

Avanne Michaels

The Alpha

Part Two



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Black Dog Publishing LLC

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A Note About This Omegaverse Story:

There are no shifters in this book.

The completely fictional characters in this story live in an alternate universe where there is a biological hierarchical system in place. The alphas, betas, and omegas in this universe have basic human physiology, but operate with some very animalistic instincts.

Alphas in this universe join together to form packs with other alphas, betas, and omegas (if they're lucky); some packs are familial in nature and others are purely functional. Alphas are stronger and are naturally very dominant creatures, and they make up a small part of the population.

Betas in this universe are not typically dominant and they naturally want/long for the security of being accepted into an alpha pack. Betas make up the majority of the population.

Omegas are precious. They are to be protected and treasured. They can be either male or female. Omegas are very susceptible to alpha orders and pheromones and are slaves to their heat cycles. Male omegas go into heat less

frequently than female omegas, but the frequency of the heat cycle of either males or females is completely individualized.

Only omegas can give birth to alphas, but beta/omega pairings are not discouraged. Mpreg is not a thing in this universe, not that I have a problem with it, it just didn't fit this story.

Reproductive Pairing:

Alpha x Alpha = Zero offspring. Alphas cannot reproduce with other alphas.

Alpha x Omega = Alpha offspring or Omega offspring

Alpha x Beta = Beta offspring

Omega x Beta = Beta offspring

Beta x Beta = Beta offspring

Omega x Omega = Omega offspring. This pairing is the most rare, and difficult to achieve.

TW/CW:

There are some very intense themes and acts in this story, both sexual and violent. Kidnapping and trafficking happen in this book. Domestic violence happens outside of the pack. A complete list of TW/CW can be found on the authors website and everywhere the author has online presence.

The Alpha Part Two Playlist

Man or a Monster (feat. Zayde Wolfe) - Sam Tinnesz

Masochist - Polaris

Ready or Not (feat. Esthero) - Mischa "Book" Chillak

Grinfucked - Devildriver

Save Me - Jelly Roll

The Alpha Part Two is dedicated to my inner circle of hookers.

This includes you, Kevin.

Y'all keep me going in the same direction.

I couldn't do this without you.

And, as always, to my bearded half.

He's the best research assistant in the history of ever.



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Chapter One

Desie

“Will you be watching from your room, Miss Romero? Or would you rather join us in the den?” Alpha Flores’s words swirl around me like dirty water, renewing my despair.

I don’t want to watch Michael fight. Lopez has assured me several times that Michael is very good; but if he gets hurt in the ring, I’m going to throw up all over this very expensive carpet. The need to watch the fight to see for myself that Michael will be okay is warring with my intense revulsion at the thought of seeing him get hurt.

Of course, I’m going to watch. I couldn’t possibly abandon him, even if he’ll never know that I was watching. I’d just rather fall apart without an audience. “I’ll watch in my room,” I say quietly.

He nods as if he understands how I must be feeling and gives me a small smile. “We’ll be right in the den if you need us,” he says, and I force my face to remain neutral. Need them? There isn’t a world in which I would *ever* need them. “I’ll have James bring you some snacks a little later,” he continues.

I'm pretty sure my snarling scowl is plain to see despite my best effort. The past week has been enlightening, to say the least; and watching Michael in the ring tonight is the proverbial sour cherry on top. I didn't even know he and Ben were part of the underground, sideways, unethical, dangerous, *definitely illegal*... I had no idea they were involved in the fights that everyone whispers about, much less that they were good at it. I never saw any evidence. Not a scratch. Not a bruise. I don't understand how they kept it hidden. When I get them back, they're in so much trouble.

When. Not if. I refuse to let myself give up on saving them. I'll get them back, especially now that I know how reckless they've been with their lives. With our future. They have so much explaining to do.

I close the door to my room behind me. I don't bother locking the door. What good would it do? If Flores or Lopez want in, I'm sure they have a key. I don't spend much time worrying about James or Bryant. As far as I can tell, they're little more than waitstaff. Flores is obviously lead alpha in this pack, with Lopez as his apparent second, the other two run errands and generally do whatever Flores and Lopez tell them to do. James will probably bring up a tray of fancy treats in a little while, just like Florez said he would. He'll knock on the door once and come into the room just long enough to put the tray on the dresser, then he'll leave without making eye contact or speaking to me at all. I can't imagine what their pack bond must feel like with alphas being treated barely above beta status.

The remote control for the television might as well be the hammer that nails my coffin shut. The second I turn on the television and put it on channel twenty-three everything will be real. I know and understand that my current situation is my new reality, but if I see Michael standing in the middle of a

boxing ring waiting for the bell to start the fight, then it will become really real. I don't know what I'll do when the actual fighting begins. Probably cry.

Inevitably, I pick up the controller and push the power button, then I tune it to the channel that usually shows Michael or Ben in their rooms. I know they're not rooms. I know they're little more than cells. But it helps me, just a little, to call them rooms. It makes me feel selfish, but I'm clinging to anything that might keep me from falling into total hopelessness.

The screen flashes to life and there he is, sitting on an overturned bucket in one corner of the ring. Michael is staring at the canvas between his feet. He's not wearing a shirt or shoes, and the shorts he's wearing are short enough to show the vining red roses tattooed on his upper thigh. Any other time I'd fangirl over how he looks, deep in contemplation, muscles and skin on display; but right now all I want to do is hold him.

Michael doesn't look up when his opponent ducks between the ropes and steps onto the mat. I do, though. He's the same size as Michael, more tattoos, I can barely make out any unmarked skin between them. Brown hair cut short. He's looking toward Michael like he wants to say something to him, but when Michael doesn't look his way, he looks at someone on the side of the ring. He doesn't look any happier to be there than Michael.

The person who I'm assuming is a referee says something and Michael stands up. He touches knuckles with the other guy and they stand there, shifting and bouncing on their feet until the bell rings. When it does, Michael and the other guy stand still staring into each other's eyes for just a moment before Michael makes the first attack. His arm shoots out, fast to punch the other guy in the face, immediately splitting his lip. The guy shakes it off and comes at Michael, then the fight really begins.

I'm not sure what the rules are, or if there even are rules, and I don't know

if they'll stop fighting once they reach a certain number of points like in sanctioned fights. What I do know is that within a few minutes of fighting, both men are bloody. That should be alarming, but it isn't. The look on Michael's face is what is alarming. He looks numb, like he isn't feeling anything at all. Not angry, not worried, just an unyielding lack of emotion.

I hate it.

Michael's opponent seems to get a second wind of energy and starts hitting Michael, battering his sides with hard fists, slamming his forehead into Michael's face. I lose track of time, twitching with every impact. I can't really feel the pain, but I can imagine it. Michael lets it happen, then, as if on cue, his knee comes up and he somehow manages to kick the other man across the mat. Michael descends upon him with kicks and blows and doesn't stop until the referee and four others barely manage to pull him back. The bell rings again and instead of crowing for the screaming crowd, Michael just sits back down in his corner and goes back to staring between his feet.

The fight is over. The other man isn't getting up. I don't know if he'll ever get up. I know Michael. I've seen him almost every day of my life since we were kids. I *know* he's capable of hurting people, but knowing something and seeing it happen are two completely different things. My poor Michael. He might be a sarcastic jerk sometimes, but he's a good man.

And my Benny. Will he have to do the same thing? I can't think about Benny beating a man unconscious.

"I brought you some fruit," James mumbles, startling me. I didn't hear his knock. He puts the tray on the dresser and glances at me, his already pale face losing a little more color. "Here," he says, handing me a napkin from the tray.

I didn't realize I was crying. I take it from him and stare at it.

"Michael's all right," he says. "He's been up against worse guys than that

plenty of times. He's okay."

If that was meant to comfort me, it didn't accomplish much. I bring my eyes up to meet James's and he can't hold my gaze.

He looks away and down, then says, "I'll check on you later," before he slinks out the door.

I wait until the sound of his footsteps fade, then I crawl into the bed I hate and burrow under the blankets with my clothes still on. As soon as I'm cocooned as tightly as I can get, I pull one of the pillows against my face and scream. I scream into the pillow over and over again until my throat is raw. One way or another, I will find a way to free us from this hell. I have to.

Chapter Two

Michael

Fight.

Eat.

Sleep.

Fight.

Eat.

Sleep.

Over and over. That's all there is. That's all I can do. I don't know how long I've been here. I don't know if it's night or day most of the time. I try to sleep as much as I can to keep the rage, the constant threat of losing myself at bay, but I'm losing the fight.

Every so often, Lopez brings a scrap of material, a tee shirt or something with Desie's sugary mint scent on it. Sometimes it helps, sometimes it makes it so much worse. He says she's safe as long as I keep winning fights. So I fight. I'll fight until my legs won't carry me, and then I'll crawl to the ring

and fight some more. I'll never stop. I can't. No matter how exhausted or defeated or hopeless I feel. I need to keep going, I need to endure.

For her.

For the memory of my brother.

I can't stop.

Sometimes I feel a little spark of Ben in the back of my mind, but I push it away. It's just a memory and makes the wretchedness of the loss I feel worse. He's gone. And Desie is lost to me. They both are.

I fought against the despair for as long as I could, but day after day and night after night of beating people to death in order to keep her safe has taken its toll on me. If this is all my life is to be, then I'll die in this cell with bloody, cracked knuckles and an aching pit where my heart used to be. I'll endure it until I die from it, and pray that she'll be alright after I'm gone.

"Get up, Aguirre," someone shouts, kicking the door of my cell. "You've got twenty minutes." The little grate in the door slides open and a tray is pushed inside. I don't care what they feed me. I wouldn't eat anything at all until I was too weak to win. When they figured out that was what I was up to, that's the first time Lopez brought down something that smelled like Desie. It was the worst possible thing he could have brought.

He pulled a pair of her panties out of his pocket, then the world turned red. I don't know how they managed to get me into the ring, but I killed two men during that bout. I didn't feel bad about it then, and I don't feel anything about it now.

"You've got a full dance card tonight, Mikey," the voice taunts. "Think you can make it through three alphas without losing wind? There's a lot of money riding on tonight."

I eat the food without looking at or tasting it and pretend not to hear the

man laughing at me. I'll win the fights. I'll win all of them. Then I'll sleep until they beat on my door again.

Chapter Three

Seth

They came. I did doubt they would, especially after Devon took the phone from Talia to tell me exactly what he thought of my calling his very pregnant omega in the middle of the night for help. But they came. I've been sick with worry about Talia flying being as far along as she is. She doesn't have that long left in this pregnancy. They also brought the triplets. I've been nauseously waiting for every text or call updating me on their progress.

Jasper might beat the shit out of me the second he sees me. I'll let him do it, too. I have no business asking this of them, of her. But I'm desperate. Desperate for so many things. Desperate to save the omega I know is mine, desperate to save my pack even though it never got the chance to fully form, desperate for everyone to finally know the truth. What I did was despicable. Wretched. Disgusting. Vile. But it was the safest choice, and I did everything I could think of to get Talia safe after the fact.

I need Talia to know. I need Desir'ee to know. I need the twins to know. It would be nice if Jasper didn't daydream about skinning me while I'm still

alive to feel it. He can think and plan about what he wants if it makes him feel better. I'm exhausted from carrying the truth around.

Things are changing on the council with Corso, Devon, and Talia's fathers pushing for better things. Things are also changing for the omegas, and big things are happening in preparation for when the trafficking is shut down. Every step forward is a step closer to keeping our omegas safe and fixing the problems with our population. A step closer to the triplets being able to play at a park in our territory without us all being terrified and paranoid something might happen to them if we blink. They're not mine, and Talia's alphas, as well as Jasper, might not appreciate it, but if anyone hurt those children I would go on a rampage and run the streets red before they can lift a finger.

I watch Alex step into the open sunshine from the plane, followed by Kaleb. I watch each of them file out of the plane once it had taxied from the runway, Talia in the middle of the line with Jasper and Corso on either side of her, Trent behind them with all three toddlers in his arms. My heart tightens and loosens at the sight of them. I missed them so much. I had no idea how much until just now.

Turning from the window, I make my way from the hangar on the private airfield so I can meet them. I never thought I'd be in this position, even though they said they were going to help me. I never thought I'd be able to call on them for help like this. Like they're my family. When Corso and Kaleb told me almost three years ago that they were going to be there to support me throughout my recovery, that they were going to do whatever they could to help me be the alpha the council and our territory needs me to be, I never dreamed that I'd ever be able to call on them like this. I can hear Corso's steady words right now like he said them just yesterday.

"You are broken, Seth. You have been broken for far longer than even you

realize. We are going to help you. We are going to see this through with you. You need to be the alpha that the council and our people need you to be, and we are going to help you find that alpha inside of you. Your father tried to ruin you, as he tried to ruin so many of the things around him, whether that was his intention or not.

“I am going to sit in your place on the council until you are able to hold that position yourself. We need you to be someone who looks out for the wellbeing and happiness of those under your care. You’re not strong enough to do that right now, but you will be. We will make sure you are.

“Talia wants to forgive you. She is going to try to forgive you. She says the only person who needs forgiveness and understanding more than herself is you. I would argue that you’re not all that far behind Devon in that regard, but what I think doesn’t matter. She forgave Devon, and she’s given him part of her heart; and she’s going to forgive you. Make sure you’re worthy of it.”

And for years, that’s all I did. I worked hard at every therapy and counseling session, every physical therapy appointment to help me get used to operating with only one eye. I shadowed Corso and Devon at council meetings. I learned how to see things no one else seemed to from Nathan. I meditated with Reid until my knees were bloody. I trained with Trent and Kaleb until I couldn’t hold myself up at the end of the day; they wanted to make sure I was able to handle myself and defend others with my physical deficiencies. I even did yoga with Jasper and Talia. Throughout all that, I learned what a pack is truly supposed to be. I learned what real, genuine love looked like. I grew impossibly attached and protective of their children. Their pack might not return my feelings and regard, but I feel them all the same.

Devon is the first to reach me and he sighs heavily as he takes me in. “How bad is it?”

“Bad.”

Another heavy sigh. “I didn’t want to bring her, but she wouldn’t have it any other way. I damn sure didn’t want to bring the kids, but it was safer to bring them than leave them. If anything happens to any of them I will hold you responsible.”

“So will I.” I hold his gaze until Talia barks at him to get out of her way so she can see me.

“You look like shit,” she says, trying to keep Dutch in her arms. Dutch couldn’t look more like Trent if he tried. Talia finally gives up and puts him down so he can run to me, screaming his version of my name.

When I bend over to pick him up, the first thing he does is rip my eyepatch off and try to put it on his head.

Talia reaches us and takes it from his chubby fingers to tie a knot in it so it will stay in place over his eye. It takes up a quarter of his small face. “Okay, little man, you’ve stolen the goods, now *be* good.”

I hug him to me, smelling his wild scent that is a mix of his parents in his equally wild hair before I let her take him from me.

Iris waves enthusiastically from her perch on Corso’s shoulders and I wave back at her as I take my spare patch from my back pocket. I fully anticipated Dutch’s thievery, he almost always steals my eyepatch the minute he sees me. I’m glad he still wanted it after me being away for so long. Zetty, ever serious, peers silently at me from Jasper’s arms. That’s better than the stink eye she usually sends my way. She can look at me however she wants, I love her stinky little eye.

“Don’t listen to them,” Talia smiles, trying to lighten the air. “They’re excited about all the different foods they’re about to eat.”

I smile back at her, but we both know how unhappy her pack is with what’s

happening right now.

“We have a couple good ideas,” she continues. “We need to get to the rental, though. I need a nap or three, and these three need to run off some energy.”

I nod. I explained the basics of the situation to her in various texts and calls as they were traveling. She knows what I’m fighting for, what I’m asking her pack to help me fight for. It doesn’t hurt that the Flores pack is possibly in the center of a lot of the omega abductions and trafficking. Nathan is especially anxious to find out exactly how much they’re responsible for.

The sound of Nathan cursing draws my attention to the back of the plane. Case after black, hard-shell case has been unloaded and piled with the normal luggage along with several giant black duffles. It looks like they may have raided the COT weapons depot before leaving. It is a great possibility this is all from their own stash too. With Alex and his penchant for mayhem, any number of things could be in those boxes.

I get a glimpse of hard density foam and the flash of a camera lens before Nathan zips it back up after making sure nothing was broken when the airfield employee tossed it from the hold. Glaring at the guy, who is handling the remaining cases much more gently, he grabs an armload of straps and takes off for the back of the SUV to load his own equipment. All those weapons are another reason they needed a private jet.

I lost the diplomatic privileges of a council distributed house and vehicle to use while I’m here the minute Minos heard from the leaked information source that I’m a monster. The conversation he had with me was short and full of regret. I’ve been staying at the twins’ house. It smells like them and Desir’ee. It’s been the only thing that’s eased some of the empty ache eating its way through me. There’s not enough room at the house for Talia’s pack,

and I don't think Desir'ee would appreciate her home smelling like strangers when we get her back, so I found them a place on the other side of the neighborhood. It's a vacation rental with plenty of bedrooms, a privacy fence, and no pool. That was the deciding factor, the other places I looked at had pools, and I couldn't stand the thought of one of the babies falling in. My chest is tight now just thinking about it.

"I got you guys a van for the kids and an SUV. Should have got you a cargo van if I had known you were bringing all that." I hand Kaleb the keys. "I'll text you the address of the house, and you can follow me over. I looked it over, I think it'll be okay. If it isn't, I can find you something else. Thank you for coming. Thank you so much. I know I shouldn't have asked, but I didn't know what else to do, and –"

"It's fine, Seth," Kaleb cuts in. "Well, it isn't. But it's going to be. Let us get rested up, then we can go get your girl."

"Then we'll get the twins. Talia says they're identical?" Corso asks.

I nod. "They are. Michael is the asshole and Ben is full of shit. Actually, they're both full of shit, and they're both assholes, so that's not really helpful. I couldn't tell them apart for an embarrassing amount of time." I smile when I say it, and I catch Talia smiling back, but my smile fades when I think about the possibility of never seeing them again.

"We'll find them, Seth," she assures me. "We'll get them back."

Chapter Four

Lopez

It's only been three weeks. There's no possible way Desir'ee could be as comfortable with us as Ernesto is trying to force her to be. I've spoken with him about it on multiple occasions but he won't be reasonable.

To be perfectly honest, I'm far more concerned about her than I thought I would need to be. On paper, she's sensible, responsible, sound; but the sallow omega sitting at the end of our table is a ghost of her previous self. She barely eats, and she's taken on enough shifts at the hospital that true exhaustion is beginning to show. I know my worry is genuine.

I'm worried for Desir'ee's health and wellbeing, but Ernesto seems only to be concerned about her next heat cycle and reminding her about the fights scheduled for Benjamin and Michael. He seems to enjoy her discomfort more than I ever anticipated he would. I know he wants her to be our omega, but for him I think it's less about having an omega than it is about having control over an omega. I also think he enjoys the discomfort that keeping Desir'ee, specifically, causes.

It's my mistake, really. He would have probably chosen a different omega if he didn't know how much of an interest I've kept in Benjamin and Michael. I started keeping track of their lives after the mess with Rafe. I thought keeping up with them and helping them when I could was the right thing to do, but I overestimated my ability to keep it mostly secret and I underestimated Ernesto's propensity to pick at wounds and hold grudges.

Ernesto has always been a jealous person. He's jealous about power and attention. My attention more than anyone else's, apparently. I wanted to help my sister by helping her son, and he was taken from us. I tried to help the twins the best way I was able to attempt to make up for that loss, and now their omega is wasting away a little more every day under my roof. Ernesto doesn't care about anything but power. It took me years to fully understand that, but by then I was so deep into the underbelly of his goals that I couldn't get out.

"You will eat, Miss Romero. If I have to command you to do it, I will have no trouble doing that," he chides as he cuts into his steak.

"I'm not hungry," Desir'ee responds quietly in a muted voice. She's lost so much of herself in such a short amount of time. It wasn't supposed to be like this. She was supposed to be understandably sad for a little while, then perk back up.

"I don't care if you're hungry or not, Miss Romero," Ernesto says, smirking and tilting his head to the side. "Put some food into that pretty mouth of yours or I'll do it for you."

"Don't," she whispers. "If I eat anything I'll be sick. I'm tired. I just need to go to bed."

I watch Ernesto's lips flatten and his nostrils flare. He isn't used to defiance at any level, especially not from an omega.

“She could have something after she rests. We don’t want our omega unwell,” I suggest in an effort to remind him that she is, in fact, supposed to be ours and well cared for.

He won’t be deterred. “If I tell her to eat, she will damn well eat, Elijah. Pick up your fork, Desir’ee.”

She glares at him, a small snarl lifting her top lip. “Don’t call me that.”

“Why not?” he laughs. “It is your name, isn’t it? Eat the goddamned steak, Desir’ee.”

She grips the edge of her plate and narrows her eyes. “Don’t call me that.”

Ernesto takes a sip of his wine and gently places the glass back down beside his plate.

“Ernesto,” I start, but he holds up a hand.

He smiles across the table at Desir’ee, but there’s no warmth in it. “I’ll call you whatever I want to call you, Desir’ee. And you *will* eat your dinner. You’ve wasted enough of my food and time. Get over whatever this is and stop pouting. You have a job to do and you’re going to do it.”

“What job?” she asks, her eyes narrowing even further.

“You are here to be my omega, and it’s time you start acting like it. Stop your silly moping and do what you’re here to do.”

She stands suddenly with her plate in her hand. “I am not your omega,” she hisses. “I will never be your omega.”

Ernesto doesn’t stand up, but he flattens his hands on the table. “You are my omega, Desir’ee.”

“Don’t call me that,” she seethes. “Only Seth calls me that. And I am not your omega.”

She’s going to do something foolish. I can see it. She’s going to do something that will get her hurt. “She’s to be our omega, Ernesto. She just

needs a little more time,” I say, simultaneously trying to soothe his pride and remind her that we haven’t done anything to change her status yet. It’s the only thing I can think of that might diffuse the situation.

Ernesto moves his angry glare to me. “She’s *my* omega before she’s *our* omega. Don’t forget that, Elijah. I brought her here and I will decide what she does and when she does it.” He returns his attention to her. “Sit down and eat, Desir’ee. Don’t make me tell you again.”

“Don’t call me that!” she screams, and hurls the plate across the table at him.

I’m not fast enough. Ernesto is on his feet and striding around the table before I’m even fully standing, and the sound of the slap he gives her bounces off the walls. Her eyes fill with tears that don’t fall, the hand print already angry on her cheek by the time I reach her side. I start to pull her away and out of the room, but Ernesto wraps his hand around her wrist.

“Sit down, Elijah,” he orders, his voice heavy with command. It isn’t an alpha command, he doesn’t try to use those on me anymore. He still uses them on James, Bryant and the others, but not me. I look from him to Desir’ee, but outside of trying to physically pull her away from him, which will cause more damage than good at this point, I can’t do much. I grit my teeth and move back to my seat. He holds eye contact the whole time I’m making my way back to my seat, only breaking it once I’m back in my chair. Then he says, “give *our* omega the rest of your dinner, Elijah. She hasn’t eaten for days and we need her well cared for.”

I do it. I do it even though I know what’s about to happen. There will be no coming back from this. There is no way to move past this moment into an arrangement that would allow her to willingly be our omega. I slide my plate into the place hers was in before she threw it and I wait for the inevitable.

“Sit down, Desir’ee,” Ernesto says, his voice full to bursting with alpha command.

She sits, rage evident in her eyes.

“Pick up the fork, Desir’ee,” he orders.

She picks up my fork, and clenches her jaws so tightly that I hear her teeth gnash.

“Eat every single bite of food on that plate, Desir’ee. Don’t get up from that spot until you do.”

“I hate you,” she whispers, as she cuts into the steak on the plate.

By the time she finishes eating, her tears are freely falling. Ernesto sat beside her the whole time, watching her chew and swallow every bite she took, and now that she’s finished he’s smiling at her.

“Was that so bad?” he asks.

She doesn’t answer. Her cheek and eye are swollen and she’s even more pallid now than she was at the beginning of this wretched meal.

“Go to your room, Desir’ee,” he says, still smiling at her.

She stands up and walks out of the room, leaving me to weigh the consequences to her if I say a single word of the many things I want to launch at him. We sit in silence for a long time, then he breaks it with a self-suffering sigh.

“What, Elijah?”

I stare at him for a long minute before I answer. “Do you really need to ask?”

“She needs to learn her place.”

I shake my head. “Not like that. It will never be a good thing now, Ernesto. She will never come to us willingly.”

He sighs again. “She was never going to.”

I leave him to deal with the mess of the dining room on his own. I want the solace of my own room. I want to lay on my bed in the dark and imagine what it might be like if Desir'ee was actually my omega. What it might be like if I had the comfort of an omega. I've never had that. I've never tried to sample that experience from any of the omegas I've been with in my lifetime. They were always a means to an end, or I was for them. There was never any of the soft comforts I long for. And Ernesto's actions tonight have ensured that I will never have them.

I walk past Desir'ee's door on the way to my own room. I'm assaulted by the sounds of sobbing and the smell of sick. We did that. We are responsible for her misery. I have had the heaviest and most direct hand in what she is suffering through. I wanted an omega, needed an omega. I have wanted my own omega for as long as I can remember. And now that I have access to one, one who was supposed to be mine, all I can give her is hardship and hurt.

Pausing in front of her door, I'm tempted to knock. My gut reaction to hearing her discomfort is to try to fix it, but what would be the point? Any chance of her not hating us for the rest of our lives has been destroyed. The best thing I can do for her is leave her alone.

Later in the night, I wake to the sound of her crying still filtering down the hall. This can't continue. I can't let this happen. I've come close to ending things with Ernesto before, but it's never been like this. Any respect for him that I was still clinging to has crumbled when he took a marked omega when he has access to so many others. I might not have the reach and power to stop his operations, but I can sever my bond with him. And I'm damn sure going to try to get Desir'ee out of here. He can't have her. She deserves to be

happy. If I can get the twins out of Backhouse without Ernesto noticing, I will; but Desir'ee will be saved from this life.

Chapter Five

Ben

I can smell Michael in the fibers of the mat. I've been feeling his tug sporadically, weakly, ever since they brought me to this place. I thought they would have killed us by now, but they haven't. Not yet anyway. They want to make as much money off of us as they can before they kill us. I'd laugh about the fact that our debt is for sure paid off now if I could bring myself to make that sound.

I wonder if Michael knows I'm alive. Or if Desie knows. Michael probably doesn't. Might think I'm dead, they sure as shit made it look and sound like they killed me. I couldn't hear properly for a long while after that gun shot. As far as Desie goes, Lopez is probably using me and Michael to keep her nice and cooperative. I have to be very careful to not let myself imagine too much of what that cooperation might include. If I ever get out of here, I'm going to rip that motherfucker apart with my bare hands.

I can't tell days from nights. There's no way to know. Food comes at odd intervals, and the only way I can measure time passing is how long it usually

takes me to heal after a fight...and that's taking longer than it should. I'm getting the shit kicked out of me on the regular. Doing the fights alone is so different from fighting beside Michael. Harder. I can take a punch and I can handle myself against some wild odds, but I'm wearing down. I can feel it.

The door to my cell opens and Lopez walks in. He doesn't look like his usual smarmy self. He looks tired. Pinched. Good. I hope his day is a shit sandwich. He walks over and sits on the stool in the corner, leaning his head against the wall. "Do you have many regrets in your life, Benjamin?"

"I regret meeting you."

He cuts a look at me. "I'm sure you do. I have many regrets, and recently it seems like they grow in number every day. I didn't intend for my life to turn out the way it has."

What is happening right now? He came down here to have a heart to heart with me? What the fuck? I just look at him and wait for him to keep talking. Maybe something useful will come of it.

Lopez sighs, the heavy sound of it bouncing off the walls. "When people lose sight of their purpose, things get messy. I'm too old to be standing covered in gasoline while it all burns down. When I began this journey, there was a set goal; but somewhere along the path the goal was sullied and the intention behind it blurred into something it was never supposed to be. Have you had much disappointment in your lifetime?"

He smiles and answers his own question. "Of course you have. First with Rafe, then your parents, and now all of this. You never had a chance, did you? And I'm to blame because I let what happened with Rafe slide. Flores assured me that it wasn't intentional, he even believed that at the time, but now neither of us are sure."

What am I supposed to say? How could I possibly form a response to that?

Yes, I've been disappointed, but I never even considered the possibility that Lopez was really responsible for what happened to Rafe. Anger and sorrow come boiling to the surface again at the thought of Rafe and what our lives were supposed to be.

"What would you do, Benjamin, if I left that door unlocked when I left?"

A trick. Some kind of trick to get me to betray my brother or Desie. It has to be.

"Tell me," he repeats. "What would you do?"

Fuck it. I look him straight in the eye. "Start killing people. Kill every single motherfucker between me and my brother, then we'd kill our way to Desie. Then we'd disappear."

Lopez smiles then. It's condescending, but I think that's more because that's just what his face looks like than any effort he's putting into it. "You think Michael is alive?"

I don't answer him.

"It must be the twin thing," he says, but doesn't elaborate. That's what it is. He's come down here to try to torture me with hope. The problem with torturing me with hope, though, is that I don't have any. I can't afford it.

He sighs again. "I've always liked you more than your brother. You have a better personality. If Rafe had lived, the three of you would have been a solid pack. A formidable one. And Desir'ee Romero would have been the perfect omega for you."

He gets back to his feet and looks down at me. I haven't moved from the cot on the floor this entire time. "I have a few things to consider. There will be no more fights for a while." Then he leaves.

What the actual fuck was that about?

~

True to Lopez's word, there have been no more fights. It feels like a few days have passed, but it could be more than that. There are no windows, and I don't get to leave for even exercise. I gave up asking the guards, or whatever you want to call the assholes who slide food and buckets into my cell, what day it is or the time of day a long time ago. Time doesn't have much meaning for me anymore. All I know is that my injuries have completely healed.

Maybe that's the point. Give me time to completely heal so they can put me in the ring with a real monster. It doesn't matter. Not really. Even if Michael is alive somewhere in this shithole, he's probably no better off than I am.

Chapter Six

Desie

I don't know how I'm going to watch tonight. It's been awhile since they were in the ring but Flores told me at dinner that there was a fight tonight. Whether it's Michael or Ben doesn't matter, it will be one of them and I don't know if I can sit on the foot of this bed and watch them fight for their very lives without having some kind of breakdown. It makes me feel so selfish. I'm here in this penthouse, in a richly decorated and comfortable room. Clean, fed, and relatively safe, while they're in such terrible conditions. I should be stronger than this. They have to fight for survival and all I have to do is watch.

I will watch, though. I look in on them every night before I lay down on the extravagantly dressed bed Flores provided. I watch Ben roll over onto his side and tracing designs on the wall behind his cot. I watch Michael do his sit-ups on the disgusting concrete floor. I watch them get beaten. I watch them lose something of themselves each time that I'm not sure they will ever get back. Not watching would dishonor them, no matter how awful it is to

see. Seeing them on the monitor every day at least lets me know they're alive, and that gives me hope.

This can't be how our lives go. I refuse to accept it. If the boys can keep hanging on, keep fighting, so can I. I can find a way out of this for us. I have to. My heat is due in just a few weeks. I'm going to have heat spikes for about a week before it starts. I have to figure something out before then. I can't let Flores and his pack touch me. I can't let them try to cancel out Michael's and Ben's marks. I wouldn't survive it.

Sometimes I can feel one of the twins through my bonds. Not often, and not for long, but every now and then I'll get a flash of rage that I know belongs to one of them. It's gone before I can focus on who it belongs to, but it's there. And it gives me hope.

"Good evening, Miss Romero," Flores says, slinking into my room in his designer suit.

I hate it when he invades my space. I hate it even more when he's here to witness my horror and heartbreak during the fights. And my guilt. I think he enjoys my guilt more than anything else.

I don't respond. I don't respond to anything he says unless I'm forced to. I don't speak to any of them. It doesn't matter if I respond or not, he's going to do as he wants and what he usually does is sit on my bed, contaminating it with his foul, greasy scent regardless. Yay for me. I get to wash everything, again, after the rollercoaster that this evening will be. Another late night with work early in the morning.

Lopez comes in after him. He's been doing more of that. He doesn't seem to want Flores to be alone with me, but he's very careful about it. "Hello Desir'ee. How are you this evening?"

I don't respond to him, either; but I'd rather answer his questions than

Flores's as a general rule. He seems different for the past week or so, ever since Flores made it abundantly clear that I was to be his omega before I would be the pack's. I think that was the plan all along.

"We're going out tonight," Flores chirps. "Let's put on a dress, something really nice. Some thicker heeled shoes would be better for the venue. We can't have our lovely omega twisting an ankle." He smiles at me on his way to the closet. There's nothing garish or overly risqué in there, so whatever he picks is what I'll wear. It's not like I can get out of this outing and the less of my own effort I have to put into it the better. I don't care what I wear anymore. It doesn't matter.

Lopez is watching me very closely. There's been a lot of that lately. Watching. They basically have me on lockdown, I don't know what he feels like he needs to watch out for. It isn't like I can do much more than go to work and there is always one of the betas lurking around to make sure I don't try to slip away.

Flores comes out of the closet carrying a black cocktail dress with green sequin accents and a pair of simple black wedges. "This will be just the thing. Get changed. The car will be out front in twenty minutes." He spreads the dress on the bed and places the shoes next to it and touches my chin on his way out the door. It takes all I've got to stop myself from wiping my chin.

Lopez lingers, looking from me to the dress on the bed, his expression pinched. "I was outvoted. Just know that. Bring a wrap, it might be beneficial tonight." He doesn't touch me when he leaves the room.

I put on the dress. I put on the shoes. I brush my hair, and I take the first wrap I come to in the drawer. It's purple and doesn't match the outfit, but it reminds me of the last blanket Michael found for my nest which is a small comfort. I don't know where we're going. As much as I hate seeing them

fight, I feel like a traitor for going out with Flores and his pack instead of watching the twins.

“Perfection,” Flores remarks when I join him, Lopez, and James at the door. James smiles at me, but doesn’t say anything; and Lopez’s brows and mouth are still set as tightly as they were when he left my room. None of them offer me an arm when we make our way to the elevator or when we step into it, and I’m grateful because I hate touching them. James does open the door for me when we get to the car, and Lopez puts his hand on my elbow when I get in.

I watch the city go by without actually seeing anything. I assumed we were going to dinner somewhere, but the car turns onto the road that leads to the docks. This is the shady part of town. This is where most of the back alley, sideways things happen. Mateo and everyone else I know has drilled it into my head from the time I was little to stay away from here.

We pull into a gravel parking lot in front of what looks like a warehouse. The building is huge but nondescript. The kind of place you see in mobster movies. I hope we’re not here long.

Flores claps his hands together, startling me, and says, “we’re here. Let’s get up top before the fight.”

No.

Simultaneously, the bottom of my stomach drops into nauseating emptiness and my heart leaps into my tight throat.

I can’t be here. I can’t watch the fight in person. I can’t.

“Please,” I whimper. Yes, whimper. I might actually die if I have to watch them be hurt and be unable to go to them.

“Ernesto, this—” Lopez starts, but he’s quickly interrupted.

“Is an excellent learning opportunity,” Flores clips. “For her, as well as the

twins.”

And that’s the end of the discussion. James gets out of the car and opens the back door. Lopez offers me a hand after he’s out but I can’t take it. I can’t move.

“Get out of the car, Desir’ee,” Flores says in a flat tone.

I shake my head. “I can’t,” I whisper. “Please don’t make me do this. I can’t.”

He smiles at me. “You can get out of the car on your own and walk inside with us or I can make you do it. Either way, you are going inside and watching this fight.”

I close my eyes and swallow thickly. I have to walk in on my own. If Flores gives me an alpha command, he can make me walk in there with a smile and I don’t want to smile. I take Lopez’s hand and let him help me out of the car. He reaches back inside and picks up the wrap I forgot and drapes it over his arm, then he leads me into the building.

We enter through the back. I’ve never been to a place like this, but I guess this is where the VIP’s come in judging from all the sparkle that the women are wearing. The place smells like grime and sweat. I know either Ben or Michael are here somewhere and I spend a few breaths trying to catch their scent on the air, but there are too many other odors and I just ended up making myself sick. I follow Lopez down a hall and up a flight of stairs to what must have been an observation catwalk when this building was a warehouse or factory. Now I know why wedges were necessary. This is little more than a metal-grate bridge overlooking the floor and ring. There are no seats, just railing.

I pause before I step onto it, stopping Lopez from moving forward and causing James to run into me. “Will it hold us?” I don’t mean to sound as

afraid as I do, but I don't want this thing to collapse and leave me to die in a pile of metal and people I hate.

Lopez looks back, patience and concern evident on his face. "It will. I promise. I won't let you fall."

I hate that his reassurance makes me feel better. I hate it with every fiber of my being. But it does help and I step onto the metal gridding.

We have a perfect view of the ring and most of the floor from the center of the catwalk. The buzz of the crowd gets louder as the remainder of the seats are filled. I wonder if it's always this packed, or if this is out of the ordinary. I've mostly been tuning out whatever Flores and the rest have been saying this whole time, but when Flores looks at his watch and says, "any minute now," I start paying attention.

Music starts blaring from speakers that are hanging from the ceiling a few feet from us and the crowd erupts. I don't know where to look, so I'm looking everywhere. This has to mean one of the twins is making an entrance. I hate the circumstance, but this will be the closest I've been to them since we were taken from the parking garage at the hospital. I don't want to miss even a second of seeing them.

Lopez notices and points toward the side of the warehouse just in time for me to see a figure walk down the aisle between sections of seats. He's wearing black shorts and has a towel draped over his head and shoulders, but I'd know that walk anywhere. It's Michael. If I was blind, I'd still know he was near because my bond with him is practically throbbing. My breath hitches when he takes off the towel and sits on the overturned bucket in one corner of the ring.

"He looks good tonight, doesn't he?" Flores asks. I don't know if he's asking me or if it's rhetorical, but it doesn't matter. I'm not going to entertain

him if he intends to torture me about Michael. He chuckles when I don't answer and I go back to tuning him out.

A few moments later, Lopez points to the other side of the warehouse as the song starts over after a brief pause for dramatization. For the second time tonight, my stomach falls to my feet and I really might throw up this time, right over the side of the railing and onto the screaming people below us. For the first time in weeks, I feel both of my boys, alive, along our bonds and I almost wish I didn't. Almost.

Ben doesn't have a towel draped over his head. He's wearing red shorts and nothing else. I watch his gate falter as his gaze zeroes in on Michael. I watch as Michael slowly stands up and watches Ben's journey to the ring.

Ben climbs the stairs and steps between the ropes as the music stops. The crowd is wild. Completely and utterly belligerent. The referee steps into the ring and holds up his hand. The crowd slowly hushes, and everyone in attendance hears me scream the word *no* when he lowers his hand and the bell rings.

Both Michael and Ben look up at me with dark expressions before they look back at each other and nod.

Chapter Seven

Michael

It didn't occur to me to plan for this scenario. There was no reason for me to expect Ben to walk into this ring because *I thought he was fucking DEAD!* Probably. I thought he was *probably* dead. I've been too afraid to hope for him to be alive.

And to know Desie is somewhere in this building...she can't be here for this. My mind is racing and I know this was probably their plan all along, but they can't possibly think it's a good idea to let her watch Ben and I fight each other. I felt her the minute I sat down in the corner, then she screamed and every horrible emotion and paralyzing fear I've been pushing away rushed over me at once.

This is the first time I've seen my brother and my girl in who knows how long. My relief is quickly replaced with even more fear, most of it pouring in from Desie. From Ben's ticking jaw and set brow, I know he's feeling the same. We look at each other and know what we have to do. We don't need a conversation. He was told the same thing I was told. Win the fight, keep her

safe. So, that's what we're going to do. One of us will win this fight. It doesn't matter which one. And Desie will remain safe. I only wish I could have gotten a better look at her before the ref barked at us to begin.

It makes me sick that I have to go from being ecstatic that my brother is alive to beating the fuck out of him. We haven't gotten into a real fight with each other in so long. This isn't exactly a real fight, though. I mean, it technically is; but we aren't fighting with each other. In a way, a fucked up, sideways way, we're fighting for each other like we always do.

