



EVERLEY FALLS

UNSTEADY

Rivers and Roads • Book One

A CONTEMPORARY OMEGAVERSE ROMANCE

UNSTEADY
Rivers and Roads
Book 1

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OceanofPDF.com

Unsteady by Everley Falls

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World Information

This book is set in an alternate universe—aka, the omegaverse. Welcome!

Books in the omegaverse come in many different flavors, the common thread being the existence of different “dynamics” amongst humans (or aliens or shifters or what have you). Each person is designated as an alpha, beta, or omega, and each has their own unique biological quirks.

If you’re not familiar with this genre, I recommend a quick Google search to clear up any confusion. The world of this series has its own quirks, and these are described thoroughly in-book.

Additionally, like many omegaverse books this is a reverse harem or “why choose” romance, which means the main character does not have to choose between her love interests.

Now, to the book!

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Esperanza

I lunge for the plate, catching it just before it can finish its slide down the precarious mountain of dishware drying beside the sink. “*Gracias a Dios,*” I whisper to myself. I’d been carefully assembling said mountain for the past hour, slowly turning the disgusting mess of a kitchen back into a workspace suitable for human food preparation.

Grabbing a clean towel out from under the counter, I quickly dry the rescued plate and move a few other dishes cautiously over before they too make an ill-advised leap to freedom. They’d end up leaving the house in pieces, in the garbage, cuddled up to the unmentionably moldy food I just threw away. But at least they’d make it out. These days it’s hard not to wonder about the price *I’d* willingly pay to finally get myself out of this house.

With a sigh I turn back to the sink, still full of soapy bubbles, and resume washing the dishes. I try to stay focused on my task instead of letting my gaze drift out the window to the backyard. It won’t do any good to tease myself with the sight of the outdoors right now, and if my dad catches me slacking there will be hell to pay. Again. Glancing at the clock instead, I see it’s nearing eleven o’clock and I’ll be expected to have lunch on the table soon. Something light will have to do today. This morning was the first time my dad let me out of my room in four days, and I’ve had no chance to put in a grocery order like I normally would.

Bedroom, cage, prison, torture chamber . . . These words are all synonyms in my world.

I shiver slightly thinking back on his latest round of experiments. The hot water encasing my arms does nothing to chase away the chills that crawl down my back. I finish the last dishes quickly, making sure to drain the sink and rub it down until the white porcelain is shiny enough that I can see my face in it. My father constantly tries to instill in me the lesson that a woman's kitchen is a reflection of her virtue—and by extension, her value—as a mate. It's probably the only reason he lets me out of my room at all, so I can practice serving my future husband.

In a weird way, that's one of the things I've come to despise him for the most. I actually love cooking, cleaning, and organizing. Those activities have always soothed me—even before my omega nature formally made itself known. But over the past couple of years he's twisted it, turning my biology into shackles and forcing me to hate a part of myself I've always loved.

I move to the fridge, pulling out a few sad-looking vegetables from the crisper drawer. Looks like it's a soup day, and if I'm lucky I'll be able to thaw out a few of the chicken meatballs I made a month ago to round out the meal. I allow myself to hum softly under my breath as I go through the motions of washing, chopping, and simmering, everything on autopilot.

My mother always used to sing to my brother and me when we were younger, and it's one of the only remaining ways I have to feel close to her. Sometimes I wonder how my life would be different if she hadn't died, wonder if maybe my father wouldn't have snapped and taken on such extremist views. We were happy once upon a time, but the pain of losing my mother to a freak medical accident is something none of us seem able to move on from. I was only ten when she went to the hospital for a simple surgery to fix a herniated disc in her back, a leftover injury from a horse-riding accident in her youth. She reacted poorly to the anesthesia, and before the doctors could do a thing, she was gone. A rare allergy, they told us. My memories from that time are numbed by shock and grief, but I do clearly remember how I made my first rudimentary nest and lay with my brother in there for days while we just held each other and cried.

Designations don't typically reveal themselves until puberty, but my family always suspected I'd be an omega. It's relatively rare for a family of betas, but not unheard of. There was supposedly an omega on my mom's side of the family a generation or two ago and my dad has a second cousin who is an

alpha. It was something about my eyes, my mom used to say. She liked to talk about how when I was a baby I would just sit and stare at her and she'd feel like I was seeing into every nook and cranny of her soul. I never really understood what she meant by that, or why she thought that made me an omega. Mom never got to see my awakening, but I like to think she knows and is somewhere out there smug and satisfied by her impeccable predictive skills.

The soup is almost done, the meatballs sizzling in a skillet, when I hear the door to my father's study creak open.

I can feel my heart pounding in time with his footsteps as I rush to grab a bowl and spoon, pausing to pull a beer out of the fridge. By the time he's made it to the kitchen I'm serenely ladling the soup into his dish and adding a few meatballs on top. I keep my eyes lowered as I approach him at the bar counter, making sure not to touch him as I cautiously arrange the steaming bowl and cold beer.

"And what's this then?" he asks, taking a long pull from his bottle while eyeing my offering. "Soup?"

"I was remiss in making sure we had the right groceries. Please forgive me, sir. It won't happen again," I murmur, still keeping my eyes trained on the ground.

Everything is my fault, I've learned. The best way to avoid angering him is to remain submissive and meek—the perfect picture of a proper omega daughter. Or so he insists. We didn't have many dedicated alpha/omega studies in school, seeing as how most people in my rural school district are betas, but I had always understood that equality for all designations was the default in society. I grew up being taught that everyone has value, regardless of designation, and although different designations naturally have to contend with distinct biological dictations, anyone can be or do anything they want.

It hasn't always been this way, of course. Back in my grandparents' generation, omegas were expected to keep house while betas were often kept out of positions of power and treated more as blue-collar laborers. Alphas sat comfortably in a position of unquestioned power. But times have changed.

For most of society, that is.

“Soup isn’t a filling meal for an alpha. How will you feed your mate if all you offer them is water and vegetables?” my father scolds, frowning at me as he tastes the soup.

“Let me get you more meatballs,” I reply, moving quickly back to the stove to avoid him seeing the way my teeth are biting sharply into my cheek.

“You will read the latest issue of *Omega at Home* and write me an essay on the best foods to prepare for your alpha. This afternoon. After your chores,” he states, separating each sentence with a perfunctory sip of soup. “And you will write out a meal plan covering one month of meals to provide for your future mate.”

“Yes, sir,” I murmur obediently.

He likes to make up written assignments for me to supplement my “hands-on” training. We now have a small library of books touting the virtues of a good omega and how to please an alpha mate or mates. Typically, omegas end up with packs of alphas. Though every alpha my father has brought by have been flying solo. I started checking publication dates out of boredom, and so far, he hasn’t given me one book published within the past three decades. Some of the magazines he makes me read seem to come straight out of a different era, and I suspect he gets them from members of his BFOS group. *Betas for Order and Submission*. The insidious group that at first seemed harmless, if bizarre, and that is now holding me hostage to this terrible fate.

My brother and I were happy at first to see that our dad was getting out of the house and finding ways to occupy his time after losing Mom. I was too busy with school and friends to really pay much attention to what he was doing or who he was hanging out with. The acronym meant nothing to me, though it did make me nervous when people noticed his affiliation in public, catching sight of our bumper sticker or his branded T-shirt or hat. Some would give us a hostile look and move away, while others would grin and give a small, knowing nod. Both reactions made me squirm.

“Make sure dinner is better.”

I jump slightly at the sound of his voice, having gotten lost in my own mental trap of despair. “Yes, sir.”

“And have that essay to me before the game tonight.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And for Gods’ sake, you look like a mess. You need to do better, Esperanza. You disappoint me.”

I remain frozen as he walks out with that parting shot. “Yes, sir,” I finally whisper, glad he’s far enough away not to hear the bitter edge to my voice.



By the time I make it back to my room that evening I’m barely able to stand. Gods forbid my father do anything to clean up after himself; while I was locked away for the past four days he left my chores to pile up. Four days’ worth of back-breaking work squeezed into one miserable session. It doesn’t help that my body is still recovering from the lack of food. I’ve learned the hard way I can’t make up for lost calories by just stuffing my face once I’m finally released from one of my father’s “experiments.” My stomach shrinks in size when it doesn’t get any food, and all I can tolerate for the following day or so are thin broths. I managed to get down some of the soup I made for lunch, but for now, all I can do is rest.

This was the first time he’s locked me away for four days. Normally he sticks to three—just enough to make my body desperate, as he likes to say. I shudder involuntarily at the mere thought of the explanations he gives for his experiments.

His lecturing started about three years ago, back when my brother was still at home. My father would sit us both down and start spouting off about the proper roles of each designation and how it was our duty to make the most of our station in life. At first I just thought it was annoying, and Em and I would entertain each other by seeing who could get in the biggest eye roll when our dad wasn’t looking. But then the tone of the lectures started changing and he began hosting meetings at our house for the BFOS.

Em was a senior in high school and took every excuse to stay out of the

house. If he wasn't at school or studying, he was with his friends. He was good about keeping me with him when he could, but when he started an after-school job, Dad began insisting on picking me up from school the moment it let out and bringing me home to do chores. I did my best to stay out of the way of the men in his BFOS group, but it always felt like there were creepy crawlies running up the back of my neck whenever they were in the house.

I quickly strip off my clothes, throwing them into the hamper in my closet before pulling on a pair of sweats and an old T-shirt of Em's.

The nest in the corner of my room beckons me like a poisonous flower, calling out in all its soft, fluffy glory. Every few weeks my dad presents me with new types of pillows and blankets and then watches over me as I rearrange everything. Most omegas find comfort in constructing and burrowing deep inside these elaborate piles of bedding and cushions. It's supposedly a biological urge that drives us to create a space where we feel protected. I'm no exception to the rule, but it's been years since I slept in mine.

I give it a perfunctory glance, allowing the customary longing to wash over me for a moment before I turn away. Then, reaching into the bottom drawer of my dresser, I grab out Old Faithful—my nickname for the ugliest and itchiest blanket known to humankind.

The faded brown-and-yellow pattern looks like rotting leaves, and it smells like spoiled beer and BO. I found it in Em's room after he left for college, a staple from when he used to sneak out at night and drink with his friends in the field behind the old Miller farm. It's impossible to get comfortable on the ratty thing, which unfortunately is exactly what I need.

Ever since I turned seventeen my dad has been trying to trigger my heat. I am determined to make sure he fails—by any means possible.

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Esperanza

I'm up early the following morning, crawling over to shut off my old-fashioned alarm clock before it can wake my father. He took my phone away two years ago, so I've had to settle for the janky old relic I found in a box in our basement, or I'll risk oversleeping and having him discover my rebellious sleep routine. I don't even want to imagine how he'd react to learning that every night I sleep on the floor in the middle of my room, wrapped in a scratchy old blanket.

I do a quick series of stretches before heading to my closet, making sure to pick out one of the outfits guaranteed to meet my father's approval. My dark brown hair is mussed from sleep, so I take a moment to throw it into a quick bun before tiptoeing to the bathroom across the hall. It wouldn't do to wake my father up this early. It is an omega's place, after all, to rise early and see to the needs of her alpha. As much as I know my father is working to bring on my heat so he can sell me off, I suspect he enjoys playing alpha and having me at his beck and call. All under the guise of ensuring I'm properly "trained," of course.

I shut the bathroom door and begin my routine, starting the shower and catching my wan reflection in the mirror above the sink as I wait for the water to heat up. The girl staring back at me makes me want to cringe. Her skin looks pinched and sallow. The bones in her face are too prominent and her eyes appear far too sunken in her head, with bags that look like bruises puffing out underneath them. Her lips are pale and chapped, her hair dull where it rests in its bun. Her hazel eyes, just like her mother's, are haunted

and lifeless as they take in her appearance.

I look away, brushing my teeth before grabbing the small jar of coconut oil I keep on the sink to dab over my lips.

I try to ignore my body as I strip out of my clothes, eager to crawl under the now steaming water. My body still hints at the hourglass figure many omegas have, but mine is a shrunken, battered version. My body's still primed to hold onto fat to pad out my breasts and hips, but continuous rounds of my father's food-deprivation experiments have steadily eaten away at those reserves. My ribs and hip bones look too pronounced and always feel slightly bruised when I wake up, no doubt in protest of my nights spent sleeping on the hardwood floor with Old Faithful. This is nothing compared to my *real* bruises, of course.

The water feels divine, and I let out a small moan as I slip into the shower.

Time flies by far too quickly as I go through the motions of washing up, and before I know it, I'm out of the shower and pulling on my clean clothes.

It's nearing 6:30 a.m. when I reach the kitchen, the sun just starting to filter in through the windows in the living room. I take time to carefully braid my hair as I wait for the kettle to boil, then I go about preparing my father's breakfast. I'm required to have his food ready by seven, then after he eats we go over my "assignments" for the day.

Bastardo. I roll my eyes internally just thinking about his stupid rules.

I'm not allowed outside unsupervised, not even around our property. My father instigated that rule about a year ago when I ran to a neighbor's house, desperate to get help after finally learning his full plans for me. It was just my luck that sweet Mrs. Wilcox's eldest son was also a member of BFOS. I was back home twenty minutes later, my father practically apoplectic.

That's a night I prefer not to dwell on.

I was on house arrest for a while, but then Dad begrudgingly started letting me out to tend to the garden and take care of other outdoor chores. Albeit on the condition I wear a leash. An actual freaking *leash*. Like, for a dog. He set up these medieval poles all over our property and chains me to different ones depending on which task he's assigned me. I tried to yank one out of the

ground a few months back, but he must have installed concrete bases too, because the damn thing didn't budge. Or maybe I'm just that weak. Either way, it was useless.

I shake away my thoughts as I hear his footsteps on the stairs, not wanting him to pick up on the anger constantly simmering in my mind.

“Esperanza. Good morning.” My father runs his eyes over me critically before taking his usual seat at the table.

“Good morning, Father.” I'm dutiful in my reply as I move to serve his coffee, my face a perfect mask to hide the elaborate fantasy playing out in my head of what exactly I'd get up to if only I were as gifted as Bruce Banner.

He says nothing as I bring over a heaping plate of French toast and sausages, inspecting everything before beginning to eat. He has his phone out, looking over emails perhaps. Even with all the time he spends with his BFOS group, he still manages to hold down his job as a property insurance salesman. Or so I assume. He goes into work a few days a week, and the days he works from his home office I sometimes hear him on the phone discussing assessed value, policy limits, premiums, blah blah blah. I far prefer those calls to some of the other things I've overheard in there.

Ten minutes pass and he remains engrossed in the electronic device. I start to feel the familiar ball of nerves gathering in my stomach. I'm expected to stand at attention while he eats, and often he uses this time to give me new assignments or announce plans for his experiments.

Dad pulled me out of school the second semester of my junior year, right after I turned seventeen, getting permission from school administrators to homeschool me. At first I thought, perhaps hoped, he just wanted to get rid of me—that he'd make me take a bunch of online courses so I could graduate early and disappear off to college. I always planned on going. Instead he stripped me of my freedoms one by one.

Then the experiments started.

For months I just thought they were punishments. Cruel, abusive, undoubtedly illegal punishments. A twisted way for him to work out whatever anger he was carrying, picking on the weakest member of his

family since Em was no longer around to look out for me. He cut off my access to the outside world early on, taking away my phone, putting controls on my computer, and forbidding me from touching the mail. I kept waiting for Em to come home and see what was happening, to get me out of here, but he never did.

The first set of holidays passed, then the second. Then a whole summer went by. I still have no idea where Em is or why he hasn't returned for me. Sometimes I worry something bad happened to him, and other times I decide he's forgotten about me or doesn't care. But thoughts like those can make me spiral fast, so mostly I try to lock away my emotions and focus on getting through life one day at a time.

"I'll be having a guest over tonight," my father announces suddenly, and I turn my attention back to him.

"A guest?"

"Mr. Vessnick. Make sure you prepare something special for dinner, and I expect you to look the part."

What part? I think to myself, though I already know the answer. The part of the pretty, submissive omega. A glorified show pony.

"Yes, sir."

I keep myself together while my father finishes his breakfast, but as soon as he disappears to his office, I allow my knees to give out underneath me.

Mr. Vessnick is horrible. An alpha in his late forties my dad has invited over several times this past year. He describes the man as someone "interested in my development," which I know is just code for him being a prospective buyer. How evil must you have to be to purchase an omega on the black market? We're rare, but not so rare that most alphas don't eventually find an omega to join their pack. All the men my father brings around seem to be packless, which is a sure sign everyone agrees they're trash human beings.

I turn nineteen in a few months, and I think my father is getting more desperate. More and more often he's been inviting alphas to watch his *experiments* on me, probably hoping that having an alpha around will help force my body into heat. I don't know enough about my own biology to

figure out his exact strategy, and it's terrifying not knowing what to do to try and counteract his efforts other than stay out of my nest and keep my emotions shut down.

Last time Mr. Vessnick was here my father tied me up in only my underwear and beat me with his belt. In between his hits, the psycho alpha would come over and stroke me, petting the skin on my arms and stomach and rubbing against my breasts. He even scent-marked me a few times, and I literally threw up from the moldy smell pouring out of his glands.

It was terrifying, humiliating, and painful. And the *experiments* keep getting worse.

I don't know what my father has planned for this evening, but I'm absolutely certain it can't be anything good. A keen desperation spikes in me, telling me I have to escape. If only I knew how. All the doors and windows have electronic locks on them, and I don't have any means of communication. I've thought through every scenario a million times, but as I push myself back off my knees, I vow to think of the millionth and one.

I don't want to die in this house, but neither do I want to leave it sold off as a slave.

Seas fuerte, Espy, I tell myself.

I can do this.



The hours pass by too quickly, and despite my determination I'm yet to come up with a magical escape plan. I go through the motions of my day on autopilot, desperate to latch onto something, anything, that might get me out. The more minutes that tick away, the higher my panic builds.

There *are* the kitchen knives—a thought I've had before but ultimately shied away from. I'm not a violent person, and even living under this abuse it's hard to imagine ever using one of those things with the intent to do harm. Not to mention, would I even be able to overpower more than one person? I might

have a chance of winning a surprise attack, but at only five foot two and as starved as I've been it feels impossible to imagine taking down multiple men. Especially if there's an alpha around. That's not even including the fact that injuring—or, Gods forbid, killing—my father might be a dead end. Emotional trauma aside, all the locks are controlled from his phone, so what if I incapacitate him only to become trapped in my own home?

No puedes rendirte. I clench my jaw, forcing myself to think things through. The hours have flown by, and I'm currently in my room getting dressed for what's sure to be a nightmare of a dinner.

Just because I can't unlock the doors or windows doesn't necessarily mean I can't get outside. There must be something in here that will break glass, right? Even if it sets off an alarm and summons the police. Actually, that would be perfect, assuming my dad doesn't have BFOS buddies on the force . . . I could always make a run for it, sticking to the woods and not going to any neighbors. I'm not sure where I'd go, but if I could just make it into town, I'd surely be able to find somewhere public where someone would be able to help me contact my brother.

It feels crazy. And daunting. But a glance at the clock confirms I've run out of time.

My father is still in his office, so I race as silently as I can down the stairs and into the kitchen. The duck I prepared earlier is keeping warm in the oven and the space is spotless, showing no trace of all the hours I put into making the meal. Just as I've been trained.

I walk over to the block of knives.

Something too big doesn't seem practical. Where would I put it, and how would I avoid cutting myself? But would something smaller be enough to defend myself? I start to lose my nerve as my mind floods with all the "what-ifs" and "hows" and "whens."

The sound of tires coming up the long dirt track reaches my ears, and I know I need to act. Now.

I quickly grab one of the paring knives and rush back up to my room, where I tuck it safely under a pillow in my nest. I will use it tonight. I'll make it

through whatever torture my father has planned and then wait until he's asleep. Then I'll do what I have to do to ensure I make it out and that I won't be followed. Not allowing myself to second-guess my decision, I hurry back downstairs to dutifully take up my position behind my father by the front door.

All I can do now is pray this night goes by quickly.



Mr. Vessnick appears, looking just as malicious as he does in my memories.

The man is easily recognizable as an alpha, his body large and muscular, his demeanor dripping with self-righteous superiority. *#NotAllAlphas* and all that, but the ones my father brings around seem to embody the worst of every cliché I've ever heard.

I do my best to disassociate, locking my mind away tight so I'm nothing more than a bot going through the motions. I endure the oily, spoiled scent that washes over me when Mr. Vessnick greets me with a leer and a hug that lingers nearly as long as his possessive gaze. I serve drinks, and then dinner, and then dessert, my composure unflinching aside from a slight trembling I just can't shake off. I tune in and out of their conversation, dreading whatever comes next. No amount of dread will save me, of course, and in the blink of an eye my father is gripping my arm and forcing me up into my room.

Putting up a fight doesn't help, I've learned. It just angers him—*embarrasses* him, as he says—and whatever pain I'm in for gets worse.

Vessnick follows us into my room and takes up a deceptively casual stance against the wall. I close my eyes as I follow my father's orders, stripping off my clothes down to my underwear as my mind locks down tight.

Sobrevivirás, I mentally chant. *Será igual que antes*.

I detach myself even further. The only thought in my head is of the knife I know is hidden in my nest. My hands are bound, as they always are, and soon my father's belt is punishing in its relentless rhythm against my body. He's

come to favor the sides of my stomach, my hips, and my thighs, having found these places are the most painful. He's speaking, as he always does. Telling me this is for my own good, that he's helping me fulfill my Gods'-given duty as an omega. That I can end this pain, that Vessnick will end this pain, if only I accept him. He will protect me, and I only have my own stubbornness to blame for him putting me through this.

Blow after blow after blow. I block out his voice; it's poison and nothing more. The bruises that never quite fade bloom once more across my skin, the ugly purple overlaid by an angry red that grows brighter with each strike. I'm not so tough that I don't cry out, begging him to stop. My body trembles with the pain.

"Come closer," my father says, and I know without opening my eyes he's speaking to Vessnick. Even knowing this would happen, I'm not prepared for the vile scent, and I gag violently at the monster's first stroke down my chest and stomach.

"I can save you," he murmurs in my ear, the words sounding mocking and spiteful.

"Don't touch me," I spit, wrenching my head away as I gasp for fresh air.

His scent smothers me as my father continues his beating, and Vessnick's hands resume their wandering. I feel dirty, broken, and desperate, but I know I can survive this. And eventually, as I knew it must, the torture ends and I'm left in a sobbing heap on the floor. I sigh out in relief, waiting to hear the men's angry retreat as is their routine, but instead I feel a pair of arms tugging me up and dragging me over to my nest.

"No—stop!" I cry out, thrashing against the hold. Whatever this is, I know it can't be good.

My words go unheeded, and suddenly I'm being pressed into the pillows and blankets and a heavy weight pins me against the mattress. I'm so frightened by this escalation that my mind blacks out. All I feel is terror as I struggle to get free. Could this be it? Did my body betray me and go into heat? Can I not tell in my damaged state? The only saving grace of my father's experiments was his insistence that an omega remain pure for her mate or mates—which offered the tiny comfort I wouldn't be raped by the men he brought over. But

now, as I feel the hands upon me, I think maybe I've lost the battle against my own body. Maybe it's given up and given in to the alpha on top of me and everything is over. My life is over, and I was too late, too *weak*, to save myself.

There's grunting, and my eyes fly open involuntarily to see what's happening. I immediately wish they hadn't.

Vessnick is just a dark shape on top of me, straddling my waist, but there's enough light for me to see his pants are open and his hand is stroking the large appendage between his legs. I shriek and thrash, desperate to get away, but Vessnick just chuckles.

"Settle down, omega. I like 'em feisty, but your yelling is giving me a headache."

"Be careful," I hear my father say from somewhere else. "I can't have you pushing her over the edge and wasting all my hard work. Just get off and rub it into her."

Get off?!?! Is my father telling this alpha to . . . to . . . fucking masturbate on me? The thought is so revolting I retch, turning my head as the bile spills out and over my pillows.

"Disgusting," Vessnick sneers, and I groan in pain as his palm strikes my face. "You need more training, omega."

I have an instant of relief as he moves off me, only to be crushed when I feel him flip me over and settle back down on my hips. Despite my bound hands I attempt to crawl forward, away from his assault, and it's then that my hands brush against cold metal.

The knife!

My plan was to use it against my father when he was sleeping, and I don't know if it can save me from a fully alert alpha *and* beta, but I have to try. My fingers clutch the handle, and, taking a deep breath, I use all my strength to twist my body, swinging my hands wildly at Vessnick as I go.

I feel the knife hit, but against what I have no idea. I continue thrashing my hands, intent on doing as much damage as I possibly can in this one window I

have. I hear cursing, and then there's pain—sharp pain—against my arm and my side. Angry shouting fills the room as my brain struggles to process what happened, but before I can figure it out, I'm being yanked off the nest and thrown to the floor. My head hits the edge of my dresser, and despite my desperation to remain alert, everything fades to black.

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Lincoln

“Are you sure this is the right way?” I ask, frowning over at my packmate.

“I’m sure,” Leo replies, his voice tight.

“I recall you saying that once before . . .”

“Linc.” He cuts me off, a threatening growl escaping his chest.

I sigh, knowing my nagging is doing nothing to help. “Sorry, man.”

Our eyes connect briefly, and he gives me a short nod before going back to staring out the front windshield. I return my own focus to the road, knowing I need to concentrate. It’s dark as hell out here, and even my headlights seem to be sucked up by the heavy shadows of the trees pressing in on all sides. It’s hard not to feel a little spooked. Between the oppressive darkness outside and the thick tension inside the car, it’s no wonder I’m on edge.

Deep breaths, I remind myself. This is just another mission. Stay focused and execute the task.

I risk another quick glance at Leo, taking in his rigid posture and white knuckles from where he’s gripping his seat too hard. “You don’t know what we’re walking into,” I remind him softly.

Honestly, the words aren’t as comforting as I want them to be, even to my own ears.

While my intention was to talk him off the cliff of worst-case scenarios,

saying it out loud forms a stark reminder that this is an unauthorized, minimally planned mission I'm undertaking with a civilian. An emotionally compromised civilian.

Leo came to me two days ago, uncharacteristically serious. I've only known my packmate for a little over a year, having met him and his buddy coincidentally at one of the giant mixers our university throws every quarter. I was technically working security that night, but on a break, I saw him and Tanner trying to work up the nerve to approach a group of girls. I sidled up to give them shit and offer my own unsolicited advice. They both struck out—pretty brutally in Tanner's case—but I kept finding them during my breaks, and by the time the evening was over we were exchanging numbers and planning a night out the following evening to help them over their bruised egos.

They were both freshmen at the time while I was a junior, and it didn't take us long to fall into a loose pack structure. Not all betas opt for the pack dynamic these days, but Tanner and I being alphas, it was natural for our friendship to turn into more, and Leo was more than happy to come along for the ride.

I sometimes wonder how packs have stuck around with the emergence of omega rights and greater equality across all of society's designations. In the past, alphas had to band together to compete for their most precious resource: an omega. Omegas used to not have a say; they'd be hunted and claimed by whichever alpha pack was the strongest and best able to protect their prize. There have always been many fewer omegas than alphas, and in history class we learned how omegas were often kidnapped by feuding packs. As both a limited resource and a spoils of war, omegas served as both the impetus for war as well as the prize. As society evolved, the government eventually stepped in, attempting to make the claiming of omegas a more civilized process, but that only extended as far as substituting bloodshed for blood money. Soon, omegas were put up for sale like any other commodity the government had control over.

That, thankfully, came to an end nearly ninety years ago. Things didn't change overnight, of course, but I'd like to think we've come a long way.

Not all of us, I remind myself, chancing another quick glance over at Leo.

That's why we're here after all. Out in the middle of nowhere at 1:48 in the morning.

Two days ago, Leo came to me on edge, saying he needed to make a trip home and asking if I'd come with him. The guy doesn't talk much about his family, and I always assumed it was a bit of a sore spot for him. When I pressed him on why he needed to make the trip, he told me he was covering extremist groups in one of his pre-law classes, and earlier that day his professor had taught him about some group called "Betas for Order and Submission." He admitted his father was a member—at least he was at the time Leo left for college. He'd always found the members creepy and the teachings, in his words, backward horseshit, but he'd never actually thought of them as dangerous.

Now, though, after hearing his professor describe the group as one of several regional extremist groups that were tipping over into domestic terrorism, he felt differently.

I'll admit I was more than a little angry when he confessed he had a younger sister at home, an omega, whom he hadn't laid eyes on in two years. He said he'd get texts from her occasionally but hadn't spoken to her directly since he left. Hearing about how BFOS preached the role of omegas as subservient, objects to be possessed by alphas, he'd started to panic. Her last message was from months ago and indicated she was forgoing a university degree in favor of getting a job locally while she looked for a mate. While it is true that some omegas—even some betas—opt to find a pack and settle down immediately after high school, it certainly isn't the norm these days.

Leo insisted this wasn't like his sister and begged me to make the trip back to his hometown to check things out. Looking back through his text thread with her, I saw more than enough red flags to have me concerned. Her messages sounded nothing like the girl Leo described. After losing my temper for a few minutes and tearing him a new one, we kicked into gear and put together a plan.

Luckily, this kind of thing is my literal job. I'm not pursuing a standard degree, opting for special ops training after my freshmen year. I was always more of a hands-on guy, and with River Valley being home to both a university and a military base, there are several joint programs on offer. I'm

in my fifth year, one more to go before I'll officially be a graduate and eligible to join a tactical team full-time. I've been on a few low-risk field missions before, but more and more, this situation feels nothing like those.

It's entirely possible we'll get to Leo's childhood home and find nothing but an angry father-daughter pair annoyed at being woken in the middle of the night, pissed their son slash brother was so judgmental of their harmless life choices that he felt the need to make a surprise visit at 2 a.m. On the other hand . . .

"Make a left up here," Leo says, pointing to a small break in the trees ahead of us. "It's just up that road, maybe another five minutes."

"Plan?" I demand. To his credit, Leo doesn't make a fuss despite this being at least the fifth time I've made him recount it on this drive alone.

"Kill the headlights before we reach the first of the neighbors, come in slow and silently. Together we assess the property visually, from the car. If it looks clear, you go in for closer reconnaissance while I remain in the car—"

"With the doors locked," I interrupt.

"With the doors locked," he continues, giving me a small look of annoyance this time. "You'll evaluate next steps based on your assessment. I'll remain in the car with the doors locked. You may decide to access the premises to gather more information or decide it's safe to make contact. Either way, I'll remain in the car with the doors locked. You'll ensure you're able to conduct a visual evaluation of Espy as well as speak to her. I'll remain in the car with the doors locked."

I give him a smile that he begrudgingly returns. Good to know he's finally embraced the need to stay away from the "scene," so to speak. He isn't trained, and although this is his home and his family I can't have him walking into a potentially dangerous situation, compromising his safety and the safety of the inhabitants. It might seem like overkill, but I take my training seriously and know how quickly things can go wrong.

"I'll have my radio on me. If there's an emergency, just hit the yellow button on yours and mine will vibrate. Otherwise, wait for me to contact you."

He nods as I make the turn off the main road. I slow down and dim my lights,

turning them off completely when he wordlessly points to the first of his neighbors' houses. It's slow going from there, the moon barely showing through the clouds. The road at least is fairly well-maintained. It's definitely remote out here, but more in an "I can afford not to deal with other people" kind of way.

"It's the next one down," Leo whispers, and I slow down to practically a crawl.

The house itself is set back about thirty feet from the road. As I come to a stop, I see there's a front porch light on, but otherwise the house and large yard appear dark. It takes my eyes a few seconds to make out objects in the gloom, but as soon as they adjust, I suck in a harsh breath. A high-tech electronic security fence spans the front of the property, cutting off access to the driveway and walkway. I see a familiar set of electronic receivers mounted in the nearest trees, telling me the whole place is wired with cameras and, most likely, an alarm system. It's not until my eyes scan past the outer security system that I feel my body freeze and my blood goes cold.

"Leo, do y'all have a dog?" I ask, dreading the answer but somehow already knowing what it will be.

"You've got to get my sister out of there, Linc." His voice is steely with anger and resolve. "Get her the fuck out of there—right now."

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Lincoln

I automatically blank out my emotions. This situation just ratcheted up to worst-case scenario, and I need to be thinking like the special operative I'm training to be. I can feel Leo practically vibrating next to me, but I can't afford to think about him right now. I can't afford to think about this like it's my packmate's sister being held in that house; like it's his sister whose body gets strapped into the numerous shackles I can see spread out across the yard. They loom like an army of horrific, spindly ghosts peering back at us from the gloom. I can just about make out the chains and what looks like a set of cuffs and a collar attached to each pole.

This place is a prison, and I need to mount a prison break—stat.

My training kicks in and I start to move. Step one is putting on all my gear, already set to go in the seat right behind me. Step two is calling in backup. I may be a young, hardheaded alpha, but I'm trained to know what I can handle and what I can't. I grab my phone and dial in to my command unit.

“This is Masters. I'm up in southern Wyoming on scene of a possible 10-33. Requesting immediate backup. Oh, and one civilian with me, family ties to the likely compound. Be advised.”

I'm on the phone for a few minutes, providing my coordinates and an assessment of the situation. I know a team will be dispatched to our location ASAP, but in the meantime I need advice on how to proceed. As I wait for the intake operator to wake up my commander and get him on the phone, I turn to Leo.

“You with me, man?” I ask, giving him an assessing once-over. He looks like he’s holding himself together, and when he gives me a nod, I decide that’s good enough for me. “My team will be here soon, but in the meantime we’re gonna have to do this right.”

I fish a recorder out of my gear bag, setting it between us and hitting play.

“This is Lincoln Masters, on scene at the site of a presumed extremist compound of BFOS. The time is 2:04 a.m. on September 14, 2007.”

I proceed to rattle off a bunch of other details and then instruct Leo to start taking pictures of everything he can see from the car. Thank goodness I’m always prepared and had my night vision camera ready to go.

Just two minutes pass before I hear my commander’s voice coming through the phone resting in my lap. “What in the Gods-damn hell have you gotten yourself into, Masters?!”

“Commander Willis . . .”

“You’re in some deep shit, son,” he growls, and even through the phone line I feel my muscles tensing from the dominance in his voice.

“I know, sir. And I need you to bail me out.”



Backup will be at least an hour out—impressive considering the two-and-a-half-hour drive it took Leo and I to get here. I’m relieved my commander isn’t making me wait in the car for the others to arrive, as I don’t think my nerves can take it. I toy briefly with the idea of handcuffing Leo to his door to ensure he won’t do anything stupid, but in the end I decide that would be more of a liability.

I make quick work of the security fence with the help of one of the tech guys back at the base. It’s far from military-grade, but the very existence of such a security system surrounding a supposedly ordinary home is a red flag. Combined with the chains, Leo’s concerns about his sister, and the

connection to BFOS, my gut tells me I'm about to enter a home connected to the omega trafficking trade.

There have always been bad people doing bad things in society, but organized omega trafficking is a fairly new brand of evil. At least according to the American military. Biology is a truly fascinating force of nature, and in the case of omegas, their designation apparently evolved to protect them from being forced into packs against their will. But the cost is high. It's well known that omegas tend to be highly sensitive, feeling and responding to emotions more deeply than your average beta or alpha. And once omega rights took hold, allowing omegas to control their own lives and choose their own mates, their biology quickly followed.

It's the very definition of a beautiful tragedy if you ask me.

Now, if omegas experience sexual trauma, such as being bought or kidnapped and raped by one or more alphas, their minds and bodies will be in so much distress they'll lose the will to live and soon pass away. I still remember the anger and sorrow etched on my mom's face when she explained all this to me as a young teen, my fathers' faces ashen at her side. An omega herself, my mother made it a point to give me and my siblings an unabridged account of our history. Alphas, and even some betas, continued trying to overcome this biological quirk for several years, but eventually it seemed most gave up. As disgusting as it is to think about, it was a waste for them to invest the time and money into purchasing a trafficked omega if she or he was simply going to die.

Of course, evil always finds a way.

One of the units at the River Valley military base specializes in omega rights protection and enforcement. I learned from my work with them that at least one organized crime group discovered a work-around to the "distress equals death" issue. If an omega is in heat, the trauma of assault is reduced to the point the omega will survive. Of course, omegas only go into heat if they feel safe. And usually, they only go into heat once they've found a pack.

Again, biology at its best.

That should be enough to protect them, but some truly despicable scum of the earth apparently found a way to brainwash captive omegas to the point of

bringing on their heat. Just a few months ago I was being briefed on a recent case where a raid on a branch of the Alphas First group unearthed evidence of a brainwashing operation. It's not a widespread practice, from what the military has gathered so far, but I fear whatever I find in this house may be along the same lines.

Leo's dad is a beta though. It's unfortunately not unusual to find betas working with alphas on these sorts of things, but the name of the group seems to suggest the mission is beta-driven. Could it be possible that BFOS is capturing and brainwashing omegas to sell off to other betas? Are they trying to form beta-only packs? Or perhaps the group's name is misleading, and the betas are working on behalf of alphas.

I step on a small branch, the crunching sound making me freeze in place halfway to the side of the house.

Focus, Lincoln.

Now's not the time to be puzzling over the why of the situation. Right now, my only job is to locate Leo's sister and secure her. *Esperanza*, I remind myself. Or "Espy," as Leo apparently calls her. I know basically nothing about the girl aside from the basic physical description Leo gave me—short, dark brown hair, young—and I presume she shares Leo's warm, sun-kissed skin tone. Hopefully, I'll be finding out in just a few minutes.

I keep moving after ensuring I didn't disturb anything with my misstep. I'm at the side of the house a few seconds later. A quick inspection tells me that entering through a window is the best course of action; the door looks more high-tech than the windows do, and without someone from the base guiding me through the steps to disable the lock I don't trust myself not to set off some sort of alarm and wake Leo's father.

I enter through what seems to be the living room. The house is dark, only the lights of a few electronics guiding my way. I have the rough layout in my head, and I use a small flashlight to go through each room, methodically checking for any inhabitants or dangerous items. The place is clean and well-maintained. If not for the stacks of BFOS literature I find in the office, I'd say it looks like any other middle-class home I've been in. Nicer even. Almost sterile.

My heart picks up speed as I make my way to the stairs, desperately praying I'll find Espy upstairs in her room, asleep and unharmed. Brainwashing can be reversed, I assume, but what if she isn't even here anymore?

I clench my jaw to drive away that notion. The thought of us being too late, of Leo's sister having already been sold off to some vile, heartless alpha, makes me want to scream. She's eighteen—not an uncommon age for omegas to reach maturity and go into a first heat. If her bastard of a father managed to brainwash her enough to trick her body into responding to an alpha . . .

This is just another mission. This is just another mission. This is just another mission.

I let the mantra take over to blank out my thoughts as I reach the top of the stairs. There are only a few doors leading off the hallway, and I know from Leo that his and Espy's rooms are to the left and their father's to the right. I'm relieved to hear snoring coming from behind their father's door. I affix a quick locking mechanism to the door handle—a small attempt to secure the scene and contain him should he wake up—and double-check Leo's old room and the bathroom to make sure there's no one else hiding up here. And then I can't delay it any longer.

Looking at the closed door to Espy's room, I start to think about that Schrödinger's cat thing from high school Psych classes. Right now, with the door closed, Espy is both safe and unsafe. She's alive, unhurt, happy even, at the same time as she's brainwashed, locked up, perhaps harmed, sold, or—Gods forbid—dead. My hand starts to shake as I extend it, wanting to preserve for a few more precious seconds the suspension of her fate.

I turn the handle and enter cautiously. The room is dark, and it is empty.

FUCK!



My head spins as I frantically scan the room for any sign of Esperanza. From

the scent alone it's obvious an omega was staying here. My nose picks up faded floral notes, but the more prominent aroma is the acrid smell of burned sugar. Classic markings of an omega in distress. The strong scent of whiskey and a sort of burned oil filter in next, along with a few other stale scents of alpha.

My knees buckle as I move toward the nest and get assaulted by sharp copper. The smell of blood. I shine my light over the piles of blankets. I'm barely able to repress the growl that rumbles up my throat at the sight of the wet, red streaks. *She was here! Fuck! She was here and she was hurt, and now she's missing, and the scent of an alpha is all over this room.*

I frantically check the closet, just in case, but no luck. I drop to my knees in the middle of the room, pulling at my hair as I think through my next steps. Leo is out in the car, probably tearing his own hair out waiting for any news. Backup is on the way—thirty minutes out if their estimates are correct. Leo's father is secured in his room, and Espy is missing.

Fuck! Fuck! FUCK!

I give myself a moment to silently rage before getting back to my feet. I should go back to the car and wait for the true professionals to process the scene. Perhaps her father can be persuaded to give up the details on who he sold her to. There's no way I'm willing to entertain the possibility she's already dead, or beyond saving. The blood from the nest is still wet, and there isn't enough there for her to have possibly—

Wait! The blood! The blood on the bed is still wet!

I rush over to confirm, smearing my hand a dark red. Her clothes are still in her closet; the dresser looks full . . . I silently rush to the family bathroom, confirming there are toiletries that look like they belong to a female. All her stuff is still here, and *she* was here recently. Maybe, by some miracle, she still is.

