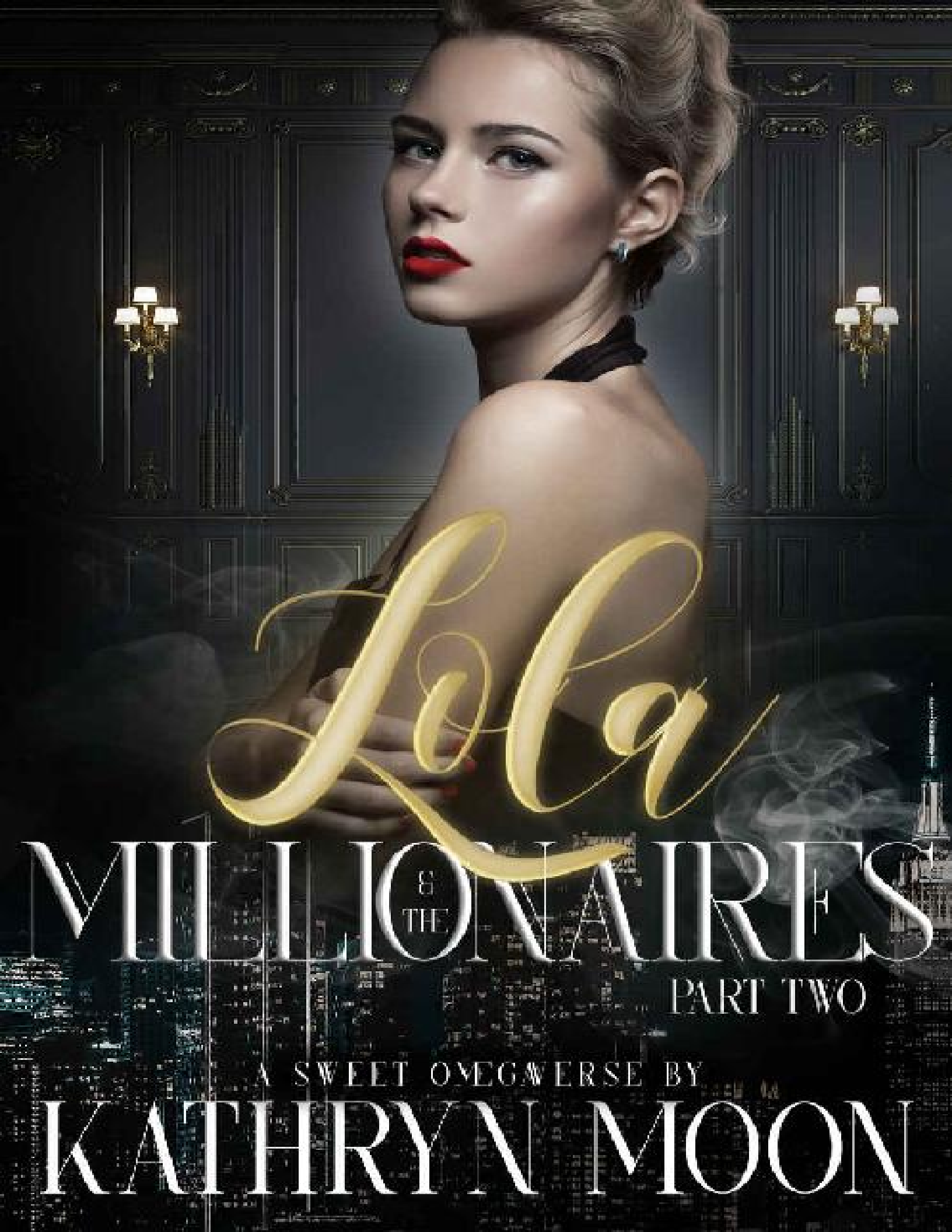

Lola
& THE
MILLIONAIRES
PART TWO
A SWEET OVERVERSE BY
KATHRYN MOON

LOLA & THE MILLIONAIRES

Part Two

KATHRYN MOON

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Lola & the Millionaires, Part One

First publication: June 11th, 2020

Cover art by KellieArts

Font art by Lana Kole

Editing by Meghan Leigh Daigle

Formatting by Kathryn Moon

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To the girls who cry,
You're emotional, you're reactive, you're strong, you're passionate,
you're angry, and you're still feeling every drop of it.
You're powerful, and fuck anyone who tells you otherwise.

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Also by Kathryn Moon

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ONE

Caleb

Lola was sound asleep in the center of my bed, her face tucked against my hip as I leaned against my headboard and watched Leo dress. His eyes trailed constantly back to the bed, fingers digging paths through his dark hair until he remembered to smooth it down again. Rake was spooned against Lola's back, one arm curled tight around her middle and his own snores puffing softly into her hair.

"She's safe, Leo," I whispered, drawing his pacing steps to a pause. "I promise not to let her out of my sight until you're back."

"I know," Leo sighed, his smile half-hearted as he shook his head. "I just…worry where this is going to put her."

With us, I thought, a purely selfish pleasure threading through my heart knowing that Lola had agreed to stay with us for the foreseeable future.

"I think her being here is encouraging," I said, in a more diplomatic version of my thoughts.

We'd barely made it back to the house with a couple hours to sleep at best, but those hours had been spent with the entire pack pressed together in one bed. All of us but Wes, who'd stayed at Lola's apartment to finish with the police before running directly to his office downtown.

Cyrus and Matthieu had left for the magazine an hour ago, their expressions a little haggard from the trying night. Matthieu was

scowling like he would've rather let Wendy burn *Designate* to the ground than leave Lola to manage the situation.

"I do too, I just…" Leo released a slow breath and then crossed to me, kneeling on the bed and leaning in for a soft kiss. His head rested against mine, and I soothed my fingers over the soft scratch of his stubble. "Work some of your magic with her today," Leo said, smiling.

I laughed at that. "My magic?"

"Mmm. You know. Where you make someone feel like the world's stopped so they can catch their breath while you wait with them."

I blushed at the description. "I think you're giving me too much credit, darling."

"I'm really not. And keep Rake from overwhelming her. I know he's itching to start shopping again after the whole…" He grimaced, and I mirrored the expression.

I hadn't gotten a long look at the devastation of Lola's wardrobe, only enough to know that the slashing of her clothes was more than a taunt. There was a violence to the tears and cuts that gave me chills and made me itch to draw Lola into my arms. It'd taken all my restraint as it was to let Rake and Leo take precedence at her side through the night—Matthieu had his own claim and no one bothered trying to challenge our head alpha. Every little whimper as she slept made me twitch with the desire to push my own bondmates aside and wrap her up in my embrace.

"Mmph, heard that," Rake mumbled, stirring and nuzzling into Lola's shoulder. She hummed, but didn't budge.

I winked at Leo, which wasn't quite a promise. But I was shit at reeling Rake in when he went on a tangent, and I already knew he would be careful with Lola. Our bond was thrumming with worry and affection.

"Love you," Leo murmured, kissing me again, his hand reaching for Lola and then retreating to keep from waking her. "I'll cut today short if I can."

"Try not to worry. She'll need to sleep most of the day anyway." My challenge would be trying to sort out how to feed us all when I didn't want to leave her side.

Leo took a deep breath and nodded, forcing himself to leave the bed and then the room. Rake was peeking up at me from Lola's hair after he was gone. I slid down into the pillows, painfully delighted when Lola unconsciously slid closer, coiling into my side, rooting for my scent. She sighed against my throat, and Rake's arm stretched across our waists to find my hand and tangle it with his over my chest.

"Am I terrible for being glad she has to stay with us?" Rake whispered.

"I certainly hope not," I said. Mostly because I felt the same.



LOLA WAS STARING into her coffee cup at the kitchen counter as I stood sideways at the stove, trying to watch her and not burn our grilled cheese sandwiches at the same time.

"How's the headache?"

"Mm, better," Lola said, nodding and rolling her head on her shoulders. Rake bustled around the island, a bowl of cut strawberries in his hand. He set it on the counter and then raised his hands to her shoulders slowly. Her eyes flinched before sliding shut, and she leaned back into his hands.

I wanted to know exactly how she was feeling. Was she accepting our attentions because she worried about offending us—a pattern I'd caught from her in the past—or were we offering her genuine relief?

I'd been spoiled by years of a bond giving me insight into my closest loved ones' emotions, and now it was a constant irritation to be left wondering. If I could just take a *little* nibble…

You've lost your bloody mind, I told myself.

And then Lola sighed happily, the faint tension in her forehead melting, and my own shoulders drooped with relief.

"Do you think we can eat in the green nest?" Lola asked. "I just kind of want to nap in the sunlight like a cat. Pretend I'm back in Malta a little bit."

"Of course," I said.

“Lollipop, we can go to Malta right now,” Rake said.

Lola laughed, and I gave him a slight shake of the head. Matthieu would kill him. Leo might too for that matter. He smirked at me, and his head nodded to where Lola was smiling and popping strawberries between her pink lips.

I pushed the grilled cheeses onto plates, and Rake grabbed the bowls of baked potato soup that Leo had ordered and had delivered to the house for our lunch. Somewhere along the line, it’d been passed around the pack that the one form of gifting Lola didn’t shy from was food, and I had a feeling our pantry was about to be deeply overstocked.

The weather had brightened slightly for the day, enough that I could slide back some of the screened windows on Rake’s plant-filled nest room so we could enjoy the sunshine falling through branches and a perfect springtime breeze. Lola used her sandwich like a spoon in the bowl of soup, eyes already drooping with a second round of exhaustion. There was a wide daybed in the room that three of us could share. I wasn’t tired now, but I’d lie as still as a board if that was what Lola wanted.

“How was your appointment this weekend?” Lola asked me.

My brow furrowed. “Appointment?”

Rake cleared his throat, eyebrows bouncing significantly. “You know. Your appointment with a client that meant you had to cancel going on the trip.”

Oh, well done, Caleb. “Ohhh.”

Lola glanced between us, a real smile finally stretching over her lips. “There wasn’t one, was there? Caleb, you didn’t have to give up the trip!”

I huffed and shook my head. “I wanted to. It was my idea.” And if I hadn’t, would Lola have been in her apartment when Indy broke in?

“Leo says we’ll go back again, so you better not skip the next one for my sake,” Lola said.

My heart flipped, and Rake beamed at me. That was a beautiful picture of the future, and the fact that she’d put herself right into the mix of it made me want to kiss her. I almost wanted to text it all to Leo. This wasn’t moving backwards. She’d been rightfully terrified the night before, but she’d come to *us*, and that was what mattered.

“The pack hasn’t had a proper vacation together in ages, and I’ve never been to Malta. We’ll have to plan it soon. I bet I can poke a few designers and one of them will take the bait to have a shoot there,” Rake mused.

“It’s not a vacation if you’re working,” Lola said, nudging her knee to his.

“It is if the pay covers our drinks,” Rake said grinning. His eyes slid to mine, and his grin turned sly. “Speaking of work, I’ve got some emails to send out and a few calls to make. I’ll come find you again when I’m done.”

Bollocks. He did *not*. Sneak.

“Kay,” Lola said, lifting her chin as he kissed her lips and then rose from his seat, gathering up our dishes. She turned to me as Rake left the room. “You don’t have to stay with me if you have work you want to tackle too.”

I hesitated, wondering if she’d prefer to be left alone, but I’d meant what I said to Leo this morning. “There’s honestly nowhere I’d rather be.”

Lola’s cheeks pinked. Her hair was rumpled, bundled up on her head, and I wanted to untangle it from the knot and comb my fingers through it.

“Even if I just end up drooling on your chest?” she asked. “Matthieu can warn you, it’ll happen.”

I laughed. Matthieu wouldn’t have complained if Lola drew naughty doodles on his bedroom walls in Sharpie. He was so smitten with the woman, he’d probably have it framed.

“I excel at being a pillow, love, don’t worry about me.” I would probably get more pleasure out of her nap than she would. I stood and offered her my hand, leading her into the little nestle of ferns that surrounded the daybed on the far side of the narrow room.

Lola followed me down onto the mattress on her knees, picturesque and perfectly unaware of it. She was wearing Leo’s sweater over a pair of sleep shorts, the hem of the shorts nearly vanishing under the heavy knit. It made her a perfectly delicious combination of their scents, one I wanted to lick off her skin as if she were my dessert.

Be a gentleman, I reminded myself as she made herself comfortable against me, head on my chest and one of her legs draped over mine. I framed one of my arms down her back and rested my other hand on the swell of her hip. Her breasts brushed against my chest as she sighed, and her hand slid up my chest, leaving goosebumps in its wake.

“Someone should bottle this,” she murmured, scooting in closer, sliding up my side so the pert tip of her nose rested against my throat.

I tried to stifle the purr in my chest, but it refused to be silent, thrumming for the woman in my arms. I’d never been with a woman before, although I’d been attracted to a few over the years. Never seriously, but enough to understand the appeal of feminine curves. It seemed crude to compare Lola to Rake or Leo, but I did wonder… how would things be different with her? What would it feel like to be inside of her? Watching her with Leo and Rake during the heat, she’d seemed to flourish with every touch, like she was a flower desperate for the sun’s rays.

My hands were travelling absently over Lola’s side and back as I thought, trying to keep my interest under wraps. I hadn’t realized the way I was pawing at her until Lola’s hand clutched at my shirt as my hand slipped up beneath Leo’s sweater, her skin hot to the touch against my fingers. Her gasp was damp against my throat, and for a moment my purr became an almost roar of pleasure. I swallowed it quickly, hand pulling away.

“Sorry, I—I didn’t mean to—” Maybe this was a harder test to pass than I’d expected. I couldn’t soothe the girl by groping at her.

“No, it was just… It was nice,” Lola said, voice breathy. “Felt good.”

I remained frozen until Lola’s hips shifted against mine, as if she were trying to relieve the craving for friction, something I could relate to in the moment. My hand was drawn back to her skin like a magnet, her sigh sweet and audible as I stroked down her bare thigh, skin delicate and soft under my fingers. I listened to every wistful note as I made gentle passes up and down, barely slipping under the hem of her shorts and then sliding up over the fabric to her back.

She moaned, almost whispered the sound, and her head turned to hide her face as I traced patterns on her smooth back beneath the sweater.

“Good?” I asked, feeling my way up her spine.

“Mhm. Don’t stop.”

It was almost innocent. It *would* have been innocent, if it weren’t for the fact that I was starting to ache, my cock growing restless. Lola’s breath was shaky, and her tongue lightly grazed my skin as she licked her lips. Her swallow was loud in my ear with how determined I was to hear every note of her.

“Come here,” I said, not thinking.

She was already close but I wanted her closer, and I tugged her up to lie over me completely. My purr was thick and loud as she draped herself over my chest, her legs sliding open to rest on either side of mine. I rucked the sweater up to expose her back to the light as it filtered through large palm fronds. My touch grew more determined, working into her muscles until she whimpered and groaned, and then growing light and teasing again until she wiggled with minute motions over my hips.

“Caleb, I…”

I waited for the words, hands stroking up from her hips to her shoulders, gripping there to hold her fixed to me. She never finished the thought, or not with speech. Instead her head turned, mouth on the skin of my neck, tongue licking at me with little kitten flicks.

This wasn’t innocent at all now; it was erotic and dangerous. Whose territory was I encroaching on being with Lola like this? Leo and Rake would likely be thrilled, but how would Matthieu feel to have another alpha with his girlfriend?

As if it might undo any danger I’d landed myself into, I resisted the urge to push either of us further. But I couldn’t make myself stop, hands travelling constantly over Lola’s warm skin, my purr heavy and dense between us. Lola buried her sounds against my throat, and I watched as her back tensed and relaxed, her own body struggling at a precipice.

“Caleb, I’m going to—” she gasped, her body stiffening, and my purr strengthened to a satisfied growl. Lola’s head lifted and I was ready, pulling her mouth to mine, with a hand on the back of her

head as she shuddered on top of me. The kiss was comparatively gentle to the illicitness of what was happening between us, soft sips of our lips together, her taste sugary on my tongue.

Lola eased, melting in my arms, limp and panting as I rolled us onto my side, holding the kiss long after she'd gone still. Her eyes blinked slowly at me as I leaned away, her cheeks and throat flushed, the sweater halfway up her waist. I could smell her release on the air, a tarter version of the taste of her mouth, and it took everything in me not to slide down the daybed, peel away her little shorts, and feast on her sex.

Her lips parted, and I rushed to speak before she could. If she invited me to go any further with her than I already had stumbled into, I wasn't sure I'd be able to resist the offer.

"Rest," I said instead, kissing her lips, her chin, her forehead. "Try to get a little more sleep before the others get home."

Lola sighed, her blush deepening, and her eyes fell shut as I guided her head back down to my shoulder.

TWO

Lola

My phone blared and I groaned, burrowing into the chest I was draped over before the soft purr that answered reminded me where I was, whom I was with, and what I'd done before falling asleep. I sat up like a shot and stared down at the rumpled picture of Caleb beneath me, golden hair out at odd angles, the fresh drool spot I'd left on his chest taunting me. His eyes blinked slowly up at me, and the soft smile he wore soothed away my panic.

Had I molested him? Maybe a little, but he looked pretty happy about it.

Back on your bullshit again, Lola.

I fumbled for my phone where it was buried under a pillow, sliding off Caleb's lap. His hand stroked my thigh as I shifted, and I bit back the soft moan in my throat, remembering the perfect heat of him as he'd purred me straight to orgasm.

Caleb, for all his quiet conversation and awkward hesitance, was no less deadly than Matthieu. It just snuck up on me in the form of drowsy cuddles.

Baby's name glowed on the phone screen and I swiped, eyes widening, and mouth open to tell her what had happened.

"Where are you? Are you all right? I need you to come to the Plaza!" Baby said in a breathless rush.

"Indy's in town," I said just as fast.

Baby sucked in a breath. “Fuck. I was hoping I could break it to you. We just heard from the police.”

“He broke into my apartment,” I explained.

“*What*?! Are you okay? Where *are* you? Lola, you gotta—”

“I’m at Rake and Leo’s. I’m okay. Leo and I were in Malta when it happened, and I got home and…” I puffed out a breath. “Anyway, I’m staying here until…well, for a while.”

Baby was quiet and Caleb sat up on the daybed, holding an open invitation for me to cuddle into his side, his arm raised and waiting. *Resistance is futile*, I thought, and I sank in, leaning my folded legs against him and resting my head on his shoulder.

“Did you just say you were in *Malta*?” Baby squawked in my ear. “Who the hell’s gonna take me to Malta?”

I heard a chorus of voices in the background of the call, mostly affirmative offers and one “What state is it in?”

“So you’re good?” Baby asked.

I looked down to where Caleb was threading his fingers in with mine and smiled. “I’m definitely good. Spooked, but I’m safe here.”

“And the alphas?”

I hummed. There was no way Caleb hadn’t heard the question, considering his head was right over mine, and I wasn’t sure it was totally appropriate to give Baby the rundown on…well, everything. The heat. Matthieu. And now Caleb, too.

“We should really catch up soon,” I said instead, and Caleb chuckled against me.

“Ooo, I just heard a yummy manly sound,” Baby said.

Leo burst into the room in the next moment, chest sagging as if he’d thought I’d gone missing in the house, and he rushed to the daybed.

“Hey, Leo just got home. We haven’t had a chance to talk today and—”

“No, I get it. I’m just glad to know you’re safe. We *do* need to catch up though. But it can wait. Love you, Lo.”

Leo was on the daybed, kneeling next to our legs, and he bent and pressed a long kiss to the top of my bare knee.

“Love you, babe,” I answered, hanging up.

I sat up and Leo dragged me into his chest.

“I’m fine,” I reassured him, rubbing over his back. He looked rough, dark circles under his eyes and stress binding his shoulders up tight. He relaxed as I held him, and Caleb shifted so that Leo fit between us. “All I did was sleep all day,” I said, combing my fingers through Leo’s hair. *Sleep all day and hump your alpha*. What was the delicate way of putting that? Either way, it would probably brighten Leo’s mood.

“Mmm, you two smell like the best cuddle ever,” Leo rasped, nuzzling my throat.

Probably better to just…have out with it.

“I may have molested Caleb a little,” I said.

Caleb gasped as Leo laughed. “You did no such thing. Not any more than I did to you.”

“A little bit more,” I whispered to Leo.

He rolled, leaning into Caleb, and revealed his dimples in a giddy smile. “Any chance I can ask for a repeat performance?”

Caleb purred and I laughed as the door to the room swung open again and Matthieu entered. He had a low sound in his throat, midway between growl and purr, and I stiffened as he headed directly for me. He didn’t look much better than Leo, hair at odd angles like he’d been driving his fingers through it all day, and his carefully tailored suit was half-disassembled. He dove onto the daybed at my back. Caleb and Leo exchanged one look, Leo’s smile falling to a frown as they started to move away.

“Stay,” Matthieu muttered into my hair, his hand clutching at Leo’s side. “I’m not trying to kick you out, I just need to be here right now.”

His arms circled my waist, his front plastered to my back, but he left room for Leo to hold onto me as well, and Caleb’s hand returned to my hips.

“Five minutes,” Matthieu said, his purr softening. “Maybe ten.”

“Ten,” Leo confirmed, kissing my forehead.

“FUCK,” Matthieu groaned against my shoulder, hips rocking against my ass, cock pumping slow and steady inside of me. I clutched at

the bedspread beneath me and stared into the glass wall where I could see a blurry echo of us reflected from the bricks, just enough to keep me grounded to who I was with.

One of his hands burrowed beneath my hips at the edge of the mattress, my toes curling in his dense carpet as I arched to take him deeper. Not that he could get any deeper like this, not unless I decided to try and take his knot.

“Oh, god, Matthieu!” I cried out as he rubbed over my swollen clit and precious spikes of giddy warmth rushed through me.

I’d been undressing for a bath, stacking my borrowed clothes carefully to come back to, when Matthieu had dropped to his knees behind me and started feasting on me, clit to ass. One pleading orgasm later, and I was face down on the bed with Matt’s arms cradling me and his cock thrusting. There was a little old anxiety creeping in at first when I couldn’t really see him from behind, but soon I was soothed by his scent and his voice in my ear, praising me and apologizing for rushing and pleading for release.

“That’s it, Lolotte, come for me now,” Matthieu growled, coaxing the orgasm with his fingers pinching carefully on my clit.

I shattered as his thrusts turned urgent, burying my shout into the bed. I moaned as his release flooded my core, his body growing heavy on my back. Before the aftershocks were over, I was lifted up, pussy aching at the sudden hollow sensation.

“Apologies,” Matthieu murmured, carrying me bridal style into his vast black tiled bathroom towards a golden tub. It looked like the kind of thing that belonged in a palace, but I suppose that’s sort of what this house was in terms of metropolitan real estate.

“Fuck apologies,” I said, sex drunk and limp in his arms.

Matthieu laughed, stepping into the tub and lowering me down with him. We both hissed at the hot water, but I leaned into his chest, legs tangling with his. The tub was the perfect size, wide and long enough for the two of us but no more than that. Even though the room was spacious, with Matthieu I felt safe and cozy.

“I was a wreck today,” Matthieu said, sighing. “I meant to be very gentle with you this evening, and instead I jumped on you when I was trying to be tender.”

“Two orgasms is a good substitute to coddling,” I said. He smirked a little at that, so I decided to throw him off a bit. “Next time just pull my hair too, like you usually do.”

Matthieu growled and his head ducked, mouth taking me in a forceful kiss that still tasted of my own release. He clasped me tight against his chest, arms alternating in long strokes over my back that brought warm water over my skin with every pass.

“Now neither of us is quite so tense,” Matthieu said as he eased the kiss into brief nibbles. “Ah, *merde*. What did I say?”

“No, it’s not—I just—” I fumbled and tried to wiggle away, but Matthieu held me fast.

“I only get a little time with you alone. Understandable, but I want to make the most of it,” Matthieu said, kissing my forehead. “Let me hold you while you tell me what I did wrong.”

“*Nothing*. You did nothing wrong, I just—” I swallowed and blurted the words out. “Something happened earlier with Caleb.”

“Something…objectionable?” Matthieu asked.

I swallowed and grimaced, and this time when I moved to sit up he let me go, although he pulled me to sitting over his lap so we could face one another.

“I don’t know. Not to—not to me, but...” Matthieu’s eyebrow raised, and I pushed on. “We kissed and, I don’t know, he was purring and I just kind of…got off on it. Him. I came.”

I was bright fucking red. I knew because the blush was traveling all the way down to my breasts, and Matthieu seemed to be watching the shift of color with appreciative amusement.

“Is that—are you mad?” I asked. He didn’t look mad.

Matthieu’s eyebrows jumped. “God no, why—No, I suppose I can understand why you might worry, but please don’t. If you are happy, and you are here with me, then I’m also happy,” he said with a shrug.

I sighed and nodded, my fingers trailing through the milky water. Matthieu had put some kind of magical concoction in for the bath, and already my skin felt like silk.

“Your head is still spinning,” he noted, tapping my forehead with a dripping finger.

“I feel like I’m back to nasty old habits,” I said, staring back at him.

I didn't know why it was so easy to spill these secrets to Matthieu. I didn't want to confess to Rake how much I'd resented omegas and the devotion they garnered from alphas before I'd met him. And how could I look at Leo and explain the unshakeable sense that I would never be worth as much as an omega, when Leo had such an incredible bond with his own alpha? Still, I never would've guessed it'd be easier to cover these topics with Matthieu, an *alpha* and twice my age to boot.

"Like, I'm here just sniffing around for alphas, the way I—" I grimaced and tried to turn away, but Matthieu's hand caught my chin, forcing me to hold his stare.

"You are not *sniffing* around. I've seen how Caleb has looked at you these past few weeks. How we *all* have," Matthieu said. He pulled lightly, and I followed the urge, floating lightly in the water, my back exposed and my breasts brushing against his chest. "What is it that attracts you to me?"

I blushed at the question, but Matthieu looked so mild as if he was only faintly interested. He wasn't digging for compliments, he was trying to guide me through the problem.

"You are…you're so careful with me," I said, studying him with equal interest, staring at the brush of silver in his hair and the bob of his Adam's apple. "You study me and then you respond to my needs, even when I can't bring myself to voice them. And outside of that you…you don't try to present yourself in any certain way. You're the CEO of one of the most influential companies in the world, but you don't even try and prove to anyone that you're powerful. You used to be the lead singer of a punk band, but you don't stand around flipping off the world, either."

I smiled as I caught him blushing, and Matthieu cleared his throat. "I wasn't expecting any of that. I thought you'd say I was protective or sexy."

I grinned. "You are *very* sexy and protective." Although he was protective in a different way than Wes. Matthieu's protection was physical and close, while Wes turned his eye on the entire world around me, searching for threats.

"Well. Are any of those things you described the reasons you sought attention from alphas before?" Matthieu asked.

I sighed and shook my head, relaxing against him. “No. They aren’t.”

“Then this doesn’t sound like an old habit. Caleb wants desperately to see you comfortable and happy. At first, it was for Rake and Leo’s sake, and now it’s for your own. Do you regret what happened?” he asked, brow furrowing.

“Nope,” I said, smiling and resting my chin on his chest, water lapping at my jaw. “You’ve talked me down.”

“Good,” he said, smiling. “Now tell me again how powerful I am. You’re very good for an old man’s ego.”

I laughed and floated closer, hovering my face just out of kissing range, his cock nudging against my hips. “Not too old. You’re getting hard again.”

Matthieu’s cheeks went pink again, but he grinned back. “Can’t be helped with a beautiful woman rubbing up against me in the tub.”

“Hmm. We should go down to dinner soon,” I mused, floating forwards and backward and watching Matthieu’s eyes grow hooded with every shift of my body against him.

“And here I thought you were about to proposition me.”

“Oh, I *am* propositioning you. But I think we should move to the shower first, to save time.”

Matthieu growled and just like that, I went squealing up into his arms, giggling as he braced me against his shoulder. He narrowly avoided slipping on the way to the shower, his hand squeezing hard on my ass.

“Don’t throw your back out,” I teased, and then let out a guttural, sharp moan as his hand cracked lightly on my wet skin, a playful spank.

“Naughty, Lolotte,” Matthieu purred, pushing me up to the tile and letting me slide down until I was perfectly poised above his cock. He swiped at the shower handle without looking, and warm water came spraying down from the ceiling with his first thrust inside of me.

“Fucking beautiful,” Matthieu said in my ear as I cried out, arching in his arms. His hand dug into my hair, fisting it gently, and I beamed at him.

“Oh good, you take direction,” I said, and then knotted my ankles behind his back and moaned as he started to fuck me.

THREE

Wes

I startled in my chair as knuckles rapped lightly on my office door. Garrett stepped inside, smirking as if he knew exactly what I'd been up to—napping on the job.

"What've you got for me?" I asked, rubbing my eyes and glancing at my computer. I'd been midway through an email with a client when I'd closed my eyes to think and ended up nodding off. I minimized it for the moment. It could wait until tomorrow. I'd only been stalling at the office in the hopes that some news would come in about—

"Think I might've found a trail," Garret said, bringing me a file. "Looks like there's a new gang forming just outside of the city. Specifically, one that's forming a nice little rap sheet of assaulting young women, all betas so far."

"Names?" I asked, reaching for the file.

"They wear masks. Skull masks. And there's enough variety in the descriptions that it took the cops a while to realize this wasn't just confusion over one pervert."

I flipped it open and frowned at the words. Fuck, I was probably too tired to make sense of this at the moment. "What made you think of our guy?"

"One girl saw a noose tattoo, and get this—" Garret said, trying to withhold a laugh and grimace at the same time. "It was around his fucking cock. Like, what's the symbology behind that shit?"

I scowled at Garret, and he sobered. Garret was one of my best employees, and I appreciated that he did as good a job on his digital

research as he did tracking it down on the ground and face-to-face with people. He was affable, handsome, and an alpha. And two of those traits were reasons why I hadn't ever let him be on the rotation of guarding Rake and Lola during fashion week. I trusted him not to scare or hurt Lola, but I didn't trust him not to try and flirt with her. And there was something about his whole 'silky long dark hair and tattooed arms' look that I was afraid might catch her eye. At least compared to me and my jawline like a brick.

It'll be better now that she and Matthieu are together, I thought. Maybe it was a little antiquated of me, but Lola felt like a more permanent member of the pack now that one of our alphas was developing a bond with her.

"So he could have Hangmen ties," I said, nodding. Lola hadn't mentioned Indy having a noose tattoo on his dick, and it wasn't in any of the police files, but it might've been new. And if it wasn't Indy himself, it might be someone who could get a call to the guy.

"I'm getting a list together of all the Hangmen the police didn't catch. It's taking a little time 'cause even now that these guys have been gone for over a year, no one wants to accidentally piss them off," Garret said.

"Sounds like proof that there's still a few around then," I said nodding. "Okay, keep doing what you're doing. I appreciate the help."

Garret shrugged. "I mean, yeah, happy to. But also, it's my job."

To be fair, Matthieu had put in a fair amount of money to help me cover the time my guys were giving to this investigation. Not that I needed the money, the firm had an over-generous amount of padding in our provisional savings, but I hadn't expected to talk Matthieu out of the offer either.

"You should go home," Garret said, wincing. His arms crossed over his chest, colorfully decorated biceps pulling at his stupidly small t-shirt. "You look like shit."

I blew out a long breath and nodded. "I think I'm about there, yeah."

"Go check on your pretty beta," Garret said, winking and hurrying out of my office.

How the hell did he know—

“You don’t need to investigate her shit, Garret,” I barked out my door. I’d put money on him scoping out Lola’s social media just for curiosity’s sake. Dickhead.

I sighed and gathered my stuff up, adding the file Garret had brought to the others I had waiting in my laptop bag. We had everything saved digitally in a secure server, but I hated staring at screens when I didn’t have to and preferred to flip through information on paper when I was able.

My offices were downtown, not too far from the Stanmore in a more modest building. I saved our money to pay my employees what they deserved, rather than impressing anyone with a fancy high rise office. Our work came steadily by word of mouth, and we served our clients best by flying *under* the radar.

I drove home with Lola on the mind. Not that there’d been room for much else since she’d reappeared in my life. She was staying in the house now, and it was a genuine relief to have her close. I understood her desire for independence, and I understood why Leo let her come and go, but it had made me tense and restless every night she’d slept away from our pack.

Now I just hoped that this skeezy fucker could be caught, but not before Lola realized she belonged exactly where she landed. With us.

I made it back to the house in easy time, and I went ahead and jogged up to the family floors, the scent of dinner teasing me on the way up. It smelled like Leo had been doing a little stress cooking.

But it was the entire pack I found when I made it to the kitchen, all together, working on dinner and laying down plates in the adjoined dining room. The entire pack plus—

“Wes,” Lola said, setting down a bowl of steamed dumplings on the corner of the table.

I froze as she crossed to me, suddenly unsure of what to do with myself. Why did it feel like I should’ve been dodging to the side? She wasn’t a *bullet*. Still, there was an impact in my chest as Lola’s arms circled my waist in a tight hug. I wrapped my free arm around her back, and the shock settled into ease. Last night it had been easy too. I’d acted on instinct when I arrived at Lola’s place, scooping her up and holding onto her for as long as she’d needed.

Instinct was probably the way to go now. I bent slightly—Lola was petite—and nuzzled my cheek on the top of her head. Her hair was damp, freshly washed, but she smelled mostly like Matthieu. I glanced back to the kitchen and found him watching us as he uncorked a bottle of wine, but he was smiling at me. Not resentful, just unable to do anything but watch Lola.

I could relate to that.

“Thank you again for last night,” she murmured into my chest.

“Don’t mention it. How’re you doing?”

“Better,” she said, nodding and stepping back. Her face was tilted up to me like a perfectly designed invitation, lips swollen with kisses and begging for more.

I swallowed hard and stood straighter. “Good.”

“Glad you’re home,” she added, backing away. “I was afraid you’d try and overwork yourself.”

Leo arched an eyebrow at me and I felt pretty transparent. He knew my habits. Knew I was probably about to ask for a plate and head to my office to continue to work. I set my laptop case down in the doorway to the living room and took off my jacket, leaving it there.

“Who me?” I asked, feigning innocence as the rest of my pack snickered to themselves.

Caleb and Lola passed one another on trips to and from the kitchen and Caleb caught Lola’s hand, bringing it to his lips for a brief press to her palm. I couldn’t see Lola’s face, but I saw the blush on the side of her cheek and the way her steps stumbled. Rake came from the other side of the island, bringing me my second hug of the night, this one equally perplexing.

“Hey, sexy,” he teased in a phony feminine tone, and then winked at me.

“Shut up,” I said, punching his shoulder lightly. But I gave him a bear hug for good measure. This was a nice way to come home in the evening, even if he was being a little asshole.

MUSIC DRUMMED in the gym as I ran on the treadmill. I was dead tired, but I knew what would happen if I got into bed right now. My head would go spinning back into work, and then somewhere in the mess of wondering where to find Indy, I'd get back to thinking about Lola. About her pressed to my chest, arms around my waist as she stared up at me with worry in her eyes. Or the picture of her as she gazed back at Leo during dinner, love in her eyes and an easy smile on her lips.

I frowned at myself in the mirror as my cock twitched with interest, its favorite subject back on my mind. My head conjured a little fantasy, one of its favorites lately, of Lola spread out beneath me on a beach towel, skin pink with sun and little flecks of sand sticking to her from a dip in the ocean. Her sex on the beach comment had been a wicked temptation, and if it weren't for what had immediately followed with Carolyn's teasing, I might've found it in me to flirt back.

But Lola needed my help, not my body.

And I needed to get some sleep tonight, so it was time to burn off my last remaining dregs of energy. I hit the button on the treadmill to pick up speed and resistance, nearly stumbling as the door to the gym opened and in walked the only woman who refused to leave my thoughts in the past six years or more.

She waved to me in the mirror, dressed in black leggings and a loose t-shirt that was just a little too short. I wanted to lick that little sliver of skin I was seeing, and I tore my gaze away to focus on turning the treadmill down before I wiped out and made an ass of myself.

"Music down to fifteen percent," I said, stepping down and grabbing a towel to wipe the sweat from my face and neck, trying not to notice the way Lola licked her lips. The drumming and crooning over the speakers softened to background noise around us, and Lola took slow steps closer. "Thought you'd be in—asleep by now." I couldn't even say the word 'bed' when it came to Lola. It immediately brought to mind visions of her doing anything but sleeping.

"I'm all messed up with the time shifts and then just kind of napping all day," Lola said with a shrug. "I know I need to get back on track, but I wanted to talk to you first."

My eyebrows ticked up and Lola was less than a foot away. Why was my brain debating between lunging and catching her up in my arms or running away? Since when were those the only two options?

"Do you know self-defense?" Lola asked in a rush, teeth digging into that precious bottom lip of hers. She blushed and shook her head. "I mean. Obviously you *do*, but do you like, know how to teach it?"

I swallowed hard, and Lola bounced nervously on the balls of her feet, those pretty gray eyes batting alluring lashes at me.

"I just…I trust you, and I honestly wouldn't know how to get myself out of a head lock, let alone…" She trailed off, and the light in her eyes dimmed a little, making my chest hurt.

I wanted to tell her she didn't need to know how to defend herself, none of us would ever let anything happen to her. It was a vow I intended to keep. But I knew what it would mean to her to feel prepared, and that was worth setting my pride aside.

"Sure, we can start with some good basics," I said, nodding.

Lola beamed at me, and it was like a sucker punch to the gut. She was back to bouncing, and I made sure to keep my gaze on her face.

"Okay awesome. What do I do? Can I wear this?"

I blinked at her and shook some of the cobwebs out of my head. "Ah. You want…right now?"

"Oh. Right. You're probably exhausted," Lola said, stepping back with pink cheeks. "Sorr—"

"Nah, I'm fine. Come on over to the mats," I said.

I'd rather lie awake all night thinking of Lola than disappoint her.

ON SECOND THOUGHT, I probably should've disappointed her. The strikes were easy once I got Lola used to the idea that she wasn't gonna hurt me. Or if she did, I could take it. But strikes were only good when an attack was facing you.

Moving onto breaking out of holds had been my real mistake.

Having a trembling and terrified Lola in my arms the night before had been a little bit of a head trip. I'd felt powerful, protective, my hindbrain roaring with satisfaction. But this?

This was hell.

Lola's back was to my chest, her breaths panting from an hour of exertion, body wiggling as she examined my hold and looked for her correct maneuvers. She smelled like a fucking popsicle, and her heartbeat pounding against my forearms was skipping. She rose to her toes, and the top of her ass nudged my groin, my hips immediately pulling back to try and keep her from feeling my arousal.

Fucking inappropriate.

I wasn't fast enough.

Lola gasped a little, and I loosened my hold so she could slip free, but instead she stumbled back into me, not stiff with shock but almost resting against me.

"Bend," I grunted, trying to hold myself in control and remind Lola where we were. If her own sweet beta scent was strong, mine was probably all but drowning her, and she was there in my arms, sucking down great gulps of the pheromones.

She bent, but she rose to her toes again, ass cozy against my groin, and I growled softly at the sensation, my hands practically shaking with the urge to push her down to her knees.

"Elbows," I snapped, and Lola jumped into action, twisting in either direction, elbows connecting lightly with my cheeks before she twisted out of my arms to attack from behind.

Her strikes against my back and legs were soft brushes, she was following the motions but without the strength, and irritation stirred through my veins. Was she tired, or playing with me? I spun to face her, a glower tight on my face, and then stilled as I caught a look at her.

She was swaying toward me, lids heavy over her eyes and lips parted on a steady pant.

Fuck. This was my fault. I knew she had a thing for my scent, and I hadn't been able to keep a lid on my own arousal. Not with so much physical contact.

"Wes," she murmured, tiptoeing closer until her chest was against mine.

“You’re tired,” I said, trying to bite down around my growl. At least it should’ve been a growl. I was gonna make things a lot fuckin’ worse for her if I started purring right in her ear.

“I’m fine,” Lola said, lips curling up as she arched into me.

My eyes slipped to her throat, stretched for my perusal and pulse visibly pounding under her delicate creamy skin. I wanted to sink my teeth in. The thought was jarring and sent a tremor through me. I wrapped my arms around her waist and hauled her roughly against my chest, one arm sliding down to fasten her hips to mine.

Lola moaned and went nearly limp in my arms, head tossed back as I shared the full extent of my interest with her. I wanted to walk her up to that mirrored wall, strip her bare, and fuck her until she couldn’t stand. She was all but high on my scent, and I knew perfectly well there’d be no resistance. I could take that bite, tie her up in me, and she’d never so much as whimper and ask me to stop.

I’d be exactly the kind of alpha she was terrified of.

I sighed, trembling as my head lowered, and I pressed my lips over her pulse, taking deep breaths until she was all I could taste. Her own breathing mirrored mine, her racing heart slowing, and her head turned, nose in my hair.

“Wes?” Her hands on my shoulders smoothed in slow circles, and even now as her head cleared, she wasn’t trying to get away.

Which made my mind up.

“Time to tap the brakes, sweetheart,” I said, words thick and gritty.

She hummed, and her scent sweetened as I nuzzled her throat. My mouth was fucking salivating for a taste of her, and all I had to do was lick my own lips and she was there, citrus and flowers and sugar.

“Fuck.” I tugged Lola off of me and set her down on her feet at arms length.

She was chewing on her lip again, and it took everything in me to keep from lunging and sucking it between my own teeth. “Sorry,” she said, wincing and curling in on herself.

I shook my head. “It’s not your fault.”

Except that wasn’t doing the trick. Lola was practically wilting in front of me. *Where’d you fuck it up, shithead? Fix it. Fix it.*

I tugged her back with my hand around her wrist, meeting her in the middle and chucking her chin with my fingers, tilting her face up to mine.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, sweetheart,” I said, bending. I rested my forehead to hers, watched her eyes fall shut with a weak sigh, and hoped I wasn’t making a mistake. I tilted my head and found her mouth, soaked up the way she bloomed under me, leaning into the kiss. I shared my groan of satisfaction with her and this time when I pulled away, Lola was smiling. “Just wasn’t the *right* time or place.”

Lola nodded, eyes growing drowsy and her feet twisting against the mats. “You’re right.”

Fuck it, I thought, diving in for one more kiss, cupping her cheeks as I dragged one sweet whimper from her mouth after another until she was stumbling to my chest, hands clutching my collar. All the bruised mood was gone when I pulled away again, candied Lola on my tongue, and she grinned at me, cheeks pink and eyes glittering.

“Now, I think it’s time for me to walk you to your door,” I said. Leo and Rake were probably anxious to get their hands on her again. Last night had stressed the whole pack out, and the cure was having Lola safe and close.

“You’re kinda traditional aren’t you?” Lola asked as I guided her out of the gym.

“I am, I guess,” I said, arching an eyebrow. She looked pleased by the declaration, and her hand slipped into mine, my knuckles grazing against her hip as we walked to the elevator.

I took her up to Caleb’s room where the pack seemed to decide she would be staying, and dropped her off at the entrance of her rooms, ignoring Rake’s waggling eyebrows from inside.

“Goodnight, Wes,” Lola said, rising to her toes and circling my neck with her arms. She pressed a kiss to the corner of my jaw that made me want to push her up against the doorway and start rutting, regardless of how innocent the gesture was.

“‘Night, sweetheart,” I murmured, letting my hands pass over the soft swell of her ass. Traditional, but not a saint.

“You know you can cuddle with us, Wes,” Rake called to me.

I nodded and waved, but turned to leave. I was pretty sure Matthieu didn't want me cuddled up to his ass with a stiffie for the rest of the night. And there was no way this was gonna go away on its own after I'd nearly had Lola underneath me in the gym.

But a girl that sweet deserved flowers and dates and excuses to get dressed up and a fuck of a lot of kisses before I took her to bed. And definitely before I begged to bite her and make her mine.

FOUR

Lola

I stared out Wes' passenger seat window up at the Stanmore. It'd been three days away from work, and my entire world seemed to have rearranged itself in that tiny amount of time.

"You thinking about playing hooky? I can always pawn my work off on one of the guys if you need another day," Wes said.

His thumb was turning circles over the back of my hand, just as it had been for the entire drive when he wasn't shifting gears. Wes was another thing that had shifted as recently as last night. I kept waiting for that voice in my head to rise up and throw accusations. That I was an alpha hungry slut. That I was an idiot. That I was falling into a trap.

Except each ugly thought felt…tired. Like even the hateful part of myself couldn't work up the energy to bother. So I let them go.

Wes was tender and affectionate, but also respectful. I'd teased him about being traditional the night before, and he'd only shrugged. I wondered what he'd think of how Matthieu and I had fallen in together in the backseat of a limo, or Caleb and I dry humping like sleepy teenagers.

Shit. How thirsty *was* I?

When Wes was near, I was *parched*.

"No, I'm just kind of reconciling Friday to today," I said, turning to face him. He was leaning in my direction and I took advantage, tipping to him and catching him in a surprise kiss on the lips.

In for a penny, in for a…a pack?

Wes gripped my chin, firm and gentle all at once, and his tongue stroked the seam of my lips, sliding in to caress my own. I moaned and tried to slide closer, but Wes' hand moved to my collarbone, holding me back.

"Careful, Lola girl," Wes said, growl rattling in his words. "You've got work, and I can't get us arrested for public indecency in a car in front of the Stanmore."

"See when you say it like that, it just sounds even more fun," I said, making Wes laugh in a bark and lean safely back against his driver's side door.

"Go on. I'll be back when you're done for the day, and tonight we can all fight over who gets to hold you while we watch a movie."

I blushed. So Wes had caught on to me making an almost full circuit of the pack. Of course he had, it wasn't like I was very good at hiding it.

"See you later," I called, pushing out of the car and hurrying into the building. Who knew how much time I'd wasted over-thinking while sitting in Wes' car, and I'd already been cutting it close this morning after bickering with Rake over the sudden wardrobe I'd acquired.

It was one thing for Matthieu to slip a pretty hair clip onto the bathroom counter, that was just one little item. But waking up to the delivery of what amassed to a *closet* of designer clothing was an entirely different matter. At least, most of it seemed to be designer. Which somehow made it harder to try and look Rake in the eye and ask him to return it.

Apparently, I was pretty shallow and easily bought when it came to designer clothing. I obviously hadn't put up a good enough fight either, because I was walking into the Stanmore in one of Rake's picks, a brightly patterned long-sleeved cling dress. It was just *so* pretty.

I'd tried to dim it down with one of Caleb's giant knitted cardigans, but I'd ended up just looking bohemian and…and kind of like the old Lola, which was a nice change.

It wasn't until I was stepping into the *Designate* offices that I realized my mistake. Fuck. I smelled like alpha. And omega. I

smelled like Caleb's cardigan and Rake's breakfast nuzzles and Wes' kisses. Hell, I probably still smelled like Matthieu after the double whammy before dinner yesterday.

Oh my god. Did I smell like an orgy? It would explain the stares I was getting. Not from everyone, but definitely from Daze and a few other faces in departments I passed, puzzled frowns staring through glass walls. They couldn't smell me through walls, right?

Was it the dress? It was from a lesser known designer. I was trying to fly under the radar, not make heads turn. I did a discreet self-sniff, and yeah there were traces of the pack on me, but someone would've either needed an extremely sensitive nose or very intimate knowledge of my—the pack. Everyone's notes were all muddled together in a comforting blend.

"Morning, Lola," Corey said, waving at me from her desk. Anna grinned at me too, eyes scanning me over, but neither of the other girls looked at me the way some of the staff had on my way in.

"Cute outfit," Anna said, and I blushed and thanked her. Anna was kind of a queen in the office of eclectic fashion, and I had yet to gush at her about how much I loved her style.

It wasn't until I turned and found Betty and Zane glaring daggers at me that confusion turned to worry.

"A Gunner Keen original," Betty said, eyeing my dress with an arched eyebrow. "*Present*?"

I swallowed hard and tilted my head. "A little self-care splurge," I lied.

"Did you get it yesterday playing hooky?" Zane asked, sneering slightly.

There was always an edge of cattiness dealing with Zane and Betty, but it'd seemed pretty harmless up until now. They were Queen B's—not the buzzing kind of B—of the office, and to be honest, they were fashion people. We all had a little element of performance to us, an air of superiority that floated around the culture. But this was more direct. They'd turned their aim onto me and were firing careful shots, digging for something, and I had a pit in my stomach that told me exactly what it might be.

"No, I spent yesterday sleeping, pretty much," I said. I'd emailed Cyrus for the sake of the lie, but he'd come armed to work with my

excuse for staying home—a twenty-four-hour bug. I probably could've told the truth about what happened, but it would've taken a lot more lies to cover where I was for the weekend, and I'd been trying not to raise questions. So much for that plan.

Knuckles rapped on the doorway and I spun, relieved to put a pause on the conversation with Zane and Betty. Cyrus was waiting for us in the hall, giving us all a quick nod hello. An hour ago, I'd been laughing with him over coffee, Rake cozy between us. Things with Cyrus at the moment were somehow both more and less complicated than the others. We shared a lot of mutual staring and flirting, but there was also a hard line drawn between us, and I wasn't sure if it was me working here at *Designate* or something else. It was a little bit of a relief. One less changing relationship to make my head spin.

"Hey, guys, we've got a lot of little details to nail down for this issue and some brainstorming for the next. Let's have a quick chat in the conference room, and then we'll come back to it this afternoon for serious talks," Cyrus said.

I hurried to the hall, happy to put space between me and the others, but I hadn't even made it to the conference room when Wendy's assistant stopped me.

"Lola, Wendy's hoping to have a quick word with you this morning," he said.

"Oh, I…" I turned to check with Cyrus, hoping he might have some clue as to what was coming, but he was frowning at the assistant.

"Can it wait? I wanted a quick team meeting before we got started for the day," Cyrus said.

"Now would be best."

Cyrus shrugged at me. "It's fine. The others will catch you up when you get back," Cyrus said, with a half-smile.

"Right. Okay." I started back for the elevators when Betty's shoulder nudged against mine.

"Good luck, *killer*," Betty hissed in my ear.

Fuck. Oh, *fuck*. The posturing from Zane and Betty. The stares from a random collection of people in the office? I tried to remember names to the faces, but I was still new. All I knew was that Daze,

Zane, and Betty were definitely on Wendy's list of potential keeps. And if they were giving me the stink eye, and she was calling me up to her office…

Oh, fuck.

I'd been careful this weekend, not posting anything to social media about my trip with Leo. The only possible connection I could think of was that maybe someone had recognized Wes in the car outside as Rake's alpha. Considering the way people tended to overlook him, it seemed unlikely, but I hadn't exactly been hiding when I'd kissed him in the car.

No. No way. Word didn't travel that fast, not even in the fashion world.

I wracked my brain on the elevator ride up to Wendy's office, her assistant giving me a steady amount of side-eye. Flirtations with Rake during photoshoots. Or…the party. The night of the party at fashion week. I hadn't known about the whole mess with Wendy at the time, and I'd made no effort to avoid the pack.

My heart was racing, hands clammy, and a steady ringing burned in my ears as I walked toward Wendy's office. I wanted to believe this was nothing to do with the looks I'd been getting, that Wendy only needed to see me to offer some new confidence regarding her plans for *Designate*.

Confidence I would then pass on to Matthieu and Cyrus.

Yeah, no. I was fucked.

Wendy was busy on her tablet as I entered her office. I left sweaty palm prints on the metal back of the chair across from her, standing and waiting for her to acknowledge me. She made me squirm as she ignored me and I knew, *knew* she'd discovered my relationship with the pack.

Lie, I thought. Tell her I'd only met them the night of the party, that it'd just been a silly dance that Rake had talked me into.

Except when Wendy turned the tablet and slid it across the glass top to me, I knew that wasn't going to fly.

"Can you explain this photograph to me?" Wendy asked.

That damn party. I hadn't known at the time everything that would come next with the magazine, with Wendy, and I'd finally let my guard down around Leo's pack.

It was a great photo actually, but I probably couldn't ask Wendy for a copy. I was in the center of the photo, a blue light cast on my side, highlighted between Matthieu and Leo, Rake's hunching form clear against mine. Caleb and Cyrus were in the background, a little blurry but I'm sure Wendy made them out no problem.

Lie, I told myself.

Except I really didn't want to, regardless of what came next.

"That's me dancing with my boyfriend and his pack the, um… Saturday night, end of fashion week," I said, voice flat.

"You're dating Rakim Oren," Wendy sneered.

I opened my mouth to say 'no' and then shook myself. "I am now. At the time, I was only dating Leo."

Wendy's eyebrows jumped, and I had a strange kind of satisfaction at surprising her. "And now you're with Rakim instead?"

"I'm with them both," I said, pressing my lips together hard. And Matthieu. And Caleb, I guess. Oh, and Wes probably.

So. Fucked.

Wendy's eyes narrowed. "So you've been involved with this pack long before I reached out."

I nodded and held my breath.

"And in this situation, where would you say your loyalty is, Lola?" Wendy asked, every word bitten with the precise anger of an alpha, in the package of my beta boss.

"With *Designate*," I said, and Wendy scoffed, pulling her tablet back and snapping it shut.

"Fine. I see. How much did you tell them?"

She didn't have to say their names. We both knew. "Everything," I said, cold running through my veins, a heavy acceptance for what would come next.

Wendy nodded in a jerky way, automatic and tense, and her hands fisted in front of her, knuckles going white. "Of course. Of course you did. Lola, am I your boss?"

So was Cyrus. So was Matthieu. "Yes," I said.

"Not anymore," Wendy said, just the flinch of a smug smile on her lips. "You're fired, Lola Barnes. We're over-staffed. Your position is redundant."

I stared blankly back at her, my mind equally stunned by and prepared for the declaration. Could she do that? Probably. I might have grounds to fight back, but Wendy and I both knew I probably wouldn't. Another question lingered at the back of my mind. What would happen when Matthieu found out?

"That will be all, Lola," Wendy snapped. "HR will be in touch."

I swallowed hard and turned my back on the woman, keeping my shoulders straight and my head high. I wasn't ashamed of my actions. It might've been underhanded listening to Wendy's offer and keeping my eye on her plans, but I *had* shown loyalty, and I'd made my decisions on what was best for *Designate*, not for Matthieu or Cyrus.

Wendy's assistant avoided my eyes as I headed for the elevators. Fuck, I had to do that whole, pack up your things thing. Except I didn't really have things. I had my bag which was in the office, and that was basically it.

You just got fired from your dream job, idiot.

I got fired for trying to *protect Designate*.

I took slow, deep breaths for every step back to the office, eyes focused directly ahead of me. Either I was paranoid and imagining the feeling of eyes on me, or every one of Wendy's two dozen allies were watching me retreat from her office. As certain as I was that I'd done the right thing, I still couldn't shake the sea-sick queasy sensation in my stomach.

The Beauty Editing team was only just leaving the conference room, filing out one at a time with Betty and Zane in the lead. Their eyes glittered with delight at seeing me, and I resisted the urge to check my reflection on any available surface. Did I look devastated or numb? Who the hell knew, but Betty and Zane were clearly aware of the conversation I'd just left. I buried the spike of anger in my chest. They were living for the drama of the moment more than any actual injury I might've been suffering.

"There you are. The crew can catch you..." Cyrus' words trailed off as he looked closer at me, a frown sinking over his face.

Corey and Anna headed into the office, but Zane and Betty were too riveted to the entertainment, dawdling by the doorway. I could ask them to leave us alone for a minute, but I could guess the kind of

rumors that would start flying after my exit. That photograph probably hadn't been kept a secret, and me having a whispered exchange with Cyrus would just add fuel to whatever fire I ignited on my way out.

"I've been fired. I need to grab my things and go," I said, relieved at the steadiness in my voice.

"You've been *what*?" Cyrus hissed, stepping forward.

Betty's satisfaction wobbled at the growl at the back of Cyrus' throat, and she dragged Zane into the room with her, leaving Cyrus and me alone in the hall. For now.

"I'm redundant," I said, and Cyrus' outraged expression in response actually made me smile. I took a step toward him. "But really, it's because she found out about me and the pack. I admitted to speaking with you and Matthieu," I confessed in a whisper, low enough to stay between the two of us.

Cyrus blew out a long breath, his gaze narrowed over my head into the office where the others waited quietly. I thought I could hear Anna questioning my leaving, voice sharp with surprise.

"Okay. Hang on." Cyrus shook his head. "No, we're going to speak with—"

"Actually, I think I better just go," I said. My hand found his arm when he opened his mouth to object, and I pulled it back just as quickly. "Obviously something is about to explode, and I think it's better for everyone involved, myself included, if I'm not at the center of it."

