







# Accidentally Forever (Beta Accepted)

**Author:** N. Slater

**Category:** Urban

**Description:** Wrong Place. Wrong Time.

All I wanted to do was provide for my new Omega, Sofie.

My best friend. My lover. And my entire heart.

As a Beta, though, I'm not enough for her.

Her little cries for me to fill her worsen by the day. With Sofie's first heat around the corner, she will suffer if we don't find an Alpha. And soon.

When her heat starts, though, we aren't prepared. The only Alphas within reach are the very same ones

covered in tattoos and piercings who come by every week and spend far too much on the canvases my boss displays around the studio.

Puma. Gray. Lance. Hawk.

I've forgotten what it's like to lean, to give in, to not always be in control. I'm terrified of the instant connection Sofie and I have to these men, the way we crave their attention, their touch, and their acceptance.

But when our pack is threatened by likes of fake art and stolen pieces, my focus is on proving their innocence.

After all, my precious Omega deserves a happily ever after.

And so do I.

Accidentally Forever is an 18+ MMFFMM Betaverse novel with a Beta FMC protective of her Omega, loving Alphas, a bit of mystery, betrayal, and a happy ending. This is a polyromance novel where all the characters are together, however, there are mild MM moments on page. CW in the Author's Note.

~ This book can be read any order but Violet and Sofie from Accidentally Forever first show up in Corrupt Me ~

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:50 pm*

## Chapter one

### VIOLET

A few months ago Sofie and I were faking our allegiance to Pastor Ezra so that we could spend time with our bestie Camila. Just three Betas, waiting for our forevers to show up on our doorstep and whisk us away from the monotony of our lives. And now, Camila is mated to the best men in the entire world, Sofie is a late-presenting Omega, and I'm in love with a woman I'm not enough for.

Her parents were over the moon when she presented, building up entire portfolios of packs rich enough to buy the entire damn city. She took one look at those scent cards and threw them the middle finger, saying that she wouldn't be leaving my side. Of course, that wasn't the response her parents were hoping for and now we're on our own. Because my parents in tandem so that we were disrespecting god or some shit—whatever Pastor Ezra had stuffed down their throats at the time.

I might have been selfish enough to believe we could do it. Sofie is everything to me but the one thing she needs, I don't have and we're both stubborn enough not to go searching for it.

Which is why I'm currently stuck at Ash & Ivory at the edge of our little city, trying and failing to switch out some of the art for the showing tomorrow evening.

The weight of the damn frame digs into my palms, the awkward angle burning my arms as I stretch up, trying to hook the edge onto the display wall. The nails aren't lined up right, of course. Nothing ever is in this overpriced, pretentious gallery that

reeks of desperation. I should've measured. Should've cared more. But all I can think about is her.

Sofie hums softly behind the front desk. She's stacking glossy, framed purchases into neat piles, her delicate fingers brushing against the surfaces like they're precious artifacts instead of gaudy expressions of "wealth" and "taste." Her dark brown hair glimmers under the overhead lights, her movements graceful despite the exhaustion clinging to both of us.

It's been nearly three months since she first presented. And only weeks since everything changed. Sofie used to be this bold, take life by the balls kind of woman before her biology fucked us over. She seems even smaller than she used to be, timid, and a little terrified of the world she used to rule so defiantly. And me? Still just a Beta, trying to figure out how to keep her safe, how to give her everything she needs when I know I'm not enough.

The frame shifts, my muscles screaming for a break. "Piece of shit," I mutter, letting the edge scrape against the wall. It's too heavy, too awkward. Kind of like my life these days.

Sofie giggles, a soft sound as her melon scent sweetens and I glance her way. Her hazel eyes meet mine, my beautiful Omega glowing despite everything—the fear, the unknowns, the way her body has betrayed her with this late presentation—she's still glowing.

I can't lose her. I won't.

Her smile widens as she catches me staring and she waves like we're kids again, like this world isn't grinding us down one brutal day at a time. I force a grin back, hoping it hides the cracks. "Don't get too comfortable over there, baby," I call, my voice lighter than I feel. "I might make you climb up here and hold this thing for me."

Sofie laughs again, but there's a softness in her gaze, a knowing. She sees me. Really sees me. And it terrifies me, how much I crave that, how much I need it.

I shove the frame into place, the corner finally catching on the nail. My arms drop, relief rushing through my body. But it's fleeting. The weight isn't just in my hands—it's everywhere. Pressing on my chest, squeezing my lungs. The weight of being her protector, her provider. Her everything.

"Vi," she says softly, pulling me back to her. She's standing now, her hands clasped in front of her, her head tilted just enough to make my heart ache. "You okay?"

I nod, wiping my hands on my jeans. "Always."

It's a lie, but I'll keep telling it as long as she believes it.

There's three more frames that have to be hung and while I could enlist the help of the boss' son, I know he won't lift a finger. Marion probably isn't even here, despite the hefty salary his father throws at him. Not that it matters. Marion and his father barely step into the front part of the gallery unless there's a patron with deep pockets or it's a showing. The peace and quiet lets me work uninterrupted but it's moments like this when I wish I had a little help.

I swap out another over-priced painting on the display wall, my hands covered in dust and grit. I can't fucking wait to get a shower as a bead of sweat drips down my back beneath the suit jacket the boss requires I wear. Sofie gets away with those gorgeous sundresses and that thick sweater I bought her a few weeks ago while I'm slaving away in this atrocity. I'm surprised I'm not required to wear a bowtie.

I snort and dust off my hands, gathering the hammer and the leftover nails as the front door opens. A patron dripping in more money than I could dream of makes a beeline for the counter, no doubt to put a claim down on one of the many overpriced art

pieces in the gallery. Sofie looks up with a bright smile, greeting everyone as she always does seconds before her scent hardens.

“Excuse me! Is anyone even paying attention here? This is completely unacceptable!”

My gaze narrows at the middle-aged woman as her heels clack against the floor, her tone razor-sharp and dripping with entitlement. Sofie’s smile falters, her shoulders hunch slightly, and then she leans back. Most people wouldn’t notice but I do. I see the way she’s subtly retreating.

No. Not happening.

I focus back on the wall, trying to breathe through it, trying to keep my own temper in check. But that woman’s voice grates on me like nails on a chalkboard. “I ordered this piece for my living room and it arrived with a scratch on the frame! How am I supposed to display this in my home? It’s a disaster!”

Sofie stammers something—too soft for me to hear—and the woman cuts her off with a scoff. “Do you even inspect these things before you ship them out? Honestly, the lack of professionalism here is astounding.”

The growl slips out before I can stop it, low and feral, echoing in my chest. My feet are moving before I realize what I’m doing as I march toward the desk. “Ma’am,” I snap, my voice cutting through her tirade as I slip behind the counter. “Step back.” I swallow the sigh of relief when recognizing her as a Beta, even if she has 20 years on me. Approaching an Alpha like that could have dire consequences.

She turns to glare at me, lips curling in indignation. “Excuse me?”

I place myself between her and Sofie, my body tense, my fists clenched at my sides. “You’ve got an issue? Great. Let’s hear it. But don’t you dare stand here and berate

Sofie when she's the reason your precious art even made it to your house in the first place."

Her eyes narrow, but there's a flicker of hesitation. Good. Let her think twice before mouthing off again. "I—uh—there's a scratch on the frame," she stammers, holding up her phone to show a blurry photo. "It's unacceptable."

I lean in, taking the phone and squinting at the picture. It's a hairline scuff at best, something a little polish would fix in five seconds flat. "That's it? You came all the way here for this?"

The woman's lips part, but before she can say another word, the door bursts open again, and a kid—maybe sixteen—rushes in, panting and red-faced. "Mom, stop!" he shouts, skidding to a halt next to her. "You do this all the time! There's nothing wrong with it, okay? It's fine. Let's just go."

The woman's face flushes crimson, and she splutters, but the kid grabs her arm and starts tugging her toward the door. "Sorry," he mutters to me and Sofie, his eyes full of embarrassment. "She's... yeah. Sorry."

I watch them leave, my hands still clenched, my chest heaving with restrained frustration. When the door finally swings shut behind them, I turn back to Sofie. She's in the chair a few inches behind me, her entire body trembling, my poor Omega curled in on herself as she tries to fight her emotions.

"Baby, fuck. You didn't do anything wrong." I crouch down in front of her seat, taking her hands in mine and rub my thumbs over the back until she meets my gaze. Her hazel eyes are wide and glossy, my heart breaking just a little more today. "She came in here screaming but she was in the wrong."

Sofie gives me a small nod. "I know. It's just... everything is always so loud and



different. I just wanted to give her whatever she wanted so that she would go away.” Her body relaxes the longer I hold her hands until that sweet melon scent is back. “I’m sorry.”

I can’t remember how many times she’s said that in the last few weeks as if all of this is her fault. “Just breathe with me, baby.” She takes a short breath, chokes on it, and then sputters. There’s a strained giggle in there somewhere as Sofie tries to compose herself which brings a smile to my face. “In through your nose, out through your mouth. Nice and slow.”

She nods but doesn’t quite follow, her breaths hitching. Her scent’s already changing—sweet, heady, and too damn close to tipping into something I’m not ready to handle in the middle of this godforsaken gallery.

I dig into my pocket and pull out the little bottle of lotion I carry everywhere now, just in case. The label’s worn off, but I don’t need to read it to know what it does. A quick twist of the cap and I smear a dollop under her nose, swiping it gently across her upper lip.

“Better?” I ask, watching her expression change from mild panic to relief. “This’ll help. Just focus on breathing, okay?”

Her lips part slightly as she inhales a shaky breath. The tension in her shoulders starts to ease, the wild panic in her eyes dulling just enough for her to focus on me.

“Better?” I ask, brushing a strand of hair out of her face.

She nods, leaning forward to rest her forehead against my shoulder. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she whispers, her voice cracking. “My head’s all over the place, and my body—it’s getting hot again. I think—”

She doesn't finish, but she doesn't have to. I know what's happening. She's close. Having presented so late, we had no idea when her first heat would hit. Stress like this only pushes her closer to the edge and I'm kicking myself for not stopping that woman sooner.

"It's okay," I murmur, wrapping my arms around her, holding her close. She feels so small like this, fragile in a way that breaks my heart. "I've got you. Everything's gonna be okay."

I press a soft kiss to her temple, my lips lingering for just a second. Her scent's still thick in the air, even with the lotion, and it stirs something primal in me, something I shove down hard.

The sound of heavy boots on tile pulls me back and I glance up to see our boss emerging from the back office. His scowl is as permanent as the cheap cologne he bathes in, his beady eyes narrowing as he takes in the scene at the desk.

"Cut the PDA," he sneers, crossing his arms. "This isn't a daycare. Violet, I need you back in the stockroom. Now."

My jaw tightens, but I nod, squeezing Sofie's hand one last time before standing. "I'll be back in a minute," I whisper to her. She nods again, her gaze dropping to her lap, and it takes everything in me not to snap at him for being such a prick. As I follow him, I glance over my shoulder, catching Sofie's eyes one more time. "It's okay," I mouth to her. And I mean it. Because I'll make damn sure it is.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:50 pm*

### Chapter two

#### VIOLET

The back rooms of the gallery always smell the same—old wood, varnish, the lingering scent of something expensive but neglected, like forgotten wealth gathering dust. It feels like too many secrets are tucked back here between canvas and frame, the lights casting a sickly glow over everything, which just makes the space feel colder than it should. Rows of paintings lean against the walls, some half-covered with protective cloths, others left bare, their edges worn from being handled too many times.

I've never understood why some paintings are handled with more care than others since it doesn't correlate with how much they're sold for. There's another system in place, one I don't understand and one that doesn't actually matter to me. So long as I get paid and Sofie is safe, I keep my head down, mouth shut, and do whatever Xavier asks of me. Well, almost. I told him off the other day when he asked me to repaint one of the back rooms. That shit is in nobody's job description and unless he wanted it looking like shit and he was paying over time, I wasn't touching it.

I stifle a chuckle as Xavier walks ahead of me, the click of his boots echoing off the polished floors. His shoulders are stiff, his posture impatient, like he's already decided the conversation we're about to have is a waste of his time. I know that look. I know exactly what it means. I'm not gonna like whatever bullshit he's about to dump on me.

He stops near a row of portraits, each one draped in loose sheeting, and turns to face

me, his expression mirroring the agitation I feel. “These need to be hung up immediately,” he says, his voice clipped with annoyance. “Event’s tomorrow.”

My gaze flicks to the covered pieces, unease curling deep in my gut. I’m already in the middle of hanging shit he gave me earlier, everything perfectly curated to a certain artistic vibe. They’ll clash. Something’s off. I cross my arms. “And the guys you usually hire for this? Did they all suddenly disappear?” As cheap as Xavier is, he’s usually proud of his stock and threatens me enough times not to mess with the money makers. And now he’s asking me to be in charge of them? I’m good at a lot of things, hanging up art... not so much. Case in point, the fact that I scratched the wall earlier.

I’m also tired and cranky and if he makes me pull down all the work I just did, someone’s getting punched.

Xavier scoffs, dragging a hand over his jaw. “You ask too many questions.”

“And you don’t ask enough,” I shoot back, the irritation slipping into my voice before I can smooth it out. “Like, how the hell am I supposed to do this alone before the end of my shift?” One of those frames is nearly as wide as I am tall.

His expression barely shifts, but I catch the flicker of something in his eyes—condescension, barely concealed irritation, the usual cocktail of bullshit he serves up whenever I push back. “Then Sofie should do it.”

I blink, thrown for a second before my stomach tightens, anger sparking in my chest. “Sofie?” My voice is sharper than I mean it to be, but I don’t care. “You want Sofie to handle this? She barely weighs more than one of these frames, and you want her climbing ladders and moving shit worth more than my rent?” Whenever it comes to Sofie, I’m irrational—whether it’s protecting her, making sure she’s safe, or standing up for her when she can’t. My best friend, Camila, has laughed at me a time or two,

mentioning that my connection with Sofie mirrors the way her Alphas are possessive over the Omega in that pack.

Xavier exhales through his nose, taking several seconds before he says anything. “You’re lucky to have a job, Violet. I brought you in here when you needed help, even after what happened at the last one. I’d start acting a little more grateful.”

“That wasn’t my fucking fault,” I mutter, Xavier throwing me another hard look. A few months ago, Camila’s ex had stormed into the art gallery we used to work at and damaged property. He ended up paying for it but we lost our jobs in the process because that boss had been a dick. Xavier is also a dick but instead of firing me, he just pushes the right buttons to piss me off.

He’s been doing it since the day I started working here, testing boundaries, seeing how far he can go before I break. And fuck, I want to break. I want to tear into him, tell him exactly what kind of reckless, arrogant piece of shit he is for even suggesting Sofie handle this, for pretending this whole place isn’t built on backroom deals and whispered transactions. But I can’t, not if I want to ensure that Sofie has a place to lay her head every night.

So, instead, I force my hands into my pockets, fingers curling into fists, my nails pressing hard enough against my palms that I wonder if I’ll leave marks. “Fine,” I grind out, keeping my voice even, keeping my temper just below the surface. “But I’m not pulling anything down I’ve already hung and if something happens to these paintings, that’s on you.”

Xavier smirks, already turning away. “It won’t.”

I watch him disappear down the hall, my jaw pulled tight as I swallow a frustrated growl. The silence he leaves behind is suffocating as my attention drags back to the covered portraits, that knot in my stomach twisting tighter. Sofie shouldn’t be

anywhere near this. And for the first time, I wonder if maybe I shouldn't be either.

"This is bullshit," I whisper to myself, gently dragging off one of the sheets and frowning at what's unearthed. I don't understand what I'm staring at—mostly because I know fuck all about art but also because I'm 99% sure I've seen this one before. Xavier made it a point to drill into my head that he deals in one of a kind paintings so having a duplicate doesn't make any sense.

However, I'm not paid to care. I'm paid to obey. Glancing around, I look for a cart to wheel these out into the main lobby, hoping and praying I don't damage a wall or knock something off a table in the process. Then again, one of the patrons might just think it's part of the display.

The cart's wheels squeak with every push, the uneven sound grating against the quiet as I stack the covered portraits, taking care even though my patience is already stretched thin. The frames are heavier than they need to be, overdesigned and bulky, the kind of gaudy shit rich people throw money at so they can call it culture. I used to want to study art but soon realized that I'm not cut out for this world. Everything that people think is beautiful and gorgeous... I just get confused.

Sofie finds beauty in everything and I love the way her little face lights up when she sees something she likes. But if I had the choice, my walls would remain bare. A frustrated huff leaves me as I struggle with the next painting, the fabric draped over it kicking up a cloud of dust that sends me into a coughing fit. I swear Xavier gives me certain jobs to punish me because there's no reason for me to be doing this.

I was hired as customer service.

The only thing that is going to serve me in this moment is my stubbornness as I push the cart into the hall, silently cursing as one of the wheels sticks. I'm not even two steps into the lobby when there's a quiet, familiar hum of disapproval.

"Those are heavier than the other ones. You're not gonna be able to lift those by yourself," Sofie muses, leaning against the wall a few inches away, arms crossed, her weight shifted onto one hip.

I glance up at her, chuckling at how adorable her defiant expression is. "Baby, I don't really have a choice. Xavier wants these up before the showing and he decided not to hire the usual guys." I manage a shrug, pushing the cart forward a few more steps. My mind works through several different scenarios and how I'll have to maneuver different ladders and stools in order to balance this shit correctly.

A sigh leaves her, soft and full of something that feels too much like concern. Her presence shifts closer, even though she doesn't reach for me. Even with her scent muted by blockers, something about having her near eases a little of the tension curling at the base of my spine. But I hate that she's worried.

"Baby, it's okay. Just go back to the front desk, okay?"

The sharp edge to her scent has me sighing, knowing that my beautiful Omega is not going to let me do this alone. "No. I'm not going to sit over there and watch you struggle." It's times like this that I still catch the fierce woman she used to be as a Beta, when life wasn't as confusing, when her biology wasn't constantly muting her inhibitions.

"Fine, just be careful okay?" I pull the sheet back just enough to get a better grip on the first painting, fingers pressing against the edge of the canvas. The texture is off—something not quite right beneath my fingertips. I frown, shifting my hold, and when I move my hand away, the color smudges.

Shit. I jerk my hand back, expecting nothing, expecting maybe a bit of dust or old varnish coming loose. But—the paint smears. I freeze, watching as the colors blend in a way they shouldn't. The surface is still damp, too fresh, too wrong for something

that should've been dry long before it ever ended up in my hands.

"Is that supposed to do that?" Sofie asks, peering over my shoulder.

I wipe my fingers against my pants, shaking my head. "Not usually." My stomach tightens, a slow, uneasy curl of dread settling in the pit of my belly. I think there's a reason Xavier didn't hire the usual crew but I'm not going to dwell on it. "I don't know enough about all this shit to make a fuss, though. Xavier already doesn't like me much as it is, baby."

Sofie doesn't respond right away. She's still looking at the painting, brows pinched together, lips pressed into a thin line, like she's trying to piece together something she doesn't like. Whatever this is, whatever's wrong with these paintings, it's not something I can solve now.

"Let's just get these hung up in the empty spaces left," I say, brushing dust off her sleeve before nudging her gently with my hip, forcing a bit of lightness into my voice. "And after? I'll make sure we swing by that ice cream shop you love so much."

The corners of her mouth twitch, like she wants to argue, like she knows I'm trying to distract her but also really wants that ice cream.

"I'm getting two scoops," she mutters, finally stepping back.

A slow grin pulls at my lips. "Baby, I'll get you three if it gets you to stop worrying about me."

Sofie lets out a delighted little squeal, the sound cutting through the quiet, stale air of the lobby. "Four scoops," she whispers and before I can react, she presses a quick, happy kiss to my cheek and immediately sets to work beside me. Her excitement is contagious and I love that the small things make her so fucking happy.



“Didn’t know hanging overpriced shit could make you this happy,” I tease, sliding my hands under the next portrait and carefully hoisting it onto the cart.

Sofie giggles, her fingers brushing mine as she helps position it. “It’s not that,” she says, sucking her lip between her teeth. “And it’s not just the ice cream, Vi. I don’t know how to explain it but just... you. Everything about you. I don’t even like when you disappear into the backrooms.” Her expression darkens a little bit before it’s like it never happened.

I’ve noticed the changes in her emotions and the way her entire existence revolves around me because it’s the same for me. I don’t claim to understand it but knowing that I’m not enough for the woman who has my heart just makes it worse.

We keep working, a quiet rhythm forming between us. We’re down to the last one when Sofie suddenly stops, fingers hesitating on the corner of the cloth. She doesn’t look at me right away, her gaze flickering between the canvas and the floor, like she’s debating something.

“Vi,” she starts softly, almost unsure. “Do you...” Her voice trails off and she exhales sharply before trying again. “Do you like me like this?”

I blink, the question catching me off guard. “Like what?”

Sofie shifts her weight, her eyes flicking up to meet mine. “Like this. Being an Omega.” Her throat bobs as she swallows. “Does it make me... more desirable? Or less? I always feel needy and irritable and I snap a lot or get scared. You always have to step in. Fuck, I shouldn’t have said anything.”

Every once and a while, Sofie asks but there’s never been tears glazing over her eyes as she asks. It’s always just a soft check in, a bit of curiosity. Today, it feels like the wrong words will tear her entire world down. I don’t know why she thinks it even

matters but then I remember just how lost she is in this new designation and the constant reassurance she seeks.

I set down the last painting, leaning one hip against the cart as I really look at her—dark brown hair a little messy from work, those big, expressive eyes searching mine, fingers twitching like she’s afraid of the answer.

“Baby,” I murmur, stepping closer. I reach out, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, letting my fingers linger at the side of her face. “My feelings for you haven’t changed. Not once.” I hold her gaze, making sure she hears every word. “I’ve always loved you in some part, even when we were just stupid kids sneaking out past curfew. Even when we were Betas together and you were trying to teach me how to braid hair and I was fucking terrible at it.”

Sofie lets out a small, watery laugh, her lips twitching.

I keep going, my thumb tracing a slow, lazy circle against her cheek. “But now? Now, it’s just stronger. Deeper. Not because of what you are, but because you’re you. You could be anything, baby, and I’d still be here. Being your Beta? It’s the best thing in the entire world.”

Sofie’s smile blooms, her scent thickening in the air—warm and sweet and hers. It wraps around me, fills my lungs, makes my stomach twist in that way it always does when she’s close. For a second, I almost pull her closer, almost let my hands slip lower, let my mouth find hers. But the staunch smell of fresh paint tears me from the fantasy.

I clear my throat and tap the tip of her nose, forcing myself to step back. “Go on, baby,” I murmur, nodding toward the front. “Back behind the desk with you.”

She pouts dramatically, but there’s still that radiant smile beneath it. “You’re no fun.”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “Shift’s over in an hour, sweetheart. Then we’re outta here.”

Sofie sighs, but she listens, trailing toward the front of the gallery with a satisfied hum. My shoulders sag the moment she turns around and my gaze drops to the smudged paint on my fingers. I might not be well versed in art theory but I’m pretty sure it’s not supposed to be that fresh. Turning to face the picture in question, I hate that it’s such a magnificent piece. Something that I might even stare at a little bit longer than the others, admiring a vision that I don’t understand.

Don’t worry about it, I tell myself, even as I move toward the little kiosk to find the display cards that go with each of these new paintings. I’ll focus on memorizing the artist, a little of their history, and what the art represents. Past that, I’ll feign innocence and everything will be just fine.

Except, I don’t have a good poker face.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:50 pm*

### Chapter three

#### LANCE

I tap my fingers against the steering wheel, exhaling slow, dragging the moment out as if I can force something interesting to happen just by willing it into existence. Anything to break the monotony, anything to keep my mind from circling back to the thing I've been trying to ignore for months.

Sofie and Violet.

The thought alone is enough to drag my mood straight through the fucking dirt, yanking me back to the last time I had my hands on them, the last time their warmth had curled against mine like they belonged there.

The Omega and Beta duo working at Ash & Ivory have been the kind of distraction that gets under my skin, sticking to me long after I've left their presence. All soft curves and sharp tongues, two sides of the same coin, sweetness and bite tangled together in a way that's been impossible to forget. I still remember the exact moment Violet caught me watching Sofie, how her lips had curved into that wicked little smirk, like she already knew exactly where things would end up. And she had been right.

One night, one invitation for drinks that turned into something else entirely. Sheets twisted around us, Sofie's breathless little whimpers still burned into my memory, the way her wide eyes had flickered between hesitation and need. Violet had been a steady heat against me, guiding her, guiding us, her grip firm, her words just as sharp

even as she unraveled beneath me. It happened again. And again. And then—nothing.

No calls. No messages. No hints of them waiting for me to find them again. The silence stretches on, each day chipping away at the patience I barely have to begin with. We weren't a 'thing', there had been no discussion for permanence, and even if there had been, I'd have had to run it past my pack. There wouldn't be any pushback, I'm sure, but it would have added to the strange dynamic we already have.

I glance at Hawk, silent beside me, eyes scanning the storefronts as the Jeep rolls to a slow stop near the gallery. He's been watching me the entire drive, saying nothing, but that smirk playing at the corner of his mouth tells me everything I need to know. He doesn't have to voice the thought—I can feel the amusement simmering beneath his skin, the barely restrained teasing he's just waiting to unleash the second I give him an opening.

I swing the door open, albeit a little too roughly, and step out onto the pavement, stretching out my shoulders and shaking off the tension winding through my muscles. Hawk follows, leaning lazily against the Jeep, arms crossed, that same smug expression still plastered on his face.

"So," he drawls, voice dripping with amusement, "you volunteering to come along today wouldn't have anything to do with a certain cute little Omega at the front desk, would it?"

He's never really met Sofie, not the way I have. I've always been the one dealing with Xavier and his sorry ass but today, our main Alpha—Puma—mentioned that Hawk should take the lead. Of course, I still offered to come and it was very much because of the beautiful Omega at the front desk. I shoot him a glare, already regretting that Puma gave him this task. "Fuck off."

His shoulders shake with laughter, the kind that grates just enough to make me want

to knock that smirk clean off his face. Staring at my own face, though, just makes it worse. Having a twin is all fun and games until it feels like my mirror image is laughing at me. Hawk shoves his hands into his pockets, falling into step beside me as we approach the gallery. “You’re not denying it.”

“There’s nothing to deny,” I mutter, adjusting the cuffs of my black button-up. “She is cute. And I don’t mind looking.” I want so much more than that, her pliant body beneath mine, those sweet little sounds as she arches into my touch, and the way her eyes glaze over as she comes. Sure, maybe they only called me so I could ease the ache of an Omega’s need but Sofie’s got me wrapped around her finger and she doesn’t even know it.

“Or touching,” he adds, his grin widening when I flip him off.

The conversation dies after that, but even in silence, there’s an unspoken understanding curling between us, something that neither of us needs to say aloud. Even as we step onto the sidewalk, my body pulls toward the gallery before my mind fully catches up, an instinctual alignment toward them, toward the thing I haven’t been able to shake since the last time I walked away. I tell myself it’s just curiosity, that it’s nothing more than lingering interest, but that’s a lie.

Violet’s fire has always drawn me in, a magnet pulling tight no matter how much space I try to put between us. Every sharp comment, every challenge thrown my way, every time she meets my stare without an ounce of hesitation—I crave it. And Sofie? Sofie is a different kind of want, the kind that settles deep, the kind that makes me want to ruin her in the best possible way while keeping the rest of the world from touching her.

And I know Hawk feels it too. He hasn’t mentioned Sofie or Violet but the few times I’ve brought them up in conversation or come back from a night with them, Hawk lingers. Because we never do things separately—not in the long run, anyway.

It's been that way since we were kids, raised side by side, shaped into a seamless unit, two halves of the same whole. We learned early on that moving together was easier, that trusting each other above anyone else made things smoother. We share everything—money, business, our place, even our lovers. Whether it's Gray, the youngest Alpha in our pack, or some pretty thing we pick up at a club, there's never been a need for distance. No jealousy, no second-guessing. Just an unspoken understanding that what's his is mine and what's mine is his.

Which is why I'm not the least bit surprised when Hawk glances at me, brow lifted, curiosity flickering behind those eyes as we walk toward Ash & Ivory. "Those women must be pretty damn special," he muses but I know him too well to miss the edge of amusement beneath it.

I know what he's getting at. It's rare—real rare—that I do something without him, that we both don't sink our teeth into the same thing, the same person. But that night with Violet and Sofie? It just happened. A few times, but who's counting?

"Nothing special," I mutter, shrugging like it doesn't mean anything. Like I haven't thought about it more times than I can count. "It wasn't planned or anything, it just... I don't know. It felt natural." I exhale, dragging a hand down my face, restless energy coiling tight beneath my skin. "You know what was nice about it? Not having to worry about someone wanting to be part of the Ashford pack." The words come easy, even though I'm not sure they're entirely true. "Those two? They just wanted to have a good time. No expectations, no strings, no bullshit. I'm not even sure they knew who I was."

Hawk chuckles, rubbing his jaw, the corner of his mouth twitching up in something close to a smirk. "Bet you liked that."

"Damn right I did." A grin pulls at my lips. "And then Violet all but kicks me out in the morning."

That gets him. “Damn, I already like her.”

“She is something,” I admit, rolling my shoulders, shaking off the phantom memory of her smirk, the way she looked at me like she already knew what I’d do before I did it. “Sofie too. Quiet, but sweet. I get why Violet keeps her close.”

Hawk nudges me with his elbow, eyes glinting with mischief. “Maybe you’ll share the love one day.”

A short laugh leaves me, but I don’t respond, because maybe is a dangerous word. Maybe means thinking too much about those nights. Maybe means wanting another one and another after that. And I don’t do maybes.

The second we step inside Ash & Ivory, it feels like we’ve entered an entirely different world. The scent of varnish and aged canvas clings to the walls, mixing with two sweet scents that I’ve been craving for weeks. It lingers in the air, gently coating the space around us, almost as if this place is wholly theirs instead of Xavier’s.

My gaze falls on Sofie, the sweet little Omega peeking over the top of the front counter, wide hazel eyes locking onto us the second we step in. There’s a brief flicker of surprise, then her expression softens, her lips curving into the kind of smile that makes my chest go tight. She throws me an enthusiastic wave, her cheeks coloring.

Fuck, that does something to me.

I lift a hand in return, but the moment her scent shifts—blooms—it’s like a wire pulling taut beneath my skin. It’s stronger today, richer, something unmistakable curling at the edges of it and my gut clenches, my muscles locking up. I force my jaw to stay loose, my body to stay relaxed so that I don’t scare her. Even so, my cock thickens in my pants, the urge to reach down and adjust it while she’s watching growing with every second.



Hawk exhales beside me, a quiet grunt as he steps away without hesitation, disappearing into the deeper part of the gallery. He's just as affected as I am, the bastard giving me a few minutes to make a fool of myself.

"Hey, Sofie," I manage, stepping up to the counter. The color in her cheeks deepens as she unconsciously leans forward, searching for my touch. I can't help but give in, gently caressing the side of her face. "You doing okay? You're feeling a little hot, sweetheart."

The name just slips out, Sofie offering me a small smile. "I'm okay. Promise." She lets out a heavy sigh before pulling back, those hazel eyes still focused on my face. "It's nice to see you. Violet is over there if you're looking for something new. We just put up a few things."

I can tell she's lying, the sweetened edge to her scent signaling her nearing heat. I have no idea how they're going to maneuver that and it's none of my business but my instincts are yelling at me to swoop in and be there for Sofie. We've never entertained an Omega in heat, something that would start a serious discussion once we got back home. Once again, I'm thinking of a connection that just isn't feasible.

I pat the counter once before letting my eyes wander over the displays of artwork. Some of it is the usual overpriced bullshit that inexperienced collectors eat up—predictable compositions, clean lines, empty statements dressed up as something profound. But some of it is real, vibrant strokes against muted backgrounds, figures distorted in a way that makes them feel more human than anything else. Pieces that look like they don't quite belong, like they were meant for a different kind of place.

But my attention doesn't stay on the artwork for long when I catch Violet adjusting one of the heavier frames on the wall. That fierce expression on her face reminds me of how amazing she is with Sofie, her protector, lover, and her entire world. Watching them together was always mesmerizing. Her short brown hair is pulled

back in a mini ponytail on top of her head, her sleeves rolled up as she lets out a little grunt of frustration.

She pulls back, curls her hands into fists and shakes them at the painting before trying to adjust it again. Hawk's laughter comes up at my side, both of us watching the woman step back and clap her hands, satisfied with her work. Then she glances over at us, a smirk playing on her lips. "Fancy meeting you here, Lance," she muses, arching a brow. It always feels so fucking good that they can tell us apart. Never once has she mistaken us for each other.

I return the smirk, shifting my weight lazily onto one foot. "Guess you're just lucky."

She huffs a quiet laugh before turning fully to face me, arms crossing beneath her chest, her gaze steady and unbothered. "What can I do for you, Lance, Hawk? You were just in here last week for new material."

I tilt my head, dragging my gaze down and back up again, not ashamed in the slightest at cataloguing the way her clothes fit every last curve of hers. "I dunno," I say casually, "I kinda just like seeing you work."

Violet snorts, unimpressed. "Bullshit."

I grin. "Okay, mostly bullshit. But I do appreciate a woman who knows how to handle things."

She rolls her eyes, but her attention never strays, the corner of her mouth twitching like she's fighting another smirk. "You flirting with me, Lance?"

"Wouldn't dream of it," I say smoothly, even though we both know that's a lie.

Her smirk lingers, but then her gaze flickers past us, shifting toward the front of the

gallery, toward Sofie. She's still at the desk, fingers fidgeting with the edge of an open ledger, her attention fixed on the pages but not really on them. There's tension in the way she's sitting, a sort of quiet restlessness that doesn't match the bright warmth of how she greeted us earlier.

I don't get long to dwell on it as Violet moves easily into the conversation, gesturing toward the newest collection with the kind of effortless confidence that makes it clear she knows her shit. "Most of these came in last week," she says, stepping forward, falling into a rhythm. "Private sellers, some fresh from collectors who wanted to switch things up. A few from an estate sale upstate."

My gaze drifts over the paintings, taking in the variation, the different styles, the way some seem to fit Ash & Ivory's usual aesthetic while others feel almost too refined for a place like this. Violet is always like this—vibrant, engaged, talking with just enough energy to make you feel like she actually gives a damn about the work. And maybe she does. Maybe this job is more than a paycheck, maybe she really believes in what she's selling.

But she's also fiercely protective of Sofie and that's something I can't ignore. Not many Betas are built that way, willing to put someone else before themselves and I admire that about her. Even if it makes her hard to read sometimes. She keeps talking, explaining the origins of a few more pieces, but I stop in front of one that sends shivers crawling down my spine. Not just because it's famous. Because it shouldn't be here.

The portrait is unmistakable, a dark aura, layers so thick with pigment it feels like the subject might shift beneath the weight of a stare. The artist—long dead—had been notorious for hoarding his own work, for refusing to let more than a handful of his pieces see the light of day. Most of them had ended up locked in private collections or secured in vaults where no one but the absurdly wealthy could get their hands on them. And yet, here it is.

Hawk hums, a near-silent sound that confirms he recognizes it too. There's no fucking way that Xavier got his hands on a piece like this. I know he has connections but in this business, everyone knows everyone and there's no damn way this is real. And if it is, I need to know what he did to get it because it couldn't have been legal.

My fingers graze the edge of the frame, not quite touching, but close enough to feel the weight of the thing, close enough that I can almost hear the ghost of the artist's brush against canvas. "This is an interesting piece for a place like Ash & Ivory to get their hands on," I murmur, glancing at Violet.

She doesn't react right away. Doesn't perk up with that same enthusiasm she had when talking about the other works, doesn't immediately launch into some spiel about its value or history.

She answers, sure. Tells me the name of the painting, the supposed details of how it got here, rattles off something about the previous owner. But her voice is different. Too even, too practiced, like she's reading from a script instead of selling it. Something like this—something this rare—should have her practically buzzing, pushing it like it's the crown jewel of the collection. A find like this doesn't just appear in a small gallery. It should be headlining an auction, commanding a bidding war so absurd it makes headlines.

But she's just... talking. Going through the motions. Answering because she has to, not because she wants to. Suspicion pricks at the edge of my thoughts, but I don't let it show. Instead, I nod slowly, dragging my gaze over the piece one last time before saying, casually, "I'll put in a bid."

Her brows lift just slightly, and for a second—just a flicker—there's something unsure in her expression. Then it's gone, buried beneath that same smirk she always wears. "Big spender," she teases.

I flash her a grin. “Always.”

Hawk doesn't say anything, but I can feel his gaze burning into the side of my head, his silent what the fuck are you doing? pressing against the back of my skull. Violet takes down my information as I ignore my brother, waiting until we're back in the car before acknowledging him.

“Why would you do that? That shit has to be a fake.”

“Because I want eyes on it. A bid will ensure I'm notified if someone else wants it as well. We both know it shouldn't be at Ash & Ivory so I'm curious as to what Xavier is up to.” If it's fake, we know that Xavier is just a greedy bastard. But if it's real, I have questions. So. Many. Questions.

The rest of the drive back is tense, my mind wandering to Sofie's impending heat. There's no way Violet doesn't know it's just around the corner but my need to insert myself in their situation isn't going away.

“Stop fucking thinking about it,” Hawk growls at me. “That's not a road we can go down, not without the approval of Gray and Puma.”

I shake off the feeling, hoping I can forget it by dinner time. Unlikely. However, there's a much bigger issue. Violet's strained speech as she explained that painting worries me. I've dealt with enough sellers to know when something isn't right. Desperate ones who will push anything for a quick buck, greedy ones who overvalue their stock, slick bastards who act like they're doing you a favor by letting you spend a fortune. But reluctance? That's rare. And that makes me curious.

The black gates swing open at our approach, sleek metal parting without hesitation, welcoming us home. The house itself is a mix of past and present—towering columns of old wealth wrapped in modern darkness, deep stone and reflective glass

swallowing the night around it. It's the kind of place that draws a reaction from everyone who sees it, whether that reaction is reverence or fear depends entirely on who's standing at the gates.

Once inside, the scene that greets us is about as typical as it gets around here. Puma sits at the kitchen table, his gaze flicking over a stack of photographs, studying them with the same quiet intensity he gives everything. Gray is sprawled across his lap, legs draped carelessly over the chair, head tilted just enough to let Puma trail slow, absent-minded kisses along his jaw. The kind of contact that speaks of time, of ownership, of something settled.

They look almost like something out of a picture themselves, tattoos twisting up their arms—Puma's speaking of a life well lived and Gray's showing the torrent of chaos that always floods his mind.

Gray hums, holding up two pictures side by side. "Which one do you think works better as a centerpiece for the house I'm working on?"

Puma doesn't answer right away, still focused on the slow drag of his lips against Gray's skin, like he has all the time in the world. Hawk snorts, heading straight for the bar. "Are we interrupting?"

Gray smirks but doesn't move. "Would it stop you?"

"Not even a little." I drop into a chair across from them, stretching my legs out.

Puma lifts his gaze, dark eyes finding mine. We're all Alphas but there's a different aura Puma carries, almost like a presence that demands respect. He's the head of our pack and our business, nearly ten years older than my thirty-seven years of life. The silver strands through his black hair speak of wisdom and knowledge I've only begun to curate. There's also a mass of wealth his family built over a century, our pack

reaping the benefits.

“How’d the visit go?” He asks, his voice rumbling through the room.

Gray shifts slightly, attention shifting between us, curiosity flickering across his features. “Yeah,” he adds. “Find anything good?” His tongue darts out to lick his lips, his nostrils flared no doubt at the two scents lightly coating us. I have a mind to grab him and bend him over the counter but that’ll have to wait.

I lean back, rolling my neck, exhaling slowly before answering. “Same shit, mostly. New art, new collectors, same overpriced bullshit. And yes, I know you sent Hawk to take point on this but he’s shit at talking to people. I’m the charming twin, remember?”

Hawk snorts from the bar, swirling a healthy serving of whatever whisky Puma bought recently. “Brother, you can be the charming one all you want. I’ll just keep doing what I do well.” He reaches down and grabs himself through his pants, stroking a few times as my face turns up in disgust. God, I don’t know why I’ve let myself suffer around him for this long.

Turning back to Puma, I bring up the painting I did buy. “One piece stood out for multiple reasons but the Beta selling it... she wasn’t into it. Didn’t push it, didn’t try to hype it up. Almost like she didn’t want me to buy it.”

Gray frowns, sitting up a little straighter. His mop of dark hair falling into his eyes. As the youngest and wildest of our pack, he is also the one that stands out the most. A mass of piercings littering his face as he chews on the ring through his bottom lip. “That’s weird. You always told me she knew her shit. I bet she’s snarky. Hey, Puma, I’m going to—”

Puma playfully slaps him across the head. “No. You’re doing just fine where you are.

I don't need you terrifying that poor Beta with what you like to call charm."

Gray is wonderful with his clients, helping them decorate rooms in their houses. He can talk them into almost anything, getting them to spend hundreds of thousands of dollars without fail. However, he's also a bit... blunt. And while I'm sure Violet could deal with his snark, not everyone can.

"I put a bid on it to figure out what's wrong with it. It's from some elusive collection that Xaiver shouldn't have access to. It makes no sense that it was just sitting up there when there's an event soon." I mull over the many different avenues this can go. If no one bids on that shit, I'll be taking home what I think is a forgery. Or someone else will buy it and then I can send Gray to help them position the artwork in their home.

Most everyone who buys something from Ash & Ivory ends up calling one of us for our input.

Puma hums, considering, his hand still absently tracing over Gray's hip, his mind already pulling at the loose threads of the conversation. "You think Ash & Ivory is shady?" He asks like he doesn't already know, like he doesn't already have a mountain of information sitting in his office on the subject. While we're out finding new art to drag into our collection, Puma is researching. Constantly looking at the bigger picture, the players, and everything in between.

The answer is immediate. "Yes but I didn't think it was forgery level of shady."

"Always have," my brother adds as he plops into a seat beside me.

Gray glares at me, his nostrils still flared. I can't be sure whose scent he's reacting to, not that it matters. "Why would you keep going back then? This is the first time you've bought something in a few months. Well, bid."



A grin pulls at my lips. “Because the Omega at the front makes it hard to hate the place.”

Gray’s gaze flicks between me and Hawk. He stretches slightly in Puma’s lap, dragging his fingers over the arm of the chair like he’s piecing something together, turning over the thought before giving it a voice. “The Omega, is that the same one that’s always there? The one you’ve had a few nights with?” I nod, a small smile playing on the younger Alpha’s lips. “She’s cute and no I wasn’t stalking, but Puma’s stopped through a time or two and I caught her rosy cheeks through the glass.”

Across from me, Puma’s expression barely changes, but I see it. The way his jaw tightens, just slightly. The subtle press of his fingers against Gray’s hip, the small moment where he forces himself to relax. Anyone else wouldn’t catch it. Most people wouldn’t even notice. But we do.

It’s no secret that our pack is different. We aren’t like the traditional ones, the ones that move in predictable patterns, bonded together in a way that fits into the expectations of everyone around them. We don’t follow the usual rules, don’t exist in the shape most people assume we should. We’re not all Alphas looking for an Omega to balance the pack, to fit into the empty space that tradition says we should be filling.

And Puma? He made it clear a long time ago that he will never take an Omega again. Not after his first one passed away. That wound still runs deep, an old scar buried beneath too much time, one that never really faded no matter how many years passed. I know that better than anyone. And for all her softness, all her quiet warmth, not even Sofie—with her sweet scent and those wide, curious eyes—could fill the space Puma refuses to let anyone else touch.

But despite everything, despite the distance he’s held between himself and the idea of claiming again, he’s always been clear about one thing—If we bring an Omega into the house, he won’t stop us. He won’t take them, won’t claim them as his own, but he

will protect them with a pack bond. Nurture them. Keep them safe. Because that's who he is. It always has been.

The moment passes, slipping back into the easy quiet that settles over us when we aren't trying too hard to dig into things that don't need to be said out loud. I roll my shoulders, stretching my arms out before flopping into a chair at the table, exhaling loud and exaggerated. "Alright, so—who's cooking dinner?"

The silence lasts half a second before—

"Not it," Gray says immediately, lifting both hands in surrender, completely unbothered.

"Not it," Puma adds without hesitation, the corner of his mouth twitching.

A slow smirk pulls at my lips as I tilt my head toward my brother, who's just sipping his whiskey. He sighs, the sound long and drawn out, already resigned before he mutters, "Guess I'm cooking because if I don't, we'll be having fucking pizza again."

Gray grins, completely unapologetic. "And? Pizza's a valid option."

Puma chuckles, pressing a slow kiss against Gray's temple, murmuring something against his skin that I don't quite catch, something private between the two of them. I'm always a little jealous at how easy their relationship is with each other, reminding me just how much I want something of my own.

Hawk pushes to his feet, disappearing into the kitchen as I relax a little further, trying to avoid Puma's gaze. But it's like he knows where my head is at, my Alpha silently telling me that it's okay to want and to have. I know I need to bring up Sofie seriously at some point and my intentions with her.

And then I realize that talking to Puma and Gray can't be the first step. Violet is. In this strange, convoluted relationship—not the relationship that we have, but Violet is her protector and without her approval, I'm getting nowhere.

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:50 pm*

### Chapter four

#### VIOLET

When I first rented this apartment, I had hopes and dreams of where we would end up. Maybe I foolishly thought it would be me and Sofie against the world, regardless of our designations. That hasn't been the experience, at all, though. And every time her cries get a little louder when I'm not enough, it just hurts that much more.

Especially because she doesn't want to want anyone else. God, this arrangement is fucking stupid. It's too quiet in here, only the sound that comes from the dresser drawers sliding open and slamming shut as I dig through them echoing through the space. I'm searching for something— anything —clean enough to wear. Every damn piece of clothing I own is either stained, wrinkled beyond saving, or just missing altogether, lost somewhere in the mess of laundry we never got around to doing.

Another drawer, another disappointment. My patience is wearing thin, but finally, I find a pair of sweats that seem clean enough to pass. I don't need much—just something decent to wear while I run across the street to grab the pizza.

The thought of it is already in my head, the smell of melted cheese, pepperoni, the warmth of real food instead of the cheap, half-assed meals we've been living on for weeks. It's been too long since we've had something that actually fills us up, but money is tight. The bills are stacking up, each one another reminder of how little room we have to breathe. A few more weeks, maybe, before things get bad enough that we really have to start worrying.

But that's nothing new—I'm always worrying.

My fingers tighten around the fabric, jaw clenching as my mind starts spiraling. I need to figure something out. I need a plan, a solution, something better than barely scraping by, pretending things are fine when they're anything but. Then, something cuts through my thoughts.

A soft, broken moan. My pulse stalls, my mind catches up too slow, and then instinct kicks in. That melon scent I've fallen in love with thickens until it's almost unbearable, my thighs clenching together as pure unadulterated need bleeds through me. The bathroom door is cracked just so, steam curling into the hallway but it doesn't mask anything.

I rush over to the door and shove it open, my heart slamming into my ribs, and—

Fuck.

Sofie is on her hands and knees in the shower, her body trembling, her skin flushed red. Water slips over her, dripping from dark brown hair that clings to her shoulders, trailing down the curves of her back. It would be beautiful if it weren't so damn wrong. "Fuck, baby," I push out as I scramble to her side, twisting the knob off without even thinking. The sizzle of hot metal causes me to wince but I push past it, needing to make sure my omega is okay. "Sofie, breathe. Baby, come on, look at me."

I gently cup her face as I pull her into my arms, tears streaming down her cheeks. My heart breaks for her as she clings to my shirt, a small whimper escaping her. Her forehead presses against my chest, breath coming in sharp, uneven gasps. "Vi..." Her voice is weak, cracking on the syllable. "I—"

Another wave of her scent hits me in a rush, slick drenching my sweats. It's

impossible to focus in moments like this but my only priority is her comfort. I slide my hands under her arms, lifting her up, supporting her weight as her body presses against mine. Her breath stutters, catching in her throat as I haul her out of the shower and onto the bathroom floor.

“Shit,” I mutter, my grip firm as I gather her close. There’s only one way to fix this—one that neither one of us want to think about. I’m terrified she’ll get hurt and Sofie just doesn’t want anyone other than me.

She sags into me, body limp and pliant as I lift her again, carrying her through the hallway, into the bedroom, and lower her gently onto the mattress. The sheets wrinkle beneath her, the mattress catching the excess water as I finally look at my beautiful Omega. Her pupils are blown wide, lips parted, chest rising and falling in uneven gasps. Her entire body is flush with her heat and any other day, I would lovingly worship every inch of her.

But right now, she needs the one goddamn thing that I don’t have. “Baby,” I whisper, leaning in, pressing the softest kiss to her lips, just enough to anchor her, just enough to let her know I’m here.

Her fingers clutch at my shirt. “It hurts,” she breathes.

“I know, baby,” I murmur, stroking her cheek, my palm cupping the heat of her skin as her scent thickens in the air, wrapping around me, making it harder to think, harder to breathe. “I know.”

I can’t get the goddamn sweatpants off fast enough as I rummage through one of the drawers for the one contraption that will give her relief. Well, enough relief until we figure it out.

“Lance?” Sofie whines as I crawl back onto the bed with the largest silicone cock I

could find at the store a few weeks ago. Her glassy eyes meet mine as she writhes on the mattress, seeking release. “Call Lance.”

I would if I thought it would be safe. Lance is a good time but he’s mated and dragging him into a heat with an unmated Omega never ends well for the weaker party. I would never forgive myself if something happened to her, even if I do believe that Lance is hers. Maybe not mine but I know he would take care of her.

“Fuck!” I cry out. Sofie flinches and then relaxes the moment I lean down to press a kiss to her lips. “Sorry, baby. I’m just frustrated. Let’s make you feel better, okay?” She hums her response, clinging to me as I strap on the dildo, hoping and praying that the fake knot at the base will be enough to drag her out of this heat spike. Her whimpers heighten as I lower myself over her, soothing those sounds the moment my lips attach to the base of her neck. Her back arches toward me, her nipples brushing against my chest, drawing out my own need. Wetness gathers between my thighs as I rock my hips over hers, cries softening just a fraction.

“Don’t tease me, Vi. Please don’t... I need it.” Another whimper hits me in the gut as her fingers dig further into my arms.

I sit back and flip her over, dragging her ass up in the air for a better angle. And then I just thrust inside, her howl of pleasure spurring me on. The slap of skin against skin echoes through the small room, her slick making each slide into her pussy more obscene with every thrust. Her fingers are curled into the sheets, Sofie pushing back against me as she screams for me to go harder and faster and deeper.

And then when she calls for my knot, I almost break. Her body craves that biological ring of muscle, one I can never provide her. One that I’ll have to find for her tomorrow because fuck if I’m going to let Sofie suffer. I don’t care what we want—what she wants—just this once, I want her to be comfortable.

I dig my fingers into her waist, giving her everything I've got until the last second and then spear the fake knot inside of her. She's still whimpering but the sounds have lessened, her body sagging against the mattress as slick drips down her thighs. Her body vibrates with pleasure, a soft orgasm tearing a small cry from her throat. I fall with her, careful not to give her all my weight, letting her pussy continue to suck the fake knot in further.

I continue rocking my hips against hers, despite the strain creeping up in the back of one of my legs. This is the worst time for cramp but I keep moving until one of her little snores permeates the silence. I flop onto my side, the dildo slapping up against the shirt I never took off. Her slick is just as potent as her scent, the desire to thrust that dildo into my own heat a little too hard to resist. But getting Sofie cleaned up is more important.

Neither one of us want to sleep in these soaked sheets but Sofie's already passed out, her body still flush with her impending heat. She's never had a spike this strong before and the next one, I'm not going to be able to satisfy. After watching the slow rise and fall of her chest for a few moments longer, I climb off the bed and head to the bathroom. I undo the straps and wash the silicone before grabbing a fresh set of sheets and a warm washcloth to clean Sofie up.

She doesn't fight me, those pretty hazel eyes shining through parted lids before she falls back asleep. If only I could give her true peace.

Hell, if only I had been blessed with a knot.



## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:50 pm*

### Chapter five

#### VIOLET

With Sofie passed out after forcing her to eat one of the leftover sandwiches from the fridge, I curl up on the bed with her in my lap, the soft beats of her breathing allowing me to finally relax. She's resting—for now. But it won't last.

A long breath escapes, exhaustion pressing at the edges of my mind. Sleep refuses to come, taunting me as all the things going wrong feed into my worries. The low buzz of my phone cuts through the quiet, pulling me back to the present. Careful not to jostle Sofie too much, I reach for it, glancing at the screen.

Missed call – Camila.

A small smile tugs at the corner of my lips, the first real one I've had in hours. Of course, it's her. No matter how much time passes, no matter how much life shifts beneath our feet, Camila always has a way of cutting through the fog in my head like a damn knife. A few months ago, it was me pushing her to step out and follow her heart. And now she's got three beautiful mates. I can only hope that my happily ever after is around the corner too.

I redial her number, opting for a video call, needing to see her gorgeous face. It rings twice before she comes into view, Camila too damn close to the screen before leaning back. She looks every bit as relaxed as I expected, her dark hair a tousled mess against the pillows, a lazy, satisfied smirk curving her lips. She's lying back on a bed, looking ridiculously comfortable, while Kolsen, one of her Alphas, sits behind her,

one arm draped around her waist, scrolling through something on his phone like this is just another night.

“There you are,” Camila murmurs. “Missed me?”

A snort escapes before I can stop it, shifting the phone slightly to get more comfortable. “You wish, Mila.” Sofie lets out a little whimper and curls in tighter against me as I draw the covers up further over her shoulders.

Camila hums, amusement flickering behind half-lidded eyes, the kind that says she knows better. Her gaze drops down to the tip of Sofie’s head, all she can see through the screen, and then back up to me. “You look like shit, babe. Rough night?”

Anyone else, I would deflect or pretend this wasn’t happening but there’s no need to hide from Camila. We’ve told each other everything since we were kids and that hasn’t changed. “You could say that.”

Kolsen’s gaze flicks up from his phone, nodding in greeting. “Violet.” His good eye settles on me, the other one covered in a soft black patch. I still remember the story Camila told me about the flames that left half of her Alpha’s face scarred. He had saved their Omega and I agree with Camila wholeheartedly that Kolsen is still beautiful inside and out. He has a terrifying Alpha presence but he’s gorgeous.

Camila twists around, playfully poking his arm. Despite having mated three men who own an entire sex club, she’s still adorable. Soft like Sofie is in some ways. “You don’t have to be so formal, Alpha,” she muses.

Kolsen smirks but doesn’t argue, his focus already shifting back to whatever he is doing. Camila, on the other hand, watches me more intently now, amusement fading just enough to make room for something sharper. “Tell me what’s up. And don’t give me the bullshit. You told me Sofie was going into heat months ago. What’s going

on?”

I glance down at the love of my life in my arms, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead before I speak. “I thought I could do this, Mila. I thought I could be everything she needs but she needs so much more than me. The bills are stacking up. Work is bullshit and Sofie... god, she’s a fucking angel, Mila.”

Camila’s expression shifts to something softer. “How is she?”

The guilt settles in deep, a familiar, unwelcome ache in my ribs. Camila and Sofie used to be close—we used to be close. The three of us, Betas running wild, moving through the world like nothing could touch us, convinced we had everything figured out. Untouchable, unshaken. Sofie was the wild one, the one that captured my heart, my whole world becoming her.

Then Sofie presented and everything changed.

She had been embarrassed, so damn embarrassed, retreating into herself, avoiding everyone—especially Camila. And it hadn’t helped that Camila had just found her mates, trying to figure out her own issues with her overbearing father. By the time Camila was fully settled, Sofie was so terrified of the world around her that I couldn’t even convince her to go do simple errands with me.

I had thrown everything into taking care of her. And while Sofie has come so far, I’ve let everything else slip. Camila fell to the sidelines. Other relationships withered away. The strained conversations between my parents stopped. They didn’t want me with Sofie now that she was an Omega but I wasn’t leaving just because things got hard.

A tear slips down my cheek and I wipe it away with my arm, Camila getting a full view of Sofie sleeping against my chest. I clear my throat and apologize. “Fuck,

sorry. It's been rough. She's okay now. Well, not really." Do I dare tell Camila how awful it's been when she's finally gotten the happy ending she deserves? One look at my best friend's face and I know that if I don't tell her, she'll have my ass for it. "That day in the park when I told you Sofie had presented? It's still like that. Everything is terrifying and strange and new. I want to rip out everyone's goddamn throats all the time when they look at her wrong."

Camila lets out a small laugh but it doesn't quite reach her eyes. "I love how protective you are over her. I wasn't sure what was going to happen when her parents threw her out but you've done amazing. And when everything evens out, I demand a get together. I've missed you two for too long."

That's a no brainer. "Her heat should be in the next couple of days. I still have to figure out what we're going to do."

"And you will." Camila shifts, her dark hair spilling over Kolsen's arm as she twists around. "You know," she muses, "I could always get you a job at the club." Kolsen barely glances up from his phone, fingers moving over the screen with idle attention. His grip around her waist tightens slightly, a subtle claim as a slow grin follows.

A quiet snort escapes as I shake my head. "Yeah, no thanks."

Camila pouts dramatically, tilting her head just enough to make it look convincing. "Come on, babe. It's easy money. Just flash that mean little smirk of yours and let the desperate fucks throw their wallets at you." Kolsen squeezes her side again, this time in warning. No doubt, she's going to get punished later or whatever kinky shit they get up to these days. I've lost count of how many stories Camila has thrown at me that end up in her naked usually somewhere in public.

I'm only mildly jealous. "Mila, as much as I'd love to shake my ass or whatever happens at Temple, I can't bring all those scents home. Sofie would lose her damn

mind.”

Camila hums. “She still that scent-sensitive?”

A slow breath pushes through my nose, as I resituate, gently laying Sofie down beside me. She immediately curls around my thigh, her cheek pressed into my bare skin. “She’s getting worse,” I admit, reluctant. “Had to throw out a whole sweater the other day because I brushed against someone too strong at work. It’s like... her body knows she needs something, but she won’t admit it. We both know she needs an Alpha and we had fun with one a few times, nothing serious. Don’t look at me like that. He’s the only one I’d mildly trust but he’s got his own pack. I’ve seen the bites in his shoulder. Every time I actually bring it up though, outside of the heat spikes, Sofie tells me she doesn’t need anything other than me.”

Camila’s smirk fades slightly, softening at the edges. “She loves you so goddamn much, Vi. I can’t imagine how painful that situation is.”

A shrug is the only answer I give, but even that feels forced. It gnaws at me, this helpless, restless thing that won’t settle, no matter how much I pretend we have it under control. “We’re managing.”

She doesn’t believe me. I can see it in the way she watches me, in the way her lips press together, the way her fingers drum absently against Kolsen’s forearm. Camila doesn’t take bullshit from anyone, least of all me. “Is there anything I can do?” Camila doesn’t say things just to say them—when she offers, she means it. If I asked, she would pull through without hesitation, without complaint.

Shaking my head, I manage a half-smile. “I’ll figure it out. I always do.”

Kolsen finally looks up from his phone, his sharp, assessing gaze flickering between us before settling on me. “Why not just call that Alpha friend of yours?”

I've never really spent a lot of time with Camila's mates but it's clear she tells them everything. "Because a mated Alpha helping with an unmated Omega's heat is tricky. I don't want Sofie pushed into something she can't get out of. I know that Alpha is a good one but if he lost his control for even a second, Sofie would end up mated without a conversation. It's too dangerous."

"And you think he would do that?" Kolsen pushes.

I realize I'm being unreasonable, that I should have at least called Lance to see if he would come regardless of the circumstances. Sofie had asked for him and I told her no. Fuck, I'm an idiot. "No, I just... I'll figure it out," I say, flustered. "I've gotta go. Early start in the morning." It's a bunch of bullshit, the goodbyes brief, and then the call ends.

The second the screen goes dark, the silence in the room feels heavier than before. I slip down under the covers, pulling Sofie against me as she hums into my chest. It takes me a moment to realize she's purring for me, my beautiful Omega giving me the most precious sound in the world. God, I don't deserve her.

### Chapter six

#### VIOLET

The gallery is slow today which is great because I slept like shit. My chin rests in my palm, fingers drumming against the counter in a lazy rhythm, my gaze flicking toward Sofie, who's been quietly reorganizing the small prints near the kiosk. Her movements are steadier today, less hesitant, less fragile. However, her cheeks are flushed pink, her biology threatening to undo us at any minute.

At least with the scent blocker and the heat pills, I'm hoping she can hold on longer. I wanted to leave her at home, told her to have her phone by her if I had to rush back but she wouldn't have it. Sofie mentioned that staying that far away from me wasn't going to happen and I caved. Because when it comes to my Omega, I'll always cave. Even if it's fucking dangerous having an Omega nearing heat in the middle of an art gallery.

Sofie lets out a little sigh, bringing me back to reality. Exhaustion claims her movements, her body working against her. And yet, she's still trying to be strong, trying to help, trying to be useful. "Baby, come sit down before you fall over."

"I'm not going to fall over," she mutters as she stomps back over to the counter and plops into the seat. I chuckle at the cute pout on her lips, raising an eyebrow in amusement. "Fine. I was and I hate it. I'm so tired, Vi. I just want to curl up in a ne—" Sofie catches herself, her lids falling closed as she lets out a little sigh. It's one of the things she's never really built. I have no idea why. An Omega like Sofie, I would have thought she would thrive in pillows and blankets and the comfort it

brought.

But she hasn't even tried rearranging the pillows on our bed once. So long as I'm near her, she just curls up in my arms like I can protect her from the entire goddamn world. Well, that and the one raggedy-ass cushion that has seen better days.

"Sofie, it's okay. We can build one tonight, okay? I'll make sure to pick up a few more pillows. Maybe some—"

Sofie shakes her head. "No, I'm not sure why I said that. I don't need a nest. I have you."

A frustrated sigh falls from my lips as I perch my ass on the edge of the corner and lean over to catch Sofie's attention. "Baby, you will always have me. That will never change but you don't have to pick and choose. You can have a nest too. Do you want one?"

Her nose scrunches up and then she shakes her head. "I keep telling myself I should want one but it doesn't feel right. I just want you. Just you is fine." She angles her chin up, patiently waiting for a kiss. God, she's adorable. Gladly, I oblige her, swallowing the little noise she makes before I head into the main part of the gallery. There's a few patrons wandering around but they've been here more times than I can count.

They don't need my help to explain what's here and if they choose something, Sofie can check them out. My only job is to be here should someone need information. Or if Xavier throws some asinine task at me again.

The bell above the door chimes but I don't look up right away. It's muscle memory at this point, the sound signaling another wide-eyed rich person with too much money to burn or some businessman looking for a statement piece to make himself seem



cultured. There's very few people that walk through that door that truly ever catch my attention and fewer that catch my interest.

Lance is one of those people. Hawk might also be, the way those dark eyes bore into me, dissecting me until I was laid bare for him. However, the presence that steps through the door today is on an entirely different level. It feels like I've somehow found a piece of home, the thick scent of sandalwood filling my nose until my entire body is alight with need. It's nearly as strong as the moments Sofie goes into a heat spike, her scent making me crave things I won't be able to satisfy.

I slowly turn around to find the source, my gaze landing on the man I've told myself I can't have. Puma. He comes in here nearly as often as Lance does but his purpose seems different. Those silver strands wound through his dark hair, a full beard that makes me wonder what it would feel like grazing along my inner thighs. The dark blue sweater he's wearing clings to every last muscle beneath it, tattoos peeking out of his collar and the cuffs, covering his hands. A heavy sigh falls from my lips as his pale green eyes move to connect with my brown ones.