Ben gives me a small and sad smile before he throws out his fist. We know all of the other's strengths and weaknesses, we know each other's strategy. I don't know what they're hoping to accomplish with this, I can beat other men to death any day of the week, but not Ben. Desie wouldn't want that regardless of any other circumstance.

I dodge the punch, because I always dodge it, and we settle into something similar to our sparring routine. After a few minutes of that, the crowd starts getting restless and the ref hisses at us to do something besides play with each other or Flores will make good on his threat. The ref probably doesn't know what the threat is, only that there is one and if we were smart we'd try to avoid it.

Ben and I step away from each other just long enough to exchange another determined nod, and then we go at each other in earnest. I let Ben take me to the mat and fight the urge to hug him to me. The crowd wouldn't like that. They didn't come here to watch us hug each other.

"You win," Ben says into my ear as we lock up with our arms around each other's necks, and I shake my head. The only way either of us wins is if the other is either unconscious or dead. The bell rings and we ignore it. Rules don't matter very much at The Backhouse.

“No,” I grit out. He’s on top of me, pinning me with my face smashed into the mat.

“Yes,” he grunts, bringing his knee sharply into my side. “Don’t drag it out. Knock me out, I’ll leave it open. Get it over with. She doesn’t need to see it drag on.” Then he releases me and backs up to his corner to give me time to get to my feet.

I look into my brother’s eyes one more time before I step toward him

“I love you, Mikey,” he says, then turns his shoulders to the left just slightly, giving me the opening just like he said he would.

Chapter Eight

Desie

I couldn't hear the crunch of Ben's nose when it broke, but I felt it. Ben falls to the mat just as the bright red blood starts pouring down his face, falling face down unconscious. I watch in horrified silence as Michael crawls to Ben's limp body and pulls it into his lap. He begins weeping and I weep with him. When three other men come into the ring to pull Ben away from him I watch the humanity leave his face and the rage-filled mask of a feral alpha take its place.

I've seen enraged alphas before, not up close; but I've seen what they look like and the damage they can do to other people and themselves. Those men are going to have to kill Michael to get Ben away from him.

And they're going to. Sudden clarity clears my mind of every emotion but fear.

"No!" I cry. "Michael! Don't! Calm down!" It doesn't matter. He isn't hearing anything right now.

One of the men grabs Ben's arm and the other two pounce on Michael. They're prying them apart. They're using their fists and knees to beat Michael into submission, but he won't stop.

I lean around Lopez to get Flores to look at me. He's smiling, enjoying the show. "Please!" I beg. I don't care. I'll beg for Michael and Ben. "Please! Make them stop!"

He turns his gleaming eyes on me and it makes me want to gag. He wants this. He wanted this to happen. He planned for it, all of it.

I clutch Lopez's arm and look up at him. He is not enjoying this. I remember what he said before we left. He was outvoted. I grip his arm even tighter. "Please. Please don't let them. Please. I'll be good. I'll do anything. Just make them stop."

The crowd starts really screaming and I look down into the ring to see even more men surrounding Michael. They've made a circle around him and Ben. It makes no sense, Ben is unconscious, but they're still kicking him. Michael is doing his best to cover Ben's body, but there are so many people hurting them.

"Please!" I scream at anyone who might listen.

"Isn't this enough?" Lopez asks Flores.

Flores smiles down at the ring. "Not quite."

He's not going to stop them. He's going to watch those men beat Michael and Ben to death with a smile on his face.

No.

My vision blurs on the edges as an almost peaceful feeling flows through me. If Flores won't stop this, I will. One way or another. I keep hold of Lopez's arm for balance as I slip my feet out of my shoes. Then I step up onto the lowest bar on the railing.

I feel Lopez's hands pulling at my arm, and James pulling at my skirt, but they aren't strong enough to stop me from climbing up to the next bar.

"Desir'ee," Flores says, his voice full of alpha command.

I ignore him. I'm going down to my boys.

I start to lift my knee over the top rail and then everything sort of turns white. I can't really hear anything anymore and I can't actually see much past the filmy gray haze that started to cloud my vision when I took my shoes off.

Eventually, I can feel that I'm moving. Someone is carrying me. It's probably Michael. He'd want to get me away from this awful place as fast as he could.

As more awareness filters in, I get sick when I realize it isn't Michael carrying me. It's Lopez. I feel the bile churning in my stomach, but it won't come up. I try to scream, but I can't form the words. I can't make a sound, not so much as a whimper. I can't move. More and more unwelcome awareness bombards me and I can feel how listless my body is as Lopez cradles me against him.

Slowly, their words start making sense.

"I told you not to do this," Lopez growls.

"And I told you to shut the fuck up. She's fine."

"She is not fine. It was too much for her, you knew it would be. You knew what would happen, Ernesto. We're just lucky she wasn't too far gone."

"Nonsense," Flores says, "she can't fight an alpha command. I was only making sure she knew we were her only option. And I was giving the boys one last chance to see each other. It never occurred to me that she might try to climb over the rail. Or that you and James might be unable to stop her from doing it. She's just an omega, for fuck sake."

"Enraged omegas can be far more dangerous than any alpha, Ernesto. You

know that. I told you not to do this.”

“Just get her to the car,” Flores barks. “They took the boys back to their boxes. We’ll just tell her they’re dead. Then we can move on from all this and you can start having your babies and all the other useless fuckery you used to go on about.”

I will not be participating in anything with this pack, regardless of any command they might give me. I have never become enraged, I didn’t know it was something that actually could happen. I thought that was something that we’re taught but doesn’t happen in the real world. Part of me is very curious about what would have happened if they hadn’t stopped me from doing whatever I was about to do.

An alpha command would explain why I can’t move or talk far better than a mental breakdown, although the sort of catatonia this seems to be is common in omegas who have breakdowns. This is fine, actually. They’ll leave me alone to think if I’m passive and limp. And I have a lot to think about.

I am going to kill Flores. I’m going to kill him myself. I want to be about four inches from his face when the light leaves his eyes. I want it to be an excruciating death. A long death. I want him to suffer.

When I come out of this stupor, I’m going to pretend like I don’t remember anything. None of it. I’ll be distraught when they tell me Michael and Ben are gone. It will be utterly believable because I am distraught. I’m smart enough to know that I am completely traumatized, and that’s what they’re looking for. Then, when I go back to the hospital for my next shift, I’ll take something from the meds dispensary that will knock Flores out. I’ll also take several vials of potassium.

I’m a nurse. I work at a hospital. At any given time, I have complete access to any drug, supply, or equipment I’d ever need. That’s how it works. Every

nurse who works at a hospital or a clinic has to be ready and able to provide any care necessary on-site at all times. All I have to do is take a few doses of whatever I want and a few syringes.

My next heat is due in about two weeks. I'm going to start having heat spikes and that's how I'll get him. I am just an omega, after all. It won't be too difficult to fake one, or even utilize a minor one. He'll definitely be interested in a heat spike and I'll use that to my advantage. Once he's close enough, I'll inject him with the sedative...or maybe just a tranquilizer... But what about after? Lopez or one of the others will surely come see what's taking so long and what will I do when they find him unconscious? I was hoping to make his death long and drawn out. I have time to work it out. I won't go back to the hospital for a few days.

I'm still under what must be the strongest alpha command ever issued when we get back to the penthouse. Lopez carries me up to my room and gently lays me down in my bed. He doesn't undress me, he just pulls the blankets up over me and tucks them in snugly. He even presses pillows tightly around the outside of my body.

"I don't know how to build a nest, not a proper one. I hope that this helps, even just a little. I am so sorry, Miss Romero," he says, pressing his palm against my forehead. Then he turns on the lamp and firmly closes the door behind him.

Of all the things I expected in this situation, Lopez trying to build a nest around me isn't one of them. The worst part about it is that it does actually help; the pseudo nest, not Lopez. It makes me feel like a traitor.

Traitor or not, I still fell asleep; and I awaken to the stench of Flores. He's sitting in a chair beside my bed. I briefly consider pretending to still be

asleep, but he'll probably just wait around. I open my eyes and do my best to show no emotion when I look over at him.

“Good,” he says quietly. “You’re awake. I didn’t know you’d be out of it for so long after we gave you that command. The twins are dead. I thought you’d want to know sooner rather than later.”

Regardless of the fact that I know the truth, my eyes fill with tears hearing the words aloud. I don’t say anything to Flores; he probably expects an outburst or something, and I’m not giving it to him.

“Do you know why they started fighting?”

I shake my head. I didn’t know they were doing them at all until we were taken.

“For you, of course. They borrowed money from us. They borrowed enough to keep that pathetic little house so you’d have a home when they finally found a third. Unfortunately, after we took our cut of the winnings, they didn't have much to show for it. It was going to take a very long time for them to pay off their debt. And now that the circumstances have changed, the money doesn’t matter.”

I just look at him. I don’t know what response he’s after, but, as before, I’m not giving him one if I can help it.

“Remember what I said when I brought you here? As long as you were good, they’d be safe. It was the same for them. So long as they did what they’re told, they thought they could keep you safe.”

That gets a reaction. He was using us against each other, with no intention of keeping them safe. He *used me* to hurt Ben and Michael. “Do they…” my throat is so thick that I nearly choke on my words, “did they know what you’re planning on doing to me?” If they’ve been fighting for me with the full knowledge that Flores intended from the start to make me his omega, that

he intended to cancel out and cover their claiming marks on my body. I don't know what I'll do.

He chuckles. "Of course, they did. Why, every now and then Elijah took a scrap of something that carried your scent to them just to remind them what we had that they didn't. You know, to keep them on edge. Edgy, desperate men fight harder than men who have nothing to fight for. What did he take to share with Michael before his first fight?" He looks off to the side as if trying to remember. "Oh yes," he smiles. "It was a pair of panties. That really got him going."

The thought of Lopez touching a pair of my underthings, much less using them to hurt Michael, is so wretched, so disgusting, so horrible. The tears filling my eyes are more from anger and the need to throw up more intense than any other of the myriad of emotions I'm feeling.

"You're due to go into heat in roughly two weeks, aren't you?" he asks, but doesn't wait for me to respond. "You have until then to wrap your pretty little head around the fact that you will have new alphas and that you will be a good omega. Elijah has always wanted a family and you're going to give it to him." Then he leaves.

So many things are racing through me. Too many to keep up with. Rage. Disgust. Horror. Despair. Then right back to rage. That's the one I'm going with.

I will not be their omega.

Chapter Nine

Seth

“You can’t go in there, Talia. Not without your pack. You don’t understand. Flores has eyes everywhere. We can’t put you at risk like that.”

Jasper nods his agreement with me. “Seth’s right. You can’t go to the hospital without all of us.”

Talia blows out an exasperated breath. “You can come to the hospital, but Desir’ee won’t talk to me with all of you in there. It needs to be just me. You can all sit on your hands in the waiting room. I’ll be perfectly safe. And I’ll be armed. I won’t let myself be kidnapped, I promise.”

“Nobody doubts you, cupcake,” Nathan says gently. “It’s just that this asshole took two alphas and their omega from a parking garage at this very same hospital, and he did it in broad daylight. We can’t take even a tiny risk.”

Talia huffs out another breath. “She won’t talk if you’re all in there. If any of you are in there with me, even one of you, she won’t say a word and we’ll never get her out of there. Even Jasper. This isn’t an omega thing, it’s a female thing. I need you all to trust me.”

I can clearly see that they are warring with themselves. Every alpha in the room is torn between wanting to tell her absolutely fucking not and trusting her to make this call. It's a bad spot to be in. I'm glad I'm not them, but this is one of those rare occasions where my opinion might make a difference.

"Talia," I start, rubbing the back of my neck, "listen. I've been here for a while. I've met these assholes. Even Minos watches what he says and keeps people with his omega every second of the day, and he's the head of the damn council. Please, for once in your stubborn life, let someone guard you. Let one of them go back with you. Let Nathan. He's the nicest. People like talking to Nathan."

"She won't leave with us if Nathan is with me, Seth. After everything she's been through, she won't trust him. It has to be me alone."

We're going to lose this argument because she's right, but being right doesn't mean we agree with her, and being right won't keep her safe. I know for a fact, especially after looking through all Nathan's information and talking to Mallory Minos, that Flores would go to great lengths to get his hands on Talia.

"What if I stayed right outside the door, in the hall?" Reid asks. "With Devon? We could stay in the hall and wait for you to come out. We wouldn't need to be in the room. That would give you room to talk to her in private, but still keep you safe. Would that work?"

Talia's mouth twitches to the side, but she sighs and agrees. "Fine. But you have to stay in the hall. And you," she raises a brow at me, "can't come at all. One glimpse of you will ruin everything and you know it. You can't be near the hospital, much less in it."

"I know," I agree. "As much as I want to be there to get her out myself, I know how dangerous it would be if anybody saw me." I don't mention that

Desir'ee might not leave with me, and everyone else is kind enough not to, either. "Besides," I continue, "I want to make some phone calls. If I can get Minos to meet with me, I can explain and maybe that will help."

"We," Talia corrects. "We will meet with him and he'll listen to us. He'll listen to me. I won't give him a choice." Then she goes over the plan one last time before she succumbs to her need for rest.

Nathan does whatever he does and gets into the hospital's system to see when Desir'ee would be there for her shifts. Tomorrow is her first day back after a three day break, and Talia has an appointment for a sonogram. When she made the appointment, she emphasized that she felt the need to check on her baby after such a long trip from the Eastern territory, and she dropped enough names that the staff was practically falling all over themselves to make her happy. She didn't mention Desir'ee by name, but Nathan will make sure Desir'ee gets Talia's chart in her rotation. Once Desir'ee takes Talia back for her scan, Talia will tell her everything and we hope Desir'ee will believe her and leave the hospital with her. If she doesn't, Talia will give Devon the signal and they'll take Desir'ee out of the hospital kicking and screaming if they have to. I hope it doesn't come to that, though.

I'm not optimistic that Minos will meet with me on my own merit. He liked me well enough; but now that he's been presented with my past, that has obviously changed. Maybe not, though. Maybe it won't be as bad as I think it will be. Minos looked and sounded almost apologetic, or at least reluctant, during our last conversation. It's possible that he would have made different decisions if other people hadn't been watching so closely.

When I wake up the next morning I'm feeling a little worse about trying to meet with, or speak to, Minos later in the day. I can go to counseling or therapy or whatever for the rest of my life, hell, Talia can keep going with me

like she does sometimes, but it won't change what I did to her or how it makes me feel. It doesn't matter how much work I put in to try to work through it, and I don't think it matters how much Talia puts in. People are going to think and assume whatever they're going to, and I can't change that.

“Pull your head out of your ass, Pratchett. We don't have time for it.” Kaleb says around his toothbrush, poking his head into my room. Under the assumption that anyone who knows I'm still here is probably watching every move I make, I left the twins' house. The less attention on their place, the better. The rental I arranged for Talia's pack is huge. I wanted something that would have room for Desie, and hopefully the twins. I know they will want to be at their place, but I need them to be safe, and Talia's pack means safe.

I rake my hands through my hair and get up and dressed. Most of what I want to try to accomplish today can be done from the couch or kitchen table, but I'm a little too uptight to work in the clothes I slept in.

After I'm dressed, I leave my shoes by my bedroom door and head to the kitchen for coffee. Talia hands me a cup when I walk into the room. I'm still not entirely comfortable with her caring for me like everything's okay, but I've learned that it's better for her if I just let her do it. Jasper motherfucking hates it. So does Devon. Jasper's jaw ticks almost as violently as Devon's vein throbs every time Talia makes a special effort for me, even if it's something so small as giving me a snack. They *extra* hate it when she goes to a session with me.

“It's going to be fine, Seth. Like I said, if he doesn't want to hear you out, fuck him. He can deal with me. I'd like to see him try to say that his feelings and opinions about the whole thing are more important than mine.” Talia says with a smile.

Kaleb comes in and wraps his arms around her, kissing her neck before he

lifts her up to sit on the counter. “Nobody’s feelings and opinions are more important than yours, cupcake.”

Talia rolls her eyes and leans into him. As much as I feel like I’m intruding during moments like these, I am unfathomably happy that this is her life and that I get to witness it. The only things I ever want for Talia are safety and happiness.

During our last few counseling sessions together, we’ve been considering the relationship we’ve grown into. The counselor says we’re fortunate, but I’m sure anyone outside of our unique situation would think our relationship is strange, at best.

Apparently, Talia and I function as dysfunctional siblings. That’s what we call it, anyway. She says I’m the only one who understands why she doesn’t hate me and why she thinks nobody else should, either. I don’t agree with her, but I know, without doubt, that she is the only person who truly understands why I have the problems I have. She was there when most of them were created. If I’m lucky, Desir’ee and the twins will be there to help me work through everything, but Talia understands why I need to.

Everyone else files in for breakfast, including the triplets. Dutch eats all of his eggs and toast, and steals half of Zetty’s before she screeches at him and shoves him away from her. I save him from his own poor choices, grabbing him and another piece of toast from the pan on the stove on my way back to my bedroom.

“The toons,” he whispers not so quietly in his gruff little voice, prompting me to pull up banned cartoons on my phone. We’re only supposed to let him watch enriching children’s educational shows, but that stuff will rot his brain. I watch the good stuff with him. I’m just really careful not to get caught.

We get fifteen good minutes of actual cartoons before Jasper comes looking

for him. “Come on, wild boy. Let’s go get you dressed. You and your sisters are going to the zoo this morning.”

Dutch climbs up Jasper’s body and immediately starts yelling about lions. Jasper’s eye only slightly twitches with certain vowels.

“Alex and Trent are taking them?” I ask. I’m worried shitless, but ultimately Jasper and the others have the final say. I don’t think two of them are enough. If my opinion mattered, they’d stay here until everyone could go.

“You might be worse than Devon,” Jasper says, flipping Dutch around to hang over his shoulder. “That’s not a compliment. You both probably have ulcers at this point.”

He’s probably right, but I can’t help it. “Just tell them to be careful.”

Jasper looks at me like I’m an idiot, but says, “I’ll tell them. I know you’re anxious about everything right now, but Trent and Alex can handle it. They’re going to take the backpack harnesses and everything. And they’ll check in a lot. They’ll be okay.” He turns to leave, but pauses at the door. “You could go with them, you know.”

His suggestion floors me since I know he plots my demise often and in great detail. But, I didn’t think of that. I could make my inquiries while I walk around the zoo with the kids, and I’ll be another person there to protect them. Plus, I fucking love the zoo. Especially the lions. “You think so? I wouldn’t be intruding?”

“No,” he says. “I think it’s a good idea. The more eyes on them the better. I’ll tell them you’re coming.” Then he goes to get Dutch put together.

It’s mid-morning by the time goodbyes are said and seat belts are buckled. I make my first call to Minos’s office on the way to the zoo. I offered to drive, but Trent declined and that works just fine for what I need to do. Between him, Alex, and the GPS we’ll get there eventually.

The secretary picks up and I give her my name. “Good morning. This is Seth Pratchett. I’d like to schedule a meeting with Alpha Minos as soon as possible.”

After a brief delay and some clicking, she comes back with disappointing news. “I’m sorry, Mr. Pratchett, but Alpha Minos won’t have any time to meet with you for quite a while.”

“A phone call then. Could you patch me through? I won’t take up much time.”

“Hold just a moment, please,” she says, then I’m listening to the hold music before I have time to respond. She comes back after a minute. “He’s out for the day, Mr. Pratchett. I can take a message if you like.”

I sigh and bite back my disappointment. “Yes, thank you. I’d appreciate that.”

I end the call after I give her my number with a message for him to call me at his earliest convenience.

“You should have said as soon as fucking possible,” Alex gripes from the passenger seat of the minivan. “At his earliest convenience was too nice. You need this asshole to hear you out, not fuck around and get back to you eventually, if ever.”

“Don’t say fuck,” Trent hisses through his teeth, but it’s too late.

“Fuck!” Dutch yells, thoroughly pleased with himself, then repeats it several times.

“Talia’s going to beat your ass,” Trent says.

Alex looks back at Dutch. “Don’t say fuck, sweetheart. Mama doesn’t like to hear you say that word.”

“Yeah,” Trent snorts, “that’s definitely going to work.”

Dutch only says fuck two hundred times before we get to the zoo. Iris

whispers it once, and Zetty narrows her eyes at me like it's my fault her siblings are delinquents. When I think about the scene we must make climbing out of the van, assembling strollers, distributing sippy cups and the entirely-too-healthy cookies Talia sent for the kids, I start laughing.

"What's so funny?" Trent asks, with his fingers tangled up in the ponytail dangling off the side of Zetty's head.

"We are," I laugh. "Look at us. You with all the tattoos, him with the hair, and me looking like a pirate. We don't look like we should be cruising around in a minivan and adjusting ponytails. That's all. It just struck me as funny."

Alex looks at Trent, and Trent looks at Alex, then they look around at the kids and all their equipment. "Yeah, okay," Alex grins, "we look ridiculous."

"You look ridiculous," Trent argues. "I look hot. Don't I, darlin?" he croons to Zetty, who beams up at him. Then Dutch takes off, because that's what he does, and I run after him.

We've spent way too much money on treats the kids are definitely not allowed to have, and are each pushing a stroller full of sleeping toddler through the underground aquarium that lets people see what otters do when they're underwater when we run right into the very person I wanted to see. Looks like Minos really wasn't in his office.

"Seth!" he calls, smiling at me before he remembers he's not supposed to. "I thought you left for home." He gives Trent and Alex a good look, then comes back to me with more than one question in his eyes.

"I did," I tell him. "But I didn't get very far. This is Trent and Alex, of the Johnson pack." I give him a lingering look. "They're friends from home."

"Alphonse Minos," Alpha Minos introduces himself, reaching out a hand to shake theirs. They glance at me and between each other, their expressions

immediately going stoic as they each shake his hand. “You say you didn’t get very far?”

I nod. “I turned around. Listen, I called your office this morning. I need a chance to explain my situation. Things aren’t the way they sound.”

A flash of something flickers in his eyes. “The report was wrong? Why didn’t you say anything?”

“No,” I start, “the report—”

“Isn’t complete,” Trent interjects, shooting me a look.

Mallory comes to Minos’s side and takes his hand. “Seth,” she says. “Didn’t expect to see you today. Who do we have here?” she asks, looking down at the sleeping toddlers.

“They’re ours,” Alex doesn’t smile when he says it. He looks at Minos and holds his gaze. “We need a meeting with you. Do you think you can work us in? I’m not sure how long we’ll be able to stay in the territory.”

“Not without some of the other counselors, I’m sorry. What’s this all about?”

“When was the last time you heard from Flores?” I ask.

Minos glances back at his pack to make sure they are out of hearing range. “I’m not really sure. Why? What do you know that I don’t, Seth?”

I breathe a small breath of relief. Minos could still be an ally. “Not here, with the kids and your omega. I’d rather meet with you at your offices so we can get everything out in the open and settled.”

He sighs and nods. “Alright. I’ll set it up and give you a call. I’m glad you’re still here. Nice to meet you both,” he salutes Trent and Alex.

“Beautiful children,” he smiles, then leads Mallory and his pack out of the otter display.

“That was Minos?” Alex asks, his brows furrowed.

I nod, leading us out of the display in the opposite direction that Minos took.

“I thought he was supposed to be a dick,” Trent says, pushing the stroller canopy up to block Iris from the sun.

I nod again. “He was. But he kind of isn’t. I told y’all, he seems like an alright guy. His omega is messed up, though. She’s the one who wants to talk to Elizabet. I’m pretty sure she’s one of the taken ones. Minos is as bad as you guys when it comes to her.”

“Good,” Alex says quietly. “He should be. Can we leave now? I’m hungry and the brats are out of cookies.”

Chapter Ten

Desie

I have eight ultrasound appointments today and six general check-ups. I wish there were just a few less, I'd like a little more time to work up the nerve to carry through with my plan. It's still better now that I know what I'm going to do. I'm not as weighed down with fear as I was when all this began, I'm thinking clearly.

I'm going to go into heat in a little more than a week. I will not allow any member of the Flores pack to touch me. I'd rather die a thousand deaths than let that happen. If I go into heat, I'll never be able to fight them off and I don't care how stringently Lopez watches me, if they try to cancel out Ben's and Michael's marks I will find a way to jump off that balcony.

There is a last minute sonogram added to my schedule when I look at my charts to plan for my day. It's got a yellow star paperclip at the top, which lets me know this patient is a big deal. Either she's someone important, or she's the omega of someone important. Great, just what I need, someone else to cater to. It's fine, though. It's just a sonogram, it won't take long; and she's

my second appointment of the day. I just need to be extra accommodating to her and her pack.

My first appointment ran a little longer than I anticipated. The omega is due next week and her pack was way more concerned about it than she was, and that worried them more than anything else; so there was lots of assuring on my part. They left happy, but now I'm walking into my appointment with the star patient harried and tense. Not exactly ideal, considering whoever she is might be important enough to file a negative report on me. I take a calming breath and force myself to smile at the three alphas standing in the hall outside the exam room.

"We'll wait for her down there," the blonde one says softly and motions at the row of chairs a few feet down the hallway, and they each smile at me as I walk around them to knock on the door.

The omega perched on the edge of the exam table looks a little bit like a fairy out of a book with her sharp features and pale skin. A very delicate, very pregnant little fairy. "Good morning, Missus..." I glance down at the surname highlighted on the chart, "Nattier. My name is Desie. I'm going to be doing your scan today. I apologize for the wait. How are you feeling?"

She smiles at me, rubbing her rounded belly. "I'm okay. Thank you for squeezing me in with such short notice. I was just so worried after the flight. I'll feel much better after I check on this little girl."

As the words leave her mouth, I find myself wishing she'd stop talking. Her accent is nearly identical to Seth's, and hearing it makes the hole in the pit of my stomach contract painfully. Hearing her sweet, little twang forces me to think about all the things I've lost and all the things I might never have.

"Perfectly understandable," I try to appear kind and warm when I smile at her. "I'd be worried, too. Let's get you settled back and we can begin."

I help her lean back against the little pillow and tuck a towel under her belly to protect her leggings from the gel, then I dim the lights in the room. It doesn't take much time or effort to find the baby's heartbeat flashing and swooshing steadily on the screen, and I turn up the volume so we can hear it.

"See?" I say softly. "Such a perfect little girl. Let's see if we can get a view of her face. Maybe we can get a good picture."

"Thank you," she says, her eyes flicking back and forth between the screen and me.

"Are you here on vacation?" I ask. I can't imagine an omega as far along as she is traveling for a vacation, but to each their own I guess. Michael and Benny wouldn't let me near a plane if I was even a little bit pregnant.

"No, not vacationing. A family emergency."

That makes more sense. "I hope everything's okay," I tell her. "Are you from the Southern East Coast?"

She gives me another smile. "How could you tell?"

I move the wand to the side of her stomach, pressing at different angles in search of a clear shot of her baby's face. "Your accent. I used to know someone that sounded like you."

"Used to?" she asks. I can feel her eyes on my face.

I nod, moving the wand up a little and force a smile. "Yes. He was only here for a while. He had to go back home."

"I'm sorry," she says, her tone gentle. "He might come back."

I swallow and smile, choosing to focus on the monitor rather than the pitying look in her eyes. I finally get the baby's profile on the screen and capture several images to print out for her to take with her.

"Would you want him to come back?" she asks, her bright blue eyes staring straight into mine.

Of course I want Seth to come back. Part of me thinks that if he would come back he could fix all of this. “It doesn’t matter. He had to go home.”

“It matters, Desir’ee.”

I take a step away from her, my eyes wide, shaking my head. “Why did you call me that?” Only Seth says my name that way, and I *know* I introduced myself as Desie.

She smiles at me, exuding patience and empathy. “I don’t know if my chart has my first name listed. I’m Talia. I’m here for Seth. I wanted to meet you.” She sighs and gestures toward her belly, “I was also worried after the flight.”

“Is Seth here?” I whisper, cutting my eyes anxiously to the door like he might walk in any second.

She, Talia, smiles again. “Not in the building, no. He sent me here to get you.”

I feel myself deflating. No, I can’t leave with her. Not even for Seth. I have a plan to stick to. I won’t save myself and leave Michael and Benny at the mercy of Flores. “No.”

Her face drops, her brows knitting together. “No?”

I shake my head slowly. “I can’t. I won’t leave my boys. If I don’t go back to the penthouse, Flores will kill them. I know he will. I have a plan.”

“A plan?” she repeats.

I nod. I don’t know how much to tell her, but she and I are the only ones here and she was sent by Seth. “I’m going to kill him. Soon. Then I’ll find the boys and we’ll get out of there. We can find Seth after.”

An elated grin slowly spreads across her face. “He was right. I do like you. What’s your plan?”

I take a deep breath and tell her, giving her the quick version. “I’m going to inject him with a cocktail that will stop his heart and leave him to die while I

go get Ben and Michael. He's keeping them locked up somewhere awful, but I'll find them." I hand her a towel from the cabinet over the counter.

Talia nods and begins wiping the gel off of her stomach. "What about Lopez and the rest of his pack? They won't let you just walk out of there."

"I'll wait till it's just Flores and me. The rest of them are always running around to other places. I'll be gone by the time they get back." I can tell from her expression that she doesn't like my plan. "It's going to work. It has to. I'm going to go into heat in a couple weeks and I can't be there when it hits. I won't let them touch me. I'd rather die."

She finishes cleaning herself up and sits up on the table when I offer her my forearm to assist. "You dying isn't an option. I like the plan, though. We can work with that. Tell me how you feel about Seth."

My mouth pulls to the side as I consider which version of the truth to give her. Ultimately, I give her all of them. "Seth belongs with us, but he's hung up on something that happened on the East Coast, and now my brothers and the WCC are hung up on it, too. He's mine. I know he's mine. But there are so many problems. And he ran from us. He didn't even try to explain. He just left. I have to get to Michael and Benny first, then we're going to find Seth and figure out what to do. He's their third. We all know it. I don't care what he did in the past, he needs someone to look after him now."

Talia's face transforms into pure happiness. "Yes," her smile grows just a little bit deeper, "he does. Would you like for me to tell you what happened on the East Coast? It might help you understand him a little better. It's my story as much as it is his, and I think you should know."

Part of me prickles with the knowledge that she, another female, knows more about Seth than I do. "We don't have time. We've already taken longer than a scan should take. People will get suspicious."

She smirks at me. “I am Corso Zaphir’s and Devon Johnson’s omega and my last name is Nattier. I can close down the whole fucking hospital if I want to. No one will mind if I take a little longer than what was scheduled.”

She isn’t wrong. Still, I go to the door and lock it before I wedge a chair under the handle. I text Annie to ask her to push my other appointments back for me and mark the board. “Okay. First, do you need anything? I know I just locked the door, but I can grab you a juice or something and lock it back.”

“I’m good. You might need that chair, though,” she says before she starts her account. “Actually, can I do something that is more than a little strange? For Seth?”

“What do you want to do?”

“I want to cut a piece of your hair for him. I want to braid it into his hair. He’s having a really hard time and he’s utterly convinced that you hate him. That way he’ll know you don’t hate him and he can keep part of you with him.”

After a moment’s thought, I decide I like that idea and reach into my pocket for my small scissors and release my hair from the clip. She snips a small section from an area where it won’t be obvious and starts telling her story while I’m twisting my hair back up.

“On the East Coast, when a beta completes their courses at the omega institute they have the option to go out into the world to find their own way, or they can choose to be assigned to established packs to try to find their fit. I didn’t want to find my own way as a beta—”

“Wait,” I interrupt. “What do you mean beta?”

She smiles patiently. “I began this life as a beta. I didn’t come into being an omega until after I found my Jasper.”

I nod, even though that’s bizarre, and she continues. “I didn’t want to find

my own way. I have always been small, and there weren't too many packs that would actually want me as their beta. I didn't look like much and I knew I wouldn't survive on my own, so I asked to be assigned. I was eventually assigned to Seth's pack. We now know that his father was a son of a bitch and pulled strings to get me placed with them, but that isn't the point right now. The point is that I was placed with Seth's pack and the two other alphas in the pack were horrible, disgusting, evil bastards. They were also part of the organized rogues who have been kidnapping omegas for years."

"Seth was in with the rogues?" I ask, not believing it.

"Not intentionally. The other two alphas in his pack were twisted fucks and believed they could force me into my magical omega awakening. Seth was very neutral about me being with his pack until he walked in on the other two...hurting me. Jay, the worst one, was taking pictures of him trying to force his knot inside me when Seth walked into the room. He stopped them. Looking back on it, I think I may have registered that he was panicking about what to do, but then one of those assholes got his father on the phone and he started talking shit like he always did and..." she trails off, her breath trembling.

Oh god. It was Talia. The blanked out name on Seth's file is Talia's. I think I'm going to throw up. Never. I never would have thought the girl in Seth's file was Talia. The way he talks about her makes it sound almost like they have something like a sibling relationship.

"It's okay, you don't have to finish," I say softly. I don't want her to be too upset. And it might make me a terrible person, but I'm not sure I want to sit in the same room with her and listen to the account.

"No," she gives me a fierce look. "No. I will finish. You need to know. Seth has been through years of counseling. I've even gone with him on

multiple occasions. I don't hold what happened against him. If anything, I'm grateful for what he did; but he won't hear about that. Seth did the best he could in an impossible situation. I've thought about it hundreds of times and I can't think of another way he could have safely gotten us both out of that room without doing what he did."

"I don't understand. Michael said he," I stop talking when Talia holds up a hand to quiet me.

"Seth did technically rape me. He put himself inside me and I didn't consent to it, but he didn't hurt me. Even with his pack and his disgusting father urging him in the most vile ways, he didn't hurt me. He only did as much as he had to to satisfy them, then he got us out of there. He didn't enjoy it, not a single second of it. In my opinion, Seth was raped as much as I was, but he won't hear about that, either. None of them want to hear that."

"What happened after that?" I ask, reeling from the horrible truth.

Talia takes another deep breath. "He untied me and helped me get cleaned up. Then he locked me in a holding cell inside of a locked room and refused to let his pack have access to me. I remember him screaming at them that he was the lead alpha and he was the only one who could fuck me. But he wasn't fucking me. He didn't touch me again after he got me out of that first room. After a few days, Corso came and took me away. I went to the omega council at the institute to report what happened and try to make sure no omega would ever be placed with Seth's pack, and it was almost easier to convince them than it should have been. From then on, until we brought him out of the rogue compound with my alphas, Seth acted like he hated me. He was awful to me, and encouraged his pack and his friends to be awful to me. At the time it was frustrating because I was the one who had been wronged, but now I know that it was the only way he knew to protect me. Seth is

broken, Desie. You can fix him. Michael and Benjamin can fix him. He needs the three of you.”

I think I’m going to cry. I can feel the tears gathering heavily. They all believe Seth is a monster. Seth believes it himself. But he isn’t. I knew he wasn’t. “Where is he?”

“He’s trying to secure a meeting with Alpha Minos to get the situation sorted and try to get a fix on where Michael and Ben are being held. And he might kill me when he finds out I walked out of here without you.”

It’s my turn to smile at her. “He won’t kill you. He loves you.”

She blinks at that, but doesn’t argue. “You definitely know what to inject Flores with?”

I nod.

“And you’re sure you can get him alone?” she raises her brows.

“Absolutely.”

She sighs. “Okay. He’s going to be pissed. No, he’s going to be livid. Can you put my number in your phone?”

Crap. “No, not without Flores finding it. I can remember it, though.”

Her mouth draws into a little line. “Did he put a tracker on your phone?”

“Yes.”

“I’m not surprised. They’re all going to be upset with me for leaving you, but I agree with you. If you don’t show up after your shift, they’ll take it out on your boys. Fuck, Devon’s going to be pissed. Okay. When are you planning to take out Flores?”

I bite my lip and mentally calculate the window between my heat and my remaining shifts, taking into consideration the spikes I’ll start having soon. It’s a small window. “Friday.”

Talia just looks at me. “Friday?”

I nod. "I only have about a week's window between now and my heat. I've already started having mild spikes, that's how it usually goes for me. I can't let that... jerk touch me."

"Okay. Friday," she says. "When will your next shift be after that?"

"I'll come back on Monday, but if everything works out like it's supposed to, then I won't be back."

She blows out a breath. "Give me a pen."

I hand it to her along with a notepad. "This is my number," she says the numbers aloud as she writes them on the paper. "You won't be able to keep the paper, but seeing it will help you remember. Call me the second he's down. Call me if you need help. I'll find you, I promise."

I believe her.

She hands the pen back to me and then yanks me in for a fast and hard hug. "I really do like you. Kill that motherfucker. We'll come and kill the rest of them and clean up the mess. We'll get your boys out and safe, and you'll have your pack whole in time for your heat."

God, I hope so. I hug her back, not feeling even a little bit awkward. I completely understand why Seth adores her. Her confidence in me might be stronger than my own.

Chapter Eleven

Ben

I wanted Michael to knock me out, not break my fucking nose. It's been broken before, but never like this. Fuck, it hurts. I'm glad for it, though. The pain will keep me sharp and grounded while I figure out what to do and how to do it.

Desie was going to jump off the damn catwalk. I think there was something wrong with her. I couldn't smell her, there were too many other scents in The Backhouse and she was too far away from me to pick hers out, but I could feel her. She was there, sad, scared, and angry, then she was something else entirely before Michael punched me. I can't put my finger on exactly what, but it was intense.

Michael is alive, which is what I was hoping for even though I was afraid to. I don't even mind that we had to fight each other, I still got to see him. Smell him. I got to be next to him even if it was a shit situation. The stark relief on his face when he saw me said everything. He thought I was dead.

Lopez said there weren't going to be any more fights. He lied, of course; but why would he tell me no more fights if he was just going to put me up against my brother? And how could they possibly think it was a good idea to bring Desie? Why? I mean, obviously they'd want to hurt us, but why put her through it? If they're trying to win her over or some bullshit like that, watching me and Michael try to kill each other isn't the way to do it.

My thoughts circle around to Seth. Every time I think about him I get angry. He just walked away. He didn't fight for us, he didn't try to explain anything, he just left. We already had a pack bond starting to form, how could he just walk away from that? And Desie, what kind of idiot would walk away from her without a fight? There has to be more to it. There has to be some reason.

A loud bang on the door has me jolting upright.

"Here," a voice barks, and a tray of food comes through the slot.

The room spins when I start to stand up, so I crawl across the floor to get to the tray. My nose will heal, but my body is going to need fuel to get the job done. I spent too much time in the beginning refusing the food they brought me and I suffered for it during my first fight. So, I'll eat the stale sandwich and whatever else they bring when they bring it. I'm breaking out of here, and I'm going to find Michael. Then we're getting to Desie. After that, we're going straight to the East Coast so I can beat some sense into Seth's ass.

He's our third. I don't care that he did something fucked up. There has to be a reason. Seth wouldn't have done something like what was in that file, there has to be something more to the story. I've had time to think about it. I don't know if Michael is going to feel the same way as I do, but regardless of anything else, Seth is ours.

Hours, maybe a day later, Lopez comes for another visit. I'm sitting on the

edge of the bed trying to decide how crooked my nose is going to be when he comes in and sits next to me. “Your balls might be bigger than mine.”

He shakes his head at me, then puts his elbows on his knees and starts aggressively rubbing his eyebrows. “They’re not.”

We sit next to each other for a few minutes before I break the silence. “Why are you here?”

He draws in a breath and forces it out. “I’m about to make a decision that will affect you. All of you.”

“Why tell me?”

He stands back up and looks down at me. “Because you’re more level-headed than Michael, especially right now, and I like you more than I like him.” He pauses to smile. “And I don’t want my nose broken.”

“Is Desie alright?” If he’s down here discussing his decisions with me, then he’s probably willing to talk to me about her.

“Truthfully,” he sighs, “no. She’s declining and I can’t make it stop. If we were going to take her as our omega, it would have been better if you and Michael had died. If you were dead she could maybe move on and it would have been better for her to be with us, at least we would have been familiar, provided for her in everything she needed as she healed and after. But I’m tired, Benjamin. I’m tired of causing damage to people who don’t deserve it.”

