect. Or at least, I thought that they were... at the time. But then I got pregnant." Summer barely even whispers that last word, tears shimmering in her beautiful brown eyes.

The rest of us are rendered speechless. A shocked silence blankets the living room. Mav's jaw is locked tight, teeth grinding, while Brooke's and Mason's are damn near touching the floor. Myself, I think my eyes might pop out of my head, but I'm more focused on thinking back to her body during the heat a week or so ago. There wasn't any indication she's had a baby. No stretch marks on her stomach and her tits... yeah. No evidence of a baby there.

"I lost it very shortly after that first doctor's appointment." A tear finally falls, and I watch it skate down her cheek before she wipes it away. "They changed after that. So I left."

"Were they abusive?" I grit out. I will fucking kill them. Useless excuse for alphas.

The sad smile I get in return makes me want to jump up from this couch and run to the gym to hit the shit out of Mav's heavy bag. "It was mostly emotional abuse. But the night I ran, she had hit me when I told her I miscarried." She huffs a laugh, "Part of me wondered if I was too hasty. If maybe we could have worked through it. None of them were ever physically abusive before."

"You did the right thing, babe. Abusers are like a time bomb. It could take weeks or months... maybe even years. But they eventually go off. You did the right thing leaving. It would have only gotten worse after that." Mason's words are somber, his eyes half vacant, and I know he's thinking about that abusive, vile pack that tossed him to the curb when they met their fated mate.

They were sort of the same as what Summer's describing. Only Mason was fully aware of the emotional abuse from really early on; he just couldn't make himself leave on his own. That's what makes a good abuser, I guess. The gaslighting and bullshit that made him think it was somehow his fault. Honestly, the best thing they could have done for him was leave him. Because then he found us. And now, Summer.

"I don't understand..." Brooke says, clutching Summer's feet again to get her attention. "So you left them. Is that why you couldn't feel us? Because you already have mates?"

"After I met you guys at the bar, I started having stomach pains. Severe stomach pains and I had no idea why. So I went to the doctor. That's where I met Doctor Tanner. She did a test and found this drug in my system."

"Passion Pack," Brooke whispers. With somewhat dead eyes, Summer nods her confirmation.

"My old pack was drugging me. For two years." The air in the room gets cloying as everyone's scents sour in anger, but Summer continues like she can't smell our reactions to her words. "So when I left them and started taking the bond and heat suppressants, my body started rejecting them. That's apparently why I couldn't feel you right away. Some of the drugs were still in my system. Maybe still are. But every day I saw you—all of you—the more I wanted you and the less I felt *them*."

"What do you mean you felt them less?" Mav asks, rubbing his hand across his jaw the way he does when he's trying to puzzle something out. The way I've seen him do numerous times while flipping houses.

"When Doctor Tanner told me I had to stop taking the suppressants, I flushed all of them down the toilet. The next day, I could feel all three of them through the bonds again. Their emotions, yes, but also their voices when I couldn't block them out. Then I started seeing you guys around more. I didn't realize it at the time, but the more I was with you, the less I felt them. I think maybe... I think that was our actual bond." The way she says bond is tentative like she is still having a hard time letting herself believe we're mates. Even though she knows we are now. "They were never my fated mates, but you are. So maybe your bonds were strong enough to stifle theirs? I don't know."

A growl builds in my chest at the thought that she's been suffering for so long, and I couldn't help. That she's had to live with three unwanted voices in her head because some sorry fucking excuses for alphas trapped her into

something so sacred and treasured. Something that is supposed to be an act of love.

Not a vehicle for obedience.

"Who are they?" Brooke's voice is calm. Almost eerily. Her eyes are hard and laser-focused on our mate. This is deadly Brooke. It's not often that she lets her dominant side out, but there's a reason she's our pack alpha. When she wants to be, she's absolutely lethal. Summer's eyes bug out when she looks at Brooke. A moment of uncertainty crosses her features like she's almost scared to give her their names. My perfect, intuitive mate. With the way all of our muscles are strained and backs are ridged while we wait for her to answer, it's not a big leap to guess what we want to do to them.

Buzzing sounds throughout the quiet space while we wait on bated breath for our mate's fucking bond's names. I pull my phone out of my pocket and look at the screen. But I don't have any new notifications. The buzzing continues, and I watch Brooke and Mav check theirs, too. Both shake their heads, and we all look toward Mason and Summer. With one look, I know immediately it's not Mason's phone going off. Our mate's face has gone deathly pale. With eyes squeezed shut, she pulls her phone out of her back pocket.

After a brief glance at the screen, she hits the lock button again and shoves the phone into her chest to hide what's on it. Mason, the usually very tactful and reasonable one of the pack, reaches around and plucks the phone right out of her hands.

"Mason!" Indignant shock in her eyes as she tries to grab her phone back. But Mason tosses it to Brooke and then wraps his arms back around her to hold her in place. Summer only half-heartedly tries to get away before sort of whimpering in defeat and buries her face in his neck, hiding from us.

"What the fuck?" Brooke hisses, finger-scrolling through what must be a lot of messages. "Is this them? Wait—" She looks up at Summer now hiding her face, and Brooke looks more shocked and scared than I've ever seen her. "You messaged them?"

"What?"

"Who?"

"When?" Mav, Mason, and I all blurt at once. She messaged her old pack? Was this when she thought we were tricking her? Did she want to go back to them?

No. That's stupid. She wouldn't go back to a pack that drugged her.

Unless those drugs were still in her system. Does she still have feelings for them?

Brooke pops up and starts pacing the living room. She runs her fingers through her hair. "Okay. This is going to be fine." Back and forth, she paces in front of the coffee table that sits in between the three couches. "Here's what we're going to do. You three will go with Summer to her apartment and pack up her things. She's moving in here tonight. I'll call the security company we used to get them back on the payroll and get things ready around here. Be sure to—"

"Wait, hold on." Summer's cheeks are flushed. I can't tell if it's from embarrassment, anger, or arousal.

"Yeah, Brooke. It's not that dire. Let's calm down—" Mav starts, worrying his bottom lip and staring at Summer's red face.

"Not that dire?" Brooke growls and chucks the phone at Mav. "She didn't just message them. She threatened them. Look at their last text to her."

His face pales at first glance, and then he's scrolling through all the messages, too. "They..." he looks like he wants to say more, but his anger is cutting off his air supply, and his face is slowly turning an alarming shade of puce.

"Spit it out," Mason gripes.

"They have her address," Brooke finishes for him. "Down to the apartment number."

Oh, hell fucking no. I stand up and stalk over to the couch Summer and Mason are on, grab our mate, and toss her over my shoulder. "Let's go," I bark to Mav and Mason, who follow me after a brief, hesitant glance at each other.

FIVE

SUMMER

WHEN HUDSON STOPS MANHANDLING ME, he places me gently into the back of Maverick's Wrangler. I cross my arms over my chest, ever the petulant child, and fume silently the whole drive over to my apartment. How dare they?

On the one hand, I'm secretly so excited that my mates—my *real fated mates*—are welcoming me into their home with open arms. It's what I've always dreamt of, what I thought I had before. A pack to spend my life with. To share the little moments: snuggles in my nest, Christmas mornings, supper around the dinner table after a long day at work. It's what they're giving me now. But that's the problem. They're giving—no, demanding—it. Rather than asking me to move in with them, I'm being escorted to my apartment to pack up my life without any say. Jade did the same thing two years ago. The difference there is that I was already heavily under the influence of the passion pack drug, so I couldn't feel any of my feelings about the way she moved my things into their home without a conversation. I hadn't even fully come out of my heat yet, and my room was almost set up.

My mind is switching between the parallels of then and now as Maverick pulls up to the curb in front of my building. Another bout of embarrassment hits me at the sight of it. After being in their almost mansion with its updated appliances, marble countertops, and all-white aesthetic, my apartment looks akin to a homeless shelter with its water-stained ceilings, bubbly vinyl floor, and cream-colored walls edging more toward brown from lack of upkeep. Then Hudson opens my door for me and holds out his hand, gesturing for me to take it so he can march me up to my room like my own personal guard. The embarrassment turns back to anger. I won't take it out of him, though. Nope, I know how these things go. Their pack alpha gave them instructions,

and they followed. A little more brute-ish than need be, but my ire is for Brooklyn. When we get back, I'll have words for her. That gives me the next few hours to formulate a concise, logical argument in my head rather than the rambling, incoherent words of rage swirling up there right now.

"Can I help you?" Hudson's angry bark pulls me out of my thoughts in time to see a young beta male jump at the harsh words. The guy isn't much of a threat at no more than five foot seven and one hundred and fifty pounds soaking wet. I recognize him as the guy who lives at the end of the hall from me, so I give him a small, brief wave and an apologetic smile. *Sorry*, I mouth to him and let Hudson use his body to shield me from the poor beta.

Once the four of us are in the elevator, I pull my hand from Hudson's. "Would you guys relax? He wasn't a threat."

"We don't know that. All we do know is that your old pack knows where you live, and anyone could have told them," Maverick grumbles, clearly on Hudson's side.

"Well, it certainly wasn't Ben from apartment four-ten. The guy wouldn't hurt a fly," I argue, leaning into the corner of the elevator, away from them. Yeah, maybe I'm pouting still. Sue me.

Hudson and Maverick both take in breaths like they're gearing up for a fight, but Mason chimes in.

"Drop it." His tone is soft in a dangerous sort of way while he glares at the two of them. I can't lie. The way they fall silent at his words—and the look on Mason's face—makes a flush of heat travel up my spine. I can feel a little slick escape, and by the looks of all three of their faces, they can tell just how turned on Mason's dominance makes me. Maverick's and Hudson's nostrils flare while they get a good whiff of my arousal in the small space. Luckily, the elevator dings and the doors open just as it looks like they may jump at me.

"Don't even think about it." I hold up a finger as I pass them, and it looks like they may still try to touch me. I'm holding onto this indignation and anger over being escorted to pack my things as long as I can. Even if my resolve is wavering with each smoldering glance thrown my way.

When I have the door to my apartment unlocked and usher everyone in, they immediately get to work. Or rather, Mason takes charge, and it doesn't help much with the way my body is reacting to him.

"Okay. You two, start packing clothes up in trash bags. I'll go back downstairs and see if I can find some boxes with the recycling for the heavier

stuff.” He looks at me this time, eyes softer than they were for Maverick and Hudson. “Pack whatever you would for a short trip in a backpack so it doesn’t get lost in all the other stuff. Toiletries, makeup, toothbrush, a few pairs of work clothes, whatever.” His smirk tells me the dreamy feeling floating through me is reflected on my face as I nod at him.

Mason disappears back through the front door while we get to work on my apartment. I already have the small backpack with the few things I’d packed before heading to the Hog’s Head earlier. That’s now somewhere at the pack house; I didn’t see where Brooklyn set it.

The cabinet door under my kitchen sink creaks as Hudson grabs the box of trash bags. I don’t even question how he knows exactly where to find him. They were both here for my heat, and when they left, my cabinets were filled to the brim with food.

The apartment is quiet, except for the shuffling of feet and banging of cabinets as we work to pack up the meager amount of belongings I’ve managed to buy for myself since landing in Chicago. Besides the clothes on my back and cash in my pocket, I didn’t have a single possession. I’ve pillaged a small wardrobe from thrift stores, purchased plates, cups, and silverware from dollar stores, and pennied my way into a couple of pots and pans as well. But I’m not much attached to any of it. So when they start talking about renting a small moving van for my bigger items, I interject.

“I don’t need any of that stuff.” Their heads turn toward where I’m leaning against the bathroom door frame, half of my toiletries and makeup in my backpack already, and looks like they’re about to argue. Or at least insist I bring my belongings. Probably hoping they’ll make me feel more at home in the pack house they’re forcibly moving me into. So I plow ahead. “I got the end table from a yard sale for fifteen dollars.” I begin with the table by the door and then continue by pointing at each item after it for emphasis, “That couch is practically ripped to shreds. I got it and the coffee table in front of it online. Both from this wealthy pack that was practically giving them away for free. Besides my mattress, everything in here isn’t worth more than ten dollars anymore. None of it has any sentimental value. I don’t need them. We can just donate it all.”

Maverick eyes the space a little more critically, and Hudson eyes me. I hold his stare and let him see how much I couldn’t care less about these things. He sighs.

“Fine. We’ll leave the couch and coffee tables. But we’re bringing

everything else. It won't fit in the Jeep since we all came, but I'll come back in the morning and grab the rest of the boxes and your mattress." I shrug. His prerogative.

The rest of the evening goes by in a blur of trash bags and boxes that Mason did indeed find downstairs. After a few hours, I've got my bag slung across my shoulder, and each of the guys are carrying two trash bags a piece, full of the rest of my wardrobe. There are maybe half a dozen boxes left to grab tomorrow with the rest of my shoes and kitchen supplies along with my mattress, but at least I won't be hauling them over myself.

In the few hours we were packing, I'd lost all my indignation. They were being so sweet and helpful that I forgot for a minute that it wasn't my idea to move in. Or that I wasn't asked. So now that we are driving back to the pack house in silence, it comes rushing back. I need to have a few words with Brooklyn.

Buzzing sounds from the front seat. Hudson and Maverick both pull their phones out of their pockets and frown. With a glance and head shake at each other, they convey it's not their phone. When the buzzing reverberates through the car again, a light bulb goes off in Maverick's head because his frown turns into a murderous glower. Grumbling something unintelligible under his breath, he fishes out *my* phone from his jacket pocket. It slipped my mind he even had it. Since right after Brooklyn tossed it to him, they were ushering me out the door to my apartment.

The screen illuminates his face as he reads the texts coming through. Whatever they say, it must be bad because his fist tightens around my phone so hard I hear a small cracking sound that makes me unbuckle my seatbelt at a supersonic speed and lean over the driver's seat to snatch the phone from him. Or try to. As my fingers wrap around the phone to pull it from his grip, he moves it out of reach again. "I don't think so. Sit back and buckle up before you get hurt."

"No, give me my phone, Maverick." I try to lean forward a little more, but his arms are so long it's no use. I'd have to crawl over him.

"Sit back before I have Mason pink your pretty little ass, sweets." I scowl at him. With a quick glance behind me, I see Mason grin antagonistically at me, daring me to push Maverick a little further. Men. Two can play this game. When I turn back around, it's to see Maverick holding the wheel in his left hand and typing with his right.

On my phone!

His eyes dart between the screen and the road, completely distracted. So I do the only thing I can think of, and I lean into his neck, licking a stripe up the column of his throat before pressing a kiss and then biting gently at the juncture between his neck and shoulder. Right where a claiming mark would go.

The car jerks as his left hand spasms on the wheel. But my seduction works because he drops the phone in his lap as he grabs the wheel with his right hand to steady us. As he does, I dart my hand around and grab the phone before he can protest. With an audible click, I buckle back up so nobody can say I'm not being safe and grin my own antagonistic smirk at Mason. Only, he doesn't look defeated in the least.

The look in his eyes screams *I'm still going to spank the shit out of you later.*

A small burst of perfume fills the cab of the Jeep. To which I dutifully ignore all the heated stares, opting to look out the window and pretend I'm not dripping slick onto Maverick's leather seats. The pack house comes into view. From here, I can already tell the security team Brooklyn was talking about calling is waiting on us. There is an unfamiliar black sedan parked in the circular driveway directly in the path of the front door. For a moment, a touch of insecurity hits me. They shouldn't be going through this trouble. Not for me. I don't feel worthy of the fuss and care they're trying to give me. Maybe that's the real reason I'm so upset about Brooklyn's unilateral decision to have me move in. Sure, I would have liked to have been *asked*, but a small part of me also doesn't feel deserving of this pack.

What was the Goddess thinking, making them my fated mates? What have I done in this life to deserve them?

In the time since they met me, they all knew immediately I was their mate, felt completely rejected by my lack of acknowledgment, and then continued to pursue me at a respectful pace. Never making me feel overwhelmed or pressured.

If I'm putting two and two together correctly, then they also hired security when they met me. To do what? I'm not sure. Follow me all the time, run background checks, I don't know. All I do know is their intentions were good, and it's another thing for me to feel undeserving of.

"Baby girl?" Hudson says, startling me from beside where he's holding the door open. "Sorry. You were just stuck in your head. We're here." The smile I give him feels sheepish, and I take his extended hand before letting

him help me hop out of the Jeep.

The living room comes into view when we walk through the door connecting the garage to the house. Two imposing-looking outlines have taken up residence on one of the couches, while the third stands behind them, arms folded across his chest, unmoving.

It's a little unnerving how he's standing there, still as a statue, eyes straight ahead. Brooklyn is in the kitchen, leaning with her elbows on the island and whispering into her phone. The door slams shut behind Mason as the four of us walk into the house, and it grabs the attention of Brooklyn and the three strangers. All of their heads whip around to stare at us. The two men on the couch stand when we get near and clasp their hands behind their backs.

"No, Tillie. Don't reach out to them yourself. I'll handle it. I have to go. Yes, now. I'll text you later," Brooklyn says in a firm voice, rolls her eyes, and then hangs up. She walks into the living room where I'm standing with Mason, Hudson, and Maverick in a semi-circle at my back and staring at the security team who has yet to say a word. I can't tell if they're being overly professional and waiting for introductions or if they're just standoffish by nature.

Heels click against the tiled floors as Brooklyn makes her way over to us. She looks exhausted, still in her work clothes, and small bags forming under her eyes. But her back is still straight, head still up, and aura screaming *pack leader*. She walks right up to me and engulfs me in a tight hug. Despite the ire still brewing about the situation, I can't help but melt into my alpha, wrap my arms around her, and breathe in her lavender and mint scent. What sounds like a relieved sigh tickles my ear. The stress must be getting to her tonight because her scent, while still tantalizing and delicious, is edging a little more toward burnt lavender.

A purr rumbles up in my chest in response to her anxiety. It's quiet, barely making any noise at all, just enough for her to feel the effects. And feel them, she does. The taut muscles in her back loosen, her shoulders droop ever so slightly, and she presses a sweet kiss to my temple in thanks before stepping back.

She sweeps out a hand to gesture behind her at the security team still standing with straight backs, watching our interaction. "Guys, these are the owners of *Pack Protection Services*: Wells, Houston, and Damien," she says, pointing to the two who were sitting on the couch first. That makes the eerie

one who doesn't move—who was standing behind the couch—Damien. He dresses to match his attitude it seems. The suit he's wearing fits him perfectly. Tailored to him in a way that screams money. If I were to describe him from one look, I'd say he seems poised and professional but distant.

While Maverick, Mason, and Hudson all reach out to shake their hands and exchange small talk, my eyes drift to who she introduced as Houston. He's the shortest of the three at maybe five-ten or five-eleven. Also the leanest. But neither of these things take away from the sharp way his eyes track everything. I watch as he shakes hands with my mates, taking note of their clothes, faces, and—by the slight flaring of his nostrils—their scents. All the while, he keeps glancing around the room. With sandy blond hair buzzed into a standard military cut and the way he exudes a calm alertness, my guess is he's the most dangerous one of the trio.

Though he seems to try to hide it behind the casual jeans and flannel attire and a bland smile he probably thinks puts people at ease. Wells is the last and the tallest of the three. He's very clearly the most charming and energetic, too. Effortlessly dropping the professional facade once introductions are made and getting along swimmingly with my mates. He's got dark hair styled in a way that is purposefully mussed and shaggy with a clean-shaven face. He's also huge. The tallest and most muscular of the three, in direct contrast with his bubbly personality.

My pack has finished introducing themselves, so I take my turn shaking their hands and giving them my name. All three of the members of *Pack Protection Services* are handsome. Not in the same league as my pack in looks—maybe I'm a little biased—but I'm sure none of them have trouble in the dating department.

“They've already been briefed about the situation and agreed to take us on as clients,” Brooklyn tells us. “You guys can sit and make yourselves comfortable.” Everyone, including our pack, takes a seat on one of the three couches surrounding the coffee table. Everyone except Damien, that is. He goes back to standing behind the couch with his arms folded.

“Brooklyn tells us you've gotten threatening texts from them?” Wells says, taking the lead. I honestly can't tell which of them is in charge. I'd guess Damien since he's in the suit, but then he's just standing silently, letting Wells take the lead.

I nod in response to his question. “Can we see them?” he asks politely.

“Why?” I don't know why I'm hesitant. They're only here to protect me,

but it feels too intimate somehow.

“We’d like to assess the threat and determine if there is genuine cause for action behind them. Or if they were sent to scare more than anything. We need to know everything in order to better protect you,” Houston interjects.

“We’d also like to sit down with you and go through your life with them. Their personalities, likes, dislikes, triggers... everything. We can do that together or in a more private setting.” Wells looks at my pack as he says this. It’s clear he’s anticipating a negative reaction to his words, and he gets it.

“I don’t fucking think so. She’s our mate. If you need to talk to her, we’re in the room.”

Wells completely ignores Maverick’s angry retort and continues speaking directly to me. “We’ve found that it’s easier for omegas to talk about their past and any trauma they’ve suffered when they don’t have to put on a brave face for their pack. Or worry about upsetting them.” As he speaks, I can see exactly how they may have run into issues in the past. I picture myself telling them about what I now know was emotional abuse I’d taken without a fight from Pack Monroe. Or explaining any kind of intimate moments we might have had. If I had to hear my fated mates talk about past relationships, I’d not take it well either. They’ve got a point...

“We can talk by ourselves.” Maverick goes to object, but I just squeeze his knee and shake my head at him. Hudson sits on my right, and I can feel how tense he is at my declaration, but he doesn’t say anything. It may feel like I’m keeping secrets from them, but I’d rather them think that and save them from any kind of anger they’ll feel hearing about my old pack and any kind of retaliation they’d want to give in response.

Wells nods at my response, and I fish out my phone, unlock it, and hand it to him to read the messages. He takes it, and Hudson leans in to read over his shoulder. When they’re done, Wells hands it to Damien to read.

“The good news is, it could be worse. The only really worrying text is your address. It is a very clear threat. They know where you live. But besides that, they’ve not indicated in any way that they’re going to act upon that information. The other texts, while disgusting and clearly abusive, don’t point to action either. At least not immediate action. The first thing we would have advised was moving you out of your apartment. So it’s good you’re here. We will be working in eight hour shifts: seven am to three pm, three to ten, and ten to seven. That way one of us will be with you at all times, and we’ll take steps to make this place more secure, too. Additional locks on windows and

doors, more cameras, and we always recommend getting a dog to clients.”

At his words, I sit up so fast I knock off the arm Hudson rested gently around my shoulders when we sat down. A puppy. I’ve always wanted one. I asked Jade a few times in the beginning, after we’d mated if we could get one. The first time, she was gentle in her refusal. *Our furniture is so nice and expensive. A dog will ruin it*, she’d say. But after the second and third time I’d brought it up, she shut it down so firmly, and in her angry tone she adopted when she was on her way to steaming mad that I never brought it up again.

A few chuckles sound out around me from my mates. “A puppy, huh?” Mason asks from where he’s sitting on the other couch with Brooklyn. I shrug, not wanting to let on how much I want one, only to be shut down again.

“Hudson has been pestering us to go with him to the pound to adopt a dog, but we’re always so busy,” Brooklyn laughs.

“Maybe my mate will go with me then,” Hudson says in a hopeful voice, looking at me with big, blue puppy dog eyes. The grin that takes over my face is so big it starts to hurt my cheeks. I nod and start to bounce in my seat in excitement. *I might actually get a puppy.*

He grabs me tight by my hips and yanks me into his lap. I yelp at my sudden change in seating, and Hudson must not know his own strength because he pulls so hard I fly into him, hitting his head with mine.

“Ouch,” I chuckle, rubbing the tender spot on my forehead.

“Fuck, I’m sorry, pretty girl.” Laughter comes from all directions at his show of clumsiness, and I shoot everyone a glare before planting a chaste kiss on Hudson’s lips. His answering growl is completely indecent for company, and I love it. Love how a simple gesture can draw such a reaction from him. I pull away to continue the conversation and laugh as his lips chase after mine.

His arms wrap tight around my middle when I lean back against him.

“Obviously, we’re here to keep you safe. But even we’re infallible. Having multiple protections is ideal.”

Hudson and I share a giddy smile.

“They’ll be staying in the basement until further notice, or we no longer have use of their service,” Brooklyn tells us.

“That’s where we’ll be if you need one of us that isn’t on shift watching Summer,” Damien tells us, but mostly, it’s directed at me. His next words are

for me alone. “If you want to come downstairs with us now, we can get that conversation out of the way and let everyone get some sleep.”

Suddenly nervous, I nod without looking at my mates and follow my three new bodyguards as they walk ahead of me to the door that leads to the basement, already so at ease in this house.

Jerks.

SIX

SUMMER

THEY GRILL me for what feels like an hour about the littlest details that couldn't possibly be important. I tell them about Pack Monroe's family, friends, jobs, likes, dislikes, hobbies. They ask about the pack house and the pack's charitable work. Using the computer in the corner of the basement, I look up a picture of the three of them at an event so they know what each of them looks like.

Part of me shudders when I look at their eyes. How did I never notice the dead look in them? Especially in Jade's. Just soulless pits of nothingness.

When they've run out of questions, and I've spilled my guts about how they used to treat me, I head back up to the living room to see my pack waiting on me.

The four of them are in the same spots they were before I went downstairs. Just looking off into space. Crickets chirp in the deafening silence.

Fine, maybe there aren't actually crickets, but the silence feels loud for some reason. I try to move as confidently as Wells, Damien, and Houston did. Like they own the house. But even knowing they're my mates, it feels weird walking freely in someone else's home.

"You okay?" Hudson asks when he sees me walk back over to them. I sit back in his lap.

"Yeah, it's just..." I try to think of the words. Why does it feel so weird all of a sudden? "I don't know. This isn't strange for you guys? Moving me in so fast?"

Mason snorts, and when I whip my head around to frown at him, he manages to turn his laugh into a cough, beating his chest like he choked on

something. “Something funny?” I try—I do—but I can’t keep the hurt out of my voice. It doesn’t deter him. If anything, he looks like he’s trying even harder not to laugh.

“Oh, babe. It may feel fast to you, but we’ve known from the first time we saw you that you were meant for us. Took everything I had to stop Maverick from throwing you over his shoulder like a damn caveman and handcuffing you to his bed.”

My eyes shoot to Maverick, who stares blankly back at me and shrugs. Completely unrepentant. I look between the four of them, searching for some indication they’re joking.

“Don’t believe him?” Maverick sits back, crossing his arms over his chest and raising an eyebrow.

“It’s not that I don’t believe him. But knowing I’m your mate and moving me into your pack house are still two different things. It’s moving very fast.” I scoot off Hudson’s lap so I can have a better view of all of them for this conversation.

“Okay, let’s say you’re right,” Hudson jumps in, keeping an arm around my shoulder so I can’t get too far from him. “Let’s say it is fast. What’s wrong with that? It just means we’re all on the same page. We want you here, with us. Pack.”

“Right now,” I shoot back.

“What?” Hudson frowns.

“Right now, you want me here. But what happens when I eat the last of your favorite cereal or clog the drain with all my hair? What if I want to decorate your incredibly white walls with something bright and colorful—” A hand clamps over my mouth, stopping my ranting. I stick my tongue out and lick the offensive appendage, but Mason just laughs and wipes my slobber off on my own face. I grimace, laughing a little, and push his hand away.

He addresses all of my worries after wiping the rest of his hand on his jeans. “I don’t have a favorite cereal, so eat whatever you’d like. We’ll just order more. We already live with a woman—Brooklyn, in case you’ve forgotten—and she clogs the drain all the time,” an indignant noise comes from Brooklyn at that, “but you don’t see us kicking her out. And paint the damn walls. Plaster wallpaper up, buy eclectic art, and put your mark on this place. I’ve wanted to do it since the minute I stepped foot in here. It’s too white and boring. Brooklyn never let me, but one puppy dog pout from you, and she’ll break her back to get you whatever you want.”

I open my mouth to argue, contradict him, or maybe even commiserate in general—despite Brooklyn’s nod and shrug like everything Mason said is absolutely correct—but I’m stopped in my tracks. Maverick stands up, walks over to me, and lifts me from the couch with ease. An *oof* is forced from me as I’m thrown over his shoulder. Drool may or may not pool in my mouth as I get a good look at his ass in the jeans stretched taut over it. It’s got me so distracted I don’t even realize we’re headed toward the stairs until he hits the first step.

“Don’t! I’m too heavy!” I cry, squirming to be put down. He chuckles, deep and sexy, before slapping my ass. Hard.

“Please, you’re about as heavy as a wet towel. Hudson and I renovate houses, sweets. The wood I was carrying around today weighed more than you.”

Part of me wants to continue to complain and demand he put me down. The other part of me revels in the way he’s moving with ease. Almost jogging up the stairs with me slung over one shoulder. Talking without panting and only holding me tighter as I squirm. Resigned to not going anywhere, I pinch his butt—well, I try to; the thing is rock solid—and then wrap my arms around his waist to enjoy the ride. I look up to see Mason and Hudson following us with giddy smiles. Brooklyn just looks nervous.

Oh, my Goddess. Seeing her nervous face has butterflies assaulting my stomach. What could she possibly have to be nervous about in her own home?

Maverick stops outside a closed door and sets me down. “Ready?”

“Ready for what?” I ask, looking around at them.

“Ready for us to show you that we want you here. Forever. Even if it seems too soon to you, it’s not to us.” Maverick says, and then he turns the handle and pushes open the door.

It’s dark inside, but I can tell immediately that the room is on the smaller side. Maverick reaches an arm in and flicks a switch. A light comes on, but he must have a dimmer switch inside as well because it’s muted. It is bright enough, though, that I can see the whole room now.

I take an involuntary step forward. Just inside the room, there is a small step that leads to a bed stretching from one wall to the other. It looks like at least three king-size beds across. Every inch of it is covered in blankets and pillows. Some of which are the same ones I have at home. Or, I guess, in a bag downstairs since I packed up my apartment.

“We bought those after we saw them in your apartment during your heat,” Hudson calls from behind me.

I take the step up, ducking slightly because the ceiling is lower here than the other rooms in the house, and sit on the bed. It’s the perfect blend of soft and firm. Exactly the one I’d pick out if I were doing it myself. In somewhat of a trance, I pick up a blanket. It’s a warm, fuzzy one—though they do have some silk blankets and other materials strewn about—and I bring it to my nose. Summer rain and notes of freshly cut grass stick to it. *Mason*.

“We each take turns sleeping in here, so our scents are on everything,” Mason says, looking a little scared and kicking at the ground like he’s nervous about how I’ll feel about that. Sure enough, now that he’s said it, sandalwood, bourbon, lavender, and citrus all hit me. All of my mates. In my nest.

Tears prick at my eyes. I look up to dry them before they have the chance to fall. Stupid, stupid tears. Stupid, wonderful mates.

“When did you—” I whisper, trying to keep my voice from breaking. My hands brush something that isn’t a blanket. When I look down, I see I’ve picked up a T-shirt that smells like Hudson. Not only did they sleep in here, but they’ve stashed clothes to keep their scents in here, too.

“The day of the St. Patty’s Day bar crawl. First day we saw you,” Maverick answers my half-question. “Brooklyn had the supplies ordered the next day, and Hudson and I were in here working on the platform as soon as they were delivered.”

“But—” I look at Brooklyn. “I didn’t meet you until that day in the office.”

She walks forward and sits next to me on the bed. Gently, she pries the clothes and blankets from me so she can take my hands in hers. “I didn’t meet you until then, but that didn’t matter. Not really. They had their mate. So even if you weren’t mine—destined by the Goddess, I mean—it wouldn’t have mattered. I’d have fallen for you the second I saw you, no matter what.”

The look I give her is surely as dubious as I feel because she forges on. “You don’t believe me because you don’t see yourself clearly, cherub. There’s a reason that—*pack*—” she chokes on the word like it tastes no better than ash in her mouth and continues, “latched onto you. They weren’t stupid. They saw what a prize you are. How beautiful, kind, intelligent... how perfect you are. And they took advantage of it. Anyone who knows you is sure to love you. That is one thing I’m absolutely certain of. Even if you

weren't my fated mate, the minute those goofballs brought you home, I'd have been hooked."

There they go, those stupid tears falling down my cheeks. Brooklyn reaches up and wipes one away. Then, looking more chagrined and embarrassed than I've ever seen her, she continues. She clears her throat. "And I owe you an apology. For earlier. I should have never acted like that. Demanding you move in and forcing them to pack your apartment with you. I was scared. Probably more scared than I've ever been, and I wanted to protect you. It's no excuse. I'm so sorry."

The weight I was holding onto in my chest—the anger and indignation—lessens with each word. I don't think I'll let go of all of it right away; it's too close to the PTSD Pack Monroe saddled me with. But I can at least stop it from festering away, eating me from the inside.

"Thank you. And it's okay." I smile at her, eyes still leaking those offensive waterworks.

"It's not, but thank you for accepting my apology." She leans in and gives me a sweet, chaste kiss. "And in the spirit of that, we've got something we want to ask you."

"Uh, oh. Okay," I stutter, looking between the four of them.

Hudson steps forward, sitting on the single stair to the platform. He's so tall; his head is almost level with mine. Mason and Maverick both step into the room, too. "Summer, will you please—pretty please, with a cherry on top—do us the honor of moving in with us?" He bats his long lashes at me, making me laugh.

"That's what you wanted to ask me? After you've already moved me in?" I giggle, unable to help it. This is so ironic.

"Well, we wanted to actually give you the option," Brooklyn answers, throwing a nervous smile my way. "After the way I acted, I realized I took your choice from you. So I'm giving it back. If you truly don't want to live here with us, we'll take all your stuff back to your apartment, and I'll find a way to make it safe for you there." She looks like she's just eaten a sour grape, but the look she gives me is open and genuine. There isn't a doubt in my mind that they'd take me back tonight.

"So if I said I wanted to go home, you'd let me?" I test the waters.

She rubs a hand on the back of her neck. "I would. But I hope you'd be okay with at least one of us staying with you every night. To compromise." The rest of that weight lifts off my chest, so I put them out of their misery.

“I don’t want to go back. I’d like to stay—” Just before I finish talking, Hudson throws himself at me.

I yelp, ready to take his weight, but it turns out, I don’t need to. As we’re falling back, he turns his body so I land on top of him. From this position, I’m straddling him, and I’m almost one hundred percent certain the bulge I feel pressing against me isn’t his phone.

There is a half-annoyed, half-exasperated laugh from behind us, but I can’t take my eyes away from Hudson. His eyes. Or his lips. I lean down to kiss him when a loud, shrill sound comes from down the hall. It sounds like an alarm.

I jolt, scared at the sudden screeching noise. My heart takes off, and in my mind, I’m going to the worst-case scenario. *Someone broke into the house. It’s Jade, Connor, and Brody. They followed us from my apartment. Or it’s a home invasion. Someone with a gun trying to rob them—us.*

Mason and Maverick don’t hesitate, taking off down the hall and *toward* the noise—Brooklyn hot on their heels. Hudson sits us up, and we stand, following them at a much slower pace. The minute we leave the nest, he stays in front of me, covering my body from any danger we may be walking into. Since he’s in front of me, Hudson sees what the commotion is before I do. His shoulders relax when we hit the living room, and the tight hold fear had on my heart lessens.

When I walk to stand beside him, he lets me, so I know whatever it is isn’t a threat. No, definitely no threat. The scene in front of me is almost comical in a scary way. Scary because the men who are supposed to be protecting me are in the corner of the living room. Wells has the smallest member of their trio—Houston—standing on his shoulders, tinkering with the wires of a camera. The noise dies, and I see Damien, their suited-up leader type, stand with the plug in his hand.

“Fucking dumb-dicks,” he mutters. “Try getting it hooked up, *then* plugging it in, assholes!” Damien yells at them. Then turns to Brooklyn, who is glaring at them, looking positively murderous. It would scare me if Maverick and Mason weren’t two feet behind her smacking each other in the arm when the other cracks a smile, trying not to laugh.

Damien, completely unperturbed by Brooklyn’s angry face, turns to us. “I’m sorry for them. They really aren’t stupid; they just seem it all the time.”

A surprised laugh rips from me at his words. This coming from the man who stood like a statue, just staring, unspeaking during introductions earlier.

From the guy who looks like he sleeps, eats, and breathes his polished, buttoned-up suit look. Sitting here making jokes. Or maybe not *jokes* per se, but he's definitely teasing his teammates.

Albeit in a rough, slightly offensive way.

It lends a whole new light to him.

"Wells is the one who plugged it in. I told him not to," Houston grits out. It must be taking a lot of effort to keep his body tight enough not to fall from Wells' shoulders while he works on the security system they seem to be installing.

Wells, for all the heat he's taking, just stands there with his hands locked around Houston's ankles and shrugs. But the shrug makes Houston go off balance. Luckily, he throws his hands out and braces against the wall. "Stand still, you big bastard. Man hard at work up here."

At that, Maverick snorts, but Wells just laughs along with him. Between the three of them, it's immediately clear that Wells is the more outgoing, goofy one. Doesn't seem to take himself or the situation too seriously. I like him right away.

As I'm looking at the duo, the living room seems really bright all of a sudden. Every light and lamp is on, and I realize it's pitch black outside. That would be why it's lit up like a Christmas tree in here. The drive back from my apartment was dark, but the sun had only recently set, so the sky was a dark purple, heading toward a night black. *Wasn't that only a little bit ago?*

The kitchen appliances are too far away for me to make out the time, so I look around the living room and spot my phone. With a tap of the screen, it lights up, and my eyes bug out of my head.

"How in the world is it two in the morning already?" I ask incredulously. "I have to be up for work in a few hours."

"Maybe you should call in," Hudson says, earning a scowl from me that has him holding his hands up. "Or not. Sorry."

"I'm going to bed," I grumble, standing on my tiptoes to give him a kiss so he knows I'm not mad at him.

"What time do you want to leave for work in the morning, ma'am? I'm on first shift," Houston calls from on top of Wells' shoulders.

"Umm... seven-thirty? And it's just Summer." He nods respectfully. But the look on his face tells me he's sticking with ma'am. Okay then.

When I turn to walk toward my nest, Hudson grabs my hand. "Sleep with me tonight?" He looks so eager that I melt, nodding.

“Goodnight,” I call back to everyone when Hudson starts pulling me back toward the stairs. A chorus of *nights* are shot back, and we’re out of sight a second later.

Hudson’s room is the one right next to my nest. Brooklyn’s is the master on the left side of the hall, and Maverick and Mason have rooms on the main level. The door snicks shut behind us as I take in his space. The king bed is in the middle of the room, sitting on a large, beautiful wooden frame. The nightstands are the same color of wood, and the wall behind them is brick. Maybe a faux brick backsplash.

The rest of the room is minimalistic and neat. A desk sits in the corner of the room with some papers strewn on it a little haphazardly. But besides that, there’s no mess in sight.

“Surprised?” Hudson laughs, making me look at him apologetically.

“I guess I just thought you’d be a little... messier?” I feel bad thinking it, but he does put off a goofy, sort of sloppy energy sometimes.

“Believe it or not, Brooklyn is the messy one.” He walks over to what must be a walk-in closet and comes back out with a shirt draped over his shoulder. If I thought it was for him, he nips that thought in the butt. “Arms,” he instructs when he reaches me. My arms go up automatically, and he peels my work blouse up and over my head. Strands of hair get pulled loose from my ponytail as the fabric tugs at it. “Turn.”

I must be in a trance because I move without question. With my back to him, he makes quick work of unsnapping my bra. It falls from my shoulders, hits the ground, and he turns me back around. Every part of me wants to lift my arms to cover myself. But he’s got his hands on my biceps as he looks his fill. The darkening of his eyes—the way his pupils dilate—keeps me rooted to the spot.