It's equally as likely whichever alpha assaulted her in her room carted her away without any of her belongings, but I allow myself a small moment of desperate hope as I hurry back down the stairs. There is one final part of the house I haven't checked yet. *Time for a Hail Mary . . .*

The door to the basement is locked, but a quick twist of my wrist solves that problem. I turn on the light as I rush down the steps, done with subtlety at this point. It only takes two seconds for joy to spear through me.

There, right near the base of the stairs, is my missing omega. Espy. It has to be.

She's not in good shape, but I can tell immediately that she's alive, her chest moving in a shallow but steady rhythm. She's lying against the wall on the bare concrete, her hands cuffed and chained to a metal ring drilled a few feet up the wall. She's only half-dressed, and I give her body a quick, professional scan. She's covered in bruises. They seem to be concentrated around her arms and legs, but I suspect I'll find more on her back. Classic defensive wounds. She's small—seemingly child-size. Not just her height. She looks far too skinny for a woman who's gone through puberty. Especially an omega.

My eyes briefly take in the harsh jut of her ribs against her skin before they catch on the cuts along her arm and hip. There are a few other scrapes, but these two look deep, based on the amount of blood covering her skin and pooling on the ground below her.

The alpha instincts inside me roar to the surface. *Omega! Must protect!*

I can tell she's gorgeous, even beneath the evidence of her abuse and obvious malnutrition. The delicate lines of her face and her full lips have me gulping. Her resemblance to Leo is clear. I keep my eyes firmly above her neck now that I've visually assessed her injuries, but my mind flashes guiltily to the small curves just barely hidden behind her bra and underwear. I look around for a blanket, but it seems modesty will have to wait.

"Espy," I whisper, kneeling down next to her. "Please, wake up."

She doesn't move, so I reach out a hand to tap gently against her nearest arm. "Espy?"

Suddenly I'm staring into a pair of wide, greenish-brown eyes.

"Don't be scar—"

My attempt at calming her is cut off by a terrified scream. I instinctively fall

back and away from her.

“Don’t touch me!” she screams again, the sound echoing through the small basement and making my ears ring.

She looks absolutely panicked. I watch helplessly as she sits up and begins frantically pulling at her restraints, seemingly throwing her whole body against the chains in her attempt to get free.

“Please—it’s okay,” I try again. I keep my voice soft and my body in an unthreatening position, but there’s only so much I can do. I’m a big guy. At six foot two and with a physique honed by years of military training, I know my appearance broadcasts *alpha*.

I back away even further as a whimper emerges from the back of her throat and she starts thrashing harder against her cuffs. The smell of burned fruit bursts out and assaults my nose. I almost choke at its heaviness.

“Espy, it’s all right. My name is Lincoln and I’m here with Leo. He sent me to come get you. Leo’s here—he’s waiting for you. Everything’s going to be fine. You’re safe—”

“No! Please! *No me toques!*”

My words don’t seem to be getting us anywhere, and I’m not even sure she understands me through her fear, pain, and adrenaline. I do a quick trade-off calculation in my head. I was hoping not to have to do this, but she may end up hurting herself if she doesn’t calm down.

I’m quick, jumping forward to grab her arms and pin her body as gently as I can against the wall. I pull a syringe from my vest and jab the auto-injector into her leg before she can even take a breath.

“I’m so sorry, little one,” I murmur softly, my words lost against her panicked shrieking.

I slowly move away from her as her eyes fall shut and her body goes limp, lowering her head gently to the floor. I allow myself a moment of weakness and run my hand carefully down her long, tangled hair. Despite the fact I just drugged a terrified omega—my packmate’s sister, no less—and knowing all the shit that’s yet to come, all I feel is relief. And gratitude.

I swear from this moment on, no harm will ever come to her under my watch.

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Esperanza

The first things I become conscious of are the sounds.

It's as if there's an underlying buzz surrounding my head, though as the seconds pass the buzzing sharpens and splits into a myriad of different noises. I hear beeping, the drone of an AC unit, the sound of shuffling and clangs here and there. And are those muffled voices in the distance? The noises are foreign, and with a start I realize I'm not in my house.

Memories of the night before come flooding in with a vicious rush.

My father bringing Mr. Vessnick to the house, the beating, the . . . My pulse picks up speed as flashes of the assault flood my mind. Being forced into my nest, being held down and stripped of my clothing; his disgusting smell and bruising fingers; the way he rubbed his—

Nope.

I squeeze my nails into my palms, embracing the sharp pain in exchange for temporarily wiping my brain of the memories.

It takes a few tries to get my eyes to open, and when I finally manage it I immediately regret it. The room spins around me. Before I can even make sense of my surroundings, my body lurches to the side and I throw up the contents of my stomach. The heaving feels almost violent. Tears spring to my eyes as my stomach convulses and a new batch of colorless bile joins the puddle I've managed to get half on the side of my bed and half on the floor.

Wait—I'm in a bed?

I'm shaking so badly I can't even look up at the sound of someone entering the room.

“Oh, hon, let me help you.”

The voice is sympathetic and feminine, a combination I haven't heard in longer than I care to calculate. I feel a hand run over my shoulders before my hair's pulled back, and then a wet cloth is gently dabbed against my chapped lips.

“There now. Let's get you sitting up and I'll grab you some water. Just small sips for now—we don't want to trigger your nausea again.”

I allow the woman to shift me around, groaning as despite her attempts another surge of nausea shoots through me. She appears to be in her late thirties, a beta, and she's wearing scrubs.

“Where am I?” I ask. “Is this a hospital?”

“You're in a private medical facility, Ms. Alvarez. I need to get your vitals here, and then we can get all your questions answered.

A private medical facility? As she's strapping a blood pressure cuff to my arm, more memories from last night come flooding in. I was left in the basement. There was an alpha there—a stranger. Did my dad let him in? *Oh Gods.* My muscles seize as I recall him speaking to me. He told me he was there for me, that some other guy, Leo, had sent him. Is Leo another alpha? Did my dad give up on bringing on my heat and finally sell me off?

The woman is making notes on a chart, her gaze focused on one of the monitors near my bed. “Don't worry about the nausea—that's just a side effect of the drug. How do your extremities feel? Any tingling in your fingers or toes?” She looks at me expectantly, her face turning to a frown as she takes in what I'm sure is my completely panicked expression.

Drug? I've been drugged???

I remember a sort of stabbing feeling in my leg after the alpha tackled me. As I scramble to push the blankets off my legs so that I can inspect them I catch

sight of my left arm. An IV tube protrudes from my elbow, snaking up to a bag full of clear liquid.

“No,” I mutter. *This can't be happening.* “No. No, no, no! Get it out of me!” My voice rises to a near hysterical pitch as I tear at the tube, trying to rip it from my arm. What have they been putting inside of me?

“Ms. Alvarez, it's okay. Please calm down—you're safe here!” The woman, presumably a nurse, leaps into action, wrestling me to try and keep me from yanking out the IV. She's too slow, and a burst of blood accompanies the sharp pain that spikes up my arm. I have no time to think about that right now though. I have to get out of here.

“Ms. Alvarez!” The woman makes another grab at me, but I tumble away and off the bed. “Oh, hell.” She gives up on trying to calm me, instead reaching over to hit a small yellow button on the wall.

I hear an intercom come on somewhere outside the room and realize she's called security. She's standing between me and the door, but there's another smaller door off to my right, which I dart toward. A bathroom. It's better than nothing, though I realize when I slam the door closed that there isn't a lock. I'm shaking, bleeding, and from the feel of things completely naked under the gown I woke up in. My head is pounding, and all I know is that I can't let myself be given to this *Leo*, whoever he is.

My legs collapse underneath me as I back into the shower portion of the tiny room. All I can do is wrap my arms around my legs and pray.

“Espy!”

That voice. *I know that voice!*

“Espy?!”

It's my brother, Em. He sounds almost as panicked as I feel.

“Em?” I call back tentatively, my voice hoarse. “Emilio?”

“*Gracias a Dios. Estas despierta.*”

The bathroom door opens, and everything after that is a blur of arms. I haven't seen my brother in over two years, and now here he is holding me in

a death grip on the floor of a hospital bathroom as I sob into his chest. Something about his familiar smell of freshly turned dirt has my walls crumbling down. My tears and snot soak into his shirt, and I know firsthand these tiles are majorly uncomfortable. Still, he continues to hold me, stroking my hair and murmuring to me in Spanish.

At one point I feel him lift my body and set me down on what must be the hospital bed. Em stays wrapped around me, and I trust him to keep me safe as I let all my pent-up fear, rage, and desperation pour out. Eventually I must dehydrate myself as my tears taper off with a hiccup.

“How did you find me?” I finally croak.

“Find you?” Em asks, sounding confused.

I push gently against his chest so I can see his face. His handsome features look tired in the harsh fluorescent light. I’m betting I look worse.

“The alpha, he kidnapped me, and-and he said that some other guy sent him for me—some guy named Leo . . .” I cut myself off with a shudder.

“Oh, *pequeña*, no,” Em groans, and I see his face contort into a look of horror. Mixed with guilt? “That was Lincoln, my packmate.”

“Packmate?”

“I started going by Leo when I started school here. Gods, Espy, I’m so sorry. I didn’t even think about that. We were so focused on just getting you out.”

My emotions are too raw, my headache too pounding, to make sense of the rest of his explanation. I make out enough of the apologies and self-recriminations to know Em is taking on a lot of responsibility for leaving me there, but I just can’t process that right now.

The nurse from earlier returns with a doctor in tow, and this is when I learn that I’m in the medical facility at the River Valley military base. They explain I was too agitated when my brother’s packmate found me, and he made the choice to sedate me to avoid me further injuring myself. Apparently, I was out for about twelve hours, and while I was transported back to the base my father was arrested.

It's all too much to take in right now. I'm relieved when the doctor finally takes pity on me, reinserting my IV and administering some pain meds to help me sleep. Em promises to be here when I wake, so I give up and let the drag of exhaustion pull me under.



The next two days are long. And frustrating. The doctor insists on keeping me at the clinic, wanting to keep an eye on me and correct some of the effects of malnutrition I'm suffering from. In addition to the various cuts and bruises, I'm underweight and have vitamin and mineral deficiencies. And, most troubling, emotional deficiencies.

Okay, so the doctor didn't actually say I was emotionally deficient, but she was concerned enough about my mental state that she called in a psychiatric specialist to evaluate me.

I'll admit I'm feeling . . . off. Fragile? Unstable? Anxious? My new therapist, Dr. Morgan, calls it a "trauma response."

All I know is I'm not coping super well.

It's been hard to stay asleep, and when I'm awake I find my mind wandering. It's hard to focus on what people are saying or asking me, and sometimes my thoughts feel jumbled and I freeze up when I try to speak. I have what Dr. Morgan calls an "elevated startle response." I call it stranger danger.

All the new people coming in and out of my room have my nerves frayed. There's the medical staff, Dr. Morgan, law enforcement officials from several agencies who all want me to give statements and describe everything that's happened to me in the past few years. A few representatives from the Department of Omega Rights, state and federal, and even the undergraduate dean from Em's university have stopped by. Apparently, the military base is jointly located with the school campus, and the administration wanted to check in with their student and his "family emergency".

Em's packmates, Lincoln and Tanner, tried to stop by my second day on the

ward, but my response to their alpha scents was too much. It wasn't that they smelled bad—they were actually some of the most pleasing ones I've ever been around—but it's like my brain-body response just isn't ready to be in close proximity to alphas.

Poor Lincoln looked pretty destroyed that I flinched away from him when he got near my bed. A small part of me wanted to reach out and grab his hand, to thank him for rescuing me and to apologize for being so jumpy. But a bigger part of me wanted to just burrow into my blankets and hide, so the gratitude and formal introductions will have to wait.

Em's been great, never leaving my side.

I know there's a lot to talk about, but right now all I can think about is getting out of this hospital and finding a way to regroup. None of my injuries are serious enough for them to keep me in any longer, so they've agreed to release me into Em's care this evening. Technically I'm free to go wherever since I'm an adult at almost nineteen, but my life is in such disarray right now that I can't think beyond the next few hours at a time.

"I really think I should book us a hotel."

This is probably the sixth time Em's said this in the past two hours, and it's starting to make me nervous.

"Em, no. I just want to be somewhere safe and familiar. Or as familiar as I can get. Your dorm will be fine, I promise."

"It's just . . . I live with Tanner."

Oh. I shuffle through my mental reel to pull up a picture of the big blond alpha I met yesterday for all of twenty seconds.

"He can stay with Lincoln for a few days. I swear he won't be there, but his smell will be all over our dorm." My brother shrugs, his face the perfect mixture of nervous and apologetic.

"Lincoln doesn't live with you guys?" I ask, buying myself some time as I try to process the idea of staying somewhere saturated in alpha pheromones.

"He has a place closer to the base. We haven't moved into a pack house yet.

They're a bit pricey, and this setup works for us for now." He shrugs.

Right, pack houses. River Valley is a much bigger town than where we grew up, so I'll have to get used to the whole pack-culture infrastructure. There were mostly betas in our small hometown, and packs weren't really the norm. I knew alphas tended to form them and it was common for omegas to end up mated to a pack.

Omegas make up only three percent of the population, according to the last census. Alphas make up ten percent, with the other eighty-seven percent being betas. Apparently, the alphas who are unscrupulous enough to purchase an omega, as my father was trying to facilitate, are evil enough that most haven't managed to find a pack. At least, my father only ever trained me to care for a single mate.

I feel a shiver work its way down my body as I imagine being sold to a whole group of alphas.

"Do you have your own space at least? Someplace that doesn't smell like him?"

"Let me call one of my beta friends—they can spray some de-scenter and air the place out."

Em disappears to make his call, and I take the opportunity to drift back into an uneasy sleep.

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Esperanza

“Cereal?”

I accept the bowl from Em automatically and stare down at the now familiar brown kernels floating in the milk. “Health nut,” I tease him, making an exaggerated face as I eat a spoonful of the Grapenuts. I swear they’re the crunchiest, blandest cereal ever invented.

“Hey! A body like this doesn’t happen automatically.”

I laugh as he flexes for me and stick out my tongue. It feels good to laugh.

My first few days at Em’s place passed in an anxiety-ridden haze. My emotions are still all over the place, and I’ve been having a hard time feeling relaxed and at ease. I’ve gotten a respite from talking to law enforcement, but I’m still seeing Dr. Morgan every other day. I protested the arrangement at first, knowing that neither my brother nor I have the money to pay for private therapy, but it turns out it’s on the government’s dime. Small favors, I guess.

I’ll admit it’s been kind of nice having a constant in my life. Dr. Morgan has assured me everything I’m feeling is perfectly normal given what I went through over the past two years, and that I’m now suddenly in a new environment.

I’ve ventured outside with Em a few times, sometimes for my therapy and other times just to get some fresh air, but the large crowds of college kids set me on edge. We’ve tried going out at night when there are less people

around. Even so, my legs tend to start shaking after one hundred feet or so and I have to sit down or turn back. Something about being conditioned to captivity . . . Dr. Morgan says it will be a process to reboot my mental configuration of the world. To feel comfortable being able to move about freely.

“Are you sure you’re okay with me leaving? I can one hundred percent stay with you again today.”

“Em, *hermano mío*, go to class.”

“Espy . . .”

“I’ll be fine, I promise,” I assure him, walking over to where he’s hovering by the front door. He looks almost as uncertain as I feel, but I push that emotion down. “I promise. *Ten un poco de fe en mi.*”

He sighs and I know I’ve convinced him. “Okay, okay, I’ll go! It will be two hours tops, and then I’ll bring back lunch.”

“And, umm . . . no one’s going to come by, right? Tanner doesn’t need anything from his room?”

Em’s packmate has stopped by once so far to pick up some extra clothes, but otherwise he’s been super understanding of my need for an alpha-free space. I feel guilty kicking the guy out of his own home and know we can’t keep up this arrangement forever.

“Tanner has class all morning, so he shouldn’t have any reason to stop by. I doubt anyone else will drop in, but if they do, don’t answer the door!”

It’s nice to have my protective older brother back. He’s apologized so many times for “abandoning” me these past two years. I’m honestly not ready to examine any of my feelings around why he never made more of an effort to check in on me. They’re going in my mental safe next to my father being in jail and my memories of all my “trainings.” Dr. Morgan explained to Em that I’m not ready to talk things out with him yet, so instead we’ve been keeping things light.

Light has been nice.

Still, I know I can't keep Tanner away indefinitely. This is his home after all, and I'm the interloper.

Em must pick up on my anxiety because he drops his backpack and walks back over to me. "Tanner's fine," he assures me. "He hasn't complained once. Well, except for the fact that Lincoln has been making him train with him, but that's just tough love."

I smile. Em's been telling me stories about his pack, and by now I've heard enough to know that Lincoln keeps to a strict exercise routine and diet as part of his training for the military.

"We can't go on like this forever though," I prompt, looking away so I won't have to meet my brother's eye. "He deserves to be back in his own space, and you probably don't want your sister hanging around cramping your style . . ."

"Espy. *Basta*. You're not going anywhere, and you're not cramping anything. I wouldn't let you move out right now even if you begged." He smiles to show he's joking, but I know deep down he's deadly serious. "If you're not in the right headspace for Tanner to move back in, then you and I will find our own space."

I chew at my lip as I think over the possibility. I suspect it would be hard to find another place on campus midway through the semester, and I know Em's scholarship doesn't provide enough for him to cover the rent on two rooms. He'd have to find someone to take over his room here, and that would likely be even more disruptive for Tanner.

"I'd like to try. Being around him, I mean. But maybe baby steps?"

"How about a movie night tomorrow? Tanner can come over, and we can all relax and eat some pizza. I can even invite some of my female friends. Assuming that makes you feel safer . . ."

"Okay." I nod. That actually sounds pretty good. I haven't hung out with anyone my own age in forever. Or of any age.

"All right, I'll set it up. Now, I gotta run or I'll be late!"

"Em, wait," I call out to him as he's halfway out the door. "Female friends . . .?" I waggle my eyebrows up and down exaggeratedly.

“*Mocosa.*” He rolls his eyes as he leaves, but I still note a hint of pink on his cheeks and laugh as he shuts the door.

I finish my cereal and put away my bowl, then I move to tidy the blankets from my makeshift bed on the couch. Em protested up and down when I insisted on taking the couch, convinced we should set up a nest for me in his room, but I put my foot down. I don’t think he understands all the reasons behind my refusal to sleep in a nest. Luckily, he dropped the idea and let me have my way. Where was this superpower when we were growing up?

I would describe the couch as exactly what you’d expect of two young guys living on a budget in college. It has a few stains, is fairly worn down, and I occasionally find pieces of popcorn stuffed in the cracks.

Still, it’s certainly more comfortable than the floor.

Dr. Morgan prescribed me some meds to help me sleep, but I’m too afraid to take them. I’d rather have all my wits about me, even if that means a bit of insomnia. And nightmares when I do manage to fall asleep.

It’s a process.

That’s one of the phrases Dr. Morgan likes to use, and I smile to myself as I move to grab the notebook she gave me. It’s supposed to be for journaling, but instead I’ve taken to writing down the little sayings she has a tendency to throw out. Basically, the stuff you could slap on a poster with a picture of the sunrise and have instant motivational artwork.

I write it down next to “remember to be kind to yourself” from yesterday’s session.

Then, not knowing what else to do, I turn on the TV and pick up a different pad of paper. This one Em got me, apparently remembering I liked to draw in high school. I spend the day sketching and watching trashy daytime television, and when Em makes it back after his classes, we toast the tiny milestone with soda and tacos from his favorite food truck.

Victory.

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Mason

“Uurgghhh.”

I try to lower myself down on the bench slowly, but instead my tailbone meets the hard wood with a distinct *thunk*.

“You okay there, Hayes?”

“Shove off, Simpson.” I playfully scowl at my teammate, giving him my middle finger as the locker room fills with laughter.

Coach was all over me today, making me do an extra-long session in the weight room before letting me get into the pool. My legs are dead, and I’m not exactly sure how I’m going to manage to drag myself all the way back home. I consider calling up Cabe to come get me, but then I decide the ribbing from my team would be nothing compared to my packmate. Maybe I could go sit in the steam room for a while to gather my strength . . .

We have a big meet coming up against Ouray College in a few weeks, and as the captain, it’s my responsibility to lead our team to victory. I don’t particularly enjoy being in the spotlight, but coach insists I’m the right man for the job. I’m pretty sure he only says that because I’m an alpha, and alphas are *supposed* to lead. A designation doesn’t automatically make someone a good leader—despite some of the beliefs still out there.

Still, as a senior, this season will likely be my last doing any kind of competitive swimming. Might as well make the most of it.

I decide food sounds better than the steam room at this point, so I finish drying off after my shower and slowly ease into some clean sweats.

“Hey, Alvarez! You’re late!”

I look up to find Leo standing at the door to the locker room looking a little sheepish. “What’s up, man?” I ask as he walks over to join me. “I thought you were going to be out for a while.”

“Yeah, might be able to come back next week, though I may need to play things by ear a bit still. Just wanted to come check in.”

This is Leo’s third year on the swim team, and he’s damn good. Super-fast on the short sprints and our secret weapon on the 4x200-meter freestyle relay. We need him if we want to win against Ouray, but he called me last week to tell me he had a family emergency and would be missing from practice for an undetermined amount of time. I figured he’d gone back home for a while.

“Everything okay with your family?”

“It will be,” he responds, and I see his eyes darken in apparent anger for a moment before clearing up again. “Coach said you’d give me a rundown of what I need to do to make up for missing practice this week.”

“Sure thing, but there’s no rush if you need more time. You know we’d love to have you against Ouray, but Samuels has been making progress, so we’re not dead in the water without you,” I tease. Honestly, I really want him back, but family comes first.

Leo grins at me. “Can’t have a freshman taking my spot,” he teases back. “Let me make up my conditioning this weekend, and I’ll check with Espy to see if she’s okay with me joining practice again on Monday.”

“Espy?”

“My sister,” he explains, and I’m glad my expression is hidden as I pull on my sweatshirt. I’ve heard him mention a sister once or twice, but her showing up after Leo told me he had a family emergency has my alarm bells going off. Did something happen to his parents? Is he now the guardian for a younger sibling?

“Want to walk and talk?” I offer. “Coach had a sadistic streak today, and if I don’t get food in me soon I’m gonna collapse.”

Being a late Friday afternoon, most of the guys have already cleared out, but we say our goodbyes to the stragglers and make our way out of the athletics center. The sun is just setting, but the temperature has already plummeted, so I stop to pull my jacket out of my duffel bag.

“Think it’s gonna snow?” I ask.

“Nah, too early. We’re not that high up in the mountains. I bet we make it until Halloween at least.”

“Then the temperature should ease up,” I joke.

Despite having lived in the area all my life, I still hate the cold. Probably something to do with the fact I often have wet hair from swimming. When we were kids, my brother and I used to dunk our heads in a tub of water and then run around outside until our hair had frozen in spikes. Then we’d come back inside and chase our sisters around and spar with each other like freakin’ bighorn sheep. Speaking of family . . .

“So, your sister’s visiting?”

I can see the question makes Leo uncomfortable, but to his credit he answers me anyway.

“Yeah. She’s . . . going to be staying with me for a while.”

“With you and Tanner?” I prompt, picturing their small dorm room with a frown.

“Yeah. Or . . . hopefully. We’re actually gonna test that out tonight, see how it goes.” He blows out a heavy breath that lingers in the cold air.

I’m not a gossip, but I am his team captain, and it’s my job to know what’s going on with my guys. I decide patience is the best approach, and we continue walking in silence for a while.

“I’m sure you’re wondering,” he starts, finally looking over at me.

I don’t deny it. “You can trust me, man.”

We keep walking as the story comes out. I find my jaw clenching harder and harder, enraged to hear that Leo's father was practically torturing his own daughter, locking her up and colluding to sell her into slavery. I try to keep my mouth shut, wanting Leo to have the space to get all the words out, but when he tells me about the condition his packmate found her in I can't help letting a growl escape.

"Please tell me the piece of shit is dead," I snarl, realizing belatedly that I'm talking about his father. I can't quite find it in me to take my words back though.

"He's been arrested. Or taken into military custody? To be honest, I'm not real sure of the technicalities of it all. Linc has been following all that for me," Leo admits, the stress clear in his voice.

"Linc? That's your packmate, right?" I've met Leo's packmates once or twice. Linc isn't big on social gatherings from what I recall, but I'm pretty sure I've seen him at the occasional swim meet.

"Yeah, he's the one who got her out that night. He's in the military program, so he's been able to keep an eye on things. Thank Gods."

"It's gonna be all right, man," I say as I reach over to give his shoulder a squeeze. Poor guy is dealing with a lot of shit. The thought of anyone doing that to either of my younger sisters has me once again swallowing down a growl. "Let's talk about getting you back in the water and burning away all that stress."

He grins, and we quickly put together a modified training plan. I decide to follow him to the pizza place off campus, figuring I've earned a bit of a cheat day after my grueling workout. I'm sure Micah and Cabe will be thrilled they don't have to cook. Leo ordered ahead, and I can't help but laugh when I see the six large pizzas he grabs.

"Your sister must be a big eater, huh?"

Leo starts to smile back, but then he frowns, and I immediately feel like shit. Who knows what kind of trauma this girl is working through right now, and here I am joking about her appetite.

"We're working on that," he offers after a slight pause. "But we decided to

have a low-key movie night with Tanner and Linc. And Mackenzie.”

“Mackenzie, huh?” I waggle my eyebrows at him. His crush on the omega is a poorly kept secret amongst the swim team. Probably amongst all of campus, to be honest.

“I figured Espy could use someone to talk to! Make her feel more comfortable with having alphas around.”

I feel like he doth protest too much, but instead of shoving him like I normally would, I take two pizzas off his stack to add to my three. “I’ll help carry. You’re on my way back.”

The campus dorms aren’t the most glamorous, but they get the job done. I lived in them my first two years at River Valley, but when Micah started here we decided to get a pack house. Cabe and I always knew we’d be a pack. Growing up we were practically inseparable, and it was he and his family who taught me about being an alpha. My family are all betas, but from a young age my parents suspected I’d present as an alpha. I was a bit big for my age and supposedly had a tendency to act like a mother hen with all my siblings, and even my mother at times. My father used to refer to me as “his eldest in disguise” since technically I’m the second child.

Cabe and his family pack lived nearby, and being the same age, we had a strong bond. Micah is two years younger, but as we were the only two boys in our family, he’d often tag along with us. It’s hard to say why Micah became a part of our pack, but none of Cabe’s brothers did. The driving forces governing pack formation are still a bit of a mystery. There are competing theories out there in terms of whether it’s based in science or culture—the classic “nature vs. nurture” debate.

Maybe it was growing up in a non-pack family as an alpha, but I’ve always been interested in the question of how packs form. I’m doing my senior thesis on the topic, putting my dual majors of molecular biology and anthropology to good use. Packs are still the norm, but it seems to have become harder to form them over the past few decades. In the past, people’s worlds were smaller and therefore their choices more limited. With the rise of technology and globalization, those choices have grown exponentially. Instead of having a set pool of potential packmates in a single small town, now alphas (and

betas and omegas, of course) are living in larger cities, moving around more for school and work, and they can find and connect with any number of people living anywhere in the world. In my opinion, at least, all this choice has made it harder to identify and form strong pack bonds. Some academics it “decision paralysis.”

My pack is relatively old-fashioned in that we all grew up together. The university here hosts pack speed-matching socials through the Pack Council, and the other day one of my teammates showed me a new app his buddy had sent him called “PackMe.”

On the bright side, all this change and uncertainty has provided me with plenty of fodder for my research.

“I’m up on the third floor,” Leo states as we make it to the entrance of his dorm. “Your fat ass could probably stand to take the stairs.”

“Little shit,” I grumble at him good-naturedly. He already made fun of my dead-leg waddle earlier. “I can easily add a few more sprints to your set this weekend.”

He just laughs as we get in the elevator.

“You know I’d invite you to stay, but Espy has a tough time around alphas, and I don’t want to overwhelm her . . .”

“No worries, man.” I cut Leo off.

Honestly, I have very little desire to be around other people right now. It’s been a long week, and all I really want to do is inhale this pizza and go to bed. Though when the door to his dorm swings open, I realize I may have spoken too soon.

“Thank goodness. I thought I was going to starve!”

My jaw goes slack as I stare down at the beautiful slip of a woman in front of me. She has long, dark hair and a delicate mouth curved into a sweet smile. I take in light caramel skin, light pink lips, and slight curves hidden behind simple jeans and a long-sleeve T-shirt. She seems to take notice of me at the exact same time, freezing in place as her eyes go wide.

“Espy, shit! *Lo siento, lo siento*, he was just helping me carry the pizzas.” Leo looks half-panicked, and I take a step back automatically to give the little omega some space.

“Sorry,” I murmur, not sure what to do. I avert my eyes and slouch down when I see she’s started to shake, trying to make myself look as nonthreatening as possible.

Fuck, Leo wasn’t lying when he said she was afraid of alphas. The sweet scent of roses and creamy vanilla that initially accompanied her turns sour. I consider setting the pizzas down and making a run for it.

“This is Mason. He’s the captain of my swim team. He’s *safe*, and he’s *not staying*,” Leo assures her, reaching out a hand to run along her head in an attempt to comfort her.

His sister remains frozen, but just as I decide I’d better leave she seems to come out of it.

“I-I’m Esperanza. Nice to meet you, Mason.” She gives me a quick, timid smile and small wave as she wraps her arms around herself. “Sorry about . . . well, me.” She grimaces a bit, but moves back to let us in. “Here, Em, let me take those.”

I carefully follow the two siblings in, not convinced yet that my presence is a good idea. Her scent hits me even stronger inside the room, and my chest squeezes. It’s mouthwatering, and I try to surreptitiously gulp down as much as I can manage without looking like a complete creep.

“Em?” I ask, trying to distract myself.

“Oh, right.” Espy gives me another smile as she sets the boxes down on a small table, gesturing for me to do the same. “I keep forgetting that people here call him Leo.”

When I look at Leo, he just shrugs.

“I guess I just wanted a change. My full name’s Emilio.”

“Good intel,” I say. Lamely. Now I’ve set the pizzas down I have nothing to do with my hands and no real reason to be in the dorm. But something about

this omega has me captivated, and I find myself fighting off the urge to grab a bunch of blankets so I can bundle her up to keep her safe and warm. I give my hands a little shake to ward off the impulse and end up sticking them in my pockets.

“You’re not staying?” Espy questions—not in a rude way. She keeps her distance from me, but at least she’s stopped shaking. “Do you want some pizza at least? Em seems to have massively over-ordered.”

“Hey, if you think I eat a lot, just wait until you see how much alphas can put away,” Leo protests, laughing.

“He’s right.” I grin. “But actually, these three are mine.” I reluctantly slip the bottom three boxes from my pile, knowing that’s my cue to leave. I was all ready to get home, but now I find myself wanting to stay and feed Espy. An image of her sitting in my lap as I feed her a slice of pizza out of my hand has a tiny purr rumbling through my chest. I quickly cough to cover it up.

“Wow. In that case, I’m not sure we have enough.” I catch Espy looking me over and feel my chest puff out in pride under her gaze.

“For me and my packmates,” I correct her. “Though at this rate I’m so starving I could probably eat them all.”

“Thanks, man.” Leo walks me to the door.

“No problem. If my legs aren’t dead, I might join you for some of your conditioning tomorrow. I’ll shoot you a text,” I say, darting a quick look back at Espy still standing by the table. “It was nice meeting you, Esperanza.”

“You too, Mason,” she calls, offering a small wave.

The door shuts behind me and I hurry away. Best to put some distance between myself and that dorm room before I get any more crazy thoughts about my teammate’s traumatized sister.

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Esperanza

Wow. Holy alpha.

I was not expecting Em to be with anyone when I opened the door, and my brain panicked when I first caught sight of the large man next to him. The guy was undeniably alpha, his scent of juniper and sawdust coming through strong despite the smell of chlorine emanating from the duffle bag he was carrying. His blond hair was tousled and damp, the sides shaved close to his head, and his strong jaw was dusted with just a hint of stubble.

He smelled a bit like the mountains I grew up in. Normally, thoughts of home have me spiraling, but Mason was like a siren of comfort, and it didn't take me long to calm down in his presence. I hope that's a good omen for this evening. Em's two packmates, Tanner and Lincoln, will be over soon, as well as two girls Em is friends with from class.

I want to say I'm more nervous about the two alphas being around, but in all honesty it's the girls who have me the most anxious at this point. I've at least met Tanner and Lincoln a few times, albeit from a distance. They're a somewhat known entity to me, and the rules of engagement are clear. They know what I've been through—partially at least—and we all have a shared goal of getting me used to their presence. Tanner especially. But I have no point of reference for the girls. I had friends in high school, but I was never Ms. Popular. What if the past two years have completely stripped me of my ability to make small talk?

“So, these girls coming over . . . What context do they have?” I ask in an

attempted casual tone as I get out some plates from the small kitchenette. I don't want Em picking up on my nerves.

"Context?" Em asks.

"Yeah, like, do they know the deal? With me."

"I told them you've been through some shit and you're going to be staying with me for a while. I also mentioned you were nervous around new people, especially alphas."

"Right." I swallow heavily, avoiding eye contact. Nothing he said is untrue, but all of a sudden I feel like a charity case, the little sister with fragile feelings that everyone has to pretend to like.

"Espy, hey, it's okay." Em comes over and wraps me up in a big hug, lifting my feet off the ground like he's always done once he hit his growth spurt. "They're both super nice, and no one is judging you. Plus, I kinda wanted an excuse to hang out with Mackenzie, so, honestly, you're doing me a huge favor here." He blushes.

"Mackenzie?" I grin up at him as my nerves abate somewhat, still smooshed against his chest. "Does my big brother have a crush?"

"Espy, come on. *No te dices nada*. I swear you'll be sorry if you embarrass me in front of—"

"In front of who—your girlfriend?" I tease, then I shriek as his hands dig into sides and move across my ribs like a master pianist. He knows all my worst ticklish spots; I should have been more careful before opening my mouth.

"Em, stop! No, *déjame*, please!" I'm breathless and giggling.

Luckily, I'm saved by a knock at the door, and I take the opportunity to scramble away, sticking my tongue out as I go. Em's love life was a nice momentary distraction, but now I'm faced with two alphas entering my space, and I can feel my heart rate ticking back up.

Em greets them at the door, and I give a small wave but otherwise keep my distance as both guys settle in and grab some pizza. I forgot for a moment that this is Tanner's home and technically I'm the interloper in this space.

Lincoln, too, is clearly very comfortable here. My eyes track him as he moves to the couch, his large form sinking easily into the cushions.

I don't remember much from when he found me at my father's house—a side effect of the drug, I'm told—but I remember enough to feel mortified. Logically, I'm sure Lincoln couldn't care less about the state he found me in and was probably just concerned with making sure I was safe. Emotionally, however, I'm still an eighteen-year-old girl, and it's humiliating to know that this super-hot guy saw me dirty, bloodied, and in my underwear. When I mentioned this to Dr. Morgan, she said she wasn't surprised my mind was fixating on something so inconsequential. It's my brain's way of protecting itself, apparently, choosing something unimportant to obsess over as a way to block out all the other shit.

Personally, I blame it on hormones and Lincoln's insane level of hotness. Trau-mayto, Trau-mahto . . .

The guys give me plenty of space. I'm reminded of when I used to visit my friend Mary's house in elementary school. Her family had a cat that was always running away from me despite my dutiful efforts to be its best friend. Mary's mom taught me you had to studiously ignore cats until they felt comfortable enough to let their guard down and come to you. In this scenario, I am the cat, and surprisingly, the metaphor helps me to calm down. I eventually earned my cuddles with the skittish feline, so presumably there was hope for this situation as well.

I manage to settle in on the battered love seat, relaxed enough to put away a slice of pizza and listen to them chat. Maybe this won't be so bad.

“Knock, knock!”

My gaze swivels back to the front door, and I just barely manage to avoid choking on a piece of crust.

Both the women who just entered are gorgeous, but one in particular is absolutely stunning. And very clearly an omega. I don't know why I'm so shocked. I've seen omegas on TV of course, and in newspapers and magazines. There was even an art instructor in the next town over that I knew from rumor was an omega, but I only ever saw her from a distance. Never before have I been so close to another person of my designation. Not to

mention an omega my own age.

Em is like an overeager puppy as he rushes over to greet the women with a giant grin on his face.

“Hi, I’m Mackenzie!” the omega introduces herself with a warm smile and an outstretched hand. She’s tiny, like some sort of fun-size Southern belle Barbie doll, with gorgeous straight blonde hair and pale blue eyes. She smells like peaches and sugar, and I don’t hate it.

“Es-Esperanza,” I reply, cringing as I stumble over my own name. So much for not coming across like the country bumpkin I clearly am.

“Leo’s told me so much about you! This is Silver,” she adds, gesturing to the woman beside her.

“Silver?” I quirk an eyebrow, taking in the beta’s bright—and entirely blue—outfit. “Don’t hear that every day.” Or maybe you do in a city. What the hell do I know?

“My parents own a jewelry business. I have a sister named Gold.” She shrugs, offering me a wry grin.

“Yeah, but you like to rebel, don’t you?” Mackenzie pipes up, laughing. “You’ll see—she likes to embody a different jewel tone every day.”

“Today is blue sapphire,” Silver adds as she gives a little twirl in place. “Can’t let my name put me in a box.”

“What was that green one you were wearing last week?” Tanner asks, shuffling over to join our conversation while still giving me a healthy amount of space. “You blended a few different shades together, almost like stripes.”

“A man who pays attention to my outfits! Aren’t you a dream?” she teases him. I catch a blush on his cheeks and smile, not used to seeing a big alpha looking bashful. “That was malachite. You liked?”

“It was pretty,” he agrees.

“Yes, yes, Silver is very fashionable,” Em says, coming and herding the group of us over to the pizzas. “Now grab some food so we can start a movie. Lincoln’s bedtime is nine thirty.”

Everyone laughs while Lincoln scowls from his place on the couch and flips his middle finger at his packmate. I feel a bit of my anxiety uncoiling from my stomach and grab a few more slices of pizza before settling back down in the love seat.



We make it through *She's the Man* and manage to polish off most of the pizzas. Soon Em, Tanner, and Silver are battling it out on *Mario Kart* while Lincoln tries to backseat drive. It's clear Em and Silver are chaotic players, neither are paying any attention to the strategy that Lincoln is trying to impart. Much to the alpha's chagrin.

Meanwhile, Mackenzie and I move over to the small kitchen table, where we share the brownies she snuck in.

"Can't let the boys see," she giggles, angling her body to hide the Tupperware from the group in front of the TV. "I swear, alphas will gobble up everything in sight. When my older brother presented as an alpha, my parents had to set up a special cupboard with snacks that they kept under lock and key, just so the rest of us wouldn't starve!"

"Good call," I agree, quickly devouring half a square. "Oh, *Dios mío*, these are amazing!" Normally, I'd feel embarrassed at the animal sounds I'm making, but it's been *soooooo* long since I had a brownie that I can't quite find the energy to care.

"I know, right? It's my friend's recipe. It's her time of the month, and she swears she can't function without a constant source of chocolate. I took a few of these off her hands as a safety precaution so she doesn't overdose."

"But what a way to go . . ." I grin.

"True!" she laughs. "Can you imagine having to go through that every month? I swear, for all the things that suck about being an omega, at least we only go into heat occasionally."

I tense up, the remaining brownie turning to ash in my mouth. I can tell

Mackenzie realizes her mistake as well, and I catch her grimace of regret and pity before I look away.

“Hey, Esperanza, I’m so, so, so sorry. I swear I didn’t mean to make you feel unsafe or, like, remind you of what happened . . . Leo only told me the basics of what you’ve been through, I’m just an idiot and I wasn’t thinking, but I would never make light of something so traumatizing—”

“It’s okay,” I mumble, summoning a weak smile as I cut off Mackenzie’s rambling. She seems super uncomfortable when I look back up at her, biting her lip and practically vibrating with nerves on the edge of her seat. I’m reminded suddenly that as an omega, her overabundance of empathy must be riding her hard right now. So I try again.

“Really. It’s okay.” I sit up straighter and meet her gaze. “I know you didn’t mean anything by it. It’s obviously a bit of a trigger for me, but I don’t want you to feel like you have to walk on eggshells around me. To be honest, I’ve never been around another omega my age before. Or any omega really. Em and I grew up in a pretty small town, and practically everyone was a beta. Our school didn’t even have an official course on Principles of Dynamics, so most of what I know about being an omega comes from the media. Or from the doctrine my father tried to shove down my throat, but I hope to Gods he was wrong about all of that.”

I take a breath, realizing I’d gotten a little carried away and unintentionally heated. I notice Lincoln giving me a searching look from the couch and quickly avert my eyes.

“What I mean to say is that I could use some help.”

“You mean you could use an omega bestie? Gotcha covered!” Mackenzie chirps, darting away for a moment and then coming back with a blanket from the stack of bedding that I’d shoved into a corner earlier. My makeshift bed from sleeping on the couch. I just sit there, blinking, as she effortlessly wraps it around me in a practiced motion, pulling the material tight until I feel like a baby that’s been swaddled. “How’s that?”

“I can’t move!” I laugh, wriggling around a bit to demonstrate and nearly losing my balance.

“My mom used to do this for my sister and me when we got overstimulated as kids. I still love it. Makes me feel like I’m being hugged, ya know?”