A slow grin spreads across his lips as if he's found the one thing he came for, his approach full of command that most Alphas wish they could harness. He's a picture of tailored perfection, like he just walked out of a damn magazine and yet, it looks so goddamn effortless.

Sofie lets out a tiny giggle, breaking the tension I hadn't even realized had wrapped itself around me. She fucking knows exactly how I'm feeling right now and the fact that she's not affected by Puma just tells me how much shit I'm in. I can't afford anything that would distract me from caring for Sofie.

I clear my throat and weather a small smile. "Afternoon. Welcome to Ash & Ivory."

His lips twitch, the ghost of something amused there for just a second before he

speaks. "Violet," he says, voice low and rich, sinking into my skin like the perfect drug. "We've met." His head tilts as he observes me, my body warming beneath his attention. This is dangerous.

"I know, Puma." Something twists inside of me, the fantasy of calling this man Alpha swirling around in my head. The idea of moaning it as he... Fuck. "Yes, I remember. Did you come in for something in particular or did you want to just look around? There's several new paintings." I'm kind of hoping he doesn't want to see the new ones. I still feel weird about putting them up yesterday.

Puma's gaze lingers, drifting over me in a way that tells me he's feeling the same pull I am. Neither of us addresses it, though as he finally shakes his head. "Just browsing but stay close. I might have some questions." We both know that's bullshit. Out of everyone who comes through here, Puma is one of the most educated patrons we have. He's taught me more about the art in here than the little cards next to the frames ever will.

But I'm not going to pass up a chance to walk with him. I glance over at Sofie again to make sure she's okay, her bright smile and that little wave of her hand giving me the courage to enjoy this for just a little longer.

Puma fits his hands behind him, pulling his sweater just a little tighter across his chest. I try hard not to stare but it's like every instinct I have is dragging me toward him. And I'm not sure I want to fight it. It's a good thing I have some self-control as he moves in calculated steps through the gallery. He doesn't just glance at the artwork—he studies it, like he's looking for something beneath the paint, something hidden between the brushstrokes that no one else has noticed. The way his gaze lingers, assessing, makes the gallery feel smaller, like the walls have pressed in just slightly to accommodate him.

It's mesmerizing to watch him, the desire to have him watch me like that a gnawing

feeling in the back of my mind. I keep my pace beside him, answering his occasional questions, the deep baritone of his voice thrumming through me. I'm going to make a fool of myself soon, heat building in my belly as I try to keep my voice steady.

Because then, Puma stops. Right in front of the same painting the twins had been so damn interested in yesterday. A stillness settles over him, a shift so small most people wouldn't even notice it, but I do. The way his frown deepens just slightly, the way his jaw tightens in a way that's nearly imperceptible, like something isn't sitting right with him.

Did he see it? Did he notice the same thing I did?

My pulse picks up, but I force myself to stay still, to keep my expression neutral. I don't know enough to point out what's wrong with the piece and saying the wrong thing—saying anything —could put me in a position I don't want to be in. So, I do what I've gotten good at. I keep my mouth shut.

Puma steps closer, hands still clasped behind his back, his head tilting just slightly as his eyes trace over the canvas. The careful scrutiny of a man who knows art, who has spent years curating his own collection, who can likely tell at a glance when something isn't right. Then, casually, almost like an afterthought, he murmurs, "I'm pretty sure I have one of these pieces in my collection."

My breath catches.

"Finding another," he continues, his tone almost a test to my control, "is such a rare opportunity."

A cold prickle works its way down my spine. That isn't just an observation. That's a statement. One that means this painting shouldn't be here. Do I tell him? Do I mention the way the paint smudged beneath my fingers, the way it had still been wet

when I touched it?

For the sake of keeping my job and providing for Sofie, I can't say anything. The answer settles quickly in my gut, pressing down on any instinct that tells me otherwise. I have a job to do. This is just another sale. Just another day. Even if everything about this—lying to Puma—is telling me to give him the truth.

Puma hums, as if to himself, then finally glances at me, something I can't decipher still lingering in his gaze. "Any offers on it?"

Relief flares at the shift in conversation. I nod, seizing the opportunity, already moving toward the kiosk. "I can check the log." My fingers move quickly over the keyboard, scrolling through the file until I find the painting's listing. I skim over the details, letting out a breath as I focus on something normal. "Three bids since yesterday afternoon," I say, pointing to the screen. It seems Lance wasn't the only one interested in it.

A second passes before I realize he's stepped in behind me. The shift in air is immediate, the warmth of him pressing up against my back pulling a gasp from my lips. He's not exactly touching me, but it doesn't matter—his presence is enough, making the small space in this corner of the gallery feel even smaller. His scent lingers between us until I have to take shallow breaths not to overwhelm myself.

My grip tightens on the edge of the kiosk, knuckles going white. He's still not even touching me and I already feel marked. Consumed. Overwhelmed.

Puma leans in just slightly, voice lowering, words brushing too close to the shell of my ear. "And you?"

The question short-circuits my thoughts for half a second. "What about me?" I twist around, biting back a moan when I find him inches from my face. His lips are a

breath away from mine, the temptation lingering between us. I clear my throat and step out from between him and the kiosk. “What about me?” I repeat.

His gaze flicks toward me, once again observing me like I’m the most important thing in this room. “What do you think about this painting?”

I feel his words more than I hear them, something about the way they press into the space between us, a weight against my skin. A slow swallow pushes past my throat. My mind races for the right answer, something neutral, something that won’t give anything away. “I think...” My voice stays steady, but I hesitate, choosing my next words carefully. “I think someone’s going to be very lucky to add it to their collection.”

Silence stretches for a beat too long. Then, finally, that slow smirk tugs at his lips, a glint of amusement flickering in his expression, like he knows exactly what I’m doing. He turns his attention back to the painting for a moment longer before he nods. “I’ll have to think about it but I’ll be coming to the showing later this evening.”

I can’t think up a response as he leaves me with yet another one of those smirks before heading for the entrance. He moves with that same infuriating, effortless confidence that makes my stomach coil too tight, my pulse stumble in ways it shouldn’t. The bell chimes as the door swings shut behind him and I force my hands to unclench, dragging them over my face, willing my heart to settle back into something steady.

“Violet.”

Sofie’s voice pulls me back, breaking through whatever haze had wrapped itself around me. She’s standing behind the desk, waving me over with a smile that tells me she saw all of that. Rubbing the back of my neck, I shake off the lingering warmth still clinging to my skin and make my way toward her, wary of whatever expression

she's got waiting for me.

She's grinning. And that? That's suspicious as hell. "What?" My voice comes out flat, already on guard. "Is something wrong, baby?"

Her grin only widens, hazel eyes bright with amusement. "You're blushing."

A scoff escapes before I can stop it, arms crossing over my chest in pure, knee-jerk denial. "Am not."

Sofie giggles. "Vi, it's okay if you want to start something with that Alpha."

Every muscle in my body locks up. Giving into my desires means leaving Sofie alone and that's not an option. Not when she's so close to her heat. "Sof..."

"I'm serious," she says, her voice gentler now, the teasing replaced by something softer, something I don't want to hear. "You don't have to—"

"I can't." The words come too fast, too sharp, cutting off whatever she was about to say before it can dig its way into my fragile heart. "You are my priority. End of discussion."

The frown that pulls at her lips is immediate, the look she gives me so full of exasperation that it makes my stomach twist. "Vi," she says, voice edged with frustration. "You're allowed to be happy too." For a second, I almost argue, almost tell her that isn't how this works, that nothing about this situation allows for things like that, but before I can, she shakes her head and pushes something across the desk. "That's not what I wanted to say, though. This is."

Glancing down, I expect—I don't even know what I expect—but it sure as hell isn't a magazine. Thick, glossy, one of those expensive collector's editions we get in

sometimes, filled with luxury features, high-end interviews, business profiles. Sofie's finger presses against the middle of the page and my stomach drops. Four beautiful, powerful men, posed in a photo so precise, so polished, that it practically radiates wealth, control, status. And right there—smirking, arrogant, wearing a suit like he was fucking born in it—Puma.

My breath catches in my chest as I continue to inspect the image. Flipping the page, my eyes scan the text, barely absorbing the words, moving too fast to process until—The Ashford Pack. “Wait, baby, The Ashford Pack?”

The name pulses through my head, through my chest, like an alarm I should've heard ringing a long time ago. Flipping back to the picture, my stomach twists even tighter as my gaze catches on the twins standing beside Puma. Fuck.

My fingers grip the edge of the magazine, knuckles whitening as I force myself to look at the last man in the photo. The younger-looking Alpha with easy charm. Everyone in this business knows his name. The designer. The socialite. The one who turns million-dollar houses into art. A man I spent a passionate-fueled weekend with years ago. A man who filled too many fantasies for me to count.

This has to be a fucking joke. The Ashford Pack that trades art all the time, the pack that owns half the collections we've displayed over the years... the very same Alphas I've had thoughts about or had in my bed over the years without even fucking knowing who they were.

Sofie's watching, waiting for me to say something, to react, but all I can do is stare down at the page, my pulse a hammering, uneven mess. “How did we not know who they were?” The question slips out, a little bit of anger simmering beneath the surface. I've been trying to remain unattached, untangled from packs in general because it's what we wanted.

Sofie gently reaches for my hand and then flips it over, tracing the lines there. “Vi, we never looked at pictures. But... it’s weird that they’re everywhere, right? Like first Lance...”

“Gray,” I mutter, not wanting to lie to my Omega. “Baby, Gray was first. Remember the guy I told you about years ago?”

Her eyes light up, a wild smile spreading across her face. “Wait? The guy you disappeared with for a weekend? Camila and I were terrified! You didn’t even answer your phone. I almost called the goddamn police.” Her brows furrow as she glances back down at the page again. “That Gray? God, Vi, this is really complicated.”

Don’t I know. Because the things Gray did to me that weekend still make me blush. He worshipped my body like nobody ever has. I thought for a brief moment that there could be something there but that conversation never happened. And then the weekend ended. Neither of us shared numbers or anything that would have helped us find the other. I was content to let it be a dream.

But now? Things are all fucked up.

Because it’s not just about Lance and Gray. It’s the fact that Sofie reacted to Hawk and I’m having thoughts about Puma. There’s no fucking way we can insert our way into their lives. Then it dawns on me that she didn’t react at all to Puma. “Baby, what about Puma?”

She shakes her head, a soft giggle falling from her lips. “He’s all yours, Vi. What? We’re talking about fantasies, right? If that’s the case, I want to be stuffed between the twins.” She points at the image. “Lance’s hands are magical and two pairs of them? Yes please.”

“Is that what you want, baby?” I denied her Lance yesterday. I won’t do that again.



Whatever the fallout is afterward, I'll deal with. It doesn't matter that Puma would never go for a Beta like me or that Lance can't be her Alpha for real. I'll do anything Sofie needs.

She shakes her head as she steals back the magazine. "Vi, I only want you. It was a joke. I don't need... I'm sorry. It was a bad joke."

"No, it wasn't. We both know that when your heat starts, you'll need an Alpha. I won't deny you that or anything else you need. Baby, look at me. What do you need?"

She hesitates before looking up at me, tears glazing those beautiful eyes of hers. "I just want us both to be happy. No, you don't understand. Vi, the way you lit up when Puma came here. The way you used to talk about Gray. I miss that. I don't get to see you smile a lot but moments like those are so precious."

"You're my priority. Your happiness means everything to me."

"Good, because I'm happy when you're happy. And I love that you're taking care of me and that you love me with your entire soul. I feel safe in your arms but what happens when you're protecting me? Who protects you? Because it can't be me anymore. I'm an Omega now."

I swallow, nervous, guilt settling in the pit of my belly. "What are you saying?" My voice wavers, thick with regret. Is she about to tell me that I'm not enough for her?

"Vi, no. I know what you're thinking. You are everything that I need. But... I don't think I'm enough for you." Sofie leans forward, cupping my face in her hands, a gesture she rarely gives. "I love you so damn much because I know that when I fall you'll be right there. But I need to know that when you fall, someone will be there to catch you."

“You need an Alpha,” I whisper, a tear slipping down my cheek.

“No, Vi. You do. Biologically, yes, I need one. But god, you need the same comfort that I need from you. I don’t know why I never saw it. Maybe I’ve been too selfish to figure out what you need but Vi, please just be a little selfish, okay?”

“The Ashford pack isn’t an option, Sofie.” Her shoulders fall and I silently curse myself again. “Fuck, that’s not what I meant. I’ll call Lance if that’s what you need. I just...I’m not sure...”

Sofie releases me and walks around the counter before pressing herself into my chest. “Stop thinking about me for one second. What do you want?”

She wants me to be selfish but I can’t do that. Not at the expense of her well-being. So, I’ll force a tougher smile onto my face and make sure she knows that I’m happy right where I am. Because I am. Even if some part of me longs for just a little bit more—and feeling the way I felt today with Puma in my space, makes me want it more. But that’s not an option.

“I want you,” I finally say, pressing my face into the curve of her neck. “Nothing but you, baby.” The way she tenses in my arms tells me she sees past the bullshit.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:50 pm*

### Chapter seven

#### SOFIE

Violet moves through the gallery seamlessly, the way she always does. She knows this gallery like the back of her hands, the woman having studied every little placard she can so that she's become one of Xavier's best employees. He still treats my Beta like shit and it pisses me off but my soft voice just makes him give me those uneasy smiles that curl in my gut.

I'm still mad that she's so selfless. She's given up everything for me—her life, her dreams, even her home. The moment I rejected the packs my parents offered, Violet took me in. There was no hesitation, no extra conversations needed, nothing. And I hate it. I hate that I need that. I hate that we can't just be the Betas that we used to be where I wasn't so unsure of myself, scared of the world I was thrust into.

I wish I could stand beside her, part of the rhythm instead of an afterthought. Helping, handling the clients, holding my own, doing something instead of being stuck behind this fucking desk, feeling useless.

Or better yet, doing something real . A proper job. A desk job, a warehouse job, hell, even standing behind a register for eight hours would be better than this —than being stuck in this limbo, watching my world shrink down to the space between my ribs, watching my own body betray me piece by piece. My hands press against my lap, fingers curling into the fabric of my dress to keep them from shaking. My breathing stays measured, forced into something steady even as my pulse races beneath the surface.

Somewhere deep down, I knew it was possible. I knew the risks, knew what late presentation could do, even if I told myself it wouldn't happen to me. I recognized the signs when I was younger, when I was smaller than the other Betas, when I realized my instincts didn't work quite the same. When I craved comfort more than control, when dominance never settled right in my chest the way it was supposed to.

There's a history of it in my family—late presenting. But it was always the other way around. Beta to Alpha. Never this. I was supposed to be safe. I was supposed to have a normal life. I had plans. Fucking dreams. One of which was marrying Violet. Now it's all burning, reduced to nothing but ashes and wasted breath, because my body wants things I can't control, things I never asked for.

It craves them. An Alpha. A knot. A pack. Even though the only person I've ever wanted in my bed is her. And instead of building a future, I'm here, waiting for my body to turn me into someone else, something else. My heat looms on the horizon, closing in with each passing day, a storm I can't outrun, pressing at the edges of my control.

All I ever wanted was her and now my reality is telling me she's not enough.

I try not to focus on that despairing reality as heat bleeds through me, an ache simmering in my belly. Pressing my thighs together does little to dull the sensation and I hate it. Hate the heat that refuses to fade, hate the way my body keeps reminding me—taunting me with every pulse of warmth, every racing heartbeat.

I am an Omega, I tell myself. The words taste like poison, settling under my skin like a second, unwelcome presence. Rubbing my arms, I try to shake off the discomfort crawling up my spine, but it clings to me, unwilling to be ignored. The doctors had called this normal. Had said it with a clinical ease, voice detached in a way that made me want to scream.

"Late-presenting Omegas often experience severe disorientation as their body adjusts," she had said, flipping through my chart like I was just another name, just another case. "You may feel more needy than those who presented at twenty or twenty-one. Your system is just catching up."

Like that was supposed to help . Like I wanted to hear that I was behind, that I was broken, that my body was playing some cruel game of catch-up to a race I never wanted to run in the first place. A jagged sigh pushes past my lips and I let my head fall back against the chair, closing my eyes for just a second.

Violet thinks my heat might happen at some point tomorrow but it's much, much closer than that. It's just around the corner, threatening to throw everything into chaos and yet I was selfish enough to plead not to be left at home. Because I couldn't handle the thought of being away from Violet for even one goddamn second. Shifting in my seat, I swallow hard, pushing past the lump in my throat and force my eyes open.

My Beta hums under her breath as she moves through the gallery, sleeves rolled up, a smudge of graphite already staining the inside of her wrist from earlier. She's setting up the practice easels with the kind of quiet care she always gives to things that matter.

It's one of the few good things about this place, one of the only things that makes it feel real, human, instead of another cold, high-end gallery where rich people pretend to appreciate art while throwing obscene amounts of money at pieces they barely understand. Xavier may be an asshole, but he's a businessman before anything else, and he knows this is profitable.

Parents stay longer when their kids have something to do, and the longer they linger, the more they spend. It's a calculated move, but Violet doesn't care about that. She likes it. She loves seeing the easels lined up, waiting for tiny, paint-covered hands.

She loves the way kids light up when they see blank canvases waiting just for them, the way they throw themselves into their work, unrestrained, fearless. There's something in the way she moves as she sets up, something light, alive .

I always watch her like this, always wonder what it would be like to have something like that for ourselves. A home. A family. Little feet pounding against the floors, high-pitched laughter echoing in a space that feels like home instead of just another temporary stop. Paint-streaked fingers grabbing at my clothes, excited voices calling my name, warmth filling the corners of my world instead of this ever-present sense that it's closing in on me.

But that's too far in the future. And right now, there are bigger problems.

Heat licks through my veins, curling low in my belly. It's a warning, a pulse of sensation that makes my breath hitch, makes my muscles tense. My fingers dig into my thigh, trying to ground myself, trying to breathe through it, but it doesn't pass. Fuck.

The room seems to grow warmer as I scramble around the counter, searching for the scent-blocking crème Violet keeps nearby, the one that dulls everything just enough to make me functional. It's always there, always within reach. Except this time, it's not. And then the next wave crashes over me.

Just as I think it's going to pass, I feel the one sensation that tells me this is more than just a minor spike. Slick coats my panties, makes my skin burn with something too close to need, something I refuse to acknowledge, something that makes my throat tighten, my stomach churn. The chair scrapes against the floor as I shove it back, the sound cutting through the quiet like a blade. I don't look at Violet—I can't —not like this, not with this fire under my skin, not with this ache spreading through me.

I rush toward the private bathroom in the back, away from patrons slowly filing in for

the class Violet has set up. God this is embarrassing. My breath is already ragged by the time I shut the door behind me. I grip the sink, fingers clutching the cold porcelain like it can anchor me, like it can pull me back from the edge.

My Omega instincts start chanting the one thing I need—a knot but there's no person I trust to take care of me during my heat. I'm terrified that I won't be me, that I'll be lost to a haze that I won't come back from. Lance's name rolls through my mind but I shove it away, refusing to dwell on it. Yesterday, I cried for him because it was the only solution I could think of.

Today, it's the only person I can think of who can give me what I want. The name presses against my lips, almost forming, almost slipping free, almost real. My phone is in my pocket. One call. One word. That's all it would take.

Dragging someone from the Ashford Pack into my life, into our lives, would make everything more complicated than it already is. It would shift the balance, tangle things up in ways I'm not ready for, in ways I can't be ready for.

No, I can do this.

Just breathe, right?

Another wave of heat rips through me, my entire body cramping up as I curl up into a little ball on the floor. Telling Violet, at the very least, would be the best course of action but she's already on thin ice with Xavier. No, I can do this part. Just for a little while longer.

When the next cramp hits, slick flooding my panties, I'm not so sure I can.

### Chapter eight

#### VIOLET

There's only an hour and a half left of my shift but it's going to be the most stressful. Xavier purposely had me work the later shift because I'm a lot more people friendly than the other two employees he has and while his son, Marion, is a people pleaser, I tend to be easier on the eyes. Xavier's words, not mine.

That being said, the gallery is packed, all designer suits and silk dresses and hushed conversations mixing with the soft clink of champagne glasses. The scent of expensive perfume clings to the air, failing to mask the undercurrent of wealth and quiet competition that lingers beneath every carefully measured smile.

The bombardment of scents only makes it worse. I've slathered a bit of Sofie's scent blocker beneath my nose because I can't be bothered to suffer while also not grimacing at the wealth in this room. Just one of their watches would pay rent for like the next six months.

I grant a small smile to a patron, hoping it'll be enough for them to keep moving. My only job is to answer questions should they arise and clear off the tables set up for food and drinks. Marion's job is to actually converse with them, entertain them, and get them to buy paintings I'm almost sure are fake. He's much more of a charmer than I am and currently, most of my attention is on Sofie.

She's barely left my side all night, her small frame brushing against mine in fleeting touches, pressing closer every chance she gets. But every so often, without warning,



she disappears, slipping through the crowd toward the bathroom down the back hall, her movements growing more frantic as the evening drags on.

Her scent is shifting, becoming syrupy sweet, coating the back of my throat, demanding attention. Every time I look at her, I can see it—see the way her pupils are blown wide, the way her breathing comes faster than it should, the way her hands tremble slightly at her sides. And every time, she gives me that tight, nervous smile, the one that doesn't reach her eyes. ' I'm fine ', she says.

Which is bullshit. But I won't call her on it yet because no one else seems to be as affected by her scent as I am. Pushing will only make it worse, will only send her deeper into whatever mess she's drowning in. So, I keep her close instead, my arm brushing against hers, my hand twitching at my side, ready to steady her if she suddenly falters, if she loses the fight she's barely holding onto.

I'm already on edge, my mind racing through possible next moves, when I feel them. Lance, Hawk, and Puma. I expected the older Alpha to be here but I wasn't prepared having all three of them here.

They move through the gallery exuding the kind of confidence that makes people step aside without a second thought. Their presence shifts the air, sends an undeniable ripple through the space, something unspoken but felt . The Ashford Pack. There's sudden whispers, greetings, and smiles as everyone points toward three members of the most famous pack in this arena. I'm not sure what would happen if Gray was here.

Not that it matters as Sofie stiffens beside me. Her fingers curl into the fabric of her dress, gripping it so tightly her knuckles go white. Their attention roams the gallery before falling on us, their gazes dragging over my skin before moving to hers. The predatory looks behind those fierce eyes and the way their nostrils flare just so tell me they know exactly what's happening .

And fuck, the last thing I need is their attention. The last thing I want is them getting any ideas, thinking they should step in, thinking this is their problem to handle.

But then—Sofie makes a sound. Soft. Barely there. A tiny, broken whimper that slips past her lips before she can stop it. Her eyes go wide, her breathing shuddering, panic flashing across her face for half a second before she bolts, disappearing through the crowd, her body moving before her mind can catch up. I don't miss the way Lance reacts to it .

The way his muscles tense, the way his body shifts before he can stop it, drawn to her like she's calling him without meaning to, like the sound reached something deep inside him, something instinctive even across the goddamn gallery.

Seconds later, her thick scent hits me full force, heat bleeding through me as well. I don't even think as I weave past people, cutting through the slow-moving crowd without a single thought for the mess I'm making. I head the same way she did, heart pounding, praying to whatever cruel god might be watching that I can get to her before this gets worse.

The chaos from the gallery fades behind me, a muted hum of conversation barely reaching this far down the hallway. Each step echoes against the polished floors, a steady rhythm that does nothing to slow the tight coil of panic twisting in my stomach. My pulse pounds against my ribs, a dull, insistent beat as I move, scanning the back rooms for my Omega.

I'm nearly at the end of the hallway when a sharp, broken whimper heats my ears. Barely there, but enough to make my blood run cold. I follow it, my steps quickening, my breath catching when I spot the cracked door at the end of the hall. Another soft, agonizing little cry fills the hallway, ripping me apart.

I push inside, my Omega curled on the floor, shaking so hard it makes her look

smaller than she already is, her arms wrapped around herself like she's trying to hold her body together by sheer force of will. Her face is buried against her knees, but it does nothing to hide the damp streaks on her cheeks, the way her entire frame trembles with each shallow, uneven breath.

"Vi," she whimpers, voice barely above a whisper, so weak, so desperate. "I tried to hold on but I couldn't. Please—please do something."

My chest pulls tight as I sink down onto the dusty lounge chair, reaching for her, pulling her into my lap, into my arms, where she belongs. Her body folds into me instantly, her fingers fisting into my shirt, her forehead pressing against my throat as she shudders. She's burning up. Heat pours off her in waves, sinking into my skin, wrapping around me, suffocating. Her scent is everywhere, syrupy sweet and overwhelming, thick enough to drown me, thick enough to make my head spin.

This is so fucking bad and it's the worst possible situation we could be in.

"It hurts," she breathes against my neck, barely able to get the words out. "Vi, it hurts ."

I hold her tighter, my fingers stroking down her back, desperate to ground her, desperate to do something . "I know, baby," I whisper, pressing a kiss to her hair, wishing it could be enough, hating that it isn't. "I know."

Her body jerks in my arms, writhing, desperate for something I can't give her. Her breath stutters against my skin, her nails digging into my waist, her body arching like she's trying to run from it, but there's nowhere to go, nothing she can do.

I'm not sure how long I hold her, trying to find a solution. It's going to be impossible running her past all those people in the gallery. If the wrong Alpha gets a whiff of her, I'll have a fight on my hands. It was so fucking stupid bringing her with me but I

didn't see an alternative. Leaving her alone all day felt worse. Because as much as she says that she can't bear it when we're apart, I feel the same way.

It's like a physical pain in my heart when we're separated. I don't know how to explain it. All I know is that it's not normal.

"Violet?"

I glance up to see Lance standing just inside the room, his broad shoulders filling the space, blocking the only exit. His hands flex at his sides, nostrils flaring, his entire body wired as his gaze locks onto Sofie—at the way she's clinging to me, at the way she's falling apart right in front of him.

His voice is low, rough, barely restrained. "Let me help."

I go still, caught between instinct and logic, between no and yes and fuck, I don't know. He takes a step closer, slow, like he's approaching something fragile, something on the verge of breaking. His brown eyes are dark but focused. There's no ill-intent resting in them. "Violet, I don't want anything from you." His voice is different—earnest, desperate in a way I've never heard from him before. "We both know that you're aware of who I am. I can see it in your expression but this has nothing to do with that. I just want her to be okay."

Sofie shifts against me, her fingers gripping tighter, her breath coming in short, painful gasps. Lance swallows hard, his hands curling into fists at his sides. "Her cries are gutting me in a way I don't understand, but watching her suffer like this?" His jaw clenches, his voice dropping even lower. "I can't."

My throat tightens, my stomach twisting as I look down at her, at the way her body trembles, at the tears slipping down her flushed cheeks. I was pretty sure Lance and Sofie were mates with how easily she melted against him the first time. But it wasn't

my place to bring it up. And as time passed, Sofie never said anything. I didn't force it. Maybe it was selfish of me for that too.

And now I have a choice to make to ensure my Omega's safety, her comfort, and her happiness. Fingers shaking, I brush damp strands of hair back from her face, pressing my lips to her temple, whispering, "Sof, baby, what do you want?"

She snuffles, lips trembling, breath catching as another wave crashes through her. "I—I just—" Her voice wobbles, tears clinging to her lashes as her body shudders, her small hands gripping at my chest like she's begging for something she doesn't know how to ask for. She lets out a tiny, wrecked sob, pressing her face into my neck. "I just want it to stop."

There's no choice here. Not really. I nod, once, barely more than a twitch of my chin. Lance is already moving. He drops onto the lounge beside me, his movements measured, but his eyes—his eyes are burning with something raw, something I can't name.

I don't stop him. Don't pull Sofie back as he reaches for her. Don't say a word as he lifts her into his lap like she belongs there, cradling her against his chest, handling her like something precious, something his. Sofie whimpers, her hands immediately curling into his shirt, her body instinctively pressing into his warmth, into the relief she knows he can give her.

Lance exhales, a slow, steady breath, his fingers stroking down her spine, his voice barely above a whisper. "I've got you, sweetheart."

I swear my heart breaks just a little more as I step outside, closing the door behind me, the first of many tears falling down my cheeks.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:50 pm*

### Chapter nine

#### SOFIE

I can't think of anything other than the Alpha holding me, his fierce citrus scent mixing with my melon one. His caresses are so soft, his whispered words drawing another moan from my lips but it's not enough. I curl my fingers into his suit jacket, crying out for more. My pleas gut me, the pain curling in my gut pissing me off. This is the part I didn't want—the need so goddamn strong that my Beta couldn't help me.

Her scent is gone from the room, panic clawing at me but the knot I crave overrides the fear. I can't expect her to sit and watch this, watch someone else fuck me to sate my biological impulses. A tear slips down my cheek as Lance reaches between us to undo his pants. There's no time for formalities but I don't think he minds.

“Sweetheart, I got you, okay?”

My head bobs up and down as the sound of his zipper hits my ears. It isn't until he lifts me up, angling his cock at my pussy as he pulls my drenched panties to the side that I finally let out a sigh of relief. And when I slide back down, the Alpha filling me to the brim, I melt against his chest, the heat fading just a bit. Sweat licks down my back, clarity coming back in small waves. “Fuck, I'm so sorry.”

“Shhh, we'll talk after I give you what you need.”

I just hum my response, Lance doing all the work as he pumps up into my heat, his knot fluttering at the entrance. My instincts have me rubbing my face all along his

suit, coating him in my scent. Something almost animalistic tells me that this man is mine even if I know I can't have him. It doesn't stop me, though.

Lance's hands fall to my hips, fingers digging into the bare skin. Before I know it, those beautiful hands are cupping my ass, as he drives up harder and deeper into me. A broken cry leaves me as he hits the perfect spot, my voice something I don't recognize. He presses kisses to the top of my head, this obscene scene only heightening as more slick drips from me, coating my thighs and his pants.

It makes the slide easier, although the way he's fucking me feels possessive. I feel owned in the best of ways. It's different from the nights we spent together, not a care in the world. This feels like something more, something I shouldn't be reading into. So, I don't. I just focus on getting what I need so that this embarrassing moment can end.

"Knot, please," I ask, my voice cracking. I reach between us, wrapping my fingers around what I can reach, a strangled groan pulling from Lance. "In. Fuck, just put it in. Why are you playing with me?" Tears stream down my cheeks as I try to force myself down onto his knot.

"Sweetheart, you're going to hurt yourself. Come for me and I'll give you what you need."

I let out a little frustrated growl, leaning back to curse this man withholding his knot. That stupid smile on his face doesn't surprise me but the earnest look in his eyes overwhelms me. My body tenses and then I melt, pleasure spreading through me as I come. Another cry falls from my lips as he thrusts up into me one last time, his knot slowly expanding to lock us together. It's almost too much, feeling like he's about to split me in half as that muscle continues to swell inside of me.

My body goes numb with the sensation of Lance letting go, filling me with his come

and that's when I truly become undone. My lips part as ecstasy bleeds through my limbs, Lance capturing my lips in a passionate kiss. I had no idea it could feel like this. I had no idea the pleasure that could come with giving into my instincts, with having what my body needs.

It feels like forever before the high dissipates, Lance still holding me against his chest. "You alright, sweetheart?"

"Better," I mumble, sleep trying to pull me under. "It's not supposed to feel like this. Not supposed to be good." The words are meant mostly for me as I lean against his chest, burying my face against his suit.

"What are you talking about, Sofie? It's always supposed to feel good. Did I do something wrong?"

A snort comes from me at how selfless this man is. Well, not entirely. With his scent mixing with mine, it's hard to ignore how much I crave it. Finding a scent match is terrifying because it means my body really does need more than my Beta. "You didn't do anything wrong." My words slur as the infamous stories of Omegas falling asleep after getting knotted flood my mind. I'm trying to have a damn conversation and my instincts are telling me to rest. "Violet. Just her. Need her. Only her."

After today, it's going to be impossible to convince Violet or myself of that.



### Chapter ten

#### VIOLET

Hearing my name, I slip back into the room, freezing at the sight of Sofie passed out on Lance's lap. She looks so perfect like that, like she was made for him. Her breathing is still uneven, catching in her throat every few exhales, but the tension that had her shaking before is slowly bleeding out of her limbs. She's steadying, grounding herself in the warmth of him, in the safety he's offering without hesitation.

Sofie told me that I was the one who needed an Alpha but I think we both need one—we both need that extra tether, that one person we can lean on, someone who takes our worries and gives us a place to feel safe. It can't be Lance, though. He has a pack already.

Lance glances up at me, a weight behind his words when he speaks. "What's your plan?"

My jaw locks. "I'm handling it." I have one plan and it's the only one I don't hate. There's a small business at the very edge of the city, a rent-an-Alpha service that will give us a room and an Alpha vetted. They'll even let me stay in the room as Sofie's emergency contact. It's the best solution out of a multitude of solutions.

Silence stretches between us as his gaze drops back down to Sofie in his arms. It feels like he's considering my words until Sofie lets out a soft sound against his chest, barely more than a breath, and Lance's fingers tighten against her hip. His throat moves as he swallows, his lips parting slightly like he wants to say something, like

he's about to push harder.

Hope lingers in his eyes. The kind that makes my stomach twist. The kind that looks like he wants me to say something else, to let him stay, to let this be something more. Maybe it would be easier. Maybe giving in would make things simpler, letting someone else shoulder this for a little while, letting someone else be the one to carry Sofie through this instead of trying to do it all myself. And if this wasn't her heat, I would have that conversation with Lance, with the whole pack. But not with this.

I shake my head, keeping my voice even, forcing the tightness in my throat down. "Involving you, even just for tonight, is dangerous."

Lance's jaw tics, his grip flexing, his body stiffening in a way that tells me he doesn't like my answer.

Before he can argue, I press on, letting the words settle between us. "You have a reputation to uphold, a certain image and I know for a fact that it's pretty taboo for a member of a pack to help an unmated Omega with her heat."

His lips press together, his fingers stalling against Sofie's waist, but he doesn't say anything because he knows I'm right. Even if I let him in, even if I let him help tonight, it wouldn't end here. With Lance as her mate, he's going to want to claim her, maybe Hawk too. But what about Puma and Gray? Do they even want an Omega? The little bit I read from that magazine told me that they've been without an Omega for years. They haven't been searching either.

And yet, the idea of Lance being part of this—the rest of them being people I can turn to, doesn't sit wrong in my chest. I think that's what truly makes my stomach knot. The thought that I don't hate the idea of a pack.

A broken sigh falls from my lips as I move to sit beside Lance, hoping that his brief

claim on her won't keep me from touching her. I've read up enough about Alphas and what they deem their territory to know never to reach in between an Alpha and their Omega during a heat. This is only a spike but it doesn't change that they're mates and that Lance's instincts might view me as a threat.

Hesitantly, I reach forward, Lance watching the movement as I caress Sofie's cheek. Her lids fly open, a whimper tearing from her throat as she moves from his lap to mine. The obscene amount of slick and cum that coats Lance's pants as his knot comes free is an overwhelming, enticing scent. Sofie curls into my arms as if she hadn't just needed the Alpha beside us.

"I didn't like it when you left," she mumbles, falling asleep almost instantly.

Lance slowly puts himself back into his pants, although it won't do much for the fact that he looks like the front of his pants went for a swim. "Why did you leave, Violet? You didn't have to."

"Knowing that I'm not enough for my Omega kills me. Watching her curl into you and find the relief that I can't give her is impossible to watch. I'm not enough, Lance. I'm not sure why I thought I would be."

I tighten my arms around her, pressing a kiss to her head as I try to figure out how I'm going to make it to the car without everyone staring at us. Lance stands, gesturing to the door. "What's the plan?"

"Dropping her off in the car while I finish up here. I can be done within the hour as she sleeps. God, your pants. What are you going to do?"

He laughs, a deep, dark sound that settles in the pit of my belly. "Follow you out that back door we're not supposed to know about and grab a change of clothes from the car. What? I know a few things." He heads toward the door and opens it, peeking out

before gesturing to me to follow him. Then he leads me to Xavier's office, a room I've only been in a few times. I avoid it like the plague but Lance pushes inside like he owns the goddamn place, pointing to a door at the far end. "The parking lot will be off to the side. If you need something else, let me know, okay?"

I nod, my words caught in my throat as he steps outside. I follow, heading straight for my pitiful little car, hoping that Sofie can hold on just a little longer.

### Chapter eleven

#### VIOLET

I help Sofie strip out of her dress and her panties, throwing her the extra shirt and shorts I keep stocked in the car. I have to help her into those, Sofie trembling against me as she then climbs under the blankets on the backseat. I brush damp strands of hair from her face, pressing a quick kiss to her forehead as she curls up in the backseat. “I’ll be out in an hour, tops. Just rest, okay?”

She nods weakly, but her eyes don’t open all the way, like even that small movement is too much. The way she shudders, the way her fingers twitch against the blanket, makes something deep in my chest twist.

The car door clicks shut louder than I mean it to, my fingers lingering on the handle for half a second longer than necessary before I lock it. One last glance at her, tucked into herself like a wounded animal, before I force my legs to move, turning back toward the gallery.

Of course, the moment I step back into the event, my luck ends.

“I don’t pay you to disappear whenever the fuck you feel like it.” Xavier’s voice cuts through what little calm I had left. “This is a showing, Violet. A busy one. Get your ass back into the crowd and make sure the tables stay clean and stocked.”

It takes everything in me not to turn and rip into him, to let the violence simmering just beneath my skin break free. My fingers twitch at my sides, nails biting into my

palms, but I force my face into something neutral, something he can't sink his teeth into, something I won't regret later. "I'll be in and out," I say, voice smooth despite the fury burning in my gut. "I just needed a minute."

Xavier scoffs, stepping closer, crowding into my space like he thinks he's intimidating. "You're already on thin ice," he sneers. "Don't fucking test me."

My teeth sink into the inside of my cheek so hard I taste blood. I refuse to give him the satisfaction of a reaction. I just turn, shoving my way toward the main event before the temptation to swing at him takes over completely. God, my luck just keeps getting worse—Lance waiting a few feet away.

His body tenses the second he sees me, brows furrowed, concern bleeding into his voice. "Is Sofie okay?"

My jaw clenches, the words sticking in my throat. I don't have the energy for this. Not when my hands are still shaking, not when my head is a mess, not when every second that passes is another second Sofie is suffering in the car alone. "She's fine," I grit out. I'm thankful to Lance but I also don't want to cause a scene. Without this job, I'll have to start over and as much as I despise Xavier, he pays more than the grocery store across from our apartment.

Hawk is with him this time, standing slightly behind him, his gaze scanning me like he's looking for cracks, like he can see something I don't want him to. I don't like the way he's watching me, the way his attention lingers a little too long. "What's going on?" he asks. "This have anything to do with the fact that my brother came in with a new set of clothes?" His nostrils are flared, no doubt reacting to Sofie's scent.

I shake my head, pulse hammering, everything in me screaming to shut down, to keep moving, to get the fuck out of here. "It's nothing," I snap, the words coming out a little too sharp, tears threatening to surface. "Please—just enjoy the rest of the show."

I push my way through the crowd, throwing fake smiles and little head nods to keep the peace.

No one minds me because I'm just an employee as I swipe a few empty glasses and a plate. Someone asks me a question but I'm too lost in my head to answer. Whispers flit through the crowd, my attention snapping to the right as his scent hits my nose. Puma is watching me, studying me just like Hawk had been. It's unnerving the way he's trying to dissect me but I shove the lump down in my throat and focus on getting through the next hour.

Five minutes left of my shift is the moment when everything goes to shit. Low murmurs, hushed voices bleeding into the air just behind me, just quiet enough to make me strain to listen.

"...fake painting..."

My hands keep moving, pretending to focus on the table, but my ears sharpen, my body locking into place as I listen.

"...stolen, I heard."

Everything inside me goes still.

"...Ashford Pack might be tangled up in it."

My grip tightens on the rag, fingers curling so tight the fabric twists under my palm.

A slow, heavy pulse beats through my skull as the words sink in. I should ignore it, should let it roll off me like all the other bullshit that floats through this place. But my mind latches onto the words like a damn vice, tightening with every second. Stolen. Fake.

The accusation digs in deep. Have I been selling stolen work? Have they been buying it? The thought is a slow poison, an infection spreading too fast. It doesn't make sense. Every sale I've handled for them has been real, legit. I've never moved a piece that felt off. But I have seen things that didn't sit right.

That one art piece from a few weeks ago. And then the one painting from yesterday. The wet paint. Like something wasn't adding up, like there was a piece missing that no one wanted to say out loud. Fuck .

I'm staying out of it though as I rush the last bit of trash to the bin in the corner and then grab my bag from behind the counter, my pulse still hammering in my ears. Xavier is across the room, deep in conversation with a group of collectors, but I don't care. I push toward him anyway, my patience already burned to nothing but ash. "I'm off," I state.

He barely glances at me. "No, you're not."

"It's 9 pm. Shift is over."

Xavier turns, scowling, his mouth twisting like I'm something stuck to the bottom of his shoe. "And? You think that means you just get to—"

"I don't care," I cut him off, the last thread of restraint snapping clean in half. "I'm leaving." I push through the front doors, stepping into the darkness, my only thought getting to Sofie and getting her home. I reserved one of those rooms for tomorrow but I'll have to see if they have someone tonight. I'm not sure her heat will wait that long.

"Violet."

Puma is stalking toward me, dark eyes locked onto mine when I turn around, burning with something furious. He moves like a predator, his steps measured like he's giving



me a chance to explain myself before he rips me apart.

"You want to tell me why the fuck people are whispering about fake paintings in that gallery?"

I exhale hard through my nose, barely holding on to the last frayed edge of my patience. "I don't know," I snap, my voice clipped, rough around the edges. "And right now? That is the least of my fucking priorities."

Puma's gaze flickers, something shifting behind his eyes. He tilts his head just slightly, watching me like he knows I'm holding something back. "I've had my suspicions for a while," he mutters, more to himself than to me, jaw tightening. "But hearing it thrown around like gossip?" He shakes his head, dark eyes flashing. "That's not a mistake. Someone planted that."

I dip my hand into my pocket and then shove a business card against his chest, and he catches it without looking away from me. "Call me tomorrow if you need to," I grind out, the weight of exhaustion dragging through my bones. "Right now, I need to take care of my Omega."

Something changes in his face. A small shift, barely noticeable, but I catch it. He frowns, his brows pulling together. "Your Omega?"

My jaw clenches so tight my teeth ache. "Yes," I bite out. "My Omega. Sofie, the girl from the front desk? I need to get her home." It feels wrong being so defiant to this Alpha as if some part of me wants to submit.

Puma goes still, the anger seeping from his expression until the softness feels like a complete 180. "Is she okay?"

The question hits me like a punch to the ribs which makes me laugh. A panicked

response, sure but it's all I have. A sharp, breathless thing that barely escapes my throat, bitter and humorless and soaked in exhaustion. "Why do you care?" I breathe, shaking my head, throwing my hands up because I don't have it in me to pretend anymore. "Why the fuck do you care, Puma?"

"What?" My voice is raw, frayed at the edges. I'm too fucking tired for this.

Puma exhales, dragging a hand through his salt-and-pepper hair. "I shouldn't have come at you like that," he says, voice lower now, steadier. "I'm sorry."

I blink, the anger still burning under my skin, still hot in my veins, but the unexpected softness in his words takes me off guard. I've seen Puma controlled. I've seen him calculated. I've seen him dangerous. But I've never seen him like this.

His posture shifts slightly, his hands tucking into the pockets of his slacks, but there's nothing casual about the way he looks at me. "I do care, Violet," he says, quieter this time, like the words are something meant only for me. And fuck if that doesn't make something tighten in my chest, something I don't have time to pick apart. "But those rumors in there? They aren't ones to be taken lightly."

My jaw clenches, because I know he's right. I know this isn't something I can just ignore. But I don't want to deal with this. Not when my entire world is narrowed down to one thing—getting Sofie home, making sure she doesn't drown in this heat that's clawing its way through her.

Still, when he gives me that expectant look, the kind that demands more than I want to give, I exhale sharply, rubbing my temple. "I didn't think anything of it before today, but yeah, something was weird with one of the paintings."

His expression sharpens instantly. "Weird how?"

Frustration claws up my throat, presses against my ribs. "I don't have a fucking degree in this," I snap, the words slipping out before I can stop them. "I don't have training beyond what Xavier drilled into me to make a sale. But I do know that wet paint isn't supposed to smudge on something that's supposed to be decades old." I shrug, defensive even though I shouldn't be. "I didn't ask questions because asking questions gets me in trouble."

Puma studies me for a long second, his dark eyes flicking over my face. "That's why you didn't really want to sell it to Lance and Hawk."

"Yeah."

A slow, deviant smile spreads across his lips. "I guess I'm going to have a talk with your boss."

A laugh rips out of me before I can stop it. "Good fucking luck with that."

The predatory look in his eyes is the kind of look that sends a warning through my veins, a silent promise that Xavier doesn't even realize what is coming for him. Oh, Xavier is fucked. I leave Puma, dashing the rest of the way to the car, relief flooding through me when I catch Sofie still asleep in the back seat.

Her skin is still flushed but she's resting as I slip into the front seat and take off down the street. There's a billion things rushing through my head that my knuckles turn white around the wheel. One thing at a time, I tell myself. Get through Sofie's heat and then we figure out this complicated connection to the Ashford pack.

### Chapter twelve

#### SOFIE

My body aches, every muscle sluggish, weighed down by something deeper than fatigue. The heat is still there, simmering low in my belly, dulled but not gone. Lance's knot helped immensely, his citrus scent still lingering around me, keeping the real heat at bay. But none of that is what makes my chest tighten. It's Violet.

She's gripping the steering wheel like it's the only thing keeping her together, fingers wrapped so tightly around it that her knuckles have turned bone-white. Her jaw is clenched, her throat working as she swallows hard, her breath uneven, barely controlled. She's trying not to cry.

I shift in the backseat, pushing past the exhaustion, past the soreness, past the way my limbs tremble from the aftershocks. I have to reach her. Have to say something. Have to tell her—I don't even know what.

I should have said something sooner. Should have told her how bad it was getting, how much I was struggling, how this thing inside me was unraveling faster than I could keep up with. The outcome could have been worse. So much worse. And I hate that she had to be the one to handle it. That she had to clean up my mess. That she had to let him in when we both swore we wouldn't.

But I can't be mad that he was there. Not when the only thing keeping me from drowning was the way he held me.

My fingers press against my chest, an unconscious attempt to steady the storm raging beneath my skin. Violet wipes a hand across her face like she's angry at herself for slipping, for letting the cracks show even for a second.

It was supposed to be just us. Just me and her against everything. But now? Now there are Alphas in our orbit, pulling at the space we carved out for ourselves. And yet I know, deep in my fucking bones, that we both need more.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, my voice hoarse, barely audible over the steady hum of the engine.

Violet's breath stutters, her grip on the wheel tightening. "Sof, don't." I open my mouth to say more, but she cuts me off before I can even try. "You have nothing to apologize for," she snaps, her voice frayed at the edges. "This isn't your fault."

I bite my lip, staring down at my lap, swallowing against the lump in my throat. She exhales hard, fingers twitching, then glances at me through the rearview mirror, her eyes shining with something fierce, something unwavering.

"Even with the entire fucking universe against us," she growls, her voice filled with a conviction that makes my breath hitch, "I'm not leaving your side."

By the time Violet has me tucked in bed, rushing around, gathering things I don't understand, my heat is no longer staying away. "Vi, what—what are you doing?" I reach for her weakly, hating that she's everywhere but at my side. A whine pulls from my throat as my body heats, slick coating the inside of my thighs. At least the cramps haven't restarted. "Vi!"

She stops and looks toward me, scrambling toward the bed. Violet drops to her knees, frantically running her fingers through my hair. "Baby, we're going to this little place I found. It'll let us rent an Alpha and I can still be in the room to make sure you're

okay. It's the safest option I found."

God, she's thought of everything. I can see the pain in her eyes but there's nothing else we can do. "Okay."

"Okay?" It's almost like she thought I wouldn't agree.

"As long as you're right there, I'll be okay. We just have to get through this and then we can figure everything out." My words are threatening to slur as my heat looms, dragging me under that needy haze but it won't be just for a spike this time. It'll be for real.

Violet kisses my forehead and then returns to packing a bag with every necessity we could ever need for the next few days. It feels like she's preparing for war and maybe in some part, that's exactly what this is. Especially when my thoughts start drifting, my body growing unbearably hot. I can't seem to focus on anything as heat pulses through me. This time when the cramp tears through me, the only thing I can do is curl up into a little ball.

A strangled cry tears from my throat, my body seizing up as a white-hot bolt of agony slams through my stomach, through my spine, through every single nerve in my body.

"Sofie?!" Violet's voice cuts through the haze, frantic, breaking apart at the edges. Then she's there, beside me again, her hands grabbing at my shoulders, her touch urgent, desperate, trying to lift me, trying to understand.

I open my mouth, try to say something, try to tell her that there's no more goddamn time but I don't need to. Because that's when my scent thickens to this syrupy sweetness that makes me sick to my stomach. Her hands tighten around me as she lifts me against her chest, rushing toward the door.

We're out of time.

### Chapter thirteen

#### VIOLET

“Hold on, baby,” I murmur, pressing my lips to her damp temple, barely registering the way my voice shakes as I rush down the steps, bag in tow. “I got you.”

A tiny sound slips from her lips, almost like a whimper, barely conscious, barely clinging to reality. Her fingers twitch against my hoodie, like she’s trying to hold on, like she knows she’s slipping and doesn’t want to go under alone.

I adjust my hold on her, shifting her just enough to fumble the car door open and ease her into the backseat, tucking a blanket around her. A tiny sob leaves her lips, her body curling inward, her whole frame shaking as she whispers a desperate plea. Please.

It fucking shatters me as I slam the door, my hands shaking as I grip the wheel, shoving the car into drive and peeling out of the parking lot without a second thought, tires screeching against the pavement. The city blurs past in streaks of orange streetlights, dark roads stretching ahead, empty except for us. The only thing that exists is the sound of her whimpering in the backseat, the way she gasps for breath between quiet cries, the way her pain presses against every nerve in my body like it’s my own.

Her scent makes it nearly impossible to focus, clinging to the air, wrapping around me like a second skin, sinking into my lungs until I can’t tell where my own breathing ends and hers begins. It’s syrupy sweet, too potent, too strong, pressing



against the inside of the car, curling against my skin like it knows what I can't give her. My own desire rages, my pussy squeezing around nothing, needing to be filled.

Cracking the window gives me little relief. The rearview mirror keeps pulling my gaze, my stomach tightening every time I look. Sofie is wrecked. Tears stain her flushed cheeks, her body trembling violently beneath the blanket, her hands gripping the fabric. She's curling in on herself, knees pressing together, her whole body fighting what's already consuming her.

Every second that ticks by, every mile that passes, every breath she takes—it's all spiraling. She makes a sound—high, desperate, something close to a whimper—and my pulse lurches.

“Vi.” Her voice is so fucking raw, so thick with misery, like she's breaking in real-time, like she's slipping through my fingers. “I need you—please, I—”

My hands tighten on the wheel, my knuckles turning white. “Baby, just hold on, okay? We're almost there.”

That's a lie. We're at least twenty fucking minutes out and I don't know if she has twenty minutes. I don't know what happens when an Omega isn't sated but the few medical books I've read say it could damage her health. She may never have children if I let this drag out. And that is one thing I can prevent.

She gasps, her back arching, her body twisting against the seat, her thighs pressing together as another wave crashes through her, stronger than the last. “Vi—please—”

My Omega—my best friend—is suffering and I can't do a goddamn thing to help her. I can't fucking touch her without making it worse. I force myself to blink, my vision blurring at the edges, my foot pressing harder against the gas pedal, the car roaring down the near-empty stretch of road.

Think. Think. Think. I can't let her keep hurting like this. But I don't know if we're gonna fucking make it.

The sky crackles overheard, thunder in the distance as if laughing at my plight. Big fat raindrops pound on the windshield but they're unable to drown out Sofie's cries. There is one other option and while I might regret it, it'll save Sofie.

I screech to a stop, just at the corner of an intersection and throw open the door to get to Sofie. She's clawing for me and I eagerly crawl into the back seat to draw her into my lap. She immediately shoves her face into my neck, taking large gulps of my scent. But it's only going to frustrate her.

I shove a hand into my pocket, fingers fumbling against the slick surface of my phone, my grip shaky as I scroll through my contacts to get to Lance.

My thumb hovers for half a second before I press down, before I force the call to go through, before I let go of the last shred of control I have left. It rings three times before his voice comes through the earpiece. "Violet?"

Lance's voice is rough, groggy, like I just dragged him from sleep, but there's something else beneath it. This is it. No going back. No undoing it. "I need your help. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't an emergency." The words feel jagged, like glass against my tongue. "I don't—fuck, I don't have any options."

"Where are you?"

The simple certainty in his tone nearly knocks the breath out of me. Like it's that easy. Like it's not even a question. Like there was never any doubt he'd come.

I blink hard, my vision swimming for a second as I stare through the windshield. The street lights flicker in the distance, casting long, fractured shadows against the rain-

slick pavement. The road stretches empty ahead of me, unfamiliar in the way that every road feels unfamiliar when your world is crumbling around you.

“I—” My throat locks up. My grip tightens on the phone. “I don’t fucking know. There’s that bookstore across the street. The little shoddy one. Fuck, I’m sorry.”

There’s rustling on his end, the sound of movement. “Stay on the phone,” he commands. “Don’t hang up. Just keep talking to me.”

Sofie lets out a soft, keening sound, her body wracked with another wave of heat, her hands weakly tugging at me. I tighten my arms around her, press my lips to her temple, murmur something soft, something useless, because nothing I say will make this better.

“I—” The words barely come out. I force them, my hands shaking, my pulse hammering. “She’s bad, Lance. I thought we had time.”

A low curse slips through the receiver. Fabric rustling. The faint sound of keys jingling. He’s moving. “I’ll find you. Just stay put.”

I nod, even though he can’t see me, shifting Sofie against me, rocking her slightly, whispering reassurances she probably can’t even hear. For the first time in a long while—we’re not completely alone.

### Chapter fourteen

#### PUMA

The wind howls as the storm lashes against the house, rain hammering against the windows in relentless waves. The low hum of the TV barely registers, some late-night show casting dim light across the living room, the flickering images reflected in the darkened glass. Gray's head in my lap, breath slow, deep, the kind of half-sleep that comes from too many late nights and too much whiskey.

He's been overworking himself, my beautiful little Alpha trying to save everyone's living room from artistic disaster. I'm not sure what he's trying to prove or maybe he's trying to fill some empty hole that the rest of us can't. He's been seeking me out more often, finding ways to touch me, lean against me, and steal my attention.

It's been so quiet in this house for so damn long that I enjoy the change. Hawk is on the other side of me, passed out. His suit jacket was discarded across the armrest, his shirt unbuttoned, revealing the mass expanse of dark bronze skin beneath. I almost want to rouse him from his sleep and start something to erase the moments of this evening. The rumors of fake and stolen paintings spread like wildfire, our name in everyone's mouth.

A very thorough conversation with Xavier told me nothing but I'm 99% sure he's in some shady business. We won't be buying from Ash & Ivory any time soon. A brief whiff of melon hits my nose, making me chuckle.

Lance is somewhere but he didn't have to explain what happened when we all

climbed back into the car. That little Omega's scent was clinging to him like a second skin and while I'm curious, it's none of my business. However, the panic in her Beta's eyes feels like my business. I've been wondering if she's okay, if she has the support she needs for her Omega and it's been the only other thing on my mind since we got home.

Even still, thinking back to those big brown eyes, her clipped words and the twinge of fear lingering in her expression guts me. I've never been intrigued by the few one night stands I've entertained but Violet, I haven't even had her in my bed and she's plaguing my thoughts. Her sharp jasmine scent toys with me, tempting me to do something I shouldn't.

We have very different paths we're walking down. My path doesn't include another Omega and I would never pull Violet from Sofie. Still, my mind whirls, playing with fantasies of her beneath me, her screams swallowed by my mouth as I suck on those gorgeous lips.

A sudden movement behind us rips me out of the fantasy as I catch Lance rushing through the kitchen. "Fuck," he mutters under his breath, shaking his head. "We have to go. Now."

My pulse kicks up. That feeling—that tension in his shoulders, the sheer urgency in his voice—it's not normal. Not something I hear often. Gray stirs slightly, mumbling something, but I don't have time to check on him. I shift him carefully off me, settling him into the couch, before I stand, already reaching for my own jacket.

Lance tosses me the keys. Whatever is happening, he's silently telling me that he needs my strength to keep him grounded. That's one thing I can do for my pack. We shove out the front door, immediately into the thick of the rain, soaking through my shirt in seconds. Lance's focus is locked on his phone still tethered to his ear as we head for the jeep.

I'm already speeding down the road, unsure of where the fuck I'm heading, Lance pulling the phone from his ear to let out a soft growl. Then I hear him. "Don't move. Just stay where you are. We're coming."

Lance rattles off an approximate address before whispering soft words into the phone. He's comforting someone, telling someone it'll be okay. I can feel his fear, his hope, hell even the desire trickling through the bond. And that's when I hear a small broken sound filter through the earpiece.

It has to be Sofie. There's no one else I've seen move Lance like she has. The few nights they spent together, his expression was brighter, more determined. I knew it might only be a matter of time before he dragged Hawk into the picture and it became a more permanent thing. It never happened but... I guess it's happening now, isn't it?

The rain makes everything hazy, but when we hit the small intersection just off the highway, I see it. A car parked at the side of the road, hazard lights blinking weakly through the downpour. Lance exhales sharply, already reaching for the door handle, ready to jump out before the car even comes to a full stop. "I'll understand if you don't want Sofie back at the house. But I needed someone who could keep their head on straight until we got here."

I keep my hands on the wheel, fingers flexing against the leather, watching him closely. "Are you asking for my permission, Lance?" I'm not angry with him and hell, he doesn't need my permission. The estate might have been passed down through the generations but it's all of ours.

Lance flinches, bowing his head to me. "Alpha, I... fuck, I don't know. I just knew I needed to get here."

He's her mate. That much is obvious. The care in his expression and the need in his eyes tells me everything I need to know. He drags a hand down his face, wiping off

the excess water. Time is of the essence, though, and he wouldn't have chosen me to come with him if he didn't trust me. "Lance, I'd never put them out," I murmur, the words barely louder than the rain. A breath of relief slips past Lance's lips, so quiet I almost miss it. His shoulders drop just slightly, some of that tension bleeding out of him. "But don't expect me to help."

His gaze snaps back to mine and I'm not sure why he thought it would be different. Losing my Omega in my 20s to a tragic accident during her heat took everything from me. In no world do I ever want to feel that pain again. I promised myself I wouldn't give myself over to scents and biological impulses after that. Mating three other Alphas gave me the comfort I needed while I told myself it was enough.

And it is. Except the growing desire for Violet to be in my bed and at my side tells me that things are changing.

Regardless, if Lance wants Sofie to spend her heat at the house, I'll make sure she's comfortable and has everything she needs. But I'm not sure I can ever participate in another one. Not when that's how I last saw the Omega I called mine.

Lance reaches across the console and grabs my hand, squeezing softly. "I understand. I would never ask that of you. I just need to know that she's safe, Puma." It occurs to me the other reason he called me out here when Lance jumps out of the jeep and heads to the other car.

Violet.

She's already moving toward us, stumbling out of the car before we even reach her, her movements frantic, her breaths short and sharp. Her hair clings to her face, her hoodie plastered to her body, and when she looks up at Lance, there's nothing but raw desperation in her eyes.

“Please,” she gasps, barely seeing me, barely focused on anything except the Alpha beside me. Her fingers curl into the front of his jacket, holding on like he’s her only lifeline, her voice breaking over the words. “Lance, please, I wouldn’t ask if I had another choice, but she’s hurting—she’s—”

Her throat closes around the rest. The panic in her voice grates against something deep in my chest, but I don’t have time to process it as my attention shifts past her—to the open car door, to the wreckage of an Omega curled up in the backseat.

She’s soaked in heat, body trembling, slick shining on her thighs even through the storm. Her hair clings to her sweat-damp skin, her lips parted around tiny, pained whimpers, her fingers twitching like she’s reaching for something—someone—but there’s no strength left in her to follow through. The scent of her suffering lingers thick in the air, heavy enough that even the storm can’t wash it away.

Something dark coils in my stomach. Not hunger. Not need. Something worse. Despair. Because I recognize love when I see it. Violet is breaking for this Omega, splintering apart in real time, her hands shaking, her face drawn tight with helplessness. She’s already given up before she’s even stepped back. She’s already mourning the fact that she isn’t enough.

And fuck—if that isn’t a feeling I know all too well.

Lance slips past her, crouching low, his voice soft as he murmurs, “I got you, sweetheart.”

Sofie shudders, her small body already leaning into him before she even fully registers what’s happening. It’s instinct, that need to be close to an Alpha, to feel safe. She lets herself be pulled into his chest as he scoops her up into his arms. My attention drifts to Violet who is on the verge of tears, her usually sharp scent burnt and acidic.



I move before I think, wrapping careful fingers around her arm, pulling her away from Lance. She stiffens beneath my grip, her muscles locking up, but when she finally looks at me, it nearly knocks the breath out of me. It's like I can read every emotion playing on her face. Her whole world is sitting in the arms of an Alpha she's hoping she can trust and it's killing her.

Lance carries Sofie to our car, slipping into the back as he continues to hold her crushed against his chest. By the time I slide in behind the wheel, Lance is whispering quiet things that make her fingers twitch, make her body sag just slightly, just enough. Violet moves to sit in the front seat, staring at them in the mirror, her hands curled into fists in her lap, her shoulders hunched like she's bracing for impact.

I start the engine, the low rumble filling the silence between us, filling the spaces between words we don't know how to say.

Then, quietly, I murmur, "It'll be alright." I'm not entirely sure I believe that, though.

### Chapter fifteen

#### VIOLET

Puma hasn't said much since we took off down the road, just that Gray would pick up my car in the morning. His voice had been low, almost distant, the words slipping past like an afterthought. The dynamic I'll have to face once everything is settled will be chaotic but none of that matters right now.

Because behind me, Sofie is finally, finally quiet. Not fully—but enough. Her whimpers have softened, no longer gasping, no longer sharp with pain. Her body is moving differently now, less like she's being torn apart, more like she's finally grasping something to hold onto.

Lance is giving her that something. He holds her like she's something precious, like the weight of her doesn't bother him in the slightest. His voice is quiet, murmured against the top of her head, soothing in a way that makes my stomach churn. She clings to him, fingers curled into the front of his jacket, face buried against his chest. Her hips shift, slow, seeking, and his hands are there, steadying her, letting her take what she needs, letting her use him the way her body is demanding.

I force my eyes forward, staring into the darkness beyond the windshield, trying to ignore the way my stomach knots, the way my throat tightens. Because I had to watch her suffer, had to hold her through the worst of it, had to listen to her sob and beg and break apart in my arms—only to be helpless.

The jeep skids to a stop into their long driveway, my heart in my stomach at the

thought of walking into their estate. There's no turning back now. I rush out of the car, already moving alongside Lance as he cradles her. Hawk pushes the front door open, his face twisted up in confusion as we step inside. His gaze falls to Sofie, the same heat in Lance's expression now mirrored in his.

Not much is said in the next several minutes as I follow on Lance's heels, needing to make sure Sofie is safe and taken care of before they shut me out. My connection with Sofie is visceral, almost animalistic. It doesn't make sense but it's the reason why this is so much harder than it needs to be.