Cyrus winced and sighed, rolling his shoulders and nodding. "Okay, you're right. Hey, wait. Call Wes, okay? He'll get you back to the house."

I shook my head, I could find my way back, even with a cab. But Cyrus gave me a hard look with raised eyebrows.

"Lola, the guys are still on edge after yesterday. Call Wes and don't leave the building…*please*."

Right, because Indy had tracked me down to my apartment. He probably knew I worked at the Stanmore too. Had worked. Past tense. Because now I was fired.

"Okay. I'm just gonna grab my bag."

“I’m gonna go drop this bomb on Matthieu. He’s going to lose his mind,” Cyrus said with a weary sigh, squeezing my shoulder as he passed. He bent and breathed into my ear before going, “Just relax today at home. I’ll see you there later. Everything’s going to be fine.”

I didn’t know if he meant in general or here at *Designate* specifically, but I straightened my back and lifted my chin before walking into the offices.

“No way,” Anna said shaking her head, standing from her desk and crossing her arms over her chest. “No way can she fire you. You’re the best thing that’s happened to our department in years.”

Zane puffed a breath and rolled his eyes in the corner, but he never looked directly at me.

“Lola, what happened?” Corey asked from her chair, eyes worried

Damnit. These were the girls I should’ve befriended when I’d arrived at *Designate*. Corey and Anna were sweet and genuine.

“Case of loose lips from what I heard,” Betty muttered with her back to me as she faced her computer.

“Loose something,” Zane quipped quickly, although his eyes flicked in my direction and his lips turned down.

Anna looked about ready to tear one of them a new asshole so I hurried to cover the quiet, grabbing my bag up from where I’d left it by my chair.

“I probably better not get into it, to be honest,” I said. “At least until I talk to HR later. I’ll see you guys around, okay? Anna, I’m officially a subscriber, so I’ll be squeeing all over your videos.”

I grabbed a quick hug from Anna and Corey, and left the others in their uncomfortable quiet.

“Good luck, Lola,” Corey called softly.

I waved and then dug for my phone in my purse, finding Wes’ number near the top of my calls as I headed for the elevators again. *My life is an actual roller coaster these days*, I mused, Daze’s stare digging into my back as I waited for my elevator.

“Hey, sweetheart, what’s going on?”

“Hey, I…I need a ride,” I said, the first wobble of tears rising up in my voice. *Keep it together. Just keep your shit together until you get back to the house at least*.

“A ride? I can—yeah, I can get to you, what’s happened?”

I stepped into the elevators and waited for the doors to close on the stares of the office before I answered him. “Some stuff is going on at the magazine, and I got fired for my part in it.”

“You *what*? Does—what the fuck? Have you—” Wes stuttered, and I heard a door slam over the phone.

“I talked to Cyrus before I grabbed my things.”

“Does Matt know?”

I sucked in a deep breath and squeezed my eyes shut for a moment. Matthieu was a weak spot for me. There was a big part of myself that wanted Matthieu to jump into the fray and become my white knight in the situation. But he had Voir and the magazine to worry about, and I wanted to hold onto just a little bit of dignity. Enough to get myself calmly out of the building.

“I think Cyrus went to talk to him, but I need…I need to just keep that separate for a little bit, okay?” What was it going to look like if the CEO of Voir stepped in to save one tiny little brand new assistant editor’s job? Like I was sleeping with him.

Which I was.

But not for the sake of my job.

Wes was quiet, and I held my breath, blinking rapidly as the doors opened and a few men in suits stepped into the space with me. “You’re right, sweetheart. I’m grabbing my car, and then we’re going to go somewhere together.”

“Go where?” I asked, the idea distracting me from the tension rising in my chest.

“I dunno. Where’s…what’s fun? What do you like to do? We’ll just goof off a little for the day.”

I smiled and swallowed down the lump in my throat. “How about a movie with a lot of unnecessary explosions?”

“As long as there’s a tub of popcorn the size of you, I’m in,” Wes said.

My phone beeped in my ear, and I checked the screen. Matthieu.

“Hey, Matthieu’s calling. I’m gonna answer.”

“On my way. Stay in the lobby until you see me in my car,” Wes answered, voice stern.

“Yes sir,” I chirped, noting with another smile the growl that was cut off as I switched calls. “Hi, I’m fine, I’m going downstairs to meet

Wes."

"Come up to my office," Matthieu said, his own growl resonating and tinny on the phone. "You're *not* fired. She'll be fired, with prejudice—"

"It can't be about me," I said, voice low. I was only ten floors from the lobby.

"You know that's not… Well, it's not the *entire* reason," Matthieu grumbled.

"Hey, just get things in order there and don't worry about me. You haven't bitten her head off yet, right?"

"I…I have not made it to her office yet."

My lips twitched as the elevator chimed our arrival in the lobby. "Retreat, please. Worry about the company," I whispered. I bit my lip and realized I knew exactly what it would take for Matthieu to redirect his focus off of me. "Wes is going to take me to a movie. Lots of popcorn. Not as good as french fries, but with enough butter and salt, it will do."

There. Just like that, a purr. All it had taken for Matthieu's mood to flip was…

Was to know I was being taken care of. I stopped still in the heart of the lobby, blinking at nothing as men and women in business tailoring wove their way around me.

"You're being very sensible," Matthieu said, warmth seeping into his tone. "All right. I'll take care of business here first. You're fine?"

"I'm fine," I echoed, voice a little thin.

Matthieu was perfect. All of them. They were all too good to be fucking true. And I wasn't fucking this up. I mean, I wasn't making it easier probably—I had baggage up to my eyeballs. All they wanted to do was help me carry it. Was that how decent relationships worked?

"You know, I think I was really looking forward to being unprofessional," Matthieu mused. "How disappointing to be corrected."

"You can be unprofessional with me later," I teased, watching a long black Plymouth pull up to the curb.

"Oh, my Lolotte. I *will*," Matthieu purred.

I shivered. "My ride is here. I…I gotta go."

“Be good, darling girl. I’ll see you tonight,” he rumbled.

Woof. I was so screwed. But in the fun way.



“CAN’T BELIEVE you dragged me to a movie where the lead actor’s name is car fuel,” Wes said as we left the theater.

My hand was in his, fully surrounded. I’d checked while the movie was running, and his were at least twice the size of mine.

“What do these weigh, you think?” I asked, shaking his hand in front of my face. “Like ten pounds?”

“*What*?”

“When you need a hammer do you just use your fist?” I asked, trying to fight my grin. A dumb movie and a lot of time sitting cuddled up to Wes had been exactly what I needed to dull the shock of the morning.

“Are you… Is your blood sugar low or something?” Wes asked as we stepped onto the escalator down into the mall where the theater was located.

I laughed and shook my head. “Um…I doubt it, but I wouldn’t mind some fro-yo.”

I could see Wes’ inner granola and egg-white health-nut struggling with my request. Popcorn and frozen yogurt probably wasn’t his idea of a balanced meal but…

“Okay, but you have to get at least one type of fruit on it,” he said.

“Deal.” I wanted raspberries anyway.

This was nice. Like a *date*. Granted, it was a pity date because I’d just been fired, but since neither Wes nor I were going anywhere near that topic, it made the morning feel frivolous and fun. I didn’t get very many opportunities to see Wes out of work mode, even at the house, and it was nice to discover his dry sense of humor and his total inability to handle a jump scare in an action movie.

Walking from the theater to the food court, Wes transformed slightly, carrying part of the conversation while his eyes watched the crowd around us. When a crowd of teenage boys walked toward us, never moving out of our way, Wes pulled me to his front, his hands

on my shoulders guiding me past the group. He stayed like that for the rest of the march over to the yogurt kiosk, acting like a cuddly barrier to keep anything from touching me.

“Hey, can I ask a question?” I asked as we settled at a table with our cups—mine twice the size of his and loaded with chocolate. And some fruit.

“'Course you can.”

“What’s, um…what’s going on with Indy?” I asked, wincing.

Wes frowned and straightened in his seat. “Ah. Right, so I’ve set your phone up to pass unknown calls and messages to a dummy account of mine.”

I sighed and nodded. That explained why it’d been radio silent since Sunday night. “Okay, cool. I’m good with that. I…I can’t ignore that he’s sort of out there, like a shadow in my life right now. But I’m okay without the constant reminders.”

“If you need to know anything, just ask, sweetheart. But I’m more than happy to be the one handling him.” Wes leaned forward and caught my hand, and I left my spoon standing in the yogurt, gazing back at his brilliantly blue stare. “I’m not going to let anything happen to you, okay?”

“I know,” I said, smiling at Wes. “I…I know I’m safe with you, not just because you would never hurt me. You’d never let anyone else hurt me either. I’ve known that for a long time, Wes.”

I squeezed his hands and Wes stared at me, stunned and quiet. He swallowed as I pulled away and nodded jerkily. I hid my grin by ducking my head. Wes wasn’t used to being seen, but I was more than happy to let him get used to the feeling. I planned on keeping my eye on him.

FIVE

Lola

"You know, I honestly could pay you better than *Designate*," Rake said, twirling a lock of my hair around his finger as we caught our breath on his bed.

My skin was sweaty and sticky, and Leo turned his head to lick the underside of my breast. He was resting on my stomach, my fingers scratching through his hair, his cock softening after the quick and messy threesome we'd thrown together.

"Your schedule would be flexible too," Leo added, waggling his eyebrows. "You could travel with me."

"And me," Rake said, rolling and propping his chin on my breast, waggling his eyebrows at me.

Leo had come home early to catch up on rest and been more than happy to find me returning from the movie and lunch with Wes, who headed back to the office. One quick text to Rake about what Leo was planning to do to me with no one else home, and two had become three, and I had become limp and breathless.

The previous night's cuddle pile with everyone minus Wes had been lovely and affectionate, but it hadn't left much room for fooling around. Rake and Leo had my right side, rotating at some point during the night, while Matthieu held fast on my left, and Caleb and Cyrus had taken the far end near Rake. As sweet as the whole thing had been, I had missed the way Leo and Rake tended to put me to sleep—with as many orgasms for the three of us as possible.

Now I was just about ready for that shut-eye again.

“Mm, I’ll think about it. I like doing makeup, but probably not as much as I love thinking about it, and experimenting with it, and discussing it on a platform like *Designate*,” I said.

“Okay yes, but think of the parties and the traveling and…” Rake tilted his head at me and wrinkled his nose. “Do you *like* parties? Are they too much?”

“I used to *love* parties,” I said. “Any night I didn’t have to work was a night to go to a party or a bar. But Baby was my ride-or-die for that kind of thing, and she’s on lockdown with her alphas now.”

Rake frowned at that and stared at me skeptically. “You know I love this pack, but no one keeps me home from a party I want to go to.”

I hummed and shrugged, “Maybe the Howlers are just a little bit more…”

More alpha? That didn’t seem fair. Matthieu and Wes were inarguably *alpha*, they just weren’t domineering. And come to think of it, Bullet hadn’t seemed that way with Baby at all.

“I should get to know them better before I make any assumptions, I suppose.”

“Oh fuck, we should have them over for dinner!” Rake said, sitting up with excitement.

Rake tended to be a little wired after sex when it wasn’t a marathon session where I used the lock on him. Leo on the other hand… He twisted and curled into my left side, burying his face in my hair and slinging his arm over my chest after Rake abandoned it. Leo would be out in a few minutes probably, even just for a little nap.

“The *Howlers*?” I asked, eyebrows raising.

“Yaaaasssss,” Rake said, eyes wide and wild with excitement. “Can you imagine?”

I snorted and shook my head. “I can’t. At all. God, think of poor Caleb. How would he decorate for that?”

Leo snorted against me. Or snored. It was hard to tell.

“Amazing. It would be amazing, I can’t—” Rake cut off abruptly at the sound of voices downstairs. “Oh shit, it’s time to start thinking about family dinner.”

I hummed and glanced at Leo, who was sacked out and adorably innocent looking in sleep.

“How about we think of something to cook and let Leo rest?” I said.

“I honestly don’t know how to turn the oven on, but I do an excellent job at ordering delivery.” Rake rose up from the bed, strutting proudly towards the door, picking up a pair of jeans from the floor as if it were an afterthought to walk around his house with pants on. Maybe it was. Maybe I would learn that Rake just ran around naked most of the time if I stayed here for much longer.

Imagine it, I teased myself. *Leo says this pack could be yours.* There was a dark warning trying to wrestle its way up from the optimism. I shut both sides down just to be safe, and tried to find my way out of the bed without waking Leo.

“Sounds like Matthieu and Cyrus,” Rake said from the hall. “If you just lie right there, Matt will sniff you out, but it’s up to you whether or not you want a conversation or a horny alpha to deal with first. Actually, Cyrus’ self-control’s probably getting close to snapping too. How do you feel about a Dom, Lola?”

I was in the middle of sliding out of Leo’s embrace when the last question smacked me sideways.

“Sorry, wait, what?”

“Cyrus. He’s chill as hell regularly, but he’s a control freak in the bedroom. He’s worried you’re not ready for that level of intensity though,” Rake said, struggling into a t-shirt before glancing over his shoulder at me with keen study.

“I…”

I'd be lying if I said I hadn't already started thinking of Cyrus sexually, but Rake's question made those desires skitter nervously. Cyrus was sexy as hell, but was I up for being the submissive to Cyrus’ dominant? It was intriguing, but it also raised a spike of anxiety in my chest. That was a whole world that relied on trust and vulnerability, something I shared in very carefully controlled doses.

“Got it. Not ready,” Rake said, winking at me.

“Yeah, let’s just table that for now,” I muttered, slipping out of bed and hunting for something to wear.

Most of what I’d brought—everything Indy had left me with—was either in the wash or still in my bags in Caleb’s room. My new

wardrobe from Rake was waiting for me in a guest room that'd been offered up for my use, but I was still trying not to think about that.

I debated between gathering some mix of Leo and Rake's clothes to wear or getting back into the dress I'd worn earlier, and decided comfort was the winner of the day.

Matthieu was on his way up the stairs, Rake passing him with a smile, and he caught me in his arms as we met on the landing. His eyes searched my face, a frown digging lines over his features. I reached my fingers up to smooth them away and let his scent wash over me.

"I'm fine. Tell me what happened after I left."

Matthieu released a long sigh, easing against me, and lowered his head for a smooth, languid kiss on my mouth that nearly changed my mind about talking business *first*.

"Come downstairs, we'll include Cyrus. By the way, what's it going to take for you to start stealing *my* clothes?"

I laughed. "Consider the invitation accepted."

With one more detour—Matthieu fitting me to the wall of the next landing and kissing me until I was breathless and on the verge of begging before he pulled away—Matthieu and I made it down to the kitchen where Cyrus was uncorking a bottle of red wine and Rake was flipping through menus on a tablet.

"Is that consolation wine or celebration wine?" I asked, smiling at Cyrus and perching on one of the island stools. Matthieu skipped a chair and settled in against my back, his arms around my waist and chin on my shoulder, a little rumble of a purr rattling softly against me.

Cyrus cracked a short laugh and poured himself a deep glass. "De-stressing wine. And maybe a little of both of those too."

"We had a fair amount of scrambling to do this morning with the other editors we brought into the loop, but your heads up gave us the opportunity to fill some important roles. We're left with a bit of a skeleton crew, but luckily for us, Wendy seemed to mainly target assistant editors," Matthieu explained.

Cyrus passed us each a glass of wine, including Rake, and rolled his eyes. "Because any department heads would be looking at a noticeable pay cut to join her new adventure."

“Betty and Zane?” I asked Cyrus.

He grimaced. “We’ll see, although I’m not happy with their role in this. I’m hoping they decide to leave.”

“When we knew we had our asses covered, I sat down with Wendy and our lawyers today, and terminated her contract. She was in serious breach, and you weren’t our only piece of evidence, so it’s effective immediately. Rake, I’m starving. You don’t have to check *every* menu in the city,” Matthieu said.

“I’m just making up my mind,” Rake said. “Might get eclectic. Can’t decide between Peruvian and soul food. Lola, what do you think?”

Matthieu’s hand slipped underneath my shirt, caressing up my ribs and then pausing just beneath my breast, making my core clench and my body freeze in surprise.

“Um. Both?” I said, too focused on Matthieu’s thumb stroking the underside of my breast, barely teasing my nipple. Sneaky bastard. I didn’t know if I wanted to lean in to the touch, or pinch him and make him retreat. Cyrus was studying the menus, but there was a sly curve to his mouth that made me think he knew exactly what we were up to.

“Fried okra please,” Matthieu said. He tweaked my nipple between thumb and forefinger, and I gasped, warmth and a little wetness flaring in my sex.

I pushed his hand away before the others looked over, and Matthieu kissed the corner of my jaw, his purr growing louder.

“Who’s the new editor in chief now that Wendy’s gone?” I asked Cyrus, tangling my fingers with Matthieu before he got any other clever ideas.

“You’re looking at him,” Matthieu said.

“*Interim* Editor-in-Chief,” Cyrus clarified with a heavy sigh. “Only until Matthieu can find someone better for the job. But I’m the most senior staff member.”

“And the most trusted right now,” Matthieu added.

“You don’t look excited,” I said gently.

Cyrus shrugged, head tipping back and forth. “I liked my little bubble. Chief involves a lot less art direction, which is what I love, and a lot more management. Wendy was very good at her work and

very passionate. But my taking on the role will be the best way of implementing a new direction for *Designate*, one that can compete with Wendy's concept without sacrificing the beauty and history of the magazine."

"For what it's worth, I think you're what's best for the magazine right now," I said, making Cyrus relax and smile. "Where does that leave Beauty?"

"Probably down two assistant editors, provided you'll come back. Has Rake talked you into working for him?" Matthieu asked.

"I made a serious effort, but she's obnoxiously loyal," Rake said, tapping items on his screen. He glanced up briefly to grin at me.

"Which we love about her," Matthieu said, a little chastising.

"Yes, we do," Rake crooned, beaming.

I blushed and hurried to redirect the conversation. "But the Head Editor?"

"Ah, that is the exciting news," Cyrus said. "We called in a favor, did a *lot* of nagging and negotiating, aaaand…" He drummed lightly against the countertop. "We snagged Maureen Weiss."

I jumped up from my chair, dislodging Matthieu from my shoulder with a rough grunt. "Shit, sorry! No way! How? I can't believe she was interested!"

I'd gotten to work three shows for the iconic Maureen Weiss during fashion week, and she was fearsome and forward-thinking and bossy. I adored her in a terrified way.

"She wasn't at first. But we talked about some of the new ideas, and we dropped your name which seemed to help a little. She likes you." Cyrus grinned at my squeal.

I couldn't keep still. Maureen freaking Weiss working for *Designate*. That was going to shake some serious shit up in the magazine. Our photoshoots were going to be *bomb*. Matthieu laughed as I started to bounce, traveling wildly around the island. I launched myself at Cyrus for a brief tight hug, and then Rake, and finally ran back to Matthieu's arms, leaping up and allowing him to catch me with another 'oof.'

"I take it that means you'll come back to work for us?" Cyrus asked, laughing. "The magazine's taking a little break and Maureen

won't be in until Monday, so when we come back we're really going to need you. You in?"

"Oh, fuck yes I am. You couldn't keep me out of the building if you *tried*," I said, grinning. "Wait, I can, right? What will people think after today?"

Cyrus sobered, and Matthieu squeezed my shoulders. "You haven't seen HR and you won't now, so really your termination never took," Matthieu said cautiously.

I glanced up at him and studied his guarded expression before looking to Cyrus, raising my eyebrows and hoping he'd be straight with me.

"It's...it's an office setting," Cyrus said, wincing. "On top of that it's *fashion* so…"

"So the rumor mill is running," I said, nodding.

"Most people know Wendy fired you, and soon they'll know Matthieu fired Wendy. Legally, we have to be careful about divulging the reasons. Even in breach of her contract, we can't start a smear campaign against Wendy. Although I'm sure the truth is floating around as much as…" Cyrus trailed off.

"As much as the idea that you fired Wendy because you're sleeping with me," I said to Matthieu, who grimaced. I sighed and leaned back in his arms, letting the whole situation run through my head, one little bullet point at the time. At the end, my answer was clear. "I guess I don't care. I mean, this *did* happen because I'm involved with the pack. And I did decide to manipulate Wendy. I feel like I made the right choice, but that's just our side of the situation, and Wendy's entitled to be pissed. The best thing I can do with rumors is let them happen and not react. Anyway, I don't want to miss a chance to work for Maureen, if I'm honest."

"I'm very impressed with your decision," Matthieu murmured. "I promise not to make it any harder for you at work."

"Reasonably, an assistant editor and the CEO of Voir don't have much of a reason to cross paths in the office," I said, shrugging. "That will be easy enough."

"True, but I also don't want to play games and pretend we aren't together. If we have an event, I want us to attend as we would if it weren't an issue. As a pack," Matthieu answered.

I'm not pack, I thought in reflex. *Not yet,* Leo's voice teased back. Either way, I understood what Matthieu meant. I was *with* the pack, and it would sting just as much for them to avoid me in public for the sake of appearances as it would for me to be ignored.

"Just don't promote Lola to head editor of a department anytime soon, and people will get over it," Rake said. He spun his tablet to face me and slid it across the island. "Now, pick what you want for dinner."

I gaped as Matthieu skimmed through Rake's cart. "That's like the entire restaurant, Rake!"

"Yes, but what do we need twice as much of?" Matthieu asked.

"Welcome to living with six men, sunshine," Cyrus said, smirking.

Caleb and Wes appeared in the next moment, crowding around my sides, hands passing briefly against skin in greeting as they started to negotiate their dishes.

"Hello, love," Caleb murmured, pressing a kiss to my temple.

"How was your day?" *Mine was wild. I got fired, had a cute date with Wes, got screwed silly by your bondmates, and then unfired*.

"Mmm, paint chips and sketching and talking my client into a minor remodel," Caleb said. He pulled a small envelope from his coat pocket and set it down in front of me. "You don't by any chance have any interest in ballet, do you?"

My eyes widened and my breath caught. "Umm, if by interest you mean I was a proud tutu owning little girl who dreamed of being a prima ballerina but never actually practiced pointing my toes, then *yes*. Some interest."

Caleb looked as giddy as I was sure I did in that moment. If what I thought was in that envelope…

They just feel bad that your life is such a mess. This is pity.

Fuck off, I answered myself.

"I did the interior at the new opera house a few years ago, and I still have a box and a season pass. Would you like to see *Juliet and the Montagues* with me?"

I restrained my happy squirming and nodded quickly. "Yes. Definitely. Please, please, please!"

Sure, it was the story of a beautiful young omega coveted by the rival pack of her family, but it was one of the most *beautifully tragic*

stories of its kind and a pretty ballet. And anyway, I *wanted* to go. I didn't need to judge myself just because the heroine was an omega and I wasn't.

"Perfect. I usually have to twist this pack's arm to see a performance with me," Caleb said, raising an eyebrow at Rake.

"Then I guess we needed Lola so you'd have a pretty date who is as excited about hours spent sitting in a dark theater listening to dusty classical music as you are," Rake answered.

"Okay, Prokofiev *isn't* dusty," I volleyed back.

"Thank you," Caleb said with a nod of support.

"Today she made me go see a terrible action movie," Wes muttered, moving to the other side of the island.

"I *made* you?" I scoffed.

He grinned at me across the space and shrugged. "My ears are still ringing from all the explosions, sweetheart."

"Maybe you should've turned down your hearing aid, old man," I swatted back. I wasn't really sure how old Wes was, not too much younger than Matthieu, if I had to guess.

Rake cackled and a sleep rumpled Leo came plodding into the kitchen, heading directly to cuddle against Caleb and squeezing my hand as he reached us.

"What have I missed?" Leo mumbled.

Matthieu was on my other side now, leaning against my shoulder, his nose nuzzling the top of my head as he added items aimlessly to our order—I refused to look at the total at this point. The others caught Leo up on the conversation, him smiling vaguely as everyone spoke over one another.

This was nice. This was more than nice, it was what I'd always wanted, this feeling of belonging and love. This was what a pack was.

I wanted it to be *mine*.

SIX

Lola

"Honestly, returning all of this would be pointless," Rake said, crossing his arms over his chest and sticking his chin out. "It's not like I got these at a department store and have receipts, Lola."

"You don't have receipts?" I snapped, staring at the overflowing contents of the guest room closet.

Rake examined his fingernails carefully, hip propped against the long teak dresser. Which was also full. "I deleted the emails."

I narrowed my eyes at him, right down to the nervous jiggle of his heel over the floor. "Liar," I said.

Rake's arms spread wide, voice rising. "What? It's just…it's just a gift, okay? What else are you going to do for clothing?"

"I have money, Rake!" Not a lot. Not enough to replace what I'd lost, but I could cover my rent and some clothes with my paychecks, it would just take time.

Rake made a dismissive sound and rolled his eyes, and I clenched my fists.

"What? What does *that* mean?!"

His hands raised in false surrender, expression every bit as argumentative as a moment ago. "Nothing! You just don't have to use it! I have money too. I used mine on this. How is this any different than Matthieu buying you things, or the trip to Malta, or the ballet?"

My breath was ragged and I whipped around, giving Rake my back as I tried to rein in the torrent in my chest. He was right. One after the other, I'd been using this pack in little ways. Or not so little. A trip to Malta wasn't little. The ballet wasn't. God, my fucking job wasn't little either, and I still had that because of the pack too.

Pretending to play the feelings game when all you want is presents and someone telling you you're worth something so they can get you on your back. The words hissed through my head, and I squeezed my eyes shut. I tried to swallow the whine but it was halfway out already, and I paced to the window, sinking down at the side of the guest bed.

"Lola, I—"

"Rake, out." Cyrus appeared, cutting Rake's soft words off with sharp precision.

"But—"

"Out," Cyrus said, power in the word.

Tears stung my eyes. Excellent. Now I'd gotten Rake in trouble with one of his alphas.

You're doing a great job here, fucking idiot.

The door to the bedroom shut quietly, and I released a hiccuping whimper, thinking I was alone until soft footsteps shuffled against the carpet. Fuck. I raised my knees and covered my face with my hands as Cyrus sank down at my side, his long limbs filling up the space and almost pinning me in.

"He's not used to not getting his way," Cyrus murmured softly. "Matthieu's the only one who really bothers trying to rein Rake in, and mostly Rake's learned to just skip consulting Matt at all."

"It's not his fault. I've been taking advantage," I said, squeezing the words out through my tight throat.

Cyrus was quiet. He was close, and his bubbly scent was muted, something silkier in its place. He didn't reach out and draw me to him like any of the others would've, and I was grateful for the fact.

"I'm trying to see your point, and I'm failing," Cyrus said eventually.

I lifted my head and frowned at him, and his gaze darkened, brow tightening when he saw my face. I wiped the tears away in a rush and shook my head.

“How are you failing? An unbonded beta attached herself to your pack, attended your omega’s heat, landed herself in your *house*, and now I’ve…” I growled at the sight of the clothes Rake and I had been arguing over a moment ago. It’d started when another delivery arrived and then escalated when Rake had tried to coax me out of my reservation by getting me to try things on. Somewhere in the mix, it’d turned into an actual fight, one where I’d really wanted to stomp out of the room or alternately *hit* Rake for being such a bull-headed little…

Brat.

“Is that how you fucking talk to yourself?” Cyrus asked, gaping at me. “Jesus, Lola. That’s not okay, that’s not what happened, and you *know* that.”

Screw you, tears. Take a hike.

Cyrus sighed and turned around, facing me as he leaned against the wall but still offering space. “Is that what you think we see when we look at you? Or people at *Designate*?”

I shook my head. I knew the pack didn’t think that about me right now, but later…

“I think Rake is taking advantage of you, not the other way around,” Cyrus said with a shrug.

“What? No he’s not!”

Cyrus gazed at the closet and hummed in thought. “I mean, isn’t he? You’re in a very vulnerable position—your home isn’t safe for you to be in, and you’ve lost a giant portion of your possessions. Rake’s trying to use that as a means of making you accept what is *absolutely* a ridiculous gift. One which could create an uncomfortable power shift between the two of you.”

“He wouldn’t use it like that,” I said.

“No, he wouldn’t,” Cyrus agreed readily. “But it’s understandable that you would be wary.”

I chewed on the inside of my lip. Mostly I’d felt that the gesture was wasted on me. Not because I didn’t like the clothes, I *loved* the clothes, but because I…wasn’t worth it. Aw, fuck. I really needed to find that fucking therapist, didn’t I?

“He was being nice,” I said softly.

Did this mean I had to just accept the clothes? Cyrus was…his own kind of tricky, wasn't he?

But no, Cyrus was laughing a little, trying and failing to stop himself. "Sorry, it's just…I know Rake, and I'm sure the idea of being nice was involved, but it wasn't the main motivator. He was just trying to win you. I mean, I think in his mind it was going to go a lot more smoothly than this. You'd see the clothes, you'd love them, you'd be excited like you were over the ballet tickets, and you'd appreciate him."

I puffed out a long slow breath. Because Rake's alphas and I were now becoming involved, and Rake was used to people working him for his alphas. Did he really think I would lose interest in him now that I was spending time with the others? Maybe not consciously, but if anyone was aware of what a bitch the subconscious could be, it was me.

"For the record, I don't think you have to accept the clothes if you don't want to. I just think Rake might let it go with a bit of direct conversation. There's probably something he'd be happy to hear in exchange of 'fine, the clothes can stay,'" Cyrus said, widening his eyes significantly.

I blushed and nodded. "Yeah, I hear you. I'll go talk to him."

I rose up and Cyrus followed me, but when I made to step around the bed one of his hands caught my wrist, and the other snagged my chin. His grip was stern, firm enough to make me startle and remember that I was alone with an alpha in a way I rarely ever considered the men of this pack. He wasn't dangerous, but in this moment he was *intense*.

"One more thing," Cyrus said lowly, his body bowing over mine.

I wasn't scared, but I was clearly *caught* in the snare of an alpha powerful enough to bend my will if he wanted to.

"I don't *ever* want to hear you speak about yourself that way again. You can question whether or not you are satisfied with your place here with us, but never your *worth*. Do you understand me?"

My breath was shallow, goosebumps sharp on my skin and body just at the edge of trembling. *This* was the Cyrus Rake had mentioned, and no, I was not *quite* ready for him. But fuck, I totally

hoped I would be soon. *Setting achievable goals is important*, I reminded myself.

I nodded and swallowed. “I understand.”

Cyrus bent a little more, lips grazing over my forehead to leave a warm and sparkling kiss on my skin, and then I was released. “Cool. Come on, I’ll show you my best guess for which of his little nooks Rake went to for sulking.”

Cool?? Cool, cool. I’m a hella intense alpha in secret, who can turn the bark on in like a second flat and make your panties wet just as fast. Super cool.

“How’s *Designate* been since Wendy left?” I asked, following Cyrus down the hall and around the long windowed corridor that overlooked the back garden.

“Definitely buzzing. Betty tried to stir some shit and…I went ahead and fired her.”

“Cyrus,” I started.

“It wasn’t about you, I promise. Anyway, I think Zane had a crisis of faith because he came to me with a big confession, a stack of information on Wendy’s contact and plans, and a major plea for his job,” Cyrus said.

“Oh, damn. Have…have you considered he might be staying for Wendy’s sake though?”

“Yeah. He seemed genuine in our conversation, but at the same time, I think he could flip all over again if he felt like it. I plan on moving him out of Beauty and, before you ask, that is a little bit for your sake.” Cyrus stopped in front of a bookshelf at the end of the corridor and turned to face me.

“Really? Because I think the farther Zane is from me, the more comfortable he’ll be spreading gossip about me,” I said.

Cyrus smiled, gaze warming. “You think I should let him sweat it out with you guys? Anna and Corey are team Lola all the way. I don’t know what I missed when I went to see Matthieu after you left, but I know by the time I came back, Betty’s ego was about five pounds lighter than before.”

My lips twitched. “Is that evil of me?”

Cyrus laughed and shook his head. “Only in a way I admire. Here,” he said, turning back to the bookshelf and sliding a bookend

to the right to reveal a door latch. He pulled it down and the shelf popped forward, the scent of burnt chocolate slipping out from the crack. “That’s him,” Cyrus whispered.

I nodded, and Cyrus pulled the door open for me. Just when I thought I knew all the surprises of this ridiculously pretty house, I found a room like this. The glass wall that overlooked the garden continued, and it was almost like being perched in a treehouse, branches of a white birch extending like a frame around the small narrow room. The walls were painted a deep brown, and the carpet under my feet was plush. There was no bed, like in most of Rake’s other nooks, and no alpha scents either, just a few plushy bean bag chairs and a large basket of blankets and pillows. This space was Rake’s and Rake’s alone, which left me feeling like an intruder.

Rake was slouched at the far end of the room, sitting on a large cushion with his back against a bean bag. He was staring at his own hands, forearms resting on his raised knees, but I knew he hadn’t missed my arrival. He looked pale, and I wanted to fall into his lap and kiss him until he was blushing and smiling again.

“How badly did I fuck up?” Rake asked, all the brightness rinsed out of his words.

I shut the door behind me and moved through the mess of cozy to kneel at his side, leaning into the same bean bag and glancing out the window. Through the birch branches, Rake had a clear view of the park behind the house, where some kids were racing through the green.

“Rake, I love you.”

His head shot up, whipping to face me, and I turned my own to meet his shocked gaze. “Wait, what? Lola, I—” A smile cracked over his mouth even as his brow folded in confusion. “I… Fuck, Lola, I love you too! That’s why I…I just don’t want you to be worried about what to do next, or to have to think about that asshole every time you need a dress for an event or—”

I tilted my head and narrowed my eyes, and Rake stopped abruptly. “You know that I know you started buying a lot of that *before* Indy broke into my apartment, right?”

Rake blushed and swallowed hard. “Okay…yeah. But I wasn’t planning on dropping it all in your lap at once or anything. And look, I

do see the difference between me, you know, buying you a wardrobe and Caleb taking you to the theater. I shouldn't have said that."

"You shouldn't have, but my issues with how to accept letting this pack into my life need to be resolved, and I have to handle that on my own." I waved my hand through the air. "I don't wanna get into all of this again I just… Listen, the shopping thing stops now, okay?"

Rake's expression hardened, just a little, enough for me to know that he wasn't sold on the idea.

"I don't need you to buy me things for me to appreciate having you in my life, Rake. I don't need it from any of you," I said, and hurried as he opened his mouth to object. "Also, I do have personal taste, you know. I would *love* for you to come with me when I shop and help me pick things out. And gifts are not off the table, but I want our exchanges to be relatively even and this was *not*. That sits weird with me."

Rake combed a finger through his curls, ones he seemed to be letting grow out just because I liked running my own fingers through them. So I reached up and did so, digging in at the back of his neck and making him sigh and soften.

"Okay, yeah that's fair," Rake said nodding. He winced and asked, "Does that mean I have to return everything? I didn't actually delete the receipts, I was just being a dick. But it would make for some awkward conversations with designers."

I sighed and snuggled into Rake's side, all my tension unraveling as his scent sweetened and he cuddled me close. "Not everything. We can go through stuff, and I'll pick my keep pile and you pick whatever you picked just because you really wanted to see me in it —"

"That would be everything."

"—And I'll have some vetoes, and we'll figure it out. I mean, it can't *all* fit me."

"That's what tailoring is for. Ouch!" Rake jumped as I pinched his nipple hard and twisted. "Okay, okay. I'm with you. I agree…I'm…I'm sorry, Lollipop." He hummed and nuzzled my forehead. "I love you. I'm glad you're developing relationships with the others, and I *know* they don't lessen what we have. You've made that clear. I got carried

away with the whole spoiling you thing, and it probably did turn into a little bit of a power flex."

"I love you too, and no alpha changes that."

"Not to argue, but if anything, it makes everything stronger. Especially with Caleb. It's hard to explain the bond, but things growing between you…I can feel it. It's like I get to know the parts of you that Caleb values, and I see you through his eyes too," Rake said.

I pressed my warm cheek to Rake's shoulder and resisted the urge to squirm into his lap. Instead, I raised my head and accepted his ready kiss, drinking up one after another of the soft, silky passes of his lips over mine.

"Speaking of, want to help me pick out what I'll wear to the ballet tomorrow night?"

Rake's eyes lit up. "You know I do. Also…" His lips twisted nervously and I nodded for him to continue. "Okay, how opposed are you to me taking you to a spa for pampering?"

I fought my eyes very hard and forced them not to roll. "Maybe another time," I said carefully. "But I will trade you a spa day in exchange for me pinning you to the bed and locking you, and then the two of us doing some in-house pampering. It's not like you don't have all the supplies and—"

I squealed as Rake pushed me back to the floor, climbing on top of me and sliding between my legs, his hips already pumping and his smile glowing.

"Lollipop, you can't just talk like that and not expect to get me hard as a rock. I fuck you now, we pick out clothes, you make my brain explode after, and *then* we pamper." His hands were fumbling over and under my clothes, his fingers wiggling into one leg of the shorts I was wearing to rub quickly over my clit.

"Yes, deal! Deal, deal, deal," I chanted, my hips riding against his quick fingers.

"I love you," Rake rasped, and then he dove down, tongue fucking into my mouth as I moaned and wrapped myself around him.

SEVEN

Lola

"Good thing I made you lie on my t-shirt yesterday," Rake said, grinning at me as I examined my reflection in the mirror, turning to see the thin strip of red that ran down my spine. The dress I'd chosen was all but backless, and the ribbon was more a tease than it was functional. "Rug burn would've ruined the effect."

I laughed and spun again. "You don't think it's kind of racy for the ballet?" I asked.

Rake had been pretty insistent on getting me into the vivid red dress after our make up sex, and while high on serotonin, I'd been all about the jaw-dropping dress. The halter top had a v neck to my ribs and the diaphanous skirt sported two slits that rose to top of my thigh over either leg, gauzy red draping over my pale skin. Now I was starting to feel a little shy about the skin on display. I looked amazing, there was no arguing it, but was it too much for a beautiful evening at the theater?

"The box is really private, so the only one who's going to get to spend any quality time staring at all of that perfection is Caleb," Rake said, shrugging and grinning. "And I'm seriously considering coming along just to watch him squirm next to you. When Caleb becomes attracted to someone, he gets it *bad*."

"You should come," I said.

Rake shook his head. "Nah. I want this to be for you two. You'll both enjoy the performance, and you deserve time together. Also, I

plan on enjoying the long-distance slow burn of arousal from Caleb's end of the bond. I'll get Cyrus to ride it out with me."

My jaw dropped slightly as I stared back at Rake through the mirror. "Sorry. Wait. You mean you'll… You can feel him being turned on through the bond?"

I had known that, hadn't I? Had I? Oh, shit.

Rake grinned and nodded. "It's hot when it's for me, but I dunno if it's a kink of mine or whatever, but I fucking *love it* when it's about Leo or you. Like, I'm horny and that's mine, but it's also Caleb's, *but also* it's about you? I guess it's like voyeurism." Rake's head tilted as he stared at my slack expression. He laughed. "Lollipop, did you not know about that?"

"I…knew about the bonds, I just…" I shook my head, and let out a little laugh. "I'm glad I never thought that through, I would've been too nervous when things started with you and Leo." Like the time I'd sucked on Leo's bondmark. I checked the clock and cursed. "I've got to get downstairs!"

"Come on. I low-key want to take, like, prom photos of you and Caleb," Rake said, rolling off the guest bed and taking my hand.

"Don't you dare," I hissed, bumping my hip against his and enjoying the swish of the skirt over my legs.

"I won't ask you to pose, but I'll totally take candids on my phone," Rake said. "Oohh, okay. Idea! Someday, can we do a photoshoot?"

My eyes widened and my heart hammered a quick beat. "Like one of your sexy ones?"

"I prefer the term erotic, but yeah. If you're comfortable."

Part of me was thrilled by the idea, my body tingling at the offer. The other part of me worried that photos could be permanent and a relationship like this could end badly. I loved Leo and Rake, in a way that couldn't even be compared to past relationships. I had told Leo I would start considering the idea of becoming pack, but so far he and I were the only ones who'd discussed it, and I hadn't successfully buried the doubt.

"I'll think about it," I said, squeezing Rake's hand and smiling at him.

The pack was together in the family living room and right away I picked out Caleb, dressed in a deep blue, exquisitely cut tuxedo, laughing down at Leo sprawled on the couch. Matthieu in his armchair had the first clear glimpse of me, and he sat up straight with a start, his purr carrying through the room and right to where I stood in the doorway. Wes was wandering in from the kitchen, and he choked on his beer as he caught a glimpse of me, his blue eyes wide.

“Holy shit, gorgeous,” Leo said, sitting up as his eyes made a steady run over me from head to toe and back again. “You are making me…really appreciate the ballet.”

“I regret saying I wouldn’t come along,” Matthieu murmured from his chair, eyes hot on my skirt where it hinted at the slits in the fabric.

“You can’t get ready in time, and you can’t go in your shlubby jeans,” Rake said, quick to defend my evening with Caleb.

Cyrus stood from the armchair he'd been sitting in, reaching me before Caleb shook himself out of his shock. His shoulders blocked the room and my view of the others as he stared at me with an intent and hungry gaze.

"I have something for you. No balking," Cyrus said, soft but stern.

I bit down on my own tongue as he pulled a long box out of his pocket, his eyes holding to my face like he was just *waiting* for me to refuse.

"You need a necklace. May I?"

I wasn't sure if it was because of the way he'd spoken to me yesterday, or just pure curiosity at what was in the box, but I didn't have it in me to argue or even demure from the gift. I nodded and swallowed, my head turning as Cyrus moved to stand behind me. Rake was at my side, eyes wide and body vibrating giddily as he watched our exchange.

A moment later, Cyrus was reaching around me, a glittering collection of delicate chains hanging from his fingers. Tiny stones dripped down like dewdrops, catching the light as Cyrus placed the necklace on me as I lifted my hair for him to clasp it in the back. His thumb stroked the nape of my neck and with the entire pack's eyes on us, I resisted the impulse to shiver at his touch.

"It's beautiful," I said, glancing down at the cool metal that ran down my chest, a few stones hanging just above the lowest point of my neckline.

Cyrus hummed and gave me a scorching look as he guided Rake down into the living room to share the armchair he'd left empty. Matthieu rolled his eyes at the pair of them but shared a private smile with me, remaining in his chair as Caleb rounded the couch. Caleb's hand slid into mine as he stood close. In my heels, I only had to tilt my head back a little to stare up at him.

“You look very dapper,” I greeted.

Caleb purred a little and leaned in, lips against my ear. “You look like temptation.” I blushed and resisted the urge to fidget. Behind him, I heard Rake’s phone make a telltale ‘click’ of a photo.

“Ready?” Caleb asked me.

I nodded, and the room was a chorus of goodbyes.

“Have her home by midnight,” Leo said, grinning and leaning against the back of the couch, watching us head toward the stairs.

“Don’t get caught by the ushers like last time!” Rake called, and I turned to look at Caleb in surprise. He was bright red, head shaking.

“It’s not what it sounds like,” he muttered.

I HAD to keep reminding myself to breathe as I watched the dancers below, the orchestra carrying sweeping notes of romance and discordant strikes of conflict up to where Caleb and I sat ensconced in the dark.

“Do you think that’s cupid?” Caleb murmured in my ear, drawing out goosebumps on the column of my throat.

I watched the exquisitely liquid dancer who moved through the players like a ghost, manipulating each moment to draw the Montague pack to meeting Juliet.

“Mm,” I nodded, unable to tear my eyes off the scene.

The theater was beautiful, grand and striking and contemporary with a ceiling that twisted and turned to create full and rich acoustics. Even better, the private box was genuinely private, not too high

above the stage, and with walls that hid the audience from our view and made the performance perfectly central. I'd only ever been to a few theaters when I was younger, mostly as a child, and it was a completely different experience this way. There was no distraction from the stranger sitting next to me, no heads I had to lean carefully around to see past.

Best of all, the seating was practically a couch, just soft enough to stand the hours of sitting but not too much that I was tempted to fall asleep. Caleb and I were pressed close together, his arm on the back of the bench and around my shoulder, his other hand wrapped up in mine.

My hand tightened around his as the score drummed and heightened for the Dance of the Knights, one of the most dramatic pieces of music in the ballet, the dancers performing at the Capulets' ball, surging together and spinning apart again. My chest burned with wistful jealousy and appreciation as I watched.

"Breathe, Lola," Caleb said, his head lowering and lips grazing over my bare shoulder.

I gasped, my lungs grateful for the sudden intake of air. I laughed with Caleb, keeping our voices to whispers, and turned to smile at him, breath catching for an entirely different reason.

Caleb was ridiculously handsome. He was possibly the definition of it, at least traditionally, his blue eyes boring into mine, features classical and perfect. Someone, probably Leo, had helped him style his hair to lie smoothly back, and he looked like an old movie star. I wanted to muss him, make his hair stick out and his cheeks flush and leave his buttons loose. His eyes darkened and he leaned in, catching my lips in a brief caress, and then pulled back as I followed him for more.

"You're missing the show," he breathed.

I tried to shake the haze out of my head as I turned back to watch the stage. The ghost, or Cupid, was playing a game between the Prince and Tybalt. I couldn't tell if she was stirring up trouble for the lovers or trying to help, but either way, as a dancer she did it beautifully. My attention was fully fixed to the performance again when I felt my skirt twitch against my bare leg.

Glancing down, I found Caleb gathering the gauzy fabric of the overskirt in his fist, raising it to my knees. I'd mostly forgotten about my dress once the music started—although I secretly relished the stares Caleb and I received on our way through the crowded theater lobby to our seats. Now I realized that both the slits had parted to reveal the full length of my legs, barely curtained by sheer red fabric.

"Watch," Caleb whispered to me, his own eyes on the progress of his hand. His gaze flicked up to mine. "Should I stop?"

Stop implied he wasn't done. Stop meant he wanted to…

I forced myself to breathe again, to turn back to the dancers, but my eyes glanced around the edges of our box. If I couldn't see the rest of the audience, that meant they couldn't see us, right? Holy shit, was I actually considering letting Caleb—?

His fingers grazed the top of my knee as he lifted the sheer skirt back, and I barely withheld the small weak note of relief in my throat.

Live a little, Lola, I told myself, and the words were so kind for once, I barely registered the exchange between the lovers on the stage before me, Juliet alone with the Montagues, turning gently between the four men.

Caleb's fingers were paused on my skin, warm and gentle. Chaste for the moment.

"Don't stop," I whispered, if I made any sound at all. It didn't matter, Caleb was watching my face and he saw the words even if he didn't hear them.

For a moment there was no difference, maybe a slight stroke of his fingertips on the inside of my knee. His touch swirled, and I breathed out a quiet shaking sigh of relief. My skin burned. Not just my legs or my sex, but even my chest and shoulders, as if they sensed where Caleb's eyes landed as he studied my reactions.

The chorus of dancers returned to the stage for a rowdy last reprisal, but I knew what was coming next. The balcony scene. The romantic *pas de cinque* between the lovers in one of the quintessentially beautiful romantic scores of history. I stifled a whimper as Caleb's hand slid back and forth against my inner thighs, his fingertips drawing swirling patterns on one and his knuckles grazing against the other.

I leaned heavily into him, his nose nuzzling at my throat, lips taking soft sips from my skin. Fuck, I wanted to stretch myself out in offering, but he was right. I wanted to watch the show. Specifically, I wanted to watch the flipping Montague and Juliet balcony scene while one of the sweetest men I knew tortured me with delicate touches.

Caleb's purr was soft and quiet, humming in my ear without drowning out the music, and his scent made me languid in his arms, my throat stretched and exposed, legs growing loose. I really hoped no one could see us because even if I realized they could, I probably wouldn't have asked Caleb to stop at that moment.

The chorus dancers ran into the wings and the Montagues appeared in the courtyard, elegant leaps and spins in the air, exultant with love at first sight. The balcony extended out from behind a curtain, and the pack wove through its arches as Caleb's touch returned to my knees, gentle and teasing, almost innocent.

"Beautiful," Caleb murmured, almost unconsciously, and I shivered. I slid one heel back beneath the bench, opening my thighs to encourage him to return, and he pressed a long kiss to my shoulder. His palm flattened on the inside of my thigh and stroked up until he reached the crease of my thigh and the edge of my lace underwear.

I shook in his arms, my eyes fixed to the stage and my chest heaving with stifled, silent breaths. Caleb's touch was exploratory and gentle as if he were mapping me first. His hand turned under my skirt, the parted fabric rustling, and I bit back a moan as the pad of his thumb found the lips of my sex. His purr deepened for a moment and his tongue swirled over my shoulder.

I wanted to cry out for him, to pull him over me, but there was something even more delicious about the forced silence, the restraint of his touch, and my inability to encourage him without giving us both away. Juliet was dancing delicately down the length of the balcony, the Montagues spinning under the arches below her, the lovers in secret harmony. I tilted my head, my cheek against Caleb's hair, and his hands stroked back down my legs in long, firm sweeps, warming my skin.

I didn't know how far he would take the game, how far I could stand to be touched without making a sound. He mouthed against my skin, a touch hungrier than a kiss, and his arm slid down my bare back, tugging me around my waist to rest closer against him.

"I want to touch you, love. To watch you," he whispered.

I nodded loosely, and Caleb rumbled with pleasure at my agreement, his hand on my legs moving back up to my sex. He raised his head, forehead pressed to my temple, breath hot on my neck.

"You'll be quiet?" he asked.

I nodded again, and Caleb kissed my cheek before forcing his fingers inside the edge of my underwear to press my bare skin. I nearly broke that promise in the next moment, the shock of one of his fingers sliding smoothly inside of me so sudden, but I bit hard on my lip, and Caleb rewarded me with another kiss on my cheek and his thumb grazing over the hood of my clit.

I was every bit as aware of Caleb's stirring touch, his finger pumping lightly inside of me, as I was of the playful and sweet dance on the stage below. Juliet teased the pack from above, before surrendering into their arms to be spun and lifted and poised into every perfect position. Caleb's touch was patient, as slow and sweet as the music, and it was every bit as hard to remember to breathe as it had been before.

His other hand cupped over my ribs was firm, and it slid up my side, moving under the red wedge of fabric that covered my breast so he could touch there too. I gripped one of his knees to steady myself, and held onto the bench with the other as he fit another finger inside of me and rubbed harder over my clit. I thought he would take me directly to the end, the music swelling as Juliet connected with one after the other of the packmates. My body was rolling softly into the touches, my breaths coming faster, my eyes desperate to fall shut. And then just as slowly, Caleb retreated, his thumb pulling away, his fingers stilling.

I whimpered and then swallowed the sound, and Caleb kissed down my jaw and then over my collarbone, his hand still on me as Cupid returned to the stage with the Prince.

"Please," I whispered, trying to wiggle forward into his hand.

“Mmm, I will, love,” Caleb said, his hand on my side covering my breast and then sliding down again.

But he didn’t move. I was throbbing around his fingers, still growing wet at his touch, halfway ready to forget the performance and turn myself to face Caleb, to tear his damn tuxedo off and ride him to my own satisfaction.

At the end of my patience, the lovers returned to the stage and Caleb began to fuck me with his fingers again. I nearly sobbed in relief, my body going limp in his arms as arousal and pleasure started to rise again, faster than before.

I knew his game now. I would ride it out with him. And later, I would think of some way of paying him back. Probably.

Every time he felt me start to clench around his fingers, Caleb would slow until stopping, waiting for my body to calm again. This fucking balcony scene was suddenly the longest ballet sequence in history as far as I was concerned, my body hyper-aware of every second that passed. Caleb took me to the edge three more times until there was sweat beaded on my skin and I was near tears, both with the emotion of the dancers and the agony of delayed release.

Juliet was soft in her lovers’ arms, completely surrendered to their holds, her body like liquid as she was passed from one to the next, each making their vows together in the union of their choreography.

“Almost there,” Caleb whispered in my ear before sucking on the lobe.

The lovers retired, the Montagues leaping off the stage, and Cupid returned in all of her elegant and foreboding glory. Caleb’s hand returned to my breast, his fingers pinching my nipple as his fingers thrust with sudden speed.

“Quiet,” Caleb cautioned as my mouth opened on a silent cry, ecstasy spiking quickly in my core, electrifying the blood in my veins.

The music warned of what was to come for the lovers below, but all I could hear were mine and Caleb’s breaths and the soft rushing of the coming explosion inside of me. As the lights went down and applause rose from the audience, I turned my head and Caleb took my mouth in a fierce kiss, swallowing my moan. Light flashed behind my squeezed eyes and I grabbed Caleb’s shoulders as I came,

shuddering in his arms, fluttering around his fingers, and he kissed me through the storm of heat that flooded my body.

The small sounds of my release were drowned out by the theater as the audience cheered and then shuffled as the lights came up for intermission.

Caleb kissed me down from the high of the aftershocks, his hand moving to my back to soothe me, fingers withdrawing from my still singing pussy.

“Okay?” Caleb asked, nose stroking against mine.

“You secret *deviant*,” I murmured, eyes opening wide. Caleb froze, cheeks blushing, and I laughed at his caught expression. “You *totally* got caught fooling around with Rake in the theater.”

Caleb grinned sheepishly and pecked my lips again, and then removed his hand from under my skirt, raising his fingers to his lips and sucking my release off his skin. All further teasing died on my tongue, and I wondered what it would take for me to get Caleb to go down on me in the next act.

No, bad Lola.

“Only because Rake can’t keep his mouth shut during ballet. He thinks because there isn’t any dialogue, he ought to supply some,” Caleb said. “So I gave him something to do with his mouth.”

I gasped, mouth forming a comical ‘o,’ and delighted in the fact that Caleb—who often seemed too sweet and gentle to be real—could still blush bright red after admitting he’d gotten Rake to give him a blow job in public. Actually, I bet Rake had loved that.

“I meant to behave this time, but you are absolutely exquisite tonight,” Caleb said, leaning in for another kiss, this one a little flavored by me. “And even more so when you’re caught up enjoying the performance.”

“Mmhmm. Well, you definitely heightened my enjoyment,” I said, laughing.

Fuck yeah, he did.

Caleb sat up a little straighter at that, pride adding to his perfect blush. “I’ll probably be able to restrain myself for the rest. At least until we get home,” he added lowly.

I shivered, and let Caleb steady me as we stood, the red fabric of my skirt falling like a curtain over my legs.

EIGHT

Caleb

Lola's scent was still on my fingers, and I was loathe to get rid of it. I wanted to track Leo down in the house and shove my hand into his face, as if I were a little kid showing off his art project to anyone who would look. I'd made Lola come, I'd felt her clasping around my fingers, weeping against my touch as I'd stolen her breath over and over during the ballet. And try as I might, I couldn't stop wondering what that clutch and flutter would feel like around my cock.

Lust wasn't a common symptom in my life, even as an alpha, but it threaded through me now, lighting me up from the inside and making me edgy. I imagined this was what feral alphas out of packs might feel like. During Rake's heats, the arousal was smooth and demanding, easy to conquer. With Lola, I wasn't quite sure what to do with myself, and I had too many delicious ideas running through my head.

Lola's hand was in mine as I led her up from the garage, her eyelids heavy and the same soft smile she'd been wearing ever since I'd released her from the kiss I'd taken while she climaxed. I wanted to pin her to the wall, pull her legs up around my hips, and rut as if it were one of Rake's heats.

"Your date game is pretty outstanding, you know that?" Lola said, bumping my hip and then stepping into the elevator ahead of me.

"Have I earned my goodnight kiss?" I teased, following her in and turning to shut the gate behind us.

When silence answered, I scrambled to think of a way of moving past my fumble, until Lola's arms circled around my waist, her chest pressing to my back. Her breasts rose as she arched, her hands stroking over my ribs.

Her lips grazed against the shell of my ear, and my normally quiet purr became thunderous in the small space. "I think you've earned more than a kiss, Caleb," Lola murmured, throaty and sinful as her hands slid down over the waist of my pants to cup and rub at my cock. Pleasure jolted me, my knees threatening to buckle as I growled and thrust into her hands, my cock more than happy to answer the command of her hands.

"I don't know where you learned to drive a girl crazy like that, but I am *extremely* grateful," Lola breathed.

I blinked and stared at our warped reflection in the elevator doors. Her fingers were fiddling with my zipper, and if I let Lola go much further, Leo would end up finding me fucking our girl in the elevator and probably completely mindless with the pleasure of it.