“Why are you telling me all this, Lopez? If you haven’t noticed, I’m a caged animal.” During our last conversation, he asked me what I’d do if he left the door unlocked. Maybe this is another of those conversations. If he has had a sudden change of heart and leaves that door open right now, I’ll blow right past him and find Michael. I know he’s somewhere in this building.

He sighs. “I’m not telling you anything yet. Your nose is very broken. Let me see it.” He steps in front of me and I am abruptly reminded of Seth

stitching up Michael. I tilt my head back so he can have a clear view, and he clicks his tongue. "You won't be as pretty, but your ego can take the hit. Ready?"

I give him a quick nod and he presses the pads of his fingers firmly on either side of the bridge of my nose. He doesn't give another warning before pushing my nose into a straighter position and I let out an involuntary grunt.

"Well, it isn't perfect, but it's better than it was. At least now people will be able to tell you two apart."

If he's down here talking about me being pretty when I leave from here, it tells me all I need to know. I'm getting out of here. All I need to do is wait.

Chapter Twelve

Seth

“You left her there.”

“I did,” Talia says, holding my gaze. “It was the right thing to do, Seth.”

“How? How was leaving her there to go back with Flores the right thing to do? I’m trying to understand.” I rake my hands through my hair. It isn’t Talia’s fault, but I’m so angry. And afraid. I don’t understand why Desie would choose to stay with Flores when she had the option of escape.

“She’s going to kill him. She has a plan. It’s a good plan, but she has to be the one to do it.”

Desir’ee isn’t like Talia. She isn’t like the rest of us. She doesn’t kill people. I can’t imagine her actively killing anyone. “What did she say? What is her plan?” I remember the twins’ plan. It was a really stupid plan. I’d never accuse Desir’ee of being stupid, but she’s more aligned with giving life than taking it.

Talia’s mouth tightens. “You’re not going to like it.”

“I’m sure I won’t. What is it?”

Then she tells me, and I'm considering changing my mind about accusing Desir'ee of being stupid. And I'm about to start a fight because I might just inform Talia of the fact that she's just as stupid.

She must see it on my face because she quickly adds, "do you trust her?"

"Of course I trust her, Talia. But that isn't the point. She isn't like us. She can't kill Flores. And she's going to get hurt, or worse, if she tries." I'm trying not to sound angry, but fuck, I'm angry.

"Watch it," Devon says. He's been very patient throughout the conversation, and he very obviously agrees with me about this ridiculous plan, but the general rule with Devon is that the only person allowed to be snippy with Talia is Jasper. And even that is pushing it.

"I'm sorry, but what would you do if you were me?" I ask him. "Would you be smiling about this?"

He considers that for a moment, then he crosses his arms. "No."

That isn't helpful. "How am I supposed to be okay with this?"

"You aren't," Talia says. "But it's happening. She can do this."

"She shouldn't have to. You should have made her leave with you. Y'all should have dragged her out of that hospital. She should be here right now." I try to reign in my anger and frustration, but my words still come out harsh and I can feel the snarl pulling at my face.

Talia takes a step away from me. She isn't afraid of me, not really, but instincts are instincts and an angry alpha is a threat.

Devon takes a step forward, but I'm already sitting down in a chair before his foot touches the ground. "No," I say very softly. "Don't do that. I didn't mean for it to come out like that. I would never hurt you, Talia. I'd never threaten you like that. I'm just scared."

"I know you are, but trust her," Talia sits at the other end of the table. "It's

alright, Devon. What would you do if you were in his position?”

“I would have put her over my shoulder and carried her out, but you wouldn’t let me,” Devon deadpans.

Talia glares at him. “That’s not helpful. Don’t be an ass. What would you do if you were in his position right now?”

He takes a few minutes to think about it before he answers. “I made a lot of mistakes with you. Mistakes that got you hurt and almost killed more than once. I should have done a hundred things differently.”

Talia starts to interrupt, but he holds up his finger to quiet her, then he addresses me. “You have to trust them. You have to trust your omega. You keep saying Desir’ee isn’t like us, but you don’t know what she’s capable of at this point. She lost everything all at once, but she’s still fighting for her pack. She’s fighting for you. If Talia came to me and said, ‘Devon, I’m going to kill that motherfucker,’ I’d believe it and I’d do whatever I could to help her. If Talia says she’s going to kill something, she’s going to.”

I open my mouth to tell him, again, that Desir’ee isn’t like Talia, but he stops me. “Your omega has called for a death. She deserves that death. And you are going to deliver it to her, however she wants it. That’s what we do. If she wants to kill someone, you hand her the gun. It’s as simple as that, Pratchett.”

It might be as simple as that for him, but he’s never met Desir’ee. He doesn’t know how wonderful she is. He doesn’t know how kind, how selfless and caring she is. I can’t imagine her aiming a gun at someone and actually pulling the trigger. He’s absolutely right about one thing though. I’m going to deliver Flores’s head to her on a fucking platter.

Talia pulls a folded paper towel out of her bag and hands it to me. I don’t know what I expected when I unfolded it to see what was tucked inside, but a

lock of hair isn't it. One breath tells me it's Desir'ee's. "What's this?" I ask. "I know it's her hair," I bring the tresses closer to my face to draw in her sweet scent, "but why?"

Talia flicks a look to Devon. "Don't get worked up about this."

"I never get worked up."

"Devon," she snorts, "I love you, but that's all you do. He needs this. It will help him. Don't be a dick about it." Then she gets up and stands behind me and to the side. "Tilt your head like this," she angles my head and picks up a pen from the cup in the center of the table. I am thoroughly confused as she parts my hair and starts pulling at it. Then she picks up the lock of Desir'ee's hair and I understand.

"I thought this might help with the separation," she says as she continues weaving Desir'ee's hair into mine. "It should stay until we get her out. It's right by your ear, so you should be able to smell it for a little while, and you'll know it's there after the scent fades. She really liked the idea of it, too."

Devon watches her fingers moving in my hair with mostly curiosity, but his tone is curt when he says, "Jasper wouldn't like this."

"You're right," Talia says. "He wouldn't. And he might pout. But maybe you'll help me talk him out of being too upset."

Devon smirks. "This is how it's going to be for you, Pratchett. They bat their eyes and make a lewd suggestion and you find yourself allowing the most ridiculous things to happen. You haven't even marked your Desir'ee and you're about to take on the entire West Coast Council and an underground operation; and worse, you snapped at Talia. Tisk tisk. I'd never do something that stupid."

Talia ties off the braid and goes to lean into Devon. "Yes, you would. But

it's okay."

Devon will never forgive himself for his part in what happened to Talia, just like I won't. But that doesn't stop her from trying to convince us that it's okay. I reach up to touch the snug braid that goes from my temple, down my hairline and across my nape, and stops on the other side under my ear. She left the braided tail of Desir'ee's hair to dangle onto my shoulder. I really look like a pirate now, but I don't care. I can smell Desir'ee, and knowing that I've got part of her with me really does help.

"So, what?" I ask. "She kills Flores and leaves him laying, then she calls us to help her get out? Then what? When do we go for the twins? It will have to be that same night. Lopez will do something to them after he finds out Flores is gone. We need to get to them before he finds out."

"We will," Talia says.

"What will we do, bella?" Corso says as he comes into the room. He steps in front of her, crowding her against Devon, and leans down to kiss her.

Devon answers for her. "We're going to sneak into wherever it is and steal Pratchett's twins while his omega is busy killing Flores."

"Oh," Corso purrs, straightening. "Is that all?"

"That's the plan," she says, sounding a little breathless. A blush starts creeping up her neck and into her cheeks, making it perfectly obvious what effect being sandwiched between Devon and Corso has on her. "Unless you have a better one?"

Corso tilts his head, looking deep into Talia's eyes, his hand cupping the side of her face as he contemplates a better version of the plan. "We," he dips his head for another kiss, "are going to watch a fight. And by we, I mean Kaleb, Trent, and myself. You, mio tesoro, are going to remain here with Jasper and Reid."

Devon runs his nose up her neck before nipping Talia's earlobe with a soft growl. "They will be waiting in the stands (jellyfish- seats?) until it's time to get to the twins. Alex, Nathan, and I will go get Desir'ee's out. Seth is going to be very busy, because he will likely need to be in both places as efficiently as he can get there."

I'd argue with them, but there's no point. Devon's right about me needing to be in two places at once and the way everyone's divided up works as well as it's going to. I don't want Talia and Jasper here with only Reid to guard them, but hell will have to flood before Jasper will let anything happen to Talia; and the devil himself will have to make it past Reid to get to both of them.

Chapter Thirteen

Desie

I have been going through the motion of existing here since I saw Talia. Seeing her, and learning that Seth is fighting for us after all has been enough to keep me calm. But this morning a twinge of an early heat spike woke me up and now I'm back to being anxiety ridden.

Flores and the rest mostly leave me alone as long as I'm not doing anything to draw their attention. Lopez has been particularly observant, though. He walked into my room last night with Ben's stormy scent on him. It was wonderful and very inconvenient. I think that's what triggered the minor spike this morning. He came into the room and stood near me without saying anything for a few long minutes while I took in deep breaths, then he nodded at me and left. It could have been kindness on his part.

It's almost time for dinner. I hate having dinner with them. It's almost always just Flores, Lopez, and me. Everyone else is either out doing whatever it is that they do, or they take their meals in their rooms. I wish I could do

that. I might be able to actually keep something down if I could eat in my room.

As if on cue, Flores taps on my door frame. “Dinner is ready, Desir’ee. I’ll walk down with you.”

I bristle every single time he says my name. It isn’t so much that he’s saying my name, it’s that he’s saying it the way Seth does. Seth says my whole name, not an abbreviation, not a nickname. Desir’ee. Every time he says it. I hate it coming out of Flores’s mouth.

“You don’t have to wait for me, I’ll be right down,” I try to sound pleasant. Docile. Agreeable. I’ve been trying to maintain a level of neutral cooperation since the fight. I can’t be too happy about the circumstances, obviously; but I can’t fight them too hard for the same reasons.

“I don’t mind waiting,” he says, and comes into my room. He picks up the remote control for the television and holds it up. “I don’t suppose you’ll need this anymore, will you?”

I haven’t turned on the television since the last fight. I haven’t been brave enough. I’ve been operating under the assumption that Ben and Michael are alive and well enough, I was too afraid of having a huge reaction if I saw them on the screen. But the idea of Flores removing the television and taking the option away from me causes me to react. Violently.

I make a grab for the remote control, but I can’t pry it out of his hands. He holds it above his head and tilts his head to look down at me. “What’s the matter with you?”

“You can’t take it,” I hiss.

“The remote control?” he asks, thoroughly puzzled.

“Give it back.”

“No.” He smiles at me like we’re playing a silly game.

“Give it back,” I repeat.

“Why?” his eyes narrow. “You never watch television, and there’s no longer anything to see on channel twenty-three.”

“Give it back to me.” I can’t help the quiver in my voice. Common sense tells me that I wouldn’t be able to see them even if I tried, it would be stupid for Flores to leave me the option of seeing them if I’m supposed to believe they’re dead.

“Why, Desir’ee?” He starts squeezing the remote control in his hand, the plastic popping in his grip. “There’s nothing to see. You don’t watch anything and Michael and Ben are dead.”

It’s a mistake. I shouldn’t do it. I know I shouldn’t even as my hand is whipping out to make contact. The slap I give him stings my palm. It doesn’t matter that I know the truth about Ben and Michael, hearing it said aloud, hearing *him* say it, is too much.

I have a moment to register the sound of the remote control being crushed before Flores’s hands are wrapped around my upper arms in a bruising grip. “They are dead, Desir’ee,” he growls, “dead. You will never see them again because they are dead.” Every time he says the word dead, he gives me a vicious shake; so hard that my head snaps back and forth on my shoulders.

“Don’t call me that!” I scream. There is no saving this situation. I can feel and smell the belligerent anger billowing off of him. At this point he’s so angry that he wants to hurt me more than he wants me to be his omega.

He wraps one hand around my neck and he pulls the other back. He’s going to hit me. He’s going to punch me right in the face. I close my eyes for the impact, but it doesn’t come. I crack my eyes back open to find that Lopez is standing behind Flores, gripping his wrist tightly.

“Release her, Ernesto,” Lopez snarls.

Flores laughs and squeezes his hand tighter around my neck as my vision starts to sparkle around the edges.

“Now!” Lopez growls again, even more violently.

Flores releases me all at once, causing me to fall to the ground, and laughs again. He turns to face Lopez, transforming himself from the irate alpha he was a moment ago into his usual condescending, arrogant self. “Really, Elijah? You were never bothered when it got physical with any of the others.”

“They weren’t ours,” Lopez clips. “Miss Romero is.”

Any other time, I’d correct him. I am not theirs. I will never be theirs. I will die before I ever give them a reason to believe that I’m theirs. But challenging that now might actually get me killed, and I’m not ready to die. I have to get the drugs from the hospital. I have to save Ben and Michael. We have to get to Seth and save him, too.

“I told you already, Elijah,” Flores sneers, “she was never going to be ours willingly. She might live here and she might pop out your babies, but she’s never going to truly be ours.” He jerks his wrist out of Lopez’s hold and stalks out the door.

Lopez reaches down to offer me a hand, this time I let him help me up. “Are you hurt?” He presses his lips together and his nostrils flare with the breath he blows out. “Obviously, you’re hurt. Let me see.”

I’ve never been hurt by an alpha, or a beta for that matter. I have never been handled like this, and my neck, throat, and arms do ache, but it’s nothing compared to the emotional marks being left. I wouldn’t survive in a situation where this was my norm. “I’m alright,” I say, but it comes out coarse and strained.

"I never meant for you to be harmed, Miss Romero. Not physical or lasting,

anyway. I knew you'd be upset, distraught, but I didn't think it would be like this. Flores said," Lopez takes another breath. "He assured me that you'd be emotional for a while, time would lessen your pain and things would get easier for you; but this..." His voice trails off as his eyes move down to my feet then back up to my own, "this is unacceptable."

I'm about to tell him that there isn't a universe in which what he and his pack are doing to me and mine would be acceptable, but he surprises me.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out something in a blister pack. He holds it out toward me, palm up, and I take it, gasping when I turn the packet over.

"Heat suppressants?" I ask, at once incredulous and suspicious.

He nods twice, then shakes his head rapidly, giving a long blink of his eyes. "You can't go into heat."

I don't know what I'm supposed to say, or think about that declaration. I agree, going into heat while I'm here would be devastating for me, but why is *he* saying it? The whole point of kidnapping me and keeping me here is so I can be their perfect, good omega. "Why not? Isn't that the whole point? Isn't that what you want? For me to go into heat so you and your pack can try to override the bonds I have with Ben and Michael? So you can force me to take you," bile rises up and I have to swallow harshly to force it back down, "so you can do all the disgusting things Flores said?"

His mouth tightens and he drags a hand down his face as he moves to sit on the foot of my bed. "It wasn't supposed to be like this. I *wanted* him to be right. I had the selfish audacity to want something that has been denied to me time and time again as I provided it to others. He said you would be perfect for us, and I'm stupid and selfish enough to have believed him. I believed it because I wanted it so much."

I must look as confused as I feel, because the corner of his mouth lifts in a sad smile. "Do you know how many packs on the West Coast have their omega because I brought her to them? I have introduced omega after omega to pack after pack. Council packs, low-born packs, rich packs, poor packs, so many packs have the thing I've always wanted."

He closes his eyes for a moment, and I keep my mouth shut, waiting for him to keep feeding me information.

"We weren't always like this, you know. He wasn't. I was young and prideful enough to follow along with whatever scheme he concocted to get us more money, more leverage, more power. I didn't question him when he began making deals with alphas with no affiliations. Everything he'd done before then was for the good of our pack, why would I question him?" His laugh is raspy and full of self-loathing.

I've never heard him sound like this. He always sounds so condescending, so full of his own self importance, but the man sitting on my bed right now is neither of those things.

"He promised we'd get our omega after we finished this, after we did that, on and on. Then we started doing the fight nights and there never seemed to be time to find an omega for our own pack. Then Rafe was lost. After that, I started to understand that Flores didn't truly want our pack to have an omega," he continues, sounding more and more lost inside himself.

But he's said two things that I need clarification on, and I refuse to let them go. "What do you mean Rafe was lost? *I* lost Rafe. My *pack* lost him. And if Flores doesn't want an omega why am I here? Why keep me here if you don't want me?"

Lopez sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Rafe was my nephew, Miss Romero. He was never supposed to be at that house. I don't know why his

mother sent him. I told her to keep him home that day. He probably wouldn't have listened, anyway."

No, he probably wouldn't have, but that doesn't excuse what happened. Before I can say that, though, Lopez begins talking again.

"Flores sent the team into the house to deal with the pack who lived there as they were potential competition. He didn't take into consideration that my nephew was a runner for them and might be there for whatever reason. His reaction to Rafe's death was the first thing that made me truly question him. And as for your being here, it was a stipulation of an ultimatum. I've had enough, you see. I got word that Flores's name is mostly clean, but mine has been sullied over the years. Then he informed me that an omega would do nothing but distract us from our goals and would be an unnecessary annoyance to him, and that he had no use for children in his pack, and I wanted out. I told him I was leaving our pack and he agreed to an omega to convince me to stay with him. He said he found the perfect one for us. And here you are."

"So," I take a breath to steady myself, "he doesn't want an omega? At all?"

Lopez gives me a look through his brows and pushes his tongue into his cheek. "Not for himself, not really, and not to keep. But it's the only way he could convince me to stay."

I cannot scream. If I scream, Flores might come back to see what the problem is; but my throat is tight and raw with frustration to go along with the physical damage. "What about the others? James and Bryant? What do they want?"

He sighs and says, "they want what they're told to want. They are functional pack members but in a massively dysfunctional pack. They may be alphas but

they are sheep and were picked by Flores for that reason. He needs to present this facade that he has built."

My scream is going to claw its way out of my mouth. My lips flatten as I stare into Lopez's eyes, my jaw clenched so tight my teeth are going to ache. This whole time, we thought someone may have targeted Rafe specifically. To learn that it was a mistake orchestrated by his own uncle's pack...I might cry before I scream. It's so wasteful. So unnecessary. I open my mouth to say something, anything that might convey the torrent of emotions shaking me, but all that comes out is a small hollow, "we were supposed to be happy."

Lopez at least has the decency to look away from my pain and down at the floor. "Yes."

My anger rolls back to the front and I glare at him. "And now what? Why tell me any of this? Your pack killed Rafe, you've taken Ben and Michael from me, and now you have me here, trapped in a pretty cage. To what end?"

His eyes harden and burn with something that looks like it could be guilt. "You're here as a punishment, Miss Romero. For me and for the boys. I told Flores I wanted out and he's known Michael and Ben wanted out for a while. He had such big plans for them. What better way to punish them than by giving you to me, and what better way to punish me by giving me something that reminds me so much of everything I've helped destroy? He finally agreed to the omega I've always wanted, but your very presence eats away at the last of the strength I have. I had hoped he was right, and that you would come around, but that was a fool's dream. Even if you weren't marked by the twins, there was never any hope."

Broken. Elijah Lopez is broken. Broken the same way Seth is, by the consequences of his own choices. The difference is that Seth was strong enough to walk away.

Lopez sighs again and stands back up, visibly building himself back up after his unexpected show of vulnerability. He stares into my eyes, his mouth still tight. "Take the suppressants, Desir'ee. If you go into heat, there's a chance it could trigger our rut. You have no reason to want any one of us in that way and I don't want that to be my only experience with an omega in my home. And I certainly don't want to do any more harm to you than has already been done."

He goes to walk out the door but I stop him. "Won't Flores be suspicious if I never go into heat?"

He closes his eyes, his shoulders sagging just a little, but he tells me, "I'll figure something out. Just give me time. Don't be difficult, just do what you have to do. I'll figure something out."

Then he leaves and I pull the blankets off my bed. As nice as it was for him to share some secret truths and his vulnerable side with me, I'll never be able to sleep in a bed that reeks of him.

What am I supposed to do with all the information he just handed me? Who could I tell, and what good would it even do? Talia's pack? I can tell Talia's pack. Half of them are either council members or they work very closely with the council, Seth said as much, and the other half are important in other ways. They can use all the information I can get from the Flores pack.

Chapter Fourteen

Desie

It's a good thing it's Friday. I've been taking the suppressants, but they're not the same formula that I usually need and they're barely enough to keep the minor spikes at bay. The major ones are still happening, but at a lesser degree in strength and frequency. I'm just grateful that most of them have happened away from the penthouse, which I find to be especially hilarious since I've spent my whole life dreading and trying not to have even the tiniest heat spike away from home.

My shift ends in an hour. I'm going to stop by the dispensary on my way out the door. No one will stop me; but if they do, all I have to tell them is that I'm checking the supply of literally anything in there and it won't raise a red flag. Not that it would anyway, but Flores might have someone checking after me, who knows.

I should probably feel anxious or afraid, but I'm not. All I feel is relief. Even if my plan doesn't work and Flores turns the tables on me, everything is over tonight. I am leaving the penthouse and Flores. I hope it will be exactly

the way I've planned. If it isn't, whatever happens will undoubtedly end the current situation.

I've had Talia's phone number memorized since she gave it to me. I think that's the best plan. Give Flores the injection, then call her so she can send her pack to help me. I'm almost certain I'm going to need help. Especially if some of the betas are in the building. I haven't had all that much interaction with the majority of them, but I know they'll do whatever Flores has ordered them to do. I can guarantee letting me waltz out of the building isn't on the list.

I don't know where Michael and Ben are being held. Probably at that awful place where they were fighting. That's what makes the most sense. I wasn't paying complete attention on the way there, and there was no way I could remember anything on the way back, but it can't be hard to find. I'll check there first, and if they're not there then they'll be somewhere nearby. Seth will be with me by then. Just the thought of having him with me by morning, where I can see him and touch him, is enough to make me positively giddy. Seth will help me get to Ben and Michael.

Then he's going to mark me. I don't care if he has a panic attack, we'll work through it. We'll keep trying until he can manage it. I am done waiting for a complete pack. If he marks me, Michael and Ben will just have to deal with it. If I can work through and accept what happened in his past, so can they.

If we can't find Michael and Ben tonight, he's still going to mark me. I need it. I need the stability. I need the bond. I can be patient, and I will be, but he has to do it. He needs it as much as I do.

Thinking in if's isn't going to help me right now. Thinking about the very real possibility of this plan falling apart around me and the consequences of

that happening isn't an option. I can't get hung up on being afraid of it failing. I'm going to push through with the expectation of success. I have to.

I get into and out of the dispensary without any trouble. I have two loaded syringes of the sedative and five vials of potassium sulfate in my pocket when I get into the car that picks me up.

James is the driver today. "How was your day?" he asks as I put on my seatbelt.

James isn't a bad guy. He's just sort of there. He's really smart though, from the things he has said. I haven't had too many conversations with him, but that much is obvious and it makes me genuinely wonder how he got mixed up with Flores. Was it like what happened with Lopez? Maybe he didn't know what he was getting into until it was too late.

"Fine," I reply. "Busy."

We drive along in silence for a while then he startles me. "Hey. Do you want to stop for hot dogs? We're about to go by a truck. You can have dinner on the way home and then you'll be able to relax and get some rest when we get there. Bryant and I have a place to be tonight, and everyone else is going to be busy. Elijah will probably grab something out."

It's very interesting that he doesn't mention Flores. But I don't mention that. And it's been a long time since I've had a hot dog from a food truck. "I wouldn't mind a hot dog. With (jellyfish asked cousin who lives in Cali in San Diego, she said the current trend is a bacon wrapped dog with monterey jack and guac. I am curling my nose up at this, I know we don't judge kinks but I'm so judging this same because ew) listen, we're putting mustard on it and relish). Thank you, James. I am really tired."

The car stops a few minutes later and I get another surprise when he opens the door for me to get out. I must have a look on my face because he says, "I

thought we could get some air while we eat. We don't have to. You can stay in the car and I can bring yours to you. It's okay."

What is happening right now? James making a decision without consulting Lopez or Flores? Eating hot dogs on the street? Leaving me alone when I get back to the penthouse? "No, some air would be alright. Thanks."

Once we get our hot dogs and sodas, we sit on the hood of the car, watching the people go about the end of their day as we eat. He doesn't ask anything of me, just sits and enjoys the food, the sun setting. It's almost nice. Almost.

Once we're back at the penthouse and inside the elevator, he gives me a strange lingering look, then he very slowly puts in the code for the elevator. Very. Slowly. I don't know if caution bells should be ringing or if I should be ecstatic, but either way, it would be stupid of me to not pay attention. He lets me step off the elevator first and follows me all the way to my bedroom door. I turn around to thank him, but he just waves me off. I hear him telling someone that I'm not feeling well and to let me rest on his way back to the elevator.

That's fine. I'm glad that what will hopefully be my last interaction with James was pleasant. I don't bother packing anything from this room. These aren't my things, not even the scrubs. I didn't pick out any of this stuff and I don't want any of it. The only things I'm going to take out of here are the clothes I'm wearing when I leave. And I'm burning them as soon as I get somewhere safe.

I haven't heard anyone moving around the penthouse, but I know at least Flores is here. The betas and runners don't usually come up here, they typically stay on the lower floors. They might be problematic when it's time for me to exit the building, but if the code I watched James put in is still

functional, it might not be a big deal. I might be able to just stroll out the door without any trouble.

First things first, though. Flores. If anyone would have suggested that I'd be readying myself to actually kill someone before the past few weeks, I would have laughed in their face. But here I am making sure the syringes with the sedative will be ready to go when I need them. I send the text to Talia telling her I'm about to get started and the address. I also remind her about the elevator code in case I can't get down. I don't doubt her pack's ability to get me out if I need their help.

The trouble with faking a heat spike is that you can't fake the scent. I'll at least need to try to smell aroused if I'm going to have any chance at pulling this off. I haven't been aroused for even a second since I've been here. I've been too sad, too angry, or just too numb. But the time has come, and I'll never convince Flores to come close enough to allow me to inject him with anything if he doesn't believe I'm having a legitimate heat spike. Lucky for me, I've got plenty of memories with the twins to draw on to help me make it at least a little bit believable. Believable enough to draw his interest.

I lay back on the bed and close my eyes and think of all my favorite memories with Ben and Michael. I think about the first time, when everything was so new and they were still afraid to touch me. Michael seemed almost obsessed with my scent and my taste. I knew that they could bring me to orgasm with their bodies, but it didn't cross my mind that he'd want to do it with his mouth again and again until I practically had to kick him away from me to make him stop.

I think about riding one of them while the other watches and gives encouragement and makes the most toe-curling suggestions. I think about their individual and combined tastes. I remember all the times I laid between

them while they took turns kissing me, both touching me everywhere there was to touch until I was a panting, begging puddle. Then I think about my last heat, and how it felt for both Michael and Ben to fill me up while Seth praised me the whole time. I begged him to let me taste him, I wanted the most obscene things and I said most of them out loud. He did his best to give me what I needed without losing himself. Just the thought of how badly I wanted Seth and how careful I had to be with him squeezes my heart and that is what causes me to release the whimpering sound that I need Flores to hear.

I can smell my own arousal, it's faint, but just strong enough to be a present note in the air. I sit back up and press my thighs together to give the impression of intense and unmet need, then I whimper again. Within a minute, Flores is leaning against the door frame.

“Did you need something, Desir’ee?” he purrs.

I fight to keep the warm tightness that I felt moments before when the sound of his voice and the stale, overfull ashtray stink of him threatens to overwhelm my thoughts. I close my eyes for a brief moment and suck in a quick breath, like I'm gasping, when I open them again. His eyes are burning into mine.

“Are you having a heat spike? It's nearly time for you to go into heat, I've been waiting for you to start having spikes. Are you in pain, omega?”

I stand up and move to the desk, making a big show of bracing myself against it. Hearing him refer to me as omega makes me want to wretch, but I fight back the urge. I do allow another whimpering sound to escape, though. He'll take it as the sound of an omega in sexual distress instead of an omega in actual distress. I swallow to keep myself from gagging and lift my hand to reach for him. My other hand, the one on the other side of my body where he can't see it, is inside my pocket silently uncapping the syringe.

“No need to come to me,” he purrs, “your alpha will come to you. You won’t have to suffer.”

If I could laugh without it ruining what I’m trying to accomplish, I would. All I’ve done under his care is suffer.

He takes the few steps across the floor to reach me and I have to make a choice. I don’t want him to kiss me, but I need to put the injection in his neck or shoulder in the hope that it will take effect quicker. Oh god. It has to happen. I’m going to have to get him to kiss me.

Suppressing a shudder, I tip my head back and try to make my face look the way I think faces look right before a kiss when I look up at him. He smirks down at me and his purr turns into a soft growl as he presses his mouth against mine. I lean into him and wait for him to relax into this, willing him to put his hands on my hips or anywhere to give me an excuse to pretend to cling to him the way omegas having heat spikes tend to cling to their alphas.

Flores switches back to a purr and puts one hand on my hip and sinks the other into my hair, that gives me the opening I need. I slide one of my hands up his side and around his waist and moan slightly as I move my other hand with the syringe close to his neck. I open my mouth in a faux invitation to distract him from my hand movement. It works. He shoves his disgusting tongue into my mouth and I jab the needle into the fleshy place between his neck and shoulder and depress the plunger.

He jerks his head away, his eyes narrowed. “What was that?”

I hold up the empty syringe and tilt my head.

“What did you do?” he snarls into my face, twisting his fist tightly into my hair.

I clench my teeth against the sharp ache in my scalp. “Injected you with a sedative.”

“You stupid, little bitch,” he growls, and stalks to the bed, dragging me with him by my hair.

My whimper as he hauls me onto the bed is a real one. Abject terror claws at me as I consider the horrifying possibility that the sedative wasn't strong enough. If it wasn't, he's going to have plenty of time to do all kinds of awful things to me before he kills me. He'll probably break my neck. That would be the most efficient thing to do. I'm not going to just lay here and let him do it, though.

Flores lays over me, pinning me with his weight, his hand still twisted in my hair. His other hand grasps one of my wrists and he yanks it over my head. I can't get to the other syringe with my free hand, it's trapped in my pocket on the other side of Flores's body. I bring one of my knees up as hard as I can with the intention of smashing it into his balls, but he quickly twists his hips to the side and blocks the brunt of the blow.

“You'll be a thorn in my side for the rest of your life, won't you, Desir'ee?” he hisses through his teeth. “We've been too lenient with you from the beginning. I should have shown you your place the first night I brought you home.” He jerks my head to the side and buries his face into my neck. I suppress a shiver as his breath rushes against the marks I carry. “It's time we take care of this little problem, isn't it?” He licks across the marks and I gag.

He laughs at me and brings his own knee up between my legs, keeping one trapped and freeing the other. “You're disgusting,” I growl. “You'll never be my alpha, or anybody else's. You're too weak to have an omega. All you can do is steal one that doesn't belong to you.” I put all my strength into rolling us over. He's still got a grip on my hair and wrist, but I'm on top now and my other hand is free.

I tug half heartedly at the hold he has on my wrist and throw more insults.

Angry people make mistakes, and he is approaching belligerence. “You’re pathetic. You’re not good enough for an omega. You have to force them to be with you. No omega will ever want you. You’re nothing but a nasty old man trying to make everyone around you miserable. You’re a joke.”

He growls and rolls us back over. I keep us rolling, using the momentum of our combined weights to throw us off the bed. I point at him to keep his attention on that hand and laugh while I discreetly pull the other syringe out of my pocket and flick off the cap. “You can’t even keep me pinned down,” I taunt. “How are you in control of this horrible operation? None of these people follow you because you’re strong enough to lead them. You’d be nothing without the leverage you steal.”

I have no idea what I’m saying, only that it sounds like things people say in movies to anger the bad guy into being sloppy. Alphas need to think they’re strong. The best way to make one angry enough to be foolish is to tell them how weak and useless they are. From the look and sound of things, Flores is about to make a big fool of himself.

“You’re only a stupid, little omega. You come from a shit family in a shit part of the city. Your mother was just as ignorant as you are. She wouldn’t leave well enough alone, and look where that got her. You’ll be the same.” He lunges at me, throwing his full weight into me so that my back smashes into the dresser. It hurts, but he’s too busy drawing his fist back to realize I’ve jabbed the needle into his thigh.

“You’ll find yourself in a different environment when you wake up, Desir’ee. You’ll dream of how your life could have been,” he seethes. He might hit me, and it might knock me out, but the last two words he said were slightly slurred so maybe I’ve got a chance.

When Flores brings his fist down, aiming at my face, I turn my head just

enough that he makes contact with the back of my head instead of my face. His blow glances off my skull behind my ear and it hurts, but he loses his balance and falls forward onto me. He brings up his arm to catch himself, but his elbow buckles, causing his forehead to come down onto my mouth and chin. The taste of blood fills my mouth immediately, but he doesn't get back up. It's over.

I expected him to be heavy, but this is ridiculous. Maybe it's because of the adrenaline leaving my body, but I'm having a really difficult time pushing him off of me. After a few tries I manage to get enough of him rolled off of me that I can slide out from under him. Getting to my feet, I look down at him. Then I kick him. Right in the ribs. I hope I kicked him hard enough to break one of them.

Blood is pouring from my bottom lip and my chin is throbbing. I'm going to have such a headache, but I don't have time to dwell on either of those things. I wipe my chin on my shoulder and get the vials of potassium. I can reuse one of the syringes, it doesn't matter if they're sterile. I originally wanted him to have a really terrible, painful, long death; but after the struggle that just happened I just want him dead. The need to find Ben and Michael is heavier and louder than anything else now. I need Flores dead so I can go after my boys without worrying about him.

I'm bending down to pluck the syringe out of Flores's thigh when someone grabs my arm and whirls me up and around.

"My god. Are you alright, Miss Romero?" Lopez asks, eyes wide with concern as he takes in my bloody mouth.

I don't know what his intentions are with me, but I shake my head.

"I knew this was going to happen," he says softly, touching my jaw to tilt my face into better lighting. "I knew it would come to this. Did he attack

you? Why is he unconscious?”

I hold up the syringe. I’m blaming the adrenaline again, but Lopez doesn’t feel or smell dangerous, just tired.

“A sedative?”

I nod.

He nods back at me. “Let’s get you cleaned up. It was bound to happen, I just planned to do it myself. You’ll be safe, Miss Romero. I swear to you, you’ll be safe.”

He starts to pull me out the door behind him but I stop him. “He might wake up.”

Lopez nods again. Then he pulls out a handgun from the holster attached to his belt under his suit jacket and hands it to me. “He has information I need to fix things, but if he wakes up, shoot him.” He touches the center of his forehead and leaves the room.

I’m still reeling from the fact that he handed me a gun when he strides back into the room with a handful of thick zip ties. Together, we secure Flores’s limp limbs, essentially hogtying him.

I let Lopez lead me down the hall and then the stairs to the kitchen. He’s filling a bag with ice when the sound of muffled gunfire filters up through the floor.

Chapter Fifteen

Seth

Corso has enough money to convince anybody to do anything, so I'm not surprised when he texts to let us know that he convinced whoever schedules the fights to put Kaleb down against Michael tonight. What I *am* surprised by is the fact that they listened to me when I told them Michael and Ben were too dangerous to fight as a unit. Kaleb is a big, mean motherfucker and can more than hold his own, but he's fair. Michael and Ben wouldn't fight fair; and when Kaleb suggested that it might be a huge pull to have the twins take on a single fighter from the East Coast together, I couldn't let it happen. I expected half of them to tell me that Kaleb could handle the twins because of his COT training and background, but they didn't. Kaleb just nodded at me like I knew what I was talking about and they agreed to him going up against just Michael. Trent did ask why not Ben, and the only answer I could give him is because Michael is a bigger asshole. I couldn't really explain the sudden feeling in my gut telling me it needed to be Michael. He just shrugged

his shoulders and went back to checking the weapons we're taking with us to get Desir'ee.

That's going to be a huge operation full of unknowns. We won't know which of Flores's addresses she is being kept at until she texts or calls Talia. She refused to give it to us on the principle we would ride to her rescue before she could fulfill her end of the plan. So we can't truly plan much past getting in, shooting anyone who gets in our way, retrieving Desir'ee, then fighting our way back out. Then we're going immediately to The Backhouse to get Michael and Ben. Hopefully, everything will somehow run together smoothly. It won't of course. These plans never do. But if Desir'ee sends out her call in enough time before Kaleb gets into the ring with Michael, we can get to her and then the twins more efficiently. If she doesn't call in time, we're switching the plan and getting the twins first, then we'll all storm the castle to rescue the princess.

I like the idea of going in after her together with Ben and Michael, but getting her out needs to happen first if we can manage it. If I get them freed before I get her, they'll do more than beat my ass; and I wouldn't blame them.

I text Kaleb. *You have the cloth?*

They might be pissed off at me for a while, but I needed to send Kaleb in with something that would let them know that he was a friend. I cut a strip off of one of the blankets from the nest Desir'ee built weeks ago. It's still intact, and I have fought against every instinct and urge in my being telling me to sleep in it. It's the only place I want to be. I've been staying in the house with Talia's pack, but I can't resist going to the twins' house every few days and sitting next to her nest for a while.

Yes. Good to go. Kaleb responds, and I nod even though he can't see me.

He, Corso, and Trent are already at The Backhouse. They're going to stay there until they either get the message that we're going in for Desir'ee or it's time for Kaleb's fight. Under other circumstances, I'm confident that the three of them would have enjoyed it very much; even the part where Kaleb gets in the ring. Talia is pissed that she isn't getting to see it. I overheard Devon whispering to her that he'll take her to see a fight after the baby's born. It pacified her enough to keep her from complaining, and I'll never rat Devon out for taking her – even if I don't approve. I would never take Desir'ee to an underground, back alley fight, pouting and pissed off or not.

We're sitting in a utility van with some rug service logo on the side that Alex 'found'. It's parked on the street outside the hospital where Desir'ee works. We thought that might be a good place to wait because of its central location. It might be a central location, fuck, I don't know. All these streets are a tangled up web of bullshit. Devon and Nathan are sitting in the front seats watching people and vehicles go by while Alex and I are in the back. Alex is, of all things, reading a book by the dim light of a headlamp.

“What are you reading?” I ask him. I don't want to be distracted, but I'm wound so tight with worry that I need to talk to ease just a little of it.

He glances up at me and smiles. “You wouldn't like it.”

Well, now I really want to know. “Why not?”

He sighs and closes the book. “Because it's not a comic book.”

“I don't read comic books.” That's mostly true. I used to read comic books when I was a kid, but now I read other stuff. I like poetry and biographies... and historical romance. Talia left me a copy of her favorite book when I was at the facility and I probably read it a hundred times. Apparently I like my books like I like my movies, easy and sweet.

“It's an account of the changes in society over the past century.”

I look down at the cover. There's a rose on it. The title is *The Turning*. I look back up at him with raised brows. "No, it is not."

He grins. "Nope, it isn't. But you still wouldn't like it. It's a story about an omega who lost her pack and has to learn to love a new one."

That's a poor fucking choice, considering what we're doing tonight. My face must broadcast my thoughts because he sighs and says, "I told you you wouldn't like it."

I shake my head. "I'd like it another time. Did you ever read that book Talia likes so much?"

His grin changes to a soft smile and he nods. "I know that book."

"I love that book. It's so good. I'm trying to collect the author's other work. I want a whole collection of my own so I don't have to borrow them."

Alex laughs softly. "I didn't know you enjoyed softer fiction." The way he smirks when he says *softer fiction* lets me know exactly how familiar he is with the book and it's more erotic content.

"Girly books," Devon mutters from the front. "You can't like normal shit like horror or action, even sci-fi. It's got to be sappy love stories."

"I'm telling Talia you said she reads girly books and that she's sappy," Alex counters. "You've apparently never read one. One would think you'd enjoy the sexual content in a fair amount of them. There are ones that get downright dirty. Isn't that right, Pratchett?"

"Some of them can get pretty intense," I nod.

Nathan laughs, "Devon and Kaleb prefer to read weapons and training manuals. Trent still reads comics, though." We don't give Nathan a hard time about what he reads, because he reads everything.

