







# Who We Are (Collapse of the Premium Designation: The Invisible Omega Duet #4)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** Who am I?

Still an Omega, unfortunately.

Hunted and terrified,

I have no choice but to trust the promises of love.

I've been torn from my mates before and survived.

Can I make it a second time?

Who we are now will never be who we were.

No longer carefree children excited by the world,

We're each a little broken.

More than a little, actually.

How many times can we break before there's nothing left?

I've been many things.

A happy, adventurous kid.

An Omega manipulated and molded for slavery.

A girl who fears her own shadow.

A bonded mate.

Once again in the hands of monsters, who will I become this time?

**Total Pages (Source):** 75

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:19 am*

## PROLOGUE

### SAMUEL

" E MMETT!"

Jolting upright in my favorite chair, I'm shocked to find my heart already beating out of my chest. In my mind, my alpha paces like a caged animal, but I'm wary to let him out without reason.

"WAKE UP!"

"WHAT?! WHAT IS IT?!" Emmett's shout follows Oliver's panicked screeching upstairs.

The bond, which was peaceful if not a little anxious when I passed out in the living room, is now trembling with fear. I thought they were fucking sleeping. Wide awake now, I'm worried I won't be able to keep my feral half in control if I don't get an explanation soon.

Thundering down the stairs alerts me to their presence before their bare chests and haphazard put together selves are rushing for the front door. I'm on my feet in a flash and following without stopping for my shoes.

I can't hold in my confusion as the cool night air slaps me in the face and the pounding in my chest threatens to steal the air from my lungs. "What's going on?!"

My packmates don't even spare me a glance and bolt across the lawn without care for each other too, it seems. The streetlamps cast shadows around our sprinting bodies on the street below us.

"Vincent!" Oliver cries a few yards ahead.

I'm almost to the sidewalk when I realize the shadows aren't playing tricks on me; shrapnel, two shattered mirrors, a leather seat, and ice cream litter the asphalt on the corner of our road.

My little brother crashes to his knees, ripping open his gray sweatpants and scraping his skin without thought. I stumble my way to them, my throat closing over at the sight before me. Oli chokes on a gasp while I can't seem to catch a breath.

"Oh my god," Emmett breaths, coming to a stop beside me. "Oh fuck. Oh FUCK! I don't have my phone. I don't have my phone!"

My friend vibrates with terror while his beta clutches an unconscious, bloody Vincent to his heaving chest. Digging into my jeans, I do my best to soothe Emmett. "Em, I have mine. Help Oliver, make sure Vince is breathing. Roll him onto his side. Fuck," I mutter, my emotions battering against my breastbone make my knees buckle.

With nine-one-one dispatch on the line, I can't look away from the rise and fall of Vincent's chest. The alpha who's meant to be my brother in every way but blood. He's the one scent matched pack member who has never let our omega down.

Our omega.

An explosion of panic, far worse than I have ever known fires from every nerve ending. The need to make sure my mate is okay now rides every fucking thought and behavior. "AMAYA!"

My phone meets the ground, mixing in with the rest of the shattered pieces of Vincent's bike. Officers are on their way. Vincent is being watched over.

But who's watching over our omega?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:19 am*

1

AMAYA

I already know this is worse than the academy. No amount of isolation, weight checks, drugs, heats spent as an experiment or the rough handling of the enforcers at the Premium Designation Academy is going to come close to this next level of hell.

How do I know that?

Us omegas, we kept to ourselves. The academy even did their best to keep us from forming friendships, giving us no chance to really speak or band together. But now, waking up to the sounds of screams and cries of at least a dozen people, tells me everything is different. And not for the better.

No longer are our scents muted or are we being scolded for our loud desperate pleas. Our scents mingle in a cloud of rotten fear, each individual signature of an omega lost in the haze of this new form of torture.

Gone are the large isolation cells, morbid clinic rooms, and stingy dorms. Calling these new accommodations a cell would be generous and laughable. These are fucking cages. Cramped, unable to stretch out in any direction without poking through the bars.

Blinking through the stinging of my dry eyes, I see a few omegas kneeling and gripping the sides of their cages. Worn steel bars showcase claw marks of the poor souls who were here before us.

These mini torture devices aren't new. They've been used and reek of the turmoil left behind by their previous occupants. It's hard to focus on my own entrapment when the horror-stricken faces around me are the most terrifyingly animated things I've ever seen.

Over the past year I've started getting used to omegas showing their emotions, but the four years before rehab are hard to shake. We were meant to be quiet, submissive, and invisible. There was no room for our feelings in the midst of survival, especially once they trained it out of us.

My throat feels like sandpaper and tastes like I got water boarded with salt water. I can just taste the overwhelming undercurrent of sea water in the air. The humidity coating my skin in sweat does nothing to hydrate me, and the bottom of my cage is tucked too far away from the puddle in the middle of the large room.

Even if I wanted to reach for the water, I can't move. My head pounds to the beat of its own drum. I'm too numb to feel the anxiety making my heart race. I know it's there, but I'm adrift; floating on the silent bond I've sufficiently drowned in the abyss of disassociation.

As long as I don't feel, don't react, Vincent is safe from everything I'm about to suffer.

I used to hate how alone I was, especially after having so many people to love and spend time with. While that is true once again, I would rather feel this empty loneliness than subject my alpha to the torture only meant for me.

I'll stay hollow and drown myself in the sea of my blue-eyed mate for as long as I can. I'll even find appreciation for the mockery of water in the air and use it to think of Vincent.



The ocean is beyond the stone wall at my back, I bet. I wonder if it's as blue as my alpha's eyes. Nothing beats the deep, beautiful, sparkling soul of my alpha, though.

'Alpha?'

As long as we are nothing, he will be okay.

'Protect alpha.'

"Protect alpha," I repeat in a hoarse whisper and drift off in the wave of my mate's love.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:19 am*

2

VINCENT

A maya?

It's dark in here except for the random gold pulse. It beats like a heart and acts like a gentle hue for half a moment, not allowing me to see anything. My entire body feels numb, but with each pulse of gold, I feel her. Amaya. I'm not alone, even in this vast nothingness where her bond thumps through me.

"Amaya?" I croak, stumbling and trying to focus my gaze. With the next surge, I swear I hear her whispered voice. "Little mate?" I gasp and run forward without caring if I'm headed in the right direction.

"Alpha?" My omega's soft hum curls around me in a tired tone that sends the thundering in my chest even wilder.

A sputtered gasp falls from my lips. "Where are you, Omega?" Please, please, please, tell me.

Gold thrums across my vision. A soft vibration follows, feeling like her dainty purr. "It's going to be okay, alpha," she replies, her voice everywhere and nowhere at the same time.

"Why do you sound like that?" I snap. Amaya should never sound quiet and resigned, especially not in here—our bond, our tether. If I'm right, I'm stuck in the place between

us. "Amaya, please , where are you?"

The gold pulses and holds a second longer than before. Then again. "Breathe, Vincent. Breathe with me."

I can't help but follow her direction and take quivering breaths with the soothing thump of our bond. My plea cracks. "Am-Amaya."

Another gentle vibration coils around me and presses on my chest. Fear of losing even just this hypothetical touch of my mate makes me grip at the pressure. Come on, where are you, little mate? I turn in circles, still seeing nothing but darkness and the dull hue of our bond pulsing around me.

"All you need to worry about is healing."

"What," I growl, "the fuck are you talking about?!"

On the final thump of the heartbeat of our bond, a tsunami of affection slams me right in the chest and surrounds the ache in my brain. Amaya's voice is a distant hum beyond the sparkling gold that blinds me. "I love you."

With a desperate lunge, I reach for my omega who doesn't seem to really be here anymore. "NO!" Instead of colliding with Amaya like I wished, I'm swept away in a wave of love and encouragement.

Gold turns to darkness once again.

"NO!"

Pain.

Not only did my shout feel like it ripped my vocal cords in half, but even the hoarse volume of it makes my head throb. Beyond the thundering in my skull, shrill beeps get louder and louder. Suddenly my dream comes rushing back to me.

"AMAYA!" No please, god no. Is it possible it was truly just a dream and the pulsing bond was the headache trying to force my eyes out of their sockets? Or did my omega shut me out in a burst of love?

Darkness still swallows me. Instead of a room, I'm trapped in something that feels like a scratchy coffin. Wrestling and writhing, I try to find the thump of my omega in my soul. Maybe I can drag her to the forefront so she's all I feel instead of the agony searing through every inch of my body.

My golden girl, come back. I plead and whimper, thrust and snarl. Nothing will keep me from my omega. Not the blinding pain, and definitely not the fucking numbness I feel in my soul.

It can't be true. "Come back!" My throat strains telling me my horrified begging was audible. She can't be gone. My omega can't leave me!

"OPEN YOUR FUCKING EYES!"

"Jesus, Oliver!"

"What?! He's going to hurt himself if he doesn't snap out of it."

A hot touch burns my arm, instantly helping the struggling limb to relax. My face pinches, though, not wanting to be controlled. I have to fight for my omega. Nothing will stop me.

"Do what I do!"

"Sam, I don't think..."

A snarl. "Just touch him!"

Heat warms both my calves, my other arm and my forehead. Like a drug, the warmth seeps through the coffin holding me down, and instead of fighting it, I sink.

Amaya...no...have to bring her back.

"It's working." Awe laces the voice I've come to crave.

"How did you know, Oli?"

"Pack." My heart calms with the words spoken near me. "We're a fated pack. We need each other, too."

Pack.

The voices finally register as I become one with the nothingness around me. Samuel, Oliver and Emmett.

But where's Amaya?

3

AMAYA

" I love you," I whisper into the freezing crease of my elbow. The surge of affection I push through the bond shoves me back into consciousness until the only thing between Vincent and me is my love for him.

Nothing else. No pain or hunger. He won't feel my desperation or my hope. My alpha won't feel anything else for as long as I can manage. I don't know how long I'll be able to hold the bond shut. It's like flexing a muscle. At some point I'm going to get tired, but I have to keep strong.

I've been here before. Maybe not this bad, but I've been imprisoned, just in a larger cage. I've been starved, slept on hard surfaces, and have been kept in darkness. I've dealt with sneers from people who think they're better than me, and watched my designation be reduced to nothing.

It's the differences in this situation that make my heart thud a little faster and my fear stab a lot sharper. There's far less structure here than there was at the academy. I knew what to expect back then, but nothing here is ever the same when I crack my eyes open.

Omegas are missing from their cages one moment, then they're back the next. Sometimes men with batons and guns are patrolling the large space, other times alphas in suits are grinning maliciously at us as they pace between the cages. Which is why, instead of choosing to witness my fellow captives sob and vomit in their

cages around me, I close my eyes and let it all go.

I start at my toes until they are gone, followed by my calves and thighs until I can't feel my lower half anymore. Next comes the gnawing hunger in my stomach and my chest where my heart aches painfully. My arms feel heavy until they too feel like they are melting away. My face slackens with the release of my throat, washing away the pounding in my head. Then the gut wrenching sounds around me go, followed by the metallic taste in my mouth. Last to fade away is the scent of ocean water, blood, and fear.

By then, I might as well be the same as the puddle of water that's been teasing me for days. Maybe it's been a week, who knows? It won't matter because when I open my eyes again, I'll have lost even more time.

I knew who I was at the academy and how to behave. But who am I now? What will become of me?

Nothing can answer my musings, so like the rest of my being, I release my worries and drown myself in the feel of my alpha.

I'll be okay.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:19 am*

4

OLIVER

The only time I've seen Vincent without a hat on was during Amaya's heat, and those times were few and far between, anyway. As soon as it would fall off, Maya would be lunging for it and placing it backwards on his buzz cut once again with satisfaction in her gaze.

"You look funny without a hat," I murmur to him, twirling a string on the shitty comforter between my fingers.

My lips twist as I continue to study the alpha lying motionless in the hospital bed. It's been three days since I heard his motorcycle crash in front of our house, but the pale pallor of his face and sunken cheeks make it seem like it's been ages.

I trail my gaze over the bandage wrapped around his head and the cuts finally beginning to scab over on his face. Vincent looks like he's been in an accident, but it's deeper than that.

He's fighting something in his mind. His eyes dart around beneath his eyelids, and he clenches the sheets every so often. I've jumped a few times already today when his whole body jolts with a low growl rattling from his dry throat.

Vincent's a scary alpha when he's awake, but even asleep I'm wary of the guy. Like now, a rumble vibrates his bed, sending chills up my arms where I'm leaning against it. I train my attention to his face to see if there are any signs of him waking up.



I look from him to the door a few times, silently hoping Sam and Emmett will be back soon after their coffee run. I don't think I'll be able to settle Vincent by myself if he has a panic episode again.

"Come on, Vince," I whisper, trailing my fingers over the intricate vines tattooed up his neck. "Either sleep or wake up."

The doctors are convinced he's battling something we can't help him with, leaving him in this perpetual state of unconscious restlessness. I'm worried about him. Between his concussion and sprained wrist and my omega being snatched right from her home, I don't think I'm holding it together very well.

I don't have a bond to Amaya like Vincent does, and I don't have natural instincts to help me during this fucked up time. I'm just a simple beta with a kidnapped scent match and a fractured pack. Not to mention the alpha who wrecked his bike right outside my goddamn window is a man I don't think I can live without.

My eyes blur as I watch my hand trail from his throat down to his chest. The only solidarity in my life anymore is the connection Emmett and I have. He's my bonded alpha and no matter the shit show that life becomes, we will always love each other.

Leaning forward, my head hits the bed beside Vincent's hip. "Vince, I don't have a clue how to help," I whisper, knowing nobody will hear me break open and bleed. "I almost had her, you know? I've missed her for so long, like something vital was missing from my heart and soul."

Tears tickle my nose as they trail down and drip onto the bedspread. "Holding her in my arms again... it was more than I ever could have asked for. And now... now she gone a-again and there's no rage or hurt to hide behind. I'm just a terrified beta without his omega to love."

A sob gets lodged in my throat, forcing me to cough it away. Vincent's no longer twitching, so I refuse to be the reason he wakes up. He needs real rest. His pain calls out to me with feverish hands that grip my heart and twist.

I don't know what Vincent and I were building between us before that fateful night three days ago, but I can't bring myself to leave his side. Emmett and Sam have begged me to come home to shower or something, but I'm incapable.

Maybe it's the fact that Vincent is my connection to Amaya, or maybe my feelings for the alpha are deeper than I thought. Either way, Vincent and Amaya need me, and I can only be here for one of them. Vince won't wake up alone.

More tears fall and finally a sob breaks free. The whimper that follows my display of heartache doesn't come from me, though. My head shoots up and I ignore the pinch in my neck at the movement when I see Vincent's chest rising and falling at a rapid pace.

Soon the hospital room is echoing with my sniffles and Vince's distress. "Vincent?" I croak. Something's wrong and I don't know what to do. I try to reach the other half of him instead. "Alpha?"

He jolts.

"Hey, time to wake up, Alpha," I murmur, wiping my tears and gripping his hand. "Don't let me cry alone," I tease, my voice a little wobbly.

Vincent's eyes shift and crack open before he releases a stuttering breath. I tug on him just a little, mindful of his wounds. "Wake up now."

Pain and complete devastation reflect back at me in his blue eyes. The tears fall next, my name tumbling from his split lip like a plea. "Oli..."

I give a weak smile because I'm pretty sure that's what I'm supposed to do, and if not, well, it's what I know best. "Yeah, man. I'm here," I murmur softly, hoping not to add to the ache in his skull.

Fucker really did a number on himself and his bike. I'll never be able to scrub the memory of his broken body twisted up on the road. If I tell him he's not allowed to ride a motorcycle ever again, would he listen? Doubtful.

"Am-Amaya?"

Just like that, all thoughts of his bike are squashed as reality crashes in once again. I hesitate, but shake my head, unable to find the words to tell the alpha that our omega is gone. Lost. Disappeared once again.

His face fucking crumbles beneath the lack of news I have for him. I'm expecting him to panic again. Instead, he closes his eyes and grits his teeth until his stubble covered jaw pulses.

"Vincent?" I lean away from him with wariness. "What's wrong?"

His eyes snap open, and fury lashes out at me. "What isn't wrong, Oliver?!" Instead of continuing to speak to me, he starts murmuring to himself. "Come on Amaya. Come back. Come back. Don't shut me out. My god, please Omega!"

My already shattered heart begins to tremble at his frantic pleas. Vincent's head shakes back and forth repeatedly; his eyes are screwed shut. Christ, I don't know what to do!

Just as I'm about to start shouting to get him to calm down, more raised voices join Vincent's rising panic. Before I can truly register what's going on, the door is thrown wide and Paul comes barreling in with a snarl on his face aimed right at the alpha

spiraling in a hospital bed.

"WHERE THE FUCK WERE YOU?!"

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:19 am*

5

AMAYA

Drip. One, two— drip. One— drip. One, two, three— drip, drip. One, t—I don't hear the next drop of water taunting my parched mouth. The soothing presence of crisp snow and budding familial love connecting my heart to my dad pulses with uncharacteristic rage.

"Dad?" My confusion is just a puff of air against my freezing arm, but as I'm gathering some semblance of calm to send to him, my soul is rocked and split wide. Vincent's bond tugs in a catastrophic amount of guilt that he manages to break through the barriers I've built between us.

The shock of both my dad and my alpha's immense feelings sends me reeling into the recesses of my mate bond with Vincent.

Vincent's anguished groans are the first things that register. "No, no, no, no. I'm sorry. I'm so, so fucking sorry," my alpha cries.

Then he comes into view. Kneeling in the hazy gold fog that surrounds us, his bloody forehead, dangling wrist, and cuts littering his body stand out in stark contrast to the gentle thump of our bond around us.

My knees wobble, the weakness seeping into my tired bones even here. Now that he's shattered the numbness meant to separate him from my pain, I can't give him a brave face. I can barely even stumble my way to him.

While I'm inching toward my mate, my belly cramps with hunger pains. My limbs are stiff, trying to drag me down, but I can't let them. My alpha's cries urge me forward.

"I didn't know. I didn't mean to. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. So, so, so sorry!"

Just as his voice rises to a wail, I crash down on all fours before him. "Vincent," I whisper, tears blurring my vision. "Breathe, please ."

He doesn't open his eyes, though, even when I grip his cheeks in my shaking hands. "You're right!" he shouts, making me jolt back in shock. The move makes me woozier.

With tears flowing freely, I crawl back to him and plead with my alpha to hear me. "Who's right?"

"You're right, Paul!" he shouts as tears stream down his face. What? "You're right. It's all my fault!"

My belly twists, and if I had anything in there, I'd puke. What the hell is going on? Why is my strong alpha reduced to his knees and yelling about my father?

Then my dad's roar echoes through our trembling bond like there are speakers all around us. 'She's gone because of you!'

No. That's not true!

Vincent croaks out a sob and doubles over. "All my fault. I'm so, so sorry."

"No!" I yell and reach for my alpha, only to tumble right through him like smoke. "VINCENT!"

"Alright, omega slut. You're next."

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:19 am*

6

EMMETT

"F uck!" I curse, running after Paul. His misplaced anger is the last thing Vincent needs right now.

Samuel beats me to the room just as Paul's accusing roar hits Vince like a physical blow. "WHERE THE FUCK WERE YOU?!"

My spine straightens, and my jaw tingles with the urge to protect the recovering alpha. Then Oliver's bond shrivels with fear at the display of aggression.

I rush around Amaya's fuming father and snatch my beta around the waist, dragging him away from Vincent's side. I don't know Paul well at all, but I know a father's love for a child can transcend all rationality.

"You left her there! ALL ALONE!" Paul shouts, his fists clenched tight at his side.

I may be tucking my beta behind me, but so help me god if this man raises a hand against my scent matched pack member, I'll rip his wrist clean out of its fucking socket. The calm one I may be, but nothing is fucking normal anymore. Amaya's gone. We have an alpha struggling to stay sane in a hospital bed and a feral father blaming Vincent instead of everyone else.

Tension has been high since Vincent crashed three nights ago, and my nerves are worn to dust. So no, nobody will raise a hand to any of us if I have anything to do



with it.

"No, no, no, no. I'm sorry. I'm so, so fucking sorry," Vincent cries, his head shaking like he's trying to dislodge something. I thought he was pale before, but now, in the face of our mate's dad, Vince looks like a shell of himself.

"Vincent—" Oliver gasps, trying to shoot around me. Even though I can feel the ache of my mate wanting to soothe the man we've all come to care about through our bond, I grab his arm and stop him.

"You're sorry ?!" Paul snaps, shifting to take a step. Before he can move an inch, Samuel's there, forcing him into a headlock.

My soul cracks as I watch Vincent fold himself in half and pull on the hospital gown around his heart. "I didn't know. I didn't mean to. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. So, so, so sorry!"

Oliver struggles against me just as Paul does against Sam, but I'm unable to let him go. There's a feral fucking alpha in the room hellbent on shattering the one person who has been nothing but amazing for the omega we've all failed.

"She's gone, Vincent!"

Sam snarls and yanks Paul back even harder. "STOP!"

"You're right, Paul!" Vincent's voice rises with tears streaming down his bruised cheeks. "You're right. It's all my fault!"

"No, it's not!" Oliver yells and yanks hard enough to break my hold on him just as Paul says the one thing he will never be able to take back.

"She's gone because of you!"

"You're out of line!" Samuel growls and throws Paul to the ground. My mouth gapes as my best friend lands a brutal punch to the older man's ribs.

"All my fault. I'm so, so sorry," Vincent wails with a hoarse whisper. He's shaking as Oliver finally reaches the bed and scrambles up to kneel beside him.

"No, Vincent," my beta coos while wiping the alpha's tears. He shifts and I can no longer see either of their faces.

Samuel continues to threaten Paul in a deadly voice all while I just stand here fucking motionless by the wall. I have never seen someone completely shatter before my eyes, but I think I just watched Paul break the greatest man I have ever met.

I've had the privilege of watching Amaya be happy with this alpha. Vincent has not only taken care of Amaya for months now, but he's cherished her, loved her, and made our omega feel special when she felt alone.

And all I do is stand here watching him being torn down into nothing but a bleeding heart drowning in an ocean of guilt.

I'm snapped out of my horrified stupor when Sam reaches down and grabs Paul by his throat. Just as he lifts the asshole, a red-faced doctor comes rushing in, only for Samuel to throw Paul out on his ass and slam the door.

"What happened?!" Vincent's doctor asks, wide-eyed and out of breath. We must have given the poor guy a scare. He looks too young to be winded from rushing in here, so maybe it's the mixture of our own stricken scents that's freaking the beta doctor out.

In the wake of his question, we're all breathing heavily when Vincent croaks, "All my fault," one last time before passing out.

No, it's our fault.

7

AMAYA

How long can someone live without water? I must be coming up on the limit because there is no fight left in me as I'm drug out of my cage by my numb ankles. I don't even twitch.

The reality of my situation barely registers. I'm woozy, and all my energy is going toward rebuilding the protective walls between me and Vincent. At this point, I'm not sure if I'm doing more harm than good, but I'm teetering on the edge of existence. I fear the finality of the next time I close my eyes.

The bite of pain in my biceps and scraping of my knees on concrete keep me awake though, so at least there's that. Taunting remarks float around me, but I pay no attention, my dad's accusation and Vincent's soul crushing guilt playing repeatedly in my mind.

Was that even real?

My head hangs, and it's impossible not to enjoy the pinch in my neck muscles. Anything to ground me. It doesn't last long, because soon I'm flying through the air. It feels like years until I'm crashing to the ground and crying out. The lack of food has left my bones protruding, making them take the brunt of the fall.

A ball gets lodged in my throat and my eyes burn with the need to cry, but nothing comes out. All light seeps from the room with the slam of the door a moment later,

and I release a tiny, relieved sigh.

This, this I know.

My muscles spasm and protest as I try to curl into a fetal position, but nothing works. I'm numb. Pins and needles stab me every which way. The only semblance of comfort I find in the dark silence is stripped from me in a flash of blinding white light and blasting rock music.

Limbs that refused my command just a second ago now scurry to cover my ears and eyes. I can't even fucking scream with my throat so dry. Instead, I mouth the words, "make it stop," over and over again.

But it doesn't. The pounding base rattles my skull, and the light shines brightly on my deteriorating form.

I could deal with the solid ground, freezing temperature, and blessed silence. Where I once thought being lonely, cold, and uncomfortable was omega hell, I now know better.

This is omega hell.

I can't. I can't do anything but shake and try to block everything out. These torturers have made it impossible for my disassociation tactics to work.

Most importantly, though, I can't spare Vincent.

The walls he tore down with his explosion of guilt are nothing but a thin film now. It's all I can muster up. My only goal at this point is to keep him from suffering the blasting music and blinding light. I can only fucking hope the blurry soundproof barrier I'm imagining is actually working because the torture on my senses is keeping

me from fading into our bond to check.

'Alpha?' my omega whimpers. The music is so loud I can barely hear her in my mind.

Shhh . I soothe her to the best of my ability and encourage her to cover her ears too. We can't call for Vincent. I won't allow his attention to drift to me if I can manage it.

All at once, the music turns off, then my ears ring like I was just front and center for an explosion. The reaction has a whimper clawing from my throat and it almost drowns out the heavy metal door opening.

Shadows pass over my closed eyelids and my anxiety dares to peek them open. Multiple people are moving around the cement room, but one man kneels next to my head with a grin. I blink. And blink again, hoping to make his cruel attention disappear.

His mouth moves, but nothing registers. Smirk widening, he reaches for me and peels my hand away from my right ear. "Thirsty?" he asks once again.

I can only stare at his far too sharp jawline and angled nose. His tan skin speaks of time spent in the sun, and his low dark ponytail looks like something I could use to smash his head into the wall.

All thoughts of murder fly out of my mind when a glass of clear liquid enters my vision. For the first time in I'm not sure how long, I lift my head and my mouth pops open on a gasp.

The alpha, judging by his disgusting rubber and smoke scent, chuckles and tips it to my lips. "There you are," he says warmly, like he's feeding a pet.

I don't hesitate and suck the water down. It takes a moment to realize the wrongness

that just entered my system, then it's coming right back up and soaking my thin sleep shirt in salt water.

"That's n-not wa-water," I sputter, and look up at the alpha in confusion and betrayal.

He snorts and splashes the water in my face, making me cry out and cover my stinging eyes. "Technically, it is water," he taunts.

I squint in time to watch him uncoil from the ground like a fucking snake. I have half a mind to snap at him, but he shifts and the head of a hose is staring me down.

"You want to hydrate? Open wide!" the alpha cheers just as the hose opens and blasts me in the face.

8

SAMUEL

" I 'd suggest you think about what's going to come out of your fucking mouth, 'cause I'm seconds from busting your teeth in."

I have never been so spitting mad in my entire goddamn life. This motherfucker thinks he can waltz into Amaya's life and tear down the one person who has been everything for her, all while he's been absent her entire life.

Honestly, I might just rip Paul's tongue out of his mouth even if he doesn't say another word to piss me off.

"Listen kid?—"

"NO!" I shout, advancing on him without caring about the scene we're causing in the hospital hall. " You listen, old man. You will never speak to Vincent like that ever again. If you so much as look at him wrong, you'll have his entire pack to deal with."

I'm not getting enough air in my lungs, but nothing else matters besides keeping my pack safe. I've already failed Amaya twice. There's no way I'm going to fail my new pack brother again.

We never should have left our omega and Vincent alone after her heat. Not only was Amaya in a vulnerable state, but Vince was too. An alpha who took the brunt of her neediness and demanding nature would be exhausted and riding whatever instinct



swallowed him whole.

I don't know why Vince left Amaya home alone that night, but it's not his fucking fault. I'm very aware that Amaya would not approve of her dad's behavior, but that's not why my alpha is riding me to snap Paul's neck for his gutting display of disrespect.

I may never bond Amaya, hell I might even be cast aside, but Vincent is my scent matched brother. Not only that, but he's the most admirable man I've ever met. He's meant to be a leader, and this scumbag, currently lifting his hands in surrender, beat him when he was down.

"I'm sorry, Sam," Paul says, his voice strong. Not good enough . "I shouldn't have done that. Shouldn't have said those things."

"Obviously!" I growl, gritting my jaw to keep myself from saying something I'll regret too.

The angry bully I saw minutes ago fades with a heavy slump of his shoulders. Paul's eyes shutter, and his neck gives way for his head to hang just as his ass hits a plastic chair against the wall.

"I'm so fucking sorry," he whispers. "I?—"

My teeth gnash. "Who the hell do you think you're apologizing to? You didn't shatter my soul while I was laying broken in a hospital bed. You didn't disrespect and annihilate my mate."

The reminder of who he hurt drags a choked grunt from his shaking shoulders. "Amaya... Christ ."

"Imagine if she heard what you said to the one person who has done everything and been everything for her since he caught her scent. Did you even know he graduated top of his fucking class in rehab so he could heal? FOR HER !"

Paul flinches. Everyone fucking flinches, but I'm not done. "We are all hurting, Paul. And blaming each other isn't going to get us any fucking closer to saving Amaya."

"You're right," he relents.

I scoff. "That's what Vincent said to you."

Paul grunts like my jab physically hurts him, but he can fuck right off and wallow in his guilt just like I've been doing since I wronged my omega. There's nothing else to say, no forgiveness to give until he fixes the damage he caused.

I'm heaving and trying desperately to garner some semblance of control when a familiar voice bounces through the white hallway.

"Please tell me you didn't break the one person who can track Amaya?"

Kate's voice is nothing but a rabid screech forcing my shoulders to hike up in an attempt to cover my poor ears. Whirling around, I see the short-haired omega fast approaching with some furious looking dudes on her heel.

I think I recognize the bright blond guy, but my wariness of the other two rises before I can even attempt to greet who I'm assuming is Kate's pack. Beside the platinum blond alpha is another, more dominant man with ebony skin and a tight scowl pinching his features. On the end, with dark hair and a more animated facial expression, is another alpha. I don't know who the hell the pack leader is, but they look like a force to be reckoned with.

"Kate," I say evenly with a respectful nod, but I don't take my eyes off the three threats behind her.

"Sam," she sneers, coming to a stop, her tiny exterior vibrating with rage. "What's going on?"

"Where do I begin?" I huff, sending a glare at Paul who is now standing stiffly at my side.

"Where's Amaya's bonded?" the animated guy asks. I narrow my gaze, but he just sighs with an eye roll. "My name is Remy. I'm Kate's alpha, and an OPS detective."

Paul stiffens. "OPS detective?" he repeats.

Remy nods grimly. "Yes. Since my pack and I are in town for the foreseeable future because of Kate's support position with Amaya, Baltimore and the surrounding areas are under my jurisdiction."

"Amaya?" I croak, hope bubbling in my chest.

"My top priority," Remy answers the unspoken question. "We have a plan. There are omegas across the country that have been taken, and agents assigned their cases. Since Beck and Kate know Amaya well, she's mine."

I don't fucking care about why we'll have his help. My tone is desperate, like the step I take toward them, as if they might leave us alone in this nightmare. "What's the plan?"

"Vincent," Kate answers.

Fuck.

9

AMAYA

I wish I wouldn't have opened my mouth.

I don't care that my tongue feels like it's been ripped to shreds. All that matters is I could be blissfully fading away into nothing right now. Instead, I sucked down as much of the fresh water as I could. Even now, my tongue darts out to lick the drops trickling down from my hairline.

Desperation stole my death.

Now I'm failing my alpha. Would it have been easier to let this life go and allow Vincent to move on instead of slowing down the unstoppable crumbling of the walls I've erected between us? I don't know, but there's no choice now.

The barrier between our love and my anguish is failing. I'm failing him . It's all my fault. I shouldn't have drunk the water like the needy bitch my captors like to call me. I could have saved him from my pain.

My thirst is hardly quenched, but the life-threatening dehydration has been staved off by the brutal punishment they blasted my sensitive, abused flesh with. There were moments I thought my skin was peeling from my bones, but alas, I'm still in one piece. Well, one trembling, freezing piece with a horribly cramping stomach.

If I didn't know any better, I would think my heat was starting, but there's no desire in

my new painful existence. With each intake of breath, the meager amount of water sloshes in my belly, and I swear I can hear it moving.

I wait and wait and wait for my body to give out, but my shaking and chattering teeth keep me semi-lucid. Sometimes I even force myself to shake more by tensing my muscles so I'll weaken faster.

I just want Vincent.

If I can't die, I just want to go home. I need my alpha and he needs me. I can feel his trembling in my soul too. Hopefully I'll wear out soon, so I can sink into our bond and leave this blinding, loud cell behind.

I would even settle for my cage at this point. Maybe then I could spare Vincent the abuse to my senses, because one thing is for certain, I'm losing the battle to keep him safe.

My one goal, and I've failed.

Now my alpha will suffer, and it's all my fault.

10

VINCENT

She was here. I can still feel her touch and hear the worry in her voice.

Amaya found me in my darkest moment, but I don't know how much passed through into our bond. Part of me feels like I should keep away from our aching tether, but even if she shuts me out, I'll be there for her.

So I let myself sink, leaving behind the desolation that my reality has become. I'm a failure. I let my omega down when she needed me the most, and now she's gone. Kidnapped. Taken from her home because I left her alone to face the demons of her past by herself.

Now everyone is hurting... missing her. Fearing for her life. Paul was right; it's all my fault. A jittery pulse of gold flares around the darkness encompassing me. Amaya.

Affection warms me, soothing the shakes still wracking my body, even in the recesses of my soul where my omega resides. But beyond the love Amaya fills my veins with, is an unsettling amount of understanding.

"Little mate?" I whisper, fully settling into this plane of existence. "Where are you?"

A hue of gold swirls from the next pulse of our bond, floating down until it lies at my feet. On the next beat, the sparkle fades and my omega is there, lying in a blurry haze.

"It's my fault," she whimpers, the words sounding far away.

"What?" I gasp and fall to my knees. The pain that should spring through my bones doesn't exist, our bond cushioning my bones. "Amaya, it's not your fault."

Up close, I can see her hair looks damp and stuck to her pale skin. The pajamas I last saw her in are in clinging tatters. She shakes just as I was before I felt her reach out to me. Amaya almost looks like she's fading in and out before my eyes. Is she trying to hold on to her place here, or stay awake for whatever is out there?

Blinking tired eyes open, my omega looks at me with all the sorrow and regret in the world. "I'm sorry, Vincent."

"For what?" I breathe, reaching out to touch her cheek only to pass right through.

She takes a shuddering breath and my throat spasms with emotion. "I don't think I can protect you from this anymore."

"Protect me from what?"

Her little body clenches and curls, but no matter how hard I try, I can't fucking grab her. It's not for lack of trying or clear frantic desperation to hold her in my arms, she's just not fully here with me.

"Omega," I croak, tears now streaming from my cheeks. "Come on, stay with me, Amaya." I'm trembling again, the love she feels for me no longer able to numb the terror and uncertainty.

"I c-can't..."

"Can't protect me from what?!" I choke out. God, I'm fucking terrified of what she's

about to say. Giving up on trying to touch her, I curl up on my side and face the woman I love.

With one final anguished look in her eyes, Amaya sobs. "From this."

All at once I'm slammed with terror unlike anything I have ever experienced. Next comes the bone deep ache and horrifically cramped muscles. On top of my own throbbing concussion, Amaya's similar wound makes the pounding increase tenfold. Ice slithers through my veins, replacing the warmth of my mate.

The bond which was once dark with a golden hue now shines like the inside of a fucking spotlight and blasting music replaces the steady pulse of my mate. Her eyes widen one second before I register the red welt now blooming on her collarbone.

"AMAYA!" I scream, reaching for her one last time, only for her to disappear with a wail of suffering and shock.

What was once a calm place to hide away in, our bond now flashes with sparks of red and shouts of my mate's torture above the ear-splitting bass. My knees, which were once cushioned by the bond, now ache with the blow they took when I collapsed in front of Amaya.

She's been shielding me.

"My god, Amaya..." I grieve.

What have they done to destroy her strength to protect me? Because I know Amaya, she would have never let me suffer alongside her. They're breaking my mate, and there's no way my sorry ass can help her in here.

Time to wake up.



11

OLIVER

I have no fucking idea what just happened. The shouting from outside stopped a few minutes ago, which is around the same time the doctor left. Probably because he finally felt safe to do so.

Before leaving, he checked Vincent's vitals since the poor alpha passed out. Still kneeling beside Vincent, I can only worry my lip and clutch his good hand to my chest.

Doc's pinched smile and hesitant departure lingers on my anxiety. Emmett's still staring at the door with a frown marring his handsome features. I, too, am replaying the man's words.

"It's the mate bond. Mr. Katz is fighting something in the connection with his omega."

Physically, Vincent is healing as he should be, but mentally and emotionally, he's struggling. More than struggling.

I do the only thing I can and keep a tight grip on the alpha beneath me in hopes I can tether him to life. Knowing what I do about mate bonds, whatever Maya is going through, so is Vincent. And vice versa.

Pinching my eyes shut, I try really damn hard not to think about what's happening to

our omega, especially if it has one of the strongest men I've ever met in a scary state of unconsciousness.

Vincent should be awake. He should be talking to me, telling me he's okay, and offering me reassurance that Amaya will be just fine. That he will be just fine.

My god, we aren't even a legit pack, but I feel like I lost Vincent the same way I lost my girl. One of them, I have to help one of them.

The low murmuring on the other side of the door is background noise as I absently hope Samuel doesn't kill Paul. I really don't want to get kicked out and banned from Vincent's side.

"Do you think he can hear me?" I murmur, still gazing at Vincent's bruised jawline. Unable to help myself, I trail my finger across the purple flesh while I await Emmett's reassurance.

Heat envelopes my back, then my alpha rests a hand on my shoulder. "I'm sure he can, Oli." He hesitates, but adds in a whisper that sounds like he's hesitant to believe. "Maybe Maya can hear us too if their connection is strong enough."

My head snaps around so fast I almost fall off the bed. "What?!" I hiss. "You fuckin' know their connection is amazing, so you're telling me she might have heard Paul?!"

Emmett gives me a sad nod while bending and wrapping an arm around my waist. "Talk to him, my beta. Talk to them. Tell them we're here and we won't ever give up on them."

I gulp, trying to swallow the ball of emotion that steals my voice. Emmett knows; he feels the need for me to help them in some way. He could easily take over and talk to Vincent, but he gifts me the opportunity.

"Vince, Am—Amaya," I croak. "Fuck baby girl, if you can hear me, hang on. Please. We're coming."

Swallowing, I shift on my knees. Maya is strong. She doesn't need me to keep begging her to survive. She needs to know we're okay. "Vincent is okay. He's worried about you, but we're here with him. He's safe. We're safe. And we won't stop until you're safe too, baby."

Focused on Vincent's eyelids, I don't notice Sam peeking his head in the room. "Guys, get out here."

Glancing over my shoulder at Emmett, I wait for him to release me. I hate the chill that replaces his warm chest, needing his comfort now more than ever. But Samuel sounded serious.

Maybe he really did kill Paul.

I contemplate whether or not that would upset me as we bustle our way into the hall. Giving Vincent a final look, I close the door quietly behind us. To say I'm shocked when I turn around would be an understatement. Three alphas and Kate seem to have joined our nightmare.

"Dora," I greet with a smirk, adopting the nickname Amaya gave her and hiding behind a dash of humor.

She huffs and the alpha wall behind her growls. Beckett's eyes are a little more deadly when he glares at me, but that's just because he's protective of Amaya. As friends, I have to remind myself.

In a sickly sweet voice, Kate says, "Dickhead."

Sam snorts, shocking the shit out of me enough to take my eyes off the angry men. "You can laugh?" I mock gasp.

He flips me off and turns the gesture into a wave at the dark-haired guy behind Kate. "Listen."

Glancing at Emmett, then back at Vincent's room, I decide we're wasting time shooting the shit. I need to get back to Vincent.

"My name is Remy, it's nice to meet you," the newcomer says, only for Kate to mumble, "Is it?"

I bite back the urge to throw more sass. "Oliver and Emmett," I reply with a nod to my alpha.

The alpha beside Remy with shiny ringlets and ebony skin inclines his head. "Nick."

"Nice to meet you," Emmett greets. "Beckett," he addresses the final alpha who definitely hates us. He doesn't respond, making me bristle at his obvious rudeness to my pack.

We're fucking trying!

"Kay." Kate claps, and it gives me sick satisfaction when Paul jolts. "Let's get this show on the road. To recap, Remy is an OPS officer and is assigned Amaya's case. Every missing omega has a team trying to find them, but they're all trying the same technique."

Before I can ask, she continues. "We have a plan. But we need Vincent." For once, the ire in her gaze when she stares at us is gone and in its place is fear and desperation for her friend. My omega.

Paul curses, scuffing his feet and balling his hands. Everyone narrows their eyes at him. I pale. Vincent is not in shape for anything right now and I have no idea what the pressure of his omega's safety weighing on his shoulders would do to his mental health.

"What do you need him to do?" I ask.

"He bonded Amaya, right?" Kate asks, and I nod. "He should be able to track her through their connection. Like a game of hot and cold."

Fuck.

Silence descends. Emmett, Sam, Paul and I share a look. Vincent is practically fucking comatose.

"What?!" Kate snaps, stomping her foot and making her alphas close in.

I clear my throat. "He's not going to be of any help right now."

"Why?"

"Doc says something is wrong with the bond. And well." I glance at Paul. "He's mentally and emotionally unstable, guilt-ridden and... I don't really know," I answer, worry strangling my tone and dragging my gaze to the tile floor.

Raspberry bubble gum bursts through the hall in agitation, but with the touch of her three mates, Kate takes a deep breath and calms. "Call him," she whispers in defeat.

Nobody moves, us having no idea who she's talking about.

"Call him, Remy," she repeats, tone assured.

Samuel steps forward, arms crossed like he's ready to defend the man lying in the hospital room behind us. "Who are we calling?"