Just as I think he’s going to act on the desire swimming there, he jerks out of his trance and slips his shirt over my head. It reaches mid-thigh, practically swallowing me. There’s a soft sound as his knees hit the carpet to unbutton my slacks and peel those down next. Not waiting for instructions this time, I step out when they’re at my ankles. My hands dart out to use his shoulders for support.

Still kneeling, Hudson trails his fingers up my thighs. The gentle touch tickles and his fingers stop at the bottom of the shirt. “I’m trying to be good. You have to sleep. But you smell so good. Like gingerbread cookies. And arousal.” The grin he gives me from his spot at my feet is mischievous. My

core clenches, and I know he's right. I feel myself getting wet the longer he's down there, touching me.

"True... but going to sleep at two-thirty instead of two won't make mu—ahh!" With his hands still on my thighs, he doesn't even let me finish my sentence before he hoists me up and tosses me on the bed. It's much softer than the one in my nest, so I sink down without bouncing. At the end of the bed, I watch as he sheds his shirt and pants in record time.

The way he crawls to me is... predatory. Stark naked, muscles in his shoulders and arms bunching, and a hungry look in his eyes. On instinct, I start scooting back on the bed until I reach the headboard.

"Where do you think you're going?" Hudson rumbles a laugh, grabs hold of my ankles, and yanks me down to him.

A laugh breaks free at the move. My beautiful, goofy Hudson, who—despite being an alpha—does not exude the most dominant air. The slap-happy grin he gives me just proves it. As much as a girl loves to be thrown around in the bedroom, variety is the spice of life, and I'd never want Hudson to change who he is.

"Well, now that you've got me here, what're you going to do with me?" I grin down at him, laying on his stomach with his head between my legs.

"I can think of a few things," he chuckles, trailing a light finger up my thigh. Up and up until he reaches my core. He ghosts his finger over my folds, barely brushing my clit, before bringing it back down to the inside of my thigh. Tingles shoot through me, and goosebumps erupt over my skin. It's strangely erotic, the way he's lazily touching me. Like he's got all night and just wants to memorize every inch of me.

The familiarity in the touch alone is enough to have slick dripping from me. I prop myself up on my elbows to watch him. His eyes never leave mine. Not as his hand drifts up toward my core again. Not as his thumb presses against my clit, moving in tight, maddeningly slow circles. Not as he leans forward and licks where his thumb just was.

His usually laughing eyes are now serious as he licks my pussy in slow, thorough strokes. He grips my thighs right at the junction where my panty line would be and pushes my legs open as far as they'll go. I gasp as cool air hits me, and then he's diving in again.

"Oh, Goddess. Don't stop," I moan when I feel the familiar warmth spreading through my legs. Hudson keeps up the same pace and pressure, and I start to build... and build...

“Please,” I whimper, just on the edge. Right there. He groans, and the vibration sends me over the edge. The moan I let out is deep and satisfied, and he doesn’t stop lapping at me until my muscles loosen, and I relax into the bed.

Only then does he pull away to kiss up my stomach and chest. Trailing sweet kisses on either side of my neck before pressing his lips to mine. I can taste myself on him—surprisingly sweet—but rather than be put off, it turns me on. This man is *mine*, and it’s written all over his face.

“Sleepy?” Hudson asks as he pulls away, eyes darting between mine.

“If you don’t fuck me right now, we’re going to have problems,” I growl, knowing he’s worried about keeping me up later.

He leans down to kiss my cheek and then whispers in my ear, “Yes, ma’am.” In seconds, he’s notched at my entrance and slides inside me.

“Fuck.” He shudders, looking down to watch as he thrusts in again and again until he’s seated to the knot. Then he looks back up at me, making eye contact again. Neither of us says another word. I just stare into his usually ocean-blue eyes—that look a little darker right now— as he fucks me. Never increasing his speed. Never breaking eye contact.

All that can be heard in the quiet of the room is the whirring of the ceiling fan and our own moans and sounds of pleasure. I wrap my legs around his waist, meeting him thrust for thrust, and he drags his hands over every curve and dip of my body.

When his thumb skates over my peaked nipple and pinches harder than I expect, my pussy contracts, squeezing him. His hips stutter for the first time, and he growls. His next thrust is harder. Not fast, just more brutal, like he can’t hold back his alpha from wanting to feel that again.

So I squeeze around him to torture my mate. Tease him.

“Ugh, fuck,” he grunts, and gives another hard thrust. “Do that again, pretty girl.” So I do. He may not be dominant, but he’s still an alpha who can be thrown into a rut. Not a full rut—not outside of a heat—but there is enough of my scent in this room now to drive him crazy.

In a swift move, he rolls over to lay on his back. “Ow, fuck,” he grumbles, rubbing the spot on the back of his head that just hit the wood headboard. I try not to laugh because I’m really turned on right now, but it is a little funny, so a giggle slips through before I can disguise it as a cough.

“Oh, is that funny, little mate?” He arches a brow at me, still rubbing his head, and this time, I don’t try to hide the laugh. His hand drops from his

head to grip my waist, bends his legs to plant his heels on the bed, and thrusts up into me. With the new angle, his cock drags along that deliciously sweet spot inside me, and it cuts my laughter off immediately, turning it into a moan. He must have something to prove now because there isn't any more soft and slow Hudson. Instead, he hammers into me, topping me from the bottom.

I lean back against his thighs so his cock drags along my G-spot with each thrust. *Goddess*. The pleasure is so intense I could weep from it. My breasts are bouncing with each movement, and the hungry look in his eyes as he stares at them sends me over the edge. I come shouting his name, and he pulls me down hard one last time. His knot locks in me, prolonging my orgasm. Jets of cum coat my insides as he finishes over and over. Perk of a knot. Multiple orgasms for both of us.

I collapse on top of his sweaty chest, breathing heavily.

“Fuck, I love you,” he whispers, and I jerk my head up to look at him. But his eyes are closed, and his breathing has evened out. Did he just tell me he loved me and then *fall asleep*?

Well... I guess that stops me from having to say it back. Do I want to? Do I love him? It's too early, right? You can't love someone that fast.

But it's different for fated mates... The voice inside my head screams at me. And maybe I didn't feel it last week. But accepting it, listening to Dr. Tanner earlier, and seeing the test results, it's like I know in my soul that they were sent to me directly from the Goddess.

Maybe he won't even remember telling me. That's probably it. It was a post-orgasmic, half-asleep confession. He'll wake up in the morning and not have any recollection. With that semi-depressing thought, I lay back on his chest to wait for his knot to deflate and fall asleep.

SEVEN

SUMMER

“HEY, pretty girl. Time to wake up.” Someone is shaking my shoulder. I try to lift my head to look at him—to turn my body at all—I really do, but I can’t. Each of my limbs feels like they’re strapped down to the bed, my eyelids are so heavy I can’t even crack them, and to top it off, my lower back hurts. Overall, I’d say getting hit by a truck and then rolling down a steep, rocky hill in a tire would feel better than this. All I can offer him is a groan. Not the fun kind, either.

“I know. I’m sorry. But Houston is waiting in the kitchen for you. You’ve gotta get up and get ready, or you’ll be late for work.” His voice is soft as he brushes his fingers gently through my hair. Somehow, I manage to crack an eye open and peek up at my mate. The smile he gives me is soft, sweet, and understanding. Which melts me. But he also looks wide awake, which has me wanting to grumble at him to go away.

“Come on, up and at ‘em,” he laughs, grabs both my hands, and pulls me into an upright position. He’s standing off to the side of the bed, so instead of getting up, I use the opportunity to procrastinate getting ready for just a little longer. I wind my arms around his middle and rest my head on his chest, breathing in his sandalwood and orange scent. It wraps around me like a soft blanket, as do Hudson’s arms. Nothing about his comfort and warmth makes me want to get up. Which must occur to Hudson, too, because in the next breath, he has me shooting out of bed to get ready for work.

“I sure do love you, you know that?” His warm, raspy laugh follows me all the way down the hall to the bathroom, where I spend the next fifteen minutes hiding from him and taking a quick shower before work.

“Summer? Can I come in?” Brooklyn’s voice is barely audible over the

shower and through the closed door.

“Yeah!” I shout back and turn to shut the water off. The door creaks as it opens, and the sharp tapping on the tile tells me she’s already dressed for work and in her heels. I wrap the towel around my body that I hung over the rod and then open the curtain. In one of her arms are slacks and a dress shirt, and dangling from her other hand is the singular pair of black heels I own and the purse I take to work that usually has a manuscript or two in it.

“I figured you’d be in a hurry. The rest of your clothes have already been hung in the closet in your nest. We really need to take you shopping, by the way. You’ve got next to nothing in there.” She places the clothes on the bathroom countertop and leans her hip against it, facing me. Today she’s in a tight, knee-length burgundy pencil skirt with a white button-up. The sleeves are rolled artfully up to just below her elbow, and her heels are the same burgundy color as her skirt. I’ve never seen anything or anyone more beautiful than Brooklyn. It makes my heart race just looking at her. But instead of acting on my attraction—it’s not like I’ve got the time this morning—I focus on her words.

“I don’t need to go shopping. I’ve learned to make do with less these past few months, and it hasn’t been bad.” I shrug.

“Well, if you truly don’t want to get new things, I won’t badger you about it. But if you’re just being stubborn because you don’t want to spend our money, then you should know that our money is your money. Not only by law since you’re our mate but also because you’re our family. I already called Renee to get you added to our will and had your name put on all of our accounts. Your card should be delivered in the next week or so.” I stand there with my jaw touching the ground, gaping like a fish, and trying to come up with something to say.

But I can’t.

She grins, a toothy, self-satisfied smile, and walks over while I’m still standing there mute. Her finger tilts my chin up, and she plants a quick kiss on my lips before turning around and walking out, leaving me to get ready alone.

When I walk into the kitchen ten minutes later, hair thrown up in a neat bun and work clothes on, Houston is standing in the kitchen talking to Mason. Or rather, Mason is chattering away while flipping pancakes, and Houston stands near him with a mug of coffee in his hand, listening. None of my other mates, Wells or Damien, are anywhere else to be found.

“Hey!” Mason half yells when he sees me. “Pancakes?” I shake my head, opting for a banana out of the fruit bowl they keep on the kitchen island.

“Sorry, I’m in a hurry this morning,” I explain as he pouts at me. I walk up to him and give him a kiss on his cheek as he flips another pancake, to which he leans down slightly to give me better access.

“Are you ready, ma’am?” Houston confirms, sets his mug in the sink, and turns to me.

“Summer,” I correct. “Yes, I’m ready.”

“Wait, at least take a protein bar for breakfast,” Mason says as he walks to the pantry, leaving a pancake unattended in the pan, and rummages around until he pulls out a chocolate chip breakfast bar. I take it to appease him, not sure I’ll eat it until closer to lunchtime, but it makes him happy, and my omega preens at the caring gesture.

The drive to work with Houston is a little awkward. I try to get him talking. About anything. I ask questions about his family, how long he’s worked with Wells and Damien, what his favorite flipping color is, and even if he’s got a pack or mate. All I get in return are one-word responses and grunts of confirmation or denial if my questions are yes or no in nature. I do my best not to take it personally. His job is to protect me, not be my friend. But it does frustrate me a little.

My phone pings. I rummage around in my purse for a minute before pulling it out. It’s a text from Hudson.

HUDSON

Have a great day at work, pretty girl.

The frustration lifts, and a smile stretches across my face. Before I can even begin to type a response, another one comes through.

HUDSON

Oh, and I love you.

For some reason, I turn my phone away from Houston instinctively and try to hide my blush. There’s nothing sexual or risqué about the text. But for some reason, I feel like a teenage girl who doesn’t want her dad to know she’s dating. Which is ridiculous on so many levels.

ME

Two heart emojis

HOUSTON

laughing emoji *Winking emoji*

He's laughing at me. The man knows I'm avoiding telling him I love him, and he's enjoying every bit of it. If the roles were reversed, I think I'd be upset. Not at him exactly—you can't help if you love someone—but at the situation. I'd wonder why he didn't say it back, if he didn't like me anymore, or if he was going to leave me because I said it too soon.

Not Hudson, though. Maybe it's because he *knows* I love him, too, but am too chicken shit to say it out loud. I thought about nothing else but that in the shower this morning and came to the realization that the only people I'd ever said 'I love you' to have been my mom and Pack Monroe. The first died on me, and the others... Well, that obviously didn't work out well for me, either. Maybe I should go to therapy. I could afford it now if Brooklyn was telling the truth this morning. Not that she has any reason to lie about that. Something to think about when I'm not pulling into work.

Houston parks the car in the covered garage attached to the building Pen2Paper Press is in. The car has a sticker on the windshield for one of the reserved spots closest to the elevator. When I see it, my eyes widen a little. Just a regular spot in this garage is over two hundred dollars a month, and I've heard from the people I work with that they have to fight for space on one of the first couple floors, or they're stuck on the top, which is uncovered. So I'm sure the reserved spot is much more expensive than that. Brooklyn must have arranged that last night, too. How she got the sticker already, I'm not sure.

We walk side by side to the elevator and up to the fourth floor. His head never stays still. It's always moving side to side, checking our surroundings. When we reach the floor for Pen2Paper, he walks me to my desk to make sure there is no hitman hiding under it, I guess, and then tells me he'll be seated in reception all day if he needs me.

"Morning," I call out to Jerrick as I get settled, who is already sitting at his computer. Glancing at the time on my phone to make sure I'm not late, I realize it's ten til eight. We made good time, so Jerrick must have gotten in extra early.

Instead of just calling out a good morning like he usually does, I hear his chair roll back, and footsteps come from his office. I throw my purse in the drawer of my desk and turn to his office doorway as he steps out.

“Morning, Summer. Who was that you walked in with?” I freeze. He’s leaning against his doorway, staring at me with an open, curious expression. Nothing about his stance or facial expression would suggest he’s gearing up for a fight.

“Oh. Right. I’m sorry. I should have brought this up before coming in. But he’s my... um, security.” I feel silly saying that out loud. As if I’m important enough for round-the-clock security. As if I’m in danger at work, in the middle of the day, surrounded by people.

His eyebrows shoot up, and he stands, no longer leaning against the doorway. “Are you okay?”

I startle, a little taken aback by his concern. “Oh. Umm, yeah. I’m fine. Just precautionary...” It’s not very specific, but I don’t really feel like airing out all my dirty laundry at work. Not that I think he’ll use it as water cooler gossip, but these things never stay secret. Just having Houston here will draw enough questions.

Jerrick raises a brow, then takes a few steps closer until he’s standing only a foot or two away from me. With a quick look around, he bends slightly and, with a lowered voice, says, “Does this have anything to do with why you can’t be on the payroll?”

He’s talking about having to pay me under the table. Which now is unnecessary, I guess, since they found me anyway. I can stop living like a recluse: paying only in cash, avoiding signing up for things with a last name, always looking over my shoulder. They know exactly where I am and who I’m with, so there isn’t a point in hiding.

“It does. Is that a problem? I’d like to continue working here, but I’d understand if this complicates things.” I’m about to beg for my job, but Jerrick raises his hand to stop me before the groveling begins.

“It’s not going to be a problem. But you’re okay? Do you need anything?” He looks genuinely concerned if not a little protective.

“I’m okay. My mates just thought a few extra safeguards would be helpful. So if he could stay in reception during work hours until this whole... thing... gets resolved, that would be great.” At the word *mates*, he takes a little step back. Almost instinctively. Strange.

“That’s fine. If you need anything else, let me know. Otherwise, ready to get started?” He points his thumb into his office for our daily morning meeting. I agree and follow him in, ignoring the strange look he’s giving me all of a sudden.



“Hey, Summer. Can you hand this to Jerrick when he’s free?” Becky, another assistant, asks. I grab it from her, place it off to the side, and get back to work. After a few seconds, I look up and arch a brow at Becky, who is still standing in front of my desk.

“Yes?” I ask, laughing.

She grins back. “Nothing. You just look different today.” I stop typing and lean back in my office chair.

I fold my arms over my chest and give her my full attention. “Good different? Bad different?”

“Good different. Happier. Every time I’ve looked at you today, you’ve had a secret little smile on your face. What gives?” When she points it out, I realize my cheeks do hurt a little. Maybe I *have* been smiling nonstop. But if I have, it’s because my pack has been texting me throughout the day. Mason said he’s not going to be home until late because he’s got a photoshoot but that he’d miss me. Maverick and Hudson are together today working on the house they’re flipping, so I’ve been teased all day with sweaty, shirtless pictures. And, of course, Hudson has been tormenting me with random “I love you’s” and getting a kick out of my hard-core avoidance. Brooklyn sent me take-out options for dinner, stating that because I was her favorite, she was letting me pick. All day, it’s been nothing but reminders that despite the dark cloud looming closer, I’ve never been happier than I am with this pack. My pack.

Claire walks up beside Becky—the two are office besties. Thick as thieves. “She’s right. You’re practically glowing. Spill.”

I roll my eyes and go to respond, but just then, Wells walks up. “Hey, sunshine. Just wanted to let you know I’m up. Ready to kick ass and take names,” he says, turning to face the two friends. “Well, hello. I’m Wells. A friend of Summer’s. I hope you don’t mind me saying, but you two are absolutely stunning.” The man winks at them, picks up one of each of their hands, and kisses their knuckles. The whole interaction makes me want to burst out in a fit of laughter. It is so unbelievably cheesy, but Becky and Claire both flush a beet red and look stunned, speechless. Did they hit their

heads?

A throat is cleared from behind us, and Becky, Claire, and I all startle at Jerrick's sudden appearance. The two girls scamper off to their own desks at a record speed, and I turn to gauge his mood. Houston was quiet and respectful all day, but Wells made himself known within minutes, all while disrupting work.

There is mirth in his eyes, thank the Goddess, but he still addresses Wells. "I have no objection to you hanging around during the day to protect Summer, but please keep the work distractions to a minimum." Then he turns on his heel and walks back into his office.

"You got it, boss!" Wells calls out, laughing at Jerrick's retreating back. "Well, Summer. I'll be in reception if you need me or are ready to go home." At my nod, he turns and walks back to sit in the same seat Houston occupied the whole day.

An hour later, Jerrick comes out of his office with his backpack on. "I'm headed out a little early today. You're free to go, too."

"Oh, great. Thank you." My voice sounds equal parts shocked and happy. I'm ready to see my pack.

"Have a great night." He waves and walks away. A few clicks of my mouse later, and my computer is locked. I grab my purse from the drawer and head toward the reception to meet Wells. When he sees me, he stands. There is a little bounce in his step as he meets me halfway and slings an arm around my shoulder.

"Ready to go, squirt?" Holy cow, this guy is friendly. I'm not sure what to make of it. It reminds me a little of Hudson, minus any of the feelings. Wells' affection feels almost brotherly. Like in the next second, he's likely to give me a noogie just to mess my hair up.

"Ready," I confirm. We take the elevator down to the parking garage level and walk to the car that is in the same reserved spot as it was when Houston and I drove in.

"How did Houston get home?" I ask Wells. He responds easily, much more talkative than Houston was this morning.

"He took the car that I drove here, duh." Oh. *Obviously*. Despite Wells' affable personality, his head is on a constant swivel, just as Houston's was. He just manages to carry a conversation at the same time. "How was work today?" Wells asks me, waiting for me to get in the passenger seat before he jogs around to the driver's.

“It was fine. Nothing big happened, so it kind of dragged.” I shrug, buckling my belt. When I glance over, I notice Wells is backing out of the spot with his seatbelt buckled behind him.

“Why aren’t you wearing your seatbelt?” I ask him out of curiosity.

“Why are you wearing yours?” His response is instant.

“Safety.” He turns onto the road and then glances at me out of the corner of his eye.

“Ditto.”

“You *don’t* wear a seatbelt... out of *safety*?” The incredulity in my voice is obvious.

“Exactly,” he laughs, reaching to turn the music to a different station.

“That doesn’t make any sense.” I frown at him and then reach over to turn the station to anything else when he turns on a sports station.

“Hey!” he grumbles, turning it back. “You know, curiosity killed the cat.”

I flip the channel back to a pop station. “Yeah, but satisfaction brought it back,” I growl at him.

A hand shoots up in surrender; he leaves the radio on the pop station, laughs, then answers me. “Habit, I guess. I like to not be hindered by anything in case I have to make a quick exit. So it’s mostly for safety, but a little because I just got used to doing it.”

“Where’d you learn it?” I wonder, fascinated that he is so open when his teammate was the exact opposite this morning.

“I was a cop for a few years, then a detective for six.” He signals and switches lanes.

Huh. Not what I would have guessed for the goofy flirt of the trio. But I suppose personal security also seems strange. Or at least it would if he wasn’t built like a freaking machine. “And Houston and Damien?”

“Houston was military. Damien worked for OPS for a few years before deciding to go into private security. He was the one who started the company and hired Houston and me.”

“Huh,” I say in amazement. I could see that. Damien definitely had the buttoned-up leader look down-pat. And Houston, with his ‘yes ma’ams,’ brusk demeanor, and buzz cut, definitely screams military.

Wells laughs at the face I pull. “You really got him to open up to you this morning, huh? Did you guys exchange friendship bracelets and make a secret handshake?”

“Are you always this obnoxious?” I grumble, poking him in his ribs. This

just seems to amuse him.

“Yes,” He replies, matter-of-fact. Well, at least he’s honest. Then, he surprises me by giving me some more information without me even having to ask. “Don’t take it personally. Houston. He’s always been closed off. Even to me and Damien. I don’t know why, but Damien must because he always steers conversations away from Houston’s time in the military. So, if you want to stay in his good graces, just don’t ask too many personal questions. Especially about his past. Just bring him chocolate-covered anything, and you’ll have a friend for life. Albeit a very grouchy one.”

“Chocolate,” I laugh. “Got it. Thanks.” We don’t talk the rest of the way to the house. I just laugh and record him as he belts out the lyrics to every pop song that comes on the radio in the next ten minutes. The sports station may have just been a ruse, I’m starting to wonder. Because he is enjoying the heck out of the one *I picked*. I think he just played some reverse psychology on me, and I’m too amused to be mad about it.

We pull up to the house and wait for the garage to open. There isn’t a car in there yet, so we must have beaten everyone home. I walk into the house alone. Wells says he’s going to do a sweep of the perimeter, which seems excessive since it’s the middle of the day and Damien and Houston are both here, but hey, he’s the expert.

The house is quiet. It feels weird. Like I’m walking into someone else’s house when they aren’t here and shouldn’t make too much noise. The kitchen is still a mess from Mason’s breakfast shenanigans. So I walk over, wipe down the countertops, do the dishes, and unload the dishwasher. When all that’s done, I look around the kitchen and into the open-concept living room. Everything else is more or less clean. So I walk over to the couch, sit down, and pull out my phone. We got here in good time since Jerrick had to leave early. I’m not sure what to do with myself until everyone else gets home.

All of a sudden, my eyes feel heavy, and I remember I only got a few hours of sleep last night thanks to all the excitement. So I pull the throw off the back of the couch, cover up, and snuggle into the couch for a quick power nap. It’s no time at all when sleep drags me under.

EIGHT

MAVERICK

“MORNING, BABE,” I yawn, walking up behind Mason while he’s making pancakes, and lean in to kiss him. He pulls back a little but turns to smile at me and says, *Good Morning* back. But the smile is forced, and he returns to his task right away without his usual teasing or flirtation.

Hudson walks into the kitchen just in time to see the interaction, and he raises a brow at me in question. Or accusation. Who the fuck knows. I just shrug back at him.

“You ready to get going?” I ask Hudson. We’re headed back to Naperville to do some construction for the flip. The floors and drywall were delivered a few days ago, and today is the first free day we both have.

“Yep. Let’s get this show on the road,” he chirps, snatching his phone off the island.

“Want some pancakes to go, Hud?” Mason asks, all sugary-sweetness that he definitely was not giving me. My own greeting was ice-cold in comparison. Fucking Antarctica.

“Awe, fuck yeah!” He does a hop-skip over to Mason and grabs two pancakes from the plate beside the stovetop. “Thanks, shnookums.” He grins and blows Mason a kiss on the way out the door to the garage. I stand at the island for a second, waiting for Mason to offer me some to-go breakfast. Or even for him to just fucking look at me.

Nothing.

“Okay, well, I guess I’ll get going...” I drag my feet. “I’ll see you after work?”

He hums back and flips another pancake. “Don’t wait up. I’ve got a shoot that’ll probably run long later.” Still, he does not look at me.

“Um, right. Okay. Have a great day.” I frown, backing toward the door.

“Thanks, you too.” Well, that’s something. At least he didn’t tell me to fuck off. Seriously, *what the hell?*

Hudson is waiting in my Jeep when I make it to the garage. As soon as I slip into the driver’s seat, the third-degree starts. “You still haven’t apologized yet, have you?” It’s phrased like a question, but his intonation is more of a statement.

“What exactly do I have to apologize for?” *What did I do?* I thought we’d gotten past all the jealousy and miscommunications. Summer knows she’s our mate now, Mason’s had just as much alone time with her as any of us, and he knows I still love him. Her being a part of this pack changes nothing about our dynamic.

Hudson is quiet for so long, I look over at him just as I turn onto the main road. He’s staring at me with an odd mix of incredulity and introspection.

“What?” I growl and flick my turn signal on with more force than is necessary.

“I’m just trying to figure out if you’re serious or not.” More staring. I look at him again, brow raised, and wait for him to spit it the fuck out. “Okay. You’re serious. What the fuck, Mav. You went through a full-blown fucking heat with Summer and didn’t even bother to mention it to him.”

Not this shit again. “He knows she went into heat! What was I supposed to do? He was in another fucking country!” I can’t keep having this conversation with him.

“How about show a little decency? If the roles were reversed, he would have told you immediately. Even if there wasn’t anything you could do to help. His first thought would have been Summer’s well-being and then making sure you knew what was going on with your mate. Because he, oh, I don’t know, *loves you.*”

I slam on my brakes, ignoring the angry honk from behind us. “Are you trying to imply that I don’t love Mason? Because I swear to fuck, Hudson, I will beat the fuck out of you.”

The smile he gives me in answer is not at all reassuring. It’s damn near antagonistic. Sarcastic. “Oh, spare me your macho-man bullshit. Of course, you love him. But your love is selfish sometimes. When she went into heat, you were thinking about what was easiest for you. You knew Mason was struggling. You guys were in a weird limbo and have been ever since finding Summer. So, instead of texting Mason and potentially making things more

strained between you two, you did nothing. Said nothing. And it pissed him off. So now you have to man up and fucking deal with it. Apologize.” Hudson is almost yelling by the end of his tirade.

I’m frozen in my seat. The person behind me lays on their horn until I let off the gas and get moving again. Is that true? At the time, I convinced myself I didn’t want Mason to feel like he had to rush back and ruin his chances at winning that grant. But maybe that was just what I told myself.

Hudson is definitely half-right. Mason and I’s relationship has been strained since we met Summer. Not that it is by any means her fault. We both love her too much to throw any blame her way, and she didn’t choose us as her mates. The Goddess did that. So that means if there is any fault to be had, it lands on me. I let the rift between us get bigger and bigger.

And for what? Because I was too fucking chicken shit to have the hard conversations? Mason deserves better than that.

“Jesus, man, relax.” Hudson says, breaking me out of the downward self-deprecating spiral I was headed in. He wrinkles his nose at the way my scent sours with my mood. “It’s going to be okay. You were just a jackass. It’s not like you went out of your way to hurt anyone on purpose. Just apologize, and you’ll be fine. Maybe bring him home some of those cinnamon butter rolls he loves. It’ll be fine.”

“Right. Yeah.” I nod. I can do that. Fuck, this is going to suck. I hate talking about my feelings. But Mason eats that shit up. He’s so in tune with his now, so I’ll have to spill my guts a little for him to realize I’m being genuine before he accepts any apology. The rolls will definitely help, though.

A few minutes later, I pull into the driveway, and Hudson’s phone pings. A full-blown belly laugh rips from him, he snickers, and then his fingers are flying on the screen.

“Care to share the joke?” I grumble. Clearly, I’m still in my feelings a little.

“Oh man, look at this,” he says, still laughing, and turns his phone for me to read. My eyes scan the small print, but immediately, the words ‘love you’ hop out at me.

“Who...?” I start to ask, and my eyes snag on the recipient of the text. “You told Summer you love her?” Shock. That’s all he hears in my voice. Not that he loves her. Fuck, we *all* love her. But we’ve had more time to ruminate on the mate bond. We literally just laid it all out for her last night.

“Oh yeah. I told her last night but then pretended to fall asleep so she

didn't have to say anything back. Then again this morning. And I'm going to text her all day so she gets used to hearing it." The smile on his face is limned with humor.

"So she hasn't said it back? And you're okay with that? Did she freak?" So many questions. Just swirling around in my head. He seems absolutely unbothered. That's one of his best traits, though. He goes through life with a very devil-may-care attitude. Always sees the best in every situation. A lot like Mason in that regard. Brooklyn and I are the cynics of the pack. Summer seems like a nice balance between the two.

"Nah. She was definitely freaking out a little in her head. But I know she loves me. She loves all of us." My heart warms at his suggestion that she might love me. "But she just needs to realize that it's okay to admit it. To herself. To us. So I'm helping her out a little." The man lifts a shoulder like he didn't just blow my mind.

"Jesus, man. When did you become so fucking wise?" First, his advice about Mason, now his view on Summer. I don't give him enough credit.

"Shut up, let's just get started." He huffs and gets out of the Jeep. No part of me was being sarcastic. But maybe I don't compliment him enough because he thinks I was.

I follow him up the sidewalk and unlock the door. "I wasn't kidding, you know. It's freaking genius, and I think it's going to work. That old *pack* of hers fucked up her confidence." The word *pack* feels dirty coming out of my mouth. I refuse to acknowledge them as anything to her. "So saying it first is probably really smart. I think it'll help." I shrug. What do I know, though? I can't even keep my beta happy.

Something soft hits me in the back of the head, and I look down to see a wadded-up rag on the floor. Hudson is beaming at me. "Thanks, man."

"Yeah, yeah. Let's throw up the drywall in the front room first." A nod, and then we get to work.



It's been five hours of manual labor already, and we've barely made a dent. Well, we're moving at a decent rate, I suppose; we've gotten all the drywall

put up in the downstairs rooms. But Hudson and I usually work a lot faster than this. But he got me started with the horseplay, and it's become a fun distraction. Each of us has been sending Summer flirty texts all day. Hudson, of course, has continued his "I love you" crusade, and I jumped in to get her even more worked up. Several shirtless pictures and provocative poses later, and she has stopped responding altogether. I think we broke her.

"Do you want to get started on the floor in the front room?" Hudson swipes some forehead sweat with the back of his arm. All the windows are open, and there is a decent breeze coming through, but with Spring coming in with full force, it's heating up. And this old house doesn't have the best insulation. We're fixing that as we go, too, and the new windows being installed next week will help.

"Yeah, but I'm starving. Let's order some lunch first." That's how we find ourselves sitting on the dusty floors in the front room of the house forty minutes later, eating wings and fries and talking about what we'll finish today before calling it quits.

Three raps on the front door filter in before the sound of high heels is heard. My first thought is Brooklyn came by. But then I remember she's got a ton of meetings today with her current clients and prospective ones. A feminine voice calls out. "Hello. Anyone home?" The woman doesn't wait for an answer but walks through the entryway until she sees us sitting on the floor. "Hi! I'm so sorry to interrupt, but I saw all the trash in the front yard and wanted to check the house out." I exchange a look with Hudson, and then we both set our food down and stand up.

"Okay, that sounds strange. Let me start over. I've been house hunting for quite some time. My omega wants more space, and I was hoping this house might be up for sale soon. Maybe I can look around? The outside is beautiful, and the location is perfect for us."

What the fuck? Who just randomly walks into someone else's house because it's being renovated? This could be our personal home. This woman has no idea. But from the looks of her, it doesn't seem like she gets told 'no' very often. Everything about her screams old money. From her expensive clothes, the way she holds herself, and that look in her eye. All confidence and surety, and not just the kind that comes from being an alpha. Like any problem she's ever had has been solved by throwing money at it. I want to tell her to fuck all the way off, but Hudson is much more polite than I am. And besides, we *do* plan on selling. If we could tack on twenty thousand or

so more than we would have initially asked because, let's face it, Miss Moneybags could probably pay it, then that would be ideal.

"Hi. Sure, we can walk you around the place and tell you our plans. We're flipping and putting it on the market within the next six months if all goes well," Hudson tells her amicably and walks forward to shake her hand. "I'm Hudson, and this is Maverick."

She smiles, all teeth, and says, "Great to meet you both. I'd love a tour. Thank you." Hudson smiles and starts leading her from room to room. He tells her about our plans to keep as much of the integrity as we can. I tune him out, focusing on her. Something is weird about this lady. I can't put my finger on it.

"Oh, that's a great idea," she says, and I tune back in.

"Thanks, that was our omega's idea." Hudson beams proudly at the mention of Summer. I didn't hear what they were talking about. But when I glance at our newcomer, her eyes are flashing, and she's got a tight-knuckled grip on the cell phone in her hand.

What the...

She sees me looking, relaxes her grip, and pastes on a friendly smile. Yeah, time to wrap this up. "Well, we should probably get back to work if we want to finish before it gets dark," I say to Hudson, raise a brow at him, and hope he gets the message. My attitude seems to confuse him because he draws a response that definitely sounds like he has no idea what I'm talking about.

"Right. Yeah, sorry. So much to do today..." He rocks back and forth on his heels and claps his hands together. "Oh! But here, take my business card and give us a call if you're interested in buying in a few months still." He rifles around in his pocket and pulls out a very bent, used-looking card. Despite my thoughts on this woman, I roll my eyes.

Professional, Hud. Very professional.

"Great! Well, thank you for the tour. I'm sure I'll be seeing you very soon." He shakes her hand one last time, and she strides out the door. When she's out of range and the front door is shut behind her, he turns to me.

"What was that about? You didn't have to be so rude." Hudson crosses his arms over his chest, waiting for an answer.

I throw my arms out. "Are you serious? You didn't think that was fucking weird as hell? What woman just randomly walks into a house that isn't hers? Because why? It *looked* like it was being renovated. And what was with that

parting line? She'll be *seeing* us soon? The fuck?" Not right. My instincts are screaming at me that there was something not right about her.

"You are being too paranoid. She's looking for a house for her omega. It's sweet. And it's just an expression, Mav. Relax. Untwist your panties, and let's get back to work. The sooner we're done, the sooner I get home to Summer. Chop, chop."

He's being naive. But no matter what I say, he's just going to brush me off. I'll tell Brooklyn about it later.

"Fine, let's start on the floors."

NINE

SUMMER

A DOOR SLAMMING jolts me out of my dream.

Crap.

Crap. Crap. Crap. *Crap.*

I look around, heart beating out of my chest, scared to ask my mom to take me to school because I just missed the bus. Again. Then a very dirty Maverick walks in, followed by Hudson, who is equally covered in dust and grime. Brooklyn trails behind them, talking on the phone and looking perfectly put together. Then I remember I'm twenty-six, and I don't go to school anymore. Much less take the bus.

The relief I feel is instant, and I flop back on the couch, feeling my heartbeat settle by the second.

"What's got you smiling?" Maverick asks me. He bends down, careful not to touch the white couch with his dirty hands, and gives me a quick kiss.

When he pulls away, my lips chase his, and he smirks at me as I pout. Laughing at me. It's infuriatingly sexy the way his lip tilts up a little. "Oh, just a dream," I say distractedly. I lick my lips, tasting bourbon and citrus lingering there. He tastes so good, and all of a sudden, I remember that *other* parts of him taste just as good. Flashes of my heat come back to me, and warmth travels through my body.

Great, now I'm horny.

My scent must spike in the open space because all three heads turn my way and flare their nostrils, varying degrees of alpha growls rumbling through their chests.

"I like where your head is at. But hold that thought until I've had a shower, sweets," Mav growls, and I decide to tease him a little.

I look between him and Hudson, glance very obviously at their dirty clothes, and wrinkle my nose. “Yeah, probably should shower first...” A long-suffering sigh. “I just hope I haven’t taken care of the problem myself before you get back. Better hurry...” Before I’ve even finished talking, he and Hudson are both sprinting away, ripping off clothes as they go. Hudson grabs Mav by the arm and pulls him back when he gets a little lead. When they turn the corner, I relax back onto the couch with my arms behind my head and a smile on my face.

Too easy.

“That was evil,” Brooklyn sniggers and plops down beside me on the couch. Then she wiggles until her head is in my lap, and she’s lying longways along the couch. Her eyes close immediately, but I can still tell how exhausted she is. With a few kicks, she chucks off her heels, turns her head into my stomach, and sniffs.

My heart aches a little, so I do the only thing I can think of. I comb a hand through her hair in light strokes and let out a soft purr. One meant to soothe, to relax. Tension drains from her, starting with her shoulders, and I watch it like a wave through her body. Shoulders, then arms, and legs all going limp. Even the tension around her eyes relaxes, making her look years younger.

“Pretty sure this is supposed to be the other way around,” she mumbles quietly, seemingly on the edge of sleep.

I frown. “What is?”

“The comfort thing. Alphas comfort their omegas.” Her words are matter-of-fact. Like she hasn’t known anything else. It is amazing how different everyone’s views are. How the way we’re raised warps our way of thinking. My mom always told me it was an omega’s job to ensure her alphas were taken care of. *They take care of your needs, give you a home, and stability. You have to return the favor. Alphas never look after their own emotional needs. Their omega has to do that,* my mom used to tell me.

After I hit puberty and presented as an omega, that is. I think part of her hoped I was a beta. Maybe the world looked down on them, but they also weren’t bound by the same rules and societal standards as alphas or omegas. She wanted a simple life for me. Easy. I wonder how she’d react if she were alive today.

“I don’t think it’s a mutually exclusive thing. We’re supposed to take care of each other. I *want* to take care of you.” I murmur, still stroking her hair.

“Mmmmmm. Perfect mate.” Her words are little more than a mumble. Barely audible. A few more brushes of her hair, and the quietest snore slips out. A chuckle tries to work its way up and out of me, but I choke it down so my body doesn’t shake and wake her.

Wells walks in the front door a moment later, and I hold my free finger to my lips to make sure he stays quiet. In his hands are three large pizza boxes and two smaller ones. The smell of pepperoni and cheese wafts in with the breeze, and my stomach growls.

“Met the delivery guy at the gate when I was doing my rounds,” he whispers, tiptoes into the kitchen to set the boxes down, and points out that he’s going to be downstairs. I nod back and give him a thumbs up.

Every part of me wants to get up to eat. Since I smelled the food, my stomach has not stopped growling. It’s actually starting to make me worry it’ll wake Brooklyn up. Footsteps thud in the quiet house, sounding akin to a stampede. I flinch, watching every twitch and breath come from Brooklyn, hoping she stays asleep.

When they both slide around the corner, laughing, I glare at them and hold a finger to my lips like I did for Wells. This just makes them cackle even harder.

“Don’t worry, pretty girl. Once she’s out, *nothing* is waking her up for at least several hours. Trust me, we’ve tried. Drums, banging pots and pans, nada.” He flares his nostrils, clearly smelling the pizza, and continues, “Come on, let’s eat. Scoot out from under her. She won’t wake up. Promise.” I glance at Maverick, but he doesn’t look like they’re trying to pull one over on me, so I do. Even still, I lift Brooklyn’s head from my lap gently and place it down on a throw pillow that I pull over with the same care.

I stand there for a few seconds, just making sure. But they were telling the truth. If anything, her snoring gets a little louder, her sleep deeper. I shake my head and laugh a little.