The bedroom door is already open by the time I reach it, Lance laying Sofie down in the middle of a bed larger than my fucking dreams. He brushes damp hair away from her face, his fingers trailing lightly over her skin, his movements slow, patient. Hawk steps in right behind him, his face softening. Their scents mingle with hers, creating this erotic smell of citrus, melon, and mint. They're hers. Lance and Hawk are undeniably hers and I can't fight that knowledge any longer.

I wrap my arms around my soaked self, watching as they lovingly caress her, slowly moving to undress her, stripping away the rain-soaked fabric clinging to her overheated skin. Her head tilts, body arching instinctively toward Lance's hands, her breath catching on quiet, desperate little sounds. She's completely succumbed to her heat, her eyes glazed over as she pleads for more.

And even though I know I should leave, let them take care of her the way she needs, my feet won't move. Some part of me wants to throw caution to the wind and curl up beside Sofie as they knot her but experience tells me that it won't end the way I need it to. I might be Sofie's Beta but I'm not theirs. I have absolutely no idea how they'll react to me and one wrong move will ruin everything.

Besides, she's in good hands. I hope. I stay long enough to watch her cling to Hawk as he steps out of his pants and thrusts into her, her little cries of pleasure causing me

to shut the door. I can't fucking watch that. She's getting what she needs but it doesn't mean it isn't painful in the process.

I press my forehead against the cool wall, fingers curled into my damp sleeves, my body wrung out, my mind stretched thin. The weight of exhaustion sits heavy in my chest, but my nerves won't settle, won't let me rest, won't let me breathe. A shiver runs down my back, the cold threatening to pull me into a void of sickness I don't have time for.

"Violet, come with me."

My body shudders beneath Puma's command. I didn't even know he was standing there, watching me fall apart. It makes me feel just a bit worse. When I don't move, I feel his hands on my shoulders, fingers lightly pressing into my skin.

"I know this hurts but standing here, torturing yourself will only make this worse. Let's get you dry and then you can come back to check on Sofie. I promise she's safe."

I'm not sure why those are the words I needed to hear but I let him guide me away, across the hall to a second bedroom. It's warm, the glow of a bedside lamp casting soft shadows along the walls. Puma disappears into the attached bathroom, the sound of running water filling the quiet space. It's odd for someone to focus their attention on me without wanting a crack at Sofie.

The few advances I've had in the last three months aside from Lance have always been because they want an Omega to fuck. Puma's goal feels completely different, like Sofie isn't the prize at the end of the game for him. In some weird fucking way, it feels like I am. Like all those soft smiles when he came into Ash & Ivory were always for me.

It feels weird but it also feels nice. Really fucking nice. Just the thought of being able to lean on someone else, to pour my heart out to someone who won't judge me sounds like heaven. Sofie was right. I do need an Alpha. I need someone to catch me when I fall. Because when I feel helpless, when I feel like I'm not enough... I fall apart. And god, this is so much harder than I thought it would be.

I don't even realize I'm shaking until he steps back into the room, his gaze sweeping over me, taking in every little tremor, every uneven breath. His exhale is measured, like he's choosing his words carefully. "You did the best you could," he says. "She's safe now. Being taken care of." His eyes hold mine. "Now it's time for you to take care of yourself."

That's what breaks me. Because I don't know how. I don't know how to stop holding everything together with sheer fucking willpower, don't know how to let go, don't know how to rest without the crushing weight of guilt pressing into my chest.

A sob tears free before I can swallow it down, my body folding in on itself, my arms tightening, fingers digging into my skin like I can hold myself together if I just squeeze tight enough. "I—I don't know how," I whisper, my voice wrecked, shaking apart with every breath.

Puma steps closer, one hand coming up to cup the back of my neck, fingers slipping into my damp hair, his grip firm, grounding. The contact ignites the need I've been ignoring, the desire Sofie's heat scent creates but I can never quench. "Then let me take care of you," he murmurs, his voice like honey as it glides over me.

I'm done telling myself I don't need help. I'm tired and scared and fucking mad at myself that I let Sofie suffer for so long. So, I close my eyes and give in.

### Chapter sixteen

#### PUMA

It's like watching a flower wilt . Violet's silent as I sit her on the toilet seat. I meant to just run her a bath and leave her to herself but it's like all the fight has left her now that Sofie is safe. I can't imagine what's going through her head, the sound of her Omega's cries slipping through the door. I thought about dragging Violet to a room farther down the hall but her connection with her Omega is stronger than anything I've ever seen.

It makes sense now, Violet's fierce protection and the despair in her eyes when we showed up. I'm not sure how anyone has missed it but Violet and Sofie are a bonded pair. Not sure how it happened or how it works but it checks every box, what little I've figured out from the medical jargon I studied thinking I wanted to be a doctor after my Omega died.

Violet's heart is literally breaking and I suspect the moment Sofie comes out of that heat haze, she'll go looking for the Beta in front of me.

"Violet, love, I need to get you out of those clothes. If I do nothing else, let me do that." The raw, broken look in her eyes when her head tilts upward tugs at my heartstrings. God, I'm going to break for this woman, aren't I? When she doesn't move, I reach forward and slowly grab the hem of her hoodie before pulling it up. She doesn't fight me, something almost like resignation settling in her scent.

I don't expect her to be bare when the hoodie comes off, Violet not even moving to

hide herself from me. She just lets me undress her the rest of the way before I guide her toward the bath, her hand gripping my arm. I almost miss the word that falls from her lips but it's a command I can't ignore. Stay.

"Do you want me in the bath with you or just in the room?" Violet doesn't answer. "Love, I can't help you if you don't—"

A broken sigh falls from her lips as a tear falls down her cheek. "I just don't want to think anymore."

I nod, stripping out of my own clothes before helping her into the warm water. Settling behind her, I pull her flush against my chest, content to hold her there, her head falling back against my shoulder. The silence allows for Sofie's cries to filter into the room, sobs tearing from Violet's throat. "I know she's okay. I can feel it. She's getting everything she needs."

It feels like she's reassuring herself but it almost cements the idea that they're bonded. Not with a physical mating bond but with something stronger, something deeper than just our biological ties. Needing to cover up Sofie's cries, I let my purr take over, the sound rumbling through my chest. I'm trying to comfort the Beta wrapped up in my arms, give her something else to focus on but it's only proving to frustrate the both of us.

Even though I don't see an Omega in my future, that doesn't mean I'm immune to that syrupy melon scent filling the entire goddamn house. I have no idea where Gray ended up but if he's still in the house, no doubt he's staving off the desire running through his veins.

A whimper comes from her as she sits forward, Violet twisting around as she fights with her feelings. "I'm sorry, fuck. This isn't..." Her sharp scent is back in full force, my cock thickening between my thighs. I can't even apologize for it as her gaze dips

down to my length. “Fuck.”

Violet is mine, I can feel it and the visceral need to draw her into my lap and fuck her senseless is trying to override my rationale. I should help her out of the tub, dry her off, and put her to bed. I should check in with the twins and then find Gray before fucking his brains out to relieve this need. But I’m too selfish for that.

“Use me, love. Take what you need.” And I mean it. The same way Lance couldn’t stand Sofie’s painful cries, I can’t sit here knowing that Violet needs more than she’s asking for. She hesitates and I realize it’s because she doesn’t want to think. Doesn’t want to make any more decisions. She’s exhausted and about to spiral and I might be the one person who can stop it.

So, I drag her onto my lap and crash my lips to hers. Violet’s reaction is immediate, her body melting against mine, her nipples dragging along my chest. Her hands fall to my shoulders before her arms extend past them, those elegant fingers sliding into my hair. She’s absolutely everything I thought she would be, all soft skin and sharp edges.

And god, after tonight, I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to let her go.

She rocks her hips over mine, seeking the relief I can give her before she reaches between us to grab my cock. There’s no hesitation in her movements as she slides down my length, her hips moving automatically. Violet lets out a strangled moan, dropping her head to my shoulder as she rides me and I just hold her.

It feels like she’s trying to run a marathon, pent up on a mixture of anger and despair, her pussy already trying to suck me in deeper. My knot flutters at her entrance, tempting me to go a little further but neither of us are in the right headspace for that. It’s a discussion that may happen in the future but Violet wouldn’t enjoy it in this moment. She’d feel trapped and that’s the last thing I want.



She comes on a broken cry, her entire body shuddering with relief as I drag her off my lap seconds before my own orgasm. She sags against me, uneven breaths hitting the curve of my neck. It takes me a few moments before I realize the wetness dripping down my chest is from her tears.

“Do you want to check on Sofie or let me put you to bed?” I’d be remiss if I didn’t at least ask. As hard as it might be to watch the twins satisfying her Omega, it might still be a reassurance she needs.

Silence filters between us before she nods. “I need to see her. I just... I won’t touch her. I just need to see her.”

My heart breaks a little more at her resolve as she slaps away the tears on her face. She climbs out of the bath on shaking legs and I’m right behind her, determined to care for her the way she needs. Violet lets me dry her off, even allowing me to press a kiss to her forehead before I procure a shirt from the drawers in the bedroom. It’s long enough to cover her, Violet scrambling across the hallway the moment I slip it over her head.

The door is cracked, whispers spilling into the hallway as Violet gently presses it open. Lance and Hawk are curled around Sofie, the Omega even smaller than I remember. Her lips are parted in sleep, her cheeks flushed, Hawk currently knotting her based on their positions. Violet’s scent hardens just slightly, Hawk’s attention focusing on the Beta at my side. His nostrils flare, his lips turning up in a snarl.

It’s just his instincts talking, his need to protect Sofie present over everything else but I already know that this shit isn’t going to fly. Sofie is Violet’s first regardless of what bonds get passed around in the house.

Violet quickly steps back and marches herself back into the other bedroom, already climbing into my bed. “Love,” I start but she just shakes her head.

“No. I knew it would happen. That’s why I didn’t go in. I smell like a threat. We’re not mated and it would cause confusion and maybe even a fight. I can’t go in there. Fuck! But she’s safe. Sofie is safe and she’s happy. Did you see that sweet smile on her face?”

Violet is spiraling, her breath coming in small pants. She sits back up, clawing at her chest, tears streaming down her cheeks. She’s murmuring something I can’t hear, but the broken look on her face causes me to act. My own instincts are taking over as I slide in beside her, pulling her down and into my chest.

My purr starts up again, immediately calming the Beta in my arms. Her body sags against me, those sobs softening. “I’m so sorry,” she whispers.

“Don’t be. I’m not sure I’d be as strong as you have been for Sofie. Most would have given up already but you’re still here, putting her first, making sure she gets what she needs. I can see that it’s breaking you to give up control so while you’re here, let me pick up the pieces.” I press a soft kiss to her damp forehead. “Let me take care of you the same way you took care of your Omega. You’re safe here.”

She won’t believe me. Not yet but I have a feeling she’s going to be here a lot longer than just tonight. When I hear the nearly soundless ‘Okay’, I know that I’ve got one foot in the door with this fiery Beta and it’s all I fucking need.

### Chapter seventeen

#### VIOLET

A sudden discomfort tears me out of Puma's warm embrace, the Alpha sitting up with me. He cups my cheeks in his hands, pale green eyes searching my face. "What is it, love? What's wrong?"

"I can feel her. Something... is off." I scramble from the bed, my heart pounding in my chest as I throw open the bedroom door just for a naked Sofie to fall into my arms.

She's trembling against me, her small hands fisting into the fabric of my shirt, her bare skin burning against mine, still feverish, still lost in the haze of her heat. Lance exhales sharply, his fingers flexing at his sides, his jaw ticking as he watches her burrow into me, pressing her face against my neck like she's trying to crawl inside me. He looks wrecked, exhausted, still shirtless, still carrying the weight of the last few hours in the way his shoulders sit stiff and tense, like he's waiting for another battle.

"I told you to rest," he mutters, rubbing at his temple, his voice tight but still soft.

Sofie doesn't even acknowledge him. Her grip on me tightens, her body pressing closer, her breath warm against my throat. "Couldn't," she whispers, her voice smaller than usual. "Needed you."

I hold her tighter, my fingers stroking through her sweat soaked hair, hoping that

touch grounds her. "I'm here, baby," I murmur. "Not going anywhere."

Lance lets out a low breath, shaking his head as his eyes flick to mine. "She's still deep in it," he muses, but there's no mistaking the edge beneath it. "We took the worst of it off, but it's not done. I have no idea how she has the strength to stand right now."

Neither do I but having her back in my arms is everything I needed. I continue stroking my fingers through Sofie's hair, pressing my lips to her temple, needing to feel her, needing to remind myself that she's still mine, even as everything around us is shifting. "Were they good to you?" My voice is quiet, but I need to hear her say it.

Her big brown eyes blink up at me, hazy, dreamy, still lost in the afterglow. A slow, lazy smile spreads across her face, warmth radiating from her in waves, her whole body practically purring against mine. She doesn't need to answer. I already know. Still, she nods, pressing her cheek against my chest, breathing me in, her voice barely above a whisper. "They were perfect."

Shuffling down the hall, a grunt following hits my ears as Hawk comes up behind Lance. "Fucking hell." He drags a hand down his face, his entire body sagging with relief.

And now I'm intrigued as Hawk pulls off his shirt and slips it over Sofie's head. She lets out a little murmur of contentment before snuggling back into my chest. Lance leans against the arch, folding his arms across his chest. "She took off the moment Hawk's knot loosened. Stumbling around, incoherent. I thought something was wrong but it seems she was just looking for you. I always knew you two were bonded but had no idea how strong it was."

I frown, confused. Betas can't bond anyone, not without an Alpha somewhere in the middle. "We're not bonded."

“Maybe not physically but yeah, you are. It’s why she’s seeking you out instead of resting with us. You are her home, her guiding light, everything she fucking needs. I might have a knot but you have her heart.”

I look down at the woman in my arms, wondering if that’s why it’s been so hard to let someone else in. Why we’ve never wanted to be separated. Why I thought I could take on the goddamn world for her. She’s been mine from before she was an Omega, but my feelings for her strengthened when her designation changed.

Lance leans down to press a kiss to Sofie’s head, a soft sound falling from her lips. “I’m not going to take her from you, Violet. Regardless of what happens, she will always be yours first.”

Hawk hums his agreement as I gather Sofie up in my arms and carry her back to the bed. Puma hasn’t moved from where he’s sitting up on the mattress, his eyes softening as I lay Sofie down and climb on after her. She wriggles, a tiny smile playing on her lips. “You’re in the middle, Vi.”

“Baby, you need—”

“No. I can smell him on you. I like it,” she whispers, her words slurry as she closes her eyes. “I think it might be my new favorite scent.”

Puma pulls me in between them, like this is perfectly normal, Sofie snuggling up to my chest as he drapes an arm over our waists. Lance and Hawk are still standing at the entrance, almost as if waiting to see us get settled. There’s no jealousy in their eyes, no anger, no possessive Alpha bullshit lingering in their expression. Just adoration and maybe even a little bit of love.

I ignore all of that, pulling Sofie closer into me until I’m sure I’m suffocating her but she doesn’t protest, holding onto me just as tight. The heat from Puma’s chest bleeds

into me, his purr starting up again, lulling me to sleep.

“You’re not losing her. You will never lose her, love.” Puma kisses the back of my neck, a shiver running down my spine. I nod, tucking my head into Sofie’s neck, the mixture of her scent and the twins perfect. It smells so natural, so her .

Maybe this is her happily ever after.

Correction.

Maybe this is ours.

### Chapter eighteen

#### VIOLET

The next morning, I wake up to coffee and Sofie clinging to my side. She's absolutely adorable, all whines and grunts as I lead her to the kitchen, Puma telling us to take a seat in the living room. We're still clad in the Alphas' shirts, our other clothes soaking wet so I do as I'm told, Sofie curling up in my arms and promptly passing out.

"That's normal," Puma offers. "Omegas will be in and out of sleep during their heat. I'm guessing the height of it will hit some time today. Cream or sugar, love?" He's been calling me that since last night and it does something to me, a need to be back into his arms even as I hold Sofie. The feelings are conflicting and yet I want more than I've allowed myself to have. "Violet?"

He catches me staring at the expanse of bare skin glaring back at me. I hadn't been in the right state of mind last night to catch it but the artwork covering his right arm and spreading across his chest is mesmerizing. I clear my throat and smile, an awkward thing to ease my embarrassment. "Cream please."

He nods, shaking his head to hide his chuckle before handing me the mug. Hawk and Lance are sprawled out on either side of me, Lance basically passed out, a soft snore hitting the air. His brother's attention is on us as he sips his own mug. I get the feeling he's the one with the intense emotions but the words don't come as easily.

Sofie curls up tighter against me and I start to realize just how odd this scene is. She's

basically in heat and instead of leaning toward the Alphas that can help her, she's in my arms. We really are bonded—there isn't any other explanation. It's more than just love, it's a biological impulse so much stronger than what her body needs. She lets out a little puff of air, her lips parted.

I take a rather healthy gulp of my coffee, nearly moaning at the rich taste on my tongue. I'm not sure that sound would help anyone though so I swallow it down, watching as Hawk reaches forward to place a gentle hand against Sofie's back. It's amazing to watch as she relaxes further as if the combination of our touch is what she needs.

"She was so scared last night," Hawk cuts into the silence. His hand becomes a little more insistent, drawing small circles across her back. Sofie lets out a small soft sound, twisting around to look up at him with sleepy eyes. Her nose twists up as her gaze flits between the both of us in the most adorable way. It takes me a moment to figure out she's trying to decide where to sit.

When her scent becomes panicked, I push her toward Hawk. "It's okay, baby. Sit with him for a little bit, okay?" There's a happy little noise that falls from her lips before she climbs into his lap and I watch as his entire demeanor changes. Lance and Hawk are on the larger side for Alphas but the way Hawk holds her is so precious. And she curls up so tightly in his arms like his embrace is safe, like it's perfect just for her.

"I don't think I've seen anyone that terrified. I thought something was wrong until she found you." Hawk sighs as he caresses the side of her face. "You really are her heart." There's no jealousy in his words, no hate, just acceptance.

It feels powerful knowing that I won't lose Sofie, even as she needs more than I can give. Yesterday, I was falling apart because I couldn't do this on my own. And while I know that the Ashford pack might not be where we end up, I'm not so opposed to



having help now. Watching Sofie quickly fall asleep in his arms is enough to prove that.

Silence stretches between the three of us until Puma joins us, scooting to sit beside me. Lance jostles awake, a sly grin playing on his lips like he knows. It wouldn't be hard to tell. I'm drenched in Puma's scent and the only reason I'm not worried about it is because Sofie told me she liked it, the same way I like the twins' scents on her. I drag my mug back to my lips, my cheeks heating as Puma slides a hand around the back of my neck. His fingers lightly dig into my skin, offering a comfort I didn't know I needed. "We can all agree that this situation is complicated, that it's going to take some maneuvering but I need both of you," he glares at Hawk first and then at Lance, "to understand that Sofie is Violet's first."

Lance snorts as he throws his arms up in the air to stretch. "No one's contesting that, Puma."

"I mean in everything . We let our instincts take over and then suddenly our possessive side is front and center. I know it's going to be difficult as fuck, but Sofie is Violet's first, " Puma repeats, a growl at the edge of his words. He's telling them that I come first, that what happened yesterday as Hawk nearly snapped at me can't happen again.

Puma is putting me first.

And god, the feeling that comes from that is fucking addictive.

He leans over to press his lips to my temple, lingering there, offering comfort and a steadiness that grounds the chaos in my head. Hawk and Lance watch with a mixture of amusement and awe as I melt against Puma's side, enjoying his touch. It's so different from Sofie. With her, she's always in my arms but with Puma, I'm the one getting held.

Lance breaks the silence this time. “Violet, I want Sofie to spend her heat here if you’re okay with that. I know it’s probably more than you bargained for—”

“As long as she’s okay with it,” I push out. “I want her happy over everything else. It doesn’t matter what—what I need.” I stumble over my words as Puma’s fingers dig a little deeper into my neck. His warning glare tells me he’s not going to let me sacrifice myself for Sofie the way I used to. The words he doesn’t say are so fucking loud in my ears.

You deserve happiness too.

You are worth so much more than you think.

Let me care for you.

My nose scrunches up as I fight the feelings trying to build in my chest. “I just... do you mind if I stay here? I don’t... it’s not that I don’t trust you.” A bit of fear wells up in my chest at the thought of being apart from Sofie. My eyes widen as my breathing becomes uneven, Puma’s fingers pulsating between light and heavy touches to calm me.

“Love, no one is going to separate the two of you. You have a space here for as long as you need.”

I notice he doesn’t say ‘as long as Sofie is here’ as if the two things are not connected. The panic subsides and I’m left staring at Hawk still holding my Omega. Well, she’s ours now, isn’t she?

Lance catches my attention. “Violet, I’m not going to say this lightly but give us a chance, alright? I don’t know where this is going or where we’ll end up but I want more. It’s been barely a night and I can’t imagine either of you anywhere else but

here.” I open my mouth to speak but he shakes his head. “Don’t worry. We talked about it before you even called last night. The dynamic might be something to get used to but if you’re willing, we’re right here.”

I glance between him and Hawk, seeing the same expression on their faces. I was afraid that this might just be a heat thing, that this influential pack would kick us to the curb the moment Sofie was lucid enough. Instead, they’re inviting us in, giving us a place to be. I turn to Puma for his reaction, a tight smile on his face. “What isn’t being said? Why do you look like that?”

Puma lets out a slow but heavy breath, his hand slipping down to sit on my waist. “Violet, we’re not a traditional pack. The webs aren’t all tangled between the four of us and while we’ve all agreed should an Omega come into this pack that she would receive the pack bond, she would not be all of ours.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that she would not be the only focus in this pack.”

My face warms at the thought but I have no idea how Sofie would feel about that. Omegas can be territorial. Will she get mad that Puma’s focus is elsewhere? Will Gray want her? I have no idea how that’s going to work. Sofie makes a small sound, tearing me out of my thoughts. “You make Vi happy,” she mumbles, her hazel eyes wide and fixed on me. “I don’t need everything. This is nice. Remember, I told you that he’s all yours. I’ll take the twins.”

Puma laughs, his entire body shaking with the sound. “We’ll see where Gray fits when he shows up but I have a feeling I know exactly where his attention is going to end up.”

And damn, I have the same exact feeling.

### Chapter nineteen

#### PUMA

I stand at the edge of my room, watching as Violet paces on the phone. After last night, even just watching her fills the hole in my heart that I didn't know was there. She's a bit of sunshine in the dark parts of my mind, my walls crumbling faster than I can rebuild them. A bit of sweetness and a temptress all wrapped up in the gorgeous woman I'm currently staring at. The fierce look on her face as she paces the length of my room, her jasmine scent sharp and cutting until my body is responding to it. She has no idea what she's doing to me, what she's doing to all of us.

I never thought I'd see the day but I'm pretty sure Sofie will be the twins. However, Violet might be all of ours. She doesn't know it but the few glances Lance and Hawk sent her weren't innocent in the slightest. There was heat behind their eyes, a connection I'm sure Violet doesn't even recognize. It just means that I'll have to share her with the others.

Gray hasn't met them yet but I know he'll gravitate toward Violet and then he'll fall head over heels for Sofie because she's adorable. My attention settles back on Violet, the Beta still clad in only my shirt. Their clothes are in the wash but for now, she seems perfectly content surrounded by my scent, the warmth of that realization settling in my chest.

The moment is dashed as Violet lets out a little growl and pulls the phone from her ear to put it on speaker. "What the fuck do you mean I'm fired?"

“You ruined a perfectly good showing last night. I think I was perfectly clear that you were on thin ice, Violet. But the whispers of fakes in my goddamn gallery? Only that could have come from you.”

Her face scrunches up as she pinches her nose. “Why the fuck would I say that? I don’t have an art degree remember? I’m just some dumb bitch you hired because you thought that having pretty girls at the front would drive in more business. You’ve told me time and time again not to ask questions and I haven’t. I didn’t say shit last night.”

Xavier’s cold, harsh laugh bellows through the speaker. “Violet, you can’t expect me to believe that.”

“I need this job. Fuck, Xavier, please .” A sob catches at the edge of her voice and I’m not sure whether to pull her into my chest or let her deal with this on her own. It’s impossible to know what to do for this woman who’s so fucking strong.

“You apparently don’t need it enough if you can’t protect the gallery from rumors like this. You know that Puma Ashford came to find me? Had a lovely conversation with a man who could make or break my business. I’d have thought nothing of it—that he was just protecting his assets but I saw him outside with you. What did you tell him, Violet?”

This time Violet breaks, crumpling to the floor. “You don’t understand. I need this job. I wouldn’t beg if I didn’t. Xavier—”

“Sofie can come back if she wants to but I don’t need someone like you in my gallery. I thought I could trust you but it seems that your interests are elsewhere.”

I move into the room and sit on the floor beside Violet, gently tugging her into my lap. It feels so natural holding her against me as she tries her best to be strong. It

makes sense now why she took this call away from Sofie. I think in some part she knew the outcome and didn't want Sofie to overhear. Even in the little things, Violet is always selfless, always looking out for her Omega.

"Xavier, I didn't say anything. If someone brought it up, it's because they noticed. I swear. Please. Just—"

"You should have been more sorry before you had your Omega fucked in my back room. Did you think I wouldn't know? Her scent was everywhere, tracked through my office, and out that back door. Your last paycheck will be sent in the mail."

And then he hangs up, the silence he leaves behind stifling. I can feel emotions, vivid, twisted through a bond that shouldn't exist. And yet, it's like I'm experiencing the same fury and despair she is. "He fucking knew," she spits out as she leans her head against my shoulder, twisting around so that her back is against my chest. "He fucking knew that I was there to provide for Sofie. He also knows I wouldn't have said anything. Sure, I had my suspicions but fuck! I don't... I don't know how I'm going to do this again, Puma."

"Love, breathe with me for a second."

She blows out a pitiful breath before she falls back into that angry expression. I swallow a chuckle, amused at her defiance.

"Again, settle ." I drag my hands up and down her sides, Violet grumbling under her breath for several seconds before she relaxes. "There you go. One more."

She blows out another breath, her entire body deflating with it. "I'm fine."

"No, you're not. You also don't have to be fine," I murmur in her ear. "You can say no but let us show you what it means to be part of our pack. Lance and Hawk aren't

going to let Sofie go anytime soon and you're mine." Violet tenses at my declaration but there's an added sweetness to her scent. I noticed in the last few hours since everyone has been awake that she enjoys having someone to lean on. She nearly melted in my hands on the couch and I want that every goddamn day. "It's only a matter of time before you're the twins and Gray's as well."

Her scent sweetens further and I have no idea if it's because she'll have the attention of four Alphas or something else. Not that it matters. I now have a new purpose—proving to this woman in my arms that we can take care of her and her Omega, that we are the pack she needs.

"Let us prove to you that this could work, Violet. Let us help you take care of Sofie in all things." I might not want Sofie like that but that doesn't mean I can't provide for her—whether it be a safe place to rest her head or a job that will satisfy Violet's requirements.

"I don't want a handout, though, Puma. I can't... I don't want generosity for the sake of it. Even if it's just for Sofie. I want to work for it. Anything less will make me feel helpless."

I understand that more than she knows. So many people have accused the Ashford name of stealing its wealth and while some of it has been passed down the generations, I worked damn hard to get where I am now. "Violet, look at me." She doesn't move, still facing away from me. I grip her chin, twisting her just enough that our eyes meet. The defiance in her eyes pulls me in and takes everything in me not to kiss her. "I don't want you here because of Sofie. I want you here because of you. You are irreplaceable and I'm going to make it my job to prove that to you every goddamn day until you start believing it." Her breath catches and I can't help myself, dipping my head so that lips brush against hers. "You are so fucking precious, Violet. So tempting. So mine."

Maybe it's too early to utter those words but they feel right. For the first in a while, I want to open my heart to someone else and then I'm going to do everything in my power to protect her.



### Chapter twenty

#### SOFIE

Violet follows Puma back into the kitchen, the tension from earlier as she slipped off to the bedroom mostly gone. It's still there, lingering, festering and I have a suspicion that it has to do with the showing last night. I peek up from my seat on Lance's lap, my inability to choose where to sit making it hard to think.

At least the haze from my heat has lessened. I track Violet's movements, waiting for her to come over and when she's within reach, I grin up at her. "Good morning, Vi."

"Hey baby," she mumbles into a kiss as I all but climb over the edge of the couch. She laughs as she keeps me seated on the cushions shaking her head. "Stay there. I need to get some food in you." Her nose twists up as she stands back, her brows furrowing. Puma comes up behind her and places a kiss on the side of her head. "Fuck. We need to get some food in you."

I never thought I'd see the day that she gave up a little bit of control. And seeing how affectionate Puma is with her warms my heart. She needs this, needs it more than I do. I'd suffer every goddamn day to be with my Beta but she needs someone to lean on when I become too much. Puma is perfect.

"Was it Xavier on the phone?" I ask, tugging at her hands gripping the back of the couch. "Vi?"

"It's nothing. I'm figuring it out. Don't worry, baby."

She's still trying to figure this out even though they've all expressed interest in making this more than just my heat. So, how can I not worry that she's going to try and shoulder whatever is going on by herself when she doesn't need to?

"What did he say?" My voice is softer this time, but there's an edge to it, something that's begging her to tell me the truth.

Violet exhales, her expression tight, her jaw working. "It doesn't matter."

I shake my head, my fingers curling tighter around her wrist. "Of course, it fucking matters." The others haven't seen this side of me but I guess now's a better time than any. With Violet, I can find my voice, find the defiance I used to have as a Beta. With her, I find it easy to push at times. Like now. Like when she's being stubborn. I swallow hard, forcing the words past my throat. "Did he fire you?"

The way her lips press together, the way her scent goes sharp, the way her gaze flickers, just for a second, is all the confirmation I need. Rage flares in my chest, burning through the last traces of exhaustion.

I shake my head, my breath shuddering as I force myself to stay calm. "No. No, he can't do that."

Violet finally looks at me, really looks at me, and there's something in her eyes that guts me. "He said I'm the reason people were talking about fake paintings yesterday, said that I'm the reason the showing failed. He didn't believe whatever I said but it's okay. We're going to be okay." She bows her head to mine, blowing out a heavy breath. "They... they said they're going to take care of us."

I'm not sure if she knows how important those words are—how much weight they hold. It's been us against the world for what feels like years even if it's only been months. And she just told me that she's going to let someone else help. To truly help.

I would have eaten a thousand more of those strange little sandwiches currently in our fridge and spent a billion more nights in that bed we both kind of hated. I would have worked that front counter for the rest of my life, watching my beautiful Beta as she flit around the gallery like it was the back of her hand. And yet, I'm excited to start this new chapter—a chapter where she has the same support she's given me.

She will always be mine and I will always be hers. But maybe, just maybe, we can also be theirs.

“Are you going to get another job?” I'm hopeful that she will because she loves it and this time around, it won't be because she needs to.

Puma approaches the back of the couch again, crouching down so that he's eye level with me. He's truly a beautiful Alpha even if his scent doesn't make my mouth water. “I've offered her a little something and no, Violet, it's not a handout.”

Violet rubs a hand down her face, a smirk tugging at the corners of her mouth. “You'll draw up a contract?”

Puma shrugs, standing back up and leaning against the couch. “If that's what you need, absolutely. Whatever you need, I'll give. Any stipulations I need to make sure are in there?”

His seriousness has me and Violet laughing. Hers is more nervous than mine but something in her eases. Her scent softens and the guards she always has up fall just a little. “No,” she muses. “I'm good. It's just going to take time to get used to all of this.” She waves her hand in the air, grinning when Hawk reaches over to steal me.

A squeal tears from my throat but I think I'm loving this. There's so many laps to choose from. Violet will always be my first choice but being swallowed into the twins' arms is perfect. I almost disappear.

My gaze falls on my Beta again and her smile as she looks up at Puma is everything . That's genuine happiness on her face and it's a look I've been dying to see. I can't wait to see what happens when Gray shows up. She's going to get so flustered with all that attention on her and I can't fucking wait.

### Chapter twenty-one

#### VIOLET

The morning passes mostly in silence with soft caresses and barely there kisses. Sofie hops around between the three of us before she settles on the floor, dragging a blanket into her corner. Then a pillow. And then hilariously one of Lance's socks that she steals off his goddamn foot. I never thought I'd see her nesting but this just proves that we belong right here.

That is until I catch the one scent I hadn't prepared myself for. God, I knew he was part of all this but it didn't really dawn on me last night because he wasn't there. I hold my breath, his warm amber scent filling my nose, faint notes of vanilla and other spices I can't figure out—all of it bringing back the fantasies from that one weekend.

I twist around just enough to catch those light blue eyes I remember staring into as he treated me like the most precious thing in the entire goddamn world. He's still covered in a mass of piercings—the one in his lip that he likes to play with, the one over his brow, his ears decorated with hoops and dangling hooks. His grin is slow, knowing, sharp at the edges, and the worst fucking part is that he's enjoying this. Enjoying the way I've gone stiff, enjoying the way my whole body is betraying me, the way I can't even school my face into something neutral because I didn't have time to prepare for this.

“See, I knew the twins had brought someone home last night but I didn't expect you,” he drawls, stepping up to the back of the couch, inches away from me. Puma is just behind me, the heat of his presence keeping me from falling into a puddle. The

mixture of their scents is making it really hard to concentrate. “Princess, what are you doing here?”

Heat bleeds through me, a small need to reach for him growing until it’s damn hard to ignore. I forgot how explosive the passion between us was. It had been an immediate connection, something we both needed, something we both craved. I should have figured it out then that he was my mate but I was twisted up in my head that it never occurred to me. Even as my body gave me every fucking clue in the book.

And now, here, I’m not sure how I ever missed it.

Lance shifts beside me, sensing the change, his brow furrowing as he glances between us, clearly picking up on the sexual tension but not understanding where it’s coming from. “Wait, do you two know each other?”

Gray grins wider. “Intimately .”

I expect for someone to freak out, to demand our history, to figure out where we first met but it’s quite the opposite. Sofie is beside herself, all giggles and happiness. The twins having matching grins, almost as if they’re just as amused at this turn of events. And Puma, fuck, I don’t even have to turn around to know how he feels about this. It’s like his emotions are bleeding into me, a mixture of desire and love. I’m not sure how to handle this.

“I was gone for one night and it’s like I just walked into a fucking dream. Princess, are you ours? Is that what this is? Please tell me yes, god, tell me yes.” The earnest plea in his voice deepens as he bends down to claim my lips unashamedly. It’s too much and not enough in that moment as I melt against the edge of the couch, his hands cupping my cheeks, drawing me further into the embrace.

When he releases me, I fall back against Puma, my cheeks heated. Heat claws up my

throat, my stomach twisting, my breath shallow, my scent sweetening just enough for everyone in the room to know how I feel about this development. It's like we're back during that weekend, like I never left his bed. Like there hasn't been any time that's passed.

Puma leans forward, his lips pressed against my ear. "See, he couldn't stop from talking about you when he came home after that weekend. The first and last time he's taken off of work. Didn't know that it was about you or I'd have dragged you home a lot sooner."

"How did you figure it out?"

His lips trail down my neck and I realize he's doing it on purpose, Gray's eyes tracking the moment, heat building in his expression. "He's an artist. Described every last curve, freckle, everything . I kept trying to get Gray to pick up the paintings at Ash & Ivory but he was always 'too busy'."

A gasp falls from my lips as his teeth graze my shoulder, my back arching just the slightest bit. God, this is embarrassing. "Need a minute," I push out, dashing off to Puma's bedroom, Sofie on my heels. Her giggles follow me, growing louder as she shuts the door behind us and stumbles into my arms. "You didn't have to come in here."

She just shakes her head, tilting her chin up for a kiss. I grant it to her, knowing we both need it right now. "You deserve that. All of what just happened. You're happy here, aren't you?"

"It was just a little too much."

"It was like you lit up when Gray walked in, like some part of you has been searching for him."

That feels like exactly what it was. “Something like that. I just... we went from us to four more. It’s a lot of attention.” I try to dissect the expression on her face, realizing that she didn’t just come in here to talk to me. Her cheeks are flushed, her body heating up again. “Sofie...”

She turns up her nose. “Don’t. He came into the room and then your scent got sweet and I just... I think I’m going to have another spike.” She twitches in my arms, letting out a breathy sigh as her scent thickens. The scent of her arousal blooms in the air, a small whine pulling from her throat.

“I do not have what you need, baby. There’s more than enough Alphas out there to help you through this.”

“I don’t want it if you’re not there. No. Listen to me. You have no fucking clue how it felt being lost in that haze and you weren’t there. Lance and Hawk were so good to me.” She pushes away from me, jabbing a finger into my chest. “But, you. Weren’t. There. Lance said something about us being bonded and I think, I think I need you more than you know. We need each other. You’re not allowed to be anywhere other than right here.”

She ends her words on a whine, crumpling against my chest.

“Who do you want? Other than me, baby.”

She gives me some undecipherable answer so I just yell for Lance. He’s the only one I know well enough and I need less questions and more action. I also don’t want to deal with the Alpha bullshit from yesterday. Sure, Puma told them that Sofie is mine but I’m not sure how I’ll react if Hawk snarls at me again.

“I’ve got you, baby,” I murmur against her forehead, carrying her to the bed before I start undressing her. She’s squirming, reaching for me, crying out for relief as she



loses herself to another heat spike. This time I don't feel the pain of not being able to fulfill her. She's going to get what she needs and I'll be right here with her, holding her, keeping her safe.

Lance is there seconds later, already scooting in behind her. He strips faster than I can blink, no words shared between us as I crawl into bed and draw her into a full kiss. She's scratching at my chest, tearing at my shirt, whining for more.

"He's going to give you his knot. Hold on baby." She lets out a pleasurable sigh as her back arches and her hands dig into my arms. "Ah, he's got you, doesn't he?" It feels almost normal, sharing Sofie like this, like we used to. She smiles up at me, her eyes glazed over as she nods. "Stretching you out just like you need. Taking that big Alpha cock like a good girl, aren't you?"

She hums a yes, little whimpers falling from her lips as Lance starts fucking into her. I drag her into another kiss, licking the inside of her mouth as I take what's mine. She's a garbled, beautiful mess between us, threatening to come undone like the goddess she is.

"She wants more, Violet. Give her more."

So, I do, reaching between us as I press my fingers to her clit, massaging the sensitive bud. She bucks against my touch, screaming out in pleasure as she holds onto me. God, she's gorgeous like this. All soft and pliant and taken care of.

My body is running hot, the need for relief growing but this moment is about her. Until it isn't. Sofie lets out a frustrated sigh, dragging Lance's hand from her hip and placing it on mine. "She comes with us. Mmm, Vi comes with us." Her words are slurred, almost impossible to catch but the intent is clear.

I'm about to protest when Lance just follows Sofie's command like it's law. I have to

grip Sofie's arms for purchase as two fingers slide inside of me, curling a second later. I forgot how delicious this man's hands were, how easy it was to fall apart on them. My body jerks with every plunge of his fingers, the man's coordination between fucking Sofie and me is commendable.

And that's when pleasure shoots through me, Lance's growl reverberating through the room. It feels like we come together, Sofie crying out again as Lance's knot lodges inside of her. His fingers are still curling inside of me, dragging out my orgasm as I coat his fingers, the three of us moving together like a well oiled machine.

Sofie is passed out in seconds, those Alpha pheromones pulling her under so that it's just me and Lance as he removes his fingers. I'm waiting for it to get awkward now that the silence has set in but instead, I watch as he sucks those fingers into his mouth, moaning as my taste coats his tongue. "One day, it'll be my tongue between those thighs, Violet. What? You didn't think I'd want you too?" I didn't. I always really thought it was about Sofie. Sure, the three of us had fun but Sofie was our focus. Still is. "Violet, listen to me when I say that when we're done with the both of you, you will be wearing my bite. It's only a matter of time until I get you to melt the same way Puma and Gray have. They might have a head start but we'll see who wins."

My face flushes with embarrassment, the need to go hide somewhere else a very real thought. But I don't leave, Sofie reaching for me even in her sleep. "I was doing it by myself for so fucking long that I think I've forgotten how to give in, how to accept that I don't need to be in control." The weight of my words hits me like a freight train. "That I don't want to always be in control."

Leaning on Puma last night was everything I needed it to be. Having Lance in this bed feels normal, right. And the idea of being part of this pack no longer feels as terrifying as it did two days ago.

### Chapter twenty-two

#### GRAY

I expected there to be questions, maybe even some pushback from Puma for literally stealing Violet from his lap. She wasn't actually sitting on him but it was obvious to see that in that moment, she was his. I expected there to be a conversation, some yelling, some tension between the four Alphas of this pack.

Except, none of that happened and the little pleased cries coming from Puma's bedroom is making it damn hard to concentrate. Knowing that Lance has that glorious view of Violet and Sofie, giving them what they need—god it's not fair.

It's even less fair that I'm stuck at the kitchen table with Puma and Hawk, both of them waiting for me to spill my guts. I already mentioned Violet years ago, the woman I couldn't get out of my head. The woman who had plagued every thought of my mind for weeks after. It didn't feel like a fling but she never called or texted so I thought it was just that.

Never in a million years did I think I was going to come home to her after yet another all-nighter fixing someone's goddamn banquet hall. And now, I'm pretty sure I chased her away with my eagerness to pick up right where we left off. At least, that's what it feels like with the way Puma is glaring at me.

Fuck, he didn't even kiss me when I came in.

I exhale sharply, dragging a hand down my face. "This really isn't a big deal." But it

is, because fantasies of bringing her into our pack surfaced during those weeks after. I had no idea that's how it felt to have a scent match. None of these men are my scent matches. I just love them and biology wasn't going to stop me. It might have started out as more of a business transaction but that doesn't change my feelings. "Okay, it's a big fucking deal. Please tell me they're not leaving, Alpha."

I don't care how pitiful I sound but the rest of my heart and soul was just sitting on the fucking couch. Puma leans back, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "Sofie's heat is soon and as complicated as that situation is, no, they're not leaving. Just tone it down with your enthusiastic self. This Violet may not be the same one you remember."

My smile disappears and I'm about to fight him on that when Hawk cuts in. The bastard doesn't speak much and while he is usually my least favorite of the twins, his stoic presence is sometimes exactly what I need. "Gray, Puma is not saying to back off. He's telling you to go slow. Ease her back into the woman you first knew. She's been taking care of her Omega for so long that her entire thought process is wired around protecting her."

"I briefly met her at the club—Sofie, was it? She was a Beta then." The room goes silent and I realize that's not information anyone knew. "I swear. Violet mentioned multiple times that she had been out with her friends, all Betas. Told me all about them and how she should probably tell them where she was so they didn't call the police."

Hawk sits forward, his expression darkening. "I've never heard of an Omega presenting that fucking late. How old is she?"

I snort. "Isn't it a little late to be asking about ages? Fuck, I'm sorry. We're around the same age. Thirties, or so?" The twins are almost eight years my senior, Puma closer to fifteen or sixteen years older. I can't remember which birthday we

celebrated last and it doesn't matter. "All I needed to know was that there was another chance with that goddess in that room."

"And Sofie?" Puma presses. "I had my suspicions that you'd pounce on Violet first but I'm curious."

"She smells like a fucking dream, Puma but I'm also not going to encroach on the twins territory. Do you see how Hawk's eyeing me right now? Fuck, I'm not getting in the middle of that. Or wait, I might like that. Sandwiched between the twins is one of the best fucking places."

Puma cuts me off, roughly grabbing my ear and yanking me toward him. "I have a mind to fuck some sense into you right here but you'd enjoy that too much."

"I can pretend to hate it if that makes it better?"

The Alpha releases me, shaking his head but I know who's bed I'm going to be in tonight and who I'm dragging in between us. "It's going to take some time to adjust with the new dynamic but I thought you might enjoy a little company on your errands while they're with us. Don't look at me like that. I hate how hard you've been working and maybe Violet can knock some sense into you."

A slow, deviant grin spreads across my lips at the thought, a billion ideas running through my mind of where I'd like Violet to 'knock some sense into me'. Hawk lets out one of those warning growls, ruining the little bit of fun I had planned.

"I promise that I won't do anything untoward Violet while we're out unless she's begging for it."

That seems to end that portion of the conversation but they have no idea I will absolutely have Violet begging for it. Well, Puma probably knows but he's just as

much of a dirty bastard as I am so he wouldn't object. He'd probably ask to watch.

### Chapter twenty-three

#### VIOLET

Sofie is unraveling and I can feel it in every sharp inhale, every frustrated movement, every single tremor in her fingers as she grips the blankets like they might slip through her grasp if she lets go. Her scent is thick again, coating every damn thing in Lance's room. It's not quite a spike, not full-blown heat, but something close enough that my stomach tightens with a mixture of instinctual panic and need.

She's still standing there, arms folded tight, jaw clenched, glaring at the empty space in the nest like it personally insulted her. And that's when I realize what's missing. Sofie's never truly built a nest and I'm so damn proud of this one but she's missing the pillow from our apartment.

I scrub a hand over my face, trying to push past the exhaustion, past the absurdity, past the fact that I should be used to this by now. This is how she gets when her instincts are running too hot, when her body overrides her rational mind, and there's not a damn thing I can do to talk her down from it. She needs the pillow.

The one we've had since the college days, the one with stuffing practically leaking from the seams, the one we used to fight over when we had sleepovers at my house like it was some kind of prize. Of all the things she could have fixated on, of all the luxury surrounding her in this ridiculous estate, she wants that.

I sigh, dragging my hands through my hair. "Baby, I don't think I packed it."

Her breath catches, her fingers twitch, and then a whimper falls from her lips. Low, broken, barely a sound at all, but it guts me like a knife between the ribs. Fuck . She looks at me, her lips parting, eyes glassy with raw emotion, and I know—fuck, I know—I just made it worse.

The panic is settling in now, twisting its claws into her, making her scent shift into something desperate. I move fast, closing the space between us, hands settling firmly on her shoulders. “Hey, hey, I’ll figure something out, okay?” The words spill out too quickly, too eager, because I’ll say anything to stop that look of despair on her face.

She nods, but doesn’t look convinced. Her hands fist into my hoodie as I press a kiss to her forehead. “Just breathe for me, baby.” I exhale, stepping back and forcing my hands to move even though I want to keep them on my Omega as I draw her into my chest. “I’ll check my bag. Just sit, okay? Stay in the nest.” I know for a fact that it’s not in my bag. It’s one of many things I forgot but it’s the most important thing and now I’m kicking myself for it.

I dash out into the hallway, hoping that Sofie won’t notice I’m about to leave the house. It won’t take long to drive there and back, maybe thirty minutes. It’s a dumb thing to do but the only thought on my mind is making her happy. She needs the pillow so I’m going to go get it. Unfortunately, I barely make it to the kitchen before I realize my mistake.

The moment I snatch my keys off the counter, Puma and Gray’s quiet conversation cuts short, their attention snapping toward me like I just announced I was setting the house on fire. Sofie is right behind me, gluing herself to my side immediately. Well... that was anticlimactic.

Puma’s brows furrow. “What’s going on?”

I flick my keys between my fingers. “I’m grabbing Sofie’s pillow.” Sofie grunts, a



wordless gesture that tells me I should have just told her that it wasn't here.

His frown deepens. "Is that a good idea with her this close to her heat?" Puma stands, walking toward us, his expression full of concern. "Love, she might be hours away from a full-blown heat and if you're not here, she's going to panic."

That would explain why Sofie is basically speaking whines and grunts. I twist to look at her, her hazel eyes glazed over. Her hand digs into my shoulder, one of her brows lifting in a challenge. She's not letting me leave her side.

Gray laughs from his seat at the table, but there's no humor in it—just dry amusement mixed with pure disbelief. "Yeah, that's a horrible idea."

I bristle, ready to argue, but then I catch the warning look in Puma's eyes. I hate the way my gut tells me to listen, the way my instincts are at odds with what I want to do. I'm not used to standing down when it comes to Sofie. But something about the way these two Alphas are watching me, waiting for me to make the wrong move has me hesitating.

Gray lets out a heavy sigh, approaching the both of us as well. "I'll go."

Sofie immediately shakes her head, stubborn as ever. "You won't know which one is the right one." Her words are thick and slurred, her body starting to vibrate by my side. God, the idea swirling around in my head is an awful one.

Gray raises a brow. "It's a pillow, sunshine."

Sofie glares. "It's the pillow."

Gray exhales through his nose as he pinches the bridge, shaking his head. I turn to Sofie, brushing my fingers along her warm wrist, trying to reason with her. "Baby, if

you have a spike while we're gone, you need to be here. The twins or Gray can help."

Sofie shakes her head harder, clutching at my hoodie. "No."

I sigh, rubbing my temple. "Sofie—"

"No, Violet." Her voice wobbles, and fuck, it's the tone that gets me. She's not arguing for fun—she needs this. I can feel it in my chest, the way she leans into me, the way her body trembles just the slightest bit.

Gray rolls his shoulders, exhaling sharply before stepping forward. "Fine. We all go." Gray is already moving, grabbing a jacket off the chair, Puma throwing him a warning glance as well. Puma turns to me and presses a simple kiss to my forehead like 'be safe' and 'be smart' all in one gesture. Nothing about this is smart and I'm surprised no one is yelling at us for it. That is until I realize the two men who probably would stop us from doing something this reckless are the twins who aren't currently here.

Sofie is practically vibrating, barely waiting for us before she piles into the backseat, already tucking herself into the blankets. I watch her for a second, making sure she's settled, then turn back to Gray with a mock-serious look. "No kinky business," I warn, wagging a finger at him. "Sofie's too close to her heat for you to be playing around."

Gray laughs, a rich deep sound I've missed, shaking his head. "Princess, I remember how much you loved that side of me."

And just like that—his hands are on me. Strong, sure, fingers curling around my waist, pulling me close until my breath catches in my throat. Gray's amber scent wrapping around me, making my thoughts hazy for a split second. I gasp, pressing my hands against his chest, heart hammering when I feel how solid he is. "Gray—"

His lips curve into a dangerous, teasing smile. “What’s wrong, princess? Thought you could handle me?”

I let out a low growl, shoving against him half-heartedly. “Just keep it in your pants,” I mutter, forcing myself to step back, ignoring the way my skin feels cold the second I’m out of his grip. “Sofie’s coming with us. And I can’t handle it if there’s a repeat of the other night.”

Gray’s teasing grin softens, something gentler slipping into his expression. “I get it. Let’s go get our Omega’s pillow.”

Our .

He says it like it’s the most natural thing in the world, like Sofie already belongs to him. To us. I try not to read into it.

### Chapter twenty-four

#### HAWK

Lance doesn't wait for me to say anything. He's already reaching for his phone, fingers moving fast as he types something out, his expression controlled, the way it always is when shit is about to hit the fan. I keep my focus on the screen, skimming through the latest investor threads, searching for the root of this bullshit. Someone started it, and whoever they are, they know exactly where to hit us.

This isn't just idle gossip. This was a deliberate, targeted attack. Lance curses under his breath, tossing his phone onto the desk. "Gray's gonna fucking love this."

The sarcasm is sharp, but there's real frustration underneath it. Gray can handle bad press. He thrives in it, actually. But this? This is more than just a few headlines questioning his latest work or some petty jealousy from another artist. This is our entire operation, our reputation, our future—all getting dragged through the mud over something we didn't even do.

I rub a hand over my jaw, trying to push past the initial wave of fury, trying to focus. "How bad is the damage?"

Lance pulls up our client list, scanning through the recent communications. His fingers tap against the desk, an erratic rhythm that tells me my brother's more pissed than he's letting on. "So far, two investors have officially pulled out. Three others are waiting for a response. They're not cutting ties yet, but they want reassurances." He exhales sharply. "And if they're asking questions, you can bet more are coming."

I click into another tab, checking our accounts, scanning transactions, double-checking every piece of documentation we have on our latest acquisitions. Every purchase is clean. Every deal accounted for. There's no reason for anyone to believe we're moving fakes. Unless someone wants them to.

Lance must be thinking the same thing because he straightens, a soft growl coming from him. "This isn't random."

"No," I agree, a little more certain with all the details. We've been at this most of the morning. "It's a setup."

He nods, silent for a beat, then leans forward, forearms braced against the desk. "Who do we know that benefits from this?"

I grit my teeth, running through a mental list. Competitors, past deals gone sour, collectors we've had to cut ties with—there are plenty of people who would love to see us fall. But this feels personal.

At first, the rumors had been nothing more than background noise, just another wave of bullshit gossip drifting through the art world like it always does. The kind of talk that flares up and dies just as fast. But now, it's different. Talk from that showing has exploded and as I scroll through some of the newer emails, I realize someone's suing us. It's time to get Puma involved, both of us heading out of the office to locate our Alpha.

We find him exactly where we expect, perched at the kitchen island with a magazine in his hands, flipping through the pages like he doesn't have a single goddamn care in the world. At first glance, it's a picture of indifference. Controlled. Unbothered. But it's not just any magazine. It's the latest issue, the one that ran a feature on us. The one that made my life a living hell.

Flashing cameras. Forced smiles. Hands constantly adjusting, positioning, molding us into something more palatable for the public. Every second of it had grated against my skin like sandpaper, an intrusion I swore I'd never go through again. I told Puma that next time, if there ever was a next time, I wasn't doing it. No staged bullshit, no polished images, no empty performances.

He looks up, searching our expressions. "What's going on?" Puma sits up a little straighter, closing the magazine, waiting for one of us to talk.

I slide my phone onto the counter, the screen still lit up with the email thread. Puma's gaze drops to it, scanning, his fingers hovering over the screen. I watch it happen—the way his expression shifts, casual amusement draining away, the faintest crease forming between his brows. He exhales, setting the magazine aside like it suddenly weighs too much.

"Shit," he mutters, rubbing a hand over his jaw.

My arms cross over my chest, but it doesn't do a damn thing to quiet the twisting in my gut. Something's gnawing at me, an itch beneath my skin that has nothing to do with the lawsuit or the emails or the way our name is getting dragged through the mud. And that's when I realize the house is too quiet. I glance around, scanning the kitchen, the living room beyond it, the space feeling too open, too empty. The longer the silence stretches, the worse the feeling gets.

I look back at Puma. "Where are Violet and Sofie?"

Puma waves a hand, brushing the question off like it's nothing. "Relax. They just went on an errand." He knows exactly how Lance and I would feel about that, the pull toward Sofie stronger than it should be in such a short length of time. He knows we would have said no and I suspect that's why he didn't consult with us on it—not that he needed to.

“They went out?” Lance asks. “When?”

Puma rolls his eyes. “Not long ago. They’re fine. Gray went with them.” Puma sighs, glancing at how emotionally charged my brother and I are before gesturing for the both of us to sit. It isn’t a suggestion and not quite a command. Still, I drop down into the chair, waiting for an explanation. “Sofie needed something for her heat and before either of you tell me how awful of an idea it was, I’m well aware. It’s why I have my phone on me should things change and we need to spend her heat at their apartment. Violet was going to go alone, Sofie refused that option so Gray compromised and went with them. They’ll be fine.”

It’s not the worst idea and I know that. He’s reliable. If something happens—if Sofie has another spike, if she needs help—he’ll handle it. I exhale hard, trying to force the frustration out with it, but it doesn’t help. My hands are already curling into fists, nails biting into my palms, the thought of them being out there—while we’re being watched, while people are waiting for us to slip up—sits in my stomach like something rotting. I shake my head. “You should’ve put your foot down.”

Puma chuckles and then he gives me that look—the one that grates like fucking sandpaper because I already know whatever comes out of his mouth next is going to be something I can’t argue with. “Are we talking about the same Omega,” he asks, voice laced with amusement, “who crawled out of bed after literally being knotted and ran straight into her Beta’s arms?”

I hate that he’s right. Sofie isn’t like other Omegas.

She’s soft, yeah. Sweet, sure. But she’s also stubborn as hell and if she’s decided she needs Violet, then there’s no keeping her here, no reasoning with her, no convincing her otherwise. She doesn’t break, doesn’t bend the way people expect Omegas to.

Lance shifts against the counter, arms locked tight over his chest, the tension in his

shoulders bleeding into the sharp edges of his voice as he changes the subject. Which thank fuck because I'm not trying to dwell on the fact that our Omega is currently outside in preheat. "We've gotten several emails this morning. A few cutting ties, some asking for clarification." He exhales hard, nostrils flaring. "The rumors are sticking, Puma. They're mixing with our name."

Puma sighs, rubbing a hand over his jaw again before pulling out his phone. "I'll take care of it."

The words should be reassuring, but they don't land that way. I watch as he dials, pressing the phone to his ear, his posture shifting, eyes hardening as he listens to whoever is on the other end. The conversation is low, mostly murmured words, short grunts, the occasional sharp exhale. Puma isn't the type to waste breath on unnecessary talk. If there's a problem, he gets straight to the heart of it. But whatever he's hearing, it isn't good.

When he turns to us after hanging up, my stomach twists. "Just got off the phone with one of the galleries in the next city over. They're hearing it too. People are clutching their wallets."

That means it's not just our clients. It's not just whispers. It's the entire fucking industry coiling around us like a noose, tightening with every passing second. Art is built on reputation. Trust. The illusion of prestige. If people start second-guessing us, hesitating before making a purchase, questioning the legitimacy of what we sell—we're fucked.

Before I can even process the weight of that, Puma's phone buzzes again. A name flashes across the screen and my stomach fucking drops.

"Why the fuck is the lawyer calling you?" I growl



Puma exhales, dragging a hand through his hair before he picks up. "I'm assuming in everything you find, a client or two is probably suing us for selling them a fraudulent painting, right? I'm surprised it took them this long." Puma lets it go to voicemail before throwing me a firm glare, silently telling me not to try anything. "I know how tempting it is to try and figure out who it is but it doesn't matter. The damage is already done," he continues. "They don't need proof to tarnish our name. Even if the painting turns out to be real, it's the initial scare that gets everyone."

Fucking hell.

This is what I hate about the art world—the way whispers carry more weight than facts, the way speculation sinks deeper than truth, the way people who have never set foot in a gallery or touched a brush in their lives suddenly become experts when there's a scandal to latch onto. It doesn't matter if we win this fight. The stain will linger. It always does.

Beside me, Lance exhales sharply, fingers pressing into his temples like he's trying to fight off a headache of his own. "What now?"

Puma sets his elbows on the counter, leaning forward just slightly, his gaze steady, unshaken. The way he carries himself, the way he speaks, the way he controls the room without raising his voice—it's always been something I admired. "We tread carefully. For now, don't answer or respond to a goddamn thing. Let the lawyer figure out our plan of attack." His eyes flick between me and Lance, making sure we're listening. "But the only thing I want you two to focus on is Sofie's heat for the next few days. That's it. Make sure she's comfortable. Make sure she has everything she needs."

The distraction is welcomed because I can definitely give Sofie my full attention, just as soon as she comes back. "What about Violet?" I ask, wondering why Puma didn't mention her.

And that's when I see it—the shift in Puma's expression. The slight quirk of his lips, the way his eyes darken just enough to make something twist low in my stomach, the glint of something sharp, something almost predatory. He leans back, smirking like he already knows exactly where my mind is going, like he's been waiting for me to ask. "Taking care of Violet is my job."

Lance chokes on his breath, turning away as he coughs into his fist, but I don't miss the way his shoulders shake just slightly, the way his amusement bleeds through even as he tries to fight it.

I'm just glad Puma's opening his heart up again and if anyone can break down those walls, it's Violet.

### Chapter twenty-five

#### VIOLET

Sofie barely waits for the car to roll to a stop before she's shoving the door open and bolting up the stairs. Her excitement radiates off her in waves, a stark contrast to the nerves that used to grip her so tightly. For so long, I worried she'd never want this. That she'd reject every part of being an Omega, that the fear would keep her from fully stepping into herself. That the weight of it all—the expectations, the stigma, the loss of control—would bury her before she ever had the chance to breathe.

But now, she's giggling, her hands trembling not with anxiety but with excitement as she fumbles with the lock, dragging us toward the tiny apartment we left behind. All for a goddamn pillow.

But it's not just a pillow, is it? It means so much more to her and now I understand why.

Gray and I follow, the Alpha chuckling under his breath, the sound settling something deep in my chest. He takes his time climbing the steps, like me, watching her bounce with anticipation, letting her have this moment.

Inside, the apartment is exactly how we left it—small, cramped, filled with echoes of the life Sofie and I built together over the last three months. The weight of memory presses against my ribs, a strange mix of comfort and something harder to swallow. This was home for so long, the space where we survived, where we figured shit out one day at a time, where we only had each other to rely on.

Gray's hand finds mine, bringing me back to the present as Sofie darts into the bedroom. His grip is firm, fingers brushing against my skin like he's testing the waters. Before I can react, he lifts my hand to his lips, pressing a soft kiss against my knuckles. Heat rolls through me, curling low in my belly, seeping into my bones, making it harder to breathe for a different reason entirely.

"Princess." His voice is rough, threaded with something deeper, something almost longing as he catches my gaze. "I wish we hadn't let it end that day."

The weekend that wasn't supposed to mean anything but did. The nights that bled into mornings. The slow unraveling of everything I thought I knew about him, about myself, about what we could have been. The thing we never named before it slipped through our fingers. The way it felt to wake up alone, to realize whatever we had was over before it even had the chance to begin.

I press my lips together, hesitation flickering for half a second before the words slip out. "Me too. But," I add, exhaling slowly, forcing myself not to look away, "even though I wish we had come back together sooner... maybe it was for the best."

I glance toward the hallway where Sofie disappeared. The time apart, the choices made, the lives lived in between—it all led back to this moment, to this second where everything hangs in the balance.

"Things needed to happen before it would ever work out," I whisper, turning back to him. "Before the universe could bring us back together."

Gray moves before I can, slipping behind me, his body solid and warm as his arms wrap around my waist, pulling me against him. The heat of his chest seeps through my shirt, like he's making damn sure I feel him, making sure I know he's here. A slow shiver rolls down my spine as he dips his head, lips pressing against my temple, the kiss soft, lingering, almost careful. "Then I'm glad it worked out," he mumbles.

I hate how easy it is to melt into him. Hate how natural it feels, how familiar. Like we never left. Like the years between then and now were nothing but a pause, a breath—not a full stop, not the ending it was supposed to be. I've been closing myself off for so long so that I could focus on Sofie that I've forgotten what it's like to truly feel. Puma and Gray in less than a day have reminded me.

Gray hums low in his throat, his arms tightening just slightly, enough to make sure I don't pull away as he asks the same question I'm thinking. "How the hell is it so easy for you to just step back in like you never left?"

Maybe it's because I never really left, not in the ways that mattered. Maybe it's because his scent still fucks with my head, still makes my thoughts sluggish, my body too aware of his. Maybe it's because I'm tired, and letting him hold me takes less energy than fighting it.

"You know," he murmurs, his lips brushing against my hair, "Puma told me you were a little more stubborn these days. Said you'd fight me on everything."

A scoff leaves me before I can stop it, my body relaxing despite myself. "I am. I do."

"But you're not fighting me now."

"I'm just... tired," I admit, my voice softer than I intend.

"You're breaking my heart, princess."

I shift, turning just enough to see him, to meet those light blue eyes that still feel like a storm rolling in, unpredictable and endless. "It was just me and Sofie for a long fucking time," I say, voice rougher now, steadier. "And then she presented and everything became about making sure she was okay."

Gray watches me carefully, his fingers trailing higher, his palm resting warm against my ribs. "And what about your happiness?"

I stare at him for a long moment before I just shrug. "It didn't matter."

Silence creeps back in as we stand there, the quiet comfort he offers taking over everything else. It takes me entirely too long to realize that Sofie hasn't come back yet.