My heart warms and thumps double time with the hope that things are going to be different once our family is all together. Where are you, baby girl?

"Someone who can help Vincent," Nick replies with a gleam in his eye that I can't read.

I narrow my gaze. "Help how?"

"Trust me, he'll help Vincent navigate the mate bond," Beckett says with a smirk. "He might piss you off a little, but he's our best shot."

In no position to turn down help, I swallow the urge to ask more questions.

Whoever this guy is, he better fucking help.

12

AMAYA

Why the hell is it a universal thing to grab someone by their hair before snatching their arm? Honestly, just grab my fucking bicep. There's no need to rip my hair out to get me moving. My body has no fight left in it. I don't need the threat to my scalp anymore.

Alas, I guess it's time to take me out of the torture room, and the only way to do that is by the poor strands on top of my head. Apparently, it's hard to drag someone across the ground like that though, because just like every other time, two hands grab my biceps and release my hair, making my head droop in defeat.

I can't even muster up the urge to gasp and whine at the ache left behind. Excitement travels through my entire body at the prospect of being tossed back in my cage. At least there I will be left alone. For how long? I don't know, but any amount of time in natural lighting and the sounds of crying omegas instead of blasting music sounds like a vacation.

Christ, that's sad. I'm sad.

The drag of my knees on the uneven concrete bites, but I swallow the groans, preferring to live in this half lucid state for as long as possible. Maybe if I'm a little numb to the torment, Vincent will be too.

I just won't think about all the aches and pains. Maybe that will work.

A grunt pulls my attention to the betas dragging me through the dingy halls. The guy with a raspy voice squeezes my arm tighter as he complains, "If they would have done their fucking job, we wouldn't be doing all the brunt work. I would have an omega of my own."

The other beta is a woman who has the nastiest sneer. "They did one thing right at least."

"Enlighten me," the guy huffs, taking the brunt of my weight for the woman. Intentionally, I sag a little extra, hoping to make this harder on both of them. Fucking bastards.

"The files," she responds, and I swear to fuck my heart falls out of my ass. "At least those dumbass academy scientists sent their information far and wide."

"Yeah, but it took us fuckin' months to act on it!"

"Whatever, we'll get our own piece of ass soon enough," the beta bitch gloats with an extra yank on my arm, almost tugging it out of its socket.

Their conversation halts, or at least I think it does, and I'm stuck on the bomb they dropped. Everything about me... it's all in their hands?

They made us traceable! None of us omegas are safe. Not our families or our friends either.

As I'm thrown into my cage, the excitement ceases to exist. My little reprieve from the torture chamber has been eviscerated with their revelation.

I'll never be free as long as they can track me.



13

EMMETT

My leg won't stop fucking bouncing. Whether I try to force it to stop, or ignore it completely, it... won't... stop. Not even Oliver's soothing temperament through the bond right now helps.

I envy my beta and not only because there's no more space on the bed beside Vincent, but because he's finding ways to be useful. With Oli tucked up next to him, Vince has been slowly coming to for the past fifteen minutes. If Oliver weren't so exhausted, he would have noticed by now, and would be chomping at the bit to encourage the bruised alpha into consciousness.

So with Oli asleep, snuggled against Vincent, and Samuel trying to figure out a way around bringing in an outsider to help Vince, I'm left alone to watch over them.

My leg started bouncing the first time Vincent twitched and cracked an eye open. Excitement and wariness stole all the sleepiness from my body. With my mate lying beside him, if Vince goes feral and panics, Oli could get hurt.

Instead of snatching Oliver away, I'm trusting the alpha. Not only because he's a damn good guy, but because his body language doesn't raise any red flags. If anything, he's shifted closer to my beta.

Vincent's eyes blink open again, ever so slowly, like the weight of the world rests on his eyelids. Then he shifts, his right fist reaching for Oliver's hand. My leg stops

bouncing at their contact. Still, Oli doesn't twitch, allowing the alpha to get a firm grip.

Eyes focused on the ceiling, Vincent takes a shuddering deep breath. I don't move, afraid to trigger him. Fuck, please don't let Sam walk in right now. Watching Vincent's chest rise and fall in a normal pattern settles my soul just a little. I won't be okay until Amaya is safe, but witnessing this alpha coming back into himself after some seriously fucked up shit gives me hope.

Driven to be near him, I lean forward in my chair only for the piece of plastic trash to creak. I swear to god if I set him off...

Sparkling blue eyes snap to me at the same time his grip on Oliver strengthens. Once he sees it's just me, Vincent relaxes and seems to droop with relief. "Emmett." He sighs.

"Hey, man." I lack the energy to feel embarrassed by my obvious crack of emotion.

Slowly, Vince looks at the sleeping Oliver snuggled beside him. I watch in fascination as his harsh eyebrows rise a little. He tugs his hand free, making my heart skip a beat, then he raises his arm.

"Fuck!" Vince hisses. I cringe, watching the alpha grit his teeth and fight through the pain to tug my beta into his chest. "Worth it," he grumbles and dips his nose into Oliver's hair.

I clear my throat, a little shocked at the man's boldness when Oli is obviously my mate. Hell, his fucking hand is right next to my bite mark on Oliver's throat. Swallowing the flare of possessiveness, I ask him what really matters. "How are you feeling?"

Blinking his eyes open once again and turning to face me, Vince shocks the living shit out of me again. His eyes burn red and a tear falls into Oliver's curly brown locks.

"Vince," I whisper, standing to crouch beside him. I don't wipe his tear, that's not me and we definitely aren't in an affectionate relationship, but I still place a hand on his forearm above the brace on his wrist. "Talk to me."

He shakes his head. "You don't want to know." Pushing through the hoarseness in his throat, he adds, "What's the plan?"

I'm not surprised at his change of behavior, because the torment and pain swirling in his ocean depths tell me everything I need to know. We need to hurry the fuck up.

Reaching for the water pitcher, I pour him a small cup and top it off with a straw. Before I can explain that he's physically ready to be discharged, Sam sneaks into the room with a heavy glare pointed behind him.

"Son of a bitch," my best friend groans and drags his hand through his dirty blond hair. I don't remember the last time it didn't look like a mess, so at least his hair still looks the same during the worst days of our lives.

I don't know if it's the obvious shift in the atmosphere, but Oli's head shoots up. "Sammy? What is it?"

Vince chuckles at Sam's jolt of surprise, only to devolve into a coughing fit. Shoving the straw between his lips, I focus on keeping the poor guy comfortable. I pretend not to notice Oliver's bright red cheeks when he sees the new position Vince tugged him into.

"I couldn't hold them off," Sam all but growls, pacing the room.

Knowing who he's talking about, I frown. "Why would you want to?" Kate and her men know someone who can help us find Amaya. Fuck knows what our omega's going through.

As much as I would like to grab some guns and speed through cities until we find her, we can't. We're goddamn realtors. What the hell are we gonna do?

Sam stops his movements and snarls at me. "We don't need strangers sniffing around our family!"

"What are you talking about?" Vincent questions while Oliver climbs to his knees and whips his head around, trying to follow the conversation.

Sam just stares at the alpha between my beta and me. Nervousness steals his ability to answer Vincent, so he turns to me with a grim look. "They said we're running out of time to save her. He's here."

Cursing, I stand not bothering to brush my sweatpants off. "Let's go meet him then, yeah?"

"Fuck!" Samuel snaps, tipping his head to the ceiling like he's praying for patience. "Fine. Let's go meet Lucas."

14

AMAYA

I 'm dirty, starving, and in pain, but that doesn't mean my mind has to be. My body may be broken, but my mind wanders free. I've been here before, in a much less dire situation, but if I try hard enough, maybe I can escape for a little while like I used to do in isolation at the academy.

After a while at the academy, when hope was fading, my memories would make me angry and fuel my fire just enough to keep me going. I was so hurt that my guys didn't come to rescue me, and now I worry it will happen again. I know the truth now; they never looked for me.

I choose any emotion over the fear obliterating my brain right now though. I'd much rather Vincent feel something other than the distress coursing through my nerve endings and misfiring in my mind.

An omega's distress is like a fucking siren's call to their mates, and since we're bonded, Vincent will be getting slammed with the overpowering need to make it all better. He doesn't deserve that, so I'll give him something else.

Calling on old habits, I feel my ankles and bony knees pressing into the bottom of my cage. Then my left hipbone, and my ribs follow. My cramped shoulder numbs, and my elbow ceases to exist. My fisted hands disappear and my skull melts into the earth.

I float.

I disappear into something other than terror.

16 Years Old

(3 days before first kidnapping)

Hip cocked, hand resting on it, I grin. "What are you guys doing?"

"AH!" Emmett whisper shouts, whipping around and clutching his chest. Sammy grunts and shoves him with a scowl. Beside me, leaning against the doorjamb, Oliver laughs and gives me a high five.

"Jesus, Maya. Shouldn't you two be asleep?"

It's Oliver's turn to scowl at his older brother. "We're sixteen, not six, Sam. And you two definitely aren't twenty-one."

Emmett shifts nervously, tucking the bottle of vodka behind him and shoots Sam a worried look. I can't help but smirk at his anxiousness and Sammy's shifty eyes.

Silence continues to thicken the air between us until I can't stand it anymore. "You gonna share, or what?"

"No!" Sammy snaps and jumps at his own volume. Quieter, he hisses, "Absolutely not, Petal. You're too young."

"Oh fuck ooffff," Oli groans and ambles toward Emmett. I swear I see a little extra sway in his hips as he approaches our friend. "May I?" he whispers, reaching around Emmett and gripping his wrist.

I watch as my dark-haired, easy-going friend releases the bottle as if in a trance. Surprised, even though I shouldn't be anymore, I step into the room. Oliver has Em wrapped around his finger lately.

"Emmett!" Sammy huffs and throws his hands in the air. Pacing the kitchen with the clock shining midnight behind him, I'm shocked his head hasn't exploded. "Ugh, fine. I'll get the shot glasses."

"Pfft," I respond, snatching the now open bottle from Oliver. "We don't need shot glasses."

With a firm grip on the handle, I bring it to my lips while keeping eye contact with my partner in crime and take a big ass swig. Oli's eyes crinkle in time with mine, but as soon as I'm done, he jumps to do the same, shooting me a wink.

"Fuck, if we get caught?—"

"We won't," Oli cuts Sam off.

"Dad's gonna kill me," Sammy finishes his dreadful thought while swiping a hand through his crazy blond hair.

Oliver rolls his eyes, passing me on the way out of the kitchen with the bottle. I follow, Em and Sammy not far behind as we tiptoe our way to the basement where our sleepover is being housed.

Instead of sitting on the couch where my blankets are, I settle next to Oliver, only for Sam to plop behind me and tug me against his chest. Snuggling in, I turn to the side and make grabby hands for the bottle. Before I can grab it, Sam snatches it and pins me with a look. I can't resist watching his throat bob with each gulp, and I don't know if it's the burn of vodka, but heat unfurls in my belly.

"Give me that," Emmett demands, reaching forward so his face is within a foot of my own. I swear my lips tingle and my eyes refuse to part from his. What is wrong with me ?

My breath stutters, and Sammy chuckles, vibrating my bones. "None of that, Petal," he murmurs in my ear as Emmett moves away and twirls the vodka bottle in his long fingers.

My mouth pops open on a silent gasp, the heat of Sam's breath on my neck threatening to steal my own. I feel hot all over, even as goosebumps erupt on my skin when Oli reaches for my left hand. Emmett frees up a hand to grip my ankle, making me oblivious to the conversation they're all having.

Friends... We're just friends. I shouldn't be feeling like this.

"So, get this," Oliver says around a laugh. "Lexi leaned in for a kiss right before I was about to turn her down."

I stiffen. Emmett fucking stiffens too. Oli is oblivious to the shift in us, still cackling away at the expense of a girl in our grade. Or maybe it's not at her expense. Maybe he kissed her. My belly clenches and twists with the opposite of the butterflies from before. I'm lost in my treacherous thoughts until a bark of laughter from Sam behind me snaps me out of it.

Annoyed with them and probably more so myself for the jealousy roaring through my veins, I scurry to Emmett and steal the bottle. It's tipped back and burning my throat without a second thought. I gag and sputter, coughing up a lung.

"Woah, calm down baby girl," Oliver warns with a smile.

I ignore the concern in his gaze and murmur, "Don't call me that."



Emmett's the only one who hears me though, Oli already onto the next story of his popularity. "Don't you worry, Maya," Em soothes, wrapping a platonic arm around my shoulder.

I'll always worry, especially when it comes to my status in their budding pack.

"Becca's scent spiked in class today. Like vanilla and strawberries," Sammy says almost wistfully.

None of that, Petal, he said.

Just a friend... I'm just their friend.

15

SAMUEL

I don't like this guy. And I especially don't fucking like him in my omega's house. Actually, I don't like any of these people in her house. Amaya should be here, having a say who gets to be in her personal space, but she isn't and now there are ten goddamn people not including Vince, Oliver, Emmett and me.

I don't know why they all have to be here. I can understand Paul's desire to be here while Lucas helps Vincent, and maybe accept the fact that Lucas' mate, Freya, is here if she's anxious to be away from one of her alphas. But why the hell is Freya's entire pack under my omega's roof?! Amiri, Casey and Ronan hover in Amaya's kitchen, not to fucking mention Kate and her guys are laying out pizzas as I glare.

This isn't a party. We literally got back a few hours ago and while I understand the need for Lucas to be here right away to help us find Amaya, there's no goddamn reason for the suffocation of scents tainting my mate's home.

Oliver bustles around the kitchen, weaving between bodies and trying to play host for all the unwelcome guests. I watch from my annoyed perch against the wall as my brother's anxious gaze flits to Vincent constantly.

The battered alpha leans forward on the couch, listening intently to Lucas. Purple bruises beneath his eyes have me narrowing my own. He needs to rest. This is too much. But Amaya is counting on him... on us. Doctor's orders are for him to take it easy, especially on his wrist and head. We're under strict orders to watch over him

since his concussion was pretty bad. Christ, the guy crashed into fucking concrete without a helmet on.

Leaning against the wall between the kitchen and living room, I check on Emmett. He's not faring much better than Oliver. His knuckles are white where they grip the back of the couch above Amaya's little nest. A low snarl builds every time someone even fucking looks at the cluster of blankets and pillows.

I look at Paul where he's sitting in the window nook, gripping his head in his hands. When we got here, nothing was out of sorts, and I think I know why. Paul beat the cops here the night Amaya was taken, and he beat us here today. He did some serious damage with his words at the hospital, but I couldn't imagine what it would do to Vincent to see Amaya's home in disarray from her struggle.

No way Maya's favorite sheet was left folded on the couch when she was taken. I'll never forget the crippling anguish radiating off of Vincent when he clutched the fabric to his chest and took a deep inhale. His rattling sob shook me to my core, sent Oli into a frenzy, and Emmett hasn't left his post above her nest.

"Excuse me," Oli mutters, stealing my attention. In the kitchen, he's trying to push past Remy and Ronan, both large alphas with dominant auras. He repeats himself, making me stand up straight.

No response.

Too many voices drown out my little brother, and Vincent's rubbing his temples like his headache is returning. I'm pretty damn sure Emmett is about to snap the couch in half too. I can feel his tension vibrating through the pack bond.

The bond we've formed as a pack makes my chest thump heavily. One not created by a bite, but a family forged through natural connection. Similar to that of a blood bond,

which I know Amaya and Paul have formed. It will only grow stronger once we have our omega.

I might not be connected to Vincent, but his body language says it all; this is too much.

Though I may not be pack alpha anymore, I'm still a fucking alpha and this is not okay. I spent too many years not protecting my pack. There's no way I'm allowing it now. I'm not proud of it, but I'm not sorry. I snap.

"Don't you have anywhere else to be?!" I roar, my muscles bunching as I square my shoulders at the two packs loitering in the kitchen.

Silence. Blessed fucking silence .

I don't even care that I now have five alphas rounding on me with a mixture of disbelief and anger. Elliott and Freya's beta, Casey, stiffens and shuffles toward the outskirts of the kitchen. Sitting at the island, Freya and Kate hunch their shoulders, making me feel guilty.

One of the alphas steps between me and Casey with a growl so loud I can feel it in my gut. "Want to repeat that?"

As much as I would like to step forward and challenge the dark-eyed alpha, I refrain, because it's obvious he's protecting his beta mate. The tension in the room is born of protectiveness. In the past, I might have thrown down with the guy, but I respect the shit out of his priorities.

"Alright kids," Paul drawls, standing now and eyeing us like we're about to have an all-out brawl in Maya's kitchen.

I sigh. "Listen. I'm sorry. This is a lot. I get you all mean well, but my brother has been trying to leave the kitchen for a bit now. All the noise isn't good for Vincent's concussion and to be completely honest, you're strangers to me and you're in my omega's safe space."

A few of them soften and when I notice Kate finally relax, I know speaking the truth was the right move instead of resorting to anger. I am annoyed, but it's up to me, to our pack, to protect and advocate for ourselves, nobody else.

"You're right," Freya whispers as her alpha, Ronan I think, helps her off the stool. "We're sorry, Sam. If I leave my number, do you promise to keep me updated?"

I blink down at the tiny blonde omega and give her a sad smile. "Of course," I reply and hand her my phone. Her alpha nods at me before going to speak to Lucas who's watching from the couch.

"Add mine too," Kate murmurs, coming up behind Freya. To me, she narrows her eyes a little just like Beckett does behind her. "Careful with your tone around a bunch of protective alphas and omegas struggling with their trauma, Samuel. I get it, I do, but you need to learn if you're going to be a part of Amaya's life."

I nod, feeling rightfully reprimanded. "My apologies. Are you two okay?"

Freya gives me a small smile and gives me my phone back. Kate thanks me for hearing her, and I get a train of nods as they head out. Remy pauses, though, and snatches my phone.

"Our address," he grunts, his phone pinging in his jeans. "We're a neighborhood over in two safehouses. The girls wanted to stay close to Amaya. Do not leave me out of this. I'm your omega's OPS investigator. We need each other."

With that, the alpha leaves, leaving my pack, Paul, and Lucas behind. The soft murmurings of our small group settle my nerves. Oli and Emmett snuggle beside Amaya's couch nest, and Paul sits at the kitchen island.

With a deep sigh, I look down at my phone and see the messages the three of them sent to each other. Remy sent his address, but Freya got a bit more creative.

To Kate's number she sent, If you want to keep your balls intact, I suggest keeping Kate in the loop.

To herself, she sent something that will stick with me for a long time. Don't give up on her. The academy didn't create docile omegas. They forged fighters in the heat of their hell.

## Page 17

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 8:19 am*

16

AMAYA

I 'm glad I have no idea how long I've been here for, or what day it is. With no clue how long I've been shivering in my, once again, soaked clothes, I force my ears to tune out the horrible music drilling into my brain.

The light today isn't white. Oh no, they have different fucking settings. Today, bright pink and purple are set on a strobe like setting, effectively making me want to vomit. Which I've done twice now.

Swollen from the powerful hose, my tongue makes breathing difficult. With the taunt of fresh water, I opened and gulped as much of the liquid as I could, and I still hate myself for giving in to the temptation of thirst.

I've bought myself more time, yet I'm still so damn thirsty. Again I ponder what would be better for my bonded alpha—this suffering or my death?

Unfortunately, I'm too weak to allow myself the mercy of death. But I am strong enough to distract myself.

10 Years Old

The girls are at it again. I'm not sure if they want to be heard whispering about the boys, or if they're just dumb, but Laura's giggle can be heard across the classroom.

"He's so cute!"

"I saw him first," Mandy says with a pout and pushes Laura. Childish .

A poke in my side forces my jaw to release its annoyed clench. "What's the matter?" Oliver asks, eyes moving all over my face.

Grumbling, I say, "Nothing." If he didn't hear the girls, then there's no way I'm going to bring attention to their crush on him. Them . I swear all my classmates drool over my friends; it's why I only have three of them. Sammy, Oli, and Emmett.

All I hear every dang day is how cute they are. Nobody wants to be friends with me for me . They just want to get Oli's attention and the other two if they're around. Oli and I are in the same class, while Sam and Em are a grade ahead, which only adds to their coolness, I guess.

Ugh, I don't know why I'm mad.

"Maya?" Oli nudges my arm. I glare down at the pencil slash through the last few lines I had written in my paper. He chuckles, seeing how he messed me up. "Oops."

My jaw aches again as I twirl my pencil around and begin erasing. "Like that wasn't on purpose," I mumble.

"Why are you so cranky?"

I sigh, feeling a little bad that I'm bringing Oli's mood down too. My pencil clicks against our shared table. Before I can explain my embarrassing feelings, Laura laughs loudly again and tucks her hair behind her ear when Oliver looks over.

I know my face is probably not looking friendly at all, but really ?



"Oh," Oli whispers and tugs my arm off the table. Softly, his hand grips my forearm.  
"They're annoying."

My head darts over to him and seeing him working on his essay like he couldn't care less about the other girls makes me feel so much better.

"Yeah, they are," I agree, my cheeks heating. Blinking at my friend a few times, I can't help but smile. I'm so glad he doesn't like them , especially not like like them.

"Oli," my voice wavers, "do you have a crush on anyone?"

Oh no, OMG why did I say that?!

My hands prickle with sweat and my butt feels hot against the plastic chair. Crap, what if I leave sweat marks on it?!

Then Oli's freckled cheeks turn bright red, and his hand squeezes my arm a little.  
"Ah, no. No crushes."

I feel bad again for making him feel weird. But butterflies flutter in my belly since he's clearly hiding something.

I wonder who he likes!

17

VINCENT

"What do you feel?" I'm going to wring Lucas' fucking neck if he asks me that one more time. "Dude, chill. I'm trying to fucking help you. Stop your damn growling."

My annoyance builds and builds until it snaps through the living room with a snarl. Words are beyond the alpha riding my agitated body. My ass fucking hurts from sitting, my skull throbs incessantly, and my skin itches around every motherfucking scab! AND I'VE STILL GOT NOTHING! I'M FAILING HER!

"That's not true, Vince." Oliver's whisper breaks through the internal pounding in my brain. Shit, I'm losing it. He hasn't left my side since I woke up, and I'd be a fool to take him for granted. "Can you tell me what she feels like?"

Coming from Oliver, the question doesn't feel like a throat punch trying to steal my words. Instead, his soothing cadence relaxes the ache in my vocal cords and loosens them enough for my alpha to sink back a little.

But I'm still a man. A man who doesn't fucking understand what's going on in my own mating bond. My scalp pinches as sweat beads in my hairline. "It's hard to explain."

Pretty boy tests my patience again. "Then?—"

Oliver shoots Lucas a glare, cutting the alpha off before turning back to me. "Close

your eyes, Vincent."

I shake my head, not caring to look at the beta as he approaches me. "It's not going to work, Oli. We tried this already."

We've been at this for two damn days. It doesn't matter whether my eyes are open or closed; I can't get a read on Amaya. If I can't figure this out, she's lost to us until someone else finds her. What kind of alpha am I if I can't protect my omega, let alone fucking find her?

Cooped up in her house healing like I'm told and trying to figure out the tether connecting me to my mate has made me restless and, quite frankly, an asshole. I have to do something. I should get out there and find her, not poking and prodding around in my soul searching for hers. While my omega is experiencing more horrors, I'm literally fucking soul-searching.

Even in therapy at rehab, I didn't feel this useless. I was working toward being better every day so I could get out of there and find her. The similarities aren't lost on me, but this time, it feels impossible.

"You tried it with Lucas. Try with me , Alpha."

Like a siren call, my eyes shoot up to meet his piercing green ones. Oliver's gaze is open, laying everything out there and asking me to do the same. I gulp, feeling oddly connected to this man. Even in the face of tragedy and losing my omega, my heart thumps a little extra for Oliver.

"Come on," he encourages, standing in front of me with only a few inches of space separating us. "I'll do it with you."

I watch as Oli's eyes flutter shut. Releasing a deep breath, his shoulders drop and his

face goes slack around his soft smirk. I'm not sure what he's doing, or how him meditating is supposed to help, so I wait for him to elaborate.

I try really damn hard to keep my annoyance in check, too, but we're—no, I'm wasting precious time. My omega is out there somewhere, in so much pain. The echo of her misery warbles through my body like a reminder of all my failures.

Like that first day I saw her... her pain was evident, but before I could have her, I had to be better. I will always hate our time apart, but when I found her, I was the best version of myself I had ever been. Now I have to do it all over again. I have to conquer more of myself to get to her.

And here I am failing again because I cannot get any fucking read on her!

Oliver hums, pulling me from my spiraling thoughts once again. Fuck, I need to get a grip. "Emmett is a soft golden green, kind of like his eyes mixed with mine."

Confused, I frown. "What do you mean?"

His eyes don't open when he answers my question. "The bond. Golden green, swirling all around me. What color is Amaya?"

What an odd question, but it's one I actually know the answer to.

I don't need to close my eyes to tell Oliver what color our bond is, but I do anyway because it's the closest I can be to my omega right now. And there she is... "It's dark in here but a golden hue pulses like a heartbeat brightening the space every few seconds." My voice feels far away as I sink into the feel of my golden girl.

He hums. "Em is anxious to get back to us, but he's torn 'cause we need food." Oliver sounds like an echo, but I follow him like he's my guide and salvation. What is it

about this beta?

I feel my lips twitch. "Do you actually feel that in the bond, or do you just know him well enough to guess?"

"Touché," he murmurs, the heat of his body tethering me to the world around me. "But no. The bond sizzles around the edges with his nerves. There's this little quake every so often; his mind warring with his feelings that he's doing what he needs to be doing right now. So I put the pieces together."

Blinking my eyes open, I study the beta before me. His brown curls flop over his forehead since his head is tilted forward like he's focusing. Freckles sprinkle across his nose and cheeks. The laugh lines around his eyes and mouth when his face twitches give me insight to the man I can't see myself without anymore. The scar through his lips looks like a straight line from afar, but up close it's jagged and puckered. He has a sort of masculine beauty that I don't think I'll ever tire of looking at.

The way he speaks of his alpha is wistful, but it doesn't make me jealous. I want to bask in their love for one another. Oliver truly feels Emmett, and it's like he's all Oli can focus on when deep in their soul connection.

I glance at Lucas who's reclined back into the couch watching us with a mixture of curiosity and respect. The alpha knows everything there is to know about his bond to Freya, but from what I understand, theirs was formed in drastically different circumstances. What makes mine similar to his is Lucas used his bond to find Freya after she was taken from them.

But I'm not Lucas. His pack bond is one I'll never understand, let alone grasp his connection to Freya. I won't ever be able to learn my way around the mating bond warming my chest from someone I'm not close to.

I need Oliver. He's my fated packmate and the closest I can get to anything similar to Amaya and myself. Pack. Family.

Maybe once I figure this out, Lucas can show me how to track my omega.

Locking eyes with the football jock I went to the academy with, he gives me a nod. "Call me when you're ready," he murmurs, rising and letting himself out.

Appreciation loosens my shoulders. I always thought Lucas was a dick, and he definitely was at the Designation Academy, but he's changed. I will definitely be calling him when we're ready. A man with that much personal growth is one I'll need by my side to save my omega.

Turning back to Oli, I jolt when I see his striking green eyes already looking at me. Affection burns beneath the surface and his soft smile makes my stomach flip. I don't notice his hand reaching for mine until the heat of his soft palm holds my clammy one. Electricity tingles up my arm and I swear my breastbone expands to accommodate the beta. Mossy green clouds my eyes, but it's gone so fast I feel I must've imagined it. By Oliver's rapidly blinking eyelids and his stuttered breath, I wonder if he felt something similar.

"Ready to continue?"

I give Oliver a jerky nod and keep hold of his hand as our eyes flutter closed once again. Come on, Amaya. Give me all of you, golden girl.

18

AMAYA

15 Years Old

O liver's voice has the power to blow me away on the gentle summer breeze. This, him singing to me, has been the only time I've felt lighter than a feather since Nana died.

He found me crying one day a few weeks ago in my backyard, and ever since then he's become my solace in the pain. Just like that day, Oli and I lie in the field by his house while he sings the weight of loneliness away from my tired body.

With each melody and accidental crack of his voice, I sink further into the grass. My eyes may be closed but my head stays tilted toward my friend so I can bask in everything that he is.

Every so often, I open my eyes to stare at him. Messy brown curls hang in his right eye as he's curled on his side facing me. His fingers play with my hair sprawled out around us, tugging on knots sometimes, but he doesn't apologize and I don't scold him because it keeps me awake. It keeps me here, with him, in the only moments I can be conscious and happy lately.

Without Nana to brighten my home, I feel like I'm wading in waters tortured by a heavy storm. Living alone with my mother wasn't something I could have prepared myself for. She's gone most of the time, off doing whatever she does to make her

come home reeking of sewage and booze, but when she's home, her rot does more than stink up the house. It's strangling.

Oliver breathes life back into me. He makes me happy. I can smile and laugh with him without feeling guilty for still being alive when the person I loved the most isn't. With Oli, I can close my eyes without seeing Nana's pale face haunting me.

I wish I could picture her beyond the lifeless face I saw in her open casket.

"You've been torn to pieces, lost in the storm... hating lost life, hating you've been born. But I'll always be here to dry your tears... and chase away all your fears."

With Oli, all I see is him because he sees all of me.



19

OLIVER

I hope this works. Uncertainty threatens to smother my concentration on my bond with Emmett, but I've spent many hours wading through everything that is the connection between my alpha and me. I know him and our tether better than I know myself, so my experience has to be useful, right?

Please let me be helpful .

Vincent's breaking my goddamn heart watching him struggle and reprimand himself for each passing moment he can't grab onto his bond with Amaya.

He's right, a mating bond is hard to explain. They are beautifully and overwhelmingly unique, but the five senses still exist within the shared space.

Sight? Emmett is a swirly golden green wrapping all around me. Loving and cherishing me with a hint of protective alphaness.

Smell? My fresh cut grass scent tinged with his minty yumminess. And maybe a whiff of Sammy's signature sugary lime as my brother gets close to Em.

Sound? Right now, since Emmett can feel me poking around in here, his rumble purr echoes throughout the bond.

Touch? Cozy warmth, and if I focus hard enough, a subtle chilly shift when he exits

the grocery store.

And of course the taste of my alpha lingers on my tongue not only from this morning but from the potency of his minty freshness swirling through the bond and teasing me.

"Now," I begin, settling onto the couch, Amaya's little nest between us in the corner as we face each other. "What does Amaya feel like?"

I could ask him what she's feeling, but in my experience, figuring the details out is much harder than getting a general sense. I would fucking love to know what Amaya is feeling right now even if it scares the shit out of me, but just the small smidge of hope that she's feeling fine pushes me forward.

Cocking my head, I watch Vincent's brows furrow over his closed eyes. He's focusing, which is good, but...

"You need to feel , Alpha."

He grunts at me and rolls his shoulders back. I can tell he's struggling, then he leans forward toward me a bit, and his eyebrows slam down hard .

"What?" I whisper, worried, but I need to know, and I'll help him no matter if it breaks me.

Vincent shakes his head. "She—It doesn't make sense." I wait, but he doesn't take long, the words bursting out of him like he can't hold it in. "All I feel is you ."

Jerking, I scoot away. "What? Like I'm distracting you?" Fuck, I've been trying to help all this time, but maybe leaving him with Lucas was the better choice.

"No," Vincent whispers, pulling me from my panic. "No. Amaya feels you , Oliver."

I'm studying his features fucking hard and my heart absolutely pounds away in my chest. What does he mean?! I ignore Emmett's concerned prodding in our bond, knowing he and Sam will be home soon enough.

"W-what?" I stutter. Very helpful, I know.

Without opening his eyes, Vincent reaches for my knee and splays his hand above my gray sweatpants. "All the pain, loneliness, fear... it's gone. I don't know how to explain it, Oliver, but it feels like you in here."

"How so?" I have to know .

"Warm and comforting, like a life raft. It feels like... like you're saving her." My throat closes and my eyes prick with tears. Amaya? "I swear I can hear?—"

The front door opens, Sam and Emmett come in and drop the groceries off in the kitchen, but I don't think that's what halts Vincent's explanation.

"What can you hear?" My voice is thick, the heavy weight of his hand keeping me from flying off the couch and pacing. How can Amaya be feeling me in the bond when we don't have that connection?

What Vincent says next is an explanation without description. "Torn to pieces, lost in the storm... hating lost life, hating you've been born," he murmurs, liting the end like a question.

Something shatters. Be it my soul plummeting in complete shock or my heart falling out of my ass, I don't fucking know, but oh my hell.

"What?!" Emmett's gasp and Sam's cursing don't even rouse Vince from his task. Flicking my gaze over the couch to the other two alphas, I see Sam bent over scattered glass and Em staring at us with his eyes and mouth wide open.

Gulping and begging my heart to calm down before I pass out, I snatch Vincent's hand off my leg, fall to my knees before him, and press his knuckles to my chest. At the feel of me, the big alpha with his signature backward cap snaps his eyes open. His gaze sears through me, but I'm unable to read the burning in his bright blues.

"I-I wrote her a song after her nana died when we were fifteen. She was hurting so damn much," I breathe, unable to hold back the tears now tracking down my cheeks.

"I'll always be here to dry your tears... and chase away all your fears."

Vincent completing the verse Amaya is reliving through the bond breaks me. A sob bursts from my strangled throat. "Except, I'm not !"

Heat envelopes my back and my cheek, but still I clench my eyes shut, fighting the comfort offered to me. I ignore Emmett's loving words warming the back of my neck, Sam's protests further away and the tugging on my jaw.

"I p-promised her!"

"Oliver—"

"No!" I cry, trying to pull myself from between the two alphas to no avail. "I'm not there! Oh fuck... I haven't been there for her for years! " Guilt, horrid and coiling, tugs on my guts, threatening to make me vomit everywhere for the horrible mate I've been.

How many tears has Amaya cried? How often has she begged for me to chase away

her fears? I'm the worst beta... worst man to ever exist.

"BETA!" Vincent snaps. My jaw creaks with the force of his punishing grip, forcing me to look at his thunderous gaze. "You will never speak of yourself that way again. Do you hear me?"

I'm silent for too long. Vince shoots daggers over my shoulder, having a wordless conversation with Emmett. Next thing I know, my alpha has a hand wrapped around my throat, cutting off my air supply as Vincent leans in and shifts his hand to a stinging grip in my hair.

"Listen, Oliver." Vincent's order is softer than I expected, making me melt into their grasp. Emmett relaxes on my throat, allowing me to breathe. "All I feel is you . All Amaya feels is you . I feel safety, comfort, and so much damn love radiating through the bond. Amaya feels safety, comfort, and love. Even if she's blocking me from something else, you are still there making it better."

I see Samuel hovering over his shoulder out of the corner of my eye, but Vincent has me locked on him. His aura and sheer dominance leaking out in a sharp lemon tang around us forces me to stop and listen.

"Oliver, you are there with her. You're saving her, Beta. You are her solace in the storm. Even without you physically there, you've loved her enough to keep her heart and mind safe." Vincent is firm in his explanation.

"Your omega is seeking comfort in her memories of you, Oliver," Samuel adds, tone sturdy with a touch of awe.

Their words settle in my soul, soothing the fear that I'm not doing enough, but it's Emmett's words that have pride for the young boy I used to be swelling my chest.

"Thank you for giving her a place to retreat, Oliver."

I have to thank my younger self for being everything she needed me to be. Until I wasn't. Never again, baby girl. I'll be everything you need me to be and more for ever and ever.

"Okay," I sniffle. "Let's keep going."

We have to find her.

20

AMAYA

15 Years Old

"Emmett, can we please just go back inside?" I'm being a brat, I know it, but I would so much rather go lay on his couch and take another nap.

"No," he says over his shoulder.

I glower, annoyed, and I may stomp my feet through the garden beds a little until I realize what I'm doing. My eyes prick with tears again at the complete disrespect to John's garden.

Like Oli and Sam's parents, Emmett's have been nothing short of sweet, yet here I am disrupting their flower beds. John takes so much pride in his ability to provide herbs and produce for their family. For years, he's taught me and Emmett all about the stuff he's planted. Rich, Emmett's other beta dad, lights up whenever he sees us out here.

Gosh, the love Emmett's family radiates is... it's beyond words. I miss Nana. Bitterness and depression are so hard to fight off lately, but I can't take it out on anyone else.

Being around Em lately is unnerving. He's just so dang calm all the time, and all I want to do is cry. Or scream. Maybe break something. Like I just did to the poor pea plant.

I don't realize I'm grumbling and sniffing until Emmett whirls around, forcing me to stop my careful steps. "Pick, Maya."

"Pick?"

He raises an eyebrow at my confusion and points to the beds of mint. I try to tamp down my annoyance. I really do, but this is not what I want to be doing. "Em..."

"Come on." Settling on his knees, he reaches up and tugs on my sweaty palm. "Just sit with me at least. Please?"

His eyes melt me until my butt settles in the dirt beside him. Earth and fresh mint flood my senses while I zone out and Em forages some stuff for his dads.

Time ceases to exist except for the occasional summer breeze forcing breath into my lungs. Why did you leave me, Nana?

Nothing is the same and it won't ever be again. I used to love going home and now... I fear it. Will I get yelled at or talked down to? Maybe I'll be insulted or accused of something or other. No matter what I do, it's wrong. I deserve my mother's wrath. It's because of me she drinks herself into a spiteful rage.

On the nights she doesn't come home, it still freaking hurts. The quiet is nothing but a horrible reminder that the one person who loves—loved me unconditionally is gone.

Heat tickles my chin until suddenly I'm no longer staring at the blurry clumps of dirt and am looking at a blurry Emmett. "Amaya?" he whispers.

A sob explodes from my lips that I didn't even realize were trembling. "I—" Choking on emotion, I can't get a thought out, let alone even figure out what broke me just now.



Em opens his mouth, making me freak. "NO!" I gasp. "It's not okay. Don't tell me it's okay!"

Everyone keeps telling me it's okay. Okay to be sad, to cry. But it's NOT. I'm fifteen. I shouldn't know this level of heartbreak. It's unfair I've been born into a life without a dad and a mother who doesn't love me or even like me, and the one family member I have is dead. DEAD.

"IT'S NOT OKAY!" My fists clench and slam into the ground beside my knees, making me crumble even more. "No no no no no," I mumble, pushing the dirt back to where it was. John's flower beds!

"Amaya—"

"NO!" I cry, dirt digging its way under my nails as I frantically try to fix what I've broken. But what's the point? Everything is broken. I have no family. Nobody who cares if I go home. Nobody who cares if I'm okay.

Words trickle through the overwhelming panic of loneliness, and they are... everything .

"You're right, it's not okay," Emmett whispers with a hand on my knee, grounding me to the here and now. My shoulders loosen. Finally someone understands me. "But the garden is."

A shocked laugh bursts from me, and I slap my dirty palm over my mouth in awe. When was the last time I laughed?

"I certainly don't mind the dirt on your face either," he teases with a grin and a swipe through the tears, turning my cheeks to mud. "But I'm not about to pick all this by myself, so come on, hop to it, Rose. No more playing in the dirt."

Normal . Emmett makes me feel normal.

21

EMMETT

Being strong and relaxed for everyone has always been my superpower. It feels like a curse now, though. Even Vincent glances at me when emotions are high and whatever he finds seems to relax him.

I honestly don't think I'm doing that good of a job. On the inside, I'm fucking roiling with nausea. I'm so damn anxious all the time. It's been nonstop for a week. The moment I walked out Amaya's front door after her heat ended, I was slammed with a nervousness I chose to ignore.

I should have stayed .

We're all so fucking dumb. Who leaves their omega literally hours after her heat breaks?! It's irresponsible and negligent.

I'm in a constant state of unrest, and yet I seem to be the calming presence for everyone. It's overwhelming and a burden I really can't handle right now. My girl is out there somewhere, enduring fuck knows what, and I'm sitting here on the couch just staring at another alpha, waiting for him to fix everything.

Shit . Now I feel like an ass.

My hand is punishing as I drag it down my face. I'm overwhelmed? Please . Everyone has been staring at Vincent all damn week waiting for him to find Amaya. That's

overwhelming.

"Let's do this again," Oliver murmurs, settling beside Vince on the sectional. I tune back in, praying he'll find something; a clue or hint.

Samuel abandons his sandwich on the kitchen island and bends over, resting his forearms on the back of the couch. His tangy lime scent tickles my nose, zapping me upright and forcing the last of my wayward thoughts away.

Come on, Vincent.

Oli watches Vince close his eyes before doing the same. "Emmett feels like a restless Pop Rock but there's a heavy weight pushing on the sensation, trying to smother the nerves. Like... like he feels obligated to tamp the feeling down."

Son of a bitch . My neck pulses with the effort to keep from hiding my face. Embarrassing .

Smack ! "Ow!" I shout, my hand flying to the back of my head while shooting a glare at Sam behind me. "What the fuck?!"

The bastard just narrows his eyes like I deserved the cuff upside the head. "I knew you were being way too normal. You do nobody any good if you aren't fucking taking care of yourself, Emmett!"

"I'm just fine. Lay off," I growl. My cheeks feel warm, though.

"No," Sam states, arms crossed in defiance above me. "Feel your feelings now because as soon as Vincent has a location or something, you need your game face on. We don't need you acting like a damn Xanax right now. Save it for Amaya. Figure it out."

My annoyance fizzles out. Is he right? If I smother my shit now, will it come out at the worst possible time? "I-I don't know how."

Sam opens his mouth, his frown marring his sharp features, but Oli interrupts gently. "Sam, he's not tamping it down on purpose. Em's always done it naturally."

"Well, cut it out," my friend huffs.

I roll my eyes. "That's the opposite of what Oliver's saying, Sam."