Hudson has pulled three plates out from the cabinet by the time I get to the kitchen, and Maverick has all the boxes open and laid out. The two small boxes are cheesy bread and garlic knots. Then the big boxes are one pepperoni, one meat lover’s, and one supreme pizza. Hudson hands me and Mav a plate and then starts to pile up his own. He takes four slices right off the bat of the meat lover’s and a few pieces of the bread sides.

“I’m a growing boy, babe. Gotta fuel up.” Hudson winks at me as I stare incredulously at the piled-high plate in his hands.

“Shut the fuck up and get out of the way,” Maverick growls, shoving his way in front of the boxes. He’s no better, taking two meat lover’s slices, two supreme, and bread, too. I opt for one slice of pepperoni, one supreme, and one each of the sides. Some of it still may go to waste. When you eat for your budget—and your budget accounts for ramen noodles and cereal—you tend to get used to small quantities.

“Where do you want to eat?” Mav asks me, taking my plate from me and looking around.

I shrug. “Where would you eat if I weren’t here?”

Without any hesitation, he says, “My room,” and at the same time, Hudson says, “Mav’s room.”

“You both would eat in his room?” I ask, frowning at them.

Pink tinges Maverick’s cheeks which immediately piques my interest. “We, uh, well, we usually hop online while we eat.”

Hudson slaps Maverick on the back, almost making him drop his plate. It earns him a scowl, but Hudson just laughs. “Don’t mind him. He’s always been a little embarrassed of his hobby. He’s a bit of a *super nerd*.” Hudson leans in to whisper that last part like it’s top-secret information, waggling his eyebrows. Which, I guess it is because I would not guess Maverick would be the one to be called nerdy from this pack. Mason maybe. Brooklyn, definitely. Maverick...

“I am not a nerd,” he grumbles, shoulder-checking Hudson as he passes. He gently grabs my hand as he passes and leads us to his room. As soon as we get to his room, I watch as they move in synchronized ease with one another. Clearly, they’ve done this a thousand times before. Hudson walks to the window and draws the blinds while Maverick sets his plate down on the side table by the bed and pats it for me to sit on the bed. Then he walks to his closet and pulls out a second chair to match the one already at what I’m sure is his gaming station in the corner. It’s essentially just three of the largest computer monitors I’ve seen. When he lifts it up to carry it over to set it next to the other, the muscles in his arms tense and flex, drawing my gaze. Drool starts to build in my mouth, so I clear my throat and look away.

Dinner first, Summer, I scold myself.

Maybe they could be dinner, the devil on my other shoulder cackles. I ignore both sides of my inner monologue and opt for a bite of pizza instead. When I look back up, Hudson has a headset in his ears and is handing a second one to Maverick. It’s wireless, so he grabs it and walks back over to

me. He leans down to give me a quick kiss that catches me off guard because I'm currently chewing my dinner and grabs his own plate. "We only have two chairs and headsets, sweets. Nobody else likes to play with us, so we've never needed another one. I'm sorry." The chagrined half-smile he gives me really does look remorseful, so I let him off the hook.

With a shrug, I say, "It's okay. I've never really been much of a gamer. But I like watching. Just do your thing."

Two hours later, I regret telling them I liked to watch. The first thirty minutes really were interesting. Comical, really, the way they'd yell at the other people in their headsets. And each other. They obviously take it very seriously, and tomorrow, I'll be sure to tell Hudson he can't call Maverick a super nerd like he's above him because he is just as bad.

My eyes are starting to feel heavy, and they show no signs of stopping, so I nudge my way under Maverick's covers to get comfortable and pull out my phone. I may as well get a little reading in.

I open the library app on my phone, where I've been reading ebooks for free—since coming to Chicago and not being able to afford to splurge on the physical copies—and start reading.

TEN

SUMMER

“THAT MUST BE MASON. He’s home really late.” I hear Hudson whisper near me. But I’m so warm and cozy, eyes still so heavy, that I don’t even attempt to get up and join the conversation.

“He did say he was going to be working late,” Maverick whispers back, but he sounds farther away. A second later, a door shuts, and then his voice is much closer. “He’s been finding more work closer to the house lately. Not as many long trips for landscape shots.”

“Yeah, I wonder why that is.” Hudson’s low voice sounds scolding, almost accusatory.

“Butt-out.”

“No. Fix your shit, Mav. I’m serious,” Hudson growls, and then I hear the quiet sound of footsteps on the carpet before a second door closes. It’s quiet in the room for so long that I think maybe both of them left. But I still can’t bring myself to get up or open my eyes.

I wonder what Hudson was talking about. Why does it sound like he blames Maverick for Mason staying close to home?

A sigh comes from down by the end of the bed that almost startles me into actually opening my eyes. At least I know Maverick is still in the room. There’s shuffling, the sound of drawers opening and closing, and then he’s out the door, too.

Part of me is ready to snuggle deeper under the duvet, but then my bladder tells me that isn’t going to happen. With a groan and an immense amount of effort, I throw the covers back and crawl out of their warm embrace. Bleary-eyed, I amble down the hall to the bathroom only to hear the water running. Maverick must have come to take a shower. Part of me wants

to just walk in there and use the bathroom—sure he wouldn't mind—but the other, louder part of me is too embarrassed. So I walk downstairs to use the other bathroom.

Mercifully, it's empty. I relieve myself quickly and am about to head back upstairs when I hear rustling coming from the kitchen.

Mason is leaning over the island, pizza in one hand and scrolling on his phone in the other. I must make a noise because as soon as I'm in the living room, his head jerks up, and a brilliant smile lights up his face. The smile I return is effortless.

Everything about Mason puts me at ease and makes me feel like coming home after a long day.

Walking up to him and wrapping my arms around him is natural. As easy as breathing. He returns my hug for a second and then surprises me by lifting me by my hips and planting me on the island countertop. The squeak that comes out of me is embarrassing, but he ignores it.

The sweetheart.

Despite the late hour and him having worked all day, he doesn't look the least bit tired as he stares adoringly at me. I bring a hand up to his cheek, and my thumb traces lines along his sharp cheekbone and under his eye where there should be dark circles but are none.

"You're so handsome," I whisper, heat tinging my cheeks as his summer rain and freshly mowed grass scent grows more pronounced at my words. A rumble travels through his chest. Not a growl since only alphas and omegas have true growls, but it gets the point across well enough. Well, enough that my legs spread automatically.

He steps between them, and I hook my ankles around his back, pulling him even closer.

"I missed you." His voice is deep and gravelly in a way that sends shivers down my spine. Hands run up and down my sides in gentle strokes while he stares into my eyes, hunger shining in his.

My body leans into his, and so slowly I want to scream, he bends down to kiss me. His lips on mine are unhurried and so freaking soft. Butterflies are bouncing around violently in my stomach at the tender way he's kissing me, holding me; I'm almost vibrating with them. His tongue darts out to my lips, and I open for him. So there we stand—or sit, in my case—in the middle of the kitchen, making out like it's just him and me in the house. And in this moment, it feels like it is.

But then a throat clears from across the living room, near the stairs. Mason and I don't jump apart from each other like we've just been caught doing something we shouldn't. We don't stop kissing right away, either. Somehow, it would feel unfinished.

He kisses me once more in a long, lingering caress before pulling back to turn toward our visitor. Maverick is standing on the stairs, hair wet and only in a pair of basketball shorts. If Mason's eyes were hungry staring at me, Maverick looks ravenous at the both of us.

To my utter mortification though, Maverick was not the one who cleared his throat to stop us because Houston is standing in the living room, back ramrod straight with his hands folded behind it and his eyes staring straight ahead, not looking at us.

"Apologies, ma'am. I was just coming to make sure you wanted to leave at the same time tomorrow," he says, when he feels our attention on him.

"Oh—" My voice is so husky I have to stop, swallow, and clear it before I continue. "Yes. Same time is fine. Thank you."

He nods, not turning our way, before walking toward the door that leads to the basement and their rooms.

There is an awkward silence while Mason and Maverick stare at each other. The tension practically crackles in the air between them. And not a good kind, either. Part of me wants to run to my nest and hide from what seems like a brewing fight. The other part is too scared to move in case it triggers it while I'm still in the room.

A few tense moments later, Mason breaks eye contact first to look back at me. My own eyes are still darting between the two of them worriedly. "Come to my room?" he whispers, tucking a finger under my chin and pulling my face up to look at him. He's smiling at me, but it's not the soft, genuine one he gave me when I first walked into the kitchen. This one is tighter, more closed off. My answering nod is wary.

Maverick's sigh is so loud and resigned that it draws both mine and Mason's attention. "Actually, I was hoping I could talk to you." This is clearly directed at Mason, and I see my escape. Blessed relief is just a dart around Mason away. I try to hop off the counter, but he holds me still and raises a brow at me. "Where do you think you're going? This should be a talk between all of us."

My skin starts to crawl, anxiety welling up. This is where they blame me for causing a rift between them. Or they start yelling at each other, and I feel

like it's all my fault anyway, even if they aren't explicitly pointing fingers at me.

Mason must feel the emotions coming off me or smell it in the way my scent sours because he sweeps me off the counter, throwing me over his shoulder. The breath gets knocked out of me for a second. "Hey!" I whisper-shout at him because Brooklyn is still snoozing on the couch. I guess she really can sleep through anything once she's out.

"Shhh," he says back mockingly, and pinches my ass.

"Ouch! What was that for?" *Seriously, what happened to a good ole fashioned ass slap?*

"Just 'cause my mate's got a good butt." Any resistance melts out of me when he calls me his mate. I love hearing it. For some reason, it doesn't make me feel even the slightest bit of panic, like when Hudson tells me he loves me. However, even that is less scary now that it has had a chance to settle.

Mason walks right by Maverick, who stands there looking a little lost, not sure whether to follow or not.

"Well, are you coming or not, you big lug?" Mason huffs back, not breaking stride. If I thought he was walking toward his own room or even Maverick's, I was mistaken. He marches right to the end of the hall where my nest is and walks right in, depositing me on the huge, floor-length bed. He pulls his shirt off one-handed, in the way only men can do, and places it over my own head. Immediately, I'm engulfed in his scent. It's enough to calm my nerves, but he takes it a step further, sniffing all the throw blankets around the bed until I'm bundled in all my mate's scents.

Maverick is standing in the doorway, watching it all happen. Once Mason is leaned up against the wall with his arm around me, and I'm tucked into his side, Maverick steps in and closes the door behind him.

If there is still tension swirling between the two of them, I don't feel it anymore. Surrounded by blankets and swimming in my mates' comforting scents, I'm completely at ease. Almost riding a drug-induced-like high.

"If you're waiting for me to start this, I'm not going to. I'm not emotionally bailing you out again," Mason says, and shock breaks through my bubble. He sounds...like an alpha. So firm and dominating. Maverick doesn't look the least bit surprised by this, so I'm guessing my fun-loving beta has a little bit of a darker side. One I haven't seen yet but now really want to.

Maverick's eyes roll back in his head. "Don't be a brat. I'm trying to find

the words.”

“More like the courage,” Mason whispers in my ear. Maverick still hears him but chooses to ignore it.

“I did a lot of things the wrong way. At the time, I thought what I was doing was in your best interest. But it wasn’t my place to make unilateral decisions in our relationship, and I’m sorry.”

I’m...so confused. He seems genuine, but I don’t know what this is about. So, being the absolutely unhinged omega that I am, I tentatively raise my hand.

“Are you raising your hand?” Mason sniggers in my ear, to which he promptly earns an elbow to the gut.

“You don’t need to raise your hand, sweets.” Maverick laughs along with Mason.

I pout at both of them and then ask my question. “Umm. I guess I don’t really know what you’re apologizing for.”

“Yeah, I think I’m a little lost on that one, too. Care to elaborate?” Mason grins at Maverick like he really does know what he’s apologizing for but doesn’t want to let him off so easily. Our alpha takes it in stride.

He kneels down on the bed and crawls until he’s right next to us. He looks at me first and says, “Since we found out that you were our mate, I’ve made a lot of dumb decisions. Starting with not telling you that you were our mate.”

“To be fair, we all messed up there. Not just you,” Mason interjects, dropping the dominant facade to look at me with a touch of regret. I just nod, not wanting to interrupt, and also because I don’t blame them. What if’s aren’t really helpful or productive if any of us want to move forward.

“Regardless,” he says to Mason, and then looks back at me. “When we found out you were our mate—both of ours—we decided to put the physical part of our relationship on hold until you knew. Or until you felt the bond yourself.”

My jaw drops. I *knew* this was my fault. “Why?” I whisper.

“Omegas can be territorial. I’ve met several who refused to be a part of packs where there were other relationships outside of hers and her alphas.” It’s Mason who answers me.

“We wanted to make sure you knew you had a say. As our fated mate. Neither of us wanted to lose you over it.” Maverick says it, but Mason is nodding along to his words. Both look like they have swallowed something

sour.

“And if I didn’t want you to be together?” I ask incredulously. They exchange a sad look, and it’s Mason who answers.

“Then we wouldn’t be. I was still your fated mate, too. So neither of us was going to be alone. We’d have you.” Simple as that, right?

“But you guys love each other! In what world would you have actually been happy with that scenario?” I practically yell at them, completely incensed now.

“It would have been hard, but we could have done it.” Maverick isn’t looking at either of us anymore. Instead, all his attention is on the blanket in his hands as he pulls at the strings at the end.

Yeah, freaking right, they would have been happy.

“You guys are probably the most—” Every part of me wants to yell at them. Call them idiots and scold them for making this so much more difficult than it should have been. But I stop and take a deep, steady breath.

That won’t be productive, I tell myself internally.

“Okay. Whatever. What’s done is done. So, is that why you guys have this rift between you? It sounds like that was a mutual decision.”

“Well, I guess that is a *little* my fault. Though Maverick was definitely a jackass.” One pointed stare at Maverick before he continues. “You know I had a pack before this one. One that kicked me to the curb when they met their omega. I guess when we decided to take a break, it brought up a lot of those insecurities, and I started feeling like I wasn’t good enough again.”

Tears well in my eyes at his admission. That’s something we have in common, and it breaks my heart that he ever felt that way with me. Or even Maverick. Mason’s smile is sad as he looks at me, acknowledging a shared insecurity.

“You are and always will be good enough. For us, for this pack, for every happiness. I’ve never met someone more deserving of love than you,” I choke out as a tear falls down my cheek. The sad smile he was wearing turns into a beaming, joyful one as he leans down to kiss me.

“She’s right,” Maverick says, his own voice hoarse. “I’m sorry I ever made you question that. I’m sorry for not calling you when she went into heat. Or after. I knew how you were feeling and was more interested in avoiding any real conversation than making sure you were alright. I was a bastard. It won’t happen again. I promise. Forgive me?”

I smile at Maverick. So proud of him for owning up to his mistakes and

sounding truly genuine and remorseful.

“No,” Mason says, and my head shoots around to him as my eyes pop wide open.

ELEVEN

SUMMER

“I UNDERSTAND,” Maverick frowns. “I’ll earn your trust back. Whatever it takes.”

Mason hums, looking at me with an eyebrow raised. That dominant look is back in his eyes, and I start to think that he’s teasing Maverick.

“It’s going to be *hard* work. I’m not sure you’re *up* for it.” All nonchalance in his voice. “You might even call me a *pain in your ass* by the time you’ve atoned.” The bass in his voice drops an octave, and a shiver runs through me. Holy hell. A flutter already starts up in my core in anticipation. Maverick isn’t unaffected, either. His eyes have darkened, but there’s also something else...

He looks *submissively* at Mason. His eyes are slightly downcast, and his neck is bared. My eyes dart between my alpha and beta. The same beta who was just spilling his insecurities is now looking more alpha than anything. Those beautiful hazel eyes I love so much are looking darkly at me. “What do you think, omega? Are you ready to play?”

I nod so fast he chuckles at me. “Lay back then.” I comply immediately, shuffling down so my back is on the mattress.

“Well, what are you waiting for? Take your mate’s clothes off,” Mason growls at Maverick.

Our alpha jumps to do as Mason says. The blankets are ripped away from me so he can grab my pants. They are peeled slowly off my body before he moves to my top. One button after another is undone until it hangs off my shoulders. I’m laying on the covers in essentially just my bra and panties, and I’ve never felt more powerful. The way they’re both looking at me says more than words ever could.

“Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful,” Mason hisses through clenched teeth, rubbing himself through his jeans. “Isn’t she?”

Maverick nods, speechless. “Why don’t you show our mate just how beautiful you think she is? Hmm?”

“Yes, sir,” Maverick responds before peeling my panties down my legs. Instead of tossing them somewhere on the bed, he brings them to his nose, sniffs them, and groans.

Mason snatches them from his hand. “Did I say you could enjoy yourself? To be clear. You don’t get to come until I say so.”

Maverick narrows his eyes at him but nods. “Yes, sir.” This one is through slightly clenched teeth, and it makes Mason cluck his tongue at him but wink at me out of the corner of his eye.

Rough, calloused hands grab my thighs and pull them as far apart as they’ll go. Maverick settles between them and, without any further prompting from Mason, licks a stripe up my core. My thighs start to tremble right away, but he holds them tighter and continues to eat me out until I feel myself building and building toward the edge.

“Stop,” Mason says right as I feel Maverick’s fingers at my core, and my orgasm slips away. I whimper and pout at Mason. I thought Maverick was the one he was punishing.

“Don’t look at me like that,” he laughs. “I thought Mav here might like to get his dick wet. Wouldn’t you rather come on him than his fingers?”

Heat travels through me. When he puts it like that... I nod and look down at Maverick. He’s staring at Mason like he knows exactly what game he’s playing at.

“You think I can’t hold off coming if she’s squeezing my dick?” There’s a challenge in his voice that Mason returns with an evil grin and a simple shrug.

“Spread those legs, sweets,” he growls, crawling closer. Without waiting for me to do as he says, he takes one thigh and wraps it around his hip while holding the other open. I barely feel him press the tip at my entrance before he thrusts inside me with one hard motion.

He’d worked me up far enough that slick was starting to drip from me, so he slid right in with no resistance. With my head thrown back and a silent scream coming from me, I barely register Mason crawling to the end of the bed and into my closet.

Maverick pulls back and thrusts back in. Without stopping, he continues

to work his way in and out of me, and I feel myself building to the edge again. The sound of a cap opening draws my attention just as Maverick thumbs my clit.

“Goddess,” I moan. Then my eyes lock onto what Mason grabbed from my closet. Something I didn’t even know I had in there. Probably one of many gifts from my pack stashed in drawers I haven’t looked through yet. But he pulled out a small vibrating bullet and a tube of lube. There is already a nice amount of lube all over the bullet, and I watch as he turns it on.

The loud vibrations finally draw Maverick's attention, and his head whips around to where Mason is kneeling at his back.

“Bend over,” Mason says evenly.

A growl tears from Maverick’s chest. “You bastard. You and I both know I can’t hold off coming with that thing in my ass.”

There isn’t an ounce of apology in Mason’s eyes as he shrugs. “Not my problem. If you come without my permission, you don’t get to fuck either of us for a week.”

My mouth pops open in protest, but the look Mason gives me has it snapping shut. Evil. That’s what he is. But I’m not getting in the way of them right now.

“Now. Bend. Over.” Mason’s voice is still calm as he waits.

The look Maverick gives him is baleful, but he does as he’s instructed. He leans his chest over mine. I wrap both my legs around his hip, this time to give him more room to move his own legs. He ends up in what looks sort of like a downward dog position, still inside me, but the perfect view for Mason to slide in the bullet.

Maverick and I groan in unison when it’s pushed in. I can feel the vibrations through him, and he jerks, pushing harder into me. The knot at the base of his cock thickens, and I feel it nudging against me with every movement now.

And I want it. Even if he isn’t allowed to come. I’m feeling selfish enough at this moment not to care. The only thing I want is his knot locked into me.

So, I wait for my moment, watching his eyes go slightly unfocused as he loses himself in pleasure. Over and over, he drags his cock along my G-spot, my orgasm just on the cusp, and desperation takes over me.

The next time he pulls out, I lock my ankles in a good grip behind his back. Just as he pushes forward again, I pull at the same time with all the

strength in my legs, and his knot locks into place.

“Fuck!” he shouts, punching the bed beside me as his body spasms, and we both come in unison. I can feel his cum leaking out of me as I pulse around him. Warmth travels through my whole body as wave after wave of pleasure spreads until I go limp with it.

Mason must have pulled the vibrator out when we locked together because a few seconds after my breathing comes back under control, the vibrating starts again. My whimper mixes with Maverick’s groan. His hips jolt forward as far as they can go while we’re locked together, and a mini orgasm rocks through me. The pulses are gentle in comparison, but they go on forever. Flutters pulse around Maverick’s cock, and sweat beads on his forehead, his teeth clench, and a vein pops out on his temple as he comes again, too.

“Tsk, tsk. I almost don’t even want to punish you for that, Mav. Clearly, our omega was feeling needy. But rules are rules.” He sighs like he truly does feel sorry for enforcing them. But then he pulls the bullet out, reaches his hand around Maverick, and scoops up a mixture of my slick and Maverick’s cum. That hand wraps around his dick. At some point, Mason got completely naked, and here he is. Stroking his erection with our combined juices. Lubing himself up.

“I’m feeling magnanimous, though. We’ll say three days instead of a week,” he groans as he pushes himself into Maverick. As he bottoms out, Maverick gets pushed further into me.

“Fuck. So tight,” he groans, looking up at the ceiling. Veins pop out of his neck as he clenches his teeth so hard I hear them grinding together. “Whose ass is this?” Mason grunts.

Maverick looks me right in the eyes, his own hazy with pleasure. But he doesn’t say a word. A sharp slap sounds through the room, and Maverick propels into me again.

“I said.”

Thrust.

“Whose.”

Thrust.

“Ass.”

Thrust.

“Is.”

Thrust.

“This?” His growl is so deep and guttural that I thought it came from Maverick for a second. Betas don’t make sounds like that.

“Yours!” Maverick shouts. His abs clenching as he comes again. Sweat is beading everywhere on his body now. His chest and shoulders are glistening, and I watch a droplet fall from his temple down into his scruff. The muscles in his arms give out, and his weight falls on me.

Mason doesn’t stop the steady rhythm he’s picked up. Fucking over and over into his alpha which makes Maverick’s sweaty chest slide up and down my breasts. The friction on my nipples is enough to start stimulating me again.

My core starts clenching around Maverick. In lazy movements, he snakes his hand between our bodies and rubs tight, fast circles on my clit. Not thirty seconds later, I detonate around him. He must squeeze reflexively, too, because a second later, Mason shouts out his own orgasm.

Mason pulls out of Maverick, gives him a sweet kiss on his back, and flops down on the bed beside me. Heavy breathing is all the noise that can be heard in my nest, the three of us not talking for a few minutes. All the while, Maverick stays locked inside me and lying on my chest. It’s actually a comforting weight, having him lay on me. Like a de-stresser.

Finally, Maverick’s knot deflates, and he pulls out, dropping onto my other side. In unison, they both roll onto their side and drape an arm over me. It makes me laugh. Once I start, I can’t seem to stop. A fit of laughter overtakes me, thinking about what just happened. My fun-loving, goofy beta just topped Maverick, my stoic, always serious alpha. And it was some of the hottest sex I’ve ever had.

A stitch forms in my side from laughing too hard.

“What’s so funny, sweets?” Maverick whispers, half-asleep. I shake my head, holding my breath and thinking about work and old ladies in their underwear to stop my fit. Eventually, I settle down, acknowledging internally that I’m probably slap-happy and should get some sleep.

“Nothing. That was just...amazing,” I chuckle again.

“It was. Thank you, babe.” Mason agrees, thanking Maverick.

“You’re welcome. Am I forgiven now?” Maverick laughs, and I raise my eyebrow at the both of them. It’s Mason who explains.

“I don’t get to take charge very often. Mav is more dominant, but he lets me explore my dominant side sometimes. Usually when he wants something or is trying to grovel.”

Ahhhhhh.

“So does that mean he’s allowed to have sex the next three days?”

“No.” They say at the same time, making me laugh again. A yawn slips free at the end of it.

“Get some sleep. I love you,” Maverick says, but it sounds like he’s saying it to both Mason and me.

“Love you both,” Mason says back, nuzzling my neck, scent-marking me.

Neither of them push me to say it back, but I don’t have that sinking sensation in my stomach anymore stopping me from saying it.

There is just one thing...

“Let me out,” I tap on their arms. They release me immediately. I rummage around in the nest of blankets for something quick to throw on so I’m not running around the house naked. Not that I think anyone would mind, but we do have security in the basement. No part of me wants Wells, Damien, or Houston seeing my business.

“Where are you going?” Mason leans up on one elbow, frowning worriedly at me. I blow him a quick, reassuring kiss after throwing on what looks like Maverick’s shirt. It falls to just above my knees.

“I’ll be right back. Promise. Don’t take my spot,” I warn, pointing at both of them. They can cuddle when they’re in their rooms. But in my nest, I’m getting the cozy spot. Yeah, call me a selfish omega.

See if I care.

Out the door, I tiptoe down the hall until I get to Hudson’s room. A few raps on the door, and me calling his name, and nothing. Crickets. So I open it a peek and poke my head in. Gentle snores reach my ear.

I think about turning around and letting him get his rest, but then rethink it. No way he gets mad at being woken up for this. In fact, I’d bet he’d be upset in the morning if I didn’t. I walk up to his bedside. “Hudson,” I whisper.

Nothing.

“Hudson,” I say a little louder, tapping his shoulder. He rouses slowly, eyes searching the darkness before they focus on me.

“Hey, pretty girl. What’s wrong?” I have to tell my vagina to settle down at the raspy quality in his voice. As if she didn’t just get very satisfied. Always ready for her mates, it seems.

“Nothing. I just wanted to tell you goodnight.” I lean down and press a kiss to his lips. His hands dart out to hold either side of my face. His tongue

licks at my lips, and I open for him automatically.

He tastes sweet, like his orange blossom scent, and he pulls me on top of him so I'm straddling his waist. But I pull back rather than grind down on the impressive erection I feel nestled against my thigh already. This night is about Maverick and Mason. Mustn't get distracted.

"Mmm mmm. Nope. I have to get back," I tell him, to which he responds with a really cute pouty lip. I chuckle, shaking my head, and hop off the bed.

I'm all the way at the door to his bedroom, about to shut it behind me, when I poke my head back in. "Hey, Hudson."

"Yeah, pretty girl?" he asks, grinning at me propped up against his headboard with his arms tucked behind his head. Naked chest on full display.

"I love you," I grin at him.

His jaw drops right along with his arms before a brilliant smile stretches across his face. "I know," he winks at me, and I laugh, closing the door behind me.

Back in my nest, Mason and Maverick—the sweethearts—did, in fact, leave me my space between them. They also both fell asleep while I was gone. So I snuggle in between them, pull a blanket up under my chin, and join them.

TWELVE

SUMMER

“I’M HEADED OUT FOR LUNCH,” Jerrick says as he walks out of his office, shutting the door behind him.

“Sounds good.” I nod and get ready to clock out for my own. When Jerrick goes to lunch, that’s usually when I take mine. Except, because of recent *circumstances*, I agreed to pack my lunch for the foreseeable future and eat in the office.

“Want to join me?” he asks.

“Oh, no, thank you. I’m all set,” I say, pulling my lunch box from the bottom drawer of my desk and showing it to him.

After he heads out, I open my lunch right there at my desk. Screw walking to the small break room with two tables that are always full. At least I’ll be able to catch up on some reading here without any distractions. Just as I hit the button to clock out, my work phone rings. Every part of me wants to send it to voicemail. Technically, I am not here. But at the same time, it could be an important call, and I am *right here*.

With a sigh, I grab the phone and pull it to my ear. Holding it there by my shoulder, I open my lunch box at the same time and greet whoever is on the other line. “Jerrick Price’s office.”

Static crackles through the phone. I frown and repeat myself.

After a few more seconds of silence, I’m about to hang up. “I’m sorry, but I can’t hear anything. Try calling back.” Just as I start to pull the phone away from my ear, a feminine, smug-sounding laugh comes through.

Every part of me freezes. Every muscle from my neck down to my toes is locked up tight, and there’s a ringing in my ears. Dark spots appear in my vision, and I vaguely register I’m on the verge of a panic attack.

Because I know that laugh. It's not one I would likely forget.

"Jade," I breathe.

"Awe, I knew you couldn't forget me. No matter how hard you've been trying, little mate." The violence underlying her words is impossible to miss.

Despite it, despite all the warning bells going off in my head telling me not to provoke her, I can't stop myself from hissing, "I am *not* your mate. I'm not any of your mates."

The laughter cuts off, making my blood run cold. "Those bite marks on your body say different, bitch. No matter what you say, you're ours."

The noises around the office—the clicking of fingers on keyboards and the thrum of conversation—filter in like noise underwater. But I raise my head from the floor, and my eyes unfocus enough that I lock eyes with Houston in reception. My face must give me away because he stands from his seat and walks through the glass doors separating reception from the rest of the floor, making his way toward me at a brisk pace. Almost a run.

"You think that security guard will be able to save you? As if we'd actually be discouraged by a group of disgraced rent-a-cops. You'll be back in our house soon, darling. And you'll bear your punishment in silence." With that parting line, the call drops just as Houston takes the phone from my hand. Numbly, I let him, not putting up an ounce of fight.

On par with his persona, he doesn't say a word. Just listens through the receiver for a second, sighs, and then hangs up and looks at me for an explanation. Quickly, I explain what she said, and he nods when I've finished.

"I'll make some calls to a few tech friends we've got. See if there is a way to trace a call after it's been made. We may not have any luck, though. I'll also have them look into the security cameras in the office. They must have found a way to tap into one. There's no other way she would have seen me coming. This floor is secure. So just go about the rest of your day like it didn't happen. I'll let you know what I hear." Then he pivots and walks back to reception, phone already at his ear by the time he reaches his chair again.

Go about my day.

As if. There is no way I'm eating at my desk now. I go to grab my lunch box and stop when I see how badly my hand is shaking. I squeeze them both into tight fists to stop the trembling, close my eyes, and take a deep breath. When I'm somewhat back in control, and the nerves are no longer shooting through my body at a rapid pace, I snatch my lunchbox and head to a break

room.

The first one is full, as I expected. The other assistants are all gathered around the two tables, whispering and laughing without a care in the world. I hustle on through the mostly empty hallway until I come to the second break room. It's at the end of the floor where there aren't a lot of cubicles. So, when I get there, one table is occupied by a few men I recognize from the IT department, but the other is open. I settle in an empty seat and pull out the contents that Brooklyn was sweet enough to pack for me. She said she woke up really early—on account of sleeping on the couch—and made chili for all of us to take today. They're all eating packed lunches for the time being, as well.

In solidarity.

I tried to tell them it was sweet but not necessary. They insisted. But as I pull off the lid to my thermos and take a bite, I hardly register the stinging heat or the savory flavors. The chili tastes like little more than ash on my tongue.



I'm just finishing my lunch when I see Jerrick walk past the doorway of the break room. I pack my things and follow after him back to my desk. Confusion ripples through me when I see him open his office, grab his backpack, and walk right back out, shutting the door behind him again.

“Oh. Hey, Summer. Great. I caught you.” I set my things on my desktop.

“Are you heading back out? I didn't see any meetings on your schedule this afternoon.” I chew my lip, worried I missed something.

He chuckles. “No, I didn't have anything on the schedule. I'm taking a personal day for the rest of the afternoon. Something came up. But Brandon said he's dipping into Doherty's manuscript when he gets back from lunch. So you can head to his office and shadow him the rest of the day. Cool?”

Hope fills my chest. “What about your phones?” If I didn't have to worry about every incoming call the rest of the day, stressing that every call would be Jade on the other line. Or Connor or Brody. It would be a huge boon.

Jerrick shrugs. “Let 'em go to voicemail. If it's important, they'll leave a

message.”

Thank the Goddess.

A genuine smile flits across my lips for a moment. There and gone, but there nonetheless. “Oh, there’s Brandon now. Give him a second to get settled, and then you can head over. See you tomorrow.” And with that, he’s walking toward reception. Houston sees Jerrick leave again and gives me a once-over. Probably seeing if I’m about to pack up and leave, too. Instead, I put my lunchbox back in the bottom drawer and grab a notebook and pencil to take notes. After twiddling my thumbs for a few more minutes, I head to Brandon’s office.

“Perfect timing, I was about to come find you,” Brandon says as I knock on his open door and poke my head in. “Come in. Pull that seat around.” He points to one of the two chairs facing the front of his desk. Large, heavy wooden chairs. I set my notepad on his desk and use both hands to drag the chair around his desk. Thank the Goddess for carpeted floors because I cannot lift this chair with my abysmal upper body strength. The noise it would make on tiled floors would be like nails on a chalkboard.

After a minute of struggling, none of which Brandon notices, I breathe out through my nose to try to catch my breath without him noticing how out of shape I am. An alpha, with their heightened sense of smell and sound, may have noticed my labored breathing or smelled the sheen of sweat that broke out on my upper lip. But Brandon is a beta, and one very uninterested in anything outside of his computer. Thanks to small mercies.

“Okay, here is Dillon’s manuscript. I’ve already started making some notes here in the margins,” he says, pointing to the screen at the tiny red print off to the side of the document. I lean in to get a closer look to see what it says and pull back immediately. His scent is awful. Not like body odor or in any way that suggests he’s bad at grooming. But sour. Overly pungent, that may be pleasant to some, but it makes the hairs in my nose burn.

Great.

Looks like I’ll be breathing out of my mouth for the next four hours. Brandon looks back at me, completely oblivious to my newly nauseous state, and smiles. He’s not an unattractive male. His features are symmetrical, facial hair kempt, straight white teeth, and kind brown eyes. All things that someone may be attracted to, but I can’t get past his scent. I lean all the way back in my chair subtly. It helps a little.

“Okay, it may be useful to hear where you’re at with structural editing.

What do you know?”

Heat singses my cheeks. Will he not want to teach me when he hears how little I know? For a second, I contemplate telling a little white lie and exaggerating what I know. But then what if he asks me to explain or expects me to be able to do the work? Instead, I go with honesty.

“Nothing. This is my first job in the publishing world, and I don’t have any kind of editing experience at all.” He must see the fear in my eyes because he gives me a reassuring grin.

“That’s okay. From the beginning, then. Crash course.” He slaps his knees and spins his chair around to face me fully, ignoring his computer for now. “Basically, a structural editor is concerned with the overall structure and organization of a piece of writing.” When I nod, he continues, holding up a finger with each point he makes. “They make sure there is a consistent voice throughout the piece, they look at the language as a whole to make sure the voice is the same start to finish, pay attention to character development—namely that there is some and it makes sense to the story—and pay attention to the tone and style of the content.”

So far, so good. Simply reading all my life has given me at least some basic knowledge so I can keep up with him. I jot down a few key words on my notepad. When I look back up, he gives me a kind smile and goes on.

“It’s very similar to developmental editing and can be done at the same time. At Pen2Paper Press, though, they are done separately. George heads up developmental editing and will start on it after we’ve completed our work with Dillon.”

“What really is the difference then?” I ask, never having heard of the two different types of editing.

“George will look at developing specific ideas with Dillon: adding or deleting full sections, developing arguments within the writing, that kind of thing. With me, we’ll mostly focus on organizing and honing what he already has rather than changing the piece.”

“Got it.” I nod.

“Cool. So, let’s start going through it. Don’t be afraid to ask questions if you’ve got them.”

The next few hours are spent doing exactly that. I do ask some questions. For the most part, though, I don’t need to because Brandon explains almost everything he’s doing as he’s doing it. He also added me to the shared document with all his notes on it so I can go through them on my own if I

want to.

It's something I can log on to from home. I don't have a computer or my own laptop, but I figure one of my mates does. I'm sure they won't mind sharing with me. When I jump right to that conclusion in my head, I mentally fist-bump myself because a week ago, I would have been too unsure to ask that of them. Not after seeing the nest they created for me already. Without even knowing if I'd ever use it. Those people definitely wouldn't mind sharing with me.

Progress.

When four in the afternoon hits, Brandon says he's going home for the day. Which means I am, too. After a quick stop back at my desk to grab my things, I head to reception. Wells is waiting for me. Just an hour earlier, when he switched with Houston, he popped his head in to let me know, but neither of them brought up my phone call from the she-devil. Jerrick is aware of the vaguest details about my personal life, but nobody else in the office is.

So when I get to Wells, I'm itching for an update.

"What's up, shortstack? Ready to bounce?" Is this man just trying out nicknames for me until he finds one he likes?

I huff a pity laugh at him. When we're in the elevator—just the two of us—I raise a brow at him. "Well?"

"Yes, Sum?" he says, shortening my name. Gross. I ignore that nickname and growl at the aloof smile he's sporting. He knows what I'm asking. "You call that a growl?" He howls with laughter. "Cute."

"Don't be annoying. Just tell me." I throw my hands on my hips, my purse and lunchbox dangling awkwardly from my wrists, slapping my thighs and completely ruining the intimidating look I'm going for.

Wells throws his head back dramatically, stares at the ceiling, and lets out a sigh of the long-suffering. "Fiiiiine," he groans, making the single word four syllables. "There's not a lot to report, honestly. Houston called his friend. Apparently, *it's not like in the movies.*" He makes his voice go high and squeaky to imitate this so-called friend. "Said it would take more than a few hours for him to write the code to get into the security system here to check the traffic for any unwanted users to see how she knew when Houston was walking toward you. He's still trying to trace the exact location of the call itself. But he was able to, at least, eliminate the Chicago region. All of Illinois, actually. She was not calling from in-state. Which is a good start."

Tension leaks from my body at that. Jade isn't anywhere near me. I can

relax.

“Would it have been so hard to just say that from the start?” I grumble at Wells.

The jerk laughs at me again. “I gotta have my fun where I can. Let’s get you home before I have to block Hudson’s number. Swear that man blows up my phone more than any client I’ve ever had.”

It’s my turn to chuckle. “Wait, how many texts does he send you a day? Do they all message you?”

Wells digs into his back pocket and brandishes his phone at me like it’s a weapon. “Look at this shit.” My eyes scan over the texts, not reading them but rather noting the volume. Dozens of texts already from today. It warms my heart and makes me want to roll my eyes at the same time. Overprotective alpha males.

“Reminding me what time my shift starts, telling me not to be late, texting to make sure I’m paying attention when I *am* working. Brooklyn will text me once a shift to make sure I made it to tag Houston out. Sensible. Responsible. Hudson is straight up off-the-wall.”

“Woah, easy. That’s my mate you’re talking about,” I laugh, though, because I know he’s just teasing. “And besides... You know what they say about glass houses and all that.”

“I am *not* crazy! You take that back.” His mouth hangs open in faux outrage as he stares at me.

“Oh, please. You and Hudson are the same person. Kindred spirits.”

The elevator door pings, and I walk out before Wells does. I’m half-turned, glancing back at him to tease him a little more, when someone grabs my arm and yanks on it.

THIRTEEN

SUMMER

“YOU—” Before I can even register who grabbed me—before they’ve even finished a word—Wells has wrenched me free, and my back is pressed to his as he faces them.

“Ow, let go, you brute! What is your problem?” a high-pitched, whiny voice cries out. Wait... I know that voice. Where have I heard it?

I side-step Wells to get a look at her. “*Amber?*” My own voice reaches a startling high pitch. Now I know where I remembered the voice. Hudson’s ex, who I saw with him outside the coffee shop not too long ago.

She sneers at me. “*Amanda.*” Oops. “As if you didn’t already know that.” Her mouth opens like she’s about to say something else when Wells interrupts her.

“*Back. Up.*” My own blood runs cold at the alpha bark in his voice, and it’s not even directed at me. *Ambe—Amanda—*whimpers, bares her neck, and stumbles back at least five steps. “Get in the car, Summer.” When he addresses me, his voice is much softer. But I can still hear the seriousness in it. So I don’t hesitate. The SUV is once again in the reserved spot a few feet away. I half-jog to it, jumping into the passenger seat, and watch through the tinted window as Wells says something else to Amanda that has her nodding vigorously and scampering away.