Our conversation ends abruptly when Devon's phone chimes. "Time to go," he says, and hands his phone to Nathan so he can put the address into the

GPS.

The building we park across from looks like every other highrise on this block. They're all identical except for the small signs on the doors signifying what each one is called. The one we're about to crash is called The Pinnacle 2113, and there's a middle aged man, possibly a beta, sitting behind the front desk looking at his phone.

"Ready?" Devon asks, unbuckling his seatbelt.

"Ready," we all answer at the same time. We're all strapped and loaded with firearms, ammunition, knives, cording, rope. Alex insisted on bringing what he called low-grade explosives. I asked him to try not to use them. I couldn't take it if something went wrong when he was trying to blow someone up and he ended up crumbling the building.

We know Desir'ee will be in the penthouse at the top of the building; which isn't surprising because Flores imagines himself to be this ultra important kingpin or some shit like that. All the villains in the movies live in high rise penthouses, and Flores is most definitely a villain. None of us bother trying to look like we're not about to bring this place to its knees when we get out of the van. We cross the street adjusting clips and checking guns.

The man at the desk is, in fact, a beta and he quickly stands when I walk through the door before the rest of them. He reaches for the mic clipped to his shirt, but Alex reaches across the desk and grabs the back of his head.

"Who are you?" the beta stammers. I almost feel sorry for him.

"I'm Seth Fucking Pratchett."

Alex laughs at me and slams the betas head down on the desk. He's just knocked out, not dead. We don't actually intend to kill people we don't have to, and that guy was just trying to do his job.

"I cannot believe you said that," Devon says, pinching the bridge of his

nose.

“Why not?” I ask. “You guys say it all the time. It was funny.”

Nathan goes around the desk and starts tapping the keys on the keyboard. “It’s wide open. Not even a password. Yeah, living quarters start half way up, Flores at the top. Jesus, Seth. How big is this pack? They have a lot of registered spaces.”

I shrug. I don’t know how big the pack is. “Flores, Lopez, two more alphas but they didn’t seem to have much pull. I know there are betas based on what I’ve overheard, I don’t know how many, though. Maybe they’re not all registered to this pack? Maybe they’re just working for Flores and living here.”

“It wouldn’t be unheard of,” Devon says. “COTs have housing all over the place and they’re not affiliated with every pack they’re stationed with or near. What about the elevator? Talia said there was a code. We’ll use the stairs, but I’d like to be able to use the elevator if we need to.”

Nathan does more typing and tapping. “Yeah, there’s a code, but I can’t tell what it is from this console. I’ll figure it out if we need to, that type of system isn’t hard to work around. Alright, let’s go. Are we clearing every floor, or would it be better to clear as needed?”

I look at Devon. He’s their leader in shit like this. I’d love nothing more than to ride that elevator to the top floor and bring Desir’ee out without dealing with all the other people in the building, but I’m smart enough to know that Devon will know the best thing to do.

Alex is watching Devon, too, but he has a question. “If we clear each floor, who’s to say that more people won’t show up to surprise us on the way out? The people still here could call for help.”

Devon nods. “We clear each floor. Quietly. Dead people don’t call for

help.”

“I should have signed up to be a COT,” Alex smiles. “I would have made an excellent member.

“No,” Nathan says, “Trent’s bad enough. You’d cost the council too much money. Fucking flame throwers. Let’s go.”

Then we go. Floor by floor, up more stairs than I ever want to climb again. We don’t find anyone on the first few floors, but there are sixteen floors in this building and there’s no way it’s empty. The way this place is set up is strange. Each door either opens up into a massive office or storage space or an open floor plan consisting of a common space with couches and a television. That then merges into a huge kitchen and dining area with private spaces lining the exterior.

“How many floors are residential?” Devon asks Nathan.

“Every third.”

We encounter our first group of betas on the ninth floor and take them down before they really ever realized we were there. Easy pickings is what Alex called them. They were, well, I don’t know what they were doing, but they were all bunched together talking. I heard one of them say the name James before Alex tightened a fucking ziptie around his neck and left him to flop on the ground like a fish while the rest of us were handling the others in the group.

Most of the residential floors are empty and I’m glad. I have the distinct impression that the majority of the people who work for or with Flores aren’t doing it because they want to. But Devon’s right though, dead people can’t call for backup no matter what brought them to their current situation.

We run into actual trouble on the fifteenth floor. There are probably thirteen or fourteen guys, all betas, all armed, lounging in front of a giant television

who all look up at us when we step in from the stairwell. After about three full seconds of silent inaction, one of them reaches for his gun and then it gets loud.

Everyone starts shooting and diving behind furniture to avoid being shot. We take down several of them, but the ones who got to cover have an advantage over us since we essentially marched into an open field whereas they know where everything in this area is.

“Two around the corner,” Nathan says into his mic, “two behind the couch.”

“Three near the elevator,” Devon says into his.

“One behind the weird shelf thing,” Alex adds, not to be left out.

I don't say anything. I saw the guys moving towards the elevator when all the shooting was going on and I wanted to put myself in a position to head them off. They are right on the other side of the low wall backed with filing cabinets I'm crouched behind and I'd really like it if they were surprised when I start shooting out kneecaps.

Alex knows I'm here. He's inching closer without looking so as not to give me away. Devon shoots at the media cabinet that Alex referred to as the weird shelf thing, splintering the wood beside the head of the man hiding behind it. I'm not sure if it was unintentional or if Devon is just that good, but I have a clear view of the splinters bouncing into the man's cheek. He yells and jumps out from behind the cabinet, firing several shots into Nathan's direction, but Devon takes him out before he realizes what's happened.

Nathan drops to his knee and aims at the armrest of the couch. I don't have time to see what happens because the three guys on the other side of the filing cabinets make a run for the elevator. I fire on them, getting one in the back of

the head as he's running. I stand up to give chase, but Alex is suddenly beside me aiming a...crossbow?

Not a crossbow, a personal grappling hook launcher. I didn't know they were real, I thought they were just in the movies. He pulls the trigger and the hook is thoroughly embedded into the torso of the guy closest to the elevator before my thought completes itself.

"Ha!" Alex barks.

"Where did you get that thing?" I say through my teeth.

"Nathan," he says, and jerks on the cord connected to the hook.

The man on the other end of it grabs at the line, but the hook must be embedded too deeply for it to do any good.

"Go!" one of the other betas shouts.

"Get to the elevator!" He started off strong but the last few syllables are distinctly guttural.

His buddy will never make it to the elevator if I can help it. I can hear a struggle happening from where Devon and Nathan are dealing with their targets, but I'm too busy running for the elevator. "Go help them," I call to Alex. "I've got this asshole."

Asshole number two hears me as clearly as Alex did and he turns around instead of continuing his escape to the elevator. Beta or not, he's big. Tall like Obi, and muscular like some of the rogues I saw at the compound a couple years ago. The thought of how similar he is to them is fleeting because he's as fast as he is big and he smashes into me in a full frontal collision.

"Who are you people?" he grits, trying to roll us over so that he's in a dominant position.

I don't answer. Instead, I roll with the momentum he's trying to create and straddle his chest. I can feel his body twisting as he tries to gain purchase but

it won't do him any good. I've got a knife plunging into his neck, he just needs time to realize he's bleeding out.

It sounds like Devon and the others have everything under control, but the guy run-through with the grappling hook isn't down and he's moving steadily, albeit slowly, to the elevator. We can't have that. The beta under me isn't gurgling anymore, so I stand up and start closing the distance between me and the grappling hook guy.

"Wait a minute!" Alex yells, so I stop and turn around.

Alex stops at the filing cabinets and opens the drawer that he apparently put the grappling hook pistol inside. The guy on the other end had so much slack, I thought he'd cut the cord, but I'm not surprised in the least that Alex thought of securing the other end of the cord to a piece of furniture. "Hear me out," he says, a grin spreading across his face. Great. He's going to do something theatrical. This is the perfect time for theatrics. We're not in a rush at all.

He basically skips back to where Devon's holding their last breathing beta on his knees with his hands clasped behind his head. Then he wraps the cord around the beta's neck a few times and ties it off. Devon pulls out a knife and cuts the end so Alex can tuck the pistol back into wherever he had it hidden in the first place.

"Trent is going to be so fucking jealous," Nathan sighs as he watches Alex pat the beta's cheek.

Grappling hook guy has been more concerned with taking the last few remaining steps to the elevator instead of what's happening on the other side of his tether. He pushes the button to open the elevator door and I let him get in. I watch him push what must be the button for the ground floor, then he enters the passcode on the keypad and frantically presses the door close

button; all without turning around to see me standing right on the outside of the door.

He does finally turn around just as the bell dings to signify that the door is about to close and I smile at him as his face morphs into startled dread. Then I throw out my fist, smashing it into the center of his face. He crashes against the back wall of the elevator and is in the process of hitting the floor when the doors close and elevator starts the trip down.

Nothing happens for a moment, then stumbling, dragging, thumps, and grunts fill the space as the beta attached to the other side of the cord is forcibly pulled across the ground. Nathan's right. Trent would love this and he's going to be horribly jealous.

The beta's body thunks against the closed doors and he doesn't have enough slack to even grab at his neck before he starts screaming. The lower the elevator goes the deeper the cord digs into the beta's flesh. I take a few steps back. If this guy's head is going to pop off, I don't want to wear the mess.

Actually, I don't want to see it, either. The cord is more likely to bore its way through his neck than it is to snap. Whatever happens, this guy is going to have an excruciating and painful death. I turn away from his inevitable end and join the others.

"You don't think that was excessive?" Devon asks Alex. He can sound as disapproving as he wants but he's losing the battle to keep the smirk off his face and we can all see it.

"Fuck off," Alex laughs. "It was awesome. I saw something like that in a movie. I knew we were going to have to deal with a high-rise elevator and I wasn't going to miss the opportunity."

Nathan's eyes are on the gruesome scene unfolding at the elevator, but his

tone is contemplative and soft when he says, “that’s not what that was designed to do.”

“But it sure as shit is what it accomplished. Good job, resident genius,” Alex beams.

Chapter Sixteen

Seth

The penthouse is eerily quiet after the chaos of the floor below. There's no way in the universe nobody up here heard all the gunfire and yelling, I don't care how nice and insulated this place is. And it is nice, that's for certain.

We go room by room looking for Desir'ee. Every room is so fucking... sterile. I cannot imagine all of Desir'ee's vibrance and life trapped and dulled by these white walls. There is no warmth here. Looking around at the lack of true substance in this place, I'm suddenly even more worried about how I'm going to find her than I already was.

I catch Desir'ee's minty scent near the open staircase and follow it around the corner and through a dining room that must never be used I take one step into the kitchen and freeze, blocking the doorway. She's there, leaning against the counter, brows pinched and eyes wide as they meet mine, while Lopez dabs at her mouth with a bloody cloth.

Almost as if in slow motion, Lopez turns, putting the cloth into Desir'ee's hand, and deeply sighs. "Alpha Pratchett."

She doesn't appear to be upset or afraid, which is very, very good; but I can't stop looking from her horribly swollen lips to the bloody cloth. Someone hurt her. The violent vibration of the fact that someone put their hands on her, harmed her, caused her pain, has me trembling with my blood thundering in my ears.

"Seth," she says softly.

I look from the cloth, to her puffy bottom lip where I can clearly see broken skin and the blue beginnings of a bruise, then to Lopez. He hasn't moved. He shouldn't be anywhere near her. A slow calm starts to unfurl in my chest as I realize I'm going to kill him. I can see it all playing out in my head. I should have killed him the first time I met him.

"Seth," Desir'ee calls again. "Seth, he isn't a threat."

I tilt my head to the side and move my glare to her. She cannot defend him. After everything. And even if she does, it won't matter. I'm going to kill him.

"Seth," she snaps. "He didn't do this. He helped me. He isn't a threat. I need you to hear me."

"I hear you." The words are barely audible through the growl my voice has become.

The floor squeaks behind me as someone shifts their weight, and Desir'ee's eyes grow even wider as she frantically looks behind me.

That single squeak begins to echo in my mind, and I shake my head once to try to stop it; but I can't.

Desir'ee is hurt.

Lopez was holding a bloody cloth.

She's bleeding.

The squeaking is turning over and over and now it's closer to a scream.

I came here to save her, but I was too late because there's blood all down

the front of her shirt, and Lopez has it on his hands.

“Seth!” Desir’ee is in front of me now. Shoving me back. Away from Lopez.

“Stop,” Devon whispers harshly. “Stay back.”

The only thing that breaks through the dark fog spinning around me is the look she gives Devon right before she rolls her eyes. “You be quiet,” she hisses. “Seth,” she calls sharply, firmly placing her palm against the center of my chest. “I’m alright. He’s not a threat.”

I look down at her and blink. “He’s not a threat,” I repeat. Devon’s words about trusting our omegas swing into the forefront.

“No,” she tries to smile, but winces when it hurts, “he isn’t. Are you?” She reaches up to smooth the snarl yanking at my mouth.

“Yes,” I answer, and close my eye, pulling in a breath before I open it again. “No.”

“Okay,” she says and steps into me, wrapping her arms around my waist.

I lean down and bury my nose into her hair. There are other scents, scents that offend my inner alpha, clinging to her, but they’re not important. All that matters is that I have her in front of me.

“Ernesto is upstairs,” Lopez says quietly. “I’m going to walk around you, Alpha Pratchett. I am not going to touch or look at Miss Romero. I don’t want you to misunderstand.”

“She said you weren’t a threat,” I murmur, and tip her head back so I can look at every detail of her face. “I trust my omega.”

Desir’ee’s breath hitches and she blinks up at me.

“Take us to him,” Devon says. “Alex, you stay here. I’ll yell if we need you.”

“Got it,” Alex answers. “This place smells like nothing and nowhere.”

“It isn’t a home,” Lopez answers the non-question as he walks past, giving as wide a berth as the room allows. “It was never going to be. Follow me, please.”

“You good?” Alex asks, coming fully into the kitchen and opening the refrigerator.

I nod. “Yes.”

“There’s nothing good in there,” Desir’ee says, seemingly not at all bothered by the things happening around us. Then she leans back into me, squeezing me a little tighter. “You came,” she whispers.

“I should have—” I start to say that I should have been here sooner, I should have never left, I should have done any number of things, but she stops me.

“You came for me,” she says, looking up at me.

I swallow around the tightness in my throat and kiss her forehead. “I did.”

She nods, then a fierceness overtakes her expression. “Now go get Ben and Michael.”

Chapter Seventeen

Seth

“You sedated him,” Devon says, fighting hard against a smile.

“Fucking hogtied him,” Alex says, grinning.

“Well, not exactly hogtied,” Nathan corrects. “But he’s definitely secured. What did you use to keep him under for so long? A tranquilizer?”

Desir’ee shakes her head and presses tighter against my side. “Sedative. He’d still be able to move if I’d used a tranquilizer. I needed him to not move.” She shakes her head again. “I wanted to kill him, but I thought about his horrible operation. I thought Seth’s people might be able to get some information from him that would help.”

Every eye in the room swings from the unconscious alpha trussed up on the floor to Desir’ee, then to Lopez to gauge his reaction. His mouth tightens, but that’s about it.

“How were you going to do it?” Alex asks, because why wouldn’t he? It’s definitely the most important thing to ask about right now.

Desir'ee reaches into her pocket and pulls out two small vials and one loaded syringe. She holds them out for Alex to see. "Potassium."

Alex lets out a low whistle and Nathan's brows raise. Devon reaches over to take them from her hand, but she closes her fist around them and holds them against her chest. "I'm still going to kill him. After."

Not if I can help it. This is the last time she's going to be this close to Flores. Someone else can kill him and she can watch from a safe distance.

"Uh-huh..." Alex smiles, tilting his head. "You and Talia are going to be a lot to handle, aren't you?"

"If you say so," Desir'ee deadpans. Then she looks up at me. "Do you know where they are? I could only see them on the monitors. I don't think they're in this building."

"We know where they are," I tell her, and take a breath before I give her the news that's probably going to piss her off. "I'm going to get them. You're going with Devon."

Desir'ee snorts. "I am not going with Devon. I'm staying with you."

"No, honey," I soothe, "you're not. I need you safe. You can't go where Ben and Michael are. Please understand. Devon, Alex, and Nathan will keep you safe while I go get the twins."

"Which one's Devon?" she asks.

"I am," Devon answers, putting effort into softening his expression.

Desir'ee sighs, sounding almost disappointed. "Of course you are."

Alex laughs, but I lean down and brush my lips against her hair. "He's not that bad. I trust him with you. All of them. You'll be safe, I promise."

"He is that bad, sweetheart," Alex teases, "but we won't let his bossy ass get too carried away."

"What about him?" Desir'ee gestures towards Flores.

We don't have an answer for that. We expected to call a clean up crew for corpses. None of us thought to prepare for an interrogation. We're quietly staring at Flores, no doubt spinning hundreds of potentially disastrous suggestions in our heads, when Lopez speaks up.

"Take him to the docks. We have units there, and everyone there is paid very well to be blind and deaf. It's where we keep the..." he falters for a moment, but then squares his shoulders. "*Kept* the omegas before they're shipped out. Take him there. You can't take him anywhere near the boys' house and keeping him somewhere else would be a risk. I'll take you there and give you the access codes."

Devon's eyes narrow. "Why?"

Lopez rubs his temple with two fingertips. "Because I'm tired. Because things should not be the way they are. And because she," he nods at Desir'ee, "and they deserve better. This outcome was inevitable, it just took me a little too long to finally put it in motion. It took her bravery to spur me into action. I am so sorry, Miss Romero. It never should have come to this."

Desir'ee nods, but it doesn't seem right. A simple, spoken apology for putting her, and Michael and Ben, and all the other omegas and their families through such hell. It isn't enough. A low growl starts rattling my chest, but Desir'ee reaches up and pulls my face down so she can kiss my cheek. "It's alright, Seth. He got it right. Late is better than never."

"This is hilarious," Alex snorts, and holds up his hands when Desir'ee glares at him. "I'm just saying it's a funny thing that he," he points at me, "has to deal with him," he points at Lopez, "in this situation. It's a fair turn of events, if you ask me."

Devon pinches the bridge of his nose and Nathan covers his mouth.

"I don't understand," Desir'ee says, clearly displeased at being outside the

loop.

But I understand perfectly, and it sours my stomach and has scalding guilt clawing at my insides. “He’s my Seth,” I say softly.

The look she gives me tells me that she still doesn’t understand, but she nods anyway.

“This isn’t going to bother you at all?” Devon asks Lopez. “He’s part of your pack, and interrogating isn’t a friendly process.”

Lopez shakes his head sadly. “Of course it will bother me, I’ve been with Ernesto for more than half of my life. But I’m finished. I was already going to sever the bond with him and help James and Bryant through the process. I’m releasing the betas, there isn’t a true bond with them, anyway. We were a functional pack, not a genuine one. I think James, Bryant, and myself can become a true pack if we put in the effort. If they’ll still have me, that is.”

“They’ll have you,” Desir’ee says softly.

I hate that she can speak so gently to him after everything he’s done. Motherfucking hate it. Goddamn.

I hate the smirk on Devon’s face almost as much.

“So, we move him to what I assume is a holding facility. At the docks you control. And we just trust that you won’t move him again after we’re gone?” Nathan asks.

“I won’t move him,” Lopez quietly responds. “I don’t have the answers you’ll need to put a stop to everything. He made sure no one but him knew everything about the operation. You can change the codes, you got in here so you obviously won’t have any trouble changing them. The only way to get into the units is with the codes.”

“Are you currently holding any omegas?” Devon asks, his tone just a breath shy of a threat.

Lopez meets his gaze. “I don’t know. I don’t think so, but Ernesto stopped telling me things a few years ago. I hope there are no omegas on the docks. If there are, we’ll call for medics and get them taken care of.”

“He’s going in the trunk,” I announce darkly. “Just like Michael.”

Lopez nods. “You can follow me, or I can ride with you. Whatever you’re most comfortable with.”

God, I want to be the person behind the wheel so I can sling that motherfucker around and bounce him off every surface of the trunk; but I have to go get Ben and Michael. Right now.

“Alright,” Devon says. “Alex and I will ride with you. Nathan will follow with Desir’ee.”

She looks up at me, even more unimpressed than she was before. “You’re going alone to get Michael and Ben? Absolutely not.”

“I won’t be alone. Go with Nathan and we’ll come get you after. You’ll be safe. It’s going to be alright, I promise.”

~

I look stupid in a ball cap. I have always looked stupid wearing one, even before my hair grew out to the length it is now; but it’s a necessary evil. I’m wearing a stupid, scratchy prosthetic eye, too. The assholes at the door might be looking for a one-eyed redhead, and this is as disguised as I get.

I spot Corso in the crowd almost immediately. Some sort of VIP section with security, a complete bar and more finely tailored suits and diamond encrusted women than I have seen in a long time. He nods to the ring where Kaleb is warming up in his corner with Trent on the outside of the ropes playing the part of his trainer. The announcer is droning on about an alpha from the East Coast coming all the way to the West Coast to embarrass himself. I make my way to the side of the ring and wait for Michael’s

entrance. No doubt, they'll make a big show of it. I hope they do. I won't be able to slip back to the locker rooms if they don't.

Lopez said that the twins still go to the locker rooms after fights to shower and get cleaned up. He also said he would send Bryant down to be Michael's handler. When Desir'ee asked why he couldn't just call the fight off and have Michael brought to us, Lopez wasn't happy to explain that Flores's influence was much heavier than his and he wouldn't have the authority to do that until people knew Flores was out of the picture. None of us were happy about that after all we had done up to this point. It was never going to be easy, this was par for the course then.

Michael's entrance music starts blaring from the overhead speakers and the crowd begins cheering. If Michael hears the screams, he doesn't care about them. There's no showboating, no gearing up and elevating the energy of the crowd. He just steps through the ropes and sits on an overturned bucket in his corner. I recognise the younger alpha that leans over the top rope to talk to Michael from the meet and greet. He must be Bryant. I can see his lips moving, but I can't make out what he's saying.

Michael's head tilts sharply to one side and he glances at Kaleb before he cranes his neck to look back at Bryant. Bryant nods and I watch Michael's jaw tick and his eyes narrow. He shakes his head slowly and turns away from Bryant. I hope his hateful ass doesn't force Kaleb to really knock him out. I need him conscious. I don't know how Ben might be, but I know we won't be able to carry both of them out of here.

The referee barks something, Bryant and Trent both step back and hop off of the mat, exchanging a quick look between the ropes. Trent looks behind him and gives me a subtle nod after he finds me in the second row of seats. Then the bell rings.

Michael stands up slowly, clenching his taped fists. Kaleb does the same. They circle each other twice, then Michael tosses out an exploratory jab. Kaleb ducks away from it, smiling at Michael around his bright, blue mouth guard. Michael isn't wearing a mouth guard. If Kaleb knocks out a tooth, Desir'ee might just kill him.

The fight gets going, both Kaleb and Michael exchanging blows; without it being obvious that Kaleb is just biding time. Michael is becoming frustrated and he flicks occasional glances at Bryant as he and Kaleb move around the mat. With only a few seconds left in the first round, Michael comes out of nowhere with a kick, planting his heel solidly into Kaleb's jaw. Jarred or not, Kaleb catches Michael's foot as it's coming down and jerks his body closer. The crowd cheers so loudly that the sound of the bell is nearly drowned out by their screams.

Kaleb goes to the ground, taking Michael with him. He maneuvers them into a position that allows him to speak into Michael's ear. Whatever he's saying has Michael's eyes wide, and they grow wider when Kaleb shoves his hand in front of his face to show him the cloth wrapped around his knuckles, then the referee comes over to order them apart.

When Michael goes back to his corner, he gives Bryant his full attention, nodding at what he says. When the bell rings again, he goes back to meet Kaleb in the center of the ring and Bryant meets my gaze for half a second before discretely tipping his chin toward the door that leads to the locker rooms. That's my signal.

I wind my way through the crowd instead of walking down the aisles out in the open. I need to get back there without anyone noticing, especially the men standing in the middle of each row. Lopez said they're who Flores hires to

keep the crowd in order and they've been looking out for me for weeks... which is the biggest reason for the hat and the stupid, fucking prosthetic eye.

The locker room is as empty and quiet now as it was the first time I was in it. I won't sit on the bench to wait this time, though. I pace. I'm going to wear a hole in the floor while I listen to the ups and downs of the crowd as Kaleb and Michael go for an appropriate amount of rounds. Lopez said that most of the bets would be placed on Michael winning because everyone knows what he's capable of. One of the things Bryant was supposed to do is suggest that it would be a very funny thing if the majority of these assholes lost a lot of money if some random guy from another territory won.

Ben would throw the fight, for sure; but Michael might not like the idea of Kaleb winning. I think if they truly put their minds to it, Michael and Kaleb could very well beat each other to death without either of them realizing it. Hopefully it won't come to that, though. Desir'ee wouldn't be impressed. And Talia would fucking kill me.

Finally, after what feels like fucking hours, the crowd goes absolutely wild, which means the fight is over. A few minutes later, the door to the locker room opens and Michael stops two steps into the locker room. He looks at me, and I look at him. Then he stalks across the floor toward me and punches me. I stagger back, and manage to keep my footing, fully expecting to take a beating from him; but instead, we both just stand there watching each other.

Michael finally shakes his head, his mouth pressed into a thin line, then he steps toward me and I brace for his attack. It doesn't come, though. Michael falls into me, his chest thudding against mine as he wraps his arms around me.

He squeezes me so tightly that I can't catch a full breath and his fist beats against my back with the ferocity of it. Then he's choking thickly as he fights

against the swarm of emotions even I can feel. All I can do is put my arms around him and hold him until he's able to find calm. This is not the reaction I expected from him. Not by a longshot.

"Do you have her?" he rasps, not letting me go.

"Yes."

"Ben?" he asks, the merest drop of hope lacing his tone.

"Not yet," I say softly. "We're going for him next."

"Is she..." he trails off.

"She's fine. Really fine. Are you alright?"

He pulls back, barking a rough laugh as he puts himself back together.

"Fuck no. Are the rest of your people here? Help me get this tape off."

I tell him the abridged version of everything while I unravel the tape from his knuckles. Bryant comes in at a point, followed by Corso.

"Kaleb and Trent are going to park the van near the side entrance," Corso says quietly. "We probably need to move. Is Benjamin close by?"

Michael shrugs, but Bryant answers. "He's in the next building. James is clearing the level. It should be a quick in and out grab."

Michael shoots him a glare. "I should fucking kill you where you're standing."

"You should," Kaleb shrugs, "but don't. We don't have time, and your omega doesn't want you to."

"Why not?" Michael snaps.

Kaleb offers him a smile that might actually be sarcastic. "Because she decided he gets a second chance."

"You're Devon?" Michael asks him, and pulls a shirt from the top shelf of one of the lockers to put on.

"Kaleb. Devon is with Desir'ee," Kaleb says.

Michael nods and shoves his feet into his shoes. “Let’s go get my brother.”

Chapter Eighteen

Ben

Anxious energy is winding through me. Something is about to happen. Something important. I can almost feel it getting closer. I've been feeling the build up and pacing my cell for a couple hours now. Whatever it is, it's happening soon.

James knocked on my door a bit ago. *Knocked*. And asked if I was awake. I answered him by knocking back on the door. He said, "good," and I haven't heard anything else from him, but I know he's still there. Waiting.

I don't want to fight Michael again. Ever again. If we get out of this fucking catastrophe, I'm never fighting with him again for the rest of our lives. He can win any argument we have, I don't have the will to fight with him anymore. I might not even be able to practice with him. It only lasted a breath, but I don't ever want to see that level of anguish on his face again.

James starts speaking in a hushed tone, but he isn't speaking to me. There are other quiet, muffled voices on the other side of the door and my ever-optimistic mind is screaming that it's Michael. The lock turns, and when the

door swings open I find myself blinking wildly as Seth fills the doorway. He looks me over from my eyes down to my feet and nods once before stepping to the side.

My racing mind fills that brief moment with every horrible and beautiful thought I've had since I've been here. Maybe he's here to get me out. Maybe he's here to finish the job Flores started. Maybe he's here to gloat because he's been working with Lopez this whole time and now he's got Desie all to himself because Michael's dead. Maybe he paid off James and he's whisking me out of here so we can go get Michael and Desie. Maybe I've finally lost my mind and I've just hallucinated and it's really someone else here instead of Seth.

But then Michael steps through the door and I take my first full breath in what feels like years. He puts his trembling hands on either side of my face when he gets to me, angling it from side to side as he examines my nose.

"I'm sorry," he whispers.

I just laugh at him and pull him into the hardest, tightest hug I can manage, then I shove him behind me when I notice the unfamiliar alphas standing with Seth and James.

"Relax," Michael says gently. "They're Seth's people. We're leaving."

"What about James?"

"Switched sides. Lopez too," Michael squeezes my shoulder in solidarity, "They'll catch us up in the van."

"Is Desie okay?"

Seth answers instead of Michael. "She's fine. Let's get the fuck out of here."

I keep waiting for something to happen or for someone to stop us as we follow Seth and the others out of the building, but it's unnecessary. We don't

come across another person from the time we leave my cell until we're piling into the back of a panel van. It's surreal, almost too good to be true. Too easy. We don't have this kind of luck; yet, here I sit between my brother and Seth in the back of a van on a rolled stack of rugs.

As we pull out of the parking lot, I take a closer look at the men in the van who I don't know. The one behind the wheel is huge and has a black eye and a bruise forming on his jaw. Another is covered in tattoos that could rival a botanical garden. And the last one... I lean into Michael to whisper, "are you serious? Is that Corso Zaphir?"

The guy with all the tattoos snorts and Corso Zaphir turns around in his seat to smile at me. "It is good to meet you, Benjamin."

I side eye Seth and his mouth turns up in a small smile. Then I realize he's looking at me with two eyes. My staring must make him uncomfortable because he clears his throat and looks away. "Sorry," I whisper. "The last time I saw you, you only had one."

"I still have just the one," he says. "We knew people would be watching out for a guy wearing an eyepatch, so I wore the prosthetic. Are you alright, Ben?"

The funny thing about that question is that, no, I am obviously not alright, but at the same time I am. I'm sitting next to my brother, my *alive* brother, and we're hopefully on our way to get my omega, my *alive* omega, who is also whole if this good luck doesn't give out. "I'll be fine. Where's Desie?"

"With Devon," Seth says, leaning back against the seat.

Devon...I've heard him on the phone with Devon. "The asshole?"

"Devon isn't an asshole," Seth mutters.

The guy with all the tattoos laughs. "Yeah, he is. But your Desir'ee can handle him. That one's a firecracker, isn't she?"

That's one way to put it. "She's really alright, though? You said she was fine, fine isn't the same thing as alright."

Seth drags his hand down his face. "She's fine. She'll be alright once we get to your house."

I look over at Michael. Sometimes the twin thing is intense, and I didn't expect it to just snap back into place after so long apart, but one look tells me we're on the same path. Seth got to Desie and saved her. He saved us, too. I don't give a shit about anything in his file. He's ours. Our home is his home. "She's at home?"

"Yeah," Seth nods. "Devon, Nathan, and Alex are staying with her until we get there."

"How long have you had her?" Michael asks.

Seth's jaw clenches before he answers. "We got her out of Flores's penthouse about three hours ago." He rolls his head on his shoulders and continues. "She sedated Flores, Lopez helped her tie him up. They're putting him in a holding unit at the docks, wherever that fucking is, and giving us the code to get into and out of the unit. Lopez says he wants to fix shit over here, he wants to start over with the other two alphas. He doesn't want the rest of the betas, though. That's all I've got."

"The rest of the betas?" I ask. I know the Flores pack had at least ten or twelve betas that carried out business, not to mention the numerous other betas who hung around trying to get a foot in the door.

"Some were killed when we went in for Desir'ee," Seth shrugs.

There is a small giant standing on our porch with his arms crossed across his chest when the van parks in front of the house. Damn, what do they feed these guys? Must be all the fresh air or some shit. If I didn't know he was part of Seth's family, I'd probably be pretty worried.

The tattooed guy slides the door open and gets out.

“Ready?” Seth asks, looking between me and Michael.

“She’s really okay?” I ask again.

“She’s okay. Her lip’s busted pretty bad, and I saw some bruising, but she’s okay.”

“Good enough,” Michael says, climbing out before reaching back in to pull me out, and we both wait for Seth on the sidewalk. The others have already made it into the house by the time we’re stepping onto the porch.

“It’s weird that our house is full of strangers,” Michael mutters, then he leads us through the door.

Our house isn’t big. It’s not exactly tiny, either, but you’d never know it with eight alphas standing awkwardly around the living room.

“She’s in the shower,” one of the ones who wasn’t in the van with us offers when he stands up from the couch. He’s got brown hair and warm eyes and he gives off the same tranquil energy as deep breathing exercises. “She said she needed to fix her scent.”

I nod, not knowing what else to do. I don’t want to do introductions. I don’t want to get into the story of the night right now. I don’t want to hear about how they stormed the castle and pulled off the rescue. I just want to see Desie. That’s all.

“Lopez said you’d be safe here. He gave his word that no one would bother you, he said he’d make sure of it himself,” the alpha standing by the window says, probably to Seth. “But I’m sure you know how I feel about that. It’s your call. Do you think you’ll be alright, or do we need to park out front for a few days? Desir’ee made her opinions abundantly clear, and we don’t mind taking shifts to watch the place until you’re ready to take care of business.”

Seth starts to answer, but stops himself and glances at Michael then me.

“It’s your call. I was there when we got to the penthouse, but you weren’t.”

Michael holds his gaze for a long moment, then says, “I want to know what you think. You’re right, we weren’t there. You’d know if he was telling the truth or not.”

Seth scrubs his hands down his face and neck, visibly uncomfortable. “I think Devon would feel better if they were watching the house, but he wouldn’t have mentioned *not* watching the house if he didn’t believe Lopez was telling the truth. I trust Devon. He would never say anything out loud that would put Desir’ee at risk.” He blows out a breath and rubs at his neck again. “Lopez didn’t lie about wanting to change things. He didn’t lie about helping Desir’ee with Flores. He was sad, but he wasn’t lying.”

“Okay,” Michael says, “we’ll be fine. If you—” he stops abruptly when the bathroom door opens and the aroma of soap, steam, and Desie flows down the hall.

She walks into the living room barefoot, wearing one of Michael’s hoodies and the ugliest flannel pajama pants she owns. She stops as soon as she sees us and it’s one of those cheesy movie moments where it seems like time is standing still. Then she rushes toward us and Michael and I wall her in between us when her body crashes into mine.

For a minute, all I can do is breathe her in while she clutches at me and Michael. Her hair is soaking all of us. She’s got an arm wrapped around my neck and her nails buried in my shoulder. Her other arm is looped backwards around Michael’s neck, pulling him face-first into her wet hair. It’s the best thing I’ve ever felt in my life.

The brief look I had of her face was really only long enough for me to register that she was really there, I didn’t think to check the wounds on her

mouth or the bruising Seth told us about. “Hey,” I say, trying to urge her face upwards, “let me see.”

She shakes her head, burrowing into my chest. “Not yet.”

From my peripheral, I watch Seth take a step back. Away from us. He catches my eye and the look on his face guts me. He saved us so we could be together again, but he’s pulling away. He thinks he’s separate. He holds my gaze, his mouth set in a grim line, and he takes another step toward the guy who drove the van.

“Seth Pratchett,” Desie sniffs, her voice clear despite being muffled between Michael and me. “If you take another step away from us I’m going to get the wooden spoon. Come here.”

He has the good sense to stop where he is. “I just didn’t want to…”

“Didn’t want to what, Seth?” Desie asks sharply. “Intrude? Get in the way? Come here.” She wriggles around between the cocoon Michael and I have created around her and stretches out her hand, reaching for him.

He doesn’t smile, but he doesn’t argue, either; and he slowly comes to us. When he’s close enough, Desie grasps his shirt and jerks him against us with enough force that I grunt. It’s very obvious that he doesn’t know what to do with his arms, but Michael wraps one arm around his shoulders and Seth allows himself to be included in the pile-up. This is very close to perfect. Our combined scents cloud protectively around us and I close my eyes to savor it.

Someone quietly says they’ll check in later and I feel Seth nod.

When I open my eyes again, Seth’s people have somehow managed to leave the house without me realizing it. To be fair, though, the moment Desie opened the bathroom door nothing else really mattered. I cup the back of her head and urge her to look at me “Baby, let me see your mouth. Seth said you got hurt, I need to see. Everyone else is gone, it’s just us now.”

She tilts her head back and I suck in a breath. When he said bruising, I thought he meant maybe her arm. I didn't think it would be the entire space between her bottom lip and her chin. I didn't think there would be varying shades of yellow and green ringing her neck. And the swelling of her mouth. Fuck.

"I'm okay, Ben," she whispers. "I'm okay. I am. I'll be better in no time."

"Which one of them did it?" Michael asks, his voice a quiet threat. He hasn't seen the damage, just my reaction to it.

"Flores," Desie answers. "He'll suffer for it. I'm going to make him suffer for everything."

The fuck she is. She's not going anywhere near him ever again. She's right though, he's going to suffer.

"The last time I saw you, those guys were kicking you. They were all around you after Michael knocked you out. I thought they were going to kill you. Then Flores broke the remote control and I couldn't stand it. We're okay now, though. We're okay." She leans against me again, pressing her forehead into my sternum, and my breath catches as I realize I can feel her worry and sadness in our bond. I missed feeling her inside me so much that the relief of finally being able to feel her again is dizzying. There are a hundred questions spinning in my head about what she just told me, but I'll ask them later.

"We're okay," I say instead. "We're okay." I bend down and swing her up into my arms. Suddenly, the only place I want to be is in our bed, in our room. I want to look at every inch of her and kiss every cruel mark those bastards put on her, no matter how small. I need to feel her against me. I need to see her surrounded by our pack and happy more than I need my next breath.

I look over Desie's head at my brother's sour expression and nod my head

toward the hall, then I look back at Seth. His expression is even more grim than Michael's, but he follows us down the hall without needing to be pushed; which is a very good thing because Desie is going to need all three of us.

Chapter Nineteen

Desie

It doesn't seem real. A few hours ago, I was fighting for my life; now I'm lying in my own bed sandwiched between Michael and Ben while Seth sits on the bed at our feet. I have them back. All three of them. I can smell them, and the bonds I have with the twins have flared back to life. I don't have a bond with Seth yet, but I will soon. Just having him near and close is good enough for now.

"I want to kiss you," Michael says, brushing his lips against my temple, "but I don't think I can do it without being too rough." He traces my swollen bottom lip with his fingertip, his touch barely there.

"It'll be worth it," I tell him, "and I might die if you don't."

"I don't know about that, but..." he hums and presses his lips against mine so carefully that my heart breaks a little.

Ben turns me towards him so he can give me an equally tender kiss, and Michael takes the opportunity to bury his nose into my neck. He pushes his

hand under the hoodie I'm wearing and growls when he finds that I'm not wearing anything underneath.

"If it's too soon, we can stop," Ben murmurs against my lips.

I know they'd stop everything they're doing, and we could lay here together and reconnect without taking off a single piece of clothing, but I want them. I need them. I need to feel their skin against mine. I need to feel their hands and mouths on me. I need to touch them and feel for myself that they're whole, and I need the taste of them on my tongue to wash away all the bitterness that has been thrown at us. "No, don't stop. Please, Ben. This is what I need."

"Good," Michael breathes against the shell of my ear. "We need it, too." He palms my breast, cups it, then rolls my pebbled nipple between the pads of his fingers before dragging his hand down my stomach to tease the waist of my pants. "I missed you so much, baby. I was so worried."

Ben sits up and yanks his shirt over his head. He drops it over the side of the bed into the floor and bends to give me another gentle kiss before he starts tugging at my hoodie. His reaction isn't what I want it to be. I want to see the same look on his face that he always has when I start losing clothes, like he's been starving for me. I want to hear the hungry growl in his throat as he looks me over, but I get icy, sharp rage instead. It takes me a moment to catch up, I was so caught up in him and Michael that I forgot about the fingerprints spotting my arms, the dark bruising and scrapes on my shoulder, the marks on my neck. I look at Michael and glance down at Seth and find them glaring at various injuries as the energy surrounding us turns frigid.