He throws his hands in the air. "All I'm saying is if you keep ignoring your shit, it's going to come back and bite us in the ass. This, finding our omega, is going to get worse before it gets better. You need to deal with your emotions now 'cause there's only gonna be more coming."

Shoving to my feet, I whirl around. "I don't know how to be anything but the way I am, Sam! We all deal with our issues differently, so back off."

"I'm just worried about you!"

Now it's my turn to toss my hands in the air, my emotions crackling and ready to snap. And snap they do. "That's a first! Oliver and I have been fucked up over how you've been handling Amaya's disappearance for years . Years, Sam! I'm already struggling to figure out my feelings without you putting even more pressure on me. I've been the calm one since I can remember. I don't know how to not be that for you all."

"For us?" Sam replies, aghast.

"Yes! For you. For Oli, and Maya when we were kids. Everyone needed a safe space, and that was me. What am I if not the person you all look to, to calm your own nerves

and worries?!"

He just stares at me now, and I keep my back to my beta and Vincent, not wanting to see their stricken expressions.

"I mean, shit, Sam! Oliver has so much depth beyond the happy guy we all love. You, aside from your years of being a fucking asshole, are our pillar of strength and protection, and you aren't even buff. You both provide so much to this pack, but this, being calm, is all I have."

"That's not true," Oli whispers, but I ignore him.

My hand slams against my chest as I stare into the eyes of my best friend, finally laying my truth at his feet. "I don't know what I am to you guys if I'm not your safe space."

There's nothing but silence.

My chest heaves with the force of the rant that stole my breath. All my fears and insecurities out there have the wind ripping through my sails and leaving me stranded in a sea of vulnerability and judgment.

My mind conjures possible reactions in rapid succession, but none of them happen. Instead of Oliver wrapping himself around me in comfort, or Samuel denying his worth too, it's Vincent that breaks the tension in the room.

"You're more than the calm one, Emmett." I turn slowly to look at him in muted disbelief. Before I can tell him he doesn't know me, he murmurs, "You're... everything ."

"What?"

"Come here," Vincent demands softly while standing. Trepidation coils in my gut, but I still listen to the big alpha. "Right here." He points to the tips of his toes.

Once I'm within inches of him, and huffing down his lemon scent, a new tension fills the air. I whisper, "I don't?—"

"Do you trust me?"

Those Pop Rocks Oliver described? They're fucking popping alright.

"I-Yeah." My response is quiet but sure. I do trust him. If I can trust him with my omega, then absolutely.

Heat encompasses my wrist, but I can't look away from the sincerity and passion in his blue eyes. There's a darkness there that wasn't there before Amaya was taken, but it's held in the arms of compassion and tenderness.

I watch my hand come into view and heat flushes through my entire body and settles in my dick as his lips brush the veins of my wrist. "I'm giving you my bond, Alpha," he declares, voice thick and rumble.

I gulp. "Wh-why?" What the hell is happening right now?

"Because you're everything." A sharp canine presses into the taut skin. "You're still waters after a shattering of the surface. A warm grip on the elbow keeping the edge of a cliff far away. You are a gentle lift in crushing moments of tears."

I don't breathe. What is he saying?

"Do you trust me?" he repeats.

"Yes." It's immediate. I have to know where these words are coming from.

How is this alpha painting these intricate pictures of my character when he doesn't know me? And how do I not view myself this way? Who views me this way?

Vincent, slowly with heated eye contact, presses my wrist into his teeth. The prick of pain is washed away in a tsunami of heartbreak, anguish, determination, sorrow, and finally... pride. Everything Vincent feels rushes through me and if he weren't holding me, I'd be swept off my feet and crashing beneath the waves of him.

But... there's something else. No. Someone else.

There's nothing, nobody, that can keep me standing once she floods my system. Amaya . I crash to my knees. Vincent follows, keeping my cheeks in a brutal grip.

" Feel her, Emmett."

"Amaya," I choke, squeezing my eyes shut to try to hold on to her sunshine and warmth because I can feel it slipping through my fingers before being replaced with frigid numbness and muted fear.

"No, past that," Vincent encourages. The wrist he sprained flicks out and his hand squeezes my jaw a little harder, keeping me from floating away into the black waters of her disassociation. "You have to swim deeper to get to her. Go deeper ."

I find my omega in a gentle current of warmth surrounding her body to keep her from drifting too far and a soft pressure keeping her from sinking like a stone.

"That's you , Emmett. She's feeling you."

"H-how do you know?" My voice sounds garbled and far away, but... how?



"Listen now."

Amaya screeches through the water, startling me and demanding my focus. "IT'S NOT OKAY!"

"You're right. It's not okay." That's my voice. Not as deep, but soothing and understanding. I remember this.

"His words trickle through the overwhelming panic of loneliness, and they are... everything." Amaya's voice.

"Maya," I choke, keeling forward as the connection fades.

"See? You're everything. And now." Vincent swipes his tongue over my fresh bond mark. "Now she has you."

She will always have me .

22

AMAYA

15 Years Old

Sammy sighs again. It's getting on my nerves. I don't know what his dang problem is. I just want to be left alone. It's not my fault he dragged me to his house and demanded we have our usual biweekly friend date.

We do the same thing every time; he makes us nonalcoholic margaritas and we sit by the fire in his parents' living room, catching up on the days in between Sam and Maya time.

I'm not sure when we started doing this, but these are nights I treasure. It's a constant, and one I've avoided since Nana died. Nothing is the same anymore, so why should the world keep moving?

I didn't want to come tonight, knowing that each friend date with Sammy is just another way to prove time is passing me by. The world is moving on, but I... I'm stuck and I don't want to fix it. I want to stay in my space where all I can think about is my nana, even if it hurts.

Staring into the flames, I can still picture her face and mischievous smile. She was a force to be reckoned with. Who will be the cheerleader and champion in my corner now?

"Here."

I jolt, not having noticed Sammy moving to sit closer to me. His eyes are concentrated on my lap, so I follow his gaze and find his arm stretched over me.

"Sam!" I hiss. "What are you doing?" Oh my hell, his dads are going to kill him if they find out he stole tequila from their cabinets.

"Shush," he huffs and screws the cap back on after making our margaritas real ones. Dumbfounded, I watch him nudge the bottle under the couch and lean back without a care in the world.

"You're gonna get us in trouble!"

He gives me a bored look and takes a sip of his drink. Mine weighs heavily in my lap, a temptation I don't know if I should give in to. "The one who's going to get us in trouble is you if you keep talking about it."

My lips purse with a comeback on my tongue, but I bite it back and bring my glass to my mouth instead. Gingerly, I take a sip and my eyes widen. "That's so much better," I whisper in awe.

Sammy smirks, making my cheeks heat. "Happy to be of service," he teases, clinking his beverage against mine.

We drink silently and slowly together and soon I feel a little extra warm. My butt feels like it's pressing into the couch a bit more and I finally relax into my time with my friend. The silence allows me to think, and I don't find myself thinking of Nana. No, I'm wondering about the boy next to me.

"Sam," I murmur, pulling my legs up on the couch and curling toward him. He hums

without looking at me. "Why did you do that?" I ask, gesturing to the margarita.

He shrugs. "You needed some adventure."

"What?" What's that supposed to mean? "You could get into trouble for this!"

Finally, he looks at me with a serious glint in his eye surrounded by a warmth he rarely allows others to see. "It would be worth it. For months I've hardly seen any emotion beyond your pain, Petal. I'll gladly be grounded just to see your eyes widen in wonder and excitement over a splash of tequila in your drink."

Tears burn my eyes for the millionth time this year, but this time it's an overflow of appreciation and love for my friend. He would get in trouble for me just to battle the pain festering in my soul for a moment.

"And, Maya?"

"Yeah?" I whisper, peeking over at him again.

"I will always be in your corner. No matter what you need, Petal, you can count on me."

The damn breaks, my meager wall of numbness splintering into pieces as emotion crashes through on a watery sob. Unable to hold myself up, I collapse against his side and press my forehead into his bicep. Heat on the crown of my head soothes me, then Sammy drops a kiss on my hair.

"Anything, forever and always."

I soak in his words, allowing his declaration to give me strength and support. I know I can't do this on my own and I need to remember that I don't have to. Silence stretches

on with me leaning against him, the crackle of the fire our background noise with a frequent snuffle from my tingling nose.

"Sammy," I whisper. "Can I have more tequila?"

He snorts, shifting around until his arm around is around my shoulder and my face rests on his chest. "No, you delinquent. I'm not getting you drunk, so you'll just have to settle for cuddles."

I sigh, but not out of disappointment. Snuggling into him further, I rest my eyes and give him the weight of my sorrow.

My warrior .

My sweet, thoughtful, protective warrior.

23

SAMUEL

I have no idea what in the fuck is going on anymore. Emmett's been in la-la land since Vincent bit him and started the process of their bond. It won't be complete or run fully through the pack until Em bites him back, but there's an unspoken agreement that they'll wait for Amaya. I think. Or maybe they need to build their own relationship first.

Fuck if I know.

Vincent is an echo of a pulsing thrum through the pack bond, lighting Emmett's tether up as a reminder that there's a new alpha coming into our pack. I'm not upset. I'm just really damn lost.

Every so often I get a weird feeling from Emmett which I am inclined to believe is him seeking out Amaya through Vincent. I don't know, it's all so very complicated. I'm thankful to Vince for giving Em this peace of mind that I never could have done.

I can't believe my best friend has been struggling with his place in our pack for this long and I didn't know. Actually, that's fucking stupid because I've been shutting him and Oli out for years now.

Holding in a groan, I rub my forehead. The uncertainty of everything and not knowing how to help makes me want to punch something. If Paul ever shows his face around here again, I might just take a swing. Fuck knows he deserves it after how he's

treated Vincent.

"Sam," Oliver murmurs from his place by Emmett. I drag my frown away from Em and look at my brother expectantly. "Stop that."

My gaze now narrows on him. "Excuse me? What am I doing?"

If this is going to be another emotional yelling match, I really don't want to be a part of it. It's happened way too many times these past few months.

"Stop staring," he hisses, gaze flitting between me and his mate.

"I'm not staring." Oliver rolls his eyes and Emmett still sits there, unmoving, with his eyes closed. "Okay fine, I'm staring," I grumble, leaning back on the couch and turning my attention to Vincent on the floor.

What the fuck he's doing down there, I have no idea.

"Samuel," Oliver groans. "Your alpha vibes are skeeving me the fuck out. Leave them be."

I huff a laugh. "My alpha vibes?"

"Yeah, you're practically coating Amaya's living room in your anxious tang. Stop it, let them work."

Closing my eyes, I let my head drop back against the couch with a groan. "What the hell am I supposed to be doing, Oli? It's been a week and a half and we still have nothing ."

"Shut up," Vincent grumbles from the floor. The alpha seems to be feeling much

better, but he's a bit rough around the edges these days. Guilt basically oozes off of him.

Oliver jumps up at the sound of Vincent's low voice. "Do you need anything? Water, maybe a sandwich. How can I help? I can call Lucas."

Ugh, not that asshole. The way he just waltzed into Amaya's home like he owned the place and took control of our situation irks the shit out of me.

Sitting up, Vince glances at Oli before rubbing his eyes. "No thank you, Oliver." Vincent declining makes my brother deflate, but before he can shake off the disappointment, Vince is studying him. "On second thought, can I get a glass of water, please? Lunch sounds good too."

"Of course!" Oliver practically bolts from the room, leaving his fresh cut grass scent in his wake.

I lean forward, watching Vince watch Oli with a look of sadness and fondness. "Thank you for that," I say genuinely.

Vince flicks his attention to me as he stands and cracks his back. "No need to thank me, man. He needs something to do to feel useful and to keep his mind off of everything."

I nod, knowing exactly how Oliver feels, but it doesn't mean I'm not grateful to this alpha for providing my brother with said distractions.

"So," Vincent drawls, sitting on the cushion beside me. "You ever give a fifteen-year-old tequila?"

"What?" I sputter. "The fuck are you on about?"



"You know," he leans forward, studying me and my shocked expression, "after all these years and bullshit, she still takes comfort in the foundation you built when you were kids."

"Wh-what are you talking about? Amaya?" My heart beats wildly in my chest while my brain ping pongs around in my head trying to keep up with Vincent.

Nodding grimly, Vincent zones out on the dark TV screen. "I don't know what she's doing, Sam," he whispers like he's afraid to admit it. "It's like she's broadcasting these memories at me with high intensity."

He blinks. I blink, waiting for him to continue. Emmett moves out of the corner of my eye, listening in on the exchange.

"I can't feel her . All I get is dull aches and pains, and a whisper of my weeping omega. But her present feelings are snuffed out and muffled by her memories of you guys." He scratches his chin. "You were all there for her in your own ways after her grandmother died."

"Nana," Oli's voice cracks as he enters the living room again. "She was so heartbroken."

"Lonely," Emmett adds quietly. "Maya felt so alone."

Nodding sadly, I say, "She would zone out a lot. Her eyes were always so damn sad. It physically hurt me."

Vincent nods like he knows exactly what we're talking about. "So you sang," he gestures to my brother. To Em he reveals, "You accepted her pain and gave her space to feel what she needed to."

I can see in their twin expressions that it's hard for them to grasp the high praise they've been given when we've all done so much damage. But I know it's true, I was there.

"Sam," Vincent continues. "You gave her adventure. Amaya continued to live and explore because of you. I'm not so sure the tequila was a good idea." He chuckles. "But you did everything you could to chase away her demons."

My throat closes with an emotion I don't have the capability of understanding. Did I do that?

"All three of you battled those demons with her. And from what I'm gathering, because of your devotion back then, you're saving Amaya now."

"What do you mean?" My brother seems hesitant to know Vincent's insight, and honestly, I am too, but the more we know, the better.

"She's—" Vincent chokes, his face contorting in a wince. "I don't think Amaya's okay, guys."

It feels like my face tightens. The tears suck all the moisture from my pores. "What?—"

"So she's disassociating in you . You created safe memories; that's where she is. It's why I can't fucking find her!" Vincent's voice rises as his body does. "My omega has to fucking hide in memories that make her feel comforted and not alone, because she IS alone!"

Oliver rears back. "Vincent?—"

"NO!" Vince paces back and forth, ripping his hat off at chucking it toward the front

door. "She's hiding from me!"

Fuck, I didn't see this coming. I stand, noting Emmett pulling his beta away from the irate alpha that seemed to come out of nowhere. "Hey, man, let's calm down for a second, okay?" I plead.

"NO!" Christ, is this what talking to a child is like ? "Why would she run from me like this? I can help her too. That's all I've ever wanted to do—is love her and be there for her and now she's shutting me out!"

I worry we're getting dangerously close to him saying something he can't take back, but he bypasses the obvious jab he could have made at our shitty absence in her life.

"Sam," Emmett warns as I inch closer to Vincent. I wave him off, though.

Suddenly, Vincent's wild pacing comes to a halt, stunning me to my spot a few feet away from him and the window. "You alright?" I hesitate.

Fuck, it's like some kind of horror film as he turns around. Tattooed neck flexing and cocking with a stricken look on his now pale face, Vincent looks like he's seen a ghost. His hands grip his chest over his heart. I watch with horror as tears fill his blood-shot eyes and his mouth drops open on a gasp.

"Amaya," he whimpers and crashes to the ground.

24

AMAYA

The blissful silence in my head and soothing warmth in my soul explodes with more aggression than the bass beating down on me from the speakers and the power of the hose trying to shred the skin from my bones.

Vincent .

Where he was once a subtle presence beyond the protective veil of my memories, he crashes through in a jumbled heap of terror and choked shock.

On his knees before me, Vincent meets my eyes, shattering the illusion of Sam and the fireplace heating my toes. But they weren't my toes, were they? Fifteen-year-old me doesn't exist anymore and the ice chilling my feet is a brutal reminder of the torture I'm hiding from.

"Amaya," my bonded mate whispers, reaching for me as the fantasy I've created warbles and sucks all sound away like a vacuum.

No!

His presence is unnatural in the safety of the past, making my carefully constructed memories pull taught like a rubber band. Like a white pinpoint, it reaches the end and snaps back, ricocheting me right back into the present without a shield to protect me or my mate from the torture I'm suffering on the outside.

"Ah, there she is."

No, no, no! A whimper slips free, but whether it's because of the awful voice of my abuser, the welts burning my once soft skin, or the thundering ache of loneliness and fear leaching my soul of hope... I don't know.

"I have some glorious news, little slut."

My belly roils as I fight to inch myself away from the man in charge of my punishments. God, why do I keep drinking the water? I just want it to stop.

Dread that isn't mine coils tight in my chest before it's plowed over by a surge of comfort and concern. I know it's not me because I don't have the capacity to feel anything else besides terror and loneliness. The more my hope dissipates, the less energy I seem to have. Which begs the question, will I be able to recreate my memories or am I stuck living the nightmares of my present?

Hot fingers wrap around my ankle and drag me across the floor until I'm sprawled beneath the alpha with the ponytail. He tuts with a grin and drags the offending hand up my bare leg, bunching the fabric of my torn and battered pajamas. At least I still have those .

"S-stop," I croak, unable to put up much of a fight. I don't know if I'll survive a violation like the one swimming in his devilish eyes.

"Oh hush," he huffs. "Very full of yourself, aren't you? I admit, your lavender scent ripe with fear is delectable, but I don't sample the dirty pussy I sell."

Rage like I've never felt before lights a fire up my throat like a thousand cases of heartburn. A whine breaks through Vincent's rage, and I try as hard as I can to get him to stop.

'Alpha?' My omega whimpers, lifting her head from the fetal position she's been curled up in since we got here.

I can't. I can't handle my pain and his.

She nods sadly and releases a low purr through the bond. 'Gentle, Alpha,' my omega pleads before ducking her head and hiding from the monster petting my thigh.

"Listen, bitch!" ponytail asshole snarls and digs his nails into my leg. I gasp and wiggle, trying to ignore the much quieter pulse of anger from my mate. "Do you want to hear the good news or not?"

No, I really fucking don't .

In a singsong voice he says, "You're going to make me a lot of moneeeeeey. Well," he exhales, "first we're gonna have to break you a little more."

I am already broken .

"So let's get you back to your cage. Your buyers are dying to see the daughter of the one and only... Paul Arison!"

My dad? What does my dad have to do with this?!

"Ah, I see..." he taunts, standing and waving at his guard to manhandle me to my numb feet. "You didn't realize dear old daddy has some enemies, huh? Imagine my surprise when your name and a little digging made you a top commodity. Everyone wants the chance to fuck up a lawyer's kid."

Walking backwards, the evil alpha smirks at my continued trembling and tripping over my feet. Cries and whimpers reach my ears just as the scent of too many omegas

and alphas sting my dry nose.

"Not only are you Paul's kid, the amazing lawyer with plenty of targets on his back, but you're also friends with the omegas who ruined our brother operation." He shrugs. "No skin off my back, though. I much prefer breaking you bitches with force rather than their backhanded manipulation."

My head swims trying to piece together the information while it feels like my body is giving out every second I try to keep my feet under me. I don't understand. Because of my dad and Kate, maybe Freya too, I'm... what? Being sold?

"In you go, slut. Your new alphas will be along shortly."

New alphas?

Thrown into my small cage, I'm relieved their hands are off of me. A snarl vibrates my chest, one that isn't mine because the only thing I can muster up is a sad little tear that steals the moisture my body desperately needs. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by Vincent's growl through the bond, I sink into the feel of my alpha.

I won't shut him out any longer and not just because I don't think I have that ability anymore, but because it's going to be the only thing keeping me sane.

'Alpha?'

Go to him , I encourage her, needing one of us to be wrapped in his love and protection.

Closing my eyes, I fade away enough to feel my omega reaching for her alpha and releasing a shuddering keen of sorrow. The dam bursts. Even though I'm too dehydrated for my body to cry, my soul bleeds.

And my alpha weeps.



25

PAUL

What is normally just a blip of time has become the longest two weeks of my life. I've lived too many lives in the time since they kidnapped Amaya. Each day for the last week and a half since they released Vincent from the hospital has been nothing short of hell.

I would give anything, fucking anything, for my bond with my daughter to work similar to that of a mate bond, just so I could find her. We're all relying on Vincent, leaving the rest of us to sit on our asses like a bunch of useless pricks.

Ignoring the ache in my knuckles, I pound on the door again. Thankfully, I finally hear some movement beyond the door. "SEVEN A.M.," Kate screeches, then deeper voices mumble through the door.

I don't give two shits what time it is; my daughter is missing. My fists clench in response to the familiar tug in my heart telling me Amaya needs me, but before I can knock again or maybe kick the door down, it's thrown wide.

"What the fuck, Paul?!"

I cross my arms over my chest to keep from throttling the shirtless kid. "Beckett, get Remy. Now."

His pale complexion tinges pink with obvious annoyance at my audacity to demand

things right now, but I haven't slept for days . I need my daughter.

"You woke my omega," Beckett fumes, taking a step outside of the front door to their safe house. It's a townhome, situated down the street from Amaya's house while Freya and her pack occupy the home next to it. How they could share a wall with one another is beyond me. They're all fucking crazy, especially the alpha currently hulking out at me.

Remy appears behind Beckett, with a shirt on thankfully, and slaps a hand on the alpha's shoulder. "Beck, go make Kate a coffee."

Just the man I wanted to see.

Beckett huffs, his glare lingering a moment longer than polite before he brushes past their pack alpha. I clench my jaw in an attempt to hold my instinctual urge to put the pup in his place, but I rein it in for the sake of my daughter.

"What's the update?" I demand, stepping back when Remy closes the door behind him. "Do you have a location?"

He raises a brow and sits on their porch swing. I stay standing but lean my hip against the railing so I don't come off as crazy as Beckett. Too late , I think to myself, but this is my kid we're talking about here. I only just found her, and I fucking lost her.

"Does Vincent have a location?" My tooth cracks but he continues. "Paul, we're waiting for Vincent to figure the bond out. We have a few alphas bonded to the missing omegas trying to figure it out too, but not nearly enough. The OPS is doing everything they can, just like we are."

"Doing everything we can?!" I snap. "Remy, we haven't done shit!"

His eyes darken. "I'm protecting my omega and my sister-in-law, so watch your mouth, Paul. How 'bout you make yourself useful and go see if Vincent needs help?"

My mouth slams shut.

Remy sighs and stands. "Look, I know you aren't on good terms with them, but you need to figure it out. If you want to help, go to Amaya's pack and offer it." The alpha drops his head and when he looks up, he looks like he's aged twenty years. "She's going to need you more than ever, Paul. Amaya will need as stable of a support system as possible to heal, so I suggest you go mend the hurt and anger between her mates and yourself."

Guilt and self-loathing settle like a brick in my stomach, rooting me to the spot in fear of what the future holds. I even feel the telltale sign of tears burning my eyes, but I swallow the emotion and wrap my love around the little tether connecting me to Amaya.

"You're right," I whisper. My feet shuffle back, ready to do as the younger man suggests. Before I can turn around, my phone blares in my pocket.

I don't know what intuition grabs hold of the hope thumping in my soul, but I know this phone call will change everything.

It's Oliver.

"Oli," I grunt, putting him on speakerphone.

"It's Vincent," he breathes shakily across the line. "Amaya dropped the barrier."

My eyes widen, and my chest expands on a gasp. Meeting Remy's eyes, he gives me a sharp nod. "I'll get Lucas."

"We're coming," I declare into the phone. We're coming, darling.

26

VINCENT

I wouldn't change my life.

I really, truly wouldn't.

But this pain, it's debilitating and I can't figure out if it's mine or my omega's.

Would I change her life?

I don't know the answer to that. Would I have ever found Amaya if she didn't suffer at the hands of the academy? We may be fated mates, but were our paths always destined to cross? Are fate and destiny the same? Would I still be bonded to my golden girl if it weren't for the lives we've lived?

I don't have the answers, but I sure as fuck would change everything about the last two weeks. Maybe in a few years, once we've all dealt with the trauma of these horrible days, I can say— Nope. I can't even fucking think it. Nothing, no part of this, will ever be okay. I had my mate, and now she's gone. It's up to me to get her back and all I can do is pace around her kitchen island and grumble about the complexities of the bond.

"Hey, man."

My head snaps up so fast my nails scratch my scalp. "Fuck, Lucas. You gotta help

me. Please," I plead with the alpha walking toward me with his hands up in surrender already.

"I know. I'm going to help, but you need to center yourself first." He's talking to me like a wounded animal and, honestly, I might as well be. "Okay, I know that sounded stupid as shit, but the only way you're going to feel the tug to her location is if you calm yourself first so all your focus is on her."

"My focus is always on Amaya!" I snarl, my hackles rising.

Lucas shoots a frustrated look over his shoulder before shaking his shoulders out with a sigh. "Okay, alright," he mumbles like he's giving himself a pep talk. "I know not to say this, especially to a woman, but I need you to calm down, Vincent. My alpha sees your behavior as a challenge right now, and I'm already on edge with the threat looming over my omega. Cut me some slack, or I have no choice but to leave before shit gets ugly."

My eyes must be bugging out of my head. The fuck is he talking about? This escalated really fast.

"Vincent." Oliver's voice helps my shoulders relax and my attention turns to him as he enters the kitchen. His fingers wrap around my belt buckle and I swear to fuck my breath catches in my throat. "Listen to him. He's only here to help."

Slowly, I come to my senses and nod, shaking out the defensive fog clouding my sensibilities. "Right." I inhale, letting his subtle, fresh scent center me like a beta is meant to do for an alpha. Leaning forward, I brush the scruff on my cheek against his, scent marking him and whispering in his ear, "Thank you, Oli."

Now it's his turn for the air to stutter in his throat as my lips brush against his earlobe. The sense of control brings my frazzled, wayward thoughts and nerves to heel. "Good

boy, taking care of your alpha," I add in a husky whisper, letting my canines scrape his neck as I pull back. "Now, go see if your other alpha wants to help," I direct Oliver, knowing he needs to keep busy.

Green swallows the pinpricks of his irises, need and awe shining bright. Fuck, I can't wait to explore this . I've never been with a man, but there's something about Oliver and Emmett that makes me want to watch them ravish each other while I tell them what to do.

Oli nods and bounds up the stairs to find Emmett. I turn back to Lucas and apologize. "Want anything to drink?"

He shakes his head. "Nah, I'll get something once we have you zoned out. You ready?"

It's hesitant, but I nod. Fear of failure is the only thing holding me back right now, but Amaya's terror is my first priority. I can deal with my insecurities later once I have my omega tucked in my arms.

"Couch?" Lucas nods to the living room just as Emmett and Oliver come downstairs.

"Alright," I choke out, already feeling my own emotions receding and Amaya's taking front and center. It fucking hurts . "I-I need to sit."

I rub absently at my chest as I make my way to the living room and I notice Emmett clenching his fists too. Making eye contact with my partially bonded alpha, I jerk my chin to the spot on the couch next to me.

He settles in, his thigh pressed to mine. Leaning forward with his arms braced on his knees, he stares Lucas down. "How can I help?"

"You're half bonded, yes? Just need to bite Vince back to complete?" Lucas inquires.

I nod. Before he can suggest we complete the bond, I interrupt. "We won't be taking the next step until we have Amaya home, safe, and in between us."

Oliver sucks in a breath where he sits on the floor a few feet in front of us. "Fuck," he mutters, cheeks tinging pink.

I wink, but a full body shudder rolls through me. Fear like no other slams into the bond, forcing my rage to blaze in my chest. "Fuck!" I roar as I slam my hands on my knees. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"What?!" Oliver recoils and panics.

I don't have words though. I'm trying not to alarm my sweet omega when it's clear she's dealing with too much right now. Emmett answers for me, his face pale and a little green.

"Something's happening. The small bit I can feel from Amaya... it's a sickening amount of... fuck, she's just so scared," he finally chokes out.

The awful feeling fizzles out a little until it sucker punches me in the chest once again. "Fuck. I can't—" I stutter, unable to control the alpha rising and snarling with no way to help his mate.

'Alpha?'

A cool sensation tickles the back of my neck, making my eyes shutter closed and my head droop forward. Gentle fingers run the length of my spine, and my head turns fuzzy against the soothing feel.



Gold enters the murky darkness behind my eyelids as I sink into the bond where my mate is reaching for me. It's not Amaya comforting the burning rage in my soul, though; it's her omega.

I crumple to the ground, my omega following me and pressing her chilly cheek into my back where her soft fingers still pet me. Her whimpers break me, so I snatch her frail body around and tuck her into the crook of my neck.

For my omega, I release my own thoughts and feelings and allow myself to truly melt into her. While I weep, I track.

Where are you Amaya?

27

AMAYA

I wish, I fucking wish I would have woken to the sound of the disgusting voices instead of the stiletto heel currently trying to puncture a hole between my thigh and my ass. I don't know how the hell it happened, but my bottom half is sprawled out of my cage, leaving my ass and legs vulnerable. At least the scraps of my clothes still cover my bruised legs. Weeks with only scraps of bread and chunks of rotten banana have reverted me to my bony, malnourished self.

I miss Vincent. Blueberry muffins and ice cream too. I spent so many years without the goodies of the world. A few months wasn't enough to satisfy my appetite for sugar and carbs. I miss my nana's soup and I hope I will make it to the day my mates make it for me again.

"She doesn't look very pretty. And what the hell is she wearing?"

Digging my head further into the crook of my elbow, I hide the pain burning my eyes because of the woman's heel bruising my ass.

The alpha who has been in charge of my daily torture speaks up, not surprising me in the slightest that he's here. "I don't run a fuckin' fashion company or a spa. You want the slut looking nice, you figure it out."

A voice I don't recognize grunts. "Dress her in these after her... bath." The new man chuckles like the fact that my bath isn't actually a brutal hosing.

"Whatever you want as long as you got the money," ponytail asshole responds with a bored tone laced with threat.

I do my damndest to bite back my whimper when the stiletto breaks skin, but it slips out anyway. "Aww. Such a pretty little noise, Omega."

Without warning, a hand coils around my ankle and drags me the rest of the way out of my cage. This time I bite back the noise of protest, but my arms give way, and my face is free for them to see as I'm nudged onto my back.

"Aww, Kallan, you shouldn't have. You didn't mar these little features." The woman coos who I realize is clearly an alpha now that her rank ass toxic scent slams into my nose. It's strong, like an old lady's perfume, and when she trails her manicured claw across my face, I recoil.

She tuts, her high red ponytail shaking with her disappointment. "Add that to the list of things to fix please," she says over her shoulder and to my surprise, the ponytail alpha nods.

"W-Wh—" I try to croak and gag on her scent.

The woman's face twists in faux pity. "Aww, little one. You're mine now, and I like all my dollies to be absolutely perfect."

I try to scramble away like hell hounds are nipping at my heels, only to bump into something solid. Dread settles heavy on my shoulders as I peek up, seeing an equally attractive man as the beautiful woman, but the salacious grin he wears snatches his beauty away with shadows of evil. He has slicked back black hair and a tailored suit to match the skeevy look.

"Bony bitch aren't ya?" His voice is the one who mentioned a change of clothes and

as I whip my tired neck around, I notice I have the alpha woman blocking one side, my torturer on the other side, and this other alpha who reeks of sugary vinegar. "Kallan, I don't like em' like this."

Still sprawled between them, the alpha who has ruined me speaks up, giving me the bit of information that his name is Kallan. "You want her fattened up? You pay for it Greg."

Greg, vomit.

"Wanna add it to the list, Shan? Or just fix it at home?" Greg looks at the woman still staring at me like she's going to eat me alive.

"I want her home as soon as possible. So much fun to be had," she sings, crouching down and tugging on my top.

Trembling, I don't even think about it, but I lift my hand to cover my nose to block out their putrid scents. Rage contorts her feminine features, then she lashes out and scrapes the tips of her nails down the length of my left forearm. She rips four lines of skin open and forces my hand to flail away as I scream.

I've had scrapes, welts, ripped out hair, a couple beatings, starvation, and perpetual thirst. This might be the first thing I've truly felt in a long while. Burning flame licks up my arm, and clutching the wounded limb to my chest only makes it worse, but I have to stay small.

"Look what you did!" she hisses, jumping to her full height and kicking the pointed toe of her stiletto into the middle of my spine as I curl into a ball.

Tears that I didn't think were possible in my dehydrated state track down my cheeks. This, by far, isn't the worst pain I've felt, but here on the cold, hard floor is the worst I

have ever felt.

With cries of my fellow omegas as background noise, I'm forced to listen to my new owners discuss the lessons they would like beaten into me before they come back next month.

Three alphas hover over me with their feet threatening to do more damage. I have never felt so vulnerable, and it's all because I don't have the energy to slip away. My body may be in a constant state of horrific vulnerability, but I've lost the ability to shield my mind and heart. My soul is safe with Vincent for now. I just hope it doesn't fracture before they find me.

If they find me.

28

OLIVER

I thrive in chaos, right? Yes. My own chaos though. This? This is not my jam. At all.

I feel guilty for blocking everyone out with my earbuds shoved in my ears, but I can't deal with all of this. It's one thing to feel the stress of everything when it's just the four of us. But add in the other packs dropping by constantly and Paul sitting like a statue in Amaya's window nook? I'm about to lose my mind.

We don't need me flipping out when Sam's doing that perfectly. Every time someone rings the doorbell, he snarls and yanks the door open so hard I worry it's going to snap off its hinges.

Now I understand why it always pissed Amaya off when we came over.

We are once again stuck waiting for Vincent to figure out how to locate Amaya through the pull of the bond. While we are one step closer to finding her, it still feels like we are never going to find her.

I'm very aware of the fact that it hasn't even been twenty-four hours since Vincent had a breakthrough in the bond, but so much can happen in as little as five fucking minutes.

So I wait, trying to avoid the thrumming energy Emmett is channeling from our tether into seeking out our omega through Vincent too. I'm a few too many people removed

from her, so all I get is what Em is feeling. Nothing from her. Sometimes I get a little snippet of Vince, but he's working so hard to push himself to the side to let Amaya through that he's nothing but a passing emotion trickling down to me.

My ankle spasms forcing my bouncing leg to pause. The pen I've been clutching for the past twenty-seven minutes digs circles and random lines into last week's grocery list.

I don't even hear the lyrics drowning out Lucas' encouraging words in the living room. As much as I think I would feel better getting some space from all the crazy, I can't bring myself to leave. We've only gone home a few times to get more clothes and other random shit, but this is our home base. Amaya's home is the closest we can be to her right now, and there's no way I would choose to nap in my own bed.

Bent over the counter, I press my forehead to the cool surface. I feel the vibrations in my chest, but I don't know if my groan is actually audible.

Seconds later, heat presses into my lower back, drawing my head up and around to see who's holding me. Emmett leans against the counter beside me, dragging his hand up and down my back. I offer him a small smile that definitely doesn't reach my eyes. My alpha narrows his gaze and plucks one of my earbuds out.

"You alright, Oli?"

Raising a brow, I reply, "What do you think?" I may not be an omega, but I'm also not an alpha. The alpha vibes in this house constantly make me want to crawl under the sink and do some deep breathing exercises.

Emmett's terse expression softens into one of understanding. "What can I do, my love?"

I shrug and melt a little beneath his palm. "I'm enjoying the back rub." He laughs quietly and steps behind me to dig his other hand into my tense muscles.

"You should go rest," he murmurs.

I shake my head, not wanting to nap right now. Vincent is deep in his head with Lucas guiding him, and my brother looks ready to implode. "Maybe later," I lie.

We both know I'm not going to walk down the hall into one of Amaya's guest rooms and sleep until my body forces me to later. Sleeping under my omega's roof without her here is fucking torture, but I have to stay somewhat rested for when it's go time.

"Oli—"

Ding dong!

"Motherfuckers!"

I snort and Emmett groans at Samuel's shout of annoyance. Springing off the couch, my brother rushes around the sectional. "I said I would call when we knew more! We don't need you breathing down our goddamn necks. She's OUR omega," he hollers, reaching the door and ripping it open in a fit of rage. "So?—"

"Samuel Jenkins! What is the matter with you?!"

Shock rips a curse from my throat as I scramble away from Emmett and around the counter. "OH FUCK! Mom?!"

Spitting mad bright blue eyes lock on me over Samuel's shoulder, then the sweetest woman to ever live shoves past my brother and points a threatening finger at me. "Language!"



My lips curl inward and I stop my forward trajectory, slightly afraid of her. Fuck, if she's this angry, it's only a matter of time before ? —

"Explain, right now!"

I cringe, Dad's booming voice thundering through the doorway. Reid, Samuel's biological dad and pack alpha, is terrifying all the damn time. I was used to it growing up, but not being around his overpowering energy constantly has my beta instincts wanting to dive under the sink again.

"Look," Sam starts, dragging a hand through his hair.

Papa Scott, our second alpha dad, brushes by him, slamming a big hand on his shoulder. His strawberry blond locks are in messy disarray like Sam always wears his. He chuckles. "Try again, son."

I would laugh, but I'm kind of freaking out.

Why are they here ?! How did they find us? And when was the last time I checked my fucking messages?

"I'm sorry, Momma," Samuel says softly, moving to her and kissing her cheek. Grudgingly, she accepts it, but as soon as he pulls away, her hands land on her hips and she looks at me expectantly.

"Sorry, Mom," I whisper, swooping in for a kiss, then Emmett's there gathering my mom in a bear hug and greeting her with excitement. She smiles and I relax.

"Where the hell have you two been?" Reid demands stomping in after Sam.

Papa Scott hikes a thumb over his shoulder toward Vincent. "And who's the hunk?"

"Guys..."

Thank fuck ! Pops is here. My bio dad and Alpha Reid's brother, Taylor, steps through the door, shining brown hair and rolling green eyes as usual. I've always gravitated toward my pops and it's not only because he's a beta like me. We are both so similar, and if you add Scott's humor and nonchalance, that makes me. Oh, and add Mom's beauty, of course.

"Hey kid."

"Hey old man!" I hoot, diving in for a hug and low key hiding from the mounting tension.

"Now," he drawls, squeezing me a little too hard. "What's this I hear about my boys having an omega?"

Shit.

29

AMAYA

A musement.

What an odd feeling.

I don't remember the last time I felt like laughing.

Loneliness, which was once an obvious pressure on my psyche, now grabs hold of both my hands and drags me to hell. I try to appreciate the foreign feeling that encourages happy bubbles in my belly, but it sours and roils in my gut instead. What is he laughing at?

Whatever my alpha is doing is making him somewhat happy. I should feel grateful that something lifted his mood, but all I can focus on is how low I feel compared to that one little whoosh of amusement.

Suddenly, it's gone. He's gone. Muted like I'm trying so hard to be. Without his overwhelming presence in my soul, I'm left with myself. Vincent's subtle tugs and pokes are welcome, but now I miss his happiness.

I did that. I sucked the happiness right out of my mate.

That thought is more painful than the fire burning my nostrils.

Sugar, vinegar, and the most toxic perfume I could every imagine pumps through the air vents of my usual torture chamber. I can't escape it.

I can't even conjure up the scents of my mates.

Please make it stop.

30

EMMETT

"What's this I hear about my boys having an omega?"

"WHAT?!" Natalie screeches, making Vincent and Lucas jump out of the corner of my eye.

I cringe so fucking hard. I was so caught up in how happy I was to see the Jenkins family that I didn't even think about what's about to happen. Come to think of it, I don't know how their mom didn't latch on to the fact that Sam claimed an omega during his shouting at the doorbell.

Poor woman always hated her kids cussing.

"Momma—" Sam starts.

She whirls around on him with wide eyes and demands, "Why are you here ?!"

Oliver raises a hand like a kid in school from beneath Taylor's arm on his shoulder.

"Actually, how did you know we were here?"

Natalie purses her lips with all the sass in the world. "Your cars are out front."

I absently hear Vincent chuckle, probably enjoying the brothers getting a verbal lashing. It was very common when we were younger to have their parents

exasperated with their attitudes and chaos, so this is a nice breath of fresh air. At least some things never change.

"Now answer the darn question." She stomps her foot. Reid scowls at Sam and Oliver before moving over to Natalie and rubbing his omega's shoulder. I would laugh at the shit show going down around me, but the look Reid shoots me tells me I'm definitely included in this interrogation.

Fuck, now I'm going to have to tell my dads, too. As soon as they find out about Amaya, they're going to have so many questions. Fuck, they were so angry with our attitudes when they found out she disappeared.

"Uh..." Oli rubs the back of his neck and I notice Taylor tightening his arm on my beta. I try to rein in my protectiveness, but the small rumble still comes out. Everyone's heads snap to me, and my cheeks heat of embarrassment. That's his dad .

A hand slams down on my back, forcing me to cough, and my growl stutters to an end. Vincent comes around and peeks at me with a raised brow before addressing the room. "Hi, I'm Vincent. This is my mate's home."

I bite my tongue. Samuel's glaring at Vince, and Oliver's nervousness rattles around in our bond, setting me on edge. Through the half-formed bond, I can tell Vincent is enjoying this a little too much. He knows exactly how their parents are going to react when they find out he's talking about Amaya. Someone needs to say something .

"Your mate," Natalie repeats. "And how do you know my three sons, Vincent?"

My heart warms at her inclusion of me. Being adopted by two beta males without a motherly figure made Nat's acceptance of me that much sweeter. She's always been so loving toward me, and I know my dads appreciate the hell out of her for it.

Vince glances at me, the awkward tension getting to him now, too. He probably should have stayed over by Lucas and let this play out. Speaking of Lucas, the back door snicks shut as soon as I realize he's no longer in the living room.

"Can someone start explaining before the alphahole over there loses his shit?" Scott bellows, gesturing wildly to Reid who's vibrating behind Natalie. "The tension in here is ruining my vibes."

I snort and ignore the extra glares sent my way. I forget how alike Scott and Oli are sometimes.

"Momma, please sit." Sam sighs and directs her over to the couch. The Jenkins men follow their omega, but Scott's the only one to sit beside her like he doesn't have a care in the world.