Unease settles deep in my gut as I glance toward the hallway, expecting to hear her footsteps, the sound of her voice spilling over with excitement about finally getting the pillow she's been obsessing over. But there's nothing. No movement. No sound. Just silence stretching out too long, too empty.

Gray immediately notices my discomfort. "What's wrong?"

I don't answer him as I take off down the small hallway and step into our bedroom, my heart sinking into my stomach. Sofie is kneeling in the center of the bed, thighs spread just enough to show the way her muscles tremble, fingers tangled in the sheets like she's holding on for dear life. Her breath comes fast and uneven, soft little whimpers slipping past her lips, her entire body locked in the throes of something she can't fight. Her pupils are completely blown, dark and unfocused, her skin flushed, the heat creeping down her throat, disappearing beneath the collar of her shirt.

Her lingering heat scent from before masked this moment, neither of us able to catch onto the fact that Sofie was suffering in here. She's not even crying out, her soundless cries as she parts her lips making it worse. Now that I'm standing in our room, though, the sharp, melony tang that coats the back of my tongue, rich with desperation and need, her arousal bleeding into the air.

The room tilts, my grip tightening around the doorway as I fight to stay steady, to

keep my head above the rush of heat slamming through me. Gray is behind me, his body heat burning through my back, his breath ghosting against my hair as he gets too close. "Jesus fucking Christ. They always talked about Omegas in heat but this is like a fucking drug." His cock thickens against my ass, a purr rumbling through his chest but he waits.

Sofie's head snaps up at the sound, lips parting, pupils somehow going even wider, body swaying slightly like she's dizzy, like she's seconds from tipping over. The shallow rise and fall of her chest is too fast, the panic in her body warring with the biological need clawing through her. "Vi," she whimpers, my name breaking on her tongue, desperate, pleading.

I rush to her and cup her face, pressing my forehead to hers, letting her scent wrap around me, letting her shake in my arms. "It's okay, baby," I whisper, the words shaking, unraveling. "I've got you." I make quick work of her clothes, hoping and praying that Gray is on the same wavelength. I hate to ask him to help but there's nothing in his expression that tells me this is a chore.

Gray glances at me like he knows what I'm thinking. "Violet, I didn't just come with you to make sure you two were protected. You might be the woman in my head, in my dreams, and in my heart but Sofie is like a breath of fresh air, like sunshine. I came because I want you both and the fantasy of having you two all to myself? I couldn't pass it up." And then all of his attention is on Sofie as he strips his own clothes and moves onto the mattress.

Sofie is already reaching for him, Gray pulling her to straddle his thighs, my Omega wildly rocking her hips as she cries for relief. Gray doesn't waste time as he wraps a firm hand around his cock and raises Sofie up far enough for her to slide down. She lets out a garbled moan, her hands searching for something more even as Gray starts fucking up into her pussy. It's chaotic and messy, the sound of slick echoing through our room.

“Vi,” she cries and I hold out my hand to her, Sofie trying to drag me onto the bed. Unlike Puma’s, though, this twin size doesn’t allow for much room. I try to twist myself around but it’s an awkward position that just makes Sofie frustrated.

Gray chuckles as he grips my waist. “Get undressed, princess. I got an idea.” I know for a fact that whatever his idea is, is going to be something just as wild as he is but I don’t fight it, slipping out of my clothes until I’m standing bare in front of him. Sofie is glaring at him to do something, to make this better just as Gray reaches for me again. “Drag your sexy ass over here and sit on my face.”

This is not the first time Gray has told me that but it’s been years since anyone has given me that kind of pleasure. “Just focus on Sofie,” I say but he’s not having it.

“I can multitask, princess.” This time when he grips my waist, it feels like a command, one I don’t want to disobey. I swallow nervously, climbing onto the edge of the bed beside Sofie. He lets out a little growl as he manhandles me into position. “Sit on my goddamn face while I knot our Omega.”

I slowly lower myself over his lips, Sofie grinning as she drags me into a filthy kiss at the same time Gray’s tongue thrusts inside of me. I nearly topple forward, Sofie is the only reason I haven’t. I swear this man has practiced since I’ve last seen him and maybe that should bother me but fuck, it doesn’t. Because I feel like I’m about to combust, just melt right here into a goddamn puddle.



### Chapter twenty-six

#### VIOLET

An hour later and Sofie is tucked into the middle of her nest, dead to the world, fingers clenched around the pillow like it's the only thing keeping her tethered. The soft, steady rhythm of her breathing fills the room, her scent finally evened out, no longer thick with distress. Gray stood behind me as I watched her for several minutes, the smug bastard who kept nibbling at my ear, his hand settled on my waist to remind me of what just happened.

I hadn't even shared Lance with Sofie like that before.

Now, at the kitchen table, I'm wedged between Gray and Puma, a half-empty plate in front of me, the remains of an artisan pizza I barely tasted. The scene unfolding around me is almost painfully normal—the low murmur of conversation, the way the twins argue over the last slice like they're kids and not two tattooed gods in the art world.

Gray's thumb keeps skimming over my thigh, every pass of his skin against mine dragging me deeper into this moment. The whole thing is overwhelming, but not in the way I expect. This feels like home. Not just a house, not just a place to sleep, but something real. Something permanent. Something that should terrify me, but instead, it just sits there, clawing at the edges of my mind, demanding to be acknowledged.

A piece of tomato clings to my plate and I push it aside with my fingers, my ears tuning into the hushed conversation happening around me.

"—it's not just one or two clients," Lance says, the easygoing smirk from earlier wiped clean from his face. "It's getting worse."

Puma doesn't react right away but I see the flicker of irritation in his eyes before he tips his head back slightly, lounging in his chair like he isn't secretly pissed. "How bad?"

Hawk, sitting across from me, exhales hard before shoving the last bite of crust into his mouth. He chews, swallows, then leans forward, elbows braced against the table, expression dark. "We lost a sale this morning," he says. "A big one."

The fake paintings. The rumors. The whispered suspicions spreading through the industry like wildfire. Gray sighs beside me, rubbing a hand over his jaw, the rasp of stubble audible in the quiet. "People must be getting paranoid," he mutters.

Puma makes a low sound, something between frustration and acceptance, then turns his gaze on me. "You worked there, love. Did you ever notice anything off, other than those paintings from the showing?"

I think back through all the shady things Xavier did over the months I worked through, scrutinizing every encounter I can remember. "Not at first," I admit. "Xavier always had shady connections, but it's art. Everyone has shady fucking connections. But the last few weeks, something felt wrong," I say. "Some of the paintings were coming in with wet paint, like they'd been touched up. Sofie was the one who caught it first, but I didn't think much of it at the time."

Hawk frowns, arms crossing over his chest. "You didn't ask questions?"

A snort escapes before I can stop it. "You don't ask questions when you need a paycheck. I'm sorry but that job was all I had to provide for Sofie and we were barely making it. I couldn't jeopardize it and I didn't know enough about art to truly

question it. Yes, it felt wrong but I was already on thin ice." I'm not proud of it but Sofie had a roof over her head.

Puma lets out a heavy sigh as he drags a hand down his face, fingers brushing across his beard for a few moments before speaking. "No one faults you for that, Violet. Survival is never pretty. Xavier, on the other hand, is not smart enough to pull this shit off. There's someone else running the operation and unfortunately, until we have more information, our hands are tied."

Gray's hand rests on my hip, his fingers moving in lazy, absentminded circles over the thin fabric of my leggings. It's nothing. It's everything. A small touch, a simple motion, but it holds me here, tethers me to the present in a way that words never could. Each slow drag of his fingertips sends a ripple through me, a quiet pull that makes it impossible to focus on anything else.

The conversation drifts in and out of my awareness—strategy, damage control, the fake paintings, the growing storm circling around us—but the words don't stick. They slide right past, lost to the heat pooling low in my stomach, to the way my fingers tighten around the edge of the table as Gray's hand shifts just slightly. My breath catches in my throat, so quiet I barely notice it but Puma does.

His gaze sharpens, zeroing in on the tension in my grip, the way my lips part just slightly, the way I shift ever so subtly in Gray's lap. Puma reaches over and plucks me right out of Gray's lap and sits me in a seat between them.

Gray grumbles, the sound edged with a mixture of amusement and irritation. His fingers twitch like he's tempted to pull me right back, but Puma doesn't even acknowledge him.

"Focus," Puma says, but it's not directed at me.

Gray exhales a dramatic sigh, rolling his eyes like Puma is being unreasonable, stretching his arms out before leaning back in his seat. Puma's attention is still on me, his hand finding my cheek, his thumb sweeping along my jaw as I realize that this Alpha sees me.

I've spent years being Sofie's protector, making sure she has everything she needs, being the one person she can rely on. I've spent even longer making sure I'm strong enough to survive, keeping my guard up, making damn sure I don't get tangled in things that will only leave me exposed, vulnerable.

But now, I'm drowning in it.

Too many hands on me. Too many people paying attention, watching, caring. It's lovely. It's also overwhelming.

Gray's gaze is still on me, weighted with amusement, the same knowing look he always has when he sees me getting thrown off balance. Lance and Hawk don't stare, but I catch the way their eyes flick toward me between sentences, assessing, taking note. None of it is bad. None of it feels unsafe. But it's a lot. Too much. The kind of attention I don't know what to do with, the kind that makes something inside me tighten with unease.

Puma leans in slightly, voice dropping low enough that only I can hear. "Thought you might need a minute." The softness in his tone is what undoes me the most.

His fingers brush against my wrist, a single, fleeting squeeze. A silent I got you . Then he turns back to the others, picking up the conversation without missing a beat, his presence still there, steady, but giving me the space I need.

The voices filter back in, the weight of the moment lifting just enough that I can breathe again. Gray's talking about a client or something, a tight smile on his face.

“I’ve got a meeting with one of our regulars in two days. Figure I’ll feel them out for whispers, see what’s going around. They usually have a pretty good handle on what’s going on.” Gray’s attention shifts to me, his entire face lighting up. “You wanna go with me, princess? That’s if we’re not tied up with Sofie’s heat.”

Hesitation flickers for half a second before I nod. “Yeah. I’d like that.”

Gray looks like he wants to jump me, drag me into his lap all over again, and smother me but he doesn’t. He just tugs at the lip ring, chewing on it for a few seconds as if pretending it’s my lips he’s nibbling on. “Dibs on Violet tonight.”

Lance snorts, shoving a piece of crust into his mouth. “Yeah, good luck fighting Sofie.”

Laughter bubbles up, slipping past my lips before I can stop it. A shake of my head, a roll of my eyes. “Shouldn’t you all be fighting over the Omega of the pack, not the Beta?” The words are out before I think too hard about them, but the second they hit the air, the mood shifts.

Puma, leans forward, elbows resting on the table, his gaze locking onto mine with quiet, unwavering certainty. “You’re just as precious as she is.”

Sofie has always been the delicate one these last few months. The one people doted on, the one people cherished, the one people fought to claim, protect, love. It was expected. She is an Omega, the center of everything, the bond that ties a pack together.

But Puma is saying that she’s not the only one this pack is centered around and it’s a disorienting feeling. Gray, ever the shit-stirrer, grins as he hooks a finger under my chin, tilting my face toward him. “You hear that, princess?” he murmurs, his breath warm against my lips. “You better start getting used to it.”

And just like that, I know.

I'm in deep.

### Chapter twenty-seven

#### SOFIE

The heat clings to me, my skin damp with sweat, my body restless in the tangled mess of blankets. The discomfort is relentless, pressing into my muscles, into my bones, making every inch of me feel too tight, and too sensitive.

A low groan slips from my lips as I shift, the sheets sticking to my skin, my fingers patting blindly through the nest, searching for something solid. My hand connects with a leg, warm beneath my touch, and for a moment, I breathe easier. The room is dark, the air thick with the familiar mix of the Ashford Alphas' scents that usually soothes me—summer heat and home, citrus and mint. But something's missing.

Jasmine . The absence hits hard, a crack through the haze. Violet's scent isn't here. A quiet rumble vibrates against my back, Lance shifting closer, his bare chest warm as he curls around me. His breath ghosts over my shoulder as he murmurs, voice rough from sleep. "Hey, sweetheart. You okay?"

I nod, but it's a lie. Nothing about this feels okay. "Just uncomfortable," I whisper, shifting again, my skin damp, my body tense, coiled too tight. A shiver rolls through me, more frustration than cold. "Where's Vi?"

The silence stretches too long and I tense, fingers gripping the sheets, heart pounding a little harder now. I sit up fully, my breath coming too fast. Lance is here. Hawk is here. But they aren't her. The need claws at me and I know it's fucking irrational but I need her here with me.

I scramble from the bed, desperate to find her, legs shaky as I push myself upright. The room tilts for a second, the heat making my head swim. I rush out the door, the pounding of my heart drowning out everything else. This feels too much like it did after my first heat spike with the twins—when I couldn't find Violet, when the panic dug its claws into me and wouldn't let go. That same fear surges through me now, making it impossible to think.

Barefoot, barely dressed, Hawk's oversized shirt clinging to my damp skin, I take off down the hallway. The fabric sticks where sweat pools, the heat crawling beneath the surface, burning, pulsing, a slow, unbearable ache that spreads through my limbs, making me weaker with every step. Slick is gathering between my thighs, threatening to render me useless but I won't give into this heat haze until I find her.

My throat feels raw, my voice wrecked before I even speak, but I force it out anyway. "Vi?" The sound barely registers over the blood rushing in my ears, my vision blurring at the edges. My body aches, too hot, too sensitive, my balance unsteady, but then I see her, a blur of dark hair, soft limbs, the curve of a familiar form tucked between Gray and Puma on the couch.

She's curled up, her lips parted slightly as she nestles into Puma's chest like she belongs there, Gray's hand resting lazily on her thigh, The tension in my shoulders loosens just enough for something else to slip through, something softer, something that tugs at the corners of my lips before I realize I'm smiling. It's small, barely there, but real. She's letting herself rest. Finally.

But my body isn't done reminding me why I came here.

I sway where I stand, my body betraying me, my throat tight as a small broken whimper slips free before I can stop it.

"It's starting," I manage, my voice barely more than a breath. "I need Vi."



The heat pulses in my belly, an ache that spreads through my limbs, making it impossible to stand still. My weight shifts from foot to foot, fingers clenching and unclenching at my sides, nerves and desperation tangling into something unbearable. Another soft whimper slips past my lips as the pressure beneath my skin mounts.

Gray leans down, pressing a slow kiss to Violet's lips. She stirs instantly, her body shifting against Puma's, like she was just waiting for an excuse to wake up. Her eyes flutter open, still heavy with sleep, but the second she sees me standing there, trembling, flushed, barely keeping it together, she's alert.

"Hey, baby." Her voice is soft, the way it always is when she's trying to calm me down. "You okay?"

A frantic nod, then a sharp shake of my head, because I don't know. I don't know if I'm okay. "It's time." My voice shakes, hands twitching, body burning. "I think. I'm not sure. I just—" The words fall apart before they can fully form, lost to the need clawing through me. My fingers flex, grasping at nothing, my breath coming out shallow, uneven. "I just need you."

Violet's expression softens further as she climbs over the back of the couch. She follows as I lead her back toward the bedroom and the second we step inside, the twins are waiting, standing at the edge of the bed like they've been expecting this, like they knew the moment was coming before I did. Their attention shifts between me and Violet, watching, waiting, letting me take the lead.

But before this happens, before the heat fully takes over, before I lose myself completely, there's something I need to say. I stop just past the threshold, turning to Violet, giving her hand a quick, urgent squeeze before shifting my focus to the twins.

I point a finger in their direction, my expression twisted into something fierce despite the heat dragging me under. "No Alpha bullshit." Both of the twins quirk a brow,

both fighting a smile. "I mean it. If either of you are mean to Violet, I will kick both of you out. I don't care if I'm in heat. I don't care if I'm delirious. I will get up, and I will drag your asses out of this room myself."

I expect some bullshit about pheromones or instincts but Hawk just nods and Lance agrees like it was just that easy—all I had to do was ask. "Understood, sweetheart."

I watch them a second longer, my pulse still too fast, my skin still too hot, but something inside me settles just enough to let me turn back to Violet. The weight of her gaze, the quiet affection, the unwavering warmth—it's enough to make the tension in my shoulders ease, just a little. Her fingers tighten around mine, her grip sure, even as everything else blurs at the edges.

And just like that, I let go. I stop fighting. I let myself fall.

### Chapter twenty-eight

#### VIOLET

The four of us stripped and climbed back into bed, all of us on edge, ready at a moment's notice for Sofie's heat to hit. She's been irritable for the past several hours, whining and twisting between us. I keep asking her if one of the twins can soothe that ache but she just curls into a ball and shakes her head. No one ever told me about this part of a heat and to be honest, I don't think it's normal. I think Sofie, in some part, is fighting her biology. It doesn't last long, though, Sofie waking up on a whine, grabbing for something to soothe her.

Her scent turns into this thick, molten syrup, the smell of slick filling the room. Hawk doesn't hesitate as he drags her into his arms, facing her toward me before sliding right in. She sighs in relief, reaching for me even as he nuzzles her neck, his breath hot against her skin, whispering words of reassurance. "It's okay, baby," he murmured, his voice low and soothing. "You're safe with us."

Sofie's anxiety melts away under Hawk's gentle touch, and she sighs, her body relaxing into his embrace. Hawk's hands roam over Sofie's body, his touch both gentle and possessive before resting on her breasts, his thumbs teasing her nipples. Sofie arches into him, her eyes fluttering open, a mixture of desire and relief shining in their depths.

She reaches for me again and I slide closer, tangling my hands into her hair before dragging her into a filthy kiss. She moans into my mouth, her scent sweetening further, heat building in my belly, the need for relief growing. I always thought

during her heat that I'd be fine, that it wouldn't affect me that much but god, it's overwhelming.

Lance is right there, behind me, his cock thick against my ass as he whispers for permission. I break the kiss just long enough to say 'god yes' before diving back into capturing Sofie's lips. Lance chuckles as he grips my hip, slowly sliding inside of me. The brothers seem to pick up a rhythm, the four of us moving as one in some kind of erotic dance.

It's heaven and ecstasy wrapped up together as Lance reaches down between us, squeezing my ass before slipping his thumb between my cheeks. My entire body jerks forward as I cry out, a foreign sensation ripping through me as he circles my puckered hole. "I've never..." I start but can't catch my breath.

"Not tonight, Vi."

I hum my response as I return to my Omega, kissing down the side of her neck and then taking her breast into my mouth. She writhes between us, screaming for relief before she starts chanting for a knot. She's goddamn beautiful like this, like a whole ass goddess falling apart between us. And when I lightly bite down on her nipple, Hawk growls, pushing his knot inside of her at the same time.

I know because of the way her pupils widen, her entire body shuddering, the little whimper of pleasure from her swollen lips hitting the air. It's fucking perfect. Lance isn't far behind, thrusting into me like it's a race. I can barely keep my head about me and when his thumb dips just inside my ass, I see stars. He spills inside of me, his knot fluttering against my pussy, tempting me to push back just enough to suck him in.

But I'm not going to take away from Sofie. When she wakes up, she's going to need another Alpha. I sag against the bed, Hawk staring down at Sofie with a love I don't

think I could mirror. The sloppy smile on Sofie's face is everything as she hums a soft sound before sleep takes her.

Lance is still rocking himself inside of me, his biting grip on my waist reminding me of all those nights Sofie and I spent with him. His lips are grazing my neck, teeth scraping against skin, teasing it. Some part of me wants his bite but the other part knows that it's too soon. That we need to have a conversation. Lance purrs in my ear, the both of us watching Sofie as she slowly falls asleep on Hawk's knot. He's looking at her like she's the most precious thing in the world and damn, she really is.

"Maybe one day we'll stretch you out so that you can take my knot," Lance muses, one of his hands moving upward to cup my breast. He squeezes, my entire back arching as my breath catches.

"Too late. Gray already has." I know that it's going to start something, the moment those words leave my mouth.

Lance lets out a little growl, nibbling on my ear. "I feel like that was a fucking challenge. How about here?" His hand leaves my breast and moves between us, his thumb finding my puckered hole again. "Ever been knotted here?" Just the thought of being that full causes me to moan. I had thought for sure that Sofie's heat was going to be all about her but it seems that it includes me too. "Seems like you like that. You're squeezing my cock, Vi."

He continues to rock against me, his thumb playfully pushes just inside. It's a strange sensation as he continues massaging it and slipping the tip of his thumb there until I'm seconds away from another orgasm. I'm not sure if it's just Sofie's heat scent or the combination of his thumb lightly fucking my ass but a cry pulls from my lips, Lance's purr starting up as he fills me again. I can feel his knot thickening against my entrance. A mere push backwards would suck it inside but the last thing I want is to take the attention away from Sofie when she wakes up again.

“Just so you know, Violet. I call dibs.”

I hesitate for a few moments and then give in, smiling down at the Omega squished between us. “After Sofie’s heat. She needs you more right now.”

### Chapter twenty-nine

#### VIOLET

My body aches, my mind foggy from the past two days of Sofie's heat. The room is filled with moans, the air heavy with the scent of sex. I look over and see Sofie on all fours, her body slick with sweat, as Lance thrusts into her from behind. His movements are relentless, his grip on her hips firm as he takes her with a force that stirs both envy and arousal in me.

I let out a soft chuckle, watching Sofie's face twist with pure ecstasy. Her eyes are shut, her lips parted as her cries echo through the room. The muscles in Lance's back twist and shake as he fucks into her. He's a wild force, untamed, and Sofie seems to delight in every second of it. Her fingers curl into the sheets as she cries out again, Gray stealing my attention as he moves onto the bed, hovering over me.

He caresses the side of my face as the rest of the room comes into view, Hawk hilariously sprawled out over a chair in the corner. There's an empty tray beside him, courtesy of Puma no doubt, the Alpha taking care of the five of us. He's the only reason I have any strength left—between the showers, making sure I eat, and checking in on us to make sure we're okay, I'm not sure I've loved anyone more.

Gray presses a light kiss to my lips and there isn't even an ask as he slides into me, both of us sighing with the desire coursing through us. He grants me a soft kiss before curling down to suck my tit into his mouth, his other hand brushing over the other one, drawing a strangled moan from my mouth.

“Last time,” Gray murmurs as he pulls back. “Then I’m taking you out of here. You’re exhausted.”

I don’t even have the energy to throw out some retort. I’m bone-tired but being in this room makes it hard to sleep and even harder not to feel like I need to be filled. So, I just hum a response, my throat too hoarse to answer.

As a Beta, I am not built for the relentless pace we’ve set for ourselves over the past two days. And being a female Beta with a female Omega only adds to the challenge. Our bodies are different, and while the pleasure is immense, it takes a toll on me in ways it doesn’t on our Alphas.

Gray fucks into me lovingly, one of his hands cupping the back of my thigh and bringing it up over his hip. My cries mix with Sofie’s, pleasure swarming through me as my orgasm comes quick, Gray already spilling into me seconds later. We never last long, slaves to Sofie’s heat and pheromones, not that I’m complaining. Sofie’s moans follow not long after, Lance pushing his knot into her once again as I silently hope that’s the last one. He maneuvers them onto their side, Sofie mumbling incoherently as Lance kisses down her neck.

I let out a pleased sigh as Gray pulls out of me, curling up against my back, the both of us watching our Omega as she drifts into sleep.

Wrecked doesn’t even begin to cover it.

My limbs feel like they don’t belong to me anymore, a dull, aching exhaustion settling deep into my bones. My skin is damp, sticky, every inch of me oversensitive and spent, covered in cum, sweat, and all of their scents. Sofie’s scent is finally settling, no longer the suffocating, syrupy drug it was hours ago.

Thank fuck. Any more of it and I might’ve broken apart completely.



A slow shift sends a jolt of soreness through my muscles, every small movement dragging awareness back into my body, making it clear just how much I've been wrung out. I try to stretch, just to see if I can, but the sharp protest from my body has me thinking better of it.

Lance, half-asleep beside me, groans, barely lifting his head. His voice is rough, thick with exhaustion, as he mutters, "Get her out of here."

I don't have the energy to respond. Gray, completely bare and looking far too satisfied for someone who should be just as exhausted, doesn't even hesitate. Strong arms scoop me up with ease, as I let myself fall into him.

The second we step outside the bedroom, the shift in temperature is instant. Cool air rushes against my skin, washing away the lingering humidity that clung to the walls. The contrast is enough to make a soft sigh slip from my lips. I love Sofie but god, it might be a while before I'm ready for another one of her heats. Here's to hoping she's on those three-month cycles and not the unlucky Omegas who go into heat closer to every month.

Gray moves effortlessly across the hall and into Puma's room. The moment we reach the bathroom, Puma is already there, leaning against the doorway, watching with a soft smile. Neither of them speak, no words needed as they seem to speak with their eyes. Gray steps inside the massive shower, the warm spray already cascading down, steam curling around us, filling the space. I barely have time to process before Puma reaches for me, steady hands guiding me under the water.

The moment the heat hits my skin, I melt. Tension drains from my body in an instant, the steady stream rinsing away the sweat and the exhaustion. Gray's hands move over me with a cloth as I lean against his chest, letting him take care of me. Puma is at my back, another cloth running over my raw skin, each of them moving in small, soft, soothing patterns.

My legs tremble, knees going weak beneath me, and before I can even start to fall, Puma is already catching me, already holding me up. Strong arms wrap around me, a quiet reassurance, while Gray's hands settle on my hips from behind, both of them continuing to clean me without a word. It's a strange sort of feeling—that I'm cared for and loved and seen without a word being passed between the three of us.

### Chapter thirty

#### PUMA

This is perfect. Better than expected, better than anything I thought was possible. There was doubt in the beginning, a quiet, gnawing fear that the dynamic would feel off, that the pieces wouldn't fit the way we needed them to. That this was all just a reckless gamble, bodies and emotions thrown together, hoping for something that might not hold. But fuck, it works.

Sofie is where she belongs, curled up between the twins, cherished in the way she's always deserved, their arms locked around her like she's something fragile but unbreakable. And Violet is here, pressed between me and Gray, tucked into my chest, her breathing slow and steady, the rise and fall of her chest telling me how real this moment is.

I trace lazy paths over the curve of her hip, the warmth of her skin beneath my touch a quiet reassurance. The three of us didn't even bother getting dressed after we dried off and I carried Violet to bed and I'm glad we didn't. Feeling her against me like this, her breasts dragging against my chest, my cock firm against her leg, brushing the apex of her thighs ever so often is giving me thoughts I shouldn't entertain. She's tired and worn out, no doubt sore.

So, I drape my arm over her hip, my hand resting on Gray's waist. He meets my gaze over her head, a sleepy smile playing on his lips. This feels like I have everything I've been seeking, almost as if we've been waiting for Sofie and Violet since we came together as a pack.

Gray lets out a heavy sigh, his fingers playing with Violet's hair. "She's going to be pissed when she finds out how deep the art shit is," Gray mutters. "Pretty sure she's going to try and murder Xavier or some bullshit."

"Probably." I chuckle, the warmth of Gray's skin still under my palm, the contact steady, familiar. "I'll make sure she doesn't do anything reckless."

Violet stirs slightly, a small grumble slipping past her lips, her fingers twitching against my arm before tightening, holding me in place. "Shut up," she mumbles, voice thick with sleep.

Gray chuckles, amusement curling around the edges of his words. "Go to sleep, princess."

Another groan comes from her, muffled against my skin, a soft threat that carries no real bite. "If you two don't stop talking, I'm sleeping in the other room."

Gray and I exchange a glance, a silent conversation in the space of a second. A challenge. A dare. Gray smirks first, shifting closer, lowering his voice, teasing in the way only he can be. "But princess," he murmurs, lips just near her ear, words dipped in something smug and playful, "you're so warm right here."

A huff of frustration falls from her lips, more exasperation than actual annoyance, but I feel the way her body relaxes, the way she gives in just a little more, the way she sinks further into the space between us. Her sharp jasmine scent sweetens and I know that I've got her pegged.

"If you hadn't just experienced Sofie's heat, I would be sinking into you right now, love." She wiggles against me, obviously loving that thought. "Ah, you're a temptress, aren't you? Don't do that. You're sore and I don't want to hurt you."

She lets out a little noise, Gray nibbling on her ear. “Stop. Both of you. No more talking, nibbling, teasing. I am sore and fucking me again is not going to make it better!” The playfulness in her tone is easy to hear, drawing a chuckle from me.

“Ah, but, temptress, I wasn’t going to be so barbaric as I fuck you. It would be loving, sweet . I would have you crying out, needy for more—”

She lightly slaps my chest. “One more word and you’re sleeping on the couch.”

I clamp my lips shut, not willing to test it. Besides, having Violet in my arms is everything I need.

### Chapter thirty-one

#### VIOLET

Everything fucking hurts. Not just my legs, not just my arms, but something deeper, something that sits low in my bones, something that feels like it clawed its way through my body and left nothing but exhaustion and ache behind. How the hell do Omegas survive this?

Sofie rode out her heat like it was nothing. She made it look easy, seamless, like it was the most natural thing in the world. Meanwhile, I feel like I got hit by a truck, dragged for a few miles, and left for dead in a ditch. The hunger is worse than the soreness. It twists in my stomach, gnawing at the edges of my already frayed nerves, making it impossible to focus on anything else. The need to eat outweighs everything, even the lingering exhaustion still pulling at my limbs.

The kitchen is quiet when I shuffle inside after checking in on Sofie. I didn't really see her, but the tangled mess of limbs in the bed was enough to know she was exactly where she needed to be. I, however, am not.

The fridge hums when I open it, the cool air brushing against my too-warm skin, but my brain lags behind, unable to focus on anything inside. My body is running on nothing but instinct, basic survival mode kicking in while my mind struggles to catch up.

Gray and Puma are nearby, soft conversation and chuckles following behind me that I can't quite understand because the hunger is overtaking every part of my brain.

However, they haven't stopped touching me since last night. It's subtle, but it's there. The brush of fingers against my back when I pass, a palm grazing my hip as I reach for something, the slow, steady pressure of a hand on my shoulder.

And I really fucking like it. Especially with how bare their skin is.

Puma is near the counter, shirtless, his tattoos catching in the kitchen lights, dark ink against golden skin, muscles shifting under the glow. His hair is still damp from the shower, beads of water trailing over his collarbone, disappearing down his chest.

Gray is leaning against the table, nothing but a loose pair of sweats hanging low on his hips, stretching in a way that is absolutely, one hundred percent intentional. I swallow hard, pretending I don't notice, pretending I don't want to crawl back between them, sink into their warmth, let them touch me in ways that don't feel like a casual habit. But hunger wins. Eggs. Avocados. Something easy, something mindless.

The fridge closes with a soft thud, and before I can even start doing anything, Gray moves in behind me, the heat of his chest pressing against my back. His chin settles on my shoulder, his voice filled with amusement. "You cooking for us, princess?"

I roll my eyes, an automatic defense against the warmth curling low in my stomach. "I'm cooking for me. But if you're nice, I might share." I start opening random drawers until I find cooking utensils and a pan.

Puma chuckles from across the room, his words laced with heat that I absolutely cannot entertain right now. "Be careful, Violet. That sounds an awful lot like an invitation to stay."

"Later. Right now, food."

The spatula in my hand stills, my body going rigid with an innuendo I'm not even

sure I understand but Gray catches on and suddenly his hands are everywhere. Fingers skating over the curve of my ass, gripping, kneading, teasing in a way that's almost lazy, like he's got all the time in the world to drive me insane. His lips linger against my neck, dragging over sensitive skin with the kind of filthy intent that makes my stomach twist. The heat of his breath ghosts over my pulse, his voice a low growl, rough and full of promise.

"Princess, you can't be walking around in just one of our shirts and think it's going to be that easy. Besides, I've told you before that I can multitask."

I slap at him with the spatula until he leans back just enough for me to catch my breath, my entire body now flushed. "Be serious."

"I am serious."

The grip on my hip tightens, fingers digging in just enough to make my breath hitch, to make my legs go just a little weaker beneath me. There's nothing playful about the way he holds me, about the way his fingers flex like he's testing his claim, like he's seeing how much I'll let him take. But before he can push his luck any further, movement at the entrance of the kitchen catches my attention.

I don't expect Hawk to be standing there, looking entirely too pleased with himself, and Sofie—Sofie is slung over his shoulder like a damn sack of flour. She dangles there, her tiny fists pounding weakly at his back, but the effort is half-hearted at best. Giggling like an idiot, she writhes, her legs kicking just enough to be obnoxious, not enough to actually make him let go.

I cross my arms, barely restraining an eye roll. "What the fuck are you doing?"

Hawk shrugs, still grinning like an asshole. "She needed her Beta but said her legs weren't working. So I brought her to you. Neat, huh?"



Sofie flops backward the second he sets her down on the counter, limbs loose, dramatic, fingers wiggling in my direction like she's some spoiled little princess demanding tribute. God, I love her. I drag her into my arms, giving up as Puma steals the spatula. As long as he cooks something fast, I really don't care at this point.

Puma moves through the kitchen easily. There's something stupidly attractive about a man who knows how to cook, especially one who does it without making a big deal out of it. No need for praise, no expectation of gratitude. I perch Sofie on the counter, her feet swinging, Gray resuming his position at my back, his breath against the shell of my ear. Hawk leans against the fridge, his attention fully on Sofie. It's a quiet comfort—a domestic feeling that I'm falling in love with.

Then Lance stumbles in, barefoot, shirt hanging loose off his broad shoulders. He looks half-asleep, like he barely dragged himself out of bed, but he's locked in on Sofie. She squeals as he roughly grabs her by the hips before tilting her chin up to kiss her. It's not soft or sweet, a deep, hungry claiming like he's been starving for her and I fucking love watching it. Sofie makes a small, pleased noise, her fingers gripping his tight curls, melting into him without hesitation.

And just as I start to feel like this isn't something I should be watching, Lance turns his attention to me. That wicked little smirk creeps onto his lips, the kind that sets something low in my stomach twisting, the kind that says he knows exactly what he's about to do. He closes the space between us in seconds, dragging me into a very similar kiss he gave Sofie.

I remember the way it was with him before. The way it felt easy, natural, like we were meant to fall into each other's space. His playful touch, the heat in his gaze, the nights spent tangled together with Sofie, all of it still there, waiting beneath the surface. It was only a matter of time before we fell back into that.

Gray groans dramatically behind me. "Alright, alright, that's enough. Quit hogging

her and go back to Sofie so I can have my princess back.”

Lance grins against my skin, pressing one last kiss to my cheek before stepping away. “Jealous?”

Gray doesn’t hesitate. “Obviously.”

A laugh slips past my lips, easy, light, before I turn to Gray, arms crossing as I smirk. “Maybe I’d rather have Puma.” Puma, who has been watching all of this unfold with quiet amusement, doesn’t miss a beat. He simply raises a brow, unimpressed, before flipping another egg onto a plate with the same practiced ease he’s had this whole time.

Gray groans like he’s in actual pain, dragging a hand down his face. “See? This is what happens when you let them run wild. Betrayal.”

Laughter rings through the kitchen and it’s just so easy . Ridiculous but easy. I wiggle my way out, making sure to squeeze Hawk’s hand on the way past before stepping up to Gray. His little pout makes me want to give in, his arms immediately coming around me. “You still up for tagging along to that client meeting?”

I smirk, reaching for a slice of avocado from the counter, popping it into my mouth before answering. “Gotta earn my keep somehow.”

The laughter that follows makes this feel like home.

### Chapter thirty-two

#### SOFIE

It doesn't feel as harsh this time when Violet leaves. No crushing weight in my chest, no sharp-edged panic twisting in my gut, no restless energy clawing at my ribs, making it impossible to stay still. The last time she left, I tore through the house searching for her, frantic and desperate, like something inside me would shatter if I didn't find her fast enough. But now? I feel settled, although I did text her twice in the last thirty minutes just to make sure she was okay.

The room is quiet except for the distant hum of conversation from the other side of the house, too far away to matter, too soft to pull me from the warmth of where I stand. My gaze shifts to the couch, where the twins have taken up more space than should be physically possible, their massive thighs sprawled out, their arms draped lazily over the back.

Lance twirls a toothpick between his fingers, his brow rising in jest as he catches me trying to figure out where to be. Hawk looks half-asleep, his body relaxed in that way only he can pull off, one hand resting on his knee, the other rolling a single grape between his fingers. Something inside me tugs, but hesitation keeps me frozen for a moment, hovering in the middle of the room, unsure where to sit.

The frustration creeps in, curling at the edges of my mind. A small huff slips from my lips, an exasperated breath that doesn't quite belong to me, before I give up and do what feels right. Crawling into Hawk's lap, draping my legs across Lance's.

Hawk lets out a deep, pleased grunt, his arms immediately curling around my waist, pulling me flush against his chest like this is exactly where I belong. Lance just chuckles, adjusting beneath me so my legs rest perfectly over his lap, his palm brushing along my calf in slow, lazy circles, his touch warm and grounding.

Yeah. This is better.

Something cool presses against my lips, Lance holding a slice of pear between his fingers, waiting. The teasing glint in his eye tells me this is just as much about feeding me as it is about watching me take it from him. I take a slow bite, humming softly at the burst of sweetness on my tongue, the warmth of their hands making it impossible to focus on anything else.

Hawk shifts beneath me, pressing his nose to the side of my neck, his breath warm as he murmurs, “You’re purring, sweetheart.”

I hadn’t even noticed. I’ve only done it once with Violet before. Lance feeds me another bite, voice dipping into something teasing. “You’ve got it so rough, huh?”

Across the room, Puma watches, stretched out in one of the lounge chairs like the protector of the pack. There’s something so steady about him, something that makes my Omega instincts settle even though I know he’ll never be my Alpha. And the strangest part? That doesn’t bother me.

Most Omegas—every Omega I’ve ever known—would hate that. They’d feel territorial, possessive, like something was being withheld from them, like they weren’t being fully claimed. They’d want all eyes, all focus, all devotion.

But I don’t. Maybe it’s because Violet is happy. And if she’s happy, then I am too.

The thought lingers for only a moment before I push it aside, choosing instead to steal

another slice of fruit from Lance's fingers, sighing contentedly as I melt further between them, their warmth sinking into my skin, their hands keeping me exactly where I want to be.

Puma finally cuts the silence, his deep voice rolling through the space. "So, what do you want to do now that your heat is over?"

My stomach twists, breath catching in my throat, mind jumping straight to the worst fucking assumption possible. Everything inside me goes tight, a sharp spike of panic slamming into my ribs before I can stop it.

Go.

The word echoes through my head. The same fear I've carried for so long, the one that's always lived under my skin, waiting for the moment I overstay my welcome, waiting for the moment someone tells me it's time to leave. It's why it was always just Violet and me against the world.

Puma notices immediately, his body shifting forward, forearms resting against his knees. "You and Violet are not going anywhere."

The certainty in his voice cuts through my panic before it can fully take hold, the weight of his words settling something in my chest. Right, of course. He isn't asking if I plan to leave. He's just asking what I want. Exhaling, I sink back against Hawk's chest, the tension bleeding out of my body as quickly as it hit. "Oh," I murmur, stomach unclenching, breath evening out.

Lance nudges me, the press of his fingers against my thigh meant to pull me back, to keep me in the moment. A shrug is easier than answering. But Lance doesn't let up, head tilting slightly, eyes dragging over my face like he's trying to see through me.

The weight of their attention is different now. Before, it was teasing, warmth, safety, something I could sink into without thinking. Now, it's something else. It's not just hands and laughter, not just casual affection or easy comfort. Now they want to know me. And that's harder.

I pick at the hem of Hawk's shirt, a small, mindless movement, something to keep my hands busy while I figure out how to answer. "Art was Violet's thing," I admit, voice quieter than I mean for it to be. "Not mine. I don't know what I want." The words come out flat, frustration curling at the edges. "I had so many dreams and plans and ideas, but we were stuck going to our parents' church for a while. Don't ask." A sharp exhale, nose wrinkling before I can stop myself. "I never really figured out exactly what I wanted to do, but then my entire life derailed when I presented. The world doesn't make sense anymore."

None of them interrupt which makes it easier to keep talking.

"The only person who ever stood in my corner was Violet. And our best friend, Camila." The name hits harder than I expect. A second passes, then another, before realization slams into me all at once. "Fuck, I've been a bad friend." The words leave my mouth before I can stop them, my shoulders slumping, a pout tugging at my lips.

It's been months since I talked to her, since before my body stopped feeling like my own, before everything changed. I know she understands. That doesn't change the fact that I haven't reached out. Fingers trail up my spine, grounding me before I spiral. Hawk's touch is careful, quiet reassurance in the way only he can give.

So, I continue. "I hid away from the world. I was ashamed of what I became because nothing made sense. I'm only just accepting who I am now. Figuring out how all of this fits together." A vague wave of my hand follows, the motion encompassing everything. My body. My place here. The way the pack wraps around me like I've always belonged. The world itself, how it still doesn't make any fucking sense, no

matter how much I try to adjust.

Something shifts in Puma's expression, just the smallest flicker of softness around his eyes, the kind that most people wouldn't notice if they weren't paying attention. "You don't have to figure it out right away. There's a lot of options for you and I want you to think about them. No pressure."

No pressure. The words don't sound real. Because my whole life has been under pressure. Expectations wrapped so tightly around my throat I forgot how to breathe. Rules I never made but had to follow anyway, paths I never chose but had to walk, because the alternative was worse.

My gaze finds Puma's, searching, waiting for some kind of sign that this is temporary, that there's still some kind of expiration date attached to this, to me. The weight of uncertainty sits thick in my chest, so I do the only thing that makes sense. I ask the question that's been clawing at the edges of my mind since my heat ended. "Why does it feel like this went from a trial to a permanent thing?"

Hawk hums against my temple. "If you think any of us are letting you two go," the grip on my waist tightens, his fingers pressing into my skin like he's making sure I feel it, "you're mistaken."

Twisting in Hawk's lap, I shift to face them all, studying the way they lounge so effortlessly, as if they've always belonged here, as if they were built for this moment, for the slow claiming of something neither of us ever thought we'd have. "Violet is stubborn."

Lance chuckles under his breath, shaking his head like he already knew that, like it isn't even worth saying aloud. Of course, she's stubborn. It's in her bones, in the way she carries herself, in the way she has spent years holding the world together with nothing but sheer fucking will.

“She’ll push,” I add. “She doesn’t always let people take care of her because she’s had to do it herself for so long. And even now, even with all of you...” A slow sigh escapes, heavy with something I don’t quite know how to name. “She might not break down so easily. You have to show her that she doesn’t always have to be in control.”

It feels like everything halts and then I catch Puma’s grin, a slow, dangerous thing. “Sweetheart,” his voice is low, a promise and a threat wrapped up in one. “I love a challenge.”

That’s what Violet is to him—a puzzle worth solving, a wall worth breaking down piece by piece. And he’s already worked his way under her skin, just enough to make her hesitate, just enough to make her falter in all the ways she never allows herself to. She’s cracking. And I love watching it.

“Rest,” he says simply, changing the direction of the conversation. “You’ll still be sore for a little while.” His gaze flicks toward Hawk, then to Lance, something sharp glinting behind his eyes, a smirk curling at the edge of his lips. “But I’m sure the twins would love to pamper you.”

Heat flares in my face, creeping up my neck, searing against my skin. “Wait—”

Too late.

Hawk moves faster than I expect, grabbing me like a goddamn caveman again, lifting me effortlessly before slinging me over his shoulder. A startled squeal rips from my throat, my legs kicking uselessly as I’m thrown into the air like I weigh nothing at all.

“Hawk!” My hands press against his back, fists curling in his shirt, but the laughter bubbling up from my chest betrays me. “Put me down, you menace!”



Lance is already cracking up, leaning back in his seat, watching the scene unfold like it's the best entertainment he's had all week.

“Lance! Save me!”

His grin unapologetic. “Oh, sweetheart, I wouldn't dream of it.”

### Chapter thirty-three

#### GRAY

Violet's hand is small in mine, familiar despite the years that stretched between us. The distance never really erased her touch, never dulled the way it felt to have her close, to have her fingers curled around mine like they belong there. Puma told me to spoil her and I plan to take that very seriously. After this meeting, she's mine for the day. No distractions. No interruptions. No walls between us. Just her.

She's been talking about Temple during the drive over to our client—Nolan, about her best friend and the pack that took Camila in. There's warmth in her voice when she speaks about it, a soft kind of affection, but there's something else beneath it. Pain. She's good at hiding it but I see it.

The slight falter in her voice when she mentions Camila's pack. The way her fingers tighten around mine, just for a second, like she's steadying herself. The careful way she picks her words, like she doesn't want to say too much, like she doesn't want me to hear what's underneath them. It's a reminder of everything she didn't have. Everything she had to fight for.

The last few months, it's been her and Sofie against the world. That much is obvious. The weight of it still lingers in the way she moves, in the way she holds herself just a little too tightly, in the way she watches people like she's waiting for the moment they let her down.

I want to ask. I want to dig into it, break it apart, learn everything that happened when

I wasn't there. Every hardship. Every battle. Every fucking moment she thought she was alone. But just as I open my mouth, she beats me to it. "Enough about me." She squeezes my hand, teasing, but there's an edge of something real beneath it. "Tell me something I don't know."

An eyebrow lifts, a smirk playing on my lips. "You mean about me?"

She rolls her eyes, flashing a grin. "Obviously, dumbass."

A chuckle rumbles in my chest and I drag my thumb along her knuckles, tracing the fine lines there, memorizing the feel of them. "Alright, let's see..."

There's so much I could tell her. That I thought about her more times than I should have. That her scent haunted me long after that weekend, long after she walked away. That I want her in my bed, in my pack, in my goddamn life.

But instead, my smirk lingers, and I say, "I learned how to make the perfect Old Fashioned."

She snorts, shaking her head, eyes glinting with amusement. "That is the most Gray answer I've ever heard."

"There's nothing exciting about my life," I say after a beat, rolling my shoulders, trying to shake off the weight of the last few years. "Just me and my half-brother a few cities over. We talk sometimes, but he's caught up in hockey and college, and I'm caught up in work."

Violet's eyebrows lift, her surprise genuine. "You have a brother?"

I huff a quiet laugh. "Surprised?"

"Yeah, you don't exactly scream 'big brother energy.'"

"Thanks," I deadpan.

She tilts her head, eyes narrowing just a little, still studying me. "So, what's the business? Is that why you never came into Ash & Ivory?"

I never stepped foot in that goddamn gallery. Not once. Despite knowing it existed, despite being in the same fucking industry, I never went. I should have. I should have walked in, found her, figured out what the hell had happened between then and now. But I was so focused on everything else. My tongue swipes across my lips, the grip on the steering wheel tightening as I force my voice to stay even. "I help design spaces."

Violet's unimpressed look makes it clear she wants more.

A sigh pulls from my chest. "I help customers envision or prepare setups for parties. You know—matching art they buy or rent with their event aesthetic. Sometimes from a gallery, sometimes from Puma's private collection."

"So, you're a glorified party planner?"

I groan, dragging a hand down my face, already regretting giving her anything. "It's not—Jesus, you make it sound like I coordinate table settings and balloon arches."

That's it. That's what does it. She throws her head back and fucking laughs, the sound shaking through her whole body, spilling into the car like sunlight cracking through storm clouds. God, I missed that sound. "Fine, fine," she says, grinning as she looks at me. "You're a high-end, luxury, artistic visionary."

I side-eye her, unimpressed. "That sounded sarcastic."

She shrugs. "A little."

The rest of the drive is comfortably quiet until the car rolls to a stop in front of a monstrosity of a house. The front door is massive, oversized to the point of absurdity, the kind of thing that probably weighs more than my entire car. The kind of door that exists solely to make a statement. I understand Puma's estate. It has history. It makes sense.

Money lives here. Power too. But taste? Questionable.

"This is one of your best clients? The whole house is... so much."

A chuckle slips from my lips, shaking my head because yeah, she already knows the type. "It's not all bad," I continue. "They pay well and they actually give a shit about the art. Just—" I pause, a smirk tugging at the corner of my mouth. "Expect some passive-aggressive comments about how your shoes 'aren't Italian leather' or some shit."

"Figures." Silence creeps into the car before she turns to face me. "Puma said something about how hard you work." The words catch me off guard, punching through whatever lightness was left hanging between us.

A slow exhale leaves my lips, fingers running through my hair before resting back against the wheel. "Yeah, well... had to do something, right?" I try to shrug it off but there's no question that I was lost for a little bit. "It felt like something was missing for a while. So, I just kept filling the time with more projects. Spending time at home wasn't enough."

I don't say what was missing but I think she knows.

Because before I can look away again, before I can retreat behind something safer,

she reaches out, fingertips tracing along the edge of my jaw, the softest touch dragging my attention back to her. And then she kisses me.

It's not hurried. Not desperate. Not the kind of thing meant to pull me under and leave me breathless. It's the kind of kiss that sinks into your bones, that makes your chest ache because you forgot what it felt like to be kissed like that. My breath catches, the tension in my body melting for just a second, just long enough to let it happen, let it take hold.

Then I pull back, just enough to press my forehead against hers. "Fuck. You're dangerous."

Violet smiles, the tips of her fingers still pressing lightly against my jaw. "You're just figuring that out now?"

A quiet laugh rumbles through my chest, shaking my head. Another quick kiss, a stolen moment, then I force myself to pull away, to focus. "Let's go inside before Nolan decides to come out here and see us making out like teenagers."

A soft giggle comes from Violet as she slips out of the car and follows me to the entrance. I don't even knock, the door opening as I punch in the code. It's one of the many perks of having the job I do. The second we step inside, Violet lets out a low whistle.

"Wow."

A smirk tugs at my lips. "Told you."

The place is fucking ridiculous. Polished marble floors stretch out beneath blindingly bright chandeliers, so pristine it almost doesn't feel real, like a showroom instead of a home. Sculptures sit on pedestals in carefully curated displays, lining the walls like

we just stepped into a museum. A staircase dominates the room, sweeping upward in a dramatic curve, the kind of thing you see in period dramas or those over-the-top romance movies where someone always runs down the steps in a ball gown.

Violet turns in a slow circle, taking it all in, lips parted slightly as her gaze drags over every gaudy, excessive detail. “You sure this isn’t a hotel?” she mutters.

A quiet chuckle slips from my lips, hands tucking into my pockets. “Wouldn’t surprise me if they charge guests at the door.” Nolan would be appalled at the idea of renting out what he calls his ‘goddess’ and I don’t blame him. I might be stingy with this place too if I owned it.

Everything in this house screams wealth. Not quiet, generational wealth—the kind that settles into old estates and private islands like Puma’s—but loud, new money wealth, the kind that needs to be seen, acknowledged, envied.

And right now, all that wealth is standing in front of us, exuding the kind of effortless arrogance that only comes with having too much. Nolan’s expression shifts slightly as he takes in Violet’s presence.

"This is Violet," I say smoothly, voice even, perfectly practiced. "My assistant."

Violet side-eyes me so hard it’s a miracle I don’t drop dead on the spot. The sharp inhale of breath tells me she’s about to argue, but I don’t give her the chance. Nolan barely seems to care, nodding in approval before gesturing lazily toward the hallway. If he knew I was bringing my mate, this would be a different conversation about professionalism and I don’t need to hear that from him.

"The dining hall is the one we need outfitted. Once you’ve had a look, we can talk details," Nolan says, already half-distracted, swirling the amber liquid in his glass.

I guide Violet toward the dining hall before she can say something that'll piss Nolan off. She lets me, though I can feel the tension in her shoulders. The second we step inside, she stops short, eyes widening as she takes in the sheer absurdity of the space as well.

A chandelier the size of a damn car hangs overhead, its golden light reflecting off a table so massive it could easily seat twenty, maybe more. The chairs are ridiculous—ornate, gilded things that probably haven't been sat in more than once or twice. Along the walls, pretentious art stares back at us, pieces so carefully curated they practically reek of look how much money I have.

Violet turns to me slowly, pointing at everything in one sweeping motion. "I thought you were joking but you really just make the room look pretty and then they pay you?"

I chuckle, hands shoved into my pockets. "Pretty much."

She snorts, shaking her head as she wanders deeper into the room, dragging her fingers along the back of one of the chairs, probably judging how completely unnecessary it is. I watch her. The way she moves, the way she fits here even though she doesn't realize it. She might not have come from money, might not have grown up around shit like this, but it doesn't intimidate her. She doesn't shrink in spaces like these.

I shake myself out of it before I start thinking too hard. "I'll be back in a few," I say, and she waves me off, already fixated on the monstrosity of a centerpiece, poking at it like it personally offends her.

I head toward the client's private lounge, the rich, smoky scent of aged whiskey lingering in the air before I even step inside. Nolan's already pouring themselves another drink, the casual ease of his movements suggesting he's been at it for a while.



"Gray," he sighs, swirling the liquor, watching the way it catches the light. "You've been busy."

Leaning against the doorway, I roll my shoulders. "You know how it is."

Nolan doesn't even pretend to be impressed, giving me a long, assessing look. "The rumors are getting worse." He takes an obnoxious sip, his gaze unwavering from mine. "There's been no public statement," he continues. "And in our world, silence is an admission of guilt."

I force a smile. "We're handling it."

"I'd hate to see your business get dragged through the mud over something like this," Nolan muses but the weight behind his words is anything but light. The line between business and warning is thin.

Crossing my arms, I hold his gaze. "That a warning?"

A shrug. "A friendly one." He then turns the conversation. "I heard you've added to your pack. Congratulations. Because we both know that you didn't bring your assistant. Just be careful," he murmurs. "There's going to be legal issues coming your way. Prepare for that."

If Nolan wasn't one of the better clients, I'd think he was threatening me but I take his words to heart anyway. "If you think this could hurt your reputation, why did you still want me to come?"

Nolan tilts his head just slightly, like he's reassessing me, like he's deciding whether I'm worth giving a real answer to. "You have an eye for art. You're not stupid and you would never tarnish your brand with such nonsense."

“No,” I smirk. “I wouldn’t. I’ll have something drawn up for you by the end of the day.”

I dip out of the room before Nolan can continue the conversation so that I can return to Violet. She’s standing near the table, bottom lip caught between her teeth, fingers hovering just over the extravagant centerpiece, her entire body angled like she’s already breaking the room down piece by piece in her mind.

She doesn’t notice me at first, too caught up in whatever thought has taken hold of her. Her eyes flick from the chandelier to the paintings, then to the table itself, the wheels turning fast, the calculations already being made before she’s even conscious of them. I lean against the doorway, watching for a second longer than I probably should.

“What’s on your mind, princess?”

Her eyes snap to mine and then she just starts talking, spilling thoughts like she’s been waiting for someone to listen. She explains that the lighting clashes with the texture of the walls. The chandelier, while impressive, makes the room feel cold. The table is stunning but needs better contrast with the chairs. If they’d actually let her, she could make the entire space feel less like a museum and more like a place people actually want to eat in.

She keeps going, each detail sharp, precise, slipping from her lips with an ease that shouldn’t come from someone who isn’t in this business.

And I just watch. Listen. Because fuck, she’s brilliant. I’ve been doing this for years, but the way she sees things, the way she dissects a space without hesitation, without even realizing she’s doing it—it’s like watching someone who was made for this.

“You been holding out on me, princess? Because you talk like someone who should

be getting paid for this.” Her lips part, but there’s hesitation now. The briefest flicker of doubt before she can even let herself consider the thought. I don’t let her shut it down. “You’re good at this. Really good. All I have to do is teach you some of the acronyms and other bullshit and you’d be amazing.”

Violet laughs, a soft barely there sound as I pull her toward me. Her warmth seeps into me, her scent curling in my lungs, a warm jasmine, something I don’t think I’ll ever get enough of. "God, I’ve missed that sound," the words come low, almost a growl, slipping past my lips as I press gentle kisses down the column of her throat.

She tilts her head, just slightly, just enough to let me have more, and I don’t waste the opportunity. My teeth graze the spot just beneath her ear, the place I know will send a shiver down her spine. She sucks in a breath, but she’s trying—really trying—to keep her thoughts straight, to stay focused on something other than my hands gripping the fabric of her dress, the way my fingers flex like I’m barely keeping myself in check.

"I worked in art galleries for a long time," she pushes out. "Even before that, I liked making things look pretty."

I hum against her skin, letting my lips drag a little lower before pausing, fingers tracing idle circles against her hip. "Yeah? You ever think about doing this for real?"

There’s a beat, a moment where I feel her hesitation before she turns in my arms, tilting her chin up, her hands pressing against my chest. “Maybe? Never thought about it.”

I clear my throat, forcing my brain to shift gears before I forget what the hell we came here for. "I’ve seen all I need to see," the words come out rough, like my voice hasn’t fully recovered.

She blinks, still dazed, still trying to catch up. "Huh?"

"The job," I smirk because I know damn well she forgot all about it.

"So, we're heading back home now?" She asks as I lead her back out to the car. "You don't have to talk to Nolan or whatever?"

"Nope. I send him a small map of the room, where everything needs to move and it seems that my job has already been done for me because I cataloged all your suggestions. So... it's time for a date."

Her reaction is instant. Her whole body stiffens, her jaw practically unhinges, and she turns fully in her seat, blinking at me in surprise. "A what?"

I barely bite back a laugh, keeping my eyes on the road, hands steady on the wheel, but I feel her stare, the way her disbelief practically burns through me. "I've been dreaming of this goddamn moment for too fucking long. The others said it was okay if I steal you away for a little while." I chance another look, meeting her gaze head-on, daring her to fight me on this. "Please let me have it."

She swallows, her lips pressing together, something flickering behind her eyes as she searches my face like she's looking for a reason to say no. She doesn't find one. "Yeah, okay."

A slow grin spreads across my lips, and I reach over, giving her thigh a squeeze. "That's my girl."

### Chapter thirty-four

#### VIOLET

I prop my phone up against the dashboard, angling the screen just right before hitting the video call button. It rings twice before Sofie's face appears, flushed and damp, strands of wet hair sticking to her cheeks. Behind her, Hawk and Lance sprawl in the oversized tub, their broad shoulders bracketing her small frame, looking entirely too pleased with themselves. Lance's arm is draped across the edge, fingers tracing slow, idle circles along the water's surface, while Hawk leans back, eyes half-lidded, his hand resting on Sofie's thigh.

The image is obscene in the most unintentional way—too intimate, too easy, too much like something out of a dream. I shake my head, snorting. “Jesus, I leave you alone for a few hours, and this is what I come back to?”

Sofie giggles, tilting her head to nuzzle into Lance's chest, her fingers trailing lazily over his skin. Hawk doesn't even open his eyes, just keeps rubbing slow, possessive circles against her thigh like he's memorizing the shape of her.

“They're taking care of me,” she murmurs, voice warm, drowsy, satisfied in a way that makes my throat go tight.

“I can see that,” I say, watching as Lance plucks a piece of fruit from a nearby dish and presses it to her lips. She parts them easily, letting him feed her, the sight so soft it almost doesn't fit the rest of this fucked-up world.

Gray, silent up until now, glances over at me. Amusement flickers in his blue eyes, but he doesn't say anything, just keeps his attention split between me and the road, like he's giving me the space to process.

Sofie's gaze finds mine again, something quieter settling in her expression. That bright, youthful giddiness shifts, dims just a fraction, turning into something deeper. Something certain.

"We can be happy, Violet," she says, no hesitation in her voice now. "We can have them too."

I exhale sharply, forcing a small smirk, needing the moment to be lighter than it is. "Let them pamper you, baby."

Sofie hums, her fingers tracing lazy patterns along Lance's collarbone. "I am. But you have to do the same." Gray chuckles, a low, knowing sound that vibrates through the car, and I barely get the chance to shoot him a glare before Sofie continues, her expression turning smug, but still deadly fucking serious underneath it all. "Let Gray take care of you."

My mouth opens—ready to argue, ready to brush it off, ready to turn it into something easier—but the moment I do, Sofie's expression shifts again. The teasing edge fades.

"You deserve it, Vi."

Gray's fingers curl around my thigh, like he's been waiting for this exact moment to remind me I'm not alone in this anymore. I exhale through my nose, roll my eyes because it's the easiest thing to do when my chest feels like it's caving in, when raw emotions are scratching their way out into the open. "Fine. But don't get used to it."

The call ends, the screen going dark, and I sink back into my seat, exhaling like I can force this feeling out of me, like I can push it away before it settles too deep.

Gray doesn't say anything at first, just keeps his hand right where it is, thumb tracing slow, steady circles over my jeans, like he's waiting for me to shatter and isn't in any hurry to rush it. Then, after a beat, he asks. "So... you gonna let me take care of you, princess?"

"If you're good," I throw back at him.

The diner hums with low conversations, the clang of metal spatulas against greasy grills, the occasional burst of laughter from the corner booth where a group of truckers are probably swapping stories about the worst roadside stops they've ever been to. The air is thick with the scent of sizzling meat and deep-fried everything, the kind of smell that sticks to your clothes and lingers under your nails.

This is the kind of place where time doesn't matter. Where you could walk in at three in the morning or three in the afternoon, and the same tired-eyed waitress would still be chewing gum, scribbling down orders like she's been doing it for a decade. It's exactly the kind of place I wouldn't have pictured Gray bringing me to.

I lean back against the cracked vinyl of the booth, drumming my fingers against the table as he sprawls in front of me, casual, unbothered, arm draped over the back of his seat like he owns the damn place. A smirk tugs at the corner of my lips. "Didn't take you for the type to eat greasy foods like this."

Gray huffs out a laugh, dragging a hand through his hair before shooting me a look that's far too amused for my liking. "Princess, you think I'm living off caviar and expensive steaks just because Puma owns a nice house?"

I shrug, tugging at the hem of my shirt. "I mean... kinda."

He snorts, shaking his head as he pushes open the door, the little bell above jingling weakly like it's seen better days. The wave of warm, greasy air that hits me square in the face is almost suffocating, but in the best way.

"That house was passed down in Puma's family," he says as we weave through the narrow space, past booths filled with people who barely look up, too focused on shoveling food into their mouths. "Puma makes breakfast. Hawk usually makes dinner. None of us are around for lunch, so it's whatever's easiest."

A flicker of disbelief crosses my face. "Hawk cooks?"

Gray slides into a booth in the back, the table slightly sticky, but he doesn't seem to notice or care. "Like a goddamn chef."

Skepticism coils in my gut as I fold my arms over my chest. "No fucking way. Hawk, the walking scowl, can cook?"

Gray grins, shaking his head like he's remembering something. "You should see him when he's focused. Gets all quiet, brows furrowed, dead serious."

I snort. "Sexy."

He winks, leaning in just slightly. "If you're into that sort of thing."

A waitress swings by, smacking her gum loud as she pulls a pen from behind her ear. She barely looks at us as she slaps down two laminated menus, but I don't need to look.

"Double cheeseburger, extra pickles," I say easily. "Large fries. Vanilla shake."

Gray tilts his head, amusement dancing in his eyes. "You eat like a starving



teenager.”

“You have no idea.”

He lets out a chuckle and orders the same, insisting we “keep it simple” like he’s trying to prove something. The waitress scribbles it down, gives us a lazy nod, then disappears back toward the kitchen. The lull in conversation stretches, comfortable but expectant. I prop my chin on my hand, studying the way Gray leans back, fingers brushing against my shoulder absentmindedly.

“How did the four of you come together?” I’ve been mulling on the question for a while but now I’m curious because the four of the Ashford Alphas just seem so wildly different.

“It was chaos at first,” he admits, his voice low, just loud enough for me to hear over the noise of the diner. “The pack forming. Trying to make it work. It was mostly business at first. None of us expected it to settle the way it did. Puma was already established, Lance and Hawk were just doing their thing, and then I kinda slipped in. It took time, but we found our footing. Now, it works.”

“Do you ever wish it was different?”

Gray tilts his head, meeting my gaze. “What do you mean?”