"I'm alright," I promise. I *am* alright. I'm a little banged up and emotionally ragged, but I'm okay. I'll be okay as long as I have them.

Ben runs a fingertip over my shoulder. He doesn't say anything, he doesn't

have to. "That must have happened when I fell off the bed." I thought explaining how the bruise could have gotten there would make them feel better, but their low growls tell me exactly how wrong I was. Seth sounds especially murderous. "I rolled us off," I continue awkwardly. "I needed to get to the other syringe. My head hurts worse than my shoulder." Furthering the explanation doesn't help anything.

"He should be dead," Michael says lowly.

"He will be," I assure him.

He doesn't say anything about that, either, but his opinion is more than obvious.

Ben moves his hand to cover my breast, cupping it and thumbing my nipple. "We'll just have to be extra careful with you, then, won't we? Why does your head hurt?" he asks, breathing the question against my ear and making me shiver. "Did you hit it when you fell?" He sucks my earlobe between his lips and drags his teeth over it. "We need to know what happened, so we can take care of you."

"He pulled my hair a lot earlier," I tell him, letting my words rush together. I don't want to think about Flores or his hand ripping my hair out of my scalp. I sure am not going to tell them about him hitting me if this is their reaction from just seeing bruising. I want to lose myself in my boys, all three of them. "It doesn't matter, now. It's over."

Michael leans over me and licks across my other nipple. My hands automatically move to hold him there, demanding more attention. My fingers sink into hair that hasn't been long enough to sink into for years, and I tug on the ends just to give him the experience. "You need a haircut," I mumble. "Ben, too. And a shave." It isn't that I mind the scruff on Michael's jaw and

chin, I actually like it *a lot*. It's that they've kept their hair too short to pull for years, and neither of them have the patience to try to grow a beard.

"What? You don't like how it feels?" Michael purposefully drags his scruff across my skin, making me arch into him.

I tug at his hair again, still pressing closer to him. "You still need a haircut."

"You don't like it longer?" Michael asks, drawing my nipple into his mouth and letting it go with a pop.

"I like it," I gasp. "I'm just used to it being short. I don't care if you let it grow to your feet."

I shiver as Ben laughs softly against my neck. "Not that long, but I think I'm going to grow mine out a little bit if you like pulling it that much." Then he moves down to my other breast and my eyes roll back with the attentions of both him and Michael.

Almost as if they planned it, Michael lifts up to pull me into another kiss while Ben slides down to the foot of the bed, kissing and nipping bits of skin along the way. I give half a thought to whether or not he's pushing Seth away, but Michael's mouth is too demanding for me to concentrate on anything but him. Ben is suddenly between my legs, yanking my pants down and off, and pushing my knees apart and up. Just as Michael's tongue licks deeply into my mouth, he swipes his own tongue across my clit. I buck up off the bed, gasping into the kiss. I don't know how they do this to me so well. They work together and against each other at the same time, like they're competing, and the goal is to make me melt and scream but the only way to win is to work together. It's overwhelming and wonderful.

I lose myself in them, just like I wanted, and when a hand touches my jaw to turn me away from Michael I growl in protest. But it's Seth, and that's nothing to complain about. He kisses my forehead, then my nose, and it's

such a sweet contrast to the intensity of Ben's mouth moving between my thighs and Michael's hand palming my breast that my breath hitches.

"I'm going to kiss you," he whispers. "I'll be careful."

I want to tell him that he doesn't have to be careful, but all that comes out is a groan because Michael chooses then to lick a wide path across the marks he and Ben put on my neck. The only thing keeping me from coming up off the mattress is the fact that this is the first kiss Seth has tried to give me since I've had him back. He presses his lips against mine so, so gently, his long fingers spread around my jaw and behind my ear. He pauses, pulling in a deep breath before his grip tightens enough to urge my mouth open, then he covers my mouth with his, swirling his tongue aggressively against mine. Seth kisses me like he's been starving, deprived of everything he's ever needed, and I'm the only sustenance he'll ever want. It leaves me gasping and whimpering, tightening my fingers into his hair as my body catches fire.

I can feel it. This is going to throw me into a heat spike. All three of them, all three of my alphas, using their hands and mouths to make sure I know I'm theirs is the most satisfying and erotically stimulating thing I've ever felt in my life. The need and pleasure rushing along the twins' bonds is waging war on my mind and I'm going to have a spike. Then Seth is going to have a panic attack; and I don't want that. Even knowing that, I can't bring myself to push him away or make Michael and Ben slow down. I need them too much.

Instead of trying to back away from the inevitable, I leap into it. I hook my calf around Ben's back, pulling him even closer to me, and get an even tighter grip on Seth's and Michael's hair. Hot energy crackles through my bonds when the scent of the oncoming spike starts winding around us. Seth growls deep in his chest and my body physically reacts, releasing a flood of slick and causing Ben to groan and double his efforts. Michael somehow covers both

marks on my neck with his mouth and sucks hard before raking his teeth across them. They're going to make me cum before the spike ever crests.

Michael's hand leaves my breast and snakes across my stomach to pull my knee up, spreading me wider, then Ben's fingers push inside me, and I moan into Seth's mouth. Seth drags his hand from my face, trailing his touch along my neck and between my breasts, never pulling away from our kiss while he plucks at my nipple.

Then three things happen at once that send me careening into an orgasm that I had no idea how badly I needed. Ben flicks the stiff point of his tongue over my clit in quick, firm circles and pushes in another finger, the stretch burns deliciously as he thrusts them inside of me again and again. Michael bites into my marks, causing me to see actual stars behind my eyelids as a pleasure so sharp it almost hurts spikes through me. Seth forces his tongue into my mouth groaning in pleasure when I suck it deeper, and when his fingers close around my nipple to roll it between them, I begin thrashing. I don't know if it's because I'm finally safe after weeks of misery and fear, or if it's because I finally have the pack I've always needed, but the orgasm that screams through me is blinding.

You'd think that an orgasm like the one I just had would put off a heat spike, but apparently that's not going to happen because I can still feel it coiling tighter. The only thing that will make this better is one of them helping me through it. But I need to check on us first. When I can manage it, I open my eyes and find myself looking into Seth's sky blues. I don't think I like him having two eyes. The last time I saw him, he only had one. I reach up to touch the space under the fake. "Is this going to be a regular thing?"

"Do you want it to be?" he asks quietly.

I answer without hesitation. "No."

He smiles, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "Okay." Then he kisses me again, just a gentle press of his lips. "I'm not going anywhere, but I am going to go take a shower. I washed my hands earlier, but I'm not comfortable with all this mess being so close to you. I'll be back in a little while." I open my mouth to argue, I don't care about any mess he thinks is important, but he puts a finger over my lips. "Michael and Ben need this. And I need a minute. You're in the middle of a spike and I still might have a hard time with that. I want good things for you, and good things for them. This is how I'll take care of my pack, that's what we are now, right?"

I nod, my eyes filling with emotion.

"So, let me take care of us like this. I need to wash the penthouse off of me just like you did. I'm sorry I'm in your bed with all this, but you needed me more than I needed to be clean. Ben and Michael will take care of you while I'm in the shower, and I need to check in with Kaleb. Then we can all get some sleep. Tomorrow is going to be exhausting and we need rest. Okay?" He cups my cheek in his palm and kisses me again.

"Okay," I agree.

"Okay," he repeats. Then he exchanges a look with Ben and Michael and leaves for the shower.

"He's alright, Des. Now," Ben says, brushing a kiss on the inside of my knee, "where were we?"

Instead of crawling back up to close me in between him and Michael again, Ben grabs my wrists and pulls me up into a sitting position as he drops down onto his knees on the floor at the foot of the bed. He lets one hand go, but keeps pulling on the other, guiding me up onto my knees and further until I'm balancing on my knees and elbows. With him kneeling on the floor, I'm at the perfect height for him to kiss me.

I feel Michael's warmth as he rises onto his knees behind me and pushes one palm from the base of my spine all the way up to the nape of my neck. "I wish you didn't have a headache. I'm going to miss pulling your hair." He slides his hand back down my back and grips my hips, letting his fingers dig into the flesh. "God, you smell good." He pulls my hips back, groaning when his cock pushes into the slick space between my thighs. I gasp when the engorged tip nudges my swollen and sensitive clit.

"That felt good, didn't it?" Ben purrs. "Don't stop, Mikey."

Mikey doesn't stop, and the sounds they're making in combination with the friction just makes me burn hotter. This is the first intense spike I've had, it's almost like my body was waiting until I was with them. The suppressants Lopez gave me have obviously helped, but right now I'm choosing to believe it's meant to be like this.

"I was so worried about what would happen when you went into heat without us," Ben whispers, running his fingers through my hair. "I didn't know how long it had been since we were separated. It feels like it's been so much longer than a few weeks."

Michael leans over me, his chest warm against my back. "I knew you were alive, but I was terrified for you. Omegas don't usually willingly accept other alphas once they're claimed."

"Flores said he was going to override your marks." It's probably a mistake to tell them right now, but it just spills out. Both Ben and Michael freeze and I can feel the silent conversation they're probably having.

Michael takes a long breath and puts a kiss between my shoulders. "It doesn't work like that, Desie. All he would have accomplished is hurting you. But you're with us now."

"Right where you belong," Ben finishes as he frames my face with firm

hands and kisses me again, his lips moving possessively.

I start to say something as sweet and meaningful as what they've said, but Michael lifts back up and grips my hips again before thrusting inside me and anything I would have said comes out in a scream. I'd be embarrassed about screaming into Ben's face, but Michael pulls out and plunges back inside of me so deeply that I tip forward and have to rebalance myself. Then he does it again.

Michael keeps that heavy rhythm, rocking me forward with every thrust of his hips, while Ben gives me such tender kisses until I'm reeling between the contrasting sensations. Every time Michael bottoms out, he tells me how much he loves me, how okay everything is now that we're together and home, how happy he is that our pack is finally whole. Meanwhile, each time Ben pulls back between kisses he says something about how gorgeous I look taking Michael's cock, how he can't wait to kiss me while Michael knots me, how good I'm going to be for my alphas. By the time Michael does begin to push his knot inside me, I'm burning so hot that I am unable to do more than gasp and whimper into Ben's mouth.

After several moments of intense and delicious stretching, Michael eases his knot past my entrance, and I feel his release surging inside me as his body locks us together. He falls forward again, catching his weight on trembling arms on either side of me. All I can hear is his purr, but I can feel his chest contracting with each ragged breath he takes. Through his bond, I can feel so many things all at once. Completion, elation, joy, but above all else I feel staggering relief pouring from him. Ben kisses me one last time and gets up to get the pillows from the head of the bed. He helps pull the sheets out from under us and get us all tucked in. Michael never says another word, he just purrs for me, deep and loud.

"I don't think we'll be able to let you out of our sight for a while. I hope you won't hate us for it," Ben says as he pulls my head onto his chest. Michael gives my hip a squeeze so I understand he feels the same way.

"I don't want to be out of your sight," I whisper. My eyes are starting to feel heavy; my words probably sound heavy, too. I can hear the water still running in the bathroom, and between the sounds of the twins purring and deep breaths and the shower, I don't stand a chance. I fall asleep smiling, happy and safe.

Chapter Twenty

Seth

I can still hear everything happening in the bedroom despite the sound of the water. The scent of Desir'ee's spike is faint, but it's a constant note in the steam. I don't know if it's because it's so close to her going into heat, or if I'm that attuned to her, but it's more powerful than any of the soaps and shampoos I've messed around with in here in an attempt to distract myself. It's intoxicating. I keep waiting for the panic that swarmed through me when she was having spikes before, to come rushing back, but the only reaction I'm having is a painfully angry erection.

Jesus fuck, my dick is hard. Every drop of water spraying and dripping onto it feels like nails driving into and dragging across my skin. I want to wrap my hand around it to try to relieve the pressure, even just a bit, but I'm afraid it might hurt. And each time I breathe through the intensity of it, thinking I might have a handle on things, Desir'ee's sounds of pleasure ring out and I'm even harder than I was to begin with. The cycle is bordering on torture.

Kaleb. I need to think about what I'm going to tell Kaleb. That will help. They all left so abruptly that I didn't get a chance to thank them or to talk about what we're going to do tomorrow or discuss what's going to happen with Flores or Lopez. I'm glad Lopez volunteered the unit at the docks, but I don't trust him. I don't care how 'not a threat' Desir'ee thinks he is, fuck that guy. The irony of the situation is unfathomable.

Lopez is, without doubt, my Seth. I understood how fucked up it was for Talia's pack, especially Corso and Jasper, to accept my permanent presence in their lives; and how much they hate my nearness to her, but I fucking *get it* now. Fuck, do I get it. I was ready and more than willing to tear his head off his shoulders, but a few words from her stopped me, and that's been a raw point of frustration for hours. Frustration doesn't quite cover it. If I could combine disgust, rage, frustration, and righteous indignation with a general feeling of failure and hate...that *might* cover it. Maybe.

And he wasn't the one doing most of the hurting when Desir'ee was with them. From the sound of it, he was trying to help her. I actually did hurt Talia. What I'm feeling right now couldn't possibly be anything close to what her alphas must feel. Especially Corso, Alex, and Reid. The look on Corso's face when he carried Talia out of the holding cell I kept her in said everything at the time, but I didn't fully grasp how he must have felt in that moment until tonight.

They are always going to want my death and they deserve it. It doesn't matter what good Lopez might do, I will always want to see him scattered across the floor. And Flores...fuck Flores. I'm not sure if I'll be capable of interrogating him, but I want to be there when the light leaves his eyes. No amount of pain he'll experience will ever atone for what he's put my pack

through. He deserves to feel every moment of fear and pain Desir'ee and the twins were put through, then he needs to die a brutal death.

I can't think of anything that might make me feel better about Lopez. I don't know how I'm still walking around. By all accounts, Corso should have put a bullet in me before he gathered Talia in his arms the day I called him. It's only fair that I have to give Lopez the same second chance that they have been giving me.

I tilt my face into the spray and then turn so that the water hits my back and shoulders, feeling the muscles bunch when high-pitched moans begin to cut through the air. I need to find a way to weather this, these spikes and her heat cycles. I need to be able to help her through them. I need to be a good alpha, that's what she needs more than anything. I can't be that for her if I shut down every time she goes into heat, and I sure as fuck can't see her through a heat if I have to struggle so hard to knot her.

My cock bobs, throbbing at the thought of my knot locking into that perfect place inside her and I let out a quiet, involuntary purr. Groaning, I turn off the water and get out of the tub. I've been in the shower so long that my fingertips are pruned and the layer of thick steam reaches lower than my shoulders. Things sound quiet in the bedroom, and I'm at once relieved and regretful. I towel off and put on the pair of shorts and the shirt I stole from a drawer in one of the other bedrooms. I left my bag at the place Talia's pack is staying, so I can stand wearing a pair of shorts that only just reach my knees and a borrowed shirt.

I creep down the hall and into the kitchen with my dirty clothes and put them into the washing machine. I don't start it, though; I don't want to wake up Desir'ee and the twins if they've fallen asleep. Laundry is a job for tomorrow. It's probably too late to call Kaleb, too. I'm caught between

deciding to go to bed with the others or sleeping on the couch when Ben walks quietly into the kitchen.

"You smell like everything in the bathroom," he says, getting a glass from the cabinet. "You alright? I told her you were."

"I'm good. Are you alright? Is she? And Michael?"

Ben opens the fridge and makes a face at all the things he doesn't find in there, then goes to the sink to fill the glass. "We're all good. Pissed off, but good. She's got bruises all over her. Michael is a little bit of a mess, and we'll have to talk about that tomorrow, but he's alright. Desie is going to probably handle this better than all of us, but she's different. She feels, I don't know, a little harder maybe. But just a little."

I nod. It's to be expected. You can't go through what she went through without your skin getting a little thicker. "I'd offer to make you something or go get you something, but there's not much here and I don't know what might be open. I'm sorry, Ben; I know you're probably starving."

"Nah," he shrugs. "They fed us. And Desie might throw a fit if she woke up and you weren't here."

Michael comes in after a few minutes, looking absolutely wrecked and mildly cranky... if you can accuse a guy who looks like he does of being cranky. He pulls out a chair and falls into it as Ben slides the half-full glass of water in front of him. He drains it and looks first at Ben, then at me. "I want to ask you about a lot of things, but I'm going to start with where is that motherfucker, really?"

I sigh, dragging a hand down my face. "I didn't call Kaleb to get the details, but Flores actually is secured at a unit on the docks. If there was a problem, they would have mentioned it."

"And Lopez?" Michael asks without trying to disguise a snarl. "We're not

really going to trust that asshole, right?"

I sigh again and roll my neck. "Desir'ee says we can. I trust her."

They both nod, despite their obvious dislike of the situation.

"He's me," I say quietly, not looking either of them in the eye.

"How's that?" Michael asks, putting his elbows on the table and propping up his chin.

I close my eyes and take a breath, building myself up for the explanation.

"We have to learn to deal with him like Corso and the rest have to deal with me."

I'm ready and prepared to go on with the conversation, but Ben shakes his head and waves me off. "If you're going to explain all the blacked out shit in your file, I'd like to wait until we've had some real sleep, if that's alright.

That's going to be some heavy stuff and I can't do it exhausted and hungry." I cut him a look, he said he wasn't hungry. He rolls his eyes and continues.

"Besides, we have something more important to deal with tonight."

Dread pools in my stomach at the thought of working through something worse than my past. "What is it?"

"You need to mark her," Michael says gently. "Now. Tonight."

My chest tightens, but not as much as it would have a few weeks ago. I want to. God, do I want to. But if I put my mark on her, claim her as my own, I'll have to knot her. I don't know if I can. And if I can't, the rejection she could feel... on top of everything else...I can't do that to her.

"No, Seth," Ben grips my arm. "No. I know what you're worried about, and you don't need to be. Me and Michael will be right there with you. We'll be with her. It won't be like what happened before. I promise."

I start to shake my head, but he puts his hands on the sides of my face and forces me to look into his eyes. "I promise. We'll be there with you. She

needs you. You need her. You need us. You can already feel the pack bond. I know you can because I feel it, too. We need you to have a bond with her to make it real. Make us whole, Seth."

I swallow harshly. "What if I can't do it?" I rasp, the words thick in my throat.

Michael puts his hand on my shoulder. "You can. You'll go slow. You know Desie will help you; me and Ben will, too. She's going to go into heat soon, Seth, probably within a week. Don't get upset, it's just a fact. You're ours now, she'll need you. Mark her, create the bond so you'll be able to feel her. That's what you need. We'll help you."

I'm not sure how Ben and Michael can help; but despite everything, I *can* feel our pack bond forming. I was too terrified to really admit it to myself before I left to go back to the East Coast, but it's there.

"There you go," Ben says, patting my cheeks and smiling. "Now, let's go get our girl taken care of."

"I don't want to wake her up." It's a last-ditch stall tactic. A lame one, but that doesn't make it less true. She's exhausted, emotionally at the very least.

"Wake me up!" she yells from the back bedroom, and Michael snorts.

Ben laughs outright. "Come on, let's go. It'll be alright."

So, I take a deep, shuddering breath and follow them down the hall.

Desir'ee smiles when I walk through the bedroom door. All the scents from earlier are still a heavy presence, but it feels right. Michael settles into the chair beside the window, and Ben nods at me as he leans against the wall on the other side of the bed. They're both quietly pumping out calm, supportive energy like it's their job; which I suppose it might be since we're going to be a real pack now.

When Desir'ee reaches for me, I only hesitate for a moment. I try to mask

the movement of squaring my shoulders to build myself up for what I'm about to do, but I'm pretty sure she didn't miss it. I go to her, all but falling into her arms, and let her pull me down onto my back. She props herself up on her elbow and looks down at me, tracing my jaw and tugging on the tail of the braid of our combined hair. "Hi," she says softly.

"Hi," I respond, trying hard to smooth my voice into something better than a strained croak.

"Did this help?" she winds the braid around her finger.

I nod. "It helped a lot." It really did. It's been a constant reminder that she wants me, that she's with me. That I'm hers. And that's what I am and always will be. I felt it the night I walked across the dining room of that swanky restaurant and sat at her table. Hers.

"Good," she says, and lowers her mouth to mine.

I'll never turn down a kiss, but it can't be like this. Not anymore. It won't work. It can't be like it was before, asking for permission before every touch. She needs me to be her alpha, not some fool too terrified of himself to take the gift he's being offered. Desir'ee needs me to claim her, and that isn't something I can do from my back. She needs to know I'm strong enough for her, that she's more important than my fear. She needs to understand that I'm strong enough to lead her and it starts here. I take one single, deep, breath and carefully thread my fingers in her hair to pull her away just far enough to break the kiss.

"What's wrong?" she asks, concern obvious in her eyes.

"Nothing," I say, my voice still made of gravel.

She smiles and bends to kiss me again, but she can't lower her head without pulling against my grip. "Seth, what are—" She cuts off with a squeak as I

wrap my other arm around her waist and pull her across my body, rolling us so that our positions are switched.

"It's time for me to claim my omega," I growl, moving my fingers from her hair to press against the point of her chin with my thumb so that her mouth opens. "The way she deserves to be claimed," I finish, and pray that I can do it as I cover her mouth with mine. With my thumb keeping her mouth open, it's easy for me to lick my way inside, aggressively tasting her, possessively running my tongue against hers. "Fuck, you taste good," I groan against her lips, then dip back inside for more of her.

Already, her leg is hitched up and wound around my waist and the sweet scent of her arousal is clouding my concentration. It's been longer than I care to think about since I've shown any kind of dominance with a female, much less tried to kiss one like this. Come to think of it, I can't remember kissing any female before Desir'ee kissed me for the first time. I know it happened, it must have, but it just doesn't matter enough to remember. All that matters, all that I care about, are Desir'ee's kisses and her taste in my mouth, her scent taking over my senses.

I drag my fingertips from her chin and across her throat. "You need to tell me immediately if I hurt you or scare you. Do you understand?"

Her eyes close in long blinks as she nods up at me, but it isn't enough.

My heart is thundering in my chest, forcing blood to rush and race through my veins. I can do this. God, I think I can, anyway. But only if she understands. I stretch my grasp around the lower half of her face, my fingertips and the tip of my thumb pressing into her soft skin almost firmly until she gives me her eyes. "I mean it, Desir'ee. If you get so much as a hair upset, you tell me. I refuse to hurt you, intentionally or unintentionally. Do

you understand? I need to let myself go for this, just a little, but I need you to promise me that you'll say something if it gets out of hand."

"I promise," she says, big, honeyed eyes peering up at me with pure acceptance.

"Ben, Michael," I call out, never dropping Desir'ee's gaze.

"Seth," they answer in unison.

"Watch her. If she looks even a little bit of the wrong kind of uncomfortable, put a stop to everything. Full brakes." I feel as desperate as I sound. Depending on them, trusting them, it's terrifying, but I don't know if I can trust myself and they'll keep her safe. I don't doubt that for a second.

"Won't take my eyes off of her," Ben assures me, and Michael tips his chin when I glance over at him.

"Alright," I say, brushing my nose against hers. "This isn't going to be like before, darlin'. I won't be asking." I don't give her time to respond or give myself another second to doubt myself. I give her one last gentle kiss, then I *take* her mouth. All but devouring her, I thrust my tongue against hers in a mimicry of what I intend to do later between her thighs. I haven't let myself have that yet, and I plan to indulge myself tonight. Heavily.

She makes soft, little gasping noises when I kiss and lick down the side of her neck; and when she arches back, giving me complete access to her throat, I can't stop the sound that escapes me. I have never experienced an omega submitting to me because they wanted to. Not once. It's always been about rank or survival, never want or need. The sight of it actually makes my head spin.

"Thank you," I whisper, kissing the center of her exposed neck. "Thank you," I whisper again, my lips brushing against her skin. "Thank you," I murmur yet again, and gently nip at her soft, vulnerable throat.

At the feel of my teeth, she makes a sound that forces me to break out in goosebumps. She sinks her fingers into my hair and winds her leg tighter around my waist, and I roll my hips just a little because we both already need the friction. I reach back up to her jaw again and turn her head to the side so the twins' marks are clearly visible. I lick across one and suck a mark over the other and purr when she bucks hard enough that both of us leave the mattress.

"That's not fair," she whines, but she's got a death grip on my scalp, daring me to stop mouthing their marks.

I growl and press my teeth into her neck, making sure to make contact with the scarring of both their marks, and she moans, long and loud, and the scent of slick grows heavy and intoxicating. Pulling against her grip on my hair, I pull back and look down into her face as she rocks her hips against me.

"Where do you want my mark, Desir'ee? I'll put it wherever you want it."

Her head whips to the other side, showing me the other unmarked side of her neck. "Here. So that everyone can see it."

Pride, foreign and unexpected, blooms inside me at her words. I want everyone to see my mark on her. I want everyone to know she's mine. But to know that she wants it, too... It's overwhelming. Humbling. "Yes," I say against her neck, my voice is barely more than a purr. "Everyone will see that you're mine." I kiss that perfect place, directly parallel to the twins' mark. "And theirs." I lift up and press a kiss to her mouth. "Ours."

Desir'ee smiles up at me, trust and acceptance written on her face, and it takes my breath. I'm so lucky. So fucking lucky. She didn't give up on me, and she didn't leave me, not even when she should have. "I'm going to do everything I can to be worthy of you, Desir'ee." I kiss her again, "I will live my life for you and for this pack. I promise." Then I start making my way down her body.

It's a funny thing to want to rush through doing something because you want to do it, and do it all, so badly, but at the same time want desperately to drag out each moment into an exquisite eternity. I want to lick a direct path straight to the delicacy waiting for me between her thighs. I want to lay between her spread legs and indulge myself until she's trembling and begging me to stop. I know better than to do that, though. This is a moment to savor.

Her fingers stay tangled in my hair as I kiss the inside of her breast. She isn't quite pulling me to her nipple, but she isn't *not* urging my attention there, either. Smiling, I cup her breast, mounding it up, and suck her dusky nipple into my mouth. She groans in relief as my tongue slowly swirls around it, her grip on my hair tightening. "Don't stop, Seth," she breathes.

It never occurred to me to stop, but I do reach over and palm her other breast and pluck at that nipple each time my mouth pulls her in. Her thighs are splayed wide now, one calf still hitched around my back. Her minty sugar scent is growing heavier, tunneling deeper into my awareness. Headier now, the smell of her arousal is tinged with the pheromones that flood an omega when they're nearing their heat. It should bother me like it has in the past, but if she had a spike right now, I'd probably lick every drop from her and wish for more.

Reaching back for her wrist, I pull her hand from my hair and press it firmly into the mattress at her side. "Stay just like that for me." Her scent is even more enticing as I scoot farther down the bed. I am as nervous as I am ravenous. I haven't allowed myself the taste of a female in so long. I didn't trust myself enough to attempt it. But I need this, I need her.

When I'm finally settled between her legs, she's spread before me like a banquet. I can feel the heat and want radiating from her. I use my thumbs to spread her even more open and her swollen clit throbs as she moans and lifts

her hips. "Please, Seth." I glance up to find her eyes hooded, her puffy bottom lip trapped between her teeth. So beautiful. And she's mine.

I can't help smiling at the luck I've stumbled into, but I don't have it in me to tease. Not tonight. I wrap my hands around her thighs and hold them apart as I dip my head between them to slowly, firmly lick her clit. The taste is indescribable. I hate to make any comparison at all, but it was never like this with Derek and Jay. We shared a few women between us a few times, but the combined tastes of our pack and the female was always sour. I was ready for that same experience because she was just with Michael a little while ago, but this is nothing like I expected. The notes of Michael's release are faintly present, and the combination of him with her want triggers something that feels like satisfaction. It's very basic, very instinctual. The knowledge and evidence that my packmate found completion with our omega and brought it to her as well, has me purring as I lick over her clit again while she gasps so prettily.

She thrashes, crying out, but I keep my grip on her and suck her clit between my lips. I want her to cum on my tongue. I want her pleasure to explode all over my face. But I need it to happen fast because, unfortunately, I can feel the base of my cock pulsing in the way it does right before my knot starts to swell.

I've thought it out. I've been thinking about it for weeks. The act of pushing my knot inside her is going to trigger a panic attack. There's no way around it. As pathetic as it is, I won't be able to overcome that; not yet. I hope, like the twins said, that having a bond with her will help with that, but as is, I need my knot inside her before it starts to form. I'm determined to make her cum with my tongue first, so I suppose the race is on. I give her clit another

long lick before lifting my head to look up at her. "Cum for me, Desir'ee. Hurry. We only have a minute before I'll need to fuck you."

I return to my task, licking at and sucking her engorged clit for no more than a few seconds before she's thrusting her pussy against my mouth, her fingers back in my hair in a vicious grip as she groans my name at the ceiling.

"Good girl," Michael praises from his post. That feels right, too. She loves praise and we can all give it to her.

I crawl back up her body and brush my nose against hers. "I'm going to fuck you now. If it's too much, tell me."

She nods up at me.

I take a deep, shuddering breath and reach a hand down to line up my cock with her entrance. I'd rather die than hurt her, but I don't think I can be gentle with this. Already the base urge to bite into her neck and pin her to the bed so I can shove myself into her as hard as I can is beating at me. All I can do to keep it at bay is move through every goddamned breathing exercise I've ever been taught and squeeze the base of my dick in a death grip to keep my knot from swelling too soon.

Desir'ee drops her hands to the mattress above her head, her fingers curled in calm acceptance, her lip again trapped between her teeth as she watches my face. I press my forehead against hers and thrust inside her all at once, and still, frozen in the moment and terrified that I might have hurt her.

"Again," she sighs. "Just like that. Please, Seth."

I mutter a curse and curl my hands under and around her shoulders as I thrust again, the movement harsher than the first. She throws her head back, locking her ankles around my waist as she offers her submission.

"*Fuck*," I growl, the sound ripping out of my throat in either a prayer or a threat as blood rushes violently into my groin.

"Again," she gasps, "please."

I kiss her soft, parted lips once, then let myself go. I allow my hips to snap forward, my body slapping against hers thickly as her pleasure rings in my ears. "So good," I rasp. "You feel so good, Desir'ee."

Too soon, a sharp throb tightens my balls and I feel the base of my cock thicken, making me have to work harder on my next stroke. Pausing just long enough to guide her hands to my sides, I sink inside her as deeply as I can. I change from brutal thrusts to more of a rocking, grinding movement that is no less intense. I rock my hips, the head of my cock nudging the deepest parts of her. I want so badly to look down and watch her body taking mine so perfectly, but I'm not about to risk ruining this. I don't need to see it; I can feel it.

Desir'ee's eyes are closed, her neck still arched as I lower my mouth to kiss her throat. She whips her head to the side, presenting the unmarked side of her neck, and my mouth waters for the feel of her skin breaking under my teeth and her taste washing over my tongue. It feels like I might truly die if I don't set my teeth into her flesh and put my mark on her.

"Give it to her," Ben urges. "She needs it."

I lick over the stretch of skin, relishing her hoarse moan, pushing inside her with sharp, urgent thrusts.

"Do it, Seth," Michael says softly.

My hips stutter, losing rhythm. I'm so close.

Desir'ee doesn't have words, she can only give me these tight little noises from the back of her throat as she clenches around me.

The hot tightness of her body is almost overwhelming, and when she rakes her nails down my back, her heels digging into me as she lifts her hips to meet my thrusts, the first pulse of my release forces my balls to contract and

my knot to fullness. I grip her shoulders a little too hard as I sink my teeth deep when my orgasm comes rushing out of me. The pleasure is blinding. I can hear myself as if from far away, the noise escaping through my throat the most desperate thing I've ever heard in my life.

Her body tightens around my knot like a vice, locking us together, and I can feel a bond linking us together forming with every heartbeat. All at once, the entirety of Desir'ee's emotional load barrels into me, leaving me gasping in shock and relief.

She's so happy. She wanted to be mine so much and she's so fucking happy right now. She's content. She's satisfied. She's full.

This is the best thing I've ever felt. Nothing could possibly ever compare to this.

Her complete and utter acceptance pushes any potential panic I might have had about being knotted with her into nothingness. This is what I was meant to do. My entire existence is built for and around this moment.

"You're my omega," I whisper, gently licking at the wound I put on her neck.

"Mmmhmm," she purrs. "You're my alpha."

Again, pride blooms warmly inside me. I tend my mark and bask in the fullness of Desir'ee's bond until she falls asleep. I am genuinely and thoroughly locked inside her... and I'm okay. She's okay. I can feel Ben and Michael, too; and they're okay.

"We're alright," I whisper.

"We are." Michael climbs into the bed beside Desir'ee and kisses her temple. Ben gets in next, and tucks a strand of hair behind her ear before he starts getting comfortable.

My breath hitches yet again. We're going to sleep together as a complete

pack and I have never been this content. This is the purest definition of contentment.

I gently roll Desir'ee and myself over until she's resting on my chest. It's not awkward when the twins tuck themselves in on either side of us. It's perfect.

Chapter Twenty-One

Ben

You know, it was completely reasonable and understandable to stop at the hospital to grab what Desie called a belly kit to take to Talia, but this is too much. Parking on the side of the freeway so Seth can rip flowers out of the ground for another pack's omega is not a valid reason to be even later than we already are. We were supposed to be at his people's place seventeen minutes ago.

"Get some of the yellow ones, too!" Desie points to the lone patch of wild mustard flowers further up the hill.

"He's going to get bit by a snake." I return the look Desie shoots at me with a wink. He won't. He *probably* won't.

The thing is, I can't even be irritated about this. I couldn't count the number of times I've stopped off to pick up something special for Amber. Flowers, seashells, fucking chili fries. Omegas are meant to be spoiled and I'm not going to be the asshole who doesn't stop for roadside posies.

“Go help him, Michael,” Desie whispers. “He’s pulling them up by the root.”

Michael rolls his eyes, but up the hill he goes. There’s a brief conversation about saving the root system and the soil here being too sandy to hang on to roots in the first place, but they both eventually have enough sense to pull out their pocket knives and cut the stems. Then Michael points to a shrub and says, “watch that snake,” and Seth jumps back so fast that he loses his footing and all but rolls back down the hill, long legs and arms flailing comically .

“Michael! He could have rolled over a snake and actually been bitten!” Desie’s yelling, but I doubt he hears her. He’s laughing too hard.

Seth’s flowers are mostly alright, and Michael carries down enough to make up for the ones that were crushed in the tumble.

“Was there really a snake?” Seth asks Michael, his eye righteously narrowed.

“No,” Michael snorts.

“Asshole,” Seth murmurs, but he’s smiling.

We stop, *again*, at a gas station on the way. He said he needs contraband, and we all laugh when he comes back to the car with a bag of candy. He sends a text when we’re a few blocks away and then we’re parking in front of a huge house with one of the alphas from last night standing on the porch with his hands on his hips. “We’ve been looking for you for almost an hour. Dutch is going to attack you when you walk through the door. Talia’s going to love those though. What’s in the bag?”

Seth grins and tilts the bag so he can see inside.

“She’s never going to give all that to them.” The alpha, Kaleb, I think, is fighting to hide a smile and failing.

“I’m going to sneak it to Alex. And he can sneak it to the kids.” Seth rolls

the top of the bag down, as if that could mute the scent of pure sugar.

“So, you’re the bad uncle, huh?” Desie smiles at him.

Seth ducks his head and looks sheepishly at Kaleb. “I just want them to be happy.”

“Put some toothbrushes in the bag next time and she might not get the spatula. Come on, they’re all in the living room.” He starts to open the door, but pauses, turning back to look at Desie. “Are you alright?”

“I’m good,” Desie assures him. “We might have to leave kind of abruptly if... well, if we have to go, we’ll come back.”

“Got it,” he says. “We’ll try to keep things brief.” Then he holds open the door for us.

We walk into a room exploding with toddlers and several different kinds of energy. A little boy runs toward Seth at full-speed and Seth barely has time to drop the bag of forbidden candy into my hands and shove the flowers at Michael before the kid is literally climbing up his body, yelling the word *late*.

“I know, buddy,” Seth laughs. “I stopped to get your mama some flowers. Do you want to give them to her?” The little boy nods and clambers back down. Seth passes the bouquet from Michael into the boy’s chubby little hands and watches him take off toward a very small, very pregnant omega who I assume is Talia.

“Thank you, Dutch,” she says, smiling over his head at Seth. “Now, go be good with your sisters.”

I can’t stop a smirk from pulling at my lips. That little boy doesn’t look like he’s very good at being good with his sisters or anyone else.

There’s a few drawn out moments of our packs taking in each other after Dutch takes his dramatic exit. I recognize two of the alphas from last night, maybe three. I really only had eyes for Michael and Seth last night, and Desie

as soon as she walked down the hall. Their expressions are as varied as their energies. Everything ranging from curiosity to outright distrust. We're going to leave here exhausted just from being in this mix.

Our omegas aren't putting up with it, though.

"Talia," Desie smiles. "How are you feeling? I brought a belly kit. I don't mean to over-step, and you didn't ask, but I'll feel better if I check on you and your little one before we start talking. Last night was stressful for everyone."

The tall alpha standing behind her nods. "Yes, please; and thank you, Desir'ee. We've heard so much about you. How are you feeling today? You've been through such an ordeal."

I'm trying not to gawk. He looks way too much like Corso Zaphir for my comfort. I vaguely remember his profile in the dim light of the van last night. I mean, Seth mentioned a Corso, but why would anybody assume he meant Corso fucking Zaphir? Surely, Seth would have said something about having an association with *the* Corso Zaphir. That's something someone would mention. Right?

Apparently not, because Desie doesn't skip a beat. "I'm alright, Alpha Zaphir. Thank you for asking. I appreciate everything your pack has done to help us."

"Corso, please," he amends. "We are glad to help." The stone-faced alpha standing in front of the couch by the window pulls a tight face, but he doesn't disagree, so maybe not overly glad.

"If you'll sit down, I'll get started," Desie tells Talia, motioning toward the other couch in the room.

Talia sits, with Corso and another smaller male hovering at the side of the couch. The other male isn't fragile at all, but he is smaller in size than even a

beta. If he smelled different, I'd assume he's an omega. I haven't really been around any male omegas, but they're supposed to be smallish. He doesn't smell like an omega, though. And he sure as hell doesn't feel like one. He doesn't give off beta energy either, though; and he's obviously not an alpha. One look at Michael lets me know he has just as many questions as I do.

Seth catches the eye of the other unnecessarily huge alpha in the room and flicks a look at the bag of candy in Michael's hand, wiggling his eyebrows. The alpha sticks his tongue into his cheek to keep from smiling as he makes his way over to shake hands. "This is Alex," Seth tells us. "Ben," he nods at me, "and Michael," he tips his chin toward Michael.

"You're going to get me in trouble, Pratchett," Alex says under his breath, then much louder, "I'm the fun one. Nice to meet you."

"Hey!" a dark haired alpha with tattoos crawling up his arms calls. "I'm more fun than you are." He doesn't look like he'd be much fun. He looks like he'd be an asshole.

"Trent wishes he was the fun one," Alex smirks. He takes the bag from Seth and hands it off to the other fun guy, whose eyes round when he looks inside.

He quickly twists the bag closed and glances back at Talia before he glares at Seth. "You're going to get us in trouble."

"Just go hide it in Devon's room. We can give them a piece at a time," Alex glances at Talia, too, "when she's not looking."

Trent slinks away to hide the bag of candy with a raised brow at Seth. That was an entire covert operation centered around an apparently legitimately illegal substance.

"Talia doesn't like them to have junk," Seth whispers. "But all that healthy food stuff isn't good for them. We have to sneak around to get them the good

stuff.”

I nod like I agree with their ridiculousness, but I can't imagine that little omega being mad about a few pieces of candy.

After Desie gives Talia the all-clear, everyone gathers into the living room for a round of very awkward, and occasionally tense, introductions. I immediately like the one called Nathan. Devon puts out fuck-you energy worse than Michael does, and I get the feeling that they're all absolute fools for their omega. As they should be. And there's plenty of them to keep her happy; my god, between the eight of them she's probably spoiled beyond belief. Again, as she should be. I can only hope that Desie will finally let us spoil her that bad.