Hanging back, Vincent and I both keep our distance. It's obvious this isn't going to go over well. I have to bite the inside of my cheek to keep my next growl in when eyes glance at Amaya's little couch nest, but Vince snarls for me. Nobody really spares him a glance, too caught up in Sam's shifty behavior and Oliver's pacing.

"Sam, what's going on?" Natalie whispers, cracking my heart wide open. "You're scaring me, baby."

"I—" Sam squeezes his eyes shut. "Please don't hate me," he says under his breath and the rest of my heart shatters for him too. Oli has tears building in his eyes, making mine burn too. This is going to ruin us all.

With red-rimmed eyes and trembling shoulders, Sammy looks his mom in the eyes and admits our greatest sin. "Amaya. Amaya Rose is our mate. Our omega."

31

SAMUEL

I was expecting it, even had my muscles clenched preparing for it, but living it is beyond what I could have readied myself for.

First Mom's blue eyes widen, then her shaking fingers lift to her wobbling bottom lip, and it's almost as if the touch releases all the emotion she's harbored for the girl she loved and missed for years.

Those years I spent hating Amaya, my parents harbored no ill feelings toward her, only sadness and concern. Not once did they waver in their love for our childhood friend. The disagreement caused a rift between us. Then being sent to designation school? Well, the relationship Oliver and I used to have with our parents has never been the same.

I've always been a little rough around the edges, but before Amaya went missing, I respected my parents and admired the shit out of them. We were happy. I was understood and loved for all my quirks, same as Oli. Then our little ray of sunshine left us and not only did I feel betrayed by the girl I've always loved, but my parents sided with her too.

"Momma?" I whisper, wanting to lean forward and wipe her tears. Oliver has stopped pacing and is standing stock still beside me with horrified eyes trained on our beautiful mom. "Please say so?—"



"Silence, boy!" Dad snaps. He rushes forward and scoops my mom off the couch and rushes out the back door, her sniffles following them all the way out. I flinch at the slam of the door.

"Fuck," Papa Scott murmurs, and pushes off the couch to look down at me. I deserve whatever punishment they give. "Come outside in five minutes."

With that, our fun-loving dad leaves me in his wake of disappointment that weighs heavier with his alpha energy. Taylor sighs, drawing my attention to him just as he tips his head back to the ceiling.

"Pops..." Oli whispers, stepping toward his bio dad.

Taylor shakes his head and looks at each of us, including Vincent in his saddened gaze. "How long?"

How long what?

"How long have you known that sweet girl is your mate?"

I pale. Oliver stops breathing and Emmett makes a choked noise.

Taylor's jaw bounces with the force of his teeth grinding. "You have three minutes to pull yourselves together. I'll see you outside where you'll give your mother the truth to every question she asks. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," the three of us murmur.

"Oh." Taylor turns back to us on his way out and points to Emmett. "I'll be getting your dads on the phone for this conversation too."

The door slams closed. Emmett curses and drags his hands through his dark hair.

With our parents huddled on the back patio consoling my mom, we're left in silence. I glance at Vincent who looks a little nauseous but curious. Before I can ask the alpha what he's thinking, he nods and uncrosses his arms. "I like them. I'll bring the case of beer."

"Start at the beginning," Dad demands, tone dark and glare lethal with his arms wrapped around Momma on the patio couch.

"I—I don't—" Fuck, I don't know which beginning to start at.

Emmett's on the ground with his head leaned back in Oliver's lap beside me, both of them comforting each other. Em's dads are on speakerphone in the center of our group.

Vincent's sprawled out, much like Papa Scott, in their own swivel chairs. Behind mom, Pops raises a brow at me. "How about you start by answering my question from inside? How long have you known Amaya is your mate?"

It feels like a steel ball lodges itself in my throat, but I clear it with a little pent up aggression from my alpha side. ' We have to atone for our mistakes ,' my alpha snarls in my head, still angry with me for how we treated our omega.

It's a good thing everyone has a beer in their hand. Except for Momma, who politely and quietly declined Vincent's offer to numb the pain we're about to cause .

I inhale, only for Oliver to bump my leg with his. "Sammy, I can do it," he whispers, eyes still bright red with tears and so much fear that my chest aches. I shake my head. I can save him from saying it out loud.

"Since the night she left us, we knew."

Protests and anger-filled accusations fill the space between us, some coming from Emmett's dads' on the phone, making my Em stiffen and clench his eyes shut.

"WHAT?!" Momma shouts above everyone else. She tries to launch herself off Dad's lap, but he keeps his grip on her firm and unyielding. "How—Why—You were so angry!"

I nod solemnly. "I thought she abandoned me..." I croak, hanging my head but dragging it back up because I need to face this head on.

"You thought..." Taylor repeats. "But what really happened, Samuel? Oliver, what happened to Amaya?"

I thought I could do it. Really, I did. I thought I could be strong and take the burden of breaking my parents' hearts, but the words don't come. Oli practically recoils, all his previous confidence slipping away with each pounding wave of disappointment and rage. Em looks like he's trying to cave in on himself to get away from it all. We're incapable.

"Her mother sold her to The Premium Designation Academy."

Vincent. No. Fuck. No.

I don't hear anything else, too stuck on the horrible truth being laid out there for my family to bear the guilt and pain of. Who knows how long it takes for my mom to gather herself again? Once her sobs subside and she scrambles away from Dad, her frantic question finally pierces my zoned-out state.

"Where is she? Where's my Maya?! Sweetheart, where are you?!"

"Fuck," Oliver gasps, his body shuddering on his own silent cry.

"Momma." I stand and grab her hand to stop her wild spinning like my omega is going to come out of the bushes at any moment. "She's not here."

"Well, where is she?! I have to see her. Gosh, I missed her so much. Where's my little girl?" The horror of learning the truth morphs into hope of seeing my mate. Now I have to watch as dread coils and strangles the life out of her sparkling blue gaze.

"She—" I can't. Pathetic.

"No..." Scott says, on his feet now too, with wide eyes. "They took her again, just like the other omegas? Please tell me I'm wrong. They're saying it's omega traffickers behind the disappearances, Sam! Tell me I'm wrong!"

At least this time I can't respond because no response tells the truth without a breath uttered.

"Oliver?" Taylor turns to my brother.

Oli chokes and shudders, then Emmett's there, scooping his beta into his arms and whispering in his ear. Vince moves to the couple and wraps them both in his large arms like he can shield them from the pain.

"Start over. Tell us everything, Samuel."

So I do, because there's no choice but to listen to my dad's demand. And the truth is the only thing I can give them since I can't give them the girl they've always loved as their own.

My penance? Watching my momma break.

I didn't think I could hate myself any more than I already do, but shattering the heart of the woman who raised me and loved me through all my bullshit? I deserve nothing less than hell.

I'm sorry won't cut it anymore.

I have to bring her home. It's the only way to mend the shattered pieces of all our hearts.

32

AMAYA

I wish I could say nobody could ever be trained to enjoy a scent they once found nauseating. I would fucking love to prove their hypothesis wrong, but each moment in this chamber scares me that much more.

The more I'm fed yummy chocolates and all the water I could want while choking on the mixture of the scents of those alphas, the easier it is to breathe in the artificial vinegar perfume smell.

I'm scared.

I don't want being around them to become easier. Greg and Shan. The alphas who purchased me. I haven't seen them for a while, but who knows how long it's really been. Time doesn't exist anymore. Hasn't for a long time. Or at least what's felt like a long time.

This new torture, though? This is something far worse than any physical abuse my body has taken. I'd rather starve than salivate for the almonds in Kallan's hand, but my body has other ideas.

I need that food .

And don't get me started on the tiny sip of apple juice I was rewarded with when I didn't gag on a deep inhale of Shan's scent being pumped through the air vents.

Chills burst across my chest and arms, zapping my fried nerves at the memory of what happened after I threw back up a gulp of the sugary juice. I gagged, forcing my eyes to water and my hand to come up to cover my mouth and nose.

Kallan, the bastard, tells me any negative reaction in this torture chamber of nasty alpha scents will result in punishment. The punishment I was given was fingers shoved down my throat and all my rewards spewing back up, then splattering across my lap and the ground.

So now I take my rewards slowly.

But sometimes, like right now, I just can't. My omega can't. She's been rising and rising. There's no stopping her except for an occasional chocolate covered almond. Unfortunately, the guilt and rage is a little too potent, like the scents in the room.

"Deep breath," Kallan instructs, his voice nasally behind the mask protecting his nose. He taps the chair I've been gifted with his foot when I don't immediately inhale through my nose.

I'm not sure what's worse, tasting their acidic scent on my tongue, or burning my nostrils. Still, I do as I'm told.

I want the fucking almond.

Unfortunately for my rumbling stomach, this is one of those times that I can't hide my distaste. My nose crinkles, and my mouth turns down just as Kallan's lips twist in disappointment and unmasked annoyance.

He has a month to get me ready for my buyers, and their main ask was for him to train me to enjoy their scents. Nobody is accounting for the fact that conditioning and brainwashing someone, let alone an omega with a sensitive nose, takes time and this

psychopath's patience is really fucking slim.

Dumbasses .

Saliva builds in my jaw, nausea foaming and ready to greet us once again, but in a move I don't see coming, Kallan's leg sweeps out and kicks the chair out from under me.

I screech, trying to grapple for balance as another one of my creature comforts is taken away, but it's no use. My hands, which reached for the chair, leave my shoulder and face vulnerable to the rapidly rising ground.

Crack!

I hear it before I feel it. Pressure like nothing I've ever felt in my cheek steals my breath right before sheering pain radiates through the entire right side of my cheek.

Kallan's muttered curses barely register as the lights dim and my body floats to the ceiling. Darkness swallows me whole, and I can only curse the goddamn chair that I was so excited to sit on like a person.

But once again, I'm on the floor with my vomit inches away and blood heating my ear. Another failed training, without a treat tucked away in the corner of my starving belly.

Just like a dog.

Throbbing. Pulsing. My face feels like a literal heartbeat.

"Damnit, Kallan! This is coming out of your fucking check."



Grumbling.

"Shit," a feminine voice huffs. "Fucked her cheekbone, huh? She's not very pretty like this."

More grumbling.

An agonizing poke. My eyes fly open, and everything comes crashing in. Bright lights, a claw-like nail dragging across my pounding cheek, and three alphas hovering over me. I open my mouth to protest whatever fresh hell they are going to do now, but my face protests in a thundering quake of agony.

"Aww," Shan purrs. "Poor, little whore." I don't have time to react before she's hauling me up beneath my armpits and dragging me into her ample chest. "Let's see if my toy has learned anything, shall we?"

My hands are too slow and sluggish to stop her from snatching my ratted hair and forcing my face into her neck. Her scent gland. No artificial concoction through the air vents could ever prepare me for the intimate onslaught of her scent from the source.

The vinegar reek of her companion ceases to exist in the crook of her neck as I'm flooded with the pure essence of this fucking bitch.

' Not my alpha!'

33

VINCENT

F ive sad assholes sit around a table. Do they eat their breakfast or pick at it?

The answer is...

The depressing joke dissipates in a cloud of nostril burning perfume. I hack, looking behind me to see if... Fuck I don't know, but it reeks in here.

I look around the table, but they're all just zoned out in their eggs. Ugh. Covering my nose doesn't even block it out.

"Fuck. Does anyone smell that?"

"What?" Sam and Oli say at the same time. Emmett shakes his head.

My eyebrows slam down.

What the fuck is that?!

34

AMAYA

This alpha. She floods my senses with everything they are not.

'Not alpha! Not. Alpha. NOT. ALPHA!'

It bubbles. Then she boils. My omega careens to the surface and topples over the ledge, unleashing a battle cry laced with a fearlessness I never knew her capable of.

My neck snaps back, shoving me a little deeper into my subconscious. With one hard fucking thwack, my omega unleashes with a head butt to Shan's face.

My throat gurgles, my instincts screaming for my voice to work, and with a busted nose bloodying my teeth, I find it.

"NOT YOURS!"

35

VINCENT

A thundering quake ruptures my train of thought and throttles me backward.

Nothing but air. I'm careening through time and space, all black specks and hazy pulses of gold. Flying. I'm flying. Or maybe I'm falling. But it doesn't matter because wherever I'm going, it's toward my golden girl.

A weightlessness hugs me, making me feel small and insignificant in the vast everything that is my omega. Amaya, my beautiful girl .

Is she here? I reach my tingly fingers outward, enjoying the warmth brushing from the tips all the way to my heart. Of course she's here. This is her. My omega.

The feathery feeling shatters with a startled grunt bursting from my mouth. "Fuck!" I grunt, rolling off the broken pieces of Amaya's wooden chair. "Ow."

"Jesus, man, you alright?" Sam leans over me a little breathless from laughing at my expense.

I don't say anything, mainly because I can't. You know, having the wind knocked out of me and shit. So I was falling. But wait...

I gasp, and choke a little as I follow the golden tether that no longer disappears into the abyss.

My body was falling, but in the moments it took me to hit the ground, I was fucking flying. "Amaya!" My voice is nothing but a croak, but she's here! Or maybe I'm there! Fuck, it doesn't matter.

"What?! What's happening?!"

I barely notice Oliver kneeling by my side, but still I use his shoulder to scramble to my feet. My knees tremble and I careen to the side, but Emmett's there, wrapping an arm around my waist.

"Vincent," my half-bonded alpha murmurs worriedly. "Talk to me."

I shake my head, even go as far as banging my palm against my forehead to check if I'm just going crazy. I'm not. I'm right there with her, aching cheekbone, busted nose, pulsing fury, and all.

"She's—I'm—" I stutter, struggling to orient myself in my body when my soul is miles away, having been swept into the torrent of my omega's bravery. "I have her."

"What?"

"You're serious?!"

The pack sounds surprised and excited but it's Emmett that settles my frayed nerves and bone deep unsteadiness. "Good job, Alpha. Let's go get our omega," he rumbles in my ear.

Yeah. Let's fuckin' go.

36

PAUL

I 'm buzzing with so much pent up angry energy that festers with guilt. I can't help but wonder if I hadn't verbally attacked Vincent in the hospital, would I still be left on the fringes right now?

I get it. I do. But nothing and no one is going to stop me from going after my daughter with them. Them being Amaya's four mates and Remy. Lucas is tagging along too in case Vincent needs help with bond stuff. From what I've heard, though, his experience is a lot different from Vincent's.

The two packs of Amaya's friends are sacrificing one alpha each to save my daughter. Anxiousness and pure terror radiates from the omegas watching the chaos around us.

Packs don't do well being separated from any of their mates, especially under duress.

Beckett's a few feet from me, practically vibrating with his brand of crazy. Fucker wants to go kick some asses, and I honestly can't blame the guy. He's Amaya's friend, but the urge to stick close to Kate, his omega, and his twin sister Freya keep him rooted to the spot. I'm sure it's taking a lot of effort to keep from tossing a suitcase in the back of Remy's truck.

The girls, Kate and Freya, are fidgeting beside Beckett with the other guys. I can't remember everyone's names right now. That's a lie. I can't remember most of their names ever.

The omegas might be trembling, but their eyes are pure fire. They're proud of their mates for going out to save their friend. I'm so damn happy Amaya has a wonderful group of people who are looking out for her.

Even those damn mates of hers.

I might not know everything that went down between my kid and those three assholes from her childhood, but I know enough to realize they fucked up bad . Vincent deserves none of my ire. I just wish I would have drilled that into my head sooner.

If I'm to be a part of Amaya's life, these kids are going to be my sons in law. I wish I had some fucking friends to talk to about this shit with. How the hell am I supposed to be okay with them being with my little girl? Let alone touching her? Vomit .

Swiping the back of my hand over my mouth to rid the nasty thoughts from my mind, I step forward to toss my bag in Remy's truck. The alpha narrows his gaze on me and I already know I'm not going to appreciate whatever he thinks is great advice.

If he were ten years older, I might befriend the guy. This is why I don't have friends. I always find some kind of excuse not to get too close to people.

"Paul," Remy grunts with a jerk of his head, indicating I follow him over to the side.

"I'm coming with you," I declare, crossing my arms over my chest. No way in hell am I staying behind. She's my kid.

His eyes roll. "Obviously. But you're not driving with Luc and me."

"Why not?" If it weren't illegal, I would punch the condescending eyebrow right off his face.

"You need to figure your shit out with them." He nods to Amaya's pack.

Vincent is staring hard at the ground while leaning against their black SUV. Oliver's running back and forth from their house to Amaya's, dragging bags and anything he thinks they will need. Emmett's doing something similar, but with Amaya's things. Samuel's glaring at them while barking orders to hurry up.

"Now's not the time," I grumble. I should be focusing on Amaya, not having heart to hearts with her mates.

Remy hums and rocks on his heels. "A five-hour drive sounds like the perfect time to work your shit out before Maya comes home."

"Don't call her that!" I snap and immediately regret it. Rubbing my hand through my hair, I sigh. "Sorry. She just doesn't like nicknames."

He frowns, but nods. I'm aware her mates call her that, but as far as I'm concerned, she only lets them do it.

"Alright," I concede.

Remy grins. "I'm right, huh?"

Scowling at him, I hike my bag over my shoulder and head for Sam's SUV. As much as I hate to admit it, Remy's right. Although, I'm not sure putting the five of us in an emotionally chaotic vehicle together is the right call, but the more I watch them freaking out, the more I think they might need me.

"Give me a gun."

I stop and gape at Vincent. The fuck did he just say?



"Absolutely not." Remy snorts and waves the alpha off.

Vincent doesn't take no for an answer, striding right past me and heading for Remy.

"I'm serious, Remy. How am I supposed to save her if I don't have a weapon?"

"Yeah. I need one too," Samuel adds, following Vincent and crossing his arms over his chest.

Oliver and Emmett are still flittering about, making sure everything is ready to go and contemplating everything Amaya might need when we get to her.

Remy leans against the hatch of his truck and studies the two idiots demanding firearms. When he sees they're dead serious, he shakes his head. "Fuck no. Why would I ever give you a gun when you aren't trained to use one, and neither of you have a license to carry? Not to mention, Virginia Beach is crawling with innocents looking to have a good time. What happens if you accidentally shoot someone?"

I was shocked when they managed to pinpoint a general area off the direction of the tug Vincent feels. All Remy needed was a direction and match that with the information the OPS has gathered. Virginia Beach is the best bet.

"It won't be an accident, and they won't be innocent," Samuel snarls, fists bunched at his side.

Remy looks exasperated as he kicks off the truck and walks away. "No, Sam. No guns," he shouts over his shoulder.

The two alphas charge after him, Vincent grabbing Remy's shoulder and tugging him back around. The hairs on my arms stand up, seeing the possible throw down that's brewing.

"How are we supposed to help then?!" Vincent's voice cracks on an anguished growl that makes my heart cramp a little.

Remy narrows his gaze. "You are helping."

Vincent shakes his head, and I know he feels like he's not doing enough because it's the same way we all feel.

"What about me? Remy, man, come on." Samuel's practically begging. My heart goes out to him too. This is all so fucked.

"NO!" Remy snaps. "You have your weapon," he gestures to Vincent. "You're only job is to get us close to her. My team and I will handle the rest. Honestly, Vincent is the only one who should be coming with. You are not officers; you're a fucking hazard!"

I step forward to interfere when Samuel's face flushes an angry red, but Kate beats me to it with a soft touch to Remy's arm and soothing voice.

"Remy," she murmurs, tugging him away. My alpha hearing still picks up their conversation. "Hey. It's okay." Kate cradles Remy's cheek.

Like magic, his shoulders deflate, and he leans into her touch. "I can't give them guns, Kate. They'll get hurt or hurt someone else."

I can feel Sam and Vincent trying to control their obvious frustrations. This is what I mean by the upcoming car ride being emotionally charged. I'm not sure how Oliver is going to deal with four alphas losing their minds.

"You don't have to give them guns. But they are going. Nothing would have kept you from me, just like nothing would have kept Freya's pack from her either. Give them

something, though. Please, Alpha. You know what they're feeling."

I watch in fascination as his forehead drops to hers. "Dammit, woman. Why do you always gotta be right?"

"A gift, I know," she teases, and I turn away before I witness their kiss.

Loneliness settles like a stone in my chest. Why have I isolated myself all these years?

"Alright, listen up!" Remy shouts, and everyone steps forward. "Lucas and I are riding together to meet up with my extraction team. There will be other units joining us on the way. Virginia Beach is a large place, and it's only a guess right now. Vincent, keep in constant contact in case the bond pulls you in different ways. Especially when we get close."

Samuel fidgets, drawing Remy's attention. "Sam, Oliver, Emmett, and Paul are riding with Vincent. Your jobs are to keep Vincent calm and focused. When we get there, you will not be rushing in with us. You'll stay back and be ready for your omega, because I have a feeling she's going to need you. Need you, not need you kicking asses and shooting people. Understood?"

Nods all around, but Sam still opens his mouth. Remy cuts him off. "I'll hand out knives, but that's it. You are to only use them in self defense. No fucking around like those jackasses." He hikes a thumb over to point at Freya's pack who all smirk.

"What'd they do?" Oliver wonders out loud.

"Tried to help without permission," their beta, Casey says, shifting on his feet.

Freya huffs a little laugh when Remy continues to glare. There's a story there, and

one I might be interested in hearing later, but Amaya is my only focus.

"Everyone understand their assignment?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" Oliver shouts and runs for the SUV.

Time to go get my kid.

37

AMAYA

" Y ou little BITCH!"

"Fuck you!" My snarled response is immediate. Fury floods my veins, smothering every ounce of pain radiating in my face. The pressure is still there, a pulsing reminder of everything these alphas are not. And they are NOT mine.

I watch the red-haired female jump to her feet, and my little feral omega finds sick pleasure in her blood oozing from her nose and split lip. I smirk, unable to help it, and not wanting to hide it.

As my rage settles into my bones, so does my omega, and it's the closest to cohesive we have ever been. No longer separate in our needs, we are one.

All we want is our pack.

Fuck any piece of chocolate they try to train us with. They can shove their almonds up their asses and choke on their apple juice. What I want, what I need is a cocktail of lemon lime, with a dash of mint and added summery freshness.

These alphas, no, these criminals , won't ever replace the burning desire for my fated mates. The only thing their putrid scents have done is cause me more pain. The forced vomiting, the stolen rewards. They're trying to alter my mind, just like the fucking academy. I knew it while it was happening, even if I yearned for another

nibble of chocolate or something to quench my horrible thirst. It won't ever be something I'll forgive and forget.

They underestimate us academy omegas. We may have been trained to suppress ourselves and psychologically tortured us for years, but because of those horrible lessons, we learned something they never expected. We aren't so easily manipulated any more.

Because of all their different brands of torture, I know when I'm being abused. And those almonds? That was fucked up.

How dare they try to exploit my basic needs for their own fucking gain?!

A low growl builds in my chest, something that may be distinctly omega, but scary in its own right. "Not. Yours," I repeat, dragging myself from my ass and squatting into a defensive crouch. "Not my alphas."

"Kallan! You had one job! I liked the slut better the last time we were here!" I can't even remember the asshole's name right now, but he's pissed. He's not mine, so I have no desire to make him feel better.

'Almonds. We shove them down his throat! No chewing! Just choking!'

My grin stretches a little wider, probably making me look as feral as I feel. My omega isn't sleeping any longer. She's awake, and ready for blood.

I couldn't agree more.

My trainer and torturer, Kallan, advances on the other guy with his mask still in place. "I told you she wasn't ready. She just fucking failed another test, and you expect her to want you? Your scents smell like ass. This is going to take time!"

"WE DON'T HAVE TIME!" Greg roars, spittle spraying every which way.

Kallan stalls to a stop. "What do you mean?" he grits out.

Shan hasn't looked away from me once, still using her white blouse to stanch the bleeding. Not so pretty now either, huh?

'Bitch.'

I do snort at that.

Shan's face purples, lunging for me only for Kallan to step between us. Must protect the merchandise.

"Start talking or get the fuck out and never come back. I have plenty of other offers on this slut." Ah, my knight in shining armor.

"You haven't heard?" Shan taunts menacingly. "They're coming for you, Kallan. Now give me my property. I'll fix her myself."

"I don't—" Kallan's cut off by the shrill sound of his phone ringing. Dread fills the torture room.

I really hope it's karma calling.

38

OLIVER

I would rather the car be filled with anything else but anxious energy. I'd prefer some sexual tension, but I'd settle for some uncomfortable awkwardness. There's too much unknown sucking the air out of the car, and being the only beta surrounded by four very obviously half feral alphas is not going well for me.

I've been doing my best to breathe through my mouth, but the stench of fear coats my tongue instead and leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

Three hours. Two to go.

I have to get through this, but I need some fucking relief. My hand sneaks out and I press my finger down on the window button. Sweet fresh air floods the SUV and I huff it down like an addict.

"Fucking HELL, OLIVER!" My brother shatters my peace with his roar and uses his driver's side controls to roll my window up and turn the child locks on. "You KNOW it hurts our damn heads, you asshole."

"Then crack yours too!" Idiot. Obviously, I know only having a back window open makes the pressure do weird things, but it's a simple fix.

Sam scoffs, glaring daggers at me in the rearview mirror. "It's raining!"



I huff right back. "Sam, I can't stand the feral vibes. I'm so on edge I feel like I'm about to-to ooze."

"Ooze?" Paul murmurs from the back row behind me.

Emmett rears back a little in his captain chair next to me. "Ooze what ?" he asks a little louder than Amaya's dad.

Vincent is the only one who doesn't seem disgusted by my choice of words. Although, I don't think he's paying attention at all. That's probably for the best. Remy said to keep him relaxed and focused. Honestly, I'm not sure why he didn't just go with Remy and Lucas, but maybe being around his pack is helpful even if we are a wired ball of nerves.

"Just... take a nap," Samuel mumbles, annoyed.

"Did you not hear what I said?" I smirk, unable to hold it in. "You're. Making. Me. Ooze. Sammy ."

Sam whips around, one hand on the steering wheel, the other fisting and punching the side of my thigh. "Motherfucker!" I roar, meeting his growl head on with my own annoyance.

"EYES ON THE ROAD!" Paul shouts, head popping between mine and Emmett's seats.

Sam glowers at the road, the leather steering wheel creaking under his frustrations.

"You're such a dick," I grumble at my brother. "That fucking hurt."

"Oliver, I swear to?—"

"Shut up! Goddamn, are they always like this?" Paul turns his exasperation on Emmett.

My alpha sighs and nods sadly. "Worse actually."

I gasp in mock horror with my hand pressed to my chest. "How dare you?"

Emmett smirks at me but resumes looking out the window a moment later, once again lost in his worries. I catch Vincent rubbing his temple and decide to quiet down. Just in time too. Samuel's phone rings through the Bluetooth in the car.

"Hello?" Sam answers.

Remy's voice filters through the speakers, hard and serious. "I have updates from the two other warehouses that the OPS raided today. If I tell you, can you keep calm? I want you to be prepared for what we might find."

"Sam, maybe you should pull over," Paul suggests.

"No! We have to keep going," Vincent refuses with a panicked breath.

It's silent for a beat before Samuel replies to Remy. "Tell us."

"Both warehouses were north of Baltimore on the coast. My guess is we will be looking for a similar dirty shipping port tucked away from prying eyes like those two were."

"And?" I whisper, knowing Remy will hear me still.

"And..." Remy sighs, making us all stiffen. "It's not good guys. There's evidence that they weren't in time to save all the omegas."

"What kind of evidence?" Paul grits out, his grip testing the strength of my arm rest.

It's silent for a beat, but the alpha on the phone drops the bomb with no finesse. "Empty, bloody dog crates, not used for dogs since there were six other Omegas in the occupied cages."

"Six?! How many omegas have these monsters kidnapped?!" Sam shouts, bafflement and fear twisting his voice.

"These aren't just the omegas kidnapped this year, Sam. These are missing person cases spanning years and years. Some I bet from previous graduate classes at the academy too."

"Oh fuck," Sam breathes, head slamming into the back of the driver's seat. "This is so fucked up."

"This is much bigger than we could have imagined. These are the omega traffickers. The ones the OPS has been hunting for longer than I've been alive."

My pulse thuds in my throat, my wrist, my cheeks, even my fucking ass cheeks. This can't be happening. How are we going to save Amaya from something as big as this?

"There's more," Remy continues, but doesn't wait for us to prepare ourselves. Not that any amount of time could have prepared me for what he says next. "The omegas were physically and psychologically tortured, guys."

"FUCK!"

The car jerks to the right with the force of Samuel's punch on the dash.

"PULL OVER! Right the fuck now!" Paul bellows, grappling for purchase on the

bench seat he's not buckled into.

Samuel continues to curse as he shoves the car into park on the side of the highway. He's out and screaming into the pouring rain before I can even blink.

Tortured.

Baby girl, what have they done to you? Are you even still there?

"I'll drive," Paul murmurs, but it's a distant sound. Just like I barely notice Sam drenching my left leg as Amaya's dad forces him inside and between the seats.

Please let my omega be okay.

She doesn't even need to be okay. Amaya just needs to be alive. The rest I will walk through hell fire to make better.

Broken or shattered... Amaya is mine. Sharp edges and all.

39

AMAYA

F uck. Fuck!

What do I do? What do I do ?!

Maybe I don't need to do anything. If it makes Kallan spitting angry, then it must be good for me, right?

He's been on the phone for a few minutes now, and with each passing second, his body coils tightly with rage. I swear I sense a little fear in his demeanor too. He's even ripped his mask off, probably too stressed to have it on.

What's got him so stressed? I wonder to myself, my head cocking like an animal seeking out a weakness in its prey.

The curiosity and a bit of sass bubbles and bubbles until they boil over to taunt my abuser. "Scared, Kallan ?"

I'm bluffing, obviously. I have no clue what's going on, but Shan and Greg sure seem to think he's in some kind of trouble. Kallan doesn't even hear me, too lost in his phone. My buyers, though, they start circling my crouched form like vultures. Hissing, I snap my teeth at them, kind of enjoying this new feral side of me.

Maybe my omega can run the show from now on. I much prefer this instinctual feisty

version of myself to the fearful girl I've been for as long as I can remember.

"Don't touch her," Kallan snaps, and gestures for the guards.

No amount of growling and teeth baring will wipe away the abuse my body has suffered. I'm malnourished, exhausted, and everything hurts.

Kallan stomps out of the torture chamber with an order thrown over his shoulder. "Lock her up. I have work to do."

The lackeys grab my biceps in punishing grips, but still I thrash and snarl.

'No touch! Not theirs!'

I hold lightly onto my grip of control, not fully allowing my omega free rein, but worried this new tension radiating through the warehouse will be the thing to finally break me. Or maybe I'm already broken.

'Protect,' my omega whispers through my brain.

No, I'm okay , I push back.

'No,' she insists, even as our body fights the meaty hands dragging us back to our cage. 'You protect me. Protected me. My turn. You rest. I protect.'

My eyes burn with the emotion of the connection I'm building with my other half, while my body fights the sickening touch of anyone other than my mates.

I try to soothe her frantic energy as we get closer to the cage. I'm here .

'You rest now.' She pushes me, our consciousnesses battling to protect each other

from whatever new torment is about to occur.

There's something going on. Something big. Phones are ringing. Alphas are raging and kicking cages as they rush past. Omegas whimper and cower while a few reach through their cages to attempt an attack on the distracted assholes.

Something is happening. I fear it will be the end.

The end of what, though?

40

EMMETT

I don't know how Vincent is staying sane right now. Maybe he isn't, and he's just better at compartmentalizing the sheer chaos thundering through the bond with Amaya. I can't feel half of what he does from our omega, yet I'm still jittery with the clear fucking feralness exuding from her that shatters any kind of calm in the bond.

She's filtering through the pack bond too. I can see it in Samuel's rage and Oliver's need to escape.

Something's changed, but my mind runs rampant with what that could possibly mean. Are they scrambling to run now that two of their locations have been raided?

"Vincent—"

"She's still there. Hasn't moved," he answers my unspoken question in a stunted monotone voice that worries me. Vince's voice might not show his emotion, but the way his hand settles over the center of his chest where he feels the tug to her location says it all.

"But—" I stutter, feeling the urgency in the bond.

Oliver's eyes dig into the side of my head. "What's going on?"

"She's going feral," Vincent replies. He doesn't look back and doesn't sugarcoat his



words.

Samuel snaps and lunges between the seats. "What?! Why?!"

"Sit down!" Paul roars as my arm whips out to keep my friend in the back. We don't need him getting us into an accident when we're only an hour out.

Oliver pokes my thigh. "Why is she feral, Em?"

His worried tone and watery eyes break my heart. The organ has taken beating after beating that now seeing my beta looking so scared and lost makes me physically hurt.

"Something's going on," I mutter, squeezing my eyes shut and trying to focus. It's fucking useless though, because Vincent and I don't even have a full bond. The only thing I have is a rising sense of foreboding and a ton of damn fear about why Vincent's acting like the life is being sucked out of him.

Shit, can that happen?

I rub my chest. This is the strongest I've felt Amaya since Vincent bonded me. Is it possible that she's getting stronger because she's channeling his strength?

I lean forward and curl my fingers around the big alpha's shoulder. He doesn't even flinch. "Vincent, are you okay?"

"Fine." He gives me a brisk nod without breaking his stare off with the highway.

Paul's head whips back and forth from Vincent to the road. "What's going on?" he asks, dividing his attention between us and driving.

I wait for Vincent to answer, but he doesn't make any move to show he heard his

father-in-law. "I don't know," I say, eyes locked on the alpha I really fucking wish would give me anything .

I can't work through what I'm feeling because it's secondhand. Feeling Amaya losing herself and succumbing to her instincts is just that, a feeling. I don't know anything.

In the silence, something builds. And builds.

It's like my chest is expanding, like I'm being filled to the point my bones are creaking. With the rising pressure behind my breastbone, my breathing stutters and shallows.

"Em?"

"Guys what's?—"

"I—" I choke and gurgle, trying to get myself under control. But it's useless. My alpha rushes the cage he resides in, rattling my sanity. The urge to get to Amaya rises with the horrific realization that the clock is ticking.

"H-hurry!" I gasp out, doubling over just as Vincent does the same.

Vincent loses it. His sanity. He loses his sanity in the face of Amaya's impending doom. "FASTER! FASTER! FASTER!"

I can't breathe.

Oh fuck...

The cage shatters into a pile of rubble, my alpha breaking free and shattering all reason. Then the pressure of my mate's unbridled fear crumbles and vibrates with the

anguished roar of my own feral descension.

'OMEGA!'

41

AMAYA

I won't ever forget the screams of the broken omegas. Pure fear tinged with so many scents, one of them being the stench of piss.

The time has come.

Alphas shout orders, some of them bulldozing into the warehouse while others run for the doors. Everything blurs in the chaos, and I'm left dizzy, but at least my omega is no longer fighting to turn us feral.

A slam rings out, followed by a sharp agonizing zing of pain across my already battered face. As I crumple to the ground with a cry, I realize the guards who were about to toss me into my cage are nowhere to be found.

The urge to snap at Greg festers, but I'm too disoriented and my omega is too distracted trying to figure out what's going on. Until he speaks. "Get the boat running. I'll get the bitch."

Fuck. No. No, no, no, no.

'I kill?'

Honestly? Fucking go for it.

There's no goddamn way I'm getting on a boat with these crazy fucking alphas. I blink, trying to rid the wooziness from my mind. Fight, damn it!

Greg grabs my upper arm; I hiss, but bite my tongue. It's better if he thinks I'm weak.

'We surprise.'

Yes. My legs take the brunt of the abuse from being dragged across the ground, but each new scrape and freezing puddle works to wake me up.

"MOVE!" someone shouts, and more raised voices follow.

We come to a halt, and I chance a peek around, noticing a traffic jam of cages and alphas at the doors. Greg curses and spins, trying to find another exit. I do my best to ignore the awful twinge in my shoulder as he yanks me this way and that.

I'm eager to thrash, yell, and kick his ass, but there's no way out. If I get away, I can't run.

"THERE!" Another loud yell reaches above the others. I can't see anything, but it'll be worth it.

Then I see it... light. Someone found the button for the hangar doors. They see an escape. I see freedom.

With newfound urgency, Greg bends faster than I can blink and hauls me over his shoulder. Blood rushes to my head and throbbing face. There's no holding back anymore. How dare he touch me this way?! I could deal with their vile hands grabbing my arms and hurting me, but to wrap his arms around my waist and toss me over his shoulder is too much.

'Not my alpha!'

Certainly not.

"Let me go!" I shove and pop off his back with my hands. Before his vinegar scent can burn my nose hairs off, salt water tingles my senses. Ocean. Ocean eyes.

'Alpha.'

Vincent.

My eyes burn for a whole other reason beyond the scent of the outdoors. I want my alpha. The burn isn't of sadness though. There's a fire licking up my spine and heating my limbs. The freezing stiffness of this horrid experience washes away with newfound bravery.

I want to look into my alpha's eyes and sink into their ocean blue depths. Not only Vincent's, though. I need Sammy, Oli, and Emmett too.

Like an inky sort of haze, blue, green, and gold swirl and twirl in my eyesight, morphing the wretched industrial port surrounding us into a dancing battle flag, urging me to fight for a future.

One without an aching belly and blistered, freezing skin. I'll have clothes that aren't in tatters, and my cozy nest to curl into, but not because I'm limited to the small space. The colors of my mates' eyes wave and swallow my sight whole until all I see is us. Our future.

The one I can have if only I can fight for it.

My gums pulse, and my fingertips ache. My omega readies to go home to her mates.

'We fight.'

But first, we fight .

With a scream meant to shatter the sky, I unleash every horror I have suffered. My trauma tank is full, and I'll use it to throw gas on the fire of my bravery.

Until my last dying breath, I'll fight to go home.

42

VINCENT

We've been speeding along the coast for a while and I can see the water lapping at the docks as Paul races us through the industrial district. The torrent of salt water assaulting my senses shocks me enough to make me choke. I can practically taste it on my tongue as if all the windows were rolled down.

They aren't. Paul never turned off the child lock. It's Amaya.

Fuck, is she on a boat?!

"HURRY!" I snap, panic shooting up my spine like I'm being stretched to the max.

"What do you think I'm doing!?" Paul yells. His grip on the steering wheel is fierce and his eyes are glued to the back of Remy's truck.

I'm no longer needed to tell them the way. Amaya's tug in my chest got us close enough for the helicopters to spot the location. Remy said they were panicking which made it possible for the officers in the sky to spot them.

Now we just have to fucking get there.

Our tether pulls tighter and tighter. It feels like my heart is about to yank out of my chest and slam through the windshield to get to her. The aching organ would abandon its post just to ensure she's okay.



This entire five-hour drive, I've been so focused on the pull to my mate, rushing across state lines for fear I might lose her any moment. The few times I panicked, Lucas walked me through ways to lock back in on her. What didn't help was the incessant bickering in the car, though.

My head throbs with the concentration, and exhaustion pulls at my limbs the harder Amaya's presence radiates through the bond. Feral . I can't think about what might have happened to trigger my omega into fighting back viciously enough to knock me off my fucking chair, but still, I'm proud.

She'd been so quiet these past few weeks, hiding from me, protecting me. It all flipped on its axis with a waft of overpowering perfume and an ache in my nose that still hasn't calmed its heated pulse.

"Shit. Oh SHIT! LOOK!" Oliver bellows, pointing at the window on our side of the SUV. "FUCK!"

A yacht speeds through the narrow port, bodies dressed in black pointing guns off the sides. Another boat follows, this one smaller with more speed, riding the ass of the yacht, trying to get around it.

"Is that—Are they?—"

Emmett doesn't get his question out before Paul slams the car into a screeching halt behind Remy's truck. "Out of the car!"

I'm out before it even stops moving. Guns fire, screams, shouts, and engines roaring to life meet in the battle space to create my worst nightmare.

Paul meets me around the hood of the car and snatches my bicep before I can rush into the fray. "Stay back!"

"LET GO! Amaya's in there!" My heart pounds against my ribcage and my soul yanks tight, trying to pull me forward, but with Paul's grip the force threatens to send me to my knees.

Amaya's father pulls me back to him and yells in my ear. "You get hurt, she gets hurt, Vincent! Think!"

Shit. Shit, he's right. A bullet to me is a bullet to her.

Frantically my eyes search the chaos, narrowing in on the cages being hauled onto boats and some surrounded by officers on the ground.

"I don't see her!" Emmett informs, but I don't look at him.

The five of us, all of us and her dad, stand around watching bodies hit the ground in a pool of their own blood. Skin flashes on bony frames as another omega is saved and brought to the rescue vans. Up above, helicopters follow the escaping boats. Microphones spew threats and warnings.

"He needs medical attention!" an officer declares, holding a young boy in nothing but a pair of dirty, ripped basketball shorts. My gut clenches. The sandwich Paul made me eat wants to crawl its way back up as I watch the unconscious omega boy currently bleeding out over the male officer.

Bullets batter a truck beside us, forcing us to duck and crouch behind some barrels. A bullet to me is a bullet to her, I remind myself.

"Damn it! Holy hell!" Emmett gasps as he huddles beside me. "We're realtors. My god. What do we do?! What can we do!?" He's freaking out, but I can't help him when I need to help her.

Save Amaya, save the pack.

"Sam," Oliver whispers and shakes, tears in his croaked voice. His brother doesn't respond, but as Oli lowers in fear and shock, Sam inches forward. I watch the alpha out of the corner of my eye, but I don't tell him to move back and away from the chaos. Paul's too busy looking for Amaya on the other side of our position to stop him.

Restless energy jabs me in the back, making me want to rush forward into the fray, but I don't.

A bullet to me is a bullet to Amaya , I chant continuously in my head.

'Omega.'