I covered her hands with mine, drawing them away from me before she succeeded in freeing my rapidly rising erection, and turned in her arms. Lola was ready, chin lifted and eyes hooded, parted lips begging for another kiss.

And I wasn't nearly strong enough to refuse her. My head fell, and our lips fit together like a dream. I was already drunk on her, the slightly citrusy and sweet taste of her, the tiny whimpers and hums of pleasure she tried to strangle.

Her hands traveled as greedily under my jacket as mine did over her practically bare back. I wanted to snap that little red string that masqueraded as fabric with my teeth, tear away the red like wrapping paper on my new favorite present. When Lola pulled away with a gasp, my hands flat and hard against her back holding her to my chest, I made my confession.

"I learned," I said, pecking her lips again, "to please you," another kiss, "by your own reactions, love." I lifted my head to see her dreamy smile. "I've never had a sexual relationship with a woman before you."

The elevator dinged, and Lola's eyes went wide, chest still heaving with breaths and lips shining from our kiss.

“But you…” Lola blinked at me, dreaminess being replaced by genuine confusion. “You *edged* me.”

I let out a soft nervous laugh. “Only because I forgot how long the end of that act was. I wanted you to finish with the curtains.”

Lola’s giggle was delicious. I’d noticed her trying to withhold the girlish sound before, but it was a perfect song in my ears, playful and delighted, proof that we’d done something right as a pack for this perfect creature.

“Holy shit,” Lola breathed, and then she leapt, my arms barely catching her in time as she attacked my mouth with fevered nips and sucks, her legs rising to twine around my waist. “If that’s your beginner mode, I cannot wait for you to level-up.”

I grinned and carried her out of the elevator and into the hall, heading for my room and wondering how many others we’d find there. I didn’t think Lola would mind if Rake and Leo were there when I stripped her naked and begged her to let me sink into that shockingly hot, slippery, decadent cunt of hers, but I was less certain about Cyrus. And I wasn’t sure how I felt about the idea of Matthieu joining us, although at this point I might not care as long as I was the one holding Lola.

“You’ve really never been with a woman?” Lola asked, apparently happy enough to be carried. Which was good, I didn’t want her out of my arms until we were both panting, sweaty messes.

“I’ve found women attractive, but I’ve never had a real connection with one before you,” I said, one of my hands making a greedy pass over Lola’s ass to squeeze, grinning as she jumped and rocked against me. “I’m not as interested in sex until I feel strongly about someone.”

Lola blushed and snuggled into my chest. “I know you’re just being honest, but that’s a really nice thing to hear.”

I kissed her temple and made it to my rooms, surprised to find them empty of the others. Even Wes had made an appearance in the evenings, never settling into the bed with the rest of us but coming in to wish us all—see, Lola—a goodnight. I could’ve alerted Rake and Leo to our return, but suddenly I was glad to have Lola to myself for this. I wanted her undivided attention on me, and I wanted to give her mine in exchange.

On her first night in my room, Lola had declared the space ‘romantic,’ deep green walls, heavy wood furniture, and dense luxurious fabrics making the vast space retain a kind of closeness. I kept fresh flowers on the side tables and warm lighting, and now the romance of the space held a sexuality that was usually reserved for Cyrus or Rake’s space. I wished I had candles to light, but I settled for flicking on a small lamp in the far corner. I wanted to be able to see Lola but not blind her.

“Can I ask a silly question?” Lola stared up at me as I set her down at the foot of my bed and resisted the urge to push her back and leap on top of her. I’d seen Leo and Rake’s passion with her, but I’d also seen their reserve, their care at making sure she was never thrown out of the current moment and into the past.

“Of course.”

“Does it feel like starting over at all?” Lola asked, biting her lip in hesitation. “Like you’ll be relearning sex?”

I grinned. “Not relearning. I’ve seen the mechanics, you know, and it still looks roughly the same, give or take what I learned this evening. But definitely a new act of sex I suppose. Are you worried I’ll be terrible?”

Lola’s laugh was bright and startled, and she leaned into me, looping her arms around my neck. “God, no. You’ve already exceeded expectations. Everything that comes next is the cherry on top of my sundae. Anyway, I just want to enjoy *being* with you.”

“It might not feel like my first time, but it is our first time, love,” I said softly, dipping my head and brushing my lips over hers. “That alone is enough to give me butterflies.”

Lola hummed and pulled me just a little closer, lips stroking against mine, teeth dragging my bottom lip between hers for her to suck and soothe with her tongue. I always enjoyed watching the give and take between Leo and Rake, their jostling of dominance, but with me, they offered total surrender. There was something to Lola, maybe her need to maintain a comfort of control, that gave her an edge with me that I found exquisite.

So much so, I wanted to offer her my own surrender, or at least my absolute devotion. I pulled slowly free of the kiss as I lowered myself to my knees in front of her, my hands guiding my path along

her back, over her ass, and the back of her thighs. Lola's breath hitched above me, color high in her cheeks and chest rising and falling with rapid breaths as she watched me raise the skirt of her dress.

Or maybe I just wanted to devour her like the intoxicating temptation she was.

"Caleb," she whispered, and the sound of my name spun like sugar on her lips made me purr.

I prowled on my knees closer, my face nuzzling at the apex of her thighs through her skirt, a deep lungful of that sweetly tart scent filling my lungs and leaving me hard as a rock.

"Caleb, you don't have to—oh, god!"

I had the skirt raised high enough to catch the first glimpse of Lola's sex through the delicate cream lace of her panties, and I dove forward, sucking at the soft flesh. Lola wavered, and I let the fabric go in favor of holding her to my face by the backs of her thighs.

"Open," I said, the alpha in me taking over, taking what I wanted as I nuzzled and mouthed at the crease of her thighs, her hips, back to her damp folds as her legs spread to make room for me.

"Holy shit," Lola gasped as I tilted my head back, soaking my tongue with her flavor through the lace, the texture rough. I pulled her closer, forcing her to widen her stance again, straddling my mouth. "Ohmigod, Caleb. Fuck! Fuck."

My cock was throbbing in my pants, and I'd forgotten that I was still dressed head to toe in my suit. None of it mattered, not the curtain of Lola's dress covering my eyes, not my cock scratching against my zipper, begging to be freed and thrust into Lola. The only impediment was—

Rrrrriiip.

Lola cried out as the lace of the panties dug into her hips and then tore away under my fingers, my tongue immediately burrowing into the slick folds of her pussy. I growled and Lola moaned, her fingers fighting through fabric to dig into the strands of my hair. What was this fucking flavor? Like a bouquet of flowers and a glass of lemonade. Whatever it was I wanted more, and Lola rocked in my hands, nearly falling backward but for the grip I had on her ass and

her own in my hair. My tongue fucked into her, and I sucked her arousal down, snarling and purring and trying to burrow closer.

Rake said I gave the best head, simply out of enthusiasm and lack of control, and I wanted Lola to agree. This was different, unfamiliar territory, but I'd done my reconnaissance at the ballet and it served me well now. I pulled on the lips of her sex with my mouth, barely nibbling and feeling her fight and squirm in my hands, her voice muffled behind her lips. I fucked her with my tongue until she rode my face, all but grinding down, her thighs shaking around my ears as she panted and sighed like a fallen angel above me.

"Oh, god, Caleb. I want your cock. I want your cock in me, *please*," Lola whined, hips twisting.

I purred against her and Lola shuddered, wet arousal slipping over my chin, and my cock jumped in my pants, begging for me to obey her demand. But first, I wanted one thing.

I licked and sucked and nibbled my way from her core to the soft swollen hood of her clit.

"Caleb!" Lola cried, hips jumping as I clasped my lips around her clit and sucked hard. I tightened my grip on one of her thighs and slipped the other between her thighs, pumping and twisting two fingers at her opening. Lola's shout was a rush of victory as she clamped down around my fingers and bucked softly against my mouth.

She fell back, her knees buckling, and I jumped up quickly, catching her waist and tossing her onto the bed. Her skirt was up, exposing her now pink and juicy pussy, and my hands fell to my waistband, tugging hard at my button and zipper.

Lola giggled, and the sound cut through some of the alpha fog in my head, making me stop and smile at her.

"You have to undress," Lola said, grinning and wiggling to sit up. "And you're not tearing this dress like you did my nice underwear. Look at you, you look feral."

I shook myself. She was right. I was acting like an unbonded alpha. Which reminded me to check in on the background feelings of my bondmates. Leo was amused, as if he'd been tuned in to my moods already, but Rake was…busy. Probably with Cyrus, based on the high energy thrill I was getting from him.

Lola was sitting up on the bed, her blush still bright as she watched me in my stupor, and reached behind herself to unbuckle her dress.

“I think I could spend all of tonight with my face between your thighs,” I confessed, throwing my tuxedo jacket behind me on the floor and moving quickly to the buttons of my shirt.

“I think that would be a terrible waste of that tent you’re pitching,” Lola said, her grin so wide and bright, it made my heart actually ache. I wanted to feel her happiness, her joy at being with me. I’d never imagined how suddenly I might want a bond with Lola, and how badly. She wasn’t ready, and I understood that, but it would be torture in the meantime to wait.

My hands stalled as Lola unzipped the waist of her dress and then shimmied it down her hips, wiggling her way out of the skirt by falling backward on the bed, the sweetest and most decadently sexual picture. I kicked my way out of my pants, not giving Lola a chance to look her fill before I was on the bed, tugging away her dress and throwing it back to join my own pile.

Lola laughed, her breasts and stomach jumping as I climbed over her, the chains of Cyrus' gifted necklace sliding over her skin and stopping at the pert tipple of a nipple. Her eyes were so *bright*, even in the shadows beneath me, and her smile so wide, and somehow it all just made me stiffer, my pulse an obvious pounding in my length.

“Come here,” Lola murmured, eyes hooding and her tongue peeking out to wet her lips, the tiniest and most effective seduction.

Her knees raised and I swallowed hard, staring down at her center as she made room for me between her thighs. My muscles trembled as I lowered myself, my elbows on either side of her shoulders. She was so small that I could cover her completely, my lips hovering above her forehead.

My own strength gave out with the first slide of my cock over her sex. She was so hot and so *wet*.

“I’m going to make a fool of myself,” I muttered.

Lola arched beneath me, and I growled as her breasts brushed against my chest. Damnit. I’d forgotten about those, and I’d barely gotten started with them at the theater. I gave myself three slow slides against Lola’s slick pussy and then shimmied down her body.

“Caleb, you’ve already more than satisfied me. I couldn’t care less how impressive you are the first time you fuck me when you’ve just made me see stars,” Lola said.

All the same. I bent my head over her breast, tongue swirling around a precious pink nipple, and Lola sighed and trembled beneath me. I hooked my fingers into the necklace and dragged it over to her other breast, running the cluster of chains and cold stones back and forth over her skin. I’d get her begging and praising me once more at least. I was determined.

Lola’s nails scratched softly up my back and into my hair, holding me to her as I kissed and sucked one nipple, and then shifted to the other. Back and forth, back and forth, until she was whimpering and whining, skin pink from the treatment, her legs wrapping around my hips and trying to force me to her core.

“Fuck me,” Lola pleaded. “Please, I’ve got to have you, Caleb, I’m *aching*.”

My hindbrain returned in full force, my knot swollen and pounding at the base of my cock. I rose up and Lola took no chances, one hand sliding between us to grab and pump my length, guiding it to her center. My arms shook as I held myself up, happy for her direction before I started blindly thrusting, my desperation turning me wild.

But there was no preparation for that first, easy, silky inch as if it were her mouth sucking me in. Even though some distant part of me knew I should move slowly, work my way into Lola’s heat with her begging for more at every second, the demanding impulse to feel her squeezing every inch of me took over.

“Ah!!” Lola bowed beneath me as I filled her in a single thrust, and concern spiked in my head bringing clarity with it.

“Fuck, I—” I rasped, resisting the urge to pull out and slam in again. She was perfectly tight, already trembling around my length, wetting my knot against her opening.

“Gooood yes,” Lola moaned, her mouth slack.

She liked it. *You lucky son of a bitch*.

Lola squirmed under me, and that was all the encouragement I needed, drawing back before filling her with another deep thrust.

Lola gasped, her hands gripping my shoulders, thighs squeezing my hips like a vice.

“Don’t fucking stop, Caleb!” she said, words broken and just a hint of a laugh.

I growled and started bucking in earnest, every slam in driving Lola a little up the bed toward the pillows. She moaned and rocked into the thrusts, encouraging me faster, harder. A thick haze settled over me, not a full rut but something like it, the imperative to *fuck* and to *feel* Lola writhing under me, begging for more and praising everything I gave her.

Her hands flew from my back, bracing herself against the headboard to hold herself steady. Our skin slapped together and I bent down, sucking on Lola’s jaw, my teeth scratching gently, aching with the need to bite her.

I wanted to consume Lola or be consumed by her. I wanted to fill her completely, to take every inch she could give me. My hands moved to her hips and with my next thrust, I pushed just a little, testing my knot against her.

“Oh god!” Lola shuddered, her eyes flying open. All around my cock, her sex clasped and soaked my length, trembling with her rising orgasm.

I pulled back. I needed to be inside of her, completely.

Lola’s hands slapped to my shoulders as I drove in, refusing to stop until we were joined.

“Caleb, wai—Ngh!!”

Lola stiffened beneath me as my knot dug into her, stretching her and making itself a home just inside of her opening. I roared at the sense of her holding me, as if it were her fist around my heart, and my cock pulsed with its first release, coating our union in slippery satisfaction. I sagged, lethargy and pleasure shuddering through me, and finally realized that the woman beneath me was not limp with weary pleasure.

You. Fucking…

“Lola?”

She whimpered, and a wave of shame hit me like ice water.

“Oh fuck, love, I’m so—I’m so sorry!” I tried to lift myself up, and Lola whined, making me freeze.

I couldn't pull *out* of her without causing her more pain.

"Just…just give me a second," Lola said, her voice thin and thready, her hands on my back softening and making a slow pass over my tense muscles.

She was trying to *comfort* me. I was the lowest piece of shit around, and I'd probably just ruined our night together. I sank down against her and Lola shook beneath me, trying to catch her breath.

Bollocks.

NINE

Lola

Pressure.

It was all I could feel. Like a hand around my throat or a cement block sitting on my chest, the sensation of Caleb's knot inside of me was strangling. I didn't want to move or breathe, just wanted to wait until it passed and he loosened and I could roll away.

Like that, Showgirl? Yeah, listen to you whine. Take it deeper.

"Lola, I'm so sorry," Caleb murmured, his own tense frame softening one tiny fraction at a time, the knot sinking just a little deeper and echoing higher in my throat. Fuck, what if I was going to be sick?

Caleb had been like an unleashed beast during sex, and I'd *loved* every second of it, his loss of control with me, his desperation to be inside of me. Right up until I remembered with shocking clarity what an unleashed alpha needed most. To knot.

"Hang on, love," Caleb said, and I could've killed him as he started to move. Every shift made me more aware of that dense wedge of muscle and nerve that fastened him inside of me.

Caleb held me close, jostling me as little as possible as he rolled us on the bed until he was on his back. I sat up immediately, my eyes falling shut as Caleb fit just that little bit further inside of me.

"I'm so sorry," Caleb whispered, his hands stroking over my hips in a repetitive gentle path. "I'm so, so sorry. I wasn't thinking, and I should've been more aware of what I was doing."

I opened my eyes and blinked slowly, Caleb's room coming into focus, the bed, him beneath me. His face was shrouded with self-disgust, and it made my heart hurt to see, especially when he looked so sweet against the pillows like that, hair mussed and lips swollen.

"I'm okay," I said, my voice slow.

Caleb winced, his head shaking a little. "Lola, I…" He swallowed hard.

Except…I was okay, wasn't I? I took a deep breath, and inside of me the knot—Caleb's knot—shifted, grazing my inner walls in a way that tugged hard in my gut. Yes, there was pressure, and a pinch of pain too, from the stretch. But there was no humiliation, no burning agony of force.

Caleb had knotted me, a beta, because he was so lost in the moment, he hadn't been able to stop himself. Warmth joined the heaviness and I sighed, rocking a little on his lap.

Caleb hissed, his hands clasping hard at my hips as if to stop me, while his knot pulsed inside of me. "Love—"

"Caleb, it's all right," I said, reaching down to stroke at his chest. "I'm okay."

And then maybe to prove it, or maybe just because I wondered how it would feel, I squeezed around him, gasping as I realized where the knot hit inside of me while I was on top like this. Caleb's groan was strangled, his body vibrating as if he were resisting the urge to rut from below.

"Does it feel different?" I asked him.

"Lola." Caleb's brow was furrowed with worry still, and I decided that I'd officially spooked him too much to let go again. At least as far as he already had. I took his hand from my hip and brought it to my sex, guiding his fingers to my clit and sighing with the first brush.

"Does it feel different to knot me like this?" I repeated.

"Yes," Caleb squeezed out. "Tighter than Rake. God, Lola, have I hurt you?"

I shook my head and rolled my hips into his touch and then back again, little gasps with every movement. Was it *too* much? I couldn't tell yet if I could come like this or if the intensity was too high. I was willing to give it a shot though. I could breathe clearly while I was on

top, and there was no resemblance between Caleb or his rooms to those hours with Indy.

“No, it—” I moaned as Caleb started swirling my clit in earnest. “It doesn’t really hurt. You just surprised me. Can you sit up? I wanna kiss.”

There was something about the knot, or maybe just Caleb’s pheromones from minutes ago, but I was kinda high again like I had been during the heat. And it felt *good*, making me loose and relaxed. The longer I had the knot, the more I liked it.

Caleb sat up, and I tipped into him, taking his mouth in a deep kiss. He was stiff and tentative at first, but soon he was answering my thrusting tongue with long strokes, his purr rising between us.

“Fuck, that’s…ohmigooood,” I whined and twisted. Caleb sitting up moved him to a different spot, and I had to grind down to make his knot reach where I wanted, creating a new friction over my clit against his groin.

“You like it,” Caleb breathed.

“I fucking love it,” I slurred, nuzzling his cheek.

Holy shit. I was taking an alpha’s knot. And it wasn’t because I had to, it was because I *needed* it.

Caleb’s arms wrapped around me, finding the rhythm I liked as he worked me on his lap until I was too weak and too desperate to manage it myself.

“Fuck, Lola, you get any tighter, and I’m going to come again and this is going to last—”

“Come, come, I wanna feel you. Oh god, Caleb, yes!”

That delicious thick scent of Caleb’s was washing over me, wrapping me up in its embrace, and the orgasm seemed to take me like a tidal wave, dragging me mindlessly into rapture. I moaned, and Caleb took the sound into his own mouth with a deep and filthy kiss. There were three heavy waves, and Caleb stiffened and groaned on the third, his own release a warm burst inside of me. We rocked in each other's arms, losing our balance, and then Caleb regained control enough to move us.

His knot tugged and shifted a little, stirring up aftershocks, as Caleb moved us back into the headboard. He was lying over me

again, but it wasn't stifling this time, and I rubbed at his back until he relaxed.

"Don't feel bad," I murmured, opening my eyes and smiling as I found Caleb's face so close to mine.

"I shouldn't have lost control like that," he said, but he pecked my lips. "What if you hadn't felt safe or comfortable?"

"I'm safe and comfortable—*more* than comfortable—because I'm with you," I said, nudging my nose against his. "Now we know."

Caleb hummed and kissed me again. "What do we know, love?"

I grinned, and my eyelids were heavy. "We know you can't resist me. And we know I like your knot."

Caleb purred, but his expression was somber. "That's not going to happen again. Not unless you're begging. I don't ever want to scare you like that again."

I wrapped my arms around him tighter and kissed him deeply, Caleb cuddling closer the longer the kiss went on.

"Once more," I whispered, rolling my hips against his and smiling as his eyes grew wide. "Please. Just before we sleep. Please, Caleb."

Caleb was vibrating, his purr restrained in his chest. But I didn't want him falling asleep angry at himself or worrying about what had happened. Not after a night like this one. The knot might've been a hiccup, but it wasn't one I was regretting now.

"Please," I whispered, kissing his lips in little presses, my eyes wide and pleading. "I'm begging now."

I realized I could feel the slightest difference in his knot between when he'd orgasmed, and when he was ready to make *me* orgasm. It grew just a little thicker, his pulse pounding against my opening.

"You vixen," Caleb groaned, following my coaxing hips in a slow gentle rocking. "No alpha is in control of themself when you say things like that, love."

Those words were music to my ears.

I GROANED as I rolled over the next morning, my nose bumping into a firm chest. My body was sore—not painfully, but definitely in a way that recommended I call a timeout on my own insatiable appetite for the men I was currently living with.

“Lola.” Lips pressed to the crown of my head, and I smiled, stretching into Leo’s embrace. I spread my legs behind me but there was no sign of Caleb on the other side of the bed. “He’s downstairs making us breakfast. *You* breakfast.”

“Us breakfast,” I corrected. There was no way Caleb would leave Leo out.

“Lola, did what I think happened last night happen last night?” Leo asked, and I finally realized there was an undercurrent of worry in his tone.

I lifted my head and shared my own sleepy smile with Leo, and he sighed with relief immediately, his arms looped around my waist squeezing me tighter.

“Maybe,” I said, grinning and biting my lip.

“Gorgeous,” Leo said, a low warning.

“Caleb got a little carried away,” I said, and then rushed to add as Leo stiffened and his brows rose, “But it’s okay. It caught me off guard, but after a minute I got my footing and…” I couldn’t speak with my smile so wide, and I broke out into a soft giggle.

Leo waggled his eyebrows. “So you liked it? Caleb was all over the place in the bond for a while there.”

“I liked it,” I said, which was an understatement really, because once I had Caleb as close as could be, I’d absolutely *loved* every second. My cheeks were warm as Leo peppered my forehead with kisses.

“Do you want breakfast in bed or downstairs with the others?”

Oohh. Both were good offers. I was tempted to say I wanted breakfast in bed with everyone together, but that seemed like an ask.

“Downstairs. After a quick shower, I think,” I said, moving to get up.

“Um…” I paused at Leo’s hesitation, and he shrugged. “If you can stand to wait a bit, it’ll give Caleb a nice little ego boost to have you smelling like him around the others. Up to you of course.”

“Oh! I hadn’t thought of that. Yeah, give me just a second,” I said, leaning into Leo to kiss him quickly before wiggling my way out of the bed and running to the bathroom.

Someone had already sorted our clothes from the floor, my red dress draped over the armchair in the bedroom. The more I moved around, the better I could examine the residual sensation of being knotted. It was a little bit of a hollow feeling, and I was generally kind of tender. Thinking of Caleb just made me more eager to go and find him, curl into his side and gain back some of that closeness we’d shared the night before.

Leo was waiting for me at the edge of the bed when I’d finished cleaning myself up enough to go downstairs, and he had a small pile of clothing at his side.

“Oh, bless you,” I said, sighing and plucking up the simple cotton underwear to slide into.

“I can feel Caleb downstairs,” Leo said, a dreamy smile soft on his lips. “It’s almost like he’s…humming? Kind of singing?”

I jumped as I worked into my leggings and then picked up my t-shirt. “You can feel that much detail?”

“When I want to. It’s sort of like he’s standing next to me, but also sort of like I can read his mind,” Leo described. He watched as I pulled my hair up into a high ponytail. It was greasy and it needed a wash, but I could wait until Caleb got a nice cuddly possessive hit of our scents together to make him smile. “Do you want a bond someday?” Leo asked.

I froze and my eyes slid sideways to find his on me, the subtlest calculation in his gaze. He was feeling me out, checking to see if I spooked at another mention of my involvement in the pack. I breathed through the anxiety, batted away the nasty words my brain tried to feed me, and moved to him. His hands cupped the back of my thighs as I scooted between his parted knees, and raised his face for a kiss.

“I think so, but I’m not ready for one yet,” I said gently.

I was proud of myself for not pulling away, and based on Leo’s warm gaze, he was proud of me too. He nodded, and I was glad that could be enough. I was trying to take his advice and let the idea of belonging with the pack, *being* part of the pack, soak into my head,

but I still had reservations. What would it put Rake or an alpha or even Leo through to feel me in a bond while I was in the middle of a panic attack, or a nightmare? What would my own self-effacing thoughts feel like to them? I wanted to be healthy and happy, and I didn't want to cause them any stress. I was working toward that, but I wasn't there yet.

"Breakfast?" Leo asked, before nibbling on my bottom lip as if he couldn't wait.

"Mmm, please."

Leo and I went down to the kitchen hand in hand, and I greeted Wes, Matthieu, and Cyrus with a warm smile before sneaking up to Caleb's back as he flipped an omelet in a pan. I wrapped myself around his waist and grinned into the back of his shirt as he started to purr.

"Morning."

Caleb twisted in my hold, pulling me to my toes as his head bent. There was no reservation in his kiss, and I was glad to know that whatever worry or regrets he'd had about knotting me had vanished by the time we'd fallen asleep, bodies still tangled together.

"Good morning, love," Caleb said, voice raspy and quiet. The way he lingered over his pet name for me filled me with heat and made me want to climb him and beg for us to replay the whole night over again.

You're sore, remember? I was, but it'd be worth it.

Caleb kissed me, a lazy and deep kiss, and then lingered over my mouth. "Go sit. I'll bring you a plate."

I would've moved, except he was still holding me and I wasn't about to just *pull away*. Someone whistled at my back.

"I wondered why I've been feeling like I'm walking on clouds all morning, and now I see it," Rake said as he entered the kitchen.

"Well thank you very much for your compliments to our night together," Cyrus said drily, and I grinned as Rake murmured something filthy and sweet to him in consolation.

Caleb finally released me with a firm press of his lips to my forehead, and I wobbled as I turned and went to find an open spot. The last one left was between Leo and Matthieu, which suited me

very well, but I grabbed a kiss from Rake and left one on Wes and Cyrus' cheeks on my way there.

Matthieu's hand took mine as I settled into my seat, and he raised it up to his lips for a kiss on the back, his gaze smiling at me and making me blush. No worries there about whether or not he minded me adding another packmate to my bed. At least that was one idea I was growing used to—that as far as the pack went, I was welcome to form attachments where I pleased.

"Easter is coming up," Caleb said at the stove. "Any family members joining us this year? Mum is staying with my sister."

"I can issue an invitation," Leo said, shrugging and then turning to me. "My dad's a bit odd about the pack, and my mom goes along with him."

"I was thinking of inviting Garret and Rory's pack to join us," Wes said. "They're still new, and they could probably use the domesticity."

"Those are alphas who work for Wes," Matthieu supplied in my ear.

Both Cyrus and Rake answered no, which made sense. With what I knew of packs, once a child had found their new pack, it was pretty rare for them to spend a lot of time with their parents. All the more reason for the pack to be strong.

"Lola?" Caleb asked, turning and sliding a heaping plate of eggs and veggies and roasted potatoes and glistening crispy bacon to me.

Me? Oh. Family. I swallowed. "I can ask David, although he usually has a party he plans to attend for holidays."

The pack was quiet for a beat, and I felt the question no one asked. What about my parents? But thankfully, these guys were kings of subtext, at least when it came to me. Caleb nodded and went to load another plate.

"He's more than welcome if he'd like to join us."

I hummed and tucked into the feast before me, relaxing as Caleb rounded the island, taking his place against my back, his gentle purr soothing away any threads of tension.

TEN

Lola

I was curled up on the daybed in the green balcony—possibly my favorite room in the house—reading beauty blogs on my tablet when Matthieu found me. He joined me on the bed without a word, rearranging me to lean against him, our hands linked and resting over my stomach, my tablet discarded to the side.

"You follow the sun through the house like a cat," Matthieu said.

I grinned at the description. "Interesting, coming from the man who purrs louder than my old cat, Oatmeal."

Matthieu scoffed, but already I could hear him thrumming behind me. All it took was us together, touching, and Matthieu ran like a motor. Quiet followed our teasing, and my eyes drifted shut. Maybe it was time for a nap in the sun after all, feline accusations or not.

"You know, I was nervous at the thought of meeting your parents," Matthieu said.

I flinched and swallowed. I supposed I had to know that wasn't going to just fly under the radar. And I couldn't reasonably go on forever without telling the pack anything about my family, could I?

"You don't have to worry about it," I said. "My mom died a few years ago, while I was still in college. Lung cancer."

Matthieu's hands squeezed mine. "My mother's was pancreatic. About…hmm, a decade ago, I suppose."

He kissed the top of my head, and I brushed my thumbs over the back of his hand. Cancer was a bitch, and that's all that needed to

be said. Except I knew we weren't done.

"And your father?"

Fuck. I really didn't want to get into this. And to be fair, if I'd said so, Matthieu would drop the subject. He made things easy for me that way, always trying to smooth the path ahead of me to offer me a little peace. It was just there was a part of me that knew this was kind of important, and sharing it with Matthieu…well, maybe he needed to hear it.

I sighed and wiggled out of his arms, patting his hand at the soft sound of protest. He sat up as I shuffled and turned to face him, and then his worried face relaxed as I planted myself over his lap. I looked Matthieu dead in the eye and told him what I had never shared with anyone. At least not anyone that didn't already know, like David or my aunts and uncles. Not even Baby.

"My dad was—*is* an alpha," I said. "He left when I was little. Really little, I don't remember him."

I held Matthieu's stare and watched it sink in, a little mystified by what I saw there. Surprise was first and I'd expected that, but I hadn't expected the anger and outrage that followed.

"He *left*?" Matthieu growled.

A deep weariness sank into me when I thought of my dad, and it made me sag on Matthieu's lap as I nodded. "My mom got pregnant when they were both super young, and my dad met his pack after that. And then his pack found their omega. It messed my mom up," I said.

Don't lie. It messed you up too.

I didn't remember much of my dad from the time—I was too young—and it was a long time in my childhood before my mom spelled out for me what our family was missing. But when she had, she made sure to do so in the ugliest of terms. We were only betas, and that wasn't worth enough to a man like my father. An alpha.

"Lola," Matthieu said slowly, sitting up straighter as his hands reached to hold my face. "Is this…?" His brow furrowed, and I tried to steel myself against any assumptions.

"Do I seek attention from alphas to cope with my dad leaving?" I asked, watching Matthieu wince. "Probably. I don't know. Yes. I hate

thinking of myself like a stereotype, but all the signs point to ‘daddy issues.’”

Matthieu growled, and then his arms bound around me, gripping me to his chest. “Finding a pack or an omega is a very complicated pull on oneself, but it’s no excuse for abandoning a child or a bondmate,” Matthieu said.

“She wasn’t his bondmate.”

“But you *are* his daughter,” Matthieu bit out. He loosened his hold and pulled me to sitting up so he could look at me. “Do you know him? Know his name?”

“Matthieu…”

“I’m not…” Matthieu shook his head. “I’m not saying I would do something, I just…” His hands tightened over my shoulder and then soothed down my arms to take my hands in his. “I don’t like the words 'daddy issues,’ although I see the…” He blushed and shrugged.

“The resemblance in our relationship?” I said, raising an eyebrow. “Yeah. Me too. I’m not saying I look at you or Caleb like my *dad*,” I said, turning bright red.

“But to know that an alpha values you and puts you first is a reassurance,” Matthieu finished for me, thankfully undaunted by the awkwardness of the conversation. He hummed and drew our hands up to his chest. “I’ve been told that I need to be needed in a relationship.”

My brow furrowed. “That doesn’t sound like a bad thing to me.”

Matthieu smiled and tugged, and I leaned in to drape myself over his chest. “I never thought so, but I suppose it might be seen as an inadequacy to some. But if what I need is a partner who desires my care and focus and attention, and what you need is a partner who can offer you those same things, then we are not ill-matched.”

I turned my head and hid my smile against Matthieu’s chest. “Thank you.”

Matthieu made a soft dismissive sound, and his hands stroked my back. This was nice. We did a fair amount of post-coital cuddling, but this was affection at a simple and base level, and it was nurturing a different part of me.

“Back to your father…”

“Yes, I know his name. He…he started emailing me after my mom died, and he ended up covering college for me. I never answered, and when I graduated I changed my email,” I said. “He’s…he lives in the city.”

Matthieu rumbled under me and I couldn’t tell if it was a purr or a growl, but I was leaning to the latter.

“On a reactive level, I appreciate your resistance to letting him in your life. I think he deserves that. But I wonder if you wouldn’t find some reassurance in having some point of contact with him,” Matthieu said gently.

My nose wrinkled, but I rolled to my side so Matthieu could see my face. “I’ve considered it, I just…haven’t made the leap yet. What if…” I swallowed hard and squirmed with discomfort. “What if he has kids? Or another daughter?”

What if he had that perfect omega daughter I’d always wanted to be?

Matthieu nodded and let me hide my face again. “I understand. I’m here regardless. We all are.”

I sighed and nodded, and Matthieu and I fell into an easy quiet together. Maybe some people would see the sensational end of our relationship—our age difference, his position at Voir, my vulnerable background—but I felt more at ease with him than I ever had been with anyone. We were probably both flawed, but at least we were a matched set.

I settled, ready to nap, when Matthieu spoke up again. “Do you…do you want kids?”

His voice had the slightest wobble in it, like he was nervous to ask the question, and my own stomach dropped. Was he nervous I would say yes or say no? Did *he* want kids? Realizing I was stiff as a board and Matthieu was starting to get twitchy himself, I forced myself to relax. Better to be honest, I decided.

“I do, yeah.” The pack didn’t have any kids, although I wasn’t sure how Rake and the others would feel going through a surrogate. But they had the option and…

“I do too,” Matthieu said, and then rushed to continue. “The whole pack does, but Rake’s much younger than I am. And I think he’s

been waiting to be ready to leave modeling before making any decisions."

I wondered for a moment why Matthieu hadn't already had children, and then remembered his shock at my own father. He'd assumed my mom had been a bondmate, that my dad had some expectation of permanence before getting my mom pregnant, because that was the kind of man Matthieu was.

"You'll be a good dad," I said.

Matthieu purred and relaxed, squeezing me a little closer. "It will happen when it's time."

"YOU NERVOUS?" Wes asked as I fidgeted in his front seat outside the Stanmore.

I glanced at him out of the corner of my eye, and he laughed lightly. Of course I was nervous. I'd just been fired a week ago, and now I was coming back to the entire office knowing that I was in some way responsible for the major upheaval of the magazine.

"Just remember this isn't your only opportunity for work," Wes said.

I nodded and released one long breath. "I know. But I think it's my favorite one."

Wes hummed with agreement, and I shifted on the bench seat to look more closely at him, struck again by the pure *strength* that Wes was made of. He was so calm and quiet, not to mention built like a boulder. Warmth slipped through me and I leaned across the seats, noting the second that Wes stiffened, his pupils growing just the slightest bit as I got closer.

I paused and grinned. "Are you scared of me?"

"Not the word I'd use, sweetheart," Wes said, words throaty and deep.

I slid across the bench seat just an inch or two. "You know you don't have to hold back quite so much?"

Considering our scorching kiss in the gym, and the handful of sweeter ones I'd grabbed in the week since, I'd expected Wes to

make a little more forward motion with me. Matthieu and Caleb had both thoroughly unraveled in a fairly quick amount of time, but Wes' control seemed to be far stricter.

His eyes narrowed a little bit, almost like he knew I was *trying* to tempt him. And god, I totally was. Except I didn't feel like such a shit about chasing *this* alpha. He deserved to have a woman panting after him, and if no one else was going to do it, I would *gladly* take on the responsibility.

"I think I like you in the driver's seat of this, Lola," Wes said, cocking an eyebrow at me. "So maybe you're the one holding back."

Well, that was just a challenge. I closed the distance between us, grabbing Wes' broad face in my hands and dragging his mouth to mine for a fierce, deep kiss. His purr thrummed immediately, heavy hands grabbing me by the waist, but he didn't pull or push. Wes just held me as I licked and kissed my way into his mouth, the vibration of his chest growing louder by the second as I arched against him.

A car honked behind us and I jumped in my seat, pulling away and getting a full look of Wes' hungry expression, his eyes hooded and nostrils flaring slightly.

"Get to work, sweetheart," Wes growled.

"You get to work," I volleyed back, grinning.

"I will when you're done with me."

Oof, that really made me not want to be done with Wes. But the taxis would probably riot, and the Stanmore might have us towed.

"For now," I said, laughing as Wes' tongue flicked over his bottom lip, catching a taste of me. I slipped back to the car door, grabbing my purse.

"It's gonna be Danny who picks you up today. And Matt too, if you're ready for that," Wes said.

Ready to be seen leaving work with the CEO of Voir? Ehn, fuck it. It's not like it wasn't what everyone was already whispering about. I shrugged, and Wes nodded as I left the car.

I was getting stares as I entered the Stanmore, although to be fair, that might've had more to do with my vivid blue trench coat than any notoriety. But when I walked into the office, there was no mistaking it. Every set of eyes were turned in my direction. Daze was gone—she was one of Wendy's pets, and I knew she'd been looking

at a better position than receptionist—and in her place was the only unfamiliar face who didn't pay more mind than to glance up. New hire. Well, at least for the next couple hours there was one person who didn't know who I was.

"Hi, Lola!" A young man with fire orange hair and black gauges in his ears waved with a tight smile as I passed him in the hall.

"H-hey!" I answered too late. Did I know him?

Every window I passed, people corrected their expressions into some kind of smile. Oh my god. Did these people think I held some kind of power over their jobs because I was dating Matthieu and the pack? *Did I* have some power? If I did, it would be a violation of my relationship to even try using it, and totally uncomfortable for me.

Although, you kind of assisted Zane in keeping his job, didn't you? I'd promised myself I'd be walking into the offices with my chin held high, but now I wondered if it wouldn't have been better to adopt some kind of disguise. This was awkward as hell.

I took a deep breath, returned smiles and waves as demurely as I could, and hauled ass to my own office. *Please let it not be weird. Please let it not be weird. Please—*

"Woman, you have created some kind of storm in here," Anna greeted me with wide eyes. Corey laughed nervously at her own desk, and I glanced to the far end of the room. No sign of Zane.

I shut the door behind me, the one we usually left open, and sagged against it. I couldn't quite read the tone of the room yet, and I made a rough guess at how to greet them.

"It honestly wasn't *entirely* my fault," I said, raising my hands up in surrender.

Anna smirked. "No, I know. There's a lot going around, but the only one that actually makes any sense is that Wendy scouted you for her new project thing without realizing you were dating the fucking CEO of Voir's pack."

"Not the *whole* pack," I hedged. Not yet at least.

Anna laughed at that and shook her head. Thank god for Anna. She was cool as hell.

"I'm glad you came back," Corey said, simple and sweet as ever.

I sighed and nodded. "I am really glad to be back actually. Not super excited about everyone looking at me like they think I could

get them fired, but—”

Anna raised an eyebrow. “Couldn’t you?”

I pulled my trench coat off, leaving the safety of the door and heading for my usual desk spot. “Not as far as I’m concerned. I work at *Designate*. I am in a relationship outside of *Designate*. All I did was take information to my boss.” That was mostly all I did. “Zane’s not in yet?”

The door opened and I turned to find Zane, pale and nervous, visibly gulping at the sight of me. He stood, frozen, eyes darting between the three of us, and I hesitated.

“Anyone seen Maureen yet?” I asked, settling on ignoring the elephant of Betty’s absence for the moment.

Zane stepped inside and left the door hanging open. “I just saw her walk in. Literally shaking in my boots.” Maureen probably wasn’t the only reason.

“You met her at fashion week, right?” Corey asked me.

“Yeah. She’s…like abrupt, but in a good way. I’m excited to see how she’s going to jump into this setting.”

Zane slid into his own usual chair, leaving one empty space between us where Betty would’ve been. He kept looking at me out of the corner of his eyes, and I realized that between the two of us, he was probably sweating harder than I was right now.

“I’m glad you’re here,” I said, with as little extra meaning added to it as I could manage.

Zane sighed and rolled his shoulders, loosening in his seat. “Me too. Corporate espionage is all fun and games until it comes time to jump a ship, and you realize you actually kind of liked where you were. Like, god, working from home? I don’t need to see that much of my roommates. And what am I going to do for lunch? *Cook*?”

I snorted and rolled my eyes, and Zane cracked a half-smile before the tiny and terrifying Maureen stepped into our office, eyes glaring through thick glasses. She gave me a brief nod, more like she was accounting that I was actually here than greeting me, and then turned to the others.

“Okay, we’re getting started immediately. Every morning until I say otherwise come in here, drop your things off, and then get to the conference room,” Maureen said in a quick snap. She shook her

head at Zane, who'd started to rise from his seat. "Not now, obviously, I'm already here. We're scrapping these three projects, I hate them," she said, raising three of our recent mock-ups. "I want at least one of these replaced with a *strong* men's look. Talk amongst yourselves here for…forty minutes should be enough, and then come to my office with solutions."

Maureen turned and left after passing a stunned Corey the mock-up copies.

Zane turned to me with enormous eyes. "I thought you said abrupt in a *good* way?" he whispered.

I laughed and pushed my rolling chair over to Corey so we could start working.



OKAY, one last phone call, but I'm almost done. Meet you in the car.

I glanced at the text from Matthieu, lips quirking. Maybe I should've planned to ride home alone. I had a feeling that 'almost done' for Matthieu was probably longer than he realized. I hadn't seen much of him at work yet, but I got the impression that for as relaxed as he could be when he made it home, he was as much a workaholic while in the office.

I slid my messages closed as I walked out of the Stanmore lobby and toward the black car at the curb. As I neared the car, my eyes looking up from my phone screen, I started to slow. Something was off. The car waiting for me looked like one of the usual company cars, except this one was ever so slightly dated and not nearly as shiny as they usually came. Even more unusual, there was no driver coming to greet me at the backseat.

Wow look at you, all used to being chauffeured. It was just that that *was* their policy and—

The driver's seat door shut, and a younger man jogged around the car. Danny was a beta, in his fifties and this was definitely not him. He was wearing a black suit, but it didn't fit him right, and there was something kind of…scruffy about it. New hire maybe?

“Uh… here,” he said, his head ducked low as he reached for the back seat, standing on the wrong side of the door. I would have to pass between him and the door to get inside.

Warning bells rang in my head at the same moment that the first whiff of cigarettes and caramel hit my nose. The cigarette stench was on his clothes, but the caramel…

Alpha.

I stepped back, and his head jerked up. “Where’s Danny?”

The alpha frowned and shifted, eyeing me and then my phone. “Schedules got switched, and boss sent me.”

Yeah fucking right. No way would the service swap drivers without telling Wes, and no way would Wes not tell me.

“Ah,” I said, forcing a smile and nodding. “Well, the other client is just about to make it downstairs. I’ll just wait—”

“Here,” he said, throwing open the door and stepping toward me.

Run. Run, Lola.

“I think I’m just going to call—” I raised my hand as I started to back away, accidentally jostling someone on the sidewalk. “Sorry, I —”

A tight grip snagged my wrist holding my phone, tugging me in. “Just get in the car, bitch,” the alpha hissed, his young face mangled with anger, sweat now clear on his pale brow.

He pulled me in toward the car and I knew, without a doubt, that there was no way Matthieu or Wes or even Danny was going to magically appear to rescue me at the moment. I dug my heels into the sidewalk, glad I was wearing some solid chunky boots, and jammed the heel of my free hand up toward the alpha. I missed his nose, but I hit his jaw hard enough to make my wrist scream and him growl.

“Let me *go*,” I snapped, yanking on my other hand, and kicking out with one leg.

“Fucking bitch!”

My hand slipped free with a throbbing pain, but my cell phone clattered to the ground. It didn’t matter, I had *one* shot to get away. I twisted on foot and took off at a run, weaving through the pedestrians on the sidewalk. How far would he follow me? Would he leave the car? I forced myself to remember to breathe and tried to

move faster, nearly tripping over my own feet. There was a subway station around the block. If I could get there…but what if he did follow me and made it all the way onto the train? Could I circle back to the Stanmore to meet Matthieu, or would this alpha still be there?

I glanced over my shoulder as I rounded the corner and bit off my own curse. He was there, pushing through the crowd.

Just run.

My boots felt like anchors on my feet, and I was officially going to embrace the trend of sneakers as fashion, just as soon as I got somewhere safe. Fuck heels. Fuck boots that weighed three pounds. Also, I was going to start running in the gym because my lungs were *burning*.

The faster I ran, the quicker people hurried to get out of my way. When I turned the next corner, the alpha was still there but farther back, trying to run his way around a mother and a stroller.

This was Indy. Not him exactly, but one of his new cronies. First my apartment. Now where I worked. Did he know where the pack lived? I should've run to Wes' office instead of the subway, and I had no way of reaching out to any of the guys without my cellphone. If anything happened…

Just run, Lola.

I all but fell down the stairs and into the subway, scrambling through receipts and chapsticks in search of my neglected subway pass. *Please let there be money on it, please let there be money*.

I panted and sagged as the light turned green on the turnstile, looking over my shoulder as I pushed through. No sign of him yet. What if he arrived while I was waiting for a train? What could he do in front of others?

I fought my way out of my blue coat, turning it inside out so it was mostly black lining, hoping he might miss me at first glance without it on. My hair was up, and I tugged it free of the twist, letting it fall around my face as I took another set of stairs down onto the platform that would take me toward Uptown. My heart raced at the sound of the rushing wheels on tracks at the end of the tunnel. I might make it…as long as he didn't reach me first.

I walked as fast as I could, squeezing around the other people on the platform, refusing to look backward, just trying to put as much

distance between myself and the alpha who was after me. Could I fight him again? I'd mostly caught him by surprise the first time.

Yeah, but Wes is going to be proud.

Tears stung my eyes, and I swallowed hard as the wind picked up with the arrival of the train.

You lucky bitch, I thought. I waited, rising on my aching toes and trying to spot the little alpha asshole on the platform. The doors opened in front of me, and I waited. Would he get on if he saw me come down here? I could miss him that way too.

It wasn't until the doors were chiming and ready to close that I saw the alpha racing down the steps. I dove for the doors, halfway in when they hit my chest and made me cry out, the rest of the riders staring at the indecisive idiot who'd waited until the last second. I pushed my way in, and they slid shut behind me. A soft ding and then a moment later, a blissful jerk forward.

Safe. I thought I was safe. The train headed toward the stairs and I held my breath, standing at the window. There. He was glaring at the windows, scanning them quickly, searching for me, and I whipped my back to him as the train pulled out of the station.

Matthieu is going to lose his damn mind, I thought.

ELEVEN

Lola

Every step I took through the neighborhood, navigating my way back to the pack's house by walking streets I usually saw from the inside of a car, came with the sound of my own racing heart pounding in my ears. Did Indy know how to find me here too? Would I even get to make it safely inside, or would he grab me from under a shadow at the last moment?

Stupid fucking phone on the stupid fucking sidewalk. Why hadn't I run inside the Stanmore? Except the doors were full of men and women squeezing their way *out* not in, and that alpha might've dragged me back to the car without anyone bothering to blink. Sometimes I loved the apathy of the city, but right now I was cold and anxious, and I just wanted to—

There. The house was there. My steps grew quick, and I ignored the persistent throb of my feet complaining in my boots as I picked up my pace until I was jogging up to the gate. Which was locked. Damnit.

I hit the buzzer, staring up at the house and pretending I didn't feel the weight of imaginary eyes on my back. A figure moved on the second story, standing in the landing, tall and straight with hair at odd angles. Caleb.

I whimpered as he disappeared from view, others rushing into the window. The gate clicked, and I pushed forward, running up to the front of the house just as the doors opened and Caleb came racing down the steps.

“Lola.” One gasp of my name and then I was in the air, braced tight to Caleb’s chest. I could hear the others, Rake and Leo’s voices noisy from inside, and Caleb turned, carrying me dangling from his arms, up the rest of the steps and into the house. “Love, we’ve been mad with worry. Call the others,” he shouted past my head. He shut the door with his foot as I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and pressed my face firmly to his throat.

“Lola!”

Caleb didn’t seem interested in setting me down, which was fine with me because I was *tired* now and gasping, and I wasn’t sure if it was to fight off tears or to finally catch my breath for the first time in an hour.

Leo appeared at my back as we made it to the bottom of the stairs, his arms wrapping around Caleb and I both.

“Is Rake—”

“He’s on the phone with Matthieu now. Lola, are you all right?”

I took a deep breath, pushing on Caleb’s shoulders until he set me back on my feet and I was able to turn. Rake was at the top of the landing in front of the painting of the angel, phone to his ear and brow folded with worry. Leo’s hands swept through my sweaty strands of hair as I nodded.

“I’m okay. Just…I’m shaken is all.”

Leo raised my wrist, pushing the sleeve of my coat back to reveal the growing bruise marks, his face locked in anger.

“Hey,” I said, tipping my head to bump gently against his. “I’m here. I’m okay. I lost my phone while I was getting away.”

Leo leaned in, pressing a long, gentle kiss to my cheekbone. His struggle was palpable, tension radiating off of him in waves, and Caleb loosened his hold on me, allowing me to wrap Leo up in a tight embrace.

“I hate this,” he whispered in my ear, arms just shy of crushing as they wrapped around my ribs. “Stanmore security caught the tail end of your struggle, but for an entire hour we thought he had you.”

“I couldn’t decide between focusing on getting back here or finding some way of calling you,” I said. There was no signal in the subway, and even if I had found some sympathetic fellow passenger

to lend me their phone, the only number I might've been able to track down was *Designate*'s. I needed to memorize Leo or Wes' number.

"You did the right thing, clearly. You're here. You're safe," Caleb said, clearly trying to reassure us all. "Come on, let's get upstairs."

"They're on their way back now," Rake said, pulling his phone from his ear and slipping into his pocket. "Cyrus feels…a little feral," he added softly.

Caleb and Leo ushered me between them and up the stairs, pausing to let Rake grab his own long hug from me. His arms circled my shoulders, one hand cupping the back of my head gently, fingers digging into my hair.

"I'm okay," I said, and I realized it was true.

I'd fought back. I'd gotten away. I'd made it back here to my…my guys.

Rake nodded, and together we sighed, all three men staying close as we walked up the stairs to wait for the others.

WHEN THE ELEVATOR dinged on the family floor, I untangled myself from three pairs of arms, almost anxious to see the others.

"Lola, wait. Cyrus is still kind of… And I don't know about the others," Rake murmured, but I was already up off the couch, my bare feet running me to the hall.

I was prepared for Wes or Matthieu to be growly and grabby, and I knew I needed that moment of connection every bit as much as they probably did. What I wasn't expecting was for it to be Cyrus charging out of the elevator, his expression livid and his back hunched with anger. My steps halted and I leaned back on instinct, a flinch of terror in my chest. I might've run if I'd hadn't already been so close and Cyrus moving so fast.

His growl was thunderous, bouncing off the bright walls of the hall, and his arms banded around me, lifting me from the floor and holding me to his shuddering chest. There was no taste of champagne on his skin, but a dark and low warning like steel.

“Cyrus!” Matthieu barked, exiting the elevator. His hair was a mess, like he hadn’t stopped running his fingers through it for the past hour. Behind him, Wes was twice as broad as usual.

I was stiff in Cyrus’ hold, unable to pick out my friend from this dangerous man, and I held still as Cyrus’ face pressed to my throat. The growl cracked and then softened, Cyrus gentling, and just like that, I was at ease again. I leaned my head into his and smiled at Matthieu over Cyrus’ shoulder until he reached my side. Cyrus’ tensed briefly and then forced himself to relax as Matthieu nuzzled into me on the other side.

“Sorry,” Cyrus rasped, gradually releasing me, Matthieu eager to take his place.

I arched my neck to let Matthieu press kisses over my temple and down my jaw, his mouth hovering over my throat.

“It’s fine,” I said, squeezing Cyrus’ hand before he stepped back. “I’m sorry I wasn’t able to let you all know where I was.”

Wes took Cyrus’s place and my hand, holding it tightly between his own as Matthieu kept a firm grip on me. I wanted to pull Wes in, press myself to his chest, but I was aware that there was some kind of alpha positioning involved in the pack. Matthieu was head of the family, and Wes wasn’t going to overstep like Cyrus apparently had. I turned my head, catching a firm stamp of Matthieu’s lips to mine, and then he sighed and reluctantly let me go.

I made to jump to Wes and frowned as he stepped back, still holding my hand and guiding me back to the living room. With everyone gathered there, I understood Rake’s desire to be square-shaped. Except I wanted to be a hexagon. Whatever secret pack dynamics there were, I ended up settled on the couch between Leo and Matthieu with Caleb and Rake close at hand. Wes perched carefully on the coffee table in front of me as if he wasn’t completely confident it could hold his weight.

“I need you to tell me everything you can about what happened. Do you mind if I record it? I’ll go over it with my guys later.”

“That’s fine,” I said, nodding to Wes and waiting for him to set his phone up on his knee. I started with the car, noticing it was a little run down and ran through every detail—with a few helpful coaches from Wes—of the alpha who’d tried to grab me and what he’d said. I even

told Wes about the hits I'd managed to land to get myself out of his grip, hoping it might make him proud of me.

"I should've tried to get back into the Stanmore," I said, shaking my head. "Or made it to your office."

"Hey. Hey, no," Wes said, sliding forward and scooping up my hands into his vast warm palms. "You did the only thing that mattered, which was get away from that guy. Idiot left the car in front of the Stanmore, so we have that. But I think you're right and he probably has your cell phone."

I bit back my moan, and my head drooped on my shoulders.

"It's okay. Did you have it passcode protected?" Wes asked, and I nodded. "Good. If you'll share your cloud information with me, we might be able to slip in and clear it all out, move everything to a new account for you."

"Lolotte, I don't want you to feel like we're putting you on lockdown but…I need you to have one of us with you anytime you're out of the house or the office," Matthieu said, gentling the tone of his order with long strokes of his hand over my back.

I turned to blink at him, and his face winced like he was waiting for me to get angry or refuse.

"Okay," I said, shrugging. "Deal. I probably would've come up with excuses to wait for one of you anyway."

Matthieu exhaled in a rush, a soft smile splitting the worry on his face. "Right. Well, *merci beaucoup*, I suppose." He leaned in and pressed his lips to my forehead.

"When you're ready, we'll take care of it," Wes said with a nod.

"Now," I said. "We know what resources we have, but we don't know what Indy has. I'd rather not let him have access to your phone numbers or any of my accounts linked to my phone." I sat up straighter, and Leo and Matthieu gave me room to scoot forward.

Something was going on with Wes, some internal struggle. Was he holding back what Cyrus had let out, some alpha impulse to grab me up to reassure himself? Or was it more than that? Either way, he looked like he was swallowing rocks at the suggestion that we deal with my data cloud right away.

"Okay," he said slowly, still holding my hands as he helped me up from the couch.

“We’ll have dinner ready when you’re done,” Caleb said, his hand brushing against the back of my leg as I passed him.

I kept a tight grip on Wes as we left the room, intensely relieved as he let me lean into his side.

“Are you okay?” I asked as we took the stairs up to his office.

“Am I—” His steps faltered. “Am I okay? Yeah, I…shit. That scared the crap out of me, sweetheart. And it wasn’t the best day to start with. But yeah, I’m okay. Are *you* okay?”

I hummed and frowned. “Is it odd to say that I feel…I mean, not *good*, but like I’m just glad to know that it happened and I got away and I made it back here? I didn’t freeze and let him throw me in the car and cower, you know?”

Wes growled at the back of his throat and ushered me into his office. “You have no idea how fucking proud I am of you.”

I paused in the middle of the cluttered room, and Wes paused at my side too. “Show me,” I said, looking up at him. Surprise froze his face and I tugged on his hand, turning to face him. “I mean…I could use a hug, maybe?”

“Fuck.” Wes hunched, and I looped my arms around his neck as he lifted me off my feet in the world's sexiest smelling bear hug. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. I’ve been using my professional brain to try and keep my shit under control.”

“You’re forgiven. I really respect your professional brain and its determination to keep me safe. But I also just need *you* right now.”

Wes purred like a chainsaw starting up, and if he weren’t such a sturdy dude, I would’ve accused him of swooning into his armchair, taking me down with him over his lap.

“I’m a lot of trouble.”

“You aren’t. You just look really tempting to trouble. But I’m gonna chase this asshole off, right into jail,” Wes said, adjusting me into a closer cuddle. “Hang on, let’s see if we can do this from my phone. I suppose we could’ve stayed downstairs.”

“Not if you were gonna sit across from me and not do this,” I said, closing my eyes and fisting one of my hands around the open collar of Wes’ black button-down.