“It’s pretty great,” I agree, allowing myself to settle into the feeling. It does feel calming, like all the nerve endings sending constant pings of anxiety to my brain have been smothered. Dulled. Though if I’m not careful, one wrong move will have me tumbling off this chair and landing on my face.

“So, everyone in your family is a beta?” she asks, settling back gracefully in her seat and grabbing another brownie.

“I think there might be some distant relatives who were non-beta, but I don’t really know. Maybe I was adopted. Or maybe my mom had an affair with someone sane,” I mutter, only half-joking.

It would be a comfort, honestly.

“Maybe,” Mackenzie concedes cautiously. “But it’s not crazy unusual for an alpha or omega to pop up out of nowhere in a beta family. There’s another omega here with a similar background that I met through O-Club.”

“O-Club?”

“It’s a student group for omegas here. You should totally join! I’m not super involved with them—some omegas around here treat it like a full-on sorority—but their socials can be fun, and they’ve brought some really interesting speakers to campus. They also hold joint events with the Pack Council every quarter or so. It can be a good place to safely meet some alphas if that’s your thing.

Despite it being decidedly NOT my thing right now, I find myself blushing.

“I don’t know all that much about pack culture,” I admit, wiggling around until I manage to free a hand from my blanket burrito so I can grab another brownie. “Em’s is the first pack I’ve been around. And, well, this is the most time I’ve spent around Tanner and Lincoln so far.”

“No need to rush finding a pack. You don’t ever need one, honestly. As omegas it tends to be in our nature to crave the pack structure and all the . . . *things* an alpha can offer,”—she gives me a pointed smirk, and I blush again—“but everyone is different. Our ancestors fought for equality for all

designations, and you'll find most people here respect omegas' rights. Bullshit extremist groups aside, of course," she finishes with a frown.

I decide I don't want to dwell on my father and the terrible company he kept.

"What about you? Do you have a pack? Is that the right terminology?" I ask. I know my brother admitted to having a crush on Mackenzie, but so far, I haven't seen any indication that they're actually dating.

"Um, not yet. But I am being courted," she states, a bit shyly but with obvious excitement. "It's new."

"Is it this pack?" I ask, a sudden feeling of unease creeping into my gut. I can't place why. She seems really great, and it would be cool to have her around more.

"No," she replies, an odd look on her face that I can't decipher. "These guys are great. Leo and I connected instantly in a class we shared last fall. Tanner and Lincoln are super great guys too, but they haven't approached me, and I'm not exactly sure I get a 'compatible pack' vibe from them," she admits, the strange look still firmly in place.

I'm not sure how exactly to feel about that information, so I simply nod and ask more questions.

We spend the next twenty minutes talking about the pack that is courting her, the soothing hum of Tanner getting destroyed at *Mario Kart* playing in the background. Mackenzie is just a little older than I am, a sophomore at River Valley, but her life is so different from mine. She grew up in a pack in a much less rural part of the country than me. She's a student, confident in her omega-ness, and being courted by a pack. I can't help but be intrigued, though I don't feel at all ready to consider socializing so closely with multiple alphas.

Respect the journey, I remind myself—another favorite phrase from Dr. Morgan, though frankly, I feel like it's so similar to "it's a process" that it shouldn't count.

It's almost midnight when our little bubble is finally invaded by Silver, and her discovery of the brownies we'd been hiding brings all the boys over as well. Our secret stash is gone in seconds.

Mackenzie and Silver both try to give me their numbers, looking shocked when I admit that I don't have a phone. Em promises to fix that ASAP, and I say goodnight to the girls with promises to get together again soon. I hope it's not just platitudes—I really did enjoy spending time with them. Mackenzie especially.

I've gotten pretty comfortable around Tanner this evening and I tell him he's welcome to come back and stay, though I'm secretly grateful when he declines, suggesting we give it a few more days. Em disappears into his room after checking with me that I'm okay, muttering something about needing to sleep so he can get up early to train tomorrow. That leaves me alone with Lincoln for a few minutes while Tanner gathers some clean clothes from his room.

"You're not a big video-game guy?" I ask, feeling a bit awkward and not knowing how to act around the handsome alpha. I try to push out thoughts of my humiliation at being rescued by him, but it's hard.

He shrugs. "Sometimes, but I'm just as happy to watch."

I nod. "I used to play a bit with Em when we were younger, but I never quite got the hang of it. He kept refusing to play on a team with me, and he'd beat me too easily when we went head-to-head," I share. I'm clearly the queen of small talk.

"I have something for you," Lincoln finally states after a few beats of stilted silence.

"Oh. What? Shouldn't I be the one getting you things as a thanks for saving me and all?" I joke awkwardly. *Boy, this alpha makes me nervous.*

He gives me a soft, adorable smile, and I can't help but smile back. "Here." He grabs something out of a bag I hadn't noticed by the door, handing it over to me.

It's a hoodie. His hoodie if I'm not mistaken. I take it gingerly, not sure what I'm supposed to do with it. It has been getting pretty cold. Maybe he thinks I need more layers to stay warm?

"Ummm, thanks. It's not really my size, but . . ."

Lincoln laughs, and I can't help but feel butterflies erupt in my stomach. "My mom suggested it. She's an omega. I explained the situation to her. Just the basics—I'm not going around gossiping about you," he rushes to add. "But I figured she might have some ideas. She said I should give you something with my scent on it, to help you . . . acclimate. Get used to me, you know? Tanner's scent is all over his room, so this way you'll be able to get used to me as well. If you want. No pressure."

"Oh," I murmur, my throat suddenly feeling too tight. It's so . . . sweet. I blink rapidly to make sure I don't start crying. I've hit my quota of embarrassment with this guy—can't afford to pile on more. Not knowing what else to say, I bring the hoodie to my face and breathe in. His comforting scent of salted honey and leather fills my lungs immediately, much stronger than the whiffs I've gotten so far. It's glorious, and I can't stop my fingers from curling into the material possessively.

"Thank you," I manage finally.

"Sure thing," Lincoln replies, looking a bit awkward himself now.

Luckily, Tanner emerges from his room, saving us both from having to say anything more. "Ready, man?" he asks, joining us by the door.

Lincoln nods, and both guys put on their shoes.

"Nice hanging with you, Espy." Tanner smiles at me and holds out his fist. I smile back as I give it a bump, truly appreciative of how he's respecting my boundaries. "We'll see you soon!"

"Have a good night," I reply, closing the door behind them.

Mission accomplished, I think. I survived an evening around two alphas. It actually went better than I expected, with them both keeping their distance physically and allowing me to start building up a sense of safety around them. Speaking of, I can't resist burying my nose in Lincoln's hoodie once more. His scent is warm and masculine and makes my gut clench in a way that I decide not to examine too closely. He's my pack-in-law, or whatever the proper term is. He's an extension of family, and his scent *should* comfort me.

It doesn't take me long to clean up the remaining plates and glasses and then

set up my makeshift bed on the couch. I tuck Lincoln's hoodie up near my pillow and settle in. I don't have any trouble falling asleep that night.

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Esperanza

It's been a few weeks since our movie night, and not to toot my own horn or anything, but I've come a long way. If "come a long way" can be defined as having only a handful of breakdowns and finally allowing Tanner to move back into his own home.

So, yeah, I'm a bona fide rockstar.

Truly, though, I do feel like I've made some progress. I'm managing to go outside a bit more, always with Em or Tanner by my side. I'm drawing more. I've met up with Mackenzie and Silver and been introduced to Mackenzie's roommate, Claire. I'm even sleeping a bit better, with fewer nightmares.

Em and Tanner finally convinced me that I needed a sleeping arrangement more substantial than just camping out on the couch, so a few days ago they brought home a little cot bed for me that we managed to squeeze into a corner of the living room, and we rigged up some curtains around it. It's a tight fit in the small space, but I'll admit, having even that tiny amount of privacy is kind of nice. I still feel safest when I can hear Em's breathing (a.k.a. snoring) as a reminder of where I am, but as my anxiety starts to lessen, I've found that the enclosed nature of the curtains is comforting.

The thought of trying to make a nest still sends primal fear shooting through me, but the blankets I've borrowed are pretty cozy. Not to mention Lincoln's hoodie, which I've kept a close hold of. My pillow has even started to smell like him, and I find it calms me down whenever my anxiety starts to creep in.

“Hop along, Espy!” Tanner calls from where he’s standing a few feet away.

“Settle down,” I grumble back at him, teasing. “The cafeteria isn’t going to run out of food if it takes us an extra two minutes to get there.”

“Not worth the risk.” He winks at me.

We’ve fallen into a routine of sorts. At least during the weekdays. In the mornings I typically follow either Em or Tanner, depending on their class schedule, to the cafeteria, where they swipe me in as a guest. We eat breakfast, and then my escort does some homework while I either draw, read, or study from my new college prep books. I usually stay there through lunch, with Em or Tanner switching out as needed. In the afternoons we sometimes switch to the library or hang out outside if it isn’t too cold.

I hate being a burden, but I do appreciate the safety net they’re giving me.

Lincoln has started taking “Espy’s shifts” recently as well. He’s often busier than the other two, but he always brushes me off when I try to tell him I don’t want to be a bother. They all do.

While they aren’t my pack romantically—for obvious reasons, ewwwww—it does feel like I have a whole network of protective men around me, and I’d be lying if I said it wasn’t nice. Mackenzie explained to me that they’re acting as my family pack. She told me it isn’t uncommon for packs to take in younger, unbonded siblings. Omegas especially.

“French toast today—awesome!” Tanner crows as we enter the cafeteria.

The food here is surprisingly good, and I take my time meandering through the many stations set up around the large room. Some specialty items they rotate out, like the French toast, but other things are staples, like their cereal, yogurt, and oatmeal bars. I swear I’ve put on at least five pounds in just a few weeks as I’ve made sure to try out all the different offerings. It’s not like I couldn’t use the extra weight. In fact, what better place for an underweight omega to hang out for hours each day than an all-you-can-eat cafeteria?

Tanner and I settle into what’s become our usual booth: a spot against a wall, but with a good view of most of the large, open space. It was overstimulating to be around so many people at first, but now I find the crowd comforting. The public provides a level of anonymity and safety that feels reassuring.

Tanner sits with me for a few hours, but eventually he has to get to class. Em will be stuck in class for a while yet. I finally realized he'd just been skipping that one without telling me. *Qué menso!* After a nearly forty-five-minute argument last night, he finally agreed we'd experiment with leaving me on my own for a while. I had to promise not to move from the cafeteria *and* to send him updates via text every twenty minutes so he won't worry. I made sure to roll my eyes before agreeing, but in all honesty, I am a bit anxious about being alone in public. I could have just asked Tanner to walk me back to the dorm, but I can't hide away forever.

Luckily, a buddy of Em's had an old phone sitting around that he agreed to let me have, so at least I have a way to communicate—and to ask for help if I start having a panic attack or something like that. It feels *soooooo* good to have a phone again. My dad took mine away two years ago after Em left for college, and it was so frightening not having any way to tell anyone what was going on. I only have a few numbers so far, but it's nice. And the emojis have gotten a lot fancier too.

I wave goodbye to Tanner and send off a preemptive text to Em letting him know I'm all good and that I'll text him every twenty minutes as promised. I even set a timer to make sure I won't forget. Hesitating for a just a minute, I pull up Lincoln's number too and shoot him a similar note.

Good girl, he replies a few seconds after I hit send. My stomach swoops in a way I'm beginning to become accustomed to with him. A few seconds later he follows up with, **Call me immediately if anything happens. Or if you need me.**

I smile and put my phone away, returning to the college prep math book I was reading before Tanner left. It still feels too early to make any major decisions about my life in the short-term, but before my dad derailed my life I always planned to continue my education. The deadline to apply for spring admission at River Valley passed a few days ago, on October 1, but Em got me an appointment with the registrar's office, and they seemed surprisingly sympathetic of my situation. My father didn't allow me to take my ACT or SAT exams, having already decided that I was to be sold off to an alpha. No undergraduate degree required for that, apparently. I always did fairly well in school, though, and the registrar said they'd allow me to apply late and make my acceptance conditional on getting my exam scores in by January 5. Even

if I don't score all that well, it sounds like they're willing to work with me. I'm grateful.

Em and I have also talked about the possibility of me applying for disability, but I don't like the sound of that. Emotionally, it makes me feel like a victim. Logistically, it sounds like a nightmare to get all the paperwork filled in. I know I'm putting a strain on Em's tightly managed budget right now, but it won't be forever. If I can't go to school, then I'll get a job. I won't let my trauma deny me that.

I need to be able to support myself.

I make it through two more chapters in my prep book before my brain feels fried, so I decide to switch things up. I pull out my sketch pad, flipping to a blank page. I've always liked to draw, whether with charcoal, colored pencils, or crayons. Even pens when I'd get bored in class and start sketching in the margins of my notes. I'm okay at drawing realistically, but I'm better at pulling things out of my head. For one class project back in tenth grade I made a series of sketches where I interpreted what common animals might look like in an alien zoo. I was so proud of those creations, and while I know they're still sitting somewhere in my dad's house, I doubt I'll see them again anytime soon. I decide to work on a new edition instead, focusing on various bird species instead of the larger mammals I drew before.

I allow myself to get lost in the work, only stopping every thirty minutes to send the obligatory text to my brother. I'm busy working on my vision of an alien peacock when I hear someone clear their throat right next to me.

I jump, banging my knee on the table and accidentally drawing a line where I hadn't wanted one. "Jeez," I groan, rubbing at my bruised knee as I take in the stranger standing before me.

"Hi."

The boy's cute. Looking to be a little under six feet, he's skinny but lean, with slightly curly sandy-blond hair hanging around his ears and falling into his murky green eyes. His face manages to be both heart-shaped and masculine at the same time, and his skin looks like it got stuck somewhere between pale and lightly tanned.

He is beautiful. No two ways around it.

“Ummm . . . hi?”

I’m not used to strangers approaching me, and though this guy smells like a beta I’m not keen to let down my guard. As my father proved, betas can be monsters too.

“I’m Micah,” the guy says, holding out his hand with a disarming grin.

I just blink, still confused about why he’s here, and I don’t bother to take his hand.

He doesn’t seem to mind, pulling his hand back to rest it in his back pocket and leaning against my table casually. Fortunately, he’s at least giving me space. “You’re Espy, right? Esperanza Alvarez? I’m Mason’s brother. Or the handsome Hayes, as I’m known around here.” He gives me a playful wink, and I quickly wrack my brain.

Mason . . . that’s the name of Em’s swimmer friend, right?

This much is confirmed when Micah points off to his left and I look over to see the alpha I met two weeks ago sitting at a table with another guy who seems to be about the same age. They’re both staring at me, and at Micah, I guess. It makes me nervous, so I quickly look back at the guy in front of me.

When I remain frozen, I get my first glimpse of Micah’s confidence starting to slip.

“Hey. Sorry. I didn’t mean to ambush you.” He frowns. “Mason told me not to come over here, but I’ve seen you around, drawing, and I just had to come say hi. He mentioned you aren’t super comfortable with strangers, but since you’ve met him, and he and I share about fifty percent of the same DNA, I figured I’d take a chance.” He shrugs sheepishly.

I’m not getting a bad vibe off him. The opposite, in fact. His scent is strong for a beta; hints of nutmeg and coffee reach me even through all the other scents swirling around. It’s very different from his brother’s, but it has the same calming vibe and mountainy undertone.

Realizing I’ve been silent for an awkward amount of time, I try to shake off

my nerves. “Yeah. Yes. I’m Espy. It’s, er, nice to meet you.”

His grin returns as he slides into the opposite side of the booth. “This okay?”

I nod. I have an escape route still. It’s fine.

I’m not sure why he’s here, though, and not knowing what to do with my hands, I pick my pen back up and start twirling it around with my fingers, biting at my lip nervously.

“I-I don’t want your friends coming over,” I burst out suddenly. *Dios mío*, that was so rude! My face burns in humiliation. “That was— Sorry! I don’t mean to be a bitch, it’s just—”

“Hey, no worries!” Micah cuts in, not looking offended in the least. “I’m the asshole here, coming over and bothering you out of the blue.”

“Why . . . umm . . . why *did* you come over here? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“Like I said, I’ve seen you drawing.” He gestures to my notebook with the now slightly wonky alien peacock. Darn, I’ll have to find a way to incorporate that errant line somehow. “Can I?”

I hesitate for a second before handing over my sketch pad. There’s nothing private in there, per se. What’s the harm? Then, as the silence starts to stretch between us while he flips through the pages, I realize the harm is in my embarrassment. I’ve just been playing around, doodling really. What if this cute boy is about to make fun of me or thinks I’m weird?

“Wow.”

Finally, he speaks!

“Wow? Wow like . . . I’m a crazy person and need help?” I joke, still nervous.

“Wow like, this is super-cool. You’re super talented, Espy.” He sounds so sincere. It’s hard for me to look away from his eyes, which are now laser-focused on mine.

“Thanks,” I finally manage to murmur. Blushing, of course.

“Where do you get your ideas from?”

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “They’re just things that pop into my head. I guess I like to play around with familiar things and, I don’t know, jazz them up a bit. Do you draw?” I have to get the conversation away from me before I make a fool of myself.

“Nah. That’s actually what brings me here.” His grin splits his face once again. “I’m in need of some artistic services.”

Well. That manages to pique my interest. I raise an eyebrow as I finally smile back at him. “Tell me more.”

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Micah

Be cool. Be cool, be cool, becoolbecoolbecoolbecooooooool!

My brain feels like it's about to short-circuit. Or for a better, more crass metaphor, I feel like a two-pump chump, about to blow my load at the first taste of heaven.

Honestly, that's a pretty good description of what being around Esperanza Alvarez feels like: *heaven*.

I didn't think much of it when Mason came home a few weeks back babbling about some omega chick he'd met. He had pizza and I was in the middle of a gaming tournament—nothing really registered past that. I'd met Leo a few times but didn't know him super-well. It sucked that his sister had been put in such a shitty situation, from Mason's telling of it, but I didn't spend too much time dwelling on it.

Our pack had talked about looking for an omega last semester, but it didn't feel as if any of us were in a rush. We went to a few events put on by the Pack Council and even tried a non-university-sponsored one as well. We met a few omegas who seemed like they had potential, but in the end, no one caught our eye enough to make us want to pursue them further. I did meet this one omega who was super into gaming like I am. He and I still online play every now and then.

Maybe it's because I'm a beta, but I just haven't felt that pull toward anyone yet. Don't get me wrong, I've run into some super-cool and, okay, super-hot

women here at River Valley, but none who scream “pack” to me. I’ve wondered sometimes if Mason and Cabe feel a different pull, being alphas. I know finding an omega can be deeply instinctual for them. But so far, they seem to be just as happy as me to focus on school and hobbies. Or sports, in their case.

They’re both seniors this year, though, so I wasn’t too surprised when Mason brought up this girl again. We were all walking to class a few days after he met her and out of nowhere he stopped and got this moony look on his face. Said he was just remembering the way she smelled. I was almost worried he was going to start stalking the poor girl, but before he could get to that point she popped up out of thin air.

We all tended to eat on campus during the day and one day last week when we entered the cafeteria for lunch, there she was. Mason got all quiet and hyper-focused, making me trade seats with him so he could watch her without it being obvious. She was with her brother and a guy I assumed is one of his packmates. They were just eating and hanging out. We all had classes to get to, but Mason straight up ditched us so he could stay and watch her. The other guy left, but she stayed there with Leo—for a few hours, according to Mason.

The next day, she was back. And then again, the day after that.

It’s easy to see what drew Mason to her. She’s gorgeous, but understated.

Female omegas tend to have overemphasized . . . feminine attributes, so to speak. “Curves you’d like to drive a car around,” as one of Cabe’s older brothers liked to say. That sure was confusing to my seven year old brain, but made a lot more sense once puberty hit. A lot of the omegas I’ve met also have a habit of dressing to impress. Most are born into pack families, which naturally have more wealth to shower on their children since packs often have between three and six breadwinners. Mason is super into all the biology stuff, and he enjoys studying what draws a pack together, but I’ve always been more interested in the socioeconomic side of it all. Not enough to, like, make a career of it or anything. My future is in computers for sure. But still, a stark minority of people blessed with clear financial advantages simply as a function of the family they’re born into . . . Our society sure has some stuff to figure out.

Esperanza—or Espy, as Mason mentioned she likes to go by—is not a flashy dresser. Her curves, subtle. “Simple” sounds like a bad word to describe a woman I’m into, but I can’t think of a better one. Her features stand out all the more against her plain clothes and lack of makeup. She often looks small, and a bit terrified at times, but I swear there’s a spark there that shines through. I see it the most when she’s drawing. That’s when she truly seems to lose herself—lose the tension.

The three of us have without a doubt crossed the boundaries of politeness with the amount of time we’ve spent spying on her these past two weeks.

I’ve begged Mason to just go over and say hi, told him he can pretend to be looking to talk to Leo for all I care, but he won’t cave. He says she’s too afraid of alphas and he doesn’t want to make her uncomfortable. I can appreciate that, of course. I’m not a monster. And what I know of her story makes me want to rip her father apart.

However, I’m not an alpha. And the pull I feel toward her is irresistible. When we came in for lunch today and I saw she was alone for once, I figured I’d take my shot.

I didn’t plan to ask her for help with my art, but seeing her talent and creativity with a pen has my wheels turning. “Let me go quickly grab the thing I need help with,” I say, thanking the stars I happen to have one of my comic drafts on me. “Wait.” I turn back to survey her table. “Have you had lunch yet?”

“Nope. Guess I got distracted.” That light blush is back, and I just want to grab her and rub my face all over hers so I can bask in it.

“Let me grab you something. Any allergies?”

“Uh—nope. I’m not picky.”

Perfect.

I hurry back to my table and grab my backpack.

“Dude.” Mason looks pissed, and I can practically feel the growl trying to escape his chest. Cabe, on the other hand, just looks intrigued.

“What happened, man? How does she smell?” He goes to grab my hand and give it a sniff, but I shake the big oaf off.

“Cabe, *manners*. No sniffing each other in public. I’m adding it to the pack rules tonight.” He sits back, pushing his tongue against his teeth in a rueful smirk.

“Dibs when we get home then.”

I laugh while Mason just shakes his head with a scowl. “That’ll have to wait.”

Before they can question me further, I’m back in front of Espy, my latest draft folder in hand.

“Tada!” I announce, setting it down in front of her with an exaggerated flourish.

She gives me a questioning look, which is fair enough.

“I write comics,” I explain, moving to open the folder. “This is one of my latest drafts I’ve been playing with. You’ll see the artwork leaves . . . something to be desired.” I grin. That’s an understatement. I have zero artistic talent when it comes to drawing. I’ve tried using my computer to render a few graphics on some of my other comics, but the one in front of her now just has my own chicken scratch.

“Give it a look.” I tap the papers. “I’ll be right back once I grab you some food.”

With that, I turn my attention to the cafeteria. *What to get, what to get . . .?* There’s something instinctually satisfying, I’m suddenly finding, about feeding an omega. I never paid too close attention in my Principles of Dynamics class in high school. There was a more in-depth class alphas and omegas were encouraged to take, but as a beta I opted out in favor of a computer programming elective.

I’ll have to ask Mason and Cabe for some tips. Or maybe they have a course here I could take to get up to speed? I make a mental note to check later.

I eventually decide on a grilled chicken panini and salad. Plus, a cookie. Who

doesn't like a little sugar? Espy looks engrossed in the pages when I make it back to her table. Hopefully, that's a good sign.

"So, what do you think?" I prompt, scooting the food over to her as I settle into the opposite bench. "I'm a shoo-in for the Pulitzer, right?"

"Micah." She looks up at me in concern, an adorable frown on her face. "There are literal stick figure drawings in here. It looks like a . . . a five-year-old tried to—" She cuts herself off abruptly, eyes a bit wide.

"Go ahead, Esp. Keep stroking my ego like that." I wink, not offended in the least.

"That was rude," she concedes. "Sorry."

"Maybe I'm into a little degradation. Could be a kink."

Her blush grows darker at that, and she looks away. I just chuckle.

"Here. Start eating. It'll be harder for you to insult me when your mouth is full."

She pouts a little but grabs the food. "Are you not eating anything?" she asks, going for the salad first.

I already ate, but the idea of sharing food with her is dangerously appealing. I grab half the sandwich and take a big bite, pleased when she smiles.

"Okay, so obviously I can't draw for shit. I'm pretty decent at the story arcs though. From what I saw in your sketchbook, I'm thinking you might be just the person to help me bring the whole package together."

"You want me to teach you how to draw?" she asks, looking a little dubious. My "talent" tends to have that effect on people.

"No. I want you to be my illustrator. My *partner*," I can't help but add. *Be cool, Micah. Jeez.*

"I . . . I'm not sure I know how to do that." She frowns.

"I promise you're gonna be great at it. Let me walk you through it a bit more."



An hour goes by in a flash.

Somehow, I've ended up sitting next to her. Granted, we're still sitting a good foot apart at least, but it's close enough for me to bask in her delicious rose and vanilla scent. Shoot, maybe I will let Cabe sniff me tonight. I could feel the jealousy rolling off him and Mason when the two left about 45 minutes ago.

I've managed to walk Espy through the universe I've created in my comics. I only have the one with me right now, but she seems genuinely interested in listening to me talk about the series I've been working on. She has her sketchbook in front of her again, and she's been making a few rough outlines for my main protagonist as I offer my input.

It's mesmerizing to watch her in action. She has this cute little habit of biting her tongue when she concentrates, and I decide that I'll spend the rest of the day sitting right here with her. My late afternoon class be damned.

What I don't expect is the growl. Deep and threatening enough that I have to forcibly fight off my instinctual fight-flight-freeze response, instead curving my body around Espy's as I turn to face the unknown threat.

"Get the fuck away from her."

The alpha now standing a few feet from me is huge—about the size of my packmates, but with a lot more bulk. He looks vaguely familiar, but more than anything he looks pissed. Like he's just barely keeping himself from attacking me. I turn my body fully toward him, making sure to tuck Espy further behind me and back into the booth.

"Lincoln!"

Okay, so Espy clearly knows this alpha. He doesn't break eye contact with me though; he just continues with his low, terrifying growl.

"Move!" he barks.

Yeah, right. I scowl in response. “Back off! She’s not comfortable around alphas. You need to fucking step back right now.” I don’t have a true growl, but growing up with Mason, Cabe, and Cabe’s brothers has taught me how to hold my own against alphas.

“Micah, no! It’s okay! This is Lincoln. He’s in my brother’s pack.”

Ah, so that’s where the familiarity is from. I feel Espy push gently against my back, trying to get me to move out of my protective stance, but I’m not quite ready to budge. The alpha, Lincoln, is still looking murderous. Our standoff lasts another few seconds before he eventually steps back. Barely.

I get up cautiously, moving to stand close by, but without getting between the two of them. When he’s deemed I’m sufficiently out of the way, his glare turns to Espy.

“You forgot to check in.”

“Oh, shit.” She goes pale, and I see what looks like real regret in her eyes as she scrambles for her phone.

“Leo sent me after you. He’s losing his mind. We all were,” he adds, looking at her pointedly. He seems to have calmed down somewhat now that I’ve moved, but the guy’s still sending out major hostile vibes.

“I’m sorry, Lincoln. This is Micah! He’s Mason’s brother, one of Em’s—I mean Leo’s—teammates from swimming. We were just talking, and I . . . I must have lost track of time.”

I want to crow with victory at hearing that I managed to distract her, but I decide that would be inappropriate given the current circumstances.

Lincoln doesn’t look super mollified. “You, call your brother.” He points at Espy. “And *you*, move along. *Now.*” The second part is directed at me, no surprise.

Begrudgingly, I agree it might be time to make my exit.

“You good?” I ask Espy. I have to make sure she feels safe before I go anywhere.

She nods, not meeting my eye and looking embarrassed.

“Okay.” I gather up the pages of my comic, which are now spread across the table. “Thanks for the assist with the drawing. Can I get your number? I so want to keep working on this.”

Lincoln butts in with another growl before she can even open her mouth.

“On second thought, I’ll just give you mine.” I pick up her discarded pen and quickly scribble my number on one of the pages she was outlining on. “See you soon, Esps!”

With a wink, I force myself to walk away.

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Cabe

I'm still sweating when I make it back to the house, and I know the burn of lactic acid build-up is coming for me hard. It may be the offseason for soccer, but my team trains practically year-round. I did team conditioning at the field earlier, then I decided to run the mile and a half back home in an effort to burn off some of the anxious energy that's been burning me up all afternoon.

Damn Micah, taking life by the balls.

I leave my shoes at the door and head straight to my room, stripping out of my soaked clothes as I go. It's only October, but Colorado can get chilly even in the fall. A warm shower right now sounds amazing. I stand buck-naked in my bathroom as I wait for the water to heat up. I like it extra scalding. Micah's music drifts through the walls, confirming the little shit is, in fact, home. Good. I can't wait to hear everything about the omega he ambushed earlier. Espy.

Not gonna lie, it's an odd name. Her full name, Esperanza, is beautiful. It's also four long-ass syllables. I looked it up when Mason first mentioned her, and it means "hope." It definitely suits her, as I swear it's the overriding emotion that's been battering me this past week or so.

The small bathroom is looking steamy, so I step under the spray with a hiss. *Perfect!*

I stand for a while soaking in the heat, eventually picking up my soap and going to town.

I caught a whiff of the sweet little omega on Mason a few weeks ago, picking up her lingering scent even over the pizza he was carrying. It was appealing, that was for damn sure. Then again, it isn't unusual for an omega's scent to pique my interest. Last year I managed to convince Mason and Micah to come with me to meet some of the unbonded omegas on campus looking for a pack. There were a few I liked and wanted to get to know more, but I could tell neither of my packmates were sold. Maybe it was growing up in a pack or knowing two of my older brothers had recently found *their* omega, but I'd been feeling the itch. I'd actually been considering going to a few of the socials solo, to see if I couldn't do the leg work of finding a good potential match to bring back to Mason and Micah.

Both of my packmates are a lot busier than I am. Mason has his double major and is captain of the swim team, while Micah has a ton of side hustles going on in addition to his rather demanding comp-sci courses. And I'm just . . . getting by.

I'm on track to graduate this year with a psych major and business minor, but I can't say I'm really inspired by either. They seemed like good, general options when I was forced to choose my sophomore year, that's all. I blame it on growing up the youngest of four boys in a pack family. There was always chaos around me and no real need or opportunity to form hobbies or interests outside of our unit. Making enough food for four young alphas, three adult alphas, two adult betas, and one busy omega was a massive undertaking in itself. This was only compounded when my younger brother and sister came along seven years after me—my parents' surprise twins.

Anyway. I thought if I could manage to bring them a prescreened omega, ready to court, then that would solve our issue. I wasn't expecting Mason to stumble across one by accident.

I lean forward to rest against the shower wall as I allow my soapy hand to wander down my chest and between my thighs. Hormones mixed with pheromones can wreak havoc on alphas and omegas. Ever since I started spying on Espy in the cafeteria two weeks ago, catching little wisps of her scent, I can't seem to go more than three hours without getting hard. Even in the middle of the fucking night. I've started waking up at 2 a.m., balls aching and dick like a fucking steel rod, all red and angry, demanding I solve the problem.

I feel like a Gods-damn teen again, back when I first revealed as an alpha.

I'm sure Mason knows all the science-y stuff behind it, but it's unusual for an alpha or omega to pursue sexual relationships outside the pack. Probably some evolution thing about ensuring reproductive health and the passing along of genes that will be cared for by a family unit, blah blah blah. My dads gave me the talk when I turned twelve. It wasn't any less embarrassing having heard it three times before when my brothers presented.

I knew some alphas and betas messed around. There were probably omegas who did as well. I had a girlfriend in high school, and we made out sometimes. I didn't have any big drive to take it further though. It was just nice having someone to hang out with, rely on, and protect. As far as I knew, even betas who didn't join a pack tended to wait for physical intimacy until after a commitment was in place. It's just kinda the way things are.

I bite my lip as I wrap my hand around my swollen cock, using the soap to help things along. It's hard not to be crass in the safety of my own head, but I honestly don't need much more than to picture Espy's gorgeous face with those big, baleful eyes. I imagine getting to hold her, running my hands down her curves. What would it feel like to pin her body beneath mine? Would she whine for me? Would she submit?

"Aurggggh," I groan softly, turning my head to bite into my arm as I pick up speed.

Just as my mind starts to wander into dirtier fantasies I'm interrupted by a knock.

"Cabe! Pack meeting!"

Gods-damn Mason and his shitty timing. I try to ignore him and concentrate on the task at—*ahem*—hand.

"Cabe!!"

"Okay, okay. I'm coming—just a sec!"

I'm so close to *actually* coming, I decide to hurry things up. It makes for a rather unsatisfying finish to what had been shaping up to be a lovely shower, but at least I won't be sporting an erection for this meeting.

I'm back out in the living room in no more than two minutes, both Mason and Micah waiting for me on the couch.

The two always look related with their blond-ish hair and green eyes. If I squint, or if I've been drinking, they sometimes blur into a single entity. The Hayes-hybrid.

"Dude," I say, pointing a finger at Micah as I take a seat. "Spill. I assume that's why you've called us here." I raise an eyebrow at Mason, who nods.

Damn beta goes and sets up shop with my dream omega and then refuses to respond to my texts all afternoon. *Jerk.*

"I want to court her."

"Yes!" I crow, pumping my fist in the air as I cheer. *Finally.* Someone else is on board.

"Don't you think that's getting ahead of ourselves? Just a bit?" Mason crosses his arms with a frown, looking unconvinced. "She's been through a serious trauma. I only got the cliff-notes version from Leo, so who knows how sick of a situation she was really in. She can't even be around alphas right now. And I don't blame her. How are we supposed to court her if she's terrified of us?"

It's an okay point, but not enough to dissuade me.

"She's scared now, but that doesn't mean she'll be scared forever," I point out.

"Yeah! She seems okay with her brother's packmates, and they're both alphas. The scary, big one, Lincoln, came and chased me away from her in the cafeteria after you guys left. She was fine," Micah states.

"Wait, he chased you off? What did you do?" Mason's frown only gets deeper.

"It was nothing. She just forgot to check in with her brother, and he was worried about her. She was so *distracted* by my company, and I guess the pack panicked." Micah waggles his eyebrows, clearly pleased with himself.

"That's my point exactly!" Mason cries, looking exasperated. "She's fragile!"

She doesn't need us chasing after her while she's trying to get her feet back underneath her."

"That's for her to decide," I speak up. "Though I agree we can't rush her. If she needs time to heal, she can have it."

"Of course!" Micah agrees. "I'm not saying we go club her over the head and drag her back here or anything." He rolls his eyes.

"Doesn't sound terrible to me." I smirk. I may or may not—but definitely do—have a fantasy just like that I've taken to occasionally playing out in my head.

"We're not even looking for an omega!" Mason tries a new approach, seeing that we're not persuaded.

"Speak for yourself."

That has both of my packmates staring at me.

"Wh-what?" Mason looks shocked.

"You've been looking for an omega?"

"Well, kind of." I shrug. "I'm not, like, out every night trying to hunt one down or anything. But . . . it would be nice. Ya know?"

I don't feel the need to break out into some emotional speech about my desire for family—for a fully formed pack bond. I'd rather save all that mushy shit for my omega.

There's silence for a while, and then: "This is great!"

Micah, of course. Mason's still frowning.

"I still say we're getting ahead of ourselves," he grumbles. "None of us know anything about her really. Cabe's never spoken to her. Never even made eye contact."

"We know some stuff—" Micah tries to protest.

"We know the shitty things that have happened to her! Some of them at least. But that's just something that happened *to* her; it doesn't define her. We

know she's Leo's sister. We know her relative age, height, ethnicity—”

“We know she's an awesome artist,” Micah tries again, pouting. “And we know what she likes to eat.”

“Only because we've been stalking her!”

“Hey!” I bark, surprising both of them. Mason's negativity is starting to freak me out, and I need to put a quash on that, stat. “Maybe we're *all* getting ahead of ourselves. Of course we need to spend more time with her, get to know her more, to see how we all gel. Do some good old-fashioned sniffing.”

Micah snickers, but I'm not entirely joking.

“But you're being too hasty saying we shouldn't pursue her at all. We don't have to march up to her right this second and submit some sort of formal courting application bullshit, but I vote we set a goal of getting to know her more. *All* of us,” I emphasize, looking pointedly at Mason.

He looks like he wants to say something but ends up closing his mouth instead.

I stand up and walk to the fridge, grabbing out two beers. Mason doesn't normally drink much during the swim season, but I suspect this conversation has him in need of one.

“Hey!” Micah protests when I bypass him.

He's not yet twenty-one, but it's not like we actually enforce shit like that at home. He's on my side on this whole thing, so after taking a long swig I pass over my beer and settle back into my spot.

The silence stretches, but I'm not deterred. I refuse to be.

“Mason. Man. What's holding you up here? You're just as obsessed with her as we are. You've skipped class just to stare at her, probably more than once. If you weren't into her or something I wouldn't push it. But clearly that's not the case.”

“I think he's nervous,” Micah states, giving his brother an appraising look.

Mason scowls. “Am not.”

“Are too!”

That’s all it takes for Mason to pounce, and the two start to scuffle.

“Awwwww, is ickle Masey-kins scared of the big, bad omega?” I taunt, helping Micah pin him against the couch. He just growls in response, struggling against our hold.

Micah and I laugh, but it’s a mistake. Mason takes the distraction to thrust his hips up, knocking us both to the floor.

From there it’s a full-out wrestling match. At some point Micah and I give up ganging up on Mason and it becomes a free-for-all. The coffee table gets knocked over, and the couch almost follows suit. We eventually end up in one massive pile, everyone with huge grins and breathing hard.

“From now on, I vote we hold all pack meetings this way,” I laugh.

“No fair! Can we duke it out on the Xbox instead?” Micah pouts. He *is* at the bottom of the pile, but it’s not like the kid doesn’t know how to play dirty. I’m pretty sure he tried to bite me at one point.

We lie there a minute longer. It’s nice. Primeval, probably. I can hardly imagine what it would feel like if we had Espy here in between us, safe and warm in our puppy pile.

“So. You good, dude?” I finally ask.

“Yeah.” Mason lets out a long sigh, but the underlying excitement in his voice is clear. “Let’s do this.”

Micah whoops, and I feel a thrill burst in my chest.

Here. We. Go.

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Esperanza

“Seven . . . eight . . . nine . . . ten . . .”

Finally!

Once I hear the magic word, I let my arms collapse and my body falls ungracefully against the sweaty gym floor.

“I think I’m dying,” I groan. My words are muffled since I can’t be bothered to turn my head. I shift my eyes to look at Lincoln. The large alpha is crouched down a few feet away, and he doesn’t look impressed.

Uh-oh.

“What?” I pout, slowly dragging my body into a sitting position.

“We were going to fifteen this time, Espy.”

I try to hide my shudder. Even disapproving, Lincoln’s deep, rumbly voice gives me full-body shivers.

“Can I do them on my knees?”

He blinks at me inscrutably, then nods.

“You know,” I say, begrudgingly moving back into a push-up position. “This goes directly against my therapist’s instructions to be . . . kind . . . to . . . my . . . self.” I punctuate each word with a half-hearted push-up, and this time, I roll so that I collapse onto my back. It’s easier to glare at Lincoln this way.

He just smirks, then straightens. “Come on, short stack. Give me two laps, and then we do another set.”

For a second I consider not moving and just taking a nap on the disgusting gym floor. However, this was *technically* my idea. The fact that I’d underestimated Lincoln’s definition of “working out” was a rookie mistake. Tanner did try to warn me, his eyes going comically wide as he frantically shook his head when I first brought up the idea. I can’t decide if I owe him an apology for not heeding his warning, or if I ought to kick his butt for not trying harder to stop me.

Definitely option number two, but I’ll have to wait until after my legs aren’t so sore.

Lincoln watches like a hawk while I make my way around the small indoor track. His stare is . . . unnerving. It makes me nervous, but I’d be lying if I didn’t admit that it also excites me. I need to find a way to channel that metabolically so I can make it through this workout.

It’s been over a week since he stormed into the cafeteria and “rescued” me from Micah. He was mad. Even more so than Em had been. When my groveling and apologies for worrying him didn’t work, I went a different route. I drew a caricature of him being a grump and handed it over with some cookies Mackenzie brought me. The look on his face when I gave it to him was priceless. Probably better than the one I drew.

At least it did the trick, and he’s forgiven me now. Unless he’s just taking it out on me in his role as my trainer. If that’s the case, he’s a genius.

“All right. Just one more round of the sit-ups and push-ups—*fifteen* each—then you’re free.”

“Do them with me?” I cajole, flinging my body back to the floor. “I think this whole drill-sergeant routine is taking precious time away from your own training.”

He looks at me with a mixture of humor and exasperation but still lowers his body down next to mine. *Score!* He’s worked out with me a few times since we started this, and there is nothing like watching Lincoln Masters working his body.

It's fine-tuned. He has the look of someone who actually uses their muscles, as opposed to those guys who just bulk up for show. The way his shoulders bunch under his T-shirt when he drops his chest to the ground for a push-up is delicious.

"*Espy . . .*" he growls.

Whoops! I forgot to keep doing my own workout while I creeped on him.