“Where should we start?” Nathan asks.

“Where's Flores really? How secure is he? And what the fuck with Lopez? In that order, please,” Michael pulls Desie toward a chair, ignoring her exasperated huff.

“Really? I told you about Lopez,” she sighs, but she sits in the chair.

Michael cocks a brow at her and she rolls her eyes.

Trent snorts. “Good to see it's not just ours. Flores is secured in a holding unit on the docks. We have the only pass code for the door, Nathan made sure of it. Lopez appears to have switched sides, but we don't trust him. Not yet. He's got a lot on his plate right now with trying to fix what's left of his pack. He says he wants to work with us to dismantle the bullshit y'all have going on over here, which is just fine as long as he does it. We'll watch how he does and see where it goes. He's at their penthouse figuring shit out, but he says he's available for anything he can help us with. Oh, and he says to keep *Miss Romero* and any other omegas we care for out of sight for the

foreseeable future. He thinks things might get a little wild before he can fully take over the reins of that Flores fuck's operation."

Michael nods but doesn't say anything and takes up position behind Desie's chair. I perch on the arm of the chair and let my cheeks puff out as I blow out a breath. "Well, I guess that's as good as that's going to get. Let's just rip the duck tape off, shall we? Might as well kill the elephant first thing. We need a good, thorough walk-through of the missing shit from Seth's file. He started to tell us, but we had other things that needed to be done first and we get the feeling that it would be better coming from all of you since you're his people. So," I give Seth a pointed look, "spill."

Seth drags his hand down his face, seeming to wipe the color away with the motion, and takes a breath to do just that, but Talia holds up her hand.

"Wait," she says. "I'll start it. Seth can add as he needs. You can't start this story from Seth's entrance."

"No, that's not true." Seth interrupts. "It started on my end before you ever got there."

Talia presses her lips together and closes her eyes for a moment before she responds. "Fine, we'll take turns. But I'm starting."

"Okay," Seth says, and sits on the floor beside Desie's feet.

"Okay," Talia shakes her head. "Desie already knows all of this. I told her at the hospital."

"You know about everything?" Michael leans over the chair to look down at Desie.

"I know Talia's part. I want Seth's version. You and Ben get both at the same time, I've had to wait. Don't be rude, Michael."

"You don't be rude. You could have told us."

"When?" she asks. "During the heat spike? Or when Seth was marking me?"

When we were sleeping? Or first thing this morning over breakfast? Which of those times would have been the most appropriate, do you think?"

Michael's jaw actually ticks as he straightens back up at his post.

"That's what I thought. Sorry, Talia. Please go on." Every alpha in the room, besides Michael, of course, is trying not to smile.

Talia doesn't bother to fight off her smile. "I don't think I could have picked someone better for him than you. As I was saying, Desie knows the basic run down from my point of view. I don't want to get very much more detailed than that, if that's alright." Seth nods. Her whole pack nods, except the smaller male, Jasper. He's doing his best to keep the animosity off his face, and failing. The asshole who was introduced as Devon moves to stand near Jasper.

"I started out as a beta. There's a whole backstory with my mother and all kinds of unnecessary details that you'll eventually get the feel of, but none of it matters at this moment. What matters is that betas who complete training and graduate from the program get two choices. They can find a pack on their own, which takes a long time, or they can be placed with a pack through the council until they find the right fit. I am not and have never been a loner as I don't do well on my own, so I opted to let the council place me. I'm not the easiest person to get along with," she sighs as her story is interrupted by her pack's soft smiles and chuckles. "So, I was passed around a bit. Eventually I was passed to Seth's pack. The thing is, my mother had insisted I would eventually make the change to omega, I just needed the right pack to trigger my system into doing it but I was happy as a beta if that never happened. Seth's father wanted ties with my family, so he managed to pull enough strings to get me placed with his son's pack thinking they could make that change happen."

“My pack was bad,” Seth cuts in. “I didn’t know they were when my dad introduced us. I thought they would make a strong pack, my dad said they would. But they were horrible people. The more time I spent with them, the worse it got. My dad got worse, too, but he was my dad, you know? I didn’t want to disappoint him. I thought I must be the problem because I didn’t want the same things they all did. It took my dad months to convince Talia’s mother to put her with us for a trial run. I didn’t feel any connection to Talia, not the way Dad wanted me to, and I left her alone for the most part. Jay and Derek were nice enough to her in the beginning, but then they started going after her. I didn’t find out until after everything happened that they were in with the rogue organization that was responsible for so many omega disappearances. My dad got in with them because he wanted more power for our name and he used me to get it.”

My stomach starts to sink as Talia takes back over. “Seth did leave me alone. He made sure I didn’t need anything, but he didn’t give me the attention Jay and Derek did. He was very neutral with me. Then one day I was cutting fruit in the kitchen and Derek came up behind me and grabbed me. I had about a few seconds delay before I started fighting him because at first I thought he might have just been horsing around, but then he started dragging me deeper into the compound. I’d never been down there. Jay was there to help him get me on the table –”

“Stop,” Seth whispers, all the color drained from his face, even the ashen gray from before. “Just, please. Stop. Please. Let me catch my breath.”

The energy in the room has turned black. Talia reaches for Corso and Devon steps further into Jasper’s space. Jasper looks especially murderous. Reid, who has been silent until this moment, puts himself on the other side of Jasper.

“It’s okay, Seth. I’m not going into any more detail. I just wanted to give the right impression.” She waits for Seth to nod, then continues. “Anyway, they got me on the table and—”

“They tied her down on that goddamned medical cart and raped her.” Seth’s voice sounds like broken glass over sandpaper.

“They did. Then Seth came through the door. I don’t know what it looked like on his end, but I’ve had time to think and process how it was for me,” Talia says softly, looking at everyone and no one. “Seth—”

“I raped her, too.” Seth doesn’t look up from the floor.

Silence.

For a full minute.

Then I break it. “Wait. I thought...you talk about her like she’s your sister or something. How? Why?”

“He didn’t want to,” Talia answers. “It was obvious he didn’t want to, but there were very few options left for him to get me out. I know, for a fact, that Jay and Derek would have killed both of us if he had tried to fight them off. I wasn’t able to do much and Seth was in too much shock to be at his best. They would have killed us in a fight, starting with me, so he did something else. I watched him weigh our options, I just didn’t realize it at the time; but I do now. He showed them what they needed to see, then pulled the whole *I’m the lead alpha* shit and took me away. He got me off the table and gave me a bath in the biggest sink in the world and put the shirt he was wearing on me, then he locked me in a cell with every blanket he could find. He wouldn’t let them into the room. He only came to the cell to make sure I was okay. He didn’t talk to me or touch me. I slept a lot. I don’t know how long I was there. Then Corso came out of nowhere and carried me out. I didn’t care at the time, I was just so glad that he came. I don’t know how that happened.”

“I called him.” Seth chokes out, still looking at the floor. Everyone in the room looks at him all at once and he flinches.

“You called me?” Corso asks, tucking a few strands of hair behind his ear as he considers Seth from across the room.

Seth barely breathes as he speaks in a monotone voice that sounds almost nothing like him. “Alpha Zaphir. Talia Graves is in a holding cell at the Pratchett compound. Go around the building on the left side. The door is brown, it will be unlocked. Walk straight down the hall, take two rights. There will be a cup of coffee on the desk, the key to her cell is in the cup. Her cell is on the other side of the green door. It will take you an hour to get here. I’ll keep them distracted.”

Corso openly gawks. “I didn’t make the connection.”

“I tried not to sound like me,” Seth whispers. “I just wanted you to come get her, not waste time fighting to get to her. I picked a fight with Derek and Jay and lured them into the woods. I fought them for hours, praying that you’d get there for Talia before it was finished.”

Silence again. The energy shifts into something less deadly, but it’s nowhere near friendly.

“I didn’t know you called him.” Talia’s eyes are all for Seth.

Seth only nods and Desie runs her hand through his hair. “I met with the council that same day. I made them agree to never place another omega with us ever again, and I begged them to black out your name from the record of the meeting. I didn’t want anyone to know what happened to you unless you told them. I didn’t know what else to do to protect you.”

“You protected the other omegas, too.”

Seth shakes his head and presses his forehead against Desie’s knee. “Not enough.”

No one seems to know what to say or do with this new information. I think Talia's pack has considered Seth to be an alpha just as bad as the rogues for so long that being presented with the idea and proof that he isn't is a shock. Me and Michael are just relieved that he isn't what we thought he might have been. I still don't like the violent intent vibrating from Jasper in dark waves. Neither does Michael. In fact, he likes it way less than I do. He's positively bristled.

"Listen," he looks directly at Jasper as he steps partially in front of Seth, causing several other alphas to stiffen. "I don't know what the fuck you are, but I'm going to need you to tone that shit down a little bit. Seth and Talia need support right now, not your bullshit."

"He's an omega," Desie snips. "A rude one."

"Omega, my ass." I look at Jasper more closely. No way is that guy an omega. Omegas don't feel or smell like him. He might be physically small, but he's probably got more pull and rank than anyone here.

Seth leans further into Desie and wraps a hand around her ankle. "Jasper is an omega. Don't fuss at him. He has every right to hate me. He's her mate."

Now I'm gawking. "Omega mates don't happen."

"Obviously, they do," Devon says, attempting to link his fingers with Jasper.

It takes a moment, but Jasper eventually looks down at Devon's hand and takes it. The dynamics in their pack must be a roller coaster ride. "It's fine. Desir'ee is right, I am being rude. I'm going to need time to process this. Why didn't you say anything, Pratchett? I'd still be angry, but I wouldn't have spent the last few years trying not to hate you. Plotting ways to kill you that wouldn't upset Talia. If we had known..."

"You wouldn't have believed him, Jasper. You know you wouldn't have.

Even if it was obvious that he was telling the truth.” Talia reaches over for Jasper’s other hand and he grips it tightly.

“I’ll need to apologize,” Jasper grumbles. “Eventually.”

“Please don’t. I don’t deserve an apology. I still did it, it’s just not the way you thought. Can we be finished with this part, for today at least? Please?” Seth’s anxiety might be worse now with the prospect of Jasper apologizing than it was when he was talking about what happened. Which is saying something because what was flowing through our freshly solid bond was enough to make me sick and I can feel that it’s the same for Michael and Desie.

Kaleb clears his throat. “Well, we can talk about apologies and what you think you deserve some other time. Nathan booked us an appointment with the West Coast Council for this afternoon. Are you feeling up to that, Desir’ee?”

Desie nods, but Seth’s head snaps up. “Where is the meeting? We can’t meet at the council building. It’s not safe.”

“Actually,” Nathan says gently. “We can. This meeting needs to happen in front of a lot of witnesses who like to wag their tongues to the right people. We have news to intentionally spread. We have a private meeting with Minos penciled in for tomorrow night at a bowling alley, of all places.”

“Hell yeah,” Trent grins. “I love bowling. We’ll let the kids use that ramp thing.”

There’s a collective eye roll.

“Wait. Not to be *rude*,” Jasper gives Desie a small smile, “but will that work for you? Talia said you’re going into heat at any time. Are you comfortable storming that meeting with us? I don’t know if I have the mental

capacity to march in there with one very pregnant omega, one omega about to go into heat, and three toddlers.”

Desie clicks her tongue. “Yeah, that’s a lot. Seth and the twins have to go, but I could stay here with the kids. I know you just met me, but I’ll take care of them.”

“Negative, baby,” I wrap my arm around her shoulders. “One of us will stay with you wherever you are. Probably me. I think the more assholes on our side at the WCC the better, and we both know Michael is the bigger asshole.”

Reid, who has been still and silent this whole time, speaks up. “Alex will stay here. And Trent.”

“Bossy ass,” Trent mumbles. “Why do I have to stay?”

“Because Jasper and Talia need to go, and I need to be there with them. Devon needs to be there because he’s a sitting councilman, as does Seth and Corso. Nathan needs to go for obvious reasons. Kaleb will help keep things calm, one way or the other. Alex hates meetings and you like giving the kids candy.” Reid crosses his arms, waiting for Trent to argue.

Trent rocks back on his heels and clucks his tongue. “Well, I didn’t mean for you to break it down like that. And I didn’t get any candy to give the kids.”

“A technical truth.” Reid’s mouth twitches with an almost-smile.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Michael

Fuck these people. All of them. Even Talia's pack. Not Talia herself, and not Nathan and Kaleb or Reid, but the rest of them are lacking. Definitely fuck every member of the WCC spread out around this douchy table.

"What's this all about?" the pompous asshole in a honest to fuck green suit asks. He said his name, but I didn't retain it and I don't intend to. None of these people really matter. "I thought Alpha Pratchett went back to the East Coast where he belongs." Maybe I should have remembered his name. He sounds just like the kind of guy I'd like to run into in a dark alley.

"Alpha Pratchett is here at my request, Robert." Alpha Minos leans back in his chair, making a point to visibly relax into his seat.

Robert sneers. "What's the point, Alphonse? We all saw his file. It's an insult that they sent someone like him as a representative in the first place."

It's going to be much more difficult to keep myself in check than I thought. Maybe Ben should have come instead.

“It’s bad enough that he doesn’t have a pack, but we’ve all heard what he did to that girl on the East Coast. He should be in a cell somewhere at the very least, not playing at being a councilman.” The douche continues to talk just to hear himself.

Talia tilts her head to one side and meets his eyes, all but daring him to look away. “I am that girl. What was done, was done to me. And I am here to speak on his behalf.”

Surprised silence follows with all of the members of the council glancing nervously at each other, except Robert who is still held by Talia’s gaze. After a few tense moments, Robert finds his tongue. “He found you in some hole in the wall to defend him. What kind of mother would drag a child into a situation like this? You should be as ashamed as he is.”

“Are you accusing my omega of lying?” Corso asks, his tone cool and deadly. “Be very careful with your answer.”

“No one is saying she’s lying,” another councilman placates. “There’s just no justifiable reason for the girl he raped to come to his defense. You have to understand.”

“I do not have to understand. You only need to listen to her words and accept them. Talia is here with her pack to try to right some of the wrongs that have occurred here. You would do well to keep your tongue because we are not patient or kind when it comes to her treatment.”

“Please, Craig, we are here to listen,” Minos says, lifting a palm to urge Talia to continue.

“Thank you, Alpha Minos,” Talia nods. “I will not be getting into the gory details, but I need you to understand that you have been given an inaccurate account of what happened between Seth and I. Seth only did what he did so he could save me.”

“You must know how that sounds. You can’t expect us to believe—”

Robert is stopped short when Devon slams his hands down on the table. “If you call her a liar again I will do worse than shoot you. Do you understand?”

“You can’t walk in here threatening us,” Robert snarls.

“I can do whatever the fuck I want. We haven’t been introduced. My name is Devon Johnson, I’m sure my reputation precedes me. I sit on the East Coast council alongside my father Alpha Anthony Johnson, my pack member Alpha Corso Zaphir, who is standing right here, and Alpha Seth Pratchett who holds the same seat his father held. On top of all that, this is Jasper Nattier, of *the* Nattiers, and Talia is his claimed and marked mate. Two of her fathers sit on the East Coast council, and her mother is Elizabeth Graves. I will have your ass in a basket within the hour if she even hints at wanting it. You might be a member of this council, but you’re a shit councilman and worse alpha. Based purely on the way you have spoken to my omega, you are obviously not fit to hold any position of leadership. It leads me to wonder who’s pocket you’re in. It won’t be hard to find out. We’ll likely know before we walk out of this room, anyway. That’s going to be some powerful information, wouldn’t you say?”

With every word of Devon’s little speech, the faces at the table grow more somber and pale. By the time he’s finished, Robert and another of the alphas are physically rubbing their chests.

“Please continue, Missus Nattier. You won’t be interrupted again. Is that clear, councilmen?” They all nod in response to Minos and keep their mouths shut.

“I don’t have much else to say, just that Seth asked that the file on what happened not mention me to protect me. He is a good alpha. Whoever gave you his file twisted the information in it to suit their own narrative and you all

acted on it without a second thought, just like they wanted. I'm sure you were planning to block him from joining the Aguirre pack. And I doubt that had little to do with Seth's perceived crimes against me and a whole lot to do with keeping Desir'ee Romero from being claimed by a full pack of three alphas because someone with a lot of money and pull wanted her. That's a stupid fucking rule, by the way."

"I instituted that rule years ago in an attempt to protect the omegas. Omegas kept disappearing. The idea was that three alphas could keep their omega safe, and if one of the alphas went down a wrong path, the other two could either bring them back to the light or could support the omega when that alpha was lost. Omegas are safer with a larger pack surrounding them."

Minos has the decency to look embarrassed by the logic.

"Well," I sigh. "That's a better reason for it than the one I assumed."

"What did you think was the reason?" Minos asks.

"To settle arguments."

He forces his mouth not to curl up into a smile. "That was a convenient side effect."

"It's still a stupid rule," Talia grumbles. She rubs her belly and Reid and Corso are immediately at her side. "I'm alright, just getting a little tired."

"How far along are you?" Minos asks, his face lighting up with warmth.

"No offense, Alpha Minos, but I'm not about to announce my due date. Too many pregnant omegas and babies disappear around here." Talia gives Reid a lingering look. He nods once and tips his chin at Kaleb.

Kaleb clears his throat, bringing everyone's attention to himself instead of Talia. "So, we're all clear on Seth, right?" Silent nods around the table, a few faces more sour than others, but whatever. They'll have to get over it or die from it. "Good."

Minos knocks on the table to get everyone's attention. "I did a little digging, myself. The person who shared the file with us has since been proven to be untrustworthy on other fronts. Things are going to be changing somewhat rapidly and drastically in our council and the West Coast as a whole." One or two of the more unpleasant councilmen, including Robert, start making noises, but Minos's voice booms over them all, effectively silencing them. "I am head of this council and I will remain so until someone more worthy comes along. None of you are in line for my position, and some of you aren't fit for your own, but that is a separate conversation. I've spent a great amount of time with Alpha Pratchett, and I have made calls to Alphas Graves and Johnson just this morning. We are going to work together to clean up the mess this rogue organization has made of the territories. We will be calling on the Northern and Southern Councils. Together, we are going to make our territories safe for our omegas again. No amount of money," he pauses to look at each of the councilmen, holding their gaze until their eyes drop to the table, "will change these facts. I have let things go on long enough. It was foolish of me to lean into the hope that our council was good and honest enough to take care of things in our own districts. Things will be changing and you will either work with us or be forced into exile. Meeting adjourned."

Well damn. I wasn't sure what to expect, but that wasn't it. That seemed awfully easy, but the real work starts after the meeting, not during it.

Mother. Fucker.

Seth is an actual councilman. Our pack is going to be involved in the work Minos talked about. Shit. I just wanted us to have Desie and live our lives, and now we're going to have to be involved in whatever territory revolution council upset Minos has in mind. Ben's going to be as ecstatic as I am.

“Seth, a moment, please,” Minos calls as we start filing out of the meeting room. “Let me walk you out.”

Seth nods and waves at Kaleb. “We’ll catch up. I’ll be quick.”

We follow Minos down a different set of hallways that takes us to offices, his own private suite. He unlocks the door and ushers us inside, locking the door behind us. Then he leads us further into the suite and into the private bathroom where he turns on the faucet at full blast before turning to us.

“I won’t take much of your time, but I want to show you something.” He pulls out a few pieces of folded paper from the inside pocket of his suit jacket and hands it to Seth. “Look over that and tell me what you think. Not here. Take it with you. We can talk about that later. I need to ask about Flores. I assumed he was dead or otherwise gone, but I need to know for sure.”

“He isn’t dead,” Seth folds the paper into a smaller square and slides it into his back pocket. “We have him. He’s going to be dead, though. We just need information first.”

I almost fall over when Minos doesn’t have a problem with that. “Good riddance, I say. Don’t tell me anything, I trust you and the Johnson pack to get the job done. How is Miss Romero?”

“Desie’s a little bruised, but she’s tough,” I answer.

“She is that. And Lopez?”

“You might not want to know about that just yet, either,” Seth says.

Again, Minos nods. “I thought not. I’m not going to keep you. Get that omega somewhere to rest.”

“So, wait,” I hold up a hand, “you’re just going to trust us? Just like that?”

Minos levels me with a look. “Yes, Mr. Aguirre, I am. In just the past few weeks, Seth has proven himself to be more loyal to his people and to the wellbeing of our society as a whole than most of the alphas sitting on our

council. Add to that the fact that the Johnson omega spoke on his behalf and that Thaddeus Smith and Marcus Graves are standing up for him, and he's golden as far as I'm concerned. You're his pack, you get my trust by default."

When we step out of the building onto the sidewalk, Seth pulls out his phone as soon as I do. "I've got Ben, you text Desie."

"I never thought my life would end up handling council shit," I murmur as I shoot Desie a text letting her know we're okay and heading back.

"You going to be okay with that?"

"I'll have to be, won't I?" I sigh. "Apparently, you're the man for the job. Are people going to come for us for the rest of our lives?"

Seth puts his phone back into his pocket and gives me a long look. "Yeah. Probably. For a while, anyway. Till things settle."

I nod, nothing we haven't already dealt with. And now we've got two council's backing us. "We can handle it."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Desie

I want ten kids.

I've been playing with the triplets for the past hour and now I'm making them snacks and I want ten kids. But I'll take no less than eight if the guys argue about the first offer. I thought I wanted to wait until I was more settled in my career at the hospital, but I can settle my career and still have twelve kids.

Now that our pack is complete, I could start having them anytime. The biggest problem I think we'll run into is whether or not Seth's anxiety over safety and literally everything else can stand the idea. I bet I can convince him that it's the best idea in the world; I don't even think it'll be hard to do with how his bond feels.

They'll never go for it right now. Not this heat cycle. Everything is too fresh, and I still have bruises from the ordeal of the past little while and then we can get started on my ten kids. Twins don't really run in my family, so I don't think I'll ever get twins, but I can have stairsteps.

My reproductive planning is interrupted by Ben carrying Dutch into the room by his ankles. Dutch's squealing laughter is the best thing I've ever heard. I hope all eight of my kids are as loud and happy as he is.

"What's got you smiling, beautiful?" Ben flips Dutch around and sits him on the counter right next to my growing pile of cucumber slices. He snatches a few slices and splits them with Dutch, who is very happy to be sitting on the counter.

"The kids."

"These kids?" Ben asks, ruffling Dutch's unruly hair.

"Our kids."

He raises his brows. "Our kids?"

"Yes. I want ten. You three won't go for it this heat cycle. Understandably. But I want it on the table for the next cycle."

Watching his face light up at the thought makes me smile even harder even as he says, "but that's not the plan, Des. Our plan is to wait until you're in the position you want at the hospital for a couple years, and then we talk about a kid or two. Ten? You don't mean that literally, do you? I mean, I don't mind. If you want ten, ten it is. Michael's going to shit his pants when he finds out. Seth might have a heart attack. Can I tell them? Please, let me tell them."

I distribute the cucumbers next to the wheat crackers and hummus and put the little plates on the little kid's table beside the kitchen table. I'm not a fan of hummus, but after the amount of candy these alphas gave the three food regulated toddlers I'm glad Talia has more healthy options than anything else in the house. She's going to kill these men when she gets home and finds her children mid-sugar rush. "Eight or ten. I want a bunch of them. I want sweet ones like Iris, loud ones like Dutch, and I'll even take a tiny adult like Zetty. But just one, though. I swear, she's older than I am. The way she looks at

you...” I let out a whistle. She judges you. The whole time that little girl looks at you, she’s sizing you up. She’s beautiful, though. And smart.

“But can I tell them? That’s the important part.”

He’s so full of himself. “You just want to be mean.”

“Yeah, I do. Can you imagine Seth’s face?”

Trent comes in carrying the girls and wrinkles his nose when he sees the ultra-healthy snack. “What are you going to do to Seth? I hope it’s awful and that I get to watch it.”

“You’re as bad as he is,” I shake my head.

Ben reaches down and pulls the end of Zetty’s ponytail and winks at her when she scowls at him. “I’m going to tell Seth about the ten kids Desie has planned.”

“Holy shit, let me be there,” Trent laughs. “His freckles might fall off.”

That would be a tragedy. “You’re both terrible. Do you guys want any of this before I put it away?”

They both give me a disgusted, “no.” There was a silent implied *hell* in front of it but there are little ears in the room. I’ve heard Dutch say a fuck or two so they don’t need anymore swear words added to their vocabulary no matter how funny it is.

An hour later, the front door opens and a crowd of people having a tense discussion arrive. Seth’s face is set in tight lines and Michael keeps flicking glances from him to Kaleb. Talia looks like she’s had about enough of all of them.

“It would be a smart move, Pratchett,” Devon argues.

“The information you’d have access to,” Nathan says softly. “I know it would be hard, but it would really help.”

“You can do it, Seth. It’s a perfect opportunity.” This encouragement from

Kaleb.

All at once, Michael, Talia, and myself all say a version of *leave him alone*.

“Give him time to breathe, for fuck sake,” Talia hisses. “This isn’t a decision he can just make. Corso still has his seat on our council, this is asking too much of him.”

Anxiety, frustration, shame, and too many other negative emotions are twisting up Seth’s bond. “Stop,” I say, loud and clear. “Stop. Seth, I need you. Right now.”

His gaze snaps to mine and I reach for him. When he gets close enough to me, I grab his hand and haul him out of the kitchen and into the bathroom down the hall. The second I shut the door behind us, he falls to his knees and wraps his arms around me. “What happened?” I rake my fingers through his hair and tug on the ends.

He swallows, his throat clicking audibly. “Nothing bad. The meeting went well.” He closes his eye and drags in lung-fulls of air, his nostrils flaring as he deeply takes in my scent.

“Okay. Good. Why are you upset if everything went well?”

He swallows again. “Minos wants me to have a seat on the West Coast Council.”

“That won’t work. You’re already on the East. He can’t ask you to give that up.”

“They want me to do it,” Seth’s fingers dig into the backs of my thighs. “They say it will help everything. And it would. I know it would. But I haven’t even stepped fully into the seat my father vacated with his death. I haven’t been ready. Corso is sitting there until I get there.” He takes a few breaths, then whispers, “I think he should keep it.”

“Then he will,” I pull his hair back to make him look up at me. “You don’t

have to sit on either or any council. I don't care what any of them say. If you don't want to do it, you don't have to. They can try to force the issue, but I won't let them. I'll take care of you."

"Desir'ee," he says softly, his blue eye brightening. "I think I just fell in love with you."

I laugh and bend down to kiss his forehead. "Good, because I want ten kids."

"Oh god." If he wasn't already on his knees, I'm confident he would have dropped to them from the tide of shock and worry I feel crashing through him.

I laugh again. "That's something you can stress yourself out about instead of this council nonsense. And as far as you loving me goes, I've been thinking about it, and I'm pretty sure I fell in love with you when you shared your dinner with me the first time I met you. I've just been afraid to let myself feel it. Now, let's go back in there and tell them you're not ready to make any council decisions, okay?"

"Okay."

When we get back to the kitchen, we find a verbal free-for-all waiting for us. Some of them are arguing that we need Seth on the West Coast as a point of contact or influence, some of them are arguing that the East doesn't need to mix itself up with the West's bullshit any more than it already has, a couple of them aren't saying anything at all, and Michael and Ben are just making sure that everyone remembers that Seth is a person and not a tool.

Seth and I stand just inside the doorway listening to them for long minutes before anyone notices us, and when we are noticed it isn't by anyone we would have expected. Iris stares hard at Seth for a moment, then scoots out of her chair and marches over to us. She raises her squishy little arms, reaching

up for Seth. He scoops her up and she cuddles into his chest, twirling the messy end of the braid around her little fingers.

Twelve. I need twelve babies. Immediately.

So immediately that my temperature starts creeping up. Just a little. Still, way too many eyes dart toward me all at once. I am ridiculous and mortified.

“Well,” Ben clicks his tongue, “on that note, we’ll have to continue this enlightening conversation later.”

Seth kisses the top of Iris’s head and carries her back to her seat. “Keep your brother in line for me, sweetheart.” No one would guess that the same heat that’s beginning to course through my veins is rushing just as quickly through his. I can tell, though. By the time he turns back toward me, I can almost see a hint of a blush staining his cheeks.

Michael makes his way around the chairs and the bodies leaning against counters to take my hand and leads me through the sea of legs and feet and directly out the back door. “What about that conversation triggered a heat spike? I’m not complaining, just curious.”

“Seth did it.” I’m glad he’s pulling me to the car. The spikes make my legs feel like jelly, and it doesn’t help that the pants I decided to wear over here will probably be ruined by the time we get home.

“What did I do?” he says from close behind me, his voice more purr than anything else.

“You were holding Iris and it made me think about our twelve babies and it just happened.”

“Hey!” Ben pouts. “I wanted to tell him about the babies.”

Michael opens the door for me, and I climb into the back seat. Ben folds himself in behind me and Seth twists around in the passenger seat when he gets inside. “How fast can we get home?”

Michael starts the car and turns around to look at me as he backs out of the driveway. "Twelve kids? When did we decide to have twelve kids?"

"In the bathroom." I lean into Ben when he wraps his arm around me. I hope this spike will continue to grow slowly. When I'm this close to going into heat they can come on all at once and I really don't want to have to deal with that in the back seat of this car.

Seth reaches back to press his palm against my forehead. "How long will it take to get home, Michael?"

"At least half an hour. Can you make it, Des?"

I nod. "Ben's back here with me if I can't."

Seth's bond is tight and hot. I'm as nervous about how he's going to manage my heat for the first time as I am excited. Actually, I can't wait for it. I hope being able to feel a little of how I'm feeling and how much I want and need him and the twins will allow him to let go. *Really* let go. Last night was just a taste of how intense Seth can be and I want all of it. I want every single drop of everything Seth is.

We're barely halfway home when the spike turns vicious and makes it apparent that I'm not going to make it home without relief. Before I can catch a long enough breath to ask Ben for help, Seth starts barking orders. It might be the sexiest thing I've ever heard, and it catapults an already intense spike into something almost unmanageable in the back seat.

"What the fuck are you doing, Ben? Get your dick out. Right now. Michael, get home faster. Drive through people's yards, I don't care, just get us home. Move, Ben!"

Ben laughs but starts working on his belt buckle.

"Laugh at me if you want to, just take care of her," Seth says, touching my forehead again, then my cheek. "Jesus, you're burning up. Tell us what you

need, darlin'. We'll make it happen."

"I'm not laughing at you, Seth. I'm just happy, that's all." Ben's cock is hard and leaking when he finally gets it free. All I can do about any of it is whine, lick my lips, and burn up from the inside. He wraps his fingers around the base, squeezing it, making it visibly throb. "Here, baby. Is this what you need?"

No, but it's a start. I want it inside me, but his precum is dripping down the side of the swollen head and that will ease the rolling cramps enough to let Ben and Seth push my pants down my thighs. Ben's rich taste spreads across my tongue like a balm and he groans when I hum in relief.

Between the three of us, we manage to get my pants off without ripping them. I'm glad I decided on a pair of soft lounge pants this morning, jeans would have been too hard to deal with and Seth is concerned enough about me that he probably would have ripped them. That's a fun thought, though. I'd mourn the jeans, but I can imagine how it would feel if he did it while I'm bent over Ben's lap and, yeah, that's something I'm going to want to explore.

"What are you thinking about, Desir'ee?" Seth purrs. "Is it always like this? This intense? Do you always feel what she's feeling?"

"We can feel it to an extent, but we'll never feel exactly what she's feeling. It's kind of like the impression of how she's feeling." Michael's very helpful explanation is threaded with amusement. "When she's in heat or close to it, everything feels so much *more*. I could tell you that you'll get used to it, but you won't. You just learn how to handle it better, and you'll still end up in rut before it's over with."

The image of the three of them surrounding me, strong, lost to rut, their focus solely on me, brings another whine from deep within me. I'm usually too far gone to my own heat to have a visual memory of Ben or Michael lost

to rut, but I've seen pictures of alphas in rut, and I can imagine it. Suddenly, the taste of Ben is nothing in the onslaught of need and want that rushes through me.

He pulls me up and onto his lap, helping me to position my thighs wide on either side of his. With one hand he grips the front of my shirt and jerks me close enough to slam his mouth over mine, the other hand reaching between us to line up his cock. I don't need encouragement or help to sink down, taking every solid inch of him to the thickening base. Then I raise up to do it again. And again. But it isn't enough. I need it to be hard, violent. I need to feel him pounding inside me. But we're cramped in the backseat and I don't have enough leverage to get what I need. That won't stop me from trying, though.

I start grinding my hips, trying to ease some of my ache by pressing my clit against his pubic bone as hard as I can. But it still isn't enough, and a quick peek out the window tells me that we're still not close to home. Not that it would matter. I'm not about to stop riding Ben just to walk into the house. Not when I'm so close to getting what I need.

Except I'm so far from it. "It's not enough," I pant, leaning back and putting my hands on his knees. The change in angle helps, but it still isn't right. "I need more. Harder. Please, Ben."

He shoves his hips upward, thrusting deep, his partially formed knot pressing hard against the constriction of my entrance. "You need to be on your hands and knees, baby. I could fuck you as hard as you want like that. As soon as we get home, that's what we'll do." I look down and watch him trap my engorged clit between his finger and thumb, throwing my head back and crying out when he tugs it firmly away from my body.

"Fuck, Ben, you're going to make me wreck the car if you keep teasing

her," Michael growls, the sound seeming louder in the confines of the car.

"Can you turn her around?" Seth asks. I glance over my shoulder to find him turned all the way around in his seat.

I don't know how he does it, but Ben somehow gets me spun around without fully pulling out of my body, bringing me mostly face to face with Seth. He turns toward Michael. "Do not wreck the car." Seth comes back to me and kisses me once, gently, before he pushes my head to the side, baring the damp skin of my neck to the cold air blowing from the air conditioning vent. He looks at Ben over my shoulder. "Harder." Then he tilts his head and covers one of the twins' marks with his mouth. My scream breaks into silence as his lips and teeth work that mark hard enough to make me see actual, sparkling stars in my peripherals. Seth and Ben time their movements and attentions perfectly together, creating a sea of pleasure for me to drown in. It feels like hours of torturous, exquisite, perfection, and I start rolling in one, long, drawn out, blinding orgasm.

Soon, though, Ben is at his limit. He grips my hips tight as he begins pushing his thick knot inside me. I cum again, but the intensity of it is taken up by the satisfaction of finally being knotted. The moment I feel his release surging inside me, I start to purr, my body giving a full twitch with every jerk of his cock.

Seth kisses the mark, then my forehead. "Better?"

"Mmmhmm," I nod. It's been years since I fell asleep in a car. And we're about to be stuck in here for at least a little while.

"I'm going to take us around by the beach while you rest," Michael says, smiling at me in the rearview mirror. "Is that okay?"

Yeah, that's okay. It's close to sunset. I love sunset at the beach. I lean back against Ben's chest, linking my fingers with his when he wraps his arms

around me. The last time I was at the beach was when we all came together, and then we went to the concert. It seems like so long ago.

A few weeks. That's all it took to nearly destroy our lives. A few weeks to ruin any chance at happiness we would have had. Every single time I think about what was almost ripped away from me, away from us, my blood boils. I still want to kill Flores. I want to be the one to do it. I want to be staring into his awful eyes when the last speck of despicable life leaves them. I didn't know I was capable of this level of hate. I'm glad we're all together now, but the idea that he's sitting somewhere mostly unharmed doesn't sit well with me. He needs to be suffering. Until his last wretched breath.

"What's wrong?" Ben purrs against the side of my neck. "You're supposed to be all snuggly and sleepy right now."

"I think you should take me to see Flores."

Every bond goes taught. Michael raises a brow at me in the rearview mirror, and Seth turns back around to face me.

"Why?" Ben isn't purring anymore. None of them are.

I answer truthfully. Bluntly. "Because he should be suffering. He needs to be hurt. He needs to answer for what he's done to us. And then he needs to die."

Chapter Twenty-Four

Seth

We can't take her to see that motherfucker. I won't do it. She cannot share the same space with him. I won't let her near that piece of shit ever again. I don't care that her anger is eating its way through this intense bond between us. This is something she's going to have to be disappointed about.

"What do you mean, no?" Her narrowed eyes are watching the sunset that Michael parked us in front of, but none of the calm beauty of it touches her words. I'm doing great, less than twenty-four hours into being bonded with her and we're about to have a fight. Devon would be so proud.

"Desie," Michael sighs. "Please just listen. What kind of alphas would we be if we let you anywhere near him? After what he did to you? You still have bruises, baby. Bruises that he put on you. I'm not even sure any of us need to be around him. Nathan said they needed information from him. I don't think me, Ben, or Seth could be near him without ripping his fucking head off. And now he's got you talking about making people suffer and die."

She shakes her head. "Not people, Michael. Him. Just him. And you know I'm right. He needs to be in as much pain as he put us through. And we don't even know what else he's responsible for."

"No." I don't care. It's not happening.

Ben groans. It's out of place, and any other time it would probably be comical. "Look, if you don't calm down about it, we're going to take up permanent residence in this car. You're so tight right now. Fucking killing me. I can't concentrate long enough to argue with you."

"Call Kaleb," Desie keeps going. "Find out where he is. The docks, right? I'm going to go into heat any second. It'll be so much better if I know he's suffering while we definitely aren't. He needs to suffer. Please do this for me."

This is the shit Kaleb and the rest talk about. The insane, absurd, bullshit need to do whatever their omega wants despite the fact that it goes against every instinct they have. My fingers are practically itching to take out my phone.

Michael rubs at the space between his brows and glances over at me. I drag my hand down my face and shake my head at him. "No."

The energy in the car goes flat. That might be worse than anger. The blank absence of reaction. Dammit. But we can't let her near him. He hurt her; he was going to do worse than hurt her. He cannot be near her again.

The sun sinks below the horizon, leaving only splashes of color reflecting off the water. We watch it in silence. Waiting.

"We can do it," Ben finally says. "She doesn't need to be close to him. She can stay as far back as she needs to. That would work."

Neither Michael nor I answer him. I don't want her in the same room with him. And then there's the thing Michael already said. "Michael's right, Ben. I

don't trust any of us to not kill him, and Nathan does need information. I don't trust myself. Look at her mouth. Look at her neck. We've left our marks, but those bruises aren't ours. I'm sick with knowing our omega is carrying bruises from another alpha. We'll kill him. *I'll kill him.*"

"The potassium." Desir'ee says softly, just a little more than a whisper.

"What?" Ben asks.

Desir'ee straightens up, dragging another tortured sound from Ben. "The potassium. I was going to inject him with it. I have enough to kill him. That's what I was going to do until I thought about Talia. If I didn't inject him with all of it at once he wouldn't die from it, but it would hurt him. A lot. It would be complete torture and misery. I was going to offer to do it, you know, to help with the questioning."

"You're not going near him, Desir'ee."

"None of you would know how much or the best, or worst, places to do the injection. I understand why you don't want me near him, Seth. I do. And any other time I'd agree with you. But he took things from me, and he was going to take everything else. He hurt Michael and Ben. He made them fight each other. He kept them in cages. He made everyone think you were a monster. I need him to hurt. *I need to hurt him. I feel it inside me.*"

I flip up my eyepatch and scrub my heels into my eye sockets. I know she wants this. Hell, I can feel how much she needs it. But what if something goes wrong? What if we take her there and something happens? What if they all get taken from me again. "No. I can't. I can't do it. No. I'm not doing it again."

"Doing what again?" Ben asks.

I turn my head to look at him. I focus on his now crooked nose. "You and Michael fought?"

"Yeah. He knocked me out. Desie was losing her shit. We had to end it before she got hurt."

Michael snarls. "It was fucked. She was going to jump over the railing when all those assholes surrounded us. I don't know how they got her out of there. Have you ever seen an omega lose their shit?"