“Didn’t wanna get in the way.”

“I know I’m just one girl and there’s six of you, and we’re all kind of…at different places together. But if there’s one thing I’ve figured out in the past few weeks, it’s that when shit goes down, I need *all* of you. Even just for a quick cuddle,” I said, raising my head to look Wes in those pretty blue-green eyes of his.

He looked… Wes looked *exhausted*. He looked like me from months ago, a little haunted and like he was holding something ugly and festering inside of his chest. This hadn’t even been there this morning, but I had a hard time after what we’d just been talking about believing that this was *all* from my being missing for an hour.

He raised his phone between us, and I took it automatically. “Go ahead and write out your account info. Do you know your password?”

I nodded and typed out my info into the boxes for Wes, passing it back to him and studying him once more.

“Anything shitty from today you need to share? Or anyway I can help?” I asked, reaching a hand up to rub the rough whisper of a shadow on his jaw.

If anything, my questions just made Wes look wearier, his eyes refusing to rise to meet my own.

“I… It might be better if we talk about it another day,” Wes said. “Enough has already happened for one evening.”

Frost ran up my spine, and I straightened on Wes’ lap.

“Um…nothing bad was ever made better by letting anyone stew over what it might be for any length of time. You can’t tell me I need to hear it later, and not tell me *now*.” That just gave my anxiety an entire football field inside of me to run rampant with wild fears and assumptions.

“Lola…” Wes whispered, physically wincing as I tried to catch his eye.

No no no no.

“Is it about me?” Aw, fuck. Wes looked like he was about to *cry,* and that just made my blood run colder, shivers teasing at my back. “Wes, please. Rip the band-aid off.”

Why did I feel like this was going to hurt worse than any little band-aid action?

Wes swallowed hard and looked up, meeting my gaze. “We broke into Indy’s cloud today.”

My stomach swirled like an overcrowded pool of eels as Wes hesitated.

“It was…mostly, it was really helpful. He stopped using his phone and has been sticking with burners since the Hangmen were broken up, but we’ve got a good collection of leads to follow to track him down.”

“But,” I whispered, waiting for the anvil to drop.

“But…but I found a video,” Wes said.

The word was so innocent in itself, it took me too long to feel the weight of the implication.

“Of me. You found a video of me,” I breathed. The world seemed to grow muted around me, my own pulse amplified in my ears like someone had stuffed them full of cotton.

Wes didn’t answer. The pain was in his eyes and the lines of anger around his pressed lips. “I didn’t watch it all. Just made sure it wasn’t… I fucking hate this guy, sweetheart, but if I can say one thing, one positive thing, that shit isn’t uploaded anywhere. It’s just…”

It’s just that it had happened in the first place. When, when had it happened? The more Indy had hung around my time with Buzz, the less sober I tended to be, but even so, there was…

There was only one night I really thought it could’ve been, simply because it was the night I somehow remembered the least of. And what I did was the most vivid parts of my nightmares.

“You didn’t watch?” I asked, a kind of heavy numbness sinking over me, making my limbs ache and my head feel foggy.

“No. Just…when I saw your face, that was it,” Wes said. He lifted a hand to my face and I flinched automatically. I grabbed his hand before he could pull it away, pressing my cheek into his palm and letting my eyes fall shut.

Except Wes’ touch didn’t erase all of the other touches I was imagining in my head, ones I wasn’t even really certain had happened or not.

“I need to see it,” I said.

“No, Lola,” Wes murmured, sitting up straighter, trying to pull me to his chest.

I braced myself. For once, I didn’t want the cuddle. “Wes, I…I need to know what happened.”

“You…you don’t need to see it Lola. You shouldn’t put yourself through that. It’s not gonna make it go away.”

“You don’t know what’s on it, and *I* don’t know what’s on it, Wes. What if…”

I scoffed at myself. *What if it wasn’t that bad?*

It was, I knew it was. The reason Indy had that recording was because he’d been watching that night. The reason I’d woken up reeking of alpha was because…

I twisted away from Wes as acid burnt in my chest, tickling at my throat. Hold it together, Lola. Wes won’t let you face this if he thinks you’re gonna throw up and fall to pieces. Be strong. Be the girl that punched the asshole who tried to grab her today.

“Lola…”

“It’s not rightfully your decision to make, Wes. I need to see that video. I deserve to know what happened that night. It was *my* body.” I made my words solid and hard, my voice steady, and it took every ounce of strength in me, even as my skin prickled with cold.

Wes was quiet, his hands hovering over my back. He wasn’t sure how to handle me, I knew that about Wes. When I asked, he jumped. This time, I was just asking for something really high. If it were Matthieu or Caleb or hell, *any* of the others, they would’ve put their foot down. But with Wes… He wanted to believe in my strength as much as I did, and he didn’t like to push back, to challenge my own control.

“Okay, sweetheart. Do you want me to go get Leo or—”

I shook my head and steeled myself, maintaining a calm exterior, even as avalanches of pain were cascading down inside of me. “This part I need to do alone.”

Wes sighed, a heavy and hopeless sound, and grabbed his laptop bag.

You idiot. You stupid bitch. You know what happens next. You know what happened that night too.

Wes drew a dark screen up on his laptop, and I nearly threw myself across the room to escape the first little glint of silver, one of Indy's stupid bracelets.

"Lola, I…"

"I'm going to watch it in the guest room. I'll be down when I'm done," I said, rising from Wes' lap. I leaned in and kissed his cheek for the sake of the lie, praying every second that I wasn't about to be sick.

Wes' eyes were fixed to me as I took the computer in my hands. We both knew what a fucking awful idea this was. I already owed Wes an apology for letting me get away with it. But I walked out the door, relieved no one had come to check on us, and crossed the hall to the guest room. I shut the door behind me and stared down at the laptop in my hands.

It would be a better idea to drop it out a window. Or to take it back to Wes and ask him to get rid of every trace of that video without anyone else ever seeing it.

Indy has seen it, I thought. He was there. He'd made this. He'd *done* this to me. And he hadn't been alone.

Maybe it was a weak excuse, but there was something in me that wanted to hate him for every single thing he'd put me through, and to do that I really believed I needed to know each detail.

I sat cross-legged on the bed with the laptop in front of me and took three long breaths. My hand snapped out and hit the play button like it was poisonous.

"Her name was Lola…she was a showgirl…" Indy's hand caressed a woman's—*my*—stomach in dim lighting as he sang at a whisper. There was a bang of a door, tinny and distorted on the phone, and he continued singing. He only knew the first stupid lines of that stupid song. *"With yellow feathers in her hair and a dress cut down to there*. *Ahh…she's waking up. Get ready*."

"Where's Buzz?" my voice whimpered.

This was what hell felt like.

TWELVE

Rake

My eyes flicked back to the doorway, waiting for Lola and Wes to reappear for dinner. My heart had barely stopped hammering since Matthieu and Wes started calling about Lola being missing, and I just wanted to see her again to reassure myself that she'd made it back safely.

"All I'm saying is that we already *know* she's pack. If there was a *bond*, we'd at least have known she was safe. Or running, you know?" I whispered over the kitchen counter to Caleb and to Leo's back at the stove.

"You know I am as much a fan of the idea of Lola bonding this pack as you are, but I'm telling you, she's not ready for that step. And doing it as a *security* measure isn't going to boost her confidence about her place with us. She'll feel like a burden," Leo said.

Matthieu was sitting at my side, ignoring his second glass of scotch and watching the conversation with keen interest. I was pretty sure I had an ally in him if it came to it, and I was willing to test the theory.

"If anything, the bond might help convince her she's *not* a burden," I said. "She'll know how we feel about her."

"Rake, I…I see your argument, but I do think there's an element of rush to it," Caleb said. "Lola deserves to feel steady, and I'm not sure a sudden bond would achieve that."

“If I was an alpha, Lola would’ve been bonded by the end of fashion week,” I muttered.

“If you were an alpha, Lola would’ve avoided you like the plague. Your aggression works to your advantage because you’re an omega,” Matthieu said, words clipped and shoulders high.

Okay, so maybe not an ally. Not that Matthieu wasn’t right. Because Lola had been alpha shy even a month ago. I’d let myself forget that with how far she’d come. *Cough, taking knots from Caleb, cough*. I huffed and bent over at the counter, scrubbing my face with my palms.

“I know Lola and I aren’t in the same place as the rest of you, but for the record, I agree with Rake,” Cyrus said, leaning into the counter at the corner of the kitchen, a deep glass of wine in his hand.

“Look, we all know the pack is on the same page, okay?” Leo said, staring at each of us. “But for her sake, we should take this one challenge at a time. Let’s make sure Lola is good after this scare.”

Wes’ steps were clear overhead and I fidgeted at the island, waiting for him and Lola to arrive in the kitchen. Except when he did, it was only Wes. I stretched on the stool, hoping Lola was just hidden by all of those muscles and bulk, but there was no sign of her.

“Where is she?” Matthieu asked, sitting up.

“In the guest room,” Wes said, and Matthieu nodded.

I stared at my alpha, the one I’d known longest, all but my brother. I’d seen Wes at his best when he was in love for the first time and had just started his own company, and at his worst when that first flame had broken his heart and he’d lost a client to his old company. And right now, the look on his face was the same terrible mix of self-disgust and heavy-hearted despair. No, this face was even more crumpled, and the sight of it left me with the sensation that the floor had been taken out from under me.

“What happened?” I asked.

Wes swallowed twice and shook his head. “I…she—I think I fucked up.”

Leo and Caleb both swung away from the stove, and Matthieu’s hands fisted around the edge of the counter.

“What do you mean?” Matthieu asked, rising from the stool.

If I had been an alpha, I would've growled. It was a testament to Wes and our pack that even dropping a bomb like that, no one lunged at Wes. We knew he'd never hurt Lola.

Wes looked like he might be sick, but he jammed his hands in his pockets and met our eyes, his shoulders heavy. "They broke into Indy's digital shit last night. I spent all day digging through it and… Fuck, anyway, I found a video of Lola from when she was staying with them."

The silence hit the room in a single stroke, so thick it was like there was no sound in the world for a moment. And then it broke with a whisper.

"No," Leo sighed out.

"She asked to see it," Wes said, and I flinched away from the sound of his voice. "I should've said no. I shoulda fucking deleted it this morning. I shouldn't've told her about it."

"She's watching it," Matthieu said, and Wes nodded, motion jerky. Wes' mouth was twisted in a snarl, and I knew the anger was directed mainly at himself.

"Fuck," Leo muttered, bracing himself against the island, his head dropping down to the floor.

"Should someone…go be with her?" Caleb asked.

"She asked to be alone and I—"

"It's no one's right but Lola's to see that," I said, nodding to Wes. "And if she… God, I don't know what the right thing to do is. I don't like thinking of her being alone but…"

"But I'm not sure we can barge in on her right now," Leo murmured to the floor.

"We put together a plate of food for her. We give her…no more than an hour. It is her right to… But it is our job as…" Matthieu sucked in a deep breath and looked us each in the eye, "…as her potential pack, to make sure she gets through this and doesn't take the responsibility of what happened onto her shoulders. Needing space and isolating herself are two different things."

"Agreed," Caleb said, and the rest of us murmured assent.

Smoke and the start of garlic burning rose up from the stove, and Leo cursed and turned the burners off, shaking his head.

“Honestly, though. Who can say they’re hungry right now?” Leo asked, and no one answered.



LOLA DIDN’T COME DOWN for dinner. At some point, the shower ran in the guest room en suite. Ran, and ran, and ran. Matthieu and Wes were both in their offices, and the rest of us were curled up together in Caleb’s little library. All three rooms were within hearing distance of the guest room, the entire pack clearly waiting for the sound of the door opening. I was curled up between both of my alphas, Leo on Caleb’s other side, but the mood was ugly. Our entire bond was thick with stress and worry, and it was as if each minute that passed added a cement brick to my chest.

“How long has it been?” I whispered.

“An hour. But I…” Caleb sighed. “I don’t know if it’s an alpha she should see right now?”

Leo shifted at the end of the couch, and I sat up to look at him. “Can I…can I come too?”

I felt Leo’s refusal in my chest like a brick wall, but it seemed to crumble upon impact, and behind that there was only Leo’s honest and gentle concern.

“Would you go and see if you can talk her into coming to bed with all of us?” Leo asked.

I sat up straighter. Leo and Lola had a strong connection. Of all of us, I was pretty sure Leo could ride the waves of Lola’s struggles best. And as for the alphas…Lola turned to them for protection and a kind of shielding. I assumed I’d be the last choice to go to her now.

“She loves you,” Leo reminded me. “All you have to do is go in and be with her. Feel out what she’s up for.”

I nodded and stood up from the couch. I could do that. There were things I was confident in—sex and laughter and parties—and none of those applied here. But Leo knew me, and if he thought I could help Lola right now, then that’s what I would do.

Matthieu was in the hall when I left the library, but he was only standing and staring at the door, his brow furrowed.

“I don’t know what to do,” he whispered.

“Let me,” I said. He nodded, but didn’t move as I approached the door.

The handle turned, a surprising relief lifting the weight from my chest. At least she hadn’t locked us out. It was dark in the room, and the light from the hall fell over Lola’s still legs on the bed. She was on her side, facing the door, wearing sweatpants and one of Leo’s sweaters. She was as still as a doll as I stepped inside, eyes fixed to the wall.

Did I speak? Did I wait for her to acknowledge me?

Leo would go and sit at her side and brush her wet hair off her cheek. Caleb or Matthieu would lift her up into their arms and bundle her up and purr until she fell asleep. But they weren’t here.

I moved to the far side of the bed and slid in behind her, close but not crowding, one of my arms going over her waist to tangle my fingers with hers up by her face.

“I’m okay,” Lola said, sounding the exact opposite of okay. In her head, she was back in that place, I just knew it.

I tested the waters, scooting closer to her back, sighing as her legs curled with mine and her fingers squeezed my hand.

“I think I should just be alone tonight,” she said next.

Fuck. This was the part I was afraid of. Did I push or retreat? What was more valuable to her right now? Being cared for or being obeyed? I had a feeling that no matter what I chose, I would be making a mistake. There was no road map that drove you safely through this territory.

“I know…I know you probably want that. But I think you might be wrong,” I said, cursing myself in my head over and over as I laid out the words in the gentlest way I could. “I will leave if you ask again, but I think it would be better if someone else was here with you.”

It doesn’t have to be me, I thought, but I really didn’t want her to send me away. She’d showered with the scent canceling materials for the first time in weeks, which made me a little sad.

Lola released my hand and rolled toward me, and I prepared myself for her to push me away.

“Fine,” she murmured, tucking her face under my chin and folding her arms between us.

It didn’t really feel like a win.

THIRTEEN

Lola

Every minute of the next day, it ran through my head. Now I knew what their faces looked like. Now I knew what they did to me. Now I knew why I hurt the way I did the next morning. Where the bruises came from. Why I flinched for months afterward when someone reached for me.

I went through the motions of the day. Wake up, shower, have breakfast, and accept the kisses on my cheek, the fingers through my hair, the arms around my shoulders…

It *wasn't* uncomfortable. It did still feel good for Matthieu to nuzzle my forehead or for Leo to kiss my jaw as he passed by. It's just that the good was buried under a blanket of a mildewy memory and images I'd seen on a screen. Was I still that girl on the bed who moved when told, who cried and obeyed and hurt? I'd put her away, but not permanently. She'd only been hiding from view.

Still, I was *functioning*. I went with Wes in the morning to make another police report about the attempted kidnapping. I found a therapist where I could make an appointment for the next week. I did my work at the magazine, and I sat down for dinner with the pack.

It was just that I wasn't alone now. *She* was sitting with me, squatting in my chest and wincing from the gazes of the men around me.

"Would someone take me to my apartment tomorrow?" I asked, drawing a forkful of salad up to my mouth. I wanted my old tennis

shoes in case I needed to run again, even though my body felt weirdly limp and weak all day.

Trapped between two vaguely familiar alphas from the gang, hands slapping on my skin as I whimpered and did as I was told.

"Your apartment?" Matthieu asked in the ensuing silence.

I glanced around the table and realized the entire pack was staring at me in shock. "It's been a couple weeks, I should make sure everything is okay, right?"

"I've had the guys checking on it at least once a day," Wes said.

I blinked, brow furrowing as I stared back at Wes. "But that's so much trouble."

"It's not." Wes was firm. *Retreat*, I told myself. I was sure not all of his employees felt like double-checking my apartment was worth the extra time it took on what had to be busy schedules, but I was also sure I didn't have it in me to argue.

"You should cancel your lease," Rake said, shrugging and taking a bite of the enchiladas Leo had made for dinner.

"Why would I cancel? I'm barely three months into it," I said. I looked at the others and wondered if I was imagining the way none of them would meet my eye. Had Wes told them about the video? Was it only me withdrawing, or were they as disgusted with me now as I was? "I mean, I know we don't know how long it's going to be before Indy is caught, but…I can't stay here indefinitely."

Matthieu's hand caught mine as I reached for my wine glass, and he drew it to his lap, leaning over the arm of his chair to hold my gaze. "Yes you can, Lolotte. We're all hoping you *will*."

"If the guest room is too small I can easily trade with you," Caleb chimed in before Matthieu's words had time to sink in.

"I'll have Indy handled for you in no time, sweetheart," Wes growled.

"But that doesn't mean you should leave!" Rake was quick to add.

"Sunshine, don't be in such a rush," Cyrus said.

I gaped at them all, each of them wearing earnest, nervous expressions. Leo was the only one who hadn't spoken in the sudden rush, and I looked at him last.

"Told you," he said, gaze gentle but watching me carefully.

I think you need to reconcile yourself to the idea that the pack is going to want you to stay.

He'd warned me.

But I'd thought he'd meant…in a few years. Or at least closer to an entire year. It hadn't even been a month since Rake's heat.

Be calm, Lola. *Be fair to them, and fair to yourself*, the kinder side of my thoughts offered.

Are you really going to let them saddle themselves with the girl in that video? answered the other half of me.

"Aren't you all worried that this is…a very premature offer? I've…I haven't been staying here long and—"

"Lola, I knew from the day you first came to this house that you belonged with us," Rake said, leaning in at the table. "I want you living here permanently. I want you bonded to my alphas so I know that you'll always be with us."

"Okay, I agree, but I think we'd better just cover—" Leo started, setting his hand on Rake's shoulder.

"Bonds can be arranged," Matthieu purred, squeezing my hand.

My chair screeched against the floor and I was standing before I'd realized it, the room spinning around me. My hand was still warm from Matthieu's touch, but I was cradling it against my chest, trying to hold in the torrent rushing through me.

"What happened to one step at a time?" Caleb murmured to Rake.

"Lola, wait," Leo murmured, his own chair backing up. "I know that feels like a lot all at once but—"

"I—" *I can't, I can't, I can't. You won't want me.* "—can't just join the pack like this! What if—"

"Lola, gorgeous." Leo shuffled out from behind his chair, jogging around the long dinner table as I stumbled out of my own seat. Matthieu was quick to follow, and in a moment I was caged between them, a flight instinct rising high and rapid in my chest, like a bird startled from its branches.

"Lolotte, not one of us has any doubts," Matthieu murmured, ducking his head to try and meet my eyes as I looked for my escape route. "And there is no promise as secure as a bond. You would never need to worry that we would leave you."

“Because you couldn’t,” I said, high and breathless, whipping to face him. “But what if you regretted that? Matthieu, I’m a mess.”

“You’re not a mess!” Rake said.

Dinner was fucking ruined. I’d done that much already.

“Lola, listen. This doesn’t need to be this conversation right now. Let’s talk about your apartment first. I know it’s only two weeks, but would you feel ready to move in here permanently? Then you wouldn’t have to worry--”

“No. No, no, *no*. I’m not ready. Hasn’t this week made that clear?” I asked, facing Leo with wild eyes and a fist of panic around my throat. “I spent a year completely shut down, and I’m barely making progress now!”

“That isn’t true at all, love,” Caleb said.

“Lola, the fact that you’ve been here with us proves how much progress you made,” Cyrus argued.

“I think we all need to take a step back,” Wes said, watching me carefully.

“Leo, I love you, I do,” I murmured, eyes filling. “But I can’t—I’m trying not to be an entire baggage car, I'm honestly not, but I can’t put everything I’m carrying on this pack.”

“Lola, you are not a burden,” Matthieu said in my ear.

“I am a burden to *myself*,” I snapped, eyes squeezing shut. “Just try and imagine what you guys would’ve gone through if you’d been bonded to me last night!”

“We would’ve known you were safe as you came home,” Rake said, rising.

“And you would’ve felt everything I felt while I watched that fucking video!” I shouted back, silencing the men around me. I opened my eyes again and stared at them each in turn. “You have no idea,” I said, voice breaking and my head shaking. “And I don’t *want* you to. Can’t you understand I want to…to feel *good* for all of you? But some days I just can’t. Right now *I can’t*.”

“The bond isn’t about what you can bring to us, Lola,” Caleb said.

“It *should* be. This whole thing between us is so uneven, I’m just constantly leaning on all of you—”

“So lean on us, Lola!” Matthieu answered, finally losing his cool. I jumped at his bark, and he hissed, turning away and covering his

face. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I just—this can be easy, darling. It really can.”

“Not for me,” I whispered, shoulders rising high. *I’m trying to help you, Matthieu*.

Leo’s touch was faint on my arm and he turned me slowly. “I know this is overwhelming you. But listen, a bond is not a one-way street, and in spite of the direction of this conversation,” he bit out, glaring at Matthieu and then Rake, “that doesn’t have to be a hurdle we jump right now. *When* that time comes, and you feel ready, I can honestly say that burdens are easier to carry with more than one set of hands.”

I shook my head, and he hushed me, squeezing my arm gently and making me pause. “Just think long term. We are dead set on you living here with us and being a part of this pack in whatever way you are willing. And if you want that too, then we’ll take it from there.”

It sounded really simple, but right now it felt like the world’s most complicated puzzle. And mostly what I kept thinking of was that fucking video. What if they saw it? What if they knew that uneasy question that was hovering in the back of my head? Had I made that happen by wanting attention from alphas? Had I enjoyed it?

“I’m fritzing,” I said to Leo, and his hopeful expression crashed.

“Lola, please.”

“I just need to retreat a little. I’m not…” I looked at all of them, at the beautiful dinner and the glittering silverware and each of their perfect—perfect for me, but not for *her*—faces. “I’m listening, okay? And I will try to…to deal with my hang-ups and come back ready to let us move forward.”

“Come back?” Matthieu asked.

I swallowed and turned to face him, hit by the raw grief of his expression. He’d offered me *a bond,* and I'd thrown right back at him… All the more reason to get my head on straight.

“Just a little bit of space, please,” I whispered. “If I’m here, it’s going to feel like pressure every time I’m with one of you. I need to just back up and sort through this for myself.”

Leo huffed, stumbling back and hitting the wall, his face vacant as he raised eyes to the ceiling. Rake looked gutted, falling back into his chair. Was I making a mistake, or was *I* the mistake? Everything

was muddled for me right now, and the blatant smack in the face of the conversation was hitting me hard. Would I accept being a member of the pack? Not today, I wouldn't.

"I'm sorry," I said. *You're missing your chance. They're better off without you*. This was the side of myself I didn't want them to know, to feel lurking in the bond like a predator. Would it hit them the way it hit me? No one answered me, and the air was stale in the room. "I'm trying to do the right thing. For myself *and* for all of you."

"We know you are, love," Caleb said, a soft grimace in his eyes.

They just didn't think I was succeeding. Fuck.

"I'm—I'm just going upstairs," I said, pushing past Matthieu and heading for the hall.

I said I needed space, and now I needed to figure out how I was going to find it. All because I'd wanted to swing by my place tomorrow and grab a pair of fucking sneakers.

I WAS MINDLESSLY PACKING a duffel bag in the guest room, half-aware of my own actions, when there was a knock on the door. I stared down at the bag on the bed and winced.

Are you running? Leo's voice asked in my thoughts. Yes, I was.

"Come in," I called, staring at my bag. Should I just unpack it all? Go downstairs and apologize and beg them not to give up on me?

And leave them stuck with her?

"Hey, sweetheart."

I sighed as Wes entered the guest room, coming to immediately sit on the bed. He'd been avoiding me as much as he was able since he'd let me watch the video last night. He'd seen enough of it in the beginning, and I didn't blame him for keeping his distance. I pushed the duffel aside, and Wes reached out, gently guiding me to sit down on the bed next to him. Our bodies bumped together as we sank on the mattress, and I was surprised by how reassuring it felt.

"This is for you," Wes said, holding out a brand new cell phone to me. "I…it does have a tracking service on it, but I can show you how to turn it off if you want."

I shook my head. “No, that’s fine. I’m good with you knowing where to find me.”

“Tell me you’re not packing,” Wes said, eyeing the duffle behind us.

“Not for like…not to *leave*,” I said. I huffed and bent forward, propping my elbows on my knees and my head in my hands. “God, I don’t know what I’m doing. I just know that I don’t feel *ready* for you guys.”

“Sweetheart, I don’t feel ready for you either. You scare the shit out of me.”

I whipped my head up to gape at Wes, and he shrugged.

“What if I can’t protect you, and someone grabs you and I let you down after everything I promised? What if you realize that I’m not one of the men in this pack that you want a permanent bond with? I know you and I haven’t jumped into anything yet, not like you have with the others, but I’m *there*. I’ve been there since you kept fucking lookin’ at me the night of that stupid fashion party. Nobody ever bothers looking at me, and that’s okay—”

“It’s not. I *love* looking at you. You’re handsome and you’re so smart and you’re sexy and respectful,” I said quickly. Anybody who didn’t see Wes’ value was missing at least four of their senses on top of being emotionally blind.

He huffed and rolled his head on his shoulders, working out tension. “Shit, Lola, you are not making this easier. I’m just…I’m just trying to say that it’s okay to still feel like you’re in the middle of the journey, and to know that we’re your destination. You don’t have to be ready yet.”

“Rake wants—”

Wes turned, nudging my knees with his. I sat up, and his hands cupped my face. “Hey, I love Rake, I do. And don’t tell him I said this, but at the end of the day, Rake isn’t an alpha,” he said softly, head tipped over mine. “He might want you to have a bond with us, but the decision is between you and whoever you choose. Also, he’s impatient as fuck, don’t worry about it.”

I laughed for the first time in twenty-four hours and rolled my eyes. That was true. Baby kind of was too, wasn’t she? Maybe it was an omega trait.

Wes' hand came to rest over mine, thick fingers turning my palm up, his touch ticklish over my sensitive skin. I could see him chewing on words in his head, trying to work up the courage to speak, and I was happy to wait.

"I don't want to add to this pressure, and I've been trying this whole time to let you find your own way into this pack. But I don't want you to walk out of this house, even just for a little bit, without knowing that I *want* you, Lola. More than I've ever wanted anyone in my life." Wes had to duck for us to be on eye level, he was such a giant, but his eyes held mine as he continued. "I've never doubted Rake was my omega, but I know now that was because it leaves room for me to fall in love with you, for my world to revolve around *you*."

My heart was in my throat. Wes and I had been idling in one place almost this whole time, but what had been growing between us was as powerful as it was between myself and any of the others. And maybe it was awful of me, but it felt *good* to hear Wes say that I was his center and not Rake, a pillow that temporarily smothered the ugliest and most insecure part of myself.

"The video—" I started, eyes blinking rapidly.

"The video doesn't mean shit to me, aside from the fact that it hurt you. That it put this haunted look back in your eyes," Wes said, reaching up and stroking his thumb over my cheekbone. "Those men were monsters."

I took in a deep breath and lifted my eyes. "What if I wanted it? What if it was my fault?"

"Lola, sweetheart, *no*. You didn't even remember it. That's not consent," Wes said. "Doesn't matter if you want alphas to pay attention to you. Doesn't matter if you like rough sex or being told what to do. The only person who can tell you whether or not that night was your choice is you."

"It wasn't," I said, and the declaration came easily and with tears.

Wes nodded, expression open and honest as always. "If you need to go and catch your breath, that's fine," he said. "I just need you to know that I'm already waiting for you to come back, Lola."

I pushed into Wes' chest, stretching and catching his strong jaw in my hands. I tilted my head and pulled his mouth to mine, lips

slotting together, our breaths mingling as we took soft, exploratory kisses from one another. Wes growled as I leaned into him, growing needy and dragging my teeth over his lips, wanting more. His arms spanned my back, dragging me to his chest, my body strained in an arch against him. It was the first real sexual contact I'd had with anyone since I'd watch the video, and it was as if Wes was erasing all the phantom touches I'd been left with.

I moaned and leaned into him as he sucked on my tongue, trying to crawl further into his embrace when I was already plastered against him. Wes' hands spanned my back, fingers pressing to my shoulder blades, and our hearts hammered in rhythm against each other's chest. I pushed, and Wes followed my lead, falling back onto the bed and then rolling to cover me. His breath hitched, and his hold on me loosened as he started to lift away.

"No, stay," I said, my legs slipping out from beneath him to help hold him to me.

Wes purred, and my eyes slid shut at the sound, silky and reassuring. His breath skimmed over my cheek, and then his lips pressed in a long series of kisses down one side of my jaw and then the other. His fingers tipped my face side to side as he continued the slow path down my throat, over my collar bone. I shivered beneath him, goosebumps rising, and Wes leaned to the side, fingers tracing the path of his kisses and continuing it down over my shirt, between my breasts.

"You said I've been holding back," Wes murmured, his low voice scraping as he grew quiet. "I've been afraid of scaring you off."

My eyes opened, and I reached up to hook a finger in the collar of his t-shirt and pull him close again. "You don't scare me. You make me feel safe. And when we're together like this, you just make me soaked," I said.

Wes' purr rattled, and he dove down again, our mouths colliding and his hand pressing to my stomach, stroking up my ribs to grip one breast and then down between my thighs to cup my sex over my leggings.

"Is that true, sweetheart? Are you getting wet for me?" Wes growled, two fingers rubbing me sweetly through layers of fabric.

I whined and nodded. “You know I want you too, don’t you? I know I’m a mess right now—”

“You’re not a mess,” Wes said, nipping my bottom lip.

“But I’m not confused about how I feel about you, about the pack,” I finished, my eyes wide even as I squirmed my hips against his teasing fingers.

“I know, sweetheart. Tonight’s conversation didn’t go the way any of us wanted. Don’t worry about that right now, just let me touch you,” Wes rasped, ducking his head for a deep and thorough kiss.

He swallowed my sighs and moans, my body shuddering against him as his hand left my core to slip up beneath my sweater, tugging down the cup of my bra to pinch playfully at my nipple. I gasped against his lips, my own touch traveling under his shirt.

“Holy muscles, Batman,” I murmured, pulling away from the kiss.

Wes choked on his own laugh as I wrestled his shirt up his stomach, revealing a chiseled set of abs and pecs that I kind of wanted to squeeze the way Wes had been holding my own breasts. Except when I did, they were tight and firm.

“Cut it out,” Wes laughed, grinning above me, his smile brushing dark cobwebs out of my head.

“I can’t. Your chest is a siren call. God, Wes, who let you wear shirts? It’s a crime.”

Wes growled and caught my hand that had been petting the ridges of his eight-pack, pushing it above my head and pinning it there. “This okay?” he asked.

I smiled that he was careful enough to check in with me, and brave enough to try and dominate me, especially after our conversation. Wes might’ve been holding back for a while, but he’d been using that time to observe me.

“Yeah, I mean, I miss your abs but—mmph!”

Wes turned the kiss into a fierce claiming, one of my hands trapped and the other free to wrap around his shoulders, holding him to me as I let him take charge. Finally, my- this alpha was letting loose again, giving me more of what I’d only had a taste of in the gym that night. His teeth scratched over my bottom lip, biting and kissing down over my jaw to my throat, worrying the muscles of my

shoulder in a soft bite. His free hand returned to my stomach with soft taps of his fingers over my ribs.

“Wes, please,” I whispered.

“I know, sweetheart. I wanna see you falling apart just as badly as you do,” Wes growled.

His fingers hooked into the waistband of my leggings and underwear, pulling them down as I wiggled to help, but he didn’t bother pulling them all the way, leaving my thighs pressed together. They were barely over my hips when he lost his patience, fingers sliding against my wet sex, his growl reverberating against my neck. With my thighs trapped, Wes’ fingers had to squeeze against me, stroking the lips of my pussy and swirling over my clit.

I tried to work my clothes down my legs, but Wes lifted his head and caught my eye, the strong lines of his face firm as he gazed down at me. “Leave it.”

His eyes held mine, watching me as he forced his hand hard against my sex, pressing to my opening, just barely able to hook inside. My mouth parted on a gasp, and Wes purred as I squeezed around him.

“S’tight like this, huh?” he asked.

It was, and Wes’ already thick fingers felt even more so inside of me. I nodded, whimpering as I licked my lips, and Wes covered me again, his thumb finding my clit as he stole soft sipping kisses from my lips. I wanted to ride his fingers, spread myself open for him to take, but he had me trapped. And instead of feeling scared, all I felt was relief. I was with Wes, I was safe. All he wanted was to make me feel good.

Wes’ cheek nuzzled against mine, his teeth nipping at my earlobe and sucking it softly. “Stay, sweetheart. Don’t leave. I know you need to think, but just stay,” he whispered in my ear.

His hand nestled closer, fingers sliding deeper to stretch me open as his thumb brushed against my clit, sparks of heat and licks of pleasure chasing every slide and swirl.

“Wes, I—” I might’ve said yes in that moment, let him lull me into a sex-drunk acceptance, but Wes dove down and covered my lips with his, tongue plunging and fucking my mouth as his fingers did my pussy.

I moaned and raked my fingers through his hair, did my best to rock into his touch as he drove me high, higher, right to the peak.

“Come for me, sweetheart,” Wes mumbled against my lips, and then he hunched and nipped my shoulder, the introduction of a bite.

I stiffened and cried out as the orgasm claimed me in a sudden snap, Wes’ fingers fucking me through the fall until I was trembling. I tugged on the hand he held pinned and he let me free, trailing kisses over my jaw and lips and the bridge of my nose.

“Fucking beautiful,” Wes murmured, nuzzling my cheek.

“Undress, gimme, I wanna—” I was wobbly-legged and winded from release, but I tugged on Wes’ shirt and fumbled at his belt buckle.

“Mm, wait,” Wes said, catching my hands and rolling to the side. “I want to too, but if you’re still feeling like you need to go, then I need this to happen later.”

I stalled, lying on my side with my leggings around my thighs, and one of my breasts popped out between my bra and sweater. Wes, glancing down, seemed to realize the same, righting my bra and smoothing the sweater as he leaned in for another kiss.

“Sorry, I’m not trying to hold sex over you, honestly. I just…I don’t want this to happen while you’re thinking of leaving and all I’m trying to do is convince you to stay,” he said.

I puffed out a breath and collapsed, eyes lifting to the ceiling. Fuck. Or no fuck, in this case. And Wes was right—if we had sex right now, I’d feel twice as confused afterward, no matter how sweet it was. My eyes slid to Wes and found his own focused on my sex, a kind of proud happy glaze over his face that made me smile.

“You’re right.” I lifted my hips and pulled my clothes back up, grimacing at the feeling of cool damp panties. I needed a quick change now before I left too.

“I’ve got one issue with you going though, sweetheart,” Wes said, frowning and opening his arms to make room for me on his chest. “You can’t fucking stay at your apartment alone.”

“Ah, yeah, I thought of that,” I said nodding. “I know where I want to go instead.”

FOURTEEN

Lola

The Plaza looked different than it had a year ago, glossier and buffed up. Baby had mentioned that they'd remodeled the upper stories while making a sort of pack-family house on one wing, but I hadn't realized how much it would change the place. If it weren't for the familiar neon signs, I wouldn't have recognized the LNH Plaza as we pulled up. Relief hit me as we turned into the drive. It was a little easier to pretend that this was an entirely new building and not the one I'd been to on the back of Indy's bike.

I'd managed to talk the entire pack out of dropping me off, another source of relief when we pulled into the parking lot to the LNH Plaza to find it surprisingly busy, even for nearly midnight on a Tuesday night. I didn't want to do the long and uncomfortable goodbyes in front of a crowd. Rake was sulking at home with Cyrus as company. Matthieu had let me leave with a snarling kiss, his hands fisted like claws against my back as I'd slipped away. Caleb had kissed me goodbye with a look of pure injury written over his beautiful face, nearly giving me a change of heart.

In the end, it was Leo and Wes in the front seats of the car, Leo's eyes taking in the line of motorcycles.

"You're not worried about dealing with alphas?" Leo asked, twisting in his seat to face me.

I shrugged. I totally was. "I'm trying to look at it like…kind of a test. I need to exist in the world, outside of the bubble of just where I

feel safe, right?"

"Right," Leo said, somewhat reluctantly.

"Baby says to pull around to the back," I said, glancing at the text on my phone.

Wes circled the Plaza to the back, where I was surprised to find a little vegetable garden in a gated area, and a small collection of cars. There was also a small seating area on the bar end, where a group of leather-clad bikers were sitting and smoking. At the center of the building, in front of an open door, stood Baby with her alpha, Scorch.

I waved out the window, my eyes popping as Baby glared at the car, specifically at Leo in the passenger seat. Whoops, what had I missed telling her when I asked if I could come stay?

"Lola—"

"I'll be back to the house soon," I said before Leo could continue, leaning to the front seat and kissing his cheek. He turned his head, reaching back to hold my face for a more thorough kiss.

"You better," he whispered. "And you don't have to be ready for everything, okay? Fuck, Lola, I wish we could've just erased dinner altogether."

"It isn't just the conversation at dinner. And this isn't a break on the relationship," I said, stroking Leo's cheek. "This is me going to hang out with my friend for a few days. And to think a lot about the relationship, and to hopefully get over this big ass wall in my head about belonging. I'm just overdue for some girl talk."

He sighed and leaned back, offering me a half-hearted smile. "I can't argue with girl talk."

"If it hadn't been for Indy's break-in, I wouldn't have been at the house every night, right? I'm just catching up on the breathing room." I was feeling more level after my time with Wes, more like I owned myself again and less like I was hosting a parasite version of me from the past. But I was sticking to my request for space, and with the Howlers seemed like the safest place to find that space at the moment.

"That omega looks like she's about to take a tire iron to my car, sweetheart," Wes said.

I leaned back and found Baby still eyeing the car with suspicion.

"I love you," Leo said with an urgency that made my heart ache.

“Leo, baby, I love you too. I’ll talk to you tomorrow, okay?”

He nodded, and I grabbed one last stamp of my lips to his before turning and taking the same from Wes.

“Be good and be careful. Still gonna have a driver take you to and from the Stanmore every day,” Wes said.

I almost protested, but he raised an eyebrow in warning and I nodded instead. “You got it. I’ll talk to you both soon.” I grabbed my duffel and tried not to see the silent plea in Leo’s eyes as I slipped out of the back seat.

Baby’s thunderous expression vanished as I emerged from the car, and she bounced on the balls of her feet, arms spread wide. I ran into her hug, squeezing her tight in my arms before I’d realized that even this had been impossible for me months ago. I was improving, the pack was right. I just needed to feel it for myself.

“Bullet can shoot out their tires for them now if you want, we've got a signal,” Baby muttered in my ear and nodded to where Bullet was waiting in the patio area.

“Babe! I’m not *mad* at them,” I said, leaning back and giving her a bemused smile.

She frowned in confusion. “You’re not? Then why the sudden decamp to us? Not that I’m not glad to finally have you here.”

“Come on, you two. Let’s get inside, and I’ll make you both a drink before you get into it,” Scorch said, standing back and ushering us inside.

“I should’ve introduced you to Leo,” I said as we moved up the stairs.

“Honestly, your message seemed kinda dire, and I probably would’ve punched him in the face. I thought they’d like, not *hurt* hurt you, but like, emotionally distressed you,” Baby said, catching my hand.

“I emotionally distressed me,” I said, shaking my head. “It’s…it’s a whole thing.”

“Well, you’re more than welcome here. We’ve got an open studio apartment right now with a nice pullout couch, or a guest room in the pack house.”

“The studio sounds nice,” I said. As much as I was happy to get this time with Baby, I wasn’t sure I was ready to shack up with her

and her six guys. Especially since the Plaza wasn't nearly the size of my- the pack's house.

Look at you, getting all used to mansions, I thought.

"Ooo, good. That's where we set up the cocktails and face masks and stuff. Also, I figured you probably don't wanna hear us going at it like rabbits at night," Baby said with a shrug.

"Baby girl," Scorch growled at our backs.

"What? I'm loud. Whose fault is that?" Baby threw over her shoulder, and I caught Scorch puffing with pride. She stopped on the landing, a short hallway going off to our right with two doors on either side and one just ahead. "So the studio for you is just here on the left, and that door is the one to our whole homestead, and you can feel free to knock anytime. Door on the right is just the stairs down to the bar."

The studio was small but bright and clean, and there was a little table by the window with a basket full of what I suspected were some of Baby's own personal stash of spa materials. In the half kitchen, a large collection of liquors and mixers waiting on the counter left my eyes the size of saucers. Was Baby trying to give me alcohol poisoning?

"You should see the ice cream collection in the freezer," Scorch said, grinning at me. "The budget she gave Books when she sent him was intense."

"I thought we were like…you know, doing the thing," Baby said with a shrug.

The thing girls did for a bad breakup. I shook my head and went to sit on the couch by the door, tucking my bag into the corner of the room. "It's nothing like that. Although, don't get me wrong, the ice cream can definitely stay."

"She likes gin and citrus, but you can get fancy for us," Baby murmured to Scorch before coming to join me. "So what did happen?"

"Umm…we were having dinner tonight and…god, I don't even know how it happened. But one minute, I was asking for a ride to my apartment, and the next they were talking bonds and me joining the pack, and I totally freaked out. It's… There's more to it than that. My head is in a weird place right now, but that's the gist."

I wasn't sure what kind of bartender Scorch was, but he seemed to be having fun sniffing the contents of bottles and aimlessly adding them together. I needed to be careful of how much of that I drank since I still had to be at work tomorrow.

"Isn't that kind of nice though? I mean, I thought you were already sort of becoming part of their pack," Baby said.

"I was. I *am*. I just…I think I've been waiting for them to change their mind."

"Have you changed your mind?"

"No! No, but…" My eyes flicked to where Scorch was finishing up tall glasses with a healthy amount of ice. He turned from the counter and brought them to us on the couch as I hesitated to continue.

"All good, baby girl?"

"All good, alpha."

Scorch nodded and passed us each a drink. "I'll leave you to it. Glad to have you with us, sweetheart," he said to me.

I winced at the reminder of Wes, whom I was already missing, and nodded as he left. Baby was sipping on her drink as I turned back to her, and I stalled by trying my own. Oh no. It went down like fruit juice, but immediately made my chest tingle with warmth. We were going to get so plastered.

"So I am a little bit biased against people who find their pack and then fight it," Baby said slowly, watching me carefully. "Jonah, Scorch, dug his heels in for way too long. So tell me what the hold up is for you."

I groaned and leaned back against the arm of the couch, letting my head fall back. "Um…okay. Let's just go backward. Last night, I watched a video that Indy took of me. A night I don't…I *didn't* remember."

"Oh, Lola." Baby's hand raised to cover her mouth, eyes immediately filling. "No..."

I sat up and nodded. "Yes. And that wasn't even the only thing that happened."

One moment at a time, piece by piece, I unloaded. Poor Baby probably heard what I was supposed to be taking to the therapist. Somewhere in all of the revelations, I forgot that Baby was tangled up in this history of mine, mixed in with everything awful that had

happened with Buzz and Indy. By the time I'd rolled that ugly red carpet all the way back to my dad, Baby was bundled up on the couch, sniffling like mad.

"I should've never left you at the bar. God, I shouldn't've let you leave with Buzz and Indy when you came here," Baby cried.

I winced and shook my head. "Honestly, I… You called David and his text was the first thing I saw the next morning, and it just suddenly hit me in that moment that I could leave. I honestly thought that if any alpha was paying any attention to me at all, it was good. I wanted to be sucking it up. And then…and then it was just too much, and I grabbed that lifebuoy and ran. I don't know if you'd told me to stay when I came here, that I would've had the sense to listen."

"I don't blame you for avoiding me, or avoiding the alphas after all of that," Baby whispered. "I mean, alphas are… It is intense, I know. And I feel out of control too sometimes."

"It's not so much that high that I mind, but the fact that sometimes I feel like someone who just…can't say no to them?" I said, taking a long gulp of my drink, relaxing as it leached away the tension of the conversation.

"Is that how it is with your pack? Do you just give in?" Baby asked, making my heart clench that she thought of them as mine.

If I was honest with myself, I thought of them as mine too. "I think it's what I'm still afraid of. But no, with them I just…I did hold myself back and so did they, but everything about them is just…*right*. It's not giving in, it's just that they keep offering me what I've always wanted."

Baby wiped glossy tears off her cheeks and mustered a smile, leaning forward and swatting my leg. "Lola, that's *good*."

"I know," I said, quickly nodding, my own bottom lip trembling as I thought of the men I'd left in Uptown. "But I can't shake the worry."

Baby sighed and shook her head. "This whole thing…Jonah's mom was an omega, and she left his dad's pack after she had him. She wouldn't bond them. The situation you're in right now makes me think a lot about how it was for us when we first met. I was sold on this pack the way your pack is on you. He kept waiting for me to change my mind."

I blushed and ducked my head. Seemed…familiar, yeah.

“I do wish I’d been a little more patient with him,” Baby said. “You can’t help that feeling you have that says it’s going to hurt worse later. But at the end of the day, the only way to know if something will last is to let it last. If it didn’t feel right, you wouldn’t have made it this far, and I think it’s good to trust your instinct when it comes to pack.”

“I hear you,” I said.

“I’m not kicking you out or anything. You can stay as long as you want. But if being here gives your head room to talk you out of what you know is right? Then you better turn your ass straight around and go back to that delicious omega of yours. And Mr. Wes. How is Mr. Wes, by the way?”

I laughed and hummed. “Umm…also very delicious. Secret gentleman.”

“You smell like him,” Baby said, waggling her eyebrows. “Don’t think I didn’t notice. Makes me feel like getting all close and cozy with you,” she said, feigning a seductive look and rising up to her knees and crawling over the length of the couch to me.

“Swear to god, Baby, if you dry hump me,” I said, pointing a finger at her in warning. But I was grinning and glad for the break in the heavy conversation.

She snorted loudly and shook her head. “Trust me, one of the guys would bust down the door if they felt me getting frisky in here. Dunno if they’d save you or just watch, but we’d definitely be interrupted. Aromatherapy face masks?”

I sighed and nodded. “Definitely face masks.” I shook my empty glass and eyed Baby. “Am I gonna be hugging the toilet if we have another one of these?”

“Fuck if I know what Jonah put in ‘em,” Baby said with a shrug. “Vitamin C and magic? I’ll text him. He said he’d play room service as long as there weren’t any fights in the bar tonight. Hey,” she said, stopping me on my way to the basket. “I love you, Lo. I’m really glad you’re here, and I’m really happy you’re giving that pack a chance to treat you the way you deserve to be treated. Even if it is fucking terrifying.”

I pulled Baby in for another bear hug, the pair of us swaying in place, just a little tipsy. “It’s less fucking terrifying when I have you at my back.”

“Woman, I was ready to bust up some alphas when I got your text. You cannot put me on high alert like that. I have an arsenal of bikers ready to do my bidding!”

I giggled and pulled away from Baby. It had been a long ass night. A long ass *month*, but it was good to be here right now. The only dampener on the moment was the fact that I knew my guys were stressing. As Baby texted Scorch our drink order and headed to the bathroom with a bucket of face mask options, I dug for my own phone.

I’m sorry I left in a rush. I know you all deserve a better answer to your offer, and I want to come back ready to give the right one, I texted to them all in one message. *Baby’s determined to talk sense into me, and I’m determined to let her. Love you, Lola.*

FIFTEEN

Matthieu

I ran my finger across Lola's text from the night before, as if it might bring her back to my arms. We'd all answered, one by one, with encouragement and sweetness and acceptance. I wondered if anyone else had felt the way I had—ready to drive at high speeds to Old Downtown and steal Lola from the biker's pack. Not that I had anything against them. Nothing except that was where she was, and I was *not*.

The elevator chimed and Cyrus tapped my elbow, shaking me out of my head and back into the moment. I slipped my phone into my pocket and gave him a grateful nod as we stepped out into the hall.

"You know she's here today," Cyrus said, and I grunted in answer. "You could just swing by her office. See her, tell her you love her, throw her over your shoulder and carry her to the nearest privately located flat surface."

My lips quirked, and I glanced at Cyrus out of the corner of my eye. "I can't, and you know it."

Cyrus rolled his eyes, pushing into the office with his shoulder. "I wonder if we aren't being a little too respectful of her boundaries. Maybe what she needs is an alpha push."

I gritted my teeth. Part of me wondered that too. But the rest was determined to follow the route we'd taken—the one we'd promised Lola at the beginning—that she would be able to choose when and with whom and how she entangled herself with our pack. Now was

either the perfect time to break that promise or the worst, and I wasn't ready to risk the latter.

"Aside from respecting her wishes, I can't imagine it would go over well for her to have me making a scene of our relationship," I said.

Cyrus grinned and laughed at that. "Maureen certainly wouldn't appreciate it, that's true. I just don't think we should leave room for her anxiety to prey on her during the absence and make her think we aren't waiting impatiently for her return."

I paused in the doorway of Cyrus' new office, watching his back as he walked to his desk. I knew Cyrus cared about Lola, and I'd seen the evidence of his attraction to her, but he hadn't been very clear about his intentions with her beyond that. When he slid into the chair behind Wendy's old desk, I caught his eye and tipped my head.

"You too?" I asked. Had Lola woven her shy spell over all of us?

Cyrus' smile was easy, but it was difficult to read behind the expression. Was Lola an aimless interest for him or something permanent? His outside relationships tended to start in a rush and end with a crash. As much as Cyrus was pack, I would have a hard time if he ran carelessly into a connection with Lola that couldn't last.

"It's different than I'm used to, I'll admit," Cyrus said. "When it comes to her…I prefer to be patient. You don't need to worry. Lola is pack. I'm not about to jeopardize that."

It was enough for me, for now. Cyrus was a passionate storm, but I intended to be a powerful foundation for Lola. Whatever came next for her, I wanted to be the one to help her weather the change. I just needed to convince her to give me that role.

"I'll see you on the way out. Good luck today, call if you need me to strong-arm any cooperation," I said, pushing off the doorway.

"You're my last resort. For as long as I'm at the helm here, I hope to stand on my own merit," Cyrus said.

I nodded and left him to it. We'd already heard the cries of favoritism in Cyrus' promotion, but I'd given him the position for the same reason I'd wanted him in my pack. He was as personable as he was intensely creative, and his sense of responsibility to his work was deep. He would win over the magazine without another peep from me.

I had a private elevator to my own office and I turned there now, my eyes scanning the hall for any sign of Lola. She wouldn't be here, her department was two floors down, and I had no reasonable excuse to find myself near there. I mulled over Cyrus' words all the same. Did Lola need a push? Or just a steady reminder?

She never said you couldn't still send her presents, a little voice at the back of my head offered. There was a resemblance to Rake in the words.

I pulled out my phone and opened my notes. To my own minor and private embarrassment, I had a list saved of things I thought Lola might like. Rake had learned the lesson for us all not to overwhelm her, but I could get away with something more thoughtful than indulgent for the time being. Something she wouldn't expect.



FAMILY DINNER WAS SUBDUED. No one seemed to want to bring Lola up, but neither were any of us able to think of another topic of conversation to hold our attention. Wes especially was stone-faced and lost in his own thoughts. He and Lola had clearly stepped forward the night before, their scents blended on one another as I held her before she left. I wondered if he regretted the timing, or that it hadn't kept her here with us.

"Does anyone want to watch a movie, or are we working tonight?" Caleb asked.

Rake, who had a 'kicked while down' expression permanently fastened to his face, murmured an agreement. My heart hurt for us all. We'd made up our minds about Lola weeks ago, and having her separated from us was a palpable tear in our fabric.

"I'll join you," I said. Maybe I'd let Rake antagonize me, just to cheer him up.

"Actually, Matt, I'd like to borrow you," Wes said.

That caught the others' attention, Leo ignoring his still almost full plate of food, sitting forward and catching Wes' eye. "Is it Indy? Do you have new information?"

“A bit,” Wes said, and then stopped there to the group’s frustration.

“Wes, this isn’t a private job, this is family,” Rake said. “Can’t you give us anything else?”

Wes’ jaw ground as he thought, scanning over each of us. “I…I told you I forwarded any unknown contacts from Lola’s phone to a line I can watch. Indy’s been persistent up until Lola lost her phone. But he sent something today that makes me think he’s caught on to the fact that there’s…well, me, basically. That we dug out his private videos and scratched them all. I like that he’s sweating, and I want to push harder.”

“What about that means you need Matt specifically?” Leo asked.

Wes was quiet again before he settled on, “Budget.”

Leo frowned, and Caleb shook his head. “Whatever it is, the family accounts are yours to do what you can.”

I met Wes’ eyes and saw the urging. ‘Budget’ wasn’t really covering whatever Wes wanted to discuss, and I nodded my head.

“We’ll go over it,” I said. But Caleb was right too. Whatever Wes needed to do, or wanted to do, I was on board—regardless of cost or anything else. Lola deserved to feel safe with or without our protection.

Dinner ended with further quiet, and Leo watched Wes and I with a fair amount of curious suspicion, but when the plates were cleared and put into the dishwasher, he and the others moved into the living room.

“Your office?” I asked Wes, both of us holding generous glasses of scotch in our hands.

He nodded, and the heaviness of his expression left dread pooling in my stomach, sitting thickly on top of dinner. Was Lola in more danger? Surely Wes wouldn’t leave her staying with her friend if she was.

“You know money isn’t an issue,” I said as we entered his office.

Wes shut the door behind me, and my eyebrows raised. He really didn’t want the others involved?

“It’s not about how much, although that’s plenty. It’s what it’s for,” Wes said, moving to his desk chair.

I grabbed the spare and slid to join him. He was bent over his desk, his hand covering his jaw, eyes scanning the blank screen of his computer.

“Indy knows about the pack,” Wes said.

I controlled my growl and nodded. “We knew that would come up at some point.”

Wes nodded. “He's upping his threats, and if I had to guess, he probably knows they aren’t going directly to her. It’s shifted to less about the two of them and more about her and us.”

“So we’re targets now too. And the police—”

“I finally got someone on Lola’s case who I can communicate with directly, but at the end of the day, they’re about five pieces of information behind us, and I…” Wes’ head turned to me. “Fuck, Matt, if Indy gets arrested now, his sentence could get pretty weak. He wasn’t caught with the others, and there’s no statement saying he was there, so with a decent lawyer he’d get off the trafficking charge.”

“And all we have are threats,” I mused, the weight Wes had been carrying now lying heavy over my own shoulders.

“He doesn’t give a shit about the restraining order requests,” Wes said. “He’s completely feral. If I had to guess, he knows taking on the Howlers right now would be his own head.”

“Lola looks like easier prey.”

“And I’m sure he doesn’t think we’re as much of a threat,” Wes said, shrugging. “He thinks he’s hot shit, and I bet we look like a prissy pack of Uptowners.”

I growled. I’d be happy to show the fucker exactly what a real alpha could do to him. “And the money?”

Wes’ lips pressed flat, and his head shook, some internal debate waged in his head.

“Just tell me. We’ll go from there,” I pushed.

“One of the guys has a…contact of a contact. A rumor, basically. Someone we could hire,” Wes said, turning to face me, eyes holding mine and waiting for it to sink in. “To deal with Indy privately, outside of legal routes.”

My eyebrows rose as it hit me. “You want to hire a *hitman*?”

“A hitwoman, actually,” Wes said, all the strain now loose and vanished from his face, the weight of the secret off his hands.

I gaped at him, but in my head the idea stirred. Everything Indy had put Lola through, had left her with to carry—that alone made me want to strangle him. And now the fact that he was chasing her again, snapping his teeth just to feel the thrill of being her predator? Would it really be so terrible if he was wiped from the earth?

“You’re worried about it coming back on us,” I said.

“There are definitely ways we can turn that money around and around and around and hope it doesn’t come back to bite us in case things go sideways, but…there’s no guarantees.”