As if my alpha sensed the doom approaching, a bloodcurdling scream pierces the air and shatters the sound barrier around me. All I hear is her, my omega.

All the logic in the world doesn't stand a chance.

Nothing keeps me from my omega.

43

AMAYA

My ears ring from the proximity of my scream, but I'm thankful for the reprieve of Greg's vile words. Stupid cunt. Bitch. Spread these legs a little wider, whore, and I'll shove my fingers up your ? —

I am none of those things, but hearing them so close to my ass as I hang over Greg's shoulder makes me feel dirty and tainted.

I break my scream to pommel his back and unleash all my pent-up aggression. "Let me go, asshole! I swear I'll make your life with me a living hell if you take me anywhere near your fucking boat!"

Greg chuckles and slaps my ass, making bile snake up my throat and my eyes slam closed. "DON'T TOUCH ME!" I can't .

'Not my alpha! Not his!' My omega screeches in my mind, sending me into a tailspin of instinctual panic and a deep-rooted need to disassociate.

If he lays his hands on me like that, there might not be anything left of me to save.

"Oh, my poor little slut," Shan's taunting voice slithers over my pebbled skin like the snake she is. She sounds muffled in my sensitive ears, but I hear the threat for what it is. We're on the boat.

I stiffen. The cold realization that we've made it to my final resting place steals the breath from my lungs. There is no fucking way I'm going with these sick alphas.

I'd rather die.

This boat won't hit open water with my beating heart. I'll either be free or dead. Obviously, I have a preference; I want to go home . I'm just not naïve enough to think I actually stand a chance against two alphas and whoever else is manning their escape vehicle.

'Alpha!?'

With my omega's distracted whimper bouncing around in my skull, I thrash and flail to no avail.

"Motherfucker!" Greg snarls when the boat rocks, clamping his hands down on my thighs to keep me steady. "SHAN, LET'S GO!"

I huff in frustration, hating how small I am compared to him, and push myself off his back. Whipping my head around, I can't tell where I am other than the fact that there's a balcony ledge to my right with ocean water lapping far below. To the left there's a white wall with gold-rimmed windows. The fuck kind of boat is this?!

The roar of the engine acts as my final call to action. Dead or alive, I'm not going with them . I have no time to waste.

"I SAID!!!" I push up as far as I can and fight against his hold on my legs. Supermanning this asshole's shoulder, he scrambles to get ahold of me again. "LET ME GO!!!"

With one final burst of exertion from my tortured body, I curl in on myself and

manage to fumble my knee into Greg's chin with a shout of fury. Almost like it was planned, the boat jolts forward as my captor stumbles back.

Gravity, and maybe a little karma, does the rest.

With uneven footing, Greg careens backward, taking me with him, but as his back cracks into the railing, there's nothing to keep me from tumbling straight into the murky depths below. But not before his meaty fingers snatch my ankle. My ankle that's attached to my already twisting leg as the rest of my body is thrust from his shoulder.

Nothing but air greets me when a sharp, searing snap ricochets from my foot up my calf. I no longer feel his fingers gripping my left ankle, every sensation from my knee down turning hot and heavy.

A scream tears from my chest as my body tries to curl around its shattered ankle. Nothing else matters but the immediate throbbing pain. Not my hair billowing out around me like a parachute, and not the fact that water is fast approaching.

The aching breath in my lungs runs out, forcing me to gasp for air so I can wail out my misery to the sky, but my inhale is met with a flood of salt water stealing the oxygen from my chest.

With no air to spare and a heavy crash smacking me upside the head and swallowing me whole, my priorities shift from protecting my foot to trying to survive my imminent drowning.

Except, I forget two important things; I'm already out of air, and one foot sends excruciating pain through my leg when I use it.

Just like when Greg shattered it, fiery pain shoots through my ankle with my first

attempt to kick to the surface. With the agony of forcing a broken bone to swim comes a bellowed scream that's soon followed up with the dreaded response to breathe.

I don't feel anything. My body doesn't buzz with the anxiety I feel running rampant through my head. I lack all control. I am no longer here. I'm trapped in my head that feels like it's about to implode as my limbs and lungs work their fight-or-flight response when they should be playing dead, because with each reaction comes another consequence.

I'm blind with shooting pains from my ankle and lava in my chest.

And still, I don't just fucking die.

Stop fighting! I plead with my body.

'Alpha?'

Stop fighting, stop fighting, STOP FIGHTING!

I. Stop. Fighting.

And it's... bliss.

44

SAMUEL

Nothing else matters but the speed at which my legs carry me. Too fucking slow. With each slam of my feet against the concrete, I'm one step closer to the dock that fucker is carrying my omega across.

"DON'T TOUCH ME!"

I don't hear anything but the screams of my mate. The pops of gunfire and threatening shouts are muffled when all I hear is her. I'm yards ahead of my packmates. If I go down, those are invaluable seconds that could cost Amaya her life.

I am nothing without her. We've all seen it. Amaya is the only thing that will ever fucking matter. A bullet to my back wouldn't stop my forward momentum.

Faster, faster, faster! I have to be faster!

My arms pump and my chin tilts to my chest like that little aerodynamic difference will make me reach her in time. If that boat leaves...

"AMAYA!" My roar of terror as she's dragged onto the boat is met with the same ferocity from my alpha. 'OMEGA!'

The fucker with his hands on my mate whips his head in my direction, and I might enjoy his shocked look if it weren't for his fucking mouth opening. "SHAN, LET'S



GO!"

Shan's dead if that boat— VROOM— The engine roars to life.

Yep, DEAD.

The bastard rushes around the corner with my omega hanging over his shoulder, stealing her from view. Fuck, no, no, no! The idea of not having eyes on her again tears my gut to anxious shreds.

"Sam!"

I ignore my brother's fearful yell behind me and sprint onto the dock just as the sound of gears grinding vibrates my feet.

Why does their goddamn yacht have to be at the very fucking end?!

"I SAID!!!" Amaya's sassy scream pierces the air as I take my final few steps. "LET ME GO!!!"

The boat lurches forward just as I take a leaping lunge across the few feet separating their deck from the dock. Blood pounds in my ears, as does the roar of the engine trying to steal my mate from me.

"SAMUEL!"

It doesn't matter. Nothing else matters but Amaya. If I die, so be it. So I ignore my pack's shouts of terror as I flail through the air and tumble into the pristine white wall of their yacht.

"Fuck!" I grunt, landing hard.

Shoving myself away from the wall, I bolt in the direction that dead man took my girl. Her name bubbles in my throat, the need to shout for her almost blowing my cover, but I hold it in. The element of surprise will have to be my weapon.

We never did get those fucking knives from Remy, and for that, I'm going to beat his ass. Or haunt it, depending on the outcome of the next couple of minutes.

The water whipping by confuses what I think might be sounds of a struggle, but as I round the corner attempting not to slip on the soaked deck, my heart plummets right out my ass.

Without fear for my safety when I can clearly see the gun poking out of the alpha's jeans, I rush forward just as he's pulling himself up from the ground.

My fist cracks into his jaw, and the realtor in me winces at the pain throbbing in my knuckles, but my alpha brushes it aside with a snarl. "Where is she?!"

The bastard who had my omega over his shoulder spurts out a bloody chuckle. "Probably dead. Or dying." He smirks at me, his white teeth gleaming crimson as he hikes a thumb over his shoulder.

Over the railing.

Nothing else matters. Not the abusive prick cackling beneath me or my desire for vengeance ripping my mind in two. All that matters is Amaya.

"PETAL!"

I dive.

45

EMMETT

Right foot down. Amaya floating in a yellow bikini . Left foot down. Maya splashing into the lake with a cheeky grin. Right foot . She breaks the surface with a scowl at Oliver after he dunked her . Left . My girl diving beneath the surface to make another attempt at scaring Sammy.

Amaya can swim . These memories scream persistently in my head as the seconds pass without her head breaking the surface.

With each slam of my foot on the dock, I try to calm the terror rising in my chest after seeing her tumble overboard. She'll be fine, she can swim. So why the fuck isn't she surfacing?!

"Emmett!" Oliver shouts behind me, but I pump my arms harder and force my legs to carry me faster. Something's wrong .

The yacht continues speeding away with Samuel on it, but I'm not focusing on that right now. My omega fell off the fucking boat and the area she splashed into is nothing but fading ripples.

Three, two, one. Airborne. Arms outstretched over my head, my toes point and rise above my ass. I dive with no care for the chilly bite that swallows me as I sink.

Forcing my way up, I suck in greedy gulps of air and aim for the last place I saw

Amaya. With every stroke, my lungs ache and my eyes burn, but I keep going. She never appears.

I hear Samuel's roar, then a splash in the distance, but she's not here. "Fuck, Amaya!" I grunt and gulp down a final breath before diving back under.

Through the darkness, I see nothing. My fingers don't swipe across her silky skin. I see weeds and feel water but still I don't swim to the surface. I'm in the right area, I fucking know it.

Fuck, fuck, fuck!

My shoes weigh heavily, waterlogged and dragging me deeper, but if that's where she is, that's where I'll go.

Come on, come on, come on!

My vision wavers, and my lungs convulse with the urge to breathe, but I push the natural instinct away. It's already been too long. I don't have time to go back up for another breath.

Boats above make my ears vibrate with their engines. Subtle currents tug me in different directions, teasing me with the idea that it's Amaya swimming near me.

But I hear her. "Don't be a big baby, Em! Just hold your breath for as long as you can. I bet I'll win!"

Little did twelve-year-old Amaya know, I just hated the idea of her struggling beneath the water so she could win a bet. I knew I could probably tell her no again and she would drop it, but her pouty lip forced me to indulge her whim. So we dunked beneath the water hand in hand. When I felt her grip tighten in mine, I surged

for the surface and brought her with me.

"See?!" she sputtered while laughing. "I told you I would win!"

I had smiled, mesmerized by the water clinging to her dark lashes while she heaved for breath. We weren't under longer than eight seconds, but I knew then, like I know now, Amaya can't hold her breath for long.

The possibilities of where she could be swim through my head as I come to a stop. Cupping my hands, I swish them through the water, making my body spin in a circle. Up and around, I blink through the salty fire in my eyes and heavy lungs.

I can't hold on much longer. And if I can't hold on, then Amaya...

The heaviness in my neck doubles, my head becoming heavier. My arms slow and begin to float at my sides. Everything feels thick. Murky like the water that stole my omega from me.

Movement catches my eye, the glare from above warping for a moment before my best friend comes into view. I can hardly keep my eyes open and I'm pretty sure my legs aren't kicking anymore. The urge to breathe rises, scaring the shit out of me, but just in time for me to end it all, Sammy slams his lips to mine and breathes life back into me.

It's just a bit, but it's enough for me to blink away the black spots dancing in my vision and actually study the mess of weeds dancing beneath us.

I almost waste the oxygen Sam gifted me when a scrap of white catches my attention. Shooting my arm out, I hit Sam on the side and point. Dread and a whole lot of heart pounding fear zap through my limbs and mind, rejuvenating my body in a way my alpha has been roaring for. We don't waste a goddamn second before we're pushing

our bodies to swim faster.

Holy fuck... it's her! Dark hair swirls in the current and mingles with the weeds as her head lulls to the side.

My eyes clash with Sam's, his terror mirroring my own. Without any further hesitation, we each wrap a hand around her tiny biceps and haul our asses to the surface.

I try not to notice the way her head drags down and only focus on getting her some fucking air. It feels like I've been underwater for an eternity, so what does that mean for her?

Will CPR even work at this point? How much water is in her lungs? Is it possible for them to be damaged if she survives? If she survives...

With that heart wrenching thought, the three of us break through the surface with heaving gasps of breath only coming from two of us. Sam curses and grips Amaya's cheeks. I place my hand on her forehead and sprawl her across my chest with my front to her back.

"Sam," I sputter, salt water and tears continuing to soak my cheeks as we bob with Amaya's dead weight between us. I can't bring myself to check her pulse. I'm weak. A failure. If she?—

"I know," he croaks, eyes clenching shut as he shakes his head as if to clear it. "I know, I know, I know."

We're suspended in time and space for a moment, both of us staring at our fated mate floating lifeless against me. My throat closes on an emotion far more strangling than the suffocation of drowning.

"EMMETT! SAM!"

Snapping out of our trance, our heads whip to the side. There, what looks to be about a minute to swim back to the docks, is Oliver being held back by Vincent. The big alpha looks tormented and my beta seems to want to throw himself into the ocean too.

Without a word, we swim as fast as we can, Amaya's weight barely slowing us down as we get her to safety. To someone capable of saving her fucking life. Because fuck knows all I'm capable of doing is letting her down.

The least I can do is get her to her alpha.

46

OLIVER

"O liver," Vincent warns behind me. "Stay."

Without moving my panicked gaze from the water, I snap, "I'm not a fucking dog!"

"No," he agrees, "you aren't. But you are scaring me, Beta. Please step away from the edge."

I can't make my feet move away from the last spot Emmett was before launching himself into the water, but I do shoot Vincent a shocked look. "I'm scaring you?! They've been under for a fucking eternity, Vince!"

The three most important people in my life are down there. My brother, my alpha, and my omega, for fuck's sake!

Vincent nods, stepping toward me, his eyebrows drawn down in worry. "I know, but I can't lose you too, Oli," the big buff alpha whispers. Surprise distracts me from my drowning pack, but Emmett's blaring panic slams into me with a force of a fucking tidal wave.

I could barely hold myself back when Samuel reached the spot I last saw Emmett, but I should have known my brother would never leave his best friend and omega down there alone. Now all three of them have my heart in a vise grip.



My lungs cramp like I can't breathe. I swear my arms and legs ache like Emmett's must be as he wades through the dark waters trying to save Amaya.

"Em," I breathe, my feet moving of their own accord. Before I can fall in after them, Vincent wraps an arm around my waist with a snarl.

"What the fuck did I just say, Oliver?" His voice breaks through the pulse whooshing through my ears. Instead of fighting him, my hand latches onto his forearm. "I need you here with me," Vincent all but begs.

"Guys," Paul says, stepping up beside us, tone tight with anxiety. "Look."

First comes the ripple, then a rush of bubbles. Something tightens around my middle, but I pay it no mind. I have to help them. "EMMETT! SAM!"

As one, their attention whips in my direction, drawn to my voice or my flailing, I don't know, but I need them on land now . A quick shift of their bodies and my world stops.

" Amaya ..." I choke, my body going as limp as hers as my packmates drag her through the water.

A ragged noise rumbles by my ear. Vincent's losing his control of his emotions too, but still he holds me like he's holding together the pieces of his sanity. Without his strong arms, I might break too.

My attention is completely stuck on Em and Sam as they paddle their way closer. I barely notice Paul's shouts for help and medical attention. Fuck, there could be bombs going off and I wouldn't even care.

Everything of importance is right in front of me, dragging themselves up onto the

dock as I crumple to my knees beside my lifeless omega. I don't know when Vincent let go of me to help them, but without his strength, my weakness drags me down.

Hands flutter into my vision. They look like mine, but I don't know. I shouldn't be touching her pale, bruised skin. I'll hurt her . I can't hurt her! The hands disappear only to be replaced with arms that aren't afraid to save her. To save my omega...

Self hatred slithers around my throat, strangling the crazy mumbling spilling from my lips. ' Useless. Failure. Burden.'

"EMMETT!"

I jump, the deprecating words coming to an immediate halt with Vincent's loud voice. It's painful, but I tear my gaze away from the paramedics giving Amaya CPR to check on the other piece of my heart.

' Failure. Failure. Failure.'

I wince with each suffocating reminder that I'm?—

Vincent lunges for Emmett who's crouched with his hands in his hair. "You are NOT a failure! Get that through you thick fucking skull right now, or so help me I will spank you!"

Emmett . Those feelings, those words, weren't mine trying to beat me down. My alpha feels like a failure. That realization punches my already bleeding heart, making me feel like a piece of shit too.

How am I supposed to help my alpha and my omega when it seems they are both dying? One mentally, the other physically.

"Vince—"

"Fuck off, Sam!" Vincent snaps.

'Failure.'

With one final roar, Vincent snatches a handful of Emmett's hair in one hand and his jaw in the other. Snarling, the alpha drags my bonded mate to his feet and slams his lips against Emmett's.

Life, like sparkly blues, bursts in my bond with Em. He'll be okay .

With my alpha being taken care of, I settle all my hopes on Amaya. Please, baby girl. I beg constantly as her body lurches and shakes with each punishing push of the paramedics' hands.

Her mouth is wide open from the breaths she's been given, but she remains silent and pliant. The way her body quakes and moves with their ministrations will forever be ingrained in my memory.

Come back to me, baby. Please.

She needs to replace this nightmare with our dream.

13 Years Old

"Tell me again. Please," she whispers.

I smile and close my eyes, knowing Amaya will do the same so we can imagine our dream is real. "Someday," I begin, "we will see each other every day. I'll wake up, peek my head out the door and see you and your crazy sleep hair passing by my

room. Emmett will have pancakes ready, and bacon too, of course. When we enter the kitchen, Samuel will be on his laptop already starting his work day like a weirdo."

Maya giggles and her hand squeezes mine.

My smile widens, imagining the picture I'm painting of our future. "The three of us will be running our dads' realty business, but I'm gonna have a line of fans threatening to blind me with their cameras."

"And me?" she murmurs like she always does when I tell her how I picture adult Amaya.

"You, my friend, will be chaos incarnate. No one job will settle you down, and we won't hold you back. Pack supports pack, and you will do it all. You'll help market my singing, maybe even help me write a song. I bet you'll go to art school just to try it. Surfing? An adult softball league? Bartender? You name it, I can see you doing it."

Blinking my eyes open, I turn to Amaya and see her already looking at me with watery eyes. "You'll do it all, Amaya. We will make sure you follow every dream you have. You'll be free, and when you fly, we will always be the air under your wings."

"That's a beautiful dream, Oli." A tear drops from her lashes just as she rests her head on my shoulder.

I nod. "It will be a beautiful life, Maya."

47

VINCENT

I can still feel the cold, wet skin of my mate as I hauled her out of the water. Nothing will ever compare to the horrific feeling of her limp body in my arms. And to have to set her down and move away? Fucking torture.

All I can do is stare and watch the chaos of people trying to revive my omega. She looks so small lying on the dock where, just minutes ago, she was alive and fighting like a woman striving to survive the horrors she was living in.

Another alpha put their hands on my girl. How many though?

'Useless.'

My arms hang heavy at my sides as I study every mark, welt, and scrape from her dainty form. She was always small, but now she's back to the malnourished look all the omegas had at the academy.

'Burden.'

My shoulders droop like I'm suddenly being weighed down by a cinderblock.

'Failure.'

I feel like I'm drowning. Just like Amaya .

'Failure.'

I feel like I'm dying. Just like ? —

I'm jolted out of the warbling sense of depression and guilt by Sam's words. "Shit, Em. You okay?"

Emmett. He's the one who feels like he's drowning. Like he's dying. Not me.

My attention snaps to the alpha just in time to see his legs give out and his head bow forward into his hands, all the while his voice ricochets through my head in a chant of self-hatred.

"EMMETT!" I try to snap him out of it.

' Failure. Failure. Failure.'

Rushing toward him as his thoughts continue to swallow him whole, I panic and delve into the only headspace I can think of to bring him back. "You are NOT a failure! Get that through your thick fucking skull right now, or so help me I will spank you!"

When in doubt, dominate? Emmett needs someone to take control. To drag him from the depths of the trauma he's endured, just like Amaya.

Samuel, seeing the shift in my demeanor he takes a step toward us where I hover over his friend.

"Vince—"

"Fuck off, Sam!" I snap, refusing to look at him.

'Failure.' He's not fucking hearing me!

Like a snake, my coiled body lashes out. Without thought, my hand delves into Emmett's hair and my other snatches his jaw. I drag him up with adrenaline pumping through my veins and slam my lips against his.

If I can't help one mate, I'll help the other.

Salt and mint explode on my tongue as I force my way between his lips. I need him here with me. We may not be fully bonded, but he's mine. With great effort, I pull back and drop my forehead to his.

"Alpha," I murmur as I wait for his eyes to open. When they do, the torment I find swirling in his dark gaze makes my heart pound double. "You did so good, Emmett."

"Amaya—" He tries to look around me, but I hold him steady.

Emmett doesn't need to see that. Sam and Oliver shouldn't even be watching the scene behind me, but I'm unable to save all of us from the sight of our omega not breathing. Just hearing the chaos and movement of them performing CPR on Amaya is a thing of nightmares.

Oliver sobs and I flinch. Emmett's eyes widen, but my hand comes up to hold his face in front of me. I shake my head, pleading with him to stay with me. I don't know who I'm saving right now, me or Emmett, but I need him just like he needs me.

"Is she—" Em whispers, tears falling freely from his wide eyes.

Sam's voice reaches into my chest and squeezes my soul. "Amaya..." He sounds so stricken. I can't bear to look at him. Instead, I focus on the subtle pulse of gold in my soul.

"Feel," I whisper, dragging one of Emmett's hands to my chest and the other to his own. "She's still there. We would know."

I don't acknowledge that the thump of her life force in the bond is extremely weak compared to the usual golden glow of my omega. I keep it to myself because Emmett already knows. It's in the fearful flicker of his gaze from my chest to over my shoulder, where she slowly slips away from us.

"I think?—"

My throat closes over, but I don't let Emmett speak the words that would surely break me. With nothing but pure selfishness to avoid the horrible truth, I kiss him again. I can't do this. I can't live without her .

Not even the kiss can hold the feral beast inside of me at bay. I feel my alpha climbing and clawing his way up my spine, raking his nails through my broken heart as he fights to make himself known.

'Maim. AVENGE!'

I shudder and clutch Em to my chest like he can keep my feral pieces locked away. My own tears mix with Emmett's, creating a taste of utter sorrow. But as his minty freshness teases my tongue, the air shifts and my soul shudders.

The gentle ripples of Amaya in the bond pulse like a shuddering deep breath and?—

A heaving gurgle followed by a watery gag steals the breath from my lungs and rips me away from the alpha against me.

"AMAYA!"



Oliver's startled gasp is nothing but a distant sound when I see my omega lurching into a fetal position and puking up water. There are other hands on her, other men touching her skin. Amaya steals my breath and my sanity in one fell swoop.

'KILL THEM ALL!'

48

AMAYA

I nstincts are a bitch.

And I'm not talking about the omega wreaking havoc in my mind and soul. I mean the ones that forced my lungs to inhale when there was no oxygen and urged my feet to kick in the water even though my ankle clearly wouldn't work.

Those same natural born instincts force my aching body to curl in on itself as I hack up liquid fucking hell fire. I can't stop the trembles from rattling my bones and jarring my throbbing ankle.

Nothing registers around me but the pain fraying my nerves. Among the lava in my throat, a scream bubbles and fear boils over despite the suffering of my lungs. My head is pounding like I just got crushed by all the water in the world and my ankle? My fucking ankle demands attention.

'Beta! BETA!'

My omega slams against my rib cage, frantic to be unleashed, and I'm afraid I don't have the energy to stop her. All my willpower goes to trying to shove the pain away and open my eyes.

I promised myself I would escape or die before the boat left the port.

Did I fail?

"Fuck! Fuck, fuck, fuck, Amaya. Shh, baby."

'Beta.'

"Oliver..." A hesitant voice filters through the shrill scream trying to implode my skull. I can't place it, but it reminds me of everything I have always wished for.

'Dad.'

Dad ? My mouth tries to form the words but only a croak escapes. Am I dead? I use all the willpower I can find to peel my heavy eyelids open. Surely, if I were dead there would be no pain though, right?

Faces I don't know filter through my blurry vision, making the pounding of my heart more noticeable. Thump, thump, thump . With each beat, a new ache forms and heightens the burn in my lungs.

Everything hurts. Living hurts.

One face disappears. Splash! Then another.

"Sam, don't! Shit! Emmett grab Vincent!"

Oliver?

'Beta!' my omega huffs.

I swear I can hear my neck groan and creak as I twist my head to look around me. What I see stops the blood pumping in my veins. My alphas, turning their backs on

me.

"GET ME A BOAT!" Vincent roars, punching someone in the face as Emmett snatches the back of his shirt. "I'M GOING AFTER THEM!"

No! "No," I try to yell, but my desperate plea is hardly more than a whisper.

"Get off me!" Samuel snaps, shoving at Oliver who has him in a death grip. "They touched her!"

"They helped her, dumbass!" Oliver yells, tugging viciously on Sam again. It's then I notice the guy on the ground with a bloody nose and a baffled scowl.

What are they doing?! Don't they see I need them?!

Vincent whirls around on Emmett with a snarl. "Let go! I have to make them pay!"

"Please no," I whisper, cursing my body once again for not doing what it should do. They can't leave me . "Don't leave me!" Still, it's nothing but a croak.

"Amaya, breathe," my dad soothes, entering my line of sight, but I fight to look around him. "Hey, breathe. You need to calm down."

He looks scared, but it only freaks me out more. Not even him gathering me in his arms and tugging me onto his legs helps to ground me.

Everything hurts and none of my mates are helping me! Doesn't he see?! I NEED THEM!

"Vinc—" A ragged cough steals my cry for my alpha. They continue to struggle and tussle, leaving me a weeping, aching mess on the soaking wet dock.

"Fuck!" my dad grunts, pulling me into his arms and patting my back, which arches in pain from the rough handling. "Amaya, you need to fucking breathe!"

I see Emmett's grip on Vincent falter, allowing my bonded alpha to take another step away from me. That one move splits my soul right down the center, unleashing my feral omega in a fit of pure desperation.

"PLEASE DON'T LEAVE M-ME!" My body flings itself forward and off of my dad's lap, only to fall limp with a heavy crash. The fight seeps out of me like a fire extinguishing. Shouts and cursing lull my battered body into darkness.

49

PAUL

As I pat Amaya's back trying to get her to breathe, I'm thrust into so much goddamn regret that I wasn't there for her when she was a baby. With her mouth wide open, gasping for air around the panic seizing her lungs, I wish like hell I would have been there to cradle her against my chest as I burped her.

But I failed as a father in every sense of the word. I wasn't there for anything . Except now I'm here for one of the worst moments of her life, and I can't break. I won't. She needs me. Amaya needs me to be the dad she's always wanted. Always needed. I may never deserve her, but I'm going to do everything in my power to be worthy of my beautiful girl.

My chest constricts as I watch her struggle and cry out for her mates, but I keep forcing my heart to beat and my lungs to work. I have to be strong for her, even though all I want to do is scream and kill someone like Sam and Vincent.

"Amaya, you need to fucking breathe!"

My daughter fought for her life only for her mates to crush her fucking heart when they decided vengeance was more important not two seconds after she opened her goddamn eyes.

Her panicked eyes dart around, hope leaking from them in salty tears as the guys continue to struggle. I want to roar and pummel the four of them, but Amaya is more

important. She won't take a fucking breath!

An extra tussle out of the corner of my eye distracts me for a moment when Vincent manages to escape Emmett's hold on his shirt. "Don't fucking do it," I mutter to myself, fearing that Vincent will take the opportunity to bolt.

He doesn't make it more than one step before Amaya breaks in my arms and tosses herself in his direction. "PLEASE DON'T LEAVE M-ME!"

"FUCK!" Cursing myself for being distracted by those assholes, I scramble to catch her, but she's already hitting the dock with a pained whimper and a muffled plea for her alpha to come back.

"AMAYA!"

"Sir! Move!"

Uncertain who's shouting now and not giving a shit, I pluck my daughter out of the puddle and cradle her to my chest, only to find her eyes closed and neck limp. My stomach drops and my throat closes over on a choked cry until her chest rises.

"Darling..." I shudder, running my fingers over her cold cheeks.

"Sir, I need to get her moved," a feminine voice snaps.

I lift my head, noticing a woman with a stretcher hovering over us with a stern expression and a team of other EMTs behind her. Nodding and ignoring my daughter's four mates now crashing to their knees beside me, I take one final moment to watch the rise and fall of her chest.

I'll just be thankful she's breathing . If I think too hard about what happened to my

poor girl, I might completely break. I'm a dad now. Dads have to be strong for their little girls.

The image of Amaya's limp form being gingerly plucked from my arms plays continuously in my mind. I can still feel the ocean water dripping from her dangling hair as she rose above me. Parting with my daughter and watching her limp form be rolled off the dock and into the back of the ambulance did something to me.

The life I knew is over and I wouldn't have it any other fucking way.

Everything that matters in the world is currently being hauled across Virginia Beach under flashing lights. In the wake of the screaming sirens, Emmett and I speed to keep up.

My hands squeeze the steering wheel, the salt water having leached all the moisture from my skin. Keeping my eyes glued to the back of the ambulance, I let my alpha dad energy take the wheel in my mind.

If my hands are dry just from holding Amaya, then her skin is going to be miserable, right? Fuck, I'm not good at this. This is exactly why I bought her a damn house—I'm not equipped to be a father.

"You're a good dad, Paul."

I whip my head toward Emmett who just uttered his first words in I don't even know how fucking long. Kid is going through it.

He offers me a small, sad smile. "You mumble when you're stressed."

To that, I grumble and keep my eyes on the road ahead. "I'm most definitely not a good dad, Emmett. I bought her a house not even a few weeks after she got out of



rehab and never went to check on her."

As I say the words, more of my failures start waving around in my head like red fucking flags. My mistakes come tumbling out one by one. "I wasn't there when she was born. I never fed her or held her. She was sent to that fucking academy, SOLD actually, by her MOTHER. Emmett, I am the worst fucking dad. When I finally had the chance to have her in my life, instead of giving her all of my effort, I move her out without even making sure it's what she wanted. I stole that choice from her because I thought it was what was best. I forced her to be alone because I didn't feel like I was good enough for her. And I didn't even try to be good enough for her."

He's silent, but I can feel his stare burning a hole into my right cheek. I continue, my heart bleeding for the daughter I let down.

"I might as well be just as bad as her fucking mom. Kate warned me, you know... they all did. Amaya was struggling so much and I physically pushed her away. She was stubborn and kept to herself when I brought her home, but I never really thought about why. What father doesn't even try to see it from his kid's point of view before they make a decision for them?"

"Paul—"

I shake my head, making a sharp turn at the same time. "There's nothing you can say, kid. You won't change my mind or how I feel because everything I said is true. I'm going to do better. I'm going to be Amaya's dad. One she loves and leans on. So don't placate me, okay?"

"Alright," he says and when I glance over at him, his brows are drawn down in thought.

"Now, tell me what's going on with you." It's not a question, it's a demand. We all

have to be strong for Amaya, and I think Emmett's going to need a swift kick in the ass to figure it out.

50

EMMETT

What's going on with me? Where do I start?

The way Paul eyes me makes me fidget and want to curl into the blanket one of the EMTs draped over my shoulders.

"Emmett, tell me."

I don't see the traffic we're passing or really acknowledge that everyone is pulling over for Amaya's ambulance ahead of us. I should be in there with them, but I didn't feel like I deserved to be at my omega's side.

Now all that decision is doing for me is adding to the guilt. Why the hell am I not with my scent match right after she fucking drowned?!

Paul sighs. "Son, you only have a couple of minutes to get yourself situated. I know you're breaking, but Amaya needs you. She wants you. All she wanted on that dock was the four of you beside her. Nothing else matters but being with her."

He's right, but all his words do is stack more weight onto my suffering. What the fuck is wrong with me? Sweat makes my scalp itch, but I still tug the blanket around me tighter like it will save me from the self-reflection Paul is forcing on me.

"How do you do it?" I mutter and turn my body toward him so I can soak in his

wisdom.

"Do what?"

I frown, trying to think of the best way to explain my thoughts. "How do you feel so much and know how to channel it? You expressed your pain and acknowledged all your shit, but you just... you're using it instead of drowning in it."

Paul sends me a look filled with compassion. "I've lived a life of loneliness, Emmett. My reason for existence was out there, and I didn't even know it. Too much time has been stolen from me and I won't allow another moment to slip through my fingers."

I'm absolutely riveted and feel myself getting choked up when Paul swallows thickly. "I guess to answer your question, I refuse to stand in my own way. So many other factors kept me from Amaya, me included, and as much as I hate the time I've lost with my daughter, my feelings are much more useful as fuel to be the father I really, truly want to be."

I have nothing to say. Everything he says taps on the insecurities in my mind that are masking as failures. Did I actually do anything wrong? Five minutes ago, I was so sure I was the worst person that could be around my omega... But now?

"I want to be the best father I can be. You want to be the best mate you can be. I think we have a few things in common, kid," Paul continues, pulling into a parking spot and looking me dead in the eye. "We're great alphas just for wanting to be our best. Mistakes have been made and we want to be better. What might get in our way is a whole fuck ton of insecurities and anxiety."

My eyebrows rise, making Paul chuckle softly. "We are good alphas, Emmett. If you feel like you need to be better, then that makes you good. I'm afraid I don't know the first thing about being a dad to a daughter who's already an adult with her own

family. I don't know where I fit in her life, and I think you might feel the same."

"If it weren't for Sam, I never would have gotten her out. I would have drowned right along with Amaya," I blurt, my heart pounding as my failure surfaces.

Paul shakes his head. "Emmett, you did everything, literally everything, to save your omega. You were willing to die for her. Do you know why I like you guys, even though it's clear you three have some groveling to do too?"

I shake my head, stunned, as his words turn over and over in my head.

"Because the team you all make together is fucking epic. A pack is a team and while I might be a lone alpha, it's really damn obvious that the four of you are meant for your omega. Who found Amaya after Sam helped you?"

"I did," I whisper, feeling self-conscious.

Paul nods and shrugs. "I can't smooth out the struggles running rampant in your head, but I guess what I'm trying to get at is there is so much more to think about beyond telling yourself you're a failure."

I hear him, and I think that's the best I can do right now. "Thank you, Paul." My body locks up as my eyes land on the hospital doors over his shoulder.

"Let's get you to your pack."

"Alpha!"

My soul jolts and floods with love and urgency as Oliver comes rushing through the bright white waiting room. "Beta," I hum, wrapping my arms around my bonded. "Fuck, I'm sorry, Oliver."

He tries to tug out of my embrace, but I hold him to me and let my tears drip into his messy brown waves. "Don't apologize," he says into my damp shirt.

"No, just listen," I beg, squeezing my eyes shut against the abrasive lights. "I'm going to be there for everything from now on. No more running. I think... I think I should talk to someone. There's so much going on in my head. The guilt and all the insecurities are suffocating," I whisper, clinging to my beta.

This time when he tries to pry himself from my grasp, I let him. "I love you," Oliver says with conviction as his green eyes swim with love and a hardness that surprises me. "For the record, you are the greatest, most admirable man I know. I'll always support you finding the help you need."

I wish I could deny his words, but he continues after tugging on the collar of my salty shirt. "No more running, especially from the good things. Amaya's awake. She's going to be okay."

"What?" I breathe, my steps already moving for the double doors. "She's awake?" Fuck, how long was I outside talking to Paul?!

Oliver nods with a grin that stirs my cock just a little. "Our omega is asking for you."

I curse and rush forward, all my issues forgotten.

51

AMAYA

I can't breathe. I can't fucking breathe!

Darkness surrounds me and crushes me from the inside out. My chest feels like it's collapsing, or maybe I just don't exist at all.

Everything is pressure and pain. There's an ache, but maybe I am the ache. Nothing feels real beyond the suffocation twisting me into something unrecognizable. Something that doesn't even exist.

Am I dead?

What did I ever do to deserve this kind of afterlife?

I'm dying all over again, gasping for air that isn't there, from a mouth that is nothing but a shadow.

I am nothing.

'Alpha...'

Why can't I breathe?!

My chest bounces and comes into focus. 'Alpha!'

My heart jolts from my nightmare, but my body stays lax, making me realize that exhaustion was the thing crushing me into a shell of myself. What happened? Why can't I move?!

Beeping surrounds me as the scent of sterile sheets and salt water assault my nose. Please tell me I'm not back there! I try like hell to pry my eyes open, but it feels like they are sewn shut.

No, no, no! What have they done to me now?

All at once, I feel everything .

Every bruise and scrape tingles with awareness. My ankle burns with hot pulsing beats and my lungs ache with every inhale. Around my mouth and nose, a gentle pressure makes itself known muffing my broken whimpers.

Don't touch me , I want to scream. Writhing away from the weight on top of me isn't possible, nor is slapping away the hands grabbing my legs and arms.

No, please no!

"Ms. Rose, I need you to calm down. You'll hurt yourself."

I don't recognize the male voice, so why the hell would I listen to it? Where are my alphas? Where's Oliver? Why isn't anyone here?!

Flashes of Sam's angry face and Vincent's back moving away from me tumble through my mind. They were trying to leave me! They saved me just to walk away?!

"Sir, she's going to do more damage!"



A woman. Shan?

"Gimme that and dim the lights."

My mouth opens on a screech when something warm and damp touches my forehead. The pressure is soft, but it's a trick. At least I think it is until a soft humming sound begins and the cloths swipes across my eyelids.

"Come on, open your eyes now, girl."

I do as the motherly voice tells me, but not because I'm being submissive. I ought to know what I'm up against and why this person is being so nice to me.

White ceilings and even whiter lights glare back at me first. Then I see the lab coats and hear the crinkly bedding as I wince. This isn't real .

"Ms. Rose."

My eyes fly to a graying man in a coat. A white lab coat. Just like the clinic where our heats were studied at the academy.

"No," I whimper, trying to scramble away, but I'm incapable of moving.

Then my eyes flick over the rest of the room and each new person in scrubs steals what little sanity I had to begin with. The incessant beeping speeds up and my lungs feel like they're concaving. I can't get a word out and they won't allow me to scratch my pleas free with my fingernails.

"Sir!" That voice gasps again and when I look to my left, I see an older woman with a blonde bob tickling her jaw and wide blue eyes. "She needs?—"

"I know! Get me the sedative!"

"NO!" the woman snarls, finally prying her eyes from mine. "Get her pack! She needs her pack!"

"No time," the older man huffs, plucking a needle out of a younger woman's hand, solidifying the awful fear that I'm back at the academy clinic.

My flailing increases. Each movement feels like a hot poker stabbing in my chest and ankle. Fireworks explode beneath my breastbone, but I can't focus on anything beyond just getting the fuck away from that needle.

"Sir!" blonde bob lady scolds and rushes away, leaving me alone with the monster coming toward me.

"GET THE FUCK AWAY FROM MY OMEGA!"

52

SAMUEL

"H oly fuckin' shit," Oliver huffs quietly with an anxious laugh.

I thought I was the hothead in our group, but Vincent proved me wrong. With our backs pressed against the white wall inside Amaya's hospital room, my brother and I watch our new pack alpha throw that shithole of a doctor right out the door and demand another one.

I smirk watching the nurses gasp and scramble to the furthest corners of the room. Vincent whirls around and slams the door behind him. I don't realize Emmett is on the verge of exploding too, but I don't have to worry for long after I notice his clenched fists, red face, and glare aimed at the door.

With a one-track mind, Vince stomps over to Emmett and latches a hand around his throat. "Enough," he snaps.

"Damn," Oliver basically moans next to me.

Emmett's frown deepens. "But?—"

"No. I'll handle it." Vincent growls, walking my friend backward and forcing him to his knees. "Watch over our omega while I find the best fucking doctor in this place."

Our omega... Amaya!

I rush toward her now that Vincent's sheer dominance has dissipated enough for me to move.

Like a switch has been flipped, we crowd around our mate lying shocked on the bed looking so fucking tiny it hurts my heart. Whipping around, Emmett basically falls against her sheets and snatches her hand in his. Vincent is swift to drop a lingering kiss on her forehead and whispers something in her ear, to which she nods, before running out of the room.

Emmett chokes on a sob just staring at our mate.

"Em," Amaya whimpers. "I?—"

Her heart rate monitor starts beating double again. Oliver jumps toward her, but I grab the back of his shirt. We need to take it easy with Amaya, I think. She doesn't need us on top of her, especially while there are still a few nurses shuffling about.

"Shh, girl. Let's get you checked over," a nurse with a bob coos and starts tapping on a computer on the other side of Amaya.

I place a palm on Emmett's shoulder and Oli crouches down beside his alpha. My omega watches the beta nurse with so much emotion my heart nearly splits wide open. The feelings flooding the room without Vincent's alpha energy to dominate the space are so overwhelming I'm not surprised when Maya's eyelids start drooping.

"It's okay. You can rest while we wait for the doctor," the nurse says softly, giving my petal a gentle smile and nod.

Before Amaya crashes, she takes one final look around all of us and whispers, "Thank you."

She never has to thank me for anything. Ever. I'll cross any line, any fucking boundary, just to see her beautiful golden eyes.

"There she is," the new doctor whose name I don't really care to know says when Amaya stirs ten minutes later. I'll hand it to the middle-aged beta though. He doesn't look the least bit worried about Vincent hovering beside him with a deep scowl and fighting stance.

"Hi, beautiful," my brother murmurs, petting Amaya's head. A small smile curls my lips when she leans into his touch. Thank fuck she's not flinching away from us.

"My name is Doctor Carter. Ms. Rose, I need to talk to you about your care and our next steps. Would you like anyone to leave?"

My lips curls back in a silent snarl. I'm not fucking leaving . Even Oliver looks ready to unleash a growl.

"Just the nurses," Vincent demands, but Amaya stiffens. Of course, the big alpha notices her reaction and flicks his eyes to the nurse with a bob. "Except for you. She wants you to stay."

The fearless doctor waits for Amaya to say something, and my mate just nods, agreeing with Vincent. "Alright then. Chrissy, can you stay, please?"

The other two nurses file out of the room, keeping space between themselves and Vincent. Chrissy smiles and pats Amaya's shoulder gently. "I got you, girl."

Envy flashes through me fast and vicious when my omega relaxes even further for the stranger. A hard kick to my shin snaps me out of it, so I aim my negative vibes at Emmett.