I shrug, rolling the question over in my mind, trying to figure out how to say it without making it sound like something it’s not. “Like... I don’t know. More normal?”

He chuckles under his breath, shaking his head. “Define normal.”

I scoff. “You know what I mean.”

Gray runs a hand through his hair, exhaling like he's considering it, like he's giving the thought real weight. "Honestly? No. Not really. I mean, I wish things were easier sometimes. I wish I was closer to my brother. But this pack? It's mine. It's home."

There's something final about the way he says it. Something sure. I hesitate, then ask, "When was the last time you saw your brother?"

His lips press together, his fingers twitching like he wants to reach for something, maybe a cigarette, maybe a drink, maybe nothing at all. "Been a minute. He's caught up in hockey and college. I'm caught up in work."

I bump my shoulder against his. "We should go to one of his games. I mean it," I say, holding his gaze. "It's not like you don't have the time. And if you don't, then make the time. He's your brother, Gray." I don't have my family anymore, not like I used to, not after I chose Sofie and I'd do it again every goddamn time.

"I'd really like that," he murmurs.

I grin, squeezing his arm. "Then we'll go."

### Chapter thirty-five

#### LANCE

The house is quiet, Sofie and Violet curled up in Sofie's nest. Since her heat, she's taken over my room but I'm not surprised. It's the room closest to Puma's, where Violet has been spending most of her time. It's also the closest to the kitchen. I peer down the hallway from my seat at the kitchen table, almost as if waiting for my bedroom door to open and those big beautiful brown eyes to peek out. But no, they both need their rest and I'm not going to be the one to face one of Sofie's adorable pouts.

I lean back in my chair, arms stretching over my head, muscles pulling tight before I exhale, letting them drop. A lazy grin tugs at the corner of my lips as I nod toward the dimly lit hallway. "Well, boys, I think it's safe to say I'm never getting my damn room back." Sofie's scent clings to it, wrapped up in Violet's, intertwined in a way that tells me neither of them are going anywhere.

It's only a matter of time before Puma actually tries stealing Violet away from Sofie. Hell, I'm surprised Gray hasn't yet. Hawk snorts, arms crossed, one boot kicked up against the leg of the table. "Like you even want it back."

I grin, tipping my chair back onto two legs. "Fair point."

The mood should stay light, should drift into something easier, but it doesn't. It shifts instead, reality creeping in around the edges. Because there's a reason the four of us—me, Hawk, Puma, and Gray—are still sitting at the kitchen table instead of

sinking into the comfort of the women sleeping just down the hall. A reason the exhaustion pressing against my bones isn't enough to send me to bed.

Puma rakes a hand through his hair, a deep frown cutting into his brow. His expression is unreadable, but I know that look. "We've got bigger problems than just a few pissed-off clients," Puma says. He slides a folder across the table, fingers tapping against the surface. "Banks called. The lawsuit isn't just about damages anymore. There's a criminal case being built. Someone's claiming the paintings weren't just fakes—they were stolen."

Hawk is the first to break it. "That's bullshit." The words come out clipped, his usual level-headedness cracking around the edges. "We don't deal in stolen shit. We've been careful—"

"Careful doesn't mean we aren't being set up," Gray cuts in. His fingers drum against the side of his glass, jaw tight. "Whoever's pulling this isn't fucking around. First, the fake rumors, now stolen art? This isn't about business anymore. They want to burn us down."

Puma nods, a flicker of anger shifting through his expression. "That's exactly what Banks thinks." His fingers stop drumming, stilling as he exhales sharply. "The problem is, we don't know who's behind it. And with all this noise, we're gonna start losing real business if we don't get ahead of it."

Gray scoffs, shaking his head. "Already happening. Nolan basically told me to tread carefully because people are getting nervous."

The family lawyer, Banks, has been a godsend, keeping us out of murky waters when things get a little rough. However, we've never dealt with rumors like this before and if our best client is saying to tread carefully, it isn't good. "Great. So, what's the next move?"

Puma doesn't answer immediately. He looks at each of us, measuring his next words. He isn't just the protector of our unconventional pack. He's also our voice of reason, a man who's been in this business far longer than any of us have. The silence stretches long enough to set my nerves on edge before he finally speaks. "First, we talk to Banks again. Figure out what angle the prosecution is playing at. If they're serious about the stolen art claims, we need proof we weren't involved."

"That's a given," Hawk mutters.

Puma continues. "Second, we get Nolan to keep us in the loop on any business-side whispers. If there's talk of fakes, I guarantee there's a name attached to it somewhere. We find the source, we find who's trying to pin this on us."

Gray nods slowly. "And if we don't?"

Our head Alpha's shoulders drop just slightly and I can't tell if it's defeat or just a result of being tired. "Then we get dragged through the courts, and best-case scenario, we walk out with a reputation in fucking ruins."

The more I think about it, the more the pieces don't add up. Every new bit of information, every whisper of rumors, every well-placed accusation—it's all too convenient. Too perfectly timed. Like someone has been laying the groundwork for months, waiting for the right moment to strike.

The lawsuit, the stolen art, the way clients are pulling back just enough to stir unease but not enough to sever ties completely. Someone isn't just trying to mess with our business. Someone wants to dismantle us piece by piece.

Frustration twists sharp in my gut, bleeding into my tone. "Has anyone talked to Xavier?" My words cut through the low murmur of strategy being tossed around, silencing the room for half a beat before Puma shakes his head.

His expression hardens, his gaze flicking between us like he already knows I'm about to suggest something reckless. "No. And we can't. Banks says that's a bad idea. People are already trying to get their money back, getting spooked about the whole thing. If we start poking at him, it could blow back on us."

I grit my teeth, fists curling against the table. "So what? We just sit here and wait?"

"No." Puma leans forward, bracing his forearms against the surface. "We just need to point the finger in the right direction. Xavier's involved, but he's not the mastermind."

I let it sit for a second, rolling through every possible name, every collector or dealer with enough power and pull to set us up like this. It's not a long list, but one name keeps circling back. A name that's been an issue since the moment our pack carved out its place in the art world.

Orion.

No one's met him. He's more of a myth than a man but he's still a thorn in our side when his name comes up in conversation. If anyone is shady, it's the man without a face. My gaze flicks to Puma. "You think it's Orion?"

Puma doesn't respond right away, but the way his expression doesn't shift, the way his fingers press together like he's already considered this, tells me everything I need to know.

"It's the only guess I have," I continue. "He's the only collector that has enough pull to do something like this."

Hawk raises an eyebrow, amusement flooding his features. "It's not like we can go talk to him, though. Even if we could..."

Gray's head snaps up immediately, his expression flickering between disbelief and exasperation. "Yeah, definitely neither of you." He gestures between me and Hawk, eyes narrowed. "You're both wonderful Alphas, really, but also a little terrifying when people first meet you."

Hawk scoffs, crossing his arms. "We're not that bad."

Gray doesn't even blink. "Hawk, you growled at a waitress last week because she forgot your extra fries."

"That was different."

"It really wasn't." A smirk takes over my face as Hawk's scowl deepens, looking more like an offended child than a dangerous Alpha.

"Okay, so if not us, who?" My smirk widens. "You volunteering, Gray?"

"No one is talking to anyone," Puma repeats, his words edged with a growl. "Our job isn't to make the whispers go away—it's to set the record straight. Banks will figure out the best course of action and we'll handle it how we do everything else." His green eyes scan the room, daring anyone to challenge him.

"And if that doesn't work?" I'm itching for some damage, someone to turn my irritability on because waiting feels like a terrible game that we're going to lose.

A muscle ticks in Puma's jaw before he exhales. "We'll figure it out."

That's always his answer. A solid rock while the rest of us bristle and seethe, looking for a fight, for an outlet, for something to take the edge off. But that's why we've survived this long. Puma doesn't panic. Doesn't lose sight of the bigger picture. And when the rest of us start spiraling, he's the tether that keeps us from unraveling

completely.

“For now,” Puma continues, leveling us all with a look, “don’t worry Violet and Sofie with this.”

I breathe out a quiet sigh. Of course. It’s honestly not a bad reason to hold back. We’ve never truly had anyone we’ve had to protect. No one we’ve had to shield from the weight of our job or keep out of the limelight. Now that Sofie and Violet are here, everything has shifted and the last thing I want to do is throw them into a situation we can’t get them out of.

“We’re just supposed to pretend our livelihoods aren’t about to fall apart?” Hawk mutters, tone edged with frustration. Of course my brother is the one that doesn’t quite get it.

“Yes.” Puma nods once, unflinching. “Because we have two precious packages in that room that deserve all of our attention, regardless of what shit is going on in the world. They deserve a place to be safe. You in?”

It’s not a question. Not really. I glance at Hawk, then at Gray, and we all nod, because it’s not even a debate. Our women come first. Puma smirks, satisfied, but his focus shifts almost immediately to Gray, who’s been uncharacteristically quiet. And that’s never a good sign. The moment stretches as Puma moves without warning, reaching across the table. His fingers wrap around the front of Gray’s throat—not rough, not threatening, just firm enough to command attention. Gray blinks, lips parting slightly, surprise flickering in his sharp blue eyes.

“And while we’re on the subject of being safe...” Puma’s voice dips with a kind of controlled tone that carries the promise of consequence. “If you don’t cut down your goddamn hours, I will let Violet strangle you. And not in the way you’re thinking.”



I stifle a laugh as Gray's gaze darkens, something dangerous sparking behind his smirk. His tongue swipes over his bottom lip, but for once, he doesn't argue. "I get it," Gray murmurs, voice a little rougher, a little lower, like the way Puma is holding him like this does something to him.

Puma's fingers tighten just a fraction before he leans in and presses a kiss to Gray's mouth—a possessive, claiming kiss that tells all of us that Puma isn't playing around.

Gray exhales against Puma's lips, his smirk curving lazily when Puma pulls back, his voice gravel-rough. "You're a hot commodity," Puma mutters, fingers brushing over Gray's jaw before finally releasing him. "But you're not irreplaceable. Someone else can do the jobs that fall through the cracks, or they can wait for you."

Gray drags a hand through his hair, lips curling up. "Knew you loved me."

Puma huffs, eyes narrowing. "Don't push your luck. I'm serious Gray. I've been worried about you for longer than you realize. Burning yourself out isn't the answer." What he says next isn't what I expect. "I wasn't sure why you thought tiring yourself out was a good thing. And maybe I was selfish the few times you stumbled into my room, silently asking me for comfort. I didn't want to understand. I loved that you liked to lean. I love that you all do. But I understand now."

"Understand what?" Hawk cuts in but I'm still looking at Gray's expression, a sort of hopeful despair that doesn't make any sense. He's the most lighthearted out of all of us. But the look in his eyes right now is one of longing.

And then it clicks.

"Violet," I push out. "You've been searching for her ever since that weekend. I think we all figured you were mates but then nothing came of it so we never brought it up. And in a wonderful sense of fate, she was brought right back to us. You've been

trying to fill the void she left, haven't you?"

Gray's brows furrow as he seems to curl into himself, the Alpha nervously chewing on his lip ring. "How would you know that?"

"Because I've been doing the same thing with the both of them. Why the fuck did you think I'd so eagerly go over to Ash & Ivory? It wasn't for Xavier, Gray. The few times I had them in my bed was everything. I can only imagine the tug on your instincts for how long you've been separated. It must have been torture." I'm seeing Gray through an entirely different lens now.

He manages a small frustrated sigh, flopping back in his seat. "I didn't even know why I was so goddamn interested or why she was in every one of my thoughts. I hadn't had a mate and I didn't know what a scent match felt like. But Jesus, yeah, it's been a bit of torture." He faces Puma, squeezing the Alpha's arm. "I'll cut down my hours, promise. The most important part of our pack is in that room. Those women will take precedence over everything else."

I snort. "Well, they better but we're going to have to make some kind of damn schedule when they aren't actively shutting us out of the nest." Gray frowns so I explain it a little better. "I have a feeling that all of us, at least once, are going to suffer their wrath and get kicked out. I'm banking that it's either Gray or Hawk first."

"My bet's on Gray," Hawk adds.

Gray sticks his tongue out at us and points to me. "Definitely going to be you."

We all look to Puma for his choice and he just grins. "If you all think Sofie isn't going to kick all of you out so she can be with her Beta, you're sorely mistaken. We might all have our claims on those women but Sofie's claim on Violet is much stronger than I've ever seen."

That sets us into soft laughter, my mind racing as the fantasy of Sofie kicking all of us out sets in. She can be adorably fierce so I'm all for it.

### Chapter thirty-six

#### VIOLET

When Hawk peeked into the room to ask if we wanted to go to dinner, I didn't expect an actual restaurant. I also didn't expect one of those fancy private booths that cuts us off from the regular dinner hall. There's still chatter and the occasional laughter but it's all very... poised. The only reason I'm suffering through is because Sofie is curled up in my lap, her body draped against mine like she belongs there. Her fingers rest against my thighs, as she hums around the bite of food I just fed her. She's still caught in that post-heat haze, that syrupy sweetness that makes her melt a little too easily, makes her sigh every time my fingers slide through her hair.

She's been softening like this every time one of us gives her more than a few seconds of attention and I fucking love it. She's leaning into her instincts, letting herself feel out the Omega she wants to be. And I for one am all for this version.

The twins sit shoulder to shoulder, murmuring between themselves, their hands moving lazily as they pick through their food. Hawk glances over every few moments, like he's making sure Sofie is still enjoying herself. It's instinct, and I know it, because I've been doing the same damn thing. However, Hawk's gaze occasionally falls to me, a smile tugging at the corner of his lips. Puma wasn't wrong when he said that I caught the attention of all four of the Alphas in this pack.

His sharp musky scent is tinged with an edge of mint, a cooling feeling that settles my nerves. It's never been this strong before, heat pooling in my lower belly at the thought of Hawk doing more than just staring. I quickly clear my throat and feed

Sofie another bite as my attention flits to Puma seated at the head of the table. He's staring at me with a knowing smirk, my entire body lighting up. God, it's going to be impossible with these men, isn't it?

Gray shifts closer to me, his amber scent thickening as his lips meet the curve of my ear. A shiver runs down my spine as I feel like I'm suddenly on display for these men. His tongue darts out to lick sensitive skin before a small piece of steak is lifted to my lips. "For you, princess," he murmurs, voice edged with teasing, something darker curling underneath it.

I twist around to see him, my eyes narrowing, already knowing this is a setup. There's no way in hell I'm playing into whatever game he's decided to start. My mouth opens, already halfway through a well-aimed insult, Gray taking the opportunity to press the beef through my lips.

Hawk and Lance stop mid-conversation, their forks hovering in the air, their gazes locked on me like I just did something completely out of character. Puma doesn't react, but there's amusement rolling off him in thick, unspoken waves. And Gray is watching me like he's won something.

The heat that licks at my cheeks is slow, creeping up from my neck until I'm damn sure I'm going to burst into flames. I chew, swallow, glare at him. "Happy?"

Gray hums, dragging his fingers against my jaw, barely grazing my skin before he reaches for another bite. "Almost. One more." This time when he feeds me, the rumble of his purr has me pressing my thighs together and holding Sofie a little tighter against my chest. My scent betrays me, though. Hawk tentatively reaching over to slide a hand around the back of my neck. And then he squeezes, a traitorous moan falling from my lips.

"Fuck," I mutter, embarrassed, ashamed—hell, I'm not even sure. The heat in

Hawk's eyes has deepened, his nostrils flaring as something connects between us. I quickly shimmy out of his grip but there isn't anywhere to go, trapped between him and Gray. "Just keep talking and leave me be. There is no way to relieve this state you've got me in. No, none of you look like that. We're not doing stuff in public."

Gray grins. "You used to. What? She did! Remember that one day at the mall—"

"No ." God, where is a hole so I can drop into it and lose myself forever. "Please just eat." Puma's sitting over there, his shoulders jostling as he tries to swallow down his laughter. I'm not even going to chance looking at Lance.

Sofie is looking up at me with that knowing smile so I grab one of the cherry tomatoes from her salad and stuff it between her lips. The conversation picks up again, leaving me and Sofie to our own little piece of heaven. It's starting to feel like this could be more than a fleeting moment, like it could be some kind of forever and I'm deliriously hopeful.

Half an hour later, I can't eat another bite and if Gray tries feeding me again, I'm going to bite off his finger. He seems to know that as he sneaks bites off my plate like he wasn't the one hand-feeding me a minute ago, his grin smug every time I glare at him. I settle back into the cushions, pulling Sofie with me. She's half asleep, murmuring about something I can't quite catch. God, I love that she's comfortable enough to do that now—to relax because a few weeks ago, she'd be all wide-eyed and alert.

I'm just about to ask if we can get dessert when a haughty, irritating voice spreads across the table. "Oh, I didn't know you had started entertaining company again," she drawls, her smile slow, practiced, laced with condescension. "This the newest bunch?"

The conversation around us dies, the warmth in the air bleeding out. Hawk's jaw

tightens, his entire body going rigid. Lance's fingers curl into his napkin. Gray—who had been lazily sprawled in his seat just seconds ago—goes completely still. I'm not ready for the way Puma reacts to this woman though, because he just looks bored. He leans back in his seat, folding his arms across his chest, one brow raised as he waits for the woman to explain herself.

Sofie huffs, something between annoyed and irritated, curling a little tighter into my chest. Gone is the ease of this moment, turned into something filled with tension. The Beta at the edge of the table—all long legs, dark red lipstick, and hair that a shampoo commercial would be jealous of—tilts her head, her smile just a little too sharp, her gaze flicking between me and Sofie like she's already worked out exactly where to dig in the knife.

“Oh, come on,” she purrs, saccharine sweet. “They occasionally pick up a straggler, give ‘em all the riches and everything, and then drop ‘em when they’re done. Didn’t they tell you?”

I think about checking the expressions at this table, where I'm supposed to tread or if they're going to defend us. However, if they truly want me here with them, as part of their pack, they're going to stand behind the haughty, hateful words that are about to come out of my mouth. A woman like her is either right and these Alphas are lying dicks or she's a bitch, sticking her face where it doesn't belong. Now I'm wondering which dick she tried to suck and who turned her down.

God, if she touched Puma, I'm going to tear her apart. “You want to run that by me again?” My voice is quiet, an edge of amusement padding my words. Because this is funny. The moment I start thinking about forever, this woman is just one of many things that decides to come along and ruin it.

Her head tilts, an infuriating little show of indifference. “I just think it's interesting that they always seem to bring home Omegas in need. They find someone new, get

all wrapped up in them, and when the high is over? They move on. Happened a few years ago. Happened a few years before that too.”

Again, unless these Alphas have been lying to me, I know for a fact that isn’t true. It’s not a secret that they’ve had relationships outside the pack but they haven’t brought home an Omega. They better not have. “You got some fucking nerve,” I spit out. “Coming over here and running your mouth about people you clearly don’t know.”

A flicker of hesitation crosses her face, gone in an instant. “I was just—”

“No,” I cut her off, eyes locked onto hers, daring her to try and backpedal. “You weren’t just anything. You came over here with your little fucking half-smile and your veiled insults, hoping to shake something loose. You thought you could plant a few seeds of doubt, stir up a little drama, and walk away feeling smug about it.” I love the way she stutters, her hands wringing together in front of her as she fights for words. No doubt she expected me to fall apart but I’m not a trophy piece. “You wanna know what they’re doing?” I continue, my words dripping with venom. “They’re making sure my Omega is safe. They’re making sure I am safe. And if you think for one goddamn second that I’m gonna let you stand here and talk like you have any fucking clue about what we have, you’re delusional.”

My words feel even more powerful since I’m sitting in the middle of the booth, the twins on one side, Gray on the other, and Puma at the head. She’s standing inches from him, a snarl playing on my lips. I swear to god if she fucking touches him, I’m ripping that hand off. Jealousy is rarely something I feel but I’m beginning to realize that at some point these Alphas became my Alphas, they became family. And not just because they’re taking care of Sofie anymore.

The Beta blinks, lips parting slightly, like she wasn’t expecting pushback. Like she thought we’d just sit here and take it. Puma stands, rolling his shoulders back as if



shaking off the very presence of the woman before him. His expression doesn't shift, doesn't flicker, but his eyes—those sharp, calculating green eyes—are locked onto hers like a predator sizing up prey. "Jana," he says, voice smooth but sharp enough to slice. "I would say it's nice to see you, but it's really not."

Sofie stiffens against me, breath catching in her throat, the scent of her unease curling around. I tighten my arms around her and place a kiss to her temple, murmuring that it'll be alright.

"As for the women at this table?" Puma continues, his voice deceptively casual, laced with the kind of authority that makes men fold. "That's none of your fucking business. But if you must know, they're our mates." His head tilts slightly, lips curling in something that isn't quite a smile. "And as for your little 'newest bunch' theory?" His voice dips lower, a razor's edge. "We've never operated like that and you fucking know it."

Jana's nostrils flare, arms crossing over her chest like she's trying to armor herself against his words. Puma isn't finished.

"Open relationships are one thing," he continues, stepping toward her, each movement precise, controlled. "But we don't work on a revolving basis. Just because Gray denied you a few times doesn't give you permission to come over here and ruin a perfectly good night."

Jana's expression darkens, her lips pressing into a thin line. "Oh, so now you're mates?" she scoffs, gaze flicking between Sofie and me like she's trying to find the cracks in the foundation. "You expect me to believe that you've suddenly changed your ways? Please."

Puma doesn't blink, doesn't even look amused anymore. "I don't give a fuck what you believe."

Jana exhales sharply, then shifts, attention narrowing in on me, and for the first time since she opened her mouth, I feel a very specific kind of rage settle into my bones. "You won't last long," she murmurs, voice sticky-sweet, sick with condescension. "None of them do."

This feels like high school where we had to deal with so much bullshit regarding the popular crowd. But we're not kids anymore and I don't take kindly to lies being spouted. So, I focus on making it seem like none of this shit bothers me, forcing ease into my posture. If she wants a rise out of me, she's going to have to work a hell of a lot harder than that. "At least I've had all the men at this table," I say smoothly, flashing her a slow, deliberate smile.

Her brows furrow before she turns her attention to Puma, laying a soft hand to his shoulder. She opens her mouth to say something as fury curls in my gut, my teeth bared as jealousy takes over. Sofie leans forward before any of us can react, her voice slicing through the tension like a blade. "Back off, bitch."

Jana yanks her hand back as if she's been burned, eyes wide, disbelief flashing across her face. She blinks, stunned, mouth parting like she might actually try to argue, but nothing comes out. I'm sure this is the wrong time to laugh but Sofie is vibrating on my lap, her body now facing Jana, her cute nose scrunched up in anger.

The Beta stays a few seconds more before stalking off, Sofie letting out a slow breath and sinking back against my side, her scent settling again. But everyone is still looking at her now, and I don't miss the way Hawk's lips twitch with something close to pride.

I nudge her lightly, smirking. "Are you jealous, baby?"

She makes a tiny sound of frustration, burying her face against my shoulder. "I didn't like that." The words come out muffled, laced with something deeper than just

irritation.

Hawk and Lance exchange a glance, something silent passing between them before Lance leans forward. "Sofie, Violet, we've had past relationships, yeah, but that doesn't mean we were just running through them. We've never done something like this before."

Sofie lifts her head, studying him. "You mean the whole pack thing?"

"Yeah." Lance nods, eyes locked onto hers. "This isn't just some fling. We're all in. For you. For Violet. For all of us."

Sofie relaxes and it's the same words I needed to hear from them as Puma takes his seat again. He seems a little too smug at how we handled ourselves and I'm sure he didn't immediately push Jana away because he wanted to see what happened. I'll get him for that later. Right now, though, I focus on Sofie. "We get it, baby. We've had past men too. It doesn't mean anything."

And the second those words leave my mouth, I realize my mistake. Gray, who's been sitting comfortably against my side, suddenly goes rigid. His arm tightens around my waist—not enough to hurt, just enough to remind me he's there, that he heard every single word. His voice is low, rough, vibrating through his chest. "Who?"

I groan, already exhausted, throwing my head back against the chair. "Gray, don't—"

"Who?" he repeats, slower this time, darker, more insistent.

My fingers trail up his arm, pressing gently against the tension there. "Calm down, tiger."

Gray scoffs, exhaling through his nose. "I'm no tiger, princess. I'm a wolf."

Laughter erupts around the table, Puma taking full advantage of the moment. He reaches over, gripping the front of Gray's shirt with one strong hand, dragging him into his side with absurd ease.

His smirk is slow, a dangerous edge to it. "When it comes to me, you're a goddamn puppy."

Gray growls, trying to shove him off, but Puma doesn't budge, effortlessly keeping him pinned like he's nothing more than an unruly pet. Lance, barely keeping it together, nearly chokes on his drink. "Fuck, Puma, let the man have some dignity."

Puma shrugs, releasing Gray with a rough pat on the chest. "What dignity?"

That just adds more laughter to the table, Sofie giggling in my arms, bringing back the warmth from earlier. Puma drags Gray into a fierce, claiming kiss that has the rest of us groaning but I'm really fucking happy for once. I'm not sure how I survived this long thinking that we were better off alone. And maybe I'm a little selfish for being glad that my plans fell apart.

### Chapter thirty-seven

#### VIOLET

The night ends in a walk across the pier, a small piece of land that hits one of the lakes at the very edge of Ansdale. The distant lull of waves crashes against the docks, filling the space between footsteps and hushed voices. Somewhere nearby, laughter spills from late-night strollers, a moment that doesn't belong to us. Further down the wharf, a street musician plucks out a slow tune, the melody weaving through the salty air like something half-forgotten.

Puma and Gray flank me, their heat pressing into my sides. Lips brush against my temple, my jaw, the shell of my ear, and it's so fucking easy to melt between them, a little dazed, a little too comfortable in how effortlessly I fit here.

"Think we can keep her all to ourselves, Puma?" Gray murmurs against my skin, voice curling around the words. I elbow him in the ribs just to wipe that smug grin off his face.

Puma chuckles, his fingers tracing lazy circles at the small of my back. "Not a chance."

Before Gray can respond, a delighted squeal cuts through the air, and Sofie steals him, fingers curling around his wrist as she tugs him toward the water, breathless laughs falling from her lips.

Lance is right behind them, running at full speed, grinning ear to ear. His movements

are all reckless joy, broad shoulders shifting as he swoops Sofie up into his arms before she can tumble, spinning her once before setting her back on her feet. She shrieks, slapping at his arm, but the way she clings to him says she doesn't mind one bit. Watching them, something deep in my chest settles. It's such a different dynamic from when we first met.

It felt like I was trying to keep myself from falling apart, hoping and praying that Sofie would have the help she needed. And now, I'm slowly falling in love with the men around me. I look around, searching for the missing Alpha, Hawk sitting on one of the benches a few feet away. His arms are stuffed into his pockets, a tight smile on his face, his gaze focused on the three playing at the edge of the water.

Something calls to me, a need to sit beside him, to explore this growing thing between us. It feels both awkward and comfortable as my knee grazes his thigh, my hands twisting in my lap for several seconds before I manage to say something. "You good?"

His lips twitch, barely there. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"Feels like you're thinking real hard about something."

He manages a shrug, his scent wrapping around me, providing that same comfort from before. "I'm the quiet twin, Vi. Doesn't mean I don't see everything."

I shift, turning fully toward him. "And what exactly do you see?"

"I see Sofie falling harder for us than she realizes. I see Lance already gone for her, in a way I don't think he's ever been for anyone." His gaze flicks toward me, something unspoken moving behind it. "And I see you, sitting here, trying to figure out where you fit into all of it."

It's like he cracked me open, dug through all the shit I wasn't sure how to put into words, and laid it bare in the salt-stained air between us.

"You're thinking too much about it," Hawk says. "Trying to figure out where we go from here, what the next steps are. You're worried about Sofie, about yourself, about the pack—when all you really need to do is just be here."

My throat tightens, something thick lodging itself behind my ribs. "That easy, huh?"

A flicker of amusement passes over his face, gone just as quickly. "Nothing about this is easy. But it's not meant to be a goddamn war, either."

He's right. I don't know why I thought it had to be complicated. Why I thought I had to plan every step like I was bracing for a fallout that might never come. Maybe it's just instinct. Maybe it's just me. I really look at him this time, and for the first time since meeting him, I realize—Hawk isn't just the quiet twin. He isn't just the one who lets Lance do all the talking, lets him play buffer between the world and whatever sharp edges he's keeping tucked away.

He sees me . Like he's stripping me bare with nothing but his words.

He leans forward, elbows resting on his knees, fingers laced together, the muscles in his shoulders tight. "I let Lance do all the talking," he muses. "He's the charmer, always has been. People love him. He makes friends in an instant, gets into their good graces without even trying." His exhale is sharp, his head shaking slightly. "Me?" A humorless chuckle under his breath. "I like the work. The hunt. Finding the pieces no one else sees." His gaze flicks to mine, steady, searching. "I don't do well with people."

I raise a brow, watching the way his jaw flexes. "You seem fine to me."

His lips twitch, but it doesn't stick. "You don't count."

A soft breath of laughter pushes past my lips. "Why's that?"

"Because you don't expect me to be something I'm not."

I study him, my gaze tracing the sharp cut of his features, the way the moonlight catches the angles of his face. His expression is unreadable, carefully blank, but his posture isn't. His body is tense, wound up tight, like there's something inside of him coiled and waiting.

Hawk exhales through his nose, like he's coming to terms with something. "I don't do well with emotions either. Lance says it's because I don't let people in. That I let myself care, but not in a way people understand." His fingers twitch, brushing against my knee. "But I do care, Vi. And I don't want to do this half-assed. I don't want to be good at this in a way that makes sense to anyone else." A pause. Then—"I want to be selfish."

Something tightens in my chest. "Selfish?"

His jaw ticks, his eyes locked on mine. "With you. With Sofie."

"Hawk..."

He shakes his head once, like I don't need to say whatever it is I think I should. "Sofie's easy," he says, quieter now, like he's treading into unfamiliar territory. "She's already madly in love with you."

That makes me smile, because yeah. She is. Sofie is love in its purest, wildest form, throwing herself headfirst into the people she wants without hesitation. But Hawk looks at me like I matter in a way I don't think I've ever let myself believe. I try to



joke, try to ease the weight of whatever this moment is. “You think Sofie’s already madly in love with you too?”

His lips twitch, but his eyes don’t waver. “I’m not talking about her.” My breath catches. He shifts then, turning toward me fully, one arm now draped along the back of the bench, the other resting on his knee. His fingers flex, his shoulders shift, like he wants to reach for me but won’t let himself just yet. “I’m talking about you.”

The air in my lungs vanishes, my pulse stuttering against my ribs. Hawk has been the quiet one. The gruff, brooding twin who lets everyone else take the lead. But now he’s looking at me like he’s done watching. Like he’s been holding this in and finally decided to do something about it.

“I’ve wanted you since the second I walked into that gallery. But you looked at Lance first. You looked at him, then you looked at Sofie, and I told myself it didn’t matter. That it wouldn’t matter.” His throat bobs, jaw clenched tight. “But it does. I don’t know how to do this.” His voice drops lower, something almost hesitant. “Not like Lance. Not like Gray or Puma. But I know I don’t want to sit on the sidelines anymore.”

A sharp exhale forces its way out of me, my fingers dragging through my hair before resting against the bench, gripping the edge. “Hawk—”

“Tell me if I’m wrong.” His words come fast, like he needs to say them before I stop him. “Tell me if I’ve been reading this all wrong, and I’ll drop it. But if I haven’t—”

I don’t let him finish. Fingers curling into his shirt, I drag him toward me, closing the distance before I can think better of it. His mouth crashes against mine, heat and desperation bleeding into every second. His hands are on me instantly, gripping my waist, pulling me closer, and then I’m in his lap, thighs bracketing his hips as his fingers tangle in my hair. He groans against my mouth, his grip tightening, his body

pressing up into mine, and fuck waiting because I want this too.

“We can take this at our own pace,” he mumbles against my lips as he pulls away slightly. “I’m not in a rush, Vi. This isn’t a fleeting thing for me.” A slow drag of his thumb along my hip makes my skin tighten, makes my breath stutter. He traces the hem of my shirt absently, his voice dipping into something softer. “The first few times I saw you, I was amazed at your tenacity.” His lips twitch, the barest flicker of a smile in the dark. “How sharp you were. How relentless.”

A huff of air slips past my lips, shaking my head. “That’s a nice way of saying I’m a pain in the ass.”

His grip tightens, the weight of his hands pressing firm against me. “It’s a nice way of saying I was fucking captivated. And then I found out how much you’ve done for Sofie, how much you’ve given up, how much you’ve fought to make sure she never had to go without. And I was so goddamn proud of you, Vi.”

“Hawk...”

He shakes his head, dragging a hand through my hair, settling his palm against the back of my neck. His thumb strokes along my skin, like he needs the contact as much as I do. “Those feelings morphed into something else before I could stop them. Something I didn’t know how to deal with. And that first night with Sofie...” His chest rises and falls against mine, his fingers pressing lightly against the back of my neck. He’s weighing something, deciding how much to say, how much to let me see. “She wasn’t the only one searching for that extra scent,” he finally exhales.

My stomach twists. “What?”

“You were all over her, Vi. Your scent clung to her like a second skin. It was everywhere.” His throat bobs. “And I couldn’t stop myself from reaching for it. From

licking it off her skin, from imagining your taste on my tongue mixed with hers. She might have gotten to you first that night but she wasn't the only one looking for you."

I had spent so much time making sure Sofie was okay. So much time convincing myself that I was fine, that I didn't need anything, that whatever happened between us—whatever happened with the pack—was something I could handle from the outside. It never occurred to me that someone had been looking for me. That each and every one of these men had been reaching for me, searching for me, wanting me in all different ways.

Fingers still curled tight in his shirt, I don't even realize I'm shaking slightly until he moves, brushing his lips against mine in another slow, deliberate kiss. Then he pulls back, just enough to speak, his forehead pressing against mine. "You're the strongest person I know," he murmurs, voice like gravel and honey. "And I don't know anyone else I'd rather have at my side than you. You're going to be my Beta too, Violet."

The gravely depth of his voice melts away as he attacks my lips and I sink into his embrace. His fingers dig into my hips, a small cry falling from my lips as he rocks me over his lap. This is dangerous in all the right ways, need creeping through me as his cock thickens against the apex of my thighs. "We shouldn't," I breathe against his lips but Hawk isn't listening to me.

His lips dip to the curve of my neck, my entire body lighting up from the inside. "Tell me Gray was wrong. That you don't like to play a little bit. That you aren't the very embodiment of trouble when you let yourself be happy."

A strangled sound comes from my lips as he pulls me further down onto his lap so that I can feel every last part of him. "He—fuck, he wasn't wrong but Sofie—" He's still directing my hips, driving me mad, driving me to an orgasm in the middle of the fucking wharf. My fingers curl tighter into his chest, a gasp tearing from his throat as I try to keep my wits about me.

“Taken care of. Give me a better excuse.”

“Puma—”

“Loves watching.”

I twist around, eyes wide, Puma standing a few feet away. His eyes are nearly molten black, a grin spreading across his lips. His scent is just as strong as Hawk’s, my gaze raking over him and falling to the bulge between his thighs. My breath catches as I realize how much these two men want this. How much I want this.

Hawk resumes his kisses up and down my neck as I fall against his chest, letting him give me the pleasure I so desperately need. I don’t even care that someone could walk past us, the little pants falling from my lips disappearing into the night air. “Fuck, Hawk. I’m going to...”

“I know. If I thought we wouldn’t get in trouble, I would stuff you with my cock and fuck you right here on the beach while Puma watches.”

I moan, trying not to show Hawk just how much I love that idea. But my damn scent has other ideas, Hawk chuckling into my neck.

“You’re going to be trouble, aren’t you?”

“No,” I answer just a little too quickly. Hawk takes it as a challenge, his purr rumbling through his chest, adding to the pleasure thrumming between my thighs. My pussy is clenching around nothing, my body demanding to be filled but I’m not doing it on the beach. Sand is the one place I won’t fuck someone. And just as I’m on the cusp of an orgasm, Hawk completely stills.

His hands keep me from moving, from finding the friction I need, a low whine

tearing from my throat as I dig my nails into his chest. “Seriously?”

“Are you going to let yourself be loved, Violet? Are you going to let us take care of you, let us see all of you?” One of his hands moves to caress my cheek, his thumb running across the flushed skin. His voice drops a few octaves, his lips hovering over mine. “Trouble, will you be mine?”

“God, yes.” I’m not even sure why I was holding out for so long, Hawk resuming his pace. Puma takes a seat beside us, roughly gripping my chin and dragging me into a tongue-licking kiss. Seconds later, I’m coming apart on Hawk’s lap, Puma swallowing the moan that follows.

I sag against Hawk, trying to catch my breath even as these men caress and kiss me, telling me that I’m theirs. Sofie’s giggles sound in the distance but I’m content to sit right here, both of their purrs rumbling through me, lulling me into a wistful sleep.

### Chapter thirty-eight

#### PUMA

The week drags, the air heavy with the kind of waiting that grates on my nerves. Lawsuits pile up like dead weight on my shoulders, dragging behind me with every step. It's all bullshit—whispers twisted into accusations, accusations sharpened into threats. I half-expected it, but now that it's in full swing, now that it's clawing at the edges of everything we've built, I'm more annoyed than anything.

Xavier has vanished, slipping into the cracks before we could pin him down, and the idea that Orion is behind this is only part of the problem. There's someone else in the shadows, pulling the strings. This isn't just retaliation. It's strategy. A setup. The kind I've seen before, the kind that ends with people behind bars or buried in the ground.

Still, none of it is more important than keeping my people safe.

Violet and Sofie have changed the house, filled the spaces between us with something warm, something none of us realized we were missing. They've made it feel like a home, like more than just a place to sleep between jobs, between fights, between waiting for the next inevitable problem to knock at the door. Gray is the most obvious about it, a lovesick bastard walking around like he's just waiting for Violet to breathe in his direction. Lance and Hawk are no better, circling Sofie and Violet every chance they get.

Sofie and Violet have been attached at the hip over the last week, but the energy between them has changed. Sofie sleeps through the night without waking in a panic,

without scrambling to find Violet like she's the only thing tethering her to the world. And Violet—she's letting down her walls.

It's been so much easier as she lets herself be loved in the stolen kisses and soft caresses. She doesn't flinch when one of the twins drags her into their lap, doesn't tense when a hand lands on her waist. Hawk's become more bold, catching her before she reaches the kitchen as he smothers her. And the rare moments she lets me steal her away for a bath or just to curl up against me at night is everything.

The moment we finally had time to give our women a full tour, I wish we had done it sooner. The wide-eyed looks, Sofie's squeals, and Violet's knowing smirk as she whispered 'there' and then looked over at Gray. If she thinks he's the only one who will be christening this house, she's sorely mistaken.

I watch them from the kitchen, arms crossed, coffee in hand, leaning against the counter as I take it all in. The house is loud in a way it never used to be, filled with laughter, teasing, chaos. And I fucking love it and not just for the distraction it provides. Gray's got Violet in his arms, dipping her low in some exaggerated ballroom move, a manic grin stretched across his face as she shrieks and claws at his shirt.

"Gray, you asshole—"

"Shh, princess, I got you."

She's fighting and melting at the same time, rolling her eyes but holding onto his shoulders like she'd never dream of letting go. Sofie watches from the couch, curled up in Lance's lap, fingers absently playing with his. Hawk is stretched out next to him, long legs sprawled over the cushions, but when Sofie giggles at something Lance says, Hawk—without even thinking—grabs her and hauls her onto his chest.

Like some kind of caveman.

“Mine.” The word rumbles from his chest, lazy and absolute, like it’s just a fact.

Sofie lets out a startled squeak before dissolving into laughter, squirming in his grip. “You gonna carry me around forever?”

“Yeah.” No hesitation. No humor. Just pure, unwavering certainty.

Violet, still half-trapped in Gray’s hold, chokes on her laughter. “Jesus, Hawk, at least pretend to be civilized.”

Hawk shrugs, his fingers still curled possessively around Sofie’s waist. “No.”

I smirk, shaking my head as I disappear into the office, hearing the soft footsteps following me. It’s the moments she sneaks away into my office that I enjoy the most. The door creaks open, the sound hesitant, but I don’t bother looking up. I already know it’s her. I’ve told her too many times she doesn’t have to knock or tread lightly in here but it never changes.

Soft footfalls move across the room, and then she’s there, climbing into my lap without a word. She exhales long and slow as she melts against my chest, face pressed into my shirt, fingers curling into the fabric like she needs something to hold onto.

I let my hand settle on her hip, rubbing slow, lazy circles over her shirt as her jasmine scent sinks into me. “Something wrong, Dove?” A few seconds ago, she was laughing right along with the rest of them and now... I don’t really like the way her lips are pulling into a frown.

She shakes her head, her fingers trailing idly along my collar. “No. Just... needed to



work some things out in my head.” Her breath slows, her body settling, but her fingers keep moving, tracing thoughtless shapes against my chest. Then, finally—“It’s not just Sofie,” she murmurs, voice quiet. “I mean, she’s settled now, and that’s good. But there’s everything else. The apartment, the bills, the fact that I need to figure out what the fuck I’m doing before next month rolls around.”

There it is. Violet has spent so much time making sure Sofie is okay, making sure she fits into this life, that she hasn’t stopped to think about herself. Violet might have been letting us in but I think we all kind of forgot about the life she stepped out of—the one she left behind. In no way do I want her to return to that apartment. Hell, I want her to get rid of it. There’s no reason for her to still have it.

The problem is that none of us have talked about it. It hasn’t come up in conversation as if we’ve all just been so focused on the life we’re building here that we forgot everything else. And that’s on me. I drag my hand up her spine, fingertips pressing just firm enough to keep her grounded. “What do you want to do?”

She hesitates before tilting her chin up to look at me, something tired in her eyes, something worn. “I don’t know.” Her laugh is small, humorless. “I haven’t had time to think about what I want. I’ve just been surviving, you know? And now I’m in paradise. It feels like a dream.”

Yeah. I know. A dream I never want to leave. I know exactly what it’s like to live like she had. To carry everything on your back without stopping to ask if you even want to. To prioritize someone else’s safety, someone else’s comfort, until you forget what it means to have your own. It’s why I pull her closer, why I press a kiss to the top of her head and let it linger. “You don’t have to figure it all out today, dove.” She hums at the use of the name I’ve given her over the past few days. She’s all fierce and rough around the edges but when she lets us see her, there’s that renewed scene of peace that shines through.

“I know,” she whispers. “But it’s hard to turn it off.”

A smirk tugs at my lips, my arms tightening around her, locking her against me. “Then let me help.”

I’ve never been a hesitant man. Every move I’ve made in life has been calculated, deliberate, made with confidence since my Omega passed away. I don’t second-guess, don’t leave room for doubt. But this—this is different. It isn’t business. It isn’t some deal that can be negotiated, signed, and tucked away under the watchful eye of a lawyer.

It’s them. Violet curled into my lap like she was always meant to be here. Sofie, nestled between the twins, half-asleep, glowing with that soft, quiet happiness that’s still so fucking new. It’s them, and I haven’t been fair.

They’ve been waiting. Even if they don’t say it outright, even if they hide it well, I see it—I feel it. The doubt. The fear that this is temporary. That one day, the pack will decide they’ve had their fill, that Sofie and Violet will be forced to pack their shit and leave with nothing but the memories of warmth and security they were finally allowed to taste.

I hate that I haven’t done enough to make them believe otherwise. And as fucking soon as it might seem, I’m done waiting. This week has been proof enough that they belong here. In this house. In this pack. With me. With all of us. And I’ll be damned if I let them think for another second that they’re anything less than permanent. Violet stirs against my chest, shifting just enough to meet my gaze, her brows pulling together when she catches the tension in my muscles. “What’s wrong?”

I brush my thumb along her cheek, smoothing out the little crease in her brow. “There’s a conversation I’ve been waiting to have until the time is right,” I murmur. “But the truth is, it may never be the right time. And with everything going on, I

wanted to wait, but—”

She straightens, eyes narrowing, reading me the way she always does, always searching for the angle, the catch. “Wait, what’s going on?”

“Relax, dove.” I shake my head, holding her closer. “It’s nothing bad.”

She doesn’t relax. If anything, she tenses even more, fingers curling into my shirt like she’s ready to hold herself together with sheer force of will.

So I don’t drag it out. I give her the truth. “You and Sofie aren’t temporary. I don’t know what you’ve been told before, what you’ve had to go through, but this?” My voice stays low, steady, leaving no room for argument. “This isn’t a trial run, Violet. You’re part of this pack. Sofie is part of this pack. And I’m not letting either of you go.”

Her breath shudders, lips parting, fingers tightening where they grip my shirt. She’s fighting it, holding herself back, trying not to let herself believe. So I cup the back of her neck, tilting her chin up, forcing her to meet my gaze.

“Do you understand me?”

She swallows hard, something flickering behind her eyes—something vulnerable, something raw. Then, so fucking quiet I almost don’t catch it—“Say it again.”

My grip tightens, my lips brushing against hers, voice nothing but a murmur between us. “I’m not letting you go.” I cup her face, thumb brushing along the sharp edge of her jaw, and pull her in, pressing a slow, deliberate kiss against her lips. When I pull back, I realize that keeping Violet and Sofie out of the limelight is one thing but keeping things from them is entirely different. They deserve to know just what they’re getting into with us—however it ends. “There’s something I need to tell you.”

Her brows pull together immediately, eyes narrowing with that sharp, calculating way she looks at things when she's waiting for a fight to start. "That sounds ominous."

"It is."

She stiffens, but she doesn't pull away. Doesn't even flinch. "Tell me."

So I do. I tell her everything. The rumors. The whispers that started quiet and then grew into a wildfire. The accusations of fraud, of stolen art, of entire collections being fabricated. The lawsuit. The criminal investigation. Xavier going off the grid. Orion looking more like a puppet than a mastermind. The looming suspicion that someone else is pulling the strings, someone with power, someone with a plan.

I tell her about the emails, the legal threats, the way clients are getting skittish. The way our best client warned us to tread carefully, the way Banks is scrambling to keep us one step ahead before this whole thing collapses. By the time I'm done, she's not scared. She's pissed.

Her whole body vibrates with emotion, with that slow-burning rage that builds until it explodes. "You didn't think to tell me this sooner?" She growls, her face twisted in anger.

My shoulders rise with a heavy breath. "It wasn't about keeping you in the dark, dove. It was about protecting you."

Wrong fucking answer. Her eyes flash, jaw tightening like she's seconds from swinging on me. "You think I need you to protect me?" she snaps, her grip on my shirt turning punishing. "This isn't about keeping us safe, Puma. This is about helping. You didn't tell me because you thought you could handle it yourself. Because you thought we were just here to be pampered and doted on. You always tell me to lean but you're just a hypocrite. I could've helped. I can help."

Her breath is coming too fast, her pulse hammering against my fingertips where I still have a hand on her hip. She's not just angry. She's insulted. I watch her, measure the frustration pouring off her in waves, then tip my head. She's not wrong. Taking this all on myself, even trying to make sure the others don't worry has made life way more difficult than it should be. And yet... there was still a reason for it. "That's why I've been waiting."

She hesitates, expression shifting. "Waiting for what?"

Dragging a hand through my hair, I let out a slow breath, holding her gaze. "Waiting to talk about bonds."

Her lips part slightly, eyes narrowing like she's trying to fit that piece into the rest of the puzzle. "Because of this?"

I nod. "Because I wasn't sure how you and Sofie would feel while all this chaos was going on. I didn't want you thinking we were dragging you into something bigger than you signed up for. That we were claiming you just to keep you locked in while everything around us burns."

The anger in her expression softens as if she understands where I'm coming from but I'm not ready for the sadness that lingers in those brown eyes. "I was watching Sofie fall apart." She lets out a quiet, shaky breath, like she's saying something she hasn't let herself acknowledge yet. "We thought we could do it alone. We thought we could keep everything together, that we didn't need Alphas to handle our shit. And for a while, it worked." Her eyes flick back up, something exhausted behind them. "But we were wrong."

I don't say anything. I let her keep going.

"Sofie needed a pack. She needed stability. And I needed someone to remind me that

I didn't have to shoulder everything alone." A bitter chuckle leaves her lips as she shakes her head. "So, if you think a few fucking rumors are gonna scare me off, you don't know me at all."

A slow grin tugs at the corner of my mouth. "That's my girl." She glares, but there's no fire behind it, just exasperation. The silence that follows makes me wonder if she even wants bonds, if that physical tether is in her million plans running around in her head. I already know what Sofie wants. Her instincts have been driving her, the way she slightly tilts her neck every time one of us approaches. Those little smiles when the twins or Gray start kissing up her shoulder and grazing their teeth over the skin.

She'll be more than happy to take all they have to give but Violet isn't submissive like that. She's softer but still hard to read at times. Like now. I drag my thumb across the heat of her cheek, watching the way she leans into it, maybe without even realizing. "You want a bite, dove? Or is that just for Sofie?"

Her body tenses, the hesitation so slight, so quick, that most people wouldn't have caught it. But I do. I see the way her fingers twitch against me, the way her throat works as she swallows, how her gaze flicks away just for a second. And then she softens again like I hadn't even asked the question.

"There are four Alphas vying for your attention, sweetheart," I murmur, letting my lips graze her ear, feeling the way she shudders against me. "It's only a matter of time."

Her breath slips out in something close to a sigh. "It wasn't something I always thought about," she admits. "But in the last week? The way I look at things has changed. I want that familial tie-in," she says, like she's only just realizing it as the words leave her lips. "That sense of belonging. And now that Sofie is safe, now that she's cared for and not fighting just to get through every day... I don't feel so guilty about being happy too."

I wasn't expecting her to just say it, to lay it out in the open, to strip it down to its rawest form and hand it to me without hesitation. No coyness, no avoidance, no deflection. Just truth. Just want. Just the first glimpse of what she's finally allowing herself to have. I press my lips to her forehead, lingering there for a long moment, breathing her in, letting it settle. "You're amazing, you know that?"

### Chapter thirty-nine

#### VIOLET

Speaking with Puma gave me some clarity and warmth I didn't know I needed. Being around him always does. It's like I seek out the comfort he provides in a way that I don't with the other Alphas. Gray is always around when I need that extra smile, Lance a breath of fresh air, and Hawk a quiet fortress. But with Puma... I can just be . I can say whatever is on my mind and he either understands or helps me think through it.

They all see me in different ways—even Sofie, but it's a nice feeling that I always have somewhere to land. The moment I emerge from the office, Sofie pops off the couch, runs for my hand and drags me into her nest. The door is promptly shut and locked after us as I'm pulled into a land of pillows and blankets. Two seconds later my Omega is wrapped around me, her head tucked beneath my chin. Her favorite pillow is by her head, the one we nearly died retrieving when she had another spike.

“Hey, baby, what's wrong?”

“Nothing's wrong. But you needed to talk.”

I snort, wondering yet again how I never figured out we were mates. We feel each other out like most people do with bonds. “Yeah, I guess. We've been here for a little while and I'm just wondering if you want more.”

I wait for the words to hit, for her to truly understand what I mean and the squeal that



comes from her as head shoots up, knocking my jaw tells me she gets it. “Sorry, Vi. But really? Oh my god. They want us forever? That’s what Puma said, right? Lance and Hawk said it too and Gray says if you try to leave he’s going to find you and fuck you right there. Don’t laugh at me, that’s what he said! But they’re ours, right?”

“Breathe, baby,” I laugh. Sofie’s flushed, excitement flooding her features, those hazel eyes rapidly searching my face. “Yeah, they’re ours.” I tug her back toward me, my hands settling on her waist as I press a small kiss to the bridge of her nose.

“Wait.”

I still, unsure of what she needs. Her scent hasn’t shifted and she doesn’t seem in pain so I just hold there, waiting for her to explain.

She sits up fully, glaring down at me as her hair falls over her shoulder. “What do you want, Vi?”

A laugh slips out before I can stop it, caught off guard by the sudden shift. “What?”

Sofie narrows her eyes. “Don’t ‘what’ me. I know you. I know you’re always thinking about me first. So, I’m asking. What. Do. You. Want?”

I reach up, my fingers sliding into her hair before caressing her cheek. She nuzzles into my palm, patiently waiting for my answer. “Yeah, baby. I want this. I want us to have this together.” She huffs out a little noise before curling back into my chest but now I have a question, one I’ve been avoiding for a while. Omegas are supposed to be the center of their universe and I’m still having a mild problem that Sofie isn’t. Not because I think she’s having an issue with it but because I’ve been taught that she’s supposed to. “Are you really okay with this dynamic?”

Sofie snorts, giggling into my chest. “Vi, you deserve to be the center of someone’s

universe. And if that means four universes, then so be it.” She pulls back again, letting me see those hazel eyes again. “Vi, you will always be my Beta but you’re allowed to be their Beta too.”

“God, I love you,” I murmur against her lips before kissing her, taking what’s mine. She tastes like warmth, like home, like something I don’t have to fight for anymore. Her fingers curl against my shirt, and I soak in everything—the scent of her, the softness of her skin, the feel of her smile against my mouth.

The moment is dashed by my phone vibrating in my pocket. An irritated growl rips from my throat as I tear away from Sofie and pull it out, ready to chuck it against the wall. Except for the fact that it’s an unknown number.

Sofie groans, flopping onto her back, glaring up at the ceiling. “Tell them to go away. I want my Beta to fuck me.”

“So that’s really why you dragged me in here, wasn’t it?” The phone is still ringing in my hand and I hesitate before answering it and bringing it to my ear. “Hello?”

The voice on the other end is clipped, all business. “Ms. Torres? This is Officer Hale with the Ansdale PD. We’d like to ask you a few questions regarding the Ashford case and the allegations surrounding the gallery. Would you be willing to come down to the station?”

My heart drops into my stomach as I sit up straight, all of my nerves immediately shot to hell. Puma told me everything there was to know but that doesn’t make it any easier to hear that it’s real. “The Ashford case?”

Sofie tenses beside me. The officer continues, like this is just another call, just another routine inquiry. After all, no one knows Sofie and I are currently with the Ashford pack or this would be a very different call, I’m assuming. “Yes, ma’am. We

can either come to your residence or you can come down to the station. Your choice.”

I don't even know what the fuck they think I know, but my gut is screaming at me that this is bad. That this isn't just some casual questioning, not just some formality. They're looking for something. They're looking for someone. I also don't want them showing up here because that would derail everything we've started, not to mention that the officers will think we're involved.

And I wouldn't care but I still have Sofie to think about. I take a slow breath, forcing my voice steady. “I'll come to the station.” I quickly hang up, stuffing my phone into my pocket and head for the kitchen to find my keys. Sofie is right behind me, her bare feet slapping against the wood, each and every one of our Alphas looking up at our entrance. Well, fuck, this is going to be an awkward conversation.

Puma is leaning against the counter, arms crossed over his chest. Hawk and Lance are at the table, but they aren't relaxed, muscles tight beneath their shirts, like they're a single wrong move away from launching into action. Gray is pacing, back and forth, tension rolling off him in waves. Whatever they were talking about a second ago wasn't good but I'm about to make it worse.

Hawk breaks the silence. “First off, neither one of you are going anywhere. Trouble, I know that look on your face. Whatever it is, we can figure it out. Second, tell me what the fuck just happened because we were pretty damn sure Sofie dragged you in there for a little fun and neither one of you smell like that.” There's an edge to his words as he approaches us, all darkness and roughness that makes my belly flip. “Talk to me.”

“We were going to have some fun but then an Officer Hale called and asked me to come to the station. He said he could come here but I think that would make everything worse.”

Puma's jaw ticks, the muscle feathering beneath his skin. "And why exactly do they want you at the station?"

"They didn't say," I answer, voice even, steady. "Just mentioned the Ashford case and the gallery allegations."

That's all it takes. Lance mutters a sharp fuck, running both hands through his hair like he wants to rip it out. Hawk draws me and Sofie into his chest, his purr rumbling through us like he's trying to protect us from the entire world. Gray is muttering something to Puma but from where I am, Puma is just watching. I'm waiting for him to push back, to say that we're not going, to tell me that this fight isn't mine.

I told him before that that's not how this works.

"You're not going alone. Listen to me, dove." Puma steps up to me, slowly extracting me from Hawk. "You are too precious to be rushing off into this by yourself. This goes both ways, alright? One of us will drive behind you, make sure you're okay and I'll send Banks to the station."

"So, don't say anything till he gets there?"

Puma shakes his head, "Correct. He'll help guide you through their questions but answer truthfully. We have nothing to hide." He seems to catch the shock on my face. "Dove, you're part of the family now which means those protections extend to you. You've got a lot in your corner, more than you probably know." He gives me a quick kiss before turning to the others. "I'll keep you updated. Don't do anything fucking stupid while we're gone."

Sofie is still buried against Hawk's chest, her surprised expression slowly turning to desire. Something that the twins pick up on at the same time. Hawk grins, hoisting Sofie up into his arms. "Can't make any promises."

The drive over is longer than I thought it would be and not the location I expected. It's the small house just across the street from Ash & Ivory, the interim station they sometimes populate when there's too much chaos at the main station in the heart of the city. I feel like it's on purpose this time. Still, I shrug it off and march up the steps, not daring to look back at Puma. He's definitely not happy about these turn of events, his need to protect me very obvious. It's both comforting and disconcerting all at once. An older gentleman is standing at the entrance, the Alpha throwing out his hand to me. "Banks."

"Violet," I offer.

"Nice to meet the one who's got Puma rethinking things. Now, let's get in there and figure out this bullshit, alright?" He gives me a warm smile and I decide that I already like this down-to-earth Alpha.

He guides me inside, an officer pointing toward a desk at the back. The little house is cold and uninviting—sterile walls in dull grays and washed-out blues, eerie lighting, an atmosphere designed to make people feel guilty before a single question is asked. It's the kind of place where even the innocent second-guess themselves.

I weave my way through the desks and take a seat in front of the officer that has to be Hale. He's a few sizes too large for his uniform but he's also terrifying so I make a point to keep a soft smile on my face. Banks sits beside me, the perfect picture of elegance as he crosses one leg over the other. "Boys," he muses.

The officer beside Hale grunts. "Violet, I'm not sure why you'd bring a lawyer with you. However, I want to know how you could afford him. His rate is nearly \$2,500 an hour." I try not to choke on that because what the fuck? I'm going to have Puma's ass for sending this guy here. There's no fucking way I'm going to be able to pay that. "Seems like he's trained you well. Look, let's get down to the questions so we can get you out of here. I heard your Omega was near heat."

I'm not answering that. I don't even need the lawyer to tell me that. Hale grimaces as if he's pissed I'm not just over eager to answer his questions. But what did he expect?

"Excuse Hale, he was born in a dog house. I'm Officer Kane. Thank you for coming down to speak with us. There's just a few questions and then hopefully you can help us understand about the art prints you helped sell. Sound good? Okay, so, you worked at Ash & Ivory for how long?"

"A few months. I only moved over to this side of Ansdale then." My voice doesn't waver. I'm hoping he doesn't ask about the last gallery I worked at and why I no longer work there. He doesn't need to know that Camila's ex Alpha tried to scare her into being his pack Beta. And I'm definitely not going to recount the swoon worthy moment that Camila's current Alpha stalked in all Alpha-like and pinned that bastard against the wall. Nope. I'm not saying shit.

Hale clears his throat, directing my attention back to him. "And in that time, you never once suspected you were selling fraudulent pieces?" There's something pointed in the way he says it, like he's waiting for me to flinch, waiting for me to second-guess myself.

I don't blink. "No."

"Even with the volume of pieces coming in and out, the high-profile clients, no authentication checks that struck you as odd?" He tilts his head, like he's trying to catch a flicker of doubt in my expression.

Rolling my shoulders back, I shift slightly in my seat. "We had a process. And I wasn't in charge of authentication—that was Xavier or his son. He hired me because I was pretty and I didn't ask a lot of questions but that's mostly because I don't know much about art." I have to take a minute to swallow back my flippant attitude, lest Hale and Kane think I'm annoyed.

“And where’s Xavier now?” Kane asks.

“No clue. He fired me the day after the showing.”

“But you were his assistant,” Hale presses, tapping his pen against his notepad. “You worked closely with him.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes. “No, I was his employee. Very different. I wasn’t even allowed in his office. I memorized those little cards beneath the paintings and researched them in the database so I knew enough to talk about them when someone came in. I helped put up the frames sometimes but I was getting paid minimum wage.” That reminds me. He didn’t send me my last paycheck. Fuck.

Kane glares at me, his eyes darting to Banks and then back to me. “So you’re saying you were blindly selling paintings to people without knowing where they came from?”

My jaw tightens, a flicker of irritation slipping through. “I’m saying I trusted the process.”

Hale lets out a low whistle which just further irritates me. “Did you ever see any large payments come in under Xavier’s name? Any transactions that seemed off?”

I’m not sure what they don’t understand about my position there. The most I did with money was enter in a bid or a drop off time. We did a lot of scheduling but Xavier handled the actual transactions, money wires, all of it. Other than the prices on the paintings themselves, I didn’t do anything else with numbers. “I only handled the actual paintings. Xavier did the actual transactions.”

Another look passes between them. Irritation. Frustration. They don’t like that they aren’t getting what they want. Banks sits forward, a slow grin sliding across his face.

“I’ve heard quite a lot and I think it’s time for me to talk to my client.”

Hale straightens slightly, feigning ease. “This is just a conversation.”

A slow, amused smile curves at the Alpha’s lips. “That’s cute.” I almost choke as Banks adjusts his cufflinks like he has all the time in the world. “Unless you’d like to explain why this feels like an interrogation rather than just a few questions. Because I’d be happy to shed some light on what’s going on here.”

The officers exchange a look, their frustration shifting into something closer to reluctant compliance. A few beats pass before Hale mutters something under his breath, then both push back from their chairs and walk away, leaving us in peace.

Banks turns to me, gently patting my shoulder. “You’re just as strong and stubborn as Puma boasted over the phone. I thought I’d have my work cut out for me, telling you where to speak and when to hold your tongue but there isn’t anything I would have changed. They’ll want you to step into Ash & Ivory to give them any other information that you can. It was shut down a few days ago so it’ll just be the officers and the two of us. However, you’re not under arrest and there’s no need for you to agree to any of this.”

I shrug. “I’ll do it. Anything I can do to get the suspicion off of my Alphas I’ll do.”

He offers me a soft smile. “Violet, that’s not exactly how this works. The legal and art world are very confusing places but I admire the thought behind it. Let’s get this over with, then.”

“Any pointers or whatever?”

“Don’t lie and don’t give them too much. Just answer the question they’ve asked and nothing more. If they want more information, they’ll have to ask for that.”



“I definitely thought you were going to say something about how my actions would reflect on the pack as a whole or something.” I chew on my bottom lip, waiting for him to start laying down the do’s and don’ts like I see on TV.

Banks just shakes his head. “Violet, you just told me that you’re here to help your pack. You drove here alone and walked in here without Puma at your side because you know exactly what that would construe. I don’t have to tell you what weight your words have. Right now, these officers want information because they have absolutely no idea where to look. It’s why some of those questions came off a little accusatory. You’re going to be fine in there, I’m sure of it. Anyone Puma talks highly of is special in my books.”

My cheeks heat a little as I blow out a deep breath and push to my feet, heading toward Hale and Kane to let them know I’m ready for more. They seem to be surprised I’m taking this so well, nodding to the gallery across the street. I feel like this whole process is a little uncouth but I don’t ask questions as we step into a place I couldn’t wait to get away from. There were some good memories here but mostly a lot of strenuous moments where I was just trying to survive.