This is why he didn’t want to share it with the pack. The less they knew about this decision, the better for them. It occurred to me then that I certainly didn’t care if Indy was killed on Lola’s behalf. I’d happily do it myself. Wes would too, I was sure. But we probably couldn’t get away with murder. A professional, however…

“*Merde*, are we really thinking about hiring an assassin?” I asked.

“No, those are for major cultural or social figures,” Wes rattled off, and then cleared his throat.

“Please tell me that’s not in your search history.”

“Nah, I took it old school and checked the dictionary.” Wes cracked a faint grin at me, and I huffed and shook my head, rubbing my hands over my face. “Look, I know the risks. If I didn’t, I wouldn’t have come to you. I just…”

“I want him dead,” I rasped, lowering my hands and looking at Wes. He nodded, and we both reached for our drinks, taking deep gulps and wincing as it ran like fire down our throats.

“I don’t have to—”

“Do it,” I said, holding Wes’ gaze. “I want this situation with Indy ended. For Lola and the others. Ourselves. Reach out…however it’s done.”

Wes sighed and sank back into his chair. “I was both hoping and afraid you’d say that. I’ll take care of it.”

SIXTEEN

Lola

"Another milkshake, hun?" The cotton candy haired waitress—actually *named* Candy as far as I could tell—leaned against the large round diner booth Baby and I were sitting in with a couple of the other pack girls—Tiny and Juliet.

"I'm completely stuffed," I said, shaking my head.

"Can I have like, haaaalf of one?" Baby said, wincing. My eyes widened and Tiny caught my look, her lips twitching and her own eyes rolling.

She leaned over to whisper in my ear, "You think omega appetites are insane in general, or does Baby just eat like an alpha?"

Juliet, on Tiny's other side, chimed in. "It's all the sex. She burns calories like a racehorse."

"I can fucking hear you," Baby called to us, pointing with a fry that was nearly dripping in cheese. "And you're not wrong," Baby added primly.

I laughed with the others, still marveling at the way Baby got along with the betas. And it wasn't just her. The girls I'd met all had bonding marks from their own alphas, but the pack as a whole treated each of the betas as if they were queens of the pack, equal to their omega.

"You know Chef'll make you any size you want," Candy said. "And if he doesn't, I'm kinda in the mood for a treat myself."

I sighed and slouched in the booth seat, tempted to undo the buttons on the waistband of the jeans I'd changed into to give my

overfull stomach a break. “I’m gonna leave here like twenty pounds heavier if I keep eating like this. I know there are healthy options on this menu, but damn are the bad ones more tempting.”

Tiny snorted and shook her head. “Sounds like the way I talk about men.”

I laughed and shook my head. I was cured of that craving at least. In fact, I was really missing my good men. There’d been a little communication back and forth between us today, but for the most part, it was clear they were trying to give me space. And I was trying really hard to make use of it, and not just give in to the urge to grab my bag and head back to the pack.

My phone chimed at the same moment that the back door to the diner banged open and two of Baby’s alphas—Tornado and Books—came jogging in, shirtless and dewy with sweat.

“Five,” Tiny whispered.

“Four,” Juliet echoed.

Baby dropped the fry she’d been about to take a bite out of, her eyes snagging on her alphas’ backs as they stood at the counter and spoke to Chef.

“Three,” Tiny breathed, as Tornado glanced over at us, his lips twitching as he caught Baby’s stare.

“Two,” Juliet said. Books turned and leaned back against the counter, grinning at Baby as her perfume turned thick and cloying.

“One?” I murmured.

“I’ll be right back,” Baby mumbled, sliding out of the booth and then taking off at a run through the diner tables. She launched herself at the redhead, springing on and wrapping her arms around his shoulders. Without missing a beat, Tornado fitted himself to Baby’s back, and the three moved away from the counter, heading for the back door.

“She will absolutely not be right back,” Tiny said, sitting up on the booth seat and dragging Baby’s cheese fries to her lap.

“Mhm, and I would not recommend using the back hall anytime soon,” Juliet said with a nod.

I laughed and finally looked down at my phone. It was a notification from my music streaming app. *The Playlist ‘For Lolotte’ has just been shared with you by user Segal76*.

I swiped immediately, my throat squeezing. Matthieu had made me a playlist? That was so… My heart thumped in my chest. It was more than sweet and better than spoiling me with french fries. This was dumb, how could I miss him this badly? It'd been less than forty-eight hours…although maybe it was closer to a few days since I'd really been present in my own head with him.

"Aw, your face. Did they text you?" Juliet asked.

I shook my head, scanning the list of songs. Most of them I didn't know, or they looked familiar but not ones I'd listened to much. I wanted to dig my ear pods out and listen to them all immediately while wallowing on the stiff pull out couch I'd tossed and turned on the night before. Turns out when you get used to the hella luxurious beds of millionaires, it's kind of hard to go back to roughing it with the rest of the world.

"Matthieu made me a playlist," I said, showing them.

"Ohmigod, that's fucking ultimate romance angst right there, I can't even," Tiny moaned, her hand over her heart. "I'm gonna give Brody so much shit until he makes me a playlist, and then it's gonna be like, country songs and rap, not cool new wave and indie love songs."

"Matt*hieu*," Juliet said, giggling at the airy ending pronunciation of his name. "That's hot. Come on, we like to take our plates to the kitchen so the others don't have to worry about them. Then we'll go find Emmy. She's got the best speakers to play music on. And see if Green has anything he needs us to sample."

Tiny laughed at the suggestion.

IT'D BEEN over a year since I'd been high, and I was pretty nervous when we first stepped into the back office of the Howler's dispensary. But Green was quiet and steady, and he offered me the CBD heavy strains to test, less likely to make me feel anxious or unsteady. And then when he heard we were going to Emmy's to listen to the romantic playlist Matthieu had arranged for me, he'd decided to *join* us. The girls didn't even look surprised.

“I like his taste,” Green said to me, at my side on the couch of Emmy and Chef's modest apartment.

Green was close, but not overpowering. There was something really calming and natural about his scent, but it was more like being in a vegetable garden after a rainstorm or taking a hike through the woods. Nothing like Caleb’s dreamy blanket pheromones.

“He was in a punk band, Washed Up,” I said.

Green’s eyebrows ticked up, and he combed thick black hair out of his eyes. “No shit? I used to listen to them. Huh.”

Green was…eternally chill. That or his CBD weed was just working really well. Probably both. I regretted not spending time around Baby's pack before this week. I'd been wrong about them on every count.

Compared to Green, Emmy—Chef’s beta bondmate—was steely and sarcastic. It took me a solid fifteen minutes before I realized she was making a serious attempt at being nice to me, simply because her version of that was a full-on interrogation.

“So how long have the six of them been together?” she asked me.

“Emmy, why don’t you just ask Lola for her pack’s social security numbers, now that you have everything else?” Green asked, causing Tiny to snort from my other side.

“I’m taking an *interest*,” Emmy snapped back, totally unafraid of growling at an alpha. Her legs crossed as she sat in her armchair and Prince crooned over the stereo. Her loose foot bobbed almost anxiously as the rest of her lounged, blonde hair with fire-orange ends spread over her shoulders. “Betas gotta look out for each other, right?”

“Right,” Juliet and Tiny chorused, raising their beers in the air in a toast. I followed, a little late in the gesture, but no one seemed to mind.

Green grunted and sat up from the couch. “That’s my cue. I’ll see you ladies around. Lola, find me if you need a refill. That’s the strain people seem to like to just combat anxiety and stress.”

“Bye, Weed Daddy,” Tiny cooed, and she cackled at Green’s soft growl as he left the room. She whispered when the door shut behind him, “I can’t believe I used to think he was mean.”

“He was just quiet and kind of,” Emmy paused and then made a cartoon version of an intimidating, stern face. “Baby fucked it out of him though.”

“Did you guys freak out when Baby arrived?” I asked.

“One hundred percent,” Juliet said. “Steve and I hadn’t been together that long, and he was fairly new to the pack too.”

“Brody and I talked about whether or not he’d leave the pack so we could just bond and be happy,” Tiny said, head tipped thoughtfully.

“He’d have done it,” Emmy said to reassure her. “Chef was there too. And then Baby was…well, Baby.” Emmy cracked her first real smile since I’d entered the apartment, and I relaxed into the couch at the sight. Good, I wanted the entire pack to love Baby the way I did, the way she deserved. That was clearly the case.

“Emmy’s talking like they were immediate best friends,” Juliet said with a snort. “I swear Em nearly punched her out when they met in the hall.”

“Yeah, but I didn’t,” Emmy said, rolling her eyes.

Tiny turned to me and shrugged.“Anyway, it worked out. Baby is family, and she did exactly what an omega does for a pack—smooths out the alpha temperaments and weaves all the ends in. Including us.”

“But this pack that you’re actively avoiding,” Emmy said, her pretty cat eyes narrowing into a deadly squint. “What’s the story there?”

“I’m not *avoiding* them. I just…I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around the idea of being a pack member. They’re like…a fairy tale. Or, no that sounds cheesy. They’re very real and they’re amazing people and I just…can’t figure out what I bring to the table, I guess,” I said, plucking at the label on my beer and listening to the new track on the playlist, a familiar David Bowie love song. The longer the playlist ran, the more I ached for Matthieu. It was one long love letter penned in music, and I wanted to wrap myself around him as I listened.

“Betas are underrated in packs,” Emmy said. She struck me as someone who was always ready with an opinion, while the others were more patient and ready to hang back and listen. “Everyone

thinks that packs are alphas and omegas, and that's it. Like the rest of us, you know, more than fifty percent of the population, are just supposed to mind our own business. But if it was just Baby and the boys around here, shit all would get done."

"That's not true and you know it," Tiny said, laughter cackling. "Baby does a ton."

"Baby *organizes* a ton, but let's be honest, she usually gets distracted by muscles. The girl takes sex breaks like a pack a day smoker," Emmy said.

I snorted and shook my head. Considering what I'd just witnessed in the diner, I believed it.

"Stahhp, Emmy! You're making it sound like she's a nymphomaniac," Juliet said. She was curled up on the floor in front of the coffee table, and she reached out to swat at Emmy's legs. "Ignore her, Lola. Baby can totally focus when she wants to, it's just that she usually doesn't have to worry about it. But damn, if I had six dicks to play with, I'd be making time when I could too."

I blushed at that. I did have six dicks to play with—at least, hypothetically. I probably couldn't keep up with them the way Baby did though. God bless bisexuality, it was definitely the reason I could still walk after a weekend at the house with the pack.

"Betas are the fucking shit," Emmy said with an easy shrug. "Compared to an alpha or an omega, we can keep our heads on straight, or we can give into all the pheromone highs. We are the pocket knife of designations."

"Super tricky to open?" Tiny asked, brow furrowed.

"No! Versatile," Emmy said, pouting when her metaphor missed its mark. "So, don't tell yourself you don't bring anything to the table. Like, yeah okay, that pack sounds like kind of a big fucking deal, but you're like twenty-five and you work at *Designate*. That's plenty of room to move up in the world. And if they only have one other beta, then as a pack they probably need you for stability."

"I think the last thing I bring the pack is stability at this point," I said.

Emmy huffed but Tiny leaned into my side, bumping her shoulder against mine. "You never know. Before Emmy and I showed up to this pack, the bar was run like a charity service, Brody's gym didn't

have anyone but pack who used it, and Chef couldn't keep employees around because he was too much of an asshole."

"My man needs me to put the smile on his face," Emmy said proudly.

I hummed and shrugged. None of my guys had been hurting in their businesses before I'd arrived but…

But Matthieu had spent half his time away from the pack with Carolyn, Wes was pushed into the background, and Rake and Leo were both getting involved in relationships outside of the pack. Ever since I'd been staying with them, and even before, the entire pack was always present for family dinner. And I'd stepped in for *Designate* before Wendy could tear it down.

"So what happened to your purple hair?" Emmy asked me.

I blinked and startled. "Wow, you remember that? Umm, it faded and then kinda just grew out. I miss it, but I think I just got used to flying under the radar."

Tiny sat up straighter and leaned forward. "How *much* would you say you miss it?"

She had a predatory gleam in her eye, and when I glanced at the others they both shared the look, eyeing my blonde hair hungrily.

"What did you have in mind?" I asked, and Tiny grinned at me, rubbing her palms together like some old movie villain.

HANDS GRIPPED my wrists and ankles, fingernails digging into the back of my neck. I was pulled and stretched in every direction, shoulders tearing and legs splitting, a high howl of pain ringing in my ears as I screamed.

"Take it, Showgirl."

I woke up to my own heartbeat pounding in my ears as I sat up on the pull out, gasping for my breath and stifling my scream to whimpers. My fingers dug into the mattress, my eyes scanning the tiny apartment unit for any sign of danger. Any sign of *Indy*. As the darkness settled into the semi-familiar shapes of the room and my

racing heart calmed, I realized the pounding wasn't all in my own head. Someone was knocking on the door.

"Lola? It's me, Baby. And Tornado," Baby said in a small, worried cry from outside the door.

I panted and shook myself, rubbing goosebumps off my arms as I slid out of the bed and stood at the door, sliding the chain lock out of the way and pulling it open.

"Hi, sorry," I said, blinking against the dim hall light. I glanced at the alarm clock near the bed. Four-thirty was earlier than I really wanted to be awake, especially since I'd gotten in bed closer to midnight after goofing off with the girls, but it would be easier to get ready slowly than try to find sleep again. "Just a nightmare, but I'm fine."

"You want company?" Baby asked, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "Little bit of a snuggle?"

"I think I'll just shower and find myself some coffee. Go on back to bed."

Baby's lips pursed and she looked at Tornado, who offered her an easy smile, despite the exhaustion in her own gaze. He leaned in and kissed her cheek. "I'll go get the coffee, you two just get comfy."

He left, and Baby pushed her way into my apartment, the door clicking shut behind her.

"You really have these guys wrapped around your fingers," I said, crossing my arms over my chest.

Baby—who had Tornado's rough and sweet scent all over her, as well as a rich and creamy coffee scent—just helped herself to the pullout, slipping under the blankets and holding her arms out for me. I sighed and followed her in, letting her fold me up in a cuddle. It did feel nice actually, Baby and her alpha's scents weaving like a complicated blanket through my head to block out the nightmare.

"When I wake up from a nightmare, this is what helps," Baby said, squeezing me close and resting her cheek against my head. "So you're stuck with my home remedy."

"What kind of nightmares are you having, babe?"

I'd meant it as kind of an absent question, something to clear my own head, but as Baby's quiet grew between us, I tensed. I moved to

sit up and looked down at my best friend as she stared up at the ceiling.

“Babe?” It occurred to me then that I knew my own experiences with Buzz and Indy. But Baby had been *kidnapped* by them. Had they…? Bile rose in my throat until Baby looked my way, her gaze distant.

“I killed Buzz.”

Of all the things I’d prepared myself to hear in that brief pause, it sure as hell wasn’t this. I sat up with a jolt and twisted to face Baby as she sighed and pushed up, leaning against the back of the couch.

“You…*what*?”

Baby stretched her neck and rolled her shoulders, trying to force tension out of her body as her eyes stared down at her own lap. Her brow furrowed, and then she looked at me, jaw firm.

“I know what he had planned for me, but it was more than that. He had Emmy too, and when they found out I was bonded, they said they were going to kill my guys to break the bond. I *had* to get out. And that fucker had a gun on him, used it to threaten me. Like he thought I couldn’t *do* anything about it,” Baby said in a snarl. Her face settled in a smooth calm that Baby hardly ever wore. “So I did something about it.”

I tried to make my dropped jaw close, but my face was numb and refused to listen.

Baby’s eyes winced as she stared back at me. “Are you mad?”

Finally, I blinked. “Wait, *what*? Baby, why would I be…I’m not mad! I’m…shocked. But only because this isn’t the kind of thing you really expect to hear.” Baby—*Baby,* my beta-proud, no-longer-beta best friend—had *killed* someone.

He deserved it, I thought.

“The police said he was shot in the arrest altercation,” I said, frowning.

Baby nodded and twisted her hair back over her shoulder. “Um, yeah. They said friendly fire, they thought. We don’t know if they really believe that, or if they just didn’t want to press the issue with us, or if they don’t care how Buzz is gone. And I don’t regret it, exactly. I just sometimes can’t avoid remembering it.”

“So you’re just…a badass?” I asked, staring at Baby.

Her eyes widened and my lips twitched. My head wasn't totally wrapped around this whole concept of Baby *shooting* someone, but as far as I could tell, neither was hers. She protected herself, her friend, and her pack. And if Buzz was still alive today…well, I certainly wouldn't be sleeping any easier.

Baby huffed and shook her head. "Shut up. I just…I was running on animal instinct. The aftermath of that catches up to me at night sometimes. But Brody does have a special night in the gym just for training all the girls in hand to hand combat. It's tomorrow, if you wanna come."

Considering Wes and I had barely gotten started on the concept before getting totally distracted in…well, each other, that seemed like kind of an awesome idea. "I'll be there!"

"Also, is it this lighting or is your hair like…rainbowy?" Baby asked, leaning forward and squinting.

"Took you long enough to notice," I said, smiling and turning my head to the side for her to admire the subtle shifts of pale color. "The girls did it. It's the opal effect."

"I fucking love it. I wish I was brave enough to color my hair," Baby sighed.

I opened my mouth to answer when there was a soft rap on the door. It opened, and Tornado came in with two full mugs of coffee.

"You can only have this because I know one isn't enough to make you start bouncing off the walls," Tornado said softly to Baby, passing her a mug. For a guy with a name like a storm, I found Tornado really pretty peaceful to be around.

He passed me my own mug and grabbed a chair from the small dining table, pulling it over to join us. "Do you have a lot of nightmares?" Tornado asked me.

I hummed as I took a sip of the coffee. Not quite as smooth as the coffee at home, but Baby'd always liked hers black as the night sky. "I do, usually. It sounds cheesy to say, but I kind of get a break from them when I'm with the pack."

"That doesn't sound cheesy at all," Baby said, reaching out to squeeze my bare calf.

"I used to get night terrors constantly," Tornado said. "I always made sure to sleep alone. I was terrified about bonding Baby

because I thought she'd start feeling my PTSD symptoms."

I swallowed, and my eyes flicked between them. I was terrified of sharing my own anxieties in a bond too. "And?"

"I can feel them coming on, but that's exactly what's great about the bond," Baby said, smiling at Tornado.

"It's like having a lighthouse kind of calling out to you, showing you where the rocks are in the water," Tornado mused.

"I can always pick out my own feelings from his and vice versa, so it's more like an alert system. And then I can try and do my best to just weather it with him," Baby said.

"Now night terrors are more like standard nightmares," Tornado said with a nod. "I have Baby in the background with me, separating reality from the trauma."

Which meant that my worry was for nothing. If anything, I would feel safer in my own head with a bond. *Kind of exactly like Leo said you would*.

"We'll let you get ready for the day," Baby said sweetly, and I thought I caught the faintest hint of smugness in her smile. Had she put her alpha up to this? Talking me out of my fears in committing to my pack?

Well, you're already sort of settled on the possessive there, so maybe it's time to get with the program.

"I love you, babe," I said.

"I love you more," Baby said as she sailed out of the apartment door and left me with a spinning head.

SEVENTEEN

Wes

I fucking hated nightclubs. They were crowded, no one was aware of their own surroundings, you paid way more than it was worth to be sweaty in a group of strangers while loud music pounded from speakers, and you drank thinly alcoholic beverages. Mostly though, I was a shit dancer and not a big fan of people I didn't know touching me.

I pushed the beta girl that tried to climb me back onto her own feet and spun her in the direction of a different alpha. I'd been hoping the next time I ended up in a place like this, I'd be with Lola. I might be a shit dancer, but I'd seen how she moved. I was pretty sure I could learn simply because following her sinuous dancing would be a magnetic reaction. But Lola was still with the Howlers, and I was stuck here on…

Well, it wasn't exactly business.

I scanned the swarm of intoxicated partiers around me as if I might spot her in the crowd. Eve. Our hired killer.

I'd nearly called the whole thing off when I got word she wanted to meet me before accepting the hire. I was trying to avoid getting tangled up with this job more than necessary, and I certainly didn't want there to be any link between us. Meeting in a sea of witnesses seemed like the worst kind of idea.

But it wasn't like I had a whole pool of hitmen to tap for this kind of job. And I couldn't talk myself out of wanting to see this through. Lola needed to live without the threat of Indy anywhere in the world.

Hell, women in general could do without the asshole. And my pack needed to be safe too. Indy was dangerously specific with his warning texts to Lola. He had his little network hunting my pack at the same time that my team was hunting them.

Hopefully, Eve would turn the tables in our favor.

I'd been instructed to wait on the dance floor to be met by a contact, but I was starting to lose my patience. There were a few alphas at the club, but generally it was full to the brim with betas, and I was attracting too much attention. When hands stroked down my back, reaching around my waist, I spun with a soft growl in my throat, ready to chase off another overeager girl.

Spice tickled my senses first, and then the metallic and sweet grease of gun oil. The woman in front of me had a smooth, stunning face, and she towered nearly to my height in a pair of skyscraper heels. Her body buzzed with energy, and her eyes struck like flint against mine.

Alpha. I narrowed my own gaze back at her and then stiffened at the first prick of a knife—one at the back of my neck beneath her palm, and another against my stomach. Just warnings for now, but easily turned deadly.

"Eve," I said. How the hell were we supposed to talk like this? With the music louder than our conversation ever could be, it was pointless.

Her smile was slick, but there was no warmth in her dark eyes as she guided me with a gentle touch. I hunched over her, her lips against my ear like a lover's.

"I don't like working for alphas," she said in my ear, words as smooth as the way she'd snared me in her trap, as smooth as the glossy black hair piled onto her head.

She was slender, although it was clearly pure muscle. Without the heels, she had to be no taller than my shoulder, but being this close to her made all the hairs on my body stand on end. She could kill me, probably with or without the knives. I was twice her weight and I was trained, but she was inch-to-inch *deadly*. Her entire presence was a warning, and even the dancers around us had opened up, giving more space to her than they had to me alone.

“But I’m considering the case for the girl, the beta,” Eve said in my ear. “I don’t have any qualms about killing little Joseph, but I think you better give me a good reason not to make sure *you* and your *pack* never go near that girl again.”

I swallowed hard staring over the pale and slender shoulder. “Lola would be devastated.”

“Are you sure? Because she seems to be fine while she hides out with the bikers,” Eve said, feigning a nuzzle against my temple that made me queasy. Eve had found Lola? It’d been all of two days, and she’d tracked Lola down to the Howlers. Regardless of Eve’s threats, I wasn’t a fan of the woman taking an interest in my girl.

“If Lola doesn’t want to be a part of our pack, she doesn’t have to be. But I still want Indy taken out,” I said.

A little damp drip of blood was all that was left of the pressure at the back of my neck as Eve’s arms dropped from around me. She stepped back into the space the dancers seemed to afford her unconsciously, and nodded once at me.

“I’ll track him down,” she said, leaving me to read the words on her lips.

My shoulders eased. This woman was poisonous, but if she could turn that poison on Indy, I really didn’t care.

She turned into the crowd and grabbed a young male beta by the collar, pulling him into her arms. His eyes lit up at the first whiff of her, and he ground himself eagerly against her. Eve took his jaw in a firm pinch of slender fingers and pulled his face to her for a rough kiss. She caught his free hand before it grabbed for her ass, and twisted it behind the man’s back, arching him against her.

I shook my head and turned away, weaving through the crowd quickly, eager to get away from the scene.

'Will you walk into my parlour?' said the Spider to the Fly.

Eve could weave her webs. I knew her type now, and I was more than happy to serve Indy to her all wrapped up in a silky bow.

EIGHTEEN

Lola

"Look what we just got!!" Baby squealed, bursting into the apartment on Saturday morning. She had an issue of *Designate* in her hand, but her grin dropped as she saw me folding up the bedsheet I'd been using. "Waaaiit, are you leaving?"

I bit my lip and nodded. "I feel like… I mean, I'm having such a good time here, but I know the guys are missing me and I feel sort of guilty."

"Aww, I mean, I get it. It's just been super fun to have you around, and everybody loves you," she said. "But if you're ready to go, does that mean…?"

"I feel ready, yeah. At the very least to be on the path to becoming a pack member. Definitely to not spooking and running away just at the idea of discussing it," I said, shrugging. It was more than that though. Talking with Tornado about the bond had left a craving in me. "I love them, and I think being here has been a little bit of a wake up call. I've had all these ideas about what it meant to be a beta, and this pack is so…"

"We're very equal opportunity," Baby said with a nod. "Except, I guess with just one omega. Although, I dunno. With what you told me about male omegas, I'm kinda—"

"Girl, keep it in your pants. I have seen first hand exactly how much sex you are having, babe, and you are not missing out."

“You haven’t seen it firsthand!” Baby cackled and waggled her eyebrows. “Bet some of the guys wouldn’t complain if you wanted to though.”

I scoffed and shook my head, dropping the folded sheet over the arm of the couch. “Quit propositioning me. I have my own alphas to worry about, thank you.” And just the thought made a smile grow over my lips.

“Gah, that’s so cute, you totally do,” Baby said, coming and wrapping her arms around me.

With the magazine in her hand, I finally realized what issue it was. “Wait! Is this the highlighter shoot issue? I totally forgot what month it was coming out!”

“It’s officially my debut as a fucking magazine model month now!” Baby said, jumping against me. “The pack is gonna throw a party tonight in honor of Seth and I. I was hoping I could talk you into doing my makeup again? I dunno if Seth’ll wanna recreate his whole look though,” she said with a snort. “But I understand if you wanna get back to your guys.”

I did want to get back to them. For days, we’d all been in contact but so careful with our words. I was trying to be honest and open, and they were trying not to pressure me. I really just wanted to see their faces again and tell them I loved them and that I was in it for good.

On the other hand, I’d told Leo earlier in the week I’d try and be home by Sunday night. I could still be early if I went back to the pack tomorrow morning, and it would be fun to spend one more night with the Howlers and my new friends. Kind of like a going away and thank you party.

“I do, but I think I can hold tight until tomorrow,” I said to Baby, catching her brilliant grin.

“You sure?” she asked.

I was like eighty percent sure. I nodded, “I’m talking about forever with them, I can do one more night away.”

AS IT TURNED OUT, bikers and biker chicks had a fair amount of scars in general. I guess that wasn't so much a surprise. What was a surprise was that in celebration of the magazine, the pack had blown up the pages which featured Baby and Bomber to grainy poster-sized images and plastered them over the walls. I ended up with a makeup booth at the bar, decorating everyone's scars with highlighter like a face painter at a county fair. I made sure to take pictures too because I couldn't wait to see the makeup team's faces when they got a look at these big burly dudes with pastel glitter over their knuckles and on their biceps and jaws.

I liked the music at the bar, and I liked that it was loud enough to dance to, but not too much to drown out conversation. The one and only time I'd been here before, the room had been chilly with tension, but that had been Buzz and Indy's fault, not the Howlers. I'd assumed for so long that Baby had found herself with the lesser of two evils, and now I felt like an idiot. The Howlers were warm and welcoming and goofy. Being here was like showing up at a family gathering, although my family had definitely never been made up of tatted up alphas who cussed like, well bikers, but treated women like queens and princesses.

"Hey, sugar, all done making us beautiful?" Scorch asked as I walked up to the bar.

"I can officially say that you will be finding glitter and shimmer all over your bar for the next three years at least," I said with a nod, laughing as Scorch looked stricken by the realization.

"What do you mean you don't know the recipe?" Bomber asked Bullet over the bar.

"I mean, I don't know what fuckin' goes in the drink, it just sounds cool," Bullet answered. Baby was cuddled up on his lap, playing with a loose strand of hair, and I gave it about ten minutes before she dragged him off somewhere private.

Bomber shook his head and rolled his eyes, staring across the bar and calling out to everyone. "Anybody know how to make a Bone cocktail?"

"You propositioning us, Bomb?" Chef answered as the room laughed.

"You fuckin' wish, you dirty old man," Bomber answered.

“I know how to make it,” I said. “Well, I remember the ingredients.”

“Good enough for me, get on back here,” Bomber said, gesturing for me to join him behind the bar.

Scorch slid out from behind the bar to make room for me, and I turned to the wall of alcohol to hunt down a good rye bourbon for Bullet.

“It’s gonna taste better comin’ from her anyway,” Bullet said, gleefully goading Bomber.

“Where’d you learn weird ass cocktails people only order when they think they’re being real interesting?” Bomber asked me, and I grinned as Bullet huffed.

“She worked the bar where I was a hostess before I met you guys,” Baby said. “We did a lot of theme week cocktails to keep happy hour interesting.”

“This one was from our Western week,” I said with a nod, grabbing a short glass and pouring in the rye into the glass, squeezing in a lime quarter. “Do you have simple syrup?”

“Here,” Bomber passed me a little bottle, and I guesstimated the amount for the drink.

“And finally…” I’d seen the Tabasco on the counter when I’d come in, and I grabbed it now, sprinkling it into the mix.

“Oh, handsome, that looks gross,” Baby said as I slid the drink to Bullet, who frowned at the Tabasco bottle in my head.

“Now that I think of it, maybe it was called Bone Machine?” Bullet said.

“Tough, this is your drink now,” I answered with a shrug. At that moment exactly, I saw the man approaching the bar, his eyes on me.

In torn jeans and a leather jacket, Matthieu blended into the crowd, his hair damp from a shower and raked back, curling on the ends and threatening to fall forward into his eyes.

My heart ran like a race car in my chest, and I wrapped my hands around the edge of the counter. After so many days of not seeing him, I wanted to cry or swoon as I watched Matthieu slide onto the empty barstool next to Bullet. Slowly, the room seemed to take notice of him, his energy just a little too heavy for the party. His scent

called to me, tempting me to crawl up onto the bar and slide into his lap.

“Matthieu,” I breathed.

I only noticed the lines of worry around his eyes as they softened. “Hello, Lolotte,” he purred, leaning as far forward as he could over the bar counter.

Just the sound of his voice, thick with his purr and aching, made color rise in my cheeks. I turned away from the bar, grabbing a second glass, and pulled his favorite scotch from the shelf, pouring him two fingers and adding one cube of ice before facing him again.

“My favorite,” he said, but he was looking at me instead of the drink. “I didn’t realize you were keeping track.”

“Holy shit, man! You French??” Bomber squawked at my side. “Jeeeeesus, now even my panties are wet.”

Matthieu flashed a grin as Baby cackled on Bullet’s lap. My alpha dipped a head in Bomber’s direction, raising his glass and taking a sip. “*Merci.*”

“Bar’s yours again,” I said to Bomber before quickly jogging around and onto the floor, heading directly to Matthieu.

He rose from the stool just in time for me to crash against his chest, his arms circling me tight around my shoulders, and his face in my hair. We were both panting like we were winded, when really all we were doing was taking deep gasps of each other.

“I was afraid you wouldn’t be pleased to see me,” Matthieu said, his rough cheek against the top of my head.

“I’m always happy to see you,” I said, grinning as I realized the words were true. I tilted my head back and rose to my toes, nipping playfully at Matthieu’s throat and shivering as his purr roared in answer.

“Ohmigod, helloooo, *daddy*,” Baby moaned behind us.

“You better watch it,” Bullet muttered to her.

“I was coming home tomorrow morning, but I’m glad you’re here now,” I said, kissing Matthieu’s jaw.

He tensed around me and then loosened his hold enough to lean back and look down into my face, his eyebrows rising hopefully. “Home?”

Somewhere inside of me, that ever persistent self-destructive flame tried to light a new match, to swallow the promise I'd made up my mind to make. Worry flickered in my head, but this time I stamped it out.

"To my pack," I said softly.

Baby squealed in the background, her cry of happiness stifled as Matthieu's eyes widened above mine. But he didn't ask me if I was sure, and he didn't ask me to repeat myself. He dove down, his hands on my waist holding me tight, and I relaxed as his lips crashed against me.

I'd missed his flavor, I'd missed the way he kissed—perfectly happy to devour and dominate me in the gentlest way—and I'd missed his scent. As nice a week as I'd had here with the Howlers, Matthieu was reminding me now that all my senses were turned up high when I was with him and the rest of our pack.

I moaned as his tongue licked against mine, my arms circling his neck and my body loose in his arms. The bar was cheering around us, laughs and hoots growing louder the longer the kiss extended, Matthieu totally uninterested in our audience. I detangled us slowly, smoothing my fingers through his hair to calm him until he finally let me catch my breath, his own lips continuing over my jaw up to my ear.

"I should take you home right now, but I'm afraid I won't make it back before I need to feel you against me," he whispered in my ear.

I tucked my blush against his shoulder as Matthieu's hands stroked my back. Now that I had Matthieu back in my sights, I badly wished the rest of the pack was here too. But Matthieu was right. I needed more of this moment with him, preferably privately, and there was no way that would happen between the Plaza and getting home.

"Come with me," I said, lifting my head and biting on my smile. I found Matthieu's hand on my waist and tangled my fingers with his, stepping away and leading him to the door that led up to the apartments.

"Don't break my couch, Lo!" Baby called, now with Bullet and Green both circled around her.

"Worry about your own couch," I answered, shaking my head. She'd have those alphas all over her in a minute now.

“It was, um…very lovely meeting you all,” Matthieu said, blushing as he gave the cheering room a small wave. “Rake is hoping to have you all over for dinner soon.”

I laughed at that and Matthieu’s vaguely overwhelmed expression as I dragged him along behind me. He followed me into the stairwell and I leaned past him, shutting the door on the party’s laughter, sighing at the quiet that followed. Matthieu crowded me to the wall, and I wrapped myself around him, tilting my head back. Tears welled at the corner of my eyes as Matthieu scattered kisses over my forehead and cheeks and mouth.

“Fuck, Lolotte, I’ve missed you,” Matthieu murmured.

“I’ve missed you too,” I said, choking around the words. “All of you. I’m sorry I left like that.”

Matthieu rumbled and stepped back, eyes catching mine. “But it was worth it? You feel…”

“I feel sure I belong with the pack,” I said, holding his gaze and watching tension melt away on his face.

He brought my hand up to his lips, pressing a wet kiss to the center of my palm, and then his brows jumped. “So where are you taking me? This stairwell smells of someone else’s pack.”

I laughed. “Pretty sure this whole place reeks of Baby and her alphas. Come on, they gave me a little studio to use.”

Matthieu followed me up the stairs, his fingers combing through strands of my hair. “This is new.”

“I let the girls goof off with it. I was missing having color in my hair.”

“It suits you,” Matthieu said, catching me on the hall landing and fitting himself to my back, kissing my shoulder. “You could do something at *Designate* with this kind of color.”

I hummed and decided not to tell Matthieu that opal hair had been a trend two years ago. He was good with the business end of the magazine, but it was for the best he wasn’t an editor. I unlocked the door as we reached my borrowed apartment and pulled Matthieu in behind me. He grinned as I slammed the door shut and then pushed him against it, rising up on my toes and pressing myself to him.

“Another kiss please,” I said.

Matthieu purred and bent his head to do exactly that, but he pulled away far too quickly, hands framing my waist and guiding me back a step.

“Come sit with me, I want to talk first,” Matthieu said, strain in the words.

I frowned but let him slip out from between me and the door, following him to the couch and sitting there on my knees, facing him. “Nothing good ever started with ‘I want to talk,’” I said, although I was fairly confident Matthieu wasn’t about to tell me he’d had enough. Not after the reception I’d gotten downstairs.

He growled softly and leaned toward me, taking my chin in his hand and pecking my lips. “I want to be sure you feel good about this. And not that you’re trying to keep the peace.”

I sighed and shook my head, and Matthieu leaned back, making room for me as I slid over onto his lap, facing him. “I feel good about this. I’m still nervous. I’m still anxious. But being here made…I think it made the pack feel like less of a fantasy. These people have what I want, what you’ve all offered me. And the only person standing in the way of that is me.”

Matthieu leaned in and kissed my jaw, pushing my hair back over my shoulders as his lips traveled down my throat, pulling away just as I arched my neck for him.

“I know we rushed the topic at dinner on Tuesday. I especially got carried away,” Matthieu said.

Because he’d offered me a bond. My smile fractured a little. “Do you…feel differently now?”

Matthieu’s eyes widened and he stiffened in front of me. “Differently? What? No! No, I still want to claim you, Lola, but only when you don’t have any doubts.”

Ah, easy. I relaxed and scooted closer, my lips quirking as Matthieu grunted as I wiggled over his lap. “It’s recently come to my attention that the best way of knowing that I can be a part of the pack, be loved and accepted by you, be happy…is to just *let* myself,” I said, bending forward and nuzzling against Matthieu’s nose. “It’s been a long time since I’ve doubted any of you. And I’m ready to let you all prove that I can stop doubting myself.”

His purr thrummed to life and I smiled, kissing the hooked bridge of his nose. “Is that so?” he asked, his own grin growing.

“I already know that I’m yours, Matthieu. I love you, I admire you, and I feel more myself when I’m with you, in the best way.”

“Lola,” Matthieu growled, his hands pressing to my back to pin me to his chest, his hips rising to meet mine as I rolled gently on top of him, stirring interest in his cock. “My darling girl, there is no luckier pack, no luckier alpha than I am to hear you say those words.”

His tongue vibrated as I slanted my lips over his, licking into his mouth and claiming him in my own way, my fingers combing through his hair and my body playing at riding him, waiting for him to take the invitation.

He tore away from the kiss and rasped against my cheek, “I love you.”

“I love you too,” I said, biting at his bottom lip and pushing at the shoulders of his jacket. “Now take off all your clothes.”

Matthieu barked a laugh, head falling to the back of the couch. I took the opportunity to suck kisses down his throat, wrestling him out of his jacket, and pushing it out of the way. I leaned back and blinked down at him and realized he was wearing one of his grubbiest t-shirts.

“Babe, were you in your pajamas before you came here?” I asked. Or did he think it took armpit holes to blend in with the Howlers?

Matthieu hummed and reached for my own t-shirt hem, smiling as I raised my arms for him to peel me out of it. “I couldn’t sleep another night without you, Lolotte.” I shivered at the sweet words and the cool air running over my skin, and Matthieu’s eyes caught on the lace bra I’d been wearing. “Should I be jealous you’re wearing this without expecting to see me?”

I laughed and shook my head, cupping his jaw and lifting his gaze to mine. “It was my last clean one before I came home, so I would’ve worn it tomorrow for you.”

His hands skimmed up my back, drawing me in at an arch, offering my breasts up to his mouth, his lips clasping over the lace and tongue flicking over my nipple. I moaned and held him to me, bouncing against his now stiff length for friction.

“You know I love to watch you come, but I want to know it’s my cock making you scream this time, Lolotte,” Matthieu growled, teeth tugging on the cup of my bra as his hands unhooked the clasp at the back.

“Works for me,” I gasped out, sighing as he switched to the other breast, this time without the barrier of fabric, tongue swirling and teeth grazing gently.

I tugged his t-shirt over his back, dragging it up over his shoulders, and Matthieu pulled away just long enough to help me free him.

“What’s your pleasure tonight, *mon coeur*?” Matthieu purred, hands cupping and massaging my breasts, his thumbs flicking over my nipples.

Did I want him pounding me from behind and tugging on my hair? A little bit, yes, but I’d missed seeing him and feeling him, and there was something I *really* wanted tonight.

“You pinning me to this creaky old couch while I squeeze you so tight, it makes you feel like a teenage boy,” I said, grinning and bumping my forehead against his.

Matthieu’s hands cupped my waist and I giggled as he twisted us on the couch, my bare back landing against cushions. Matthieu was on his knees, between my legs, his fingers tugging hard at the button of my jeans, yanking down the zipper and then hooking into the waistband. He growled as my breasts jiggled with laughter, diving down to suck and bite at my breast while he tried to pull my jeans off. Given the way I was spread for him, it didn’t work very well, and he ended up huffing and pulling away, frowning at me as I laughed beneath him.

“Worry about yourself,” I said, sitting up to give myself room to shimmy out of my pants and underwear.

Matthieu grinned, standing and easily slipping out of his own loose jeans, cock jutting proudly in my face. Before he could stop me, I leaned forward, lapping at the head of him, sighing as the warm flavor sang through my veins. Strong fingers combed into my hair and then clutched hard, drawing my head away.

“Naughty girl,” Matthieu purred, and I shuddered, following his gentle guiding to lay down again. I draped one leg off the edge of the

couch and bent the other, exposing myself to Matthieu's hungry view.

He settled between my legs and released my hair to grip my hips, pulling me forward until the head of him bumped my opening.

"Are you ready for me?" he asked.

I knew I sure as hell was, but I lifted my hips to tease. "Check."

Matthieu grinned, his right hand stroking over my hip to my core, two fingers pressing gently at my opening. They slid in easily, pumping just long enough to leave me whining for more, before withdrawing, shining with my arousal. He stroked them over his throbbing cock, lubing himself up before notching himself against me.

"Yes, you're ready," he hissed, eyes on where we were connected, dipping in with tiny thrusts.

I nearly nodded, but then he was driving into me, my body bowing with relief and agony mixing together. "Oh god, Matthieu, yes!"

Matthieu groaned, his hips pressing into mine as he lowered himself over me. My legs rose to wrap around him as Matthieu's chest covered mine, the curling hairs tickling my skin.

"I love you," he whispered, lips grazing over mine.

"I love you." I tangled my arms around his shoulders, one hand on his back and the other in his hair.

"I missed you terribly," he said.

"Won't happen again," I said, smiling.

Matthieu's purr shook us both with its strength, and I sighed. My eyes fell shut at the feeling of a perfect, sweet, vibrating alpha draped over me with his cock thrumming deep in my core.

"Move, Matthieu," I said gently, kissing his cheek. "Claim me."

He thought I meant with sex, which was fine for now. His body rose to my command, thrusts slow but deep, hands and mouth traveling anywhere they could reach, kissing over my throat, pinching my breasts, gripping my ribs. One of his hands burrowed beneath me to hold the back of my neck in a possessive and powerful grip that I found thrilling and calming all at once.

I was Matthieu's. Not *just* his, but tonight I belonged to him and we both knew it. I rocked into his thrusts, squeezed my legs around his hips and my sex around his cock. Matthieu knew me well by now,

knew by the sounds of my gasps and the dig of my nails in his back when I was getting closer, and he quickened his pace to drive me there faster.

“More, Matthieu, love, please!” I gasped, unable to decide between relaxing into the rising wave or bracing myself for the crash.

“I have you,” he breathed, biting my bottom lip and then soothing it with his tongue.

“I want you.”

“You have me, Lolotte.”

I tucked my face into his neck to hide my wicked smile and then pressed my heels into his ass, lifting my hips to his so his knot dug at my opening. “All of you,” I moaned breathlessly.

His breath hitched in realization, but he didn’t stop his urgent rocking and on the next collision of our bodies, I held him fast, my orgasm just teasing at the edges. “Please,” I whispered in his ear, sucking on his lobe.

Matthieu growled and pushed, his hand on my neck bracing me as he pinned me down and thrust in. The stretch and strain was first, but with it came the heated wave of release, distracting me from the initial pain. Matthieu roared and trembled against me, his own release hot and dense inside of me as he adjusted to the vice of my body around his knot.

“Oh fuck. Fuck. *Dieu*, Lola are you—?”

“Mmm, I’m fine.” I turned my head and caught Matthieu’s mouth with mine before he could ask again, sucking on his lips and fucking my tongue against his.

I was still squeezing his length, his body slowly relaxing into mine and his knot settling more comfortably.

“You were planning that,” Matthieu rumbled, nudging his nose against mine.

“I was,” I said, grinning and adjusting my legs around his hips. “Do you like it?”

Matthieu huffed, his grin boyish and giddy. “Lola, I haven’t knotted anyone in years. You nearly gave me a heart attack.”

My eyes widened at that. I’d assumed he and Carolyn…but he’d never *said* so, and he hadn’t even blinked when I’d said I hadn’t wanted to try.

“Do *you* like it?” Matthieu asked, brows raising. He made an experimental rock against me, his pelvis against my clit, and then he grinned as I fluttered around him and wriggled with the echo running through me. “Fuck, you do. My Lolotte.”

His movements were soft shifts, but tied together with his knot everything was insanely powerful. It was tighter from this angle, not quite the deep and pounding kind of satisfying as when I’d been on top with Caleb, but full of sensation and an intense and feverish feeling that left me tingling.

“Jesus,” Matthieu panted, sweat dewing on his brow. His lips stamped against mine, once and then again. “I love you. I love you. You’re mine, Lola.”

“I am yours,” I said, a selfish emotional satisfaction filling me from head to toe at the words. “Forever.”

Matthieu purred, and when I arched my throat to him the sound grew louder, his lips brushing back and forth over the curve of my shoulder. Between the soft grind of him against my clit and the overwhelming weight of the knot, I was quickly approaching another orgasm.

“Bite,” I said, combing my fingers through Matthieu’s hair.

His purr continued, and he sucked on the muscle of my shoulder, his head rolling back and forth. “You don’t need to be rushed,” he said, but I could hear the strain in the words as he resisted my demand.

“Neither do you, but I’m ready. I’m yours when you’re ready too,” I said.

Matthieu lifted, and I moaned as he pushed deep into me, the head of him nesting as deeply as it could. His mouth covered mine, teeth dragging over my lips.

“I love you,” he growled, and then he pulled away, hips kicking quickly into me.

I came with a cry, body bowing, and Matthieu arched over me. Electricity rushed through my veins and stars flashed behind my eyes, the faintest whispers of the damp breath on my shoulder. And then Matthieu bit, fire lashing through me, my body freezing in his hold as his teeth sank in.

I was claimed.

The bite echoed in my core, the pain and pulsing pleasure blending together until I went limp with relief. Warmth and softness followed, not unlike the usual aftereffects of good sex. I hummed as Matthieu very gently eased his bite, tongue lapping over the wound. That dense liquid heat grew deeper, the long rush of alcohol blooming in my chest. A velvety caress followed.

Tears rose to my eyes as I realized what was happening, Matthieu's bond sweeping me up in his embrace. Love was heady and rich, draping over me completely, soaking into my veins like sunshine.

"Oh, Matthieu," I breathed.

"Yes, there you are," Matthieu sighed before going back to attending the bite. It stung a little, ached from the wound, but with every kiss of his lips and swipe of his tongue, pleasure sang too, making me clasp around him.

I was liquid gold in Matthieu's arms, stunned by the force of his affection and love, smiling at his amusement at my own shock, a little loop of us calling to one another.

"There was no one I would share this with but you, Lolotte," Matthieu said, kissing the bite and making the tears spill over. "I know I won't be alone in your bonds, but you will always be mine."

"I will," I said softly.

Matthieu left the bite for the moment, straightening so his face hovered over mine. The soft lines of his age were full of smiles in my eyes, and I kissed his mouth greedily.

"I want to take you home tonight. I don't care what time. But for now, I want to hold you and feel this. You are shining, my darling girl."

I nodded, holding tight to Matthieu and soaking up the bond. I might've felt foolish for resisting a bond when it was so powerful and beautiful and fulfilling, but Matthieu left no room between us for any shame, and I sighed with relief as he turned us slowly to our sides, contentment filling the quiet.

NINETEEN

Lola

I woke to a soft kiss on my lips. And then more on my jaw, my neck, my shoulders.

I shuddered and sighed as Matthieu sucked gently on his bondmark, a sweet pulse of desire rushing through me. He purred and leaned back, and I opened my eyes to find us in the garage of the house, Matthieu hunched into the passenger side of Bertha.

"We're home," I murmured.

Matthieu's smile was brilliant in answer. "We are. I know the others would hate if we made them wait to see you until the morning, but I wanted to catch a few more seconds with you alone. Also, I'm not sure I can carry you and work the elevator at the same time."

I laughed and stretched on my way out of the car, groaning as my body reminded me that I'd not only been missing the creature comforts of the beds here, but had just been knotted and bonded on a freaking couch. *Worth it*, I thought. I was sore, but it was only working as a delicious reminder of my evening.

I stood on wobbly legs and Matthieu held me to his chest, my head tucked beneath his chin, the bond running like a cord between us, full of love and affection and relief. Matthieu was relieved and happy to have me, to have our bond.

You've only known these men a few months.

As quick as the thought came, it was squashed by a wave of contentment from Matthieu and my own determination not to stand in

my own way. I sighed at the proof of the bond's power over my mood, and Matthieu nuzzled my hair as if he'd sensed the shift as well.

“If you want to go straight to Rake and Caleb, they’re in his room. I can run up and wake Leo,” Matthieu murmured, making no move to leave the garage or our hug.

“Is Leo not with them?”

“He was in his rooms when I left.”

Hmm. I didn’t like the sound of that. Leo wasn’t like Wes or Matthieu—he usually didn’t go in for alone time.

“I’ll go to Leo first. I think I need to clear the air.”

Matthieu kissed the top of my head. “You were honest with us, you took the space you needed, and it gave you the room to make your decision. He’ll understand.”

I nodded, and Matthieu and I finally separated, walking hand in hand into the house and up to the elevator. I did think Leo would understand, but that didn’t mean I wouldn’t make the apology. Mostly though, Leo and I shone best when we had moments between just the two of us, without the alphas who claimed us or the omega who united us.

“I’ll wait in my own room, get a little nap in,” Matthieu said with a great yawn as we stepped into the elevator. His hand squeezed mine, and he gazed down at me with a warm, sleepy stare. “But come find me before you see the others? I’m claiming my right to sleep next to you tonight, no matter what kind of fight Rake puts up.”

I laughed and nodded, and the elevator cranked us quietly up to the top floor.

Matthieu left me in the hall with a long kiss, as if I was leaving the house again, not just stepping into Leo’s suite for a dead-of-night talk.

The rooms were dark, and it’d been a while since I’d been up here. I tiptoed into the bedroom, pausing in the doorway and staring at the soft shadow of Leo in the bed. He was curled up on his side, his pillows surrounding him at every side, like he was trying to make up for sleeping alone. I would’ve bet money that Caleb was tossing and turning in his own bed.

Slipping my shoes off, I padded silently to the bed, sliding onto the mattress and watching Leo frown in sleep. I leaned and turned the bedside lamp on, watching as he stirred, brow furrowing. He was wearing my favorite sweater of his, and my heart panged at the sight. Had he washed it, or was he trying to catch a little whiff of me on its fabric the way I did of him when I wore it?

Leo blinked at me, an adorable grumpy frown on his lips, and it took him a minute before the annoyance at being woken transformed into the shock of being woken by *me*.

"Hi."

"*Lola*?" Leo scrambled in the sheets, pushing pillows out of the way as he sat up and scooted toward me, his hands reaching out and then pausing between us. "God, what time is it?"

"Nearly three, sorry for the rude awakening. Let me make it better," I said.

I leaned in and Leo's eyes widened, but his lips were parted and ready as mine covered his, the kiss deep and desperate. His hesitant hands found their courage, and he gathered me up against his chest, sleep-warm skin sliding under my touch as I wrapped my arms around him. Leo shuddered and his hold tightened, the scruff of his cheek rubbing over mine as he turned the kiss into a hug.

"I missed you," I whispered in his ear, my eyes stinging.

Leo huffed frustrated amusement and turned his face into mine, kissing blindly against my ear and hair and jaw. "What are you doing here? How'd you get home?"

"Matthieu came to the Plaza."

Leo stiffened against me and leaned back, finding my eyes, his brow lined with worry. "We said we wouldn't push you."

"He didn't." I kissed Leo's nose and then went ahead and let my greedy fingers dig in his hair, missing that thick and velvety texture. My eyes traveled over his face. I hadn't forgotten how beautiful he was, but it was better in person. "I was planning on being home tomorrow for breakfast to surprise you all. Well, originally, yesterday. But Baby asked me to stay one more day."

I checked Leo's face, just to make sure he wasn't offended that I'd been willing to put my return off, but that didn't seem to be what was bugging him. One of his hands slid from my back, coming

around to cup my face. His lips quirked as he saw my hair, and he flipped it around his fingers before frowning again.

"Matt didn't pressure you?" Leo asked.

I grinned and shook my head. "If anything, I pressured him."

Matthieu certainly hadn't been expecting me to take his knot, for starters. Leo couldn't see the bondmark under the Howler's sweatshirt I was wearing—my going away present from Baby's pack—but I wanted him to hear me out before he saw it, so he'd know my decision was my own.

"I'm sorry I ran like that," I said. Leo opened his mouth to object, and I pushed on. "No, really. I was in a really ugly place in my head, and I let that give me a reason to ignore the obvious in that moment. This pack has done nothing but show me that I have a safe place here to grow stronger and…and *belong*."

"Rake got carried away, and the others encouraged him," Leo said, frowning.

I shrugged and whispered, "Let's be honest, Rake will always get carried away, and the others will always encourage him. That's why this pack needs us."

Sleepy and bleary as he was, Leo's eyes lit up at that statement and his grin stretched. I pressed a quick kiss to my favorite dimple in the world and then leaned away before we could get caught up.

"You're staying?" Leo asked.

"I'm staying. I… Indy and Buzz are not the only reason I have this…voice in my head that's so determined to convince me I can't find my place in the pack. My mom was feeding me that at a really young age too, and I guess…until you guys, there was never any proof to the contrary." I blew out a deep breath and waved my hand between us. "Anyway. Therapy is going to be rough but worth it. I want to be happy, and I want to be a member of this pack."

Leo let out a soft strangled noise of relief and then caught me up, one persistent kiss after another pressed to my lips. "We will make that as easy for you as possible."

"You already have."

Leo sighed and sagged back into the pillows and I followed, folding my arms over his chest and resting my chin on the back of my hands.

“I’m glad you came home. I…I tried to actually think about what would’ve happened if I’d met you first, or just never met Rake and the pack,” Leo murmured, tension radiating through him.

I hummed and shook my head. “I want to believe we’d be happy, but I think without this pack, we might’ve had a much harder road to rediscovering our self-worth.” My nose wrinkled at the thought. “Not that the pack is what makes me worthy. Just that you’ve all been a catalyst for me digging that negativity out of my head and finding my own recovery. I think we are where we were meant to be.”

Leo’s hands stroked my back. “I agree. That’s how I felt by the end too.”

One hand reached up to my left shoulder and squeezed, right over my still fresh bondmark, and I hissed and sat up, shaking off his hands.

“Oh, sorry, gorgeous, are you all—”

I laughed and swept my hair out of my face. “Actually, I do have one more thing to tell you. Just remember the part where I said I pressured him, not the other way around.”

Leo blinked at me and I lifted my sweatshirt up over my head, untangling myself and righting my t-shirt with its wide, open v-neck draping slightly off one shoulder. He stared up at me for a moment, and I shrugged my shoulder, waggling my eyebrows. It took a moment, a blank study on his face interrupted by a slight twitch of his eyebrows. Leo’s eyes widened and he sat up, jaw dropping as he stared at the fresh bite on my shoulder.

“You—he… Lola, you’re *bonded*?” Leo gasped, reaching for my arm to draw me in as if he were checking to see if the bite was only makeup.

“Yeah. I…I’ve been worried about you guys sort of catching my anxiety through the bond, but after talking to Baby and some of her alphas, I realized that’s not really how it works,” I said, blushing.

Leo was still staring at the wound, his thumb stroking around the raised edges. It was a little ticklish, but nothing quite as strong as when Matthieu touched the spot.

“Wow,” he whispered. His eyes grew even bigger as he looked at me, cheeks twitching with a smile. “*Wow*. You’re stuck with us.”

“You’re stuck with me,” I said, grinning.

Leo laughed, and I leaned in for his kiss when he raised his chin. “God, Rake doesn’t know yet, does he?”

“I wanted to talk to you first,” I said. “But I do want a big cuddle. Matthieu called dibs on half of me though.”

“I bet he did. It’s good to have your alpha close after the bite. Especially for us betas, it heals a little slower on us. Come on, let’s grab Matthieu and then see if Rake even notices when we get in the bed.”

Leo rummaged for a pair of boxers as I ran to the other suite to wake Matthieu up. He hadn’t gone to bed but was lying back in an armchair, a lamp turned away from his eyes. His mouth hung open and he puffed soft breaths in his sleep. I perched myself on the arm of the chair and ran my finger down his nose, making him twitch and smack his lips.

“Wake up, old man,” I whispered.

Matthieu purred, a smile stretching over his lips as he blinked slowly awake. “How often do you think you’re going to get away with saying that?” he asked.

I tilted my head and feigned thought. “Maybe about as often as I want.”