No, I haven't. But I've heard stories of omegas who went a little crazy when their children or their pack were in danger or hurt. I think that's what happened with Jasper, why he makes those creepy fucking sounds and feels so...something. I've had a lot of time to decide if I'm angry with Jasper about shooting my father, and a very small part of the reason I'm not is because I believe Jasper truly is Talia's mate and her reaction to my father was more than he could bear. The majority of the reason why I'm not angry with Jasper about my father's death is because my father was a bastard and, good intentions or not, he wanted me to be a bastard just like him. He might have apologized to Talia, but I will never forgive him for what his actions and words caused. He contributed to so many awful things that I can't feel sorrow at his loss. Sometimes I feel a blankness around his memory, but mostly I feel disgust and anger. Talia says that's why I'm going to keep going to counseling. Not the point right now, though.

"Lopez carried me," Desir'ee whispers. "He carried me to the car and then up to my room. He wouldn't let Flores be alone with me after that. He did his best."

Well, let's throw a fucking party for Elijah fucking Lopez. I need to buy Talia's pack flowers or a car or something. This has to be the exact way they feel about me. Lopez isn't the bastard we thought he was, but he still contributed to her hurt. Even if he tried to protect her from it.

Desie suddenly gasps and Ben groans at the same time, the inside of the car

flooding with their combined scents and it makes me hard again even though my mind is saturated with thoughts of bastards and assholes. "The syringes are in my top dresser drawer," she continues. "We could go get one of them and tuck Flores in for the night. I might go into heat as soon as tomorrow. I want to know that he's rotting in a miserable, hot place, laying in a pool of his own waste, while we're doing every single thing he tried to take from us."

"That's.... graphic," Ben laughs, but his heart isn't in it.

Michael cranes his head to give Desir'ee a hard look. "I don't like how hard you feel right now. I know you're angry, I am too; but I don't like that you want to be the one to act on it."

She shrugs. "I can't help how I feel."

"No," I say again. "Really. No. I can't stand the thought of you near him. I agree with you, though. I think it would be great to make him miserable before you go into heat. That will make us all a little happier, I believe. I just don't want you to be the one to do it, Desir'ee. Please try to understand."

She blinks at me, then gives the water her attention. She doesn't say anything else until the warm colors in the sky start fading. "I need to do it, and you need to let me. And I need one of you to do something else before I give it to him."

The three of us look at each other, then her. We're not winning this, and we know it. Sure, one of us could command her to listen, but that would change things in our pack that our new bonds may not be able to withstand. "What do you want us to do?" I glance at Michael again. Whatever she wants is going to be awful in some way or another.

"I need you to pull out his teeth. The canines and incisors. I want to see for myself that he'll never, ever, be able to claim an omega."

Ben sucks in a breath.

Michael's brows raise.

I nod. I think that's an excellent idea. "Do we have pliers back at the house?"

Michael's attention jerks to me. "You serious?"

I nod.

"Fuck that guy," Ben agrees. "I'll do it."

~

Kaleb is happy to send me the coordinates to the unit on the docks, and Trent is ecstatic about meeting us there. Nathan comes along, too, and between the five of us I think it's mostly safe enough to have Desir'ee present. I still hate the idea of her being physically close to Flores, but Devon's words from a couple weeks ago keep coming back at me. My omega has asked for retribution and death. I intend to give it to her. However she needs it.

Desir'ee has explained how the potassium works and how it will affect Flores a couple times, but I don't actually care. She says potassium injections are incredibly painful and that potassium overdose is excruciating, and that's enough for me. The current conversation is whether or not pulling just a few teeth will do what Desir'ee wants it to do.

"It's the saliva that does it more than the teeth," Nathan puts forward for the second time. "We're trying our best to overcomplicate something that is really a very simple process. We use our sharpest teeth to make the path for our saliva to enter the omega's system. We lick the bite, which allows the omega's blood to enter our system. Those biochemical processes are what makes the physical claim possible. He could still *technically* mark an omega if he cut into one. All he'd have to do at that point is lick the wound."

"But jerking out his teeth would make a statement," Ben argues.

"And it would hurt like a bitch," Trent finishes.

"That!" Desiree lifts a fist in Trent's direction. "That is the majority of the point. But also to take the act away from him. He told me so many times that he was going to put his mark over the twins' marks. He said he was going to override our bond. I want him to understand that he will never be able to do that."

Trent holds up his fist for her to tap it with her own. "Fuck yeah. No wonder Talia loves you."

"I'm doing it." Michael has been clacking the pliers together over and over for the past ten minutes. "I'll pull out all his goddamn teeth if you want me to. I'll string them up and we'll hang them from the rearview mirror."

Trent's eyes light up like the happiest of fireworks. "We can get one of those tiny drills!"

I pinch the bridge of my nose. "No. I don't want to ride around with that asshole's teeth. Does it really matter if he would still be physically capable of marking an omega even without teeth? He's not leaving that cube alive or in one piece."

Nathan shrugs. "It's the thought that counts."

Ben suppresses a chuckle. "We're good, then? Do you have what you need, Des? Show me again which vein."

I turn my arm over so she can point out the right vein on the underside of my elbow. "This one," she puts her finger on the most pronounced blue line near my elbow. "The basilic. It will hurt immediately. A lot. But the bodily reactions won't start happening until it has time to start working through his system."

"You sure you want us to just leave him?" Trent asks.

She nods. "If you could swing by a couple times to hydrate him so he doesn't die before we get the information we need, it would be good. But

don't clean him up. Take face masks. It's going to be rank in there. More than rank."

"It won't kill him? To be in that... mess?" She said it wouldn't, but I don't want us to miss the chance to wring information from him.

Desir'ee and Nathan both shake their heads. "No," Nathan responds. "He's an alpha. It will take a lot more than skin breakdown and dehydration to kill him. He can take it."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Desie

Flores is bound to a metal chair that looks like it belonged in some industrial office and someone knocked the wheels off it so it can't roll anymore. It has a heavy metal frame so he can't get free even if he managed to get out of all the rope and tape he's been secured with. There are multiple straps stretched from his torso to his thighs wrapping around the back and seat of the chair, and his hands and feet are duct taped to the arms and legs of the chair. The tips of his fingers have turned a grayish blue color and I couldn't be happier about it. I hope they fall off, and I hope it hurts when they do.

He lifts his head to glare at me when Seth finally lets me into the unit.
"Hello, Desir'ee."

Michael, who happens to be standing right next to him, doesn't do a thing but bring his fist down into Flores's face. He grins at Ben. "I've been dying to do that."

Seth crosses the short space and leans down to speak into Flores's ear.
"Don't say her name again."

"I'm surprised to see you're still here, Pratchett. I thought you'd be back on the East Coast where you belong." Flores's bravado and arrogance is still front and center regardless of his current situation. I wonder how long they'll last.

Michael chooses then to clack the pliers again as Seth smiles down into Flores's face. "Why would I be on the East Coast when my pack and my omega are here?"

"You took her from me," Flores snarls.

Seth's head tilts to the side, dropping his smile. "She was never yours."

"She will be. Trust me on that."

"Will she, now?" Seth drawls, and steps away from the chair and the pathetic man in it. "She told us about your big idea to cancel out the marks we put on her. You didn't really think that would work, did you?"

"You're not a full pack. I could have given her a stronger bond. My pack is whole. Strong." His eyes move from Seth to the twins and back, uncertainty finally creeping in.

"Your pack has been dismantled," Seth says. "And the few that didn't run aren't loyal to you. None of them were loyal to you. Not a single one."

"Cowards," Flores spits. "Where is Elijah?"

"Alpha Lopez is no longer your concern." Seth nods, coming back to stand beside me. "The first plan was to just kill you. Nothing elaborate, just death. But my Desir'ee," he smiles when he says my name, "she wants more than your death. She wants your suffering, and we're going to give it to her."

Michael clacks the pliers. "Now?"

"Now," Seth confirms and bends to brush his lips against my temple.

Michael hops onto the chair and straddles Flores, continuously clacking the pliers and digging his knees into his thighs. "I'm going to enjoy this."

Ben steps up behind Flores and grabs his head with a hand on his forehead, pinning his head against his chest so he can't move and forces his chin down with the other, pushing Flores's mouth wide open. Ben's hands are so big that he is able to use the side of his hand to put pressure on Flores's throat, constricting his airflow as a happy side effect. It takes a few drawn-out seconds, but as the pliers get closer to his face, realization finally dawns on Flores and he starts trying to thrash his way to freedom.

"Buck all you want, motherfucker. I'm still taking those pearly whites." Michael goes for one of the upper canines first.

He grips the pliers tight enough to turn his knuckles white and starts working the tooth back and forth, the tendons in his arm flexing with the effort. The tooth must break at one point, and I flinch at the resulting popping sound. I might flinch, but I still smile when Flores starts screaming.

Michael gives one last jerk and straightens upright, the tooth, roots and all, gripped tightly in the pliers. Blood spews from Flores's mouth as he tries to turn his head to the side to spit out the blood.

"That one was just for fun. We have to work for the others," Michael purrs. "We're going to make sure you don't have any teeth to mark anyone with and you're going to answer every question we ask while we do it."

Flores takes a breath, then spits blood into Michael's face. "I'm not telling you a fucking thing."

Ben leans over him, grinning, and takes the pliers from Michael. "Yeah," he taps Flores's cheek, "you will."

It only took two more teeth, the other upper canine and one of the bottom ones, and about forty-five minutes to convince Flores to start offering us

information. I have all three teeth in my pocket, and I don't mind at all that these pants will be bloodstained. They might even be my favorite pair at this point. But all good things must come to an end.

"You've still got a lot of teeth in your mouth, and a lot of names in that head," Seth clicks his tongue, "but we have other, better things to do; so you'll have to stay put and try to recall as much information as you can before we get back." He nods at Ben, who wipes his hands off on Flores's shirt and pretty much skips over to me.

I brought a syringe loaded with just enough potassium to make Flores regret being alive, not stop being alive; and I hand it to Ben when he reaches for it. I'm still a little miffed that I won't be the one to give the injection, but Seth and the twins promised me that I could give him the last injection. I understand their caution, really, and I even agree that it's a safe compromise; I just want him to suffer because I physically caused the pain myself.

Ben and Michael remove the tape so they can get Flores's arm turned over. He isn't pale like Seth, but they find the right vein easily enough. Flores begins thrashing again as the needle pressing into his skin. "Be still or I can take another tooth," Michael grits.

Flores stills. "What is that? What are you doing?" The words are thick with swelling, blood, and pain.

"Just giving you a little shot," Ben says, depressing the plunger. "It'll keep you so busy that you won't even think about being left here all alone until we come back to visit."

Trent steps forward with another roll of tape and yanks the end, filling the space with that velcro sound that only really sticky tape can make. They make sure to check the rest of his bonds, then we leave the stench of the holding unit and the muffled sounds of Flores's screaming curses.

"Somebody's going to hear that," Michael announces.

Trent shrugs. "Lopez said they wouldn't."

Whether that means they literally wouldn't hear anything, or anyone within hearing distance would ignore anything they did hear isn't important. Lopez is finished with Flores. If he says nobody's going to hear anything, I believe him.

"Good enough," Nathan says. "I have a good starting point. I'll get to work on what we've got. Kaleb will want to come next time. Maybe Devon, too. When do you think we'll be coming back? I'd like a few days to do some digging before our next visit."

I run my fingers across the outline of the teeth in my pocket. Flores did suffer tonight. He suffered because I wanted it, and my pack made it happen. It might be a completely deranged reaction to a completely insane line of thinking, but I'm almost certain watching my alphas make Flores pay for what he's done to us is going to push me over the edge into heat. I could feel it the minute I heard the first tooth pop when it cracked. "Four, maybe five days. Probably four."

They all whip their attention to me. Only Trent notices my fingers rubbing the teeth through my pocket and his nostrils flare as he scents the air. "You're going to be one of my favorite people before this is over with. My bet is five days. Don't worry, darlin'. We'll come by and make sure Flores doesn't shit himself to death before you can get back over here to oversee the rest of his interrogation."

I was right. By the time the car parks in front of the house, my temperature is already rising.

"Shower," Seth decrees when the door latches behind us. "Now. Everybody. Desir'ee first."

"We can all fit, can't we?" I suggest, licking my lips at the thought of all three of them wet and soapy in the steamy shower.

"Please," he groans. "Please take your pretty ass into the bathroom and wash the night off of you. And hurry. You're already heating up, and I need to do something before you're too far gone."

"What do you need to do?" A million wonderful scenarios swirl around in my mind. I want him to do all of them.

"Desir'ee, fuck. Please. I'll do whatever you're thinking about as soon as we're clean."

I don't immediately make a run for the bathroom. I'm too caught up in the way his gaze is burning through me, so I'm caught completely by surprise when Michael's palm lands a stinging blow on my right ass cheek. "March it, Desie. Your alpha gave you an order."

He didn't, not really. But the thought of him ordering me to do any one of the things I can't stop thinking about pulls at something low and deep inside me and I clench at the sudden spear of need that runs through me.

"Desir'ee," Seth growls. "Go."

I go.

I take the fastest and most thorough shower I've ever taken in my life and don't bother putting on clean clothes after I dry myself off. The towel barely covers me from my breasts to the tops of my thighs, and the cool air rushing around my damp, heated skin causes me to break out in goosebumps. All three of them are on the couch, sitting in dimly lit silence when I lean into the room from the hallway. "Next," I say, and turn to walk down the hall to the back bedroom and my nest.

It's been pulling at me, my nest. I need to fix it before they're finished showering. I'll have time. It doesn't need much, just a few little tweaks, and

maybe the towels they dry off with. They'll be damp, but that doesn't matter. I just want the fresh scents of my alphas surrounding me.

"Here," Ben says, handing me his towel. "I tried to shake off as much water as I could once I knew you wanted the towels. I don't want your nest to be wet...with water." He gives me that half-smile I love so much as he holds it out to me.

"Our," I correct, tucking his only slightly damp towel between a pillow and one of the silky blankets. I don't remember the exact moment when Seth and Michael came in and asking for the towels, but I can make out their newly cleaned aroma from the towels woven through the older scents in the nest. "Our nest. It's ours."

"It's perfect, Desir'ee." Seth smiles softly. He looks at the nest I've made for us with such reverence that it makes my heart catch.

I go to him and plant a kiss in the center of his chest because that's what I can reach without raising onto my toes. "Wasn't there something you wanted to do before I was too far gone?" I'm not too far gone, not yet, but this isn't a spike. I'm going into heat tonight and this is just the beginning.

He flicks his blue eye at me and grins sheepishly. He didn't put on his eyepatch after he got out of the shower. He's self-conscious about going without one, but I think he's handsome with or without it. "Yes. Are you ready?"

I've been ready. I answer his silly question by nipping the place I just kissed, and he growls, which makes slick rush down my thighs...which makes him growl again. He picks me up and lays me down in the center of the nest quicker than I realize it's happened and lays down between my legs, looking up at me across my torso. "You probably won't let me do this in an hour, but I've been thinking about this for so long, Desir'ee." He pushes my

knees wide and holds them, keeping me spread open and vulnerable. He gives me one last simmering glance, then he licks up the center of me from my perineum to my aching clit and my hips jerk in response to the sharp and sudden pleasure.

Seth licks across my clit again, then moves back down to my dripping entrance where he laps and sucks until I'm trembling and crying out his name over and over. That isn't enough for him, though. He flips us over, so that I'm now on my knees over his face, and he wraps his hands around my thighs and jerks me down. He alternates between sucking my clit and lashing it with his tongue, stopping every so often to thrust his tongue inside me to lick at my inner walls. My head is thrown back, and my eyes are rolling back so hard that they're beginning to ache.

"God, you look gorgeous riding his face," Ben purrs. "Cum for him, baby. He wants to drown in you."

I reach down and grasp a handful of Seth's fiery hair, simultaneously pulling him closer and forcing his eye to mine. "Don't drown." I feel him smile against me even as he licks into me again. I moan loudly, grinding against him. "That feels so good, Seth." He groans at the sound of his name and uses gentle pressure from his teeth to tug at my clit, flicking his tongue against it, and the vibration sends me spiraling into the orgasm he's been working so hard to give me.

Seth rolls us back over and kisses the inside of my thigh. "I've been thinking about that for weeks."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Michael

Seth is completely gone to rut. Ben and I knew he would be, but I thought it would have taken longer than a few hours. I guess it's because he's never been through a heat *with* an omega before. I'm just glad he isn't having a panic attack; and I'm pretty sure his bond with Desie is the reason he isn't. It makes sense. The ability to actually feel how she's feeling and what she needs is probably the best thing in the world for him.

He's been really great, too. Ben and I didn't fight over Desie during our first heat with her, but that happens in new packs more than you'd think; and we are a newly formed pack. We figured it would likely go one of two ways with Seth; either he'd panic, or he'd get jealous and greedy. He isn't doing either of those things. All he's interested in is making sure Desie gets what she needs and he's not afraid to bark polite orders at Ben and me to make it happen.

"Ben," Seth growls, pointing at the empty space in front of Desie. We've got Desie on her hands and knees. Seth is sitting beside her, stroking and kissing bits of skin, and I've just started getting into a good pace behind her;

but that's not enough. Between Desie's need for all three of us all at once, at all times, and Seth's hyperfocus on what she needs, none of us are spending much time being untouched.

Ben happily gets to his knees in front of her so she can have access to whatever parts of him she needs without discussion. It's been like that for hours. We don't need real conversation between us to communicate. I don't mean that in a ridiculous way. Nobody's over here trying to be psychic or anything, there's just so much connected feeling between us that words are really just...unnecessary. It's things like this that make me think of Rafe.

We were kids. We really were. Even Rafe, despite being older than Ben and me. It was like that with us back then. We didn't have to discuss everything; we just did what we needed to do, and it was good. It worked out. It was kid stuff, like where we were riding our bikes to, or how to deal with neighborhood fights between other kids. We just worked with each other while we were beside each other and it worked out. When Desie came into the picture, all that just intensified and centered around her. Obviously, it was still kid stuff. We played a lot of games she liked way more than we did, but we were all kids and we just wanted her to be happy and smiling.

Then we started getting older. And the games changed. Desie was still in-between being a kid and being a teenager when we lost Rafe; and me and Ben weren't much older. Hell, we even still enjoyed playing to *play* sometimes. But not Rafe. He was older and trying to set us up for our future. Everyone here knows that the way to get ahead is to get in with Flores when you live in the part of town we grew up in. If you can be useful to him, then you'll be alright. That usefulness came with a price, though, didn't it?

What a fucking thing to be thinking about right now. Fuck. It's just that it feels so much the same with Seth. It's been so easy to just fall into it with

him. Every pack has a lead alpha. Every single one. Neither Ben nor me are that. Neither of us have ever wanted to hold that position over the other. We've held on to Desie and our dreams because we're too stubborn to give up, but we are so much better with someone to follow. Seth is a lead alpha. I don't know if he realizes it, but he is. He's ours.

I watch Seth gather Desie's hair into a pretty good ponytail as she's licking across Ben's cock, and smile. He's completely unbothered, he just wants to make it better for her. I grip her hips a little tighter and adjust my stance a bit. This is the stuff that Ben and I excel at. We are very, very good at fucking Desie between us. But then someone knocks on the front door, and the entire moment takes a turn. The deep, snarling growl that comes ripping out of Seth makes me itch to turn my head and show him my neck. But I don't. That sound wasn't meant for me, it was meant for the asshole at the door.

"I'll go," I say quietly. If we didn't have Flores locked up in a box on the docks, I wouldn't bother with the door; but if something has happened, we need to know, heat or not. And if Seth goes to the door, he's more likely to tear someone's head off than to find out what they need. "You take over for me here." It better be one of the neighbors because I don't know what we'll do if someone is bringing a problem to our door.

Desie whines when I pull out of her, but she's happy again as soon as Seth takes my place. It really is just that easy with him. I thought after all the bullshit we might have some awkwardness to hurdle or something, but no, we're good. I grab the first pair of shorts I find in the dresser and have one foot in them when Seth growls my name to get my attention. "Don't be long. We need you with us. Be careful."

There are a lot of things I could say right now. A lot of smartass remarks about me being a grown ass man who has been doing this a lot longer than he

has. I would say every single one of them to Ben. I don't say any of them to Seth, though. I nod and say, "I will." No, I'm not going to spend even a handful of seconds being choked up about Seth telling me to be careful answering the fucking door. Absolutely not.

It turns out that there's no reason for me to be careful. Kaleb is standing on the porch with a case of water and a basket of what smells like orange-cranberry muffins.

"Sorry," Kaleb says, shrugging awkwardly with his arms full.

"Why do you have muffins?"

The corner of his mouth twitches. "Talia sent them. I think they have zucchini in them, too. You never know with her."

I don't care what they have in them, I'm eating all but three of them. Starting with the one I grab out of the basket before I take Kaleb's load from him. "Thank you," I mumble around the entire muffin in my mouth.

Kaleb laughs and shakes his head. "I came to check on Seth. He... needed a lot of support over the past couple years. He has a hard time with omegas, especially when heats are involved. I just wanted to see if he's—"

Desie lets out a moan loud enough to hear outside through two closed doors. Kaleb coughs to hide his laugh.

"I think he's doing alright. No panic or anything like that." I'm grinning. I'm actually very proud of Seth. After seeing how he was the first time he was here when Desie was in heat, to say I was nervous would be an understatement.

"I agree," Kaleb nods. "Okay, well, enjoy those, and check in when you're able to." He turns to leave, but I stop him. I have some questions, and now is as good a time as any. Not questions, exactly. More like polite accusations and warnings.

"You know you're Seth's family, right?"

Kaleb's head tilts. "I suppose it's something like that."

"No. You *are* his family. That's how he thinks of you. He loves you. All of you. He would do anything he could to help and protect you. Especially the kids, and Talia. Jasper, too, even though I don't think he deserves it. You do know that, right?"

Kaleb quirks his mouth while his lips form a thin line and holds my gaze for a moment before he answers. "It has grown to that point over time. And now, after finding out what he tried to do for Talia, and that he called Corso after what happened, yes. It's been a slow process, and Jasper will very likely always have a difficult time. I don't know that I'd say he loves us, but we do seem to have adopted Seth in a roundabout way."

"Nope. He does love you. I can feel it. And because he loves you, and you're his family, that means you're mine and Ben's, too. We take care of our family, always, and we will go to great lengths for it. But we have high expectations of our family. Seth is a priority for us. Keep that in mind the next time you all start deciding what he's going to do with his life. We'll follow where he leads, but he gets to decide where that is. Not you. He'd try to do whatever it is you want him to do simply because you're asking him to do it, but don't forget that love is supposed to go both directions."

His brow raises, and it starts smelling like I was wrong and a problem has found its way to our door, but Kaleb sighs and nods. "It's hard for some of us. Even now. Jasper especially has a difficult time with Seth, but if we didn't care for him, he wouldn't live in an apartment beside the manor. If we didn't trust him, we wouldn't allow him near our children. You've seen how much they adore him, even Zetty will run to him if she has an ouchy."

Just hearing the word *ouchy* come out of this big motherfucker's mouth is

enough to lighten the air. "I know. And I get it. I think we're about to be in a similar situation with fucking Lopez. Desie's over here singing that asshole's praises and talking about him like he didn't fucking kidnap her. It's bullshit. But he kept her as safe as he could, and he helped with Flores. So, I get it. But he thinks you still hate him, especially Jasper. It would go a long way if he knew you didn't."

Kaleb nods again. "Noted. I'll pass that along."

One more question before he goes. I don't have any reason to be worried, but Desie would ask and so would Seth, so I'm asking. "Is Talia alright? That belly isn't playing around." That isn't an exaggeration. She's all belly, and she looks a little bit like she might explode.

An actual moony expression passes over Kaleb's face, and I instantly regret asking. "She's great. She's only got a few weeks left at this point. We were hoping to get back home before the birth, but we're coming to terms with the fact that this is going to be a west coast birth. It will be different, but fine."

"Desie will be there, you won't have to deal with a stranger. She's an amazing nurse."

"Talia likes Desir'ee very much. I think they're going to be a lot of trouble together." Kaleb puts effort into looking indulgent, but it's more than obvious that he likes the idea.

"Please thank her for sending these. I'm not sharing."

"I'll pass that along, as well," he laughs. "Check in when you're ready."

I don't stand on the porch to wave him off. I have an omega to take care of and a basket of fresh muffins to hoard. Not really. I wouldn't really hoard them. I'm going to put them on the dresser and force Desie to eat one as soon as she's capable of it. Then I'll eat the rest of them.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ben

This is everything.

This is everything we were meant to be.

Desie, me, Michael, and Seth. This is everything. This is right. We feel so full, so complete. I knew it would change some things, but I had no idea how much better everything would be with a full pack. I can't seem to stop smiling, even though Desie's trying her best to kill us.

This is the third day of her heat. It's usually the most intense day, and it's no different now. Well, not entirely different. Michael and I have always talked a lot of shit to her about making her pregnant, or how beautiful she's going to be with a belly, all kinds of things like that; and she's always really receptive to it and loves it. This time, though, she's talking her own shit and she means it. The shit we talk to her doesn't typically affect us; we say all those things because she gets off on hearing them. The shit she's been saying this whole time is completely working on us though. Even, and maybe especially, Seth. She wants babies with us now. Fucking immediately.

I've got fairly decent stamina, but fuck. Every time I'm inside her as deep as I can get, she finds a way to get me just a little deeper and begs for me to finish *right there*. Swear to fuck, if we didn't have these implants, her heat would have ended yesterday because she'd be knocked up.

"Lean back into Seth, baby. We've got you." Seth and I have her between us right now, on our knees facing each other, so close that our breaths are mingling. I've only ever shared with Michael like this. It's different, but still amazing. But I want more leverage than what I'm getting with her legs wrapped around my waist and her smashed against my chest. I want to watch my dick push in and out of her while she cums all over the place. And I want Seth to hold her while I do it. "Just let him hold you. It's going to feel so good."

She lets go of my shoulders without hesitation and leans back against Seth's chest, trusting him to hold her up. Her legs grip me a little tighter, but the change in our angle has her eyes rolling back. From where I am, all I have to do is look down and I can see everything. I can see her face, her arched neck, her breasts and stomach moving with each of my thrusts. I can see her stretched around me and it's beautiful.

"Do you want to watch with me, baby? Want to watch me fuck you? Seth can watch, too." I'm not *exactly* an exhibitionist, but I definitely enjoy an occasional audience. Especially if the audience is in a position to reach down and elevate the experience.

The noise I hear isn't the one I expect. I was anticipating another round of Seth's wild-ass verbal porn, not quiet sounds of distress. I glance up to see Seth's face buried into her neck, the corner of the eye I can see slammed shut.

"What's wrong? What happened?"

"I thought I could do it," he whispers. "I wanted to do it."

"I don't understand."

"The angle," he chokes out, anger bleeding into the distress. "It's the same as... I want to see. I want to watch. Fuck."

It's the same as... Oh. Talia. Well, that's just not going to work. He needs to be able to see Desie like this if he wants to. "Let's try something. Keep your eyes closed. Give me your hand." I look over at Michael and motion for him to come closer. I want him within grabbing distance if Seth really can't handle this.

Seth stretches out his arm and I grab his wrist and place his palm on Desie's chest above her breasts. If she's aware of the angsty, therapy shit going on right now, she doesn't show it. "Keep your eyes closed. Don't look. Think about the hottest things you've ever experienced. Imagine them. Like a movie. I'm going to hold your wrist, let me move your hand. Got it?" I wait for his nod before I start the slow journey down her body.

I keep my thrusts slow and gentle. If this works out the way I hope it will, then I'll be fucking her as hard as I want soon enough. "Concentrate on her skin, how it feels." I drag his hand over one of her breasts, making sure his fingers graze across her nipple. We both smile when she sighs at the sensation.

I keep moving his hand down, over her stomach now. I pause, lifting his wrist so that he's only just touching her skin. I want him to feel her move under his palm as I fuck her. I want him to think about how that feels instead of how it looks. "Can you feel it? Her body moving when I fuck her?" He nods and kisses her neck. "Focus on your bond with her. What does it feel like?"

He pinches his eyes shut a bit tighter, running his nose against her ear. "Hot. Burning. Like she's on fire."

"But good, right?"

He smiles the smallest smile. "Yeah. Good."

"Keep thinking about that. Don't stop imagining the fun stuff, either. Keep your eyes closed."

I thrust deep inside her and still, keeping my movements slight and shallow as I pull his hand down to where she's gripping my cock. I don't give even a small fuck if it's weird for him, I groan when his fingers brush against my forming knot. It feels fucking fantastic. "Touch her pussy. I know it's puffy and stretched, but that's good. Don't think about how you're touching me, too. I don't give a fuck about it, just feel her. Feel how she feels."

His fingers split around my shaft to better press against her, and it's all I can do to stop the noises threatening to come out of my mouth. Then Desie's hand shoots down to join Seth's; and when she touches and rubs everything she can reach there's no stopping the rolling, purring, gasping moan that tumbles out of me along with every foul word I know.

"What are you thinking about, Seth?" she asks, looking down to watch their fingers touching the place where my body joins hers. "Tell me."

"The way you said my name that first time on the couch. When you pulled down your shirt so I could see your breasts. Your thighs when you were walking on the beach."

Fuck yeah. "That white swimsuit fucking kills me. Wait till you see the black one."

"What's the black one like?" he asks while I stifle another groan as his and Desie's touch moves around me. They're not intentionally touching me, but I can feel the pressure of their fingers sliding against her and the sensation is unexpectedly amazing.

"Rub her clit, side to side. Yeah, like that," I say, my grip on his wrist

tightening just a little. "The black one is a bikini. Well, most of a bikini. She can choose how much tit she shows with how it's made, and the bottoms tie at the side. It's more string than bikini. Fuck, it's hot."

"Please, for the love of fuck, Desir'ee. I don't know if I can handle you wearing that." His eyes are open now. Wide open.

I laugh and fuck into her again. "Jealousy's a bitch, isn't it?"

Seth growls a little but doesn't stop moving his fingers. "She can't wear that around anybody but us."

"I'll wear it to meet your mother if you don't make me cum in the next few seconds," Desie snarls.

I groan and thrust inside her once roughly. Desie doesn't usually say things like cum and cock unless she's in heat or having spikes. Sometimes something might slip out, but for the most part she doesn't, so when she does say those types of words it goes straight to my balls, and my knot throbs in response. "Close your eyes, Seth. Or don't look away from hers. Either way, I need you to do it."

He snaps his eyes shut.

I pull his wrist down so I can make his fingers do what I want them to. "This should probably be awkward," I mumble while I position his fingers to lay over her outer lips and around my shaft. I press on his knuckle, putting gentle and constant pressure on her swollen clit. "Stay like that. You're going to feel me push into her. Don't be weird about it. I want you to feel what happens, not see it. I think this will help."

"Ben," Michael quietly warns, coming up to kneel beside me.

"Shh," I hiss. "It's going to help." Then Desie puts her fingers over Seth's, and I watch her use their fingers to spread her apart for me. "Fuck. Yes." This is good. Really good.

"Do it, Benny," she whines. "Give it to me. I need it."

She definitely needs it, but I'm taking it a lot slower than she wants me to. I don't know what Seth would do if he felt me shove my swelling knot inside her like I want to and I'm not trying to find out today. I'll take it nice and slow and torture all three of us.

"Keep your eyes closed, Seth," Michael purrs. "Focus on how she feels. Focus on your bond with her. Can you feel it?"

Seth nods.

"Good," Michael continues, his eyes fixed on Desie's body giving way for my knot. "Can you feel how much she needs what Ben's doing?"

Seth nods again and reaches up to grasp her breast and roll her nipple between his fingers with his other hand. Desie gasps and arches into his touch, which causes her hips to shift and thrust against me. She's stretched around the start of my knot now, and I can feel their fingers spreading wide around me. God, it feels good.

Desie drags out my name in a long moan, digging her heels into my ass and the backs of my thighs, pulling me even closer. "Please, Ben," she pants, but I hold back. I'll never not give her what needs, she'll get everything she ever asks me for, I just need to do this one thing for Seth. I really think this will help him, and our future.

"You feel it, Seth? Can you feel it all?"

"Yes," he hisses. "Don't make her wait."

"I'm going to push my knot inside her now. I want you to feel it. I don't care if you touch me, too. It doesn't matter. I need you to feel what she feels like when she takes it. I want you to look when I tell you to."

He nods, his eyes still squeezed shut, but Michael calls another warning. "Ben. It's too much."

"No, it isn't," I grunt. "It isn't. He panics because of the memory. He needs new memories. To battle it out with the old, bad ones."

Desie hisses my name again and I tighten my grip on her hips. "Ready Seth?" I wait for his halting nod, then I push the rest of my aching knot inside her. "Now, Seth," I grit through my teeth. "Look now. Look and feel."

He cracks his eyes open, one blue iris slowly becoming visible. He sucks in a breath and turns into Desie's neck but doesn't look away. His and Desie's hands are trapped between mine and Desie's straining bodies, their fingers slipping through the slick as I rock my hips to lodge my knot inside her, and my back bows with the added friction.

"It's good, right?" I ask, but he doesn't respond. He's staring too hard at our joined bodies.

"Seth," I grunt. "It's good, right?"

"Really good," he whispers against Desie's cheek. "So good. You're doing such a good job, darlin'."

And he's back. Thank fuck, because I need to get off. "You ready to cum for us again, Desie?" She answers with that gorgeous whining moan noise that wraps around the base of my skull. I circle my hips, moving my knot inside her as much as I can, but her orgasm doesn't come. "What do you need, baby? Tell me."

"Michael," she whimpers.

"I'm right here," he says, leaning down to kiss her.

Then it happens. Her walls constrict and tremble around me, bringing my release roaring out of me. The rhythmic tightening around my knot makes my orgasm last for what feels like hours while her own drowns us in slick.

When my ears stop ringing, I hear Seth and Michael mumbling sweet things to her and purring. I join in and we collapse into a pile of satisfied, happy

people.

"Thank you," Seth whispers after a while.

I raise up on my elbow to look at him across Desie's shoulder. "If one of us isn't okay, none of us are. You'll be okay."

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Desie

Seth is perfectly fine; better now than he was before, I think. I remember chunks and pieces of my heat, and what I can remember is amazing. I'm so proud of him. I'm proud of the twins, too. But I'm sore. Pleasantly tender is how I put it to the boys. It's been two days since it lifted, time enough to see where our pieces would fall, and now it's time to go back to work.

Not my job at the hospital. I informed the administration that I'd be out for a few weeks to get things settled with my new pack. We're going back to have another round with Flores this afternoon. I probably shouldn't be excited, but I am. Ben is glad for what he's calling my bloodthirsty streak, but Michael is a little concerned. Seth is full-on worried. I keep assuring them that I'm not going to start going on killing sprees, or something equally ridiculous. I'm just happy that Flores is paying for some of his crimes. I think anyone in my position would be.

Michael doesn't want me to change. He doesn't want me to be hard like they are. He doesn't have anything to worry about, though. I might want Flores to

suffer, and I might want to contribute to that suffering, but I'm not ever going to be hard. There's a difference between distributing justice and hurting people.

Alpha Minos is sitting at our kitchen table, along with Mallory and someone else from the council. They want to go with us to visit Flores. Michael said no, and Seth said absolutely not. Ben said Minos could go, but Mallory couldn't; and that's what I think, too. I don't want Mallory anywhere near him. The only reason *I'm* going near him is because he committed crimes against me personally. He owes me.

"He took my life from me," Mallory says quietly. She doesn't look up from the table. "He stole my life."

If any of the things people say about Alpha Minos were true, he'd argue that Flores gave her the life she has with him, but they aren't. He catches her twisting fingers between his palms and waits until she brings her gaze up to meet his. "What would you have me do?"

Mallory's eyes pool with tears and she looks away from Minos and toward Seth. "I don't have to go. I understand why I shouldn't. But let him go so he can see that monster's suffering for himself. That would help me."

Seth rubs his chest and glances between Michael and Ben.

"I say he goes," Ben says. "But I don't know about taking him in broad daylight. I don't think it's a great idea for the head of the WCC to be seen doing shady shit on the docks. I think Devon should come along, too; but he probably shouldn't be seen, either."

That's one of the problems they've been discussing since last night. Nathan, Trent, and Kaleb being seen on the docks is bad enough, but none of them have positions of power. They just have ties to people in power, which isn't a big deal because we all do at this point. But actual council members, of any

council, being seen in the middle of this mess wouldn't do anything for our ultimate goal of fixing the West Coast or any of this trafficking mess. The problem is that Devon needs to be there when we interrogate Flores so he can provide a council witness for the East Coast Council, and Alpha Minos needs to be there not only to hear what Flores says himself, but also to give his omega just a bit of peace. I understand that more than anything, and I think my boys do, too.

"Nobody around here knows who Devon is," Seth sighs. "At least, I doubt they do."

Michael shakes his head. "Somebody here knows who he is. I guarantee it. He can't be on the docks."

Everyone goes back to the same chin scratching and head shaking that they've been doing all day. Then I get an idea. It's a ridiculous idea, but it could lead to a better idea. "What if they dressed up? Maybe a costume, or something."

Ben smiles at me, but not in a way that says I've solved the problem. "A costume would draw more attention than just them being seen as themselves."

"Wait," Alpha Minos raps his knuckles on the table. "She's onto something. It isn't so much that we need to be completely disguised. We would only need to have our faces covered so we couldn't be seen from a distance. Anyone who knows me and gets close enough will recognize my scent. Flores will know me the moment I walk through the door, but no one here actually knows Devon or any of the Johnson pack. They might recognize one of them from pictures, but unless they know his scent no one will know who he is. Including Flores. It could add an element of fear to the interrogation."

It sounds no less ridiculous coming from his mouth, but he might be right.

I've seen people in the grip of delirium. Based on what Kaleb said, Flores may be in the throes of a mental break brought on by the state we left him in. If I was a more compassionate person, I'd feel regret and pity, but he snuffed out any compassion I might have ever had for him. "Kaleb said he was hallucinating. He said he was talking to Elijah."

Elijah Lopez has called us twice since everything happened. He and his pack are on the lower end of the Western territory right now trying to come to terms with themselves. Even if he was in the area, he certainly wouldn't be with Flores in that container on the docks. Michael and Seth share a long look.

"I have that lion mask from the festival," Alpha Minos suggests.

"This is ridiculous," Ben huffs. "You can't wear a fucking lion mask to torture information out of someone."

I tilt my head and push my lips from side to side. "Why not? He's miserable, but he wasn't afraid when we were there the last time. He just wanted you to stop pulling out his teeth. He needs to be afraid. He deserves to be as afraid as I was. As we were." I nod at Mallory, and she slowly nods back. "If he's out of his mind like Kaleb says he is, a bunch of people in masks standing around and watching what happens to him would be terrifying. Even if he recognizes Alpha Minos's scent, it will be clouded by all the other smells; and he won't know Devon at all."

"You pulled out his teeth?" Mallory asks, her brows pinched together.

"Yes," Ben answers. "Michael and me."

"I didn't want him to be able to put a mark on an omega. Ever." I hold Mallory's gaze while I say it. "I have them in a jar in the freezer."

The corner of Mallory's mouth turns up. "Good," she whispers.

Michael drags his hand down his face and sighs. "We have the ones we

bought this year. Devon could wear one of those."

All the alphas take turns looking back and forth at each other. I look at Mallory. "How old were you?"

"Seventeen," she softly answers.

He really did take her life. "How bad was it?"

She just shakes her head.

"When did you meet Alpha Minos?"

She smiles, and it's sad around the edges. "He brought some of us to a card game. Flores liked to parade us around and pretend like he was some kind of matchmaker. The packs were gambling for us. I saw Alphonse from across the room when he walked in. He looked at me and nodded, and I felt it in my toes. I don't know how much money he threw around, but I went home with him that night." She takes his hands in hers as she finishes.

I love listening to Mallory. Her twangy accent is different from Seth's, but it's still soothing and sweet. Seth comes to stand behind me and puts his hands on my shoulders. "I changed my mind. She should go with us. If Alpha Minos agrees. She's right. Seeing Flores die will help her. It will, at the least, make her feel safer."