There’s a strange aura in the air, the counter devoid of any happiness that Sofie brought. Hale and Kane are walking through the gallery like giants in a glass house, looking absolutely out of place. It’d be funny if not for the reason we’re here. I follow them, staring at the paintings and the space I called my second home but there’s something different. Most of these frames aren’t the ones I hung for the showing. They feel like that painting that smudged beneath my fingers. They all have this non-authentic feel and a quick glance at some of them show hurried strokes similar to the kids in the painting classes I oversaw.

Others, I can’t tell but I recognize from that back room.

Hale stops in front of one painting and points to a little mark in the right hand corner.

It looks like many of the others I've dealt with and it means nothing to me. Even at the last gallery, I just always dismissed any oddities, calling it a flair of artistry or some bullshit.

"We had a few experts comb through these and there seems to be a calling card on most of them." He shines a light over the small patch of green and I lean in, eyes widening as I catch the soft strokes of a name. "No idea who it is and no one seems to have seen it before. However, it seems like this isn't the first time these have shown up."

I swallow nervously, Kane making me realize they aren't just poking around in the dark. They've actually done some research. "And it seems that at your last employment, we confiscated a few of these as well." I want to ask them if they think I'm involved but I don't get that far. "You're not under arrest and you're not a suspect but we're hoping you know something since you've been around all of this for more than just three months."

My stomach twists as I glance at Banks. He gives me a small nod, silently telling me to share the truth. "I honestly don't know. I'm not an artist. I worked at the last gallery because of my friend and moved here because it pays the best. The only alternative was the grocery store and it's like \$5 less an hour." Even if I had noticed the pattern months ago, it wouldn't have made any sense to me.

Hale lets out a frustrated sigh, dragging his hand through his hair. "I was hoping you had more for me, Violet but it gives me something to work with. We'll stay in touch if we have more questions."

Banks cuts in. "If there are more questions, you can reach out to me."

"How the fuck does she afford you?" Kane growls before leading us back over to the parking lot across the street. "Don't answer that. I guess we'll be in touch with your

lawyer should we need anything. Thanks for speaking with us.”

There’s no handshakes or goodbyes as they disappear back into that little house, my face twisted up in confusion on how awkward that felt. I turn to Banks, trying to suppress my emotions and fail. “This is bad, right?”

“Something like that. Seems like whoever is dealing fakes is a lot more ingrained in the business than we thought. It’s going to take some time to wade through. For now, I’d go home and calm down your Alpha before he finds a way to cuss me out.” Banks playfully points to the other car in the parking lot, Puma’s fierce stare focused on my face. Even through the window, I can see him focused on me, a need to see that I’m okay.

I’ll make him stew a little more until we get home. I’ve always wondered what would happen when I break his resolve. Will he stay this soft or will there be another version of him?

### Chapter forty

#### PUMA

Violet isn't answering the goddamn phone. I've called her twice, following behind her in my car and she keeps declining it. I have no idea what she's playing at but god, I'm going to let her have it the moment we pull into the driveway. There's very few seconds as my tires screech to a stop and I hop out before dragging Violet out of her driver's seat. "Why weren't you answering, Violet?"

Her wide eyes have me hesitating as her hands fall to my chest. "Fuck, we were just coming home!"

"What did they say in there? Are you okay? Why—"

A slow, practiced smile spreads across her lips as she leans her head back against the door, Violet sucking in that bottom lip like the temptress that she is. My heart's beating erratically, every terrible idea running through my head from what happened at the station and in the gallery. Banks would have said something but still my mind went to the worst place. And now I see that Violet was testing me.

"Dove, do not fucking play with me." My voice drops a few octaves as I close the distance between us until there's negative space. She lets out a needy sigh, her brown eyes locked on mine. That's when I see the woman Gray used to talk about—the woman from that weekend that wanted it all, every last bit of attention that he gave her.

I shouldn't. I should drag her inside and make her share what happened but I'm too caught up in this moment, her jasmine scent thickening the longer we stand here. God, I haven't felt this irresponsible since before... My breath catches realizing how precious Violet truly is. She's more than just my Beta, my mate, and my entire heart. God, she's the one person who has broken through every last wall until I'm ready to give her all of me.

I haven't even done that with Gray.

"I love you. I should have said it before today, before now but god, you're mine, Dove." I don't give her a chance to answer as I crash my lips to hers, sliding my hands around the back of her thighs and pulling them up to hug my waist. She lets out a little squeal as she wraps her arms around my neck, fingers playing with the hair at the base there.

My hips move of their own accord, rocking against her core, my cock thickening in my dress pants. If we keep going, one of the others is absolutely going to catch us. I find that I don't care. If Violet doesn't stop me, I'm going to take. Her little pants of desire become breathier the harder I rock against her until I need more. I need to be inside her. I need to feel her squeezing my cock, pinned between me and the car as I take what's mine.

I drop her to her feet and flip her around, Violet huffing as I drag her hair away from her neck to kiss down the curve of sensitive skin. "Alpha, fuck, they're going to see."

"Let them, Dove," I growl because fuck if the others see. She's theirs just as much as she's mine but in this moment, I'm going to show her who she belongs to. I'm going to show her what she does to me and how crazy she makes me when she pulls shit like not picking up my phone calls. So, I give up thinking and let my instincts take over.

Reaching around the front of her, I undo her pants and slip my hand into her panties, Violet rocking against my hand, trying to find friction. Her head falls back against my shoulder as I continue kissing her neck, switching between little nips and sucks until she's crying out for more. "Alpha, if you don't give me what I need..."

"You're not in control of this moment, Dove." Then I slip two fingers inside of her, her arousal making the slide easy. God, she's so sweet and I wonder if she's been thinking of this since she sped out of the station's lot. She bucks against my hand, fingers splayed out against the window, a frustrated growl falling from her lips when I remove my hand. She doesn't have time to get mad though as I shove her pants down her thighs, letting them rest a few inches below her ass.

Her panties next, her gorgeous ass staring back at me. I hold her there for several seconds, letting the cool air touch her skin. "Puma, I—"

"Tell me no and that will be the end of it." If she's not comfortable, I'm not going to push her.

"I was about to tell you to hurry up and fuck me already or I was going to find a different Alpha to do it. Maybe I'll grab Sofie and one of our toys—"

"Yeah, Dove, I don't need anyone to fuck you. I'mma do just fine." I unhook my belt with one hand, undoing the button and zipper with one fluid moment. It's seconds later that I have my cock out, slipping between her barely parted thighs. It's going to be a tight fit in this position but god, I can't wait to have her strangling my cock.

The recordings on the camera pointed at the driveway is going in my private collection if Violet okays it. For now, though, I'm going to enjoy the moment of sliding into her tight heat. Violet throws her head back, whimpering as I begin to push inside of her, my beautiful Beta unable to spread her thighs, her jeans restricting her movements. It's a delicious torture as her entire body shudders, taking all of me like

the amazing woman she is. When I'm fully inside of her, I gently wrap a hand around the front of her neck, massaging it for several seconds before she lets out the breath I was waiting for.

I dip my lips to her ear. "Don't do that again, Dove. Don't leave me on read. Don't decline my calls. You have too many people waiting for you, needing you, wanting you."

"You're not making a good argument, Alpha. This is making me want to rebel."

"Temptress," I purr before nibbling her ear, starting up a rhythm as she's plastered against the car. My gaze darts to Gray standing at the front door, his brow raised, his arms folded across his chest. The front door is closed and I'm sure that's by design, Gray offering to come see what was taking so long. A grin splits across his face as he reaches down to grab himself through his pants, the desire to show off for him growing.

"Seems one of your Alphas already found us, Dove, and I think he wants a show."

Violet twists her face to the door, letting a garbled moan as I pick up my pace. If I was truly a glutton for punishment, I'd knot her right here but I've got a better idea. Her whines are becoming obscene, her pleas for more, harder, and faster telling me that there's no shame in this moment.

I continue to caress her neck as I fuck into her, owning her, claiming her. I imagine where I'll put my bite, where it'll sit in the dip of her shoulder so that the entire world will know she's mine. But not today. Today, I'm just going to remind her of where she belongs.

Right here with us.

With me.

“Alpha, I’m going to come. Shit, you’re not going to—”

“You’re not in control, Violet. Tell me not to or let it happen.”

She doesn’t fight, doesn’t push back, doesn’t tell me to stop. Instead, she pushes back against me, sliding down the side of the car so that she’s bent in half, giving me better access. “Don’t fucking knot me out here or that will be the last time you fuck me.”

“I thought about it.”

She’s about to argue but I slip a hand into her hair, tugging back hard as I settle my other hand on her waist and then fuck into her like I’ve been meaning to. She’s going to have bruises and I can’t wait to watch them form, showing off my claim. Her body starts to tremble as her orgasm builds, her pussy starting to throb around me. I won’t last much longer but I’m going to make a mess of my woman and then I’m going to watch her sit with her Alphas without being able to wash up.

Another strangled moan comes from her as she comes, sucking my cock deeper inside of her until I’m filling her up. I’m still fucking into her, enjoying the squelch of our combined release and the way it drips down the inside of her thighs, glistening against her smooth skin. Only when she pushes back against me for relief do I pull out and stuff myself back into my pants.

I help her back into her pants, flipping around to button them again before pulling her into a filthy kiss. “Time to go inside, Dove.”

“Yeah, let me just grab a shower.”

“Absolutely not. We’re going to let the others know what happened at the station. I



think it'd be fun to watch you sit there, my cum leaking out of you as you try to keep a straight face. They'll all be able to smell it, catch your desire, your need. I want them to know who just claimed you."

Her face goes scarlet before she dashes up the steps, straight into Gray's arms, the Alpha running his nose along her cheek. "For reference, I quite like his smell all over you."

"It's messy ," she whines.

"Then maybe next time you'll pick up your phone," I joke. This wasn't supposed to be that much fun but I'm enjoying her embarrassment and the way she smells thoroughly claimed.

### Chapter forty-one

#### VIOLET

I step into the house, my cheeks flushed, acutely aware of the mess in my panties and between my thighs. I always knew that Omegas come a lot, a mixture of their release and slick but damn Puma's release is not staying where he put it. And it's unfortunately making it very hard to focus. I glare back at him, the man smiling like he just won a trophy and I guess he did by the way the other Alphas are shooting him matching smiles.

Sofie bounds up to me, grinning. "Oh, you smell like dessert. Come sit with me and tell me what happened."

"About what happened?" I squeak and then realize she meant at the station, not just what happened on the driveway. Still, I clarify. "Did you see—"

"Did I see Puma bend you over and fuck you like he owns you? I might have peeked through the window. It was so fucking hot. I almost grabbed the twins but I didn't want to miss the show. Don't be embarrassed. Watching that man handle you—"

I growl at her to stop, a playful sound but still serious. She doesn't need to recount what just happened. So, I refocus on the task at hand. "Hale and Kane were the ones to talk to me. I don't know if their names ring a bell." Our Alphas gather around us. "They asked me a lot of questions, not that I gave them answers they wanted to hear. I don't know anything about how Xavier runs the gallery. But we visited Ash & Ivory and the paintings have changed from the showing. They're definitely forgeries."

Hawk frowns, folding his arms across his chest. "How do they know?"

"They got an expert and pointed out whatever the calling card was. It's usually covered by the frames but the ones that Xavier put up showed them. I'm guessing he doesn't really know all the details. But I've seen the signature before at the gallery I worked at before." I think about sketching something down but nobody would understand what I wrote. Then I remember there are a few pictures I took a few weeks ago. I slip my phone out, grimacing when that reminds me of how wet my panties are.

I glare at Puma again and he just grins wider. Bastard, I mutter before scrolling through my phone until I find one of the paintings and that odd signature over green paint. Once the frames are attached, it's hidden and no one's the wiser. He really did clean up his tracks. I turn my phone around, even gathering a little closer as I zoom into the corner. "See? It almost looks like a symbol or whatever but you can definitely see some cursiveness in there."

"Cursiveness?" Gray jokes and I punch him in his arm. "Fuck, princess."

Hawk leans in a little closer, his eyes darkening several shades before he exhales a sharp breath. "He better not be doing that shit."

My gaze snaps to him. "You know him?"

Hawk drags a hand down his face, shaking his head. "Kind of. I recognize the signature. It's definitely a forgery. And honestly? I'm surprised whoever the officers were was smart enough to catch it. Fuck I'm surprised we didn't catch it."

"The frames usually cover it. It's always at the farthest corner but I don't think it's something the artist talks about so Xavier wouldn't know to cover it up. I've only ever seen that green patch in passing. It would have never occurred to me if the paint

hadn't started smudging. But wait, Hawk, you know him?" I glance at the Alpha, waiting for the reveal of the man who could be targeting my Alphas.

Hawk's gaze locks onto mine, something unreadable flickering behind his eyes. "No one knows. That's the problem. He's got no real name, no face, nothing. Just that signature. He's been floating around the industry for years, fucking with private collections, slipping forgeries into high-end sales. In some ways, it actually increases the value of some pieces because people get weirdly obsessed with him. But in others, we're all trying to get this guy out of the industry because he's cheapening the value of real paintings."

A slow, sinking feeling claws its way into my gut. I knew something was off about those paintings. The ones that felt wrong. The ones I didn't want to sell. The ones that sat too long in storage, moving in and out of collections with too much ease. I ignored it because it wasn't my job to investigate, but now? Now it turns out they're tied to some ghost in the art world. Some mystery forger who's been getting away with this shit for years.

Lance sits forward, rubbing a hand over his jaw, his expression grim. "You're saying whoever this is, they've been targeting us now?"

Hawk nods, his fingers pressing against his temple like this is giving him a headache. "Looks like it."

Puma lets out a slow breath, dragging a hand over his face. "Perfect."

And now this is outside of my wheelhouse. "Lovely. Wonderful. I'm going to take a shower and no, none of you are allowed in there with me." Sofie sticks out her bottom lip, trying to catch me with that adorable pout. I lean down to suck it into my mouth, my Omega whining for me as I pull back. "Not you either, baby. You were just there letting me get fucked. Didn't even try to rescue me."

She frowns. “Vi, you didn’t look like you wanted to be rescued.”

“Oh, I didn’t. Not the point.” I throw her another kiss before scurrying into Puma’s bedroom to immediately shed my clothes, his cum still slipping down my thighs. I’d kill him if I didn’t like that possessive edge to him so much.

### Chapter forty-two

#### VIOLET

Gray huffs against my neck, nuzzling into the spot just below my ear a few hours later. “Princess, you’re gonna give yourself a headache,” he mutters, wrapping an arm around my waist, holding me against his chest.

I glare at the stack of papers in my lap, the legal jargon swirling into nonsense the longer I stare at it. “I just want to be useful,” I grumble, flipping to another page.

Gray tugs the folder out of my hands, tossing it onto the coffee table. “You are useful. You keep this place running with sheer willpower alone.”

I roll my eyes, but I can’t fight the warmth curling in my chest at the words. I glance over at Sofie, who’s curled up in Hawk’s lap, minding her own business like she wasn’t just clinging to me the second I walked through the door. She’s got her hands wrapped around a mug of cocoa, steam curling up toward her face, and she hums happily as Hawk rubs slow circles on her back.

“See? Sofie’s happy with some hot cocoa and marshmallows.” Gray tightens his grip on me, nosing at my jaw. “Why can’t you be happy with that too?”

I scoff, trying to squirm out of his grip, but Gray’s stronger than he looks when he wants to be. “Because someone has to figure out what the hell is going on,” I argue, shifting in his lap, only for him to grip my hips and grind me back down against him. My breath hitches.

His lips graze my ear, voice dropping into something dark and smug. “You wanna be useful, princess?” His fingers flex against my waist, digging in just enough to send heat down my spine. “I can think of a few ways.”

I shove at his chest, cheeks burning as Lance chuckles from across the room. “Gray, Jesus, I think one public show a day is enough, yeah?”

Gray leans back, hands raised in mock surrender, but there’s that fucking smirk on his lips, the one that tells me he’s going to make me pay for denying him later. “Alright, alright, back to business,” he drawls.

Hawk clears his throat, shifting Sofie just enough to grab a few of the papers from the pile. “None of this looks like anything we didn’t already know,” he says, scanning over one of the documents. “No real leads, just speculation and a lot of expensive-ass problems.”

Lance groans, running a hand through his hair. “Great. So we’re still fucked.”

Puma strolls into the room, rolling up the sleeves of his shirt as he surveys the chaos. “Not necessarily,” he muses, plucking a sheet from the pile in Hawk’s hands. “We just have to keep playing it smart. Let Banks work his legal magic. No one do anything stupid.”

I snort. “Yeah, good luck with that.”

Gray pinches my thigh, and I yelp, slapping his hand away. “Excuse me?” he teases. “You saying we’re not the picture of restraint?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying, Mr. Alpha who watched me get fucked by another Alpha out on the fucking driveway.” My cheeks warm at the recent memory before I shake it off.

Puma leans against the counter, arms crossed, watching me like he knows exactly how this is gonna go. “You’re not gonna solve this shit in a day. We’ve been seeing this artist pop up for a while, but he’s never sold anything on this side of Ansdale. This is the first time it’s hit this close to home.”

I exhale sharply, wanting to be more helpful than I have been. For some reason, I feel like I have to be. “I like puzzles,” I mutter, running a hand through my hair. “But this one? It’s pissing me off. It’s too hard to decipher, and the worst part is—” My jaw tightens. “It might be my fault.” It clicks why the flip switched the moment I stepped inside. It feels like if I don’t do all I can, then it won’t be enough.

It’s the same way I handled Sofie. It was my fault her parents kicked her out. It was my fault that my parents all but disowned me. And it was my fault we couldn’t survive on our own. It would have never worked—and that’s my fault. Gray tightens his arms around me, his lips brushing my ear. “Breathe princess. Deep breaths for me. There you go. This shit is not your fault, do you hear me? You wouldn’t have known. None of us did. The guy is a damn good forger.”

I let out a bitter laugh, arms crossed tight over my chest. “Yeah? Well, someone should’ve known. Someone should’ve caught it sooner.” If I had been more attentive then I could—

“Vi.” Puma’s voice is softer now, but no less firm. He pushes off the counter and steps into my space, leaning down to grip my chin between his fingers. “It’s not on you.”

I shake him off and turn back to the papers, my head a mess of frustration. My eyes flicker over the little signature, that weird little mark that keeps staring back at me like a challenge. “I can’t just let it go,” I murmur, mostly to myself.

Sofie’s voice pipes up from the couch, where she’s curled up in Hawk’s lap, nursing



a cup of cocoa. “She won’t,” she says simply, nudging Hawk’s arm like he should already know this. “Whenever Violet is determined about something, she won’t give it up.”

Hawk smirks, pressing a kiss to the top of Sofie’s head. “Sounds familiar,” he muses, eyes flicking to Lance.

Lance grins, shaking his head. “Yeah, but at least we know when to take a damn break.”

I glare at them. “I do take breaks.”

Sofie snorts. “When?”

Gray chuckles as Puma releases me to sit beside us. “You can’t fix everything overnight, princess,” he murmurs, pressing a kiss to my shoulder. “We’ll figure it out. But you’re not gonna do it by driving yourself insane. It’s also not going to happen tonight.”

I huff, but I don’t fight him. “Let it breathe, dove.”

“From the research we pulled earlier, it looks like all, or at least most, of the fakes came from Ash & Ivory.” Hawk offers. “There were a few at the gallery Violet used to work at but not many.”

A slow coil of unease winds through my gut. “Then Xavier or his son has to know something.”

Gray’s lets out a low whistle. “He’s always been ambitious, but this? This is a different level of recklessness. Reckless ruins people in this business.”

The room stills, thick with tension, but before anyone can respond, Sofie suddenly stretches, arms reaching high above her head as she lets out a dramatic, exaggerated yawn. “Okay, that’s enough for tonight,” she announces, her tone light but her eyes sharp with finality.

A low chuckle rumbles through the room, a mix of amusement and exasperation, but the moment one of them even thinks about arguing, she cuts through it with a soft growl, lips twitching when they all react exactly as expected.

Gray groans, tipping his head back. “Sunshine.”

Sofie lifts her chin, completely unbothered. “And none of you are allowed in the nest tonight.”

Puma chuckles, already knowing better than to push back. “Can’t argue with an Omega in charge.”

Hawk smirks but doesn’t protest, and Lance leans back further, arms crossed, looking entirely unsurprised by the turn of events. Before I can react, Sofie slips from Hawk’s lap, grabs my hand, and tugs me toward the hallway. The door shuts behind us with a quiet but final click, locking us into the warmth of the bedroom, shutting out the rest of the world.

She doesn’t let go of me, fingers curled tight around my wrist as she pulls me closer. The shift is subtle, but I feel it instantly. I study her, searching for something in her expression. “Are you angry, baby?” My voice is quieter now, the sharp edges of the night dulling under the warmth of her presence. “What’s wrong?”

Sofie tilts her head, grinning up at me, all mischief and sweetness, her body pressing flush against mine as she murmurs, “Nothing’s wrong.” A pause, just long enough for me to feel the shift in the air. “I just wanted you tonight, that’s all.”

I cup her cheek, brushing my thumb over her bottom lip, watching the way she reacts to the simple touch. “You could’ve just said that.”

She giggles, leaning into me. “Where’s the fun in that?”

The corner of my lip twitches, amusement cutting through the weight of the night. God, I love her. Sofie pulls me into her nest, settling the pillows around us, waiting for me to lay down before curling into my chest. Her breathing slows until it stills before she speaks again.

“Vi, I know you’re going to do something stupid. You’re going to try and solve this even if it’s not entirely your burden to bear.” I open my mouth to speak but she shakes her head. “No, don’t lie to me, Vi. Just promise me you’ll come back. Whatever you’ve got planned in that head, I know you’re going to do it. You may not even know it yet. Our Alphas won’t like it but there’s no stopping you when you get all determined like this. Just promise me one goddamn thing.” She angles her head up to me, tears glazing her eyes. “Come back to me.”

I hate how well she sees me. And now I know why she really wanted just the two of us, because she knows that I’m going to try something that will inevitably piss off the men we left in the living room. “I promise,” I whisper before pressing my lips to hers. I just hope I can keep it.

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:51 pm*

### Chapter forty-three

#### VIOLET

The warmth lingers even as consciousness creeps in, a slow and steady thing wrapped in the scent of my pack, the steady rise and fall of Sofie's breath against my chest, the solid weight of Gray at my back. His arm is draped over my waist, fingers twitching slightly like he's still chasing sleep. Sofie's hands rest loosely against my shirt, her body curled into mine, soft and pliant, lost in the haze of slumber.

I have no idea how he snuck in here but I'm not complaining. Apparently, Sofie didn't mind either but I was too tired to even notice when it happened. It's quiet. Safe. A moment that shouldn't be disturbed.

Then a loud, earth-shattering bang shatters the silence.

The front door rattles under the impact and my entire body locks up, my heart hammering hard enough to shake the edges of sleep from my mind. Sofie makes a soft, confused noise, nuzzling deeper against me, but the next bang has my muscles coiled tight.

A voice follows. "Open up! This is the police!"

Fuck.

Gray groans against my shoulder, muttering something incoherent, but I'm already moving, slipping free from the nest, the loss of warmth barely registering. Sofie stirs

immediately, her sleep-heavy limbs clinging for a second before her instincts catch up, her fingers wrapping around my wrist as she scrambles after me.

The hallway is dim, shadows stretching long against the floor as I rush toward the main area, my pulse hammering in time with each step. Hawk is already there, meeting us halfway. He plants himself in front of me, a wall between me and whatever the fuck is about to come through that door.

“Stay put,” he murmurs, his voice calm but edged with uncertainty.

Another bang. More voices. The door handle rattles and Hawk mutters a curse before striding toward the entrance, his movements tight with barely contained irritation. The door swings open and three Alphas in full uniform push inside without waiting.

Big, mean-looking motherfuckers who fill the space with too much presence, like they were handpicked to make a statement. The station didn’t send some low-rank Beta for a polite conversation—they sent their best enforcers. A deep voice rumbles from behind me.

“What the fuck is so goddamn important at...”

Puma steps out from his room, rubbing a hand over his face, his movements slow and unbothered despite the sudden intrusion. Sweatpants hang low on his hips, his bare chest broad and marked with the tattoos I’ve fallen in love with, his entire presence dripping with the kind of authority that makes even the officers pause.

His expression is unreadable, but there’s something in the sharp lines of his jaw, the way he rolls his shoulders back, that makes it clear he isn’t fucking amused. One of the officers steps forward, the one in charge, his uniform stretching over too-large muscles like he’s trying to intimidate his way into an advantage. “Puma Ashford?”

Puma exhales slowly. “Yeah. That’s me.”

The officer crosses his arms. “We have some questions for you.”

Puma tilts his head slightly, unimpressed. “At three in the fucking morning?”

“We received new information about your involvement in the forgery case. Puma Ashford, Lance Ashford, and Hawk Ashford—you’re under arrest for the purchasing and distribution of fraudulent artwork.”

Sofie’s fingers dig into my arm, but I barely register it, my mind still catching up to the words that just left the officer’s mouth. The words echo, bouncing around inside my skull, rattling loose something panicked in my chest. No. That’s not possible. Fraud? Distribution? Arrest?

This isn’t how it works. Cases like this take months, sometimes years, to investigate properly. To build enough of a case for charges, let alone a fucking arrest. There’s no way they have enough evidence already. None of the information I gave them yesterday would have pointed them in the Ashford Alphas’ direction.

The officers don’t give us time to argue. “We can do this the easy way,” one of them states flatly, his tone impassive, his expression hard. “Or we can cuff you and drag you out.”

Sofie stiffens at my side, her scent shifting from warm and honey-soft to something sharp, uneasy. A quiet, nervous sound escapes her, barely more than a breath, but it still spikes something furious in my blood.

Puma just sighs, rubbing a hand over his jaw before reaching for his coat like this is nothing more than an inconvenience. “No need for dramatics, gentlemen.” His voice is calm. Too calm. The kind of calm that makes my stomach knot up, that tells me

he's already thinking five steps ahead. "Let's go." Lance and Hawk exchange a glance before moving in tandem, grabbing their jackets without a word.

I feel like I'm drowning. "Wait—" The word barely makes it past my lips. My chest is tight, lungs refusing to work right. "You—you can't just arrest them for some bullshit charges. This takes time. There's no way—"

One of the officers turns his gaze on me. "Ma'am, we have probable cause."

Probable cause. Probable fucking cause. My stomach knots, twisting into something painful. "That doesn't mean you get to skip protocol." I have no idea what I'm talking about but I'm hoping something works.

The officer sighs like I'm nothing more than an inconvenience. "Tell it to your lawyer."

Panic claws up my throat, frantic, desperate. This is wrong. This is fucking wrong.

I turn to Puma, hoping for him to say something, to do something. He meets my gaze, everything about him composed even at three in the fucking morning. That's what pisses me off the most—the way he looks like he's already played this scenario out, already calculated every move, already accepted that this is happening. I am barely processing it and he's already playing out something he's planned for.

He steps closer, gently prying my fingers from where they've locked around Sofie's wrist in a death grip. "Dove," he murmurs, voice a steady anchor in the chaos. "Gray will take care of you both. Call Banks."

Gray stiffens beside me, every trace of humor drained from his face, his entire body going rigid with something cold. "I'll handle it," he says.

Lance and Hawk nod, but their eyes stay on me, watching, waiting—like they know I’m about to do something reckless. Like they think I’ll fight for them. Like they think I’ll make this worse. Sofie was right about wanting to do something, needing to do something. But there’s nothing I can do in the moment as Puma whispers to us that they’ll be back soon. And then just like that, they’re out the door, the police cars heading back down the driveway until I can no longer hear the engine or see the flashing lights against the large windows of the house.

Sofie is trembling against me but I can tell she’s in shock. Gray stalks into the kitchen, his voice sharp as he shouts into his phone, most likely speaking with Banks. I want to fall apart, drop to my knees, yell into the void but that won’t help anyone. No, my priority is my Omega and make sure that she’s settled.

“Come on, baby,” I urge her back toward her nest. She doesn’t go right away. Only until I gather her up in my arms does she seem to shake out of the stupor she was in. Sofie curls into my chest, letting me place her back in the multitude of pillows, Gray joining us soon after. I tell her to rest, that maybe our Alphas will be back in the morning.

However, even tucked between me and Gray, wrapped in the warmth of the nest, she stays tense. Every so often, a little whimper slips from her lips, her body twitching like she’s caught in some restless dream. Every instinct in me screams to fix it, to make it better, but there’s nothing I can do to untangle the worry curling around her like a vice.

Exhaustion finally drags her under. The moment her breathing evens out, I watch her for a long while, letting my own breath match hers, grounding myself in the rise and fall of her chest. Safe. Warm. Protected. But none of those things apply to Puma, Hawk, or Lance. A slow, burning frustration churns beneath my skin, making it impossible to stay still. Instead of twisting and turning and waking up Sofie, I slip out of bed, hoping I can find something to distract me.



Gray moves the second my feet touch the floor, following me out into the hallway. “Princess,” he murmurs, voice thick with sleep. “Where are you going?”

My body pushes forward on instinct, straight to the office, too restless, too fucking pissed to stay in bed and pretend everything is fine. Gray follows, his footsteps trailing mine, a sigh slipping from his lips as he drags a hand through his hair. “You can’t solve this on your own,” he mutters, voice quieter now. “We’ve got a great family lawyer—”

I whirl on him, tension snapping like a live wire. “I can’t just fucking sit here!” I hate this helpless feeling growing inside of me. For a while, I let myself fall. I told myself that I didn’t have to be in control. I handed the reins over to them, loving the freedom that came with not having to think about every goddamn thing. And now the very men who I gave that control to are gone and I’m spiraling because I don’t know what happens next. Gray could tell me a thousand fucking times that they’ll be okay and for some reason I can’t bring myself to believe it.

Gray steps up to me, squeezing my shoulders as he drags me against his chest. “Princess, we will figure this out. Banks is pure magic when it comes to matters like this. They’ll be home in the morning but you’ll be no good running yourself into the ground. I should know.”

A shattered breath falls from my lips as I sag against him. “I need everything to be okay.”

He hums a response, slowly wrapping an arm around my back, the warmth of his skin against mine causing me to sigh against his chest. The other slides along my shoulder, his fingers slipping into my hair as he holds me. “You’ve needed to be absolutely everything to Sofie for so long that you’re having trouble separating that and these moments right here. You crave control when everything is chaos but let me tell you that this is one thing you can’t control.”

Tears glaze my eyes as I cling to him.

“However, we have people who can control it and I need you to trust that they’re damn good at their job.”

I let out a watery laugh, thinking back to when I was at the station. “You mean the guy who charges \$2,500 an hour?”

“We get a discount. But yes. Banks knows what he’s doing.” He continues running his fingers through my hair before leading me to the couch. He pulls me into his lap, my back pressed against his chest, his fingers now playing across my belly beneath my shirt. It’s a mixture of intimate and perfect as I sag against him. “I’m giving you half an hour to work through the thoughts in your head and then we’re going back to Sofie. No excuses.”

Fifteen minutes later, Gray’s answered every last question I had, adding onto what Puma told me. Gray keeps nuzzling against my cheek and my shoulder and I realize that he’s using his scent to calm me. It’s a strange movement but I’m not as squirrely anymore and there’s no dying need to solve everything tonight. Still, I’ve got fifteen minutes and I’m going to use them.

“You said someone had it out for Puma?”

“Not exactly. More like a vendetta against anyone that kind of gets in his way so the Ashford pack has been on his list, I suppose. The name he goes by is Orion but we can’t seem to find a connection to what’s happening now and his usual... deviance.”

I snort at the word, placing my hands over his before tangling our fingers together. “I know an Orion.”

“Yeah?” His voice is soft against my ear, one of his hands trying to dip lower but I

keep it firmly placed on my belly.

I let my mind turn over the memory, picking apart the details. “One of the guys that used to help hang up pieces at Ash & Ivory . Always real nice. Would stick around longer than most. Talked to Xavier a lot.”

Gray straightens slightly, the shift in his posture small but noticeable. “I don’t think he’d be on a crew.”

“Why not?” The question leaves me before I can think better of it. “If he wanted to make sure his shit was getting in the right place, why wouldn’t he be?”

Gray shakes his head, his skepticism thick in the air between us. “Because Orion isn’t a goddamn delivery boy. He’s got people to do that shit for him.”

I shrug, crossing my arms. “Maybe he wanted to make sure everything was handled personally. Wouldn’t be the first time a guy with money wanted to play in the dirt for a little while.”

“Orion’s got a reputation for being a goddamn bastard, Violet. Ruthless. I don’t think he’d be chatting up Xavier for fun.”

A smirk tugs at the corner of my mouth, my head twisting just enough to catch his expression. “Why does it sound like you’ve never actually seen him?”

Gray scoffs. “Because it’s almost like he’s a myth. He supposedly exists, but very few people have actually met him. He operates in the shadows, makes deals through whispers. If someone’s been showing up at Ash & Ivory pretending to be Orion or sharing the same name, I highly doubt it’s actually him.”

“Well,” I hum, tapping my fingers idly against the desk. “He’s pretty.”

Gray untangles his fingers from mine and twists my entire body around until I'm straddling his thighs. I also forget that he's so much stronger than I am, his lean body wholly deceptive. I grin at the glinting metal staring back at me, metal that definitely lured me into his bed the first time around. He digs his fingers into my hips, fingers flexing, his mouth hovering just over mine. The heat rolling off of him is all challenge, all smug, sharp-edged amusement. "I'm pretty," he growls out.

A short laugh pushes past my lips and I tap his chest playfully. "Is that a line? Because that's not going to get you fucked."

Gray groans, tilting his head back like I've just told him the worst news in the world. "I try so hard." He recovers just as quick, pressing a soft kiss to my lips before slipping me off his lap. "Times up. Let's get back to bed before Sofie wakes up alone. She'll have our asses for it."

She absolutely would and I don't want to be on the other side of that anger. For now, I'll try to sleep, to rest, to trust in Gray's words that Banks has it handled and that my Alphas will be fine. I don't need to be in control, I tell myself. Now, I just need to believe it.

### Chapter forty-four

#### PUMA

The interrogation room stinks of stale coffee, sweat, and the kind of cheap cologne that clings to polyester uniforms and false authority. It's the same little house they brought Violet to, the only good thing being that it's less than twenty minutes from the estate rather than the one in the heart of the city. Still, it's goddamn three in the morning and I'm about to kick someone's ass for dragging me out of bed.

Mostly because of the fear in Violet and Sofie's eyes. Hell, even Gray was slightly panicked even though he won't admit it. Some part of me wishes we were bonded to those beautiful women so that I could know how they were feeling but it's a two way street. And the twins aren't handling this very well. They look like they're going to murder someone and while I have enough restraint, I'm not sure they do.

I lean back in the uncomfortable metal chair, arms crossed over my chest, keeping my gaze fixed on the officer as he paces back and forth. The guy's pushing fifty, gray hair, a gut that shows he's spent more time sitting behind a desk than doing actual fieldwork. Still, the arrogance in his movements screams the same message I've seen a hundred times before: he thinks he can break me down, get me to talk. It won't fucking work.

Because there's nothing to fucking talk about.

Lance and Hawk are sitting to my right, and even though none of us say a word, the tension radiating off them is palpable. Lance is barely keeping his cool. His fists are

clenched against the metal table and his shoulders are hunched like he's a second away from flipping the damn thing over. Hawk, on the other hand, is still. His sharp eyes keep darting between the officer and the door. Calculating. Waiting. Not tense, not angry, just ready in case things escalate. I have a feeling he's going to be the one to smother Sofie the minute we get home.

Nothing about this screams professional, especially the fact that no one else is in the station and we're all sitting here uncuffed in the same goddamn room across from the main officer who claimed we were under arrest.

The officer slams his hands on the table, leaning in close. The sour smell of stale coffee on his breath hits me. "I always knew your wealth was built on stolen goods," he sneers. "People like you don't get to the top without getting their hands dirty."

Ah, so he's been fed information and he's already made his conclusion. Most of the officers I've worked with are pretty impartial but for someone to want to drag us out at three in the morning, it must have been important.

The officer's face twists, like he's annoyed he hasn't gotten a reaction. "Nothing to say, huh?" His smirk is smug, but there's no real fire behind it. "You think sitting there looking untouchable makes you innocent?"

I tilt my head, letting the silence stretch a little longer before finally responding. "I think sitting here makes me patient," I say evenly. "Which is more than I can say for you."

His jaw tightens, and for a moment, I wonder if he's about to take a swing. But then he pulls back with a sharp exhale, muttering under his breath as he straightens up. "You're not getting out of this. Not this time. You and your little art empire are about to come crashing down. We're gonna keep you locked up until we sort this mess out, and trust me, it's not looking good for you."

He starts rapid-firing questions at us regarding how we found the fake prints, who we got them from, who we're working with, how many we have in our collection. Each question we don't answer, he becomes a little more frustrated but even if I didn't feel like fucking with the guy, I can't give him what he wants. We haven't dealt in anything fake.

Fifteen minutes of this nonsense and Banks steps into the room, glaring at the officer who's been berating us. He lets out a heavy sigh, a storm brewing in his dark eyes, and I already know whoever dragged us in here is about to regret it. He immediately holds a hand up to the officer to keep him from continuing. "Yeah, no, you don't get to question my clients anymore." He gestures toward the door. "Bye."

The officer scowls. "You don't run things here, lawyer."

Banks turns his head slowly, eyes narrowing. "Neither do you when you pull bullshit stunts like this. You mentioned they were under arrest, they get legal counsel." He leans in slightly, lowering his voice. "I left my very pregnant Omega at home for this nonsense. So unless you want me filing so many complaints your superiors won't have space to shove them, I suggest you get the fuck out of my face."

The officer clenches his jaw, muttering something under his breath, but he stomps out, slamming the door behind him. Lance lets out a low whistle. "Damn. That was kinda hot."

Banks sighs, finally turning to us as he drops into the chair across the table. "Already mated. But you owe me for this," he grumbles, running a hand down his face. "I left my Omega and my Beta alone at home to deal with this bullshit."

I smirk, stretching my legs out. "She's gonna kick your ass."

He scoffs, sitting back. "That's what my Beta is for. Hopefully, he'll keep her happy

until I get home.”

Lance chuckles. “You hope.”

Banks flips him off before clasping his hands together and leaning forward, all business now. “Alright, let’s get to it. The officers absolutely overstepped their power dragging you out at this hour. It’s intimidation, a tactic to get you flustered, see if you slip. But other than a few accusations, they have no solid evidence.”

Hawk tilts his head. “You’re sure?”

Lance crosses his arms, the tension in his posture matching Hawk’s. “Where did the tips even come from? Who called it in?”

Banks lets out a dry chuckle, one that lacks any humor. “Xavier,” he says, flipping through his notes. “Or at least, the phone number registered to him.”

Hawk stills, his hands flexing at his sides. “That little weasel—”

Banks holds up a hand, cutting him off. “He’s caught up in something way over his head,” he says, voice even. “That much is clear. But that doesn’t mean we’re in the clear. In fact, I’d say this is going to get worse before it gets better.”

Lance rubs a hand over his face. “And you’re sure there’s no real evidence yet?”

Banks nods. “Yet. But Xavier has done an excellent job fabricating it. He’s spun this whole thing so that the likely deduction is that the Ashford pack is knee-deep in this mess. He’s lined things up just enough that when they do find something, they’ll be looking at you three first.”

Hawk lets out another low growl, pacing again. “Fucking fantastic.”



Banks drags a hand through his hair, shoulders rising with a sigh. “And it gets worse.”

Lance lets out a humorless laugh. “Of course it does.”

Banks levels us with a serious look. “Because of all the connections—your names being tied to this case—it’s only a matter of time before people start looking into your pack. And the moment it gets out that Violet and Sofie are officially part of the Ashford pack, they might get dragged into this investigation too.”

I’ve spent my life building an empire, securing every angle, eliminating every weak spot to make sure nothing could ever touch the people under my roof. And yet, here we are. On the brink of disaster. And now my women—our women—are in the line of fire.

“No,” Hawk snaps, shaking his head. “That’s not happening.”

“Absolutely fucking not,” Lance agrees. “We need to make sure they’re protected. That this doesn’t even touch them.”

Banks nods. “Good. Because the moment they get caught up in this, it complicates everything tenfold. Laying low is the best course of action but I know that won’t last long. You four get antsy when you have nothing to do. I suggest getting ahead of the story, control the narrative before it spins out of control.”

That gives me several ideas, none of which Banks will like.

Banks sighs. “Cut that smirk off your face, Puma. You pay me well but not well enough to get you out of whatever shit is running through your head. In the meantime, I’ll be doing everything I can to tear down whatever case they think they have before they can even put the pieces together. It’s not just your safety I’m

worried about. It's your reputation. A rumor like this? It can destroy a man before he even has a chance to defend himself. But you—" he gestures between us, "—you're the Ashford pack. Your entire foundation is built on reputation. You don't get to fuck around and hope it all works itself out."

I drag a hand down my face, exhaling hard. "And what about Sofie and Violet?"

Banks hesitates for a second. Then his voice drops, something colder settling beneath the usual sarcasm. "Don't let them out of your sight. There's no hard evidence against you yet, but public opinion? That shit is a weapon as you all well know. And if someone decides the Ashford pack is running an art forgery ring, it doesn't matter if it's true or not. They'll make it true. The last thing you need is Sofie or Violet being dragged into this shitstorm."

I have a feeling that keeping Violet and Sofie locked up until this all blows over is going to be a challenge but if it keeps them safe, I'll do it. There's just one issue left. "Banks, why does it feel like you're about to walk us out of here after being charged?"

"I've been on the case from day one—both civil and criminal to make sure that I catch whatever whispers are rolling through the network. A lovely conversation with two of those officers let me know that this was nothing more than a scare tactic to get you to talk. I'll be calling their supervisors in the morning to let them know some of the officers are abusing their power. They probably wanted a notch on their belt but they seriously fucked up. Now, let's get you back home so I can go back home. I have a feeling that we both have mates that are going to be pissed at our disappearance."

He's not wrong.

I push to my feet, the twins following me as we exit the room. The first officer spins,

about to spout more bullshit when Banks, again, just holds his hands up. “Threatening my clients by saying they were under arrest for art forgery in the middle of the goddamn night and then not even processing them into the system is a terrible look for Ansdale police. Either charge them officially or they’re going home.”

The officer sputters around for the right words. “We’re following up on a credible tip.”

Banks laughs, shaking his head. “Yeah? Well, if the one calling in was actually credible, maybe I’d take this whole thing a little more seriously.” I hold back a laugh, recognizing just how unprecedented all this is. If I had a little less money to my name, I’d still be in that interrogation room, trying to find a way back home.

But money talks and apparently, so does Banks. I’ll make sure to pad his fee a bit for tonight’s call.

### Chapter forty-five

#### VIOLET

Sofie has that restless energy, the kind that makes it impossible for her to stay still more than a few minutes. She slept—barely—maybe an hour before she started flopping around like a fish, twisting her limbs in frustration. At first, it was funny, her sighs and huffs exaggerated. But then she got irritable, and when Sofie gets irritable, everyone feels it.

“Okay, okay, enough,” she mutters, shoving the blankets off. “I’m getting up.”

Gray barely cracks an eye open before I’m already moving, watching her stomp off toward the kitchen. She’s still worn out from the last few days, but her mind is clearly racing. She perches on the one armchair that faces the foyer, draping her arms over the back, eyes locked on the front door like staring at it long enough will make them walk through.

I rub my hands over my face and follow her. “Baby, they’ll be back soon.”

Sofie huffs, looking up at me with those big, pouty eyes. “I don’t like not knowing.”

Gray chuckles, stepping behind me and resting his chin on my head. “She’s not going to move, princess. She’s just as stubborn as you are.”

“Yeah, no shit,” I mutter, watching her drum her fingers on the couch.

Time drags, half an hour creeping by, and she never looks away from the door. Her attention doesn't waver, her ears straining for any hint of sound that might mean they're back. I step toward her but she just shoots me a glare, pinning me in that spot. I can't imagine what's going on in her head but I'm also not going to coddle her. And then finally, the front door creaks open. Before I can even move, Sofie bolts, flinging herself at the twins the second they step inside.

Lance catches her first, but Hawk is right there too, both of them wrapping her up as she clings to them, her body vibrating with relief.

"Jesus, sweetheart, let us breathe," Lance teases, laughing as he holds her tight.

But Sofie isn't in a joking mood. "I don't want to wait any longer," she says, pulling back enough to look at both of them. "I want to be bonded. I need bites. Stat." Her gaze moves to Puma and then Gray, her tone softening as she adds, "Violet too."

Gray stiffens behind me as the entire room goes still. Sofie's expression doesn't falter—she isn't embarrassed, isn't flustered. She's completely serious. I should have known an incident like this would drive that reaction.

"I didn't like not knowing anything or where you were," she continues, quieter this time. "It felt wrong."

The Alphas exchange glances, surprise flickering across their faces. Lance is the first to break the silence, rubbing the back of his neck. His brows draw together in something close to amusement. "Isn't that usually something an Alpha says to their Omega?"

Sofie just shrugs, unconcerned. "Maybe. But I'm an Omega and I want to be bonded." She turns to me next, her eyes softening as they meet mine. "Vi?" She struggles to slip out of the twins grasp, walking up to me and cupping my face in her

delicate hands. “I need this so goddamn much. I can feel you but I can’t feel them and I need it.” Tears gather in her eyes as she sniffles. “I just... I didn’t know. This is the part I hate. The Omega part that needs, that craves, that demands. If I was a Beta...”

I stop her there, softly drawing her into a kiss. “Baby, I might be a Beta but that doesn’t mean I wasn’t—I’m not terrified. Had a whole meltdown while you were sleeping.” I manage a small smile. “You are allowed to need, crave, and demand whatever the fuck you want. Besides, I think bonds are an excellent idea.” For a moment, it’s just the two of us, my Omega and I holding each other.

Then Puma clears his throat, reminding us that we have an audience. Sofie grumbles something before turning around. “Great. It’s settled. Let’s go.” She marches back over to the twins, reaching for their hands.

Gray snorts, shaking his head. “Wait—” His voice is edged with something confused. “Oh, she meant now?”

Silence hangs for half a second. Then the laughter starts as Sofie drags the twins toward the bedroom, Gray eagerly following them. I watch, knowing that everything after today will change. It hasn’t been me and Sofie against the world for a little while but now it’ll be permanent. I’m so fucking ready.

I let out a heavy sigh, waiting for Puma to join by the door. I reach for him, my fingers curling into the sleeve of his jacket. “Everything okay?” I murmur.

Puma nods, the gesture slow, measured. “It might get a little dicey until we figure out everything,” he admits, voice low enough that only I can hear. “But right now? It’s okay.”

I snort, tilting my head at him. “Liar.”

A smirk tugs at the corner of his lips before he leans in, pressing a lingering kiss to my temple. “Right now,” he repeats, pulling back just enough to meet my eyes, “there’s nothing we can do. So, let’s focus on this. Right now, in this moment, just the six of us.”

Before I can argue, a soft, breathy moan echoes from the room. Gray steps back into the hallway, his hands on me before I can react, his arms wrapping around my waist as he hauls me off the ground like I weigh nothing. I gasp, hands flying to his shoulders as he grins up at me, eyes gleaming like he’s been waiting for an excuse to manhandle me all damn day.

“Come on, princess,” he purrs. “It’s starting!”

I barely get a chance to yelp before Gray spins us, laughter tumbling from my lips as he finally sets me down. The warmth of his chest lingers against my back as I steady myself, taking in the scene before me.

Sofie’s practically vibrating, buzzing with excitement as she flits around the nest, fluffing pillows and arranging blankets with the precision of a master architect. It’s been moved from the bed to the back corner and I’m pretty sure no one is getting any of the clothing items back that have been woven into the edges.

She spins around, hands on her hips, chest rising and falling as she surveys her work before beaming at me, wide-eyed and bright. “Now we’ll all fit!” she announces.

I blink at her, my heart stuttering in my chest as she runs at me, hands reaching for mine, fingers threading together with a kind of familiarity that feels like coming home. She looks up at me, eyes shining, voice filled with an almost childlike excitement.

“Isn’t it beautiful?”

I can't help the smile that stretches across my face. "It's gorgeous, baby."

Sofie grins, tipping up onto her toes as she presses her lips against mine. I melt into her, one hand sliding to cup her cheek, the other still locked with hers, unwilling to let go. The kiss is sweet but electric, a slow burn that I could drown in, that I want to drown in. A playful voice cuts through the moment.

"Hey!" Lance drawls from somewhere behind us. "You two are already bonded! Save some for the rest of us."

I pull back, rolling my eyes even as Sofie giggles, burying her face in my neck. "Jealous?" I tease.

Lance smirks. "Nah. Just making sure you two don't get a head start."

Hawk snorts. "I don't think that's possible."

Gray, still pressed against my back, hums. "Well, now I feel left out."

Puma chuckles, stepping up beside me. "This is our women's show. Be patient. Let them lead." I love the way he's included me in as if my feelings on the matter mean just as much as Sofie's. He cups the back of my head, gently running his thumb along the back of my ear. "Ready, Dove? Because god, I've been thinking about this moment for weeks."



### Chapter forty-six

#### VIOLET

Sofie is so fucking adorable, nearly disappearing in the twins' hold as they take her apart. Her little whines of pleasure filling the room, her scent suffocating the rest of us. The three of them are lost in a trance, sharing a moment I'll file away forever. Her face is flushed, lips parted as Lance makes love to her, Sofie whining every time his knot catches on the edge of her pussy. I have a perfect view from where I am, a smile playing on my lips that we're about to get everything we never knew we wanted.

However, on my side of the nest, someone is about to die. Me. I am. Because Puma won't fuck me properly. He's teasing me as he slowly fucks into me, his bruising grip on my waist driving me mad. Every time I think I'm going to come, he slows his pace, grinning against my shoulder until I'm crying out for more. Cursing him. Yelling at him. Telling him he's not going to fuck me ever again after this bullshit. Gray's just laughing as he peppers kisses along my cheeks and neck, his lips traveling south until they reach one of my tits.

I swear someone put these men on earth to kill me. I'm going to fucking explode. A growl of frustration tears from my throat as I try to hasten Puma's pace but he just holds me tighter, Gray chuckling against my tit. The vibration sends pleasure straight down my spine, Puma's purr thrumming against my back. A moan falls from my lips as I give into the sensations, the Alphas moving in tandem with each other, like this is a practiced move. I don't fucking care at this point. I just want to come.

"Ready Dove?"

I just nod, the sharp pain in my shoulder reminding me why we're here and god, it feels better than anything I could have imagined. My entire body surges with ecstasy, the bond snapping into place as I truly feel Puma for the first time. He's still fucking into me, holding me, caressing me, his hands everywhere as we connect. I feel that protective and possessive piece of him. The part that's terrified. That part that loves me.

It's almost too much, tears streaming down my face as I feel the faint bonds from the other men connected to Puma. My vision blurs as I try to stay present and in the moment but I'm losing control until another sharp pain floods my senses, a chuckle vibrating through my ear.

It's followed by a wayward tongue and then someone sucking on my earlobe, my entire body thrumming with energy as I fall apart. I press my hands against Gray's chest for purchase, Puma thrusting inside of me one last time, his knot catching on my entrance. I force myself backwards, taking all of him, a garbled cry tearing from my throat as his knot starts to expand.

"Do you feel that, Dove? You're ours now. Forever and always." His hands move to my chest, massaging my tits as my pussy tries to strangle his cock and suck it farther inside of me. Not that I can take anymore. I'm so fucking full.

Seconds later, he's coming inside of me, the combination of his knot and their bites making it impossible to stay in control. I'm not even sure how long I'm there, vibrating between them, coming down from a high I've never felt. My body is strung out, my limbs useless as Puma starts rocking himself against my ass until his knot deflates and he can pull out.

"My turn," I hear as Gray then rolls me onto my hands and knees and then slips inside. He's no less relentless, his lips sucking my earlobe between his teeth. I cry out, the newest pleasure point making me fall apart all over again. "Jesus Christ,

princess, you feel amazing. I always knew it would, being tethered to you, but fuck. You're mine."

I'm deliriously happy, an emotion I can't claim to have felt in years. Part of the reason is the sudden surge of a bond that's always been there—Sofie. I glance over at my Omega, her lips parted in ecstasy as Hawk knots her. She has two pretty bites on each of her shoulders, just at the base of her neck, the twins nursing them. Her pupils are blown wide, exhaustion already creeping in but I know she's just as happy as I am.

Gray slaps my ass, chuckling when I twist around to growl at him. He pulls out, flips me onto my back and slides back in. "Focus, princess. You can fuck your goddess later. Right now, this is about you and me." And it's like that's all it takes as I come again, Gray rocking against me as if he's just enjoying the moment. I'm about to whine for his knot when he just shakes his head, leaning down to kiss me. "Later. You're going to be so fucking sore later. I should know."

I stare at him and then look over at Puma in all of his naked tattooed glory propped up on one arm. I knew that my Alphas were together but like... a full knot? Gray? That... no, yeah that tracks.

Puma grins, moving toward us with a deviant smile on his lips. I catch onto what he's about to do seconds before he's there, Gray's eyes rolling into the back of his head as he nearly collapses on top of me. "Holy fuck. You're not... Puma—"

"I think it would be a perfect time, don't you?" He purrs. I twist just enough to see Puma stroking his cock, gathering up precum and my own release onto two fingers. There's no fucking way he's just going to...

When Gray tenses above me, bracing his hands on either side of my head, I realize that Puma is absolutely going to do that. And I'm so fucking ready. Sofie's over there

getting fucked within an inch of her life and I'm about to experience just how powerful Puma's thrusts can be. "Holy fuck. I always seem to forget how thick his fingers are. Princess, I'm going to come embarrassingly quick."

I giggle, a sound torn from my throat as he thrusts forward, his face contorting in a mixture of pleasure and torture, Puma leaning over his back to suck on the bite on his shoulder. It's like watching art come to life as Gray's muscles strain, the man trying to focus and not fall apart all in the same breath. And when he lets out a guttural moan, Puma pushing him deeper inside of me, all I can do is hold on.

Because the game Puma is playing is very different from the one I thought I signed up for. I cling to Gray's arms, his cock searing into me every time Puma thrusts into him. I have nowhere to go to hide away from this kind of torturous pleasure, Gray lost between us.

"You two are so fucking beautiful like this, submitting to me. I want you to come again, Dove."

That's going to be impossible even if this feels amazing. I'm about to protest until Gray leans down and sucks his bite between his lips, causing me to cry out. Puma grins, his purr rumbling through him as he picks up the pace. I have no idea how he still has this much energy, my entire body writhing with energy as Gray's knot keeps catching at my entrance. He's absolutely right that I'm going to be feeling this shit tomorrow but I don't care.

All I know is that I'm about to come again and fuck, I think I'm going to pass out.

Even so, Puma keeps fucking into Gray which pushes him deeper into me, Gray letting out another groan as he fills me with his release. I follow seconds later, confused when Gray's entire body starts trembling, the man's lips parting with a gasp. "Gray, what's—"

“He’s knotting me, princess. Holy fuck. Shit.” Puma slowly pulls Gray back with him so that they’re both sitting up, Gray firmly on Puma’s knot. His cock is still hard, jutting out against his stomach as I’m splayed across pillows and blankets. I don’t think I’ve ever seen something so beautiful, Gray’s nostrils flaring as he weathers the sensation.

Puma’s lips are trailing Gray’s bite on his shoulder, teasing him and well, I’m not going to let them have all the fun. I crawl over to them on shaky knees, grinning up at Gray as he weakly tries to push me away. “Fuck, no, princess. I’m so full right now.”

“Hey, it’s only fair,” I mumble before swallowing his cock, our taste mingled together. I hum around the taste, my lids closing as I lick up the side of his length, loving the way he trembles beneath me. Placing my hands on his thighs for purchase, I start to suck, feeling both Puma and Gray through the bond—their pleasure, desire, need, love, and everything else.

Puma’s purr thickens, mixing with the twins’, the heady twist of scents and sex in the room driving us on to yet another orgasm. I don’t get very far, delicate hands grabbing my ass, the softest of lips attaching to my pussy. It’s been a damn long time since I’ve been on the other end of Sofie but god, it’s one of the best feelings in my entire life.

My body jerks forward as I dig my fingers into Gray’s thighs, the Alpha chuckling. “Seems like it’s only fair.” His laugh dies off as Puma thrusts upward. “Stop moving, Puma. You’ll break something.” The knot won’t last long—Alphas and Betas aren’t made for them so I’m sure Puma is doing something to keep his knot swollen and inside of Gray.

I moan around his cock, bucking between him and Sofie, loving the soft licks and touches as she takes what she wants. Her soft hums heighten my need to come yet again and I know that this last one is going to wreck me. And when Gray reaches

down to massage his bite on my ear, I collapse, an orgasm ripping through me. He spills down my throat, some of it coats my lips and chin as I shudder, pulling away from Sofie for a bit of relief.

She's relentless though, climbing up my side until she's licking my face, cleaning me up.

"Jesus, baby."

"You taste good with Gray," she hums, clinging to me. Her hips are already moving against my hip, her body flush with heat. This whole process must have thrown her into a pseudo-spike but it's not painful. She's delirious with need and I'm more than happy to sate her.

"My turn," I whisper against her lips, slowly laying her back. My limbs are protesting, everything in me wanting to sleep but I can go one more time, even if just to hear that beautiful cry from my Omega's lips.

"Well damn, this has to be the hottest shit I've ever seen," Gray murmurs as he slowly comes off Puma's knot.

"Didn't think we'd ever get to watch," Hawk muses.

I nod, slowly sliding down Sofie's body. "And that's all you'll be doing. Watching. I think I'll pass out if another cock touches me." They're all laughing but I'm serious, even as I prop my ass up and dip my head down before thrusting my tongue inside of her.

The cry she gives me as her back bows off the blankets is everything.

### Chapter forty-seven

#### SOFIE

I wake up slowly, warmth pressed against every part of me, the heavy weight of a knot still keeping me plugged up. My body hums, sore and sated in a way I've never felt before. It's like I've been stretched open and filled with something more than just relief—something deep and tethering, something that makes me feel whole.

Gray is still wrapped around me from behind, his breath hot against the back of my neck, one arm draped lazily over my waist. Violet's in front of me, dead to the world, her lips parted, a little bit of drool slipping onto the nest. She looks so soft like this, so peaceful. And I can feel every single Alpha in this room. Even though I don't have Puma's bite, I can feel him through the twins and Gray. I can feel him through Violet too.

I shift slightly, and Gray lets out a deep, sleepy groan before his knot slips free with a slick pop. A rush of warmth spills out of me, pooling between my thighs, soaking into the nest beneath me. Jesus. This whole place needs to be bleached at this point.

But I feel so goddamn good. I stretch my limbs, my muscles sore and deliciously worn out, little sparks of overstimulation trailing up my spine. Violet stirs at the movement, grumbling as she wipes at the drool on her chin, blinking up at me with sleep-heavy eyes.

"How's it feel?" she rasps, voice thick with sleep.

I meet her gaze, my breath catching in my throat as something shifts inside me. It's like I've been watching her from behind glass my whole life, feeling her emotions in muted echoes—but now, now, it's different. The glass is shattered. The bond between us is alive in a way it wasn't before. It sings.

I can feel her. Not just her presence, not just the tether that's always been there, but her emotions, her warmth, her exhaustion, her love. My vision blurs with sudden tears, my throat tightening as I reach for her. “Vi,” I whisper, my fingers brushing over her cheek, tracing the soft skin there. “I could always feel you—I always knew how you felt, what was going on—but for the first time, I can actually feel you.”

Violet's breath hitches, her lips parting as understanding dawns on her face. She lifts a shaky hand to cup mine, pressing it against her cheek, tears brimming. Gray groans beside me, shifting onto his back, running a hand through his messy hair before he looks over at us with a lazy grin. “That's what happens when you share an Alpha,” he rumbles. “Strengthens bonds. Deepens connections.”

I glance at Violet, at the love and awe in her gaze, and I know—this isn't just about Gray. This isn't just about our pack. This is ours. This bond between us has been reforged, strengthened by something beyond just biology. It's everything. Violet lets out a choked laugh, curling into me, pressing her forehead against mine. “Guess you're stuck with me,” she whispers.

I let out a breathless giggle, burying my fingers in her hair. “I've always been stuck with you.”

I'm still floating somewhere between sleep and consciousness when Gray starts nursing his bite. I have no idea how long I was out or how Gray convinced the twins to let him have me this long. Their scents are still in the nest so I know they're here, Puma and Violet wrapped up in each other in front of me.



Violet growls beside me, shifting so fast I barely process it before she's pressing her face into my neck, her arms locking tight around my waist. "Why didn't you bite Sofie in a weird place too?" she grumbles.

Gray chuckles against my skin, unbothered as he nips at my shoulder again before pulling back to regard Violet with amusement. "You want me to put a bite somewhere ridiculous just for fun? You did practically threaten me last night."

Violet scowls, rubbing her face against my skin in that mine kind of way that has my heart pounding. "You bit me on the ear, you bastard," she accuses. "The ear ."

Gray's lips curl into a slow, teasing grin. "Saying the right thing will set Sofie off," he muses, shifting so he can run a hand down my spine. "She's an Omega, after all." His voice is a low, playful murmur, and my breath catches in my throat because he's right. My body reacts to every little touch, every word, every goddamn thing. And now that I can feel them all—I can feel every bit of pleasure and desire running through the bond. I bite back a whine as slick coats my thighs, realizing how impractical being an Omega is.

"But," he continues, eyes twinkling with mischief, "it's not socially unacceptable to lovingly reach out and touch my mate's ear, is it?"

I don't even process what he means before he reaches out, pressing his fingers against the fresh bite on Violet's ear. She basically melts beneath his touch, her eyes rolling into the back of her head. It's the kind of sound that shouldn't come from someone just waking up, the kind that immediately makes my skin prickle with heat, more slick pooling between my thighs. Gray smirks like the smug bastard he is, his fingers still ghosting over Violet's ear, like he's testing how much it takes to make her fall apart.

Hawk groans from somewhere nearby, voice thick with frustration. "Absolutely no

more of whatever the fuck is going on," he warns. "Or someone is getting fucked again."

Gray sighs dramatically, rolling onto his back with a stretch. "Party pooper," he mutters. "But fine." He pauses, then tilts his head toward the doorway. "What's for breakfast?"

Hawk grunts. "I'm not cooking."

Puma dips his lips to Violet's bite on her shoulder, my Beta wriggling between us before just giving in. "Guess we're ordering in," he mutters against her skin. "Not even sure what fucking time it is but we should at least get some food in us."

Violet finally pries herself off me and slips out of Puma's grip, stretching like a cat before rubbing at her ear, still looking half-asleep. "This house is ridiculous." She looks freshly fucked and I got to taste her. This is definitely a win in my book.

"Welcome home, princess."

And despite how exhausted and sore I am, I can't help but smile, because yeah—this is home now.

### Chapter forty-eight

#### VIOLET

The fight to shower alone is damn near impossible.

Gray is the first obstacle. He clings to me like he's trying to fuse our bodies together, arms heavy and unrelenting, his lips trailing over my skin with a slow, lazy hunger that makes my pulse stutter. Every shift, every breath, he's there, pressing himself into me like he can't stand the thought of even an inch of space between us.

Puma isn't much better. He curls around me at breakfast, brushing his lips along my jaw, neck, and our fresh bond between bites of food. The weight of his presence alone makes it impossible to think. At one point, he leans in, voice low, amused, telling me I smell too good for my own fucking safety. For a second, I'm convinced one of them is going to bend me over the goddamn kitchen table.