His arms snapped around my waist, tugging me onto his lap, and I squirmed to get away as he growled happily, drawing me to his chest and planting his mouth over my bondmark. I turned to jelly in a half-second flat, warmth coursing through me and my eyes hooding with exhaustion and arousal.

“You said we could sleep downstairs,” I gasped out before he got carried away.

Matthieu paused and then pressed a chaste kiss over the spot. “You’re right, I did. Very well.”

I let out an ‘oof’ of breath as Matthieu scooped me into his arms, carrying me to the doorway to meet Leo in the hall.

“Good work tonight, Matt,” Leo said, grinning and tweaking my toe with his fingers.

Matthieu hummed and nodded his head as I rolled my eyes. “Thank you, I thought so.”

“Excuse you, I was very much responsible,” I said.

Matthieu let me down by the stairs with another brush of his lips over my mark. Even that was enough to leave my knees a little weak. Hopefully I'd get acclimated, otherwise Matthieu would have way too much fun taking advantage of his new power over me.

Power I'd granted, and gleefully. I smiled at the thought as we reached Caleb's floor.

"I'm going to go tell Wes you're home," Matthieu said. He pointed at Leo and I. "I expect to find my spot saved when I get back."

Cyrus and Caleb had Rake bundled between them, and just seeing the three of them made me feel more relaxed. I hoped Matthieu convinced Wes to come in too.

"Just slip in," Leo whispered to me. "I'll get Caleb's back."

He went first as I crawled onto the foot of the bed. Caleb didn't wake, but as Leo curled against his back, Caleb's lips curled up and he leaned in Leo's direction. I wondered if that was the bond effect, and looking at the four men on the bed, I knew Matthieu was right. He wouldn't be my only bond. I wanted to be so tangled up in this pack, there was no argument on whether or not I belonged—from myself or anyone else.

Slipping up between Caleb and Rake seemed simple enough until I realized in the dark that I was dealing with a whole absurd tangle of legs. I hit one shin, and then a knee, and Rake groaned in the dark, huffing and rolling onto his back.

"Can you *not*?" Rake hissed.

"I'm not *trying* to," I answered.

Rake stiffened and then sat up like a shot, startling his alphas as he dove down the bed and tackled me backward.

"Lola! When did you get home? Why didn't you call us? How did you get back?"

"Rake, give her a chance to speak," Leo said, rolling and turning on a light.

"Ohmigod, your hair! That's gorg—wait, what is—" Rake's eyes widened.

Unlike Leo, it didn't take Rake long to spot the bite mark. His face grew cartoonish in his excitement, and he gasped for an exaggerated length of time until I thought he might just pass out.

“That sneaky French bastard,” Rake hissed. “He didn’t even *invite* us.”

“I’m not sure a bonding is the kind of thing I’d want a big audience for,” I said.

Which officially caught Caleb and Cyrus’ attention.

“Rake, move.” Caleb pulled on his omega’s arm. “Let her up.”

Rake ignored him, dropping on top of me and holding my face for a filthy, licking kiss. I sighed into his lips, and he relaxed against me, sucking my bottom lip before finally rolling away.

"You're not getting rid of me now, Lollipop. I'm the barnacle on the ass of your ship from here on out," Rake murmured, grinning madly at me.

I giggled at my omega and he helped pull me to sitting. As soon as I was up, Caleb was there, scooping me up in his arms. I snuggled in against his chest, taking a deep lungful of his scent and softening against him. Behind me, Cyrus held us both, his chest hot against my back. Cyrus lowered his head and I shivered as he ran his nose along the edge of the bite, sniffing at the bond.

“Good,” he said.

“Are you…you’re happy?” Caleb asked.

“Happy to be home, happy to be bonded, happy to be part of the pack,” I said, which was basically the cliffnotes of my conversation with Leo, who was beaming at me over Caleb’s shoulder.

“Where is Matt?”

“Here,” Matthieu said.

I twisted between Caleb and Cyrus to see Matthieu alone in the doorway. His smile tightened, and a soft thread of comfort tugged inside of me from our bond.

“Wes apparently snuck out for a client,” Matthieu said. “He’ll have to be pleasantly surprised when he gets back.”

I nodded and Matthieu joined us on the bed, Cyrus sliding out of his way so Matthieu could lay down on my left, the same side of me as the bondmark.

“What are the rest of us supposed to do, arm wrestle?” Rake asked.

“If there’s going to be wrestling, I’d rather you all get oiled up for it, but I really think I’m too sleepy for that tonight,” I said, grinning and

holding my arms out.

Rake was first to dive for the spot and to be honest, I don't think any of the others planned on getting in his way. "I missed you, Lollipop. I was going to tell you not to do that again, but it seems kind of moot now. Also I'm really mad you changed your hair without letting me be excited, but I do love it."

"Thank you," I said, stifling a yawn. "And you don't need to worry. I'm settled."

Matthieu purred and kissed my shoulder.

"I just needed to put my head on straight. I can't always promise it will stay that way, but you're right. I'm not going anywhere."

The pack rearranged themselves in the bed, Leo at Rake's back, and then Caleb and Cyrus after him. I draped an arm over Rake's stomach and Caleb reached back, linking his fingers with mine over Leo's chest.

"Good work, Matt," Rake murmured, just as I was on the edge of sleeping.

"Why does *everyone* keep saying that?"

Matthieu huffed at my back, as close as he could get, and either it was his own exhaustion working or he knew a magic trick because in the next moment I was falling to sleep without an answer to my question.

TWENTY

Lola

I can think of a very small collection of perfect days in my life.

One was a day at the beach with a friend from middle school and her family. I don't remember the details now, I just remember there being a lot of kids laughing, an extravagant amount of ice cream, and my friend's parents saying nice things about me as I pretended to sleep on the drive back.

Another was a day with Baby, wandering around the city together in the winter and splurging with our Christmas bonuses. We'd had cocktails at lunch *and* appetizers, and we'd window shopped in the boutiques before shopping for real at the thrift stores. Then she'd invited me to her little apartment to stare out at the city and drink hot cocoa and paint our nails.

The Sunday after I came back to the pack was also shaping up to be a perfect day. After sleepy shower sex with Leo and Rake, there was a buffet of breakfast foods from our three alphas. It was one of those pajamas only, movies running in the background while you napped on the couch, kind of days.

There was just one thing missing. Or rather, one man.

"Has anyone heard from Wes? I texted him this morning, but I haven't heard back." I was putting together a salad with Cyrus for our late lunch, while Leo and the others bustled in the kitchen around us.

"He's probably on a stakeout of some kind, he goes quiet during those," Rake said, shrugging as he juiced a grapefruit.

“Trust me, he’s not avoiding you,” Cyrus said, bumping against my side.

I bit my lip and nodded like that hadn’t been exactly where my head went the longer Wes was out of the house. Cyrus watched me, giving me the distinct impression that I was becoming transparent around this pack. But, at last, that left me with a sense of relief. I wanted these men to be as aware of my needs as I was determined to be of theirs.

And speaking of needs, I was getting flushed the longer Cyrus watched me. Our hands grazed over the mixing bowl as we added toppings, and Cyrus took special care to graze the back of my hand with his knuckles.

Noted, I thought. Now that I was…

I was part of the pack.

It put another dreamy smile on my lips to remember it, and Matthieu sang down the bond to me, equally thrilled for the reminder.

Now that I was part of the pack, the hesitancy between Cyrus and I was going to start thawing quickly. I was glad he’d moved up to Editor in Chief at least. Working with him in the Beauty Department with the two of us ogling each other would’ve been the least productive environment ever.

“Salmon is ready,” Leo called to us.

I grabbed the salad bowl and Cyrus followed, his hand cupping the back of my neck with a gently possessive grip on my right shoulder. His thumb stroked the back of my neck, swirling over loose strands of hair as warmth seeped from the touch into my skin and right down to my toes.

Thawing indeed.

I put together a plate and grabbed a seat between Caleb and Matthieu at the island, sliding one of my feet onto Caleb’s stool to play footsie with him. He had a plate from Leo in front of him and a notebook to the side that he was scribbling in.

“What are you working on?” I asked.

“Just putting together a list of the things we’ll need to take care of to move you in,” Caleb said, and then his head shot up, eyes wide and startled on me. “You are—it’s not presuming?”

I smiled back at him. “I’m moving in, Caleb. You’re good. What’s on the list?”

“Well, wrapping up your lease, of course. Arranging the movers. There’s just the issue of space,” Caleb said.

My nose wrinkled and I shrugged. “I don’t have a lot at my place, and probably even less that we’d really need here.”

“It’s that, but it’s more…we moved into this pack as six and now there’s seven. The guest room is nice enough, for now,” Caleb started.

“The guest room is nicer than my apartment,” I cut in.

“Old apartment,” Matthieu corrected, and then he leaned in and kissed his bondmark with a happily self-satisfied smile as I rolled my eyes and ignored the giddy thrill that ran through me.

“But it’s as if we’ve just given you the leftovers,” Caleb concluded.

“The green deck is Lola’s,” Rake said. “And how often do you really foresee us letting her sleep in her own bed?”

“As often as she pleases,” Leo said, swatting Rake on the back of the head and then walking by and kissing the spot. “But I agree with Caleb, gorgeous. You need to claim your territory in the house. I could swap out my suite for you, and then we could take down the wall separating the guest room from my office. Or I can move my office into my suite.”

“Stop!” I cried, laughing and shaking my head. “First of all, I’m not stealing your room, Leo. You designed that floor specifically for yourself and Matthieu. And I *don’t* need the guestroom to be bigger. That is plenty of space for me. I will take the green deck though. That’s my favorite spot in the house.”

Rake stretched forward, arm raised, and I leaned past Caleb to answer his high-five.

“We’re at least redecorating then,” Caleb said, somewhat sullenly as he rearranged his list. “And I like Leo’s idea of taking out his office. We could expand the bathroom then and give you a walk-in closet.”

I gaped at Leo and Cyrus, who only shrugged back at me. Caleb was apparently a lot less gentle when it came to the arrangements of the house. I might’ve found the conversation more stressful if

Matthieu wasn't sitting next to me absolutely *buzzing* with pleasure at the entire conversation.

"How would you feel about a canopy bed, Lola?" Rake asked, smirking.

"She wants one," Matthieu said, responding to my internal thrill before I could object.

Caleb hummed and made a note.



IT WAS LATE EVENING, all but one member of the pack in the kitchen finishing dinner, when I finally heard the faintest sound of the garage door closing. I glanced at Matthieu, and his lips twitched at my spike of excitement.

Wes never answered my texts, but now that he was home, it was probably just a matter of time before I could grab him. I had some very specific things I wanted to say to Wes. About his place in the pack, and mine, and ours together.

Except the dishes were in the dishwasher and everyone was moving back to the living room, and I still couldn't hear so much as any stirring on the stairs or from the elevator. Matthieu's arms circled my waist, his lips hovering over my bondmark—his new favorite spot to kiss me.

"You should go find him."

"Why hasn't he come up yet?"

"He's used to being out of orbit with us. So was I, to be honest. He's probably down having a swim or working out a bad day in the gym," Matthieu said.

I fidgeted in place, turning in Matthieu's arms and looking up at him. The speckles of gray growing in over his jaw, the mess of hair he was ignoring on his day off. My alpha. He grinned at me as the euphoria welled up.

"I like these little moments where you remember what's changed." He kissed my forehead. "I love to feel how happy you are."

"How happy you've made me."

“Not just me though,” Matthieu said, his eyebrows jumping briefly.

I took a deep breath and gathered my courage, reaching up between us to rest my fingers on his cheeks. “You know that I want to—”

“Yes, Lolotte. I’m yours and you are mine, and you are *ours*. Pack,” Matthieu said, leaning into the touch.

I released the breath in a sigh, and Matthieu pulled me to him for a sweet and lingering kiss.

“I’ll see you later,” Matthieu murmured. “The others may have to sleep without you because I don’t think Wes or I will share tonight.”

I grinned as Matthieu released me. “That’ll have to get sorted out sooner or later. I don't want to always choose between them and the two of you. But tonight, I think you’re right.”

"We'll learn exactly how close we’re willing to get, I'm sure," Matthieu said with a nod. "But until you're ready to take Caleb's or Cyrus' bond, I'll hog you as much as I'm able."

I caught the smiles from the rest of the pack, and the equally knowing looks. Yeah, transparency was kind of nice when it was my guys looking through me. The elevator sank smoothly down to the basement level, and as soon as I stepped out, I heard the music. Pounding rock, heavy drums, and bluesy chords muffled behind the walls of the gym. Wes was lifting weights, his chest heaving and legs straddling the black bench. He should’ve had a spotter with him, and I wondered what kind of day he’d dealt with to be working out this much frustration.

But it wasn’t a bad view from my end. Although I had a couple ideas of how to make it better. The music was deafening as I stepped inside, and Wes didn’t notice my arrival. His scent was heavy in the room, thicker than any other lingering traces, and right now the salt was cutting through his usual sweetness. It still made me automatically wet. Which was convenient.

I didn’t want to surprise him in the middle of a rep, so I turned the music down with the wall controls, watching him pause to catch his breath. He tilted his head to check the mirror, and I grinned as the frown he was wearing vanished in a flash, leaving open shock and what I hoped was excitement. He tried to sit up, and nearly crashed into the barbell.

“Stay,” I called, moving directly to his side. When he twisted to slide out from under the weight, I stopped him by raising my knee and resting it lightly over his stomach. “I said, stay there.”

His brow furrowed, hands fisted around the metal bar. “Lola, sweetheart.”

His chest was bare, gleaming with sweat, and up close to him like this, the salty bite of his scent was appealing on its own, although it was quickly growing sweeter by the second.

“You missed my texts,” I said, sliding my knee across him, grinning as I straddled him over the bench. I was just about an inch above his hips, and he panted as he looked between us, hips kicking up briefly to nudge against me before he regained control.

“Haven’t even checked my phone. When did you get back?”

“Really late last night,” I said. I raised my shirt up over my head and then swept my hair to the side.

Wes’ eyes moved slowly up from my stomach, hovering on my bare breasts as a purr started up in his chest, before finally finding the bite on my shoulder.

“I’m your packmate now,” I said.

“About damn time,” Wes growled, ignoring my instructions and moving swiftly out from under the bar. His hands grabbed me by the shoulder blades, and I braced myself for the rough impact of his kiss, lips and teeth and tongue claiming me forcefully until I was moaning and rolling my hips over his.

I pulled away from the kiss, sucking at the corner of his jaw and then over his throat, my hands trapped between us as I tried to push him back. His damn chest looked like a buffet to my brain at the moment, and I wanted to *devour him*. Wes cooperated a little, huffing a laugh as I scooted back and sucked his collarbone and over his chest, scraping my nails lightly over his nipples.

“Fuck, sweetheart, wait,” Wes rumbled, hands stroking my shoulders and down my arms. I nipped at his skin, and he caught my hands in his, whipping them behind my back and making me gasp at the sudden shift in control.

Wes raised an eyebrow at me, his lips twitching as I panted and squirmed. I should’ve gotten *totally* naked before getting on his lap.

“Hello, Lola. I’ve missed you. I’m glad you’re home,” Wes said with a painfully patient pace, raising his eyebrows at me.

I grinned at him and settled, my breasts thrust forward by Wes’ grip on my arms at my back. He did his best not to look down, but I might’ve wiggled just to tempt him.

“Hello, Wes. I’ve missed you too. I’d really like to screw you silly on this contraption that was obviously designed to operate as a sex bench.”

“I’ve got plans for you,” Wes said, eyes hooding. “Candles and dinner and—”

“I’m not going anywhere,” I answered, leaning in to kiss the dent on his chin. “Plenty of time for candles and dinner. But I have plans for you too, and they involve this bench and us enjoying the view in that mirror.” I jerked my head back to the mirror behind me and watched as Wes’ pupils expanded at the suggestion.

I rolled my shoulders back and rocked over his growing erection, brushing my chest against his. Wes’ eyes trailed down between us, and his tongue flicked out to wet his bottom lip. He looked back over my shoulder to the mirror, and a thick purr rattled against my breasts.

“Stand up and turn yourself around,” Wes said.

My breath hitched as he released my arms, and I stood, wavering slightly with the force of his command. I was getting what I wanted, but now I was entirely in Wes’ hands. I crossed over his lap and turned to face the mirror, biting my lip as Wes’ hands cupped my hip. I’d worn sleep shorts all day, and Wes’ thumbs hooked into the waistband.

“Shimmy for me,” Wes purred.

I laughed and shook my hips as Wes drew the shorts and my underwear down to my calves for me to step out of. With the picture of me naked clear in the mirror, I flushed pink from head to toe. Wes’ warm palms traveled back up, outside my thighs and over my hips, squeezing the globes of my ass before sliding up and circling my waist almost completely.

I gasped as he lifted me, bending my legs up for him as he raised me back onto his lap, pressing my back to his chest. My feet settled on the floor, and Wes’ hands slid down my front to the crux of my

thighs, holding me open and framing my pussy, fingertips barely grazing the lips of my sex.

“Like this, sweetheart?” Wes purred in my ear, tongue flicking out to lick along the shell.

He was holding me just over his lap so there was no friction for me to use to relieve the ache in my core. I arched and whined, my ass against Wes’ stomach and his cock tapping against my cheeks through his loose shorts.

“Like this, but with you naked,” I said, turning my head and trying to catch Wes’ lips for a kiss. It was too far to twist, but I did get to see Wes taking an appreciative look down my chest.

“Take them off for me,” Wes said.

My brow furrowed at the request. The bench wasn’t going to make that easy. Neither were Wes’ hands or me over his lap. But I bent forward to do my best, reaching underneath where Wes held my legs apart to tug on his shorts. His hips bucked to help, and I gasped as he ground against my ass, the slippery fabric of the gym shorts stretching before finally pulling free. His cock tapped me playfully on the ass, and Wes’ purr grew louder.

I huffed as I pulled his shorts to his knees and then sat up, grinning at him in the mirror.

“I see you’ve adapted to this situation easily enough to take the upper hand, alpha,” I said, meaning the title as a tease.

Wes clamped a hot hand over my sex and the other rose to base of my neck, bending me backward with a moan falling from my lips.

“I am an alpha—*yours*. And I think you like to push so that I’ll push back,” Wes said softly, turning his head to press a kiss to my temple. His fingers rubbed over my pussy, spreading my arousal over every sensitive fold and around my clit. His cock was wedged between my ass cheeks and I bounced a little, trying to drive his touch closer and tease his length. Wes growled, eyes falling shut, and he rubbed harder.

“Please,” I panted, riding the dull pleasure of his hand. “Please, I need you. And you need me too.”

Wes paused, his hand moving from my neck, and I reached up to hold his grip there, finding his gaze in the mirror and holding onto it.

“We’re a part of this pack, and it’s about time we *both* started acting like it,” I said, locking my eyes with his, admiring the view of myself stretched and poised for his taking. “No more hovering at the edges, Wes. No more pretending to be the bodyguard. Love us. Let me love you.”

Wes’ touch was loose and I was able to twist, ignoring the strain of muscles in my waist as I caught Wes’ lips for a licking kiss. His breathing was heavy and his hands wandered, stroking my breasts, my taut thighs as I balanced over him.

“Love you, sweetheart,” Wes purred in a mumble against my mouth.

“I love you too, alpha,” I answered in a whisper.

A whisper was all it took. Wes growled and tugged me against him, the head of his cock finding my opening just in time for him to push me down. I gasped, mouth falling open as I sank onto Wes’ thick length, while his tongue twisted around my own and he swallowed my groans.

He scooted us to the edge of the bench, spreading my thighs open as my legs hung over his knees. “Look,” he said.

I turned to the mirror and moaned at the picture of us, Wes’ cock red and stretching my opening. His knot was almost visibly pulsing, dark and aching to be inside of me, but Wes was long and I’d be feeling him *everywhere* before we got to that point.

“You’re fucking beautiful, Lola,” Wes murmured, stroking my ribs, my breasts, my stomach, and my legs. “Fucking exquisite. Jesus, you feel so good.”

I moaned and shifted, rocking and rising, resisting the urge to let my eyes fall shut just so I could watch the slow reveal of Wes cock as he slid out of me, shining with my juices. Wes’ hands cupped my ass and pushed me back down, a little farther than before, his purr thick and rattling behind me as I cried out.

“What a goddamn view,” Wes breathed, and I grinned, repeating the slow ride up and down his cock, savoring the deep and full feeling of him buried inside of me, the delicious drag as I lifted off him.

I wondered if Rake knew he was missing out on the biggest cock in the pack. Lucky me.

Wes' hand returned to the back of my neck, gripping my nape in a firm but not painful clasp. It was commanding, and he used it to push me back down every time I rose up, creating a deep thrill in my gut. I arched and bowed to take him deeper, and Wes' hand on my ass squeezed hard, making me clench around him.

"Good girl," Wes purred. "Show me those pretty tits."

I moaned and lost the fight to keep my eyes open.

"I feel you sucking on me, sweetheart. I wanna watch you touch yourself."

Goddamn. Wes was a dirty talker. I was officially a dead woman. But I'd be dying happy.

"Now," Wes growled.

I whined and spread myself open with one hand, rubbing rapidly over my clit with the other, my legs straining. Wes pulled my shoulders back, kissing my ear, the corner of my jaw, and then sucking his lips over my pulse.

"Can you stay like this for me?" he asked.

I nodded and swallowed hard, my body aching from the stretch but in all the good ways. Wes purred, and then both his hands covered my breasts, squeezing and rolling them before his fingers focused on my nipples.

"Tell me when it's too much."

I gasped as he started to pinch and pluck, little tugs echoing in my core and pounding in my clit. My breasts were pushed forward and pressed together by the position of my own arms, and Wes traded the gentle little plucks for deep grips of my flesh. The more ragged my breath became, the harder he played with my nipples until a pinch was a burn and a pluck was a long pull that left me trembling.

"You like it?"

"Yes, alpha," I breathed, and Wes answered the word with a roaring purr. What a wonderful secret weapon to have.

"I don't want to do too much and leave you sore. How close are you, sweetheart?"

I was right at the edge, my hands aching from where I played with myself, my thighs burning. "So close. Please. Please just a little more."

Wes kissed my cheek and then pinched my nipples tight and rolled them lightly, making me scream, lightning striking right down from my breasts into my clit, and then booming out of me. Wes' arms wrapped around my waist to hold me through the wave, and I leaned forward, bracing myself on his knees.

I had more than one secret weapon, and I used the other one now, pushing my fluttering sex down onto Wes' knot, feeling the depth all the way up to my throat. The dreamy crush of the orgasm grew sharper with the tension of the knot, and I clenched my teeth and keened. Wes growled and tensed as he locked inside of me, pulling me back to his chest, the both of us gasping.

"Fuck, fuck," he breathed, shuddering. "Lola…I…"

And then he snarled, and we slid off the bench and onto the work out mats. I caught myself on my hands and knees as Wes covered my back, hips snapping and digging into my ass. His knot was just barely lodged inside of me, and I spread my thighs so he could fit deeper.

"Does it…does it hurt?" he asked, voice tight. "I've never…"

"God, no. It's a good kind of too much." I arched my back, and Wes moaned as I gripped him. I'd gotten a little taste through the bond with Matthieu before we'd left the Plaza, and the level of pleasure for him had almost been strangling. Wes certainly sounded like he was having a hard time breathing, all snarls and growls and the occasional whine of need. His hands held my hips in a bruising grip as he rutted against my ass, cock throbbing inside of me. I squeezed around him, and he shouted, his release bursting even as he continued to fuck me.

I grinned and looked up in the mirror. Wes' face was strained with ecstatic agony, mouth hanging open and brow furrowed with concentration as he stared at where we were joined, as if he was thinking on the act rather than acting by instinct. He had none of Cyrus' restraint or Matthieu's calculated control, he was purely response, purely chasing pleasure.

"Jesus fucking Christ, I can't breathe," Wes groaned, eyes falling shut. "God, it's so good. Fucking perfect. Sweetheart, you're *mine.*" He growled the last word, and I hummed in agreement.

I lowered myself to my elbows and sighed as Wes' knot rubbed my inner front walls. That was it, god, that was the fucking *spot*.

"I am yours, alpha," I said. Emmy had been the beta most ready and willing to give me her rundown of best knotting positions, and I could see why this was one of her favorites. Wes was losing his mind, and his knot was like a massive vibrator just set to—

I gasped and shuddered as a surprising, soft orgasm rushed over me, and Wes growled and bucked right through it, his hands smoothing over my trembling back.

When I caught my breath again, I settled myself further, watching Wes' stomach flex in the mirror, his eyes on my reflection. My breasts pressed to the cool padded mat, and Wes couldn't get any deeper inside of me, but he seemed content to grind in place, his eyes getting droopy with satisfaction.

"Are you going to make me yours?" I asked softly.

He blinked, and then blinked again, bowing over my back. His hands braced on either side of my shoulder. "Look at me."

I turned my head, resting my cheek on my folded arms, and looked at him as much as I was able to out of the corner of my eye.

"Sweetheart, are you asking…?"

"I want your bite, Wes," I said, butting myself back into his hips and squeezing my core around him. "I'm yours."

Clarity settled over his gaze, and Wes' arms looped around my middle, shifting us so that he was sitting on the floor with me on his lap again.

"You are mine. And this is the last time I'll make you ask, but I wanna be sure," Wes murmured, leaning to the side so we could see each other more clearly. His hands were petting every part of me, thick fingers tangling in my hair, then stroking my waist, and then up to hold and soothe my breasts and the nipples he'd abused sweetly.

"Bite me, alpha," I said, catching his lips in a soft kiss.

I expected him to growl with satisfaction like Matthieu had. But he only kissed me back, languid and lazy, and then grazed his lips over my cheek, nuzzling my temple. He continued, over my jaw, my throat, my right shoulder, and then even my left, pecking his lips over Matthieu's bite. His nose nudged at my nape and then one of his hands reached up to my jaw, tipping my head far to the side.

I didn’t think to brace, so lulled by his kisses, and there was no hesitation on his part. One moment, he was kissing the back of my neck, and in the next his teeth were buried there, my eyes wide on the mirror as he thrummed with a heavy purr.

Wes rolled us to the side, and then flattened me to the floor beneath him, pulling his teeth free from the burning bite and growling out, “Spread. Farther, sweetheart.”

My legs spread until my thighs burned and I couldn’t move anymore. Wes began to rut again, his tongue lapping over his mark on my neck. The bond was heavy, the sensation of hands everywhere. But instead of them being tight or cruel, it was as if I was being held up by them. Wes wasn’t the high and happy glow of my bond with Matthieu, he was foundation. Steady ground to stand on. Tears welled in my eyes, and I swallowed them down as his knot dug perfectly inside of me, his hands holding me to take all of him. Shuddering warmth spread through my veins.

“I have you,” Wes murmured, voice tight with his own desperation.

He did, and it was the perfect possession. I sank into the sensation, let it rise up over my head, a welcoming version of drowning.

“I love you,” I breathed, although from the bright burst in my chest from him, he felt it before I said the words.

Wes’ fingers found mine on the mat as he rolled over and into me like a wave, and our hands locked together as we both shuddered and let the tide take us.

TWENTY-ONE

Lola

"I love the idea, but why are you bringing it to me?" Maureen asked, arms crossed over her chest and hip cocked as she frowned up at me. "You have a direct line to management," she added, eyeing my shoulder where Matthieu's bite was peeking out of the collar of my dress.

"Because that's not how pitching concept issues works here." I raised an eyebrow in an answering challenge.

Maureen's lips twitched.

The weekend was over, and despite Wes' attempt to talk me into a 'take my beta to work, and by work, I mean bed' day, I'd returned to *Designate* in higher spirits than I left it. I was fucking bonded. To the *boss'* boss' boss. But that didn't mean I wanted to turn to Matthieu *or* Cyrus over the breakfast table and hand them the idea. They wouldn't have cared and probably would've snapped their fingers and made it happen, but I wanted to follow the usual route.

Maureen shrugged and leaned to the side to look around me at the others working at their desks. "Fine with me. But I'm not advocating you in an email to Cyrus, it's a waste of my time. Go up to the office and tell his assistant you want to see him. Make your pitch, and then get back to work on our layouts," Maureen said.

"Got it," I said, leaving our department for the elevators.

I hadn't been up to Cyrus' office since he'd taken over, and I was surprised as I arrived to see his first change—curtains over the vast

glass walls that looked into his office. I was also surprised by his choice of assistant.

“Can I help you?” The woman at the long narrow desk was older, with a heavy helping of silver in her short bob. She was petite, Asian, and wore a warm smile on her lips. Her outfit passed for the halls of *Designate*, but there was something distinctly…mom-ish about it, the floral button up and soft cardi brightly colored and modest. I liked her immediately.

“I’m here to see Cyrus about a pitch. Lola Barnes,” I said, moving to take one of the chairs.

“Is he expecting you?” she asked, and unlike most professional assistants, she managed to make the question sound welcoming.

“He’s not. Maureen in Beauty sent me up,” I said, resisting the urge to say I was a packmate.

The woman hummed and rose from the desk, peeking inside. “Cyrus, a Lola Barnes is here. Should I schedule—”

“Lola! Quit playing tricks on Ora and come in,” Cryus called, adding a murmur to Ora that made her eyes widen at me as she stood back and held the door open.

“I’m only here about *Designate*,” I said, rising from the chair and standing in the doorway.

Cyrus shrugged and waved me in, eyes rolling. “You still don’t need an appointment. Use the perks, sunshine.”

“Thank you,” I said to Ora. She gave me a bemused smile and let the door swing shut as Cyrus rose from behind his desk and crossed the room to me.

The room was still mostly the same, although the curtains over the glass walls made it feel closer, and Cyrus had added some color-blocked abstract art to the walls.

“Sit with me,” Cyrus said, taking my elbow and drawing me over to the sectional in the corner of the room, a low coffee table in front of it covered with open sketchbooks and the latest issues of *Designate*.

Cyrus sat closer to me than a business meeting really called for, stretching his arm across the back of the couch and letting our knees bump together. His smile was bright and warm, and I was starting to feel floaty from that bubbly bright scent of his.

“I’m here to pitch a concept issue,” I said, nudging his knees and trying to sit up straight.

“Done, accepted, let’s do it,” Cyrus said shrugging. “What do you want for lunch?”

“Cyrus!”

He grinned at me. “I’m teasing. Go on.”

“I want *Designate* to make a beta only issue,” I said, and I was actually relieved to see Cyrus’ brow fold instead of his immediate acceptance.

“Isn’t *Designate* very approachable to betas?” Cyrus asked.

“Of course but…” I hummed and let my eyes wander over the room while I thought of the right words. Maybe I did have an advantage with Cyrus, being able to relax in our conversation, but I didn’t mind in this case.

“Right, so if we do an article about self-care, it’s usually something along the lines of ‘How to Spoil Yourself Like An Omega,’” I said, and Cyrus nodded. “Which is good, but what I want is to celebrate betas as they are, not as an omega. And yes, I think the principles should be the same, but I’d like to be more mindful of our language. Quit asking betas to live up to the confidence of an *alpha*, or to treat themselves as an *omega*.”

Cyrus’ brow smoothed as he considered my words, head nodding slowly. “I see. That’s something we should consider more carefully in general.”

“Yes, but I want this to be more than that. I’d like to avoid talking about alphas or omegas period in this issue. Find powerful betas to interview, but not compare them to their alpha peers,” I said. “Also, I’ve been doing some research, and I’ve found online that there are communities forming around the concept of all beta packs, rejecting the idea that a pack has to include alphas or needs an omega to cement it together.”

“This is good. What about our fashion and beauty angle? Beta designers, companies?” Cyrus asked.

“Models,” I added. “And if you think we can swing it, I’d like to look at perfume companies that focus on enhancing beta biochemistry, instead of ones that try to replicate alpha or omega

pheromones. It'd be great if we could have like, a centerfold of little samples."

Cyrus whistled, his eyes widening. "Actually, that sounds like a major opportunity for the magazine to make productive advertising money. How long have you been brainstorming this?"

I blushed and ducked my head. "Umm…just a few days, actually. But I think it's really good."

"It is, it's great. I'd have to look at our exact demographics, but at a guess, I'd say we're eighty percent beta subscribers."

I nodded. "We're over fifty percent of the population, and we're almost never represented without it being in relation to alphas or omegas."

"You don't like playing it safe when you get a new idea, do you, sunshine?" Cyrus asked, relaxing into the corner of the couch.

"You don't think this is safe?"

"I think it's going to make waves. But good ones," Cyrus said with a dip of his head.

"It's content that's available, but not on a platform as wide as *Designate*," I said with a shrug.

"Then I guess we better jump on it before someone else does. I'm sold. I'll look at our schedule and push this as far forward as we can without risking the quality. There's just one thing," Cyrus said, eyes watching me without blinking. "I think you're going to have to guest edit."

My eyes grew wide. "Cyrus, I can't—"

"It's your concept."

"Lots of people bring concepts and don't get guest editor positions!"

"And I'm an *alpha*, so I can't lead this issue if we're doing it right," Cyrus said. His knee nudged mine. "Do you really trust anyone else with this?"

I frowned. Not off the top of my head, but I didn't know the staff of *Designate* that well. "There is…Kathleen Hughes, she's chief editor on a beta pride lifestyle website. There's not a lot there in the way of fashion and beauty, but she'd be good for the self-care and the professional content. I was thinking of her for an interview, but what if we asked her to be our guest editor?"

“Lola, you can do this!”

I grimaced, “Not *really* though. I don’t know half of what you or any of the head editors at the magazine do about layouts. Not *yet*. But I would be happy to work with Kathleen, and have your eye on things.”

“Co-edits,” Cyrus mused. “That’s a good idea. It’ll keep my hands out of the mix more that way, you’re right. But I think you need to reconcile yourself to pushing out of the assistant beauty editor box soon. You’ve got the head for it, and you’d be good for the magazine.”

“Think of what people would say,” I whispered, wincing.

Cyrus shrugged. “Fuck ‘em. You know what they’ll say? 'No wonder that pack scooped her up at the first chance.'” Cyrus leaned forward, head tilting and lips sliding over mine in a surprising, intoxicating, although brief caress. “Sorry. I know this is a business meeting, but it seemed necessary.”

I blushed as Cyrus leaned away, my smile swelling despite my efforts to fight it. “Necessary. Right.”

He grinned, unrepentant. “On to family-related topics though, Matthieu has to stay late for a meeting. Any chance I could talk you into having dinner here with me while we wait for him?”

I blinked and frowned. “You don’t want to just take a car together without him?” Not that I wanted to leave Matthieu stuck at work without us, but wouldn’t Cyrus mind missing family dinner?

He scooted forward, our legs brushing together and rucking my skirt up by a few inches. Cyrus glanced down and then settled his hands over my bare skin before catching my eye again. “If I take you home after work, I can think of at least four people who will demand your attention the second we step through the door. But if we stay *here*, I’ll have you to myself. Up to you,” he said, his stare tangibly hot on my skin.

I didn’t know if it was the bonds tying me into the lovely tangle of the pack, or if it was just time to take the leap, but now the nerves buzzing through me were expectant instead of cautious.

“Dinner would be nice,” I said, electric arousal flashing at the brief clench of Cyrus’ fingers on my legs.

I MADE my excuses to skip going out for lunch with the others—with Indy out and about and Wes keeping a lid on the subject, I didn't want to risk leaving the Stanmore—and settled for one of the ridiculously ritzy and convenient pop-ups in the cafeteria. I grabbed an open table and sat down with my bento box, munching on my teriyaki and taking notes on my phone for what to say to Kathleen Hughes in an email, when I picked up a thread of conversation from three women behind me.

"Isn't that her?"

"Yeah. I can't figure it out, she's only a beta."

"I heard it's not just Segal. There's photos of her all cozy with Rakim Oren, too."

"Ohmigod, she is in for a rude awakening when that pack tosses her to the curb."

I didn't bother turning around to see who was speaking. I didn't really want to find myself in an elevator at some point and know I was alone with someone who'd been that spiteful. There was a simpler solution. I took the elastic hairband off my wrist, lifting my newly rainbowed hair up into a careless messy bun.

Behind me, the three catty bitches took a collective breath as Wes' fresh bite mark was revealed. I shifted, reaching for my drink and letting the left shoulder of my dress slide down.

"Are you—"

The voice was hushed as I reached up and soothed a finger over Matthieu's bite, smiling to myself at his whispering call of curiosity and longing in the bond.

"That was well handled."

I looked up from my food to find a visitor at my table. She was a few inches taller than me and slender, her black hair hanging like a sheet down her back and glowing red under the faux-natural lighting of the cafeteria. She was beautiful, features unusual and unspecific, eyes cat-like, lips a perfect full bow, and skin a pale fawn brown.

"I personally would've settled for a throat punch," she added, helping herself to the chair across from me.

"Maybe if I were out at a bar," I said, lips twitching.

The woman's eyes widened, and I got the first whiff of rich spice and something sweetly chemical. And then there was the heaviness that surrounded her, a pulse of electricity that stirred the air. An *alpha*. She leaned back in the chair and eyed me as she took a deep slurp on a straw, drinking something from the current, vegan 'milk'shake vendor we had in the building.

"Now that you're locked down, do you even get to go to bars?" she asked, eyes narrowing.

I forced my expression not to change and remembered what Rake had said when I'd suggested that Baby's pack might prevent her from a fun night. Like hell would any of his pack stop him. And they had let me go to the Howlers when I needed to.

"They're not like that," I said, smiling. "They might want to come with though, but not for a girls' night."

The alpha hummed and eyed me, the rattling suction at the bottom of her cup echoing between us. It occurred to me a little late that I was sitting at a table with an alpha I didn't know. One who was rocking back on two legs of her chair, balanced perfectly in place as she stared me down. I wasn't relaxed with her, but I didn't want to run and cower either. At least she wasn't an Odette, trying to push her alpha energy at me to make me edgy.

"So they're golden, your pack?" she asked.

I frowned and tipped my head to the side in question. "They're… mine. They're my pack." I shrugged. "They're golden for me."

The front legs of the chair landed on the floor, and the alpha made an amused sound, nodding at me. "Fair enough, Lola. See you 'round."

I gaped and blinked as she rose and turned away. Had I just passed some kind of test? And if so, who was giving it?

ORA WAS GONE when the rest of the beauty department left for the day and I headed back up to Cyrus' office.

"Come in," Cyrus called as I rapped my knuckles on the door.

I stepped inside to find the lights off, the glow of the city lighting the room in a glitter of color. Thick, purple clouds hung above the skyscrapers, threatening us with a rainstorm for later.

“Lock the door behind you, sunshine,” Cyrus said from behind his desk. “I don’t want anyone to know I’m still here. It’s been non-stop questions since I got the position.”

It took me a moment to sort out the fancy sliding latch on the door, but it clicked shut and I turned back to admire Cyrus. His computer screen created an ethereal shine on his smooth skin, glinting off the glasses he was wearing.

“Hmm? You’re staring.”

“You’re nice to stare at,” I said. He’d raised the stakes by asking me to come here tonight, but I didn’t want to make him do all the work.

Cyrus grinned at me and raised his hand, crooking his finger. If I hadn’t known better, I would’ve thought he was a magician because my pussy automatically clenched and pulled me forward at the gesture.

“I only got a taste earlier,” Cyrus said as I came to stand at his side.

His hands reached for my hips, drawing me in close, rubbing over my sides. I bent and braced my hands on his shoulders, catching a quick kiss on his lips before his glasses bumped against me.

“No, leave them,” Cyrus said as I reached to remove them. “I have an email to send, and I need them.”

He took my face in his hands next, turning my head to the side and slotting our lips together, his tongue plunging in on my gasp. I moaned as Cyrus conquered my mouth, my body nearly falling into his, knees wobbling at the force and hunger of his kiss.

“There,” Cyrus said, voice scratching. “Now turn around.”

I swallowed at the command. I was finding my footing with trust again, and Cyrus was the last of the alphas in my pack to get his share. I’d certainly let Wes take charge the night before. Things with Cyrus were different, edgier, and somehow left me feeling like it was a bigger risk. We weren’t in love, he wasn’t my protector, but we’d left our attraction on simmer for so long it was ready to boil over between us now.

I stood up and turned, and Cyrus' hands moved to hold the back of my thighs, slipping under the skirt of my dress and finding my stockings and garters.

"Oh, I like this," he murmured, fingertip catching on a garter and snapping it against my skin gently. "Would you like to try something with me?"

My breath was heavy in my chest, and I nodded loosely, jumping as Cyrus' hand slid up and pinched the underside of my ass.

"Yes," I said.

"How do you feel about names, sunshine? Want me to stay Cyrus, or…"

"Boss," I said, lips quirking.

Cyrus laughed, bright and noisy, cutting through our growing tension. It was a little silly even to say, but the nickname cut some of the tension in me, and it would be a constant reminder that I was with *Cyrus,* who was familiar and safe, even when he was thrilling. His hand just below my ass moved between my legs, and I adjusted my foot to open for him until he slapped the outside of my left thigh with his other hand, keeping them closed.

"How do you feel about pet?" Cyrus asked.

I blinked, surprised by the deep clench in my core at the name. I nodded and then corrected myself. "Yes please, Boss."

"Ohhh, very good, Lola. I want you to sit right here on my lap while I work, pet," Cyrus said, both of his hands squeezing around my left thigh, guiding me down in a wobble until I was seated on his right thigh, my legs slightly spread and my skirt hitched over his knee.

"Relax," Cyrus said, and I had to force myself to let him take my weight. "Good. Lift your heels and find the bar underneath. Got it?"

"Yes, Boss," I breathed, wanting to twist to look at him but not sure if I was allowed to. Instead, I focused on the deep red curtains that covered the glass walls.

I hooked my heels into the bar under the chair and gasped as Cyrus turned us back to the computer screen. His leg beneath me bounced, and I whimpered at the sudden friction of movement against my sex.

“Hands flat on the desk.” I slapped them down gratefully, and Cyrus chuckled. “Good, pet. Lean forward.” He bounced his leg again, and I sighed. “Farther forward.”

This time when he shifted, it dragged directly against my clit and I couldn’t swallow my moan.

“There, perfect. I want you to stay just like that for me. If I stop moving, you take over. You can go as fast as you like, but you ask permission before you come. Understand, pet?” Cyrus asked.

I nodded quickly, and he ran his hand up and down my spine. “Anything you don’t want?” Cyrus asked.

I bit my lip, and my head twitched in his direction. “Um…I don’t want—please don’t say mean things?” I’d liked being called a slut or a dirty girl at one point, but now it just reminded me of Buzz and Indy. Maybe it was something I would try again, but for the moment I didn’t want anything to interrupt us, especially not a panic attack.

“Of course not, pet,” Cyrus murmured. His hands reached up to my hair, and he undid my careless bun from lunch, sifting his fingers through the strands before pulling it into a tight high ponytail. I rocked over his thigh, and he hummed. “What if I want to fuck you when you’re done riding me?”

“Absolutely. Fuck me, Boss,” I said, nodding. I was already desperate for the fill.

“No knot though, you’ve had enough for now.”

I blushed at his knowledge but didn’t disagree.

“Very good, pet.”

“Your—your pants, what if I…?” I was already wet, and I didn’t want to ruin Cyrus’ lovely trousers simply by having a good time.

“It’s not your job to worry about that,” he said, giving a tug on the roots of my hair, making me pant and rock faster. “Now, I’m going to be one-handed on this email, so it’s going to take a long time. You might want to pace yourself.”

I slowed my movement at the subtle hint. Did that mean I wasn’t allowed to come until he was done with the email? I was already wet and throbbing, and honestly, a few more tugs on my hair and I’d probably be ready to come.

Cyrus’ thigh bounced steadily beneath me, and I shut my eyes and pressed my lips together, trying to restrain my whines and

moans. I focused on the sound of Cyrus' slow typing. How could he fucking concentrate? I could barely see straight. The man had not missed a fucking leg day, that was for sure.

"Did I say I didn't want to hear you?" Cyrus growled, jerking my head back by the end of my ponytail.

I cried out as his leg went still, immediately using my own pace to grind against his thigh, bracing myself between my hands on the desk and my heels on the bar of the chair. I whimpered and sighed and groaned as I rode his lap, trying to slow myself down even as the heat in my core spiraled faster.

"Cy—Boss, I—"

"No, pet, not yet."

I gasped and stilled on his leg at the rude awakening. I was nearing the edge, and I wasn't going to just *get* permission to come because I'd asked for it. Cyrus picked up the rhythm when I stopped, and I shuddered and tried to ignore the pulsing of my core, the swelling warmth running through my veins.

I whined as my body began to tingle in warning. Had I ever held off an orgasm on my own? Caleb had edged me at the ballet, but he'd been careful to stop stimulating me when I was too close. Cyrus was determined to do the opposite.

"Boss, I…fuuck that feels so good," I whispered. It was like a coarse tongue licking over my clit, the lace of my underwear combined with the weave of his pants densely textured against my sensitive sex.

"Keep going, pet," Cyrus murmured, his leg resting.

When I didn't move right away, Cyrus pulled roughly on my hair again. My body jumped into motion, more at the drum of desire than his urging.

"Please. Please, Boss, I don't know if I can—" I whined as my pussy clenched on nothing, nearly at the edge.

"Relax, take a deep breath," Cyrus said, still plodding away on the keyboard out of the corner of my eye. Was everything erotic now, or did Cyrus have especially beautiful hands? Artist's hands.

I breathed through my teeth, and the wave subsided for a moment. I tried to slow down again, but on the precipice of an orgasm, it only would've taken one graze to pitch me over the edge.

“Hold it down, imagine a weight,” Cyrus murmured, combing his fingers up the back of my neck, digging into my roots.

I wanted to stamp my foot and ignore his orders, hump his leg until I fell forward onto the desk panting. But I wanted Cyrus to see that I could do as he said, and a part of me was curious if I could actually do it. It didn’t make the pounding pleasure subside, as I focused on his instructions. If anything, the sensation was *more* powerful for being held over the long stretch of time.

I moaned and Cyrus hummed.

“Good, isn’t it?”

I wasn’t sure if I could answer and maintain control, but thankfully he didn’t push me. I was rolling my hips over Cyrus’ thigh, the slippery slick of constant arousal making the path smoother. The motion was hypnotic, as was the steady pulse of warning running through me, a constant threat that any moment my control might slip and I’d crash before I had permission.

“Please,” I whispered.

“Almost done,” Cyrus said with a truly unfair amount of calm.

My head hung forward, rocking on my own neck until Cyrus pulled up again with a yank on my hair that nearly made me shatter, the lightning in my roots echoing in my cunt.

“Oh fuck! Please, please, please. Please, Boss, let me come, let me come,” I whimpered, body tensing. “Please, I don’t think I can—”

“Up, pet,” Cyrus snapped, hands on my hips steadying me as I stumbled off his lap. “Bend over the desk.”

I plastered myself to that desk like I was a fresh fucking coat of paint.

Cyrus’ hands slid up my thighs, pushing my skirt up over my ass, and he huffed at the picture of me. “Forgot about those garters,” he said. “But that’s all right.”

The glasses he’d been wearing clattered to the desk, and even that sound made me shiver. I was so distracted by the clink of Cyrus’ belt and the *zziip* of him undoing his pants, that it wasn’t until the fabric of my underwear was pulling and dragging over my clit that I realized what he was planning. He tugged and twisted the fabric, making it rub against every over-sensitized nerve.

“Oh, god, Cyrus! Fuck, Boss, I’m gonna come. Please, please, just fuck me. Please, I can’t…” I whined, hands slapping the glass.

“I’d spank you for telling me what to do if it wouldn’t get you off. Wait until I’m inside you, Lola,” Cyrus said, warning clear. I could still get that spanking if I didn’t get it under control.

A spanking didn’t sound so bad, really.

Control, Lola. For once, my mantra was turned sweetly in my head. I craned to see Cyrus dropping his pants out of the corner of my eye, his hands cupping my hips to hold me away from the edge of the desk. And in the next moment, I released a grateful shout as he thrust into me. I don’t know if I managed to hold off coming until he was all the way in. All I knew was the sudden lightning strike of my climax and Cyrus’ unrelenting fucking.

“Jesus Christ, sunshine, you feel like fucking heaven,” Cyrus groaned, hips slapping my ass and his balls echoing wetly against my clit with every thrust.

I couldn’t catch my breath, my fingers slipping against the glass top of the desk. I giggled as I remembered this was Wendy’s desk once.

“Did you and Wendy have—ungh, fuck yes—sex on this?” I asked, rocking back into his pounding pace.

Cyrus’ rapid bucking stuttered, and he laughed. “Wha-what? No. I—why are you thinking about that?” He leaned forward and wrapped my ponytail around his fist, drawing my shoulder up with his pulling. “I need to do better if that’s where your head is at.”

I was already sex drunk, but I didn’t tell Cyrus that when he reached his free arm around me to fondle my clit. I keened, throat arched, and Cyrus gasped as I clutched around his length as he pumped again.

“That’s it, pet. Suck me into that pretty pussy of yours. I wanted to take a picture of it when I saw it, all red and wet and begging for my cock.”

“Yes, Boss,” I gasped. I swallowed and then gave in to the urge. “Harder, please.”

Cyrus grunted in answer, and I moaned as he did as I asked.

“Come, Lola,” he growled.

Either his timing was perfect or I was a better submissive than I realized, because I tensed and shuddered as the orgasm slammed me flat back to the desk. Cyrus released my hair and pinned his palm to my back, grinding his knot against me, growling and purring until he came in a hot rush inside of me.

“Fu-fuck,” Cyrus gasped.

He went rigid against me and then sagged. He scooped me up from the table, cock slipping free as he settled us back in his chair, breaths ragged and bodies limp. I really was going to make a mess of his pants now. I wiggled to get free, searching the room for something to clean up with, and Cyrus swatted my thigh.

“Give me one second,” he said, pressing a damp kiss to my forehead and then nuzzling down to my mouth, making up for the sex without kisses by feasting endlessly on my lips now. He groaned as he pulled away, head dropping back against the chair. “Give me two minutes.”

I laughed, but when I stood, Cyrus followed, pulling his pants to rest open over his hips. He lifted me against his side, smiling sleepily at me as I stiffened in surprise.

“Let me clean you up. There’s a bathroom through that door, and the aftercare is my…well, maybe not my favorite part of this, but it’s one of them.”

I softened and nodded, relaxing in Cyrus' arms as he took us into the bathroom and found a soft cloth to tidy us up with, his free hand constantly petting and soothing me, scent-marking me with nuzzles the whole time.

“That was fun,” I murmured, leaning into him.

He grinned at me and nodded. “Next time, I want to strip you bare and test that control of yours. You know Rake never once managed to hold off coming for me?” I gaped at Cyrus, and he laughed. “Rake likes to play the brat. But you…you’re a *good* girl, aren’t you?”

I shivered and swallowed hard at that, something silky and dark running over me, a kind of satisfaction I’d never run into before. I nodded, and Cyrus smiled and leaned forward, kissing my forehead.

“I thought so, pet. Maybe soon I’ll make Rake watch us, show him how perfectly you behave for me?”

Had I not just come twice? I was pretty sure I had. But if Cyrus told me to get down on my knees for him in that moment, I absolutely would have. Even if he told me he was going to make me hold off my orgasm for twice as long.

“I’d like that,” I said, my face hot.

Cyrus opened his mouth to answer when a knocking on the office door made us both pause.

“Oh! It’s Matthieu,” I said, grinning and feeling Matthieu’s affectionate irritation burning in my chest.

Cyrus laughed and hurried to let my alpha into the office, fastening his pants on the way.

“You asshole,” Matthieu growled at him, barely restraining a smile as the door opened. “You couldn’t have *warned* me? I was so hard through that entire meeting, I had to cut it short. Lola, come here.”

I hurried to Matthieu’s side, gasping as he dove in for a rough and desperate kiss, pulling me close and grinding against me. Just as I was clutching closer, Matthieu sighed and pulled away, dropping his forehead to mine.

“Do you want to wait until we get home where I can make love to you properly, or do you want to show Cyrus how beautiful you look with my cock in your mouth?” Matthieu growled.

There was a possessive edge running in the bond like nails scratching lightly down my arm, but it was affectionate rather than angry. Matthieu liked the feeling of what had happened between Cyrus and I, but he didn’t want to be left out.

I gripped his belt and unthreaded it slowly, smiling as Matthieu’s eyes widened with surprise. He hadn’t expected me to take the bait?

“Fuck,” he sighed, and his cock jumped under my hand as I cupped it through his pants.

Cyrus moved to the couch, spreading out and grinning at the pair of us. “Carry on,” he said. “I was planning on watching a movie later, but this will be better.”

I sank to my knees and Matthieu moaned, brow furrowing and chest panting.

“Did you really think I wouldn’t?” I asked, gazing up at Matthieu.

“You are all of my favorite dreams, Lolotte,” Matthieu murmured. Then he flashed his grin and reached for my ponytail, taking a

commanding grip. His voice lowered to a growl, and his eyes hooded. “Now show me how much you missed me today.”

TWENTY-TWO

Leo

My knee jiggled erratically, heel popping against the carpeted floor of the waiting room. Caleb sat on my left, sketching in a notebook filled with fabric swatches and paint chips, seemingly unaware of my anxious mood. Or so I thought, until the woman sitting across from us sighed heavily and eyed my bouncing leg.

Caleb rested his pencil in the heart of his notebook and set his hand down over my knee. He didn't press, but some of his calm flooded me and I sagged, leaning into his shoulder.

"You aren't worried at all?" I asked in a whisper. Caleb frowned and tilted his head in question. "It's just…therapy can be a rough process. She might backslide a bit."

"She might," Caleb said, nodding. "But she's still part of us now. Wes and Matthieu will be there to shore her up when doubts creep in again. I don't think Lola was careless when she made the choice to bond them."

I grunted and slouched, staring down at my own lap. No, Lola seemed happy to be bonded. To Matthieu. And Wes.

"You're jealous?" Caleb whispered in surprise. "I thought you wanted—"

"I *do*. I am…I'm glad she's bonded. That she's my packmate," I said, with a slightly sour note to the last word.

Caleb sighed and lifted his hand from my knee, wrapping his arm around my shoulder. "Leo, Lola loves you. You're more than her

packmate. And so is Rake. And so am *I*," Caleb murmured.

"Then why haven't you asked her yet?" I asked. "Or why hasn't she asked you?"

Caleb's lips twitched, and it actually annoyed me how easy going he was about this. Maybe it was selfish of me, but I couldn't help feeling like I'd brought Lola into the folds of this pack and now she was slipping out of my reach. It *was* selfish, not to mention kind of dumb. Lola had spent a couple nights with Matthieu and Wes while their bonds solidified, but she'd joined Rake and me the night before, and I'd heard her in the shower this morning with Caleb.

"If you were an alpha, you and Lola would've been bonded weeks ago," Caleb said.

I nodded. That was true. I would've been borderline pushy about it too, so it was probably for the best that I wasn't an alpha.

"I'm ready, Leo. When *she* is. And I'm not her therapist, but I think Lola may find it reassuring for her first bonds to be between herself and her alpha alone. Or easier to acclimate, maybe?" Caleb shrugged. "The change in Wes alone…"

I smiled at that and rolled some of the tension out of my shoulders. That was true. Wes was basically bouncing on his toes these days, a new goofy grin on his face I'd rarely seen before.

"I plan on forming a bond with Lola, but it's only been five days since she came back home," Caleb said, catching my eye and smirking. "Don't you think we can be a little more patient than that?"

I laughed and shook my head. "Yes, fine."

"I think you're catching some of Rake's impatience," Caleb added. Which was true, Rake was like an ant-hill in my chest, teeming eagerly as he waited for Lola to claim one of his alphas.

If she picks Cyrus first, I swear to god, I'll make one of the other alphas bite me just to—

"Doesn't it drive you mad to be waiting out here and not know how she's doing?" I asked Caleb.

He blinked and tilted his head in thought. "I…I was more nervous when I didn't know if she was interested in me, I think. Now I can just relax and let things happen. Anyway, I think the reason we're here and Matt or Wes aren't is because there *isn't* a bond yet. We can give her more privacy as she starts this process."

I cracked my knuckles, caught the glare of the woman waiting, and then quickly settled again. I hadn't considered that, and I'd seen the grimace of acceptance Matthieu had worn when Lola had told him she'd wanted us to be the ones waiting on her.

"She's ours, Leo," Caleb said softly.

"She is." And Caleb was right, I could wait a little longer for the bond. Lola was more than judicious with her affections throughout the whole pack. It wasn't attention I was lacking, it was just that larger claim on her I was greedy for.