A gun I didn’t even see him draw gets placed back in the concealed holster he’s got inside the waistband of his jeans, and then he’s stalking toward the driver’s seat.

Inside the car, he puts on his belt, places the car in reverse, and backs out of the spot. I jerk forward when he changes gears faster than normal, but I don’t say a word. Not until he does. But he doesn’t. All the way out of the

garage and through the Chicago rush-hour traffic, Wells is silent. I'm starting to sweat.

Finally, I break. "Are you mad at me?"

His knuckles tighten on the steering wheel for a second before they relax. A breath spills from him, and the tension from his shoulders along with it. "No, Summer. I'm not mad at you. I'm mad at myself."

I frown at him. "Why? You didn't do anything wrong."

"I did. You never walk in front of me again, okay? That was my fault. I should have walked out first. But please... just, wait next time. Deal?" He glances my way when I'm silent a beat too long. I don't like that he's beating himself up over nothing. Over an annoying ex. Part of me wants to say something else that'll absolve him from whatever he's feeling right now. But I incline my head at him instead.

"Thank you. Fuck, they're going to rip me a new one." I'm not sure whether he's talking about my pack or his own team members.

"Don't tell them." His head whips toward mine, eyes incredulous. I shrug. "I'm serious. What good could it possibly do? Nobody was hurt. We learned our lesson. I walk behind you from now on. Done."

He narrows his eyes at me for a beat before turning back to the road. "You'd lie to your pack?" When he says it like that...

"It's not *lying*. If they ask me directly, I'll tell the truth. We're just omitting a very unimportant detail. We'll still tell them we ran into Amanda. They'll want to know that. But it was uneventful, and you took care of it. End of story." That really is the truth. So I don't feel too bad not giving them the version of events Wells is beating himself up over.

A long stretch of silence fills the cab before he gives a reluctant nod.

Ten minutes later, we're walking through the connecting garage door into the house. Where Maverick is sitting on one of the couches, legs spread open in a lazy, relaxed position, and he's staring at the phone in his hand. He's already in a pair of light gray sweatpants and a loose-fitting black T-shirt. Which means he's been home from work for a minute, probably. Brooklyn is also on her phone, but she's leaning against one of the floor-to-ceiling glass panes overlooking the backyard, talking to someone on the other line. Two fingers are pressed against the bridge of her nose, and she's scowling. So, it's going well.

I don't see Hudson or Mason right away, but footsteps start thundering from upstairs, drawing nearer. Two shaggy blond heads of hair pop into view

a second later, one longer and the other cropped short. They're nudging at each other and racing down the steps toward me. Hudson beats Mason, sweeping me into a crushing hug and sealing his lips to mine. A grumbled "asshole" comes from Mason. Hudson sets me down but doesn't let go, grabbing my hands instead. On his way past us, Mason doesn't miss the opportunity to smack my butt before he jogs over to where Maverick is.

He flops down gracelessly onto the couch, laying horizontally with his head in Maverick's lap. It doesn't make Maverick look away from his phone, but his free hand does come up automatically to run his fingers through Mason's hair in a tender, loving way that makes my heart happy.

"Well, it's about fucking time you guys got your heads out of your asses!" Hudson booms, leading me to one of the other couches, and pulls me down into his lap.

"My head was not in my ass, thank you very much," Mason says, popping his lips at the end of his sentence for some extra *oomph*, I guess.

"What's up, Wells?" Brooklyn frowns, walking over from where she must have just gotten off the phone and interrupting whatever verbal sparring match these three were about to get into.

With a glance at Wells, I understand why Brooklyn asked. Instead of dropping me inside and walking around the house like he had done before, Wells stuck around. His eyes look around at my mates with an uneasy expression that suggests he'd rather jump into a pool of piranhas than tell a little *fib* like we talked about. So, I save him from it.

"He's just swallowed a lemon because he had to deal with Amanda trying to accost me after work." I roll my eyes, but Hudson goes rigid beneath me.

"She *what*?" His words are whispered, but everyone in the room must hear because their scents start to sour. The living room, which a moment ago smelled like the most tantalizing mix of summer rain and lavender, citrus and bourbon, now smells like a burning field of grass and rotten fruit.

Hudson's fingers flex on my hip, Maverick has finally abandoned his phone, and Mason is sitting upright, elbows on his knees as he leans in to hear the full story. While he is usually the one not to overreact—to be level-headed always—his eyes are burning with intensity.

"What happened?" Brooklyn says in the same calm voice Hudson used. I fill them in on what happened—truly, not much if you ask me—and then Brooklyn turns to Wells, who is still lingering in the room.

"What did she say to you when Summer was in the car?"

“That she just wanted to talk. I didn’t give her the chance to say anything else before telling her to kick rocks.” Wells’ eyes darken, too. But not for the same reason as my mates. I’m sure he’s roiling in a pool of self-hatred for his perceived fault.

So, I try to lighten the mood. “You mean before you barked at her to kick rocks.”

Only Mason smiles.

“That fucking cunt. I get a restraining order against her, so she reacts by going after Summer.” Hudson is vibrating under me. “You’re getting one, too. All of you are.”

I startle. “Don’t you think that’s a little much?”

“No.” Brooklyn, Maverick, and Hudson all chorus at the same time. Mason has leaned back against the couch and looks to be contemplating it. At least he’s back to thinking level-headedly. Though with all the others so firmly behind the restraining orders, I’m not sure his sensibility will sway anyone this time.

“I’ll call Renee.” Maverick’s phone is already back out and to his ear before he’s finished talking. He gets up, kisses Mason on the top of his head, and walks out of the room. Hudson, clearly still letting the nerves and stress eat at him, lifts me, kisses my head just as Maverick did to Mason, and follows after him.

“I’m calling Carl about the building’s security,” Brooklyn says, leaving the room as well. Carl, the building’s front desk security. Apparently, they’re on good enough terms that she’s got his number. The thought makes me snort. Not that he’s not a good man. I really like Carl. But I guess I’m finding the humor in all this that they are not.

Overprotective alphas. Can’t live with them, can’t live without them.

Mason and I watch all the alphas leave the room, taking the stress and tension with them. When I turn around, Wells is gone, too.

“Sooooo. Here we are. All alone... What are we going to do?” The flirting and teasing in his voice makes me laugh.

“Actually, I did want to ask you for something,” I put a seductive kind of purr in my voice, batting my eyelashes.

“Oh?” Mason’s grin is near-feral, and he leans forward again, intrigued.

I get up from the couch I shared with Hudson and walk around the coffee table separating us until I’m standing right in front of him. His hands come up and wrap around the backs of my thighs.

“Mmmhmm,” I hum, yelping a little when he pulls me down to straddle his thighs. My hands dart out and hold onto his shoulders to steady myself.

“And what does my mate want? Anything her heart desires.”

“Anything?” I purr, massaging my fingers into his shoulder-length blond hair, pulling a little to tilt his head up so his eyes meet mine.

“Anything,” he breathes, pupils blown wide with lust.

Gripping his hair hard in my fist so he can’t move, I lean in slowly toward his lips. A small moan slips from him. Centimeters from our lips meeting, I whisper, “Can I borrow your laptop.”

He licks his lips, ready for—

I practically see the record screeching to a halt in his head when he registers what I said.

“Wait, what?” He shakes his head in a daze, and when his brain catches up to the conversation, he laughs. “You’re the devil. You know that?”

I laugh and stand up. “I know. Can I, though? I want to go over some things from work, and I don’t have one.”

“Speaking of,” he says offhandedly, looking around for something, and stands. I follow him as he walks into the kitchen, muttering to himself about misplacing things. An *aha* moment hits him, and he opens one of the kitchen drawers. “Of course, one of the bastards put it in the junk drawer.”

I frown and peek over his shoulder into the drawer. It’s a mess. “The what?”

“Junk drawer.” He points to it and rolls his eyes. “It’s a midwest thing. If you ever need anything: a screw, a Band-Aid, a ponytail. The most random thing you could think of for a kitchen drawer, it’ll be in here.”

Indeed, it’s a mess of random objects. Just with one glance, I see a deck of playing cards, mail, rubber bands, a pack of gum, and a singular condom. The grin he gives me is sheepish when I raise a brow at him. He just shrugs and pulls out the mail, shuffling through it before plucking out one with my name on it. “This is yours.”

“What is it?” I frown, sticking my finger under the flap and ripping open the envelope. Inside is a credit card with my name on it.

“It’s a card to the pack accounts. Didn’t Brooklyn tell you she’d ordered you one?”

“Oh. Well, yeah... She did, but—” *But I’m not going to use it for a laptop, I think to myself.*

“If you don’t buy one yourself, I’ll just buy it for you.” Mason looks at me

like he knows exactly what I'm thinking. "Look, I get it. I was the same way when Maverick gave me mine. You don't feel like you deserve it. Like you didn't do anything to earn it, and it isn't your money to spend."

I look away, not wanting to tell him that he just read me like a freaking book.

"That's not how a healthy relationship works, though. Always keeping score. That's your old pack talking, festering in here," he says, tapping my head, "Don't let them keep making decisions for you. You're a part of this pack now, and even if *by law* you weren't required to be given access to pack accounts, the outcome would be the same."

"I hear you, I do, but—"

"But nothing. Think about this for a minute: Brooklyn, Hudson, and Maverick have never had an omega. Never been given the opportunity to nurture someone the way their instincts are literally screaming at them to do. Maverick has me, sure, but it's an alpha's nature to provide for an omega. They *want* to do this for you. They need it."

My brow scrunches as I think about it. As an omega, it's in my own nature to want to please my alphas. I feel that pull, that instinct, to soothe them any time their scents start to change or I feel their stress and anxiety. A purr will start to build in my chest without a thought from me. Is it so hard to imagine they're following their instincts, too? And is it fair of me to deny them that because of my own issues and insecurities?

My eyes meet Mason's to see him grinning triumphantly at me. Smug as can be. He knows exactly what he said. "Jerk," I whisper, and pocket the card.

"Well, can I use yours tonight until I've had the chance to buy one?" I grumble, throwing my hands on my hips.

"Yes," he laughs, pulling me into a hug and kissing the top of my head. My arms wrap around his body automatically, and I breathe in his scent. "Oh, wait. No. I have to work tonight, too." He pulls back and frowns down at me. "The deadline for that grant is tonight. I have to finish edits on the pictures I took in Iceland."

"Oh, well, that's okay. I can do it some other night," I pout.

"Don't be ridiculous. We'll just steal Mav's computer. The asshole hasn't touched it in months." The frown that starts to pull at my face despite myself turns upside down, and a chuckle slips free when Mason grabs my hand and starts to guide me toward Maverick's room. His warm hand feels smooth

against mine. So unlike Maverick's or Hudson's tough ones. An artist's hand.

With the ease of someone who has spent countless hours in this room, Mason ruffles through Maverick's drawers and closet, pulling out a baggy shirt for me to slip into, an extra fuzzy blanket to wrap up in so his bed feels more like a nest, and Maverick's laptop. Mason fusses over me, making sure I'm comfortable, for a solid ten minutes before he races out to find his own laptop and darts back into the room not two minutes later, panting slightly.

His body flies through the air as he leaps the last three feet, twisting in the air and hugging his laptop to his chest as he lands next to me on his back. The movement stirs the air, and his scent slaps me in the face, mixed a little with Maverick's, as his body bounces a little before settling.

Mason locks eyes with me and waits...

"Seven and a half," I announce solemnly.

He huffs his outrage. "That was at *least* an eight."

"I took off a half point for range. It would have been more impressive if you jumped from the door," I sniff with an air of importance. When a look of pure determination flashes in his eyes and I see him move to get up, I throw a hand out to grab onto his shoulder and push him back down.

"Okay, okay. It was an eight!" I half-yell, which makes us both laugh. Him at me. "Oh, hush. Don't you have work to do?" I grumble, and open Maverick's laptop to do my own.

"You're right. I'll wait until Mav is here to see my *big* move... Did you just roll your eyes at me?"

"No. I was just overcome with a strong urge to stare at the ceiling for a moment." I open Maverick's laptop, not needing to enter a password because, apparently, he doesn't have one.

Mason mumbles something that sounds a lot like *look at the ceiling, my ass*.

I turn my head to hide my grin, and we both fall silent as we lose ourselves in our work. Maverick comes in at some point, looking for all the world like he's sleep-walking toward us, and crawls in between Mason and me, claiming that we're in his room now so he gets the best spot. It's so endearing, and he's practically a dead man walking, so neither of us argue as Maverick hits the bed and falls straight to sleep, an arm draped over my legs and one of his legs slung over Mason's.

When I feel my own eyes start to droop, I'm overcome with a feeling of *rightness* when I look over at my mates, close Maverick's laptop, snuggle

down under the covers next to him, and fall asleep.

FOURTEEN

SUMMER

THE NEXT FEW days fly by without incident. There are no more calls from Jade at work, though it doesn't stop my heart from trying to fly out of my chest anytime it rings. No more parking garage bump-ins with any ex-girlfriends. Houston still drives me to work in silence, and Wells takes me home, jabbering my ear off the whole way about absolutely nothing. The pack falls into somewhat of a routine with everyone coming home straight after work so we can eat dinner and just exist together for a while.

I've fallen asleep in my nest, missing the warmth and comfort it brings my omega. Brooklyn spent one night with me and Hudson the next, while Maverick and Mason have been getting some alone time in, making up for the time they spent avoiding each other. Everything has felt perfect.

Too perfect... Almost suspicious.

With each day that I haven't heard any news from Wells about Houston's contact who was looking into the security cameras, any time I picked up my work phone, and it wasn't Jade, my anxiety started to climb higher. Like a building block added each hour of every day that is starting to get so high, it feels like it's going to tip over.

At this point, I'm hoping for *something* to happen, some news—good or bad—to get rid of the what-ifs.

Part of me knows any extra time I spend worrying about what might happen, they win a little. So I throw myself into work, into my pack, and try to shove the uncertainty into the recesses of my brain. But Goddess, is it hard.

It's four-thirty Friday evening, and I've got a shift at The Hog's Head tonight, so I peek into Jerrick's office. When I see he isn't on the phone or in a meeting, I knock gently. His head pops up. "There's nothing else on your

schedule for the day. Do you mind if I take off?"

He checks his watch, and his brows pop up. "I didn't realize it was this late already. Sorry, Summer. Yeah, you're good to go. Have a great weekend."

I frown a little. He seems a little off-kilter today. Distracted. *He's just your boss*, I remind myself. Not any of my business. "Thanks. You, too," I say, and head out to reception with my things in hand.

"Hop to, Summer bug. Hop to," Wells claps as I head toward him. "Hurry up. I got a hot date tonight." I huff, rolling my eyes.

"Even if I move at a snail's pace, you'd still have to wait for your date until your shift is over."

"Ugh. Ruin my fun. Let's get you home."

I look at him when we get into the elevator. Didn't I mention to the pack that I work tonight? I try to rack my brain. Maybe I didn't... But they know I work weekends at Ava's bar. I wonder if Brooklyn just forgot to mention it to Wells, Damien, and Houston when she hired them.

"No, we're going to The Hog's Head. I work there tonight."

He looks at me and frowns. "What's that? I didn't know you had another job." I nod.

"Yeah. I usually work Friday and Saturday there. It's my friend's bar." His frown deepens.

"You're working at a bar on a Friday night? Why did nobody tell us this?" The happy-go-lucky Wells is gone, and the hired security Wells is back. Tension limns his eyes, and his shoulders tighten a little as he whips out his phone and calls someone. "Damien? I need you to meet me at a bar. I'll send you the address." There's a pause while Damien says something back, and the elevator doors ping, opening to the parking garage. Wells walks out first, and I follow. "No, Summer works there. She's got a shift tonight." A glance at me. "I know. I'll see you there." Then he pockets the phone and walks to the SUV, where he opens the passenger door for me.

"I don't know why this is such a big deal. I've been working there since I came to Chicago. Nothing bad has ever happened." Wells pulls the SUV onto the road, following instructions pulled up on his phone to Ava's bar.

"Well, you also haven't had contact with your old pack until recently. They know where you are now, and anything can happen at a bar. There are too many distractions. A brawl could start, pulling my attention for a *second*, and that's enough time for something to happen to you. We should have been

told. We can't protect you if we don't have information."

We stew in silence the rest of the way while I mull over his words. When he pulls up to the curb in front of the bar, I whisper, "I'm sorry."

He sighs. "It's not your fault, Summer. It's not anyone in particular's fault. Just bad communication. It's okay. Let's go."

The bar looks the same as it does every Friday afternoon. An evening crowd here for happy hour drinks but not overly crowded just yet. The music is still low, and the conversation is just loud enough to drown most of it out. I'm halfway to the bar when I spot a girl I haven't seen before sitting on a stool near the end of the bar where employees usually wait to clock in.

By the scent coming off her, I can tell she's not entirely relaxed... and a beta, it seems. I'm about to ask her if she needs something when Ava pops her head out from the back hallway. "Oh, hey, Summer! You're early. Come talk to me for a minute."

My brows furrow, but I nod at Wells and hold up a finger to indicate that I'll be back in a second. He follows me anyway. The brute.

I shut the door behind me, leaving Wells in the hallway when I get to Ava's office. His growl comes through the thick wood, and it makes me almost want to laugh, but I'm still too confused. And more than a little nervous for some reason. But Ava just smiles at me and points to the chair in front of her desk. Holy Goddess. I'm about to get fired.

Scenarios start pouring through my mind as I try to imagine what I did that was a fireable offense. Did I miss a shift? Have I been accidentally stealing money from her by undercharging people? Oh, Goddess. What if she doesn't want my drama here anymore?

"Summer, *relax*," Ava laughs. "My goodness, I'm choking on your nerves over here." She pinches her nose dramatically like my scent is turning her off.

I try to loosen my tight limbs and settle back into the chair. "I can't help it. You're making me nervous."

She stops with the teasing, but the kind smile doesn't leave her lips. "Do you remember when you came to me and needed a job?"

I nod, remembering it perfectly. Nearing the last of my savings and feeling absolutely desperate for a job, having already been denied at dozens of places, I was more than willing to beg at that point.

"One look at you, and I knew I had to help you. You needed it. So much that you've been working two jobs for the past five months, killing yourself

to stay above water.”

I don't even need to nod or agree with her. She knows she's right.

A sigh leaves her lips, and she leans back in her chair, shrugs, and raises her palms at me in a gesture of supplication. “You don't need to anymore. You've got a pack now. People you should be spending your weekends with. Not with me. Not busting your ass working sixty hours a week to make rent and have food to eat for the week.”

“But I like working here, seeing you,” I argue, although I know what she's saying is true. I also know I was right, and I'm about to be fired.

“I know, babe. But we'll still see each other. You're always welcome here, and we can hang out outside of this fucking bar. But you don't *need* me anymore. And I need to offer that help to other people now. People who do need it.”

“That girl at the bar?” I frown.

“Yeah. She's in a similar situation you were in all those months back. She just needs a chance...and I'm in a position to help. But I can't keep you both on the payroll.” Ava does look a little apologetic, but for the most part, her face is firm. Unyielding.

And I know she's right.

“So I'm fired.” Tears try to build in my eyes, but through sheer will, I manage to choke them down—not sure why I'm even sad. It will be so nice not having to work my weekends away. Not having to bust my butt and spend precious time away from my mates. I guess this bar has started to feel a little like home. Or Ava has.

“Think of it as your good deed for the year. You're helping her as much as I am. And I need you to train her tonight. Show her the ropes. So you'll still get one last shift in.”

I laugh at the wink she throws me, though it comes out a little strained. We stand at the same time, and she walks around the big oak desk to wrap me up in a tight hug. Being a few inches taller than me, she rests her chin on my head, whispering, “I'm so fucking glad I met you, and we'll still see each other all the time. It's not like we're going to stop being friends.”

Damnit. That did it. A tear escapes, dripping off my cheek and onto her shirt. I pull back, wiping my eyes, and nod. “We better.”

Wells is leaning against the wall opposite her door when I come out and frowns at what must be my red-rimmed eyes. But I smile to show him I'm all good and then head out to the front to greet my trainee.

Sitting at the bar when Wells and I walk back out is Brooklyn. She's staring at the wall of liquors with a worried look on her face and tapping her high-heeled toe against the bar footrest. I've never seen her so...fidgety.

As I near, she must scent me because she looks right at me as I walk up to her. Though, her nerves don't settle. "Give us a minute, will you?" she asks Wells, who nods, walks to the bar door, and stands vigil like the bar's very own bouncer.

I stand in front of Brooklyn as she takes both my hands in hers. "Okay. I'm trying really hard to be supportive and not come across as an overbearing, demanding alpha." She takes a deep breath in through her nose and expels it from her mouth before continuing. "But I don't want you working here anymore." I bristle a little until she continues. "I'm sorry. It's not my place to ask that you quit. But I'm doing it anyway. I thought you might on your own now that you didn't have to work two jobs. That's why I didn't tell the guys about you needing to be here tonight. That's on me. I made assumptions. But my omega continuing to work at a bar, without my mark... it's going to kill me. Literally, drive me insane—"

"Brooklyn," I say, squeezing her hands and laughing just a little at her nervous ramblings. "This is my last shift." I don't bother saying I got fired; I think she just may be crazy enough to *want* me not to work but still get upset at my getting canned if it upset me.

A shuddering breath leaves her, and she tugs on my hands until I fall into her arms. Goddess, she smells good. Suddenly, I get her not wanting me to be unmated and working in a bar because every part of me wants her to leave, so no other omega gets a whiff of her and thinks she's fair game.

"Thank the Goddess. Okay. Well, I still have a few clients to meet with, so I have to go. But sleep with me tonight? I'll wait up." My blood heats at the suggestive look in her eyes, and I agree without any hesitation.

I watch her walk over to Wells, say something to him briefly that must be an apology based on the semi-contrite look she's sporting, and then she walks out the door.

Finally, I turn to greet the beta girl who is still sitting in the same spot a few feet from where I was talking to Brooklyn. She clearly heard every part of the conversation, but she turned slightly away and pretended like she didn't to give us some semblance of privacy.

Sweet of her.

We introduce ourselves and jump right into work. The next several hours,

she just watches me make drinks, and I show her where everything is she might need. We don't have a barback since it's hardly ever so busy here that we need one. There are always two bartenders during the weekend shifts, so when we slow down, one of us stocks up. I show her where the stock and break rooms are. Tell her to order whatever she wants from the kitchen before it closes since they always have extras they'd need to throw out at the end of the shift, anyway. Near the end of the shift, she's filling orders and pouring drinks, too. It's clear right away that she is an incredibly fast learner. Either that, or she's bartended before. She's also really funny. Well, when she speaks. For the most part, she stays quiet, and I don't pressure her to talk to me. Not when I was the same way four months ago.

It's almost three in the morning when we both clock out. Wells texted the pack to say I'd be working a little later than usual, so they didn't worry, and I closed the bar down with Ava and Jules, our trainee. Ava tried to get me to leave when I was supposed to, but part of me couldn't bring myself to shut the door just yet on this adventure. So, we closed down together, and all took a few shots to toast the end of an era. And the beginning of a new one.

The drive home was uneventful. Damien told Wells to go home sometime around one when the crowd thinned out enough that they both stopped sweating my safety so much. Since I don't have the same rapport with Damien or Houston as I do with Wells, I leaned my head against the window of the SUV on the drive back and drifted in and out until we pulled into the garage.

Stumbling out of the car—feeling those shots a little—I head straight for my nest, needing the comfort of all my mates' scents wrapped around me and feeling a little morose still about losing a friend. Even though I know I'm not losing her, it still feels that way.

It's almost four in the morning by the time I've brushed my teeth, showered the bar stink off me, chugged a water and some pain medication to get ahead of the hangover, and stumbled to bed.

I stop dead when I open the door to my nest, fully expecting to go to bed alone. Instead, Maverick and Mason are wrapped up in each other on one side, there's a space in the middle for me, and then Brooklyn and Hudson are sound asleep on the other end. All my mates in my nest. Like they knew I'd want them here, *need* them, tonight.

Goddess, I love them, I think as I take my place between them. One big inhale of all their scents, and I'm out.

FIFTEEN

SUMMER

“WAKE UP, PRETTY GIRL,” someone whispers in my ear, placing kisses along my neck and down to my shoulder. The sweet, feather touches feel sinful. Going so far as to make my core flutter at the contact, but I’m not ready to get up just yet. Every inch of my body feels as if it got run over, and my eyes are so heavy I can’t open them.

How many hours of sleep did I get? Three?

“Go. Away,” I grumble, shoving my face hard into the pillow to block out the light and his voice.

His masculine chuckle still manages to filter through the couple of inches of cotton I have covering my ears. “I thought, since everyone else is busy today, you’d want to go to the pound with me.” There is the smallest amount of insecurity in his voice, enough to get me to open my eyes and peer up at him. Hope shines back at me when I half-heartedly glare at him. Rather than deter him, it makes him grin.

“Come on, please. I’ve wanted a puppy for years,” he pouts. Something tells me there is more to the story, but instead of pushing right now, I throw the covers back and groan. I don’t get up, though. The sound is more of an indication that I’m *trying* to get up. Hudson laughs at me and extends his hands to help. I place mine in his warm, calloused ones, and he tugs. My body jerks forward too fast for me to have any control over it, and he wraps me tight in a bear hug. He’s completely dressed and tugged me right out of bed. It feels good to be held, but my feet are dangling at an odd level, my toes just barely able to touch the ground, but not enough to actually provide support. I start to wiggle, trying to find purchase.

With a disgruntled huff, he ignores me trying to get down, and yanks me

up even tighter. The squeal that comes out of me is high-pitched and surprised. Goddess bless him because he ignores it. Doesn't even wince at the sound. His arms tuck under my butt, and I wrap my legs tight around his waist, arms around his neck.

Sandalwood and orange blossom go a long way to waking me up as I tuck my nose into his neck. Damn, he smells delicious.

Just a few more hits...

I take a few big sniffs of his scent, and then, just because I can't help myself, lick a path up his neck before biting gently where I'm going to put his bond mark during my next heat.

"Summer," he growls, and I feel him growing hard at my touch.

"What?" I ask sweetly, pulling back to peer at him with an innocent expression.

"As much as I'd love to bend you over the bed right now, that'll have to wait. I called ahead, and they're letting us in a half hour before it opens." He tucks my hair behind my ear, probably in vain since I'm sure I have horrible bedhead, plants a kiss on my nose, and then sets me down. "So go get dressed, pretty girl. We've got a dog to adopt."

Giddy anticipation races through me, and I'm finally fully awake. With a bounce in my step, I practically skip toward the closet, noticing that nobody is in the nest anymore. They must all have gotten up to start their days and let me sleep a little longer. While I'm rifling through my shirts, having already decided on a pair of black straight-legged jeans, Hudson joins me.

Standing in the closet doorway, hands holding on to the top of the door frame so his shirt rides up enough to see his happy trail and the little "v" in his hips I love so much, he smirks. "No black."

Huh?

It takes a second for my brain to catch up. Right. Dog hair. Well, that'll take some getting used to. I swap the black jeans for blue ones and grab a maroon T-shirt.

"We'll need to stop and grab a few lint rollers then," I gripe, not willing to drop black from my wardrobe altogether.

He chuckles but agrees and wraps his arm around my shoulders, leading me out to the garage.



The animal shelter we pull into looks like a normal house: brick, white wraparound porch, and trees artfully placed on either side for shade. The only thing that sets it apart from a regular house is the huge fenced-in yard in the back and the large dog kennels lined up one after the other on the side of the house.

Chicago Humane Society is displayed on a large wooden sign in the front yard. My door opens, startling me, and Hudson is there, extending his hand to help me out of his truck. I must have been too lost in my thoughts looking at this place to realize he'd gotten out.

"Ready?" he asks me, tilting his head.

I nod back, a huge smile on my face. "Ready."

A bell chimes as we walk through the unlocked door. A lady with short gray hair pops out from what looks like an office behind the counter and greets us. "You must be the Whitlock's."

My heart leaps at her words but then starts beating faster than a damn racehorse at Hudson's confident, proud reply. "That's us." The hand resting on my hip gives a small squeeze.

We haven't talked about me taking their last name. It's not exactly common in packs since bond marks are more permanent. Names only get changed with marriage, and it's most common among beta pairings since they can't give bond marks. Packs do still have marriages within them, though it's not the norm. More personal preference than anything. But I have to admit I like the sound of it.

Summer Whitlock.

Rolls right off the tongue.

"If you'll just sign this waiver, you can follow me." We both sign, not even reading it. I'm sure it's the regular liability stuff. But even if a dog did bite us in here, I'm confident neither of us would kick up a fuss or sue the shelter.

We follow her into the back, through a heavy-looking door she unlocks with her key and then re-engages the lock once we join her. "Each of the kennels has a placard with their information. If the card has a green sticker,

you can stick your hand through to pet them. The orange stickers are at your own risk; they're mostly gentle but a little temperamental. The red stickers we do not suggest touching without a handler present. These are the aggressive ones. Most are slated for euthanasia. These dogs have to go to homes without children or other pets and are most commonly adopted by professional trainers." At the word euthanasia, my heart squeezes painfully in my chest. "Well, I'll leave you to it. I'll be in the back if you have any questions or want one of the kennels opened." She points to a small desk tucked into the corner. It's clearly used just for sitting and waiting since there is barely anything on it. A few papers and a pencil.

We nod at her and start looking.

The first kennel has a placard that says the dog's name is Luka, and he's eleven months old. His coat is brown with a white belly, and he looks like a pit bull mixed with something else I can't quite place.

My name is Luka, and I'm looking for a happy forever home. My favorite things are getting belly rubs and doing zoomies during playtime. I love treats, so feel free to feed me.

He's got a green sticker and is right up at the fence, tail wagging and tongue lolling out the side of his mouth in a happy smile. It's absolutely adorable, but I don't have the insane urge to bundle him up and take him home with me. Still, I reach through the fence and give him some scratches behind his ear. Hudson steps away for a second, coming back with a handful of small treats. We each give Luka one and then move down the line.

The fence of the next kennel rattles through the room as an all-black dog jumps up at our approach. He's just as friendly as Luka was, and he's got a green sticker, too, so I stick my hand through and give him just as much love.

My name is Bubba, and I'm two years old and love kids. My first family passed away, so I was sent to the shelter, but I'm ready to give my love to another family in need. I

love long walks and playing with all the other pups. Please, please give me all the treats.

“That’s so sad,” I whisper. Hudson murmurs his agreement and gives Bubba an extra treat. We continue down the line one after the other. Giving pets and love to all the ones with green stickers and tossing the treats in without petting them for the orange and red stickered ones. They stay in the back of their kennels anyway, clearly either afraid, overstimulated from people always trying to touch them, or really uninterested and aggressive.

We’ve almost seen and played with three-quarters of the dogs, and I’m starting to get disheartened. None of them are jumping out at me or calling to me in a way I always imagined.

I frown at the next kennel. There is an absolutely gorgeous black and brown shepherd in the back of the cage. Unlike the others, this dog is chained to the back, muzzled, and it’s got a red sticker, as well as a date scrawled on the placard. It’s this coming Wednesday.

“Excuse me?” I call out to the elderly lady whose name I realize I never got. She looks up from where she was playing on her phone. “What’s this date? And why is this dog chained?” It can’t just be because it has a red sticker. There were three other dogs with red stickers who weren’t muzzled or chained like this one. An odd look flickers across her face, and she looks around the room like we aren’t the only three back here.

“That is the date Nala is set to be euthanized.” She uncrosses her ankles and gets up from the chair, walking our way. There is a sad frown marring her face when she stands next to us, glancing in at the shepherd she just called Nala. “She was a K-9. A drug dog, but her handler was killed on duty, so they sent her to us. Between you and me, she’s actually an incredibly sweet pup.”

My eyes travel back to the muzzled dog, taking her in. The big fluffy tail is wagging back and forth, and she’s sitting at attention, staring at me. Directly at me, with her big brown eyes, like she’s trying to communicate with me. Despite the muzzle, I can see her tongue peeking out in a friendly, adorable way.

“Why is she set to be put down then if she’s so friendly?” I hear Hudson ask the lady. It’s the question I wanted to ask, but I’m too busy staring at Nala, entranced. Her eyes still haven’t left mine either.

This is her.

This is my dog.

I know it just like I know Pack Whitlock is my family. She belongs with us. The way Nala is staring back at me, I think she knows it, too.

I turn toward the woman to hear her answer, sad to break Nala's gaze.

"Between you and me," she starts in a low whisper, looking around again, "that sticker was green two weeks ago. But we had the governor come for a visit. A photo op, more than anything." She rolls her eyes at the notion. "He had some news crews with him, and when he found out Nala was a K9, he thought it'd be a good publicity stunt. So he went to put his hand in there to pet her. But she backed away and growled at him. Fur was up and everything. We told him to step away and maybe try a different dog, but he insisted we open the kennel so he could get his shot. Once we did, she lunged at him and latched onto his arm."

With a glance at Nala at the lady's words, I grin. I could be imagining it, but I'd swear Nala has stood even taller like she's proud of what the lady is saying.

"The governor threw up a big fuss. Demanded the cameras be turned off and the footage erased. He made us switch her sticker to red and put her on the list to be put down." She looks at my dog with sad eyes.

Yeah, my dog. I'm not leaving here without her.

"And you just did it?" Hudson asks incredulously, eyebrows raised. "When she hasn't ever been aggressive before?"

The lady must take some offense to this because she glares at my mate. A wave of alpha energy rolls off her, enough that I tuck closer to Hudson when she answers, "We are a government building, state employees, and paid for with taxpayer dollars. We don't have the kind of say we would if we were privately funded. The governor of the state tells us to do something, we have to do it. You don't like it? Vote him out of office. But Nala will still be euthanized on Wednesday."

"I want her," I say firmly, looking at Hudson to see what he thinks. The smile he gives me back is dazzling. Completely on board.

My words make the lady shuffle her feet and look at us in obvious discomfort. "Oh, well. She isn't up for adoption anymore." Clearly afraid of the governor's wrath. What will the man do, though? What's the worst he could do? Fire her, maybe. I can't see that happening.

"Did he specifically tell you nobody was allowed to adopt her?" Hudson

asks her, lacing his fingers with mine in a silent request to let him handle it. I do, simply because I might start screaming if she tries to stop me from taking Nala home.

She thinks for a second, looking off in the distance like she's recalling every word the governor said to her. "No..." The word is slow and drawn out. Unsure.

"Great. So then he should have no objections. I'm sure there were several people here that can attest to the fact he didn't forbid adoption?" It is framed as a question, but the meaning is clear. He's giving the lady a line of defense if she gets any backlash. Seeing it for what it is, she nods in agreement.

"Great." He pulls his fingers from mine to clap his hands together like that settles that. "Let's get to filling out some paperwork then." They go to step away, but I stop them.

"Can you unlock the kennel first?" With barely any hesitation now, she steps forward, pulls the keychain from her hip, and fiddles with it before finding the correct key. In seconds, the lock falls away, and they walk off to fill out whatever needs to be filled out.

The kennel door creaks as I pull it open and step in. There is confidence in my steps as I approach Nala, sure of her temperament. "Hey, pretty girl," I coo at her, kneeling down and scratching her chest and back since the rest of her has some sort of restraint on it. "I'm going to take these off of you. How's that sound?" Her tail wags aggressively. I doubt she understands my words exactly. It's more like she's just happy to have contact again. The muzzle is velcro, easy to take off. Once I do, I rub all over where it touched. Scratching under her mouth, behind her ears, and down her snout, whispering soothing words. "That's a good girl," I grin, and she jolts forward to lick a big, slobbery kiss on my cheek. I chuckle, "Aw, thank you."

Nala tries to jump on my shoulders, but the prong collar and chain attached to the fence stops her. I tsk. "Okay, sit still. I don't want to hurt you." I take off the prong collar without pulling on it too hard so it doesn't pinch her skin. She sits there, completely still, with patience even grown adults don't have. "Such a good girl." Throwing the collar on the ground beside her, I stand and decide to test just how well-trained she is. I'd stuffed some treats in my pockets earlier, so I pull those out and say to her, "Stay," while I walk to the other side of the crate. Nala doesn't move an inch.

Holding one treat out in front of me so she sees it, I give the next command. "Come." She does without hesitation.

“Sit.” Her butt touches the concrete floor.

“Shake?” This comes out as a question because I’m starting to get to the end of the commands I know are usually taught to dogs. Her paw comes up and rests in my hand.

“Good girl,” I extend my other hand full of small treats, but she doesn’t take them. “Erm...go ahead,” I say, half a question, half statement, giving her permission since I don’t know why she won’t take them. She drops her paw from my hand, lays down, and looks at me as if to say, *I have to finish my tricks first.*

Then she barks at me and jumps up to eat the treats. Got it. So lay down and speak, too. She’s a smart puppy. Or, maybe not a puppy. I didn’t get a look at how old she is. I walk to the door of the kennel and check the placard.

Four years old, spayed, police dog.

“I wonder how long you were on the job, pretty girl.” Nala walks right up to my side, so I reach down to pet her behind the ears. “Let’s go see how much longer before we get to take you home, hmm?” My words are said out loud, but I’m not really talking directly to Nala. More voicing my thoughts so she doesn’t feel lonely.

We walk down the hall together, her side pressed right up against my leg in the most adorable and comforting way. Already switching into protector mode. Hudson is at the front counter, sliding his credit card when we join them. “All set?” he asks, putting the credit card back in his wallet and pocketing it.

“Yep. You?” Nala sits at my feet when we stop at the counter. Not even needing a leash. Though, I will get her one and a collar. Just in case.

“Yeah. Let’s get this lady home. We’ll have to stop at the pet store first.” The door chimes behind us, and a beta couple walks in. I glance at the clock on the wall. We’ve been here an hour. Which means they’ve been open for about thirty minutes. We finished up just in time. The couple walks up to the counter, and the woman loses her footing briefly, stumbling into my side and mumbling a quick apology.

But Nala growls at the lady and stands between us, making my eyebrows jump in surprise. The young beta woman who bumped into me takes several steps away from where my dog is growling at her.

“It’s like she knows she’s yours already,” Hudson chuckles in quiet surprise. I just drag a hand down Nala’s head, telling her it’s okay until she settles down.

“That’s because she is. Sorry about that,” I murmur to the couple, who shrug it off with wary smiles. “Let’s go home, Nala.” Understanding exactly what I’m saying, she trots out the door of the shelter and hops right into the backseat of the truck when I open the door for her.

Settling into the front seat next to Hudson, he takes my hand, plants a sweet kiss on the back of it, and we drive off.

I can’t remember a time when I felt as happy and content as I do now.

Everything feels so *right*.

Famous last words, I guess.

SIXTEEN

SUMMER

WE ENDED up getting way more than a collar and a leash at the pet store. In all the excitement of finally getting the puppy he'd been asking for for years, Hudson went a little overboard. The store allows you to bring your fur baby inside with you, so Hudson suggested we let Nala pick her own toys. Except any toy that she sniffed for longer than a passing glance, he picked up and put in the cart. Twenty-two toys. I counted each one that was dropped in.

Toys, leash, collar, dog food, dog bowls, and an overwhelming number of treats later, Hudson has decreed that we *might* be set. We're almost home with a happy dog hanging out the half-opened window when my phone vibrates in my back pocket at the same time Hudson's lights up with an incoming text. A message in the group chat.