I avert my eyes and push through my last reps.

"Okay. You did good today," he rumbles approvingly.

"Good enough that we can move on to you showing me how to kick some alpha ass?" I quip.

The original idea behind working out was to learn self-defense. I wanted a way to feel safer and like I have more autonomy over my own body. Plus, the exercise endorphins are theoretically supposed to help with my anxiety.

Lincoln looks over at me with a soft, almost tender look. I'm not expecting it, and tears spring to my eyes out of nowhere. It's hard not to feel vulnerable. Not to sink back into that mental state where I was imprisoned and tortured, all so some alpha could rape me and force me into a bond.

I was asked to come in yesterday to speak with the law enforcement officials handling my case. There's a whole task force on BFOS now, apparently. Em came with me, of course, and Lincoln tagged along as well. I guess he's been following the case against my father pretty closely, keeping tabs on how the investigation is unfolding.

We went over a lot of the same things I gave them before, answering questions about what my father did to me, what I remembered of the other members, the alphas who came to the house, etc. This time they had pictures though. Some of my house and some of individuals they suspected were involved.

It was brutal.

I thought I'd been doing really well. I'm able to be around Tanner and Lincoln without issue. I can walk around more and be on my own in public.

I'm even sleeping slightly better!

But seeing the house again . . . it made me relive everything and forced me to focus on the faces of the alphas who witnessed my torture—especially the last man, Vessnick. The one who assaulted me that final evening, and who they *still* haven't found.

I was a bit of a wreck last night, barely sleeping and wracked with anxiety. I wonder if it would be weird to ask Lincoln for another of his sweatshirts. His scent on the one he gave me weeks ago has gradually faded, and I miss it. I wonder if he'd buy that I'm still scared around him and need more clothing to help keep that at bay . . .

I blush at the thought of telling him I need his scent.

Better idea: I'll just find a way to steal something from his bag.

Lincoln stands and bends down to offer me a hand up. I reach up automatically to take it, then I freeze. My eyes dart up to his, shocked. He looks equally as frozen. Both our arms stay outstretched, hands hovering barely an inch apart. Both he and Tanner have been so good at giving me space since I showed up, never coming closer than a foot or so, and certainly never touching me.

I'd bet both Lincoln and I were operating on autopilot.

Before I can overthink it any more, I close the minute distance, tentatively grabbing his hand. His skin is warm and a bit rough. It's also damp, and I cringe internally realizing that my hand is undoubtedly covered in sweat as well.

He keeps his eyes locked on mine the entire time as he pulls me to my feet, giving my hand a gentle squeeze before letting go. All I feel is warm. Maybe a bit tingly.

Lincoln's musky scent hangs like a cloud around us, deepened from working out.

I decide I feel safe.

He's already walking away, heading toward our bags in the corner. I trot after

him, reaching out to grab his hand once more and tugging him to a stop. He turns to face me, one brow raised in question.

“Ummm . . .” I hesitate for just a moment, but then I tug him down as I raise my arms.

It’s not the easiest thing, trying to hug a giant when you’re only five foot two. I end up wrapping my arms around his chiseled waist and tucking my head against his chest. He meets me halfway, curling his body down around mine protectively, his arms around my back.

It’s slightly awkward. And sweaty. And wonderful.

A small purr escapes me, and I jump when a second later his much louder purr vibrates against my ear.

I allow myself a few more seconds in his arms before pulling away. I’ve been deprived of touch for so long, it’s hard to let go.

“Thank you.”

“For what, short stack?”

“Not for that nickname, that’s for sure.”

He laughs as I pout up at him.

“Just for, you know. Rescuing me. Being so careful around me. Training me.” I shrug. It makes me feel self-conscious to spell it all out.

I move away from him to grab my bag, and he does the same.

“Always, Espy.”



The dorm is empty when Lincoln drops me off. Em is at swim practice and Tanner is . . . studying, maybe? Their schedules are up on the wall by the front door, courtesy of the “Dogs of River Valley” calendar I found on sale at the student bookstore. Given that it’s almost mid-October, I got it for a buck.

November 5 is circled in red, marking the date I've signed up to take my SATs.

Blurgh.

I should probably use this time to study, but instead I grab my sketch pad from my "corner" and settle in on the couch.

I've been too nervous to text Micah. Em assures me he's a great guy, and it's not like Micah is trying to ask me out or anything. He wants a graphic artist to collaborate with, not to date me or kidnap me or sell me off . . . He probably wants to be friends. Which sounds really great! In theory.

My anxiety disagrees.

Maybe it makes me a child, but I've been avoiding the cafeteria this past week, holing up in the library and dorm instead and getting Em and Tanner to bring me to-go containers so I don't starve. I know they worry that I've regressed, but having to admit a crush to my brother isn't happening.

Micah's number stares up at me from the page, accusingly, so I quickly flip past it to my more recent sketches. I've been picking up where we left off in the cafeteria, working to bring his main character to life. I don't know anything about comics, but Micah's passion and vision has totally sucked me in. It sounded like there's a whole series he's working on, but his main character is a teenage boy blessed (or cursed?) with a nefarious genetic mutation. He was experimented on by the government and now has the ability to switch between designations at will. I'm still not entirely clear what kind of special ability that translates to, but his mission is to take down the evil government agencies that created him.

I've drawn out a few different options based on the description Micah gave me. Young, dangerous, and driven, but still a little nerdy. I'm not sure how much his physical body changes along with his designation, but I went ahead and mocked up alpha, beta, and omega versions. I even started playing around with different color schemes. Are all comic-book heroes supposed to have some sort of crime-fighting suit? A cape doesn't feel right, but I don't know if Micah had anything in mind for his character's clothes.

I go to start another sketch, but then stop. I'm being ridiculous. I'm eighteen,

almost nineteen, now. There's no reason for me to be hiding from a cute boy like I'm back in middle school.

Time to put on your big-girl panties, Espy.

I grab my phone and start snapping pictures, then I flip back through my sketch pad until I find Micah's number. I agonize over what to say. Do I explain? Apologize? Pretend I've been sick? Blame Lincoln?

I eventually decide on *none of the above*. Instead I select two of my favorite sketches and hit send before I have the chance to change my mind.

Jiminy Cricket. My heart's beating harder than it was during my workout earlier. How pathetic.

I leap up from the couch and go to the kitchen to get a cookie. Distracting myself with sugar sounds like the perfect idea. When there's no response after five minutes, I grab another one.

I've basically gone out of my mind when I finally hear the ping. Nearly forty-five minutes after I sent my text! I try to be cool, ignoring it while I finish reading the paragraph I was on in my SAT prep book, but that only buys me a few seconds. I hold my breath as I unlock the screen, letting it out in a rush when I see Micah's number staring back at me from my inbox. I click on the message with a slightly shaky hand.

M: Hi :-)

Hi. *Hi?* What am I supposed to do with that? Before I can spiral too far, another message comes through.

M: I'm glad you texted.

M: I was beginning to think you were just a figment of my imagination.

That makes me smile.

E: Who says I'm not?

M: Not a chance. My brain is incapable of thinking up those drawings. You have an incredible talent, Espy.

I blush, thankful he can't actually see me turning red through the phone.

E: Those are just some options. You don't have to use them or anything.

M: Too late, they're mine. Verbal claim. It's binding, ask any lawyer ;-)

M: Do you have any more?

I bite my lip. Will he think I'm crazy if I show him how many sketches I've actually done? Taking a deep breath, I send over the other pictures I took. There are twenty-one in total.

I wait, expecting a reply, but it doesn't come. I check my phone, wondering if I somehow lost service. Nope. I close my messaging app then open it again. I stand up, sit down, then stand up again. I grab a glass of water.

What happened?

I've just convinced myself he hates them when my phone rings, making me jump. *Caramba!* It's him.

"H-hello?" I try not to sound as nervous as I feel, but I doubt I succeed.

"Esperanza Middle-Name Alvarez. These. Are. Amazing. Holy shit!" His voice is warm and excited, and I immediately feel at ease.

"Iliana."

"Iliana?"

"My middle name," I clarify, grinning.

"Right. Sure. Don't try to distract me. Your drawings are like . . . like . . . I don't even have words. Where were you five years ago when teenage me thought it was a good idea to enter one of my comics in the local 'new authors' competition and the judges put it in the eight-to-ten-year-old category?"

I laugh. "I've seen your drawings, remember? Are you sure it wasn't the four-to-six-year-old division?"

"Woowwwwwww. Okay. So you're mean," he teases. "Is that where you've been all week—working out ways to insult my perfectly average artistic ability?"

Oh great, he noticed. Had he been looking for me? What do I say?

“Maybe?”

“Well, I guess I have to forgive you if all *this* is the result. In fact, I’ll *help* you come up with more insults if you’ll keep drawing these. Mason and Cabe have some great ones. I think you’ll be impressed.”

Right. His packmates. Alphas. One of the reasons I’m so nervous at the idea of being around Micah.

“How long have you been a pack?”

“Since forever, basically. I was always a clingy younger brother. I guess they eventually gave up trying to ditch me.”

“So it’s Stockholm syndrome?”

“A very effective, underrated strategy,” Micah chuckles. “Actually, that’s Mason’s area. He’s super into all that pack formation stuff.”

“Oh wow, really? Sounds cool,” I muse. “So he’s into science, and you’re into . . . comics? Creative writing?”

“Eh, the comics are just a hobby. My new *favorite* hobby,” he emphasizes. On cue, I blush, not even knowing if I’m reading more in his words than I should be. “I’m a computer programming major. And I might as well fess up and admit I’m into video gaming too. Don’t let my packmates fool you. They may be semi-talented at sports ball and getting from point A to point B super-fast, but I’m the one with the most trophies.”

I love Micah’s playful cockiness. There’s something about the beta that just pulls me in. As if he’s the Energizer Bunny and when I’m around him I get a contact high.

“Very impressive,” I coo with mock sincerity.

“Damn straight. So, what’s it gonna take to get you to keep working with me on this? Name your price, pretty girl.”

“Ummm. Well . . .” I pause, mouth going suddenly dry. I dig my fingernails into my palm, hoping the pain might shake my brain free from the instinctual

fear that grips it.

“We can meet in the cafeteria again if that feels most comfortable. You can even bring that scary alpha with you—the mean, growly one. Hell, bring your brother’s whole pack. Whatever you need to feel safe. Just please don’t leave me hanging.”

He sounds so earnest I don’t want to let him down.

“Okay.”

“Okay?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Micah!” I groan, playfully.

“All right, all right,” he laughs. “I’m just excited. Tomorrow? My last class ends at three.”

“Deal,” I agree.

“Awesome. See you soon, pretty girl.”

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Esperanza

Spending time with Micah feels like taking a shot of espresso.

Or so I assume. I never had the chance to develop a taste for coffee.

I meet him twice in as many days, and each time we spend hours poring over his comics as I outline more characters and scenes. I recruit Tanner as my escort to help me feel safe getting there, but as soon as I'm with Micah my inhibitions seem to melt away. I even let him walk me back to Em's dorm the second time, when we somehow stayed so late at the cafeteria the place shut down around us.

I haven't seen him in a few days since he had midterms, and I already feel like I miss him. Something about his kindness and sense of humor are addicting, and I always find myself wanting more. Maybe it's because I was kept isolated for so long, or maybe it's just Micah. Either way, I decide not to examine things too closely.

He had his last exam yesterday, so we planned to meet up again this afternoon to pick back up where we left off.

Only, an hour ago Micah texted me to ask if I'd be up to hang out at his place instead of the cafeteria this time. He said he wanted to show me more of his comics and some of his favorites from other authors. He promised snacks, "the comfiest couch you've ever sat on," and an alpha-free house.

The idea of being somewhere unknown, without the protection of being in

public view, has my anxiety skyrocketing. Yet here I am, outside the front door of the address he gave me.

The university-sponsored pack houses sit in a neighborhood of sorts and are further away from main campus than the other student dorms. The buildings are compact, but not tiny, and though most have the same basic layout, from what I can see, there do seem to be homey touches here and there that help the different units stand apart.

I almost wasn't able to make it into the neighborhood, with the smell of alphas hanging heavy in the air here. It didn't occur to me before setting out that I'd be walking into a part of campus with the heaviest concentration of alphas. Now I'm here, all I want is to get inside so I won't be so vulnerable and exposed.

"Hey, pretty girl!" Micah chirps as the door swings open. His face falls when he catches sight of my panic. "Hey, what's wrong?"

"Inside," I manage to squeak, pushing past him to get in. I've gotten semi-used to the scents of Micah's packmates from being around him, so my anxiety immediately lessens when I'm inside despite the wall of lime, tonic, juniper, and sawdust I walk into.

I take a few deep breaths to ground myself, squeezing my eyes shut as I hug my arms around my stomach to quell my sudden trembling. I must look like an insane person, but I just need a few seconds to calm down.

"Espy, did something happen?" Micah's voice is soft and concerned, and I feel him walk over and kneel down in front of me.

"No, I'm okay," I assure him, my eyes still firmly shut. "There were just all these alpha scents out there. I mean, obviously," I laugh awkwardly. "This is where all the packs live. I didn't make the connection before coming over, so it took me by surprise."

"Shit, I'm so sorry! I didn't think of that either. Where's Tanner?"

"He had something come up, and I figured I'd be fine to come alone." I shrug, finally opening my eyes. Micah looks super worried, which oddly makes me relax more. "I'm really fine, I promise. I just need a minute."

“Okay. Of course. Take all the time you need. Oh!”

“What?” I ask, bemused, as I watch him jump to his feet and walk away.

“I have an idea. One sec!”

He’s back before I can truly wonder what he’s up to, holding a bundle of material in his arms.

“Here—can I try this?” As he approaches, he holds out the material in front of him, and I see he’s carrying a blanket. I’m not entirely sure what he intends to do with it. Maybe he’s going to bundle me up like Mackenzie did.

I nod.

Instead of swaddling me, Micah gently arranges the blanket around my shoulders, careful not to touch me. I’m instantly covered in a heady dose of his scent. This must be one of his own blankets, judging by how deeply the material is saturated in his nutmeg-and-coffee pheromones. It’s incredibly soothing, and I find myself turning to nuzzle my face against the soft fabric covering my shoulder. My trembling subsides in seconds, and then I’m clear-headed enough for the embarrassment to set in.

“Thank you.” I blush, gripping the blanket in my hands to tug it more securely against myself. “Apparently, blankets are like catnip for omegas.”

“Of course, Espy. Are you sure you’re okay?”

I let him lead me over to the couch, where he hovers over me anxiously. I can see his hands twitching, and when I give him a questioning look he lets out a self-conscious laugh.

“Sorry, it’s instinct. Or something like that. I have the strongest urge to just tuck you in even tighter, surround you with couch cushions, that sort of thing.”

“Oh.” I look away. That sounds really nice, but also really strange.

“Yeah.” He blushes. “Must be an omega-triggered thing. Maybe spending so much time with Mason and Cabe has made their alpha instincts rub off on me.”

He looks adorable when he's uncomfortable, and I can just about make out a few freckles along the bridge of his nose.

"Let me get you some water."

While he walks off to the kitchen, I finally take the chance to look around. I'm in a decent-size living room, and back behind me Micah's in a nice open kitchen with a dining table tucked against the farthest wall. There's a small hallway leading off to one side, as well as a staircase leading to the second level.

Seeing my perusal, Micah offers me a tour when he returns with my water.

The place is basic but cozy, with lots of little touches reflecting the personality of its occupants.

"How long have you all lived here?" I ask, following Micah to the upper level.

"A little over a year now. Mason and Cabe were in the dorms their first two years, but when I showed up, we decided it made more sense to just get a pack house so we could have more space. It's nice having our own bathrooms and kitchen and stuff. We have a small yard and deck out back too."

"And you don't need an omega to qualify for a pack house?" I've been learning a bit more about packs from Mackenzie, but I'm still a bit confused by all the different norms. "And sorry if that's a nosy question," I hurry to add. "I didn't really grow up around this, and Em—I mean, Leo's—pack is the only one I've spent any time around. He and Tanner live together, but Lincoln lives closer to the base."

"I don't mind! I grew up near a few packs and obviously was really close with Cabe and his family. But Mason's the only alpha in our immediate family. He's an anomaly. Y'all should totally form a club. Cabe's family basically took him in, and I tagged along for the ride. This is Cabe's room." He pauses in front of a slightly ajar door.

Peeking in, I get a glimpse of a neatly made bed, a less neat desk, and some posters. A soccer ball sits tucked into the corner.

"To answer your question, packs don't *need* an omega to move into a pack

house. Just like they don't *need* an omega to be considered a pack. Some of the packs around here have bonded to omegas, but others are like us. Each house comes with a nest, but I've definitely seen some packs move into bigger spaces when they bond."

"This house has a nest?" I can't help my intrigue. Emotionally, I have such bad associations with nests. For over a year I had to resist what my body was instinctually calling for, convinced that if I used the nest my father made me build, it would bring me another step closer to my heat hitting. It was a representation of my captivity, my torture, and my future of being sold off as a sex slave to some scumbag alpha. Not to mention the night before my rescue, I was assaulted in my nest.

And still, none of that erased the nearly overwhelming urge I feel to hoard and assemble every soft thing that crosses my path.

"Yep," Micah confirms.

"Would it be okay for me to see it? I've never actually seen one before, and I'm curious."

"Well . . ." Suddenly, Micah looks embarrassed again.

Did I overstep? Is it inappropriate for a non-pack omega to be in that space?

"I won't, like, go in it or anything," I rush to clarify. "I know it's a sacred space for omegas, and I'd never try to put my scent on anything in there."

"Oh jeez, now you're *really* making me feel guilty," Micah chuckles, running a hand through his wavy hair as he looks away.

"Huh?"

"I've— Umm . . . we may have gone a bit unconventional with the space . . ."

"Unconventional?"

"When we moved in, I sort of convinced the guys to let me claim it as my own room . . ."

I blink up at him, dumbfounded. "You're using an omega nest as your bedroom?"

“It’s not as weird as it sounds!” he protests, smiling nervously. “Or maybe it is. I’m not, like, sleeping in a nest or anything. It just . . . it has a super-nice bathroom, and it’s designed to get all dark, which is perfect for my gaming setup. I figured since we don’t have an omega, it wouldn’t hurt to use it in the meantime.”

I must still look pretty stunned, because he starts walking down the hallway again to a door at the farthest end.

“You can take a look.”

At first glance, the room doesn’t seem that different from any other bedroom. There’s a bed in one corner, but most of the space is taken up by a large desk with a fancy-looking computer on it. There are three screens, a large set of headphones, and a few other techy gadgets I don’t recognize, but the only thing that strikes me as odd is that there aren’t the normal windows I’d expect. Instead sliding screen-like things are pulled across the glass, and soft lights up in the corners of the room lend the place a glowing, comforting vibe.

I take a few steps inside, noting a few feet in, the flooring changes from hardwood to something soft and cushiony.

“Come on—you have to see the bathroom. You’ll see why I couldn’t resist.” Micah leads me further into the room and over to another door.

The lights in here are a little brighter, but not by much. There’s a large shower and a giant jacuzzi tub. If it weren’t for the personal products lying around, the space would look like it belonged in some sort of fancy spa.

“Wow,” I agree. I spend a few more minutes looking around the room before following him back out the door. “But what do you do when an omega you’re courting wants to check out the nest space?”

Mackenzie was telling me about this just the other day. The pack courting her brought her over to show off their nest, probably in one of the houses nearby. She was telling me how it was an important step in showing an omega they’ll be provided for, and often a pack will buy the omega new nesting materials as a gift.

“We haven’t exactly gotten that far,” Micah admits, not quite meeting my

eye.

I try to ignore the little stab of satisfaction that hits me at the knowledge that he doesn't have an omega that he's serious about right now.

Not your business, Espy.



After the tour we get to work. Micah pulls out boxes and boxes and boxes of comic books he's collected over the years. Some look decades-old. We go through them together and discuss the different styles, and he shows me some of his favorite characters and the artists who drew them. My brain is overflowing with ideas, and the afternoon goes by in a flash.

Micah's watching me sketch out a new version of one of his supporting characters when I see his phone ringing. He ignores it, but when it rings again, I give him a look.

"Aren't you going to get that?"

"Get what?"

"Your phone." I gesture with my head to where the thing is lit up and vibrating on the seat next to him. By this point I'm spread out on the floor, using the coffee table as a drawing surface while Micah observes from his higher vantage point on the couch.

"Oh," he says, looking surprised to see his phone ringing. He picks it up. "Hey, man."

I can only hear one side of the conversation, but Micah seems annoyed.

"Sorry, I didn't realize what time it was. Don't you have errands you can run?" He pauses. "Yeah, she's still here. Everything's good. We're just working." He stands up and walks toward the kitchen, giving me a quick glance. "I know, I know. Can't you just grab food from the cafeteria? Mason will be done with practice soon—he can join you."

He's protecting me, I realize, instantly feeling bad. He must be talking to Cabe, who's clearly checking to see if it's safe to come home. I look at my own phone and see it's nearly 7 p.m. No wonder he's calling—I've been here for nearly four hours now.

Once again I've managed to evict a man from his own home because of my fears.

"Micah, hey." I stand up, waving to get his attention. "Don't keep Cabe away on my account. I should probably be heading back anyway. I need to grab some dinner and get out of your hair."

"No, don't go." He pouts, tucking the phone against his chest to muffle the receiver. "Can't I keep him away on *my* account? The guy smells after practice. It's self-preservation."

I grin.

"This is *his* home. I don't want to be a nuisance. Plus, I'm hungry," I cajole.

If I've learned anything this past month, it's that no one can stand the thought of a hungry omega. It's like nails on a chalkboard for all the men in my life.

On cue, Micah's eyes widen. "You're hungry? Shit! I never got out the snacks we made."

I hear a noise come from the phone, and Micah puts it back to his ear with a wince. "Dude, I'm sorry! I forgot! I'll take her to get food right now. You can beat me up later."

Like I said, it's a trump card every time. But I don't want to put him out.

"Micah, no. It's okay. It's freezing outside—you don't need to come with me. Let me just call Em to see if he's done with practice, and he can walk me back."

"He'll still be at practice for another thirty minutes." Micah waves me off. "*Hold on,*" he hisses into the phone, taking it away from his ear again. "Espy."

"Micah . . ." I say back, cocking my head at him.

“Can I propose something that you can absolutely say no to?”

I gulp. Why does that sound so ominous? “Sure.”

“You were totally in the zone there with that character. What do you say to letting Cabe come back here and AFTER he showers,”—Micah gives me a smirk—“we’ll have him make dinner for us. I promise he’ll stay in the kitchen and won’t come near you. We were already planning to have a taco feast, so there’s more than enough food for you to join us. And I’d never say this to his face or anything, but Cabe’s, like, a pretty awesome cook—”

“Why wouldn’t you say that to his face?” I interrupt, frowning.

“Because it’s dangerous to stroke an alpha’s ego.” He winks at me. “You can totally, absolutely, one hundred percent say no. I don’t want to pressure you! But I like spending time with you, and I feel bad that I forgot to give you the snacks Cabe prepared last night, and—”

I cut him off again, raising my hand. His rambling is cute, but it doesn’t help me think. *Am I okay if Cabe comes back here?* His citrusy scent is all over the place, so it isn’t like I haven’t had time to adjust. I’ve never actually spoken to the guy, but I know who he is from seeing him in the cafeteria a few times. I trust Micah, and I’ve felt nothing but safe with him, so logically I should feel the same about his packmate . . .

“Okay,” I agree once I’ve finished sorting through my thoughts.

“Yeah?”

“Yes.”

Micah grins. “Cabe, hey.” He turns back to his phone.

I tune out the rest of his conversation, going back to focus on my illustrations. *Te lo puedes hacer, Espy.*

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Mason

I'm trying not to brood, but when I catch myself frowning at my soup for the third time, I figure it's a lost cause.

I have an expanded outline for my honors thesis due to my advisor in four days, a paper due in my Militarization and Dynamic Health seminar, and a lab I need to finish for my Advanced Genetics class. Not to mention, we have a swim meet next weekend out of state. I *should* be figuring out how in the world I'm going to pull all of this off. Instead I'm once again obsessing over a certain omega.

I was shocked when I walked in a few nights ago and saw Espy sitting there eating dinner with Micah and Cabe. I knew she was coming to the house, but she was supposed to be long gone by the time Cabe and I got back. I've never been more regretful about being held up at practice. While I was going over strategy with Coach, my packmates were hanging out with her and making tacos. She left almost as soon as I got home. Maybe two alphas were too much for her, or maybe she doesn't feel as comfortable around me as she does Cabe.

Fuck. I hope that's not it.

I was so disappointed I'd missed time with her I literally pouted.

Our house still has traces of her scent. Like the fucking creepers we are, Micah, Cabe, and I have all been fighting over the blanket Micah very cunningly wrapped around her. There's nothing that reminds you you're an

alpha quite like getting a boner from sniffing a piece of cloth.

It's in mine and Cabe's nature to abstain from most sexual activity until we find our mate—one of many fascinating biological developments that have evolved in the human race. Scientists think it's one of the older evolutionary traits we still cling to, meant to promote unity in a pack, reduce sexually transmitted diseases, and ensure offspring will always have maximum protection. Or so the theories go. Though betas don't have the same hormonally driven checks on their system, culturally it's still rare for sex to happen outside of a bond regardless of whether that bond is marriage or a pack bite.

Everyone has to take sexual education in school, but for alphas it's a bit different. In addition to learning all about the ins and outs of our knots, we're also taught to embrace sexual openness with our packmates. Knowing we'll likely be sharing a mate one day, the government and school boards apparently decided it was best to embed the concept of group sex into our psyches early on. We're biologically programmed to accept, even thrive on, shared sexual experiences, but before last night I'd never experienced that firsthand.

Micah was in his room, but Cabe and I were sharing a few beers in the living room, the Espy blanket sitting on the couch between us. We were just chatting, relaxing after our busy days. Then Cabe starts recounting *again* what it was like to have Espy over at the house. How good she looked next to Micah, how her nose crinkled when she laughed, how she'd made this sweet humming noise when she tried the food. *Cocky bastard.*

My mind started wandering, picturing it all. Adding in new details. Imagining she'd stayed longer when I got back. That she was part of our pack. That she was here right now, curled up on the couch in between us. She'd be wearing one of my shirts, following the innate need to be covered in her alpha's scent. Maybe she'd let me play with her hair, and I'd run my fingers through those long, dark waves while she leaned into my chest. She'd have her feet in Cabe's lap, moaning softly and arching into me as he dug his thumbs in . . .

I don't know if his mind wandered to the same place or if my pheromones set off his. But before I knew what was happening, Cabe and I both had our hands down our sweats.

It was strange, but not awkward, per se. Almost like I didn't have control over my actions in the moment, but in a relaxing way. It reminded me of the first time I got high, also with Cabe. And his brothers. My mind just sort of disconnected, and all I could think about was chasing my pleasure as Espy danced her way through my imagination. The thought of sharing her with my packmate only heightened my lust.

I heard Cabe come a few seconds before I did, both of us sitting there panting and sticky.

I *did* feel a hint of embarrassment sneak in at that point, and I sheepishly tucked myself back into my sweats. Cabe just had a gigantic grin on his face, as if the experience were more than a simple orgasm for him.

I find my gaze tracking to him now, sitting across from me in the dining hall. He's in an animated conversation with two of his soccer teammates, not looking anywhere near as distracted as I feel. He's always been more confident in his alpha-ness than me, having grown up with so many of them. Whereas my brain keeps running over and over how much everything has changed since Espy came onto our radar, I wouldn't be surprised if he hasn't given it more than a passing thought.

I felt surprised—and guilty—when he told Micah and me that he'd been wanting an omega. There I was assuming we were all on the same page, only to find out Cabe had been hoping we'd change our minds.

It's not like I don't understand why he wants to complete our pack. Lots of packs find their omegas in college, if not shortly after. Something about the structure and emotional bond is grounding. I know some people out there consider bonding an omega to be the official mark of adulthood for an alpha, like a stamp of approval to become a productive and fully functioning member of society.

Of course, just like omega rights have evolved over the years, so too have societal expectations for alphas. It's not crazy to see a pack of alphas who don't find their omega until later in life, or even some who never do. Others have started eschewing packs altogether, choosing relationships with betas instead. The balance of biological instinct, culture, and pursuit of freedom means not everyone fits the mold. Legally, there are no restrictions beyond

the age of consent.

I give up on my soup and attempt my meatloaf instead. *Thesis, paper, lab, swim. Thesis, paper, lab, swim.*

“Hey!” Micah whisper-screams in my ear, jabbing me with his elbow for good measure.

I turn to glare at him, only to see him nodding over to the entrance of the cafeteria where Espy, Leo, and his two alpha packmates have just come in. There goes my five-second attempt at concentration . . .

Micah’s waving them over before I can even blink, and a shot of warmth settles in my stomach when I see Espy blush and offer a small smile and wave in return. I catch Leo’s eye, nodding at him in greeting. The big, gruff-looking alpha next to him—Lincoln, I believe—just frowns at me, but the other alpha is all friendly smiles.

As the group makes their way over to us I start to panic. Are they going to join us? Is Espy comfortable with that? My warring desires to be near the little omega and simultaneously protect her from alphas makes my head spin. It’s only when they’re a few feet away that I finally notice three other girls with them, including the omega Leo has a crush on: Mackenzie.

“Hi,” I say, trying to sound normal. Cool. Composed.

“Want to join us?” Micah pipes up next to me.

Our large booth can fit a few more, but seven is probably a stretch. Everyone seems to notice this at the same time, but it’s Mackenzie who jumps in.

“You boys stay and talk sports-ball; us girls will be right over there having a ladies lunch.” She points one of her perfectly manicured fingers toward an empty table a little way away.

Still feels too far.

“You know there aren’t any balls in swimming, right?” Leo nudges her teasingly.

“Well.” Mackenzie gets a devious smirk as she looks him up and down, focusing pointedly on his groin. “That’s good to know.”

Leo blushes as everyone else laughs.

“All right, all right. Be gone with you,” he mock-growls, shooing the four girls off.

I allow my eyes to track Espy as she walks the few feet before settling down at the other table. *Bummer*. Instead of pouting, I work on scooting over my large frame to make room for the newcomers.

“Wait!” Micah shouts, pushing on my shoulder to get me to move. “I was telling Espy about this amazing lemon cake the chefs here make. I think I grabbed one of the last pieces—I should give her mine.”

With that he’s scrambling past me, cake plate in hand, and going to join the girls.

What a sneaky, brilliant bastard my brother is.

I scoot over, taking his spot as Leo settles next to me, and Lincoln and Tanner end up next to Cabe. I make quick introductions between their pack and the soccer players sitting between me and Cabe, and then everyone settles into eating and easy conversation.

“Who are the other girls with your sister?” I ask Leo, trying to sound casual and not like I’m being overprotective and nosy.

“You know Mackenzie,” he starts, and when I smirk at him, he blushes again. “Shut up!” he grumbles. “The other blonde is Mackenzie’s roommate, and the brunette is Silver. Espy has been spending some time with them since I introduced them a while back.”

“Yeah, giving her some much-needed time away from all us men,” Tanner jokes, puffing out his chest cartoonishly. “All this testosterone is a lot to handle.”

“It’s good that she’s making friends,” I agree, nodding.

“Sure has been spending a lot of time with your pack,” Lincoln comments, giving me a hard, unblinking stare. It’s phrased as a statement, but I can easily feel the demand for answers underneath. He wants to know what our intentions are with Espy.

I gulp. “She and Micah have definitely hit it off,” I offer neutrally.

“Yeah, have you seen what they’re working on?” Cabe asks, his easygoing nature coming to my rescue. “I saw some of the panels she was doing the other night. They’re so cool! Mic’s been needing a decent illustrator for years now. I’m a little surprised she’s been able to escape his clutches at all.”

I wince a little. “Escape his clutches” doesn’t feel like the best turn of phrase under the circumstances. Lincoln seems to agree as his cold gaze swings around to focus on Cabe.

“How’s she settling in?” I ask Leo, figuring it best to change the subject.

He looks thoughtful and takes a while before answering. “Pretty well, I think.”

I raise an eyebrow, hoping he’ll share more. Is Espy having a problem? Is it something my pack can help with?

“She *is* doing well, Leo,” Tanner cuts in, giving his packmate a pointed look and reaching over to squeeze his shoulder. “We’ve talked about this. You’re doing everything you can right now. Things will just take time.”

“I know,” he sighs. “Some things are still tough.” He turns to me again. “And it’s hard not to be overly protective of her after everything.”

“I can only imagine,” Cabe chimes in, looking uncharacteristically serious. “I would go ballistic if shit like that happened to my baby sister.”

I nod, thinking of all three of my own sisters. It makes me shudder.

“You know she’s safe when she’s with us,” I say. “I-I mean when she’s hanging out with Micah. We would never hurt her, and we’ll always make sure she’s protected.” It feels like a heavy statement, but my alpha nature ensures my gaze remains steady as I meet Leo’s eye.

“One hundred percent,” Cabe chimes in.

“That so?” Lincoln prods, a hint of a challenge in his voice. “And how exactly are you going to protect her? Are any of you trained in defensive strategies? Hand-to-hand combat? Do you carry any weapons?” he barks, his eyes cold.

My hackles go up immediately. Even if we're not actually courting Espy, my instincts won't allow another alpha to challenge me on my ability to protect an omega. Tension fills the table as I start to growl, Cabe's growl joining mine in a sort of eerie, threatening duet. Micah pops back up right as Lincoln's growl breaks into the mix, and even Cabe's soccer friends, who'd been having their own conversation at the end of the booth, go silent as they take in the alpha standoff taking place.

"Ummmm, hey," Micah says cautiously.

No one responds, and I'm unable to peel my eyes away from Lincoln's.

"Linc, dude, calm down," Tanner finally breaks in, grabbing onto his packmate's forearm where it rests on the table, his fists clenched. "*Lincoln.*" Tanner adds a bark to his voice.

It's clear Lincoln is the more dominant alpha in the pack, but it seems this is enough to snap him out of it. His growl cuts off and he looks away, jaw clenching. "Sorry," he bites out.

Doesn't sound that sorry to me.

Cabe and I go quiet as well, but the mood around the table remains tense.

"Uh, we've gotta head to class," one of the guys next to me interrupts. All three of Cabe's soccer friends are betas, and I don't blame them one bit for wanting to escape our alpha standoff.

Leo and I get out of the booth, and they take off in a flash. I'd feel bad if my emotions weren't on such high alert.

Taking the opportunity to look over at the table where Espy and the other girls are seated, I find they're all looking at us, wide-eyed. In fact, there are a lot of eyes on us from all across the cafeteria. I wouldn't be surprised if someone alerted the university's alpha response unit. Confrontations between our kind can get out of hand under the wrong circumstances.

I take a deep breath and sit back in the booth, both Leo and Micah following me in.

"I'm good," I say, and then I look at Cabe.

“Yeah,” he nods. “Me too.”

“Clearly I missed something,” Micah says as he cautiously scans everyone’s faces.

“Nah, Linc’s just having a hard time,” Leo says, grimacing at his packmate sympathetically.

I understand Espy is pack family for Lincoln, but the large alpha’s overprotectiveness rubs me the wrong way. I have to fight down the growl that wants to spring back up.

I watch as Leo continues to hold eye contact with Lincoln, and the latter finally sighs. The tension visibly falls away.

“He’s right,” Lincoln admits. “There was an attack on some omegas last week, and I’m on edge.”

I go still, and I can see Cabe’s face pale across from me. “What happened?” I practically demand. Luckily, no one seems to be bothered by my harsh tone.

Lincoln runs a hand along his close-cropped hair before he responds. “It was over at Waterford, in Utah. Some of the guys on my team were called in to help. Apparently, they’ve had suspicions about one of the extremist groups operating out there, rumors about mistreatment of omegas, beta sex trafficking, illegal substance distribution—the usual.” He shrugs.

That shit’s the usual? *Damn.*

“From what I understand, the group infiltrated the university’s security and managed to kidnap one omega and one beta. Another omega escaped, injured, and two alphas ended up in the hospital as well. Looks like it was a coordinated attack with targets picked out ahead of time. At least four terrorists were on campus to snatch the girls, but they suspect there were more people working with them. They caught one of the guys and are interrogating him, but so far, they haven’t found either of the girls.”

“What?!” Micah sounds agitated and distraught.

I feel horrified. I know, in theory, that illegal omega trades take place, but I’ve never heard about it firsthand. It’s the stuff of gritty crime TV shows and

occasional national news headlines that I quickly breeze over, too distracted by other things.

Leo slams his fist on the table between us. “*Hijos de puta!*”

I don’t need to know Spanish to understand the sentiment.

“Do they know what group is responsible?” Cabe asks, his voice low. “Is it the same group your dad was a part of?” He tilts his head at Leo.

“They’re not sure,” Lincoln responds. “Leo’s *father* was working with BFOS, ‘Betas for Order and Submission.’ Before we pulled Espy out, it doesn’t seem like the military knew the group had gotten into the omega trade and become so extreme. Originally, the group was focused on betas and promoting their position in society. It’s normally the alpha-affiliated groups messing with omegas.”

My pack all listen raptly as Lincoln goes on to lay out the different groups operating in the US. As far as I knew, omegas have a biological safeguard against kidnap and rape that helps protect them from alphas wanting to claim them against their will. Something about being unable to survive the trauma of an attack and dying, therefore making the alpha’s “investment” worthless. *Motherfucking evil bastards.*

I feel my lunch wanting to come back up as Lincoln describes how criminal groups have been working on different brainwashing methods to override omegas’ natural instincts, simulating the conditions of safety and pack relationships to bring on their heats and force them into bonds. Then Leo jumps in to explain his father had been using physical abuse, including starvation and beatings, to try to force Espy into heat. It seems his BFOS cell wasn’t aware of the brainwashing methodology, and so they tried a different—and equally inhumane—approach. A ringing fills my ears when I hear Leo’s father brought alphas over to their house, forcing Espy to lay with them in her nest after beating her in the hopes their pheromones would trigger a sense of safety. The thought of what they might have done to her . . .

Leo gave me such an abridged version of the story before. I almost feel stupid now for not realizing or even beginning to imagine the depth of Espy’s trauma.

“My outfit has upped our efforts to gather intel on BFOS, as well as Alpha First, who we think are behind the brainwashing activities,” Lincoln continues. “There’s been chatter, though, about chemical experimentation. Fucking terrorists are apparently trying to come up with some Gods-damn cocktail that mimics the biology shit that tells an omega’s body to go into heat.”

“Synthetic hormones,” I breathe, horrified.

“Something like that.” Lincoln nods. “We haven’t found anything to suggest the groups are active around here, but Utah isn’t that far away. Neither is Wyoming,” he adds, cutting his eyes to Leo meaningfully.

Right. That’s where he and Espy are from. Both states are Colorado’s neighbors.

“So again, sorry,” Lincoln finishes, still sounding a bit brusque. “I didn’t mean to jump down your throats. But the way I see it, everyone could stand to be on higher alert right now.”

The whole table is silent in response, everyone presumably lost in the same troubling thoughts as me. Suddenly, I’m not as bothered by Lincoln’s overprotectiveness.

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Esperanza

“He’s super-cute,” Claire giggles, winking at me as Micah retreats back to where his and my brother’s packs are eating.

“Some good genes in the Hayes family, that’s for sure,” Silver agrees.

“It’s not the *jeans* I’m staring at—I’m too distracted by what’s underneath!” Claire declares, all three women around me bursting out into laughter at the double entendre.

I find myself chuckling too. She’s not wrong. If I thought Mackenzie and Silver were confident and outgoing, they’re minor-league compared to Mackenzie’s roommate Claire. She is loud, bold, and unapologetically flirtatious. It took me a little while to get used to her, but now I’ve adjusted, I find I enjoy her larger-than-life personality.

I take another bite of the cake Micah gave me, savoring the tangy lemon icing. He was right: it’s delicious.

“Look at you, Ms. Thing. Only here a month and you already have boys bringing you dessert,” Claire continues, grinning. “Must be some good genes in the Alvarez family too. I know Mackenzie over here has a thing for your br — Oomffff.” Her words turn to gibberish as Mackenzie slaps her hand over her roommate’s mouth.

I smile. The past few weeks it’s become clear to me that Mackenzie has just as much of a crush on my brother as Em has on her. But she’s being courted

by another pack, and I've never seen either one do anything other than some light flirting. So far, I've decided to just let it be.

"Espy has been helping Micah with a project he's working on." Mackenzie changes the subject deftly. "You should show Claire those pictures you sent me a few days ago!"

I pull out my phone and bring up the Photos app, passing it over. Both Claire and Silver ooh and ahh as they scroll through, and I can't say that doesn't fill me with a warm wave of pride. I've illustrated quite a few panels at this point. He let me take some pages home after I left his house the other day so that I could keep working on some of the parts we talked through and sketched out. I've been using them as an excuse to procrastinate studying for my SATs.

My application is almost ready to go. Both Em—or rather, Leo, as I'm trying to train myself to call him—and Tanner have been hugely helpful. *Leo* especially. He helped me get my high-school transcripts transferred over, and Tanner worked with me on crafting an essay that conveyed more than just "my dad tortured me and tried to sell me on the black market, please take pity on me and let me into your school." Now I'm just waiting on one more letter of recommendation from an old teacher and I'll be set.