Caleb lifted his free hand and twisted his wrist to glance at his watch. "They'll be finishing up now," he said. "I'll go settle things at the front desk."

"She said she wants to pay," I said.

Caleb only made a soft 'pft' of refusal and then rose, heading toward the receptionist's desk. Sure enough, a moment later the door to the therapist's office opened. Lola appeared, eyes red rimmed and steps a little unsteady, and I jumped up from my seat, crossing to meet her.

"I'll see you next week, Lola," said Dr. Goulden, a middle-aged woman with a gentle tone and faded red twist of hair.

"Thank you," Lola said with a quick glance over her shoulder. She didn't really look grateful, and anger twisted together with worry in my gut.

"All set," Caleb called, and Lola nodded, not even asking about the bill, but seeming relieved to make her way out of the office.

Are you all right? was on the tip of my tongue, but the answer was obvious. She was not.

"Do you want to find a different therapist?" I asked immediately.

Lola's head raised, and Caleb choked on a laugh as he helped her into her coat.

"What? Why would I change?"

"You…you're upset," I said, grimacing at my weak reasoning.

Lola's lips curled in a smile and she leaned into my chest, reaching up for a kiss I was only too happy to bend and grant her.

"I think that's normal," she mumbled against my lips.

She pulled away, and Caleb opened the door for both of us. Lola's hand slipped into mine as we headed for the office building's

elevators.

“It wasn’t fun or anything, but I can’t say it felt pointless. I think…I think this is just going to wear me out for a while. I feel like I’m hungover? Kind of nauseous.”

I raised my arm and smiled as Lola immediately tucked herself into my side. Caleb moved up to her other side, catching her hand in his and raising it to his lips.

“We’ll get home, make some ginger tea, and get a warm bath going,” Caleb said as we stepped into the elevator.

“I can sit on the ledge and give you a head and shoulders massage,” I offered.

“Mmm, now I just sound high maintenance,” Lola said, but I caught her smile in the reflection of the closing doors. “I do have some joints from one of Baby’s alphas that sound nice though. It might help to kind of turn the volume down on my head.”

I blinked. Lola had weed? Would she share? If she did though, we’d probably end up with everybody but Caleb and Wes high.

“That sounds like a very good plan,” Caleb said with a nod.

When we made it to the garage, Caleb volunteered to drive, and I slid into the backseat to hold Lola for the ride home. I wanted to ask her a million and one questions about her session, but before I could decide if that was okay or where to start, Lola spoke.

“Can I have a little bit of a distraction?”

I swallowed my questions down quickly and relaxed as Lola leaned into me, adjusting her head on my shoulder.

“Of course, love. Do you want music?” Caleb asked.

“Mmm, no. Tell me how you go about working for your clients. Do they tell you what they want or…?”

Caleb pulled us out of the garage and onto the city streets, sliding into the slow flow of post-rush-hour traffic. “I like to do some interviews to get to know them, have them show me some visual inspirations they like, that kind of thing. But I also try and talk to them about their routines and what they’re hoping to improve in their life. Someone who wants to be more organized needs beautiful and functional storage systems, ones that are easy to form a habit around. Someone who wants to cook more needs a social kitchen

that's easy to navigate and work in. Are you considering taking me up on my offer to help you with your room?"

It was a relief to me not to hear it as the guest room anymore, although I still thought we needed to find a way to give Lola an equal amount of territory to claim in the house.

"I think so. I never really got around to working on my last apartment or any of the ones before. For all my personal taste when it comes to clothes and makeup, I'm kind of lost when it comes to interiors," Lola said. Her eyes were drifting shut and her face was pale, although I wasn't sure if that was the nausea or exhaustion's fault.

"You've got Caleb giddy at the thought," I told her, and savored the smile over her lips.

"Give me five adjectives for a space you'd love that come to you off the top of your head," Caleb said over his shoulder.

"Mmm, romantic," Lola said, her brow furrowing with thought. Romantic was good. I liked a romantic bedroom. "Sacred. Eclectic. Um…I…want it to be private. Is that okay? A space to share with just myself?"

The naughty fantasy in my head burst like a bubble, but what was left behind was a strange and gentle happiness. The only thing I wanted as much as Lola forming a bond with Caleb—and me—was her making our home into hers. Claiming room for herself was important in that. She knew she was welcome with us in our rooms regardless.

"Absolutely," Caleb said.

"Okay, and then colorful. Kind of…dense."

I stifled my laugh at the brief flare of panic from Caleb. His expertise was in neutrals. But he would manage.

"I accept this challenge," Caleb answered.

Lola bit her lip, eyes narrowing as she stared out the window. I stroked my fingertip down the length of her nose, making her eyes cross before she looked up at me. "And?"

"And I want a bigger tub," Lola whispered.

"Done," Caleb said, so quickly it made Lola jump. "If I'm redoing the bedroom, I'm certainly redoing that bathroom."

I winked at Lola, and she melted back into my side, eyes falling shut in an aimless doze for the remainder of the ride home. Caleb was right. She was ours, *mine*. The bond would happen when Lola threw Caleb down on the bed and told him it would. I just wanted to make sure I was on hand to enjoy the show.

TWENTY-THREE

Lola

"Knock—"

"Get your cute butt in here," Wes growled, spinning in his office chair and holding his arms out for me.

I laughed and crossed the space, helping myself to Wes' lap. He tugged me close, straddling me over his legs and letting my toes dangle over the floor. When I tried to scoot back, he pulled me forward, grunting and grinning as I rocked over him.

I raised an eyebrow.

"In the mood for an afternoon quickie?" he asked, waggling his eyebrows.

Tempted, I glanced at his desk, but it was a mess compared to Cyrus' and that *really* wasn't the reason I'd come to talk to him.

"Hold that thought," I said, tapping Wes' chin as he leaned forward for a kiss. "Mmph. Mphseriousesss."

I moaned as Wes licked and nipped at my lips, his hands rocking me over his crotch. He was growing stiff against me, and I tried to stamp down the lust stirring up in my veins—helped by Wes' own enthusiasm—to focus on why I'd come to talk to him.

It was a lazy Sunday and the whole pack was home, and I was feeling a little less foggy after a few days of a nasty therapy hangover. Which was a scientific thing, as it turned out, and knowing so left me feeling less shabby about the struggle to get back out of the dark parts of my head.

Wes sighed and sagged against the back of his chair as soon as I started whimpering, a teasing triumph twisting his lips.

"So what did you need, sweetheart?"

Well shit, now I needed *Wes*.

"Um…" Oh right. "Um, the police called me. They said Indy was spotted in Uptown last night."

"Oof. Okay." Wes huffed and rearranged me to sit sideways over his lap, spinning us to his computer as I wrapped my arms around his shoulder. "Yeah, I've got them talking to Garret and he sent me that text this morning. It wasn't real close to us, and it took a while to ID him."

I wasn't sure if it was just that we had a bond now and that kept Wes pretty chipper, but he didn't feel nearly as stressed about the call as he seemed a few weeks ago. Then again, I didn't really either.

"You didn't tell me," I said, drumming my fingers on his shoulder.

Wes' eyebrows rose and he petted over his bite on the back of my neck, sunshine running through me at the simple touch. "I wasn't sure if you'd want to know. Seemed before like you preferred me handling it without you having to hear too much about it?"

"That's true, I suppose. I think I want to be kept in the loop now."

Wes nodded. "Deal. Okay, so in that case. Garret got a few more details out of his contact. Indy went to check in on an old Hangman, someone who stepped out *before* the raid last year? A fight broke out in the bar and according to witnesses Indy was…rebuffed. Sounds like he has about six guys on his team and they're all pretty wet behind the ears."

"I guess it makes sense that he's not the most popular guy," I said, breathing a sigh of relief. "What about…has he tried contacting me anymore?"

"So…yeah. That I have been keeping from you. I think he's onto my involvement because he's sending messages to your old number but they seem…directed more at us. But before you get stressed, just know, it's a lot of empty goading."

"But he's talking about the pack?" I asked, biting my lip.

"Don't take this worry on, sweetheart. I've got all kinds of security covered. Your old place until we clear it out. Everyone's offices. This

house is secure too. No sign of anyone out of the ordinary, and it'd be pretty easy to spot on a street like ours," Wes said.

"But that's not going to be the end of it," I said, staring at Wes and holding that bright gaze of his.

He licked his lips and frowned. "Probably not. And I don't want you feeling like you're under house arrest or anything but…"

I shrugged. "But I need to keep being careful. Stanmore and home unless I'm with pack."

Wes winced. "Do you mind?"

"Do I mind spending all my time with any of six deliciously handsome men who took me on when I was struggling to cope with like…everything, including myself? No, I'm pretty into that," I said, and I answered Wes' growing smile. "If in another year we're still staring down the barrel of the Indy problem, then…maybe."

"Won't be an issue by then, sweetheart," Wes said, leaning in and kissing my chin.

"I like your confidence," I said, marveling at the rock solid calm coming from Wes in our bond. There was a little flicker of guilt, but it was quickly squashed by determination, and I took another kiss from his lips to reassure him of my absolute faith in his ability to remove Indy from our lives. "Now…how about that quickie?"

Wes purred and I giggled as he lifted me up from the chair, hoisting me around his waist. "Sweetheart, you ever heard of the position Wesley Wallbanger?"

I snorted and shook my head. "Not even the drink."

"That's 'cause we're about to make it up," Wes said, carrying me to an open space of his office wall, fixing me there between the flat surface and his very muscly one.

He set my feet on the floor, and we both hurried to undress ourselves, me slipping out of the pajama shorts I'd still been wearing. I grabbed Wes by the shoulders as soon as I stepped out of them and jumped, his hands catching me by my thighs just in time, his pants pushed just far down enough to give me access.

"Now, I want you to tell me loud and clear when I hit a good spot, Lola," Wes said. And then he lined himself up and drove home, filling me in three quick, rough thrusts.

My voice was hoarse before I left the room, wobbling away on weak legs as Wes caught his breath and went back to work, my scratches on his back exposed proudly to the room.



ONE VERY LONG shower and very lovely nap in the sun next to Matthieu—who worked on clearing out his emails while running his fingers through my hair—later, I went to change in my room. The pack wanted to go out for dinner to celebrate my bondings, and I wanted to choose something pretty that Rake had picked out for me.

On the way to my room I slowed in the hall, the sounds of Nina Simone coming from Cyrus' little studio space. From the cracked doorway, I could smell Cyrus' champagne and fresh paint. I wondered if he'd be annoyed with me for taking a peek of him at work, and then decided with the new take on our relationship, a little annoyance might suit me very well. I leaned into the door and it swung in silently.

Cyrus' back was to me, wearing a faded old blue silk shirt with its sleeves rolled up to the elbows. He had a messy palette of color balanced on one knee and a side table next to him littered with brushes and palette knives and stained jugs of water. What was most shocking was the face on the canvas and the slight dread the image left me with.

"You're painting me?"

Cyrus painted portraits when his relationships *ended,* not when they began. I wanted to take one of the jugs of foggy water and toss it at the image, shocked by how unhappy I was to see myself on his canvas.

"Hey!" He twisted to face me, smile bright and then faltering as he got a look at my face. "Oh, hey, no. Come here." I hesitated, and Cyrus' voice lowered. "Pet."

For an untrained submissive, I had a few things down right. I stumbled toward Cyrus and he set his palette aside, pulling me against him.

"Sunshine, look at it," Cyrus said softly, squeezing my side.

I *was* looking at it. It looked like the others. My face was on a dark, shifting, shadowy background, and I was amazed at how well Cyrus had captured my features without reference. But still, there I was, the left half of my face in shadow and the right half glowing with a spotlight. I recognized the girl in shadow more than the glossy glittering version. I knew those dark circles under my eyes, I knew that vaguely horrified look in my eye, the downward slant of my lips. Cyrus had captured the me of two months ago, the girl who'd shuddered and cowered in front of him in a dark elevator. But that was…

I looked over to one of the canvases leaning against a wall and finally saw the difference. All the other paintings had the right half of the face in shadow, the left in light.

"It reads left to right," I said, echoing his explanation to me from weeks ago. Which meant that brilliant, bright, happy side of me in the portrait was…

"The future is bright, Lola," Cyrus said softly, leaning in and kissing the corner of my jaw.

I blushed at my own error of judgment and turned to catch Cyrus' laughing gaze.

"You painted a beginning instead of an ending," I said, my heart pounding as he nodded.

He turned on his stool, pulling me to stand between his thighs. Seated, our faces were perfectly level, and I granted myself permission to run my hands over Cyrus' shoulders.

"As soon as I realized what you were becoming to this pack, I knew I wanted to be sure your heart would be as safe with me as it was with the others," Cyrus said. "You're going to be mine someday soon, Lola."

I nodded and I didn't even care that for once I didn't need to overthink it, or judge myself, or worry about what Cyrus wanted from me. Somewhere between the heat and being bonded, one thing had become clear. This pack was made for me. It wasn't that they were the fairy tale pack every girl dreamed of because those were just cardboard cutout men. Rake was a little self-absorbed, Caleb and Wes tried to dim their own brilliance, Matthieu was getting complacent in his place at Voir and forgetting that publishing was

about publicizing *change*, and Cyrus was coasting at *Designate* instead of pursuing his passion in painting. Leo *was* perfect though. I'd have to remember to tell him later.

"I'm done looking for different shades of love," Cyrus said, holding my gaze.

Which was a nice thing to say, but I wondered if he thought it was what I wanted to hear. Cyrus loved falling in love, and if I had to guess, he loved the heartbreak too. But he knew the difference between those relationships and the one we were forming, and that was all that mattered to me.

"Does it change your love for Rake to start something new with me?" Cyrus frowned and his head shook so I continued. "Then discover as many shades of love as call to you. You're going to be mine, too."

He blinked and then beamed at me. "Noted, although we'll see who turns out right."

"Deal. Also, it's time to get ready for our dinner date," I said.

"Mmm, also noted," Cyrus said, holding the back of my thighs.

He leaned forward and I grinned, greedily accepting the offered kiss, stealing hungry nibbles from his full lips and listening to him purr in response. I pushed my luck, slipping my tongue into his mouth and curling it around his, enjoying the thrum of his purr in my mouth. Cyrus pulled away with a growl and I tightened my grip on his shoulders.

"Pet, did I give you permission to take control?" Cyrus asked lowly, eyes narrowing.

Swoop went my belly.

"No, Boss," I said, shaking my head, legs squirming to create friction.

Cyrus' hand snapped lightly on my ass, and I stiffened with a gasp. "What time is it?"

"Um…five-thirty."

"Then we have plenty of time for a lesson before dinner," Cyrus said. I bit my lip as heat pooled in my core, and Cyrus soothed over the rounded flesh he'd swatted. "What is it?"

"Just um…my back is a little bruised from wall sex with Wes, so can we work around that?" I asked.

Cyrus nearly fell off his stool laughing.

TWENTY-FOUR

Rake

"Rake. Rake *please*," Lola hissed as I bounced her over my cock, my hands tight on her hips. "Please, enough!"

I'd woken this morning to Lola trying to sneak out of my bed. The sight of her ass wiggling, still pink from Cyrus' playful spanks the night before, made me decide it was really time for some morning sex with my girl. But this time, I didn't want Cyrus leading the show, which meant we needed to be quiet out on the couch in my sitting room so we didn't wake him.

Despite her begging for a break, Lola's hips were grinding down to meet mine rather than rising to get away. I rubbed the buzzing vibrator quickly over her clit until she tensed and clamped down on my cock, dragging another orgasm out of us both with lightning bright licks of heat. I pressed my hand over her mouth, stifling her pretty, broken cry as she bowed back, the ends of her hair tickling my thighs. She fell forward and I buried my own groan against her throat, my hips still bucking up into hers as I pumped release into her until it started to drip out again over my balls.

"Fuck," Lola panted, the word muffled behind my palm. She rocked, working through an aftershock as her arms circled my neck. "Wow, hi."

I laughed into her hair, pulling my hand from her lips and rubbing it over her cool, bare back. "Hi. Good morning."

"Mmm. I think I'm going to have to pretend to take up horseback riding to explain why I'm going bowlegged," Lola said.

“Lollipop, everyone knows you’re in our pack now. Pretty sure they know exactly who you’ve been riding,” I said, and she huffed and nipped my ear lobe.

God, I loved this girl. I was tempted to just stay here like this until her little sighs and her simple scent and her wiggling got me hard again. If she was going to be walking funny, might as well make the most of it.

“Sore?” I asked.

“A little.”

Damn, never mind then. Lola was in high demand with the pack, and none of us wanted her to end up uncomfortable because we couldn’t get enough of her.

“Shower with me?” Lola asked, sitting up and pecking at my nose.

I nodded and wrapped my arms around her, Lola giggling as I stood. I could totally keep my hands to myself for twenty minutes, right?

“You have a photoshoot today, don’t you?” Lola asked in a whisper.

Cyrus was sprawled out over the sheets as we snuck back through my room. He’d probably woken up at some point and knew exactly what we were up to, but I’d thank him later for letting me have selfish Lola time.

“Mhm. Think they’re calling it urban retro,” I said, setting Lola down once we were in the bathroom.

Lola ran on tiptoes to the open shower, hopping in place as she turned the water on high and giving me a wonderful view as she bounced, waiting for it to warm up. “So Wes will be with you?”

“No, I’ve got Danny driving and a new beta…Troy or Trevor? I can’t remember. You know Wes wants to be on hand for you,” I said, stepping under the water with Lola as she twisted her hair up off her shoulders.

Her brow furrowed and she reached for a bottle of shampoo. “Let me wash it, I’ll give you a scalp massage. What do you mean? Wes isn’t your security because of me?”

Backtrack, buddy, I warned myself at the first anxious note in Lola's voice. “He will be for some things, I’m sure. But these shoots

always have their own security anyway, and his new guy will get a chance to train. He might even have another client he's dealing with," I said, bending my head and sighing as Lola dug sudsy fingers into my hair.

"He's still your alpha, even if we're bonded. You trust him," Lola murmured.

"I do. And I trust him to find me replacements when he can't make it," I said, grinning. I wrapped my arms around Lola's waist and drew her to my chest. "Don't stress, Lollipop."

I bent my head and slid my lips over hers, water drumming over my head and shoulders until it sent shampoo rinsing down my face.

Lola pulled away, face scrunching. "Ugh, shampoo kiss. Turn around and lemme scrub you before you get all excited again."

"Oh yeah, 'cause having your hands all over me makes it so much easier to stay calm," I said, and I grinned as Lola giggled at my back.

URBAN AND RETRO sounded good until it was urban, retro, and raining. It looked great in the shots but it was a cold spring day, and I was officially soggy from head to toe and losing my patience with the work. More and more, an early retirement was looking tempting. I'd always have work if I took care of myself and I wanted it, but it might be getting time to rest on my laurels and enjoy being a homebody omega after all.

The crew had rustled together a hastily organized shelter for me under an awning, around the corner of the alley we were using. I was huddled there in my next outfit and a fluffy robe, waiting for Travis—not Troy *or* Trevor—to bring me a hot tea as I listened to the crew wrestling a dumpster over a brick drive for the next shot.

"What's going on over there?"

I looked up from the game on my phone and frowned at the man walking up the alley. Hadn't security put partitions up? The lanky figure striding toward me almost looked as though he belonged in the pages of the photoshoot. Not his clothes—grimy and threadbare

punk-rock was all wrong—but something about his energy. Physically, he was angular and harsh, the proportions on his face not quite right. But still…he was the kind of hot that came with a penetrating stare and regretting all your decisions the next morning as you went to get tested, just in case. Not my type, but someone's.

"There's a photoshoot happening. Private permits," I said, glancing back to the corner. I was out of sight of the crew in my hiding spot, and I wasn't sure if it was worth getting soaked just to avoid this stray.

"That must make you some kind of supermodel," he said, continuing closer.

I resisted the urge to stiffen at that first whiff. Bitter, sour, sticky. An alpha. Feral, by the look of him. But I was *not* prey, and I refused to act like it. Stressing would just make him want to chase. And that scent…

"No super, just the basic kind," I said, hoping the old trick of turning back to my phone would drop a hint.

"Hey. I know who you are. That omega, Rakim Oren… I have a friend who knows you," he said, lowering his voice as he stood within arm's reach of me.

My stomach dropped as the scent clicked in my head. I'd smelled this alpha before. Not in person, but in traces around Lola's apartment. I glanced up and studied the man in front of me, not bothering to temper the hate in my glare. Indy. Pocked cheeks and mean lips and greased back hair with shaved sides. So this was him. And he'd found me.

Poor Wes is gonna be pissed about this. And Lola… Lola would feel like it was her fault.

"She's not your friend," I said, voice flat.

Indy just grinned at me, a chipped tooth winking at me like a short fang. I moved to step into the rain, join the crew, and his hand snapped out like a whip, catching me by my arm and holding me in an iron grip. He pressed to my back, free arm wrapping around me to yank my phone from my fingers.

And now you've lost your chance to call the cops, Rake. Come on, Travis. Hurry your ass up.

“I was gonna ask you to give her a message for me, but now I think I have a better idea,” Indy said.

My eyes were on the brick wall ahead of me and I was ready to shout, when I heard the metallic click at my back, a cold sinking weight settling in my chest. I glanced back over my shoulder and there was a gun. I knew Wes owned guns and I’d seen them in his holster before, but it was like it was an entirely different animal to be staring at the mouth of one, pointed at me with intent to harm. Or at least the threat.

“Don’t scream. Male omegas aren’t my type, and I don’t give a shit about you. You can come with me, or I can leave you dead in this alley. Either way is fun for me,” Indy snarled in my ear, tugging on my arm.

I jerked, wanting to fight or run or flip him off, but the press of the cold gunmetal at the back of my neck drew a cruel, scared part of myself out of hiding. I believed that Indy would shoot me. That he’d be as happy to leave me dead as he would to drag me off and put my pack into a state of panic. Either would make Lola miserable.

But only one of the two would be permanent. And Indy didn’t know what he was in for, dealing with Wes. Lola might be his bondmate, but I was his omega, his friend, his family.

“Look at you, what a good little omega,” Indy growled as I stopped resisting and let him drag me down the narrow little walkway between buildings. “This serves your pack right for letting you out of the house. Unattended omegas aren’t safe, you know. What? You used up all your polite conversation already?”

There was a dinged up old hot rod idling on the sidewalk we were approaching, but the neighborhood of the photoshoot was mostly run down and empty. There was no one passing by for me to call to as Indy shoved me toward the car.

“You’re awfully chatty for a dead alpha,” I said, and grunted as Indy wrestled me into the backseat, pushing me in and toward an alpha waiting by the drivers side door.

There was another alpha behind the wheel of the car, this one with a halfway pleasant smell of toasted bread, although at the moment the smell was soured by nerves. Whoever they were, they were both covered in black hoodies and plastic Halloween skull

masks. Like that wouldn't attract attention. The one at my side grabbed my wrists and bound them up in a few twists of duct tape.

"Go," Indy barked at the alpha, sliding in at my side.

The car jumped to a jerking start, squealing as it pulled away from the curb.

"I said I didn't like male omegas, but I know a few alphas who won't give a shit as long as you've got a hole they can knot. I'd keep your smart mouth to yourself," Indy said, keeping the gun digging into my side.

I fought my own wince and swallowed, grinding my teeth together to bury the curses I wanted to spit at Indy. In my chest, worry was scratching from Caleb and Cyrus, and I tugged hard on our bonds.

"You said we could use him if she came," the alpha on my right hissed.

"When she comes," Indy echoed. "Then he's yours."

My alphas were calling back, terror spiking in my chest as the threat to Lola, the threat to *me* burned like poison in my stomach.

TWENTY-FIVE

Lola

It came from two places at once. Anger, terror, and guilt from Wes that made my muscles tense and my hands form tight fists at my side before he promptly slammed a door on our bond, the blank space leaving me hollow. And a slow dread like melting ice coming from Matthieu.

“Lola?” Zane asked, leaning to me where I was bent in my seat, pushing back from the desk.

The cut off from Wes was a punch to the gut, but there was something worse in the mix—a shock so deep, I was fighting the urge to double over.

“I…I need to—” I stumbled as I rose up from the chair, grabbing my bag and running for the door.

“Lola, are you okay?” Anna called.

I spun in the doorway and then gasped as Matthieu did something with the bond. It was like he had an actual grip on my heart. My hand pressed over my mark, and I sighed as he settled in relief.

“I think I need to go,” I said, the room spinning around me. “Tell—tell Maureen…”

Tell her what? That I was just running out of work in the middle of the day? I didn’t have an option. Something was wrong with the pack.

One of the girls called goodbye as I rushed for the elevators. Maybe the stairs would be better? Did I even know where I was

going?

The elevators arrived before I even had to press the button, doors opening to reveal Matthieu with the phone to his ear and a slumped Cyrus at his side. I ran in and Matthieu tugged me to his chest, the doors sliding shut behind us.

“I have her, we’re going down to the car now. Where do you want us?”

“Tell Wes I want to come,” Cyrus rasped. His breathing was labored and his warm skin now looked ashy.

“He says home,” Matthieu answered.

“Fuck *that*. I’m not going home while Rake is *missing*. He’s terrified, Matthieu! Give me the phone.”

Matthieu hesitated and then passed Cyrus the phone, both of his arms fastening tightly around my shoulders.

“Rake?” I asked, tipping my head back.

Matthieu’s face was lined with tension, his jaw ticking. “He went missing on set in Old Downtown. Somewhere between ten to fifteen minutes ago. Cyrus came to see me when he felt Rake’s panic, and then Wes got the call from his employee a few minutes later. We’re going to go home and wait for Wes—”

“I am his *alpha*!” Cyrus barked over the phone, and I jumped and skidded out of reach on instinct.

“Cyrus, enough,” Matthieu growled, sliding between us. The words weren’t as sharp or loud, but they were equally powerful.

I glanced over to the elevator buttons and realized why we hadn’t needed to stop yet. Matthieu had some kind of master key for privacy.

Cyrus snarled softly back at Matthieu but settled, glancing at the phone and then shoving it back into Matthieu’s hands. “He hung up on me.”

“Because you were wasting his time. Wes knows what he’s doing, and talking you down over the phone won’t help.”

Cyrus growled and shifted in place before catching my eye over Matthieu’s shoulder. “Fuck, sunshine, I’m—”

I pulled free from Matthieu and hurried to Cyrus, snatching him up in a hug as he lifted me off the floor, my heels dangling from my toes. “It’s fine. Has anyone called Caleb and Leo?”

“Mm, I’ll take care of it,” Matthieu murmured, his hand passing down my back briefly before leaving me to Cyrus’ almost painfully tight embrace.

The elevator chimed as we reached the lobby and I pushed gently on Cyrus’ shoulders to coax him into setting me down, his hand clammy and grip desperate as it wrapped around mine.

“This is Indy,” I breathed, staring at our reflection on the wall.

Cyrus looked twice at me and his head jerked. “Not…not necessarily. Rake’s an omega, and he has over-enthusiastic fans who find his schedules and track his social media. If security was lax or he was recognized in the area…Rake would try to keep them calm.”

Rake would try and keep you calm too, I thought but didn’t say. It was obvious that Cyrus knew this was more serious. We all did. If anything, it made it worse to know that any overzealous fan might’ve grabbed Rake. At least I knew what Indy wanted.

We hurried to the black town car waiting for us, and Cyrus’ eyes scanned the sidewalk and streets as if he might spot Rake out in the open. Squeezed together in the back seat of the car, I dug my phone from my purse as we pulled away from the curb.

“Who are you calling?” Matthieu asked.

“The Howlers. Old Downtown is their territory, maybe they’ll see someone.”

Cyrus huffed, a weak and watery sound, bending forward and kissing the top of my head as Matthieu squeezed my knee.

“Thank you, Lola,” Matthieu murmured. “Give them Wes’ number?”

I nodded and made the call to Baby, listening to her bark orders to her alphas who bustled into motion over the line.

“If the neighborhood saw anything, the boys will find out,” Baby said.

“Love you, Babe.”

“Love you, Lo! Keep me updated.”

The drive back to the house was silent, and I wished we were turning around and heading in the opposite direction. Matthieu typed at rapid speed on his phone as Cyrus crushed my fingers in his grasp, clinging to me like a lifeline. I wanted to ask him what Rake

was feeling, and at the same time I wished I knew how to distract him. Instead, I simply leaned into his side, trying to let some of his tension and worry bleed into me just so he didn't have to carry it alone.

We made it back to the house at the same time as Leo, pale and shaking as he stepped out of a car and joined us on the way to the door. Caleb was waiting, eyes red and shining, hands wringing together. He and Leo collided in the entryway, Cyrus finally releasing my hand to join them.

"Anything from Wes?" Caleb whispered.

"Not yet," Matthieu answered. "He promised to get in touch by… any minute now. Let's go upstairs and—"

My phone buzzed in my purse and I grimaced, squeezing past my men and heading for the stairs as I pulled it out. "Sorry, I'll turn…" My words trailed off as I glanced down at the screen.

It was a video chat request. From Rake.

"Lola?" Leo called.

"Shh." I spun to face them, my finger raised to my lips. "No one say anything. No matter what."

Cyrus started toward me, but Matthieu caught him by the back of his suit and held him in place as I turned back to my screen, phone vibrating in my palm. My own expression was there staring at me, tense and terrified as I raised a finger to swipe.

It was dark at first, blurry and pixelated. And then a light turned on somewhere and I gasped, my free hand reaching up to slap over my lips. Rake's face was there in the dark, eyes glaring at the camera. A dark cloth was tied around his mouth, and his bottom lip was swollen and bruised.

"Looks like I finally have your attention, Showgirl," Indy hissed from behind the camera, and an avalanche of loathsome confirmation of my worst fears dropped inside of me, numbing me from the waist down.

I pulled my hand from my mouth and hardened my expression. Indy didn't deserve to see my worry.

"What? No hello?"

Matthieu was roaring with anger inside of me, and I didn't dare look up from the phone to check on his control.

“Rake, I love you,” I murmured, watching Rake’s glare ease.

The camera moved, backing away, and I swallowed hard and withheld my whimper as Indy revealed the figures in black, their skull masks pale and glowing in the dark as they surrounded Rake. He was bound to a rickety looking chair and, aside from the split lip, he looked unharmed so far. He was even still wearing whatever suit he must’ve had on for the photoshoot.

“I thought this might bring you out of hiding,” Indy croaked.

I wanted to shove a lead pipe through his voice. It was bad enough to still have it running through my head and pinning my self-confidence six feet underground for a year. Having to put up with it in real life again made me sick.

Worse though, was when he tapped the screen and flipped the camera to face him. I’d never liked him. Even those first few times, I’d tolerated his face and his hands and his breath on my neck, thinking—no, just pretending—that it might impress Buzz. Another waste of my time. Buzz had disguised his cruelty. Indy relished in it, and that was clear even now on the taunting twist of his lips.

“What do you want?” I whispered.

Indy grinned, and hatred burned through me like a brushfire knowing I had to play his game. But Rake wasn’t going to go through what I went through. I would cooperate with Indy as much as I had to to get Rake back to our pack.

“You know what, Showgirl. I’ve had a lot of betas, but not one cried as pretty as you.”

I swallowed bile and looked away from the screen while Indy laughed at me. The pack, waiting a couple yards away, looked at their wits end, and Matthieu’s gaze was so powerful on me I thought he might be able to actually drag me closer.

“Not one took a knot like you did either.”

My eyes whipped back to the screen and I spoke loudly to cover the rumbling growls off frame. “Go to fucking hell!”

“You know what I want, Lola. You and *only* you, comin' to visit me. And if you take that stupid fucking head of yours and use it to think for two seconds, you’ll know where to find me too,” Indy growled. “But I swear to god, if you fuck it up and anybody walks in

but you, this omega is dead. It would be my absolute pleasure to do it."

The screen blinked and went black. My knees crumpled and no one was fast enough to catch me, although Matthieu came sliding in over the polished wood, dragging me into his arms a moment later. His body was rigid and his growl was thunderous.

"I know where they are," I said. I recognized the dinginess of the room they were in. And Indy would know…he'd *know* it was the last place I'd ever want to step foot inside.

"Tell us and we'll send Wes. You're not going," Matthieu said.

"Matthieu!" Cyrus snarled.

I wiggled back out of Matthieu's grasp and took his face in my hands, shaking my head. "Wes would never make it to Indy before Indy made good on the threat to Rake. He doesn't care what happens after that, he's having too much fun toying with me. I have to walk in first."

"I won't let you. Wes sure as hell won't," Matthieu growled.

"I'm calling him. Lola, tell us where they are," Caleb said.

I glanced at everyone and my heart was lead in my chest. "I…No. Wes will try and go in first," I said. I looked to Leo and he covered his torn expression with shaking hands. I met Cyrus' eyes next. He was wild, at his wits end, but he held my gaze as he knelt down at my side.

"What happens to *you* if you go in, Lola?" Cyrus asked.

I pushed on Matthieu's chest when he tried to lunge at his packmate, leaning into him and wrapping his arms around my waist to settle him.

"Indy's not going to kill me. Not before the cavalry arrives, anyway. He won't have any fun if I'm not terrified or helpless. I…I can keep myself together long enough to give Wes or the police or anyone time to get in and…" I chewed on my lip as I thought it over. "I don't want Indy to get away and I…I don't want him in jail."

My eyes fell to my lap at the confession, waiting for disgust from any one of the men around me.

"I have something I need to tell all of you," Matthieu said, voice as deep as a grave. "Something Wes and I have done."

"I CAN'T BELIEVE you hired an assassin without telling us," Caleb breathed. He stood at my back with his arms around me, crossed over my chest, and I wondered if he thought he could keep me from going through with my plan just by holding me.

Wes was standing across from me in the old gated parking lot I'd told him to meet us at, his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes narrowed in a glare. But our bond was filled with an affection and love so fierce, it nearly made me breathless. On either side of him stood two unfamiliar alphas, dressed in the same light tactical gear Wes was sporting.

"Hitma—Hitwoman," Matthieu corrected.

"Lola," Wes growled. "I want you to tell me right now where this asshole is."

I blew out a brief sigh of relief. That meant he hadn't realized where we were yet. It was only a matter of time, but it was time I could use to convince him I was right. I peeled myself out Caleb's arms, fighting my own response to his soft groan of refusal as I dropped his hands.

"Wes, please listen. I know you can handle Indy, I do. But I'm telling you, and I really think you believe me when I say, that if you or your men are even *heard* going in, Rake will be seriously hurt if not worse before you get to him," I said, moving to my alpha. His arms were tense under my fingers and he stared at me with absolute suspicion, perfectly aware I was trying to talk him out of something he was dead set on.

Unfortunately for him, I was dead set on my plan too.

"If I go in first—" Wes snarled at the words and I squeezed his arms, not that I could make a dent. "If I go in first there is nothing that can happen to me in the very little time it will take you *and* the police to reach Rake and I, that I can't handle."

"Lola—"

"*Wes*, I have lived through it before and I'll do it again," I snapped, and his jaw clacked shut. "And when you walk into that building it will *end*. Rake will be safe, I will be safe. We'll go home and it will be over, okay? But it has to be *me* who goes in, otherwise

we risk Rake. And if we risk Rake, I think we all know we're risking our entire pack, okay?"

I ignored the tears under my eyes. Crying was just a habit of mine at this point, and I wasn't about to let it get in my way.

Caleb stepped up to my side, turning me to face him. "Lola I don't want you to—Not because—"

I rose to my tiptoes and Caleb ducked, the kiss soft and brief, our heads resting together. "I know," I said, leaning back and looking at the others. "I'm not doing this because I think it's either Rake *or* me. I'm doing it because we're not complete without each other, and I'm the first step to getting Rake back with us safely."

"Matthieu," Wes said, looking over my head, his face twitching as I learned that I could prod him with my own irritation. Going over my fucking head to Matthieu as if they could outvote me just because their bondmarks were on my skin? I would have something to say about that when there was less on our plate.

"I've already refused…but I don't think it's my decision," Matthieu said, with a grudging slowness to the words. His eyes met mine and held them fiercely, gaze warning me that his support was given reluctantly. As if I hadn't noticed. "And I think Lola is right that the pack is at risk if this goes sideways."

"She's not wrong, Pike," one of Wes' alpha employees said. "If she can go in and stall, hold attention, we can go in after her quiet, with or without police."

"Fuck!" Wes barked.

I reached for him in the bond and he pulled hard. I stumbled forward at the demand of his call and tucked my face into his throat as he wrapped me up in his arms.

"Stupid fucking plan," he muttered, and he growled as I dug my fingers through the short hair at the back of his head. "You go in, you fucking *talk*. You do not bargain and try and get Rake out, you just waste that fucker's goddamn time until we get in. If a gun is pulled, you hide, I don't care what fucking direction it's pointing in, you hear me?"

It was there in my chest, Wes' worry that I was trying to trade Rake's safety for mine. I really wasn't, but I knew it might turn in that direction.

“I promise,” I said.

“Lola.”

Wes set me on my feet so I could turn and face Leo, and I immediately wanted to smooth away the lines carving into his forehead.

“Don’t let him back in your head, gorgeous. No matter what happens, don’t go back to that place,” Leo said.

I swallowed around the knife in my throat and nodded, tipping my chin up for Leo to kiss me. He sucked on my bottom lip, lingering, and I could almost feel him running it over in his head. He could lose Rake, or me, or both of us.

Neither, I thought. It had to be neither. The pack would fracture if either Rake and I were lost. And it hit me then that I *was* important. To these men, I was precious, as much as their own omega. So I was going to have to live up to the promise and see Rake and I safely out of that hell hole.

TWENTY-SIX

Lola

It was one thing to tell the others that I was going in alone. It was an entirely different, horrific story to stand in the doorway of the Devil's Noose and try and force myself to step over the threshold and back into my nightmares. I was grateful that the others were waiting far enough out of sight that they couldn't see me shaking like a leaf, although Matthieu and Wes were there in our bonds. My spine was iron straight because of them. I was still standing because of them.

The door was cracked open, little whispers of alphas' scents muddled over the frame. The thought of touching anything made me shudder so I settled instead on toeing the old crooked door open.

Memories hit first. The hallway where Buzz had pressed me to the wall, wallpapered posters drooping like dead flowers. The sticky bar where they made me sit and watch them catcalling other beta girls in the bar, talking about drug runs and convenience store robberies. An old bitter voice rose like smoke in my head, but before the words could land—I was stupid, I landed myself in the pile of shit because of it—Matthieu was there, blacking out the doubts and the ugliness. That part of my life was over. I was pack.

I had to find Rake and stall until Wes and the cavalry arrived.

I paused in the bar, listening and waiting, half expecting the room to come alive again with smoke and booze and pheromones. Instead, everything was stale. Even the quiet was oppressive.

Until the ceiling above me creaked with a footstep on the second story, and suddenly I would've been glad for hours of silence leaving me alone on memory lane.

Except Rake was upstairs with those footsteps, and that was the best motivation I could think of. There was a set of double doors, one propped open, that led to the lobby of the old motel the Hangmen had used for their clubhouse. The space was thick and dark, but in the shadows I could pick out the pieces of my time here that I remembered. The beat up old couch and chairs just ahead, where Hangmen had lounged and waited for desperate girls like me to kneel for them. The reception desk on the left, where they had stashed weapons and drugs for club members to grab at will. The stairs on the right, leading up to the bedrooms.

Every step up creaked beneath me. Indy's scent grew stronger the farther I traveled, and it was my bondmates and the thought of Rake that held me up on the slow ascent to the second story.

There was a lamp flickering on the landing, just enough light to reveal the mold staining the walls near the ceiling and the dark boot prints that led to my left. I didn't remember the room, but I could guess. Indy had a sick sense of humor or poetry or whatever he called it in his own head. He would use the room where he'd made the video of me. He would enjoy the cruelty of that even if I hadn't known all the details now.

I followed the footsteps to the end of the hall, a door opening and releasing a shocking flood of sunlight from the bedroom.

"Right on time, Showgirl."

Indy leaned in the doorway, crooked grin taunting me as he watched my approach. He looked rougher, thinner, *meaner* after the year of hiding. He licked his lips as I walked up, and his Adam's apple bobbed with his swallow.

Mixed in with that bitter pine scent of his, Rake's anxious burnt chocolate was slipping out of the doorway. I would have shoved Indy then, just to get to my packmate, but he stepped back, leaving the door hanging wide open. His arms opened at his side in some madman's magnanimity as if he were welcoming me to the room. He reminded me then of a ringleader at some twisted circus. I was only

his next act and I wanted to be the lion, ready to finally turn on its trainer.

My eyes shot to the right, where Rake was exactly as I'd seen him on the video chat, bound and bruised and surrounded by disguised alphas. I lunged in his direction and cried out as a tight fist wrapped around my elbow, swinging me away from Rake. Indy jumped between us, tugging me to his chest, strangling me with his scent.

Rake struggled in the chair as I tried to pull out of Indy's arms, and I settled more for his sake than mine.

"I knew you'd come," Indy said, grinning down at me.

"You took my omega," I snarled back.

An alpha scoffed behind Indy, and he barked a laugh directly into my face. I winced and leaned away from his bitter breath.

"First you try and be an omega, begging and whining and popping your ass for us alphas. And now you want to claim an omega like you think you're a fucking alpha? Showgirl, you are fucked in the head. You know you're just a beta, don't you, babe? You know you're completely worthless. Don't you?" Indy hissed and leaned into my face, teeth snapping on his words. He jerked and shook me, making my head rattle on my neck. "Fucking say it, Showgirl."

I held my lips shut and raised my eyes up to glare at him. *Just keep him talking, Lola*, I thought in Wes' voice, my alpha's steel solid love giving me the strength to stare back at Indy's crazed face.

"A worthless beta? You went to an awful lot of trouble just to drag me back here," I said.

Indy grinned again and shrugged. "What can I say? I'm sentimental. You're my favorite little scrap on the side."

His hands snapped up and grabbed me by my hair on either side of my head, pulling and yanking me side to side. "Come on, Showgirl. Tell me you fuckin' missed me."

Rake was shouting, alphas holding him down as he bucked in his seat, and I stayed silent, head and heart pounding as Indy tried to get a rise out of me.

"What the fuck is this?" Indy hissed, stopping and pulling the hair on the left side of my neck up to expose my bondmark from

Matthieu.

The minutes were ticking in my head, but I had no idea how long it would be before Wes would make it up here.

“Tell me what this fucking is, bitch!” Indy screamed, spittle hitting my cheek and getting a flinch out of me. He pushed at my shoulder and I stumbled back. He pushed again, grinning, over and over until my back ran into the hard ridge of a window ledge and my head bounced against cold glass.

“You know what it is,” I said, and at least I enjoyed the snarling frustration on Indy’s face.

“Jesus Christ, you really are desperate aren’t you, Lola? How many alphas did you have to spread your legs for before you found one willing to put up with your weak ass?” Indy hissed, leaning into my face.

I stared back at him in silence and breathed through the storm in my head, in the bond.

“I’ll fucking show you what an alpha does with a beta like you,” Indy snarled.

His mouth crashed into mine, teeth scratching and biting, tongue trying to force its way in. I knew what he wanted, and I’d given it to him plenty of times before. To whine, to cry, to fight.

So I took the ruthless excuse for a kiss and held still and silent, resisting the urge to gag at his taste, hiding my hands behind my back so I didn’t claw them over his skin.

Indy pulled away with a growl, fist pounding against the window, and even as it rattled I didn’t flinch. His eyes narrowed as he stared down at me.

“You want it, Lola? You miss my knot? I was thinking about making you watch as I let the guys have their turn on this omega fucker you’re shacked up with, but now I think I might go ahead and start with you. Make him watch. What do you think? Really give him a peek at how you and I used to shake the beds, huh?”

One of the alphas in question growled in objection. My hands snapped out before they could speak, and I hit Indy squarely in the chest. Either it surprised him, or he’d lost muscle too in the past year. All at once, the words poured out of me, lashing back at Indy like whip strikes.

“What do you want me to say, Indy? That I hate you? That you disgust me?” I stepped forward and struck against him again, but this time he didn’t move.

“Indy?” one of the alphas asked, as if he knew my patience was at an end. That the lion had stolen back her leash and was ready to lunge.

Indy just grinned and shook his head. “We’re good. This is how I like her. Want her screaming under me.”

”Fuck you,” I spat. “Your attempt to be some kind of thriller movie villain is *pathetic* to me. You’re not my bad guy. I have that role well and truly covered on my own. You’re just the tool I borrowed a year ago to try and tear myself down. That’s over now, and I’m still standing. So I guess that makes *you* completely worthless.”

My hands were shaking, my insides were made of wild animals, and my mouth was numb with the words, but that didn’t stop me from spitting directly into Indy’s red and fuming face.

I wasn’t surprised by the fist that flew in my direction or the way it hit me like a lightning strike in the cheek, briefly blacking out the vision in one eye. I was surprised that I managed to grab onto Indy as I cried out, digging my fingers into his shoulders and pulling him to me.

Oh god, oh fuck, what do I do?!

Knee.

My knee jammed up into Indy’s groin and he bellowed in my ear as I stumbled away. He was bent forward, snarling at me, and my heart was running like a rabbit’s, urging me to turn tail and hide.

Fist, chin.

Screaming, I jumped forward, swinging my fist up into the underside of Indy’s chin.

The alphas around Rake started to move forward, but I was on Indy, tackling him to the floor. One grabbed for my arm, but I got my elbow to his face and then I was free again. My fists were so tight the bite of my nails in the heel of my palm was clear and sharp. Every hit to Indy burned in my hands, echoed in my knuckles, but I didn’t stop.

“You should’ve fucking died with Buzz!” I screamed. “You’re a pointless piece of shit! You hateful—” Hit, crunch.

“Repulsive!” Hit.

“Abusive!” Hit.

“*Bastard*!” Hit. Wet and red.

Footsteps pounded around me and Indy clawed at my arms, hitting me hard in my ribs and making my unending shriek stutter as I lost my breath. Indy’s grimace was toothy and bloodied. He yanked on my hair and reached for my throat, and I dove down, biting viciously between his thumb and forefinger.

I had no goal. There was nothing in me but the anger and the fact that I could *keep* hitting him. Keep hurting him. Keep him from hurting Rake and my pack.

“Lola! *Lola*!”

Arms reached for me and I fought them off, landing another clumsy strike on Indy’s ear. I was lifted away and I went kicking, striking Indy in the groin again, flailing against my attacker.

“Sweetheart, I got you. I’m here. I got you.”

Citrus. And salt. Familiar, gentle arms. I sagged as Wes dragged me away, unable to move my own feet as I caught my breath. There were scratches on Wes’ arm. Scratches from *me*. I moaned and Wes moved in front of me, one arm banded around my waist while his free hand reached to tip my chin up. His head ducked until our eyes met, and the red mist of rage simmered slowly out of my vision.

Over Wes’ shoulder, police were moving into the room, grabbing up Indy’s alphas and untangling a shouting Rake from his binds and muzzle. And suddenly, I realized why he was shouting. Indy was rising from the floor, a gun in his hand pointed directly at Wes’ back.

“No!” I twisted, pushing hard at Wes’ chest.

Wes didn’t resist me, and we stumbled to the side just as glass shattered behind me, hitting the backs of my legs and showering the floor. Had Indy shot the gun? Was Wes hurt?

“Lola, sweetheart, are you okay? Did you—”

Wes was whole and safe, my hands running over him desperately. Rake yanked himself free of the police and ran to us. And Indy…

He stumbled back a few steps, landing on his knees while a dark stain bloomed over his chest and his gun dropped to the floor.

“Everybody freeze!” an officer cried as they realized that somehow, in the melee, Indy had been shot.

He’s dead. He’s dying. Finally, he’ll be gone.

Rake ignored the officers, and Wes and I opened our arms just in time for him to collide into them with a great ‘oof’ of breath. My omega’s mouth pressed to my cheek, my temple, my nose. Rake blocked out the view of Indy collapsing to the floor, the wet sounds of his breath muffled by Wes’ murmuring reassurance, Rake’s ragged sighs.

He’s dead now. It’s over.

I closed my eyes on that chapter of my life, refusing to look back at his body. It wasn’t relief or happiness that followed, but a bone deep acceptance. I’d lived through Indy. In the end, I’d won.

TWENTY-SEVEN

Lola

"I do have one last question for you, Ms. Barnes," the detective said, glancing up from my statement.

I was tired, I was sore, my hands were bandaged and bruised and swollen, despite the ice the police had given me. But I was almost done with the interview, and I could restrain my frustration with this guy's questions for another minute or two.

"The shot that killed Indy came from outside of the room. Probably a window or building from across the street. We just can't seem to think of who would've been watching from there," he said.

I blinked. That wasn't really a question and certainly not one I was going to answer with, *'Probably the hitwoman my alphas hired to kill the asshole. She was a little tardy, but I guess she got the job done.'*

"I don't think Indy could've had that many friends left and I doubt I'm the only person relieved that he's dead now," I said instead. "I have no idea who it could've been. I assumed the police."

The detective hummed and his head tilted, eyes narrowing, but before he could ask me anything else, the door to the room opened and a regal woman in a well-tailored suit stood with an officer.

"Lisa Campion, Ms. Barnes' attorney. I'd appreciate it if we could get Lola home with her pack to rest, and finish any further questions at a later time," Lisa said. It wasn't a question, and she didn't step farther into the room but eyed my detective in challenge.

I did my best to hide my surprise at her arrival. I definitely did not have an attorney, and it was the first time I'd heard anyone outside of the pack referring to me as a member. It gave me a heady thrill and a deep sense of comfort all at once.

The detective raised his hands in surrender and nodded to her. "I'm all wrapped up for today. Ms. Barnes, thank you for your time and I'll be in touch."

I nodded and rose from the table, hurrying to follow Lisa Campion down the hall, my eyes searching around shoulders and heads for my pack.

"Any issues?" Lisa asked me as we walked at her brisk pace, her heels clipping against the tile floor.

"Um, no. You're…"

"I represent your pack. Well, the home side of things," Lisa said, flashing me a toothy smile. "I don't get very many calls though, so this was fun. Everyone else wrapped up already and Matthieu had concerns about how long they were keeping you."

"Just quizzing me over why I went in alone," I said.

"In the future, they'll go through me. It'll be wrapped up soon," Lisa said. The woman seemed to be built on confidence, and I was all too happy to let her take over the circus of my dealing with police.

"For now, I leave you with your alphas," Lisa said as we arrived at the busy lobby of the station.

Matthieu and Wes stood and stepped forward as I arrived in the room, and I wove through the mess of police and waiting civilians to get to them. I ran and fit myself directly between them, sighing and letting my eyes fall shut as they closed in at my front and back, blocking out the rest of the world. My forehead rested over Wes' heartbeat as Matthieu crowded close behind me, combing his fingers through the tangle of my hair and pressing a long, soothing kiss over his bondmark.

"The others?" I asked.

"I convinced them to wait at home, I hope you don't mind," Matthieu said. "Rake needed to get out of here, and the others weren't really better off."

I nodded and reached for one of Matthieu and Wes' hands each, tugging them up to my chest as I caught my breath. Matthieu grazed

his thumb over my fingers, and I hissed and lifted my head as it scratched at my raw knuckles. I twisted as Matthieu pulled my hand back, raising it to his lips and kissing each red, scratched, swollen mark softly.

“You should’ve seen her wailing on him.” Wes ducked his head, bumping it against mine. “Proud of you.”

I tilted my head and stole a firm kiss before Matthieu tugged me away, catching my face in his hands and dragging a slicker deeper stroking kiss for himself. “Good girl,” he whispered in my ear, the sound harsh and making me shiver with a confused kind of pleasure.

I shook my head and stepped back. I didn’t want to think about Indy, or how satisfying it had been to make him bleed. Reasonably, I knew he’d be a piece of baggage I had to carry a while longer, but for the rest of the day, I planned on leaving him in that mildewy old motel room.

“Home?” Matthieu asked, reading my mind.

“Please.”

I left the police station with both of my alphas' arms around me, holding me steady as we descended the long steps to the street. I was happy to see one of Wes’ guys waiting at a long dark car. I wanted to be squeezed in the backseat between him and Matthieu, not watching him drive.

“Thanks, Garret,” Wes said, as the shorter and prettier of the two alphas who’d met us in the parking lot earlier slid into the driver's seat.

It was absolutely a squeeze in the backseat. Mostly because Wes was so broad. Matthieu twisted on my right, and as the car pulled away from the curb, Wes gingerly lifted my legs from the floor and draped them over his lap. I leaned into Matthieu’s chest, his arms immediately wrapping around my waist.

“Did the glass cut you?” Wes asked, running his fingers carefully over the back of my calves.

“Just a few scratches, nothing serious. I cleaned it up at the station.”

“Wes…the shot?” Matthieu whispered.

Wes nodded and shrugged at the same time. “I’m assuming it was her.” The *hitwoman*. When Matthieu had first said it, I’d balked

at the idea. Now I really didn't give a shit. Actually, I was pleased. I only wished she got around to it sooner.

"How is Rake?" I asked.

"Physically, fine. Emotionally…well, I'm sure that's a different story," Matthieu said.

Wes glanced at him and then back to me. "He about threw a fit when the others made him leave the station."

"But you said—"

Matthieu huffed, warm breath rustling my hair. "I said he *needed* to go. He didn't want to leave without you, but an omega in distress is kind of a beacon for trouble in a police station."

"The others will calm him down," I said.

Wes hummed with thought. "Maybe. Right now, he needs the beta who stormed a pack of alphas to save him."

I blushed and glanced down at my own lap as Wes stroked the tops of my legs. The time between Indy getting shot and me sitting down with the detective was foggy in my head, blurred by shock. But Rake was there in the midst of it, arms wrapped around me tight. I glanced out the car window, my eyebrows rising as I realized the sun was setting. It had been around lunch time when I'd walked into the Devil's Noose. No wonder Matthieu had grown impatient with the police interview.

"I'm curious as to what that beta needs," Matthieu said, his hands rising to cup my shoulders.

I sighed and let my head fall to rest under his chin. "Just my pack."

Matthieu purred, and the familiar and comforting rumble of the sound sent my eyes drifting shut. It was only then that I caught the wriggling worry in my chest, and realized it was coming from Matthieu, not me. I raised my left hand to cover his, my thumb stroking over his skin.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said, a little too quickly.

My eyes opened and I frowned at Wes, who was almost *smirking* at Matthieu like he was laughing at him.

"Tell me," I said, squeezing Matthieu's fingers and scooting slightly so I could see his face.

His eyes were flicking back and forth, gaze drinking me in, and there was a pang of wistfulness in the bond.

"*Matthieu*," I urged.

He sighed and shook his head. "It's just that…you're safe now, which I'm grateful for."

"But…" I said, watching him.

Matthieu pressed his lips together firmly, and it was Wes who answered. "He's worried you won't need us now."

"What?!" I gasped out.

Matthieu huffed and glared at Wes before swallowing and turning back to me. "It's not that…that I don't think you love us. I just…"

"Matthieu, do you think I asked you for my bondmark because I wanted the pack's house or protection or money or anything like that?" I asked, frowning. I tried to pull my legs off Wes' lap but he wasn't having it, and instead he pulled me out of Matthieu's arms, leaving me to face off with my troubled alpha.

"Of course not, Lolotte. I can *feel* how much we care about one another. It's only that I…" Matthieu's voice strangled as he searched for the words, his fingers dragging through his hair and combing it back.

I blinked and remembered our conversation from a couple weeks ago. Matthieu understood his own value by being needed or being able to nurture. But why would he have imagined that had changed now that Indy was gone?

"I always considered things with Indy a burden I was trying to hold at bay," I said, watching Matthieu's reaction. "I know that you and Wes and the pack did help me shoulder that burden, but that wasn't what I was grateful for. I mean, I *am* grateful for it, all of it," I rushed to add, looking over my shoulder at Wes. "But for me, our relationship was only ever about *us*. I'd still rather have pretty things and french fries than any of you worrying about vanquishing my monsters for me."

"So nothing changes?" Matthieu asked.

"I mean, hopefully a lot changes for the better, but you and I haven't *lost* anything between us now that Indy's gone," I said. "If you have a hero complex you want to work out, I'm sure we can think of some kind of role-playing game to try."

Matthieu barked a laugh, and Wes scoffed at my back. “Sweetheart, just tell him to get therapy like a normal person.”