I tilt my head back to look up at him, and he leans down to brush his lips against mine. I can feel exactly how anxious he is about Mallory being there. He doesn't want either of us near Flores. I can also feel how much he believes what he says. I don't really want to put Mallory through this, but Seth is right. Watching Flores's interrogation and knowing he's confined on the docks is one of the reasons I'm breathing easier. "She can wear my mask. I've been thinking about something else, too. What if Flores decides to keep quiet. He knows he isn't going to live through this, he has to. What if he doesn't give up any more information than he has?"

"Sodium thiopental."

We all look at Mallory.

"Sodium thiopental," she repeats.

None of the men in the room seem to know what that is, not enough to get excited about it, but I do. "That's a great idea!"

Her smile widens.

"What is it?" Ben asks.

"Basically, a truth serum," I explain.

Mallory's scent flattens. "They would give it to some of us if we refused to talk about our families and friends. We didn't want them to take anyone else but with that stuff, we had no choice."

Ben shakes his head. "Why, though? We can smell lies. If he tries to lie to us, we'll just rip out another toenail or something until he decides to tell the truth."

"That's fine if he's talking; but if he decides to keep quiet, there won't be anything to smell. Sodium thiopental will make him talk. He won't be able to help himself."

His face drops into a pout. "But I wanted to do more interrogating."

"We start with the interrogating," Michael hums. "And switch to the truth serum plan if we need to. Can you get it at the hospital?"

My excitement dies. No, I can't get it at the hospital. It's a medical facility. There's no need to keep something like that.

"I can get it," Alpha Minos says. "The council has a pharmacy for things like that. Nothing but a phone call. Jackson can pick it up and bring it to the docks. He has a mask too. We were a pride of lions this year."

I look back up at Seth. "I'm not wearing a mask. And I'm giving him the injections this time."

His lips tighten into a thin line, but he nods. "Okay."

~

Two lions and three foxes follow us into the unit after Michael opens the door and declares it safe enough to enter. The smell is... overwhelming. But it's supposed to be. After a brief discussion, we decided that everyone else but me would wear black ski masks. The idea was to add to the fear we hope to instill.

Inside of a minute, it becomes very obvious that Kaleb's assumption about Flores being delusional was accurate. He doesn't register anything but black forms surrounding him until he sees my face.

"Desir'ee," he calls, relief written on his swollen face. "You came to help me. I knew you would." His words are thick in his mouth. Nearly a week of dehydration after having some of your teeth ripped out has that effect.

"Did you?" I ask, stepping around the puddle of mess that has collected on the floor at his feet.

"Help me up so we can go home. Eijah is getting the car." He strains against the bindings on his wrists impatiently. "Come on, help me out of this. Elijah will be here any moment."

"She's not helping you," Devon says flatly.

"Who is that?" Flores hisses. "Who have you brought with you, Desir'ee?"

Michael clacks the pliers aggressively from his position near Flores's head. "Don't say her name again."

Flores flinches at the sound of the pliers, but his face twists into as much of a snarl as it's capable of in its current state. "I should have had you and your brother taken care of a long time ago. I kept giving you chance after chance to join the movement, but all you ever wanted was a home." He stops to laugh. "A family. Just like Elijah. What can a family do? Drag you down.

Use you up. I thought breaking the three of you up would make it easier to make you fall in line; and getting rid of Elijah's nephew should have been enough to keep him in line." He laughs again. "Weak. All of you."

Michael pulls the ski mask off and leans over Flores's face. He smiles down at him, twirling the pliers around where Flores can see them. "We've got some more questions for you."

Flores screams for Elijah, and Devon answers him in that same monotone voice. "Elijah isn't coming."

Flores's eyes frantically move around the room, and with each dark, faceless figure or animal mask staring back at him he becomes even more frantic. "Desir'ee. Help me. Get me out of here."

I just smile at him.

"Like I said, we've got some questions for you," Michael clacks the pliers again. "And you're going to answer them."

Seth steps forward, wearing his mask from the festival. "Where are the omegas being held?"

"What omegas?" Flores counters.

"The omegas you stole. The omegas you took from their packs. Where are they being held?"

Flores closes his mouth and glares around the room. Seth nods at Michael, and Michael tips his chin at Ben. Between the two of them they get his mouth open. "Last chance," Michael taps on a tooth. "Where are they?"

Flores does his best to spit at Michael.

"I'm so glad you didn't answer," Michael says. "I've been looking forward to this." Then, instead of going to work on the tooth, he slides the pliers up the side of Flores's face to the shell of his ear and captures the upper part and slowly tightens his grip. Flores doesn't react at first, but when Michael starts

pulling the pliers towards the floor Flores begins cursing and screaming. Ben nods at Michael and he abruptly releases the ear.

"Where are the omegas?" Seth repeats.

Flores snarls and spits in Seth's direction. Seth tips his chin at Michael and it begins again with Flores's other ear. They go through a couple more rounds without Flores saying anything more than a few belligerent curses, then Seth raises a hand.

His heavy sigh bounces off the walls of the holding unit. He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his knife. It's not one of those obscenely huge hunting knives, just a run of the mill pocketknife. "I'm going to give you one last opportunity to answer every question we ask. If you don't give us every drop of information we need, you will no longer be subject to Michael's kindness and you will endure mine. Where are the omegas?"

"Fuck you," Flores screams.

"Alright," Seth drawls, and nods at Michael. "Watch her. If it's too much, take her out for a break." He flicks open his knife and looks down at Flores. He nods at Minos too and Mallory next to with the same message. "You're out of chances. Every time you don't answer a question, you will lose something."

My breath hitches. Seth's fingers. His eye. This is how he lost them.

"It's okay, Desir'ee," he says over his shoulder. "It's alright. Hold on to Michael."

He starts with a pinky. He slits the nail down the middle and pries off half of it. "Where are the omegas?" Flores doesn't answer, and Seth pulls off the rest of the nail.

Seth rolls his shoulders and tilts his head from side to side. "The thing is, Flores, I can do this for a long time. Hours. Days. I'm good at it. I have

experience on both ends of this kind of thing. I know what works and how it works. I've got a pretty good idea of how long it takes, and we're just getting started." Then he moves to the next finger.

By the time it becomes apparent that Flores can hold out past losing a few nails, I'm shaking. Not because it's too much for me, but because of the thoughts racing through my mind about how it must have been for Seth. Did his old pack cut off his fingers and take his eye? Did they take a lot of smaller, less permanent things first, just like this? How long did it go on? My poor, poor Seth.

I don't want him to do this anymore. I don't want him to think about what was done to him while he does it to someone else. I want to find the omegas, but Seth is real to me. He's more important than they are, and I don't care how selfish that makes me. I tug on Michael's shirt, and when he looks down at me, I hand him the syringe with the serum. He gives me a quick nod and walks over to jab the needle into Flores's thigh.

It takes less than five minutes for it to take effect. In Flores's declined state, his mind is more susceptible to fear and paranoia than we anticipated. By the twenty-minute mark, Flores is screaming about the 'demons' in the room and begging me to protect him.

"All you have to do is tell me where the omegas are. Give me a location and I'll ask them to leave," Seth says.

Flores's face twists from terror to desperation. "The Northern Territory. I don't know where they go after I send them out. I just know they go to the Northern Territory. We keep the best ones, though. For ourselves. And the councilmen."

I glance at Mallory. I can't see her face, but I can see her hand clinging to Alpha Minos's. Their story was sad, but sweet. They made it sound like he

rescued her, but she's still a trafficking victim and he's still a councilman.

"What do you mean, the councilmen? Which ones?"

"You said you'd make them leave!" Flores cries.

Seth hums, nodding his head. "I did." He turns away from Flores and towards Devon, Minos, and the others. "Will you leave?"

"No," Devon answers.

Seth turns back to Flores. "There. I asked. Now answer Desir'ee's question. Which councilmen do you keep omegas for?"

"All of them," Flores sobs. "For money. For property. To look the other way. We trade them for power. Please make them leave."

My head whips to Alpha Minos, but Michael leans down to kiss my temple. "Just wait," he whispers.

"And what about Minos? I met his omega. She's one of yours," Seth continues, pressing his knife against the tip of one of Flores's fingers.

"Minos wouldn't take the bribe. He lost standing and more money than she was worth. He's not going to be in power for much longer, anyway. Please tell them to go!" Sheer desperation and fear soak his plea.

Seth pulls the knife away, nodding. "Who leads the rogue organization? Not in this territory. Everywhere. Who calls the shots?"

Flores screws his eyes shut and shakes his head. "Make them leave, please!"

"Answer my question," Seth says, bringing his knife back to Flores's fingertip and sliding it under the nail.

Flores chokes on another sob. "I've never met him. His name is Owens. He's a doctor. He's looking for a specific kind of omega. They're all supposed to go through his facility in the Northern Territory."

"Where?"

"I don't know!" Flores yells. "I don't know. The rogues didn't answer questions, and they kill people for asking too many questions."

Seth sighs and pulls the knife away again. "What kinds of omegas is this Owen looking for?"

"Males mostly, and twins. Especially if they're identical. Special females, too. Males more than anything, though."

Devon steps closer to Flores. "Special how?"

Flores shrieks, struggling to get away from Devon. "Stay away from me!"

"Special how?" he repeats.

"Strong ones. Smart ones. Females who have frequent heats and produce multiples. And any omega with ties to power."

Devon growls but goes back to his place with the others.

Seth looks over his shoulder. "Anything else?"

"When will they come for the next group of omegas?" Nathan asks quietly.

"Fall," Flores answers. "They send a messenger a few weeks before letting me know when they're going to make the next round."

"How many rogue compounds are there?" Nathan asks.

Flores shakes his head, and Devon takes a step forward.

"I don't know!" Flores yells. "I don't know! A few in each territory. The biggest is in the North, another big one is in the South. They are everywhere though."

Nathan and Devon exchange a look, then Nathan asks, "who runs them?"

"Anyone. Mostly councilmen. But they all just want money. They don't care what happens to the omegas, as long as the money comes."

"Good?" Seth asks.

"Good," Devon answers.

"Alright. You don't have to stay for the rest." Seth backs away and motions

for Michael to join him. "Our omega put in an order, and we're going to deliver."

No. I don't think I want Seth to suffer another minute of this. I don't want another nightmare in Benny's or Michael's heads. "Just end it," I whisper. "I want to go home."

Seth's relief slams into me as hard as Michael's does. "Are you sure?" he asks.

"I'm sure," I give him a small smile. "Let's get out of here."

Ben leans over and flicks Flores's forehead. "You're a lucky motherfucker."

Michael takes my hand to lead me to Flores. It's time for me to finish it. I think they'd be happier if I handed off this part to one of them. None of my alphas want me to be the one to kill Flores. But I'm going to. He's taken too much from me. And he's taken too much from them. He contributed to every awful thing surrounding this moment, including Seth's missing eye and fingers. Even during all this, he is taking things from us. My boys should never have gone through this interrogation. Seth has been strong through it, but I'm beginning to feel the threads of his strength unraveling. I am going to make sure he can't hurt anyone or take anything ever again. This is for me, for us, and for all those other omegas and their people.

I pull the loaded syringe from my jacket pocket and step up to Seth's side. Flores looks at me and he's not the same man who put me through weeks of torment anymore. He's not broken enough to regret any of it, though. He isn't the type of person who understands the concept of regret.

"I would have given you a life. You would have had anything you wanted," he tells me.

"I wanted them," is my simple reply with a nod to my pack. Then I push the needle into his arm.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Seth

That was one of the worst deaths I've ever seen in my life. It was more violent than anything any weapon could have produced. Holy fuck.

Desir'ee watched him convulse and scream and everything else without flinching. She watched the light leave his eyes while she held my hand. And now she smells like him and everything else that was in that unit and I need it off of her. Now.

Devon and Minos said they'd take care of the body, and Ben called someone from somewhere to clean out the unit. I don't know why he knows a clean-up crew, and I don't care. I just want to go home.

We climb into the car and Michael drives us home in complete silence with every window open. When we get home, we all go to the bathroom and get undressed, still without saying anything. Ben turns on the water and urges Desir'ee and I into the tub while Michael gathers the clothes into a thick garbage bag.

The water is hot, but we need it to be. We set to work scrubbing each other off, starting with her. I can't stand the smell on her. I scrub her skin until she starts wincing when I go back over places, then I wash her hair a couple times. She washes me after that, and I have to get on my knees so she can wash my hair. I'm the first one to speak when she starts to get out of the shower after me so that one of the twins can get in.

"No," I rasp. "Stay in. Wash them, too. I'll make us some of the tea that Talia sent." I kiss her slowly, lingering over her bottom lip, and push Ben towards the tub.

The kettle takes no less than eight hundred years to hit a boil, but that's okay right now. I need every one of those years to sit at this table and attempt to process the information Flores gave up, not to mention the fact that I just did to him a whole lot of the things that were done to me... without batting an eye.

That's what bothers me the most, that I'm unbothered by most of it. The only part I'm really worried about is that I'm pretty sure my pack and Kaleb's have a good idea of how exactly I lost my fingers and eye. They might not have the full details, not yet, but they know enough to look at me differently. And *that* is what bothers me. It's not exactly pity, but I was hoping that Talia would never know that I lost my eye because I refused to give Derek and Jay any more details about Talia, her family, or her body than they already had. Instead, I told them I was the one who contacted the Omega Institute about what we did to her. They took it poorly.

They had already been chipping away at my hand before then because I refused to give them, or any of the other rogues who interrogated me, information about the council, or about COT operations. I didn't have much information, just what I'd overheard my father say or things I had privy to as

a councilman's son; but some of the information I actually did have would be dangerous to Jasper. He can hate me for the rest of his life if he needs to, but I'll never tell anyone about how he ended up at the Institute. I don't even think Talia or Devon know. Nathan could find out easily enough, but I don't think it would occur to him to look.

Jasper's family is from the Southern Territory. Correction. Jasper's family is the Southern Territory. They're wealthy. Like, wipe-your-ass-with-bank-notes wealthy. They travel around and donate to charities and pawn their kids off on nannies and au pairs until it's time to shove them off into whatever school or institute that best suits their current political needs. I'm not exactly sure of his family's pack dynamics, and I definitely have no business knowing as much as I do outside of that, but I am absolutely certain Jasper doesn't want his pack to know that he was pushed off and away without a thought.

I'm also certain that he doesn't want anyone to know there were no less than fourteen kidnapping attempts on him before he was shipped off to the Institute; or that he is the only remaining Nattier descendent in his generation. His family is as secretive as they are cold. As far as the rest of the world outside of registration files knows, Jasper is one of four living descendants of reproductive age. This is why his family wasn't exactly thrilled when he announced that he wouldn't be passing on any genes with his chosen pack.

I was looking for a way to move my pack ahead in the registration process for omega consideration before everything happened with Talia, and stumbled on some files that mentioned the Nattier pack. I was curious. I read the files. Jasper's family donated a couple million to the Institute to convince them to accept him. The original rejection letter stated that his acceptance would put the rest of the omegas at the Institute at risk, but between the donation and Jasper's natural talents, they eventually took him.

That's the kind of thing that he might not want broadcasted. It's also the kind of thing that will get your fingers cut off a bit at a time. After what happened with Talia and what I witnessed at the compound, I wasn't giving any asshole a single word that would put an omega at risk. And I'd really rather Jasper not know that I lost any part of myself because I wouldn't give the rogues any information that would put him or his family at risk. I don't want him to feel obligated to *not* hate me.

I thought about how unbothered I am about interrogating Flores the whole drive home. I thought about it while Desir'ee was scrubbing me down. I didn't think about it at all while I was massaging soap across her skin, but I'm thinking about it now. It's because he hurt her. It's because he hurt Ben and Michael. I think if he hadn't hurt my pack, I might have been reluctant to slice pieces off of him and I'd most likely be squeamish about the whole thing. But he hurt my pack, and he left ugly bruises on my omega, so he deserved so much worse than he got. The only thing that actually bothers me about what I did to Flores was everyone watching me do it and feeling how much I didn't want everyone to know what happened to me hurt Desir'ee. Sometimes the bonds aren't a blessing.

Tea. And snacks. Talia sent some of their omega tea over with Kaleb, along with a note instructing all of us to drink a cup because of its supposed calming effects. I'm not an expert on making tea, I pretty much just put the bag in the cup and pour water over it, but I am decent at snacks. I'm making cinnamon-sugar toast with enough butter to cancel out any health benefits associated with that omega tea and a bowl of sliced apples. That's what my mom made when I was upset as a kid. It's my version of comfort food.

The toast comes out of the oven just as the shower shuts off; and by the time I'm carrying everything into the bedroom my pack is already in bed. I

put the big cookie sheet I used to cart the tea and snack on the dresser and roll my neck before I look at Desir'ee and the twins. They don't feel alarmed or upset. They feel, for lack of a better word, numb. Well, not Desir'ee. She feels worried, but in an abstract way rather than sharp concern. When I open my eyes, they look the exact way they feel; and they're all looking at me expectantly. So, I start distributing tea.

"Talia said we all needed to drink this," I inform them, handing each of them a mug. "It's still hot, so be careful. I made us toast, too. Like my mom used to make me when I was a kid. And apples." Then I sit on the corner of the bed with my own mug gripped tight in my fist, and we drink tea and crunch toast and apples without saying much of anything, being very careful to not get crumbs everywhere.

Michael collects everything and takes it all back to the kitchen when we're finished. I'm still sitting on the corner of the bed, and we still haven't talked about anything. This can't fester. I'm not sure what this reaction is, but I can't let it get worse. "I need someone to tell me something. What are we thinking about right now? What's bothering us? Tell me so I can get us past whatever this is."

Desir'ee fidgets with the blanket and licks her lips. "I don't need you to tell me how you lost your fingers or eye. I don't need the story. But I need you to know that I think it's awful and I hate that it happened to you. So much." Her lips quiver around the last few words.

"Hey," I say, moving up in the bed to stroke her hair and touch her cheek. "It's alright. It was worth it. I'd lose them all over again if I had it to do over. I don't care about missing pieces."

"But you felt upset, like you didn't want to do it to Flores."

I nod, still running my hand over her hair and neck. "I was upset, but not

because of Flores. I would have done worse to him, but we needed all that information. I was only upset because I didn't want you to imagine someone doing that to me."

"Why did it happen to you?" Michael asks, sliding back under the blankets next to Desir'ee.

I sigh and sit back up, then I hold up my hand with the missing fingers. "I lost these a little bit at a time because I wouldn't give my first pack, or the rogues they worked with, the information they wanted." I point at my empty eye socket. "I lost this because I gave them an answer they didn't want."

Surprisingly, the next question isn't what the information was that I wouldn't give up, or what was the answer I did give. "Your pack did that to you?" Ben asks, his voice thick.

I look into his dark eyes and smile. "They did. But they were never really my pack. Not completely. It fucked me up when the twisted, ugly bond I had with them severed, but they weren't good alphas, Ben. That is putting it mildly, they weren't even men with the things they did. I don't miss them. Or mourn them."

"We could never do something like that to you," Michael snarls. "We will never let anyone hurt you like that ever again."

I lean forward to touch his shoulder. "I know, Michael. You and Ben are good alphas. Desir'ee is perfect. And together, we will make a great pack. I'll take care of you, and you'll take care of me. That's what real packs do, right?"

"Yes," Desir'ee says, giving me a smile that I need like oxygen. "Come get into bed with us. We need sleep."

She and Michael lift the blankets up and I crawl in between them. I don't know if this is how other packs sleep, but falling asleep with the sounds and

scents of my pack surrounding me is the most perfect thing in the world.
Even if Michael snores into the back of my head all night.

Chapter Thirty

Desie

Waking up in bed with all three of them is my favorite. I fell asleep between Ben and Seth, and I woke up between Seth and Michael. Ben was spooning Seth pretty hard, but we're not going to talk about that when the sun is shining. I stretch my arms above my head and arch my back, then scramble and crawl over the men in my bed. All three of them take up so much room that I'm not entirely sure how we all fit.

"Where are you going?" Michael purrs against my neck after he snatches me back under the blankets.

"The kitchen," I whisper. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

He kisses my shoulder and reluctantly lets me up. "Don't be long. I wasn't finished with you."

I don't know how long I'm about to be. I'm calling Talia. I woke up several times in the night worrying about her going into labor. I grab my phone from the nightstand and tiptoe down the hall. It's well into mid-morning, with three toddlers underfoot, Talia is sure to be awake.

She answers on the second ring, sounding very much like she may actually have been sleeping.

"I'm so sorry! Did I wake you up? I thought—"

"No," she laughs. "It's alright. I was just resting. Is everything alright? Did you drink the tea I sent?"

"Yes. Thank you for that. I think we were all a little shell-shocked last night. Are you alright?"

I listen to the sound of rustling fabric on her end as she answers. "I'm good. Just tired. The last stretch of the pregnancy, and all. Nathan and Reid have the babies outside to give me a chance to lay down and rest for a little bit. But you called me for a reason."

I clear my throat. "I did. Please don't take this the wrong way, I would never tell you how to live your life. But you can't have the baby at the hospital."

"I didn't intend to."

Oh. This is going to be an easier conversation than I thought. Every omega has a different idea of how they want their labor and delivery to go. Some want a hospital birth, and some want home births. We are trained to provide support in either location. I'm just glad she isn't determined to be in a hospital since she won't be able to have her baby in her own home back east.

"Do you have an idea of how you'd like it to go?" I ask. "You only have a few more weeks left, right?"

"Yes," she hums. "I'm having the baby here as I didn't think traveling while this pregnant would be ideal so doing it twice to return home is out of the question. Why the phone call, though? Why shouldn't I have the baby at the hospital? I'd go to your hospital. I'm hoping you'll be there, anyway. And while we're on the subject, would you mind coming by so we can call Obi?"

He'd like to meet you since you're my first choice for birth attendant in this territory."

"It isn't safe," I blurt.

"What isn't safe?" she asks, alarm sharpening her tone.

"The rogues. The hospital is crawling with them. They were watching me. I don't know who, I just know that there are rogues in every department. On every floor."

There's silence for a moment on her side, then she sighs. "And I'll just bet a baby or two have gone missing."

"Mothers, too," I answer. "And siblings. I know your pack will protect you, and mine will too, but I'd also like to ask my brother's pack to be there. You're high profile and on everyone's radar now. Plus, you've had multiples. Then there's Jasper. Amber is pregnant, but she's not due for a couple of months. She could be another support inside and Mateo and the rest of them could stand guard."

"I would need to meet them first, but I think that's a good idea," she says. I listen as she calls for Corso and catches him up on our conversation.

"Yes," he agrees, and I can almost hear him nodding. "I think that would be good. I look forward to meeting Desir'ee's brothers. How is Seth's pack this morning?"

"You're on speaker," Talia says. "I'd like to know, too. Devon gave us the impression that the interrogation was... a lot."

I nod even though they can't see it. "It was. I learned a lot about Seth last night. And the twins. And myself. But we're alright. I'll call Mateo later today and let you know what he says. Do you need anything?"

"I'm good," she tells me. "I can't wait to meet your brothers. I miss mine a lot."

I start to say that I'm going to miss mine when we leave for the east coast, but I stop myself. I'm not really ready to talk about a life away from my family. Not yet, anyway. Not out loud. Instead, I change the subject. "We could have a cookout! Benny and Michael would love that. We could invite all my brothers, Mateo's and Sebastian's packs. There would be a ton of food. It would be fun."

There's a brief pause on their end of the call, then Corso says, "I think a gathering would be good, as long as it's safe."

That is a thought. One that I didn't consider before getting excited about the idea of a cookout with my family. I haven't seen them for longer than a few minutes since I was taken in the parking garage at the hospital. It feels like so much longer than it actually has been. I can't imagine a safer place to be than surrounded by my family, but I know that's not what Corso means. He means outside threats. It didn't seem like Flores had many, if any, friends, but he is very obviously absent, and I am very obviously no longer under his thumb. I don't think Elijah has had time to gather himself and his new pack and take control of the Flores's operation. It's entirely possible that someone looking to gain more power and control might put things together and come to retaliate before Elijah gets things settled.

"Let's talk to Seth, the twins, and Mateo. I'd really love to do something fun to celebrate coming home," I tell them. "If they decide that it's too dangerous, then we won't do it. I can always just put you in contact with Mateo and see them at home. We don't need a big gathering, I just thought it would be fun."

"It would be fun, Desir'ee," Corso says. "And I'm sure Trent would be very happy for an opportunity to stretch his stomach. We just have to make sure everyone will be safe."

"Okay. I'll text you later, Talia. Try to get some more rest, and call me if

you need me."

We end the call and I go back down the hall to the warm bed waiting for me. My boys are sprawled all over it. Ben is cuddled against Seth's side and one of Michael's legs is thoroughly trapped by one of Seth's. They're adorable, but I'm not sure they would appreciate that particular compliment.

I crawl up from the foot of the bed to wriggle between Seth and Michael, smiling as they both hitch their legs over mine. It smells like home, and I close my eyes for a few long moments. This is what I've needed for so long and I finally have it.

It doesn't take long for me to be cuddled back to sleep, and when I wake up again there are two sets of eyes peering down at me.

"Hi," I say, reaching up to tuck Seth's hair behind his ear. Then I stroke down Michael's jaw.

They both bend down to kiss me, but I only have one mouth and Michael gets there first. Seth settles for brushing his lips against my temple before lifting back up. "Hi."

"I want to have a big cook out. With us and Talia's pack, and my brothers and their packs."

Seth drags his nose down the side of my neck and across the twins' marks. "We usually have a huge end of summer cookout back home. It's wild, but we'd be having something like that around now anyway. As long as it's safe."

"That's what Corso said, about it being safe. I'm going to call Mateo. I would really like as much protection for Talia as possible when she goes into labor."

Michael jerks himself up into a sitting position. "She's having the baby at the house, right? Not in the hospital?"

"Right," I say, tracing a line down his chest, "she's going to deliver at home.

We're going to be there. Me inside helping her, and you guys standing guard outside the house."

He nods and settles back down beside me. "If we have a cookout with that many packs, it'll turn into a block party."

"That just means more food," Ben says, clambering over Seth to take up residence on top of me. "Cookout before the baby, though. I'll pout if you make me wait till after. I need all the grilled goodness."

"I love this," I sigh, running my nails gently across Ben's shoulders.

He laughs. "Being squished?"

"Mmhmm," I nod. Their bodies pressing against mine from every angle feels nothing less than perfect. "But if we stay like this much longer, I'll get sleepy again."

"Well, we can't have that," Michael says, sliding his fingers through my hair and turning my face towards him for a kiss. "You have calls to make." He gives me another kiss, then Seth's long fingers are turning me towards him.

"A cookout to plan," he purrs, licking across my bottom lip.

Then Ben drags a fingertip between my breasts, and I know I won't be doing any of those things until much later.

~

"I knew something wasn't right, Desie," Mateo growls. It started as a phone call, but after the first few sentences he hung up on me and showed up at our door with his pack and Sebastian's to sit around my kitchen table and all over my counters to yell at me. I understand they're upset and angry, but Amber's pregnancy is starting to show and that's all I want to talk about. I missed the first part of her pregnancy. And I missed Sebastian being officially welcomed

into his pack. And I'm going to miss so much more because soon I'll be living thousands of miles away.

Ben leaves his perch on the counter to stand behind me and put his hands on my shoulders. He doesn't say anything, or tell Mateo to stop yelling at me, he just supports me while I deal with my brothers on my own. I've never needed help in this arena, and the twins have always understood that. Seth, however, looks like he wants to intervene and is having a hard time not doing it.

"Of course, you did. You always do. But I had to do what I could to keep them safe. And Elijah was helping me."

"No," Mateo clips. "No. We're not going to talk about Elijah Lopez like he's a good guy. He's as bad as Flores as far as I'm concerned."

Seth's entire demeanor transforms as he raises a hand, palm up, toward Mateo and looks at me. "Thank you!"

"He *did* help me, though," I grit out as they slap palms. "He kept the worst from happening and he helped with Flores at the end. And now he's going to redo the whole operation Flores built so we can use it to find and save a lot of people. He was a jerk, I'm not denying that. But you can't deny that he helped and is continuing to help. He's not as awful as we thought he was."

Seth and Mateo collectively grit their teeth and roll their shoulders, but they don't argue.

"We've got her back now," Sebastian says. "That's the important thing. And Lopez is already making moves. There were a whole lot of displaced betas over in Long Shop a couple days ago."

Michael's head jerks back. "What were you doing in Long Shop?"

"Lito's."

Michael nods. "That's the only good thing about that shit hole."

"So, now that you're finished yelling at me," I start, but Mateo interrupts.

"We weren't yelling at you, Desie. We have been so worried. We knew something wasn't right, but we had to trust that you'd let us know when it was time to storm the castle."

"I know," I smile at my brother. "But it's over now. And I need you to do something."

"What do you need us to do?"

"Stand guard while Talia has the baby. I'll be helping with the delivery. Amber and Cera can help too since I was going to ask both your packs to help as well. With everything going on, we don't want the baby to be born at the hospital, you know?"

Mateo looks across the room at Dom. "Yeah?"

Cera answers for him, though. "Yes," says, digging her elbow into Dom's side. "Talia will need to meet all of us first, though."

"Exactly," I smile. "Which brings us to the cookout. We'd like to do a big one here so everyone can meet each other."

Mateo rolls his eyes. "With all of us and the nine of them, it's going to be more than a cookout. It's going to be a backyard party that spreads across the neighborhood."

"I know."

"And we think this is a good idea?" Dom asks. "A safe idea?"

"It'll be as safe as it is right now," Lucas shrugs. "Maybe safer since the whole block will get involved inside of an hour."

The conversation turns into a battle plan involving food and plates, ending with me texting Talia to confirm everything with her pack. Corso was right, Trent's excitement about it all is comically obvious. By the time I kick my

brothers out of my house, I'm ready to go back to bed and be left alone for a while. Left alone in the middle of my boys.

Chapter Thirty-One

Ben

We won't be able to have the cookout just yet. Talia's pack is all twitchy because Jasper is due to go into heat in the next few days. That's fine, it gives us more time to get everything and everyone ready.

I've never really been around a male omega. I've only known of one or two, and that was from a distance. Honestly, I haven't spent too much time thinking about how it would be for a male to have a heat cycle. Our mom made sure we knew enough about both male and female omegas, that we'd be okay taking care of one if that's how everything turned out for us, but we always knew it would be Desie so we only really gave it one ear. I did, anyway. Michael probably paid more attention and retained more, he's good like that. But now that our family will include a male omega, I'm starting to remember things I forgot I knew.

Mom always said that if you meet your omega, whether they were male or female, you'd just know and what they were wouldn't matter. That's fine and all, but what if a male omega found his pack but they were all males and that

wasn't anything any of them were interested in? What then? I don't know what I'd do in that position. That would feel... so...

"What are you thinking about that's making you have that face?" Seth asks. He sits down on the porch steps beside me and stretches his legs out.

"Where are your shoes?"

He looks down at his feet and flexes his toes. "In the house. What's wrong with you? You feel weird."

"You feel weird," I counter, and nudge his knee with mine. "I was thinking about Jasper."

"Why?"

"He's a male omega."

He raises his brows and lifts a hand to motion me to continue.

"I was thinking," I puff out a breath. Blunt is usually best. "I was thinking that it would be weird to be a male omega and go into heat. I was thinking that it might be strange to have a male omega and deal with him going into heat. Like, what if he wasn't into me or I wasn't into him but he was still my omega. Is it like that for Jasper? That's horrible if it is. He shouldn't have to live like that. Or what if it was one sided? I don't know, I was just thinking."

Seth laughs at me. Laughs. "Ben, it isn't like that for Jasper, I promise. But I'm sure he'd appreciate you worrying after him."

"How is it, then? Talia said he's going into heat. What would that even be like?"

Seth laughs again. "For one, didn't you study omega anatomy at all? And for two, I don't have any personal experience with a male omega in heat, but based on what I've heard, it's pretty similar to a female omega's heat cycle. I mean, there are obvious anatomical differences, but the concept is the same minus pregnancy. If your omega is in need, you provide."

"But what if he doesn't want it?"

Seth sighs. "That's a problem nobody wants. And I'm glad Jasper doesn't have to deal with that." He sighs again. "This probably isn't information I should share, but I don't think they'd mind. Trent and Nathan never had male partners before Jasper. I don't know about Devon and Kaleb."

"How did they handle that?"

"I wasn't close with them," he says. "I haven't been close with them until after the compound. But they don't seem to be bothered at all. They're obviously pretty happy about how things worked out."

"With Talia."

He cuts his eye at me. "Before Talia. For them, Talia is what is commonly referred to as a happy accident. They weren't planning for her, and they weren't trying to get her before Jasper decided for them that she was going to be theirs. It was purely coincidental that she ended up an omega. The minute she met Jasper everything was decided, it just took time to get them there. And then there is the Zaphir pack side of things...I don't want to get into that mess if you don't mind. Why are you so deep in this? Did something happen that I don't know about?"

Now it's my turn to sigh. "No, nothing happened. I was just thinking about how awful it would be to be a male omega going into heat with an all-male pack if you weren't into men. Then I thought about having a male omega if I wasn't into men. Just thoughts."

"Well, that explains the weird feeling. Jasper is fine. Trent and Nathan are fine. And if it had turned out that you'd have a male omega, you would have been fine. But you have Desie and you don't have to worry about that."

He's right, but I'm probably still going to think about it. Especially now that I know a male omega personally and Desie wants so many kids, one is bound

to end up with a male of some designation. "So," I drag out the word, "about how long do Jasper's heats last?"

"Based purely on observed behaviors and whatnot," Seth hums. "About like any other omega. But they have mentioned that his cycles are different when Talia is pregnant. So, maybe this one will be shorter than it normally would be."

Good. A shorter heat means less time between now and food. Sure, we can cook the same stuff anytime, but when it's in large quantities and being shared with a lot of people it tastes better.

A week later, Jasper's heat is done and over. Food has been bought and prepared. Tables, grills, smokers, and roasting pits have been set and prepared. And people are officially piling into our yard. That's not entirely accurate. People are piling into our entire neighborhood. Our house is the central location with our pack, Talia's, Mateo's, Sebastian's, and even Minos's. Yeah, that was wild to come to terms with. The head of our council manning a grill in my backyard wasn't exactly on the list of things I thought might happen in my lifetime, but here we are.

Everyone in the neighborhood is out. I don't think there's a single empty yard. Kids are everywhere. Even Talia's kids. That was hard, though. I get being overprotective of your kids, especially considering all that's happened. But they're literally surrounded by all of us. Trent had to be convinced it was safe for their kids to go play with the rest of them. Not Zetty, though. Zetty's sour little self is staying on the porch with her mama while Jasper and Nathan run around with the rest of the kids.

We do, however, have a bit of an interesting development unfolding. Things must be different on the East Coast, but here packs start clumping together from a young age. Some of those packs gather around their omega

even as kids, like what happened with us and Desie. Sweet little Iris is currently being doted on and surrounded by a group of neighborhood boys. Two of them, Joseph and Cody, are our cousins on our dad's side. Neither of them is very old, maybe seven or eight, but they run with Brandon. Brandon isn't related to any of us, but he belongs to all of us. His parents are some of the many who have disappeared, so every mother in the neighborhood takes care of him, especially Joseph's and Cody's. Michael and I have been worrying about how he'll turn out and if he'll end up in Long Shop. If things go the way they look like they're going to, Long Shop won't be an option for a multitude of reasons.

Somehow, a little girl barely old enough to throw a fit has three boys picking flowers and blowing bubbles for her. Boys who are usually in the thick of whatever small-time shenanigans happen to be available. It makes me wonder if that's what we looked like following Desie around. It's also the reason the vein in Devon's temple is visible and why Trent is walking around rubbing his chest.

"Sit down and drink this," Talia says, dragging Trent into a chair and handing him a beer. "They're just being kids." She leans over him as much as she can and kisses his cheek.

"Bullshit. She's not even three years old and look at them," he clips, "swarming her."

Talia swallows a laugh and kisses him again. "They're just little boys."

"My ass. They're stubby little vultures. Wolves circling our baby. Ouch! Hey!" he yelps as Talia pinches his side.

"They're little boys, Daddy. They could be pulling her hair and being little shits, but they're picking flowers and showing her bugs. Be happy they're not like my brothers were and how you probably were."

Trent pulls her around to sit on his lap. "Keep calling me Daddy and we can go find an empty room somewhere."

"No, no," I cut in, smirking at their display. "None of that. There are no empty rooms within a two-mile radius."

Zetty comes up to me, batting her bright green eyes as she reaches to be picked up. I bend down to scoop her up and tweak her nose. "You okay, sweetheart?" She wants something. I've been around her enough to know that the only time she bats her eyes is when she wants something.

"I want a mato, please," she says, sounding much older than almost three. The way she says tomato kills me though. She and her sister are much more reserved, and quieter, than their brother. Dutch is a good kid, but he's a handful and a half.

"Well, let's go find you one," I say, then grin. "And maybe a piece of cake. Or some cookies. I know we have some ice cream in the freezer. Let's go find something good to go with your mato."

She actually smiles at me. I'll give her the whole kitchen.

"Oh no," Talia groans. "You're as bad as the rest of them are."

"What?" I laugh. "There's a neighborhood party going on, she needs treats. It's a requirement."

I've got one foot in the door when I hear tires squealing around the corner. Then I hear the screams. The last thing I register before going to the ground to cover Zetty's little body with mine is gunfire.

My mind is raging at me to go find my pack. Desie was inside the house a few minutes ago. She was washing the cherry tomatoes Zetty was after. I don't feel anything but worry coming through her bond. I can feel anger and distress coming from Michael and Seth and I crane my neck to try to find them.

Devon crawls to me from inside the house and pulls Zetty away from me and inside where it's safer. "Desir'ee is okay. She's with Alex, Reid, and Jasper in the kitchen. She's safe."

I knew she was alright, but hearing Devon say it sends relief flooding through me. "Okay."

Whatever I was going to say next is cut off by vicious snarling and another shot, then more screams.

"Let her go!" I hear Michael roar.

Then more snarling. I can't see shit over the damn bushes in front of the porch railing.

More tires screaming on the asphalt, then a woman crying out, "run! Get inside! Go!"

Fuck this. I stand up and cover Trent while he gets Talia inside and into Devon's arms. She turns wide blue eyes back to Trent, and he nods back at her.

"Do you recognize any of them?" Trent growls.

I shake my head. I don't. I don't know the cars or any of the rogues plowing through the river of people racing to get into houses. What else could they be but rogues. If Lopez has betrayed us, I'm going to do worse than kill him. I scan the crowd, frantically searching for my brother's blue hat or Seth's red hair.

I find Michael stomping into the side of a body, while holding tightly to a nearly hysterical Rose. Seth is kneeling on the ground next to another body. More relief courses through me. My pack is okay.

The remaining rogues pile back into their cars and squeal away, screaming out vague threats containing the name Flores. Most everyone has found their way inside. It looks like Rose might have been a target and they missed

thanks to Michael and Seth. They were probably here for some revenge with the bonus of taking innocents to line their pockets now that their cash cow is missing.

Then Seth stands up and turns toward me. Deep red is spreading up the side of his white tee shirt, I can see it almost pooling between the fingers he has clamped over the wound. Fuck. Maybe Rose wasn't the target.

I quickly make my way to Seth's side to help him across the yards to our house. By the time we get to the porch he's giving me enough of his weight to worry me and he's covered in sweat.

"Desir'ee?" he wheezes.

"I'm here," Desie says, shoving her way past Reid to lift Seth's other arm across her shoulders. "You're going to be okay."

Any relief or hope I dared to feel is instantly destroyed when Trent's stricken eyes meet mine from the corner of the house.

Talia pushes past Reid, jerking her hand away from his when he tries to keep her from going outside. She looks from me, to the blood on Seth's shirt, to Trent, then abruptly stops, putting one hand on her upper chest and the other on her stomach.

"Where's Iris?"

I don't like the idea of making anyone feel like they need to read this, but here are the places you can find me:

@avanne_michaels_author on Tiktok

@avanne_michaels_author on Instagram

@Avanne.Michaels on Facebook

I also have an entire website where you can find information about what's going on with me, what I'm working on, what my release schedule is, and even more contact information.

<https://avanne-michaels.square.site>