I have just under three weeks to get ready for my SAT exam in early November. If I completely bomb this one, I'll have one more shot to retake the test and still get my scores into the university by January 5, as promised. No pressure or anything.

I mostly listen in as Mackenzie, Claire, and Silver continue chatting. They're talking about people and places I'm not familiar with, but it's still nice to be included while I eat. Silver and Claire eventually leave to go to class, and Mackenzie and I wander back to my brother's table so she can say goodbye before she does the same.

"Gotta get to class!" she chirps, walking up to the edge of the booth. "I return to you one sister, unharmed other than having to listen to Claire going over her extensive list of options for a Halloween costume."

She clearly means it as a joke, but I'm taken aback to see matching frowns pop up on nearly every one of the guys' faces. Things are awkward for a

moment, but then Tanner breaks the silence.

“I’d better get going too. I have to make it all the way over to east campus by two.”

“Yeah, I need to meet some folks for a group project,” Cabe agrees.

With that, everyone starts packing their bags and cleaning up their trays, the tension gone.

“You’re headed to the science building, right?” Em/Leo asks, looking at Mackenzie.

“You memorize my schedule?” she jokes back.

I remember how Claire teased her just a little while ago and bite back a smile.

“Nah, you’re just predictable,” he counters. “I’ll walk with you—it’s on my way to my next class. You heading back to the dorm, Espy?” Em turns to ask. I mean Leo. *Damn it.*

“Urgggggh,” I groan, adding a little whine to my voice. “I need to do a practice test today. I should probably go to the library so I can focus without getting distracted.

“I can take you, short stack,” Lincoln offers. “I can’t stay though—I have to report in. But I’ll be off around six, so I can grab you then if Leo or Tanner can’t swing by.” He looks calm, but I know from experience he hates leaving me alone in public places.

I’ve been to the library a few times on my own, and I’m honestly getting a lot better at being out by myself. I sometimes feel panicky, but usually if I go somewhere quiet and take some deep breaths, the feeling passes. We got into a bit of a tiff earlier this week when he tried to forbid me from being out without one of the pack, but *Leo* backed me up. Lincoln earned himself another caricature for that spat. It’ll be a full collection soon if he’s not careful.

“I can go with you.”

I turn my head, eyes widening at hearing Mason’s offer. Of Micah’s two packmates, he’s the one I’ve spent the least amount of time around. He’s

more reserved than his brother and Cabe, though I'll admit I find that comforting to some degree. Micah talks about him a lot while we're working, oftentimes referencing the work his brother is doing around packs.

"Only if you're comfortable with it," Mason rushes to add, glancing over at Lincoln of all people. *What's that about?* If I had to guess, my grumpy trainer gave everyone a lecture on respecting boundaries and treating me with kid gloves.

It's sweet, but also frustrating.

"That's nice of you to offer, but I don't want to inconvenience you." It's one thing for my brother and his pack to babysit me, but I don't like the idea of a bunch of other people thinking I'm some kind of child that needs her hand held to cross the street. Metaphorically speaking, of course. The thought of holding hands with Mason makes butterflies dance in my stomach.

"No inconvenience," he insists, moving out of the booth to come up next to me. "I totally understand if you want to go on your own, but I was actually planning to head over there anyway. I need to put in some serious study time before our meet this weekend, and being in the library forces me to buckle down," he explains, bouncing what looks like a heavy backpack to emphasize his point.

"That sucks," I empathize, buying myself a second or two to evaluate how I'm feeling. Another trick from good old Dr. Morgan. She taught me a nifty checklist to go through in my head to help gauge if I'm up for any given activity.

After some quick thinking, I decide I feel good about this.

"Okay," I finally say, feeling a whole new type of anxiety hit me now I've decided to hang out with him. Just this short proximity has me squirming with a rush of *something*. "Is it okay if we stop by Em—I mean, Leo's—dorm first? I need to grab my books."

Mason nods, and the whole group heads out.

"You're in for a treat, Esps!" Micah declares, practically bouncing as he walks next to me. "Cabe is always making these amazing snacks, but he likes to hoard them and won't share with Mason and me. Buuuuuuuutt I bet he can

be convinced to give some up for you . . .”

“Shithead,” Cabe mumbles, rolling his eyes. Even so, I watch as he opens his bag and pulls out a Ziplock full of some cookie-like things, which he then hands over to Mason. “Don’t let him hog them all,” he directs at me, winking.

Oh boy. Is this what swooning feels like?

Everyone says their goodbyes and heads in different directions once we make it outside.

“Tomorrow, short stack. I’ll come get you at 6 a.m. sharp. Don’t make me drag you out of bed again,” Lincoln says, using his special “I’m threatening you, but it’s because I care” voice.

“6:10 a.m.!” I call after him, laughing as he shoots me a glare over his shoulder.

Then it’s just me and Mason.

“What’s tomorrow?” he asks as we both head in the direction of the dorms.

“Just my punishment for being naïve enough to ask Lincoln to train me in self-defense. I thought he’d spend a few hours showing me some moves, but instead he has me doing conditioning three days a week for an hour and a half, and then on two *other* days he’s been teaching me some defensive combat techniques. AND,”—I pause dramatically, giving a fake shudder—“as you heard, he’s a *morning* person.”

Mason laughs. His face looks so beautiful when he does it. “Sounds rough!” he sympathizes. “Isn’t that a lot of physical exercise for an omega?” He grimaces as soon as the words are out of his mouth. “Shit, that sounded horrible. I didn’t mean you’re weak or can’t learn martial arts or anything like that . . . To be honest, I’m not a huge expert on omegas. I just have these vague notions of all the differences in our biology and physiologies and I’m leaping to conclusions from there. Can we please pretend like I didn’t just majorly stick my foot in my mouth?”

“It’s fine.” I wave him off, smiling. “To be honest, I don’t know much about omegas myself. In high school my teachers just kind of guessed at what

might be different for me compared to my beta classmates. And most of the reading I've done on omegas was . . . not very enlightened." I scowl, not wanting to think about the bullshit propaganda my dad made me study.

"Well, I may not know Lincoln that well, but I'm betting he knows what he's doing. Plus, they say alphas have a sort of innate instinct driving them to take care of omegas. I'm sure he'd be able to sense if your body couldn't handle the stuff he's throwing at you."

"He must have built up a tolerance then. The guy is immune to my pouting," I joke.

"Shit, he must be superhuman to pull that off," Mason replies, his face soft as he meets my eye.

I feel my cheeks go pink.

It doesn't take too long to get to the dorms. Mason follows me on the now familiar route up the stairs and through the halls.

"Just give me a minute," I call, moving off to my corner to grab the books I'll need. I decide I also want to change into a more comfortable outfit. The comfier I am, the better my brain functions. Science!

"What's with the curtains?" I hear Mason ask from where he's waiting by the door.

"Oh right, we didn't have this setup last time you stopped by." My little cot area looks pretty tidy, so I pull back the curtains so he can see. "Me sleeping on the couch was getting to be disruptive, so we turned this into my 'room,' so to speak." I gesture at the small cot, the neat piles of books and art supplies, and the small chest of drawers wedged in against the wall.

I'm proud of my little space. It's become a safe haven for me, a non-nest spot that's only mine and offers me a sense of protection. Though watching Mason's face as he takes it in, I doubt he views it the same way I do.

"You-you're sleeping here?" he clarifies, looking disturbed as he moves a little closer.

"Yes," I reply simply.

“Don’t you need your own room?” he asks again, his eyes moving over every inch of my little home. “I know omegas like to nest in enclosed spaces, but this seems barely workable.”

“And where exactly would I get my own room?” I push back, trying to keep from getting defensive. I can tell he’s not trying to make me feel bad; it’s just his alpha protectiveness kicking in.

It was hard to convince Tanner not to give up his room for me, and it took a few conversations with Lincoln to get him to back off.

I watch as Mason’s eyes move around the rest of the dorm room, seemingly coming to realize there are only two rooms. “Right. You’re right. I’m sorry,” he says, rubbing at the back of his neck sheepishly. “I’m on a roll today—two-for-one on the insults,” he chuckles. “Can I risk going for number three and ask to see your art?”

“Oh man, sounds dangerous,” I tease. My tone is light, but in all honesty, the request does make me nervous. Micah has seen quite a bit given that most of my recent stuff is for his comics, but some of the sketchbooks I have here have other, more personal drawings in them.

I spend a moment rooting around, deciding that showing him my alien zoo creatures can’t be too dangerous.

Mason moves to sit next to me then hesitates. “Sorry, ummm, I didn’t mean —”

“It’s fine.” I cut him off, scooting over on my cot to make room. “This isn’t, like, my nest or anything,” I explain, looking away. No reason to bring up my aversion to nests with this sweet alpha.

The whole cot creaks underneath his weight as he settles next to me, and we both laugh.

“Okay, maybe we take this to the couch,” I concede. “You get five minutes of perusal, and then we hit the library.”

Secretly, I’m disappointed at having to move. It probably makes me a creep, but I won’t deny I was very much hoping his woodsy scent would rub off on my bed. I managed to get one of Lincoln’s shirts to replace the hoodie I

originally had, but the idea of multiple alpha scents surrounding me while I sleep has a purr threatening to escape.

He flips through the pages slowly, his seemingly sincere compliments leaving me warm and happy. I only have a few animals drawn out, though, and before long he's moved past them and found the sketches I've been making of my new friends and E— *Leo's* pack. Definitely forgot those were in there, but it's too late now.

"Is this Micah?" he asks, tilting the notebook toward me so I can clearly see the sketch of his brother I was fiddling with last week.

Busted.

"Yeah," I admit, blushing a bit. "Sometimes I just draw things subconsciously, like my brain won't settle unless I have a pencil in my hand. I wasn't able to do any drawing, you know, before coming here . . . I guess there's a lot built up that's bursting out now."

Mason must sense my unease with the direction the conversation is headed because he shuts the notebook gently and stands up. "You're massively talented, Espy. Could I maybe commission something from you? My mom's birthday is coming up soon and she is absolutely obsessed with our family's dog. I bet she'd love to have a sketch of him that she could frame and put up on the wall." He reaches out a hand to help pull me to my feet, and I'm so dumbfounded by his question I don't even notice I'm touching him.

"You-you want me to make something for your mom?"

"It would be perfect, actually," he muses, still holding my hand in his. "I heard Micah singing your praises left and right the other day when he called home. Please let me have dibs on your hands. It's impossible to come up with gift ideas my mom actually wants. I can't have Micah stealing my thunder on this."

My face must be purple by now. I know it was just a turn of phrase, but the thought of Mason calling dibs on my hands has my imagination running a mile a minute. I pull my hand out of his abruptly, convinced he'll be able to read my thoughts through skin-to-skin contact alone. Better not risk it.

"I . . . umm . . . yeah, I can do that for you. When do you need it by?"

“How long do you need? Her birthday is in about a week and a half—would that be enough time?”

“Sure, just send me the picture you want me to recreate. And I’ll need the size, material, and style you have in mind . . .” I muse, trying to think through all the information I might need. I’ve never had anyone ask me to draw something on commission before. It’s . . . exciting.

We talk through a few more details as I quickly change and finish gathering my books. Mason insists on carrying them for me, and I can’t help but sneak glances at the defined muscles in his arm where it curves around my SAT prep monstrosity.

“My brother’s birthday is coming up soon too,” I share as we make our way across the quad. “Growing up, he always had a costume party since it’s right before Halloween and *Día de los Muertos*. Does he do that anymore?”

“Not that I’ve seen,” Mason laughs. “But our swim team always does a fun event on Halloween. We all dress up in costumes and then do a fifty-meter race. If I remember correctly, Leo tends to go for style over hydrodynamics in the water. Usually, the freshmen all go with a group costume. They were Disney Princesses last year.”

“That’s amazing!” I laugh. “Lucky for whoever got Jasmine—I don’t think she ever wore a dress, right?”

“Yeah,” he agrees. “I think I have pictures, actually. Let me check.”

We pass his phone back and forth for the rest of the walk. After all the photos from the swim team’s Halloween bash, he finds other photos of Leo competing, and then some of him, Micah, and Cabe.

“Who are all those guys?” I ask, pointing at a picture where his pack is joined by a bunch of other guys, all dressed in suits. I wonder if there’s any way I can get a copy of that. They look crazy-handsome.

“Oh, those are Cabe’s older brothers. That was from two years ago. We were celebrating the official bonding of the eldest two’s pack with their omega.” He points at the two in the middle.

Now that he mentions it, they do all look a lot like Cabe.

“Two of his brothers are in a pack together? What about the third?”

“He has four packmates of his own, they all live up closer to our parents’ place and last I heard they were opening some sort of restaurant-type thing. I’ll probably get an update over Thanksgiving.”

“Why isn’t Cabe in a pack with any of his brothers?” I ask, genuinely curious about how it works. “You and Micah stuck together—wouldn’t it have made sense for Cabe’s brother to join you guys?”

“It is pretty common for brothers to stick together in a pack, but not always. It’s hard to describe the feeling you get that pushes you toward pack bonds. Even more interesting when you consider some betas are joining packs these days even though it’s believed they don’t have the same biological drivers as alphas do. This is actually perfect.” He smiles down at me as he nudges my hip gently with his own. “I’m writing my thesis on this topic and I need to put an outline together. Keep asking me questions.”

So I do.

We end up finding a small study room in the library, my SAT prep books lying abandoned in the seat next to me for hours.

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Esperanza

I never do get around to doing my practice test. To be honest, I'm not sure Mason gets much of his work done either. He claimed I was helping him think through ideas for his thesis, but I can't imagine answering my millions of questions was really that productive for him.

I, on the other hand, learned a ton.

Not only about packs and their history, and how they form, but also the color of Mason's eyes, the way they light up with excitement when he shares something he's particularly passionate about, and how he has a habit of rubbing at his chin when he's thinking of an answer. I was feeling downright dizzy by the time he finally had to leave for swim practice—no doubt the result of being in a small room with such a mouthwatering alpha for three hours.

I'd known going in that I could trust Mason, be it gut instinct or my friendship with Micah, but I wasn't expecting to feel so relaxed so quickly. It was a whole process with Tanner and Lincoln, slowly building on our interactions until I felt at ease. I suppose I hadn't been too bothered by Cobe either when I had dinner with him and Micah. But it wasn't just the two of us then. I'm putting this down on the list of things to talk to Dr. Morgan about in my next session.

I was supposed to meet up with Micah yesterday to put in more work on the comics, but I decided to cancel on him and force myself to actually take my practice test. He'd pouted a bit when I tell him, but was mollified when I

offered to come over and make it up to him this weekend. When I told him that Mason had offered up their kitchen so I can make a cake for Leo's birthday, he's downright ecstatic. From the sound of it, he's already recruited Cabe as my baking assistant.



I have several different recipes tucked away in my bag, courtesy of Mackenzie. I thought my head might explode having to score my test after spending hours taking it, but luckily Mackenzie was nice enough to offer. I know Leo or Tanner would have done it for me—or heck, even Micah—but a not so small part of me didn't want them knowing what I scored. If it was bad, I didn't exactly want to advertise that. And if I happened to score really well, then that would just be pressure to do the same on my actual exam.

Something about having Mackenzie do it just made me breathe easier.

I scored a 1250. I definitely don't want to jinx myself, but I'm pretty sure if I can pull that off again on November 5 I'll have done enough to get into River Valley. If not . . . Well. Beyond the vague notion of getting a job, I haven't truly allowed myself to think about what I'll do if I don't get into school.

"Hey, Espy!" Leo greets me as I come through the door. He and Tanner are sitting on the couch playing video games.

"Hey, guys," I greet them, walking over to see what game they're playing.

Before I make it to the couch, Leo pauses the game to look me over thoroughly. It would be a little creepy if I didn't know it came from a good place.

"How was studying?" he asks, apparently satisfied I'm unhurt as he picks his controller back up.

"Good! I was over at Mackenzie and Claire's for a little while. They volunteered to grade my practice exam."

"How'd it go?" Tanner asks at the same time as Leo says, "Mackenzie?"

I smirk, deciding to let his obsession slide. “It was okay. I think I might have gotten as far as I can possibly hope to get in math, though, so I might just focus on my written and verbal sections to try to get my score higher.”

“Flashcards!” Tanner exclaims, and before I can blink, he’s scrambling off the couch and disappearing into his room.

“Flashcards?”

“Flashcards,” Leo confirms. “Tanner has a thing for studying with them. I’m a little surprised it’s taken him this long to break them out, honestly.”

It only takes a few seconds before he’s back in the living room, a stack of colorful flashcards in hand. I follow him over to the table next to my little corner, where he opens his laptop and pulls up a website full of suggested words to learn for the SATs. I’ll need to budget for one of those, I realize, looking at the sleek computer. There’s apparently some money tucked away in a 529 college account that my dad wasn’t able to touch, but I suspect that will only go so far. Budgeting is another thing on my list of topics to tackle sooner rather than later.

Tanner spends a few minutes explaining his study method to me, then he leaves me to it as he and Em—Leo—go back to their game.

An hour goes by, but I barely notice.

Eventually, a knock at the door and the smell of food pulls me out of my study bubble. Apparently, the boys were feeling too lazy to go to the dining hall—their words, not mine—so they went ahead and ordered chicken wings. I smile when Leo walks over with a salad and a small container of wings for me.

“Not spicy, just like you like ‘em.”

“*Gracias*, Emilio,” I coo in appreciation.

“You’re the only Mexican I know who doesn’t like spicy food,” he grumbles good-naturedly.

“Half-Mexican.” I stick my tongue out at him. It’s an old argument. Despite the wonderful food my mom used to cook for us, I never did learn how to

tolerate anything with too much heat. “No Lincoln tonight?” I ask, looking around the dorm room in case I somehow managed to miss him walking in.

“Nah, he’s on duty,” Leo replies, pulling over his own bucket of wings that smell decidedly more dangerous than my own pile.

I try to ignore the little stab of disappointment that washes over me at hearing Lincoln is busy. It’s just my desire to have my whole family pack around me. Perfectly natural, or so I assume.

We eat in comfortable silence for a little while. Tanner disappears into his room to study, though he leaves some sports game on the TV that Leo seems to be watching halfheartedly. I’ve never cared much for sports, but the background noise it creates is soothing. Just being here, in a cramped dorm room at a cramped table, eating mediocre wings with my brother, is nice.

More than nice.

“So, do you have a costume picked out for Halloween?” I ask, noticing the game has gone to a commercial. “Mason told me about the annual event the swim team puts on. You were some sort of bat last year . . .?” From the pictures I saw it was hard to tell what he’d been going for, standing there covered in soaking-wet fabric with a grin on his face.

“Flying squirrel,” he corrects.

“Last I checked, those things weren’t known for their swimming ability.”

“Yeah, well, I tried to use the space in the arm flaps to rig some inflatables, thinking it might counteract the weight of the material. Didn’t exactly work out as planned.”

We laugh, and I move to grab a glass of water from the small kitchen. When I sit back down, I notice Leo looks decidedly more serious.

“So. Mason, huh?”

“Ummmm . . . yeah? I went with him to the library the other day to study, remember?”

“And you’ve been hanging out with Micah a lot. Working on those illustrations with him.” It’s not a question, but I feel compelled to answer

anyway.

“We’ve met up a few times. He’s nice. And you’re friends with them too,” I accuse, feeling suddenly self-conscious and slightly defensive.

Leo doesn’t meet my eye, and an awkward silence spreads between us for what feels like forever but is probably just a few seconds.

“Jeez, you know I’m no good at this shit, Espy,” he finally states, looking over at me with a grimace.

“Good at what?”

“Maybe I should bring Tanner out here for this . . .” He looks longingly at the door to his packmate’s room, but I might die if there’s another witness to what I suspect is coming.

I reach up and grab his chin, redirecting his face until our eyes are locked. “Emilio. Alvarez.”

“Okay, okay! Look—” He pauses, grabbing my water off the table and taking a long drink. “You’re an omega. They are alphas.”

“Micah’s a beta,” I interrupt pettily.

“A beta who’s part of an alpha pack. I just want to make sure you’re being careful. That you’re comfortable. That you know what you’re getting into. That they’re treating you right, not pressuring you into anything. All the *stuff*, you know.”

“We’re just friends,” I protest, feeling my cheeks heat. Even having suspected this was what he wanted to talk about doesn’t make it any less embarrassing.

“Right. If that’s true, that’s fine. It’s also fine if it’s more than that. I just worry about you with everything that happened. And you didn’t grow up around packs—neither of us did—so the different culture and customs can be confusing. I have to look out for you as your older brother, and— *Mierda!* I’m totally screwing this up, aren’t I? They must have guides for this sort of thing. Here—” He shoots his arm out to grab Tanner’s computer, pulling it in front of him and quickly logging on. “The internet has everything. I bet they

have some sort of script I can use. Should have started there . . .”

“Emmmmmmm,” I groan, slipping back to the name I’ve always called him. “We aren’t . . . you know . . . they aren’t courting me or anything like that. They’re just . . . nice! I like helping Micah with his comic books—it gives me something to do other than therapy and studying. And Mason and Cabe, it’s not like I’ve really spent that much time with them. I just see them around sometimes when I’m with Micah. You know how I am with alphas right now.”

Em cringes at the reminder.

“But I’m okay around them! Just like Tanner and Lincoln! It feels safe to be around them, and that’s . . . that’s nice. Not feeling so scared and being able to make friends.”

“They feel like Tanner and Lincoln to you?” he asks, looking a bit suspicious.

“Yeah. I mean . . . yes,” I agree, stumbling a little. No need to examine that too closely.

We’re silent again for a few seconds, each of us staring at the other as I try to hold my ground.

“You know about courting?” Em finally asks.

“I mean, a little.” I shrug. “Mackenzie has told me a bit since she’s being courted right now.”

I know it’s a sore point, and I feel bad when I see my brother’s shoulders slump and the way his mouth goes tight.

“Right. Yeah. Of course,” he mutters. He sounds so dejected I almost wish I’d said nothing and just tried to suffer through hearing my brother explain the alpha-omega version of the birds and the bees. *Almost.*

“Okay. So . . . super successful conversation. Yeah?”

“The best,” I agree sarcastically, burying my head in my arms so I don’t have to keep looking at him.

He chuckles, ruffling my hair as he stands up and clears away his food.

Eventually, he goes to bed, and I retreat to my curtained corner, my flashcards trying—and failing—to keep me distracted from the conversation I just had.



The pack housing part of campus looks a lot different on a Saturday than it did the last time I was here, during the week. Before, the lingering scent of unfamiliar alphas had me feeling all jumpy and panicked. Today I can actually see the alphas out and about, moving through the small cluster of houses. There's nothing inherently aggressive or threatening about them, but they still have me on edge.

I see them moving around alone, in packs, and a few with their omegas. Probably just running errands, heading to the dining hall, going out to have fun . . . Just doing normal, human things. I even spot two alphas tossing a football back and forth while a large dog bounds between them. Still, I find myself keeping to the very edge of the sidewalk and doing my best to surreptitiously keep my eyes on everyone.

“You okay?” Mackenzie asks, giving me a sympathetic frown. She had plans to see the pack courting her today, and she offered to walk with me to Micah, Mason, and Cabe's place.

“Yep,” I nod, sparing her a quick glance before going back to tracking my surroundings. My palms are sweaty where I'm gripping the handles of my two large tote bags. “Just peachy.”

“If you want, we can call Micah and have him come meet us here so you don't have to go the rest of the way alone,” she offers.

“No, no, we're almost there. I can do this,” I reassure her. And I can. It's just . . . uncomfortable. “I know I'm, like, uniquely sensitive to this and all, but it really doesn't bother you to be around so many alphas?” I ask, genuinely curious.

Mackenzie shrugs, but she thinks about it for a moment before replying. “Not

really. I mean, yeah, there are a lot of scents here. But being outside helps. Makes it so I don't feel all that trapped, you know. Plus, I've met a few of these packs before. At some of the pack council events. If it was dark out, I'd feel a lot different. Or if I were alone. Definitely don't ever discount your instincts, Espy. I know plenty of omegas who only travel around with escorts. Everyone has different sensitivity levels, and frankly, safety is more important than independence in my opinion."

"I guess I just wish I didn't feel so close to a panic attack," I mumble.

"We'll just have to make sure those boys of yours walk you back home, won't we?" she says with a wink, reaching out and squeezing my arm.

"They aren't my boys." I blush, my mind instantly going back to the conversation I had with Em/Leo two days ago.

Mackenzie's laugh sounds downright musical, and I catch more than one alpha turning to look in our direction as we make our way through the different housing clusters.

"You okay if I leave you here? I'm heading down that way." She stops a few houses down from Micah's, pointing off toward another row of houses set further back in the neighborhood.

I nod.

"Okay, give me a call before you leave! I'm not sure how long I'll be with Pack Sanders, but if timing aligns, we can walk back together.

She swoops in for a quick hug around my bags and then bounces off while I quickly finish walking the last few feet to the familiar house.

"Espy!" Micah is bounding down the steps before I've even had a chance to reach the front porch. He looks truly happy to see me, and I allow his excitement to wash over me and scrub away the lingering anxiety I felt on the walk over.

"Hey, Micah." I grin.

He seems to go in for a hug but then pulls back with a jerk, instead reaching out and taking the bags off my hands. "Come on in! Cabe is so excited to

have you in the kitchen he kicked me and Mason out hours ago. I wasn't even allowed to have coffee," he grumbles good-naturedly as he directs me inside.

"You're such a liar!" I hear Cabe shout.

Looking up from taking off my shoes, I see the alpha is, indeed, standing in the middle of the kitchen as if he's guarding it.

"About the coffee part," he amends, sending me a warm smile. "I *have* been excited to cook with you." He winks.

"Hey, Espy."

I turn to see Mason coming down the stairs, looking a bit hesitant. Micah has moved off to the kitchen with my bags, so I end up wrapping my arms around myself awkwardly.

"Hey."

"I can, uh, stay upstairs. Or clear out or whatever. I know the three of us might be a bit much. I just wanted to come say hi," he states, coming to a stop in front of me. His hair looks a little wet, and his sawdust-and-juniper scent is slightly dampened by the smell of soap. He must have just gotten out of the shower.

"No— Uh, I mean . . . yes. No. Yes, you can stay. No, you don't have to hide upstairs." I smack a hand against my face as I shake my head. The thought of him all wet really threw me off. "Sorry, I must need more caffeine or something," I mutter as Mason just smiles at me.

"That I can do," he says. Reaching up, he gently grabs my hand and pulls it away from my face, using it to tug me behind him as he makes his way into the kitchen.

If I thought full sentences were hard to form before, I doubt I'll get any words out now that my hand is cradled inside his much larger one. I decide to just keep my eyes down as I shuffle behind him, scared at what my face might give away if his packmates happen to be watching me.

I'm soon settled on a seat at the breakfast bar, coffee in hand, watching as Micah and Cabe carefully pull out all the items I brought over. They're

mostly baking supplies, but I have some of my art stuff tucked in the tote bags as well.

“Wow, how big of a cake are we making?” Cabe questions, lining up all the ingredients along the counter. “It looks like you could feed a whole army with this stuff. How did you even manage to carry it all over here?” he questions, moving over to me and reaching out to teasingly squeeze my biceps.

“I couldn’t decide what I wanted to make!” I whine, laughing as I pull my arm away. “And don’t let looks deceive you. Lincoln has been working my butt off—carrying a few measly bags across campus is nothing.”

Cabe braces his arms against the counter and leans over, his eyes going to where I’m sitting.

“Looks to me like it’s still there. But maybe I should take a closer look,” he states nonchalantly, leaning over even further.

My face goes beet-red as my mouth drops slightly open, and I have to resist the useless urge to smack my hands over my butt. His gaze makes me squirm.

“Bro,” Mason groans, reaching out and shoving Cabe’s chest until he stumbles back a few steps.

“What?” he laughs, turning back to look at me. “Just making an observation.”

He’s so ridiculous and disarming I can’t help but smile back at him despite my embarrassment. If we’re being totally, one hundred percent honest, my butt *has* been looking pretty good lately. Having enough to eat and all the running and squats Lincoln’s been putting me through have the beginnings of a nice curve coming in.

I decide to be brave.

“Thanks,” I reply, straightening up in my seat and meeting his stare head-on.

I watch Cabe’s smile turn into more of a smirk as he gives me a nod. Next to me, Mason shakes his head in exasperation while Micah just laughs.

I might be in for an interesting afternoon.

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Cabe

I can't believe I got Espy to joke with me about her *butt* of all things. It's so delightfully unexpected that I can feel myself basically floating around the kitchen with smug joy. Mason's still glowering at me over Espy's shoulder, but he needs to chill out. I may come across as silly and carefree, but I'm paying attention. The cute little omega is a bit nervous, but it's muted. She's comfortable here—comfortable with us—and a little flirting won't scare her away.

I'd turn into a monk before I let that happen.

Micah may have been exaggerating a bit when he said I kicked him and Mason out *hours* ago, but he honestly wasn't too far off the mark. Aside from the other night when she ended up staying for dinner, I haven't had much of a chance to hang out with Espy at all. I'd be jealous of Micah, and now Mason, if I weren't so simultaneously excited for them.

All things in good time.

Besides, I have a new outlet to work through my instincts now, which has been helping a ton. That lunch we had the other day with Leo's pack really rattled me. I wanted to beat the crap out of Lincoln for challenging me and Mason on our ability to protect Espy. I still have little cuts along the base of my palms from clenching my fists so I wouldn't take a swing at him. But then he shared all that stuff about how omegas are being targeted and the attack that happened in Utah, and I started to feel a bit of shame. Here I was pining after the idea of having an omega for the past year or so, and yet I was

already failing to do the bare minimum of having basic fucking awareness of what threats were out there.

I spent hours afterward jumping back and forth between being pissed at Lincoln and pissed at myself before it finally occurred to me there was a better outlet for my anger. I sucked up my pride, and after getting Lincoln's number from Leo, I called him up to ask how I could help. He was dismissive at first, but when I wouldn't back down, it seems he finally decided to take me seriously. Turns out there's a reserve program at the base here that takes civilians and trains them up to deploy in emergency situations. They were getting ready to start a recruitment push to beef up security around the university in light of the attacks. Lincoln gave me the right number to call, and ten minutes later I was all signed up.

My first meeting is on Monday, and already I feel calmer knowing I'll actually be *doing* something to help.

But it's still the weekend, and Espy is here in my house and in my kitchen.

"So, what are we working with?" I call out, clapping my hands together. The sharp smacking sound it makes reminds me of the starting whistle at one of my soccer matches. Just like in that situation, I feel alive and ready to play my heart out.

"Someone's eager," I hear Micah teasing me under his breath. I don't even spare him a glance as I flip him off, my gaze locked on Espy as she smiles up at me shyly.

She looks adorable. All big hazel eyes, long dark hair, and lips that look soft and inviting. She's wearing these cute gray leggings with little pink socks and an oversize white sweater that hangs down almost to her knees. She looks cozy and even tinier than usual, forcing me to fight my natural instinct demanding that I grab her up and tuck her away in my room under a pile of blankets. Maybe crawling in there with her. . .

Unfortunately, that will have to wait, but her outfit is a good reminder of what I have planned.

"Hold it!" I shout, dashing out of the kitchen and up the stairs to my room. I'm back before anyone even has a chance to move, and I'm not even out of

breath. *Thank you, offseason conditioning.*

Espy's head cocks to the side slightly as I approach her, hands held behind my back so she can't see what I'm holding. It didn't escape my notice earlier that Mason was holding her hand, but I don't want to push her too far too fast. I make sure to stay two feet away as I come to a stop in front of her.

"First things first, we gotta talk protection." I wink at her, loving that I get a front-row seat to see just how far the blush spreads across her cheeks and down below the collar of her top.

"Cabe . . ." Mason groans again, but I don't pay him any mind.

If anything, Espy's rose, vanilla, and cream scent grows a bit stronger, and I know she isn't put off by my innuendos.

I bring my hands around, holding up the cute little apron I bought for her as soon as Mason mentioned she'd be coming over to bake. It isn't a courting gift, per se. Technically, we aren't courting her, but who doesn't like gifts? I watch her nose crinkle as she laughs, reaching out to run a hand down the material. I still don't know her that well yet, but I figured I couldn't go wrong when I saw this one with little dancing cartoon kitchen items.

She doesn't hesitate when I take her hand to pull her off the stool and turn her around so I can tie the apron straps. She barely comes up to my chest, and I take the opportunity when her back is turned toward me to bend down and smell her hair. I let out a whole-body shiver as I inhale, and I have to hurry away to put on my own apron just to hide my reaction from her.

"Flowers?" Espy questions, following me into the kitchen.

"My grandmother's." I wink at her and give a little chest shimmy, all the better to show off the ruffles. "I was my family's de facto sous chef growing up. Trust me, it took many hours of hard labor to earn this puppy."

"Lots of tears too," Micah adds. "Wasn't it a pity gift to get you to stop crying after that one Thanksgiving when you accidentally mixed up the salt and sugar, and Brite spit out that bite of yams, and—?"

"Okay!" I interrupt. "That's enough from the peanut gallery. Don't you both have things to do? Homework?"

“Nope,” Micah chirps back. The little shit.

I know for a fact Mason is buried in work right now, but he studiously avoids catching my eye as he sips nonchalantly at his coffee. Seems it may be harder to get rid of my packmates than I anticipated.

“Who’s Brite?” Espy asks curiously.

“A complete figment of Micah’s imagination, just like that story,” I declare. There are more than a few embarrassing stories about me that Mason and Micah could share. Best to nip that in the bud early. “In fact, Micah’s a compulsive liar. Let’s set a rule now that you won’t believe a single thing he tells you about our childhood.”

“You mean things like how your brothers liked to play ‘pack,’ and they’d force you to be the omega, and you’d spend hours making sure you got the nest just r— Ooumphff.”

I press my hand against Micah’s mouth to cut him off, but the damage is done. Lucky for my beta, Espy is laughing sweetly.

“Payback’s a bitch,” I mock-growl at him.

Mason comes to my rescue, reaching over to tug Micah out of my grasp and out of the kitchen.

“Wait!” Espy says, rushing forward and rifling through the pile of stuff I unloaded from her bags. “I brought stuff for you. Here.” She hands a small stack of pages to Micah, and another to Mason. “Just some drafts of the new panels we were working on, and a practice sketch of that gift for your mom,” she explains, looking a bit shy about the last part. I watch as she unconsciously tucks her hair behind her ears and steps back.

“You’re making something for Mason?” I question, eyeing my packmate suspiciously. This is news to me.

Mason explains he asked Espy to help with a gift for his mom, and Micah, predictably, pouts about not being able to compete with his own gift. I tune them out, ready to go back to baking and back to my excuse to have some one-on-one time with Espy. The two eventually scatter, presumably retreating to their rooms, and Espy spreads out the recipes she printed off along the

counter. They're all cakes and look reasonably straightforward to make.

"Piece of cake," I say, loving when I earn an eye roll for my terrible pun. "Which do you want to make?"

"Hmmm . . ." She bites at her lip as she studies the pages closely. "How are your decorating skills?"

"Yours for the taking," I flirt. "And I'd rate them at more than halfway decent."

Another eye roll, and I feel like I've won the lottery. Or at least ten bucks in one of those scratch offs.

"Wait, shouldn't you be really good at decorating, cause of being all artsy and stuff?"

"Frosting is not my medium." Her lips twist into a faint pout, and I take a second to imagine what they'd taste like pressed up against mine.

We end up deciding on a chocolate caramel cake, settling into easy teamwork. I tell her a bit about my family, knowing from talking to Mason and Micah she's curious about pack dynamics. I might also take the opportunity to slip in a bunch of embarrassing stories about the two Hayes brothers. In the spirit of evening the playing field and all. I'm not the only one in this pack with older siblings. I ask a little bit about her family, but I know it's a sensitive topic, so other than getting a few stories about her brother's birthdays growing up we mostly stick with my family.

"Wait, you're telling me each of you has younger twin siblings?" She looks up at me with a furrowed brow, pausing in the middle of stirring the batter.

"Well, it's the same set for Mason and Micah." I shrug.

"So their sisters are sixteen years old, and yours are . . .?"

"My brother and sister are fourteen. They were a surprise for my good old mom and dads. Probably a disappointment too after having the universe's best kid." I gesture to myself with exaggerated arrogance as I waggle my eyebrows. That's three eye-rolls now. *Score!*

"My goodness, your poor mother," Espy clucks with sympathy, turning back

to the batter. “And your poor sister! Being the only girl and having to grow up with five alpha brothers must have driven her insane.”

“Four, actually,” I correct her, taking the opportunity to dart my hand in and steal some of the batter when she turns to look at me questioningly. “Only four of us are alphas. My younger brother presented as an omega about a year ago.”

“Oh,” she says, looking thoughtful. “That’s pretty rare, right? For there to be a male omega.”

“I betcha Mason would have the exact statistics for you, but yeah, they aren’t super common. Not as rare as female alphas, though, and there’s one of those in my family tree. Maybe you’ll meet him,” I add, trying not to sound as eager as I feel at the thought of Espy being around my family. “The twins tend to come spend a weekend or two with us during the year. My older brothers and I take turns getting them out of the house when my mom goes into heat.”

I don’t realize my mistake at first, but when I feel Espy go still beside me I immediately freeze. I quickly run back through what I said. Was referencing my parents’ sex lives crossing a line? Was I unintentionally presumptuous that she’d want to meet my family???

Then it hits me. I mentioned my mom going into *heat*.

Idiot!

“Espy, sorry, I—”

I go to hold her but end up pulling back. She has her arms curled around her stomach like I’ve seen her do on occasion when she’s feeling nervous or insecure. Her eyes are squeezed shut and she looks to be shaking slightly. My arm hangs uselessly between us, and not knowing what else to do, I end up shoving my hand into the back pocket of my jeans. Her beautiful scent sours, and that base knowledge that there’s a distressed omega right in front of me, and that I triggered that distress, is enough to send my instincts spiraling.

My eyes start darting around frantically, making sure Espy is safe and the perimeter is secure. Then I’m tugging her backward and moving her into a corner, gently, putting unnecessary distance between her and the preheating

oven she was standing next to. Like a compulsion, I also look around to reassure myself all the knives are put away in the knife block. Next, I find myself at the fridge, pulling out the jug of filtered water we keep in there and pouring her a glass. Then I realize she might find tea more comforting, so I switch gears and throw some water in the kettle and set it to boil.

By the time Mason comes walking down the stairs a minute or so later, I'm elbows-deep in a cabinet trying to find some of the tea my mother gave me at the start of term, babbling about the different snacks we have around that I could feed her.

“Ummmm . . .?” he asks, coming to a stop by the counter and looking back and forth between Espy and me.

I glance over and see her eyes are now open and have gone wide, fixed right in my direction. She looks a little less terrified and a lot more confused, which I guess is an improvement. I turn my head slightly to the side and mouth, “Triggered,” at Mason, who immediately nods and disappears back upstairs. Before it can register that he just abandoned me, he's back, this time with a very concerned Micah in tow.

Reinforcements, thank the Gods.

“Hey, Esps.” Micah smiles tentatively as he cautiously approaches her.

She turns her wide eyes in his direction, and as if I've been released from some sort of tractor beam, I stealthily sprint over to the couch and grab up the blanket she used last time she was over. Mason's still hovering by the counter, but as I approach Espy with the blanket I see Micah's managed to get close enough to her to wrap an arm around her shoulders, and her face is buried against his side. My brain has no space for jealousy right now, but if it did, I'd be pouting for sure.

I move in closer to the pair, my brain and my instincts at war over what she needs the most right now. I end up hovering awkwardly behind her, trying to tuck the blanket in around her shoulders without actually touching her.

Surprising me, she turns suddenly in Micah's arm and grabs the blanket, pulling it around her body and over her head like some sort of robe. Once she's fully encased, she turns around and burrows her head back into his

chest.

“Uh . . .” I catch Micah’s eye, then I turn and do the same with Mason. None of us seem to have any idea what to do now. “Why don’t we go to the couch?” I eventually suggest. “It’s probably more comfortable than being wedged against a counter.”

I take the nodding motion of the blanket to signal Espy’s agreement, backing out of the way so Micah can slowly guide her toward the living room. They settle down and Espy curls her feet up underneath her until she’s tucked into a ball, still plastered to Micah’s side. Seeing her seek him out for comfort, I allow my instincts to come forward and find myself sitting close on her other side. Mason seems to feel the same pull and kneels in front of her in seconds, all of us surrounding her in the protective bubble of our pack.

My heart practically leaps out of my chest when I feel the purr rumble out of me, and when Mason joins in, Micah lifts his head to look at us in surprise.

It feels weird coming out of my chest. But good. Almost like there’s been this subtle itch along my diaphragm for years that I could never scratch, and now suddenly it’s gone. It’s pretty uncommon for alphas to purr without an omega present, and I’ve never found myself doing it before. When I glance over at Mason, I almost lose my purr to laughter at seeing the dumbfounded look on his face. If it wouldn’t be one thousand percent inappropriate to take a picture right now, I’d totally pull out my phone to capture all our faces.

Instead, I lean in closer to Espy and grab the blanket to tuck it more securely around her feet. Despite the fact she’s upset, it’s a nice moment, and I make sure to commit this feeling to memory.