“That too,” I said, my smile cracking as Matthieu’s stress melted away. “Oh! But Wes, you could be the dragon. I can be an equal opportunity princess.” Wes growled back at me, but his lips twitched as I waggled my eyebrows. “I’ll let you pick out my costume.”

Matthieu snorted, hands reaching out to wrap around my wrists and pull me across the bench seat, Wes’ hands around my hips.

“You are a very wonderfully, silly girl,” Matthieu murmured. “And if you think I won’t take you up on this offer, you’re mistaken.”

“You’ll have to get past her dragon first,” Wes said.

Don’t make a sword fighting joke, I hissed to myself.

“I love you,” Matthieu whispered.

“I love you too,” I said, stretching for a kiss before arching back to do the same with Wes. “And I love you.”

“Love you, sweetheart,” Wes said, all gruff and choked up and blinking as if he was about to tell me he’d gotten something in his eye.

“Now, we’re almost home, and you should prepare yourself,” Matthieu said, tucking my hair behind my ears. I raised my eyebrows, and he continued softly, “Rake is going to be begging you to bond one of his alphas and I’m not sure even Leo will be able to keep him in line.”

“For that matter, I doubt Caleb or Cyrus will try to stop him,” Wes added.

I nodded at them both. “I understand. It’s fine. I know I want all the bonds I can get with this pack, I was just waiting for the right time.”

Matthieu sighed and nodded, his smile a little rueful. “Then I suppose Wes and I will have to give you up for a little while tonight.”

Wes grunted, and his hands squeezed against my hips. “Not if the dragon drags the princess off into his tower.”

I laughed and pecked a kiss on Wes’ jaw. “Another night. I really need them right now too.”

He sighed and nodded, reaching up to fist one hand in my hair, tilting my head back to steal a filthy kiss that left me sighing and

whining. The car pulled to a stop in front of the house and Wes pulled away, a little breathless and appropriately smug.

“Another night,” he said with a grin.

“Good job, Wes. Now you and I get to be sexually frustrated while our mate goes off to an orgy,” Matthieu said with a sigh, swinging open the car door as I burst into giggles.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Lola

I stood outside of Rake's bathroom door, smiling to myself and listening to the soft hum of conversation and the bubble of the jacuzzi tub. If I'd been waiting to walk in on Matthieu or Wes in the bath, they would've known it and called out to me. Without the bond, the rest of the pack had no idea I was here.

And I couldn't *wait* to change that.

I had already left my shoes somewhere downstairs, and now I peeled out of my sweaty, stinky clothes from the day. There was literally no smell on earth worse than stress sweat, and I'd been stuck in mine for hours in the police station.

I hoped Rake wasn't in too much of a hurry for that orgy, because a bath sounded like a really wonderful idea. Shucking off my underwear to the floor near the piles from the others, I pushed open the door and tiptoed inside.

Rake's back was to me but Leo saw me immediately, and I wondered if it was their bond or his enormous smile that alerted our omega first.

"Lola!" Rake yelped, and he lurched up from the water as Cyrus and Caleb both turned their heads to see me.

Cyrus' hands wrapped around Rake's thigh. "Let her come here first, you madman."

I ran over to the tub where Rake was trying to shake off his alpha, Leo laughing on the far side of the tub. Rake gave up fighting

and sighed as I wrapped my arms around his waist, leaning over the ledge and pressing kisses over his heart and across his chest.

“God, Lola, finally. What took so long?” Rake moaned, his arms squeezing hard around my shoulders, damp nose burrowing against the top of my head.

“Matthieu had to call Lisa Campion. I think she got there at the same time they were finally getting bored with interviewing me. I’m sorry it took so long.”

“It’s fine, love. Rake, let her in the water,” Caleb said.

Rake ignored him and leaned just far enough back to immediately dive in for a licking, starving, demanding kiss. I rose up to my toes, my breasts pressed to his chest as he ravaged my mouth, the pair of us moaning. Rake’s cock stiffened between us, sliding and slipping against my stomach as the kiss continued until he pulled away, leaving me to gasp for air.

“Lola, I want—”

“Wait,” I said, my hand flying up to cover his lips.

“But—”

I raised an eyebrow, and Rake went quiet. “Wait, I want to say something first. And god, I want a bath. Let me in.”

Rake helped me into the water and I sighed as I sank down, churning heat swirling around me. Leo and Caleb were immediately close and armed with soapy cloths, washing away the horrible smells still clinging to my skin. My hands burned as I dipped them into the hot foaming water too, but the sting subsided quickly and the warmth soothed the bruising ache that left my fingers stiff.

“Better?” Caleb asked, his hands finding my skin and petting me lightly under the water.

Leo floated close enough for our legs to brush one another's, and Cyrus was against Rake’s side, holding or possibly restraining our overeager omega.

“Much,” I said as Leo wedged himself between me and Rake, ignoring Rake’s huff of protest. I found Caleb’s hand under the water and raised it up in both of mine, cradling it against my chest and meeting the gentle alpha’s gaze. “Caleb, I love you. It’s not just the way you care for me, but also for Leo, and Rake. ”

Leo’s breath hitched on my left as Caleb blinked watery eyes. “I love you, Lola. The same way, if not more.”

I shifted closer to Caleb and his arms wrapped around me greedily, pulling me to his chest, my legs floating back behind me and bumping into the others' limbs.

“Will you make me yours?” I whispered, staring up at Caleb. His damp strands were darkened by water and brushed away from his face, skin flushed from the heat of the bath.

“Gladly,” Caleb murmured, dipping his head to graze his lips over mine. “Gratefully. Finally, love.”

We kissed, and it lingered and grew and swirled between us until our chests were brushing together with every breath and I was *almost* ready to toss away the rest of my plan and let Caleb have his way with me. But there were three very important people I didn’t want to leave out.

I pulled away slowly, Caleb’s nose nuzzling against mine, his smile hazy and soft like the ridiculous dream he was. I sucked his taste off my bottom lip and turned in the water, smiling at Leo’s outstretched hand but passing it to reach Rake and Cyrus.

Rake’s hands closed around my forearms before I could speak, soft gray-green eyes wide and focused on me. “You know I would’ve done *anything* and everything so you never had to walk into that place again, don’t you?” Rake asked.

I gaped at him and then shook off my surprise. “You know I would do anything to get you back to your pack, *our* pack?”

Rake grinned, and it was pained and sweet all at once. “I do. I definitely do now. And you don’t need to ask me twice, or for my permission or anything like that. My alphas are your alphas. God, I want you bitten all over so there’s never a single question about whether or not you belong with us.”

“I think four bites should cover it, honestly,” I said, grinning, my eyes sliding to Cyrus. “That is…if you think we’re there, Boss.”

Cyrus didn’t smile, but his eyes glowed fiercely as he stared back at me. “I hated sending you in there alone, but I hated it even more that I couldn’t even have your back or shore you up. I want my bite on you, Lola. I don’t care if this pack never has another stressful day

in our lives—I'd honestly prefer it. You're ours and you're *mine*, and I'm not waiting."

Maybe it was rushing, but I honestly didn't care. I'd made it over the crest of the mountain, and I could enjoy the thrill of tumbling headfirst down the other side if I wanted to. These men were the ones who were ready to catch me, and there was no risk in that.

Leo laughed as I finally turned to him, my own smile beaming. His eyes were shining, wet, but he'd never looked happier.

"What do you think?" I said, barely able to keep from giggling.

Leo yanked me to his chest and peppered kisses over my cheeks. "You know what I think. I've been waiting for you to be in this pack as long as…god, I don't even know anymore, Lola. I need this family. I need you. No more waiting."

"No more waiting," I agreed. I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and pressed my lips to his ear, whispering just for him. "Take me to bed."

Leo rose up from the water with me tangled around him, his hands going to hold my thighs as they wrapped around his hips.

"Hey!" Rake called as Leo stepped out of the tub and headed for the door. "Hey! What did we talk about before she got back, Leo?!"

I laughed as Leo grabbed a towel from the rack and high-tailed it into Rake's bedroom. He rubbed me down with a cursory swipe before grabbing my hips and tossing me onto the bed. I hit the mattress with a breathless giggle, sitting up halfway with my elbows in the mattress as I watched Leo pass the towel quickly over his own skin.

"What *did* you talk about?" I asked.

Leo shrugged. "I dunno, Rake was going on about something to do with making you lock him until he couldn't speak and you couldn't refuse Caleb's bite. Doesn't matter, 'cause my mama told me to always listen to a lady when she makes a request."

Leo tossed the towel to the side and then climbed onto the bed, batting my thighs apart and stretching himself over me, black hair hanging in his dark eyes. "Are you making a request, gorgeous?"

I grinned. "A demand, really. Come here."

Leo pressed himself to me, mouth slanting over mine, our tongues tangling together and hips rocking. His cock was pressed to

my sex, the head teasing my clit as he rolled against me, waiting for my arousal to coat his length.

“You asshole, Leo,” Rake said, and I giggled as Leo bit my bottom lip and mouthed wetly down to my jaw, ignoring Rake. “I mean, not that I blame you, but *Jesus*. Traitor. Is she wet?”

“Getting there,” Leo rasped as I whined and braced my feet against the side of the bed, bucking into his hips, wanting more pressure and more friction.

“Well, this will help,” Rake said, and the bed dipped by the pillow, the *clip* of a plastic cap being opened heard over my own sighs and whimpers. “Sit up.”

Leo braced himself up on his palms and then grunted as Rake wrapped a slippery, lube-coated palm around the base of Leo’s cock and pumped.

“Impatient much?” I asked Rake, grinning up at him.

“For you, Lollipop? Always,” Rake said, leaving Leo slick and coated as he sprawled out at my side.

He took my face with his clean hand and tilted it toward himself for a licking, lazy kiss, distracting me as Leo lined himself up at my entrance. My cry was swallowed by Rake’s lips as Leo began to fuck me with sharp, shallow thrusts, working his way in slowly. My own hips rose to meet his as Rake nipped and sucked on my lips. I arched my back, reaching up to hold Leo’s shoulders as he ducked and sucked on my breasts.

It was official, I loved being shared during sex. Closing my eyes and feeling twice the number of hands and mouths everywhere, hearing Leo panting as he fucked me and Rake humming happily as he kissed me. I hoped I never grew used to the magical disorienting feeling of two partners. And if I did…

The bed dipped again on my left, and a third set of lips kissed over my shoulder and my collarbone, Caleb’s sweet and drugging scent surrounding me, crystallizing with Rake’s chocolate and caramel.

“Get her on top,” Rake rasped, pulling away and leaving Caleb room to kiss me, his longer hair brushing against my forehead as I moaned and sucked on his tongue.

“Arms and legs around me, gorgeous,” Leo whispered.

I wrapped myself around him, and Caleb pulled away to let Leo roll us on the bed, his legs hanging over the edge as I lay draped on top of him. Rake was sliding off the bed, bottle of lube in his hand and a glittering excitement in his eye. Leo's lips twitched as I braced myself up by my palms on his chest and started to ride, sighing at the stretch and glide of him inside of me. Caleb took his place back at our side, leaning in for a kiss and then pausing, his thumb stroking over a growing bruise on my cheek.

"I'm fine," I promised, leaning carefully into the touch.

His eyes tightened, and he brushed his mouth over mine. "Be gentle with her," he said to his bondmates.

I was about to reassure him again when Rake worried a silky finger against my ass, burrowing and twisting it inside of me. I moaned at the teasing pressure, my head dropping on my shoulders, and worked myself eagerly between Leo's cock and Rake's finger. The first one always felt so curious and delicious.

"Fuuuuck," I sighed, and Leo grunted as I tightened around him.

Soft footsteps echoed in the room, the light dimming overhead and candlelight creating a warmer, softer glow as Cyrus watched us as he worked his way around the room.

"Relax, pet," he murmured, and I nodded and forced myself to relax and breathe slowly as Rake worked another finger inside of me. He pumped, and I whined, his shallow thrust making Leo's cock jump eagerly inside of me.

"Good?" Rake asked.

It was good, although not in the same way. It was a *strong* feeling, but I liked that in sex too, liked to feel like I was on the edge of something risky. I nodded and started to rock over Leo, grinding myself against his groin as Rake scissored me open.

"Caleb," I whispered, reaching out for him. "I want to taste you."

Leo laughed below me and nodded. "God yes, baby, come here and let me watch our gorgeous girl suck on that perfect cock of yours."

Caleb *was* pretty perfect. Like a sculpture, just thick and long enough to fill my mouth. He blushed and hesitated before rising to his knees, shuffling closer.

"No, over Leo," I said, grinning down at Leo, who nodded.

“Mhm, I wanna touch too.”

Caleb shuddered, eyes hooding, and moved to straddle over Leo’s head, his cock perfectly poised in front of my lips.

“Ready?” Rake asked behind me, wedging a third finger in to stretch me.

“Almost,” I said, voice a little strangled from the pressure. I leaned forward to lick playfully at Caleb’s tip, mouthing up his length and back again. I sucked on his head and Caleb’s hands flew up, drawing my hair into a loose pile on top of my head.

“God, that’s beautiful,” Caleb murmured.

His knot was only just starting to swell, but I planned on leaving it alone, wanting to make sure I got my moment with all of him later.

“Ready,” I said, and then I wrapped my lips around Caleb’s cock, staring up the beautifully muscled height of his as I sucked him to the back of my tongue, hollowing my cheeks.

Rake pushed, his hands spreading my ass and his cock slipping a few times before I remembered to relax again. I groaned, a high tight sound at the back of my throat that made Caleb gasp and buck a little before Leo’s hands rose to hold his thighs in place.

This time, without Rake’s heat haze, I was vividly aware of every detail and sensation of being shared by these men. I was filled in every possible way, and for a moment there was the softest tickle of panic at the back of my thoughts. Was I safe? Could I get away?

And then Cyrus came to sit on my right, petting down my spine. “Good girl.”

I shuddered and the panic vanished, replaced only with a hot and animal hunger. I slurped up and down Caleb’s cock, motivated by his shudders, by Leo’s gasps and bucking under me, by Rake’s whines as he fucked gently into my ass.

“You’re our good girl, aren’t you, Lola?” Cyrus asked.

I whined in agreement and started to move, rolling between Leo and Rake, fucking Caleb into my mouth, curling my tongue around him.

“You are, you’re beautiful. You’re perfect for us, pet.”

Cyrus’ brushing softly up and down my back, over my shoulders, kept me relaxed even as Rake bottomed out inside of me and Leo’s thrusts became more urgent. Leo tucked his elbows under him,

arching his back, and I had to pull back to giggle as Caleb bellowed up at the ceiling as Leo started to suck on his balls. I pressed my own kisses to his knot as Caleb twitched and groaned between us.

“Leo, don’t you *dare* make me come before I’m inside her,” Caleb panted.

“Fuck, Lola, you’re so tight,” Rake whined.

I was squeezing around him and Leo with my happy laughter, my tongue lapping up Caleb’s pre-cum like it was syrup. I wanted to suck him dry and see if it left me even more hazy and high than his scent. No offense to Baby’s alpha, but Green’s medical marijuana had nothing on Caleb.

Leo fell back to the bed, panting and rutting into me. “Fuck. Fuck I can feel Rake in you, gorgeous. I’m so close.”

His hand slid between us to fumble over my clit, and I reached out to grab Caleb’s hip, pulling him back to my mouth to stifle my squeals and pleas as Leo worked me up.

Cyrus moved off the bed, and I heard the squirt of liquid before Rake started to fuck harder into me.

“No,” he whined. “No, you’ll make me come too fast, I want—I want—oh fuck, Cy!”

“You have to let the alphas play too, hun,” Cyrus rasped.

Rake bent over my back, licking over my skin, biting as Cyrus readied him, his thrusts inside of me going uneven. Caleb’s grip in my hair tightened, and he jerked out of my mouth and back to the bed, his cock twitching with need. He scooted backward, cheeks flushed as he grinned at me, eyes bright, and then he bent over Leo, mouth poised over the shining bite mark on Leo’s chest.

The one I’d run from months ago in that club bathroom.

Caleb sucked on the spot and Leo’s eyes flew open, his lips parted on a sudden shout, cock striking deep inside of me and fingers rubbing frantically over my clit, turning the simmer of arousal into a sudden bonfire. I came with the first burst of Leo’s release inside of me, clamping down on his and Rake’s cocks as I shouted and fell to Leo’s chest, body shuddering with my orgasm.

Rake’s voice was strangled, and the flood of him in my ass was almost embarrassing, slipping out between us and dripping down between my thighs. He was still moving but it was more like

momentum, and I realized that Cyrus was inside him now, fucking Rake into me.

Damn. I wasn't sure I'd ever want to be filmed having sex again, but if I did, that would definitely be a request.

"God, unghf," Leo squirmed beneath. "Stop, someone stop, it's too much."

I gasped as Cyrus hauled Rake slowly off my back and out of me, body suddenly gaping and hollow. But it was worth it for the sight of Rake collapsing forward onto the mattress, Cyrus over his back, fucking mercilessly into his omega.

"God, yes, don't stop, don't stop, donstopp…" Rake whined into the sheets as Cyrus clamped one hand over the back of Rake's neck and wrapped the other around his hips to pump his cock.

"You make the wet spot, you take the wet spot," Caleb breathed.

I gasped with my laughter at the rule and then gasped again as Caleb wrapped his arms around my waist and lifted me off Leo's lap and onto his.

"Hello, love," Caleb whispered, and I tilted my head back for his grazing kiss. "You have a very wicked little mouth."

"You should've let me keep using it," I said, smiling drowsily up at him.

Caleb hummed and nuzzled my cheek, drifting feather-light kisses to my ear. "Not when I have plans for your pretty pussy."

Hearing the word 'pussy' on Caleb's otherwise perfectly polite tongue was a giddy shock, and I broke into giggles right until he slipped two fingers up inside of my soaking channel, and then pulled me down onto his cock.

I gasped and arched in his arms at the overfull stretch.

"Someday, Leo and I are going to share this," Caleb murmured, and my eyes widened as he wiggled his fingers inside of me.

Leo sat up and moved to my back, Rake and Cyrus making the bed rattle on the other side of him. "Would you like that, Lola?"

I swallowed hard at the thought, barely able to find the words as Caleb seated himself, and kept his fingers moving inside of me.

"At the same time?" I breathed, voice strangled by the unusual sensation.

“Mhm,” Leo said, kissing across my shoulders, Caleb mirroring him over my chest and throat.

“We’ll practice like this first, and with toys,” Caleb said. “No knot, of course. Just two cocks fucking this perfect cunt of yours at the same time.”

I fucking *came*, just like that, with absolutely zero warning. It was soft and simple, but it still stole my breath with the surprise of it.

“She likes it,” Leo said, his laugh moving him as I shook between them.

“Hold her for me,” Caleb said, pulling his fingers free of my fluttering sex.

Leo shifted until I was cradled against his chest, his arms around my waist. Caleb held my thighs spread apart, my body completely balanced between them. His brow furrowed with concentration, dipping down once to kiss the tip of my nose.

And then he fucked me completely senseless. I whined and tried to rock, but I was trapped between them in the best way possible, Leo whispering praises in my ears as Caleb turned feral and beautiful again, his body striking my clit with every slapping thrust until he found the angle that made me scream. Rake and Cyrus' own shouts of completion joined mine from the other end of the bed.

I howled and strained as something fiercer than an everyday orgasm whipped through me, each kick of Caleb’s hips driving his cock up against my g-spot. Wetness splashed between us, and I was *way* too lost to feel the least bit of shame. Caleb was the dark horse. He won. Hands down. I was wrecked.

“I love you, Lola,” Caleb breathed, and that drew the tiniest amount of sanity back to me.

“Ready, gorgeous?” Leo whispered, kissing the right side of my throat.

I’d sort of forgotten the goal of the whole thing, but I was literally ready for absolutely anything either of them wanted. I keened and nodded, and Leo pressed me into Caleb’s arms. I was more than prepared, the men had turned me into liquid and I practically melted like honey over Caleb’s knot.

He stiffened and paused in his fucking as he locked inside of me. “Are you mine, love?”

Ohhh, right. The bonding. "'M yours," I agreed, tucking my face into Caleb's neck, and offering him my left shoulder. He chuckled and shifted me in his arms, turning my head in the other direction. Because that spot was already taken.

Get it together, woman, I thought. *Fuck off, I'm amazing*, I answered promptly.

"You are amazing, love," Caleb whispered in a way I was ninety percent sure wasn't a direct response to my internal conversation, but was just a compliment.

"I love you," I answered, stretching my neck for him, squeezing and rocking around his knot, every little shift sending lovely aftershocks trembling through me.

Caleb purred, and the bed wobbled around us as Cyrus and Rake approached. Hands were stroking and soothing over my skin as Caleb peppered kisses over my skin.

"Go on," Rake urged. "I wanna feel our girl."

"I want our girl to feel *us*," Leo added.

And just to remind Caleb that this was about us too—him and me as a pair, and not just our connections with Leo and Rake—I nipped his shoulder. "Please, alpha," I whispered.

Caleb's purr turned to a soft growl, and I was so far gone in the heady haze of sex that there was no pain at all as he bit me, just a slow, thick, syrupy orgasm running up and down and over me. I moaned and turned limp in his arms as his teeth held their place in the curve of my throat. He sucked briefly, and the sting of it made the world clearer, just enough for me to enjoy the growth of the bond.

Caleb was first of course, heavy and encompassing, enveloping me in warmth and comfort. Our surroundings grew fuzzy, and I lost any sense of what was up or down, completely surrounded by him. Rake burrowed in quickly after that, a little distant but giddy and soft, kisses that landed everywhere on my skin. And finally…

I sobbed a little, and Leo pressed to my back.

Leo, my perfect, simple, bright light, a fresh canvas to start over with. Gratitude and devotion and pride and lust and greedy affection struck me from every side, all three men swamping me in the bond with their love. I tried to send it back in every direction, confused about where I started and ended, detached from my own skin and

lost in the bond. The world tipped, and mouths and tongues were kissing and nibbling and comforting me.

Was I weeping? Knowing me, I was weeping.

And then, right at the brink of it all being too much, of losing myself in the tangle of *them*, pain cut through the cloud. I bit off a surprised screech, and the room came back to me. I was draped over Caleb, Rake and Leo on either side of us, hands and lips everywhere.

And fucking Cyrus had his fucking teeth *in my ass*. He chuckled and released his bite, lapping his tongue over the twin crescents.

“Better?”

I laughed and twisted, ignoring the tug of Caleb’s knot inside of me so I could see Cyrus sprawled out behind us, his hands on my butt and his grin flashing at me. He leaned in and licked again, and his side of the bond was tipsy and happy, but it still helped steady me in the moment. He was tugging on his end, holding me steady and in my own space in the cluster of the five of us together.

I grinned back at him and nodded. “Better. Thank you.”

“Mmm, no problem,” he said, wrapping his lips over the spot and sucking and licking. “Just think of how this is going to feel when I spank you pink again.”

My sex clenched around Caleb, and I flopped back onto his chest, trying to resist the urge to start humping my alpha again. My lips spread wider. My alphas. I was claimed. I was claimed to the fourth power.

Caleb took up his spot on his own bondmark, Cyrus hummed, I shivered, and Rake sent a bolt of lust at me from two directions.

Oh man, I was going to be so tired tomorrow.

TWENTY-NINE

Cyrus

It took every ounce of patience in me to wait for Caleb's knot to ease. If it had been me who'd knotted and bitten Lola first, I would have kept her there for hours, working us both into sweaty weak sexual messes.

Thankfully, Caleb was a better man than I was, soothing Lola and the others into a drowsy kind of calm, instead of keeping her perpetually aroused and stimulated. He knew I was waiting for my moment with her. I wanted to tend my bondmark, but it was too likely to get Lola wiggling on Caleb. And I was greedy. I wanted her around my knot while she was loose and liquid and coated in my lovers' scents.

I sat up on my knees at Lola's back, admiring the view of her from here. Her legs spread over Caleb's thighs. Her ass winking at me, Rake's release still a little shiny and sticky on her skin. My bite mark, red and swollen and begging for my attention.

"Don't fall asleep, love," Caleb murmured to her. "Cyrus is waiting."

"Mmm, I can feel him," she answered. She pushed herself up on weak arms, and I did my best to keep my touch light as I skimmed my hands over her back and combed my fingers through her hair.

Lola looked over her shoulder, perfectly plush and kiss-swollen lips quirking up at the corners. "Do you have plans for me, Boss?"

"Constantly," I said, a boyish tumble of excitement at her name for me in our games. I leaned forward and resisted the urge to taste

her skin, settling for a chaste kiss on her shoulder. "But this time, I just want it to be us, no playing."

I smiled to myself as something soft unfurled in my new bond. I'd only ever shared myself with Rake in this way, and our bond had been formed in a heat rut. Neither of us regretted it, I was his solitary tie to the pack for a long while, and I was a comfortably loose one for him to find his way in. Rake and I were best friends and mates, perfectly suited and balanced to one another from the start. With Lola…the bond was a new limb, a fresh part of myself I want to learn to use beautifully for both our benefit.

Lola hummed and rose up on her knees, her nose scrunching briefly until she and Caleb separated with a soft squelch. Caleb grunted as his cock slapped to his thigh, slick and coated.

"Oh!" Lola blushed and fell back on the bed, legs squeezing together and cheeks going pink as wetness slipped freely out of her. I grinned as she blinked up at me, suddenly bashful when not even a half-hour ago she'd been mastering three cocks like a goddess. "Maybe I should go clean up," she said softly.

I growled, finally free to touch our beautiful girl as much as I wanted. I grabbed Lola's hips and dragged her against me, swallowing her gasp as I bowed over her and covered her lips with mine. Lola moaned into the kiss, leaning into the circle of my arms and rising to her knees to bend backward for my taking. I gripped the back of her neck in one hand, feeling her surrender at the touch, and stroked the other down her front, squeezing her breasts briefly before forcing my fingers between her thighs to cup her sex. The thick mix of my pack's release was there on her skin, and I rubbed through it, Lola shuddering and whining against my teeth. Her ass brushed against my cock, and she froze briefly as it touched her mark.

I pulled away, grinning down at her. "I need to take care of you, sunshine. Need to clean that mark so it'll heal just right. Bend over for me."

Lola's lips were parted and shining, her eyes glassy. Not even Rake went to a sub-space as quickly as Lola did, and I wanted to be careful with her right now. She'd been floundering at the sudden influx of bonds already, and I didn't want to lose her in her head. I

nuzzled her temple, and Lola sighed and nodded, moving into an obedient pose that threatened my own resolve not to turn this into play. Her elbows dug into the mattress, head bowed to her forearms as her ass popped up in the air, showing every shining dripping inch of her to my gaze.

"Fuck," Rake whimpered.

I shot him a warning look, and he wiggled into Caleb's embrace. I wasn't sharing Lola right now. The others could watch, but this moment was going to be just for us. She and I had catching up to do in the pack, and I didn't want to be the lopsided end of her bonds.

"You're all right?" I asked her, smoothing my hands over her hips and ass, brushing my mark briefly and making her tremble.

"I'm perfect," Lola said softly.

I shared a smile with my packmates. Perfect wasn't a word Lola threw around in reference to herself very often, and I liked the sound of it on her lips. I wrapped my hands around the backs of her thighs, spreading her legs apart just wide enough to let me settle between them, Lola trembling with every little touch.

"How am I still so fucking…" She trailed off and shook her head.

"That might be a little bit my fault," Rake said. "Seeing you together like this, I couldn't be calm if you sedated me."

"Do you need a break?" I offered. I didn't want to pause, but if she was at all overwhelmed, I could wait.

"God no, I need to be fucked," Lola groaned into her own skin.

I grinned at that and then hunched, my mouth finding my mark, tongue swirling over the spot. Lola muffled her cry into her arms, and my hand on her left thigh slid up to her clenching core. I pushed the leaking cum back into her and grinned against her ass as Rake groaned and turned to his bondmates for relief.

"Oh god, Cyrus!"

I hummed against the swollen skin, licking over my own tooth marks. Lola was a little chaotic in the bond, and I studied her piece by piece with every swipe. She was shy, overly aware of how *new* our relationship was, and she was slightly embarrassed by her own arousal. Time would cure the first, praise would fix the second. I was awed by the rest of her—her devotion and loyalty, her curiosity as she picked at each thread of the bond and embraced the new

connection. I hummed over the skin, lapping once more and pulling away to watch her riding my stationary fingers.

She was panting softly into the bed and I leaned back, pressing my free hand over my mark to keep that thrill of touch from her new alpha running through her. Lola moaned and her head tossed. She had no other stimulation from me, and I curled my fingers in her just to feel her flutter, watch wetness slip down my fingers.

"I…I need more," Lola breathed, testing whether or not I would let her make demands.

Someday, I would let Lola be in charge of me completely, see if she was as good at being a Domme as she was a sub. For now though, I'd grant her wish.

I leaned in and licked her wet skin, sucking her folds between my lips, nibbling on them. I pushed a third finger into her and then found her clit with my thumb, rubbing her from inside and out, watching her shake. I licked from her pussy up to her ass, where I found Rake's sticky-sweet flavor, and then back down again.

"Oh fuck," Lola breathed.

The others were growing noisy up by the headboard, and her head turned to watch them, cunt squeezing around my fingers. Another fun game to try at some point then. Maybe even during a heat for a change of pace.

I slurped Lola as clean as I could, until it was mostly her own sweet flavor on my tongue and then moved back to my mark. I wrapped my teeth around the bite mark and sucked hard on the spot, humming as Lola buried her cry in the blankets and came with a slick release and a long squeeze around my fingers.

I pulled away suddenly, and Lola fell flat on the bed as I slid off the edge. She cried out as I grabbed her ankles, legs kicking, and I released her immediately, hands raised as she rolled over.

"Sorry," we both said in the same moment. It was easy to forget in some moments that Lola had boundaries, ones not even she was aware of until we tripped over them.

I reached for her and she sat up, letting me lift her into my arms. She pouted as I started to carry her around the bed, watching as Leo sucked on Rake's cock as the omega bounced over Caleb's lap, head thrown back.

"You'll see plenty of them later," I said in her ear. "Right now, I want to have a little time with just us."

Lola relaxed in my arms and nodded, resting her head on my shoulder. Her lips quirked as I carried her into Rake's enormous shower.

"Cleaning me up just to get me dirtier?" she asked.

I hummed and grinned, turning the water on to fall over us as I led her to the bench, settling her over my lap. Her hand immediately wrapped around my cock, pumping my length as she smiled down at me.

"That good?" she asked.

"You know it is," I said, reaching up and pushing her hair back off her shoulders. I'd have to return her to Caleb soon so he could take care of his bite too, but for now I'd be selfish. I tried to ignore the ache in my own length as Lola coaxed me back to life, staring up in my beta's pretty grey eyes. "You were so brave today."

Lola's touch paused, her sly smile fracturing and going fragile, her head trying to duck. I caught her chin with my finger and forced her to hold my stare.

"I don't know what happened in that room today, but I know you saved our pack," I said.

"Cyrus, I—"

"I know you'd do it again too. You saved Rake, and you saved yourself. And I love you for it, for coming out of there as safe as you could. For going at all, knowing what you'd face," I said.

Lola's eyes watered, and her smile was tenuous but sincere. "I love this pack. I love *you*. I couldn't *not* go."

I nodded, my free hand cupping Lola's hip and guiding her to poise directly over my cock. I pushed down and her mouth fell open, brow furrowed in ardent confusion as I sank into her.

"You were spectacular today," I said, watching Lola's skin flush, her eyes flutter. "My perfect *exquisite* good girl."

Lola moaned, eyes widening and body swaying, and she sank down in one long, fluid motion to my swelling knot.

"All the way in, sunshine," I said, lifting my hips. I went in smoothly, not fully inflated. I wanted her to feel it as I grew for her, to note every stretching moment as I got hard and locked inside of her.

"Say it again," Lola whispered, barely audible, eyes trying to shy away.

I leaned in and kissed her lips in a brief caress, her cheekbone, her forehead, and then nuzzled against her ear. "My good girl. You feel so sweet around my cock. You look so beautiful taking my pack."

Lola moaned and rocked over me, her arms twining around my neck. I cupped my hand over my bondmark on her ass, and her movement hiccuped, her lips parting on a rising pant of breath.

"Do you know how many times good girls come on their alpha's cock?" I asked, my voice growing thick as I stiffened inside of her, resisting the urge to start rutting.

"No, alpha," Lola breathed, her lashes batting softly at me. I couldn't tell if she was being coy or if she was just falling into the spell between us.

"Until they can't anymore," I growled.

Lola whimpered and I started to buck, my knot locked and grinding inside of her as she came once for me, sweet and gentle. By the time I was done with her, she'd be senseless.

THIRTY

Lola

I woke up wincing, my neck and back sore after apparently falling asleep draped over my alphas. All four of them.

We'd destroyed Rake's bed for the night, and someone threw the linens in the wash while Cyrus had me locked and begging in the shower. When he was done and I was a ragdoll, Caleb carried me to his room, and Leo went to get Matthieu and Wes. No one complained about the crowded sleeping arrangements for once, although I definitely woke more than once to someone jostling me out of one pair of arms and into another.

I would learn to sleep in a puppy pile of my packmates if I had to. Gladly.

Sliding my legs away from Cyrus and over Leo and Rake, and pulling my hands out of Matthieu's hair, I turned to fit between Caleb and Wes, deciding it'd be the least disruptive way to sneak out of the bed.

"Where're you going?" Caleb whispered, nuzzling into my shoulder and licking his bite mark for good measure. "We agreed that none of us are going to work today, and that includes you, love."

"I wanna make coffee and eat something," I said, even as I stretched against him to make his work easier. Cyrus was really going to have to make up this bite on the ass thing to me. How was I supposed to sit until he'd finished healing it? I appreciated his sentiment—and definitely his attention last night—but at least the

others had picked places that hadn't required me to be pantless while they tended their marks.

"Why not let us make you breakfast?" Caleb answered, except his hands were starting to roam.

"Because I don't want to be on the menu." I sat up and Caleb let me go, lovely and tempting and rumpled as he smiled up at me. "At least not until I'm caffeinated and carbed up."

Leo stirred on Caleb's right and Caleb gathered him up against his chest. "Fine. We'll be down to help you with breakfast shortly."

"Take your time." I leaned down, kissed Caleb once, and then ignored his soft chuckling as I tried to worm my way out of the foot of the bed.

Wes grunted and rolled onto his stomach, taking about a quarter of the massive bed for himself and leaving Matthieu with his leg hanging over the edge. Someone was going to have to break down and buy an even bigger bed if we all planned on sleeping together regularly. I dug through Caleb's drawers for a mishmash of borrowed clothes, catching his sleepy smile as I dashed on weak legs out the door, escaping before the picture of my six packmates tempted me back under the covers.

The scent of coffee greeted me on the stairs and I paused on the way down, frowning. Had someone set the machine last night? Maybe Wes or Matthieu while the rest of us were…busy. I'd never been the first one to the kitchen in the morning before, so I didn't really know the routine.

But when I made it to the landing and saw the light on through the living room, my steps slowed. Maybe the guys weren't energy conscious either? Maybe Leo had grabbed them for bedtime while they were in the middle of a late-night snack?

Maybe one of Indy's henchmen broke into your house, my brain warned.

I snuck up to the entrance between the living room and kitchen and stopped short, confusion striking me still. I recognized the woman sitting at our kitchen counter, recognized the sly, seductive smile she flashed me.

"Hello, Lola," said the woman from the cafeteria who'd pressed me about my alphas. "You can call me Eve."

The hitman. Hitwoman.

Oh, fuck.

She was wearing one of the robes I recognized from the downstairs pool room, bound loosely around her and draping over her shoulders. Her dark hair was soaked and plastered over her skin, right down to her barely exposed breasts.

“I hope you don’t mind,” she said, raising a steaming coffee cup. “How do you take yours?”

“What are you doing here?” I asked, debating on yanking on my bonds to wake the others.

“I’m just here to talk,” she said, turning her back on me to help herself to a mug and our coffee pot, pouring me a cup. “Try and stay calm so we can keep your alphas from joining us. I can see that getting very…chaotic.”

Sure enough, Caleb was reaching out, worry stretching an offering hand to me. I stamped down my panic and took a deep breath, doing my best to offer reassurance back until he retreated.

“They’ll come down soon,” I said.

Eve nodded and glanced over her shoulder at me, turning and sliding the new cup in my direction. I glanced down at it and shook my head.

“Fair enough,” she said, grinning. “Here.” And then she took a sip of each cup and raised her eyebrows at me.

“Still pass,” I said.

Eve pouted at me. “But it’s good coffee, it’d be a shame to waste it.”

“There are to-go cups just there. You can take it with you. You’re wasting your time before someone else comes in.”

She laughed and chugged back the mug she’d been drinking from, rolling her shoulders and taking both to the sink to rinse them clean. Polite hitwoman then. Still very uncool.

“I just wanted to make sure you were all right after yesterday,” she said. “You look well. Very freshly fucked.”

“What took you so long?” I blurted out and then immediately regretted the words as she looked up, gaze sharp on my face. “Matthieu told me they hired you over a week ago. And you were

there yesterday. You could've dealt with Indy before I ever had to walk into that building."

"I could have," Eve said, and all the playful pretending she'd done left her voice, the words flat, simple, and without intonation. "How would that have felt for you? What would've happened to your omega alone in that room of feral alphas?"

I swallowed, and my eyes dropped to the counter.

"Lola," Eve whispered, moving around the space, coming to stand in front of me. "You should never take your eyes off a predator."

She was barely taller than I was and wrapped up in a bathrobe… but she was right. She still looked deadly. Her eyes were cold, her beautiful face edged with a constant threat.

"I thought you needed to see him again," Eve said. And then she turned on like a lightbulb, cheerful mask back in place. "How did it feel? You looked glorious."

"It felt like I was bleeding emotions all over the room," I said, frowning.

That seemed to puzzle Eve, a little furrow appearing between two exquisitely shaped eyebrows. "Interesting."

I took a deep breath and resisted the urge to move away from her. "Thank you. For finishing it." *For not making* me *finish it*, I thought.

"I was paid," Eve said with a shrug. "I'm not a hero. I get paid to kill men. Sometimes, for fun, I kill the men who pay me too."

Anger snapped out of me, sudden and shocking, but I leaned into it, stepping nose to nose with the woman. "If you're threatening to hurt my pack, I will *not* let you walk out of this room."

Chai and oily sweetness swirled around me, and Eve sighed and swayed into me, cat-eyes batting her lashes at me. "Don't tease me with threats, Lola. You have a pack, and I don't like sharing."

Oh. Eve was…Eve was crazy. Possibly even feral.

Of course she's feral. She's an alpha hitwoman.

Sighing and rolling her shoulders again, Eve turned on her toes. "I'm taking this robe with me, and I'll reset the security on my way out. Someone is on their way down." She headed for the back hall, raising her hand in a little wave of her fingers at the top of her

sleeve. “I’ve left my number in your phone. In case you get sick of your bonds. Or just want a girls’ night or whatever. We can throat punch someone.”

Dear god, never introduce her to Baby.

I blinked, and Eve was gone and my pack was shuffling down the stairs.

Move!

I windmilled my arms through the air as if it could disperse the scent of Eve’s visit. At least she’d been fresh out of the pool. For the most part, the room didn’t smell like her. Then I hurried to the coffee pot, dumping the contents she’d made in a mad rush. Had she poisoned the pot? Probably not, but I wasn’t chancing it.

Matthieu made it to me first, wrapping himself around my back as I stood at the sink. “*Ça va*?”

Was I okay? A little tendril of high school French left. I nodded and leaned into him. “Got kind of lost in yesterday. And I got grounds in the pot,” I said to explain why I was cleaning it.

I didn’t want to lie to my pack, but I also didn’t want to see what happened when Wes found out Eve had broken into the house. To check on me. As long as that never happened again, I was willing to keep the secret once.

“Let me,” Matthieu said, kissing my temple. “I think Wes has something he wants to show you.”

Curious, I passed the sudsy coffee pot to Matthieu and slipped out from between him and the counter. Leo and Caleb were at the fridge, pulling ingredients out, and I pressed quick kisses to each of their cheeks. Rake was propped up against Cyrus, who snatched me around my waist and dragged me against his side.

“You’re on my shit list, mister,” I said, feigning a glare at Cyrus, who grinned.

“That's not what you said last night,” he said, his hand sliding down to squeeze over my mark. “I was thinking I could put you over Leo’s lap while I tend the mark. Watch you suck off Rake while I finger you silly.”

My glare became heated for an entirely different reason. “You’re trouble,” I said, kissing him briefly. “Quit getting me all thirsty before breakfast. I had, like, corn chips for supper and that’s it.”

My alphas growled at that announcement, and Cyrus' wicked gleam softened as he took another softer kiss. "Noted. We'll play later."

I bit my lip, a little tempted to start the game now, but then my stomach growled in warning and Wes reached out to tug at the back of my shirt. I turned to him, climbing up on his lap, careful to keep the partly healed mark on my ass from being irritated.

"Hello, good lookin'," I said, nipping over Wes' eyebrows and then down to his mouth.

"I'm just going to chop everything up into a massive scramble," Leo said to Caleb. "We're all too sex-crazed to prep a full English, babe."

"I drew you this," Wes said, taking a folded piece of paper up from the counter and sliding into my hands.

"Is it naughty?" I asked, eyebrows bouncing.

"No, but I'll take that into consideration for the revisions, sweetheart," Wes said, grinning.

I settled as comfortably as I could—thanks *so* much, Cyrus—and opened the paper, staring at the silly little drawing as tears started to well up in my eyes.

"Oh, *Wes*," I breathed. A giggle broke loose and I blinked the tears away, turning and pressing kisses over his cheeks.

"Let me see," Rake mumbled, rousing himself from Cyrus' back and stumbling over. I passed him the page, grinning as he blinked at it. "Wait, is that our house? Why is there a dragon on top of it?"

Wes blushed, and Matthieu laughed as he brought me a cup of coffee. "I've been thinking about the whole argument of your space in the house," Wes said. "What do you think of a tower?"

Caleb stretched across the counter as Leo dumped a cutting board's worth of meat and vegetables into the skillet to sizzle. Caleb frowned at the cartoonish drawing on the page. "I'm not opposed to a roof addition, but I *am* opposed to this architecture."

I giggled and leaned back against Wes as he ducked his head to hide from the others, his lips grazing over his bondmark and making me shiver.

"Tower rooms are very trendy," Leo said, smirking. "The reno will be hell, but I don't see why not."

“But not with stone brick, surely?” Caleb said, brow furrowed.

“And what does our princess think?” Matthieu asked, winking at me.

I huffed and rolled my eyes, but I took Wes’ hands in mine and squeezed them. “*If* we’re going to make a fuss about a room for me —” I started.

“We are,” Cyrus said.

“It’s already started,” Leo confirmed.

“I have wallpaper picked out,” Caleb added.

I laughed and shook my head, clearing my thoughts. “Then…yes. I like this. I love it.” I blushed and smiled at all of them. “I love you, guys.”

Wes purred as the others answered me, Matthieu and Rake both sneaking in close for kisses.

We weren’t a fairy tale, but we were exactly as close to one as I needed to be. And I was pretty sure that it would all end up happily ever after from here on out.

Epilogue

I leaned into the car window, watching the slow hills of Malta's countryside roll by, sunshine turning the grass golden, the sea sparkling in invitation past the cliffs.

"Are you glad to be back?" Leo asked, squeezing my hand in his before returning it to the gear shift as he drove around a curve.

"Mmm, very. I can't believe it's been a year."

"It was a crazy year," Leo said.

The beginning of it certainly was. And maybe the parts in the middle, when Wendy had finally gotten her digital enterprise, *Glamazon*, underway and came gunning for *Designate* right at the peak of the fall fashion season. Voir had decided to take the high road, which meant those of us left at *Designate* could only carry on as we had been, not allowed to return the shots fired. *Glamazon*'s opening subscription deal had shaken our subscriber numbers, but Wendy wasn't prepared for my betas-only issue with Katherine Hughes. We'd gained back our numbers and then some with a new audience, and now *Designate* was on a path into arts, culture, society, and fashion. And *Glamazon* had their gossip column led by Betty. It was probably a draw in terms of success, but it was one I was proud of.

"I wish the others had been able to come," I said, trying not to frown.

"Mm, me too," Leo said, although he was feeling pretty chipper. Maybe he was glad for the time alone with me.

The thought made me smile, and I squeezed his hand back, and then blinked out the window, wondering if I was imagining the familiar scenery. “Is this the route we took to the Grechs’ last time?”

“It *is*,” Leo said, wiggling his eyebrows.

All of his giddy excitement made sudden sense and I laughed. “Are we going back? Ohh, but it will be so different now.”

“It will,” Leo said, nodding and grinning.

His enthusiasm bubbled into me, and my smile grew wider. Part of me almost hated to see any changes made to the little house by the cliff and the salt farm below, but when Leo was excited it was impossible not to share that with him.

“Is it where we’re staying?” I asked.

This visit, Leo had rented a car for us so we could travel more freely around the island, although I was still getting used to him being on my right for the driver’s seat.

“We are staying there,” Leo said.

I narrowed my eyes at him. “You’re being very close-lipped about this. What’s the secret? Do you own the resort?”

Leo laughed and pressed his lips together, shaking his head. I tugged on his sleeve and he grinned. “Just wait. We’re nearly there, gorgeous.”

“You’re being sneaky. You must be spending too much time with Rake,” I said.

“I love the way Rake insists on spoiling you. I knew he loved being on the receiving end of surprises, but I didn’t know he’d take so well to the situation being reversed,” Leo said.

“I see you trying to change the subject, babe,” I answered.

“Oh, look! We’re here!” Leo cried, pulling off the road and onto a long gravel drive.

That distraction worked at least. I sat up straight, waiting for the first glimpse of whatever kind of high-end resort the sweet little farm had been transformed into. There was no sign, no grand parking lot, no umbrellas and gate and beach chairs as we pulled up to a small, stone carport. The Grechs’ small home was now a much wider stone structure, although it looked like it was just a very tall walled off space not a house, and I stared at it with a frown, trying to puzzle it out.

Not a resort but…I had no idea what it *was*.

“Come on, we’ll go in first and then come back for our bags,” Leo said.

“Ohhhkay.” I slipped out of the car, standing on the stone and staring at the stone wall. “What is it?”

“You’ll see,” Leo said easily, and then he took my hand and tugged me along.

There were a few trees planted around the wall, and glimpses of greenery peeking over the edge, but I didn’t even notice the humble little door until Leo and I rounded a pair of olive trees.

“Leo…” I said, watching him take a key from his pocket and unlocking the door. “Is this a *home*?”

“It will be. A home away from home,” Leo said. “When the owner arrives.”

That was better than a resort at least, the Grechs' had got their wish in the end. I was about to ask who owned it, when Leo stepped through the door, and I gaped at the scene in front of me. If the outside was lightly landscaped, the inside was lush. There was a long stone footpath leading up to a lovely stone building that resembled the Grechs’ home in the same golden stone, although I could tell it was a new structure and a little more modern.

Mostly though, I was staring at the long, crystalline blue pool on my left. At the bottom of the pool was a series of dark panels that I suspected were windows to an underground level. If we were staying here, we were allowed to use the pool, right? I was getting my first real vacation since I’d started at *Designate*, and I planned on making the most of our week here.

“Think of the skinny dipping,” Leo said in my ear, and I grinned back at him, stretching up to my toes to catch a kiss.

“I was. Want to take a dip now?”

Leo hummed and his gaze was hungry, but he shook his head. “House first. And then yes, definitely.”

The house was a flat rectangular structure with big bricked stone and small windows with blue shutters facing us. Leo held my hand as he led us to the door. There was no key this time, but as we stepped inside, I knew immediately why. We stepped into a decently long hall, filled with art and greenery—Caleb’s stamp was clear on

the space, and the color of the walls matched the stone outside, the floor tiled with wild and colorful patterns.

“Leo…who is the owner?” I asked, staring straight ahead at the full wall of windows. The house was poised right at the edge of the cliff. A set of industrial looking stairs led down at the windows, and I suddenly realized we were on the tip of the iceberg. The house was *under* us.

“Come on,” Leo said, pulling me along. “There’s a bedroom and bath on either side of us. A little cozier than at home, but they could be for guests. And then down here…”

I held my breath as Leo took us to the stairs, the view out the wall of windows dizzying and breathtaking, sea and salt flats for miles and miles ahead of us.

“We have a living space, kitchen, and dining room in an open plan,” Leo said.

I barely tore my eyes away from the sea before gasping at the room. It was vast, contemporary, and colorful. One of Cyrus’ cityscape paintings was hanging up on the walls, and my throat squeezed at the sight of a family photo of our pack on a table between deep and squishy looking couches that faced the water.

Looking at the shimmering light falling over the massive dining table, I laughed as I realized the pool was directly above it. It was a beautiful light feature for the room, making everything ambient and almost like stained glass, but it definitely put an amusing spin on my idea of skinny dipping.

“Downstairs there’s a master en suite, as well as a few private rooms. And for being two stories underground, it’s brighter than you’d expect. Every room has a natural light source, either cut from the cliffside, or tunneled from the yard,” Leo explained, and it was almost like he was pitching it to me.

I pulled my stare from the lovely communal kitchen, an almost perfect replica of ours at home, and turned to face Leo. His back was to the windows, and he was bouncing on the balls of his feet, eyes bright as he waited for my reaction.

“It’s ours?” I breathed.

Leo raised a hand and wobbled it in the air. “It’s…it’s *yours*,” he said, lips quirking.

I huffed and blinked at him, swallowing twice before I could speak. “Then it’s ours,” I said, because Rake trying to slip me a car at Christmas was one thing, but this place was…

Magical. Perfection. Out of my wildest dreams.

My eyes couldn’t stop traveling over every little detail. The whole pack had been involved, obviously. Rake’s thoughtfulness was in the details of comfort, Wes’ in privacy. Matthieu and Leo in the sheer gall it took to surprise me with a *house in Malta*.

Leo stepped forward, hands wrapping around my shoulders and drawing my focus back to him. “Are you fritzing?” he asked, lips twitching.

“A little,” I said, grinning. “But in a good way.”

“I know it’s a big present—”

“Okay, but let’s call it a family investment,” I suggested.

“—but it’s an engagement present, so it ought to be a little extra,” Leo said.

I stared at him, my mouth hanging open, my eyes drinking up every detail of this man I loved so much, it often stopped me in my tracks.

“A what?” I breathed

I didn’t even make it to Leo’s knee touching the floor, I was in tears before he was halfway down, hand reaching into his pocket.

“Leo!”

“Lola,” he said, grinning and staring up at me. “I know that we are a pack. We’re more than *just us* now, but I do want to celebrate what you and I have, how far we’ve come. And I can’t bite you, but I can *marry* you…if you’ll have me.”

There was a ring in one of his hands, my own hand in the other, but I would worry about those later. My heart was *singing*, and I wasn’t the only one. I laughed through stupid, happy tears as Leo rang like church bells in the bond, the rest of the pack answering us both.

“They’re here, aren’t they?” I asked, beaming at Leo.

“I couldn’t leave them out,” he said, shrugging. He tugged my left hand closer, warm metal touching the tip of my ring finger. “What do you think?”

“You know what I think,” I said. My cheeks hurt, but also every single cell in my body felt *amazing*. When Leo looked bursting with anticipation, I tried to get the words out, my head nodding madly first. “Yes. You know I—Leo, *yes*.”

There was a wild cheering from below, and I gasped and cried and laughed as Leo jumped up from the floor. The ring was on my finger and Leo’s arms were around me and my face was lifted to his and footsteps ran up from below, the moment rushing so fast, I wished I could stop the clock. We kissed, and it was easy and familiar, and desperate and thrilling at the same time. The pack surrounded us in a rush, arms and limbs folding us up.

My alphas were joyous, Leo was *incandescent*, and I was having a beautiful out of body experience in my happiness. The marriage would be symbolic more than anything, but I didn’t care. The wedding would be *pretty* and the honeymoon heaven, and Leo and I would be tied together in our own way forever.

There was just one sweet little fly in the ointment.

I turned in the embrace of the group, accepting kisses from the others, and serving them pinches for keeping this whole surprise a secret from me.

“Don’t play coy,” Matthieu murmured roughly in my ear. “You know you love it.”

“I do,” I answered, and he kissed me again.

Caleb was crying, Wes was giving Leo a bear hug that potentially threatened Leo’s ribs, and Cyrus had his arm around a beaming Rake. But there was no fooling me, I could feel the delicate bruise he was trying to hide. Cryus slid away as I stepped up to Rake, wrapping my arms around his shoulders and rising up to nuzzle against his lips and cheeks.

“I am so happy for you, Lollipop,” he said.

“I know you are.”

We were quiet, and I wove my way through my bonds to tug gently on Rake’s hurt.

“Don’t,” he said.

“Tell me,” I answered, pecking at his lips.

“I’m just a little jealous, but in a nice way,” Rake murmured. I kissed him again to encourage him, resisting the urge to laugh as he

started to snuggle closer, cock growing stiff in his pants. “I know what we have is perfect and special. It’s just that the others get their bites on you, and Leo and you will be married…”

“You wish we had something unique between the two of us,” I said, leaning back to stare up at him.

Rake hummed and nodded slightly. He *was* happy for us, that wasn’t a lie. It was just in Rake’s nature to be a little greedy. Which was fine with me.

I wanted for nothing with these men, aside from the occasional night with just women for company. And I did my best to ensure that the same was true for all of them.

I pressed my lips to Rake’s jaw and took his hand from the back of my waist, bringing it to the front. My mouth slid to his ear to whisper, “What if I said you and I already had that?”

The room fell silent as Rake’s shock rocketed through the bond like a firework, exploding with excitement at the peak. He leaned back, eyes wide on my face.

“We haven’t even started trying yet,” he breathed, a comically wide smile spreading over his lips.

I laughed, buoyed by his joy. “That's what you get when you call exclusive dibs on my pussy during your heat, baby.”

Rake’s own laugh was loud and sudden, and then I was up off my feet and in his arms, our pack watching us as he kidnapped me and headed for the bedrooms down below.

“You bitches better get ready to be a whole new kind of daddy,” Rake called over his shoulder.

I cackled as I watched the bomb explode over the others' expressions until they were chasing after us, questions and exclamations on their lips.

“Rake, don’t you dare drop her!” Matthieu barked.

“You're sure?” Rake asked me.

“Mhm, I've been using protection with everyone else,” I said.

“I hope you weren’t looking forward to spending much time outside, Lollipop, because I’ve got about fifty million wicked things I want to do to you now,” Rake hummed.

“You better be prepared to share,” Wes growled at him, quick on our heels.

“Do your worst,” I said, and I giggled as Rake tossed me onto the bed. I’d appreciate the beautiful room later. Right now, I had six men I needed to enjoy being devoured by.

Life was delicious these days.

FIN

Also by Kathryn Moon

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Acknowledgments

Well 2020…this is no thanks to you.

This is absolutely thanks to my family, my friends, my Moongazers.

Thank you to the readers who let me run around in genre playgrounds, rearranging all the pieces into something completely different, and are still happy to come and play with me after I've made a strange and interesting mess of things. My books will never be for everyone, but if *this* book was for *you*, then I'm so happy!

Now specifically onto the people who keep me on track and in the best possible shape-

Gorgeous cover compliments to Kellie Arts for the art and Lana Kole for the font work!

Proof-reading amazingness thanks to Bookish Dreams Editing!

My alphas - wink wink - Chloe, Lana, and Desiree, who chased me down for more every day (cough, Chloe, cough)

My beta babes who absolutely devoured and protected this story; Jami, Ash, Kathryn, and Helen, thank you so much for all of your input and for making Lola so much stronger as a book!

I also just want to say to all of the above women that if I ever wanted to commit a crime, I would just present it as a book idea and you'd probably all let me get away with it, cheering me on from the sidelines the whole time. And I really appreciate that! Not that I plan on committing a crime…

About the Author

Kathryn Moon is a country mouse who started dictating stories to her mother at an early age. The fascination with building new worlds and discovering the lives of the characters who grew in her head never faltered, and she graduated college with a fiction writing degree. She loves writing women were are strong in their vulnerability, romances that are as affectionate as they are challenging, and worlds that a reader sinks into and never wants to leave. When her hands aren't busy typing they're probably knitting sweaters or crimping pie crust in Ohio. She definitely believes in magic.

You can reach her on Facebook and at ohkathrynmoon@gmail.com or you can sign up for her newsletter!