Then there are the twins. Hawk and Lance aren't as obvious as Gray and Puma, but they don't need to be. The subtlety of their touches is worse—more insidious. Fingertips skimming the bare skin of my back, a palm spreading wide across my hip when I shift to refill my coffee. Lance leans into my space when he speaks and the way he looks at me makes it clear he's waiting for the moment I give in to them as well.

Sofie, of course, is fucking thriving.

She soaks up every ounce of attention, giggling as the twins take turns feeding her

pieces of what looks like waffles, touching her like she's made of something delicate and divine. They are completely and utterly hers, wrapped around her finger like they wouldn't have it any other way. And she knows it. She preens under their hands, enjoying every second.

I'm different. I don't know how to exist in this the way she does. The attention is overwhelming. The softness in their touches, the way they look at me, like I belong—like I am meant to be here. It makes my skin itch with something I can't name, something too big to contain. But I'm not fighting it like I had before.

Maybe it's the way Puma had held me last night, the steadiness of him against my back, the way he exhaled slow and deep, like having me in his arms made him whole. Maybe it's how Gray had tucked my hair behind my ear this morning, pressing a lingering kiss to the bond mark there, like he was still in awe that it existed. Or maybe it's the patience in Hawk and Lance, the way they watch me, waiting for me to breathe, waiting for me to accept them the way I've already accepted the others.

Still, I need space. Just for a minute. Just to process. The moment I manage to pry myself away, I bolt for the bathroom, slamming the door shut before one of them gets any ideas about joining me.

Steam curls against the mirror as I step under the scalding spray, letting the water pound against my shoulders. My muscles ache in the best way, a lingering reminder of last night, of Gray's hands on my hips, of Puma's teeth at my throat. I had thought that being bonded would feel like being trapped or this constant presence in my head. Sure, I wanted it but I didn't know how it would truly feel.

It's everything I didn't know I needed. Safety, love, adoration, need. I want to give in to this, to let them take care of me the way they take care of Sofie, to let myself need them without feeling weak for it. But the outside world hasn't gone away. The lawsuits, the forgeries, Xavier's ghost still haunting my every step.

Everything is still waiting for us even if we haven't talked about it. That feeling when they were carted away this morning still lingers and it's only a matter of time before the haze wears off and Sofie starts asking questions—the same ones I want answered. I force myself to rinse off before I can spiral too far because I'm trying to be better at knowing that I don't need to be in control.

This doesn't all rest on me. Losing myself to my shower, I mindlessly wash the chaos down the drain until I can think clearly again. Only then do I step out onto the rug, wrapping a thick towel around me. My phone vibrates a second later, an annoying rhythm in the mess of the clothes I hastily stripped out of. It takes me a few minutes to find the thing, a smile curling on my lips as I recognize the name.

Camila.

The towel is barely secure around my body as I drop onto the closed toilet lid, fingers gripping my phone a little tighter than necessary. I blow out a deep breath before answering, trying not to laugh as her frustrated face stares back at me. I should have called her days ago and again after Sofie's heat but everything has been so goddamn complicated that I forgot.

"Mila, I swear, I was going to call," I say, running a damp hand over my face.

A sharp exhale crackles through the line. "I couldn't get a hold of you for days, Vi. Days. Do you know what that does to me? What the hell is going on?"

"Everything's changed."

Everything is different now. The way I wake up surrounded by warmth, pressed between bodies that want me there. The way the house feels like more than just four walls and a roof, like something permanent, something solid beneath my feet instead of another place I'm waiting to leave. For the first time, I am not an afterthought, not

a convenience. I am not just someone people tolerate until they don't need me anymore.

Camila scoffs. "No shit. First, you ghost me and then I hear whispers about you being wrapped up with the Ashford pack?"

A dry laugh huffs from my lips. "You heard about that?"

"Vi, everyone's hearing about it. You know how it works. The moment those rich Alphas start collecting something—or someone—people start talking."

There's a small creak, the subtle shift of wood against hinges. My eyes flick up, catching the bathroom door cracked open just enough for a familiar face to peek through. Sofie stands there, hair still tangled from the twins being absolute nuisances, her hazel eyes wide, curious, lingering.

I mouth, ' Talking to Camila' .

She hesitates, hovering in the doorway like she's trying to decide whether or not she should leave. But instead of backing away, she steps closer, small fingers reaching for the edge of my towel where it wraps around my thigh, anchoring herself to me like she always has.

There's a few seconds that Sofie stays out of frame and then she perches herself on my thigh, Camila's expression shifting from irritation to outright disbelief as she practically screeches, "Sofie?!"

Sofie winces at the volume, then giggles, ducking her face against my shoulder.

"Oh my god," Camila gushes, leaning forward like she could force herself through the screen by sheer will alone. "Look at you, you look fantastic. Jesus, it's been

forever."

Sofie's fingers tighten on my towel as she curls up in my lap, her cheeks flushing pink. "I—I'm sorry I didn't reach out."

Camila softens instantly, the sharpness in her gaze easing into something gentler. "Hey, don't do that. I wasn't mad, sweetheart. I was just worried." Sofie peeks up, lips parted like she wants to say something, but she hesitates. Camila narrows her eyes. "What's on your mind?"

Sofie's gaze flicks to me, like she's searching for permission. I squeeze her hand, rubbing my thumb over her knuckles in reassurance. She takes a breath. A steady inhale before finally murmuring, "I... bonded."

Silence. Then—"You what?!" Camila's voice is loud enough to rattle through the speaker, and I wheeze, biting back laughter as Sofie pouts beside me. Camila's eyes dart across our faces, dipping to our shoulders, no doubt catching Puma's fresh bite on my skin.

Sofie mumbles, "I didn't expect it to happen so soon, but it just... felt right. Something happened yesterday and I just needed it. We needed it."

Camila's brows shoot up so high I think they might hit her damn hairline. Her mouth opens, then closes, her brain visibly working overtime to process what she just heard. Her eyes flick between us, something unreadable flashing across her face before she huffs, shaking her head like she's already given up. "Goddamn it, you two."

I smirk. "You love us."

A dry, suffering sigh. "Unfortunately."

Laughter spills into the space between us, warm, familiar, something that makes my chest ache in a way I haven't let myself feel in a long time. Sofie just starts talking, like we never really parted ways, like all those months we hadn't suffered a turn of events.

"And then Gray bit Violet here—" her fingers brush over the mark on the shell of my ear, sending a shiver straight down my spine.

Camila whistles low. "Damn."

Sofie giggles, clearly pleased with herself. "Which I didn't even know was a thing, but it totally is, and then Hawk bit me here—" she stretches her neck, tilting her head just enough to show the fresh mark blooming against her skin, the claiming still new enough to sting. "And then Lance—"

"Okay, okay," Camila interrupts, wheezing with laughter. "I get it. You're claimed and glowing. Jesus."

Sofie just beams, absolutely unbothered. "You're just jealous."

Camila snorts, shifting the phone slightly. "Sweetheart, I have plenty to keep me occupied."

Something is off. Her voice is light, teasing, but there's something behind it, something just a little too controlled. Her cheeks are pink, but it's not from excitement, not from laughter. There's heat there, something she's trying not to give away.

Narrowing my eyes, I lean back against the toilet. "Mila."

She blinks. "What?"



Sofie tilts her head, studying her just as closely. “Are you pregnant?”

Camila’s jaw drops so fast I swear I hear it. “What the fuck, no!” Then, almost immediately, she groans, dragging a hand over her face. “Not for lack of trying.”

Sofie lets out a high-pitched squeal, practically vibrating in place. “Camila!”

Laughter erupts out of me before I can stop it and I have to cover my face with one of my hands. Camila rolls her eyes so hard she almost falls backward. “It’s a good thing I don’t really have a job,” she mutters.

A shout rings out in the background before another voice—deep, rough, unmistakable—joins in, completely unbothered. “Your only job is sittin’ on this dick, mama!”

Sofie wails. Her entire body folds as she collapses into my lap, face buried in my stomach, wheezing so hard I’m worried she might pass out. Camila groans, and the camera flips, giving us a full view of her Omega, Sasha, sprawled shirtless on their ridiculously massive bed, grinning like the goddamn devil himself.

“Sasha!” Camila screeches, launching something at him. A pillow, maybe. A shoe. Hard to tell. “I’m on the fucking phone, you goddamn menace!”

Sasha just smirks, entirely unbothered, stretching like a fucking king. “I know. That’s why I said it.”

Tears burn at the edges of my vision from laughing too hard. Sofie is completely gone, her laughter muffled against my skin, her entire body trembling from how hard she’s shaking. Camila groans again, flipping the camera back to herself, glaring at us. “I hate all of you.”

More laughter spills between us, lightening the air, easing something deep in my chest. The teasing, the jabs, the playful insults—it all feels familiar, grounding in a way I didn't know I needed. For the first time in a long time, Sofie isn't curled up in herself, isn't keeping her distance from the rest of the world. She's here, with me, laughing until her sides hurt, grinning so wide her face might break. And Camila, despite all the chaos she brings, is still Camila. Still the person who has always been there.

The moment stretches, something unspoken lingering between us, before I finally clear my throat. “Hey, we need a night at Temple soon. It's been too long.”

Camila smirks, tilting her head. “Name the date and time, Vi.”

Sofie perks up immediately. “Can we bring our Alphas?”

Camila and I exchange a look before her lips curl slow, wicked. “Oh, fuck yes.”

A night out with Camila and our packs? I can't fucking wait to see that.

### Chapter forty-nine

#### VIOLET

Sofie spends a few more moments with me before disappearing back into the kitchen, leaving me to drag on a pair of pants and shirt. I forgo a bra because we're not going anywhere and I know it'll get our Alphas all riled up, even more so when I tell them they're not allowed to touch. A deviant smile spreads across my lips as I reach for my phone, just about to step into the hallway when it buzzes.

I expect it to be Camila, telling me some new thing in her life but it's an unknown number. Curiosity gets the best of me, the hairs on the back of my neck standing up, telling me that this could be a trap. Still, I open the message.

Xavier:

I have information that might help the investigation. Meet me in an hour. Alone.

He must think I'm fucking stupid to fall for that.

No can do. Where are you anyway? The police are looking for you.

Not anymore, Violet. See, the information I have could go either way.

What the fuck is he talking about? The man's an asshole but his threats weren't all that great. Other than firing me, I wasn't scared of him. I stare at the last message, wondering what's going on when a second message pops up. It's a grainy image but I

can still make out the night of the showing, Puma standing in front of me by my car.

Another text comes in.

See, I know where you're staying. It only takes a few well-placed clues for me to pin everything on them.

The fuck? They never bought or sold anything fake, Xavier.

But they did, didn't they? Bid on one right before the showing.

Frustration bubbles up in my stomach as I place a hand on the doorknob, ready to alert my Alphas that Xavier is fucking playing games with our safety. But the next message changes that. Pure dread coils in the pit of my belly as I reread the words several times.

It won't just be a quick trip to the station, Violet. They're going to rot in jail with the evidence I have. Everything will be stripped away from you, that house, the safety, maybe even your Omega.

Don't you fucking touch her.

I won't need to. The system will when they find out she aided and abetted the Ashford pack, leaving you alone without any family.

That thought terrifies me, especially after I just found my happily ever after. The blood in my veins turns to ice, my grip tightening around the phone as I read it again, as if the words will shift into something less dangerous, less inevitable. This has to be bait but there's also a chance Xavier isn't lying.

Why would I believe that you have evidence I can use when you just fucking

threatened my pack.

Pack?

Fuck. I shouldn't have said that. I confirmed what he already knows but I'm not budging on this. I take several breaths, trying to calm my nerves. No need for my Alphas to rush in here, asking what's wrong.

Does this give you a bit of incentive?

A slew of other pictures hit my phone, pictures that this man shouldn't have. Pictures from that one night we went out to dinner and headed to the beach afterward. Pictures from Sofie and I hanging out on the front porch, Gray being a goddamn menace. Pictures of Puma fucking into me on the driveway. But it's the one picture at the end that gives me pause. The others just mean Xavier is stalking us, waiting for us. But this one means he was at some point in the goddamn house or someone he's in contact with. Because the last picture is one of Sofie's wide eyes staring out into the kitchen. I recognize that moment, just yesterday, the moment when our Alphas were 'arrested'.

We still haven't talked about what happened or how they were let go. All I know is that whoever Xavier has got in his back pocket was in my damn house. And he's got his sights locked on Sofie.

Yeah, fuck that.

I barely get into the kitchen before Hawk is studying me, searching my face. He can read me just as easily as Puma can feel me and I hate it. "Trouble, what's wrong?"

"Nothing! Nothing. Just... I realized that I need to start cleaning out my apartment. I didn't renew the lease but like—" My explanation is flimsy at best as I steel my

emotions, closing off the connection to my Alphas. They can't know what I'm about to do. Sofie's words ring in my ears, the ones where she told me to do whatever I had to but to make sure I came back to her.

And I will.

But I'm not going to let them hurt Sofie or my Alphas. Hawk raises an eyebrow, his hands moving up and down my arms as he just nods. The others haven't noticed my presence just yet, Hawk using the distraction to case me in against the wall. "Trouble, tell me the truth. What's going on? I don't need a bond to see that something unsettled you."

He caresses the side of my face, leaning down to press his lips to mine. The touch softens me, allows me to relax even with the truth lingering around me. "Nothing."

"Again. One more time. Lie to me one more time and I'll believe you. Or tell me the truth so I can help."

"You can't help," I whisper, a whine following. "Hawk, you... I can't. They..." It's about to all come spilling out and I won't be able to do a fucking thing to ensure the safety of my pack. He curls me into his chest, holding me as I cling to him for safety. He's murmuring something in my ear as my fingers dig into him, his purr lulling me into a false sense of calm.

My phone vibrates again but I ignore it, staying in this moment.

"Tell me when you're ready but don't do anything stupid. Let's go get that stuff from your apartment."

I nod, letting Hawk guide me into the kitchen as he announces our plans. None of our Alphas look convinced, Sofie glaring at me over the edge of the couch. Hawk just

grabs the keys and we walk out the front door, my eyes peeled for anything out of the ordinary.

“What are you looking for?”

“Xavier. He was texting, saying he’s known all about us and he had pictures. He’s been here. It’s why I had to go. Why I need—”

“Not alone, Violet. Never alone.”

I agree, knowing that my semi plan of running off to save the day would have either gotten me killed or seriously hurt. No, this is a much better plan. I swallow nervously, climbing into the driver’s side, Hawk lovingly closing the door after me. I watch him walk around the front, his eyes searching the area like mine were.

“Drive.”

A voice from behind me pops up, the click of a hammer ringing in my little car. I twist around to see the barrel of a gun in my peripheral but it isn’t pointed at me. It’s pointed at Hawk.

“Drive or he’ll be the first one on the floor.”

I don’t think. I just do. And the look on Hawk’s face nearly breaks me but god, at least he’s still alive.

### Chapter fifty

#### HAWK

Violet is about to be on my fucking shit list. I could tell the moment she rushed out into the hallway that someone contacted her, made her believe that her only choice was showing up somewhere alone to get information. It's a common tactic and one that rarely fares well. Puma was halfway out of his seat before I asked him to let me handle it and now she just fucking took off.

I'm going to throttle her.

I rush inside to snatch my keys off the table when I'm met face to face with the fury on Puma and Gray's face. They can feel Violet differently than I can and it takes me a moment to realize that the fury isn't directed at Violet. "Where the fuck is she?" Puma growls, his eyes flashing with rage. I've never seen him this pissed off before.

"I don't fucking know. She just took off."

Gray steps up beside Puma, both of them rushing me toward the door. "She's fucking terrified. Whatever just happened set her off. You have no idea where she's going?"

"She didn't tell me. We were going to go together or I thought we were but—"

A little whimper catches my attention, my eyes falling to Sofie trembling on the couch. I move toward her, Lance already dragging her into his lap. She looks up at me, tears falling down her cheeks. "She's so scared, Alpha. She... she wouldn't leave



like that. I told her to do whatever she needed to as long as she came back to me but this... she's..."

Something spooked her. That's the only explanation. She brings out her phone with trembling fingers, trying and failing a few times to unlock the screen before handing it to me. I stare down at the open app, seeing a small blue dot speeding down the highway. Fuck, it's Violet.

I plant a big kiss on Sofie's head and dash out the door, Gray and Puma right behind me as we rush to the jeep. I should have fucking seen something like this coming. If it wasn't Violet sneaking out trying to save us—the way she's blamed herself for all of this shit, it would be someone trying to ruin us. None of us expected that someone would take Violet, though. No one is ever after the Beta.

And maybe that's the goddamn point.

Puma speeds down the street as I stare at the phone, my frown deepening the further the car goes. "She's heading outside of Ansdale. To the Hillburg Estates."

That doesn't make any sense but it's hard to focus with the emotions rolling off the three of us, so much so that I have to roll down the goddamn window. Puma slams his open palm against the steering wheel, a snarl pulling on his lips. "I'm going to fucking break whoever took her. They're going to die. Gray, call the police."

Whatever is about to go down might just be another ripple in all of this chaos and I fucking hate it. After this shit, I'm not waiting to put my bite on Violet any longer. No fucking way. I think back to the moment she took off down the driveway and start picking apart what really happened. Her eyes got really wide and then she was gone.

A glint of sunlight against metal rings in my memory and then I understand. "Someone was waiting in the goddamn car for her with a gun."

“What the fuck?” Gray calls out, his phone to his ear.

“But it was pointed at me.” Violet was protecting me, us , the same way she’s been doing with Sofie. And now she’s going to suffer for it by the hands of some madman.

“Puma, don’t hurt whoever this guy is too bad. I need to make sure I get my hands on him too.”

Gray huffs. “Get the fuck in line.”

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*Source Creation Date: July 22, 2025, 4:51 pm*

### Chapter fifty-one

#### VIOLET

Terror bleeds through me, the connections to my Alphas fierce with rage. I'm trying to stay focused even as the dashboard brings up Puma's call. A hand from the backseat quickly declines it just as Gray's call comes through. The hand keeps declining my Alphas' calls, a cackle coming from the voice in the backseat until it's all I can do not to cry.

When the hand declines Sofie's call, I can't hold it back anymore.

"Don't worry, Violet. We'll get this all straightened out. Promise."

"That means nothing you fucking shit bag." He put the address in on the dashboard a little while ago, Ansdale leaving us behind as we drive into the part of a city that feels like it dropped out of a fairytale. The houses are even larger than the Ashford pack's, monstrous entities that have no business being someone's home.

"You should have just come outside when you were told. Then none of this would have been an issue." He lets out an exaggerated sigh as he points to the third house, a driveway that takes us up a hill. I pull to a stop and lean back in my seat, wondering where we go from here.

He threatened to kill Hawk and no doubt he would have done the same to my other Alphas. I'm a good defense against a lot of things... a gun is not one of them.

“Time to go, Violet. Time to see just what I’ve got in store for all of you.”

None of this makes any sense as the man slides out of the car and then comes to my door. He opens it, grinning down at me, a face I never thought I’d see, Marion, Xavier’s fucking son standing in front of me. He’s always been so innocent despite his haughty demeanor. Nothing about the way he carried himself made me believe he’d be twisted up in all of this.

He guides me up the massive steps, a firm grip on my arm, his gun dangling from his other hand. It’s like he wants me to see it, wants me to see the control he has over me and my choices. It isn’t until we step inside, the front door slamming closed that he lets go of me.

“Where the fuck is Xavier?” I demand, tears still streaming down my face. God, why did I ever think I’d be able to step out for some information? I should have just given my Alphas my phone in the first place. This would have never happened.

Marion doesn’t answer right away. Then his expression shifts, his smirk curdling into something colder. “Long gone,” he muses. “In the wind, I’d say. Guess he finally realized it was in his best interest to disappear.”

Disgust curls hot in my throat. Xavier ran. Or Marion made him run. Every instinct in me is telling me to get the fuck out, to turn around and sprint to my car before this gets worse, but my body is locked in place, gaze focused on the shiny piece of metal in his right hand. One wrong move and I might not be leaving here with my life.

The surge of energy through the bond tells me that my Alphas aren’t that far away, that Sofie must have given them my location. I just have to hold on until then if Marion doesn’t get trigger happy before then. I clamp my lips shut, backing away toward the door and that’s when I see what this place is. It feels like a shrine, paintings on every available surface, spread out across the open layout. They remind

me of the one that smudged beneath my fingers—meaning that these are all fakes. Whoever did this, spent a lot of time and effort in building their brand. What I want to know is why they would copy rather than just create.

Marion just smirks, catching my bewildered expression. “You were so fucking stupid, thinking you could save your little pack with a last-minute meetup,” he says, shaking his head. “What? I absolutely know that if you could, you would have snuck out without your Alphas. Just so happens that they’re a little territorial, hmmm? But like, what’d you think this was, Violet? Some kind of redemption arc? That Xavier was gonna hand over something to clear the Ashford pack’s name?”

My hands tremble at my sides as I try to piece this together. Marion was going to get me here one way or another. He had been prepared and had Hawk actually gotten into the car, I wonder if he’d still be alive.

I steel myself, lift my chin, force my voice to stay steady even as my stomach churns. “This is the dumbest possible reason to ruin a life,” I say, gesturing to the frames littered across the walls. “What was this? A grab for money? Some desperate need to be noticed? You finally get sick of being a talentless little shit and decide to fake your way to success?”

I should hold my tongue but the rage seeping into me from the bond is giving me confidence to speak my mind. Unfortunately, that just makes him laugh as he twirls the gun in his hand. He twists around, no doubt marveling in the creations as I hurriedly reach for my phone. Puma is calling so I answer before slipping it back into my pocket.

“I told him he should take some of the blame,” Marion says casually, turning around and stepping closer, forcing me back a step. “But you know how it is. Cowards always run. And now? It’s easy. We just pin the rest on the Ashford pack. What a tragedy, huh? The downfall of such an influential family.”

“You planned this. It was never about giving me information for the investigation.”

Marion shrugs, hands spreading like this is just business. “Violet, that’s never how it was going to work. I see opportunities where others don’t. I needed an out and you just perfectly dropped into my lap with that perfect little body and that smile that could light up a room.” He comes closer, casing me in, his gun running down the side of my face. “Xavier really liked you, told me you were the best employee he ever had—loyal to a fault, pretty, punctual. Thought he was going to try and be your Alpha with the way he kept talking about you and that pretty little Omega.”

I growl at him, silently warning him that Sofie is off limits.

“And as for all this? I didn’t paint shit. But you know what I am? A charmer. And the number of prints people have bought? It’s given me a wealth I could have never gotten just working under my father.” His grin widens, self-satisfied, and my blood boils.

I clench my fists, steadying myself, forcing my expression to stay blank. He slowly removes the gun from my cheek, placing it beside us on one of the entry tables, allowing me to relax ever so slightly. “So, you just conned your way into the industry? Rode on the coattails of forgers and liars, pretending you had talent?”

His eyes gleam. “I wouldn’t say conned, exactly. I just gave people what they wanted. A little mystery, a little scandal. The art world thrives on that kind of shit. And it was easy—so fucking easy—until your Alphas had to go and ruin everything.”

I frown, my gut twisting. “Puma didn’t say shit until after the whispers had already started.”

Marion lets out a sharp ha! shaking his head. “Please. Puma’s been sniffing around for months, questioning shit, pulling threads, making people nervous. And then those

two overgrown meatheads you call Alphas put a bid on that painting before following up with an email—asking for more information. More history. More proof."

The smugness on his face makes me want to rip it off.

"They were onto the fakes," he continues, like this is just a fun little game for him. "So what better way to teach them a lesson than to accuse them of dealing in stolen and fake art?"

Marion truly had planned everything, down to the last detail so he can walk away, unscathed.

"You're fucking sick," I snap at him. "You let people trust you. You worked with them. You let them invest in you and now you're ruining lives just because you got caught? Why the Ashford pack, anyway? You could have dumped this on anyone!" My voice echoes, Marion stepping back as he observes me.

"Oh, sweetheart, you're acting like I care. Like I wasn't just waiting for the moment this all caught up to me. I just decided to control the narrative. I can spin this any way I want." He lifts a hand, gesturing vaguely. "Maybe I was pressured into it by bigger players. Maybe I was misled into thinking these pieces were real. Maybe I'm just a victim in all of this, just like you."

The rage that claws through me is blinding. "You're not a fucking victim," I hiss.

He just shrugs. "That's for the world to decide."

My mind is racing, scrambling for an out, for a way to flip this back on him. Because fuck that. I'm not letting him play martyr while my pack takes the fall. He's still watching me, a slow grin overtaking his face as he returns to standing right in front of me. I barely have time to blink as he reaches behind me and slides out my phone.

“Whatever did you think was going to happen now, sweetheart? You were just gonna run back to your Alphas and hope that everything you found here was enough to clear them? Bitch, I’m just one player in the game. You still have shit.” Then he drops my phone to the ground and stomps on it with his heel. Glass and metal crack under the pressure, the screen fizzing out as a little tendril of smoke rises from it.

I stare at the mess of pieces, knowing that that was my one lifeline to my Alphas. And now, they have absolutely no idea where the fuck I am. That terror from before returns full force, overshadowing the anger and every other emotion. He’s faster than me, bigger than me, and he might very well grab that gun and shoot me if I try to take off.

There’s no good course of action here.

"Here’s what I propose," he says, voice light like he’s making a simple business deal. "If your Alphas confess—just a simple admission of guilt—I’ll let everything else go."

I blink at him, disbelief slamming through my system. "Let what go?" I ask, my voice flat, void of emotion, because I already know I’m not going to like the answer.

Marion's grin sharpens. "Well, since the twins won that bid," he starts, drawing out the words for effect, "shouldn't they get the art they paid for?" He watches me closely, like he’s waiting for me to catch up, and when my eyes widen, he lets out a mocking little hum of approval. "Ah, there it is," he murmurs. "That moment when you realize just how bad this could get."

If the twins accept that painting—if they even acknowledge it as theirs—it’ll look like they’ve been involved in this shit from the beginning. It won’t matter that it’s fake. It won’t matter that they were set up. Because there will be proof. Fabricated, manipulated, but still proof.



Worse, Sofie is at home. Sweet, soft Sofie, probably curled up in the nest right now, waiting for me to come back like I promised. I straighten my shoulders, locking my jaw, forcing steel into my voice. "I'm not selling my Alphas out for your fucking agenda."

Marion shrugs, completely unfazed. "That's fine," he says, slipping a hand into his pocket and pulling out his phone. "I'll just let the station know that the cute little Omega at the front desk had a hand in all of this. That should be fine, right?"

"You—" My throat tightens, my pulse pounding as I take a step forward, but he just grins.

"Oh, don't look so fucking surprised," he says, tapping at his screen like he's just scrolling a menu. "The station needs a fall guy. Someone guilty enough to be believable but small enough that they won't cause too much trouble. That little thing at Ash & Ivory ? Perfect candidate. You should have heard her, Violet—'I didn't know, I didn't realize,'" he mocks, his voice going high and breathy, dripping in fake distress. "Pathetic."

Rage rips through me, so fierce and hot it feels like I might explode from it. "She's innocent," I snarl, stepping right into his space, seething. "You know she is."

Marion smirks. "And you know that doesn't fucking matter. All that matters when things are said and done is that I'm not the one in the line of fire."

"You're a monster," I whisper, and his smirk just widens.

"And you're out of time, sweetheart. So? What's it gonna be, sweetheart? Your cute little Omega? Your Alphas? Or maybe you'd like to play the martyr yourself and take all this shit on your shoulders."

"You motherfucker."

Marion laughs, slow and amused, because he thinks I don't have an out. That I'll pick the lesser of the two evils and bend.

"I'll make it easy for you," he continues, stepping closer, his presence looming. "Confess that you were working with Xavier—say that you knew everything that was going on and this will be over."

I catch the flicker of fear in his expression, almost as if he's not holding all the goddamn cards. He mentioned that there's more people in play, that he's just small fry. Which means that being caught up in all of this, they're probably hanging him out to dry which is why he's trying to control the narrative.

Which means as terrified as I am, he's not really the one I should be scared of. I take a chance, eyes darting across the open floor, looking for somewhere I could hide. Even just a small crevice but there's nothing that would shield me from a gun and I'm not even sure I could be fast enough.

So, I choose the next best thing and scramble for the metal piece beside me. It was a stupid mistake to leave it there but maybe Marion just isn't as smart as he thought he was. All I need to do is make sure he has no idea I've never held one of these things before. It feels vile in my hands, like I'm holding the power to death but I point it at him anyway, my entire body trembling with the thought of what I might have to do.

Marion's hands fly up. "Bitch, put that shit down."

"Why? You pointed it at my Alpha! Why the fuck would I care about pointing it at you?" I fumble with the safety, unsure of how to get it to unlatch or unhook or whatever the goddamn it needs to do so I can shoot the bastard in front of me. I'm too focused on it when a punch lands against my cheek, my head falling back against the

door.

I crumble to the floor, Marion turning around to reach for the gun when I grab his ankle. He's not going to fucking kill me here. I promised Sofie that I'd be back. And I don't break my promises with her.

He jams his free foot backward, nearly catching me in the face but I'm fast enough to roll over and climb up beside him. Marion is absolutely larger than I am, stronger too but the fear coursing through my veins and what I have to protect makes me better. I throw a punch to his groin, the Alpha doubling over as curses stream from his lips. The next punch hits him in his neck and then his forehead as I let my rage pour out.

My luck runs out as he grabs me around the waist and flattens me out on the floor. My eyes widen at the inevitability of this position, horror flooding my expression when instead of hitting me, one of his hands moves to my jeans. "Maybe I'll ruin you in another way," he jokes, his fingers catching the button.

I wriggle beneath him, struggling for purchase as I flail around. Screams tear from my lips as I try to fight him off and fail. I manage to flip back over, crawling away from him but then he's over me again, his hot breath at my ear. Tears gather in my eyes as I continue to struggle. "Why? Why the fuck are you doing this?"

I get that he needed an out. But this? There's no need for this.

"Maybe because I don't fucking like getting played." A growl echoes through the room as he grips the back of my shirt and rips it open. "God, you're gorgeous. It's too bad that I'm going to have to ruin this."

I'm not fucking going down like this.

He rocks against my ass, the vileness of the movement urging me to fight back. I do

everything I can but the grip he has on my waist is keeping me from getting far. That's when I notice the gun just past my fingertips. He's too focused trying to get my jeans off as the tatters of my shirt hang off my arms. But none of that matters.

Just a little closer.

"Stop squirming, bitch. Or this is going to hurt." He's jams his fingers in the waistband of my jeans as I curl my hand around the barrel of the gun and swing it backward, catching him square in the cheek. There's a large crack as he falls to the side and I scramble to my feet, flying toward the door to escape.

He's there in an instant, smashing my face against the door as he fights for the gun. Every part of me is screaming for relief, to stay alive, to be saved but I know that if I don't fight, there won't be anything left to be saved. I don't have to be in control, I tell myself. They're on the way. But if they can't find me, I'll have to save myself.

Something wet drips down over my top lip, Marion roughly grabbing the back of my neck as I hold the gun to my chest. "Give. It. Back. I have no idea why you're fighting so much. Actually no, stand there. I can fuck you just fine against the door."

Both hands grab the waistband of my jeans and yank them down my legs, a horrified yelp pulling from my lips. I fumble with the gun, trying to remember all of those goddamn movies, anything that will help me get this man off me. Something clicks and I twist around, hooking my finger around the trigger and pulling. It's not angled right but Marion stumbles back anyway, blood trickling down his forehead.

He wavers, the sound no doubt ringing in his ears as I sag against the door, trying to hold myself together. My fingers are trembling as I fumble with the doorknob, cursing at it to open, to let me out, to let me free. Tears blur my vision as I struggle, a scream tearing from my throat when the door is thrown open but then there's just utter relief, Hawk scooping me up into his arms, his purr immediately rumbling

through him.

“I got you, Trouble. Fuck, I got you.”

### Chapter fifty-two

#### PUMA

That filthy bastard is going to answer to me. It doesn't matter that there are officers on route. It doesn't matter that this shit could land me in jail. My fist is going in that piece of shit's face. I hear bones crack beneath the pressure when I connect with Marion's cheek, the guy stumbling back into a wall. Gray is right behind me, both of us seething with anger and rightfully so.

Not only did Marion steal our Beta, he tried to ruin her. I heard enough on the phone. Her screams. The terror through the bond. The moment she nearly resigned to her fate. God, Marion is dead. My fist connects with his nose this time, head thudding against the wall. "You fucking touched my Beta," I growl out, my hand going around his throat. "You put your fucking hands on my mate and thought it was just going to be that easy?"

I nearly had a fucking heart attack when the connection to her phone dropped. There were three possible streets for him to have gone down, each several houses long. I was going to go fucking crazy until Gray spotted her car up top the hill. And now, Marion is in front of me sputtering for an answer. "You weren't supposed to—"

Gray lets out a cackle, throwing his own punch at Marion, the Alpha groaning in pain. I'm going to do so much worse to him the moment Hawk takes Violet outside. I can't even bear to look at her right now, knowing that I'll see that fear in her eyes—fear that we almost didn't make it and that's on me. "What was the fucking reason, you piece of shit? You got yourself in too deep and then thought you'd put

your hands on what's mine?"

I punch him again, this time in the stomach. His eyes roll into the back of his head as he tries to push away from us. It doesn't work. He's scrambling for an explanation but I already heard everything over the phone. He already spilled his guts, already mentioned that not only was he dealing in fakes, that he's hardly the main character of our nightmare.

Each word out of his mouth pisses me off a little more, my control waning as I let my anger out on the man who almost took something from me. It takes me too long to realize why I'm so fucking pissed. Because I almost lost what was mine again. This time I was lucky but next time I might not be and that terrifies me.

Someone clears their throat behind, a sense of authority following it, enough to pull me back to reality. I twist around to a detective I recognize—Detective Grayson from the main station in Ansdale. He's usually the one I deal with when it comes to possible issues in the art world, one of his brows raised as he stares at me. "Seems like you've done a number on one of our suspects, Mr. Ashford."

We're both on a first name basis but he's using my last name as a sign of respect. "He nearly—"

The detective holds up his hand, shaking his head. "Don't need to explain to me. However, my partner will be here in a second so maybe... wrap it up?" He wiggles his brows as I turn to the heap of trash at my feet. I'm not sure when that happened but I'm more pissed that he's still alive. "He looks like he can still talk, which is great for us. Why don't you go home and I'll give you a call when things settle a bit."

He's giving me an out and I take it, despite what my instincts are yelling at me to do. I throw him a nod of thanks before slipping past him and heading toward the car, knowing full well that we're against protocol. The other detective frowns at my

departure, Detective Grayson calling him inside. “Leave him be. They just came to retrieve their mate. The guy we’re worried about is in here.”

Violet is curled up in Hawk’s arms in the backseat by the time I get there, his jacket wrapped around her shoulders. There’s blood dribbling from her nose and a bruise forming below her right eye. My heart drops into my stomach at the fragile sight before me—Violet still trying to be strong despite the emotions running through her.

“Dove—” My voice cracks on the word, my beautiful tortured Beta scrambling to climb into my arms. I hold her tight against my chest, her legs wrapped around my waist as she cries into my shoulder. “Fuck, I wasn’t sure we’d get here in time. Are you okay? Do we need to call—”

“No.”

That one word is all it takes. We’ll go home and then I’m not letting her out of my sight. Not that I think she’ll want to leave any time soon. She tucks her face into the crook of my neck, clinging to me like I’m her lifeline and despite the questions I want to ask, I just climb into the back beside Hawk. Gray hops in the front seat, barely waiting before he’s tearing down the road back home.

Violet is trembling against me, her tears slipping down my shoulder and it takes everything in me not to demand Gray to turn the car around so I can finish the fucking job. Hawk isn’t that much better as he slips a gentle hand into her hair, pressing light kisses to her temple. She’s quiet the entire way home, passed out by the time I’m climbing out of the car and handing her to Gray.

As much as I don’t want to let her go, I know for a fact that we all need to be around her right now. And the moment we step into the house, Sofie is going to attach herself to Violet’s side. The tension thickens as Gray walks her into my bedroom and I check in on Sofie and Lance. He’s got his arms strapped around her, Sofie crying to go see



her Beta. She's distressed, her scent sharp and twisted as she claws at Lance's arms. God, this is going to be a fucking shit show.

"Sofie, look at me." I push some of my Alpha bark into my words, waiting for her to still, her tear-stricken eyes meeting mine. "They're just going to give her a shower, alright? Then they'll be right back."

"What happened? Who hurt her? Why—this wasn't supposed to—she feels—" Sofie doesn't finish any of those words, grabbing her chest as if it's a physical pain.

The worst part is that I have no idea and there isn't much I can do to say to soften the anguish we're all feeling. "She's going to need you, Sofie. She's going to need all of us for a little bit. I'm going to ask you to do probably the hardest thing you've ever done and be strong for her."

Sofie doesn't even hesitate as she nods, relaxing within Lance's arms.

### Chapter fifty-three

#### VIOLET

I feel numb, somehow detached from myself, watching as Gray slowly pulls the coat off my shoulders to reveal the tatters of my shirt. Gray gently grabs the fabric, almost as if he thinks I'm going to fight him but I don't. I know I'm safe here and yet what could have happened in that house freaks me out. No one would have heard my screams.

He would have ruined me. And then how would I be able to come back to this pack when Marion stole a piece of me? But he didn't. He didn't take anything. I got away. My Alphas saved me. I'm okay. I'm okay.

Gray presses a kiss to my forehead, crouching down in front of me. "Princess, we can leave if you need us to but I want to get you in the shower before we put you to bed."

I swallow nervously, chancing a glance at Hawk. I can't read him, his eyes so dark they're almost black. "It wasn't your fault," I mumble, wondering if he blames himself. "I would have never let him hurt you."

Hawk lets out a growl, his hands twitching at his sides. He wants to reach for me, grab me, roughly yank me around and god, I need it to forget Marion. "Violet, you're just as important as every single person in this house. Your life isn't less. Fuck, we almost lost you and you're still thinking about us." His fingers are still twitching, his nostrils flaring as he fights his own desire.

“Touch me,” I breathe, needing their hands on me. I’m not ready for anything full on but I still feel the ghost of his fingers gliding down my back, against my cheek, the curve of my ass. I need it gone. “ Please ,” I plead. I don’t have to ask again as Hawk pulls me against his chest, holding me there as he blocks out the rest of the world.

Gray stands up behind me, slowly hooking his fingers into my jeans but pauses when I tense. “Princess, he didn’t...”

“No, but he was at my back. I’m fine. Just go slow. Fuck, I hate this.” I’m withering between them, needing their touch and hating it all in the same moment. My body aches from being thrown around, my vision blurred by tears I’m trying not to shed. I lean farther into Hawk’s chest as Gray finishes undressing me, both of them moving me into the shower and holding me there.

I have no idea how long we stand under the hot spray but the fear soon morphs into weariness. I’m so goddamn tired from trying to be strong, my legs giving out. Gray’s right there, holding me up as Hawk gathers some soap in his hands. “Let’s get you cleaned up, Trouble. You did so fucking good, baby girl. You were so strong, so brave.”

The tears fall as I lean back against Gray, unable to rein in the emotions. Gray presses feather light kisses down my cheek, nibbling softly on his bond mark. “You were fierce and I’m sure you fought like hell until we got there. God, I don’t think I’m ever going to be able to let you go.”

“Don’t.”

It’s not a plea. It’s a command.

### Chapter fifty-four

#### SOFIE

It's been three days since the incident, Violet slowly coming out of her shell until she's almost the same woman she was before. She'll never be the exact same, in the way that her gaze always seems to find Puma wherever he is and then she burrows herself into his arms. She does the same with Hawk, finding safety with them that she didn't need before.

And then she crawls into my bed every night, holding me so tight I might suffocate. I hate that Marion almost took something from my Beta but the fact is—what he did take was worse. He took a piece of her sanity, her safety, her confidence. Her outspoken nature has softened just a bit where she's more submissive than before, melting faster into our Alphas' embraces like she craves it.

And while I love that—I hate why that is.

Violet hasn't talked about what happened in that house after Marion's intentions changed. All I know is that he didn't get far.

I breathe out a sigh, stepping into the hallway, immediately searching for Violet because after three days of waking up to her—her absence is felt. I feel through the bond, trying to gauge what she's feeling when I hear genuine laughter ringing in the living room. I rush toward the sound, Puma eyeing me to stay put. He's leaning against the counter, watching the same scene I am. She's curled up in Hawk's lap, Gray leaning forward with a sloppy grin on his face, his hands moving a mile an

hour.

It's the first real happy sound I've heard from her, my heart surging with love for my Beta. Her cheeks are flushed, a bright smile spread across her lips, her body more relaxed than I've seen it for a while. Lance comes up behind me, kissing the top of my head. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

I nod and then immediately redirect the conversation. "When are you going to bond her?"

Lance snorts. "Whenever she's ready, sweetheart. These things can't be rushed and while I would have done it the same night we bonded you, Puma and Gray fucked her unconscious. I've got my kinks but that isn't one of them."

A giggle falls from my lips as I cozy up to Puma's side, the Alpha throwing an arm around my shoulder. He's offered me a pack bond—something akin to a tattoo—if I wanted it, explaining just why that's all he could give. My heart broke at his story and the loss he's suffered, which explains why he's been so protective of Violet. And I fucking love that. And now I'm sporting the Ashford pack's bond on my shoulder, showing everyone that I'm Puma's too—even if it's a little different.

"You going to be okay, Sofie?" Puma asks. "The shit storm is going to be a bit before it blows over."

He says that like he has a plan. Our Alphas have been all secretive, in and out of that office, throwing around words I don't understand. I'm sure that they've been contemplating something after Marion was taken into custody. He hasn't told the officers much, that I know of. "What's the plan?" I ask. Puma raises an eyebrow as he glances down at me. "I mean it. Don't shut me out."

Lance humors me as he pulls up a seat near the counter. "Sofie, there's many moving

parts. Marion has said fuck all but I guess that's a good thing, seeing as he tried to frame us and that didn't work. The main detective on the case is kind of an acquaintance, I guess you could say, and there's been no additional information regarding who's actually behind the scenes."

I glare at him. "But what about the painting you guys bid on? Where is that?" Violet's quick thinking, calling Puma at the time saved her from having to recount any of the details. Puma was able to retell everything he heard to the detectives and we were able to move on. Mostly. The part I hate is when I saw all those horrid threats Marion sent my Beta—down to the fucking pictures he took of all of us. I can't imagine how much it hurt to see that firsthand.

He laughs. "You're too smart for your own good. Sweetheart, all we know is that he's dealing in fakes. He's got his hands in deep and he is trying to pin it off on someone. I can guarantee you that we're the easiest target but not the only one. However, there might be a way to draw him out into the open."

I lean toward him, sucking my bottom lip through my teeth. "Really? Why haven't we done it? Why are we sitting here?" The smirk playing on Lance's face is starting to piss me off. I grumble at him but the longer I stare, the more my body heats until my goddamn scent gives me away. "No. None of that. Tell me and you can fuck me later."

"I'll hold you to that, sweetheart. Now, how do you feel about parties?"

I hesitate, mostly because I'm not sure what kind of party Lance is talking about. Like the drunken ones at Temple where Violet always had to pull me down from a table? Or the pish posh ones like at the showing? Or like a gala?

"Is that a no, Sofie?"

I twist around to look at Puma and shake my head. “No. I just don’t know what kind of party. Is this one of those rich ones?”

“Absolutely. You’ll have to dress up and there will be hors d’oeuvres and lots of really fancy people you’ll get to meet. See, we’re all pretty sure that whoever is fucking around is enjoying that from within the circle. It’s why throwing a party, almost as a last hurrah will bring all those wishing for our downfall, those itching to find out the truth, and the one person who’s hoping and praying we’ll go down under. At least, we hope it’ll work. A few officers will be here. Banks thinks we’re doing ourselves a disservice and Hawk over there says if someone so much as looks at either of you wrong, that the party is over. I feel the same.”

I wholeheartedly agree but I’m worried that Violet isn’t ready for something like that. My gaze darts over to her, that warm smile still on her face as Hawk peppers kisses all over her cheeks, Gray being a dumbass as he holds her hand to his lips.

“Sofie, you’d be surprised. This was her idea.” Puma laughs at how fast I twist to look at him. “She’s not broken. She was hurt and confused and...”

“Tell me,” I whisper, wanting to know what happened. No one’s said anything. And for a little while, I didn’t want to know but I need to understand the terror in her eyes.

“A gun was involved and it went off but I don’t know much more than that. Sofie, she fought so goddamn hard to make it out of there. She hit him a few good times, held him off until we got there. I think of that moment every goddamn day, trying not to think of what could have happened had we been a few minutes later.” Puma rakes his hand through his hair, letting out a heavy sigh. “She’s here with us and that bastard is in jail. If he makes bail, he’ll regret it.” There’s no hesitation in his voice and I know for a fact that Marion’s mug shot would have looked a lot worse if the detectives hadn’t gotten there when they did. “As for whether or not Violet is ready, she’s the one who suggested we ‘do it like the movies’, for better or worse. I think

she's stronger than any of us really know, Sofie. She's an amazing woman."

"Yeah, she is," I mumble before squeezing Lance's hand and moving toward the couch. Violet immediately perks up, hands reaching out for me. I crawl into her lap, right on top of Hawk, the man drawing us both into his chest as I let my Beta devour me with kisses. "Thank you for coming back to me," I whisper against her lips.



### Chapter fifty-five

#### VIOLET

Planning and plotting. That's what the last week's been all about in between each of our Alphas cradling me against their chest as if I'm something to break. And for a little bit, I was. However, it's Hawk that gets all grumbly, stealing me away in the mornings to hold me on the couch. I fucking love the attention and I need it more than ever. Sofie's little giggles as Gray and Lance focus on her is everything too. Even Puma can be found talking to her about art, her little nose scrunched up in annoyance as she seeks an out.

I've found comfort in the routine of doing very little, working beside Gray as he visits the few clients who don't hate us. Pointing out where to put things, what to add, and then stealing kisses in the expensive nooks when no one's looking. It feels like a fucking dream as I come back out of my shell, the horrors of those moments with Marion slowly fading away.

He's still there at the edge of my consciousness but I keep telling myself that he didn't get me. That I didn't suffer. That I'm okay. And I am. I truly am. Something everyone in this house keeps reminding me of.

There's been endless discussions at the dining table, the kitchen counter, the living room floor as they flesh out an idea I threw out on a whim. Apparently, it was perfect, although Banks thinks we're walking into the line of fire. They all have their quirks, their way of showing Sofie and I they care, that they love us. Words that I'm trying to find the right time to say. There's never a right time which is why I'm hoping that in

the next several hours, they all hear it from me.

I glance over at Sofie, sprawled out on Puma's bed as I shimmy into the dress for tonight's affairs. It's some obscene purple thing that nearly cuts all the way up my thigh, showing off a little more skin than I'm used to. Gray picked it out—said that it would be perfect. I think he's just trying to get me fucked by one of our other Alphas before the night's over. I'm not complaining, though.

Tugging at the fabric, I try to resituate it but there's no hiding the cleavage—something else Gray probably did on purpose. My gaze falls on the low cut-V, the way it hugs every curve and the shining bite on my shoulder. I'd been avoiding the conversation for days, curling into myself after that incident with Marion. Hawk was really the one that drew me out of that funk, his brother always just around the corner keeping me out of my head.

And it was just yesterday that I fell into their arms, both of them giving me the last piece of the puzzle.

Hawk follows me into the bathroom after he announced that I was taking a shower. I catch the smirk playing on his lips, the boyish charm making an appearance that only seems to come out when it's just us or us and his brother.

“Is there something you need, Alpha?” I purr, suddenly feeling confident with his dark eyes trained on me. His nostrils flare as I shrug off my shirt and then start on my pants. “Because suggesting that I need a shower makes me think you're telling me I stink. Is that right?”

I'm only in my panties at this point, having forgone a bra since I'm just walking around the house. It drives my Alphas wild and I catch Sofie staring every once in a while. The self-confidence boost it gives me is amazing. Hawk doesn't say anything, still watching as I step over to the shower and turn the knob, wiggling my ass just

enough to keep his attention. The growl that follows as he stalks toward me tells me what his intentions are but I twirl around, shaking my head.

“No, you said a shower. That’s what we’re doing here.” I grin up at him, his hands falling to my hips. He’s breathing just a little too hard as he hooks his fingers into my panties and then rips them off of me. A yelp tears from my throat as he walks me into the shower, plastering me against the wall, his lips immediately on mine.

I chuckle into the kiss, clawing at his clothes, demanding more than he’s already giving. I’ve been working up to this moment—the one where I add to my bonds because I can’t stand not being part of everything they’re giving me. Puma told me to take. So, I’m taking.

“You should have stripped outside the fucking shower, brother.”

“Only need my cock to get the job done.”

I squeal as the buttons on his shirt spray across the shower, water seeping into his sweats, showing the full outline of his cock. He hoists me up against the wall, my legs immediately around his waist. “I thought we were showering!”

Hawk silences my playful comment with more kisses before his lips are trailing down the side of my neck, hovering inches from where Puma left his bite. “Trouble, tell me I can—we can. Fuck, I don’t want to wait anymore.”

A gasp falls from my lips as my head hits the tile behind me, my gaze following Lance as he steps into the shower with us, gloriously naked. An expanse of dark tatted skin stares back at me as Hawk maneuvers us until I’m between the both of them. “Do you two do everything as a team?”

“Answer the question, Vi,” Lance purrs against the back of my neck.

“More than ready.”

And I am. I don't expect them to go easy on me and yet, they're so gentle, Hawk reaching beneath my ass to undo his pants. He slowly walks us back toward the wall again but this time, I'm up against Lance's chest, his cock wedged against my ass. My breath catches as I cling to Hawk, the Alpha slowly guiding his cock into me.

“How—how is this going to work?” I breathe out, Hawk already rocking against me. Lance kisses my jaw down to my shoulder, pleasure already thrumming through me.

“I asked you once before if I could knot you here.” His fingers cut through the seam of my ass, catching on my hole. “If I could be the first one to make you feel so goddamn full that all you could think of was me—us.” I'm vibrating between them, my pussy strangling Hawk as Lance rocks against my ass. “I can feel that you want it, Violet but I need your words. Give me your words, sweetie.”

“Yes, god yes.”

Just the idea of being that full has me clenching around Hawk, my fingers digging into his arms as he steps back just enough to give Lance room to move. The cold sensation pressed to my ass has me jumping forward, Hawk sinking further into me as I cling to him. “Relax, Trouble. Just focus on me,” Hawk purrs, dragging me into a kiss as his hands fall to my ass. He slowly pulls my cheeks apart, Lance swirling two fingers around my puckered hole.

It's been a long goddamn time since someone's fucked me there but it was the most intense orgasm I've ever had. There's the sound of a cap and then a bottle being squeezed, my gaze darting to shower shelf as Lance places a small container of lube. I wonder if they placed that in here knowing what would happen or if it's always been in here. Lance is gentle as he preps me, even if there's a sense of urgency that follows it, two fingers slipping in before I know it. My head is buried in Hawk's shoulder, my

cries muffled until Lance is once again at my back, the tip of his cock pressed against my hole.

“Ready?”

I manage a nod, whining as the stretch is nothing like I’ve felt before. Hawk already inside of me, I feel like I’m slowly getting ripped apart, my body on fire in the best of ways. No doubt Puma and Gray can feel this through the bond, Sofie most likely going to drag Gray off into her nest for relief. I wonder if Puma would ever fuck into Gray as he takes our Omega—

“Focus, sweetie. Brother, I think she needs a little reminder to stay in the moment.”

My chuckle dies off as Lance continues to push inside of me, my nerves pulled tight until I’m fully stuffed with two Alpha cocks, ensnared in the twins’ embraces. I can hardly breathe, my eyes rolling into the back of my head, a floating feeling falling over me the longer we stand here.

And then Hawk moves, pulling out and thrusting back in so hard I see stars. My scream reverberates against the tile, Lance and Hawk moving in opposite rhythms, driving me fucking crazy as I try to tame the sounds coming from my mouth.

“No, we’re doing that. I want to hear them, sweetie. I want to hear every last noise you make because of us. The whole damn house should hear you as we give you the pleasure you desire. God, you’re perfect for us, squeezing my cock so damn tight,” Lance growls out the last few words, one of his hands snaking up my front to grab my tit, the other gripping the front of my throat in uneven pulses.

Both of Hawk’s hands are settled on my waist, a punishing grip keeping me from directing any movement as he kisses the life out of me. I’m going to die happy between these two men as they control my pleasure. Every time I feel like I’m going

to fall over the edge, they slow down, prolonging the sensations until frustration starts to build, my body whining for relief. I'm so fucking full, both of them using me like I belong to them.

And god, I totally do.

There's just one problem.

“Don't knot me in the shower!”

A rumble of laughter follows as Hawk slips out of me, stalking into the bedroom without a care. Lance is right behind him, one of his arms wrapped around my chest just beneath my tits as he carries me on his cock into the bedroom. It's a very odd sensation as I hang there, Lance stuffed in my ass, the slight pull making me whine for the relief I so desperately need.

I don't have to wait long as Lance sits on the bed and leans back, pulling me with him so that I'm splayed out over him. Hawk slips right back in, his purr rattling through his chest until I'm once again caught between the twins—a mixture of citrus and mint filling my nose. It works so perfectly as I lose myself to their touch, memorizing their scents, their bodies, and everything in between.

And then comes the small bite of pain as Lance digs his teeth into my skin, right beside Puma's. I shatter just like that, screaming into yet another kiss, Hawk's touch grounding me until I taste copper on my tongue. I'm about to yell at Hawk for fucking biting my goddamn lip but I can't even think, both of them surging forward, their knots slipping inside of me, swelling and locking us together.

They come at the same time, the combination of their release and their rapidly expanding knots making my back arch up off of Lance. I growl into Hawk's mouth as the last of the bonds snap into place, the twins' deviance meshing with Gray's laid

back personality and Puma's grounding one.

"How's that feel, Trouble?"

"Like you goddamn bit me on the lip! What the fuck is wrong with you and Gray?"

Hawk grins, still rocking his knot inside of me as he hovers over my lips. "Because then all it takes is a kiss to make you melt." As if to make a point, he sucks on my bottom lip, grinning as I shudder and come again around their knots. "When my knot comes down, I'm going to fuck you properly, Trouble."

"Wasn't this..."

"No. It wasn't. And if you think either of us is done with you, you have another thing coming."

They fucked me unconscious, until my throat was hoarse, and I could barely move. Even now, there's still a tremor running through my body, my legs threatening to give out. No one is allowed anywhere near my pussy for at least two days. Or my ass. God, they knotted me so many times, my sorry ass crying out for me as they owned me, used me, loved me.

I run my finger across my lip, a shiver running down my spine as Hawk seemingly responds across the bond. He's been trying to kiss me most of the morning and when Gray found out, he's made it his mission to make me fall apart. My only saving grace was Sofie laughing at me and Lance telling her that she was going to suffer the same fate.

And now, we're here, dressed in clothing that's worth more than my entire salary. I glance over at the glittery gown Sofie chose out of Gray's options. Her eyes just about jumped out of her head as she saw it and I knew she'd pick it over anything

else. It wasn't even about standing out. It was the fact that it was shiny and I don't blame her. It's gorgeous.

I glance over to see her giggling into her phone, no doubt messaging Camila. It's been wonderful seeing her bloom right alongside me, the two of them thick as thieves all over again. We'll squirrel away somewhere and bother Camila until Sofie shoos me away, saying that she needs to talk to her privately. There's been a time or two our Alphas or Camila's have had to end the call, saying it was time for bed. Sofie and I always end up grinning at each other like teenagers caught sneaking out, but there's comfort in knowing that even if everything else feels uncertain, this—us, here, now—is steady.

And now, we're about to hopefully end this saga of whatever bastard is messing with my family.

"Ready for this Sofie?" I ask, my Omega crawling off the bed to stand beside me. I turn to lean down and kiss her, a spark of lust drifting through the bond, slamming into me all at once. Apparently, it doesn't matter who kisses me before I go all weak-kneed, Sofie's scent sweetening as she pulls away from me.

She lets out a little moan, a frustrated growl following. "This is highly inconvenient. I just want to kiss you. Why do I now need sex?"

I snort at her scrunched up nose, pulling her against my chest. "Welcome to the world of being an Omega, baby. But hey, now it's almost like a beacon. We don't even have to call them. Just come find me and I'm sure one or all of them will come running." I have too many goddamn plans on how I'm going to weaponize Hawk's bite against him.

He's in a meeting, needing to stay focused? Not anymore. The bastard on the phone with a client? Great time for a distraction. On the way home, stuck in traffic? I'm



going to torture the shit out of him. Hell, I'm going to do the same with Gray too.

Five minutes later, we're touring the open hallways and show rooms that are kept locked off for the most part. Puma took us on a tour and I was awed by how much room this estate has and how little the four Alphas actually use. In fact, they kind of just exist in that one wing for the most part. We weave in and around tables crowded with finger foods, fancy hors d'oeuvres that look like they belong in some upscale downtown restaurant and delicate pastries that Sofie's already been eyeing since they appeared this morning.

Somewhere, a string quartet plays an elegant, muted piece—nothing too heavy, just a faint backdrop to the low murmur of voices drifting through the rooms. I've never seen this many people here at once. Caterers in crisp uniforms dart back and forth, setting trays on pristine white linens, whispering about when to serve what. They move like a well-oiled machine, even as the occasional laugh or clink of silverware breaks the illusion of total order. Guests are already starting to arrive, slipping into the main hall as they enter. They're grabbing champagne and whispering away as they point toward paintings I've never seen. I've been so fucking focused on building this life with my mates that I kind of forgot how much wealth and beauty is in this house.

Paintings cover the walls, all carefully spaced, perfectly lit. Each one is unique—bold strokes, intricate details, colors that seem to shift and shimmer the longer you stare. And there's more than just paintings. Sculptures sit on pedestals, their marble and bronze surfaces gleaming under the soft lighting. Photographs, too—large black-and-white prints that manage to feel both modern and timeless. The house has been transformed into a gallery, every room an exhibition.

I'm awed at how much is here and how little Puma boasts his wealth. There's a regal air to almost everything he does but he doesn't wear what he's worth on his sleeve. It's only when you actually see it do you realize how deep it goes.

“God, look at this one.” I stop in front of a massive piece—a swirl of blues and silvers, the brushstrokes chaotic and precise at the same time. Sofie’s standing just behind me, leaning on my shoulder as she stares at it. “It’s like... it’s like the ocean at night, you know?”

She giggles. “I have absolutely no idea what you’re talking about. But you’re happy, so I love it.”

I elbow her lightly, smiling. “I’m serious, baby. You don’t see it? It’s all dark and stormy and—”

“I see pretty colors,” she cuts in, laughing. “And I see you totally geeking out over this stuff.”

“Whatever,” I mutter, though I can’t help the grin tugging at my lips. I move on to the next piece, then the next, pointing things out to her as she follows along. Art has never truly been my thing. I never wanted it to factor into my profession but I realize I’ve fallen in love with it, even more so because it’s my Alphas’ world. “This one—look at the texture here. You can actually see the layers of paint. It’s almost sculptural.”

She hums, tilting her head as if considering it. “It’s nice. You’re learning lots of big words from Gray,” she says, then shrugs. “But you know what? I’d rather look at you.”

I roll my eyes. “You’re impossible.”

She just grins. And it’s that grin, that warmth, that makes everything feel lighter. We lose track of time wandering like that until we circle back around to the living room. It’s like we’ve interrupted some kind of Alpha pow-wow. Gray, Puma, Lance, and Hawk are all standing there, looking like they’ve stepped out of the pages of some

absurdly high-end fashion magazine. Even Gray, who usually has that whole laid-back, “I don’t give a fuck” vibe, is in a tailored suit, hair brushed out and neat. For a moment, I just blink at them, because damn, they’re a sight to behold.

Gray’s the first to break the silence, his lips curving into that boyish, mischievous grin he always has when he’s about to say something that’ll get him into trouble. “I thought girls take forever to dress up and pamper,” he teases. “You guys got ready faster than we did.”

Sofie gasps, spinning in her dress to show it off. The fabric flares out slightly before falling perfectly into place again. “Are you saying I’m not pretty without makeup?” she asks, wide-eyed and all mock-hurt. It’s impossible not to smile at her theatrics, the way she’s got everyone’s attention in an instant.

Gray’s grin falters as he tries to backpedal. “What? No! That’s not what I meant—”

I can’t help but laugh at his stumbling. Poor guy walked right into that one. Before he can dig himself in deeper, I step forward, sliding an arm around Sofie’s waist and pulling her close. “You’re perfect,” I say, my voice soft but sure. “Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”

Sofie beams up at me as I steal a kiss, loving the way my Alphas grumble at the heat that blooms between the six of us. I already know that one of them is going to try and start something as I pull away, shaking my head. “We have a party to attend. One that you all are throwing. No funny business.”

Hawk’s already wiggling his eyebrows and I know that I’ll be paying for it later. Puma steps up to us, the warm smile on his face tortured by the weight of the cases against the Ashford Pack. “You both look gorgeous and I can’t wait to show everyone the women we’ve brought into our pack.” He runs his fingers along his bite on my shoulder at the same time he touches Sofie’s pack bond. “I just ask one thing

of you. Stay beside one of us at all times. As much as I think the culprit will be here just for flair, I need to make sure you two are protected.”

“Absolutely.” There’s no hesitation in my voice. I don’t want a repeat of Marion and I’m no longer going off to be a martyr. There’s going to be security here and a few officers as well as Banks. There’s no need to be a hero. The only point of this party is to lure them out of the shadows.

We’ve spent too long planning this that I need it to go off without a hitch.

### Chapter fifty-six

#### PUMA

The showing is going better than I could've expected. People are milling about, sipping wine and champagne, nodding at the art like they're pretending they know what it all means. Not that I care. They're here, they're seeing the collection, and more importantly, they're starting to change their minds.

I can hear snippets of conversation here and there—some old-moneyed Alpha murmuring that it's hard to believe such pristine pieces are “under scrutiny,” another guest marveling at the detail in one of the larger works. It's not much, but it's something. A crack in the facade of suspicion that's been looming over the Ashford pack.

Banks is beside me, not understanding much of anything that comes with this world. He doesn't have to because he's a damn good lawyer and a family friend. “The whispers are still there but a few legal suits have been dropped in the last few days. The professionals you hired are pointing out that every single one is real. Verified.”

“That's a good thing. Now we just wait for the bastard or bastards who are trying to prove that they are fakes. I'm not worried about the people on the fence, questioning us. I want to see the ones that are so sure we're doing wrong. That's where we start.” My gaze drifts around the room and I nod to one of our clients, making a note to speak with them later.

Light giggles tear my attention away to Violet and Sofie hanging off the twins. Hawk

is trying and failing to kiss our Beta, Lance twirling Sofie around in small circles. The twins still have their eyes out, watching for anything out of place but I'm just glad our women are enjoying themselves.

"How's Nadia?" I ask.

Banks points to a small lounge at the edge of the room, a very pregnant Omega leaning back against a Beta nearly as large as Banks. "Pissed at me but I brought her those weird little strawberry sweets. So, she's good for the moment."

"When's she due?"

"Month and a half or so and then good luck on all your legal shit. She's not going to let me out of her sight then. She barely does now." Banks chuckles, dragging a hand down his face. "When are you going to start thinking about children? Don't look at me like that Puma. You've always wanted one or two and now you've got two wonderful women in your pack. Who do you think is going to get pregnant first?"

"Don't put that shit on me, Banks. None of us are ready for that right now." I push off the wall, about to throw out another retort when Gray appears out of nowhere.

"Okay," he says, cutting straight to the chase. "You need to see this."