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Esperanza

Taking up residence in a blanket for the rest of my life isn't something I've considered before, but it honestly feels like my only option at this point.

It has two main advantages going for it. One: it's super comfortable, warm, and smells like Cabe and Mason in a toe-curlingly delicious way. Two: it would mean I'd never have to face said alphas or their beta ever again, nor explain why I'm such a basket case.

Pretty compelling marks in the "pro" column if you ask me.

"Esperaaaaannzaaaaaaa," Cabe singsongs quietly near my head. "You still in there?"

No. Nope. No way. Negatory. This is too humiliating. I have practice going without food; I bet I could wait them out in here until they lose interest, and then I can make my escape.

I jump slightly as the hand pressed against my side comes to life and moves along my arm in a comforting stroke.

"Esp." Micah this time, dropping the "Y" from my nickname in the way only he ever does.

Do I have my phone on me? If I can get to it, maybe I can text someone to come act as a distraction. Leo and Lincoln aren't an option—they'd both overreact and go into uber-protective mode. Mackenzie is probably still nearby, but I can't pull her away from hanging out with her prospective pack.

Or can I?

What level of humiliation qualifies one to break up a date in favor of a rescue mission?

My frantic ruminations are interrupted as I'm suddenly lifted into the air, blanket and all. My squeak of surprise cuts off abruptly as I'm settled back down, only now there's the distinct feeling of a firm set of thighs underneath me. The owner of the lap I'm now in—I suspect Cabe's, from the citrusy scent—wraps their arms around me and pulls me gently to their chest, where I feel a quiet purr start up again.

My brain totally wants to flip out in excitement that I'm being held by Cabe, but since there's no room in my head for anything but embarrassment, I force the feeling away.

“Espy, can you just let us know if you're okay? You've kinda got us all freaked out here.” Mason does indeed sound on the verge of a panic.

“Dude,” Micah pipes up from right next to me. “Don't put that on her. Ignore my brother, pretty girl. Alphas never know how to deal with emotions. We're all fine, and we just want to make sure you're fine too.”

“I'm especially fine,” I hear Cabe rumble against my ear as he gives me a little squeeze, and I can't help but wriggle self-consciously at the reminder of just where I'm sitting.

Escaping the situation is starting to seem less and less likely.

“I'm fine,” I finally say. “Never better.”

I feel the blanket being tugged, and before I know it my face is uncovered and I'm looking into the eyes of an amused Micah.

“Hi.” He grins at me.

“Ummm . . . hi?” I offer in return, looking away from him. I catch sight of his hands on either side of my head where he's holding the blanket. On instinct, I dart my hands forward to grab it and wrap it back around my head, this time conceding to leave my eyes uncovered.

“Don't be embarrassed,” Micah chuckles, stroking a hand down my blanket-

covered head.

“I’m *not* embarrassed,” I retort. “I’m not even here. This is all a horrible dream where I humiliate myself in front of a whole pack, and really, I’m back in my bed right now, learning the valuable lesson that I should never, ever, under any circumstances, ever leave my house.”

I can see Micah and Mason trying and failing to hide their grins while Cabe shakes with laughter underneath me. I somehow managed to forget that I was currently on top of him, and at the reminder I quickly readjust the blanket so I’m fully covered again.

There’s some shuffling, and then I feel my protective shield being pulled away once again.

“Are you really okay?” Mason asks, having switched places with his brother. The kindness and sincerity on his face is like a tonic to my emotions, and I feel my flight response begin to recede.

“I’m so sorry, Espy,” Cabe jumps in, his tone serious this time. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s not your fault!” I do my best to twist my head to look up at him. Not an easy feat in my little blanket cocoon. “I don’t even know what all my triggers are. I certainly don’t expect anyone else to. I just . . . Sometimes certain things get to me, and I don’t have a lot of control over how I respond.”

“Like a panic attack?”

I twist back to look at Mason and give a small nod. “I used to get them a ton when I first moved in with Em. Leo!” I correct. “I . . . uhhh . . . I had a hard time leaving his dorm room, being around other people. I’m getting a lot better, but there are certain things that just remind me of . . . you know . . .” I trail off.

“We know,” Micah agrees, reaching past his brother to squeeze my shoulder reassuringly. “I mean, we kind of know. Just the basics. But if you want to talk about it, we’re happy to listen.”

I shake my head. I *don’t* want to talk about it. Outside of my sessions with Dr. Morgan or the times I’m being grilled by the authorities, I prefer to block

it all out. “Not right now. Maybe at some point. But I don’t like to, you know, dwell on things . . .” I trail off.

“No dwelling, coming right up!” Cabe declares, and I have to school my face to hide my disappointment when he lifts me off his lap and deposits me back onto the couch.

He’s in motion before I can ask questions, running up the stairs only to appear a minute later with a pile of blankets and pillows in hand. I have a moment of unease as I’m reminded of nesting materials, but instead of handing them over to me, he drops them in Micah and Mason’s laps.

The three of us end up watching a movie while Cabe gets to work in the kitchen, picking back up where we left off with the cake. I try to insist on helping, but after he brings me tea and a mixing spoon covered in homemade caramel, I gamely give up and give in to the welcome comfort of being looked after.



“So you ended up burrowed in a blanket, sitting on Cabe’s lap?” Mackenzie confirms, walking over to her fridge to put away my brother’s immaculate-looking birthday cake, which I brought over to be stored. “Sounds better than my date with the Sanders boys,” she laughs.

“It was so embarrassing!” I protest, burying my face in my hands as I sit at her counter.

She and Claire share a room in one of the more upscale dorms on campus. It’s larger than Leo and Tanner’s, though not quite the same size as a pack house. It’s clear both girls have more money at their disposal than my family.

“I’m sure it wasn’t that bad!” Mackenzie consoles, coming back over to join me. “Except, I mean, your hair, girl. Not gonna lie, you look like you lost a battle with a blow-dryer.”

“What?!?” I gasp, my hands shooting up to feel my head. It’s clear she isn’t exaggerating. “Oh Gods, it must have been the blanket,” I groan. “I can’t

believe they didn't say anything."

"I'm sure they didn't care," she reassures me, smiling. "And Claire has a ton of hair products. Give me a second and we'll have you all sorted."

"Distract me," I plead, calling after her as she pops into the shared bathroom. "What did you get up to with your pack today?"

When she reappears, her face is turned down in a bit of a moue, and she looks thoughtful. "It was okay," she finally says, spraying something on a brush before combing it gently through my hair.

"Just okay?" I prompt when she doesn't add anything else.

"I mean, they're nice guys. Very respectful, smart, cute . . ."

"But . . .?" I prompt again when she trails off.

"But there's just no . . . spark, you know? I don't feel like they're *home* for me. I have a good time when we're hanging out, but then I don't miss them that much when we aren't together. I don't find myself daydreaming about them or wanting to go all possessive and cover them in my scent."

"Is that a thing?" I interrupt, both shocked and intrigued.

"Totally," she laughs, moving away from me and setting down the brush.

I reach up to confirm I no longer have a bird's nest taking up residence on my head.

"Sometimes I forget you don't have any background on this. You *need* to come to O-Club with me. They have all these resources on what to expect from our omega sides, and they probably have experience dealing with people who were raised in beta-only families. Besides,"—she pauses to look at me slyly—"seems like you could use a crash course on courting sooner rather than later."

My face heats, and I immediately blurt: "They aren't courting me!"

Mackenzie raises a single eyebrow in response, looking thoroughly unconvinced. "They aren't?"

"No! We're just— We're friends. Just like with Tanner and . . . and Lincoln.

And you!” I rush to add her to my list. This is starting to sound just like the conversation I had with Leo a few days ago, only moderately less awkward.

“I don’t know, Espy. I know I haven’t really seen you guys all together, but from where I’m sitting it seems there’s definitely something there. Leo was telling me—”

“*Nooooooooooooo*,” I moan melodramatically. “Please tell me you have not been gossiping about my *nonexistent* love life with my brother.”

“No gossip, promise. But he *was* fishing for info, asking me if I thought there was something going on between you guys.”

“What did you tell him?” I ask, fiddling with the ends of my hair as I studiously avoid eye contact.

“I told him the truth. That I didn’t know,” she states, and I find myself letting out a deep breath of relief.

“So?”

“So?” I parrot.

“*Is there something going on?*”

I’m about to deny it once again, but I hesitate before the words can burst out. The truth is, I honestly don’t know if there is something between me and Micah, Mason, and Cabe. Pack Collins, as I’ve learned their official, collective name is. I know what having a crush feels like. I had a boyfriend for a month or so in tenth grade, before things with my dad got out of control. And it’s hard to ignore the way my heart races any time a text from Micah comes through, or the somersaults in my stomach when I’m near any one of them. The way I crave their scents and crave their company, and the way they make me feel safe, excited, and nervous all at the same time.

But.

But. But. But.

They aren’t the *only* ones making me feel this way.

“I . . . I don’t think so,” I finally answer Mackenzie.

“No?” She looks slightly disappointed.

“No. I— They’re great. But when I’m around them, I feel like I do when I’m around my brother’s pack.” *When I’m around Lincoln*, I add to myself silently.

Her face scrunches up in surprise. “Really?”

I nod.

“Okay. Well . . . that’s fine! Maybe it’s better even. Ohh! I know! This means you can come to the pack speed-dating event with me next month!” She claps her hands in excitement as she bounces in her seat.

“Ummmmm, no,” I laugh. “I’m not even an actual student here—that has to disqualify me.”

“Pssshhh,” she scoffs. “That’s just semantics. You’ll be a student soon enough.”

“I’m not sure I’m ready to be around so many strange alphas,” I try instead, shrugging. It’s not a lie, but it isn’t the whole truth either. Even if what I’m feeling for Micah, Mason, and Cabe is just friendly and familial, which feels like a stretch, the thought of going out and flirting with other packs leaves a sour taste in my mouth.

“Of course,” Mackenzie says, looking at me with sympathy. “No pressure. There will be other events later on. And, duh, it wouldn’t be very smart of me to bring you along anyway. You’d just pull all the attention away from me and distract the alphas. Let’s wait until I find a better match than my last one, and then we can see about finding you a pack.” She winks.

I laugh. “Deal.”

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Esperanza

For the sixth time in ten minutes, my eyes dart to the analog clock hanging at the front of the room. The time I have left to finish this essay is quickly winding down, and yet instead of concentrating on the paper in front of me, I keep nervously watching the second hand click-click-clicking around.

Concéntrate, Espy, I scold myself.

It's been almost four hours of being trapped in this classroom, desperately trying to prove I'm smart enough to deserve a spot at River Valley. Or any institute of higher learning, honestly.

I've only been studying for the past two months. Is that enough time? Was it a good decision to concentrate on bringing up my language score instead of trying to bring up my math score a little higher? Maybe I wasn't meant to go to college. Maybe all the forced training my father put me through on how to be a *proper* omega turned my brain to mush and I'm no longer capable of performing academically.

"This is your five-minute warning," the proctor announces from the front of the room.

The guy, probably not much older than me, looks bored. Instead of wasting time fantasizing about swapping places with him, I force myself to push through. Just a few more sentences and I'm there. It may not be the most impressive essay anyone has ever written, but it at least follows what I'm told is the expected formula of intro-body-conclusion.

I'm wracking my brain for the perfect way to bring it all to an end when time is called.

Shit!

I glance up furtively, and seeing the proctor has begun collecting the exams from the first row, I use the precious extra seconds my fifth-row seat affords to force my hand to bring things to a close. Then I stumble to my feet, dutifully handing off my answer packet when the proctor reaches my row. He doesn't spare me a single glance as he just continues up the line. I feel embarrassingly light-headed. Probably a combination of the drop in adrenaline paired with the fact I stupidly skipped breakfast. Leo and Tanner are both away at a big swim meet in New Mexico that my brother is competing in today, so there was no one there to scold me as I let my nerves get the better of me this morning.

Micah and Cabe have also gone on the road trip to support Mason. As a senior and captain of the swim team, it's a big event for him, or so I gather. I received texts from each of the Collins pack this morning wishing me luck with my exam. Their sweet yet simple notes made me happier than I'm willing to admit, so I tried not to think about them after sending my own notes to Mason and Leo letting them know I was sending them speedy vibes for their races.

Handing off my packet feels anticlimactic, and I fidget a bit as I look around. The results won't come back for a few weeks, which feels ridiculous to me. Couldn't the proctor just grade them himself, right now? Most of the test is just a Scantron sheet—it couldn't take more than two minutes to spit out a result. Right?

Reluctantly I leave the room and head next door to the staging area where we were made to leave all our belongings before the test. I only brought a purse with my phone and keys to the dorm, plus my winter jacket and a hat. We had a major surprise snowstorm last week, and the campus is still covered in a good layer of snow. Thank goodness for Mackenzie and Silver and their penchant for fashion. Between the two of them, I'm newly outfitted with hand-me-down boots, hats, scarves, and a puffy down jacket. I need to be careful about collecting too many things as my closet at Leo's (a.k.a. the old suitcase of his I'm using to store my clothing) is now full-on overflowing.

I check my phone and see several missed texts from Micah. Clicking into my messages, I see he's been giving me a play-by-play of the boys' events at the meet, including a video. In his latest message, from just five minutes ago, he's checking up on me to see if I survived, in typical cheeky fashion.

Grinning, I'm about to reply when I'm intercepted by a large body stepping in front of me. "Lincoln?" I ask, blinking up at the familiar face I wasn't expecting to see.

"Hey," he replies simply, his dark eyes roaming over me in the way I've recently become accustomed to. It's definitely an alpha thing, I've noticed. Whether it's Lincoln, Tanner, Cabe, or Mason, each of the alphas has a habit of inspecting me each time we meet.

"Whatcha doing here?" I question again, tilting my head as I conduct my own perusal.

He looks good, as always. Actually, he looks great.

I cut my eyes away quickly before he can catch me checking him out, automatically moving to tuck my hair behind my ear before realizing I have it back in a ponytail today. I end up twitching, and then I awkwardly rub at my ear. I blame my lack of calories and zombified brain.

"I wanted to see how your exam went," he answers easily, turning to join me in my march toward the exit. "With Leo and your other *friends* out of town, figured it'd fall to me to check up on you."

"My *friends*?" I goad him, knowing exactly who he's talking about but feeling in the mood to bait him anyway.

"Pack Collins," he grunts out as he stares ahead, sounding sullen. I've only seen Lincoln interact with them a few times so far, but each time it's been clear there's no love lost between them. Lincoln's a grump with me too, of course, so his attitude seems very in-character.

"So. You got saddled with babysitting duty since everyone else is busy?" I sass.

"Maybe I volunteered," he parries back, giving me an inscrutable look.

“Volunteering is still an obligation,” I counter. I’m not truly that bothered by it. The attentiveness of my brother’s pack is something I’ve gotten used to and, mostly, appreciate. I blame my omega nature for being so bristly.

It’s a handy scapegoat, I’ve decided. Weird behavior or feelings? Blame it on my omega side.

“You’re not an obligation, short stack,” Lincoln soothes me, reaching over to wrap an arm around my shoulder and tuck me into his side. It’s become a habit, this whole *touching* thing.

Ever since the hug we shared a month ago after one of my training sessions, we’ve both indulged in the occasional casual touch. If it felt like butterflies were exploding in my stomach every time it happened, well, that was just a natural reaction to feeling comforted by a friend. By *family* even. As a member of Leo’s pack, he’s like a brother to me.

He. Is. A. Brother.

“You *are*, however, slacking on your training,” he continues, his fingers drumming an insanely distracting beat against my ribs.

“I’ve been studying!” I protest feebly.

“Uh-huh.” He looks down at me knowingly.

I *have* been studying. But I’ve also found time to do other things, as Lincoln well knows. Including celebrating my brother’s birthday just a few days ago. Not to mention spending another evening over at Micah, Mason, and Cabe’s place for dinner.

“I have been!” I insist again.

“Then I’m sure that test was a piece of cake and you’re in no need of the distraction I was planning to offer you,” he teases, a faint smirk pulling back the corners of his mouth.

I smack him as I simultaneously move out from underneath his arm and stop his forward momentum. Unfortunately, the quick movement makes my head spin once more, reminding me of my need for food.

“Espy? Are you okay?” Lincoln snaps out of his playful mood and jumps

immediately into threat-assessment mode. It would be sexy if it weren't so sweet. Can it be both? *No, not sexy.* I shake my head to try to dislodge the inappropriate thought.

"I could use some lunch," I admit, grimacing as my stomach growls loudly right on cue.

"Right." He nods, reaching out to spin me around and continue on our path out of the building. "Come on, short stack—let's get you fed."



"This is pretty good!" I manage to get out around the giant bite of burrito I'm currently chowing down on.

Lincoln decided to take me out to a little Mexican restaurant a few blocks off campus, and it's more than hitting the spot. The cafeteria food is good, but it gets repetitive after a while, and while Cabe has proven to be an excellent cook, his dishes are a bit more refined than the pile of cheese and carbs I have in front of me now.

"I come here with my unit sometimes. It's a good way to get a lot of calories as quickly and cheaply as possible," Lincoln shares, eating a bite of his much healthier-looking spinach enchiladas. "I wasn't sure you'd be into it though. I tried bringing Leo once, and I got a ten-minute lecture on 'proper Mexican food.'" He shudders comically.

"I mean, American Mexican food is in a category all of its own. Not really fair to compare them," I laugh. "My mother was an amazing cook. She had this green pozole recipe she swore was handed down for generations in her family, and sometimes we'd come back from school and she'd just be randomly making it. She never let us request it, and we could never predict when it would make an appearance. She'd tell us it was magic and she'd find herself buying the ingredients without having planned to, somehow just knowing when Em and I needed it most." I trail off for a moment, lost in my memories of the tangy, acidic smell of the green soup base. "I wonder if there's a place to get hominy around here. She taught me the recipe when I

was only six or seven, but I haven't made it in years."

Out of nowhere I feel tears welling up, and I try to discreetly wipe them away while feigning needing a sip of water. Lincoln neither comments on my sudden emotion nor does he change the subject.

"Tell me more about her?" he prompts, gazing at me with soft but un pitying eyes.

So I do.

I don't actually have that many solid memories of my mom since she passed away when I was ten, but once I get talking, I find it's hard to stop. My burrito lays abandoned on my plate as I recount how she used to sing to us all the time, and how those songs often pop into my head when my mind wanders. I talk about being confused when I was really little that I spoke two different languages, and how my mom was often the only one who understood me in my baby chatter, switching back and forth between English and Spanish. I talk about visiting her family in Mexico one summer, and how I ate so many avocados Leo convinced me my skin was going to turn thick, green, and bumpy, just like the fruit. It took me years to eat avocados again after that, despite all my mom's reassurances that my skin would stay just the same as hers, only a little lighter.

The words pour out of me, but instead of feeling empty I feel a certain energy invading my body. I don't think I truly realized until this moment how much I'd been blocking out from my earliest years. Things went so wrong after we lost her, and I made it a point not to dwell on the "what could have beens". Recently I've been finding it harder and harder to keep those rigid mental boundaries in place—the ones that have steadfastly protected me over the past two years. Dr. Morgan has started poking at my feelings for my brother lately, and how it felt when he left for college and essentially abandoned me to my father. That line of thinking feels like an emotional nuclear bomb—one I have no interest in detonating.

"Espy?"

I blink and refocus on the man in front of me. I must have trailed off at some point while reminiscing.

“Sorry,” I titter, a bit embarrassed to have lost the plot.

I feel suddenly vulnerable, sitting here with Lincoln, talking about my mom. It feels like the barrier I erected between my past and my present is eroding, and the longer I sit here with him in this Mexican restaurant, the more likely it is that the dam will burst and my trauma will come pouring out. He’d at least be able to run away from that shit, but I know with certainty that I’d be left to drown.

“Didn’t you say something earlier about having a distraction for me?” I ask, eager to navigate back to solid ground. “Besides feeding me, that is.”

Lincoln looks at me searchingly for a moment, but whatever he finds he wisely decides to let lie. “I did.” He nods, taking a long sip of water. “But honestly, you might not be up for it now.”

I bristle. *Not up for it?* Did I truly let my mask slip too far, and now he’s seen the scared, damaged girl I’ve been trying so hard to hide he thinks I’m too delicate to do anything more than hide in my brother’s dorm room? I take all the anger I was feeling about my own vulnerability and redirect it straight at him.

“I’m up for anything,” I declare, laying down the metaphorical gauntlet with narrowed eyes.

“Yeah?” he asks, raising a single eyebrow as he takes in the challenge in my voice.

“Absolutely,” I confirm, clenching my jaw with determination.

He smirks. “Remember you said that, short stack.”

Twenty minutes later, I sincerely wish I hadn’t.

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Esperanza

“You are the worst.” I pout, trudging after Lincoln as we make our way out of the athletics center at the military base.

“You said you were up for *anything*. This is a thing.” He shrugs, though the devious grin on his face totally undermines his casual tone.

“Any chance you have selective memory?” I suggest.

He shakes his head, so I try a new, rather desperate, tack.

“You know omegas are flighty, irrational creatures. We have too many hormones floating around our small bodies. We can’t be trusted to think clearly or make decisions for ourselves. Obviously, you have to disregard anything I say.”

Lincoln doesn’t break stride, but he does roll his eyes quite dramatically. “Then as the good alpha that I am, allow me to make your decisions for you. And I decide . . . we’re doing this.”

Well, that backfired pretty thoroughly.

“Liiiiiiiiiiiiinncoooooooooooln,” I whine pitifully. “You do realize you took me to eat *Mexican* food literally sixty minutes ago. I just ate a bunch of rice and beans and cheese, and now you want to make me work out? There’s got to be some sort of rule about how much time to take between eating and running. If my burrito makes a surprise reappearance, I’ll be off Mexican food for life. *You’ll* probably be off Mexican food for life too, since you can

bet I'll do my utmost best to ensure I end up puking all over you," I threaten.

"So dramatic." He tsks at me. "First, you barely ate half of that burrito. You'll be fine. Second, no running today. I thought we'd switch things up a bit."

He took me from the restaurant back to the military base, stopping at his apartment along the way. My heart leapt for minute as I thought maybe we'd be hanging out at his place, but he just ran in to grab a bag and then continued on to the athletics center where we always train. I'm not sure where or when he got them, but at the entrance to the locker rooms Lincoln handed over a bag with snow pants, snow boots, and a long-sleeve athletic top, and then instructed me to get changed. The damn things fit me perfectly too, taking away a great excuse I could have used for bailing.

"While I appreciate that you're not gonna make me run in the snow, which I'm not fully convinced of yet, what exactly are we going to be doing then?" I ask, following him outside and back into the cold. It's not snowing, but that makes it even colder since the lack of cloud cover means there isn't any natural insulation to trap what little heat there does happen to be.

Lincoln continues leading me away from the building and over to a nearby athletic field, which remains covered in snow. When we get to the edge he stops and turns toward me, and like I child I blow a big gust of frosty breath into his face, giggling at his shocked expression.

"Watch it, short stack, or I'll change my plans and have you shovel this entire field," he growls playfully.

The place looks like a freaking football field, so I dutifully blow my next breath out toward the ground, watching it condense and swirl between us.

If I cared to analyze my behavior, I might observe that I am engaging in classic omega behavior. Testing boundaries against an alpha and potential mate. But since I absolutely, positively, very much, one hundred percent do *not* care to analyze anything, I don't.

"Okay, alpha, you've got me here. Now what are you going to do with me?" I grin with delight as a light blush paints his cheeks, looking very out of place.

He clears his throat awkwardly. "Two birds, one stone. I'm gonna teach you

some survival skills, and you'll get a workout in at the same time."

"Survival skills?" I look around again at the snowy field. "You gonna teach me self-defense in the snow?" I don't think it's a terrible idea. We've been working on some moves in between conditioning sessions, but the gym is a very controlled environment. Ignoring the fear that always crops up at the thought of being attacked anywhere, I think about how I might apply what I've learned in the snow.

"No self-defense today, though it's not a bad idea. Maybe I'll throw some of that in . . ." Lincoln muses, looking me up and down in a decidedly analytical way.

"So . . .?" I prompt.

"So I'm gonna teach you how to build a snow cave."

"A-a snow cave?" My face scrunches up; I'm not sure I heard him right. "You're going to teach me how to make a cave. In the snow. For *survival*???"

"Yep," Lincoln confirms.

"What kind of situation do you think I'm going to be in where I'll need to stay alive in the snow for long enough to warrant setting up shop in a cave?" I ask, bemused and also slightly alarmed at what the answer might be.

"Life is unpredictable." Lincoln shrugs. "Maybe you're skiing and there's an avalanche, or you get injured, or maybe you're hiking at high altitude and there's an unexpected snowstorm, or maybe your car breaks down in a rural area and it isn't safe to walk out to look for help," he ticks off, holding up his gloved fingers as he lists off each example.

"I feel like it might be easier if I agree to never ski, hike, or drive in rural areas ever again," I declare, laughing.

"You live in Colorado now, baby. No way will you be able to avoid all three—it's basically a requirement for residency."

"You're telling me there's some sort of snow cave exam I need to pass before I'm allowed to stay?" I tease, deciding not to call him out on the casual endearment he'd let slip. "Who enforces this rule?"

Lincoln's eyes dance with amusement, and I feel my stomach squirm at how hot he looks with a genuine smile on his face. *Not hot! He's family pack!* I reprimand myself mentally.

"The police do surprise inspections." He plays along. "You've been lucky so far to avoid one."

"So let me get this straight. Not only is your idea of a post-SAT reward a workout, but it's simultaneously a study session for *another* exam. I think you're in need of some lessons of your own, big guy." I stick out my tongue and place both hands on my hips. I'm not sure where this playful mood came from, but I'm going with it as long as it delays me having to work out.

Lincoln skirts his gaze down to my mouth before dragging it back to my eyes. He bends forward and down, erasing the distance between us as he leans in to my ear, his warm breath sending a shiver along my exposed neck. "I said I had a *distraction*, Espy. Trust me, there'll be no doubt when you've earned a reward."

My mouth drops open in shock at his low tone and suggestive words. This causes my lips to brush against the skin of his cheek, dragging gently against the rough stubble of his barely-there beard.

He pulls away before I can do more than gape, turning and walking further into the snow-covered field. With a racing heart and blanked-out mind, I follow.



Turns out, running might have been an easier workout.

Lincoln threatened me with having to shovel the entire field, but there's so much snow-moving involved in making a snow cave that I'm not sure I truly avoided that fate. We've been going at it for about an hour and a half now, and though it can't be more than thirty-five degrees out, my inner layers are soaked in sweat. Both of our jackets lie abandoned next to us, and I swear I can see a faint but constant shimmer of condensation from where the cold air

hits our warm bodies. Both of our scents are out in force, but Lincoln in particular is practically a walking cloud of salted honey and leathery goodness.

“Be careful with this part,” he warns, looming above me where I’m currently crouched on the ground trying to shape out the main body on my second snow cave. He started with showing me how to do it and then had me give it a try. My first attempt was nice, but uninhabitable. His words. I called it a hot mess—before amending it to a *cold* mess.

Haha, get it?

I text a picture to Micah, Mason, and Cabe on our group thread.

I haven’t had many chances to check in with them this afternoon, but it looks like the final afternoon session of the swim meet is just wrapping up. Both Mason and Leo have done well, or so I’ve been told. I’m sure I’ll get the play-by-play when they get back, though given it’s about a seven-hour drive, that’ll take some time.

I try to focus on the task at hand. I have absolutely zero doubt Lincoln will make me do this all over again if this second cave isn’t up to his standards. For as much shit as I gave him before starting, it’s honestly turned out to be a lot more fun than I anticipated. Not only am I learning a cool survival skill, but I’m also learning a lot about my brother’s packmate. Though I’ve spent a fair amount of time with Lincoln the past two months, something about working next to each other the way we are brings out his chatty side. That might be an exaggeration. It brings out his less monosyllabic side.

He’s shared a bit about his mom before, and I know she gave him some tips on how to interact with me when I first moved in with Leo. Like many packs, his family is dominated by boys. He has two younger brothers, one alpha and one beta, and both go to schools out of state. I learn he joined the special military track after his freshman year and hasn’t looked back since. Apparently, it pays for a good seventy-five percent of his educational costs. Maybe I should be considering something similar in case I’m unable to gain access to the college fund that was started when I was born. And, hey, if there really is some sort of snow cave-making exam, I’ll already have a leg up!

“Are you sure I can’t use a shovel this time?” I ask yet again. “I’m open to

compromising and never going anywhere without a shovel ever again if you'll let me use that red one for five minutes.”

They're sitting right there. He actually went and grabbed two shovels from the athletic shed earlier so he could show me both techniques before promptly declaring them off-limits.

“You're almost done,” he retorts, unbudging.

I can't see his face since I'm currently lying on my belly with my front half stuck inside a pile of snow, but I'd bet there was an eyeroll to accompany that statement.

He's not wrong. The hardest part is over: gathering all the snow to make the pile from, which I then have to excavate to make the “cave” part. He went over different terrains and different options with me when we started. When I asked why we couldn't have done this up in the foothills where there are numerous tree wells I could just dig down into to make a shelter, he gave me a mini-lecture on the importance of learning skills under the most challenging conditions first. He caught me muttering “you're a challenging condition” under my breath, and for that I got tossed in a snowbank.

Fair enough.

I'm scooping out snow and shaping the roof and walls with my hands, shuffling further in as I go like some sort of chubby, uncoordinated snake. It's a little bit unnerving having Lincoln just standing there on the outside, and I wonder for a minute if he's taking the opportunity to stare at my wriggling butt the way I did to him earlier when he was showing me how to make the cave. I blush at the thought and work even faster until all but my boots have made it in. When I'm satisfied with the depth, I flip onto my back and start widening the roof a bit more so I won't feel claustrophobic. And so Lincoln can fit in to check my work. I crunch up every once in a while to grab a mouthful of snow, holding it in my mouth until it turns to water and I can drink it down. Hydration!

Fifteen more minutes and I decide to call it.

“Done!” I announce, once again wriggling gracelessly out of the entrance and blinking as the sun hits my face. Once my eyes have adjusted, I see Lincoln is

holding out his hand to help me up, and I eagerly accept.

“Let’s see how you did,” he states, squatting down to peek inside and using his hand to test out the strength of the walls. He takes a few minutes to poke and prod then eventually gives me a nod. “Looks halfway decent. Not bad, short stack. Want to test it out?” he offers.

“I definitely didn’t make it big enough for you,” I protest when I see him starting to crawl in.

“Don’t worry—it’s pretty close. I’m just expanding it a bit,” he calls back.

Better him than me, I decide, and I wait until he makes it all the way in before dropping to my knees and shuffling after him. It’s a tight squeeze, but it’s apparent he made it quite a bit bigger in just a few minutes of work. Which is attractive, to say the least, seeing how effortlessly he can provide for me in this completely made up survival scenario. *Not attractive*, I scold myself, closing my eyes to squeeze the thought out of my head. *Comforting. It’s comforting that a member of my pack family is able to provide for me so efficiently.*

There’s no way to sit up in the cave, so once I make it all the way in on my belly, I twist to flip around onto my back. It’s a lot more intimate than I anticipated. Though Lincoln is barely out of breath, I’m still panting from my earlier exertion, and our combined body heat soon fills the small cavity.

“It’s . . . cozy,” I admit, impressed. “I could totally fall asleep in here.”

“My brothers and I used to sleep in these when we were younger,” Lincoln shares, tipping his head to the side until we’re looking at each other. “Used to drive my mom crazy. Sometimes we’d just hide in them until she came looking for us, then we’d burst out the top screaming when she came near. We’d get saddled with a bunch of chores, and my dads would have to listen to her rant about needing more kids so she could finally have some girls to balance out the testosterone she had to put up with.”

I smile. It’s a cute story, and even cuter to think about a mischievous, younger Lincoln getting up to no good. He’s so serious and strict, it’s hard to imagine him playing a prank like that. I shift my body until I’m resting on my side so it’s easier to look at him.

“Your poor mother,” I cluck, laughing.

“She has a few nieces, luckily,” he states as he too turns his body to mimic my position. “You did good, Espy,” he praises, glancing around the cave.

“Yeah? Think I’m ready for the big leagues? Should I join Search and Rescue instead of trying the whole college thing?” I tease.

“Don’t you dare,” he growls, and I freeze as I feel one of his arms come around my back and pull me into his chest. “These skills are to be used in emergency situations only, not so you can risk your life intentionally traipsing around the mountains in dangerous situations.”

“Okay,” I squeak out. Is . . . Could he possibly be *holding* me? I stay frozen as my mind goes a mile a minute, inadvertently breathing in a deep lungful of his heady scent.

Neither of us says anything after that, and I have no idea how much time passes as we just lie here. My hormones feel like they’ve gone haywire. *This* is why I told Mackenzie I wasn’t ready to look for a pack, and why I told her I wasn’t into Pack Collins. These are *not* feelings I should be having for someone in my family pack.

I suddenly come to a realization that turns my blood as cold as the walls of this cozy cave. What if everything my father did to me actually messed up my omega “sensors,” or whatever the hell it is that helps omegas navigate finding the right pack? He put me through some pretty extreme treatment, and with all the alpha hormones he brought around me, both synthetic and straight from the source, maybe I’m more damaged than I realize. He was trying to make me susceptible to alphas; trying to force my body into heat as an attempt to draw alphas to me to end my suffering. I grit my teeth in hatred at the memories that come spilling in. What if I’m having these reactions to the alphas around me because my body has somehow primed itself to react to any alpha that way? What if he actually succeeded, and I’ve finally snapped?

“Espy?” Lincoln’s voice is worried. He can’t see my face since it’s pressed against his chest, but even I can smell the way my scent has soured—a clear signal of distress. “What’s wrong, little one?”

“I—N-nothing,” I sputter, shoving against his hold as I try to extract myself.

It takes longer than I want, but I manage to make my way out of the cave without collapsing the entire thing. The outside air feels freezing after the warmth I just experienced, and I quickly move to grab my jacket and pull it on.

Lincoln is right behind me and squats down in front of me. He looks both cautious and concerned, but I'm not sure what I can say to explain how I'm feeling.

"Can you talk to me?" he asks softly.

I shake my head, feeling the beginnings of a panic attack setting in. Part of me wants to throw myself back into his arms, while the other part is horrified to realize that maybe I only *think* I want that because I've been brainwashed to feel this way.

It's the second part that wins out, and a new wave of dread crashes over me.

"Space! I need some space. Just for a minute," I sputter, turning away from him as my body begins to shake.

He looks pained, but Lincoln simply nods and takes a few steps back.

"Why don't you go wait for me by the entrance, and I'll run these shovels back and then meet you over there? Then we can get you home."

I nod. Home sounds good.

I don't really notice my feet carrying me back over to the field entrance, but somehow I get there and turn my back to the fence as I sink down the wall. I see Lincoln in the middle of the field, and it looks like he's erasing the cave village we made by whacking the various structures with a shovel. He's always so thoughtful, making sure we aren't leaving behind any obstacles for the athletes who'll soon be back to use this field.

I try to focus on breathing and emptying my mind. I've learned if I try too hard to fight the panic, it fights back. I draw my knees up to my chest and lean my chin against them as I follow Lincoln with my eyes, trying to count his steps as he eventually makes his way over to the far side of the field to return the shovels to the shed.

Just when I think I'm gaining some control I'm startled by the sound of approaching footsteps. My head jerks toward the sound, and to my horror I see a group of three unfamiliar men walking through the entrance to the field. They're less than ten feet away, and I can tell instantly at least two of them are alphas. My fight-flight-freeze instinct slams into me. It has me wanting to take off running in the opposite direction, but it also recognizes there's no way to outrun these strangers. A small whimper escapes my throat unbidden and immediately catches the group's attention.

They look surprised to see me here. A fair reaction.

"Hey," the one closest to me says, sounding unsure as he takes a step toward me. "Are you okay?"

No, no, no, noooooo! I silently freak out. I was already teetering on the edge, but their unexpected appearance and unfamiliar scents are pushing me all the way off.

All three begin moving in closer to me, and before I can get the words out to ask them to back off, a loud siren shrieks out all around us. Some part of my brain screams at me to keep my wits about me, but the more dominant part wins the battle, and I succumb to a blind panic.

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Lincoln

Fuck. FUCK! How did this afternoon become such a shitshow in zero seconds flat?

I'm not sure what happened to set Espy off, but one minute I have her lying in my arms, and the next she's freaking out. Pushing me away and asking for space. *Probably because you crossed a line, you dick*, the voice inside my head scolds. I know I shouldn't have gotten so familiar with her, but it's just so hard to resist wanting to be as close as possible to the tiny omega.

Something about her just captivates me. I desperately want to chalk it all up to my being her brother's packmate, and maybe even because I was the first on the scene to extract her from that Gods-damn house. Neither of those reasons ever feel quite right though. My protectiveness is starting to feel like a borderline obsession. I hate whenever she's not with me, especially when she's with Pack fucking Collins.

I smack my shovel extra hard against the roof of my demo snow cave, imagining it's something else beneath me.

Those children can't take care of her the way I can, my brain taunts. I know logically that two of them are older than Leo and Tanner, but they aren't *my* pack, and I don't know them. I don't trust them. I'll admit I was fairly impressed when Cabe called me up and asked to get involved. I tried to blow him off at first, but the bastard wouldn't back down. I suppose he gets a few points for that. I put him in touch with the reservist recruiter, and from the sound of things he's been taking it very seriously.

Tanner joined as well, and I can't decide if I'm pissed off or pleased the two have become friends recently.

I look over to confirm Espy is still by the entrance to the field and see she's sitting down and curled up into a sort of ball. I turn away, running a hand through my sweaty hair, knowing it will soon turn to ice in this weather. I pull my jacket on and grab the shovels, walking slowly over to the shed to give her more time alone and myself more time to think. Maybe it would help if I actually knew the endgame here. My brain just keeps going in endless circles, knowing emphatically she cannot be the right omega for me as my packmate's literal fucking *sister*. But at the same time, I'm unable to let go.

At least the escalating terrorism threat against omegas is providing me with a solid distraction, for better or worse.

Who am I kidding? It's definitely for the worse. There hasn't been another attack on a university campus since the incident in Utah, but all our intel on the different groups out there suggests they're becoming more organized, effective, and bold. The two kidnapped girls still haven't been located, and the whole community is understandably distraught. Not to mention terrified. I was horrified when I heard that the terrorist they managed to capture had recently enrolled as a student at the school there, using his access to campus to help identify and target the girls. I'm glad our own base is increasing our reserve numbers and implementing new protocols and patrols, but at the same time I worry there are too many vulnerabilities in the system. There are almost ten thousand students enrolled at River Valley. That's not including staff and support services . . .

I take a calming breath as I reach the shed. Espy will be able to sense if I'm all worked up when I get back to her, and I'm positive that isn't the kind of energy she needs from me right now.

After stepping into the shed to put back the shovels, I take another minute or so to organize a few of the tools. Right as I'm reaching to move a box back into a corner, the campus alert system blares out, making me jump and almost hit my head.

I forgot they were testing the system today—part of the increased safety measures the school is taking in conjunction with the base. Despite the

booming voice loudly repeating over and over again that this is a test, I worry the alert will put Espy on edge. I hurry out of the shed, only to freeze when I realize she's no longer alone.

All I can see is that she's on the ground with three men surrounding her, one of whom seems to be bending down over her. It's as I'm sprinting to reach her that my brain takes in further details and I realize I know these guys. They're all in my unit, people I trust. I send up a thank-you to the powers that be that the danger is only mental, not physical, but I still cuss myself out for being so far away from her in the first place.

I reach Espy quickly, not sparing my friends a word until I have her in my arms. Her small legs automatically latch around my waist with a fierceness that belies her fear, and she burrows her face into my chest as I band one arm across her back and the other around her waist. She's shaking and whimpering, and I can't help but let out a growl in response.

When I'm satisfied she's secure, I look up to meet my friends' eyes. To say they're shocked is an understatement. I suppose it's not every day they see me cradling a terrified omega in my arms.

It's clear to me from their body language what happened. They probably saw her when they came in and wanted to make sure she was okay. Espy was giving out tons of stress pheromones, so it would be totally normal for them to check on her. I'm not angry with them, but I also don't have the time to explain as I need to get Espy home ASAP.

"Sorry, guys. This is my packmate's sister. From Wyoming," I state. Though they don't have all the details of the rescue mission, they know enough to understand the gist of what's happening, I'm sure. "We need some space right now. I'll hit you up later."

They nod, faces grim and apologetic.

I don't waste any more time, turning and carrying Espy away from the base and back through campus. My room is closer, but I feel like it's best to get her in her own space right now, so I head to Leo and Tanner's place. She eventually stops shaking once the sirens switch off and the normal sounds of the campus return. She's like a human barnacle in this position. A very cute barnacle, and one I have zero interest in detaching myself from.

I force away any thoughts of enjoying the moment and focus instead on reassuring her she's safe and all the danger her brain is signaling she's in is actually a false alarm. I'm not sure what words I use or if she even hears them, but it's all I can think to do until I can get her inside.

"It's okay, little one. You're okay," I murmur. "I swore to myself the first time I saw you that I wouldn't let any more harm come to you. I promise you're safe."