"It's from Mason," I say out loud since Hudson is driving. I tap on my screen to see what it says. "It's a screenshot. Mason, thank you for your interest in our Landscape and Wildlife Grant for emerging and unknown photographers. We have reviewed your portfolio and are pleased to announce... No freaking way! He got it!" I holler and turn to Hudson. His face is lit up, a blinding smile stretching across it as I reach over and smack his shoulder several times out of excitement. "He freaking got it! This is the best day ever. Oh, my Goddess. We need to celebrate. What's his favorite food? Why don't I know that already?"

"Take a breath, pretty girl. It's probably a tie between Maverick's chicken piccata and a nice steak and potatoes dinner." He's mocking me, chuckling at my excitement, but I couldn't care less. Nothing is dimming the pride I feel for my mate.

"Well, seeing as how I'm not Maverick, let's just do steak and potatoes.

Can we make a quick stop at the grocery store? You'll have to stay in the car with Nala while I get the food."

"Uh uh. No way am I letting you go in alone. You stay in the car with the new guard dog. I'll get the food." His face is stern, daring me to argue.

"We both know Houston's been tailing us since we left the house. I wouldn't be alone, but fine. I'll stay with Nala while you run the errands. Twist my arm." He winks at me, not rising to my bait, and more than happy to do the shopping, it seems. Something Jade, but especially Connor and Brody, would not have been caught dead doing.

An omega's duty.

The car is whipped into a spot close to the grocery store doors, and Hudson instructs me to lock the car behind him as he jogs inside, leaving me with Nala. But, just as I knew, a familiar black SUV pulls into a spot a few places down moments later, and the driver doesn't get out to go into the store. I wave at Houston to let him know he's not that sneaky, but the window is too tinted to see his response. Wells would have rolled the window down and made some silly face back at me, but not Houston. Something tells me I'll never crack open his shell. That steel exterior that gives nothing away. Even if they're employed by Pack Whitlock for a year, he'll remain a mystery; I'd bet all the money in my now apparently sizable bank account.

Twenty minutes later, Hudson throws a dozen bags in the backseat with Nala—way more than we need for a steak and potatoes dinner—and we pull out of the parking lot to head home. On instinct, my eyes snag on the side mirror to watch Houston pull out behind us. But the SUV doesn't move right away.

My brows furrow.

Weird.

We get all the way to the light where we're turning onto the main road before I see the tail lights illuminate and the vehicle pulls out of its spot.

Only Brooklyn's car is in the garage when we pull up to the house. Maverick texted to say he was taking Mason out for a few celebratory drinks before dinner, so it's just the three of us until then. Well, four, if you are counting our new furry pack member. Excitement courses through me at the idea of introducing Brooklyn to Nala. A giddy sort of happiness that makes me want to let out a little scream or shake off some of the feeling.

I hop out of the car and open the back door. "Come on, Nala," I coo, "Let's go see your other mom." When I reach in to grab some of the dozens of bags of food and dog supplies, Hudson stops me.

“I’ve got these, pretty girl. You go find Brooklyn. She’ll be more excited about a dog in her very clean house if you’re the one telling her.”

My head whips around to see if he’s serious. The grin on his face tells me I have nothing to worry about, but all of a sudden, nerves wrack me. What if she really isn’t happy with having a dog running about?

No part of me is capable of giving Nala up now that I’ve met her. Now that we’ve already bonded. So when we get inside, and I head through the house in search of my alpha, I turn to Nala trotting beside me and whisper, “You have to be on your best behavior, okay? No going to the bathroom in the house, no chewing up expensive pillows, or peeing on priceless rugs. Capiche?”

Tail wagging aggressively and tongue lolling out of her mouth, I’m sure she has not understood a thing that I’ve just said. I sigh. “It’s going to be okay. You were a police dog. Surely that means you’re already housebroken and well-trained.” I’m talking not to Nala now but to myself.

I finally find Brooklyn in her room, sitting on her bed with her laptop resting on her outstretched legs. There is a focused frown on her face as she stares at the screen, typing relentlessly. I think about turning around and coming back when she isn’t busy, but then Nala lets out an impatient bark, and Brooklyn’s head pops up, surprise limning her gorgeous gray eyes.

Shoulders back, I try to throw some confidence into my gait as I stalk to her bedside. Nala follows right at my hip.

“And who might this be?” Brooklyn says, humor in her voice.

That’s a good sign.

“Nala. We rescued her from the pound this morning. She was set to be euthanized next Wednesday. And she’s a retired police dog.”

“Well, aren’t you gorgeous,” Brooklyn murmurs as Nala approaches her with caution. The hair on the back of her neck sticks up ever so slightly, and Brooklyn extends her hand for Nala to sniff. And she does. After sniffing the back of her hand and glancing up at me—seemingly to see if we like her—the hair sits back down, and her tail starts up its dance again.

Brooklyn laughs, a husky, alluring sound that immediately has my blood heating as Nala jumps up on the bed for extra love. At least she’s already making herself at home. My heart warms as my protective puppy gives sweet, slobbery kisses over as much of Brooklyn as she can. Not that she minds, it seems. Her laughter fills the room as she pets Nala all over.

“Okay, you love. That’s enough. Down,” she chuckles, and to my

surprise, Nala barks and obeys immediately. She bounds off the bed and runs to the door but doesn't leave. Instead, she circles a few times in one spot before plopping on the ground and laying her head on her front paws.

"Come here," Brooklyn purrs after setting her laptop on the bedside table. My feet move without any hesitation. I crawl up onto the bed to sit beside her, but she takes it a step further and wraps one arm around me, using the other to pull both my legs over hers. There isn't an inch of space separating us this way, and I cuddle down a little further to get comfortable, wrapped in her warm embrace. "Hey," she says, and tilts my chin up with a finger, "Are you happy?"

She looks at Nala briefly, but the question feels more loaded than that. Like she's still worried about the way she moved me in, about how I feel with my place in the pack.

I answer her unspoken question instead. "After I ran from my old pack, I spent months wondering what my life would look like. Worrying that I'd have to take suppressants my whole life, struggle through heats alone, and run every day until either they died or I did." Her eyes shudder briefly at that, but I continue. "I thought I'd never be happy again. That I'd spend the rest of my life alone. Packless. Now I have four mates, sent to me from the Goddess herself. I have the sweetest new puppy. A job I love. For the first time in a while, I feel *safe*. So...yeah, alpha," I whisper breathily, "I'm happy."

Silver lines her gray eyes, and I feel myself start to tear up, too, as she looks at me with a deep, unending devotion and says, "I love you."

My words come out sounding choked. "I love you, too." Then her lips are on mine, and her tongue sweeps into my mouth with thorough, lazy strokes. The hand on my cheek moves back so she can snake her fingers through my hair and tug a little. A moan escapes me at the movement, her soft lips not leaving mine for a single breath. We sit like that for a while, my legs thrown sideways over hers as we get lost in each other. But then her hand leaves my hair, and I feel the back of her fingers trail down across my throat, a whisper of a touch, and continue south to ghost over my breast.

I suck in a breath at the touch, and she takes the opportunity to move from kissing my lips to trailing light, biting marks across my jaw, down to my neck, and along my collarbone. I throw my head back to give her better access, and she takes full advantage. "Right here," she groans, biting a little harder on the junction between my neck and shoulder. "I'm going to bite you here so everyone knows you're mine. So *you* know who you belong to." The

primal part of me, the part so ingrained in my biology to want to be possessed, preens at the growl in her voice.

An alpha claiming her omega.

Her hands find the hem of my shirt, and I lean away from her just enough to help her pull it off so I'm left in only my simple black bra and light blue jeans. Soft hands wrap around my ribs, right under the band of my bra and her thumbs stroke lightly over the exposed skin. Brooklyn's eyes are a little glazed as she stares at me, her scent spiking in the room, and she leans down to place a featherlight kiss on the top of each of my breasts.

My heart rate spikes and I feel slick starting to pool at my core. The build-up is driving me crazy, and lust pools in every crevice of my being.

"Please, Brooklyn. Touch me," I beg. But she growls softly, and I quickly amend it to, "Please, *alpha*." Her purr of satisfaction sends a shiver crawling down my spine. Suddenly, she moves so quickly that I startle, and in the next second, she's throwing my pants across the room as I gape at her. I'm now somehow laying flat on my back with my legs thrown over her shoulders, completely exposed to her. She doesn't waste any time before licking me from opening to clit. I grip the covers on either side of me, holding on for dear life as she starts up a relentless rhythm. A no-holds-barred, veritable feast. Alternating between sucking my clit, giving teasing strokes with her tongue, and hard, fast circles with her thumb. My release barrels through me so fast and surprising that I shout, screaming her name as I clench around nothing.

Most people would stop, smug in their satisfaction at getting off their partner. But Brooklyn doesn't miss a beat, not stopping for me to recover as she thrusts in two fingers, curling them to drag along the rough, oh-so-sensitive spot inside me.

I can't tell if I'm sobbing, begging, or pleading. Maybe a mix of all three as Brooklyn pumps her fingers in and out of me, hard and fast. Merciless.

There is a tearing sound that I vaguely realize is the comforter ripping beneath my ironclad grip.

The pressure starts to build a second time, the feeling more powerful, more intense than the first. With her fingers still moving in me, my mate plants one then two trailing kisses along the inside of my thigh before...

"Ahhh!" I moan my release as her teeth sink into the meaty flesh of my thigh, right below my underwear line. It won't create a bond outside of a heat, but it can still be a powerful aphrodisiac under the right circumstances.

“So perfect.” She kisses over the bite mark.

“So beautiful.” A kiss on my hip.

“Kind.” Up along my stomach.

“Smart.” Between my breasts.

“Tender and sweet.” She flicks her tongue over one peaked nipple and the next, making my core flutter with a small aftershock.

“Mine,” she growls against my lips in a final, rough claiming. My grip on the comforter relaxes, fingers a little stiff from squeezing so tight for too long, and I bring my hands up and weave them into Brooklyn’s hair to hold her head to mine.

Using my grip on her, I pull her head back just enough to lock eyes with her, grin, and whisper, “My turn.”



“Well, it’s about damn time! I thought I was going to have to come drag you guys out by your toes,” Mason shouts as Brooklyn and I walk hand-in-hand into the living room. It smells amazing, and I feel just a little bad that I not only left Hudson to bring in all the stuff we bought but to cook the meal I suggested in the first place.

“Ignore him,” Maverick says, walking up from behind us on silent feet and scaring the life out of me. “He had a few too many at happy hour.” His eyes shine with laughter as he stares at his very tipsy boyfriend and gives me a quick, passing kiss as he makes his way to the kitchen where Hudson is plating the food.

The dining table is already set with silverware, napkins, and drink glasses. There doesn’t appear to be anything for me to help with, so I walk over to Mason, and Brooklyn joins Maverick and Hudson in the kitchen. “Good day?” I smirk at my mate.

He wraps me in a tight hug, stumbling slightly and making me take a little of his weight. “The best day,” he agrees, slurring just a teensy bit. Enough that I know he’s been drinking, but not enough to make him belligerent. I reign in my laugh at the half-drunken grin he gives me.

“Congratulations, Mason. I am so proud of you.” I throw every ounce of

sincerity I can into it, and the drunken grin morphs into a watery, proud smile before he kisses me. He tastes like his usual summer rain but mixed with whiskey.

Mason tries to deepen the kiss, but something nudges between our shins, breaking us apart; I laugh and bend down to scratch behind Nala's ears.

"Wha- WHO IS THIS?" Mason yells and drops to his knees. I want to warn him to let her sniff him first, but he already has Nala wrapped up in a giant hug and is nuzzling her snout before I can utter a word of caution. Apparently, I didn't even need to, though. Nala's tail is swishing back and forth while she gives frantic kisses all over Mason's face, barking happily at him as he laughs.

"That's Nala," Hudson chuckles, walking over with a plate in each hand to set on the dining table. "Here I was thinking she came pre-wired to only love Summer. But looks like Mason makes the cut, too."

It's an effort not to roll my eyes at my big, goofy alpha. "Nala loves all of us."

"Sure, sure," he agrees quickly, nodding sagely. "Dinner's ready!"

Two clicks of my tongue has Nala following me to my seat and sitting obediently at my side. My cooed, *good girl*, and generous scratches earn me a few licks on the back of my hand.

"Case and point." I hear Hudson mumble, and I raise a brow at him.

What was that? I say with my eyes, and he answers with an innocent expression.

Mason takes his seat on my right, Mav next to him. To my left, Brooklyn takes what could be the head of the table, and Hudson sits right across from me. Nobody waits to start passing around the big salad bowl or the mashed potatoes and broccoli, all in separate bowls in the center of the table. Each plate already has a steak that Hudson grilled outside, much to Mason's obvious delight. Since he didn't even wait for the sides to come his way before digging in.

"Debishhu," Mason exclaims. Or tries to. His mouth is stuffed full of food, making the words come out more of an incoherent mumble.

"What?" I chuckle.

He holds up a finger, chews for a few seconds, and swallows so much food in one go that I cringe a little. "I said, 'delicious.' Best steak you've ever made, Hud." Then he's cutting into his steak again, ignoring the laughter echoing around the table at him.

A nudge at my calf has me looking down to see Nala giving me her very best puppy dog stare, to which I tell her she is already a spoiled princess and give her a few bites of my steak. When she sees I'm not going to give her any more, she turns to Brooklyn.

A little begrudgingly, she offers up a bite of her dinner and then gives Nala a firm look to say no more. Unperturbed, Nala makes her way around the table, and everyone parts with a piece or two. That is until she gets to Mason.

Mason, who is already finished with his steak.

"Sorry," he says, showing Nala his plate. I wasn't aware that dogs could give looks of disapproval or disdain. But my pup has managed it. Mason must see he's on the chopping block for her favorite, so he tries in vain to give her a piece of broccoli. A sniff is all it takes for her to let out a low growl at the offending food, and she trots back to my side, where she weaves between my feet and lays down between them.

"Wow, Mason. Not even twenty minutes and you're on the chopping block. That's gotta be a record," Hudson laughs, leans under the table, and tosses one more piece of steak to Nala. The traitor catches it and then crawls forward until she is between *his* legs.

"Unbelievable," I huff when I duck my head under the table to glare at her. The look on her face is just as innocent as Hudson's.

"Okay, okay. No more table scraps. I don't want her getting sick. Besides," Brooklyn smiles, lifts her wine glass, and glances at Mason, "We're celebrating Mason tonight."

When I turn to my right and peek at my fair-haired beta, his cheeks are flushed—whether from embarrassment or alcohol—but he's grinning broadly.

"We are so proud of you, Mason. None of us doubted you for a second. Congratulations," Brooklyn says, and we all echo our own *congratulations*.

And when I reach over to give his hand a squeeze, he mouths *I love you*. It hits me that I don't think I've ever been as happy as I am now with so much love and happiness filling the room, surrounded by laughter, the best mates anyone could ask for, and the newest member of our family drooling under the table.

I'd endure all the hell I've gone through all over again if this was the result. If it led me here, to them.

SEVENTEEN

SUMMER

SOMETHING WET NUDGES MY FACE; I swat it away. But it does it again, harder this time, and followed by a low whine. Over and over, the nudges don't stop until finally I let out a loud, frustrated sigh and sit up in my nest.

Shortly after dinner was over, the rest of the pack wanted to continue the celebration. They opened a bottle of tequila to take some shots, and I politely excused myself. All of them tried to object, to get me to stay with them and let loose. But I feigned feeling sick after dinner and went to bed early. What I didn't say is that I had already spent too much time drowning in self-pity, drowning out *their* voices with tequila. It became a crutch—bordering on addiction if I'm being honest with myself—so I decided not to use it anymore.

Which means no tequila parties with my mates.

They all stayed downstairs while I came up to bed. All of them tried to follow me, to say that they didn't need to drink, but I insisted they celebrate Mason and took Nala to bed with me. Nala, who is currently whimpering at the foot of the nest, turning in circles fast and darting to the closed door and back to me.

Well, now I feel a little bad for being frustrated with her. Poor girl needs to use the bathroom. I glance around the nest to see it's empty. Nobody came to join me after their night, it seems. I was so sure at least one of them would.

I find out why a few minutes later when I follow a sprinting Nala downstairs to the front door. All four of my mates are passed out on the couches in the living room. Brooklyn on the smallest one, Hudson taking up one by himself, and Maverick and Mason fighting for space on the couch across from Hudson's. I try not to laugh at the open-mouthed snores coming from *all of them* or the dozens of beer bottles they must have gotten into after

finishing off the tequila.

“That’s why they didn’t make it to bed, huh, girl?” I whisper to Nala, who is standing at the front door, waiting impatiently for me. “Okay, okay. Let’s go.”

I open the front door and let her run into the yard. The whole place is gated, so there’s no danger of her running off into the road. Not that I think she would, anyway. I step outside with her, out onto the sidewalk, not wanting to go into the dewing morning grass. It’s still a little dark out, but the blue-black sky is fading as the gray and pink of sunrise becomes visible. Too early to be awake. Especially for a Sunday.

Even so, I can’t resist her when Nala comes trotting back up to me after using the bathroom, a stick clutched between her teeth. “Oh, alright. But only a few. It’s cold,” I say sternly, cock my arm back, and put all my power behind my throw. A retired police dog surely doesn’t tire easily, so I have to wear her out.

Too bad I’ve never been the most athletic omega in town. The stick makes it further than I thought it would, but she’s got it back to me within seconds; her entire back end is wagging left to right this time, ready for my next throw.

I oblige; the stick going a little further this time. But when she goes to retrieve it, something must catch her attention at the gate down by the road because all of a sudden, the hair on the back of her neck is sticking straight up, and she’s sprinting toward the gate, barking like mad. “Nala!” I yell, trying to call her back. “Nala, come.” She ignores me and makes it to the road, where she runs along a ten-foot area of the gate, snarling and growling at something.

“Dammit,” I huff, and then run through the grass after her. The dew seeps through my socks, but at least the morning chill is easier to bear as my body heats up at the exercise. When I make it halfway, a black SUV pulls out of a spot in front of the entrance to our drive and takes off.

I stop dead in my tracks as a shiver that has nothing to do with the weather spider walks up my spine.

Nala has stopped barking now that the car is out of sight and ambles back to my side.

“Who was that, Nala?” She stares up at me, no longer running for her stick. “Yeah, let’s get back inside.”

The feeling like I’m being watched hits me on our walk back up, and I

jerk my head back to the street. But there's nothing there. Still, I jog the rest of the way to the pack house, locking the front door behind us. I slip a little in my wet socks as I hit the tiled entryway. But I don't walk back up to my nest. Instead, I beeline for the door that leads to the basement. Where Wells will be. Him and Damien and Houston. It's still early, so Houston won't be awake for his shift. It'll be Damien on the clock.

I knock on the basement wall as I walk down the stairs in case any of them are indecent. "Hello?" I call down, walking slowly until I hear a deep voice call back.

"Come on down, Summer." Damien, definitely not Wells' voice. I jog the rest of the way down the steps.

The basement is set up like a separate living space. There's a small bar area off to the right with a mini fridge behind it. Directly in front of the stairs and off to the left is a living room. A small sectional couch in the center faces a TV, and against the far wall is where Damien sits in a swivel chair. He spins away from the dual monitor setup to look at me, and before I open my mouth, Wells pops up from the sectional, looking around bleary-eyed, clearly having just woken up.

"Hey, what are you doing down here?" Wells mumbles, rubbing his eyes with closed fists.

"Oh, um. Well, I was just outside with Nala," I start.

"I know. I was watching you on the monitor." Damien jerks his head behind him, where there are indeed several outside cameras loaded on the screen. But when I look, I notice they only reach as far as the gate. Not the road, so they wouldn't have seen any cars take off.

"Oh. Okay." Goddess, why do I feel so stupid all of a sudden? It was probably nothing. Just a regular car with a regular, unsuspecting neighbor who was leaving their own street parking spot.

"What's wrong?" Wells asks, concern lacing his voice. Damien shoots him what looks like a disapproving look.

"Nala started going crazy, and then this dark car just took off from the street. I guess...well. Did we ever figure out where Jade was calling from?" *Was that them?* Goes unspoken, but by the look they exchange, they know that's what I'm really asking.

"New York," Damien says. "Houston's guy confirmed it came from New York. We also have APBs out on all the cars registered in their names. They haven't crossed state lines. Their cars haven't even left New York."

“But the car out front was a black SUV. They don’t own a black SUV. It could be a rental,” I insist.

“They’d still need to rent it in their names. We’re monitoring their credit card purchases. Nothing like that has been bought recently.”

Wells must see the worry in my eyes, the fear starting to creep up, ready to paralyze me. So he butts in. “They could have rented under a family member or friend’s name, though,” he says, looking at Damien. “They could have borrowed a car from family or friends, too. It’s worth looking into.” They continue to stare at each other for a long minute, like they’re having an unspoken conversation right in front of me. Then Damien nods once and looks back at me.

“We’ll look into their friends and family, too. In the meantime, make sure you’re not going outside with Nala again without your mates or one of us. Okay?”

“Deal.”



The rest of the day, Sunday, went by too fast. Because my mates were sleeping off a hangover, I grabbed my Kindle and started a new book, cuddled up in my nest with Nala. They didn’t wake up until mid-morning or afternoon. Even then, they were non-functioning. So I continued to read as they all, one-by-one, stumbled into my nest, looking worse for wear, and slept the rest of the day away. They didn’t start feeling better until last night when we all ordered take-out and went back to existing like degenerates.

“You all set?” Wells asks from where he’s leaning across the reception desk, flirting with our new beta receptionist, Penny. It must be some of his best work because her cheeks are so pink they match the bright shade of her lipstick.

I smirk at him, in good spirits now that the Monday blues are over, and ask back, “Are you? I can give you a minute to wrap things up.”

His answering laugh is throaty and makes Penny’s cheeks heat up even more. “Nah. We’re all set. Already got Penny girl’s number.” He leans over the counter to grab her hand, brings it up to his mouth, looks right into her

eyes as he kisses her knuckles and murmurs, "I'll call you tonight."

The way he says it is so sexual that I look around the office to make sure nobody overheard. Poor girl. If I wasn't so in love with my pack, I think I'd almost be jealous. That's how much charm he threw into it. He places her hand back down and walks towards me, where I'm waiting near the elevators. When he reaches me, he throws his arm around my shoulder and guides me the rest of the way toward the doors, pushing the button when we reach them. It's nothing sexual in nature, his touch. But hearing him talk to Penny just now, I'm beyond grossed out with his arm around me, so I elbow him hard in the ribs and step away, shuddering as I do.

"Gross, Wells. Don't touch me after you talk like that. It's weird." We step into the elevator together; he pushes the button for the main level and just chuckles.

"Whatever you say, Winter." He's taken to just switching out my name for each season. Yesterday, I was 'Spring' because he's clever like that.

"What happened to that other girl, anyway?" The elevator door pings, letting us off at the bottom as I ask him the question.

"Which one?" Wells walks slightly in front of me, just as he has every day since the run-in with Amanda. Within reaching distance and close enough to my side so I don't feel like he's guarding me, but a little ahead of me so he can jump in between me and anyone who might pose a threat.

Sometimes, it's easy to forget that he's paid to be here. Our friendship has been so effortless since day one. More so than with Damien or Houston.

"The tall, blonde omega from the coffee shop," I say at the same time as I murmur *thanks* to him for holding the door open for me as we step out into the parking garage.

I didn't even hear his answer because a car is parked next to the SUV today. One I recognize. Maverick is leaning against his Jeep, one foot kicked up on the tire, with a stunning bouquet of flowers held at his chest. The setting sun shines in from the street and lights up his handsome face, making my heart squeeze. If love were a physical thing, I'd imagine it as a vine. It starts out small and then grows and grows inside you, wrapping itself around your heart and brain and through everything vital, consuming you.

That's the way he makes me feel, the way they all do. Just by existing. And it's not in a suffocating way. More like the vine is wrapping me in a warm embrace, with large, smooth leaves rather than thorny stems.

A snort sounds from behind me that I assume comes from Wells at the

surely lovestruck look on my face. To which I promptly ignore him and hurry toward my mate. Mav opens his arms at my rushed approach, and I leap into his arms, wrapping my legs around his waist and squeezing the life out of his neck. His laugh travels through me, and his deep voice rumbles through my chest. “Hey, sweets. I missed you, too.”

I pull back to look him in the eyes, pausing just long enough for him to wrap a stray piece of hair behind my ear. The look he gives me is adoring and filled with the same kind of love I feel for him. With my arms still wrapped around his neck, I pull his face to mine and slant my lips over his in a hungry kiss. Too soon, he pulls back.

I pout at him, to which he grins and says, “As much as I’d love to stay here kissing you, we’re already cutting it close on time.”

Erm.

“Time? For what?” My legs loosen from his waist, and he sets me gently down on the ground so I don’t wobble and topple over in my work heels.

“That’s a surprise.” He hands me the flowers and opens the passenger door. “For you, m’lady.” With a roll of my eyes and a shake of my head, I hop into the passenger seat, and the door closes after me.

Through the door, I hear Maverick’s slightly muffled voice saying Wells can take off for the night. One look at Wells’ face, and I know he’s not going to be doing that. Sure, he nodded an ‘okay’ to Maverick, but he’ll just tail us. Follow from a distance, make sure I’m still safe. The wrath he would receive from Brooklyn if he didn’t is a good motivator. For anyone, even Wells in all his six foot two, two hundred twenty pound glory. She’s already made it abundantly clear that one of them will *always* be with me. At least until Jade and her pack are out of the picture. That’s why they’re working three eight-hour shifts. So one will always be able to get a full night’s sleep before their turn to babysit... I mean, *protect* me.

Maverick hops in the driver’s seat, winks at me without giving me any hints as to where he’s taking me, and then pulls out into traffic from the parking garage.

The drive is silent. I don’t ask where we’re going, and he doesn’t offer any hints. Music plays softly in the cab of the truck, both of us just content to be in the other’s presence. Maverick keeps his left hand on the wheel and his right on my thigh the whole drive. The steady, firm pressure eases the tension that had steadily coiled inside me during work. Just from being on my feet running around the office all day and trying my best to absorb the

information Brandon was feeding me like a sponge.

“We’re here,” Maverick says, giving my thigh a squeeze and pulling me from my thoughts of work.

I look up, and my eyes focus on where *here* is. The Jeep is parked in a small lot of a strip mall. Well, maybe mall is too loose a term. It’s just a few shops. The setting sun shines on the storefronts, so it’s easy to make out each space. There’s a hair salon at the far end, what looks to be an omega nest shop next to it, a tattoo parlor, and finally, a Chinese food restaurant that we are parked in front of at the other end. With a look of confusion, I turn to Maverick.

“You’re taking me to dinner?” I mean, I *am* hungry, and I really appreciate any date they want to take me on, but with the way he made it so secretive, it seemed like it would be...grander, maybe? Not in the sense that I’d expect more lavishes, but we went to dinner the other night, too, with not half as much fuss.

“Nope.” His lips make a popping sound on the ‘p’ while he hops out of the car and runs around to my door to open it for me. “Come on, hop to. We’re running late.”

“Uhhh, okay...” I respond, taking his hand and hopping out of the Jeep. The minute my feet touch the asphalt, he’s pulling me. There’s a slam of the car door and then a beep as he locks the door. We walk right by the Chinese restaurant’s door. Right up to the tattoo parlor.

“Maverick, what...” I don’t even get to finish my sentence. The bell chimes as we walk inside, and we are immediately greeted by the receptionist.

“Welcome to Townsend Tattoos. How can I help you?” The receptionist’s voice is chipper in a way that seems to compliment his friendly appearance. For a tattoo parlor employee, he’s got very few tattoos, shockingly blond hair, and baby-blue eyes. From his scent, I can tell he’s a beta. On the stronger side, but still a beta. The shiny white name tag says his name is Jesse.

Jesse looks at me for an answer, and he must look a little too long for Maverick’s liking because I feel him stiffen at my side.

“We’ve got a six o’clock with B.” His words are clipped. Jesse looks at Maverick, sees the possessiveness burning a hole through him, and just rolls his eyes. It makes me want to laugh, but I choke it back.

“Relax, I’m taken.” Jesse pulls his black T-shirt to the side by the neck,

exposing a bite mark on top of his shoulder. A very pink, raw bite mark. Given within the past few days, if I were to guess.

“Congratulations.” I smile at him, genuine and cheerful in hopes that my mood settles Maverick’s simmering jealousy.

“Thank you.” Jesse’s returning smile is beaming. “I’ll tell B you’re here.” Then he disappears down the hallway.

I turn to Maverick and raise an eyebrow at him. “Really?”

“Sorry, can’t help it sometimes.” He manages to look chagrined and somehow completely unrepentant at the same time as he shrugs.

“So what are you getting?” I ask him, moving away from the satisfied smile he’s wearing.

“Me? Oh, I’m not getting anything. We’re here for you.”

“Me?” I hiss at him in a whispered voice. “I’m not getting a tattoo.”

That smile he was wearing turns into a patient and unbothered soft smile. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to. We can turn around right now, grab some dinner, and go home. But I thought maybe you’d want to cover your scars this way. With something beautiful. Of *your* choosing.”

The way he says *scars* with gritted teeth, I know he’s doing his best to avoid saying mate marks. Of all of them, he gets the most upset thinking about my having a different pack before them. Not only having a different pack but forging bonds with people who aren’t them. My fated mates.

And I get it. If the roles were reversed, I’d want to hunt down the omega that tricked them and kill her with my bare hands.

I must be quiet too long or have a murderous look on my face thinking about any of them being in my position because Maverick’s smile drops, and he starts looking a little nervous. “Did I overstep? I’m sorry. I just wanted to give you the choice. I saw you crying the other morning, looking at the one on your hip. But we don’t have to do this. We can look into other ways to cover them. Or maybe we could find someone to do laser scar removal. Or you can keep th—”

I tug him down by the front of his shirt so I can shut up his word vomit with a kiss.

“This is...perfect. Thank you,” I whisper, after I pull back. His eyes shine full of love, and he takes my face gently with both hands, kissing me chastely once more before whispering, “You’re welcome,” back to me.

A throat clears from behind me. “B is ready when you are,” Jesse grins.

EIGHTEEN

SUMMER

JESSE ESCORTS US down the hall, not even waiting for us to follow him. Buzzing sounds as we pass by three different rooms before reaching our own at the very end. The three before this one all had tattoo artists who were hulking alpha males. Covered head to toe in tattoos and bent over some body part or another, tattooing their canvas. Which is why I startle a little at my tattoo artist. Still covered in tattoos but much, much smaller than the other three. And female. And stunning. She's got silvery-colored hair with lavender and pink streaks throughout.

"Hey, I'm Bailee. But all my friends call me B," she says, walking up to me and extending a hand to shake. Her scent is sweet, with a spicy undertone that compliments the fruity tones perfectly. Based on the layers of additional scents hidden beneath her own, she's a mated omega, too.

"Summer," I tell her, shaking her hand.

Her head swivels toward Maverick's, and he gives his name, too. But she doesn't approach him to shake his hand. Which makes my omega purr in approval. Sometimes, I really hate biology.

"So... Summer, from the notes, it looks like you're the one I'm tattooing. I wasn't told what, though. Do you have any inspo pictures, or would you like to take a look at my work?" B takes a seat on a swivel rolling chair and rolls herself back to the countertop, snags a thick binder, and rolls to me, handing it over.

"Truthfully, I haven't even thought about it." My smile is apologetic. It makes Maverick jump to my defense.

"I kind of sprung this on her. As a surprise." This makes B's eyes raise up to her hairline.

“Do you want a tattoo?” Her eyes rake over my completely tattoo-less body with a semi-disbelieving look.

“Three, actually. I just don’t know what I want yet. Can I have a minute to think about it?”

“Three?” The shock is clear both in her voice and on her face. But then she laughs. “Go big or go home, I like it. Yeah, take your time. I’ll just go hang out with my mate. Holler when you’re ready.”

So she’s mated to Jesse, then. That would be nice, working with your mate. I wonder if the three alphas that work here are also her mates.

“Thank you,” I smile at her as she leaves and then open the heavy binder. I’m immediately blown away. Her work is impeccable. Not that I know anything about tattooing, but I’d know if something was ugly. These are not that. Her work ranges in the binder from simple, small black and white tattoos to the larger, colorful pieces in the back. I’m definitely not brave enough for those, so I stay within the first couple of pages, looking at her small work. Any one of these would cover my marks.

Within the first minute, I already know what I want one of them to be. Then that snowballs into an idea for the second, and within five minutes, I know what I want for all of them. I also know I want one of them to be a surprise.

“Will you go grab B, please?” I bat my lashes at Maverick. Before he leaves, I speak again. “And stay out there? I want it to be a surprise.” He pauses at that, looking a little disappointed, but then sighs and agrees. Part of me hates disappointing him—my omega side is whining a little at not pleasing her alpha—but the bigger part is excited to see his face when the tattoos are done.

It isn’t a long wait before I hear the echoing of footsteps coming from the hallway. B pops her head in first, like a doctor would at an omega clinic, before coming the rest of the way in. “All set then?” she asks, heading over to the counter to prepare. I’ve never gotten a tattoo before, so I’m not sure exactly what she’s doing, but she’s ripping open packages and using a lot of wipes to clean things, so that part, at least, is reassuring.

Once everything is set up, she turns to me. “So, what are we doing?”

Just as I’m about to tell her, my phone rings. “Sorry, let me just...” I pull my phone out of my pocket to hit ignore when I see it’s the clinic.

The clinic... Why would—?

My heart sinks.

In all the hoopla of moving in with the pack, getting Nala, and settling in, I forgot all about my last run-in with Doctor Tanner, when she took my blood to run more tests.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper to B, “I have to take this.”

“Take your time,” she says, and then, mercifully, steps out into the hallway. I still see her, so she hasn’t gone far, but she’s giving me some privacy.

“Hello?” My voice shakes a little when I pick up.

“Summer. It’s Doctor Tanner.” Her voice gives nothing away, and I hate it. I wish I could tell if she’s about to deliver bad news. That way, I could hang up before she has the chance to.

“Yes, hi. How are you?” I ask, falling back on pleasantries automatically.

“I’m good. Thank you. Do you have time to talk for a minute?”

“Yes.” I hesitate. “Is this about the tests you ran?”

There’s a short pause on her end. “It is.”

“Just say it.” For some reason, I already feel the tears welling. Like, I *know* that it’s bad. Intrinsicly, in my soul, I can feel it.

“Well, the good news is, I confirmed all traces of the drug have left your system. There aren’t even small amounts in it anymore. So it would be safe for you to start any suppressants you wanted again.”

“But,” I prompt.

A little sigh on the other end of the line and then a deep breath. “But... I also ran your FSH levels. Those are what would tell us about your ability to conceive. The tests indicate what I feared. You likely...you most likely will not be able to conceive anymore. Certainly not outside of a heat. But even during a heat, when your levels would typically spike...the odds of you getting pregnant are very low.” I can hear the regret in her voice, but it doesn’t soothe the way her words are slicing me open. Carving pieces from my heart.

“How low?” My voice cracks a little.

“It’s hard to say exact—”

“How. Low?” I growl this time. “Give me a number. Ballpark.”

She sighs again. “Maybe five percent.”

“Five...” *Five percent.* There is only a five percent chance I’ll ever have a family. Ever feel that joy again. “Thank you,” I say abruptly, and then hang up before she can get another word in.

The tears that had started to well at the beginning of the call are long

gone. Instead, there's a dull, lifeless feeling spreading through me. Everything feels numb.

"Are you ready?" B asks, poking her head in and frowning at the look in my eyes. Still, I nod.

"You sure? I can go get your mate if you need—"

"I'm ready," I mutter in a quiet but strong voice.

Her eyes roam over me once before giving me one curt nod.

I open the binder back up. What I want isn't exactly in here, but I figure she can work with it since it's all similar. B comes over on her rolling chair to get a better look at the binder and which ones I'm indicating. "I want this one on my ear," I say, pointing to the spot where my first mate mark is. It must not be super noticeable because she simply nods and looks back at the book for my second. "This one to cover this on my hip if I can." Then I unbutton my work slacks and pull them down just low enough to show the very clear bite mark just above the waistline of my panties. Her eyes dart up to mine when she sees it, then back up to my ear, scrutinizing it a little harder.

"May I?" she asks, lifting her hand to indicate she wants to touch them. I nod. The room is quiet, except for her chair rolling back a little as she stands to prod at my ear first. "Lay back a little for me," she says. The tattoo chair I'm in is adjustable, and it's currently at an incline, making it easy and comfortable to relax into it while exposing my hip to her. Cool fingers prod at the spot, making my stomach clench a little at the first touch. "You've got one more mate mark to cover, right? You said three tattoos."

I'm wearing my most used heels, so it makes kicking one off hassle-free. B drops into a squat to look at the mark on my foot. The one I hate the most because I have a thing about feet. Which Connor knew before he bit me there.

Prick.

"Okay. The good news is I cover scars a lot. So it shouldn't be a problem. What were you thinking about for this one?" I show her one of her other drawings and explain the minor changes I want made. "That should be doable. But because the one on your hip is the biggest and the deepest scar, I think we should switch these two and make this bigger," she explains, pointing to the first and second ones I chose.

After her consultation, she draws up some sketches quickly to show me. They're stunning. Exactly what I want, and I tell her so. A few minutes later, she's got them on this paper that has the first drawing on it in purple. The one

that will go on my hip. Each of her movements are swift and sure, telling me she's done this a million times. It has become second nature for her.

I'm lying back on the chair again after she placed what she called the stencil when a constant buzzing fires up. "Okay, here we go. If you need to stop at any point, let me know."

My body locks up in anticipation of the pain. The needle hits my skin, and I clench my eyes shut, bracing for it.

But I'm already numb. The gun feels like little more than small pinpricks by a pointy pencil.

"That actually doesn't really hurt. Kind of tickles," I say, but my voice is as dead as I feel.

"Yeah, I didn't think you'd have an issue. Honestly, none of the omegas ever do. Too used to heat pains; a little needlework is nothing. Jackson and Marcus are the worst I've ever tattooed. Giant, muscled-up babies." I know she's trying to make light, to avoid talking about whatever happened on the call to make my mood change so quickly. She's trying, so I will, too.

I give her a confused look, and she explains. "They're my other mates. You probably saw them on the way back."

"Your whole pack works here?" My brows draw down as a little pain registers.

Nothing I can't handle, though.

"Going over the scarring will hurt a little more than the rest of the skin," she answers my flinch. "But no. Not my whole pack. Jackson and Marcus are two of my alphas. They tattoo here. Jesse is my beta. But I have another alpha, James, who works for the Omega Protection Services."

OPS for short. I've never had to work with them, though I probably could have reached out for help when I left Pack Monroe. But I was scared and distrustful of anyone at the time.

"That's actually how I met my pack, through James." The admission makes me pause. She doesn't expand on it any further, and from my own experience with traumatizing pasts, I don't ask her to explain.

"So you have four packmates?" I ask, noting the way her shoulders loosen ever so slightly at my brushing right past her confession.

B nods. "James and Jackson are twins, Jesse is their younger brother, and Marcus is their childhood best friend."

"That worked out really well for them, finding their mate together," I smile at her. It feels fake on my face. "Are you all fated mates?"

The buzzing stops for one heartbeat, and her eyes shudder before starting back up again. “No, we’re not.” I barely hear the whispered words over the tattoo gun.

“I’m so sorry; I didn’t mean to pry.” She looks so sad for a second that, despite my own maelstrom of despair swirling in me right now, I want to reach out and squeeze one of her hands.

“It’s fine. It’s the obvious next question.” Then we fall into a strained silence while she continues to work at my hip. It’s quiet so long, I think we’re going to continue the rest of the session in silence. When she starts to speak again, I almost startle. “We all found our fated mates already. They had one before me, and I had one before them.”

“Really, you don’t have to explain. I’m sorry I pried.” Her voice is haunted in a way that I’m almost afraid for her to keep talking.