I shoot Banks a look—hold that thought—and follow Gray through the crowd. He leads me into one of the smaller showrooms. This one's quieter, less crowded. Most of the pieces here aren't as grand or as well-known, so the foot traffic is lighter.

Gray stops in front of a smaller painting, a piece I wouldn't normally pay much attention to. It's nothing special at first glance, just an unassuming landscape. But then I see it. Something's off. The brushstrokes are sloppy, the details don't line up. It's like the artist stopped caring halfway through, or someone rushed it out the door

without checking their work. My stomach sinks as I recognize it—it's one of the pieces from Ash & Ivory. One of the fakes.

“Shit,” I mutter under my breath.

“Yeah,” Gray says, folding his arms and staring at it like it personally insulted him. “It's here. But it doesn't belong here.”

I turn to him, frowning. “How the fuck did this get in?”

Gray's lips press into a thin line, then he says, “I checked the cameras.” He shoves his phone into my hands, pointing to the tall, broad-shouldered man slipping through the crowd with it tucked under his arm. No doubt everyone here thought he was part of the staff, moving things around before he unwrapped it in here. The very distinct glint of metal on his wrist tells me it won't be hard to find out who he is—well, once we get the police more involved.

“It's a good thing you created an inventory of our showing, Gray,” I state. “It gives us some credibility but now we just have to wait for it to fall apart.” I hand Gray his phone back, chuckling as Violet bounds up to my side. I swear it's like trouble literally calls her name, our Beta dragging me into a filthy kiss that has me wanting more. Hawk groans, not far off and I just laugh. She's torturing him and I love it.

Gray reaches for her ear and she slaps it away. “Touch it and I cut it off.”

“My finger?” He asks, playfully shocked.

“No, my ear. ”

That earns her a growl as people start to trickle in, everyone making their way around the room until pausing near the fake painting. We don't have to wait long, someone

loudly pointing out the validity. Bingo. “That wasn’t here an hour ago,” Gray states but that doesn’t dissuade the man.

“Well, that’s not my problem. You have a fake in your collection. After everything you’ve all done to make us believe otherwise...”

I step in, cutting this off before it gets worse. “I checked the cameras and it wasn’t placed by us or any of my staff. I wouldn’t have lined it up so haphazardly alongside the others, blocking a famous print behind it. However, with the tapes, I’m sure the police can find just who is behind all of this or... we could have a discussion.” The room has gone deathly quiet, waiting for the man to answer.

He looks around, wringing his hands together before giving me a small nod. I gesture to a small office off to the side, all of us piling in. Violet is plastered against my side, Hawk and Gray near the door, Banks taking a seat by the desk. The man is plastered against the far wall which in this space is really only a few feet from us.

And that’s when Violet just rips it all open. “That’s Orion.”

His face blanches, the man sputtering for an out and not finding one. “I’m just Orion. Not the Orion. I get paid to do shit. The money is good and I could really use a pretty dollar here and there, okay? Marion told me to keep my head down and not ask questions.”

“Wait,” Hawk cuts in. “Xavier wasn’t your contact?”

“What? No. He’s useless. I mean, he’s technically the owner of Ash & Ivory but Marion runs it. He’s the one with all the numbers and bullshit. He’s not as dumb as he looks.” Orion drags a hand through his hair, chin falling to his chest. “I was just told to pull one of the paintings and drop it here.”



Violet steps forward and I tug her back against my chest. God, she's going to give me a heart attack one day. "The gallery is closed down, though. It's been warded off by the police."

"I didn't get it from the gallery, Violet. I got it from the source. You weren't supposed to figure all this shit out so quickly. It was going to be a quick and fast death to your career that you couldn't come back from. Fuck, I'm not getting paid for this one."

I don't understand why Orion would spill his guts here. He could have made up some bullshit and had us toss him out but he's owning up to actual crimes. He's just another fall man, probably less tangled up in all this than Marion but still an issue. I should push this off to the detectives walking through our home, tell them we found another piece of the puzzle but I'm not going to let this bullshit sit any longer.

"Why us? Since you're feeling like talking. Why the fuck were we targeted over any of the other collectors in the city?"

Banks mutters under his breath, "Puma, this isn't the time or the place."

I wave him off. "He accused us in public," I growl. "We've had long-time clients file lawsuits, people we've done nothing but good business with. They're cutting us off without a shred of evidence. Orion should be glad I dragged his sorry ass in here instead of playing his game and airing out his dirty laundry all over our showrooms." Turning back to Orion, I wait for an explanation and while I was bracing for the reality, I'm still not prepared for it.

"You're all so damn dumb. The real Orion or at least this version has been under your goddamn noses this entire time." He glances up at me, a twinkle in his eyes. "Seriously, Puma? Think about it. The man who's never once flaked on you, never once questioned your prices, never once caused any problems. Always reliable,

always helpful. Every single party Gray throws—who's the guy you can always count on to make it a success? Orion is not a name. He's an entity, an idea, a thought. People use it for many different purposes, mostly deviant ones."

My jaw tightens as I rack my brain. I glance at Gray, who's frowning, his arms crossed over his chest. "No one comes to mind," I say finally, even though I know it's a lie. Someone does come to mind, but I need to be sure. I need him to say it.

Orion lets out a low laugh. "Don't play dumb. I'm talking about the guy you all trust more than anyone. The one you probably call your lifeline or some sentimental bullshit like that. He's been in your lives for years, Puma. He's the reason this has gone so smoothly. I should have known you guys would have done some shit to draw him out and I got caught in the crosshairs. He's a slippery motherfucker but it seems that you guys came prepared. Kudos. Now, where does this leave me?"

I have no idea. I also don't really care because he's not the issue here. He did a job and he'll get paid for it. No, I'm more pissed at the real Orion or at least the current one that's been toying with us. This time when I meet Gray's eyes, I know that he's already pegged who it is.

### Chapter fifty-seven

#### GRAY

Everything inside me is on fire as I push through the halls, my boots pounding against the polished floors. The party noise fades into the background, replaced by the roaring in my ears. I can't believe it's him. Out of everyone, the one client we trusted above all, the one person who never gave us a reason to doubt. My blood is boiling.

When I hit the living room, I spot him. Nolan, our so-called best client, trying to slip out unnoticed. He's quick, I'll give him that, but I'm faster. I'm on him before he makes it out the door, catching him just a few feet away from his car. His hand is on the handle, and for a second, he freezes. I don't give him a chance to run as my hand slams into the car door, blocking his escape.

Puma and Hawk appear behind me, their presence a solid wall of backup. I don't need to look to know they're just as furious as I am. Banks can't be far off, but this is mine. I'm taking this one.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" My voice is a low snarl, but the rage in it makes Nolan flinch. His shoulders tense, and then he turns around, trying for some weak version of his usual charm. It falls flat.

"Gray, come on," he says, letting out a bitter laugh that makes my stomach churn. "It's not personal."

"Bullshit." I shove him roughly against the car, my hand fisting in his shirt. "How is

this not personal? You've been in our house. You've eaten our food, drank our whiskey. Hell, we trusted you." Just thinking of all the hoops we had to jump through, the pictures Marion sent Violet to threaten her, the terror our women lived through—it was all just a game to this man while he was hiring me to rearrange his goddamn dining halls.

Nolan's smile twists into something bitter. "Maybe that was your first mistake."

I want to hit him, but I hold back. The anger rolling off Puma and Hawk behind me tells me they're ready to jump in, but I need answers. "Why, Nolan?" I demand. "Why would you do this to us?"

He shrugs, like he's talking about something as minor as a parking ticket. "It was time. The Ashford pack has been riding high for too long. No one stays on top forever, Gray. And let's face it, you guys were due for a fall."

"So that's it? Jealousy? You're pissed because we succeeded?"

"Doesn't matter now, does it?" Nolan sneers. "The damage is done. Your reputation—your so-called perfect pack—will never recover. You'll see."

I watch Puma rear back, his fist slamming into the car just beside Nolan's head with enough force to leave a dent. The sound reverberates through the driveway as Nolan flinches hard, his shoulders slumping as the mask of smugness slips off his face for the first time. The crowd gathering at the front of the house gasps, whispers cutting through the tension. This isn't good. It's all wrong. This could spin out of control, but Puma doesn't give a damn.

"Try again," Puma growls, his voice low and dangerous. The look on his face—pure, unfiltered rage—sends a chill up my spine, even though I'm not the one on the receiving end. "Because I happen to know that you didn't work for shit. We both

come from money. We grew up together but we took very different routes and that wasn't enough for you, was it?"

Nolan swallows hard, his jaw tightening. The guy is slick, I'll give him that. He's got a cockroach's survival instinct, always wriggling out of tight spots. But right now, with Puma pinning him down and the rest of us standing like a brick wall behind him, Nolan's charm is useless.

There's something that feels uneasy about this but I don't get the chance to hash it out as a sharp jasmine scent comes barreling toward us. Lance is right behind her, looking flustered as hell, holding Sofie close as if that's going to stop the inevitable train wreck. Whatever argument had been bubbling up between them isn't even a footnote now—Violet's focus is locked on Nolan.

I don't know how she does it, how she makes herself seem so much taller than she really is, her presence so sharp that it cuts through the air before she's even spoken. She stops right in front of him, hands on her hips, her gaze drilling into him with such force that I almost feel bad for the guy. Almost.

"You bastard," she says, voice steady but low enough that it cuts like a knife. "You're a lowlife piece of shit for trying to ruin a family over your own greed. All of this—all of it—would've probably flown under the radar if the fucking prints Marion left weren't still fucking wet."

Nolan has the nerve to laugh. "If I didn't know better, I'd think you were an Alpha," he sneers. His grin is crooked, a blend of condescension and something almost... amused? The arrogance dripping off him is enough to make me want to snap at him myself, but this isn't my fight anymore. This is Violet's moment, and she's owning every damn second of it.

She squares her shoulders, her voice dropping even lower. "I'm not an Alpha, but I

have people to protect. And that's all that matters."

The crowd's murmurs grow louder, buzzing like flies around us. Nolan's smug grin doesn't falter. He shrugs as if her words bounce right off him. "Well, isn't that noble? Shame it won't make a difference. From what I heard, your fearless little tryst with Marion didn't exactly pan out the way you hoped, did it?"

A flicker of pain shoots through her expression before that fierce look is back on her face. "He's in jail and he'll probably sing like a canary if it gets him out."

His lips twitch and I can't tell if he's still being smug or the sliver of fear flickering in his eyes is real. Whatever it is, I'm just pissed that this is only the beginning of the end. As much as I want this to be an open and shut case where Nolan's taken in and we never hear about this bullshit again, I know it won't be.

And then the fucking Alpha grins like he's holding some card we don't understand before lunging toward Violet. I'm not sure what he was trying to do but Puma and I move as one. We slam him back, his body hitting the door with enough force to rattle it in its frame. I can feel the tension in Puma's shoulders, his muscles tight as steel as he holds Nolan pinned, his teeth bared like he's one second away from sinking them in. I'm not much better—my grip's so tight I can feel the bastard's pulse beneath my hands, fast and erratic like he knows he's cornered.

Someone yelling our names cuts through the haze but it isn't until one of the detectives approaches that I let go. "Alright, gentleman, I think the show's over." I twist around to see Detective Grayson moseying up like he's watching an actual show. "As entertaining as this little display is," he says dryly, "I think we can all agree it's time to let the authorities handle it."

Nolan snarls something under his breath, but the detective ignores him, looking pointedly at Puma and me. "I did see him try to attack your Beta, though. Not exactly

a bright move on his part.”

Puma’s growl vibrates through the air and for a second, I think he’s going to ignore the detective entirely and just finish what Nolan started. But then he exhales, a short, sharp sound, and steps back. I don’t let go right away, my hands still clenched in Nolan’s shirt, my knuckles white. Detective Grayson looks at me, one brow raised, and adds, “That said, a well-placed punch or three might just teach him not to try it again.”

I can’t help it. A laugh bursts out of me as I loosen my grip just enough to let Nolan sag against the door. “Gladly,” I say, and the look on Nolan’s face—somewhere between rage and fear—makes it worth it.

### Chapter fifty-eight

#### SOFIE

All I got from all of that is that this bullshit isn't over. Tucked into Lance's side doesn't make it any better, knowing that the real investigation is just starting. It's a terrifying thought. Lance squeezes my shoulder, pressing a kiss to my head as he guides me back up the stairs. People are filing back inside after Gray threw a punch at Nolan's face and then Puma just said that he's holding his for later.

Without any more excitement, everyone really wants to get back to the art. I just want to hold my Beta against me and tell her how much I love her and then complain about this fucking Orion bullshit. Lance runs his fingers along my shoulder, a breathy sigh falling from my lips. "That's a problem we worry about at another time."

"But that means it's not over! I just want a little peace. To be a family. To not have to look over my goddamn shoulder and wonder if Nolan has something else planned."

"The authorities have him and I'm sure sooner than later, we'll find out the truth. Something we can brace ourselves for and if it's too much, then we move onto something else." Lance shrugs like it's no big deal, like he would just give up his entire livelihood if it meant our safety.

I'm about to protest when Hawk joins us, affirming the same thing. "It'd take some getting used to but it wouldn't be the end of the world, Sofie. I'm sure we could figure out life without all the lavish parties and bullshit."



My Beta steals my attention as she climbs the steps toward me, her head held high, her shoulders back. I can't help myself; the second she's within reach, I'm all over her. My arms lock around her waist, my hands digging into the small of her back like I need to hold her close just to breathe right. "You looked fierce," I whisper against her ear, and she lets out this tiny, breathless laugh before turning to kiss me. It's not soft, not shy—her lips move against mine like she's still got adrenaline pumping in her veins, and I love every second of it.

Hawk's there a heartbeat later, his big arms coming around the both of us, pressing me against Violet. He murmurs something about being proud, about how Violet handled everything, but honestly, I'm not even listening. My attention's on her, on the way she holds me like I'm the most important thing in the world.

A noise from downstairs pulls us apart. I glance over Violet's shoulder just in time to see Puma and Gray coming up the steps. Gray immediately swipes over to Violet's side, gently massaging her ear until she's nearly melting against me. "You bastard!" She hisses but there's no heat in it, even if I'm one step away from slick gathering in my panties. Thank fuck for the liners Violet brought home a week ago.

It keeps my Alphas from immediately descending like vultures.

I thread my fingers through Violet's turning to face Puma. "What now? They're still out there and—"

"Sofie, that is a problem for another time. If someone shows up, then we'll tackle it. But not until then. Right now, I'm going to show off my mates and enjoy the rest of this little showing because it's the last one we're doing for a while." He mumbles something else before stepping inside, people yelling that they never doubted him or that they were always on his side.

I snort at everyone being so damn obvious as Gray gestures to the door. "We should

probably get in there. As much as Puma likes art and showing it off, he's not a real big fan of people in his house."

"Wait, what?" That's news to me. "Why did he throw this party then?"

Hawk squeezes my shoulder and then points to Violet. "Because our Beta suggested it and Gray is his other mate. Between the two of them, I'm sure Puma would burn down the world if he thought it would make them happy."

The evening stretches on and despite the looming disaster somewhere in the future, I can't stop grinning. Every time I turn, one of them is there—Lance brushing a kiss to my temple as he passes with a plate of appetizers, Hawk catching my waist and spinning me around like we're on some grand stage, Gray's deep chuckle rolling through me as he slips a chocolate truffle into my hand. Puma's been keeping watchful eyes on the guests, but even he's taken a moment to lean down and press his lips to my forehead, a grounding warmth that sends my heart fluttering. It's like I'm floating in a dream, everything soft and sweet and perfect.

Why did I ever think this wouldn't happen? Why did I spend so long convinced that happiness wasn't something I could reach out and touch, that it wasn't something I deserved? Now it's everywhere, in the laughter that fills the room, in the way my Alphas hold me like I'm the center of their universe, and in the way Violet stands out like a star—bright and shining, like she was always meant to be here.

But then it hits me, that faint ache just beneath the joy. It's not mine. My smile falters as I glance around the room. Guests swirl past, glasses clinking and low murmurs filling the space. And then I see her—Violet. She's standing beside Gray, laughing at something he said, head tossed back like she doesn't have a care in the world. But I know better. I can see it beneath her laughter, that small shadow in her eyes. My chest tightens. She's not okay.

I make my way over, weaving through the crowd, ignoring the soft calls and offers of drinks. She looks up as I approach, her smile still in place, but I see the way it slips for just a second. It's like she knows I can see her, really see her. "What's wrong?" I ask softly, slipping my hand into hers. She hesitates, glancing at Gray, then back at me. I squeeze her fingers. "Vi, you don't have to pretend with me. I can feel it."

Her shoulders drop, just a little, and she leans in closer so only I can hear. "I'm sorry, Sofie," she says quietly, her voice trembling at the edges. "I'm so sorry I made you suffer for so long. I thought I could do it on my own, that I had to do it on my own. But I couldn't. I never could have. I was so fucking wrong."

The weight behind those words makes my chest ache. I shake my head against her, my arms wrapping tighter around her waist. "Don't do that, Vi. Don't beat yourself up over those months. We got through them, right?"

She lets out a small, shaky laugh, but it's not really humor—it's relief, maybe. Regret. "We got through them, but it could've been so much worse. You were right. I needed someone... or someones," she says, her voice breaking just a little on the word. "You were right all along."

Hearing her say it, hearing her admit it, doesn't fill me with satisfaction. I don't want to be right. I just want her to be happy. I pull back just enough to look up at her. "Vi, I don't fault you for those months. They were hard, sure, but they were also bittersweet. It was you and me against the world, like always. I'll never hold that against you."

Her smile is faint, but it's there, a soft curve of her lips that makes her whole face gentler, lighter. "Are you happy, Sofie?" she asks, her voice so soft it's barely more than a whisper.

I nod, no hesitation. "Yeah, Vi. I'm happy. I mean, look at this—look at us. How

could I not be?"

Her hand comes up to cup my cheek, her thumb brushing lightly against my skin. "And what about you?" I ask her. "Is this everything you wanted?"

Violet's eyes meet mine, and they're warm, steady, full of something I can't quite name but feel down to my bones. "Everything I want is right here in my arms," she says, her voice firm and honest. "But I'm more than happy to have the four men that came with it."

That pulls a laugh from me, a genuine one that bubbles up and fills the room as she dips her lips back to mine. It's like the world fades away, just the two of us in it even as heat builds in my lower belly, threatening to ruin this moment. Hawk is also now on my shit list. Until the bite heals, we're both going to succumb to this feeling and it's impossible not to touch my Beta.

A warm hand on my waist yanks me back, breaking the kiss and pulling me a step away from Violet's warmth. I blink up, startled, only to see Lance looking down at me with that familiar mix of fondness and teasing. Hawk is just behind him, arms crossed and smirking like the devil himself.

"Sofie," Lance says, his voice low and amused, "your scent's getting a little too sweet."

I glance back at Violet, her lips parted, cheeks flushed, and I know exactly what Lance means. I feel the heat on my own skin, and my tongue darts out to taste the faint tang of my own arousal lingering in the air. My first instinct is to shove him off, but before I can, Hawk cuts in with a laugh. "We're not giving the guests a free show."

The guests. Right. There are people here. A lot of people, scattered around the house,

sipping wine and murmuring in low voices. It's easy to forget when Violet's hands are on me. And now most of them are looking, chuckling, admiring.

I scowl at them both, my lips still tingling, and grumble, "Then send them home."

That earns me more laughter, Lance shaking his head and Hawk giving me a playful nudge. "Not how it works, sweetheart," Hawk says, his voice light but his smile soft. "You're stuck with us until they leave. Besides, we haven't fully introduced the two of you as part of the Ashford pack."

I cross my arms and glance around the room, my eyes moving over the small groups of people lingering near the art displays, the faint hum of conversation in the air. It's still strange to me, seeing this place filled with strangers, but the thing that strikes me the most is how natural it all feels. How we've fallen into this life, this family, with all its chaos and tension and love.

It's not just Violet and me anymore, not just us against the world. It's her, me, and these four infuriating, wonderful Alphas who have somehow managed to anchor us in a way I didn't think was possible. I catch Violet's gaze across the short distance Lance put between us. She's watching me with a small, knowing smile, and my heart stutters. We've been through so much—struggled, fought, cried, and healed—but now, standing here with our mates around us, I realize that this is what a happily ever after looks like. Not the perfect fairy tale, but something messy and real, something we've built together.

And I wouldn't trade it for the world.

### Chapter fifty-nine

#### PUMA

It's been an entire two weeks, in and out of calls with Banks as we try to figure out how much shit we're in until this blows over. The showing was a success, many of our clients throwing fake apologies and sending gift baskets as if to make up for all the hurtful words. It doesn't but seeing how excited Sofie gets over the expensive chocolate is enough to make me let it go.

Gray has picked up a few more projects, Violet keeping him from overworking himself. Code for she tires him out so that he ends up calling clients and saying that he needs to reschedule. I, for one, am not complaining how many times I've walked in on them, Violet straddling his thighs on the couch, the two tangled in something that is wholly them.

And the one time they all but stumbled into the goddamn house, clothes already disheveled, Gray laying her out in the foyer.

It's a good thing we don't regularly host parties or I'd have to kill my fair share of clientele.

It's an entire madhouse that we've adopted, all of us finding ourselves deep inside of our women whenever they'll let us, Sofie still finding ways to drive us up the wall when it's just the two of them. It's the most precious thing to watch, the both of them teasing each other to orgasm while we give into our desires.

And then when it just becomes a mass cuddle at the end of the nights, each of us sharing bits and pieces of our day, Sofie and Violet thriving in a way I never thought possible. Hell, I'm thriving, my heart in my throat at the memories of everything I've lost and everything I've gained. Maybe one day I'll be strong enough to recant that story to my pack.

For now, though, I throw up a little thank you to the woman who first had my heart, hoping she can see that I finally let myself be truly happy again.

And then I drag myself back to reality.

I huff out a heavy sigh, leaning back in my chair as I stare at a case folder I most certainly should not have access to. Detective Grayson has been relentlessly working on the case, interrogating both Nolan and Marion, not that they've really let anything slip.

Until today.

When Detective Grayson called, letting me know that they'd found something, I made the twins promise to stay at home and only allowed Gray to come because of his personal connection to Nolan. He needed to see this through more than I did. He's bristling at my side, one of his legs bouncing uncontrollably as he tries and fails to contain his emotions. I reach over and squeeze his thigh. "Breathe, Gray." I glance up at Detective Grayson across the table. "Now, tell me again what I'm looking at, detective."

"Noah, please. Jesus, Puma. You're always so formal. Look, I've been trying to crack them for weeks and for a while, I thought we were just going to have to work with whatever bullshit we could drag up. Until the warrant for Nolan's house pushed through. We found a few things." Noah flips through a few pages and then points to a slew of pictures.

At first, I have no idea what I'm looking at and then it all makes sense. Nolan wasn't just a jealous asshole, threatening to ruin our livelihood. Well, he was that but so much more and now I need answers. "Tell me I can fucking talk to him."

Noah grins. "Why do you think I called you down here? Look, don't touch him. Don't even look at him funny. My job is on the line here but I pulled a few strings to work this shift alone. They needed everyone on a case in the city, anyways. So, it's us three and that poor sucker for a bit."

Gray cuts in. "Just like that? He's going to give us all the answers?"

The detective shakes his head, standing up and gesturing for us to follow him. "Not in the slightest. I already got my answers two days ago. Currently sitting in a report on my chief's desk and it goes way deeper than everything we thought. However, I thought you might enjoy him telling it to your face."

He takes us through a small corridor, down a few steps, the hallway opening up to a long room with several bars along the back wall. My face scrunches up, Noah laughing as he points to the far cell. "It's not pretty but that's what the city gets when they give us this stupid cottage looking house for a second station."

Nolan peeks his head out, his dark eyes meeting mine through the bars. "Came to gloat, hmm? I'm going to jail and all that bullshit. I'm disheveled, haven't had a good moisturizer in days. Laugh all you want boys. This is as good as it gets."

Something about how clipped his words are give me pause. There's something else here and it isn't just jealousy. "What was the reason, Nolan?" I growl out, resisting the urge to step closer and grip the bars. I want to strangle that man's neck but it can't happen.

"You two, all of you really. Thought you were so smart and you still can't figure it



out? It's about balance. You've had everything handed to you. I just thought it was time you felt a little pain. The plan was perfect. All the pieces were in place. Then that fucking Beta had to go and ruin everything."

Beta? I blink, confused for a split second, before it clicks. Violet. She must've caught on, done something to throw a wrench in his scheme. And that's what's pissing him off. I glance at Noah as he nods, letting me know that Nolan's telling the truth. "That's what this is about?" I hiss. "You tried to destroy us because you think we've had it too good? You call that balance?" This doesn't make sense. There's no reason someone like Nolan would throw everything away for a game like this. It's too easy.

Nolan leans closer, his voice dropping as he presses his face against the bars. "You don't get it, do you? It's not about what you have. It's about what I don't. People like you—your pack—you don't understand what it's like to scrape by. To see people hand you respect just because of your name. I had to work for everything, Gray. And still, it was never enough. It didn't matter how much I had in my collection or the size of my house or the Omega I had on my arm."

I remember the days when I was just starting out, when I took over my family's fortune and began doing things my way. Nolan and I ran in the same circles but while he fell into the life of a collector, I branched out and became so much more. When the twins and Gray became part of the pack, everything exploded into the masterpiece operation we now have. Never in a million years did I think that Nolan saw that as competition or an issue.

He had always been cordial, helpful, and he liked Gray—even used to make comments about the Alpha before Gray officially accepted my bite. "Filtering bullshit into the art world was never going to give you the status you craved. Because you couldn't claim it. Sure, you have the riches but there's no fame that comes from dealing in fakes, Nolan. Where the fuck did you see all this going?"

Nolan sighs, leaning back, his head hitting the stone wall behind him. His gaze settles on Gray, a twisted smile sitting on his lips. It's almost as if he's mulling the weight of words, choosing which answer he wants to give. "There's no point in saying anything to you. I'm sure the papers will blast it to high heaven once the case starts."

I step forward, slamming my hand against the bars. "And I want to hear it from you. Nolan, you were a business connection, an acquaintance, but more than that a friend. I trusted you. I'm not naïve enough to think that you need to repay those feelings but what you did would not have only ruined my livelihood but my family. Do you see that? Do you even care?" A growl follows, reverberating through the jail room.

Noah clears his throat, raising an eyebrow at me to cut the shit and keep my anger in check. I merely nod at him before turning my attention back to Nolan, waiting for an explanation.

The easy smile on his lips is pissing me the fuck off. "It was easy. Populating the market, making a fortune, bringing in people who wanted to make money too. But then you all showed up and made it impossible. Impossible for me to be the one everyone turned to for their recommendations." Nolan lets out a heavy sigh. "You ripped the rug right from under me with your fancy suits and pack life that everyone wanted to delve into. It made sense to step up the game."

I frown, counting back the years when we first met, when everything really started. "Wait. Are you telling me that you built everything around this? That it was never real? Nolan..."

He lets out a sharp laugh, managing a shrug. "Puma, only you would be so goddamn stupid as to think that everyone gets their wealth so legally. I'd look through all those past sales your parents did and their parents did to garner all that money. I assure you it's not all above the table."

I know for a fact that everything was above the table because it's one of the few things they drilled into me. It's one of the only things my father made me promise him every goddamn day of my life—that my business measures would always be pure regardless of the world around me. And I've stuck to it because my family comes first and then the art. It's why in the last two weeks, I haven't felt the need to jump right back into all this bullshit.

Not if this is what it's going to get me.

Gray steps up beside me, his anger radiating through his entire body. “So, this was all just a game to you? Just a need to get your audience back, per se? Why the fuck did you keep hiring me?”

“Keep up an image, I guess. I couldn't outright fire you because then you'd see me working with someone else and besides, you're excellent at your job. I needed to be the best and you were just right there for the taking.”

That pisses me off but it irritates Gray more. “So just use me while you tear my family apart. And now you're in jail after running after some game that still doesn't make any fucking sense.”

Nolan pushes off the little seat, coming to press himself against the bars. Gray and I step back, not really wanting an altercation that will land us in jail. “I know you think I'm Orion or some part of his empire that he built but that's only half the truth.”

“And what is the whole truth, Nolan? Stop beating around the fucking bushes.”

He doesn't answer but I'm done playing games. I just want to go home, turn off the world and focus on my mates. Maybe get a little drunk, dance around, and then fuck some of them unconscious. Or maybe we'll all watch Violet fuck Sofie. We've been asking for it but every time it comes up, Violet says she no longer has to work that

hard anymore because Sofie has three cocks to choose from.

And then we find Violet washing off that knotty dildo the next morning with a smirk on her face.

I rattle the jail door, growling through the bars at the one man I'd like to wring to death. He lunged at my mate, was working with Marion who assaulted her, and he's betrayed my trust. Forget the fucking court case, he deserves death. I'm not sure what does it—the rustiness of the lock or maybe Noah didn't really lock it but the fucking door slams open, giving me full access.

I shouldn't.

I should walk away even though I don't have the answers I need. But I don't. I rush inside, slamming Nolan against the far wall, my hand around his throat, fingers digging into the skin. "Tell me what the fuck is going on, Nolan. For real this time." My lips are curled up in a snarl, my Alpha roar rumbling through my chest.

It's the first time I've seen true fear in this man's eyes and it's everything and yet, still not enough.

Trembling fingers claw at my wrist as he scrambles for air. "Get the fuck off of me! Look, none of this matters. They've got me but it's not everything. Orion is just a name, basically myth. I'm only part of the problem. You didn't know? Sure, I'll end up spending a few nights behind bars until someone pays off the judge and the case is dismissed. I'll disappear into the shadows and then someone will take my place, someone you least expect, someone who will fuck with the next person's head until they're discovered too. Don't you get it? It's a game."

This man borrowed a myth in order to fuck with me, my family, and my livelihood. I pull him forward and then smash him against the wall again, growling in his face

until a sharp click echoes in the cell. I twist around to see Noah pointing a gun at me. “Let him go, Puma. I gave you this moment to figure out what happened so you could have closure. Not so you could kill him.”

I chuck Nolan away from me, grinning at the way he stumbles and sputters for air, Noah’s gun still trained on me until I step back into the hallway. He locks the cell and ushers us back into the main part of the small station, shoving his gun back into his holster. I’m not even going to apologize. All I know is that this is over and while it pisses me off that this was just a game to him, I can be relieved that the moves have been made.

Now, I just need to know when this fucker is getting out.

It’s as if Noah can read my mind. “Nolan isn’t getting out, Puma. We got Judge Fawn. You know, the one who puts people away forever because she’s good at what she does. I don’t care what kind of money Nolan has or had but you won’t be seeing him out on the streets. Now, go home and fuck a mate or two. I think I need a smoke and whiskey after that shit.”

I chuckle, turning to shake his hand, silently apologizing for my temper. Gray shakes his hand as well as we head out to the car.

“Well, that was bullshit,” Gray grumbles. “I want to play a game that involves taking it out on his ass.” I raise an eyebrow, waiting for the younger Alpha to realize what he said. “Fuck, that’s not what I mean.”

“But that’s what you said. It’s okay, babe. I’ll make sure to take it out on your ass when we get home. Maybe knot you again while Violet tortures you with her mouth.”

He snorts, climbing into the car. “That’s not going to happen. The moment we get home, our women are going to want to know what’s going on and then they’re going

to get a little angry and then probably shut us out while we have to hear them fuck.”

That’s entirely true which is why I dial Lance, telling the twins to soften them up for when we get home. Unfortunately, the obscene moans playing over the speaker as Lance changes it to a video call have me speeding down the road. I can’t even see the fucker’s face, Sofie neatly spread over his lips, Violet straddled over his lap.

She steals the phone, my beautiful Beta’s face coming into view, her lips parted on a moan. “We were getting a little bored waiting.”

“Fuck, Dove. I have to drive.”

“Then hang up and drive. See you soon.”

I might break a few laws on the way home to our mates because fuck, I’m ready to start the rest of our lives. Gray’s cackling in the background and I make a mental note to fuck him first when we get inside.

### Chapter sixty

#### A MONTH LATER

#### VIOLET

Life in the house is different now, softer, easier. We've found our rhythm over the last month, a comfortable routine that feels natural even though it's still new. Gray and I work side by side most days, bouncing ideas off each other, and honestly, I didn't think I'd love the way he slides in every now and then with that smug grin and some witty remark, but I do. I really fucking do.

Business is picking up again and we've been busy, which I'm grateful for. Ash & Ivory shut down—finally—and a massive fraud investigation is sweeping through the community. Every day, there's another name in the news, another collector or dealer getting caught up in the mess. It's strange to watch it unfold from a distance now, knowing that the storm that was directly over us has moved on. They're all on edge, trying to figure out if the infamous "Orion" is a real person or just some elaborate ghost story. I don't have the energy to care anymore. Let them dig. Let them chase their tails. I'm just happy that we're finally getting some peace.

Sofie's thriving and I can't stop smiling when I think about it. She's come alive in a way I haven't seen in years—maybe ever. Her days aren't consumed with worry or the endless burden of survival anymore. She's happy. Playful. Light. And it's so damn good to see. But I keep checking in anyway. It's a habit I can't shake. "Is there anything you want to do, baby?" I'll ask her when we're curled up on the couch or eating breakfast, and for weeks she just kept saying, "I'm still thinking."

Then, just the other night, she turned to me, her head resting against my shoulder, and she said, “Is it okay if I’m just an Omega?”

I stopped cold for a moment because I knew exactly what she meant. I knew what it felt like to think you had to be something more, to be everything for everyone, all the time. I pressed a kiss to her hair and said, “You’ll never be just an Omega.”

And she smiled. God, that smile. It felt like we’d turned a corner.

Now, I find myself enjoying the little things more than ever. The quiet mornings when I wake up sandwiched between Gray and Sofie. The way the twins bicker over who gets the last slice of toast at breakfast. Puma’s steady, grounding presence that always seems to settle the room, even when things get a little too loud. The long nights spent planning projects with Gray or curled up on the couch with the twins, talking about nothing and everything all at once.

“Hey, is everyone ready? It’s already seven!” I yell, eager to meet up with Camila at Temple . She’s been asking for a few days now but I couldn’t get all of our Alphas in one place. But tonight, our packs get to meet and I’m so damn excited to show off the happy ending I never thought we’d have. Especially since I have a small secret that I’m bringing with me... well, secrets.

Camila spots us the moment we walk in and breaks into this huge grin, waving us over to her private booth. Her mates are sprawled out around her, unsure expressions on their faces. None of the Alphas are particularly excited about tonight, Gray specifically mentioning something about squealing women but I playfully slapped him for it and then Sofie said we’re both off limits to Gray for the rest of the week.

Neither one of us is going to be able to uphold that promise but at least Gray thinks we will. Lance immediately drags Sofie onto the dance floor, Gray following and I already know that there’s going to be some kind of obscene rhythm happening in the



next five minutes. If all of Sofie's clothes stay on, I will be amazed. However, my attention is on Camila.

Kolsen and Amiri are off to the side, watching Sasha as he leans back against Camila, looking every bit the spoiled Omega. I slide into the booth, Hawk pressing up beside me on the cushioned bench, one of those delicious hands on my hips as he murmurs something low in my ear that makes me blush. Camila starts going off about the club and everything that's happening, Hawk not even trying to hide the way he nuzzles into my neck every so often, planting warm, open-mouthed kisses against my skin. Puma is sitting to my left, sipping on something that looks deceptively mild, but I know him better than that. It's probably strong enough to knock me on my ass.

Camila takes a break in her story, a soft smile spreading across her lips "You look so fucking happy, Violet. And Sofie—god, she's coming out of her shell. I'm so glad."

I glance over to where Sofie's dancing and laugh softly. Gray is practically grinding against her, his hands on her waist and Lance is right there beside him, moving in sync with the two of them. She's smiling so wide I half expect her face to split. I turn back to Camila, shrugging like it's no big deal, but my heart feels full in a way I can't describe. "She deserves it," I tell her. "We both do."

Sasha, who's been lounging against Amiri's shoulder, perks up at that. He sits forward, his eyes bright with mischief as he looks at me. "She's fucking precious," he muses. "If you're not going to take care of her, I've got another space for her."

Amiri groans, slapping a hand over Sasha's mouth. "No," he says firmly. "We absolutely do not have space for another Omega. Don't even think about it."

Laughter ripples through the booth, and I shake my head, grinning at the way Sasha rolls his eyes but doesn't push it. Kolsen mutters something about how he'd lose his mind if he had another Omega to deal with, and Amiri nods along like he's been

through a war. Sasha just smirks, clearly enjoying the chaos he's causing.

The guys peel away, off to some corner of the club to talk business or whatever the hell they find so important. Puma catches my eye as he goes, giving me a look that's part warning, part amusement. I roll my eyes, mouthing "I'll be good," and then they're gone. It's not like I'm going to cause trouble—not tonight, anyway. I lean back in the booth, nursing my drink and taking in the scene.

Then I notice it. Camila's glass is full and untouched, which is unusual enough to make my brows shoot up. I glance over at her, and she catches my look, her lips curling into a knowing smile. Before I can even ask, she leans in, her voice low so we don't have to shout over the music.

"Sasha's hard work paid off," she says, a little smug and a lot proud.

It takes a second for her words to click and then my eyes widen. "What? Seriously? Why aren't we celebrating?"

Camila laughs, tipping her head back. "Because I haven't told anyone yet, dummy."

"Well, how did it happen? Which position did the trick?" I ask, grinning. Months ago before Camila met her mates, we jokingly printed off a list of sexual positions and things to try. When her mates found it, they took it more as a challenge and as far as I know, she's done just about every single one of them. By god, some of them would make the devil blush.

Camila laughs harder at that, shaking her head. "I'll tell them in a bit," she says, placing a hand over her stomach. "Assuming they don't notice the belly first."

"You mean—" I scramble across the booth to get a closer look, peering down at her midsection. Sure enough, there's the tiniest little bump, barely noticeable under the

flowy top she's wearing. "Oh my god," I breathe, wrapping her in a hug. "Camila! Congratulations!"

She hugs me back, her laughter turning softer, more private. "Thanks, Vi. I found out a month ago, but I didn't want to say anything until I was sure. Plus, I'm really enjoying the manhandling, and if Amiri or Kolsen find out, they'll probably say I'm fragile now or some bullshit."

I pull back, grinning at her. "You mean they don't know yet?"

"Not officially," she says, smirking. "But I wouldn't be surprised if they've caught on and are just waiting for me to say it."

Sofie, who must have caught the tail end of our exchange, pops up beside me. "What's going on?"

I glance at Camila, who nods, and then I tell Sofie the news. Her face lights up, and she lets out a little squeal before hugging Camila.

"That's amazing!" Sofie says, practically vibrating with excitement. "But wait, why is it still a secret?"

"Because I'm enjoying my fun," Camila says, smirking. "The moment they know, they'll start treating me like I'm made of glass."

Sofie giggles, leaning against me. "I can't believe it. It's almost like old times."

The words hit me, bittersweet, and I see it in Sofie's face, too. The memories of those wild nights when it was just the three of us, no packs, no mates, no bonds. Back then, it was all tequila shots and table dancing, laughing until our stomachs hurt, and stumbling home barefoot with our shoes in our hands.

Sofie sighs, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “I wish I could get drunk and dance on the tabletops again, but no doubt one of our Alphas would end up punishing me.” Camila and I exchange a look. Then Sofie grins, mischievous and bright. “Actually,” she says, her voice taking on that familiar playful lilt, “not a bad idea. Well, minus the drink part. Wish me luck.” She blows us both a kiss before running off, focus locked on the small detached stage by the front.

Camila watches after her for several moments before her smile flips and she glances back at me. “Wait, why the fuck isn’t Sofie drinking? Bitch, are you holding out on me?” She stares as I dig into my purse and unearth two pregnancy tests I had to stealthily buy two days ago. The signs were all there and we just needed to know. Our Alphas are going to have a fucking heart attack. Her eyes are darting between the tests and me, her gaze narrowing until it clicks. “Bitch, are you both pregnant?”

I chuckle, nodding. “It seems that the four of them have been very eager with all the free time they’ve had and now we’re reaping the rewards.”

“Holy shit and neither of them know?”

“They’re about to. I wanted everyone to see their faces when I tell them the good news.”

Camila snorts. “No, you wanted to watch them freak the fuck out as they realize that they’re going to be dealing with two hormonal, crazy women. Don’t look at me like that. You’re stubborn as hell and Sofie is...” We both look over to see her squealing as Hawk throws her over his shoulder and carries her back toward our table. Our men are slowly meandering back over as Sofie slides in on our side of the booth and I enact my plan the moment Puma comes within ear shot.

“Be careful Hawk. She’s pregnant. You’ve got to take it easy.”

Silence filters between us, the chaos and pumping music settling in. Lance frowns. “Wait, what?”

Sofie cuts in. “Hey! I’m not the only one.” She reaches over and steals the pregnancy tests, shoving them toward our Alphas. Camila’s Alphas and Sasha are all there, everyone wide eyed. For a moment, I just hold my breath and then—

“Holy shit,” the twins say in unison.

Gray follows with, “We’re going to be dads.”

Sasha lets out a frustrated grown. “So not fair. I’ve been fucking our little mama for months and they get pregnant first?”

“Who said?” Camila pushes out, raising an eyebrow. More shock, more silence before Sasha nearly launches himself over the table, one of her Alphas having to catch him by that beautiful collar around his neck.

Camila, Sofie, and I burst into giggles, plans already running through my head at the fact that our children are going to be thick as thieves the same we were. The only difference is that I’m not going to abandon them when things get hard. Through thick and thin, I will support them through every venture and every choice and every hardship so that they know they don’t always have to be in control.

That sometimes, you can lean.

### Chapter sixty-one

#### Three Months Later

#### VIOLET

This took forever to plan—like some kind of divine alignment of stars just to make it happen. We're finally here, though, in a crowded rink that smells like popcorn and ice and bodies pressed a little too close together. The place is alive with noise, shouting, cheers, and the occasional crack of a puck against the boards. Roman is on the ice, gliding like it's second nature, barely looking 23 with that boyish grin he flashes when he lands a clean pass. The Beta is all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and the crowd adores him. Every time he touches the puck, the noise swells, a collective gasp and cheer that rattles in my chest.

Sofie is cuddled up beside me, her face flushed from the chill of the rink. She's wearing that oversized scarf again, the one that makes her look even smaller and more adorable, and she keeps sneaking glances at Roman with the kind of quiet awe she usually reserves for our Alphas.

The twins are missing tonight—Hawk and Lance stuck dealing with some gallery exhibit and Puma only barely made it. He's sitting on the other side of Gray, both of them looking like proud parents as they watch Roman weave between defenders and set up another perfect play.

Sofie and I are both sporting small bumps, mine more pronounced than hers because apparently Betas show faster which is bullshit. I was just happy—as were our

Alphas—that I wasn’t carrying twins or god forbid triplets. We’ve shared each little milestone, driving our Alphas mad with the strangest cravings and needs that always seem to happen at the worst times.

At least here, I can eat my chocolate covered popcorn dipped in ketchup in peace. It has to be the greasiest, buttered stuff with chocolate melting on my fingers as I crunch. It’s a whole process, one that Gray teases me about. Sofie isn’t much better, sneaking a piece of popcorn every now and then before dropping it into her tropical soda. It has to be the right amount of soggiess before she eats it. Unlike me, she wants no crunch.

I admit it’s gross but I’m not telling our Alphas that.

The game drones on, nothing about it making any sense but I find myself clapping along, getting caught up in the energy. It’s hard not to, though. Maybe I should be watching the whole team but my attention is on Gray’s brother. It’s clear he thrives on the attention, grinning every time the crowd erupts. Sofie giggles when Roman flips the puck casually over a defender’s stick and I nudge her playfully, feeling her lean more into my side.

Half time comes and goes, Gray and Puma both checking in on us multiple times, asking if we’re warm enough, if we need to move, if we’re comfortable and I have to growl at them both to stop bothering us. We’re fine. For now. That might change in five minutes.

My attention is stolen by a Beta slipping into a seat beside us, her face flushed as she rubs her hands together and blows into them. “Maya?” I ask, a little confused how we ended up in the same goddamn arena right next to each other. “What are you doing here?”

Her eyes widen as a smile takes over her face. “Sofie, Violet? Wow! I didn’t think I’d

see you all out here. Damn.”

Gray leans over my shoulder, silently asking for an introduction. I grasp his chin between my fingers, smearing a little chocolate there. “Maya lived two doors down in our apartment building. Maya, this is Gray and Puma, two of our Alphas.”

She waves at them before refocusing her attention on us, her smile dropping when she notices the messy food we’re eating. I move the bucket out of the way to show off my belly, Sofie sitting up to do the same. Maya bursts out laughing. “Damn, they’ve got a handful but you two look good! I’m happy for you. You both deserve it so goddamn much.”

“What brought you here? This game isn’t exactly... on the way to anything.”

She nods, leaning back in her chair. Her thick, curly hair is pulled tightly back into a perfect, round bun, accentuating the sharp lines of her cheeks. “My dad used to coach the team decades ago and I guess this whole place is bittersweet. I’m heading here for grad school in a few weeks.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, maybe some sports medicine. I’m not entirely sure but I think this is where I’m meant to be. I spent so many damn mornings in ice rinks when I was little that it kind of feels like home. I was only in Ansdale for undergrad.” Her entire face is beaming, like she’s proud of this step she’s taken and I am too.

“Well, I hope it all works out.”

“I hope so. Even if I wasn’t going here in the fall, I’ve never missed a game since my dad stopped coaching.” Her attention turns back to the ice and I can see in the way her face moves that she’s analyzing every pass, every move, every little thing. I can



only imagine all the things her father taught her and how much all of that sucked her in.

The very same way being around our Alphas truly immersed me into the art world. They've left a lot of it behind after all of the Orion bullshit. Puma said it wasn't worth it to chance fate and while I felt sorry we were ruining their livelihood, after showing me his bank account, I no longer feel that way. Especially since Gray still takes clients when he wants to and the twins find ways of trading art when they can. Puma's still sifting through collections, all of them busy in their own way... just differently than before.

As the game goes on, the tension rises, both on the ice and off. The crowd grows louder with every play, every near goal, and every time Roman skates past our section. Maya's gaze drifts to the goalie, snagging on him several times, a warm smile playing on her lips. It's when Roman seems to look into the crowd, searching for someone that I have to hold back a laugh.

Because who he's looking at is the very same Beta enamored with the goalie. Fuck, I wish I wanted to go back to school so I could see how this unfolds. I eagerly chomp on my popcorn before setting the bucket on the floor, Gray graciously handing me a napkin. I'm too busy watching this vague threesome play out to even know the game ended except for the cheers erupting through the stadium.

"That's it?" I ask, Gray shaking his head as he helps me to my feet. Puma hops up the row behind us to hoist Sofie up to his level. She grins up at him, saying something about 'thank you, my king', before breaking into a fit of giggles, our men guiding us down the steps to the rink a few moments later.

I throw a wave back at Maya, keeping my thoughts to myself. For now. Because now we're about to meet the family and I'm just a little terrified.

Roman's still on the ice, making a few slow loops as the stands slowly empty. He spots us and skates over, a wide smile splitting his face. The kid barely looks old enough to rent a car, all bright-eyed and earnest, and the way he beelines straight for Gray has me stifling a laugh. Gray's already bracing himself when Roman crashes into him, wrapping him in a tight hug that would've bowled over anyone else. I watch as Gray grips the back of Roman's jersey, their laughter blending with the fading cheers in the background.

When Roman pulls back, his eyes flicker to me. He tilts his head, a curious smile playing at his lips as if he's putting the pieces together. "So, you're the reason my brother looks like he finally got his shit together."

I chuckle, crossing my arms over my belly. The sweatshirt hides most of my figure but not entirely. "I think he got his shit together all on his own. But I'm happy to take credit if it makes me look good."

Roman grins wider and then turns toward Sofie, his gaze softening. "And you must be Sofie." He steps closer, reaching out to gently take her hand. "I'm Roman, by the way. Glad to meet you. My brother's been bragging about you both and the fact that he's going to be a dad twice over. Shit, you've got your hands full, bro..."

Sofie blushes furiously, her smile shy but genuine. "Nice to meet you, too," she murmurs, her voice barely above a whisper.

"Glad he's got some female influence now. Lord knows he needed it. Hopefully, you have daughters so you can punish him a little bit."

I raise an eyebrow, leaning forward just enough to catch Roman's attention. "It seems there's a little in your life too, no?" I nod toward the stands, my gaze locking on Maya who's still staring out at the ice. Her shoulders fall just slightly before she picks up to leave.

Roman's cheeks go red, his expression faltering for just a moment before he covers it up with a forced laugh. "There's always a few fans around."

I smirk, shaking my head. "Really? Because I know that look and I wasn't talking about the way she was looking at you." I nudge Gray, who's watching the exchange with thinly veiled amusement. "That's exactly how I look at Sofie. Like she's my entire world."

Roman shoots me a look that would probably wilt a lesser Beta, his cheeks darkening further. "Buzz off," he mutters, but there's no real heat behind the words. He glances back at the stands, Maya long gone, and then clears his throat. "You guys coming to the celebratory dinner?"

I exchange a glance with Sofie, who's grinning from ear to ear. "Wouldn't miss it," I say. Roman skates back across the ice to join his team as Puma grabs my hand and Gray settles on the other side of Sofie. It feels amazing, although it'd be even better if the twins were here.

The cold hits hard as we step outside, the crunch of ice underfoot punctuating our conversation. My gaze finds Maya leaning against her car, arms crossed, her eyes fixed on the team entrance as if she's waiting for one last glance at the players. I have no idea why I think Maya and Roman are going to end up together. But in my gut, it feels like fate. I also think the goalie is going to be involved. He looked kind of like an Alpha. He was large enough to be one. "Two months," I murmur as we approach our own car.

Gray raises an eyebrow, smirking down at me. "Two months for what?"

"Roman and Maya and that goalie," I say, slipping my hand into his. "They'll be a thing in two months. Tops."

He huffs out a laugh, shaking his head. “Were we watching the same game, princess?”

I nod, more sure than I probably have any right to be. “It’s fate,” I say simply, grinning when he rolls his eyes. “It’s written in the stars, Gray. Just trust me on this. Her eyes were locked on the goalie but she caught Roman’s attention. I’m telling you it’s going to be a thing. Call him in two months and ask how it’s going.”

Gray chuckles, squeezing my hand as we come to a stop. I glance back again and catch Maya still standing there. She looks conflicted. Her shoulders are tense, her jaw pulled tight. Before I can second-guess it, I lift my free hand and wave at her. She blinks, looking startled, but then gives a small wave back.

I tilt my head toward the goalie, who’s talking to someone near the exit. “Talk to him,” I call over. “Maybe it’ll be something.”

Maya’s mouth opens, then closes. Her expression twists and she shakes her head quickly, a flash of sadness crossing her face. “Just old friends, Violet. You don’t need to pair everyone up all the time.”

I shrug, giving her a small smile. “Fighting it won’t make it any easier.” I neglect to mention that Roman’s got his eyes set on her. She’ll figure that in due time when he tries to use his boyish charms on her. If Roman is anything like his brother, it’s going to be a glorious disaster and I’m so here for it.

Gray ushers me toward the car, almost like he’s embarrassed at my blunt self. As we climb in, Puma chuckles from the driver’s seat. “Alright, so Violet bet that they’d win by double,” he says. “Which means Violet gets to choose the sleeping arrangements tonight.”

I shoot him a grin, catching Sofie’s sleepy smile in the back seat. “Me and Sofie in

the nest tonight,” I say brightly.

The collective groans from the guys are immediate and hilarious. Gray looks at me like I’ve betrayed him. Puma just shakes his head, laughing as he starts the car.

I settle back, smug as hell. “Blame Puma for that one,” I say. “Not me. And Gray? You get to tell the twins they’re not allowed in.”

“You realize what you do to us when you shut us out and then fuck each other, right? Do you know how hard it is to hear that and not be in there with you? God, Puma, this is why you don’t bet against Violet!”

### CAMILA

I smooth down my dress, staring at the periwinkle color that my mother fell in love with years ago before she passed away. Our house is doused in the simple purplish gray but I've grown to love it. The top scrunches around my chest and bows out just above my hips hiding the rolls I'm subconscious of. Unfortunately, it only accentuates the fact that I look like an Omega—chubby cheeks and baby fat I've never lost. The problem? I'm very much a Beta.

Nerves have me on edge driving from my father's house to my brother's, unsure if they truly want me to ride to the fair with them or if it was just a nice gesture. After all, Ethan has a pack of his own and I'm just his older, unmarried, unbonded sister who still lives at home. Swallowing down my anxiety, I raise my hand to knock on the door when it swings open.

"Mila!" Ethan screeches as I catch a face full of Omega. I wrap my arms around my younger brother, giggling at the way he snuggles into my chest. He's always been cuddly, even before finding his pack and I used to enjoy the movie nights in his makeshift nest in the basement before he moved out a year ago. Ethan is the kind of Omega that just has so much fucking love to give that people can't help but smile in his presence. Add in the fact that he smells like summer—no distinct sweet flavor—just summer itself and it is hard to be anything other than carefree around him.

I tighten my embrace before his Alpha, Zana extracts me from my brother to give me a hug of her own. "Almost thought you weren't coming, Mila," she purrs into my hair, followed by a soft kiss. I lean into her chest, drinking in the warmth provided by

my brother's pack. Ethan takes to hanging off my side, pressing his cheek to my arm as he rambles a thousand words a minute about his day, his weekend, and his newest favorite contraption—the expensive espresso machine sitting on the counter.

Zana helps me inside, chuckling as Ethan bounds over to the unopened box, pointing at the numerous bells and whistles he's excited to try out. I smooth down my dress again, a little worried that I've interrupted something when Zana just shakes her head. "We're very happy that you decided to drive over to the fair with us rather than your father. The stuffy old man kind of dulls your shine, sweetie."

I open my mouth to say that my father isn't a 'stuffy old man' but that's unfortunately a perfect description of him. Pastor, avid churchgoer, and a stickler for rules within the house. I'm happy that Ethan found his pack just after he graduated college last year so that he doesn't have to deal with any more of our father's bullshit. The curfews. The blind dates. The etiquette classes. Sunday services and the numerous sermons my father would dole out on the daily when we did something he didn't like.

Our father despises that Ethan found his forever outside of the church and with two mates rather than an Alpha that he picked out. I wouldn't trade Zana and Reid for the world, though. They're a precious addition to the family and fill the hole in my heart that comes with the absence of mates of my own.

My attention falls back on Ethan who is now unpacking the metal contraption even though we're supposed to be leaving in five minutes. "Zana, have you been giving my brother coffee?"

"No, that's all Reid. Apparently, Ethan's started obsessing over things we enjoy. He picked up sewing a few months ago because my tailor was on vacation. He bought all the supplies himself and he apparently has a knack for it." She turns around slowly, holding out her arms to show off a pantsuit that looks eerily similar to the ones she always wears. Correction, this one is a pale rose, brighter than her usual. It is, however, beautifully done, hugging her fit curves and accentuating the gold flecks in

her hazel eyes. When our eyes meet, I see that she's enjoying being catered to by her Omega. That it's a gift to be loved so completely. "Reid made a comment about shitty coffee a week or two ago and now we've worked through a few espresso machines. Ethan has to have the right one."

I thought I knew my brother but he continues to surprise me with his little quirks. I can't wait till I have someone I can love with my entire being, where it doesn't feel like a chore but a desire. A craving. A small smile creeps onto my face as Ethan grunts, trying to fit pieces together while a slightly annoyed Reid, their Beta, stomps into the kitchen to help. Ethan pauses when Reid wraps his arms around the Omega and then kisses his neck.

"We don't need coffee before we leave, Tan." Reid's nickname sounds like 'Tahn', Ethan wriggling in his Beta's grip. "Let's get you changed so we don't miss anything at the fair. How about that?" Ethan makes no move to answer, still gripping a piece of the machine in each hand. "Hello, Mila." He drags Ethan from the kitchen without looking over at us but I caught the smirk on his lips. Zana lets Ethan get away with murder. Reid, however, enjoys wrangling him into submission.

I plop onto one of the barstools, admiring their house. Zana's job as a lawyer pays well and she can afford to live the lavish life she's given herself and her pack. The white marbled floor and counters brighten this space and the living room is filled with creams and a hint of orange, courtesy of Ethan. That anxiety starts to creep back in as I drop my gaze to my lap and begin picking at my fingers.

"Mila, talk to me. How are you?"

"Great," I mumble. God, that was very convincing.

"You smell like a pack of lies," Zana says as she sits beside me and drags my stool closer until our knees are touching. "Try again." This woman has been trying to build my confidence since she met me. She's a saint for doing so but it's not her job. If I



just had the courage to tell my father that I was done with his rules, everything would be fine but angering him terrifies me more than marrying an Alpha he chooses.

I blow out a deep breath and then meet her gaze. “It’s an unnecessary power for an Alpha to know when I’m lying. I’m fine. Dad’s fine. Teo’s fine. Church is fine.” A whole bunch of bullshit if I would just be honest with myself. I’m far from fine. My father is ruining any bit of happiness I have left in my life. An art degree might bring me joy but I won’t need it when I get married—according to my father. And Teo? That on-again, off-again boyfriend that I can’t seem to shake because my heart is too broken to try new things will be the death of me.

But it’s fine.

Mostly.

Not really.

Zana groans as she leans back, looking down the hallway Reid and Ethan disappeared down. “Too many fines, Mila. Reid! Get over here and talk your sister-in-law into spilling the beans. You can kiss our Omega later!” Silence meets her demand and then Reid comes sauntering down the hallway, a sloppy grin on his face. He absolutely was devouring my brother even though we should be leaving. He looks smug as shit about it too.

Reid already knows about everything, though. He’s my best friend aside from two Betas at church and Ethan. He’s also the only one who truly understands what it’s like to be a Beta. The forgotten one. The discarded one. Some packs only ever take in Betas to ensure that the Omega is well-cared for. And before Reid met Ethan and Zana, he was on the sidelines just like I was. He doesn’t understand all my feelings but he’s so much easier to talk to about my pitiful outlook on life.

The Beta rounds the counter and pulls me into a hug, drowning me in his woodsy

scent that fits so perfectly with this pack. “You look better. You were pretty shot last weekend.” I weather a groan, wishing Reid hadn’t mentioned that. Zana has been pretty vocal about what she thinks about my father, even going so far as threatening to extract me from beneath his claws.

I have to remind her time and time again that my father isn’t the devil. He’s just... misinformed about a few things.

Her gaze narrows at the two of us. “Wait, Reid, did you go to the Sunday service?”

“Of course. Solidarity for our sister, Mila. Had to.” Reid tags along occasionally, mostly to be a nuisance but it gives me something to focus on other than the sermons that drone on about nonsense. I’m not even sure many of the words that come from my father’s mouth are from the Bible anymore. And when the other pastors speak? Snore.

Zana doesn’t understand my need to continue going. For as long as I am still at my father’s house, unmated and unmarried, he demands that I follow his rules. Sunday services and the occasional picnics require my attendance. Working at an art gallery in the heart of the city doesn’t pay enough for an apartment and while Zana has offered space in her home, I can’t impose like that. I love my brother. He’s my heart and soul but I refuse to listen when he’s getting fucked within an inch of his life.

Reid pulls away, searching my expression. I know he’s waiting for me to nod so that he can bring up the real reason my anxiety is at an all-time high. The gesture is barely there before Reid turns to his Alpha. “Mila fought with Teo again.”

“Why haven’t you two broken up yet?”

My body sags on the stool as I let out a pitiful sigh. “We’re not even dating, Zana, but Dad assures me that he’s the perfect Alpha for me to bow my head to.” I grit my teeth, hating the way my father explained my role within a pack, that all I needed to

do was smile, keep my head down, and be a good girl.

Fuck all of that.

It doesn't really hurt when my father demeans my position within a pack. However, for whatever reason, when Teo does it? A man I used to think I was in love with? It picks at old wounds, reminding me why I broke up with him in the first place. I try to see the good in that Alpha—for my father's sake—but after three months, I'm failing to see any real redeeming qualities that I would be able to suffer through for a lifetime.

Deciding to give them both the real truth, I swallow nervously and then puff out my chest. "The fights are always the same and I wouldn't call them fights. Disagreements? We don't see eye to eye on what we want in a pack. He wants someone cuddly to come home to, to smother him in love and affection with dinner ready on the table. He wants to fuck an Omega raw during their heat and protect his person wholeheartedly. I..." I pause. This isn't something I've ever admitted aloud, Reid and Zana leaning forward, waiting for it. "I don't want any of that."

Reid raises an eyebrow, confused while Zana just runs her tongue along her upper lip, trying and failing to hide a smile. "Explain, Mila, because I have about a thousand ideas of what you mean but I want to hear it from you."

I thank the stars that I have no problem talking about my private issues with these three, sharing the most intimate parts of myself with those I consider family. "I don't want cuddly. Don't get me wrong—I love my brother but I would go crazy with an Omega like that. I need..."

"An edge," Reid offers. "I would have never guessed that you and Teo didn't work because he was too vanilla. Does he only know how to do missionary?"

I choke on a laugh, officially done with this conversation. Reid isn't far off, though.

The craziest sex I've ever had with Teo was against a wall but only because a bed wasn't available and he promised not to drop me. Spoiler, he fucking dropped me. I didn't even come but faked a very good moan that had him smiling as if he had done something. Just another reason to stop trying with him, regardless of what my father wants.

Jumping off the stool, I head to the door before adding one last piece. I'm feeling a little spiteful after Zana and Reid have bolstered my confidence. Being around them makes me feel safe and beautiful in my own skin. "Teo might have also mentioned that I should try being a little more submissive since I look like an Omega."

The Alpha stands, shaking her head. "Every time you visit, you give me one more reason to confront that Alpha. Just say the word, Mila."

I wave her off before exiting the residence. Zana would make Teo shit his pants. Teo might look like a linebacker but all those muscles don't do anything useful. They're for show but Zana? Her anger is silent, calculating, and then at the last moment, it explodes. Everyone within reach is susceptible to experiencing Zana and it's not pretty.

The three are bumbling outside seconds later, Ethan taking my hand and dragging me to the car. "Zana promised me my weight in sugar."

"Seriously? Zana, do you ever tell him no?"

She laughs. "No, that's what Reid is for. Besides, this fair is the only fun thing to do in Ansdale. You can paint the cherry blossoms after Teo decides to act like an ass."

We pile into the car and I situate my bag on the floor, a small sketchpad, my phone, and a few other items stuffed inside. Ethan scoots in beside me, Zana in the driver's seat, and Reid beside her. It isn't even five minutes down the road when I catch Ethan snatching something from my purse, his eyes growing wider by the second.

“Mila,” he drawls. His scent thickens in the car and I roll down a window before snatching the paper back. I’m not fast enough to put it away before Reid takes it and all hope of surviving this car ride flies out the window.

Several seconds of silence filter between us before Reid turns to face me, dark blue eyes piercing through me. “Mila, did you print out a fucking sex checklist? Some of the things on here are... fuck, I wouldn’t even try some of these things.”

“It’s just a stupid dare, okay? Don’t worry about it.” I hold my hand out, my cheeks on fire with embarrassment. Reid stares at it for another few seconds before giving it back and I stuff it into my purse. I hold my purse in my lap and then look out the window, not wanting to discuss the paper they just found.

Violet and I were joking around at work, my best friend talking about all of the things she tried and experienced before. When I stared at her like a deer in headlights, she jokingly printed out this list and told me to experiment a little. I’ve researched most of the items, many of them making me a little worried for those who have tried them. However, I was intrigued so I kept it.

And now my brother’s pack knows about it.

Kill me now.

Well, after I get some cotton candy.