My friend just raises a brow in challenge, and I roll my eyes in return. I can't be the only one to set my mate at ease, I know that. Doesn't mean I don't wish it was me that has her sinking further into her papery blankets.

I am glad though. During Amaya's quick nap, Emmett was able to take a deep breath and get his emotions under control. Now that he's standing, he looks a lot better, especially with his arms wrapped around Oliver.

The pack bond is much more leveled out now, at least.

Speaking of the pack bond... "Tell me. Now," Vincent demands, eyes hard on the doctor.

'Alpha.'

The word rattles around in my head and I swear I feel it echoed back in acceptance from Oli and Emmett too. The way Vincent busted Amaya's hospital door down not minutes after she was wheeled away from us and took control of a really fucked up situation changed the structure of our pack. Vincent isn't even entirely part of our pack bond, but even with his half tether to Emmett, my alpha is roaring his acceptance of our replacement.

The bond will only strengthen once we all bond with Amaya, but until then, or even if it doesn't happen for some of us, our friendship and pull to each other keeps our pack bond alive.

Sidestepping our new pack lead, the doctor moves to Amaya's other side and starts tinkering with the computer. "Ms. Rose, we will need to continue to monitor your vitals for a few days. You have some bumps and scrapes. The four lines on your forearm should heal up just fine; no scarring would be my bet, along with the other abrasions. To put it simply, you drowned. We need to take some precautions. Blood

pressure and oxygen saturation are our main concerns besides your ankle."

I step around Emmett, needing to be closer to Amaya as we take in the bad news. "Her ankle?" I'm studying the covers where I know her feet are, but of course I don't see anything.

Dr. Carter nods. "We will need to do some imaging to figure out what's going on, but based on the swelling and odd angle, we may be looking at a fracture. To prevent further complications, we need to move on it now. Do you understand?"

Amaya nods. "Okay," she croaks, but I sure as hell don't understand.

"What the fuck do you mean fracture?!"

"Sam—" Oliver hisses, but it's Amaya's soft fingers connecting with my wrist that halt me in my angry panic. She shakes her head with a sad little smile that physically hurts me. Sighing, I drop my head between my shoulders.

"Chrissy," Dr. Carter says, and the whirl of activity that follows makes my head spin.

Please be okay, Petal.

53

OLIVER

Surgery.

Logically, I think I know what's happening right now, but emotionally, I really don't want to fucking think about it. I can't help myself, though. "What did he call it?"

With his head leaned back on the plastic chair, Samuel responds, his voice devoid of emotion. "Fractured Fibula."

"And—" I gulp. "What do they need to do to fix it?"

Sammy sighs but doesn't open his eyes. "Do you actually want to hear me say it again?"

"No," I mumble. "Not really."

Silence surrounds us. Instead of bothering him with my anxiety, I slouch and watch the other two alphas pace around the waiting room. Apparently, Amaya will be sent to a different room after surgery since we were in the emergency wing. Vincent hasn't unclenched his fists in a while and Emmett still looks like he's going to explode.

I don't know what the hell happened in that car with Amaya's dad, but the determination pounding through our mating bond is overwhelming as hell. Don't get me wrong; I much prefer this version of Emmett to the self-deprecating one.



Em struggles with his worth and his place among our pack, but no matter what I do, those demons aren't mine to conquer. I've spent years thinking about how I can help my alpha see himself the way Sam and I do, but nothing worked. I didn't give up, I just realized that the only thing I can do is love him endlessly and hope for the day he learns to love himself too.

Emmett deserves everything good in life and whatever Paul said to him seems to have sparked something in him. I'm glad and so proud, but all I can focus on are the minutes ticking by while Amaya is getting her ankle fixed.

Fractured fucking fibula.

I want to know what happened so damn bad, but I'm terrified. What if I can't hold her trauma with her? Am I strong enough to take on her horrors? I suppose this is what a pack is for, though. I wouldn't be able to be everything Amaya needs, just like Sam and Emmett wouldn't either. She needs all of us just like we need each other.

My gaze flicks toward Vincent, and the chills from watching Emmett turn into a hot flush. Each time they pass each other, my mind takes a turn and imagines them ripping their clothes off. Maybe Vincent would knock my alpha to his knees and ? —

"Oliver!" Emmett snaps, but the red creeping up his neck makes my lips lift. "Yeeees?" I tease.

Em narrows his eyes and takes a step toward me with a lifted, pointed finger. "Knock it?—"

A whirl wind of blonde curls zooms between us, cutting him off. "Where is she?! Is she okay?!"

Four tall men follow and it takes me a moment to fully process what's happening until

the voice registers. "MOM?!"

"Oh!" My mom gasps, spins around, and bolts away from the nurse's desk and right into me as I stand. "My boys! Where's Amaya? Is she okay?! Can we see her? Wait, why aren't you with her?!"

"Momma," Sam starts, also rising to his full height. Peeking at him over our omega mother, I catalog his red-rimmed eyes and slouched shoulders. We all must look a mess. "She's in surgery."

"SURGERY?!" Mom screeches and pushes back from me.

"Her ankle, ma'am," Vincent adds quickly, having joined the ring of men around my mother. "Her fibula is fractured. They had to go in, reset it, and put some plates and screws in."

Bile climbs up my throat, but I force it back down with a swallow. I catch Sammy's knowing gaze beside me and lean into him a bit.

"My poor girl," Mom whimpers, wiping tears from her eyes.

Papa Scott steps forward and drops a kiss on Mom's forehead before reaching a hand out to Vincent. "Good to see you again, hunk."

I snort, earning me a little glare from said hunk. "You too, sir," Vince responds kindly.

"Tell us everything," Reid, Mom's pack alpha, demands.

Vincent takes the lead, Sam adding bits and pieces here and there. When the information dump finally comes to an end, I can barely keep myself standing. My

strength was stripped away with each recap of what we all went through.

It hurts even more that we don't have Amaya's story. All we have are the bruises and raw patches of skin. She drowned and was held in a cage against her will. We don't know who bought her or if they've been caught. We know nothing but our own fucking trauma, and hearing it spoken out loud makes me want to burst into a puddle of tears.

Silence settles around us except for the soft murmuring of my parents and Emmett on the phone with his dads. Paul chats quietly with Reid and Scott near the double doors where Amaya is. I'm glad they're getting along.

Unable to sit any longer, I stand and make my way over to the vending machine. Though I don't actually see anything or press any buttons. I'm not hungry. I just want my omega to be okay.

The air shifts around me, slowly dragging me from my thoughts. I lock eyes with my biological father, Taylor, and my eyes immediately burn. "Hey kid," he murmurs, bright green eyes shimmering with so much love it makes my throat clog.

"Old man," I croak, my tears falling in the face of my family. We all have special bonds with each other, but Pops has always felt like the other half of me. He knows my mind and my heart, rendering me vulnerable with just one look in his similar gaze.

Pops nods in understanding, knowing I'm about to break. "Sounds like your girl is a fighter, huh?"

A loud burst of laughter explodes from my quivering lips, and I collapse into his arms. "Yeah. Yeah, she really is."

54

AMAYA

Murmuring slowly rouses me. "...when we get home."

'Mates.'

I hum a little internally to tell my omega I heard her, but I'm too damn tired to do much else. A soft purr vibrates around in my head as my omega curls up to rest, too, after shaking off the nightmare that haunted our dreams. Our pack is here; we can sleep safely now.

"What if she doesn't want us, though, Sam?" a timid voice breaks through the Zen I just started to slip into.

"We'll still do anything and everything for her, Oli. Even if she cuts us out of her life, we'll still be there in the shadows, okay?"

"Enough." 'Alpha!' Vincent. "Nobody's going anywhere. Now kill the anxiety please. Amaya doesn't need that around her."

There's some grumbling that warms my heart. Hope that they've gotten closer since I've been gone makes me eager to open my eyes and see them.

With each tiny blink, the buzzing in my chest increases. It takes me a moment to register that it's not my aching lungs but my bond with Vincent. I can feel his

unwavering strength not only for me, but for all of us. Beneath that, though, my alpha is terrified. He's focusing on what he needs to do and ignoring what his soul is screaming to feel.

There's something else behind the beat of my alpha's love for me. It's tired, anxious, and so full of eagerness that isn't Vincent. My alpha is buzzing with energy, hiding his exhaustion from me, I think, so what I'm feeling isn't him.

What's happening?

My own nerves light up, giving my eyes the jolt of electricity to open. There's an intake of breath, and the cramp in my lungs and throbbing in my head tells me it was me. I'm breathing . Tears burn my dry eyes as gratitude for oxygen sweeps through me. I'm so relieved to feel each painful breath of air that I almost don't notice the conversation around me has stopped.

Blinking, I'm relieved the warm lights are dimmed. Nothing like the emergency room I was taken to when I got here. I notice the leather couch on the far wall first and slowly drag my awareness through the room.

It's nice. Comfortable. But it doesn't smell like home. I catch whiffs of my pack, but the bleach and medical stench steal the effect my scent matches have on me.

The room darkens, my eyelids drooping again. Why is it so hard to be awake? I barely get a look at my mates now moving toward me as my head lulls to the side.

I blink. Then blink again, forcing my sight to clear. Emmett lays hunched over the side of my hospital bed with his head buried in his arms a few centimeters away from my thigh; he's not touching me. I wish he was.

It takes far more effort than I thought it would to get my hand to move, and even

then, I barely make it off the sheets. My eyes tingle again; the need to run my fingers through my alpha's hair is so strong it's choking me.

My bottom lip trembles while I fight for my tired limbs to work. I need him. Why can't I get to him?!

Just as the monitor by my head starts beeping faster, a shadow moves in my line of sight, and a large, tan hand reaches for Emmett. Long fingers gently curl in Em's hair just like I crave to. A tear falls from my lashes, sadness coursing through me.

"We're here, golden girl."

I gasp, breaking out of my depressing trance of watching Emmett's black hair tangle in someone else's hand. "Vince?" I whisper, eyes snapping up to see my bonded alpha standing over Emmett and me with a look of pure love and longing.

The bond crackles and a fissure bursts in the hardened wall of strength. A tear slips from his ocean eyes. "I'm here now. We're here, Amaya."

Before I can turn into a blubbering mess, Vincent tugs on Emmett's hair and forces the alpha to wake with an annoyed grumble as he shoots a glare up at Vince.

"Ow, what the fuck, man?"

Vince doesn't say a word nor does he stop looking at me like I could disappear at any moment. Emmett, confused and a little cranky, untangles Vincent's hand from his hair and finally, fucking finally, looks at me.

All at once, a rush of excitement roars to life in my battered body, soon followed by a niggling sense of fear. But I'm not afraid.

"Amaya," Emmett chokes, reaching forward as if to touch me, but he hesitates. "Maya," he repeats in a pained whisper.

"I—" I swallow, my pinky grazing the side of his hand. My eyes widen, the fear doubles. "I feel you. Em, I feel you."

He's beautiful and so full of emotion it's breaking my thundering heart. Panic flares just as Emmett whips a worried gaze up to Vincent, making the panic double in my shaking limbs as mine meets his.

I don't care how I can feel him right now; I just can't lose him! "Don't. Please don't leave me," I plead. I'll beg if I have to, but I can't handle them trying to leave me again. I won't survive it. A girl can only be rejected and abused so many times before it ruins her.

Emmett's shocked gaze lands on me again as the bed dips on my other side. Oliver's voice tickles my left ear, and his palm settles over my belly. "We aren't ever going to leave you, baby girl. Not even if you want us to."

Turning my head, my lips brush his cheek as he pulls back. "Oli," my voice trembles.

"Yeah, baby," he says softly and lifts my tingling hand to his scarred lips.

Over his shoulder, I find Samuel hovering, his hands in his pockets. His eyes twinkle with unshed tears, but he's keeping his distance. "Don't want to overwhelm you, Petal."

Oh. I frown, not liking his reasoning. "Please?"

Sammy's face softens, and he pulls his hands from his pockets. He doesn't make me ask twice, already sitting beside his brother by my knees.

I want to stay awake so badly, but my eyelids betray me. My body weighs heavily on the bed, and darkness sweeps me under. I fall asleep, cocooned in the safety of my pack and Oliver's sweet song that coaxes me into serenity.

"I'll always be here to dry your tears... and chase away all your fears."



55

VINCENT

Emmett's struggling to wade through his guilt. Oliver's usual smile is absent. I can't stop running through the list of bastards who need to fucking die.

And Samuel...

"Hey," Remy peeks his head into Amaya's room disrupting my thoughts. "My dad's here. We need to get a statement from you guys."

"I'll do it," I say gruffly and stand. I'm watching his eyes intently because if he so much as looks at my sleeping omega, I will rip his spine from his throat. She looks peaceful in her slumber, except she's trembling on the inside. The bond flares with pain, both physical when she shifts and emotional when it reminds her of the turmoil she has suffered. I'll give the goddamn statement, then I'll come right back.

I don't have a clue how to shoulder some of this pain she's feeling, but I'm determined to figure it out. Maybe she can teach me how she channeled our bond so fiercely a few days ago. Fuck, have I really been riding the edge of feral for days now?

Remy's eyebrows furrow as he gives me a once-over. "Not you. Samuel can."

"Excuse me?" I growl low and round Amaya's hospital bed. His eyes flick to my golden girl, making me stiffen. The alpha in me forgets about the blatant challenge of our pack hierarchy and shifts into protection mode. "Don't fucking look at her."

He's not a threat. He's a friend, but there's no convincing me of that when my entire fucking pack is a goddamn mess and my omega is vulnerable.

Remy studies me with only his head popped through the door. He nods to the hall and steps out. "Let's talk out here."

I grit my teeth and look over my shoulder to check on Amaya. Oliver's asleep next to her on the bed, Emmett has his head in his hands beside them, and Sam's staring right back at me a foot away.

My lip curls a little at Sam's patient look. Why the fuck isn't he a mess?

Samuel sighs. "Vincent, let's—" he pauses and bares his throat just a bit, but it's enough to appease the beast in me. "Can we talk out in the hall? Please."

I raise a brow, cock my head, but save my words and exit the room with him a few steps behind me. Remy and an older man who looks just like him look up from down the hall, but Samuel asks me to wait.

"I can do it, Sam," I snap, annoyed with him getting in my way. I need to get this over with so I can get back to my omega.

The usual look of annoyance that's plastered to his face is gone. I haven't seen it since we got to this fucking city and it's leaving me a little off balance with him. Since getting to this goddamn city, everything is out of whack. Emmett's a shell of himself, Oliver cries more often than he laughs, and Samuel is far more level-headed than I am.

"I'm not saying you can't, Vincent," he says patiently, crossing his arms. "I'm saying for your sake and everyone else's, you need to go sit with Amaya."

"What the hell does that mean?"

Running a hand through his dirty blond hair, he sighs again. I clench my jaw to keep from saying something I don't mean, yet at the same time, a flash of loneliness tumbles through my bond with Amaya. My body jolts toward her closed door, but the sound of Remy talking to his dad stops me.

"That's what I mean," Sam says, gesturing to my clenched muscles. "The only thing that's going to calm your alpha is your omega. And you do need to calm the feral down 'cause as much as you can feel her, she can feel you. Fuck, even I can feel the murderous rage pouring off of you, and it's setting everyone on edge."

I start shaking my head to protest, but Sam slaps a hand down on my shoulder. "Part of being pack alpha is delegating. Go look after our girl. I got this. I promise."

With that, Samuel tucks his hands in his hoodie and saunters over to the OPS officers without noticing my throat rumbling appreciatively at his words. I scan the hall, making sure there are no threats he may encounter. I almost shout at him to take his hands out of his pockets and be ready for anything, but I don't because the urge shocks me.

Pack alpha . That's what he called me. Is that why the caged alpha in me feels ready to unleash at a moment's notice to protect not only my omega, but all my packmates?

I allow myself one final glance around the hallway to ensure Samuel's safety, and when my eyes land on him, I can't help but snort a little. He's facing me with two thumbs up and a cocky fucking grin. Who knew the douchebag could read people so well?

I flip him off and duck into Amaya's room.

As I walk back to my seat, I run my hand through Oliver's wild curls and brush my fingers along Amaya's throat to feel her pulse. Satisfied with Oli's steady breathing and my omega's strong heartbeat, I lean down and draw Emmett's minty scent into my nose.

With my alpha, beta, and omega resting only feet away from me, I take my seat and watch over them. Half my attention stays on the door and anything I can hear outside.

When Samuel slips back in, I nod over to the couch to which he gives me an appreciative smile and collapses into the blankets.

They're all here and safe.

Now it's my job to keep it that way.

56

AMAYA

I think one of the worst things about being in the hospital is the way everyone watches me. It's constant. At least one set of eyes is on me at all times.

Right now, I have six men staring at me, waiting for an answer to Remy's question. Would I like to give a verbal or written statement? The intense burn of my mates' gazes makes my response easy.

"Written, please," I whisper. I watch the blood in my hands shift and pale as I wring them together in my lap.

The silence that follows makes my chest feel heavy. God, it's like I don't know how to be anymore. Everything that happens around me makes my heart pound and my breath stutter.

There's one man not here, and it's the one I wish would protect me from the staring—Dad. I wonder if he would know I need everyone to leave me alone. Not that I want my mates to leave, but can't they watch a movie or take a nap or something? Literally anything to get them to stop watching me like I might break.

"Alright. Vincent, I'll email you," Remy murmurs a few more things, then the door closes behind him and his dad. I breathe a little easier without the extra alphas in my room.

Oliver shifts beside me, but I don't pay him any mind. My omega has been taking all my focus for the past few days. While my body has been recovering, I've been a shell of myself on the inside.

The only time I truly feel something is when one of my mates is holding me or close enough to touch. But beyond that, fear and pain run my thoughts.

My soul is a jumbled mess of confusion. My omega's behavior paints a vivid picture in my head. One I can't look away from.

Long dark hair whips around in the storm of gold, brown, and blue. She's not looking at me but over my shoulder where the chaos of our bonds collide. Even Emmett's subtle link is a writhing mass of heartache.

With her arms wrapped around her waist, tears stream down her cheeks. I almost ask her what's wrong just so I can force a reaction from her instead of this hopelessness stealing the shine from her golden eyes. But I already know what's wrong. Emmett is suffocating in guilt, Vincent is still feral, and there's nothing my omega and I can do to help them like an omega should.

Instead I crumble and the gold swirling around us loses its sparkle only to be drowned out by the struggles of my mates.

Vincent and Emmett explained their situation, and I'm honestly really glad they started their bonding. I bet having an additional something to ground themselves has been really beneficial for all the craziness I've put them through.

I wonder if Samuel and Oliver were bonded to us too, if a torrent of green would rip through. Would their trauma be our downfall, or would they save us?

Vincent calls me his golden girl, but pretty soon, the gold in my eyes will turn to a

murky numbness. I don't know how to get myself out of the water that I feel is still pummeling me while I scream into the ground.

I feel like I'm nothing but welts and water. The ocean still drowns me; instead of salt water, it's everything that has ever happened to me.

"Darling?"

I jump a little; the voice shocking me out of my stupor. Blinking a few times to erase the image of my broken omega, I look up to see my dad kneeling beside me and Oliver is nowhere to be found.

As much as I wanted to see my dad, I didn't want Oliver to leave me.

My stomach drops, and my heart beats faster. Shuffling to the edge of the bed, I ignore the fire zipping up my leg and clench my eyes shut. "Where's Oli? Where did he go?!"

"Shh, Amaya. Breathe. He's outside talking to his parents."

Cursing from the other side of the room draws my attention to Samuel, who has his head dropped back, and his sigh puffs up to the ceiling.

I frown, my belly twisting and my throat protesting my next words. "His parents?"

"Paul," Vincent's voice rumbles. "We were waiting to tell her that."

My dad stands, confusion written all over his face. "Why?"

Oh fuck... Sam and Oli's parents are here?! I haven't seen them in so long. Why are they here? Are they here to yell at me for disappearing all those years ago? If their

mom told me to go to hell, I would in a heartbeat. Do they hate me?

"Nobody hates you, Petal!" Samuel snaps, coming to my side and tugging on a lock of my hair. "Momma loves you and has been begging to see you. All she's talked about the past few weeks is you."

"Weeks?" But that would mean...

"Yeah. They showed up at your house a few weeks ago while we were trying to figure out where you were. We ignored them for too long, so they tracked us down. Dad was pissed."

"Still is," Vincent adds with a grim tone. He catches my curious look and gives me a small smile. "Sam and Oli have a lot of making up to do, love."

"They know?" I whisper. Bile rises at their nods. "No... why?! Why would you tell them?!"

Sam grabs my hand that's yanking on the skin of the other, and places a kiss on my palm. "Because they love you, Maya. They never once gave up hope that you would come back to us. They've been so scared for so long. We couldn't keep this from them. It's my mom, Petal... Please understand."

Surprise chokes me for a moment at seeing Samuel Jenkins pop a tear, but I swallow it down and nuzzle his hand, scent marking him. "Okay," I whisper. "I understand."

A breath of relief bursts from his lips, then he's dipping low and runs his scruffy cheek against mine in a blatant move of affection. "Thank you, Omega."

I preen, a big smile stretching my cheeks and tugging on the cuts around my lips. My omega finally looks at me, and that familiar sparkle we used to have brightens a little



with our alpha's attention.

Dad crosses his arms and narrows his eyes at my two alphas. "So why didn't you want Amaya to know your parents are here? From what I can see, she handled that pretty well."

They both stiffen, but I break it up before they can get into it. "Where's Emmett?" I know they're just trying to protect my emotions, and I will admit that was a bomb to drop on me. A bloom of white and purple draws my gaze. "And where did you get the flowers, dad?"

"Um." Sam hesitates and glances at Vincent for guidance. Vincent shifts on his feet, anxiety sizzling through our bond.

"She's not going to fucking break," my dad snaps and turns to me. "His dads just got here, too."

I swear my eyes bug out of my head. "John and Rich are here?! Oh, are those from John?" My eyes blur with tears, remembering the flower garden I used to spend so much time in at Emmett's house. John has a perpetual green thumb.

"Yeah." Sam squeezes my hand and rubs the back of his neck with his free one. "They would have been here sooner, but their cruise just ended yesterday."

"Fuck," I grumble, even as my omega does a little happy dance. "I don't know..."

"Later." Vincent's voice holds no room for argument.

Grateful for the continued space, I nod. I don't think I'm ready to see everyone. There's too much of a difference between the girl they used to know and the woman I am now. I would just like the opportunity to figure out the differences first, though.

I'm happy for the support, but seeing the parents is going to have to wait. First, I have a final check-up and a discharge conversation to have in an hour.

I just want it all to be okay again.

57

EMMETT

Four days in the hospital feels like four months when we get inside a car for the first time. Of course, it must feel longer for Amaya. I can't even begin to imagine what she's feeling.

My omega is unreadable. I swear every situation she's been in these past few days makes her uncomfortable. The only time she seems relaxed is when all four of us are surrounding her. It should make me feel good that she needs us, but damn it, I want my wild girl to find her independence again.

As much as the alpha in me hates the idea of Amaya doing shit on her own, it's important. I'll always be here for her to lean on, but I also want to cheer from the sidelines as she lives her life.

I just hope I'm a part of that life.

When the time is right, I'm going to bring her to get a professional massage. I have never seen someone tense up so often in my life, and I've been friends with an uptight jackass since I was a kid. Samuel. I'm talking about Samuel.

A throb in my skull alerts me to the annoyance of my possessive side. Maybe I'll watch some videos on massaging . I don't want anyone touching my omega.

A rumble of approval vibrates my right arm, making me frown and look over at

Vincent squished into the back with me. "What?"

He smirks and leans in, raising the temperature in the back seat about a hundred fucking degrees. "I felt your possessiveness, Alpha."

I huff. My reaction has absolutely nothing on the feral coursing through his veins all the time. "I'm always feeling your crazy ass possessiveness too."

Vincent bares his teeth, and I'm reminded once again of the edge he's on. "Mm, keep sassing me, Emmett. See what happens."

Oliver groans from the seat in front of us. "Please, can I be there?"

"You can join, Beta." Vincent's voice is a low thrum that sends pleasure straight to my dick.

"Join what?" Amaya's head lifts from the window and looks between the three of us. We all stare at her in surprise since I could have sworn she was softly snoring a minute ago.

With her foot that's in a cast on Oliver's lap to keep it elevated and her messy bun on top of her head, she looks fucking adorable even with the purple bruises marring her face. And the short shorts with Samuel's sweatshirt covering her thighs? Never mind, it's about a thousand degrees hotter in here.

Vincent's eyes narrow on her before flicking down to make sure the seatbelt is still secured—which he's done every thirty seconds since we got in the SUV. "You should be resting."

She's tired, it's obvious, but still her lips kick up on one side. "The sexual tension aroused me."

Oliver's mouth drops open, and I snicker. Vincent fights his smile, trying to be an overbearing alpha male, but she wins, and Vince's tough guy facade cracks. Lunging between the seats after unstrapping his seat belt, he hovers over her in her captain's chair. "Fuck, I missed you, golden girl."

Tears spill from her eyes, and her shaking hand touches his stubbled jaw. "I missed you too, Alpha."

I feel more than see their kiss. I meet Oli's gaze, emotion roaring between us and filling the car with warmth.

"Seatbelt," Samuel scolds from the passenger seat up front. Remy nods beside him in agreement as he drives us closer to the airport.

Vincent's groan echoes through the space, but he pulls away from a blushing Amaya and buckles himself in. He grumbles about being stuck in the back, all the while staring at the little circles Oli rubs on her knee.

"Five minutes, Vincent. You got this," I tease, having just checked our ETA for the airport.

The look he sends me is pure fucking alpha, making my jeans feel far too snug to sit comfortably for the rest of the drive.

"He better not scratch my car."

Glancing at Samuel, I roll my eyes and go back to watching Maya trying to get comfortable with Oliver. "Lucas won't do shit to it. Calm down."

"Whatever." He pouts, sinking into his seat with his arms crossed.

"At least our flight is one-fourth of what the drive would be. Honestly, you should be sending him a fucking thank you so we can get our omega home early."

He sighs and looks around the private jet Remy's mom arranged for us to fly home. She's a nice woman, and incredibly supportive of Amaya. "I guess. It's pretty nice. Who would've thought we'd ever travel this good, huh?"

I take in the cream color lounge chairs, the couch Amaya is struggling on, and the fully stocked bar. The bathroom is fancy, I bet, but there's no way I'm taking my eyes off my omega long enough to see.

It's only an hour-long flight. I can hold it.

"Pretty nice," I murmur. My attention is on my girl, not Sam, even though I'm right beside him. Vincent is obsessing the same way I am.

Finally, Amaya settles in with a blanket over her lap and her head resting on Oliver's shoulder. It's not her nest, and there aren't enough materials on board to fix it, plus everything is lathered in descenter. She's unsettled; it's making my heart pound.

"There you go," Oliver soothes, leaning his head on top of hers. "You just rest. We'll be home before you know it."

Through the bond I can feel him relaxing the longer Maya leans against him. She seems more relaxed with him, probably because his beta energy is meant to soothe. I try not to be jealous, but I want her snuggled up to me the same way.

We all watch as her eyes flutter closed and her shoulders loosen. My body uncoils with her. Oliver releases a contented sigh and whispers, "Good girl."

Amaya stiffens, and my back goes ramrod straight. I watch with a ball of emotion

lodged in my throat as she sits up and turns away from him. With nowhere to go, she lifts her leg onto his lap instead and slumps against the armrest.

Confusion and hurt twist Oliver's expression. He watches her, opens his mouth a few times but stays quiet and turns a pleading gaze on me. I can feel the turmoil stabbing his heart like it's my own.

I don't know, Oli, I almost say, but she needs to sleep. Instead, I push understanding and love through the mating tether holding us together. His eyes crinkle and he hangs his head.

My eyes don't leave Amaya for the whole flight, and her body never relaxes.

What happened to you, sweetheart?

58

AMAYA

Pulling into my driveway feels like an out-of-body experience. My omega goes awfully quiet and the chaos of my bond with Vincent muffles. Emmett's small tether completely disappears as I'm slammed with images of me being yanked through my front door.

The guys are a flurry of activity around the van we borrowed from Kate as they unload their luggage and the random shit I'll need to help me function with my broken ankle. Like a handicapped bar to install next to the toilets and a chair for the shower. Chills race across my skin, and my belly twists at the idea of subjecting my poor skin to more blasting water. Never again.

But how will I ? —

I cut that thought process off, needing to focus on one dilemma at a time. And right now, my main concern is getting through the front door and up to my nest without allowing the panic I can feel bubbling up behind my ribs to swallow me whole.

Samuel and Emmett are running back and forth from the trunk, and I haven't seen Oliver since he dragged two suitcases in. Do I want to be here?

My door slides open a second later and I'm slammed with Vincent's glorious scent of lemon, reminding me not only of him but of my nana. A tear falls, making my alpha's face twist in concern.



Before he can ask me what's wrong, I shake my head and murmur, "I don't know." Except, I do know, there's just too much to say. How do I tell him everything that's wrong with me? It would be faster to tell him what's right .

I would tell him the morning light shining around him highlights the thorny rose tattoos on his neck so beautifully he looks like a painting. He looks untouchable even as he reaches for my cheek to wipe away my tears.

I would explain the warmth in my heart and the yearning of my soul when I have all my mates around me. So much wrong has happened that the feeling of completeness when I have the four of them near me, touching me, loving me... it makes it all just a little more bearable.

Ignoring the fact that life right now is only bearable , if my alpha were to ask me what's right in the world, I would point to my dad's car pulling in behind us. Dad jumping out of the driver's seat and rushing toward us until he's standing beside Vincent; that is what's good right now. Seeing them beside one another reminds me of the things I heard in the bond. I'm just too tired to ask right now.

They're adults... They should be able to figure their own stuff out, right?

"Darling," dad breathes like he's relieved to have eyes on me again. I have no idea how he got here right after us, but I don't care. There's something about my dad only having eyes for me that settles the abandoned girl inside of me who was sold to an abusive experiment.

"Hi, dad," I whisper. I finally know what it's like for the waterworks to rush forward at the presence of my parent's concern.

So much love shines in his eyes. "I won't ask if you're okay. But how 'bout we get you inside, and I go get you one of those foot long deli sandwiches you like for

whenever you're ready to eat?"

I nod emphatically. "Yes, please! With their signature sauce? Maybe a bowl of—" I pause, blushing and feeling weird for asking for something.

"Hey," Vincent says. He reaches forward and grips my chin. "You ask for whatever you want. A bowl of what?"

"Chili," I whisper and gulp. "And can you get the guys something too? I don't think I'll be up for coo?—"

"Don't say it," Vince growls. "You are going to rest, and we are going to worry about you. "

"He's right, Amaya. Let your mates take care of you. I'll be back later with enough food to feed your army," dad says with a wink. Before he walks away, he and Vincent lock eyes. Something passes between them that I will for sure have to ask about later, but right now? Well, I'm trying to figure out how I'm supposed to crutch my way up the porch steps.

A car engine turning over draws my attention away from the death traps I have to use to get around for a few weeks. Dad backs out of the driveway and Vincent reaches inside the car for me after flipping his hat backwards.

My core flutters at the sight, but he soon tugs me from my seat and swoops me into his arms. Gasping, my lungs squeeze painfully, but my arms are soon wrapped around his neck, and I'm lost in his blue eyes.

"I can?—"

"What did I say about letting me take care of you?" Vincent nips my jaw, making me

forget what I was about to say. "Do you want to text Kate? I have your phone."

"No. No, thank you," I decline immediately. I don't need anyone seeing me like this. "Just?—"

I was doing so much better at making choices before I was taken again, but I feel like no matter what I want, it will be wrong. I couldn't do anything right all those years in school, and I sure as shit couldn't do anything right in the torture chamber.

Knocking the front door open with his hip, Vincent doesn't break eye contact with me. My omega hums softly in my mind, enjoying the feel of him against my skin. "What do you need, Omega?"

His direct question to my omega doesn't go unnoticed. I can feel her sitting up and pushing forward. I gratefully lean back and let her handle it. 'Nest.' "Nest. I want my nest."

The words come out as a whine and a bowl clattering onto the island snap me out of my omega daze. My entire body involuntarily stiffens when my eyes take in my living room. My attention never even making it to my mates hovering in the kitchen.

Blackness swoops in, stealing my sight and my breath one panicked fuzzy at a time.

"Shit!"

The only sense that works is sound, and all I hear as air brushes past me and my lungs protest life is a high-pitched whine.

'Alpha! Need alpha!'

59

OLIVER

S hit. Fucking shit !

"Vincent, man. Put her down." Ordering my feral pack alpha is probably not the smartest thing I've ever done, but...

"NO!"

Double shit . "Vince, seriously..." A bit of fear snakes up my spine and steals my next words.

I let the Neanderthal sprint up the stairs and break Amaya's nest door into three pieces, but I can't just watch him squeeze her to death. I don't even know if she's getting full breaths being shoved into his armpit like she is.

"Oliver, maybe you should?—"

"Leave Sam!" I snap, cutting my brother off. When the fuck did they follow us? At least he and Emmett know not to enter her nesting space. Amaya hasn't invited them in, and nobody should ever disrespect an omega that way. It's a sure way to undo all the groveling.

Amaya's trembling in Vincent's meaty arms and she's not getting better. I've been keeping a watchful eye on her dainty little limbs.

"Maybe get her in the shower?" Emmett suggests softly from outside the threshold with Sam. The only response my alpha gets is a choked cry from Amaya and a heavy glare from me.

With a shake of my head, I say, "Guys, go." They listen with a shit ton of hesitancy, but I am pack beta. I know what my omega needs. Alphas may know what their mates need on an instinctual level, but this isn't only Maya's omega feeling the effects of her trauma.

"Vincent!" I snap. "Put her down."

"NO!" he roars, clutching her tighter to his chest. I swear I hear something pop, but she doesn't fight him.

No number of textbooks on how a beta is supposed to keep a pack calm is helping me in this moment. How do I help a feral alpha help a traumatized omega when they are both lost to the world?!

I can't snap and snarl at him. Samuel might be able to, but Vincent is the pack lead. There's no fighting him into submission.

Could logic work?

"Feel her, Alpha. She hasn't stopped shaking in seven minutes. What you're doing isn't working. We need to try something else." Now to appeal to his feral tendencies. "Keep touching her, but lay her down so she can feel her nest. She asked for her nest, remember?"

Please don't kill me. Please don't kill me, I chant repeatedly in my head while watching the wild man before me for any signs I might be pushing him too hard. Vincent's not my priority, though. Amaya is, and this is not fucking helping. She

needs blankets, comfort. Touches. Distraction.

"Omega needs a different kind of touch, Alpha," I soothe, moving forward on my knees and running my fingers down Amaya's spine. She whimpers and wiggles, telling me I'm right. "Lay our baby girl down, Vincent. She needs our attention."

Vincent stares at me for a long moment before taking a deep breath of Amaya's messy bun. With a grunt, he shifts and lays her on the cushions on her side.

Like the sweet little thing she is, Amaya snuggles further into the coziness of her nest, but when a small pillow sneaks between her thighs, her movements become something else altogether.

"No, no, baby. That's mine," I coo and pluck the pillow from her needy pussy. Vincent growls and lunges for me. Instead of fighting back, I dip my head and tuck my shoulder, readying for the blow. It never comes. When I look up, Vincent's eyes are locked on Amaya's bare legs.

How did she take her leggings off so fast?

I choke a little, my desire clouding my vision. And if her black silky panties are clouding my judgement... "Vincent. Don't."

"No," he murmurs, all viciousness gone from his tone. He whips his shirt off and licks his lips.

Amaya groans, eye fucking the hard planes of his chest. I'm no better, but someone needs to stay levelheaded. "Is that the only word you know, caveman?"

He cocks his head, but I continue even as I pry my omega's knees open and gaze at her pretty pink flesh around her panties. "Just watch, Alpha. You're too far gone. She

needs tender. Release and love. Go suck her tiny nipples for me?" The wet spot grows and the scent of delectable lavender makes my mouth water.

I don't need to look at Vincent to tell he's struggling with me taking the lead. I can feel it in the heavy glare pointed at my temple. But just as I feel his tension, I also know it dissipates when Amaya pulls her shirt up and breathes the word, "Please?"

"Fuck," he grunts and dives for her nipple. Watching him wrap his plump lips around her tit and pluck the other one makes my dick fucking weep .

I curse and joke. "So you know two words." I hide my smirk by delving between her creamy thighs and swiping my tongue over the edge of my omega's panties.

My cock throbs behind my zipper when her taste explodes on my tongue. Just as I rip her panties to the side and take a swipe of her slick, heat envelopes my dick in a tight squeeze. Sputtering, I look down, then up and lock eyes with Vincent.

"Mine," he rumbles, giving me another squeeze with an added tug that makes my balls draw up. "I know more words, Beta. Like... make our mate come and I'll make my bossy beta cream his fucking pants."

He raises a brow, Amaya writhes before thrusting her hips up at me, and I gape at him. Holy fucking shit...

"Oli!" Maya gasps, arching her back as Vince pinches her left nipple.

Gently, oh so gently, I pull her casted leg over my shoulder. "Gotta keep it elevated, baby." I wink and swoop in for another taste of my girl.

I fight like hell to keep most of my attention on Amaya, but when Vincent tugs my zipper down and frees my aching cock? I know I'm way too close to coming to be

playing any damn games with my omega.

Pressure builds, warmth shooting through my cock and with a vicious suck on my mate's tiny little clit I fucking explode and hope like hell I marked her with my cum.

"Ahhhh! Yes, yes, yes!" she screams, clutching Vincent to her perky tits and keeping me suffocated in her cunt. Coming down, a small, contented hum spills from her panting lips.

"Time for a shower," Vincent whispers, peppering kisses along her chest that's pink from his scruffy jaw. "Then cuddles."

Amaya stiffens ever so slightly, but the movement turns into a catlike stretch that highlights her flat stomach and peaked nipples. "No shower. Just cuddles."

"And food," I say, wiping my face on the inside of her thigh. My girl needs to fucking eat.

Vincent grins, seemingly less feral now, and mock whispers to Amaya, "Bossy beta."

"My bossy beta," she whispers back, red tinging her cheeks.

He hums as I stand to get a wet rag to clean Maya up. "Ours," Vincent corrects and fuck my heart does a little jig.

My brain perks up already twirling lyrics around for our future. We're together now. Anything is possible.



60

SAMUEL

The only reason I'm not sporting a boner is because Amaya's tear-stained cheeks are haunting every thought I've had since Vincent ran her up to the nest.

"I'm going back up there," Emmett explodes and turns for the stairs.

My arm snatches out and grabs my best friend by his bicep. "Stop. She'll be okay."

Em's eyes contain a storm of fear and anger. "How do you know that?! Did you not see her? Sam, she never had fucking panic attacks when we were kids. This is so fucked up. She can't even walk into her own home without breaking into pieces!"

I know his rage isn't aimed at me, but goddamn, it's hard not to snap back at him. My alpha's already keyed up, and his condescending tone is testing my last nerve. "I know she'll be perfectly fine, because your beta is up there making her moan like she's about to combust."

"What?" he asks, bewildered.

I roll my eyes. "Listen," I huff, pointing to the ceiling. Like I planned it, Maya lets loose a soft mewl of pleasure. Moving my hand, I jab my finger into his chest where I know he can feel her if he tried. "Now feel . If not her then your alpha. What is going on with Vincent?"

When did I become the voice of reason? Pretty damn sure that was Em's job not too long ago. We might need to have a conversation because this emotional side of him is something I'm not sure how to approach.

"Vince is..." he trails off and nibbles his lip. His eyes flick up to the top of the stairs, a blush tinging his cheeks pink.

"Horny?" I deadpan, feeling like I should get used to all the PDA that comes with a happy pack.

Is that what we are? Happy?

Emmett groans and hangs his head. Nodding, he grips the back of his neck and turns his attention to the living room. "What are we going to do about this place? Think she should come live with us?"

I snort. "Absolutely not. Amaya might have panic attacks now, but I promise you she's still that little girl who stole our shoes and hid them when we tried to force her to wear a longer dress when she was sixteen."

Em laughs and when he locks eyes with me, I'm so damn pleased to see a little sparkle back in his eye that I bounce a little on the balls of my feet. "Shit, I forgot about that."

I nod with a mock pout. "We should've just gone barefoot. Jimmy Staze was just fuckin' beggin' for us to rip his eyeballs out."

Disgust and annoyance flit across Emmett's face at the mention of that damn wang. "Fuck that guy. So if we are supporting her independence, how do we make this her safe space again?"

Ding dong .

I smirk and pat him on the shoulder. "I got it all taken care of."

"Why the fuck are there strangers in Amaya's home?!"

"Christ, Vincent," I grunt, nicking my gums with my nail where I was nibbling anxiously on them. "Be quiet, you big oaf. Your hissing is loud enough to bring the new chandelier down."

"Samuel," Vince growls so low it's barely even audible. "Get them out of here. Right the fuck now."

Emmett looks over, blushes, then skitters away. Point made, even whisper yelling, Vincent is loud as fuck . Taking in my pack alpha, I notice he's in low slung sweatpants and no shirt. I'm pretty sure those are scratch marks I see on his buzzed skull and his lips are far thicker than normal.

"Jesus, dude. You can't come down here smelling like our needy omega when I have people here trying to work." He's lucky they're all betas who are required to wear descenting sprays and lotions. The gloves and covered skin are so they don't leave a trace of themselves behind.

No, they are not murderers. And I obviously made them wait outside until the orgasmic screaming stopped a few hours ago.

The couch groans as it's lifted from the ground. "They are my staggers. We hire them to decorate and furnish homes for showings."

"And, pray tell before I ban you to the backyard, why is the couch leaving? Where's the rug? Why the hell is the kitchen table double the length? And what the fuck was

wrong with her regular light fixture?"