“I didn’t want you to think we were too impatient to wait for the Goddess’s match.”

“It’s not uncommon for packs to mate with other people. I wouldn’t judge you.” She nods.

“Their mate wasn’t a good match for them,” she continues when I don’t push. I start to get the notion that she needs to talk about it. So I listen. “She was horrible. Abusive. Manipulative. They saw it all before they mated, thank the Goddess, and rejected the bond. It took them a long time to get past the pain of the rejection, even though they’re the ones that cut it.”

I can’t even imagine that type of pain. Infinitely worse than going through a heat alone. You’re essentially cutting off a limb and suffering a heart attack at the same time.

“And you?” I ask, clenching my stomach a little as she tattoos over another thick part of the scar. For a second, the only sound is the buzzing of the machine as I watch her swallow a lump in her throat.

“He died.” Her words are hollow, haunted, and the spice in her scent starts to overpower the floral. It makes my heart hurt for her. Arguably, it’s an even worse pain than rejecting a bond, I’d imagine. Her pack chose their fate; she didn’t.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper, wishing I were an alpha and could soothe her pain with my purr. But an omega’s purr doesn’t work on another omega. Especially when they aren’t mated.

“Thank you.” Her head jerks in a little nod. Silence once again. Then, for some reason, probably because she laid her bleeding heart out for me, I

choose to share a little of my story. Two omegas suffering together.

“A little over two years ago, I found a pack I thought were my fated mates.” Her eyes dart to mine briefly before going back to her work. So, I continue. “They were perfect in the beginning. Dragged me out from a deep depression, whispered sweet nothings in my ear, and I mated them almost immediately.” My mind plays a motion picture of those first few months with them as I talk. “But they weren’t actually my mates. Not the ones the Goddess intended for me, at least.”

The buzzing stops completely, and she meets my eyes. “They drugged you, didn’t they?” My head jerks down to stare at her, shocked that she got there so fast. I nod. “James has relocated several omegas with a similar story recently. Passion Pack, right?” Another nod. The hollow look she had is replaced by one of pure rage. But she doesn’t say anything. Simply stewing in anger, starts the machine back up, and I continue.

“I wasn’t exactly happy. I get that now, but looking back, I thought I was. Until I miscarried.” Her spicy scent invades every orifice of her studio the more I talk. “That’s actually what this tattoo is for. She, or maybe he, would have been born in October.” My voice cracks on the last word, and I feel myself start to tear up as she finishes up the marigold bouquet on my hip. “I left after that. Even the drugs couldn’t stop me from realizing how dangerous staying with them would be. I landed in Chicago, met my pack, and I guess you could say the rest is history.”

What I don’t say, what I just learned, is that the tattoo brings on a whole other meaning now. The one and likely only child I’ll ever have is being memorialized on my body as we speak.

I feel something wet land on my hip. Only to realize B is crying. Maybe for me, or her, or perhaps both of us. So we sit there while she works, crying in a way that feels cleansing, in complete silence for the rest of the night.

NINETEEN

SUMMER

WITH ONLY A FEW finishing touches on my foot left, I look at the clock. It's been hours since we started. For the size of the tattoos, I suppose I was expecting it to go a lot quicker. The grumbling from my stomach that started about an hour ago is happening every couple of minutes now.

Jesse poked his head in a little bit ago to check on how long we had. So I'm sure Maverick is bouncing off the walls up front. Maybe he went back to the car to wait until I was done. He's not the most social alpha in the pack.

"Done," she says with one last wipe at the tattoo. "Take a look." B rolls in her chair to give me space.

"It's perfect. Exactly what I wanted. All of them are. Thank you so much," I tell her sincerely, hopping off the chair and pulling her into a hug. It must startle her because she's stiff in my arms for a second before wrapping her arms around me, too. It almost makes me laugh at how awkward her pats are.

Almost.

But I still don't feel like I'm in a laughing mood. I pull back, saving her from reciprocating any further. Some people just aren't huggers. Strange to find an omega like that, though. We're usually very affectionate.

"I'm glad you like them. Let's head up front and get you checked out." I nod, looking down at my bare foot. I don't want to put the heel back on. She put a wrap on that one, so I suppose I could, but it's a little tender, and I don't want to make it worse. But I also don't want to walk around barefoot.

B sees my hesitation, walks to her countertop, rifles around in one of her drawers, and pulls out a pair of black socks that she hands to me. With a grateful look and fervent *thank you*, I put them on.

We're halfway down the hallway when I hear boisterous laughter coming from the waiting room. The men have pulled four chairs around into a circle in the front room. The two I don't recognize must be Marcus and Jackson, then there is Jesse, and finally, Maverick, huddling around a makeshift pool table. The table itself looks like a traveling felt top from a real table, but it's sitting on one of their gumball machines.

All four of them look up from their game when they scent us. "All done, baby?" One of the alphas asks B. But I don't hear the rest of their exchange. I'm too busy staring at Maverick with an open mouth. His handsome face is lit up, laughing at something Jesse just said.

What has he done to my mate?

The one who is a prickly alpha at the best of times to everyone outside of his pack. Sure, *I* know he's really a big softie. But that's not how he presents to the rest of the world. Not like Hudson, who makes friends with everyone he sees, or even Mason, who is always there to counter Maverick's off-putting comments with more polite ones.

Here he is, though, laughing and joking and playing cards with a pack he just met.

"Having a good time?" I manage a small grin when I walk up behind his seat at the table. I rest my hands on his shoulders, and he leans back into my touch, turning his face up toward me.

"Hey sweets, you like 'em?" I lean down to give him a quick kiss and nod as I pull back, mustering up a smile. Or rather, I feel my lip tilt up. It could be construed as a grimace. That's what it seems like Maverick interprets it as since the beaming smile he was sporting a minute ago falters some at my face.

One of B's alphas stands up and comes over to shake my hand. He's tall. At least as tall as Maverick's six foot two, with dark shaggy hair and a long scruffy beard. "You must be Summer. I'm Marcus. Mav couldn't go one whole hand without talkin' 'bout ya." Marcus has a little country twang in his voice. Like maybe he was raised in the country but has lived in the city for long enough that it has tempered itself.

I blush at his words but note his use of Maverick's nickname that everyone but me has adopted. I'm not sure why; Maverick just seems more personal somehow. I'll probably never call him Mav. "Marcus," I acknowledge, shaking his hand. "So that must make you Jackson. It's good to meet you both," I say, nodding at Jackson, who has walked over to where B

is behind the reception desk. He's shorter, probably closer in height to Hudson, hovering around six foot maybe, with a dark blond, brownish hair color identical to Jesse's. The brother thing is making a lot more sense.

"So B couldn't stop talking about us, either. I'm flattered, beautiful." Jackson's voice is so deep. One of the deeper voices I've ever heard, so low it sounds almost like a rumble coming out. I don't correct him and say that's literally all I know about them. Their names. So I just smile and nudge Maverick in a gentle request to butt in.

My very astute mate does so without further prompting. He goes to the counter, pays, and starts the goodbyes all within a few minutes.

My goodbyes with the men are quick. Either a handshake or a simple nod. Then B walks up to me. I don't bother trying to give her a hug this time, and she doesn't initiate one either. Instead, she hands me a piece of paper.

"If you need anything, you can call me. For a friend, another tattoo, to talk, whatever." Scrawled in a messy jumble is a number. Barely legible in such an ironic way that it makes me laugh. A supremely talented artist who just finished giving me three gorgeous pieces and can't write for crap.

"Thank you." I give her a genuinely grateful smile, tuck the piece of paper in my pocket, and then Maverick ushers me out the door.

A two-toned beep comes when Maverick unlocks the Jeep while we're walking to it. The headlights fire up and illuminate the Chinese restaurant and, just like that, my stomach is growling again. I try to pull Maverick to it, but he pulls even harder when he sees where my eyes are locked on.

"Don't look at me like that," he laughs at my scowl. "Besides, they're closed."

Ugh.

I pout at my mate, who winks at me and opens my door. The most delicious smell wafts out immediately, making my eyes search the cab. Right there on the floorboards is a metric ton of Chinese take-out.

I whip around to face Maverick so fast that I get a little dizzy. He's smirking at me, leaning against the passenger door. "Have I told you how much I love you today?" The smirk he's sporting softens into a dopey smile.

He pulls me in for a kiss, then holds me against his chest. It is such a sweet, tender moment until he opens his mouth. "I can think of a few ways you can show me just how much."

"Ugh." I pull back, smacking him in the chest in faux indignation while he roars out another laugh. "Just get in the car, Casanova. I'm hungry."

“Yes, ma’am,” he chuckles, lifting me up into my seat, closing the door, then jogging around the front of the car to his side. I watch him the whole way, admiring how the headlights shine on him, giving me an unhindered view of the way his shirt molds to every inch of him.

Hopping into the cab, he must remember he didn’t get to watch me get tattooed because he turns to me and asks, “So do I get to see them now? Or are you going to make me wait a little longer?”

I’m half tempted to tease him, make him stew a little longer. But I relent. With a turn of my body, I show him my right ear where a string of black sparrows are, starting at the bottom of the lobe where the puncture wound from Blaire’s bite is and stopping halfway up.

“Sparrows signify loss.” I don’t explain that further to him. Let him think it’s only for the child I lost. If he knows it also symbolizes the life I lost—the future I envisioned—when I met Pack Monroe, when Jade swept me out from the gutter, it’ll only make him want to kill them more than he already does. Still, he nods in understanding. I’ll have to tell them about the phone call, but I’d rather tell it once. To all of them.

My work slacks are still unbuttoned, so I pull those down a little to show the only color tattoo of the three. It’s a bouquet of marigolds—brilliant oranges, reds, and yellows. “The marigold is the flower for October babies. When mine would have been born.” Thank the Goddess I already got all my crying out with B. Or the sympathetic frown Maverick gives me would send me over the edge. If anything, crying on the table and sitting in silence after spilling our secrets felt like washing off all the dirt and grime of a long day’s work.

“And the last one?” Maverick prompts, taking my hand and lacing our fingers together.

I grin at him, my first real and effortless one since Doctor Tanner’s phone call. This is the one I wanted to be a surprise. Still barefoot, but with the socks B gave me, I peel one off to show him the tattoo I got for my pack. It’s a heartbeat tattoo, with a filled-in black heart in one of the lines to cover one of the puncture wounds and *Whitlock* written in cursive next to it.

For my mates who helped me feel something again besides heartache and betrayal. When he gets a good eyeful of what it is and says, his eyes shoot up to mine. The look he gives me can’t be described as anything other than stunned. I meet his stare without blinking, suddenly feeling self-conscious.

Oh my Goddess. He hates it. I should have asked first. I don’t even know

if they want me to take their name.

He opens his mouth to speak but has to clear his throat first. “You know once Mason sees this, he’s going to be at those doors first thing in the morning when they open to get a matching one, right? And I’ll be right there with him.”

“Wait... You don’t hate it?” The nervousness shaking in my voice is hard to hide.

“Hate it? I’m only mad I didn’t think of a pack tattoo first.” The insecurities vanish as quick as they came. Maverick pulls our laced hands to his mouth and kisses the back of mine, something he’s become very fond of doing. It never ceases to make butterflies erupt in my stomach, though.

“Alright. Let’s get home before Hudson has a coronary. He’s texted at least a dozen times in the past two hours telling me to stop hogging you.”

Hudson, my overprotective teddy bear. I smile and lean back to buckle up. As I do, my eyes catch on the side mirror where a black sedan is parked on the opposite end of the lot. Wells’ figure is barely visible, but I know it’s him. Following us as I knew he would like the big brother I never had.

TWENTY

SUMMER

“AFTER YOU,” Wells says, holding the door to the restaurant open for me. *RJ’s Steakhouse* is supposed to be one of the better steakhouses in the city. I’ve wanted to try it since I started really exploring after moving here, but up until recently, my budget didn’t allot for frivolous expenses. Which I put a fifty-dollar steak into the category of.

The ambiance is quiet and polished, in the sense that the people eating look the part of the higher middle to upper-class echelon. It’s the middle of the work day, so most of the patrons are dressed in their nine-to-five attire: dresses, pantsuits, and crisp khaki. Murmured voices are audible over the slightly muted music filtering through the place.

“Just two?” the hostess asks us.

“Yes. If we could have a corner table, that would be great. Thank you,” Wells says, putting on the charm and winking at the poor girl. She blushes, nods, and grabs us two menus with clumsy, flustered hands. I try not to laugh—that is just the power of Wells’ charm, I guess—as she leads us toward the back of the restaurant. Wells pulls my chair out for me and takes a seat with his back to the corner so he has a clear view of all the patrons, entrances, and exits.

“Your waitress will be right over,” the hostess murmurs and then hustles back to her stand like if she stays any longer, she’ll melt into a puddle before Wells. He watches her go just a little longer than is polite, staring hard at her ass.

“She’s pretty,” I grin at him, picking up my menu nonchalantly. Ever since he’s been assigned to my security detail, I’ve tried to get him to spill about his love life. To no avail. The man’s lips are sealed tighter than the

pickle jar I tried to open the other day. Only about his love life, though. Anything else, and I can't get him to shut up long enough to get a word in edgewise.

"Very." His eyes trail back to me long enough to show me he's rolling them, and then goes back to scanning the room.

"Maybe you should ask her out." I raise an eyebrow at him.

"Maybe you should focus on your own love life." He raises one right back, and I chuckle.

"My love life is great, thank you very much. That's why I'm focusing on yours. I need a hobby."

"Try knitting," he deadpans.

I laugh, "Okay, fine. I'm done. Be lonely forever for all I care."

"Thank you."

"Hey there, my name is Crystal, and I'll be your server today. Do y'all want to start off with some drinks?"

I order two waters and a steak with asparagus for myself. When the waitress looks at Wells, he sticks with water, no food. I ask if he's sure, but he insists he already ate a packed lunch. So I shrug and hand our menus over to the waitress before she walks off.

"This is weird," Wells mutters.

"What's weird?" I frown and resist the urge to pull out my phone and send flirty texts to my pack. I've gone love-drunk.

"Being in this fancy fuckin' place with you. We look like a couple. It's gross," he grouses, folding his arms across his chest and scrunching his nose like he smells something sour.

"What?" I laugh, shoulders shaking at his comment. "We've eaten together before."

"Yeah, but at like... your office or grab-and-go spots. This is where I'd take a date or something."

"Speaking of dates..." I start to say, latching onto the slip-up.

"You know what, forget I said anything," he hastily tacks on. The teasing grin I'm giving him does not ease. I do throw him a bone, though.

"Or it could be a business lunch. Just pretend I'm your boss. Oh wait... I am." My eyes pop open wide in a mocking sort of surprised way. Not that I think of him like an employee. A brother more like. Plus, it still feels weird to openly say the pack's money is mine now, too. In my head, I'm still clinging to the notion that Brooklyn hired him with her money, not *ours*.

“You’re such a smartass, you know that?” I shrug. Truthfully, I never really have been. If anything, people have always told me I was too shy or reserved. Awkward. But it’s easy to tease Wells.

His phone buzzes, and he pulls it out to look at who texted him. That gives my addicted self the justification I need to take mine out, too. When I see Brooklyn’s name on my notifications page, it makes a goofy smile spread across my face. It’s nothing salacious or really flirty. A simple ‘I miss you’ text, is all. But butterflies still dance in my stomach every time I see or think of them.

I send her a text back, telling her I miss her, too. Then I snap a quick selfie and send it in the pack group chat.

ME

picture At RJs for lunch. Wish you guys were here. <3

The texts come in back-to-back right away.

HUDSON

Jealous! Bring me home a steak, pretty girl! Please, please, please.

BROOKLYN

She told me she missed me first. Btw.

MASON

You look beautiful <3

MAVERICK

I hope Wells is there with you.

MASON

You’re quite the charmer, babe.

I grin at Mason’s response after rolling my eyes at Maverick’s. They’re all taking the threat Pack Monroe poses seriously, but Maverick and Brooklyn have been the most anal about my safety lately. Hudson’s constant texts to Wells notwithstanding; I’m pretty sure that’s just his way of trying to be friends with Wells, anyway.

And Mason is back to “babe-ing” Maverick. They’ve been back to being the perfect couple since Maverick apologized and we all spent the night together. Thinking about it has heat rising to my cheeks and my scent spikes as flashes of sweaty bodies and clenched teeth–.

“Whatever you’re thinking about, can you stop? It already feels weird being in here with you. I don’t need you perfuming all over me,” Wells hisses, leaning back in his seat and honest to the Goddess *plugging his nose with his fingers*.

Brat. I stick my tongue out at him and look back down at my screen as my phone buzzes again.

MAVERICK

Mason’s right. You look beautiful. But you always do.

ME

Thank you, handsome <3

MAVERICK

So is he?

I groan. Silly, overprotective alphas. This time, I snap a picture of Wells while he’s scanning the restaurant and send it to the group chat. Which I promptly close and put back in my purse, in case he asks more questions. Like why Wells’ phone is out and *is he distracted*.

He knows Wells takes my safety seriously. Especially after last night when Wells pulled into the garage right behind us after we got home from the tattoo parlor.

Maverick had grumbled something about how he thought he gave Wells the night off. To which Wells just shrugged and said he went on a night drive to clear his head. A truly awful lie, but Maverick hadn’t seemed to care as respect shone in his eyes.

My phone pings again, and I only last thirty seconds trying to ignore it before caving and pulling it out.

MASON

Called that tattoo parlor. They’re fitting me in tonight after work.

HUDSON

Me too?

MASON

Hell no. You assholes can make your own appointments.

A bubble of laughter breaks free. Maverick was right. As soon as I got home and showed them all my new tattoos, Mason was on the phone trying to call the shop. But they were already closed; having only stayed open longer

for me anyway.

Brooklyn got a little emotional seeing the tattoos. I swear I saw tears build when I explained what the bouquet of flowers was for. Part of me wanted to tell them right then about the call from Doctor Tanner. But I couldn't. I kept imagining the way they'd start to see me differently. They'd say it was okay. That they didn't need biological kids to be happy. Maybe even that I was enough for them. But then the resentments would creep in. The realization that I wasn't, and could never, be enough.

So I haven't told them.

Yet.

But I will.

The food comes, and somehow...some freaking how, Wells manages to let me eat in silence. Like he can tell I'm stewing in my thoughts, delving into self-deprecating ones, and it would be better to leave me be for now than have me snapping at him for no reason. I finish quickly since I have to be back to work soon.

"I'm going to go to the bathroom before we leave." I stand up, and he goes to follow me. "It's right there, Wells. You can watch me the whole way." I don't know why, but it always feels weird when he stands right outside the women's restroom waiting for me to finish. It isn't illogical, but it makes me feel self-conscious, like he can hear every bowel movement I make.

His gaze is stern, but he relents, sitting back in his seat. "Don't be too long or I will charge in there after you." At his words, I hustle to the bathroom.

It's a good thing I only had to pee, I think as I'm washing my hands a few minutes later and eyeballing the door through the mirror, imagining Wells charging in any second. Only, I don't see him in the mirror. I see a mop of long blonde hair and striking blue eyes coming through the door. From the smell of her, she's a beta, can't be much taller than five feet, and is absolutely beautiful. Not wanting to be the creep that stares too long—which I'm sure she gets a lot—I look back at my sudsy hands.

Coconut and creme fill the space beside me as I feel her walk up to the mirror. Out of the corner of my eye, I see her fluff her hair in the mirror and adjust her clothes. She's wearing a completely white outfit. A uniform it looks like. I think the kind that chefs wear.

Maybe she works here.

“Ugh. I had to have a bad hair day today of all days.” Feeling like this is sort of permission to stare, I look up from my hands and smile at her. There isn’t a hair out of place. It’s all long blonde curls, coiffed to perfection.

“Your hair looks amazing,” I reassure the stranger. “Big day?”

“Sort of,” she shrugs, still fiddling with her hair. “I’m meeting my ex here. I haven’t seen her in a while. She dumped me for someone else.” Her blue eyes darken a smidge before she plasters on a smile.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I guess that didn’t work out though?” Since she’s meeting her here, I’d hope not. It would be hard to sympathize with this woman if she’s openly admitting to cheating.

“Oh, no. This is sort of our thing. We break up and get back together all the time. The time apart makes the sex that much better when we do get back together.” She winks at me, and I have to force a smile. Sounds toxic to me; but who am I to judge?

“Well, good luck. You look great,” I reassure her and turn away, waving my hands under the air dryer to my left. A few seconds later, I feel a sharp sting in the back of my arm.

“Ow! What the...” The stranger is standing right behind me. She pulls her hand behind her back and looks at me with chagrin.

“I am so sorry. I’m so staticky. I must have shocked you when I walked by.”

I narrow my eyes at her, wondering what her deal is. The throbbing in my arm that is still very much present doesn’t feel like it was caused by *static*. “Static?” My tone drips with disbelief.

“Yes, *static*.” Why does her voice sound so forceful? Heat washes through me, starting at my head and traveling through me to my toes. My head swims a little, and I sway, catching myself off the wall.

“Woah, easy. You must have had some bad food for lunch. Maybe you need to go home and lie down.” Yeah. That makes sense. The steak did taste funny. I’m nodding along to her words as she ushers me toward the door.

“Your car is waiting in the alley. Your pack will be with you soon.”

I nod, and a smile stretches across my face, cheeks burning, with the thought of my pack. I love them so much...

Wait.

Why can’t I remember their names? And why is my head still fuzzy? And where is Wells?

That steak really must have been rancid. Black spots start to appear

around the edges of my vision and the heat is ratcheting up another notch, but I keep walking toward the side door that leads to the alley.

Once I make it to the car, I can pass out. Sleep off whatever I feel attacking my immune system right now.

A black SUV idles right outside the door. I try to walk toward it, but my vision blurs, and I stumble. Where there was one SUV a moment ago, there are now two. The sun beats down on me, making me squint. No matter how hard I try, though, I can't see anything.

The ground that felt solid now moves with me. I throw my hands out to brace my fall when the asphalt dances beneath my feet, but it doesn't help, and my face slams into the rough pavement.

I groan, trying to move my arms so I can push myself off the ground. At least into a sitting position. But where there should be two arms, it feels like they've been replaced by weighted sandbags, and I can't move.

"Motherfucker. Can't make anything easy," someone grumbles.

"Just grab her and put her in the car," another voice says. Suddenly, I'm being lifted by someone...male. That's about all I can tell. If I could move my head even an inch, I'd see who it was. But as it is, my head is lolling around like it's a heavy weight being held up by overcooked spaghetti.

"More trouble than she's worth. You assholes should listen to me more often," the first voice says again.

"Just shut the fuck up and drive." The words are coming through a tunnel now, echoing and distant. My body jolts as the car takes off, and everything goes black.

TWENTY-ONE

BROOKLYN

WHEN MY PHONE GOES OFF, I smile a little to myself, hoping it's another selfie from Summer. She looked stunning in the first one. So fucking happy that my alpha purred in my chest.

We did that, she seemed to say.

The omega I met that first day in Pen2Paper Press is a whole different person than the one that moved into the pack house; than the one who sent a selfie in the group chat a moment ago. That omega was shy. Quiet. Scared.

This one is flirty and fun. Full of life.

It makes my blood heat that we were able to do that. To help our omega in that way. Bring her out of her shell and make her feel...well, *loved*.

So I'm smiling ear to ear when I pull out my phone. Only, that smile drops when I see Wells' name on the screen. Somehow before I pick up, I know something is wrong.

I bark, "What is it?" as I pick up.

"She's gone. I don't know how it happened. She's gone," Wells is panicking, out of control.

No.

No. No. No. No. No.

It was the middle of the day. She had security with her. Security that is supposed to keep her *safe*.

This is a sick joke. "Where are you?" How I manage to keep my voice even, I don't know.

"RJs. I—" I hang up before he can say anything else and look around the conference room I'm in alone, waiting for my meeting to start with the editors at Punk'd Publishing. We're supposed to be meeting in five minutes to

discuss the rights to one of my clients' next graphic novel. I'm the first one here, so I don't even hesitate to get up and run out the door. Shooting a quick text to my client to let her know an emergency came up, and then one more to the group text to meet at RJs-911-I'm barreling out the front door of the publishing house and flagging down the nearest cab.

Please let her be okay. Please. I send up a quick prayer to the Goddess and jump in the cab that screeches to a halt in front of me.



Wells meets me at the front door when I beat the rest of the pack to the restaurant. Maverick and Hudson are the furthest out since they're working on the house in Naperville today, but Mason should be right behind me. In the text I sent, I told them all the information I know, which is really nothing, but I've ignored all their calls. They'll have to wait until I can figure out what happened.

Which is what Wells starts in on before I can even ask. "This way," he says, and I follow him as he relays what happened. "Summer went to the bathroom before we were getting ready to leave. I had a view of the door the whole time. The *whole time*. Then something caught my attention. It was her previous alpha. Jade Monroe. And she was making a beeline right for the bathroom."

That fucking *bitch*.

"So I jumped into her path to stop her from going in there after Summer. She started raising her voice, causing a scene. I had the manager make sure she left out the front door. Then I went straight to the bathroom to get Summer. But she wasn't there. I looked everywhere. There's a door to an alley at the end of the hall, and I looked all over outside, too. Nothing. She's gone."

"Did anyone else see anything? Are there cameras?" I can feel the panic start to overwhelm me, the blood long since drained from my face.

"They're pulling the tapes now," he says grimly. And that's when I realize it's where Wells has led us. We're in the manager's office where the beta at the computer has several screens pulled up. Half a dozen camera

angles visible.

“Did you find anything?” I bark, and by the grim look he gives me, I know he has. And it’s not good news.

“There’s a video of her coming out the back alley. She looks intoxicated. Like she can’t walk. And then two guys come into the frame, one picks her up, puts her in a car, and they drive off. That’s all we have. No license plate. We do have a shot of the guys, but they keep their heads down, so it’s not really clear.”

He plays back the video, and Wells and I watch Summer stumble outside. The manager was right, she does look drunk. Or drugged...

The growl that slips out of me when she faceplants onto the concrete in the alley, and then just lays there until that piece of shit drags her away, promises violence.

“What about inside? Do you have that video?” Wells asks the manager, who has started to wring his hands and shake his head.

“We’ve got a camera in the back, one out front, in the kitchen, and one on each of the tills in the restaurant in case of theft. But this hallway leading to the bathroom doesn’t have any. When she leaves your table, I can’t see what happens next until she appears in the alley.”

“I want her picture out there. Plastered all over the news and social media,” I tell Wells. “I want the whole world looking for her,” I growl.

He nods and pulls his phone out while he leaves the office to make a call. “Damien might be able to reach out to someone at OPS. Someone he used to work with maybe. I’ll check. He’s on his way here already.”

That’s right. Damien is ex-OPS. Houston, ex-military. Wells, ex-detective. I pray anyone of their pasts can be useful right now.

As Wells leaves, Mason bursts into the office, eyes darting around frantically before they land on me. “What happened? Where is she?” He’s near hysterical, but I fill him in on everything we know so far. On the verge of a panic attack, I put a little bit of a bark behind my words as I tell him to calm the fuck down. His body obeys, and his breathing evens out as he shoots me a grateful look.

When he’s able to think straight, he looks over to Wells who has just walked back in. “Did she drink at lunch?”

“No. She had water.”

“Someone can still spike water,” I point out.

“Or the food,” Wells agrees.

“Well, they’d have to work here then. Wells, you talk to the kitchen staff. Mason, come with me. We’ll talk to the kitchen staff.”

“Did you get a hold of Damien?” I ask as we leave the manager’s office.

His brows knit, concern shining in his eyes. “He said he’d call. But I guess he left on bad terms. He likely doesn’t hold any sway anymore.”

My heart sinks, and we all break off at the end of the hallway. Wells goes to the bar area, and before Mason and I can walk back to the kitchen, Maverick and Hudson have joined us.

Mason fills them in on everything as I throw open the swinging double doors that lead into the back. It’s noisy back here: people shouting orders at each other, fires burning, the sizzling of steaks, and the sounds of knives hitting cutting boards as vegetables are chopped.

My eyes roam the staff, all in black uniforms, except one. The head chef wears white. I start to advance on her until I get a good look at her face, and I stumble. Mason steadies me, and then his eyes follow my line of sight before I feel him stiffen beside me.

“Tatem? What the fuck is she doing here?” Mason’s voice is soft, suspicious. I shoot him a confused look.

What *is* she doing here? Last I heard, she still worked at Woodlands across town. A small family-owned farm-to-table business. While we’re all staring, she must feel the attention on her because she turns from where she’s talking to a young man in a black uniform. Her eyes lock on mine, and a blindingly white smile takes over her face. Where once that smile may have made my heart beat a little faster, when I used to think she was one of the most beautiful women I’d ever met, it now does nothing for me. My heart rate doesn’t spike anymore, and when I stare at her, she seems so...*ordinary* compared to my mate.

Tatem walks right up to us and leans into me, apparently going in for a hug, before Mason tugs me back and inserts himself between us. “Don’t touch her,” he hisses, glaring at my ex-girlfriend. I don’t do anything to dissuade him. To reprimand him. Instead, I give his forearm a grateful squeeze for pulling me away when my body was in a temporarily frozen state of shock.

There is no small amount of ire lighting up Tatem’s eyes as she glares back at my beta—who she never got along with, no matter how hard I tried to get them to reconcile their differences. Mason wouldn’t budge.

Always insisted she was rotten.

“Bite me, Mason. I can hug an old friend if I want to,” she retorts.

“No. You can’t,” I say automatically. When her eyes shoot over to mine in shock, I continue. “When did you start working here?”

There’s a quick pause while she glances at Mav and Hud behind us, and says, “A couple weeks ago. Shortly after you broke things off, I got the call. I got the head chef position I had applied for.” There is no small amount of pride tinting her voice, but when none of us congratulates her or praises her in the way she’s used to, a dark look flits across her features. There and gone.

“My mate was just in here. We think someone tampered with her food, and we need to know everyone who touched her plate. Our security will talk to them.”

Tatem’s back goes ramrod straight, and she looks right at me. “Well, nobody in my kitchen would tamper with anything.” She practically sniffs the air indignantly. “But if you know the table she was at, and what she ordered, I can pull the ticket and find out.” Then she pauses like she’s not sure if she should say what she wants to say next, but does anyway. “Is your mate okay?”

Mason stiffens again at the way she says mate. Through semi-clenched teeth. My own hackles rise at the tone, and I say, “She’s fine,” in a cold voice, and turn around to go get the table number and what she ate from Wells.

We’re all back out in the main area of the restaurant when my phone vibrates. But it’s not just mine. Hudson, Mav, and Mason’s ping, too. Looking around, I realize everyone in the restaurant is pulling their phone out. With a frown, I open my lock screen to see an omega alert flashing across it with Summer’s picture lit up, clear as day. My eyes pop open. That was incredibly fast. We haven’t even called the police yet, and the pull you’d need... I look at Wells. But he’s shaking his head.

“I got it out to the news stations and put it up on all the social media platforms, but this wasn’t me. Or Damien.”

“I called a friend from the car and asked for a favor,” Mav says from behind me. We all look at him with various levels of shock on our faces. He shrugs. “I didn’t know if he could do it, but his packmate works at OPS. So it looks like he pulled it off.” He’s talking about Omega Protection Services. Who is this guy, and how does he know Maverick enough to call in favors with him?

“Some of you are going to have to go back to the house now,” Wells

starts to say and holds up his hands when we're all poised to object. "When OPS gets involved, they send agents to your house to ask questions. They also stick around so they're present if any useful tips come in."

They all look at me. As pack alpha, it's my job to call the shots. In our pack, I rarely have to make calls like this because we're all usually on the same wavelength with everything. But not now. Now, everyone wants to be out here actually looking for our mate. Nobody wants to wait at home twiddling their thumbs. But one look at Hudson, and I *know* he will fight me tooth and nail to stay out here. There's an edge to his eyes that tells me now is not the time to try to pull rank on him. He's riding a vicious, vulnerable wave that is ready to take out everything in his path.

"Maverick, you and Mason head back to the house. It was your contact, and there should be two of us at the house. Just in case."

They look at me for a minute like they want to argue, but then nod. "Houston will be there, too. He's already working with his friend about tracking where that SUV went after leaving the restaurant. Damien will stick around here with me to talk to staff and guests to see if anyone saw anything."

"We'll drive around and look for her in the meantime," I tell Hudson, and his eyes shudder in relief. Doing something.

He *needs* to be doing something.

Right. We've got a plan.

We'll get her back.

We have to get her back.

TWENTY-TWO

MAVERICK

HOUSTON'S CONTACT lost the car when it went into a parking garage a few streets away from the restaurant. He thinks they may have switched cars in the garage and then pulled out without anyone the wiser.

The same contact told us the searches Damien and Wells had him do into Pack Monroe's friends and family led nowhere. Before I could throw something at the lack of any usable information, he went on.

A charge to a private detective, he'd said. There were several payments for the same amount. Made every few weeks for months. To one person.

The bastards hired a PI to find Summer. They probably found her weeks ago, but confirmed it when they responded to her threatening text.

I'm going to make you pay.

When I read the text she sent them, I didn't know what to fucking feel. So damn proud of her for her bravery. Fucking furious at her for putting herself in danger. Absolutely terrified at their response.

I knew then, intrinsically, that trouble was coming.

Now she's gone. I've been pouring over the security footage from the restaurant since we got home. Looking for something, anything, that could help us. I've got the wide angle of one of the tills open where you can see Wells stop that woman—*Jade*—from walking to the bathroom when Mason walks up behind me.

"What're you doing?" he whispers. He must be trying to avoid being a distraction to the OPS agents who showed up half an hour ago as they talk to Houston.

I'd called Jackson, one of Bailee's alphas that I spent a few hours playing cards with while Summer got tattooed. His twin brother, James, works for

OPS. When I told him what happened, you could hear Bailee in the background saying she'd call James, who I guess was already working tonight.

He's now in my living room, talking to the security we hired to keep our omega *safe*.

"Just watching the restaurant tapes again," I answer Mason, and hand my phone over. Sick of looking at it. He grabs it, and stares at the screen for a minute, taking in the footage. A moment later I watch all the blood drain from his face as he stares at the screen like he's seen a ghost.

"Who—" His throat bobs as he swallows a lump and tries again. "Who is that?" His voice shakes.

"That's Jade. One of Summer's exes. You know that." I frown at him.

"I don't, though... She's never shown us pictures. We asked once but dropped it when she didn't... She said her old pack was named Monroe." His eyes look haunted as they meet mine.

"Yeah, that's Jade Monroe. Mason, what's up?" His reaction is starting to worry me. As is the swaying his body is starting to do, and I shoot a hand out to make sure he doesn't hit the floor since it looks like he may faint.

"No. That's Jade Moore. My old alpha." I jerk back a little on instinct at his words.

"What?" There's no way...

"That's... Moore. That was their name. Jade and Connor and Brody. *Moore*. I didn't know... How would I have known?" His voice starts to get louder and louder as he speaks. "She never said their first names. Never showed us pictures. I didn't know!" His breathing gets shallower and shallower, panic setting in. "My fault," he whispers.

"Stop," I bark. So rarely do I use my alpha bark on him. "Breathe," I say again, and he does. "It's not your fault. It's nobody's fault but theirs. We're going to get her back." He nods along with my words, eyes still full of self-loathing.

"There's someone at the gate," Houston says, coming over to us and interrupting Mason's meltdown.

"Who?" we say together, both praying it's Summer, and she wasn't actually ever taken. That it was all a sick mistake.

"Says her name is Amanda."

My lip pulls back into a snarl. She's choosing *now* to try to move in on Hudson? I'll kill her with my bare hands. "Tell her to *fuck. Off.*"

Houston looks at me in an appraising sort of way, eyebrow raised, completely unperturbed by my temper, and says, “She says she’s got information that you’ll want to hear. That will help.”

“She’s lying. She’s fucking crazy.”

“I think you should hear her out,” James, Bailee’s mate, says. Overhearing our conversation, he comes over. “This early on, any little thing helps. It’s worth speaking to her, even if it doesn’t get us any closer to finding your mate.”

I’m about to beg to fucking differ, but the other OPS agent and Houston are all nodding their heads in agreement.

“Fine. But we go to her. She’s not allowed in our house when Summer isn’t here.” Mason squeezes my hand in agreement.

That’s how we find ourselves standing at the end of our drive near the gate with Amanda fidgeting in front of us, clearly intimidated by all the alpha males in front of her, daring her to be wasting their time.

Her eyes scan the crowd for Hudson, and the briefest flash of disappointment enters her eyes before she addresses me. “I tried to tell her. Summer. At her work. Actually, I called Hudson a dozen times to tell him, but he never called me back. Too caught up—”

“Get to the fucking point,” I bark when she starts to head in a direction I *know* will piss me off.

She tries not to bare her throat at my command but does anyway. After a steadying breath, she says, “I was trying to tell Hudson that Summer was in danger. He wouldn’t answer my calls. So I went directly to Summer.”

“You mean you accosted her at her job,” Mason interjects, eyebrow raised. Indignation flashes in Amanda’s eyes.

“I didn’t *accost her*. I was just trying to talk to her, and that brute of an alpha ripped me away before I could.”

“And?” James asks, completely level-headed and calm.

“I was having lunch with Tatem one day.” *Brooklyn’s ex?* I frown to myself. “And she was talking crazy. About how this pack reached out to her. How she was going to get Brooklyn back, and Summer wouldn’t be a problem anymore.”

“What pack?” Houston this time.

“Summer’s pack! Apparently, she’s already got mates.” She looks at us to see if this information shocks us. It doesn’t. She frowns but goes on. “Tatem said she was going to help her true pack get her back. That she was already

mated and just wanted to steal Brooklyn from her. That she was a greedy omega.”

“Did she tell you what they were going to do with her? Where they’d take her? Anything else that could help?” James asks in an unbothered voice that makes me want to beat the shit out of him.

But she’s already shaking her head. “That’s all she said.”

“Why now?” Mason asks from beside me. “Why come forward now?” There’s still a healthy level of suspicion in his eyes.

“I saw the omega alert. I know you hate me. Maybe I haven’t always done right by Hudson, but I’d *never* want him to lose his mate. No matter what you think of me, that’s the truth.” Then with one final glare at Mason, she turns around and walks away. Everyone lets her go.

A phone rings, sounding violently loud in the now quiet darkness. It’s James’. “Yeah,” he answers when he sees who is calling. His brow furrows as he listens. “You’re sure this guy is legit? Okay, thanks. Good work.” When he hangs up, he looks over at Houston. “Your friend said something about a private detective. Did he get a name?”

“I think he said it was Joe...something. Why?”

“A Joseph Thornton just phoned into the OPS hotline with a tip. Said he was a private investigator hired by the Monroe pack to trail Summer. They said he was only supposed to find her and make sure she was safe after running away from her pack after miscarrying.”

Fucking assholes. As if she was just a depressed omega running from a caring pack.

“But he said they called him about a week ago and asked him to rent an SUV, a small car, and a house for them for the next few weeks. Under his name.”

Holy shit. We’ve got them.

A legit lead.

“Let’s go then!” Mason yells, echoing my thoughts. “Let’s go get our mate!”

“Wait.” James holds up a hand, and a feral growl rips from me. A sound I’ve never heard before. “You guys aren’t going anywhere. I’ll take a team to the house. We can make entry and see if Summer is being kept there.”

“You want us to just sit back when our mate could be hurt?” I glower at him.

“You aren’t trained for any kind of rescue or recovery. You could very

well put her in more danger by just charging in there. What if they hear you coming and decide to kill her before you can make it to her? Fucking *think*. I know you want her back. Let me and my team do it in a way that won't endanger you guys or your mate."