Soon I have her in the dorm, on the couch, and swaddled in blankets. My natural instinct is to help bundle her into her nest, but Espy doesn't have one. Knowing the reason behind that makes me want to commit murder, so instead I focus on bringing her water and some chocolate, and I even go so far as to strip off the sweater underneath my jacket to tuck against her body. I hope my scent somehow conveys how willing I am to go to war for her, and that it brings her some comfort.

Luckily, it doesn't take her long to come back to me.

She's embarrassed, which I understand but also will not allow. It takes me a while to bully her into promising not to lock me out of the dorm, but once I do I dart out to pick up the stuff we left in the locker rooms and also grab some dinner. Leo and Tanner are still on their way back, the former on the team bus and the latter carpooling with a bunch of fellow friends who went down for the big meet. I stick around, not wanting to leave Espy alone as much for her benefit as my own. I respect that she doesn't want to talk about what happened, so instead we start a movie marathon and eat junk food. I even let her make a new caricature of me—something I secretly cherish but will never, ever admit to.

If we block out all the emotional trauma, the day ends up being pretty perfect.



I'm woken up by the sound of a key in the lock, and I blink myself awake to see Leo and Tanner tiptoeing through the door. I glance at the clock in the kitchenette and see it's past 1 a.m. Neither of them had to drive, so I suspect

they aren't as exhausted as I feel after my unintended nap.

I straighten up and stretch, careful not to dislodge the sleeping omega plastered against my side in her pile of blankets. She passed out sometime before 11:30 p.m., and I must have dozed off sometime after that. Making eye contact, I tip my head, giving my packmates a heads-up so they won't wake her up. Leo nods and grabs a drink from the fridge before coming to sit on the couch, while Tanner disappears into his room.

"She okay?" Leo whispers as he looks her over.

I gave him a brief heads-up that Espy had a panic attack earlier, and I know she texted him as well. Currently, only her face is visible outside the blankets, and for all intents and purposes she appears calm and untroubled.

I nod. "All good."

I reach out and snag the beer from his hand, taking a long sip. Leo's only been twenty-one for about a week and a half now, but I already love that I no longer have to buy beer for him and Tanner. I'd only do it on occasion, not wanting to jeopardize my standing in the military, but it'll be nice not to have the little shits bugging me anymore.

"*Ladrón*," he scolds, swiping it back.

"Man, I'm wired," Tanner complains as he reemerges from his room.

"Energy drinks or sour candy?" I ask, knowing his tendencies.

"Both." He grins, shoving his hands into his hoodie and pulling out a crumpled packet of some sort of sugar-coated gummy monstrosity. "Care to get on my level?" Still grinning, he shakes the bag in front of me in clear invitation.

I roll my eyes.

I was willing to indulge in junk food with Espy earlier, but I'm not willing to throw off my diet even further with these lab-grown creepy crawlers. Alpha metabolism aside, I still have a figure to maintain.

"Seee aswweep?" Tanner mumbles around a mouthful of candy, walking over to look down at Espy.

“Not anymore,” she responds, her voice sleepy.

I manage to keep the pout off my face as she pushes up into a sitting position, shedding the blankets as she lets out a massive yawn. It was probably poor form to have her sleeping on me anyway, but my side feels noticeably colder. All traces of her earlier panic attack are gone as she suddenly launches into the air and grabs onto Tanner. I watch as they get into a play fight over the sour gummy candies, laughing as she manages to grab a fistful before dancing away, out of reach.

I’m so distracted watching their antics that I don’t immediately notice when Leo’s face turns serious. He’s staring into his beer bottle as if it has all the answers to the universe, and when Espy leaves to use the restroom he jumps in.

“So, guys, can we talk?”

I feel immediately guilty and on edge. Did he pick up on my conflicted feelings about his sister, did I cross a line by having her lying on me, and is finally calling me out? Of course, he probably wouldn’t choose this moment to do so—not when Espy will be back any minute.

I keep my face neutral as I nod, turning to face him fully as Tanner does the same. “What’s up, man?”

“Okay, right. So, yeah.” He wipes his hands on his pants, and I realize how nervous he is. “I found out today Mackenzie officially rejected that pack that was courting her. Said it wasn’t a good fit. She’s open to considering new packs again, and I want us to put in an official request to court her.”

My brain doesn’t seem to be processing his words at first. *Mackenzie? He wants us to court Mackenzie?*

“Wow.” Tanner lets out a whistle. “That’s some serious shit.”

He’s fucking got that right.

I stay silent as my mind continues to process what my packmate just asked. It’s not like I don’t know Leo has a crush on her. Hell, practically everyone knows; it’s got to be one of the worst-kept secrets in River Valley’s pack community. The guy can’t help but look at her with puppy-dog eyes any time

they're in the same vicinity. In fact, if I'm honest, Mackenzie is probably the main reason why our pack hasn't yet decided to get serious about finding an omega of our own. We only really solidified as a pack over the summer after Leo and Tanner's freshmen year, and then Leo met Mackenzie his first semester as a sophomore. Even being the eldest, I never felt any immediate need to find a mate. I just figured it would happen naturally when we were all ready, as a pack.

"It is serious," Leo agrees, his nerves seemingly fading away in favor of growing determination. "You guys know how I feel about her. You both get along with her great as well, and she and Espy are practically becoming best friends. She's smart, kind, caring, and beautiful. She's perfect for us. Something about her just fits—I can feel it. I *have* felt it. It always seemed wrong that she agreed to be courted by Pack Sanders when she's supposed to be *ours*. It just makes sense that they didn't work out. And her and Espy bonding these past two months just proves that even more. I know you're both alphas and I'm just a beta, but my instincts here aren't wrong. They can't be. The way I feel when I'm around her . . ."

I wonder if it's the same as the way I feel around your sister, I think wryly.

I still haven't said anything, and I'm not sure I can. I expected to have this conversation at the start of the semester, knowing many omegas start attending the pack-matching socials in their sophomore year. But then Mackenzie met that pack over the summer, and they were courting by the time school started. I know Leo was devastated, but I was kind of relieved. Courting an omega would mean a lot of changes, including needing to move into pack housing. I knew I'd want to make those changes eventually, but having an excuse to put it off was a relief.

Now, Leo unexpectedly asking us to court Mackenzie when my head is all messed up over his Gods-damn sister has me frozen.

"Come on, man. You being a beta doesn't mean you have less of a voice in this pack—you know that," Tanner asserts.

"I know." He breathes out shakily. "But I also know how powerful biology is, and there's a special bond with alphas and omegas. But it's *because* of biology, because of how powerfully I feel drawn to her, that I just know she's

right for us. We're a pack, and if I feel this way, then I know you both will as well once you spend more time with her and start seeing her as a potential mate. I've spent a ton more time with her than you guys have. A spark will click, I'm sure of it!"

I look toward Tanner, attempting to gauge where he's at on this subject. We've always teased Leo about his crush but never actually spoken about our own feelings. Could he have been feeling a pull all this time too and just never said anything?

"I'm not opposed to the idea . . ." he finally states, a thoughtful look on his face.

"Not opposed to what?" Espy asks, walking back into the dorm. Her eyes look tired, and some of her hair is wet, like she just washed her face. It's fresh and real and beautiful. I long to go back to snuggling with her on the couch like I was before Leo got home and laid such a life-changing request at our feet.

No one answers her right away, leading to some awkwardness as the silence hangs between us all.

Tanner finally steps up. "We were just talking about Mackenzie," he explains, smiling at her.

"Oh, yeah?" Espy asks, looking a bit confused. "What about her?"

"Leo here was just telling us she rejected that pack she was dating. Didn't realize things weren't going well there," he continues.

This seems to make Espy relax, and she moves through the room and over to her little cot area in the corner. "Yeah, she wasn't too sure about them, and she told me they mutually ended the courtship a few days ago. Makes sense that those things don't always work out, right? I mean, bonding is such a huge commitment."

While I desperately wish her presence would mean we can put this conversation on hold, Leo's gaze is fixed on my face. Waiting for my answer.

"I . . . I don't know, man," I eventually say, sighing as I lean back against the couch. I could really use something stronger than a beer right about now.

“What don’t you know?” Leo presses, frowning.

“Do you not like her?” Tanner asks. It’s clear there’s no judgment in his voice, only true curiosity.

“It’s not that,” I reply. And it isn’t. Mackenzie is really sweet. The times we’ve hung out have been easy and decently fun, and naturally I love how Leo lights up around her. I like her with him, and as my packmate, my family, I want that for him.

I’ve just never wanted that for *me*.

“So what is it?” Leo challenges, his voice harder.

“I just haven’t really thought about it,” I defend, a feeling of dread starting to pulse in my chest.

“You’ve known that I like her!” he accuses. “I’ve been into her for over a year now! I know we never talked about it outright, but I thought we were on the same page about approaching her when the school year started. You *had* to have thought about it! Back me up, man.” He turns to Tanner angrily.

Tanner, for his part, looks deeply uncomfortable. “I mean . . . we never actually said the words,” he hedges.

“Of course we didn’t say the words!” Leo cuts in. “We’re guys! We don’t talk about our feelings.”

“What’s happening?” Espy asks, cautiously walking over and looking between the three of us. Having this conversation in front of her is just making my confused emotions worse.

“Dickhead over there is being a selfish jackass, that’s what.” Leo scowls at me.

“Come on, man,” Tanner interjects. “This is an important conversation. We’re each entitled to our feelings, and it’s important to be honest.”

“This is about Mackenzie?” Espy asks again, her brow furrowing adorably before things seem to click. “Oh. You want to court her?”

“Of course I want to court her! How is this a surprise to anyone?” he bites out

in clear frustration.

“It’s not,” she murmurs quietly before continuing more loudly. “It makes complete sense. You’re not very subtle with your crush.” Her voice is teasing, but it sounds off to my ears. “I just hadn’t thought about you guys courting an omega of your own, but of course you would. Mackenzie is great.”

It’s past two in the morning, and I decide I am *done* with this conversation. I can’t make sense of what I’m feeling or why. My head is pounding, and I know I’m in no condition to be having this discussion right now. Nothing wrong with a strategic retreat.

“Can we pick this up tomorrow? I think we all need to sleep on the idea,” I propose.

Tanner nods, a tight smile on his face, but Leo doesn’t say a word. His body is tense, his jaw clenched as he stares at the ground in clear frustration. And sadness.

It feels wrong to leave, but I know it’d be worse to stay right now. I grab my stuff, say my goodbyes, and then head out. The cold, dark walk back to my room reflects the uncertainty swirling in my head.

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Esperanza

Checking the time on my phone, I sigh. I'm about twenty minutes early to my appointment with Dr. Morgan, and it's too cold out to just sit outside and kill time like I normally would. Looking around, I spot the campus coffee shop and decide to grab a tea as an excuse to be indoors.

I'm usually much better at timing out my walk over to the health services building, but today I just had to get out of the dorm room. Things have been . . . *off*, the past few weeks. First there was that meltdown I had with Lincoln out in the field, and then the painfully awkward conversation I walked in on between my brother and his packmates. Things have just been so tense. Leo is mad at Lincoln for being reluctant to court Mackenzie, and Leo and Tanner are fighting because Leo wants him to take his side in the argument, but Tanner is apparently trying to stay neutral. Lincoln has been avoiding them both, or so I gather. *I don't* have any real reason to be mad, and yet the whole thing has put me into quite the funk.

It's ridiculous for me to feel possessive over Lincoln, but I do. It hurts to think of him courting Mackenzie, and then at the same time it makes me happy to think of my brother courting her. It's like a full-on split personality. Then I get irrationally annoyed with my brother for creating conflict, anxious about anything changing in the dynamic I have with his pack, and then resentful that I can't even talk to Mackenzie about all of this.

I mean, I suppose I could, but that feels like betraying their trust. None of them have asked me not to say anything, but honestly, that might just be

because they've forgotten about me in the midst of their own drama. I've thought about mentioning everything to Micah or Mason or Cabe, but that feels weird too. There's this small part of me that wonders whether they might also want to court Mackenzie if they knew she was available. Ignoring the myriad of conflicting feelings that thought stirs up in me, I just know Leo would hate me if I inadvertently added to his competition.

I don't actually know what decision Leo, Lincoln, and Tanner made, or if they came to an agreement at all. It's driving me crazy trying to listen in on their conversations or dropping hints around Mackenzie to try to surreptitiously see if they've approached her.

Thank goodness I have therapy today.

Everything has just felt so unsteady recently. I thought I was getting a handle on things, setting myself up to start school next semester, getting back into art, working on my mental health, making friends . . . But lately it just feels like I'm walking on shaky ground, and the effort of figuring out the safest path is leaving me drained.

"Ellie!"

I look up at the barista holding my tea. Ellie is actually pretty close to my name, so I smile as I move forward to grab my drink. Leo and I used to make a game of it when we were younger. It was actually something we did with our father, back before he got too lost in his grief. My dad would give us each some money and we'd go up to the counter one at a time to place our order, each using our full names. We'd each get a point if both our names were wrong, but we'd get two points if our name was the only one incorrect. I was always "better" at the game, so to speak, and it used to make Leo so mad. He'd tell me I was cheating because my name is longer than his.

Sitting down with my tea, I unzip my bag to grab the small journal Dr. Morgan gave me to use. My assignment weeks ago was to start writing down positive memories from my childhood. It's something she's trying out with me, a way to redirect my thoughts if I find my mind wandering to the past. I'll admit I've been stubbornly avoiding doing it, so I feel pretty pleased to have something to record in here at the last minute.

Dr. Morgan has lots of little mantras and assignments for me.

She's told me more than once that I'm in no way, shape, or form a guinea pig, but it's hard not to feel like some sort of experiment when I know she's reporting back to my government case managers. It's not like she's breaking my confidence or sharing personal details from our sessions, but because of what my father was trying to accomplish with his evil brainwashing scheme, there are a lot of people interested in how my treatment is going.

I can't exactly begrudge them that. I suspect they're purposely keeping me in the dark about a lot of their investigation, but I know I'm not the only omega who's experienced shit like what I went through. I *want* to be helpful and unselfish and all that. It's just sometimes my mood gets the better of me and I find myself wallowing in self-pity, wishing some other girl with some other therapist had figured everything out already.

The wait for my tea and writing my little journal entry eat up a good amount of time, so soon I bundle up and head back to the health services building. I'm on autopilot up the stairs and through the hallways, and before I know it, I'm once again settling in in Dr. Morgan's small office. It's cozy. Decked out with a clashing mixture of pastel hues and various pieces of East Asian art, and smelling of jasmine. The space is now deeply familiar and comforting to me.

When I first moved in with Leo I saw Dr. Morgan every other day, but we slowly pulled back to three and then two times a week. As always, I'm sitting across from her in my favorite egg-shaped chair, the wooden side table holding tissues and a bejeweled elephant in easy reach.

"Hello, Esperanza," she greets in her typical soothing tone.

"Hey, Doc." I smile, pulling up my feet to tuck them underneath me. I always prefer to sit crisscross than to have my feet dangling in the air.

We go through the same quick routine at the start of every session—how I'm feeling, sleeping, and eating, then some baseline questions for anxiety and depression, etc. I answer on autopilot, watching as she marks little boxes in her session notes.

Now for the main event.

"So, earlier this week we talked about how you've been experiencing

increased anxiety and some tension with your brother. How has that been going?”

I take a deep breath in, hold it, and then blow it out. I’m naturally an empathetic person and don’t mind talking about my feelings, but given everything that happened, it can be painful to dredge up certain things. Hence the easy-access tissues. Dr. Morgan used the metaphor of a deep tissue massage in one of our first sessions, explaining it can hurt to dig into sore or injured muscles and that the pain might actually hurt more after the massage than before getting one. But it’s a healing pain, and in a few days the discomfort will fade, leaving healthier, more relaxed muscles in its wake. Time to deep tissue massage my emotional psyche.

“There haven’t been any big changes,” I begin.

I’ve been pretty open with Dr. Morgan about the whole situation with my brother and Mackenzie, though admittedly I’m too scared to confess my inappropriate feelings toward Lincoln, a.k.a. my *crush*. It just feels too stupid and too personal, a deep shame I can’t help but hide away. It doesn’t *matter* that I’m feeling this way; it’s just a small and inconsequential piece of the bigger picture. Granted, it’s a broken piece. But there are so many other more important, more broken pieces. I don’t feel up to offering this one up for inspection and diagnosis just yet.

I already decided that distracting my perceptive therapist would be the best course of action, so I reach forward to grab out my notebook, intent on redirecting us to the relatively safer ground of my childhood. *Ha!*

“So I actually wrote down one of my nice memories from—”

“Esperanza.” Dr. Morgan cuts me off, kind but firm. Her eyes seem to peer through me. “I think we should explore your current situation a bit more. Can we do that?”

“Sure,” I acquiesce, setting down my notebook and picking up my tea instead.

“You were telling me about a disagreement your brother had with his packmates. Lincoln and Tanner?” she confirms, glancing back at her notes. “Your brother wants to court a certain omega, a friend of yours, but Lincoln

and Tanner aren't on the same page."

"Well, Tanner seems to be okay with courting her," I correct. Though, honestly, I'm not entirely sure how he actually feels about Mackenzie.

"And so they're fighting? Have they come to a decision about whether or not they'll be putting in a courting bid?"

I shrug. "I'm not sure. It doesn't seem like it."

Dr. Morgan nods, studying me.

"And how do you think they're handling this conflict?"

Again, I shrug.

"You know your brother. And you know his two packmates. One you live with, the other you're around often, including for the training sessions he does with you. You've also come to know the omega your brother is interested in. You've seen them all together even, on multiple occasions. What do you think of their compatibility?"

At this I look away, not wanting her to see any of the secrets swimming in my eyes.

"I dunno. I like Mackenzie, and the idea of her becoming family sounds great," I offer.

"But . . .?" Dr. Morgan prompts.

"But . . ." I hesitate, searching for a way to explain my feelings without mentioning Lincoln. "This is my first time being around a pack, and other than when I hang out with Micah, Mason, and Cabe, they're the *only* pack I'm ever around. I'm still figuring out how all this works—the whole omega-alpha pack dynamic. There's so much I don't understand about myself. About my own instincts, and what's *normal* and *expected*. Seeing all of that from a pack's point of view is interesting, but it's also skewed. I just dropped into their lives a few months ago, but they've been a pack for years, so I don't have all the history there, I don't understand all the different relationships between them. Hell, the last time I saw my brother before moving here, he was eighteen and NOT a member of a pack. I'm not even sure if that was

something he thought about before coming to college. So everything, including him, feels new to me.”

Silence falls between us after my impromptu monologue, and I wonder for a moment if I’ve given too much away. Dr. Morgan makes a few notes before looking at me thoughtfully.

“Let’s talk more about your brother,” she suggests.

That feels like relatively safe territory, so I nod. “What about him?”

“You’ve been coming to see me for about two months now, the same amount of time since you were liberated from your father’s house and came to live here.” She pauses. “During our sessions, I’ve supported you in not digging into your relationship with your brother. Instead we’ve been focusing on building up your coping techniques and processing your trauma in a safe way. But now I’m going to encourage you to dig in a little bit.”

I gulp. Suddenly, this topic doesn’t feel so safe.

“You just said yourself you hadn’t seen your brother since he was eighteen. He left home and came here, to college. And he never went back home? He never took any time to go back and check on his younger sister, even knowing you were living with a man who was, at best, inattentive? Why do you think that is?” she asks.

Despite her matter-of-fact tone, this feels like an ambush. My chest grows tight.

“He . . . he thought he was texting with me a few times. He didn’t know my father took my phone away. He didn’t know what was happening,” I defend weakly.

“He didn’t know what was happening,” she repeats back, drawing out each word. “Two years without a phone call. Without ever coming home for a holiday, or for the summer break. Most college freshmen spend their school breaks with their families. What did he do during this time?”

I close my eyes, not wanting to think about it. I’d be lying if I said I never wondered these exact things during the twenty-four months I was trapped by my father. Wondered where he was; why he’d abandoned me. If he was even

okay. I've always tried my best to shut down those thoughts, especially since coming to live with Leo. It doesn't seem productive to dwell on something so painful, especially when I've finally been thrown a lifeline.

When I don't answer, Dr. Morgan presses on. "Thanksgiving is next week. Students get the full week off school. What are Emilio's plans? Have you discussed it?"

"We're going to go to Tanner's," I manage to choke out, fighting against the growing ball of emotion lodged in my throat. "At least for a few days."

Dr. Morgan leans forward to hand me a tissue, which I gratefully accept. "Is that what he did last year?" she asks.

I nod, remembering them talking about it when we were discussing plans for this year.

"And what did you do last year for Thanksgiving?"

At first, I'm unable to muster a response. What started as a chicken egg-sized ball of emotion now feels like it came from an ostrich, and I'm not surprised to feel tears begin pouring down my face. Given that she just handed me a tissue, I guess Dr. Morgan was expecting this reaction.

"I don't want to talk about it," I finally manage to whisper. My salty tears are starting to mix with the snot from my nose, forcing me to grab another tissue. Then four more.

"That's okay, Esperanza. You don't have to talk about it right now," she assures me kindly.

A full three minutes pass in silence. Me crying, Dr. Morgan staring sympathetically, the sparkly elephant figurine just hanging out and doing its thing. Oh, the secrets it could tell . . .

Two additional tissues and several gulps of tea later, I feel a bit more under control. To her credit, Dr. Morgan sits there patiently, not even taking notes, thank goodness. The thought of being literally evaluated when I'm most vulnerable makes me want to run and hide.

"I can see that this is a very sensitive subject for you. That's understandable,

and we don't have to rip open the wound right here, right now."

I breathe out a sigh of relief and nod my head in thanks.

"*But* I do want to assign some homework for you over the next week. We don't have any meetings scheduled until after the holiday, so that should give you some time to really explore your emotions here. If I had to guess, I'd say seeing your brother put so much effort into pursuing a woman, another omega, is tapping into feelings of resentment and abandonment you may be holding onto. He's fighting with his packmates, that's how important she is to him. It's not healthy to hold things like that inside of us, and trust me when I say, they always find a way of coming out eventually. I hope exploring and healing your relationship with your brother is another goal we can add to our sessions moving forward. How does that sound to you?"

"Okay." I nod. I can feel a headache coming on, and at this point I want nothing more than to crawl onto my cot and sleep. Dr. Morgan seems to read that on my face and closes her notebook before reaching over to gently squeeze my hand.

"That's probably enough for today, huh?"

De verdad.

As I make my way out of her office, I find it hard to shake off the weight of what I'm now feeling. Going in I was wary of revealing my crush on Lincoln, but leaving I wonder if that would've been a preferable way to go. It's easier to love my brother unconditionally than it is to acknowledge his flaws, just as it's easier for me to block out all the things my father forced on me than it is to remember the truth.

Five minutes ago I was ready to run back to Leo's dorm and hide, but with everything swirling in my head, I abruptly change directions.

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Micah

“Come on, Micah, move your ass!” Cabe calls out to me from the front seat of his car, honking the horn to punctuate his annoyance.

I flip him off like the mature nineteen-year-old that I am. This leads to more honking, more cursing, and Mason eventually getting fed up and grabbing my bags off the living room floor and shoving them in the back of Cabe’s Subaru. I follow sullenly behind.

“Stop bickering,” he scolds. “We have two and half hours in this car, and I’m not gonna play referee.” He gives me such a classic older brother look that I almost laugh.

We’re all in a bad mood today, and I know I’ve been dragging my feet. It’s Sunday, and normally we would have left Friday evening to go home and spend the week of Thanksgiving with our families while school’s on break. This year, though, leaving campus feels like a punishment. The only thing propelling my body forward and into the back seat of the car is knowing I’ll get to feed my habit once more before we go.

“Did you let her know we’re on our way?” Cabe asks, glancing at me through the rearview mirror as he shifts into reverse and starts heading toward main campus.

I nod, bouncing my hands against my legs in an erratic rhythm. It’s a poor interpretation of the tune stuck in my head, but it does the trick of releasing some of my nervous energy. I had to rush to make sure my surprise would be

ready by the time we left. I wanted it to be perfect.

About a week ago, Espy finished all the illustrations for the main comic we've been working on, and as a surprise I've been working with a buddy of mine to digitize, format, and then print it out. I'm so freaking excited to give it to her. It looks amazing, and I'd be lying if I didn't admit that seeing her name printed next to mine on the cover fills me with a smug sense of possessiveness. It's honestly even more exciting than having a finished comic finally under my belt. Even though it's just a few proof copies, it feels permanent. Tangible. Official, in a way that only *I* have with her. We're artistic collaborators and hopefully future business partners. My pack may not be courting her—*yet*—but we are linked.

For now, that'll have to be enough.

All three of us—Mason, Cabe, and I—nearly had a collective heart attack a few weeks ago when she mentioned her friend Mackenzie had suggested she go to the speed-dating event the Pack Council and O-Club are putting on before finals. It didn't seem like she was all that interested in going, which at first was a relief. But, as Cabe pointed out to us after she went home, it also didn't seem like she brought it up as a way of dropping a hint, the way another omega might have done if they were interested in *us* stepping up to court her. Didn't feel great looking at it that way.

Even if she isn't going to the event, part of me itches to storm in there and throw copies of our comic at each and every alpha. Stake my pack's claim and all that.

It's weird, these feelings of possession that keep bubbling up in me when it comes to Espy. And I don't even have alpha instincts to blame. Almost makes me feel bad for what Mason and Cabe are clearly going through. We've been spending more and more time with her, especially now her college entrance exam is over. From what I gather, her brother's pack had a little spat and she's been especially eager to get out of their dorm. Every hour we spend together is another layer deeper that she imprints on my heart. And on *other* things.

Her smell is all over our house now, and our rooms aren't soundproofed enough for me to be unaware of the effect this is having on my packmates.

An “awakening of biological instincts,” as Mason so awkwardly put it the other day. Cabe told him he needed to work on his dirty talk, and I’ve never seen my brother’s face go so red.

I’m definitely not immune to all the pheromones bouncing around either. I find my mind wandering to the little fantasy I indulged in this morning, trying to steal a few more minutes in my warm bed. Espy, in scandalous cosplay lingerie from my favorite series, straddling me in bed, her plump breasts nearly spilling out of her bra as my hand in her hair tugs her head back, exposing her smooth neck and her heaving chest. Her hips grinding frantically against my aching cock and causing a heated moan to escape her lips.

I let the memory distract me from my nervousness.

“Which building is it again?” Cabe asks.

“I think it’s that one over there.” Mason points, squinting at the cluster of higher-end dorms we’ve driven to.

Years ago, the university kept all omegas in a single building, thinking it would be easiest to secure their safety that way. Apparently, a few attempted assaults later and they realized that clustering them essentially provided a map for people with bad intentions. Now omegas’re mixed in randomly with beta, and the occasional alpha, students.

“I’ll call her, let her know we’re here,” Mason offers, pulling out his phone eagerly.

I’m not sure what the full story is, but a few days ago Espy changed her plans to spend Thanksgiving with her brother’s pack, and now she’s heading home with Mackenzie instead. She gave us some explanation about needing a break from Leo and Tanner after spending two months jammed into a corner of their dorm room. I’ve seen her little cot setup, so I can’t say I blame her for that. Just seems like there might be more going on given the fight she mentioned earlier.

Cabe got a little agitated at the thought of the two omegas not having any alphas around on their trip back to Mackenzie’s family’s place. He’s become a lot more safety-conscious lately with all his training for the reserve unit

he's volunteering for. Espy managed to placate him by explaining Mackenzie's family live just thirty minutes away, and that her car has top-of-the-line safety measures. Pretty sure he bought some mace to give her anyway, and . . . yep!

Espy comes bouncing out of the building, and before either Mason or I can get to her, Cabe's out of the car and handing over what looks like several canisters of pepper spray. I watch Mason walk over to join them, reaching out a hand to run along her braid. It's sweet, and for a minute I think about trying to convince her to ditch Mackenzie and come home with us for the holiday instead.

Good things come to those who wait. My dad used to love saying that to me when I was growing up. I *might* have been more hyperactive than your average kid, but what is hyperactivity other than absolute brilliance shining through? Around eight I started countering, telling him that I bet good things also came to those who were enthusiastic enough to go out and get them. Jury's still out as far as I'm concerned, but for now I'll play it his way.

"Hey, Micah." Espy greets me with a smile as I walk over to join the trio. She's dressed a bit nicer today, I notice. Fitted jeans and a sort of mint-green cardigan I can see peeking out of her open jacket. She's been wearing nicer and nicer clothes this past month, and I know it's because Mackenzie and her friends have made it their mission to fill out her wardrobe after she arrived here with nothing of her own. I'm not really a "clothes guy" and I couldn't care less about how she dresses, but I wonder suddenly if maybe that's something *she* cares about.

A little birdie named Leo let slip that her birthday is coming up in early December, so maybe I'll ask my sisters to take me shopping to pick out something for Espy when I'm home.

"Hey." I smile back at her, leaning forward to steal a small hug.

"When you told me you had something to give me before you left, I didn't think you meant pepper spray," she jokes, holding the package to her chest and laughing.

"You know how to use it?" Cabe asks.

“Is there a wrong way to spray an aerosol can?” she sasses, and I snicker.

Cabe pouts down at her. “They trained us with these for a good twenty minutes. At least let me give you the two-minute version.”

Espy nods, and I wait as she dutifully watches him show her the proper hand and finger placement, body positioning, and the dos and don’ts of how to escape after using it. When she successfully parrots the techniques back to him, I decide it’s time for my gift.

“As important as the pepper spray is, I actually dragged you out for a different reason. Here,” I say, handing over the thin box I wrapped the comic in.

I hold my breath as she opens it, my eyes glued to her face so I can catch her reaction.

“Oh my goodness!” she squeals, looking up at me briefly before turning back to the book in her hands. “When did you put this all together?”

“This past week,” I explain. “I wanted to surprise you with it. How’d I do?”

“It’s amazing,” she coos, flipping through the pages. “This is so exciting for you, Micah. Are you gonna sell it?”

“Don’t you mean exciting for *us*?” I counter, gently shutting the book and pointing to where both our names appear on the cover.

“Oh,” she breathes out, looking genuinely stunned. “You put my name on it?”

“Espy, you did all the illustrations,” Mason reminds her. “Of course your name is on it.”

“In fact,” Cabe jumps in, “you did by far the hardest part. If I were you, I’d hire a lawyer to make sure you lock down seventy percent of the royalties. I’ll ask my brother to draw something up while we’re home.”

“Smart-ass.” I shove him, rolling my eyes. Truth is, I’d be more than happy with that little arrangement. Having a legally agreed partnership? Dream come true.

“I don’t want money,” she giggles, turning back to the book. “This is just so cool. Thank you so much for showing it to me.”

I put my hands up as she tries to hand it back, shaking my head. “Nuh-uh. That copy’s all yours, Esps. Your job is to show it off this week, start doing some guerilla marketing. Are any of Mackenzie’s relatives in the publishing business?”

“I guess I’ll find out,” she replies, looking momentarily sad before the expression passes. “Are you guys going to be okay with driving in the snow?”

It snowed a bit last night, but nothing Cabe’s car can’t handle.

“We’ve got it, babe,” Cabe asserts, and I scan Espy’s face to see what her reaction is to the little endearment he let slip. That might be a bit of a blush I see, but it could also be the cold.

A few more seconds of pleasantries and we collectively run out of excuses to prolong this visit. I linger when I hug her goodbye, making sure to steal a heavy hit of her sweet rose scent before pulling away. When I watch Mason take his turn, I swear he scent-marks her neck. *Sneaky bastard*. The mood in the car is definitely glum as we pile back in and pull away.

Once we’re off campus and on the main road, I take out my phone, lean forward, and give a sad look at the camera as I snap a selfie of our pack. My dad may not approve, but I’m pretty sure patience coupled with persistence is all I’m capable of at this point.

Having no fun without you, I type, attaching the photo and sending it to Espy.

She sends back a hugging emoji, and I sigh and put my phone away.

This week is gonna be torture.



“Hey, Mom!” I call out as Mason and I walk into our parents’ home several hours later. As much as I can’t help but to be a melodramatic, lovesick fool, there’s no denying it *is* nice to be home.

“What am I, chopped liver?” my dad asks, walking into the entranceway to hug us and help with our bags.

“He’s just after Mom’s cooking,” Sabrina, one of my sixteen-year-old sisters, sasses.

“Yeah, the rest of us may as well be salted slug slime,” Sasha, Sabrina’s twin, adds.

“Is someone learning alliteration in school?” I tease, hugging them both quickly before making a dash for the kitchen. They aren’t wrong. I *am* a sucker for my mom’s cooking.

We spend time catching up and making plans for the week. My older sister won’t be joining us until Wednesday. As she likes to remind us, she’s a real adult with a real job. We’re doing the whole Thanksgiving shebang with my grandparents, and a few aunts, uncles, and cousins are coming in this year for the holiday. I sulk a bit when I learn I’ll have to bunk with Mason since my room is being commandeered for guests, but at least it isn’t as bad as Cabe’s family. With six parents and five siblings, space is always at a premium in his house. Once you add in his older brothers’ packmates, things become outright pandemonium over there. I won’t be surprised if Cabe ends up crashing my family’s Thanksgiving dinner. He probably has a better chance of being fed.

It’s surreal sometimes, knowing that that chaos is in my future. It was a given that Mason would join a pack, being an alpha and all, but the same can’t be said for me. It’s hard to pinpoint the exact moment I realized I was going over to the pack side. *Ha*. I guess at some point all that trailing after Mason and Cabe just got hardwired into my brain. And now we’ve met Espy, the possibility of claiming an omega and officially bonding with my packmates feels more and more real.

Speaking of Espy . . .

“Who’re you talking to?” Sasha asks, bounding over and grabbing my phone out of my hands.

“Is it his girlfriend?” Sabrina questions, joining her sister as the two little monsters gleefully scroll through my phone.

“Give it back,” I demand, trying to corner them as they run around me passing my phone back and forth. I swear I was never this annoying as a younger sibling.

“Girlfriend?” my mom asks, appearing out of nowhere.

“He’s texting a girl!” Sabrina singsongs.

Mason, who was busy typing away on his laptop, looks up to see what all the commotion is about when my dad comes up out of the basement to ask, “Is this that same girl you’ve been working with on your comics?”

How’d he even hear us down there?

“Oh! The one who did that lovely drawing of Casper that you gave me?” My mom turns to Mason.

“She’s just a friend,” my brother mumbles, clearly embarrassed.

“For now,” I add helpfully.

“Wait, Mason is the one dating her?”

I take advantage of Sabrina’s confusion and momentary distraction to grab my phone back.

“They’re a pack, idiot.” Sasha smacks her twin’s arm.

“You’re the idiot!”

“Am not!”

“Are too!”

“Hey now, none of my children are idiots,” my mom butts in, breaking up the squabble.

“Ha!” my dad scoffs loudly.

We all laugh.

I think we're off the hook when the twins disappear upstairs, but my parents stay to continue the grilling. There isn't much to say, other than our pack has a collective crush on an omega who doesn't seem quite ready to court. When Mason gives an abridged overview of Espy's background, both my parents look upset.

"I've been reading about some of that in the news," my dad says, shaking his head. "Really scary stuff. I didn't realize that shit was happening here too. What is the school doing about it?"

Mason and I run through the new protocols, mostly around enhanced security and a campus alert system. We mention Cabe joined the military base's reserve unit to help out, and it feels good to see the pride in my dad's eyes when he hears this.

All this talk makes me even more anxious to be away from Espy this week. I grab my phone to continue my text conversation with her and look over to see Mason doing the same thing.

Five more days and we'll be back on campus. Five more days, and then I'm determined to up our game and get some results.

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Esperanza

“Text me!” Mackenzie calls as she drives off with a wave.

I wave back then grab my small bag and make my way into the dorm building where Mackenzie dropped me off before going to her own. It’s Sunday and I’m just getting back from a week staying with her family over the Thanksgiving holiday. After my last session with my therapist, I felt too raw emotionally to be around my brother. Dr. Morgan told me to explore my emotions, not to have some kind of messy confrontation with Em—Leo!—in front of Tanner’s entire extended family.

Mackenzie didn’t even blink when I asked if I could come home with her, and she didn’t ask for an explanation beyond the cagey one I gave her about needing some space. Leo, on the other hand, wasn’t as easy. He seemed hurt when I told him my change in plans and kept pressing me on why I didn’t want go with him. He even offered to just stay with me in the dorms. It was Tanner, luckily, who finally stepped in and convinced Leo I just needed some space, and that it would be good for me to spend time with Mackenzie and her sister, another omega.

It was . . . strange being around a family pack for the first time. I’ve gotten used to my brother’s pack, and Micah, Mason, and Cabe, but it’s nothing like being around a mature pack with a grown family. Apparently, Mackenzie’s family is relatively small. She has four parents and three siblings, and they somehow all fit in a mini-mansion out in the suburbs. “Mansion” isn’t exactly fair. It isn’t that her home was overly fancy, but it was larger than I’m used

to, coming from my beta-only town. Her two alpha fathers and alpha brother were really nice and understanding about giving me space, and overall I spent a lot of time relaxing, eating, and playing marathon rounds of trainwreck dominoes—a Sharp family tradition, so I was told.

I stayed in nearly constant contact with Micah, Mason, and Cabe over the holiday, much to Mackenzie’s delight. She seems to have accepted my explanation that I’m not into them romantically, or maybe she’s just allowing me to keep the lie for now. I considered opening up and telling her about my worries that my omega instincts are broken, and about how haywire I’ve been feeling around Lincoln, but in the end I chickened out. In fact, I’ve tried very hard this past week not to think about the big, grumpy alpha at all. For all I know, he and Leo have worked out their spat, and now that we’re back they’ll all start courting Mackenzie. How awkward would it be if I admitted I had feelings for the guy that may soon be hers?

What a mess.

Neither Leo nor Tanner is in the dorm when I drop off my bag, and a quick text lets me know I just missed them on their way to the cafeteria. I take a few minutes to change into warmer clothes before heading out to join them for lunch.

Micah, Mason, and Cabe all got back last night, and I can’t deny I’m excited to see them after a week apart. Mason has swim practice, which I assume Leo will be heading to as well, but Micah invited me to tag along with him to go and watch Cabe’s soccer scrimmage this afternoon. The men’s soccer season won’t start until the spring, but apparently the team trains year-round to stay in shape. A bunch of them are getting together to play a practice match, and I’m excited to go watch.

Like every child in America, I played soccer for a few years growing up. I made it a few seasons beyond “bunch ball” before my mother lovingly informed me I was too uncoordinated to make it in the sport. I was happy to give it up, and my coach looked relieved.

“Hey, Espy. I missed you *hermana*.” Leo gets up and hugs me tightly as soon as he sees me walk into the cafeteria. We managed to get me my own dining hall pass weeks ago, so now I no longer have to be with one of his pack to get

in.

I smile and hug him back, not trusting myself to respond right away. If he missed me after a week apart, why did it take him two years to finally check up on me?

“How’s your family?” I ask Tanner instead, sliding into their booth after grabbing some food.

The conversation between us is mostly easy, if not a bit stilted between me and Leo. I don’t linger, heading off to meet Micah after promising my brother I’ll be back at the dorm later this evening.

I told Micah I’d meet him at the campus’s main quad, and since his back is to me as I approach, I get a few seconds to creep on him without getting caught. His blond hair is starting to look a little long, curling down past his ears, and it makes me want to comb my hands through it. He somehow manages to look hot even all bundled up, and I’m hit with the sudden insane urge to go up and chomp on his neck. *Mine*.

I shake off the impulse, instead deciding to sneak up and scare him.

“Hi!”

“Jesus!”

I laugh as he jumps, stumbling back and knocking into some poor guy walking by. Said bystander doesn’t seem as amused as I am.

“I come bearing gifts,” I declare, holding out one of the hot chocolates I made in the cafeteria before heading out. Like me, Micah has a sweet tooth.

“I think you just took five years off my life.” He pouts at me dramatically as I roll my eyes.

“The calories in there’ll take off five more,” I quip, nodding at the cup I hand over.

“Ooooh, perfect.” He grins, grabbing the cup from my hand and taking a big sip.

We chat as we walk, and I ask more details about his trip home. Over the past

week I've learned a lot more about his and Mason's family, especially the antics of his younger sisters. Turns out they've both started dating and Mason in particular is freaking out about it. Apparently neither he nor Micah ever dated in high school, so his parents are also a bit flustered. It sounds like such a normal, wholesome family squabble, like something out of a freaking sitcom. I make a note to tease Mason about it next time I see him.

It doesn't take long to get to the field, and I follow Micah up into the metal bleachers set up along the sides. We aren't the only ones who came to watch. Looking around, I see about two dozen others seated up here too. The field and bleachers have been cleared of snow, but mounds of it are piled all around. Luckily, it's sunny out today, but my seat feels like ice when I sit down. I can't decide who's crazier: the players for opting to hold a game *outside* on the first day of December, or me and the rest of the spectators for voluntarily coming to watch.

"Won't they get cold out there?" I ask Micah, gesturing with a mittened hand to where the players are running around passing a ball, presumably getting ready to play.

"Their body heat from moving around will keep them warm. I'd be more worried about us!"

"Hmmm." That's hard to believe seeing how little the players are wearing. Most have on pants and long sleeves, but I see several guys in shorts.

I spot Cabe warming up, doing some weird leg-stretch things as he chats with another guy. He must sense me somehow, because within a few seconds he looks up and catches my eye, smiling widely. I smile back, surprised when he leaves his friend and jogs over to me and Micah.