I give him a blank stare. "Are you still feral?" He glares and I sigh. "Maya freaked out when she came in here this morning. Everything about it reminded her of the night she was taken. I'm wiping her slate clean and giving her the opportunity to make new memories and find fresh comfort in her home. If she wants her stuff back, I'll have it swapped back. Promise."

Vincent studies me, then trails his vivid blue eyes around the people flitting about. "You'd really do this for her?"

"Already doing it, man." My head tilts, and I watch him grapple with understanding my gesture. I'm not dense. I know I was a horrible fucking guy for a long time and I have some serious work to do.

"I'm trying, Vincent," I murmur, tucking my hands in the pocket of my sweatshirt.

With one final sweep of the trespassers, his attention lands on me again. "Thank you for doing this, Sam." Then he turns for the stairs, ready to head back to our mate. "Oh. One more thing. Keep a close fucking eye on them."

I open my mouth, but Paul ambles into the kitchen, followed by my three dads. "We got it handled, son. Go check on Amaya. I have lunch in the fridge whenever you're ready," Paul declares before running off to help a couple of guys haul in the new flat screen TV.

My dads follow and break off to help get everything situated. Momma squeals, catching Vincent's attention. "Oh, it's perfect!"

I look over to find my mom placing a photo of Em, Oli, Maya, and me from when we were seven and eight on the mantle. John and Rich, Emmett's parents, add their own

photos, too. My eyes burn, and my feet start carrying me toward the pictures I haven't seen in so many years.

"Sam," Vincent calls my name. When I turn around, he gives me a nod. "She's going to love it."

Smiling, I feel my chest warm for the first time in forever. I think this might be what happiness feels like. If not, it's pretty close.

61

AMAYA

Do we think that since I slept in all our post-orgasm pheromones, it will cover up the fact that I've only cleaned myself with wet rags for almost a week and a hose before that?

"Golden girl..." Vincent hums, clutching my hip and rolling into me even further. "Why don't I go see what the guys are doing for breakfast while you shower?"

So... no. Fuck, I'm going to have to shower at some point.

Thankfully, my belly rumbles at the perfect moment. "Can I eat first?" I whisper, really hoping he doesn't push the issue.

Nuzzling my neck, he kisses me softly. "Sure, little omega. Let's go see what those mates of yours are up to."

His sleepy state seems to wear off immediately when my belly screams for food. Like a rocket, he launches out of bed, and before I know it, he has a T-shirt and sweatpants on.

In the soft lighting of my nest, I watch as he gathers my pretty robe and stalks towards me. There's nothing sexual about his task as he moves me around to cover me up, yet my right toes curl into the fluffy blanket beneath me. My left ones would absolutely be doing the same if they weren't trapped in a cast.

Ugh, buzz kill .

"Hey, where'd you go?" Vince whispers, tucking a lock of greasy hair behind my ear.

Somewhere that still hurts... Bacon wafts through the open door of my nest, effectively distracting me from everything.

Vincent chuckles. "Let's go get you some bacon. How does that sound, Omega?"

My head bobs, the move making me feel like a child, but I don't know how else to be right now. My alpha wants to take care of me, and I'm not capable of much at the moment, anyway. And no, not because some asshole fractured my ankle. Mentally, emotionally? I'm tired and confused. I can't even think about showering without fear that I'll panic.

Like yesterday when I saw the scene where I was stolen from the comfort of my home. Oh god...

"Come on, golden girl," Vince rumbles, hoisting me up in his arms. I'm too trapped in my worry of how I'll react when we get downstairs to protest being carried.

My gaze lands on the shattered pieces of my nest door though, and before I can question just what the hell happened, Oliver's there with a shit-eating grin. "Vincent was a little beastly last night, and the door offended him. Don't worry, baby, Samuel is going to replace it."

Sam? Why would he fix it?

I don't question it though, because like every other time I feel like saying something, my throat closes up. Why can't I just be normal? Actually, when was I ever normal?

'Mates,' my omega answers with a firm nod. 'Happy with mates.'

The burn in my eyes comes on so fast I can't stop the tears from falling or from my mates seeing. Unfortunately, while I was busy pouting, we somehow made it downstairs, and now I have all four mates staring at me with matching looks of horror.

"What's wrong? Fuck, just tell me what you don't like, and I'll have it fixed," Samuel rambles, tugging his phone from his pocket.

I sniffle and wipe my cheeks. "What?"

"Is it the couch? I knew I should have gone with leather again," Sam grumbles, already tapping away on his phone.

"Sam," Emmett mumbles, but he goes ignored.

I try to peer around the line of my childhood best friends, but I can't see shit beyond their bulky forms. Tugging on Vincent's shirt, I implore him to move us around them so I can see what all the fuss is about. When he listens, I suck in a gasp.

Gone is my brown leather sectional and in its place is a dark gray plush one. The closer we get, the more I see a new earthy green rug peeking from beneath an ottoman instead of my old coffee table— that I bashed my head on .

Which reminds me... Snapping my head up to Vincent, I study my alpha and grab his head. I move his head around, searching for anything out of place. How could I forget he got hurt that night, too?!

"Amaya." I'm the worst omega. "OMEGA!" Vincent snaps, yanking my instinctual side forward to get my attention. In a slow, steady voice, he says. "I am completely



okay. Just a mild concussion and a sprained wrist. I took my motorcycle around the corner too fast. If you want to know more, I will tell you, but not right now."

My brows furrow even further. "But..."

"No buts," he scolds and shifts me in his arms until my ass is planted on the back of the couch and my legs are wrapped around his waist. "Later. All that matters is we're both okay, and my new motorcycle has already shipped." He winks and adds, "Right now, you're gonna tell Sam and Emmett what you think about all their hard work."

I pin him with a look that speaks to the sass that I didn't know still lived in me. "Promise?"

My alpha dips his head and caresses my lips with his. "I promise I'll tell you anything you want to know later," he whispers against my cheek and takes a little nibble of my jaw as he moves away. But not too far in case I fall without his body holding me up.

Blinking away from him, I take in my main level for the first time with the softness of my new couch comforting my bare legs. There are new stools at the island that match the couch that look cozy. Everything else in the kitchen is the same, especially with Oliver hopping around in excitement. He used to bug his mom with that all the time growing up.

My eyes keep taking the changes in, and I can only gape at the big freaking table taking up space in my open concept main floor.

"If it's too much, I'll get a smaller one," Sam says fast, as if he wants to beat me before I say something negative. "I just thought?—"

"It will be perfect when we have our families over," I say with a genuine smile on my face.

Sammy blows out a relieved breath where he stands beside it. "Exactly, Petal."

My cheeks warm at his nickname for me. When his green eyes move to the ceiling above the door, mine follow, and I gasp for the second time this morning. "Oh my god," I squeal, wiggling to get down, but Vincent's arm snaps out to keep me where I am.

Huffing at him, I go back to studying the beautiful chandelier. It's not all diamonds like you'd see in a mansion. No, this one looks like a shiny weeping willow trickling down from my ceiling.

"It's so pretty," I breathe, and I know I have hearts in my eyes. "I love it." When I drop my gaze to take in my mates, I get stuck on the gaping hole that used to hold my front door.

"What happened to all the doors? Did Vincent hulk out on that one, too?" I tease and nudge him. Happiness flitters through my body, sending tingles up and down my arms. What an odd reaction .

Emmett shifts near the doorway, drawing my attention. "Uh. I may have removed it prematurely. Don't worry, though. The new one should be here in a few minutes," he rushes out.

A big grin splits my lips, and I wiggle my hands at him. Emmett comes to me like I ask and stops in front of me. I grab his hand and tug him between my legs. With my arms around him, I whisper, "Thank you, Em."

He drops a kiss on my head and murmurs, "Everything for you, sweetie."

When he moves back, I look at Sam and beckon him over too. I make him replace Emmett, but there's hesitancy between us. Looking over his shoulder at the gorgeous

chandelier, I breathe out my animosity toward the alpha who broke my heart. With my legs and arms, I tug him to me and squeeze him like I'm coming home.

"Thank you, Sammy," I whimper and dig my nose into his throat. "Thank you so much."

I cry and I cry, soaking his shirt as he whispers wonderful things into my shoulder. Is this what moving on feels like?

62

AMAYA

My belly is full of eggs, toast, and bacon. I'm a little sleepy and a whole lot toasty. The pain meds are starting to kick in, taking my mind off of my leg. All of my mates surround me, talking softly to each other and chuckling at the TV every once in a while.

I'm not really sure what's on, and I didn't even notice it was a new TV until Oli pointed it out. Technology isn't really my thing. Especially not right now. I want to live in this little slice of heaven where my mates feed me breakfast, wrap blankets around me, and curl up to watch any movie of my choice.

It's perfect. It really is. Except there's an itchiness under my arms that won't go away, and it feels like I have a layer of grease and oil over every inch of my skin. I swear my thigh sticks to my calf when I stretch it out beside the one in the cast.

I can't relax knowing I haven't washed the past month off of me. At least, I think it's been a month. I've been trying so hard to ignore the world, but I think it's finally catching up to me, and if I didn't desperately want to shave my armpits and scrub myself clean, I think I could be happy just like this forever.

So, while my guys have been chatting and relaxing, I've been trying to figure out how the hell I'm going to get myself clean. Like actually clean without freaking out. I really don't think I'll be able to take a shower.

Every so often, Vincent and even Emmett glance at me like they can hear the gears moving in my head. I pay them no mind and work through what I know, which is that I don't want water pelting my skin, and I feel like scrubbing every inch of myself.

The other thing that's very obvious is I'll need help. I glare at my ankle, but even if I didn't have a fractured fibula, the truth is I would still need someone to help me. A panic attack in a slippery tub is the last thing I need.

'Tub.' I frown and cock my head. Yeah, a shower is in a tub . 'No. Bath.'

Chills race across the nape of my neck at the idea of submerging myself in water. With a groan, I throw my head back, my attention momentarily catching on to the pretty new peal-colored front door. I love it. I love everything Sam and Emmett did to my home.

"Sweetheart," Em murmurs beside me. "What's wrong?"

Pulling my head back upright, I study him. His black hair is a little messy today, flopping over his forehead and adding to his overall relaxing mood. Since that first day in the hospital, he's really calmed down again, especially when we're all together.

What I see when I look at my alpha is the same thing I saw when we were younger. He hurt me and thought the worst of me, but Oliver and Sam did too. They're trying. He's trying. I mean, shit, Emmett chose my front door because he said it reminded him of something my nana would love.

I need someone to help me in the bathroom, but I worry Samuel might stress me out a little, Oliver would worry too much, and Vincent would probably go feral again. Vince has been much better today, slowly coming out of his alpha haze. But I don't want to risk his sanity so I can shave my armpits.

Emmett, though, while he struggled after saving me, I know he'll still keep me from drifting too far from the world or sinking into my trauma. He can help me.

"Alpha," I whisper, but it comes out more like a soft whimper. I don't look to see if the others are paying attention to us because if I see that they are, I might chicken out and never try again. "Can you help me take a bath?"

The question comes out and I know right then I would rather bathe than shower. I may have drowned, but it was only once. I was viciously hosed down too many times to count. So I naturally go with the lesser evil.

Shock flicks across Emmett's face, and I blush, feeling embarrassed. I'm about to retract my request when a blinding smile lights him up. "Of course! Now?"

I nod, biting my lip. "Please?"

With a big grin, my alpha swoops me off the couch and tucks me into his chest. I hope he can protect me from my water demons long enough to at least rinse my hair off.

Something tickles my chin, and I'm forced to look away from the full tub. "Maya? Tell me what's wrong," Em whispers, looking pained and confused. My lip wobbles. "Sweetie, you asked me to help you. I can't help if I don't know what exactly I'm helping with, and I'm getting the sense this isn't about helping you in and out of the tub."

Blinking rapidly, I fight the frustrated tears that threaten to fall. "It's dumb," I mumble, playing with the tie on my robe.

"Why did you ask me to help?"

I frown. "What? Why would you ask that?" When he tells me to answer his question, I give in. "Because you won't let me drown. Literally and metaphorically."

Surprise and so much anguish twist his chiseled features. "My god, no. I would never let that happen, sweetheart."

I bob my head sadly. "I know. You would die before you let anything happen to me." I watch as he pales, making my belly twist with anxiety and sadness. "Oli told me why you've been struggling," I whisper, hoping I'm not making a mistake.

"He did? And what did the naughty beta tell you?" Em growls, but he doesn't look mad, thankfully.

I smile sadly. "That you fought until your last breath to save me. And you feel like you didn't do enough. Like you aren't enough for us. For me."

His head hangs, slumping his forehead to my shoulder. Cursing, he grumbles, "Oli shouldn't have told you that. You don't need to worry. I'm seeing a therapist. I'm working on my hang-ups, I swear."

Running my fingers through his hair, I bask in the feel and minty freshness of my mate. "I know, Alpha. Thank you for not giving up on yourself. It's why... that's why I need you right now."

Em pulls his head back and stares into my soul. "What do you need me to do?"

I gulp, clutching his shirt, and peek at the tub that smells like lavender. "Don't let me drown." When he frowns again, I add. "No shower. They-they used a hose, and I just—This will be easier."

I don't need to explain what might happen when my body is submerged in water; he

knows. My alpha almost drowned, too.

Without overthinking the sad state of my bony body, I drop my robe and cling to my mate as he keeps his eyes trained on my face. I could cry with the respect he's showing me. He doesn't fall prey to the rage I saw flickering in his gaze when I told him about the hosing. I couldn't be more thankful than I am right now.

My scent blooms around us, my arousal obvious and embarrassing, but Emmett just kisses my forehead and says, "You got this, and I got you."

I sure hope so .



63

VINCENT

A perk of being a part of a pack is having multiple mates around to help when their omega is struggling.

During our cozy time today, I'm pretty sure we were all aware that Amaya's mind was elsewhere, but by an unspoken agreement, we gave her space. No matter how much my alpha urges were trying to force me to demand she tell us why her anxiety was buzzing through the bond, I made myself relax.

All I want to do is fix and erase the bad, which is impossible. Logically, I know that, but seeing my omega in pain and struggling against something I can't see makes me want to explode. I can't fight the monsters in her brain. Only she can do that, and in order for any of us to help, she needs to let us in. Something I learned in rehab was that nobody can help you if you don't allow them to.

I would have gotten nothing from the countless hours of therapy had I not put in the effort. That's what Amaya needs to do, and while she figures out how to ask for our help, I'll do my best to make her comfortable and happy.

Like right now, Amaya and Emmett are walking upstairs to her main bathroom. I'm curious to know why she chose him to help her when I could have done it just fine, but I also need to trust that she knows what she needs. Plus, I'm really proud of her for asking for help.

Before they took her from me, I witnessed Amaya suffering in silence and afraid to ask for support. She had it no matter what from me, but that didn't do much good until she accepted me.

Last night, she accepted both Oliver and me. Now she's letting Emmett in, and we saw her open up a little to Samuel earlier, too, with their long hug. My omega is trying. I mean, shit , we've only been home a little over twenty-four hours, and she isn't blocking us out.

Trauma is unique to the person suffering through it, and I admit I've been fucking terrified that she would shut down. The bright smiles she lit the house with a few hours ago gave me so much hope my feral edge smoothed out enough for me to sit still and chat with my pack.

My pack . How surreal. I'm not quite sure how I fell into the role of pack alpha, but I suppose that's a good thing. It means my qualities made for the right fit on their own without me trying, right?

What's even better is I didn't have to fight Sam for the title. It was never my goal to lead this pack. I just want everyone to be happy and safe, which came out very dominant at the hospital and ultimately changed the pack hierarchy.

"Do you think she's okay?" Sam asks Oliver, who looks surprised by the inquiry.

"You're asking me if she's okay?" Oli repeats slowly.

Samuel frowns and hikes his ankle up onto his knee. "Well, yeah. You're closer to her than I am right now."

A few inches away from me, Oliver tenses a little and it makes me wonder how this conversation might have been handled in the past. Sam sighs and adds, "Oli, I'm not

mad Maya is comfortable with you and not me yet. As far as I'm concerned, it makes sense. So relax. I'm not about to bite your head off for being a good fuckin' guy."

I peek at the beta who mumbles a quiet, "Alright," under his breath.

It seems like the brothers still have some work to do to mend their relationship, too. It's none of my business, though. At least not yet. As pack lead, if their relationship takes a turn for the worst, I will need to step in because it will affect all of us, but for right now, they are siblings who need to work through their issues, and that doesn't include me.

Clearing my throat awkwardly, I stand and toss a wave over my shoulder. Hopefully, I'll figure this pack leader thing out sooner rather than later.

No sooner have I filled my glass of water, my partial bond with Emmett is being yanked on so damn hard I almost drop it. Swirling around the pulsing aura that is Em, Amaya's golden hue explodes like a fucking bomb in our tether.

"Fuck!" Dropping the cup into the sink with a dangerous clatter, I bolt around the island and up the stairs, all the while cursing my slippery fucking socks. I don't even think I shout their names. Before I know it, I'm rushing through the cracked ensuite bathroom door.

The first thing I see is Emmett's broad shoulders hunched over the tub, then come the bubbles thrashing around the lip of the white porcelain.

"Shh, Maya. I'm here, I'm here, I'm h-here," Emmett's voice cracks on the last word, breaking my heart and sending it shattering to the depths of my soul.

Gasping breaths and whimpers reach my ears, automatically drawing me closer to see my little omega. Her eyes are squeezed shut, and her hands are holding Emmett's

wrists in a vise grip, where they gently clutch her cheeks.

My frantic gaze strays to her kicking leg while the left one wiggles around in the sling hung over the tub. Her top half, covered mostly with lavender-scented bubbles, hardly moves like she's frozen in her memories.

Emmett keeps talking to her and holding her head above water. His minty scent swirls around the steam in the room. I wonder if his mint is why Amaya seems to be sucking in greedy breaths like she instinctually knows her alpha's scent is meant to soothe.

Inching forward, I fold my body so I'm crouching low. Instead of approaching my fearful omega, I tuck my body around Emmett's from behind. He jolts, but I shush him and relax a little when he seems to calm with my presence.

"You came," he croaks while wiping his thumbs beneath Amaya's bloodshot eyes. "I-I don't know what to do."

"I'll always come, Alpha," I whisper in his ear. "Tell me what happened quickly."

Emmett takes a shuddering breath, his shoulder blades digging into my pecs. "She didn't want to shower, and said it would be worse than the bath. They hosed her down, Vincent. The bath is triggering her because of the?—"

He doesn't finish his thought, but I understand. Amaya drowned. Of course, the bath would trigger it. How did I not think of this? I'll just have to be really fucking glad that she did.

"We will talk about the shower thing later," I murmur and run my hands down his wet arms. "Keep talking to her."

I pull away long enough to grab her purple loofa and her flower-scented soap. After setting them down beside Emmett, I pull the drain plug for a few seconds so it's not so deep. Peeking at Emmett, pride fills my chest when I see he isn't looking at her almost bare breasts. He's solely focused on her fluttering golden eyes. I resume my position and pull one of his hands away from her pale cheeks once she's stopped thrashing her legs.

I make a mental note to text Oliver to bring some painkillers up in a bit since she definitely upset her ankle.

"Now wash your omega, Emmett. Talk her through what you're doing, starting at her shoulders and neck. Good. Now, her chest, but no lower. Good job, alpha. Repeat that very gently, and try to coax her into washing the rest of her body."

Sitting behind Emmett and watching him take care of our omega while she blinks away the horrors of her past makes my throat thick with emotion. I don't know how long I soothe Emmett while he soothes Amaya, but finally, she takes the loofa from him and finishes washing her intimate parts.

Now that she's lucid, Emmett releases her and washes her good foot and calf so she doesn't have to strain to reach. I nod to her head next while she soaks; he knows what I'm saying without words. I pull her shampoo and conditioner out of the cupboards behind me and hand them over.

Settling in, I watch my mated alpha wash my fated mate. I feel warm and content. I'm so damn proud of both of them for asking for help when they needed it. The only way we will ever move on from the shit we've survived is to lean on each other.

So when Amaya is all dried off, and I'm carrying her to her nest, I harbor no ill feelings when she whispers to me that she wants to sleep with Emmett and Oliver tonight.

With a soft kiss to her pink lips and rosy cheeks, I tuck her in and watch my pack beta and my alpha snuggle in on each side of their childhood best friend.

I have never felt more like I belonged somewhere in my entire life, even as I settle on the couch beside Sam and drink our bourbon. I may not be in bed with my golden girl, but relaxing with my packmate is fulfilling in another way I've always craved.

Even though I never belonged in my birth family, I know without a doubt I belong with my fated one.

64

AMAYA

I should be completely relaxed right now. Waking up between Oliver and Emmett, their hard cocks poking into my thighs and their hands held on my belly, should be pure bliss and horniness.

No matter how long I stay nestled in my squishy pillows, my mind won't allow me to give in to my omega urges. She's fighting hard to present to her mates and finally bond them, but there's so much in the way of that happening.

And it's all me. I'm a hang-up in this pack. Until I can figure out how to tell my pack what happened to me, I don't think I'll be able to move on.

I know I scared Emmett last night so much that he had to ask for his own help. They deserve an explanation, and until I gather my big bitch panties long enough to do so, the worried looks are going to be too much to bear.

Sighing, I turn to Emmett. I take a moment to admire the sharpness of his nose and wild black bed hair. He's gorgeous... All hard lines and prettiness. I hate to wake him or the curly-haired beta wrapped around my other side, but I need help getting out of my nest.

My fingers trail a soft line up Em's throat as my other hand dips to theirs on my belly. Intertwining my fingers with theirs, I continue my playful journey along my alpha's Adam's apple. A throaty rumble vibrates my fingers, sending tingles down my arm

and making me shiver. I squeeze their hands a little in an attempt to gain some control of the desire heating my core.

"Mmmm, smells good," Oliver mumbles into my shoulder, that's turning bright with a whole-body blush. Oli's thumb rubs a tantalizing circle around my navel over my silky robe and tests the heat coiling tight in my belly.

I squeak and try to wiggle away from his teasing touch, but that only plasters me to Emmett's bare chest. The alpha moans, too, while Oli curses the missing body heat.

"Omega," Emmett growls, eyes still closed as his hand splits from ours and grabs my hip. "Stop wiggling."

Oli digs his jaw into the crook of my neck, tickling me anew. Squealing, I try to burrow into the safety of Em while keeping my sad ankle elevated on one of my big plushies.

"Maya." Emmett's voice deepens even further, the sleepiness making my thighs sticky. "Stop. Moving."

I huff and pull back, finally plucking Oliver's wicked fingers off my belly. "Oli's being mean."

Peeking one eye open, Emmett narrows his eyes on me then over my shoulder. "Beta," he warns.

I swear I feel Oliver smirk into my neck. "Yes, Alpha?"

"Knock it off."

"Yes, Alpha," Oliver says, but nips the skin behind my ear.



"OLI!" I scream and thrash against Emmett, who snarls and throws his body over mine. "Oh," I whisper, really enjoying being caged by my half-naked alpha.

"Why are we awake?" he snaps, glaring at Oliver and softening his gaze on me while he tangles his fingers in my hair.

"I need help getting up and to my crutches," I whisper, a little embarrassed and a lot turned on.

"Pfft," Oli huffs and shoves Emmett off of me. "You don't need those sticks when you have us, baby girl."

I'm swooped into my beta's arms in the next moment and am rushed out of my nest. An unrestrained giggle falls from my lips when Emmett's shout for Oli not to run down the stairs follows us down said stairs.

Hopefully, the easiness of this morning is enough to get me through the trauma I plan to relive today.

I'm numb. Completely and utterly fucking spent. I knew going into this that it would take every broken piece of me to write my truth... but never did I think I would pour everything into it.

I left no detail unturned. Dredging up every moment of torment, loneliness, and pure pain was excruciating in its own way. I have no plans to do it ever again. At least never in that much horrific detail.

Which is why, as I stand before all my mates who are waiting for my permission to open their emails, I feel like I'm going to puke.

This is my way of telling them everything that happened. I didn't expect it to take me

until the sun went down or for my guys to have to force me to eat a little soup and remind me to drink water.

I poured my heart out into Vincent's laptop while I hid myself away in one of the guest rooms. My nest is not a place for me to relive those weeks that I'm sure will haunt me forever.

"There are a few things I have to say that won't be on there," I murmur, swinging my boot back and forth. I don't allow space for them to speak, needing to get this out before I shatter. "Please, let me talk and don't ask questions. They will all be answered in there." I point to their phones.

Into the silence, I tell them the triggers I've noticed already. "I'll need help with baths, and I-I don't foresee showers in my future. No chocolate either please... I just-I can't. Um." I sniffle. "Can we keep obvious praise to a minimum? Like 'good girl'. And maybe don't withhold food as a punishment."

"What the fuck..." Samuel mutters. The others look like they're about to puke.

"There will probably be other things. Those are just off the top of my head right now." I think the chocolate hurts the worst. When I saw the chocolate chips on the table with breakfast earlier, I almost went into full panic mode.

"Baby..." Oli gulps, looking from his phone to me. "We don't have to?—"

I shake my head, wrapping my arms around my waist and tugging my favorite blanket closer. "It's the only way I can tell you wh-what they did."

Oliver, Sam and Emmett all swap loaded looks; their shoulders pressed together on the couch in solidarity. Vincent clutches his phone so tightly I'm afraid it will break before he will.

"I—" Sam coughs, fidgeting uncomfortably. All I can do is grimace and feel bad about upsetting him. It goes against my very nature as an omega to bring them anything but love and comfort, yet here I am, dumping some of the worst moments of my life onto their laps.

Vincent stands abruptly, making me gasp and stumble away. The flash of hurt on his face forces a choked sob out of my throat. I thought I was dry of all my tears, but the look of anguish on my alpha's face is my undoing.

"No, please," I beg, my voice wobbling. "Just read them. I'm going to bed, and I would really like it if you?—"

"If we what, Omega?" Vincent urges, like I have all the answers for him.

I take a shuddering breath. "Please come to our nest when you're done." Looking from Vincent to Oli and Emmett, then my gaze finally lands on Sammy. "All of you. I need all of you."

I don't wait for a response or give them a final pained glance as I shuffle my way up the stairs on my crutches. Sleep is the only thing I need right now. Maybe that will wash away this awful day.

Will this change how they feel about me? I hope I wake to find them in my nest, loving me and all my tarnished pieces.

65

OLIVER

I just this once, I'm so damn grateful that Amaya isn't bonded to all of us. The last thing she needs is to feel our emotions as we read through what happened to her.

The torrent of emotion I felt from Emmett before he slammed the bond closed suffocated me and constricted my lungs like nothing I've ever experienced before. That, on top of my own pain and the bitter scents in the air made me almost pass out.

It's been silent for so long, and I know as pack beta, I should be working to settle the alpha energies trying to fight against this past threat, but I can't. I, too, am broken by the words I have read and the pure horror of what my mate experienced at the hands of those vile monsters.

We can't run out the door and track these fuckers down. These monsters aren't for us to slay. There's nothing left for us to do but battle the ones that live on inside her head.

The screen on my phone turns black, forcefully blocking me from rereading Amaya's statement. With every final ounce of emotional energy I have, I blast Emmett with a wave of love as I stand from the couch.

My lips don't even make the effort to open when I try to say goodnight. There's nothing to say right now. The only thing I can do to make any of this better is to snuggle my mate while she gets some much-needed rest.

Uncertain how I made it to Amaya's room without realizing I was moving, I push her new nest door open softly. Approaching her balled-up form in her nest, I kick my sweatpants off and crawl toward my sniffing girl.

"Oli?" she whispers brokenly.

I hum while stuffing a pillow beneath her poor ankle. Anger flares hot and heavy as my brain remembers that part of her statement. I bat the emotion away and focus on my omega.

Tonight, I settle on the side she's facing and wrap my arms around her. Her dainty form is stiff, testing my ability to comfort my mate on my own. "Do you?—"

"Shh, baby girl. Nothing has changed. Just sleep," I coo and start petting her hair.

It's a while of listening to the absolute silence in the house before Maya relaxes and her breathing deepens.

In the soft glow of Amaya's nest, I cradle her and whisper, "I love you. I'll love you forever."

I know I must look like a weirdo staring at Amaya's plate of bacon. But with each passing second, the longer one of her favorite foods goes untouched, the more my concern rises.

Breakfast has been a silent affair, and if it's setting me on edge, there's no telling how Amaya is feeling. She's not eating, and her cup of orange juice hasn't gone far from her mouth since she sat down. It's similar to Sam's need to continue stuffing his face. If their mouths are busy, then they don't have to speak.

Unfortunately, that is exactly what we need to do.

Taking a final bite of my toast and washing it down with a sip of my milk, I resign myself to the fact that it's going to have to be up to me to start this conversation.

The alphas are struggling, especially since Amaya has retreated into herself. Vincent seems to understand her need for space, but it's unnerving to see her zoning out on the soft snow flurries through the big window.

With as much courage as I can muster up, I clear my throat and start shredding the napkin in my lap. "I think we need to talk about everything." At least my voice comes out strong.

Amaya stiffens, Emmett whips his head to me, and Samuel shoves another pile of eggs into his mouth. Thankfully, Vincent nods and sets his forks down. "Oli's right. Amaya..."

Instead of continuing to watch the snow fall, her head drops, and she peeks up at Vincent through her hair. I wish she would say something, but her silence continues.

Vincent looks pained at her muted demeanor, so I continue, "Baby, I think I can speak for all of us when I say we don't feel any different about you."

My god , how could we?! Our girl survived starvation, torture of so many varieties, more conditioning, food manipulation, and she slept in a fucking dog cage. Amaya is the strongest person I know.

"How?" Her voice is a broken whisper, making my heart slam against my ribcage to get to her. "They?—"

"Were monsters," Vincent growls.

Emmett reaches next to him and grabs her hand. "And you are a survivor."

"The strongest person I know," I share my thoughts out loud.

Amaya's shoulders hike up with each word we say, physically denying our truths from reaching her brain. It's silent for a few beats, then she sniffles. Sam throws his fork down on the table and tosses his hands in the air with a snarl. I hate the way Maya jumps and leans back from him across from her, but what he says next is everything she needs to hear.

"Fucking hell, Amaya! You survived brutal treatment and were almost sold to sex traffickers, and you're still sitting here, living, trying ! Not only is it incredible that you survived all of that, and still you smile every fucking day, you eat, you hug us, you tease, and you're intimate! You. Are. Everything, despite what those bastards did to you."

"But—" Amaya sobs, rips her hand away from Emmett, then clutches both of hers to her chest. "I'm-I-I feel broken! I am broken!"

Furiously shaking his head, Sam's arms fling wide. "Welcome to the club, Petal! I've been fucked up for a long time with some serious anger issues." My stomach turns to lead when he points from me to Emmett. "Oli wears a happy mask every damn day, and Emmett thinks, very incorrectly I might add, that he's not worth anything."

I watch Amaya. Her eyes are wide, but this isn't news to her. "Sammy..." she whispers.

"And our pack alpha went to that same god-awful school as you and still harbors misplaced guilt that he's the reason you were kidnapped a few months ago. He's half feral most of the time, too." Sam's not pulling any punches, and I see each of them landing hard on our omega.

"Sam—" she starts again, but he cuts her off.

"So you see, Petal... we're all a little broken. And I challenge you to find someone who isn't a little cracked."

Tears are streaming down her face at this point, and I feel my own eyes burning too. "Baby girl," I whisper, leaning forward to get her attention. "No matter how much one of us struggles, we will always be here for each other. We're a pack," I add like it means everything. It doesn't. Not to the trauma horns blaring in her head and maybe Emmett's too.

"But—"

Emmett snatches her hand again and brings it to his heart. "You don't believe us, and that's okay. We will work every damn day to show you we are telling the truth. You just have to let us, sweetheart."

And there it is. There is a real roadblock we might have to fight against. Will she let us love her?

With my heart in my throat, I watch as she looks at Vincent. He nods at our omega, and with a stern voice, he says, "Listen to your mates, Omega."

Slowly, oh so fucking slowly, she nods and squeezes Emmett's hand in return. "Okay, I'll try."

It's not everything we need to talk about, but this may have been the most important. If she's opening up to us and letting us in, then the next big conversations should be much easier.

"I want..." she trails off and fidgets in her seat. She doesn't wait for one of us to encourage her, which makes me so damn proud. "I want to go out to eat. With my dad."



I smile so hard my cheeks ache immediately. She's not asking, she's telling, and fuck if it doesn't make me a little hard to hear her taking back some of her control.

"Do you want to text him?" Vince asks since he still has her phone.

Shaking her head, Amaya declines. "No, can you just set something up for me, please?"

"Of course," our pack alpha says eagerly, and I watch in awe as she takes control and willingly releases some of it to her mate.

Amaya's fucking perfect.

66

PAUL

I don't know what the fuck is wrong with me. My eyes dart to the flowers sitting in the passenger seat for at least the fifth time in the last few minutes. What if she doesn't like them ? She has to like them. They're her scent. I wasn't sure how her guys would deal with a different flower smell in the house, so I went with the safe option that I know everyone in her pack loves.

Or maybe it's weird. Is it weird for a dad to get his daughter the flower that matches her scent? Fuck, I don't know what I'm doing .

Too late. My hands sweat as I pull into Amaya's driveway. Sighing, I take in the house I bought for her all those months ago. What was I thinking?

Puffing out a breath, I snatch the bundle of lavender flowers and leave the car running as I run to the new front door. Emmett has good taste , I think to myself while I wait for someone to answer.

Humor fills me as I hear all the loud voices and clattering dishes coming from inside. I'm so damn glad Amaya has a pack. Sometimes I wish my life was filled with chaos. The kind that comes from a happy family, not a ton of work and expectations as a lawyer.

I glance down the street to see if there's any movement in the guys' house. Obviously Vincent lives here, but I wonder if the other three split their time between their own

home and Amaya's.

The door swings open, and Oliver leans against the frame. "Hey daddyo," he hoots with a grin.

Rolling my eyes like I usually do around him, I greet, "What's up, kid?"

"Ugh," he scoffs, tossing his head back. "Why you gotta call me that? You know I'm the same age as Amaya, right?"

"Yeah, and she's my kid ."

Oliver's eyes widen like a puppy. "Does that mean you claim me as your own too? Oh, please tell me I have your blessing!"

"Blessing for what?" Emmett murmurs around a bite of what looks like a cookie still in his hand. It's sweet the way he wraps his arm around his beta's hips. The way they both lean into each other is a show of trust I hope to see my daughter experience too.

"There will be no blessing until I've spoken to Amaya," I grumble half-heatedly. I'm almost positive they're all treating Amaya well, but I have to hear it from her first.

Oliver mock pouts, but before he can open his smart mouth, the girl in question is huffing her way down the staircase. Just as I'm about to bolt forward to help her down the stairs with her crutches, Samuel skids into view at the top of the stairs with a wicked glare.

"Damn it, woman! I told you to wait, not risk your neck doing it alone!" he huffs, sliding in beside her and helping her down the stairs.

She pouts and I can't help but grin at seeing her giving them a hard time. "You were

too slow."

Sam deposits my kid on her feet and checks her over for injuries. At least that's what I'm telling myself. "Would you like to repeat that in front of Vincent?"

Amaya pales, making Emmett and Oliver snicker. Samuel smirks knowing he won, and I'm starting to get more curious about the life my daughter is building. It looks like things are going better than I thought, but looks can be deceiving, even if she is grumbling while fighting a smile all the way to the front door.

Just as Amaya is about to greet me, Vincent rounds the corner by the kitchen. "Who needs to repeat what?"

Emmett and Oliver drop kisses on her cheek and hightail it out of the kitchen. Pussies .

Batting her eyelashes, Amaya leans on one crutch as Vincent approaches. "Nobody and nothing."

Sam scoffs a few feet away with a shit-eating grin. "I'll tell you later, man. Why don't you carry our omega out to the car since she has a death wish with stairs?"

I feel forgotten, but watching the way her pack is starting to come together is a blessing. When Amaya twists her nose up and says that she was just excited to see me makes my heart fucking soar, though.

"Mhmm, we'll talk about it later," Vincent admonishes in a no nonsense tone that raises my hackles just a little. I don't think I'll ever be able to get rid of my protectiveness of my daughter.

Amaya rolls her eyes and turns to me finally. "Hi, Dad. Can we go now?"

A laugh bursts out of me. "So eager to leave these guys in the dust, huh, darling?"

"You have no idea." She adds a long sigh that makes me laugh, and Vincent purses his lips. "Alright, come on big man, carry me out to the car, please. Who knows if the stairs have grown teeth or might just fall apart under me?"

Vincent has her in his arms not a moment later, but before I close the door behind us, I hear the rest of the guys discussing the reinforcement of said porch steps.

Yeah, Amaya has them wrapped around her little finger. And I'm so damn proud.

"Amaya, I need to apologize," I say once I've wiped the hot chocolate from my lips.

She does the same and cocks her head. "For what?"

I laugh humorlessly. "For so many things..." The car ride to this small mom-and-pop restaurant was a little awkward between us. However, with some decent music I let her find on my phone, we were slowly able to open up with general life things. Then once we were seated and handed menus, our conversation turned from music to the kinds of food she likes. I must say, I really wish I could have met her nana.

Amaya sighs and leans away from the little dessert Danish she'd been munching on. "Dad, you don't?—"

"No, please," I rush out. "Let me do this. It's the only way I'll be able to move forward and be the father I should have been from the beginning."

With already glassy eyes, she gives me a slow nod. Inhaling a deep breath, I recall all the things I'm eager to say, but they all fade away on my exhale. I'm left vulnerable in front of the girl I'm supposed to protect with everything I have.

I start with the most important thing I need to say. "I love you, darling. So much it fucking hurts. I can't believe I never got to see you grow up or hold my finger in a tiny fist."

Amaya opens her mouth, probably to tell me it wasn't my fault, but I beg her to let me talk and she does.

"I know it's neither of our faults, but absolving me of that guilt doesn't take the pain away. I wish I could have been there. And when I finally got the chance to be your dad, I pushed you away. I'm so sorry I couldn't be who you needed me to be at one of the hardest points of your life."

"Dad..." she murmurs, a stray tear falling from her lashes.

"One second," I whisper and lean forward to grasp her hand in both of mine. "I will forever regret not holding onto you with everything I have, but I need you to know that I am now, and I am never letting you go. Do you hear me, darling?"

With a wobbly lip, my daughter replies softly. "I hear you." She hesitates and asks, "What about Vincent?"

My stomach drops at the realization that she knows how I treated her bonded. I nod in understanding. "Amaya, I'm sorry for blaming him. I really, truly, am. It was so wrong of me and I won't make an excuse for my behavior. I'll speak with him myself and apologize. He's a good man."

She nods with a soft smile. "He is, I love him. And I love you too." Her golden eyes bounce over my face like she's thinking about something, then she says the one thing I never would have felt worthy of asking for. "I forgive you, dad."

The familial link that bonds father and daughter brightens and warms, just like our

mutual smiles of love.

"Can you take me somewhere?" she asks shyly.

"Anywhere, Amaya," I respond. I would take her to see every inch of this fucking world if she asked. Nothing is as important as my daughter, just as she always should have been.

67

AMAYA

"Hi, Nana..." I greet the cold stone before me. I don't try to hold myself up as I crumble to my knees on top of my nana's final resting place.

It's not much, just a simple stone with her name and dates signifying her birth and death. She lived a long life, but for my heart, it never would have been long enough.

"There's someone here to meet you today," I tell her as I swipe my gloved fingers over the dusting of snow on her gravestone. "I told him I wanted some time alone with you first though, except now I'm not sure what to say," I trail off, my voice nothing but a puff of breath on the brisk wind.

My thoughts start tumbling out in no particular order. "When I asked him to bring me here, I thought I was ready, but seeing you, or I guess not seeing you, is something I will never be ready for. You were my favorite person, the one who loved me unconditionally from the beginning."

Pausing for a moment, I gather the courage to speak my struggles. "I wondered so many times why you loved me when my own mom couldn't. I really thought something was wrong with me."

My knees are freezing, but I pay them no mind as I continue to pour my heart out to the one person who was always there for me. Until she wasn't.



"I know you would tell me that Oli, Emmett, and Sammy loved me and to that I would have told you they were too young to know what love was." I huff a little laugh. "Nana, you'll never believe what my life has become. I didn't come here to talk about all that stuff, though..."

Why am I here, then?

'Love,' my omega whispers to me like it's the most obvious answer.

And she's right. My love for my nana has never wavered in the years she's been gone.

"I believe you still love me like I love you, Nana." I weep into my wet gloves. "I need you more than you know. More than they know."

After a few chilly minutes of crying alone on my grandmother's grave, I wipe my tears and tell my nana about my mates. I don't tell her about our struggles or misguided paths. Instead, she hears about Oliver's scarred smile that still lights up any room and the emotional man beneath the happiness he wears on his sleeve.

Emmett is next. I tell her about his relationship with Oli, and his newfound sense of belonging in our family.

When it's Sammy's turn, I do mention some of our issues, but only because she has to understand the growth he has worked so hard to achieve to be a better packmate for all of us.

Vincent is last because she would flip out to know I had another mate we knew nothing about. His selflessness is the focus of the story I weave of my fourth mate. I can't stop myself from smiling through my descriptions of the family I'm building. The longer I sit here in my soaked leggings and aching leg, the antsier I get to go home and tell them everything I've told my nana today.

Chuckling a little with a snuffle, I dig my phone out of my jacket pocket and hit a few buttons. "Okay, now that I've blubbered all over you, I would like you to meet someone."

"Hey, darling. You okay?"

A real, blinding smile stretches across my lips when I hear my dad's voice coming up behind me. "Yeah, I really am," I say. He returns my smile with his own. "Nana, I'd like you to meet my dad."