All the fight leaves me, and ice fills my veins when he says *kill her*. I stand there in frozen horror, unable to move a muscle while my mind starts thinking of every scenario where she's hurt, brutalized, or...

"Maverick," James growls. It takes more effort than it should, but I move my head enough to look at him. "We'll get her back. Call the rest of your pack and get them back here so she has you when we do."

"No, I'm coming with you," Mason says in a matter-of-fact tone that leaves no room for argument.

"If you're going, I'm going," I growl at him. I'm not having the two people I love most in this world around those fucking psychopaths without me there. They don't get to hurt one more person. Not on my watch. I'll rip out their fucking throats.

"Yeah, that look on your face is why you aren't coming," James raises a sardonic brow at me.

"I need this, Mav." His words stop the fight brimming back up in me. Mason, who was hurt by this pack, too. Who I didn't even consider might need some kind of closure. The look in his eyes says that if I fight him on this, if I try to keep him home with me, he might never get past this part of his life. Mason sees the acquiescence on my face because he turns to James, who he also needs to convince. "I won't get in the way. I'll stay in the car until the situation is...safe."

James looks over Mason in an appraising way that Mason doesn't balk at. Instead, he squares his shoulders and meets James' eye. Eventually, James nods and jerks his head for Mason to follow him.

As the OPS agents and Mason leave, and I walk back into the pack house with Houston on my heels, I can't help but wonder if when we do get her back...

If she'll be in one piece.

TWENTY-THREE

JADE

“WHY ISN’T SHE AWAKE YET?”

“The drug never made her pass out before.”

“This is a new version. Maybe her body needs to adjust to it.” Connor and Brody go back and forth, grumbling and complaining enough to piss me the fuck off.

“Both of you, shut the fuck up.” *Before I make you*, I don’t say out loud, but the threat is clear. Two high-functioning morons, but their personalities and ideals have always been on par with mine; so they were the least unappealing choices to build a pack with.

But the two of them together don’t have the kind of dominance I do. Practically betas in all the ways that count.

Looking at Summer sprawled out on the bed though, they have a point. She looks fucking comatose, still in the exact same position they dumped her in. Arms are at odd angles, and her legs are sprawled awkwardly across the bed. She hasn’t moved an inch. The drug never used to fucking paralyze her.

Maybe that dumb bitch gave her too much.

A few hours ago, when we got the call from the ex–Tatem–saying Summer was in her restaurant with one of the bodyguards, it was impossible to pass up.

After all the research I did into Pack Whitlock—including their romantic history—never did I imagine the ex-girlfriend would give us that kind of opportunity. My first thought was to use their exes to distract them one day. Keep them all busy at the same time. But Tatem...when I spoke to her that first time, the level of obsession she still harbored for Brooklyn Whitlock, I knew she’d be easier to manipulate than the Amanda bitch.

Then when Tatem called me—when I saw our shot—we met her at the back entrance to the restaurant and handed over the shot the Ellis’ gave us. The newest version of the drug that should last four months before a new dose is needed. But they must have given us too much in one syringe because she looks half-dead.

I walk over to the side of the bed and bend at the waist to peer closer at her. Maybe she’s faking it.

When I’m inches from her face, I bark, “Wake up!” My words are heavily laced with command. Nothing.

She doesn’t flinch, her eyelids don’t move a wink, and her breathing stays the same.

Pain reverberates through my hand as I smack her across her face to see if that’ll wake her up. And a little because the cunt deserves it. For thinking she could leave me. Humiliate me.

Nothing.

“Where’s my phone?” I huff, and turn to see Connor leave the bedroom before coming back a moment later with my phone in hand.

Opening it up, I type in the number I don’t dare save as a contact. A few rings later, Kyle Ellis’s nasally voice comes down the line. “What?” he growls.

“Is that any way to talk to a paying customer?” I answer in a falsely sweet voice.

There are a few beats of silence before he answers. “How did you get this number?”

The burner phone he uses and only hands out to his scientists and precious few he trusts to distribute the drug. Never to customers. We only contact him via email. It was chance, really, that we ran into one of his scientists at another stuffy-ass charity gala. He didn’t outright *say* that’s what he worked on, but we put two and two together and had our friend in the DA’s office pull his phone records for us.

There was one number that he called religiously. Several times a day for *years*.

It was just a guess after that. But I’m glad I was right.

“That’s not important right now. What *is* important is this defective ass drug you sold us.”

“Defective how?” he says in a bored voice, and I can practically hear his eyes roll.

“She’s not waking up. We gave her your fucking drug, and she looks dead.” Still, not a twitch of any muscle.

“How long ago was the drug administered?” he says with an air of importance. Like he’s an actual doctor giving out drugs that couldn’t put him behind bars for the rest of his life.

“A few hours ago,” I say after a quick look at the clock. It’s coming up to the end of the workday, and Tatem stuck her right after lunch.

“Shouldn’t be a cause for concern. She’ll wake when her body is ready to.” Then he *hangs up* before I can say anything else. The phone protests under my grip when I squeeze it so I’m not squeezing something else.

Like Summer’s throat.



Almost eight hours later and she still hasn’t woken up. Connor and Brody are talking about leaving to get something to eat.

Like I said, high-functioning morons.

“You can’t go out to get something to eat. You all saw the omega alert. They know who we are and what we look like by now. We need to lay low,” I say without looking away from Summer, scrutinizing her for the slightest movement.

None of us could believe it when they got the omega alert out that fast. I certainly couldn’t. We’d barely made it back to the house after switching cars in the parking garage.

Average.

That’s what I gleaned from all my research on this pack. A literary agent, a real estate agent, and a glorified construction worker. Oh, and let’s not forget about the *photographer*. What a nice little surprise that was. To find out the beta we threw out just before Summer ended up being her fated mate. It isn’t lost on me that—had we just kept him around—we would have had the perfect leverage. The best and most foolproof way of making her stay. Because no omega would willingly leave her fated mate.

That was our mistake. Ours, because we all wanted him gone, and how fucking *funny* that they ended up in the same pack years later. A fucking

useless pack at that.

I'd even go so far as to say the two male alphas are just as stupid as Brody and Connor. I walked right into their house, and neither of them suspected a thing. Didn't even know who I was. I'd thought they might, honestly. An unnecessary risk, walking through that door, when they very well could have seen my picture. Known who I was. But they didn't. It was truthfully pretty fucking insulting. But I learned what I needed to know.

Unimpressive.

Small men with small dreams and an unremarkable pack.

No political pull or high-level contacts between them that I could tell. Successful enough, I suppose, but nowhere near Pack Monroe's net worth. How they have any sway at OPS is beyond me.

The omega alert puts a damper on our travel plans, but not for long. They'll get tired of combing the streets for her soon enough, then we'll take her to the house we bought in a rural part of New York. Nothing but acres and acres of land. No neighbors for miles. The perfect place to retrain a disobedient omega.

"Well, we'll order in then." I roll my eyes at Brody's snark.

"No, you'll go to the kitchen and find something to make here." There's a little bite of command in my tone. His lip pulls back at it, but he obeys like the good little dumbass he is.

"I thought that's what we got *her* back for," he mutters under his breath but does as he's told. Of the two of them, Brody has been the most vocally opposed to getting her back.

Why not just get a new omega?

Not worth the hassle, he has said. Over and over.

But he doesn't understand. Doesn't have any concept of pride. Of self-respect. Letting an omega walk away, letting her disrespect us, can't go unpunished.

I glance at her briefly, about to follow Brody.

But I do a double take, looking back at her once more. Something is different. Her leg is in a different position. I hop up from the chair I pulled in for my vigil.

"Wake up," I try my bark again, and watch as her eyelids flutter but don't open. "Wake. Up," I command through gritted teeth. Finally—*finally*—her eyes open.

A sense of sick triumph starts to course through me, only to halt at the

completely unseeing look in her eyes.

Leaning forward, I snap my fingers in front of her face. The only reaction I get is a slight turning of her head until she's looking in my direction. But *through* me; like she can't focus on anything. Or maybe the drug fried her brain, and now she's a fucking veritable vegetable.

Connor walks in as I smack her cheek again.

Not a wince. Just that blankness.

A savage rumble works its way up my chest. I'll kill them.

Seconds later, my phone is in my hand, and I'm calling Kyle Ellis again.

"What?" he yells down the line.

"What?" I yell right back. "You sold us a piece of shit, and now we have a lame omega. Fucking useless!" I'm screaming now.

"And what, exactly, do you expect me to do about that?" I'm about to reach down the phone and rip his balls out through his throat if he says one more thing in that bored, uninterested voice.

"What do I—" I laugh without humor. "You have some fucking nerve. One call from me and your ass is behind bars. Do you not understand that?"

A beat of silence and then his nasally ass voice *laughs* at me. "You dumb fucking whore. You think you're the first person to threaten me? Us? We've been in business since before you were even a tingle in your daddy's fucking testicles. You're playing a game you can't possibly win. But go ahead and try. Call the cops. You'll find yourself behind those bars before we ever are, kid." I bristle at that, my alpha hounding me to beat the shit out of him for denigrating us. But he goes on. "And maybe you've got a retarded omega now because you are *impatient* and *reckless*. You get what you paid for. The drug wasn't ready. Nobody knew the effects it may have. But you wouldn't hear it. So now you get to deal with those consequences."

"You—" I start to say, but he interrupts me.

"Don't fucking call this number again. Or I promise you, on my life, you'll regret it." Then the line goes dead.

The phone goes flying out of my hand and smashes into the wall before I know what I'm doing. Pieces of drywall spray as the phone hits the plaster and falls to the floor in several bits.

Connor, with his so-called alpha hearing, looks at me questioningly. A *real* alpha would have been able to hear the conversation.

"She's absolutely fucking useless. We may as well get rid of her." I don't want any blood on my own hands, but I'm not opposed to farming it out. I'm

sure it wouldn't be too hard to find someone willing to do it for cheap.

"I don't know. She's still hot. Maybe she's not completely useless," Connor says, adjusting himself.

I roll my eyes. "Whatever. You have until I get a buyer, then she's gone." The sound of his belt unbuckling hits my ears as I leave the room to find my laptop. I'll need to use it to find someone, now that my phone is in pieces on the bedroom floor.

The house Joe rented is a two-story townhouse in the heart of Chicago. It's how we were able to get to that restaurant so fast. Centrally located. Close to Summer's job and walking distance to anything we may need.

It's a five-bedroom home. The one we threw Summer in was one we weren't using. Rather, the three of us took the room on the second story.

The laptop is sitting on the nightstand by the bed. It's fired up, and I'm about to open my email when there's a commotion from downstairs. Like a knocking sound against the walls.

Fucking Connor. Couldn't keep it in his pants for one day. I slam the laptop shut to go downstairs and yell at him to keep it down.

My feet are heavy and loud on the stairs as I trudge down them. When I get to the main floor, I look up to see half a dozen automatic weapons pointed right at me. Brody is face down on the cold floor with their hands cuffed behind his back and ankles zip-tied together.

The six men in all black are sporting vests that read "OPS" across them.

"Get on the ground," one of the men growls, stepping forward and jerking his gun to the floor to impress upon his point.

As I drop to my knees, I glare past the agents to the bedroom where Summer and Connor are. There's a tall, bulky male with his gun lifted as he peers through his scope and growls, "Let her go and get on the ground."

Connor's voice carries through the house, a tremor in it. A coward through to the end. "Back up or I'll break her neck!"

"Let go of her. It's too late for you at this point, but at least you'll get out before you're old and decrepit. You can still have a life. You kill her, and you'll never see the outside of a cell."

"I sw-swear. I'll do it!" He sounds unsure. Wavering.

"You have three seconds. She's turning purple. Get your fucking hands off her and get. On. the. Ground," the alpha barks at him; I feel a small tug in my core. Not enough to affect me—or any alpha with even a small amount of willpower—but enough to feel the pull in his command.

“Get back!”

“One, two, –”

BANG.

The shot rings out, and no more sound comes from in the room. Connor is dead. I know it without even having to see the body.

“Clear,” the alpha says, and I hear the click of the safety on his gun before he swings it around on the strap so it’s behind his back. He disappears into the room for a minute before emerging with Summer cradled in his arms.

Her head is still lolled to the side, eyes open but staring at nothing with no idea the shitshow unfolding around her.

At least they won’t get her either, I think to myself, and that thought brings me some modicum of peace as my own hands are cuffed behind my back, and Brody and I are escorted out the front door.

Night has fallen, so it’s hard to see anything in the dark while being blinded by flashing blue and red lights. But amongst all the chatter from nosy neighbors and OPS agents, comes an all too familiar voice.

“Summer!” I jerk a little in my cuffs. The idea of a *beta* I rejected seeing me in a compromising position—seeing me so fucking *weak*—has my hackles rising. But the OPS agent’s grip on me is solid. Unyielding.

The big oaf stops us right behind where *Mason* is currently fussing over Summer’s limp body. “We need to get her to a doctor,” the big alpha who shot Connor says to the beta, who nods.

“Let’s get her home. We have an on-call doctor. She’ll know what to do.” He sounds so sure, so fucking hopeful, that I laugh.

“Not likely.” My voice sounds smug even to my own ears. She’s fucking *gone*. Nothing this ‘doctor’ does is going to change that. *Mason*’s back goes rigid when he hears my voice.

That’s right. You know exactly who I am.

His eyes slide over to mine slowly. So damn slowly before they lock on mine. The hatred burning in them surprises me a little, but I don’t let it show. I’d thought he’d look shocked, maybe a little scared. Not this...superior kind of anger. Like the little weasel thinks he’s *better than me*. “What did you do to her?” His voice is soft, but not weak. I grin at him and shrug as best I can in the cuffs.

“Nothing that she didn’t deserve.” *Maybe she shouldn’t have left me. Disrespected me.*

Even in the dark, his body is illuminated by the lights enough that I see

his body physically shake with suppressed rage.

Good.

“Take them off,” he whispers.

The agent holding me responds. “What?”

“Her cuffs. Take them off.” I frown at him. What’s he playing at? Surely he doesn’t think I’m going to be let go.

“I don’t think—”

“Now,” he growls, so deep and guttural, I think it shocks the agent into doing as he says. Cool air hits my wrists, and I bring them around to rub the spot where the metal bit against my skin. As I do, I’m too distracted to stop the blow.

Mason cocks his arm back and swings for my face. There’s so much force behind it, my body hits the ground a second before the pain in my cheek registers. The growl that rips from me is automatic as my hand comes up to prod at the split, tender skin near my eye.

He’s fucking dead.

I jump up, ready to lunge at him and tear him to pieces, when two agents grip my arms again, wrestle them behind my back, and go to cuff me once more. Anger fuels me enough that I thrash in their grips, and it takes another agent coming over to put the cuffs on while the other two hold me still. All the while I’m thrashing, spit flying from my mouth as I growl at the audacity of him.

A beta!

Humiliation and pure rage fight for space in me, and Mason just stares at me for a second like I’m no better than the gum on the bottom of his shoe, then turns and follows the alpha carrying Summer all the way to their car.

Through my growling and fighting, I’m aware enough to see the alpha raise his brows at Mason who shrugs and says in a deadpan voice, “I wasn’t going to hit someone with their hands tied behind their back.”

A deep chuckle comes from the agent, and they walk down the sidewalk to the line of police cars.

As the door shuts on them and the agents shove me to the ground once more to hold me still—as my face is pushed against the loose gravel of the sidewalk—the only thought in my head is that I hope that bitch never recovers from that drug. And I hope that tears that piece of fucking shit beta apart little-by-little until he’s nothing more than a husk, an empty shell, of a man.

TWENTY-FOUR

BROOKLYN

OKAY. She's okay, I tell myself after Maverick gets off the phone with James, the OPS agent he somehow knew enough to call in a favor with. I'll never stop being grateful for that.

But the waiting is going to kill me. Doctor Tanner is on her way, likely right behind the agents bringing Summer home.

The gate alarm at the end of the drive goes off, letting us know someone wants through. With a quick glance at the camera on the gate code, I see it's the OPS agent in the driver's seat, James, and I punch in the code on my phone to let them in.

Doctor Tanner's car drives in right behind their SUV.

All four of us run out the front door to stand impatiently in the driveway as the cars pull up. Hudson doesn't even wait for them to put the car in park before he's ripping open the backseat door. There's a pause as he stops to look at what must be Summer, and then the worry starts to creep in. She must look bad.

What did they do to her?

Hudson leans in and, with surprising gentleness, pulls our mate out of the backseat to cradle her in his arms. As his body turns and we get a good look at her, I feel my own body pause and lock up, just as he did. She's awake.

At least, her eyes are open. But she's not there.

A dead sort of blankness stares back at me, damning me for not being a better protector. A better alpha.

Mason scoots out of the car after Summer, and my eyes shoot straight to his red and swollen knuckles. When our eyes meet, he shakes his head at me. Not ready to talk.

Fair enough. I turn as Hudson walks by, Summer in his arms, and says he's taking her to the living room.

Nala runs out the front door, right up to Hudson, and starts sniffing Summer. She whines when her mom doesn't greet her. Like she knows something is wrong. The dog follows them inside, sticking right on his heels.

Doctor Tanner breezes past me next, though, and she shakes her head when he sees where Hudson aims for. "No, take her to her nest. I'll examine her there."

Without a word, or a backward glance, Hudson changes direction and heads for the stairs once inside. I watch everyone trail behind Hudson and follow behind them at a slower pace. Part of me is scared for her to examine Summer. To hear any bad news. I'd rather bundle Summer up in my arms and tell the good doctor her services aren't needed.

Summer is going to be *fine*.

She has to be.

But I know that's emotion and not logic talking. So when Tanner barks for all the overbearing mates to get out while she examines her patient, I don't kick up a fuss. Though, based on the looks the men are shooting at the closed bedroom door, they just might. Especially when Tanner lets Nala in the room with them before closing the door.

What feels like an hour—but is probably only twenty minutes—goes by before Tanner reappears. She walks out, medical bag in hand, and closes the bedroom door behind her.

I don't think I'm breathing.

"Physically, her body seems fine. Her blood pressure is within a normal range, her pupils are reactive, and despite a little redness and some swelling starting on her cheek, she appears untouched."

Untouched... as in?

Answering the unspoken question and horror on all of our faces, she nods. "I did a pelvic exam, and there are no signs of assault."

A shiver ripples through me at the same time a relieved breath shudders out. Mason, Maverick, and Hudson all look equally nauseous but reassured.

"However, she is still unresponsive. I'll send her blood work out to see exactly what was given to her. But there are no traces of the passion pack drug in the mouth swab I took. So it wasn't ingested. It was likely an injection this time. I've not seen any side effects of it to this extent. It could be that she was given too much. I won't know until the tests come back. For

now, I'll give her some medication to help counteract any amphetamines in her system. They won't reverse her condition, but they'll stop it from spreading or continuing to wreak havoc. A nurse will be here every morning to give her an IV drip for fluids and start a TPN bag to make sure she gets nutrients."

"If it wasn't ingested, then Tatem didn't put anything in her food," I frown. "How did they get her out of the restaurant then? She looked drugged in the video." The question isn't meant for anyone. It's more for me to piece together the puzzle, to make sense of what happened.

"I'm not sure. Regardless, she's awake. But despite her pupils responding to stimuli, *she* is unresponsive. Truthfully, I'm not sure what the full extent is yet, but I'd recommend taking things slow around her until we do. One person with her at a time so she isn't overwhelmed with your scents. Other than that, try to keep things as normal as you can. Talk to her when you're with her. I'll call you as soon as I know more."

She glances around, waiting to see if we have any questions. But we're all too stunned to talk. So she walks out.

Without a word, Hudson goes into the nest and shuts the door behind him.

"I guess he's taking the first shift," Mason mutters offhandedly, his eyes unfocused and staring off into space.

What the hell happened out there?

When the rest of us walk downstairs, Maverick's phone rings. He frowns at the screen but picks it up. "James? What's wrong?"

I'm too far away to hear exactly what's being said, but as I walk closer, I think I hear James say Tatem's name on the other end.

"Okay. Yeah. Wait, please. Thanks for calling." Then he hangs up and looks at me. "They arrested Tatem. After what Amanda said about Tatem possibly being involved, some agents went to RJs to question the kitchen staff again. They asked about Tatem specifically this time. One of the workers said she went to the bathroom for a second before coming back and throwing a needle into the trash bin in the kitchen. They found the needle, and they're dusting it for her fingerprints. She'll likely be charged when they come back, but they're about to interrogate her. James said he had them wait to see if you wanted to be there for it."

"Me? Why?" I ask, shocked.

"You're pack alpha. She's your ex. You could be useful if they need to use you to get a confession from her."

My body locks up in surprise. Determination courses through me.

Oh, she'll confess. If I have to flirt or beat it out of her. She'll sign that confession before the night is up.



Turns out I didn't need to do either. By the time I got to the station, they had already confronted her with the dirty syringe. The damning piece of evidence, and she folded like a lawn chair when they offered her a plea deal. Five years with a chance at parole in half that time if she testifies against Pack Monroe on the stand.

I saw the defiance in her eyes, the indignation, until they said if she didn't, they'd charge her with kidnapping, assault and battery, bodily harm using a chemical agent, and anything else they could think of. That she'd be lucky to get out in twenty years when they were done with her.

I almost begged them to let her rot for the whole twenty, but I know she's not the white whale. Pack Monroe, with all their connections and money, are going to be harder to put behind bars. They need all the evidence and testimony against them that they can gather.

So, on the other side of the one-way glass at one of the interrogation rooms, I watch my ex confess to her involvement in hurting my mate. My blood boils with each word she utters.

"They came into my restaurant one day and told me who they were. The woman—Jade—said that their omega ran away from them. Was shackled up with another pack, and they just wanted her back. They showed me the mate marks they all had. Said that Summer was their mate. They knew I was Brooklyn's girlfriend—"

"Ex," I mutter under my breath. My arms are crossed as I stand there glaring at Tatem who can't see me.

"— and they thought I'd be able to talk to her. To convince her that Summer was just using her. They said they'd do anything to get her back. To get Brooklyn back for me."

A dazed expression crosses her face, and I recoil.

How did I never see how fucking crazy she is?

I feel so blind. Foolish.

“Tell me about what happened yesterday,” the agent across from her demands.

Yesterday, because it’s currently three in the morning. A new day. Yet I’m wide awake. Fury boils the exhaustion from my system.

Tatem’s eyes refocus, and she scowls. “I saw *her* come in with a big alpha. To my restaurant. Probably another man she was trying to seduce. So I called Jade to tell her Summer was there. She told me to keep an eye on her, and they’d be there shortly. They came around the back entrance and asked me to help them. They handed me the syringe. Said it was a mild sedative and that they’d be waiting in the back alley.” She shrugs. “I saw her go to the bathroom and followed her.”

I don’t stick around to hear anything else. She confessed. That’s enough for me.

So I leave the station, nodding to James on my way out, and go home to my mate.

TWENTY-FIVE

MASON

“THEY SAY that hindsight is twenty-twenty. But it’s not really. That’s a misleading fucking cliché. It could be, I guess. But it’s only twenty-twenty if you’ve got an honest, unbiased outlook on the past. Otherwise, you’re just making the same mistakes over and over again.” I look at Summer. Those big brown eyes I love so much—the ones that are usually staring back into mine with love and acceptance—are drilling holes into the wall. It wouldn’t surprise me if she didn’t even recognize my scent, much less realize I’m here talking to her.

When Doctor Tanner suggested only having one of our scents in here at a time so we didn’t overload her senses, a niggler of hope had wormed its way into my heart. Doctor Tanner is extremely accomplished in her field and has been working specifically with the passion pack drug for long enough to know her shit. If she was talking like we’d get our mate back, it must be true.

But it’s been two weeks of us taking turns with her, talking to her, and laying in the nest with her, and she hasn’t even looked any of us in the eye. Just as Doctor Tanner said, a nurse has been by to administer fluids every morning. She comes, changes the IV and vitamin bags, and leaves. But there hasn’t been any change.

At this point, I’m not even talking *to Summer*.

It’s more so like I’m expressing my thoughts out loud, just so she can hear my voice. Sort of like mothers talking to a baby in their belly. The baby isn’t going to remember anything she says, but maybe, just maybe, they remember the mother’s voice.

Maybe it soothes them.

“Hindsight... I thought a lot about that after they threw me to the curb.

For you, I guess. My hindsight definitely wasn't twenty-twenty. I circled the drain for months. Spiraling into depression, sinking deeper into it each day. Feeling like I was an unlovable beta. Something no pack would ever want. Not when they could have an omega instead. If my hindsight was twenty-twenty, I would have seen them dumping me for what it was. A fucking *blessing*. A reprieve from the mountains of emotional abuse they buried me under. I wouldn't have had any room for depression, because I would have been too busy thanking the Goddess for blessing me." I take a breath and let it out. A hopeless sigh. With a glance down at my no longer red or injured knuckles, I wish I'd gotten another swing in.

"But then, it was a curse, too. Since it left you vulnerable to them. Goddess, Summer. What I wouldn't give to have stopped them from ever crossing paths with you. Even if that meant never finding you myself. If I could stop them from getting their hands on you—the first time *and* this time—I'd do it. I'd be happy to never have had the pleasure of accepting your mate bond if it meant you were happy, loved, and *safe* the way you deserve to be. Not this." Tears burn my eyes while I swallow the painful lump in my throat. With gentle hands, I grab her face and turn her head up to look at me. Her eyes are level with mine, but she's staring right through me.

"I hope you're in there somewhere. I hope to the Goddess you can hear me. Please forgive me. For not being there for you. For not realizing sooner who had you. For not caring enough about them two years ago to make sure they weren't abusing someone else. Please forgive me for not being enough."

A tear escapes and falls down my cheek into my severely overgrown scruff. I drop my forehead to hers, just breathing in her muted scent. Fucking drugs. Taking away even that. Her usual warm gingerbread scent is masked by the pills Tanner is administering to try to counteract the toxic overload of the passion pack cocktail those pieces of shit gave my mate.

I place a chaste kiss on her lips, feeling the chapped texture of them, before pulling back. Just as I do, a small hit of honey spikes around us. My eyes jerk to Summer's.

This is the first reaction of any kind I've noticed since we found her. "Hey, baby. Look at me." My heart speeds up when her eyes focus on me. "That's it, that's perfect." In less than ten seconds, they lose focus again. A breath stutters out of her, and she closes her eyes like the effort it took to focus on me exhausted her. Took what little energy she had and sucked it dry. But that's okay...

A goofy smile stretches across my face as I bundle her in my arms and lay us back against the mountain of pillows so she's sprawled across my chest.

It's okay because she *looked at me*.



“What the hell are you smiling for?” Hudson grumbles, annoyed at my joy as he climbs into the nest to take his shift. I get it. There hasn't been a lot to smile about recently.

I shrug. “Just...hopeful.” My smile doesn't falter even at his frown. With a little rock, I pull myself up and stand to leave. I don't tell him what I saw. Mostly because I don't want to take any of the excitement he's going to feel when he notices she's coming back around. But a little because he's been a grumpy pain in my ass for weeks... Well, that and he let Nala shit in my room the other day and left it for me to clean up.

Jackass.

That dog *still* hates me for not giving her a bite of my steak that first night.

Whispered voices come from the living room, so I follow the noise to see Maverick and Brooklyn leaning against one of the floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the backyard. They're staring out at the grassy field and talking quietly enough that I can't hear what they're saying. Based on their relaxed body language though, it isn't something that's going to raise my blood pressure.

“Ava's been calling nonstop, asking to see her,” Brooklyn says in the same low tone. Everyone's walking around this house whispering like we've just buried Summer, rather than her simply existing in the other room.

Not me. Not anymore.

She's coming back.

“Let her.” I shrug, talking at a normal volume.

“What? She's not ready for that.” Brooklyn argues, crossing her arms with a frown, turning her body more so she's facing me. With a glance at Mav, I can see he's conflicted. He doesn't want to disagree with me, but he's

on the same wavelength as Brooklyn on this.

“Tanner said to keep things as normal for her as we can. Normal is her best friend. She may not be up to playing fetch with Nala, but she can sit in the same room as her friend. Let her come.”



Two hours later, Ava walked in and went straight for the nest to see Summer. There was barely a passing glance to us, or a nod hello. She's still in there. Has been for at least twenty minutes, while the rest of us sit around the living room and wait for her to come back out, so one of us can go back in.

Probably Maverick, since Hudson just had his turn, and I was before him. Though, Hudson may try to go back anyway. It has been hard to keep him out; Brooklyn has had to pull rank so someone else can get a turn, and we aren't overwhelming her with multiple scents at once. Per the good doctor's orders.

Footsteps on the stairs have all of us swiveling around to see Ava coming down.

“Anything?” Brooklyn asks, hopeful that seeing her best friend might elicit a reaction.

Ava meets all of our eyes and shakes her head. “I'm going to head out. Lots to do today at the bar.” Her eyes drop from mine when I frown at her, and then she's out the door a split second later.

“That was weird, right?” Hudson asks, making a face at her hasty retreat.

“Yeah,” I answer. Definitely weird. She shot out of here like her ass was on fire.

Why was she acting so shifty?

“Who knows,” Mav shrugs, “I'm going up.” Brooklyn has to shoot daggers at Hudson when he looks like he's about to protest. He huffs, folds his arms across his chest, and sits back against the couch cushion again.

We all sit in silence for a second, Hudson pouting, Brooklyn flipping her phone over and over in her hand, and me tapping my foot incessantly before I give up and go find the TV remote. Something to fill the silence and pass the time, rather than us all commiserating when there isn't anything more we can

be doing.

Thirty minutes later, footsteps thud from upstairs, and Mav's frantic voice is screaming at us from the top of the steps, not even bothering to come all the way down. "Get up here! Now!"

There's thudding like he's running away, a pause, and then he's running back, yelling again. "And bring water!"

Brooklyn, Hudson, and I all jump to our feet at the same time. A worried, half-hopeful look is exchanged before they're darting up the stairs after Mav.

I'll get the water then.

Snagging a bottle from the fridge, I'm sprinting for the stairs, too. When I get upstairs, my heart drops into my stomach when I see Brooklyn standing frozen in the doorway to Summer's nest. Her hand is resting on her throat, and tears stream down her cheeks.

No.

No, no, no.

My feet carry me to the door, and I prepare myself for the worst. But tears build in my eyes, too, when I see Summer propped up on a dozen pillows, smiling softly at me.

Hudson and Maverick are on either side of her, hands fluttering uselessly around her like they want to help but have no idea what she needs and are trying not to disturb the IV in her arm.

"How are you feeling?" I ask in a daze, walking into the room and crawling up in the nest so I can sit next to her, too. Gingerbread hits me right away, and I take a big whiff, relishing that her scent has returned. It's still a little muted, not quite to her usual level, but it's *there*.

And she's smiling at me. *Seeing* me.

"Like I got hit by a truck," her usually sweet, lyrical voice comes out raspy. Ragged.

"Here," I offer, untwisting the cap and handing the bottle over to Hudson so he can help her take a sip.

She does, wincing slightly on the first drink. But she finishes a few decent sips before she hands it back to Hudson with a grateful smile. "What's wrong?" She frowns as she surely gets a good look at the stress lining all our eyes and shoulders.

Shock shoots through me. I didn't even think about the possibility that she wouldn't remember anything.

"What do you remember?" Brooklyn hedges, finally walking into the

room and perching delicately on the edge of the mattress.

Summer's brows knit together, and she looks off into space for so long that my heart rate spikes, and I worry she's getting worse again. "... eating lunch with Wells. Going to the bathroom."

"Anything else?" Maverick asks softly. A small shake of her head.

Brooklyn, Maverick, Hudson, and I all look at each other. Nobody wants to be the one to tell her.

"What?" she asks, fidgeting with the blanket covering her legs, and worry marring her face.

"It's nothing to worry about just yet. Let's call the nurse and get this IV out of you. You need to rest," Brooklyn says, wringing her fingers.

Summer frowns at her and looks around, but we're all avoiding her eyes. Nobody wants to be the bearer of bad news. To tell our mate we couldn't protect her.

"Tell me," she insists.

Brooklyn stares at Summer for the longest time, sighs, and then bites the bullet. She tells Summer everything that happened. About Tatem, Pack Monroe, the OPS agents, and the past two weeks.

Tears are streaming down Summer's face as absolute devastation coats her features.

"Hey, hey, hey. It's okay. You're alright now. Everything's going to be alright." Hudson takes her hands in his and rubs the chill from them.

"You don't understand," Summer chokes out between tears.

"Okay. So tell us. Help us understand." He brings her hand to his mouth and gives it a gentle kiss in encouragement.

We sit in silence for a few minutes while Summer gathers herself. The courage, maybe. Or the strength. She must be so tired. Emotionally. Physically.

But then she starts talking in a whispered voice. "When Maverick took me to get tattooed, I got a call from Doctor Tanner. She ran my bloodwork the night I thought you guys had... Well, that night."

She moves on quickly, talking about the night she thought we were drugging her.

"Earlier in the day, I had an appointment with her because I thought... I thought I might be pregnant. We didn't use any protection during my heat." Pink tinges her cheeks as she looks at a now eerily still Hudson and Maverick. Hope fills my chest.

A baby.

We've talked about kids before. All of us were in agreement that we wanted them someday.

Is Summer?

"But she called me with the results of that blood work when we were at the tattoo parlor. Not only was I not pregnant, but I likely wouldn't ever be. The drugs they were giving me were destroying my FSH levels."

The mood in the nest goes from wary and worried, to sad, to red-hot anger. If they weren't already behind bars, I'd hunt them down and end them myself.

"Five percent. That's how likely I was to get pregnant before. Before this new drug they gave me. That's probably zero now," she cries, the tears starting up again. Hudson pulls her into his lap and rocks her back and forth, purring for her. Trying to soothe the heartache. I watch as our big, goofy alpha looks up to the ceiling to stop his own tears from falling.

Tears that his mate is suffering so much, or for a future he envisioned that won't ever happen anymore, I don't know. He was the most vocal about wanting a kid someday.

"Hey, it's going to be okay. We'll figure it out. We'll find the best doctors, the best fertility specialists. Anything you want, we'll make it happen," Brooklyn declares. Summer peeks her head out from where she was hidden in Hudson's shirt.

"What if—What if I can't ever get pregnant?"

She thinks we'll leave her. I want to scream at Pack Moore—Monroe—for making her feel so unloved.

"Summer, listen to me." Wary, warm brown eyes meet mine. "Even if you can't ever have kids, even if we spend tens of thousands of dollars for a chance that never happens, nobody here is going to love you any less." Shock ripples through our three alphas when Summer looks around like she thinks they'll disagree with me.

"Of course not!" Hudson growls. "You're stuck with us now. Forever."

Nods of agreement from Brooklyn and Maverick. But she meets my eyes again, and I say, "Pack."

A promise from one fucked-up, insecure, former abusee to another. One word that I know she struggles to accept, and maybe always will. Like I will. Because healing takes time. People regress. There will be bad days between all the good. But one thing she'll always be able to count on is us.

Her eyes shine as she looks at me and whispers it back like a promise. A prayer.

“Pack.”

EPILOGUE 1

SUMMER

I'VE BEEN BACK to work for a few weeks now. Jerrick was ecstatic to have me back. Said that the temp they hired to cover for me in my...*absence*...was awful. Unorganized, unmotivated, and completely useless. Apparently, she spent more time taking selfies at my desk than actually working. Truth be told, I was excited to be back, too.

I love my mates... I do. More than my own life. But holy hellfire, they were driving me crazy with all the coddling.

I get it.

What it must have been like to nurse me back from basically a braindead comatose; it would have sent me into a depression spiral if it were one of them instead of me. That's why I gave them some leeway for the first month after I came to.

Despite feeling ready to come back after a few weeks of sitting around the house doing nothing, I didn't push the issue.

Besides, I did need the help for a minute.

Getting around that first week was difficult. According to Doctor Tanner, my brain had been working so hard to survive; it essentially shut down to preserve its strength. In fact, she said she was surprised I was so alert to begin with. I improved at a rate that I absolutely should not have. But she ran some tests, and everything came back fine. So fine, that she went into a little bit of a medical tailspin.

Hardly any drug left in your system, she had said before getting a slightly suspicious look in her eyes, and then we didn't hear from her for a minute. And when she came back, she didn't bring up my speedy recovery again.

Walking again after existing like a veritable vegetable was a learning

curve. I teetered around the house with the help of each of my mates until I got my sea legs back. Well, and Nala of course. Hudson said she wouldn't leave my side for anything except to use the bathroom and eat. They eventually stopped letting her in the nest because she would growl at them anytime they came in to sleep with me.

When I started back at work, each day I came home she was whining and waiting at the door for me and then stayed by my side until bedtime. After the first week though, she got used to my absence again. While she still waits at the door for me when she hears cars pull in, she no longer whines.

Speaking of getting home to my overprotective baby, I glance at the clock to see it's coming up on five now. It's been a slow day, and Jerrick has no more meetings on his schedule, so I pop my head into his office and ask if he needs anything else from me today.

"No, I'm okay. You can head home. I'll see you tomorrow." He smiles, and I do my best to smile back. It feels a little forced, though. I've only been back for a few weeks, and already I feel like something is missing. It's not being away from home. I'm happy to be kept busy again. But after everything, coming back to an assistant job does not feel as satisfying as I thought it would. I've been job hunting for the last few days, and I think I've found something I'm interested in that is in my wheelhouse. That application was submitted last night. The people pleaser in me doesn't want to tell Jerrick though until I know it's a sure thing. Not after how supportive he's been. So I hold back.

"Yeah, see you tomorrow."

Wells is waiting for me when I hit the sidewalk, the passenger door held open. Houston and Damien have already taken other jobs. Since we don't really need them anymore. Truth be told, I never was that close with them, so their absence is not a painful topic.

Thinking about Wells leaving...is a different story. The two of us have grown as close as brother and sister. I think he's feeling a little miserable about having to leave, too, because he should have left weeks ago. But he insists he needs to stick around until Pack Monroe is actually prosecuted and put behind bars. Their hearing keeps getting pushed back, but their next one is in a few weeks. Our lawyer says they were convinced to plead out rather than take it to trial, thank the Goddess. *Due to overwhelming evidence*, she'd said.

So I'll let Wells stick around until then because I'm going to miss the big

bastard, but I won't let him waste a minute more once those bars slam shut on my old life. Figuratively and literally.

We're stuck on I-55 in rush hour traffic when my stomach spasms.

"Oof," I grunt, bowing over and pushing a fist into my abdomen to lessen the pain.

Is it already time for my heat again?

I try to count back the days on when my last one was, but another contraction hits me.

"Fuck," Wells growls out when my perfume saturates the car. He may be like my brother, but he's still an alpha, and I'm still an omega about to go into heat. His knuckles tighten on the steering wheel, and he checks each of his mirrors, turning his body to check for blind spots before gunning it when the light turns green. Weaving in and out of cars and being a complete jackass, honking his horn and flashing his lights to get cars out of his way faster. If I didn't feel so bad for the way his alpha pheromones must be riding him like crazy, I'd probably laugh.

It's not even that I'm in pain. Goddess, I'll probably not even go into full-blown heat until tomorrow, but this man clearly wants to get me the heck out of his car. Another wave hits me. This time I feel slick drip onto my thighs. The sound of teeth grinding pulls my focus. A little vein is popping out of Wells' forehead to match his grating molars. With a flick of his thumb, the hands-free phone sounds through the car, and he grits out, "Call Hudson."

He picks up after two rings. "Hey, man. Everything okay?"

"Summer is going into heat. Can you meet us at the end of the driveway?" The strain in his voice is clear as day. Which is probably why Hudson curses.

"Yeah. How far are you?" Hudson asks, and there is rustling on the other end of the line while he moves around.

"Ten minutes. Maybe sooner." A car honks at us as Wells cuts off yet another car. My right hand is clutching the door handle for dear life, while my left is still fisted against my stomach.