"You came!" he exclaims, looking pleased to see us.

"You know I love watching you run around," Micah croons, putting on an overly flirtatious tone.

Cabe flips him off, his gaze never leaving mine.

"Here—to keep you warm," I offer, holding out my cup of hot chocolate.

"That's sweet of you." Cabe smiles, taking the cup and trying a sip. His face

immediately contorts into a grimace. “Maybe too sweet. Is this thing half sugar?”

I stick out my tongue out and grab the cup back. “More for me then.”

He jogs back onto the field, and a few minutes later the game kicks off. There’s no referee, and each player wears a blue or yellow penny to show which team they’re on. Micah seems to have picked up surprisingly little soccer knowledge despite attending Cabe’s games since middle school. It’s fun to just hang out and chat while watching Cabe in his element, but eventually my butt goes numb. The second I complain, Micah scoops me up and settles me on his lap, pulling so my back rests against his chest. I tense up at first, but once his arms come around to lock against my waist I find myself relaxing into him. He’s much warmer than the metal bench, and with the way my heart is pounding I have no doubt my body temperature has shot up a few degrees as well. Highly effective warming strategy, I must admit.

Some of the spectators come and go, but I stay content and cozy in my Micah cocoon. Cabe scores a goal, and when Micah hands me the last of his hot chocolate to finish, I decide this afternoon deserves a nearly perfect rating.

Of course, that’s when the sirens ring out.



The shock of the piercing wails freezes my blood and stops my breath. It feels like a minute passes, but really it only takes a few seconds for me and Micah to scramble to our feet, both of us pulling out our phones. After the test of the alert system a few weeks back, Lincoln made sure my phone number was added to the campus security message alert system. In the field that day, I hadn’t known there was going to be a test, which only added to the panic I experienced. As I click on the text from the university, I hope to see a notification of another system test. Instead it’s a warning to seek immediate shelter due to a campus security incident.

People around us are yelling, some panicking or confused and others quickly taking off. A few seem to think the whole thing is a joke, and my sudden rage

at their blasé attitude almost erases my fear.

Almost.

“Let’s go,” Micah says, grabbing my arm and tugging me along after him down the bleachers. Cabe joins us immediately, and together they lead me at a run toward what I can only assume is the nearest building. My legs feel like lead, but somehow I manage to keep up, and I make it inside along with most of the other people from the field. There’s shouting, and I hear a few girls crying, but my brain struggles to process anything. All I can manage is to cling to Micah and burrow my head into his chest, trying to hide from the confusion and terror pressing in around me.

“This way,” I hear someone say, and I feel Micah moving me deeper into the building. From the smell, I can tell we’re in a locker room. A men’s locker room, if I had to guess. The stale, sour smell of old sweat only lingers in my nose for a minute before being replaced by Micah’s burned coffee and my own spoiled rose. Clear markers of distress. I hear Cabe barking out orders nearby, and his normally refreshing lime-and-tonic scent has also turned sharp.

Micah leads me over to a bench and helps lower me down onto it. When I see his phone in his hand, I scramble to do the same. Information is what we need right now. I don’t see anything new from the school, but I have several texts from Lincoln, Leo, Tanner, and Mason, all of them asking where I am and urging me to find someplace safe to hide. My fingers, numb from the shock and sitting outside for an hour, refuse to work enough for me to manage a reply. An incoming call lights up my screen—Lincoln’s number—but before I can answer, Cabe’s loud curse cuts through the room.

“Motherfuckers!”

I look up in alarm and see that worried gaze is pinned right on me.

“What is it?” Micah demands.

“I don’t have all the details yet, but my unit commander sent out a notice there’s been an attempted kidnapping over by the math building. They haven’t caught anyone, but sounds like there are multiple men on campus and . . .” He hesitates as his eyes flit toward me and away again. “They think the

group is targeting omegas.”

My stomach sinks, my worst fears confirmed, at the same time as a woman gasps next to me.

“W-what?” she asks, her eyes wide and her whole body shaking. I can tell immediately she too is an omega, her height, scent, and extreme fear giving her away.

The whole room falls silent, and for a heartbeat all I can hear is harsh breathing underneath the continuing peal of the siren.

Then Cabe jumps into action. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do.”

Luckily, the soccer players are all used to working together as a team, and they move seamlessly around the room as Cabe hands out instructions. Everyone is told to stay quiet, the lights are turned off, and a few guys pile what they can find—a few trash cans and an industrial laundry basket—in front of the door to the locker room. Apparently, there aren’t any locks, so Cabe assigns three guys to stay posted by the door in case someone tries to come in. The rest of us huddle against the far wall, a bank of lockers between us and the door. The other omega, whose name I learn is Chloe, sticks to me like a magnet, our hands clasped together so tightly the skin goes white. The friends she was with huddle near us as well, tears pouring down one girl’s face. Reception is spotty inside this concrete building, but I watch as Chloe frantically texts her pack with the hand not clutching my own.

Micah remains wrapped around me, his arms the only thing keeping me from completely curling into a ball. His face is tucked against my neck, and every so often he whispers to me that everything will be all right. I don’t bother with my phone, trusting Micah to let everyone know where we are.

Cabe, meanwhile, stays by the door, pacing as he types away at his phone, probably talking with others in his reserve unit to find out what’s happening. Every so often he walks over to us, running his hand comfortingly along my head and leaning in to scent-mark me. It’s a possessive move and something I’d normally be taken aback by, but in this situation, all I feel is gratitude. I’m impressed with his control over his emotions; his scent has lost its sharp edge now and is simply pumping out calming pheromones. I wish I could do the same, as much as for myself as all the others around me, but I definitely don’t

have enough composure for that.

So that's how we all stay. For hours.

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Mason

My feet have literally worn a path across the floor by the time Micah finally calls me. It's been hours since the sirens went off and the alert went out telling everyone on campus to shelter in place. I was in the pool at the time, running some drills with my team. No one had their phones with them, so at first we figured it was just another system test. One of the maintenance workers came running in to tell us we needed to get out of the water, and after that we all grabbed towels and barricaded ourselves into one of the conference rooms in the athletics center.

It got pretty uncomfortable being in a wet bathing suit for hours in a drafty room. Some other people joined us as well, faculty and students who were apparently working out in the main gym when the sirens went off. The body odor mixed with the sour scent of fear got to be a lot. Let's just say, as a group, we don't smell great.

Of course, I was too worried about my pack and Espy to really be that bothered by the conditions.

All the university alert said was that there was a campus security incident—vague enough to describe anything from a stray dog stealing hamburgers to some sort of mass shooting event. *Helpful*. I had a sinking feeling it was related to the terrorist attacks down in Utah, and sadly I was right. Micah and I had just been talking with our parents about the increased threat toward omegas and how the campus was employing extra security measures. It felt like we'd jinxed it somehow.

I hoped maybe this was a false alarm—an overreaction or a misunderstanding. I was panicked, wondering if Espy was safe, and I couldn't settle until I finally got a text back from Micah and he confirmed she was okay and sheltering in place with him, Cabe, and a bunch of others who were at the soccer scrimmage.

Leo was with me, just as worried about his sister as I was, and he was equally relieved to hear she was with my packmates. I watched as his phone started blowing up with texts from his own pack. Mostly Lincoln. I'd more or less reconciled my annoyance at the alpha and suspicion of his behavior with Espy, at least enough to feel bad for the guy being out of town while something like this went down. I would've bet a lot of money he was already driving back, his instincts must have been riding him hard.

It didn't take long for the rumor mill to start churning, and all around me guys started whispering about an omega being abducted. Or was it an attempted abduction? Or an attack by another student. The intel was all over the place, but it was enough to send me into a dark place mixed with rage and fear. I prayed for the omega—all the school omegas—to be found safe and unharmed. At the same time, I thanked the Gods Espy was safe with my pack.

Between the guilt and lack of information, my stomach roiled for hours.

Eventually, though, the terror faded and was replaced by boredom. My anxiety and adrenaline remained too high to actually relax, but I watched in silence as more of the people around me began talking quietly and playing games on their phones. I gave up trying to reach Espy after Micah informed me she wasn't in the right headspace to text, so instead I just kept texting other friends and constantly refreshing the news.

The school eventually sent out some additional alerts informing us they believed the threat to be over, but asking everyone to remain in place until security completed a final sweep. It only took another forty minutes or so before a bunch of officers knocked on the door to our makeshift bunker, and after they noted everyone's campus IDs, we were asked to return home or to the cafeteria. With Micah, Cabe, and Espy still on lockdown, I convinced Leo to come back with me to our pack house to wait for everyone there.

Now, two hours later, Micah finally calls.

“Hey, can you turn that down?” I ask Leo, gesturing to the TV he’s watching the news on before answering my phone. “Hey!”

“Hey, Mason. We’re on our way back.”

“Finally!” Logically I know everyone’s okay, but I desperately need to see Espy to settle my nerves. “Just come straight back to the house. Leo is here, and we managed to come up with enough food to feed everyone.”

It was past five by the time we made it out of the athletics center, and now it’s pushing 7:30 p.m. The campus cafeteria is open, but Leo and I agreed it was a better idea to stay in. We haven’t gotten around to food shopping since getting back to campus, but with two frozen pizzas and several bags of spaghetti I think we’re set. The oven is already on, so after hanging up with Micah I start boiling water before grabbing a beer and joining Leo back on the couch.

“Anything new?” I ask, scanning the text scrolling across the screen. They’ve been reporting on the incident since we got back, but the details are still a little fuzzy.

As far as anyone can tell, between three and five young men approached two omegas on one of the campus walkways and asked for help finding a building. Shortly afterward, some of the men tried to grab the two women and drag them off, but the women drew so much attention with their screams that the men quickly gave up and fled. Some bystander ran and hit a campus safety button when she saw what was happening, and it was a few minutes after that the sirens went off and the shelter-in-place directive was given.

“Nah, they just keep repeating the same things over and over again,” Leo replies, sighing. “Lincoln doesn’t have any updates either, only that they’re still thinking this was a bunch of amateurs. Might be inspired by what happened in Utah, but so far there isn’t a clear connection.”

Lincoln returned from his parents’ place an hour ago, going straight to his unit commander to report for duty in helping secure the campus. It didn’t sound like law enforcement had caught any of the men yet, but they have some reason to believe the men aren’t part of a formal terrorist group. At

least not a sophisticated one. Though at first I was relieved to learn this, in the hour I've spent pacing I've slowly realized this just means the threat against Espy is harder to pin down. And it's growing.

I've finished my beer by the time I hear them at the door.

It's hard to hold myself back, but somehow I manage to let Leo greet his sister first before I grab her out of his arms and pull her into my own bone-crushing hug. Her normal scent is sour and dull, and as I pull back to take in her face, I see she looks withdrawn. I don't bother to ask how she is; the answer is clear.

"What do you need?" I go with instead, keeping her tucked securely within my arms.

"I'm cold. And honestly, I really want to get out of these clothes. Can I take a shower?" she asks, looking up at me.

"I need to change too—the eau de locker room is giving me a headache," Micah agrees.

I help Espy get settled in the bathroom I share with Cabe while Micah uses the fancy one in his room. Cabe shares that he needs to report for reserve duty because of the incident and sticks around just long enough to change out of his soccer gear and scarf down three slices of pizza straight from the oven before heading off again. Micah emerges first, then eventually Espy, wearing the oversize sweatpants and sweatshirt I lent her to change into. I'd be totally into it under different circumstances, so I take a few mental snapshots to pull out later when the situation isn't so tense.

We all tuck into the food, quietly swapping accounts and trying to piece together everything we know—and what we don't. Espy stays quiet but doesn't seem to be having a full-blown panic attack or anything like that. We eventually decide to watch a movie, and I put on something light while Micah steps away to call our parents and assure them we're fine. I feel Leo's eyes on me as I very obviously bundle Espy up with blankets and settle her in next to me, but his mouth stays shut.

My brain is still struggling to process everything that happened this afternoon, but one thing that's become clear to me is that I don't want to keep

waiting to ask Espy if we can court her. People have already been making assumptions given how much time we spend with her, and honestly, the only thing keeping us from making it official is our desire to give Espy the time and space to feel ready. Leo hasn't said anything to me directly yet, but I know he's wanted to. And when Micah gets off the phone and joins us on the couch, tucking in tight against Espy's other side, I know it's past time to acknowledge our intentions. Not that Leo's in charge of her or we need his permission or anything. Espy's is the only opinion that matters. But still, as her brother and my friend and teammate, I feel I owe him a heads-up.

A purr starts up in my chest unbidden, still a weird and wonderful feeling for me. Leo's eyes sharpen on me even more, but after the earlier craziness I'm too content in this moment to bother being self-conscious.

The movie plays on, but I'm not sure any of us are paying attention. I feel Espy drift off just a few minutes in—something I'm extra pleased by when Leo eventually stands up and announces Lincoln is swinging by and that they should be getting home. I point out she's asleep and he should just leave her here for the evening instead of waking her and taking her out into the cold again. He hesitates but ultimately decides not to fight me on it.

Lincoln isn't as easy, judging by the whispered conversation Leo has with him when the alpha arrives. He looks determined to override his packmate's decision to leave Espy with us, but once he catches sight of her sleeping form his determination seems to deflate, and the two quickly leave.

I get up to lock the door behind them and then turn back to Micah so we can decide how best to play this situation.

“What's the plan, big bro?”

The idea of leaving Espy alone on the couch all night unsettles me, but I also don't want to violate any boundaries with her or risk her waking up panicked in the middle of the night if she doesn't remember falling asleep next to us. But it would probably be creepy to put her in one of our beds, right?

“It's a big couch . . .” I start to say, thinking maybe one of could stay down here with her.

“Dibs!” Micah whisper-shouts, gently extracting himself from the omega to

arrange some blankets on the long part of the L-shaped couch and settle in.

“Jackass,” I scold halfheartedly. I should have known he’d do that, and honestly, it’s probably better that it’s a beta, not an alpha, who stays closest to Espy. Despite the wild energy pouring out of my hindbrain demanding all sorts of inappropriate action of me.

I turn off the lights, but not wanting to be away from them yet, I decide to post up on our love seat and wait for Cabe to get home. I close my eyes for just a moment, but I must doze off, because suddenly I’m being jerked awake by a sound coming from the kitchen. I blink, disoriented, but manage to make out the small figure over by the sink.

“Hey,” I whisper, getting up and moving into the kitchen.

“Sorry, did I wake you?” Espy asks, looking up at me apologetically. “I was really thirsty and needed some water.”

“Nah, it’s fine. I was supposed to be waiting for Cabe, but I guess I fell asleep.”

“I’m guessing *I* fell asleep. What happened to my brother?”

“Leo went back to the dorms with Lincoln. We didn’t want to wake you up, but I can walk you back now if you’d rather get home,” I offer, trying to sound sincere and not let on to the fact that I desperately want her to stay.

She bites her lip, running her finger along the rim of her glass as she seems to think about it. “Ummm . . . is it okay if I just stay here?” she asks, sounding uncertain.

“Of course! I mean, yes. Please stay. Here. Please stay here.” I stumble over my words in my eagerness, my tongue running half a step ahead of my lips.

She laughs. “I guess someone really doesn’t want to brave the cold.”

“It’s not the cold. I’d take you back to Leo’s dorm in a heartbeat if that’s where you truly wanted to be right now. But I have to admit, having you here, safe and surrounded by my pack, is everything I could possibly want right now.”

My admission hangs between us, the mood growing heavier as seconds tick

by.

“Today was really scary,” Espy admits, breaking the silence as her body seems to wilt slightly in front of me.

“It was scary for me too. You have no idea how glad I am that you were with Cabe and Micah when the sirens went off. If not, I don’t think I could have stayed put. I would have broken every safety protocol to find you and make sure you were okay.”

She smiles, but then her face breaks and a tear slips from her eye, and without thinking I move forward and take her into my arms, holding her to my chest as I rock her gently from side to side.

It seems neither of us has the right words, but as I breathe in the combination of our scents filling the air around us, I simply squeeze her tighter. Something in my chest eases, and when I eventually bring myself to pull back from the hug, I find Espy with dry eyes and a shy smile. My heart starts beating faster and faster, and without much thought for what I’m doing I lean in once again.

At the first touch of our lips I feel a shock run down my spine, causing my whole body to twitch and pushing me further into the small omega in my arms. It’s my first kiss, but after a few seconds my nerves give way to instinct as I swallow Espy’s gasp and move my lips more firmly against hers. She’s all softness and salt, and tasting the evidence of her tears only spurs me on as I seek to reassure her, to show her with my body that she is safe.

My arms move in opposite directions, and I tangle my left in her sleep-rumpled hair as my right skates down her back, just brushing against the tempting swell of her butt. Her own arms lock around my waist as a small mew escapes her, our mouths continuing to dance in an increasingly confident rhythm.

I force myself to pull back just enough to check that Espy’s as into this as I am. A quick scan of her eyes shows me everything I want and more. Her lids are hooded and her pupils blown wide. Encouraged, I confidently move my hands to her hips and lift her to sit on the counter so I can bring her closer to my height.

My lips fuse to hers once again, the new angle bringing our bodies even

closer together as I step forward between her legs. I can't get enough of her taste, of the little hitch in her breath when my teeth nip gently at her lips, and I have no idea what my plan is or where this is going—all I know is that I have to keep kissing her. I can't tear myself away, and won't until she tells me to stop.

Or I would have, if not for the sound of the front door opening.

I immediately break away from Espy, her tiny whimper of protest and confusion nearly overriding my need to protect her from whoever the fuck is entering my house at 3 in the morning.

It's Cabe, of course. My packmate looks exhausted as he quietly enters, then he freezes as he glances over and catches sight of us in the kitchen.

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Esperanza

I didn't think my emotions could be any more of a mess, but I'm proven woefully wrong when Cabe comes home and catches Mason making out with me in the kitchen.

My brain ping-pongs between embarrassment, guilt, and good old-fashioned horniness. That kiss came out of nowhere. One minute I was crying, then we were hugging, and next thing I know we were locked at the lips. Then Cabe appeared and it was like a bucket of cold water crashing down on the little bubble we'd built around us.

I don't remember what I say. I mumble some excuse and practically run back to my makeshift bed on the couch. Micah is at the other end, still sleeping heavily from what I can tell, and I quickly tuck myself in and pretend to be asleep too. *Yeah, right.* As if Mason or Cabe will buy that I'm able to fall asleep in two seconds in the midst of such an obviously embarrassing situation. Luckily it seems they take pity on me, and they both say good night as I track the sound of their footsteps disappearing up the stairs.

Qué diablos acaba de pasar?

That question plagues me for the rest of the night, and sleep evades me completely.

The kiss was unexpected. It was thrilling, comforting, and terrifying all at the same time. Were we not interrupted I feel like I could have stayed there kissing Mason for hours. It was like he was sucking out all my anxiety and

replacing it with pure need. The need to explore, to keep breathing him in, and to feel his hard muscles under my wandering hands. I've never kissed anyone before, outside of a few playground antics as a child. Does kissing always feel this amazing? Will it be the same if I kiss him again?

And what does this *mean*?

All of Leo and Mackenzie's recent questioning about what's going on between me and Mason's pack fills my mind. My denials feel ridiculous in the wake of what just happened. But does this mean they want more? Does kissing me mean Mason wants to court me? And what about Micah and Cabe? Seeing my brother's pack fighting over the question of courting Mackenzie, I know it's not a guarantee everyone will automatically be on the same page.

And what about me? Do I *want* to be courted? Am I ready?

By the time the sun comes out around 6:30 a.m. I decide to be a coward and sneak out. Whether it's coming off the stress and adrenaline from yesterday or having barely slept the night before, I'm feeling wrung out. Addressing the kiss Mason and I shared last night can be future Espy's problem. *Lucky lady.*

I want to believe what happened between us was chemistry. Attraction. The seeking-out of comfort. Three months of growing closer and closer to a pack that I just . . . vibe with. But still, in the back of my mind is the fear it's just my broken psyche playing dirty tricks. Though, honestly, the broken part isn't how drawn I am to all three members of the Collins Pack; it's how Lincoln still won't leave my mind, and even now, as I rush through the cold back to Leo's dorm, all I can think about is my need to see him.

I stubbornly try to push all that aside, instead focusing on getting home and taking some aspirin for my growing headache. It looks like both Leo and Tanner are asleep when I get to the dorm—not surprising for before 7 a.m. on a Monday, and after yesterday's craziness. Tanner is in the same reserve unit as Cabe and was probably kept out late as well, so I try to move quietly around the small space. My bag from my week away with Mackenzie is still sitting on my cot where I left it, but I don't have the energy to unpack. Instead I swallow my pills and crawl into bed, still wearing Mason's clothes. His woodsy scent clings to me, but I try to push that and the memories of our

kiss aside.

I don't expect to fall asleep, but minutes later I'm out.

I have no idea how long I've been sleeping when I eventually rouse to the sound of a text. My arm feels heavy as I sightlessly grope around for my phone, and I groan at the energy it takes to pull myself into a sitting position. Normally I don't mind the cot, but after a week of sleeping in a real bed at Mackenzie's parents' place I must be spoiled.

I scrub my hand across my face and blink away the lingering traces of my nap.

I have not one but several messages waiting.

I click on the ones from my group thread with Mason, Micah, and Cabe first, suddenly realizing I just took off this morning without letting them know where I was going. I shoot off a quick note to all three letting them know I came back to Leo's and apologizing for freaking them out. It's already 12 p.m., and I feel like a jerk for leaving them hanging for so long.

Next, I look at the note from Leo telling me he and Tanner left for class and didn't want to wake me. I switch to the alert from the campus police to see the campus will be open as usual today. I have no idea if this means they caught the guys, and suddenly I realize I was out walking on campus alone this morning without any idea whether or not it was safe.

A cold shiver passes over me. How could I be so reckless? All the horrifying what-ifs run through my mind, and my hands shake as I scroll down to the remaining messages on my phone. I exchanged a few texts with Lincoln last night, ensuring him I was okay, but I see a new one now asking if I'm up for training this afternoon.

I take a mental survey of my body. Despite the lingering headache and muscle soreness, there's enough leftover anxiety strumming through my veins that a workout sounds good. Maybe running around will be a good distraction from my thoughts. I feel my face heat up as my mind once again runs through my kiss with Mason. And as though the thought conjures him out of thin air, his name appears on my phone as it pings to announce an incoming text.

My thumb hovers over my messaging app, not sure if I'm ready to confront whatever he might have to say. Does he regret it? Is he mad that I left without saying anything?

I'm sorry about the interruption last night.

Huh. That seems . . . promising? But promising what? I still don't have any idea what I want to happen. Past Espy's a bit of a bitch for pushing this off on me.

I message Lincoln to let him know I'm in, and we arrange to meet at 2 p.m. I still don't respond to Mason even after changing into my workout clothes and making my way to the cafeteria for lunch. A second text comes through while I'm still struggling to come up with the right response.

Are you free this evening? How about we grab dinner and talk?

I bite my lip.

Talking. I can do talking, right? It's not like it's weird for me to grab dinner with Mason and his pack, yet the reality of our shared kiss—kisses, to be exact—is hanging over my head like an anvil. Presumably it will come up if we *talk*. I wish I could get a list of questions ahead of time so I can prepare. I guess it's not a great sign of maturity on my part that I wish hanging out with a boy I like would more closely resemble taking an exam or a job interview.

I respond, agreeing to meet up, and he tells me he, Micah, and Cabe will meet me in front of the cafeteria at 6 p.m. A pack affair then. I can't decide whether that makes me feel more or less nervous. Cabe must know what he walked in on last night, but did they tell Micah too?

I get so lost in my ponderings that I'm almost late to meet Lincoln and end up having to run over to the gym. At least it takes care of my warm-up, and the exertion takes my mind off the feeling of anxious anticipation that's been pestering me since the sirens went off yesterday.

He's my friend. A strong alpha and obvious protector. It's natural that my subconscious would seek him out for comfort after facing yesterday's threat.

Lincoln's back is turned toward me as I rush into the indoor track area where we always meet, but he immediately turns, and it's like I can feel the full

weight of his stare bearing down on me from twenty-five feet away. I pause, panting a bit from my jog, but Lincoln doesn't hesitate as he strides over and crushes me in a tight hug.

It feels unreasonably good, settling my nerves and even momentarily easing my headache.

"Hey," I greet, voice muffled against his chest.

He doesn't respond verbally, just breaks away from me far enough to do a thorough scan with his eyes. "You're okay?" he finally says. His tone is stuck halfway between a question and a confirmation.

"I'm okay."

He nods, seemingly satisfied. "Let's get to it then."



I can't decide if it's my night of barely any sleep and feeling like I'm getting sick or if Lincoln is purposely trying to push me to my limit.

"Another one?" I gape. I've already gone through four sets of burpees with him, and now he's telling me to go again.

"Yes. We're going a full minute this time."

"Linc—"

"This isn't a democracy, Espy. I'm the trainer here. I know what I'm doing, and I know what you need."

"What I *need*?" I turn to face him, anger starting to burn through my exhaustion.

"Yes."

"You. A man. An alpha. Someone I've only known for three months, who is five years older than me, and who grew up in a completely different family dynamic. *You* know what *I* need."

“Objectively, yes.”

I scoff, honestly shocked that he’s refusing to back down. “Are you serious right now—?”

“I’m more than serious, Espy. That’s my point! Better than anyone, I know the kind of threats you’re facing, and as your brother’s packmate—”

“Don’t you dare pull that shit with me!” I cut him off, surprising myself as I shove his chest. “Just because I’m an omega doesn’t give you the right to—”

“It does! Have you not been paying attention? There are Gods-damn fucking *terrorist cells* out there snatching omegas *just like you* off college campuses. And I don’t care if it pisses you off, if it offends your sense of independence or autonomy or whatever the hell is in your head right now, but it *is* my job to do whatever I fucking can to keep you safe. Even if that means pushing you or pissing you off. I *have* to make sure that if any one of those fucking scumbags ever gets near you, you know how to get away. That you’re strong enough to fight—to do everything you can to survive. *That’s* my job.”

There’s no one else around, and the silence that falls as Lincoln trails off is broken only by our heavy breathing.

I want to hold onto my anger; it’s more comforting than the turbulent mix of heartache and fear his words have instilled. His heady scent hangs heavy in the air between us, the hints of leather far overpowering the dominance of his usual salted honey. As much as I’ve tried to push away my inappropriate feelings for this man, in this moment I want so badly for him to be my protector. My alpha. To be able to give myself over to him and trust that I’ll be okay. The same feeling I had last night—that sense of “rightness” I had from being in Mason’s arms—sweeps over me again.

“Espy—”

Lincoln gets cut off abruptly as I reach up to wrap my arms around his neck, tugging his head down to mine. I’m too short to reach his lips without his help, so instead I press my mouth against the skin of his neck, my tongue sneaking out in a gentle caress. The moan he lets out spurs me on, and my hands clutch him tighter as his whole body rumbles against me. I pick another spot on his neck and go in for another kiss, but before I can, I feel

Lincoln's arms go around my thighs as he hauls me up his body and crashes his mouth down against mine.

My kisses with Mason were a sweet exploration, but with Lincoln things are explosive, desperate, and messy.

My legs squeeze his waist. They're not long enough for me to be able to lock my ankles behind his broad back, but I mindlessly trust his strong grip to hold me up. There's no art in the way our mouths move against each other; all that computes is a messy dance of teeth and tongues. My body undulates in his arms, my hips desperately seeking out any kind of friction between my legs. His hair is wet with sweat as my fingers instinctually comb through his hair, and I can't help but let out a moan as his mouth pulls away from mine to dive for my neck.

He growls as he nips at my skin, the light pressure from his teeth lighting a fire in my blood. The thought of asking him to bite me flashes through my mind, and I can't help the whine I let out as I tilt my head to offer him more of my neck.

"Shit, Espy," Lincoln whispers as he pulls away, our eyes locking briefly before our lips come together again. Any thoughts of right or wrong fade away, and all I want is more as I feel one of his hands move up from my thighs and dip under my shirt, the rough feel of his skin against my bare back sending a thrill shooting through me and spurring me on.

My body, already heated, somehow gets even warmer. I feel something pulse low in my stomach, and then suddenly I'm enveloped by a wave a heat that moves from my core and out through my chest. The smell of roses sweetens and deepens around us, and I feel my head go fuzzy as a low whine escapes me, my need for Lincoln ratcheting up impossibly higher.

I roll my hips against him reflexively, protesting when he abruptly pulls away and drops me to the ground as though he's been burned.

"Wha . . .?" I try to ask. *What just happened?* Why'd he stop kissing me, and why is he now staring at me in horror?

"Shit. Shit, shit, double shit, shit, fucking *shit!*"

"Lincoln?" I don't mean to sound as pathetic as I feel, but he's clearly

freaking out, and all I feel is vulnerable, hot, and achy.

He paces a few steps away but then turns and comes right back. “Espy—”

I grasp for him automatically as he steps back into my reach, but he jerks away from me before I can make contact. “Shit!”

“You said that already,” I murmur, wrapping my arms around myself instead as I fight the sudden urge to cry. *What is happening?*

“Espy, I— *Damn it!* You’re— You just perfumed. And I— *Fuck!* I shouldn’t have . . . I don’t know what I was thinking.”

He looks pained, angry, shocked. My brain barely registers his words, instead focusing on the regret I can feel pouring off him, and suddenly it’s all too much.

“No, Espy, wait!”

I ignore him calling after me as I take off, abandoning my things in the same way I hope to leave behind the feelings of shame that are now drowning me.

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Esperanza

Without my phone or my keys, I'm left with few options after running out on Lincoln. I could head back to Leo's and hope either he or Tanner are home, but when I reach his dorm building my feet don't stop, and I find myself continuing on until I eventually end up at Mackenzie's building. I follow a group of people inside, bypassing the need to scan an ID, and head to her floor. Claire answers the door, and it only takes one look for her to invite me in.

She lets me shower and borrow some clothes after I give her an abridged version of why I've shown up out of nowhere, sweaty and without a phone, keys, or wallet. She tells me she has to get to a late-afternoon class, but she texts Mackenzie before she leaves. Luckily, I only have about fifteen minutes alone in which I start to spiral out before she arrives.

"Girl, what's going on?" she asks, quickly dropping her bag before joining me on her couch.

It doesn't take long for the whole story to come pouring out, starting yesterday evening with Mason, through running away from Lincoln after he pushed me away while we were kissing. I barely take a breath as I recount everything, and I'm not surprised it takes her a few minutes to process when I finally stop speaking.

"Okay, wow. So you really weren't lying when you said the way you feel about the Collins pack is the same as around your brother's pack. Only, by your brother's pack, you really meant Lincoln." She gives me a knowing

look, and I reluctantly nod. “Wait—is it only Lincoln, or have you been crushing on Tanner too?”

I shake my head.

“Jeez, you’ve really been holding out on me!” she laughs, relaxing me slightly.

I’ve been so worried about my warped feelings it’s a relief to finally get everything out in the open with her. At this point I’m willing to face possible judgement if it means getting an outside perspective.

“I didn’t know what was happening. I still don’t! Lincoln is part of my brother’s pack. He’s essentially family, and I know how twisted it is that I feel this way. I’ve been trying to convince myself for months that there was nothing between us, but . . .”

“There *wasn’t* anything between you when you were on him like a koala making out in a public place.” Mackenzie grins at me as she waggles her eyebrows. I’m decidedly not ready to find the humor yet.

“I’m serious! What if . . . what if after what happened to me, my omega-ness is broken? What if what my dad did to me messed with my instincts, and now my brain just clings to any alpha I’m around?”

That seems to sober Mackenzie up, and she looks just as lost as I’ve been feeling.

“I don’t think . . .” she starts, but then she trails off.

As much as I might want to hear false platitudes, I’m glad she caught herself. The truth is, no one actually knows what effect my father’s experiments have had on me.

I pull my legs up to my chest, curling into a ball and closing my eyes. The headache I’d temporarily forgotten about seems to be back in force.

“Okay,” Mackenzie finally says. “I know this feels really serious and confusing and scary, but let’s not forget to take a moment to celebrate the fact that you just made out with two totally hot alphas, from different packs, in the span of about twelve hours. Was it, like, completely amazing?”

Her grin is infectious, and the corners of my mouth can't help but turn up as well.

"It was . . . mind-blowing," I admit, letting out a giggle.

"Who was better—Mason or Lincoln?"

I throw a pillow at her in response.

Suddenly, it occurs to me that maybe I shouldn't be talking about Lincoln with her.

"You're not, like, into Lincoln, right? I mean, he's not courting you, is he?" I suddenly feel sick to my stomach. With everything that happened yesterday, I haven't had a chance to ask if Leo and his pack ever approached Mackenzie with a courting offer. Is that why he looked so horrified?

The smile drops off her face, replaced by a look of contemplation. "Not exactly . . ." She must see the panic on my face because she rushes on. "I mean, it's not really a secret that I have a crush on your brother. But, like, I haven't really felt a pull toward his pack."

While my possessive side is relieved she isn't crushing on Lincoln, I'm disappointed for my brother at the same time. "Want to switch?" I joke. Though even if there were a button in front of me right at this moment, which I could push to shutdown any and all attraction toward Lincoln, I don't think I could get myself to pull the trigger. "Urgh, why is everything such a mess!" I fake-shout, throwing my head back as I send my pouty prayer up to the heavens.

"And you, like, actually perfumed? I've never had that happen to me before. It's supposed to be a pretty serious compatibility indicator. From what I've heard, some omegas don't even perfume until after they've bonded with their chosen pack."

That's not terrifying at all . . .

"Maybe? That's what Lincoln said, but I have no idea."

We eventually lapse into silence. It's already 4:30 p.m., and I realize I promised Mason I'd meet him, Micah, and Cabe at the dining hall at 6 p.m. I

was nervous before, but now, after everything with Lincoln, I don't know how I can face them. Am I supposed to tell them what happened? Will it make them change their minds about courting me, assuming that's what they even want in the first place? With Lincoln, he *can't* court me, but boy, does my body wish he could. Enough that I would give up exploring my connection with the Collins pack, though? Even hypothetically . . .?

I'm prepared to cancel on them, to make up whatever excuse I need to buy myself more time, only to remember I don't have my phone on me. *Mierda*. I could technically have Mackenzie text my brother and get Mason's number from him, but then he'll ask what happened to my phone and why I'm canceling plans with Mason, and just . . . no. I'll simply show up, explain I'm not feeling well—not a lie—and see if I can't buy myself another day at least before I have to figure things out. I'm still not sure how I'll manage to get my stuff back without having to face Lincoln though, but one problem at a time.

"Come on, Espy," Mackenzie sings, urging me to follow her out the door in the same tone she'd use on a dog. It's not, *not*, effective.

I take another aspirin, but my head continues to pound. It's only a short walk to the dining hall, but even so, it's like I can feel every gust of wind through my borrowed clothing, making me shiver with the cold.

"You sure you're okay?" Mackenzie asks, looking at me in concern once we're almost there. "You're looking a bit flushed, and your eyes are glassy."

"On top of everything, I'm probably getting a cold," I sigh. Between the recent stress and being camped out in an unheated locker room for so many hours, it wouldn't surprise me at all if I've caught something.

She nods, still looking concerned, but doesn't say anything more as she joins me at the front of the cafeteria.

"You don't have to stay."

"But I will. It's not like you have anywhere else you can go without your keys, so I might as well wait for you so we can walk back to my place together."

"Right," I groan. "Thank you." *What a mess.*

“Espy!”

I turn toward Micah’s voice and find him approaching with Mason and Cabe.

“H-hey,” I start, trying to paint on a smile to hide my nerves.

“Oh, is Mackenzie joining too?” Mason asks, looking nervous as he runs a gloved hand through his hair. “We thought we might . . . ahh . . . well . . . we made a reservation at a place off campus.”

Oh jeez, like a date. They want to take me out, and there I was making out with another guy just a few hours ago, standing in front of them now half-sick and wearing another girl’s clothes as I prepare to bail. As much as I want to just push through and go with them, my urge to go home is stronger. In fact, for the first time in years, I have this craving for a nest. It’s a weird, foreign urge, and unfortunately some borrowed blankets at Mackenzie’s are going to have to do. I just need to get through this and make it back there.

“That’s really nice of you guys,” Mackenzie chirps, nudging me subtly.

I realize I’ve yet to say anything, and I nod my head. “Yes, super nice. It’s just that—”

“Espy!”

I turn toward my name and see my brother approaching with Tanner—and, of course, Lincoln—in tow. *This can’t be happening.* I consider bolting, but before I can make up my mind the trio join us.

I’m vaguely aware of the guys exchanging greetings, but all I can focus on is not making eye contact with Lincoln. Something that’s extra-hard given that Lincoln seems determined to make eye contact with me.

“Are you guys grabbing dinner?” I hear Tanner ask.

“We were gonna take Espy to Black Mountain Brasserie,” Cabe starts to answer, only to be cut off by Lincoln.

“Are you courting her?”

The whole group goes silent at his sharp tone, and I literally take a step back, unable to handle the tension suddenly ricocheting between the assembled

males.

“Ummm, that’s not really any of your business,” Cabe finally responds, his brow furrowed.

Undeterred, Lincoln swings his gaze to me. “Are they courting you?”

Fuck! What is he playing at???” “Uh, no. Not exactly. I mean, not at all! But —”

“Good. They can’t.”

Mackenzie and I look like a pair of fish with the way our mouths gape open. *Did he actually just . . .?*

“What the fuck, man?” Leo frowns.

“Who the fuck are *you* to say—?” Cabe begins, but he’s cut off as Lincoln quickly moves to stand in front of me.

“She’s mine. I’m courting her.”

It’s like I wandered into some sort of crazy, topsy-turvy dream-turned-nightmare.

“Jesus Christ,” Tanner mutters, shaking his head like he can’t believe what he’s seeing. *Get in line, bro.*

Mackenzie reaches over to hold my hand, and I cling to the tiny shred of support. I hear growling, but I can’t tell which of the alphas it’s coming from.

“You can’t be serious, man,” Mason says, an edge of anger spilling over into his typical calm.

“I’m extremely serious.”

“Dude, are you out of your mind? Espy is my *sister*. We can’t *court* her. That’s sick! That’s—”

“Leo. Calm down, man.” Tanner steps forward to pull my brother back. “How about we *all* calm down . . .?”

“Calm down!? No way am I going to calm down when my fucking packmate

is standing there making some sort of claim on my sister—”

“He can’t just claim her!” Micah butts in, looking pissed. “Espy is a human being. *She* gets to decide who courts her!”

The arguing continues, loudly, and looking around I can see we’ve started to gather quite the crowd.

“Ummm, guys?” Mackenzie tries to intervene, but no one seems to hear her.

My heart is beating out of my chest, but no one notices my growing panic.

“We kissed! We-we were going to ask her tonight if—”

Lincoln cuts Mason off, his growl sounding scarier than I’ve ever heard it. Weirdly, instead of it sending me running, I find myself leaning toward him slightly. Like a lunatic.

“It doesn’t matter. It won’t happen again,” Lincoln declares, his voice hard as he visibly grits his teeth, his jaw clenching. “I’m not one to kiss and tell, unlike *you*, but if I were—”

“You kissed him?” Cabe breaks in, craning his neck to try to catch my eye. He looks hurt, which makes me want to run to him, to hold him and reassure him everything’s okay. Even though it isn’t.

“She *perfumed* for me this afternoon,” Lincoln practically barks, and of course that succeeds in shutting everyone up. Again. Micah, Mason, and Cabe look heartbroken. Leo looks stunned, Tanner looks thoughtful, and Mackenzie, stepping into the middle of the group, looks pissed.

“Are you all done?!” she demands, scowling around the circle. For a tiny omega, she manages to pull off fierce pretty well. “This conversation is completely inappropriate. What the hell is the matter with you?”

Without Mackenzie holding my hand, my urge to bolt only grows. Even without knowing much about perfuming, it feels like such a private, intimate thing. For Lincoln to have brought it up out in public like this, in front of my brother, has me completely flushed. In fact, I’ve never felt so red. It’s like my blood has been set to simmer, and my skin feels crazy-sensitive. Almost like I can feel my heart beating along every nerve ending. My breath starts to

stutter, and a wave of dizziness crashes over me out of nowhere.

I can't tell if anyone is talking anymore, or if they're even still standing there. Being outside is wrong. I need to get inside—into my nest. Now.

“Oh my Gods, Espy.” Mackenzie's voice somehow makes it through the fog, and my eyes lock on her wide, panicked pupils. “I think you're going into heat . . .”

Fear like I've never known before spears through me, and my legs go numb and shaky.

This can't be happening. Not now. Not *ever*. I've been fighting against this very thing for years. It's not safe. I don't have a pack. I don't have a nest. I don't even have a real bed, nor a room with actual walls. I've been given zero information about what going into heat actually entails. And here I am, outside, surrounded by alphas and with countless strangers just a few feet away.

Before I can even blink, my thoughts are shattered by a piercing wail that breaks out across the space. A siren.

The fucking emergency alert sirens!

Not a single thought enters my head. I don't make a conscious choice to move, but somehow, I get to my feet. Somehow I'm running, and it's dark. It's cold. I'm not safe.

I'm in heat.

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Please consider writing a review. As a new author, your feedback is invaluable.

Have any questions? You can reach me at everleyfalls@gmail.com.

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