And just like me, my dad falls to his knees beside me, lays a palm on her stone and brokenly whispers, "Thank you for loving my daughter until she could find me."

I cry all over again, but this time in my dad's arms as he tells my nana about the bravest, most beautiful girl he met months ago. I allow myself to soak in his words, and I love every minute of the pride filled way he talks about me.

My dad loves me. Nana loves me. And I might have four mates at home who love me too.

It's time to find out.

68

EMMETT

No matter what I do, my knee won't stop bouncing. Not even Oliver grinding against my cock can cool my nerves.

"Babe... just relax..." Oli coos in my ear before biting down on my earlobe. Reflexively, my hands tighten around his waist as he straddles me.

A groan tumbles from my lips, one that's not born of frustration but because my beta's ass on my lap is about to make me embarrass myself.

"Fuck, Oliver." Thrusting up, I try to push my worries out of my mind.

Do I hate that Amaya has been gone all day? Yes. But she's with her dad who would protect her with his life.

Annnnnnd we're not thinking about Paul.

"Knock, knock!"

Fuck! It's hard not to think about Paul when his voice shouts through the house. Oliver doesn't move, and I don't make him either. That is until I see Amaya tucked under her dad's arm with bloodshot eyes.

Even then I don't have to move my beta off of me. He flings himself up and is around

the couch before I even stand. Although I adjust my cock, I guess Oli has no such concerns about our father-in-law seeing his hard-on.

Shiver. No, thank you.

"What's wrong, baby girl?" he panics, reaching for our omega and plucking her from Paul's hold.

"Have you been crying?!" Sam bellows, running down the stairs with fury melted in his eyes. It's directed at Paul, but once Maya lays a palm on his chest, the broody alpha melts. "What's going on, Petal?"

Confused by her half snuffle, half smile, I round the couch and join the interrogation. I keep my mouth shut, though, since Oli and Sam asked everything I would have.

Turning to her dad, my mate gives him a warm smile and wraps her arms around his middle. "Thank you for today."

With a loving kiss on the top of her head, he whispers, "Thank you, darling."

Vincent ambles his way down the stairs next, immediately smiling when he sees our girl.

"Have a good night. Text me tomorrow, okay? I'd like to make this a regular thing." I swear Paul looks a little nervous, but when Maya agrees, he seems to relax. "See ya guys," Paul says to us, then Amaya is hobbling him to the door.

Honestly, the fact that she still hasn't gotten the hang of her crutches is ridiculously cute. I should make more of a point to carry her like the others do.

Their exchange of I love yous at the door makes me smile and relax. I still don't like

the redness of her eyes, though. She turns back to us with a little grin on her face and eyes us like a meal. It's confusing as fuck when it's obvious she's had an emotional day.

"Little mate," Vincent rumbles, stepping forward and sliding his tongue into her mouth like it's the most natural thing to do.

Envy steals my breath until my beta touches his pinky to mine. My cock perks up, and my minty scent fucking explodes around the room.

Sam shoots me a look. Oliver is smug as fuck, and Vincent groans hungrily against my omega's mouth. My answering growl to Amaya's mewl is carnal.

What is wrong with me?!

"Wait," Amaya breathes against her alpha's mouth. "I-I need to say something."

"What is it, Petal?" Sam asks gently while Vincent tucks her hair behind her ears.

"Let's sit," Vince suggests after a few moments of silence.

Oliver, Sam, and I move toward the couch, but Amaya is quick to shake her head. "Not there. Can we all go to my nest, please?"

Oli moans in response. "Mmm, baby, you never have to beg us to go to your nest, but it does sound so pretty." Then he adds a hint of sweetness to his dirty innuendo. "We would be honored to join you in your nest, Maya."

I'm shocked when she turns to me. "Will you carry me, Alpha?"

Obviously, my answer is ab-so-fucking-lutely.

I thought I was surprised when my omega singled me out to carry her up the stairs over one of her other mates.

Yes, I have issues. Yes, I'm working on them .

"You want what?!"

Oliver glowers at me like I'm slow and need to catch up.

"I..." Maya hesitates, looking a little embarrassed and a whole lot afraid. "I want you to finish the bond with Vincent."

"But... why?" Fuck, wrong thing to say. Tears immediately fill her eyes, and she sinks further into Samuel's bare chest.

Gulping multiple times like she's swallowing a sob, Amaya chokes out a few words. "I just thought?—"

"Emmett," Vincent snarls. "May I have a word?"

Before I can even take a goddamn breath, my beta protests. "Absolutely not! You will not leave our omega here to wonder what the shit you idiots need to discuss without her. We're a pack. We speak freely."

"Shit. You're right. I'm sorry, golden girl," Vincent apologizes to Amaya and rubs a soothing hand up her thigh, making her shiver. To me, he demands, "Do you have a problem being my bonded mate? We're already halfway there."

My jaw drops in shock at what he's thinking. Is that why my omega is crying? "The only thing I would love more than to complete our bond is to bite my omega officially," I answer honestly.

I already have my beta. Now I want my alpha and my omega.

Turning to my fated mate, I ask what I really want to know. "Why do you want us to finish the bond and not create your own with me?"

With a shuddering breath, Amaya seems to gather her emotions and holds them close for the time being. "Because I don't think I can handle another bond right now. I'm a different kind of broken than I used to be, and I have to figure out how to live with this new me. But I want you . I need all of you so much. I hate that I can't take you all right here right now."

We stare at her silently, a mixture of awe and pride filling the space between us.

Amaya pats the space above her heart. "Please give me a piece of you I can hold on to while I figure out how to heal?"

How do I deny this woman anything, let alone myself?

Like that horrifying day I dove into the ocean after her, I dive into her soft little body and take her mouth with my own. "You have me, sweetheart. I'll give you anything you want."

Fingers tangle in my black hair and yank me back so my neck arches. "You better want me too, Alpha," Vincent growls into my throat.

I can't contain the moan that slips out, but by the way Vincent's cock thickens against my back, I don't think I want to. "Y-yes," I stutter like this is my first time.

"Good," he grunts and releases me, much to my disappointment. Before my pout can fully form, Vince trades places with Samuel behind Amaya and cradles our omega between us. "Love on our mate, Emmett."

He doesn't have to tell me twice. Amaya gasps as I pin her to our pack alpha, allowing my tongue to slip through her pretty plump lips. Hands go everywhere all at once until my shirt is off, and Amaya is bare beneath me.

"You are so beautiful," I murmur. A shot of pleasure zips down my spine when her eyes shrink to pin pricks, telling me her omega is close to the surface. Leaning in so I can peer into her soul, I coo, "Hi there, pretty thing."

A squeak puffs from her parted lips, but Vincent's answering chuckle is quickly dominated by the groan of pure ecstasy when my mate dives her hand into my sweatpants and forces my dick to slip between her drenched pussy lips.

"Oh fuck," I cuss, clenching my jaw and trying to pull my hips away from hers. My attempt is futile as Vincent's strong fucking hands grip my ass cheeks and thrust me into our girl's waiting cunt.

My cry of pleasure matches Amaya's as I bottom out, and sweat immediately beads on my brow. Her juices soak the base of my knot immediately.

"Alpha" she gasps and writhes beneath me, looking hot as all hell with her dark hair fanned across Vincent's toned chest.

"Fuck her good for us, Em," Vince growls, biting his lip and watching us with nothing short of intense desire.

I do as I'm told, my balls drawing up way too fast with the need to explode in my omega for the first time ever. Hot fingers slip between our sticky stomachs at the same time a purr from Vincent rumbles through us.

"Vince," I huff, absolutely amazed at how good that feels between the three of us. He just hums, sucking Amaya's neck and keeping eye contact with me as he strums our



needy girl's clit.

"Yes, oh, right there!" Maya squeals, twisting her head to bear her throat to us. A lesser alpha would have sunk their teeth into their omega's throat without hesitation, but, just as she asked, I strike for Vincent's meaty peck behind her shoulder.

Tingles and an all-consuming pressure in my cock send me spiraling as my omega's pussy ripples and sucks my knot right into her, making sure I won't be leaving for a while.

The taste of copper explodes on my tongue, and blue tendrils sweep and swirl through my soul, followed by a hazy hue of gold that I know to be Amaya's faint presence.

"There you are," Vincent whispers as I collapse against them, with my newly mated alpha keeping most of my weight off the dainty, sleepy woman between us. "Rest now," he adds.

As I fall into a contented doze, I latch onto the raspiness of Vincent's voice as he cuddles me closer to him so I can tend to my bite.

Amaya's hands drift softly up my back and over my sides, making a purr rattle to life in my chest. Then Oli's there, placing kisses along my spine, and Sam mentions something about towels, but I'm spent and safe, so I let my pack handle the rest while I sink into a soft slumber of peacefulness.

69

SAMUEL

The house is silent besides the quiet radio playing through the kitchen speaker. Cracking an egg on the side of a glass bowl, I over think everything.

Not the fact that Amaya invited me into her nest for the first time last night, only to be focused on Emmett and Vincent until she passed out, but I can't help worrying about what she might think when she wakes up and I'm gone.

I don't want her to assume the worst of me when I'm not there to explain myself, but if she did, it would be warranted. I haven't been the best mate, or even an okay one in the past, but I would never begrudge my friends for finding more happiness and love.

Envy plagued me a little while I watched the three of them share something special, but seeing the acceptance and love in Oliver's eyes at the same time was powerful. There's no space for jealousy in a pack when each individual brings something entirely different to the family.

Amaya is worried about handling another bond right now, but she needed Emmett's stability to balance out the feral side Vincent has been showing lately. At least that's my conclusion. An omega chooses their mates when they do for a reason, for some need or desire to be fulfilled, and Em has always been the most centered out of all of us even when he's struggling. I mean shit, the guy is already seeing a therapist once a week through video call. He's solid, and she needs that right now while she figures everything else out.

So no, I'm not bitter but I am hungry and if I'm starving, then the three love birds and my brother upstairs are for sure going to wake up ravenous.

With that thought, I whisk faster, not wanting my pack to wait around for food. After pouring the eggs into the pan and putting some bread down in the toaster, a popular song filters through the kitchen.

While starting a pot of coffee, I hum along and even shake my hips. Absentmindedly I smile, remembering how Maya's nana used to do the same thing. I arch my back a little more as the first drip of liquid gold hits the pot and attempt the effortless twerk move the old lady used to.

My back tweaks and I curse while rubbing the ache away, then check the eggs. A snort halts me convincing myself I just don't have the female flexibility to do such a move.

"And here I thought you were hiding from me. Maybe even brooding in a dark corner somewhere."

Adapting a fake look of shock, I spin around and gasp at Amaya. "Me, broody? Never," I tease, then rush to the fridge to grab the butter for the first batch of toast. Cooking alone is hard. Why didn't I wake Oli up?

"Would you like some help?" my omega asks, humor still evident in her tone.

"Absolutely not," I huff and point my knife at the countertop. "Sit and relax. I'll grab you a cup..." I trail off and look to see if the coffee has enough for a cup yet—it does not.

I growl, frustrated that I'm not providing for her fast enough, but Maya just giggles and hops up on the counter with her crutches leaning beside her knees.

"What are you laughing at?"

She pats her hair down in my peripheral. "I'm not laughing. I'm enjoying the view."

Like an ass, I turn and flex my bare pecs for her. Even as she rolls her eyes, her teeth catch her pump bottom lip in a sexy little bite.

"Not your body, Sammy," she snorts, but I know she likes it. All humor fades to be replaced by genuine feelings. "I meant I like seeing you happy."

My silence weighs heavily on my chest, just like the ocean water I fought through to reach her. Eventually, the toaster popping snaps me out of my awkwardness. I pluck the browned bread from the machine and remove the eggs from the burner and murmur the words I am starting to believe. "I am happy, Petal."

"You are?" she whispers back, and it draws me to her like a moth to a flame. I'm ready to incinerate in her orbit as long as she is my last dying breath.

Tucking a snarled piece of her hair behind her ear, I step between her now parted thighs. "I am. Being here with you, with them, is everything. I can't tell you how much I hope to stay. I just pray you'll want to keep me, but even if I only have you for now, I'll be grateful for the time I got."

"Why—"

I narrow my eyes and lean into her space. "Don't play naïve, Petal. I've been the worst kind of mate, and I have a lifetime of hurt to make up for."

Now she's silent but still nibbling on her lip as she studies my face. I'm glad my omega isn't defending my actions because I might have to put her over my knee as a lesson of self-worth. This woman deserves more than me.

"Amaya, I am so so sorry. Not only for my behavior toward you, but for the betrayal of my thoughts and feelings. I never should have doubted you. The three of us knew you, the real you, and still I poisoned us against you because I was lost in the pain of perceived rejection. I thought rejecting you back would make it all hurt less. Maybe make the pain go away."

"And did it?"

I shake my head and wipe a tear from her rosy cheeks. "No, Omega. I longed for you every day. My alpha turned against me because my primal side knew you never would have left us."

"I found out that night, you know? The night they took me... From the moment I woke up in all three of your clothes I knew that I was yours. I knew, and I fought... Please know I tried. I tried, and I waited for so long, but it just became..."

"Too much," I add, knowing we left her to drown in the well of hope, unaccompanied by the heroes she needed. My heart thumps strongly in my chest at her sad nod. "I searched every nook and cranny of your house holding onto hope that you were just playing a game. I can't believe—I can't believe I let you go, Amaya. I should have fought my insecurities for you. I failed you. How can you look at me?"

She shushes me with a haste peck on my lips that stuns me fucking silent. "What's done is done," Amaya declares, her tone hard. "I want to move forward."

"Me too," I practically beg and my eyes burn with an intensity that scares the shit out of me. "Can you ever forgive me? Please keep me, Petal."

Her attention is heavy with emotion and true thinking. "I think so, Sam. You're saying the right things. Your words mean a lot. I'm glad you see the hurt you've caused. Now you have to show me. Words only get you so far, and because I see the

torment in your eyes, I'm willing to let you show me you mean it."

I blow out a breath, one I've been holding since I was a teenager. "I will. Every minute of every day I'll show you how much I love you." Amaya gasps at my words, but I plow forward. "I'll show you how far I've come and all the self-growth I am prepared to do. Amaya Rose, I will be my best for you. I swear it."

"Will you..." My omega bites that damn lip again, but she finishes her thought not soon after. "I want you for my heat."

"Your heat?!" The words burst out before I can stop them. Shit, is it already coming up again?! Panic is a real fucking threat to my sanity right now and instead of accepting the invitation, I question her again. "Amaya, that's your most vulnerable state. How can you trust me after everything?!"

Her next words make me crumple to the floor between her thighs in a relieved release of energy.

"Because I want to forgive you, Alpha."

70

AMAYA

"What's going on down here?"

I jolt at the sound of Oliver's curiosity. The stiffening of my muscles isn't because I'm embarrassed to be found with one of my alphas kneeling on the kitchen floor between my legs, though. I prepare myself to shut down any jokes made about Samuel's vulnerability.

Emmett, picking up on my mood, slips his pinky into Oliver's hand and wiggles it to get his attention discreetly. With a frown, Oli glances at his alpha and whatever he sees there has the teasing glint in his eye fading to unease.

Twisting his lips, Oliver eyes his brother who still has his face buried in my belly. "Sam, you okay?" he asks with caution.

I give him a grateful smile while I scratch my nails along Sammy's scalp. His deep rumble has butterflies taking flight where he rests, and it's all I can do to keep from squirming.

To distract myself from my rising need, I start to explain our conversation. "We were talking about ev?—"

Sam's head pops up so fast I startle. The intense look he pins me with holds me in place. Oh, and his hot hands on my thighs keep me from falling, too, of course. "Her

heat. We were talking about Amaya's heat."

My jaw drops, and blood rushes to my cheeks so fast that I immediately start sweating. I wish I could deny Sam's words, but I guess that was a topic I brought up. Opening and closing my mouth a few times like a fish out of water, I wiggle and panic at the heat searing my panties now.

Locking eyes with Sam, the pleading look he gives me makes me close my mouth and nod. The others don't need to know about our conversation. We will keep it to ourselves. Ours.

"Your heat?" Vincent breaks our connection.

"Yeah," Sam says, standing and leaning against the counter beside me. "Petal asked me to be a part of her heat. And I, obviously, whole-fucking-heartedly accept."

My panties incinerate when he winks and flexes his forearm as he drags his hand through his hair. "Oh, breakfast is ready," he adds like the perfect fucking package.

"You cooked?" Oliver looks a little green. "By yourself?"

Chuckling, I hop off the counter onto my one foot and ignore the snarls of indignation as I crutch over to Oliver. "Don't worry. I supervised." I peck his lips and huff my way to the back bathroom. "Some of it," I toss over my shoulder and giggle when arguing ensues.

Some things never change, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

"So..." My heart is in my throat, and my fingers don't have any more blood in them with how hard I'm wringing them together. "I was wondering..."



Vincent pauses the TV and full body turns to me so his knee brushes my ass. He waits patiently for me to find the words I've been rehearsing in my head since waking up this morning.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I recall some of the worries I've been fighting against all day and decide to address those first. "Was I out of line when I asked you," I look to Emmett, "to finish bonding Vincent? Because if I pressured you into anything?—"

"You didn't pressure us, sweetheart." Emmett leans forward and brushes his fingers across my knees. "It was always in our plan." He twirls a finger in a circle to indicate to himself, Oliver, and Vincent. "We just wanted to wait for your go-ahead."

More questions blare in my head, and I release one that's been demanding my attention the most. "Can you tell me more about why you started the bond already then? If you wanted my blessing."

Em and Vince trade a loaded look. With a heavy breath, Emmett opens up to me. "I was struggling because I didn't know where I fit in here anymore. I felt worthless," he whispers, shame dragging his eyes down to his lap.

I want to go to him, but my crutches are on the other side of the ottoman, and I'm squished between Vincent and Oliver. Before I can try to soothe his ache with words, Emmett lifts his gaze and gives me a real smile.

"You don't need to say anything, sweet girl, but thank you. I'm working on it, and I'll continue to grow so I can be the best version of myself that I can be. There's nothing else to say," Em preaches with confidence.

He's right. There's nothing else to say except, "I'm proud of you."

"Me too," Sam agrees.

Oliver gazes at Em with love and adds, "So damn proud."

And Vincent's words are steeped in pride when he chimes in. "Proud of you, Alpha."

Emmett's smile is so wide I don't think I'll ever forget this moment. I especially won't when he flips the attention back on me by asking, "So what else were you wondering, sweetie?"

Fuck, I shouldn't have said anything.

'Want more.' My omega paces, her anxiety making her voice waver. 'Need beta.'

I know, I know! I thought having a slightly stronger connection to Emmett before I bonded him, too, would help settle the anxious energy constantly thrumming through my veins.

And he did, in a way. But Emmett's subtle presence through my bond with Vincent isn't enough to calm the persistent feeling that I should to be on guard for something. Changing my main living space where I was kidnapped was a huge help, as was the added connection between my alphas, but I need more.

I need help.

'Help. Beta.'

The thing about what I'm about to ask, though, is this will be the closest I'll ever get to bonding Oliver myself. My bite, paired with a bite from one of my bonded alphas, will create a tether designed for a beta and an omega. One that isn't as all-consuming as an alpha/omega bond, but one that's meant to soothe and balance the chaos of an entire pack tethered to an omega.

'Say.'

"Baby girl?"

At his voice, I look into Oliver's eyes, and make my decision. I may need him, but the desire to have him, mind, heart, and soul, is as consuming as my bond with Vincent.

"Bond me?" I whisper to my beta, but before I let him answer, I turn to Vincent with a watery gaze. "Give me my beta? Please?"

I could tell them why I need him so much, and how he could help me battle my demons, but at the end of the day, that's not why I'm asking to bite my beta and have my alpha bite him too.

"I love him," I whimper, tears slipping down my cheeks as I all but beg Vincent to understand. But that was wrong. Whipping around at the sound of Oli's gasp, I clutch his cheeks and lay my heart out there for him to accept or deny. "I love you, Oli. Please? Be mine."

A choked watery laugh escapes Oli before his lips are claiming mine fast and warm. "Of course, you beautiful girl. Obviously!" He giggles and I repeat the happy sound.

A warm hand sliding around my belly reminds me there's more than just us at this moment. Peeking at Vincent, I'm afraid of his answer until his heated gaze trails over me, then Oliver.

"Be mine, too, Beta?"

"Fuck," Oli curses and bites his lip then checks with Emmett who gives him a wide smile of approval. "Yeah. Yeah, yes!"

Oli bounces like his giddiness just can't be contained. Vincent's hand shoots out and snatches his jaw. To me, Vince rumbles, "He's ours now, Omega."

In the next beat, two mouths are clashing against mine in a passionate dance that has me twirling toward their love and never looking back.

71

VINCENT

T his omega. Her sweetness and willpower to conquer everything is going to drive me absolutely crazy. I just want to fucking eat her. Which is probably why she needs to bond with Oliver. I'm not a very soothing presence in our bond lately.

I need to figure it out, but that's a phone call for later. Right now, I have a beta and an omega tongue dueling in my mouth.

It's sloppy but so fucking sexy it's nearly impossible not to blow my load before my dick's been touched. Amaya whimpers prettily and thrusts her chest into mine. Her sounds shift from pleasure to frustration so fast I yank away from them to study her face.

Flushed with an adorable pout plumping her bottom lip, she distracts me for a moment, then I see tears welling in her eyes. "What's wrong?"

That damn lip wobbles and I about panic until she huffs and tosses her blanket off her lap. Pointing to her booted ankle, she growls, "I want it off."

"Soon, baby," Oli coos while sweeping her hair off her neck. His trail of open-mouth kisses and flicks of his tongue has our omega panting between us once more.

It has to be annoying to be careful how she moves her leg. Instead of letting her think about how this will go with the three of us on the couch, I'm about to offer a solution

when she beats me to it.

"I want to watch," she breathes with her head tipped back against the couch.

Enraptured by her beauty, I tug her loose shirt down and swipe my tongue through the valley of her breasts. I'm rewarded with a soft puff of breath on my forehead. Oliver groans in response.

"Who will love on you while I make our beta scream, then?"

"Sammy," Amaya purrs, lifting her head up to look at the alpha she wants.

Oliver cocks his head at me, drawing my attention away from the eye fucking happening over my shoulder. "And you think you can make me scream?"

A dark chuckle falls from my lips as I reach my hand forward to pinch his bottom lip. "I may have no experience with men, but mark my words, when my cock is in your ass, you will absolutely be screaming."

His mouth pops open when I release my hold on his lip. "You-you've never been with a guy?"

I shake my head while stealing a glance at Amaya when her sweet lavender scent explodes a little more around us. She likes something that I've said. "No, but I think I have someone pretty eager to help me figure it out."

"Damn right," Emmett barks out. I smirk as Oliver's cheeks turn pink. "Oli, clothes off before our omega turns feral for waiting too long."

He's right. Amaya is practically vibrating between us; the tension sparking with lust and need.

A hand moves into my line of sight. Sam reaches for our mate. "Come here, Petal. Let them give you a show while I take care of you, hmm?"

Nodding, Amaya lets Samuel pull her up and help her into his lap on the other side of the sectional. Sideways with her leg propped up on a pillow, Sam settles a hand on her stomach while his other one pets circles along her collarbone.

Meanwhile, Oliver scrambles to get his clothes off while Em watches with fire blazing in his eyes. He's like a swirling pit of fucking lava in my chest right now, lighting me up like a damn hellhound ready to pounce on my beta.

"Fuck," I grunt as Oli's cock springs free. A string of precum dangles between his thighs, and without thought, I tug him toward me by the back of his legs and swallow my gift.

"Oh shit," he gasps and tries to thrust his cock into my mouth, but an arm wrapping around his waist forces him to stop.

"No, no," Emmett warns, dipping his nose into the crook of Oliver's throat. "Let me show our alpha how you like it."

Warm brown eyes snap to mine, holding me hostage. The dominant vibes rolling off of Emmett in minty waves are so fucking sexy I have to yank my pants down to free myself.

Oliver gasps and moves a little, making me jolt and my cock bounce. Emmett grins and explains what he is doing. "You get your fingers nice and wet first, Alpha. Then you make sure our beta is calm and relaxed so he can take you. Swirl your finger around the rim long enough for him to start panting, then slide in, oh so slowly," he murmurs. All the while, Oliver's eyes roll into the back of his head.

Just as Oli starts wiggling some more, Emmett nips his neck and shifts behind him. A long guttural groan explodes from Oliver. Em says, "You add in a second finger when he starts getting greedy. Spread them wide and scissor them so you can fit your fat cock in his tight ass."

Unable to control myself, I wrap my hand around my cock and give it a squeeze. Leaning forward, I lick the next drop of precum from my beta. I'm quickly finding his taste really damn addicting.

A high-pitched whine startles me out of the entrancing demonstration that Emmett is putting on. We all shift to see Amaya shirtless, sprawled against Sam in her white sports bra and blue sleep shorts stretched around his wrist. Her alpha's attention is only on her and not on what we're doing to his brother.

"Holy hell," Oli mumbles which quickly turns into a throaty moan. "Please. Fuck, I need more."

Emmett's eyes darken, and the internal struggle to let his beta go shoots feral flames through our bond. "Then," he growls, narrowing his gaze on me, "you fuck our beta."

With those words, Emmett shoves Oliver toward me with his ass stretched and dripping in lube for me. Without hesitation, Oliver climbs onto my lap with a frantic need I'm going to fulfill.

"Vincent," Oli pleads, grinding his ass on my throbbing cock. "Alpha. Can I?"

I study him for a moment, memorizing the wild brown curls in disarray across his forehead. "Take it," I urge, grabbing his hips and guiding him down.

"Yeeesss," Oliver hisses, throwing his head back and jerking his cock at the same time I slide home. "More."



"Demanding," I grunt and thrust up into his hot fucking hole. He clenches and I about lose my damn mind. "Mine," I snap, batting his hand away from his swollen dick and replace it with my own.

Absently, I notice Em sitting near us and tugging on his own cock, but all my focus is on the pleasure zapping through my balls and the bond with my omega and alpha.

Tapping into how my omega is feeling as she writhes against Samuel, I share with the group. "Amaya's close to coming, Beta. Do you think we can get there with her?"

Nodding his head like a good fucking man, I pump him faster and fuck him deeper. He bounces on my knot that pulses for him. Amaya screams, and my balls draw up. We don't come with her, though, because she immediately scrambles across the couch and sinks her little fangs into the meaty part of Oliver's shoulder.

His shout of pleasure clenches my cock so hard I see fucking stars and come just as his release paints my chest and stomach. Emmett moans beside us, adding another sexy layer to our bonding. In the midst of all the pleasure, I turn my head and bite down on Oli's wrist, which rests by my head.

A high-pitched ringing steals my hearing as the three of us collapse against each other. Green cradles the haze of gold and swirls of brown in my soul.

With my mates cuddled near me, and my packmate giving our omega some water, everything is one step closer to being right in the world.

72

AMAYA

"So how does it feel?" Beckett sprawls out on the couch beside Freya. Next to each other as they are, I can see all the similarities that make them obvious twins. Freya's hair used to be as platinum as his, but she's dyed it a dirty honey color.

Peering over my wine glass at Kate and Freya, I notice they also don't know what he's referencing. Nor is he actually looking at us, so I have no idea who he's talking to.

Kate looks deep in thought as she studies him, as if she can pluck an explanation from his brain. Freya just hums and nibbles on her fudge. The sight of chocolate makes me a little nauseous after the way it was used against me at the warehouse. But I try because apparently Beckett has a craving, and I didn't tell them about my aversion. I have to get over this trigger especially. I miss chocolate.

Swallowing my small sip of chardonnay, I cringe a little and cough. Acquired taste my ass, Kate. "What?" I choke out since nobody else is going to ask him what the hell he's talking about.

Slowly, Beckett turns to face me with an eyebrow raised. "How does freedom feel, Amy?"

That fucking nickname. I scowl and toss a pillow at him while Kate just sniggers beside me. "Next time, it won't just be a pillow I throw at you, Beckett." My hands tighten on my wine glass in threat, but I cool it. "What do you mean freedom?"

He points a finger at my bare feet, indicating the ankle that finally got out of its boot today. "Oh!" I grin big and wiggle my toes at him. "It's great. A little weird, and walking normally still kind of aches, but I'm happy to be free." In more ways than one .

Like my three friends can hear my thoughts, their faces soften and Kate snuggles in next to me. "I'm so proud of you," she says.

Freya nods and accepts the bowl of grapes her brother puts in her lap, still needing some guidance when it comes to food. "I'm proud of all of us," Beckett whispers and wiggles back into my couch.

"Proud of us," I whisper, closing my eyes to savor this moment.

It took me a little over two weeks to gather the courage to text Kate. Everyone was so very respectful of the space I requested after everything that happened. Plus, that time spent ignoring the outside world gave me ample opportunity to get to know my mates again and get closer to my dad.

So when I received a FaceTime call from Kate's number, and Beckett showed up on the screen with a few bottles of wine and snacks, demanding a girls' night to celebrate my boot coming off today, I agreed.

My anxiety still needs a lot of work, and there's a restlessness festering in me more and more every day that's pushing me to hunker down with my mates, but I'll get there. And today, that one step toward my future means sitting on the couch with my three friends and watching some dumbass movie Beckett chose.

I had to tell him to turn the volume down. It's another trigger I've found after being battered with loud music in the torture room for weeks. They didn't ask questions, nor did they look at me funny when my voice was nothing but a panicked croak. Beckett

just nodded and did as I asked without any fanfare.

Taking another sip of my wine, I swear my throat scalds itself on the bitterness, making my back itch with the beginnings of sweat. Shifting, I nudge Kate off of me and tell her I'm too warm for any more cuddles.

It was nice, though, the platonic affection from someone who wants to be around me and not because they're my mate. I fear my brokenness is off-putting, but having Kate, Freya, and Beckett here tonight not looking like they plan on leaving anytime soon is reassuring.

"Beck..." Freya mumbles sometime later, and I blink sleepily over at them to see her fidgeting with her bowl of grape stems.

My heart clenches at seeing my fellow omega still struggling with the effects of the academy, but I also smile when Beckett does. "Tell me," he encourages affectionately.

In the dim lighting, I see Freya chew her thumb nail while looking at the bowl of popcorn on my coffee table. "Can I have some popcorn?"

Beaming at his sister, Beckett smacks a kiss on her cheek and swaps the empty grape bowl for the popcorn one. "Proud of you, baby sis."

She huffs but snuggles into his side. When I glance at Kate, I see she has a similar dreamy look on her face when she watches her alpha treating his twin with so much care.

Sammy challenged me to find someone who wasn't a little broken a while ago, but I think I'd rather admire the shattered bits of people that bring them together and make them stronger. As I sit surrounded by three people who also survived similar horrors

to mine, I see so much strength, and all I feel is admiration.

Like Beckett said... I'm so damn proud of each and every one of us.

73

AMAYA

O h my fucking hell... get me out of here!

'Mate!'

"Yeah, I know," I grumble out loud, shoving and nudging my mates away from my sticky skin. "Mate. Off."

Mocking my omega in the middle of the night for her caveman talk is for sure not my greatest moment, but I'm crabby beyond belief. I'm tempted to run out of my nest and straight outside into the snow right now. I'm naked; that's how fucking hot it is in here.

"What are you doing, Omega?" a raspy voice near the top of my head asks, still sounding half asleep.

"Getting air!" Annoyance is heavy in my tone, but I immediately feel the effects of my guilt for being so bitchy. "I'm sorry," I gasp, flinging around to see my pack alpha peering at me with concern. Tears spill from my eyes with no warning, and a sob unleashes itself from my tightening chest.

Grunts and shuffling surrounds me until I'm finally free of all the limbs and blankets that were forcing the sanity to sweat out of me. Cool air brushes over my clammy skin, helping me release a sigh of relief.

"Thank you," I whimper, collapsing back into the sheets and drifting off again to the sounds of my mates murmuring to each other.

I don't think I sleep, but I'm not quite awake. There's a buzzing under my skin that makes me itch to reach out for one of my men. I'm floating on a toasty cloud of gold that I swear is coming from my skin.

"Fuck, she smells good."

"Oli," another voice snaps. "Back up."

A scoff. " Me?! You three are shaking with the effort it's taking not to devour her."

What's happening?

'Mate. We mate.'

No, I'm tired. And I really freaking am. It feels like my head is swimming, and I'm not actually in any kind of plane of existence.

'Fine. I mate.'

NO! No. Me too, please. I don't know what's happening right now, but I don't want to be thrust into the back of my mind while my omega takes complete control.

'Heat...' she explains, twirling around in my mind with a feral little grin that makes me anxious and excited all at once. 'Mates. We mate.'

Oh... OH! My eyes pop open, and I thrust myself into a sitting position. Somehow, I manage to make one of them yelp, then I'm surrounded by my mates.

"Maya?" Emmett touches the inside of my knee with his middle fingers.

Oliver shifts in behind him with wild-looking pupils. "Baby girl..."

"Shit, Petal. Delicious scent or not, don't fuckin' do that creepy shit." Samuel makes me laugh, urging off some of my anxiety. So it was my broody alpha that I startled so easily.

"Omega." Vincent kneels before me with fire and heat in his eyes, making my toes curl. "Your heat..."

I nod, feeling a slight twitch in the movement like I don't have control over some of my motions. Then my head cocks. It definitely wasn't me who did that. I swallow, then swallow again, hoping to find some semblance of control so I can get my words out.

"It's okay," Oliver whispers, love shining in his green stare. "Take your time."

Unbidden, I take in their varying states of undress and lick my lips.

"Omega," Vincent says again, and this time I snarl, annoyed that he's not speaking to me. It's giving my instinctual side more power when I'm not ready for it. "Amaya," he corrects gently, sweeping his thumb over the pulse point on my wrist.

Wait... why am I naked? Peering down at myself, I see a droplet of sweat traveling down between my breasts. My nipples are peaked and demanding attention. There's a puddle of slick between my crisscrossed thighs that's easily visible beneath my twinkly lights. How long have I been lying here?

'Mates.'



I roll my eyes, but I'm brought back to the moment when a cool bottle of water presses to my lips. Gulping it down, I choke a little, but Sam's tongue swipes out and licks away the drop of water that dripped from my mouth.

"Sam," Vincent grits out, but I'm no longer listening.

All I can focus on is Sam's pin-pricked pupils and predatory smile curling his lips. My omega snarls in my mind, or maybe out loud, because his eyes widen before I throw myself into his chest.

With a grunt, my alpha's back hits my pile of pillows, making me grin out my victory. "Mine," I purr and swoop down to lick a line up his throat as payback.

"Shit, Petal," he groans and thrusts up against my pussy, his bare cock having busted through the hole in his boxers. "Fuck. Amaya. You need to get off."

Snarling, I bare my teeth at him and latch my canines around his throat in warning. 'No. Not warning. We mate.' I'm too far gone to protest her logic at this moment. All I know is my alpha's cock is hard and ready for me, and I need his teeth in my throat now.

"Amaya! Stop," Vincent barks, but I don't move and just glare at him when he pops around by Sam's head. "I know we've talked about your heat. But think for me, please. Is this what you want? Do you want to bond your alphas?"

My saliva keeps me attached to Sammy as I rise a little and reply, "Yes. Mine."

"One more time for me, Amaya," Vince pleads, looking worried for me. For that reason, I tug my omega back and place a gentle kiss on my pack alpha's lips.

"Alpha, I'm ready. I need my mates." I pat my bare chest. "I need them in my soul. I

love them."

"I love you too," Samuel whispers in awe.

It's a battle to hold back the urge to slam down on Sam's cock while he's purring and restraining himself beneath me, but I stay still and let Vincent study my honesty. He looks at the alpha under me, who nods and accepts me with a pleading look at both of us.

Without any more hesitation, my omega rushes forward and shoves my teeth into my alpha's throat just as my pussy swallows his cock whole. I can't explain the sound that escapes me, nor can words do justice for the way Samuel's aggressive blast of green splits my soul wide open and mends it back together when his teeth sink into the top of my breast.

I ride him like the angry storm he is and just barely allow him to keep me from slamming his knot all the way in when we both come with an earth-shattering scream of pleasure.

"More, more, more!" I chant over and over again, needing to be filled. I fight and claw at my freshly bonded alpha as he plucks me off of him and spins me around. My cries stutter when I come face to face with Emmett, who cradles me to his chest.

"Our beta's going to fuck you now," Em rumbles. Not a second later, Oliver's shoving his fat cock into my cum soaked pussy.

"OLI!!" I bellow as I'm forced to give his alpha all of my weight.

"And as he shoots his load in your tight cunt, I'm going to bite the ever-loving shit out of you, sweetheart."

The contrast of his endearment and the dirty words have me squealing. "Oh my god!"

Incoherent cursing from behind me makes me grin and flutter my walls around Oli's cock. Like a fucking beast, my beta pounds into me like he can't get enough.

"Oli, yes," I whimper, licking and sucking on Emmett's collarbone. The brutal attention to my vagina shocks me since I never would have thought Oliver had this in him.

"You drive him wild, Omega." Lemon surrounds me, and calloused fingers press into my swollen clit. Vincent. 'Alpha!' "Let go, my love. Bring them home."

Bring them home.... bring them home .

With one final Kegel, I milk Oli of all his cum and puncture my final alpha with my teeth around his collarbone. Roars and white noise fill my ears, all the while every little piece of me shifts and snuggles close when Em bites me behind my ear.

Home. Each broken piece of us, all the golden-brown swirls, bursts of green, and blue sparkles settle in my soul to create a home. A pack bond filled with warmth, love, support, and hope.

And most importantly, nobody will ever be alone.

With Vincent shifting me and sinking into my needy pussy, I feel complete. Each mate has a hand on my heated skin, and I couldn't feel more at ease. They complete me just as they complete each other.

I loved us as we were then, but who we are now is everything.

The five of us have created a beautiful gold, green, brown, and blue aura of hope that

will forever highlight my vision of the future.

### EPILOGUE

#### OLIVER

A year and a half later

"They're here!" Sam bellows through the house. I can feel his excitement through the walls.

Grumbling, I glare at Emmett over my shoulder. "I still think we had time."

He snorts. "Not for all the dirty things I have planned for you." Dressed in a pair of fancy athletic joggers, he ambles toward me with a cocky grin that rivals my own. "Can you wait a couple of hours, Beta?"

Fuck, his husky voice does things to me. "We both know a couple of hours will actually be like five or six."

It's true. Every time we have a huge family get-together with all the parents and our friends, dinner turns into a full-fledged party. Especially now that it's finally summer again. I'm definitely not getting dick for a while.

Emmett hums, pulling me into his hot body by the band of my jeans. "Maybe we can sneak off later when Kate gets the tequila out. I could?—"

"Stop teasing him, Em," Vincent scolds, coming out of the ensuite bathroom looking like a fucking snack. "Let's go greet our guests."

Giving our pack lead a pout, I'm pretty damn pleased when he steps into my space and bites my lip in warning. "None of that, naughty beta, or I'll have our alpha edge you all fuckin' night."

Fucking hell. "Where do I sign up?"

"There's no signing up. Just a liability waiver," Vince continues to nibble on me.

Sighing, I tilt my head to give him access and meet Emmett's heated gaze. "Okay, where do I suck that? OW!"

"Bad," Vincent growls around my skin. The slight tilt of his lips when he pulls away gives me some more naughty ideas. "Come on, Emmett. Let's leave Oliver to cool down while we go get the hot gossip about Paul's new girlfriend."

My jaw hits the fucking ground. "WHAT!? Really?! Tell me what you know!" I shout after them as they leave the room. Glaring down at my erection, I will it to leave before the tea gets spilled without me there.

Just as my boner starts deflating as I contemplate my father-in-law's love life, a squeak from the hallway draws my attention. Amaya flies out of the master bedroom in disarray while she tugs her light pink sundress into place.

I admire my omega while leaning against the doorframe of our extra bedroom. "I missed you last night, baby," I coo, enjoying the way her eyes widen.

Most nights are spent in the nest as a pack, but there are times when Samuel needs one-on-one time with our girl, and my other two mates and I wish to get a little wild. After the last year and a half, I'd say we got our communication down pretty well. Except this morning, it looks like our omega may have forgotten about our monthly get-together.

"Missed you too," she breathes, walking toward me with bright pink cheeks.

I laugh softly and tuck some frizzy strands of hair behind her ear. "Did you forget our entire social system is here today?"

Amaya glares and starts patting down her hair. Before she can get a word out, Samuel breezes through the hall with a shit-eating grin. "Nah. I kept her up all night. Even woke our girl up early," he adds with a wink and a slap to her pert little ass.

"Oooo, special treatment from my brother," I tease her as he slips into the pack bedroom for something.

"Ugh, if you guys keep me this exhausted forever, I'll rarely leave the bedroom," Amaya grumbles and leans into my chest.

"That's the plan," I joke, but she stiffens.

"No, it's not." Her whisper is a plea for me to remember the life we dreamed of when we were children.

Nudging her back a little with my fingers on her chin, I smile at my beautiful mate who literally looks like she's loved. Her golden eyes rarely darken with the nightmares that hardly ever haunt her anymore.

"You're right," I murmur, studying her features. I'll never get tired of watching the air expand her creamy chest or the subtle pillow of her cheeks showing months of healthy eating. "So what's it going to be, baby girl?"

"What do you mean, Mr. Rose?" she asks, blinking up at me, all the while knowing how much we love when she calls us by our pack name.

"Well, let's see," I whisper, brushing my lips against hers. "You're already passing my

room with messy hair and waking up beside me every day like planned. So what is it that you want now?"

"Anything?"

Her puff of lavender breath on my mouth drives me closer. "Anything," I repeat.

"Then teach me how to make a cocktail, Mr. Rose. I want to be a bartender first."