"Okay. We'll meet you down there. Am I on speaker?" he asks.

"I'm here," I respond, knowing he's asking if I can hear him.

"You doing alright, pretty girl?" Concern drips from every word.

"I'm okay. It's not too bad yet. Wells is just a big alpha baby." At the word *baby* another wave hits so it comes out a little breathless.

His answering chuckle sounds a little tense and surely just choked out for

my benefit. "I'll see you guys in a minute then. Love you."

I'll never get tired of hearing any of my mates say those words. Warmth flows through me, a little perfume leaking out, and causing Wells to grumble.

"Love you, too," I whisper back to Hudson.

"Asshole," Wells mumbles as he hangs up the phone. I smack the boulder he calls a shoulder for talking about my mate that way, even though I know he's half-joking. Of all my mates, Wells got the closest to Hudson. Something about their personalities meshes really well.

Exactly eight minutes later, Wells comes to a screeching stop in front of the already-opened gate where Hudson and Brooklyn are waiting outside Brooklyn's Audi. Wells rolled the windows down as soon as we got outside of traffic, and I think that helped curb his pesky pheromones because the vein in his temple looks significantly less pronounced. The locks disengage before he comes to a complete stop, not even putting the car in park.

"Thanks, Wells. Sorry about this." My hand gestures along my body to basically apologize for everything in general.

"It's okay, Summer. No offense, but please get out of my car," he huffs, smiling at me in a tortured way that draws a laugh from both of us.

My door opens, letting in a draft that blows my scent around even more. Brooklyn stands half-crouched with a hand extended to pull me out or lend some strength if I need it. "You okay, sweets?"

Placing my hand in hers, I pull myself out of the car, shut the door behind me, and wave off Wells. Not needing to be told twice, he takes off down the way we came, all four windows still down. Which I'm sure will stay down until the omega heat hormones are no longer drenching every pocket of the cab of his car.

Another cramp hits, making my intestines feel like someone reached in and grabbed them in a vice-like grip. Brooklyn's small hand rubs my back in soft, soothing strokes. The pain fades again, allowing me a moment's reprieve to stand and walk toward the Audi.

I slide into the backseat, Brooklyn right behind me, as Hudson drives us back. Slick is all but coating my thighs now, soaking my work pants. The pain is starting to become more constant. Probably due to the fact that I'm around my alphas and not getting stuffed full with knots.

I'm past the days when I didn't feel like I could ask for affection.

My pack has done nothing but shower me with love since I've known them; so I don't hesitate to take what I need anymore.

It's all about growth, right?

The driveway isn't too long, but I don't want to wait. The way Hudson and Brooklyn smell... I'm going to go crazy. So I follow my instincts and swing a leg over, straddling Brooklyn. Her hands go to my hips without any hesitation, while mine go to each side of her face, pulling her lips to mine.

The kiss isn't frenzied and out of control. It's slow and deep. Passionate. My hips start to rock back and forth, trying to find friction. Brooklyn pulls me tight against her, hands roaming up my back until they reach my neck, where she grabs a handful of my hair at the nape and yanks. The movement forces my mouth from hers and my head back, granting her all the access she wants.

Wasting no time, she latches onto my neck, trailing kisses from my shoulder all the way up to my ear. Then she kisses back down to the junction between my shoulder and neck and bites, not breaking the skin.

"Ahhh," I moan, warmth spreading through my thighs as a mini orgasm rocks through me. When my walls stop fluttering, I grind against her as best I can, begging for more.

"I can't wait to leave my mark on you. Right here." She bites again in the same spot, slick pouring from me. "Right where the whole world can see it. See that you. Are. Mine," she growls out, biting a little harder, soothing it with a gentle kiss right after. I whimper, nodding frantically.

"Fuck," Hudson growls from the front seat. I turn to see him rubbing his erection through his jeans, making my mouth water.

The car whips into the garage, and Hudson yanks the back door open to pull me from Brooklyn's lap. I cling to him in desperation, my arms and legs wrapping around his body so tight that if he dropped his firm grip on my ass, I wouldn't move an inch.

He fuses his lips to mine, kissing me without stopping to catch his breath. Vaguely, I hear the garage door closing behind us, and we're moving through the house in the next second. It's pretty impressive, actually. Not once does he stop kissing me to look where he's going, navigating us through the pack house to my nest.

When we make it inside, Hudson throws me none too gently onto the mattress, following me down. Brooklyn shuts the door behind us, and I watch her reach behind her back to drag the zipper down on her dress. It pools to the floor around her ankles, leaving her standing there in a pale pink, lacey bra and panties set. More perfume leaks out of me at the sight, and her nostrils

flare.

Hudson reacts to my scent by yanking me by my hips and fitting himself at my core, thrusting against my sex.

Pleasure erupts as his cock tortures my clit through two layers of clothes. It must bother him as much as it does me, the barriers, because he rips my pants off. The button goes flying somewhere in a mess of blankets. Cool air hits my thighs as my pants are shed. Hudson doesn't bother taking his own off yet before he ducks down, throwing my legs over his shoulders, and pulling my panties to the side.

The first swipe of his tongue against my clit has me gasping out his name. The heat hormones start taking over little by little as he eats me with a precision I'll thank the Goddess for later.

Two orgasms later, my head is starting to feel a little foggy with pleasure, my body is limp, and the tremors in my legs are constant.

Brooklyn places a hand on Hudson's shoulder pulling him back. Part of me blanches as he growls at her, at his *head alpha*, but she just rolls her eyes. "It's my turn," she states, pointing him toward my head. "Switch."

A grumble is all she gets in response, but I sweeten the pot for him. "I want you in my mouth, alpha."

That gets him moving, scrambling to pull his pants off, and crawling on his knees to get to my face. The ceiling in my nest is lower than any other room, so Hudson's head would be touching it if he were to stand straight up.

Boxers and jeans discarded, my mouth waters at his cock as he strokes it inches from my mouth. The head is close to purple, veins prominent, the whole thing begging for release. His knot is already fully inflated, and my core clenches just thinking about it locking into me.

A bead of precum leaks out of his tip. I dart my tongue out to lap it up.

"Mmm," I moan and take him into my mouth, chasing more of his flavor. Brooklyn takes Hudson's place in between my legs and sucks my clit into her mouth. Just as she does, Hudson's cock nudges the back of my throat, making me whimper at the sensory overload.

"Fuck," Hudson hisses at my whimper, feeling the vibrations. "That's it, pretty girl. Take my cock. Such a good little omega."

Slick drips from me at his praise, and my pussy clenches around nothing. Goddess, I need more. Need to be filled. I spread my legs wide, tilting my hips up in invitation. Brooklyn's laugh is smug. "She really liked that. Didn't you, cherub? Soaking the sheets. You like being told how perfect you are.

Made for us.”

While she’s talking, Brooklyn shoves two fingers into me, hard and deep, dragging along that perfect spot. In and out, she keeps up a brutal pace. Hudson, seeing her pace, matches it. Rough hands grab my hair into a makeshift ponytail and pull back. With my head at the angle he wants it, Hudson fucks into my face. Taking no prisoners, his cock hits the back of my throat over and over. I try to open my throat and take everything he gives me, all the while Brooklyn’s fingers don’t stop. Tears prick my eyes, and it’s getting hard to breathe. The sensory overload is too much, and that tell-tale warmth spreads through me. My legs shake uncontrollably until my whole body locks up, and I jump head-first off the cliff.

“That’s it, cherub. Squeeze my fingers. So fucking beautiful,” she grunts, still pushing in and out of me as my pussy spasms and spasms around her. I moan long and low around Hudson’s cock, causing a chain reaction. A second later, he groans and holds my head still while he spills himself inside me.

I swallow him down and then take a gasping breath, one I’d been desperate for. Hudson continues to kneel in front of me, so his dick is still in full view. Gingerbread and nutmeg permeate my enclosed nest as I get a good look at his still very hard cock. It doesn’t even look like it’s come at all—still red and angry, waiting to knot something.

No, not something...me.

My perfume is so strong right now, I almost choke on it. The look in Brooklyn and Hudson’s eyes tells me they’re holding back a rut with everything in them. If I were to guess, they want to mark me properly before letting that side take over.

I’m about to ask Hudson to knot me when I feel something pushing back inside me. But it doesn’t feel like fingers. Looking down, my eyes pop wide open at the sight of Brooklyn in a strap-on.

“I told you I had a toy I wanted to use. This one is double-sided. So you’re going to be a good omega, and let me fuck you, aren’t you?” Her hips snap forward, and we both moan. Each thrust she gives me, shoves the dildo deeper in her, too. The look on her face as her eyes roll back in her head pushes me over the edge again. I’ve come so hard already, the dildo she’s using glides in and out of me with ease, soaked with my slick.

“Flip over, Brookie,” Hudson says, voice near a growl as he crawls toward Brooklyn. Without any question, she complies. An embarrassing *yip*

leaves my mouth as I go flying through the air, landing on top of Brooklyn, who has laid on her back. The momentum shoves me forward hard, pushing the dildo so deep it's almost painful; for both of us.

Our cries of pleasure bleed together, followed by a loud *crack*.

A harsh stinging sensation hits me. Looking back, I turn just in time to see Hudson bring his hand down on my ass again, right on the same spot. I gasp, squeezing the toy inside me so hard Brooklyn's thrusting stops. On shaky arms, I lift myself off her chest, wanting to lean back and ride my alpha.

"Uh uh." Hudson pushes me back down. I go without much fight, my entire body already feeling like mush. "I've got something else in mind for you, mate." There is a slight pressure as he rubs his thumb around my hole before pushing in. "I'm going to fuck you here while Brookie gets her fill. Then I'll take my turn in that pretty pussy, and you'll take my knot like a good omega."

My head is jerking up and down so fast that the room goes blurry.

Goddess, yes. All of that. Please.

I think I moan out little whispered pleas. I must because a second later, he's scooping up some of my slick from around my pussy, using it as lube as he works two fingers into me. A few more pumps and then a third finger joins, stretching me.

I'm grateful because none of my mates are lacking in the dick department.

After a few minutes, he pulls out, leaving me feeling empty again. That doesn't last long though, as his head replaces where his fingers were. Inch by inch, he pushes in, groaning as he goes. All the prep in the world could not compare to how thick and hard he feels inside me. When he's seated to the hilt, he grabs hold of my hips in a firm grip. At the same time, Brooklyn decides it's a good time to start moving again. She plants her heels as firmly as she can on the soft mattress and thrusts up. As she's coming down, Hudson thrusts forward.

Where she pulls back, he pushes forward.

When she thrusts up, he pulls out.

Their pace is flawless, someone always deep inside me, setting a perfect pace. Once they get into a good rhythm, it's almost as if they hit a pre-rut. They're fucking me like savages.

Hard. Fast. Brutal.

It's too much and not enough. I'm sobbing with pleasure, release after release hitting me. Hudson pulls my hair back in a tight fist, pushing my head down while using it as leverage. My neck is bared at Brooklyn, and suddenly, all I want is for her to bite me. So I pull my neck back even more, leaning down so she can see exactly where I want her.

"Bite, alpha. Please." My words can barely be heard over the grunting, slapping of skin, and squelching of my slick pouring over the toy in us. Still, she must hear me because she leans forward and kisses my neck.

Thank the God—

She pulls back.

I growl.

"Bite!" I repeat, somewhere between a whine and an angry demand.

Her answering laugh is husky. Alluring. "What was that, my beautiful mate? Did you want something?"

She's taunting me. Teasing me when my control is nonexistent. Even if the heat hormones weren't riding me as hard as they are, I'd still be near begging.

As it is, I'd lick a dirty toilet to get her mark on me.

Funny thing is, I know she wants it as bad as I do. Since the day I came home with tattoos covering my old marks—one they all got, too, after I was awake and well enough to be left alone—they've all taken to kissing and biting, teasing me where they've said they want their own marks. Leaving hickeys and bruises as temporary marks until we could do it for real. So I know just how close she is to snapping, too. And I use it.

I lean down, Hudson loosening his grip and slowing his thrusts just enough that I have control over my body again. Brooklyn turns her head, granting me access when she sees I'm trying to kiss her neck. Planting gentle, barely there kisses, I work my way up her neck before biting her ear. With my lips still around her lobe, I whisper, "I want you, Brooklyn. Mark me. Make me yours. Show me how a *true* alpha mates her omega."

The growl that rips from her is...animalistic. Primal. There's no other way for how she grips my chin in a fierce hold, yanks my head to the side, and sinks her teeth into my neck.

Brilliant white stars erupt from behind my eyes. Both mine and Brooklyn's orgasms hit us at the same time. In the next second, still reeling from the pleasure and shaking off the brief hint of pain from the puncture wounds in my neck, Brooklyn's voice finds its way into my head. Soft at

first, like being at the far end of a tunnel and trying to make out who is on the other side. But clearer and clearer she becomes, like we're jogging toward each other in that tunnel, ready for that sweet embrace when we meet in the middle.

Just as I start to come down from the mating bond high, and I can hear my alpha clear as day, I gasp at a stinging sensation on my breast, and it starts all over again. There is just enough clarity between all the dizziness and bright lights that I look down to see Hudson lapping at his mate mark. Right on my breast. Inches from my nipple.

A mate bond requires attention for days after. So this man will be licking and sucking on my breast to "heal my bondmark." I can't tell whether I want to laugh or smack him on his absurdly handsome head.

My turn, a voice in my head says. In the same breath, Hudson pulls me off Brooklyn and tosses me on my back. There is an embarrassing squelch when he does, and I look over to see the toy soaked with my juices.

Jackass, Brooklyn's voice shoots back, distracting me. Their voices are easier to distinguish between now that I'm focusing on who is talking.

Get over it, Hudson laughs back, positioning himself between my legs and sinking inside with ease. His knot nudges against my opening, so I spread my legs wider to take him in, but he pulls back.

"Not yet," he grunts, pulling back and pushing back in with shallow, slow thrusts. A small whimper escapes me. "Shhhh, pretty girl. I'll give you what you need. I just want to savor this a little longer." He lifts my hips up higher for a different angle and picks up the pace.

It feels so incredibly good, I don't think it could get any better until I hear praises and compliments streaming down the bond.

From both of them.

It drives me wild, so I wrap my legs around Hudson's back and, when he's thrusting back in, I yank with every muscle in my legs. Feeling his knot lock inside me as we both shout our release is absolutely worth it.

Hudson collapses on top of me, both of us breathing heavily. Sleep starts to drag me under, my eyes feel heavy, but I sense Brooklyn lying down beside us. Hudson turns so I'm sandwiched between them, his knot still locked in me. Brooklyn kisses the bond mark she gave me, making a small orgasm sweep through me, and causing Hudson to grunt out another release.

"Sleep, Summer. We've got all week, just us."

So I do.



“I don’t care who it is, Mason. I’m not fucking leaving her to take a phone call.” I hear Brooklyn whispering, but I’m still too tired to open my eyes. Or do anything beyond listening and trying to comprehend what’s happening. An arm around my waist tightens, cocooning me in a soft warm embrace.

Mason or Maverick or somebody must respond to her, but their voices are too low for me to hear. Brooklyn stiffens slightly beside me before cursing and slowly peeling herself from my back. I think I hear her mutter something along the lines of *fucking vile cretins*. The space at my back becomes cold with her absence. A distressed mewl leaves me in my half-sleep state, and a second later, a much larger body presses against me. Sleep takes me once more.



Pain in my abdomen wakes me up. I’m not sure how long I’ve been sleeping, but Brooklyn is nowhere to be found, and Hudson has been pushed to the far end of the nest where he snores so loud I’m surprised *that* isn’t what woke me.

Mason and Maverick now take up residence on either side of me. I should be happy, having them here. But all my omega is focused on is that one of her mates is missing. The pain flares again, making me grunt and push a fist against my stomach to soothe it. The bite mark on my neck feels hot, angry, and tender to the touch. Whether the pain is subconscious, or it really does need to be tended to by my alpha, I’m not sure.

The pain in my stomach hammers in a constant, dreadful crescendo that has now advanced on to a headache.

Why is everyone sleeping in my nest during my heat?

Deciding to be a pushy, needy omega, I grind my hips back against Maverick. Somehow, my alpha is hard even in his sleep. It must be the

cloying omega pheromones. Either way, it works out to my benefit. Everyone may be asleep, but at least they've all been smart enough to assume I'd want them completely naked and wrapped around me. I never put clothes back on after my tryst with Hudson and Brooklyn. Nothing separates us as I toy with Maverick to wake him up. The skin-to-skin contact and promise of pain relief soothes the ache for Brooklyn just a little.

The arm banded around my stomach tightens in a way that I know means I've woken him. *Finally.*

Giddy anticipation courses through me when Maverick meets my grinding with some of his own.

"Fucking hell, your scent is everywhere right now. Does my omega need something?" His deep voice sounds gravelly with sleep, but so sinful I shiver.

"Just my alpha," I purr back. A growl rumbles from his chest that I feel travel through my back. In the next breath, he picks up my leg and lifts it, not over his own body, but slings it over Mason's. Fingers brush against my sex long enough for Maverick to feel how soaked and ready I am, and then he's pushing into me in one swift thrust.

"Fuuck," he murmurs, long and low. I'm too far away from Mason, the stretch in my leg feeling a little uncomfortable, so I scooch closer. Maverick follows me until the three of us can't be distinguished from each other. Just a mess of arms and legs.

The new position lets me lift my leg higher on Mason's hip, giving Maverick a deeper angle. One he takes full advantage of, thrusting in and out, his knot nudging my entrance each time.

"I'll never get tired of this, sweets. You're everything to me. You and Mason. Everything." At his words, I clench around him, slick coating my thighs.

"I love you," I pant in response, stomach tightening as I feel my orgasm build. "Both of you, I lo—"

Lips seal against mine, and I groan. With Maverick fucking me from behind, and my focus on that sensation, I hadn't even noticed Mason woke up. Warm hands hold my face against his while his tongue licks the seam of my lips, and I open for him. Mason kisses me with the kind of passion books are written about. Tender, deep strokes of his tongue that seem to match Maverick's pace inside me. The two of them...so in sync, connected, and working in my favor right now.

Just as I think that, Maverick grunts and picks up his pace.

“Aghh, yes,” I mumble against Mason’s lips. Not to be outdone, he bites my bottom lip and becomes half-wild himself. I snake my hand down between us—the best I can with how close we all are—and stroke Mason from tip to base. Gently, he grabs my hand and moves it to his shoulder. Confused, I let it go and hold his shoulder for some semblance of control while Maverick continues to move inside me.

Mason hikes my leg higher on his hip and inches closer to me if that is even possible. This time, he snakes *his* hand down between us. If I thought he was going to rub my clit, I was very wrong. Pressure builds a little as he pushes two fingers inside me and fucks me with Maverick.

Groans come from Maverick and me at the move. It must drive him wild, because I feel his knot hit my entrance with a little more force, and I push back to welcome it. But Mason holds my hips still when he sees what I’m trying to do. “Don’t knot her, you bastard.”

A distressed noise escapes me. My omega does *not* like that. She’s all about her knots. “Hey, shh. You’ll be plenty full with both of us in your pussy.”

Everything goes still. There is no rustling of the sheets or slapping of skin on skin, and I realize it’s because Mason has rendered Maverick and me both speechless. Not to be deterred, Mason starts moving again, adding a third finger to the mix that has my eyes rolling back in my head. When he adds the fourth, I don’t think I can handle anymore. As an omega, we’re built to take knots, to stretch past what a beta or even alpha could. But that doesn’t stop the little bit of trepidation from sneaking in.

“Ready?” he asks, pulling his fingers out. I can feel my head do a little bit of a nod, shake combination. This makes him pause. “We don’t have to do this if you aren’t comfortable with it.”

“No, I want to,” I blurt out immediately. He looks back at me, eyes bouncing between mine, looking for a lie. Then the tip of his cock is nudging my entrance.

“You say stop, and we stop,” he says, holding a tight grip on my thigh, keeping me open for them. He thrusts a little. If I thought his fingers were a lot, I couldn’t have imagined this. Another thrust. Another inch. My breathing comes faster, panting as the pain and pleasure ride such a fine line.

Vibrations come from behind me as Maverick starts purring. Every locked-up muscle in my body loosens, and I go limp in their arms. The pain fades to a small pinch, pleasure overriding the rest. Another thrust, another

inch.

Mason's pelvis nudges mine. With wide eyes, I glance down to see he's seated to the hilt. The sight of both my mates inside me is so erotic, I feel an orgasm building, squeezing them.

They both groan, finding a rhythm where one thrusts in as the other pulls out.

"Please, please, please," I start chanting, not sure what I'm even asking for, but I feel myself heading for the edge of the cliff. Our bodies are all so close I can't even reach between our bodies to help myself along.

Just when I feel like I could cry in frustration, teeth scrape over my neck. Maverick bites down, and I detonate around them. With Hudson still snoring in the corner, I try to contain the scream that wants to tear the building down.

Instead, I follow Maverick's lead and tuck my face into Mason's neck, biting down harshly on his own neck. The moan he lets out is obscene, his body convulsing as jets of cum shoot inside me. So much from the both of them that I feel it leaking out of me and onto all of our thighs.

The three of us lie there, panting, bringing our breathing down. Mason's eyes are glazed as he goes through what I did with Hudson's and Brooklyn's bite marks. The influx of voices, the brilliant lights, and overwhelming pleasure.

Wait...

My fingers drift up to the side of my neck Maverick just marked. Where I expect my fingertips to brush against broken skin, they find none. It's smooth.

Bliss turns to worry turns to anger. Emotions are hitting me from every direction wondering why he didn't want to mark me. When everyone else has, and me to Mason. *Mason*. Maybe he only wanted to mate Ma-

"Ouch! What in the world," I huff, pain coming from my thigh. Maverick's chuckle following it. In the middle of my internal meltdown, he managed to pull out, settle between my thighs, and bite me right below my pantyline without me noticing.

"Sorry, sweets. I've had my sights set on this spot for a while. I'm going to have some fun the next few days waiting for it to heal."

"Men," I huff good-naturedly, rolling my eyes. First, Hudson on my breast, and now, this. I look over to Mason, knowing he'll roll his eyes with me at their caveman ways. But instead, a laugh slips free when I see he's fallen asleep.

“You wore him out,” Maverick chuckles, licking the broken skin of my new mark.

“Mmmhmmm,” I mumble, closing my eyes to enjoy the tingling sensation coming from his ministrations.

“He’s not the only one worn out, I see,” he whispers, crawling up to my side. Something heavy and soft is draped over my now-cooled skin, Maverick’s body presses up against my back, and everything after that goes black.

EPILOGUE 2

SUMMER

AFTER THOSE FIRST FEW DAYS, the heat pheromones kicked in full swing, and we let them. They didn't try to hold back a rut anymore, and I let myself go completely, too. Maverick gave Mason his own mate mark—not anywhere risqué like by his balls or anything. No, he put his right smack dab on Mason's neck for the whole world to see.

Nobody said it, but I know it was because Maverick wanted to make a point of showing Mason he wasn't, and never will be, ashamed of their relationship.

Or ashamed of his designation.

This world has a nasty habit of looking down on betas, which he learned all too well from Pack Monroe, and I think it was perfect that Maverick chose a visible area for his claim. So now I felt them all. All four of my mates were in my very soul, and life was finally perfect.

Well, almost perfect.

Brooklyn came back shortly after I fell asleep again that second day, very tight-lipped about what she was away dealing with. Instead, she simply apologized, tended to her mate mark on my neck, and I enjoyed the rest of the heat in blissful ignorance. That bliss had to come to an end though.

The heat broke almost exactly a week after it began. Blankets were pulled from the mattress to be washed. Which, on a normal day would drive my omega bonkers, but it smelled overwhelmingly of sex and sweat. We'd wash the blankets in there now, and just replace the nest with what was on everyone's beds currently. I'd still have their scents but in a *cleaner* way. The fan was turned on and the door propped open so it could be aired out, too. Mason grabbed his oils for another post-heat massage, to which I saw a

wonderful pattern emerging.

And amidst all the joy and domesticity, came the black cloud.

“Renee is on her way over to talk to us,” Brooklyn informs us as we’re all seated or standing around the kitchen island for a late breakfast. Melted chocolate and sweet pancake goodness fills the room in a rich aroma. The chocolate chip pancakes and fruit toppings bar was my request. I’ve always had a horrible sweet tooth after a heat. One which they did not hesitate to indulge.

“Renee? Is this about...?” The question hangs in the air. Mason trying his hardest not to say their names, lest it conjure them I suppose. He’s had a lot of trouble talking about them around me since I woke up. Guilt still eats at him for not being able to connect the dots on who Pack Monroe was to me. Or, Pack Moore, as he knew them. Just a lie they told him, to make sure he couldn’t find them again when they threw him aside. Despite it being my fault for not talking about Jade, Connor, or Brody with my mates, Mason is still taking on that blame.

But they’re stuck in jail now. So we can all finally move on. Well, I hope they are. With the connections they have, anything is possible.

“Yeah. She has some news. They tried to get in front of a judge to have the whole thing thrown out on a technicality. Brought in some fancy lawyer.”

Of course, they did. With wealth like that, there are no real consequences.

“They might get away with it? With everything they did?” Hudson growls incredulously. “No. No matter what, they don’t get away with it. I won’t let them.” The look in his eyes is equally terrifying and arousing. It’s clear to everyone here what he means by that.

“Absolutely not.” I glare at him. “You will not go to jail just to see them brought to justice.”

“Of course not.” He shrugs. “I’d get away with it.” An air of superiority and smugness radiates from him. I roll my eyes, noticing that Mason does, too. Maverick and Brooklyn, though, are looking at him as if he’s talking sense for the first time in his life.

“Nobody is killing anyone!” I scream, getting it on the record and putting my foot down.

Before they have the chance to argue, the doorbell rings. Brooklyn takes off to answer it, and Hudson takes over flipping the pancakes.

Arms wrap around me before summer rain overpowers the pancake smell.

Nobody is killing anyone, Mason mimics in my mind. Always on my side.

On my wavelength.

The sound of heels clicking against the floor has anxiety flooding me again. Based on the way I'm feeling a whole slew of emotions through the bond, I'd say I'm not the only one.

"Good morning. How's everyone doing?" Renee asks, a little too much pep in her step for my liking, given the circumstances. Confusion and irritation flood the bonds. Crickets follow her greeting. "Wow. Tough crowd. Well, hopefully, I can cheer you guys up." She stops at the island, setting her briefcase on it. With two clicks, she unsnaps, opens it, and pulls out a manilla folder.

I don't reach for it. Neither does anyone else. It appears we'd rather hear it straight from the alpha's mouth. Renee looks around at us and then huffs. "Fine, take the fun out of it." She opens it herself, and then fans the papers out on the island, in between the plates and silverware we set out. With one glance, my heart starts to race. They all must feel it through the bond—and notice Renee grinning at me—because they finally all lean forward and pick up a few papers each to read.

Frowns marr all their faces, not getting it.

"Why are you showing us Summer's medical records?" Maverick asks, turning it upside down and placing it back on the island so he doesn't have to keep looking at it. It's not anything crazy, just confirmation of the Passion Pack when it was still in my system. When I first moved to Chicago. Oh, and all of Dr. Tanner's charts with her notes. Including my FSH levels documenting my infertility.

"Because they're the reason I'm here. Or rather, she is," she says, jerking her chin at me and still smiling. A sliver of hope tries to break through. Maybe...

"Okay, it's time to spit it out. Start making sense," Brooklyn huffs, crossing her arms in a very clear, no-nonsense power stance.

"No fun," Renee mutters. She takes a big breath and then spills it. "These were all sent to me by opposing counsel. Rather, *former* opposing counsel I guess. I'm getting ahead of myself. Let me start at the beginning."

"Please," Mason grouses.

"Summer here emailed a journalist at the New York Times several months back. Telling a rather compelling story of an omega who had been drugged and forcibly marked against her will by one of the wealthiest, most influential packs in New York. She sent medical records and an affidavit as

proof.”

Silence. Even in the bond, my mates have no idea what to think of this as they stare at me in shock. Renee is undeterred. “The journalist was pretty shocked, I’d say. But did his due diligence. Researched the drug, Pack Monroe, *you*,” she says to me again, tapping a polished pale pink fingernail on the folder. “Then when the story was finally written, and he’d gotten approval from his editor, he saw they were arrested for kidnapping, assault, battery... you get the gist. He reached out to William Monroe, Jade’s—”

“Grandfather.”

“Grandfather,” Mason, Renee, and I all say at the same time. Mine sounding weary and Mason like he tasted something sour. I guess despite not knowing their true last name, he still had the pleasure of meeting William. An awful man. Cruel for sport.

“Right.” She nods. “The journalist reached out to her grandfather for a quote. He was *not* happy this story was getting published, or that he’d be linked to all this in the press. So he had to pull a boat-load of strings and call in several favors, but the story got pulled.”

That hope that was trying to build in my chest deflates.

“*But...*” My heart races. “He was *pissed* he had to call in his favors for this. For Jade and that ‘high functioning moron.’ His words. So he fired the two-thousand-dollars-an-hour powerhouse criminal attorney he’d been paying out of his own pocket for and stuck them with some just-out-of-law-school, twenty-dollars-an-hour public defender. Since their own accounts are frozen, and he cut them off at the knees, their sentence has become much more appropriate.”

Silence. The pancake on the stove starts burning, and Hudson curses, lunging to turn the dial and pull the pan off the burner. Pinching his fingers together, he gently pulls the burnt pancake out of the pan.

“Nala,” he calls, making a series of clucking noises with his tongue and a hundred pounds of fluff and fur come barreling around the corner. She sits dutifully without him having to even ask, and he tosses her the burnt breakfast.

“What do you mean more appropriate?” Maverick hedges, sounding dubious about the lighthearted air the kitchen is starting to get. Hudson leans back against the counter next to Maverick and places a hand on his shoulder in silent support.

“I mean, I moved for a summary judgment, and their lawyer barely put up

a fight. The judge granted it. Brody got ten years as an accessory after he threw Jade under the bus, and Jade is getting twenty-five to life.”

My throat closes up, and tears sting my eyes. Relief battles with a sense of sorrow inside me while the rest of my pack celebrates, shakes Renee’s hand, and exchanges hugs. Part of me feels that same joy, the need to raise a glass and celebrate putting three horrendous, vile people behind bars. But something about it feels...unresolved to me.

Maybe part of me wanted a big messy trial. The chance to drag their name through the mud. For that article to be published and have the whole world throw rocks at them, curse their name, and know what they put me through. What so many other people are going through because the powers that be are too scared of inciting panic to actually warn the world what hideousness is plaguing it.

We’ll tell as many people as we can, but there is only so much one pack can do.

A door closing in the distance pulls me out of my thoughts. When my eyes refocus, Renee is gone, Brooklyn having seen her out.

Mason, Maverick, and Hudson are all staring at me with varying degrees of frowns on their faces. I can feel their worry trickling through the bond, so I muster up the best smile I can. It does nothing to ease their concern, they just exchange loaded glances at it.

“I’m fine,” I say, and reach for the stack of already finished chocolate chip pancakes on the center of the island. Grabbing two, I toss them on my plate and look for the syrup.

“When a woman says she’s fine, she’s never fine.” Maverick, ladies and gentlemen, the wisest of them all.

“You forget that we now have a direct link to you, babe,” Mason says, tapping on his heart. “We can feel that you aren’t alright. So what do you need? How do we fix it?”

Brooklyn ambles back in just as he asks that, and for some reason, I have an answer. It’s staring me in the face. Suddenly, it’s all I need. But they won’t like it one bit.



“Are you sure this is what you need? I can’t talk you out of it?” Brooklyn chews on her lip, holding my hands in hers. I’m half afraid she won’t let go.

“Don’t do this, sweets. I’ve got a pint of mint chocolate chip at home with your name on it,” Maverick chimes in with a half-assed bribe. When he says it, he doesn’t even sound like he thinks it’ll work. But Hudson gives it a go, too.

“Ice cream and a movie marathon. I’ll even start up the fireplace and get some hot chocolate.”

Mason is the only one not trying to talk me out of it, leaning against the car in complete silence. They all insisted on coming, and I acquiesced that request since I knew it would be hard for them to let me do it. But I drew the line at them coming in with me.

“It’s going to be fine. You guys need to relax. I’ll only be a minute.” I try to throw as much confidence and sense of serenity down the bond as I can. Just so they know I’m not worried about it, so they don’t need to, either.

Truth is, I’m nervous.

There is a light sheen of sweat going on beneath my sweater, but they don’t need to know that.

I squeeze Brooklyn’s hands and pull away. She hesitates for the slightest bit before letting go. Panic flits in her eyes for a second before she manages to paste on a pretty convincing smile. Looks like I’m not the only one hiding my emotions today. I give them all one last smile and then walk in.

The walk to the door feels too long. The stares of my packmates on my back too heavy. When I step inside and the tint on the glass door obscures me from view, it’s a relief. A heavysset alpha male sits behind the reception desk. I square my shoulders, squeeze my hands into fists to stop the trembling and walk up to the glass divider.

“Name,” he grunts without even looking up at me. His phone holds his attention.

“Su—” I start, but it’s barely a whisper. I clear my throat and try again. “Summer.”

“Who are you here to see?” he asks.

“Jade Monroe.” Even saying her name sends shivers over my skin.

Still not looking, he grabs a pen and clipboard and slams it down in front of me. “Sign in and go through the door on your right.”

“Uh. Oh okay.” I sign my name—though it looks more akin to chicken scratches—and walk to the door off to the side. This seems like a very lax

system for a prison. Shouldn't he be a little more concerned about who is let in?

Then I make it through the next door and mentally roll my eyes at myself as three different security guards with guns strapped to their belts stand around a large metal detector and conveyor belt. Since I didn't come in with anything, I don't have a bag to put on the belt, and I walk up to the metal detector.

"Please place all keys, belts, phones, or other electronics in the bin and step through," the only female instructs. Alpha, just like the two men. Since I didn't even bring my phone, I pat my pockets to show them they're empty and step through.

The female officer waits on the other side and watches the green light on the detector. It must flash red if you've got metal on you because it stays green, then she nods at me, and motions for me to follow her.

"So who are you coming to visit?" When she half turns my way to ask, I catch the name on her badge. Officer Danica.

"Jade Monroe," I reply.

"The new girl, huh?" Danica glances at me again, looking me up and down. "But I meant, *who* are you coming to visit?"

"Oh, uh...she's..." I think of what to say. Saying out loud that she was my mate, or pack, feels wrong. Disrespectful to my actual mates, but also, like it validates what they did in some way. "Nobody special. Just a demon I'm trying to exorcize, I guess you could say."

Another long, unreadable stare from the guard as we walk down another hallway. At the end of it, she stops at a doorway without a door. "I'll be right here to walk you back when you're done," she says and then posts up in the archway as promised.

With a nod, I peek my head around. The room inside has six chairs, each sitting in its own cubicle. The cubicles all have a telephone hung up on the right and a clear glass divider with a matching phone on the other side. Unsure if there is a certain seat, I walk slowly up to the one in the middle since they're all empty—not a big day for visitors I guess—and look back at Danica. She doesn't stop me, so I take it as my sign that any seat is fine. The chair is cold. Even through my fleece-lined jeans, it feels cold and uncomfortable and squeaks as I sit on it.

The entire room has that feeling though: beige walls with chips in the paint and in desperate need of a fresh coat, and linoleum floors that look like

the cheap stuff they throw in cafeterias in inner city schools.

Rustling is the only sound in the quiet room. Which I realize is coming from me. From my leg, specifically. It's bouncing up and down in an obvious show of nerves. I don't even make a move to stop it though, because it does help a little.

I must be waiting there five minutes, watching the open doorway in the room across the glass divider obsessively, waiting for Jade to walk through it. Eventually, I muster up the courage to turn back to Danica. I startle when I notice she's staring at me still.

"Erm... How does she know I'm here to see her?" I ask. My eyes widen a little when she rolls hers.

"Greg radios back to the guards that she has a guest and they bring her up. The officer at the front desk," she explains when I furrow my brows at his name. Ahhh. The uninterested alpha on his phone. "But he tends to take his time. Shouldn't be much longer though." Then she looks up, raises a brow, and jerks her head.

My heart stops.

I turn back around in my seat to see Jade being escorted in by a giant of a man. She almost looks comically small compared to him. Comical, if I weren't so stunned speechless at the sight of her. The usual aura of sophistication and power that radiates off her is gone. Gone is her shiny, glossy mane of perfectly coiffed hair. Instead, it's pulled into a high ponytail, looking dull and dead.

There are huge black bags under her eyes that suggest she isn't sleeping well, and the orange of the jumpsuit washes out her skin tone. Add in the handcuffs on her wrists connected by chains, and the chain links on her feet, and all the nerves I was carrying wash away. This woman doesn't own me anymore. Doesn't deserve an ounce of my fear. And looking at her, fear is the furthest thing from what I feel.

Pity, maybe.

Satisfaction, definitely.

Closure? Just about.

She sits in the seat across from me, and our eyes lock. For the longest time, we just stare at each other, a battle of wills. At least it seems like a long time. Maybe it's just a minute or two. When she reaches for the phone first, a sense of triumph washes over me. It felt like we were in a staring contest, and she blinked first.

When she's got the phone to her ear, I pick mine up as well. The blank look she had on, transforms into a sneer. "What the fuck could you possibly want? Come to gloat?" she hisses.

I don't answer right away. Instead I stare a little longer. When her knuckles tighten on the phone, and it looks like she may start screaming or bashing the phone against the barrier, I speak.

Unaffected. Monotone. Sure.

"I told you I'd make you pay." The click of the phone as I hang it up sounds like closure given a voice. A metaphorical door shutting out my past. I keep my head forward, not turning back at the muffled commotion behind me.

Danica grins at me as I walk toward her. Instead of saying anything, she turns her body and holds out an arm for me to walk first. So I do, and we walk in silence all the way back to the security checkpoint where I came in.

I continue on right through the metal detector. Just as I put my hand on the door to pull it open and exit through the lobby, she calls out to me.

"Hey." I look back at her, hand still holding the knob. "Now she knows it, too."

I frown at her. "Knows what?" The two male guards are looking between us, just as confused as I feel.

"That she's nobody special." She grins. I return it with a little tilt of my lips, nod at her, and walk out.

Mason, Maverick, Hudson, and Brooklyn are all in the exact same spot they were when I walked in: Leaning against the car, waiting on me.

My feet stop just outside the prison, and I take them in. My fated mates. Every weight feels as if it's been lifted off my shoulders, and I smile. A big, genuine, show-all-my-teeth, Cheshire cat smile.

I laugh as they all let out a breath in unison, shoulders relaxing, and then Hudson starts walking toward me, gently shoulder-checking Maverick as he goes. I take off at a run, laughing as he opens his arms, and I leap into them.

Mason runs up, throwing his arms around us. Then Maverick and Brooklyn. We all stand there on the sidewalk of the prison in one big hug ball.

Love, devotion, and joy all trickle down the bond as we all hold each other.

My true fated mates.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wren White was born in Montana, but grew up and still lives in small town Indiana. She is an avid book reader, lover of RH, and dog mom of a quirky, klutzy Great Dane puppy.

Wren is an indie author who debuted her Specter Series in July of 2022. Since then, she has dipped her toe into the Omegaverse world. After finishing The Specter Series and Pack Deception duet, she also wants to jump in and attempt a PNR academy series.

Outside of writing, she works full-time and spends any free time either at the gym, with friends or reading a good book.

She loves hearing and interacting with readers, so feel free to reach out; even just to say hi!

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Trigger Warnings:

Brief mention of alcohol abuse, conversations about off-page miscarriage, mentions of emotional and physical abuse, and sexually explicit scenes